

The Radicalism of Departure

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*A Reassessment of Max Stirner's
Hegelianism*

By

Jeff Spiessens

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Meinem Liebchen,
Julie

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

The books and articles which I have used in this study are always quoted in their original language. I have only made an exception to this rule when I refer to works written in Dutch. In these cases I have provided my own translation.

References to Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* are always to Bernd Kast's "Ausführlich kommentierte Studienausgabe" published in 2009. To accommodate the English-speaking readers of this study, I have, however, also provided the references to the English translation of Stirner's work (specifically to the Cambridge edition edited by David Leopold). Throughout this study I refer first to the page number of Kast's edition, then to the corresponding pages of the English edition (which appear in brackets).

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This book is a revised edition of my doctoral dissertation submitted to the Philosophy Department at the University of Antwerp in the winter of 2012 and defended in *Hof van Liere* (Antwerp) on the twenty-second of February, 2013. The corpus of the original work has remained virtually unaltered but a new introduction has been added.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to revisit the question concerning the nature of Max Stirner's relationship vis-à-vis Hegelian philosophy. Although there is a vast number of studies about Stirner's magnum opus *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, the Hegelian question has never really been answered satisfactorily. By this I mean that there is no consensus – no standard view – regarding Stirner's philosophical allegiance at the time he wrote *Der Einzige*. To date, it remains an open question whether it was written by a Hegelian philosopher, a fierce critic of that philosophy or, indeed, by one who is completely indifferent towards it. This is not entirely surprising if one takes a closer look at the secondary literature on Stirner's philosophy: the number of scientific publications concerning the Hegelian question are very limit indeed. Considering the wide area of interest within the literature on Stirner, it is striking to see that there are virtually no academic (or non-academic) studies in which it is explicitly addressed. The American Lawrence Stepelevich, professor emeritus at Villanova University (Pennsylvania), who is widely regarded as an authority on this subject, has written only a handful of articles about it. The only book-length studies in which the Hegelian question is discussed in some detail and merit mention are Kurt Adolf Mautz' *Max Stirners im Gegensatz zum Hegelschen Idealismus* which dates back to 1936 and Bernd Kast's *Max Stirners Destruktion der spekulativen Philosophie* published in 2016.¹

The scarcity of publications on this subject is surprising if one considers the profound Hegelian character of Stirner's intellectual milieu. Moreover, what I have called 'the Hegelian question' is by no means a side-issue in the research on Stirner. The entire framework of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* can be said to be Hegelian in nature in the sense that it

¹ The work mentioned by Kast is in fact the "completely revised and actualised" version of his 1979 dissertation *Die Thematik des 'Eigners' in der Philosophie Max Stirners*. It is, perhaps, interesting to note that neither Kast nor Mautz are academic philosophers. The only study on this subject written by an academic philosopher is Harald Pamminer's doctoral dissertation *Stirner – Ein Schüler Hegels?* However, Pamminer only addresses his central question (*was* Stirner a student of Hegel and what does this entail?) in the *conclusion* of his study and even there fails to offer a clear answer.

is brimming with implicit and explicit references to Hegel and Hegelian philosophy. In fact, the very ubiquity of Hegelian philosophy seems to be the main reason why the answer of the Hegelian question is taken for granted by most commentators. It is seen as simply the reflection of Stirner's intellectual environment. This, however, is precisely the question: *can* the Hegelian framework indeed be taken at face-value or does it serve some other, perhaps more strategic, function? The answer to this question has profound implications for the manner in which *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* is interpreted. If, as I will argue in this study, Stirner is *consciously and conspicuously framing* his arguments and ideas in a Hegelian setting to make a point *about* Hegelian philosophy, then this means that all the Hegelian references gain a deeper level of meaning which has to be explored in order to get to the philosophical heart of Stirner's work. Thus, it can be said that one cannot arrive at a solid interpretation of *Der Einzige* without *first* settling the Hegelian question. It is as it were the starting point and foundation for any worthwhile discussion regarding its philosophical import and depth. One could even argue that one of the main reasons academic research on the philosophy of Stirner has been unable to get off the ground, is precisely the absence of a satisfactory answer to the Hegelian question. The hermeneutical key to unlock its meaning is still missing.

Although few attempts have been made to address the Hegelian question head-on, it is possible to distinguish between two competing interpretative models regarding the issue of the Hegelianism of *Der Einzige*. They are, however, rarely discussed explicitly or subjected to critical analysis. More often than not, they are tacitly taken for granted by an author. According to the first interpretation, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* should be understood as a work that continues to owe a great debt to Hegelian philosophy. Within this interpretative model, there are those who propose that Stirner's philosophy is a necessary consequence of *Hegel's* philosophy. According to this argument, the apparent anti-Hegelianism of *Der Einzige* is the result of a dialectical development that proceeds from Hegel's own philosophy. Seen from this perspective, the philosophical position that Stirner develops in the second part of *Der Einzige* does not represent a break from traditional philosophy but is rather a continuation thereof. Within the same interpretative model, there are also those who assert that *Der Einzige* is the work of a *Young Hegelian*, whose interpretation of Hegel is shaped by the evolution of *Hegelian philosophy* after Hegel's death.

The second interpretation raises strong opposition to this direction and proposes that neither the references and allusions to Hegel's philosophy

nor the typical Young Hegelian aspects of Stirner's philosophy – with its typical penchant for negativity, its interest in future developments and other characteristics – should be taken seriously at all. According to the proponents of this interpretation what some see as the Hegelianism of *Der Einzige* simply does not exist. The references to Hegel are intended as ironic, and Stirner's alleged Young Hegelianism should be understood as an attempt to ridicule their position by drawing absurd conclusions from it.

