THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAX STIRNER'S THOUGHT AND NIHILISM

by

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Abstract

This study deals with an *enfant terrible* of nineteenth-century German philosophy, Max Stirner, and seeks for the first time to chronicle and appraise the frequent assertions, and less frequent denials, of his being a nihilist. The thesis is that the stark polarisation of opinion on this subject is indicative of an ideological and critical divide, which inhibits any attempt to answer the question of whether Stirner was a nihilist in a balanced and objective manner. Although Stirner is not known ever to have used the word 'nihilism', or any of its derivatives, in his published writings or elsewhere, he was first accused of nihilism within a few weeks of the publication of his magnum opus, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, in 1844. Since then, the allegation has been repeated by well over a hundred writers and critics, resulting in its almost becoming a truism. My research aims, firstly, to establish a clear understanding of the multifarious meanings of the term 'nihilism', secondly, to examine the accusations of nihilism levelled at Stirner in the light of this analysis, and, thirdly, to assess not only the fairness and accuracy of the imputation of nihilism but also its usefulness in understanding Stirner as a thinker. The significance of this thesis is that it provides new insights into the nature of Stirner's thought, challenges the orthodox view of Stirner as a philosophical pariah, and proposes a re-evaluation of his ideas and their place in the history of philosophy.

Acknowledgements

My profound thanks go to Professor Wilfried van der Will, without whose enduring support and shrewd advice, spanning a longer time than either of us would care to remember, this dissertation would never have been written; to the late Professor J. P. Stern, who gave me precious insights and endless inspiration during my time under him at UCL; and to my supervisor, Dr Nicholas Martin, whose unfailing encouragement and expert guidance have not only been invaluable, but have also made the process of completing my thesis both less daunting and more enjoyable than it might otherwise have been. I should also like to make special mention of Kurt W. Fleming, the director of the Max Stirner Archive in Leipzig, who gave me both moral support and unrestricted access to the Archive's documents.

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Notes on Sources, Abbreviations & Spelling

Unless otherwise stated, I have used the following editions of the works which are most frequently cited:

Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum. Ausführlich kommentierte Studienausgabe*, ed. by Bernd Kast (Freiburg and Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2016), referred to as *Der Einzige* in the main text and *EE* in footnotes.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1967 ff.), referred to as *KGW* in footnotes. References to this edition give the section, volume and page number(s), followed by the nietzschesource.org location consisting of abbreviated title and passage number, e.g. *KGW*, VI.ii. 427, *GM-III-27*, or, in the case of the *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, consisting of the year, group and fragment number, e.g. *KGW*, VIII.ii. 157, *NF-1887*, 10[58].

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1975 ff.), referred to as *KGB* in footnotes. References to this edition give the section, volume and page number(s), followed by the nietzschesource.org location consisting of *BVN* for letters from Nietzsche and *BAN* for letters to Nietzsche, year and letter number, e.g. *KGB*, III.v. 27, *BVN-1887*, 804.

List of Abbreviations:

AC ***Der Antichrist. Fluch auf das Christentum*** (1895)
(*The Anti-Christ: A Curse on Christianity*)

BAN ***Briefe an Nietzsche***
(*Letters to Nietzsche*)

BVN ***Briefe von Nietzsche***
(*Letters from Nietzsche*)

DD ***Dionysos Dithyramben*** (1889)
(*Dithyrambs of Dionysos*)

EH ***Ecce Homo. Wie man wird, was man ist*** (1888/1908)
(*Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*)

FW ***Die fröhliche Wissenschaft ("la gaya scienza")*** (1882)
(*The Gay Science*)

GD ***Götzen-Dämmerung oder wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert*** (1889)
(*Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*)

GM ***Zur Genealogie der Moral. Eine Streitschrift*** (1887)
(*On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*)

GT ***Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*** (1872)
(*The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*)

HL ***Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*** (1874)
(*On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*)

JGB ***Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft*** (1886)
(*Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*)

KGB ***Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe***
(*Correspondence: Critical Complete Edition*)

KGW ***Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe***
(*Works: Critical Complete Edition*)

MA ***Menschliches, Allzumenschliches. Ein Buch für freie Geister*** (1878-1880)
(*Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*)

NF ***Nachgelassene Fragmente***
(*Posthumous Fragments*)

SE ***Schopenhauer als Erzieher*** (1874)
(*Schopenhauer as Educator*)

VM ***Vermischte Meinungen und Sprüche*** (1879)
(*Assorted Opinions and Maxims*)

WA ***Der Fall Wagner. Ein Musikanten-Problem*** (1888)
(*The Case of Wagner: A Musician's Problem*)

WL ***Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*** (1873)
(*On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*)

Za ***Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*** (1883-1885)
(*Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*)

MHRA referencing style is used throughout.
Sources are given in full when first referred to, and thereafter in shortened form or in abbreviated form for those listed above.
Typographical errors in quotations from primary or secondary sources have not been corrected.
German orthography throughout corresponds to that in the original source.
Italicised words in quotations correspond to emphasis in the source.
Quotation marks are only used to indicate direct speech in long quotations if the spoken text occurs within the quotation.

Chapter One

Introduction

Max Stirner: A Man of No Importance?

Stirner the Obscure

Of all the charges laid against Max Stirner (1806-1856), none is arguably more controversial than that of nihilism. The history of Stirner's reception shows that his link to nihilism has been self-evident to some but unthinkable to others: perhaps the real significance of the question of the relationship of Stirner's thought to nihilism can be found in the polarising effect of its persistent assertion. This thesis contends that Stirner and nihilism are mutually illuminating subjects and aims to offer a balanced assessment of the claims and counterclaims surrounding the contentious issue of their interconnection. In the process, it will endeavour to shed new light on Stirner as a thinker, while, at the same time, attempting to explain the substantial discrepancies between the various interpretations of his philosophy, which are nowhere more apparent than in the discussion of his alleged affinity with nihilism.

The methodology I employ comprises a three-step process, firstly to arrive at a clear understanding of the definition(s) of nihilism, secondly to identify the context of the numerous accusations of nihilism levelled at Stirner, and thirdly to consider the applicability to his thought of the specific types of nihilism most commonly attributed to him. In order to achieve these objectives, I have adopted a balanced, empirical approach that strives to avoid the inherent bias found in many of the major works on Stirner, where the ideological animus of the critic, be it religious or political in nature, frequently overshadows the study and evaluation of the ostensible subject matter. I thus set out to examine all the scholarly discussions of Stirner

and nihilism that I have located in thorough searches of the relevant conventional and digital literature, both in libraries and in the Max Stirner Archive in Leipzig, and to assess the relative merits of their arguments.

Stirner is generally regarded as no more than a footnote in the history of German philosophy, a perception, I shall argue, that deserves reconsideration. His influence on subsequent thinkers can often only be surmised, leaving, for some, a lurking suspicion of some kind of conspiracy to keep him firmly in the shadows.[1] There are many possible reasons for his disrepute, not least of which is the explosive nature of his iconoclastic message, which is too unconventional for some and too dangerous for others. Another is that, unlike many of his German predecessors, he makes no attempt to construct a grand philosophical system, but instead articulates his ideas in a single book, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1844/1845),[2] leading perhaps to their appearing less weighty or significant. Or, equally, it could be because *Der Einzige* is written in a style that is far from the abstruse complexity of his predecessor, Hegel, on the one hand, and equally far from the rich, expressive lyricism of his successor, Nietzsche, on the other.[3] In other words, his writing may appear too pellucid to those used to reading Hegel and too dull for admirers of Nietzsche. Whatever the reason, or combination of reasons, for his comparative obscurity, an issue we shall return to in the course of this study, the fact is that Stirner is largely unknown outside a relatively small circle of Marxists, anarchists, post-anarchists, and scholars of post-Hegelianism.

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[1] See Bernd A. Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident. 150 Jahre Stirners 'Einziger'. Eine kurze Wirkungsgeschichte* (Nuremberg: LSR-Verlag, 1996), pp. 73-77.

[2] The book was published in October 1844, although it is dated 1845 on the title page. See Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1845).

[3] See e.g. Arnold Ruge, *Briefwechsel und Tagebuchblätter aus den Jahren 1825-1847*, ed. by Paul Nerrlich (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1985), p. 386, where *Der Einzige* is called 'das erste leserliche philosophische Buch in Deutschland'. Cf. James Huneker, *Egoists: A Book of Supermen* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), p. 352, where it is described as 'colourless, or rather gray, set against the glory and gorgeous rhetoric of Nietzsche.'

Stirner's lack of prominence is curious when one considers that, even for a time of such intellectual upheaval as the post-Hegelian Vormärz,[4] *Der Einzige* is a remarkably radical work. It explicitly rejects as myths and fictions (or, in Stirner's terminology, spooks and *idées fixes*)[5] all the man-made causes to which humans commonly devote themselves, be they institutionalised systems like religion, communism, nationalism and monarchy, or abstract principles like goodness, truth, freedom and justice.[6] Rarely, if ever, in the history of ideas has there been such a comprehensive assault on man's convictions and beliefs. Individually, Stirner's Young Hegelian colleagues confront different elements of the prevailing ideology, as, for instance, Feuerbach does with Christianity and Marx with capitalism, but Stirner assails the entire edifice of human dogma. It is, perhaps, understandable that such wholesale destruction of the ideological landscape has often been interpreted as the epitome of nihilism.

Despite his relative anonymity, however, a growing number of voices in recent years have argued that Stirner is still relevant today. John Welsh goes so far as to say: 'Arguably Stirner's most important contribution in the history of ideas is his unique description of modernity and the problems it poses to individuals and social relations.'[7] Such a claim rests largely on the radicalism of Stirner's philosophical message; he dared to go where no thinker had gone before, or, arguably, has since, in proposing the complete dismantling of all sacred heteronomous abstractions that, in his opinion, enslave the individual to extraneous causes and inhibit his or her potential for egoistic self-fulfilment. This extreme proposition encourages

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[4] 'Die Epoche des Vormärz ("Vormärz" im Sinne von "vor der Märzrevolution 1848") lässt sich etwa ab 1830 verorten, wurde als Begriff jedoch erst nachträglich eingeführt.' 'Restauration & Vormärz (1815-1848)', in *geschichte-lexikon.de* <http://www.geschichte-lexikon.de/restauration-vormaerz.php> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[5] See e.g. *EE*, pp. 50-54.

[6] See ibid., p. 13.

[7] John F. Welsh, *Max Stirner's Dialectical Egoism: A New Interpretation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 280.

Stirner's readers not only to question authority in all its manifestations, but also to confront the validity of their own and others' convictions and beliefs. This in turn calls into question the ultimate aim of the Enlightenment challenge to dogma, which was famously expressed by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in the opening line of his essay, 'Was ist Aufklärung?', where he writes: 'Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit.'[8] In a postmodern Western world of seemingly unlimited scepticism and unbridled individualism, the issues that are raised by Stirner's philosophical undertaking, by undermining the entire ideological fabric of mankind and, however inadvertently, opening up to scrutiny the *telos* of the Enlightenment project with regard to the eradication of dogma, can be considered as crucial today as they were in Stirner's own time.

The exposition of Stirner's explosive ideas is confined, in the main, to the pages of his magnum opus, which was the only original book he published, his other publications being translations, compilations and newspaper or journal articles. *Der Einzige* contains two main sections, sandwiched between a short introduction, which stretches to just four pages in the first edition, and an only slightly longer, seven-page conclusion. The first section, entitled 'Der Mensch' (Man), proposes a quasi-Hegelian triadic process of teleological development that governs an individual human life – from the realism of childhood through the idealism of youth to the egoism of adulthood – and also, analogously, the course of mankind – from the pre-Christian ancients through the Christian moderns to the 'free ones' of the future. Both processes are ultimately focused on the gradual liberation of the individual from the tyranny of fictions, abstractions and dogma.[9] The second section, entitled 'Ich' (I), dissects various themes, like freedom, power and love, in an effort to identify autonomy in terms of the

[8] Immanuel Kant, 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?', *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 12 (1784), pp. 481-494 (p. 481).
[9] See ibid., pp. 17-159.

concepts of ownness (Eigenheit), ownership (Eigentum) and self-enjoyment (Selbstgenuss).[10] What this means in practice is the rejection of externally imposed causes in favour of individual consciousness stripped back to its essential egoistic foundations. Stirner proposes a radical re-evaluation of human existence, divested of what he views as the implausible nonsense of mythology and reduced, in quasi-Cartesian fashion, to the bare bones of what can be taken to be self-evident, namely one's own consciousness, which, once disabused of the supposed advantages of heteronomy (for example, the benefits conferred by social or religious authority), inevitably comes to recognise the primacy of the self. This enlightened, autonomous individual is 'der Einzige' (Unique One) of the book's title, while his 'Eigentum' (property) is everything that can be brought under his dominion through the exercise of his will. In keeping with the intellectual discourse of his time, Stirner also addresses extensively, though not conclusively, the question of social organisation, by postulating the so-called 'Verein von Egoisten' (union of egoists) as a model for the cooperative coexistence of enlightened individuals.

Whilst it may be unclear how so radical a viewpoint as that expressed in *Der Einzige* can have been ignored or forgotten, it is all the more apparent why it should have acquired a reputation of notoriety among many of those observers who do at least acknowledge Stirner's existence. His self-proclaimed egoism, which, as a concept, is sufficiently taboo in itself, has thus regularly, if unfairly, been lumped together with the, to many, disreputable doctrines of anarchism or nihilism. It comes as no surprise that those who have dismissed Stirner as a nihilist (who include among their number such luminaries as Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Hugo Ball, Karl Löwith, Albert Camus and Gilles Deleuze), have invariably belittled his contribution to Western philosophy, while those few (like the far less illustrious Anselm Ruest,

[10] See ibid., pp. 161-370.

Bernd Kast and Bernd Laska), who have denied any such connection, have tended towards a more positive assessment of his achievements.

This polarisation with regard to the issue of Stirner and nihilism is particularly pronounced in the world of anglophone scholarship, where what was for a long time the only full-length monograph on Stirner, R. W. K. Paterson's *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner*,[11] adopts, as the title suggests, an uncompromisingly negative approach towards the man and his ideas, portraying Stirner as a modern Antichrist, for the primary purpose of corrective education rather than the dissemination of knowledge. It is an unsatisfactory state of affairs when the unsuspecting student's main or only source of information presents a view so partisan that it obscures the sense and substance of the work which it professes to describe and analyse. It is therefore an objective of the present thesis to attempt to redress the balance, by offering an alternative appraisal of Stirner's thought and legacy, that seeks to uncover the meaning and significance of his ideas, stripped of the often self-perpetuating accumulation of nearly two centuries of obloquy.

The Life and Death of Max Stirner

Before embarking on the investigation into the nature of Stirner's thought and its relationship to nihilism, it is important to put his ideas into their historical and biographical perspective, in order properly to understand the environment in which they were generated and thereby to avoid the anachronistic interpretations of some of his critics. Knowledge of Stirner's biography also helps to explain the use to which the chronicle of his life has been put in the

[11] R. W. K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971).

process of discrediting him, a tendency which, as will be discussed below, dates back to the period immediately following the publication of *Der Einzige*.

The life and death of Johann Caspar Schmidt, alias Max Stirner, viewed through the long lens of the ensuing century and a half of human history, can appear almost comical in its ineffectualness. Much of what we know of his biography is contained in the hagiographical account written by his chief disciple and devotee, John Henry Mackay (1864-1933).[12] Reflecting on Stirner's modest grave, which lies in a forgotten corner of the 'Friedhof II der Sophiengemeinde' in Berlin-Mitte, Mackay writes with immoderate pathos:

> Neue Gräber haben das alte umschlossen und mühsam muss es durch ihre engen Reihen suchen, wer es heute finden will.
>
> Auf der Platte erlöschen die goldenen Lettern des Namens. Aber während sie dort verblassen strahlt dieser Name seinen sieghaften Glanz durch die Nacht unserer Zeit, und verkündet den Morgen, den Morgen der Freiheit des Menschengeschlechts.[13]

Mackay's almost fanatical enthusiasm does not, however, persuade him to conceal the actual, dismal chronicle of Stirner's life. He was born the only child of a flute-maker and a postman's daughter in provincial Bayreuth in 1806. His father died six months after his birth, while his mother survived her son by three years, dying in a lunatic asylum in 1859.[14] He spent his childhood in Bayreuth and Kulm, living for most of that time with his mother and stepfather, whose only child together, Stirner's half-sister, died at the age of two. He finished his

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[12] Mackay is perhaps best known today as the author of poems set to music by the composer Richard Strauss, most memorably 'Morgen!'. See Richard Strauss, 'Vier Lieder, Op. 27, No. 4, Morgen!' <https://www.klassika.info/Komponisten/Strauss_R/Lied/TrV_170_04/index.html> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[13] John Henry Mackay, *Max Stirner: Sein Leben und sein Werk* (Berlin Charlottenburg: Im Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1914), p. 213.

[14] Stirner was born in October 1806, in the same month and year as Napoleon's victory over Prussia at Jena, which has been viewed as the end of the *Ancien Régime*, and of Hegel completing and mailing his *Phänomenologie des Geistes* to his publisher, a book that, according to Stepelevich, 'revised radically the conception of the philosophical project, if not actually putting an end to philosophy itself'. Stepelevich puts forward the idea that '[t]hese three events of October 1806 are […] the clarion call and premises for a new age, "the modern age"'. Lawrence S. Stepelevich, 'Max Stirner and the Last Man', *The Heythrop Journal*, 48.8 (September 2011), 1-11 (pp. 1, 2).

schooling at the Gymnasium in Bayreuth, followed by intermittent periods of study at the universities of Berlin, Erlangen and Königsberg, during which time he was given the nickname 'Stirner' by his classmates, on account of his unusually high forehead.[15]

While in Berlin, from 1826 to 1828, Stirner attended Schleiermacher's lectures on ethics and Hegel's on the philosophy of religion, but his studies ended in 1835 with no more than a second-class teaching certificate ('bedingte facultas docendi'). According to Mackay, Stirner, nonetheless, occasionally included the title 'Dr.' on his compulsory police registrations.[16] Stirner's first wife, Agnes Clara Kunigunde Burtz, who was his landlady's daughter, died in childbirth eight and a half months after their wedding in 1837. In a letter written in 1882 in response to Mackay's request for eyewitness accounts of Stirner and the Young Hegelian group called 'Die Freien', of which he was a member, Edgar Bauer claimed Stirner had confessed to him, 'that he acquired an aversion for his first wife as soon as he caught sight of her naked. She had once unconsciously uncovered herself during sleep, and [after] this he was never able to touch her again.'[17]

Having been refused employment as a grammar school teacher, Stirner worked for five years from 1839 as a private school teacher at Madame Gropius's 'Lehr- und Erziehungs-Anstalt für höhere Töchter'. He resigned from this position shortly before the publication of *Der Einzige* in 1844, perhaps in confident expectation of its popular and commercial success, which never materialised. Instead, the book was immediately added to the German *Index*

[15] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 85.
[16] See ibid., p. 48.
[17] 'Letter from Edgar Bauer (duplicate)', trans. by Lawrence S. Stepelevich, *The Philosophical Forum*, 8.2-4 (1978), p. 171. Cited in David Leopold, 'A Solitary Life', in *Max Stirner*, ed. by Saul Newman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 21-41 (p. 23). See also Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 88.

Librorum Prohibitorum.[18] For a radical Young Hegelian thinker like Stirner,[19] it was almost more damaging, at least in reputational, if not in financial terms, that the ban was lifted in Saxony a week later, because the authorities could not imagine anyone would take the book seriously.[20] An announcement in the *Allgemeine Zeitung Augsburg* included the following elucidation:

> [D]a sie [die Schrift] sich großentheils wie Ironie und schlagende Selbstwiderlegung liest, und in den frechsten Stellen dadurch auf besonnene Leser eher einen warnenden und abweisenden Eindruck machen müsse, werde die religiös sittliche Ansicht vom Leben kaum wirksamer gefördert werden als durch den schneidenden Gegenstand eines Versuchs eine Ansicht des Lebens vom niedrigsten und beschränktesten Standpunkt des plattesten Egoismus zu gewinnen und durchzuführen.[21]

One year prior to the publication of his magnum opus, Stirner had entered into his second marriage, to a beer-drinking, pipe-smoking, billiard-playing, cross-dressing young woman of independent means twelve years his junior called Marie Daehnhardt, to whom he dedicated his masterwork with the words, 'Meinem Liebchen'.[22] Of her, Mackay says 'eine Schönheit war sie nicht'.[23] Shortly before her death, in answer to Mackay's enquiries, she said of Stirner that he was 'very sly', 'zu selbststisch [*sic*] […], um wahre Freunde zu haben',[24]

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[18] *Index Librorum Prohibitorum. Katalog über die in den Jahren 1844 und 1845 in Deutschland verbotenen Bücher. Beitrag zur Geschichte der Presse. Erste Hälfte* (Jena: Luden, 1845), p. 28.

[19] For information on the terms 'Young Hegelian' and 'Left Hegelian', see Karl Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche. Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 7th edn (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1978), p. 78. 'Der Ausdruck "Junghegelianer" ist zunächst nur im Sinne der jüngeren Generation von Hegels Schülern gemeint; in der Bedeutung von "Linkshegelianern" bezeichnet er die im Verhältnis zu Hegel revolutionäre Umsturzpartei.'

[20] At this time, towards the end of the 'Vormärz', the Press Law of the Carlsbad Decrees was still operating and was rigorously enforced throughout the German Confederation, nowhere more so than in Prussia, where *Der Einzige* remained on the list of prohibited books.

[21] *Allgemeine Zeitung* (Augsburg), 12 November 1844, p. 2533, <http://www.max-stirner-archiv-leipzig.de/max_stirner.html> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[22] *EE*, p. 10. For a character outline of Marie Daehnhardt, see Mackay, *Max Stirner*, pp. 118-120.

[23] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 118.

[24] Ibid., p. 12. See point 15 of Marie Daehnhardt's written answers to Mackay's questionnaire in 1898 for the source of this quotation, reproduced in Bernd Laska, 'John Henry Mackays Stirner-Archiv in Moskau', *Der Einzige. Vierteljahrsschrift des Max-Stirner-Archivs Leipzig,* 3.7 (3 August 1999), 3-9 (p. 7).

and that she had neither respected nor loved him. Nonetheless, their wedding seems to have been a riotous affair, or at least a highly unconventional one. On the arrival of the officiating church councillor, who went by the name of Marot, one of the guests, Ludwig Buhl of Young Hegelian fame, had to be compelled to put his workaday coat over his shirtsleeves; the game of cards they had been playing was reluctantly put to one side; the bride, who was delayed, finally appeared in a simple, everyday dress without the traditional myrtle crown and veil; and it was ascertained that no Bible could be found for use in the ceremony.[25] Mackay states indignantly, and apparently without the slightest irony, that those who were gathered there were not in a festive mood, and had certainly not recently arrived from the local pub, as was sometimes claimed.[26] When the ceremony finally got underway, the guests stared out of the window, rather than follow the pastor's arid address. To top it all, it transpired that no one had thought of purchasing wedding rings, so a fellow Young Hegelian, Bruno Bauer, had to help out by dismantling his purse and extracting the two brass rings that held it together, which served as impromptu, and no doubt ill-fitting, substitutes. Marot was invited to the celebratory dinner but made his excuses and promptly departed.[27]

The marriage lasted for two and a half years, during which time the couple managed to lose Stirner's second wife's entire 'handsome' fortune, as Mackay terms it,[28] of ten, or, according to one account, thirty thousand thalers, chiefly, it seems, through the instigation and operation of a dairy business, which achieved little more than filling Berlin's public sewers with gallons of sour milk.[29] Stirner subsequently thought of trying his hand at investing in the

[25] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 116.
[26] See ibid.
[27] See ibid., p. 117.
[28] See ibid., p. 121.
[29] See ibid., p. 187. In her written answers to Mackay's questionnaire in 1898, Marie Daehnhardt laid the blame for the loss of her fortune squarely on the shoulders of her husband: '7. Wie verschwendete Stirner Ihr Vermögen […]? Sie [Marie Daehnhardt] wird noch immer sehr ärgerlich, wenn sie daran denkt, wie ein gebildeter Mann

stock market, but was (perhaps luckily) dissuaded by a friend. Marie Daehnhardt, meanwhile, removed, in her own words, their rings from *his* fingers (the rings presumably having been bought in the meantime with *her* money),[30] and ran away to London, whence she made her way to Melbourne and became a washer-woman, married a labourer and fled 'in die Arme der katholischen Kirche'.[31] Stirner, meanwhile, spent the last decade of his life, from the time of his separation from Marie in 1846 till his death in 1856, living from hand to mouth,[32] moving home frequently, sometimes after only a few months, in an attempt to evade his creditors, and residing for the last five years in various rented accommodations as a lodger, having had to sell his own furniture.[33] His efforts to escape justice were not entirely successful and he twice served time in debtors' prison, in 1853 and 1854.

Stirner died in June 1856, at the age of 49, of complications arising from a common carbuncle on the neck, which was caused, according to some accounts, by an insect bite that had become infected.[34] Just twelve years earlier he had written in *Der Einzige* with seemingly naïve insouciance: 'Endlich der Greis? Wenn Ich einer werde, so ist noch Zeit genug, davon zu sprechen.'[35] Stirner's death was largely ignored in the press. One of the few newspapers that did report it, the *Würzburger Anzeiger*, dedicated about one column inch to the

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das volle Vertrauen, das eine schwache Frau in ihn hatte, so zu seinem Vorteil ausnutzen konnte.' Laska, 'John Henry Mackays Stirner-Archiv in Moskau', p. 7. Mackay however casts some doubt on her version of events, by calling these the words of an old lady who had completely changed her views over time. Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 182. For a first-hand account of Stirner's disastrous business venture, see Theodor Fontane, *Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig. Autobiographisches*, 2nd edn (Berlin: F. Fontane, 1898), p. 57.

[30] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 188.

[31] Ibid., p. 190.

[32] Stirner was even reduced to placing an advertisement for a loan of 600 Thalers in the *Vossische Zeitung*. 'Es ist nicht bekannt, ob das Gesuch Erfolg hatte oder nicht.' Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 192.

[33] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 202. Engels wrote in a letter to Max Hildebrandt on 22 October 1889: 'Sonst weiß ich von Stirner nichts, über seine späteren Schicksale habe ich nichts mehr erfahren, außer daß auch Marx mir erzählte, er sei fast buchstäblich verhungert; woher er das erfahren, weiß ich nicht.' Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, 44 vols (Berlin: Dietz, 1956-2018), XXXVII (1967), p. 293.

[34] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 205.

[35] *EE*, p. 24.

announcement, which ended by notifying its readers of the fact that Stirner had died 'in sehr bedrängten Verhältnissen'.[36] Marx wrote to Engels on 26 September 1856 (a full three months after the event) with what appears to be a yawn of casual indifference: 'Neues nichts, als was Dir vielleicht schon bekannt, daß *Stirner* gestorben ist.'[37] The only account that remains to us otherwise is Mackay's sober description of the circumstances of Stirner's demise, which relates the sombre details of his suppurating abscess. It reads like a prosaic antipode to the myth of Rilke's death from the prick of a rose thorn,[38] which serves to underscore Stirner's rejection of mythologisation that is reflected in the unembellished details of his biographical record.

Despite his unfailing admiration for Stirner, Mackay does not shy away from confronting reality; on the contrary, he faces his own manifest disappointment head on:

> Nicht nur eine tiefe Entmuthigung, sondern auch eine große Enttäuschung ergriff mich, als ich, immer weiter und weiter vordringend, mehr und mehr mich überzeugen musste, wie einfach und ereignislos dieses Leben sich abgespielt hatte.[39]

He had told Marie Daehnhardt, when he finally located her in 1897, that he was only interested in finding out the truth about Stirner,[40] and he seems to have remained true to his word as far as the bleak, tragicomic catalogue of biographical events is concerned, though he undoubtedly does his best to present the cold facts of Stirner's life in the best possible light:

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[36] 'Rubrik: Vermischtes', *Würzburger Anzeiger. Beiblatt zur Neuen Würzburger Zeitung*, 182, 2 July 1856, p. 2, <http://www.max-stirner-archiv-leipzig.de/max_stirner.html> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[37] Marx and Engels, *Werke*, XXIX (1978), p. 74.

[38] See William H. Gass, *Reading Rilke. Reflections on the Problems of Translation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 3. 'The myth concerning the onset of his illness was, even among his myths, the most remarkable. To honor a visitor, the Egyptian beauty Nimet Eloui, Rilke gathered some roses from his garden. While doing so, he pricked his hand on a thorn. This small wound failed to heal, grew rapidly worse, soon his entire arm was swollen, and his other arm became affected as well.' See also David Oswald, 'Introduction', in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. by David Oswald (Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 1992), pp. 7-23, where he writes of 'Rilke's transformation of death into a personal mythological event'. Ibid., p. 19.

[39] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 6.

[40] See ibid., p. 11.

> Sein Leben ist ein neuer Beweis dafür, daß nicht die lauten Lärmer des Tages, die Lieblinge der Menge, sondern die Einsamen und ratlosen Forscher, die in stiller Arbeit dem Geschicke der Menschheit die Wege weisen, die in Wahrheit Unsterblichen sind.
>
> Unter ihnen steht Max Stirner. Zu den Newtons und Darwins, nicht zu den Bismarcks hat er sich gesellt.[41]

This is the exalted company in which, in Mackay's opinion, Stirner belongs.

Stirner and 'Die Freien'

The company Stirner actually kept is considerably less eminent and acclaimed in the history of ideas, but nonetheless consisted of some of the most radical thinkers of his time. Collectively, they were known as 'Die Freien', the Berlin branch of the Young Hegelians, who gathered in various taverns, but most notably in Hippels Weinstube at Friedrichstrasse 94, in order to converse, debate and revel.[42] 'Die Freien' was an informal circle of young writers and poets, journalists and editors, teachers and students, who, according to Mackay, had only one thing in common: 'mehr oder minder unzufrieden mit den bestehenden politischen und sozialen Verhältnissen ihrer Zeit zu sein'.[43] Mackay stresses that they cannot be considered a union or a society, having had no chairman, constitution or articles of association.[44] Instead he labels them the 'äusserste Linke'[45] and 'die […] versprengten Freicorps des Radikalismus'.[46] Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), together with Edgar Bauer (1820-1886), published a satirical epic poem in 1842 entitled *Der Triumph des Glaubens*, where its members are lampooned as demons, atheists and rebels. Stirner is described as follows:

> Seht *Stirner*, seht ihn den bedächt'gen Schrankenhasser,
> Für jetzt noch trinkt er Bier, bald trinkt er Blut wie Wasser.

[41] Ibid., p. 24.
[42] See ibid., p. 57.
[43] Ibid., p. 57.
[44] See ibid., p. 58.
[45] Ibid., p. 57.
[46] Ibid., p. 59.

So wie die andern schrein ihr wild: à bas les rois!
Ergänzet *Stirner* gleich: à bas aussi les lois![47]

Perhaps the two most important thinkers associated with Young Hegelianism were the renowned biblical scholars David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) and Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). Although they were not members of 'Die Freien' at any time, their influence on the group was considerable. Strauss and Feuerbach with their magnum opuses *Das Leben Jesu* (1835) and *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (1841) respectively, initiated a period of profound and prolific polemical attack on Christianity, which was unprecedented both in its scale and significance.[48] The philosophical challenge to religion had been bubbling under for some time, as demonstrated by the 'Atheismusstreit' between Jacobi and Fichte at the turn of the century (which will be considered in more detail in Chapter 2), but, in truth, it had been festering ever since the dawn of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century. After one hundred and fifty years of Enlightenment thinkers seeking to reconcile philosophy with religion (or at least to establish their separate realms) and to paper over the ever-widening cracks in the relationship between philosophy and theological orthodoxy created by sceptical enquiry,[49] the first half of the nineteenth century was the time when the inevitable conflict between the two sides finally broke through the surface. This first manifested itself in Strauss's sensational but almost apologetic unmasking of the Jesus myth, followed by Ludwig Feuerbach's uncompromising but well-meaning anthropologisation of Christianity.

Unlike Strauss and Feuerbach, the most important Young Hegelian in historical terms, Karl Marx (1818-1883), was at least an informal member of 'Die Freien', though only during

[47] Marx and Engels, *Werke*, XXXXI (1967), p. 301.
[48] See David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 2 vols (Tübingen: Osiander, 1835/1836) and Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1841).
[49] See Anthony Gottlieb, 'The Best of All Possible Compromises. Leibniz', in *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 2017), pp. 163-195. 'Leibniz's project of universal reconciliation was not limited to philosophy. It also extended to religion.' Ibid., pp. 173-174.

the early years of its existence. Mackay states that Marx had left Berlin by the time Stirner appeared on the scene, which was probably around the middle or end of 1841, and thus the two never met.[50] Mackay's source is Engels's letter to Max Hildebrandt of 22 October 1889, in which he writes:

> In Beantwortung Ihrer Zeilen vom 19. lernte ich Stirner gegen Anfang 1842 in Berlin im Verkehr mit E. Meyen, Buhl, Edgar und später Bruno Bauer etc. kennen. […] Er konnte noch nicht sehr lange in diesem Kreise verkehrt haben, denn er kannte Marx nicht, der Berlin, ich glaube nicht ganz ein Jahr früher, verlassen und bei den Leuten sehr im Respekt stand.[51]

Whether Stirner knew them personally or not, the waves created by Strauss, Feuerbach and Marx were felt by the entire company of 'Die Freien', whose vigorous exchanges of information, and wide knowledge of subversive publications, ensured quick access to the latest intellectual developments.

The only known sketch of 'Die Freien', by Engels, shows from left to right: Arnold Ruge, Ludwig Buhl, Karl Nauwerck, Bruno Bauer, Otto Wigand, Edgar Bauer, Max Stirner, Eduard Meyen, and Carl Friedrich Köppen.[52] Ruge was a philosopher and writer, a follower of Feuerbach, politically a democratic liberal and a supporter of the 1848 revolutions, as well as the founder of the *Hallesche Jahrbücher*, which, from 1838 to 1843, was the most important mouthpiece of the Young Hegelian movement. Ruge was not an actual member of 'Die Freien'; he visited them just once, at Hippels in November 1842, departing in a fit of indignation at the coarse tone of his interlocutors.[53] Buhl was a writer, journalist and translator, and, although Mackay says Stirner was not really intimate with anyone,[54] Buhl seems to have

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[50] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 90.
[51] Marx and Engels, *Werke*, XXXVII (1967), p. 292.
[52] See Friedrich Engels, *Die Freien*, *c*. 1842, pen & ink <https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Die_Freien_by_Friedrich_Engels.jpg> [accessed 24 August 2021].
[53] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 73.
[54] See ibid., p. 90.

been one of his few friends. Of 'Die Freien', only he and Bruno Bauer attended both Stirner's second wedding and his funeral. It was Buhl who inherited Stirner's literary estate, which, according to Mackay, disappeared after Buhl's death (supposedly by suicide).[55] Wigand, who like Ruge was just a visitor, was the Young Hegelians' principal publisher, and he included Bruno Bauer, Ruge, Engels and Stirner among his clients. Nauwerck, journalist, orientalist and revolutionary, Meyen, editor, journalist and democrat, and Köppen, historian, teacher and political journalist, have all fallen even further into obscurity than the other members of 'Die Freien' depicted by Engels. Edgar Bauer, who went from freedom fighter in his youth to founding editor of a Christian-conservative newspaper, *Die Kirchlichen Blätter*, at the age of fifty, is now perhaps best known for having been the younger brother of Bruno Bauer.

Bruno Bauer (1809-1882) was, as Karl Löwith (1897-1973) states, 'der geistige Mittelpunkt der Berliner "Freien"'.[56] Initially he was considered to be a Right Hegelian, as opposed to a Left or Young Hegelian, according to the classification of David Strauss in which Strauss sought to differentiate between those conservative members of the Hegelian school who accepted Hegel's position on religion, the Right Hegelians, and the progressive radicals who rejected it, the Left Hegelians.[57] Throughout his career as a theologian, historian, philosopher and social theorist, Bauer floated between these ill-defined and fluctuating groupings, engaging in lengthy, and at times hostile, disputes with David Strauss and Marx and Engels. He is remembered above all for his biblical criticism, most notably for the denial of the existence of Jesus Christ as a historical person. He argued that the New Testament was

[55] See ibid., p. 210.
[56] Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, p. 366.
[57] See David Friedrich Strauss, *Streitschriften zur Verteidigung meiner Schrift über das Leben Jesu und zur Charakteristik der gegenwärtigen Theologie* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1837), pp. 95-126.

a fictional, literary work, owing more to the Greek tradition than to Judaism.[58] Although Bauer remained a theological radical and atheist, politically he became increasingly conservative and antisemitic with age. Clearly, like Buhl, he also had a friendly relationship with Stirner. Writing about Bruno Bauer's request to make a drawing of the dead Stirner, the painter and writer Ludwig Pietsch commented in his memoirs:

> [Bauers] Zartheit und Innigkeit der Empfindung […] bekundete sich besonders in seinem Verhalten zu den wenigen Menschen, für die er wahre Zuneigung oder Liebe hegte. Der eine derselben war sein alter, verwitweter Vater […]. Der andere war Max Stirner, ein einsamer, weltverachtender, mutiger, tief- und scharfsinniger Denker…[59]

As members of the inner circle of 'Die Freien', Mackay also includes Engels himself, Dr. Adolf Rutenberg, Mussak (Eduard Mushacke?),[60] Hermann Maron and six others. Of the 'inestimable' number comprising the outer circle, he lists well over fifty men (including Nauwerck and Marx) and five women (including Marie Daehnhardt and Louise Aston, the author and feminist). Some guest visitors are also mentioned by name, namely Arnold Ruge along with Otto Wigand and Ludwig Ruge, as well as the poets Georg Herwegh and Hoffmann von Fallersleben.[61] 'Die Freien' was, in other words, a large, boisterous, vociferous gathering of progressive freethinkers, representing the avant-garde of political, social and philosophical thinking in the period of the 'Vormärz'. Mackay's characteristically extravagant assessment reads as follows:

> Kaum jemals in der Geschichte eines Volkes – es sei denn zur Zeit der französischen Encyclopädisten – hat sich ein Kreis von Männern zusammengefunden, so bedeutend, so eigenartig, so interessant, so radikal und so unbekümmert um jedes Urtheil, wie die

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[58] See Bruno Bauer, *Christus und die Caesaren. Der Ursprung des Christenthums aus dem römischen Griechenthum* (Berlin: Eugen Grosser, 1877), pp. 1-387.

[59] Ludwig Pietsch, *Wie ich Schriftsteller geworden bin. Erinnerungen aus den Fünfziger Jahren* (Berlin: F. Fontane & Co. 1893), pp. 257-258.

[60] See Bernd Laska, 'Nietzsches initiale Krise. Die Stirner-Nietzsche-Frage in neuem Licht', *Germanic Notes and Reviews*, 33.2 (2002) 109-133 (p. 127), *LSR* <http://www.lsr-projekt.de/nietzsche.html> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[61] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, pp. 73-74.

> 'Freien' bei Hippel ihn in dem fünften Jahrzehnt des Jahrhunderts in Berlin gebildet haben.[62]

Despite Mackay's tendency towards hyperbole, this claim deserves to be taken seriously. The Young Hegelians, of which 'Die Freien' was an important element, represent one of the most significant directional adjustments in the post-Cartesian history of ideas, in so far as they employ philosophy both for the purposes of open sedition against the established order and for the uncompromising propagation of atheism. It is only, broadly speaking, after Hegel that modern, Western atheism came into the open, and, as such, the Young Hegelians can be said to have been active at a watershed moment in the emergence of secularism.[63] Prior to this, European atheists were isolated and/or secretive, like Kazimierz Łyszczyński (1634-1689), whose retraction and abjuration did not save him from becoming the only historical victim of a Polish *auto da fé*;[64] Matthias Knutzen (1646-1674 or thereafter), who was a fugitive until his trail disappeared abruptly; Jean Meslier (1664-1729), whose 633-page *Testament* was published posthumously; and Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), whose atheistic writings were published anonymously or pseudonymously.[65] Even as progressive a thinker as David Hume (1711-1776) did not openly admit to atheism and indeed defended himself in writing against such accusations.[66]

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[62] Ibid., p. 81.

[63] The reference to modern, Western atheism is as opposed, above all, to classical atheism. See Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017). My intention is not to perpetuate the 'modernist mythology' (p. 12) that 'atheism is a modern invention, a product of the European Enlightenment' (p. 4), but to concentrate on the period that is relevant to my thesis. As Whitmarsh states: 'The Christianization of the Roman Empire put an end to serious philosophical atheism for over a millennium.' Ibid., p. 238.

[64] See Henryk Hoffmann, 'The Development of Religious Studies in Poland: History and the Present State', in *Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened: The Academic Study of Religion in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Tomáš Bubík and Henryk Hoffmann (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), pp. 87-121 (p. 88).

[65] See Winfried Schröder, 'Introduction', in Matthias Knutzen, *Schriften, Dokumente*, ed. by Winfried Schröder (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2010), pp. 7-32. See also Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, trans. by Jeremy Leggatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011), pp. 29-31.

[66] See David Hume, *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh; Containing Some Observations on a Specimen of the Principles Concerning Religion and Morality Said to be Maintain'd in a Book Lately Publish'd*

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, adherence to atheism was sufficiently widespread, and the social taboos against it were sufficiently relaxed, that radical thinkers no longer felt compelled to conceal their lack of belief. Gone, by this time, are the Enlightenment's countless attempts to reconcile reason and faith, as is the reluctance to offend social mores or risk the wrath of church and state. Instead there occurs a liberation not just of thought, but also of expression, which paves the way for the unfettered ideas of Nietzsche and, in the post-Nietzschean world, of philosophy in general. Löwith, in his seminal work on the revolution in nineteenth-century thought, is routinely disdainful of the Young Hegelians, tending to view them as mere epigones of the master:

> Wer ihre Schriften studiert, wird die Erfahrung machen, daß sie trotz ihres aufreizenden Tons einen faden Geschmack hinterlassen, weil sie mit dürftigen Mitteln maßlose Ansprüche stellen und Hegels begriffliche Dialektik zu einem rhetorischen Stilmittel breittreten. Die kontrastierende Reflexionsmanier, in der sie zu schreiben pflegen, ist einförmig ohne einfach zu sein und brillant ohne Glanz.[67]

However much he plays down their individual contributions to the history of philosophy, Löwith nonetheless recognises the significance of the collective role of the Young Hegelians in challenging both the principles and the dominance of Hegelian philosophy and initiating the radical philosophical changes of that epoch.[68]

In *Der Einzige*, Stirner dedicates a sub-section to 'Die Freien', dividing the group into three main ideological blocs – political liberalism (embodied by Ruge, Meyen), social liberalism (Hess, Marx, Engels), and humane liberalism (Bauer) – all three of which he rejects as abstractions that replace the religious God of Christianity with the earthly god of humanity,

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Intituled [*sic*]*, 'A Treatise on Human Nature', etc.*, ed. by Ernest C. Mossner and John V. Price, facsimile reprint (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967). [First published in 1745.]

[67] Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, p. 79.

[68] See the section entitled 'Der Umsturz der Hegelschen Philosophie durch die Junghegelianer'. Ibid., pp. 78-136.

and thereby alienate the individual from his self-interest.[69] According to Stirner's analysis, all forms of liberalism, among which he includes communism under the name of social liberalism, are based on the same teleological principles and ethical standards as Christianity, in other words on the very *idées fixes* he aims to eradicate in the name of the sovereign individual. But however vehement his attack on his fellow Young Hegelians may have been, there can nonetheless be little doubt of the importance of the prevailing intellectual climate of unrest, upheaval and rebellion, for the development of his own ideas.

The period immediately following Hegel's death in 1831 was characterised by an unprecedented splintering of the hitherto discernible, if by no means straightforward, progression of Western philosophy into countless conflicting directions. It was as if the colossus of philosophy, Hegel, were demonstrating the proof of his dialectical theory using his own self as evidence, by inducing a similarly colossal antithetical reaction, which exploded the boundaries of rational enquiry and emancipated the critical mind.[70] He bequeathed to his successors, including Stirner, both the weapons, in the form of his analytical methodology, and the motivation, in the form of the impetus for an equal and opposite reaction. Hegel's conservative political views, based on the guiding principles of caution, discipline, diligence and order, and manifested in his apparent exaltation of the authoritarian state,[71] must have

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[69] See *EE,* pp. 151-152. 'Der politische Liberalismus hob die Ungleichheit der Herren und Diener auf, er machte *herrenlos*, anarchisch. […] Der soziale Liberalismus hebt die Ungleichheit des Besitzes, der Armen und Reichen auf, und macht *besitzlos* oder eigentumslos. […] Der humane Liberalismus macht *gottlos*, atheistisch. […] Nun ist zwar die Herrenlosigkeit zugleich Dienstlosigkeit, Besitzlosigkeit zugleich Sorglosigkeit, und Gottlosigkeit zugleich Vorurteilslosigkeit […]; da aber der Herr als Staat wieder aufersteht, so erscheint der Diener als Untertan wieder, da der Besitz zum Eigentum der Gesellschaft wird, so erzeugt sich die Sorge vom neuen als Arbeit, und da der Gott als Mensch zum Vorurteil wird, so ersteht ein neuer Glaube, der Glaube an die Menschheit oder Freiheit.'

[70] Cf. Lawrence S. Stepelevich, 'Hegel and Stirner: Thesis and Antithesis', *Idealistic Studies*, 6.3 (1976), 263-278 (p. 278). 'Stirner's thought represents the final dialectical inversion of Hegelianism.' Also, Lawrence S. Stepelevich, *Max Stirner on the Path of Doubt* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020); Victor Basch, *L'Individualisme anarchiste, Max Stirn*er (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1904), p. 101: 'Stirner est l'Anti-Hegel.'

[71] See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, in *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Werke, Vollständige Ausgabe*, ed. by D. Karl Ludwig Michelet, D. Johann Schulze and others, 19 vols

seemed like a provocation to the more radical young students attending his university lectures, and, unsurprisingly, it didn't take long after his death for intellectual pandemonium to break out. The backlash was spearheaded by the Young Hegelians, who, in the words of Paterson, 'stood for a destruction of all inherent authority, doctrinal and institutional, by a critical analysis of the presuppositions and functions of accepted beliefs and practices'.[72]

However simple and uneventful Stirner's life was otherwise,[73] it was his contemporaneity with, and proximity to, the Young Hegelians, through his knowledge of their publications and his attendance at the discussions and debates of their Berlin chapter, 'Die Freien', which gave him the opportunity to transcend his challenging circumstances and make a statement, in the form of his major work, *Der Einzige*, which is recognised by some as having far-reaching philosophical significance.[74] One of these is Laska, who sees in Stirner a 'Schlüsselfigur der neuzeitlichen Geistesgeschichte',[75] asserting that 'gründliches und gezieltes Nachforschen ergibt, daß Stirners Ideen […] eine kaum zu überschätzende Wirkung gehabt haben'.[76] Another is Mackay, who takes every opportunity to express his admiration, bordering on adulation, for Stirner the philosopher.

Saul Newman cautions against drawing too close a parallel between Stirner's biography and his philosophy. With reference to David Leopold's essay 'A Solitary Life', Newman writes:

(Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1832-1887), VIII (1833), pp. 317-319. 'Der Staat […] ist das sittliche Ganze, die Verwirklichung der Freiheit […]. Der Staat ist der Geist, der in der Welt steht und sich in derselben mit Bewußtseyn realisirt.'

[72] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 28.

[73] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 6.

[74] It is nonetheless a minority opinion. McLellan offers an alternative view: 'Stirner's book was to a large extent an amalgam of current clichés.' David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 136.

[75] Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 120.

[76] Ibid., p. 8. Laska's thesis is that Stirner had a significant 'subcutaneous' and largely unrecognised effect on subsequent thinkers, first and foremost among them Marx and Nietzsche, but also on Max Adler, Ernst Jünger and Carl Schmitt, among many others.

> Leopold […] has the decency to avoid drawing too close a link between Stirner's life and personality and his philosophy, as though the latter were merely a reflection of the former. […] [W]ith Stirner, we witness the immolation and disappearance of the author behind the text, like, as Foucault once said, a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.[77]

While this is certainly a valid point, the scrutiny of Stirner's biography is nonetheless instructive for the understanding of his work, firstly because it lends support to the evidence from his writings of a man who eschewed self-glorification (and glorification in general), and secondly because it illuminates the significance of the radical, intellectual environment of which he was a part. Newman is clearly concerned by the paradox of a philosophy based on freedom through ownership being propounded by a man who manifestly failed to own very much in his own lifetime. He is not alone in this; Mackay was also worried that Stirner's detractors, once they knew his life story, would say: 'der Lehrer des Egoismus habe seine Lehre in seinem Leben schlecht befolgt oder ihre Befolgung habe schlechte Früchte getragen.'[78] Such fears are borne out by Marx and Engels's savage, ad hominem attack on Stirner in the relentlessly sardonic and inordinately long (329-page) 'Sankt Max' section of *Die deutsche Ideologie*, where their adversary is depicted as a petit-bourgeois bigot of limited experience and narrow horizons:

> Bei einem lokalisierten Berliner Schulmeister oder Schriftsteller […], dessen Beziehungen zu dieser Welt durch eine miserable Lebensstellung auf ein Minimum reduziert werden, bei einem solchen Individuum ist es allerdings nicht zu vermeiden, wenn es Denkbedürfnis besitzt, daß das Denken ebenso abstrakt wird wie dies Individuum und sein Leben selbst.[79]

This sort of exultant denunciation of Stirner has been repeated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and down to the present day in works by commentators

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[77] Saul Newman, 'Introduction: Re-encountering Stirner's Ghosts', in *Max Stirner*, ed. by Saul Newman, pp. 1-18 (pp. 11-12).
[78] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 212.
[79] Marx and Engels, *Werke*, III (1978), p. 246.

such as Hans G. Helms[80] and Alexander Stulpe,[81] who go to even greater (book) lengths (619 and 980 pages respectively) to disparage Stirner. In the process, Stirner has been characterised in many different, often contradictory and usually derogatory ways. This is illustrated by the fact that Marxists tend to classify him as a proto-fascist, while conservatives label him a proto-anarchist.[82] Yet, as Newman says: 'He has been described as a nihilist, existentialist, individualist, liberal, psychological egoist – but all such labels are inadequate. Just as we think we have Stirner in our conceptual grasp, just as we think we have pinned him down, he slips away again like one of his own spectres.'[83] To put it another way, so many of the labels applied to Stirner are mutually exclusive that they cannot possibly all be true.[84]

The Debate Surrounding Stirner and Nihilism

The label attached to Stirner that concerns us here is that of 'nihilist'. It is, along with 'egoist' and 'anarchist', the epithet most commonly applied to Stirner, perhaps because, of all the accusations levelled at him, it is the most malleable and the least specific. Egoists, anarchists, solipsists, fascists, existentialists and individualists can all be described as nihilistic, in so far as their ideas involve negation, be it in the form of denial of morality or reality, purpose or personal salvation. It only took a few months after the publication of *Der Einzige* for Stirner to be accused of nihilism, even though, at the time, the word 'Nihilismus' was a relative

[80] See Hans G. Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft. Max Stirners 'Einziger' und der Fortschritt des demokratischen Selbstbewusstseins vom Vormärz bis zur Bundesrepublik* (Cologne: M. DuMont Schauberg, 1966).
[81] See Alexander Stulpe, *Gesichter des Einzigen. Max Stirner und die Anatomie moderner Indivdualität* (Berlin: Dunckler & Humblot, 2010).
[82] See Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, pp. 41-52 and 84-87.
[83] Newman, 'Introduction: Re-encountering Stirner's Ghosts', p. 2.
[84] See Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 5. Laska gives a comprehensive overview of the labels that have been applied to Stirner, listing twenty-two in the table of contents alone.

neologism in German.[85] The Old Hegelian philosopher and pedagogue, Karl Rosenkranz,[86] wrote in his journal in late 1844 or 1845:

> Stirner's Buch: *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* ist offenbar die Spitze der einseitig subjektiven Tendenz, in welche sich die Junghegel'sche Schule verloren hat. Sie ist in dieser Schrift vom Atheismus zum socialen Radicalismus übergegangen. Sie ist beim Naturzustande, bei der brutalen Gewaltherrschaft, bei der rücksichtlosen Licenz für alle Begierde und Leidenschaft, bei der Apotheose des Egoismus und des Nichts angelangt. Stirner will keine Schranke des Willens, nicht einmal mehr einen Vertrag. Er will nur noch einen Verkehr, in welchem die Stärke der Individualitäten sich als List oder Gewalt gegeneinander äußert. […] Theoretisch kann ein solcher Nihilismus alles ethischen Pathos sich zu nichts mehr fortentwickeln; ihm könnte nur noch die Praxis des egoistischen Fanatismus, die Revolution, folgen.[87]

The condemnation of Stirner's philosophy as nihilistic commenced at this juncture, defined as a form of ethical nihilism that derives from atheistic subjectivism and ends in revolutionary destruction. The next known usage of the term in relation to Stirner came soon afterwards, in 1847, when a short, anonymous article entitled 'Aus Berlin' appeared in *Die Grenzboten*, a weekly national-liberal journal, where the term is associated both with Stirner and 'Die Freien' as a whole and, providing substance for Mackay's and Newman's later concerns, oblique reference is made to Stirner's desultory life: 'Ein anderer Schriftsteller dieser Schule des Nihilismus, Max Stirner, […] hat im Leben sein Princip des Egoismus nicht mit besonderm Erfolg durchgeführt, weil er eben nur davon geträumt, nur in Abstractionen damit gespielt, in logischen Visionen damit gerungen hat.'[88] It is from these

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[85] For the etymology of the term, see 'Nihilismus', in *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* <https://www.dwds.de/wb/Nihilismus> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[86] The term Old Hegelian is almost interchangeable with, though more frequently used than, Right Hegelian, similarly to Young Hegelian and Left Hegelian. For further detail and explanation, see the chapter entitled 'Althegelianer, Junghegelianer, Neuhegelianer', in Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, pp. 65-152.

[87] Karl Rosenkranz, *Aus einem Tagebuch. Herbst 1833 bis Frühjahr 1846* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1854), pp. 132-133. The individual entries are not dated, but the journal ends in the spring of 1846.

[88] 'Tagebuch. III. Aus Berlin', *Grenzboten. Zeitschrift für Politik und Literatur*, 6.1-1 (1847), 562-567 (p. 563) <http://brema.suub.uni-bremen.de/grenzboten/periodical/pageview/1504593> [accessed 24 August 2021].

beginnings, shortly after the publication of *Der Einzige*, that the association of Stirner with nihilism evolved.

It can reasonably be assumed that once Rosenkranz, who was widely read and highly regarded at the time, had used the term nihilism to describe the unpalatably radical position of the Young Hegelians, it became to some extent an established view, at least in those intellectual circles in Germany where the debate over Hegel's legacy continued to rage. Later on, the connection was further reinforced by the fact that the first Stirner 'renaissance', in the 1890s, coincided with, and was to some extent fuelled by, Nietzsche's sudden and explosive popularity.[89] In this context, Stirner was often viewed as a precursor of Nietzsche, and it was only natural that nihilism, as an important theme in Nietzsche's philosophy, should also be identified with Stirner. This idea subsequently became almost a commonplace, which has only recently been consistently challenged by various writers and scholars, chiefly by figures associated with the Max Stirner Society, which was established in 2002 in Hummeltal, near Stirner's birthplace, Bayreuth,[90] and had as its mission 'die historische Forschung zu Leben und philosophischem Werk von Max Stirner […], [und] den Aufbau und die Pflege eines Archivs sowie die Herausgabe einer Informationsschrift'.[91] Remarkably, they represent, apart

[89] See Bernd A. Laska, *Ein heimlicher Hit. 150 Jahre Stirners 'Einziger'. Eine kurze Editionsgeschichte* (Nuremberg: LSR-Verlag, 1994), p. 28. 'Die sog. Stirner-Renaissance, die in den 1880er Jahren fast unbemerkt begonnen und Anfang 1893 mit dem Erscheinen des Lauterbachschen Reclam-"Einzigen" schlagartig eingesetzt hatte, hatte im Stirnerjahr 1906 ihren Höhepunkt bereits überschritten und verebbte bis in die 20er Jahre.' The second Stirner 'renaissance' started in the 1960s. Despite the similarity with the first 'renaissance', in the sense that it was driven by a hostile agent, who was not in the least bit interested in Stirner's rehabilitation (in this case, Helms), it was different to the extent that it did not immediately encourage public endorsement of Stirner. See ibid., p. 28f.

[90] The Max Stirner Society was only in existence for a decade. It dissolved itself in September 2013 following personality clashes, financial difficulties and the onset of general apathy. In terms of number of members, it reached its peak around 2006, when there were thirty-seven members, including four women. Its spiritual successor was announced as 'Max-Stirner-Freunde' in the final edition of *Der Einzige, Jahrbuch der Max Stirner Gesellschaft. Freiheit und Ethik bei Max Stirner*, 6 (2013), p. 7. There is no evidence of any subsequent organised activity of the 'Freunde'.

[91] 'Satzung der Max-Stirner-Gesellschaft e.V.' <http://www.max-stirner-archiv-leipzig.de/dokumente/Der-Einzige-Nr.17.pdf> [accessed 24 August 2021].

from a few solitary exceptions, the first real proponents of Stirner's ideas since the initial Stirner 'renaissance', which was championed by Mackay and carried forward by Ruest and Rolf Engert. The Stirner Society has made it one of its principal aims to expose significant misinterpretations of Stirner's work through analysis of the history of its reception, and one of the labels they have challenged as a misconception is that of Stirner as a nihilist.

The chief architect of this re-evaluation of Stirner is Laska, whose 1996 work, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, contains a short chapter entitled 'Der Nihilist', that lists some examples of the recurrent 'Nihilismusvorwurf',[92] culminating in Hermann Schmitz's description of Stirner as 'der einzige vollkommene Nihilist in der Geschichte der neueren Philosophie'.[93] Although Laska does not offer a direct refutation, he suggests that the various, in his opinion, inappropriate labels attached to Stirner are evidence of the fact that 'der "Einzige" in seinem Kerngehalt bisher noch niemals rezipiert wurde, d.h., daß er so etwas wie ein *hapax legomenon* im Text der abendländischen Philosophie geblieben ist'.[94] Ten years later, in a speech in 2006, Kurt W. Fleming, a founder member of the Stirner Society, returned to the subject of the labelling of Stirner as, among other things, a nihilist:

> Ist Stirner nun ein Anarchist, weil man ihn dafür hält, oder ist Stirner tatsächlich anarchistisch, wenigstens prä-anarchistisch? Demnach wäre Stirner nicht nur ein Prä- und Anarchist, sondern auch ein Nihilist, Solipsist, Existentialist […]. Es scheint dies eine pseudo-moralische Attitüde zu sein, Menschen erst dann richtig verstehen zu können, wenn man sie in einen Schubkasten gesteckt hat.[95]

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[92] Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 105.

[93] Hermann Schmitz, *Selbstdarstellung als Philosophie. Metamorphosen der entfremdeten Subjektivität* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1995), p. 309. Schmitz is echoing Nietzsche's description of himself as 'der erste vollkommene Nihilist Europas'. *KGW*, VIII.ii. 432, *NF-1887*, 11[411].

[94] Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 117.

[95] Kurt W. Fleming, 'Max Stirner – ein Prä-Anarchist.' Unpublished speech marking the two-hundredth anniversary of Max Stirner's birth, delivered on 28 November 2006 at the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Sachsen in Leipzig. Available on request from the Max Stirner Archive Leipzig.

Perhaps most decisively of all, Kast, in the afterword to his 2009 edition of *Der Einzige*, writes of the '[f]ünf ausrottbare Missverständnisse in Bezug auf den *Einzigen und sein Eigentum*', including a section on the accusation of nihilism, in which he asserts that: 'wenn Nihilismus […] die Abwesenheit von jedem Sinn und Ziel darstellt, dann ist Stirners Einziger alles andere als ein Nihilist.'[96] Yet it is precisely here that the problem lies, namely, which definition of nihilism is being applied to Stirner's philosophy, for, as Kast observes, the term is 'äußerst unscharf'.[97]

As this thesis will examine in detail, the term 'nihilism' is an insubstantial catch-all devoid of specificity. The reasons for this are both etymological and historical. Etymologically, it derives from the Latin 'nihil', meaning 'nothing', but adding only the (Greek) suffix 'ism' means there is no indication of what that nothingness refers to, leaving it open to interpretation, unlike, for instance, the word 'atheism', which has a clearly delineated field of application. As a result, there are as many forms of nihilism as there are principles that can be denied. Historically, the term was used initially by critical commentators in an undefined manner as a polemical device, which indicated little more than the hopeless heterodoxy of the accused. Since then, its status as the ultimate expression of negativity has led to it being freely used and adapted within numerous different fields, and in the process it has only to a limited extent shaken off its stigmatic quality, mainly in a countercultural context. Definitions of nihilism have thus multiplied unchecked over the course of the last two centuries.

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[96] Bernd Kast, 'Afterword', in *EE*, p. 380.

[97] Ibid. Cf. Eike Brock, *Nietzsche und der Nihilismus* (Berlin, Munich and Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 8. 'Der Begriff "Nihilismus" gehört zu jener Gruppe von Termini, die in der Regel wie selbstverständlich in Anwendung gebracht werden, ohne dass man sich dabei aber darüber klar wäre, was sie eigentlich *genau* bedeuten.'

The next step in this project, therefore, is to trace the complex genealogy of the word 'nihilism' in order to be able to evaluate the applicability of each of its distinct definitions to Stirner's ideas and thus to arrive at a balanced assessment of the relationship of Stirner's thought to nihilism. Whilst doing so, it is important to bear in mind that although nihilism has only ever been used to a greater or lesser degree pejoratively in connection with Stirner, this does not, of course, mean that positive connotations are impossible. Nowadays there are a few philosophical voices which embrace the notion that the term 'nihilism' does not in itself possess inherently bad qualities. James Tartaglia, for instance, writes about 'the false assumption that nihilism is *bad*';[98] elsewhere, he asserts that 'if nihilism is true, it cannot be good or bad. Rather, nihilism's implication that life is meaningless is best viewed as simply a fact about life, not fundamentally different in kind from the fact that life evolved on Earth; except that the former is a philosophical fact.'[99]

Stirner never employs the words 'nihilism' or 'nihilist' in his published works, and there is no record of his having referred to himself as a nihilist; but the word 'nothing', from which it derives, is a significant, if overinterpreted, term in *Der Einzige*. Intriguingly, Stirner often uses it in the sense of 'das schöpferische Nichts',[100] in other words with an apparently positive connotation. In order to understand this concept of creative nothingness and to

[98] James Tartaglia, 'Nihilism and the Meaning of Life', *Nihilism and the Meaning of Life: A Philosophical Dialogue with James Tartaglia*, *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, ed. by Masahiro Morioka, 7.1 (2017), ii-xxvi (p. v), <http://www.philosophyoflife.org/jpl2017si_book.pdf> [accessed 24 August 2021]. Cf. James Tartaglia, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 5. 'Religious leaders still espouse the idea that without the meaning God gives to life, there can be no standards of moral conduct; but few non-believers find this equation of atheism with moral chaos remotely plausible. Despite this, however, the assumption that nihilism is bad has exerted massive influence within secular culture.' Cf. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. xi. 'Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity.'

[99] Tartaglia, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, p. 5.

[100] *EE*, p. 15.

determine whether it can be considered to represent some form of affirmative nihilism,[101] it is necessary to remove the baggage of more than a hundred and seventy-five years of critical negativity associated with Stirner's alleged nihilistic tendencies, and to analyse objectively his ideas in relation to the innumerable meanings of nihilism. I shall conduct a comprehensive review of the relevant literature on the subject below, but the fundamental point is that, up until now, there have largely been just two opposing opinions, namely that Stirner is, or is anything but, a nihilist. This thesis contends that the truth is more nuanced, and in the following chapters a detailed examination of the various definitions and interpretations of nihilism will be conducted, and their usefulness considered in evaluating Stirner's thought.

[101] For further discussion of the concept of affirmative nihilism, see Keiji Nishitani, 'Nietzsche's Affirmative Nihilism', in *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. by Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 45-68.

Chapter Two

The Meaning of Nothing: Nihilism's Complex Etymology

Definitions and Interpretations of Nihilism

As noted in the introduction above, the vagueness inherent in nihilism's nonspecificity presents the first obstacle to be overcome in the process of evaluating its relevance to Stirner's thought. Although the word has, since its invention, been in increasingly common usage, there is a remarkable amount of confusion about what nihilism actually means, and few, if any, of Stirner's accusers on the subject make their definition clear. Instead, many of them seem to treat its meaning as a given, which only serves to deepen the confusion and misunderstanding. Indeed, far from leading to the term's marginalisation, the general uncertainty around the interpretation of nihilism has resulted in its liberal and, at times, almost indiscriminate use, thus increasing both the number of definitions and their ambiguity.

Unless this complex web of meanings is untangled, it is impossible to fulfil the task properly of determining whether Stirner can reasonably be called a nihilist, a task which is made no easier by the fact that standard textbooks on nihilism fail to reach a consensus view on the question of the term's definition. In the absence of clarity, both about nihilism generally and about how it applies to Stirner, it is imperative that this study provide a comprehensive, if relatively brief, account of the history of nihilism, against which Stirner's thought can be measured.[1]

[1] This approach follows the examples of Carr in her book about Barth, Rorty and nihilism, where the first three chapters trace the history of nihilism, and Tongeren's book about Nietzsche and nihilism, which has chapters on nihilism before and after Nietzsche. See Karen L. Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992); Paul van Tongeren,

The next two chapters will therefore be concerned with the etymology of nihilism, examining its various definitions and tracing its development as a concept over time. The focus will be on two central, and closely connected, themes, around which the discussion about Stirner and nihilism often revolves, namely, the relationship between atheism and nothingness on the one hand, and Nietzsche's conception of nihilism on the other. The current chapter will examine the evolution of the concept of nihilism from its origins as a polemical term used for the excoriation of irreligion, up until Nietzsche's assimilation of the word into his philosophical project. The next chapter will concentrate on the formation and development of Nietzschean nihilism and the possibility that Stirner's ideas contributed to its genesis. Armed with this knowledge, it will be possible in the following chapters to gain an insight into the different historical perspectives of Stirner's accusers and to understand the implications, and judge the veracity, of their accusations.

While general works of reference all agree about the derivation of the word 'nihilism' from the Latin word for nothing,[2] there is significant variation in the definitions they provide. *Oxford Dictionaries* offers the following: 'The rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless', adding sub-definitions for philosophical nihilism ('that nothing in the world has a real existence') and historical nihilism ('the doctrine of an extreme Russian revolutionary party *c*. 1900').[3] *Merriam-Webster* covers similar ground, listing 'the viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and […] existence is senseless', as well as the '19th century Russian revolutionary party', and adding 'a doctrine that denies any

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Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism, trans. by David Versteeg and Vasti Calitz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

[2] See e.g. Cassedy, Steven, 'Nihilism', in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, *Encyclopedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/philosophy/philosophy-terms-and-concepts/nihilism> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[3] 'nihilism', in *Oxford Dictionaries* <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/nihilism> [accessed 24 August 2021].

objective ground of truth and especially of moral truths'.[4] *Collins Dictionary* provides a simple description: 'a belief which rejects all political and religious authority and current ideas in favour of the individual'. However, it augments this with a string of further definitions including 'denial of all established authority', 'an extreme form of scepticism that rejects all values, belief in existence, the possibility of communication', 'a revolutionary doctrine of destruction', 'the practice […] of terrorism', 'the denial of the existence of any basis for knowledge or truth', 'rejection of […] beliefs in morality, religion' and 'the belief that there is no meaning or purpose in existence'.[5]

Encyclopedia Britannica proposes a relatively straightforward, if rather over-simplified, explanation: 'originally a philosophy of moral and epistemological skepticism that arose in nineteenth-century Russia',[6] while the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* asserts that it 'is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated'.[7] The *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* offers a more general assessment, namely that '[a]ny view which contains a significant denial can be described as nihilistic, but when the term is used there is often a suggestion of loss or despair'.[8] It then lists the views which are labelled as nihilistic as 'those which deny the existence of a God, the immortality of the soul, the freedom of the will, the authority of reason, the possibility of knowledge, the objectivity of morals, or the ultimate happy ending of human history'. The sheer volume of

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[4] 'nihilism', in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nihilism> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[5] 'nihilism', in *Collins English Dictionary* <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/nihilism> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[6] 'Nihilism', ed. by Adam Augustyn, in *Encyclopedia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/topic /nihilism> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[7] Alan Pratt, 'Nihilism', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://www.iep.utm.edu /nihilism/> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[8] 'nihilism', in *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. by Thomas Mautner, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 427.

divergent definitions demonstrates the magnitude of the problem of understanding and evaluating the allegations of Stirner's nihilism.

As with works of reference, studies devoted specifically to the subject of nihilism fail to present a uniform picture. In *The Banalization of Nihilism*, Karen L. Carr recognises the 'wide variety of usages' and attempts to simplify the different definitions by ordering them under five headings: epistemological, alethiological, metaphysical or ontological, ethical or moral, and existential or axiological.[9] These cover respectively: denial of the possibility of knowledge, denial of truth, denial of empirical reality, denial of absolute values, and denial that life has a meaning (along with the concomitant feelings of emptiness and hopelessness). As Carr readily acknowledges, these distinct forms of nihilism are far from being mutually exclusive, and instead, they 'overlap and intermingle'.[10] This is not, however, an exhaustive list of the manifestations of nihilism, owing to the innumerable possible applications of the action of denial. Nihilism, after all, effectively means the negation of whatever it is connected with.

Donald A. Crosby, in his study of nihilism, also identifies five types, but they differ from Carr's, in that alethiological nihilism is subsumed under the epistemological variety, while metaphysical nihilism is excluded, and these two are replaced by political and cosmic nihilism. Political nihilism can be defined as the denial of the legitimacy of certain socio-political structures;[11] it is chiefly, if not exclusively, associated with nineteenth-century Russian nihilism.[12] Cosmic nihilism is the denial of an intelligible and moral cosmic order

[9] Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, pp. 16-18.
[10] Ibid., p. 18.
[11] See e.g. Will Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern. The (Hi)Story of a Difficult Relationship from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), p. 7.
[12] See Donald A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 9-11.

discoverable in nature, and is characterised by a view of the universe as alien, chaotic and oblivious to the cares, aspirations and values of humanity.[13] Elsewhere, one can find at least five further forms of nihilism: aesthetic nihilism, or the implicit denial of God through subjective aesthetics;[14] mereological nihilism, or the denial of composite objects;[15] semantic nihilism, or the denial of linguistic meaning;[16] logical nihilism, or the denial of absolute logic;[17] and theological nihilism, or the denial of God in terms of His unknowability or undiscoverability (i.e. it is not simply a redundant synonym for atheism).[18] The list could go on and on, but the twelve definitions above cover the most frequent occurrences of the term, and it is almost certainly to one or more of these twelve types of nihilism that each of Stirner's accusers is referring, even if they may not be aware of the specific type.

Carr tries to delineate nihilism's boundaries further by examining its relationship to other, similar concepts. There is an obvious link between nihilism and atheism, but, according

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[13] See ibid., pp. 26-30. See also Donald A. Crosby, 'Nihilism', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/nihilism/v-1> [accessed 24 August 2021]. 'Cosmic nihilism regards nature as either wholly unintelligible and starkly indifferent to basic human concerns, or as knowable only in the sense of being amenable to scientific description and explanation.' H. P. Lovecraft can be considered a prime example of a cosmic nihilist. A self-confessed cosmic nihilist is David Benatar. See David Benatar, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 62-63.

[14] See e.g. Wulf Koepke, 'Nothing but the Dark Side of Ourselves? The Devil and Aesthetic Nihilism', in *The Fantastic Other, an Interface of Perspectives*, ed. by Brett Cooke, George E. Slusser and Jaume Marti-Olivella (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 143-163.

[15] See e.g. 'Peter Unger', in *The Information Philosopher* <http://www.informationphilosopher .com/solutions/philosophers/unger/> [accessed 24 August 2021]. 'In his 1990 book *Material Beings*, Peter van Inwagen said Unger's original insight […] should be called "mereological universalism". | Van Inwagen denies there is any way of simples to compose anything other than themselves, which [he] calls "mereological nihilism".' Van Inwagen is commenting here on Peter Unger, 'The Problem of the Many', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 5.1 (1980), 411-468.

[16] See e.g. Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, p. 7. Robert Kirk calls Willard van Orman Quine a semantic nihilist in Robert Kirk, *Translation Determined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 29-30.

[17] See e.g. Nikolay Milkov, *A Hundred Years of English Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), p. 94. 'Wittgenstein's logical nihilism was clearly expressed in […] the assumption that the propositions of logic are tautologies.'

[18] See e.g. Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, p. 7. See also Ludger Lütkehaus, *Nichts. Abschied vom Sein, Ende der Angst* (Leipzig: Zweitausendeins, 2014), pp. 644-655.

to Carr, neither one necessarily entails the other, except in the case of alethiological nihilism, 'which seems to lead irrevocably to atheism'.[19] Nonetheless, atheism is usually implied by nihilism in its various guises, with the possible exceptions of mereological and semantic nihilism, which are both sufficiently self-contained not to require any reference to God's existence or non-existence. Carr also distinguishes between nihilism on the one hand, and scepticism and relativism on the other, on the basis of the latter two being more 'innocuous'.[20] Thus, scepticism entails uncertainty, while nihilism, like atheism, makes a substantial (negative) claim; and similarly, relativism questions the validity of a statement by viewing it in relation to its context, but nihilism involves a further 'deterioration' into complete rejection.[21] Even so, scepticism and relativism are usually essential components of a nihilistic outlook, as is pessimism, which, like nihilism, involves the negation of some aspect of human existence.[22] All of these connections are relevant to the question of Stirner's alleged nihilism, in so far as one would expect to see some corroborative evidence of their presence in his writings.

There have been numerous other books dedicated to the subject of nihilism since the early twentieth century, some of which have made significant contributions to the modern understanding of the word, above all by augmenting nihilism's negative connotations.[23] Perhaps the most important of these is Hermann Rauschning's *Die Revolution des Nihilismus*

[19] Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, p. 21.
[20] Ibid., p. 20.
[21] Ibid., p. 21.
[22] Nietzsche, most famously, emphasised the connection between pessimism and nihilism. He saw pessimism 'als Vorform des Nihilism', and even suggested, 'daß der Name ersetzt werden [müsse] durch Nihilismus'. *KGW*, VIII.ii. 157, *NF-1887*, 10[58] and ibid., VIII.iii. 327, *NF-1888*, 17[8]. As Lütkehaus writes, nihilism for Nietzsche is 'die letzte Entwicklungsstufe, die äußerste Form des Pessimismus'. Lütkehaus, *Nichts,* p. 295.
[23] Arguably, the first in the sequence is Gottfried Benn, *Nach dem Nihilismus* (Berlin: Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1932), though it is a collection of essays, with only the title essay directly about nihilism.

(1938), in which he analyses the National Socialists' rise to, and consolidation of, power, in terms of a political nihilism that had grown out of the intellectual nihilism of the *fin de siècle*:

> Daß der politische Nihilismus der nationalsozialistischen Elite nichts anders ist als die populäre Entartung des geistigen Nihilismus einer intellektuellen Elite vor 30-40 Jahren, sollte niemandem mehr unbekannt geblieben sein, der sich mit dem gesetzmäßigen Vorgang des 'Absinkens von Kulturgut' vertraut gemacht hat.[24]

Rauschning's book represents the voice of the disinherited conservative bourgeoisie, which, as his own biography shows, was initially seduced by the Nazi message, only to become disillusioned by the concrete results of its ideology. His branding of Nazism as nihilistic tied nihilism irreversibly to the horrors of the twentieth century. It is a viewpoint that has gone on to win wide acceptance; in his first interview in Germany after the Second World War, Thomas Mann declared: 'According to my way of thinking, nazism [*sic*] was entirely devilish nihilism.'[25]

Rauschning's book influenced the Protestant theologian, Helmut Thielicke (1908-1986), who, in *Der Nihilismus* (1950), maintains that adding the suffix -ism absolutises the principle to which it is applied, leading inevitably to intolerance and totalitarianism, and a distorted perspective on God's creation.[26] He presents nihilism as the ultimate -ism, whose only message is, 'daß […] das Nichts regiere und daß die Welt sinnlos sei'.[27] This is the starting point for Thielicke's evangelical crusade against all modern manifestations of nihilism, culminating in the following dubious claim:

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[24] Hermann Rauschning, *Die Revolution des Nihilismus. Kulisse und Wirklichkeit im Dritten Reich* (Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1938), p. 150.

[25] Howard Kennedy, 'Thomas Mann distinguishes between Nazism [and] pure communism', *Stars and Stripes* (26 July 1949) <https://www.stripes.com/news/author-thomas-mann-distinguishes-between-nazism-pure-communism-1.15197> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[26] See Helmut Thielicke, *Der Nihilismus. Entstehung, Wesen, Überwindung* (Tübingen: Otto Reichl Verlag, 1950), pp. 15-19. One wonders how Thielicke's theory of 'isms' applies to 'Protestantismus' and 'Katholizismus', just to give two examples of 'isms' to which his general criticisms might be considered to be applicable.

[27] Ibid., p. 27.

> ‘Ohne Gott ist alles erlaubt’; darum sind alle einander unheimlich.
>
> Daher rührt es, daß alle atheistischen Staatssysteme notwendig zu Polizeistaaten werden: Die Menschen sind nur durch verstärkte Kontrolle und durch Terror in Schach zu halten. […] Der Polizeistaat und der Dualismus der Polizeisysteme sind eine notwendige nihilistische Konsequenz.[28]

Thielicke, here, extrapolates from the abbreviated version of Dostoevsky’s famous assertion, ‘without God, everything is permitted’, in order to underpin his sweeping statement about the nature of the secular state.[29] He thus combines Dostoevsky’s notion of atheism engendering amorality, which is repeated ad nauseam in *The Brothers Karamazov*,[30] with Rauschning’s analysis of Nazism as nihilistic, to produce a compelling, if flawed, argument for religion’s monopoly on morality.[31]

Essentially, for Thielicke, nihilism has two forms. On the one hand, it is the acknowledgement that life has no meaning, expressed through anxiety, or *horror vacui*, while, on the other, it is a descriptive term for moral emptiness, in other words, existential and ethical nihilism respectively.[32] He considers both forms to be pathological conditions, examples of

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[28] Ibid., p. 139.

[29] Jean-Paul Sartre is perhaps complicit in the popularisation of the abbreviated form of the phrase. In his well-known lecture, *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme*, delivered in 1946, he states: ‘Dostoievsky once wrote “If God did not exist, everything would be permitted”; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point.’ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet, 6th edn (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 33.

[30] See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), p. 82. ‘If there is no immortality of the soul, then there is no virtue, and therefore everything is permitted.’ The closest he comes to the well-known abbreviation, in this particular translation at least, is: ‘Without God and the future life? It means everything is permitted now, one can do anything?’ Ibid., p. 589. A different translation has: ‘Without God and without a life to come? After all, that would mean that now all things are lawful, that one may do anything one likes.’ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by David McDuff (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 753. Nietzsche uses a similar slogan in *Also sprach Zarathustra*: ‘Nichts ist wahr, Alles ist erlaubt.’ *KGW*, VI.i. 336, *Za-IV-Schatten*, which he later attributes to the Order of Assassins (aka Nizari Ismailis) ‘jenen Freigeister-Orden par excellence’. See ibid., VI.ii. 417, *GM-III-24*.

[31] This assertion has since been thoroughly discredited. See e.g. Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018), p. 200. ‘[T]hough Gods can inspire us to act compassionately, religious faith is not a necessary condition for moral behaviour. […] Morality of some kind is natural.’ See also Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), pp. 226-233; Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), pp. 173-193.

[32] See Thielicke, *Der Nihilismus*, pp. 33-35.

modern man's alienation from God.[33] The medical theme continues in another important work on the subject, *Nihilism* (1969), by Stanley Rosen (1929-2014). Rosen describes nihilism as a 'perennial pestilence', for which he attempts to provide 'protective inoculation' in his advocacy of Platonic reason.[34] His starting point is the ordinary language philosophy of Wittgenstein, of whom he writes: 'Wittgenstein and his philosophical progeny are nihilists because they cannot distinguish speech from silence.'[35] He then moves on to the fundamental ontology of Heidegger, which, he states, 'is nihilism because it makes the ostensible speech of Being irrelevant to human action'.[36] Moreover, in Heidegger's case, '[w]hat began as the attempt to overcome nihilism was transformed into a profound resignation in the face of nihilism'.[37]

Rosen argues that nihilism is the result of the collapse of belief in objective moral truths, which has led to the contemporary crisis of reason. His aim is to reveal the nihilistic essence of both the continental and analytical branches of contemporary philosophy, in order to illustrate and emphasise 'that the Platonic-Aristotelian conception of the relation between reason and the good is superior to the modern, or predominately modern, conception', as well as, effectively, to reverse Heidegger's claim 'that Plato is responsible for nihilism in the western tradition'.[38] Regardless of the merits of his argument, his exposition hardly treats the causes of nihilism. Just as Thielicke says that Christianity is preferable to modern nihilism, Rosen offers eternal Platonic values as the better option. Rosen was clearly indebted to his teacher, Leo Strauss (1899-1973), for the general tenor of his thesis, in terms of his praise of

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[33] See ibid., p. 72.
[34] Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1969), p. xx.
[35] Ibid., p. 17.
[36] Ibid., p. 42.
[37] Ibid., p. 103.
[38] Ibid., p. 138.

Platonism, as well as his abhorrence of nihilism and the danger it poses for humanity. Strauss had previously tackled the issue of nihilism in a lecture he delivered in 1941 entitled 'German Nihilism', which is largely concerned with the assertions and implications of Rauschning's book. Having failed to find a definition of nihilism there, he offers his own, namely that '[n]ihilism is the rejection of the principles of civilisation'.[39] This forms the basis for Rosen's analysis: nihilism is rooted in the chaos and destruction of the Second World War, and his response to it reflects a longing for a return to moral certainty.[40]

It is clear that Rauschning, Thielicke and Rosen are all referring to a fundamentally similar phenomenon, though each has his own political, theological or philosophical axe to grind. For all of them, nihilism is, to some degree, a conveniently negative description of the enemy, be it Nazism, atheism or anti-Platonism. Each of these works is thus an anti-nihilist polemic, and although the specific target of their criticism may vary, they all agree with, and reinforce, Rauschning's analysis of Nazism as the ultimate apotheosis of nihilism. This view has inevitably coloured the modern perception of nihilism and supported the tendency to demonise those historical figures considered to have been nihilists, Stirner among them.[41] What these books fail to do, however, is to provide an account of the etymology of nihilism, treating the word instead as a static term, dependent, to a greater or lesser extent, on the author's input for its definition. This conceals the fact that the word 'nihilism' has had a fluid and dynamic history, which needs to be understood in order fully to grasp the different meanings of Stirner's accusers. Subsequent publications about nihilism have gone some way

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[39] Leo Strauss, 'German Nihilism', *Interpretation. A Journal of Political Philosophy*, 26 (1999), 353-378 (p. 364).

[40] See Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 1. 'It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest […] toward the political thought of classical antiquity. We are impelled to do so by the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West.'

[41] For a discussion of Stirner and fascism, see Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, pp. 84-87.

towards rectifying this,[42] but significant disagreement between authors still exists, and it is therefore important for the purposes of this study to trace the tangled ancestry of the term and follow its complex evolution, especially during the period of Stirner's critical reception, from the publication of *Der Einzige* to the present day.

The Antecedents and Origins of Nihilism

All sources agree that nihilism is a relative neologism in so far as it did not exist in an identical or similar form in ancient times. 'Midenismos', which is the current Greek equivalent, was created specifically as a direct translation of the modern word 'nihilism'. The philosophy of Gorgias (483-375 B.C.E.) has been considered an example of ontological nihilism,[43] because of the well-known trilemma in *On Non-Existence*,[44] namely that:

i. Nothing exists
ii. Even if existence exists, it cannot be known
iii. Even if it could be known, it cannot be communicated[45]

However, as Higgins contends, '[t]his argument […] can also be interpreted as an assertion that it is *logos* and *logos* alone which is the proper object of our enquiries, since it is the only

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[42] Some examples are as follows: *Der Nihilismus als Phänomen der Geistesgeschichte in der Wissenschaftlichen Diskussion unseres Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Dieter Arendt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974); Winfried Weier, *Nihilismus. Geschichte, System, Kritik* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1980); Johan Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), [first published in Dutch in 1960]; Hans-Jürgen Gawoll, *Nihilismus und Metaphysik. Entwicklungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung vom deutschen Idealismus bis zu Heidegger* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1989); Frederico Vercellone, *Einführung in den Nihilismus* (Munich: Fink, 1998); Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[43] See 'Gorgias', in *New World Encyclopedia* <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org /entry/Gorgias> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[44] As reported by Sextus Empiricus in *Against the Logicians*. The original text is no longer extant. See Bruce McComiskey, 'Gorgias, "On Non-Existence": Sextus Empiricus, "Against the Logicians" 1.65-87, translated from the Greek text in Hermann Diels, "Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker"', *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 30 (1997), 45-49.

[45] C. Francis Higgins, 'Gorgias (483-375 B.C.E.)', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://www.iep.utm.edu/gorgias/> [accessed 24 August 2021].

thing we can really know'.[46] Moreover, Gorgias is recognised as one of the founders of sophism, and his trilemma can be viewed in this light more as a rhetorical exercise than a doctrinal statement, especially as the assertion that nothing exists, if taken literally, i.e. not as 'nothing' exists, is seemingly self-defeating.

Similarly, the scepticism of Pyrrho of Ellis (360-270 B.C.E.), which is based on suspension of judgment and the implicit understanding that nothing can be considered to be true, has been interpreted, by Nietzsche among others, as epistemological nihilism.[47] However, the point of Pyrrho's reasoning is not so much to comment on the nature of knowledge, but to find a way of achieving ataraxia (a state of serene calmness) in life. Both of these examples represent the historically misleading application of a modern term to an archaic idea. Indeed, the Ancient Greeks may not have entertained anything like the concept of nihilism even in its simplest form (thus explaining why they had no word for it), because they shunned the idea of nothingness. Nowhere is this clearer than in the philosophy of Parmenides (515-? B.C.E.), who 'set out to exorcize negative notions such as "nothing" and "what is not" from his account of the world'.[48] It is further demonstrated by the failure of the Ancient Greeks to accommodate, or even contemplate, zero in their system of mathematics, as Charles Seife explains:

> Zero clashed with one of the central tenets of Western philosophy, a dictum whose roots were in the number-philosophy of Pythagoras and whose importance came from the paradoxes of Zeno. The whole Greek universe rested upon this pillar: there is no void.

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[46] Ibid.

[47] See *KGW*, VIII.iii. 70, *NF-1888*, 14[100], where he writes about 'den Nihilisten Pyrrho'.

[48] Anthony Gottlieb, *The Dream of Reason: A History of Western Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance*, rev. edn (London: Penguin, 2016), p. 61.

> The Greek universe, created by Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Ptolemy, survived long after the collapse of Greek civilization. In that universe there is no such thing as nothing. There is no zero.[49]

Seife goes on to assert that the dominance of Aristotelian philosophy, having successfully fended off the challenge of atomism, held back the progress of Western thought, above all in science and mathematics, for two thousand years, with its reluctance to accept infinity and its emphatic rejection of the void.[50] It was only in the Renaissance, after the adoption of Arabic numerals (which included zero) in the Late Middle Ages due largely to trade and commerce, that the ascendancy of Aristotelian philosophy was finally overthrown, and both the void and the infinite became a part of European thinking, thus 'open[ing] the way to the scientific revolution'.[51] While the word 'nihilism' did not, and arguably could not, appear until after this paradigm shift in Western conceptual thinking, it is nonetheless relevant to the discussion of Stirner's alleged nihilism that man's problematic relationship with the concept of nothingness stretches back to antiquity. The magnitude of this issue may help to explain the emphasis Stirner's accusers have attached to the word 'Nichts' in *Der Einzige*, a subject that will be discussed at length in later chapters. There are few words able to inspire such horror in the human mind as nothingness, and Europeans' gradual acceptance of zero in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries opened up to scrutiny an idea that had remained largely hidden from view until that time.[52]

Standard reference sources are as unclear on the origin of the word 'nihilism' as they are on the question of its definition, reconfirming the impression of confusion invariably surrounding nihilism. *Wiktionary* and the *Online Etymology Dictionary* agree with each other,

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[49] Charles Seife, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (London: Souvenir Press, 2000), p. 25.
[50] See ibid., pp. 25-61.
[51] Ibid., p. 83.
[52] See ibid., pp. 78-81.

although erroneously, that its first usage was in 1817, coined by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819) shortly before his death.[53] *Merriam-Webster*, on the other hand, gives its first known use as 1812, while the *Oxford Dictionaries* and the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* are more vague, placing its inception in the early nineteenth century.[54] *Collins Dictionary* online is vaguer still, stating only that it originated in the nineteenth century.[55] Other works of reference, like Pan's *A Dictionary of Philosophy* and the 1999 edition of the *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, do not mention any date prior to the advent of Russian nihilism in the 1850s and the popularisation of the term by Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883) in his book *Fathers and Sons*, published in 1862.[56] The corresponding entry in the 2005 edition of *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* is updated to include the sentence: 'Jacobi seems to have been the first to use the word in his "Sendbrief" (open letter) to Fichte in 1799.'[57] The online version of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, meanwhile, states that: 'The term is an old one, applied to certain heretics in the Middle Ages.'[58] Which heretics and who applied it, it fails to reveal. The *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* is more forthcoming, mentioning nihilism's connection to the word 'Nihilianismus', which was used by Walter of St. Victor in the second half of the twelfth century to describe a heretical movement in Christology.[59] It

[53] 'Nihilism', in *Wiktionary* <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/nihilism> and 'nihilism', in *Online Etymology Dictionary* <https://www.etymonline.com/word/nihilism> [both accessed 24 August 2021].
[54] 'nihilism', in *Merriam-Webster*, 'nihilism', in *Oxford Dictionaries*, and Pratt, 'Nihilism', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
[55] 'nihilism', in *Collins English Dictionary*.
[56] 'Nihilism', in *A Dictionary of Philosophy,* ed. by Antony Flew (London: Pan, 1984), p. 249 and 'nihilism', in *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy,* ed. by Thomas Mautner (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 388.
[57] 'Nihilism', in *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (2005), p. 427.
[58] 'Nihilism', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
[59] See Wolfgang Müller-Lauter and Wilhelm Goerdt, 'Nihilismus', in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. by Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer and Gottfried Gabriel <https://www.schwabeonline.ch/schwabe-xaveropp/elibrary/start.xav#__elibrary__%2F%2F*%5B%40attr_id%3D%27verw.nihilismus%27%5D__1524502191047> [accessed 24 August 2021].

traces the first use of the word nihilism, albeit in Latin, to Friedrich Lebrecht Götze's employment of the phrase 'De nonismo et nihilismo in theologia' in a tractatus of 1733.[60]

As for the first appearance of nihilism in a work in Stirner's mother tongue, the *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* and German *Wikipedia* offer the earliest dates, namely *c*. 1786 and 1787 respectively, when the 'pietistic Christian of mystical bent',[61] Jacob Hermann Obereit (1725-1798), allegedly coined the term to describe 'die methodisch notwendige Annihilation einer natürlichen Weltgewissheit', caused by Kant's 'Hypostasierung des Subjekts zum Erkenntnisgaranten'.[62] Although care needs to be exercised with online sources, there is indeed, in a work by Obereit of 1787, a dramatic dialogue whose characters include 'Nihilisme', along with 'Metaphysik', 'Die Menschheit' and 'Die Ewigkeit'.[63] As the introduction proclaims, the book's objective is for the spirit of Cebes, the disciple of Socrates and archetypal seeker after truth and virtue, to illuminate and scrutinise the philosophical orientation of Kant, Moses Mendelssohn, Thomas Wizenmann and Johann Georg Heinrich Feder, in other words of leading contemporaneous Enlightenment thinkers.[64] It does this through the elucidatory debate between its abstract characters, in the course of which, 'Nihilisme' appears as the negative essence of transcendental idealism, born out of the subjectivist urge to supplant God with the noumenon, and thus ultimately representing everything that is not God: 'Denn er allein ist, der da ist, alles andre ist Nichts, Nichts ohne

[60] Ibid. The OED concurs: 'post-classical Latin *nihilismus* (1733 or earlier)'.
[61] Henry and Mary Garland, *The Oxford Companion to German Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 647.
[62] 'Nihilismus', in *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, and 'Nihilismus', in *Wikipedia* <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nihilismus> [both accessed 24 August 2021].
[63] Jacob Hermann Obereit, *Der wiederkommende Lebensgeist der verzweifelten Metaphysik. Ein kritisches Drama zu neuer Grund-Critik vom Geist des Cebes* (Berlin: Georg Jacob Decker und Sohn, 1787).
[64] Ibid., p. 3.

Ihn, Nichts vor ihm.'[65] The discourse wades into the ongoing 'Pantheismusstreit',[66] attempting to devise a synthesis of current Enlightenment ideas with Obereit's own version of hermetic mysticism, and failing, in the process, to be either particularly convincing or coherent.

It is perhaps not surprising that Obereit uses the French spelling of the word, as there is evidence of its existence in French as early as 1761, in Jean-Baptiste Louis Crevier's *Histoire de l'Université de Paris*, where 'nihiliste' is used to mean 'hérétique qui croit que Jésus-Christ en tant qu'homme n'a pas eu de véritable existence'.[67] The first known use of the word in the German spelling, 'Nihilismus', was thirty-five years later, in 1796, just ten years before Stirner's birth, when the Lutheran theologian, Daniel Jenisch (1762-1804), employed it to discredit the subjectivist tendencies of German idealism, deploring the diminution of God's realm implicit in transcendental idealism, and the ramifications for the Christian promise of eternal life.[68] The next appearance of 'Nihilismus' in the historical textual record comes in 1799, with Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's *Sendschreiben an Fichte*, which, as with the examples of Obereit and Jenisch above, is the product of a religious thinker's reaction to the perceived dangers of Enlightenment thought. Just as Obereit's above-mentioned work develops out of the 'Pantheismusstreit', so Jacobi's letter is a response to the 'Atheismusstreit', which revolved around Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) and his refinement of Kantian metaphysics and ethics, above all in his magnum opus, *Grundlage der*

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[65] Ibid., p. 15.

[66] See Jürg Freudiger, 'Der Pantheismusstreit – Eine Bestandsaufnahme', *Kriterion*, 5 (1993), 39-48.

