

Chasing Shadows: Max Stirner and Fanaticism in Political Theology

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Abstract:

This doctoral dissertation investigates the modern phenomenon of political fanaticism, which is defined as an intense emotional investment for political ends – something for example found in contemporary 'identity politics.' I argue that political fanaticism should be understood through the prism of political theology, referring to the translation of theological into political concepts and categories in the modern secular age. In investigating this problematic, I turn to the 19th century German philosopher Max Stirner. I argue that Stirner offers an original yet overlooked interpretation of the problem of political theology. His claim that modern secular and liberal concepts are merely the reinvention of Christianity and inspired by the same religious impulses of devotion and self-sacrifice, allows us to better understand the psychology of contemporary political fanaticism.

Chapter 1 serves as a literature review with the dual purpose of showing the novelty of the politico-theological reading of Stirner's work and its place in the existing literature on political theology. Chapter 2 lays the foundation for Stirner's specific views on political theology. Stirner identifies at the heart of modern political fanaticism an artificial reintroduction of a metaphysical structure via a deification of an otherwise mundane concept like liberty, equality or humanity. Chapter 3 will contrast Stirner's approach to political theology against that of Carl Schmitt, which will show that, instead of studying the parallels between modern politics and theology we see from Schmitt, Stirner reveals the theological afterimage in secular politics in the persisting subjective faith. In Chapter 4, I will extend Stirner's specific criticism of liberalism to 21st century politics to show its contemporary relevance with regard to modern political fanaticism. Finally, Chapter 5 will explore Stirner's alternative to political theology and its concomitant fanaticism that revolves around a confrontation with the world as it is, rather than as it should be.

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Introduction – Pursuit of the Abstract

'We have nothing to lose but our chains.' These words sound like the cries of the desperate, but they most certainly aren't. One can frequently hear them uttered by university students, especially in the English-speaking world. In fact, this phrase is an echo of the final words from *The Communist Manifesto* [1848], in which Karl Marx states that 'the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains.' There is an obvious difference between the 19th century proletarians and university students in the 21st century. Whereas the industrial working class two centuries ago laboured long hours to make barely enough to scrape by, students nowadays have all the modern conveniences at their fingertips while being on a reasonably comfortable path to the middle class. These students have many things to lose, but certainly no chains.

For a while I have been fascinated by such activists. On the surface there seems to be something clearly amiss, something contradictory. These students seek to compare themselves to the proletarians of the past, but their privileged lives do not warrant such dramatic language. I often find myself wondering not about the origins of the convictions they hold or their veracity, but rather about the cause of the intensity with which such political convictions are held. Why would these students resort to such dramatic language?

We find ourselves again in a time of increasing political polarisation. In Europe, we see political parties in the centre gradually dissipate while those on the extremes gain ground, with nationalist populist parties often performing well at the ballot box. In the Netherlands (Dekker & de Ridder, 2019) and Germany (Roose, 2021), for example, an increasing majority of people feels uncomfortable to express political opinions in public and thinks that polarisation grows, while in the UK the left and right have moved further apart especially on the question of cultural values (Duffy, et al. 2019). A similar sense of division can be found in the United States. According to Rasmussen (2018), 31% of the population of the United States thinks a civil war is immanent. On both sides of the North Atlantic Ocean we also find an increase in civil unrest. Many of these protests are revolts against specific issues, such as the COVID-19 regulations or the Yellow Vests in France, where protesters have clear demands. Yet, some of these protests aren't based on clear demands, but are founded on the pursuit of abstract greater goods, such as equality, Western civilisation, racial justice, nation, freedom, gender or diversity.

Though the latter aren't necessarily more violent, I am fascinated by what causes such catharsis for abstract ends. The example with which we started indicates that those student activists do not look for a negotiation about some inconvenience or managerial issue on campus, but that

they have a much larger struggle for justice in mind. Similarly, there have been, for example, clashes between groups like Antifa and the Proud Boys in which both aim for some abstract objective. In these clashes, activists sometimes even found it necessary to resort to murder, although they weren't under immediate threat. Such a situation is perfectly encapsulated by the case of Michael Reinoehl, an activist who unprovokedly shot and killed an unarmed ideological rival in cold blood. Reinoehl gave a lucid interview that was sold to Vice immediately afterwards, in which he articulates his ideological opposition to his victim in an attempt to justify his actions (Farley, 2020). Phenomena like these lie at the heart of this project.

The pursuit of such abstract greater goods has been with us at least since the time of Robespierre and persists to this day, yet the intensity of it oscillates periodically.¹ In fact, the current political polarisation is not nearly as bad as some periods of the past, even though there is also little indication that we are past its peak. What is at stake here is not the exact magnitude of it, but the specific uncompromising drivenness endemic to the behaviour of its activists. Modern history is full of clashing abstract world views that all aim to make the world a better place, yet there is an interesting paradoxicality to these activists that I cannot phrase any better than Eric Hoffer did well over two generations ago:

When hopes and dreams are loose in the streets, it is well for the timid to lock doors, shutter windows and lie low until the wrath has passed. For there is often a monstrous incongruity between the hopes, however noble and tender, and the action which follows them. It is as if ivied maidens and garlanded youths were to herald the four horsemen of the apocalypse. (1951, p. 29).

The fight for justice all too often exposes its own destructive potency. Instead of attempting to convince anyone of their views or engage in debate, these activists commonly seek to pursue their cause through violent disruption. This dissertation is an investigation into the driving force behind this activism. Rather than defending a particular political view, the aim of the dissertation is to explain the intensity with which these abstract ends are pursued, sometimes even to the point of lethal violence, as was the case with Reinoehl.

I have tried to paint a picture of a modern political phenomenon that has been with us for generations. I will refer to this phenomenon as 'fanaticism.' Fanaticism itself is a term that comes

¹ According to Norman Cohn (1970), we can even trace the modern pursuit for a terrestrial utopia back to the medieval millenarians, who believed that salvation would result from a collective and all-consuming cataclysmic clash. This approach to modern mass movements has been expounded by John Gray (2007), though a more complete elaboration of it exceeds the scope of this project.

with a lot of baggage, as it is notoriously vague and often used as a pejorative, rather than as a term of self-identification. Alberto Toscano (2010) presents a genealogical investigation into fanaticism as a phenomenon as well as the uses of the term. In doing so, he shows that even though the term has generally always been used as a pejorative, its uses have varied wildly: “The fanatic may be pathologically passive or manically active... Fanaticism may be a matter of individual delusion or crowd madness... More importantly, the accusation of fanaticism may be levelled at excesses of abstraction and universality, but also directed towards the irredeemably sensuous and particular.” (Ibid., p. 249). Yet among this variety, Toscano shows that all fanatics have something in common, namely the passionate and unwavering pursuit of an ideal.

For a more complete overview of the term fanaticism, I will also rely here on the scholarly work of Kalmer Marimaa (2011), who brings together a large variety of views on the subject in order to distil from them five characteristics. The fanatic is, according to Marimaa, characterised by (1) an unwavering and self-sacrificial (2) conviction of his/her righteous position in a (3) dualistic world view of good versus evil that s/he (4) seeks to impose on others. Additionally, Marimaa argues that for the fanatic, (5) devotion itself is more important than the objective. Crucially, Marimaa argues that anything can become subject to fanaticism, “because the vehicles of fanaticism are human beings, not ideologies, even if the latter can at times induce fanaticism.” (2011, p. 53). It is precisely the behaviour of the fanatic that is of interest to this project, rather than the ideologies themselves. Using the word 'fanaticism' to distinguish and describe this kind of behaviour, this project will be guided by the following research question: *What causes such intense modern political fanaticism for abstract ends?*

There are many ways to tackle this question, but this project has chosen to approach it from the angle of political philosophy and therewith continues precisely where both Marimaa and Toscano leave off. Marimaa argues that the fanatical behaviour ultimately lies in human beings, rather than the ideologies themselves. If this were the case, then an investigation in the origin of fanaticism would be more suited to a psychological, rather than philosophical, approach. Yet, as we will see, the distinction that Marimaa draws is not entirely clear. Ideologies and psychological mechanisms have a complex symbiotic relationship, which this dissertation will seek to elucidate. Toscano acknowledges the resemblance of the passion that drives modern political causes and doctrines to the religious fanaticism of the past. He writes that, “like fanaticism broadly construed, political religions are marked by an enthusiasm for abstraction, by some drive to unfettered totality..., and by forms of radical organizational unity... that make them into *ecclesiae militans*, militant churches.” (2010, p. 208). Toscano's investigation puts us on the right track. He sees the light of religion through the cracks of modern politics. In fact, Toscano's analysis touches on the

question of political theology, but doesn't really venture onto its terrain any further.

This dissertation will pick up from where his analysis leaves off. I will contend that modern political fanaticism bears exactly the same structure as religious fanaticism and can therefore be understood from the perspective of political theology. Political theology here does not refer to the direct political influence of established religions on politics, the political *logia* of a theos; Toscano still largely looks at fanaticism through this frame. Rather, this project will rely on the more conventional understanding of political theology, which refers to the *logia* of a political theos, a framework through which to analyse politics by looking at the structural similarities between politics and theology. In its contemporary understanding, political theology analyses the kinship of political and theological concepts and the manner in which they have been codified. Political theology is thus not a framework that analyses traditional religious dogma in modern secular politics, but a framework that analyses the ways in which modern political power resembles religion.

Though we can trace this general conception of political theology as far back as the Roman philosopher Varro, its modern usage comes to us from the twentieth century German legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt who, in his seminal work *Political Theology*, published in 1922, wrote that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts," (1985a, p. 36). Schmitt presents a transcendent framework that views politics not as something contending with existing religions, but as a system based on conceptual structures transposed from theology. With this, Schmitt has provided not just a unique angle from which we can approach politics, but also one that exposes the core of modern political questions like legitimacy, sovereignty, representation, and political fanaticism. Schmitt, and others like Kahn (2011) and Agamben (2005b), have placed a particular emphasis on the historical transposition of theological concepts to the juridical and institutional domain.

With the notion of political theology, Schmitt originally attempted to defend the idea of an authoritarian form of sovereignty, unrestricted by the normal constitutional order and defined by the state of exception. In doing so, he derived his impetus from the metaphysical outlook of Catholicism.² He contraposes this sovereign model to the modern liberal democratic system, which he sees as a reflection of the specific Protestant metaphysical view. However, if we curtail our view of political theology to Schmitt's strict definition, our confinement to the development of juridical institutions will limit the possibility of truly understanding the relation between politics and religion in modern political fanaticism. To overcome this confinement and bridge the gap between fanaticism and political theology, we will take Schmitt's definition of political theology as an

² Schmitt, 1996a.

invitation for further exploration, which Schmitt himself suggested later in life.³

It has to be noted that Toscano doesn't use the term political theology but rather relies on the term 'political religion,' which exposes his indebtedness to Eric Voegelin. What Voegelin means with political religions in some ways parallels, but is not the same, as Schmittian political theology. Thierry Gontier distinguishes Voegelin's political religions from political theology as such:

The question of the relations between theology and politics is never for him [Voegelin] stated in terms of a structural analogy between two types of mutually independent rationality; it is always posed in terms of a direct relation—whether that relation be authentic or corrupt... The "religious politics," if we may use that phrase, of Voegelin... designates a type of attraction of the political to a pole of transcendence, structured by the experience of transcendence present at the heart of the rational activity of mankind, and in particular of its communal activity. (2013, p. 43).

Gontier views Schmitt's political theology as a strict study of the structural analogy between two rationalities, more akin to Schmitt's original tract rather than the more open view of political theology Schmitt proposes in *Political Theology II*, whereas he sees in Voegelin's concept a broader pursuit of transcendence in the political sphere that defies the confinement to any political or juridical order. Voegelin's gripe with Schmitt's stricter definition of political theology is the neglect of individual commitment to the political decision that gives the resulting order its legitimacy.

Nevertheless, even though Toscano is more inspired by Voegelin than Schmitt, he never explicitly contraposes these terms, nor does he put particular emphasis on this difference. Despite the notable differences, we should still see our current enterprise as following the path laid out by Toscano. The term political theology serves the purpose of placing our investigation in a specific analytical frame, rather than either choosing sides in the opposition of Schmitt and Voegelin or continuing Schmitt's personal political views. Moreover, the subjects and concerns contained in Voegelin's concept of political religion have been overtaken by the growth of political theology as a field of research.

To find an answer to the research question - *What causes such intense modern political fanaticism for abstract ends?* - within the realm of political theology, we will turn to the often overlooked 19th century German philosopher Max Stirner. Stirner lived and wrote in the company of the Young Hegelians, many of whom have historically outshone him. Nevertheless, his 1844

³ Later in life, Schmitt described political theology as a "polymorphous phenomenon" (2008a, p. 66) that lends itself to many approaches.

magnum opus and only book length work, *The Ego and its Own* [*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*] has stood the test of time and still proves its relevancy today. Stirner is not a systematic thinker, nor does he present any comprehensive theory. What we find in *The Ego and its Own* instead is a quasi-Hegelian system of ideas written in a passionate and hyperbolic, yet very intricate and layered, style that at times values form over substance. Though most commonly interpreted as advancing some form of individualist anarchism or existentialism, *The Ego and its Own* always seems to transcend any classification. Stirner is best understood as a thinker with a strong intuition for philosophical problems, yet lacking a concise and structured articulation of them. Crucially, when we read *The Ego and its Own* as an analysis of political theology, its author can be understood as having a good sense of the cause of modern political fanaticism.

The connection between political theology and fanaticism is easily drawn and Stirner himself points this out. Much like Toscano, Stirner shows that the term fanaticism is a derivative of the Latin word '*fanum*,' which refers to a sacred place. The '*fanaticus*' then is one who attends or is inspired by such a place. However, there is more to Stirner's hypothesis than a mere perfunctory linguistic connection. Stirner further expostulates that a *fanum* does not need to be religious itself, but that political concepts may serve just as well as a *fanum*. In this case, Stirner asserts that "moral faith is as fanatical as religious faith!" (1995, p. 45), as he sees no substantial difference between modern political fanaticism and traditional religious fanaticism. To Stirner, modern political fanaticism is a direct continuation of religious fervour in the guise of secular politics.

At the end of his excavation of modern political fanaticism, Toscano writes: "Fanaticism, understood as a politics of passionate and unconditional conviction, is in many ways a child of crisis, of moments when the political compass is broken and militancy is more a matter of will and faith than the outgrowth of organic interests and clear prospects." (2010, p. 252). The crisis mentioned by Toscano in the last pages of his book is exactly where Stirner's explanation for fanaticism begins. Stirner too thinks that at the heart of fanaticism there is a crisis, but unlike Toscano, Stirner doesn't just view fanaticism as the product of a crisis in political, social or economic circumstances. To Stirner, such political crises only bring fanaticism to the surface, but fanaticism itself is rooted in a much deeper, philosophical crisis. Instead of investigating the juridical foundations of political institutions like Schmitt, Stirner starts his investigation with a phenomenological approach.

During his lifetime, Stirner noticed that, even though his contemporaries were perfervid in their atheism, they all found some new higher good at which they directed their faith. Yet instead of looking to another established religion, Stirner observed that they found an object of worship in otherwise mundane concepts that they elevated to the level of a deity, such as freedom, equality, the

nation, or even humanity. According to Stirner, the rejection of religion exposed the emptiness of the world. The metaphysical structure that once determined our lives, gave us a place in history and distinguished friends from foes is gone, burdening us with an immense ethical responsibility for all of our actions. The loss of religion thus entails a philosophical crisis, namely the lack of an objective metaphysical structure that gives us a place and direction in the world. I have called the sense of distress caused by this absence 'metaphysical insecurity.' Stirner's atheistic compatriots remedied this philosophical crisis by finding their metaphysical security in the deification of a political concept, which allowed them to reject religion without abandoning the comfortable metaphysical structure it provided. In essence, the atheists in Stirner's progressive liberal circle did little more than invent a continuation of Christianity with mostly nominal changes. The liberal views they espoused were no more than Christian morality under a secular name.

Despite the ideas of liberalism, socialism, and nationalism still being fresh when *The Ego and its Own* was published, the engagement with his radical contemporaries gave Stirner a very good sense of what would unfold even more denotatively in the 20th and 21st century. Nowadays we see an even more pronounced fanaticism for the same freedom, equality, or the nation, but these have been compounded by a wild growth of other abstract ideals that we should strive for, like civilisation, race, gender, or diversity. Thus, if we look at the current political upheaval through the lens of Stirnerian political theology, modern activists can be understood as fanatics in the literal sense, namely not just those who have an unwavering and self-sacrificial conviction of their righteous position, but as those who live for something sacred, for a *fanum*. The intensity of modern political activism can then be explained through the phenomenology of faith as a reaction to metaphysical insecurity. Stirner thus provides us with an answer to our research question. His answer is: *We can understand modern political fanaticism as the subjective search for a replacement for religion to overcome the emptiness of the world.*

Of course, Stirner does not suggest that this is the only possible way of dealing with the emptiness of the world, nor does he present a comprehensive model to understand modern politics in its entirety. Rather, we get from him a unique insight into a particular phenomenon that currently unfolds around us. On the surface, Stirner's approach also seems to directly contradict the general postmodern sentiment best articulated by Jean-François Lyotard as "incredulity towards metanarratives." (1984, p. xxiv). Lyotard hypothesises, though he would later deem it an oversimplification, that our lives used to be guided by metanarratives that present a reductionist and teleological view of the world, but 20th century technology, especially in the areas of communication and information, has dismantled these discourses precisely because science lacks a grand view beyond its own competence. Thus, instead of the world being divided by a handful of

overarching grand narratives, we find ourselves in the postmodern condition that is characterised by a multiplicity of overlapping and interwoven micronarratives without any dominant one. Stirner's view doesn't directly oppose this analysis. In principle, Stirner did not observe a loss of metanarratives in 1844 and if we extend his view, it neither directly denies nor confirms Lyotard's thesis. What Stirner exposes is a particular *desire* for metanarratives. Thus, in relation to Lyotard's thesis, the heteronomy of micronarratives would further bolster Stirner's thesis, though a more extensive investigation of the relation between Stirner and Lyotard would at this point be outside of the scope of this project.

An engagement with Stirner can bridge the gap between modern political fanaticism and political theology. However, to develop our hypothesis, we need to read Stirner's work in a different way, namely through the lens of political theology, rather than rely on the more common anarchist (Eltzbacher, 1908; Woodcock, 1962) or existentialist (Paterson, 1971; Read, 2015) interpretations. We must also emphasise the contrast between Stirner's approach to political theology and those of others, especially Schmitt. I will argue that Stirner brings something new and original to the investigation into political theology. Schmitt is the usual reference today for most enquiries into political theology (See Newman, in Delanty & Turner, 2022). He also serves as a foil for Stirner's alternative reading of political theology. What makes the contraposition of Stirner to Schmitt so interesting is that Schmitt doesn't entirely neglect the subjects addressed by Stirner, though he approaches them fundamentally differently. In some instances, the two thinkers are in agreement, yet for different reasons. They are both immediately aware of the lack of an objective metaphysical structure in the world that throws us into a state of ontological freedom – and existential uncertainty. Though Stirner thinks that, since no objective structure can be found, we should find a way to live without it, Schmitt proposes that, in the light of an impending apocalypse, a structure must be established and upheld by arbitrary sovereign decision, one inspired by monotheism and the idea of creation *ex nihilo*. It is precisely the moments where Stirner and Schmitt are simultaneously in agreement and disagreement that show the philosophical depth of *The Ego and its Own*.

Yet in other respects, they find themselves on opposite sides of long-standing philosophical debates. There is the opposition between a sociological and psychological approach to political theology in which the sociological approach (Schmitt) views the individual as a product of politico-theological forces, whereas the psychological perspective (Stirner) sees the origin of the politico-theological forces in the faith of the individual. We can also view the opposition between these two thinkers as the representation of two sides of the Euthyphro dilemma, in which Schmitt believes the good must be established, while Stirner thinks that political theology revolves around the pursuit of

the belief in ethical realism. The two thinkers relate differently to the question of truth as well. Where Stirner's obstinate scepticism leads him to contest political theology on the basis of veracity, Schmitt takes a leap of faith into voluntary submission to the authority of revelation (See Meier, 2006).

The purpose of this research is threefold. First and foremost, it is an attempt to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon of fanaticism and the way it shapes politics today. Dusting off the work of Stirner reveals a phenomenological explanation for political fanaticism rooted in political theology that has been insufficiently developed. In an age where seemingly most grand narratives have disappeared and traditional moral standards have dissipated, the value and necessity of a metaphysical structure reveals itself. After more than one-and-a-half centuries, Stirner provides us with a surprisingly accurate analysis of modern political theology, in which he managed to put his finger on something that is perhaps more prevalent nowadays than it was in 1844.

The purpose of this dissertation is not to prescribe some course of action, but to present a new toolkit with which to approach the subject of political fanaticism. This dissertation seeks to expose the phenomenological underpinnings of modern political fanaticism through Stirner's politico-theological hypothesis that seeks its origin in the search for a replacement for religion. If Stirner's analysis is correct, political fanaticism will remain part of modern politics as long as there isn't a conclusive solution to the search for an objective metaphysical structure that seems to be absent from the world. Yet, an analysis and deeper understanding of this philosophical problem can either be used to the advantage of political actors or to mitigate its consequences. It is through the analysis of Stirner's work that we may better understand ethics as a means to power in modern politics.

Secondly, by approaching modern politics through the lens of Stirnerian political theology, this dissertation aims to contribute to research in political theology. Political theology is currently a burgeoning field of investigation, as indicated by the amount of literature on the subject that comes out every year (see Lynch, 2019; Vatter, 2021; Kennel 2021). Yet in the current reevaluation of religious influences in politics, there is a large emphasis on historical and sociological factors.⁴ This project will untangle Stirner's analysis of political theology - which thus far has almost exclusively

⁴ This refers to a number of debates over the past decade or so around the meaning and parameters of the secular, and what has come to be known as the post-secular condition, which refers to the increasingly blurred line between the secular and religious, and the increased prominence of expressions of religious faith in the public sphere, even taking violent forms at times (Asad, 2003; Taylor, 2007; De Vries, H. & Sullivan, L, eds., 2006). These conditions have led to a questioning of the very idea of secularism and to the contention that we now live in 'post-secular societies' which have to renegotiate the relationship between politics and religion (see Rawls, 2005; Habermas, 2002, 2008; Laborde, 2017).

been overlooked - from his unconventional, idiosyncratic and sometimes cryptic language, thereby exposing his unique and profound insight into modern politics. Consequently, a close study of Stirner's work provides a useful framework through which we can study political theology. Instead of investigating the transposition of religious concepts from theology to politics on a historical and institutional level, Stirner counterbalances this more dominant approach by exposing a phenomenological component to political theology that relies on the faith and commitment of the individual, thereby expanding the politico-theological framework.

Thirdly, this project is a contribution to Stirner scholarship. While *The Ego and its Own* never found a secure place in the pantheon of philosophy, its history nevertheless shows its enduring relevance. Not only is the book still being translated into new languages, it has never been discussed more than it is now. It has served as an inspiration to psychologists (Hartmann, 1931), anarchists (Goldman, 1969), existentialists (Camus, 1984) and even poststructuralists (Deleuze, 1990). Yet Stirner cannot be neatly categorized into any of these approaches. In this project, I will propose a new reading of Stirner through the lens of political theology, something that has thus far received next to no attention. I will show that we can understand his philosophy only as an atheistic response to the problem political theology. In other words, Stirner's specific views are the product of the atheism that he extends beyond mere religious criticism into political criticism. Moreover, it is this politico-theological interpretation that brings together many other interpretations of his work, especially the psychological, anarchist and existentialist interpretations.

Before we can read Stirner as a politico-theological thinker and re-evaluate his philosophy along these lines, we will first need to understand his work in the proper context. In order to do so, Chapter 1 will serve as a literature review of both Stirner scholarship and the field of political theology. The dissertation then proceeds to a discussion of the specifics of Stirner's thinking. The subsequent two chapters will therefore explore in detail Stirner's approach to political theology. Chapter 2 will expound Stirner's deconstruction of modern atheism and secularism by exploring his critique of Hegelian idealism and Feuerbachian humanism – both of which he regards as forms of political theology. As we will see, even though Stirner explores the historical development of political theology, he places a much greater emphasis on the psychological and phenomenological aspects of it. In fact, Stirner shows precisely that political theology emerges out of a turn toward religion to accommodate a set of philosophical desires.

Our elucidation of Stirner's analysis of political theology will continue in Chapter 3, which will explore the similarities and differences between Stirner's and Schmitt's approaches to political theology. Taking as its starting point Schmitt's remarks on Stirner in his post-war 'prison writings,'

the chapter will explore the convergences and divergences between their different approaches to the question of how religion and politics, and the sacred and the secular, interact in the modern period. Here it will be emphasised that while Schmitt recruits political theology into bolstering state sovereignty and provides new sources of moral and political authority in the modern secular age, Stirner uses a political theological analysis to unmask the underlying religious structures that inform modern political concepts and institutions, as a way of undermining their legitimacy.

Chapter 4 looks at Stirner's critique of liberalism as a form of political theology. It also seeks to understand how this might be extended to an analysis of contemporary liberalism, beyond its 19th century context. Even though liberalism was still in its infancy in Germany, Stirner accurately identifies its politico-theological tenets, seeing in it not the pursuit of actual freedom, but the pursuit of freedom in the abstract that demands the sacrifice of individual liberty. Finally, Chapter 5 examines Stirner's alternative to political theology – his philosophy of egoism. The word egoism means more to Stirner than mere selfishness, as he views it as an attempt to come to terms with the lack of a metaphysical structure and its consequences. Instead of vainly looking for something to worship, Stirner argues that one should use the world as one pleases without any fixed moral system. Thus, Stirner presents egoism as an antidote to political theology that doesn't rely on an apotheosis of freedom, but instead on a pragmatic removal of objects in the path of the individual. What Stirner thus has in mind is not a revolution that supplants one order with another, but an *insurrection*, a revolt against the existing order without a prescribed alternative. Yet, even though Stirner presents egoism as the appropriation of the world to one's own will, this chapter will also question to what extent Stirner really manages to move beyond political theology, as he insists on describing the egoist with a vocabulary normally reserved only for the divine.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

Stirner was born under the name Johann Kasper Schmidt in the Bavarian town of Bayreuth on October 25th 1806, the last day it fell under Prussian rule. While the town was still under the dominion of Napoleon Bonaparte, Schmidt's father died from tuberculosis shortly after his birth. In the midst of the Prussian and Russian retaliation against the conquests of Napoleon, Schmidt's mother would re-marry, this time to a chemist. Shortly after, the family moved away from the war torn area of northern Bavaria to western Prussia, though a few years later Schmidt would return to Bayreuth to live with an aunt and uncle who cared for him. Little is known about this period of Schmidt's life other than that he attended the prestigious gymnasium of Bayreuth, where he would have his first encounter with the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, primarily because of his teacher Georg Anders Gabler, who ultimately would succeed Hegel at the University of Berlin. Most importantly, during this period, Schmidt's schoolmates would tease him for his large forehead. He would later adopt his childhood nickname, based on the German word for forehead, '*Stirn*,' into the professional pseudonym we know him by now, Max Stirner.

As a young man, Stirner moved to Berlin in order to study philosophy. During this period, he attended several lectures by Hegel. After his graduation, he attempted to become a lecturer, but his ambitions were interrupted by a family crisis. Stirner's mother had been suffering from mental illnesses that had deteriorated to the point that she required his dedicated attention, forcing him to leave in the middle of his doctoral exams. Once the family crisis subsided, he would return to Berlin and spend the rest of his life there. For a few years, he worked as the master of a gymnasium by day while frequenting the local '*Weinstuben*' by night. In these wine bars he would associate himself with and participated in the debates of the Young Hegelians, a group comprised of Hegel's students, many of whom would, in their own right, become very influential philosophers by reacting to and expounding on, what they saw as, the progressive message in Hegel's thought. In 1844 Stirner published his only book length work of philosophy, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*. This book, originally translated into English as *The Ego and its Own*, though perhaps better translated as *The Unique and Its Property*, together with some preliminary and supporting articles that were published in the local progressive journals, forms the core of Stirner's philosophy.⁵

⁵ There are two essays written before the publication of *The Ego and its Own* that stand out, namely *The False Principle of our Education, or, Humanism and Realism* and *Art and Religion*. They were both published in the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842. Stirner would also address the criticism *The Ego and its Own* received in an extensive essay called *Stirner's Critics*. After *The Ego and its Own* turned out to be less lucrative than Stirner expected, he published translations of Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say in 1847 and finally two volumes of translations of Edmund Burke and Auguste Comte called *History of Reaction* in 1851.

After its release, *The Ego and its Own* had a short but profound impact on Stirner's contemporaries, yet it seemed all but forgotten by the time the March Revolution of 1848. Stirner hoped to be able to build a career with the success of his book, but to little avail. After its initial success, Stirner quit his job as a schoolmaster and invested his personal savings, together with those of his wife, in a small milk store. Yet his unfamiliarity with the market would prove to be his downfall, ultimately also leading to a divorce as well. Later, Stirner would try his luck in the translation business. He translated the works of Burke and Comte, Smith and Say, but this didn't provide enough money to keep him afloat. Stirner would spend the final years of his life fleeing from debt collectors until he ultimately succumbed to some illness caused by an insect bite in 1856. A small funeral was held in Berlin, at which only Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Buhl were present from his former Young Hegelian comrades.

Yet, Stirner's flame didn't die out entirely after 1848. His philosophy was included in two large and influential scholarly works a few decades after the publication of *The Ego and its Own*. These were Friedrich Lange's *History of Materialism*, originally published in German in 1866, and Eduard von Hartmann's *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, originally published in German in 1869. We will look more extensively at what these two thinkers wrote about Stirner later. However, even though the sections on Stirner in these books are fairly brief, Lange's work especially caught the attention of the Scottish-German author John Henry MacKay, who became so enamoured that he wrote the first biography of Stirner, published in German in 1898. MacKay's work is largely responsible for renewing public interest in Stirner's philosophy. Additionally, we mostly know what we know about Stirner's life because of MacKay's efforts in collecting Stirner's writings and speaking to the people who knew him. Without MacKay resuscitating Stirner's philosophy, his work would surely have been consigned to oblivion.

The interest in Stirner's thought has fluctuated throughout the years, usually according to different cultural and philosophical trends and political events. Yet Stirner has never found a secure place in the pantheon of philosophers, although his presence has never entirely faded away either. This has made *The Ego and its Own* something of a curiosity. Despite all the derision and accusations of irrelevancy aimed at the book and its author, it persevered for more than one-and-a-half centuries while many other philosophers have faded into obscurity. Because of the peculiar history of *The Ego and its Own*, there isn't a large amount of available literature on it, although the literature that does exist is quite varied. The literature about Stirner can be divided into two major categories. The first of these categories, and historically the most dominant, considers Stirner no more than a minor actor in the development or legacy of some greater philosopher. Stirner is usually either considered to be the last and most extreme proponent of Hegelianism, a major antagonist of

Karl Marx, or controversially a precursor and inspiration to Nietzsche. Yet more recently, Stirner has come to be seen as an original and significant thinker in his own right. But before exploring this literature, it is important to explore the historical and intellectual context of his philosophy: in other words, what kinds of philosophical questions, issues and debates was he responding to; what philosophical ideas and traditions influenced his thought; who were his interlocutors?

Stirner's Bibliography in Context

During his years as a student in Berlin, Stirner attended some lectures by Hegel and subsequently acquainted himself with other students of Hegel, forming a group generally referred to as the Young Hegelians. This was a group of philosophers, journalists and writers who considered themselves the true successors to Hegel. Indeed, they saw in Hegel's work a more progressive message than the more conservative interpretation of the 'Old Hegelians.' Some of The Young Hegelians are still well-known today, like David Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, though Marx was a bit of a latecomer. When he moved to Berlin, Stirner didn't immediately seek out the company of these other philosophers. However, in 1842, Bruno Bauer returned to Berlin and rejoined a group known as the 'Doctor Club.' Around this time, and with the help of Bauer, the 'Doctor Club' transformed itself to a more loosely organised group called 'The Free,' which coincidentally drew the attention of Stirner. At this time, Stirner started working as a correspondent for two progressive newspapers, the *Rheinische Zeitung* and the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung*. Many of his contributions were quite small, but during his time as a correspondent, he produced a few lengthy essays that all started as book reviews. Of these essays, two stand out because they are indicative of his philosophical development.

In 1842 he published an article translated as *The False Principle of our Education*. This essay is both a review and a critical response to a book by Theodor Heinsius called *Konkordat zwischen Schule und Leben*, which was published in that year. In his response, Stirner agreed that we should aim for a functional education, but lamented that the realists merely offer tools to the students with little direction. The education system that Stirner envisions has a stronger emphasis on personal development, so that the functional skills are put to better use. Stirner published another essay in 1842 called *Art and Religion*. This essay is a review of Bauer's *Hegel's Doctrine of Religion and Art Judged from the Standpoint of Faith*. Stirner concurred with Bauer on the relation between art and religion, but he thought that neither of them are directly connected to philosophy. Both art and religion engage with an object, whereas philosophy engages with itself and exists for its own sake. In both of these reviews we can see elements of what Stirner would further explore in his magnum opus, namely the use of philosophy as a means for personal development.

In 1844, Stirner would finally publish his first and only book-length work under the title *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*. In this magnum opus, Stirner advocates a distinct form of what he calls 'egoism.' Even though his use of the term 'egoism' has received numerous interpretations, it can definitely be considered as an extreme kind of individualism that centres around personal development rather than commitment to an alien cause. Stirner advocates an open rejection of all morality and idealism, which he clusters together under the name 'spooks' as a play-on-words of the Hegelian '*Geist*,' as he thinks that we only see them in the world because we want to see them. Even though the references to Hegel's work are overt, the book is mostly a direct reply to Hegel's disciples, in particular Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer.

The book has an interesting publication and translation history. Even though it says that the year of publication is 1845, Stirner published his book in 1844. The difference in publication dates was an attempt to confuse the censors, yet this, together with the self-censorship of some words, wasn't enough to keep it off of the lists of banned books in Saxony and Prussia. This brief stint on the ban lists didn't hinder the popularity of the book much. It saw three editions with the original publisher and, starting from 1899, it has been translated in at least 17 languages. The first English translation would see the light of day in 1907. It was translated by Steven T. Byington with a foreword by James L. Walker, and both financed and published by the anarchist individualist Benjamin Tucker. Byington's translation has historically been the most authoritative. However, more recently two new translations have come out with noticeably different titles. The first of these came out in 1995 with the title *The Ego and its Own*. Its translator David Leopold based his translation on that of Byington but amended it. Byington called his translation *The Ego and his Own*, whereas Leopold called his *The Ego and its Own*. In the foreword to the amended edition, Leopold argues that the changed title is “not out of ahistorical considerations of 'political correctness' but because Stirner clearly identifies the egoistic subject as prior to gender.” (In Stirner, 1995, p. xl). In 2017, native German speaker Wolfi Landstreicher published his entirely new English translation called *The Unique and Its Property* - one that doesn't rely on Byington's work at all - in an attempt to better capture Stirner's unique use of language.

These different translations are a testimony to the complexity of translating Stirner's work. His idiosyncratic use of language makes it not only difficult for readers to grasp what exactly he means, but also for translators to properly convey his meaning in a different language. Stirner has a tendency to use words in a very specific way to either refer to or mock the thought of another philosopher without making it explicit. He also writes in a particular polysemic way that could lead to multiple interpretations in German. In some cases he specifically uses these ambiguities and double meanings to make a point, though this doesn't always translate well into other languages. A

good example of this is the word '*der Einzige*,' which has been translated into English as either 'the ego' or 'the unique.' The word itself can be translated as 'the unique one' or 'the only one,' though the latter is more etymologically accurate.⁶ The German word combines these meanings elegantly in one word, and Stirner uses both meanings at the same time. For this reason it is understandable that Landstreicher chooses a more literal approach, while Byington has used the word 'ego' to convey the same meaning. We also have to keep in mind that Byington's translation predates the popularisation of this term by Freud.

Many of those in Stirner's circle of philosophical associates actively engaged in debate with him. They published their praise and criticism in reviews in the local periodicals shortly after the publication of *The Ego and its Own*. In turn, Stirner compiled his response to the first three reviews in a long article called *Stirner's Critics* that has recently also been translated into English for the first time and published in book form by Landstreicher (2012). The primary purpose of this essay is to clarify certain aspects of *The Ego and its Own* and present counter-arguments to some of the criticisms of Feuerbach, Hess and Von Zychlinski. In this dissertation, I consider this text, together with *The Ego and its Own*, as the core of Stirner's philosophy.

Stirner as a Minor Actor

For most of its lifetime, Stirner's work has generally been consigned to the footnotes in the annals of philosophy. A good example of this is the brief description Frederick Copleston gives of Stirner in his *History of Philosophy* (Volume VII, 1963). Copleston includes Stirner in a section on the transition away from idealism and concludes this description of Stirner as follows: "Stirner's philosophy has been mentioned here, however, not for any anticipation of later thought but rather as a phase in the movement of revolt against metaphysical idealism." (Ibid., p. 303). In his study of fanaticism, Toscano also gives a small place to Stirner in the legacy of Marx,⁷ though we generally find more extensive references to Stirner in works that treat the Young Hegelians (see Moggach, 2006; Breckman, 1999; Solomon & Higgins, 2004). In his evaluation of the history of German philosophy, Karl Löwith (1991) dedicates a few pages to Stirner's thought and places it firmly in the transition from Hegel to Marx and Nietzsche. Stirner has most commonly been associated with these three philosophers, so we will look more closely at them chronologically.

⁶ The English word 'only' is derived from the words 'one' combined with the suffix '-ly.' Etymologically, this combination of words is related to other Germanic words for 'alone,' 'unified' or 'similar.' In this case, the German word '*Einzig*' is built up of roughly the same components, namely '*Ein*,' meaning 'one,' and the suffix '*-zig*,' generally used to indicate 'what pertains to.'

⁷ In Toscano, 2010, p. 182

Hegel

Stirner attended several of Hegel's lectures and associated himself with The Young Hegelians, so the search for correlations between Hegel's thought and that of Stirner is understandable. Many works on the Young Hegelians include at least a mention of Stirner, but only refer to his work superficially, mostly focusing on Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer. The first to explicitly point out the correlation between Stirner and Hegel is Karl Marx. About two thirds of his perfervid work *The German Ideology* (1998) is dedicated to the critique of Stirner, who is parodied as 'Saint Max.' Since the antagonism between Stirner and Marx has historically received a reasonable amount of attention, and since that attention mostly revolves around *The German Ideology*, we will look at it separately in the next section. Nevertheless, the few comments Marx makes on the relation between Stirner's and Hegel's work are worth mentioning briefly here. Like many after him, Marx thinks that Stirner's work is a continuation of Hegelianism, rather than a rejection of it, despite what Stirner himself claimed. More specifically, according to Marx, Stirner's extreme individualism is not the result of his empirical observations, but rather the result of him taking the Hegelian dialectic to its limits. Stirner wants to free the individual from the realm of ideas, yet exclusively treats the individual as a cerebral entity.

Even though the arguments aren't always the same, Marx is by no means the only one to see Stirner's work as an extension of Hegelianism. In the last half-century, the connection between Hegelian and Stirnerian philosophy has been explored in greater detail by the likes of David McLellan (1969), Widukind de Ridder (2008), John Welsh (2010) and Fabián Ludueña (2015), though the most substantial and clearest articulation of this reading comes from Lawrence Stepelevich (1985). In fact, Stepelevich goes so far as to consider Stirner the last Hegelian, despite what he considers to be the very un-Hegelian tone and style of Stirner's writing. Stepelevich sees Stirner's Hegelianism in three closely connected principles. The first principle is that, unlike most other Hegelians, Stirner takes the *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807] as his starting point. From this starting point, Stepelevich writes that the path of knowledge for the phenomenological observer ends in complete self-consciousness. From this, Stepelevich derives the second principle, which is "that this absolute embodiment of self-consciousness is not merely an ego, but a unique ego (*dieses und kein anderes Ich*). In sum, the dominant idea emerges: the phenomenological "we" of Hegel... has been crystalized by Stirner into *Der Einzige*. Absolute knowledge can only exist within a particular consciousness; it is not a self-subsistent but rather the self-comprehending, and infinite, relationship of self to self." (Ibid., p. 609). From this, Stepelevich deduces the third principle: "The unique ego which cumulates the phenomenological experience is also, in its immediacy, a purely negative "reality" that transcends conceptual history." (Ibid.). Stepelevich concludes his article

with: “To Stirner, and *with* Stirner, Hegelianism had accomplished its task of freeing the self from its self-inflicted domination of fixed ideas. Hegel had clearly proposed this as the ultimate intention of his philosophy.” (Ibid., p. 613). In his most recent work on the subject, *Max Stirner on the Path of Doubt* (2020), Stepelevich not only reaffirms his initial thesis that Stirner brings Hegelianism to its logical conclusion, but especially argues how Stirner supersedes the other Young Hegelians in the continuation of the thought of their teacher. Stepelevich argues that, unlike the other Young Hegelians, Stirner has no grand visions for a revolution or a society of the future. The other Hegelians all find a new theology in another totalising view of society, be it liberalism, communism, or something else. Rather, Stirner finds the conclusion of Hegelianism in what Stepelevich calls “self-affirming realism.” (Ibid., p. 59).

Yet the connection between Hegelianism and Stirner's thought has been challenged. According to Jeff Spiessens (2018), we shouldn't consider *The Ego and its Own* as merely bringing Hegelianism to its logical conclusion, but neither should we consider the clear references in the book to the works of Hegel as just a parody that is easily dismissed. Even though both views are understandable, Spiessens argues that we should view the way Stirner uses and references Hegelian terms and structures, not just as inspiration, but as exemplary of Stirner's philosophy in practice. In his magnum opus, Stirner argues that one should use the ideas of others as a tool for oneself. According to Spiessens, Stirner uses Hegelian structures and terms in the same vein and alters them to suit his own purposes. Spiessens concludes that we therefore shouldn't simply see Stirner as attempting to take Hegelianism as it is and bring it to its logical conclusion. Rather, Stirner uses Hegelianism to support and buttress his own views.

Marx

When it was published, Stirner's book had a profound influence on his contemporaries, but out of all of them, it had the greatest impact on Karl Marx. Marx received a copy of *The Ego and its Own* shortly after it came out from Friedrich Engels who initially gave it glowing praise. In the spring of 1846 they wrote down their thoughts on Stirner's work in an extensive manuscript that would never be published during their lifetimes, despite their best efforts. It would ultimately be published in Russia in 1932 by decree of Stalin and it subsequently saw the light of day in German and English with the title *The German Ideology*. The book doesn't exclusively deal with Stirner's work, but also with the works of Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer. In fact, Marxists historically have mostly concerned themselves with the section on Feuerbach. Yet about two thirds of *The German Ideology* is devoted to Stirner, which makes for a longer text than *The Ego and its Own* itself. However, the length of Marx' treatment of Stirner has not drawn as much attention as its aggressive and mocking

tone, together with the endless repetitions of the same points, personal insults and intentional misreadings. When reading *The German Ideology*, it is immediately clear that it isn't just about an intellectual disagreement, but that Stirner's thought, as Isaiah Berlin puts it in his brief but insightful comments on the matter, "is treated as a pathological phenomenon, the agonized cry of a persecuted neurotic, belonging to the province of medicine rather than to that of political theory." (1959, pp. 130-131). In his evaluation of the Marxist criticism of Stirner, Philip Dematteis (1976) speculates that "there are strong indications that Marx's devastating attack on Stirner was prompted largely by the recognition that Stirner's philosophy was a very viable and real alternative to his own, both for others and even for himself." (Ibid., p. 146). Marx's emotional reaction is then driven by the realisation that Stirner presents a strong and seemingly convincing criticism of the existing order from an individualistic perspective, rather than the materialistic one that Marx had in mind. There is also the thesis that Marx's 'epistemological break' with humanism and idealism can be attributed to the encounter with Stirner (see Althusser, 2005, p. 65).

Initially only the section on Feuerbach from *The German Ideology* received attention from Marxists, as this was perceived to be the only part of relevance to Marx' philosophical development. However, in *From Hegel to Marx* (1962), Sidney Hook is among the first to acknowledge Stirner's influence on Marxism and presents it in an eloquent, albeit somewhat misleading at times, overview of Marx' criticism. According to Hook, Marx adopted Stirner's criticism of the naive reliance on altruism by their socialist contemporaries and morphed Stirner's Hobbesian 'war of all against all' into a war of class against class. Stirner also eviscerated the right to property and Marx gladly took this over, even though their reasoning wasn't entirely the same. Additionally, Stirner was also the first to plant the seed that would eventually sprout the distinction between positive and negative freedom. Hook also briefly summarises the criticism of Stirner that Marx presents in *The German Ideology*. Perhaps the most crucial difference between the two thinkers that Hook mentions is their views in the relation between the individual and the social environment: "Marx devotes considerable effort to show that Stirner's reduction of the objective social and industrial relations under which men live, to states of consciousness in the mind of the individual, is inconsistent, confused, and inadequate as an explanation of the social process. It makes a casual explanation of the social phenomenon and, there, intelligent social action, impossible." (1962, pp. 178-179).

Even though Hook provides a good initial overview of the main criticisms from Marx, there are a few he overlooked that are worth mentioning. Marx attempts to pitch materialism against idealism, so as to indicate his distance from idealists, whom he refers to as 'Saints.' Thus, Feuerbach becomes 'Saint Ludwig' and Bauer becomes 'Saint Bruno.' In a similar fashion, Stirner becomes 'Saint Max,' though unlike Feuerbach and Bauer, Stirner clearly doesn't view himself as an idealist.

Marx is aware of this, which is why he, among his countless derogatory names for Stirner, mostly resorts to a comparison with Sancho Panza. Much like the actual servant of Don Quixote, Marx thinks that despite Stirner criticising idealism on the surface, *The Ego and its Own* buttresses the views of the idealists by taking 'egoism' as the new norm. Though Marx, like many early critics of Stirner, erroneously views his use of the word egoism as normative idea, which I will dispute in more detail later in Chapter 5. Additionally, Stirner is among the first to move philosophy away from the exclusive focus on the mind, as one will find in Hegelianism, and to consider a flesh-and-blood existence as being just as much part of what makes people who they are, which is a shift in philosophy generally attributed to Marx, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. In *The German Ideology*, Marx correctly criticises Stirner for not going far enough with this and, even though Stirner writes that we must include our physical existence in philosophy, he still generally views people and property as the product of mind. Finally, Hook's predilection for Marxism gives him a blind spot for Marx' criticism of Stirner's view of religion. According to Marx, Stirner overlooks the importance of material condition in the development of religion and retreats too easily to the mind, as he seeks the origin of religion in the personal fears of the individual.

The bulk of the literature that discusses the connection between Stirner and Marxism revolves around *The German Ideology*, because this is the only place where Marx explicitly gives his views on Stirner in any detail. Even though we know that the two were at least acquainted, as Marx worked as an editor for the *Rheinische Zeitung* when Stirner's work was published in it, no actual debate would happen between the two and Stirner remained unaware of the animadversion of his greatest critic during his lifetime. However, the antagonism between the two thinkers extends beyond their immediate engagement and has taken on a life of its own. The most prominent example of this is Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994). The title is an allusion to the first line of *The Communist Manifesto* in which Marx famously exclaims that the spectre of communism is haunting Europe, which in itself is a clear reference to *The Ego and its Own*.⁸ Some of Derrida's work is dedicated to the influence of Stirner on Marx, although the work itself is not primarily an exploration of the distinction between Marx and Stirner, but rather an exploration of Marxist thinking after its proclaimed death. For this reason, Derrida mostly echoes Marx' criticisms of Stirner without paying much heed to them. In this book, Derrida explores a certain idea contained in Marxism that he calls 'hauntology.' With this term he refers to the peculiar ontological disjunction one can find with ghosts. Ghosts do not have a clear temporal place. They exist in both the present

⁸ Marx uses the word '*Gespenst*' in *The Communist Manifesto*, rather than the more common '*Geist*.' This is exactly the same word that Stirner uses to mock the Hegelian '*Geist*.' Yet, Stirner's use of '*Gespenst*' is commonly translated as 'spook,' whereas Marx' is commonly translated as 'spectre.' Because of this discrepancy in translations, the Stirnerian influence on Marx is thus somewhat lost.

and the past, yet simultaneously never seem to be fully there either. More specifically, the spectre of Marx here refers to the future that could have existed. In describing this idea and relating it to Marx, Derrida discusses Stirner merely as a transitional figure in the development of Marx' thinking, rather than as an original thinker in his own right. Stirner may have initiated the analysis of the philosophical idea of ghosts, but had not taken it far enough according to Derrida. Thus, Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* is a very modern example of consigning Stirner to the role of a supporting character in the further development of Marxism.