It is interesting to note that these mutually exclusive interpretative models seem to co-exist rather peacefully. There is no real debate between their proponents, nor is there any discussion about the central arguments supporting these theories. What is more, these arguments are rarely, if ever, offered *at all*. As a result, these models seem to be simply the *position* of an author. This position is supported only by textual 'evidence' which is believed to be self-evident, requiring no real interpretative efforts. A paradigmatic example can be found in the aforementioned study by Bernd Kast. Kast adheres to what he himself calls "an ironic or trivialising reading" of Stirner's Hegelianism.² As evidence he cites precisely those passages which do indeed seem to support such a reading. When Stirner comically points to the respect for our superstitious grandmothers as the origin of man's believe in ghosts and hence our belief in realities such as Hegel's Spirit (*Geist*), Stirner is obviously writing in jest. However, it is highly problematic to take this comical passage *at face value* and to use it as evidence in order to settle the Hegelian question as Kast seems to do.³ As I will argue, these humorous remarks can also be read as part of a wider strategy employed by Stirner, a strategy which is of great significance for anyone wishing to understand the philosophical point of *Der Einzige*. This, however, is not considered by Kast or pointed out by other commentators – even those who hold to a different interpretation of Stirner's Hegelianism.

The peaceful co-existence of both interpretative models is, I argued, problematic because the resulting lack of meaningful debate or discussion about the Hegelian question in the secondary literature conceals the inconsistencies and inadequacies of both models. If one looks at these models more closely, it becomes clear that they face serious problems. I

² BERND KAST, *Max Stirners Destruktion der spekulativen Philosophie* (2016), p. 127.

³ *Op. cit.* p. 126: "Stirner travestiert auch hier die Terminologie und die Vorstellungen Hegels [...] Stirners fiktiver Dialog mit Berufung auf die Großmutter als Autorität ist ein deutlicher Hinweis darauf; wie Stirner seine Darstellung verstanden wissen will: Es kann ihm nicht »Ernst damit« sein [...] sondern ganz im Gegenteil, er mokiert sich, zieht ins Lächerliche, banalisiert."

will mention what is perhaps the most important one here. The proponents of a Hegelian (or Young Hegelian) reading either fail to account for the many non-Hegelian aspects of *Der Einzige* or provide insufficient explanation for how these non-Hegelian elements could have continued to be included in the development of Hegelianism. In contrast, the proponents of an anti-Hegelian reading of *Der Einzige* have no explanation for why Stirner devotes half of his philosophical *magnum opus* to the reconstruction of a philosophical development that is intended as purely ironic.

In this study I propose a so-called ‘third way’. My own interpretation should not be regarded as an intermediate position that offers a bridge between the Hegelian and anti-Hegelian readings. It offers an *alternative* reading of *Der Einzige*, based on the conviction that the previously outlined interpretations are untenable. More specifically, I will argue that Stirner’s attitude towards Hegelianism must be understood in terms of *egoistic appropriation*. I will offer a brief outline of what this entails. For Stirner, egoism is essentially an *outlook on reality*, not a moral category. It is, to be more precise, the exact opposite of the religious outlook on reality. The central mark of religion, he argues, is the recognition of the *objectivity* of the world. To the religious mind, man is the *discoverer* but not the creator of its value and meaning. The clearest example of this is perhaps the famous story in the book of *Genesis* where Adam names all the animals created by God. In doing so Adam, according to earliest Jewish and Christian commentators of the Bible, is not superimposing arbitrary names *onto* reality thereby rendering it intelligible, but is *cataloging* creation. Creation, that is, is named *kata logon*, according to its *innate intelligibility* (its *logos*).⁴ The story of creation also mentions that humankind is given dominion over creation.⁵ Again, from a Jewish-Christian perspective this does not mean that by this act, mankind is given the freedom to use creation according to its *own* designs and wishes. Mankind, that is, is not given ownership over creation by God, but is called to *stewardship*.

In other words: to the religious mind, man is neither the owner of the meaning nor of the value of the world. The criterion of both is something that exists independently from him and is in no way created by him. Stirner, however, offers his own story of creation which does not involve a deity that creates the world “out of nothing”, but the egoistic individual seen as “the creative nothing” out of which everything is created.⁶ As creator of the world, the egoist refuses, in short, to defer to the supposed

⁴ *Genesis* 2: 19-20.

⁵ *Genesis* 1: 28-29.

⁶ MAX STIRNER, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (2009), p. 15 (7).

objectivity of the world but considers *himself* to be the author of its value and meaning.

This outlook is clearly indebted to the Feuerbachian theory of alienation according to which alienation occurs as the result of an inverted relationship between owner/ creator on the one hand and property/ creation on the other. The egoist, as defined by Stirner, is simply one who reclaims or re-appropriates that which the religious outlook has wrested from him. Thus, truth (*Wahrheit*) in its classical understanding of the recognition of the objective meaning of reality, is reduced to the property of the individual (to *Meinung* understood by Stirner as that which is *his*).

In this study I argue that this notion of egoistic re-appropriation is vital for the understanding of Stirner's relation to Hegel. For Stirner, Hegel represents the pinnacle of a philosophical tradition which does not see philosophical thought as merely a function of an individual generating his or her unique thoughts, but is rather seen as an objective process of which the philosopher is merely a *partaker*. In Hegel's system, the individual, seen as a creator of thoughts, has completely vanished and been reduced to a function of *Geist* (thought personified) which strives towards self-knowledge. In Stirner's view, the Hegelian philosopher is therefore promoting an *alien* affair: the affair of abstracta such as *Geist*, Philosophy or Thought and has become the tool of *their* development. Against this background, I will argue that *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* is in part a *demonstration* of Stirner's unwillingness to be a function of thought. I do so by a close analysis of precisely those segments in which Stirner seems to be engaging in an effort to reconstruct some objective process in reality (for example, the course of human history, the development of a human life). Every such instance, we will see, is couched in a Hegelian language and is marked by a distinctive Hegelian logic or outlook. The analysis of these passages will reveal that Stirner is carefully constructing a certain logic only in order to suddenly break-off his argument in order to reveal the himself as its author, or indeed, creator. In other words: Stirner, as I will demonstrate, consistently draws the attention to the thinker as the *owner* of his thoughts or philosophical constructs. As owner he is able to freely design and destroy his creation. The ownership over his thoughts demonstrates that the thinker is not led by a compelling logic that reality might impose on him but by purely subjective motives.