[67] 'Nihiliste', in *Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales* <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition /nihiliste> [accessed 24 August 2021]. 'A heretic who doesn't believe that Jesus Christ truly existed as a man.' [My translation.]

[68] See Daniel Jenisch, *Ueber Grund und Werth der Entdeckungen des Herrn Professor Kant in der Metaphysik, Moral und Aesthetik* (Berlin: Vieweg, 1796), p. 273. 'Der Gedanke des Idealistischen Nihilismus menschlicher Erkenntnis […] ist mir fast noch schauerlicher, als der Gedanke ewiger Vernichtung meiner Existenz selbst.'

gesamten Wissenschaftslehre, where Kant's mind-independent thing-in-itself is rejected, leaving the 'I' or Ego as the sole, ultimate reality.[69]

The specific catalyst for this dispute was a piece entitled 'Ueber den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung',[70] published in December 1798, in which Fichte's views clearly reflect his subjectivism and pantheism bordering, theoretically at least, on solipsism and atheism.[71] This essay was a response to, and defence of, Friedrich Karl Forberg's article, 'Entwicklung des Begriffs der Religion',[72] which was published in the same edition, and in which God is portrayed as no more than a useful fiction for the support of good moral behaviour.[73] There followed the publication of an anonymous accusation of atheism against both authors, which led ultimately to Fichte being forced to resign his professorship at the University of Jena.[74] Jacobi's response was to produce his open letter to Fichte in March 1799, in which he writes: 'Wahrlich, mein lieber Fichte, es soll mich nicht verdrießen, wenn Sie, oder wer es sei, Chimärismus nennen wollen, was ich dem Idealismus, den ich Nihilismus schelte, entgegensetze.'[75]

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[69] See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (Leipzig: Christian Ernst Gabler, 1794).

[70] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, 'Ueber den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung', *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft Teutscher Gelehrten*, 8 (1798), pp. 1-20. The editors of this journal were Fichte himself and Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer (1766-1848).

[71] See *Johann Gottlieb Fichte's sämmtliche Werke*, ed. by J. H. Fichte, 8 vols (Berlin: Veit und Comp., 1845), V, pp. 179-180. Re. subjectivism: '[I]n allem, was wir erblicken, erblicken wir bloss den Wiederschein unserer eigenen inneren Thätigkeit.' Re. pantheism: '[D]ieses absolute Seyn ist eben die Welt.' Re. atheism: '[D]er Satz: eine Intelligenz ist Urheber der Sinnenwelt […] hat nicht die mindeste Verständlichkeit.'

[72] Friedrich Karl Forberg, 'Entwicklung des Begriffs der Religion', *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft Teutscher Gelehrten*, 8 (1798), pp. 21-46.

[73] The first sentence reads: 'Religion ist nichts anders, als ein praktischer Glaube an eine moralische Weltregierung.' Ibid., p. 21.

[74] See Dieter Arendt, 'Introduction', in *Nihilismus. Die Anfänge von Jacobi bis Nietzsche*, ed. by Dieter Arendt (Cologne: Hegner, 1970), pp. 39-47.

[75] *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's Werke*, 6 vols (Leipzig: Gerhard Fleischer, 1812-1825), III (1816), p. 44. Most of the *Sendbrief an Fichte* is reprinted in *Nihilismus. Die Anfänge von Jacobi bis Nietzsche,* ed. by Dieter Arendt, pp. 107-133 (p. 131). Jacobi's comment is a direct response to Fichte's statement: 'Was in der Vernunft gegründet ist, ist schlechthin nothwendig; und was nicht nothwendig ist, ist ebendarum vernunftwidrig. Das Fürwahrhalten

This oft-quoted sentence has frequently been cited as the birth of the word 'Nihilismus' in German and, indeed, of 'nihilism' in philosophy, but such a claim ignores the antecedent dispute which had been running for more than a decade. As Wolfgang Müller-Lauter has observed: 'Jacobi hat das Wort Nihilismus nicht erfunden. Er ist auch nicht der erste gewesen, der von ihm einen philosophischen Gebrauch gemacht hat, wie man bis vor wenigen Jahren annahm.'[76] Müller-Lauter goes on to suggest the term 'Annihilation' as a possible influence on the genesis of the word 'Nihilismus', the use of which was not uncommon in the period prior to the latter's appearance (he cites F. Nicolai's 1798 polemic against Fichte as an example).[77] Commenting on Müller-Lauter's assumptions, Susanna Kahlefeld advocates the idea put forward by H. Timm,[78] that Jacobi discovered the word nihilism in the writings of Obereit and used it in a very similar way.[79] Regardless of other influences, this is almost certainly the case, as there was an inevitable cross-fertilisation of ideas within the debate around German idealism. It is no surprise to find Obereit praising Jacobi in *Der wiederkommende Lebensgeist*,[80] Jacobi having fired the opening salvo in the 'Pantheismusstreit', by publishing *Ueber die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* in 1785, in which he attacked Mendelssohn's (and Gotthold Ephraim

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desselben ist Wahn und Traum, so fromm auch etwa geträumt werden möge.' *Fichte's sämmtliche Werke*, v, p. 179.

[76] Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, 'Nihilismus als Konsequenz des Idealismus', in *Denken im Schatten des Nihilismus. Festschrift für W. Weischedel zum 70. Geburtstag,* ed. by A. Schwan (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), pp. 113-163 (p. 113).

[77] Ibid., p. 115f.

[78] See H. Timm, 'Die Bedeutung der Spinoza-Briefe für die Entwicklung der idealistischen Religionsphilosophie', in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Philosoph und Literat der Goethezeit*, ed. by Klaus Hammacher (Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1971), pp. 35-81 (p. 80f).

[79] See Susanna Kahlefeld, *Dialektik und Sprung in Jacobis Philosophie* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), p. 108. The passage she quotes is from Obereit, *Der wiederkommende Lebensgeist*, p. 16.

[80] See Obereit, *Der wiederkommende Lebensgeist*, pp. 125-126. 'So hat dann der edelmüthige Jacobi mit allen Männern Gottes vollkommen Recht gehabt, daß man nur durch ein göttliches Leben Gottes inne würde, daß göttliches Leben, Gottes Bild im Menschen, lebendige Religion, die einzige Quelle aller Einsicht des Wahren, so wie aller Liebe des Guten sey, als die einzige, beste und einige Form der Menschheit.'

Lessing's) support for Spinozism.[81] For Jacobi, Spinozism revealed the direct causal relationship between rationalism, materialism and the inevitable end result of atheism, to which he offered with proselytising zeal the antidote of 'Glaube' and 'Offenbarung', a solution that would have appealed to Obereit, and which seems to anticipate Thielicke's response to nihilism a century and a half later.

There has also been a suggestion that Jacobi came across the word 'Nihilianismus' in relation to the condemnation of the heretics Peter Lombard and Peter of Poitiers, in a reference work of 1786 by J. A. Cramer about medieval philosophy, which he was using for the second edition of his *Spinozabriefe*.[82] Be that as it may, and Müller-Lauter is generally sceptical about the idea,[83] it would probably only have reinforced in Jacobi's mind the importance of the term introduced to a German audience for the first time by Obereit. It was a word that suited his purposes perfectly: it was derogatory, it was cautionary, and it illustrated the dichotomy between the lonely emptiness of Fichte's subjective 'I' and the eternal plenitude of the Christian promise of the Kingdom of Heaven, which he sums up as follows:

> Eine solche Wahl […] hat der Mensch; diese Einzige: das Nichts oder einen Gott. Das Nichts erwählend macht er sich zu Gott; das heißt: er macht zu Gott ein Gespenst; denn es ist unmöglich, wenn kein Gott ist, daß nicht der Mensch und alles was ihn umgiebt blos Gespenst sey.[84]

For Jacobi, nihilism represents the void that he imagines would be left by the absence of his particular interpretation of God. Although Fichte had his own concept of God as the embodiment of moral order, and is thus unlikely to have considered himself an atheist, his

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[81] See Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Ueber die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (Breslau: Gottl. Löwe, 1st edn 1785, 2nd edn 1789).

[82] See Wolfgang Bonsiepen, *Der Begriff der Negativität in den Jenaer Schriften Hegels* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2016), p. 46. He refers to an idea put forward by Günther Baum in *Vernunft und Erkenntnis. Die Philosophie F. H. Jacobis* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1969), p. 42 ff.

[83] See Müller-Lauter, 'Nihilismus als Konsequenz des Idealismus', p. 114.

[84] *Jacobi's Werke*, III, p. 49.

position was clearly heretical in the eyes of Jacobi, thus making a term whose ultimate derivation could be traced back to a twelfth-century theological dispute all the more appropriate.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), who was the dominant philosopher of his, and Stirner's, time in Germany, made his contribution to the 'Atheismusstreit' in one of his early works, in which he addresses, among other things, the issue of the ontological status of nothingness, and uses the word 'Nihilismus', in Jacobi's sense of the term, in the process of undermining Jacobi's accusation against Fichte:

> Warum die Jacobische Philosophie den Nihilismus, den sie in der Fichteschen findet, so sehr verabscheue, ist vorhin gezeigt worden. Aber was das Fichtesche System selbst hierüber betrifft, so liegt allerdings die Aufgabe des Nihilismus in dem reinen Denken; […] so ist das Ich schlechthin in die Unendlichkeit hinaus von einem Nicht-Ich afficiert; wie es seyn muß, da die Unendlichkeit, Denken, das nur ein Glied des Gegensatzes ist, als an sich seyend gesetzt seyn soll.[85]

Hegel's scathing attack on Jacobi in this work led to the prolongation of the debate around the issue of nihilism. In the summer of 1802, Jacobi wrote three letters to his student and friend, Friedrich Köppen (1775-1858),[86] in which he responds to Hegel's rebuke, as well as commenting on Schelling's 'Identitätsphilosophie'.[87] These letters were to appear the following year as an appendix to Köppen's book, *Schellings Lehre oder das Ganze der Philosophie des absoluten Nichts*,[88] in which Köppen proceeds to transfer to Schelling Jacobi's denunciation of Fichte's philosophy as nihilism, using the following eccentric logic:

> [D]as Schellingische System ist weder Realismus noch Idealismus, die Frage darüber hat nicht einmal Bedeutung: aber es ist deswegen Nihilismus.

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[85] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen oder Reflexionsphilosophie der Subjektivität in der Vollständigkeit ihrer Formen als Kantische, Jacobische und Fichtesche Philosophie* in *Hegel's Werke,* 1 (1832), p. 133. First published in Schelling and Hegel's *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie* 2.1 (1802), pp. 1-188.

[86] Not to be confused with the Young Hegelian, Karl Friedrich Köppen (1808-1863).

[87] See Müller-Lauter, 'Nihilismus als Konsequenz des Idealismus', p. 152.

[88] Friedrich Köppen, *Schellings Lehre oder das Ganze der Philosophie des absoluten Nichts* (Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1803), pp. 209-278.

> Beweis. Wäre es Realismus, so müßte es mit der überwiegenden Objektivität beginnen; wäre es Idealismus, mit der überwiegenden Subjektivität […]. Nun entsteht aber alles *plus*, alles Etwas ein Ideales oder Reales, durch ein Überwiegen der einen oder der anderen; also beginnt das System mit lauter *minus* von Etwas, = Nichts.[89]

In this first phase of the existence of 'Nihilismus' in German, which occurred in the two decades immediately preceding Stirner's birth in 1806 and revolved around the world of German idealism to which the Young Hegelians would later react, the word's usage was confined to a philosophical debate about the conflict between reason and faith, where nihilism denoted the nothingness that supposedly follows, once solipsistic subjectivism has rendered the postulation of God unnecessary. In nearly all cases, with the sole exception of Hegel, the word is used during this period as an extreme form of condemnation. From this highly specialised definition, a more wide-ranging concept would develop over time. The next phase in the history of nihilism has the added significance for this study that it took place largely within Stirner's own lifetime.

The Evolution of Nihilism in Germany before Nietzsche

In 1804, just two years before Stirner was born, the concept of nihilism spilled over from the philosophical to the literary scene when Jean Paul (1743-1819), a friend and correspondent of Jacobi's, included in his book, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, a section entitled 'Poetische Nihilisten'.[90] Adopting the terminology of his mentor, Jean Paul attacks the German Romantics, who were students and followers of Fichte, censuring them for their subjectivism, just as, in *Clavis Fichtiana seu Leibgeberiana*,[91] which was written in 1799, published in 1800 and dedicated to Jacobi, he condemns Fichte for his 'Egoismus'. As Müller-Lauter observes:

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[89] Ibid., p. 85.
[90] Reprinted in *Nihilismus. Die Anfänge von Jacobi bis Nietzsche*, ed. by Dieter Arendt, pp. 190-195.
[91] Ibid., pp. 134-163.

'Jacobis Verständnis des Idealismus Fichtes als eines Egoismus, der im Nihilismus endet, hat seine Zeitgenossen beeindruckt.'[92] The introductory statement of 'Poetische Nihilisten' declares:

> Es folgt aus der gesetzlosen Willkür des jetzigen Zeitgeistes – der lieber ichsüchtig die Welt und das All vernichtet, um sich nur freien Spiel-Raum im Nichts auszuleeren, und welcher den Verband seiner Wunden als eine Fessel abreißet –, daß er von der Nachahmung und dem Studium der Natur verächtlich sprechen muß.[93]

The image of the wounds bandaged, one assumes, by the consolations of religion, and the notion of these dressings being wilfully and witlessly ripped off, demonstrates the extent of Jean Paul's opposition to the fashionable subjectivism of the 'Frühromantik' (early Romanticism).

The term 'Nihilismus' (or 'Nihilist') does not, however, appear in the works of the early Romantics.[94] This is hardly surprising as, up to this time, the word had generally only been used for polemical purposes as a means of condemning an opponent's philosophical position or point of view. In other words, it was exclusively employed by the accusers and not the accused. Carr's assertion that nihilism is not reflectively articulated may no longer be true today, but it certainly was at the turn of the nineteenth century.[95] Nonetheless, the connection between nihilism and the despair-ridden subjectivism of the 'Frühromantik' is self-evident, as numerous publications on the subject demonstrate.[96] The (anti-)hero of Ludwig Tieck's

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[92] Müller-Lauter, 'Nihilismus als Konsequenz des Idealismus', p. 142.
[93] *Nihilismus. Die Anfänge von Jacobi bis Nietzsche*, ed. by Dieter Arendt, p. 190.
[94] Werner Kohlschmidt claims that Novalis uses the term 'Nihilismus', though there is no evidence of this in the latter's *Sämtliche Werke*. See Werner Kohlschmidt, 'Nihilismus der Romantik', in *Der Nihilismus als Phänomen der Geistesgeschichte*, ed. by Dieter Arendt, pp. 79-98 (p. 83). The claim is supported by H. G. Schenk in *The Mind of the European Romantics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 49. Unfortunately, neither cites a source. Novalis does use the term 'Nicht-Ich' in the Fichtean sense. See e.g. Novalis, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Ernst Kamnitzer, 4 vols (Munich: Rösl & Cie, 1924), IV, p. 289. He also uses the word 'Nichtsein'. See e.g. ibid., III, p. 87.
[95] Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, p. 22.
[96] See e.g. Dieter Arendt, *Der 'poetische Nihilismus' in der Romantik* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1972) and Alexey Ponomarev, *Der Nihilismus und seine Erfahrung in der Romantik* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2010).

epistolary novel, *William Lovell*, which appeared in the same year as Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* (1795), has been called 'der erste wirkliche Nihilist der deutschen Literatur'.[97] The book charts the descent of the young, eponymous, English gentleman and romantic dreamer from the harmony of family life and young love, through debauchery, seduction and murder, to a self-willed duelling death. Comparing him to other Romantic heroes, Gillespie writes: 'Lovell is particularly important, not merely because he is a more radical Romantic hero but because he becomes such a complete egoist, so utterly absorbed by the demonic potentialities of the I.'[98] Lovell subjects the world as object, or not-I, to his own desire for freedom, with complete disregard for established moral or religious values, thereby leading himself into a tragic spiral of discovery and destruction. As Gillespie puts it: 'In William Lovell, we see the birth of nihilism out of the spirit of a Romanticism that is decisively informed by the thought of Fichte.'[99]

If William Lovell is the first nihilist in German literature, then *Nachtwachen*, a satirical tale dated 1804 and reliably attributed to August Klingemann (1777-1831), is the first 'nihilistisches Gesamtkunstwerk',[100] 'dessen ganzer Inhalt schließlich das Nichts und die nihilistische Verzweiflung ist'.[101] *Nachtwachen* is an episodic novel narrated by the night watchman, Johannes Kreuzgang, foundling, outsider, poet, actor and fool, who wanders the dark streets in the dead of night, calling out the intervals of the passage of time.[102] In a series of stories, fragments, letters, fantasies, observations and reflections divided into sixteen night watches, he parodies all conceivable aspects of human life including poetry, literature, love,

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[97] Werner Vordtriede, 'Das Nihilistische Geburtstagskind', in *Der Nihilismus als Phänomen der Geistesgeschichte*, ed. by Dieter Arendt, pp. 210-212 (p. 210).
[98] Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 106.
[99] Ibid., p. 109.
[100] Kohlschmidt, 'Nihilismus der Romantik', p. 83.
[101] Vordtriede, 'Das Nihilistische Geburtstagskind', p. 211.
[102] Kreuzgang, the foundling, is named after the location where he was discovered.

marriage, the law, the state, religion generally and Christianity specifically. Using irony as his chief weapon, he engages in a radical, systematic devaluation of all contemporary norms, resulting in self-conscious disorientation and despair: 'Da sah ich mich selbst mit mir allein im Nichts, nur in der weiten Ferne verglimmte noch die letzte Erde, wie ein auslöschender Funken – aber es war nur ein Gedanke von mir, der eben endete.'[103] The novel culminates in a devastating image of all-pervading nothingness, as Kreuzgang, on being shown his father's grave in the churchyard, opens the lid of the coffin and prises the praying hands apart, only for the body to disintegrate into ash. Kreuzgang exclaims:

> Ich streue diese Handvoll väterlichen Staub in die Lüfte und es bleibt – Nichts!
> Drüben auf dem Grabe steht noch der Geisterseher und umarmt Nichts!
> Und der Widerhall im Gebeinhause ruft zum letzten Male – *Nichts!*[104]

In ending *Nachtwachen* with the threefold repetition of the term 'Nichts', Klingemann is mimicking the end of Jean Paul's *Clavis Fichteana*, where the author ironically contemplates the implications of the subjectivist world view:

> Ich so ganz allein, nirgends ein Pulsschlag, kein Leben, Nichts um mich und ohne mich Nichts als Nichts – […] So komm' ich aus der Ewigkeit, so geh' ich in die Ewigkeit – Und wer hört die Klage und kennt mich jetzt? – Ich. – Wer hört sie, und wer kennt mich nach der Ewigkeit? – Ich. –[105]

The confrontation with nothingness is a central theme of German Romanticism and represents the source of its malady of the soul. Hölderlin, for instance, has Hyperion write to Bellarmin:

> O ihr Armen, […] die ihr auch so durch und durch ergriffen seid vom Nichts, das über uns waltet, so gründlich einseht, daß wir lieben ein Nichts, glauben ans Nichts, uns abarbeiten für Nichts, um mählich überzugehen ins Nichts –[106]

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[103] August Klingemann, *Nachtwachen* (Penig: F. Dienemann und Comp., 1804), reprinted in *Nihilismus. Die Anfänge von Jacobi bis Nietzsche*, ed. by Dieter Arendt, pp. 196-264 (p. 238).
[104] Ibid., p. 264. Cf. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V. 5, in *The Works of Shakespeare*, 7 vols (New York: Random House, 1932), V, p. 169. 'It is a Tale | Told by an Ideot, full of sound and fury | Signifying nothing.'
[105] Jean Paul, *Clavis Fichtiana seu Leibgeberiana* (Erfurt: Hennings, 1800), in *Nihilismus. Die Anfänge von Jacobi bis Nietzsche*, ed. by Dieter Arendt, pp. 134-163 (p. 163).
[106] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998), p. 50.

It is clear where this sceptical insecurity originates; as an imaginary Hamlet writes in his correspondence with Ophelia in *Nachtwachen*:

> [D]enn ich bin für dieses Mal wirklich toll – so sehr liegt alles in uns selbst und ist außer uns nichts Reelles, ja wir wissen nach der neuesten Schule nicht, ob wir in der Tat auf den Füßen, oder auf dem Kopfe stehen.[107]

Provoked, unsettled and emboldened by Fichte's idealism, the German Romantics carried out a literary investigation of the charge of nihilism (without actually mentioning the term), by plumbing the depths of a subjectivist world view, where individual consciousness is left on its own to confront the internalised external realities of life and death without recourse to a saviour of last resort. Kreuzgang dares to say: 'Gottlob, es gibt einen Tod, und dahinter liegt keine Ewigkeit!'.[108] With characteristic boldness, the Romantics explored the ancient horror of nothingness as none had done previously in the history of Western thought. It should, perhaps, be mentioned in passing that, although Stirner is fond of name-dropping in *Der Einzige*, the German Romantics are noticeably absent, with the exception of one oblique reference to Tieck and a disdainful characterisation of Romantic heroes as somnambulists and visionaries.[109]

Dieter Arendt observes that nihilism is 'die umgekehrte Seite des Idealismus. Nihilismus kann sich nur entfalten, wo ein ontologisches Nichts vorausgeht in der ideellen Konzeption der Welt.'[110] By the beginning of the nineteenth century, it had become a 'Grundbegriff in der Diskussion um den deutschen Idealismus',[111] and was employed in this sense not only by Fichte and Hegel, but also by Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Friedrich

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[107] Klingemann, *Nachtwachen*, p. 232.
[108] Ibid., p. 239.
[109] See *EE*, pp. 264, 44.
[110] Dieter Arendt, 'Die Überwindung des Nihilismus', in *Der Nihilismus als Phänomen der Geistesgeschichte*, ed. by Dieter Arendt, pp. 350-354 (p. 350).
[111] Otto Pöggeler, 'Hegel und die Anfänge der Nihilismus-Diskussion', in *Der Nihilismus als Phänomen der Geistesgeschichte*, ed. by Dieter Arendt, pp. 307-349 (p. 312).

Schlegel and Wilhelm Traugott Krug, Kant's successor in the chair of logic and metaphysics at Königsberg.[112] It continued to be used polemically by Catholic theological reactionaries and supporters of Jacobi, like Franz Berg (1753-1821), Professor of Ecclesiastical History in Würzburg, Cajetan Weiller (1761-1826), Professor of Philosophy and Pedagogy at the Lyzeum in Munich, and Jakob Salat (1766-1851), Professor of Philosophy in Landshut, culminating in the essays, speeches and letters of Franz von Baader (1765-1841), in which he repeatedly questions the limits of human reason as a way of undermining the assertions of enlightened idealism,[113] and offers the following as a felicitous description of nihilism: '[der] für die Religion destruktive Mißbrauch der Intelligenz'.[114]

On the Protestant side, the religious philosopher and professed theist, Christian Hermann Weiße (1801-1866), used the term 'Nihilismus' in his 1833 work, *Die Idee der Gottheit*, to describe Hegel's pantheistic idealism.[115] He goes on to extend this criticism to deism, as follows: 'Der Deismus […] wie der Pantheismus führt […] zum Nihilismus: denn auch er begründet nur eine außerzeitliche, metaphysische Categorie der Gottheit, aber nicht die Erkenntniß eines von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit in aller Zeit wirklichen Gottes.'[116] As with all of the above examples, from Obereit onwards, the formula is essentially the same, connecting pantheism and Spinozism with idealism and subjectivism, which ultimately equates to atheism and ends in the nothingness of nihilism. It is this concept of nothingness, with all the fear and trembling it entails, which can be found at the heart of many of the accusations of nihilism levelled against Stirner.

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[112] See ibid., pp. 312-313.
[113] See ibid., p. 312.
[114] Franz von Baader, 'Über die Freiheit der Intelligenz', reprinted in *Nihilismus. Die Anfänge von Jacobi bis Nietzsche*, ed. by Dieter Arendt, pp. 275-289 (p. 288).
[115] See C. H. Weiße, *Die Idee der Gottheit. Eine philosophische Abhandlung. Als wissenschaftliche Grundlegung zur Philosophie der Religion* (Dresden: Ch. F. Grimmer'sche Buchhandlung, 1833), p. 225.
[116] Ibid., p. 247.

The word 'Nihilismus' also continued to appear, and to evolve, in the literature of the time. In Karl Leberecht Immermann's (1796-1840) *Die Epigonen* (1836), a romantic satire on the decline of the nobility during the Biedermeier epoch, the word appears to be used in a way that comes closer to what would become known as existential nihilism. The protagonist, Hermann, is introduced to the reader as a world-weary cynic: 'Ich habe abgeschlossen mit dem Leben. […] Ich wünsche nichts, ich verlange nichts';[117] he is later characterised as 'einen frühreifen Propheten des Nihilismus'.[118] This gradual transition of meaning was, to some extent, made possible by the fact that idealism had had its day, the actuality of the feud between philosophical idealism and theology was no longer a given, and the term nihilism as a specific denunciation of atheist subjectivism was thus becoming increasingly redundant.

What the history of the struggle had shown, however, was that there's more to nothingness than meets the eye (or the 'I', for that matter), and nihilism, on both a philosophical and literary level, had started to establish its own identity and take on a life of its own. Its remit shifted from the narrow confines of a philosophico-theological debate to a wider socio-political sphere.[119] Thus, in the 1830s, the word 'Nihilismus' was finally beginning to demonstrate an incipient universality that transcended the strict limits of its earlier usage. Rosenkranz's adoption of the word to condemn Stirner in 1844 or 1845 is one of the last uses of the term in something close to its original sense, in so far, at least, as he

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[117] Karl Leberecht Immermann, *Die Epigonen* (Berlin: Ehle, 1854), p. 5.

[118] Ibid., p. 125.

[119] The theological debate has not, even to this day, completely disappeared, as is evidenced by Professor Hans Wiersma's 2012 article on the controversial film *Monty Python's Life of Brian,* where, following in the footsteps of the legendary Malcolm Muggeridge and Mervyn Stockwood, he concludes: 'To proclaim from the cross – that sign of eternal hope for two billion Christians – that "death's the final word" is a sort of *absconditus et revelatus sub contrario*: Nihilism hidden and revealed under its opposite. […] Like it or not, you have to hand it to Monty Python for their collective stroke of genius, for crafting a last word to beat all last words. Or you can simply point out one final irony, namely, that as the chorus winds down, nihilism itself is crucified.' Hans Wiersma, 'Redeeming *Life of Brian*: How Monty Python (Ironically) Proclaims Christ *Sub Contrario*' Word & World, 32.2 (Spring 2012) 166-177 (p. 176). See also *Friday Night, Saturday Morning – Monty Python's Life of Brian*, BBC TV, 9 November 1979 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeKWVuye1YE> [accessed 24 August 2021].

continues to employ it as a derogatory epithet, although the point of reference is now clearly starting to evolve beyond the framework of idealism.[120] Two years earlier, in 1842, the Protestant theologian Johann Wilhelm Hanne (1813-1889) had published a book attacking the pantheistic nihilism of philosophy, from Spinoza, through Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, with the lineage extended to Strauss, Feuerbach and Bauer.[121] Such examples constitute a link between the original definition and the new one which was developing as a result of the enormous social changes associated with the Vormärz and the 1848 revolutions.

In literature, these changes were reflected in the group known as 'Junges Deutschland', a loose collection of young, politically progressive, secular writers, who deplored the apolitical introspection of German Romanticism and drew their ideological inspiration from the Young Hegelians. Of the authors associated with 'Junges Deutschland', the best known today are Heinrich Heine and Georg Büchner, although the main reason Heine is numbered among them is because he was included in the Frankfurt Bundestag's resolution banning publication of their works, while Büchner explicitly distanced himself from the movement (although he did consider Heine a member of the 'literary party').[122] One undisputed member of the group is Karl Gutzkow (1811-1878), who was born into a poor family in Berlin, studied at the University of Berlin, attending Hegel's and Schleiermacher's lectures, and was profoundly influenced by Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*. Gutzkow was undoubtedly familiar with Stirner, whose first article under his own name was published in Gutzkow's journal, *Telegraph für Deutschland*, in 1842.[123]

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[120] See Rosenkranz, *Aus einem Tagebuch*, p. 132f.
[121] Johann Wilhelm Hanne, *Der moderne Nihilismus und die Strauß'sche Glaubenslehre im Verhältnis zur Idee der christlichen Religion* (Bielefeld: Velhagen & Klasing, 1842).
[122] See Georg Büchner, *Werke und Briefe* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1965), p. 188.
[123] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 93.

Among Gutzkow's many literary and dramatic works is the novella *Die Nihilisten*, published in serial form in 1853 and as a book in 1856. It is the story of a group of young radicals around the emancipated heroine, Hertha Wingolf. The tone is set in the first chapter, where she is seen to be 'studying' Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums*.[124] The nihilists in question are her suitor, Constantin Ulrichs, and his bosom friend Jean Reps (originally Johann Repse, but renamed at university as a token of the overcoming of Jean Paul),[125] who are designated nihilists because '[n]ichts ist ihnen […] erwiesen, nichts fest'.[126] But the term also reflects their failure to realise their revolutionary ideals (Ulrichs becomes a respected, well-to-do lawyer, and Reps a feltware manufacturer), and, as such, the book can be seen as an expression of disillusionment at the failure of the 1848 revolutions. What is significant, however, from a terminological point of view, is that in Germany, 'Nihilist' was, by the middle of the nineteenth century, sufficiently familiar to be used in the title of a novella, and sufficiently nuanced to incorporate different aspects of moral scepticism and political radicalism.[127]

The word 'Nihilismus' was not only becoming relatively common at this time but was also being used in various different contexts. Joseph von Radowitz (1797-1853), a conservative Prussian statesman, employed the term in 1846 to describe the lax morals of contemporary society: 'Wenn […] in der Politik wie im Leben, von den Pflichten, welche

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[124] See Karl Gutzkow, *Gesammelte Werke*, 12 vols (Jena: Costenoble, 1879), III, p. 152. 'Feuerbach's *Wesen des Christenthums* läßt sich nicht lesen, sondern nur studiren.'
[125] See ibid., p. 165.
[126] Ibid., p. 252.
[127] The term was also spreading to other countries. The Scottish metaphysician, Sir William Hamilton (1788-1856), who visited Germany in 1817 and 1820 and was influenced by the philosophy of Kant, wrote in his *Lectures on Metaphysics*: 'This doctrine [that all our knowledge of mind or matter, is only a consciousness of various bundles of baseless appearances], as refusing a substantial reality to the phaenomenal [*sic*] existence of which we are conscious, is called Nihilism; […] we have an illustrious example of Nihilism in Hume.' Sir William Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1861), p. 294.

Recht und Ehre auferlegen, ganz abgesehen wird, so scheitert selbst die gewöhnliche Klugheit bei dem Beharren im Nihilismus.'[128] In the same year, Berthold Auerbach makes a similar observation:

> Eine moderne Richtung versucht es bereits vielfach, die atheistische Verzweifelung im Volke auszubreiten […]. Dieser moderne Nihilismus steht in philosophischem Gewande auf gleicher Linie mit der von ihm hart bekämpften subjektiven Romantik; es bleibt ihm kein Maß und keine Richtung, er hält sich blos an das subjektive Belieben, dessen momentane Gelüste alle gerechtfertigt sein sollen.[129]

Feuerbach, in a letter of 28 November 1860 writes about how 'der Schopenhauersche Quietismus und Nihilismus namentlich bei der Jugend zahlreiche Anhänger habe'.[130] Another philosopher, Eduard von Hartmann (1842-1906), was also familiar with the term, using it in his *Philosophie des Unbewussten* (1869) in relation to mystics like Jacob Böhme: 'Wir finden bei dem grössten Theile der Mystiker eine Abwendung vom thätigen Leben […] sogar Streben nach geistigem und körperlichem Nihilismus.'[131] In the same year, a book was published by Max Müller with the title *Ueber den Buddhistischen Nihilismus*.[132] Victor Hugo (1802-1885), meanwhile, was still using the word as a condemnation of the rejection of transcendence: 'Denial of the infinite leads directly to nihilism.'[133] Hugo endows the word with the anti-subjectivist overtones of Jacobi's denunciation of Fichte: 'With nihilism no discussion is possible. For the logical nihilist doubts the existence of his interlocutor, and is not quite sure

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[128] Joseph von Radowitz, *Gespräche aus der Gegenwart über Staat und Kirche* (Stuttgart: Ad. Becher's Verlag, 1851), p. 328.
[129] Berthold Auerbach, *Schrift und Volk. Grundzüge der volksthümlichen Literatur* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1846), p. 304.
[130] Ludwig Feuerbach, *Gesammelte Werke,* ed. by Werner Schuffenhauer, 21 vols (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1973-1996), XX (1996), p. 314.
[131] Eduard von Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewussten*, 2nd edn (Berlin: Carl Duncker, 1870), p. 289.
[132] Max Müller, *Ueber den Buddhistischen Nihilismus* (Kiel: C. F. Mohr, 1869).
[133] Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables* [*sic*], trans. by Charles E. Wilbour (New York: The Modern Library, 1902), p. 438.

he exists himself.'[134] At the same time, by way, apparently, of logical proof of his opinion, he repeats the thoroughly discredited Pythagorean-Aristotelian denial of the existence of zero: 'Nihilism has no scope. There is no nothing. Zero does not exist. Everything is something. Nothing is nothing.'[135]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, use of the term 'nihilism' was becoming more and more widespread, with an ever-increasing diversity of meanings. Despite this, and as noted in Chapter 1, neither the word 'Nihilismus' nor any of its derivatives appears in Stirner's published works; nihilism's growing prominence does not seem to have made much of an impression on Stirner. It is nonetheless conceivable that the fact of his having lived during a time when nihilism was a developing issue of intellectual interest, and, indeed, having died shortly before its dramatic popularisation (which is the next topic to be addressed), may have influenced the opinions of his readers and critics.

Nihilism's Transformation in the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century

The decisive developments in the etymology of nihilism occurred after Stirner's death in 1856. The first of these came about with the publication of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* in 1862, which, for the first time, introduced the word 'nihilist' to a mass audience. In his postscript to the 1869 edition, Turgenev even claimed to have invented the word, despite its increasing prevalence in Germany, where Turgenev had lived from 1838 to 1841 while studying in Berlin (where he became acquainted with the Young Hegelians, including Bruno Bauer and Stirner),

[134] Ibid., pp. 438-439. Nietzsche mentions Hugo quite often, mainly in his posthumous fragments, invariably disparagingly, and often together with Wagner: 'große Charlatanerie Victor Hugo's [*sic*] und R. Wagners'. *KGW*, VIII.ii. 100, *NF-1887*, 9[171]. Also, 'Victor Hugo: oder der Pharus am Meere des Unsinns'. Ibid., VI.iii. 105, *GD-Streifzuege-1*.

[135] Hugo, *Les Miserables*, p. 439.

and from 1863 to 1870 in Baden-Baden.[136] His claim is especially remarkable, not to say disingenuous, as, according to Tomáš Masaryk, the word 'nihilism' had been used previously in Russia as well (apparently since 1829),[137] leading Masaryk to conclude: 'Die Anklage des Nihilismus findet sich um diese Zeit öfters, Turgenev hat für seinen Roman nicht nur den neuen Typus, sondern auch seine Benennung vorgefunden.'[138]

What Turgenev undeniably did do, however, was to popularise the word, which had till then been largely confined to a specific philosophical debate and to literature of limited readership, as well as to give it a clear and elaborate definition. Arkady, in *Fathers and Sons*, explains: 'A nihilist is a person who does not take any principle for granted, however much that principle may be revered.'[139] He doesn't 'recognize any authorities', repudiates everything, and is interested only in destruction because '[t]he ground must be cleared first'.[140] Turgenev's incarnation of nihilism is, tellingly, a man of science, a medical student named Bazarov. He is arrogant, aggressive, argumentative and disrespectful to his elders, and yet, paradoxically, it is he who commands the reader's deepest sympathy. If Turgenev's remarks about his (anti-)hero are to be believed, this is completely intentional. He called Bazarov his 'beloved child' and said 'that he shared almost all Bazarov's views, all save those on art'. He declared to a group of radical Russian students in Heidelberg: 'if the reader does not love Bazarov, as he is – coarse, heartless, ruthlessly dry and brusque … the fault is mine; I have

[136] See Arendt, 'Introduction', in *Nihilismus*, p. 75.
[137] See Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, p. 217. See also Stephen Lovell, 'Nihilism, Russian', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/nihilism-russian/v-1/sections/the-nihilist-movement-materialism-as-way-of-life> [accessed 24 August 2021]. Examples given include the young professor of German, Nikolai Nadezhdin, in his fight against Romanticism, and Nikolai Dobrolyubov in 1858, while discussing the reactionary attack on the valid scepticism of the young intelligentsia.
[138] Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *Zur russischen Geschichts- und Religionsphilosophie. Soziologische Skizzen*, 2 vols (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1913), II, p. 93.
[139] Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. by Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 94.
[140] Ibid., pp. 123, 124.

not succeeded in my task.' He also 'told the anarchist Kropotkin that he loved Bazarov "very, very much … I will show you my diaries – you will see how I wept when I ended the book with Bazarov's death."'[141] It is hard to deny that Turgenev did succeed in his task, giving the word nihilism its first truly, if by no means exclusively, positive slant in the process.

The reason why Bazarov elicits sympathy is because he confronts directly and without compromise the core problems of modern, post-religious man. The first of these is the fundamental meaninglessness of existence:

> The tiny bit of space I occupy is so minute in comparison with the rest of the universe, where I am not and which is not concerned with me; and the period of time in which it is my lot to live is so infinitesimal compared with the eternity in which I have not been and shall not be… And yet here, in this atom which is myself, in this mathematical point, blood circulates, the brain operates and aspires to something too… What a monstrous business! What futility![142]

The second human problem Bazarov tackles is the illusory nature of love. He says to Anna Sergeyevna, the object of his unrequited attentions: 'And besides, love…is a purely imaginary feeling.'[143] The third problem he addresses is the finality of personal extinction:

> 'Farewell' he said with sudden force, and his eyes flashed a last gleam. 'Farewell…. Listen…. You know, I never kissed you then…. Breathe on the dying flame and let it go out…'
> Anna Sergeyevna touched his forehead with her lips.
> 'Enough!' he murmured, and sank back on the pillow. 'Now…darkness…'
> Anna Sergeyevna went softly out of the room.
> 'Well?' Vassily Ivanych asked her in a whisper.
> 'He has fallen asleep,' she replied, almost inaudibly.

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[141] See Isaiah Berlin, 'Fathers and Children, the Romanes Lecture 1970', in Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. by Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 7-61 (pp. 38-39).
[142] Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, p. 208. Cf. Levin's statement to Oblonsky, brother of the title character in *Anna Karenina*: 'This whole world of ours is only a speck of mildew sprung up on a tiny planet; yet we think we can have something great – thoughts, actions! They are all but grains of sand! | If you once realize that to-morrow, if not to-day, you will die and nothing will be left of you, everything becomes insignificant!' Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. by Louise and Aylmer Maude (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 375.
[143] Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, p. 262.

Bazarov was not destined to wake again.[144]

This simple dialogue is a supreme example of understated pathos, a demonstration of Turgenev's mastery of his art, and a challenge to the reader's stoic fortitude. Life, love and death: this is the new matrix in which the word 'nihilism' now operates.

Turgenev not only gave the term a far wider audience than ever before, both in and beyond Russia, but he also effectively christened the radical political movements of the time in his homeland, in so far as Dmitry Pisarev (1840-1868) assimilated and adopted the epithet 'nihilist' after having read *Fathers and Sons*, and it was extended by association to his rival Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) despite the latter's vehement protestations.[145] Pisarev and Chernyshevsky were the ideological leaders of the two branches of Russian nihilism in the late 1850s and 1860s, each faction having its own mouthpiece in the periodicals *Russkoe Slovo* (Russian Word) and *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary), respectively. What they both had in common was atheism, materialism, positivism, scientism and the demand for social change. They differed, however, in their vision of the latter: 'Chernyshevsky's aim was the Westernisation of Russia, following Feuerbach and Fichte in a process of anthropocentrism.'[146] Pisarev, on the other hand, was an uncompromising extremist, taking social utilitarianism so far that he (in)famously justified matricide.[147] While it is impossible to prove a direct link between Stirner and either Pisarev or Chernyshevsky, the distinct phenomenon of Russian nihilism is relevant to this study, firstly because there is some

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[144] Ibid., p. 289.

[145] See Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, p. 13.

[146] Ibid. Chernyshevsky's novel, *What Is To Be Done?*, was written in response to *Fathers and Sons*, and was, in turn, ridiculed as social utopianism by Dostoevsky (1821-1881) in *Letters from the Underworld*. See Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. by Michael R. Katz (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1989); Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Letters from the Underworld, The Gentle Maiden, The Landlady*, trans. by C. J. Hogarth (London: Dent, 1973), pp. 38-44.

[147] See Vercellone, *Einführung in den Nihilismus*, p. 55. 'Pisarew stellte […] die Frage, ob es zulässig sei, seine eigene Mutter zu töten, und er bejaht sie, sofern dies "nützlich" oder wünschenswert sei.'

evidence of Stirner's influence on its forefathers, and secondly because Stirner has been accused of similar tendencies to those of the Russian nihilists. These issues will be discussed further in Chapter 5 below.

Once nihilism had been identified, thanks to Turgenev, with subversive political movements in Russia, the term was handed on, again by association, to the next generation of radicals, most notably to Sergey Gennadiyevich Nechaev (1847-1882), the author of the infamous 'Revolutionary Catechism', written in 1869, which opens with the chilling words:

> 1. The revolutionary is a doomed man. He has no personal interests, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property, and no name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and the single passion for revolution.
> 2. The revolutionary knows that in the very depths of his being […] he has broken all the bonds which tie him to the social order and the civilized world with all its laws, moralities, and customs, and with all its generally accepted conventions. He is their implacable enemy, and if he continues to live with them it is only in order to destroy them more speedily.[148]

For Nechaev, the Machiavelli of Russian nihilism, the end always justifies the means. Three months after completing the 'Catechism' he carried out, with the help of his comrades, the brutal murder of the student Ivan Ivanov, a dissenting former member of his revolutionary group, 'Narodnaya Rasprava' (People's Retribution).[149] The profoundly religious Dostoevsky was deeply disturbed by the political climate in Russia, and the murder of Ivanov was a powerful inspiration for one of his great anti-nihilist novels, *Demons* (1871-72). Ivanov is the model for the character Ivan Pavlovich Shatov, who is assassinated by Pyotr Stepanovich

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[148] Sergey Gennadiyevich Nechaev, 'The Revolutionary Catechism', §1, 2 (1869), in *Marxists Internet Archive* <https://www.marxists.org/subject/anarchism/nechayev/catechism.htm> [accessed 24 August 2021]. Even Bakunin, the father of collectivist anarchism, who collaborated with Nechaev on the 'Catechism', felt compelled to condemn his extremism. See Michael Confino, ed., *Daughter of a Revolutionary. Natalie Herzen and the Bakunin-Nechayev Circle*, trans. by Hilary Sternberg and Lydia Bott (London: Alcove Press, 1974), pp. 244, 277.

[149] See Ronald Hingley, *Nihilists: Russian Radicals and Revolutionaries in the Reign of Alexander II (1855-81)* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), pp. 58-59.

Verkhovensky, the villain of the piece, modelled on Nechaev. Unlike in *Fathers and Sons*, what sympathy there is, is for the victim, Shatov, although he is little more than a pathetic effigy of reborn innocence, whose role, it seems, is largely to contrast, offset and exaggerate the malignant depravity of the nihilists, his murderers.[150]

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) and his fellow anti-nihilist authors, Nikolai Leskov (1831-1895) and Aleksey Pisemsky (1821-1881), but also Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), each in his own different way, helped to immortalise Russian nihilism as a radical political movement related to anarchism and terrorism, which was bent on the violent destruction of all forms of authority. The association with terrorism was fed by events on the ground. In 1866 there had been an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Tsar Alexander II by Dmitry Karakozov. A decade later a whole series of political shootings and stabbings of military, police and government officials took place, including Vera Zasulich's attempt on the life of Colonel Trepov, which was the inspiration behind Oscar Wilde's first play, *Vera; or, the Nihilists* (1880).[151] Meanwhile, the unsuccessful attempts on the Tsar's life had continued; there were five in total, in 1866, 1867, twice in 1879, and 1880, culminating in his assassination by bomb in 1881, which was carried out by a group called 'Narodnaya Volya' (People's Will). In the aftermath, the nihilist movement in Russia was brutally suppressed by the Imperial authorities, at the head of which was the autocratic new Tsar, Alexander III, who had witnessed first-hand the gruesome death of his father.

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[150] Dostoevsky's abhorrence of nihilism is also evident in his satirical caricature of Turgenev in *Demons*, as the flamboyant Karmazinov, who is ridiculed for his support for, and legitimation of, nihilism. See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. by Robert A. Maguire (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 236. 'The great writer was mortally afraid of the rising generation of young revolutionaries, and […] sucked up to them shamelessly, mainly because they paid absolutely no attention to him.'

[151] See Pistolero, 'A History of Russian Nihilism', *Pistols Drawn: the site of nihilist anarchy* <http://pistolsdrawn.org/a-history-of-russian-nihilism/> [accessed 24 August 2021].

Russian nihilism never recovered. However much its successor might have owed to it, it was entirely superseded in the socio-political arena by the more potent, and constructive, force of revolutionary communism.[152] Nihilophiles need not have worried, though. Back in Western Europe, the birthplace of nihilism, the germination of its greatest redefinition and re-evaluation was already underway, which would cement forever nihilism's place in the history of ideas and create a version of the word which corresponds to many of the most entrenched opinions about Stirner's nihilism. Nietzsche first mentions 'Nihilisten' in his writings in the summer of 1880:

> Der Trost Luthers als die Sache nicht vorwärtsgieng, 'Untergang der Welt'. Die Nihilisten hatten Schopenhauer als Philosophen. Alle die extrem Aktiven wollen die Welt in Stücke gehen lassen, wenn sie ihren Willen als unmöglich erkennen (Wotan).[153]

By Nietzsche's standards, this is a relatively innocuous start to his treatment of a word which would become so fundamental to his philosophy. The next appearance comes just five fragments later, this time specifying the type of nihilism to which he is referring: 'Man beantwortet jetzt allgemein die Frage ob die russischen Nihilisten unmoralischer seien als die russischen Beamten zu Gunsten der Nihilisten.'[154] The word 'Nihilismus' follows soon

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[152] See Isaiah Berlin, 'Introduction', in Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*, trans. by Francis Haskell (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966), pp. vii-xxx (p. xxx). 'Communist practice owed much, as Lenin was always ready to admit, to the Populist movement; for it borrowed the technique of its rival and adapted it with conspicuous success to serve the precise purpose which it had been invented to resist.'

[153] *KGW*, v.i. 455, *NF-1880*, 4[103].

[154] Ibid., p. 457-458. It is safe to assume that, at the beginning of the 1880s, Nietzsche's knowledge of the phenomenon of Russian nihilism was in its factual rather than fictional form. Venturi observes that stories of Russian nihilists were commonplace in 'French, English and Italian newspapers of the 'seventies' and there is no reason to believe that German ones were any different. See Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 326. Alexander Herzen and Mikhail Bakunin are mentioned in Nietzsche's letters and fragments starting from 1872 and 1873 respectively. See *KGB*, II.iii. 41, *BVN-1872*, 248 (Herzen); *KGW*, III.iv. 182, *NF-1873*, 26[14] (Bakunin). Nietzsche does not mention Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in his published works and/or fragments and/or letters until early 1887. See *KGB*, III.v. 21, *BVN-1887*, 798 and 27, *BVN-1887*, 804 (Dostoevsky); *KGW*, VIII.ii. 73, *NF-1887*, 9[126] (Tolstoy); *KGB*, III.v. 192, *BVN-1887*, 948 (Turgenev).

afterwards in a letter of 13 March 1881 to Heinrich Köselitz (Peter Gast): 'Ich bedarf aller Arten Gesundheit – es ist mir etwas zu tief in's Herz gegangen, dieser "herzbrecherische Nihilismus"!'.[155]

From these unremarkable beginnings emerged a concept which has played a major role in the philosophy and literature of the twentieth century and beyond. Six and a half years later, Nietzsche was writing in apocalyptic style: 'Was ich erzähle, ist die Geschichte der nächsten zwei Jahrhunderte. Ich beschreibe, was kommt, was nicht mehr anders kommen kann: d i e H e r a u f k u n f t d e s N i h i l i s m u s .'[156] In an earlier fragment, he offers a definition of the phenomenon which he predicts will convulse humanity: 'Nihilism: es fehlt das Ziel; es fehlt die Antwort auf das "Warum?" was bedeutet Nihilism? – d a ß d i e o b e r s t e n W e r t h e s i c h e n t w e r t h e n .'[157] The result of this upheaval in people's minds is that 'alles Geschehen sinnlos und umsonstig ist'.[158] Here, finally, is nihilism in a form which is instantly recognisable today; no longer is it just a term of critical rebuke or a simple embodiment of the negativity that the word implies.

While Turgenev may have been responsible for the popularisation of the term 'nihilism', the most significant turning point in its etymological development is to be found in Nietzsche's formulation of a sophisticated and elaborate concept based on the prophecy of a profound spiritual malaise at the heart of Western civilisation. Thus, the word had changed in the course of the nineteenth century from being a two-dimensional, exclusively negative label, whose meaning depended wholly on its specific reference, to a potentially positive (or at least

[155] Ibid., III.i. 68, *BVN-1881*, 88. Nietzsche's comment is a response to Köselitz's letter of 10 March, in which he comments, 'dass Schuré in einem Brief an Wagner Ihre jetzigen Meinungen als "herzbrecherischen Nihilismus" (nihilisme écouré) bezeichnet habe'. Ibid., III.ii. 144, *BAN-1884*, 61.
[156] *KGW*, VIII.ii. 431, *NF-1887*, 11[411].
[157] Ibid., p. 14, *NF-1887*, 9[35].
[158] Ibid., p. 287, *NF-1887*, 11[97].

not necessarily negative), three-dimensional, free-standing conceptualisation of a pervasive socio-cultural phenomenon. Having started as little more than a polemical device, albeit one of utterly judgmental condemnation,[159] it developed into a complex and commonly used concept, focused above all on the crisis caused by the erosion and collapse of religious certainty concerning absolute truth and personal immortality, itself precipitated by advances in science and reason.

Nihilism in this new sense is essentially the result of the head-on clash of enlightened human consciousness with the fact of its own ephemerality, and, as such, 'the danger of nihilism', as Rosen points out, 'is a permanent human possibility'.[160] Such a definition, which can engender an overwhelming denial of meaning and purpose, has the potential to remain actual for as long as man has critical self-awareness and dies, unless a believable myth is created that can defuse the crisis by making immortality credible or oblivion attractive. Rosen is more pessimistic: he declares that nihilism 'cannot be "solved" without the dissolution of human nature'.[161] Certainly it is an intractable problem which, if secularisation theory is correct, is likely to become worse as the sophistication of human thought grows in inverse proportion to human credulity.[162]

One of the principal aims of this study is to ascertain how and where Stirner fits into this bleak picture. Indeed, the Nietzschean definition of nihilism plays such a key part in this investigation, especially because of the frequent association of Stirner with Nietzsche, that the

[159] There is a parallel with the word 'cynic' (Κυνικοί, meaning dog-like) as applied to Diogenes of Sinope: 'the term may have begun as an insult referring to Diogenes' style of life, especially his proclivity for performing all of his activities in public. Shamelessness, which allowed Diogenes to use any space for any purpose, was primary in the invention of "Diogenes the Dog".' Julie Piering, 'Cynics', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://www.iep.utm.edu/cynics/> [accessed 24 August 2021].
[160] Rosen, *Nihilism*, p. xiv.
[161] Ibid., p. xx.
[162] See Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

next chapter will be dedicated to dissecting its multiple layers of meaning, tracing its development since Nietzsche's death and considering what connections it may or may not have with Stirner's philosophy. This will also afford the opportunity to examine the relationship between these two nineteenth-century German philosophers, whose lives and ideas both contrast and overlap.

Chapter Three

The Tragic Age for Europe: Nihilism from Nietzsche to Now

Nietzsche's Uncanny Guest

In order to understand the relevance of nihilism to Stirner's thought, there is no more important definition of the term than the one fashioned by Nietzsche in the course of his last eight and a half years of lucidity, from 1880 to 1889. As the predominant interpretation from that time onwards, Nietzschean nihilism has coloured, to a greater or lesser degree, all but the first fifty years of the discussion around Stirner and nihilism. Because of its specific application to Stirner, which, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, is both implicit and explicit in nature, as well as its general significance for the modern understanding of the word, the meaning and impact of Nietzschean nihilism requires our special attention.

In the nearly two and a half centuries of nihilism's semantic evolution up to the present day, Nietzsche plays the pivotal role. Goudsblom calls Nietzsche 'the first man to describe nihilism in detail',[1] while Kuhn observes: 'Suchte man nach einer Kristallisation der Geschichte des Nihilismus-Begriffs, so war sie in Nietzsches Philosophie des europäischen Nihilismus zu finden.'[2] Nietzsche took a word that had recently undergone rapid development, both in its prevalence and complexity, and transformed it into a radical new concept that encapsulated the crisis of Western modernity. Ever since, the common perception of nihilism has been based to a great extent on Nietzsche's diagnosis, not least because of the

[1] Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture*, p. 18.
[2] Elisabeth Kuhn, *Friedrich Nietzsches Philosophie des europäischen Nihilismus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1992), p. V.

extraordinary influence he has had on subsequent generations of thinkers, artists and writers.[3] As Gillespie says: 'When it comes to our understanding of nihilism, we are almost all Nietzscheans.'[4]

It is, in a sense, Stirner's misfortune to have been so closely linked to Nietzsche at the time of the decisive, so-called first Stirner 'renaissance', which was largely brought about by the coincidence of three events: firstly, Hartmann's attack on Nietzsche in 1891 (discussed in more detail below), in which he used Stirner as a weapon; secondly, the publication of Lauterbach's new edition of *Der Einzige* in 1893 in Reclam's low-priced, high-circulation Universal-Bibliothek,[5] where he compares the two philosophers in his short introduction; and, thirdly, Nietzsche's meteoric rise to fame in the last decade of the nineteenth century, which inadvertently shone light on Stirner.[6] One of the abiding outcomes of this concurrence is the assumption that Nietzsche's thought and Stirner's share characteristics and concerns,

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[3] J. P. Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. x. Stern lists Rilke, Yeats, Valéry, H. G. Wells, D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, George Bernard Shaw and Gottfried Benn among Nietzsche's followers, although the full list is of course considerably longer (and constantly growing). There are numerous studies of Nietzsche's 'influence' including: Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Erich Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche: Ten Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Bruno Hillebrand, ed., *Nietzsche und die deutsche Literatur* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1978); Roger Kimball, 'The legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche', *The New Criterion*, 10.1 (September 1991), 28-38 (p. 30) <https://www.newcriterion.com/ issues/1991/9/the-legacy-of-friedrich-nietzsche> [accessed 24 August 2021]; Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche's French Legacy: A Genealogy of Poststructuralism* (London: Routledge, 1995); Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[4] Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, p. xii.

[5] See Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, ed. by Paul Lauterbach (Leipzig: Reclam, 1893). For a detailed discussion of Lauterbach's motivation for publishing *Der Einzige*, which prompted the first Stirner renaissance, see Laska, *Ein heimlicher Hit*, pp. 18-23.

[6] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 10. 'Unterdessen hatte Stirner eine Art Wiedergeburt erlebt. […] Vor Allem [*sic*] […] der grosse Einfluss, den Friedrich Nietzsche täglich mehr besonders auf die junge Generation ausübte, hatte […] die Aufmerksamkeit seinem Buche zugelenkt, das wieder viel gelesen, häufig erwähnt und nun auch durch eine billige Ausgabe in der Reclam'schen Universal-Bibliothek den weiten Kreis zugänglich gemacht wurde.' See also Egon Friedell, *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt a. M.: Zweitausendeins, 2009), p. 719. 'So viel ist richtig, daß die Stirnerrenaissance der letzten Jahrzehnte mit der Heraufkunft der Nietzschischen [*sic*] […] Philosophie in Zusammenhang steht.'

including those relating to nihilism, a belief that is reinforced by apparent similarities in their writings.

The aim of the present chapter is therefore to consider Nietzsche's role in the question of Stirner's nihilism, not only because Nietzsche's definition of the term has often been applied to Stirner, but also because of the possibility that Stirner's ideas were known to Nietzsche and used, or even plagiarised, by him as an ingredient of the 'pernicious cultural condition which he believed was gradually overtaking European civilization'.[7] While dissecting Nietzsche's definition serves to illuminate the important question of whether Stirner's thought can be viewed as nihilistic in a Nietzschean sense, evidence of Stirner's influence on, and contribution to, the genesis of Nietzschean nihilism, which is an idea put forward most forcibly by Laska,[8] would make it hard, if not impossible, to deny the charge that Stirner is a nihilist, or, at least, that his thought possesses some (proto-)nihilistic elements. Among other things, this chapter will seek to demonstrate that Laska's claim, while both interesting and astute, is too heavily reliant on conjecture to be considered as evidence for Stirner's nihilism.

Our first task is to attempt to gain an understanding of what Nietzsche meant by nihilism, an undertaking which is not as straightforward as it might seem, owing not only to the complexity of his ideas on the subject but also to how they are presented. Nietzsche writes in a distinct 'hybrid mode' of language that Stern calls 'literary-philosophical' and which is replete with metaphor.[9] Thus, nihilism is famously introduced to the reader in the dramatic opening line of the expanded 1906 edition of *Der Wille zur Macht*, as a mysterious and

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[7] R. Kevin Hill, 'Introduction', in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Michael A. Scarpitti and R. Kevin Hill (London: Penguin, 2017), pp. xi-xxv (p. xvii).
[8] See Laska, 'Nietzsches initiale Krise', pp. 109-133.
[9] See J. P. Stern, 'Nietzsche and the Idea of Metaphor', in *Nietzsche: Imagery and Thought*, ed. by Malcolm Pasley (London: Methuen, 1978), pp. 64-82.

shadowy figure: 'Der Nihilismus steht vor der Thür: woher kommt uns dieser unheimlichste aller Gäste?'.[10] Although *Der Wille zur Macht* is a largely discredited and often derided attempt by Nietzsche's sister (and her philological henchmen in the 'Nietzsche-Archiv' on the 'Lügenhügel'),[11] to produce, or fabricate, a systematic philosophical magnum opus by disingenuous and unscholarly means, based only loosely on Nietzsche's own abandoned plans,[12] the book's popularity since publication is undeniable.[13] Indeed, there is no more influential work of Nietzsche regarding nihilism; it has been described by one commentator as 'das einflußreichste Buch, das nie geschrieben wurde'.[14] What is important for us here is

[10] *KGW*, VIII.i. 123, *NF-1885*, 2[127]. See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht: Versuch einer Umwerthung aller Werthe; aus dem Nachlaß 1884-1888* (Leipzig: C. G. Naumann, 1906), p. 7. The first, shorter version of *Der Wille zur Macht* was published in 1901. The 1901 edition has 483 aphorisms, while the 1906 edition contains 1,067. See Karl Schlechta, 'Philologischer Nachbericht', in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden,* ed. by Karl Schlechta, 2nd edn (Munich: Hanser, 1960), III, 1393-1405 (p. 1394). Inspiration for the idea of the uncanny guest probably came from Hoffmann's tale, 'Der unheimliche Gast', in *Die Serapionsbrüder*, first published in 1819. See *E. T. A. Hoffmann's gesammelte Schriften*, 6 vols (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1871-1873), III (1872), pp. 92-133.

[11] This was the expression of Nietzsche's friend, Heinrich Köselitz (1854-1918) (pseudonym Peter Gast), uttered in his despair after his departure from the Nietzsche Archive. See David Marc Hoffmann, ed., *Franz Overbeck, Heinrich Köselitz: Briefwechsel* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1998), p. 771 (Köselitz to Ernst Holzer, 4 July 1909, GSA 102/664).

[12] Nietzsche abandoned his plan, mentioned at the end of *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, for a book entitled *Der Wille zur Macht* in the summer of 1888, a few months before his mental breakdown. See *KGW*, VI.ii. 427, *GM-III-27*. 'Jene Dinge sollen von mir in einem andren Zusammenhange gründlicher und härter angefasst werden (unter dem Titel "Zur Geschichte des europäischen *Nihilismus*"; ich verweise dafür auf ein Werk, das ich vorbereite: **Der Wille zur Macht**, Versuch einer Umwerthung aller Werthe).' See also his letter to Bernhard and Elisabeth Förster of 2 September 1886: 'Für die nächsten 4 Jahre ist die Ausarbeitung eines vierbändigen Hauptwerks angekündigt; der Titel ist schon zum Fürchten-Machen: "Der Wille zur Macht. Versuch einer Umwerthung aller Werthe".' *KGB*, III.iii. 241, *BVN-1886*, 741. Nietzsche specifically refers to it as a 'Hauptwerk' or magnum opus. Two years later, he was still writing about his magnum opus, this time in a letter to his publisher Constantin Georg Naumann. See ibid., III.v. 411, *BVN-1888*, 1103. For a discussion of the questionable activities of the Nietzsche Archive, see Dieter Fuchs, '"Der Wille zur Macht": die Geburt des "Hauptwerks" aus dem Geiste des Nietzsche-Archivs', *Nietzsche-Studien*, 26 (1997), 384-404. See also David Marc Hoffmann, *Zur Geschichte des Nietzsche-Archivs* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1991), p. 49f.; Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche. Biographie seines Denkens* (Munich: Hanser, 2000), p. 295.

[13] Heidegger even went as far as to say: 'Die eigentliche Philosophie [Nietzsches] bleibt als "Nachlaß" zurück.' Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 2 vols (Pfullingen: Neske, 1961), I, p. 17.

[14] Dirk Schaefer, *Im Namen Nietzsches. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche und Lou Andreas-Salomé* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2001), p. 188.

not the credibility of this posthumous collection of notes, but how effectively it has propagated the haunting image of nihilism as a sinister, uninvited guest.

Concerning the reason for nihilism's appearance, in a fragment from the 'Lenzer Heide' text (also included in *Der Wille zur Macht*), Nietzsche ties it inextricably to 'that lurid metaphor',[15] as Stern calls it, the death of God: '[S]o ist der Glaube an die absolute Immoralität der Natur, an die Zweck- und Sinnlosigkeit der psychologisch nothwendige Affekt, wenn der Glaube an Gott und eine essentiell moralische Ordnung nicht mehr zu halten ist. Der Nihilismus erscheint jetzt.'[16] Nietzsche's best-known account of God's demise, once again expressed in figurative language, is the allegory of 'Der tolle Mensch' ('The Parable of the Madman') in section 125 of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882), in which the madman, like Diogenes the Cynic, wanders around the marketplace in broad daylight with a lamp, searching in vain not, as Diogenes had, for an honest man, but for God, before revealing to the bystanders: 'Wir haben ihn getödtet […]! Wir Alle sind seine Mörder!'.[17] He then proceeds to outline the consequences of this act of deicide in a crescendo of increasingly terrifying questions:

> Wohin bewegen wir uns? Fort von allen Sonnen? Stürzen wir nicht fortwährend? […] Giebt es noch ein Oben und ein Unten? Irren wir nicht wie durch ein unendliches Nichts? Haucht uns nicht der leere Raum an? Ist es nicht kälter geworden? Kommt nicht immerfort die Nacht und mehr Nacht? […] Hören wir noch nichts von dem Lärm der Todtengräber, welche Gott begraben? Riechen wir noch Nichts von der göttlichen Verwesung? – auch Götter verwesen! Gott ist todt! Gott bleibt todt! Und wir haben ihn getödtet! […] Ist nicht die Größe dieser That zu groß für uns? Müssen wir nicht selber zu Göttern werden, um nur ihrer würdig zu erscheinen?[18]

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[15] Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche,* p. 53.

[16] *KGW*, VIII.i. 216, *NF-1886*, 5[71]. For the importance of the 'Lenzer Heide' text for an understanding of Nietzsche's concept of nihilism, see Tongeren, *Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism*, pp. 47-50. Tongeren notes how this text was dismembered by the editors of *Der Wille zur Macht*.

[17] *KGW*, V.ii. 159, *FW-125*.

[18] Ibid., V.ii. 159, *FW-125*. Nietzsche's first use of the phrase 'Gott ist todt' in his published works occurs a little earlier in section 108 of Book 3 of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. *KGW*, V.ii. 145, *FW-108*. It appears in an

This powerful parable is one of the most frequently cited passages from Nietzsche's oeuvre, though not, as its notoriety might lead one to believe, because it is the first historical appearance of the distinct idea of the death of God (as opposed to the simple fact of God's non-existence). This honour should arguably be bestowed more correctly on Hegel, although Hegel uses the concept to refer to the crucifixion as part of the dialectical process resulting in the emergence of God's complete revelation as Absolute Spirit.[19] It is, in other words, a quite different concept to the finality of Nietzsche's pronouncement.

A generation later, Stirner, who, unlike Hegel, was a self-confessed and uncompromising atheist, employed the image of man's murder of God to describe the transformation of Christian morality into secular humanism, initiated by Feuerbach's anthropologisation of theology. Like Nietzsche after him, he remarks on man's inclination not only to kill, but also to supplant, God: '[M]an hat nicht gemerkt, dass der Mensch den Gott getötet hat, um nun – "alleiniger Gott in der Höhe" zu werden.'[20] Those who have asserted that Nietzsche plagiarised Stirner have made much of the similarity between their depictions of deicide, but Stirner is far from being Nietzsche's only possible source for the idea, if, indeed, a source were needed. In the generation after Stirner, the notion of the death of God resurfaced in the philosophy of the radical, anti-natalistic pessimism of Philipp Mainländer

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unpublished fragment from Autumn 1881 (the time when he was writing *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*). See ibid., V.ii. 488, *NF-1881*, 12[77]. The ideas in the fragment correspond, in an abbreviated form, to those in 'Der tolle Mensch'. The 'Gott ist todt' metaphor is developed further in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, where God is said to have died of his pity for man. See ibid., VI.i. 111, *Za-II-Mitleidige*.

[19] See Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen*, in *Hegel's Werke,* I, p. 157. 'Der reine Begriff aber, oder die Unendlichkeit, als der Abgrund des Nichts, worin alles Seyn versinkt, muß den unendlichen Schmerz, der vorher nur in der Bildung geschichtlich und als das Gefühl war, worauf die Religion der neuen Zeit beruht, – das Gefühl: Gott selbst ist todt, […] rein als Moment, […] der höchsten Idee bezeichnen.' Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Hegel's Werke,* II, p. 570. 'Der […] Tod der *Abstraktion des göttlichen Wesens* […] ist das schmerzliche Gefühl des unglücklichen Bewußtseins, daß Gott selbst gestorben ist. Dieser harte Ausdruck ist der Ausdruck des innersten sich einfach Wissens, die Rückkehr des Bewußtseins in die Tiefe der Nacht des Ich = Ich, die nichts außer ihr mehr unterscheidet und weiß.'

[20] *EE*, p. 162.

(1841-1876), a writer whom Nietzsche had certainly read, and whom he disdainfully describes as 'den süsslichen Virginitäts-Apostel'.[21] In his 1876 magnum opus, Mainländer writes of the death of God as a welcome liberation: 'Gott ist gestorben und sein Tod war das Leben der Welt.'[22]

However, Nietzsche makes no claim to originality with regard to the postulation of the death of God. In 1882, neither the concept of atheism itself nor its metaphorical vehicle in the image of the death of God was a novel idea. Nietzsche's point in 'The Parable of the Madman' is not to make a radically new revelation concerning God's absence, but rather to highlight man's failure to appreciate and understand the nihilistic consequences of what Nietzsche considered to be the foregone conclusion of God's demise as a result of the processes put into motion by the Enlightenment.[23] The deeper significance of this passage is therefore to be found in the series of questions that are posed, which paint a picture of a dark, cooling, sunless world without a horizon, where the seas have dried up and the air reeks of atrophy and decay. Even more terrifying, perhaps, is the Lovecraftian vision of this world travelling through the empty space of infinite nothing.[24]

Nietzsche's madman nonetheless strikes a note of optimism by exclaiming with reference to God's murder: 'Es gab nie eine grössere That, – und wer nur immer nach uns geboren wird, gehört um dieser That willen in eine höhere Geschichte, als alle Geschichte

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[21] *KGW*, V.ii. 283, *FW-357*.

[22] Philipp Mainländer, *Die Philosophie der Erlösung* (Berlin: Theobald Grieben, 1876), p. 108. Stern considers Schopenhauer's phrase 'religion is almost entirely dead' and Heine's '[i]t is the old Jehovah himself preparing for death' as the antecedents of Nietzsche's 'Gott ist todt', also mentioning Plutarch's 'great Pan is dead'. Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche*, p. 144.

[23] In *Menschliches Allzumenschliches I* (1878), Nietzsche had already given the nonmetaphorical explanation: '[D]ie wachsende Aufklärung hat die Dogmen der Religion erschüttert und ein gründliches Misstrauen eingeflösst.' *KGW*, IV.ii. 146, *MA-150*.

[24] Cf. Tongeren, *Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism*, pp. 134-135: 'Should we not start by recognizing that the text doesn't so much want to tell us that God is dead, or that this would be shocking when taken on its own; doesn't it instead seek to tell us something about humankind rather than God?'

bisher war!'.[25] The death of God is thus depicted as a catastrophe but also as an opportunity and a historical necessity, analogous to the destructive clean break advocated by the Russian nihilists, discussed in Chapter 2 above; but immediately after conveying the good news, the madman announces dejectedly that his time has not yet come, and that God's 'murderers', i.e. the unbelievers of secular society, are not able to comprehend the true import of their new, godless world. In another passage in the same work, Nietzsche offers an alternative version, or perhaps the prototype, of the later image of the uncanny guest standing at the door:

> Das grösste neuere Ereignis, – dass 'Gott todt ist', dass der Glaube an den christlichen Gott unglaubwürdig geworden ist – beginnt bereits seine ersten Schatten über Europa zu werfen. […] [D]as Ereignis selbst ist viel zu gross, zu fern, zu abseits vom Fassungsvermögen Vieler, als dass auch nur seine Kunde schon a n g e l a n g t heissen dürfte; geschweige denn, dass Viele bereits wüssten, w a s eigentlich sich damit begeben hat.[26]

What lies ahead for humanity, he says, is: 'Diese lange Fülle und Folge von Abbruch, Zerstörung, Untergang, Umsturz',[27] which he later defines as the history of the next two centuries.[28] Having endowed this incipient period in the development of man with a cause, an essence and a duration, he also gives it a name: 'D a s *t r a g i s c h e Z e i t a l t e r* f ü r E u r o p a : bedingt durch den Kampf mit dem Nihilismus.'[29]

It would be a mistake, however, to regard Nietzsche's concept of nihilism as no more than a characterisation of the upheaval associated with society's transition from belief to unbelief. The 'versatility and liveliness of his philosophical imagination',[30] as Stern describes it, is such that Nietzsche weaves an intricate web of meanings around the term, which, in its totality, represents his vision of the spiritual crisis of modernity. As Edith Düsing writes: 'Der

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[25] *KGW*, V.ii. 159, *FW-125*.
[26] Ibid., V.ii. 255, *FW-343*.
[27] Ibid.
[28] See ibid., VIII.ii. 431, *NF-1887*, 11[411].
[29] Ibid., VIII.i. 314, *NF-1886*, 7[31].
[30] Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche*, p. 126.

Nihilismuskomplex ist bei Nietzsche vieldimensional. Nietzsche argumentiert in zuweilen durcheinander laufenden Gedankenlinien als Diagnostiker, als säkularer Prophet, als Kulturkritiker, als Sinnvakuumstherapeut und biopsychischer Stratege.'[31] He appropriates and assimilates the word 'nihilism', develops and extends its realm, and endows it with a multitude of associations and connotations, taking full advantage of its nonspecific malleability to create a concept of protean complexity. Goudsblom sums up the elusiveness of Nietzsche's definition as follows:

> In the 1880s Nietzsche bestowed a pregnant new significance on the word nihilism. The concept is central to his philosophy, but the meaning he attaches to it is difficult to capture in a single definition; it changes according to the context in which he uses it.[32]

It is, metaphorically speaking, this shadowy monster of nihilism, which has succeeded in capturing the collective Western imagination, and against which, for the purposes of this thesis, the thought of Stirner is, in part, to be measured.

Features of Nietzsche's Nihilism

There have been many studies of the typology of Nietzschean nihilism, which examine the different usages of the term, their relationships to one another, the periods of Nietzsche's thought in which they appear, and the interconnected phases of nihilism they reveal.[33]

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[31] Edith Düsing, 'Gottestod-Nihilismus-Melancholie. Nietzsches Denkweg als Diagnose und Therapie des Nihilismus', in *Der Tod Gottes und die Wissenschaft. Zur Wissenschaftskritik Nietzsches*, ed. by Carlo Gentili and Cathrin Nielsen (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 31-66 (pp. 48-49).

[32] Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture*, p. 10.

[33] See e.g. Kuhn, *Friedrich Nietzsches Philosophie des europäischen Nihilismus*, pp. 236-255; Brock, *Nietzsche und der Nihilismus*, pp. 288-311; Tongeren, *Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism*, pp. 68-102; Alan White, 'Nietzschean Nihilism: A Typology', *International Studies in Philosophy*, 19.2 (1987), 29-44. Concerning the phases of nihilism, Tongeren writes: 'Nietzsche can be said to distinguish four phases or stages of nihilism. These four phases comprise the whole history of European culture from the pre-Socratic Greeks to his own 19th century and beyond that up to our current days. The shortest possible summary – in an inverted chronological order, meant to indicate the dynamics of the development – would probably read as follows: Nihilism is (4) the

Goudsblom identifies six pairs of opposite meanings: as a divine way of thinking versus an expression of decadence; as a characteristic of morality versus morality as antidote to nihilism; as strength versus weakness; as complete versus incomplete; as active versus passive; and as theoretical versus practical.[34] Carr presents a similarly variegated analysis: 'Nihilism [in Nietzsche] is described as a historical process, a psychological state, a philosophical position, a cultural condition, a sign of weakness, a sign of strength, as the danger of dangers, and as a divine way of thinking.'[35] She concludes that the only certainty is its ambiguity. This ambiguity, however, is to some extent the natural product of the word's semantic vagueness. Nietzsche exploits its potential for wide applicability, bestowing on it a universality which is a key feature of its modern usage. The fact remains, though, that Nietzschean nihilism cannot be viewed as a singularity, but rather as a complex of interrelated ideas.

For Nietzsche, perhaps the most important differentiation to be made within the amorphous intricacy of nihilism is between its active and passive forms:

> Er [Nihilism] ist zweideutig:
> A) Nihilism als Zeichen der gesteigerten Macht des Geistes: als **activer Nihilism**. […]
> B) Nihilism als Niedergang und Rückgang der Macht des Geistes: der **passive Nihilism**.[36]

Even though he does not see nihilism as an end in itself, active nihilism, while it is a manifestation of destructive strength, is also a cleansing force capable of questioning, rejecting and eliminating ancient dogma, established authority and dilapidated systems of values. It is the crowning achievement of scepticism: 'die zu Ende gedachte Logik unserer großen Werthe

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conscious experience of an antagonism, that is the result of (3) the decline of (2) the protective structure that was built to hide (1) the absurdity of life and world.' Tongeren, *Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism*, p. 100.

[34] See Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture*, p. 10.

[35] Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, p. 27.

[36] *KGW*, VIII.ii. 14-15, *NF-1887*, 9[35].

und Ideale';[37] an 'Umwerthung aller Werthe', which sweeps away the old and prepares the ground for an entirely new set of values.[38] As Zarathustra exclaims: 'was *fällt*, das soll man auch noch stossen!'.[39] One is again reminded of the rebellious energy and defiance of the Russian nihilists, who, both in their real-life and literary forms, acted as an inspiration for Nietzsche's conception of nihilism.[40]

Passive nihilism, on the other hand, is presented as an expression of weakness, decadence, exhaustion and resignation, exemplified in the negativity of Buddhism's view of the universe. Schopenhauer represents the personification of passive nihilism for Nietzsche,[41] while the prime example of an active nihilist could be construed, according to his own confessions, as Nietzsche himself, who writes of being: 'der erste vollkommene Nihilist Europas, der aber den Nihilismus selbst schon in sich zu Ende gelebt hat, – der ihn hinter sich, unter sich, außer sich hat'.[42] Nietzsche's confrontation with the nihilist problematic leads to his rebirth as an anti-nihilist. His liberation from the thrall of nihilism is based above all else on the realisation of the logical fallacy inherent in the assumption of the meaninglessness of

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[37] Ibid., VIII.ii. 432, *NF-1887*, 11[411].
[38] See ibid., VI.iii. 363, *EH-Schicksal-1*.
[39] Ibid., VI.i. 257, *Za-III-Tafeln-20*.
[40] See e.g. ibid., VI.i. 457-458, *NF-1880*, 4[108]. 'Man ehrt die welche im D e n k e n den Bann der Sitte durchbrachen. […] Man beantwortet jetzt allgemein die Frage ob die *russischen Nihilisten* unmoralischer seien als die *russischen* Beamten zu Gunsten der *Nihilisten*. — Es sind zahllose Sitten den Angriffen der Freidenker und Freithäter zum Opfer gefallen: unsere jetzige individuelle Denkweise ist das Resultat von lauter V e r b r e c h e n gegen die Sittlichkeit. Jeder der das Bestehende angriff, galt als "schlechter Mensch"; die Geschichte handelt nur von diesen schlechten Menschen!'
[41] See e.g ibid., VI.iii. 171, *AC-7*. 'Man hat gewagt, das Mitleiden eine Tugend zu nennen […]; man hat aus ihm d i e Turgend […] gemacht, — nur freilich […] vom Gesichtspunkte einer Philosophie aus, welche nihilistisch war. […] Schopenhauer war in seinem Rechte damit: durch das Mit<leid> wird das Leben verneint, […] — Mitleiden ist die P r a x i s des Nihilismus.'
[42] Ibid., VIII.ii. 432, *NF-1887*, 11[411]. See also ibid., VIII.ii. 71-72, *NF-1887*, 9[123]. 'Man hat nur spät den *Muth* zu dem, was man eigentlich weiß. Daß ich von Grund aus bisher *Nihilist* gewesen bin, das habe ich mir erst seit Kurzem eingestanden: die Energie, der Radikalism, mit der ich als Nihilist vorwärts gieng, täuschte mich über diese Grundthatsache.' For the debate about whether it makes sense to call Nietzsche a nihilist, see Richard Schacht, 'Nietzsche and Nihilism', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 11.1 (1973), 65-90. See also Brock, *Nietzsche und der Nihilismus*, pp. 4-7.

life. In another fragment from the 'Lenzer Heide' text, he explains: 'E i n e Interpretation gieng zu Grunde; weil sie aber als d i e Interpretation galt, erscheint es, als ob es gar keinen Sinn im Dasein gebe, als ob alles umsonst sei.'[43]

Despite becoming an arch-enemy of nihilism, Nietzsche nonetheless persists with the annihilation of conventional beliefs, by challenging Christianity, religion in general, Western values and the notion of absolute truth, as demonstrated by the titles and sub-titles of two of his last works, *Götzen-Dämmerung oder wie man mit dem Hammer philosophirt* and *Der Antichrist. Fluch auf das Christenthum* (both written in 1888). In the former he rejects entirely the legitimacy of morality and religion: 'Die Moral und Religion gehört ganz und gar unter die P s y c h o l o g i e d e s I r r t h u m s .'[44] In the latter, he does full justice to his self-appointed role as 'ein Gegner des Christenthums de rigueur',[45] attacking Christianity with a viciousness that is unprecedented in the history of Western philosophy:

> Ich v e r u r t h e i l e das *Christenthum*, ich erhebe gegen die christliche Kirche die furchtbarste aller Anklagen, die je ein Ankläger in den Mund genommen hat. Sie ist mir die höchste aller denkbaren Corruptionen, sie hat den Willen zur letzten auch nur möglichen Corruption gehabt. Die christliche Kirche liess Nichts mit ihrer Verderbniss unberührt, sie hat aus jedem Werth einen Unwerth, aus jeder Wahrheit eine Lüge, aus jeder Rechtschaffenheit eine Seelen-Niedertracht gemacht.[46]

Nietzsche's acts of iconoclasm certainly find parallels in the unorthodox opinions of Stirner. It is one of the tasks of this thesis to assess whether Stirner, like Nietzsche, is driven by an actively nihilistic impulse, or whether such similarities are superficial or coincidental in nature.

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[43] *KGW*, VIII.i. 216, *NF-1886*, 5[71].
[44] Ibid., VI.iii. 89, *GD-Irrthuemer-6*.
[45] Ibid., VI.iii. 273, *EH-Weise-7*.
[46] Ibid., VI.iii. 251, *AC-62*.

Nihilistic statements of one form or another, destructive, sceptical, or simply amoral, abound in Nietzsche's writings, providing the building blocks for his elaborate, multi-faceted concept of nihilism. In one of his earliest unpublished works, *Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne* (1873), one finds in its opening sentences, couched in language that anticipates 'The Parable of the Madman', the relativism which acts as the foundation of Nietzschean nihilism:

> In irgend einem abgelegenen Winkel des in zahllosen Sonnensystemen flimmernd ausgegossenen Weltalls gab es einmal ein Gestirn, auf dem kluge Thiere das Erkennen erfanden. Es war die hochmüthigste und *verlogenste* Minute der 'Weltgeschichte': aber doch nur eine Minute. Nach wenigen Athemzügen der Natur erstarrte das Gestirn, und die klugen Thiere mussten sterben. – So könnte Jemand eine Fabel erfinden und würde doch nicht genügend illustrirt haben, wie kläglich, wie schattenhaft und flüchtig, wie zwecklos und beliebig sich der menschliche Intellekt innerhalb der Natur ausnimmt; es gab Ewigkeiten, in denen er nicht war; wenn es wieder mit ihm vorbei ist, wird sich nichts begeben haben.[47]

Relativism is an essential element of Nietzsche's philosophical outlook, as conveyed in one of his most celebrated phrases: *'Thatsachen* giebt es nicht, nur *Interpretationen*.'[48] But, having discarded facts, Nietzsche proceeds to question the interpretations that replace them. The conclusion he reaches amounts to alethiological nihilism (denial of truth): 'Wer tiefer denkt, weiss, dass er immer Unrecht hat, er mag handeln und urtheilen, wie er will.'[49] Elsewhere, one finds a statement that is equivalent to cosmic nihilism: 'Der Gesammt-Charakter der Welt ist […] in alle Ewigkeit *Chaos*, nicht im Sinne der fehlenden Nothwendigkeit, sondern der fehlenden Ordnung, Gliederung, Form, Schönheit, Weisheit, und wie alle unsere ästhetischen Menschlichkeiten heissen.'[50] Finally, another assertion captures the essence of existential nihilism: 'Seit *Kopernikus* scheint der Mensch auf eine schiefe Ebene

[47] Ibid., III.ii. 369, *WL-1*.
[48] Ibid., VIII.i. 323, *NF-1886*, 7[60].
[49] Ibid., IV.ii. 336, *MA-518*.
[50] Ibid., V.ii. 146, *FW-109*.

gerathen, — er rollt immer schneller nunmehr aus dem Mittelpunkte weg — wohin? in's Nichts? in's "*d u r c h b o h r e n d e* Gefühl seines Nichts"?'.[51]

Thus, one finds, scattered throughout Nietzsche's writings, numerous examples of some of the different forms of nihilism discussed in Chapter 2 above. They combine to form a conceptual edifice which constitutes the basis of the modern notion of nihilism, according to which Stirner has most often been adjudged a nihilist in the period since World War II. The heterogeneity of Nietzschean nihilism no doubt contributes to the ease with which it can be, and has been, applied to Stirner and others. Nonetheless, one crucial ingredient can be distilled from the nihilist concoction, what one might call the spirit of Nietzschean nihilism, namely the idea of the meaninglessness of human life, which is expressed in numerous pithy slogans that litter the posthumous fragments: '[d]as ist die *extremste* Form des Nihilismus: das Nichts (das "Sinnlose") ewig!';[52] '(Was bedeutet *Nihilismus*?) "Ziellosigkeit"';[53] 'Nihilism: es fehlt das Ziel; es fehlt die *Antwort* auf das "*Warum*?"'.[54] The absence of meaning or purpose is the bedrock upon which the elaborate structure of nihilism is built.

Perhaps the most paradoxical feature of Nietzschean nihilism is its portrayal as the result of the emptiness caused by the death of God, at the same time as being inextricably linked to the history of Christianity itself. While, on the one hand, Christian morality is described as 'das große Gegenmittel gegen den praktischen und theoretischen

[51] Ibid., VI.ii. 422, *GM-III-25*. Cf. Friedrich Schiller, *Don Karlos. Infant von Spanien* II. 1. (Leipzig: Georg Joachim Göschen, 1804), pp. 70-71: 'der in seines Nichts durchbohrendem Gefühle so dazustehen sich verdammt'. Stirner quotes part of Schiller's phrase unaltered in *Der Einzige*, except he writes 'nichts' in lower case. Stirner uses the quotation to describe the levelling effect of socialism. See *EE*, p. 136.
[52] *KGW*, VIII.i. 217, *NF-1886*, 5[71]. This is also from the 'Lenzer Heide' text, speaking specifically about eternal recurrence as the most extreme form of nihilism, because it perpetuates senselessness.
[53] Ibid., VIII.i. 324, *NF-1886*, 7[61].
[54] Ibid., VIII.ii. 14, *NF-1887*, 9[35].

Nihilismus',[55] on the other hand, it is precisely the Christian exaltation of the truth that, according to Nietzsche, has led to the dismantling of Christian dogma:

> Der Untergang des Christenthums – an seiner Moral (die unablösbar ist –) welche sich gegen den christlichen Gott wendet (der Sinn der Wahrhaftigkeit, durch das Christenthum hoch entwickelt, bekommt E k e l vor der Falschheit und Verlogenheit aller christlichen Welt- und Geschichtsdeutung. Rückschlag von 'Gott ist die Wahrheit' in den fanatischen Glauben 'Alles ist falsch'.[56]

Thus, Christianity carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction, in the form of the sceptical potential of the will to truth to disprove what Nietzsche describes as its 'true world' theory.[57]

Moreover, Nietzsche identifies in Christianity the passively nihilistic values of 'Sklaven-Moral', which results from its being the religion of the weak and oppressed, and is driven by the negative energy of the 'Heerden-Instinkt'.[58] The first and most fundamental of these values is the Platonic denial of the value of temporal life in favour of a mythical, noumenal 'true world'. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche describes Christianity as 'diese Religion gewordne *Verneinung* des *Willens* zum Leben!'.[59] But the value for which Nietzsche reserves his deepest scorn is compassion,[60] which he calls 'die Praxis des *Nihilismus*':

> Man nennt das *Christenthum* die Religion des Mitleidens. […] Mitleiden überredet zum Nichts!… Man sagt nicht 'Nichts': man sagt dafür 'Jenseits'; oder 'Gott'; oder 'das wahre Leben'; […] Diese unschuldige Rhetorik aus dem Reich

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[55] Ibid., VIII.i. 215, *NF-1886*, 5[71].
[56] Ibid., VIII.i. 123-124, *NF-1885*, 2[127]. The unclosed bracket is Nietzsche's.
[57] See the section of *Götzen-Dämmerung* entitled 'Wie die "wahre Welt" endlich zur Fabel wurde'. Ibid., VI.iii. 165-166, *GD-Welt-Fabel*. See also ibid., VIII.ii. 18, *NF-1887*, 9[41]. 'Die *extremste* Form des Nihilism wäre: daß jeder Glaube, jedes Für-wahr-halten nothwendig falsch ist: weil es eine **wahre Welt** gar nicht giebt.'
[58] See ibid., VIII.ii. 74-75, *NF-1887*, 10[77].
[59] Ibid., VI.iii. 357, *EH-WA-2*.
[60] Cf. Ibid., VI.i. 111, *Za-II-Mitleidige*. 'Also sprach der Teufel einst zu mir: "auch Gott hat seine Hölle: das ist seine Liebe zu den Menschen." Und jüngst hörte ich ihn diess Wort sagen: "Gott ist todt; an seinem Mitleiden mit den Menschen ist Gott gestorben."'

> der religiös-moralischen Idiosynkrasie erscheint sofort v i e l w e n i g e r u n s c h u l d i g , wenn man begreift, w e l c h e Tendenz hier den Mantel sublimer Worte um sich schlägt: die l e b e n s f e i n d l i c h e Tendenz. […] Nichts ist ungesunder, inmitten unsrer ungesunden Modernität, als das christliche Mitleid.[61]

For Nietzsche, compassion, which he sees as the ethical quintessence of both Christianity and Buddhism, is born of weakness, 'der Ausdruck einer physiologischen décadence';[62] it leads inevitably, he claims, to depression and ill health, both literally and metaphorically.[63] Here we find the origin of the association of nihilism with sickness, which, as noted in the previous chapter, is a recurring theme in studies of the subject throughout the twentieth century.[64] Nietzsche has a chronic propensity for medical terminology, to express, among other things, his disgust with the nihilistic principles of religion.[65] Pathology, symptom, sickness, decay, decadence, depression: this is the vocabulary he uses to describe nihilism and its debilitating effects. In 1887, he writes: 'Der Nihilism stellt einen *pathologischen* Zwischenzustand dar';[66] and in a later fragment:

> Man hat nicht begriffen, was doch mit Händen zu greifen: daß Pessimismus kein Problem, sondern ein Symptom ist, — daß der Name ersetzt werden <müsse> durch *N i h i l i s m u s ,* — daß die Frage, ob Nicht-sein besser ist als Sein, selbst schon eine *Krankheit*, ein Niedergang, eine Idiosynkrasie ist.[67]

Mainländer, who openly proclaimed the utter worthlessness of life, was undoubtedly one of Nietzsche's targets in this regard. But it is Mainländer's mentor, Arthur Schopenhauer

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[61] Ibid., VI.iii. 170-172, *AC-7*.
[62] Ibid., VIII.iii. 327, *NF-1888*, 17[8].
[63] Cf. George de Huszar, 'Nietzsche's Theory of Decadence and the Transvaluation of all Values', *Journal of the History of Ideas,* 6 (1945), 259-272 (p. 259). 'According to Nietzsche, all philosophies, religions and arts which spring from weakness are decadent. He combats them not as one would refute an error, but as one would fight against a disease. His critique is not that of a philosopher but that of a physician. Physiology is to him the criterion of value, the sole arbiter of what is good or bad.'
[64] See e.g. Thielicke, *Der Nihilismus*, p. 72 and Vercellone, *Einführung in den Nihilismus*, p. 8.
[65] Especially from 1875 onwards. See Malcolm Pasley, 'Nietzsche's Use of Medical Imagery', in *Nietzsche: Imagery and Thought*, ed by Malcolm Pasley, pp. 123-158 (p. 136).
[66] *KGW*, VIII.ii. 15, *NF-1887*, 9[35].
[67] Ibid., VIII.iii. 327, *NF-1887*, 17[8].

(1788-1860), who, in Nietzsche's middle and later writings, bears the brunt of his opprobrium.[68] Both philosophers are listed by Nietzsche, together with Leopardi and Baudelaire, in a group he calls '[d]ie m o d e r n e n P e s s i m i s t e n als décadents'.[69] In Nietzsche's vision of the world, they belong with the unbelievers in the marketplace, who mock the madman and fail to understand his message, and who reappear in *Also sprach Zarathustra* as 'die letzten Menschen', satiated and comfortable, but also empty, miserable and resentful, without goals and aspirations.[70] They are the atheists who reach an accommodation with the nihilism that surrounds them, accepting it as an undeniable reality and even welcoming it, but are unable to appreciate its significance for mankind or fully grasp the meaning of its meaninglessness.[71] An argument could also be, and indeed has been, made that Stirner, the egoistic atheist – carefree, assertive and blissfully unaware of the serious consequences of the death of God – is the true model for Nietzsche's 'last man'.[72] As noted above, were this to be the case, it would make the accusation of nihilism against Stirner difficult to refute, and must therefore be considered in more detail.

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[68] See e.g. ibid., VI.iii. 172, *AC-7*. *'Schopenhauer* war lebensfeindlich: deshalb wurde ihm das *Mitleid* zur Tugend.' Nietzsche had not always been so negative about Schopenhauer's pessimism-nihilism. In *Die Geburt der Tragodie*, Schopenhauer 'is […] praised for the pessimism that inaugurates a new tragic age'. Christopher Janaway, 'Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's Educator', in *Nietzsche and the German Tradition*, ed. by Nicholas Martin (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 155-185 (p. 169).

[69] *KGW*, VIII.iii. 187, *NF-1888*, 14[222].

[70] See ibid., VI.i. 12-15, *Za-I-Vorrede-5*. For further information on/scholarly discussions of 'der letzte Mensch', see e.g. Marie-Luise Haase, 'Der Übermensch in *Also sprach Zarathustra* und im Zarathustra-Nachlass 1882–1885', *Nietzsche-Studien*, 13 (1984), 228–244; Keith Ansell-Pearson, 'Who is the Übermensch? Time, Truth, and Woman in Nietzsche', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53.2 (1992), 309–331; Keith Ansell-Pearson, 'The Future is Superhuman: Nietzsche's Gift', in *Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?*, ed. by Yunus Tuncel (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), pp. 70–82.

[71] See *KGW*, VI.i. 14, *Za-I-Vorrede-5*.

[72] See Stepelevich, 'Max Stirner and the Last Man', p. 1. 'Stirner can be considered, and would be pleased to present himself, as the "Last Man".'

The Stirner-Nietzsche Question

It is certainly possible to imagine that Nietzsche had in mind such phrases of Stirner's as, 'nur als dieses einzige Ich nehme Ich Mir alles zu eigen',[73] when he put the following words into Zarathustra's mouth: 'Aufwärts geht unser Weg, von der Art hinüber zur Über-Art. Aber ein *Grauen* ist uns der entartende Sinn, welcher spricht: "Alles für mich."'[74] If so, it would underpin the idea that Stirner has nihilistic credentials, by presenting him as a sort of Nietzschean 'Urnihilist'. But before accepting this version of events, we must first ask the decisive question of whether Nietzsche actually knew of Stirner. The debate about this issue has smouldered on, and occasionally burst into flames, ever since Hartmann published an essay, 'Nietzsches "neue Moral"' (1891/1898), in which he declared that Nietzsche's 'new morality' was not new at all, but was presented by Stirner 'in meisterhafter Form' in 1845 in *Der Einzige*.[75] In comparing the two philosophers, Hartmann leaves no doubt about his preference for Stirner:

> Wer sich an Nietzsches Vexiermasken als an einer neuen und tiefen Weisheit erbaut, sollte […] vor allen Dingen nicht unterlassen, auf Stirners geniales Meisterwerk zurückzugreifen, das in stilistischer Hinsicht hinter Nietzsches Schriften nicht zurücksteht, an philosophischem Gehalt aber sie turmhoch überragt.[76]

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[73] *EE*, p. 365.