Nietzsche

Except for Schopenhauer, no thinker is more often brought in association with Nietzsche than Stirner. To anyone familiar with the writings of both Stirner and Nietzsche, it should be immediately obvious why the latter is at least reminiscent of the former. There is such a strong overlap not only in the content, but also in their writing styles. However, Nietzsche never made any reference to Stirner in his own writings or gave any indication that he read *The Ego and its Own*. At best we have a handful of anecdotes from acquaintances and students, especially from Adolf Baumgartner, a student who was introduced to Stirner by Nietzsche. This has left researchers with a conundrum, especially after Nietzsche's rise to popularity. Was Nietzsche influenced by Stirner to the point of plagiarism without ever acknowledging it or is the apparent overlap merely coincidental?

Many writings on either Nietzsche or Stirner, including some already mentioned, discuss the controversy, but in most cases do not go further than a brief comment. Menno ter Braak (1934), for example, ascribed the similarities between these thinkers to coincidence, rather than direct influence, as he thinks their shared views are the product of similar personality types. However, one of the first comprehensive studies of this subject came from the French historian Albert Lévy in his book *Stirner et Nietzsche* (2006), first published in 1904. Lévy concludes that even though there are many anecdotes indicating that Nietzsche knew of Stirner's book, it did not have a decisive influence on Nietzsche's thinking. Nietzsche was very familiar with Lange's *The History of Materialism*, and thus it is likely that he encountered Lange's mention of Stirner here. However, according to Lévy, this only pushed Nietzsche closer to Schopenhauer. One problem with Lévy's study is that it relies on Nietzsche's sister as a major source, and it has become very apparent during the last century that Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche may not have been the most reliable source because she would benefit from downplaying any Stirnerian influence on her brother.

Others (Steiner, 1960; Curas, 1911, 1914) are less convinced than Lévy that Stirner did not have a strong influence on Nietzsche. Benedict Lachmann, on advice of his close associate MacKay, investigated the connection between Nietzsche and Stirner. In his *Protagoras, Nietzsche,*

Stirner (2018), which has only recently been saved from vivisection, Lachmann presents both thinkers as modern day disciples of Protagoras, as they all see 'man as the measure of all things.' Unlike others who have studied the relation of Nietzsche and Stirner, even though Lachmann is more favourable to Stirner than most, he doesn't consider Nietzsche's work a completion of Stirner's project. On the contrary, Lachmann sees Nietzsche as a less developed version of Stirner. He acknowledges that Nietzsche's bibliography covers a more extensive range of subjects than Stirner's and that Nietzsche certainly doesn't lack in originality, but according to Lachmann, Nietzsche still believes there is some mission or vocation for humanity in which everyone has a place. Nietzsche adopts in Lachmann's eyes an elitism and a normative view contained in his concept of the '*Übermensch*' that Stirner has already left behind. Paul Carus also sheds some light on the subject. In both his book *Nietzsche and other exponents of Individualism* (1914) and his article *Max Stirner, The Predecessor of Nietzsche* (1911), he points out that even though they aren't identical, there is a clear similarity with regard to content and style. However, in not crediting Stirner for his influence, Carus argues that Nietzsche simply followed Stirner's teaching. Nietzsche appropriated Stirner's thinking and used it as he saw fit, just as Stirner instructs his readers to do.

The Stirner-Nietzsche controversy ebbs and flows because it is directly connected to the general interest in Stirner's work, which has flared up again in the last few decades. John Glassford (1999) attempted to settle the matter once and for all. He acknowledges that the positions in this debate have been strongly influenced by personal predilections, rather than actual analysis. Even though he attacks the claims of plagiarism, he decisively writes: "I know of no other example of two philosophers whose works bear such a strong similarity, but where no debt of acknowledgment took place. Those who attempt to diminish these strong intellectual ties often have a solid understanding of Nietzsche's work, but are seldom as knowledgeable about Stirner's thought or of the period concerned." (Ibid., p. 78). Around this time, Stirner was also presented in a more favourable light with regard to his influence on Nietzsche by biographer Rüdiger Safranski in *Nietzsche, A Philosophical Biography* (2002). Safranski commends the importance of Stirner's work on the historical development of philosophy. He writes that "the consistency with which he pursued nominalist destruction might appear foolish even today, particularly to the philosophical establishment, but it was nothing short of brilliant." (Ibid. p. 127). Even though Safranski admits that it is very likely that Stirner influenced Nietzsche, he does ponder why Nietzsche never makes any mention of this. Safranski answers: "Given the unfavorable reputation of Stirner, one could easily imagine that Nietzsche had no desire to be mentioned in the same breath as this philosophical outcast." (Ibid. p. 126). In his evaluation of the development and influence of Nietzsche's thinking, Gilles Deleuze (1983) gives some important insights into Stirner's influence on Nietzsche that I

think expresses a more conclusive view on this controversy. Deleuze views Stirner as a necessary negative precursor to Nietzsche. Stirner's analysis presents a problem that he himself doesn't conclusively answer. According to Deleuze, "*Stirner is the dialectician who reveals nihilism as the truth of the dialectic.*" (Ibid., p. 161). Nietzsche just seizes the opportunity to offer his own solution to the nihilism that Stirner exposes.

Stirner as original thinker - Anarchism

In the following sections we will look at the literature that considers Stirner an original thinker, rather than simply as a minor player in the legacy of another more prominent philosopher. By far the biggest legacy of *The Ego and its Own* can be found in the tradition of anarchism. Even though Stirner never labelled himself an anarchist, and even though he was quite critical of the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Stirner was almost immediately associated with anarchism. This is of course somewhat understandable, since Stirner is explicitly anti-statist. Marx was the first to call Stirner an anarchist, but *The German Ideology* didn't see the light of day until the 1930's. The idea of understanding Stirner as an anarchist was really planted in readers' heads by Stirner's biographer MacKay.

From fairly early on, Stirner would be included in several renowned books about the history and development of modern anarchism, like Henri Arvon *L'Anarchisme* ([1951], 1998), Paul Eltzbacher's *Anarchism* (1908) and George Woodcock's *Anarchism* (1962). The titles of these books aren't their only similarities. All of them give Stirner a somewhat peculiar place, as they ascribe to him a unique brand of individualist anarchism. Stirner's philosophy does not contain the same collectivism that one may find in the works of other well-known anarchists like Mikhail Bakunin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon or Peter Kropotkin. Woodcock points out that "Stirner had studied Proudhon's earlier works but... he failed to see the similarity between his own conclusions and those implied in the writings of the French anarchist." (Ibid., p. 94). Anarchists like Noam Chomsky (2004) have even challenged the idea of clustering Stirner together with other anarchists, since Stirner's philosophy, unlike that of other 19th century anarchists, has little to do with worker's movements. Whatever Stirner himself may have thought about anarchism, his writings seem to have strongly resonated with many in the anarchist camp (Landauer, 2010; Read, 1940) and still serve as an enduring source of inspiration to the likes of Landstreicher (2009). Stirner also left his mark on the anarchists in North America. Not only did Benjamin Tucker pay for the first English translation of the book, which was released in 1907, Stirner's influence is also very apparent in Tucker's own book *Individual Liberty* (1926), in which he wrote that "the book [*The Ego and its Own*] is buried in obscurity, but is destined to a resurrection that perhaps will mark an epoch." (Ibid., p. 24). With the

help of Tucker, Stirner's name found its way into contemporary American anarchist discourse and his influence can be seen in the works of Emma Goldman's *Anarchism and Other Essays*, ([1910], 1969), James L. Walker's *The Philosophy of Egoism*, ([1905], 1972) and James J. Martin's *Men Against the State* ([1953], 2009).

During the last decades, the relation between Stirner and anarchism took a very interesting turn, highlighting its connections with poststructuralist thought. Andrew Koch published an article called *Max Stirner: The Last Hegelian or the First Poststructuralist* (1997) that laid the groundwork for the connection between Stirner's thought and poststructuralism. As the title may lead one to suspect, Koch argues against the general view, most strongly presented by Stepelevich, that Stirner does nothing more than bring Hegelianism to its logical conclusion. Rather, Koch observes some strong epistemological similarities between Stirner and the poststructuralists. According to Koch, Stirner "is far more interested in the way state power gains legitimacy within a system of power/knowledge than he is in challenging the Hegelian conception of the state as 'objective spirit.'" (Ibid., p.96). Saul Newman finally brought poststructuralism and anarchism together under the banner of post-anarchism in his books *From Bakunin to Lacan* (2001) *The Politics of Postanarchism* (2010b), and *Postanarchism* (2011a). In these works, Newman views Stirner as the definitive bridge between the two and calls him a 'proto-poststructuralist,' who rejects the concept of human essence that classical anarchism is founded upon. Newman's work shows how Stirner fits into the pantheon of anarchists while at the same time already being a step ahead. He writes: "Stirner occupies a pivotal place within the anarchist tradition: he engages in an epistemological and ontological anarchism which breaks in a radical way with the conceptual categories and foundations of classical anarchism." (2010b, p. 59).

Existentialism

Stirner's name is usually absent in the literature on existentialism, yet those that discuss Stirner's thought have often pointed out its verisimilitude to existentialism. Safranski, for example, acknowledges that very early on "Stirner affirmed the existential principle that existence comes before essence." (2002, p. 128). Even well-known existentialists themselves have observed such resemblances. Martin Buber reluctantly acknowledges Stirner's relevance when he writes: "What Stirner with his destructive power successfully attacks is the substitute for a reality that is no longer believed: the fictitious responsibility in face of reason, of an idea, a nature, an institution, of all manner of illustrious ghosts." (2002, pp. 52-53). He discusses the parallels and incongruities between the world-views of Stirner and Kierkegaard in an essay called *The Question to the Single One*, later published in his book *Between Man and Man* ([1947], 2002), though this comparison

seems to mostly serve the purpose of showing the philosophical strength of Kierkegaard. Buber calls Stirner “pathetic nominalist and unmasker of ideas” who “wanted to dissolve the alleged remains of German idealism (as which he regarded Ludwig Feuerbach) by raising not the thinking subject nor man but the concrete present individual as “the exclusive I” to be the bearer of the world, that is, of “his” world.” (Ibid., p. 47).

Buber's dismissal of Stirner is not just a sign of his religious predilection, but also a sign of the times. Albert Camus also dedicated a section of *The Rebel* ([1951], 1984) to Stirner. Much like with Buber, we are quickly reminded of the general attitude towards Stirner during the time this was published. Most English translations have omitted this section from Camus' book. Yet, reading the complete version that includes the section on Stirner suggests that Camus is actually quite positive about Stirner's thought. Like many, Camus considers Stirner to be a negative precursor to Nietzsche who “goes as far as he can in blasphemy” (Ibid., p. 63), yet offers no positive answer to his rebellion. Camus is particularly inspired by Stirner's sharp distinction between rebellion and revolution. According to Stirner, a revolution seeks to replace an old system with a new one. Camus writes: “To be a revolutionary, one must continue to believe in something, even where there is nothing in which to believe.” (Ibid., p. 64). A rebellion (or in Stirner's words insurrection or uprising), on the other hand, seeks revolt without an alternative, a revolt for its own sake. This same distinction is briefly referenced by Giorgio Agamben in his *The Time that Remains* (2005a). Stirner's idea of insurrection is an important concept that we shall return to in a later chapter. James Huneker was probably not familiar with the term 'existentialism,' considering he lived in North America at the end of the 19th and very beginning of the 20th century. Nevertheless, in his book *Egoists* (1909), which is obviously named after Stirner, Huneker describes several thinkers from the 19th century, like Nietzsche or Ibsen, who all share the search for strength and personal development. Out of all of these individualists, Huneker considers Stirner to have bleakest outlook, an outlook that has a lot in common with how the existentialists would describe the world.

The existentialist reading of Stirner's work is most strongly elucidated by Herbert Read and Ronald Paterson. Read can largely be credited for bringing existentialism to the English-speaking world. In his work *Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism* (1949), he gives a general introduction to the tenets of existentialism. According to Read, existentialism takes as its starting point not man in the abstract, but the concrete individual and its radical freedom. He names Stirner specifically as perhaps the best proponent of this view, surpassing even Sartre, as Sartre still chooses to pursue idealistic ends, whereas Stirner revels in nihilism. In an earlier work called *The Tenth Muse* ([1941], 2015), Read writes that “existentialism must owe something to Stirner —the resemblances are too many and too close to be accidental.” (Ibid., p. 81). In *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner* (1971),

Paterson deepens the existentialist reading of *The Ego and its Own*. He writes that “the contours of Stirner's universe are recognizably those of the universe charted by the existentialists. Without him, the metaphysical cartography of existentialism is deficient.” (Ibid., p. viii). Stirner is to Patterson a better embodiment of existentialism than the usual names associated with it because, unlike other existentialists, Stirner precisely doesn't try to overcome the existential predicament. More specifically, Paterson writes that other existentialists “have sought, by clutching at some metaphysical or moral transcendent, to provide a meaningful foundation for their personal world, lest it be consumed by its own insecurity.” (Ibid., p. 170). Kierkegaard, Tolstoy and Buber, for example, all returned to religion, Sartre dedicated his life to the advancement of Marxism, Heidegger seeks some mysticism in Being and Camus found his home in rebellion, but Stirner is the only existentialist who seeks no solution to the loss of meaning.

The association of Stirner's thought with nihilism made by Paterson, Camus and others is understandable, though an extensive investigation of it exceeds the scope of this dissertation given the variety of interpretations of the exact meaning of nihilism. Suffice to say here that Stirner is correctly considered a nihilist when nihilism refers to the rejection or transmutation of any real or objective metaphysics or morality. Yet to Stirner, this doesn't make life meaningless. In his reflections on nihilism, John Marmysz (2003) calls Stirner a 'post-nihilist,' primarily because even though Stirner fits the premise of a nihilist, he looks at it with optimism. What, according to Marmysz, moves Stirner beyond the usual view of nihilism is that he still thinks that life is worth living, just not for the sake of otherworldly standards. Instead of accepting that life is meaningless without any ideals to pursue, Marmysz argues that Stirner opts to dissolve the dilemma. Reminiscent of Nietzsche, Stirner seeks a 'life-affirming' approach, yet unlike Nietzsche, Stirner rejects the notion that there is any universal way to do so, such as the idea that one ought to be an *Übermensch*. Instead, Stirner seeks an embracement of the unique predicament in which each individual is thrown.

Psychology

Others have viewed Stirner, as Buber put it, as “the involuntary father of modern psychological and sociological relativizings.” (2002, p. 54). Stirner is generally perceived to have been significant to the development of psychology as a science by exposing the underlying selfishness in human thought and action. The first to read *The Ego and its Own* as a psychological study of selfishness is the aforementioned Von Hartmann ([1869], 1931), who extols Stirner for locating the origin of modern political ideals in selfishness, writing that Stirner “demolishes with forcible reasons the ideal aims of political, social, and humanitarian Liberalism; and shows how the Ego alone can be

the smiling heir of all these ideals thus reduced to impotent nothings.” (1931, pt. 3 p. 97). This particular psychological interpretation of *The Ego and its Own* has persisted ever since its publication (see Jansen, 2009; Jenkins, 2009). John Jenkins in particular defends the psychological reading of Stirner’s work against attacks from the philosophical side, writing that “the human story, for Stirner, at both the personal and historical level, is exclusively one of interplay and conflict between various types of motivational belief based on the pursuit of self-interest.” (2009, p. 255).

Even though John Carroll sees Stirner as the “lynchpin of existentialist philosophy” (1974, p. 21), he extends the psychological reading of *The Ego and its Own* by giving it a special place in the development of moral thought together with Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky. These three thinkers represent, in opposition to the more well-known British utilitarian tradition and the Marxist socialist tradition, the 'anarcho-psychological tradition,' which “prepared the way for Freud's work, and for the subsequent modern interest in inner 'psychological man'.” (Ibid., p. 2). According to Carroll, Stirner “suggests that attachment to ideological and institutional structures of political authority reflects attachment to deeper and more general frames of authority.” (Ibid., p. 16) in particular the persistence of Christianity.

Miscellaneous

Thus far we have looked at the most common interpretations of Stirner's work. However, some interpretations are difficult to categorise, yet offer sufficient valuable insight into Stirner's philosophy that they cannot remain unmentioned. Welsh’s *Max Stirner's Dialectical Egoism* (2010) offers an interesting reading of Stirner that can only really be compared with that of Newman, insisting that we should consider Stirner as “a thoroughgoing dialectical thinker and should be located squarely in that philosophic tradition.” (Ibid., p. 5). Yet Welsh goes further and thinks that we should consider *The Ego and its Own* as the start of a new theoretical framework to analyse modernity, borne out of Hegelian dialectics, which he calls 'dialectical egoism.' “Stirner's dialectical egoist critique of antiquity and modernity provides a vantage point from which all cultures and all historical periods can be challenged. His primary interest is in developing an egoist challenge to modernity founded on the concept of ownness.” (Ibid., p. 81). The main focus of this framework is to relate interpersonal relations, culture and institutional systems to the immediate experience of the individual, which is what Stirner calls 'ownness,' a concept we will further explore in Chapter 5.

More recently, Jacob Blumenfeld’s *All Things are Nothing to Me* (2018) sought to save Stirner’s philosophy from historicism. Instead, he wants to read Stirner as a contemporary thinker who has considerable relevance today, as Blumenfeld “discovered Stirner’s spirit already living among us.” (Ibid., p. 7). Blumenfeld's work is an attempt see Stirner’s philosophy as thinking for a

new age. Though not entirely in the same way as Blumenfeld, this project is also an attempt to show that Stirner's thought is not as exotic as often portrayed, but that we can find in *The Ego and its Own* a description of modern politics, rather than a prescription, in which Stirner prophesied the enduring problems of political theology and fanaticism.

Stirner and Political Theology

Despite the considerable literature on Stirner, one of the areas of research that has received very little attention thus far has been his relevance to the field of political theology. The coming chapters will demonstrate that we should read *The Ego and its Own* through the lens of political theology. I will argue in this dissertation that Stirner is primarily concerned with atheism and criticism of religion, rather than an attack of the state, Hegelian dialectics, or with psychology or nihilism. Indeed, he criticises his contemporaries, and indirectly their teacher Hegel, in the first place for not going far enough in their atheism.

If we want to read Stirner's work through the lens of political theology, we will firstly need to have a proper understanding of what political theology is, but this is by no means an easy task. For a long time, a theological influence in the political domain was so ubiquitous that it could only be perceived as self-evident, until only a few centuries ago when the compartmentalising force of modernity – otherwise known as secularism – formally consigned the religious and non-religious to separate spheres of life. Only in its attempt to render apart theology and politics did we discover how entangled they really have been. In other words, political theology as a way of analysing the lingering influence of religion on modern politics only really becomes meaningful in conditions of secularism (see Schmitt, 1985a; Newman, 2019; De Vries & Sullivan, 2006).

It is important to distinguish here between two different views of political theology. Firstly, political theology can refer to the political implications of a specific religious doctrine, or to the direct influence of particular religions in politics. However, this dissertation will understand political theology in a different sense, as the underlying conceptual and historical influence of theology on politics. Even though we will examine his work in more detail later, it suffices to state here that Schmitt, who envisions political theology as a “sociology of concepts” (1985a, p. 45) in which structural analogies can be drawn between theological and political-judicial categories, and especially to the parallel between God and the miracle, on the one hand, and the political sovereign and the legal state of exception, on the other. More specifically, despite our general acceptance and constitutional codification of the separation between church and state, Schmitt argues that certain metaphysical views of a specific era manifest in concrete, tangible politics, even if their relation isn't articulated as such. Stirner finds this transposition of concepts not in the juridical domain, as

Schmitt does, but looks for the persistence of faith primarily in the cultural domain. The influence of religious thinking into broader, supposedly secular, conceptual, cultural, and even psychological domains is what concerns this thesis.

The politico-theological reading of Stirner offered in this thesis isn't necessarily opposed to other readings of Stirner. In fact, Stirner's views on political theology is the foundation for many other views he has been associated with. If we understand *The Ego and its Own* as an atheistic critique of political theology, then we can read it as being in line with, and as a radicalization of, anarchism's critique of religious authority. Here it might be recalled that the term 'political theology,' at least in its modern usage, derives not from Carl Schmitt but from the nineteenth century Russian anarchist Bakunin and his essay from 1871, *The Political Theology of Mazzini and the International*, in which he railed against the Christian influence behind the nationalism of the Italian statesman Guiseppe Mazzini. This is also pursued in his work, *God and the State* ([1882], 1970) in which Bakunin explores the connection between theology, idealist philosophy and the ideology of the modern state. Stirner, in his rejection of statism as another kind of metaphysical abstraction which derives from secularised religious sources, can be seen in some ways as a continuation of the radical atheism central to anarchism. At the same time, Stirner also exposes the religious sources behind humanistic and secular concepts of man and humanity, which otherwise served as the foundations for the anarchist critique of political authority.

We can also consider the politico-theological interpretation of Stirner's work in part as an extension of the existentialist reading. Similarly to Carroll and Paterson, we can extract from *The Ego and its Own* a starting point from which to explore the desire for an external authority, that usually takes a theological shape, in order to cope with the seeming meaninglessness of life. For Stirner, politics is not a rational attempt to organise society, but a philosophical search for a place in the world. The lingering presence of theological concepts in the secular political domain thus serves to provide an answer to the nihilistic predicament that plagues humanity.

Thus far, the only politico-theological reading of Stirner that exists to my knowledge comes from Newman's article *Stirner and the Critique of Political Theology* (2016) and his recent book *Political Theology* (2019). Newman explores some of the parallels and contrasts between the approaches of Stirner and Schmitt to political theology and their critical analysis of secularism. We will explore the encounter between Stirner and Schmitt in Chapter 3. While the focus of this research is on Stirner's original intervention into and contribution to political theology – about which very little has been written – it is necessary to situate this within the much broader field of political theology scholarship. We can understand political theology as a burgeoning field with an extensive horizon but an unclear core, which makes it elude an easy definition. It principally seeks

to understand the lingering influence of theological thinking in modern politics, thus extending into the fields of legal scholarship (Kahn, 2011; Schmitt, 2005), political theory (Losonczi & Singh, 2010), sociology (Bellah, 1967), history of ideas (Löwith, 1949; Blumenberg, 1985; Kantorowicz, 1997; Kahn, 2014; Strauss, 1982) and divinity studies (Metz, 1968; Moltmann, 1997). Yet the approaches towards political theology are often quite diffuse. As the focus of my research is specifically on Stirner, it would be beyond the scope and intention of this literature review to comprehensively survey these wide-ranging debates in political theology. However, below I will refer to some of the major interventions that are significant to my research.

Contemporary Political Theology

While secularism became the dominant mode of expression for Western politics, this did not necessarily lead to the diminishing of the power of religious belief. It is precisely the attempt to separate religion and politics that revealed how entangled these two were. The failure of secularisation to live up to its promise became particularly apparent in the crisis-riddled Germany of the interbellum. It is in this crisis that Schmitt intervened. We will investigate Schmitt's specific form of political theology in Chapter 3, but it suffices to say here that his *Political Theology* [1922] opened a veritable Pandora's Box with his definition of political theology as "a transposition of distinct concepts which has occurred within the systematic thought of the two – historically and discursively." (2008a, p. 117). In exploring the theological sources and foundations of political and legal authority in his notions of sovereignty and the legal exception, Schmitt is dealing with the constitutional crisis of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s and 1930s and the broader crisis of moral authority and political legitimacy brought on by modern secular forces – such as liberalism, atheism, materialist philosophies, technology and revolutionary politics. Schmitt sought to establish new sources of authority and legitimacy in modern politics by drawing attention to the structural parallels between God as sovereign over the universe and the state as sovereign over society. The weakness and instability of secular and liberal political institutions led Schmitt to formulate a defence of dictatorship based on his own Catholic conception of divine sovereignty. Schmitt brought together many diffuse issues about the relation of theology and politics into a more comprehensive framework that served as a platform for the political analysis of many other thinkers.

Schmitt's framing of political theology is evidently and directly inspired by the works of Weber. Though a complete exposition on the relation between the ideas of Schmitt and Weber is outside of the scope of this dissertation (see Kalyvas, 2008; Ulmen, 1985), we cannot overlook the historical significance of Weber's influence on Schmitt. Weber's lectures on economic history and

the sociology of state served as a touchstone that directed Schmitt's intellectual pursuits. G. L. Ulmen summarises that, "although Schmitt's references to Weber are fragmentary and dispersed, his writings and speeches constitute one of the keenest apprehensions of and responses to Weber's "political sociology" and the liberal, bourgeois-capitalist epoch which Weber singularly personified." (Ulmen, 1985, p. 5). The question of whether Schmitt has served as a faithful student of Weber is irrelevant for the present investigation. What matters is that Weber set Schmitt on a trail of investigating the historical continuity – and religious legacy - of modern political concepts such as legitimacy, legality, rationalisation and neutralisation.

The young Jacob Taubes, who was closely acquainted with Schmitt, took Schmitt's methodological approach to the sociology of concepts and used it in his own analysis. In 1947 Taubes published *Occidental Eschatology* (2009), in which he studies the persistence of eschatology in modern thinking with a method similar to the one Schmitt uses to approach the concept of sovereignty. Taubes argues that traditional Abrahamic conception of eschatology has generally withered away during the secularisation of Europe, yet eschatological thinking itself still persists in a secular form. Even though Kant, Lessing and Hegel have been crucial links in the development of a modern secular conception eschatology, Taubes argues that there are no better representatives than the two heirs of Hegel, Marx and Kierkegaard. Taubes continues his analysis in the *Political Theology of Paul* (2004), in which he ascribes to Paul a unique politico-theological position that has to deal with the external constraints and conditions imposed by the Roman Empire, as well as the founding of a new religious community based on the eschatological narrative of the coming of Christ. Taubes thus identifies in Paul's writings a more radical and revolutionary significance to the Apocalypse than Schmitt's counter-revolutionary one. Schmitt is one who, in Taubes's words, "prays for the preservation of the state, since if, God forbid, it doesn't remain, chaos breaks loose, or even worse, the Kingdom of God!" (2004, pp. 69–70).

In *The Time that Remains* (2005a), Giorgio Agamben seeks to continue Taubes' work to properly restore the messianic quality of the letters from Paul. With a fine-tooth hermeneutic comb, Agamben traces the inheritance of the original meaning of Paul's messianic texts in our language and thinking, despite it being at odds with the canonisation by the Church. Instead of the foundation of a new religion distinct from Judaism, Agamben sees in the letters from Paul a crisis of law, as the coming of the Messiah has fundamentally changed our view of time. Where before the world was intelligible in a linear view of time, time now has been compressed. He writes: "The messianic is the instance, in religion and equally in law, of an exigency of fulfillment which-in putting origin and end in a tension with each other-restores the two halves of prelaw in unison." (2005, p. 135). Paul is faced with the question of how to live in time until it ends and everything is revoked, a conundrum

that Schmitt hopes to resolve with a reliance on the *katechon*, a concept we will explore later. On the one hand then, Paul suggests that we should still live in the regular way and obey the law, yet, through faith, “law, politics, and religion become tightly interwoven.” (Ibid., p. 116). In his discussion of the messianic revocation of *klētos*, the Greek word from which we both derive the word 'calling' and 'class,' Agamben mentions also Stirner as one of the possible, 'ethico-anarchist,' responses to it.

Karl Löwith adopts a wider, more hermeneutical approach to the history of political theology in his *Meaning in History* (1949). Here he looks not just at the transposition of religious concepts into the political sphere, but especially the Christian influence on our perception of history. Unlike usual genealogies of ideas, Löwith hermeneutically works his way back from modern philosophy to the Church Fathers, revealing that the connection between the progressive view of history and modern eschatology is largely a product of modern philosophy and less present in the cyclical view of history of early Christianity, which showed more similarities to a pagan understanding of the world. In doing so, Löwith deconstructs Taubes' eschatological thesis to some extent. Taubes argues that there is a theological basis to the modern conceptions of progress, yet according to Löwith, the meaning of eschatology, among other religious concepts, is not necessarily the same for us as it was for previous generations. Löwith writes that “in the Gospels I cannot discover the slightest hint of a "philosophy of history" but only a scheme of redemption through Christ, and from profane history.” (Ibid., p. 191). Later Löwith clarifies that eschatology for early Christians was not a product of a rational approach to the world, as a modern thinker uses it, but a product of “an unconditional faith in God's redemptive purpose.” (Ibid., p. 206). Löwith thus concludes that the perception of Christian ideas persisting in a secular political form is an oversimplification, as our secular world-view influences the way we perceive Christian themes like eschatology. With this revelation, Löwith turns the political theology of Schmitt and Taubes on its head by exposing the more complicated symbiotic relationship between religious concepts and their persistence in the modern secular political sphere, as opposed to a simple transposition of theological concepts to the secular political domain.

Hans Blumenberg contests the thesis held by Schmitt and Löwith that church and state are currently separated, arguing that this separation only applies on a rhetorical level, rather than on a juridical level. The contributions of Hobbes and the general political transformation of the Enlightenment have, according to Blumenberg, led an adoption of a different terminology to describe the functions of the state in which divinity has been removed, though the foundation of legitimacy is still essentially the same. Though Blumenberg's contention started off as a criticism of Schmitt's thesis, it led to a back-and-forth between the two thinkers that we will further explore in

Chapter 3. Graham Hammill effectively summarises Blumenberg's contribution to the study of political theology as such:

Theological metaphors persist in the modern age not because they are structurally necessary, which is Schmitt's argument, but because, like all fictions, theological metaphors serve strategic ends. As fictions, theological metaphors satisfy the need for cogent accounts of the world, and, at the same time, as tactical forms of mediation they shelter against a literal minded view of politics that, for Blumenberg, polarizes conflict into crisis. (2012, pp. 84-85).

We also cannot overlook the contributions to political theology of Schmitt's main rival Hans Kelsen. Though as with Blumenberg, we will further explore the opposition and exchange between Schmitt and Kelsen in Chapter 3. In essence, like Schmitt, Kelsen searches for unity in politics, yet he opposes the dualism of law and state running parallel to the analogy between the state and God as drawn by Hobbes and Schmitt. Instead, Kelsen turns to the issue of transcendence. Whereas Schmitt wants the state to have supreme and total control, Kelsen sees a parallel between the relation of the state to law and God to the laws of nature, as God transcends the natural laws, yet must come down to the human level and conform to these laws. Similarly, Kelsen writes, "as the world-creating God in the myth of his incarnation must come into this world, must submit to the laws of the world (and this means: to the order of nature), must be born, suffer, and die, so too must the state, in the doctrine of its self-obligation, submit to the law created by the state itself." (1967, p. 318). The state is to Kelsen, then, not an arbitrary decider, but an entity that simultaneously conforms to the law yet still supersedes it without transgressing or violating its legitimacy.⁹

Even more interesting is Schmitt's influence on the thought of the Marxist Walter Benjamin. Though Benjamin was on the other extreme of the political spectrum, they both shared their ideas in an intimate correspondence. In his 1921 essay, *Critique of Violence* (in *Reflections*, 1978, pp. 277-300), Benjamin draws a distinction between law-making and law-preserving violence. We can compare law-making violence to the violence that founds the political and constitutional order, as opposed to the violence involved in preserving this order and enforcing the existing order. Yet this sort of sovereign legal violence, Benjamin argues, is curtailed by divine violence, which we should see as a violence in the name of a higher justice, and which has a revolutionary force that destroys state power. For Benjamin, Schmitt's legal state of emergency – designed to preserve the political order – is counterposed to what he sees as the real, revolutionary state of emergency (see Benjamin,

⁹ See also Baume, 2009, p. 381

1940).

Furthermore, in his brief *Theologico-Political Fragment* (found in *Reflections*, 1978, pp. 312-313), Benjamin articulates in politico-theological terminology the Marxist belief in progress. He points out that no profane society can fulfil religious predicates and “theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning.” (1978, p. 312). Only the Messiah can consummate earthly existence and until such consummation comes, profane society should be based on the idea of earthly happiness. Yet, unlike Schmitt, who wanted the sovereign state to serve as a *katechon*, in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (in *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 1991, pp. 691-703), Benjamin sees a Messianic force in the proletariat whose mission it is to overthrow the oppressive political order for the salvation of humanity. In fact, Benjamin even sees in a proletarian revolution a constitutive act *ex nihilo* that he compares the creation of the divine commandment against murder (*Metaphysisch-geschichtsphilosophische Studien*, in *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 1991, pp. 89-233).

Whereas the original German debate around political theology was still to a large extent directly concerned with the interaction of the theological and political spheres, the modern field of political theology has extended its reach much further. The most immediate heirs of the original debate sparked by Schmitt are those that recognise that the problems in the liberal democratic system addressed by Schmitt haven't disappeared. In his own four chapters on political theology, Paul Kahn (2011), for example, ponders why people are willing to sacrifice themselves for the social imaginary. It is, in Kahn's eyes, the willingness to sacrifice that serves as the foundation for the legitimation of a political order. Political theology is thus to Kahn differentiated from any positive political science or normative concept of justice, because at the root of sovereignty, law and the social imaginary there lies not reason but *faith*. A system that lacks a willingness to sacrifice, like liberalism, has a hard time sustaining itself (see Wydra, 2015; Yelle, 2018). Moreover, Kahn argues that political theology exposed universal ideas such as justice for what they are, namely empty. The founding and persistence of a political order is a unique and existential event that doesn't fit a model, definition or a set of conditions. Thus, he concludes:

Political theology today is best thought of as an effort to describe the social imaginary of the political... The inquiry is not to take us back to premodern forms of religious influence on political order, but to the discovery of the persistence of forms of the sacred in a world that no longer relies on God. Political theology argues that secularization, as the displacement of the sacred from the world of experience, never won, even though the church may have lost. The politics of the modern nation-state indeed rejected the church but simultaneously

offered a new site of sacred experience. (*Political Theology*, 2011, p. 42).

Giorgio Agamben has transformed the debate on political theology by taking it beyond the political question of sovereignty and law (see also Agamben, 1998) and extending it to an analysis of the idea of the economy, developing an economic theology as a further challenge to the secularisation thesis. In *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011), Agamben exposes the shortcomings of Schmitt's initial politico-theological frame of analysis by revealing the politico-theological genealogy of economy and government. This very important contribution to the idea of political theology will be discussed further in Chapter 4 when I engage with the question of liberalism as a form of government.

Other contemporary thinkers in the field of political theology have moved further beyond the frame originally set by Schmitt. The central question of political theology revolves around the place of the sacred, a place that political philosopher Claude Lefort considers structurally and necessarily empty as a result of the democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. These revolutions, to which Stirner was also responding in his own time, led, according to Lefort, to the fragmentation of the symbolic order. What was once united in the body of the Prince has now divided between the orders of power, law and knowledge. With the collapse of the monarchical and theological order, modern democratic societies are characterized by a place formally 'empty of power,' which can be contested and competed over, but never permanently filled. However, this experience of absence produces at the same time a recurring desire for the reunion of politics and theology, which leads Lefort to conclude that “any move toward immanence is also a move toward transcendence; that any attempt to explain the contours of social relations implies an internalization of unity; that any attempt to define objective, impersonal entities implies a personification of those entities. The workings of the mechanisms of incarnation ensure the imbrication of religion and politics.” (Lefort, 2006, p. 187).

Like Lefort, Robert Esposito mostly leaves the works of Schmitt behind when reconsidering the relation between politics and religion. With a particular discursive focus, Esposito argues that theology and politics are two spheres that are different and cannot be united, yet also can never be completely separated. Linguistically, we cannot even break free from politico-theological thinking. Esposito writes that “all the categories that have been employed on various occasions to arrive at the connection between politics and theology— like “disenchantment” or “secularization” or “profanation”— turn out to have political theological origins themselves.” (2015, pp. 1-2). Indeed, Esposito sees the two spheres persistently grappling for domination. A modern citizen is then constantly torn between the “transcendence of the law and imputability of the individual.” (Ibid., p.

11). Thus, Esposito argues that the largest problem we have with political theology is our inability to study and understand it from any outside position, as long as we are entangled in the politico-theological remnants left in our language.

As mentioned previously, political theology has been of interest to theologians just as much as political theorists, especially concerning the public role that theology and church institutions can play in modern secular societies (see Cavanaugh & Scott, 2019; Graham, 2013; Kim, & Day, 2017). The engagement from theologians with political theology already started in the German debate during the interbellum, especially by Karl Barth (1939). Though Barth's main concern is still theology and he only sparingly and diffusely extends it to socio-political issues, Gerald Butler (1974) has extracted and unpacked the two main tenets of Barth's political theology, namely reconciliation and eschatology. Barth's aim, according to Butler, is to transform our political world so that it reconciles and conforms most with the kingdom of God. Yet, Barth writes, "the Church on earth should not go beyond its own bounds and endow itself with the predicates of the heavenly State, setting itself up in concrete fashion against the earthly State as the true State." (1939, p. 44). In our pursuit of a better socio-political world according to Christian standards, Barth thinks we must not be misled by the deification of the political, as nothing should be more important to a Christian than faith and no earthly society could ever conform to the perfect Christian ideal.

Butler acknowledges that "Barth certainly does have a theology of socio-political reality but this does not make him a political theologian" (Ibid., p. 458), as most of Barth's work deals with pure theology and only passingly engages with political theology, yet his work paved the way for later theologians who would more directly engage with the matters of political theology, in particular the interventions of the post-war German theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Baptist Metz, who are both associated with 'liberation theology' and who both sought to present a more radical and emancipatory side to theology. Theology and the church had an important role to play, not in supporting the political order but in contesting it in the name of social, racial and even environmental justice. Originally, Moltmann concerned himself with purely theological questions, but eventually extended his interest in the theological themes of hope and freedom to the sphere of politics. His politico-theological views are most explicitly formulated in *God for a Secular Society* (1997), in which he places himself as the opposite of Schmitt and Hobbes. Indeed, Moltmann thinks that Schmitt's reverence for strong, exceptional sovereignty is antithetical to Christian theology, as he argues that we should not only see the Leviathan as the *enemy* of God, a criticism Schmitt himself made towards Hobbes, but the covenant between God and man is best expressed through democracy and federalism as well. The conclusion Moltmann reaches is a political theology best expressed in terms of resistance to the abuse of power. Similarly, Metz thinks that for too long

theology has been concerned with theoretical systems in a vacuum, forgetting that Christianity itself reaches beyond intellectual pursuits and is something that directly engages with the lives of people. In fact, the Bible makes it clear that God himself has engaged in political issues. Metz views theology, along with Moltmann, not as a tool of oppression, but a means to liberation. Partly inspired by Walter Benjamin and thinkers of the Frankfurt School, we find in his *Poverty of Spirit* (1968) a Christian theology based on praxis intended to protect the individual from both the dehumanisation of modernity and the excesses of state power.

Political Theology as a Lens

For the last few centuries we have been trying to pull the religious weeds out of the garden of politics, only to find that their roots are deeply entangled with all the other flora. Political theology has always been part of modern political theory, but Schmitt brought it to the centre of political and legal attention. Over the last half a century, interest in political theology has bloomed and moved further and further away from Schmitt's original thesis. Yet the increased interest in political theology has given an already vague and complicated subject, namely the relation between religion and politics, even blurrier contours. Political theology proves itself difficult to capture by simple definitions or descriptions. Until the 17th century, it seemed unfathomable to conceive of a political sphere without religion. Even for the early modern thinkers, a religious influence on politics seemed axiomatic. It is only because of the attempt to separate these domains that we've encountered the persevering influence of religion in the juridical, political, economic, sociological and philosophical domains.

The aim of this survey of both the investigations into political theology and the literature on Stirner has been two-fold. Firstly, it was to establish how we might understand Stirner as someone who is deeply concerned with the politico-theological problem – in other words, with the lingering influence of religion on supposedly secular spheres of life and ways of thinking about politics. As we shall discover over the following chapters, Stirner seeks to expose the Christian impulse behind secular and humanistic categories of thought – such as man, human essence, universal rationality, secular morality, as well as political institutions like the liberal state. Secondly, it was to show how Stirner, in his analysis of the structures of faith and religious devotion, can extend and deepen contemporary politico-theological investigations.

Chapter 2 – Political Atheism

As suggested in the previous chapter, in the wide range of interpretations of Stirner, the one thing that is generally overlooked is the pertinence of his thinking to political theology. This chapter, and indeed the thesis as a whole, will seek to address this oversight by demonstrating that Stirner is properly understood as a politico-theological thinker. Stirner namely finds at the heart of modern politics a philosophical crisis that is profoundly politico-theological. According to Stirner, atheism and secularism have exposed our desire for a direction and place in the world that was previously masked by traditional religion. To find the same philosophical comfort that religion once provided, Stirner observed that a number of modern thinkers transformed modern politics in a way that resembles traditional religion. Thus, as we will see in this chapter, Stirner finds in modern politics a politico-theological accommodation for the loss of religion, thereby in essence setting the stage for fanaticism.

From the first pages of *The Ego and its Own*, Stirner makes it clear that he vehemently opposes religion of any kind. Yet, instead of arguing against religion directly, Stirner aims to expose the hidden religiosity that haunts modern, supposedly secular forms of politics. In fact, Stirner takes his atheism as far as it can go and seeks to expose any semblance of religion in the political movements emerging around him, essentially making him a political atheist. In this chapter we will explore the parameters and stakes of Stirner's politico-theological critique.

Beyond Atheism

If we are to understand Stirner's specific politico-theological analysis, we must start with his criticism of religion. *The Ego and its Own* assumes that readers are generally familiar with the arguments against religion and the church, as is evidenced by passages such as the following: "The fear of God in the proper sense was shaken long ago, and a more or less conscious 'atheism', externally recognizable by a widespread 'unchurchliness', has involuntarily become the mode." (Stirner, 1995, p. 165). This passage is a good example of how Stirner takes atheism for granted and presumes 'unchurchliness' as being 'widespread,' even though piety and religious censorship were still common enough to make his own life and that of his fellow atheists difficult at the university of Berlin. Despite the enduring dominance of religion during his lifetime, he takes secular modernity as the starting point for his politico-theological investigation.

Stirner starts his argumentation from the claim that his progressive contemporaries are inconsistent in their atheism. He found himself in the company of the Young Hegelians, who were

all fiercely opposed to the authority of religion. However, from Stirner's point of view, they simply supplanted their belief in Christianity with a belief in new set of ideas and normative concepts, which were no less theological. Thus, Stirner concluded that the secularists of his time still thought in a religious manner and with the same kind of religious fervour and devotion. This leads Stirner to formulate his particular understanding of political theology as such: "Atheists keep up their scoffing at the higher being, which was also honoured under the name of the 'highest' or *être suprême*, and trample in the dust one 'proof of his existence' after another, without noticing that they themselves, out of need for a higher being, only annihilate the old to make room for a new." (Ibid., pp. 38-39).

We can consider Stirner as an analyst of political theology because of his profound insight in the persistence of religious thinking in a secular society. Yet we must acknowledge that Stirner takes a different approach to it than the more common sociological account that we find in someone like Schmitt. Unlike Schmitt, who is in principle concerned with the sociology of concepts - particularly political and legal concepts - Stirner explores psychological desires and existential concerns. The persistence of religious thinking he finds mainly in the persistence of faith and worship. In the aforementioned quote, he already hints at his view of the origins of political theology with the words 'out of need for a higher being.' The 'need' mentioned here specifically refers to a psychological and philosophical desire. Yet *The Ego and its Own* is more than just an early work in psychology, as Stirner explains how this desire for a higher good shapes the structure of modern secular politics.

Despite his emphasis on individual psychology, the historical development of ideas still plays a crucial part in Stirner's analysis. Inspired by his teacher Hegel, Stirner views the history of philosophy as a dialectical process. Stepelevich (2020) considers Stirner's dialectical description of history an extension of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, yet Newman argues that "Stirner opposes Hegel's idealist philosophy with a counterdialectic." (2019, p. 48). Though Stirner clearly views the history of philosophy through a dialectical lens, he gives no specific comment on how his historical progression relates to Hegel's. In fact, Stirner admits that he is not attempting to provide a comprehensive view of the history of philosophy at all in *The Ego and its Own*. Rather, he offers a rough sketch to illustrate his specific views of political theology and to give them a place in the history of philosophy.

History of Political Theology

Stirner's historical progression of philosophy starts in the metaphysical realism of those he calls 'the ancients.' These ancients are the Greek philosophers that lived in the period of time before Socrates. The philosophy of these ancients, at least according to Stirner, did not revolve around ideas,

abstractions, or relations, but rather aimed at the instrumentalisation of the material world for their own immediate benefit. However, Stirner goes through the early history of philosophy in a cursory fashion, spending only a few words on the ancients, as they are considered a precursor to the next stage, ushered in by Socrates. Socrates' ruthless search for the truth led to the age of idealism, the second stage in Stirner's dialectic. The final third stage of Stirner's dialectic – egoism – is still to come. We will devote further attention to this in Chapter 5.

Stirner also treats the early philosophical advances of Socrates and his students with broad brush strokes, yet he asserts that, despite the many innovative ideas since Socrates, we still haven't emerged from the stage of idealism. In Stirner's view of the history of philosophy, idealism comes in a variety of iterations, starting with Platonism, evolving into Christianity, and eventually becoming the political theology of his progressive contemporaries. We now inhabit a world divided into the real and the ideal. Unlike the ancients, who aimed at controlling and mastering the material world, Stirner maintains that the onset of idealism, with its emphasis on abstractions and ideas, sought to transform the world into an idealised image of how things *should* be. Idealism thus aims to instil norms upon the material world, rather than to live in accordance with it. Yet Stirner points out that the idealists time and time again encounter an ontological crevasse. The world of ideas is always outside of our grasp, so that we can never align the material world with the ideal.

Greek philosophers made way for Christianity and their world of ideas had been definitively and comprehensively Christianised. According to Stirner, Christianity presents a new kind of authority. Whereas the ancients aimed at a complete mastery of the physical world, Christianity now extracts a doctrine of norms out of the world of ideas with which it instils a social authority, dividing people into those that adhere to the norms and those that do not, the pious and heathens. In Christianity, as Stirner contends, there is no supreme ruler that governs physical bodies. Instead, Christianity sets up a doctrine of ideas that governs minds and souls.

At this point in Stirner's exposition of the history of philosophy, an interesting ambiguity emerges. On the one hand, Stirner holds Christianity to be essential in the development of modern political theology. Not only is it the religious background of his main philosophical opponents, it also serves as the foundation for certain secular concepts that are worshipped in lieu of the Christian God. In fact, Stirner will later argue that modern liberal political theology is no more than a continuation of Christian morality. On the other hand, he generally doesn't regard Christianity a historical *unicum*, but views it as merely one particular iteration of idealism out of many. If the Christian doctrine were different or if another religion were dominant in Europe, Stirner would still have condemned it for instilling a normative authority upon society. He therefore doesn't single out Christianity as the sole object of his criticism but directs his criticism to idealism as a whole. His

atheism and his criticism of Christianity are merely a by-product of this general opposition to idealism, which is the overarching premise of *The Ego and its Own*. Christianity is only essential to Stirner's conception of political theology because it expresses a comprehensive doctrine for idealism that has influenced the political theology of those that claim to have left Christianity behind.

The rebellious ideas of Martin Luther and John Calvin sent shock waves throughout Europe, ultimately leading to the schism of the Catholic church. This development of Protestantism is to Stirner the finalisation of the Christian normative authority. He devotes a lot more attention to Protestantism, and Lutheranism in particular, than Catholicism, primarily because the objects of his reproof have a specific Lutheran background. Yet he provides us some small insight into exactly how the authority of Catholicism differs from that of Protestantism. Catholicism, he argues, still relies partly on a traditional hierarchical structure of authority in which only the clergy directly deals with the world of ideas and dictates the doctrine distilled from it to the faithful. Stirner writes that:

The Catholic finds himself satisfied when he fulfils the command; the Protestant acts according to his 'best judgement and conscience'. For the Catholic is only a layman; the Protestant is himself a clergyman. Just this is the progress of the Reformation period beyond the Middle Ages and at the same time its curse - that the spiritual became complete. (Ibid., p. 82).