In the manner outlined above, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* can be read as Stirner's withdrawal from Hegelian philosophy. Convinced that Hegelian philosophy is based on an illegitimate inversion of the relationship between the thinker and his thoughts, Stirner did not wish to

be a slave of dialectical thought.⁷ In his view, traditional philosophy – Hegel’s *Wissenschaft* – is simply an “alien cause” which managed to not only trick men into becoming its servants, but also into successfully presenting this servitude as the highest form of freedom.

Thus, according to my interpretation, *Der Einzige* contains no evidence of an ironic rejection of Hegelian philosophy nor of any attempt to develop this philosophy further. According to my hypothesis, the Hegelian elements of the work should be understood in the context of Stirner’s effort *to stage his withdrawal from Hegelianism*. I propose that Stirner is appropriating Hegelian philosophy and reducing it to his property and that this appropriation is accompanied with an inversion with regard to the relationship between the thinker and the thought. In concrete terms, this means that the Hegelian dialectic is no longer seen as a movement that takes place in reality and which the (Hegelian) philosopher – seen as a spectator of this process – tries to grasp. In *Der Einzige*, the dialectic is instead reduced to an instrument used by Stirner in a highly unique way in order to formulate his own thoughts.

This inversion also implies a rejection of the philosophy of the Berlin Young Hegelians, who remain at the service of such personified entities as ‘Criticism’ and ‘self-consciousness’. As I will show, Stirner’s appropriation of Hegelian philosophy also represents a break from *Young Hegelian* philosophy.

In this study I will focus primarily on the first part of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. In order to explain why, we must take a closer look at its table of contents:

Ich hab’ Mein Sach’ auf Nichts gestellt [prologue]

Erste Abteilung. Der Mensch

I. Ein Menschenleben

II. Menschen der alten und der neuen Zeit

1. Die Alten

2. Die Neuen

§1. Der Geist

§2. Die Besessenen

§3. Die Hierarchie

⁷ MAX STIRNER, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (2009), p. 83 (69).

3. Die Freien

§1. Der politische Liberalismus

§2. Der soziale Liberalismus

§3. Der humane Liberalismus

Zweite Abteilung. Ich.

I. Die Eigenheit

II. Der Eigner

1. Meine Macht

2. Mein Verkehr

3. Mein Selbstgenuß

III. Der Einzige

Proceeding from this table of contents, the American Stirner-interpreter Lawrence Stepelevich characterizes the structure of *Der Einzige* as *non-Hegelian*:

In structure, the work is divided into but two main sections, ‘Der Mensch’ and ‘Ich’. Such a division would certainly disappoint anyone looking for that unmistakable signature of Hegelianism, the triad.⁸

This characterization is misleading, however, not only (and not even largely) because the structure of the work is *predominantly* triadic, but because the sub-division into two major parts is quite clearly of *Young* Hegelian signature. Stirner uses a dichotomy to highlight the break between the old and the new. In this regard, the old must obviously be understood as referring to traditional philosophy. As it seems, traditional philosophy had three stages: that of the ancients, the moderns and, finally, that of ‘*Die Freien*’. There can be no doubt that the intended audience for *Der Einzige*, the Berlin *Young* Hegelians (better known as *Die Freien*), would have interpreted this division in this way. By treating *Die Freien* last, Stirner clearly reveals that, first, his own philosophical position must be distinguished from those of his contemporaries and, second, that it assumes a break from the traditional, antiquated standpoint of his contemporaries.

⁸ LAWRENCE STEPELEVICH, “Max Stirner as Hegelian” (1985), p. 604.

In particular, the logic behind the dual classification suggests that an analysis of the first part of *Der Einzige* can offer additional clarity regarding the nature of Stirner's attitude towards Hegelian philosophy. A close reading of *Der Einzige* confirms this assumption: not only is the first part replete with references to the philosophy of Hegel; it is also the place within which Stirner develops his critique of Hegelian philosophy. In the second part, on the other hand, Stirner presents his own philosophical position against this background.

In conclusion of this introduction, I provide a brief summary of this study and present a brief explanation of the methodology that was used.

The first chapter focuses on the extent to which several of Stirner's so-called smaller writings already contain a departure. Two articles in particular that appear to point in this direction – '*Einiges Vorläufige vom Liebesstaat*' and a review of Eugene Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* – are thoroughly analyzed and discussed.

In chapter two, we turn our attention to *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. More specifically, we discuss the interpretative difficulties that inevitably arise in the reading of that work. In an initial section, I discuss the language of *Der Einzige*, proposing that it is of a deceptive simplicity. On the one hand, Stirner avoids the use of technical and abstruse philosophical jargon, which makes the work easy legible. At the same time, however, he appropriates the language and forces it to say what he wishes to say. In doing so, he twists and shifts the meaning of certain words in a subtle way, which can easily be missed and which therefore obstructs the proper interpretation of the work. This issue brings us indirectly to the central topic of this study. As I will show, Stirner's conception of the language is closely associated with his departure from the philosophical tradition. In order to separate himself from the concepts and thoughts that the philosopher constantly threatens to take up time and again, the individual must behave as the owner of the language. This brings us to the deceptive problem of Stirner's relationship to Hegelian philosophy. I propose that, in *Der Einzige*, Stirner sets the stage for his departure from Hegelian philosophy. According to my hypothesis, the denial of this fact has thus far remained captive within a specific philosophical straitjacket. On the one hand, those who argue that *Der Einzige* is a logical consequence of Hegelianism appear to decide that Stirner's attempted critical conquest of idealism was ultimately unsuccessful. As an epigone, Stirner is thus caught, as it were, between Hegel and Marx (historical materialism) of Kierkegaard (existentialism) – both of them thinkers who are now believed to have succeeded in pushing post-Hegelian philosophy in a new direction. On the other hand, those who

dismiss every Hegelian element as ironic are clearly at risk of taking Stirner out of his historical context and misunderstanding him as an anarchist or a Nietzschean *avant la lettre*.