[74] *KGW*, VI.i. 94, *Za-I-Tugend-1*. Cf. Ibid., VI.i. 13, *Za-I-Vorrede-5*: 'Es kommt die Zeit des verächtlichsten Menschen, der sich selber nicht mehr verachten kann.'

[75] Eduard von Hartmann, *Ethische Studien* (Leipzig: Hermann Haacke, 1898), p. 60. This is the revised version of Eduard von Hartmann, 'Nietzsches "neue Moral"', *Preussische Jahrbücher*, 67.5 (May 1891), 501-521. The heated debate that followed the first publication can be considered the initial catalyst for the first Stirner renaissance. See Laska, 'Nietzsches initiale Krise', p. 118.

[76] Ibid., p. 61. Hartmann was not the only commentator to champion Stirner over Nietzsche, but the majority of writers on the subject have done the opposite. Alois Riehl says that comparing Nietzsche and Stirner is like setting works of genius against a literary curiosity. Alois Riehl, *Friedrich Nietzsche. Der Künstler und der Denker* (Stuttgart: F. Frommann, 1898), p. 81. Lévy writes: 'Stirner est un esprit critique; Nietzsche est un artiste.' Albert Lévy, *Stirner et Nietzsche* (Paris: Société Nouvelle de Librairie et d'Édition, 1904), p. 35. Fritz Mauthner has called Nietzsche 'ein Dichter', and Stirner 'nur ein Denker'. Fritz Mauthner, 'Hat Nietzsche Stirner's *Einzigen* gekannt?', *Der Einzige – Vierteljahresschrift des Max-Stirner-Archivs Leipzig*, 4.16 (2001), 21-23 (p. 22).

Having acknowledged that Nietzsche does not mention Stirner in his writings, Hartmann argues that Nietzsche must have known about him, as Nietzsche's polemical criticism of Hartmann, in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (1874), focuses precisely on the chapter in *Philosophie des Unbewussten* in which Stirner is mentioned. Hartmann considers it highly improbable that Nietzsche would subsequently not have felt compelled to get to know so congenial a thinker, not least, perhaps, because of Hartmann's candid recommendation that *Der Einzige* is a book, 'das Niemand, der sich für practische Philosophie interessirt, ungelesen lassen soll'.[77] This is then followed by a thinly veiled accusation of plagiarism, identifying a shift in Nietzsche's thinking, which, in Hartmann's opinion, is best explained by his having read, and, by implication, assimilated, Stirner, without acknowledging the fact.[78]

One should not forget, however, that Hartmann had a score to settle, for which the timing of this assault was opportune; Nietzsche's growing popularity was threatening to eclipse Hartmann, but the former's mental breakdown in 1889 rendered him incapable of responding to criticism. In his *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, Nietzsche had viciously attacked Hartmann's ideas as 'philosophische Schelmerei', his thought as 'Philosophie der unbewussten Ironie' and Hartmann himself as 'der unbewusste Parodist' and 'Schalk aller Schalke'.[79] In just a few paragraphs, Nietzsche had made himself an implacable enemy. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Hartmann's prime motivation in comparing Nietzsche

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[77] Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewussten*, p. 646.

[78] See Hartmann, *Ethische Studien*, p. 61. 'Dass er [Nietzsche] sich durch meinen Hinweis nicht veranlasst gefühlt haben sollte, einen ihm so kongenialen Denker [wie Stirner] näher kennen zu lernen ist wenig wahrscheinlich. Das dritte Stück der unzeitgemässen Betrachtungen […] zeigt zwar noch keinen Umschwung seiner Denkenweise; wohl aber tritt derselbe in den nach mehrjähriger Pause erscheinenden Schriften seiner zweiten Periode um so deutlicher hervor. Eine selbständige Parallelentwicklung zu ähnlichem Ziele bleibt ja möglich, wäre aber unter solchen Umständen auffällig.'

[79] *KGW*, III.i. 310-312, *HL-9*.

unfavourably with Stirner was to discredit Nietzsche by associating him with an *enfant terrible*, rather than to venerate Stirner.[80] Stirner was little more to Hartmann than a weapon in the war against his detractor, Nietzsche, though this, in itself, does not necessarily disprove Hartmann's argument.

In fact, Hartmann's theory was as speculative as it was vindictive, but it nonetheless started a discussion which rumbles on more than a century and a quarter later. During that time, further indications of Nietzsche having been acquainted with Stirner, considered by some as evidence – circumstantial, anecdotal, thematic or textual – have appeared. Included in the first category is the fact that Nietzsche is known to have read Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus* (1866), in which Stirner is briefly discussed.[81] Indeed, the discussion is so brief that it covers no more than half a page out of more than five hundred and fifty pages. Nonetheless, the nature of the description is such that one can imagine that, had he read it, Nietzsche's interest might possibly have been piqued.[82] Lange's few words about Stirner include the following:

> Stirner ging […] so weit, jede sittliche Idee zu verwerfen. […] Schade, dass nicht zu diesem Buche – dem extremsten, das wir überhaupt kennen – ein zweiter, positiver Theil geschrieben wurde. […] Stirner betont […] den Willen dermassen, dass er als Grundkraft des menschlichen Wesens erscheint. Er [Stirner] kann an Schopenhauer erinnern.[83]

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[80] Cf. Laska, *Ein heimlicher Hit*, p. 20. 'Hartmanns Absicht dabei war klar: […] er wollte Nietzsche entlarven, blossstellen, desavouieren.'

[81] Nietzsche mentions Lange in letters to Gersdorff in 1866 and 1868 and Mushacke in 1866, and in three fragments in 1884 and 1885. See *KGB*, I.ii. 159*, BVN-1866*, 517, I.ii. 184, *BVN-1866*, 526, I.ii. 257, *BVN-1868*, 562; *KGW*, VII.ii. 90, *NF-1884*, 25[318], VII.ii. 119, *NF-1884*, 25[424], VII.iii. 173, *NF-1885*, 34[99].

[82] Mackay's interest was apparently aroused in this way. According to his biography of Stirner, he learnt about Stirner while reading Lange's book in the British Museum Reading Room. See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 5. Laska doubts the veracity of Mackay's claim of having discovered Stirner in this way. He conjectures instead that Mackay read *Der Einzige* soon after the second edition appeared in 1882, during the period of his close friendship with Hermann Conradi, but, after their acrimonious split in 1885, concealed this in order not to have to credit Conradi with Stirner's rediscovery. See Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 34f.

[83] Friedrich Albert Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* (Iserlohn: J. Baedeker, 1866), p. 292.

Nietzsche apparently knew Lange's book well enough to recommend it both to his schoolfriend Carl von Gersdorff (1844-1904) and to his fellow student Hermann Mushacke (1845-1905) in 1866, the year of its first publication (around the time Nietzsche was embarking on his detailed study of Schopenhauer), calling it 'in ihrer Art vortrefflich und sehr belehrend',[84] and '[d]as bedeutendste philosophische Werk, was in den letzten Jahrzehnten erschienen ist, […] über das ich eine bodenlange Lobrede schreiben könnte'.[85] Admittedly, one thousandth of a book is not very much, but Nietzsche's warm and unequivocal recommendations suggest that he read it in sufficient detail to have been able to absorb Lange's portrayal of Stirner, and above all Lange's rather surprising association of Stirner's ideas with those of Schopenhauer;[86] in which case, it is conceivable that Nietzsche would have been unable to resist the temptation to read Stirner's work. Albert Lévy (1844-1907) suggests as much in his book *Stirner et Nietzsche,* published in 1904: 'Lange only devotes about ten lines to Stirner; […] There is […] in this short analysis a word that must have caught Nietzsche's attention: Lange declares […] that Stirner may remind us of Schopenhauer.'[87] Four years later, Carl Albrecht Bernoulli (1868-1937) asks in *Franz Overbeck und Friedrich Nietzsche – eine Freundschaft*, while referring to the same passage: 'Hat sich nun Nietzsche mit dieser Notiz zufrieden gegeben? Hat er nicht selber nach dem Buche gegriffen?'.[88]

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[84] See *KGB*, I.ii. 159, *BVN-1866*, 517.

[85] See ibid., I.ii. 184, *BVN-1866*, 526.

[86] Although the association may, at first sight, seem far-fetched, Anselm Ruest considered it a perceptive observation: '[es] liegen tiefere Zusammenhänge […] zwischen Schopenhauerscher und Stirnerscher Weltanschauung. […] Derartiges hat Albert Lange instinktiv gefühlt und vorausgesehen.' Anselm Ruest, *Max Stirner. Leben – Weltanschauung, Vermächtnis*, 2nd edn (Berlin and Leipzig: Hermann Seemann, 1906), pp. 266-267. Anselm Ruest was the pseudonym, and is an anagram, of Ernst Samuel.

[87] Lévy, *Stirner et Nietzsche*, p. 12. [My translation.]

[88] Carl Albrecht Bernoulli, *Franz Overbeck und Friedrich Nietzsche – eine Freundschaft*, 2 vols (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1908), I, p. 149. It is certainly true that Nietzsche was fascinated with Schopenhauer, whose works he devoured voraciously around this time. See *KGW*, III.i. 342, *SE-2*. 'Ich gehöre zu den Lesern Schopenhauers, welche nachdem sie die erste Seite von ihm gelesen haben, mit *Bestimmtheit* wissen, dass sie alle Seiten lesen und auf jedes Wort hören werden, das er überhaupt gesagt hat.'

Anecdotal evidence that Nietzsche was acquainted with Stirner's work includes, firstly, Nietzsche's student Adolf Baumgartner (1855-1930) saying he borrowed *Der Einzige* from the Basle library in 1874 on his teacher's recommendation;[89] secondly, Ida Overbeck (1848-1933), wife of Nietzsche's friend, Franz Overbeck (1837-1905), recalling a private conversation with Nietzsche where he at first expressed enthusiasm for Stirner, but then immediately backpedalled and asked her to forget it, for fear of accusations of plagiarism;[90] and, thirdly, her also remembering Nietzsche recommending Stirner's book to Baumgartner as: 'das Kühnste und Konsequenteste seit Hobbes'.[91] All of these hearsay reports, based on memories dating back some twenty years, are presented by Bernoulli in defence of his erstwhile professor, Franz Overbeck, against the venomous attacks of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, the director of the Nietzsche Archive and self-appointed guardian and shaper of her brother's legacy.[92]

Bernoulli also puts forward an idea originally proposed by Karl Joël (1864-1934), author of the celebrated work, *Nietzsche und die Romantik*,[93] that the conductor and first husband of Cosima Wagner, Hans von Bülow, who knew of both Stirner and Nietzsche,[94] and

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[89] See Bernoulli, *Franz Overbeck und Friedrich Nietzsche*, I, pp. 135-136. In a text inserted into the work, Franz Overbeck writes: 'Frau El. Förster behauptet unbedenklich Unbekanntschaft Nietzsches mit Stirner. Die ganze Frage ist aber erledigt, nachdem ich aus einem alten Ausleihbuch der Basler Bibliothek im Februar 1899 ermittelt habe, daß Baumgartner am 14. Juli des Jahres 1874 das Stirnersche Werk von dort entliehen hat […]. [Baumgartner] hatte das ganze Semester zu Nietzsches intimsten Umgang gehört, und hat, wie ich nun von ihm selbst mir habe bestätigen lassen, das Stirnersche Werk damals lediglich auf Nietzsches wärmste Empfehlung kennen lernen.'

[90] Ibid., p. 239. Ida Overbeck reports Nietzsche having said: '[Klinger] war ein Philister, nein, mit dem fühle ich mich nicht verwandt; aber Stirner, ja der! […] Nun habe ich es Ihnen doch gesagt, und ich wollte nicht davon sprechen. Vergessen Sie es wieder. Man wird von einem Plagiat reden.'

[91] Ibid., p. 239. Ida Overbeck does not say whether she heard this first or second hand. See also Safranski, *Nietzsche*, pp. 124-125.

[92] For further details of the acrimonious relationship between Förster-Nietzsche and the Overbecks, see Bernoulli, *Franz Overbeck und Friedrich Nietzsche*, II. pp. 334-453, especially pp. 429-435 'Ecce Femina!' and pp. 435-438 'Overbeck über Nietzsches Schwester'.

[93] Karl Joël, *Nietzsche und die Romantik* (Jena and Leipzig: E. Diederichs, 1905).

[94] Nietzsche's correspondence with von Bülow lasted from January 1872, when he sent the conductor a copy of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, to the beginning of January 1889, when von Bülow was the recipient of one of

gave a speech singing Stirner's praises after a performance of the 'Eroica' in 1892,[95] may have introduced Nietzsche to Stirner's ideas.[96] However, Bernoulli considers it more likely that Nietzsche knew Stirner from his student days, as, so he reports, Théophile Droz, a fellow student of Nietzsche's, had intimated in his reminiscences.[97] Nonetheless, Bernoulli stops short of accusing Nietzsche of plagiarising Stirner's philosophical ideas. He inserts in the text of his book an essay by Overbeck, where the latter concludes that Nietzsche had read Stirner, but in what is more likely to be a gesture of loyalty to his old friend than a sign of appeasement to Nietzsche's sister, he declares that, for those who knew Nietzsche, plagiarism would be the last thing of which they would imagine him to be capable.[98]

Another theory, offered by Lévy, is that it may have been Wagner who introduced Nietzsche to Stirner:

> The question […] arises as to where Nietzsche encountered the name of Stirner. This name may have been uttered in front of him at the home of Richard Wagner; Wagner had perhaps heard of Stirner at the time of the 1848 revolution, through his friend Bakunin, for example.[99]

Based, as it is, on two assumptions, namely that Wagner had heard of Stirner during the 1848 Revolutions (in which Stirner was not remotely involved) and that Wagner subsequently talked about him in Nietzsche's company some twenty years later, there is even less evidence

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Nietzsche's last, pathetic letters from Turin: 'Herrn Hanns von Bülow, In Anbetracht, dass Sie angefangen haben und der erste Hanseat gewesen, ich, in aller Bescheidenheit, bloss der Dritte Veuve Cliquot-Ariadne, darf ich Ihnen schon nicht das Spiel verderben: vielmehr verurtheile ich Sie zum "Löwen *von* Venedig" – der mag Sie fressen… Dionysos.' *KGB*, III.v. 573-574, *BVN-1889*, 1244.

[95] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 8. It was von Bülow who supported Mackay in his efforts to erect a commemorative plaque on the wall of Stirner's last abode in Berlin and place a headstone on his grave.

[96] Bernoulli, *Franz Overbeck und Friedrich Nietzsche*, I, p. 151.

[97] See ibid., p. 153. 'Es heißt da (in der Übersetzung von Pfenninger, "Zürcher Post", 9. November 1900): […] "Es ist möglich, daß ein Buch, von dem man dazumal als von einer Neuheit sprach, auf den Geist Nietzsches einen bestimmten Einfluss übte. Es war *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* von Max Stirner, ein Evangelium des rücksichtslosesten Individualismus, des geistigen und gesellschaftlichen Anarchismus ohne Schranken."'

[98] See ibid., p. 137. 'Ich behaupte […], daß Nietzsche Stirner gelesen hat […]. Das mag für Gegner […] die Folgerung begründen, daß er ein Plagiator gewesen ist. Wer ihn selbst bekannt hat, wird hieran zuletzt denken.'

[99] Lévy, *Stirner et Nietzsche*, p. 10. [My translation.]

for Lévy's theory than there is for the corresponding one about Bülow, who is at least known to have been an admirer of Stirner. Unlike the claims of Baumgartner and Ida Overbeck though, neither of these theories has even unsubstantiated hearsay to back it up.

The same can be said about Laska's deliberations on the possibility that Nietzsche's meeting in October 1865 with the teacher Dr Eduard Mushacke,[100] father of his student friend Hermann Mushacke and, according to Laska, a veteran of the Young Hegelians,[101] resulted in his becoming acquainted with Stirner's thought, which, in turn, led to a profound crisis in Nietzsche's intellectual development. Laska's reasoning is as follows: 'Es ist kaum vorstellbar, dass Mushacke dem einschlägig interessierten Nietzsche nicht von seinem Freund Stirner erzählt hat; dass er dessen *Einzigen* nicht im Bücherschrank hatte; dass Nietzsche das Buch dort nicht verschlungen hat.'[102] Whether the non-occurrence of any or all of these three related events is really inconceivable or not, Laska's idea is certainly a shrewd one, tying together various details of Nietzsche's biography, his notorious mental instability and his later preoccupation with the problem of nihilism. Laska effectively replaces the conventional view that Nietzsche's reading of Schopenhauer was the impetus for his 'gravierende geistig-psychische Lebenskrise', with the possibility that it was instead the undocumented confrontation with the ideas of Stirner which resulted in his conversion from philologist to philosopher.[103]

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[100] See Laska, 'Nietzsches initiale Krise', p. 127. Laska claims that Mushacke was misspelt phonetically as Mussak by Engels in his letter to Max Hildebrandt of 22 October 1889. See Marx and Engels, *Werke*, XXXVII (1967), p. 292. Mackay received a copy of the letter and naturally adopted the misspelling unquestioningly for his biography of Stirner. Mackay, *Max Stirner*, pp. 64 and 90. Mackay states that Stirner and 'Mussak' were 'gut befreundet', although Engels's letter does not imply this.

[101] See Nietzsche's letters concerning the meeting with Mushacke senior. *KGB*, I.ii. 77, *BVN-1865*, 477; ibid., I.ii. 87-88, *BVN-1865*, 481; ibid., I.ii. 90, *BVN-1865*, 483.

[102] Laska, 'Nietzsches initiale Krise', p. 128.

[103] Ibid., p. 129. For the common view of Nietzsche's discovery of Schopenhauer having precipitated his crisis, see Safranski, *Nietzsche*, p. 36.

Although there is clearly no definitive proof that Stirner did not play any role in Nietzsche's crisis, it seems odd that Nietzsche wrote to Hermann Mushacke of all people in July of the following year (1866): 'seitdem Schopenhauer uns die Binde des Optimismus vom Auge genommen, sieht man schärfer. Das Leben ist interessanter, wenn auch häßlicher.'[104] Laska's explanation for Nietzsche's failure to acknowledge that he knew, and was influenced by, Stirner, can be found in his theory of 'primary repression', an expression which Laska borrows from Freud, and which he defines thus: 'Die primäre Verdrängung vollzieht sich, wenn jemand Gedanken, die ihn beunruhigen, nicht rational prüft und bewältigt, sondern mittels einer vorwiegend unbewusst gesteuerten psychischen Dynamik, also auf irrationale Weise, aus seinem Bewusstsein entfernt.'[105] According to this theory, Nietzsche's letter to Mushacke about Schopenhauer could conceivably be part of an elaborate subconscious attempt to banish Stirner from his mind. It is an intriguing idea, but one that it is impossible either to prove or disprove. It nonetheless makes a strong, if, once again, speculative, case for the re-evaluation of Stirner's significance in the history of ideas, which is, after all, Laska's intention.[106]

Arguing from the other end of the spectrum is Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche (1846-1935), who, having returned to Germany from Paraguay in 1893 after the suicide of her Aryan-supremacist, anti-Semitic husband, had established herself as literary executor of her deranged and bed-ridden brother, and set up the Nietzsche Archive, initially

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[104] *KGB*, I.ii. 140, *BVN-1866*, 511.

[105] Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 73. Laska uses the adjective 'primary' not, as in Freud, to denote the first clinical phase, but to distinguish it from secondary repression, which is, in his terminology, when a follower unquestioningly adopts the position of the master.

[106] See ibid., p. 120, where Laska writes of his attempt 'Stirner nicht wie üblich als Randfigur, sondern als Schlüsselfigur der neuzeitlichen Geistesgeschichte, näherhin der Geschichte der "Aufklärung", zu erkennen'.

in Naumburg in 1894, moving it in 1897 to its permanent location in Weimar.[107] Förster-Nietzsche seems to have been determined to stamp out any suspicion that Nietzsche had ever heard of Stirner. Resa von Schirnhofer (1855-1948), the Austrian philosopher and feminist who was acquainted with Nietzsche,[108] reports how, in 1897, during a visit to Weimar, she felt like a criminal as she was repeatedly interrogated by Förster-Nietzsche about whether she could categorically confirm that Nietzsche had never mentioned Stirner to her by name.[109] In her introduction to Henri Lichtenberger's *Die Philosophie Friedrich Nietzsches*, published two years later, Förster-Nietzsche, who sounds as if she could be protesting too much, puts her case authoritatively, though without any corroboration:

> Es ist […] vielfach behauptet worden, daß mein Bruder Stirner gelesen haben müsse. Mit vollster Sicherheit kann ich bis jetzt aus bestimmten äußerlichen und innerlichen Gründen sagen, daß er dessen Buch nicht in der Hand gehabt hat, und alle Nachforschungen, welche ich in dieser Richtung angestellt habe, ergaben das gleiche Resultat.[110]

In an article in 1907, Förster-Nietzsche does provide some evidence for her conviction that her brother had been unacquainted with Stirner. Her intention therein is to undermine the testimony of Franz Overbeck, by contrasting it with the declaration of Joël concerning the Baumgartner incident.[111] Unfortunately, she misquotes Joël, apparently intentionally, who

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[107] See Brian Duignan, 'Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche', in *Encyclopedia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elisabeth-Forster-Nietzsche>; Paul B. Goodwin, 'Förster-Nietzsche, Elisabeth (1846-1935)', in *Encyclopedia.com Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia* <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/forster-nietzsche-elisabeth-1846-1935>; Ulrike Ackermann-Hajek, 'Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. Eine fatale Emanzipation am Fin-de-siècle', *www.f-nietzsche.de* <http://www.f-nietzsche.de/efn.htm> [all accessed 24 August 2021].

[108] See Resa von Schirnhofer, 'Vom Menschen Nietzsche', *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 22 (1968), 250-260 and 441-458. See also Sue Prideaux, *I am Dynamite! A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), pp. 247-252.

[109] See Schirnhofer, 'Vom Menschen Nietzsche', p. 449. See also Sander L. Gilman, ed., *Conversations with Nietzsche: A Life in the Words of his Contemporaries* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 238.

[110] Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, 'Introduction', in Henri Lichtenberger, *Die Philosophie Friedrich Nietzsches*, trans. by Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche (Dresden and Leipzig: Carl Reißner, 1899), pp. V-LXIX (p. LXVII).

[111] Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, 'Nietzsche und Stirner', *Die Zukunft*, 15.24. (16 March 1907), 407-408.

corrected her in an article in the same journal just three weeks later, confirming that Baumgartner had written to him about Nietzsche recommending Stirner's book, not Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus*, as Förster-Nietzsche had claimed.[112] Even though Joël reaffirmed his belief that Stirner had not had any serious influence on Nietzsche, and although Gast came to Förster-Nietzsche's rescue in an article soon afterwards, which sought to question the reliability of Overbeck's defective memory in old age and declaring, again with no evidence, that Nietzsche had definitely not read Stirner,[113] the damage to her already tarnished credibility had been done.[114]

As a postscript to this discussion of the contretemps between the 'Weimarer Tradition' and the 'Basler Tradition' of preserving and promoting Nietzsche's legacy,[115] it is, I think, worth mentioning one other circumstantial piece of evidence, which could possibly support Overbeck's side of the argument. In a letter to Nietzsche of 15 April 1883, Franz Overbeck refers to the line 'Ich hab' Mein' Sach' auf Nichts gestellt', which features prominently in *Der Einzige*.[116] What he writes is: 'Ich schreibe Dir diess zu mehrerem Genusse des "Nichts" auf

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[112] Karl Joël, 'Nietzsche und Stirner', *Die Zukunft*, 15.27. (6 April 1907), 34-35.

[113] Peter Gast, 'Nietzsche und Stirner', *Die Zukunft*, 15.30. (27 April 1907), 146. Gast's mauling of the late Franz Overbeck is particularly dubious, considering what he had written to Overbeck in a letter fourteen years earlier: 'Die Verwandtschaft zwischen Stirner und N. ist frappant!' *Franz Overbeck, Heinrich Köselitz Briefwechsel*, p. 376 (197. Köselitz to Overbeck, 17 February 1893).

[114] Her reputation had been tarnished above all by an article by Rudolf Steiner: 'Das Nietzsche-Archiv und seine Anklagen gegenüber dem bisherigen Herausgeber. Eine Enthüllung', *Magazin für Literatur*, 69.6 (February 1900), 505-528, where he writes: 'Die Privatstunden, die ich Frau Förster-Nietzsche zu geben hatte, belehrten mich vor allen Dingen über das Eine: Dass Frau Förster-Nietzsche in allem, was die Lehre ihres Bruders angeht, vollständig Laie ist. Sie hat nicht über das Einfachste dieser Lehre irgend ein selbständiges Urteil. […] Frau Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche fehlt aller Sinn für feinere, ja selbst für gröbere logische Unterscheidungen.' Ibid., p. 519f. He concludes with the words: 'Da habe ich vielleicht aus Höflichkeit und Rücksicht im Loben ihrer Eigenschaften zu viel getan. Nun ich erkläre, dass das eine große Dummheit von mir war, und dass ich gerne bereit bin, jedes Lob, das ich Frau Förster-Nietzsche gespendet habe, in aller Form zurückzunehmen.' Ibid., p. 528.

[115] For further information on the 'Weimarer und Basler Tradition', see Hoffmann, 'Zur Geschichte des Nietzsche-Archivs', pp. 94-96. 'Charles Andler charakterisiert im zweiten Band seiner Nietzsche-Monographie ersmals [*sic*] ausdrücklich die Weimarer und die Basler Tradition. Diese beiden Traditionen gehen auf den Gegensatz zwischen EFN und Overbeck zurück.' Ibid., p. 94.

[116] See *EE*, pp. 13, 370.

welches Du "Dein' Sach' gestellt" hast.'[117] If he were indeed quoting from Stirner, this might suggest that both sender and recipient were familiar with him, and, moreover, the fact that Nietzsche makes no reference whatsoever to the comment in his reply of 17 April could conceivably be considered a reinforcement of Ida Overbeck's assertion that Nietzsche was making a self-conscious effort to prevent any association being construed between himself and Stirner.[118]

Johann-Christoph Emmelius, in his scholarly article on the subject,[119] makes an excellent, though nonetheless ultimately unprovable, case for the reference being to Goethe's poem 'Vanitas! vanitatum vanitas!'[120] (the first line of which Stirner had shamelessly appropriated for the opening and closing lines of his book), citing among other things a letter from Overbeck to Gast (Köselitz) of 24 February 1893, where the former says he cannot recall Nietzsche ever having mentioned Stirner in their conversations.[121] Emmelius fails, however, to notice one piece of textual evidence, which indicates that Stirner might be the more likely source after all, namely that Overbeck wrote 'Dein' capitalised (though admittedly he generally capitalised second person singular pronouns in the text of his letters), and, more importantly, he wrote both 'Dein' and 'Sach' followed by apostrophes, which Stirner did and Goethe did not.[122] However, even if it was Stirner that Overbeck was quoting in the letter, it does not of course necessarily mean that Nietzsche recognised it as such, or that he deliberately

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[117] *KGB*, III.ii. 366, *BAN-1883*, 188.
[118] See ibid., III.i. 361, *BVN-1883*, 403.
[119] Johann-Christoph Emmelius, '"Ich hab' mein' Sach' auf nichts gestellt." Zu Herkunft, Funktion und Vorgeschichte eines Zitats in Franz Overbecks Brief an Friedrich Nietzsche vom 15. April 1883', *Nietzsche-Studien*, 33 (2004), 306-334.
[120] *Goethe's Gedichte*, 2 vols (Stuttgart and Tübingen: Cotta, 1829), I, pp. 88-89.
[121] Emmelius, '"Ich hab' mein' Sach' auf nichts gestellt."', p. 311.
[122] In both Goethe and Stirner, the possessive pronoun is, of course, 'mein', not 'dein'. 'Mein' is only capitalised in *Der Einzige* in the title of the prologue, not in the book's last line. Mysteriously, there is not an apostrophe after 'Mein' in the prologue of the first edition of *Der Einzige*, though this is corrected in some later editions, including Lauterbach's Reclam edition and Kast's study-edition. There is however an apostrophe after 'mein' in the final line of the first edition and the Lauterbach and Kast editions, though not in the Wigand edition of 1901.

ignored it. This, therefore, is no more than another tantalising, but entirely speculative, clue, which, even together with all the other evidence, does not allow an unbiased observer to come down decisively on one side or the other.

From Nescience to Plagiarism

Between the poles of Förster-Nietzsche's unwavering denial on the one hand, and Hartmann's insinuation of plagiarism on the other, various other shades of opinion have appeared in the numerous commentaries on the subject. Lichtenberger himself writes about the inescapable similarities between the two thinkers' ideas:

> Fast ebenso stark wie bei Nietzsche findet sich der unerbittliche Individualismus, der Kultus des Ich, die Feindschaft gegen den Staat, der Protest gegen das Dogma der Gleichheit bei einem fast verschollenen Denker, Max Stirner, dessen Hauptwerk *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* […] unter diesem Gesichtspunkte mit Nietzsches Schriften zu vergleichen, sehr merkwürdig ist.[123]

The approach of Robert Schellwien (1821-1900), in his book *Max Stirner und Friedrich Nietzsche* (1892), follows similar lines, describing the two thinkers jointly as 'Propheten des Individualismus',[124] and concluding: 'Die literarische Thätigkeit der beiden Denker liegt um mehr als dreissig Jahre auseinander, aber, so gross auch ihre Verschiedenheit, ihre Uebereinstimmung ist es nicht minder.'[125]

Unsurprisingly, Mackay was less even-handed than Lichtenberger and Schellwien, asserting: 'diesen ewig-schwankenden, sich immer auf's Neue widersprechenden, von Wahrheit fast hilflos zu Irrthum taumelnden, verworrenen Geist [Nietzsches] vergleichen zu wollen mit dem tiefen, klaren, ruhigen und überlegenen Genie Stirner's, das ist eine

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[123] Henri Lichtenberger, *Die Philosophie Friedrich Nietzsches*, trans. by Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche (Dresden and Leipzig: Carl Reißner, 1899), p. 192. [First published in French in 1898.]
[124] Robert Schellwien, *Max Stirner und Friedrich Nietzsche. Erscheinungen des modernen Geistes, und das Wesen des Menschen* (Leipzig: C. E. M. Pfeffer, 1892), p. 6.
[125] Ibid., p. 7.

Absurdität, nicht werth ernstlicher Widerlegung'.[126] In a later, revised edition of Mackay's biography of Stirner, he declares it beyond doubt, since the posthumous publication of Overbeck's reminiscences, 'dass Nietzsche den *Einzigen* kannte und die erdrückende Wucht seines Einflusses scheu in sich barg, bis er sich von ihr in eigenem Schaffen zu befreien vermochte'.[127]

Anselm Ruest (1878-1943), writing in 1906 between the first and second editions of Mackay's work, maintained that Nietzsche had read Stirner, and was sympathetic towards him, but had avoided referring to him because he was concerned that Stirner's ideas were too dangerous for human consumption.[128] Benedict Lachmann (1878-1941), an acquaintance of both Mackay and Ruest, was no less convinced: 'Es ist unter den interessierten Parteien lange darüber gestritten worden, ob Nietzsche den Stirner gekannt hat. Die Frage ist mit ziemlicher Sicherheit in bejahendem Sinne entschieden.'[129] Löwith, though less partisan than Mackay, Ruest and Lachmann, seems to have accepted the Overbecks' testimony, also believing that Nietzsche knew of Stirner: 'Und so liegt die Vermutung nahe, daß Nietzsche gerade deshalb so "haushälterisch", wie es Overbeck nannte, mit seiner Kenntnis von Stirner umging, weil dieser ihn anzog und zugleich abstieß und er nicht mit ihm verwechselt sein wollte.'[130] More recently, Safranski has expressed a similar view: 'Man kann sich, bei dem schlechten Ruf Stirners, tatsächlich gut vorstellen, daß Nietzsche mit ihm nicht in einem Atemzug genannt sein wollte.'[131]

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[126] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, pp. 18-19.
[127] Ibid., p. 19.
[128] See Ruest, *Max Stirner*, p. 306. 'Nietzsche waren Stirners Lehren sympathisch, aber die Art, in der sie verkündet wurden, fand er zu skrupellos, […] für die Vielzuvielen – untauglich, allzu gefährlich.'
[129] Benedict Lachmann, *Protagoras, Nietzsche, Stirner. Ein Beitrag zur Philosophie des Individualismus und Egoismus* (Berlin: Leonhard Simion Nf., 1914), p. 12.
[130] Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, pp. 204-205.
[131] Safranski, *Nietzsche*, p. 124.

Outside Germany, various opinions have been voiced. Herbert Read (1893-1968) writes that 'it is easy to detect the influence it [Stirner's text] had on Nietzsche's *style* (its influence on his thought is still more obvious)',[132] while Leszek Kołakowski (1927-2009), in his extensive work on Marxism, proclaims that Nietzsche 'had read Stirner's work though he nowhere expressly refers to it'.[133] John Carroll, in his introduction to the 1971 abridged English translation of *Der Einzige*, echoes Lichtenberger's analysis concerning their similarities:

> The bounds of coincidence are strained by the degree to which Stirner anticipates Nietzsche both in ideas and prose style; […] they have too many key concepts in common – Antichrist, immoralism, priest-morality, irrationalism, and superman/egoist. Stirner also wrote about the 'death of God', the enervating curse of democracy, and the State as the new idol.[134]

Likewise, Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) is in no doubt about the link between the two, though he identifies Stirner as one of the prime embodiments of Nietzschean nihilism, making the relationship between Nietzsche and Stirner one of antagonism rather than affinity:

> We have every reason to suppose that Nietzsche had a profound knowledge of the Hegelian movement, from Hegel to Stirner himself. […] We will misunderstand the whole of Nietzsche's work if we do not see 'against whom' its principal concepts are directed. […] Nietzsche never stops attacking *the theological and Christian character of German philosophy* […] – *the powerlessness of this philosophy to extricate itself from the nihilistic perspective* (Hegel's negative nihilism, Feuerbach's reactive nihilism, Stirner's extreme nihilism). […] It is clear that Stirner plays the revelatory role in all this. It is he who pushes the dialectic to its final consequences.[135]

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[132] Herbert Read, *The Tenth Muse* (New York: Horizon Press, 1958), p. 76.
[133] Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Rise, Growth, and Dissolution*, trans. by P. S. Falla, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), I, p. 163.
[134] John Carroll, 'Introduction', in Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. by Steven T. Byington, ed. by John Carroll (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), pp. 11-36 (p. 24).
[135] Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 162. Originally published in French: *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).

In Deleuze's view, Zarathustra's rallying cry to overcome man is clearly directed at the ultimate manifestation of nihilism, exemplified by Stirner's demythologising egoist. '[T]he allusion to Stirner is obvious', he writes, referring to Zarathustra's appeal to the 'Higher Men'.[136] Finally, in the ledger of those convinced of Stirner's influence on Nietzsche, we find perhaps the most extreme example of misinformation in the airy assertion of George Woodcock (1912-1995) that 'Nietzsche himself regarded Stirner as one of the unrecognized seminal minds of the nineteenth century'.[137]

There are, however, others, for whom, as Lévy declares, 'it does not appear that Stirner had a decisive influence on Nietzsche'.[138] Georg Simmel (1858-1918) is one of these, contrasting Stirner's sophism with Nietzsche's nobility.[139] Another is Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), whose assessment is almost diametrically opposed to Mackay's, at least as far as influence on Nietzsche's thought is concerned:

> Welchen Weg hätte Nietzsche genommen, wenn nicht Schopenhauer, sondern Max Stirner sein Erzieher geworden wäre! In Nietzsches Schriften ist keinerlei Einfluss Stirners zu bemerken. Aus eigener Kraft musste sich Nietzsche aus dem deutschen Idealismus heraus zu einer der Stirnerschen gleichen Weltauffassung durchringen.[140]

In the anglophone world, Paterson takes the view that Nietzsche probably only knew vaguely of Stirner and that 'he never felt moved to enlarge this […] knowledge for utilization in his own philosophical programme'.[141] More recently, Glassford, while addressing the Stirner-Nietzsche question, recognises a 'startling similarity in the basic outlook',[142] and notes the

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[136] Ibid., p. 163.
[137] George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962), p. 94.
[138] Lévy, *Stirner et Nietzsche*, p. 19. [My translation.]
[139] See Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche: Ein Vortragszyklus* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1907), p. 234.
[140] Rudolf Steiner, *Friedrich Nietzsche, Ein Kämpfer gegen seine Zeit* (Weimar: Emil Felber, 1895), p. 96.
[141] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 149.
[142] John Glassford, 'Did Friedrich Nietzsche Plagiarize from Max Stirner?', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies,* 18 (Fall 1999), 73-79.

parallels in both the style and content of their writings, but finally suggests that 'Stirner and Nietzsche's work is similar simply because of the inevitable logic of post-Hegelian philosophy'.[143] Brobjer, responding to Glassford's article, considers the similarities between Nietzsche and Stirner noteworthy, but 'general' rather than 'staggering', and rejects accusations of plagiarism outright and suggestions of influence as 'inappropriate'.[144]

In the wide spectrum of the plagiarism debate, a significant majority of commentators seem to have believed that Nietzsche at least knew of Stirner, though the degree of the latter's influence on Nietzsche is hotly disputed. The reason for this overwhelming tendency in favour of familiarity may lie in the nature of the question itself, which is generally more interesting to those who recognise some form of connection, but it is noticeable that even those who deny Stirner's direct influence on Nietzsche (with the exception of Förster-Nietzsche and her associate, Köselitz), nonetheless point to their affinities. Paterson calls attention to the biographical coincidences: both thinkers were solitary; both cut short their teaching careers to dedicate themselves to philosophy; both had sudden ends to their philosophical careers; and both died relatively young.[145] He also notes the basic similarities in their 'Weltanschauungen' – the focus on individualism, the denial of transcendent solutions, the tendency towards moral scepticism, the antipathy towards all manifestations of institutional authority and the recognition of conflict as the basic feature of human intercourse.[146] Löwith says of their fundamental kinship: 'Beide können durch eine Welt geschieden sein und dennoch

[143] Ibid., p. 78
[144] Thomas H. Brobjer, 'A Possible Solution to the Stirner-Nietzsche Question', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies,* 25 (Spring 2003), 109-114.
[145] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 146.
[146] Ibid.

zusammengehören, durch die innere Konsequenz ihrer radikalen Kritik an der christlichen Humanität.'[147]

Apparent similarities in their ideas can be readily discovered through textual comparisons. Perhaps the most conspicuous of these concerns the resemblance of their pronouncements on the death of God, which was alluded to earlier in this chapter. With regard to the underlying cause behind the act of deicide, Stirner, like Nietzsche, notes the crucial role played by truth: 'Die Wahrheit hält länger vor, als alle Götter; denn nur in ihrem Dienste und ihr zu Liebe hat man die Götter und zuletzt selbst den Gott gestürzt.'[148] Stirner also anticipates Nietzsche in recognising Christianity's antipathy towards earthly life: 'In alledem ist für den christlichen Satz, daß die Welt eitel sei, für die christliche *Weltverachtung* der Raum geöffnet.'[149] Generally, Stirner's anti-Christian polemics can often sound proto-Nietzschean, both in tone and in style, for instance: 'Alles Denken aber, das nicht gegen den heiligen Geist sündigt, ist Geister- oder Gespensterglaube.'[150]

Stirner's and Nietzsche's views on Feuerbach as a peddler of secularised Christianity are also remarkably similar. Stirner declares 'wie durchaus theologisch, d.h. gottesgelahrt, die Befreiung ist, welche Feuerbach Uns zu geben sich bemüht',[151] while Nietzsche states: 'Hegel Feuerbach Strauß – das stinkt Alles nach Theologen und Kirchenvätern.'[152] Both thinkers express a profound scepticism towards the notion of truth. Nietzsche writes: 'Was sind denn zuletzt die Wahrheiten des Menschen? – Es sind die unwiderlegbaren Irrthümer des

[147] Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, p. 204.
[148] *EE*, p. 356.
[149] Ibid., p. 102.
[150] Ibid., p. 351.
[151] Ibid., p. 42.
[152] *KGW*, VII.ii. 260, *NF-1884*, 26[412].

Menschen.'[153] In a similar vein, Stirner declares: 'Die Wahrheit ist tot, ein Buchstabe, ein Wort, ein Material, das Ich verbrauchen kann.'[154] Morality fares likewise, with Nietzsche writing a book entitled *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, and Stirner proclaiming: 'Ich bin weder gut noch böse.'[155] Nicholas Martin, writing about Nietzsche's contempt for established socio-political ideologies, observes: 'Nietzsche spurns all the 'isms' of political thought: nationalism, communism, liberalism, socialism, and so forth. By the same token, he rejects universalizable ethical value-systems: Christianity, utilitarianism, the belief in human and material progress, and egalitarianism.'[156] Something very similar could be said of Stirner, the opening lines of whose magnum opus read:

> Was soll nicht alles Meine Sache sein! Vor allem die gute Sache, dann die Sache Gottes, die Sache der Menschheit, der Wahrheit, der Freiheit, der Humanität, der Gerechtigkeit; ferner die Sache Meines Volkes, Meines Fürsten, Meines Vaterlandes; endlich gar die Sache des Geistes und tausend andere Sachen.[157]

The list of similarities is a long one. Nietzsche writes 'Werde, der du bist!',[158] while Stirner declares: 'Über der Pforte unserer Zeit steht nicht jenes apollinische: "Erkenne Dich selbst", sondern ein: *Verwerte Dich*!'.[159] Nietzsche develops his social theory from the concepts of 'Herren- and Sklaven-Moral';[160] Stirner declares: '*Siegen* oder *Unterliegen*, - zwischen beiden Wechselfällen schwankt das Kampfgeschick. Der Sieger wird der *Herr*, der Unterliegende der *Untertan*: jener übt die *Hoheit* und "Hoheitsrechte", dieser erfüllt in

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[153] Ibid., V.ii. 196, *FW-265*. Cf. ibid., VI.ii. 103, *JGB-177*. 'Über Das, was "Wahrhaftigkeit" ist, war vielleicht noch Niemand wahrhaftig genug.'
[154] *EE*, p. 358.
[155] Ibid., p. 15.
[156] Nicholas Martin, *Nietzsche and Schiller: Untimely Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 196.
[157] *EE*, p. 13. The capitalisation of the personal and possessive pronouns is a particular provocation of Stirner's.
[158] *KGW*, VI.i. 293, *Za-IV-Honig*.
[159] *EE*, p. 319.
[160] See *KGW*, VI.ii. 218-222*, JGB-260*.

Ehrfurcht und Respekt die "Untertanpflichten".'[161] Nietzsche is dynamite,[162] philosophises with a hammer,[163] and creates the concept of the 'Will to Power' as the fundamental principle of human motivation and of life itself. Stirner's writing is littered with dictums that appear to support such a world view. He lays emphasis on following the dictates of the will, as opposed to the normative values of acquired knowledge: 'Das rechte Wissen vollendet sich, indem es aufhört Wissen zu sein, und wieder ein einfacher, menschlicher Trieb wird, – der Wille.'[164] He elevates might over right: 'Recht – ist ein Sparren, erteilt von einem Spuk; Macht – das bin Ich selbst, Ich bin der Mächtige und Eigner der Macht.'[165] And he extols the virtues of power: 'Meine Freiheit wird erst vollkommen, wenn sie meine – *Gewalt* ist.'[166]

Yet despite the many apparent similarities, there is no incontrovertible evidence of Nietzsche having read, or even known of, Stirner. It is quite possible, as Glassford implies, that their affinities are based on that inevitable consistency of thought which is bound to exist between two radical, nineteenth-century German thinkers. Nietzsche's nihilistic and anti-nihilistic ideas are clearly a response to the perceived miasmic spirit of Western modernity, but there are many possible philosophical personifications of his 'last man', including Schopenhauer, Mainländer and Julius Bahnsen (1830-1881), all of whom are specifically identified by Nietzsche as products of the shadow cast over Europe by the death of God. The latter two occupy, like Stirner, only minor positions in the received history of ideas, so it would have been strange for Nietzsche to have mentioned them but not Stirner, had he known of him.

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[161] *EE*, p. 19.
[162] See *KGW*, VI.iii. 363, *EH-Schicksal-1*.
[163] See ibid., VI.iii. 352, *EH-GD-1*.
[164] Max Stirner, 'Das unwahre Prinzip unserer Erziehung oder der Humanismus und Realismus', in *Max Stirner's Kleinere Schriften und seine Entgegnungen auf die Kritik seines Werkes: 'Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum'. Aus den Jahren 1842-1847*, ed. by John Henry Mackay (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1898), pp. 5-30 (p. 20).
[165] *EE*, p. 215.
[166] Ibid., p. 174.

Egon Friedell (1878-1938) acknowledges this when he asserts: 'Nietzsche […] hat Stirner offenbar nicht gekannt, sonst hätte er ihn, bei seiner Vorliebe für alle literarischen Outsider, sicher mehr als einmal genannt.'[167]

Nietzsche does not hesitate to write about those thinkers who supplied elements of the terminology he used for his most important concepts. 'Gott ist todt' is a phrase used by Hegel; 'apollinisch-dionysisch', as a philosophical dualism, came from Schelling (among others);[168] 'Wille' was central to the philosophy of Schopenhauer;[169] 'Werde, der du bist'[170] is from Pindar's Pythian Ode 2, 72;[171] 'ewige Wiederkunft' (the idea for which, so Nietzsche reports in *Ecce Homo*, came to him in a flash of inspiration)[172] appears in various forms in ancient Indian and Egyptian religions, as well as in the philosophy of Pythagoras, Empedocles, Zeno of Citium and the Stoics.[173] 'Übermensch' was a term used in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theological prose of certain followers of Luther, later to be adopted and modified in meaning by Herder, from whom Goethe acquired it.[174]

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[167] Friedell, *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*, p. 719.

[168] See Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, in *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämmtliche Werke*, Part 1 (10 vols), Part 2 (4 vols) (Stuttgart and Augsburg: Cotta, 1856-1861), 2, III (1858). See also Martin Vogel, *Apollinisch und Dionysisch. Geschichte eines genialen Irrtums* (Regensburg: G. Bosse, 1966).

[169] See Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1819).

[170] *KGW*, VI.i. 293, *Za-IV-Honig*.

[171] See Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche*, p. 115.

[172] See *KGW*, VI.iii. 333, *EH-ZA-1*. 'Ich erzähle nunmehr die Geschichte des Zarathustra. Die Grundconception des Werks, der *E w i g e - W i e d e r k u n f t s - G e d a n k e ,* diese höchste Formel der Bejahung, die überhaupt erreicht werden kann —, gehört in den August des Jahres 1881: er ist auf ein Blatt hingeworfen, mit der Unterschrift: "6000 Fuss jenseits von Mensch und Zeit". Ich gieng an jenem Tage am See von Silvaplana durch die Wälder; bei einem mächtigen pyramidal aufgethürmten Block unweit Surlei machte ich Halt. Da kam mir dieser Gedanke.'

[173] See Milič Čapek, 'Eternal Return', in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, *Encyclopedia.com* <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/eternal-return>, Carl Huffman, 'Pythagoras', in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pythagoras/>, and Dirk Baltzly, 'Stoicism', in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/> [all accessed 24 August 2021].

[174] See 'Übermensch', in *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* <https://www.dwds.de/wb/dwb/%C3%9Cbermensch> [accessed 24 August 2021]. 'Übermensch' was also employed in an anthropological sense (as opposed to meaning God-man) by Feuerbach, and subsequently by Moses Hess (who

There is no escaping the fact that Nietzsche is a highly inventive assembler of eclectic concepts.[175] As Martin remarks: 'He is an impatient, inveterate, and incorrigible borrower and rejecter of ideas.'[176] He does not, however, make any obvious attempt to conceal his sources: he mentions Schopenhauer in his writings about a thousand times, Goethe five hundred times, and Hegel and Luther more than a hundred times each; Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Feuerbach and Strauss are lumped together as theologians;[177] Herder also appears, as do Pindar, Pythagoras, Empedocles and Zeno, as well as Bahnsen, Mainländer and Hartmann. He even refers to the now obscure Afrikan Spir (1837-1890), whose work we know Nietzsche read around the time that Hartmann alleges Stirner's influence to have occurred.[178]

It is of course possible that any evidence there was that Nietzsche knew Stirner has in some way or other been tampered with (Laska speaks of 'verwischte Spuren Stirners in Nietzsches Werk und Nachlass'),[179] and that Nietzsche, and subsequently his sister, were indeed concerned about charges of plagiarism, as the testimony of Ida Overbeck would suggest.[180] The self-styled 'atheist who loves God',[181] Paul Carus (1852-1919), pronounced

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used it to describe Bruno Bauer, while he labelled Stirner an 'Unmensch'). See Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, p. 205.

[175] Even such essential Nietzschean figures as 'Zarathustra' and 'Dionysos' are adaptations of previously existing names. See Dariush Ashoori, 'Nietzsche and Persia', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nietzsche-and-persia> [accessed 24 August 2021]. See also 'Dionysus', ed. by Adam Augustyn, in *Encyclopedia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dionysus> [accessed 24 August 2021]. Also, Karl Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976).

[176] Martin, *Nietzsche and Schiller*, p. 6.

[177] *KGW*, VII.ii. 150, *NF-1884*, 26[8].

[178] See ibid., III.iv. 318, *NF-1873*, 29[200]. See also Safranski, *Nietzsche*, p. 162. 'Mitte der siebziger Jahre studiert er das inzwischen längst vergessene Hauptwerk des Philosophen Afrikan Spir *Denken und Wirklichkeit*, das nachhaltig auf ihn einwirkt. In § 18 von *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* zitiert er Spir, ohne seinen Namen zu nennen, aber mit der Bemerkung, es handle sich um den "Satz eines ausgezeichneten Logikers (2,38)".'

[179] See Laska, 'Nietzsches initiale Krise'.

[180] Glassford, for one, considers her evidence to be 'dubious'. Glassford, 'Did Friedrich Nietzsche Plagiarize from Max Stirner?', p. 78.

[181] Harold Henderson, *Catalyst for Controversy: Paul Carus of Open Court* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 47.

the accusation of plagiarism meaningless, because, if Nietzsche was beyond good and evil, then he must be beyond plagiarism as well.[182] But the fact is that the lack of any concrete evidence that Nietzsche ever encountered Stirner's writings and ideas, means that such an allegation is pure speculation anyway. Stirner cannot be considered a component of the Nietzschean understanding of nihilism on the basis of factual proof and thus cannot be accorded the title of nihilist on this account. Instead of being the model for Nietzsche's uncanniest of all guests, as has been suggested, Stirner may not even have been the shadow of its shadow. If the accusation of nihilism against Stirner is to stand up, the evidence must be sought elsewhere.

The Existential Dimension

Returning to the definition of Nietzschean nihilism as an alternative means of establishing whether Stirner can reasonably be called a nihilist, it is important for the purposes of this analysis to trace the etymology of the term after Nietzsche's death, in order to determine its full range of characteristics. The concept of nihilism continued to evolve throughout the twentieth century; following its development will help to build up a picture of nihilism's shifting appearance against which to measure, and better understand, the different, and often anachronistic, senses in which it is used by Stirner's accusers.

Vercellone observes that, '[d]as entstellte, neuentdeckte Denken Nietzsches bildet eine Art von roten Faden, der die Nihilismus-Debatte in unserem [20.] Jahrhundert durchzieht'.[183] The effect of Nietzsche's concept of nihilism on subsequent thinkers, writers and artists has

[182] 'Nietzsche has been blamed for appropriating Stirner's thoughts […]; but we must concede that the common rules of literary ethics can not apply to individualists who deny all and any moral authority.' Paul Carus, *Nietzsche and Other Exponents of Individualism* (Chicago and London: Open Court Publishing, 1914), pp. 100-101.
[183] Vercellone, *Einführung in den Nihilismus*, p. 89.

been considerable, and it has been instrumental in the word becoming part of common usage. The list of those associated, in some form or other, with nihilism after Nietzsche constitutes a who's who of modern Western culture, including: Wittgenstein and Heidegger; Sartre and Camus; Derrida and Baudrillard; Cioran and Bataille; Conrad and Kafka; Beckett and Ionesco; Duchamp and Munch; Berg and Stravinsky; Stevens and Yeats.[184] There is no major field of culture that nihilism after Nietzsche has left untouched. It has seeped into some minor ones as well: take, for instance, without necessarily having to listen to it, the type of popular music known as Death Metal.[185]

In the one hundred and thirty years or so since the onset of Nietzsche's 'geistige Umnachtung' (mental derangement) in 1889, the most important developments in the evolution of the concept of nihilism have come from the cultural movement known as existentialism. To all intents and purposes, the type of nihilism associated with Nietzsche, i.e. nihilism based on the assumption of meaninglessness, is nowadays described as existential nihilism. However, existentialism has not just adopted the term, it has also helped to shape its meaning by developing ideas not fully explored by Nietzsche. Although Reginster argues that 'Nietzsche conceives of nihilism primarily in terms of despair',[186] this begs the question of whether Nietzsche ever expresses despair, except perhaps in his final semi-lucid moments

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[184] See Glen T. Martin, *From Nietzsche to Wittgenstein: The Problem of Truth and Nihilism in the Modern World* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); Shane Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), where Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Derrida, Baudrillard, Conrad, Kafka, Cioran, Bataille, Beckett, Ionesco and Duchamp are all mentioned; Sue Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007); Theodor Adorno, *Die musikalischen Monographien* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 326; Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 173: 'Versenkt man sich in Bergs Musik, so ist es einem manchmal, als spräche seine Stimme mit einem aus Zartheit, Nihilismus und Vertrauen ins Hinfälligste gemischten Klang.'; Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of our Climate* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 62; Alan Gillis, *Irish Poetry of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 148.

[185] See Brett Stevens, 'On Death Metal and Nihilism', *Death Metal Underground* (19 August 2016) <http://www.deathmetal.org/article/on-death-metal-and-nihilism/> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[186] Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 34.

during the equine embrace.[187] 'Verzweiflung' is a word that does not play a significant role in Nietzsche's writings; even when he is articulating an idea which in itself is horrifying, the wit and wisdom of the phrase often forestalls the emotional response of the reader, as in the remark: 'Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein.'[188] In this, and other similar instances, we are confronted more with the concept of emptiness as an underlying potentiality than with the iconic scream of anguish depicted by Munch. Munch's painting may have been a direct response to Nietzsche's ideas, but it needed the artist's sensibility to express the full visceral impact of their implications.[189]

This subjective element within the modern concept of nihilism surely postdates Nietzsche, although its antecedents are to be found in Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who addresses the issue of existential despair in *Fear and Trembling* (1843):

> If there were no eternal consciousness in man, […] if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what would life be but despair? […] [I]f an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches – how empty and devoid of comfort would life be![190]

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[187] Lesley Chamberlain describes the incident as follows: 'On 3 January 1889 or thereabouts he [Nietzsche] tearfully embraced a mistreated nag in the street. The horse under duress was pulling a public conveyance on or near the Via Po. It may have fallen first or he embraced it and then fell himself, briefly losing consciousness. The accounts are various. Anyway Davide Fino [Nietzsche's landlord], who came along soon after, confirmed such an event happened.' Lesley Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin* (London: Quartet, 1997), p. 208. Sue Prideaux even casts doubt on the equine embrace ever having happened: 'On seeing a cabbie mercilessly beating his horse, Nietzsche broke down. Overwhelmed by compassion, sobbing at the sight of it, he threw his arms protectively around the horse's neck, and collapsed. Or so they said. Crises are so quickly come and gone. Eyewitnesses see so many different truths.' Prideaux, *I am Dynamite!*, p. 328.

[188] *KGW*, VI.ii. p. 98, *JGB-146*.

[189] Cf. Prideaux, *I am Dynamite!*, p. 351. 'The Norwegian artist Edvard Munch was part of the circle and Strindberg introduced him to Nietzsche's writings with such profound effect that Munch painted *The Scream*. It captured the zeitgeist as nothing else: Munch had produced the definitive icon of existential terror on contemplating the consequences of the death of God, and the subsequent responsibility of man to find meaning and significance to life.' Munch's 1906 painting of Nietzsche adorns the front cover of many books on Nietzsche. In the case of Sue Prideaux's, it is the lithograph portrait.

[190] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 14.

In *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), Kierkegaard further refines his stark description of despair: 'If, in the strictest sense, there is to be any question of a sickness unto death, it must be one where the end is death and where death is the end. And thinking that is precisely to despair.'[191] Kierkegaard, who considered doubt a proof of true faith, hypothesised the horror of nothingness, identified the denial of personal immortality as the devastating consequence of unbelief, and chose to seek solace in God.[192]

Despair plays a central role throughout existentialism. It is not always occasioned directly by the contemplation of death, but can also result from the feeling of absurdity, which, according to Camus (1913-1960), is the product of the 'divorce between man and his life'.[193] However much we might try to ignore it, behind the spirit of absurdity lies the spectre of 'the cruel mathematics that command our condition'.[194] Sartre (1905-1980) writes that '[e]xistentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position'.[195] Just as the death of God is the catalyst for Nietzsche's tragic age of nihilism, so the absence of God lies behind existentialism's concern with how to live in a world devoid of absolute truth, values and meaning. Existentialism confronts a similar set of problems to Nietzsche in his struggle with self-defined nihilism, although it approaches them in different ways and with different emphases, and therefore puts its own slant on the term 'nihilism', adding a new, visceral dimension, which is embodied in the concept of angst.

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[191] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 47.
[192] The irony has not gone unnoticed that Kierkegaard's name means churchyard in Danish, 'usually in the sense of "cemetery"'. See Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. by Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 3.
[193] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O'Brien, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 13.
[194] Ibid., p. 21.
[195] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 56.

The term 'angst', in its existential sense, derives from Kierkegaard's book, *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), where it is depicted as a 'consequence of original sin',[196] defined as 'the dizziness of freedom',[197] and associated with the recurrent theme of nothingness: 'If then we ask further what is the object of dread, the answer as usual must be that it is nothing. Dread and nothing regularly correspond to one another.'[198] Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who, in Noreen Khawaja's words, 'was clearly less forthcoming about his debt to Kierkegaard than he ought to have been',[199] and whose book *Sein und Zeit* (1927) 'transposes entire paragraphs from the German translation of Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*',[200] developed the idea further:

> *Die Befindlichkeit aber, welche die ständige und schlechthinnige, aus dem eigensten vereinzelten Sein des Daseins aufsteigende Bedrohung seiner Selbst offen zu halten vermag, ist die Angst.* In ihr befindet sich das Dasein *vor* dem Nichts der möglichen Unmöglichkeit seiner Existenz. […] Das Sein zum Tode ist wesenhaft Angst.[201]

This insight can be viewed as existentialism's most important addition to the modern definition of nihilism. Needless to say, the concept of 'Angst' plays as insignificant a role in the writings of Nietzsche as does 'Verzweiflung'; neither are explicitly developed concepts in his philosophy.

As *horror vacui* (according to Thielicke's interpretation of the term as opposed to Mario Praz's), nihilistic angst can be considered to have reached a sort of poetic consummation in Philip Larkin's 'Aubade', 'a waking meditation on extinction that unstrenuously contrives a tense, brilliant counterpoise between the stoic philosophy of

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[196] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. by Walter Lowrie, 2nd edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 47. It is also translated as *The Concept of Anxiety* ('Angest' in Kierkegaard's Danish).
[197] Ibid., p. 54.
[198] Ibid., p. 86.
[199] Noreen Khawaja, 'Heidegger's Kierkegaard: Philosophy and Religion in the Tracks of a Failed Interpretation', *The Journal of Religion*, 95 (2015), 295-317 (p. 299).
[200] Ibid., p. 296.
[201] Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 11th edn (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1967), pp. 265-266.

Lucretius and David Hume, and his own frank terror of oblivion'.[202] In it, Larkin confronts 'the dread of dying, and being dead' with unmitigated honesty, describing his view of mortality as:

> The sure extinction that we travel to
> And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
> Not to be anywhere,
> And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.[203]

Its prosaic counterpart can be found in Ligotti's *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*:

> There will come a day for each of us […] when the future will be done with. Until then, humanity will acclimate itself to every new horror that comes knocking, as it has done from the very beginning. […] And the horror will go on, with generations falling into the future like so many bodies into open graves. The horror handed down to us will be handed down to others like a scandalous heirloom.[204]

Ligotti and Larkin, along with a host of others, are the literary heirs of Nietzsche's haunting prediction of the tragic age for Europe. They are part of the existentialists' update of nihilism, which has taken the confrontation with nothingness to new levels of subjectivity. If Stirner is to be accounted a nihilist in this sense, one would expect him to articulate interests and concerns that are similar to theirs.

The existential manifestation of nihilism shows just how much the meaning of the word has changed over time. The history of nihilism, from its inception towards the end of the eighteenth century to the present day, reveals a remarkable metamorphosis, from a specialised, polemical term expressing the most extreme form of censure, via the watchword of a political movement fixated on the destruction of the established order, to the description of a pervasive socio-cultural malaise that has infiltrated post-religious human consciousness. The only

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[202] Christopher Hitchens, *Arguably* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), p. 331.
[203] Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 208.
[204] Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror* (New York: Penguin, 2018), p. 220.

constants in this process of rapid diversification of meaning are the etymological root in the idea of nothingness and the assumption of godlessness. Otherwise, there have been no constraints on nihilism's peregrinations through the tangled processes of human thought, which, together with the horrified fascination that the word induces, accounts for both the large number of definitions and the confusion that surrounds them.

The purpose of this and the previous chapter on nihilism has been to gain as clear an understanding as possible of this widely used, much maligned and mostly misunderstood word, in order to be able to comprehend correctly the sense in which each accusation of nihilism against Stirner is made, as well as to assess the fairness and accuracy of those accusations. A related aspect of this investigation has been to show that there is no proof of Stirner having influenced Nietzsche, who is unquestionably the decisive figure in the word's conceptual development, or of Stirner's ideas having contributed to Nietzsche's notion of nihilism, which, had it been the case, would have offered a shortcut to a positive evaluation of Stirner's status as a nihilist. Instead, the allegations of nihilism against Stirner must be judged solely on their individual merits; to this end, the next chapter aims to provide a chronological review of the relevant literature, for the purpose of identifying the specific types of nihilism with which Stirner's thought must, in the ensuing chapters, be compared.

Chapter Four

Stirner under Fire: Accusations of Nihilism

Allegations and Denials: The First Hundred Years

The focus of this investigation now moves from the concept of nihilism to Stirner's thought itself. The previous two chapters have provided an insight into the origins, definitions and etymology of nihilism in order to enable an accurate evaluation of its applicability to Stirner's philosophical ideas. The next step, and the purpose of this chapter, is to review the historical record of written references to Stirner and nihilism, and to consider their various interpretations and implications. For a thinker as neglected as Stirner has been, the allegations of nihilism against him have been surprisingly frequent (although the neglect may, of course, be causally connected to the accusations), and these must now be detailed and discussed before turning to an in-depth analysis of Stirner's thought in relation to the forms of nihilism which this survey will show him to be most commonly associated with.

Since the first examples of the polemical use of the term 'nihilism' in reference to Stirner following the publication of *Der Einzige*, by Karl Rosenkranz in late 1844 or early 1845 and by an anonymous journalist in 1847,[1] the echoing voices have been both numerous and at times venomous, at least once the hiatus of almost half a century of Stirner's near total obscurity had passed. From the time of the first Stirner renaissance in the 1890s until the present day, the accusations of nihilism have been relentless, to the point where the alleged connection has arguably become a self-perpetuating truism. An examination of the documents held by the Max Stirner Archive in Leipzig (which is an extensive, if not exhaustive

[1] See Chapter 1 above.

collection), reveals at least half a dozen published examples in German per decade of Stirner and his ideas being linked to nihilism, and sometimes more than double that. It is not only the prevalence of the accusations of nihilism against Stirner that is of interest for this study but also the changing usage of the term over time in the relevant books, dissertations and articles. In order to assess whether Stirner can correctly be described as a nihilist, it is necessary to define in which sense the label of 'nihilist' has been applied to him.

That Stirner did not disappear entirely from intellectual memory in the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions is evidenced by his brief appearance, as mentioned in Chapter 3 above, in two important philosophical works of the 1860s, Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus* and Hartmann's *Philosophie des Unbewußten*. However, as Laska remarks, the few references to Stirner in this period are terse and evasive.[2] One such reference can be found in Karl Grün's 1874 edition of Feuerbach's correspondence and posthumous writings; in his introduction, Grün puts the word 'Nihilismus' into Feuerbach's mouth: 'So nannte ihn Max Stirner einen "frommen Atheisten", behauptete: "Feuerbach flüchte aus dem Glauben in die Liebe". […] Dem Stirner antwortete Feuerbach zunächst: sein Nihilismus sei doch auch dogmatisch.'[3] As observed in Chapter 2 above, Feuerbach does use the word 'Nihilismus' in 1860 to describe the ideas of Schopenhauer, but neither in the essay by Feuerbach to which Grün is alluding, which was written fifteen years earlier in 1845, nor elsewhere in his published writings, does Feuerbach connect Stirner with nihilism.[4] One can only assume that Grün (1817-1887), who was a Young Hegelian journalist, political theorist and socialist politician, was applying the

[2] Laska, *Ein heimlicher Hit*, p. 15.

[3] *Ludwig Feuerbach in seinem Briefwechsel und Nachlass, sowie in seiner Philosophischen Characterentwicklung*, ed. by Karl Grün, 2 vols (Leipzig and Heidelberg: C. F. Winter, 1874), I, p. 119.

[4] Ludwig Feuerbach, 'Ueber das "Wesen des Christenthums" in Beziehung auf den "Einzigen und sein Eigenthum"' (1845), in Ludwig Feuerbach, *Sämmtliche Werke*, 10 vols (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1846-1866), I, pp. 342-359.

increasingly popular term with a combination of poetic licence and the benefits of hindsight. Both Grün's attribution of the word to Feuerbach's response to Stirner's criticism, and Feuerbach's own use in 1860 referring to Schopenhauer, reflect the broader definition that was evolving in the middle of the nineteenth century, which went beyond the one-dimensional, polemical sense associated with German idealism, and was starting to embrace broader ethical and ideological concepts of denial.

A similar understanding of nihilism can be found in a reference to Stirner in a work of 1881 by the liberal politician, Karl Biedermann (1812-1901):

> Ein gewisser Radicalismus im Religiösen, […] war zum Theil mit einem eben solchen Radicalismus im Politischen, im Sittlichen und Socialen zusammengeflossen und so schließlich an einem Punkte angelangt, wo er alles Bestehende in Kirche, Staat, Gesellschaft, öffentlicher Sitte u. s. w. gänzlich […] in Frage stellte. In Berlin bildete sich ein kleiner Kreis von Anhängern dieser Lehre, zumeist noch sehr jungen Schriftstellern, die […] sich selbst den Namen der Nihilisten beilegten. Eine Art von literarischem Programm dieser Richtung […] war die Schrift: *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* von Max Stirner.[5]

The identity of the young Berlin writers, whom Biedermann labels self-styled nihilists, is not clear. If he means 'Die Freien', there is no other source which claims that they baptised themselves in this way, and nor is the epithet particularly applicable to the liberal, humanist and socialist ideologies of most of its members. The nihilists of Gutzkow's novella, *Die Nihilisten*, are neither writers nor real nor located in Berlin. The group of rebellious, young authors around Heinrich and Julius Hart, Hermann Conradi, Karl Henckell and Wilhelm Arent called themselves 'das jüngste Deutschland', and were later subsumed under German Naturalism;[6] and, in any case, their main activities took place after Biedermann's book was

[5] Karl Biedermann, *1840-1870. Dreißig Jahre deutscher Geschichte. Vom Thronwechsel in Preußen 1840 bis zur Aufrichtung des neuen deutschen Kaiserthums. Nebst einem Rückblick auf die Zeit von 1815-1840,* 2 vols (Breslau: S. Schottlaender, 1881), I, p. 139.

[6] See Richard Hamann and Jost Hermand, *Naturalismus*, 2nd edn (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1968), pp. 12-13.

published.[7] Whoever they are, Biedermann's nihilists sound like a literary version of the Russian nihilists, with their rejection of all political and moral norms, and this is the sense he seems to apply to Stirner. Ernst Laas (1837-1885), the positivist philosopher, writing one year later and in the same vein, speaks of '[d]iese nihilistisch-promethische Abwendung von aller Sittlichkeit'.[8] Comparing Stirner to Callicles, he vilifies *Der Einzige* as: 'die rücksichtsloseste und wahnsinnigste Verunglimpfung aller moralischen Ideen und Gefühle überhaupt'.[9] One thing that many of Stirner's detractors over the years have shared is the excessive use of invariably negative hyperbole.

These early associations of Stirner with nihilism took place just prior to the publication of Nietzsche's writings on nihilism, at a time when the term was undergoing exponential growth in its prevalence.[10] As the first Stirner renaissance gained pace in the 1890s, spurred by the mounting *fin-de-siècle* fascination with Nietzsche, so the identification of Stirner with nihilism grew more widespread and more complex. In 1891, the social-democratic political scientist and politician, Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932), in the process of expressing his disdain

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[7] Hermann Wendel does, however, describe the Conradi generation as 'pure Nihilisten, als *Nichtser*'. Hermann Wendel, 'Die Generation um Conradi', *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, 5 (1906), 413-420 (p. 420).

[8] Ernst Laas, *Idealismus und Positivismus. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung*, 2 vols (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1882), II, p. 19.

[9] Ibid., p. 18.

[10] The increasing popularity of the word 'nihilism' / 'Nihilismus' is demonstrated by online search engines that chart the frequency of occurrences in printed material. See 'Nihilism', in *Google Books Ngram Viewer* <https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content =Nihilism&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2CNihilism%3B%2Cc0> and 'Nihilismus', in *Google Books Ngram Viewer* <https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Nihilismus&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=20&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2CNihilismus%3B%2Cc0> [both accessed 24 August 2021]. *Google Ngram Viewer*, which scans the frequency of a word or words in the text corpora of Google Books, and, as of October 2015, had scanned over twenty-five million titles, shows a spike in German in 1882 and in English in 1884. Two examples from cultural history of the initial proliferation of nihilism are: 1. August Strindberg's (1849-1912) declaration in a letter of 1880 to Edvard Brandes (younger brother of Georg): 'I am a socialist, a nihilist, a republican, anything that is anti-reactionary!' Michael Meyer, *Strindberg: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1985), p. 85. 2. Paul Merwart's (1855-1902) melodramatic painting of 1882 entitled *The Nihilist*. Paul Merwart, *The Nihilist*, 1882, oil on canvas, 76.5 x 120 cm <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Merwart-Nihilist.jpg> [accessed 24 August 2021].

for Stirner's alleged philosophical idealisation of bourgeois individualism, argued that Stirner's uncompromising version of nihilism should be distinguished from Russian nihilism: 'Der Nihilismus, in den Stirner's Theorie ausläuft, trägt ein anderes Gesicht, als was in Rußland diesen Namen führt. Er hat seine Sache "auf Nichts gestellt." Aber aus nichts wird nichts. Es giebt nach ihm keinen Schritt vorwärts mehr.'[11] Georg Keben (1859-1921) declared shortly before this that Stirner's philosophy ends in the sense of its own impotence: 'in einer Art nihilistischen Katzenjammer'.[12] A similar conclusion was reached by Schellwien in his book on Stirner and Nietzsche (the first but not the last of its kind): 'Hier spukt auch in Stirner etwas, es spukt voraus, der Nihilismus. Der "Einzige" ist "der sterbliche Schöpfer seiner, der sich selbst verzehrt." Alles Streben wird abgelehnt.'[13] A few years later, the socialist politician, Heinrich Ströbel (1869-1944), was even more forthright in his denunciation: 'Wohin der moralische Nihilismus Stirners führt, mag folgendes Citat beweisen: "Ich aber bin durch Mich berechtigt zu morden, wenn Ich's mir selbst nicht verbiete."'[14]

A new element that entered the discourse on Stirner and nihilism at this time was anarchism. Keben had already brought up the question of Stirner's relationship to anarchism in his article of 1890, but had dismissed any meaningful connection: 'Die Stirner'sche Welt ist das Reich der unbeschränkten Genußsucht und Pflichtenlosigkeit, der Anarchismus engt

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[11] Eduard Bernstein, 'Die Soziale Doktrin des Anarchismus. II. Max Stirner und "Der Einzige"', *Die Neue Zeit. Revue des geistigen und öffentlichen Lebens*, 10.1. (1891-1892), 421-428 (p. 428). 'Aus nichts wird nichts' was the first line of a poem by Matthias Claudius (1740-1815), 'Ein silbern dito'. It is a sort of alphabetical 25 Commandments in rhyming couplets, starting with: 'Aus Nichts wird Nichts, das merke wohl, | Wenn aus Dir etwas werden soll.' *Matthias Claudius' Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. by Wilhelm Flegler (Leipzig: Reclam, 1882), p. 460. The phrase 'nothing comes from nothing' originates from Parmenides, coming down to us in Latin via Lucretius as 'ex nihilo nihil fit'. Shakespeare uses a variation on it, 'nothing will come of nothing', in *King Lear*.

[12] Georg Keben, 'John Henry Mackay und sein Philosoph', *Monatsblätter. Organ der Breslauer Dichterschule*, 16.12 (1890), 172-190 (p. 174).

[13] Schellwien, *Max Stirner und Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 21.

[14] Heinrich Ströbel, 'Stirners "Einziger und sein Eigentum"', *Neuland*, ed. by Johann Sassenbach, 2.2 (1897), 82-92 (p. 86).

das Genießen wenigstens ideell durch das Solidaritätsgefühl ein.'[15] Bernstein, on the other hand, calls Stirner 'von allen Anarchisten der konsequenteste',[16] and his views are echoed by the French journalist and adventurer, Félix Dubois (1862-1945), who describes Stirner's philosophy as 'nihilistic-anarchistic' and *Der Einzige* as 'das erste anarchistische Werk'.[17] Similarly, Leo Berg (1862-1908), writer, journalist and supporter of German Naturalism, remarked on the similarities between Stirner and the 'French nihilist', Proudhon.[18] The lack of consensus between these various commentators can often be put down to their diverse interpretations, and sometimes imprecise usage, of the terminology. What they all generally have in common is a revulsion towards Stirner's perceived ethical impropriety, which takes on a political dimension through the reference to anarchism.

In what Kast identifies as the first academic dissertation on Stirner,[19] an 1897 doctoral thesis entitled *Die Individualitätsphilosophie Max Stirners*, Matteo Johannes Paul Lucchesi (1869-?) reaffirms the relationship between Stirner and anarchism, though his definition of anarchism is a loose one and is not restricted to the socio-political arena: 'Der Egoist muß sich als *Anarchisten* erweisen. Er soll sich wissen als den Schöpfer und Eigner der geistigen Welt.'[20] Like Berg, Lucchesi seems to employ 'nihilism' and 'anarchism' interchangeably, dividing his theological analysis of Stirner's 'Vernichtung des Geistes' into three sub-headings, 'logischer', 'ethischer' and 'sozialer' 'Anarchismus oder Nihilismus',[21] which, in

[15] Keben, 'John Henry Mackay und sein Philosoph', p. 189.
[16] Bernstein, 'Die Soziale Doktrin des Anarchismus', p. 422.
[17] Félix Dubois, *Die Anarchistische Gefahr*, trans. by Max Tüdjen (Amsterdam: Dieckmann, 1894), p. 9.
[18] Leo Berg, *Der Übermensch in der modernen Litteratur. Ein Kapitel zur Geistesgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Paris, Leipzig and Munich: Albert Langen, 1897), p. 14.
[19] See Bernd Kast, *Max Stirners Destruktion der spekulativen Philosophie. Das Radikal* [*sic*] *des Eigners und die Auflösung der Abstrakta Mensch und Menschheit* (Freiburg and Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2016), p. 137.
[20] Matteo Johannes Paul Lucchesi, *Die Individualitätsphilosophie Max Stirners* (Leipzig-Reudnitz: Hoffmann, 1897), p. 31.
[21] Ibid., pp. 31-54.

terms of the categories discussed in Chapter 2 above, correspond to alethiological, moral and political nihilism respectively.

In a number of fragments of 1887 and 1888, Nietzsche also grouped anarchism and nihilism together as symptoms of pessimism or consequences of degeneration, though without, of course, any reference to Stirner.[22] Lucchesi would not previously have read these fragments, as they were published only later in *Der Wille zur Macht*, but at this time of simultaneous popularity of, and comparison between, Stirner and Nietzsche, both were being linked to anarchism, if only because of their shared animosity towards the state and its institutions.[23] Lucchesi acknowledges the connection between the two thinkers: 'Beider [*sic*] Weltanschauungen stehen in unversöhnlichem Gegensatz zum Christentum wie zu den herrschenden Zeitrichtungen überhaupt, beide sind Vertreter eines absoluten Individualismus.'[24] He goes on to describe Stirner as a 'Nietzsche vor Nietzsche' and to define his nihilism in terms of anthropocentrism, before opposing it with a declaration of faith: 'Nur dann hat unser Leben den rechten Inhalt und das rechte Ziel, wenn unser Denken und Wollen theocentrisch ist.'[25] Like many of Stirner's critics, Lucchesi, who had been elected third deacon of the Dresden Trinity Church in 1896, had an overtly theological agenda that underpinned his condemnation of Stirner as a nihilist.

In 1898, a journalist by the name of Arthur Goldschmidt adopted a less conventional standpoint by stating that Stirner's negation of morality was *not* representative of nihilism, but

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[22] See *KGW*, VIII.ii. 73-74, *NF-1887*, 9[126] and ibid., VIII.iii. 47, *NF-1888*, 14[74]. Published as fragments 82 and 42, respectively, in the 1906 edition of *Der Wille zur Macht*.

[23] See Spencer Sunshine, 'Nietzsche and the Anarchists', *fifth estate*, 367 (Winter 2004-2005) <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/367-winter-2004-2005/nietzsche-and-the-anarchists/> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[24] Lucchesi, *Die Individualitätsphilosophie Max Stirners*, p. 3.

[25] Ibid., p. 96. Although Lucchesi connects Stirner's ideas with Nietzsche's, he does not enter into the Stirner-Nietzsche debate, remarking simply that Nietzsche need not necessarily have known about Stirner. See ibid.

rather of subjectivism, defined as a perspective based on the uniqueness of the individual.[26] Nonetheless, he does not shy away from calling Stirner an individualist anarchist,[27] leaving his denial of the connection to nihilism as little more than an anomaly amidst the otherwise steady flow of assertions to the contrary in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. There were three further indictments in the by now customary vein before the century ended: Thomas Achelis (1850-1909) described Stirner as a philosophical nihilist in an article of 1898;[28] a year later, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937), the future liberator-president of Czechoslovakia, called him a political nihilist;[29] and Julius Hart (1859-1930), the Naturalist author, employed more imaginative terminology in characterising Stirner's 'Einziger' incongruously as a nihilistic Torquemada.[30]

1906, the centenary of Stirner's birth and the fiftieth anniversary of his death, was, relatively speaking, a prolific year for publications about Stirner. Lucchesi chose, understandably, to mark only the latter, in an article in the *Dresdner Anzeiger*, where he repeats the slogan 'ein Nietzsche vor Nietzsche' and once again delineates the purported threefold thrust of Stirner's 'nihilistic anarchism'. The message is largely the same as in his doctoral dissertation, although the articulation is rather more sophisticated, as he tries, with rhetoric that is both sanctimonious and derisive, to mobilise the German people against the 'Stirner-Nietzscheschen "Philosophie"': 'Man sollte meinen, unser Volk müßte allmählich

[26] Arthur Goldschmidt, 'Max Stirner, sein Leben und sein Werk', *Die Gesellschaft. Halbmonatsschrift für Litteratur, Kunst und Socialpolitik,* 3 (1898), 227-239 (p. 233).
[27] Ibid., p. 230.
[28] Thomas Achelis, 'Ethische Probleme', *Die Gegenwart,* 27.53 (1898), 150-152 (p. 151).
[29] Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *Die philosophischen und sociologischen Grundlagen des Marxismus. Studien zur socialen Frage* (Vienna: C. Konegen, 1899), p. 390.
[30] Julius Hart, *Der neue Gott. Ein Ausblick auf das kommende Jahrhundert* (Florence and Leipzig: E. Diederichs, 1899), p. 247.

von solcher Kost angeekelt werden. […] Wie ist dem entgegenzutreten und abzuhelfen? Schule und Kirche haben hier eine große Aufgabe.'[31]

A number of the centenary publications four months later, while undoubtedly kinder about Stirner and his legacy, were equally convinced about which 'isms' best applied to him. Alexander von Gleichen-Rußwurm (1865-1947), the great-grandson of Schiller, described Stirner as '[e]in Vorläufer der Nihilisten';[32] for Hugo Nathanson he was 'der Radikalste der Radikalen […], der geistige Vater des Anarchismus und Nihilismus';[33] while Friedrich Heman, in a reference to the Russian nihilists, declared that: 'Stirners Anarchismus und Nihilismus zu einer ganz Europa heimlich unterwühlenden Partei entfaltet, deren Anhänger mit Dolch, Revolver und Bomben sich zu Eignern der ganzen Welt machen und beweisen wollen, daß sie ihre Sache auf nichts gestellt haben.'[34] At this time when the era of Russian nihilism was gradually drawing to a close, to be succeeded by the even more ruthless ideology of Bolshevism, some of the criticism of Stirner became increasingly political in nature.

The one dissenting voice in the publications of 1906 was that of the writer and publisher, Anselm Ruest, whose sympathetic monograph on Stirner appeared in the same year,[35] and who dismissed the condemnation of Stirner as a nihilist as the product of ignorance and misunderstanding:

> Max Stirner […] war Philosoph, Denker; und der Philosoph allein hat es mit der Wahrheit, der nackten, unverhüllten, zu tun. […] Und so ist er, wie nun das allgemeine

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[31] Paul Lucchesi, 'Max Stirner: ein Nietzsche vor Nietzsche', *Dresdner Anzeiger*. *Sonntagsbeilage*, 24 June1906, pp. 98-100 (p. 100).

[32] Alexander von Gleichen-Rußwurm, 'Der Einzige und sein Eigentum. Eine Erinnerung zu Max Stirners hundertstem Geburtstag', *Die Nation*, 24.3 (20.10.1906), 41-43 (p. 41).

[33] Hugo Nathanson, 'Max Stirner. (Zum hundertsten Geburtstag)', *Das Blaubuch. Wochenschrift für öffentliches Leben, Literatur und Kunst*, 1.42 (25.10.1906), 1636-1638 (p. 1636).

[34] Friedrich Heman, 'Der Philosoph des Anarchismus und Nihilismus. Zum hundertjährigen Geburtstag Max Stirners', *Der Türmer*, 9.1 (October 1906), 67-74 (p. 74).

[35] The other monograph of 1906 sympathetic to Stirner's philosophy was Hermann Schultheiss, *Stirner. Grundlagen zum Verständnis des Werkes 'Der Einzige und sein Eigentum'* (Ratibor: F. Lindner, 1906), in which, however, nihilism is not mentioned.

> Urteil und nicht selten Verdammungsurteil lautet, zum ärgsten Skeptiker und Nihilisten selbst geworden; nichts soll er uns unangetastet gelassen haben, Recht, Staat und Eigentum soll er angegriffen – ja, den Zauber der uneigennützigen Liebe und Barmherzigkeit verdächtigt haben. Die so sprechen und mit einzelnen Sätzen und Sätzchen belegen wollen, was innerhalb einer großen und komplizierten Geistesgeschichte eine ganz andere Beleuchtung gewinnt, verstehen es nicht, einen Strom bis zur Quelle zu verfolgen.[36]

Ruest's positive assessment of Stirner's individualism, and his rejection of nihilism as an appropriate epithet, is echoed in Max Messer's monograph, which was published in the following year, and expresses the view, 'wie grundfalsch es ist, Stirner als *Nihilisten* zu stigmatisieren'.[37] Messer's incisive analysis is based on the observation that although, inevitably, there are destructive elements in Stirner's thought, his ultimate aim is a constructive one, namely the liberation of the individuals who comprise humanity, by fundamentally changing their perspective on the supposedly apodictic principles of established dogma, and thus he concludes that Stirner's philosophy 'ist keine nihilistische, sondern eine optimistische, lebensbejahende, im Sinne Nietzsches'.[38]

Messer's and Ruest's opinions nonetheless remained the exceptions; otherwise the accusations of nihilism continued unabated. In 1908, Ludwig Stein (1859-1930), a political journalist and pacifist, characterised Stirner's philosophy as an 'Ausdruck des großstädtischen Lumpenproletariats' and asserted the inevitability of extreme individualism ending in bottomless nihilism;[39] Franz Ludwig, in his conservative commentary on communism, anarchism and socialism, called Stirner the preacher of both mortal enmity towards morality and the revolutionary politics of violence, declaring: 'Damit schlug Stirners anarchistische

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[36] Anselm Ruest, 'Max Stirner. Zum hundertsten Geburtstag', *Die Gartenlaube. Illustriertes Familienblatt*, 43 (1906), 918-919 (p. 919).
[37] Max Messer, *Max Stirner* (Berlin: Bard, Marquardt & Co., 1907), p. 53.
[38] Ibid., pp. 53-54.
[39] Ludwig Stein, *Philosophische Strömungen der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1908), p. 239.

Theorie die Brücke zum Nihilismus';[40] Wally Zepler (1865-1940), the social-democratic politician and campaigner for women's rights, wrote that 'Stirner am systematischsten und tiefsten gegraben und alle scheinbar unauflöslichen gesellschaftlich sittlichen Begriffe aufgelöst [hatte], bis ihm nichts blieb als die unantastbare Souveränität des Ich und ein System des wirtschaftlichen Anarchismus, das diesem philosophischen Nihilismus entsprang';[41] and the theology professor and future Bishop of Danzig, Franz Sawicki (1877-1952), who seems to have read, and been positively impressed by, Lucchesi's work, pronounced with studied emphasis: 'Stirners Philosophie ist […] ein radikaler Nihilismus, ein logischer, ethischer, religiöser, sozialer Nihilismus.'[42] The attacks on Stirner came from all points of the sociopolitical compass, converging on the focal point of nihilism, variously understood.

This pattern of denunciation from all sides, interrupted intermittently by voices more favourably inclined to Stirner, continued into the second decade of the twentieth century, with the term nihilism, which was by then commonly associated with Stirner, being bandied about, often without due care and attention. Salomo Friedlaender (1871-1946), philosopher and writer of the Expressionist and Dadaist avantgarde, and, in 1919, co-editor with Ruest of the individualist anarchist periodical, *Der Einzige*, calls Stirner '[d]er sich so nennende Nihilist',[43] defining nihilism as synonymous with atheism, and, perhaps for this reason, giving no source for the assertion of self-confession. The philosophy professor and follower of Hartmann, Arthur Drews (1865-1935), writes of Stirner's 'personalistischer Anarchismus und

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[40] Franz Ludwig, *Kommunismus, Anarchismus, Sozialismus. Geschichtliches und Kritisches*, 2nd edn (Berlin: Verlag des Reichsverbands gegen die Sozialdemokratie, 1908), p. 47.

[41] Wally Zepler, 'Individualismus', *Sozialistische Monatshefte,* 13.2 (15.07.1909), 888-901 (p. 892).

[42] Franz Sawicki, *Das Problem der Persönlichkeit und des Übermenschen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1909), p. 112.

[43] Salomo Friedlaender, *Friedrich Nietzsche. Eine intellektuelle Biographie* (Leipzig: G. J. Göschen, 1911), p. 44. Friedlaender edited *Der Einzige* under the pseudonymic semordnilap, 'Mynona'.

Nihilismus',[44] while the conservative Austrian philosophy professor, Othmar Spann (1878-1950), calls Stirner a preacher of 'gesellschaftlichen Nihilismus'.[45] Hugo Ball (1886-1927), one of the founders of Dadaism and author of the Dada Manifesto, commenting on Stirner's failure to man the barricades in 1848, writes: 'Der zynische Nihilismus Stirners blieb in der Weinstube sitzen.'[46]

The exception in this decade, with regard to Stirner and nihilism, was Aurélie Polturak (1892-1943),[47] whose dissertation on Stirner, submitted in Vienna in 1917, begins with a sober appraisal of Stirner research hitherto, which concludes: 'Als Nihilist auf dem Gebiete der Erkenntnis, Moral und Gesellschaft, der das rohe Faustrecht predigt und zum selbstsüchtigen Genusse aufruft, wird Stirner seit dem Erscheinen seines Buches bis heutzutage von allen seinen Monographen geschildert.'[48] This indictment of Stirner as a nihilist is, she asserts, based on a fundamental failure to understand his philosophy. Polturak's message, it seems, was largely ignored. In the period of the Weimar Republic that followed shortly thereafter, Hermann Graf Keyserling (1880-1946), the Baltic German philosopher, fresh from the loss of his ancestral estate in Livonia following the Estonian Land Reform of 1919, speaks of the inevitability of individualistic immoralism like Stirner's descending into bottomless nihilism;[49] W. Stockgänger, writing in *Der freie Arbeiter*, calls Stirner 'der konsequenteste

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[44] Arthur Drews, *Geschichte der Philosophie* (Berlin and Leipzig: G. J. Göschen, 1913), p. 25.
[45] Othmar Spann, *Kurz gefaßtes System der Gesellschaftslehre* (Berlin: J. Guttentag, 1914), p. 236.
[46] Hugo Ball, *Die Folgen der Reformation. Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005), p. 262. [First published in 1919.]
[47] Aurélie Polturak later became an art and literary critic in Paris, the wife of the modernist painter Léopold Gottlieb (1883-1934), a member of the Jewish resistance in Klaus Barbie's Lyon, and, finally, a deportee to Auschwitz. See Marx [Marc] Fineltin, 'Gottlieb née Polturak Aurélie "dite Relia"', *Les Amis de la Fondation de la Résistance: Memoirs et Espoirs de la Resistance* <http://www.memoresist.org/resistant/gottlieb-nee-polturak-aurelie/> [accessed 24 August 2021].
[48] Aurélie Polturak, 'Die Philosophie Max Stirners systematisch dargestellt' (dissertation, University of Vienna, 1917), *Stirneriana* 6 (Leipzig: Max-Stirner-Archiv, 1998), 1-63 (p. 5).
[49] Hermann Graf Keyserling, *Unsterblichkeit. Eine Kritik der Beziehungen zwischen Naturgeschehen und menschlicher Vorstellungskraft* (Darmstadt: Otto Reich, 1920), p. 154.

Nihilist', while highlighting his significance for the working class in identifying the state as depending on the slavery of labour;[50] the Protestant theologian, Wilhelm Lütgert (1867-1938), concurs to some extent, describing Stirner's nihilism as the necessary conclusion of a logical development, which prepared the way for communism;[51] Jakob Baxa (1895-1979), the Austrian sociologist and cultural historian, denounces *Der Einzige* as '[das] wahnwitzige Hohelied des Anarchismus im philosophischen Nihilismus';[52] and even a philosophical historian of the stature of Löwith writes perfunctorily about Stirner's 'nihilistische Philosophie' as if it were a given.[53]

Löwith's assumption that Stirner was a nihilist reappeared in his magnum opus, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, first published in 1941, where he writes: 'B. Bauer und Stirner ließen die Philosophie […] in einem radikalen Kritizismus und Nihilismus *verenden*.'[54] In a later passage, Löwith puts a little more meat on the bone, but the use of the word nonetheless assumes an element of prior knowledge of its meaning: 'Das Problem des ihnen [Stirner und Kierkegaard] gemeinsamen Radikalismus ist der aus der extremen *Vereinzelung* entspringende *Nihilismus* – bei Stirner der leichtfertige des "ich hab' mein Sach' auf Nichts gestellt" – nämlich auf nichts als mich selbst –, bei Kierkegaard der schwermütige der Ironie und Langeweile, der Angst und Verzweiflung.'[55] As with many of Stirner's other detractors, one may assume Löwith saw no reason to give a detailed definition of nihilism, because its general post-Nietzschean meaning had, by this time, become sufficiently well-established.

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[50] W. Stockgänger, 'Max Stirner', *Der freie Arbeiter. Wissen und Wollen. Publikations-Organ der Föderation der kommunistischen Anarchisten Deutschlands*, 15.44 (1922), 2.
[51] Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Die Religion des deutschen Idealismus und ihr Ende. Dritter Teil: Höhe und Niedergang des Idealismus', *Beiträge zur Förderung der christlichen Theologie*, 2.10 (1926), 212-220 (p. 220).
[52] Jakob Baxa, *Gesellschaftslehre von Platon bis Friedrich Nietzsche. Eine dogmengeschichtliche Einführung in die gesellschaftswissenschaftlichen Theorien* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1927), p. 106.
[53] Karl Löwith, *Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen* (Munich: Drei Masken-Verlag, 1928), p. 177.
[54] Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, p. 84.
[55] Ibid., p. 383.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the printed references to Stirner and nihilism continued, even if their frequency was affected by the general decline in the quality and quantity of cultural journals and scholarly publications in Nazi Germany. In the section about Stirner in his history of philosophy, Joël writes: 'Der *reine Egoismus* endet in reiner Gleichgültigkeit; der reine Individualismus endet in *Nihilismus*';[56] Kurt Adolf Mautz (1911-2000), in his doctoral dissertation on Stirner, declares: 'Die zunächst negative Tendenz, der "Nihilismus" des Stirnerschen Denkens, geht schon aus der ganzen Anlage des *Einzigen und seines Eigentums* hervor';[57] and Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966), the pioneer of existential psychology, describes Stirner as 'ein sehr gewandter Stilist und Dialektiker, ein leidenschaftlicher Revolutionär und Kämpfer, aber im Gewande eines Diktators, ein geistiger Nihilist, aber mit den Waffen des Geistes'.[58] The connotations and insinuations evident here, in the absence of actual definitions of what is meant by 'nihilism', are that Stirner's thought involves negation, destruction and the absence of a moral compass.