Whereas a Catholic needs to do no more than follow the dicta of the priests, the Protestant is not just tasked with following the Christian doctrine, but with interpreting it as well. The Protestant is therefore immediately confronted with the world of ideas. Stirner proceeds: "Through the fact that in Protestantism the *faith* becomes a more inward faith, the *servitude* has also become a more inward servitude; one has taken those sanctities up into himself, entwined them with all his thoughts and endeavours, made them a '*matter of conscience*', constructed out of them a '*sacred duty*' for himself." (Ibid., p. 81). The hierarchy between the individual and the spiritual world that was there in Catholicism, has been vaporised by Protestantism. The Christian doctrine therefore immediately exercises its power over the Protestant without the need for any mediation or translation. The Christian prescriptions must thus be followed for their own sake, rather than as instructed by the clergy. The Protestant is then tasked with interpreting the scripture to the best of his/her abilities and adhering to this interpretation, with the threat of eternal damnation constantly looming over his/her head.

Thus, Protestantism has transformed the normative authority of Christianity into a more intrusive form. In Stirner's view, the authority of Christianity is based on the demand that one lives in accordance with an idealist doctrine, but in Catholicism, this authority is still upheld by a designated class. Protestantism leads to a complete internalisation of the normative authority of Christianity by placing the burden of understanding and abiding entirely on the shoulders of the individual. Being a good Christian no longer depends on external approval or instruction, which places the Protestant in a position of permanent insecurity. Stirner provides a good illustration of the unique authority of Protestantism in the following passage. "Protestantism has actually put a man in the position of a country governed by secret police. The spy and eavesdropper, 'conscience', watches over every motion of the mind, and all thought and action is for it a 'matter of conscience', that is, police business." (Ibid., pp. 81-82). Protestantism makes one become one's own Orwellian 'thought police.' This internalised theocracy is foundational for understanding Stirner's view of political theology.

Stirner considers Lutheranism as most conducive to political theology, because it possesses characteristics that other Protestant denominations do not. The following comparison explains his point: "Compared with this puritanical Calvinism, Lutheranism is again more on the religious, spiritual, track, is more radical. For the former excludes at once a great number of things as sensual and worldly, and *purifies* the church; Lutheranism, on the contrary, tries to bring *spirit* into all things as far as possible, to recognize the holy spirit as an essence in everything, and so to *hallow* everything worldly." (Ibid., p 84). In this passage, Stirner points out that Calvinism drives the material and ideal world further apart while tasking the Calvinist with a further relinquishing of the material world in favour of a total devotion to the spiritual. In Lutheranism, on the other hand, the mundane evanesces and everything in the material world receives a religious, spiritual dimension, which is a specific trait that is retained in modern political theology. Any mundane concept can now be sanctified and extrapolated into an authoritative normative doctrine.

Stirner also briefly brings Descartes into his discussion of the history of philosophy. Descartes may not have been a Protestant, but Stirner considers him to be the Luther of philosophy because he further develops the Christian division between body and mind, definitively severing them and proclaiming that one is ultimately mind alone, instead of the amalgam of body and mind. "Only by the more modern philosophy since Descartes has a serious effort been made to bring Christianity to complete efficacy by exalting the 'scientific consciousness' to be the only true and valid one. Hence it begins with absolute *doubt*, *dubitare*, with grinding common consciousness to atoms, with turning away from everything that 'mind', 'thought', does not legitimate." (Ibid., p. 78). Stirner points out here that in the Cartesian world view, only the mind is a legitimate means to come

to a true understanding of the world, which implies that only the world of ideas is ultimately worthy of our attention. Thus, the emphasis that Descartes places on the mind is yet another step in the direction of political theology.

Stirner never further elucidates the specific politico-theological differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, probably because the primary targets of *The Ego and its Own*, Feuerbach, Bauer, and less directly, Hegel, all have a Lutheran background. Hegel especially receives criticism from Stirner as he is perceived to have set the stage for modern political theology. Stirner writes that “it was that the Lutheran Hegel (he declares himself such in some passage or other: he 'wants to remain a Lutheran') was completely successful in carrying the idea through everything. In everything there is reason, holy spirit, or 'the actual is rational'.” (Ibid., p. 85). Even though Stirner comments surprisingly little on Hegel's work, considering how important it is to his own, he considers Hegel the decisive turning point in the development of political theology. Stirner argues that Hegel integrates everything into a grand philosophical system, and, in doing so, gives everything a potential theological inflection. Hegel thereby inappropriately blurs the line between religion and philosophy, inadvertently allowing anything to be the object of religion.

Hegel may have paved the way for political theology, but it is Hegel's students – namely Feuerbach, Bauer and, to a lesser extent, Hess – that Stirner considers its main heralds. These thinkers spent a lot of time and energy dismantling Christianity, yet to Stirner, “our atheists are pious people.” (Ibid., p. 166). All of these progressive atheists have their own object of worship that operates in the same way as the Christian God. They may have discarded religion, but they still keep us caught in the second stage of Stirner's dialectic because they still think along idealistic lines. Instead of abandoning religious thinking altogether, they have finally brought us to political theology. Thus, according to Stirner, “we are still living entirely in the Christian age, and the very ones who feel worst about it are the most zealously contributing to 'complete' it.” (Ibid., p. 278). The new atheists have merely subverted the Christian god and substituted it with some other secular concept. They derive a similar normative authority directly from the abstraction and extrapolation of mundane, secular concepts. All of the main aspects of Christianity remain.

In *Stirner's Critics*, Stirner formulates this passion for abstraction in the following terms: “All behavior toward anything considered absolutely interesting, or valuable in and for itself, is religious behavior or, more simply, religion.” (Stirner, 2012, p. 66). The keyword in this quote is 'absolutely.' Stirner is not necessarily opposed to striving towards freedom or equality, as long as they are instrumental, rather than for their own sake. The striving towards freedom, equality, humanity, etc. becomes what Stirner calls religion when they become objectives in and of themselves, rather than an instrument for a concrete, tangible, pragmatic end that makes one's life

better. It is important to keep in mind that Stirner never uses the term political theology, nor does he use any other analytical term for it either, and generally just sticks to the word 'religion,' even when describing secular thought. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to use the term 'political theology' to describe Stirner's observation that religion has evolved into a secular political form.

Ludwig Feuerbach is undoubtedly Stirner's main target of his politico-theological critique. In *The Essence of Christianity*, first published in 1841, Feuerbach presents a devastating philosophical critique of Christianity, but he makes his case in a very specific way. Feuerbach demonstrates that “the substance and object of religion is altogether human.” (1989, p. 270). When meticulously going through the tenets of the Christian faith, Feuerbach unearths the anthropological origins and impulses of Christianity to show that ultimately it is nothing more than the misguided projection of extrapolated human love and virtues onto a supreme celestial being. Feuerbach therefore suggests that, instead of continuing with religious belief, we should take from it what is true, discard the rest and focus our efforts on the reverence of humanity, as it already possesses all the divine qualities.

Stirner criticises Feuerbach for being inconsistent in his atheism, as Feuerbach implies that “the **human religion** is only the last metamorphosis of the Christian religion.” (Stirner, 1995, p. 158; emphasis in original). In *Stirner's Critics*, Stirner summarises his criticism of Feuerbach as follows: ““The basic illusion,” Feuerbach says, “is God as subject.” But Stirner has shown that the basic illusion is rather the idea of “essential perfection,” and that Feuerbach, who supports this basic prejudice with all his might, is therefore, precisely, a true Christian.” (Stirner, 2017, p. 87).¹⁰ In the eyes of Stirner, Feuerbach is not a true atheist. He isn't undoing Christianity, but rather points out that we have been worshipping the wrong thing. Feuerbach has simply replaced God with Man as the supreme object of worship, with the Christian normative order still mostly intact. Thus, Feuerbach has definitively entered the realm of political theology by moving from the worship of the divine to the reverence of an elevated, deified, mundane concept. In fact, Stirner thinks the normative authority of Feuerbach's political theology is even more intrusive than that of Christianity ever was. He writes that to Feuerbach,

Man is the liberal's supreme being, man the *judge* of his life, humanity his *directions*, or catechism. God is spirit, but man is the 'most perfect spirit', the final result of the long chase after the spirit or of the 'searching in the depths of the Godhead', that is, in the depths of the spirit. Every one of your traits is to be human; you yourself are to be so from top to toe, in

¹⁰ It has to be noted that Stirner refers to himself in the third person in this quote. He responds here to Feuerbach, who wrote his criticism of Stirner and the defence of his own philosophy anonymously. Thus Feuerbach wrote about himself in the third person and, even though Stirner knew it was Feuerbach all along, he merely returned the favour.

the inward as in the outward; for humanity is your calling. Calling - destiny - task! (Stirner, 1995, p. 287).

Just as Luther removed the hierarchy from Catholicism and placed Christian normative authority within every individual, Feuerbach removes the externality of the object of worship and places it within us. We are no longer, unlike the Protestant, to police our own actions on behalf of an external God. Feuerbach wants us to police ourselves for the sake of the humanity within us that we are supposed to aspire to.

The Zeal of Faith

According to Stirner, despite having attained a high degree of secularism in our political institutions as well as in our culture, we still haven't moved beyond religion. Thinkers like Feuerbach want to rid us of religion, but the secularism they espouse is nothing more than an illusion. They still cling to the religious structure of Christianity and model their political views according to it. At best, modern politics is only a slight advance, but is still caught within on the second stage of Stirner's dialectic (idealism). The evisceration of Christianity hasn't freed us from religion, but only opened the door to new concepts being worshipped as if they were sacred. Stirner observes that

piety has for a century received so many blows and had to hear its superhuman essence reviled as an 'inhuman' one so often, that one cannot feel tempted to draw the sword against it again. And yet it has almost always been only moral opponents that have appeared in the arena, to assail the supreme essence in favour of – another supreme essence. (Ibid., p. 46).

To Stirner, political theology is simply the iteration of religion without the belief in a supernatural being. Stirner considers the wave of new sacred concepts proposed by his contemporaries as part of a cycle. Whenever the disillusion of an object of worship sets in, it is quickly dethroned, but only to be replaced by another sacred concept. Thus, Stirner comes to the conclusion that “*particular* faith, like faith in Zeus, Astarte, Jehovah, Allah, may be destroyed, but faith itself is indestructible.” (Ibid., 77-78).

Why does Stirner think that faith is indestructible, even though particular faiths change? The answer is that faith, in Stirner's eyes, precedes – and actually *creates* – the object of worship. It is not the object that demands worship, but faith that keeps looking for an object to worship. It is at this point that Stirner reveals why he places less emphasis on the historical development of ideas. Many theologies have risen and fallen throughout history, but we have to look much closer to home

to find the origin of the persistence of faith. *The Ego and its Own* provides two reasons why faith endures even though the religious particulars come and go. Firstly, Stirner ascribes the persistence of faith in part to art and modern political institutions:

God, immortality, freedom, humanity, are drilled into us from childhood as thoughts and feelings which move our inner being more or less strongly, either ruling us without our knowing it, or sometimes in richer natures manifesting themselves in systems and works of art; but are always not aroused, but imparted, feelings because we must believe in them and cling to them. That an Absolute existed, and that it must be taken in, felt, and thought by us, was settled as a faith in the minds of those who spent all the strength of their mind on recognizing it and setting it forth. The *feeling* for the Absolute exists there as an imparted one, and thenceforth results only in the most manifold revelations of its own self. (1995, p. 61).

Stirner argues here that social pressure and institutions confine our thinking exclusively to finding an object of worship and perpetuating faith. We live in a discourse in which we are at best permitted to question the object of worship, yet faith itself remains a virtue that is beyond reproach. It is also evident from *The Ego and its Own* that Stirner doesn't consider this the primary reason for the persistence of faith, as he only passingly draws attention to it.

The second and strongest reason that Stirner provides for the persistence of faith is that we have an intense and innate psychological desire to believe. The institutionalisation of belief emerges as a secondary accommodation of this desire. He observes that his fellow atheist philosophers are pestered and plagued by the longing for something greater than a simple atomistic mortal existence. They yearn for a destiny or calling to give life some direction. I would add here that, in the original German, Stirner uses the word *Bestimmung*, which has usually been translated to 'destiny' by Byington and Leopold. However, *Bestimmung* could also be translated, and usually is, as 'determination,' which has a less vague and more decisive connotation. The word *Bestimmung* refers to both a designated place and an intended direction. Stirner uses this term mostly in the way other Hegelians used it at the time, though in the recent publication *Der Einzige und die Deutsche Ideologie* (2020), Ulrich Pagel observes a slight difference in Stirner's meaning. He argues that unlike many of his Hegelian contemporaries, Stirner doesn't use *Bestimmung* to refer to some general human destiny or determination, but a very personal one.¹¹ Stirner describes the lack of a

¹¹ Stirner also uses this word specifically in contrast to self-determination, *Selbstbestimmung*, which we will explore in Chapter 5 on egoism.

Bestimmung as follows.

There winds its way through Christianity the question about the 'existence of God', which, taken up ever and ever again, gives testimony that the craving for existence, corporeity, personality, reality, was incessantly busying the heart because it never found a satisfying solution. At last the question about the existence of God fell, but only to rise up again in the proposition that the 'divine' had existence (Feuerbach). But this too has no existence, and neither will the last refuge, that the 'purely human' is realizable, afford shelter much longer. No idea has existence, for none is capable of corporeity. (1995, p. 321).

According to Stirner, there is a craving for a satisfying solution to the feeling of insecurity that arises when one is faced with a complete absence of a deity, and philosophers thus far have only sought a suitable replacement for the God they themselves defeated. This desperate search for a satisfactory calling, destiny, or *Bestimmung*, comes to an abrupt halt once we realise that, according to Stirner, "the essence of the world, so attractive and splendid, is for him who looks to the bottom of it – emptiness." (Ibid., p. 40). The more we investigate and understand the physical world, the more it becomes apparent that no destiny will present itself. What we find instead is an unbridgeable ontological divide between the corporeal world we live in and the world of ideas envisioned by the philosophers. Stirner therefore concludes that the desired solution will never come because it impossible for us to fully live up to any idea. Thus, "a man is 'called' to nothing, and has no 'calling', no 'destiny', as little as a plant or a beast has a 'calling'." (Ibid., p. 288). It must be added here that, even though it roughly captures the meaning, the word 'emptiness' is not a literal translation of the word *Eitelkeit* that Stirner uses in the original German text. *Eitelkeit* can be translated as vanity or idleness, though Stirner obviously means the latter. Earlier in *The Ego and its Own*, Stirner does use the word *Leerheit*, which is translated to 'emptiness,' to specifically address a lack of content. *Eitelkeit* in this passage is used to signify that the world doesn't provide any direction or *telos*. Thus, the *Eitelkeit* that the political theologians find in the world presents a terrifying scenario. Stirner addresses it as follows.

One needs only admonish you of yourselves to bring you to despair at once. 'What am I?' each of you asks himself. An abyss of lawless and unregulated impulses, desires, wishes, passions, a chaos without light or guiding star! How am I to obtain a correct answer, if, without regard to God's commandments or to the duties which morality prescribes, without regard to the voice of reason, which in the course of history, after bitter experiences, has

exalted the best and most reasonable thing into law, I simply appeal to myself? My passion would advise me to do the most senseless thing possible. (Ibid., p. 146).

Stirner describes the feeling of those who are faced with the emptiness of the world and suggests that they feel desperately lost. According to Stirner, there is a strong desire for some metaphysical structure that gives one a place in the world, a moral code of conduct and an objective that guides one's actions. Stirner doesn't give this desired feeling a name, but for the sake of convenience I will call it 'metaphysical security.'¹² Christianity used to be able to provide this metaphysical security, but the rejection of Christianity for scientific and philosophical reasons exposes the idleness of the world. Stirner argues that the modern progressive atheists want to have something similar to Christianity to overcome metaphysical insecurity and therefore seek a mundane concept to assume the throne left vacant by the Christian God. Stirner describes the search for metaphysical security in the following passage.

The sacred is by no means so easily to be set aside as many at present affirm, who no longer take this 'unsuitable' word into their mouths. If even in a single respect I am still *upbraided* as an 'egoist', there is left the thought of something else which I should serve more than myself, and which must be to me more important than everything; in short, something in which I should have to seek my true welfare something – 'sacred'. (Ibid., p. 37)

Stirner has led us into a linguistic swamp with this quote. To really understand not only Stirner's specific views on political theology, but also its general connection to the history of ideas, we need to briefly delve deeper into the convoluted language used here.¹³ The German word for 'sacred' is *Heilig*, which is based on the word *Heil* that is here translated as 'welfare.' However, the German word *Heil* is a very specific and particular word that has no proper equivalent in English, and we certainly must not mistake it for material welfare. It is used to describe a certain state of comfort experienced after being absolved from a troubling issue, in particular those of the religious, philosophical or psychological kind. Löwith also makes a brief comment about the complexities of

¹² In his existentialist reading of Stirner, Paterson utilises the terms “metaphysical chaos” (1971, p. 214) to describe how Stirner views the world as opposed to the “unifying principle” (Ibid.) that his opponents seek. Despite its insightful formulation, I do not think Paterson's terminology captures the specific feeling that Stirner attempts to address.

¹³ Even though Stirner plays less with the word 'true,' this word in English also has a strong politico-theological connotation. In the west-Germanic languages, the word 'true' in English is closely etymologically related to the Dutch word *trouw* or the German word *true*, which are best translated as 'faithful.' In the north-Germanic languages, it is related to the words *tro*, which is best translated as 'trust' or 'faith,' and the word *tryg(g)*, which is best translated as 'safe' or 'security.'

translating the word *Heil* to English. He writes: ““Salvation” does not convey the many connotations of the German word *Heil*, which indicates associated terms like “heal” and “health,” “hail” and “hale,” “holy” and “whole,” as contrasted with “sick,” “profane,” and “imperfect.”” (1949, p. 225). In this quote from Stirner, the best translation for *Heil* would be 'sanctuary,' rather than welfare. Stirner argues here that, in order to find their *Heil*, their sanctuary, the political theologians need to invoke something *Heilig*, something sacred.

Because of the use of language, it isn't as visible in English, but at this point Stirner reveals himself as an existentialist, albeit perhaps a more analytical one, even though his work preceded many of whom we would associate with the term 'existentialism.' Stirner observes in the absence of God the despair of a meaningless life and notices that those immediately confronted with this emptiness look for an external object of worship. In fact, Camus precisely credits Stirner for revealing how philosophers “were content to deny the truth of the history of Christ... and to maintain, by their denials, the tradition of an avenging god.” (1984, p. 34). Thereby, Stirner became the first of what Camus calls 'metaphysical rebels,' who are defined by their rebellion “against the suffering of life and death and a protest against the human condition both for its incompleteness, thanks to death, and its wastefulness, thanks to evil.” (Ibid., p. 24). To Camus, Stirner views life in a more humane way than the humanitarians, as unlike his contemporaries, only Stirner is willing to affirm that a life isn't lived only in the service of a higher master, especially if that master is Humanity.

Since Stirner thinks that political theology, which he conceives of as the worship of deified mundane concepts, is an attempt to satisfy personal desires in order to find some purpose or destiny in the world, he concludes that political theology is ultimately rooted in selfishness, even though on the surface it may appear as just the opposite. He addresses this in the following passage.

Sacred things exist only for the egoist who does not acknowledge himself, the *involuntary egoist*, for him who is always looking after his own and yet does not count himself as the highest being, who serves only himself and at the same time always thinks he is serving a higher being, who knows nothing higher than himself and yet is infatuated about something higher; in short, for the egoist who would like not to be an egoist, and abases himself (combats his egoism), but at the same time abases himself only for the sake of 'being exalted', and therefore of gratifying his egoism. Because he would like to cease to be an egoist, he looks about in heaven and earth for higher beings to serve and sacrifice himself to; but, however much he shakes and disciplines himself, in the end he does all for his own sake, and the disreputable egoism will not come off him. (1995, p. 37).

Stirner points out in this passage that the desire to obey and to sacrifice oneself to some normative authority is a way of repressing or refusing to acknowledge one's own egoism, but that this egoism is nevertheless the hidden impulse behind this desire to obey. Despite one's attempts to repress it, one's selfish disposition comes to determine the new object of worship, as it is the remedy to one's specific metaphysical insecurity. In the eyes of Stirner, political theology ultimately satisfies egoistic desires, but they cannot truly be satisfied if they are acknowledged as egoistic desires. To be satisfying, the object of worship needs to be perceived as transcendental, beyond our reach, and most importantly, feel as if it is ontologically real. If one desires to have the sense that there is a true destiny, then such a destiny cannot simply or arbitrarily be chosen but must appear as if it is objective and part of the world. Only when the object of worship seems real, can it provide the desired metaphysical security. Moreover, Stirner emphasises that there is a wish of 'being exalted.' Such a wish can only be met in the light of some normative doctrine. Yet if the world itself doesn't present an objective normative doctrine, as Stirner contends, then these progressive thinkers must invent one and make themselves believe that it is ontologically real. In this way, the philosophers make their own moral rules under the guise of objectivity so that they can satisfy the desire of following these rules.

Stirner makes it clear that involuntary egoism does not come about entirely by conscious or rational choice. What Stirner describes is perhaps better compared to a feeling that creeps up on one and can only be consciously articulated afterwards. Stirner compares this feeling to being 'possessed.'

Is it perchance only people possessed by the devil that meet us, or do we as often come upon people *possessed* in the contrary way, possessed by 'the good', by virtue, morality, the law, or some 'principle' or other? Possessions of the devil are not the only ones. God works on us, and the devil does; the former 'workings of grace', the latter 'workings of the devil'. Possessed people are *set* in their opinions. If the word 'possession' displeases you, then call it prepossession; yes, since the spirit possesses you, and all 'inspirations' come from it, call it – inspiration and enthusiasm. I add that complete enthusiasm – for we cannot stop with the sluggish, half-way kind – is called fanaticism. It is precisely among cultured people that *fanaticism* is at home; for man is cultured so far as he takes an interest in spiritual things, and interest in spiritual things, when it is alive, is and must be *fanaticism*; it is a fanatical interest in the sacred (*fanum*). (Ibid., p. 44).

Firstly, there is another play on words here that doesn't translate well into English. The German word for 'possessed' is *besessen*, which is according to Stirner revealed whenever people behave *versessen*. Even though *versessen* has been translated here as 'set,' it has a different connotation than implied here. The word 'set' in English implies that they are unlikely to be swayed to change their behaviour. Yet the German word implies that those that are *versessen* are irrationally fond of their objective and will pursue it to an extreme degree. Additionally, the word that has been translated here as 'inspiration' is the word *Begeisterung* in the original German. This translation is in itself not inaccurate. The word *Begeisterung* refers to a certain excitement or zeal and has been translated by Landstreicher as 'exaltation.' What stands out about Stirner use of language here is that the word *Begeisterung* is based on the word *Geist*, or 'ghost' in English, with the prefix 'be-' that also exists in English, like in words such as 'befall' or 'belabour.' The grammatical form indicates that one is moved by a ghost and is deliberately placed next to the word 'enthusiasm,' a word derived from Ancient Greek with similar etymological roots. Even though there is no exact etymological equivalent in English for *Begeisterung*, the closest existing English word with similar roots would be 'spirited' and the closest grammatical equivalent would be something like 'be-ghosting.'¹⁴

Secondly, it is crucial for our investigation to note that this is where Stirner mostly explicitly expounds his understanding of fanaticism. We learn that Stirner thinks that, much like there used to be a belief in the Middle Ages that people could be possessed by a malicious animating spirit that controlled one's behaviour, a similar phenomenon happens whenever one is irrationally fixated on a certain abstract mundane idea, as if some magnetic force or higher good compels the believer to act in a certain way. To Stirner then, fanaticism is more than a mere intensification of belief. We should view it as a self-induced passivity in which the fanatics do not feel as if they are making choices autonomously, but rather see themselves as being moved by a *fanum*, some divine spirit of righteousness. The core of fanaticism to Stirner is then the total self-renunciation to a *fanum*, which in turn removes all ethical responsibility for one's actions by shifting this responsibility to some external sacred concept. Later in *The Ego and its Own*, Stirner gives the following description of the mental conflict contained in this self-induced possession.

Unconsciously and involuntarily we all strive toward ownness, and there will hardly be one among us who has not given up a sacred feeling, a sacred thought, a sacred belief; indeed, we probably meet no one who could not still deliver himself from one or another of his sacred thoughts. All our contention against convictions starts from the opinion that maybe

¹⁴ We should also neglect here the modern meaning of the word 'ghosting' as ignoring someone or ceasing communication.

we are capable of driving our opponent out of his entrenchments of thought. But what I do unconsciously I half-do, and therefore after every victory over a faith I become again the *prisoner* (possessed) of a faith which then takes my whole self anew into its *service*, and makes me an enthusiast for reason after I have ceased to be enthusiastic for the Bible, or an enthusiast for the idea of humanity after I have fought long enough for that of Christianity. (Ibid., p. 316).¹⁵

Even though Stirner usually takes an inimical attitude towards political theology, this passage shows some compassion towards the inner conflict that produces fanaticism. Stirner acknowledges that the loss of faith is not uncommon, especially for his atheist contemporaries, but that an unreflective attitude towards one's inner egoistic desires leads to the subconscious espousal of a new faith. Yet because Stirner is aware that no faith could ever be satisfactory, he already anticipates a similar crisis of faith in the future.

Because Stirner considers political theology to be a product of the search for metaphysical security, he writes that the most educated and cultured, those who engage the most with ideas and questions of philosophy, have a stronger tendency to fall prey to being possessed by a new faith, as they will sooner discover the emptiness of the world and subsequently be more inclined to desperately look for an answer to this crisis, which in turn leads to the self-renunciation to a higher good that Stirner interprets as fanaticism. Stirner presents the following comparison.

The avaricious speculator throws some coppers into the poor-box and 'does good', the bold thinker consoles himself with the fact that he is working for the advancement of the human race and that his devastation 'turns to the good' of mankind, or, in another case, that he is 'serving the idea'; mankind, the idea, is to him that something of which he must say, it is more to me than myself. (Ibid., p. 270).

Stirner argues here that, much like the rich capitalist who offers the poor and impecunious some alms to absolve him-/herself of guilt and justify his/her wealth, the political theologian believes him-/herself to be serving the greater good to find absolution from his/her philosophical distress.

¹⁵ When analysing this quote, the term 'ownness' needs to be addressed as it is not actually an English word. It is the most literal approximation of the German word *Eigenheit*, which would otherwise be translated with words like 'peculiarity' or 'uniqueness.' The word is chosen by the original translator Steven Byington as he thought it better encapsulates the way Stirner uses the word *Eigenheit*. Stirner uses this word to pitch his thought against the romantic idea of absolute freedom, arguing that absolute freedom too is an extension of religious worship. Instead, Stirner favours a pragmatic freedom which involves the instrumental overcoming of obstacles for the sake of advancing other personal interests. I will discuss the concept of ownness specifically in Chapter 5.

Yet when acting on behalf of the good of mankind, the political theologian only engages with mankind in the abstract, no matter how 'devastating' his/her absolution from philosophical distress may turn out to be for actual living human beings.

The Logic of Political Theology

Stirner paints a picture of a transformation of religion into a secular form that gains power through self-subjugation, in principle without any need for external reinforcement, because it comes about through the search for a replacement for God. This picture entails a set of logical implications that we see manifest in the political sphere. The most essential part in the emergence of political theology as Stirner describes it, is that the replacement for the old God is a concept, rather than some individual. Stirner often stresses this in passages such as the following.

Concepts are to decide everywhere, concepts to regulate life, concepts to *rule*. This is the religious world, to which Hegel gave a systematic expression, bringing method into the nonsense and completing the conceptual precepts into a rounded, firmly-based dogmatic. Everything is sung according to concepts, and the real man, I, am compelled to live according to these conceptual laws. (Stirner, 1995, p. 88).

This new sacred concept is the centrepiece of a doctrine or world-view that is to guide one's actions. It is in essence the new *fanum* of the politico-theological fanatics. Though, for the sake of convenience and clarity, I will henceforth refer to such a deified concept as the 'political theos,' since the term *fanum* still refers to a topographical place of worship and the political theology that Stirner describes is precisely detached from the earthly realm. In Stirner's view of political theology, worship must revolve around a concept, rather than something mundane, because everything physical is subject to decay. The worship of an individual too would just be a temporary solution, because an individual is too temporal, corporeal and mortal to provide any metaphysical security. Moreover, an individual is fickle, emotional and erratic, which is precisely the opposite of the stability and steadfastness necessary to provide metaphysical security. Neither can the political theos be a concrete, worldly objective since the metaphysical insecurity would resurface immediately once this objective has been achieved. "Stability," Stirner declares, is "the proper life-principle of religion, which concerns itself with creating sanctuaries that must not be touched', 'eternal truths'." (Ibid., 298).

If we want a satisfactory replacement for God, it has to be something that eternally provides direction, like a North Star that is always over the horizon, lest we fall prey to the same

metaphysical insecurity again. Only a concept is abstract and transcendent enough to fill this role. Stirner emphasises that “alienness is a criterion of the 'sacred'. In everything sacred there lies something 'uncanny', that is strange, such as we are not quite familiar and at home in.” (Ibid., p. 38). In order to provide real metaphysical security, the political theos must always be over the horizon, always within sight but never within arm’s reach. It occupies a transcendental position, which Stirner calls 'alien' here, that serves as the focal point, the *telos*, towards which all human action ought to be guided. Furthermore, Stirner writes that “this foreign standpoint is the world of mind, of ideas, thoughts, concepts, essences; it is heaven. Heaven is the 'standpoint' from which the earth is moved, earthly doings surveyed and – despised.” (Ibid., p. 59). The political theos is also the epistemic position from which we must understand the world, because, in the eyes of the believer, it is more real, true and important than the mundane world in which live our everyday lives. Feuerbach’s human theos, for example, not only prescribes how we ought to live, but any action taken must be understood as a function of humanity.

The emphasis on concepts doesn't necessarily mean that there is no place for powerful and influential leaders in Stirner's analysis of political theology, but they merely serve as acolytes or priests of a concept. The most defining characteristic of Stirner's political theology, which it inherited from Protestantism, is that every individual is his/her own interpreter of what s/he believes are the precepts of the highest good. The political theology examined by Stirner is a more moralised version of traditional religion, without a mediating hierarchy, in which the represented supersedes the representer and the interpreted supersedes the interpreter. Thus, any influential figure may change hearts and minds, but is never truly in a secure position of power and can always be usurped if some slight against the highest good is perceived.¹⁶ *The Ego and its Own* provides little detail about exactly how a political theos is chosen, though we know that Stirner generally regards the choice of theos not as the product of deductive reason, but as an arbitrary preference based on an emotional extrapolation of the desires produced by metaphysical insecurity, with any kind of reasoning for it occurring *post facto*. In 1842 Stirner published an essay called *Art and Religion* (see Stepelevich, 1983, pp. 327-334) that offers some good insights into his views on this subject. In this essay, Stirner makes the proto-psychological argument that the new object of worship, political or otherwise, is a concrete expression of an already present aesthetic disposition in the shape of a solution for one's metaphysical insecurity “as a light in the innermost darkness of himself.” (Ibid., p. 327). The essay emphasises that this expression isn't generic, but a personal projection of one's feelings and desires onto an object that sets new norms. “It is the inward God, but it is set without.”

¹⁶ It is somewhat disappointing that Stirner’s view of political theology and its implications are primarily based on Protestantism, because he doesn’t provide any basis for a comparison to a political theology based on Catholicism.

(Ibid., p. 328). Religion, in turn, is according to *Art and Religion* an attempt to approach this aesthetic projection, even though it can never be reached. Stirner describes the relation between art and religion as follows.

Art creates the Ideal and belongs at the beginning of religion; religion has in the Ideal a mystery, and would, by holding fast to the Object and making it dependent upon itself unite with it in inward godliness. But when the mystery is cleared up, and the otherness and strangeness removed, and established religion is destroyed. (Ibid., p. 333).

He adds to this the following explanation. “Man relates himself religiously to the Ideal cast forth by artistic creation, to his second, outwardly expressed Ego as to an Object.” (Ibid., p. 328). Stirner argues here that religion, whether of the traditional kind or as the new political theology, serves as a connection between our psychological state and a projected aesthetic ideal. This relation provides the desired metaphysical security, but only for as long as the aesthetic object is never reached and the mystery is never resolved. In essence, Stirner sketches an image of a self-induced subjugation to self-imposed rules for the pursuit of a projection of a psychological ideal. In other words, what Feuerbach perceives as the objective rules one must follow to be a good man are in fact the product of his own personal views of the ideal man he aspires to be, based on an extrapolation of his philosophical insecurities, which especially revolve around life in the chaos of irrationality.

Art and Religion gives us a glimpse of the early development of Stirner’s thought, but it is especially relevant because it reveals how Stirner views the connection between political theology, psychology and aesthetics. According to Carroll, Stirner “transformed Feuerbach’s materialist critique of theology and metaphysics into a psychological critique of ideology. It focussed on the individual psyche as the exclusive structuring of ultimate value, and isolated ideology as the primary social weapon for subjugating this unique entity to group norms and group practices.” (1974, p. 170). Carroll doesn’t specifically refer to Stirner’s essay about religion and art, and Stirner doesn’t mention Feuerbach in this essay, yet precisely in this essay that it seems as if Stirner took a page out of Feuerbach’s book and extended it further, moving the origin of religion from anthropology to psychology. *Art and Religion* is clearer than *The Ego and its Own* about the psychologisation of religion that Carroll describes, as Stirner very explicitly links the object of religion to one’s specific psychological state.

It is crucial for Stirner’s political theology that we strive towards a political theos for its own sake. The political theos is not an instrument for the betterment of our immediate condition, but an embodiment of the good itself that serves as the foundation for a normative doctrine. Stirner takes,

for example, no issue with freedom as long as it is used as an instrument. Yet to those that seek absolute freedom, he has the following to say.

Under religion and politics man finds himself at the standpoint of *should*: *he should* become this and that, should be so and so. With this postulate, this commandment, every one steps not only in front of another but also in front of himself. Those critics say: You should be a whole, free man. Thus they too stand in the temptation to proclaim a new *religion*, to set up a new absolute, an ideal – namely, freedom. Men should be free. Then there might even arise missionaries of freedom, as Christianity, in the conviction that all were properly destined to become Christians, sent out missionaries of the faith. (Stirner, 1995, pp. 215-216).

Two comments need to be made about this citation. Firstly, in the original German, the cursive word 'should' in this citation is the translation of the word *Sollens*. In German, the word has a much stronger ethical connotation that is usually probably better translated into English as 'ought.' Secondly, the latter part of the second sentence, 'every one steps not only in front of another but also in front of himself,' seems somewhat enigmatic in this translation. In the new 2017 translation, Landstreicher translates the whole sentence as follows “Everyone brings this postulate, this commandment, not only up before others, but also before himself.” (Stirner, 2017, p. 254). In German, Stirner writes it in a way that is difficult to translate when attempting to stay as close to the original text as well as keeping the meaning. The general premise of this line is that, in political theology, the political theos is not only more important than others but even more than yourself, much like the God of Christianity is supposed to be more important than anyone in one’s life, including oneself. In fact, Stirner specifically points out that the authority of modern political theology goes further than Christianity, in particular Catholicism, ever did. Christianity is ultimately still based on an external authority that makes its doctrine known through revealed wisdom. Political theology is, according to Stirner, ultimately the product of our own cognitive faculties, but projected outwards and generalized as the highest good for all. Political theology thereby has a tighter grip on our behaviour than traditional religion ever had because it gives everything a normative dimension.

For Stirner, there is a distinctly ethical component to political theology. Metaphysical insecurity doesn’t just mean that there is a desire for a metaphysical framework that the world doesn’t meet, but it also entails that there is a lack of an ethical system because it is derived from a metaphysical outlook. Political theology is the subconscious, but artificial introduction of a

metaphysical system into the world from which an ethical system is derived. Thus, to Stirner, the desire for an ethical system precedes the actual system, i.e. the political theologian is not compelled to do good by a system of ethical realism, but has a *desire* to do good that must be satisfied.

In his critical introduction to political theology, Newman has pointed out that “political theology is not so much a problem of religion in modern societies as a problem of *power*.” (Newman, 2019, p. 19). This is definitely the case for Stirner’s view of political theology. Stirner is neither an immoralist nor a moral realist, but an amoralist, which means that he thinks that there is no morality, and that only the desire for a morality is real. His criticism of political theology is thus partly aimed at the claims of moral realism from those that believe in some political theos. For Stirner, therefore, the belief in moral realism is, often unknowingly but effectively, rendered into a means to power. His unique analysis of power sets him apart from other politico-theological theorists who place more emphasis on institutional development and therefore seem more indifferent to the place of ethics.

We can trace this understanding of ethics as a means to power back to Christianity as a specific iteration of idealism, because Stirner argues that Christianity opened the door to a new way of wielding power. Instead of physical force, Christianity presented a control over the minds of its followers with a strict normative doctrine. Throughout the years, this new idealist means to power has gradually been perfected by the likes of Luther, Descartes, Hegel, coming to its zenith in the works of Feuerbach and Bauer, and still persists to this day. We are now faced with a specifically modern drive to power that operates through a self-imposed faith in something declared sacred. Stirner describes the phenomenological power of the sacred as follows. “Before the sacred, people lose all sense of power and all confidence; they occupy a powerless and humble attitude toward it. And yet no thing is sacred of itself, but by my declaring it sacred, by my declaration, my judgement, my bending the knee; in short, by my – conscience.” (Stirner, 1995, p. 66). Stirner observes that there is a desire for something sacred. The attempt at accommodating this desire leads to the projection of a transcendental higher good, which in turn compels the individual to abide by it through its majesty. Thus, the power of political theology operates through the belief that the individual does the absolute good.

This politico-theological power works in two ways. It firstly induces the self-policing of one's thoughts and actions, and secondly it drastically affects interpersonal relations. Let us start with the first. As the previous quote already suggests, faith demands self-renunciation. As soon as something is proclaimed as sacred, its value and importance supersede a single human life, and we only exist to serve it. Stirner describes it as follows.

Self-renunciation is common to the holy with the unholy, to the pure and the impure. The impure man *renounces* all 'better feelings', all shame, even natural timidity, and follows only the appetite that rules him. The pure man renounces his natural relation to the world ('renounces the world') and follows only the 'desire' which rules him. Driven by the thirst for money, the avaricious man renounces all admonitions of conscience, all feeling of honour, all gentleness and all compassion; he puts all considerations out of sight; the appetite drags him along. The holy man behaves similarly. He makes himself the 'laughing-stock of the world', is hard-hearted and 'strictly just'; for the desire drags him along. As the unholy man renounces *himself* before Mammon, so the holy man renounces *himself* before God and the divine laws. (Ibid., p. 56).

Stirner argues here that, as soon as a political theos is invoked, it must under all circumstances be served if it truly is the ultimate good. In order to serve it, one must not only relinquish one's carnal desires but also one's critical thought so that one is completely committed to the faith. Yet he argues here as well that the faithful are 'dragged along' by desire for such self-renunciation, which hearkens back to Stirner's earlier statement that the political theologians operate under the belief that they are possessed. Self-renunciation indicates the enormity and gravity of the political theos as the only true objective for a human life and trumps any simple, earthly desire. Stirner argues that anything sacred induces an overwhelming emotional response that he calls "*sacred dread*" (Ibid., p. 67). He describes it as follows.

In fear there always remains the attempt to liberate oneself from what is feared, by guile, deception, tricks, etc. In reverence, on the contrary, it is quite otherwise. Here something is not only feared, but also honoured, what is feared has become an inward power which I can no longer get clear of; I honour it, am captivated by it and devoted to it, belong to it; by the honour which I pay it I am completely in its power, and do not even attempt liberation any longer. Now I am attached to it with all the strength of faith; I *believe*. (Ibid., p. 67).

To clarify this quote, the German word for reverence, *Ehrfurcht*, is a combination of the words for honour and fear, respectively, *Ehre* and *Furcht*. Here too, Stirner plays with the German words to distinguish a regular fear of mundane things, like heights or spiders, from the fear that one experiences in the light of the grandiosity of the political theos. The original word that is here translated as 'dread' is the word *Scheu*, which would usually be translated into English as the word 'shyness,' with which it also shares etymological roots. The fear Stirner addresses here is not a fear

of being harmed, but a fear of abandonment, as one falls back into the emptiness of the world without the theos. Stirner considers this as being a “*prisoner of faith*” (Ibid., p. 45). One is more than just possessed, as one is compelled to act on behalf of the perceived greater good because nothing is more important, not even one’s own life.

Once a political theos is invoked, it affects everything in the world and organises it in a Manichean division. Even though the object of worship is an extrapolation of an individual psychological predisposition, it is perceived as the ontologically real highest good and thus determines who is good or evil. By extension, everything in the world is arranged in the categories of good and bad, depending on how it aligns with the perceived political theos. Thus, political theology determines relationships between people by dividing them on the basis of their obedience to the political theos. Stirner contends:

Hallowed are they who recognize this highest essence together with its own, together with its revelations. The sacred hallows in turn its reverer, who by his worship becomes himself a saint, as likewise what he does is saintly, a saintly walk, saintly thoughts and actions, imaginations and aspirations. It is easily understood that the conflict over what is revered as the highest essence can be significant only so long as even the most embittered opponents concede to each other the main point, that there is a highest essence to which worship or service is due. (Ibid., p. 39).

For the faithful, the world exists in good and evil, saints and sinners. The worship of a political concept instils the feeling that one is a “*hero of faith*” (Ibid., p. 45). Stirner states that “the religious heroes of faith are zealous for the 'sacred God', the moral ones for the 'sacred good'.” (Ibid.). It is the feeling of being a hero on a quest for the greater good that completes the search for metaphysical security, as it indicates that the political theologian has not only found a secure place in the world, but one that comes with a particular destiny, *Bestimmung*.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at an overview of Stirner's unique analysis of political theology. Unlike those that have studied political theology in the 20th century, Stirner finds its origins primarily in individual faith, rather than the historical development of institutions. In contrast to Voegelin, who finds in belief the justification for a system of laws, Stirner's analysis starts one step earlier, as he argues that there is a perpetual need for, what I have called, metaphysical security to give some structure and direction to life in order to overcome a short, aimless and atomistic life in a

weak and vulnerable body prone to destruction. Modern secularism has laid bare the metaphysical insecurity that was historically held at bay by religion. Consequently, Stirner argues that the parameters of modern politics are shaped and bracketed by collective manifestation of the persistence of faith, as modern political theologians have sought to retain the religious structure of Christianity without the belief in a God by deifying an otherwise mundane concept.

When we accept Stirner's premise that politics is formed by the desire for metaphysical authority, a set of logical implications reveal themselves. Even though political theology is the product of a secular rational world view, the new mundane concept of worship must always be over the horizon and outside of our reach, as a tangible objective would only lead to more metaphysical insecurity once it has been achieved. Additionally, the deified concept must be perceived as ontologically real and objectively good, as an arbitrarily chosen object could not provide any metaphysical security if it could easily be changed. Moreover, the new object of worship demands total devotion and self-renunciation. To give the political theologian a sense of cosmic significance, the political theos must be more important than an individual life. In fact, the modern political theologian wants to feel possessed by the new political theos. It provides metaphysical security precisely because the political theologian lets it determine every aspect of his/her life, as it provides an objective to live for, a place in history and a distinction of friend from enemy.

However, Stirner sees in the emergence of political theology two conjoined problems. The first problem revolves around its veracity. Stirner argues that political theology can never resolve the philosophical crisis exposed by modernity, since there is no objective highest good. Political theology revolves around the deification of concepts, yet there always remains an ontological crevasse between the world of ideas and the mundane realm in which these ideas are sought to be implemented. This leads to an endless cycle in which deified higher goods are perpetually pursued yet never attained. Secondly, political theology demands a total dedication, devotion and self-renunciation from the individual, leading one to lose one's agency and self-determination. Yet, Stirner famously retorts: "Man, your head is haunted; you have wheels in your head! You imagine great things, and depict to yourself a whole world of gods that has an existence for you, a spirit-realm to which you suppose yourself to be called, an ideal that beckons to you." (Ibid., p. 43). Modern science and philosophy have exposed that the world itself contains no spirits, moral laws or any *Bestimmung* for humanity. Rather, this entire world of ideas is, according to Stirner, constructed internally to overcome a philosophical crisis and then projected onto the world, which Stirner effectively compares to the delusions of a madman. The combination of these two problems is the fertile soil on which modern political fanaticism grows. Stirner views fanaticism not just as the intensification of belief, but as the foundation of political theology. Fanaticism then is the self-

subjugation to a *fanum*, which in Stirner's case refers to a deified concept. The fanatic operates under the belief that s/he is compelled to act by the *fanum*, though to Stirner this is no more than a self-imposed delusion to overcome personal philosophical insecurities and to absolve oneself from the ethical burden of engaging with the world, which lends itself to intensification when political circumstances pressure the individual.

Chapter 3 – Stirner Contra Schmitt

In the previous chapter, we have examined Stirner's unique approach to political theology. In this chapter, we will contrast Stirner's ideas with those of Carl Schmitt to bring out their philosophical depth and distinctiveness. To do so, we firstly need to understand Schmitt's view of political theology. Not only is Schmitt the most prominent thinker within the field of political theology, in many ways he also represents a methodological approach that has since become 'mainstream.' Even though both Schmitt and Stirner see political theology in terms of the translation of religious concepts into secular, mundane concepts, they fundamentally differ on the level at which this transposition occurs. Schmitt studies the transposition of concepts on the juridical and sociological level, whereas Stirner finds it primarily in the faith of the individual. We will explore here how their different emphases shapes the political reality in their respective views. Furthermore, we will also explore the gap that Schmitt sees between political theology and romanticism, because Stirner's work serves as a bridge between them.

When formulating their respective views on political theology, we quickly learn that Schmitt and Stirner are often on opposite sides of classic philosophical debates. Despite his criticism of Enlightenment thinking, Stirner still generally represents the idealist search for truth, whereas Schmitt takes a Kierkegaardian leap of faith to come to his political theology. For Schmitt, then, political theology revolves around voluntary submission, whereas to Stirner it seems self-evident that one would always pursue personal freedom. Finally, their relation to the leap of faith places both thinkers on the opposite side of the Euthyphro dilemma, as Stirner sees in political theology the blind pursuit of a highest good that governs politics, whereas to Schmitt, the good is established by decision.

Schmitt's Political Theology

Stirner formulated his observation of political theology when he found himself in the prevision of social upheaval. In his group of Hegelian associates, he could already sense the early stirrings that would climax in the 1848 revolution, which in turn descended into the jostling for power between politics and religion in the *Kulturkampf*. This environment demanded a reconsideration of the religious influence in secular politics. Likewise, Schmitt found himself in tumultuous times of social unrest. He produced his most influential academic work during the interbellum, the period between the two World Wars in which the recently defeated Germany was forced to adopt the fledgling Weimar Republic, even though it did not stop Germans from looking for answers in the

political extremes. Unlike Stirner, the radical atheist, Schmitt recognised the capability of religion to provide answers in those dark times. Although he was trained as a jurist, Schmitt wrote as a conservative Catholic with a complicated relationship to the church. As a thinker, he hoped to translate the spiritual solace he found in his Catholicism to the political sphere. Unlike Stirner, Schmitt found himself in a time that already saw the formal separation of church and state and where, as Stirner anticipated, irreligiousness had gradually become the social norm. It is precisely that lack of a conspicuous connection between religion and politics that shaped Schmitt's views on political theology. Schmitt proposed his own solution to the challenges facing the fragile Weimar Republic. This engagement led Schmitt to develop a concept of 'political theology' that has subsequently become central to debates about the relationship between theology and politics.

Schmitt outlines political theology in the following terms: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also their systematic structure." (1985a, p. 36). This definition states that there are two components to the conceptual relationship between theology and politics that have to be unpacked, namely their historical development *and* the systematic overlap between theological and political concepts. To support the latter claim, Schmitt proposes an analytical framework that he calls the 'sociology of juristic concepts,' which he defines as such:

The presupposition of this kind of sociology of juristic concepts is thus a radical conceptualization, a consistent thinking that is pushed into metaphysics and theology. The metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization. The determination of such an identity is the sociology of the concept of sovereignty. (1985a, p. 46).