In the second chapter, I treat the interpretation of *Der Einzige* as a departure, albeit hypothetical and in need of further elaboration and demonstration. In chapters three, four and five, I test this hypothesis according to a careful analysis of the first part of *Der Einzige*. In chapter three, I show how Stirner uses the first chapter of his *magnum opus* to turn Hegel's account of '*die Reihe des Lebensaltern*' to his own purposes. I then show how this appropriation of Hegel's *Enzyklopädie* text is part of a comprehensive strategy: the staging of Stirner's departure from Hegelian philosophy. In the fourth chapter, I apply the same method to Stirner's view of history. I show how – in and through Hegelian discourse – he appropriates elements and ideas of Hegel's philosophy of history, making them suit his own purposes. This allows him to read Hegel's account of the historical progress of freedom as an account of the increasing servitude of humankind.

In the last chapter, finally, I show how Stirner also uses this peculiar view of history to disassociate himself at last from the critical philosophy of his Young Hegelian contemporaries. In chapters three and four, which constitute the core of this study, I follow the same methodology. Proceeding from the hypothesis that, Stirner is drawing upon specific texts by Hegel in the first part of *Der Einzige*, I study these texts in close detail. First, Hegel himself is allowed to speak. I then set Hegel's text beside that of Stirner and point to the similarities and parallels that clearly demonstrate that Stirner uses Hegel's texts in the composition of Part one of *Der Einzige*. The confrontation between Hegel and Stirner takes place in the third and final moment. This confrontation shows that Stirner does not offer an interpretation of Hegel's texts, but consciously manipulates them.

CHAPTER ONE

DIE FREIEN AND STIRNER'S PHILOSOPHICAL ALLEGIANCE BEFORE *DER EINZIGE UND SEIN EIGENTUM*

1. Introduction

Stirner's so-called *Smaller Writings* can be divided into three groups.¹ The first one contains his relatively short newspaper correspondences written for the Young Hegelian journals the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung* (with thirty-three known contributions) and the *Rheinische Zeitung* (with twenty-seven known contributions) throughout 1842.² Often, these correspondences have no title and are signed with a single letter or symbol.³ The most important one of these correspondences is undoubtedly "Die Freien" (published in the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung* on July the fourteenth in 1842) in which Stirner confirms the existence of this philosophical association.⁴ A second group includes the longer articles and essays which were either published serially in the aforementioned journals, or in other, less known, journals. They are Stirner's reviews of Theodor

¹ Articles such as "Christentum und Antichristentum" (January 1842), "Über die Verpflichtung der Staatsbürger zu irgendeinem Religionsbekenntnis" (1842) and "Die philosophische Reactionäre" (1847) have, albeit in the absence of conclusive evidence, been attributed to Stirner by some of his commentators and are even included in the most recent edition of Stirner's *Smaller Writings* (cf. BERND LASKA, *Max Stirner. Parerga, Kritiken, Repliken*, 1986). In this study I will only take into account the articles of which Stirner's authorship has been satisfactorily proven.

² John Henry Mackay, Stirner's first biographer, collected most of the *Kleinere Schriften* in two editions. The first one was published in 1898, the second, "largely extended", edition in 1914. Even today, the latter is used by most of Stirner's commentators. It does not, however, contain Stirner's contributions to *Die Eisenbahn* which were published in 1841/2.

³ A full list may be found in the bibliography of this study.

⁴ MAX STIRNER, "Die Freien" (1914) [1842], p. 136.

Rohmer's *Deutschlands Beruf in der Gegenwart* (December 1841) and Bruno Bauer's *Die Posaune des jüngsten Gerichts* (January 1842) an anonymously written response to a pamphlet concerning the people's duty to attend church (January 1842), a long essay on education called "Das unwahre Prinzip unserer Erziehung" (April 1842) an essay on the relation between art and religion (June 1842) and finally two contributions which he wrote for a new short-lived journal published by his friend Ludwig Buhl, namely "Einiges Vorläufige vom Liebesstaat" and a review of Eugene Sue's wildly popular *Les Mystères de Paris* which were both written in 1843. A third group, finally, contains the articles and newspaper correspondences that were written after the publication of *Der Einzige*. The most important publication in this group is undoubtedly "Rezensenten Stirners" (September 1845). Although it is largely a rejoinder to his earliest critics it can also be read as an exposition of the main ideas of *Der Einzige*. Stirner's publications in *Journal des Oesterreichischen Lloyd* (June - September 1848) also belong to this group.

The main aim of this chapter to establish the nature of Stirner's philosophical allegiance in the articles written prior to the publication of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* in October 1844. I will, therefore, only discuss articles belonging to the first two groups.

A study of the nature of Stirner's philosophical views, inevitably takes on the form of a discussion of his affiliation with a group known as *Die Freien*. Although it is not clear precisely when Stirner joined ranks with *Die Freien*, it is true that by 1842 his name was "irrevocably linked to the Berlin radicals" by everyone.⁵ The influence of *Die Freien* is clearly reflected in his early writings which were written in "typical Free-fashion".⁶ According to Ronald Paterson they betray an "almost unreflective adherence" to *Die Freien* which he describes as "the party of social and intellectual reform".⁷

Most commentators of Stirner's philosophy agree that these writings display the swift evolution and radicalisation of Stirner's thought.⁸ The culmination of this radicalisation-process is the publication of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*.⁹

⁵ ROBERT HELLMAN, *The Free Hegelian Radicals in the 1840s* (1990), p. 146.