Allegations and Denials: After World War II

There can be little doubt that the discourse surrounding Stirner and nihilism in the period around World War II was heavily influenced by historical events, which appeared to confirm Nietzsche's diagnosis of Western decadence, into which Stirner's rampant iconoclasm seemed easily to fit. The rare exceptions to the orthodox view of Stirner's status as a nihilist only serve

[56] Karl Joël, *Wandlungen der Weltanschauung. Eine Philosophiegeschichte als Geschichtsphilosophie*, 2 vols (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1934), II, p. 649.
[57] Kurt Adolf Mautz, 'Die Philosophie Max Stirners im Gegensatz zum Hegelschen Idealismus' (doctoral dissertation, University of Gießen, 1936), in *Neue Deutsche Forschungen. Abt. Philosophie*, 17.171 (Berlin: Junker & Dünnhaupt, 1936), p. 78.
[58] Ludwig Binswanger, *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins* (Zürich: Max Niehmann, 1942), p. 458.

to prove the enduring rule. The one such occurrence in the 1940s is Rudolf Schröder's article in *Die freie Welt*, where he writes:

> Es ist müßig, darüber zu streiten, ob Stirner mit seiner Formel 'Ich hab' mein Sach' auf Nichts gestellt' zu den Nihilisten zu rechnen ist. Er ist kein Nihilist, trotz seiner Äußerung, daß seine Sache weder das Göttliche noch das Menschliche, sondern das Seinige sei. Der Vorwurf seines Nihilismus ist schon mit dem Hinweis darauf widerlegt, daß für ihn das 'Individuum' existiert, zwar als 'Einziges', dem aber alles Andere 'Eigentum' ist.[59]

For Schröder, nihilism seems to exist mainly in the sense of ontological nihilism, or denial of being, which is a narrow definition on which to base judgment. Yet however firm his refutation of Stirner's connection to nihilism, his opinion is otherwise largely a conventional one, concurring with the usual assessment of Stirner's anarchism, which he posits unquestioningly.

Otherwise, in the post-war period, the familiar depictions of Stirner as a nihilist soon resumed. The Marxist historian, Auguste Cornu (1888-1981) wrote dismissively: 'Stirner […] erkannte nur eine einzige Wirklichkeit an, das Ich, nur ein einziges Prinzip, den Kult des Ich; er machte aus dem absoluten Egoismus den einzigen Beweggrund der menschlichen Tätigkeit und landete beim Nihilismus und Anarchismus.'[60] This is not the place to elucidate the obvious reasons for Marxist enmity towards individualism, nor is it within the scope of this thesis to examine in detail Marx and Engels's comprehensive character assassination of Stirner in *Die deutsche Ideologie*, but it is telling that writers and commentators of all political and philosophical persuasions make use of the epithet 'nihilist' to describe, and invariably to discredit, Stirner, even though it is a term Stirner never used himself. The Japanese scholar, Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990), who had studied under Heidegger, identifies 'the outlines of

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[59] Rudolf Schröder, 'Max Stirner', *Die freie Welt*, 1.1 (April 1949), 25.

[60] Auguste Cornu, *Karl Marx und die Entwicklung des modernen Denkens. Beitrag zum Studium der Herausbildung des Marxismus*, trans. by Josef Schlesinger (Berlin: Dietz, 1950), p. 77. Originally published in French: *Karl Marx et la pensée moderne. Contribution à l'étude de la formation du marxisme* (Paris: Ed. Sociales, 1948).

nihilism' in Stirner's *Einzige*,[61] while the Protestant theologian Walter Künneth (1901-1997) imagines the form of Stirner's free individual taking shape in a no-man's land, 'an der Grenze des Nihilismus, Anarchismus und Atheismus'.[62] Camus had used a similar image in *The Rebel* to delineate the realm of Stirner's 'Einzige': 'Stirner, and with him, all the nihilist rebels, run to the borders, drunk with destruction.'[63]

Among the few articles written in 1956 to mark the centenary of Stirner's death and the sesquicentennial of his birth, there are two that mention Stirner in connection with nihilism: Hans Heinz Holz (1927-2011), the Marxist philosopher, called Stirner 'einen Vorläufer moderner nihilistischer Strömungen',[64] while Wilhelm Klutentreter (1908-1986), a Catholic journalist, described him as '[e]in radikaler Außenseiter als Schrittmacher des Nihilismus'.[65] Holz was more expansive in a later publication, in which he helpfully gives a definition of nihilism, as well as showing his true Marxist colours:

> Was unter Nihilismus zu verstehen sei, […] [ist] die Verneinung jeglicher objektiver Bindungen und Werte, die dem Menschen Rahmen und Richtschnur seines Handelns abgeben könnten. […] In extremer Form wurde der Versuch ein nihilistisches Denksystem zu schaffen, einmal im 19. Jahrhundert unternommen; und zwar von Max Stirner. […] Dieser Versuch ist völlig gescheitert. […] Die Ideologie eines kleinbürgerlichen Größenwahns, die Stirners Werk spiegelt, war dem Problem des Nihilismus nicht gewachsen.[66]

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[61] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, p. 101.
[62] Walter Künneth, *Politik zwischen Dämon und Gott. Eine christliche Ethik des Politischen* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1954), p. 234.
[63] Albert Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, 54th edn (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), pp. 87-88. [My translation.]
[64] Hans Heinz Holz, 'Das entfesselte Ich. Zum 100. Todestag Max Stirners am 26. Juni', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 June 1956, p. 10.
[65] W. Klutentreter, '"Mir geht nichts über mich." Zum 150. Geburtstag von Max Stirner – Ein radikaler Außenseiter als Schrittmacher des Nihilismus', *Düsseldorfer Nachrichten*, 20 October 1956, p. 246.
[66] Hans Heinz Holz, *Der französische Existentialismus. Theorie und Aktualität* (Munich and Speyer: Dobbeck, 1958), pp. 12-13.

In the 1950s and 1960s, we also find the Jesuit theologian, Jean-Yves Calvez (1927-2010), calling Stirner 'der Vater des Nihilismus';[67] the eminent professor of history at the Sorbonne, Jacques Droz (1909-1998), referring to Stirner in relation to 'extreme individualism and nihilist anarchy';[68] and the post-structuralist philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, writing of 'Stirner's extreme nihilism' and how he is '*the dialectician who reveals nihilism as the truth of the dialectic'*.[69] A lone voice of dissent, at least on the issue of nihilism, was provided by the Dutch sociologist, Johan Goudsblom (1932-2020), who declared:

> Outright denial of the existence of truth and values is already a step beyond the complex of the nihilist problem. It is often called nihilism because of its provocative denial of all ethical norms. However, the nihilist problematic is more clearly present in the doubts of Kleist or Kierkegaard than in the fanaticism of Stirner.[70]

Here Goudsblom raises an important question to which we shall return in Chapter 7, namely whether Stirner's untormented outlook can be squared with the modern, existential definition of nihilism.

Laska identifies the second Stirner renaissance as starting in 1968,[71] coinciding with Helms's edition of Stirner's writings.[72] There is certainly a proliferation of scholarly works on, or involving, Stirner that starts around this time, and the charge of nihilism is as prevalent as ever. The Feuerbach scholar, Werner Schuffenhauer (1930-2012), speaks of 'seine nihilistisch-anarchistische Tendenz';[73] David McLellan (b. 1940) writes that 'Stirner was

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[67] Jean-Yves Calvez, *Karl Marx. Darstellung und Kritik seines Denkens*, trans. by Theodor Sapper (Olten and Freiburg: Walter, 1964), p. 108. Originally published in French: *La Pensée de Karl Marx* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1956).
[68] Jacques Droz, *Europe between Revolutions 1815-1848*, trans. by Robert Baldick (Glasgow: Collins, 1967), p. 155.
[69] Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, pp. 162, 161.
[70] Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture*, p. 137.
[71] See Laska, *Ein heimlicher Hit*, pp. 6-7.
[72] Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum und andere Schriften*, ed. by Hans G. Helms (Munich: Hanser, 1968).
[73] Werner Schuffenhauer, *Feuerbach und der junge Marx. Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der marxistischen Weltanschauung* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1972), p. 137.

indeed a solipsist and a nihilist';[74] the political philosopher Friedrich Berber (1898-1984) calls Stirner's 'Verein von Egoisten' 'rein negativ, destruktiv, nihilistisch';[75] and Dieter Arendt, in his anthology of nihilist texts, states that: 'Stirners Ich-philosophisches Denken in Negationen versteht sich zwar nicht expressis verbis als Nihilismus, ist es aber faktisch.'[76] Giorgio Penzo, in a work first published in 1971, condenses many of the previous denunciations, damning Stirner with very faint praise in a few lines of nihilism-filled prose:

> Die Aktualität von Stirner liegt […] vor allem in seiner besonderen, wegen ihrer Radikalität in der Geistesgeschichte einzigartigen Konzeption von Nihilismus. Stirner erhellt in ihr einen Nihilismus ohne jegliche nicht nur metaphysische, sondern auch existentielle Transzendenz, einen Nihilismus, der das Ende jeglichen Philosophierens bedeutet. Im Fazit seiner Schrift *Der Einzige* schreibt Stirner explizit, er wolle seine Sache nicht auf 'das Nichts' sondern auf 'Nichts' stellen. […] Keinem Denker ist es gelungen, Stirners Nihilismus in seiner tiefen Radikalität zu übertreffen.[77]

In the history of Stirner criticism, the most prolific repetition of the accusation of nihilism can be found in Paterson's canonical work, *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner*, which was also published in 1971. In the last six sentences of the final chapter alone (before the conclusion), the words 'nihilism', 'nihilist' and 'nihilistic' are mentioned sixteen times. It is a book I shall consider in more detail later in this chapter, but a foretaste of its forthright, if repetitive, condemnation can be found in the introduction:

> His one great book, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, must be the only sustained attempt to present a philosophy of unsparing nihilism systematically and without reserve. […] He intends […] to stand as the avowed representative of the most extreme dimension of nihilism to which logic can carry him. For Stirner, this is the nihilism of the nihilistic *egoist*.[78]

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[74] McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*, p. 119.
[75] Friedrich Berber, *Das Staatsziel im Wandel der Weltgeschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1978), p. 407.
[76] Arendt, 'Introduction', in *Nihilismus*, p. 72.
[77] Giorgio Penzo, *Die existentielle Empörung. Max Stirner zwischen Philosophie und Anarchie*, trans. by Barbara Häußler (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 11-12. Originally published in Italian: *Max Stirner: la rivolta esistenziale* (Turin: Marietti, 1971).
[78] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. ix.

As Paterson's book was, for a long time, the only full-length monograph on Stirner written in English, it has exerted considerable influence in the world of anglophone Stirner scholarship. David Holbrook was one of those sufficiently convinced by Paterson's argument to place Stirner within an apocalyptic vision of Nietzschean-existential nihilism:

> I believe that the underlying philosophy of our culture has become nihilistic. If we pursue the implications of nihilism to their ultimate conclusions, where do we arrive? Very few have dared to do this: Max Stirner, who published a book on this theme in 1845, was one who dared. If we turn back to him we can see that he is the unacknowledged prophet of today's fashionable culture.[79]

John P. Clark (b. 1928), commenting on Paterson's ideas from a social anarchist perspective, challenges this orthodoxy: 'He [Stirner] believes that the values which are created by the ego are worthwhile, and thus it seems invalid to call him a nihilist, in the sense of one who lives in a world without value.'[80] Lawrence Stepelevich (b. 1930) does likewise: 'But Stirner is no more the nihilist than Hegel or Sartre, who speaks of consciousness as "the worm of nothingness". Paterson's misinterpretation of Stirner as a nihilist commits a common error based upon ignoring the phenomenology of consciousness.'[81] Stepelevich accuses Paterson of misconstruing Stirner's message as being of exclusively negative import, thus pointing, if only implicitly, to the oxymoronic nature of Paterson's formulation of 'nihilistic egoism'. The heterodox opinions of Clark and Stepelevich, in the 1970s and 1980s respectively, continued the loose tradition throughout the twentieth century of one dissenting voice every decade or so on the subject of Stirner and nihilism. In the 1990s, the consensus is reasserted most

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[79] David Holbrook, 'A Philosopher for Today? Max Stirner's Egoistical Nihilism', *New Blackfriars*, 58.687 (August 1977), 382-390 (p. 382).
[80] John P. Clark, *Max Stirner's Egoism* (London: Freedom Press, 1976), p. 53.
[81] Lawrence S. Stepelevich, 'Max Stirner as Hegelian', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 46 (1985), 597-614 (p. 610).

stridently by Schmitz's immortal phrase (even if it is borrowed from Nietzsche), describing Stirner as 'der einzige vollkommene Nihilist in der Geschichte der neueren Philosophie'.[82]

The steady increase in the number of references to Stirner as a nihilist, and the relative scarcity of declarations to the contrary, has largely resulted in the label sticking. In current general works of reference one frequently finds Stirner standing 'nearer […] to […] the nihilists',[83] being placed 'among the first philosophical nihilists'[84] and ranking 'as one of the literary grandfathers of nihilism'.[85] This is also true for books on nihilism, where Stirner is often cited as one of its many representatives. Carr writes with unconvincing vagueness:

> The only possible supporter of nihilism during this period [of the earliest discussion of nihilism] was a left-wing Hegelian, Max Stirner. […] Stirner offered a view that seemed to embrace everything denounced as nihilistic by these critics. He never, however, explicitly described himself as a nihilist, which perhaps suggests that he also saw the term negatively.[86]

The self-evident limits of Carr's knowledge about Stirner lead her to fill in the lacunae using little more than the considerable power of her imagination. She thus places Stirner within the discussion of nihilism in relation to Fichtean subjective idealism and makes Stirner an advocate of the nihilistic standpoint. This is misleading, both conceptually and chronologically. It also drives her to explain why Stirner failed to confess to being a nihilist, and to speculate that it was because he was concerned about the stigma associated with the term. One can only describe this as pure fantasy; Stirner was the last person to worry about opprobrium. The reason he did not describe himself as a nihilist was because the word was

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[82] Schmitz, *Selbstdarstellung als Philosophie*, p. 309.

[83] George Woodcock, 'Stirner, Max (1806-1856)', in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *Encyclopedia.com* <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/stirner-max-1806-1856> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[84] Pratt, 'Nihilism', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[85] 'Max Stirner', in *New World Encyclopedia* <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Max_Stirner> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[86] Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, pp. 147-148.

hardly used at the time, and, in any event, on the occasions when it was, it was as a term of polemical abuse rather than as the description of a philosophical outlook. None of those accused of nihilism within the framework of this historical discussion, like Moses Mendelssohn or Fichte himself, would have considered wearing this derogatory term as a badge of honour. Carr goes on to compound her error by misnaming Stirner's magnum opus *Das Ich und Sein Eigenes*, apparently a poor retranslation back into German of the already unsatisfactory English title, *The Ego and His Own*, calling it 'probably the most frankly nihilistic work ever written'.[87] It is hard to believe that her overall appraisal of Stirner is anything more than a fanciful regurgitation of prevailing opinions.

Vercellone also includes Stirner conclusively and superlatively in the inventory of nihilists: 'Auf philosophischer Ebene stoßen wir wahrscheinlich auf keinen Text, der auf paradigmatischere Weise die Auflösung des Hegelianismus in den Nihilismus vorstellt als *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1852) [*sic*] von Max Stirner.'[88] Winfried Schröder speaks of Stirner's 'unverblümten moralischen Nihilismus',[89] and Will Slocombe repeats the same mantra as Paterson, informing us that '[t]he conflation of "nihilism" and "egoism" is implied throughout *The Ego and Its Own*'.[90] Even Ludger Lütkehaus, in his monumental attempt at a constructive re-evaluation of nothingness, describes the motto with which Stirner begins and ends his magnum opus, 'Ich hab' Mein Sach' auf Nichts gestellt', as 'das neue nihilistische Kirchenlied'.[91] Jörg Ulrich refers extensively to Lütkehaus's ideas concerning both nihilism and Stirner in his 2002 social-scientific analysis of modern individuality, and reaches the

[87] Ibid., p. 164.
[88] Vercellone, *Einführung in den Nihilismus*, pp. 34-35.
[89] Winfried Schröder, *Moralischer Nihilismus: Radikale Moralkritik von den Sophisten bis Nietzsche* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005), p. 56.
[90] Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, p. 11.
[91] Lütkehaus, *Nichts*, p. 661.

following assessment: 'Und in der Tat ergreift Stirner Partei für den vollendeten Nihilismus, indem er sich eben konsequent und rückhaltlos auf den Boden des Nichts stellt.'[92]

As recently as 2011, Gillespie, in an essay on nihilism in the nineteenth century, continues the tradition of writing Stirner off (often in very few words and without making any attempt to demonstrate an understanding of his ideas) as the odious voice of unconscionable nihilism:

> We also see this nihilistic impulse in its extremity in the thought of Max Stirner […] who sought to free the individual not only from God but also from society and indeed from humanity as such. […] Here the connection to the earlier Fichtean and Romantic nihilists and to later nihilism is especially apparent. This is equally true of Stirner's moral stance, for he was willing to countenance incest, infanticide and murder.[93]

One of the most recent textbooks on nihilism, Elmar Dod's *Der unheimlichste Gast wird heimisch* (2019), also briefly mentions Stirner, 'dessen Werk *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* […] schon vor Nietzsche die Grundlinien eines konsequenten Nihilismus vorzeichnete'.[94] It is, once again, a claim that relies heavily on *Der Einzige*'s opening and closing line, which is the title Dod uses for the relevant sub-section, and that (perhaps understandably in a wide-ranging work where Stirner plays only a minute role) offers nothing more substantial than a concise recapitulation of the consensus view.

The last quarter of a century, however, has also seen the first concerted efforts to challenge the accusations of nihilism levelled against Stirner. The chief catalyst for this loosely coordinated endeavour was the establishment of the Max Stirner Society in 2002, which acted as a forum for the exchange of ideas between its members and associates, who were, naturally

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[92] Jörg Ulrich, *Individualität als politische Religion. Theologische Mucken und metaphysische Abgründe (post)moderner Subjektivität* (Albeck bei Ulm: Verlag Ulmer Manuskripte, 2002), pp. 265-266.
[93] Michael Gillespie, 'Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century: From Absolute Subjectivity to Superhumanity', in *The Edinburgh Critical History of Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. by Alison Stone (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 278-293 (p. 284).
[94] Elmar Dod, *Der unheimlichste Gast wird heimisch. Die Philosophie des Nihilismus – Evidenzen der Einbildungskraft* (Baden-Baden: Tectum Verlag, 2019), p. 20.

enough, favourably predisposed to Stirner. Laska, in his 1996 work, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, had already included 'der Nihilist' as one of the labels used to undermine Stirner's standing, along with 'die Unperson', 'der Anarchist' and 'der Protofaschist', among many others.[95] The essence of Laska's intriguing but speculative argument is that it was the shared interest of the two antithetical philosophical colossi of the nineteenth century, Marx and Nietzsche, along with their numerous followers and acolytes, to deprecate Stirner and deny the significance of his contribution to the history of ideas, fundamentally because Stirner offered a viable philosophical alternative which threatened to subvert their ideologies. The charge of nihilism is therefore, in Laska's opinion, just another manifestation of the intrinsically hostile reception of Stirner, which is characterised by clandestine suppression rather than serious, intellectual engagement.[96]

After Laska's bold statement in defence of Stirner, a number of other writers publicly questioned the orthodox association of Stirner with nihilism. Halil Ibrahim Türkdogan, a founder member of the Max Stirner Society, wrote: '[Camus] begnügt sich […] mit dem Hinweis, Stirner in das Nihilistische einzuordnen. Stirner kündigt revoltierend sein Ekel vor den Wörtern und Ideen an, das aber macht ihn noch lange nicht nihilistisch.'[97] Another founder member, Herbert Scheit, in his speech delivered at the 2002 'Stirner-Treffen' in Hummeltal, casts further doubt on the standard view:

> Das einzige Sollen, das Stirner gewissermaßen noch gelten ließe, wäre: Sei du selbst! Oder auch: Sei Egoist, d. h. lebe dein *eigenes* Leben, denn du hast nur dieses, und verfolge nur deine *wirklichen* Interessen. […] Soll das schon der *ganze Stirner* sein? Der Prophet der Selbstverwirklichung und des Lebensgenusses durch

[95] See Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 5.
[96] Ibid., pp. 105-107.
[97] Halil Ibrahim Türkdogan, 'Fragmentarisches über die Revolte', *Der Einzige. Vierteljahresschrift des Max-Stirner-Archivs Leipzig* 3.11 (03.08.2000), 45-47 (p. 46).

> Selbstbescheidung? […] Aber wo bleibt in diesem fast sympathischen Bild von Stirner der Nihilist und Zyniker der Gewalt?[98]

As noted in Chapter 1 above, another founder member of the society, Kurt Fleming, in his speech to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Stirner's birth, also challenges the labelling of Stirner as, among other things, a nihilist.[99] In the anglophone world, Newman echoes these opinions in the introduction to his anthology of essays on Stirner. Like Fleming, he criticises the application of unsatisfactory labels to Stirner, and, like Scheit, he rejects the hackneyed reproach of nihilism in favour of a positive interpretation of his philosophy, declaring: 'far from leading to nihilism, I contend that Stirner provides us with a new ethics of freedom and autonomy.'[100]

With his three short books on Stirner,[101] Laska arguably managed to liberate him from the stigma of the previous hundred and fifty years, which stimulated an increasingly open-minded debate among his colleagues and in the wider scholarly community. At any rate, there has been a noticeable softening in the critical approach to Stirner since the appearance of Laska's publications on Stirner in the 1990s. One example of this is to be found in Reschika's chapter on Stirner in his book, *Philosophische Abenteurer*, in which he states:

> Den meisten gilt Stirner als Inbegriff eines krankhaften Solipsisten, eines schonungslosen, größenwahnsinnigen Egoisten und ethischen Nihilisten […]. Die Liste böswilliger Invektiven – Allmachtsrausch des Ichs, Haifisch-Philosophie, geistiges Kraftmeiertum, grobschlägiges Faustrecht, *Advocatus diaboli* – ließe sich jedenfalls beliebig erweitern […]. Trotz dieser einhelligen Verdammungsurteile

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[98] Herbert Scheit, 'Max Stirner – ein antipädagogischer Pädagoge', in *Stirner-Treffen. 21.-23. Juni 2002 in Hummeltal b. Bayreuth. Protokoll* (Leipzig: Verlag Max-Stirner-Archiv, 2003), 5-19 (pp. 13-14).

[99] See Fleming, 'Max Stirner – ein Prä-Anarchist.' Stulpe has since given perhaps the most exhaustive list of Stirner labels in his comprehensive study of Stirner and modern individualism, in which he writes: 'Der Einzige erscheint […] als Anarchist, Übermensch, Psychopath, Sozialist, Kleinbürger, Intellektueller, Faschist, Genie, Paranoiker, Bohemien, Satanist, Existentialist, Individualist, Terrorist, Mittelständler, Totalitarismus-Kritiker, Solipsist, Prophet, Nihilist, Metaphysiker, und all dies in je unterschiedlichen Bedeutungen, Bewertungen und Kombinationen.' Stulpe, *Gesichter des Einzigen*, p. 19.

[100] Newman, 'Introduction: Re-encountering Stirner's Ghosts', p. 16.

[101] The three books are: Bernd A. Laska, *'Katechon' und 'Anarch'. Carl Schmitts und Ernst Jüngers Reaktionen auf Max Stirner* (Nuremberg: LSR-Verlag, 1997), *Ein dauerhafter Dissident* and *Ein heimlicher Hit.*

> erstaunt die nicht zu leugnende Tatsache, daß sich Philosophen so unterschiedlicher Provenienz intensiv, aber eher polemisch als sachlich-argumentativ, mit diesem Erzfeind aller Religion, Moral und überkommener politischer Hierarchie auseinandersetzen.[102]

In his conclusion, Reschika does not fully endorse Laska's opinion, but nor does he reject it, opting instead for a neutral approach:

> [H]ier wird die Aufklärung, vor allem deren atheistisch-materialistische Richtung, mit all ihren relativistisch-nihilistischen Implikationen so zwingend wie zu keinem Zeitpunkt vor und nach dem *Einzigen* zu Ende gedacht. Ob man diese radikale […] Position auch teilen will, steht auf einem ganz anderen Blatt… Ebenso wie die Behauptung, daß Stirner bereits 'Wege jenseits des Nihilismus' (Bernd A. Laska) eröffnet hätte.[103]

Bernd Kast, not a founder member, but, for a number of years, the chairman of the Max Stirner Society, as well as the editor of the *Stirner-Jahrbuch*, makes perhaps the most vehement refutation of the characterisation of Stirner as a nihilist, calling it, in the postscript to his 2009 edition of *Der Einzige*, an eradicable misunderstanding, and making the salient point, in relation to the Nietzschean definition of the term, that Stirner is anything but a nihilist, if nihilism is defined as the absence of meaning.[104] Schönherr-Mann subsequently headlined his review of the book with the potentially ambiguous title: 'Sowenig Nihilist wie Nietzsche'.[105] It is ambiguous in so far as Nietzsche, as noted in Chapter 3, was both a self-confessed nihilist and an anti-nihilist, a combination which remains to be evaluated in the case of Stirner in Chapter 7 below.

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[102] Richard Reschika, *Philosophische Abenteurer* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2001), p. 70.

[103] Ibid., p. 100. He is referring to Bernd A. Laska, 'Dissident geblieben. Wie Marx und Nietzsche ihren Kollegen Max Stirner verdrängten und warum er sie geistig überlebt hat. Ein Versuch über philosophische Konsequenz in der Aufklärung', *Die Zeit*, 27 January 2000, p. 49. 'Niemand wollte Stirners Schritt über die Neue Aufklärung hinaus mitvollziehen. Sein Nihilismus *durfte* nicht die Konsequenz aufklärerischen Denkens sein. Derart alarmiert, war man blind dafür, dass Stirner bereits Wege "jenseits des Nihilismus" eröffnet hatte.'

[104] See Kast, 'Afterword', in *EE,* pp. 371-395 (p. 380).

[105] Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann, 'Sowenig Nihilist wie Nietzsche', *Deutschlandfunk*, 21 June 2010 <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/sowenig-nihilist-wie-nietzsche.700.de.html?dram:article_id=84619> [accessed 24 August 2021].

Even if the association of Stirner with nihilism is often not explicitly justified or explained in any great detail, the chronological record of its occurrences outlined above nonetheless throws up a recognisable pattern, which, as one might expect, follows the word's etymological development. It starts with Rosenkranz's polemical attack on Stirner's subjectivism, atheism and social radicalism, which can be seen as an extension of its usage within the context of the 'Atheismusstreit', having spilled over into post-Hegelian philosophy. The next phase begins in the final quarter of the nineteenth century with such critics as Grün, Biedermann and Laas identifying elements of moral and political nihilism in Stirner, to which anarchism was added by the likes of Bernstein and Dubois. In the first half of the twentieth century, the moral nihilism of which Stirner had frequently been accused becomes increasingly Nietzschean, especially in the hands of Löwith. Finally, with Camus and Arvon, the existentialist element starts to play a significant role, a trend that has continued to the present day. Each of these distinct forms of nihilism will require investigation in relation to Stirner in the course of this study.

Nothingness in 'Der Einzige und sein Eigentum'

One common theme throughout the evolution of the debate about Stirner and nihilism, at least from the time of the first Stirner renaissance, is the importance given to the heading of the prologue of *Der Einzige*, which is also the book's last line: 'Ich hab' Mein' Sach' auf Nichts gestellt.'[106] Even in an era that celebrates counter-cultural rebellion, the impression generally made by this statement is a thoroughly negative one; it resonates for many like a Faustian incantation. It is understood not as the opening line of a drinking song (as in Goethe's original poem, 'Vanitas! vanitatum vanitas!', from which Stirner borrowed it and which will be

[106] *EE*, pp. 13, 370.

discussed in more detail in Chapter 7 below), and thus as an expression of gay abandon, but rather as a hymn to the diabolical force of the void. Löwith writes in an endnote:

> Der Anlaß zu Stirners Motto dürfte Goethes Gedicht 'Vanitas vanitatum vanitas' gewesen sein. Auch Kierkegaard war darauf aufmerksam geworden. In den Tagebüchern (ed. Ulrich, S. 145) bezeichnet er es als 'sehr interessant', nämlich im Hinblick darauf, daß es das nihilistische 'Lebensresultat' einer sehr großen Individualität sei.[107]

The alleged nihilistic import of the short but pregnant line that bookends Stirner's magnum opus is a recurrent theme in the criticisms of Stirner by his many detractors, examples of which can be found in the comments of Bernstein, Heman, Penzo, Lütkehaus, Ulrich and Dod, all quoted above. Lucchesi sums up the argument as follows:

> Der einseitige Individualismus Stirners beginnt mit dem 'Nichts' und endet im 'Nichts'. […] Das Stirnersche Ich ist das Nichts, aus dem sein gesamter Bewußtseinsinhalt *hervorgeht*. […] Um als Nichts zu *enden*, muß dieses Ich sich selbst verzehren, sich vernichten, sich auflösen. […] Stirners Individualismus endet im Nihilismus.[108]

Nishitani is another commentator who endows this short sentence with great significance, thus leading him to infer: 'Here we have Stirner's basic standpoint *in nuce*: the negation of any and all standpoints. […] It means a lack of interest in anything […] and a feeling of general apathy.'[109] Nishitani, like many others, places a disproportionate emphasis on this one, once-repeated, line. Assuming it doesn't reflect a drastically abridged reading of the book, the reason for this hyperfocus can plausibly be found in the striking nature of the statement, which is reinforced by its two conspicuous locations. Added to this is the problematic nature of the concept of nothingness: the scourge of the ancient Greeks, the absence in Neoplatonism's *privatio boni* theory of evil, the void of Christian pre-creation and

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[107] Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, p. 432.
[108] Lucchesi, *Die Individualitätsphilosophie Max Stirners*, p. 96.
[109] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, p. 103.

the absolute antithesis in Hegelian dialectics. Rooted subliminally in the idea of the undiscovered country of death, the concept of nothingness both fascinates and horrifies the human mind, but it is horror that dominates.[110] Stirner's highlighting of this epigrammatic line exploits an elemental insecurity, thereby grabbing the reader's attention and underlining the radical nature of his message. The fact that the Goethean original is a parody of a Christian hymn, 'Ich hab' mein Sach Gott heimgestellt', which Stirner is very likely to have known, would have made it seem all the more appropriate for his purposes.[111] Stirner is notorious for revelling in the provocation of his readers, seemingly enjoying the alienating effect it had on his conservative opponents, while believing that the enlightened observer would see the funny side. In view of the overwhelmingly hostile reception his ideas have received, it might be argued that this was a serious miscalculation.

In ending his book with 'Nichts', Stirner was emulating not only Klingemann in *Nachtwachen* and Jean Paul in *Clavis Fichteana* (see Chapter 2), but also Schopenhauer, who concludes the main part of the first volume of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* as follows:

> Vor uns bleibt allerdings nur das Nichts. Aber das, was sich gegen dieses Zerfließen ins Nichts sträubt, unsre Natur, ist ja eben nur der Wille zum Leben […]. Daß wir so sehr das Nichts verabscheuen, ist nichts weiter, als ein andrer Ausdruck davon, daß wir so sehr das Leben wollen und nichts sind, als dieser Wille […]. [W]as nach gänzlicher Aufhebung des Willens übrig bleibt, ist für alle die, welche noch des Willens voll sind, allerdings Nichts. Aber auch umgekehrt ist denen, in welchen der

[110] 'Who would these Fardles bear | To grunt and sweat under a weary life, | But that the dread of something after death, | The undiscovered Countrey, from whose Borne | No Traveller returnes, Puzles the will.' William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* III. 1, in *The Works of Shakespeare*, V, p. 234.

[111] The words were written by Johann Leon (1531-1597). See 'Katalog der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek', in *Deutsche National Bibliothek* <https://portal.dnb.de/opac.htm?method=simpleSearch&cqlMode=true&query=nid%3D124437893> [accessed 24 August 2021]. It was first published in *Psalmen, Geistliche Lieder und Kirchengesang* (Nuremberg: Katharina Gerlachin, 1589). Bach (among others) put it to music as a chorale cantata, BWV 351. See 'Chorale Texts used in Bach's Vocal Works', in *Bach Cantatas Website* <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Texts/Chorale009-Eng3.htm> [accessed 24 August 2021].

> Wille sich gewendet und verneint hat, diese unsre so sehr reale Welt mit allen ihren Sonnen und Milchstraßen – Nichts.[112]

Nothingness plays a central role in Schopenhauer's 'Weltanschauung'; it is the essential pre- and post-condition of human existence: 'In dem Sinne freilich, in welchem der Mensch bei der Zeugung aus nichts entsteht, wird er durch den Tod zu nichts.'[113] This is a fundamental axiom to which all of Schopenhauer's main philosophical propositions relate, and its negative import predetermines his pessimistic outlook. In *Parerga and Paralipomena*, he writes:

> Diese Nichtigkeit findet ihren Ausdruck an der ganzen Form des Daseyns, an der Unendlichkeit der Zeit und des Raumes, gegenüber der Endlichkeit des Individuums in Beiden. […] Die Zeit und die Vergänglichkeit aller Dinge in ihr und mittelst ihrer ist bloß die Form, unter welcher dem Willen zum Leben, der als Ding an sich unvergänglich ist, die Nichtigkeit seines Strebens sich offenbart. – Die Zeit ist das, vermöge dessen Alles jeden Augenblick unter unsren Händen zu Nichts wird; – wodurch es allen wahren Werth verliert.[114]

If Stirner's thought involves negation, as many of his detractors have claimed, it is of a different order of magnitude to Schopenhauer's.

Stirner's intention is quite different to Schopenhauer's, or Klingemann's, or Jean Paul's for that matter, whose concepts of nothingness were born out of the subject-object dichotomy of German idealism. For Stirner, the real import of the word 'Nichts' in his opening and closing motto is to describe the rejection of all alien, externally imposed causes. This is made clear in another line borrowed from Goethe, which concludes *Der Einzige*'s short prologue: 'Mir geht nichts über Mich!'.[115] That 'Nichts' in the above context is also intended to establish Stirner's naturalist credentials is almost beyond doubt, judging by the tone of the

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[112] *Arthur Schopenhauer's sämmtliche Werke*, ed. by Julius Frauenstädt, 2nd edn, 6 vols (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1891), II, pp. 486-487.
[113] Ibid., III, p. 550.
[114] Ibid., VI, p. 303.
[115] *EE,* p. 15. The quotation is from *Satyros oder der vergötterte Waldteufel*: 'Mir geht in der Welt nichts über mich; Denn Gott ist Gott, und Ich bin Ich.' *Goethe's Werke*, ed. by Dr. Fr. Strehlke, 36 vols (Berlin: Gustav Hempel, 1879), VIII, p. 222.

work as a whole, as indicated by such lines as: 'Stell' Ich auf Mich, den Einzigen, meine Sache, dann steht sie auf dem Vergänglichen, dem sterblichen Schöpfer seiner, der sich selbst verzehrt.'[116] It is clear that Stirner harbours no illusions regarding the immortality of the soul.

The finitude of human existence and the fact of personal extinction are givens throughout *Der Einzige*, though they do not elicit deep reflection, or worse, despair. Strauss, Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer had done a thorough job of, figuratively speaking, incinerating the scriptures of Christianity and religion in general (and with them the belief in an afterlife); Stirner plays in the ashes that are left behind. When Stirner writes of 'das schöpferische Nichts, das Nichts, aus welchem Ich selbst als Schöpfer Alles schaffe',[117] it is a joke at God's expense, mimicking the early Christian theologians' concept of *creatio ex nihilo*,[118] and declaring that God has been replaced, not by what Stirner considered to be Feuerbach's fiction of mankind, but by the unique reality of the individual self. Clearly such profanity is highly offensive to those who choose to ignore or disbelieve Strauss, Feuerbach and Bauer's accounts of religion as a human invention, which helps to explain some of the extreme theological reactions Stirner's work has provoked. Kast, in the footnotes of his edition of *Der Einzige*, identifies more than seventy references to biblical verses, many of them mischievous, all of them, without doubt, blasphemous in the eyes of most believers.[119]

In view of the actual function of 'nothing' in Stirner's thought, Deleuze seems to be overstating the case when he identifies Stirner's ideas as fundamentally nihilistic:

> The unique ego turns everything but itself into nothingness, and this nothingness is precisely its own nothingness, the ego's own nothingness. Stirner is too much of a dialectician to think in any other terms but those of property, alienation and

[116] *EE*, p. 370.
[117] Ibid., p. 15.
[118] See Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, trans. by A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).
[119] Cf. Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, p. 85. 'Stirner goes as far as he can with blasphemy.' [My translation.]

> reappropriation – but too exacting not to see where this thought leads: to the ego which is nothing, to nihilism.[120]

Stirner does indeed affirm the nothingness of the ego, in terms of the impermanence of individual human consciousness, but the judgment of nihilism is entirely Deleuze's. Although his opinion may lean on received wisdom, it is Deleuze who overlays Stirner's observation of the ephemerality of life with Macbeth's assumption of life 'signifying nothing', which is a sentiment that is completely absent from Stirner's writings.[121] As we have seen, however, Deleuze is far from being alone in labelling Stirner as nihilistic. He is not even the most extreme of Stirner's accusers: this accolade unquestionably belongs to Paterson, and his monograph on Stirner therefore deserves particular attention in the context of this study.

Paterson's book is an exercise in excoriation, combining a moralizing tone with repetitive and intemperate language and a pedantic style of writing. His assertions of Stirner's nihilism are legion, often availing themselves of the familiar superlatives commonly encountered in the condemnations penned by many of Stirner's other detractors. Thus, he writes: '*Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* must be the most uncompromising of atheistic manifestos.'[122] Just sixty pages later, it is 'arguably the most complete and uncompromising of all nihilist manifestos'.[123] Atheism and nihilism possess, for Paterson, virtual synonymity, but he does not express this simply as his own opinion, but suggests it was also Stirner's view: 'a genuinely total atheism, according to Stirner, will find itself to be indistinguishable from the nihilism of the nihilistic egoist.'[124] As there is no record in Stirner's writings of him ever having used the words 'nihilism' or 'nihilist', one wonders on what basis Paterson makes this

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[120] Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, pp. 161-162.
[121] Cf. Isaiah Berlin writing about Alexander Herzen in *Russian Thinkers* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 107. '[T]he purpose of life is to live it.'
[122] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 192.
[123] Ibid., p. 252.
[124] Ibid., p. xii.

extravagant assertion. It is not, in any case, a slip of the pen on Paterson's part, for Stirner the incorrigible, self-confessed, ultimate nihilist ('the avowed representative of the most extreme dimension of nihilism'),[125] is a recurrent theme of his monograph. The epithet 'nihilist' is, again, Paterson's interpretation, but he presents it as if it were Stirner's own self-confession.

Paterson's understanding of nihilism becomes clear from such phrases as the 'systematic refusal to ascribe virtue or meaning to experience'[126] and the 'vision of a world without God […] of a meaningless world […] which is strictly no "world" but rather a moral and metaphysical chaos'.[127] It is essentially Nietzsche's definition based on the disorientation that follows the death of God as a viable concept, which is not to say, however, that Paterson agrees with Nietzsche concerning either God's demise or Christianity's contribution to the rise of nihilism. Paterson elevates Stirner, whom he compares to Mephistopheles, to a symbolic apotheosis of the nihilist.[128] He denounces him with such immoderate statements as: 'The monster of nihilism assuredly found in Stirner its most complete avatar.'[129] One overused word in this process of demonisation is 'total': Stirner represents 'total egoism',[130] 'total atheism'[131] and, of course, 'total nihilism'.[132] Paterson identifies 'in Stirner's Unique One (der Einzige) the one finished, historic instance of that total encounter with nothingness'.[133] What distinguishes the total atheist from the common or garden existentialist variety, according to

[125] Ibid., p. ix.
[126] Ibid., p. 45.
[127] Ibid., p. 226.
[128] Ibid., p. 191.
[129] Ibid., p. xii.
[130] Ibid., p. ix.
[131] Ibid., pp. 191-225. See e.g. ibid., p. 214: 'What the total atheist denies (and by this stage he has become identical with the nihilist) is that our experience has any ultimate moral or metaphysical meaning.'
[132] Ibid., p. 51.
[133] Ibid., p. 171. 'Total' is used by Paterson 124 times in a book of just over 300 pages.

Paterson's assessment at least, is that the former 'actively wills and lives it', whereas, for the existentialists, 'their atheism is a reluctant atheism'.[134]

It is here that Paterson's underlying agenda becomes apparent, for, having meticulously explained the meaning of belief in a transcendent God,[135] he proceeds to accuse Stirner of rejecting God as a 'deliberate and perpetual choice'.[136] Stirner is presented as the most sinful of sinners, or, as Herbert Read ironically expresses it, 'a lost soul condemned to the lowest regions of limbo'.[137] When Paterson writes that Stirner's 'metaphysical construction' is a 'project of self-gratification',[138] it conjures up images of Stirner in a darkened room wilfully condemning himself to eternal blindness. Schiereck has called Paterson's monograph 'a shambles through and through';[139] what is certainly true is that, aside from the historical and biographical information it contains, the book is of little use to anyone but the devout religious believer as an instrument of either correction or self-vindication, based on a fictitious recreation of the man and his philosophy. Paterson's Presbyterian interpretation intentionally misconstrues Stirner's meaning in the service of religion and, to this end, 'nihilist' is the perfect epithet to express his utter condemnation. In this way, at least, the accusation of nihilism against Stirner in the modern, existentialist sense, is closely related to that of the very first indictment made by Rosenkranz soon after the publication of *Der Einzige*.

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[134] Ibid., p. 225.
[135] Ibid., p. 211.
[136] Ibid., p. 224.
[137] Read, *The Tenth Muse*, p. 75. The context is as follows: 'The clash of altruism and egoism is one of the commonplaces of ethics, and the issue is never in doubt. Stirner is usually dismissed as the most extreme representative of the philosophy of egoism known to history, and students in our academies of learning only hear of him as a lost soul condemned to the lowest regions of limbo.'
[138] Ibid., p. 293.
[139] Larry Alan Schiereck, *Max Stirner's Egoism and Nihilism* ([n.p.]: Underworld Amusements, 2018), p. 54.

Egoism in Stirner's Thought

The other epithet that Paterson employs polemically, not only in the title of his monograph on Stirner but throughout the work, is that of 'egoist'. It is a term that must also be considered because of its correspondence with nihilism and its repeated use by Stirner's accusers. Unlike 'nihilist', 'egoist' is a word Stirner uses frequently, and more or less interchangeably with the subject of his book, 'der Einzige'. Egoism, seen not in terms of callous selfishness, but as the exaltation of the autonomous, subjective individual, is demonstrated throughout the work by the habitual capitalisation of first-person pronouns. But as Kast observes: 'Stirners Begriff des Egoismus hat von Anfang an zu den schwerwiegendsten Missverständnissen seiner Philosophie geführt.'[140] He lists numerous, colourful examples of this,[141] including Hartmann's assertion that Stirner's 'Eigner' would inevitably have to strive to be 'ein blutdürstiger, grausamer, listiger, verräterischer, heimtückischer und eroberungswütiger Tyrann';[142] Heinrich Beta (1813-1876) calling Stirner 'Erfinder der Haifischphilosophie';[143] and Drews referring to '[die] Bestialität des radikalen Egoismus'.[144] Paterson adds his voice to this litany, calling Stirner 'rapacious, serpentine, evasive, ruthlessly self-centred and self-destructive' and 'the brutally frank exponent of the most extreme form of ruthless egoism'.[145] The aim of all these allegations is clearly to present Stirner's egoism as directly analogous to selfishness, with all its connotations of vanity, greed and egomania, thus reinforcing the claim of his nihilistic tendencies.

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[140] Kast, *Max Stirners Destruktion der spekulativen Philosophie*, p. 215.
[141] Ibid., pp. 216-217.
[142] Hartmann, *Ethische Studien*, p. 85.
[143] Heinrich Beta, 'Ein deutscher Freihandelsapostel', *Die Gartenlaube. Illustriertes Familienblatt*, 17 (1863), 266-270 (p. 267).
[144] Arthur Drews, *Die deutsche Spekulation seit Kant mit besonderer Rücksicht auf das Wesen des Absoluten und die Persönlichkeit Gottes*, 2 vols (Leipzig: Fock, 1895), I, p. 251.
[145] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, pp. 306, 252.

The debate about the motivation behind human actions, and indeed the concept of egoism itself, have undergone great change as a result of the coining of 'altruism', a word 'created by Auguste Comte [1798-1857] in his *Cours de philosophie positive* 1830-1842'.[146] Prior to that, less harsh terminology was used to represent the dichotomy: '"self-love/benevolence", "private affection/public affection", "selfishness/kindness", "selfish/social", etc.'.[147] In ancient Greece, before the arrival of monotheism, this duality was defined in far less categorical and judgmental terms. Homer's *Odyssey* provides a good example of the ancient Greek outlook: 'The story becomes a way of working through the question of what kinds of self-interested behaviour are to be rewarded and what kinds punished.'[148] Centuries later, in classical Greece, the discussion of the ethics of human conduct had not changed significantly on this issue: 'In neither Plato nor Aristotle does altruistic behaviour appear in the list of virtues, and consequently the problem of how human nature, constituted as it is, can possibly exhibit this virtue cannot arise.'[149]

As one might expect, Nietzsche tended towards the pre-Christian view on this issue, and thus he merrily poked fun at Comte's increasingly popular neologism:

> Von Frankreich her ist neuerdings noch die oberflächliche Gegenüberstellung Comte's vom Altruismus und Egoismus – aber es giebt gar keinen Altruismus! – nach England gedrungen. […] In Deutschland […] hat E. von H<artmann> neuerdings den Comte'schen Gedanken ins Breite getreten – in die Breite von 871 Seiten – ; und […] vorne den Egoismus feierlich und förmlich zur Thür hinausgeworfen, um ihn hinten, im Namen des 'Altruismus', wieder hereinzunöthigen.[150]

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[146] 'altruism', in *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (2005), p. 18.

[147] Ibid. Cf. *KGW*, VI.ii. 274, *GM-I-2*. '[Es] geschieht erst bei einem Niedergange aristokratischer Werthurtheile, dass sich dieser ganze Gegensatz "egoistisch" "unegoistisch" dem menschlichen Gewissen mehr und mehr aufdrängt.'

[148] Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods*, p. 41.

[149] 'Egoism and Altruism', in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *Encyclopedia.com* <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/egoism-and-altruism> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[150] *KGW*, VII.iii. 246, *NF-1885*, 35[34].

While Nietzsche's opinion of altruism ranges within his oeuvre from it being a fiction (i.e. that it is negated by the principles of psychological egoism), to its being a valid description of certain types of action which nonetheless involve self-interest, in the final analysis his position appears to be, as Reginster states, that 'there is no (necessary) opposition in value between egoism and altruism'.[151] In a fragment of 1888, he writes: 'In summa: der Cultus des Altruismus ist eine spezifische Form des Egoismus, die unter bestimmten physiologischen Voraussetzungen regelmäßig auftritt.'[152] The result of this cult of altruism, according to Nietzsche, is 'Haß gegen den Egoismus'.[153]

The arrival on the scene, therefore, of altruism, as a word to describe what is (or should be) considered the gold standard of human behaviour, has led to the discrediting of its supposed antithesis, egoism, to the extent where the latter carries, in common usage, connotations of despicable selfishness and immorality. Even the best efforts of Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* and elsewhere, to explain apparent instances of biological altruism in terms of genetic selfishness, have not helped to rehabilitate egoism's battered reputation.[154] Indeed, the socio-biological (not to say empirical) evidence that humans are programmed to feel empathy, compassion and love, quite plausibly in the interests of social cohesion, and therefore gene survival, has been largely ignored in the discussion of psychological egoism.[155] The idea

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[151] Bernard Reginster, 'Nietzsche on Selflessness and the Value of Altruism', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 17 (2000), 177-200 (p. 197).

[152] *KGW*, VIII.iii. 25, *NF-1888*, 14[29].

[153] Ibid.

[154] See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 2. 'I shall argue that a predominant quality to be expected in a successful gene is ruthless selfishness. This gene selfishness will usually give rise to selfishness in individual behaviour. However, as we shall see, there are special circumstances in which a gene can achieve its own selfish goals best by fostering a limited form of altruism at the level of individual animals.'

[155] Psychological egoism is the descriptive claim that a person's ultimate aim is his or her own welfare. It is the form of egoism, as opposed to normative ethical or rational egoism, which seems to correspond most closely to Stirner's outlook. Leopold goes to some lengths to refute the idea that Stirnerian egoism might be closer to ethical egoism. See David Leopold, '"The State and I": Max Stirner's Anarchism', in *The New Hegelians: Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School*, ed. by Douglas Moggach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006),

that egoism, in its denial of the existence of true altruism, is simultaneously discounting the possibility of kindness, is patently simple-minded, but George Santayana, in a short chapter about Stirner (whom he freely admits to finding tiresome), appears to understand it in this way when he writes: 'To deny that a man is capable of generosity because his generosity must be his own, is insufferable quibbling.'[156]

Stirner, in fact, does nothing of the sort. The point, for Stirner, is not to disbelieve the evidence of one's eyes, ears and experience, in regard to feelings such as kindness and generosity in oneself and others, but more accurately to understand the underlying motivations of human behaviour, as well as to subvert the sanctimonious myth of behaviour devoid of all self-interest. Egoism, in other words, is a descriptive rather than a normative position for Stirner, as he frequently makes clear in *Der Einzige*: 'Ich und das Egoistische ist das wirklich Allgemeine, da Jeder ein Egoist ist und sich über alles geht.'[157] Such a viewpoint is not dissimilar in meaning to the famous dictum of a thinker, Adam Smith, whose magnum opus Stirner translated into German,[158] and whose own version of self-interest as the basis of socio-economic order has generally been received more kindly than Stirner's: 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.'[159] As with all his demythologising endeavours, Stirner's aim is

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pp. 176-199 (pp. 182-185). For a typical, negative analysis of psychological egoism, see Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 2nd edn (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 89-103 (p. 102). 'The truth of psychological egoism would spell the defeat of morality as we know it. If altruism is impossible, then morality cannot reasonably ask us to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of others. The central moral virtues of benevolence, kindness, and compassion would have no place in morality.' For a scientific view of the socio-biological origins of cooperative behaviour, see Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue* (London: Penguin, 1997).

[156] George Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy* (London: J. M. Dent, 1940), p. 101. [First published in 1916.]

[157] *EE*, p. 187.

[158] See Adam Smith, *Untersuchungen über das Wesen und die Ursachen des Natonalreichtums*, trans. by Max Stirner, 2 vols (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1846-1847).

[159] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. by Edwin Cannan (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 14. [First published in 1776.]

to discard the illusions created by millennia of accumulated dogma, and this includes the moralistic belief in the existence, and excellence, of human conduct that disregards the individual's own inclinations. Instead, Stirner contends that all human actions, even those that manifestly benefit others, are motivated by self-enjoyment (Selbstgenuss).[160]

The invention of altruism has given rise to a new opportunity for the expression of self-righteous indignation towards all alleged manifestations of egoism. Paterson takes full advantage of this by using the term, so drenched in negative connotations, as a stick with which to chastise Stirner: 'The conscious egoist is constantly mindful that the other is the object of his love purely and entirely because he happens to evince certain qualities which directly gratify the wishes and desires of the egoist himself.'[161] As evidence of this, Paterson provides the following quotation from *Der Einzige*: 'Dem Egoisten ist nichts hoch genug, dass er sich davor demütigte, nichts so selbständig, dass er ihm zu Liebe lebte, nichts so heilig, dass er sich ihm opferte. Die Liebe des Egoisten quillt aus dem Eigennutz, flutet im Bette des Eigennutzes und mündet wieder in den Eigennutz.'[162] He ignores the possibility of this being an accurate assessment of the motivation behind love, preferring instead to consider it an annihilation of the very idea of love. He is therefore able to conclude, disregarding in the process the concept of self-love, that Stirner is callously heartless: 'The Unique One, then, is an egoist because ultimately he cares for no one. But if he is distinctively a *nihilistic* egoist, this is because ultimately he may be said to care for nothing.'[163] Stirner's adoption of egoism

[160] See ibid., pp. 322-323.
[161] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 259. Cf. *Poems of William Blake*, ed. by W. B. Yeats (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1920), p. 141. 'What is it men in women do require? The lineaments of gratified desire. What is it women in men do require? The lineaments of gratified desire.'
[162] *EE*, p. 297.
[163] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 285.

as a self-appellation, once misdefined by Paterson as the antithesis of altruism, gives Paterson the excuse to condemn Stirner as nihilistic. It is a simple, but effective misrepresentation.

Stirner does not express anything remotely similar to what Paterson is suggesting. He is openly critical of those who are 'im gewöhnlichen Verstande Egoisten, Eigennützige, auf ihren Vorteil bedacht, nüchtern, berechnend usw.'.[164] He is equally disapproving of those who egoistically devote themselves to one ruling passion: 'Egoistisch ist ihr ganzes Tun und Treiben, aber es ist ein einseitiger, unaufgeschlossener, bornierter Egoismus: es ist Besessenheit.'[165] Instead, Stirner envisages an authentic form of egoism based on enlightened and autonomous self-possession, which he personifies in the concept of the 'Eigner'. The erroneousness of Paterson's interpretation of Stirnerian egoism is demonstrated in the 'Eigner's' attitude to, and understanding of, love and compassion, which are not diminished by the admission of self-interest:

> Ich liebe die Menschen auch, nicht bloß einzelne, sondern jeden. Aber Ich liebe sie mit dem Bewußtsein des Egoismus; Ich liebe sie, weil die Liebe *Mich* glücklich macht, Ich liebe, weil Mir das Lieben natürlich ist, weil Mir's gefällt. Ich kenne kein 'Gebot der Liebe'. Ich habe Mitgefühl mit jedem fühlenden Wesen, und ihre Qual quält, ihre Erquickung erquickt auch mich.[166]

Once again, there is a clear similarity with Adam Smith, who wrote in his first published work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759):

> How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others.[167]

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[164] *EE*, p. 85.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid., p. 294. Cf. *KGW*, VI.iii. 303, *EH-Bücher-5*. 'Die Circe der Menschheit, die Moral, hat alle psychologica in Grund und Boden gefälscht – vermoralisirt – bis zu jenem schauderhaften *Unsinn*, dass die Liebe etwas "Unegoistisches" sein soll…'
[167] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 2nd edn (London: A. Millar, 1761), p. 1.

Stirner's affinity with thinkers who would never normally be associated with nihilism is a recurrent theme of the present study, an observation which runs counter to the orthodox view of Stirner's place in the history of ideas.

Stirner takes pains to explain how his egoistic conception of love is fully compatible with self-sacrifice (or altruism, as it would become known after Comte), not through an act of sublime inconsequence, as Friedell falsely interprets it,[168] but through the egoistic acknowledgment and appreciation of the rewards inherent in self-sacrifice itself:

> Soll Ich etwa an der Person des anderen keine lebendige Teilnahme haben, soll *seine* Freude und *sein* Wohl Mir nicht am Herzen liegen, soll der Genuss, den Ich ihm bereite, Mir nicht über andere eigene Genüsse gehen? Im Gegenteil, unzählige Genüsse kann ich ihm mit Freuden opfern, Unzähliges kann Ich Mir zur Erhöhung *seiner* Lust versagen, und was Mir ohne ihn das Teuerste wäre, das kann Ich für ihn in die Schanze schlagen, mein Leben, meine Wohlfahrt, meine Freiheit. Es macht ja meine Lust und mein Glück aus, Mich an seinem Glück und seiner Lust zu laben. Aber *Mich, Mich selbst* opfere Ich ihm nicht, sondern bleibe Egoist und – genieße ihn.[169]

Such an explanation of the motivation for benevolent (or apparently altruistic) behaviour is nothing substantially new. It is the same reciprocity which Portia extols in the quality of mercy;[170] it is very similar to Hobbes's renowned reason for his act of charity in the Strand;[171]

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[168] See Friedell, *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*, p. 719. 'Diese genialische Marotte, denn mehr ist es nicht, wird nun in geistvoller, kühner und consequenter Weise auf alle Lebens- und Wissensgebiete angewendet, um schließlich, und darin besteht ihre erhabene Inkonsequenz, in einen neuen Altruismus zu münden.'

[169] *EE*, pp. 293-294. See also ibid., p. 172: 'Aber jenes "das Gute um des Guten willen tun" ohne Aussicht auf Belohnung? Als ob nicht auch hier in der Befriedigung, die es gewähren soll, der Lohn enthalten wäre.' Cf. *KGW*, IV.ii. 332, *MA-499*: 'Freund. – Mitfreude, nicht Mitleiden, macht den Freund.' Also, ibid., IV.iii. 41, *VM-62*: 'Mitfreude. – Die Schlange, die uns sticht, meint uns wehe zu thun und freut sich dabei; das niedrigste Thier kann sich fremden Schmerz vorstellen. Aber fremde Freude sich vorzustellen und sich dabei freuen, ist das höchste Vorrecht der höchsten Thiere und wieder unter ihnen nur den ausgesuchtesten Exemplaren zugänglich.'

[170] 'It is twice blest, | It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.' William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, IV. 1, in *The Works of Shakespeare*, II, p. 143.

[171] See John Aubrey, '*Brief Lives,' chiefly of Contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the Years 1669 and 1696* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), p. 352. 'One time, I remember, goeing in the Strand, a poor and infirme old man craved his almes. He, beholding him with eies of pitty and compassion, putt his hand in his pocket, and gave him *6d*. Say a divine […] that stood by – "Would you have donne this, if it had not been Christ's command?" – "Yea," sayd he.-"Why?" quoth the other. – "Because," sayd he, "I was in paine to consider the miserable condition of the old man; and now my almes, giving him some reliefe, doth also ease me."'

it is even compatible with Dostoevsky's skilful use of compersion (in its broadest sense, as enjoyment of another's happiness),[172] for instance in the story of Kolya and the dog, Perezvon, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where an almost overwhelming emotion is felt by the reader, the friends and family around Ilusha's bed, and, of course, by Kolya himself.[173] Stirner, in fact, points out that this form of human motivation happens more commonly in life than one might expect, suggesting, perhaps, the prevalence of subliminal, socialised self-deception concerning the real impetus behind such behaviour.[174]

The Reception and Repercussions of Stirner's Egoism

However perceptive Stirner's analysis of human behaviour may be, his concept of egoism was, and has remained, largely misunderstood. This was already the case in the reviews that followed the publication of *Der Einzige*. Thus, in his article entitled 'Recensenten Stirners', Stirner found it necessary to try and counter some of the criticism, and the discussion of egoism accounts for a significant part of this. Writing in the third person, Stirner bemoans his critics' preconceived notions of egoism and their subsequent inability to appreciate his meaning:

> Mehr Aergerniss noch als an dem Einzigen nehmen die Recensenten an dem 'Egoisten'. Statt auf den Egoismus, wie er von Stirner aufgefasst wird, näher

[172] For a definition of compersion, see Marie Thouin, 'Compersion: A radical love phenomenon' <https://www.whatiscompersion.com/> [accessed 24 August 2021]. 'Compersion is our wholehearted participation in the happiness of others. It is the sympathetic joy we feel for somebody else, even when their positive experience does not involve or benefit us directly.'

[173] Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (2003), pp. 693-698.

[174] Cf. Nietzsche's critique of altruism. See *KGW*, VII.iii. 152, *NF-1885*, 34[41]. 'Plaire – das große Geheimnis des französischen Willens, und im Grunde der Heerden-Moral. "Mitleid-haben", Altruismus, ist die hypokritische Ausdrucksweise dafür.' See also ibid., VIII.i. 301, *NF-1886*, 7[8]. 'Hemmung der Erkenntniß durch die Moral. z.B. Versuch, das Leben mit der Moral zu vereinbaren (zu identificiren) und vor der Moral zu rechtfertigen | Altruismus uranfänglich | die selbstlose Denkweise möglich auch sans obligation und sanction.' See also ibid., VIII.ii. 91, *NF-1887*, 9[156]. 'Fälschung in der Psychologie […]. daß die Liebe gefälscht worden ist als Hingebung (und Altruism).'

> einzugehen, bleiben sie bei ihrer von Kindesbeinen an gewohnten Vorstellung von demselben stehen und rollen sein allem Volke so wohlbekanntes Sündenregister auf.[175]

The infantile catalogue of sins, he continues ironically, includes 'wie einfältig, wie gemein und wie raubmörderisch der Egoismus sei'.[176] The link between egoism and sin is, according to Stirner, wholly dependent on an imagined external, higher cause, which designates behaviour not dedicated to the higher cause as sinful.[177] In itself, he declares, no such relationship exists; nor is there a necessary connection between egoism, as he understands it, and only caring for oneself, as that would depend on being unaware of the joys of sympathy and community.[178] Stirner concludes by giving an explicit definition of what he means by the term 'egoism':

> Der Egoismus […] ist kein Gegensatz zur Liebe, kein Gegensatz zum Denken, kein Feind eines süssen Liebeslebens, kein Feind der Hingebung und Aufopferung, kein Feind der innigsten Herzlichkeit, aber auch kein Feind der Kritik, kein Feind des Socialismus, kurz, kein Feind eines wirklichen Interesses: er schliesst kein Interesse aus. Nur gegen die Uninteressirtheit und das Uninteressante ist er gerichtet: nicht gegen die Liebe, sondern gegen die heilige Liebe, nicht gegen das Denken, sondern gegen das heilige Denken, nicht gegen die Socialisten, sondern gegen die heiligen Socialisten u. s. w.[179]

Paterson had, of course, read Stirner's *Kleinere Schriften*, and he quotes extensively from them. Nonetheless, he appears either not to have understood or consciously to have disregarded Stirner's explanations and clarifications of egoism. It is indeed generally the case

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[175] Max Stirner, 'Recensenten Stirners. Entgegnung an Feuerbach, Szeliga, Hess', in *Max Stirner's Kleinere Schriften und seine Entgegnungen auf die Kritik seines Werkes: 'Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum'. Aus den Jahren 1842-1847*, ed. by John Henry Mackay (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1898), pp. 107-166 (p. 119). The article appeared in the third volume of *Wigand's Vierteljahrschrift* of 1845 (pp. 147-194). Despite it being written in the third person, it is signed M. St., and Mackay was therefore convinced of Stirner's authorship (see ibid., pp. 109-110). His opinion has not subsequently been challenged.

[176] Ibid., p. 121.

[177] See *EE*, p. 34.

[178] Stirner, 'Recensenten Stirners', p. 142.

[179] Ibid., p. 144. Stirner here makes clear that he is not opposed to myths *per se*, but only myths that become heteronomous abstractions, i.e. sacred myths. He does not, however, spell out what this means in practical terms, nor does he discuss the viability of myth without the quality of sacredness.

that they have fallen on deaf ears. As Kast declares: 'Das Rezeptionsspektrum war […] groß, widersprüchlich und durch zahlreiche Missverständnisse belastet.'[180] This, Kast believes, can be attributed not only to the nature of Stirner's message, but also to the way in which it is expressed. He considers Stirner's parading of egoism as a virtue to be a provocation in itself, and an ill-advised one at that.[181] For Stirner, though, provocation seems to have been an instrument in his campaign to sweep away sacred abstractions in all their manifestations, as a means of rousing his readers from their dogmatic slumber. The man who appeared so shy and retiring at the meetings of 'die Freien',[182] at times used something akin to shock tactics in his writings, thus risking, and indeed creating, serious misunderstanding in the process.[183]

Those readers who have not been immediately repelled by the radical nature of his thought have been able to reach a more balanced judgment than those, like Paterson and Helms, whose ideological beliefs place them automatically in a position of antagonism. Read, while recognising that Stirner is 'usually dismissed as the most extreme representative of the philosophy of egoism known to history',[184] concludes that 'Stirner's doctrine is, in fact, a plea for the integration of the personality, and on that basis the charge of "selfishness" becomes

[180] Kast, 'Afterword', in *EE,* p. 371.
[181] Ibid., pp. 374-375.
[182] Mackay writes: 'So laut und lärmend es sonst bei Hippel zuging, so still und zurückhaltend verhielt sich Stirner. […] Nie hat Jemand ein heftiges, rohes oder gar gemeines Wort von ihm gehört, wie sie bei Hippel gerade keine Seltenheit waren. […] Die Meisten […] hielten den "stillvergnügten", einfachen, peinlich-bescheidenen Mann für einen harmlosen, wenig bedeutenden Menschen, […] und sahen über ihn hinweg, bis er dann später die Aufmerksamkeit Aller in so hohem Grade auf sich ziehen sollte.' Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 91. It is conceivable that Stirner was so quiet because he was alone in being of a different opinion to his fellow members, who fell, broadly speaking, into one of two camps, humanist or socialist.
[183] There is plenty of evidence of how shocking some of Stirner's readers have found him. One of the best examples is, of course, Paterson, whose indignation is palpable, and whose praise could hardly be fainter when he writes: 'If he coolly chose to adapt his language for the most bizarre and often scandalous purposes, at least none of his readers could deny that in his hands it was employed with a devious resourcefulness and labyrinthine erudition which marked its employer as a linguistic adventurer unique in the history of German philosophy.' Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 64.
[184] Read, *The Tenth Muse*, p. 75.

somewhat naïve'.[185] Kast holds a similar view. He summarises the essence of Stirner's concept of egoism as follows: 'Das, was Stirner Egoismus nennt, ist kein platter Egoismus im Verständnis seiner Kritiker, sondern ein Appell an jeden, keine fremden, aufoktroyierten Interessen zu vertreten, sondern für die eigenen Interessen einzutreten.'[186] Peter Sloterdijk (b. 1947) views Stirner's egoism, not implausibly, as an attempt to overcome alienation at the level of the private individual: 'Stirners Idee ist es, aus seinem Kopf alle fremden Programmierungen einfach hinauszuwerfen. Nach dieser totalen Selbstreinigung des Kopfes soll ein nackter, gewissermaßen leerer, reflektierter Egoismus übrigbleiben.'[187]

Stirner's concept of egoism can be understood in one sense as the culmination of the Enlightenment's focus on subjective self-consciousness from Descartes to Fichte, combined with Kant's pursuit of 'the emancipation of the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance and error'.[188] Schröder writes: 'So begriff sich Stirner als Vollender des von der Aufklärung in Gang gesetzten Projektes der "Selbstbefreiung", das durch die Religionskritik Feuerbachs vorangetrieben, aber noch nicht zum Ziel geführt worden sei.'[189] Egoism, as a principle, is, however, equally a discontinuity, as it distinguishes Stirner from the universalism of Hegel, from the humanism of Feuerbach, and of course from the theism of Christianity. Stirner was effectively trying to inaugurate a new, third way of thinking distinct from the religious-metaphysical and the humanist-materialist doctrines which had dominated the intellectual landscape of the first half of the nineteenth century in Germany. One reason for his failure to establish this as a movement may be the naivety of his thought on the socio-

[185] Ibid., p. 80.
[186] Kast, 'Afterword', in *EE,* p. 375.
[187] Peter Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, 2 vols (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), I, p. 192.
[188] Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 1.
[189] Schröder, *Moralischer Nihilismus*, p. 161.

political level, a charge that has also been directed against Nietzsche.[190] As Sloterdijk points out, naivety is essentially what Marx was accusing Stirner of in *Die deutsche Ideologie*.[191] Hartmann, in *Ethische Studien*, speaks of 'der kindliche Anarchismus Stirners',[192] and even Kast concedes that Stirner's philosophy reaches the limits of its effectiveness in the concept of the 'Verein potenziell-paritätischer Eigner als Konkretisierung der Verkehrsformen dieser Eigner', or, in other words, Stirner's ill-conceived and unsystematic social theory based on the concept of the union of egoists.[193] Kast also notes critically in Stirner's philosophy: 'das weitgehende Ausklammern sozio-ökonomischer Faktoren innerhalb einer Philosophie, die ubiquitäre Ansprüche erhebt'.[194]

In a sense, Stirner was born, and died, too early. His major work, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, was published four years before Marx and Engels's *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*. He missed the Darwinian revolution (*On the Origin of Species* was published three years after his death, *The Descent of Man* a further twelve years later), as well as the Freudian revolution (Freud was born six weeks before Stirner's death). Without the pieces of the puzzle that these thinkers added to man's collective knowledge, he was ill-placed to understand the full social, biological and psychological implications of his model for human existence and co-existence based on enlightened egoism.

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[190] See Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche*, p. 133. '[Nietzsche's] explicit aim […] is to make men self-reliant and self-determining, content with their earthly lot and free from all need of gods, yet the arrangements of social and political life that would be required to institute such an autonomous humanity do not interest him.'
[191] Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, p. 192.
[192] Hartmann, *Ethische Studien*, p. 86.
[193] Kast, *Max Stirners Destruktion der spekulativen Philosophie*, p. 330. In his answer to his critics, the best examples of unions of egoists that Stirner is able to furnish are children playing games, two lovers joining their hearts together and three friends drinking wine in a tavern. Although he admits that these examples are trivial, they nonetheless demonstrate the unsophistication of his socio-political thought, which has opened him up to stinging criticism, most notably from Marx. See Stirner, 'Recensenten Stirners', pp. 164-165.
[194] Ibid. For further information on Stirner's union of egoists, see Clark, *Max Stirner's Egoism*, pp. 78-86.

Although Stirner represents, supports and champions the interests of the individual, he is apparently oblivious to the fact that the history of mankind has never been about the individual in isolation, but always about interest groups bound together by a powerful myth. Stirner's union of egoists is a blueprint for a society of outsiders, much like Nietzsche's 'society' of 'Übermenschen' would be, assuming such a thing were possible.[195] As outsiders are always by definition a minority, the only at least semi-practical social application for his theory is in a commune of like-minded, self-aware, well-balanced, non-conformist individuals, the success and indeed survival of which would nonetheless be subject to the vagaries of human behaviour. It might be serviceable for a solitary animal like an ocelot but is of little use for humans.

Nonetheless, despite the unsophistication of his social philosophy, Stirner took the process of the Enlightenment, with regard to dogma, to its ultimate pre-Darwinian and pre-Freudian conclusion. But in doing so, he aroused the antagonism, not to say contempt, of a host of enemies. Thus, since Stirner let the cat out of the bag, to use Adorno's (translated) metaphor,[196] everyone imaginable (the state, the censor, Marx, Engels, other Young Hegelians, Rosenkranz, perhaps Nietzsche, certainly Förster-Nietzsche, Hartmann, Lauterbach, Löwith, Thielicke, Helms, Paterson et al.)[197] has done his, her and its absolute

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[195] Cf. John Carroll, *Break-Out from the Crystal Palace. The anarcho-psychological critique: Stirner, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 57. '[T]he Stirnerian egoist is most fully embodied in artists like Max Ernst, isolated men whose extreme lives are sustained by the force of their imaginations, and an inviolable confidence in their own capacity for revolutionizing human consciousness.' See Max Ernst, *L'Unique et sa propriété*, 1925, frottage and pencil on paper, 26 x 19.8 cm <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/L-UNIQUE-ET-SA-PROPRIETE/F51063930873D9C4> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[196] See Laska, 'Nietzsches initiale Krise', p. 114. 'Theodor Adorno gab zwar im kleinen Kreis zu, Stirner sei derjenige gewesen, der "den Hasen aus dem Sack gelassen" habe.' Laska's source is Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft*, p. 200. '[Stirner] hat, wie Adorno sich ausgedrückt hat, "den Hasen aus dem Sack gelassen".'

[197] For a comprehensive list of Stirner's detractors, see Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, pp. 7-116.

best to thrust it back in and tie up the bag once and for all. The few voices in support of Stirner have scarcely been audible above the cacophony of condemnation.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the accusation of nihilism, and the related charge of egoism, have accompanied Stirner throughout the history of his largely unfavourable reception. The epithets ‘nihilist’ and ‘egoist’ have been appended to his name by countless critics, irrespective of their political, philosophical or theological persuasions. In the case of ‘egoist’, there is clear justification for its use in Stirner’s own writings, where the term is frequently, and positively, employed, although it must be said that Stirner’s understanding of egoism is routinely ignored. As for ‘nihilist’, it has been applied to Stirner (without such immediate justification), in several invariably negative senses, but most commonly, as delineated above, as one or more of political, moral or existential nihilism. The aim of the following three chapters is to analyse and evaluate the relevance of each of these specific types of nihilism to a proper understanding of Stirner’s thought, and thus to fulfil the stated objective of this study.

Chapter Five

The State of Denial: Stirner and Political Nihilism

The Meaning and History of Political Nihilism

Having analysed and elucidated the manifold meanings of the word 'nihilism', as well as having reviewed the 175-year history of how the term has been applied to Stirner, we are now in a position to consider the degree of justification for connecting the man, and his ideas, with the concept. As established in the previous chapter, the three types of nihilism most commonly applied to Stirner are political, moral and existential nihilism. Political and moral nihilism were first associated with Stirner in the course of the nineteenth century, while the association with existential nihilism is a more modern occurrence.[1] In the current chapter I shall examine the identification of Stirner with the first of these types of nihilism, by assessing the parallels between Stirner's thought and the principles and precepts of political nihilism, as well as surveying the evidence of any direct influence of Stirner on its historical proponents, with the aim of establishing whether Stirner can justifiably be termed a political nihilist. This will be followed by similar exercises for moral and existential nihilism in the ensuing two chapters.

There is little dispute about the meaning of 'political nihilism'. Although the term can be, and has been, used in other contexts, in the history of ideas it is generally considered synonymous with the nineteenth-century phenomenon of Russian nihilism, in other words, political nihilism is the generalised form of Russian nihilism, from which it takes its characteristics. This is evidently the sense in which it is meant by Biedermann, when he speaks

[1] The term 'existentialism' was only coined in the mid-1940s. See Thomas Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 89. 'Though Jaspers called his thought a "philosophy of *Existenz*", it seems to have been Gabriel Marcel who coined the term 'existentialist' and applied it to Sartre.'

of Stirner's *Der Einzige* as a literary version of nihilism, 'die […] auf den Trümmern der Gesellschaft nur das souveräne Ich seine Triumphe feiern ließ'.[2] Likewise Masaryk, when he declares: '[Er] verkündet in seinem *Einzigen* bereits den politischen Nihilismus; […] Stirner genügt die Republik nicht mehr, der Staat überhaupt soll abgeschafft werden.'[3] Perhaps the most colourful instance of Stirner's association with political nihilism is Heman's description of Stirner's anarchism and nihilism, 'deren Anhänger mit Dolch, Revolver und Bomben sich zu Eignern der ganzen Welt machen […] wollen'.[4]

It is significant that all of these examples were written in the quarter century following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, when the memory of this and other acts of violence committed by Russian nihilists was still fresh in the mind. Nonetheless, however negative Stirner's critics meant the association to be, these crimes, shocking though they were, especially in an age where monarchical government was the rule, were carried out as part of an escalating response to the brutal repressiveness of the Russian Empire, which was characterised by countless atrocities in the form of indiscriminate massacres, public executions and mass deportations to Siberia of perceived enemies of the state, be they rebellious Poles or revolting peasants. The Russian nihilists were not, as a rule, unprincipled thugs who practised violence for its own sake. As the eminent Russianist, Eugene Lampert,

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[2] Biedermann, *1840-1870. Dreißig Jahre deutscher Geschichte*, I, p. 139. Biedermann is probably borrowing from Hartmann, who wrote two years earlier: 'Dieser Standpunkt [der Willkür] ist annähernd verwirklicht […] in Max Stirner, der auf den Trümmern aller zerstörten Illusionen nur eine einzige Illusion bestehen liess: die Realität des Ich.' Eduard von Hartmann, *Phänomenologie des sittlichen Bewusstseins. Prolegomena zu jeder künftigen Ethik* (Berlin: Duncker, 1879), p. 403. Later in the same work, Hartmann compares Stirner and the Russian nihilists. Ibid., p. 768.

[3] Masaryk, *Die philosophischen und sociologischen Grundlagen des Marxismus*, p. 390.

[4] Heman, 'Der Philosoph des Anarchismus und Nihilismus', p. 74.

writes: 'They were rebels because they felt man's inhumanity to man […]. They were the conscience of Russia.'[5]

The effective equivalence of political and Russian nihilism is borne out in general usage. In the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* we find the following definition: 'Political nihilism calls for the complete destruction of existing political institutions, along with their supporting outlooks and social structures, but has no positive message of what should be put in their place.'[6] In the same publication, Russian nihilism is described as a doctrine that 'negated not the normative significance of the world or the general meaning of human existence, but rather a particular social, political and aesthetic order'.[7] Moreover, 'it is […] the vagueness of their positive programmes that distinguishes the [Russian] Nihilists from the revolutionary socialists who followed them'.[8] The similarity between the two definitions is obvious: both describe the general outlook of Turgenev's embodiment of nihilism, Bazarov, who recognises no authority, repudiates everything and believes only in destruction. Bazarov represents the spirit of radical youth in Russia during the period spanning the hopeful start, and catastrophic end, of the reign of Alexander II, which lasted from his coronation following the death of his autocratic father, Nicholas I, in 1855, until his assassination in 1881:

> It was a reign of stern domestic tyranny […] and of protesting nihilism, a reign in which no suspect was safe from the secret police, […] while conversely every member of the government from the Tzar downward was the mark for the dagger or the bomb. This was the time when the young intellectuals of Russia, impatient of the tardiness of reform and intoxicated with the new wine of physical science, began to assail the whole

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[5] E. Lampert, *Sons against Fathers. Studies in Russian Radicalism and Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 91.

[6] Crosby, 'Nihilism', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Cf. Pratt, 'Nihilism', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. '*Political Nihilism* […] is associated with the belief that the destruction of all existing political, social, and religious order is a prerequisite for any future improvement.'

[7] Lovell, 'Nihilism, Russian', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[8] Ibid.

> fabric of society with a savage recklessness, and, having nothing to suggest in place of all that they were resolved to destroy, earned for themselves the name of nihilist.[9]

In order to reach an objective judgment concerning the link between Stirner and this particular manifestation of nihilism, we must consider in more detail the nature and meaning of the phenomenon of Russian nihilism. The most significant dates in its chronology were 1861, which saw the emancipation of the serfs with its unintended consequences which included the first major student riots in Russia;[10] 1866, when Karakozov carried out the first unsuccessful assassination attempt on the life of the Tsar, for which he was duly hanged; the period immediately thereafter of the counter-revolutionary White Terror, from 1866 to 1870, led by the notoriously ruthless Count Mikhail Muravyov, which brought the first, foundational, phase of nihilism to a close; and 1878-1881, the conclusion of the second, revolutionary, phase of nihilism, which saw a series of attempted, and occasionally successful, political murders, culminating in the assassination of Alexander II and the subsequent elimination of the nihilist movement following the state's brutal crackdown.

Russian nihilists, who were also known at the time as 'New People', generally came from what might nowadays be called the lower middle class; they were 'mostly sons and daughters of poor gentry, of minor officials and of priests or lower clergy'.[11] They were mainly youths, students for part or all of their nihilist careers, and one or (usually) more of atheist, materialist and positivist in their philosophical outlooks. Many were teachers (as, of course, was Stirner), including Karakozov, Alexander Solovyov, another would-be assassin of the

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[9] H. A. L. Fisher, *A History of Europe*, rev. edn, 3 vols (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1971), II, pp. 1132-1133.
[10] See Lampert, *Sons against Fathers*, p. 85. 'It is one of the most bitter ironies of Russian history that the 19th of February 1861, which should have been the climax of the nineteenth century, the day awaited by conscience-stricken Russia […] – "the great day of reconciliation", as Dostoevsky called it, between the Tsar and "the people" – in fact opened an impassable gulf between them and was the signal for the final rupture between the Government and the intelligentsia. Faced with the substitution of one kind of bondage for another, the intelligentsia resumed its militant role on a more serious scale.'
[11] Hingley, *Nihilists*, p. 16.

Tsar, Chernyshevsky, the editor-in-chief of the literary and political journal, *Sovremennik*, and Nechaev, who, in the memorable words of Hingley, turned 'from moulding younger brains to blowing out older ones'.[12] In the course of the movement's formation, they developed a radical, anti-establishment 'uniform', that made them instantly recognisable:

> They had quirks of dress and manner, the men going about with huge beards and long hair flopping over their shoulders, while girls had their hair bobbed and renounced such frivolities as combs, crinolines and allowing men to kiss their hands. Both sexes favoured blue-tinted spectacles and high boots. Other common features were a heavy walking-stick and a rug flung over the shoulders in cold weather.[13]

Diverse fictional manifestations of progressive and revolutionary nihilists abound in Russian literature of the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, from Turgenev's ambivalent hero, Bazarov, through Chernyshevsky's saintly Rakhmetov, to Dostoevsky's sundry sceptics and malefactors like Stavrogin, Verkhovensky, Raskolnikov and Ivan Karamazov, and elaborate caricatures such as Kirillov and Lebezyatnikov.

Stirner and the Fathers of Russian Populism

Although the term 'nihilism' was not popularised in Russia until the publication of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* in 1862, the origins of the negative political ideology which is its hallmark and most fundamental principle can be traced back to Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), who wrote twenty years earlier:

> Revolutionary propaganda is in its deepest sense the NEGATION of the existing conditions of the State, for […] it has no other program than the destruction of whatever order prevails at the time. […] Let us then trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too![14]

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[12] Ibid., p. 26.
[13] Ibid., p. 16.
[14] Mikhail Bakunin, 'The Reaction in Germany', in *Bakunin on Anarchy. Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. by Sam Dolgoff (New York: Vintage, 1972), pp. 55-57 (pp. 56-57).

In emphasizing the paradoxically creative effect of sublation (Aufhebung) within the dialectical process, this passage shows that Bakunin was profoundly influenced by Hegel, as were many Russian intellectuals at the time, including his erstwhile friends and colleagues, Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848) and Alexander Herzen (1812-1870), who, together, made up a triumvirate of revolutionary, socialist and populist (or pre-populist) Russian thinkers in the period that followed the Decembrist uprising of 1825.[15] 'The Reaction in Germany', the essay from which the above quotation is taken, is a product of Bakunin's encounter with the Young Hegelians in Berlin, where he lived from 1840 to 1842. It was written for Arnold Ruge's *Deutsche Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Kunst*, the group's most important mouthpiece. It was through his acquaintance with the Young Hegelians that Bakunin 'discovered the revolutionary implications of Hegelianism'.[16] His exposure to the ideas of Strauss, Feuerbach et al. precipitated a profound intellectual crisis, which, in the words of Lampert, 'carried him […] through all imaginable and unimaginable nihilisms in regard to society, culture, morality and religion'.[17]

As discussed in Chapter 1 above, it was within the context of Young Hegelianism, and specifically of the Berlin branch, 'die Freien', that Stirner's philosophy emerged. Inevitably, Bakunin came to know about Stirner during his time in the city, though the extent to which he was aware of, and influenced by, Stirner's ideas is a matter of debate. There is no incontrovertible evidence that the two ever met or that Bakunin read *Der Einzige*. Engels (who

[15] For Hegel's influence on Bakunin, see Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, pp. 38-43. For a definition of Russian populism, see Berlin, 'Introduction', in Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*, trans. by Francis Haskell (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966), pp. vii-viii. Venturi, among others, has pointed out that populism was a relatively late development in the history of nineteenth-century revolutionary Russian thought, although the term is generally used to cover the pre-populist phase as well. See Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, pp. xxxii-xxxiii.
[16] E. Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 110.
[17] Ibid., p. 128.

was no friend of either of them) seems to have been convinced of Stirner's effect on Bakunin, but he gives no details to support this, simply declaring tersely: 'schließlich kam Stirner, der Prophet des heutigen Anarchismus – Bakunin hat sehr viel aus ihm genommen.'[18] Mikhail Kurtschinsky (1876-1939), writing about Stirner soon after the Russian Revolution, repeats Engels's assertion: 'In betreff des von Stirner ausgehenden Einflusses auf die Entwicklung der anarchistischen Doktrin muß man […] bemerken, daß Stirners Lehre auf die Weltanschauung des Schöpfers des kommunistischen Anarchismus, M. Bakunin, unzweifelhaften Einfluß übte.'[19] In the absence of any proof, however, it is difficult to judge whether this claim is merited or, as seems more likely, is just a reflection of what Paul McLaughlin, in his study of Bakunin's anarchism, calls the 'tendency among Marxists (and others) to conflate different anarchisms, whether closely related (as in the case of Proudhon and Bakunin) or not (as in the case of Stirner and Bakunin)'.[20]

McLaughlin does nonetheless acknowledge that Bakunin knew of Stirner, insisting, however, that he would have rejected Stirner's ideas in the main. It is certainly true that there is an essential incongruity between Bakunin's view of the primarily social function of the individual, and Stirner's focus on the individual egoist, for whom society is a coercive abstraction.[21] As Lampert explains:

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[18] Marx and Engels, *Werke*, XXI (1962), p. 271. In his letter to Max Hildebrand of 22 October 1889 Engels gives a little more detail: 'Eine Wiedergeburt hat Stirner erlebt durch Bakunin, der übrigens zu jener Zeit auch in Berlin war und in Werders Kolleg über Logik mit noch 4-5 Russen auf der Bank vor mir saß (1841/42). Die harmlose, nur etymologische Anarchie (d. h. Abwesenheit einer Staatsgewalt) von Proudhon hätte nie zu den jetzigen anarchistischen Doktrinen geführt, hätte nicht Bakunin ein gut Teil Stirnerscher Empörung in sie hineingegossen. Infolgedessen sind die Anarchisten denn auch lauter "Einzige" geworden, so einzig, daß ihrer keine zwei sich vertragen können.' Ibid., XXXVII, p. 293.

[19] M. Kurtschinsky, *Der Apostel des Egoismus. Max Stirner und seine Philosophie der Anarchie*, trans. by Gregor von Glasenapp (Berlin: R. L. Prager, 1923), p. 142. [First published in Russian in 1920.]

[20] Paul McLaughlin, *Mikhail Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Anarchism* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002), p. 184.

[21] See e.g. *EE*, p. 323. 'Mein Verkehr mit der Welt besteht darin, dass Ich sie genieße und so sie zu meinem Selbstgenuss verbrauche.'

> All the operations in the life of an individual had for Bakunin a social meaning, and any separation of individual and social acts was for him a way of objectifying society into a separate entity, and hence a way of subjecting man to the tyranny of abstractions. He differed fundamentally in this respect from the most radical, solipsistic anarchist, Max Stirner, who regarded man as a dissociated body, and society as a collection of dissociated, extraneous bodies.[22]

Lampert fails to acknowledge that Stirner dismissed all known manifestations of society as themselves tyrannical abstractions, but his analysis is nonetheless sound, even if the designation of Stirner as a solipsist remains controversial, if not entirely mistaken.[23]

Paterson, too, points to the dissimilarity between Bakunin's and Stirner's social visions: 'While Stirner's philosophy may have some tenuous affinities with the revolutionary destructiveness of Bakunin, the latter's passionate zeal for social justice and his lifelong commitment to popular emancipation could hardly be further removed from Stirner's self-preoccupation.'[24] It is true that Stirner's philosophy of egoism implies a negative opinion of society, at least as Stirner understood it:

> Die Auflösung der *Gesellschaft* aber ist der *Verkehr* oder *Verein*. Allerdings entsteht auch durch Verein eine Gesellschaft, aber nur wie durch einen Gedanken eine fixe Idee entsteht. […] Hat sich ein Verein zur Gesellschaft kristallisiert, so hat er aufgehört, eine Vereinigung zu sein; denn Vereinigung ist ein unaufhörliches Sich-Vereinigen; er ist zu einem Vereinigtsein geworden, zum Stillstand gekommen, zur Fixheit ausgeartet, er ist – *tot* als Verein, ist der Leichnam des Vereins oder der Vereinigung, d. h. er ist – Gesellschaft, Gemeinschaft.[25]

For Stirner, the problem is not, as it was for Bakunin, man's alienation from his social essence, but rather the alienating nature of society itself for the individual. His solution is to eradicate society (in an ill-defined, but non-revolutionary way) and replace it with the dynamic concept of the union of egoists.

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[22] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 160.
[23] See Kast, 'Afterword', in *EE,* pp. 375-379.
[24] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 128.
[25] *EE*, p. 310.

Despite his assiduous impartiality on the question of Stirner's influence on Bakunin, McLaughlin includes Bakunin, quite bizarrely, in the long list of those who have accused Stirner of nihilism:

> The influence of Stirner may have contributed to the libertarian aspect of Bakunin's mature socialism. Nevertheless, Stirner's egocentric philosophy represents a quasi-Kierkegaardian corruption of Left-Hegelian logic – the twisting of either-or into an absurd personalistic logic – that Bakunin would never endorse. On one of the few occasions that Bakunin mentions Stirner in his writings, he refers to the 'cynical logic' of this 'nihilist'.[26]

The three words of Bakunin's that McLaughlin quotes here as if they referred to Stirner, are from the 1873 work, *Statism and Anarchy*, where Bakunin writes:

> [Marx] was the soul and center of the notable circle of progressive Hegelians with whom he began to publish an opposition journal. […] This circle also included the brothers Bruno and Edgar Bauer, Max Stirner, and later, in Berlin, the first circle of German nihilists, who far surpassed the most frenzied Russian nihilists with their cynical logic.[27]

The translator of the English edition, Shatz, clarifies in a footnote that the 'Young Hegelian circle to which Bakunin refers' was the 'Doctors' Club' (Doktorenclub), while the German nihilists are 'the Freemen' (die Freien).[28] In his remarks, however, Bakunin seems to imply some sort of separation between the members of the former, including the Bauer brothers and Stirner, and those of the latter. In fact, 'die Freien' were the successors of the 'Doktorenklub', and many of the Young Hegelians were therefore members of both, including the Bauers, Rutenberg and Köppen, but while he was certainly a member of 'die Freien', there is no record that Stirner ever attended the 'Doktorenklub'.[29] McLaughlin's assertion that Bakunin's words

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[26] McLaughlin, *Mikhail Bakunin*, p. 68.
[27] Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, trans. and ed. by Marshall S. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 141-142.
[28] Ibid., pp. 232-233.
[29] Concerning the relationship between the 'Doctors' Club' and 'the Freemen', see David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life & Thought* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1973), p. 52. Concerning their common members, see ibid., p. 32.

are meant as a direct attack on Stirner is therefore at best misleading and at worst disingenuous. It is not impossible that this speculative interpretation is, once again, inspired by the received wisdom of Stirner being an archetypal nihilist. Throughout the history of his reception Stirner's dismal reputation has invariably preceded him, distorting his image and undermining the exercise of independent and objective critical analysis.

Nonetheless, traces, however faint, of Stirner's impact can undoubtedly be found throughout the evolution of Russian nihilism, and indeed the anti-nihilism with which it went hand in hand, starting as far back as its post-Decembrist antecedents. Tangible evidence of Stirner's connection with another member of the revolutionary triumvirate, Herzen, may be even harder to discover than with Bakunin, but Isaiah Berlin, in his introduction to the English edition of Herzen's memoirs, still sees fit to mention their intellectual kinship: 'Like the more extreme of the left wing disciples of Hegel, in particular like the anarchist Max Stirner, Herzen saw danger in the great magnificent abstractions the mere sound of which precipitated men into violent and meaningless slaughter.'[30] Likewise, Martin Malia, in his book on Herzen, identifies a telling similarity between the two: 'In some way Herzen never made explicit – save for his vague vision of the fraternal commune – the absolute egoism of each was entirely compatible with the absolute egoism of all. In contemporary thought there was no individualism so extreme except the very similar egoism of Max Stirner.'[31] Masaryk also

[30] Isaiah Berlin, 'Introduction', in Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen*, trans. by Humphrey Higgens (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), pp. xix-xliii (p. xxvii). See also Herzen's letter to G. Mazzini of 13 September 1850, quoted in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 93. 'I have served one idea […] – war against all imposed authority – against every kind of deprivation of freedom, in the name of the absolute independence of the individual.' Berlin writes of Herzen's belief 'that a minimum area of free action is a moral necessity for all men, not to be suppressed in the name of abstractions or general principles […] such as eternal salvation, or history, or humanity, or progress, still less the State or the Church or the proletariat'. Ibid., pp. 98-99. The similarities with Stirner's thought are self-evident.

[31] Martin E. Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1965), p. 277.

recognises a fundamental affinity between the two thinkers: 'Herzens Ernüchterung und seine Deutung des Nihilismus kommt ganz mit Stirners nihilistischer Entheiligung überein. Herzen zieht, wie Stirner, aus seinem Lehrer Feuerbach die Konsequenzen.'[32] Such references demonstrate at the very least the extent to which Stirner's thought is perceived by many to have permeated the intellectual discourse of mid-nineteenth-century Russian radicalism.[33]

Identifying a link between Stirner and the third member of the triumvirate, Belinsky, is less difficult, thanks to the memoirist, Pavel Annenkov (1813-1887), who writes of the dramatic effect Stirner had on Belinsky in 1847, a year before his death, at a time when *Der Einzige* was, in Annenkov's words, 'creating a sensation'.[34] Belinsky, described by Berlin as '[t]he most passionate and influential voice of his generation',[35] had a profound impact on his friends Turgenev and Dostoevsky, as well as on contemporary Russian radical opinion, through his articles for *Sovremennik*, the journal that was to become the organ of one of the two branches of Russian nihilism during its foundational period, under Chernyshevsky and his successor Nikolai Dobrolyubov (1836-1861).[36] According to Annenkov, who attempted to reconstruct his conversations with Belinsky from memory, Belinsky, speaking about Stirner and *Der Einzige*, said something along the lines of:

> It has been proved that a man feels and thinks and acts invariably according to the laws of egotistical urges, and indeed, he cannot have any others. The unfortunate thing is that mystical doctrines have brought the term into disgrace, giving it the meaning of the caterer to all the base passions and instincts in man. […] The word was dishonored for no good reason, since it denotes a completely natural […] phenomenon, and,

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[32] Masaryk, *Zur russischen Geschichts- und Religionsphilosophie*, II, p. 441.

[33] Cf. Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft*, p. 346. 'Umfassende, starke Wirkung hatte Stirner zuerst in dem Land, dem er Kultur bestritten und das er der Barbarei und hunnischer Gelüste auf Unterjochung Europas geziehen hatte, in *Rußland*. […] Lange bevor Marx russische Revolutionäre inspirierte, seit Erscheinen der Erstausgabe des *Einzigen* hatten sich russische Philosophen ausgiebig mit Stirner befaßt.'

[34] P. V. Annenkov, *The Extraordinary Decade: Literary Memoirs*, trans. by Irwin R. Titunik, ed. by Arthur P. Mendel (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 211.

[35] Berlin, 'Fathers and Children', p. 12.

[36] Dobrolyubov, who died of tuberculosis at the age of 25, is buried next to Belinsky at Volkovo Cemetry in St. Petersburg.

