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Shortly after Max Stirner published his only book, *The Unique and Its Property*,¹ late in 1844, Ludwig Feuerbach published an astonishing response. Feuerbach had been one of the main targets of Stirner's scathing attack on humanism, liberalism, and socialism as all unwittingly continuing in the footsteps of religion and dragging along its mistakes and misdeeds in their wake. According to Stirner's diagnosis, the different philosophical and social projects rapidly emerging from the dissolution of Hegel's system shared one fatal mistake: they merely swapped out the ideological content of Christianity for something new, while retaining and even strengthening its structures of oppression and exploitation. In response to Stirner's anti-essentialism, Feuerbach asked: "Can you sever masculinity from what is called mind? Isn't your brain, the most sacred and elevated organ of your body, definitively masculine?" (cited in Stirner 2012, 89).

It is striking how closely this line of argumentation—the interface between gender as the truth of the self and the brain as the truth of the self—mirrors the situation today in which an unholy alliance between evolutionary psychology (cf. McKinnon 2005) and neuro-determinism seeks to naturalize gender differences as fixed by evolution in the deep history of our species and manifested in male and female brains, our gendered essence rendered on the screen by the wonders of neuroimaging. In the "so-called age of the brain", the brain has become firmly established as a cultural locus of the truth of the self (Pitts-Taylor 2012). While during the 20th century the structure and function of the post-adolescent brain was considered to be largely static

¹ I use the 2017 translation by Wolfi Landstreicher, the first new translation in English since Stirner's book was first rendered as *The Ego and His Own* by Steve Byington in 1907. In addition to the anachronistic Freudian associations of the term, Byington also uses "ego" to translate a range of German words renders more precisely as "I", "individual" and "unique" (cf. Landstreicher 2017, 8-9).

and subject mostly to degenerative change, the 21st century has seen a dramatic shift towards the notion of the brain as a fundamentally plastic organ (cf. Rees 2016). This turn from determinism to plasticity has opened up possibilities for emancipatory interventions that consider the plastic brain, as well as the discourses surrounding it, as a site of struggle against reactionary essentialisms. Alongside the “struggles among scientists, doctors, patients, advocates, ethicists, and activists over what the brain is, should be, and can be,” philosophers and theorists have taken up the brain and its plasticity as a new lens to provide insight into old problems (Pitts-Taylor 2012). In light of the “the inextricability of neuronal matter with its bodily, social, and historical surroundings”, the brain becomes a site of political interventions, contested by a multitude of actors (Pitts-Taylor 2012). Catherine Malabou is among those who have taken up the fight against oppression and exploitation on this terrain, by working towards a “culture of neuronal liberation” (Malabou 2008, 30) and a “politics of plasticity” (Malabou this volume).

The central appearance of the brain in the heated debate between Stirner and Feuerbach is an exception, it plays no larger role in Stirner’s writing. Nevertheless, my claim is that Stirner’s account of an insurrection against essentialism as a radical act of self-empowerment constitutes a valuable resource for the project of developing a politics of plasticity, and for answering the question that is the title of Malabou’s book: *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*

In order to give such an answer, we have to make Stirner speak in a language other than his own. I will attempt to lift Stirner’s thought from the Young Hegelian debates of the 1840s into the context of contemporary theories of embodiment, plasticity, and self-shaping. Developing this entirely new reading of Stirner and putting it to work for a politics of plasticity is a large task, and I will only be able to lay the groundwork for it in this paper. I will focus on four aspects:

In the following section, I will motivate the need for a new reading by highlighting the shortcomings of the earliest and latest reactions to Stirner, by Marx and post-anarchism, respectively. I will also situate this new reading of Stirner roughly in the context of recent empirically-informed continental theory as a way out of the false choice Malabou identifies “between *essentialism* and *discursivity*” (Malabou this volume, xx).

In the third section, I will show that the structures of religion have not “melt[ed] into air”, but are still operative in the form of ideology and through a mechanism that is profoundly embodied. We internalize ideological norms and materialize their effects in and through our own

bodies. Similarly, our rejection of ideology and our self-assertion against it starts with bodily exertion.

In the fourth section, I show that Stirner's notion of "property" has nothing to do with legal ownership (which he rejects along with the whole realm of legality),² but instead matches very closely Jakob von Uexküll's concept of *Umwelt*. It describes the phenomenal world of each living subject, and by treating it as one's property, Stirner means relating to the affordances in our environment without the limitations of what Iris Marion Young calls the self-imposed "I cannot" (Young 1980, 146).