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁷ R.W.K. PATERSON, *The Nihilistic Egoist* (1971), p. 46. Paterson is writing more specifically about Stirner's contributions to the *Rheinische Zeitung*.

⁸ B. Kast, *Die Thematik des Eigners in der Philosophie Max Stirners* (1979), p. 21.

⁹ ROBERT HELLMAN, *The Free Hegelian Radicals in the 1840s* (1990), p. 141: "Max Stirner is the apotheosis of the Berlin radicalism of the Forties".

The evolution of Stirner's thought between his first published writings in January 1842 and the appearance of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* in November 1844 is clearly plotted by the series of increasingly confident articles and essays which he published in various newspapers and periodicals during that time.¹⁰

In this way the *Smaller Writings* can be seen as the sketches in which the outlines of the final picture emerge ever more clearly. In this sense *Der Einzige* can be regarded – as Henri Arvon does – as “le dessin final”.¹¹ Conversely, the *Smaller Writings* can be seen as preliminary or preparatory works. In the words of Bernd Kast:

[D]ie Veröffentlichungen Stirners vor Erscheinen seines philosophische Hauptwerkes *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* 1844 [sind] Vorstufen und Vorarbeiten zum Einzigen.¹²

It is, however, important to see that this interpretation rests on a tacit presupposition: the idea that the evolution of Stirner's thought in the early eighteen forties was continuous and progressive, that it was an uninterrupted process.

I believe this assumption to be highly problematic. In this chapter I will demonstrate that there is a perceptible break in Stirner's evolution, a break which occurred *before* the publication, and possibly even the composition, of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. I will do so by contrasting some of his earlier publications, such as his review of Bruno Bauer's *Die Posaune des jüngsten Gerichts* which was published at the very beginning of his philosophical career (specifically in January 1842) with the two articles he wrote in 1843.

In the latter, I argue, Stirner's already presents a concept of autonomy which rules out the possibility of genuine (philosophical) commitment. In *Der Einzige* this concept returns under the name of egoism and is used to plot his departure from Hegelian philosophy.

¹⁰ R.W.K. PATERSON, *The Nihilistic Egoist* (1971), p. 46.

¹¹ HENRI ARVON, *Aux Sources de L'Existentialisme: Max Stirner* (1954), p. 19: “Les grandes lignes qui détermineront le dessin final, y apparaissent en filigrane”.

¹² BERND KAST. “Die Destruktion des Anderen als Voraussetzung für die Entdeckung des Eigenen – Unbekanntes von Max Stirner” (2002), p. 17. In *Die Thematik des Eigners in der Philosophie Max Stirners* (1979), Kast puts this into perspective arguing that it is precisely the failure of Stirner's critics to see the *Smaller Writings* as “Vorstufen und Vorarbeiten” that has prevented them from grasping their importance (p. 20).

2. Die Freien

2.1. Dividing the Heritage: philosophy after Hegel

When Stirner entered the public arena as a journalist in the early eighteen forties, his name was immediately linked to the “spectral” society known as *Die Freien*.¹³ *Die Freien* were the Berlin faction of the Young Hegelians.¹⁴ Before discussing *Die Freien* and their views, it is therefore important to say a few words about these so-called Young Hegelians. To understand the latter, we need to also understand the peculiar nature of their relation to Hegel. Although they aimed to be faithful students of Hegelian philosophy, they are nevertheless widely regarded as the one's responsible for its downfall.¹⁵ This ambiguity is clearly visible in the secondary literature where the Young Hegelians are alternatively seen as the true or genuine students of Hegelian philosophy and as anti-Hegelians. The truth, as Frederick Copleston points out, is that they were both.¹⁶ While severe critics of Hegel's philosophy they nevertheless remained indisputably Hegelians.

To understand in what sense this was the case, we need to return to the period directly following Hegel's death in 1831. Hegel's sudden passing forced his students and disciples to ponder the future of their master's philosophy, or as they felt, the future of philosophy as such. Lawrence Stepelevich formulates the main question for the students of Hegel thus:

¹³ BRUNO BAUER famously described *Die Freien* as “the spectre of 1842” in his *Vollständige Geschichte der Partheikämpfe I* (1847, p. 138). For further discussion see: WOLFGANG ESSBACH, *Die Junghegelianer* (1988), p. 29f. and HERBERT DE VRIESE, *Bruno Bauer en Die Freien* (2011), p. 423f.

¹⁴ In his study of the Young Hegelians WILLIAM BRAZILL argues that there were four geographical concentrations of Young Hegelians: “the South German Young Hegelians, the Berlin Young Hegelians, those associated with the publication of the *Hallische Jahrbücher* in Halle, and those connected with the *Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne” (*The Young Hegelians*, 1970 p. 76).

¹⁵ Here, we may refer to Karl Löwith's famous characterisation of the Young Hegelian party as “die im Verhältnis zu Hegel revolutionäre Umsturzpartei” (*Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, 1950, p. 78).

¹⁶ FREDERICK COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy. Volume VII: Fichte to Nietzsche* (1963), p. 297: “From one point of view they might well be called anti-Hegelians [...] From another point of view, however, the name ‘anti-Hegelianism’ would be a misnomer [...] They represent a left-wing development of Hegelianism, a development which was also a transformation. We find both continuity and discontinuity”.