> moreover, includes […] the possibility of a moral inference. But what I see in this case is an author who retains the word's pejorative connotation, the connotation given it by mystics, and merely converts it into a beacon to illuminate mankind's way by claiming to have discovered in all the pejorative ideas attributed to the word new and different qualities of it and new rights of it to universal respect.[37]

The subject of egoism was discussed in the previous chapter, in which Stirner's definition was outlined and contrasted with the common perception of egoism as sinfully self-centred behaviour. For Stirner, sin is a figment of the imagination, as expressed in his unequivocal pronouncement: 'Es gibt keinen Sünder und keinen sündigen Egoismus!'.[38] Instead, he conceives of egoism as the expression of 'Eigenheit', which may be translated variously as ownness, autonomy or self-mastery, thus making, as Leopold points out, heteronomy, rather than altruism, its antonym.[39] Strangely, Belinsky seems to have arrived at a similar understanding of egoism to Stirner's, but, apparently oblivious to this, accuses him of precisely the negative definition that Stirner decries as 'einseitiger, unaufgeschlossener, bornierter Egoismus'.[40] Belinsky, like so many before and after him, appears to have been deceived, either by Stirner's odious reputation or by his seemingly mischievous desire to provoke the reader with his statements of extreme immorality (or, conceivably, by both).

The radicalism of Stirner's thinking, amplified over time by the sensationalism of his methods, has certainly brought him notoriety and has resulted in much critical opprobrium. It has been noted in Chapter 4 above that some of the outspoken views expressed in *Der Einzige* seem to contrast starkly with the placid, reserved impression Stirner made at the meetings of 'Die Freien', but of course it is not a given that the contents of a book must necessarily reflect a writer's public behaviour. It is conceivable that Stirner, having quietly witnessed the

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[37] Quoted from memory by Annenkov in *The Extraordinary Decade*, pp. 211-212.
[38] *EE*, p. 364.
[39] David Leopold, 'Introduction', in Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, ed. by David Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. xi-xxxii (p. xxiii).
[40] *EE*, p. 85.

explosive opinions of his radical colleagues, felt compelled in his magnum opus to rise to the challenge of shocking even them, revelling in the opportunity to expose all vestiges of sanctimony, by transgressing the conventional boundaries of good taste and propriety. One by one, therefore, he demolishes the most sacred precepts of Western civilisation, starting with arguably the most prominent of the Ten Commandments, which he attempts to obliterate with his infamous phrase, so often quoted in subsequent assassinations of his character: 'Ich bin aber durch Mich berechtigt zu morden, wenn Ich Mir's nicht verbiete.'[41]

But Stirner's heterodoxy does not stop at apparently condoning homicide. He takes his iconoclastic, anti-Christian mission a step further by supporting, like Schopenhauer, the right to commit suicide:

> Den Tod abzuwarten, heischt das sittliche Gebot als das Gute; ihn sich selbst zu geben, ist unsittlich und böse: der *Selbstmord* findet keine Entschuldigung vor dem Richterstuhl der Sittlichkeit. […] Nur wenn ich keinem Wesen verpflichtet bin, ist die Erhaltung des Lebens – meine Sache.[42]

In the same vein, though further still beyond the pale of conventional morality, Stirner unashamedly offers an apparent justification of the normally unthinkable act of infanticide:

> Brandmarkt jene Offiziers-Witwe, die auf der Flucht in Russland, nachdem ihr das Bein weggeschossen, das Strumpfband von diesem abzieht, ihr Kind damit erdrosselt und dann neben der Leiche verblutet, – brandmarkt das Andenken der – Kindesmörderin. […] Die Mutter ermordete es, weil sie *befriedigt* und beruhigt sterben wollte.[43]

Nor is it just different types of killing that seem to win his tacit approval. Incest and polygamy also receive implicit endorsement:

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[41] Ibid., p. 195.

[42] Ibid., pp. 327-328. Cf. *Schopenhauer's sämmtliche Werke*, VI, p. 328. 'Da müssen wir denn hören, Selbstmord sei die größte Feigheit, sei nur im Wahnsinn möglich, und dergleichen Abgeschmacktheiten mehr, oder auch die ganz sinnlose Phrase, der Selbstmord sei "unrecht'; während doch offenbar Jeder auf Nichts in der Welt ein so unbestreitbares Recht hat, wie auf seine eigene Person und Leben.' Schopenhauer nonetheless frowned on suicide as an assertion of the will to live. See *Schopenhauer's sämmtliche Werke*, II, p. 471.

[43] *EE*, p. 322.

> Wenn man ihn [den 'Sittlichen'] fragt, ob er je daran gezweifelt habe, dass die Vermischung der Geschwister eine Blutschande sei, dass die Monogamie die Wahrheit der Ehe sei, […] so wird ein sittlicher Schauder ihn bei der Vorstellung überfallen, dass man seine Schwester auch als Weib berühren dürfe usw. Und woher dieser Schauder? Weil er an jene sittlichen Gebote *glaubt*.[44]

If, however, one takes these remarks in context, one finds, not a defence or advocacy of murder, suicide, infanticide, incest and polygamy, but rather a critique of the assumptions of religion and morality, and of the enslavement of the individual to their extraneous demands. He is, in other words, engaged in the breaking of taboos, rather than the encouragement of violence or interbreeding. His intention is to challenge all forms of heteronomy and to assert the inability of the individual to attain self-fulfilment when under the control of external moral or political authority, on the basis that: '*Alles Heilige ist ein Band, eine Fessel.*'[45] In the process, he uses the most extreme examples, of the kind already mentioned, to try to ram home his point in the most challenging and provocative way. Unfortunately (although to some extent understandably in light of Stirner's apparent endorsement of unthinkable acts), his readers have often failed to grasp his meaning, and what remains instead is the impression of satanic amorality. His colleagues among them turned out to be easier to scandalise than he had perhaps expected, and the result was reactions just as extreme as Stirner's views appeared to be.

Like so many of these commentators, Belinsky was unable to see past the blasphemies and provocations. He therefore takes the opportunity of condemning his erroneous interpretation of Stirner's version of egoism, while offering his own benevolent alternative, which is, as noted above, not dissimilar to the behaviour Stirner himself proposes for the autonomous individual operating within the union of egoists:

> Crude animal egoism […] cannot be advanced not only to an ideal, as the German author [Stirner] would have liked, but even to a simple rule of communal life. […] The

[44] Ibid., p. 55.
[45] Ibid., p. 221.

> feeling of egoism, which governs the whole living world on earth, is exactly equally the source of all the horrors that occur on earth and the source of all the good it has seen! Therefore, if it is impossible to rid oneself of that feeling, […] then it stands to reason that there is an obligation to make sense of it and to give it moral content. […] But egoism will become a moral principle only when each individual person is able to join to his own private interests and needs also the interests of persons outside himself.[46]

Stirner would have rejected the designation of egoism as a moral principle, but he nonetheless repeatedly emphasises the importance of reciprocity and shared interests between individuals: 'Und wenn Ich ihn [den Mitmenschen] gebrauchen kann, so verständige Ich wohl und einige Mich mit ihm, um durch die Übereinkunft *meine Macht* zu verstärken und durch gemeinsame Gewalt mehr zu leisten, als die einzelne bewirken könnte.'[47] Stirner rejects the idea of subordinating the interests of the individual to those of the community, but he evidently understands that a union can only function if it benefits all of its members.[48]

Even if the relationship of Stirner's ideas to those of the first generation of the Russian socialist and populist movements involves more differences than similarities, it is nonetheless clear from the above examples that the overwhelming influence of Hegelian and Young Hegelian thought on the progressive Russian intelligentsia of the time inevitably resulted in some scrutiny of Stirner's work, which subsequently provoked a discussion of the concept of egoism. Of course, none of the three intellectual figureheads of this generation, Herzen, Bakunin or Belinsky, can properly be called a proto-nihilist, let alone a nihilist in the Russian sense, but in their revolutionary opposition to the Russian state (or, in Bakunin's case, the very concept of the state) and its mechanisms of political repression, they laid the groundwork for

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[46] Quoted from memory by Annenkov in *The Extraordinary Decade*, pp. 212-213.
[47] *EE*, p. 315.
[48] Cf. Michel Onfray, *A Hedonist Manifesto: The Power to Exist*, trans. by Joseph McClellan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 135. 'Of course [Max Stirner] celebrated the absolute freedom of the individual, but he also knew how important it is for that individual not to remain alone.'

later, more radical, doctrines of Russian nihilism. Moreover, all three placed considerable emphasis on the power of negation: Belinsky, the westernising writer and critic, was called by Goncharov 'the apostle of negation';[49] 'The Reaction in Germany' by Bakunin, the collectivist anarchist, has been dubbed a 'manifesto of negation';[50] and of Herzen, the father of Russian socialism, Lampert writes:

> The emphasis on negation in Herzen's interpretation of Hegel owes a great deal to the influence of Bakunin, whose *Reaction in Germany* Herzen welcomed with enthusiasm. But the nihilistic theme pervades all Herzen's philosophical writings after his return from provincial exile. […] Philosophy […] is defined as a 'perpetual revolutionary tribunal', as 'the guillotine within man'. […] 'It abhors canonized truths' and 'turns all that is religious and political into that which is simple and human, and subject to negation'.[51]

It is this spirit of negation which the fathers of Russian populism bequeathed to the next generation of radicals and is the meaning behind the epithet that Turgenev applied to them. It is conceivable that, over time, Stirner has, by association, been implicated in this conspiracy of negativity.

Stirner's Influence on Dostoevsky and Turgenev

From a historical perspective, the best-known group of radical intellectuals in nineteenth-century Russia was the so-called Petrashevsky Circle, which was a discussion group that met on Fridays in St. Petersburg during the 1840s to discuss Western philosophy and literature. The Circle's subsequent prominence can be put down largely to the involvement of Dostoevsky, whose membership resulted in his being arrested, sentenced to death, subjected to mock execution and imprisoned in Siberia, all of which were defining events both in his

[49] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 107.
[50] Ibid., p. 130.
[51] Ibid., p. 202.

life and for his literary career. Petrashevsky, who was essentially an atheistic devotee of the utopian socialist, Charles Fourier (1772-1837), had an extensive private library of forbidden books, which included many foreign titles 'by French socialists as well as French philosophes and German Left Hegelians'.[52] As the circle was not broken up by the authorities until April 1849, four and a half years after the publication of *Der Einzige*, it is certainly possible that Stirner's book was on Petrashevsky's shelves and was thus accessible to his many visitors, who included Belinsky.[53]

It is Belinsky who is believed to have introduced Dostoevsky to the writings of Stirner. As Frank writes in his monumental work on Dostoevsky:

> [I]t was Belinsky who first acquainted Dostoevsky with the new […] arguments of Strauss, Feuerbach, and probably Stirner. And though his religious faith ultimately emerged unshaken – even strengthened – from the encounter, these doctrines did present him with an acute spiritual dilemma. Traces of this inner crisis can certainly be found in the wrestlings of Dostoevsky's own characters with the problems of faith and Christ.[54]

As for Petrashevsky himself, the Austrian journalist and politician, Ernst Viktor Zenker (1865-1946), was evidently convinced of Stirner's influence on him: 'Petraschewski selbst pries in einem satyrischen "Fremdwörterbuch", das er unter dem Pseudonym Kirilow herausgegeben hatte, als ein Verdienst des Urchristenthums die Abschaffung des Privat-Eigenthums u. s. w. Die Elementarlehre des Proudhon-Stirner'schen Anarchismus ist hier unschwer zu erkennen.'[55]

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[52] Victoria Frede, *Doubt, Atheism, and the Nineteenth-Century Russian Intelligentsia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), p. 114.

[53] Cf. Peter Scheibert, *Von Bakunin zu Lenin. Geschichte der russischen revolutionären Ideologien 1840-1895* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1956), p. 203. '[Stirner] lasen einige Jahre später die Petraschewcen.'

[54] Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 127.

[55] E. V. Zenker, *Der Anarchismus. Kritische Geschichte der anarchistischen Theorie* (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1895), p. 96.

Within the Petrashevsky Circle there were various separate sub-groups, including Nikolay Speshnev's secret society, to which Dostoevsky also belonged. Speshnev (1821-1882), whom Lampert acknowledges as '[a]part from Dostoevsky, […] perhaps the most remarkable figure among the Petrashevkists',[56] was an aristocrat and, despite that, a communist and a revolutionary. Before joining the Petrashevsky Circle, Speshnev had travelled in Europe from 1842 to 1847, during which time he was apparently influenced 'by the egoism and amoralism of Max Stirner'.[57] Frank states that Speshnev 'sided with Max Stirner's totally subjective egoism', and analyses the sparse documentary evidence for Stirner's impact on Speshnev as follows:

> The most important remarks [of Speshnev] are those that show how strongly he had come under the influence of Max Stirner. Rejecting all attempts to establish any sort of metaphysical system, Speshnev writes: […] 'Is the difference between a God-man and a Man-god really so great?' Both, he says, are abstractions, which do not concern the existing individual of flesh-and-blood.[58]

Frank goes on to speculate that Dostoevsky 'may well have been present' at Petrashevsky's in 1848 when Speshnev delivered a lecture 'on religion from a "philosophical" point of view',[59] and intimates that Stirner's ideas may thus have found their way (twenty-five years later) into the make-up of Stavrogin's character in *Demons*. Without identifying Stavrogin directly with either Speshnev or Stirner, the implication is that Stavrogin is nonetheless a construct based on their perceived amorality, decadence and atheism.[60] A minor corroboration

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[56] Lampert, *Sons against Fathers*, p. 207. Lampert may have borrowed the description, 'most remarkable figure', from Pleshcheev, who used the same words when introducing Speshnev in a letter to Dobrolyubov, after Speshnev had returned to St. Petersburg from exile in 1859. See Frank, *Dostoevsky*, p. 276.
[57] Kenneth Lantz, *The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2004), p. 409.
[58] Frank, *Dostoevsky*, p. 147.
[59] Ibid., p. 148.
[60] Ibid., p. 646.

of this theory can possibly be found in the fact that the young Dostoevsky is said to have had a copy of Stirner's book in his own library.[61]

The infiltration of Stirner's extremist philosophy into nineteenth-century Russian literature is a common charge, and Dostoevsky is the writer who is most often cited to corroborate this. The Marxist writer, Helms, drawing on Masaryk,[62] states: 'Durch Dostojevskij ist Stirner'sches Gedankengut in literarisierter Form über die Welt verbreitet worden, die Figur des Ivan Karamazov ist seither Bewußtseinsinhalt von Millionen geworden.'[63] Similarly, the Polish anti-Marxist philosopher,[64] Kołakowski, writes that 'Raskolnikov, in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, may be taken as an embodiment of the Ego as conceived by Stirner'.[65] This rare example of consensus between those normally separated by an ideological divide, demonstrates just how widespread the conviction has been that Stirner played a significant role in the intellectual discourse of Russia at this time. Carroll, for instance, writes: 'in the latter half of the nineteenth century it was in the hotbed of revolutionary thought and action, Russia, that Stirner's ideas were seized upon with the greatest enthusiasm. There they formed an important component of the egoist-nihilist-anarchist complex of doctrines.'[66]

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[61] Scheibert, *Von Bakunin zu Lenin*, p. 203. '[Stirners Buch] fand sich in der Bibliothek des jungen Dostojewskij.' Scheibert cites N. Bel'čikov in *Venok Belinskomu*, p. 279.

[62] See Masaryk, *Zur russischen Geschichts- und Religionsphilosophie*, II, p. 366. 'Nietzsche und auch Stirner üben […] beständig ihren großen Einfluß aus. […] Ich nenne F. Sologub mit seinem solipsistischen Anwandlungen und L. Šestov, der direkt nicht nur Stirner, sondern auch Nietzsche […] nachahmt. Auch hier ist Dostojevskij zu nennen, sofern der von ihm gezeichnete individualistische Anarchismus – zumal in der Figur Ivan Karamazovs – von den Anarchisten positiv gefaßt und aufgenommen wird.'

[63] Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft*, p. 347.

[64] Cf. Ralph Miliband, 'Kolakowski's Anti-Marx', *Political Studies*, 29.1 (1981), 115-122.

[65] Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, I, p. 166.

[66] Carroll, 'Introduction', in Stirner, *The Ego and his Own*, p. 28.

Laska, in keeping with his self-appointed role as Stirner's defender, begs to differ; he sees in the oft-repeated association of Stirner with Russian nihilism just another attempt to discredit him, based on completely unsubstantiated claims:

> Sogar jene russischen Autoren des 19. Jahrhunderts, die sich selbst als Nihilisten bezeichneten (etwa Pissarew, Dobroljubow, Tschernyschewski) bezogen sich keinesfalls auf Stirner. In der Sekundärliteratur findet man allerdings gelegentlich – aufgrund vordergründiger Übereinstimmung – die (nicht in einem Fall belegte) Behauptung, dass bei ihnen, wie auch bei anderen russischen Autoren (etwa Belinski, Herzen, Dostojewskij) positive Einflüsse Stirners zu erkennen seien.[67]

By implicitly questioning the veracity, for instance, of the testimony of Annenkov mentioned above, Laska would seem to be overstating his case. The same applies to the letter purportedly written by Turgenev in Berlin in 1847, and published in *Sovremennik* in the same year, which indicates that Turgenev certainly knew of Stirner and was most probably personally acquainted with him:

> In einem geistreichen Bericht von einem erneuten Besuch Berlins im Jahre 1847 sprach sich Turgenjew eindringlich über den Abschluss der 'literarischen, theoretischen, philosophischen, phantastischen Epoche des deutschen Lebens' aus. […] Der Besucher sah die Jugend sich endgültig von der Philosophie wegwenden, bei Stahl keine Hörer, Schelling vergessen, Steffens tot, nur 'den guten Werder mit drei Hörern eifrig wie je'. Bruno Bauer schien ihm verschollen – im Konzert traf er den völlig niedergedrückten Stirner.[68]

Turgenev studied philosophy and history at the University of Berlin from 1838 to 1841, at the height of Young Hegelian activity in Germany.[69] Stirner had left the university in 1834, but became, according to Mackay, a member of 'Die Freien' in 1841,[70] the same year that

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[67] Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 156. N.b., Dobrolyubov and Chernyshevsky, although they were often accused of it, never admitted to being nihilists.

[68] Scheibert, *Von Bakunin zu Lenin*, p. 88, quoting from Turgenev's letter in *Sovremennik* (March 1847) reproduced in *Russkie Propilei. Materialy po istorii russkoi mysli i literatury*, III (1916), p. 110ff. See also Leonard Schapiro, *Turgenev, His Life and Times* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 56.

[69] Strauss published *Das Leben Jesu* just before Turgenev's arrival in Berlin, in 1835, while Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* appeared before he left, in the spring of 1841.

[70] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 90.

Schelling started his lectures in Berlin, which were attended by, among many others, Bakunin and Turgenev.[71] There is certainly nothing in the chronology that rules out Turgenev's having known, or at least known of, Stirner, with all the potential implications this could have for the nature of his character, Bazarov.

Laska may have a point in his assertion that numerous claims concerning Stirner's relationship to nineteenth-century Russian thinkers are unsubstantiated, but that is not to say that no evidence exists at all, or that none of the assumptions made in this regard are based on sound reasoning. Only rarely does an account strain credulity, as with James Billington's colourful description of Stirner's influence on the controversial political writer, V. S. Pecherin (1807-1885), where he seems to be confusing Stirner's thought with elements from Hegel and Mainländer:[72]

> He had in his student days been driven to 'the Hamlet question' by Max Stirner, whose lectures at Berlin inspired him to embark on one of the many unfinished trilogies of the Russian nineteenth century. The first part of this untitled drama is a weird apotheosis of Stirner's idea that man can achieve divinity through his own uncaused act of self-assertion: suicide.[73]

As touched on above, Stirner is certainly unconventional in his attitude to suicide: he does not rule it out as a valid response to human existence, and he roundly condemns its demonisation in Christian morality. However, he is not in the least concerned with the idea of achieving divinity, either by taking one's own life, or indeed in any other way. As for him lecturing in Berlin, there is no record of that in Mackay or elsewhere, and in the unlikely event

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[71] See Terry Pinkard, 'The Social Conditions of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century (1790-1870)*, ed. by Allen W. Wood and Songsuk Susan Hahn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 46-60 (p. 57).

[72] For Mainländer on suicide, see *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, p. 620: 'schließlich ist das Himmelreich nach dem Tode, Nirwana und das absolute Nichts Eines und dasselbe.' For Hegel on Hamlet, see Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, III, in *Hegel's Werke, Vollständige Ausgabe*, X (1838), p. 566f.

[73] James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1970), pp. 356-357.

that he did, it is improbable that he would have lectured to a student just eight months his junior. Billington's confusion notwithstanding, he was an influential academic, and he thus provides a further example of how a false image of Stirner has entered, and been perpetuated in, the mainstream, through the use and reuse of inaccurate statements.[74]

Stirner and Russian Nihilism

Regarding the protagonists in the historical period of Russian nihilism, which started in the 1860s, the connections with Stirner are, if anything, even less easy to trace than in the pre-nihilist era. As already observed in Chapter 2 above, there were two main branches of Russian nihilism, whose principal ideologists were Chernyshevsky and Pisarev. Chernyshevsky has been dubbed by Hingley 'the chief inspiration of Nihilism', although he actually disowned the term as a self-appellation.[75] So central was he, however, as the editor of *Sovremennik*, to the landscape of radical debate in Russia around the time of the publication of *Fathers and Sons* in 1862, and so many were his detractors who used the term to describe him in their polemical attacks, that the label stuck; and anyway, despite his disavowal, the fact is that he contributed significantly to the evolving image of the nihilist, not least in his advocacy of communal living and his championing of an extreme version of female emancipation, which raised uxorial promiscuity to the status of a solemn family duty. Chernyshevsky's only novel, *What Is To Be Done?*, which has been described as 'the Nihilist Bible' and 'a sermon on rational egoism', was a highly successful vehicle for propagating his views:[76]

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[74] Billington was however correct concerning the influence of Max Stirner on the Russian writer and playwright, Mikhail Petrovich Artsybashev (1878-1927). See Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, p. 764, and Michael Artzibashef, 'Introduction', in *The Millionaire*, trans. by Percy Pinkerton (New York: Huebsch, 1915), pp. 5-10 (p. 9).

[75] Hingley, *Nihilists*, p. 33.

[76] Ibid., pp. 36, 48.

> [*What Is To Be Done?*] has been described with reason as the worst novel ever written, but to many Russians of the 1860s it was a sacred text. […] It did more to mould the Nihilists' beliefs and influence their actions than any other single document.[77]

Rakhmetov, who is generally considered to be the real hero of the book (even though he only has a relatively minor role), with his saintly devotion to the popular cause, acted as perhaps the most potent inspiration for the throng of disaffected and rebellious Russian youths who gravitated towards the nihilist movement.

Nonetheless, ideologically speaking, Chernyshevsky can best be described as a democratic socialist; he was a follower of Belinsky and Herzen, but Feuerbach was 'his first and enduring philosophical love'.[78] As for Stirner's influence on Chernyshevsky, the absence of any acknowledgement to that effect by Chernyshevsky himself, means that it can only be speculated upon. Chernyshevsky's principle of 'rational egoism' is conceivably relevant in this regard, as it throws up certain similarities with Stirner's concept of egoism as well as his ideas on social organisation. Chernyshevsky, like Stirner, maintained that the values governing human actions are predicated on self-interest. Thus he writes: 'On closer scrutiny we shall discover that an action or sentiment which appears to us disinterested has, none the less, its origin in the consideration of personal advantage, personal pleasure, personal welfare, i.e., in the sentiment known as egoism.'[79]

One of the main characters in Chernyshevsky's novel, Dmitry Lopukhov (who, like Turgenev's character Bazarov, is a medical student), expresses the precepts of Chernyshevsky's rational egoism in the following internal monologue:

> I hadn't been planning to make sacrifices. I haven't been foolish enough to make any so far, and I hope I never will. I did what was best for me. I'm not the sort of person

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[77] Ibid., p. 35.
[78] Lampert, *Sons against Fathers*, p. 141.
[79] Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* [Complete Works], ed. by B. Koz'min and others, 16 vols (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1939-1953), VII, pp. 291. Quoted in Lampert, *Sons against Fathers*, p. 150.

> who makes sacrifices. No one is. It's a fallacious concept. Sacrifice is all stuff and nonsense. One does what's most pleasurable.[80]

There is a parallel here with Stirner's scorn for sacrifice as a principle of human behaviour, which is a recurrent theme in *Der Einzige*: 'Der Egoismus denkt nicht daran etwas aufzuopfern, sich etwas zu vergeben.'[81] Moreover, like Chernyshevsky, Stirner questions the very credibility and authenticity of the concept of self-sacrifice: 'Und sind diese Aufopfernden etwa nicht eigennützig, nicht Egoisten? […] Egoistisch ist ihr ganzes Tun und Treiben.'[82] In Stirner we also find the same connection between human motivation and personal pleasure, as evidenced in his mature egoist, 'der mit den Dingen und Gedanken nach Herzenslust gebahrt und sein persönliches Interesse über alles setzt'.[83]

Lopukhov, like the author who created him, considers one product of enlightened self-interest in a man to be the obligation to redress the historical gender inequality by condoning, or even encouraging, his wife's adultery. Chernyshevsky explains:

> To straighten a stick which has been bent for too long in one direction, it is necessary to bend it the other way…. Woman is put below man, and, in my view, every decent man is duty bound to put his wife above himself. Such temporary disparity is essential for the sake of the equality to come.[84]

For such a position to be self-evidently compatible with egoism, one might need to delve into the realms of sexual frigidity or Freudian masochism: it is hard, at any rate, to imagine it eliciting any enthusiasm from Stirner.

Chernyshevsky's theory of rational egoism led him to a utilitarian conclusion, whereby the enlightened individual recognises that his own interests are well served by the

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[80] Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, p. 149.
[81] *EE*, p. 262.
[82] Ibid., p. 85.
[83] Ibid., p. 24.
[84] V. A. Pypina, *Lyubov' v zhizni Chernyshevskogo (Po materiyalam semeynogo arkhiva)* [*Love in the Life of Chernyshevsky (Based on Family Archives)*] (Petrograd: Put' k znaniu, 1923), p. 32f. Quoted in Lampert, *Sons against Fathers*, pp. 104-105.

maximisation of the interests of the greatest number, because this results in the best possible social environment, which is characterised by communal happiness and prosperity. The individual is therefore encouraged, for his own good, to put all his efforts into the establishment of a new system of cooperative socialism. The divergence from Stirner's understanding of egoism could hardly be greater. Thus, it is unsurprising that Chernyshevsky, despite being an intellectual name-dropper,[85] never once mentions Stirner in his writings. If he did know of Stirner, Chernyshevsky saw no reason to acknowledge him, unless his repetition in a notebook of Goethe's line, which Stirner had availed himself of, is a heavily veiled reference:

> Whoever has learned to apply this [continuous rejection of existing forms] to every manifestation of life will boldly hail the forces of chance which alarm the faint-hearted. He will echo the poet [Goethe] who said:
>
> Ich hab' mein Sach' auf nichts gestellt
> Und mir gehört die ganze Welt[86]

Once again, the question can be asked whether the apostrophe after 'Sach', as Stirner had (mis)used it, might be a clue, but, especially in the absence of any conclusive evidence that Chernyshevsky knew of Stirner, there can be no useful answer.

Chernyshevsky's adversary, Pisarev, the chief ideologue of the revolutionary journal *Russkoe Slovo*, has been called 'the most prominent of the Russian "nihilists"'.[87] Unlike Chernyshevsky, he did not reject the label nihilist,[88] which makes perfect sense when one

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[85] See Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, where the following appear in the text: Hume, Gibbon, Ranke and Thierry, pp. 75-76, Dickens, George Sand, p. 103, Gogol, pp. 154, 233, 283, Fourier and Considérant, p. 191, Comte, p. 204, Voltaire, p. 210, Beecher Stowe, p. 231, Robert Owen, p. 247, John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith, Thomas Robert Malthus, David Ricardo, Thackeray p. 283, Feuerbach, p. 292, Rousseau, p. 365, Turgenev, p. 380, and Kant, Fichte and Hegel, p. 405.

[86] Chernyshevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, X, p. 745ff. Quoted in Lampert, *Sons against Fathers*, p. 177.

[87] Lampert, *Sons against Fathers*, p. 272.

[88] Venturi considers Turgenev's use of the word 'nihilist' to be solely polemical, and that there was therefore an element of irony in Pisarev's acceptance of the label. See Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 326. 'Pisarev found a name for this tendency [the positivist and scientific reaction against Chernyshevsky's Feuerbachian

observes how, in his essay 'Bazarov', he elevates his fictional, intellectual forebear's concept of negation to a new level of exaltation:

> In a word, here is the ultimatum of our camp: what can be smashed must be smashed; whatever is able to withstand, let it stand; whatever flies into pieces is rubbish; in any case, hit right, hit left, from that no evil can nor will come.[89]

Pisarev's brief endorsement of the annihilation of the status quo expresses the essence of the meaning of Russian nihilism, in the words of the one prominent nihilist of that period who unequivocally accepted, and even welcomed, the soubriquet. It is the raising of negation to the status of a first principle that gives Russian nihilism its specific definition. As such, Slocombe seems to be missing the point when he writes:

> Russian Nihilism was social Darwinism: if an institution was strong enough to survive, then it would; if it was not, then it would fall. Such radicals were not interested in the *nihil*, but in revolution, and therefore Russian Nihilism was nihilistic only inasmuch as it relied upon certain aspects of Western philosophy that were *themselves* only tangentially nihilistic.[90]

Hingley also frames Russian nihilism within a more general definition of the term, which, to some extent, calls into question its nomenclature:

> Deriving as it does from Latin *nihil*, the name Nihilist seems to imply a belief either in nothing at all or in destruction for its own sake. In fact […] [Russian] Nihilists were not men of little or no faith. Far from it: they mostly believed passionately in something, if only in a hotch-potch involving revolution, the Russian peasant, Chernyshevsky, some kind of Socialism, the idea of progress, science, materialism and so on.[91]

It is true that Russian nihilism acquired the term from the philosophical debate in Germany which focused on the denial of God and religion, but its theorists and adherents adapted it for

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'anthropologism' and Dobrolyubov's moralism], welcoming as praise the definition of "Nihilism" which Turgenev had used as an attack in his novel *Fathers and Sons*.'

[89] Dmitry Pisarev, 'Bazarov', in *Collected Works*, ed. by V. Kirpotina, 2 vols (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo khudozh. lit-ry, 1934-1935), I, p. 66, quoted in Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, p. 143.

[90] Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, p. 15.

[91] Hingley, *Nihilists*, p. 57.

the most pressing issues in Tsarist Russia, namely political repression and social inequality. The focus thus shifted to the denial, and therefore the destruction, of the state in all its political and social manifestations, as Masaryk observed: 'Die Nihilisten sind weit davon entfernt, ihren Nihilismus metaphysisch auszudenken, ihr Nihilismus ist sozialpolitisch – Altrußland, das Rußland Nikolaus', das ist ihr Nihil.'[92] It is the vagueness of the word 'nihilism' which has allowed it, over the last two hundred and fifty years, to adopt so many guises, and, indeed, to be applied so freely to Stirner.

Venturi, in his definitive work on revolutionary thought in nineteenth-century Russia, views Russian nihilism as just another occurrence of a dynamic, but essentially enduring phenomenon. He traces the term 'nihilism' from its eighteenth-century origins and concludes that the conservative Russian journalist, Mikhail Katkov's, use of the term in 1840, in an undisguised attack on both the Young Hegelians, and Belinsky and Herzen,[93] is evidence that 'the word as used in the Hegelian Left by Bruno Bauer and Stirner was beginning to assume a philosophical and polemical significance'.[94] Apart from the fact that Bauer and Stirner are not known ever to have employed the term, and disregarding also the fact that the word was certainly used polemically well before 1840, for instance by Obereit, Jenisch and Jacobi in the eighteenth century, such a reading fundamentally underestimates the separate development of all the specific types of nihilism in general, and of Russian nihilism in particular.

Gillespie, in his attempt to force all manifestations of nihilism (before Nietzsche) into a single Promethean narrative, reaches the same conclusion as does Venturi from the evidence

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[92] Masaryk, *Zur russischen Geschichts- und Religionsphilosophie*, II, p. 96.

[93] Katkov, who, like Turgenev, was studying in Berlin at the time, wrote: 'If one looks at the universe, and has to choose one of two extreme attitudes, it is easier to become a mystic than a nihilist. We are everywhere surrounded by miracles.' M. N. Katkov, 'Sochineniia v stikhakh I proze grafini S. F. Tolstoi', in *Otechestvennyia zapiski*, 12.10 (1840), p. 17. Quoted in Martin Katz, *Mikhail N. Katkov: A Personal Biography 1818-1887* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 31.

[94] Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 326.

of Katkov's lone use of the word, and proclaims: 'The Russian debate over nihilism is thus an extension of the German controversy.'[95] This is an over-simplification; Katkov's use of the word is certainly an example of how the word was transmitted into the realm of Russian intellectual debate as a result of the encounter of Russian students and thinkers with Left-Hegelianism. However, although Katkov clearly does use it in a similar way, for instance, to Rosenkranz in his attack on Stirner,[96] more than twenty years were to elapse before the concept of Russian nihilism was to mature fully; once Turgenev had given it its definitive application in *Fathers and Sons*, it very much developed a life of its own. Venturi's failure to recognise this is illustrated by the following assertion:

> It was at once obvious that the word had been badly chosen. The 'Nihilists', more than anyone else, believed – blindly and violently – in their own ideas. Their positivist and materialist faith could be accused of fanaticism, of a youthful lack of a sense of criticism, but not of apathy.[97]

Venturi, writing here at the beginning of the 1950s, seems to be guilty of an anachronism by inferring that the choice of the epithet 'nihilist' for the Russian nihilists failed to take into account their lack of apathy, given that the explicit connection between nihilism and apathy is a more modern assumption generally associated with the existentialism of Sartre and Camus. Slocombe demonstrates a sounder appreciation of the development of Russian nihilism as a particular phenomenon with his acknowledgement of a fundamental shift in the meaning of the word 'nihilism' from a religious to a political context, coinciding with its geographical shift from Western Europe to Russia in the mid-nineteenth century. Even though he lumps Stirner together with the Russian nihilists in one sub-section under the heading of anti-authoritarian nihilism, he recognises Stirner's role as a link rather than an instigator:

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[95] Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, p. 138.
[96] See Chapter 1 above. In other words, nihilism as an extreme form of subjectivism that denies all absolute values, a definition that can be traced back to the 'Atheismusstreit' at the end of the eighteenth century.
[97] Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 326.

> [T]hey [Marx and Engels] fail to do justice to the central component of *The Ego and Its Own*: anti-authoritarianism. […] Stirner's desire to free individuals from all forms of control, whether religious or secular, links him with the movement that was developing in Russia at the time. As such, Stirner's radical perspective is one of the links between the decline in religious orthodoxy (nihilism-as-atheism) and the rise of political extremism (nihilism-as-anarchism), a movement from the atheistic origins of nihilism towards Russian Nihilism.[98]

Like all movements, Russian nihilism certainly had its antecedents, but it has to be understood nonetheless on its own terms and not confused with earlier or later manifestations of the diverse and malleable term. There is, therefore, no internal contradiction in the fact that Russian nihilists passionately believed in progress or that they did not (generally) consider human life to be meaningless. As with all types of nihilism, it is what the 'nihil' refers to that matters. Herzen offers the following interpretation:

> 'Nihilism' is the force of logic without restraint; it is science without dogma; it is unconditional allegiance to experience and a ready acceptance of all consequences, wherever they may lead…. Nihilism doesn't turn 'something' into 'nothing', but shows that 'nothing' that has been taken for 'something' is an optical illusion, and that every truth, however it contradicts our comfortable notions, is more wholesome than they are. Whether the name be appropriate or not does not matter. We are accustomed to it.[99]

If we take Russian nihilism as the self-contained historical event that it clearly was, it is easy to understand why Pisarev is its most complete representative, both because of his unique self-identification with the name, and because of his dedication to the concept of annihilation. Moreover, he held the typical nihilist beliefs in materialism, positivism and anti-establishmentarianism. Where he differed from Chernyshevsky and the other so-called nihilists was in his conviction that social transformation should be the task of an elite consisting of enlightened realists, rather than of the broad masses. This focus on the individual

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[98] Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, p. 12.

[99] A. I. Herzen, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. by Semen Iosifovich Mashinskii, 30 vols (Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1954-1965), XX, p. 349. Quoted in Lampert, *Sons against Fathers*, pp. 310-311.

led Pisarev to refine the notion of egoism, which had already featured in the ideas of his radical colleagues and predecessors, making it an even more central element of his ideology. As Lampert explains:

> The self or 'ego', unreal though it may have appeared to Pisarev as a metaphysical entity, was the ultimate measure of moral as of any other experience. And when he analysed the actual motives which made men take a certain course of action he usually discovered – *à la* Bazarov – self-interest and ambition; he did not discover a desire to promote principles and ideals, in which, in any case, he did not believe. Coquart explains Pisarev's moral solipsism as 'l'égotisme éternel de la vingtième année'. This may account for declarations such as Pisarev made to his mother: 'For me', he wrote, 'each person exists only to the extent to which he causes satisfaction in me' […]; or for saying about his mother that he 'would not hesitate to kill her if that should serve his purpose'.[100]

The correlation between Pisarev's comment on matricide and Stirner's on infanticide, both demonstrations of egoistic amorality at its most provocative, could hardly go unnoticed for long. Masaryk, in a detailed analysis of Pisarev's thought, makes repeated reference to the apparent influence of Stirner: 'Frei nach Stirner-Feuerbach negiert Pisarev alle Prinzipien, jegliches ethische Ziel, den Begriff der Pflicht und alle Ideen und Ideale überhaupt; […] Ganz wie Stirner gelangt Pisarev dazu, das Vorhandensein des Verbrechens zu negieren.'[101] Masaryk finds not only ideological but also terminological similarities between the two: 'Das ist Pisarevs psychologische Schilderung des realistischen Entnüchterungsprozesses – noch die Terminologie (Gespenster!) erinnert an Feuerbach und Stirner.'[102] Once again, there is no explicit evidence for Pisarev having known of Stirner, but Masaryk, without naming his sources, is nonetheless persuaded: 'Stirner hat er [Pisarev] auch gekannt, obwohl, glaube ich, aus zweiter Hand. […] Pisarev predigt den radikalen Individualismus, unter Individualismus

[100] Lampert, *Sons against Fathers*, p. 304.
[101] Masaryk, *Zur russischen Geschichts- und Religionsphilosophie*, II, p. 80.
[102] Ibid., p. 81.

versteht er den Kampf um die Emanzipation der Persönlichkeit.'[103] At least in his most revolutionary period, Pisarev combined an individualism like Stirner's with a concept of negation like Bakunin's or Herzen's to produce his own radical form of political nihilism.

Nechaev's Revolution versus Stirner's Insurrection

More radical still than Pisarev, though not a self-confessed nihilist, was Nechaev, communist revolutionary, advocate of 'merciless destruction',[104] assassin of Ivanov and author of 'The Revolutionary Catechism', which inspired 'Narodnaya Volya' (People's Will), the revolutionary terrorist organisation responsible for the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Nechaev has been described by Hingley variously, but consistently, as 'satanic', 'most Nihilist of Nihilists', 'a ruthless murderer, blackmailer, extortioner and confidence trickster', and 'chief ogre of the Nihilist movement'.[105] It was the excesses of what Gillespie calls Nechaev's 'terroristic religion of negation',[106] especially the cold-blooded murder of Ivanov, which captured the imagination of Dostoevsky; his horror and disgust gain full expression in his retelling of the miracle of the Gadarene swine in *Demons*, where the nihilists, and those complicit with them, are envisioned entering the swine and drowning, and thus healing the beloved motherland.[107]

Remarkably, Stirner and Nechaev are rarely associated with each other. When they are, the connection is not usually seen as being of any great depth or import, as in Cedric Robinson's casual assessment: 'Though Stirner […] failed to act out any of his asocial

[103] Ibid., p. 79.
[104] Nechaev, 'The Revolutionary Catechism', §6.
[105] Hingley, *Nihilists*, pp. 26, 57, 59.
[106] Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, p. 164.
[107] See Dostoevsky, *Demons*, p. 724.

dictums, […] Sergei Nechayev, several decades later, was the egoist incarnate.'[108] It is significant, though, that the comparison between the two is based on the amorality of their common egoism, which Robinson develops into a more sinister complicity: 'Stirner, Nechayev and […] Joseph Dejacque, anticipated, and perhaps gave some impetus to, the violence in assassinations and bombings which would characterize the anarchist movement.'[109] Robinson thus echoes Camus, who discerns in Stirner's rejection of the very notion of crime, and his championing of 'might is right', the seeds of the violent terrorism of the future:[110]

> Revolt leads […] to the justification of crime. Stirner not only attempted this justification (in this respect his direct heirs can be found in the terroristic forms of anarchy), but he was visibly exhilarated by the possibilities he was thus opening up.[111]

However, even Paterson refrains from drawing too close a parallel between Stirner and Nechaev, despite the obvious similarity of their reputations as *enfants terribles*. Instead, he argues that 'it is excessively fanciful to relate the purely metaphysical, inward-looking nihilism of Stirner to the only too fiercely active, socially revolutionary nihilism of the Nechayevs and Bakunins'.[112] The distinction is an important one, even if it ignores the social implications of Stirner's philosophy as expressed in the concept of the union of egoists. The fact is that Russian nihilism involves a primary, and at times monomaniacal, focus on the revolutionary destruction of the state for the sake of the people as a whole, while Stirner's primary focus is on the liberation of the individual from external coercion and control. That

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[108] Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Albany: State University of New York, 1980), p. 182.
[109] Ibid.
[110] For Stirner on 'might', see the section entitled 'Meine Macht', in *EE*, pp. 191-215.
[111] Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, pp. 86-87. [My translation.]
[112] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 314.

they are both therefore hostile to the state is almost coincidental, as they arrive at this conclusion from entirely different premises.

Paterson's point is that Stirner is calling for a revolution in the way we think, whereas the Russian nihilists were conspiring to bring about a political revolution leading to the overthrow of the Tsarist state. It was Hartmann who first alluded to this distinction in 1879, in his reference to Stirner and the Russian nihilists as the theoretical and practical representatives, respectively, of the belief in the senseless futility of existence:

> Im Grunde ist alles so blödsinnig, dass es auf Eins herauskommt; Leben und Sterben ist gleich sinnlos und mir darum gleichgültig. […] Aller Glaube an Sittlichkeit, an die Möglichkeit einer Besserung der Welt und des Lebens, an zweckvolles Handeln gilt mir als Illusion, womit die Menschen sich über das Elend ihrer Lage hinwegzutäuschen suchen. […] Hiermit erst ist der Standpunkt der absoluten Indifferenz gegen allen und jeden Zweck erreicht, der grauenhafteste Zustand, der sich denken lässt, denn er ist in seiner totalen Ausgebranntheit gleich fern von positivem Interesse wie negativer Verzweiflung – wie die Leere des Abgrundes aller Nichtigkeit. […] Praktisch zeigt sich dieser Standpunkt im russischen Nihilismus, formell ist er entwickelt von Max Stirner, der dazu nicht einmal des Pessimismus bedurft hat, da schon die Souveränität des Ich ihm dazu genügte.[113]

While recognising that Stirner cannot be called a pessimist, Hartmann tries, contrarily, to force both Stirner and Russian nihilism into a pessimistic world view. Neither argument holds much water: unlike Hartmann himself (along with Bahnsen and Mainländer), Stirner does not fit into the Schopenhauerian tradition, while Russian nihilism's primary issue was with the tyranny of the Tsarist state, not with the (lack of) meaning of life. Nonetheless, Hartmann does correctly identify a fundamental difference of approach between the two, even if he appears to misrepresent the nature of their affinity.

Their disparity is rooted in the fact that Stirner's focus is on *zoon logikon*, while the Russian nihilists are concerned with *zoon politikon*.[114] This is most evident in the distinction

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[113] Hartmann, *Phänomenologie des sittlichen Bewusstseins*, pp. 767-768.

[114] *Zoon logikon* and *zoon politikon* are Aristotle's terms for man as a rational and a political animal.

Stirner makes between revolution and insurrection (Empörung).[115] Speaking of the French Revolution, he writes:

> Verlief sich die Revolution in eine Reaktion, so kam dadurch nur zu Tage, was die Revolution *eigentlich* war. […] Die Revolution war nicht gegen *das Bestehende* gerichtet, sondern gegen *dieses Bestehende*, gegen einen *bestimmten* Bestand. Sie schaffte *diesen* Herrscher ab, nicht *den* Herrscher.[116]

Revolution, far from being synonymous with liberation, is, for Stirner, an obligation in the form of a fixed idea, which, in dialectical fashion, replaces one hegemony with another. Moreover, it involves for Stirner, as Camus observes, a form of belief: 'To be revolutionary, one must still believe in something where there is nothing to believe in.'[117] Instead, Stirner advocates the principle of permanent insurrection:

> Revolution und Empörung dürfen nicht für gleichbedeutend angesehen werden. […] Die Revolution zielte auf neue *Einrichtungen*, die Empörung führt dahin, Uns nicht mehr einrichten zu *lassen*, sondern Uns selbst einzurichten, und setzt auf 'Institutionen' keine glänzende Hoffnung. […] Da nun nicht der Umsturz eines Bestehenden mein Zweck ist, sondern meine Erhebung darüber, so ist meine Absicht und Tat keine politische oder soziale, sondern, als allein auf Mich und meine Eigenheit gerichtet, eine *egoistische*.[118]

Stirner advocates rebellion against all man-made myths in the interests of the emancipation of the self from heteronomous tyranny; the Russian nihilists' aim, on the other hand, was to end Tsarist repression in the interests of the emancipation of the Russian people from political tyranny. While the rebellious, emancipatory impetus may be similar, the former represents a

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[115] Steven T. Byington (1869-1957), the American individualist anarchist, in his celebrated translation of *Der Einzige*, renders 'Empörung' with 'insurrection'. Other possible translations of 'Empörung' include revolt and rebellion. Apart from the connotation of resisting authority, control or convention, the word can also express outrage and revulsion.

[116] *EE*, p. 119.

[117] Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, p. 86. [My translation.]

[118] *EE*, p. 320. For a discussion of Stirner's 'ethical anarchist' treatment of the distinction between revolution and insurrection in relation to the phenomenon of messianism in Western culture, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. by Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 30-33.

general approach, which is acted out first and foremost in the mind, while the latter is a response to a specific set of circumstances, which is acted out on the socio-political stage.[119]

There is a social element to Stirner's philosophy, as manifested in the union of egoists, but it is a corollary to his prime objective of demythologising human thought. Thus, the Russian nihilists may have borrowed certain elements of Stirner's atheism, egoism and iconoclasm, but they completely ignored his socio-political ideas. The very different plans for society proposed by Stirner and the Russian nihilists nonetheless have one thing in common, namely, an astonishing naivety. In Stirner's case it is the apparent belief that the social interaction of sovereign individuals, free from the political and judicial framework of the state, will necessarily lead to a form of equilibrium, however protean. Such a state of affairs would necessitate an excessively high level of enlightenment, especially with regard to self-interest, which would seem unattainable and utopian, at least in the context of industrial and post-industrial mass society. As Kołakowski notes, paraphrasing Marx:

> It is a pious illusion […] to expect individuals to live together without the aid of the community and its institutions. It is not in the power of the individual to decide whether his relations with others are to be personal or institutional; the division of labour means that personal relations are bound to transform themselves into class relations, and the superiority of one individual over another is expressed in the social relationship of privilege. Whatever individuals may intend, the nature and level of needs and productive forces determine the social character of their mutual relations.[120]

The Russian nihilists, for their part, had an equally utopian outlook in their belief that an equitable society would necessarily emerge following the annihilation of the old order. Isaiah

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[119] See Masaryk, *Zur russischen Geschichts- und Religionsphilosophie*, II, pp. 96-97. 'Stirner […] hat den eigentlichen Sinn seines "Einzigen" im Jahre 1848 gezeigt, als er sich an der Revolution nicht beteiligte; der russische "Einzige" ist theoretisch und praktisch Revolutionär nach der Lehre Bakunins. Das Nihil ist die sozialpolitische Destruktion, Pandestruktion.' Cf. Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 197. 'Es braucht wohl kaum ausdrücklich erwähnt zu werden, dass Stirner an den Märztagen von 1848, wie an der ganzen Bewegung nicht den geringsten äusseren Antheil genommen hat.'

[120] Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, I, p. 169.

Berlin articulates this outlook as follows:

> All these [populist] thinkers share one vast apocalyptic assumption: that once the reign of evil – autocracy, exploitation, inequality – is consumed in the fire of the revolution, there will arise naturally and spontaneously out of its ashes a natural, harmonious, just order, needing only the gentle guidance of the enlightened revolutionaries to attain to its proper perfection.[121]

History, of course, has not been kind to either point of view. Just societies have not sprung up following revolutions, and individualist anarchism has not proved to be a workable social model.

In conclusion, their many differences notwithstanding, there is sufficient evidence to confirm a limited connection between Stirner and Russian nihilism. As Masaryk states: 'Der Positivismus der Nihilisten geht […] auf Feuerbach und Stirner, zum Teil auf Hegel zurück.'[122] Despite Laska's protestations, it is clear that Stirner's ideas, most notably his concept of egoism, did play a role in the evolution of Russian nihilism, as Young Hegelianism became popular among the Russian intelligentsia from the 1840s onwards. Furthermore, Frank points out that Stirner very probably had a significant influence on Speshnev, above all with regard to the idea of moral relativism. But just because Stirner unwittingly contributed some radical elements to the development of Russian nihilism does not make him a political nihilist himself. He does not advocate either clandestine terrorism or violent revolution; annihilation of the state is far from being his primary concern; and he is not lacking in ideas concerning his vision of a new social order, however naïve, impracticable or inconsequential they may be. Despite his rebelliousness, Stirner's paramount aim is not political at all: it is to complete the

[121] Berlin, 'Introduction', in Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, p. xiii.
[122] Masaryk, *Zur russischen Geschichts- und Religionsphilosophie*, II, p. 95.

work of the Enlightenment by eradicating the hegemonic myths that enslave the individual.[123] The socio-political dimension, however unavoidable, is incidental in this endeavour.

What we are left with from the analysis of the relationship between Stirner and Russian or political nihilism are many coincidental connections, a few striking similarities, some evidence of influence, but a fundamental discrepancy in terms of aims and objectives, and no reasonable grounds for describing Stirner as a political nihilist. Nonetheless, what the current chapter's investigation does demonstrate is that there is enough of a link between Stirner and the development of political radicalism in nineteenth-century Russia to explain, at least to some extent, the assumption that Stirner shares the principal characteristics of the Russian nihilists, even if this opinion is based on inadequate knowledge or defective reasoning. This is especially the case if one takes into consideration the argument that Stirner's lasting significance is a political one, as one of the original theoreticians of individualist anarchism, an idea put forward by Mackay and enthusiastically supported by Victor Basch.[124] But the discussion of Stirner's anarchist credentials lies outside the remit of the present study; instead, we now turn to the question of Stirner's relationship to the second type of nihilism of which he is most commonly accused, namely, moral nihilism. While socio-political issues may not be central to Stirner's project, morality is at the core of his concern,[125] thus perhaps offering more scope for the aptness of moral nihilism to describe his thought.

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[123] That the completion of the Enlightenment project with regard to dogma was Stirner's aim is evident from the preface to the second part of *Der Einzige*, where he writes: 'Das *Jenseits außer Uns* ist […] weggefegt, und das große Unternehmen der Aufklärer vollbracht; allein *das Jenseits in Uns* ist ein neuer Himmel geworden und ruft Uns zu erneutem Himmelsstürmen auf.' *EE*, p. 162.

[124] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 21. 'Das Vermächtnis Stirner's aber ruht in den treuen und starken Händen der individualistischen Anarchisten.' Also, Basch, *L'Individualisme anarchiste, Max Stirn*er, p. 281. '[L]'individualisme anarchiste dont Stirner a été le théoricien le plus intransigeant.' 'Anarchist individualism, of which Stirner was the most uncompromising theorist.' [My translation.]

[125] Morality is the first of the abstractions that Stirner questions the validity of in the preface to *Der Einzige*. See *EE*, p. 13. 'Was soll nicht alles Meine Sache sein! Vor allem die gute Sache, dann die Sache Gottes, die Sache der Menschheit.'

Chapter Six

The Absence of Absolutes: Stirner and Moral Nihilism

The Definition of Moral Nihilism

Attention now turns to the second form of nihilism relevant to this study, namely to moral or ethical nihilism and its relationship to Stirner's thought. Moral nihilism is defined, simply, as the denial of absolute values and is the type of nihilism which, since the first publication of *Der Einzige*, has been most frequently used by Stirner's critics to discredit him. Laska goes so far as to view it as the fulcrum of Stirner defamation and demonisation:

> Wer immer Stirner als den extremsten, radikalsten, konsequentesten Verfechter von Atheismus, Anarchismus, Immoralismus, Subjektivismus, Individualismus, Egoismus, Solipsismus o.ä. bezeichnete, der meinte, auch wenn er dies nicht ausdrücklich sagte, jenen vagen Begriff eines ethischen Nihilismus, zu dem stets auch, wie schon bei Jacobi, Hegel und Rosenkranz, wesentlich die Schreckensvision des Zerstörerischen und Apokalyptischen, des Bösen, Dämonischen, Satanischen gehört.[1]

The justification for the accusation of moral nihilism is to be sought, naturally enough, in Stirner's numerous pronouncements on 'Sittlichkeit', 'Moral' and 'gut und böse', but before proceeding with their evaluation, it is necessary, once again, to address the familiar issue of terminological ambiguity. Unlike with Russian nihilism, there are no historical figures who readily confess to being moral nihilists, which makes it all the more difficult to build up an accurate picture of the term's full range of connotations. The first task, therefore, is to attempt to arrive at a clear understanding of the meaning of moral nihilism.

There is both the implicit and explicit imputation of moral nihilism in much of the censure of Stirner described in Chapter 4 above. It is implicit in Bernstein's distinguishing of

[1] Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 106.

Stirner's nihilism from Russian nihilism[2] and in Keben's concept of the 'nihilistic hangover' that Stirner's philosophy allegedly engenders.[3] A more recent reference to Stirner's moral decadence (though without mention of the word 'nihilism'), can be found in Helms's Marxist critique of Stirner as a petit-bourgeois proto-fascist.[4] The explicit association of Stirner with ethical nihilism first appeared in Karl Rosenkranz's pronouncement shortly after the publication of *Der Einzige*: 'Theoretisch kann ein solcher Nihilismus alles ethischen Pathos sich zu nichts mehr fortentwickeln.'[5] Similar declarations have appeared ever since, some of which have already been mentioned in Chapter 4, like Laas's description of Stirner's thought as '[d]iese nihilistisch-promethische Abwendung von aller Sittlichkeit';[6] Ströbel's phrase, 'der moralische Nihilismus Stirners';[7] and Schröder's remark about Stirner's 'unverblümten moralischen Nihilismus'.[8]

What these critics mean by moral nihilism, however, often seems to be little more than the common polemical connotation of the word 'nihilism' applied to Stirner's perceived immorality, as demonstrated by his apparent willingness to spurn the Ten Commandments and to condone acts that are proscribed by conventional morality. As described in Chapter 5, these acts include incest, polygamy, murder, suicide and infanticide. Stirner appears to have no use or sympathy for conventional morality and he rides roughshod over common moral sensibilities. But, as shall become apparent, moral nihilism is not synonymous with an attitude that is antagonistic towards traditional moral practice, or with an open-minded

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[2] Bernstein, 'Die Soziale Doktrin des Anarchismus', p. 428.
[3] Keben, 'John Henry Mackay und sein Philosoph', p. 174.
[4] See Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft*, p. 500. 'Die Lehre vom Einzigen rechtfertigt den Kapitalismus und das administrativ geordnete Chaos, sie rechtfertigt Unwahrheit und Unrecht, Haben und Nichthaben, ihr Ideal ist die unsoziale und anonyme Existenz, sie rechtfertigt sogar den Mord.'
[5] Rosenkranz, *Aus einem Tagebuch*, p. 133.
[6] Laas, *Idealismus und Positivismus*, II, p. 19.
[7] Ströbel, 'Stirners "Einziger und sein Eigentum"', p. 86.
[8] Schröder, *Moralischer Nihilismus*, p. 56.

consequentialism so permissive as to contemplate the advantages of even the most unspeakable acts under certain exceptional circumstances. In order properly to answer the question of the interrelation between moral nihilism and Stirner's ideas, we must drill down into the details of its definition.

The relevant entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* offers the following explanation: 'Moral Nihilism = Nothing is morally wrong.'[9] The author, Sinnott-Armstrong, goes on to clarify: 'Moral nihilism here is not about what is semantically or metaphysically possible. It is just a substantive, negative, existential claim that there does not exist anything that is morally wrong.'[10] The claim, he continues, is justified by such arguments as the ubiquity of moral disagreement and the capacity to explain moral belief without recourse to moral fact. Carr, however, in her account of the different forms of nihilism, offers a slightly different interpretation:

> *Ethical or moral nihilism* is the denial of the reality of moral or ethical values, expressed in the claim 'There is no good' or 'All ethical claims are equally valid.' An ethical or moral nihilist does not deny that people use moral or ethical terms; the claim is rather that these terms refer to nothing more than the bias or taste of the assertor.[11]

Carr seems to be confusing two related, and indeed overlapping, meta-ethical theories, moral nihilism and moral relativism. Her first example, namely of there being no such thing as 'good', could be an expression of either – moral nihilism's denial of moral facts, or moral relativism's rejection of objective moral values. But the second example, which acknowledges the validity of moral values, is incompatible with moral nihilism's assertion of the general falseness of all ethical claims, while being fully consistent with moral relativism's acceptance of subjective value judgments.

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[9] Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 'Moral Skepticism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/skepticism-moral/> [accessed 24 August 2021].
[10] Ibid.
[11] Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, p. 18.

Nonetheless, the inaccuracy of Carr's description is, to some extent, understandable, as both theories have much in common. There is no fundamental disagreement between moral nihilism and moral relativism on an ontological level; both are characterised by a thoroughgoing scepticism towards statements of moral fact and both reject completely the idea of moral objectivism. Moreover, moral nihilism relies on many of the assertions of moral relativism in order to arrive at its position. What differentiates them is that nihilism argues that nothing can be considered right or wrong, while relativism contends that the values of right and wrong are only applicable in relation to a particular frame of reference. Moral nihilism is therefore the more radical of the two. As Dreier explains: 'Nihilism is the view that there are no moral facts. It says that nothing is right or wrong, or morally good or bad. Nihilists believe that moral language is infected by a massive false presupposition, much as atheists understand religious talk.'[12]

A. J. Ayer (1910-1989) was among the first philosophers openly to discuss the correspondence between the meaninglessness of theological and moral concepts, identifying them as similarly fallacious 'pseudo-concepts'. Building on Wittgenstein's two dicta, 'es [kann] keine Sätze der Ethik geben' and 'Gott offenbart sich nicht in der Welt',[13] Ayer presents the arguments for so-called theological and moral knowledge to be viewed as declarations of emotional attitudes, rather than as statements of fact:

> The fact that people have religious experiences is interesting from the psychological point of view, but it does not in any way imply that there is such a thing as religious knowledge, any more than our having moral experiences implies that there is such a thing as moral knowledge. […] It follows that those philosophers who fill their books

[12] James Dreier, 'Moral Relativism and Moral Nihilism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. by David Copp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 240-262 (p. 240).
[13] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1933), pp. 182, 186.

> with assertions that they intuitively 'know' this or that moral or religious 'truth' are merely providing material for the psychoanalyst.[14]

Ayer's so-called emotivism, whereby moral judgments express feelings rather than facts, is a form of moral scepticism which includes elements of moral relativism, in that such feelings are relative to the locus of the individual, and moral nihilism, in that it considers ethical statements to be unverifiable and without validity. Gilbert Harman has characterised the intermediate nature of emotivism as 'moderate nihilism'.[15]

The distinction between moral nihilism and moral relativism is an important one for our purposes, precisely because the two positions are so frequently confused. In order to make a proper evaluation of Stirner's ethics, one must identify which of the two theories best describes his point of view. Stirner is undoubtedly a moral sceptic; the question is whether his moral scepticism culminates in nihilism. For a comprehensive description of moral nihilism with which to compare Stirner's ethical outlook, there is, as Dreier states, one standard and definitive source in John Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977).[16] Mackie (1917-1981) sets out his stall early in the preface of his book, where he writes:

> But perhaps the truest teachers of moral philosophy are the outlaws and thieves who, as Locke says, keep faith and rules of justice with one another, but practice these as rules of convenience without which they cannot hold together, with no pretence of receiving them as innate laws of nature.[17]

Although he doesn't use the term in *Ethics*, Mackie is commonly acknowledged as the first, and most persuasive, academic philosopher to propose a comprehensive theory of moral

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[14] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 158.
[15] Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 27-40.
[16] See Dreier, 'Moral Relativism and Moral Nihilism', p. 245.
[17] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 10-11.

nihilism.[18] The first sentence of the first chapter states bluntly: 'There are no objective values.'[19] Mackie does not simply endorse moral scepticism by passing doubt on the claims of moral statements but goes significantly beyond this to put the case for the denial of the possibility of moral facts.

Mackie bases his argument on an 'error theory' of ethics, which states that moral claims presuppose objective moral values that simply do not exist:

> The claim to objectivity, however ingrained in our language and thought, is not self-validating. It can and should be questioned. But the denial of objective values will have to be put forward not as the result of an analytic approach, but as an 'error theory', a theory that although most people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false.[20]

He supports his error theory with two arguments. The first is 'the argument from relativity', which states that the diversity of moral codes, depending on both their social location and historical period, makes it more likely that values 'reflect ways of life' than that they 'express perceptions […] of objective values'.[21] The second is 'the argument from queerness', to which he gives greater importance, and which he subdivides into metaphysical and epistemological parts. He sums up his two-pronged assault as follows:

> If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral

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[18] See Dreier, 'Moral Relativism and Moral Nihilism', p. 245 and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 'Moral Skepticism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[19] Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 15. Mackie is clearly not a believer. His summing up of the arguments for atheism is a gem of concise elucidation: 'I can only state my convictions that there is no cogent positive argument for the existence of a God, that the problem of evil constitutes an insuperable difficulty for any orthodox theism, that the advance of scientific knowledge renders a theistic view of the sort sketched above superfluous as an explanatory hypothesis and utterly implausible, and that no specific revelation – such as would be needed to make the proposed view morally significant – has reliable credentials.' Ibid., p. 232.

[20] Ibid., p. 35.

[21] Ibid., p. 37.

> perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.[22]

For Mackie, historical examples of moral values are too varied and too contrasting to be considered emanations of objective moral fact, while objective values, and the unique ability to perceive them, are both unverifiable and deeply implausible. What is credible, however, according to Mackie, is that there has been a gradual, false objectification of social attitudes, as a consequence of the important role morals play in the regulation of interpersonal relations. This tendency is reinforced, he says, by a deep-seated need for authority, combined with the gradual externalisation of human desires; as evolution by natural selection has favoured social cohesion, so the erroneous notion of absolute, objective and universal moral values has prospered.[23]

Having challenged the idea of objective moral values, Mackie goes on to discuss the application of moral scepticism to the principles of ethical conduct. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to enter into a detailed analysis of his suggestions for a practical moral system, there are two points he raises which are of relevance to our inquiry into Stirner's ethical position. The first of these is that he broadly endorses egoism as a valid description of normal human behaviour:

> We can […] say firmly that for any individual a good life will be made up largely of the effective pursuit of activities that he finds worthwhile, either intrinsically, or because they are directly beneficial to others about whom he cares […]. Egoism and self-referential altruism will together characterize, to a large extent, both his actions and his motives. The happiness with which I am, inevitably, most concerned is my own, and next that of those who are in some way closely related to me.[24]

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[22] Ibid., p. 38.
[23] Ibid., pp. 42-43.
[24] Ibid., p. 170.

This assessment is clearly consistent with Stirner's identification of egoism as the immutable essence of human conduct, whether or not it is consciously recognised as such, as discussed in Chapter 4 above.[25] Furthermore, Mackie's emphasis on the importance of human relationships for the realisation of human happiness is remarkably close to Stirner's conviction of the intimate connection between egoism and love, i.e. that loving is motivated by the happiness it induces in the lover.[26]

The second point relevant to Stirner's attitude to morality is that, although Mackie emphasises that the 'right to life [is] only a claim-right' and therefore 'cannot be absolute', he nonetheless rejects the death penalty specifically, and killing generally, but concedes that there are circumstances under which it is reasonable to permit suicide, euthanasia and abortion.[27] While his views on practical morality are far from conservative, Mackie is clearly not prepared to adopt so radical and permissive a position as Stirner's with regard to murder. The reason for this is that Mackie essentially follows Geoffrey Warnock in thinking that '[t]he function of morality is primarily to counteract the limitation of men's sympathies',[28] and, while he may reject morality's claims to being objective or absolute, Mackie nonetheless accepts the importance of social cohesion. Murder, therefore, cannot, in his opinion, be condoned under any circumstances, as it would defeat the social purpose of morality. This standpoint represents an implicit rejection of the excesses of Machiavelli, whose political philosophy has become synonymous with murderous duplicity.

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[25] As Korfmacher paraphrases it: 'Der Egoismus gehöre zur Natur des Menschen und sei deshalb unaufhebbar. Das Aufhören des Egoismus sei nur ein frommer Wunsch; keine Gesellschaft könne ihn bewältigen oder überwinden.' Wolfgang Korfmacher, *Stirner denken: Max Stirner und der Einzige* (Vienna and Leipzig: Karolinger, 2001), p. 36.

[26] See *EE*, p. 294. Cf. *KGW*, VI.ii. 103, *JGB-175*. 'Man liebt zuletzt seine Begierde, und nicht das Begehrte.'

[27] Mackie, *Ethics*, pp. 195-199.

[28] Ibid., p. 108.

Moral Nihilists: Machiavelli and Nietzsche?

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) is one of the few historical figures who have been considered archetypes of moral nihilism; his perceived infamy has resulted in, and been enhanced by, his being likened to the Devil and dubbed 'the murderous Machiavel' by Shakespeare.[29] Even Macaulay, who saw in Machiavelli a great mind, nonetheless accuses him of 'obliquity of moral principle',[30] whilst doubting 'whether any name in literary history be so generally odious'.[31] Had Macaulay known about Stirner (Macaulay's essay on Machiavelli was published in 1827), he might have revised this opinion; Stirner is much less well known than Machiavelli, but his standing among those who do know him is hardly any better.[32] A brief comparison of their views of morality may therefore help to shed some light on the question of whether Stirner can reasonably be described as a moral nihilist.

The reason for Machiavelli's notoriety is contained, superficially at least, in his defence of the principle that the end justifies the means, to the extent where he advocates parsimony, cruelty, wickedness and dishonesty, as well as war, devastation, violence and murder.[33] As he declares in his *Discourses*: 'For although the act condemn the doer, the end may justify him; and when, as in the case of Romulus, the end is good, it will always excuse

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[29] See George Bull, 'Introduction', in Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. by George Bull, rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 9-26 (pp. 9-10), and William Shakespeare, III. *Henry VI*, III. 2, in *The Works of Shakespeare*, III, p. 799. 'And set the murtherous Machevill to Schoole.'

[30] Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Readings from Macaulay. Italy* (Boston: Chautauqua Press, 1885), p. 60. Cf. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London and Sydney: Unwin, 1988), p. 491. 'Much of the conventional obloquy that attaches to his [Machiavelli's] name is due to the indignation of hypocrites who hate the frank avowal of evil-doing.'

[31] Macaulay, *Readings from Macaulay*, p. 57.

[32] See James J. Martin, 'Introduction', in Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority*, trans. by Steven T. Byington, ed. by James J. Martin (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), pp. vii-xvi (p. xvi). '*The Ego and His Own* […] deserves to be read in the same spirit and in the same way one reads *The Prince*.'

[33] See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 92f. parsimony, 95f. cruelty, 92 wickedness, 99f. dishonesty, 87f. war, 47f. devastation, 66 violence and 36 murder.

the means.'[34] His praise for the founder of Rome includes an appeal for his absolution for the killing of Remus, thus explicitly condoning fratricide.[35] The parallels with Stirner's attitude towards murder, suicide and infanticide are, superficially at least, conspicuous.

The chief reason for Machiavelli's cavalier attitude towards conventional morality is that his principal concern is politics rather than ethics; his aim is not to prescribe moral conduct but to describe the attributes and actions required of a political ruler to enable the formation and perpetuation of a strong, stable state.[36] He creates what he calls an 'original set of rules' to govern behaviour because 'the gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done learns the way to self-destruction rather than self-preservation'.[37] However, far from prescribing moral precepts for the attainment of salvation in the hereafter, Machiavelli proposes practical guidelines to help achieve political success in the here and now.[38] This is not dissimilar to Stirner, whose focus, however, is on the welfare of the individual rather than that of the state.

To a large extent in Machiavelli's work, morality in its prevailing, traditional form is not challenged in itself, but rather its status as an eternal, absolute and all-pervading truth is impugned. Machiavelli accepts that an act of cruelty, for instance, is reprehensible, but is convinced that any moral stain is expunged if the result of that act is good for the strength and stability of the state. Morality, in other words, is portrayed as subject to man and not vice-

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[34] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, trans. by Ninian Hill Thomson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1883), p. 42.

[35] Ibid., p. 45. See also Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 50-52.

[36] Cf. *KGW*, VIII.iii. 437, *NF-1888*, 24[1]. 'Thukydides und, vielleicht, der principe Machiavellis, sind mir selber am meisten verwandt, durch den unbedingten Willen, sich nichts vorzumachen und die Vernunft in der Realität zu sehn, – nicht in der "Vernunft", noch weniger in der "Moral".'

[37] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 90, 91.

[38] See ibid., p. 90. 'Since my intention is to say something that will prove of practical use to the inquirer, I have thought it proper to present things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined.' Russell notes Machiavelli's 'intellectual honesty about political dishonesty'. Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, p. 491.

versa. This may, or may not, be seen as a form of moral relativism,[39] but, however scandalous such a position may have appeared in sixteenth-century Italy, it essentially leaves conventional morality intact, even if its application is subject to human volition. Stirner shows no such deference towards morality, nor does he, like Machiavelli, identify Christianity as 'our religion'.[40] Stirner's outlook with regard to morality is clearly more extreme than Machiavelli's, and, while Stirner's status in this respect remains to be fully examined in the course of this chapter, it is clear that Machiavelli cannot actually, in any meaningful way, be considered a moral nihilist. He does not, as a nihilist would, state that moral judgments are necessarily false in themselves (e.g. that murder is neither right nor wrong), but only that there are circumstances under which they are not applicable. Contrary to the common understanding of Machiavellianism, one finds in Machiavelli's thought only a selective indifference to morality, not a conscious antimoral impulse of the kind that characterises Stirner's thought.

A more accurate reflection of moral nihilism can be found in Nietzsche's thought, despite his ultimate championing of the anti-nihilist cause. Harman's definition of moral nihilism as 'the doctrine that there are no moral facts, no moral truths, and no moral knowledge',[41] is encapsulated in a passage from *Götzen-Dämmerung*, which is typical of Nietzsche's reflections on morality:

> Man kennt meine Forderung an den Philosophen, sich j e n s e i t s von Gut und Böse zu stellen. […] Diese Forderung folgt aus einer Einsicht, die von mir zum ersten Male formulirt worden ist: d a s s e s g a r k e i n e m o r a l i s c h e n T h a t s a c h e n g i e b t. Das moralische Urtheil hat Das mit dem religiösen gemein, dass es an Realitäten glaubt, die keine sind. Moral ist nur eine Ausdeutung gewisser *Phänomene*, bestimmter geredet, eine M i s s deutung.[42]

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[39] See Robert A. Kocis, *Machiavelli Redeemed: Retrieving His Humanist Perspectives on Equality, Power and Glory* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1998), pp. 111-112.
[40] See e.g. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, p. 201.
[41] Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, p. 11.
[42] *KGW*, VII.iii. 92, *GD-Verbesserer-1*. N.b. the linking of moral and religious misapprehensions, as in Ayer (see above).

Nietzsche's description of the unbridgeable gap between morality and reality contrasts with the logical positivist view, expressed by Ayer, that 'since the expression of a value judgment is not a proposition, the question of truth or falsehood does not here arise'.[43] For Nietzsche, morality, rather than being unverifiable, is necessarily false: 'Die Bestie in uns will belogen werden; Moral ist Nothlüge, damit wir von ihr nicht zerrissen werden. Ohne die Irrthümer, welche in den Annahmen der Moral liegen, wäre der Mensch Thier geblieben.'[44] As such, Nietzsche's position must be considered much closer to the more radical moral nihilism of Mackie's error theory. Although Stirner does not provide such a carbon copy of Harman's definition of moral nihilism in his writings, he is, as will now be demonstrated, no less dismissive of morality.

Stirner and Morality

Harman distinguishes between various different types of moral nihilism, dividing them between extreme and moderate forms, and describing examples of each as follows:

> An extreme version of nihilism holds that morality is simply an illusion: nothing is ever right or wrong, just or unjust, good or bad. […] Such extreme nihilism is hard to accept. It implies that there are no moral constraints – that everything is permitted. As Dostoevsky observes, it implies that there is nothing wrong with murdering your father. […] [A] more moderate nihilism holds that the purpose of moral judgments is not to describe the world but to express our moral feelings. […] Moderate nihilism is easier to accept than extreme nihilism. It allows us to keep morality and continue to make moral judgments. It does not imply that there is nothing wrong with murdering your father.[45]

It is somewhere between these two distinct positions – extreme and moderate nihilism – that we must seek to place Stirner's ethical standpoint, if he is to be rightly adjudged a moral

[43] Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 29.
[44] *KGW*, IV.ii. 62, *MA-40*.
[45] Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, pp. 11-12.

nihilist. Of course, the question may arise as to whether Stirner's detractors, such as Rosenkranz, Helms or Paterson, have this relatively modern definition (or range of definitions) in mind when accusing him of moral nihilism, especially as it originates from a specialist discussion within the discipline of ethical philosophy. However, the denial of absolute, objective moral values lies at the bottom of all the different shades of meaning of moral nihilism, and this is the issue being addressed in relation to Stirner's thought.

Although Paterson, the critic who has most consistently accused Stirner of nihilism, does not specifically describe Stirner's nihilism as moral nihilism, he does include morality as an element within its framework. He states that 'it is precisely "absolute values" which excite The Unique One's most implacable hostility'.[46] This antipathy towards morality, Paterson suggests, is uncompromising. Its aim is to remove, not to improve, morality: 'although Stirner, like Nietzsche, intends to accomplish a 'transvaluation of all values', unlike Nietzsche he has no intention of replacing Christian and humanist values by a new set of moral values.'[47] Paterson bases his assessment on Stirner's rejection of all externally imposed obligations, which necessarily includes the constraints and imperatives of morality. He dismisses the view that Stirner creates a moral value system of his own, an opinion expressed by the pragmatist philosopher, Sidney Hook, who writes: 'Despite his avowals of complete ethical antinomianism, Stirner does seek to formulate his moral code. It turns out to be a variant of Hobbes' doctrine.'[48] Instead, Paterson argues that Stirner's aim is to 'expose all moral imperatives as essentially verbal figments', concluding that: 'The Unique One […] is not an

[46] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 315.
[47] Ibid., p. 157.
[48] Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), p. 170.

immoralist, but an amoralist. His text is not "Evil, be thou my good", but "Let me be beyond good and evil".'[49]

Leaving aside the apparent contradiction in citing Nietzsche as a moralist (of sorts), whilst applying a Nietzschean phrase to Stirner as an illustration of amoralism, the issue here revolves around how one defines the difference between moral and non-moral values. It goes without saying that Stirner unavoidably expresses choices, preferences and values, unavoidably because it is inherent in human thought to do so. However rudimentary his social theory may be, Stirner nonetheless presents a picture of human co-existence that rests on the intrinsic values of ownness, self-determination and the sovereignty of the individual. It is equally true though that he rejects conventional morality, which he considers to be extrinsic to the individual self. He expresses the dichotomy between internal and external evaluation as follows: 'Die Eigenheit hat […] keinen fremden Maßstab, wie sie denn überhaupt keine *Idee* ist, gleich der Freiheit, Sittlichkeit, Menschlichkeit u. dgl.: sie ist nur eine Beschreibung des – *Eigners*.'[50] For Stirner, ownness has a descriptive function, placing it in opposition to the normative principles of prescribed dogma. As each individual is unique, there is a further opposition between the relative values of each individual and the absolute values of any given external cause. Thus, he writes: 'Egoistisch ist es, keiner Sache einen eigenen oder "absoluten" Wert beizulegen, sondern ihren Wert in Mir zu suchen.'[51]

The dispute between Paterson and Hook is thus essentially a matter of semantics. Hook's position is based on a standard definition of ethics, e.g.: 'The field of ethics (or moral philosophy) involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and

[49] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 264.
[50] *EE*, p. 178.
[51] Ibid., p. 176.

wrong behavior.'[52] For Hook, Stirner is doing just this, even though the values he upholds are both relative and subjective. Paterson, on the other hand, from his theistic point of view, is unable to equate Stirner's values with what he understands as morality:

> Stirner's whole argument is surely that moral obligations of *any* kind are no more than hollow verbal devices for dividing a man from his own best interests. […] If […] Stirner deliberately cites those moral obligations which have been widely held to be among the most sacred and binding – piety and truthfulness, for example – this is not because he is adumbrating a specific new moral code in which blasphemy and lying are to be obligatory but because he is concerned to reaffirm that *nothing, not even* those primordial 'obligations', can induce the self-possessed egoist to take any step that is not in the fullest accord with his own distinct interests.[53]

The disagreement between this assessment and Hook's rests on the question of when a system of values can be considered a moral code, and when not. The fact that Stirner proposes a theory of autonomous human behaviour suffices for Hook, whereas Paterson is prevented from concurring by his much narrower understanding of the definition of morality.

The answer to this question is important for our discussion, because if Stirner, as Hook proposes, does devise a moral code, then it can hardly be claimed that he fulfils the primary condition of moral nihilism, in its broadest sense, of describing all moral statements as false. But if, on the other hand, we accept the general thrust of Paterson's view that Stirner's aim was to annihilate morality and replace it with the unprincipled behaviour of sinful egoism, then this rejection of morality could very well be equated with moral nihilism. Stirner certainly does reject traditional morality entirely; unlike Machiavelli, he does not leave Christian moral values largely intact. In fact, in *Der Einzige*, morality is treated throughout as an external myth. As Carroll writes: 'Stirner views 'good' and 'evil' as artificial indices taken up by individuals

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[52] James Fieser, 'Ethics', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://www.iep.utm.edu/ethics/> [accessed 24 August 2021].
[53] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, pp. 263-264.

to save them making the difficult choices of life; they neatly divide the activities of man into the positive and the negative.'[54] Stirner's term for such fictions is 'fixe Ideen':

> Mensch, es spukt in Deinem Kopfe. […] Du hast eine fixe Idee! […] Was nennt man denn eine 'fixe Idee'? Eine Idee, die den Menschen sich unterworfen hat. […] Ist nicht alles dumme Geschwätz, […] das Geplapper von Narren, die an der fixen Idee der Sittlichkeit, Gesetzlichkeit, Christlichkeit usw. leiden, und nur frei herumzugehen scheinen, weil das Narrenhaus, worin sie wandeln, einen so weiten Traum einnimmt?[55]

The association of morality (and other causes extraneous to the individual ego) with obsession and possessedness is a recurrent theme in Stirner's writing. Virtue is called 'der Irrwahn eines Tollen';[56] moral faith is 'so fanatisch als der religiöse!'.[57] This pathological dimension was to reappear in Nietzsche, who wrote: 'Moral als Folge, als Symptom, als Maske, als Tartüfferie, als Krankheit, als Missverständniss'.[58] For Nietzsche, morality as a form of sickness, consumed by its own principle of truth, is at the root of nihilism.[59] But Stirner's perspective is slightly different: his concern is not for the nature of morality itself, but for the autonomy of the individual, which, he believes, depends, among other things, on liberation from moral constraints. Stirner's objection to morality is not that it has become decadent, but that it is, by definition as a code of conduct, an imposition. The process of moral inculcation, he contends, starts in childhood:

> Wer hätte es niemals […] gemerkt, dass Unsere ganze Erziehung darauf ausgeht, *Gefühle* in Uns zu erzeugen, […] statt die Erzeugung derselben Uns zu überlassen. […] Hören Wir den Namen Gottes, so sollen Wir Gottesfurcht empfinden, […] hören Wir den der Moral, so sollen Wir etwas Unverletzliches zu hören meinen, hören Wir

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[54] Carroll, *Break-Out from the Crystal Palace*, p. 28.
[55] *EE*, p. 53.
[56] Ibid., p. 54
[57] Ibid., p. 56. N.b. the linking of moral and religious misapprehensions, as in Nietzsche and Ayer (see above).
[58] *KGW*, VI.ii. 265, *GM-Vorrede-6*.
[59] See ibid., VIII.i. 215, *NF-1886*, 5[71]. 'Aber unter den Kräften, die die Moral großzog, war die W a h r h a f t i g k e i t : d i e s e wendet sich endlich gegen die Moral, entdeckt ihre T e l e o l o g i e , ihre i n t e r e s s i r t e Betrachtung – und jetzt wirkt die E i n s i c h t in diese lange eingefleischte Verlogenheit, die man verzweifelt, von sich abzuthun, gerade als stimulans. Zum Nihilismus.' See also ibid., VIII.ii. 157, *NF-1887*, 10[58]. 'Die Moral als Ursache des Pessimismus | der Pessimismus als Vorform des Nihilism.'

> von dem und den Bösen, so sollen Wir schaudern usw. Auf diese *Gefühle* ist's abgesehen, und wer z. B. die Taten der 'Bösen' mit Wohlgefallen vernähme, der müsste durch die Zuchtrute 'gezüchtigt und erzogen' werden.[60]

In an essay entitled 'Das unwahre Prinzip unserer Erziehung oder Humanismus und Realismus', which appeared in the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842, Stirner had expressed his fundamental objections to an education system that fills children's brains with preconceived concepts and does not allow individual students to develop their own sovereign identities.[61] The germ of Stirner's rebellious anti-authoritarianism can be found in this short work:

> Die Wahrheit selbst besteht in nichts anderem als in dem Offenbaren seiner selbst, […] die Befreiung von allem Fremden, die äusserste Abstraktion oder Entledigung von aller Autorität, die wiedergewonnene Naivität. Solche durchaus wahre Menschen liefert die Schule nicht; wenn sie dennoch da sind, so sind sie es trotz der Schule.[62]

It is from this earnestly expounded pedagogical theory in support of independent thinking and against educational indoctrination that Stirner, the schoolmaster, came to develop his idea of the rejection of externally imposed principles. At this early stage, though, the emphasis is on freedom of thought versus the aridity of mental servitude: 'Die universelle Bildung der Schule sei Bildung zur Freiheit, nicht zur Unterwürfigkeit: Freisein, das ist das wahre Leben.'[63] Stirner identifies the purpose of the educator as the empowerment of each pupil to develop his personal potential: 'Ist nun die Idee und der Trieb der neuen Zeit die Willensfreiheit, so muss der Pädagogik als Anfang und Ziel die Ausbildung der freien Persönlichkeit

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[60] *EE*, p. 75. See also *EE*, pp. 90-91. 'Der moralische Einfluss nimmt da seinen Anfang, wo die *Demütigung* beginnt, ja er ist nichts anderes, als die Demütigung selbst, die Brechung und Beugung des Mutes zur *Demut* herab. […] Die Kinder müssen bei Zeiten zur Frömmigkeit, Gottseligkeit und Ehrbarkeit *angehalten* werden; ein Mensch von guter Erziehung ist einer, dem "gute Grundsätze" *beigebracht* und *eingeprägt*, eingetrichtert, eingebläut und eingepredigt worden sind.'

[61] Max Stirner, 'Das unwahre Prinzip unserer Erziehung oder Humanismus und Realismus', originally published in *Rheinische Zeitung*, 100, 102, 104, 109, 10-19 April 1842.

[62] Stirner, 'Das unwahre Prinzip unserer Erziehung oder Humanismus und Realismus', in *Max Stirner's Kleinere Schriften*, p. 21.

[63] Ibid., pp. 27-28.

vorschweben.'[64] This message is underlined with a rhetorical flourish in the conclusion that, at least mildly, anticipates both the shocking ideas and Christian imagery of *Der Einzige* :

> Soll daher am Schluss mit kurzen Worten ausgedrückt werden, nach welchem Ziel unsere Zeit zu steuern hat, so liesse sich der notwendige Untergang der willenlosen Wissenschaft und der Aufgang des selbstbewussten Willens, welcher sich im Sonnenglanz der freien Person vollendet, etwa folgendermassen fassen: das Wissen muss sterben, um als Wille wieder aufzuerstehen und als freie Person sich täglich neu zu schaffen.[65]

Soon afterwards, Stirner started work on his magnum opus, in which the tone changes from a plea for liberal (and liberating) education to an uncompromising attack on all heteronomous abstractions. In *Der Einzige*, the constructive criticism of educational methods is transformed into the condemnation of the evils of indoctrination; the focus shifts from the method of pedagogy to its content, with morality becoming one of the chief targets: 'Wem die Grundsätze der Moral gehörig eingeprägt wurden, der wird von moralischen Gedanken niemals wieder frei.'[66] Morality is now presented as a false, extraneous imposition that must be combatted and eradicated. Its negative connotation permeates *Der Einzige*; there is no explicit mention of replacing it with a new morality more fit for the purposes of the egoist.

Nietzsche famously, and (even if he hadn't read Stirner) immodestly, gave himself the accolade of the first immoralist.[67] Carroll thinks that Stirner has a stronger claim to the title,[68] but one should not forget that Nietzsche's proud claim appears in his last original book, *Ecce Homo*, where his writing was at its most hyperbolic. Nietzsche identifies two negations

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[64] Ibid., p. 28.
[65] Ibid., p. 30.
[66] *EE*, p. 345.
[67] See *KGW*, VI.iii. 364, *EH-Schicksal-2*. 'Ich bin der erste Immoralist: damit bin ich der Vernichter par excellence.' See also ibid., VI.iii. 364, *EH-Schicksal-6*. 'Aber ich habe auch noch in einem anderen Sinne das Wort Immoralist zum Abzeichen, zum Ehrenzeichen für mich gewählt; ich bin stolz darauf, dies Wort zu haben, das mich gegen die ganze Menschheit abhebt. Niemand noch hat die christliche Moral als unter sich gefühlt: dazu gehörte eine Höhe, ein Fernblick, eine bisher ganz unerhörte psychologische Tiefe und Abgründlichkeit.'
[68] See Carroll, 'Introduction', in Stirner, *The Ego and his Own*, p. 66.

implicit in his meaning of the term 'immoralist', the negation of the benevolent moralist, and the negation of decadent Christian morality.[69] Stirner is also scathing of various contemporary examples of the moral character which he encounters, perhaps most notably, and certainly shockingly for all but his most radical readers, in his condemnation of chastity. Having related the story of a young girl who has sacrificed her concupiscence on the altar of self-renunciation, he exclaims: 'O Lais, o Ninon, wie tatet Ihr wohl, diese bleiche Tugend zu verschmähen. Eine freie Grisette gegen tausend in der Tugend grau gewordene Jungfern!'.[70]

Stirner's description of the girl's struggle in an almost touching, unquestionably erotic, but ultimately tongue-in-cheek vignette, reveals three important elements of his thought: his unconventional sexual liberality, his opposition to established morality, and his antagonism to any form of external obligation that restricts and constrains the individual's ability or desire to follow his or her egoistic aims. The resultant rejection of morality is absolute: 'Unkeuschheit kann nie zu einer sittlichen Tat werden.'[71] He cannot, in other words, envisage a morality that would uphold the principle of unchastity which he is advocating. Stirner's criticism of morality largely concerns the Christian-humanist variety, and so he also preempts Nietzsche's second immoralist negation (of decadent Christian morality), although, as already mentioned, Stirner's issue with conventional morality is not its decadence, but the fact that it is inimical to the principles of egoism. Nonetheless, as Carroll observes, Stirner's and Nietzsche's versions of immoralism have many features in common: 'Stirner and Nietzsche demonstrate the relativity of all moral judgments: there is no absolute *good*, there is no Kantian categorical imperative. They seek to defuse morality: to reduce obligations to preferences.'[72]

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[69] See *KGW*, VI.iii. 365-366, *EH-Schicksal-4*.
[70] *EE*, p. 72.
[71] Ibid., p. 66.
[72] Carroll, *Break-Out from the Crystal Palace*, p. 38.

Just as Paterson does with Stirner, Carroll points out that what Nietzsche really means with the term 'immoralist' is anti-moralist.[73] Even if in his later works there is a shift to the 'revaluation of values',[74] Nietzsche's initial objective was to transcend morality, to propel philosophy into a new dimension 'beyond good and evil'.[75] He talks of morality as something that needs to be overcome, which, as we have seen, is very similar to Stirner's position, even if Stirner presents his case more prosaically:[76]

> Fort denn mit jeder Sache, die nicht ganz und gar Meine Sache ist! Ihr meint, Meine Sache müsse wenigstens die 'gute Sache' sein? Was gut, was böse! Ich bin ja selber Meine Sache, und Ich bin weder gut noch böse. Beides hat für Mich keinen Sinn.[77]

The concept of good and evil is meaningless, Stirner suggests, because it is antiquated, obsolescent and externally imposed: he complains, for instance, that moralists (who condemn egoism) are drifting 'zwischen dem altfränkischem Gegensatz von Gut und Böse'.[78] Morality has no more value for Stirner than ancient superstition. Unsurprisingly, therefore, he is scathingly critical of Proudhon for asserting that 'la loi morale' is eternal and absolute, and for asking who today would dare to attack morality.[79] Stirner accuses him, along with the modern ideologues of humanism, of uncritically accepting, and indeed adopting, Christian moral values: 'Die Sittlichen schöpften das beste Fett von der Religion ab, genossen es selbst

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[73] See ibid., p. 28. Cf. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 264.

[74] The phrase 'Umwerthung aller Werthe' first appears in Nietzsche's writing in a fragment of 1884. See *KGW*, VII.ii. 216, *NF-1884*, 26[259]. 'P h i l o s o p h i e d e r e w i g e n W i e d e r k u n f t . | Ein Versuch der *Umwerthung* aller Werthe.'

[75] See e.g. ibid., VII.i. 239, *NF-1882*, 6[2]. See also, ibid., IV.ii. 8-9, *MA-I-Vorrede-1*.

[76] See ibid., VI.ii. 47, *JGB-32*. 'Kurz, wir glauben, […] dass Moral, im bisherigen Sinne, also Absichten-Moral ein Vorurtheil gewesen ist, eine Voreiligkeit, eine Vorläufigkeit vielleicht, ein Ding etwa vom Range der Astrologie und Alchymie, aber jedenfalls Etwas, das überwunden werden muss. Die *Überwindung* der Moral, in einem gewissen Verstande sogar die Selbstüberwindung der Moral: mag das der Name für jene lange geheime Arbeit sein, welche den feinsten und redlichsten, auch den boshaftesten Gewissen von heute, als lebendigen Probirsteinen der Seele, vorbehalten blieb.'

[77] *EE*, p. 15.

[78] Ibid., p. 363.

[79] Ibid., p. 57.

und haben nun ihre liebe Not, die daraus entstandene Drüsenkrankheit loszuwerden.'[80] He abhors what he sees as the pusillanimous failure to question morality's authenticity: 'Sittlichkeit ist […] eine heilige Vorstellung: sittlich müsse man sein, und müsse nur […] die rechte Art es zu sein, aufsuchen. An die Sittlichkeit selbst wagt man sich nicht mit der Frage, ob sie nicht selbst ein Truggebilde sei.'[81]

As one would expect of a moral sceptic, Stirner applies to morality the argument from relativity. He quotes the dictum of the Pyrrhonist philosopher, Timon of Phlius: 'An sich sei weder etwas gut noch sei es schlecht, sondern der Mensch denke sich's nur so oder so.'[82] He illustrates this axiom by observing: 'Ein Nero ist nur in den Augen der "Guten" ein "böser" Mensch.'[83] Furthermore, Stirner points to the moral ambiguity posed by the assassination of August Friedrich Ferdinand von Kotzebue (1761-1819), a middle-aged, political conservative and dramatist, by Karl-Ludwig Sand (1795-1820), a young, militant student, and member of a liberal Burschenschaft. Sand's action, Stirner claimed, could be judged moral from the point of view of its noble self-sacrifice and its good intention to serve the welfare of the people, but immoral from the point of view that murder is always morally reprehensible: 'Ihr könntet dem Prinzip der Sittlichkeit nach, welches befiehlt, dem Guten zu dienen, doch nur fragen, ob der Mord nie und nimmer eine Verwirklichung des Guten sein könne, und müsstet denjenigen Mord anerkennen, der das Gute realisierte.'[84] Predictably enough, Stirner comes down on the side of Sand, but what the story demonstrates is firstly that good and evil are relative to the

[80] Ibid., p. 57.
[81] Ibid., p. 83.
[82] Ibid., p. 34. Cf. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. II. 2, in *The Works of Shakespeare*, V, p. 220: '[T]here is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.'
[83] *EE*, p. 63.
[84] Ibid., p. 61.

standpoint of the observer, and secondly, as Machiavelli had argued, that the means and ends of a particular act may conceivably be moral antitheses.

Stirner accepts, perhaps simplistically, that the end is generally taken to justify the means, in other words that ethical consequentialism is the dominant principle of conventional morality:

> Der Sittliche will das Gute, das Rechte, und wenn er die Mittel ergreift, welche zu diesem Ziele führen, […] so sind diese Mittel nicht seine Mittel, sondern die des Guten, Rechten usw. selbst. Unsittlich sind diese Mittel niemals, weil der gute Zweck selbst sich durch sie vermittelt: der Zweck heiligt die Mittel.[85]

He poses the question of whether Emilia Galotti's death (stabbed by her father at her own request, in order to protect her virtue) can be considered moral, pointing out not only the potential contradiction between the values of chastity and the sanctity of human life, but also the moral cowardice implicit in her failure to take personal responsibility (by committing suicide) for the deed she deemed unavoidable. Finally, though, he dismisses the bourgeois moral dilemma thus presented with a yawn of disdain: 'Solche Widersprüche bilden in dem sittlichen Trauerspiele den tragischen Konflikt überhaupt, und man muss sittlich denken und fühlen, um daran Interesse nehmen zu können.'[86] Stirner finds the problems of bourgeois morality odd to the point of nausea, anticipating, to some extent, Mackie's argument from queerness. He writes elsewhere about 'die maßlose Heuchelei von Ergebenheit, Liebe usw., an deren Widerwärtigkeit man sich täglich den gründlichsten Ekel […] holen kann'.[87]

[85] Ibid., p. 327.
[86] Ibid., p. 328.
[87] Ibid., p. 62.