Modern statecraft never happens in a vacuum, but historically always had to contend with a religion that preceded it. Yet Schmitt extends this further. For Schmitt, political theology is not just the product of politics trying to incorporate religion in some form or other. Rather, we should view politics as a concrete manifestation of the dominant metaphysical view within society in a specific era. Viewed in this way, the functions historically ascribed to religion have been gradually overtaken by political institutions, though the religious metaphysical foundation is still the same. But it is not just that secular institutions have overtaken the functions of religion - and this is also

where Schmitt reveals himself as a student of Weber - our attitude towards the law is to Schmitt essentially politico-theological, as the metaphysical conceptions that come out of religion are directly transposed to the juridical domain, even if they aren't expressed in religious language anymore. Accordingly, the current liberal order is the product of "the rationalism of the eighteenth century" (Schmitt, 1985a, p. 46), which is an attitude that comes paired with the deistic withdrawal of an active God, whereas the model that persisted until the 17th century was typified by a scholastic political theology based on miracles performed by an active God.

However, the example Schmitt presents in his definition of 'the omnipotent God becoming the omnipotent lawgiver' is to him more than merely an example. The potency of law-giving systems is crucial for his views on political theology. Schmitt wrote *Political Theology* to address the weaknesses of the liberal system that became apparent during his lifetime, which he sees as the manifestation of political Protestantism. In the vein of Protestantism, the liberal political system is more passive and detached, geared towards the individual rather than the group or a hierarchical order. Moreover, Schmitt observes that Protestantism presents itself as an apolitical theology, which subsequently leads to the liberal attempt to build a neutral and all-inclusive political system that supersedes conflicts between political groups. He clarifies:

To be sure, Protestant theology presents a different, supposedly unpolitical doctrine, conceiving of God as the "wholly other," just as in political liberalism the state and politics are conceived of as the "wholly other." We have come to recognize that the political is the total, and as a result we know that any decision about whether something is *unpolitical* is always a *political* decision, irrespective of who decides and what reasons are advanced. (Ibid., p. 2).

When understood like this, liberalism is faced with a problem when it attempts to mechanise the process of decision making. Instead of placing the burden of ultimate responsibility on the shoulders of a particular individual, the liberal system opts for protocols and procedures to guide the process of decision-making. Yet this system of procedures and protocols has, according to Schmitt, no way of dealing with any scenario that falls outside of the ordinary. In fact, such a state of exception cannot possibly be captured in any procedural system, even though, as Schmitt rightly points out, the establishment of such a procedural system itself is exceptional.

Schmitt's solution to this problem with liberalism is a (re-)introduction of a singular sovereign individual, imbued with the supreme power, "who decides on the exception" (Ibid., p. 5), similar to Hobbes' Leviathan. He says that, "in the theory of the state of the seventeenth century, the

monarch is identified with God and has in the state a position exactly analogous to that attributed to God in the Cartesian system of the world.” (Schmitt, 1985a, p. 46). Especially in situations that imperil the existence of the state, Schmitt argues that there is no way for the liberal system to come to decisive resolutions, as such situations require a singular individual with unlimited power to make decisions *ex nihilo*.

Political Theology was an explicit remonstrance of, among others, the legal positivist Hans Kelsen, Schmitt’s juridical rival. Kelsen advocated a theory of law entirely detached from facts, persons, morals and even politics. Much like facts are all empirically derived from other facts, to Kelsen, law is its own hierarchical system of amoral and impersonal laws built on already established norms, which ultimately regresses back to a foundational “*basic norm (Grundnorm)*.” (Kelsen, 1967, p. 8). The involvement of persons in the juridical sphere should, in Kelsen’s view, not be that of decision but that of application and scientific observation. However, Schmitt argues that law can never operate in the abstract as envisioned by the likes of Kelsen. Even if we would rely on an abstract, impersonal law, it would still need to be interpreted and translated to political reality. Thus, he concludes that “what matters for the reality of legal life is who decides.” (Schmitt, 1985a, p. 34).

Michael Marder draws an interesting parallel between this particular argument Schmitt makes against the likes of Kelsen and the hermeneutic philosophers. In essence, Marder makes a threefold claim:

- (1) politics is unavoidably a practice of interpretation;
- (2) the interpretation *of* politics raises the question of the meaning of politics, challenging all political foundationalisms and essentialisms;
- and (3) political interpretations and the interpretation of politics may be ultimately traced back to the theological sphere, where political concepts are born and where the co-imbrication of transcendence and immanence demands an extreme hermeneutical vigilance. (2010, p. 175).

Marder argues that the necessity for interpretation in any juridical system draws the entire system and its foundations into question, which in turn will lead to the exposition of its theological origins. In this case, law has to move away from abstractions and deal with actual situations that cannot simply be captured in abstraction. Yet according to Marder, it is at the point when law is applied to concrete situations that “otherwise abstract political terms first become meaningful in a political and, hence, historical way.” (Ibid., p. 176-177). The theological origins that Marder mentions as the third part of his parallel revolves around the question of who decides. Not everyone is in an equal

position to interpret the law, which is why, according to Marder, Schmitt invokes the sovereign decider. This decider, at least in Marder's view, does not decide on a whim as a singular person, but is the one upon whom the power of decision is bestowed to resolve practical questions and thus carries the entire weight of representation.

The following passage from Schmitt best illustrates how he considers the difference of authority between the decisive sovereign system rooted in Catholicism and the liberal procedural system rooted in Protestantism. When comparing the ideas of Hobbes with Grotius, he writes that "the difference between the two schools of natural law is best illustrated by saying that one system takes its start from interest in certain understandings of justice, and therefore from a certain *content* of the decision, whereas for the other the interest only consists in the fact that a *decision* as such has been made at all." (Schmitt, 2014, p. 17). The system that Schmitt proposes is the product of his interpretation of Catholicism in which God rules over heaven and earth with unlimited power. Likewise, the ruler of a nation-state should have an unquestionable power to directly intervene in politics in a miraculous fashion. The ruler thus doesn't interpret justice, but decides upon it arbitrarily. Of course, many liberal democracies have clauses that allow for the near total control of the state by the leader of the nation in certain times of crisis, yet to Schmitt this is not actual but provisional sovereignty, as there is still always a mechanism that allows for this unlimited power to be revoked. Schmitt has in mind a leader with truly unrestricted power. In fact, in his book *Dictatorship* (2014), Schmitt meticulously excavates different dictatorial models from the Romans to the present, yet he finds none of these satisfactory. Every case of dictatorship he discusses has been a case of someone being appointed a dictator to achieve a specific aim or mission, after which the power of the dictator is revoked.

Even though the primary inspiration for Schmitt's reverence of the sovereign dictator and the formulation of political theology has been the work of Hobbes, in the years after the publication of *Political Theology*, Schmitt reconsidered some aspects of Hobbes' *Leviathan* [1651]. These are worth investigating to acquire a more thorough understanding of Schmitt's own normative political theology. In fact, in his reconsideration of the works of Hobbes, Schmitt also revealed his enduring indebtedness to the commentary he received on *The Concept of the Political* ([1932], 2007) from Leo Strauss, as Strauss directed Schmitt's attention to a few important differences he should capitalise on. Hobbes is generally considered as a monarchist, but Strauss, like Schmitt, sees in Hobbes' views ultimately the heralding of liberalism. This implies a fundamental difference in the foundation of the state between Schmitt and Hobbes, as Hobbes still relies on human reason while Schmitt relies on an all-encompassing authority. Furthermore, although Strauss observes that Schmitt essentially appropriates the Hobbesian notion of *status naturalis*, the natural bellicose state

of humanity, Hobbes thinks that “fear brings atomized individuals together” (Schmitt, 1996b, p. 33) in a commonwealth that is held together by a monarch. Yet Strauss sees a more positive uniting force in Schmitt’s concept of the political:

For Hobbes, it is the state of war of individuals; for Schmitt, it is the state of war of groups (especially of nations). For Hobbes, in the state of nature everyone is the enemy of everyone else; for Schmitt, all political behavior is oriented toward *friend* and enemy. This difference has its basis in the *polemical* intention of Hobbes’s definition of the state of nature: for the fact that the state of nature is the state of war of all against all is supposed to motivate the abandonment of the state of nature. To this negation of the state of nature or of the political, Schmitt opposes the position of the political. (Found in Schmitt, 2007, p. 106).

Schmitt reasons that, if the foundation for a state is fear rather than a positive group identifier, Hobbes’ state will ultimately devolve into a mechanised state. Such a mechanised state is the product of Hobbes’ reliance on rationality, which inevitably leads to the development of a convoluted legal structure that is further removed from the people over whom it governs. Schmitt consequently argues:

A technically neutral state can be tolerant as well as intolerant; in both instances it remains equally neutral. Its values, its truth and justice, reside in its technical perfection. All other conceptions of truth and justice are absorbed by decisions promulgated in legal commands. The absorption of other kinds of standards and values into juristic argumentation would only create new conflict and new insecurity. (1996b, p. 45).

In Schmitt’s eyes, the Hobbesian monarch can never truly represent atomised individuals if they are only brought together by fear, as it would lead to a modern, technical, bureaucratic state that produces new insecurities, rather than an organic connection between the ruler and the ruled. Here too, Schmitt distinguishes himself from Kelsen. For Kelsen, there is nothing outside of the law, meaning that Kelsen contests what he perceives as the false dichotomy between state and law. The state that Kelsen envisions conforms to the law it itself creates and the components normally considered to be distinct, such as legislation and adjudication, are in Kelsen’s view combined in one all-encompassing process. Moreover, the mechanised state that Hobbes proposes only addresses one aspect of politics according to Schmitt. He writes that “the mechanization of the concept of a state thus completed the mechanization of the anthropological image of man. Just as a mechanism is

incapable of any totality, the here and now of an individual's existence cannot attain a meaningful totality.” (Ibid., pp. 99-100). In Schmitt's view, only in the unity of a group with a shared identity represented by a strong leader can we find meaning. What Schmitt has in mind is not a sovereign that rules over specific aspects of society to simply provide security, but one that embodies the positive identity of a political group.

Finally, Schmitt takes issue with the way in which Hobbes presents his conception of the mortal god as a giant machine. Schmitt writes that Hobbes' view of the state is a transformation of “the Cartesian conception of man as a *mechanism with a soul* onto a “huge man,” the state, made by him into a machine animated by the sovereign-representative people,” (Ibid., pp. 93-94) that is projected onto the biblical image of the giant beast Leviathan. The mythical creature of the Leviathan is not even particularly fitting for the merger of man, machine and God that Hobbes has in mind for the state, especially considering that the Leviathan is the enemy of God. Hobbes uses the symbol, according to Schmitt, in an English utilitarian way, rather than relying on the intrinsic mythological meaning it comes with. The giant mechanised man of Hobbes lacks the unique particularity that Schmitt wants to see in a sovereign. For Schmitt, if the sovereign ruler is no more than a machine, he becomes exchangeable and can never really organically represent a political group. He adds that, “when an author employs an image like that of leviathan, he enters a domain in which word and language are not mere counters that [like money] can be used to calculate worth and purchasing power. In this domain, mere ‘values’ do not ‘hold true’; whatever effectively govern are force and power, throne and master.” (Schmitt, 1996b, p. 81). Schmitt is surprised that a brilliant thinker like Hobbes, who is so keenly aware of power politics, would uncritically employ the use of a symbol with a meaning that can easily be changed, either by opponents or in another historical context.

Schmitt's politico-theological analysis is not restricted to liberalism alone, or even to the liberal underpinnings of the Hobbesian security state. Even though Schmitt wrote in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution and in the midst of quasi-civil war in Germany, it could be argued that his real target is the revolutionary anarchism of the 19th century. Schmitt claims that the anarchists' rejection of both God and the state, as we find in Bakunin for instance (see 1970), still retains the same connection between theology and politics. We must not underestimate the importance of Bakunin's influence on Schmitt, as it was Bakunin who initially planted the seed of political theology in Schmitt's mind. Schmitt even bestowed upon the Russian the title of: “the theologian of the antitheological and in practice the dictator of an antidictatorship.” (Ibid., p. 66). In 1871, Bakunin penned down a sharp polemic called *The Political Theology of Mazzini* (in 1973, pp. 214-231) in which he criticised the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini for muddying his political

views with theology and metaphysics, which Bakunin clusters together under the term idealism. Bakunin reprimands Mazzini for perpetuating the belief that religion is necessary to maintain an orderly state and argues that religion is no more than a fiction that legitimises political oppression. Yet interestingly, Bakunin embraces the theological figure of Satan as the paragon of freedom and rebellion against the authority of God.

Bakunin's criticism of Mazzini's explicit connection between religion and politics not only contributed to Schmitt's own interest in political theology, but helped shape its general outline. Schmitt sees in Bakunin's views a continuation of those from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, which in turn come out of his opposition to Juan Donoso Cortés. According to Schmitt, in following Joseph de Maistre, Donoso Cortés sees in the state an absolute authority not based on reason, but on the authority of decision alone. The anarchists Proudhon and Bakunin concur, yet what separates them from De Maistre and Donoso Cortés is their belief that humanity is essentially good, whereas the two conservative thinkers see in human nature nothing but the evil of the Original Sin. Thus for the anarchists, and Stirner with them, the authority of the state and of theology is a corrupting force and an affront to individual liberty, whereas the conservatives, and Schmitt with them, find in the state the necessary mechanism to direct humanity towards the good.

Schmitt would later return to reflect on the issues he addressed during the interbellum. As part of this reflection, his final published *Political Theology II* (2008a) in 1970 that served a twofold purpose. Firstly, he takes the opportunity to restate and clarify his original thesis, in response to the criticisms he received from various interlocutors like Hans Blumenberg and the Catholic theologian Eric Peterson. Schmitt stresses here that his understanding of political theology deals less explicitly with theology and has a general focus on the relation between politics and metaphysics. He writes about the original *Political Theology* that “the book does not deal with theological dogma, but with problems in epistemology and the history of ideas: the structural identity of theological and juridical concepts, modes of argumentation and insights.” (2008a, p. 42). He continues: “The scientific conceptual structure of both faculties [politics and theology] has systematically produced areas in which concepts can be transposed, among which harmonious exchanges are permitted and meaningful.” (Ibid., p. 109). These points are made in explicit remonstrations of, as Schmitt writes, “Blumenberg's generalising mixture of my thesis with all sorts of confused parallels between religious, eschatological and political ideas could give rise to misunderstandings.” (Ibid., p. 117). Blumenberg criticises Schmitt for being a proponent of the division between politics and religion because he seeks a politics analogous to his religious views, even though Blumenberg thinks this approach is misguided because we only make this distinction on a linguistic level. Schmitt retorts that Blumenberg attempts to scientifically undermine his

analysis of political theology, yet fails to do so because he neglects the distinction between legality and legitimacy: “Thus questions of legitimacy or legality are dissolved into the universal convertibility of values.” (Ibid., p. 120). Underneath the linguistic change, Schmitt sees a real change in values and decision-making that he thinks Blumenberg misses. In later editions of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1985), Blumenberg acknowledges Schmitt’s remonstrance as justified, but sees in Schmitt’s politico-theological thesis still precisely an acknowledgement of modern secularisation because the analogy that Schmitt sees between religion and politics requires them to be separate. He writes: “Decisionism cannot function without a 'sovereign,' be it only a metaphorical one. Thus this position in political theory has a need for metaphor, and it connects that metaphor to its problematic of legitimacy by means of the assertion of secularization.” (1985, p. 100). Yet, even though Schmitt was originally mainly concerned with the defence of a sovereign decider, the reconsideration of his original thesis in *Political Theology II* opens the door to a much wider field of political theology than it appears in his 1922 book: “All de-theologized concepts carry the weight of their scientifically impure origins.” (2008a, p. 128). He further buttresses this by writing:

Political theology is indeed a polymorphous phenomenon, and, moreover, there are two different sides to it, a theological and a political one. Each is directed to its specific concepts. This is already given in the *compositum* of the phrase. There are many political theologies because there are, on the one hand, many different religions, and, on the other, many different kinds and methods of doing politics. (Ibid., p. 66).

Secondly, and most importantly to Schmitt, *Political Theology II* challenges the claim that political theology has reached its end, which is somewhat ironic now given the recent surge in interest in the field. Schmitt finds this claim nowhere more clearly articulated than in the works of the theologian Erik Peterson. Peterson claims that it is impossible for there to be any kind of Christian political theology. The only reason that Christianity ultimately got involved in political theology, according to Peterson, is because “der Monotheismus als politisches Problem war aus der hellenistischen Umbildung des jüdischen Gottesglaubens hervorgegangen [monotheism as a political problem had emerged from the Hellenistic transformation of the Jewish belief in God.]” (1935, p. 98). In Peterson's eyes, political theology is only possible for Judaism and the pagan polytheistic religions. Christianity has been appropriated by the Hellenistic peoples to serve a politico-theological purpose, but if we do Christian theology correctly, Peterson argues that political theology immediately comes to an end because the Christian God has no stake in anything political. Peterson

supports his position with a Trinitarian theological argument that undermines the analogy Schmitt draws between God and the supreme political decider. The Christian Trinity to Peterson means that God is somehow both one and three, separate but united. Schmitt's analogy, according to Peterson, only acknowledges the Oneness of the Christian God but neglects the Threeness. Schmitt argues that Peterson's claim disproves itself. We mustn't, according to Schmitt, confuse theology with religion or faith. The former is an attempt to produce an academic discipline out of religion, rather than merely the practice of it. Schmitt then restates that theology, as an academic discipline, opens the possibility for theological and political concepts to be translated into one another. No matter how we interpret Peterson's claim about the conclusion of political theology, Schmitt argues that such a conclusion can only happen if theology and politics can influence each other. "If *the theological* and *the political* are two substantially separate spheres... then a *political* question can only be dealt with *politically*." (2008a, p. 113). For Schmitt, the end of political theology – as pronounced by Peterson – is nowhere in sight as theology lies at the foundation of politics itself.

It is important for this dissertation to distinguish between Schmitt's analysis and his own normative views. Schmitt wrote *Political Theology*, and other works supporting his politico-theological analysis, for a very specific purpose: namely to propose and defend an alternative to the failing liberal democratic system he found himself in. Yet by doing so, he also presents an innovative way of analysing politics. Thus far we have looked primarily at Schmitt's analysis, but for the comparison to Stirner's approach, it is important to delve deeper into Schmitt's normative views, especially those pertaining to representation and legitimacy.

To understand the foundation of Schmitt's political theory, we must turn to *The Concept of the Political* ([1932], 2007). The general use of the term 'political' as a pejorative indicates to Schmitt a lack of understanding, so in *The Concept of the Political* he sets out to explore its true nature. Schmitt notices that other realms of human thought are defined by clear binary oppositions. Inspired by the clear antithesis between good and evil in the realm of morality and the antithesis between beautiful and ugly in the realm of aesthetics, Schmitt defines the political as the "antithesis between friend and enemy." (Ibid., p. 26). When writing about the opposition between friend and enemy, Schmitt isn't referring to any petty squabble between two individuals. Though such conflicts may happen, Schmitt has in mind a public conflict between two groups that are, in principle, of mortal threat to each other.

Schmitt doesn't see the political as an entirely isolated domain. Rather, he considers it as a threshold of intensity of separation, writing that "every religious, moral, economic, ethical, or other antithesis transforms into a political one if it is strong enough to group human beings effectively

according to friend and enemy.” (Ibid., p. 37). We should view the political as a potential that can intensify any other opposition if there is a sufficient degree of enmity. In fact, Schmitt argues that politically antagonistic groups can even consider each other morally good, yet still remain enemies. Moreover, even though Schmitt considers the determination of the enemy to be the ultimate prerogative of the sovereign, he states that no external third-party force determines what constitutes a political group and, by extension, who its enemy is. A group forms itself on the basis of some shared value and will dissipate whenever it is victorious or when there is no longer any need to unite, opening up the possibility for new political groups to form and former friends to potentially become enemies.

Schmitt argues that the liberal state attempts to supersede the political by building a system in which antagonistic groups can be managed and controlled, a sanitised arena in which differences can be debated without resort to violence. This, according to Schmitt, cannot work for two reasons. Firstly, because the liberal system would have to identify groups and the antagonism between them, which is something only the groups themselves can do. Secondly, and most importantly for political theology, because the liberal system is ultimately an *anti-politics*: it de-politicises politics. This de-politicisation undermines that power of a state that should otherwise unite political groups. Here too, Schmitt reveals his indebtedness to Strauss’ commentary on his work, as Strauss accused him of still keeping his thought confined in the compartmentalisation of liberalism, writing that “Schmitt now seeks, for his part, to bring the autonomy of the political into recognition, in opposition to liberalism but nonetheless in continuation of liberal aspirations for autonomy.” (In Schmitt, 2007, p. 102). Schmitt took this accusation to heart. In fact, according to Meier, “one can hardly say that Schmitt answers Strauss's arguments. He makes them, in this case, manifestly his own.” (2006, p. 36). Following Strauss’ suggestion then, Schmitt reasons that, by trying to de-politicise politics, liberals inevitably engage in a political partisan conflict, since they have to be antagonistic towards those who conceptualise politics in terms of friend and enemy. He argues: “If pacifist hostility toward war were so strong as to drive pacifists into a war against nonpacifists, in a war against war, that would prove that pacifism truly possesses political energy because it is sufficiently strong to group men according to friend and enemy.” (Schmitt, 2007, 36). In fact, according to Meier, we can find the core of Schmitt’s views on political theology precisely in the acknowledgement of enmity in *The Concept of the Political*. He writes: “For Schmitt the defense of enmity has a theological foundation, the battle with the enemy follows a providential destiny.” (Meier, 2011, p. 57). He further argues that “the political unit is *authoritative* not because it would be sovereign "in some absolutist sense " but because it is *political*, and it is revealed as political, according to Schmitt, *by the dire emergency*, not on the basis of substantial characteristics.” (Ibid., p. 36). The foundation for

the political is, at least according to Meier, always the decision itself. Such a decision is like an all-encompassing revealed truth to which faith is directed under the conditions that shape enmity. He sees in Schmitt's views of political theology only the subsequent recognition of the theological character of the political.

Crucially for political theology, Schmitt connects these political groups to his concept of sovereignty through political representation. During the writing of *Political Theology*, Schmitt also worked on a book that would ultimately receive the title *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* ([1922], 1996a), which extols and aggrandises Catholicism as the most complete model of political representation. Here too, Schmitt criticises the liberal political system, but *Roman Catholicism* deals more explicitly with theological subjects than *Political Theology*, which, after all, was principally an investigation into the sociology of juridical concepts and the history of ideas. In *Roman Catholicism*, Schmitt argues that the modern liberal system has compartmentalised every aspect of human affairs, from culture to economics, as a product of the specifically Protestant secularisation. The Catholic church, on the other hand, brings together the symbolic power of art and the juridical power of canonised law in a world-historical institution that holds power through personalised authority. The church is connected to a specific metaphysical outlook, yet must always make decisions in the here-and-now. By bringing together all aspects of human affairs in a personalised power, Schmitt argues that only Catholicism manages to truly represent a group of people. He writes that “the political power of Catholicism rests neither on economic nor on military means but rather on the absolute realization of authority.” (Ibid., p. 18).

Schmitt states that the church has lost the authority it once had. In the modern, liberal society, religion is relegated to the private sphere, while politics is relegated to the state, which in turn is determined by economic considerations. A parliamentary democracy only represents certain groups, but lacks an all-encompassing capacity for representation and therefore lacks legitimacy. This in part accounts for the weakness of the state under liberalism. He writes that “the time of change came when the *state lost its monopoly on the political* and other political agents..., claimed this monopoly for themselves. The traditional categories imploded when a revolutionary class, and particularly the industrial proletariat, became the new effective subject of the political.” (2008a, p. 44). Following the Catholic model, Schmitt argues that the sovereign decider is not just the one who cuts the Gordian Knot, but also the one that embodies the collective, representing its world-view and serving as a point of interaction for those outside of the group. For Schmitt, there is no comprehensive metaphysical system that can possibly represent all political groups or views. At every moment, a new situation presents itself and the political group must react to it. Yet it is difficult for an entire group to be of one mind. In such a situation, the leader is instrumental for

being the guiding, constitutive force that grounds a new juridical order. In *Political Theology*, Schmitt writes that:

All law is "situational law." The sovereign produces and guarantees the situation in its totality. He has the monopoly over this last decision. Therein resides the essence of the state's sovereignty, which must be juristically defined correctly, not as the monopoly to coerce or to rule, but as the monopoly to decide. (1985a, p.13).

It is crucial that Schmitt doesn't rely on some metaphysical force that binds people together, like the Rousseauian *volonté générale*. Schmitt argues against Rousseau that, "just as power and right are unified in God and, according to the concept of God, whatever he wills is always good and the good is always his true will, so too the sovereign – *la volonté générale* – appears in Rousseau as something that, through its mere existence, is always just what it must be." (2014, pp. 100-101). Instead of relying on such a mystical force, the particular will of Schmitt's sovereign embodies and represents the group. If there is such a thing as the *volonté générale*, it excludes the particular will of the sovereign, which can be the only thing that can represent the will of the people: "To represent in an eminent sense can only be done by a person, that is, not simply a "deputy" but an authoritative person or an idea which, if represented, also becomes personified." (1996a, p. 21).

In both *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* ([1923], 2000) and *Constitutional Theory* ([1928], 2008b), Schmitt makes the explicit case that "dictatorship is not antithetical to democracy." (2000, p. 28). He proceeds by arguing that "democracy can exist without what one today calls parliamentarism and parliamentarism without democracy; and dictatorship is just as little the definitive antithesis of democracy as democracy is of dictatorship." (Ibid., p. 32). The connection between democracy and parliamentarism commonly presented by the liberal side is, according to Schmitt, not self-evident and in some cases even self-contradictory. A liberal constitutional system can easily become less democratic than a dictator that identifies absolutely with his/her people. The liberal system aims to de-politicise politics, yet, following Schmitt's reasoning, when the state loses its hegemony, it no longer authentically represents the will of the people. Moreover, Schmitt argues that a convoluted parliamentary system can be dominated by certain elites who support particular interests, whereas the ruler and the ruled in a dictatorship share one identity, so there is always an authentic representation. If we consider a democracy to be the rule of the people, then Schmitt argues that "democracy seems fated then to destroy itself in the problem of the formation of a will" (Ibid., p. 28), since it is based on the attempt to build an overarching system in which different political groups can peacefully disagree. If a dictator expresses the will of the people, then

according to Schmitt, this is a more direct and authentic form of governing than through an extensive bureaucratic system. Instead of delegating the function of representation to the political elites in a parliament, Schmitt makes the case for a more direct representation by a dictator. “If for practical and technical reasons the representatives of the people can decide instead of the people themselves, then certainly a single trusted representative could also decide in the name of the same people. Without ceasing to be democratic, the argument would justify an antiparliamentary Caesarism.” (Ibid., p. 31). Unlike a dictator, Schmitt argues that a liberal state can never properly represent a hegemonic group, nor will it produce rulers that identify with the ruled, and thus cannot govern with the public interest in mind.

To conclude this introduction of Schmitt’s thought, let us look at his brief but insightful comments on Stirner. In his writings during the interbellum, Schmitt never once mentions the name of Stirner, yet the connection between Stirner and Schmitt's conception of political theology was there all along. After the defeat of Germany in 1945, Schmitt transcribed in his Nuremberg prison cell some reflections on his own philosophical development. These notes, later published under the title *Ex Captivitate Salus* (2017), mention Stirner in the most peculiar way. Schmitt writes: “I have known Max Stirner since *Unterprima* [the eighth year of German secondary school]. It is thanks to this acquaintanceship that I was prepared for some of what I have encountered to this day, which might otherwise have surprised me.” (2017, p. 64). Unfortunately, Schmitt never specifies what encounter it is that Stirner prepared him for, so we cannot draw any definitive conclusions from this, though we can also not see this as entirely separate from Schmitt’s thoughts on political theology. Only after the war and his subsequent imprisonment was Schmitt willing to admit that Stirner had an influence on him and to acknowledge Stirner's work as a significant turning point in the history of philosophy.¹⁷ Schmitt further elaborates:

Whoever knows the depths of the European train of thought between 1830 and 1848 is prepared for most of what rings loud in the world today. Since 1848 the rubble field left by the self-decomposition of German theology and idealistic philosophy has changed into a force field of theogonic and cosmogonic approaches. What explodes today was prepared before 1848. The fire that burns today was laid at that time. There are certain uranium mines in the history of ideas... Poor Max [Stirner] definitely belongs here. (Ibid., pp. 64-65)

Schmitt considers Stirner as part of the change in philosophy towards, what he calls, the 'theogonic

¹⁷ Found in Schmitt, 2003, p. 96.

and cosmogonic,' thereby placing Stirner somewhere within the development of politico-theological thinking. More specifically, a little further on, Schmitt makes it clear that he considers Stirner as "one of the first Panists who later peopled the field of German literature and the paradises of its deproblematization." (Ibid., p. 66). The term Panist here, meaning those inspired by or behaving like the Greek god Pan, refers broadly to those who reject the transcendental and aim to transform our present existence into an earthly paradise. Though Schmitt considers Stirner a strong representative of modern German culture, even calling *The Ego and its Own* "the most German book title in the whole of German literature" (Ibid., p. 65), the comparison to Pan is a characterisation that Stirner would not disagree with. Despite this curious mentioning of Stirner by Schmitt, the objective of this research is not an excavation of the historical influence Stirner has had on Schmitt's thinking. Although interesting, there is almost nothing to base such an investigation on and only Schmitt himself could ever answer such a question. However, Schmitt's comments in *Ex Captivitate Salus* are relevant in two ways. They display Stirner's significance to the field of political theology and they will serve as a guide through some of the philosophical disputes between the two thinkers.

Transposition of Concepts

Now that we have an overview of Schmitt's understanding of political theology, we are in a position to compare it to Stirner's. Both thinkers view political theology as the transposition of religious concepts into the political sphere. Where they differ is the place of this transposition. Schmitt regards religion and politics in essence as separate spheres. Politics is then done in accordance with a certain metaphysical outlook that comes from religion, without actually taking the place of religion, yet the state still serves a religious purpose. In Schmitt's religious view, we find ourselves in a time between the Fall of Man and the redemption by the Messiah at the end of the world. To maintain order in this chaotic time and hold the forces of evil at bay, Schmitt sets his hopes on a *katechon*, a restrainer that holds back the Antichrist, though the fate and nature of this *katechon* is ambiguous. As long as the *katechon* holds back the Antichrist and thereby orders the chaos in the world, it also withholds the return of the Messiah and the coming of paradise. To Schmitt, this restrainer "provides the only bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire of the Germanic kings." (Schmitt, 2003, p. 60). The *katechon* is for Schmitt of crucial importance, even calling it "die einzige Möglichkeit, als Christ Geschichte zu verstehen und sinnvoll zu finden [the only way to understand Christian history and find it meaningful]" (1991, p. 63), because he sees it as a condition for immanent politics that makes human effort in the earthly realm possible and worthwhile.

Despite Schmitt's preoccupation with the *katechon*, he never developed a systematic view of it. Massimo Cacciari (2018) further investigates the exact place of the *katechon* in the world, ultimately leaving us with more questions than answers precisely because the *katechon* is so difficult to place. According to Cacciari, "the *katechon* must take the form of a complex, organized power but not that which belongs to empire nor that which belongs to the Church." (Ibid., p. 49). This complexity comes precisely from the *katechon* operating both as a function and a subject that doesn't entirely belong to an earthly empire yet is connected to it because it frames the spatial and temporal conditions necessary for earthly rule. Because Schmitt thinks every age has its own *katechon*, he looks to the state to be the one in his lifetime, though he hints that the candidates for the *katechon* range from empires to specific persons, the Church and even the Jesuits. This line of reasoning is Schmitt's way of legitimating the decisionism of the state and connecting it to authentic Christian faith.

Stirner contrarily views modern politics as an extension of traditional religion. Indeed, what makes politics distinctly modern to Stirner is its inheritance of the spectrality of religion. Political theology then emerges out of the vain secular attempt to retain certain specific aspects of the waning traditional religion in society by transposing them to the political domain. Stirner wrote *The Ego and its Own* to rebuke his progressive atheist associates, but even if we take into account that many in the modern West still hold religious beliefs, these beliefs have been relegated to the private sphere and have lost most of their immediate political relevance. Political theology is to Stirner a desperate search for a political replacement for an absent God, and when God is relegated to the private sphere, his dominion has been truncated. In colloquial discourse, God is no longer perceived to be ontologically real, but serves as a personalised guiding presence. Thus, the political theology described by Stirner has gained traction even among those who hold religious beliefs in private and therewith overtaken the political function that religion had.

So even though they both Schmitt and Stirner agree that political theology is something exposed by secularism, they interpret this differently. For Schmitt, traditional religion and politics exist side by side in different spheres, but theological views unavoidably and necessarily find their way into political theory. For Stirner too, traditional religion still exists independently of politics, but modern politics is an extension of the influence religion once had. These different outlooks on the relation between religion and politics originate in a divergence of emphasis. Whereas Schmitt principally looks towards sociology and jurisprudence, Stirner presents an approach to political theology based on psychology and phenomenology. More specifically, Stirner sees the structure and formation of society and its institutions as a product of the common effort to overcome individual metaphysical insecurity, rather than as a concrete manifestation of a dominant metaphysical

outlook.

The result of this difference in emphasis is a deviating view of the primacy of the transposition of concepts. Schmitt considers political theology as a movement that happens from the outside in. He starts with a grand view of politics in which all the elements receive a place based on the metaphysical religious outlook. The individual only comes in at the very end, as s/he is shaped by the larger structures around him. Stirner starts his reasoning from the inside out. Society, in his view, reflects a certain inner psychological struggle that produces a structure which we, in turn, attempt to accommodate through social and political institutions. In Schmitt's view, it is crucial that religion and politics exist in separate domains. Yet, because of Stirner's psychological and phenomenological approach, the division between politics and religion is less relevant. The psychological needs can be accommodated by traditional religion or by some political variety of it, with the division often not being very clear.

We can also see the religious background of both thinkers echoing in this division. Although not all Catholics necessarily agree with his interpretation of the catechism, with his reliance on external structures, Schmitt presents himself clearly as a Catholic. Stirner came to reject religion altogether, but his emphasis on the individual clearly reflects the Protestant values predominant in the Prussia of the 19th century. Yet despite their different religious backgrounds, both Schmitt and Stirner relate Protestantism to political theology in a way that is both congruous and incongruous. For both, liberalism is a clear reflection of Protestantism. They agree that Protestantism is an individualising force that removed the preceding religious and political order. Yet the fundamental difference between them is their views on how Protestantism actually leads to liberalism. As established earlier, Schmitt considers liberalism as the political accommodation of the individualised and rationalised world-view of Protestantism. Stirner, for his part, does not clearly distinguish between Protestantism and Catholicism in terms of their political effects. Indeed, Stirner never articulates it explicitly, but seems to consider Protestantism as an evolution of Catholicism, rather than a competing system. Stirner's approach to political theology is based on the idea that we search for an accommodation of a set of psychological desires. Christianity harnesses these desires for political power, but Protestantism has found a way to resonate with them more effectively than Catholicism by removing the mediating hierarchy and connecting the individual immediately to God. Liberalism has likewise done away with the supernatural God, but has retained the Protestant emphasis on the personal responsibility of living a life according to dogma. In the absence of the external corrective mechanism of God, there is in liberalism an even greater pressure on the self-policing of thought and behaviour. Additionally, Schmitt and Stirner disagree on Protestantism being an atomising force. Schmitt favours a political theology based on Catholicism because he

perceives it as a uniting force, whereas he regards the individualisation entailed in Protestantism as a force that divides a society into atomised units. Yet, even though Stirner agrees that Protestantism speaks to the individual, rather than to the collective, he finds in it a unifying force as well because it reduces everyone to the same level by removing the Catholic hierarchy. It may not necessarily unite all aspects of society or a social group into one structure as Schmitt has in mind, but, for Stirner, Protestantism consolidates all individuals on the same plane around a shared object of worship as a political unit.

We can see that both Schmitt and Stirner have certain blind spots in their analysis. Stirner shows how necessary it is to take into account the influence of individual faith, yet in the Schmittian analysis, the faith of the individual often seems to be added as an afterthought to his analysis of juridical structures. Though Schmitt himself writes little about faith, he doesn't entirely neglect the place of the individual in political theology. In 1914, Schmitt published a work recently translated as *The Value of the State and the Significance of the Individual* (2021). Even though Schmitt was clearly still refining his thought, and hadn't yet connected religion and politics as he would in *Political Theology*, he still presented some interesting reflections on the relation between the state and the individual. In fact, *The Value of the State* is a prime example of the evil Schmitt sees in human nature that must be corrected by the state, which he would more explicitly articulate in the debate between Donoso Cortés and Proudhon in *Political Theology*. Schmitt states the central premise of *The Value of the State* as follows: "the state is not a construction that humans have made for themselves. It is the state, on the contrary, that makes every human being into a construction." (Ibid., 2021, p. 223). Schmitt describes how this constructing of the people works in two ways. Firstly, once a nation is under a singular ruler, the ruler is no longer just a person, but his/her personality is part of the formation of the ethos of the state, a point that would later be more extensively articulated by Kantorowicz. Schmitt argues that, when it comes to the supreme ruler, we cannot distinguish the office from the person, as the character of the ruler shapes the norms of the state and as his/her particular will, with all of its idiosyncrasies, becomes right, somewhat like a parent in a household.

Secondly, and most importantly, Schmitt describes how he thinks the state provides the individual with a sense of direction. He describes this more poetically as the state incorporating the individual in its rhythm. In *The Value of the State*, Schmitt considers that factual existence of the individual as a pile of atoms that coincidentally came together, yet is made into an individual by the values instilled by the state. If we bring this view together with his later work that has a more direct focus on the juridical domain, we get a better understanding of how Schmitt thinks the singular individual fits within political theology. Political theology then has a profound effect on the

development of the individual because the development of the individual is directly tied to the state.

This is interesting when compared to Stirner's analysis of political theology. Schmitt challenges the idea that the state and the individual exist in separate spheres that only on occasion interact with each other, although Stirner's position on this is more complex. An uncharitable reading of *The Ego and its Own*, like that of Marx, would find in it the idea that individuals exist entirely independently of their surroundings, as has historically been proposed by the likes of Descartes and Fichte. Stirner, rather, takes the individual as a starting point of his analysis, which, as we will explore in Chapter 5, is never a fixed entity. In fact, Stirner even presents an almost direct retort to Schmitt's claim that the state shapes the individual. To the general remark: "The state is the most necessary means for the complete development of mankind," he retorts: "It assuredly has been so as long as we wanted to develop mankind; but, if we want to develop ourselves, it can be to us only a means of hindrance." (1995, p. 209). To Stirner, it isn't entirely incorrect that the state has an influence on the formation the individual. The real question to Stirner is: what is one formed into? In what rhythm are we incorporated? The state squeezes one into a predetermined mould, based on some deified abstraction. What Stirner would like to see is the self-development of the individual into a complete person that is constantly finding him-/herself anew. This is the foundational difference between their frames of analysis. Schmitt sees the individual as a wholly passive, aimless fact whose meaning is provided by the state, yet the foundation of the state is arbitrary. In the Stirnerian view, a reliance on the guidance of the state is a futile attempt to evade the ethical responsibility of the singular individual. If political theology is contingent on an arbitrary foundational moment, why leave this to the state and not to every individual? Stirner takes his own individuality as the determining factor, as in his view, you are always faced with the ethical responsibility of finding your own path, even if you pretend to outsource this responsibility to the state.

Even if we take *The Value of the State* into account, the connection of faith to political institutions in Schmitt's work is still lacking. Yet we find an interesting take on this in the works of Eric Voegelin. Though Voegelin developed his views of, what he calls, 'political religions' mostly independently of Schmitt, he presents a similar emphasis on the historical development of political institutions and the religious influence on them. Unlike Schmitt's analysis of the influence of a metaphysical outlook on politics, Voegelin looks at the way in which nation-states have historically overtaken the functions of the church. Yet Voegelin is, like Schmitt, immediately concerned with the legitimacy of political institutions and what moves people to abide by them. Voegelin specifically addresses the question of faith in this. He writes: "The political community is always integrated in the overall context of human experience of world and God, irrespective of whether the political

sphere occupies a subordinate level in the divine order of the hierarchy of being or whether it is deified itself.” (2000, p. 70). To Voegelin, no matter how political institutions are formed, their legitimacy ultimately comes from the faith of the individual. Yet this passage also shows that Voegelin in principle treats religiosity as a sociological phenomenon, rather than a psychological one.

Stirner is uniquely concerned with individual faith as the primary mover. Conversely, he writes comparatively little on political institutions because of his main concern with self-subjugation rather than social authority. His brief analysis of institutions is primarily concerned with how they relate to the faith of the individual. There is, however, an issue pertaining to the legitimacy of the state in Stirner’s view that must be mentioned here. In Stirner’s view, the persistence of the state hinges on a continued belief in and servitude to the idea behind it. This take on the state has been a particular point of contention by Marx. Marx argues that “for so long the classes which are ruled would be wanting to be impossible if they had the "will" to abolish competition and with it the state and the law.” (1998, p. 349). The point Marx makes is that there is more to the state than mere belief, as if that were the case, than the state could simply be wished away. Since *The German Ideology* was never published during their lifetimes, we have no direct reaction from Stirner to Marx’ forceful argument, yet there is also little indication that Stirner explicitly opposes this argument. The difference between the thinkers here is attributable to a difference in focus, with Marx emphasising the external material forces behind the development of society and the individual, and Stirner stressing the internal philosophical conflicts within the individual turned outward.

Because Stirner views the manifestation of political institutions mainly as an accommodation and facilitation of the desire for worship, the historical changes within these institutions correlate to changes in the object of worship. Thus, to Stirner, an absolute monarch must, in his *droit divin*, make decisions in lieu of the God of Catholicism, whereas the constitutional prince must withdraw any individuality to abide by the law and rights of the constitution, like the passive God of Protestantism. The ministers of the modern liberal system likewise must act in accordance with the spirit of the nation, for “the republic is nothing whatever but - absolute monarchy; for it makes no difference whether the monarch is called prince or people, both being a 'majesty'.” (1995, pp. 202-203). To Stirner, the changes in political institutions have been minor, because they only seek to accommodate whatever the religion *du jour* is, while always demanding the same self-sacrifice of the individual.

When comparing Stirner’s and Schmitt’s approaches to political theology, we see a different model emerging for the transposition of concepts. Schmitt presents us a comparatively simple, top-

down linear model that looks like this: metaphysics – politics – individual. To Schmitt, the politico-theological transposition of concepts starts from the general religious metaphysical outlook to the political realm, which in turn shapes the individual. Stirner views the politico-theological transposition of concepts more as a triangular movement that looks like this: individual – metaphysics – politics. Since the individual looks for something to believe in, the chosen object of worship shapes his/her metaphysical outlook that, in turn, guides how politics is done in practice.

Yet, on the matter of institutions, there is an interesting kinship between Schmitt and Stirner, specifically about the significance of the concept of humanity in liberal institutions. Like Stirner, Schmitt too sees in the concept of humanity a theological authority. He writes that,

as long as the idea of humanity preserved a spontaneous power, its representatives also found the courage to succeed with inhuman power. The humanitarian philosophers of the eighteenth century preached enlightened despotism and the dictatorship of reason. They are self-assured aristocrats. Thus they base their authority... on the claim that they represent the idea of humanity. (Schmitt, 1996a, pp. 33-34).

Much like Stirner, though from a different angle, Schmitt argues that these humanitarians only haughtily claim to represent all humans, without actually doing so. They have no mandate from actual people, but merely subsist on the claim that they know the true idea of humanity. The specific difference between Schmitt and Stirner here is not the criticism of illegitimate representation, but the problem this entails. For Schmitt, the attempt to represent all humanity ignores the friend-enemy distinction. Stirner, on the contrary, argues that the concept of humanity violates the uniqueness of the individual because the individual always exceeds any concept, including humanity.

Romanticism

There is also an important convergence between Schmitt and Stirner when it comes to the place of romanticism in political theology. Before *Political Theology* was published, Schmitt wrote a tract called *Political Romanticism* ([1919], 1985b) that, despite its popularity, covered a subject that he would never return to later in his life. Even though its legacy is somewhat overshadowed by Schmitt's other works, it gives us a unique insight in the formation of his politico-theological views. Much like in *Political Theology*, *Political Romanticism* investigates the titular phenomenon that Schmitt considers to be unique to modern politics. Schmitt observes a tendency, especially among the bourgeoisie, that depoliticises politics by romanticising it. Political romanticism, then, is not a doctrine, nor does it apply to a particular ideology or inclination, as we find it both on the

revolutionary and counter-revolutionary sides. Rather, “romanticism is subjectified occasionalism. In other words, in the romantic, the romantic subject treats the world as an occasion and an opportunity for his romantic productivity.” (1985b, p. 17). We should understand Schmitt's use of the term political romanticism as referring to the suspension of political decision-making in favour of its aesthetic appeal and the suspension of the mundane order, *causa*, for the *occasio*, the occasion or opportunity.

Schmitt distinguishes three characteristics of romanticism. The first is ontological aestheticism, which refers to the transportation of any aspect of culture, including politics, to the domain of art and emotion and thereby stripping it of its own substance. Schmitt calls the second characteristic romantic irony, which refers to moving attention and focus away from the here-and-now to a world where everything is possible, yet nothing is ever decided. By doing so, the romantic suspends the regular, mundane order of the world. This is particularly relevant to Schmitt because the political romantic suspends any real political decision in favour of dreams of the best possible world. “Every concrete point of the external world can be the "elastic point": in other words, the beginning of the romantic novel, the *occasio* for the adventure, the point of departure for the fanciful game.” (Ibid., p. 89). These two characteristics together result in what Schmitt calls poetisation, which refers to the reduction of any aspect of culture to the emotional sensibilities of the romantic, rather than truth, efficacy, resolution, or anything similar. Schmitt stresses that in politics, the romantic doesn't attempt to resolve a conflict, but rather revels in its aesthetic opportunity. In fact, everything that is romanticised blends together in one aesthetic domain.

Schmitt never explicitly connects *Political Romanticism* to his views on political theology and the secondary literature on Schmitt's work doesn't usually consider them as directly related. At best we can view *Political Romanticism* as a criticism of the lack of decision-making that Schmitt commonly observes in modern politics. However, I believe it is relevant to discuss *Political Romanticism* here. It was published only a few years before *Political Theology*, which as we know is primarily concerned with political decision-making, especially concerning the value of a sovereign decision-maker, something that is precisely the opposite of his definition of political romanticism. For this reason, Schmitt sees political theology and political romanticism as antithetical in the 1920s. However, *Political Romanticism* immediately deals with the relation between politics and metaphysics. The main difference here between political romanticism and political theology is the sphere they operate in. To Schmitt, political theology is concerned with the transposition of theological concepts to the juridical domain, which operates on the highest level of politics, whereas political romanticism is primarily an investigation into the relation between a metaphysical outlook, culture and individual psychology that shape politics on a grassroots level.

Schmitt insists that for the political romantic, politics is occasionalistic and merely there to satisfy a desire, which by extension leads the romantic to project political ideas onto theology. In the light of *Political Theology II*, in which Schmitt specifically argues that political theology refers to the two-way transposition of religious and political concepts, we can see political romanticism as dealing with 'politics as religion,' as opposed to *Political Theology* which sees 'religion as politics.'

The Ego and its Own has the potential to bridge the gap that Schmitt sees between political theology and political romanticism, as there is an interesting parallel between Stirner's general approach to political theology and Schmitt's *Political Romanticism*. In fact, this helps us further understand Stirner's place in the field of political theology. Schmitt treats political theology and political romanticism as distinct phenomena, but the political theology that Stirner describes falls somewhere in between. According to Schmitt, political romanticism is a highly individualised psychological phenomenon that serves as "a mere wish fulfillment, the illusory satisfaction of a longing that was not really satisfied." (1985b, p. 25). A little later, and in the same vein as Stirner, he emphasises this by writing that romanticism "appears as a profound impulse of human nature, a general determining factor of human activity, just as elementary as the drive for self-preservation." (Ibid., p. 26). In fact, Schmitt even recognises that there is a religious quality to this political romanticism. He writes:

What is specifically romantic: the occasionalistic displacement into a "higher third" sphere that leads the romantic into mysticism or theology, the secularization of God into the genial subject, who is not satisfied with a formal perfection even in art, but instead employs forms in an arbitrary and occasional fashion in order to find the higher meaning and a metaphysical or cosmic resonance for his subjective experience. (Ibid., p. 159).

On the surface, these few quotes are very reminiscent of Stirner. For Stirner too, there is an intense longing for something transcendental, which is precisely what equips political theology with such potency. Those whom Stirner calls 'possessed' fit Schmitt's description of the romantic as a "tool of the world spirit" (Ibid., p. 81), because both Stirner's possessed and Schmitt's romantic feel as if they are moved by some spectral force, rather than by their own volition. Moreover, Stirner himself points out that the religious think like romantics, who are characterised by the same religious "longing and hope everywhere, and nothing but these. For me, call it romanticism." (1995, p. 284).