“What is a Hegelian to do after Hegel?”¹⁷ Traditionally, the name ‘Old Hegelians’ is reserved for those who gave a very specific answer to this question. They felt that Hegel’s philosophy had attained absolute truth and thus represented the apotheosis of philosophy as such.¹⁸ With absolute truth at hand, the only remaining task seemed to be to provide exegesis for a philosophical system that had already been created. Hegel’s followers, it seemed, “had only to be students of his philosophy in order to serve the demands of truth and knowledge”.¹⁹ For this reason Karl Löwith characterizes the Old Hegelians as those who preserved Hegel’s philosophy literally:

Sie haben Hegel’s Philosophie buchstäblich konserviert und in historischen Einzelforschungen weitergeführt, aber sie nicht über die Zeit von Hegels persönlicher Wirkung hinaus auf eine eigene Weise reproduziert.²⁰

The elderliness of the Old Hegelians can be understood in a double way. Although they were hardly old men at the time of Hegel’s death – most of them were in their mid-thirties and early forties – they did belong to another generation than the Young Hegelians did: unlike the latter they had known Hegel personally. They were his colleagues and friends²¹ rather than as his pupils, and had managed to secure positions for themselves in the academic world – something which allowed them to live comfortably.²² As such they differed to a great extent from the “vagabondish”

¹⁷ LAWRENCE STEPELEVICH Stepelevich, “From Absolute Knowledge to Absolute Egoism” (1987), p. 179. Also see: HERBERT SCHNÄDELBACH, *Philosophie in Deutschland 1831-1933* (1983), p. 17: “Was ist in einem nachidealistischen Zeitalter Philosophie, und wie ist das möglich, was so genannt wird? Dies war eine Existenzfrage für alle die nach Hegel [...] noch Philosophen sein wollten”.

¹⁸ LAWRENCE STEPELEVICH describes the Old Hegelians as “those who held Hegelianism as a final revelation of the philosophical spirit, the actual *end* of philosophizing” (“Preface” to *The Young Hegelians: an Anthology*, 1983, p. ix).

¹⁹ WILLIAM BRAZILL, *The Young Hegelians* (1970), p. 9.

²⁰ KARL LÖWITH, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1950) p. 66.

²¹ Many of the Old Hegelians – Marheineke, Schulze, Förster, Gans, von Henning, Hotho – took part in the publication of the first edition of Hegel’s collected works in which they referred to themselves as his “friends” (*Vollständige Ausgabe durch Einen Verein Von Freunden Des Verewigten*).

²² JOHN EDWARD TOEWS paints a more nuanced picture by pointing out that some of “the most vociferous Hegelian opponents” of the Young Hegelians were members of the same generation and rejects what he calls the “simplified dichotomization” between an old and a young faction (*Hegelianism*, 2003, p. 205).

Young Hegelians most of whom were all still in their twenties (the exceptions being Edgar Bauer and Friedrich Engels who were barely twelve years old) at the time of Hegel's death and were his students in a much more real sense than the Old Hegelians were.

The elderliness of the Old Hegelians can, however, also be seen as bearing on Hegel's analysis of old age.²³ In his *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* the venerable *Greis* is regarded as one who, unlike the youth, is able to recognize reason in reality.²⁴ As Hegel saw it, reality is not "godforsaken" – left over to the mercy of chance and caprice – but the result of what he is fond of calling the "labour of Reason".²⁵ Moreover Hegel associated old age with philosophical aptitude. The elderliness of the Old Hegelians must be understood with this Hegelian evaluation of old age in mind. For them truth is something which has already revealed itself in reality. The task of the philosopher is to comprehend it, to recognize the structure of Reason in something that is already at hand, which has already completed its "process of formation (*Bildungsprozess*)".²⁶

On the whole the Old Hegelians shared Hegel's own vision of philosophy as well as his estimation of his own philosophical system as the culmination of all previous philosophy. For them, the question regarding the direction in which philosophy should head in a world without Hegel did not pose a great problem. The future progress of philosophy, as Eduard Gans wrote in his necrology of Hegel, can only consist in the "thoughtful elaboration" of the philosophical achievement of Hegel:

Die Philosophie hat fürs Erste ihren Kreislauf vollendet; ihr Weiterschreiten ist nur als gedankenvolle Bearbeitung des Stoffes nach der Art und Methode anzunehmen, die der unersetzlich Verblichene eben so scharf als klar bezeichnet und angegeben hat.²⁷

With this we have arrived at the Young Hegelians. Unlike the term Old Hegelians, the name Young Hegelians is a *nom de gueux*: a derogatory term used to vilify or denigrate a certain group which is later reclaimed or re-appropriated by that very group as a name of honor. The designation Young Hegelianism was indeed used for the first time in 1838 in a so-

²³ KARL LÖWITH, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1950), p. 78.

²⁴ This will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

²⁵ G.W.F. HEGEL, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1970), p. 19.

²⁶ G.W.F. HEGEL, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1970), p. 28.

²⁷ EDUARD GANS, "Necrolog von G.W.F. Hegel" (1834), p. 251f.

called *Denunziationsschrift* (a document intended to publicly accuse and condemn someone or something), viz. Heinrich Leo's *Die Hegelingen*.²⁸ This pamphlet targets a group which Leo describes as the *Hegelingen* (a contraction of the words Hegel and *Jünglingen*): "the Young Hegelian party" which he distinguishes from the *Hegelianer* or the proper Hegelians.²⁹ In the pamphlet Leo takes on the role of a defender of the existing church and state. The Young Hegelians are cast in the role of their assailants who have cloaked their mutinous and blasphemous doctrines by spreading them in abstruse and highly inaccessible writings. The aim of Leo's writing is simple: to expose and indict this atheistic "sect".³⁰ To understand the impact of *Die Hegelingen* it is important to see which charges were actually leveled against the Young Hegelians by Leo. The indictment is fourfold:

1. diese Partei leugnet jeden Gott, der zugleich ein Person ist [...]
2. diese Partei lehrt ganz offen daß das Evangelium eine Mythologie sei [...]
3. diese Partei lehrt ganz offen eine Religion des alleinigen Diesseits [...]
4. diese Partei gibt [...] sich noch das Ansehen, als wenn sie eine christliche Partei sei³¹

The effect of Leo's denunciation of this Young Hegelian "gang" was double. First of all, it greatly harmed the overall respectability of Hegelian philosophy in general by hinting at its revolutionary potential which might be unleashed by one-sided interpretations such as those proffered by the Young Hegelians. Secondly, it served, as Herbert de Vriese rightly points out, as a catalyst which caused the implicit tensions *within* the Hegel School to crystallize into two directly opposing tendencies: on the one hand there were those who identified themselves wholeheartedly with the position attributed to them by Leo, on the other those who anxiously dissociated themselves from it.³² When I talk about the Young Hegelians in this study, I refer only to those belonging to the former group, to those,

²⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the "Leo-controversy" see: WOLFGANG ESSBACH, *Die Junghegelianer* (1988), p. 29ff.