Neuroplasticity wards off the spectre of neurodeterminism, but it opens up the challenge of the neoliberal neuronal self: how do we avoid merely internalizing the pressures of the market when we shape ourselves? Critically following up on existing comparisons between Stirner and the late thought of Michel Foucault, in the fifth section I will show that Stirner's self-empowerment matches Malabou's challenge of thinking resistance to oppression and exploitation "without falling back into sociobiological ideology on the one hand, ultra-liberal philosophy on the other" (Malabou in this volume, 3).

A New Reading of Stirner

If, as Etienne Gilson says, "[p]hilosophy always buries its own undertakers" why do we need to dig up Stirner again (Putnam 1983, 303, as cited in Malachowski 1990, xi)? Even though Stirner has undergone several periodic revivals since his death, I argue that this perpetual revenant still has unfinished business on this earth. I will lay the groundwork for a new reading of Stirner, to make him rise from his shallow grave in the history of thought once again, this time to help answer Malabou's question: *What Should We Do with our Brain?*

² For this reason, one might prefer the translation as "own" instead of "property" that is used in some translations. However, the misleading legal-economic connotations of "property" are the same as for the German "Eigentum", so I follow the translation by Wolfi Landstreicher that I generally rely on.

Stirner's thought has always elicited strong reactions—repelling to some and alluring to others, but frustrating and confusing to most. Stirner's radical rejection of religion, humanism, morality, as well as marriage, the state, and the family, is often considered to be merely the “self-destructive endpoint” of Young Hegelianism (Laska 1994, 5; translation mine). He sought to throw off ideology through insurrection and to avoid any essentialism by speaking not of humans, women and men, or citizens, but only of “unique ones”, a phrase which has no conceptual content and thus does not impose any expectations on its referents (Stirner 2017, 216). He sought to dissolve and posit his own identity in every moment and live as a “creative nothing”, in voluntary associations with others called “union[s] of egoists” (Stirner 2017, 377 & 233). My claim is that reading Stirner through and alongside different theories of embodiment, we can understand his thought in a way that is both more adequate to his text and more useful to us today, including as a resource for a politics of plasticity. I will first show that we have good reason not to follow Marx's rejection of Stirner, but also that we should not be fully satisfied with the recent readings of Stirner as a forerunner of post-anarchism.

In reaction to the publication of Stirner's only book, *The Unique and Its Property*, Marx penned a vitriolic tirade against him. Even though this indictment was only edited into a book along with other texts in the 1930s, this extremely negative reading of Stirner has shaped his reception so that the most common view of him today is still that of a petty-bourgeois individualist obsessed with hoarding property, cynically dismissive of all social relations. That this is a misreading will become clear when I explain Stirner's notion of property, but Marx also includes Stirner in a more general critique of the Young Hegelians. He mocks them for setting all their hopes on ideas and ignoring material reality, comparing them to a man who thinks he can save himself from drowning if he just gets rid of his belief in the force of gravity (Marx and Engels 2010a, 24). Strategically, Marx and Engels set up the attack on the Young Hegelians to ridicule critique of ideology as a useless and misguided activity (Marx and Engels 2010, 23-24). They were surely right to reject “the critique of religion as the Alpha and Omega of radical leftism”, as Adrian Johnston puts it, but they also threw out the baby with the bathwater (Johnston 2020, 3 & 7). They believed that history had destroyed ideological illusions better than any theorist could: “for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, “Communist Manifesto”, cited in Johnston 2020, 8). However, “subsequent history has been [...] unkind to

Marx and Engels's 1848 heralding and celebration of economically-driven profanation" (Johnston 2020, 9). The continued necessity of critically analyzing the structures and contents of ideology is well-represented in Marxist thought since the 20th century, but its implication—that one of the main reasons for rejecting Young Hegelian thought has turned out to be invalid—has not led to a reconsideration of those thinkers belittled in *The German Ideology*.

In contrast to Marx's rejection, a positive reading of Stirner has been developed within post-anarchism since the 1990s. This largely academically inflected variant of anarchism brought the conceptual apparatus of Foucault, Deleuze, and Lacan—amongst others—to bear against the perceived essentialism of classical nineteenth century anarchism. In this context, Stirner's anti-essentialist project has been compared favorably to the works of all three thinkers and Stirner has taken on the role of a forerunner, if not a patron saint, of anti-essentialist anarchism (cf. Newman 2001a; Newman 2001b; Newman 2011a; Koch 2011; Feiten 2014; and Feiten 2019). This narrative itself and the role Stirner plays in it is problematic in subtle ways that I have pointed out elsewhere (Feiten 2013). One weakness of the post-anarchist reading of Stirner should be pointed out here because it illustrates very well how Stirner's project lines up with Malabou's dissatisfaction with the "discursive paradigm" (Malabou in this volume, 9). Saul Newman, the most prominent and prolific post-anarchist reader of Stirner, summarizes his commitment to the discursive paradigm thus:

We live in a symbolic and linguistic universe, and to speculate about an original condition of authenticity and immediacy, or to imagine that an authentic presence is attainable behind the veils of the symbolic order or beyond the grasp of language, is futile. There is no getting outside language and the symbolic. (Newman 2011b, 156)

The problem is that this is completely incompatible with Stirner's project. Stirner dethrones thinking through the insurrection of embodied experience, and he invents a way of speaking that is meant to prevent discursivity from ever usurping power again, by emptying it of its representational content. In the fight against ideology, "only thoughtlessness really saves me from thoughts. It isn't thinking, but my thoughtlessness, or I, the unthinkable, inconceivable, that frees me from possession" (Stirner 2017, 165) Self-empowerment requires a relation to oneself that is grounded in pre-linguistic bodily self-experience. Referring to ourselves and each other as

unique pays tribute to the fact that we are not reducible to discourse. The unique is in this sense an empty phrase, “the unspeakable, and therefore not merely something thought” (Stirner 2017, 357). Newman’s view might be an extreme example, but post-anarchist readings of Stirner are generally limited by this problem.³

The reading of Stirner I will start to develop here bears some resemblance to a movement in philosophy that has been called “continental naturalism” or “post-continental naturalism” of which Malabou’s politics of plasticity is one example (Mullarkey 2009, 259-276 & 263; Erkan 2020). One of its defining features is a way of thinking nature that cannot be reduced to the theoretical horizon of post-structuralism. Even though the post-anarchist readings of Stirner have done important work in reviving interest in him and highlighting important aspects of his work, we now have to move beyond the “very limited opposition” that Malabou diagnoses in the post-anarchist “opposition between essentialism and discursivity” (Malabou this volume, xx). It is exactly this problematic that informs Stirner’s entire project and his engagement with the question of nature.

Stirner’s philosophical relationship to nature is complex: On the one hand, he forcefully rejected the idea of human nature, particularly in the form of Feuerbach’s *species being*, as a mere abstraction over concrete individuals that is illegitimately turned into an ideal and a normative constraint. On the other hand, the vision of self-empowerment and the free play of creative agency itself seems to suggest a kind of natural state that is unearthed from the garbage heap of ideology, quoting Goethe: “I sing as the bird sings” (Stirner 2017, 309). The crucial difference between the two appeals to nature is that Feuerbach’s *species being* posits a human essence by which each individual is represented back to themselves in a state of perpetual inadequacy, while Stirner merely seeks poetic illustration for the free development of autonomous creativity. Feuerbach’s *species being*, at least on Stirner’s reading, is a kind of knowledge that claims both epistemic authority over nature and the normative authority of nature over each individual, whereas Stirner leaves nature undetermined, leaving it to express itself. Importantly, Stirner’s appeal to nature, like his reference to the unique, is not conceptual. Just as

³ Depending on their primary source of inspiration, they might have other problems with Stirner, I will comment on the ones that arise for Deleuzian readings of Stirner below, as well as the shortcomings of post-anarchist comparisons between Stirner and late Foucault.

much as he rejects essentialism, Stirner refuses to be caught up in discursivity: “the content of the unique is not thought content, the unique cannot be thought or said” (Stirner 2012, 57). His naturalism is one that rejects essences and discursive representations alike: “Only when nothing is said about you and you are merely named, are you recognized as you” (Stirner 2012, 58). By merely naming the individuals, nothing is predicated of them that could be held up against them as a normative standard—as it is when we call someone a human, a Christian, a woman or a man, a citizen, and so forth.

Stirner’s Embodiment

Stirner’s analysis of ideology was formulated as a direct provocation against his contemporaries: “Our atheists are pious people” (Stirner 2017, 198). He saw the budding liberalism, socialism, and humanism of the German *Vormärz* period as mere continuations of the religious mystifications that had propped up the *ancien regime*: “Man, your head is haunted” (Stirner 2017, 61). Marx rejected Stirner’s preoccupation with ideology as ineffective and misguided, as an idealist method to which he opposed the materialism he developed together with Engels. But modern neuroscience has changed our appreciation of the material reality of thought and ideology in a way that complicates the dichotomy between idealism and materialism and prevents some of the more direct moves of the debate in the 1840s. The ideological palimpsest that “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” has a material existence in the neuronal pathways of our brains and the surrounding tissues that enable and modify their operation, in what Malabou calls an “indissociable unity between matter and meaning” (Marx 2010, 103; Malabou this volume, xx). But already in the 1840s, Stirner’s account of the individual’s insurrection against ideology could not be rejected simply as a matter of fanciful ideas. It is not just the head that is haunted, but the entire body. I will demonstrate this central point of my reading, that in Stirner’s analysis ideology takes a hold of us through our bodies, and that our struggle against ideology is also a bodily activity, in two key passages.