Egoism and Moral Nihilism

The hypocrisy of morality is a recurrent theme in *Der Einzige*. Stirner identifies morality's falsehood in its denial of the true motivation of man's actions, or, in other words, in the denial of egoism. He seems to envisage a version of Hegelian historical teleology that leads from the darkness of moral prejudice to the promised land of enlightened egoism. The time he lives in is, in his view, an age of transition, where man is vacillating between two extremes: 'Nicht mehr kräftig genug, um zweifellos und ungeschwächt der *Sittlichkeit* zu dienen, noch nicht rücksichtslos genug, um ganz dem Egoismus zu leben'.[88] For Stirner, morality and egoism are entirely antithetical; there is no room for morality in the world view of the true egoist, just as the true moralist can only feel enmity towards the egoist. The relationship between the two is mutually exclusive: 'Der Sittliche ist notwendig darin borniert, dass er keinen andern Feind kennt als den "Unsittlichen". "Wer nicht sittlich ist der ist unsittlich!", mithin verworfen, verächtlich usw. Darum kann der Sittliche niemals den Egoisten verstehen.'[89] The reverse is equally true; one should understand, Stirner says, 'dass man *unsittlich* handeln müsse, um eigen zu handeln'.[90]

The picture thus presented of Stirner's ethical outlook is one that is best described as anti-moralistic. As Kast observes: 'Stirners Eigner bricht […] mit allen überlieferten Normen, und der Psychoanalytiker und Philosoph Ludwig Binswanger nennt Stirner deshalb einen "Bekämpfer aller ethischen Traditionen",[91] ich würde lieber sagen Stirner ist ein Vernichter jeder konventionellen Ethik.'[92] It is nonetheless prudent to ask what exactly Stirner means

[88] Ibid., p. 63.
[89] Ibid., p. 65.
[90] Ibid., p. 242.
[91] Binswanger, *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins*, p. 458.
[92] Bernd Kast, 'Rechtfertigt Stirner Mord, Selbstmord, Inzest und Prostitution? Überlegungen zu provozierenden Aspekten von Stirners Ethik', *Der Einzige, Jahrbuch der Max Stirner Gesellschaft. Freiheit und Ethik bei Max Stirner*, 6 (2013), 28-45 (p. 32).

when he refers to ethics; is it the concept of morality itself in all its manifestations that he is criticising, or just a conventional type of morality? After a lengthy diatribe against 'Sittlichkeit', culminating in the discussion of the Galotti question, Stirner informs us: 'Mehr oder weniger trifft jedoch dies alles nur die "bürgerliche Sittlichkeit."'[93] Elsewhere he exposes the origin and essence of the prevailing moral customs in the mercantile practices of the bourgeoisie: 'Das Bürgertum bekennt sich zu einer Moral, welche aufs Engste mit seinem Wesen zusammenhängt. Ihre erste Forderung geht darauf hin, dass man ein solides Geschäft, ein ehrliches Gewerbe betreibe, einen moralischen Wandel führe.'[94]

However, Stirner does not entirely ignore other forms of morality. He imagines, for instance, a prototypical version of morality, which garners no more approbation from him than the bourgeois variety: 'In ihrer ersten und unverständlichsten Form gibt sich die Sittlichkeit als *Gewohnheit*. Nach seines Landes Sitte und Gewohnheit handeln – heißt da sittlich sein.'[95] This differentiated approach suggests that Stirner admits of a multiplicity of moralities, which would leave open the possibility of his position being one of moral relativism, rather than moral nihilism. Such a view also seems to be supported by Stirner's apparently relativistic discussion of the avoidance of censorship, where he asks:

> Quittierte einer sein sittliches Urteil und errichtete z. B. eine geheime Presse, so müsste man ihn unsittlich nennen; […] aber wird ein solcher Anspruch darauf machen, in den Augen der 'Sittlichen' einen Wert zu haben? Vielleicht! – Wenn er sich nämlich einbildete, einer 'höheren Sittlichkeit' zu dienen.[96]

[93] *EE*, p. 66.
[94] Ibid., p. 121.
[95] Ibid., p. 78.
[96] Ibid., p. 62. The issue of censorship was clearly of great topical interest to Stirner, as he and his fellow Young Hegelians were under constant threat of it.

Even so, the lawbreaker's belief in a higher morality remains an 'Einbildung', something imagined, a form of delusion. It would appear therefore that, at bottom, Stirner considers morality a chameleon concept with many guises and all of them false.

Hook, however, is not alone in seeing Stirner as the architect of a new moral code. Messer makes a similar assertion, albeit combined with its opposite: 'Stirner hat lange vor Nietzsche den Kampf gegen die Moral siegreich geführt. […] Stirner ist […] der große Antimoralist und Moralist.'[97] Whether or not this contradiction is tenable in itself, it is difficult to make the case that Stirner is a moralist. While he inevitably expresses values and preferences, as well as outlining principles of behaviour within the union of egoists, it is stretching semantic boundaries to describe this as the creation of a system of morals. Messer seems to be a victim of his own enthusiasm; inspired by his veneration for Stirner he declares him a moralist, rejects the suitability of the epithet 'nihilist', and even suggests there would be room for religion in the Stirnerian world:

> Seine Philosophie ist nicht das Ende der Philosophie, seine Lehre des Egoismus nicht das Ende der Ethik, ja nicht einmal das Ende der Religion, sie ist nur das Ende der heiligen Philosophie, der heiligen Ethik, der heiligen Religion und sie setzt an die Stelle dieser Schemen die lebendige, eigene, individuelle Philosophie – meine Ethik, meine Religion.[98]

We are confronted here once again with the question of when a value becomes a moral value. Leopold has this to say on the subject:

> [A]lthough egoism is opposed to, rather than a form of, morality, it does not follow that the egoist is immoral – Stirner rejects the idea of an exclusive opposition between morality and immorality as 'antediluvian'. […] Stirner's rejection of morality is grounded not, as is often suggested, in a rejection of values as such, but in the affirmation of what might be called *non-moral goods*, that is, he allows a realm of actions and desires, which, although not moral (because they involve no obligations to others), are still to be assessed positively. Stirner's conception of morality is in this

[97] Messer, *Max Stirner*, p. 50.
[98] Ibid., p. 53.

> sense a narrow one, and his rejection of its claims is in no way coextensive with a rejection of the validity of all evaluative judgment.[99]

While Leopold makes the valid point that Stirner's concept of egoism rests on a framework of values, the suggestion that the egoist is not immoral is less tenable. It is not the opposition of morality and immorality that Stirner rejects, but rather the concept of good and evil, which, of course, is the building block of morality.[100] This, therefore, is no argument against Stirner's egoist being (regarded as) immoral. Furthermore, if egoism is diametrically opposed to morality, as Leopold acknowledges, then Stirner's egoism must be immoral from the point of view of a moralist, as Stirner indeed states (see page 219 above). And if Stirner nonetheless employs values in his ideas, albeit non-moral ones, as Leopold also recognises, this has no bearing on his immorality in the eyes of a moralist. In fact, complex thought is hardly possible without evaluating, in which case, according to Leopold's criteria, all men are necessarily moralists, or at least are not immoralists, which would seem to amount to something very similar. However blurred the boundary between moral and non-moral values may be, it should remain clear that the espousal of non-moral values does not, in itself, preclude immorality.

Conclusive confirmation of Stirner's immorality is to be found precisely in the incompatibility of morality and egoism. If morality is defined as a system of moral conduct proposed by and for a society,[101] or, as Leopold says, as the placing of obligations on others, then how can it apply to Stirner, the champion of the egoism of the unique individual, for whom it is anathema to impose any form of system on anyone, and for whom the values of

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[99] Leopold, 'Introduction', in Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. xxiv.

[100] Leopold is referring to Stirner's phrase 'zwischen dem altfränkischen Gegensatz von Gut und Böse', which is translated in the English version as 'in the antediluvian opposition of good and evil'. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 317.

[101] See Bernard Gert and Joshua Gert, 'The Definition of Morality', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/morality-definition/> [accessed 24 August 2021].

each egoist are sacrosanct and cannot therefore be compromised by being conjoined with others to form a code of conduct? Thus, Stirner writes:

> Die Sittlichkeit verträgt sich nicht mit dem Egoismus, weil sie nicht *Mich*, sondern nur den Menschen an Mir gelten lässt. Ist aber der Staat eine *Gesellschaft der Menschen*, nicht ein Verein von Ichen, deren jedes nur sich im Auge hat, so kann er ohne Sittlichkeit nicht bestehen.[102]

Morality, for Stirner, is a tool of the state, a concept which is clearly incompatible with what one might call Stirner's ego-system, the union of egoists, which is supposed to be the natural manifestation of the association of autonomous, enlightened individuals seeking their advantage in relationships with other members of the species, rather than an externally enforced template for the ethics of social behaviour.[103] The fact that this form of association assumes an organic balance would arise in a union devoid of rules of behaviour need not concern us here. What is important is that morality is one of the targets of Stirner's war on heteronomy, even if he usually means it in the relatively limited sense of its prevailing nineteenth-century European manifestation. He makes no attempt to reinvent morality in an egoistic form, because this would defeat his purpose of emancipating each individual in order for it to be able to choose for itself, which is one of Stirner's most fundamental principles of enlightened human existence: 'Ob Ich Recht habe oder nicht, darüber gibt es keinen andern Richter, als Mich selbst.'[104]

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[102] *EE*, p. 185.

[103] This is arguably the reason why Stirner's account of his vision of social organisation is so lacking in practical detail. It is based on the naïve assumption of spontaneous social harmony, which, he feels, needs no further explanation than the passing comment, in his response to Hess's criticism, that examples of egoistic union are to be found in the relationships between lovers, friends and children at play. See *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 164-165. One is reminded of Stern's comments on Nietzsche's 'innocence of politics': 'One's criticism is not that he fails to provide what he never attempted – a systematic sociology – but that the view of society and of the individual entailed by his reflections on social morality issue in an almost absolute individualism which does not provide an account of the way things are in the world.' *A Study of Nietzsche*, pp. 105, 132.

[104] Ibid., p. 193.

Crosby offers yet another point of view that lies somewhere between those of Leopold, Paterson, Messer and Hook. For Crosby, Stirner is one of the prime examples of a moral nihilist by virtue of his doctrine of egoism, which, he claims, is itself a form of morality:

> The third form of moral nihilism [along with amoralism and moral subjectivism], *egoism*, differs from amoralism mainly in that it purports to be a moral position in its own right, not a denial of all moral positions. One is morally obligated to realize or to fulfil *oneself* at whatever price to others.[105]

Egoism, Crosby contends, is nihilistic because it 'rejects what is commonly regarded as the moral point of view',[106] namely 'to look at the world from the perspective of *anyone*, not just of oneself'.[107] According to this analysis, egoism is a deviant form of morality that is simultaneously immoral and nihilistic. This is a strangely paradoxical formulation, which completes the set of opinions concerning Stirner's relationship to moral nihilism. Stirner is thus immoral and nihilistic (Paterson), moral and non-nihilistic (Hook), not necessarily immoral and non-nihilistic (Leopold), both moral and immoral as well as non-nihilistic (Messer) and both moral and immoral as well as nihilistic (Crosby).

An arguably more coherent summary of Stirner's ethical position is provided by Kast, who writes: 'Das Handeln des Eigners kennt keinen ethischen Imperativ, der außerhalb seiner selbst läge.'[108] As his writing on education clearly shows, one of Stirner's main goals is to encourage independent thinking, a theme he returns to in *Der Einzige*: 'Ein Mensch ist zu nichts "berufen" und hat keine "Aufgabe'', keine "Bestimmung."'[109] He seeks to release the individual from the is-ought problem of Hume's law by eradicating the 'ought', thereby removing the dilemma: 'Der Zauberkreis der Christlichkeit wäre gebrochen, wenn die

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[105] Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd*, p. 14.
[106] Ibid., p. 14.
[107] Ibid., p. 15.
[108] Kast, 'Rechtfertigt Stirner Mord, Selbstmord, Inzest und Prostitution?', p. 29.
[109] *EE*, p. 330.

Spannung zwischen Existenz und Beruf, d. h. zwischen Mir, wie Ich bin, und Mir, wie Ich sein soll, aufhörte.'[110] As Stulpe observes, such declarations of ethical independence have lead supporters of individual anarchism, like Ruest and Lachmann at the beginning of the twentieth century, to suggest that Stirner was a moral reformer rather than a moral nihilist:

> Stirner [gilt] als Begründer nicht eines ethischen Nihilismus und prinzipiellen Antimoralismus, sondern einer höheren, kulturell wertvollen individualistischen Moral, die dem Einzelnen nicht als 'Du sollst' von außen aufgezwungen wird, sondern auf der […] eigenen Wertsetzung selbstverantwortlicher und emanzipierter Individuen beruht.[111]

Yet, however much one admires Stirner's philosophy, it makes little sense to suggest that he replaces the discarded concept of morality with a new version of morality. Ruest's and Lachmann's argument can, perhaps, be best viewed as an ill-conceived attempt to contradict the more jaundiced accusations of his detractors.

As a sociological analysis of the history of Stirner interpretation, Stulpe's book also presents the counterargument that Stirner's concept of anarchistic co-existence, devoid of prescriptive controls on the individual, is bound to culminate in moral nihilism:

> Effektiv läuft dies auf einen moralisch-ethischen Nihilismus hinaus, der normativ alles zuläßt, was Individuen unter Berufung auf ihre jeweilige Individualität wollen bzw. tun: und zwar auch dann – das ist die normative Paradoxie dieser Position – , wenn andere Individuen unter Berufung auf ihre jeweilige Individualität das nicht wollen.[112]

While such a viewpoint correctly exposes the impracticality of Stirner's social theory, it arguably misuses the term 'moral nihilism'; social chaos would be a more accurate description of what one might reasonably expect to ensue. One can envisage the practical result of its implementation being as dystopian as the concept itself is utopian.

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[110] Ibid., p. 369.
[111] Stulpe, *Gesichter des Einzigen*, p. 508.
[112] Ibid., p. 658.

Stirner and the Label of Moral Nihilist

The main conclusion of the analysis conducted in this chapter is that Stirner's philosophy does fulfil the requirements of moral nihilism, even the extreme version identified by Harman. Stirner presents morality as an illusion, dismisses the concept of good and evil and implies there is nothing wrong with murder under certain circumstances. He is uninterested in the notion of justice and accords right and wrong significance only in regard to each individual's self-interested preferences. He rejects moral facts, moral truths, and moral knowledge, and he explicitly states that morality, along with religion, should be discarded.

The deep connection between atheism and moral nihilism, which runs like a thread from the polemical origins of the word 'nihilism' in the eighteenth century, through Nietzsche's 'Gott ist todt!', to the thoroughgoing scepticism of Ayer and Mackie, is manifestly evident in Stirner's writings. There would even be sufficient reason to consider Stirner a theological nihilist, were it not for its definition being associated with the godly nothingness in the mysticism of certain medieval theologians;[113] or, more compellingly, though more obscurely, an alethiological nihilist (a denier of truth), so damning are his pronouncements on truth and truthfulness. According to Stirner, truth: is 'nur ein – Gedanke', 'ein – Gespenst', 'wertlos', 'eitel und nichtig'; 'ist tot', 'existiert nur in – deinem Kopf'.[114] He praises 'Mut zur Lüge',[115] and, ultimately, he denies truth's very existence: 'Für Mich gibt es keine Wahrheit, denn über Mich geht nichts!'.[116] For Stirner, the iconoclastic demythologiser, religion, truth

[113] See Eugene Thacker, *Starry Speculative Corpse* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2015), pp. 21-30. Thacker lists Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart and Angela of Foligno as theological nihilists.
[114] *EE*, pp. 356, 357, 358, 358, 358, 357.
[115] Ibid., p. 306.
[116] Ibid., p. 358. For the relationship between moral, theological and alethiological nihilism in Nietzsche, see Simon May, *Nietzsche's Ethics and his War on 'Morality'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 157-158. 'In sum: the 'faith in truth' that originates with Plato is destined to bring about a progressively deepening condition of nihilism – beginning with a belief in The Nothing ('God', the 'Forms', etc.), proceeding to the 'death of God', but not yet of the 'highest' values formerly justified by him, subsequently cultivating a new conception

and morality are all human constructs, or fabrications, imposed upon the individual, and all are equally deserving of annihilation.

Stirner's position with regard to morality differs from that of Mackie, who does not go so far as to condone murder, under any circumstances, and Machiavelli, who does, but still leaves room for conventional morality. Mackie rejects murder despite his moral nihilism, while Machiavelli only justifies murder within the context of political pragmatism, but not in itself. As far as breaking with conventional morality is concerned, Stirner can be considered more extreme than either Mackie or Machiavelli. He makes no bones about following in the realist tradition of Machiavelli and Hobbes: indeed, he gives a nod to them both by repeating their best-known dicta, 'der Zweck heiligt die Mittel';[117] and 'Krieg aller gegen alle'.[118] One can perhaps also detect a hint of admiration for Thrasymachus when Stirner writes, quoting a German proverb: 'Die Gewalt ist eine schöne Sache, und zu vielen Dingen nütze, denn "man kommt mit einer Handvoll Gewalt weiter, als mit einem Sack voll Recht."'[119] But Carroll makes an important distinction between Stirner and these forebears:

> Stirner follows the realist theory, that of Machiavelli and Hobbes, in extracting one principle from politics – might is right. However, instead of completing his social picture with a dour pessimistic view of man as a violent warmonger by nature, he shares with Rousseau a passionate optimism for the creative potentiality of life.[120]

Carroll thus points to the paradox that, although Stirner's disdain for morality is compatible with moral nihilism, to regard him as a moral nihilist runs the risk of fundamentally misunderstanding his underlying positive philosophical message. It is this that Leopold, along

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of man's littleness, and then undermining the highest values of traditional morality including, finally, unconditioned truthfulness itself.'

[117] *EE*, p. 327.

[118] Ibid., pp. 262, 264.

[119] Ibid., p. 174. For Thrasymachus on power and justice, see Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 72-73. It is noteworthy that Stirner's greatest classical hero seems to have been Alcibiades, who has gone down in history as a prominent politician and general known for his flexible morals and broken allegiances.

[120] Carroll, *Break-Out from the Crystal Palace*, p. 49.

with those others who have denied Stirner's moral nihilism, are really driving at. Stirner's concern is for human emancipation at the most basic level, namely the level of the individual, and not for the nature of moral values. As Feiten acknowledges, ethics plays no role in the rationale of Stirner's central message: 'Zwar könnte Stirners Kritik der fixen Ideen als Barrieren des Selbst- und Weltgenusses als Grundlage einer eudaimonistischen Ethik fungieren, bei Stirner ist der Egoismus aber keine ethische Forderung, sondern wird nur als logische Konsequenz einer aufklärerischen Religionskritik aufgezeigt.'[121] Morality, therefore, is a purely secondary or contingent issue; as Kast indicates: 'Für Stirner […] ist […] Sittlichkeit nur eine fixe Idee.'[122] Stirner does not start out to be a moral nihilist, as Pisarev, for instance, does to be a political nihilist. Moral nihilism is not fundamental to Stirner's philosophy, it is instead an incidental consequence of the liberation from authority which he advocates.

The essential aim of Stirner's philosophy is to sweep away once and for all the fixed ideas of dogma in order to release the individual from all external constraints. The process of jettisoning all extraneous causes inevitably appears negative in its destructiveness, especially to those who hold those causes dear, but Stirner himself views the result as an affirmative act of emancipation, as well as an opportunity for man finally to come to terms with his reality:

> Jahrtausende der Kultur haben Euch verdunkelt, was Ihr seid, haben Euch glauben gemacht, Ihr seiet keine Egoisten, sondern zu Idealisten ('guten Menschen') *berufen*. Schüttelt das ab! […] Erkennt Euch nur wieder, […] und lasst eure heuchlerischen Bestrebungen fahren, eure törichte Sucht, etwas anderes zu sein, als Ihr seid. Heuchlerisch nenne Ich jene, weil Ihr doch alle diese Jahrtausende Egoisten geblieben seid, aber schlafende, sich selbst betrügende, verrückte Egoisten, […] denn *lohnsüchtig* ist der Mensch, und 'umsonst' tut er nichts. Aber jenes 'das Gute um des

[121] Elmo Feiten, 'Ethik in der Stirner-Rezeption Saul Newmans', *Der Einzige, Jahrbuch der Max Stirner Gesellschaft. Freiheit und Ethik bei Max Stirner*, 6 (2013), 53-61 (p. 59).
[122] Kast, 'Rechtfertigt Stirner Mord, Selbstmord, Inzest und Prostitution?', p. 41.

> Guten willen tun' ohne Aussicht auf Belohnung? Als ob nicht auch hier in der Befriedigung, die es gewähren soll, der Lohn enthalten wäre.[123]

Like Machiavelli, Stirner is intent on dealing with 'things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined';[124] his approach is therefore descriptive rather than normative. What needs to be changed, he argues, is not our beliefs, but our consciousness: 'der Mangel an *Bewusstsein* […] trägt allein die Schuld.'[125]

Stirner's vision, therefore, is of enlightened consciousness bringing about the end of abstraction and mythologisation. However, he seems seriously to underestimate the power of myth; he imagines that the awareness alone of the fictitious nature of an institution or belief would be enough to make it disappear. Extrapolating from the recurring theme of state censorship, he writes:

> Mein *Eigentum* ist die Presse von dem Augenblicke an, wo Mir nichts mehr über Mich geht: denn von diesem Moment an hört Staat, Kirche, Volk, Gesellschaft u. dgl. auf, weil sie nur der Missachtung, welche Ich vor Mir habe, ihre Existenz verdanken, und mit dem Verschwinden dieser Geringschätzung selbst erlöschen. […] Oder könnt Ihr Euch einen Staat denken, dessen Einwohner allesamt sich nichts aus ihm machen? der wäre so gewiss ein Traum […] als das 'einige Deutschland'.[126]

Even if it is clear that the relevant myth's disappearance would depend on unanimity of disbelief, the idea is nonetheless remarkably naïve in its failure to grasp the general dynamics of both socio-political practice and human psychology. It ignores the fact that sacred myths exist for a reason, that they are fundamental to the way human society functions. As Harari explains: 'Any large-scale human cooperation – whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe – is rooted in common myths that exist only in people's

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[123] *EE*, p. 172.
[124] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 90.
[125] *EE*, p. 263.
[126] Ibid., p. 287. Stirner, like Nietzsche, was opposed to German nationalism.

collective imagination.'[127] Myth is an essential element of human bonding and social cohesion: it enables power structures to be formed, complex societies to develop, empires to be built and, ultimately, human civilisation to flourish. According to Harari, it is the single most important factor in *Homo sapiens's* domination, transformation and, in all probability, destruction, of the Earth. Myth makes the weak strong, pain bearable, distress tolerable, suffering worthwhile, hardship desirable, the absurd meaningful, chaos intelligible and death even glorious.[128] Moreover, the power of myth to achieve all this depends on it being believed, often to the point of fanaticism; basing one's philosophy, therefore, on the abandonment of all sacred myths is a perilous – and perhaps unrealisable – enterprise.[129]

Nevertheless, Stirner's central, life-affirming message remains, contained in his concept of egoism and the liberation of the individual which it entails. It is this that has led his supporters, like Sveistrup, to place his philosophy in direct opposition to nihilism: 'Es ist das Leben selber, das sich im Einzigen gegen den Nihilismus des Ideals zur Wehr setzt.'[130] Leopold, too, is moved to write:

> Stirnerian egoism is perhaps best thought of, not in terms of the pursuit of self-interest, but rather as a variety of individual self-rule or autonomy. […] Judged against this account of egoism, characterisations of Stirner as a 'nihilist' – in the sense that he rejects all normative judgement – would […] appear to be mistaken.[131]

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[127] Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 30.

[128] E.g., see Wilfred Owen, *Poems*, ed. by Siegfried Sassoon (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920), p. 15. 'The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est* | *Pro patria mori*.' The Latin quote is from Horace's Ode III.2, with similar expressions to be found in the martial fragments of the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus and Hector's speech in Homer's *Iliad*. Contemporary Islamic militants have a version relating to God rather than country. 'Pro Deo et Patria' has long been the motto of assorted military regiments.

[129] In contrast, Nietzsche sought not to eliminate all myths, but to choose or create ones that, unlike Christianity, are inherently believable.

[130] Hans Sveistrup, 'Stirner als Soziologe' (1928), *Stirneriana* 29 (2006), 17-40 (p. 24).

[131] David Leopold, 'Max Stirner', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/max-stirner/> [accessed 24 August 2021].

There is, however, no simple answer to the question of the relationship between Stirner's thought and moral nihilism. It is hardly surprising that his unconcealed contempt for morality has led to Stirner being branded a moral nihilist, especially according to the looser definition of moral nihilism prevalent before the horrors of the twentieth century forced ethicists to question and re-evaluate conventional moral norms. At the very least, any conservative commentator would be bound to consider Stirner's annihilation of traditional morality shockingly negative. And in actual fact, although almost ironically because it is a contingent consequence rather than a key concern, Stirner's philosophy does include the salient features of moral nihilism, and a version thereof, moreover, that goes beyond Mackie's error theory to the extremes of moral eliminativism.[132]

Whether 'moral nihilist' is a useful or appropriate epithet for Stirner, however, is another matter entirely, not least because terminological precision has rarely been one of the principal objectives of Stirner's accusers. Rather than being an apt description of Stirner the philosopher, it is more often than not used simply as a conveniently pejorative classification for a perceived moral pariah. There is therefore a strong argument for rejecting the label of moral nihilist for Stirner (while of course acknowledging the elements of moral nihilism in his ideas), because it gives such a misleading impression both of the tone and focus of his philosophy; Stirner is a champion of individual autonomy, not a prophet of the moral void. Demythologisation in the interests of the liberty of the individual is what he promotes, and morality is simply one of the victims of this process. Thus, Stirner envisaged himself in an

[132] See 'Eliminativism', in *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (2005), p. 182. '[A] type of theory that combines two basic tenets: (1) the entities and properties to which a certain vocabulary or discourse supposedly refers do not exist; (2) the vocabulary or discourse in question ought to be eliminated.'

essentially constructive role as a consummator of the Enlightenment, even if this endeavor involved destructive elements:[133]

> An dem Eingang der neuen Zeit steht der 'Gottmensch'. Wird sich an ihrem Ausgange nur der Gott am Gottmenschen verflüchtigen, und kann der Gottmensch wirklich sterben, wenn nur der Gott an ihm stirbt? Man hat an diese Frage nicht gedacht und fertig zu sein gemeint, als man das Werk der Aufklärung, die Überwindung des Gottes, in unsern Tagen zu einem siegreichen Ende führte. […] Wie mögt Ihr glauben, dass der Gottmensch gestorben sei, ehe an ihm außer dem Gott auch der Mensch gestorben ist?[134]

It was Stirner's conviction that the reports of the death of the divine had been greatly exaggerated. He argued that Strauss, Feuerbach, Bauer, Hess et al. had not gone far enough; they had replaced dogmata with different, and often not dissimilar, dogmata. Stirner's intention was to complete the Enlightenment's mission through the reduction of interests to the one and only sovereign, indivisible, unhypocritical type: self-interest. He probably imagined that the result of his explanatory efforts would be a series of light-bulb moments, as the minds of his radical colleagues woke up to the possibilities of egoism. What, after all, could be more liberating than the rejection of all forms of heteronomy? In fact, he did not even manage to guide most of his readers beyond the false dichotomy of egoism and altruism. Nietzsche might have understood him: he even used one of Stirner's favourite terms to describe the dubious conflation of egoism and immorality: 'heute herrscht das Vorurtheil, welches "moralisch", "unegoistisch", "désintéressé" als gleichwerthige Begriffe nimmt, bereits mit der Gewalt einer "*fixen Idee*" und Kopfkrankheit.'[135]

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[133] For a list of the aims of the Enlightenment, which ties in largely with Stirner's project, see Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto*, pp. 209-210. '[C]ondemnation of superstition, rejection of intolerance, abolition of censorship, resistance to tyranny, opposition to political absolutism, an end to state religion, proscription of magical thinking, extension of freedom of thought and expression, promulgation of equal rights, the notion that all law arises from contractual immanence, the wish for social happiness here and now, the aspiration toward the universal reign of reason.'

[134] *EE*, p. 162.

[135] *KGW*, VI.ii. 274, *GM-I-2*. Cf. *EE*, p. 84. 'Die geistlichen Menschen haben sich etwas *in den Kopf gesetzt*, was realisiert werden soll. Sie habe *Begriffe* von Liebe, Güte u. dgl., die sie *verwirklicht* sehen möchten; darum wollen

As discussed in Chapter 3 above, the parallels between Nietzsche and Stirner are undeniable, regardless of how they arose. Perhaps Nietzsche, who has long been considered the principal founder of atheist existentialism,[136] holds the key to the question that will occupy us next: whether Stirner can reasonably be associated with existential nihilism. We have so far ascertained that Stirner influenced the Russian nihilist movement, but that he can hardly be adjudged a political nihilist himself. Furthermore, we have noted that Stirner's philosophy contains the basic, and indeed most extreme, principles of moral nihilism, although the aptness of the epithet 'moral nihilist' for Stirner is highly questionable. It now remains to be seen whether Stirner's relationship to existential nihilism is able to supply a less equivocal conclusion.

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sie ein Reich der Liebe auf Erden errichten, worin keiner mehr aus Eigennutz, sondern jeder "aus Liebe" handelt. Die Liebe soll *herrschen*. Was sie sich in den Kopf gesetzt haben, wie soll man das anders nennen, als – fixe Idee?' Also, *EE*, p. 363. 'Was die Religion den Sünder nennt, das nennt die Humanität den "Egoisten". […] Der Egoist, vor dem die Humanen schaudern, ist so gut ein Spuk, als der Teufel einer ist: er existiert nur als Schreckgespenst und Phantasiegestalt in ihrem Gehirne. Trieben sie nicht zwischen dem altfränkischen Gegensatz von Gut und Böse, dem sie die modernen Namen von "menschlich" und "egoistisch" gegeben haben, unbefangen hin und her, so würden sie auch nicht den ergrauten "Sünder" zum "Egoisten" aufgefrischt und einen neuen Lappen auf ein altes Kleid geflickt haben.'

[136] See e.g. Steven Crowell, 'Existentialism', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/> [accessed 24 August 2021]. 'Heidegger became the reluctant father of existentialism because he drew inspiration from two seminal, though in academic circles then relatively unknown, nineteenth-century writers, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. One can find anticipations of existential thought in many places […], but the roots of the problem of existence in its contemporary significance lie in the work of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.'

Chapter Seven

The Fear of Nothing: Stirner and Existential Nihilism

The Existential Question

If the examination of the relationship between Stirner and political and moral nihilism has thrown up little more than inconclusive answers, the current chapter, which looks at the most familiar form of nihilism, existential nihilism, offers the opportunity to come down decisively on one side of the argument or the other. Although Stirner has rarely been accused explicitly of being an existential nihilist, it is the sense in which most of the accusations of nihilism against him since World War II have been meant. During this time, Stirner has been described as an existentialist far more frequently than as an existential nihilist, but the link between his supposed existential characteristics and his nihilistic tendencies is often at least implied. The aim of this chapter is to determine the veracity of both, as well as to assess the interrelationship between them and thus to complete the investigation into Stirner's connection to nihilism.

Carr defines existential nihilism as 'the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that follows from the judgment, "Life has no meaning."'[1] This understanding of nihilism has become so prevalent that Gertz, in his recent book on the subject, barely discusses it in any other sense. Although he recognises nihilism's complexity and diversity, all definitions, in his analysis, ultimately revolve around the absence of meaning: 'Nihilism is not merely the denial that life is inherently meaningful, as nihilism can instead be seen as a particular way of responding to the anxiety caused by the discovery of life's inherent meaninglessness.'[2]

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[1] Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, p. 18.
[2] Nolen Gertz, *Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), p. 109.

The predominance of existential nihilism over all other types of nihilism has been attested to by numerous modern commentators. Crosby attributes its primacy to its widespread use, its ability to subsume other forms, such as moral, epistemological and cosmic nihilism, and its broad relevance to life in general rather than to a specific discipline. Thus, he concludes that 'existential nihilism is the most basic and inclusive, and therefore the most important, form of nihilism'.[3] Carr likewise recognises existential nihilism as 'probably the most commonplace sense of the word',[4] noting its significance in modern literature (citing Dostoevsky and Camus) and observing that Nietzsche was 'preoccupied with this form'.[5]

Existential nihilism may be considered to be not just the heir, but the fulfilment of Nietzsche's infamous prophecy for the next two centuries, mentioned in Chapter 2 above.[6] It is no surprise that existentialism, as a philosophical movement, emerged in the 1940s, towards the end of a thirty-year period of turmoil, horror and global conflict, that shattered hitherto well-established concepts and values, and affirmed the myth of Nietzsche's supposed clairvoyance. Nietzsche's posthumous notes and fragments, popularised in the unauthorised compilation, *Der Wille zur Macht* (1901/1906), are strewn with references to nihilism as the consequence of the feeling of senseless futility, some examples of which include: 'Nihilismus "Alles hat keinen Sinn"';[7] 'das "Umsonst", die "Sinnlosigkeit"[,] der Nihilismus';[8] and 'die *extremste* Form des Nihilismus: das Nichts (das "Sinnlose") ewig!'.[9]

[3] Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd*, p. 8.
[4] Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, p. 18.
[5] Ibid., p. 19.
[6] See *KGW*, VIII.ii. 431, *NF-1887*, 11[411]. 'Was ich erzähle, ist die Geschichte der nächsten zwei Jahrhunderte. Ich beschreibe, was kommt, was nicht mehr anders kommen kann: die Heraufkunft des Nihilismus.'
[7] Ibid., VIII.i. 124, *NF-1885*, 2[127].
[8] Ibid., VIII.iii. 222, *NF-1888*, 15[32].
[9] Ibid., VIII.i. 217, *NF-1886*, 5[71].

In a well-known fragment of 1887 (referred to in Chapter 3 above), Nietzsche explained the psychology behind the appearance of this overwhelming sense of meaninglessness:

> Der Nihilismus erscheint jetzt, […] weil man überhaupt gegen einen 'Sinn' im Übel, ja im Dasein mißtrauisch geworden ist. E i n e Interpretation gieng zu Grunde; weil sie aber als d i e Interpretation galt, erscheint es, als ob es gar *keinen Sinn* im Dasein gebe, als ob alles u m s o n s t sei.[10]

The modern existentialists may have assimilated this relativisation of nihilism, at least in so far as they share Nietzsche's opinion of it as a state that must be overcome,[11] but they focus nonetheless on its disconcerting effects on human consciousness, made manifest by a pervasive sense of disquiet, alienation and despair.[12]

Crosby considers there to be a striking similarity between Stirner, Nietzsche, and Sartre in this regard:

> We are brought […] to the view of Stirner, Nietzsche, and Sartre, i.e., to their concept of absurd, normless volition as the ultimate basis of the beliefs and actions of individuals, and as the generative source of what individuals come to regard as the structures of the surrounding world. Meaning, truth, and value are not in any sense discovered, therefore, but can only be blindly posited or sheerly invented. This thesis was earlier [in the book] associated with various types of nihilism, especially with existential nihilism.[13]

This seems a curious assertion, firstly because absurdity is hardly a theme which is common to all three thinkers, and secondly because one does not have to be a nihilist to believe that values are not preordained. Such a belief could apply equally well to an atheist or a freethinker or a moral relativist. There is also the question of why values would necessarily have to be

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[10] Ibid., VIII.i. 216, *NF-1886*, 5[71].

[11] Nietzsche speaks of the 'Selbstüberwindung des Nihilismus'. See ibid., VIII.ii. 96, *NF-1887*, 9[164] and VIII.iii. 5, *NF-1888*, 13[4]. Concerning existentialists' responses to nihilism, see John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 32. '[T]hose existentialists who do come close to nihilism recognize its temporary character and try to move through it.'

[12] See Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, pp. 17-18.

[13] Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd*, pp. 328-329.

posited blindly. Could the refusal to accept the existence of unchanging and unverifiable universal values not be considered, on the contrary, to be evidence of clear-sightedness? Crosby appears to be confusing the attributes of faith with those of enlightenment, despite the fact that they are, in many ways, diametrically opposed to each other. Nonetheless, he is one of the few authors who directly associate Stirner with existential nihilism, so his claim deserves mention as part of this inquiry.

In order to understand the relationship between Stirner and existential nihilism, we must first examine the fundamental characteristics of existentialism itself, for, as Macquarrie observes: 'even the most extreme among the existentialists seem to stop short of a doctrine of sheer absurdity and of nihilism.'[14] As there is no self-confessed existential nihilist with whom to compare Stirner, it is necessary instead to consider the link between Stirner and existentialism, and to extrapolate from that to the viability of Stirner as a model for existential nihilism. Macquarrie, along with many others, has pointed to the elusiveness of existentialism as a term, both because of the breadth of its application and the looseness of its usage,[15] but there is a general consensus about the themes common to existentialism in all its guises. If Stirner is to be classified as an existential nihilist, as Crosby maintains, it would be important, if not essential, for there to be a broad affinity between Stirner and the existentialists regarding their respective outlooks and methods.

The most basic property of existentialism is that it 'begins from man rather than from nature. It is a philosophy of the subject rather than of the object.'[16] Sartre expresses this in

[14] Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, p. 215.
[15] Ibid., p. 13.
[16] Ibid., p. 14.

existential terms in his famous dictum that '*existence* comes before *essence'*, which he elucidates as follows:[17]

> What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. […] Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.[18]

The parallels with Stirner's 'Einzige' – who is a self-defining individual, originating from nothing and with the sole purpose of realising himself through the exercise of his own will – are unmistakable. In Stirner's magnum opus one can find the assertion of self-definition: 'Ich bin ja selber Meine Sache';[19] the concept of creative nothingness: 'Im *Einzigen* kehrt selbst der Eigner in sein schöpferisches Nichts zurück, aus welchem er geboren wird';[20] the exaltation of the will: 'Die Dinge schaut man eben recht an, wenn man aus ihnen macht, was man *will* […]. Und darum sind die Dinge und ihre Anschauung nicht das Erste, sondern Ich bin's, mein Wille ist's';[21] and the exhortation to self-realisation: '*Verwerte Dich!*'.[22] Stirner's outlook seems completely compatible with the avowed first principle of existentialism.

It is precisely the dichotomy of existence and essence which is the basis of the first known description of Stirner as an existential philosopher. Rudolf Gottschall (1823-1909), writing nearly a century before Sartre, states: 'Auch Stirner ist ein Existenzialphilosoph, der mit Schelling gegen das quid? des Wesens das quod der Existenz geltend macht.'[23] Gottschall is referring to Stirner's declaration in the concluding remarks of *Der Einzige*:

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[17] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 26.
[18] Ibid., p. 28.
[19] *EE*, p. 15.
[20] Ibid., p. 370.
[21] Ibid., p. 340.
[22] Ibid., p. 319.
[23] Rudolf Gottschall, 'Die deutsche Philosophie seit Hegel's Tode', in *Die Gegenwart. Eine encyclopädische Darstellung der neuesten Zeitgeschichte für alle Stände*, VI (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1851), pp. 292-340 (p. 310).

> Das Ideal 'der Mensch' ist *realisiert*, wenn die christliche Anschauung umschlägt in den Satz: 'Ich, dieser Einzige, bin der Mensch'. Die Begriffsfrage 'was ist der Mensch?' – hat sich dann in die persönliche umgesetzt: 'wer ist der Mensch?'[24]

Macquarrie refers to the same distinction, or shift of focus, asserting its centrality to existentialism and thereby (inadvertently) confirming an affinity with Stirner concerning the understanding of human existence:

> The existentialist philosopher claims that man must always be understood as a 'who' and not as a 'what', and further that, because existence implies with it the understanding of existence, there is open to man the possibility of a knowledge of the 'who' more certain and more fundamental than any knowledge that he can reach of the 'what'.[25]

Gottschall clarifies what he means by 'Existenzialphilosophie' in an earlier comment about Feuerbach:

> Es ist die wahrhafte Existenzialphilosophie, welche das Concrete nicht in abstracto, wie die Hegel'sche, sondern in concreto, das Wirkliche in seiner Wirklichkeit, also auf eine dem Wesen des Wirklichen entsprechende Weise als das Wahre anerkennt und zum Princip und Gegenstand der Philosophie erhebt.[26]

Gottschall sees Stirner's thought as a continuation rather than a refutation of Feuerbach's,[27] and, thus, he associates both thinkers with existential philosophy, a term Gottschall may have borrowed from Kierkegaard.[28] The debate around existence and essence can be traced back through Hegel, Aquinas, Avicenna and Aristotle to Plato, and although two and a half millennia of deliberation have given rise to numerous shifts of interpretation, it is substantially

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[24] *EE*, p. 370. The question 'what is man?' is repeated a number of times in The Bible. See Job 7:17, 'What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him?'; Psalms 8:4, 'What is man, that thou art mindful of him?'; Psalms 144:3, 'Lord, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of man!'; Hebrews 2:6 repeats the above line from Psalms 8:4.

[25] John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 37.

[26] Gottschall, 'Die deutsche Philosophie seit Hegel's Tode', p. 308.

[27] See ibid., p. 311. 'Feuerbach ist die Negation der Theologie; Stirner die Negation der Ethik.'

[28] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or A Fragment of Philosophy*, trans. by David F. Swenson, 2nd edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 90-107.

the same duality to which Sartre refers.[29] What is important for our purposes is that Stirner certainly shares Sartre's opinion concerning the precedence of existence, from which derives an undeniable commonality between Stirner and existentialism. The problem with Gottschall's definition, however, is that it is so broad that Marx, for instance, would have to be included among the existential philosophers.

Positive and Negative Themes of Existentialism

For a more sophisticated analysis of Stirner's existentialist credentials, it is necessary to look more closely into existentialism's nature and meaning. Overlaying what Macquarrie identifies as its first principle, namely that it begins from man, one finds in the existentialist outlook a number of recurrent themes. These can be divided into positive and negative groups, the former being rather smaller in size than the latter, which is a fair indication of the balance between the different types of issue that existentialism sets out to tackle. The positive group includes, as Macquarrie notes, the themes of freedom, decision and responsibility, the exercise of which constitutes man's authenticity.[30] Here the links to Stirner start to become a little more tenuous, although Copleston, even in the broad brushstrokes of his *History of Philosophy*, is able to identify the outlines of similitude:

> [S]ome may wish to see in it [Stirner's philosophy of egoism] some spiritual affinity with existentialism. And there is at least some ground for this. It can hardly be said that emphasis on the theme of property is a characteristic of existentialism, but the theme of the unique free individual certainly is.[31]

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[29] See J. C. Taylor, 'Essence and Existence', in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, *Encyclopedia.com* <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/essence-and-existence> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[30] See Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, p. 16. 'Such themes as freedom, decision, and responsibility are prominent in all the existentialist philosophers. […] It is through free and responsible decisions that man becomes authentically himself.'

[31] Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 9 vols (New York: Image, 1946-1975), VII.2 (1965), p. 71.

That Stirner's 'Einzige' and the unique free individual, who forms the basis for the existentialist perspective, share a subjectivist orientation is self-evident.[32] Macquarrie, in his discussion of existential authenticity, speaks of each individual's existence being 'characterized by a unique "mineness"', which could be considered a very adequate definition of what Stirner meant by 'der Einzige'.[33] Macquarrie explains: '"Mineness" is a term that has sometimes been used to express the awareness that my existence is unique and distinct from the existence of everyone else. I am not just a specimen of a class. I am I.'[34] Compare this with Stirner's description of the 'I', or the ego, and the overlap is almost total: 'Ich bin aber nicht ein Ich neben andern Ichen, sondern das alleinige Ich: Ich bin einzig.'[35]

This similarity in the outlooks of Stirner and the existentialists is not, however, in itself particularly remarkable, bearing in mind the importance of subjectivism in modern Western thought, starting with Descartes and proceeding through Fichtean idealism and German Romanticism to twentieth-century movements like existentialism and postmodernism. The question is whether this resemblance extends beyond a general outlook to more specific themes that both Stirner and the existentialists address. As far as the idea of freedom is concerned, Crosby writes of 'the insistence of thinkers such as Stirner, Nietzsche and Sartre on the reality and critical importance of human freedom'.[36] Indeed, he further underscores a purported close resemblance between Stirner and Sartre in this regard with the assertion that 'Stirner pushes this theme [the reality and importance of human freedom] to a ridiculous extreme, of course, as does Sartre'.[37] However, a more detailed analysis of Stirner's and

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[32] See Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd*, p. 370. 'Stirner […] and Sartre are right to give crucial importance to the outlook and experience of the individual.'
[33] Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, p. 206.
[34] Ibid., pp. 72-73.
[35] *EE*, p. 365.
[36] Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd*, p. 368.
[37] Ibid.

Sartre's respective concepts of freedom is required in order to evaluate the claim of a close intellectual kinship, which Crosby, and to a lesser extent Copleston, suggest.

As Macquarrie observes, for existentialism, the significance of freedom can hardly be overstated:

> [T]here can be few themes, if any, nearer to the heart of existentialism. […] It is prominent in Kierkegaard, for whom to exist and to be free are almost synonymous expressions. The interest in freedom, or rather the passion for freedom, is not confined to any particular variety of existentialist. Surely two of the greatest apostles of freedom in the twentieth century have been the atheists Sartre and Camus.[38]

An example of the overwhelming importance of freedom for Sartre can be found in the existential hero of *La Nausée* (1938), Antoine Roquentin, who declares: 'all I have ever wanted was to be free.'[39] Stirner, however, takes a quite different view; while recognising the universal appeal of freedom,[40] he immediately dismisses it as qualitatively inferior to 'ownness':

> Du willst […] nicht die Freiheit, alle diese schönen Sachen zu haben, denn mit der Freiheit dazu hast Du sie noch nicht; Du willst sie wirklich haben. […] Und würdest Du von allem frei, so hättest Du eben nichts mehr; denn die Freiheit ist inhaltsleer. Wer sie nicht zu benutzen weiß, für den hat sie keinen Wert, diese unnütze Erlaubnis; wie Ich sie aber benutze, das hängt von meiner Eigenheit ab.[41]

Stirner describes freedom variously as an ideal, a ghost, and an empty word.[42] He declares dismissively: 'Freiheit lebt nur in dem Reich der Träume!'.[43] Indeed, in the prologue

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[38] Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, p. 177.

[39] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. by Robert Baldick, 9th edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 97.

[40] See *EE*, p. 163. '"Lechzt der Geist nicht nach Freiheit?" – Ach, mein Geist nicht allein, auch mein Leib lechzt stündlich danach!' See also *EE*, p. 166. 'Alle Welt verlangt nach Freiheit, alle sehnen ihr Reich herbei. O bezaubernd schöner Traum von einem blühenden "Reiche der Freiheit", einem "freien Menschengeschlechte"! – wer hätte ihn nicht geträumt? So sollen die Menschen frei werden, ganz frei, von allem Zwang frei!' The ironic quotation from Hegel is intended to reinforce the message of the illusoriness of freedom, in order to highlight the preferability of ownness.

[41] Ibid., p. 163.

[42] See ibid., pp. 163, 165.

[43] Ibid., p. 165.

to *Der Einzige* he lists it as one of the extraneous causes that are foisted upon man, along with truth, humanity, justice and various other sacred abstractions.[44] Whether in its positive or negative form (although Stirner's attention is more often than not directed towards the latter, as in liberation from hegemony), freedom is seen as a useless attribute unless it is subsumed under ownership and combined with power:[45] 'Meine Freiheit wird erst vollkommen, wenn sie meine – *Gewalt* ist; durch diese aber höre ich auf, ein bloß Freier zu sein, und werde ein Eigener.'[46] Stirner, in other words, while acknowledging the urge to be free, rejects the abstract concept of freedom as a diversion. As Clark explains:

> While Stirner seems tempted at times to strongly emphasize the importance of individual freedom, it must ultimately take a subordinate place in his thought, in view of his psychological and ethical egoism. Since all one does is ultimately for the sake of the ego, […] freedom must be kept in its place as a value subordinate to the ego. If not, it becomes another enslaving idea.[47]

Stirner's concept of freedom is therefore far from the idealised, and at times almost romanticised, version envisaged by the existentialists, expressed, for example, in Camus's dramatic statement: 'Men are never really willing to die except for the sake of freedom.'[48] The idea of dying for any cause is, of course, anathema to Stirner, which helps to explain his lack of participation in the 1848 Revolution.[49] Stirner does not view freedom from the perspective of the ontological matrix of existentialism, but rather as a practical function of the power of the individual.

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[44] See ibid., p. 13.
[45] For a detailed discussion of positive and negative freedom, see Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty. An inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).
[46] *EE*, p. 174. Stirner's downplaying of being a 'Freier' is almost certainly an ironic comment on what he considered to be the intellectual self-incarceration of his brethren in 'Die Freien'.
[47] Clark, *Max Stirner's Egoism*, p. 64.
[48] Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. by Anthony Bower (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 255.
[49] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 197.

In Sartrean existentialism, freedom entails responsibility. One of Sartre's best-known philosophical maxims is 'I am condemned to be free',[50] from which he develops the idea that man is responsible for the world and for himself.[51] Responsibility is not a quality that immediately springs to mind when one thinks of Stirner; indeed, as already observed, there are many who have considered him an example of the exact opposite, foremost of whom is Paterson, who writes with all the disapprobation he can muster that '[t]he philosophy of the Unique One […] is above all a philosophy of irresponsibility'.[52] Nonetheless, in considering the ethical implications of existential ontology, Sartre outlines a concept of selfhood, which, although he distinguishes it from egoism, could be interpreted as having some similarities with the psychological egoism of Stirner:

> [E]xistential psychoanalysis is *moral description*, for it releases to us the ethical meaning of various human projects. It indicates to us the necessity of abandoning the psychology of interest along with any utilitarian interpretations of human conduct – by revealing to us the *ideal* meaning of all human attitudes. These meanings are beyond egoism and altruism, beyond also any behavior which is called *disinterested*. Man makes himself man in order to be God, and selfness considered from this point of view can appear to be an egoism.[53]

Sartre's comment on man becoming God reveals a shared point of departure with Stirner, who, as we have seen, declared, 'daß der Mensch den Gott getötet hat, um nun – "alleiniger Gott in der Höhe" zu werden'.[54] As far as the positive themes of existentialism are concerned, there

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[50] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, 5th UP edn (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 439.

[51] Ibid., pp. 553-556.

[52] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 186. The full sentence reads: 'The philosophy of the Unique One is a philosophy of disengagement, it is a refusal to become ultimately involved or identified with any of the temporary objects of his enjoyment and recreation, and since these figure in his interest only as objects to *play* with, motivelessly and arbitrarily, it is above all a philosophy of irresponsibility.' See also ibid., p. 295. 'His relationship to his philosophical ideas […] is strictly irresponsible.'

[53] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 626.

[54] *EE*, p. 162. Cf. *KGW*, v.ii. 159, *FW-125*. 'Müssen wir nicht selber zu Göttern werden, um nur ihrer [der Grösse dieser That] würdig zu erscheinen?'

are clearly a few points of intersection with Stirner's thought, but these are outweighed by the differences, most notably with respect to the key concept of freedom.

The recurrent negative themes of existentialism include finitude, guilt, alienation, death, anxiety, despair, boredom and nausea.[55] Macquarrie is careful to point out that this prevalence of negative motifs does not mean existentialism can or should be equated with pessimism, but he observes, nonetheless, that existentialists are united in their awareness of 'the tragic elements in human existence'.[56] This awareness can be seen as a direct result of the questioning of religious belief, in other words it is, as Nietzsche observed in 'The Parable of the Madman' and elsewhere, intricately connected to the phenomenon of the death of God, and all the uncertainties that it engenders. Atheistic existentialism examines the wider significance of this momentous event through the eyes of the individual, thereby flirting with, though generally not embracing, the possibility of nihilism. Perhaps foremost of the existentialists in this regard is Heidegger, of whom Macquarrie says:

> The prominence of such themes as care, anxiety, guilt, finitude, and above all death, in Heidegger's account might be taken as indications of a trend towards a kind of nihilism. This impression might be further strengthened by his famous inaugural lecture […], 'What is Metaphysics?' […]; [where] we learn that metaphysics has to do with nothing.[57]

He sums up Heidegger's position as follows: 'The self becomes aware of its finitude and nothingness through the ontological experience of anxiety in the face of death.'[58] In Sartre's opinion, Heidegger considered anxiety (Angst) to be 'the apprehension of nothingness'.[59] The concept of nothingness had, for obvious reasons, always been associated with nihilism, but

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[55] See Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, pp. 17-18.
[56] Ibid., p. 17.
[57] Ibid., p. 57.
[58] Ibid., p. 247.
[59] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 29.

the existentialists, and especially Heidegger, drew attention to this relationship as never before.

The most fundamental of all the negative themes of existentialism is death. Death plays a prominent role throughout French existentialist literature, as can be seen in Camus's first two published novels, *L'Étranger* (1942) and *La Peste* (1947). The former begins with the death of Meursault's mother and climaxes with him shooting the Arab. The latter opens with the death of a rat, followed by the death of some of the major characters in the novel (Jean Tarrou, Father Paneloux) as well as some minor ones (M. Michel, M. Othon's son), and of numerous townsfolk of the plague-stricken city of Oran. In Sartre's first novel, *La Nausée*, death is not part of the action, but is like a ghost that haunts Roquentin's world, suffusing it with meaninglessness, as illustrated by his meditation on suicide:

> And *I* – weak, languid, obscene, digesting, tossing about dismal thoughts – *I too was superfluous* […]. I dreamed vaguely of killing myself, to destroy at least one of these superfluous existences. But my death itself would have been superfluous. Superfluous, my corpse, my blood on these pebbles, between these plants, in the depths of this charming park. And the decomposed flesh would have been superfluous in the earth which would have received it, and my bones, finally, cleaned, stripped, neat and clean as teeth, would also have been superfluous; I was superfluous for all time.[60]

Stirner defends suicide as a matter of individual choice;[61] Sartre's hero considers it a valid response to existence, but ultimately rejects it because, like everything else, it is superfluous. The sense of meaninglessness, embodied in the feeling of nausea to which the title refers, seeps through the entire narrative of Sartre's novel, and the concept with which this senselessness is most associated is nothingness. Nothingness lurks behind reality: 'Things are entirely what they appear to be and *behind them* ... there is nothing.'[62] It also gives

[60] Sartre, *Nausea*, pp. 184-185.
[61] See *EE*, pp. 327-328.
[62] Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 140.

existence its flavour, or lack of one: 'If anybody had asked me what existence was, I should have replied in good faith that it was nothing, just an empty form which added itself to external things, without changing anything in their nature.'[63] There is no doubt a vague parallel here with Stirner as far as the awareness of man's ephemerality is concerned, which Stirner acknowledges, for instance in the concepts of the 'sterblichen Schöpfer' and 'schöpferisches Nichts',[64] but on which he never explicitly dwells. Roquentin, however, considers this inescapable result of godlessness with something close to despair: 'And all those existents […] came from nowhere and were going nowhere. All of a sudden they existed and then, all of a sudden, they no longer existed.'[65] He sees life as pointless and arbitrary: 'Every existent is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance.'[66] As he tells the autodidact in an earnest jest: 'there's nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.'[67] This is a train of thought that is completely alien to Stirner's egoist, who never doubts that life has meaning.

Giorgio Penzo, nonetheless, supports the not uncommon view that Stirner shares existentialism's tragic awareness: 'Stirners Nihilismus stellt uns gerade die Endlichkeit des Menschen in seinen Grundgegebenheiten von Leid und Tod vor Augen.'[68] The suggestion would seem to be that Stirner is the elusive archetype of the existential nihilist. Existential nihilism is essentially the negative face of existentialism; what, after all, is existential nihilism without the despair, the alienation, the emptiness and the *horror vacui* that follow the death of God? Read sums up these tendencies as follows:

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[63] Ibid., p. 183.
[64] *EE*, p. 370.
[65] Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 190.
[66] Ibid., p. 191.
[67] Ibid., p. 162.
[68] Penzo, *Die existentielle Empörung*, p. 13.

> [T]he philosopher who calls himself an existentialist begins with an acute attack of self-consciousness […]. There he is, a finite and insignificant speck of protoplasm pitched against the infinite extent of the universe. […] Modern physicists may have succeeded in proving that the universe itself is also finite, but that only makes matters worse, for now the universe shrinks to littleness and is pitched against the still more mysterious concept of *Nothingness*. […] So there we have the Little Man gaping into the abyss, and feeling […] not only very small, but terrified. That feeling is the original *Angst*, the dread or anguish, and if you do not feel *Angst* you cannot be an existentialist.[69]

If one accepts Read's interpretation, Stirner is not, and cannot be, an existentialist. He does not express a feeling of 'Angst' in this, or any similar, sense of the term. The word itself is only mentioned in *Der Einzige* with regard to Christianity's self-tortured effort to reify God;[70] Stirner does not use it in relation to the feelings of the individual. It is similar with the concepts of alienation, despair and death. Death is simply treated as a sober fact, dissociated from the self except in so far as one administers it by one's own choice. Stirner infamously declares, 'dass Ich auch der Macht über Leben und Tod aus keiner Anwandlung von Demut entsage'.[71] There is no sense of anxiety, let alone horror; on the contrary, Stirner seems to revel in his ability to unsettle the reader with his insouciant attitude towards murder and suicide. Finitude is proudly, and without hint of apprehension, presented as a fundamental axiom of his philosophy, distinguishing the egoism of his unique individual from the idealism of Fichte's abstract 'I': 'nur das […] *endliche* Ich ist wirklich Ich. Fichte spricht vom "absoluten" Ich, Ich aber spreche von Mir, dem vergänglichen Ich.'[72] The exaltation of the ego is not diminished in any way by the fact of its impermanence, which is simply accepted as a reality, though not a grim one. For Stirner, who was in his late thirties when he was writing

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[69] Herbert Read, *Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism: Chains of Freedom*, 2nd edn (London: Freedom Press, 1952), pp. 5-6.
[70] See *EE*, p. 357.
[71] Ibid., p. 322.
[72] Ibid., p. 188.

Der Einzige, transience and death appear to have been distant concerns, as already observed in his nonchalant comment on old age: 'Endlich der Greis? Wenn Ich einer werde, so ist noch Zeit genug, davon zu sprechen.'[73] Such a remark would be thoroughly out of place in existentialist thought.

The negative imagery employed by Read to describe the existential outlook bears little relation to what is found in Stirner's writings. Stirner is untroubled by existential abandonment, ethical uncertainty, contingency, futility, the ephemerality of existence or personal extinction, and likewise by the states of mind expressed by Kierkegaard's 'angest', Heidegger's 'Geworfenheit', Camus's 'absurdité' and Sartre's 'nausée'.[74] Indeed, this goes some way to explaining Stirner's lack of allure. Confessions of self-torment and the agony of despair inevitably make for more interesting reading than a sober analysis of the mendacity of man's dogmatic mythological creations; no one could claim that *Der Einzige* is as compelling a read as *L'Étranger*. Stirner's philosophical perspective is far closer to that of Epicurus than that of Camus, Sartre or Dostoevsky. He concerns himself with how best to live this life, rather than how to prepare for the next one, or how to live in the absence of a next one:

> Mein Verkehr mit der Welt, worauf geht er hinaus? Genießen will Ich sie, darum muß sie mein Eigentum sein, und darum will Ich sie gewinnen. Ich will nicht die Freiheit, nicht die Gleichheit der Menschen; Ich will nur *meine* Macht über sie, will sie zu meinem Eigentum, d. h. *genießbar* machen.[75]

Stirner and Existentialism: Commonalities and Contrasts

Despite the numerous dissimilarities, there are some general traits that Stirner and the existentialists have in common, apart from the 'unique mineness' discussed above. Firstly,

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[73] Ibid., p. 24.
[74] Respectively: anxiety, thrownness, absurdity and nausea.
[75] *EE*, p. 322.

there is the element of rebellion (cf. the discussion of Russian nihilism in Chapter 5 above): 'Existentialists are usually rebels against the establishment. In many fields – theology, politics, morals, literature – they struggle against the accepted authorities and the traditional canons.'[76] Such a characterisation could, of course, equally be applied to Stirner (and to many others besides). Thus, Camus, in his philosophical study of rebellion, includes a short section about Stirner, portraying him as the ultimate prophet of nihilistic rebellion and contrasting him unsympathetically with Nietzsche.[77]

Camus, like many others, seems to have based his negative opinion on Stirner's sensational utterances, which appear, as noted above, to justify murder and suicide, two of Camus's chief *bêtes noires*. His condemnation of Stirner is therefore suitably abrupt: 'But to decree the legitimacy of murder is to decree the mobilisation and war of the unique individuals. Murder will thus coincide with a kind of collective suicide. Stirner, who neither admits it nor recognises it, does not, however, shrink from any act of destruction.'[78] One can question the negativity of Camus's reading of Stirner, but not his emphasis on Stirner's spirit of rebellion, as manifested in Stirner's relentless war on dogma: 'Nothing can stop this bitter and imperious logic any more, nothing but an ego that stands up against all abstractions.'[79] Indeed, antagonism towards abstractions is another general characteristic that Stirner shares with the existentialist, who, according to Macquarrie, 'sees his task as that of fighting against every distorting abstraction. The notion of the corporate personality of the state is such an

[76] Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, p. 31.
[77] See Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, p. 84. 'Stirner had already wanted to destroy in man, after God himself, every notion of God. But, unlike with Nietzsche, his nihilism is a satisfied one.' [My translation. The short section on Stirner is omitted from Anthony Bower's English translation in the Penguin edition.]
[78] Ibid., p. 87. [My translation.]
[79] Ibid. [My translation.]

abstraction.'[80] This would apply equally well to Stirner, and opposition to the state in particular ties in with what has been described as his individualist anarchism.[81]

It would also be possible to make the case for the quality of ownness, as demonstrated by Stirner's enlightened egoist, being to some extent aligned with the existentialist concept of authenticity, and, conversely, for the egoist's adversary, the dogmatist, be he of the Christian or humanist variety, exemplifying the existentialist idea of bad faith, in so far, at least, as myths, in claiming to be true, inevitably engender hypocrisy. Macquarrie's description of the existentialist notion of authentic and inauthentic existence could be superimposed on Stirner's philosophy without giving rise to contradiction:

> Existence is authentic to the extent that the existent has taken possession of himself and […] has moulded himself in his own image. Inauthentic existence, on the other hand, is moulded by external influences, whether these be circumstances, moral codes, political or ecclesiastical authorities, or whatever.[82]

Once one goes beyond such general features, however, the disparities become increasingly obvious. Concerning bad faith, Carroll points out that:

> Stirner's […] egoist critique of hypocrisy, or *mauvaise foi*, is not backed by any moral affirmation of truth or honesty. […] What he rejects in this context is the brand of nihilistic existentialism which when articulated states: 'in this meaningless world at least I must display before others my honesty in the face of despair, my integrity'.[83]

What Carroll does not make clear is that Stirner could not possibly have rejected this standpoint explicitly, as it is not one he comes across either in himself or in others. Ontological despair is not a feature of his thought, indeed, Stirner and the existentialists generally inhabit very different mental universes. Psychology does not play the role in Stirner's work that it

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[80] Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, p. 239.
[81] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 21. 'Das Vermächtnis Stirner's […] ruht in den treuen Händen der individualistischen Anarchisten.'
[82] Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, p. 206.
[83] Carroll, *Break-Out from the Crystal Palace*, p. 43.

does in Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky or Nietzsche, all of whom, in their different ways, have been characterised as psychologists of the soul.[84] Stirner's is instead a very rational, dispassionate world view, concerned primarily with material rather than spiritual problems of human existence. Carroll nonetheless speaks of 'Stirner's existentialist leanings'[85] and '[t]he strong existentialist themes in Stirner's philosophy'.[86] Like many post-war writers caught up in the spirit of the times, Carroll seems to have been eager to discover parallels between Stirner's thought and existentialism, and to squeeze him retrospectively into an existentialist, or at least proto-existentialist, mould.[87] This is just another example of the way in which Stirner's supposed 'nihilism' has evolved as the notion itself has evolved.

Another example can be found in Clark, who, despite his principal focus on Stirner and anarchism, endorses the orthodox view concerning Stirner's link to existentialism:

> A related aspect of Stirner's historical importance is his connection with existentialism. […] An examination of Stirner's thought verifies Paterson's contention that 'just as Kierkegaard is acknowledged to be the founder of Christian existentialism, ... it would seem that Stirner has some claim to be considered the earliest definite precursor of atheistic existentialism'.[88]

Stirner, as a contemporary of Kierkegaard, is of course a convenient candidate for the originator of the atheistic version of existentialism, in that he provides an appealing historical symmetry to the rise of existentialism's two distinct, theistic and atheistic, strands, planting them firmly in the intellectually fertile ground of post-Hegelianism. Stirner's life (1806-1856)

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[84] See Vincent A. McCarthy, *Kierkegaard as Psychologist* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), p. 3. 'Niebuhr hailed him [Kierkegaard] as the greatest psychologist of the soul since Augustine.' See also Rouven J. Steeves, 'Psychologists of Evil: Nietzsche and Dostoevsky on the Darkness of the Soul' <https://voegelinview.com/psychologists-evil-nietzsche-dostoevsky-darkness-soul/> [accessed 24 August 2021]. '[W]e follow these psychologists of the soul [Nietzsche and Dostoevsky] as they disclose the spiritual struggle in the heart and mind between good and evil.'

[85] Carroll, *Break-Out from the Crystal Palace*, p. 43.

[86] Ibid., p. 40.

[87] That Carroll is attempting an unusual fusion of ideas is evidenced by the subtitle of his first book: *The anarcho-psychological critique: Stirner, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky.*

[88] Clark, *Max Stirner's Egoism*, pp. 14-15. The quote is from Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 184.

and Kierkegaard's (1813-1855) largely overlap chronologically and their most important works were published within a few years of each other in the 1840s. This beguiling but misleading parallelism has proven irresistible to numerous observers.

One of the most prominent of these is Löwith, whose 1928 postdoctoral dissertation compares Kierkegaard's 'Single One' (Einzelne) with Stirner's 'Unique One' (Einzige), arguably marking the beginning of the 'existentialisation' of Stirner, alluded to in Chapter 4 above.[89] Unsurprisingly, Löwith's sympathies lie with Kierkegaard, rather than with Stirner's allegedly nihilistic philosophy,[90] a preference he reiterates in his magnum opus, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1941), where the two philosophers are once again juxtaposed, and Stirner is presented as being both marginal and disreputable: 'Sein [Stirners] Gedanke steht ebenso wie seine faktische Existenz am äußersten Rande seiner substanzlos gewordenen und ernüchterten Welt.'[91] Although he does not use the term 'existential nihilist', Löwith does assert Stirner's connection both to nihilism and existentialism. The former rests above all on the familiar insinuations regarding nothingness: 'das los und ledig gewordene Ich von Stirner weiß […] nichts anderes zu tun als in sein Nichts zurückzukehren.'[92] The latter is seen as the product of subjective egoism, or as Löwith describes it, 'die existenzielle Konzentration der ganzen Welt auf das je eigene Ich'.[93] Finally, he posits the theory of the origins of the two strands of existentialism, which has remained so influential: 'Stirners Phrase vom "Einzigen" und Kierkegaards Begriff vom "Einzelnen" bezeichnen beide dieselbe Frage, religiös und profan gestellt.'[94]

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[89] For more detail on Stirner's 'existentialisation', see Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, pp. 78-81.
[90] See Löwith, *Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen*, p. 177.
[91] Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, pp. 268-269.
[92] Ibid., p. 120. See also ibid., p. 84 and 126: 'bei Stirner die nihilistische [Position] des "Einzigen"'.
[93] Ibid., p. 322.
[94] Ibid., p. 383.

In the period between the publication of Löwith's dissertation in 1928 and his best-known book, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, in 1941, the relationship between Kierkegaard's and Stirner's thought was also considered by one of the foremost twentieth-century theistic existentialists, Martin Buber (1878-1965), namely in *Die Frage an den Einzelnen* (1936), in the first chapter of which Kierkegaard's 'Single One' and Stirner's 'Unique One' are once again contrasted and compared. As with Löwith, there is no doubt about where the author's sympathies lie; he dismisses Stirner straight away as 'ein pathetischer Nominalist und Ideenentlarver'.[95] The essay starts with an epigraph in the form of Buber's wife Paula's apophthegm, 'Verantwortung ist der Nabelstrang zur Schöpfung.'[96] It is, in other words, clear from the outset that Stirner is not going to make the grade, as indeed, he does not. In the contest between the two thinkers' attitudes towards responsibility and truth, Stirner comes a distant second: 'Für Stirner müssen beides Irrfragen sein. Aber es ist wichtig zu sehen, daß er, vermeinend die beiden Grundbegriffe zu zerstören, nur ihre Geläufigkeit zerstört und so, wider all seine Absicht, ihrer Reinigung und Erneuerung vorgearbeitet hat.'[97] At least Buber accords Stirner a useful role as an accidental purifier; this is not, however, enough to save him from further censure: 'diese Wirklichkeit der Verantwortung ist gar nicht das von Stirner in Frage Gestellte, sie ist ihm unbekannt.'[98] The unambiguous message is that Stirner does not even understand what he is talking about: 'Das zur Phrase verweste Wort will er in seiner Nichtigkeit zeigen, das lebendige hat er nie gekannt.'[99]

One should not be misled by Buber's apparently conciliatory comments about Stirner's cathartic usefulness. His final verdict is damning: 'Und doch wirken […] die beiden

[95] Martin Buber, *Die Frage an den Einzelnen* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936), p. 12.
[96] Ibid., p. 5.
[97] Ibid., p. 18.
[98] Ibid., p. 19.
[99] Ibid., p. 20.

Urverschiedenen, Urfremden, […] zusammen: […] Zerfall als Zerfall anmeldend der eine, der andre den ewigen Bau als unantastbar erweisend.'[100] For the remainder of the book, Buber concentrates on Kierkegaard; Stirner has served his purpose, to act as a negative contrast and to reduce old dogma to ashes, from which the truth of Kierkegaard's 'Single One' can rise like a phoenix. But the damage done to Stirner was not only in terms of his good name (if he ever had one). Being subject matter for Buber and being compared with Kierkegaard, together with the explicit accusation that he concerned himself with the 'Zerreißung seiner existenziellen Verbundenheiten und Verbindlichkeiten', combined to make the subsequent association of Stirner with existentialism all but inevitable.[101]

As Kast points out, Buber, whose chief concern in the book is the nature of interpersonal relationships, fails to acknowledge, or perhaps to recognise, the role that these play in Stirner's thought,[102] but this issue has more of a bearing on Stirner's connection to individualist anarchism than to existentialism, and is therefore outside the scope of this study. What is of much greater relevance is that, paradoxically, although he underscores Stirner's complete detachment from the existentialist values of freedom and responsibility, the theistic existentialist, Buber's, comparison of Stirner with the Christian existentialist, Kierkegaard, has served to reinforce the perception of Stirner's atheist existentialist credentials, whether or not this was Buber's intention. Together with Löwith, Buber succeeded in including Stirner in the existentialist narrative, and in a period of some twenty-five years from 1952 to 1976, at the height of existentialism's influence, there was a series of largely unchallenged references to the allegedly self-evident connection between Stirner and existentialism.

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[100] Ibid., p. 25. Buber's lax use of the word 'erweisen' demonstrates his own assimilation of Kierkegaard's leap of faith.

[101] Ibid., p. 18.

[102] See Bernd Kast, 'Afterword', in Henri Arvon, *Max Stirner. An den Quellen des Existentialismus*, trans. by Gerhard H. Müller, ed. by Armin Geus (Rangsdorf: Basilisken-Presse, 2012), pp. 204-219 (p. 216).

In the anglophone world, it was Herbert Read who initially took the lead in calling attention to this supposed relationship. Writing in 1952, he observes:

> It [existentialism] is saying that man is the reality – not even man in the abstract, but the human person, you and I; and that everything else – freedom, love, reason, God – is a contingency depending on the will of the individual. In this respect existentialism has much in common with Max Stirner's egoism.[103]

Apparently basing his argument solely on Stirner and the existentialists' shared focus on the individual's perspective, Read goes so far as to declare: 'Stirner is one of the most existentialist of all past philosophers, and whole pages of *The Ego and His Own* read like anticipations of Sartre.'[104] Influenced, perhaps, once again, by a desire to fit Stirner into the existentialist mood of his time, Read appears to have been blind to the fact that Stirner does not fulfil Read's own definition of an existentialist according to the litmus test of 'Angst' (see page 248 above). Thus, five years later, Read repeated his claim:

> I would like to suggest that the fashionable doctrine of existentialism must owe something to Stirner – the resemblances are too many and too close to be accidental. […] The characters in Sartre's plays and novels are constructed round a philosophy which seems to me to be identical with Stirner's.[105]

This is, at the very least, an exaggeration. Stirner and Sartre do concur on *ex nihilo*/*ad nihilum* subjectivism, self-realisation and existence preceding essence, as Leopold correctly recognises: '[I]n the 1960s Stirner was rediscovered again, this time as a thinker with conceptual affinities – for example in his anti-essentialist conception of the self as a "creative nothing" […] – with existentialist thought.'[106] But on specific existentialist themes, especially the negative ones, there is little or no consensus.

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[103] Read, *Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism*, p. 10.
[104] Ibid., p. 24.
[105] Read, *The Tenth Muse*, p. 81.
[106] Leopold, 'Introduction', in Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. xii.

Around the same time, though in the francophone world, Henri Arvon (1914-1992) advanced a similar theory about existentialism's debt to Stirner, in his aptly titled book, *Aux sources de l'existentialisme: Max Stirner* (1954). Despite the title, however, the issue of Stirner's connection to existentialism is actually only raised in the four-page conclusion, where Arvon bemoans Mackay's influence on Stirner's legacy, in creating what he considers to be a false association with anarchism. Like Buber before him, to whom he gives a nod of approval, Arvon sees Stirner's true place in the history of philosophy alongside Kierkegaard:[107]

> The two philosophers, indeed, were ignorant of each other; the atheist Stirner and Kierkegaard the believer are apparently separated by an impassable gulf. And yet, what an astonishing encounter this is. It is with the same dialectical vigour that they combat the system of Hegel; it is with the same violence that they censure impersonal Reason. Both writers found the existential Ego by infinitely extending its field of action.[108]

Arvon, like his predecessors, offers no better, or more conclusive, evidence than Kierkegaard's and Stirner's shared subjectivism. As for the fact that they were both reacting to the monolithic figure of Hegel, this was something of an inevitability for any European thinker living in the first half of the nineteenth century, so dominant was Hegelianism in the philosophical discourse of the period. Nonetheless, Arvon finishes his book with a confident challenge: 'Stirner and Kierkegaard have accomplished the same work of liberation: they have restored the pre-eminent value of the Ego to its true primacy […]. If Christian existentialism recognizes itself in Kierkegaard, can atheist existentialism continue to ignore Stirner?'.[109]

Support for the idea of Stirner's connection to existentialism continued to come from around Europe. The German Marxist, Holz, reaffirmed the link, claiming that Stirner and the

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[107] See Henri Arvon, *Aux sources de l'existentialisme: Max Stirner* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), p. 178.
[108] Ibid., p. 177. Quoted in Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 166.
[109] Ibid., p. 178. Quoted in Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, pp. 166, 167.

existentialists share in the counter-revolutionary isolation of the individual,[110] a theme which is expanded on by another Marxist, Helms, who lumps Stirner together with existentialism and other forms of (lower-)middle class fascistic ideology:

> Stirner [ist] der erste Prophet der 'Eigentlichkeit', die seither über Heidegger, Jaspers und den Existentialismus zum primitivsten, nichtssagenden Gemeinplatz der mittelständischen Ideologie geworden ist. Dagegen Marx: 'Der wirkliche Mensch ist erst in der Gestalt des *egoistischen* Individuums, der wahre Mensch erst in der Gestalt des *abstrakten citoyen* anerkannt.' Beide dialektisch zum ζώον πολιτικόν zu emanzipieren, ist Marxens Idee. Den einen mit dem anderen totzuschlagen ist das Ideal Stirners und des Faschismus.[111]

Penzo, writing in 1971, followed Arvon's example by including the identification of Stirner with existentialism in the title of his book, *Max Stirner: La rivolta esistenziale*, in which he repeatedly affirms Stirner's existential qualities: 'Meiner Meinung nach muß Stirner als Vertreter einer neuen existentiellen Seinsphilosophie angesehen werden, welche die nominalistischste Position vertritt, die die Geschichte des abendländischen Denkens jemals gekannt hat.'[112] As well as explicitly agreeing with Paterson's assessment of Stirner's existentialist credentials,[113] Penzo also follows Paterson in labelling Stirner a nihilist.[114] It is only a short step to branding Stirner an existential nihilist, although this is anyway implied by such statements as: 'Stirners Ausgangspunkt sei die schreckliche Erfahrung der Sinnlosigkeit von allem.'[115] But such assertions reveal a manifestly false assumption, namely that, because

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[110] See Holz, *Der französische Existentialismus*, pp. 106-111.
[111] Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft*, p. 95. ζώον πολιτικόν = *zoon politikon* is a phrase originally used by Aristotle, meaning 'political animal'.
[112] Penzo, *Die existentielle Empörung*, p. 24.
[113] See ibid., p. 297. 'Natürlich teile ich Patersons Auffassung, der Kern von Stirners Thematik dürfe nicht in seinen Beziehungen zu Anarchismus und Marxismus gesehen werden, sondern liege eher, wie auch Buber bereits festgestellt habe, auf existentiellem Gebiet.' See also ibid., p. 298. 'Am Ende dieser kurzen Darlegung sei darauf verwiesen, daß das Verdienst der Studie von Paterson darin liegt, den englisch sprechenden Leserinnen und Lesern die Gestalt Stirners als eines Vorläufers des Existentialismus gezeigt zu haben.'
[114] See ibid., p. 15. 'Stirners Nihilismus ist nichts anderes als ein mit erbarmungsloser Logik bis zu seinen letzten Konsequenzen hin durchgeführtes Denken.'
[115] Ibid., p. 298.

a theist views Stirner's godless world devoid of absolutes as horrifying and meaningless, so Stirner must have felt the same. There is no evidence of this being the case.

The tenuous nature of Penzo's conclusions about Stirner is demonstrated by the following extract:

> Paterson schreibt, im Grunde bleibe Stirner das Kind seiner Zeit. Er sei einerseits geprägt durch die nihilistische Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts. Sein Werk spiegele die für Leopardi, Poe, Schopenhauer, [Hartmann,] Ibsen und Baudelaire typische Welt der Verzweiflung und des Satanismus. Andererseits gehöre Stirners Werk zu der aus der Aktivität politischer Terroristen hervorgegangenen und von ihnen verteidigten Literatur. Dies erkläre die dunklen und nihilistischen Elemente, die bereits in den Schriften Baudelaires, Rimbauds und Strindbergs auftauchten.[116]

Even allowing for the inaccuracies that can creep into translations, of which, in this case, there are many, the mere suggestion of influence by authors where no record exists that Stirner knew them (Leopardi, Poe, Schopenhauer), or worse still that had not been published (Ibsen, Baudelaire, Hartmann) or even born (Rimbaud, Strindberg) before the first edition of *Der Einzige*, smacks, at the very least, of confusion on Penzo's (or his translator's) part.[117]

Another questionable contribution to the discussion of Stirner and existentialism in the anglophone world of scholarship came from Isaiah Berlin. In a lecture on the roots of Romanticism he firstly establishes a relationship of dependency between existentialism and Romanticism: 'The central sermon of existentialism is essentially a Romantic one, namely that there is in the world nothing to lean on.'[118] He then proceeds to identify Stirner as a thinker who took this logic too far, by denying not only institutions and doctrines, but also theories

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[116] Ibid., p. 297. N.b., Hartmann is omitted from the first list of authors in the authorised German translation.

[117] For the original, see Penzo, *Max Stirner: La rivolta esistenziale*, p. 364. Paterson writes that *Der Einzige* 'belongs with the nihilistic literature of the nineteenth century', and lists the authors mentioned by Penzo. He does not speak of influence. See Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 313.

[118] Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism. The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1965. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC*, ed. by Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 142.

and general propositions, culminating in the rejection of the established meanings of words themselves:

> Why should words be uniform? Why cannot I make up my own universe each time I begin? But if I do that, if there is no systematic symbolism, then I cannot think. If I cannot think, I go mad.
>
> To do him justice, Stirner did duly go mad. He ended his life very honourably and very consistently in a lunatic asylum as a perfectly peaceful harmless lunatic, in 1856.[119]

Stirner's iconoclasm did not propose, if this is what Berlin is suggesting, the arbitrary implementation of words;[120] nor did he go mad and die in a lunatic asylum (although his mother did);[121] and nor, as claimed in the original lecture (the above quotation is taken from a redacted transcript), did he die in the 1860s.[122] Hidden away amongst the numerous bizarre falsehoods is at least the grain of truth that Stirner was a radical iconoclast.

Paterson's Indictment of the 'Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner'

Berlin's light-hearted inexactitudes are in sharp contrast to the earnest pronouncements of the high priest of Stirner scholarship, Paterson. Unlike Arvon and Penzo, Paterson avoided using the word 'existential' in the title of his book on Stirner, perhaps because it was such a fashionable term at the time of writing in the early 1970s; 'nihilist' and 'egoist' were much more appropriately negative labels for the heading of a polemical work. Paterson's war was with Stirner in the first instance, and he arguably saw no reason to open up a second front

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[119] Ibid., p. 144.

[120] Concerning the meaning of words, Berlin may be referring to Stirner's phrase, 'die Nacktheit und Kahlheit der Begriffe und Ideen'. Stirner, 'Recensenten Stirners', p. 115. Stirner questions the abstract, generalised meanings given to certain specific words (e.g. 'Mensch' and 'Einzige') and criticises the unquestioning acceptance of a word's established content, but he cannot be described as a semantic nihilist. To put Stirner's ideas on the subject into perspective, see Stirner, 'Recensenten Stirners', pp. 113-118.

[121] See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 207.

[122] In the original lecture he declared that Stirner 'ended his life […] somewhere in the middle sixties'. See Isaiah Berlin, 'Existentialism & Max Stirner' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYVGH7eVyFI> [accessed 24 August 2021]. In his defence, Berlin may have been speaking extemporaneously.

against so popular an opponent as existentialism or, indeed, to dignify Stirner with such a glamorous label. He is nonetheless at pains to point out throughout the book that the origin of Stirner's 'nihilistic egoism' is the very same sense of meaninglessness which underlies existentialism:

> In the present book I have tried to locate and define the main resemblances between existentialist philosophy and the philosophy of *Der Einzige*, […] and in doing so I have suggested that the point of departure for both Stirner and the existentialists is this crucial experience of the meaninglessness of all things.[123]

Paterson falls squarely into that group of post-war critics whose anachronistic readings of Stirner rely heavily on the prevailing spirit of existentialism.

It becomes clear though, in the course of Paterson's diatribe, that the root of his grievance against Stirner is his lack of religious belief:

> The vision which Stirner unfolds is the vision of a world without God and hence without any unifying or directive value; it is the vision of a meaningless world, in which there are no inscribed purposes or true values; it is the vision of a world which is strictly no 'world' but rather a moral and metaphysical chaos.[124]

The inference that godlessness necessarily means purposelessness is, however, entirely Paterson's. Stirner does not reach such a conclusion; it is rather Paterson, as a man of God, contemplating what Stirner's annihilation of absolutes and abstractions would mean for his own world, who arrives at this result. This misplaced reasoning, similar to Penzo's mentioned above, allows Paterson to adjudge Stirner a nihilist, because the feelings that Stirner's godlessness inspire in Paterson are compatible with the common definition of existential nihilism:

> His atheism is the denial that reality has any fixed and necessary meaning. It is an affirmation of the ultimate insignificance of all things. The egoism of the total atheist

[123] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 317.
[124] Ibid., p. 226.

> is thus the egoism of the nihilist, and thus the total atheist, according to Stirner, is ultimately identical with the *nihilistic egoist*.[125]

The phrase 'according to Stirner' is particularly misleading, because it implies that this was Stirner's opinion. What Paterson actually means is according to his own assessment of what life would be like for Paterson himself in Stirner's godless world. In other words, Paterson is an example of a passive nihilist in a Nietzschean sense, who assumes that, because one interpretation of meaning has collapsed (namely his own), existence can have no meaning at all.[126] He then proceeds to project his own experience of passive nihilism onto Stirner.

Paterson argues that existentialism pusillanimously recoils from the consequences of its nihilistic roots:

> To the truly self-consistent nihilist this is existentialism's real point of failure. On the one hand the existentialist seeks to remain true to his original vision of the meaninglessness and futility of everything; […] on the other hand, his stark personal reality is that he finds himself *unable* to appropriate the truth of nihilism existentially: […] it is at this point that he clutches at the artifice of commitment, hoping to save himself from nihilistic despair by a desperate leap towards a faith that will restore meaning and purpose to his shattered world.[127]

Paterson's reasoning seems to be that, although the existentialist's starting point must always be existential nihilism, because existentialism relies on the assumptions of nihilism for the basis of its world view, the existentialist must always reject nihilism, since he or she finds its consequences unacceptably desolate. According to this theory, a fully developed existentialist can never be a nihilist, which could explain why there is no historical example of a self-confessed existential nihilist. Existential nihilism, in this case, would just be a temporary precondition of existentialism. However, Paterson then somewhat confuses matters:

> If an existentialist is a man who seeks to experience the encounter with nothingness inwardly and in his whole person, […] then the refusal to make the truth of nihilism

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[125] Ibid., p. 217.
[126] See *KGW*, VIII.i. 216, *NF-1886*, 5[71].
[127] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 238.

> one's own and build one's life entirely within its shadow is indeed a refusal of existentialism itself. The existentialist cannot find salvation in a significant, purposeful faith without ceasing to be an existentialist.[128]

This would apparently mean not only that existential nihilism is the truth of existentialism, but also that all of those whom one knows today as existentialists (Kierkegaard, Sartre et al.) are not actually existentialists at all. It would, indeed, leave no existentialists whatsoever – unless the only one were: Max Stirner.

Equally bewildering is Paterson's assumption that the existentialist seeks to experience, encounter, appropriate and live nothingness. Nothingness may be what the existential nihilist discovers at the heart of existence, in a world where the myths associated with religion (God, immortality of the soul, absolute values, etc.) are no longer credible. But it is hard to argue that the encounter is sought; the narratives of existentialism show nothingness being experienced with disorientation and dismay, which explains the search for meaning *malgré tout*. The explanation for this distortion may lie in the fact that Paterson is playing a rather clumsy blame game. By making lack of faith a matter of volition, rather than the product of enlightened reason, he puts himself in the position of being able to chastise the nihilist by asserting: 'it is in […] such a vacuum that the nihilistic egoist [i.e. Stirner] has consciously and voluntarily taken up his abode. It is in the dimension of meaninglessness that he lives and moves and has his being.'[129] The moralistic conclusion, therefore, is that '[t]he true nihilist does not want to be saved'.[130] Worse still: 'The total atheist [i.e. Stirner] does not find himself abandoned by God: it is God who is abandoned by the total atheist.'[131] Finally,

[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid., p. 241.
[130] Ibid., p. 233.
[131] Ibid., p. 224.

having posited unbelief as an act of heinous free will, Paterson introduces the concept of sin into the discussion:

> To the religious believer […] Stirner's account ought to shed a grim light on the nature and implications of 'sin', conceived as estrangement from God, from the ground and goal of our being; for in his proud self-sufficiency The Unique One is the archetype of the sinful individual, basing his life on a conscious refusal of present grace or future salvation.[132]

As an exercise in religious instruction this is no doubt useful, but it sheds no light at all on the nature or meaning of Stirner's thought.

As for his insight into the nature of the existentialist, Paterson clarifies to some extent the earlier confusion by making a distinction between the theoretical and practical variety:

> The existentialist is defined by his commitment to this [the nihilistic] truth, which renders all other commitments impossible; although actual existentialists, in their desperate search for meaningful commitments, have in fact refused this original commitment to meaninglessness, and it has in fact been left to the nihilist to preserve the nihilistic truth which is at the heart of existentialism.[133]

In other words, by 'nihilist' Paterson means 'existential nihilist', by 'true existentialism' he means 'existential nihilism', and by 'actual existentialist' he means a 'lapsed nihilist'. Again, the point of these redefinitions is to make Stirner appear the worst of a thoroughly bad bunch, in the guise of the one, unique example of an existential nihilist. Thus Paterson declares:

> Meaninglessness, for Stirner, is not just an objective feature of experienced reality which the nihilist simply discovers and passively records: meaninglessness is the household demon which he himself unleashes, it is his personal mark which he deliberately stamps upon his experience, it is a governing and universal phenomenon which he has freely chosen and wholly wills; and thus the metaphysical desert which he inhabits is ultimately a desert of his own creation; in looking into the abyss he is ultimately looking into himself.[134]

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[132] Ibid., p. 318.

[133] Ibid., p. 241. Cf. ibid., p. 251. 'To consummate the original truth of existentialism […] is to recognize oneself as a nihilistic egoist.'

[134] Ibid., p. 242. The abyss metaphor is, in all likelihood, borrowed from Nietzsche. See Chapter 3, footnote 188 above.

Largely ignoring Stirner's ideas, while considering only the implications of Stirner's godlessness for a devout believer, Paterson's purple prose continues, littered with inappropriate adjectives and inaccurate assertions:

> Rootless, vagrant, detached; frivolous, unstable, irresponsible; squandering his fluid and transient being in a consciously promiscuous career of deliberately gratuitous acts of repudiation: in the solitary and arbitrary figure of The Unique One is personified everything that is negative and destructive. On the grim, predatory features of the ruthless egoist Stirner has etched the hollow, dissipated features of the uncaring nihilist.[135]

The allegation of nihilism, by which he unquestionably means existential nihilism, is at the core of Paterson's condemnation of Stirner. Paterson sums up the case for the prosecution as follows:

> Like the existentialists, Stirner starts from the nihilistic premise. Meaninglessness, the essential nullity of everything, is for Stirner the governing and universal phenomenon, the key feature of the individual's experience, draining it of all significance and value. To exist is to live – not under the reign of God, or of law, or of humanity – but under the reign of nothingness. 'All things are nothing to me!' says Stirner in the primordial accents of the nihilist. Unlike the existentialists, however, Stirner moves from his nihilistic premise to an equally nihilistic dénouement. The existence into which he finally projects himself remains the Godless, lawless, inhuman existence of his original instinct.[136]

In Stirner's defence, this is plainly not what he says. He does not assert the nullity of everything, nor does he uphold the reign of nothingness. He proclaims the mythical nature of abstractions and external causes, which is no doubt a form of annihilation, but by no means a universal one; and he implies that an individual's consciousness is a temporary phenomenon confined to a person's lifetime, which is again a form of annihilation, but only of the dream of immortality.

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[135] Ibid., p. 248.
[136] Ibid., p. 242.

Stirner describes fictional constructs like God, humanity and fatherland as unreal; sin, as well as good and evil, as making no sense; but nowhere does he refer to life itself as meaningless. On the contrary, he states specifically that he is untroubled by his own transience, while revelling in the replacement of eternal, external masters by the transient, autonomous self: 'Hat Gott, hat die Menschheit, […] Gehalt genug in sich, um sich Alles in Allem zu sein: so spüre Ich, dass es *Mir* noch weit weniger daran fehlen wird, und dass Ich über meine "Leerheit" keine Klage zu führen haben werde.'[137] Stirner's exaltation of the ego is plainly incompatible with the stygian imagery of existentialism: 'Jedes höhere Wesen über Mir, sei es Gott, sei es der Mensch, schwächt das Gefühl meiner Einzigkeit und erblicht erst vor der Sonne dieses Bewusstseins.'[138] This is the language of celebration, not of disorientation or despair.

Paterson's case rests to a large extent on the significance of the concept of nothingness in *Der Einzige*, which he considers similar, if not identical, to that found in Sartre: 'For both Stirner and Sartre, then, it is Nothingness which is at the heart of the world, inasmuch as the being who brings the world into being is himself a Nothingness.'[139] Paterson bases his judgment on such comments by Sartre as: 'If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing.'[140] There is certainly some similarity between this and some of Stirner's pronouncements. Concerning the indefinability of the self, Stirner writes: 'Man sagt von Gott: "Namen nennen Dich nicht". Das gilt von Mir: kein *Begriff* drückt Mich aus, nichts, was man als mein Wesen angibt, erschöpt Mich.'[141] As for the nothingness of the self, Stirner says: 'Ich, dieses Nichts, werde meine *Schöpfungen* aus Mir hervor

[137] *EE*, p. 15.
[138] Ibid., p. 370.
[139] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 177.
[140] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 28.
[141] *EE*, p. 370.

treiben.'[142] However, as noted above, the positions of Stirner and the existentialists with regard to the subjective perspective of the unique, transient individual are far from dissimilar. What is dissimilar, though, is the effect that these parameters of human existence have on their very different versions of the individual existent.

'Der Einzige und sein Eigentum': Between Two Nothings

Paterson may be the most vociferous of Stirner's critics, but he is certainly not alone in associating the concept of nothingness in Stirner with what implicitly amounts to existential nihilism, or at least nihilism in a Nietzschean sense. As seen in Chapter 4 above, Bernstein, Heman, Lucchesi, Penzo, Lütkehaus, Ulrich and Dod all belong to this group, to which Löwith and Camus can be added. These and other upholders of Stirner's alleged nihilism never tire of pointing out that his magnum opus is sandwiched between two nothings, in the form of the work's opening and closing line: 'Ich hab' Mein' Sach' auf Nichts gestellt.'[143] The parallel with the Epicurean-atheist idea of life being sandwiched between two nothings,[144] what Onfray terms 'L'entre-deux néants', or, to coin a neologism, 'mesomidenika', is too conspicuous to be ignored.[145] Lucchesi observes: 'Der einseitige Individualismus Stirners

[142] Ibid., p. 240.

[143] Ibid., pp. 13, 370.

[144] See Epicurus, *The Art of Happiness*, trans. by George K. Strodach (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. 156. '[D]eath means nothing to us.'