²⁹ HEINRICH LEO, *Die Hegelingen* (1839), p. 2.

³⁰ HEINRICH LEO, *Die Hegelingen* (1839), p. 25.

³¹ HEINRICH LEO, *Die Hegelingen* (1839), p. 2f.

³² HERBERT DE VRIESE, "Het Jonge Europa en de Aftakeling van de Metafysica" (2005), p. 234. De Vriese rightly points out that identification with the Young Hegelian position (as it was described by Leo) was not instantaneous. Initially, Arnold Ruge and Eduard Meyen, who were both to become important members of the Young Hegelians, argued that Leo's distinction between 'old' and 'young' is facile, artificial and false (*loc. cit.*).

that is, who consciously adopted the name of Young Hegelian. To name some of the most important ones, these men were: Arnold Ruge, Ludwig Feuerbach, August von Cieszkowski, Moses Hess, Friedrich Engels, Bruno and Edgar Bauer and finally Max Stirner himself.

The name Young Hegelian can, however, also be seen as a re-appropriated name in another sense. For this we briefly need to return to Hegel's appraisal of youth in the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*.³³ According to Hegel, the youth is one who is not yet reconciled with existing reality. Failing to grasp its inherent rationality, his relation with the world is characterized by negativity. It is well known that Hegel had always been highly critical of such youthful negativity, a negativity that manifests itself as hostility against the supposed irrationality of the world. To him, a philosophy based on this type of negativity and negative criticism was really pseudo-philosophy. In the *Rechtsphilosophie* he refers to it as shallow thinking (*Seichtigkeit*) and suggests that it is really a form of atheism since it assumes that the ethical world is "godforsaken".³⁴ Bearing Hegel's favourable characterisation of old age (which is associated with wisdom) in mind, it seems that Hegel believed old age to be the most fitting life stage for doing philosophy. The dispassionate but wise *Greis* seems more up to the task than the discontented youth who is unable to find any traces of spirit in reality.

Thus, the philosophers known as the Young Hegelians accept Hegel's portrayal of youth but do not share his vision of the true philosopher. In their view, the youth's antagonistic attitude against existing reality is the "true philosophical attitude".³⁵

It is important to see that this identification with Hegel's wayward youth not only entails a rejection of Hegel's assessment of old age but also implies a completely new outlook on what philosophy really is. It entails, in short, a break with traditional philosophy. The Young Hegelians feel that, since the latter only aims to understand shapes of life which have (as Hegel writes in the *Rechtsphilosophie*) "grown old", it is unable to get out of the past in order to catch up with real life.³⁶ In their view, the ambition of the philosopher should be to realize (*verwirklichen*) the rational – to

³³ G.W.F. HEGEL, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III* (1970), p. 75ff (§396).

³⁴ G.W.F. HEGEL, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1970), p. 19.

³⁵ HERBERT DE VRIESE, "Het Jonge Europa en de Aftakeling van de Metafysica" (2005), p. 241: "The Young Hegelians transform the youth's 'opposition to the existing world' – which Hegel had typified as an 'untrue opposition' – into the true philosophical attitude" (my translation).

³⁶ MOSES HESS, *Die europäische Triarchie* (1841), p. 81.

change and transform reality rather than to simply comprehend it.³⁷ In this way, the Young Hegelians used “Hegel” (and more specifically his deprecatory evaluation of youth) to go beyond “Hegel” (to transcend Hegel’s philosophy as the culmination of traditional philosophy).³⁸

Thus, the name Young Hegelianism was neither arbitrarily chosen (it was, on the contrary, consciously adopted by the Young Hegelians) nor an overly simple category in which all sorts of thinkers are lumped together by certain commentators but refers to the idea of a philosophy of youth, a *young* Hegelianism which differs to a great extent from traditional Hegelianism. The parameters of this new philosophy were described by Hegel himself who, however, considered them to be characteristic of “shallow thinking” rather than of true philosophy: youthful dissatisfaction regarding existing reality, youthful restlessness which compels the philosopher to improve it and youthful vigour which demands action rather than contemplation.

2.2. Die Freien: *The radicalism of the 1840s*

After having provided this summary picture of the Young Hegelians, we can now proceed to a discussion of *Die Freien*, who, as we pointed out earlier, were the Berlin branch of the Young Hegelians. I will however focus primarily on the nature of their relationship to Hegelian philosophy – an aspect which is largely ignored in the existing literature on *Die Freien*.

In order to gain an understanding of the Berlin Young Hegelians’ understanding of Hegelian philosophy we need to turn our attention to the figure of Bruno Bauer – the “spiritual leader” of *Die Freien*.³⁹ It is hard to exaggerate Bauer’s significance for *Die Freien*. First of all, he supplied whatever unity or cohesion that kept the group together. Moreover and more important, however, is the fact that it was Bauer’s philosophy of self-consciousness and his vision of philosophy as Criticism that determined the course and direction in which the philosophy of *Die Freien* developed. In this section I will therefore briefly discuss Bauer’s notion of philosophy in order to demonstrate its influence on the development of “Free” thought – a development which is usually described as a radicalisation process. As the aim of this chapter is to establish whether or not the evolution of

³⁷ KARL LÖWITH, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1950), p. 78f.