Stirner links the way in which we are complicit in our own subjugation to the way that ideology works through our bodies. This relation is illustrated in explicitly libidinal terms. Stirner describes one of the “victims of self-denial” policing her own bodily desires and

preventing their expression when the “the rich forces of youth” come into conflict with the internalized prohibitions of ideology:

When your head burrowed into the soft pillows, how awakening nature quivered through your limbs, blood swelled your veins [...]! Then the specter of the soul and its salvation appeared. You were frightened, [...] you – prayed. Nature’s storms were silenced, quiet glided over the ocean of your desires. Slowly the weary eyelids sank over the life extinguished under them, the tension crept unnoticed from the exuberant limbs [...], and – *the soul was tranquil*. You fell asleep, to awaken in the morning to a new battle and a new-prayer. [...] The soul is saved, let the body perish! (Stirner 2017, 78-79)

What we see in this passage is the body acting as an interface between the demands of ideology which the woman has internalized and the bodily desires and forces that are properly her own. Ideology works in and through the body, and its effects are directly opposed to the fulfillment of our needs and desires. The body is the altar on which we sacrifice our happiness to the gods of introjected normativity. But the body in Stirner’s analysis is not just the place at which ideology takes a hold of us, but equally the site of our struggle against it:

A jerk does me the service of the most careful thought, a stretching of the limbs shakes off the torment of thoughts, an upward leap hurls the nightmare of the religious world from my breast, a hurrah shouted out with joy throws off years of burdens. (Stirner 2017, 165)

Just our complicity in our own subjugation to ideology is enacted through the body, so is our insurrection against it. The logic of ideology seeks to represent the individual back to itself as an instance of the normative categories of the human, female (or male), citizen, etc. Against this, Stirner’s unique asserts its self-ownership in a rebellion that is described with reference to concepts, but is carried out primarily as a bodily activity. By exerting the capacities of our bodies and inhabiting the world through our bodies without mediating this relationship through any form of representation, we short-circuit the functioning of the ideological device that has been inserted between our desires and our actions and which serves to reroute our energies from their

original role in the fulfillment of our desires towards the propagation of this very parasitic structure.

Stirner's project, both in its critical and in its positive dimensions, is deeply embodied. No reading that strives to do it justice and capture its full scope can afford to dismiss it as a rebellion in thought alone, as Marx does. Stirner describes the lived experience of the individual subject as fundamentally embodied, so it can neither be reduced to its anti-essentialist commitments, nor considered as a set of events and processes that can be described without privileging the subject and its relation to the world, as would be required by the interpretive horizon of post-anarchism.

The Unique and Its *Umwelt*

A second set of provocations consists in Stirner's claims that he is the center of the world and that the world is his property. Taken out of context, Stirner sounds like a megalomaniac, and Marx made ample use of the extreme character of Stirner's rhetoric in ridiculing him as such. Specifically, the notion of property drew Marx's ire and led him to portray Stirner as nothing more than a petty bourgeois individualist, a label that has unfortunately stuck through the centuries. But Stirner's use of the term "property" has nothing to do with legal ownership, as should be clear from Stirner's detailed critique of laws in general and the idea of legal ownership in particular, both of which he firmly rejects (Stirner 2017, 186-98). What Stirner means by "property" is something completely different: "Your world extends as far as your capacity, and what you grasp is your own simply because you grasp it. You, the unique, are 'the unique' *only together with 'your property'*" (Stirner 2012, 63). This notion has more to do with theoretical biology than legal ownership, and the thought of Jakob von Uexküll can help us understand what it means. Comparing Stirner's notion of property to Uexküll's concept of *Umwelt* also makes clear why Stirner's claim to be the center of the world is not the product of intense hubris or delusion, but simply a description of how the world is given to each living subject.

A forerunner of biosemiotics and cybernetics, Jakob von Uexküll was a biologist working primarily on the physiology of sea creatures, who developed a theory of organismic subjects and their environments that was both deeply inspired by and very influential on philosophy (cf.