The crucial difference between the two here is that, for Stirner, the desire for a higher good serves as the foundation for political theology. This is not the case for Schmitt. Even though Schmitt published *Political Romanticism* before *Political Theology* and we do not know whether he changed

his mind, in *Political Romanticism* he already makes it clear the romantic is opposed to decisive acts. “Where political activity begins, political romanticism ends.” (1985b, p. 160). Schmitt's political theology is in the first place about the sociology of concepts, but at its core it is about the relation of these theological concepts to political decision-making. The romantic that Schmitt describes precisely does not attempt to face reality or make a decision but is absorbed by a longing that is projected onto the political domain. The worst thing that could happen to the political romantic is resolution. Yet in Stirner's view, the political theologian has made him-/herself immune to resolution precisely by the longing for the transcendental. To Stirner, political theology gets its theological character specifically because the object of worship is unattainable. This doesn't mean that in the Stirnerian view decision-making is always suspended, but it always happens in service of a higher good that can never be attained. Moreover, Schmitt writes that “if anything provides a complete definition of romanticism, it is the lack of any relationship to a *causa*.” (Ibid., pp. 82-83). Schmitt argues that romanticism is characterised by its distinct occasionalistic character. Romanticism never really engages with reality, but “transposed intellectual productivity into the domain of the aesthetic.” (Ibid., p. 15). This is interesting when we compare it to Stirner's political theology, since Stirner notices a principal lack of a *causa* in his analysis of political theology. For Stirner, the political theos is the focal point of any human endeavour that teleologically organises our lives and holds together a desired metaphysical system like a keystone in a bridge. Unlike Schmitt then, not everything is herded together under aestheticism in Stirner's understanding of political theology. Rather, the political theos brings together the domains of aestheticism, morality and politics. Yet the crucial point here is that the political theology that Stirner analyses is not related to a *causa*, but to a *telos* that is always out of reach.

The bridge that *The Ego and its Own* forms between Schmitt's political romanticism and political theology is crucial for our investigation in fanaticism. Schmitt presents political theology as a sociological matter and the wider literature on the subject treats it as such, but Stirner shows that political theology is in part shaped by a profound internal philosophical crisis turned outward. Stirner thinks there is more to the romantic approach to politics than Schmitt, as for Stirner, the political dreams of the romantic lead to action, though this action isn't, as Schmitt also observes, a real engagement with the harsh reality of politics, but rather with a projection to overcome personal philosophical insecurities. It is precisely that oversimplification and lack of engagement with the complexity of the political sphere that serves as the foundation for the uncompromising attitude that characterises the fanatic.

Existentialism

If not an existentialist himself, we can certainly consider Stirner as the harbinger of existentialism. The term 'existentialism' is of course a contentious one. A complete and thorough investigation of it would at least require another dissertation. Crucial to our investigation here is the fundamental shift from metaphysical to ontological thinking associated with existentialism. Sartre is commonly perceived as the most well-known and prevailing proponent of existentialism. He describes existentialism as “existence precedes essence; or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be our point of departure” (2007, p. 20) and proceeds: “What do we mean here by ‘existence precedes essence’? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing.” (Ibid., p. 22). Even though there is an extensive variety of viewpoints among the existentialists, they share a common premise, namely that the world presents no inherent metaphysical structure and by extension, no metaphysical foundation for any moral or political direction. Existentialism then attempts to understand the world from this specific predicament.

The Ego and its Own revolves mostly around pointing out the existential predicament and its direct connection to the development of political theology, rather than looking for a way to live in the wasteland. In fact, even Camus begrudgingly acknowledges that Stirner's “nihilism is gratified.” (1984, p. 62). Paterson writes: “Stirner would vehemently condemn each and all of the specific forms of commitment into which actual existentialists have historically entered, since all of them, in their different ways, involve an ultimate self-renunciation on the part of the egoist.” (Paterson, 1971, p. 237). In the light of this project, we can translate Paterson's argument as saying that all other existentialists ultimately still fall prey to political theology, which in turn has the potency to manifest in a fanatical form, whereas Stirner doesn't because he is conscious of his egoism. Marmysz makes an interesting observation that “Patterson [sic] was correct, then, to title his book on Max Stirner not *The Egoistic Nihilist*, but rather *The Nihilistic Egoist*.” (2003, p. 183). As we will explore in Chapter 5, Stirner neither aims his faith toward a new object of worship, nor entirely accepts the meaninglessness of life. “The Unique One's self-possession is one and the same with his 'conscious egoism'. Others may be and are natural, instinctive, unreflective egoists, but The Unique One consciously chooses egoism.” (Paterson, 1971, p. 284). Instead of providing new norms, Stirner's egoism revolves around the embracement of this predicament. Stirner most clearly formulates it as such: “But how does one use life? In using it up, like the candle, which one uses in burning it up.” (Stirner, 1995, p. 283).

Existentialism is particularly pertinent to political theology. It is not without reason that the usual names we associate with existentialism wrote their most influential works between the middle

of the 19th and the middle of the 20th century. This is precisely the period in which the loss of religion pervaded every aspect of society and gnawed at the foundations that historically provided structure to one's life. The loss of a metaphysical foundation entails the loss of a fixed and objective political structure, resigning society to chaos. In Stirner's eyes, this ontological anarchy lies at the base of all the idealist structures that are believed to exist. Once these beliefs are shattered, the chaos reveals itself, which leads political theologians to vainly attempt to put the world back together by reintroducing religious structures into society under a veil of secularism.

Even though Schmitt rarely explicitly elucidates it, his philosophy operates from a similar existentialist principle as Stirner, yet takes the opposite approach. Schmitt criticises liberals for naively thinking that there is some objective justice in the world, accessible to human reason, upon which they can build a political order. There is no liberal order, at least according to Schmitt, that has been built on a purely rational interpretation of objective justice, because all of these political systems came into being through some foundational event. Being acutely aware of the lack of a political structure in the world, Schmitt argues for a politico-theological solution to the existential predicament, but more consciously than Sartre or Camus. Schmitt's explicitly conscious choice for a politico-theological solution lies at the heart of his opposition to Stirner. Even though in this project Stirner has been presented as a critic of liberalism, in *Ex Captivitate Salus*, Schmitt makes it clear that he sees Stirner precisely as an early and exaggerated version of the liberal dream. To Schmitt, the liberals aim to make this world into a hedonistic earthly paradise without any higher purpose and he presents Stirner as a champion of this view. Yet, Schmitt retorts, a reason to live and die can only be provided by the friend/foe distinction, because “under no circumstances can anyone demand that any member of an economically determined society, whose order in the economic domain is based upon rational procedures, sacrifice his life in the interest of rational operations.” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 48). For Schmitt then, the lack of a higher purpose than one's own life is the lack of an enemy and, by extension, a lack of vitality. Without any criterion to decide what is good or bad, better or worse, life just becomes dull, empty and vapid. Schmitt finds a solution to the liberal emptiness in a political theology modelled on the Roman Catholic form. He reasons that “economic rationalism is so far removed from Catholic rationalism that it can arouse a specific Catholic anxiety. Modern technology easily becomes the servant of this or that want and need... A devout Catholic, precisely following his own rationality, might well be horrified by this system of irresistible materiality.” (Schmitt, 1996a, p. 14-15). He compounds this by writing: “The rationalism of the Roman Church morally encompasses the psychological and sociological nature of man and, unlike industry and technology, is not concerned with the domination and exploitation of matter.” (Ibid., p. 13). The world of rational economics and industry that Schmitt observes lacks a proper

answer to the existential predicament, because, even though it lets people roam free, it provides no direction. Only the Catholic political form can bring people together and provide such direction.

Schmitt's solution to the existential predicament is neither an attempt to uncover the real metaphysical system that has eluded so many philosophers, nor the aimless life of an egoist. To fill the void and overcome the existential distress, Schmitt wants a system to be manufactured through some foundational event. It doesn't have to be the one true ultimate system for all of mankind. The Gordian Knot simply has to be cut. Thus, what we get from Schmitt is a politico-theological version of the Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith,' with a reasoning that adheres to Voltaire's old adage: 'If there is no God, it would be necessary to invent him.' Marder eloquently formulates it as such: "The point of the political, like the point of the decision that lies at its core, is an instant of the greatest risk, an experience of groundlessness." (2010, p. 67). Marder articulates that Schmitt engages with the political in a way that abandons any objective, formula or metaphysics. The Schmittian approach to politics is something that emerges in an unprecedented historical context. Marder proceeds: "The decision lies exclusively with the actual participants in the conflict and their judgment... that remains existentially groundless, insofar as it hinges neither on the externality of the general norm nor on the whim of a neutral third party." (Ibid., p. 77). Once the political is engaged with, Marder argues that any mediation, debate or discussion has been abandoned in the leap of faith. Finally, he concludes then that "only a politics that does not recoil from the temporal sense of Being but, rather, plunges headlong into groundless existence will be capable of overcoming the crises and metaphysical impasses of transcendentally legitimated regimes and institutions." (Ibid., p. 187).

Yet, if we follow Stirner's logic, there is also an obvious flaw in Schmitt's leap of faith, namely that it is based on an arbitrary decision. It cannot be a satisfying solution to the existential predicament if the whole order *could* be different. What would stop someone from arbitrarily deciding on another system? How does one persist in one's faith if another leap of faith can be made arbitrarily? The reason why Stirner calls thinkers like Schmitt involuntarily egoists is not just because they seek something to live and die for, but primarily because they seek to overcome their own existential uncertainty. *The Ego and its Own* is a more strongly articulated version of Sartre's description of the existential individual when he writes that "man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." (Sartre, 2007, p. 29). However, unlike Sartre, Stirner really embraces this predicament. Seen from Stirner's perspective, Schmitt just runs around in circles without finding an actual solution. At best, he finds a way to temporarily delude himself until this delusion inevitably breaks. From this perspective, we can interpret the following remark from Schmitt's *Ex Captivitate Salus* as a retort to Stirner:

The self-armoring of Max Stirner is the highest self-deception. It is for this reason that his mixture of harmlessness and cunning, of honest challenge and deceitful swindle is so ugly. Like any egomaniac, he sees the enemy in the *not-I*. Thus the whole world becomes his enemy, and he imagines that it would have to fall for him if, remaining free, he were to offer it the brotherly kiss. In this way he hides from the dialectical power of ego splitting and seeks to elude the enemy by means of deception. But the enemy is an objective power. He will not escape it, and the real enemy will not let itself be deceived. (Schmitt, 2017, p. 70).

Schmitt sees Stirner as an even worse version of a liberal. By rejecting the political leap of faith, he believes that Stirner wilfully plunges into a life of insecurity. Because of Stirner's glorification of the temporal self and his repudiation of any principle of social organisation, Schmitt thinks that Stirner can never really associate himself with others. Stirner always exists in this limbo of temporary associations in which he can never truly count anyone as a friend, and has to rely on swindling to get his way, thereby forcing himself to constantly assess his position and security anew. Yet, according to Schmitt, it is precisely that "one categorizes oneself through one's enemy. One grades oneself through what one recognizes as hostility." (Ibid., p. 71), an echo of Theodor Däubler's phrase that 'The enemy is our own question as a figure [*Gestalt*].' The enemy is to Schmitt the usual foundation for any meaningful association, because it forces people to act. Stirner may think he has no enemies and see his temporary associations as based on amity, but Schmitt knows that this 'brotherly kiss' means nothing when the objective force of the enemy comes knocking on his door.

Voluntary Submission

In the middle of the brief chapter on Stirner in *Ex Captivitate Salus*, Schmitt lets his thoughts wander to Descartes. Though he doesn't articulate it explicitly, given the context, I think this diversion is significant because Schmitt implicitly pitches this Cartesian systematic doubt against faith, against making a choice rather than endlessly attempting to uncover what the right choice is. Schmitt seems to consider Stirner as a completion of what Descartes set out to do. Descartes set philosophy on a trail of doubt to find the ultimate truth, but never pursues this path to its end. Stirner is the one who follows this path to completion, only to realise that it leads nowhere.

Descartes was, according to Schmitt, so terribly afraid of being misled, that he doubted everything in order to find the ultimate truth. Yet unlike Stirner, who sees in Descartes' emphasis on rationality as a further development of the Christian infatuation with the world of ideas, Schmitt

views Descartes as the harbinger of self-deception. According to Schmitt, “whoever thinks of escaping the deception runs headlong into it.” (2017, p. 70). Descartes is so terrified of being misled, but it is precisely this fear that leads to deception. Stirner's persistent search for the best decision makes him, in Schmitt's eyes, the embodiment of scepticism. If we charitably interpret this section of Schmitt's *Ex Captivitate Salus*, I think we can conclude that Schmitt thinks that Stirner's ultimate rejection of systematic thinking is precisely the product of his attempt to be a good Cartesian, though Stirner criticises Descartes precisely for being a bad sceptic who merely finds yet another way to prolong the life of religion and make it more pervasive by reducing it to the body-mind dualism.

Yet when investigating the views both thinkers have of Descartes, the value of truth comes into question. Schmitt's political theology is ultimately concerned with “Hobbes’ all-deciding questions: *Quis judicabit? Quis interpretabitur?* [Who will decide? Who will interpret?]” (Schmitt, 2008a, p. 51). For Schmitt, the content of the decision is of secondary importance. If there is a truth out there that answers all our questions, Schmitt thinks the attempts at finding it haven't looked successful and we cannot wait for it. What matters is that a decision is made. To Schmitt the truth is fundamentally irrelevant to politics, as the decision needs to be made in the present moment, even in a liberal constitutional system. Yet if we follow Stirner's obstinate scepticism, though he doesn't articulate this explicitly, even a Hobbesian mortal God is only a bandage to the problem of metaphysical insecurity, rather than a solution. It is only a matter of time before the mortality of this mortal God reveals itself, once again exposing the idleness of the world. Moreover, even though in the Schmittian/Hobbesian paradigm the regal position remains, a new mortal God could make decisions that moves the group in the opposite direction of the previous decider, exposing the arbitrariness of the decision-making, unless there is some Rousseauian transcendental direction for a group that supersedes the decision of the mortal God, which is precisely what Schmitt remonstrates. Schmitt argues for cutting the Gordian knot, rather than pondering which decision is best, yet in Stirnerian logic, the question of which decision is the best remains unavoidable because the mortal God is mortal. We see here once again the difference in focus between the two thinkers. Schmitt is concerned with juridical decision-making, whereas Stirner is concerned with the relation of the individual to a political system. Schmitt's decision-making cannot wait for the ultimate truth to be uncovered, but Stirner's singular individual cannot pertinaciously dedicate his/her life to an arbitrary choice.

However, underneath this superficial question about truth lies a deeper question about voluntary submission. This is a philosophical dilemma that looms over Stirner's analysis of political theology that he sadly leaves unaddressed. Schmitt is correct in viewing Stirner as the master

sceptic. Stirner is principally concerned with the veracity of political theology. He rejects any higher good, religious or politico-theological, in the first instance because it isn't the objectively true highest good. More specifically, he challenges the views of Hegel, Feuerbach and Hess because they claim that there objectively exists something that we ought to worship, which leads them to an inconsistent and self-contradictory view. In this way, even though Stirner is usually considered to be one of the main people who moved philosophy away from idealism, he is perhaps more a child of the Enlightenment than Schmitt because Stirner rejects both religion and political theology on the basis of veracity. It seems as if Stirner thinks that the likes of Feuerbach are just not aware of their mendacity because they try to satisfy psychological insecurities. Yet, let us, for the sake of argument, accept Stirner's view and presume that there is no objective good, and thus no political theos that ought to be worshipped. Stirner presumes that if the likes of Feuerbach knew that their politico-theological views are incorrect, they would certainly change them. However, we must ask the question, what stops someone from voluntarily submitting to an arbitrarily chosen political theos? What if Feuerbach would simply acknowledge Stirner's criticism and start calling himself an apostle of the religion of humanity *à la* Auguste Comte?

Schmitt, on the other hand, has long abandoned any hopes of finding the truth and bases his views of political theology on a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. By taking a leap of faith, Schmitt essentially introduces the issue of voluntary submission into political theology, whereas for Stirner, the pursuit of truth makes it self-evident that one would choose freedom whenever possible. In fact, Schmitt even acknowledges like Stirner that the voluntary subordination of the liberals to faceless protocols is “only conceivable psychologically on the basis of the remnant of some superstition or as residues of an earlier, substantively richer, religious-like belief in the statutory form.” (Schmitt, 2004, p. 21). At least in the political domain, Schmitt simply relies on a decision of a mortal God. To Schmitt this decision is not contingent on truth, but should be consistent with history. Against truth-seekers such as Stirner, Schmitt animadverts that “it is conceivable that such a world might contain many very interesting antitheses and contrasts, competitions and intrigues of every kind, but there would not be a meaningful antithesis whereby men could be required to sacrifice life, authorized to shed blood, and kill other human beings.” (2007, p. 35). Even though Stirner is often considered to be a facilitator of the abandonment of the Enlightenment, Schmitt seems far more willing to acknowledge the subconscious tribalistic attitude in human beings.

Schmitt's penchant for voluntary submission exposes the ethics that lie underneath his views of political theology. Meier writes that, “for the political theologian, who is aware of the eschatological importance of the battle for or against enmity in an age in which “nothing is more modern than the battle against the political,” the defense of the political becomes a moral duty.”

(2011, p. 25). More specifically, even though Schmitt does not see in a political system a reflection of perfect justice, Meier shows that Schmitt's political theology is founded on the moral virtues of obedience, hope, courage and humility, which are all necessary for Schmitt's politico-theological efforts to repel the chaos endemic to human lives. Schmitt wants a strictly political order to humbly obey, which requires the courage to confront an enemy in the hope of salvation. Meier further states that the exact meaning of these virtues depend on the historical situation. "What is morally imperative for him who acts historically can be only decided based on his concrete situation; it is measured on the basis of the question with which history confronts him. This holds on closer inspection even for the cardinal virtues of *obedience, courage, hope, and humility*." (Ibid., p. 20).

If I am correct in interpreting *The Ego and its Own* as a work principally occupied with the search for truth and the subsequent acknowledgement that it cannot be found, then we also have to wonder why the egoist would be concerned with sacrificing lives, shedding blood or killing other human beings at all. It is hard to estimate what the Stirnerian response would be to Schmitt's conscious voluntary submission to a higher power, since Stirner considers it self-evident that one would not worship that which is not objectively worthy of worship. A substantial part of Stirner's investigation revolves around uncovering why the delusion of religion persists in the political sphere. Yet we can take this as an opportunity to extend Stirner's reasoning. I think that in Stirner's view, you cannot make yourself believe something you know doesn't exist. Once the illusion is broken, real faith cannot persist and at best, one can only pretend to believe and hope that it solves our problems. Even if we acknowledge that juridical decisions have to be made, as Schmitt rightly points out, they will never solve the metaphysical insecurity of the individual because they are not to truly just decisions.

Ethics and Realpolitik

When analysing the views of both Schmitt and Stirner on the relation between ethics and political theology, there emerges a topological difference. To Schmitt, the relation between ethics and political theology is very clear. Unlike his German contemporaries such as Taubes or Löwith, who take a more explicitly historical approach and generally only analyse the persistence of theological concepts in secular politics, Schmitt states explicitly in *Concept of the Political* (2007) that ethics and politics themselves exist on different planes because they have different concerns. The ethical revolves around the distinction between good and evil while the political revolves around the distinction between friend and foe. Schmitt further states that despite two groups being enemies, "the political enemy need not be morally evil." (Schmitt, 2007, p. 27). This does not mean that the political and ethical are entirely separate. The ethical could indeed serve as a basis for a political

conflict, but not every political conflict is an ethical conflict. Rather, for Schmitt, the political is more like a threshold of intensification of conflict that can emerge from other spheres. Anything and everything can serve as a basis for the friend-foe opposition in Schmitt's view.

Stirner, on the other hand, sees political theology as an extension of ethics. In fact, to Stirner it is the desire for ethics that induces political theology. Of course, unlike Schmitt, Stirner isn't particularly fond of analytical thinking or definitions, so he provides no similar comparative overview. Yet, we can nevertheless deduce that Stirner connects the friend-foe distinction much more rigidly to political theology because it has a strong ethical and transcendental dimension. He argues that the philosophical desire for metaphysical security produces a transcendental metaphysical system that is entirely held together by a highest ethical good. Ultimately, the desire for metaphysical security presents itself as a means to power because it entails a Manichean division that serves as a friend-foe distinction. The enemy is equivalent to that which is evil and that which is evil is the enemy, because the enemy is a physical representation of the obstacles on the path towards the highest good. Stirner expresses the parallel between ethics and enmity most clearly when describing the encounter between political theology and the amoral – someone who doesn't acknowledge categories like good and evil: “The moral man is necessarily narrow in that he knows no other enemy than the 'immoral' man. 'He who is not moral is immoral!' and accordingly reprobate, despicable, etc.” (Stirner, 1995, p. 53). Much like Schmitt's definition of the political, it is not impossible for there to be petty conflicts among those that consider themselves good, but for Stirner these are minor considerations that do not detract from their unity in serving the same greater good.

By pitching Stirner against Schmitt, a political version of the Euthyphro dilemma reveals itself. Both philosophers are divided by the question: is it good because it is decided or is it decided because it is good? For Schmitt, the decision constitutes the good. This is clearly evidenced when he contraposes himself to the political theology of Rousseau, precisely because Rousseau can be considered to fall on either side of this political Euthyphro dilemma. According to Rousseau, the legislators ought always to follow the divine precepts of the *volonté générale*, yet the *volonté générale* is not universal, but endemic to a group. Schmitt remarks in *Dictatorship* (2014) about Rousseau's theory of the state that, ultimately, “the decision rests with the people – and not only in a superficial juridical sense, but also in the sense that it is a decision as to whether *volonté générale*, with all its constitutional qualities, exists or not.” (2014, p. 109). For Schmitt, any doctrine or guideline for decision-making always comes about through a foundational constitutive decision. As much as Rousseau wants the legislators to be mediators between the people and some greater good, to Schmitt they still have to rely on the decision of the people to believe in a *volonté générale*, as

that decision is the foundation for the Rousseauian system.

Though Schmitt only mentions Plato sparingly in *Dictatorship*, a similar criticism would apply to the concept of the philosopher king. The Platonic philosopher king is uniquely predisposed to political decision-making because s/he possesses the best developed reasoning skills that allow him/her to access the most complete knowledge of justice. Yet Schmitt argues about the necessity of an infinitely wise philosopher king that “if people are irrational, then one cannot negotiate with them or forge contracts; rather they must be mastered through cunning or violence.” (Ibid., p. 7). Even if the Platonic philosopher king would know what is just in every situation through his/her ultimate reason, his/her wisdom will fall on deaf ears because, according to Schmitt, people do not engage with politics in a rational way. The knowledge of the philosopher king must still be applied to the governed through the lens of *Realpolitik*.

Stirner doesn't specifically comment on Rousseau and only mentions his name in a footnote.¹⁸ Though without it, it is clear that he considers political theology to fall on the other side of this political Euthyphro dilemma than Schmitt. Of course, we have to keep in mind that Stirner pits himself against political theology altogether, so he has no side in the dilemma, yet the political theology he observes is based on the belief that there truly is an ontologically real highest good. The disagreement between political theologians consists in what the highest good is, but the belief that it is real is, according to Stirner, crucial to political theology because it is the teleological foundation for political decisions. Stirner himself agrees with Schmitt that the belief in something like a *volonté générale* is the product of human minds because to him it is the product of involuntary egoism. Yet even if Schmitt is right and the belief in some higher guiding principle is constituted in a decisive moment in this world, rather than ontologically real in some transcendental realm, as long as the political theologians believe that it is real and not the product of their own minds, they will act accordingly. In Stirner's analysis, political theology has a greater potency than traditional religion because it provides more stability and rigidity, as it supplants the possibility of an omnipotent but whimsical tyrant with fixed eternal guidelines.

In comparison to Schmitt, then, Stirner has a very unique view of the relation between power and political theology. Schmitt understands state authority in the traditional way, namely that it operates through its hierarchy of command and its monopoly on violence with which it enforces laws. Of course, Schmitt ponders the question of when governmental decisions are legitimate, but the power of the decision remains in the hands of the state. To Stirner, even though he makes it very clear that he opposes the external authority of the state, the state's hierarchy is only secondary to the self-imposed authority of faith to which we wilfully, though not necessarily consciously, subject

¹⁸ Found in Stirner, 1995, p. 69.

ourselves. The state, then, is just a by-product, a secondary physical manifestation of faith. The specific form of government depends on the dominant faith, but the state itself remains, nevertheless, a mere servant of an idea because it is shaped by ethical ideas that ultimately hold political authority.

Despite the disagreements over the relation between ethics and political theology between the two thinkers, they still agree that 'might makes right.' It is no secret that Schmitt falls squarely in the bracket of *Realpolitik* and, as with other realists like Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes or Clausewitz, he sees no direct connection between ethics and politics. Stirner is a more complicated case. He explicitly argues that "the substance of 'right' becomes visible; it is - *power*. 'He who has power has right.'" (1995, p. 92). In fact, it is somewhat surprising that Stirner never comments on Hobbes. Even Marx was quick to point out Stirner's philosophical kinship to Hobbes:

"Stirner" now has to introduce an empirical definition of right, which he can ascribe to the individual, i. e., he has to recognise something else in right besides holiness. In this connection, he could have spared himself all his clumsy machinations, since, starting with Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Bodinus and others of modern times, not to mention earlier ones, might has been represented as the basis of right. (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 340).

Even though Stirner views politics as an extension of ethics, it ultimately becomes a game of power once we realise that there is no real ethics. Indeed, to Stirner, ethics is a unique means to power, since ethics is a tool to mobilise political behaviour. Even though for Stirner, ethics itself is not real and thus cannot provide a foundation for politics, the *desire* for an ethics is real and leads to political strife. Thus, both Schmitt and Stirner agree that politics is ultimately a game of power, rather than an extension of any real ethics.

The crucial difference between the two thinkers is the foundation of this game. Schmitt seeks the foundation of a political order in the acknowledgement of the reality of the enemy. He therefore pursues an all-encompassing 'world historical empire' that is, much like the political power of Catholicism, based on "the absolute realization of authority." (Schmitt, 1996a, p. 18). This makes Schmitt's understanding of *Realpolitik* much closer to the way the term is most commonly used, namely as referring to the power struggle between nation-states. Marx is right to point out in his quote that Stirner radicalises realist thinking by taking the individual, rather than the group, as the base unit for the realist power struggle, which, according to Marx, subsequently leads to the political landscape of the war of all against all. Generally, Stirner isn't concerned with international

politics and rarely mentions the struggle between nations. Domestically, he views politics as revolving around the struggle for the maximisation of one's individual power. We are, to Stirner, in a constant pursuit of self-affirmation that leads to a power struggle whenever it is hindered by the self-affirmation of others. The state, then, is a concrete manifestation of collective egoism disguised as a higher good. As we will explore in the next chapter, Stirner sees the state more as a large Leviathan-esque monster which many different people attempt to gain control of. In many cases, individuals will band together in political groups because they share egoistic interests and wish to use the state to achieve them.

On this point, however, Schmitt partly agrees with Stirner. Schmitt generally views the nation-state to be the basic unit in the game of power, but he also argues that this political group is not driven by some general will of the nation but shaped by the specific idiosyncrasies of the ruler. Thus, Schmitt too considers some individuals as the basic units in the game of power. However, Schmitt radicalises Hobbes' view in a different manner. He never made a secret of the influence Hobbes had on his own thinking, in particular when it comes to a unified nation embodied by a strong decisive sovereign. In fact, Schmitt wanted to transform Hobbes' mechanical view of the state into a personalistic and authoritative one. According to Schmitt, there is a fatal flaw in Hobbes' theory of a state led by a mortal god, namely that Hobbes' argument is still based on the rational view of society of the Enlightenment. This rational view will hollow out society and neutralise its law-making process. Schmitt argues that “the *legislator humanus* became a *machina legislatoria*” (Schmitt, 1996b, p. 65) because the sovereign in Hobbes' view is more like a manager of the nation, rather than an individual decider in the first place. What is crucial for us here is Schmitt's persistent emphasis on the unity of a political group. Both Schmitt and Stirner would like to see power in the hands of individuals, rather than abstract states, yet for Schmitt, the individual represents the unified political group. For Stirner, an individual can never be represented, nor ever represent a group, because the individual is always and necessarily a unique, unrepresentable singularity. This does not preclude groups from politics, however, but here political formations emerge contingently out of specific circumstances where it is beneficial for individuals to cooperate. We will explore this further in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

In the darkest time of Schmitt's life when he was unsure how long he still had left to live, his mind wonders to Stirner, whom he never once discussed before. This revelation is surprising to Schmitt himself, but less so to us. Even though Schmitt is outspokenly opposed to Stirner's views, there is an important kinship between the two thinkers. Often these two simultaneously agree and disagree

on subjects of political theology, which sometimes places them on opposite sides of long-standing philosophical debates. Both view the transposition of religious concepts to the political domain as the foundation of political theology, but Schmitt approaches it from a sociological angle whereas Stirner considers it as a psychological phenomenon.

From this position, they come to opposite conclusions. Schmitt sees the individual as constructed by the state. The state in turn is based on some decisive founding moment. According to Schmitt, the liberal system is flawed because it is derived from the metaphysical outlook of Protestantism in which God is more distant and individualised, which makes it ill-equipped to deal with exceptional situations that defy its normalised procedures. Stirner agrees that liberalism is based on Protestantism, but sees it as a vain attempt to pursue some perceived higher good. In Stirner's view, politics is based on the accommodation of individual faith, which in turn is rooted in a set of psychological desires. The state then is not founded on a decisive moment, but on collectivised faith, and liberalism, as an evolution of Protestantism, taps into these desires and harnesses them better.

Even though both are political realists, they respond to this in a way that is so radically opposed that they ultimately position one another as romantics. Schmitt thinks the only way to engage with realist politics is to take a leap of faith and trust in a decisive strongman who establishes a political order. He sees individualists like Stirner as trying to live in a dream world, detached from reality, in which they never have to make a decision or distinguish friends from foes. Stirner thinks that the likes of Schmitt voluntarily submit themselves to political theology to absolve themselves of the confrontation with a world that lacks objective ethics. The only way, according to Stirner, to engage with the lack of ethical realism is to embrace this condition individually and make the most of it.

Stirner has set up a unique approach to political theology that revolves around the subconscious but voluntary submission to a higher good, which stands in stark contrast to the sociological approach of someone like Schmitt. In fact, it is precisely in the sociological blind spot where Stirner operates that we can find the seeds of fanaticism. In the next chapter, we will explore exactly how involuntarily egoistic submission leads to fanaticism in modern liberalism. Schmitt has criticised liberalism for naively trying to implement a flawed system based on the Protestant metaphysical view. Stirner, on the other hand, sees in liberalism precisely the most refined appeal to metaphysical insecurity, as it revolves around the endless pursuit of some interpretation of emancipation that can never be fulfilled, yet provides the liberal with the immanent sense that s/he makes the world a better place.

Chapter 4 – Fanaticism of Liberty

Thus far we have examined Stirner's philosophical analysis of political theology and compared it to that of Schmitt. In this chapter we will explore Stirner's specific critique of liberalism as a political theology. *The Ego and its Own* was written mainly as a politico-theological criticism of his Young Hegelian contemporaries, all of whom ascribe to themselves some variety of liberalism. Yet, despite their adoption of liberal secularism, Stirner views them as political theologians. He states that "the priestly spirits of our day want to make a 'religion' of everything, a 'religion of liberty', 'religion of equality', etc., and for them every idea becomes a 'sacred cause', even citizenship, politics, publicity, freedom of the press, trial by jury." (1995, p. 72-73). In this chapter we will explore the political theology Stirner sees at the heart of liberalism and his critique of it. Despite its proponents claiming that liberalism is a secular endeavour, Stirner regards it as a form of political theology because it seeks new objects of worship - abstract, universal ideals such as liberty, equality, the recognition of individual rights, and so on. He argues that "liberalism simply brought other concepts on the carpet; human instead of divine, political instead of ecclesiastical, 'scientific' instead of doctrinal, or, more generally, real concepts and eternal laws instead of 'crude dogmas' and precepts." (Ibid., p. 88). For Stirner, liberalism, as an ideology and as a whole outlook on life, is the political form that religious belief takes in the modern secular period. Liberal secularism is premised on the institutional separation of church and state with the consignment of politics from sacred to profane spheres of life, but Stirner sees at its core nothing more than the political expression of the Christian search for salvation and the specific Protestant emphasis on individual freedom. The new secular liberal state is, just as the monarchical state before, ultimately rooted in metaphysical ideas and abstractions. Yet this time, political authority is not divinely ordained but rationally deduced from extrapolated higher goods. Indeed, Stirner generally sees in liberalism only the liberation of certain ideas and abstractions that subsequently tyrannise the individual more than Christianity did. This chapter will also bring Stirner into discussion with thinkers like Foucault and Agamben to show how Stirner's analysis can inform their genealogical investigations into modern liberalism. Finally, it will explore Stirner's relevance to contemporary forms of liberal idealisation defined by the goals of emancipation and social justice.

It must be made clear, however, that Stirner uses the word liberalism in a broader way that we would do today. Nowadays the word 'liberalism' usually refers to a governmental system based on the rule of law, popular representation, market freedom and a general maximisation of individual

liberty. Stirner sees in liberalism more than just a negative doctrine that curtails governmental control over the lives of citizens. He considers it as a normative doctrine, based on the apotheosis the concept of 'liberty,' but even extends this beyond the common meaning of liberty. Thus liberalism, for Stirner, refers to all progressive and emancipatory forms of politics, including not only what we might regard as classical liberalism - the doctrine of individual rights and freedoms - but also socialism and republicanism. Stirner draws a distinction between three forms of liberalism, which he names political, social and humane liberalism. This terminology may not be entirely intuitive for readers in the 21st century, but the ideas contained in this distinction are still clearly visible in modern politics. We have to keep in mind that *The Ego and its Own* was published in 1844, which not only means that Stirner used the terminology available at the time, but also that most of the ideas of the liberals had yet to be implemented, especially in the more autocratic German states. Stirner merely addressed the liberal theories in the way they were presented to him at the time and identifies politico-theological patterns in them that persist to this day.

Political Liberalism

The first form of liberalism that Stirner identifies is 'political liberalism.' This is nowadays perhaps best understood as something like classical or constitutional liberalism. Of the three main currents in liberalism that Stirner delineates, this is the one that comes closest to the more common contemporary use of the term. The aim of political liberalism is, according to Stirner, the liberation of a rational law from the whims of an absolute ruler, something that transforms subjects into citizens endowed with political equality and legal rights. To remove the birthright of the king, the political liberals necessarily oppose the *droit divin* argument upon which a monarchical system is based. Yet, despite the liberals claiming that they wish to remove religion from matters of state, Stirner wonders, "what is the meaning of the doctrine that we all enjoy 'equality of political rights'? Only this, that the state has no regard for my person, that to it I, like every other, am only a man, without having another significance that commands its deference." (1995, p. 93). Whether the individual is a subject to the king or a citizen of the state, s/he is not recognised as an autonomous individual in both cases, but only as a smaller aspect or component of some great abstraction. Through liberalism, the individual is reduced to nothing but a citizen whose identity is confirmed by abstract rights that, to Stirner, are just as artificial and fictitious as the monarchy itself. Liberalism thus has little to do with the liberty of the individual. He proceeds:

Political liberty means that the *polis*, the state, is free; freedom of religion that religion is free, as freedom of conscience signifies that conscience is free; not, therefore, that I am free

from the state, from religion, from conscience, or that I am rid of them. It does not mean *my* liberty, but the liberty of a power that rules and subjugates me; it means that one of my *despots*, like state, religion, conscience, is free. State, religion, conscience, these despots, make me a slave, and *their* liberty is *my* slavery. (Ibid., p. 97).

Indeed, much like traditional religion, the political theology of liberalism isn't there to serve us. Rather, it presents a new object of worship around which our lives must revolve. Political liberalism revolves around two conjoined candidates for the new object of worship. Firstly, instead of the *droit divin* or religion in general, the political liberals want a state founded on the apotheosis of human reason. Newman elucidates that reason in the conception of the modern secular state functions in Hegel's view as a transposition of divine providence. "For Hegel then, the unfolding of the spirit of reason throughout the world is simply the unfolding of religion, and its culmination in the secular state is the realisation of the kingdom of God on earth." (Newman, 2019, p. 46). The state is in the Hegelian view the political manifestation of the world spirit with the ethical content of the Christian idea that in turn serves as its source for authority and legitimacy.

Stirner remonstrates: "What is wanted is not free movement and realization of the person or of me, but of reason - a dominion of reason, a dominion. The liberals are *zealots*, not exactly for the faith, for God, but certainly for *reason*, their master." (1995, p. 96). To the liberal, reason is a tool that helps us to get rid of religious dogmas. Of course, Stirner entirely agrees with the liberal opposition to the dogmatic character of religion, which is why he contends that human reason itself becomes equally dogmatic. "The critic remains on one and the same ground with the dogmatist, that of *thoughts*." (Ibid., p. 131). Even though he acknowledges the instrumental value of reason, Stirner is highly aware that a human life can neither be understood nor governed exclusively through the lens of reason. The religion of old demands that the individual contorts itself in impossible ways, but so too does the liberal apotheosis of human reason. Even though the politically liberal state would be founded on reason rather than authority, it matters not for the liberty of the individual, as the individual is now compelled to live in an impossible self-renunciation according to the rules of reason instead of the whims of the monarch or the predicates of religion.

The second object of worship in political liberalism is the apotheosis of the constitutional state. The nationalism Stirner addresses here is one of the legal kind, rather than an elevated national spirit like Rousseau's *volonté générale* or even the nationalism we saw in the 20th century. In Stirner's eyes, instead of fighting for 'king and country,' the individual is now expected to lay down his/her life for 'constitution and rule of law.' Furthermore, Stirner writes that the apotheosis of the state is no more rational than the *droit divin*. "He in whose head or heart or both the *state* is

seated, he who is possessed by the state, or the *believer in the state*.” (Ibid., p. 209). The modern secular state has become internalised within the subject. It doesn't need to rely on a monopoly of violence, because the individual cannot envision him-/herself without the belief in or possession by the state. In this way, the rule of political liberalism is actually an even greater infringement of the liberty of the individual than the monarchy. He asks and answers: “What had the individual now become? A political Protestant, for he had come into immediate connection with his God, the state.” (Ibid., p. 94). The political Protestant pursues an unattainable objective for his/her own sake. We no longer police our own thoughts and behaviour out of fear of being sent to hell, but out of fear of straying from the path towards some self-imposed objective. Stirner further elaborates that “one is no longer separated from the state by intermediaries, but stands in direct and immediate relation to it; because one is a - citizen, not the subject of another, not even of the king as a person, but only in his quality as 'supreme head of the state'.” (Ibid., p. 96). Much like Protestantism removed the hierarchical Catholic mediation between the individual and God, political liberalism removes all the mediating subdivisions within society and thereby induces a stronger and more direct command of the state over the individual with statesmen only acting as representatives of an idea.

This direct command is more than a juridical or social contract. Stirner writes: “The properly *political* epoch had dawned. To serve the state or the nation became the highest ideal, the state's interest the highest interest, state service (for which one does not by any means need to be an official) the highest honour.” (Ibid., p. 91). In political liberalism, the state now directly commands you and expects your immediate obedience, like an active God without any intermediary. The constitution is the modern altar on which the uniqueness and self-determination of the individual is sacrificed. Stirner argues further “that in this they necessarily follow the principle, 'the end hallows the means', is self-evident. If the welfare of the state is the end, war is a hallowed means; if justice is the state's end, homicide is a hallowed means, and is called by its sacred name, 'execution'; the sacred state *hallows* everything that is serviceable to it.” (Ibid., p. 97). In liberalism, the state has the power over life and death for the sake of the abstract, even though the liberal state itself is less tangible than the monarch. At least when Louis XIV proclaimed that *l'état, c'est moi*, we knew what the state looked like, but the liberal state is based merely on the belief that it exists.

Social Liberalism

The next step on the road to liberalism is what Stirner calls 'social liberalism.' We must not confuse this with more modern left-liberalism. What Stirner really means with 'social liberalism' is socialism and communism. In fact, he generally uses these terms interchangeably. Stirner usually takes Hess and Weitling to be the main proponents of social liberalism, but includes Marx as well in the

response to his critics.¹⁹ Stirner views social liberalism not as a rival to the tenets of political liberalism, but as an evolution of it. Within the framework of liberalism, socialists accept and acknowledge the juridical equality of the citizens and thereby side with the political liberals, but also recognise the shortcomings of political liberalism. To the socialists, equality of rights simply enshrines bourgeois individualism and selfishness. In effect, the desired political and legal equality are undermined by social and economic inequality. Therefore, the social liberals sought not only liberation from political oppression but also from poverty.

Stirner acknowledges the gripes that the socialists have with political liberalism, yet believes that socialism itself is no better. The socialists ascribe the obstinate attachment to the rule of law of the political liberals to a pursuit of egoism, as they think the political liberals merely aim at securing their own wealth and property. Stirner concurs, arguing that the political liberals use the new secular state to sacralise their property in order to perpetuate the same class exploitation as before. They pursue no more than the limited and narrow egoism of ever-increasing profits, which is legitimated by the belief that property is sacred. “Under the regime of the commonalty the labourers always fall into the hands of the possessors, of those who have at their disposal some bit of the state domains..., especially money and land; of the capitalists, therefore. The labourer cannot *realize* on his labour to the extent of the value that it has for the consumer.” (Ibid., p. 104). An equalisation of rights means very little in practice for the pursuit of self-mastery. He further argues that:

Condemning a man to machine-like labour amounts to the same thing as slavery. If a factory worker must tire himself to death twelve hours and more, he is cut off from becoming man. Every labour is to have the intent that the man be satisfied. Therefore he must become a *master* in it too, be able to perform it as a totality. He who in a pin-factory only puts on the heads, only draws the wire, works, as it were, mechanically, like a machine; he remains half-trained, does not become a master: his labour cannot *satisfy* him, it can only *fatigue* him. His labour is nothing by itself, has no object *in itself*, is nothing complete in itself; he labours only into another's hands, and is *used* (exploited) by this other. For this labourer in another's service there is *no enjoyment of a cultivated mind*. (Ibid., 108).

Yet Stirner asserts that the socialists pursue egoistic ends just as much as the political liberals. Instead of acknowledging egoism and opening the road so that everyone may pursue their own opportunities to acquire more wealth, Stirner remarks that socialists desire a collectivisation of wealth and an abolition of all private property: “social liberalism concludes, *no one must have*, as

¹⁹ Found in Stirner, 2012, p. 94.

according to political liberalism *no one was to give orders*; as in that case the *state* alone obtained the command, so now *society* alone obtains the possessions.” (Ibid., p. 105). The socialists take away any and all ownership of the individual and put it in the hands of the vague abstraction called 'society.' The individual is now only at the mercy of society in the abstract and must obey its commands, which effectively makes society the new supreme object of worship – the new 'spook.'

It has to be noted that especially in his discussion of social liberalism, Stirner leans heavily on German grammar when he uses the word 'property.' Even though the German word that he uses, *Eigentum*, is translated correctly as property and colloquially used like that by German speakers, the word itself is comprised of the word *Eigen*, translated into English as 'own,' combined with the suffix *-tum*, which exists in English as the suffix '-dom' and is commonly used in words such as kingdom or Christendom. As in English, this suffix is used in German to refer to something belonging to its root word, i.e. kingdom means everything that belongs to the king and Christendom means everything that belongs to Christianity. Commonly, these grammatical formulations are used without much thought, and Germans indeed use the word *Eigentum* to refer to material property, but in his criticism of socialism, just as in the title of his book, Stirner uses the exact grammatical meaning of the word so that *Eigentum* refers to everything that could belong to the individual, including thoughts and opinions. Thus, taken in this way, Stirner's gripe with social liberalism is not just that it strips the individual of material property. When social liberalism aims to abolish all property, it strips the individual of his/her personality because, to Stirner, personal expression and autonomy are part of one's property. Stirner proceeds: “Before the supreme *proprietor* we all become equal – *ragamuffins*. For the present, one is still in another's estimation a 'ragamuffin', a 'have-nothing'; but then this estimation ceases. We are all ragamuffins together, and as the aggregate of communistic society we might call ourselves a 'ragamuffin crew'.” (Ibid., p. 106). The only way that the socialists can equalise everyone is by dragging them all down to the lowest level. Thus, the liberation from wealth inequality comes through a forced establishment of an equalising dearth.

Crucially, much in the same way that the political liberal recognises in his fellow man only a citizen, the socialist sees in his fellow man only a labourer, rather than an individual. By doing so, the socialists have transformed labour itself into a religious object by which one's values is measured. Stirner argues:

If you were a 'lazybones', he would not indeed fail to recognize the man in you, but would endeavour to cleanse him as a 'lazy man' from laziness and to convert you to the *faith* that labour is man's 'destiny and calling'. Therefore he shows a double face: with the one he takes heed that the spiritual man be satisfied, with the other he looks about him for means

for the material or corporeal man. (Ibid., p. 110).

Being a citizen merely entails an abstract juridical distinction that, in principle, requires no additional effort from the individual. However, Stirner argues that in the socialist's apotheosis of labour there lies a set of strict norms that the individual must always conform to.

Humane Liberalism

Stirner concludes his critical analysis of liberalism with its final form, 'humane liberalism.' In this case it is harder to provide a simple definition or easy comparison to 21st century political ideologies, though Stirner generally views Feuerbach's apotheosis of humanity as the main representative for humane liberalism and includes Bauer's republican criticism of political and social liberalism as well. According to Stirner, we should see this form of liberalism again as a reaction to the previous two. The humane liberal sees that political and social liberalism are both ultimately still motivated by egoism. Political liberalism seeks a liberation of the individual from monarchical authority and birthright to maximise his/her own pursuit of wealth, while socialism likewise wants to "form a society in which men are no longer dependent on fortune, but free." (Ibid., p. 109).

According to Stirner, "humane liberalism has undertaken the task of showing the other liberals that they still do not want 'freedom'." (1995, p. 125). The humane liberals observe that a pursuit of egoism only leads to antagonism. They realise that the other liberalisms only strive toward specific freedoms, rather than freedom itself, as the political liberals want to make subjects into citizens of the nation-state and the social liberals want to make citizens into labourers. Instead of emphasising the liberation of specific groups for the pursuit of their egoistic ends, the humane liberals want to free humanity from all antagonism and alienation. Ergo, the humane liberal recognises not the fellow citizen or labourer, but emphasises instead our shared humanity. Humane liberals reach the conclusion that "therefore a general human faith must come into existence, the *'fanaticism of liberty'*. For this would be a faith that agreed with the 'essence of man', and, because only 'man' is reasonable.., a reasonable faith." (Ibid., p. 116). In this way, humane liberalism is overall best compared to the modern progressive aim of tolerance and inclusivity that seeks some emancipation of all humanity from oppression, rather than the emancipation for a particular social group.

The humane liberals have taken the modern quest for liberty as far as it can go and have reached the pinnacle of liberalism, which Stirner calls the fanaticism of liberty. According to Stirner, humane liberalism aims for a total hegemonisation of society. Whereas the political liberals

and the socialists merely address specific aspects of society, the humane liberals seek a total integration and subservience to the deified concept of 'Man.' Yet, he argues that “as nobody can become entirely what the idea 'man' imports, man remains to the individual a lofty other world, an unattained supreme being, a God.” (Ibid., p. 129). Stirner proceeds:

Political liberalism abolished the inequality of masters and servants: it made people *masterless*, anarchic. The master was now removed from the individual, the 'egoist', to become a ghost - the law or the state. Social liberalism abolishes the inequality of possession, of the poor and rich, and makes people *possessionless* or propertyless. Property is withdrawn from the individual and surrendered to ghostly society. Humane liberalism makes people *godless*, atheistic. Therefore the individual's God, 'My God', must be put an end to. (Ibid., p. 128).