[145] For the concept behind 'mesomidenika', see Onfray, *A Hedonist Manifesto*, p. 109. 'Between Two Nothings | Every existence entails an emergence from nothing, and the only prospect is to return to it someday. Life unfolds between two nothings.' See also Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto*, p. 66. '[E]ach life constitutes a brief interlude between the nothingness that came before it and the nothingness that comes after it.' Cf. John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* (London: J. M. Dent, 1900), p. 81. 'Heaven fashion'd us of nothing; and we strive | To bring ourselves to nothing.' Cf. Jules Laforgue, *Sonnet pour Éventail*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Jules Laforgue*, 3 vols (Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1902-1903), I, p. 46. 'L'homme entre deux néants n'est qu'un jour de misère.' 'Man between two nothings is but a day of misery.' [My translation.] Laforgue (1860-1887) was a disciple of Schopenhauer and Hartmann. Cf. Nietzsche's *Dionysos Dithyramben*: 'Jetzt – | zwischen zwei Nichtse | eingekrümmt, | ein Fragezeichen, | ein müdes Rätsel –' *KGW*, VI.iii. 390, *DD-Raubvögeln*. Cf. Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, pp. 208-209. '[A]nd the period of time in which it is my lot to live is so infinitesimal compared with the eternity in which I have not been and shall not be. […] What a monstrous business! What futility!' Cf.

beginnt mit dem "Nichts" und endet im "Nichts".'[146] Paterson states in a similar vein: 'The Unique One creates his personal universe by reproducing the Nothingness of existence, which he therefore begins and ends by affirming.'[147] All of these detractors disregard the fact that the book's title includes no negative reference whatsoever, and concentrate instead on the less prominent, but far more controversial, line that starts and finishes the text. In so doing, they ignore the primary meaning of 'Nichts' in the line in question, extrapolating instead from Stirner's secondary meaning, to create an image of the existential void. His critics, to borrow the words of Unamuno's attack on atheists, 'have invested Nothingness with substance and personality';[148] with more, at any rate, than a careful reading of Stirner bears out. One might describe the resultant theories of Stirner's nihilism as much ado about two nothings.

The actual context of the heading, 'Ich hab' Mein' Sach' auf Nichts gestellt', can be found in the first line of text that follows it, where Stirner rejects all external obligations, which he lists thus:

> [D]ie gute Sache, dann die Sache Gottes, die Sache der Menschheit, der Wahrheit, der Freiheit, der Humanität, der Gerechtigkeit; ferner die Sache Meines Volkes, Meines Fürsten, Meines Vaterlandes; endlich gar die Sache des Geistes und tausend andere Sachen.[149]

Stirner instead makes his cause *nothing but* himself:

> Das Göttliche ist Gottes Sache, das Menschliche Sache 'des Menschen'. Meine Sache ist weder das Göttliche noch das Menschliche, ist nicht das Wahre, Gute, Rechte, Freie

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Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 190. 'And all those existents […] came from nowhere and were going nowhere. All of a sudden they existed and then, all of a sudden, they no longer existed.' And, finally, for something completely different from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*: 'You know, you come from nothing | You're going back to nothing | What have you lost? Nothing.' Eric Idle, 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life' <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/1921933/Always+Look+on+the+Bright+Side+of+ Life> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[146] Lucchesi, *Die Individualitätsphilosophie Max Stirners*, p. 96.

[147] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 250.

[148] Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and in Peoples*, trans. by J. E. Crawford Flitch (London: MacMillan, 1921), p. 122.

[149] *EE*, p. 13.

> usw., sondern allein das *Meinige*, und sie ist keine allgemeine, sondern ist – *einzig*, wie Ich einzig bin.[150]

The 'Nichts' in the heading, therefore, refers to all abstract, generalised, external causes; Stirner submits to none of them.[151] This oft misconstrued line is thus a confession of nominalism, not a declaration of nihilism. Stirner makes his meaning abundantly clear by explaining that the same applies to all of the other, general, causes, which are also concerned with *nothing but* themselves: 'Gott und die Menschheit haben ihre Sache auf Nichts gestellt, auf nichts als auf Sich.'[152]

As a skilled wordsmith and self-confessed atheist, Stirner almost certainly intended the word 'Nichts' in the opening epigram and elsewhere to embrace a secondary meaning, namely the nothingness of the self, in terms of the transience of each unique individual's existence. Stirner does not, as theologians are wont to do, fill the gaps in human knowledge with God. Instead, he leaves them as gaps; where God once stood, there is nothingness, above all before birth and after death. This is not dissimilar to Roquentin's view of life: 'It is I, *it is I* who pull myself from the nothingness to which I aspire.'[153] However, Stirner is careful to distinguish between the empty, created, nothingness of generalised, fictional causes, and the creative nothing of the self that is grounded, for a lifetime at least, in reality: 'Ich bin nicht Nichts im Sinne der Leerheit, sondern das schöpferische Nichts, das Nichts, aus welchem Ich

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[150] Ibid., p. 15.

[151] Kast has correctly interpreted the line in question as expressing the rejection of all abstractions and preconceptions: 'Stirner erhebt mit diesem Zitat den Anspruch, sich von all dem abzusetzen, was an nicht mehr hinterfragbaren und hinterfragten Voraussetzungen dem Einzelnen zugeschrieben wird, indem er den radikalen Bruch vollzieht mit der bisherigen Geschichte und der Kontinuität des menschlichen Bewusstseins.' Kast, *Max Stirners Destruktion der spekulativen Philosophie*, p. 177. Löwith also understood the meaning of 'Nichts' in this context as 'nothing but', but he nonetheless associates Stirner with nihilism. Cf. Welsh, *Max Stirner's Dialectical Egoism: A New Interpretation*, p. 48. 'Commentators such as Löwith and Paterson interpret Stirner's signature slogan in the preface as evidence of his nihilism […]. This is a misrepresentation of Stirner that is based on the studied avoidance of his discussion in both the preface and core of the book.'

[152] *EE*, p. 15.

[153] Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 145.

selbst als Schöpfer Alles schaffe.'[154] Stirner, therefore, is not, as is so often assumed, presenting a doctrine of nothingness, but of autonomous self-reliance within the parameters of finite existence; as such, he should be seen as a demythologising egoist rather than a dismal and destructive nihilist.

In the world of anglophone Stirner scholarship, which would of course include Paterson, there is one mitigating circumstance for the misunderstanding of Stirner's 'Nichts', in the form of Byington's English translation of the line in question, which he renders as: 'All things are nothing to me.'[155] Although it rolls easily off the tongue, it has quite different connotations to the original German and is much more suggestive of a pervasively nihilistic outlook. Presumably for this reason, Carroll, in the 1971 abridged version, altered it to 'I have founded my affair on nothing', which is less misleading, if also less pleasing to the ear.[156] In the original 1912 edition, 'I have set my affair on nothing' is offered in a footnote as 'the literal translation'.[157] Neither the inaccurate original translation nor the clumsy, more literal one, even in conjunction with the ensuing phrase 'nothing but themselves',[158] is conducive to a ready understanding of Stirner's meaning, and they have almost certainly helped to encourage the already widespread perception of Stirner's nihilism.

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[154] *EE*, p. 15. In the first edition of 1845 (released 1844), the first 'nicht' is omitted, so it reads: 'Ich bin Nichts im Sinne der Leerheit.' The 'sondern' that follows makes it clear that this is a printing error. Three lines later Stirner writes: 'Was gut, was böse! Ich bin selber ja Meine Sache, und Ich bin weder gut noch böse.' Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* (1845), p. 8. There is a remarkably similar thought process in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, where Nietzsche connects the indeterminacy of good and evil with the creative individual. See *KGW*, VI.i. 242-243, *Za-III-Tafeln-2*. '[W]as gut und böse ist, das weiss noch Niemand: - es sei denn der Schaffende! | – Das aber ist Der, welcher des Menschen Ziel schafft und der Erde ihren Sinn giebt und ihre Zukunft.'

[155] Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. by Steven T. Byington, ed. by J. L. Walker (London: A. C. Fifield, 1912), p. 3.

[156] See Stirner, *The Ego and His Own* (1971), p. 39.

[157] Stirner, *The Ego and His Own* (1912), p. 3.

[158] Ibid., p. 5.

Nothingness does not, in fact, play a major role in Stirner's philosophy. It is a point of reference and an expression of conviction, but not a *primum mobile*. It is a counterbalance to its opposite, being, but it does not overwhelm it. Stirner does not ask the scientific question of whether the void is real, nor the metaphysical question of why there is something and not nothing, nor, unlike Hegel and Sartre, the ontological question about the relationship between being and nothingness. The word 'nothing' has a far more limited scope in Stirner's thought; as a noun, it is used primarily to describe the unreality of abstractions, as invented phantasms with no substance, much as Harari depicts the myths of mankind.[159] Stirner, like Harari, is fixated on the problem of abstractions, but not on the idea of nothingness. The following gives an insight into the relationship between these two concepts in Stirner's outlook:

> Feuerbach pocht in den 'Grundsätzen der Philosophie der Zukunft' immer auf *das Sein*. Darin bleibt auch er, bei aller Gegnerschaft gegen Hegel und die absolute Philosophie, in der Abstraktion stecken; denn 'das Sein' ist Abstraktion, wie selbst 'das Ich'. Nur *Ich bin* nicht Abstraktion allein, *Ich bin* alles in allem, folglich selbst Abstraktion oder Nichts, Ich bin alles und Nichts.[160]

For Stirner, in other words, nothingness is a descriptive quality of abstractions; it has no connotation of apprehension or disquiet. Thus, when Copleston says that 'Stirner's obscure remarks about "creative nothing" recall to mind certain aspects of Heidegger's thought',[161] it is important to add that Heidegger's notion of nothingness differs greatly from Stirner's in this respect. The difference is most evident in Heidegger's concept of Angst, which he associates with nothingness: 'Das Nichts, davor die Angst bringt, enthüllt die Nichtigkeit, die das Dasein in seinem *Grunde* bestimmt, der selbst ist als Geworfenheit in den Tod.'[162] Nothingness in Heidegger, unlike in Stirner, is inextricably linked to a negative perception of death and

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[159] See Harari, *Sapiens*, p. 31. 'There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings.'
[160] *EE*, pp. 343-344.
[161] Copleston, *A History of Philosophy,* VII.2*,* p. 236.
[162] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 308.

personal extinction. Stirner's 'creative nothing' is a wholly positive construct and can hardly be called 'obscure' when viewed from the perspective of the intellectual environment within which Stirner was operating.

It can reasonably be assumed that Stirner's most immediate source for the idea behind the term 'creative nothing' was Feuerbach, whose *Das Wesen des Christentums* includes two chapters, 'Das Geheimnis der Vorsehung und Schöpfung aus Nichts', and 'Die Bedeutung der Kreation im Judentum', which deal with the creation myths of Christianity and Judaism respectively.[163] The language Feuerbach uses is reminiscent of Stirner's subsequent utterances on the subject. In the former he writes: 'Der höchste Gipfel des Subjektivitätsprinzips ist die Schöpfung aus Nichts';[164] and in the latter one finds: 'Nur in der unergründlichen Tiefe und Gewalt des hebräischen Egoismus hat […] die Schöpfung aus Nichts […] ihren Ursprung.'[165] Feuerbach had, by demonstrating the anthropomorphic nature of religion, sought to replace God with man: 'Homo homini Deus est – dies ist der oberste praktische Grundsatz – dies der Wendepunkt der Weltgeschichte.'[166] It is quite natural that Stirner, who set out to extend Feuerbach's method from man as a collective to man as an individual, should transfer the man-made attributes of God at the same time, especially as it afforded him the opportunity to indulge in some ironic humour at the expense of religion.

Stirner's notion of 'creative nothing' has far more to do with an irreverent response to the Christian theological interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2,[167] and 2 Maccabees 7:28,[168] than it

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[163] See Bernd Kast, 'Vorbemerkungen des Herausgebers zu "Rezensenten Stirners"', in *EE*, p. 400. 'Mit keinem Philosophen, Hegel ausgenommen, hat sich Stirner so intensiv auseinandergesetzt wie mit Feuerbach.'
[164] Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, in Ludwig Feuerbach, *Sämmtliche Werke*, VII, p. 148.
[165] Ibid., p. 168.
[166] Ibid., pp. 361-362.
[167] 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.'
[168] '[L]ook upon the heaven and earth, and all that is therein, and consider that God made them of things that were not.'

does with the Nietzschean or existential nihilist sense of the word 'nothingness'. It signifies the finite individual's usurpation of the creative function of the uncreated, omnipotent God of Christianity. But arguably of greater importance in this respect is Hegel's concept of nothing, with which Stirner would have been well acquainted. The relationship between 'Being' and 'Nothing' is a fundamental topic of philosophical debate stretching back to Parmenides, and one to which Hegel naturally also turned his attention. In Hegel's deliberations on the subject, one can immediately recognise the coordinates of Stirner's interplay between creation and annihilation. Hegel writes, for instance: 'Dieses reine Seyn ist nun die reine Abstraktion, damit das absolut-negative, welches, gleichfalls unmittelbar genommen, das Nichts ist.'[169]

In his *Wissenschaft der Logik*, Hegel introduces the triad of being-nothing-becoming, where nothingness, defined as 'vollkommene Leerheit, Bestimmungs- und Inhaltslosigkeit',[170] is part of a dialectical equation, rather than an object of existential horror: 'Es ist die dialektische immanente Natur des Seyns und Nichts selbst, daß sie ihre Einheit, das Werden, als ihre Wahrheit zeigen.'[171] Nothing is, therefore, together with being, a necessary prerequisite for becoming, which annihilates both being and nothing: 'Das Werden ist das Verschwinden von Seyn in Nichts, und von Nichts in Seyn, und das Verschwinden von Seyn und Nichts überhaupt.'[172] The result is that 'nothing' is rendered, existentially at least, a harmless part of the process of becoming: 'Seyn und Nichtseyn ist dasselbe; also ist es dasselbe, ob ich bin oder nicht bin.'[173] This also means, of course, that 'nothing' is no obstacle

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[169] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse. Erster Theil. Die Logik*, in *Hegel's Werke, Vollständige Ausgabe*, VI (1840), p. 169.
[170] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik. Ersther Teil, Die objective Logik. Erste Abtheilung, Die Lehre vom Seyn*, in *Hegel's Werke, Vollständige Ausgabe*, III (1833), p. 78.
[171] Ibid., p. 108.
[172] Ibid., p. 109.
[173] Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, p. 82. Cf. Lütkehaus, *Nichts*, pp. 660-661. 'Wie es die erklärte Absicht der Hegelschen Logik ist, die bestimmte Negation als positives Bewegungsmoment zu nutzen, so wird also auch die unbestimmte Negation des "*reinen Nichts*" unter der Hülle der Identität des Seins und des Nichts positiviert.'

to immortality: 'Die populairen, besonders orientalischen Sprüche, daß Alles, was ist, den Keim seines Vergehens in seiner Geburt selbst habe, der Tod umgekehrt der Eingang in neues Leben sey, drücken im Grunde dieselbe Einigung des Seyns und Nichts aus.'[174] Although Stirner, like all Left Hegelians, is critical of Hegel (and not least of his conciliatory attitude towards religion), his concept of 'Nichts' is essentially based on Hegel's idea that it represents the negative impulse within the dialectical process.

It is in this Hegelian sense of 'Nichts', as the absolute of the antithesis (a word Hegel did not use, but which adequately describes the second step of his dialectical model), that Stirner envisages the activity of the self in relation to the state:

> Es ist fortan nicht mehr um den Staat […] zu tun, sondern um Mich. Damit versinken alle Fragen über Fürstenmacht, Konstitution usw. in ihren wahren Abgrund und ihr wahres Nichts. Ich, dieses Nichts, werde meine *Schöpfungen* aus Mir hervor treiben.[175]

At the same time, Stirner also indicates the secondary meaning of nothingness associated with the transience of the individual ego, which stands in opposition to the generalised abstraction of the absolute self.[176] The primary sense in Stirner remains, however, Hegel's second or negatively rational moment, although Stirner seems to be more interested in its quality of annihilation, which he implements enthusiastically in his campaign against sacred abstractions, than in its qualities of mediation and preservation implied by Hegel's concept of sublation (Aufhebung). Annihilation is an important aspect of Stirner's programme of self-empowerment through ownership, as is demonstrated by the following remark: 'um sie [die Gesellschaft] aber vollständig benutzen zu können, verwandle Ich sie […] in mein Eigentum und mein Geschöpf, d. h. ich vernichte sie.'[177] But this form of annihilation is not part of the

[174] Ibid., p. 80.
[175] *EE*, p. 240.
[176] See ibid., p. 188.
[177] Ibid., p. 185.

definition of existential nihilism outlined above, nor even of political nihilism, as it takes place on the nonphysical level of ideas.

Stirner's terminology places his philosophical project firmly within the context of post-Hegelian discourse.[178] But his conceptual mimicry of Hegel disguises to some extent Stirner's ideological opposition to Hegelianism. In sharp contrast to Hegelian dialectics, all processes of development in Stirner's thought begin and end with the self:[179]

> Alle Prädikate von den Gegenständen sind meine Aussagen, meine Urteile, meine – Geschöpfe. Wollen sie sich losreißen von Mir, und etwas für sich sein, oder gar Mir imponieren, so habe Ich nichts Eiligeres zu tun, als sie in ihr Nichts, d.h. in Mich, den Schöpfer, zurückzunehmen. Gott, Christus, Dreieinigkeit, Sittlichkeit, das Gute usw. sind solche Geschöpfe, von denen Ich Mir nicht bloß erlauben muss, zu sagen, sie seien Wahrheiten, sondern auch, sie seien Täuschungen. Wie Ich einmal ihr Dasein gewollt und dekretiert habe, so will Ich auch ihr Nichtsein wollen dürfen.[180]

As Kast observes: 'Mit der Akzentuierung des Willens des konkreten Einzelnen, […] hebt sich Stirner von Hegel mit dessen eigener Terminologie ab.'[181]

But despite his antagonism towards Hegel, Stirner's concept of 'Nichts' nonetheless derives its conceptual framework directly from Hegel. Even though there is a tenuous link between the dialectical sense of nothingness in Hegel, via Fichte's notion of being and nothingness, through European Romanticism and Kierkegaard, to existentialism, it is of no particular relevance for the understanding of Stirner's use of the term. Stirner completely avoids the element of despair which characterises the Romantic confrontation with nothingness. Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), who has been described as 'the supreme

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[178] Like Hegel, though by no means so thoroughly or extensively, Stirner divides his book into sections and subsections of three. Kast considers this a trivialisation of Hegel's triadic system: 'Stirner opponiert […] gegen Hegel, indem er in den Unterteilungen die Triade […] von Hegels Darstellung der Weltgeschichte trivialisiert.' Kast, *Max Stirners Destruktion der spekulativen Philosophie*, p. 132.

[179] See ibid., p. 129. 'Stirner bricht mit Hegels dialektischem Verfahren, baut es ab und destruiert es schließlich. Gerade diese Destruktion der Dialektik wird meist verkannt.'

[180] *EE*, p. 341.

[181] Kast, *Max Stirners Destruktion der spekulativen Philosophie*, p. 81.

exponent of the Romantic malady of the soul',[182] provides a good example of such a response to nothingness, which contrasts so strikingly with Stirner's: 'All is nothingness in the world, including my despair.'[183] Like Stirner, he describes the self as nothing, but what for Stirner represents an opportunity, is for Leopardi a torment: 'I was frightened to find myself in the midst of nothingness, a nothing myself. I felt as if I were suffocating, thinking and feeling that all is nothing, solid nothing.'[184]

Nothing Really Matters

It is arguably the commentator's urge to compartmentalise and, during the existentialist era, to do so while looking through an existentialist lens, which has resulted in Stirner's references to 'Nichts' being so frequently misunderstood. But another reason lies in the conceptual ambiguity of the word itself. This starts with the contradiction that, as the ancient Greeks discovered, by positing 'nothing', one automatically describes something, the so-called paradox of negative existentials,[185] which has troubled philosophers, theologians and writers

[182] Schenk, *The Mind of the European Romantics*, p. 49.
[183] Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, trans. by Kathleen Baldwin, ed. by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 75.
[184] Ibid., p. 82.
[185] Negative existentials are defined as follows: 'Very briefly, the problem can be stated as follows: it seems that in order to deny the existence of a given individual, one must assume the existence of that very individual.' Maria Reicher, 'Nonexistent Objects', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/nonexistent-objects/> [accessed 24 August 2021]. Examples, both in literature and philosophy, are myriad, e.g.: Ronald Green, *Nothing Matters: A Book about Nothing* (Alresford: iff Books, 2011), p. x. 'What is this *nothing* that we can't actually see, touch or feel? Is it absolute? Is it relative to everything else? If we are able to think about it, write and read about it, is it something, and if so wouldn't it *not* be nothing?' Cf. Sartre, *Nausea*, pp. 192-193. 'In order to imagine nothingness, you had to be there already, right in the world, with your eyes wide open and alive; nothingness was just an idea in my head, an existing idea floating in that immensity: this nothingness hadn't come *before* existence, it was an existence like any other.' Cf. Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 108. 'ROS: We might as well be dead. Do you think death could possibly be a boat? | GUIL: No, no, no ... Death is ... not. Death isn't. You take my meaning. Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can't not-be on a boat. | ROS: I've frequently not been on boats. | GUIL: No, no, no – what you've been is not on boats.'

ever since.[186] It is a word, therefore, that at best defies definition and at worst is self-annihilating. In Fregean terms, the word 'nothing' can always have a sense, but only has the appearance of a reference when used to describe an absence, though only in so far as the appearance does *not* include that which is absent.[187] This obscurity of meaning acts as both a spur to the imagination and an aid to misunderstanding.

Its ambiguity is only increased by the fact that the word 'Nichts' is both a noun and an indefinite pronoun. As a noun it means nothingness, nonexistence and the void, while as a pronoun it means 'not anything', as in the absence of something, and can be used together with other words (prepositions, conjunctions and quantifiers) such as 'anderes', 'außer' and 'als'. In the case of the infamous heading of the prologue of *Der Einzige*, the primary meaning of 'Nichts' is as a pronoun, while the secondary meaning is as a noun. Admittedly, 'Nichts' is capitalised, even when the line is not being used as a heading (i.e. when it is repeated at the end of the book), which would imply that it is meant as a noun, but Stirner, whose capitalisation is consistently unorthodox anyway, is quoting from Goethe's poem, 'Vanitas! vanitatum vanitas!', where 'Nichts' is also capitalised, and where it means 'nothing in particular' rather than nonexistence or the philosophical concept of nothingness.[188]

The fact that the poem's first line is a relatively well-known quotation gives Stirner licence to imbue the capitalised word 'Nichts' with meaning, but it is equally clear that the primary sense in Stirner's reproduction is as in Goethe's original, which describes a man who has tried devoting himself to money, possessions, women, travel, fame and war, and after a

[186] Parmenides, the father of metaphysics, started off the discussion, with his rejection of nothingness: 'What is for being and thinking must be; for it can be, and nothing can not.' Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 132.
[187] See Gottlob Frege, 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung', *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, 100.1 (1892), 25-50.
[188] See *Goethe's Gedichte*, I, pp. 88-89.

series of disasters and disappointments, has decided to dedicate himself to nothing (i.e. to none of these things), with the result that he has finally found contentment. The final stanza includes the lines:

> Nun hab' ich mein Sach auf Nichts gestellt.
> Juchhe!
> Und mein gehört die ganze Welt.
> Juchhe![189]

It is clear how well the sentiments expressed here correspond to Stirner's philosophy, which explains the repetition of the poem's first line in Stirner's magnum opus. Moreover, Stirner's secondary meaning of 'Nichts' is suggested by the title of Goethe's poem, 'Vanitas! vanitatum vanitas!', which refers to the Vulgate biblical phrase, 'Vanitas vanitatum dixit Ecclesiastes vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas', used in Christianity to remind believers of the transience of earthly life, for instance in funerary art and memento mori.[190]

On the rare occasions in *Der Einzige* where Stirner uses the word 'Nichts' solely as a noun, he invariably does so in the Hegelian sense, to describe the nothingness of an abstraction or the process of ontological annihilation, for example: 'Stelle Ich denn meine Sache […] auf *Mich*, der Ich so gut wie Gott das Nichts von allem Andern, der Ich mein Alles, der Ich der Einzige bin.'[191] Stirner uses 'nichts' far more frequently as a pronoun, which leads to a further problem in English, where nouns are not capitalised as in German, meaning that there is no visible difference between the noun and pronoun forms of the English word, 'nothing'. Thus, the translation of 'Mir geht nichts über Mich!',[192] is 'Nothing is more to me than myself!'.[193]

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[189] *Goethe's Gedichte*, I, p. 89.
[190] Ecclesiastes 1:2, partially repeated 12:8. An English translation is: 'Vanity of vanities says the preacher, vanity of vanities all is vanity.' Andreas Gryphius (1616-1664), the German baroque poet, used the same title for a poem, which starts: 'Die herrlichkeit der erden | Muss rauch und aschen werden'. Andreas Gryphius, *Lyrische Gedichte*, ed. by Hermann Palm (Stuttgart: Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins, 1884), p. 217.
[191] *EE*, p. 15.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 7.

If, in this case, 'Nothing' is misread as a noun, instead of meaning 'nothing else', the sentence could conceivably be considered, as indeed it often seems to have been, as evidence for the glorification of nothingness. Similarly, when the word is at the beginning of a sentence in German, it is capitalised regardless of the part of speech, as in: 'Indem der Egoist sich gegen die Anmutungen und Begriffe der Gegenwart wendet, vollzieht er unbarmherzig die maßloseste – *Entheiligung*. Nichts ist ihm heilig!'.[194] Both in German and English this brief statement could be misconstrued as a slogan for a religion of nothingness. It is almost certainly the same in translations into other languages. This, it would seem, is how Stirner's declaration of independence from dogma and other idealised abstractions has been misinterpreted by critics such as Paterson and Penzo as the satanic worship of nothingness.[195] In short, Stirner appears to be the victim of the preconceptions, prejudices and prudery of his readers. Like Nietzsche, however, he did little or nothing to forestall such misconceptions, wishing to be understood only by those who would be at pains to understand – and caring not a jot for the rest.

Stirner had a foretaste of the trouble the word 'Nichts' would get him into in Feuerbach's review of, and riposte to, *Der Einzige* that appeared in *Wigand's Vierteljahrsschrift* in 1845,[196] in which Feuerbach fired back Stirner's own accusation that Feuerbach was a pious atheist, claiming, in other words, that Stirner had retained the qualities of religion within the framework of an atheistic philosophy.[197] One finds, in Feuerbach's reasoning, the first historical example of an overemphasis on the significance of the word

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[194] *EE*, p. 190.
[195] See Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 313, and Penzo, *Die existentielle Empörung*, p. 297. Paterson also compares Stirner to Mephistopheles. See Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 191.
[196] See Ludwig Feuerbach, 'Ueber das "Wesen des Christenthums" in Beziehung auf den "Einzigen und sein Eigenthum"', in *Wigand's Vierteljahrsschrift*, 2/4 (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1845), pp. 193-205.
[197] See *EE*, p. 191.

'Nichts', understood as nothingness, in *Der Einzige*: 'Aber ist denn nicht auch das Nichts ein Prädikat Gottes, nicht auch der Satz: Gott ist nichts, ein Ausspruch der Religion? So hat also der "Egoist" doch auch noch seine Sache auf Gott gestellt!'.[198] In the edition of his complete works in which this review is included, Feuerbach adds a footnote beneath this statement by way of explanation, which confirms the trivialness of his assertion: 'Der Satz: Gott ist Nichts oder das Nichts findet sich bekanntlich nicht nur in orientalischen Religionen, sondern auch bei christlichen Mystikern und Schwärmern.'[199]

Even in a pre-existentialist world, Stirner's adversaries managed to read far more into his references to 'Nichts' than, as may now reasonably be asserted, was ever envisaged by Stirner himself. Stirner's response appeared in the next quarterly edition of *Wigand's Vierteljahrsschrift*, and was understandably dismissive:[200] 'Aus Stirners "Ich hab' mein' Sach' auf Nichts gestellt" macht Feuerbach "das Nichts" und bringt dann heraus, dass der Egoist ein frommer Atheist sei. Das Nichts ist allerdings eine Definition Gottes.'[201] Feuerbach had failed to comprehend the primary meaning of 'Nichts' in Stirner's infamous epigram. Stirner's answer is ironic, reaffirming God's nothingness, but in the sense of his original definition of God as a fictional abstraction. One wonders, though, if, as a result of his comments, any of his contemporaries understood Stirner any better.

Stirner sought in his reaction to Szeliga's review of his book, contained in the same article, to explain why his 'Einzige' was not just another abstraction, in the form of the sacred

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[198] Feuerbach, 'Ueber das "Wesen des Christenthums" in Beziehung auf den "Einzigen und sein Eigenthum"', in *Wigand's Vierteljahrsschrift*, 2/4, pp. 193-194.
[199] Feuerbach, *Sämmtliche Werke*, I, p. 343. In the text, 'Gott ist nichts' is corrected to 'Gott ist Nichts'.
[200] See Max Stirner, 'Recensenten Stirners', in *Wigand's Vierteljahrsschrift*, 3/4 (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1845), pp. 147-194. The article was published with the initials M. St. at the end. Stirner's authorship is not disputed, as Mackay confirms: '[D]ie Initialen der Unterschrift M. St. dulden keinen Zweifel über den Verfasser.' Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 164.
[201] Stirner, *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 149.

individual, as Szeliga had claimed.[202] Ominously enough, the word he resorts to in order to clarify this was 'Nichts':

> Der Einzige ist eine Aussage, von welcher mit aller Offenheit und Ehrlichkeit eingeräumt wird, dass sie – Nichts aussagt. Der Mensch, der Geist, das wahre Individuum, die Persönlichkeit u. s. f. sind Aussagen oder Prädicate, welche von einer Fülle des Inhalts strotzen, Phrasen mit höchstem Gedankenreichtum; der Einzige ist, gegenüber jenen heiligen und erhabenen Phrasen, die leere, anspruchslose und ganz gemeine Phrase. […] Erst dann, wenn Nichts von Dir ausgesagt und Du nur genannt wirst, wirst Du anerkannt als Du.[203]

Ruge may have believed *Der Einzige* to be the first readable book of German philosophy,[204] but his flattering opinion was perhaps largely based on his having become accustomed to the often inaccessible writings of Hegel. In truth, many of Stirner's readers found their understanding of his ideas hampered by his idiosyncratic prose style, which is characterised by persistent use of quotation marks, capitalised personal pronouns, ironic biblical references and extravagant wordplay.[205] Above all, his is the language of provocation and confrontation used indiscriminately and with complete disregard for the convictions and beliefs of others. To use Bertrand Russell's phrase about Nietzsche, Stirner liked to shock conventional readers.[206] Even some of his less conventional readers have found it difficult to look beyond their initial consternation at Stirner's shameless iconoclasm.

Nonetheless, a dispassionate analysis of Stirner's use of the word 'Nichts' shows that its meaning has little to do with the existentialists' despair-ridden confrontation with the terror incognito, as it were, of nothingness. Once this misconception is eliminated, all that is left of

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[202] Ibid., p. 113.
[203] Ibid., pp. 113-116.
[204] See Ruge, *Briefwechsel und Tagebuchblätter aus den Jahren 1825-1847*, p. 386.
[205] Cf. Leopold, 'Introduction', in Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. xiii. '[A]lmost every feature of his writing seems calculated to unnerve. The use of aphorism and metaphor, the neologisms, the mixture of self-consciously obscure terminology with colloquial language, the excessive italicization and hyperbole, all confound the received framework in which philosophical argument is conducted.'
[206] See Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, p. 730.

Stirner's connection to the existentialists is their shared starting point, namely, that existence precedes essence, combined with a rebellious, subjectivist outlook and a general mistrust of abstractions.[207] While these shared aspects are not insignificant, they hardly suffice to label Stirner a proto-existentialist, let alone the original atheist existentialist: Stirner's ideas reflect the zeitgeist of the 'Vormärz', not of the 'Nachkriegszeit'. Some more recent commentators have come to a similar conclusion. Kast, having posed the question of whether one can speak of Stirner's existentialism, answers thus:

> Die vordergründigen Übereinstimmungen rechtfertigen meines Erachtens eine solche Zuordnung nicht, auch wenn der Eigner und Einzige zweifellos existenzialistische Eigenschaften besitzt und er Existenzialisten Argumente geliefert hat. Stirners Philosophie verweigert sich jeder Kategorisierung und Etikettierung. Für sie gilt, was für den Einzigen gilt: Sie ist einzig.[208]

Laska, meanwhile, mentions the solitary example of an existentialist, Nicola Abbagnano (1901-1991), who, allowing himself to be provoked by Paterson's book in 1971, vehemently denied in a newspaper article any affinity between Stirner and atheistic existentialism.[209]

Stirner's Optimism, Hedonism, Eudaemonism

Stirner's relationship to existentialism may not be non-existent, but it is too remote to offer any solid support to the claim that he is an existential nihilist. It is above all the complete absence of existentialism's negative tendencies in Stirner's thought that make the connection untenable. Existential nihilism is based on an outlook which is susceptible to the unravelling of meaning and the descent into irrefutable senselessness, purposelessness and emptiness. As

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[207] Because of the relatively large number of theistic existentialists, the most prominent being Kierkegaard, Buber and Jaspers, one can hardly say that Stirner has atheism in common with existentialism, despite Sartre's partisan assertion: 'Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position.' Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 56.

[208] Kast, 'Afterword', in Arvon, *Max Stirner*, p. 219.

[209] See Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 80. The article in question was Nicola Abbagnano, 'L'apologia del Nulla', *La Stampa*, 22 April 1971, p. 3.

Gertz writes: 'Nihilism is supposed to be something dark, something negative, something destructive.'[210] Nihilistic philosophers, Crosby tells us, have a 'dismal view of the world'; two examples he cites are Schopenhauer and Cioran.[211] Stirner cannot be made to fit into this mould: he does not ask despairingly what the point of life is; he suffers from neither angst nor ennui; he is not tormented by the human predicament; and nor is he plagued by the problem of meaninglessness or overly concerned with the nature of evil. The death of God is, for him, a given, making theological debate entirely redundant. He is a positivist in so far as the world according to the data of sensory experience is his starting point. His response to it is devoid of myth, mystery and miracle.

With regard, therefore, to Paterson's implicit accusation that Stirner is an existential nihilist, there is a fundamental incongruity between Stirner's philosophy and the existential nihilist's outlook defined by the belief in the meaninglessness of life. In Stirner, one can find none of the oudenophobia (fear of nothingness) that runs like a red line through the tortured intellectual history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western culture, embodied in the works of Kierkegaard, Mahler, Munch, Beckett, Cioran and Larkin, to name but a few. Stirner's method may involve acts of destruction, clearing the ground on a philosophical level much as the Russian nihilists aimed to do socio-politically, but his ultimate message is overwhelmingly constructive and entirely free of morbidity or dread.

Despite pessimism's clear link to nihilism discussed in Chapter 2 above, few, if any, have attempted to make the case that Stirner is a pessimist. One might argue that the reason for this lies in the fact that the word 'pessimism' has a much more specific definition than nihilism and is therefore less susceptible to misuse. It is certainly true that Stirner's writings

[210] Gertz, *Nihilism*, p. 5.
[211] Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd*, p. 376.

do not include the common themes of pessimism, like the pointlessness of existence or the malevolence of the universe. It is no oversight on Thacker's part that Stirner is missing from his 'Patron Saints of Pessimism', which canonises Chamfort, Cioran, Kierkegaard, Joubert, Leopardi, Lichtenberg, Mainländer, Nietzsche, Pascal, Schopenhauer and Unamuno.[212] Similarly, it is no coincidence that, while most of the above thinkers have been associated with anti-natalism, a conviction which shares many of the concerns and preoccupations of both nihilism and pessimism, there is no evidence of such a view in Stirner.[213]

The logic of anti-natalism is clear: if life has no meaning, then to create new life is not only senseless, but also cruel.[214] This opinion has a long history in Western thought stretching all the way back to Thales, who, when asked why he had no children, replied: 'Because I love children.'[215] Such statements, of which there have been many notable examples,[216] reveal the essential moral core of anti-natalism. Stirner does not express any hint of such a sentiment in his written works. When he uses the word 'Geburt' in *Der Einzige*, he uses it in the sense of lineage or extraction;[217] the relevance of birth in Stirner's writings is social and juridical, not

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[212] Eugene Thacker, *Infinite Resignation* (London: Repeater Books, 2018), pp. 247-386.

[213] See e.g. E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998), pp. 3, 4; Giacomo Leopardi, *Moral Fables, followed by Thoughts*, trans. by J. G. Nichols (Richmond: Alma Books, 2017), p. 114; Mainländer, *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, p. 536; *KGW*, III.i. 31, *GT-3*; *Schopenhauer's sämmtliche Werke*, II, 216. Other notable proponents of anti-natalism include Al-Ma'arrī, Benatar, Larkin, Onfray. Pessoa and Sartre. See Ken Coates, *Anti-Natalism: Rejectionist Philosophy from Buddhism to Benatar* (Sarasota: First Edition Design Publishing, 2014).

[214] Cf. David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 6. 'It is curious that while good people go to great lengths to spare their children from suffering, few of them seem to notice that the one (and only) guaranteed way to prevent all the suffering of their children is not to bring those children into existence in the first place.'

[215] Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 66. Cf. Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. by E. F. Watling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 109. 'The greatest boon is not to be; | But, life begun, soonest to end is best.'

[216] Perhaps the bluntest expression of anti-natalism is to be found in the poem, 'This Be The Verse'. See Larkin, *Collected Poems*, p. 180. It also appears in Arabic thought. See 'The Meditations of Ma'arrī', in Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), pp. 43-289 (p. 74). 'Better for Adam and all who issued forth from his loins | That he and they, yet unborn, created never had been!'

[217] See *EE*, pp. 122, 127, 196, 198.

existential. Stirner implicitly rejects anti-natalism not only because he does not consider life meaningless and therefore better not lived (despite his own simple and uneventful existence), but also because he is not in the habit of taking a moral standpoint on any issue. The absence in Stirner's writing of any of the features that could be considered compatible with anti-natalism illustrates both Stirner's proximity to moral nihilism and his remoteness from existential nihilism.

While Stirner is not an optimist in the philosophical sense of Leibniz's best of all possible worlds,[218] he is one in most other senses, to the point of naivety, indeed, as far as his social theory is concerned (discussed in Chapter 4 above). Stirner certainly cannot with any degree of seriousness be described as a pessimist, in view of the preponderance in his thought of life-affirming principles. Stirner's central undertaking is the emancipation of the individual through the process of self-empowerment: 'Sieh Dich als mächtiger an, als wofür man Dich ausgibt, so hast Du mehr Macht […]. Du bist dann nicht bloß *berufen* zu allem Göttlichen, *berechtigt* zu allem Menschlichen, sondern *Eigner* des Deinigen.'[219] He specifically condemns 'die christliche *Weltverachtung*' for its life-negating outlook,[220] and advocates instead the positive principle of self-love:

> Erst dann, wenn man sich *leibhaftig* liebgewonnen, und an sich, wie man leibt und lebt, eine Lust hat […] – erst dann hat man ein persönliches oder *egoistisches* Interesse, d.

[218] See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Essais de Theodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (Amsterdam: David Mortier, 1720).
[219] *EE*, p. 365.
[220] See *EE*, p. 102. '"Drum fürchten wir nichts, wenn gleich die Erde sich wandelt". In alledem ist für den christlichen Satz, dass die Welt eitel sei, für die christliche *Weltverachtung* der Raum geöffnet.' Cf. *KGW*, VI.iii. 190, *AC-24*: '[D]ies ist die jüdisch-christliche Moral ganz und gar. Um Nein sagen zu können zu Allem, was die a u f s t e i g e n d e Bewegung des Lebens, die Wohlgerathenheit, die Macht, die Schönheit, die Selbstbejahung auf Erden darstellt, musste hier sich der Genie gewordne Instinkt des ressentiment eine a n d r e Welt erfinden, von wo aus jene *L e b e n s - B e j a h u n g* als das Böse, als das Verwerfliche an sich erschien.'

> h. ein Interesse nicht etwa nur Unseres Geistes, sondern totaler Befriedigung, Befriedigung des ganzen Kerls, ein *eigennütziges* Interesse.[221]

Similarly to Nietzsche with his concept of 'amor fati', Stirner proposes a world view based on the affirmation of life, though, unlike Nietzsche, Stirner focuses on this primarily in terms of enjoyment:[222]

> Mein Verkehr mit der Welt besteht darin, dass Ich sie genieße und so sie zu meinem Selbstgenuss verbrauche. Der *Verkehr* ist *Weltgenuss* und gehört zu meinem – Selbstgenuss. […] *Lebensgenuss* ist Verbrauch des Lebens.
>
> Nun – den *Genuss* des Lebens suchen Wir auf![223]

In the final sub-section of *Der Einzige* prior to the short conclusion, entitled 'Mein Selbstgenuss' (my self-enjoyment), Stirner extols the virtues of a life founded on pleasure:

> Von jetzt an lautet die Frage nicht, wie man das Leben erwerben, sondern wie man's vertun, genießen könne, oder nicht, wie man das wahre Ich in sich herzustellen, sondern wie man sich aufzulösen, sich auszuleben habe. […] Ganz anders lebt es sich im – *Genuss!*[224]

Stirner's is a reductionist view of human nature; what remains after the numerous layers of socio-cultural conditioning have been stripped away is the unique, individual egoist. The point of Stirner's wilful annihilation of abstractions is not to destroy for the sake of destruction, but to free the individual from external control and allow him to pursue his own pleasures, which Stirner regards as the fundamental impulse behind all human behaviour. There are echoes in this of Freud's pleasure principle: 'Es ist […] einfach das Programm des Lustprinzips, das den Lebenszweck setzt. Dies Prinzip beherrscht die Leistung des seelischen Apparates vom

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[221] *EE*, p. 23. Cf. *KGW*, VI.i. 238, *Za-II-Geist-2*. 'Man muss sich selber lieben lernen – also lehre ich – mit einer heilen und gesunden Liebe.'

[222] Cf. ibid., VI.iii. 55, *GD-Sprueche-12*. 'Der Mensch strebt n i c h t nach Glück; nur der Engländer thut das.'

[223] *EE*, pp. 323-324. Nietzsche's affirmation of life is far more complex and far less hedonistic than Stirner's, but no less fundamental to his philosophy. Cf. *KGW*, VI.iii. 46, *WA-Epilog*. 'Die vornehme Moral, die Herren-Moral, hat umgekehrt ihre Wurzel in einem triumphirenden Ja-sagen zu s i c h , – sie ist *Selbstbejahung*, Selbstverherrlichung des Lebens.'

[224] *EE*, p. 325.

Anfang an.'[225] It is also comparable with Nietzsche's idea of 'Lust' (pleasure) that is presented as the driving force of life in 'Das Nachtwandler-Lied':

> Oh Mensch! Gieb Acht!
> Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?
> 'Ich schlief, ich schlief – ,
> 'Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht: –
> 'Die Welt ist tief,
> 'Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.
> 'Tief ist ihr Weh – ,
> 'Lust – tiefer noch als Herzeleid:
> 'Weh spricht: Vergeh!
> 'Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit – ,
> ' – will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!'[226]

For Nietzsche, however, the affirmation of life is in a constant state of struggle with nihilism, whereas, for Stirner, the only apparent obstacle to uninterrupted pleasure, apart from the natural parameters of life, is the tyranny of heteronomous abstractions.

Stirner remarks approvingly on the importance of pleasure for what he loosely describes as 'the ancients': 'Was sucht also das Altertum? Den wahren *Lebensgenuss*, Genuss des *Lebens!*'.[227] Indeed, his thought as a whole shows a far closer affinity with the tradition of Democritus's eudaemonism and Epicurus's hedonism, than with that of pessimism or nihilism. Hartmann hinted at this in a chapter on 'Stirners Verherrlichung des Egoismus': 'Aller Egoismus ist nur als Individualeudämonismus zu behaupten; Individualeudämonismus ist wieder nur auf Grund eines eudämonologischen Optimismus möglich.'[228] Although Stirner refers only briefly to Democritus and Epicurus in *Der Einzige*, and then as part of a triadic exposition of the development of human consciousness (ancients, moderns, free ones), they

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[225] Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, ed. by Lothar Bauer and Kerstin Krone-Bayer (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2012), p. 13.
[226] *KGW*, VI.i. 400, *Za-IV-Nachtwandler-12*.
[227] *EE*, p. 32.
[228] Hartmann, *Ethische Studien*, p. 89.

are not targets of his invective, as Christians and humanists invariably are.[229] He shares with them Democritus's materialist view of the world and Epicurus's indifference towards death.[230] A less obvious, though nonetheless discernible, connection to Stirner can be found in Democritus's thoughts on the relationship between virtue and egoism:

> The novelty in his [Democritus's] preaching lay largely in the fact that he urged virtuous behaviour on his fellows not because it would please or placate the gods, or ensure a satisfactory afterlife, but because such virtues paved the one reliable path to individual happiness here on earth. In other words, virtue is really a matter of self-interest.[231]

This idea resurfaced most famously in Cicero's dictum, 'virtue is its own reward'.[232] It is not a great leap from this to Stirner's description of egoistic love and compassion: 'Ich liebe die Menschen […], weil die Liebe *Mich* glücklich macht.'[233]

As discussed in Chapter 4 above, what Stirner means by egoism is not the narrow interpretation characterised by the egoism-altruism dichotomy, which pits the selfish desire for exclusive personal benefit against the selfless desire for the benefit of another.[234] For Stirner, the dichotomy is instead between the prescribed 'heilige Liebe' (holy or sacred love)

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[229] See *EE*, pp. 32-34.

[230] Re. Democritus: 'He [Democritus] elaborated a system originated by his teacher Leucippus into a materialist account of the natural world.' Sylvia Berryman, 'Democritus', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/democritus/> [accessed 24 August 2021]. Re. Epicurus: 'In fact, when once the death that knows no death has done away with our mortal existence, it is no different than if we had never been born at all!' Epicurus, *The Art of Happiness*, p. 48.

[231] Gottlieb, *The Dream of Reason*, p. 112. Cf. Democritus / Stobaeus, *Anthology*, III.iii. 46 = B 194, in Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 270: 'Great joys come from contemplating noble works.'

[232] S. Parker, *Cicero's Five Books De Finibus: or, Concerning the Last Object of Desire and Aversion* (Oxford: N. Bliss, 1812), p. 97. Cf. 'For no man giveth, but with intention of Good to himself; because Gift is Voluntary; and of all Voluntary Acts, the Object is to every man his own Good.' Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: J. M. Dent, 1914), p. 78. Also: 'The first and only foundation of virtue […] is the seeking of our own advantage. […] Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; nor do we enjoy it because we restrain our lusts; on the contrary, because we enjoy it, we are able to restrain them.' Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. by Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 179-180.

[233] *EE*, p. 294.

[234] See Joshua May, 'Psychological Egoism', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://www.iep.utm.edu/psychego/> [accessed 24 August 2021].

of Christianity or humanism and the voluntary 'Eigenliebe' (self-love) of egoism.[235] The former he designates 'die Heuchelei oder vielmehr Selbsttäuschung';[236] the latter represents the ownership of love 'als meine Empfindung'.[237] The former, he maintains, is a Christian invention unknown to the ancients: 'An Liebe fehlte es dem Altertum so wenig wie der christlichen Zeit; der Liebesgott ist älter als der Gott der Liebe. Aber die mystische Besessenheit gehört den neuen an.'[238] The latter acknowledges self-interest at the heart of every action and recognises the innate sense of compassion as the source of every compassionate act.[239] Stirner had no intention of denying or diminishing the importance of human emotions like love, affection, kindness and compassion; he aimed instead to demystify the motivation behind them and show it to be firmly rooted in the self.

The eudaemonistic themes of egoism and hedonism that form the framework of Stirner's philosophical project stand in clear opposition to the pessimism and despair of existential nihilism. Existentialism grapples with the issues inherent in the contradictory biological programming both to die and to resist dying in a species endowed by evolution with the epiphenomenon of consciousness. In stark contrast to this, Stirner, although he seems completely aware of his own transience, responds with unflustered indifference to the prospect of personal extinction, as if he had quietly assimilated Epicurus's advice concerning death.[240]

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[235] See Kast, *Max Stirners Destruktion der spekulativen Philosophie*, pp. 236-239.
[236] *EE*, p. 297.
[237] Ibid., p. 296.
[238] Ibid., p. 297.
[239] Cf. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, ed. by Wolfgang Promies, 4 vols (Frankfurt a. M.: Zweitausendeins, 1994), II, p. 200. 'Man liebt weder Vater, noch Mutter, noch Frau, noch Kind, sondern die angenehmen Empfindungen, die sie uns machen; es schmeichelt immer etwas unserem Stolze und unserer Eigenliebe.' Like Nietzsche (and Schleiermacher, the Schlegels, Schelling, Burkhardt, Benn and Jung), Lichtenberg (1742-1799) was the son of a pastor. Also like Nietzsche, he was an atheist: '[I]ch dank es dem lieben Gott tausendmal, daß er mich zum Atheisten hat werden lassen.' Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, I, p. 402.
[240] See Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. by Sir Robert Allison, 2nd edn (London: Hatchards, 1925), p. 118. 'Think how the long past age of hoary time | Before our birth is nothing to us now, | Thus in a

He writes about the 'christliche Sehnsucht und Begierde nach dem Jenseits' as if it were a longing that had never touched him.[241] Stirner does not rage against the dying of the light; he accepts without protest or dismay both his personal limitations and his inevitable mortality.

Even if, therefore, Stirner might reasonably, if incongruously, be called an ethical nihilist, he is far from being an existential nihilist. In this sense, Kast, Laska, Fleming et al. are quite correct in their assertions of his being anything but a nihilist. They may not qualify explicitly what sort of nihilist they have in mind, but what they presumably mean is a (post-) Nietzschean or existential nihilist, who, like Tartaglia, says: 'There is no overall point to human life.'[242] Stirner's scepticism is wide-ranging, but it never stretches to doubting the meaning of existence. Instead, he expresses life's purpose by adapting Protagoras's most famous phrase, to proclaim, 'dass nicht der Mensch das Maß von allem, sondern dass Ich dieses Maß sei'.[243] While this may reveal some affinity with the subjective perspective of existentialism, it demonstrates a far greater disparity with nihilism, further proof of which can be found in another significant statement in *Der Einzige*, not in quite such a prominent position as the opening and closing line, but at the end of the penultimate section, where Stirner declares: 'Nicht als Mensch und nicht den Menschen entwickle Ich, sondern als Ich entwickle Ich – Mich. | Dies ist der Sinn des – Einzigen.'[244] Although the first sentence contains two negatives, the message is unmistakably positive; above all, in positing meaning, Stirner implicitly repudiates futility, and his thought therefore cannot reasonably be categorised as an example of existential nihilism.

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mirror Nature shows to us | Of what will be hereafter when we're dead. | Does this seem terrible, is this so sad? | Is't not less troubled than our daily sleep?'

[241] *EE*, p. 43.

[242] Tartaglia, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, p. 21.

[243] *EE*, p. 356.

[244] Ibid., p. 365.

Thus ends the detailed analysis of the relationship between Stirner's thought and nihilism with a firm rejection of the claim of Paterson and others that Stirner's is a philosophy of emptiness and meaninglessness. Of the three specific types of nihilism examined in this thesis, it is existential nihilism which is the least applicable to Stirner's world view. Simultaneously, and ironically, it is, at least by implication, the type of nihilism that has been most frequently associated with Stirner since World War II, which raises questions about the wisdom, or motives, of those who make this claim. The final task of this study is to summarise its findings, to consider their significance in relation to Stirner's reputation and his hitherto marginal place in the history of ideas, and to give a final verdict on the complex question of the suitability of the epithet 'nihilistic', in any of its various meanings, to describe Stirner and his philosophy.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

Max Stirner: The Happy Nihilist?

At the root of the question this study has set out to answer is its contention that the issue of the relationship between Max Stirner's thought and nihilism is key to a proper understanding of his philosophy. This idea rests on the fact that, although the depiction of Stirner as a nihilist is so widespread as to be almost axiomatic, the evidence of nihilism in his writings is scant. Despite this apparent paradox, Stirner was first accused of nihilism by Rosenkranz shortly after the publication of *Der Einzige* in 1844, and well over a hundred writers and commentators have since repeated the allegation, including important historical and philosophical figures such as Masaryk, Löwith, Camus and Deleuze. If Stirner's status as a nihilist is doubtful at worst and partial at best, as has been demonstrated in the preceding three chapters, it begs the question of why he has acquired this ill-deserved reputation and what the true substance and significance of his thinking might be.

This thesis has examined the record of Stirner's labelling as a nihilist and attempted to order and evaluate the numerous examples according to the different meanings of nihilism employed by his accusers. The aims of this undertaking have been to uncover the rationale behind the nihilist label, to comprehend the polarised opinions on the subject of Stirner and nihilism, and hence to arrive at a fair assessment of Stirner's thought and its place in the history of ideas. This represents an original contribution to knowledge in a number of ways. Firstly, it is the only study ever to have examined Stirner and his ideas with the primary purpose of assessing the veracity of the nihilist label that has so frequently been attached to his name. Secondly, it offers for the first time a comprehensive challenge to the orthodox view that Stirner

is only to be fully understood as a nihilist. And thirdly, it makes thorough and extensive use of the unparalleled, chronological collection of articles, books and dissertations at the Max Stirner Archive in Leipzig, in order to provide a detailed overview of the historical record of the association of Stirner with nihilism. It is to be hoped that the unique approach and conclusive findings of this research will help to bring about a change in the critical reception of Stirner and, above all, result in a significant decline in the tendency to ignore or dismiss him as an ogre and an outcast.

The task at hand has been made harder by the elusiveness of the term 'nihilism', which is a word that is not only unspecific in terms of its reference but is also made more obscure by being centred around the mysterious, and mystifying, idea of nothingness. In the absence of a universally accepted definition of nihilism, it has been necessary in the first instance, in Chapters 2 and 3, to follow the word's protean etymology and establish the parameters of its use in connection with Stirner. Subsequently, a clear pattern emerged in the literature review of Chapter 4 that placed the great majority of the accusations of nihilism against Stirner within the context of one or more of three types of nihilism – political, moral and existential nihilism – each of which has in turn, in the following three chapters, been closely scrutinised in relation to Stirner's thought. This final chapter will take stock of the findings of this inquiry and endeavour to assess the degree to which Stirner can reasonably be called a nihilist, as well as venturing to propose an alternative interpretation of the meaning of his philosophy and the labels that best describe it.

One of the key findings of this study is that Nietzschean or existential nihilism occupies a prominent position in the common (mis-)conception of Stirner as a nihilist. While Stirner had a limited effect on the development of Russian nihilism, as was argued in Chapter 5 above, and while moral nihilism may adequately describe Stirner's ethical outlook but not his philosophy as a whole, as was discussed in Chapter 6, it is the assumption that he is expounding a

philosophy of emptiness, in the sense of meaninglessness, which has continually dogged the debate about Stirner and nihilism, especially since World War II. Stirner's critics in this regard have invariably ignored the fact that his version of nothingness, in so far as the concept plays any role in his philosophy, is meonic, in the form of the 'creative nothing' of a transitory individual's life.[1] The equating of Stirner's meonic nothingness with the empty void of existential nihilism is a recurrent misconception in Stirner criticism and one which must be rectified before a coherent picture of Stirner's thought can emerge.

As observed in Chapter 7, Stirner's detractors have also tended to disregard the fact that the central themes of pessimism, like the pernicious effects of the passage of time or the absurdity of human existence, which are a fundamental part of existential nihilism, are entirely absent from Stirner's writings. One of the few commentators to acknowledge this absence is Carroll:

> Paterson makes a central point of identifying Stirner with nihilism. His argument depends on a failure to distinguish between social values, which Stirner does reject, and personal values, to which he is more overtly committed than any other philosopher. The dark pessimism, the hesitancy of Will, and the disaffection with life symptomatic of the nihilist are not to be found in Stirner – rather the contrary. Schopenhauer, with his constant doubts about the existence of any value, was a nihilist; Turgenev's Bazarov, Dostoevsky's 'underground man', his Stavrogin and his Kirilov were closer to nihilism.[2]

Like many other critics, Carroll does not specify what type of nihilism he is referring to, but it is apparent from the context that he means it in a Nietzschean or existential sense. The same can be said of Leopold when he writes: 'Stirner is clearly committed to the "non-nihilistic" view that a certain kind of character and mode of behaviour (namely, autonomous individuals

[1] See *EE*, p. 15. '[D]as schöpferische Nichts, das Nichts, aus welchem Ich selbst als Schöpfer Alles schaffe.' Meonic: 'Of, relating to, or consisting of a kind of pregnant nothingness or void (as distinguished from an absolute blank nothingness) having the potential to transform into matter.' 'meonic', in *Oxford Lexico* <lexico.com/definition/meonic> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[2] Carroll, *Break-Out from the Crystal Palace*, p. 87.

and actions) are to be valued above all others.'[3] Both Carroll and Leopold acknowledge that the largely positive nature of Stirner's philosophical message precludes his being subsumed under so negative an epithet as nihilism.

If then, as this study has sought to demonstrate, Paterson's claim is erroneous, namely that *Der Einzige* strikes a similar 'despairing and satanic chord' to, and thus belongs with, the 'nihilistic literature' of 'Leopardi, Poe, Schopenhauer' et al.,[4] the question remains as to Stirner's proper place in the history of ideas. One possibility can be found in the atomistic-Epicurean tradition, which Onfray traces from Democritus, Diogenes, Protagoras and Epicurus, via the gnostics, Gassendi, Cyrano de Bergerac, Meslier, La Mettrie and d'Holbach, to Bentham, Mill, Deleuze and Foucault. Like Stirner, each of these philosophers, whom Onfray classifies collectively as anti-Platonists, displays a fundamentally hedonistic attitude towards existence, as Onfray explains: 'They want happiness on earth, here and now, not later in some hypothetical, unattainable world.'[5] Ideologically speaking, Stirner could fit quite comfortably into this loose family of eminent thinkers – none of whom is generally regarded as a nihilist – if only because he shares with them what Onfray calls 'the aspiration of the Epicurean project', namely '[t]he pure pleasure of existing'.[6] Stirner is notoriously difficult to categorise, and, as observed in previous chapters, some, like Laska and Fleming, have bemoaned his critics' tendency to pigeonhole him, but if one nonetheless felt compelled to do so, there is good evidence that he belongs among the hedonists and optimists rather than the nihilists.

Another common feature of the members of Onfray's band of anti-Platonists, which is an equally important indicator of affinity with Stirner, is that they all 'share a formidable

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[3] Leopold, 'Introduction', in Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. xxiv.
[4] See Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 313. Paterson's full list comprises de Sade, Leopardi, Poe, Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, Ibsen, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Swinburne, Rimbaud, Huysmans, Strindberg and Nietzsche.
[5] Onfray, *A Hedonist Manifesto*, p. 10.
[6] Ibid., p. 11.

concern with deconstructing myths and fables, rendering this world inhabitable and desirable'.[7] Ironically, in Stirner's case, his endeavour to deconstruct the myths that, in his opinion, oppress and tyrannise the individual, plays a significant role in his reputation, and often violent rejection, as a nihilist. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 above, Stirner's programme of radical iconoclasm, presented in a manner that is intended to shock, has invariably been regarded as being beyond the pale, and has resulted in countless polemical attacks on Stirner by his adversaries. Although demythologisation in itself does not belong to any of nihilism's known definitions, Stirner's acts of desecration are so comprehensive, and his disregard for others' convictions so complete, that 'nihilism' has become the label of choice for those who want to convey their disapproval of his ideas and methods.

In characterising Stirner as a nihilist, his critics often seem to focus entirely on their abhorrence of his iconoclasm, rather than on any of the definitions of the epithet discussed in Chapter 2 above. However unsuitable the term 'nihilist' may be, Stirner undoubtedly deserves his place in philosophical history's long line of iconoclasts that starts with Diogenes of Sinope (although, unlike Stirner, Diogenes was also a moralist), and includes Nietzsche (although Nietzsche ultimately erected new icons in place of the idols he had shattered).[8] Stirner occupies a privileged position within this select company, owing to his thoroughgoing commitment to demystification and demythologisation; with his scepticism, irreverence, suspicion of all

[7] Ibid. Cf. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, p. 124. 'This first because my theme is great, and I | For object have to free men's minds from fear | Of the bonds religious scruples have imposed.' Deleuze also highlighted the demythologising tendency of anti-Platonist naturalism, evident in Lucretius's Epicureanism: 'The speculative object and the practical object of philosophy as Naturalism, science and pleasure, coincide on this point: it is always a matter of denouncing the illusion, the false infinite, the infinity of religion and all of the theologico-erotic-oneiric myths in which it is expressed.' Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester, ed. by Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 278.

[8] See Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 85. 'He [Nietzsche] demolished so many idols only to replace them with others: a false iconoclast, with adolescent aspects and a certain virginity, a certain innocence inherent in his solitary's career.' Cf. Welsh, *Max Stirner's Dialectical Egoism: A New Interpretation*, p. 263. 'Nietzsche's goal is to replace one set of fixed ideas with another.' A more sympathetic view of Nietzsche's constructive efforts might point to the double meaning of the hammer in the subtitle of *Götzen-dämmerung*.

ideologies and rejection of morality, religion and the state, Stirner's philosophical rebelliousness is unsurpassed.

Far from earning him plaudits from his readers and critics, however, Stirner's peerless heterodoxy has led, in the main, to his vilification. Stirner appears to have imagined that, following the spectacular dismantling of speculative philosophy and religion by his Young Hegelian colleagues, the world was ripe for the *coup de grâce* to end dogma, absolutism and psychological self-deception once and for all.[9] He seems to have thought he was presiding over a seminal moment, the completion of the Enlightenment project through the application of truthfulness to the human condition, as well as to truth itself.[10] This turned out to be a serious error of judgment on Stirner's part. He underestimated the strength of the negative reaction to his ruthless assault on mythology, failing to realise how deeply unpalatable, not to say offensive, his iconoclasm would be to those with a vested interest in the fashioning of icons and the perpetuation of sacred myths. It is one of the more surprising findings of this study that the backlash against Stirner's call for universal demythologisation plays a far greater role in his characterisation as a nihilist than any specifically nihilistic features of his thinking.

If Harari's theory, referred to in Chapter 6 above, is to be believed, namely that it is the ability to create myths, and the willingness to believe them, which distinguishes *Homo sapiens* from all other animals, then it is clear that Stirner inadvertently set himself up as an enemy of the people.[11] He acquired a reputation as a pariah and a misfit, despised by the political right

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[9] Stirner resigned from his teaching job on 1 October 1844, shortly before the publication of *Der Einzige*, quite conceivably in anticipation of achieving fame and success. See Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 183.

[10] See *EE*, p. 162. Stirner had a thoroughly materialist view of truth. Truth exists for him in the sense of verifiability but is nonetheless relative to the observer: 'Mir sind die Gegenstände nur Material, das Ich verbrauche. Wo Ich hin greife, fasse Ich eine Wahrheit, die Ich Mir zurichte.' *EE*, p. 358.

[11] Feuerbach considered religion to be the difference between man and other animals; see Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, p. 47. For Aristotle, the difference was reason or the rational soul; see Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. by R. D. Hicks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), pp. 59-65, 151-155. For Descartes it was variously reason, language, self-consciousness or the soul; see René Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, trans. by John Veitch (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1920), pp. 1, 3-4, 36-37, 45-46, 149. Dostoevsky has Razumikhin say it's 'talking nonsense'. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. by David McDuff (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 242. For Harari, however, it is myth: 'The real difference between us and chimpanzees is the

as a dangerous anarchist and by the political left as a proto-fascist, though in fact he was just a man who held up a mirror to *Homo mythologicus* in all his nakedness.[12] In this way, Stirner exposes what he considers to be the mendacity of man's fictional abstractions: 'Es wird […] im Einzigen nicht etwa nur […] die "Lüge der bisherigen egoistischen Welt" offenbar; nein, in seiner Nacktheit und Kahlheit, in seiner schamlosen "Aufrichtigkeit" […] kommt die Nacktheit und Kahlheit der Begriffe und Ideen ans Tageslicht.'[13] As a philosophical approach, demythologisation arguably has many positive qualities – the elimination of deception, the condemnation of hypocrisy, the establishment of personal autonomy – but, as discussed in Chapter 6 above, it overlooks the importance of mythology for mankind. The history of mythology may be, in the words of James Frazer (1854-1941), 'the melancholy record of human error and folly',[14] but that does not, in any way, affect the success or durability of mythopoeia.

Myth is the answer, however imperfect, to many of man's existential problems, not least that of the consciousness of his own death. It is, moreover, the expression of the power of the human spirit, the inspiration of art and culture, the engine of human progress, and the driving force of history. For a species whose coherence, identity, self-belief, sense of security and evolutionary success depend crucially on its unique capacity to create (and believe in)

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mythical glue that binds together large numbers of individuals, families and groups. This glue has made us the masters of creation.' Harari, *Sapiens*, p. 42.

[12] For Stirner's reception by the political right and left, see Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, pp. 42-52 and 84-87 respectively. For 'Homo mythologicus', see Robert W. Brockway, *Myth from the Ice Age to Mickey Mouse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 7. 'Modern people are no less prone to create myths than our archaic ancestors. Perhaps we should speak of *Homo Mythologicus* in the way we speak of *Homo Religiosus* or *Homo Ludens* meaning "religious man" and "playful man," implying that these traits are natural to us as human beings. It is our nature to weave myths and to think in mythic terms.'

[13] Stirner, 'Recensenten Stirners', p. 115. Cf. *EE*, p. 169. 'Allein die Gewohnheit religiöser Denkungsart hat unsern Geist so arg befangen, dass Wir vor *Uns* in unserer Nacktheit und Natürlichkeit – erschrecken.' Cf. Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto*, p. 2. 'Human credulity is beyond imagining. Man's refusal to see the obvious, his longing for a better deal even if it is based on pure fiction, his determination to remain blind have no limits. Far better to swallow fables, fictions, myths, or fairy tales than to see reality in all its naked cruelty.'

[14] James George Frazer, *Balder the Beautiful: The Fire-Festivals of Europe and the Doctrine of the External Soul*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1919), II, p. 304.

myths, a demythologiser instinctively appears to be a formidable threat.[15] From the point of view of the well-being of the species *Homo sapiens*, Stirner's iconoclasm seems inexcusable, which is why philosophers and historians of ideas have never forgiven him, while simultaneously doing their level best to forget him.[16] Stirner's outlaw status as a desecrator of sacred beliefs thus plays the decisive role in his enemies' portrayal of him as a nihilist, a term that is sufficiently vague to be acceptable to adversaries and critics of all persuasions as a catch-all expression of contempt. As the literature review of Chapter 4 has shown, Christians, communists and conservatives are all united in their condemnation of Stirner as a nihilist. If he is to be saved from what I argue is undeserved oblivion or infamy, a reassessment is needed of the uncritical and misleading association of demythologisation with nihilism.

This study has attempted to show that the common perception of Stirner is based on an accumulation of false assumptions and misguided criticism that has distorted, or even disfigured beyond recognition, the meaning of his ideas. The Stirner who lies largely concealed beneath countless layers of misinterpretation, deserves to be rediscovered for what he has to say on mythology, egoism and individual autonomy, which have only been briefly discussed in this inquiry, but which represent important areas for future research. In this way, Stirner can perhaps be rescued from the margins of intellectual and scholarly discourse, especially in the anglophone world, where Paterson's largely unchallenged interpretation has done immeasurable damage to Stirner's standing. If the present study succeeds in supplanting Paterson's book as the main reference work for Stirner studies in English, it will have achieved

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[15] See Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 214. 'The myth has, after all, been identified as a universal phenomenon of human society, a constitutive factor so critical in importance that it is difficult to imagine a culture having any coherence at all if it lacked the mythological bond.'

[16] See Laska, *Ein dauerhafter Dissident*, p. 7. 'In philosophiegeschichtlichen Darstellungen wird er [Stirner] meist übergangen oder nur am Rande erwähnt. In den Registern der Fachzeitschriften, in den Programmen der Verlage, in den Vorlesungsverzeichnissen der Universitäten ist er nur selten zu finden; auch im ausserakademischen Diskurs spielt er kaum eine Rolle. Es gab und gibt nicht einen Philosophen, der sich positiv und spezifisch auf Stirner bezieht.'

one of its prime objectives. This undertaking with regard to Stirner's legacy should be seen not so much as a rehabilitation, as Stirner has never been truly accepted as a serious philosophical protagonist, nor a rediscovery, as he has never been completely buried either, but rather as a re-evaluation of his worth as a thinker.

This is not, however, to promise Stirner a place at the top table; his contribution to the history of ideas is plainly not comparable with that of Socrates, Kant or Nietzsche, or the other giants that dominate the histories of Western philosophy. Stirner's written output is meagre and the range of his ideas is limited; his social theory seems rudimentary and alarmingly naïve, and he has nothing to say about the transcendental, not even how to deal with its absence; his writing is readable, especially compared to that of his predecessors, although it is neither poetic nor cerebral; but his original ideas on the antagonistic relationship between the egoistic individual and sacred heteronomous abstractions have hardly been surpassed in the ensuing period of nearly two centuries. Stirner was the first, and is, arguably, the only thinker to deconstruct entirely man's urge to mythologise, not only in terms of extant myths like monarchy, state and religion, but also with regard to the process of mythologisation itself.

One final task before reaching a concluding verdict on the question of the relationship between Stirner's thought and nihilism is to ask whether a version of that opaque term 'nihilism' might exist that reconciles the affirmatory and annihilatory aspects of Stirner's thought, in other words, whether Stirner, even if he is not specifically a political, moral or existential nihilist, might be described as a 'happy nihilist'. Camus appears to hint at such a possibility when he compares and contrasts Stirner's nihilism with Nietzsche's: 'But, unlike with Nietzsche, his nihilism is a satisfied one. Stirner laughs in the impasse, Nietzsche rushes against the walls.'[17] However, while this statement is admirably poetic, its accuracy is more

[17] Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, p. 84. [My translation. The short section on Stirner is omitted from Anthony Bower's English translation in the Penguin edition.]

questionable. Camus seems to have derived the image of a laughing Stirner from one solitary passage which he quotes from *Der Einzige*, where Stirner uses the idiom 'der lachende Erbe' to describe himself,[18] while poking fun at the notion of the thousand-year existence of the German nation.[19] True to his provocative style, Stirner describes the death and burial of the German people, but far from plotting their premeditated murder, as Camus goes on to suggest,[20] Stirner is predicting, in entirely metaphorical terms, the demise of German nationalism as a tyrannical absolute, and celebrating the envisioned liberation of the individual from its yoke.

Camus's flawed interpretation of Stirner's text leads him to conclude: 'Thus, on the ruins of the world, the desolate laughter of the king of individuals depicts the last victory of the spirit of revolt. But at this extremity, nothing else is possible but death or resurrection.'[21] 'The king of individuals' that Camus describes sounds more like the murderer, Mersault, in *A Happy Death*, than Stirner, whose philosophical endeavours were directed instead towards the attainment of a happy life.[22] The impression Camus gives of Stirner is of a bitter and twisted, apocalyptic rebel, laughing demonically at his acts of destruction. It is unfortunate that one of Stirner's best-known critics has given such a misleading account of his work, thereby

[18] 'Der lachende Erbe' means literally 'the laughing heir', but a better translation might be 'the lucky winner'.
[19] See *EE*, p. 223. 'Deutsches Volk und deutsche Völker haben eine Geschichte von tausend Jahren hinter sich: welch langes Leben! Geht denn ein zur Ruhe, zum Nimmerauferstehen, auf dass alle frei werden, die Ihr so lange in Fesseln hieltet. – Tot ist das *Volk*. – Wohlauf *Ich*! […] Morgen trägt man Dich zu Grabe; bald werden deine Schwestern, die Völker, Dir folgen. Sind sie aber alle gefolgt, so ist - - die Menschheit begraben, und Ich bin mein eigen, Ich bin der lachende Erbe!' Camus only quotes the last sentence, which ends with the idiom in question.
[20] See Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, p. 87. 'Since every individual in and of itself is fundamentally criminal towards the state and the people, we must recognise that living is synonymous with transgressing. To be unique, he who does not take it upon himself to die, must take it upon himself to kill.' [My translation.] Camus's analysis is perhaps unduly influenced by the horrors of the recent world war. Concerning his state of mind at that time, see Albert Camus, 'The Human Crisis', a lecture delivered at Columbia University, New York in 1946, quoted in Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 21.
[21] Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, pp. 87-88. [My translation.]
[22] See Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*, trans. by Richard Howard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

perpetuating the myth of Stirner, the happy, or at least laughing, nihilist, though not laughing like Rembrandt's portrait of Democritus, but more like Lucifer on his descent to hell.[23]

It is clear that Camus's description of Stirner as a laughing nihilist does not achieve a balance between the constructive and destructive elements in Stirner's thought, as it relies too heavily on a negative reading of *Der Einzige*, exaggerating the significance of Stirner's apparent condoning of murder,[24] while ignoring the positive themes of self-mastery, individual autonomy and liberation from external subjugation, thus allowing him to declare: 'With Stirner, the negation that animates revolt irresistibly overwhelms all affirmation.'[25] Paterson would later echo Camus's sentiment: 'To seek in Stirner a positive moral or social philosophy, then, is to seek in vain.'[26] In truth, the label 'happy nihilist' is of little use as a description of Stirner, mainly because, like Paterson's unfortunate phrase 'the nihilistic egoist', it is too oxymoronic to make any real sense, but also because it would satisfy neither side of the debate, neither those who wish to demonise Stirner for his acts of desecration, nor those who consider his message to be both positive and valuable.

There is an alternative reading of Stirner's project that deserves attention because of its potential relevance to the question of his alleged connection to nihilism. The idea was first mooted by Keben in 1890: 'Stirner's radikaler Individualismus enthält die logische Begründung der bestehenden Zustände! Ja, gewiß – der Egoismus Aller wird nur eingeschränkt durch den siegreichen, übermächtigen Egoismus Weniger.'[27] Five years later, Zenker observed

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[23] Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Young Rembrandt as Democritus the Laughing Philosopher*, *c*. 1628, oil on copper, 22.2 × 17.1 cm <https://www.rembrandtonline.org/The-Young-Rembrandt-As-Democritus-The-Laughing-Philosopher.html> [accessed 24 August 2021].

[24] See Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, pp. 87-88.

[25] Ibid., pp. 85-86. [My translation.] Camus is effectively focusing on the shorter first part of *Der Einzige* and disregarding the longer second part. See Leopold, 'Introduction', in Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. xxii: 'Whereas the negative project of the First Part of *The Ego and Its Own* was to demonstrate that modernity had striven unsuccessfully to overcome religious modes of thought, the positive project of the Second Part is to characterize the future epoch of egoism.'

[26] Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, p. 316.

[27] Keben, 'John Henry Mackay und sein Philosoph', p. 190.

in a similar vein, 'dass wir es […] hier […] im Grunde nur mit der consequenten Weiterführung der heutigen auf der freien Concurrenz beruhenden Gesellschaftsordnung zu thun haben'.[28] Schultheiss, in his 1905 doctoral dissertation, also writes about Stirner being 'einer, wie es viele gibt', and his theory of egoistic social organisation, the union of egoists, being a reflection of current reality.[29] More than a century later, Stulpe took up the idea again, speculating that Stirner was now forgotten, 'weil der Einzige mittlerweile in gewisser Weise allgegenwärtig und zur Selbstverständlichkeit geworden ist'.[30] Despite the apparent incoherence of Stulpe's proposition that a writer's popularity is inversely proportional to the prevalence of his or her ideas, this is a more subtle argument than Helms's elaborate but clumsy attempt, discussed in Chapter 7 above, to establish an implausible connection between Stirner, fascism and the West Germany of the 1960s, via the ideology of the lower-middle class, which leads Helms too to observe: 'Nie ist Stirner gegenwärtiger, nie zeitgemäßer als heute.'[31] Perhaps the most recent declaration of Stirner's modernity can be found in Jacob Blumenfeld's monograph, where he remarks that 'Stirner's […] philosophy is especially in vogue today', as evidenced by Engels's sketch of Stirner's face having been 'revived as a meme, popping up in the stranger corners of the Internet'.[32]

All of the above examples, stretching back to the late nineteenth century, demonstrate the enduring actuality of Stirner's focus on egoism, individualism and anti-establishmentarianism. Although the overwhelming majority of such comments have been critical in nature, attacking the perceived excesses of amoral libertarianism or radical

[28] Zenker, *Der Anarchismus*, p. 86.
[29] Schultheiss, *Stirner*, p. 129.
[30] Stulpe, *Gesichter des Einzigen*, p. 28. Cf. Jacob Blumenfeld, *All Things are Nothing to Me: The Unique Philosophy of Max Stirner* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2018), p. 1. 'Stirner's […] philosophy is especially in vogue today.'
[31] Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft*, p. 499.
[32] Jacob Blumenfeld, *All Things are Nothing to Me: The Unique Philosophy of Max Stirner* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2018), p. 1.

anarchism allegedly reflected in modern social trends, there has, in recent times, been a resurgence of interest in the political implications of Stirner's ideas because of their relevance for a contemporary Western society which is increasingly fractured, individualistic and sceptical of authority, government and the shifting ideologies of the political left and right.[33] Stirner's outline of an alternative both to socialism and to conservative orthodoxy, as well as his mistrust of all power structures and their mechanisms of indoctrination, resonates with those who are disaffected by the development of modern capitalist society, but are also unconvinced of the practical benefits of Marxism. Newman thus insists that Stirner should not simply be seen as constituting a historical and philosophical curiosity;[34] by applying Foucault's concept of voluntary inservitude to Stirner, Newman reveals a link between Stirner's egoism and postmodern individualism, which leads him to declare: 'There emerges, from Stirner's thought, a certain kind of micro-political ethics that has important implications for any consideration of radical politics today.'[35] More generally, Stirner, in challenging the tyranny of absolute abstractions and sacred myths, paves the way for a reassessment of the individual's relationship to the self and others, as well as offering an entirely new perspective on the mechanisms of power and alienation.

Extrapolating from these analyses of Stirner's thought in the light of the growth of individualism in Western society, one might regard Stirner as the archetype of a mutant adaptation which, arguably, is becoming increasingly widespread almost to the point of ubiquity, as mankind moves ever further away from the generations that felt powerfully the loss of faith, for the simple reason that there is ever less faith to lose: a calm, quiet, easy-going,

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[33] As examples of the renewed interest in Stirner's political significance, see, for instance, Welsh, *Max Stirner's Dialectical Egoism: A New Interpretation*; Saul Newman, 'Stirner's Ethics of Voluntary Inservitude', in *Max Stirner*, ed. by Saul Newman, pp. 189-209; Kathy E. Ferguson, 'Why Anarchists Need Stirner', in *Max Stirner*, ed. by Saul Newman, pp. 167-188.

[34] See Newman, 'Introduction: Re-encountering Stirner's Ghosts', pp. 4-5.

[35] Newman, 'Stirner's Ethics of Voluntary Inservitude', p. 189. Cf. Welsh, *Max Stirner's Dialectical Egoism: A New Interpretation*, p. 5. 'Max Stirner was a theorist of modernity […] rooted in his unique concept of egoism.'

self-composed, almost anonymous, even serene individual, not overly concerned with personal survival, unimpressed by authority of any kind, sceptical of dogma in all its guises, protective of his personal autonomy, happy to enjoy the moment for as long as it lasts, and ready to disappear at any time into the anonymity of the crowd, or into the sunset if necessary.[36] Such a type is, in other words, a twenty-first century version of Nietzsche's 'Letzter Mensch', or the personification of Watson's untroubled ones, who, like Dürer's knight, are unconcerned by Death and the Devil, though not because of a supernatural myth that guarantees salvation, but because of an apparent insensitivity to Death's sting:

> Such individuals may call into question Robert Musil's claim that even people who scoff at metaphysics feel a strange cosmic presence, or Thomas Nagel's comment that we all have a sense of looking down on ourselves as if from a great height. But such individuals are not 'metaphysical types' and seek no 'deep' meaning in existence. They just get on with their lives, making ends meet, living from day to day and season to season, enjoying themselves where they can, untroubled by matters that so perplex their neighbours. […] In some ways, they are the most secular people of all and perhaps the most content.[37]

According to such a view, Stirner would represent the premature beginning of the end of angst, the incipient transition from transcendental homelessness to transcendental obliviousness, and the potential for the start of a new era based on realistic, earthly expectations and belief in the power of practical reason. He would, however unintentionally, be a solution to nihilism rather than a nihilist, the herald of a secular, post-postmodern epoch of satisfied, if subversive, nominalism, as man evolves in a new world which is not so much brave as indifferent. Indifferent, that is, not to life, but to the collision between individual consciousness and personal mortality. This interpretation would give us a Stirner who could be seen as a guide

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[36] Cf. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1992), p. 191. 'I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning.'

[37] Watson, *The Age of Nothing*, p. 542.

to the future beyond Nietzsche's ominous prediction for the next two centuries;[38] a Stirner who could be described, in short, as an *anti*-nihilist.

What, then, can be concluded about the relationship between Stirner's thought and nihilism? On the face of it, Stirner's philosophy seems to have more in common with Democritus and Epicurus, or Adam Smith and Alexander Herzen for that matter, than with anyone who, like Mainländer, Heidegger or Cioran, might be considered a nihilist. Indeed, it is clear that calling Stirner 'the Nihilist', as one might call Schopenhauer 'the Pessimist' or Sartre 'the Existentialist', is highly problematic. Not only are there, as outlined above, a number of more appropriate labels, with one possible interpretation even making Stirner the exact opposite of a nihilist, but the word 'nihilism' without a qualifying adjective generally means, in current usage, existential nihilism, which is completely unsuitable as a description of Stirner's life-affirming philosophy that is so devoid of the negative aspects of existentialism.

Furthermore, even though there may be some elements of Nietzschean active nihilism in Stirner's iconoclasm, as observed in Chapter 3 above, there is no hint of passive nihilism, nor of pessimism, anti-natalism or suicidal tendencies. Despite this, Stirner seems to have become caught between the two nothings that flank his magnum opus, a victim of his own lust for irreverent provocation, his ghost condemned to walk the earth as a case of (often intentionally) mistaken identity. If, despite all the evidence to the contrary assembled in this study, one were to persist in using the term 'nihilist' as a way of expressing disapprobation of Stirner's dismantling of cherished beliefs and institutions, it would be at the cost of misrepresenting his ideas, ignoring his positive message, and giving a one-sided, jaundiced view of his thought. Were one nonetheless to do so, focusing, however tendentiously, solely

[38] See *KGW*, VIII.ii. 298-299, *NF-1887*, 11[119]. 'Was ich erzähle, ist die Geschichte der nächsten zwei Jahrhunderte.'

on Stirner's godlessness, sacrilegiousness or antagonism towards heteronomous abstractions, would not 'atheist', 'iconoclast' or 'nominalist' be more apposite terms than 'nihilist'?

In other words, Stirner may be a nihilist according to Rosenkranz's evaluation in his diary entry of 1844 or 1845, which represents the first association of Stirner with nihilism, but it means little more than that Stirner does not share Rosenkranz's belief in certain narratives, or, in Stirner's terminology, *idées fixes*.[39] As such, it tells us more about the reader's fears than it does about the writer's ideas; it is tantamount to using the word 'nihilism' as a malediction rather than a useful description,[40] which is indeed, as we have seen, how it was generally employed until Turgenev and Nietzsche transformed its meaning. The accusation against Stirner of nihilism in this sense is, arguably, predicated on the Ionian fallacy of assuming that everything that exists belongs to a single coherent structure and that the only alternative to monism, therefore, is nihilism.[41] It is certainly noticeable that many of Stirner's staunchest critics, foremost among them Paterson and Helms, are devoted monists. Stirner, on the other hand, has all the hallmarks of being a pluralist (another topic worthy of further research), taking pluralism, in fact, to the utmost extreme of a plurality consisting of every individual voice, entirely without the synthetic formation of groups, let alone one single self-anointed group governed by a virtually unchallengeable doctrine.[42] The rejection of Stirner using the extreme imprecation of 'nihilism' is, to a large extent, the result of a conflict between the dogmatic defenders of various monistic ideologies and their perceived enemy in the form of the ultimate demythologiser, whose denial of the validity of absolutes discredits and fatally undermines

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[39] See Rosenkranz, *Aus einem Tagebuch*, p. 133.

[40] Onfray makes a similar point about the polemical use of the word 'atheist', which he calls 'this single weak epithet, tailored to discredit'. Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto*, p. 20.

[41] See Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. by Henry Hardy (New York: Viking Press, 1979), pp. 76-77.

[42] Cf. *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, 1:06:52 – 1:07:04 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytTr4pfP-tw> [accessed 24 August 2021]. Brian captures perfectly the essence of Stirner's pluralism: 'You've got it all wrong. You don't need to follow me. You don't need to follow anyone. You've got to think for yourselves. You're all individuals.'

their fictional structures of belief. One can surmise that, this being the case, the word ‘nihilism’ when applied to Stirner is often not intended to have a specific meaning; its purpose is simply to act as an anathema.

Although the chorus of monist cries of ‘nihilist’ is misleading for anyone who wishes to approach Stirner with an open mind, perhaps a greater issue in the history of such accusations, as this study has sought to demonstrate, has been the extension of the practice of associating Stirner with nihilism beyond the time of its fundamental shift in meaning in the middle of the nineteenth century, thus transposing nihilism’s etymological transmutation to Stirner’s thought. As pointed out in Chapter 3 above, this process was, to some extent, made inevitable by the concurrence in the 1890s of Nietzsche’s sudden popularity and the first Stirner renaissance, which largely sealed the fate of Stirner’s legacy. The fact is that if the allegations of nihilism against Stirner were to be seen as no more than an excessively disparaging response to his rejection of a particular ideology, they could be considered almost harmless; but couched as they are in the context of the porous terminology of modern, unqualified nihilism, the word takes on a far more sinister meaning that contributes both to Stirner’s continued ostracism and the failure on the part of scholars and other critics to engage seriously with his ideas.

To sum up, in terms of the specific definitions of qualified nihilism, which it has been the purpose of this study to analyse and evaluate in relation to Stirner’s thought, a tenuous connection to political nihilism has been established, not least because of Stirner’s modest (and partly hypothetical) influence on Bakunin, Herzen, Belinsky and Speshnev, as well as, conceivably, on Pisarev and Nechaev. Political nihilism is not defined, however, simply as the rejection of the state, a position that Stirner certainly holds, but which is better described as anarchism. Political nihilism refers instead to the specific doctrine prevalent in mid-nineteenth-century Russia that promoted the annihilation of political authority without much consideration for what would follow, a context with which Stirner clearly had no direct involvement. Political

nihilism is violent and revolutionary; Stirner's thought, despite its unwarranted reputation, is neither.

There is a deeper and closer connection between Stirner's thought and moral nihilism, in so far as his explicit rejection of 'Sittlichkeit' (morality or ethical community), and his relegation of the notion of good and evil, along with all evaluative judgment, to the status of relative expressions of personal preference, is entirely compatible with moral nihilism. Nonetheless, to call Stirner a moral nihilist is to highlight just one corollary aspect of his thought and is therefore wholly inadequate as an overall explanation of his philosophy. More inappropriate still is Stirner's classification as an existential nihilist, a designation for which no valid reason can be found despite some general characteristics shared by Stirner and the existentialists. Above all, Stirner's positive outlook on human existence disqualifies him from representing, or indeed personifying, existential nihilism.

The present thesis has demonstrated that none of the specific types of nihilism most frequently associated with Stirner can reasonably be claimed to provide an adequate encapsulation of his philosophy as a whole. As a comprehensive description of his thought, nihilism would only be appropriate in the unlikely event that the word were one day to lose its negative connotations, and a new variety, 'mythological nihilism', were coined. In the meantime, and in the light of this study, it is more reasonable to conceive of Stirner as a hedonistic, nominalistic, anti-heteronomous, iconoclastic demythologiser, whose ethics are consistent with moral nihilism, and whose philosophy is based on the oft-misconstrued concept of egoism. Admittedly, this is not a simple characterisation of Stirner's thought, but nor is it an over-simplification.

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Appendix

English Translations of German Quotations

Listed by chapter and footnote number.
Translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

Chapter One

3. [footnote] the first readable philosophical book in Germany

4. [footnote] The epoch of the Vormärz ('Vormärz' in the sense of 'before the March Revolution of 1848') can be located from around 1830 onwards but was only introduced as a term later on. [The latter observation is, of course, patently obvious.]

8. Enlightenment is man's exit from his self-incurred minority.[1]

13. New graves have enclosed the old one, and whoever wants to find it today must laboriously seek it through their narrow rows. | The golden letters of the name on the slab are losing their luster. But while they fade there, this name shines its victorious gleam through the night of our time and announces the morning, the morning of the freedom of the human race.[2]

19. [footnote] The expression 'Young Hegelians' first of all means merely the young generation of Hegel's pupils; in the sense of 'left-wing Hegelians,' it designates the radical party, revolutionary in respect to Hegel.[3]

21. Since it [the work] reads largely like irony and striking self-refutation, and since in the most audacious passages it should therefore rather make a cautionary and repellant impression on prudent readers, the religious moral view of life could hardly be more effectively promoted than by the strident subject matter of an attempt to gain and implement a view of life from the basest and narrowest standpoint of the most banal egoism.

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[1] Immanuel Kant, 'Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment', trans. by Thomas K. Abbott, in *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. by Allen W. Wood (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), pp. 133-141 (p. 133).
[2] John Henry Mackay, *Max Stirner: His Life and His Work*, trans. by Hubert Kennedy (Concord CA: Peremptory Publications, 2005), p. 213.
[3] Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. by David E. Green (London: Constable, 1965), p. 66.

22. to my sweetheart[4]

23. a beauty she was not[5]

24. too selfish to have true friends[6]

29. [footnote] How did Stirner squander her fortune […]? She [Marie Daehnhardt] still gets very annoyed when she thinks how an educated man could take advantage of the complete trust a weak woman had in him.

31. to the arms of the Catholic Church[7]

32. [footnote] It is not known if the attempt was successful or not.[8]

33. [footnote] For the rest I know nothing about Stirner; I never found out what subsequently befell him, except that Marx told me he had almost literally starved to death; where he got this from, I don't know.[9]

35. Finally, the old man? When I become one, there will still be time enough to speak of that.[10]

36. in very straitened circumstances

37. No news apart from what you may already know, namely that *Stirner* has died.[11]

39. Not only a deep discouragement, but also as great disappointment gripped me, as continuing to press forward, I became more and more convinced how simply and uneventfully this life had been lived.[12]

41. His life is a new proof that it is not those who make the big fuss of the day, the darlings of the crowd, but rather the solitary and restless researchers, who in quiet work point the way to the fate of mankind, who in truth are immortal. | Among them stands

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[4] Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, trans. by Steven T. Byington, ed. by David Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 3. Hereafter, *EO*.
[5] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 118.
[6] Ibid., p. 12.
[7] Ibid., p. 190.
[8] Ibid., p. 192.
[9] Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, trans. by Peter and Betty Ross, etc. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975-2004), XXXXVIII (2001), p. 394.
[10] *EO*, p. 18.
[11] Marx, Engels, *Collected Works*, XXXX (1983), p. 70.
[12] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 6.

Max Stirner. He has joined himself to the Newtons and the Darwins, not to the Bismarcks.[13]

43. more or less dissatisfied with the political and social conditions of the time[14]

45. extreme left[15]

46. the scattered volunteer corps of radicalism[16]

47. See *Stirner* too, the thoughtful moderation-hater;
Though still on beer, he'll soon be drinking blood like water.
And if the others shout a wild: *à bas les rois!*
Stirner is sure to add: *à bas aussi les lois!*[17]

51. In reply to your note of the 19th, I made Stirner's acquaintance around the beginning of 1842 in Berlin when he was hobnobbing with E. Meyen, Buhl, Edgar and subsequently Bruno Bauer, etc. […] He cannot have been hobnobbing with this circle for very long, since he didn't know Marx, who had left Berlin, if my memory is correct, less than a year previously and was much respected by the others.[18]

56. the intellectual center of the Berlin 'free spirits'[19]

59. Bauer's tenderness and intimacy of feeling […] was particularly evident in his behaviour towards the few people for whom he harboured true affection or love. One was his old, widowed father […]. The other was Max Stirner, a lonely, world-despising, courageous, profound and astute thinker.

62. Hardly ever in the history of a people – unless it was at the time of the French Encyclopedists – has a circle of men met as significant, as unique, as interesting, as radical, and as unconcerned about every judgment as 'The Free' at Hippel's formed in the fifth decade of the nineteenth century in Berlin.[20]

67. Whoever studies their writings will discover that, in spite of their inflammatory tone, they leave an impression of insipidity. They make immoderate demands with insufficient means, and dilate Hegel's abstract dialectics to a piece of rhetoric. The

[13] Ibid., p. 24.
[14] Ibid., p. 57.
[15] Ibid., p. 57.
[16] Ibid., p. 59.
[17] Marx, Engels, *Collected Works*, II (1975), p. 336.
[18] Ibid., XXXXVIII (2001), p. 393.
[19] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 343.
[20] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 81.

contrasting reflective style in which they generally write is monotonous without being simple, and brilliant without being polished.[21]

68. [footnote] The Overthrow of Hegelian Philosophy by the Young Hegelians[22]

69. [footnote] Political liberalism abolished the inequality of masters and servants: it made people *masterless*, anarchic. […] Social liberalism abolishes the inequality of possession, of the poor and rich, and makes people *possessionless* or propertyless. […] Humane liberalism makes people godless, atheistic. […] Now masterlessness is indeed at the same time freedom from service, possessionlessness at the same time freedom from care, and godlessness at the same time freedom from prejudice […]. But since the master rises again as state, the servant appears again as subject; since possession becomes the property of society, care is begotten anew as labour; and, since God as man becomes a prejudice, there arises a new faith, faith in humanity or liberty.[23]

71. [footnote] The state […] is the ethical whole and the actualization of freedom. […] The state is the spirit, which abides in the world and there realizes itself consciously.[24]

75. key figure in modern intellectual history

76. thorough and targeted research shows that Stirner's ideas […] have had an impact that can hardly be overestimated

78. the teacher of egoism followed his teaching poorly in his own life or that following it bore bad fruit[25]

79. In the case of a parochial Berlin school-master or author, […] whose relations to this world are reduced to a minimum by his pitiful position in life, when such an individual experiences the need to think, it is indeed inevitable that his thought becomes just as abstract as he himself and his life.[26]

87. Stirner's book: *The Ego and Its Own* is evidently the pinnacle of the one-sided, subjective tendency in which the Young Hegelian school has lost itself. In this work, it has transitioned from atheism to social radicalism. It has arrived at the state of nature, at brutal tyranny, at ruthless licence for all desires and passions, at the apotheosis of egoism and nothingness. Stirner wants no barrier to the will, not even in the form of a contract. He wants just one type of intercourse, in which the strength of individualities is expressed as cunning or violence against one another. […] Theoretically, such

[21] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 67.
[22] Ibid., p. 65.
[23] *EO*, pp. 128-129.
[24] *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. by S. W. Dyde (London: George Bell, 1896), pp. 244-245.
[25] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 212.
[26] Marx, Engels, *Collected Works*, v (1976), p. 263.

nihilism in relation to all ethical pathos cannot develop into anything; it could only be followed by the practice of egoistic fanaticism, by revolution.