Feiten 2020; and Feiten et al. 2020). He believed that organisms are not merely complex machines, but living subjects, and that each of them lives in their own world. He illustrates this by inviting us to imagine a stroll on which we encounter each animal enclosed in their own phenomenal world, or *Umwelt*, as in a soap bubble:

We begin such a stroll on a sunny day before a flowering meadow in which insects buzz and butterflies flutter, and we make a bubble around each of the animals living in the meadow. The bubble represents each animal's environment and contains all the features accessible to the subject. As soon as we enter into one such bubble, the previous surroundings of the subject are completely reconfigured. [...] A new world arises in each bubble. (Uexküll 2010, 43)

Uexküll developed the concept of *Umwelt* to refer to the environment of a living creature as it is experienced from the first-person perspective, in contrast to its physical surroundings considered in an abstract view from nowhere (Feiten 2020, 2-4). What this means is simply that the world I experience and inhabit is my own because its existence as phenomenal experience is brought forth through my own existence and activity. This is what Stirner means when he writes that “no one lives in any other world than his own, and [...] everyone is the center of his own world” (Stirner 2012, 63).

Stirner says that your “world extends as far as your capacity” because the *Umwelt* of an animal is made up only of those aspects of its environment that are capable of affecting it in some way. For most animals, those are only those objects that provide a direct opportunity for action in the service of satisfying some organismic need. In ecological psychology, these properties of the environment which provide an opportunity and invitation for goal-directed action are called *affordances*, “equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior” (Gibson 1979, 121; see also Chemero 2009).

The affordances that make up an *Umwelt* depend on the abilities of a subject, its power, but the subject also has to be attuned to the match between the information about features of the physical world available in its sensory array and its own powers. This attunement is not a conscious mental act or content, but instead an achievement of the nervous system that makes it possible for affordances to appear in the conscious experience of the subject. Uexküll took his

theory to be a continuation of Kant's first *Critique*, but it constitutes a radical departure from Kant: instead of categories and forms of sensible intuition, Uexküll describes a kind of embodied a priori: the semicircular canals in our inner ear make possible our experience of three-dimensional space. The nervous system, for those animals that have one, plays an absolutely crucial role in the constitution of their *Umwelt*. Uexküll's view anticipates aspects of different contemporary views on the brain, even where these views are generally opposed: like Thomas Metzinger, Uexküll sees the brain as projecting a world of experience (Metzinger 2009). Even though Thomas Fuchs is radically opposed to Metzinger's position, he adopts Uexküll's view the brain "provides open loops of possibility that are closed by suitable complements in the environment and thus become functional cycles of interaction" (Fuchs 2020, 5).

For Uexküll, as for Stirner, each living subject inhabits a world of their own. A central tenet of Uexküll's view is that there are "as many worlds as there are subjects," and Stirner agrees that "no one lives in any other world than his own, and [...] everyone is the center of his own world" (Uexküll 1926, 70; Stirner 2012, 63). This brings them in conflict with two different strands of post-anarchism, those who adopt a Deleuzian view and those who adopt realism (Rousselle 2013, 157-65). Despite Deleuze's positive use of Uexküll at different points, his mode of thinking rules out that every subject is contained in their own world. Instead he emphasizes the Spinozist motifs in Uexküll's *Bedeutungslehre* and develops a kind of non-constructivist reading of Uexküll (cf. Feiten et al. 2020, 10-16; Uexküll 2010; Deleuze 1988, 122-30).

Besides Uexküll, Stirner's radically self-centered account of existence also resonates very strongly with the starting point⁴ of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*:

I am, not a 'living creature' nor even a 'man', nor again even 'a consciousness' endowed with all the characteristics which zoology, social anatomy or inductive psychology

⁴ The starting point, but not the end point. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists also emphasize the inter-subjective nature of our experience. What exactly the methodological and ontological consequences of this commitment are and whether they are as incompatible with Stirner's view as the term "inter-subjective" suggests cannot be discussed here in detail. I do not claim that Stirner agrees with the phenomenologists I cite here in every regard, only that important aspects of their work can help us understand Stirner better.

recognize [...] —I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself [...] the horizon [...].
(Merleau-Ponty 2002, ix)

Stirner has been described as an “an early, generic practical phenomenologist”, with the caveat that terms like “phenomenal” cannot be taken to describe a fixed method in Stirner but merely point out that he is dealing with “nonconceptual experiences” that exceed and occur independently of “symbolic concepts” (McQuinn 2012, 36 & 7-8). However, some general points from phenomenology can highlight the specificity of Stirner’s project. Likely drawing on Husserl’s then unpublished writings which he accessed in the archives at Leuven, Merleau-Ponty writes that “[c]onsciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 159; cf. Bernet 2013, 44). This matches Stirner’s valuing of bodily action over thought as the primary mode of being in the world, where “grasping” in the intellectual sense becomes merely one modulated variant of the more general embodied grasp that the subject has on its world.