Since the humane liberals present an all-encompassing system of liberalism, there is no space for individual uniqueness. When Stirner writes 'my god' in this quote, he does not actually refer to some personal faith, but rather means that the individual is no longer the centre point of his/her own life, much like a god would be. We will explore this specific aspect of Stirner's philosophy in the next chapter when we look at his notion of the 'creative nothing.' The crucial point here is that, whereas the socialist may take away all the physical possessions of the individual for the sake of society, the humane liberal strips the individual of all thought and agency for the sake of humanity. Stirner further argues:

The politicians, thinking to abolish *personal will*, self-will or arbitrariness, did not observe that through *property* our *self-will* gained a secure place of refuge. The socialists, taking away *property* too, do not notice that this secures itself a continued existence in *self-ownership*. Is it only money and goods, then, that are a property, or is every opinion something of mine, something of my own? So every *opinion* must be abolished or made impersonal. The person is entitled to no opinion, but, as self-will was transferred to the state, property to society, so opinion too must be transferred to something *general*, 'man', and thereby become a general human opinion. (Ibid., pp. 115 – 116).

Here again Stirner leans on the wider grammatical meaning of the word *Eigentum*. Every advancement of liberalism is to Stirner a further encroachment on individuality. Political liberalism strips the individual of self-determination. Just as under political liberalism the individual is bound

to the laws of the nation, and just as under social liberalism s/he is stripped of all property and subordinated to society, so too under human liberalism the individual is subjected to some abstract human community or idea of human emancipation. Humane liberalism is an ideology that becomes completely internalised within the individual, becoming integrated with his/her very identity. The individual is now required to conform not to some external institution like the state and its laws, but rather to his/her own human identity, his/her essential humanity, generalised into a universal ideal.

We also have to draw a connection here between Stirner's criticism of humane liberalism and Bauer's republicanism, as Bauer brought a different aspect of humane liberalism to the table. Bauer's republicanism falls in line with the criticisms of political and social liberalism that Stirner ascribes to humane liberalism, but on the surface seems to better acknowledge the uniqueness of the individual. According to Moggach, Stirner represents a radicalised version of the Spinozist tendency in Hegelian thought that comes to expression in his view of the individual as an atomised particularity of momentary and immediate consciousness. Stirner's individualism is then interpreted by Bauer as an uncritical relation of the self to the self. Yet, Moggach argues that "particularity in its various guises is heteronomously shaped by the impress of the existing order, and by the narrow and egoistic material interests that correspond to it." (2003, p. 44). Through critical reflection, Bauer thinks that the momentary self eventually makes way for the rational self who has ends beyond his/her immediate desire.

The frequent repudiation of self-denial in Stirner's text finds its riposte here. For Bauer, the particular consciousness must elevate itself to universality as a condition of genuine self-consciousness, freed from determination by alienated, merely given forms of life. This new kind of freedom, universal self-consciousness, requires individuals to disavow their immediate interests and identities wherever these conflict with higher aims. (Moggach, 2009-10, p. 78).

There is, however, a difference in interpretation of human reason between Stirner and Bauer, at least in the way that Moggach presents him. Bauer, like other liberals, takes a Fichtean approach to reason. Once human reason is acknowledged, it entails a certain set of norms that supersedes one's immediate, momentary and 'inertial' desires. One ought to follow these norms for the general advancement of humanity. Unlike the characterisation of Stirner that Moggach presents, Stirner does indeed acknowledge the value of human reason, but he considers its value to be purely instrumental. Reason itself entails no norms and people like Bauer use it to pursue their own egoistic desires. Moreover, the individual without substance cannot distinguish between the

immediate private desires, which Bauer views as 'bad,' and the general human aims, which Bauer views as 'good,' because the general human experience is according to Stirner inaccessible to the particular individual.

Though Marx would overall fit best in the category of social liberalism, he criticises Bauer's position within humane liberalism for not being humane and liberal enough. In *On the Jewish Question* ([1844], 1978), Marx addresses a particular aspect of Bauer's aspirations to build a liberal state free from both the monarchy and the dominance of Christianity. According to Marx, and unlike Stirner, Bauer is too individualistic in his reasoning, as he wants to reduce society to a collection of atomised individuals with material aims who are only addressed on a juridical level, rather than emancipating the complete human experience. The particular Jewish question that Marx addresses here is that even though Bauer wants to emancipate the state from religion, Marx argues that he does not emancipate the people from religion but instead relegates religion to the private sphere. What Marx aims for instead is a human emancipation, a coming together of humans in a general community that encompasses all aspects of life. Thus Marx argues that:

Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a *species-being* in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognized and organized his "own powers" as *social* powers, and, consequently, no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political* power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished. (1978, p. 46).

When Marx detaches the pursuit of a common human spirit from the juridical structure of the state, it reveals precisely the alienation that Stirner attempts to address. Though Stirner never explicitly addresses Marx's views and may not even have been aware of *On the Jewish Question*, he argues that the likes of Marx and Bauer divide the individual in two, with a true human rational character on one side and an unimportant carnal momentary human existence on the other. The former of these ought to be the real human pursuit and the latter ought to be neglected. Yet Stirner's subjective approach to philosophy allows no basis to distinguish within an individual between the true human and the temporal momentary one. To the singular individual neither of these parts is more important than the other. The self is always and under all circumstances comprised of both components, so when we neglect the immediate aspect of the individual, we are not considering the self in its totality, yet the complete individual cannot be captured or represented by any of these liberalisms. Stirner refers to this unacknowledged part of the individual as the 'un-man,' a term he uses to

indicate the opposite of the perceived 'true' human. "Liberalism as a whole has a deadly enemy, an invincible opposite, as God has the devil: by the side of man stands always the un-man, the individual, the egoist. State, society, humanity, do not master this devil." (Stirner, 1995, p. 125). The un-man is crucial to Stirner's criticism of liberalism because liberalism is incapable of reckoning with it. Thus, whereas the likes of Bauer and Marx want to emancipate humanity from all manner of abstractions and argue over how this should be done, Stirner seeks to emancipate the singular individual from humanity, the final abstraction.

Equality

As the name implies, the principle aim of liberalism is to bring about a certain interpretation of liberty in society. In Stirner's distinction, the political liberals want to liberate society from birthright, the social liberals want to liberate society from poverty and the humane liberals want to liberate society from alienation. Yet Stirner demonstrates that the quest for liberty is inextricably tied to the quest for equality. All of these various views of liberalism aim to liberate people from some inequality, with the political liberals aiming for equality of rights, the social liberals aiming for equality of wealth and the humane liberals aiming for an all-encompassing human equality.

Stirner sees in the liberal pursuit of equality ultimately an extension of Christian morality: "*equality of rights*", as the revolution propounded it, is only another name for 'Christian equality', the 'equality of the brethren', 'of God's children', 'of Christians'; in short, *fraternité*." (Ibid., p. 168). The Christian morality that Stirner alludes to is well enunciated by Saint Paul when he reminds us that "in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:26-28). The liberals do nothing more than give the same Christian morality a new secular face. Stirner further expounds that "hitherto men have always striven to find out a community in which their inequalities in other respects should become 'non-essential'; they strove for equalization, consequently for *equality*., which means nothing less than that they were seeking for one lord, one tie, one faith." (1995, p. 123). Much like Christians, liberals induce their desired equality by subjugating everyone to some higher objective. However, liberals want an equality that is much more intrusive than that of Christianity, without any mediation or hierarchy. This great war for equality, waged by both the Christians and the liberals, only ends when "the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace." (Psalm 37:11). Whether everyone is equal as a citizen, labourer, human, Christian or any other denomination, to Stirner, these are all indicators of servitude, as under all circumstances it is a decimation of individuality, because inequality originates in dissimilitude between individuals.

However, if we follow Stirnerian logic, a few important differences between Christianity and the liberal political theology reveal themselves. If we are all equal in the eyes of the Christian God, this does not necessarily mean that we, as mortal individuals, must consider everyone as equals. The equality that Saint Paul refers to is not enforced by humans, but by the creator of the universe. This is not the case for the liberals. Even though liberalism derives its notion of rights from Christianity, there is no God to enforce justice in the afterlife, so the liberals must pursue justice on earth. Thus, the modern liberals judge the society of mortals from some assumed godlike position as if they had the eyes of God. In their pursuit for this equality, these liberals expose the politico-theological character of their views, as they pursue an objective that can never be reached. Much like the concept of humanity, equality can mean one of two things. Either it refers to the Procrustean attempt to make everyone identical, which is obviously not what the liberals have in mind, or it refers to, as Stirner puts it: “Equality being now conceived as equality of the *human spirit*, there has certainly been discovered an equality that includes *all* men; for who could deny that we men have a human spirit.” (1995, p. 156). When viewed in the latter way, even though we have many idiosyncratic differences, we are all equal on some spiritual level. Whereas it is easy for the political and social liberals to measure how equal people are with respect to their specific aims, the humane liberals need to rely on some abstract metaphysical scale that indicates equality. Yet, unlike the Christians, from whom equality depends on God’s sagacity, the liberals have no clear way to measure the value of human beings. Thus, Stirner points out a paradox:

Every real man, because he does not correspond to the concept 'man', or because he is not a 'generic man', is a spook. But do I still remain an un-man even if I bring man (who towered above me and remained other-worldly to me only as my ideal, my task, my essence or concept) down to be my *quality*, my own and inherent in me; so that man is nothing else than my humanity, my human existence, and everything that *I* do is human precisely because I do it, but not because it corresponds to the *concept* 'man'? *I* am really man and the un-man in one. (1995, p. 159).

Whenever equality is taken as the highest good, the world is consequently framed as an opposition between two groups. Bauer explicitly elucidates: “the general freedom (that all citizens are equal) is still subject to limitations in real life where religious privileges are still powerful, and this limitation influences legislation and creates a division of the citizens into oppressors and oppressed.” (1958, pp. 67-68). This particular dichotomy of oppressors and oppressed, sometimes phrased as the opposition between privileged/unprivileged, advantaged/disadvantaged or haves/have nots, leads

liberalism, like any other political theology, to a distinction between friend and foe that is reminiscent of Schmitt, with the liberals there to emancipate the oppressed. Though unlike Schmitt, for Stirner such an opposition comes precisely out of the moralisation of politics. Though this division is endemic to all liberalisms, it is most noticeable among the socialists, as in their efforts to emancipate one group they must necessarily pitch it against others. Nevertheless, for all liberalisms the dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed becomes the *de facto* lens through which they look at politics and the liberal can easily be convinced that there is always something to emancipate.

Humane liberalism seems to be the outlier here, as it proclaims an opposition to all antagonisms. Yet these liberals too live in a world with a moralised dichotomy in which they must oppose any dissenters, emancipate them and bring them into the fold of humanity. In fact, this is where Stirner's criticism of the apotheosis of humanity in liberalism aligns perfectly with that of Schmitt, who articulates this point of criticism as follows.

Humanity as such cannot wage war because it has no enemy, at least not on this planet. The concept of humanity excludes the concept of the enemy, because the enemy does not cease to be a human being-and hence there is no specific differentiation in that concept. That wars are waged in the name of humanity is not a contradiction of this simple truth; quite the contrary, it has an especially intensive political meaning. When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy. (Schmitt, 2007, p. 54).

Schmitt follows this up with the sharp remark that "here one is reminded of a somewhat modified expression of Proudhon's: whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat." (Ibid.). To both Schmitt and Stirner, humanity is never used in its literal meaning, but as a means for enmity. For Schmitt, the concept often merely serves as a justification for political opposition, but for Stirner the concept of humanity entails an additional problem. Stirner argues that we can interpret the liberal use of the term 'humanity' in two ways. Either it is merely a descriptive concept, in which case it is so vague and all-inclusive that it becomes devoid of content and thus meaningless because absolutely everyone is included for just being human, or we can take 'humanity' as a restrictive normative concept. In the latter case, it sets a standard that everyone ought to live up to. Yet Stirner rightfully points out that it is impossible to entirely live up to these standards, as one either falls short of all

the norms that must be lived up to all the time, or the individual exceeds this narrow definition of humanity. There is for the subject always an excess that exceeds the narrow definition of humanity of the liberals, which is a philosophical problem Stirner refers to as the 'un-man.' The un-man complicates the emancipatory pursuits of the liberals because the liberals base their argument on a claim of representation, with socialists representing labourers and humane liberals representing all of humanity, even though they have no mandate to do so. The un-man refers to that aspect of the individual which falls outside of any definition of humanity, yet is still relevant to the subject, which makes it necessarily unrepresentable. When the liberals claim to represent this particular view of humanity, it always entails a particular enmity towards the un-man, because an individual never fits the brackets of the liberals.

Moreover, what if one does not want to conform to a normative interpretation of 'Man?' Besides restricting individual freedom, Stirner also exposes the folly of the attempted eradication of all antagonisms. As soon as they set up some normative view of humanity that has to include everyone, then anyone who doesn't comply is branded an enemy and is immediately dehumanised. The liberal attempt to be tolerant and all-inclusive actually leads to an antagonism between the concept of humanity and individual humans. Even if the wishes of the individual would align perfectly with some grand liberal objective, liberalism still restricts the freedom of the individual. Stirner elaborates:

If one were even to conceive the case that every individual in the people had expressed the same will, and hereby a complete 'collective will' had come into being, the matter would still remain the same. Would I not be bound today and henceforth to my will of yesterday? My will would in this case be frozen... My creature - namely, a particular expression of will - would have become my commander... Because I was a fool yesterday I must remain such my life long. So in the state-life I am at best - I might just as well say, at worst - a bondman of myself. Because I was a willer yesterday, I am today without will: yesterday voluntary, today involuntary. (Ibid., p. 175).

If the Prussian monarchy was replaced by some democratic, parliamentary form of liberalism in which the individual gets his/her way, the sacralisation of this new institution may serve just as much as a hindrance in the future. Stirner is very aware that individuals aren't perfectly reasonable and their wishes are subject to change, yet the apotheosis of some deified concept leads to a fixed orientation point just over the horizon, even if it is voluntarily chosen.

Finally, to Stirner, the last thing an autonomous individual would want is equality. The

political theology that Stirner describes exists in denial of one's uniqueness, and uniqueness revolves precisely around inequality. It has to be noted here that in English, the word 'equality' is loaded with the connotation of a comparison of a certain values, i.e. wealth, strength, influence, status, etc., whereas the words like 'sameness' or 'likeness' refer merely to equalities or differences without any particular value attached. However, with regard to Stirner's criticism of liberalism, the distinction between the connotations of these words becomes meaningless for two reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, Stirner rejects any abstractions that serve as the foundation for the connotation that the word 'equality' has – a devaluation of all values – which renders the meaning of 'equality' as similar to words like 'sameness' or 'likeness.' Whether we regard the word 'equality' as being based on a hierarchy or not, it always implies a hegemony that opposes the uniqueness and 'ownness' of the individual. Secondly, the German language makes no distinction between these connotations like English does. Stirner nearly always uses the word *Gleichheit*, etymologically related to the English word 'like' or 'alike',²⁰ which is usually translated in *The Ego and its Own* as equality.²¹ When not quoting French authors, Stirner only uses the word *Egalität* once in the original German,²² which shares Latin roots with the English word 'equality,' to make the specific point that the free market of the liberals is not free to compete with the state while making a quick reference to the ideals of the French Revolution. Thus, as part of his criticism of liberalism, Stirner opposes equality/sameness and celebrates inequality/difference because it is the main vehicle for expressing one's uniqueness. The individual, in the Stirnerian view, gives a unique and personal meaning to everything, whereas the equality of the liberals robs the individual from assigning his/her own value to anything.

Pastoral Power

Stirner presents an image of a liberalism as a political rationality that exerts power not through the force of repression, but through a self-enforced subjugation to some higher good. It is a kind of power that, at least according to Stirner, we have inherited from Christianity because it is in essence a secularised version of Protestantism. There is an important parallel that is worth exploring between the power of political theology that Stirner sees lingering in liberalism and the notion of 'pastoral power' as described by Michel Foucault. In his lecture series *Security, Territory, Population* ([1977-78], 2007), Foucault finds the origins of liberalism and the modern *raison d'état* in the idea of the Christian pastorate. He sees in Christianity a unique development with respect to

²⁰ The English word 'sameness' also has Germanic roots, but only in the Scandinavian languages does it retain the same meaning as in English. In both Dutch and German, 'sameness' is related to the words *samen* and *zusammen*, which in both cases means 'together.'

²¹ This applies to all the English translations, including the new *The Unique and Its Property* from Landstreicher.

²² Stirner, 1995, p. 231

not only the Hellenic civilisations, but also with respect to the Judaic religion. Instead of God serving as a supreme, sovereign decider that rules over a certain territory like a monarch, Foucault argues that early Christians viewed God as a shepherd that guides his flock as a “multiplicity in movement” (2007, p. 171) towards its own salvation. He sums it up as follows:

We can say that the idea of a pastoral power is the idea of a power exercised on a multiplicity rather than on a territory. It is a power that guides towards an end and functions as an intermediary towards this end. It is therefore a power with a purpose for those on whom it is exercised, and not a purpose for some kind of superior unit like the city, territory, state, or sovereign. Finally, it is a power directed at all and each in their paradoxical equivalence, and not at the higher unity formed by the whole. (Ibid., 174).

Foucault presents pastoral power as a form of power that relies not on the force of decree and absolute obedience to a sovereign ruler, but on individuals being guided as a flock by a shepherd towards a salvatory end, thereby transforming the old fear of violence within a certain territory into the leadership of a willing collective. This new leadership operates along three vectors, delineated by Foucault as: “The pastor guides to salvation, prescribes the law, and teaches the truth.” (Ibid., p. 224). According to Foucault, the *raison d’être* of the pastorate is not to command people, but to lead them towards the good, which does not just revolve around actions but also their spiritual guidance. Thus, following the shepherd is in the self-interest of the individual and the community on the path towards salvation. In order to attain this salvation, the shepherd erects a set of rules, an order of law, for the flock to follow. Finally, the truth here does not refer to any scientific or rational truth. According to Foucault, we must understand it as a submission to revealed wisdom. The truth here then is not the truth about the physical world, but the following of a dogma in order to discover, according to Foucault, the secret depths of the soul. Foucault explains:

The function of the examination of conscience... is not to assure the individual’s mastery of himself, in compensation, as it were, for his subordination to the director in this examination. On the contrary, it will be quite the opposite. One will only examine one’s conscience in order to tell the director what one has done, what one is, what one has experienced, the temptations to which one has been subject, and the bad thoughts that inhabit one’s mind, that is to say, one examines one’s conscience the better to mark and fix more firmly the relationship of subordination to the other. (Ibid., p. 238).

Pastoral power reveals a paradoxical view of the individual, at least in the way Foucault describes it. On the one hand, pastoral power speaks immediately to a sense of self. The self, as long as it obeys the spiritual guide, follows a straight path towards the good, but only at the price of individual autonomy, which is willingly relinquished because of the promise of salvation. “In pastoral power...” Foucault further explains, “we have a mode of individualization that not only does not take place by way of affirmation of the self, but one that entails destruction of the self.” (Ibid., p. 236). On the other hand, the shepherd also guides the flock as a whole. Even though the shepherd must save and protect all individual members of the flock separately, the paradoxicality here is that, as Foucault explains, “the necessity of saving the whole entails, if necessary, accepting the sacrifice of a sheep that could compromise the whole.” (Ibid., p. 226). Through pastoral power, the individual is now tasked with the specific purpose of pursuing salvation through the guidance of the shepherd, but in this is contained a demand for self-renunciation and obedience.

Foucault calls this liberal appropriation of the Christian pastoral power 'governmentality,' which demarcates a shift in the way people are ruled from absolutist monarchies to the modern nation-state. Lois McNay effectively summarises governmentality as follows:

Foucault uses the term ‘governmentality’ to denote a peculiarly modern form of political rule, the legitimacy of which is derived not from the wisdom, might or religious sanction of the sovereign but from the ‘rational’ ordering of men and social affairs. Governmental reason represents an approach to social control that operates not through direct state sanction but through the indirect shaping of ‘free’ social practices on two levels: *regulatory* or *massification techniques* that focus on the large-scale management of populations... and *individualizing, disciplinary mechanisms* that shape the behaviours and identity of the individual through the imposition of certain normalizing technologies or practices of the self. Both regulatory and disciplinary techniques operate at the level of the body but ‘one is a technology in which the body is individualized as an organism endowed with capacities, while the other is a technology in which bodies are replaced by general biological processes.’ (2009, p. 57).

This new governmental reason integrates aspects of the pastoral approach to power; the liberal state sees itself as the shepherd of a collective. A complete exposition of the inner workings of Foucault’s notion of governmentality exceeds the scope of this project. What warrants a discussion here is how Foucault describes its influence on the individual. His lecture series given the following year, *The Birth of Biopolitics* ([1978-79], 2008), further extends his description of the liberal appropriation of

the Christian pastoral power into the 20th century. Here he articulates a shift within the liberal view from classical liberalism to ordoliberalism, which is Foucault's name for the distinct philosophy of the Freiberg school in the 1930s. Whereas classical liberalism desires an active refrainment of the government from social life, ordoliberalism seeks to understand social life through the lens of economics, which places the burden of responsible self-management on the individual. The individual is reconfigured as a self-governing enterprise, which, according to Foucault, is the primary disciplinary mechanism through which this conception of liberalism operates. McNay further elaborates: "Discipline and freedom are not opposites, therefore, but intrinsically connected in that biopower indirectly organizes individuals in such a way that their apparent autonomy is not violated." (2009, p. 63). Thus, rather than limiting governmental power to maximise individual freedom, as in the classical conception of liberalism, Foucault identifies in ordoliberalism a conjunction of governmental power and individual freedom.

Newman is right to point out a correlation between this pastoral power and Stirner's political theology. He writes: "For Foucault, then, the question of power relations is necessarily connected, as an ethical problem, with the relationship one has to oneself." (2019, p. 123). There is, on the surface, a clear similarity between Foucault's description of pastoral power and Stirner's analysis of political theology. Both Stirner and Foucault observe a transformation of ethics into a means of power. This new means to power operates through the renunciation of the self that is inherited by liberalism from Christianity. This self-renunciation comes about voluntarily out of the belief that it leads to some salvation. Newman continues: "Like Stirner, who was engaged in a similar revolt against the pastoral power that lingered on in liberal humanism, Foucault is interested in the ways in which the subject might evade the 'fixed ideas' and essential identities that he was required to embody and conform to." (Ibid., p. 122). We can view Foucault's formulation of governmentality as a more concrete articulation of how a modern state operates once we accept Stirner's premise of internalised subjection to some higher good. Whereas Stirner sketches the particular subjective philosophical crisis with which pastoral power resonates, Foucault shows how it has historically shaped the modern political sphere. However, the crucial difference between them is that Stirner sees in the innate philosophical crisis a drive towards unification and hegemony, whereas Foucault describes a multiplicity of individual enterprises existing under the wing of a pastoral government.

There is also a connection here between both thinkers and Nietzsche's reflection on the relation between power and ethics, which falls exactly in-between the two as Nietzsche was likely inspired by Stirner and in turn inspired Foucault. However, although the assault on moral realism in *On the Genealogy of Morality* [1887] looks similar to that of Stirner, Nietzsche chooses an inverted approach. For Nietzsche, the dominant values in society are established on the basis of the

psychological character of the dominant group, whereas Stirner believes that it is the psychological primacy of belief itself, rather than the content of the belief, that enables this particular power to be wielded. Though not entirely in the same way, Foucault re-inverts the connection Nietzsche inherits from Stirner between ethics and power.

Giorgio Agamben sought to expand and deepen Foucault's genealogical investigation into liberal governmentality and pastoral power, but instead of considering it as a particular modern development of Christian thinking, he reveals in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011) that the origin of pastoral power can be traced much further back to Hellenic thinking. *The Kingdom and the Glory* was written as a companion piece to Agamben's most explicit and elaborate investigation of Schmitt's thought in *State of Exception* (2005b). Whereas the latter explicitly deals with Schmitt's politico-theological paradigm of sovereign decision-making, the former explores the more inactive side of political theology. Agamben starts his investigation from the debate between Schmitt and Peterson, but uses it mainly as a platform to further investigate Peterson's admittedly flawed rebuttal to Schmitt's *Political Theology*. As we have explored in the previous chapter, Peterson argues that a true Christian political theology is impossible because Schmitt neglects the distinct Threeness of the Trinity. Through Peterson, Agamben finds the origin of political theology and pastoral power in the Hellenic concept of *oikonomia*. With their faith interpreted as a divine *oikonomia*, the management of the household, the early Church fathers sought to understand how the Christian God, who is both one and three at once, manages His world. However, Agamben notices that this early discussion of the Trinity in the divine household somewhat overlooks the place of the spirit and emphasises mainly the relation between the Father and the Son. Rasmus Ugilt comments that "the solution to the problem of squaring monotheism with the divinity of both Father and Son entailed a distinction between God's being and God's activity in the form of *oikonomia*." (2014, p. 86). This dichotomy between being and activity is the central issue of Agamben's investigation, as he still finds it in the liberal view of governance in a secular form. Even though Agamben thinks that Peterson's dismissal of political theology is erroneous, he credits Peterson for "having grasped the analogy between the liberal political paradigm that separates kingdom from government and the theological paradigm that distinguishes between *archē* and *dynamis* in God." (2011, p. 73). Peterson set out to disprove Schmitt's political theology as a field of investigation, but, according to Schmitt, he thereby made a valuable contribution to it. Agamben follows Schmitt in seeing in the liberal political view the same division between *archē*, the underlying abstract providential principle, and *dynamis*, the historical potential that unfolds out of the *archē*. He then continues these observations by identifying at the heart of the Christian interpretation of *oikonomia* a fundamental bipolar division and oscillation between, what he calls, the Kingdom and the

Government that extends all the way to modern liberal thought. Agamben succinctly summarises the exact different between Kingdom and Government as follows:

The Kingdom concerns the *ordo ad deum*, the relation of creatures to the first cause. In this sphere, God is impotent or, rather, can act only to the extent that his action always already coincides with the nature of things. On the other hand, the Government concerns the *ordo ad invicem*, the contingent relation of things between themselves. In this sphere, God can intervene, suspending, substituting, or extending the action of the second causes. Yet, the two orders are functionally linked, in the sense that it is God's ontological relation with creatures - in which he is, at the same time, absolutely intimate with them and absolutely impotent - that founds and legitimates the practical relation of government over them; within this relation... his powers are unlimited. The splitting between being and praxis that the *oikonomia* introduces in God actually functions like a machine of government. (Ibid., p. 134).

Agamben traces this distinction back through Peterson to Adolphe Thiers' proclamation that the King reigns but never governs. The King in this case provides the symbolic authority, legitimacy, and ontological foundation. The Government, in turn, refers to the Christian *oikonomia* or management of the world, whereby the authority of God is delegated and a certain division of labour is established. It deals with the practical aspects of politics and immediate situations, but always does so under the guidance of the Kingdom. The two are always related, but can never merge. Ugilt summarises the central issue of the Agambian view of governmentality as: "Politics moves from theological ontology to theological economy. It is not the sovereign—and certainly not the sovereign people—but rather the minister and the administrator who are in power. Or to be precise: the centre of power has been emptied, but the minister is still keeping house with persons and things from his position right next to the empty centre." (2014, p. 88). In the view of the intergovernmental oscillatory picture that Agamben presents, governance happens in the shadow of an absent God. However, this dichotomy has a third component that Agamben alludes to in the previous quote with the word 'intimacy.' There is a connection between the Kingdom and the Government that is not always easy to discern, yet politics relies on it constantly. Agamben refers to this in-between as the 'glory:' "the government is possible only if the Kingdom and the Government are correlated in a bipolar machine: the government is precisely what results from the coordination and articulation of special and general providence." (2011, p. 114). The glory is the connecting tissue that brings together the Kingdom and the Government. It is often manifested in rituals and

festive celebrations, and today in the form of the mediatic spectacles, to indicate the alignment of governing with reigning.

Even though the immediate reference to God is absent from modern statecraft, Agamben argues that this dichotomy serves as the “epistemological paradigm of modern government.” (Ibid., p. 142). Modern politics is to Agamben really just a bipolar providential machine. On the surface it is based on a mechanistic view of society and its people, but driven by a secularised version of divine providence. Agamben argues that “modernity, removing God from the world, has not only failed to leave theology behind, but in some ways has done nothing other than to lead the project of the providential *oikonomia* to completion.” (Ibid., p. 287). Modern governments are just as much based on some providential guidance, as Agamben points out that “the model of general providence is based on eternal laws that are entirely analogous to those of modern science” (Ibid., p. 122), as those of the natural sciences and human reason. The modern view of *oikonomia* is, according to Agamben, the managerial rationality that seeks to govern society in its own (economic) interests, often according to the imperatives of the market or the exigencies of security, or according to other biopolitical norms and goals (health, productivity). It is this approach to politics that produces not necessarily any specific goals or norms, but the epistemological paradigm that one ought to live up to any goals or norms that Stirner is so vexed about. In fact, Agamben ties the governmental machine to biopolitics by identifying a final component, 'grace.' Grace stands in Agamben's analysis opposite to nature. It refers to the uniquely humane qualities of reason, will, communication and so on that have been bestowed upon us by God to burden us with the task of finding the truth ourselves. Agamben proceeds:

Starting from the end of the sixteenth century, the problem of the government of the world will overlap more and more with that of the modes and the efficacy of grace: the treatises and debates on providence will take the shape of analyses and definitions of the figures of grace as preventative grace, concomitant grace, gratuitous grace, habitual grace, sufficient grace, efficient grace, and so on. And not only do the forms of government immediately correspond to the figures of grace, but the necessity for the gratuitous help of God, without which man cannot achieve his aim, corresponds to the necessity of government, without which nature would not be preserved in its being. (Ibid., p. 137).

Despite removing God from the equation, modern governmentalism relies on the same introspective discipline for the governmental machine to operate. Only through the specific innate humane qualities characterised here as grace can we connect governmental providence to practical politics

through an individual or communal self-administration.

Foucault and Agamben together present an understanding of the persistence of Christian thinking in modern secular politics that is similar to that of Stirner, but much more refined and analytical. They all ascribe to the metaphysical outlook of medieval Christianity a unique approach to politics that demands the coordination of individual behaviour by the providential power of the state and the market. This view stands in stark contrast to Schmitt's exclusive emphasis on decision-making that neglects any kind of providence, which is precisely what Agamben ascribes to Peterson's contribution to political theology. Moreover, Schmitt criticises the liberal-Protestant approach to politics precisely for attempting to manufacture such providential guidelines through procedures and committees. Yet both Stirner and Foucault think that the pastoral transformation of power was already contained in the Catholic view. Foucault specifically sees the Reformation not as a fight over doctrine, but a fight over the pastorate. The central question to the Reformation, then, is: who will guide the individual to salvation, the hierarchy or an individual connection to God? Moreover, in contrast to Schmitt's view, Agamben's work reveals that the formation of the liberal system was not a foundational act *ex nihilo*, but based on the persistence of the Christian, and even pre-Christian, providential view that still guides liberal decision-making today. When taken together, these three thinkers show that liberalism does more than it lets on. It is more than just a value-free system that exists merely to manage conflicts between otherwise free atomised people. Even though God has been removed from the providential machine, there is still a clear and compelling normative orientation to the liberal view that places the burden of obedience on the individual.

Even though Foucault and Agamben present an approach to political theology that aligns very well with Stirner's direction, there are differences that need to be addressed. Most prominently, both Foucault and Agamben engage in a history (or archaeology, genealogy) of ideas and practices, in order to explore the emergence and development of the concept of modern liberal government. In modern political institutions, Foucault finds not a continuation of pastoral power as such, but pastoral power as a model for, what he calls, modern 'governmentality.' Agamben finds a similar connection to perceived eternal laws of modern governments that guide their earthly decisions. Stirner takes a different approach. Whereas Foucault and Agamben both focus on the interaction between subject and governance, Stirner focusses on the internalised philosophical struggle of the singular individual within this interaction. Yet in doing so, he has to detach governmentality from the historical development of ideas and look at the psychology of the individual to find how and why governmentality resonates with people. This is more than a mere perfunctory difference in emphasis. The capacity for this resonance is for Stirner not tied to any particular historical

development. On the contrary, the whole transformation from Catholicism through Protestantism to modern liberalism has for Stirner been a long process of refinement of the psychological appeal and resonance of pastoral power. Even though Stirner addresses similar aspects of political theology as Foucault and Agamben, the picture he paints is fundamentally different. Agamben and Foucault still stick to the traditional politico-theological paradigm that looks at the development of ideas first and then turns to its effect on individuals. Stirner, on the other hand, sees individual psychology as the fertile soil that nourishes these developments. Thus, the modern transformation of governmentality is to Stirner a further psychologisation of pastoral power in which the godlike shepherd of Christianity recedes further to the background and the sheep act more like their own shepherds.

Contemporary Liberal Fanaticism

The views on pastoral power and governmentality from Foucault and Agamben draw a politico-theological connection between Christian beliefs and an internalised self-control within modern liberal thinking. Stirner further compounds this understanding of liberalism by exposing the psychological mechanisms that allow pastoral power to resonate with the individual, thereby providing a bridge to modern liberal fanaticism. We will conclude this chapter by looking at modern liberal politics through a Stirnerian lens to identify how it is still guided by the same Christian providential concepts. *The Ego and its Own* was written near the end of a tumultuous period in history usually referred to as the Age of Revolution. During this time, liberalism was still in its infancy, especially in Prussia, while the religious presence remained strong enough to make life difficult for Stirner and his associates at the university of Berlin. Nevertheless, Stirner was familiar with the ideas of liberalism that would form the dominant ideology for at least the next century-and-a-half. When evaluating the ideas of his liberal associates, Stirner issues a harrowing prediction:

Warfare of the priesthood with *egoism*, of the spiritually minded with the worldly minded, constitutes the substance of all Christian history. In the newest criticism this war only becomes all embracing, fanaticism complete. Indeed, neither can it pass away until it passes thus, after it has had its life and its rage out. (1995, p. 315).

'The newest criticism' in this passage refers to the liberals' criticism of the existing order. Stirner sees in this criticism a dire predicament that would start raging only a few years later. In 1848, the *Vormärz* would come to a violent conclusion in Prussia, as in many other places throughout Europe. Stirner himself did not partake in the riots because he had no stake in them, but he did see his prediction unfold. Possessed by the "*fanaticism of liberty*" (Ibid., p. 116), many progressive minds

took to the streets, but not without a cost. Ultimately, 303 young revolutionaries lost their lives on the streets of Berlin in March 1848 for some abstract conception of liberty that they could never enjoy.²³ Through his association with the likes of Marx, Engels, Ruge and the Bauer brothers, who eventually partook and often assumed leadership roles in the 1848 revolutions, Stirner developed a premonitory sense of the consequences and implications of liberalism.

Eventually, at least in Prussia, the revolutionaries brought the monarchy to its knees. The monarchy in response met their demands and promised the revolutionaries both the desired parliamentary representation and an eventual unification of Germany. The political liberals, as Stirner defined them, got what they wanted, namely a political emancipation of the population from birthright and an emancipation of the nation from the monarchy. Yet even though their desires were met, Stirner already foresaw what would happen next. Historian Roger Price describes the immediate aftermath of the 1848 revolution as such: “The era of 'freedom' appeared to have dawned. Abstract and universalistic political principles were reinterpreted by various groups in terms of their own immediate interests, and in a fashion which frequently revealed a deep, and hitherto normally concealed, aversion for the social order.” (1988, p. 46). Further that: “The intense political debate so characteristic of these early months of 1848 served to widen divisions amongst liberals and between them and the supporters of political democracy and social reform. It was already evident that if there was widespread support for change there was no common vision of its nature.” (Ibid., p. 48). Stirner’s predictions about the reaction to political liberalism after the revolution came true. The revolution only whetted the appetite of the other liberals. Now that liberalism had usurped the monarchy, new wars of political theology broke out, at least if we follow Price’s description of the events. Much like the wars of religion, the liberals now contested each other over abstract, secular interpretations of Christian salvation. Yet even more than Christianity, the liberals set politics on a journey that would never end, as the pursuit of the emancipation of the abstract could never be satiated.

The liberal theological impulse that Stirner saw in his revolutionary associates still persists to this day, even though contemporary liberal terminology doesn’t easily map onto the categorisations made by Stirner in 1844. Nowadays the meaning of the term liberalism depends largely on the context in which it is used. In certain contexts, particularly the United States, liberalism commonly means 'left' as opposed to conservatism, whereas in Europe the term liberal still has a more traditional connotation. Additionally, an economic liberal agenda nowadays doesn’t necessarily coincide with a cultural or social liberal agenda, although Stirner doesn’t address them separately because for his opponents there was no particular distinction and despite their

²³ Found in Siemann, 1985, p. 65

disagreements, they still all shared the same opposition to the old monarchical system. Furthermore, because liberalism was still in its infancy in 1844, Stirner clusters many views under it that would today be considered as distinct and in some cases even opposed to it. Nowadays it is somewhat peculiar to, for example, associate nationalism with liberalism as Stirner does, but in 1844 it was considered a progressive political view. In fact, in the 1848 revolution, Stirner's associate Ruge even made the progressive case for a "democratic conception of nationalism" (Siemann, 1998, p. 145). Similarly, to Stirner, socialism and Marxism would come under the category of 'liberalism.' Overall Stirner uses the term liberalism broadly to refer to modern political thinking as opposed to the monarchy.

However, what is crucial for our investigation is not Stirner's exact classification, but the politico-theological ideas, currents and aims he identifies within liberalism that persist to this day and, by extension, give rise to modern-day political fanaticism. Of these politico-theological currents, even though they often come conjoined, there are three that stand out in contemporary politics and are particularly suitable as indicators of fanaticism in thought and action. Firstly, out of Stirner's characterisation of social liberalism we can extract a general aim of the emancipation of a particular social group in opposition to other groups, commonly called 'identity politics.' Secondly, there is still a persistent trend to emancipate all of humanity from conflict and enmity, though nowadays this comes under the banner of tolerance and inclusivity. Thirdly, there is still an apotheosis of equality, though, as Stirner often argues, the meaning of such a spook is not particularly clear and despite the former two currents operating under a different interpretation of equality, it is still worth investigating separately.

Let us start with the first. Stirner's direct liberal interlocutors wanted to emancipate two groups of people, namely the people of the nation from the monarchy and labourers from economic oppression. Although the 19th century pursuit of economic emancipation still exists largely today in the same manner, during the last decades there has been a gradual shift away from it to a more modern social and cultural emancipation of particular demographics. This approach to politics is sometimes, though somewhat controversially, referred to as 'identity politics.' Summarised briefly, identity politics considers the political sphere as being comprised of groups that are united by a sense of identity, rather than a voluntary association based on shared political views. These identitarian groups are subsequently perceived as having a shared morality and a unique world-historical mission. Unifying identities may be immutable characteristics such as gender, race or sexuality, though identity politics no less revolves around religions and nationalities (the nationalist movement 'Generation Identity' even explicitly bears its name). Modern identity politics revolves not just around an acquisition of power, legislation or wealth. Miguel de Beistegui and Carl

Raschke contribute that we should see modern identitarianism as a “*struggle for recognition.*” (Raschke, 2019, p. 124). They see in this desire for recognition a particular facet of pastoral power, which they describe as “a process of subjectivation. It recognizes an object or phenomenon— a homosexual, a Jew, a poor person— but on the basis of concepts that are themselves normative.” (De Beistegui, 2018, p. 204). Sonia Kruks poignantly summarises identity politics as follows.

What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different. (2001, p. 85).

The term 'identity politics' is currently hotly contested, though its exact meaning is of secondary importance to our investigation. What matters here is the modern search for the emancipation of a particular social group against other groups or humanity in its entirety, based on a claim of representation. The opposition of identity politics to the 'fold of universal humankind,' mentioned by Kruks, is perfectly articulated by the firebrand identitarian Robin DiAngelo, who argues that “the term *identity politics* refers to the focus on the barriers specific groups face in their struggle for equality... any gains we have made thus far have come through identity politics.” (2018, p. xiii). Modern identitarianism is in its reasoning no different from the emancipatory aims of the social liberals that Stirner identifies, besides the aforementioned shift towards the social and cultural sphere. It is a view that stands in opposition to any kind of universalisation of humanity because it sees in a humane universal an inability to address the particular needs of the particular group. Clashes like these entail that there is an inherent contradiction within the pursuit of freedom and equality. The American nationalist Richard Spencer, for example, who has presented himself as the avatar of 'white identitarianism' in the United States, formulates a typical racial identitarian view as such:

And race isn't just color. Color is, in a way, a minor aspect of race. But you're part of something. Whether you like it or not, you're part of a bigger extended family. You're part of this world; you're part of this history. And that race has a story to tell... Sure, Europe's a place. It's a place on the map, the people, the blood and its spirit. That's much more

important than some map. There are Europeans all over the world. If we went into space, we'd still be European... A race is genetically coherent, a race is something you can study, a race is about genes and DNA, but it's not just about genes and DNA. The most important thing about it is the people and the spirit. That's what a race is about.²⁴

This approach to politics is buttressed by DiAngelo, who argues that “we bring our racial histories with us, and contrary to the ideology of individualism, we represent our groups and those who have come before us... What's more, we don't see through clear or objective eyes—we see through racial lenses. On some level, race is always at play, even in its supposed absence. (2018, p. 85-86). Fortunately, Stirner's employment of the exact grammatical meaning of the word *Eigenthum* already equips his criticism of liberalism with the ammunition necessary to deal with this shift towards collectivised social and cultural emancipation that we see in the 21st century. Stirner points out the obvious flaws he sees in the identitarian view of politics. Just as with Stirner's criticism of humanity, any group based on an abstraction is always too limited to capture the complexity of an individual, a philosophical problem that Stirner expresses as the un-man. He even formulates this criticism in a way that seems directly applicable to the identity politics of the 21st century, though in this case pertaining to sex rather than the earlier example of race.

Man is something only as *my quality* (property) like masculinity or femininity. The ancients found the ideal in one's being male in the full sense; their virtue is *virtus* and *aretē* - manliness. What is one to think of a woman who should want only to be perfectly 'woman'? That is not given to all, and many a one would therein be fixing for herself an unattainable goal. *Feminine*, on the other hand, she is anyhow, by nature; femininity is her quality, and she does not need 'true femininity'. I am a man just as the earth is a star. As ridiculous as it would be to set the earth the task of being a 'thorough star', so ridiculous it is to burden me with the call to be a 'thorough man'. (Ibid., p. 163).

Though correctly translated, Stirner's language is somewhat archaic here. When Stirner writes 'star,' he obviously means what we now call 'planet' and the newer translation by Landstreicher has corrected this. Besides that, Stirner points out that identity politics does not recognise people as individuals, but rather views them as members of some kind of spectral group. These groups are

²⁴ This quote is from a speech at Texas A&M on 12-6-2016, which can be found here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wblLNWIFEY0&ab_channel=TheBattalion-TexasA%26M A transcription of his speech can be found here <https://www.thepoliticalcesspool.org/jamesedwards/transcript-of-richard-spencers-speech-at-texas-am/> Retrieved on 21-10-2021.

based on an idealised abstraction that can never adequately express any concrete individual. The individual is even more confined to a strict set of norms because of the emancipatory aims of identity politics. Identitarianism must necessarily have a strict definition of a certain identity in order to represent and emancipate it, which in turn necessarily diminishes the particularities of an individual.

Crucially, identity politics is a perfect example of what Stirner takes to be fanaticism. When analysed with Stirner's concept of involuntary egoism in mind, we can see this as an attempt to run away from the unique burden of the ethical responsibility the singular individual bears by projecting one's metaphysical insecurities onto some abstraction that subsequently possesses the individual. The individual in identity politics is thus led by an abstraction that dictates how s/he should act, i.e. all uniqueness is through involuntary egoism subsumed in trying to behave entirely like a woman, homosexual, patriot, etc. Stirner further expounds: "To this day we use the Romance word 'religion', which expresses the concept of a condition of being *bound*. To be sure, *we* remain bound, so far as religion takes possession of our inward parts." (1995, p. 48). In the case of identity politics, the possessed individual ties him-/herself to some abstract view of a collective that requires emancipation and subsequently claims to act on behalf of it. Stirner writes:

I distinguish between *servile* and *own* criticism. If I criticize under the presupposition of a supreme being, my criticism *serves* the being and is carried on for its sake: if I am possessed by the belief in a 'free state', then everything that has a bearing on it I criticize from the standpoint of whether it is suitable to this state, for I *love* this state; if I criticize as a pious man, then for me everything falls into the classes of divine and diabolical, and before my criticism nature consists of traces of God or traces of the devil., men of believers and unbelievers; if I criticize while believing in man as the 'true essence', then for me everything falls primarily into the classes of man and the un-man, etc. (Ibid., p. 309).

It is the servile attitude Stirner describes here that leads to the uncompromising Manichean view of politics we commonly associate with political fanaticism, expressed in this quote as the dichotomy between 'divine and diabolical.' When intensified, this division could easily manifest in violence, though this intensification isn't exclusively turned outwards. The political theology of liberalism is especially revealed by clashes within a particular identitarian view about the 'true' core of its identity, like nationalists arguing over what the true core of the nation is or feminists arguing about whether transsexuals belong to the abstraction of womanhood. Yet we must, in the Stirnerian view, not mistake the antagonism of identitarianism towards other groups or for humanity as a whole for

maliciousness, as the liberals claim to act not out of spite, but out of love. Stirner characterises the love of the liberals, which they have directly inherited from Christianity, as 'romantic love,' which he contraposes to 'selfish love:'

Selfish love is far distant from unselfish, mystical, or romantic love. One can love everything possible, not merely men, but an 'object' in general (wine, one's fatherland, etc.). Love becomes blind and crazy by a *must* taking it out of my power (infatuation), romantic by a *should* entering into it, by the 'objects' becoming sacred for me, or my becoming bound to it by duty, conscience, oath. Now the object no longer exists for me, but I for it. (Ibid., p. 259).

Stirner argues here that the liberals aim for an impossible and unrequited love. The objective of the liberal is always over the horizon. There is always something to be free from or to equalise, as Stirner states that “‘freedom’ is and remains a *longing*, a romantic plaint, a Christian hope for unearthliness and futurity.” (Ibid., p. 148). It is, according to Stirner, precisely the impossible distance between the liberals and their objective that makes the objective so attractive. The attraction of liberalism lies in the longing and the futurity, not in the achievement. In fact, Stirner even refers in this quote to the biblical definition of faith: “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Heb. 11:1). DiAngelo, for example, professes this endless longing by arguing that “we must never consider our work towards racial justice to be finished. No one ever arrives at a racism-free state” (2021, p. 173) and “interrupting the forces of racism is ongoing, lifelong work because the forces conditioning us into racist frameworks are always at play.” (2018, p. 8-9).

Stirner proceeds: “the mystical possessedness belongs to the modems. The possessedness of love lies in the alienation of the object, or in my powerlessness as against its alienness and superior power.” (Ibid., p. 260). Much like the romantic that Schmitt describes, the worst that could happen to the liberal is actual resolution. Even though romantic love is, according to Stirner, always an unrequited longing for the sacred, to elucidate his point, he draws a further distinction between religious love for an idea and the sensual love for another person:

Every love to which there clings but the smallest speck of obligation is an unselfish love, and... a possessedness. He who believes that he *owes* the object of his love anything loves romantically or religiously... Religious or romantic love is distinguished from sensual love by the difference of the object indeed, but not by the dependence of the relation to it. In the

latter regard both are possessedness; but in the former the one object is profane, the other sacred. (Ibid., p. 260).

According to Stirner, all romantic love contains a certain obligation, but there is a difference between the love for another person and the love for the abstract. The liberals may argue that they work towards some emancipation, but they do this out of love for the abstraction, rather than for actual people. Even if we regard both as being 'possessed,' as Stirner argues in this quote, there is a flexibility in the love for another person that is not reflected in the love for the abstract because the abstract itself is fixed.

This is also where we see the peculiar relationship of the liberal with his/her own involuntary egoism. Stirner points out that none of the actions of the liberal are really aimed at the common good itself: "Are these self-sacrificing people perchance not selfish, not egoist? As they have only one ruling passion, so they provide for only one satisfaction, but for this the more strenuously; they are wholly absorbed in it. Their entire activity is egoistic, but it is a one-sided, unopened, narrow egoism; it is possessedness." (Ibid., p. 70). Here Stirner argues that the liberals aren't really in it for the greater good, but for some egoistic emotional gratification. Liberalism, in Stirner's view, ensures the sense of metaphysical security because it offers an abstract pursuit of the good that absolves the individual of moral quandaries. With this insight, Stirner exposes the contradiction in liberal fanaticism. Even though the liberals claim to pursue some greater good, Stirner reveals their failure because they only manage to gratify part of their egoism. Stirner's subsequent criticism, then, is that the liberals will not find actual freedom as long as they do not acknowledge their own egoism and embrace it fully.