88. Another writer of this school of nihilism, Max Stirner […] did not realise his principle of egoism with particular success in his life, because he only dreamed about it, only played with it in abstractions, wrestled with it in logical visions.

89. [footnote] The so-called Stirner renaissance, which had begun almost unnoticed in the 1880s and had started abruptly at the beginning of 1893 with the appearance of the Lauterbach Reclam edition of *Der Einzige*, had already passed its peak by the time of the Stirner year of 1906 and had ebbed away by the twenties.

91. historical research on the life and philosophical work of Max Stirner […], [and] the establishment and maintenance of an archive as well as the publication of a journal

92. accusation of nihilism

93. the only perfect nihilist in the history of modern philosophy[27]

93. [footnote] the first perfect European nihilist[28]

94. the 'Unique One', in its essence, has never been properly received till now, so that it has remained something like a *hapax legomenon* in the text of Western philosophy

95. Is Stirner therefore an anarchist because one takes him for one, or is Stirner really anarchistic, at least pre-anarchistic? According to this, Stirner would not only be a pre-anarchist and anarchist, but also a nihilist, solipsist, existentialist […]. This seems to be a pseudo-moralistic attitude, only to be able to understand people correctly once one has pigeon-holed them.

96. five eradicable misunderstandings with regard to *Der Einzige* | if nihilism […] represents the absence of any meaning and purpose, then Stirner's 'Unique One' is anything but a nihilist.

97. extremely unclear

97. [footnote] The word 'nihilism' belongs to that group of terms that are generally used as a matter of course, without one actually knowing clearly what they really mean.

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[27] I think 'the only consummate nihilist' is a better translation, but I am following the examples of various translators of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*, including Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, and R. Kevin Hill and Michael A. Scarpitti, who translate the corresponding phrase of Nietzsche's using the adjective 'perfect', as in the translation that follows.

[28] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: Selections from the Notebooks of the 1880s*, trans. by R. Kevin Hill and Michael A. Scarpitti (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 7.

100. the creative nothing[29]

Chapter Two

22. [footnote] as a precursor of nihilism

22. [footnote] that the term should be replaced by *nihilism*[30]

22. [footnote] the last stage of development, the most extreme form of pessimism

24. That the political nihilism of the National Socialist elite is nothing else but the popular degeneration of the spiritual nihilism of an intellectual elite of 30 to 40 years ago should no longer be unfamiliar to anyone who is acquainted with the routine process of cultural decline.[31]

27. that […] nothingness prevails and the world is meaningless.[32]

28. 'Without God, everything is lawful,' and everybody becomes uneasy about everybody else; nobody can depend upon anybody.

This is the reason why all atheistic state systems necessarily become police states: the people can be held in check only by stronger controls and by terror. […] The police state and the dual police system are necessary consequences of nihilism.[33]

30. [footnote] Nothing is true, everything is permitted[34]

30. [footnote] that order of free spirits *par excellence*[35]

47. [footnote] the nihilist *Pyrrho*[36]

62. the methodologically necessary annihilation of a common global certainty

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[29] *EO*, p. 7.
[30] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 32.
[31] This section is omitted from the English translation.
[32] Helmut Thielicke, *Nihilism: Its Origin and Nature – with a Christian Answer*, trans. by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), p. 27.
[33] Ibid., pp. 116-117.
[34] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 285.
[35] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, *Ecce Homo*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 150.
[36] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 263.

62. hypostatisation of the subjective individual as a guarantor of knowledge

63. Nihilism, Metaphysics, Humanity, Eternity

65. For he is the only one there, all else is nothing, nothing without him, nothing before him.

66. pantheism dispute

68. [footnote] The idea of the idealistic nihilism of human perception […] is almost more horrifying to me than the idea of the eternal destruction of my own existence.

69. [footnote] *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*[37]

70. On the Basis of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World[38]

71. [footnote] Wherever we look, we see nothing but the reflection of our own inner activity; this absolute being is precisely the world; to assert that an intellect is the creator of the sensible world […] possesses not the least intelligibility.[39]

72. The Development of the Concept of Religion

73. [footnote] Religion is nothing other than a practical belief in a moral world government

75. Truly, my dear Fichte, I should not be annoyed if you, or whoever else it may be, want to call chimerism that which I oppose to idealism, which I rebuke as nihilism.

75. [footnote] What is grounded in reason is purely and simply necessary, and what is not necessary is – precisely for this reason – contrary to reason. To hold something of this latter sort to be true is an illusion and a dream, no matter how pious the dream may be.[40]

76. Jacobi did not invent the word nihilism. Nor was he the first to make philosophical use of it, as was assumed until a few years ago.

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[37] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, trans. by Peter Heath, in *Fichte: Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*, ed. by Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970).

[38] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, 'On the Basis of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World', in J. G. Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings (1797-1800)*, trans. by Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1994), pp. 141-154.

[39] Fichte, 'On the Basis of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World', pp. 144-145.

[40] Ibid., p. 144.

78. [footnote] The Significance of the Spinoza-Letters for the Development of Idealism's Philosophy of Religion

80. [footnote] So, the noble Jacobi was perfectly right, with all the men of God, that only through a divine life can one become aware of God, that divine life, God's image in man, living religion, are the only source of insight into truth and of love of goodness, as the only, best and united form of humanity.

81. *On the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Mr Moses Mendelssohn*

84. Man has such a choice; this single one: nothingness or God. By choosing nothingness he makes himself God; that is, he makes a ghost into God; for it is impossible, if there is no God, that man and all that surrounds him should not be mere ghosts.

85. We have already shown why Jacobi so violently abhors the nihilism he finds in Fichte's philosophy. As far as Fichte's system itself is concerned, nihilism is certainly implicit in pure thought as a task […]. So the Ego is for ever and ever affected by a Non-Ego. This has to be the case because infinity, or thought, which is only one *relatum* in the antithesis, is to be posited as being *in itself*.[41]

88. *Schelling's Teaching or the Complete Philosophy of Absolute Nothingness*

89. Schelling's system is neither realism nor idealism, indeed the issue is meaningless: but for this reason, it is nihilism. Proof: if it were realism, it would have to begin with the predominance of objectivity; if it were idealism, with the predominance of subjectivity […]. Now, everything arises as a plus, every something, ideal or real, through the predominance of the one or the other; so, the system begins only with the minus of something = nothing.

90. Introduction to Aesthetics, Poetic Nihilists

92. Jacobi's understanding of Fichte's idealism as egoism that ends in nihilism impressed his contemporaries.

93. It follows from the lawless capriciousness of the present zeitgeist – which would rather selfishly destroy the world and the universe, in order to empty out free space in nothingness, and which tears off the bandage from its wounds as if it were a fetter – that it must speak contemptuously of the imitation and study of nature.

97. the first real nihilist in German literature

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[41] G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith & Knowledge*, trans by Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), p. 168.

100. nihilistic work of art

101. whose entire content is ultimately nothingness and nihilistic despair

103. Then I saw myself alone with myself in the nothingness, only in the far distance did the dying earth glow like an expiring spark – but it was only a thought of mine that simply ended.

104. I scatter this handful of paternal dust in the air and it remains – nothing! Over on the grave the seer is still standing embracing nothing! And the echo in the ossuary cries out for the last time – nothing!

105. I, so completely alone, nowhere a pulse, no life, nothing around me and without me nothing but nothing – […] Thus I come from eternity, thus I go to eternity – And who hears the lamentation and knows me now? I. Who hears it and who knows me after eternity? – I.

106. Oh, you poor ones […] who are also so stricken through and through by the nothingness that presides over us, who see so well that we love a nothing, believe in nothing, slave away for nothing, in order gradually to pass over into nothingness.

107. For I really am mad now – so much does everything lie within us and is nothing real without us, according to the latest thinking we don't even know whether we are in fact standing on our feet or on our heads.

108. Praise God, there is death, and behind it lies no eternity!

110. the reverse side of idealism. Nihilism can only evolve where an ontological nothingness precedes it in the conceptual idea of the world.

111. fundamental concept in the discussion around German idealism

114. the misuse of intelligence destructive to religion

115. *The Concept of Divinity*

116. Deism, like pantheism, leads to nihilism: for it too only establishes an extra-temporal, metaphysical category of deity, but not the knowledge of a God who is real from eternity to eternity for all time.

117. I have finished with life. […] I wish for nothing, I ask for nothing

118. a precocious prophet of nihilism

124. [footnote] Feuerbach's Essence of Christianity cannot be read, but only studied.

126. nothing is proven to them […], nothing fixed

128. If […] in politics as in life, the duties imposed by justice and honour are completely disregarded, even common sense fails to deter the insistence on nihilism.

129. A modern trend is attempting repeatedly to spread atheistic despair among the people […]. This modern nihilism is philosophically on a par with subjective Romanticism, against which it fought so hard; it has no sense of moderation or direction; it merely adheres to subjective pleasure, whose momentary desires are all supposed to be justified.

130. Schopenhauer's quietism and nihilism had numerous followers, particularly among the young

131. We find the majority of mystics turning away from the active life […], even striving for spiritual and physical nihilism.

132. *On Buddhist Nihilism*

134. [footnote] Victor Hugo's and R. Wagner's great charlatanry.

138. Accusations of nihilism were rife at this time, Turgenev thus discovered not only the new character type for his novel, but also its name.[42]

147. [footnote] Pisarev posed […] the question whether it was permissible to kill his own mother, answering in the affirmative, in so far as it were 'useful' or desirable.

153. The consolation of Luther when matters didn't move forward, 'the end of the world'. The nihilists had Schopenhauer as a philosopher. All of the extremely active ones want to let the world go to pieces, once they realise their will is impossible (Wotan).

154. Nowadays, one generally answers the question of whether Russian nihilists are more immoral than Russian officials in favour of the nihilists.

155. I need all types of health – it has gone a little too deep into my heart, this 'heartbreaking nihilism'

[42] The existing English translation by Eden and Cedar Paul mistranslates this line.

155. [footnote] that in a letter to Wagner, Schuré described your current opinions as 'heartbreaking nihilism'

156. What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what is inevitable: *the rise of nihilism*.[43]

157. *Nihilism*: there is no goal, no answer to the question: why? What is the significance of nihilism? – *that the highest values devalue themselves*.[44]

158. all that happens is gratuitous and meaningless[45]

Chapter Three

2. If one were looking for a crystallisation of the history of the concept of nihilism, it could be found in Nietzsche's philosophy of European nihilism.

6. [footnote] In the meantime Stirner experienced a kind of rebirth. […] [A]bove all the great influence that Friedrich Nietzsche more and more exercised every day, especially on the young generation […] drew attention to his book, which was again much read, often mentioned, and has now been made available to the widest circles through an inexpensive edition in the Reclam Universal-Bibliothek.[46]

6. [footnote] It is quite correct that the Stirner-renaissance of the last decades is connected with the rise of the Nietzschean philosophy.[47]

10. Nihilism stands at the door; whence comes this most uncanny of all guests?[48]

11. hill of lies

12. [footnote] I shall probe these things more thoroughly and severely in another connection (under the title 'On the History of European Nihilism'; it will be contained in a work in progress: *The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values*).[49]

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[43] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 7.
[44] Ibid., p. 15.
[45] Ibid., p. 30.
[46] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 10.
[47] Egon Friedell, *A Cultural History of the Modern Age: The Crisis of the European Soul from the Black Death to the World War*, trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson, 3 vols (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), III, p. 114.
[48] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 11.
[49] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 159-160.

12. [footnote] The preparation of a four-volume magnum opus is projected for the next four years; the title is enough to frighten you: *The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values*.

13. [footnote] [Nietzsche's] philosophy proper was left behind as posthumous, unpublished work.[50]

14. the most influential book never to have been written

16. Thus the belief that nature is utterly immoral, that everything is purposeless and meaningless, is a psychologically inevitable sentiment, when belief in God and in an essentially moral world order is no longer tenable. Nihilism appears at this point.[51]

17. *We have killed him* […]. All of us are his murderers.[52]

18. Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? […] Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? […] Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. […] Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?[53]

19. [footnote] But the pure concept or infinity as the abyss of nothingness in which all being is engulfed, must signify the infinite grief [of the finite] purely as a moment of the supreme Idea […]. Formerly, the infinite grief only existed historically in the formative process of culture. It existed as the feeling that 'God Himself is dead,' upon which the religion of more recent times rests.[54]

19. [footnote] The death of the mere abstraction of Divine Being […] is the bitterness and pain of the 'unhappy consciousness,' when it feels that God himself is dead. This harsh utterance is the expression of inmost self-knowledge which has self bare and simple for its content; it is the return of consciousness into the depth of darkness where Ego is nothing but bare identity of Ego, a darkness distinguishing and knowing nothing more outside it.[55]

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[50] Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, trans. by David Farrell Krell, 2 vols (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), I, p. 9.
[51] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 43.
[52] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 181.
[53] Ibid., p. 181.
[54] G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 190.
[55] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. by J. B. Baillie, 2 vols (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1910), II, p. 795.

20. They did not notice that man has killed God in order to become now – '*sole* God on high'.[56]

21. that mawkish apostle of virginity[57]

22. God has died and his death was the life of the world.

23. [footnote] the growth of the Enlightenment undermined the dogmas of religion and inspired a fundamental distrust of them[58]

25. There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us – for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.[59]

26. The greatest recent event – that 'God is dead,' that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable – is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. […] The event itself is far too great, too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having *arrived* as yet. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means.[60]

27. This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm[61]

29. The tragic age for Europe: caused by the struggle with nihilism.

31. Nietzsche's nihilism complex is multi-dimensional. Nietzsche argues in sometimes muddled lines of thought as a diagnostician, a secular prophet, a cultural critic, a therapist of senselessness and a biopsychological strategist.

36. It [nihilism] can *mean two different things*:
(a) Nihilism as a sign of an increase in mental power, as *active nihilism*...
(b) Nihilism as a decline and retrogression of mental power: *passive nihilism*.[62]

37. the logical outcome of our greatest values and ideals[63]

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[56] *EO*, p. 139.
[57] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 309.
[58] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 81.
[59] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 181.
[60] Ibid., p. 279.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 24.
[63] Ibid., p. 8.

39. That which is falling should also be pushed![64]

40. [footnote] One honours those who broke the spell of convention. […] The question of whether the Russian nihilists are more immoral than the Russian officials is generally answered in favour of the nihilists. – Countless mores have fallen victim to the attacks of the free-thinkers and doers: our present individual way of thinking is the result of nothing but crimes against morality. Everyone who attacked the existing order was considered a 'bad person'; history is only about these bad people!

41. [footnote] One has ventured to call pity a virtue […], one has made of it *the* virtue, […] – only, to be sure, from the viewpoint of a nihilistic philosophy. […] Schopenhauer was within his rights in this: life is denied […] by pity – pity is *practical* nihilism.[65]

42. the first perfect European nihilist, but as one who has already outlived the nihilism he contains within himself – who has left it behind him, considers it beneath him, no longer a part of him.[66]

42. [footnote] The courage to face what we already *know* only comes late in life. I have only quite recently admitted to myself that I was the quintessential nihilist all along: the energy and radicalism with which I progressed as a nihilist deceived me about this fundamental fact.[67]

43. *One* interpretation has failed, but since it was considered *the* interpretation, it now seems as if there is no meaning in existence at all, as if all is *in vain*.[68]

44. Morality and religion fall entirely under the psychology of error.[69]

45. an opponent of Christianity de rigueur[70]

46. I *condemn* Christianity, I bring against the Christian Church the most terrible charge any prosecutor has ever uttered. To me it is the extremest thinkable form of corruption, it has had the will to the ultimate corruption conceivably possible. The Christian Church has left nothing untouched by its depravity, it has made of every value a disvalue, of every truth a lie, of every kind of integrity a vileness of soul.[71]

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[64] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 226.
[65] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 118.
[66] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 7.
[67] Ibid., p. 25.
[68] Ibid., p. 43.
[69] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, pp. 52-53.
[70] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 48.
[71] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, p. 186.

47. In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of 'world history' – yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die. | One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened.[72]

48. facts are precisely what there are not, only interpretations[73]

49. He who considers more deeply knows that, whatever his acts and judgments may be, he is always wrong.[74]

50. The total character of the world […] is in all eternity chaos – in the sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms.[75]

51. Since Copernicus, man seems to have got himself on an inclined plane – now he is slipping faster and faster away from the center into – what? into nothingness? into a '*penetrating* sense of his nothingness'?[76]

51. [footnote] to be condemned to stand there with the penetrating sense of his nothingness

52. This is the most extreme form of nihilism: nothingness (that is, 'meaninglessness') for ever![77]

53. (What does nihilism mean?) Purposelessness.

54. Nihilism: there is no goal, no answer to the question: why?[78]

55. the great *antidote* to practical and theoretical *nihilism*.[79]

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[72] *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 42.
[73] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 287.
[74] Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 182.
[75] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 168.
[76] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 155.
[77] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 43.
[78] Ibid., p. 15.
[79] Ibid., p. 16.

56. Christianity's downfall comes about through its morality, which is inseparable from it and which turns us against the Christian God. Our sense of truthfulness, which has been highly developed by Christianity, is *disgusted* with the falsehood and hypocrisy of the whole Christian interpretation of the world and its history. And so we swing from the extreme of believing that 'God is truth' to the opposite extreme of fanatically believing that 'all is false'.[80]

57. [footnote] How the 'Real World' at last Became a Myth[81]

57. [footnote] The most extreme form of nihilism would be to think that every belief, every act of taking something to be true, is necessarily false: because there is no *world of truth* at all.[82]

58. herd instinct

59. this denial of the will to life become religion![83]

60. [footnote] Thus spoke the Devil to me once: 'Even God has his Hell: it is his love for man.' | And I lately heard him say these words: 'God is dead; God has died of his pity for man.'[84]

61. Christianity is called the religion of *pity*. […] [P]ity persuades to *nothingness*! ... One does not say 'nothingness': one says 'the Beyond'; or 'God'; or '*true* life'; […] This innocent rhetoric from the domain of religio-moral idiosyncrasy at once appears *much less innocent* when one grasps *which* tendency is here draping the mantle of sublime words about itself: the tendency hostile to life. […] Nothing in our unhealthy modernity is more unhealthy than Christian pity.[85]

62. an expression of physiological décadence[86]

66. Nihilism represents an *intermediate* pathological state[87]

67. What they do not understand, although it is palpable, is that pessimism is not a problem but a symptom, that the term should be replaced by *nihilism*, that the question

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[80] Ibid., p. 11.
[81] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, pp. 40-41.
[82] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 21. The Kaufmann translation is perhaps, in this case, preferable: 'because there simply is no *true world*'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 14.
[83] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 320.
[84] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 114.
[85] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, pp. 118-119.
[86] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 32.
[87] Ibid., p. 20.

of whether it is better to be or not to be, is itself an illness, a decline in strength, a kind of hypersensitivity.[88]

68. [footnote] Schopenhauer was hostile to life: therefore pity became for him a virtue.[89]

69. the modern pessimists as decadents

70. the *Ultimate Man*[90]

73. it is only as this unique I that I take everything for my own[91]

74. Our way is upward, from the species across to the super-species. But the degenerate mind which says 'All for me' is a horror to us.[92]

74. [footnote] The time of the most contemptible man is coming, the man who can no longer despise himself.[93]

75. in masterly form

76. Whoever acclaims Nietzsche's puzzling masks as a new and deep wisdom should […] above all not fail to revert to Stirner's brilliant masterpiece, which in terms of style is not inferior to Nietzsche's writings, but towers above them in philosophical content.

76. [footnote] a poet […] only a thinker

77. [a book] that nobody interested in practical philosophy should leave unread[94]

78. [footnote] That he [Nietzsche] should not have felt prompted by my reference to become more closely acquainted with so congenial a thinker [as Stirner] is hardly likely. The third part of the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* […] does not yet show a change in his way of thinking; however, it becomes all the more apparent after a break of several years in the writings of his second period. An independent parallel development towards a similar end remains possible but would be remarkable under such circumstances.

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[88] Ibid., p. 32.
[89] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, p. 119.
[90] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 45. Also known as 'the last men'.
[91] *EO*, p. 319.
[92] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 100.
[93] Ibid., p. 46.
[94] Eduard von Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, trans. by William Chatterton Coupland, 3 vols (London: Trübner & Co., 1884), III, p. 97.

79. philosophical joke […] philosophy of unconscious irony […] the unconscious parodist […] rogue of rogues[95]

80. [footnote] Hartmann's intention was clear […], he wanted to expose, denounce and disavow Nietsche

83. Stirner went so far […] as to reject all moral ideas. […] What a pity that to this book – the extremest that we know anywhere – a second positive part was not added. […] Stirner lays so much stress on the will […] that it appears as the root force of human nature. It may remind us of Schopenhauer.[96]

84. excellent in its own way and very instructive

85. the most important philosophical work to have been published in the last few decades […] about which I could write a full-length panegyric

86. [footnote] there are deeper connections […] between Schopenhauer's and Stirner's world views. […] Albert Lange instinctively sensed and envisaged as much.

88. Was Nietzsche satisfied with this comment? Did he not reach for the book himself?

88. [footnote] I belong to those readers of Schopenhauer who know perfectly well, after they have turned the first page, that they will read all the others, and listen to every word that he has spoken.[97]

89. [footnote] Mrs. El. Förster claims unhesitatingly that Nietzsche was unfamiliar with Stirner. The whole issue is settled, however, since, in February 1899, I found out from an old loan register of the Basel Library that Baumgartner had borrowed Stirner's work there on 14 July 1874 […]. [Baumgartner] had belonged to Nietzsche's most intimate acquaintances for the whole term, and, as I have now had him personally confirm to me, he only got to know Stirner's work on Nietzsche's warmest recommendation.

90. [footnote] Klinger was a philistine, no, I feel no relation to him; but Stirner, yes! […] Now I have said it to you after all, and I did not want to speak about it. Forget it again. People will talk of plagiarism.

91. the boldest and most consistent since Hobbes

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[95] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thoughts out of Season II: The Use and Abuse of History; Schopenhauer as Educator*, trans. by Adrian Collins (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910), pp. 77-79.
[96] Friedrich Albert Lange, *The History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance*, trans. by Ernest Chester Thomas (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), p. 256.
[97] Nietzsche, *Thoughts out of Season II*, p. 114.

94. [footnote] In view of the fact that you started and have been the first Hanseatic citizen, I, in all modesty, only the third Veuve Cliquot – Ariadne, may I not spoil the game for you: instead I condemn you to be the 'Lion of Venice' – may he devour you... Dionysos.

97. [footnote] It says there (in the translation by Pfenninger, "Zürcher Post", 9 November 1900): […] It is possible that a book, which at the time was considered a novelty, exerted a certain influence on Nietzsche's spirit. It was *The Ego and Its Own* by Max Stirner, a gospel of the most ruthless individualism, of intellectual and social anarchism without barriers.

98. [footnote] I maintain […] that Nietzsche did read Stirner […]. For opponents this may […] justify the conclusion that he was a plagiarist. For those who knew him closely, it is the last thing they would think.

102. It is hard to imagine that Mushacke did not tell the deeply interested Nietzsche about his friend Stirner; that he did not have his *Ego* in his bookcase; that Nietzsche did not devour the book there and then.

103. serious mental-psychological life crisis

104. Since Schopenhauer removed the bandage of optimism from our eyes, we see more clearly. Life is more interesting, even if it is uglier.

105. Primary repression occurs when someone fails to examine rationally and master thoughts that worry them, but instead removes them from their consciousness by means of a mainly unconsciously controlled psychic dynamic, i.e. in an irrational manner.

106. [footnote] to identify Stirner not as a marginal figure, as is usually the case, but as a key figure in modern intellectual history, or, more specifically, in the history of the 'Enlightenment'.

110. It has […] often been claimed that my brother must have read Stirner. For certain external and internal reasons, I can say with complete certainty that he never held his book in his hand, and all the research I have made in this direction has yielded the same result.

113. [footnote] The kinship between Stirner and N. is striking!

114. [footnote] The Nietzsche Archive and its charges against the former editor. A revelation.

114. [footnote] The private lessons I had to give Mrs. Förster-Nietzsche taught me above all one thing: that Mrs. Förster-Nietzsche is a complete layman in everything

concerning her brother's teaching. She does not have any sort of independent opinion about the simplest aspects of this teaching. […] Mrs. Förster-Nietzsche lacks any sense of finer, or even for coarser logical distinctions.

114. [footnote] Perhaps I have done too much out of courtesy and consideration in praising her qualities. Now I declare that this was a great stupidity on my part, and that I am most willing formally to take back any praise I have bestowed on Mrs. Förster-Nietzsche.

115. [footnote] In the second volume of his Nietzsche monograph, Charles Andler explicitly characterises the Weimar and Basel traditions for the first time. These two traditions go back to the conflict between EFN and Overbeck.

116. All things are nothing to me. [Alternative translation] I have set my affair on nothing.[98] [A more accurate translation is, perhaps: I have made nothing my cause.]

117. I am writing you this that you take much pleasure from the 'nothing' on which you have 'set your heart'.

123. One finds in an almost forgotten thinker, Max Stirner, nearly just as strongly as in Nietzsche, the unrelenting individualism, the cult of the ego, the hostility towards the state, the protest against the dogma of equality, so that to compare his magnum opus, *The Ego*, from this point of view with Nietzsche's writings is very curious.

124. prophets of individualism

125. The literary activities of these two thinkers lie more than thirty years apart, but, however great their disparity, their congruity is no less.

126. wanting to compare this eternally vacillating, muddled spirit, who is repeatedly self-contradictory, almost helplessly tumbling from truth to error, with the deep, clear, calm, and superior genius of Stirner is an absurdity not worth serious refutation.[99]

127. that Nietzsche knew *Der Einzige* and shyly buried in himself the overwhelming force of its influence, until he was able to free himself of it in his own creating.[100]

128. [footnote] Nietzsche liked Stirner's teachings, but he found the way in which they were promulgated too unscrupulous, […] for far too many people – unsuitable, too dangerous.

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[98] *EO*, pp. 5, 324. Stirner, *The Ego and His Own* (1912), p. 3.
[99] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 18.
[100] Ibid., p. 19.

129. It has long been argued among interested parties whether Nietzsche knew Stirner. The question is almost certainly decided in the affirmative.

130. And so it is easy to imagine that Nietzsche was so 'economical,' as Overbeck called it, with his knowledge of Stirner because he was both attracted to and repelled by him, and did not want to be confused with him.[101]

131. Given the unfavorable reputation of Stirner, one could easily imagine that Nietzsche had no desire to be mentioned in the same breath as this philosophical outcast.[102]

140. What path might Nietzsche not have taken if, instead of Schopenhauer, his teacher had been Max Stirner! In Nietzsche's writings no influence of Stirner whatsoever is to be found. By his own effort, Nietzsche had to work his way out of German idealism to a Stirner-like world conception.[103]

147. Both can be separated by an entire world and yet belong together through the inner consistency of their radical criticism of Christian humanitarianism.[104]

148. The truth wears longer than all the gods; for it is only in the truth's service, and for love of it, that people have overthrown the gods and at last God himself.[105]

149. In all this there is room made for the Christian proposition that the world is empty, for the Christian *contempt of the world*.[106]

150. But all thinking that does not sin against the holy spirit is belief in spirits or ghosts.[107]

151. how thoroughly theological is the liberation that Feuerbach is laboring to give us[108]

152. Hegel Feuerbach Strauss – it all stinks of theologians and church fathers.

153. What are man's truths ultimately? Merely his *irrefutable* errors.[109]

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[101] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 187.
[102] Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, trans. by Shelley Frisch (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2003), p. 126.
[103] Rudolf Steiner, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Fighter for Freedom*, trans. by Margaret Ingram deRis (Englewood, NJ: Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1960), p. 122.
[104] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 187.
[105] *EO*, p. 311.
[106] Ibid., p. 85.
[107] Ibid., p. 306.
[108] Ibid., p. 33.
[109] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 287.

153. [footnote] Perhaps no one has ever been sufficiently truthful about what 'truthfulness' is.[110]

154. The truth is dead, a letter, a word, a material that I can use up.[111]

155. I am neither good nor bad.[112]

157. What is not supposed to be my concern! First and foremost the good cause, then God's cause, the cause of mankind, of truth, of freedom, of humanity, of justice; further, the cause of my people, my prince, my fatherland; finally even the cause of mind and a thousand other causes.[113]

158. Become what you are![114]

159. Over the portal of our time stands not that 'Know thyself' of Apollo, but a '*Get the value out of thyself!*'[115]

160. *master morality* and *slave morality*[116]

161. *Victory* or *defeat* – between the two alternatives the fate of the combat wavers. The victor becomes the *lord*, the vanquished one the *subject*: the former exercises *supremacy* and 'rights of supremacy', the latter fulfils in awe and deference the 'duties of a subject'.[117]

164. Proper knowledge perfects itself when it stops being knowledge and becomes a simple human drive once again, the will.[118]

165. Right – is a wheel in the head, put there by a spook; power – that am I myself, I am the powerful one and owner of power.[119]

166. My freedom becomes complete only when it is my – *might*.[120]

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[110] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 88.
[111] *EO*, pp. 312-313.
[112] Ibid., p. 7.
[113] Ibid., p. 5.
[114] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 252.
[115] *EO*, p. 278.
[116] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 175.
[117] *EO*, p. 13.
[118] Max Stirner, *The False Principle of Our Education or Humanism and Realism*, trans. by Robert H. Beebe (Colorado Springs: Ralph Myles, 1967), p. 20.
[119] *EO*, p. 187.
[120] Ibid., p. 151.

167. Nietzsche himself, it is patent, never read Stirner; otherwise, with his love for all literary 'outsiders,' he would certainly have mentioned him more than once.[121]

170. Become what you are[122]

172. [footnote] I shall now tell the story of Zarathustra. The basic conception of the work, the *idea of eternal recurrence*, the highest formula of affirmation that can possibly be attained – belongs to the August of the year 1881: it was jotted down on a piece of paper with the inscription, '6,000 feet beyond man and time'. I was that day walking through the woods beside the lake of Silvaplana; I stopped beside a mighty pyramidal block of stone which reared itself up not far from Surlei. Then this idea came to me.[123]

178. [footnote] In the mid-1870s, Nietzsche studied a treatise called *Denken und Wirklichkeit* (Thought and Reality, 1877), by the philosopher Afrikan Spir. This work had long been consigned to oblivion, but it had a lasting impact on Nietzsche. Section 18 of *Human, All Too Human* cited Spir, not by name, but by presenting a 'proposition by an outstanding logician'.[124]

179. obliterated traces of Stirner in Nietzsche's work and estate

183. Nietzsche's distorted, newly discovered thinking forms a kind of common thread that runs through the nihilism debate in our [20th] century.

184. [footnote] If you immerse yourself in Berg's music, you sometimes feel as if his voice was speaking with a sound mixed with tenderness, nihilism and trust in the most frail.

188. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.[125]

201. *But the state-of-mind which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein's ownmost individualized Being, is anxiety*. In this state-of-mind, Dasein finds itself *face to face* with the 'nothing' of the possible impossibility of its existence. […] Being-towards-death is essentially anxiety.[126]

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[121] Friedell, *A Cultural History of the Modern Age*, III, p. 114.
[122] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 252.
[123] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 99.
[124] Safranski, *Nietzsche*, p. 161.
[125] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 84.
[126] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), p. 310.

Chapter Four

3. Thus Max Stirner called him a ‘pious atheist’ and claimed: ‘Feuerbach fled from faith into love.’ […] Feuerbach’s initial response to Stirner was that his nihilism was also dogmatic.

5. A certain radicalism in a religious context […] had merged to some extent with a similar radicalism in the political, moral and social spheres, finally reaching the point where it entirely called into question everything in the existing order including the church, the state, society, public morals, etc. In Berlin, a small circle of followers of this doctrine formed, mostly still very young writers, who […] gave themselves the name of nihilists. A kind of literary manifesto of this school of thought […] was the work: *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* by Max Stirner.

6. Youngest Germany

7. [footnote] pure nihilists, as nothings

8. this nihilistic-Promethean turning away from all that is moral

9. the most reckless and demented denigration of all moral ideas and sentiments ever

11. The nihilism, in which Stirner’s theory ends, has a different face to that which bears the same name in Russia. He has ‘made nothing his concern’. But nothing comes from nothing. After that, there is no way forward.

11. [footnote] From naught comes naught, please learn this too, | If something’s to become of you.

12. in a sort of nihilistic crapulence

13. Here there is some spook in Stirner, it spooks out at one, nihilism. The ‘Unique One’ is ‘the mortal creator, who consumes himself’. All striving is rejected.

14. Where Stirner’s moral nihilism leads may be demonstrated by the following quotation: ‘But I am entitled by myself to murder if I myself do not forbid it to myself.’

15. The Stirnerian world is the realm of unrestricted hedonism and irresponsibility; anarchism, at least ideally, restricts enjoyment through the feeling of solidarity.

16. the most consistent of all the anarchists

17. the first anarchist work

20. The egoist must show himself to be an *anarchist*. He is supposed to identify himself as the creator and owner of the spiritual world.

21. annihilation of the spirit

21. logical, ethical, social anarchism or nihilism

24. Both world views stand in irreconcilable opposition to Christianity as well as to prevailing trends in general, both are representatives of absolute individualism.

25. Nietzsche before Nietzsche

25. Only when our thinking and willing is theocentric does our life have the right substance and purpose.

31. One would think that the people would have gradually become disgusted by such fare. […] How can it be countered and remedied? Our schools and churches have a great task here.

32. a precursor of the nihilists

33. the most radical of radicals […], the spiritual father of anarchism and nihilism

34. Stirner's anarchism and nihilism developed into a party secretly subverting the whole of Europe, whose followers want, with dagger, revolver and bombs, to make themselves owners of the whole world and prove that they have made nothing their cause.

36. Max Stirner […] was a philosopher, a thinker; and the philosopher has to deal solely with the truth, the naked, undisguised truth. […] And so he has become, as is now the general verdict, and not infrequently the condemnation, the worst sceptic and even nihilist; he is said to have left us nothing unscathed, to have attacked law, state and property – indeed to have called into question the magic of disinterested love and compassion. Those who speak in this way and claim to prove something with single sentences and phrases, which gain an entirely different light within the context of a great and complex intellectual narrative, do not understand how to trace a river back to its source.

37. how fundamentally wrong it is to stigmatise Stirner as a nihilist

38. is not a nihilistic one, but an optimistic, life-affirming one, in the Nietzschean sense.

39. declaration of the urban lumpenproletariat

40. Stirner's anarchist theory thus built the bridge to nihilism

41. Stirner had dug most systematically and deeply and dissolved all apparently indissoluble social and moral concepts, until nothing remained for him but the inviolable sovereignty of the ego and a system of economic anarchism that sprang from this philosophical nihilism.

42. Stirner's philosophy is […] a radical nihilism, a logical, ethical, religious, social nihilism.

43. the self-proclaimed nihilist

44. personalistic anarchism and nihilism

45. social nihilism

46. Stirner's cynical nihilism remained seated in the wine tavern

48. Since the publication of his book until the present day, Stirner has been portrayed in all his monographs as a nihilist in the fields of knowledge, morality and society, who preaches the law of the jungle and calls for self-gratifying indulgence.

50. the most consistent nihilist

52. the lunatic hymn to anarchism in philosophical nihilism

53. nihilistic philosophy

54. B. Bauer and Stirner brought all philosophy to an end in radical criticism and nihilism.[127]

55. The problem of their [Stirner and Kierkegaard's] common radicalism is the nihilism which arises from extreme isolation. For Stirner it is the careless nihilism of 'I entrust my cause to nothing' – namely, to nothing other than myself. For Kierkegaard, it is the melancholy nihilism of irony and boredom, of anxiety and despair.[128]

56. Pure egoism ends in pure indifference; pure individualism ends in nihilism.

57. The initial, negative tendency, the 'nihilism' of Stirner's thought, emerges at once from the whole conception of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*

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[127] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 71.
[128] Ibid., p. 359.

58. a very skilled stylist and dialectician, a passionate revolutionary and fighter, but in the guise of a dictator, an intellectual nihilist, but with the weapons of the mind

59. It is pointless to argue about whether Stirner, with his formula, 'I have made nothing my cause', is to be counted among the nihilists. He is not a nihilist, despite his statement that his cause is neither the divine nor the human, but his own. The accusation of nihilism is already refuted by the reference to the fact that for him the 'individual' exists, admittedly as the 'Unique One', but to whom everything else is 'property'.

60. Stirner […] recognised only one reality, the ego, and only one principle, the cult of the ego; he made absolute egoism the sole motive of human activity, ending up with nihilism and anarchism.

62. on the border of nihilism, anarchism and atheism

64. a harbinger of modern nihilistic trends

65. a radical outsider as a trendsetter for nihilism

66. What is to be understood by nihilism […] [is] the negation of any objective obligations and values that could provide man with a framework and guideline for his actions. […] In an extreme form, the attempt to create a nihilistic system of thought was once undertaken in the nineteenth century; namely by Max Stirner. […] This attempt was an utter failure. […] The ideology of a petit bourgeois megalomania, which Stirner's work reflects, was not up to the problem of nihilism.

67. the father of nihilism

73. his nihilistic-anarchistic tendency

75. union of egoists

75. purely negative, destructive, nihilistic

76. Stirner's self-absorbed philosophical thinking based on negation is not explicitly nihilism, but to all intents and purposes it is.

77. Stirner's current relevance lies […] above all in his particular conception of nihilism, which, in its radicalism, is unique in the history of ideas. Stirner illuminates in it a nihilism devoid not only of metaphysical but also of existential transcendence, a nihilism that means the end of all philosophising. In the conclusion of his work, *Der Einzige*, Stirner writes explicitly not that he wants to make his concern 'nothingness', but 'nothing'. […] No thinker has succeeded in surpassing Stirner's nihilism in its profound radicalism.

82. the only perfect nihilist in the history of modern philosophy

88. On a philosophical level, there is probably no text that presents the dissolution of Hegelianism into nihilism in a more paradigmatic way than *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1852) [*sic*] by Max Stirner.

89. outspoken moral nihilism

91. the new nihilistic hymn

92. And indeed, Stirner sides with perfect [consummate] nihilism, precisely by consistently and unreservedly standing on the ground of nothingness.

94. whose work, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, sketched out, even before Nietzsche, the elements of a consistent nihilism

97. Camus contents himself […] with pointing out that Stirner can be classified as nihilistic. As part of his revolt, Stirner pronounces his disgust for words and ideas, but that is far from making him nihilistic.

98. The only duty that Stirner would to some extent consider valid, would be: be yourself! Or also: be an egoist, i.e. live your own life, for you only have this one, and pursue only your real interests. […] Is that really supposed to be the whole Stirner? The prophet of self-realisation and enjoyment of life through self-denial? […] But where is the nihilist and violent cynic in this almost sympathetic picture of Stirner?

99. [footnote] The 'Unique One' appears […] as an anarchist, superman, psychopath, socialist, petit bourgeois, intellectual, fascist, genius, paranoiac, bohemian, Satanist, existentialist, individualist, terrorist, member of the middle-class, critic of totalitarianism, solipsist, prophet, nihilist, metaphysician, and all of these with various meanings, evaluations and combinations.

102. Most people consider Stirner to be the epitome of a pathological solipsist, a relentless, megalomaniacal egoist and ethical nihilist. […] The list of malicious invectives – omnipotence frenzy of the ego, shark philosophy, tough guy mentality, crude law of the jungle, devil's advocate – could be extended at will […]. Despite these unanimously damning verdicts, it is an astonishing and undeniable fact that philosophers of very different provenances engage intensively, although more polemically than objectively or argumentatively, with this arch-enemy of all religion, morality and traditional political order.

103. Here the Enlightenment, above all its atheistic-materialistic line, with all its relativistic-nihilistic implications, is brought to a logical conclusion more compellingly

than at any time before or after *Der Einzige*. Whether one also wants to share this radical […] position is another matter altogether... As is the claim that Stirner had already opened up 'paths beyond nihilism' (Bernd A. Laska).

103. [footnote] Still a dissident. How Marx and Nietzsche suppressed their colleague Max Stirner and why he outlived them intellectually. An attempt at philosophical consistency concerning the Enlightenment

103. [footnote] No one wanted to follow Stirner's step beyond the New Enlightenment. His nihilism simply could not be the consequence of Enlightenment thinking. They were so alarmed that people were blind to the fact that Stirner had already opened up paths 'beyond nihilism'.

105. as little a nihilist as Nietzsche

106. All things are nothing to me. [Alternative translation:] I have set my affair on nothing.[129] [A more accurate translation is, perhaps: I have made nothing my cause.]

107. The inspiration for Stirner's motto probably was Goethe's poem 'Vanitas vanitatum vanitas.' Kierkegaard, too, was acquainted with it. In his *Journals* (ed. Ulrich, p. 145), he describes it as being 'very interesting,' because it is the nihilistic 'summation of life' of a very great individuality.[130]

108. Stirner's one-sided individualism begins with 'nothing' and ends in 'nothing'. […] The Stirnerian ego is the nothing from which the entire content of consciousness emerges. […] In order to end as nothing, this ego must consume itself, destroy itself, dissolve itself. […] Stirner's individualism ends in nihilism.

111. I have made God my cause

112. Before us there is certainly left only nothing; but that which struggles against this flowing away into nothing, namely our nature, is indeed just the will-to-live which we ourselves are […]. That we abhor nothingness so much is simply another way of saying that we will life so much, and that we are nothing but this will […]. [W]hat remains after the complete abolition of the will is, for all who are still full of the will, assuredly nothing. But also conversely, to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is – nothing.[131]

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[129] *EO*, pp. 5, 324. Stirner, *The Ego and His Own* (1912), p. 3.
[130] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 411.
[131] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), I, pp. 411-412.

113. Of course in *that* sense in which he arises out of nothing when he is begotten, man becomes nothing through death.[132]

114. The vanity of existence is revealed in the whole form existence assumes: in the infiniteness of time and space contrasted with the finiteness of the individual in both. […] *Time* and that *perishability* of all things existing in time that time itself brings about is simply the form under which the will to live, which as thing in itself is imperishable, reveals to itself the vanity of its striving. Time is that by virtue of which everything becomes nothingness in our hands and loses all real value.[133]

115. Nothing is more to me than myself![134]

115. [footnote] Satyros or the deified sylvan devil

115. [footnote] Naught in the world is more to me than I; | For God, he is God, and I, I am I.

116. If I concern myself for myself, the unique one, then my concern rests on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself.[135]

117. the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything[136]

140. Stirner's concept of egoism has, from the very beginning, led to the most serious misunderstandings of his philosophy.

142. a bloodthirsty, cruel, cunning, treacherous, perfidious and conquest-mad tyrant

143. the inventor of shark philosophy

144. the bestiality of radical egoism

147. [footnote] it was only when aristocratic value judgments *declined* that the whole antithesis 'egoistic' 'unegoistic' obtruded itself more and more on the human conscience[137]

150. From France, Comte's superficial juxtaposition of altruism and egoism – but there is no such thing as altruism! – has reached England. […] In Germany […] E. von

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[132] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, II, p. 481.
[133] Ibid.
[134] *EO*, p. 7.
[135] Ibid., p. 324.
[136] Ibid., p. 7.
[137] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 26.

H<artmann> has recently brought Comte's idea to wide attention – as wide as 871 pages – ; and […] ceremoniously and formally thrown egoism out of the front door, in order, in the name of 'altruism', to force it back in through the back door.

152. In short: the worship of altruism is a specific form of egoism, which occurs regularly under certain physiological conditions.[138]

153. *hatred of egoism*[139]

157. I and the egoistic are the really general, since every one is an egoist and of paramount importance to himself.[140]

162. To the egoist nothing is high enough for him to humble himself before it, nothing so independent that he would live for love of it, nothing so sacred that he would sacrifice himself to it. The egoist's love rises in selfishness, flows in the bed of selfishness, and empties into selfishness again.[141]

164. egoists in the usual sense, selfish people, looking out for their own advantage, sober, calculating[142]

165. Their entire activity is egoistic, but it is a one-sided, unopened, narrow egoism; it is possessedness.[143]

166. I love men too, not merely individuals, but every one. But I love them with the consciousness of egoism; I love them because love makes *me* happy, I love because loving is natural to me, because it pleases me. I know no 'commandment of love'. I have a *fellow-feeling* with every feeling being, and their torment torments, their refreshment refreshes me too.[144]

166. [footnote] The Circe of mankind, morality, has falsified all *psychologica* to its very foundations – has *moralized* it – to the point of the frightful absurdity that love is supposed to be something 'unegoistic'.[145]

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[138] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 218.
[139] Ibid.
[140] *EO*, p. 162.
[141] Ibid., pp. 260-261.
[142] Ibid., p. 70.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid., p. 258.
[145] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 75.

168. [footnote] This clever fancy, for it is no more, is then applied in the most ingenious, boldest and most logical fashion to all fields of life and knowledge, only to emerge – and herein lies its splendid inconsequence – in a new altruism.[146]

169. Am I perchance to have no lively interest in the person of another, are *his* joy and *his* weal not to lie at my heart, is the enjoyment that I furnish him not to be more to me than other enjoyments of my own? On the contrary, I can with joy sacrifice to him numberless enjoyments, I can deny myself numberless things for the enhancement of *his* pleasure, and I can risk for him what without him was the dearest to me, my life, my welfare, my freedom. Why, it constitutes my pleasure and my happiness to refresh myself with his happiness and his pleasure. But *myself*, *my own self*, I do not sacrifice to him, but remain an egoist and – enjoy him.[147]

169. [footnote] But how about that 'doing the good for the good's sake' without prospect of reward? As if here too the pay was not contained in the satisfaction that it is to afford.[148]

169. [footnote] Friend. – Fellow rejoicing, not fellow suffering makes the friend.[149]

169. [footnote] *Joying with*. – The serpent that stings us means to hurt us and rejoices as it does so; the lowest animal can imagine the *pain* of others. But to imagine the joy of others and to rejoice at it is the highest privilege of the highest animals, and among them it is accessible only to the choicest exemplars.[150]

174. [footnote] 'Plaire' – the great mystery of the French spirit and at bottom of herd-morality. 'To feel pity', altruism, is the hypocritical expression for it.

174. [footnote] Inhibition of knowledge by morality. e.g. the attempt to reconcile (identify) life with morality and to justify it before morality. Altruism: primordially the selfless mode of thinking, possible also without obligation and sanction.

174. [footnote] *Misrepresentation in Psychology* […] That love should have been misrepresented as devotion (and altruism).[151]

175. The critics display even more irritation against the 'egoist' than against the unique. Instead of delving into egoism as Stirner meant it, they stop at their usual childish depiction of it and roll out to everyone the well-known catalogue of sins.[152]

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[146] Friedell, *A Cultural History of the Modern Age*, III, p. 114.
[147] *EO*, pp. 257-258.
[148] Ibid., p. 149.
[149] Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 180.
[150] Ibid., p. 228.
[151] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 181-182.
[152] Max Stirner, *Stirner's Critics*, trans. by Wolfi Landstreicher (Berkeley: LBC Books, 2012), p. 60.

176. how stupid, vulgar and predatorily murderous egoism is[153]

179. Egoism […] is not opposed to love nor to thought; it is no enemy of the sweet life of love, nor of devotion and sacrifice; it is no enemy of intimate warmth, but it is also no enemy of critique, nor of socialism, nor, in short, of any *actual interest*. It doesn't exclude any interest. It is directed against only disinterestedness and the uninteresting; not against love, but against sacred love, not against thought, but against sacred thought, not against socialists, but against sacred socialists, etc.[154]

180. The spectrum of reception was […] large, contradictory and fraught with numerous misunderstandings.

182. [footnote] As loud and noisy as it usually was at Hippel's, just as quietly did Stirner keep a low profile. […] One never heard from him a vehement, raw, or even vulgar word, such as were no rarity at Hippel's. […] Most people […] held the 'contented,' simple, painfully modest man to be a harmless man of little importance, […] and they ignored him until later, when he drew the attention of everyone in such a high degree onto himself.[155]

186. What Stirner calls egoism is not the trite egoism of his critics' understanding, but an appeal to everyone not to advocate externally imposed interests, but to stand up for their own interests.

187. Stirner's idea is simply to expel all foreign programming from his mind. After this total self-purification of the mind, a naked, in a sense empty, reflective egoism should remain.

189. Thus Stirner saw himself as completing the project of 'self-emancipation' set in motion by the Enlightenment, which had been driven forward by Feuerbach's critique of religion but had not yet reached its goal.

192. Stirner's infantile anarchism

193. union of potentially equal owners as the materialisation of the forms of association of these owners

194. the exclusion, by and large, of socio-economic factors within a philosophy that makes a claim to ubiquity

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[153] Ibid.
[154] Stirner, *Stirner's Critics*, p. 81.
[155] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 91.

196. [footnote] Theodor Adorno admitted in a small circle that Stirner was the one who 'let the cat out of the bag'

196. [footnote] Stirner, as Adorno put it, 'let the cat out of the bag'

Chapter Five

2. which […] allowed none but the sovereign ego to celebrate its triumphs on the ruins of society

2. [footnote] This [arbitrary] viewpoint is almost realised […] in Max Stirner, who left but one illusion standing on the ruins of all destroyed illusions: the reality of the ego.

3. [in *Der Einzige* he] was already advocating political nihilism […]; for Stirner, a republic was no longer enough: the state as such is to be abolished.[156]

4. whose followers want, with dagger, revolver and bombs, to make themselves owners of the whole world.

18. Finally came Stirner, the prophet of contemporary anarchism – Bakunin has taken a great deal from him.[157]

18. [footnote] Stirner enjoyed a revival thanks to Bakunin who, by the way, was also in Berlin at the time and, during Werder's course of lectures on logic (1841-42), sat on the bench in front of me along with four or five other Russians. Proudhon's harmless, purely etymological anarchy (i.e. absence of government) would never have resulted in the present anarchist doctrines had not Bakunin laced it with a good measure of Stirnerian 'rebellion'. As a result the anarchists have themselves become nothing but a collection of '*Unique Ones*', so much so that no two of them can abide one another's company.[158]

19. With regard to Stirner's influence on the development of anarchist doctrine, it must be noted […] that Stirner's theory undoubtedly exerted an influence on the worldview of the creator of communist anarchism, M. Bakunin.

21. [footnote] My intercourse with the world consists in my enjoying it, and so consuming it for my self-enjoyment.[159]

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[156] *Masaryk on Marx,* An Abridged Edition of T. G. Masaryk*, The Social Question: Philosophical and Sociological Foundations of Marxism*, ed. and trans. by Erazim V. Kohák (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1972), pp. 261-262.
[157] Marx, Engels, *Collected Works*, XXVI (1990), p. 364.
[158] Ibid., XXXXVIII (2001), p. 394.
[159] *EO*, p. 282.

25. But the dissolution of *society* is *intercourse* or *union*. A society does assuredly arise by union too, but only as a fixed idea arises by a thought. […] If a union has crystallized into a society, it has ceased to be a coalition; for coalition is an incessant self-uniting; it has become a unitedness, come to a standstill, degenerated into a fixity; it is – *dead* as a union, it is the corpse of the union or the coalition, it is – society, community.[160]

32. Herzen's disillusionment and Herzen's interpretation of nihilism harmonise perfectly with Stirner's nihilistic iconoclasm. Herzen, like Stirner, deduces the ultimate logical conclusions from the teachings of Feuerbach.[161]

33. [footnote] Stirner first had a comprehensive, powerful effect in the country to which he had denied culture and which he had accused of barbarism and Hunnish lust for the subjugation of Europe, in Russia. […] Long before Marx inspired Russian revolutionaries, ever since the publication of the first edition of *Der Einzige*, Russian philosophers had dealt extensively with Stirner.

38. There is no sinner and no sinful egoism![162]

40. one-sided, unopened, narrow egoism[163]

41. But I am entitled by myself to murder if I myself do not forbid it to myself.[164]

42. To await death is what the moral commandment postulates as the good; to give it to oneself is immoral and bad: *suicide* finds no excuse before the judgement-seat of morality. […] Only when I am under obligation to no being is the maintaining of life – my affair.[165]

42. [footnote] Thus we hear that suicide is the most cowardly of acts, that only a madman would commit it, and similar insipidities; or the senseless assertion that suicide is 'wrong', though it is obvious there is nothing in the world a man has a more incontestable *right* to than his own life and person.[166]

43. Denounce that officer's widow who, in the flight in Russia, after her leg has been shot away, takes the garter from it, strangles her child with it, and then bleeds to death

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[160] Ibid., p. 271.
[161] Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia: Studies in History, Literature and Philosophy*, trans. by Eden and Cedar Paul, 3 vols (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1919-1967), II (1919), p. 482.
[162] *EO*, p. 317.
[163] Ibid., p. 70.
[164] Ibid., p. 169.
[165] Ibid., p. 286.
[166] Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, p. 77.

alongside the corpse – denounce the memory of the – infanticide. […] The mother murdered it because she wanted to die *satisfied* and at rest.[167]

44. If you ask him [a 'moral man'] whether he has ever doubted that the copulation of brother and sister is incest, that monogamy is the truth of marriage, […] then a moral shudder will come over him at the conception of one's being allowed to touch his sister as wife also. And whence this shudder? Because he *believes* in those moral commandments.[168]

45. *Everything sacred is a tie, a fetter.*[169]

47. And if I can use him [the fellow man], I doubtless come to an understanding and make myself at one with him, in order, by the agreement, to strengthen *my power*, and by combined force to accomplish more than individual force could effect.[170]

53. [footnote] A few years later, the Petrashevskyites read him [Stirner].

55. Petraschewski himself, in a satirical *Dictionary* which he published under the pseudonym of Kirilow, praised as one of the merits of early Christianity the abolition of private property and so on. We can easily recognise here the elements of Proudhon's and Stirner's Anarchism.[171]

61. [footnote] [Stirner's book] could be found in the library of the young Dostoevsky.

62. [footnote] Especially influential […] have been […] Nietzsche, Stirner. […] I may refer to F. Sologub with his solipsist paroxysms; and to L. Šestov, an imitator of Stirner and Nietzsche. […] | Dostoevskii must be mentioned in this connection, in so far as the conceptions of individualistic anarchism incorporated by him in the figure of Ivan Karamazov are given a positive turn by the anarchists and are accepted by them.[172]

63. Through Dostoevsky, Stirner's ideas were disseminated across the world in literary form, and the figure of Ivan Karamazov has since become part of the consciousness of millions.

67. Even those Russian authors of the nineteenth century who described themselves as nihilists (such as Pisarev, Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevsky) did not refer to Stirner at all. In secondary literature, however, one occasionally finds – on the basis of superficial

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[167] *EO*, p. 281.
[168] Ibid., p. 45.
[169] Ibid., p. 192.
[170] Ibid., p. 276.
[171] E. V. Zenker, *Anarchism: A Criticism and History of the Anarchist Theory* (London: Methuen, 1898), p. 118.
[172] Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia*, II, pp. 392-393.

agreement – the assertion (not substantiated in a single case) that in them, as in other Russian authors (such as Belinsky, Herzen, Dostoevsky), positive influences of Stirner can be recognised.

68. In a witty account of another visit to Berlin in 1847, Turgenev spoke poignantly about the end of the 'literary, theoretical, philosophical, mythical epoch of German life'. […] The visitor saw the youth of the day turn away from philosophy for good, no students at Stahl's, Schelling forgotten, Steffens dead, only 'the good Werder with three students as eager as ever'. Bruno Bauer seemed to be lost without trace – at a concert he met the completely depressed Stirner.

72. [footnote] Ultimately, the kingdom of heaven after death, nirvana and absolute nothingness are one and the same thing.

81. Egoism does not think of sacrificing anything, giving away anything that it wants.[173]

82. And are these self-sacrificing people perchance not selfish, not egoist? […] Their entire activity is egoistic.[174]

83. who deals with things and thoughts according to his heart's pleasure, and sets his personal pleasure above everything.[175]

92. The nihilists have by no means thought out their doctrine metaphysically; their nihilism is social and political; they aim at destroying Old Russia, the Russia of Nicholas. [That is their 'nihil'.][176]

101. Freely following Stirner and Feuerbach, Pisarev negates all principles, all ethical aims, the concept of duty, ideals in general. […] Pisarev, like Stirner, denies the existence of crime.[177]

102. Such is Pisarev's psychological description of the realistic process of disillusionment, and his terminology, with the reference to spooks, recalls Feuerbach and Stirner.[178]

103. He knew of Stirner's work, but I believe at second hand. […] He preached radical individualism, understanding by this term the struggle for the emancipation of the individuality.[179]

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[173] *EO*, p. 228.
[174] Ibid., p. 70.
[175] Ibid., p. 18.
[176] Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia*, II, p. 73.
[177] Ibid., p. 54.
[178] Ibid., p. 55.
[179] Ibid., p. 53.

113. Ultimately, everything is so ridiculous that it comes down to one thing; life and death are equally senseless and are therefore a matter of indifference to me. […] All belief in morality, in the possibility of an improvement of the world and of life, in purposeful action, is for me an illusion with which people try to hide from themselves the misery of their situation. […] Only here is the standpoint of absolute indifference to all and every purpose reached, the most horrific state imaginable, for in its total burn-out it is as far removed from positive interest as negative despair – like the emptiness of the abyss of nothingness. […] Practically, this point of view is shown in Russian nihilism, formally it is developed by Max Stirner, who did not even require pessimism for it, as the sovereignty of the ego sufficed for him.

116. If the revolution ended in a reaction, this only showed what the revolution *really was*. […] The revolution was not directed against *the established*, but against the *establishment in question*, against a *particular* establishment. It did away with *this* ruler, not with *the* ruler.[180]

118. Revolution and insurrection must not be looked upon as synonymous. […] The revolution aimed at new *arrangements*; insurrection leads us no longer to *let* ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and set no glittering hopes on 'institutions'. […] Now, as my object is not the overthrow of an established order but my elevation above it, my purpose and deed are not a political or social but (as directed toward myself and my ownness alone) an *egoistic* purpose and deed.[181]

119. [footnote] Stirner, […] refraining in 1848 from participating in the revolution, incorporated into his life the true significance of his book *The Ego and his Own*, whereas the Russian 'ego' is a theoretical and practical revolutionist guided by the teaching of Bakunin, his aim is socio-political destruction, pandestruction.[182]

119. [footnote] It hardly needs to be expressly mentioned that Stirner had taken not the slightest outward part in the March days of 1848 or in the whole movement.[183]

122. The positivism of the nihilists was derived from Feuerbach and Stirner, and in part from Hegel.[184]

123. [footnote] The *other world outside us* is […] brushed away, and the great undertaking of the men of the Enlightenment completed; but the *other world in us* has become a new heaven and calls us forth to renewed heaven-storming.[185]

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[180] *EO*, pp. 99-100.
[181] Ibid., pp. 279-280.
[182] Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia*, II, p. 73.
[183] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 197.
[184] Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia*, II, p. 72.
[185] *EO*, p. 139.

124. [footnote] The legacy of Stirner, however, rests in the faithful and strong hands of the individualist anarchists.[186]

125. [footnote] What is not supposed to be my concern! First and foremost the good cause, then God's cause, the cause of mankind.[187]

Chapter Six

1. Whoever labelled Stirner the most extreme, radical, systematic advocate of atheism, immoralism, subjectivism, individualism, egoism, solipsism or the like, meant, even if he did not say so explicitly, that vague concept of ethical nihilism, to which belongs essentially, as already with Jacobi, Hegel and Rosenkranz, the horror vision of the destructive and apocalyptic, the evil, demonic and satanic.

4. [footnote] The doctrine of the Unique One justifies capitalism and administratively organised chaos, it justifies falsehood and injustice, having and not having, its ideal is an asocial and anonymous existence, it even justifies murder.

5. Theoretically, such nihilism in relation to all ethical pathos cannot develop into anything.

6. this nihilistic-Promethean turning away from all that is moral

7. Stirner's moral nihilism

8. outspoken moral nihilism

13. there can be no ethical propositions[188]

13. God does not reveal himself *in* the world[189]

25. [footnote] Egoism is a part of human nature and is therefore irrevocable. The cessation of egoism is only a pious wish; no society can master it or overcome it.

26. [footnote] Ultimately one loves one's desires and not that which is desired.[190]

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[186] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 21.
[187] *EO*, p. 5.
[188] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, pp. 183.
[189] Ibid., p. 187.
[190] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 88.

36. [footnote] Thucydides and, perhaps, Machiavelli's prince, are most akin to me, through their unconditional will not to delude themselves and to see reason in reality – not in reason or still less in morality.

42. One knows my demand of philosophers that they place themselves *beyond* good and evil. […] This demand follows from an insight first formulated by me: *that there are no moral facts whatever*. Moral judgment has this in common with religious judgment that it believes in realities which do not exist. Morality is only an interpretation of certain phenomena, more precisely, a *mis*interpretation.[191]

44. The beast in us wants to be lied to; morality is an official lie told so that it shall not tear us to pieces. Without the errors that repose in the assumptions of morality man would have remained animal.[192]

50. Ownness has not any alien standard, […] as it is not in any sense an *idea* like freedom, morality, humanity, and the like: it is only a description of the – *owner*.[193]

51. It is egoistic to ascribe to no thing a value of its own, an 'absolute' value, but to seek its value in me.[194]

55. Man, your head is haunted. […] You have a fixed idea! […] What is it, then, that is called a 'fixed idea'? An idea that has subjected the man to itself. […] Is not all the stupid chatter […] the babble of fools who suffer from the fixed idea of morality, legality, Christianity, and so forth, and only seem to go about free because the madhouse in which they walk takes in so broad a space?[195]

56. a madman's delusion[196]

57. as fanatical as religious faith![197]

58. morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask, as tartufferie, as illness, as misunderstanding[198]

59. [footnote] But among the virtues cultivated by morality was *truthfulness*: in the end, it is this which turns us against morality, and discovers its *function*, its *partiality*. At

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[191] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, p. 55.
[192] Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 35.
[193] *EO*, p. 154.
[194] Ibid., p. 152.
[195] Ibid., p. 43.
[196] Ibid., p. 44.
[197] Ibid., p. 45.
[198] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 20.

this point, our *insight* [into this long ingrained mendacity that one despairs of putting off] acts as a stimulant to nihilism.[199]

59. [footnote] [Morality as the cause of pessimism] | Pessimism as the prototype of nihilism.[200]

60. Who is there that has never […] noticed that our whole education is calculated to produce *feelings* in us, […] instead of leaving their production to ourselves. […] If we hear the name of God, we are to feel veneration; […] if we hear that of morality, we are to think that we hear something inviolable; if we hear of the Evil One or evil ones, we are to shudder. The intention is directed to these *feelings*, and he who should hear with pleasure the deeds of the 'bad' would have to be 'taught what's what' with the rod of discipline.[201]

60. [footnote] Moral influence takes its start where *humiliation* begins; yes, it is nothing else than this humiliation itself, the breaking and bending of the temper down to *humility*. […] Children must early be *made* to practice piety, godliness, and propriety; a person of good breeding is one into whom 'good maxims' have been *instilled* and *impressed*, poured in through a funnel, thrashed in and preached in.[202]

61. *The False Principle of Our Education or Humanism and Realism*

62. Truth itself consists in nothing other than man's revelation of himself, […] the liberation from all that is alien, the uttermost abstraction or release from all authority, the re-won naturalness. Such thoroughly *true* men are not supplied by school; if they are nevertheless there, they are there *in spite* of school.[203]

63. The universal education of school is to be an education for freedom, not for subservience: to be free, that is true *life*.[204]

64. Now if the idea and impulse of modern times is free will, then pedagogy must hover in front as the beginning and aim of the education of the *free personality*.[205]

65. If my conclusion is to express in a few words which goal our time has to steer toward, then the necessary decline of non-voluntary learning and rise of the self-assured will which perfects itself in the glorious sunlight of the free person may be expressed

[199] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 16.
[200] Ibid., p. 17.
[201] *EO*, p. 62.
[202] Ibid., p. 75.
[203] Stirner, *The False Principle of Our Education or Humanism and Realism*, p. 21.
[204] Ibid., p. 26.
[205] Ibid., p. 27.

somewhat as follows: *knowledge* must die and rise again as will and create itself anew each day as a free *person*.[206]

66. He on whom the principles of morality have been duly inculcated never becomes free again from moralizing thoughts.[207]

67. [footnote] I am the first immoralist. I am therewith the *destroyer par excellence*.[208]

67. [footnote] But there is also another sense in which I have chosen for myself the word *immoralist* as a mark of distinction and badge of honour; I am proud to possess this word which sets me off against the whole of humanity. No one has yet felt *Christian* morality as *beneath* him: that requires a height a farsightedness, a hitherto unheard-of psychological profundity and abysmalness.[209]

70. O Lais, O Ninon, how well you did to scorn this pale virtue! One free grisette against a thousand virgins grown grey in virtue![210]

71. Unchastity can never become a moral act.[211]

74. [footnote] Philosophy of Eternal Recurrence. | Attempt at a *Revaluation* of all Values.

76. [footnote] In brief, we believe […] that morality in the sense in which it has been understood hitherto, that is to say the morality of intentions, has been a prejudice, a precipitancy, perhaps something provisional and precursory, perhaps something of the order of astronomy and alchemy, but in any event something that must be overcome. The overcoming of morality, in a certain sense even the self-overcoming of morality: let this be the name for that protracted secret labour which has been reserved for the subtlest, most honest and also most malicious consciences as living touchstones of the soul.[212]

77. Away, then, with every concern that is not altogether my concern! You think at least the 'good cause' must be my concern? What's good, what's bad? Why, I myself am my concern, and I am neither good nor bad. Neither has meaning for me.[213]

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[206] Ibid., p. 28.
[207] *EO*, p. 302.
[208] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 127.
[209] Ibid., p. 131.
[210] *EO*, p. 59.
[211] Ibid., p. 53.
[212] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 45-46.
[213] *EO*, p. 7.

78. in the antediluvian opposition of good and evil[214]

80. Moral people skimmed off the best fat from religion, ate it themselves, and are now having a tough job to get rid of the resulting scrofula.[215]

81. Morality […] is such a sacred conception; one must be moral, and must look only for the right 'how', the right way to be so. One dares not go at morality itself with the question whether it is not itself an illusion.[216]

82. in itself nothing is either good or bad, but man only *thinks* of it thus or thus[217]

83. A Nero is a 'bad' man only in the eyes of the 'good'[218]

84. According to the principle of morality, which commands us to serve the good, you could really ask only whether murder could never in any case be a realization of the good, and would have to endorse that murder which realized the good.[219]

85. The moral man wants the good, the right; and if he takes to the means that lead to this goal, […] then these means are not his means, but those of the good, right, etc., itself. These means are never immoral, because the good end itself mediates itself through them: the end sanctifies the means.[220]

86. Such contradictions form the tragic conflict universally in the moral drama; and one must think and feel morally to be able to take an interest in it. [221]

87. the measureless hypocrisy of devotion, love, etc., from whose repulsiveness one may daily get the most thorough nausea.[222]

88. No longer vigorous enough to serve *morality* without doubt or weakening, not yet reckless enough to live wholly to egoism.[223]

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[214] Ibid., p. 317.
[215] Ibid., p. 46.
[216] Ibid., p. 68.
[217] Ibid., p. 26.
[218] Ibid., p. 51.
[219] Ibid., p. 49.
[220] Ibid., pp. 285-286.
[221] Ibid., p. 286.
[222] Ibid., p. 50.
[223] Ibid., p. 51.

89. The moral man is necessarily narrow in that he knows no other enemy than the 'immoral' man. 'He who is not moral is immoral!' and accordingly reprobate, despicable, etc. Therefore the moral man can never comprehend the egoist.[224]

90. one must commit *immoral* actions in order to commit his own[225]

92. Stirner's 'owner' breaks […] with all traditional norms, and the psychoanalyst and philosopher Ludwig Binswanger therefore calls Stirner an 'opponent of all ethical traditions', I would rather say Stirner is an annihilator of all conventional ethics.

93. Yet all this applies, more or less, only to 'civic morality'.[226]

94. The commonalty professes a morality which is most closely connected with its essence. The first demand of this morality is to the effect that one should carry on a solid business, an honourable trade, lead a moral life.[227]

95. In its first and most unintelligible form morality shows itself as *habit*. To act according to the custom and habit of one's country is to be moral there.[228]

96. If someone let his moral judgement go, and set up a secret press, one would have to call him immoral; […] but will such a man lay claim to a value in the eyes of the 'moral'? Perhaps! – That is, if he fancied he was serving a 'higher morality'.[229]

97. Long before Nietzsche, Stirner triumphantly waged war against morality. […] Stirner is […] the great anti-moralist and moralist.

98. His philosophy is not the end of philosophy, his doctrine of egoism not the end of ethics, not even the end of religion, it is only the end of *sacred* philosophy, *sacred* ethics, *sacred* religion, and it puts in the place of these concepts a living, autonomous, individual philosophy – *my* ethics, *my* religion.

102. Morality is incompatible with egoism, because the former does not allow validity to *me*, but only to the man in me. But if the state is a *society of men*, not a union of egos each of whom has only himself before his eyes, then it cannot last without morality.[230]

104. Whether I am in the right or not there is no judge but myself.[231]

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[224] Ibid., p. 53.
[225] Ibid., p. 210.
[226] Ibid., p. 54.
[227] Ibid., p. 101.
[228] Ibid., p. 63.
[229] Ibid., p. 101.
[230] Ibid., pp. 160-161.
[231] Ibid., p. 167.

108. The actions of the ‘owner’ know no ethical imperative that lies outside of himself.

109. A man is ‘called’ to nothing, and has no ‘calling’, no ‘destiny’.[232]

110. Christianity’s magic circle would be broken if the strained relation between existence and calling, that is, between me as I am and me as I should be, ceased.[233]

111. Stirner [is regarded] as the founder not of an ethical nihilism and fundamental anti-moralism, but of a higher, culturally valuable, individualistic morality that is not imposed on the individual as a ‘thou shalt’ from the outside, but is […] based on the particular values of autonomous and emancipated individuals.

112. Effectively, this amounts to a moral-ethical nihilism that normatively allows everything that individuals want or do on the basis of their respective individuality: even then – this is the normative paradox of this position – when other individuals do not want this on the basis of their respective individuality.

114. only a – *thought*[234]

114. a – ghost [235]

114. valueless[236]

114. vain and a thing of naught[237]

114. is dead[238]

114. exists only – in your head[239]

115. courage for a lie[240]

116. For me there is no truth, for nothing is more than I![241]

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[232] Ibid., p. 288.
[233] Ibid., p. 323.
[234] Ibid., p. 311.
[235] Ibid., p. 312.
[236] Ibid., p. 313.
[237] Ibid., p. 313.
[238] Ibid., p. 312.
[239] Ibid., p. 311.
[240] Ibid., p. 267.
[241] Ibid., p. 313.

117. the end sanctifies the means[242]

118. the war of all against all[243]

119. Might is a fine thing, and useful for many purposes; for 'one goes further with a handful of might than with a bagful of right'.[244]

121. Although Stirner's critique of fixed ideas as barriers to the enjoyment of the self and the world could serve as the basis of a eudaimonistic ethics, for Stirner, egoism is not an ethical demand, but is simply revealed as the logical consequence of an Enlightenment critique of religion.

122. For Stirner, […] morality is just a fixed idea.

123. Thousands of years of civilization have obscured to you what you are, have made you believe you are not egoists but are *called* to be idealists ('good men'). Shake that off! […] Just recognize yourselves again, […] and let go your hypocritical endeavours, your foolish mania to be something else than you are. Hypocritical I call them because you have yet remained egoists all these thousands of years, but sleeping, self-deceiving, crazy egoists, […] for man is *mercenary* and does nothing 'gratis'. But how about that 'doing the good for the good's sake' without prospect of reward? As if here too the pay was not contained in the satisfaction that it is to afford.[245]

125. the lack of *consciousness* […] alone bears the blame[246]

126. The press is my *property* from the moment when nothing is more to me than myself; for from this moment state, church, people, society, and the like, cease, because they have to thank for their existence only the disrespect that I have for myself, and with the vanishing of this undervaluation they themselves are extinguished. […] Or can you imagine a state whose citizens one and all think nothing of it? It would be as certainly a dream […] as 'united Germany'.[247]

130. It is life itself that defends itself in the 'Unique One' against the nihilism of the ideal.

134. At the entrance of the modern time stands the 'God-man'. At its exit will only the God in the God-man evaporate? And can the God-man really die if only the God in him dies? They did not think of this question, and thought they were finished when in our

[242] Ibid., p. 286.
[243] Ibid., pp. 229, 230.
[244] Ibid., p. 151.
[245] Ibid., p. 149.
[246] Ibid., p. 229.
[247] Ibid., p. 252.

days they brought to a victorious end the work of the Enlightenment, the vanquishing of God. […] How can you believe that the God-man is dead before the man in him, besides the God, is dead?[248]

135. the prejudice that takes 'moral,' 'unegoistic,' '*désintéressé*' as concepts of equivalent value already rules today with the force of a 'fixed idea' and brain sickness[249]

135. [footnote] Spiritual men have *taken into their head* something that is to be realized. They have *concepts* of love, goodness, and the like, which they would like to see *realized*; therefore they want to set up a kingdom of love on earth, in which no one any longer acts from selfishness, but each one 'from love'. Love is to *rule*. What they have taken into their head, what shall we call it but – *fixed idea*?[250]

135. [footnote] What religion calls the 'sinner', humanitarianism calls the 'egoist'. […] The egoist, before whom the humane shudder, is a spook as much as the [d]evil is: he exists only as a spectre and phantasm in their brain. If they were not unsophisticatedly drifting back and forth in the antediluvian opposition of good and evil, to which they have given the modern names of 'human' and 'egoistic', they would not have freshened up the hoary 'sinner' into an 'egoist' either, and put a new patch on an old garment.[251]

Chapter Seven

6. [footnote] What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what is inevitable: *the rise of nihilism*.[252]

7. nihilism […] 'Everything is meaningless'[253]

8. the futility, the pointlessness[,] nihilism

9. This is the most extreme form of nihilism: nothingness (that is: 'meaninglessness') for ever![254]

10. Nihilism appears at this point, […] because the idea that evil, or for that meaning existence itself, has a 'meaning' is regarded with the utmost suspicion. *One*

[248] Ibid., p. 139.
[249] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 26.
[250] *EO*, p. 69.
[251] Ibid., p. 317.
[252] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 7.
[253] Ibid., p. 11.
[254] Ibid., p. 43.

interpretation has failed, but since it was considered *the* interpretation, it now seems as if there is no meaning in existence at all, as if all is *in vain*.[255]

11. [footnote] self-overcoming of nihilism

19. I myself am my concern[256]

20. In the *unique one* the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, of which he is born.[257]

21. One does look at things rightly when one makes of them what one *will* […]. And therefore the things and the looking at them are not first, but I am, my will is.[258]

22. *Get the value out of thyself!*[259]

23. Stirner is also an existential philosopher who, with Schelling, asserts the quod of existence against the quid? of essence.

24. The ideal 'man' is *realized* when the Christian apprehension turns about and becomes the proposition, 'I, this unique one, am man.' The conceptual question, 'what is man?' – has the changed into the personal question, 'who is man?'[260]

26. It is the true existential philosophy which recognises the actual not abstractly, as in Hegel, but concretely, the real in its reality, as true, therefore, in a way that corresponds to the essence of the real, and elevates it to the principle and object of philosophy.

35. But I am not an ego along with other egos, but the sole ego: I am unique.[261]

40. [footnote] 'Does not the spirit thirst for freedom?' – Alas, not my spirit alone, my body too thirsts for it hourly![262]

40. [footnote] All the world desires freedom, all long for its reign to come. Oh, enchantingly beautiful dream of a blooming 'reign of freedom', a 'free human race' – who has not dreamed it? So men shall become free, entirely free, free from all constraint![263]

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[255] Ibid.
[256] *EO*, p. 7.
[257] Ibid., p. 324.
[258] Ibid., pp. 297-298.
[259] Ibid., p. 278.
[260] Ibid., p. 323.
[261] Ibid., pp. 318-319.
[262] Ibid., p. 141.
[263] Ibid., p. 144.

41. You do not want the freedom to have all these fine things, for with this freedom you still do not have them; you want really to have them. […] And, if you became free from everything, you would no longer have anything; for freedom is empty of substance. Whoever knows not how to make use of it, for him it has no value, this useless permission; but how I make use of it depends on my personality.[264]

43. Freedom lives only in the realm of dreams![265]

46. My freedom becomes complete only when it is my – *might*; but by this I cease to be a merely free man, and become an own man.[266]

54. that man has killed God in order to become now – '*sole* God on high'.[267]

54. [footnote] Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it [the greatness of this deed]?[268]

64. mortal creator, creative nothing[269]

68. Stirner's nihilism presents us exactly with the finitude of man in its basic conditions of suffering and death.

71. that I do not renounce, from any fit of humility, even the power over life and death[270]

72. only the […] *finite* ego is really I. Fichte speaks of the 'absolute' ego, but I speak of me, the transitory ego.[271]

73. Finally, the old man? When I become one, there will be time enough to speak of that.[272]

75. My intercourse with the world, what does it aim at? I want to have the enjoyment of it, therefore it must be my property, and therefore I want to win it. I do not want the liberty of men, nor their equality; I want only *my* power over them. I want to make them my property, *material for enjoyment*.[273]

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[264] Ibid., p. 141.
[265] Ibid., p. 143.
[266] Ibid., p. 151.
[267] Ibid., p. 139.
[268] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 181.
[269] *EO*, p. 324.
[270] Ibid., p. 282.
[271] Ibid., p. 163.
[272] Ibid., p. 18.
[273] Ibid., p. 281.

81. [footnote] The legacy of Stirner […] rests in the faithful […] hands of the individualist anarchists.[274]

91. His thought, as well as his actual life, stood at the extreme limit of his world, which had lost its substance and become disillusioned.[275]

92. Stirner's 'I,' having freed itself completely from everything, has nothing else to do than turn back to its own nothingness.[276]

92. [footnote] in the case of Stirner, the nihilistic position of the 'individual'[277]

93. the existential concentration of the entire world upon the particular, individual 'I'[278]

94. Stirner's cliché of the 'unique individual' and Kierkegaard's concept of the 'individual' both illustrate the same question, asked in religious and profane terms.[279]

95. a pathetic nominalist and unmasker of ideas[280]

96. Responsibility is the navel-string of creation[281]

97. For Stirner both are bound to be false questions. But it is important to see that intending to destroy both basic ideas he has destroyed only their routine forms and thus, contrary to his whole intention, has prepared for their purification and renewal.[282]

98. This reality of responsibility is not what is questioned by Stirner; it is unknown to him.[283]

99. He wishes to show the nothingness of the word which has decayed into a phrase; he has never known the living word.[284]

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[274] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 21.
[275] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, pp. 248-249.
[276] Ibid., p. 105.
[277] Ibid., p. 111.
[278] Ibid., p. 299.
[279] Ibid., p. 359.
[280] Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 41.
[281] Ibid., p. 40.
[282] Ibid., p. 44.
[283] Ibid., p. 45.
[284] Ibid.

100. And yet […] the two, primally different, primally strange to one another, […] work together […], the one announcing decay as decay, the other proving the eternal structure to be inviolable.[285]

101. the tearing apart of his existential bindings and bonds[286]

111. Stirner is the first prophet of 'authenticity', which has since become, via Heidegger, Jaspers and existentialism, the most primitive, vacuous banality of middle-class ideology. In contrast, Marx: 'The real human being is recognised only in the figure of the egoistic individual, the true human being only in the figure of the abstract citizen.' To emancipate both dialectically into political man is Marx's idea. To beat the one to death with the other is the ideal of Stirner and fascism.

112. In my opinion, Stirner must be regarded as the proponent of a new existential philosophy of being, which represents the most nominalistic position that the history of Western thought has ever known.

113. [footnote] Naturally, I share Paterson's view that the core of Stirner's subject matter should not be seen in his relations to anarchism and Marxism, but lies instead, as Buber has already established, in the field of existentialism.

113. [footnote] At the end of this brief elucidation, it should be pointed out that the merit of Paterson's study lies in having shown English-speaking readers the figure of Stirner as a precursor of existentialism.

114. [footnote] Stirner's nihilism is nothing more than thought carried with relentless logic to its ultimate consequences.

115. Stirner's point of departure was the terrible experience of the meaninglessness of everything.

116. Paterson writes that Stirner essentially remains a child of his time. On the one hand he was influenced by the nihilistic literature of the nineteenth century. His work reflects the world of despair and satanism that is typical of Leopardi, Poe, Schopenhauer, [von Hartmann,] Ibsen and Baudelaire. On the other hand, Stirner's work belongs to the literature that emerged from the activity of political terrorists and was defended by them. This explains the dark, nihilistic elements that already appeared in the writings of Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Strindberg.

[285] Ibid., p. 49.
[286] Ibid., p. 44.

137. If God, if mankind […] have substance enough in themselves to be all in all to themselves, then I feel that *I* shall still less lack that, and that I shall have no complaint to make of my 'emptiness'.[287]

138. Every higher essence above me, be it God, be it man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness, and pales only before the sun of this consciousness.[288]

141. They say of God, 'names name thee not'. That holds good of me: no *concept* expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me.[289]

142. I, this nothing, shall put forth my *creations* from myself.[290]

143. All things are nothing to me. [Alternative translation] I have set my affair on nothing.[291] [A more accurate translation is, perhaps: I have made nothing my cause.]

145. [footnote] Between two nothings | Huddled up, | A question-mark, | A weary riddle[292]

146. Stirner's one-sided individualism begins with 'nothing' and ends in 'nothing'.

149. The good cause, then God's cause, the cause of mankind, of truth, of freedom, of humanity, of justice; further, the cause of my people, my prince, my fatherland; finally, even the cause of mind and a thousand other causes.[293]

150. The divine is God's concern; the human, 'man's'. My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is *mine*, and it is not a general one, but is – *unique*, as I am unique.[294]

151. [footnote] With this quotation, Stirner asserts the claim to disengage from everything that is attributed to the individual, in terms of presuppositions that are no longer questioned or open to debate, by making a radical break with history up until now and with the continuity of human consciousness.

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[287] *EO*, p. 7.
[288] Ibid., p. 324.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid., p. 209.
[291] Ibid., pp. 5, 324. Stirner, *The Ego and His Own* (1912), p. 3.
[292] *The Complete Works of Nietzsche*, ed. by Oscar Levy, trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici and others, 18 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1909-1913), XVII (1911), p. 181.
[293] *EO*, p. 5.
[294] Ibid., p. 7.

152. God and mankind have concerned themselves for nothing, for nothing but themselves.[295]

154. I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything.[296]

154. [footnote] What's good, what's bad? Why, I myself am my concern, and I am neither good nor bad.[297]

154. [footnote] *Nobody yet knows* what is good and evil – unless it be the creator! | But he it is who creates a goal for mankind and gives the earth its meaning and its future.[298]

160. Feuerbach, in the *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, is always harping upon *being*. In this he too, with all his antagonism to Hegel and the absolute philosophy, is stuck fast in abstraction; for 'being' is abstraction, as is even 'the I'. Only *I am* not abstraction alone: *I am* all in all, consequently even abstraction or nothing. I am all and nothing.[299]

162. The 'nothing' with which anxiety brings us face to face, unveils the nullity by which Dasein, in its very *basis*, is defined; and this basis itself is as thrownness into death.[300]

163. The Mystery of Providence and Creation out of Nothing | The Significance of the Creation in Judaism.[301]

163. [footnote] With the exception of Hegel, Stirner dealt with no philosopher so intensively as with Feuerbach.

164. The culminating point of the principle of subjectivity is creation out of nothing.[302]

165. The creation out of nothing […] had its origin only in the unfathomable depth of Hebrew egoism.[303]

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[295] Ibid., p. 6.
[296] Ibid., p. 7.
[297] Ibid.
[298] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 214.
[299] *EO*, p. 300.
[300] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 356.
[301] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by Marian Evans (London: John Chapman, 1854), pp. 100-110, 111-118.
[302] Ibid., p. 100.
[303] Ibid., p. 116.

166. *Homo homini Deus est*:– this is the great practical principle:– this is the axis on which revolves the history of the world.[304]

169. This mere Being, as it is mere abstraction, is therefore the absolutely negative: which, in a similarly immediate aspect, is just Nothing.[305]

170. complete emptiness, absence of all determination and content[306]

171. It is the dialectical immanent nature of being and nothing themselves to manifest their unity, that is, becoming, as their truth.[307]

172. Becoming is the vanishing of being in nothing and of nothing in being and the vanishing of being and nothing generally.[308]

173. Being and non-being are the same, therefore it is the same whether [I am or am not.][309]

173. [footnote] As it is the declared intention of Hegelian logic to use the determinate negation as a positive element of movement, so too the indeterminate negation of the '*pure nothing*' is positivised under the cover of the identity of being and nothingness.

174. The popular, especially oriental proverbs, that all that exists has the germ of death in its very birth, that death, on the other hand is the entrance into new life, express at bottom the same union of being and nothing.[310]

175. Henceforth what is to be done is no longer about the state […], but about me. With this all questions about the prince's power, the constitution, and so on, sink into their true abyss and their true nothingness. I, this nothing, shall put forth my *creations* from myself.[311]

177. to be able to utilize it [society] completely I transform it […] into my property and my creature; that is, I annihilate it.[312]

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[304] Ibid., p. 268.
[305] *The Logic of Hegel translated from the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. by William Wallace, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), p. 161.
[306] *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998), p. 82.
[307] Ibid., p. 105.
[308] Ibid., p. 106.
[309] Ibid., p. 85. The part in square brackets is omitted from the translation.
[310] Ibid., pp. 83-84.
[311] *EO*, p. 209.
[312] Ibid., p. 161.

178. [footnote] Stirner opposes […] Hegel in his subdivisions by trivializing the triad […] in Hegel's account of world history.

179. [footnote] Stirner breaks with Hegel's dialectical method, dismantles it and finally destroys it. It is precisely this destruction of the dialectic that is usually misconstrued.

180. All predicates of objects are my statements, my judgments, my – creatures. If they want to tear themselves loose from me and be something for themselves, or actually overawe me, then I have nothing more pressing to do than to take them back into their nothing, into me the creator. God, Christ, trinity, morality, the good, etc., are such creatures, of which I must not merely allow myself to say that they are truths, but also that they are deceptions. As I once willed and decreed their existence, so I want to have license to will their non-existence too.[313]

181. By accentuating the will of the concrete individual, […] Stirner sets himself apart from Hegel, using Hegel's own terminology.

189. My trust is placed in nothing now, | Hurrah! | At my command the world must bow, | Hurrah![314]

190. [footnote] The glory of the earth | Must turn to smoke and ashes

191. Let me then […] concern myself for *myself*, who am equally with God the nothing of all others, who am my all, who am the only one.[315]

194. The egoist, turning against the demands and concepts of the present, executes pitilessly the most measureless – *desecration*. Nothing is holy to him![316]

198. But isn't this nothing a predicate of God, and isn't the sentence: God is nothing, an expression of religion? So the 'Egoist' has still, despite everything, also based his affairs on God![317]

199. The sentence: God is nothing or the nothing is commonly found not only in oriental religion, but also in Christian mysticism and visionary Christianity.[318]

200. [footnote] The initials 'M. St.' as signature leave no doubt about the author.[319]

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[313] Ibid., p. 298.
[314] *The Poems of Goethe*, trans. by Edgar Alfred Bowring (New York: Hurst & Co., 1853), p. 99.
[315] *EO*, pp. 6-7.
[316] Ibid., p. 165.
[317] Ludwig Feuerbach, '*The Essence of Christianity* in Relation to *The Ego and Its Own*', trans. by Frederick M. Gordon, *The Philosophical Forum*, 8.2-4 (1978), 81-91 (p. 81).
[318] Ibid.
[319] Mackay, *Max Stirner*, p. 164.

201. Where Stirner says: 'I have based my cause on nothing,' Feuerbach makes it '*the* Nothing,' and so concludes from this that the egoist is a pious atheist. However, the Nothing is a definition of God.[320]

203. The unique [one] is an expression with which, in all frankness and honesty, one recognizes that he is expressing nothing. Human being, spirit, the true individual, personality, etc. are expressions or attributes that are full to overflowing with content, phrases with the greatest wealth of ideas; compared with these sacred and noble phrases, the unique is the empty, unassuming and completely common phrase. […] Only when *nothing* is said about you and you are merely *named*, are you recognized as you.[321]

208. The superficial similarities do not, in my opinion, justify such a categorisation, even though the owner and the Unique One undoubtedly possess existentialist qualities and he [Stirner] has provided existentialists with arguments. Stirner's philosophy refuses any categorisation or labelling. What is true for the Unique One is true for it: it is unique.

219. Look upon yourself as more powerful than they give you out for, and you have more power […]. You are then not merely *called* to everything divine, *entitled* to everything human, but *owner* of what is yours.[322]

220. [footnote] 'We do not fear, though the earth should perish'. In all this there is room made for the Christian proposition that the world is empty, for the Christian contempt of the world.[323]

220. [footnote] This corresponds totally to Judeo-Christian morality. To be able to reject all that represents the *ascending* movement of life, well-constitutedness, power, beauty, self-affirmation on earth, the instinct of *ressentiment* here become genius had to invent *another* world from which that *life-affirmation* would appear evil, reprehensible as such.[324]

221. Not until one has fallen in love with his *corporeal* self, and takes a pleasure in himself as a living flesh-and-blood person – […] not until then has one a personal or *egoistic* interest, an interest not only of our spirit, for instance, but of total satisfaction, satisfaction of the whole chap, a *selfish* interest.[325]

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[320] Stirner, *Stirner's Critics*, p. 86.
[321] Ibid.
[322] *EO*, p. 318.
[323] Ibid., p. 85.
[324] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, p. 135.
[325] *EO*, p. 16.

221. [footnote] One must learn to love oneself with a sound and healthy love […] – thus do I teach.[326]

222. [footnote] Man does *not* strive after happiness; only the Englishman does that.[327]

223. My intercourse with the world consists in my enjoying it, and so consuming it for my self-enjoyment. *Intercourse* is the *enjoyment of the world*, and belongs to my – self-enjoyment. […] *Enjoyment of life* is using life up. | Now – we are in search of the *enjoyment* of life![328]

223. [footnote] Noble morality, master-morality, on the other hand, is rooted in a triumphant saying of yea to *one's self* – it is the self-affirmation and self-glorification of life.[329]

224. Henceforth, the question runs, not how one can acquire life, but how one can squander, enjoy it; or, not how one is to produce the true self in himself, but how one is to dissolve himself, to live himself out. […] Living is quite another thing in – *enjoyment*![330]

225. It is simply the pleasure-principle which draws up the programme of life's purpose. This principle dominates the operation of the mental apparatus from the very beginning.[331]

226. O Man! Attend!
What does deep midnight's voice contend?
'I slept my sleep,
'And now awake at dreaming's end:
'The world is deep,
'Deeper than day can comprehend.
'Deep is its woe,
'Joy – deeper than heart's agony:
'Woe says: Fade! Go!
'But all joy wants eternity,
'Wants deep, deep, deep eternity!'[332]

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[326] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 211.
[327] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, p. 23.
[328] *EO*, pp. 282-283.
[329] *The Complete Works of Nietzsche*, ed. by Oscar Levy, VIII (1911), p. 50.
[330] *EO*, p. 284.
[331] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. by Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), p. 27.
[332] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 333.

227. What is antiquity seeking then? The true *enjoyment of life*.[333]

228. 'Stirner's Glorification of Egoism'

228. All egoism can only be asserted as individual eudaemonism; individual eudaemonism is again only possible on the basis of eudaemonological optimism.

233. I love men […] because love makes *me* happy.[334]

236. hypocrisy, or rather self-deception[335]

237. as my feeling[336]

238. Antiquity lacked love as little as do Christian times; the god of love is older than the God of Love. But the mystical possessedness belongs to the moderns.[337]

239. [footnote] One loves neither father, nor mother, nor wife, nor child, but the pleasant sensations they cause in us; it always flatters our pride and self-love somewhat.

239. [footnote] I thank the good Lord a thousand times for making me an atheist.

241. the Christian yearning and hungering for the other world[338]

243. that man is not the measure of all things, but I am this measure[339]

244. I do not develop men, nor as man, but, as I, I develop – myself. | This is the meaning of the – *unique one*.[340]

Chapter Eight

1. [footnote] the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything.[341]

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[333] *EO*, p. 25.
[334] Ibid., p. 258.
[335] Ibid., p. 260.
[336] Ibid., p. 259.
[337] Ibid., p. 260.
[338] Ibid., p. 34.
[339] Ibid., p. 311.
[340] Ibid., p. 319.
[341] Ibid., p. 7.

10. [footnote] Objects are to me only material that I use up. Wherever I put my hand I grasp a truth, which I trim for myself.[342]

13. But it is not true […] that in the unique there is only the 'lie of what has been called the egoistic world up to now'; no, in its nakedness and its barrenness, in its shameless 'candor,' […] the nakedness and barrenness of concepts and ideas come to light.[343]

13. [footnote] But the habit of the religious way of thinking has biased our mind so grievously that we are – terrified at *ourselves* in our nakedness and naturalness.[344]

16. [footnote] In the history of philosophy, he [Stirner] is mostly passed over or mentioned only in passing. He is rarely to be found in the indexes of specialist journals, in the programmes of publishing houses, in the schedules of university lectures; he hardly even plays a role in non-academic discourse. There is not and never has been one single philosopher who refers positively and specifically to Stirner.

19. [footnote] The German nation and German peoples have behind them a history of a thousand years: what a long life! O, go to rest, never to rise again – that all may become free whom you so long have held in fetters. – The *people* is dead. – Up with *me*! […] Tomorrow they carry thee to the grave; soon thy sisters, the peoples, will follow thee. But, when they have all followed, then – mankind is buried, and I am my own, I am the laughing heir![345]

27. Stirner's radical individualism contains the logical justification of existing conditions! Yes, certainly – the egoism of all is only limited by the victorious, overpowering egoism of a few.

28. that here […] we only have to do, at bottom, with the logical extension of the present order of society that rests on free competition.[346]

29. one of many

30. because the unique individual has become, in a way, ubiquitous and is taken for granted.

31. Stirner has never been more actual, never more contemporary than today.

38. [footnote] What I relate is the history of the next two centuries.[347]

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[342] Ibid., p. 313.
[343] Stirner, *Stirner's Critics*, pp. 56-57.
[344] Stirner, *EO*, p. 147.
[345] Ibid., p. 193.
[346] E. V. Zenker, *Anarchism*, p. 106.
[347] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 7.