³⁸ GEERT VAN EEKERT & HERBERT DE VRIESE, “Using Hegel to go Beyond Hegel” (2003), pp. 189-231.

³⁹ GUSTAV MAYER, “Die Anfänge des politischen Radikalismus im vormärzlichen Preussen” (1913), p. 46.

Stirner's thought matches that of *Die Freien*, we will then proceed (in section 3) to address this question.

Bauer's philosophy of self-consciousness

It is well known that before becoming the leading force behind *Die Freien*, Bruno Bauer had been an ally of conservative Hegelianism.⁴⁰ He started his intellectual career as a speculative theologian who believed that Hegelian philosophy was capable of demonstrating the truth of Christianity. In fact, he believed that in his own age – a time in which Biblical and religious criticism in general had nearly eaten away the very essence of Christian belief – speculative thought was the *only* thing capable of restoring the eternal truth of Christianity.⁴¹ His belief in the reconciliatory capacity of speculative thought was, at least initially, absolute and unwavering.⁴² As a true (Old!) Hegelian, Bauer saw “reason in religion” and regarded evangelical history as the historical appearance of the Idea.⁴³

In the period between 1839 and 1841 Bauer's thought underwent what can only be described as a revolution. He loses all faith in the capability of speculative thought to reconcile the Idea with concrete historical reality. In 1840, he refers to this “unity of the Idea with reality” as a naive dream.⁴⁴ The abandonment of this “speculative dream” signifies Bauer's break with speculative thought and his “conversion” to Young Hegelianism. This

⁴⁰ KARL LÖWITH, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1950), p. 366: “Als Herausgeber einer Zeitschrift für speculative Theologie vertrat er zunächst die Hegelsche Orthodoxie”. Also see: H.M. Sass, *Untersuchungen zur Religionsphilosophie in der Hegelschule, 1830-1850* (1963), p. 121; WILLIAM BRAZILL, *The Young Hegelians* (1970), p. 180; JOHN EDWARD TOEWS, *Hegelianism* (1980), p. 292 (where Bauer is referred to as “an orthodox Hegelian epigone”).

⁴¹ Bauer credits David Friedrich Strauss, author of the epoch-making *Das Leben Jesu – kritisch bearbeitet* (1835/6) as the one who demonstrated this *ex negativo*; namely by showing that the alternatives of supernaturalism and naturalism are antiquated models of interpreting Biblical history (cf. BRUNO BAUER, “Rezension zu: Strauss, David Friedrich, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, Erster Band” 1835, p. 883).

⁴² GODWIN LÄMMERMANN, *Kritische Theologie und Theologiekritik* (1979), p. 13ff.

⁴³ BRUNO BAUER, “Rezension zu: Neander, August, *Allgemeine Geschichte der christlichen Religion und Kirche*” (1835), p. 88. Echoes of this can be found in the introduction to the first part of Bauer's *Die Religion des Alten Testaments* (1838).

⁴⁴ BRUNO BAUER, *Die evangelische Landeskirche Preussens und die Wissenschaft* (1840), p. 2.

conversion did not entail a total reconsideration of his earlier views. Bauer had always insisted on the creative and constructive role of negativity (of the negative stage in the dialectical process of spirit). As early as 1835 he regarded it as a sort of necessary purgatory which cleanses the truth from all uncritical presuppositions and argued that to be absolutely negative (even when it comes to interpreting Biblical history) is ultimately in “the best interest of Science”.⁴⁵ In fact, the only thing that truly separates “Bauer, the speculative theologian” from “Bauer, the Young Hegelian” is his confidence in the capacity of philosophical thought to speculatively restore or resurrect the eternal truths of Christianity after they had been destroyed by philosophical criticism.⁴⁶ In this context Herbert De Vriese speaks of a remarkable shift in Bauer’s concept of Hegelian dialectics: “dialectical negativity no longer unites or synthesizes but purges: it separates the essential from the inessential and comes to its pure essence in this ‘sacrificial fire’ of negativity”.⁴⁷

In the remainder of this section I will limit myself to providing the outlines of the philosophy of Bauer as a Young Hegelian. In his main work, *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte*, Bauer referred to the latter as a philosophy of self-consciousness (“Philosophie des Selbstbewußtseyns”).⁴⁸ In reality, it is nothing less than his interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy of absolute spirit. This interpretation entails the reduction of the latter to human self-consciousness.⁴⁹ For Bauer, self-consciousness refers strictly to man – either as an individual (a concrete empirical subject) or a collective of persons (such as a community) – and has been divested of all its religious-cum-metaphysical elements. It can, in fact, be seen as a humanized, secularized and demystified conception of Hegel’s absolute spirit which restlessly strives to free itself from every objective content standing over against it as a mysterious, alien and seemingly impenetrable

⁴⁵ BRUNO BAUER, “Rezension zu: Strauss, David Friedrich, Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet, Erster Band” (1835), p. 912.

⁴⁶ JOHN EDWARD TOEWS, *Hegelianism* (1980), p. 307. According to HANS-MARTIN SASS, however, “there is no breach between the young radical Critic Bauer and the Conservative Bauer” as “one position developed from the other by consistently applying the concept of critical critique” (“Bruno Bauer’s Critical Theory”, 1978, p. 107).

⁴⁷ HERBERT DE VRIESE, *Bruno Bauer en ‘Die Freien’* (2011), p. 277f. (my translation).

⁴⁸ BRUNO BAUER, *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker I* (1841), p. xv.

⁴⁹ For further discussion see: JOHN EDWARD TOEWS, *Hegelianism* (1980), pp. 288-326; GODWIN LÄMMERMANN, *Kritische Theologie und Theologiekritik* (1979), pp.62-68.