Iris Marion Young in her analysis of “[f]eminine bodily existence” adds to Merleau-Ponty’s “I can” the case of an “inhibited intentionality” which “withholds its full bodily commitment [...] in a self-imposed ‘I cannot’” (Young 1980, 146). This is also a strikingly apt analysis of Stirner’s episode of the young woman outlined above. Ideology works through the body in the form of a self-imposed “I cannot”, and Stirner’s project is to show us ways out of this self-imposed misery. This also helps us understand Stirner’s clarification of what he means by “egoism”: “[not] forgetting that the world is “ours,” [not] forgetting that one is the center or *owner* of this world, that it is our property” (Stirner 2012, 64). Property here has nothing to do with legal ownership, in fact quite the opposite: The world is my property if I stop self-imposing an “I cannot” that turns abstract ideological, moral, and legal norms into real limits to my own embodied intentionality. Stirner’s “property” consists in an active relation to my environment that is not mediated and constrained by the specious authority of these concepts, one of which is legal property.

In Uexküll’s account of animals, the functional cycles that link a given animal’s nervous system to its environment through a loop of perception and action are prespecified in the grand

plan of Nature (Feiten 2020, 7). For humans, the situation is different: facing nature with a lack of claws, poison, or instinctual reactions reliably fitted to our environment, our survival hinges on the ability to adapt to the situations we find ourselves in. In this way, we have always been creatures and creators of our own plasticity. A new reading of Stirner's project as an embodied insurrection against the way that we limit ourselves by imposing ideological limits on our bodily intentionality thus provides a starting point for developing a politics of plasticity. Such a reading of Stirner's self-empowerment as traversing multiple dimensions of change through the coupling of brain, body, and behavior—and against the way in which ideology interfaces with all of them—highlights also the “conceptual bridge between neural and cultural plasticity”, what Lambros Malafouris calls “metaplasticity” (Malafouris 2015, 352).

The Problem of the Care for the Self

An embodied reading of Stirner's self-empowerment gives us the first step of a politics of plasticity: the decision to take control of the process whereby we are shaped and shape ourselves. But it can also help us think productively about the challenges involved with the second step: once we have made this decision, what is the form we give ourselves? Once we control our plasticity, what is the shape we mold ourselves into? Critical commentators on neuroplasticity have clearly pointed out a danger here: instead of a progressive or liberatory effect, the “neuronal subjects” are pressured to shape themselves into ever more productive, flexible, and resilient workers and citizens through a “neoliberal ethic of personal self-care and responsibility” (Pitts-Taylor 2010, 639). Even though the agency of shaping the subject is transmitted from ideological state apparatuses to the subjects themselves, the form in which they are shaped is still determined by the vectors of their oppression and exploitation. The neuronal subject would then merely internalize the pressures of the market in the same way that when Stirner was writing “[e]very Prussian carrie[d] his gendarme in his breast” (Stirner 2017, 37).

The difference between a self-shaping which frees the subject from external authority and one that merely places the responsibility for maintaining its conformity to ideology with the subject itself can be illustrated by the difference between Stirner's project and the ethics of the concern for the self as a practice of freedom in the late work of Michel Foucault (Foucault 1997).

Post-anarchists have read these two accounts as describing at heart the same form of self-empowerment. Highlighting the crucial difference between the two will then also show how my reading moves beyond the constraints of the post-anarchist reception of Stirner.

Comparisons between Stirner and Foucault have been drawn since at least the 1980s (Marti 1988). In terms of Foucault's later work on ethics of the care for the self, two major commentators making largely identical, although ultimately somewhat superficial, arguments for a link with Stirner's notion of self-empowerment. Both Jürgen Mümken and Saul Newman look to Foucault and Stirner for concrete practices of resistance against the ideological forces that shape us into docile subjects (Mümken 2004; Newman 2001a). Two questions reveal the weaknesses of this approach:

- a) What are concrete practices for us to adopt?
- b) What exactly are we cultivating by adopting these practices?

The problem with the first question is that Foucault is “not looking for an alternative; you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people” (Foucault 1984, 343). He is not interested in a “history of solutions” but a “genealogy of problems” (Foucault 1984, 343). The point of Foucault's analysis is to show that “the emergence of new thought, the motion of practice, is contingent upon the problematic that precedes it” and that each such “problematization [...] is capable of supporting contradictory responses” (Koopman 2016, 107). It is tempting to read Foucault's work on this “technology of the self” as a direct source for practices of self-empowerment, but it is also clear that the text does not provide this (Foucault 1984, 342).