Consider the case of 'micro-aggressions.' There is no universal definition of the concept, but Derald Sue, who coined the term, offers a brief list of definitions.²⁵ According to Sue, we should view micro-aggressions as small remarks or interactions that are interpreted as denigrating, even though they may not be intended as such. The great danger of micro-aggressions, according to Sue, is that "they impair performance in a multitude of settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities." (2010, p. xvii). Even though Sue isn't particularly pleased that the concept of micro-aggressions is used in a "punitive way" (Zamudio-Suarez, 2016), this hasn't stopped proponents of this idea from engaging in a kind of 'witch-hunt' and politics of piety. The endless hunt for ever more subtle forms of micro-aggressions can be considered, from a Stirnerian point of view, as a way of infinitely extending the quest for the abstract goal of emancipation. The concept of micro-aggressions is a clear and non-violent manifestation of liberal

²⁵ Sue, 2010, p. xvi

fanaticism because it entails an endless quest against some perceived oppression. The pursuit of such identitarianism never ends, as humanity is infinitely divisible and there is always some aspect of one's person that can be leveraged into an abstraction to guide one's action, yet its futurity allows the fanatic to always rest comfortably in metaphysical security.

As Stirner predicted, there is liberal backlash against the bellicose attitude of identity politics. This leads us to the second current within modern liberalism that Stirner identifies, namely the apotheosis of our shared humanity and its aversion to conflict, which we commonly find nowadays under names like 'inclusivity,' 'equity,' or 'tolerance.' Ironically, we also often find 'diversity' in this list, despite it being an antonym of equality. Liberals like Mark Lilla and Francis Fukuyama have criticised identity politics for being distinctly illiberal, even though a Stirnerian analysis shows how the identitarian view is rooted in the same liberal belief in emancipation. According to Lilla, “the paradox of identity liberalism is that it paralyses the capacity to think and act in a way that would actually accomplish the things it professes to want.” (2018, p. 14). Lilla sees the trajectory of modern identity politics as one of fragmentation and petty squabbles. Fukuyama presents a similar point of criticism from a different angle, arguing that the antagonism that is implied in the separation of people into identitarian groups will rend existing political unities apart. The same humane liberal opposition to identity politics is echoed by those who wouldn't fit the modern label of liberal, like Wendy Brown and Todd McGowan. Brown writes that “politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future—for itself or others—that triumphs over this pain.” (1995, p. 74). McGowan concurs and further elaborates:

Even if an identitarian movement claims to advocate peaceful coexistence with other groups, this claim is necessarily disingenuous. The recognition of one identity comes at the expense of others, which is why identitarians are always quarrelling about the need to recognize the specificity of their identity. We can never reach a point of equilibrium among different identity claims. (2020, p. 27).

Like humane liberalism, these thinkers all present solutions to eradicate all antagonisms through the uniting force of a shared humanity with a common goal, rather than an emphasis on the emancipation of a particular group. Lilla, for example, suggests as a solution that “we need to educate young people to think of themselves as citizens with duties toward each other.” (Ibid., p. 103). Fukuyama likewise suggests that “the remedy is to define larger and more integrative national

identities that take account of the de facto diversity of existing liberal democratic societies.” (2018, p. 123). Just like the humane liberals described by Stirner, all of them see modern identitarianism as a pursuit of the wrong kind of emancipation that only distracts from another, more important, higher good. They seek to emphasise what we share, rather than what divides us. This aim to eliminate all antagonism, or what Schmitt calls the “war against war” (2007, p. 36), comes according to Stirner directly out of the Christian emphasis on love as well, though in this case from the commandment to “love your enemies” (Mat 5:44, Luke 6:35). However, the problem they will run into, at least according to Stirner, is that this form of liberalism also revolves around the worship of an abstract concept that is always out of our reach.

A good example of the theoretical form of fanaticism for the sake of a unified humanity comes from Herbert Marcuse’s *Repressive Tolerance* (1965). Marcuse considers himself a Marxist and pitches himself directly against liberalism, though for the purposes of our Stirnerian politico-theological investigation this terminological distinction isn’t particularly relevant. Marcuse presents exactly the case of the humane liberals in modern form as anticipated by Stirner. Marcuse argues that the liberal achievement of what he defines as, pure tolerance has run its course because it leaves the decision of truth to the people and their own personal reasoning. This pure tolerance of liberalism, which Stirner would define as 'political liberalism,' is indifferent towards all positions, yet, according to Marcuse, we cannot leave it to people to decide because “they are indoctrinated by the conditions under which they live and think and which they do not transcend.” (Ibid., p. 98). Thus, “to treat the great crusades *against* humanity... with the same impartiality as the desperate struggles *for* humanity means neutralizing their opposite historical function, reconciling the executioners with their victims, distorting the record.” (Ibid., p. 113). To avoid any further affronts to humanity, tolerance has to be restricted in order to turn it into a “humanizing force” (Ibid., p. 111), which means that we can only tolerate, according to Marcuse, that which advances the cause of humanity. Yet this is so abstract that we have no way of finding out what advances the cause of humanity. Marcuse proceeds with the vague solution that “the question, who is qualified to make all these distinctions, definitions, identifications for the society as a whole, has now one logical answer, namely, everyone "in the maturity of his faculties" as a human being, everyone who has learned to think rationally and autonomously.” (Ibid., p. 106). What we thus have here is a circular argument with Marcuse himself as the ultimate judge. Only those who 'think rationally and autonomously' should be the arbiters of tolerance because when people don’t advance the cause of Marcuse’s conception of humanity, they don’t 'think rationally and autonomously.' Marcuse does exactly what Stirner anticipated, namely project his own predilections onto humanity and then assert himself as its representative, which necessarily entails a totalitarian infringement of free individual expression

and thought.

We see the fanaticism for tolerance theorised by Marcuse manifest in a concrete form as well. Take, for example, the controversial publication of *The Bell Curve* (1994) by Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein. Even though the controversy only revolves around a comparatively small section of the total work, the book ruffled a lot of feathers because one of the chapters presents evidence for a correlation between race and IQ. The selective outrage towards *The Bell Curve* would, on the surface, suggest that this case fits better with the pursuit of the emancipation of a particular group. Most of the ire against the book has been directed at the evidence for the apparent lower IQ scores of those from African descent in comparison to those of European descent. The apparent higher IQ scores of those of Asian descent compared to Europeans received substantially less attention. However, the more interesting aspect of this case is the actual physical violence it has led to. Murray was, for example, set to debate professor Allison Stanger at Middlebury University in 2017, but the debate had hardly started before it was violently shut down with the protesters reportedly chanting: "Your message is hatred, we cannot tolerate it." (Beinart, 2017). The violence was not just directed at Murray alone, but also at his opponent, who strongly disagrees with Murray's views. In fact, she had to be brought to the hospital for a neck brace because of the incident. The uprising was not a challenge to the veracity of Murray's work, but towards its message, which was considered to be divisive and offensive. The Middlebury incident was by no means an exception nor the first of its kind, but a prolific case in a long line of many others, not just surrounding *The Bell Curve* alone, but also including 'safe spaces' and language policing, that indicate the fanaticism for tolerance and inclusivity. During the last years there has again been a rise in attempts to shut down and censor particular opinions neither by some authoritative government because it doesn't suit its interest nor on the basis of veracity, but rather by large groups of politico-theologically motivated people to combat possible lines of division and to advance what they perceive as the cause of a united humanity.

Žižek also presents an opposite form of the fanaticism entailed by the arguments from the humane liberals. Instead of the aforementioned repressive violence for the sake of tolerance, Žižek sees in the liberal pursuit of tolerance an absolute passivity. He asks and answers:

Why is the proposed remedy tolerance, not emancipation, political struggle, even armed struggle? The immediate answer is the liberal multiculturalist's basic ideological operation: the "culturalization of politics" - political differences, differences conditioned by political inequality, economic exploitation, etc., are naturalized/neutralized into "cultural" differences, different "ways of life," which are something given, something that cannot be

overcome, but merely "tolerated." (2007).

The strand of liberalism that Stirner identifies as humane liberalism seeks a negation of culture according to Žižek. Yet in doing so, Žižek sees it enforcing certain liberal characteristics on other cultures that it itself perceives as neutral. Though Žižek makes this argument mainly in terms of a clash of cultures, he gives a quick nod to a Stirnerian view: "This universality which emerges/explodes out of a violent breakthrough is not the awareness of the universal as the neutral frame which unites us all.; it is the universality which becomes for-itself in the violent experience of the subject who becomes aware that he is not fully himself (coinciding with his particular form of existence), that he is marked by a profound split." (2007). The split that Žižek mentions here is exactly the servitude at the heart of modern political fanaticism that Stirner addresses, namely the problem of the un-man.

Finally, even though it is intertwined with the previous two currents in modern liberal thinking we've looked at, the modern apotheosis of equality and the fanaticism to which it leads warrant a more extensive analysis. We have already seen that the value modern liberalism places on equality is an extension of the Christian view that "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28). However, unlike Saint Paul in his epistle to the Galatians, modern secular liberalism has no eyes of God to determine what exactly equality means. We can see this, for example, in the development of intersectional feminism. The traditional feminist struggle was aimed at specific legal inequalities, comparable to the political liberals that Stirner describes. Even though it was never a monolithic movement, a large part of its argumentation was based on liberal negative reasoning, as exemplified by John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (1989). Mill argues that "those who deny to women any freedom or privilege rightly allowed to men... must be held to the strictest proof of their case, and unless their success be such as to exclude all doubt, the judgment ought to go against them." (Ibid., p. 121). According to the traditional liberal argument espoused by Mill, if there is no good reason to treat men and women differently in the juridical sphere, then we should refrain from doing so. Intersectional feminism, first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), claims to be a continuation of feminism, even though it takes the opposite approach. Thinkers like Mill present an individualist approach to the subject, mostly akin to the arguments from the political liberals that Stirner distinguishes, whereas Crenshaw essentially relies on a collectivist approach to politics like that which Stirner associates with social and humane liberalism. From this perspective, Crenshaw observes that there are cases in which individuals fall into two different groups that both seek

emancipation in a different sphere. Thus, what Crenshaw ultimately seeks is a universal metaphysical standard through which we can measure oppression and inequality. Yet there is no objective universal decider for the secular liberal like in Christianity, so when a complete and total equality is striven for, it will inevitably lead to disagreements over who is more or less oppressed as long as there is no objective metric with which one measures oppression. We can see a clear example of the search for a secular godlike perspective in the popular activist slogan 'Black Lives Matters.'²⁶ Even though this phrase has led to disagreements about the colour (especially, though not exclusively, explicated by the opposing phrase 'All Lives Matters'), there is an implicit politico-theological question begged, but rarely articulated. What does the word 'matter' refer to? To whom do black lives matter? Most lives do not matter to most people, but the slogan alludes to some metaphysical scale on which these lives ought to be equal based on the particular abstraction of skin colour.

Eric Nelson (2019) addresses precisely the problem of the apotheosis of equality without a godlike perspective. According to Nelson, liberal thought is a specific response to both the Euthyphro dilemma, which we have discussed in the previous chapter, and especially the question of theodicy. Popularised by Leibniz, theodicy revolves around a specific paradox that Nelson formulates as: “the world in which we live seems to contain a great deal of evil and undeserved suffering—and Christian doctrine insists that a large proportion of the human race will be damned to an eternity of punishment. How can these facts be reconciled with God’s justice?” (2019, p. 2). Traditional liberals of the 17th and 18th century agreed with Plato’s rationalist persuasion and, in part because of their own religious convictions, they believed that the question of theodicy could be resolved through God-given human reason. Because of the attempted secular detachment from any immediate references to God in politics, the question gets more complicated for modern liberals as the natural distribution of abilities without God seems arbitrary, rather than divinely ordained. Nelson specifically attributes this rejection of the traditional liberal reliance on the justice of God to Rawls, who searches for a secular godlike position from which to judge. He famously argues that justice is not what citizens *have* agreed to, but that “the choice which rational men would make in this hypothetical situation of equal liberty... determines the principles of justice. (Rawls, 1999, p. 11). Liberalism has of course never been monolithic, so Nelson subsequently goes through the gamut of possible solutions to modern inequality, only to conclude that “the most prominent forms of contemporary liberal political philosophy, when rightly understood, do not successfully vindicate

²⁶ This slogan is often used independently of the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, which was until recently registered as a charity organisation in the United States, because it fell under a criminal investigation that revoked this status (Kerr, 2022; Brown, 2022). This organisation claims to represent those that adhere to this phrase, yet it has a strict programme that vastly exceeds the implications of the phrase itself.

the claim that an equal or egalitarian distribution of wealth is required by the principle of justice.” (Nelson, 2019, p. 158).

Though Stirner never explicitly articulated an investigation and conclusion with the detail and scrutiny of Nelson’s, he does hint at the same problem within liberalism that Nelson stumbles on, namely that the apotheosis of equality does not lead to any concrete resolution. Yet Nelson’s reaction to his own conclusion is surprisingly different from Stirner’s. “Does it follow,” asks Nelson, “that a liberal society must be inegalitarian? The answer, I think, is clearly “no.” The view that egalitarianism is not *required* by the principle of justice leaves open the question of whether such a distribution is permitted by that principle.” (Ibid.). Nelson suggests that, despite the flaws of liberalism in theory, we can still pursue some practical solution to the modern liberal theodicy problem. He concludes: “Recovering the theodicy debate has, I hope, allowed us to see that the principle of justice does not settle the question of distribution one way or the other. It’s up to us.” (Ibid., p. 165). Yet, by his own admission, we have no clear idea of how such a problem could be solved because we do not even have a good grasp on how it should be approached.

Nelson’s recovery of the theodicy debate is not only interesting because it shows in greater detail something anticipated by Stirner, namely the persistent problem liberals face when trying to shape the world according to an ideal. Nelson’s conclusion also raises a particular question in the light of Stirnerian political-theology: why ought we still pursue equality? If we take fanaticism in the Stirnerian way, namely as the wilful subservience to a greater good, then this fanaticism doesn’t manifest in a form of distinguishable uncompromising violence as the aforementioned modern versions of social and humane liberalism, but in a subtler way more akin to Žižek’s criticism of tolerance. If Nelson, and others like him, accept that equality cannot be achieved but that we should still strive for it, then gradually everything becomes subsumed by the worship of it. Not only on a discursive level will individuals be increasingly possessed with the search for inequalities, but institutions will gradually prioritise the pursuit of equality over everything. This worship thus has an eroding effect that Stirner ascribes to Lutheranism, where the spook of equality gradually haunts everything and becomes the only thing one ought to be concerned about, slowly dragging everything down to an all-equalising nadir that Stirner foreshadowed.

Conclusion

Stirner’s analysis of political theology culminates in his criticism of the tenets of liberalism. The way Stirner presents liberalism aligns very well with a similar transformation described by Foucault and Agamben as 'governmentality.' These two thinkers ascribe to modern liberalism a particular managerial rationality inherited from Christianity, which, even though it has been detached from the

guidance of God, still operates on the belief in some kind of providence. Though Foucault and Agamben give us an insightful historical account of the development of ideas and their influence on politics with an analytical clarity that supersedes Stirner's own historical analysis, Stirner himself reveals the psychological appeal of governmentality that completes this account.

In liberalism Stirner sees a continuation of Christianity, but transformed in a way that it resonates even better with the search for metaphysical security. He argues that "this fundamental doctrine of liberalism, is nothing but a second phase of – Protestantism." (Ibid., 96). In Protestantism, at least according to Stirner, the responsibility of piety is on the individual, rather than the community or some hierarchy. The external environment doesn't decide how the individual ought to follow his faith – this is entirely a matter for the individual and his/her 'calling.' Liberalism has definitively severed all ties with God that were still there in Protestantism and internalised the faith in a higher good without any mediator. This emphasis on personal responsibility, somewhat overlooked by Foucault and Agamben, helps us bridge the gap between political theology and fanaticism. Modern political fanaticism, if viewed through the Stirnerian lens, should be considered as a highly individual pursuit for absolution from metaphysical insecurity. These modern political fanatics, in Stirner's view, are not seeking to solve concrete political and social problems, but instead seek a certain moral salvation through politics.

With this connection between fanaticism and political theology in mind, we have investigated Stirner's distinction between three main currents within liberal thinking. These are political liberalism, which revolves around the establishment of a constitutional rule of law and the liberation of the state from both religion and the monarchy; social liberalism, which revolves around the emancipation of labourers from their awful material conditions; and humane liberalism, which revolves around the apotheosis of humanity and its liberation from conflict. Even though nowadays we do not use the same terminology or taxonomy that Stirner relied on in 1844, in this distinction we can find a set of liberal arguments that is still present to this day. Firstly, Stirner anticipated the evolution of economic emancipation into the emancipation of collectivised abstractions such as nationality, race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, and so on. Secondly, we still find the desire to pacify all antagonisms and deify our shared humanity in the form of censorship and repression for the sake of tolerance. Finally, we still find the apotheosis of equality in the 21st century in the attempted formulation of a universal standard on which the abstract value of everyone can be measured. Even though all of these come directly out of Christianity, they cannot all exist alongside each other without contradiction because they are based on different interpretations of liberty, equality and emancipation. Yet they are perfectly suitable for Stirner's understanding of fanaticism because in their abstraction they always lead to self-renunciation.

Chapter 5 – Stirner's Alternative: Egoism

In previous chapters, we have seen that Stirner considers political theology to be a phenomenon endemic and specific to modern liberalism. The repudiation of traditional religion that came with the emergence of modernity took away the overarching transcendental metaphysical system that structured our lives, thus revealing the idleness and emptiness of the world, which in turn exposed the human need for metaphysical security that was no longer met. Where there used to be clear normative coordinates to direct our lives and give us a place in the world, there is now an existential vacuum. In an attempt to recapture their sense of metaphysical security, Stirner observes that his progressive atheist contemporaries deify otherwise mundane concepts and ascribe to them the same characteristics as the previously defeated God. Stirner gives no specific term to this phenomenon and generally still refers to it as 'religion' because he views it as a continuation of traditional faith. However, because it specifically revolves around a projection of faith onto the political domain, as I have shown, the term 'political theology' more aptly captures the phenomenon Stirner describes. This specific approach to political theology does not primarily base itself on a study of historical or sociological changes, but rather on the understanding of an internal struggle with unrequited expectations of the world that have been exposed by the rejection of religion. Stirner sees in this philosophical crisis the foundation for modern political fanaticism, as he observes that the crisis is resolved through the voluntary submission to a higher good, a *fanum*, projected onto the world out of involuntary egoism.

As has become clear, Stirner is entirely critical of this theologised way of seeing the world. His criticism of political theology is twofold. Firstly, he writes that “he who no longer believes in any ghost needs only to travel on consistently in his unbelief to see that there is no separate being at all concealed behind things, no ghost or - what is naively reckoned as synonymous even in our use of words - no 'spirit'.” (1995, p. 35). Stirner argues here that the philosophical criticisms levelled against religion apply just as much to secular belief systems. Political theology is just as fictional and self-contradictory as traditional religion, but hides under a thin veneer of rationality. However, in the previous chapters we have also seen that this first criticism is not the entire story and that Stirner is quite sympathetic to those that vainly look for an alternative secular object of worship. Even though political theology doesn't stand up to logical scrutiny in the same way as traditional religion, Stirner's second and biggest objection to the development of political theology is the violation of the singularity of the individual. This violation supersedes simple physical force because, according to Stirner, political theology revolves around a voluntary, though often

subconscious, self-subjugation through faith. In other words, Stirner claims that there is a deep desire to find a metaphysical structure and follow its rules religiously. The previous chapters only touched on Stirner's individualist condemnation of political theology. This chapter evaluates Stirner's alternative to this theologically haunted way of thinking – his philosophy of *egoism*. Here the chapter will explore his concept of ego, and how this translates into alternative figures for subjectivity, ethics and politics. Crucially, Stirner's philosophy of egoism also contains what he perceives as the antidote to modern political fanaticism.

Egoism Defined

Stirner considers political theology as the last bastion of the second stage of history. Yet it is precisely the onset of political theology that indicates to Stirner a faltering of idealism. If the political theologians, especially those who only recently rejected traditional religion, apply the same reasoning to other iterations of idealism, then Stirner expects that this will lead them to reject political theology as well. Once the political theologians come to their senses, realise their folly and finally reject idealism in its totality, we enter the third and final stage of history, which Stirner calls 'egoism.' Stirner pitches egoism as the polar opposite of political theology. Instead of living in the service of a higher good, Stirner's egoism generally aims at living for oneself without any overarching metaphysical structure. Of course, it isn't always clear what exactly Stirner means when he uses the term egoism. As we've seen before, Stirner has a tendency not to present clear definitions for his terminology. There has therefore been some disagreement about the exact meaning of Stirner's egoism amongst commentators. More specifically, it isn't always entirely clear whether Stirner considers egoism as a descriptive or normative term.

Before we look at the various interpretations of Stirner's use of the term 'egoism,' let us first look at his own words. In the beginning of *The Ego and its Own*, Stirner gives an approximation of a definition.

But whom do you think of under the name of egoist? A man who, instead of living to an idea, that is, a spiritual thing, and sacrificing to it his personal advantage, serves the latter. A good patriot brings his sacrifice to the altar of the fatherland; but it cannot be disputed that the fatherland is an idea, since for beasts incapable of mind, or children as yet without mind, there is no fatherland and no patriotism. Now, if any one does not approve himself as a good patriot, he betrays his egoism with reference to the fatherland. And so the matter stands in innumerable other cases: he who in human society takes the benefit of a prerogative sins egoistically against the idea of equality; he who exercises dominion is blamed as an egoist

against the idea of liberty, and so on. (Ibid., p. 32)

On many occasions, Stirner uses egoism in the way we do colloquially. Here egoism refers merely to selfishness, privileging your own interests over others. Commentators like Von Hartmann (1931), Jenkins (2009) and Jansen (2009) have made strong cases for reading *The Ego and its Own* as a work that advocates psychological egoism. They argue that Stirner exposes the fact that egoism is ultimately always the motivation behind our actions. Yet they also argue that Stirner's egoism refers to nothing more than psychological egoism, which places their interpretation on the descriptive side. There is, however, a problem with a psychological interpretation of Stirner's egoism. Stirner shows in his discussion about involuntary egoism that this is actually quite complicated, as he ascribes to people, especially the political theologians, a selfish desire to not be selfish. "Religion" he writes, "is founded on our egoism and - exploits it; calculated for our desires, it stifles many others for the sake of one. This then gives the phenomenon of cheated egoism, where I satisfy, not myself, but one of my desires, such as the impulse toward blessedness." (Stirner, 1995, p. 149). Stirner claims that thinkers like Feuerbach, for example, project egoistic desires onto an invoked theos, but the interpretations of Von Hartmann, Jenkins and Jansen do not sufficiently take this into account.

When *The Ego and its Own* was published, Stirner's use of the term egoism received criticism from early interlocutors like Feuerbach, Hess, Von Zychlinski, Bauer and Marx.²⁷ These critics did not see in egoism a plea for selfishness but rather argued that Stirner contradicts his passionate philippic against morality and fixed ideas by introducing egoism as just another normative concept that serves as a replacement for the Christian god. Stirner rejects this interpretation of his work in the following terms:

Self-interest forms the basis of egoism. But isn't self-interest in the same way a mere name, a concept empty of content, utterly lacking any conceptual development, like the unique? The opponents look at self-interest and egoism as a "principle." This would require them to understand self-interest as an absolute. Thought can be a principle, but then it must develop as absolute thought, as eternal reason; the I, if it is to be a principle, must, as the absolute I, form the basis of a system built upon it. So one could even make an absolute of self-interest and derive from it as "human interest" a philosophy of self-interest; yes, morality is actually the system of human interest. (Stirner, 2012, p. 72)

²⁷ The comments of these critics, except those from Marx, can be found in Blake, 2016, pp. 2-5. Marx makes this argument in *The German Ideology* (1998).

Egoism here seems more like a selfish pragmatism, a peculiar combination of rational and ethical egoism, that, instead of being a fixed objective that we actively ought to pursue, reveals itself once the worship of any transcendental objective is surpassed. Egoism then becomes the only remaining object of any intentional act once all other external objectives are removed. Stirner indicates here that his use of the term egoism does not entail some transcendental point of orientation, but something that, like thinking itself, is constantly in motion. We have to keep in mind that Stirner's work is notoriously difficult to translate, especially when it comes to his use of the word *Einzig*. In the original English translation by Byington, this word has been translated with the word 'ego,' because of the lack of a proper word in the English language.²⁸ However, especially in English, the word 'ego' leads one to consider Stirner's argument as being about an absolute ego, rather than the more pragmatic, *ad hoc* 'I' that continuously emerges. In fact, Stirner even explicitly contrasts his own conception of the 'I' against that of Fichte:

When Fichte says, 'the ego is all', this seems to harmonize perfectly with my thesis. But it is not that the ego *is* all, but the ego *destroys* all, and only the self-dissolving ego, the never-being ego, the - *finite* ego is really I. Fichte speaks of the 'absolute' ego, but I speak of me, the transitory ego. (1995, p. 163).

Even though Stirner only mentions Fichte's work occasionally as a contraposition to his own views, it is worth exploring their opposition not only because the association between the two thinkers is often, though naively, made by critics, but also because it precisely emphasises the uniqueness of Stirner's view. Were Fichte, unlike Feuerbach, not as ambivalent about his own religious faith and were he personally acquainted with Stirner, he may well have served as a better representative of political theology than Feuerbach. Even though both Stirner and Fichte write about the 'I,' what they mean by it couldn't be more different. With regard to the 'I,' Fichte attempts to uncover his place and *Bestimmung* in the world by means of Cartesian doubt. He ultimately reaches the realisation that:

All consciousness is either an immediate or a mediate consciousness. The first is self-consciousness; the second consciousness of that which is not myself. What I call *I* is therefore absolutely nothing more than a certain modification of consciousness, which is called *I* just because it is immediate, returning into itself, and not directed outward. (Fichte,

²⁸ In his new translation, Landstreicher made sure not to rely on the word 'ego,' but stays closer to the literal meaning of the words Stirner uses.

According to Fichte, the 'I' we experience is a manifestation of a greater human spirit that imbues us with our rational faculties. Of course, not every 'I' is the same and Fichte is aware of this, yet he argues that all the particularities that make every single 'I' unique are of trivial matter, as they are all confined by the spirit of collective human consciousness. In fact, it is precisely our individual particularities that give us all a unique task to contribute to the grand human consciousness, as no single individual alone has access to the entirety of this shared consciousness, so we all ought to do our part to advance the collective human spirit towards its destiny. Thus, Fichte concludes that “reason is not for the sake of existence, but existence for the sake of reason. An existence which does not of itself satisfy reason and solve all her questions, cannot by possibility be the true being.” (Ibid., pp. 129-130). Stirner remarks that “Fichte's ego too is the same essence outside me, for every one is ego; and, if only this ego has rights, then it is 'the ego', it is not I.” (1995, p. 318). It has to be noted that in the original German of this quote, Stirner uses the same word for 'ego' and 'I.' Landstreicher translates it more accurately as: “Fichte's *I* is also the same essence outside me, because *I* is everyone, and, if only this *I* has rights, then it is "the *I*," I am not it.” (2017, p. 237). Crucially, Stirner argues that a collective overarching 'I' can never capture a specific 'I,' which is the problem of the un-man discussed in the previous chapter, especially when Fichte considers individual uniqueness as mostly irrelevant. Blumenfeld eloquently formulates this point as: “Stirner does not call it *the* I, but always *my* I.” (2018, p. 21). In fact, we can easily argue that the 'I' in Fichte's and Stirner's thought are polar opposites. Fichte views a singular 'I' as determined by a higher spirit that demands our faith. All that matters to Stirner's 'I' has, in Fichte's view, already been predetermined. Yet the uniqueness of Stirner's 'I,' the un-man, is all that remains once the belief in a collective human spirit has been dispelled.

Commentators that consider Stirner's work more favourably, such as Welsh (2010), Newman (2019), Blumenfeld (2018) and Carroll (1974), agree that Stirner's egoism isn't just exploitative nihilistic selfishness, but that there is a positive, self-assertive aspect to it. However, amongst the Stirner commentators, the interpretation of the positive side of egoism is quite diffuse. For example, Welsh (2010) sees Stirner's egoism as the foundation for a theoretical framework for the analysis of modernity, yet Blumenfeld (2018) thinks that Stirner's egoism has been an over-emphasised aspect of his thought and forgoes a general definition. Even Schmitt finds a positive side to Stirner's particular views on egoism. When he found himself in a Nuremberg prison uncertain of his future, he wrote: “At this moment, Max [Stirner] is the only person who visits me in my cell. This touches me deeply, as he is such a rabid egoist.” (2017, p. 65). Despite calling Stirner a rabid egoist, and

everything else under the sun, in his reflections on Stirner's egoism, Schmitt writes that "Max [Stirner] knows something very important. He knows that the *I* is no object of thought." (Ibid.). Even though we only have this one sentence and Schmitt never divulges his interpretation of Stirner's use of the term egoism, this nevertheless aligns with Stirner's remonstrance of his critics and his distancing from Fichte. David Leopold provides a good summary of Stirner's egoism when he writes that:

Stirner's concept of egoism is best thought of not in terms of the pursuit of self-interest (as conventionally understood), but rather in terms of the kind of self-mastery that he calls 'ownness.' The egoistic ideal of self-mastery has, we might say, both internal and external dimensions; self-owning individuals must avoid not only subjugating their will to that of another person, but also being dragged along by their own appetites. (Leopold, 2011, p. 31).

This project is in principle not concerned with the multitude of interpretations that Stirner's egoism has received, but with the specific relevance of egoism to the subject of political theology. With regard to political theology, Newman argues that "at the heart of his egoistic philosophy there is radical negativity that works against political theology and against the place of power that generates it." (Newman, 2019, p. 61). For this, he gives the following reasoning.

As a philosophy of radical negativity, egoism seeks to clear the ontological ground of all abstractions and spooks, all figures of the transcendent. It performs an exorcism on our philosophical and political tradition. Egoism calls for the complete destruction of all fixed ideas, moral and rational universals, and the political concepts they animate. State, nation, society, community, citizenship are all profaned, brought down to the level of the individual egoist so that they can be appropriated and 'consumed'. For Stirner, the only possible solution to the problem of political theology is to desacralise the space of the sacred by bringing everything back to the ego as the only ontological reality. (Ibid., p. 55)

In his explanation, Newman argues that the political theology that Stirner analyses cannot be overthrown from any normative position, as the normative position would immediately revive political theology. Though there may be changes in what is considered sacred, the place of the sacred will always persist. The only way to move beyond it is to start from an ontological position. Newman points out that Stirner specifically starts with the self as the foundational ontological reality. "Stirner's egoism can be seen as part of his nominalist philosophy, which rejects all

universal ideas and categories as meaningless. Rather meaning can only be determined from the particular perspective of the egoist, who has no regard for the sacred.” (Ibid.). Here Newman argues that, in Stirner's view, it is not that we should become egoistic, but rather that we already are. It is just that to Stirner, this egoism is insufficiently acknowledged and affirmed. When we rid ourselves of metaphysical thinking, egoism is all that remains after the dust settles. This doesn't mean that Stirner abandons logic in favour of lived experience. Rather, logic and philosophy are rendered instruments at the disposal of the egoist who no longer lives as the marionette of a metaphysical system, nor as the servant of a higher good.

Creative Nothing

Stirner uses the term 'creative nothing' to refer to the idea that no description could ever encompass an individual. The individual is continuously in the flux of creating and recreating itself, with any comprehensive attempt to encapsulate it always remaining one step behind. Blumenfeld summarises it well when he writes that “for Stirner, there is always an excess of being that outstrips the possibility for conceptual capture in a regime of representation.” (2019, p. 11). Even though I generally agree with Blumenfeld's summary, when reading *The Ego and its Own* through the lens of political theology, Stirner's phrasing raises certain questions. Despite this term 'creative nothing' receiving a lot of attention in the literature on Stirner, he only uses it on two occasions. Yet the few times he uses it are very relevant to our investigation. The first time is in the part that serves as an introduction, which states the following. “I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything.” (1995, p. 7). In the concluding part, Stirner returns to it more emphatically.

I am owner of my might, and I am so when I know myself as unique. In the unique one the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, of which he is born. Every higher essence above me, be it God, be it man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness, and pales only before the sun of this consciousness. If I concern myself for myself, the unique one, then my concern rests on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself. (Ibid., p. 324).

What stands out here is that these passages seem to have a religious connotation. This is already the case in the English translation, but this is even clearer in the original German. The verb 'creation' in English can be translated into different German words, but Stirner's original term, '*schöpferische Nichts*,' is based on the verb *schöpfen*, which specifically refers to the act of creating something *ex nihilo* and is almost exclusively used to describe gods and their creative acts.

Even some passages describing egoism that are pertinent to the creative nothing have similar religious overtones. There are two passages that evidence this most clearly. The first comes right before his mentioning of the 'creative nothing' in the closing of *The Ego and its Own*: “They say of God, 'names name thee not'. That holds good of me: no concept expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names. Likewise, they say of God that he is perfect and has no calling to strive after perfection. That too holds good of me alone.” (Ibid., p. 324). The second one of these passages reveals the religious overtones even more. He writes: “I do not presuppose myself, because I am every moment just positing or creating myself, and am I only by being not presupposed but posited, and, again, posited only in the moment when I posit myself; that is, I am creator and creature in one.” (Ibid., p. 135). The original German phrasing of this last quote again uses the words *Schöpfer* and *Geschöpf*, thus referring to himself not just as 'creator and creature in one,' but as a divine creator and divine creation. Throughout *The Ego and its Own*, Stirner has chosen his words very carefully and paid special attention to double meanings. Given this attention to detail, it is hard to overlook the use of religious terms in the aforementioned passages. If we interpret Stirner use of words here generously, one could argue that it is yet another attempt to provoke the reader. In fact, I think Paterson presents such a charitable reading when he describes Stirner's 'creative nothing' as “the 'Nothing' out of which he 'creates everything' is not a pure absence of being: it is rather a total absence of objective meaning and intrinsic value.” (Paterson, 1971, p. 220). In this generous interpretation, the 'creative nothing' refers to persistent conscious creative action with no secure metaphysical foundation.

A less generous reading would suggest that Stirner himself never really manages to get beyond political theology. Even if Stirner rids himself of any idealism, he still thinks in religious terms. In *Stirner's Critics*, which was specifically written to clarify misunderstandings, he even repeats the 'names name thee not' part.²⁹ When we look at Stirner's vocabulary through the lens of political theology, it is as if he considers himself as the Christian God in Genesis, creating the world around him without relying on an external creator. However, unlike Hobbes' mortal god, Stirner's egoist is not the embodiment of some political unit, but precisely no more or less than him-/herself. In fact, this impossibility of either representing or being represented is what Schmitt would find most objectionable about Stirner's views. Newman argues that “this is the closest Stirner comes to any kind of ‘negative theology’, where the meaning of God is approached by saying what God is not, rather than what he is.” (2019, p. 56). Negative theology here refers to an inversion of a more common form of apotheosis. Instead of ascribing certain perfect qualities to some divinity, in negative theology a divinity is described precisely by the lack of a proper description. Indeed, it is

²⁹ Stirner, 2012, p. 54

precisely the lack of a possible description that indicates its divinity. The way Stirner presents his 'I' is thus reminiscent of negative theology because he uses religious language precisely to indicate that it always outstrips any positive description.

If we take Stirner's creative nothing as a divine description of the self, then there is a politico-theological parallel between it and Schmitt's concept of sovereignty. Both recognise the insufficiency and incapability of the present system to incorporate the exception. Instead of relying on any regular order or metaphysical system, both Stirner's *Einzig* and Schmitt's sovereign are states of exception that overthrow an existing order to create their own *ex nihilo*. The absolute and total control over the juridical domain that Schmitt wants to see in a dictator is similar to the mastery Stirner wants to have over himself. In other words, Stirner wants the individual to have sovereignty over him-/herself in the same way as the Schmittian dictator is sovereign over others.

Despite the overt religious language in his description of egoism, Stirner presents egoism as an antidote to political theology because it removes an external object of worship. Yet at this point we need to briefly return to Schmitt's *Political Romanticism* as a foil for Stirner's views of egoism. We have previously seen that Stirner views romanticism as the externalisation of ethical responsibility, whereas Schmitt views the apotheosis of the self, retracted from any real political engagement, as the hallmark of political romanticism. Even though the book was explicitly written to argue against Adam Müller and Stirner is never mentioned, we know from *Ex Captivitate Salus* that Schmitt at the time was not only familiar with Stirner's work, but considers Stirner as part of the romantic turn in German literature. Even if Schmitt didn't have Stirner in mind when writing *Political Romanticism*, he still provides some interesting thoughts that we can consider as almost a direct criticism against Stirner. Schmitt presents two interconnected characteristics of the romantic that directly oppose Stirner's view. Firstly, Schmitt argues that the romantic makes himself the centre of the universe:

The distinctive character of romantic occasionalism is that it subjectifies the main factor of the occasionalist system: God. In the liberal bourgeois world, the detached, isolated, and emancipated individual becomes the middle point, the court of last resort, the absolute... In psychological reality, therefore, it combined with other, less subjectivistic affects. The subject always claimed, however, that his experience was the only thing of interest. (Schmitt, 1985b, p. 99).

If the last line of this quote would be a description of Stirner's egoism, it would, despite its brevity, not be far off the mark. Schmitt proceeds by writing that the romantics actively avoid any

engagement in reality, as they seek the appeal of what could be, rather than what is. He proceeds:

In common-place reality, the romantics could not play the role of the ego who creates the world. They preferred the state of eternal becoming and possibilities that are never consummated to the confines of concrete reality. In the moment of realization, all of the other infinite possibilities are precluded. (Ibid., p. 66).

Even though Schmitt is critical of the romantic, we cannot ignore how well his description aligns with Stirner's philosophy. The Stirnerian 'I' is always in the process of becoming. Yet, if we consider Schmitt's romantic as a description of Stirner, an interesting opposition between the two thinkers reveals itself. Schmitt describes the romantic as an individualist who avoids the real world at all costs. Rather than searching for resolution, the romantic wallows in indecision, dreaming of what the world could be. More pertinent to political theology, Schmitt argues that the romantic attempts to be his/her own god who imagines a world around him/her while avoiding a confrontation with actual decision-making. Stirner, on the other hand, isn't particularly concerned with decision-making and thinks that political theologians like Schmitt outsource their ethical responsibility by viewing themselves as puppets of some external power. In Stirner's view, the romantic envisions a world full of spooks, even though only his/her head is haunted. The point of Stirner's egoism is that the individual never fits any conceptual categories, no matter what decisions are made. Additionally, Schmitt sees in the romantic an avoidance of making the friend-foe distinction, thus considering the entire world as a potential enemy. In *Ex Captivitate Salus*, he even specifically reiterates this point with regard to Stirner. Yet Stirner sees in such absolute ideas like the friend-foe distinction an avoidance of engaging with actual people because, in his view, such a distinction always relies on abstractions.

Of course, even though Schmitt's conception of the romantic seems very similar to the way he characterises Stirner in *Ex Captivitate Salus*, we will never find out definitively whether he considers Stirner as a romantic. There is one point of Schmitt's analysis of the romantic that doesn't quite encapsulate Stirner. According to Schmitt, the romantic forgoes the *causa* in favour of the *occasio*. The world is to the romantic no more than an *occasio* to start a new adventure. I suspect that Schmitt reads in *The Ego and its Own* some kind of plea for solipsism. Yet in Stirner's eyes, it is precisely the political theologian who is afraid to embrace the *causa*, as s/he seeks absolution from his/her immense ethical responsibility. The political theologian described by Stirner then seeks no *occasio* as a replacement for the *causa*, but finds his/her absolution in a *telos*.

There is one final politico-theological aspect of Stirner's egoism that has to be addressed

here. Since the publication of *The Ego and its Own*, there has been an extensive debate to what extent Stirner should be considered a Hegelian. We have briefly glanced at this debate in the literature review and it is too extensive to further unpack at this point. The aspect that concerns us here is that, whether or not Stirner is a Hegelian, he does present egoism as the end point of history in the style of Hegel. Even without the specific theological rhetoric of Stirner's egoism and creative nothing, he clearly considers there to be a historical progression with an end, thereby giving egoism an eschatological component. Stirner may reject a transcendental heaven, but he presents egoism as a sort of heaven on earth. With heaven on earth here I am not referring to some stable blissful state, but rather finding an internal solace in the profane world. Such a view of historical progress would fit Löwith's description of a secularised eschatology. However, even if we consider Stirner as a dialectician and his egoism as the end point of history, this end point doesn't fit the usual Hegelian model of a synthesis. Egoism is in Stirner's view the comprehensive end of any faith in an external higher good. He considers political theology as evidence that faith is on its last legs and after it collapses, the end of history is also a new beginning.

A comparison to Jacob Taubes' analysis of eschatology is particularly revealing. In contrast to Löwith, Taubes places a stronger emphasis on the connection between eschatology and evil. More precisely, Taubes views eschatology as the moment an otherworldly power brings salvation by overthrowing an earthly evil. Even though we can view Stirner's description of egoism as a kind of salvation, this salvation comes not from overcoming evil itself, but ridding the world of morality. Unlike other modern eschatologists like Marx or Feuerbach, Stirner fights not against an evil, but attacks morality altogether. In the Stirnerian view, evil only exists in the eye of the beholder. So, if we take eschatology here not just as the end of history, but specifically as pertinent to the salvation from some evil, then Stirner is a complicated case, as he presents historical progression not as a fight against an evil, but against moral systems. Yet he also presents egoism with a positive connotation, despite not proclaiming it as the new highest good. Clearly, *The Ego and its Own* is a search for some salvation, even though we cannot properly call something like 'self-renunciation' an evil in Stirner's view. In his brief comment on Stirner, Schmitt also reflected on Stirner's eschatology. He writes:

This poor Pan [Stirner] was not equal to the challenge of modern natural science. Today his happiness is not even an illusion any longer. It is the pleasure of the poor holidaymaker escaped from the big city into the countryside, the fleeting awakening of cheerful feelings in the holiday child... Their desire is no longer for eternity. It moves within the frame of a right to vacation. It still naturally creates an appetite for more, but submits itself, in

resignation, to the fact that the vacation cannot be eternal. (Schmitt, 2017, p. 66).

To Schmitt, Stirner is one of the first to abandon the pursuit of the eternal in favour of an earthly paradise. Yet Schmitt sees in this an inevitable emptiness that those who live immersed in modern nihilistic consumerist pleasures and satiated by technology will experience, even though Stirner himself never personally faced this. Schmitt implies here that the only way to overcome this sense of emptiness is to turn away from temporary pleasures and look towards the eternal. It is to Schmitt precisely the elision of transcendence that ends up linking the pursuit of salvation to totalitarianism. Of course, Stirner never denied that such emptiness exists, but his egoism is an attempt to come to terms with it, rather than deferring this confrontation to a non-existent higher good as Schmitt does. To Stirner, Schmitt will always keep chasing something that cannot be reached.

Ownness

To properly understand Stirner's egoism, it is crucial to examine the related term 'ownness.' As mentioned previously, even though 'ownness' isn't an actual English word, it is the closest English grammatical approximation of the original German word *Eigenheit*. In the introduction to the 1995 edition of *The Ego and its Own*, Leopold explains: "Ownness' is best understood as a variety of self-mastery, a form of substantive individual autonomy which insists that any actions or desires which involve waiving or suspending individual judgement violate the self-mastery and independence of the person concerned." (In Stirner, 1995, p. xxii). We should view ownness as an extension of egoism. Stirner generally uses egoism to refer to a disposition, demeanour or aim. It is an ephemeral, ever-changing immediate personal pursuit that stands in contrast to the fixed highest goods that we are enjoined to pursue by the political theologians. Ownness, then, is the manner in which we live up to our egoism. We can see ownness then as the 'praxis' of egoism. Instead of following strict rules or norms derived from some higher good, a *Bestimmung*, ownness refers to peculiarities, idiosyncratic mannerisms and personal cadences with which we go through life. Like egoism itself, ownness is constantly subject to change and self-determined, making it a *Selbstbestimmung*.

In *The Ego and its Own*, Stirner specifically contraposes the term ownness to freedom in order to make explicit his criticism of those who have made 'freedom' their object of worship, especially the romantics and the liberals. He writes:

What a difference between freedom and ownness! One can get *rid* of a great many things, one yet does not get rid of all; one becomes free from much, not from everything. Inwardly

one may be free in spite of the condition of slavery, although, too, it is again only from all sorts of things, not from everything; but from the whip, the domineering temper, of the master, one does not as slave become *free*. 'Freedom lives only in the realm of dreams! ' Ownness, on the contrary, is my whole being and existence, it is I myself. I am free from what I am *rid* of, owner of what I have in my *power* or what I *control*. *My own* I am at all times and under all circumstances... To be free is something that I cannot truly *will*, because I cannot make it, cannot create it: I can only wish it and - aspire toward it, for it remains an ideal, a spook. (Ibid., p. 143).

In principle, what Stirner refers to with ownness is a kind of freedom, but not freedom as the ultimate objective of human life. Indeed, ownness is precisely the opposite of the romantic apotheosis of freedom. Although Stirner takes freedom to merely refer to negative freedom, he aims to prove, much like Schmitt, that the romantics want a freedom that cannot manifest in real life. Stirner argues that if you are truly free, it is not just that there is nothing left, but you will be a slave to yet another spook as well. "The friends of freedom are exasperated against selfishness because in their religious striving after freedom they cannot free themselves from that sublime thing, 'self-renunciation'." (Ibid., p. 152). Ownness, on the other hand, is liberating precisely because it deals with the world as it is and utilises the power at one's disposal, instead of being mired in abstract ideals that are always outside of our grasp. Moreover, the pursuit of freedom doesn't make one free, as one merely abides by the predicates of, what Stirner calls, the "reign of freedom" (Ibid., p. 144). Stirner argues that "the man who is set free is nothing but a freed man,.. a dog dragging a piece of chain with him: he is an unfree man in the garment of freedom, like the ass in the lion's skin." (Ibid., p. 152). Rather, for Stirner, "ownness' is a reality, which *of itself* removes just so much unfreedom as by barring your own way hinders you." (Ibid., p. 148). As Leopold puts it, ownness facilitates the pursuit of self-mastery. Thus, Stirner concludes: "My freedom becomes complete only when it is my - *might*." (Ibid., p. 151).

Even though there may intuitively seem to be an overlap between the concept of ownness and Isaiah Berlin's distinction between positive and negative freedom - as according to Berlin "the 'positive' sense of the word 'liberty' derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master" (Berlin, 1969, p. 178), whereas negative freedom would refer to the freedom *from* something - Berlin still operates in the paradigm of the apotheosis of freedom, since he considers freedom as "an end in itself" (Ibid., p. 214), an objective towards which we must strive. Stirner criticises this pursuit for freedom by writing that "the craving for freedom as for something absolute, worthy of every praise, deprived us of ownness: it created self-denial." (1995, p. 142).

Stirner's ownness, on the other hand, is always a means, but never an end in itself. Ownness is not even something that can be willed into existence, but something that always already exists. Much like egoism itself, it is up to us to embrace it. Instead of encouraging the pursuit of ownness, Stirner merely points to our self-suppression of it. Newman further argues that we should consider ownness as a more radical alternative to positive freedom: "where ownness departs from positive freedom is in its rejection of any higher moral or rational ideal that the self aspires to. There is no notion in Stirner of Berlin's two selves – the 'authentic' self that must master the lower, empirical self." (2017a, p. 17). The crucial characteristic of ownness that Newman points out is that it doesn't revolve around external conditions. The freedoms that Berlin discusses refer principally to aspects of social organisation that allow the individual to act in a certain way. Newman's interpretation revolves around an internal pursuit of freedom not from external constraints, but from self-imposed internal constraints. He says further that:

Freedom lies only in oneself, and is not conditional upon living up to some idealised form of humanity, as the humanists and republicans of Stirner's time proclaimed. There is nothing to be achieved, no goal to be attained, no ideal to be lived up to, no *teleological* end to be pursued. Rather, freedom is our ontological condition. Stirner's warning about possessedness is simply to make us aware of those internal drives that threaten this ontological freedom, so that we can better guard against them. (Ibid., p. 18).