The second, perhaps even more pressing issue with the “concern for the self as a practice of freedom” concerns the question of what is meant by “freedom” (Foucault 1997, 281). Stirner criticizes the ideal of “freedom” at length and forcefully rejects it: rather than orienting us towards improving our situation, the concept of freedom is somewhat of a red herring, an empty phrase that waits to be filled with content by cultural and political projects which then yoke the individual to their goals, rather than enabling them to pursue their own. In Stirner's analysis, the ideological structures, both doctrinal and institutional, which produce subjects ready to collaborate in their own exploitation and oppression, are shorn of their religious contents, but retained basically intact and even entrenched more deeply in the quest for secularization.

The “technology of the self” described by Foucault must equally be seen in its historical context. In general, the techniques described by Foucault were used only by privileged and powerful members of the relevant societies, i.e. free men. What it meant for them to practice care for the self is to ensure that they conduct their lives the way a free man would. This includes controlling one’s passions to a certain degree, inflicting only the correct amount of violence on one’s wife, children, and slaves, and so on. Freedom in this context means the degree to which one conforms to an existing social ideal, and the practices that Foucault describes in antiquity serve this goal (Miller 1997, 176-8). It is easy to see how a politics of plasticity could fall prey to this danger and result in individuals actively shaping themselves to conform to a neoliberal conception of what it means to be free. This is all diametrically opposed to Stirner’s project and highlights precisely the reasons why he rejected freedom as an ideal in favor of *Eigenheit*, or oneness, which describes not any particular state of being, so not just another new ideal, but a way of relating to oneself that is not mediated by ideals (cf. Feiten 2014).

The pressing question then is whether Stirner’s project can escape the fate of “practice of freedom.” Some might think that the pressures of a capitalist environment would still lead the Stirnerian to shape themselves into a docile citizen and a good consumer. His rhetoric certainly enables such views: “To me, objects are only material that I consume” (Stirner 2017, 306). However, Stirner’s consumption cannot be equated with the consumption of commodities, and he makes it clear that he does not think that pursuing one’s desires unhindered by ideology will be compatible with capitalism. First, he is not interested in material gain or social status: “Perhaps I can make very little out of myself; this little, however, is all, and is better than what I allow the power of others to make out of me, through the training of custom, religion, law, the state, etc” (Stirner 2017, 195). Stirner also rejects free market and argues for “[a]bolishing competition”, favoring instead free associations that work together to meet their common needs (Stirner 2017, 287). He advocated for workers to unite to fight scabs and bargain for better wages, leading Plekhanov to praise him for “attacking bourgeois reformers and utopian socialists who thought the proletariat could be emancipated by the virtuous acts of the propertied class” (Feiten 2013, 123). Despite his otherwise critical stance, Plekhanov acknowledges Stirner as preaching class struggle (Plekhanov 2001, 47-52).

Stirner’s radical rejection of all external authority starts with oneself, but it does not end there. Taking ownership of one’s lifeworld and agency does not entail a diminishing of social

relations. On the contrary, almost all of our desires directly require that we fulfill them socially. Stirner's concept of insurrection is not "aimed at new arrangements", it aims to "no longer let ourselves be arranged, but rather to arrange ourselves" (Stirner 2017, 398). Stirner is "not against love, but against sacred love, not against thought, but against sacred thought, not against socialists, but against sacred socialist" (Stirner 2012, 81-82). It seems plausible that a successful embodied insurrection against ideology could only succeed as a collective effort, because that would create the social space necessary for free association to occur and hence for the unique ones to live their lives according to their desires. The processes of self-empowerment and self-shaping that Stirner describes for a single individual become even more complex once they involve others. Stirner's own thought does not take us very far towards a detailed image of what these forms of social cooperation might look like. In one sense, his position is opposed to the very idea of determining them in advance, because this would prevent them from emerging spontaneously from the creative collaborations of unique individuals. In terms of the project for developing a politics of plasticity, this seems like an impasse at first.

The Individual and the Social

Is Stirner's "egoism" not a doctrine of isolation, at odds with the notions of solidarity and mutual aid? This common accusation led Stirner himself to complain that "[n]o one gives Stirner credit for his global intercourse and his association of egoists" (Stirner 2012, 82). These are voluntary associations that only exist as the active process of organizing and do not constitute institutions with a separate existence of their own. These relations are not mediated by any representations of its members as belonging to a particular gender, nationality, religion, or even as being human, they are enacted purely on the ground of the participants' common interest and joined powers. As Stirner puts it, "the 'exclusiveness' of the egoist, which some want to pass off as isolation, separation, loneliness, is on the contrary full participation in the interesting", what is excluded are only the obligations and limitations that go along with various ideological representations of subjects (Stirner 2012, 82). A core aspect of this "full participation" is the "voluntary and reciprocal exchange of resources and services" that Malabou identifies as mutual aid (Malabou this volume, xx).