Insurrection

To understand exactly how Stirner envisions the overcoming of idealist thinking, we have to look at a moment of exceptional analytical lucidity in his work where he contraposes insurrection and revolution. Revolutions and insurrections are commonly considered as occurring sequentially, with the initial destructive political unrest of an insurrection sometimes evolving into a full-scale revolution. Goldstone, for example, defines a revolution as "an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in a society, accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilization and non-institutionalized actions that undermine existing authorities" (Goldstone, 2001, p. 142). In Goldstone's definition, a revolt is one of the conditions required for a revolution. Stirner, however, does not regard the two as sequentially connected. He makes no mention of one preceding the other and, even if he would subscribe to the view that the one follows from the other, it isn't particularly relevant to the argument he posits. Instead, Stirner sees them as categorically different and distinguishes them as follows.

Revolution and insurrection must not be looked upon as synonymous. The former consists in an overturning of conditions, of the established condition or status, the state or society, and is accordingly a political or social act; the latter has indeed for its unavoidable consequence a transformation of circumstances, yet does not start from it but from men's discontent with themselves, is not an armed rising, but a rising of individuals, a getting up, without regard to the arrangements that spring from it. The revolution aimed at new arrangements; insurrection leads us no longer to let ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on 'institutions'. (Stirner, 1995, pp. 279-280).

Even though the word 'insurrection' is a correct translation of the German word *Empörung* that Stirner uses, it doesn't entirely capture the connotation it has in German. As in English, there are a number of German words that are roughly synonymous with insurrection, like *Aufstand* (uprising, literally 'standing up') or *Revolte* (revolt). Yet the word *Empörung*, which comes from the root word *empören*, has the connotation of a revolt that comes out of a specific emotional state, whereas a word like *Aufstand* describes a specific *social* phenomenon. There is no singular English word that captures this connotation, but it is perhaps best approached as something like 'anger' or 'indignation.' The word Stirner chooses thus also specifically includes the emotional state of the individual, as implied in the quote, rather than being purely a description of a particular social phenomenon.

The distinction Stirner makes here is that a revolution is the destruction of an existing system so that another system may take its place, whereas an insurrection revolves around the rejection of all systems. The crucial difference between an insurrection and a revolution in Stirner's eyes lies neither in the result nor in the particular social situation in which they occur, but in the aims of both. Revolutionaries always live under the delusion that they have found a perfect system that can and should replace the existing system. Yet in Stirner's eyes, they keep encountering the same pitfalls and never succeed in finding this perfect system because there is no perfect system to be found. In that sense, the revolutionaries live up to the literal meaning of the word 'revolution,' as they keep running in circles. Insurrection, as opposition without alternative, should be seen as the main objective of Stirner's egoism. Stirner has no grand revolution in mind and *The Ego and its Own* proposes no alternative plan, doctrine, dogma, or anything of the kind. Rather, Stirner aims at a self-liberating internal transformation by advocating the whimsical but intelligent pursuit of immediate personal interests without any *a priori* structure. Any change in social and political institutions is only of secondary consequence. *The Ego and its Own* should therefore not be looked upon as an instruction manual, but rather as an ethical and philosophical reflection on his own liberation, so that others may use it in whichever way they choose. Stirner's foundation for his

values is not an abstract metaphysical system, but his own volition.

Camus presents some interesting reflections on Stirner's insurrection. It is Stirner's distinction between revolution and insurrection that sparked Camus' own investigation into the subject.³⁰ Though more sceptical than Stirner about whether an insurrection, which in Camus' work has been translated as rebellion, can deliver on its promise, Camus understands and articulates very well the appeal of insurrection. He writes:

Absolute revolution, in fact, supposes the absolute malleability of human nature and its possible reduction to the condition of a historical force. But rebellion, in man, is the refusal to be treated as an object and to be reduced to simple historical terms. It is the affirmation of a nature common to all men, which eludes the world of power. (Camus, 1984, p. 250).

Camus asserts that every rebellion arises from the sense that something is amiss. He argues that "not every value entails rebellion, but every act of rebellion tacitly invokes a value." (Ibid., p. 14). Camus knows that underneath every political revolution lies a metaphysical system that can never capture an individual, yet argues that ultimately every rebellion runs aground because it cannot be value-less, as every rebellion always contains the promise of some kind of freedom or release. Camus further points out that Stirner undoubtedly thinks that insurrection is better than what we have now, and he undoubtedly thinks that it is better than any politico-theological alternative. Of course, Stirner's criticism isn't necessarily aimed at values, but at their rigidity. Indeed, Stirner aims to retain his ability to change his values. Leopold elucidates:

This [Stirner's] rejection of morality is not grounded in the rejection of values as such, but in the affirmation of what might be called non-moral goods. That is, Stirner allows that there are actions and desires which, although not moral in his sense (because they do not involve obligations to others), are nonetheless to be assessed positively. Stirner is clearly committed to the non-nihilistic view that certain kinds of character and modes of behaviour (namely autonomous individuals and actions) are to be valued above all others. (Leopold, 2019).

The crucial point of insurrection is not the opposition to ideas as such, as Stirner makes clear that he has no issue with mathematics for example, but with sanctified ideas and the normative authority they entail. Stirner writes:

³⁰ Camus, 1984, p. 63.

Now, as this rose is a true rose to begin with, this nightingale always a true nightingale, so I am not for the first time a true man when I fulfil my calling, live up to my destiny, but I am a 'true man' from the start. My first babble is the token of the life of a 'true man', the struggles of my life are the outpourings of his force, my last breath is the last exhalation of the force of the 'man'. The true man does not lie in the future, an object of longing, but lies, existent and real, in the present. Whatever and whoever I may be, joyous and suffering, a child or an old man, in confidence or doubt, in sleep or in waking, I am it, I am the true man. (Stirner, 1995, p. 289).

In an earlier work, Newman called Stirner's politics of egoism "a kind of radical ethical responsibility" (Newman, 2011b, p. 10) in which one cannot rely on absolute guarantees. What Stirner means with egoism is precisely the opposite of the political theology that he finds in his contemporaries. If we follow Stirner's logic, we can consider political theology as a psychological attempt to evade precisely the radical ethical responsibility that comes with living in a world that doesn't present us with fixed ethical standards. Yet Stirner observes that this leads to an endless search for a solution that doesn't exist. In this light, egoism is fully accepting and bearing the radical ethical responsibility for our actions.

Agamben briefly mentions Stirner's contraposition of insurrection to revolution in *The Time that Remains* as one possible societal endgame, which he aptly names "ethical anarchism" (2005a, p. 32), in which the rebel refrains from any destructive ends but rather steps out of the usual paradigm of political power that revolves around concepts like sovereignty, legitimacy, representation or agency. Newman further reveals the depth of this Stirnerian/Agambian approach to politics by arguing that:

both Agamben and Stirner propose an insurrectionary or ontologically anarchic understanding of the subject: a form of subjectivity which is not founded on any essence or firm ontological category, and which is not reducible to any kind of fixed identity; a form of subjectivity without a particular *telos* or destiny which would otherwise bind us to systems of sovereign power. (2017b, p. 293).

Newman shows that Stirner's conception of egoism aligns with what Agamben describes as "singularities that are no longer characterized either by any social identity or by any real condition of belonging: singularities that are truly *whatever* singularities." (Agamben, 2000, p. 86). These 'whatever singularities' are, according to Agamben, fundamentally at odds with the way the state

and society is organised around identity-based groups, because they can neither be confined to nor be represented by any conceptual description. Thus, what Newman sees in Stirner's view of insurrection is an abandonment or exodus out of the paradigm of power that revolves around sovereignty. "The insurrection starts not with the desire to change the external conditions that might be said to oppress the individual, but rather with the assertion of the self over these conditions." (2017b, p. 287). Though Agamben makes no mention of Stirner in his discussion of the 'whatever singularity,' he seems to come to a similar view as Newman: "The whatever singularity—this singularity that wants to take possession of belonging itself as well as of its own being- into-language, and that thus declines any identity and any condition of belonging — is the new, nonsubjective, and socially inconsistent protagonist of the coming politics." (Agamben, 2000, p. 89). Taken in this way, we get a particular and unique image of Stirner's approach to politics. Stirner sees any political engagement as a profoundly individual experience that will inevitably falter because the uniqueness of the individual always exceeds the higher good s/he wants to serve. The fanaticism entailed in the search for political servitude can be overcome through egoism, oneness and insurrection by turning one's gaze inwards and detaching from engagement in the traditional game of political power, instead of hoping for political salvation. We can perhaps find a glimpse of the 'coming politics' that Agamben alludes to in Stirner's discussion of the 'union of egoists.'

Union of Egoists

Even though *The Ego and its Own* is usually considered as a work of political philosophy, only a fraction of it is dedicated to societal organisation. Stirner's concern is never really how to organise society, but the philosophical and psychological origins of political engagement. In fact, even though it is undeniable that Stirner is largely concerned with political philosophy, he takes a very apolitical approach to it. Of course, politics extends beyond mere societal organisation, but the attention devoted to it is noticeably limited. His thoughts on a non-metaphysical society seem to be added more as an afterthought. Nevertheless, Stirner's egoism is by no means antisocial. His alternative to a state or any society based on some grand ideal - what he calls the 'union of egoists' - is not so much a plan or a programme, but rather a form of social interaction that occurs as a consequence of the pursuit of egoism. The union of egoists is a loose, ephemeral and spontaneous social tie that exists only as long as it serves an egoistic purpose. As soon as the union of egoists is no longer useful, it can easily be dissolved. Stirner describes the difference between the state and the union as such. "The state is sacred, and as against me, the individual man, it is the true man, the spirit, the ghost; but the union is my own creation, my creature, not sacred, not a spiritual power

above my spirit, as little as any association of whatever sort.” (1995, p. 273). “The society is sacred, the union your own; the society consumes you, you consume the union.” (Ibid, p. 277).

On the surface, the society that Stirner envisions looks like the polar opposite of the one Schmitt envisions. Stirner looks for a fluid, pragmatic and ever-changing community, whereas Schmitt has in mind a strict political order with a strong foundation and a decisive leader. Crucially, and in opposition to Stirner, Schmitt seeks a complete union of all aspects of life, which is why he turns to Catholicism for political inspiration. Schmitt argues that the political form of Catholicism has the “capacity to embody the great trinity of form: the aesthetic form of art; the juridical form of law; finally, the glorious achievement of a world-historical form of power.” (Schmitt, 1996a, p. 21). Stirner’s union of egoists usually serves only one specific purpose and can easily overlap with other unions. The union of egoists entails precisely the pluralism that Schmitt despises. Stirner himself is indifferent towards pluralism, so if a society develops to become a hegemonic entity by accident, he would not necessarily perceive it as a problem, as long as it is not enforced but open to change. In fact, he even expressly argues that the union of egoist may even pursue idealistic ends, but only under the condition that the egoist retains full control over him-/herself and can abandon the specific union whenever s/he pleases. He writes:

I am not unselfish so long as the end remains my *own*, and I, instead of giving myself up to be the blind means of its fulfilment, leave it always an open question. My zeal need not on that account be slacker than the most fanatical, but at the same time I remain toward it frostily cold, unbelieving, and its most irreconcilable enemy; I remain its *Judge*, because I am its owner. (Ibid., p. 58).

The problem that Stirner has with a society envisioned by the likes of Schmitt is that it is enforced through its demand of self-renunciation. A union of egoist must be able to change and transform. In fact, Stirner even argues that the inability to transform may lead one to become a slave to oneself.

Stirner's thought, especially when it comes to the union of egoists, has often been brought into association with anarchism. The precise relationship between Stirner's thought and anarchism is complicated and largely beyond the scope of this dissertation. Yet, a politico-theological reading provides some interesting insights into this relationship. A substantial part of *The Ego and its Own* is devoted to very vocal criticism of the state. The term anarchism is derived from the Ancient Greek prefix *an-* combined with the word *arkhos*, meaning 'without a ruler,' so taken literally, Stirner fits the bill of an anarchist. In fact, as we have seen in the literature review, Stirner has been an inspiration to many other anarchists and libertarians. However, the rejection of state power found

in *The Ego and its Own* is not like that of other anarchists like Bakunin or Kropotkin, but a by-product of the combination of his analysis of political theology and his personal atheism. I have argued earlier that Stirner challenges both the veracity and authority of religion like many of his contemporaries. Unlike his contemporaries, however, Stirner attempts to stay consistent in his atheism. When he sees in modern politics no more than a continuation of religion, he rejects it for the same atheistic reasons, thus effectively making him a political atheist in the realm of political theology.

Despite his rejection of the state, it is still difficult to consider Stirner a full-fledged member of the anarchist pantheon, as he is quite critical of political anarchism itself. Of course, during the writing of *The Ego and its Own*, anarchism as a political theory was still in its infancy, mostly being developed after Stirner's death. Yet Stirner is very critical of the anarchists that were around during his lifetime, in particular Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Edgar Bauer. Like other radical political ideologies, Stirner sees anarchism as one of the many iterations of political theology. Anarchists are in Stirner's eyes primarily motivated by moral views. They may disavow Christianity, yet “skimmed off the best fat from religion” (Ibid., p. 46) and continue the search for some grand idea to worship, a new highest good. Stirner proceeds: “Proudhon, like the communists, fights against egoism. Therefore they are continuations and consistent carryings-out of the Christian principle, the principle of love, of sacrifice for something general, something alien.” (Ibid., p. 222). Anarchists reject the state alongside the Christian God, but replace it with another theos and moral law that restricts our thought and behaviour. In fact, this is where Newman sees a definitive break between Stirner and the anarchist tradition, a break that leads to what he calls 'post-anarchism.' Newman formulates post-anarchism as “an understanding of anarchism that retains a political and ethical commitment to equal liberty, antiauthoritarianism and solidarity, but that is no longer reliant on ontological foundations in science, biology, human nature or universal rationality.” (Newman, 2011a, p. 323). A complete exposition of post-anarchism would at this point be outside of the scope of the dissertation, but to explain it briefly, we can distinguish three aspects of the break between Stirner and the other anarchists. Firstly, Stirner moves away from the classic anarchist assault on the state and seeks to liberate the internal subject. He thus does not subscribe to the “the idea of an ontological separation between power and social life; between power, on the one hand, and subjectivity, freedom, truth, morality and resistance on the other.” (Newman, 2010a, p. 268). Secondly, traditional anarchists operate in the Enlightenment paradigm of rational human progress. Already in the 1950's Rudolf Rocker commented on Bakunin's thought: “One should keep in mind that those [Bakunin's] superb dissertations were written at a time when intellectual life generally was under the influence of reawakened natural sciences. At that time, too, functions and tasks we

often assigned to science which it could never fulfill, and thus many of its representatives were led to conclusions justifying every form reaction.” (Found in Maximoff, 1953, p. 24). Stirner’s egoism, on the other hand, is not a rational enterprise because Stirner is keenly aware that reason alone is insufficient to capture the complexity of an individual. Thirdly, traditional anarchists believed that human nature is inherently inclined towards moral goodness, which they believe is both suppressed and misdirected by state authority. A removal of the state would unleash this natural potential of human beings that subsequently would inevitably guide us towards a free and equal society in which individuals can fully develop themselves. Traditional anarchism, like every other political theology, thus desires self-renunciation to a higher good, which in this case is a view of human progress towards a utopic society. Stirner entirely abandons this narrative and seeks an inner transformation instead. By extension, the atheism of thinkers like Proudhon is merely incidental to their anarchism, as they must reject Christianity to make way for their new moral laws. If we consider Stirner’s views as anarchist, then they are, in contrast to the likes of Proudhon, and extension of his political atheism.

It is therefore interesting that Schmitt considers Proudhon and especially Bakunin as the primary opponents of political theology. *Political Theology* was written in principle as a response to Bakunin, though in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, Schmitt provides a bit more substance to this. It is especially the characterisation of Proudhon and Bakunin that stands out. Schmitt writes: “For Proudhon and Bakunin, anarchism meant a battle against every sort of systematic unity, against the centralized uniformity of the modern state, against the professional parliamentary politician, against bureaucracy, the military, and police, against what was felt to be the metaphysical centralism of belief in God.” (Schmitt, 2000, p. 67). The description Schmitt gives here of the anarchists suits Stirner much better than Proudhon or Bakunin, since the latter two are still primarily motivated by some unifying sense of justice. Even though we know that Schmitt was familiar with Stirner's work, we can at best only speculate why Stirner isn't mentioned in this context by Schmitt. It could be that Schmitt was not yet ready to acknowledge Stirner's work, as so many before and after him. It could also be that Schmitt saw Stirner not as a representative of anarchism but rather as a representative of romanticism or liberalism. Nevertheless, the interesting point here is that Schmitt pitches anarchism against 'systematic unity' and 'metaphysical centralism.' This reveals a difference in the analysis of political theology between Schmitt and Stirner. Schmitt looks for a unifying principle in the state, which acts like God on earth. This is exactly what anarchists oppose. Yet the anarchists are not free from 'systematic unity' and 'metaphysical centralism.' Stirner rightly points out that their opposition to the state is driven by an alternative unifying metaphysical principle, namely the Christian principle of love, that serves as the highest good. In the Stirnerian analysis, the

anarchists may not have a supreme decider that unites them, but they are united by a strong and centralised normative view.

Like Schmitt, and in contrast to the anarchists of his time, Stirner favours a view of power that would later be described as *Realpolitik*. About Wilhelm Weitling he writes:

Whether I am loyal under a despotism or in a 'society' *à la* Weitling, it is the same absence of right in so far as in both cases I have not *my* right but *foreign* right. In consideration of right the question is always asked: 'What or who gives me the right to it?' Answer: God, love, reason, nature, humanity, etc. No, only your might, your power gives you the right. (Stirner, 1995, p. 168).

This realist view of power distances Stirner from most traditional anarchists and libertarians, as they tend to see politics as a continuation of ethics and thus play the game of political theology. In an earlier work, Newman already pointed out that “Stirner has shown that in subscribing to a Manichean political logic which conceives of a place of resistance outside the realm of power, anarchism has failed to grasp the new functioning of power: domination through subjectification, rather than repression.” (Newman, 2001, p. 63). Unlike traditional anarchists, Stirner doesn't consider ethics as being opposed to power, but instead as a means to power. Stirner attempts to move beyond the idealism that still traps traditional anarchists and forgoes any attempt at finding the right society or the right way to live. Even if Stirner would succeed in ending political theology, it wouldn't absolve us of power. In recognising that power cannot be removed, as the idealists hope to do, Stirner acknowledges that 'might makes right.'

Even though Stirner generally presents his idea of a union of egoists as something full of potential and opportunities that allows people to act more freely, precisely his view that 'might makes right' also raises some scepticism. A society based on the union of egoists would be a society without any fixed moral principle, which in essence entails a potential war of all against all. In his commentary on Stirner, Camus rightly points out that “unless we accept death, we must be willing to kill in order to be unique.” (1984, p. 65). Once Stirner abandons the search for ethical realism, we find ourselves in a world where murder isn't morally wrong. However, Camus then erroneously concludes that “at this extremity nothing else is possible but death or resurrection. Stirner, and with him all the nihilist rebels, rush to the utmost limits, drunk with destruction.” (Ibid.). In the Stirnerian view, bloodlust would generally be an awful approach to self-preservation. Paterson takes this scepticism a step further. He argues that Stirner never really considered the union of egoists as a replacement for society, as he thinks it would entail a complete and total breakdown of all liveable

circumstances. He elaborates:

Although Stirner speaks of an 'association of egoists', his concrete descriptions of The Unique One's actual relationship to his associates in effect demonstrate that an association whose members were all 'Unique Ones' could scarcely begin to function: an association of 'Unique Ones', each regarding the others as his tools to be manipulated and faithlessly abandoned when they were of no further use, would in practice be impossibly centrifugal. A population of 'Unique Ones' who recognized each other as 'Unique Ones' would exist in a perpetual distrust and suspicion, continually flaring up into open combat: the idea of a population of 'Unique Ones' is the idea of a 'war of all against all', of a Hobbesian 'state of nature' but a state of nature from which there would be no escape by means of a social contract, since the 'Unique Ones' would not be Hobbesian natural egoists but self-chosen, conscious egoists who would deliberately refuse to make the kind of self-renunciation required in a social contract. (1971, p. 271).

Paterson thinks that Stirner's union of egoist operates independently from society. Egoism is to Paterson a reversal of the Kantian categorical imperative, as there is only one egoist who uses the world as s/he pleases. The pursuit of egoism thus couldn't apply to everyone. From this perspective, egoism isn't just an emancipation from self-renunciation. The abandonment of morality opens the door for the egoist to use others as instruments for his/her own self-gratification. Paterson further argues that "the egoist's love is an arbitrary love, recognizing no one as 'worthy' of his love, but loving only those individuals who happen to gratify *him*." (Ibid., p. 260). This raises an important issue concerning the historical reception and interpretation of *The Ego and its Own*. Most commonly, especially by the anarchists, it has been received as still being confined to some quest for emancipation, but instead of a social change, *The Ego and its Own* aims at an internal transformation. Yet Paterson's view opposes this. Even though Paterson's thesis here is quite radical, there is at least one questionable element to it. Usually, Stirner describes his own attitudes towards all the spectral forces that try to govern him, but he also gives advice to a 'you' or a 'we,' indicating that he is not the only egoist. However, there is an important kernel of truth in Paterson's thesis. Stirner does not argue for some societal structure or pursuit of justice, nor does he present an alternative model for society. Rather, he looks at politics in a radically different way, as he is concerned with how a singular individual should relate him-/herself to politics and society without any immediate thought for the totality. We should therefore view the addressee of *The Ego and its Own* not as society in its entirety, nor should we see it as a proclamation of the departure of one

singular individual. Likewise, we shouldn't view Stirner as a self-proclaimed liberator. Rather, *The Ego and its Own* should be considered as a book addressed to a minority that is psychologically suitable for and receptive to it. The egoist in Stirner's philosophy is not like the Nietzschean *Übermensch* the strives towards an individualist ideal. We should instead view the Stirnerian egoist as one who is condemned to be a 'creative nothing' and *The Ego and its Own* as a suggestion of how to deal with it.

If we adopt this more pessimistic view of the union of egoists, it does show some kinship with Schmitt's concept of the political. As we've seen earlier, Schmitt does not consider the political as a separate domain, but rather as a dimension that can be engaged with whenever desire or necessity requires it. In a similar sense, the union of egoists is based on a friend-foe distinction that can emerge in any situation or about any subject that calls for it, though with the primary emphasis being on friend, rather than the foe that Schmitt is mostly concerned with. Stirner tends to present the union of egoists as something that emerges out of voluntary cooperation, but this doesn't free it from political enmity. Shared enemies may just as well give rise to a union of egoists. In fact, we can consider Stirner's popularity with anarchists in the same way, as they share a common enemy in the state, even though Stirner opposes many aspects of the more mainstream anarchism as presented by Proudhon, Bakunin or Kropotkin. Of course, Stirner's union of egoists reveals and hides itself much more fluidly than Schmitt's rigid all-encompassing political order. Yet, as we've seen before, Schmitt argues in *Ex Captivate* that the whole world, the not-I, must, in principle, be regarded as a potential enemy in a society based on unions of egoists.

Conclusion

Stirner sees political theology as nothing but a continuation of religion, but with God being supplanted by another, otherwise mundane, deified concept that is destined to fail not only because it can never deliver on its promise of salvation, but also because it demands the individual's self-renunciation. If we agree with Stirner's thesis, then the question arises: how do we live without political theology? In this chapter I have examined Stirner's answer: egoism. Though he doesn't give a clear definition of the exact meaning of egoism, we can regard it as something beyond mere selfishness. Instead of vainly searching for an ethical system to provide metaphysical security, Stirner argues that it is better to accept the total lack of a metaphysical structure and find our own path. Once we do this, we have reached the final stage of Stirner's dialectic. Stirner places egoism in opposition to self-renunciation. Instead of following an arbitrary set of rules, egoism encourages the appropriation of the world for oneself through a form of self-mastery that Stirner calls 'ownness.' When we take fanaticism as the relentless pursuit of a *fanum*, an object of worship, at the expense

of the individual, then egoism and ownness serve as the Stirnerian antidote to it. The insurrection it entails leads to a retreat from the usual political paradigm of sovereignty, legitimacy and representation. Egoism, ownness and insurrection aim at an abandonment of our voluntary servitude to abstractions and ideals beyond our grasp.

Yet we also have to wonder whether Stirner's conception of egoism really moves beyond political theology. According to Stirner, we must view the egoist as a 'creative nothing,' which he presents as some sort of godlike figure that is beyond description and that creates his/her own world out of nothing. Though Stirner never explicitly calls the 'creative nothing' a god, he alludes to it with religious language. Stirner's 'creative nothing' is perhaps best understood as a formulation of negative theology.

Conclusion

This dissertation has not been a defence of any particular political belief, but an investigation into the causes of the intensity with which political convictions are held. I have referred to this as political fanaticism. Alberto Toscano (2010) compares political fanaticism to religious fanaticism, but still considers them as two separate entities. My analysis of Stirner's political theology has shown that religious and political fanaticism are much more closely intertwined than we realise.

In a recent bestseller called *Woke Racism* (2021), the linguist John McWhorter makes a brief but poignant comparison between the titular modern-day 'wokeism' and traditional religions. Even though he explicitly states that not everyone who holds these beliefs necessarily behaves like a fanatic, this dissertation is concerned with those that do. If we are to view it as a religion, and McWhorter is by no means the only one to draw this comparison (see Evans & Reid, 2022; Gray, 2020), it comes with a concomitant fanaticism. In practice we see that 'wokeism' has no trouble producing its own fair share of fanatics. Though McWhorter prefers to call it 'Electism,' referring to the sense these people have that they are chosen and on a holy mission - an understandable move given the baggage and lack of clarity that comes with the term 'woke' - he accurately lists the commonalities that it shares with traditional religion. However, instead of exploring why such striking similarities occur in the first place, he evaluates the effect it has on society and how we should deal with it, leaving the deeper exploration of this connection to others:

It has often been argued that Electism simply fills a hole left after the secular shift among thinking Americans especially after the 1960s. Under this analysis, it is human to need religious thought for a basic sense of succor, such that if institutional religion no longer grounds one's thought, then some similarly themed ideology will come in to serve in its place. I will leave it to philosophers and theologians to explore that possibility in depth. (2021, p. 70).

McWhorter makes the comparison between modern political convictions and traditional religions, but stops short of engaging in a politico-theological analysis of this connection. Even though the scope of this project is larger than what McWhorter envisions, I contend that the 19th century philosopher Max Stirner has explored this possibility in depth and provides an answer. In *The Ego and its Own*, we get a unique approach to the question of political fanaticism, which Stirner locates in human psychology and the desire for the metaphysical security that was previously supplied by

religion, yet which has been lost in the modern secular age.

As we explored in Chapter 2, Stirner starts his investigations into the origins of secular faith with an unmasking of the hidden religiosity of his Young Hegelians interlocutors. Even though his progressive contemporaries claimed to be fervent atheists, Stirner noticed that they all had an alternative object of worship. Bauer and Ruge worshipped human reason, Hess and Marx sought salvation in equality, and Feuerbach set his sights on a great united Humanity. Instead of rejecting religion altogether, Stirner saw in their behaviour nothing but a reinvention of religion under a different name, just as someone like McWhorter sees a similar reinvention of religion in certain political currents today. Stirner wonders why these atheists were not consistent in their atheism, even though they only needed to apply the same arguments they used against religion to their own political views. In search for an explanation for this phenomenon, Stirner hypothesises that these progressive political views have assumed the place of religion yet serve the same emotional gratification of the individual. Stirner reasons that there is a human need for what I have called 'metaphysical security', that provides guidance to our lives so that we know what to live for, how we fit in the world and who our friends and enemies are. Yet, Stirner also notices that the world does not provide any satisfying objective metaphysical structure. Indeed, the more we look for metaphysical security, the more we realise that the world is, as Stirner puts it, idle. This lack of a satisfying answer tormented Stirner's progressive contemporaries. They could no longer believe in Christianity but, in order not to feel left out in the cold, they manufactured a politico-theological substitute for religion that served the same purpose.

Thus, what we get from *The Ego and its Own* is a very astute diagnosis of the political theology in modern liberal politics. In Chapter 3 I contrasted Stirner's and Schmitt's approaches to political theology. Although both are concerned with examining the interaction between religious and secular political modes of thinking, the main difference is in the way Stirner emphasises the faith of the individual rather than the historical and sociological development of concepts and institutions as the foundation for political theology. From this vantage point, Stirner provides us with a different frame of analysis that shares more with modern moral psychology, rather than sociology or the history of ideas. Stirner bases his understanding of political theology on the assumption that there is an innate human need for a metaphysical structure that provides transcendental and providential guidance to life. This need is met through the apotheosis of an otherwise mundane concept. This deified concept gives meaning to all aspects of life, serving as the ethical foundation for the 'good' or the 'just' and for the individual's devotion and sacrifice to these abstractions.

Because of the emphasis on the individual, Stirner provides important insights into how

power works and how it 'subjectifies' us. Even though he does not deny the factors of repression and coercion that are also central to the modern state, Stirner sees power operating in the first place in the mind of the individual. In political theology, the individual believes that s/he is compelled to act in a certain way because it is right, as if s/he is possessed by the spirit of righteousness. Stirner understands the world as a political realist for whom there is no objective ethics that guides our political conduct. Yet he observes that political theology is based on the potency of the belief in ethical realism. Crucially, this belief is, according to Stirner, not truly the product of some incorrect assessment of the nature of the world, but an entirely self-induced delusion to alleviate the ethical responsibility that comes with a world without ethical realism. Political theology thus does not ultimately revolve around the pursuit of the good, but the pursuit of the egoistic desire for absolution from metaphysical insecurity under the guise of ethical realism. Despite the general melioristic locution of political theology, Stirner observes that it essentially transforms politics into an extension of ethics that divides everything into good and evil. In this Manichean divide, the believer is compelled to combat evil, which effectively renders ethics into a means to power.

Stirner sees the structure of the political domain, outside of the basic economic necessities, as the manifestation of the search for metaphysical security. Even though the political institutions so significant to Schmitt are only of secondary importance to Stirner, he notes that their specific manifestation always revolves around collective servitude to some abstraction. The liberals of his time believed that loyalty to a constitutional order was more desirable than the office of the monarch.

Even though political theology was always present and received some interest from philosophers, the onset of secularism heralded its rise to prominence because it served as a catalyst that exposed how conjoined religion and politics really were. Stirner makes a similar observation, but unlike others, he considers political theology a direct extension and even replacement of traditional religion. Even though there are still many today in the West with strong religious convictions, we have largely relegated religion to the private sphere. Stirner has taken this as his starting premise. In fact, to Stirner, secularism has precisely strengthened the connection between the political and the religious, because even though the gap between the formal religions and governmental institutions has widened, secularism directs worship to deified political concepts and therewith removes its traditional hierarchical mediation, thus making politics more religious while engaging more directly with the individual.

Stirner sees the deification of mundane concepts most clearly in the ideas of modern liberalism, which we have explored in Chapter 4. These ideas were only on the fringes of society during his lifetime, but have germinated ever since the revolutions of 1848 and eventually became

the norm. Many things have changed between 1848 and the 21st century, but the same liberal arguments that Stirner addresses still persist to this day in some form. According to Stirner, liberalism is a continuation of Christian morality founded on the apotheosis of emancipation, consisting of some interpretation of liberty and equality. Within liberalism, Stirner delineates three strands of argumentation, namely political, social and humane liberalism. Political liberalism seeks a liberation from birthright, an equalisation under the rule of law and a general emancipation of the nation-state from the monarch. Even though constitutions have mostly become ubiquitous in the West, there is still an apotheosis of the nation-state. Social and humane liberalism both have a stronger political presence today. Socialism in Stirner's time revolved primarily around the economic emancipation of labourers, but as Stirner already anticipated, the same reasoning is nowadays extended today to the emancipation of other demographics as well. This modern pursuit of emancipation does not exclusively operate in the economic domain, but also in the social and cultural spheres. Humane liberalism revolves around the apotheosis of our shared humanity and the liberation from any conflicts within it, which today persists as the plea for tolerance and inclusivity. This variety of liberal positions should be viewed, at least according to Stirner, as a continuation of the Christian pursuit of love and salvation, which through secularisation became the pursuit of heaven on earth that is always over the horizon. Liberalism thus contains the same romantic appeal of a life lived in the servitude to the good. Yet, to Stirner, any concrete improvements that come out of liberalism are incidental, as he considers the primary pursuit of liberalism to be the search for metaphysical security that comes with subservience to a greater good.

In fact, Stirner foresees a twofold problem with political theology, namely the self-contradiction of persistent futurity and the loss of individuality. Firstly, none of these deified concepts can ever solve the problem that progressive thinkers are faced with. These politico-theological ideas still contain the same design flaws as those of traditional religion. They still try to shape the world after an ideal, which makes the progressive thinkers chase their own tails in seeking metaphysical security. We have observed in Chapter 4 that modern liberalism persistently runs into the problem of pursuing something that is always over the horizon. Yet all the liberals have to do, according to Stirner, is apply the same atheistic reasoning to their own views as they did to Christianity, and they would see that they are engaging in a Sisyphean task. Secondly, Stirner's progressive contemporaries all espoused some variety of liberalism because they all pursued some interpretation of freedom. Yet Stirner observes that even though they may liberate some abstraction, their political theology serves as just another infringement of the autonomy of the actual living human being that just becomes the servant of a new master. There is in Stirner's eyes no possible way to reduce the complexity and uniqueness of individuals to a set of abstractions.

Because Stirner agonises that we will never find the desired objective ethics, he argues for a total abandonment of religious thinking and instead, as we have explored in Chapter 5, proposes an alternative to political theology. Stirner argues that we should take the world as it is, namely a place that is entirely indifferent to our desires. Once we acknowledge that there are no objective ethical rules for us to follow, we can make this world our own. We are given a finite amount of time in this world, and Stirner contends we should make the most of it – an ethical position that he calls 'egoism.' With the term egoism, Stirner advocates for something more than mere selfishness. He aims at a pursuit of autonomy and personal development that leads to a high degree of self-mastery with an existentialist acknowledgement that we bear the full ethical responsibility for our actions. Yet instead of pursuing some apotheosis of freedom, Stirner advises us to embrace 'ownness,' which is the literal translation of the German word *Eigenheit*. Unlike freedom in the abstract, ownness aims for the pragmatic pursuit of practical freedoms required for self-development, with an emphasis on utility rather than ethics. This doesn't mean that Stirner takes an entirely apolitical stance and abandons all social struggles, but he aims primarily at an inward change in belief and behaviour of the individual. This does not necessarily preclude any engagement in social movements, but does not at the same time involve a resignation of individuality to such movements.

A common criticism levelled against Stirner's conception of egoism is that it is yet another normative idea of the self as a fixed entity *à la* Fichte, which would essentially make egoism the new higher good. Stirner quickly repudiates this by arguing that we should conceive of the self not as a fixed idea, but as an ontological starting point that he calls the 'creative nothing,' the nothing that continuously comes into existence. However, this idea is rather enigmatic and obscure; it risks, as I have argued, becoming another kind of political theology. Indeed, I have reflected on the parallels between the creative nothing and the God of negative theology. Stirner presents egoism as an antidote to political theology, yet he relies on religious terms to describe the self as the God of his own world.

Fanaticism

As we have seen, Stirner addresses an aspect of political theology that is generally somewhat overlooked by other thinkers in the field. Politico-theological research usually focuses on the development and transposition of ideas, yet often overlooks the place of the human in it. When we take political theology in the way Schmitt defines it, we have to wonder why this transposition of theological into political concepts occurs and persists in the first place. Why does political theology resonate with people? Schmitt only acknowledges in passing the relevance of individual commitment, yet he remains in a paradigm that views political theology as an entirely sociological

and historical phenomenon. Stirner's approach offers a different insight that starts with individual psychology and the desire for higher sacred ideals.

But how does this connect exactly to political fanaticism? Stirner understands the word fanaticism in principle in the way we still colloquially do, namely to refer to an intense and irrational zeal for an object of worship, a *fanum*. Since political theology is based on the deification of a concept, it has a *fanum* just as much as traditional religion. In this way, just as it is in traditional religion, fanaticism is always already contained in political theology. By extension, then, an intensification of commitment to political theology would then also entail an intensification of fanaticism. However, for Stirner, the roots of fanaticism go even deeper. He has made the case that political theology, much like traditional religion, is the product of a specific psychological need. He explicitly relies on the Latin origin of the word 'religion,' *religare*, to indicate that traditional religion and political theology both revolve around being bound or tied to something, which in this case is a *fanum*.³¹ This being bound to a *fanum* is, in Stirner's view, a product of involuntary egoism to overcome the tremendous ethical burden the idle world places on us. In Stirner's view then, the uncompromising attitude of the fanatic doesn't originate in an extreme fondness for the *fanum*, but is already part and parcel of the submission to a higher good.

We thus cannot easily separate fanaticism from political theology. If Stirner is correct, then political theology in its various iterations is itself the product of fanaticism, of the search for and desired submission to a *fanum*. When we consider fanaticism in this way, there is in principle no fundamental difference between religious and political fanaticism, nor should we view fanaticism merely as an individual behavioural trait that can be attached to anything. The manifestation of fanaticism to Stirner lies somewhere in-between the predilections of individuals and their politico-theological views that intensify when put under pressure. The solution to the experienced metaphysical insecurity is projected onto politics, which Stirner effectively compares to the archaic Christian notion of possession. The fanatic believes that his/her limbs are moved and thoughts guided not by a demon, but by the spirit of righteousness, even though Stirner points out that this is, in fact, an entirely self-inflicted delusion as the fanatic wants to be animated by a benevolent spirit to absolve him/her of philosophical and ethical quandaries. The political circumstances that bring fanaticism to the forefront are those that place pressure on the metaphysical insecurity of the fanatic, as was the case in the revolutions of 1848.

Stirner's particular understanding of political theology contains a formula with several

³¹ There is also a possibility that the word 'religion' is derived from the Latin word '*religiō*,' meaning piety or religious observance, or from the Latin conjugation '*re-legere*,' meaning to read something repeatedly or to be preoccupied with something. Stirner leaves these possible etymological roots unmentioned, though if he would have taken them into account, it would not fundamentally change his argument.

distinct elements that we can identify. Fanaticism announces its presence in the first place through the intensification of the pursuit of the abstract, as opposed to an emphasis on practical solutions. John Gray has also already noticed in his discussion of the religious character of, what he describes as, 'wokeness' that, "rather than aiming for a better future, woke militants seek a cathartic present." (Gray, 2020). Only these fanatics could pursue equality and diversity simultaneously without considering that they are antonyms. However, such histrionic behaviour does not only apply to Gray's targets. The nationalists that claim to defend Western civilisation, like those in the notorious 'Unite the Right' protests in Charlottesville in 2017, often take as their opponents liberal and Marxist ideas that couldn't possibly be more Western. In fact, Stirner precisely identifies a romantic attitude in political theology, as it does not provide any practical solutions, because if the objective could be reached, then metaphysical security would immediately dissipate. This is why there is the belief among fanatics that Western civilisation can never be sufficiently defended, the patriarchy can never be defeated, or racism can never be resolved, even though, like a tragic hero, it is one's duty to do so.

Additionally, fanaticism leads to a moralisation of politics. Political theology in the Stirnerian view always considers politics as an extension of ethics, yet an increase in fanaticism leads to a stronger association of politics with the distinction of good versus evil. In this Manichean approach to politics, the fanatic thus develops an uncompromising attitude, while the attempt at open debate and problem-solving correlates inversely to the increase in moralisation, and any dissent is rendered as evil. By extension, any violence against the perceived evil is always justified because it combats any deviations from the direct path to the highest good. Only with this mindset can the modern liberal fanatic attack his/her disagreeing opponents for the sake of tolerance. An intensification of the moralisation of politics also leads to a spiral of purity that not only affects how the fanatic sees others, namely as potential enemies, but also how s/he looks at his/her own behaviour. Political theology demands that the fanatic polices his/her own thoughts and actions in order not to stray from the path of righteousness. Crucially, fanaticism leaves no room for actual human beings, as the fanatic only acknowledges the aspects of the individual pertinent to the pursuit of the highest good. For example, a feminist only sees in the other a gender while nationalist only sees in the other a fellow countryman or a foreigner. As an extension of the Manichean view, no one operates through free choice and no one can be held to account, because everyone is possessed by either the spirit of good or evil. Moreover, the fanatic always claims to act on behalf of a political collective without any mandate or acknowledgement from the collective itself.

Relevance and Future Research

Even though the book itself was never had a prominent place in history of modern philosophy, the fact that *The Ego and its Own* still receives new translations and has never been discussed more than it is now shows how hard it is to deny its enduring relevance. My aim has been to contribute to this contemporary renewal of Stirner by offering an interpretation of him as an analyst of political theology. When we read *The Ego and its Own* as such, we get a unique perspective on political theology that is distinctive precisely because of its emphasis on individual commitment to faith. Not only does Stirner's framework help us better understand fanaticism as a phenomenon of modern political theology, but also to understand political theology as based around the dynamics of faith and devotion to a higher cause.

Before we look at the potential doors this particular reading of Stirner opens, let us take note of some of the limitations of this research. This project has stuck very close to Stirner's text, and, even though there is a lot of depth to Stirner's ideas, *The Ego and its Own* was largely written as a commentary on the political and philosophical views of his contemporaries, rather than an attempt to formulate a comprehensive philosophical system. It is a testament to Stirner's analysis that we can effectively extend it to our own time with comparatively little mediation. Even though sticking close to the text strengthens the arguments of this particular politico-theological interpretation of Stirner's work, some aspects of Stirner's thought and its implications have fallen outside the scope of this project. Firstly, I have contended that the main message of *The Ego and its Own* revolves around faith, fanaticism and political theology, although there are other important questions that Stirner addresses, pertaining to the state and economics. I have argued that these are largely peripheral and an extension of his politico-theological critique. For example, Stirner argues that no economic competition can ever be free as long as the state meddles in it, as no free competition can ever threaten the existence of the state, nor can it interfere with the state's property and jurisprudence. Another example is Stirner's claim that "the state's behaviour is violence, and it calls its violence 'law'; that of the individual, 'crime.'" (Stirner, 1995, p. 176). However, these serve as subjects for further investigation, particularly in relation and in contrast to traditional anarchism, for which Newman (2001; 2010; 2019) and Koch (1997) have laid the groundwork, or in contrast to Marxism, which would be an extension of the work done by Dematteis (1976) and Hook (1962). In a similar vein, the discussion of the influence of Hegel on Stirner has fallen outside of the scope of this project, yet there may be an avenue of further politico-theological research on the relation between two thinkers, especially considering the lingering influence of Hegel's work on the field of political theology and considering Stepelevich's (2020) recent extensive elaboration of Stirner as a Hegelian.

Secondly, this project has deliberately chosen to focus on the contrast between Stirner and Schmitt in their analyses of political theology, because Schmitt serves as the perfect foil to highlight the strengths and distinctiveness of Stirner's view. The downside of this approach is that it omits a comparison with other important thinkers, like Voegelin, who place an emphasis on the persistence of religious faith in secular political life.

Thirdly, this project has relied mostly on Stirner's particular interpretation of fanaticism, which revolves around the wilful subservience to a higher good. This conception of fanaticism serves as a red thread that goes right to the core of Stirner's analysis of political theology. However, because of the focus on Stirner's politico-theological framework, this project has largely omitted references and comparisons to other views of fanaticism, both from scientific approaches, like those from psychology (see Robles, 2013) or sociology (see Colas, 1997), and fanaticism in different fields, such as in sports (see Dwyer et al., 2016) or consumer culture (see Chung et al., 2008; Fuschillo, 2020). Additionally, this project has relied mostly on Stirner's conception of faith. He never provides us with an explicit definition of faith, but we can gather that Stirner views it primarily as an internal and introspective phenomenon. Because of Stirner's specific emphasis on internal philosophical struggles, his conception of faith is limited and rarely extends outward. There is thus an opportunity to deepen Stirner's analysis of political theology and strengthen it with regard to other theories of political theology by investigating how his conception of faith holds up when understood as an intersubjective connection, or as, for example, Žižek puts it: "faith (or, rather, trust) is the basic ingredient of speech as the medium of social bond, of the subject's engaged participation in this bond." (2008, p. 32).

Despite these few limitations, Stirner's unique approach to politics and political theology also proves its relevance by opening a number of avenues for possible future research. If Stirner's analysis is correct, political fanaticism will remain part of modern politics for the foreseeable future, and we will have to abandon the dream of ever reaching a great overarching value-free liberal system that can account for all needs and antagonisms. Not only could such a system by itself never accommodate fanaticism, Stirner has shown that the liberal view itself is based on the 'fanaticism of liberty.' Fanaticism in the Stirnerian view is neither a character trait nor a by-product of a particular political persuasion, but a component of individual psychology that looks for a politico-theological object to project itself onto and modern liberal politics is just as suitable for this as traditional religion. Thus, if our aim would be to overcome political fanaticism, no political solution suffices as it sets itself up for further fanaticism. Rather, Stirner provides us with certain clues about strategies to surmount the temptation of political fanaticism. These are contained within his alternative approach of egoism. We can consider egoism not as a political project, but as a shift in the mindset

of the individual that encourages the pursuit of personal development and self-mastery instead of tribalism and self-renunciation. In the Stirnerian view, political institutions derive their legitimacy and structure from faith, so if there is a shift away from worship, then there is a decline in the attachment to political institutions. This does not lead to their revolutionary rejection, but rather to a certain distancing or dis-identification from them that Stirner conveys in his concept of insurrection.

With regard to contemporary political theory then, the politico-theological reading of *The Ego and its Own* proves its relevance in at least three ways. The most immediate application of it would be a broadening of the politico-theological framework. Political theology has become more prolific in recent times as a framework employed in political theory debates, particularly as a critical analysis of secular and liberal politics, and emerging out of different religious traditions, including Islam and Judaism (See Campanini & Di Donoto, 2021; Laborde & Bardon, 2017; Speight & Zank, 2017; Rashkover & Kavka, 2013). As discussed throughout this dissertation, Stirner's contribution to political theology shifts away from the emphasis on historical and sociological forces that shape society to the accommodation of individual faith. By doing so, Stirner gives us the tools to examine why religious ideas not only persist in secular politics, but also why they still resonate with people and will continue to do so in the future. The afterimage of religion in politics that other thinkers in the field of political theology find in the history of ideas, Stirner sees as a reflection of an inner philosophical struggle.

Secondly, the politico-theological reading of *The Ego and its Own* has something to offer to political realism. Usually, political realists like Schmitt consider politics to be entirely separate from ethics. Rather than a pursuit of justice, they envision politics as a game of power (see Donnelly, 200; Griffiths, 1992; Schuett, 2010). This doesn't mean that, in the realist perspective, politics never engages with ethics, but only in a tangential sense. Ethics itself then only has an indirect effect on decision-making. Justice is not a good for its own sake, but a component of the power game. Stirner too sees no governing ethical principle in politics, but ties political realism to ethics through faith. If his analysis is correct, then the pursuit of ethics is rendered a means to power in itself. Ethics is not just something that requires management; as long as there is a belief that ethics is real, then this is a political force that needs to be contended with. This means to power has always been present; Stirner only exposed it.

Lastly, when taking the individual need for faith as the basis of his analysis, Stirner shares perhaps more kinship with modern moral psychology, even though there was no scientific framework for it in 1844. In his *Break-out from the Crystal Palace* (1974), Carroll is entirely correct to include Stirner, together with Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, in the 'anarcho-psychological' approach to politics that prepared the way for a science of psychology. Stirner takes as his starting premise

what is currently being investigated by modern moral psychologists, namely that there is some biological foundation to the pursuit of ethics that can be extended to politics (see Haidt, 2012; Alford et al., 2005; Bloom, 2012; Wilson, 2002). Yet unlike modern psychologists, Stirner investigates how this pursuit of ethics shapes the political sphere. There is thus an opening for further investigation and refinement in the intersection between Stirnerian political theology and moral psychology.

Even though his philosophical output was cut short by his untimely death, Stirner makes an important and original contribution to political theology, one that needs to be acknowledged in contemporary debates on the theme. In focusing on the psychological dimension of faith and the internalisation of theological concepts and categories within the subjectivity of the modern individual to a fault, Stirner allows us to grasp the religious structure of contemporary political and ideological fanaticism. In a time of the so called 'culture wars,' in which our societies are polarised around questions of identity and 'values,' rather than socio-economic or class positions, it might be argued that we have entered into a new phase of 'religious' belief and conflict. Stirner, I have argued, offers us powerful diagnostic tools for understanding the underpinnings of this phenomenon. Through Stirner's ideas, we better understand the resonance of politico-theological ideas with the subject and thereby connect politics to the existential predicament of the individual. Moreover, his radically atheistic philosophy of egoism allows us to develop strategies by which we can escape the politico-theological categories that currently imprison the individual.

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