On Stirner's account, solidarity and mutual aid do not arise out of a sense of obligation, but that does not mean that no obligations are ever involved. Once a "union of egoists" is formed to pursue some common goal, obligations arise. By cooperating freely and organizing, they are generating and accepting obligations within the context of their association. Although the association is voluntary, it thus also limits the freedom of its participants: Every "society to which I adhere takes many a freedom away from me, but grants me other freedoms in return" (Stirner 2017, 319). "[W]ith respect to freedom, state and associating are subject to no essential difference", but the state denies also my ownness when "it demands that those who belong to it subject themselves to it" (Stirner 2017, 320). What the associating egoists eschew is the creation of an institution that exists above and beyond the living human beings whose agency it usurps.

It is crucial to understand that Stirner's book is not a screed against prosocial behavior, but against the ideological formation of humanism: "Yes, the book actually is written against the human being, and yet Stirner could have gone after the same target without offending people so severely if he had reversed the subject and said that he wrote against the inhuman monster" (Stirner 2012, 74). Stirner's critique cuts through a sentimental essentialist altruism the same way as through a libertarian essentialized competition. Stirner is not opposed to feelings of solidarity or their expression in behaviors of mutual aid, but only to their symbolic representation as abstract duties. Once we learn to associate without mediation by these ideological constructs, our mutual aid will have become unchained in this way. It is not a chain of signifiers—citizen, Christian, man, human—that produces or encodes pro-social behavior, but the voluntary creation of "horizontal relationships that [...] exclude any feeling of guilt or debt" (Malabou this volume, xx).

But is the idea of individual agency not an illusion, is the behavior of individuals not determined by their material reality, i.e. by social and/or biological factors beyond their control? Is Stirner's notion of empowerment an idealistic voluntarism, the idea of a self-positing will totally independent of matter and history? Not so. In his early essay "Das unwahre Prinzip unserer Erziehung" ("The Untrue Principle of Our Education", Stirner 1986), Stirner emphasizes that individual agency is not somehow separate from the material realities of the social world, but that the will is something that develops over the course of a lifetime. The conditions which enable an individual to develop their will are social, and different contexts can support or stifle this development.

And what about social and biological determinations? Stirner does not attempt to deny material reality, he merely attacks normative representations that lead us to rush ahead and shape our actions in the way we have been told they are determined. If there really is some natural force or tendency in us that produces our feelings of love and solidarity with others, Stirner's egoists will act on them, since these feelings are their own. However, they will reject feelings of obligation that are induced by representations of human nature. Similarly, if class interest describes a material reality, it will coincide with the self-interest of Stirner's egoists and they will act in their class interest on their own volition, without guidance by a party.

This being said, we would also be misled in expecting Stirner's thought to give us a system of thought that solves all our problems. Instead, the value of his work for us in the present will likely lie in the productive combinations with other schools of thought. Many positions that partially resonate with Stirner's attention to subjective experience, like phenomenology, gestalt therapy, or enactivism, have developed rich accounts of intersubjectivity that can provide us with useful perspectives on social life where Stirner falls short. If we manage to move beyond historical misunderstandings, we might also develop a productive dialogue between the views of Marx and Stirner—a possibility that was suggested early on by Engels, Plekhanov, and Max Adler, but quickly rendered anathema by the dominant Marxist reading of Stirner (cf. Laska 1996, 23-24 & 60-62). An embodied reading of Stirner can help us see old conceptual problems in a new light, and opens up new directions for exploring conceptual ties and tensions that have been ignored because of Stirner's status as a pariah in the history of thought.

Conclusion

We have seen that Stirner's project is not exhausted by the post-anarchist readings that have popularized his thought in recent decades, but that it is fundamentally embodied in a way that escapes the discursive paradigm. Neither is it vulnerable to the central points of Marx's attack: First, ideology is alive and well today as it was in the 1840s—insofar as something can be said to be alive that has no life of its own, but exists in and through our bodies and brains. Stirner traces the way it works on our bodies, and how our bodies flex their muscles when we try to throw it off. Second, Stirner's notion of property has nothing to do with a petty bourgeois fixation on

legal ownership. Instead, it refers to the phenomenal world each of us inhabits and the way we related to it once we stop imposing ideology's "I cannot" on ourselves and our bodies. We have seen that Stirner's self-empowerment is different from the concern for the self that Foucault investigates in antiquity, and that it has at least a fighting chance at avoiding the danger of a neoliberal plasticity, in which we would take control of our lives merely in order to mold ourselves in the shape of productive workers and prolific consumers. And yet, a lot remains to be done before this new reading of Stirner can really be put to work for a politics of plasticity.

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