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# At War in Swaddling Clothes: Stirner's Unique One as a Conative Existence

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## Abstract

*In its simplest and primary sense, conatus is about self-preservation. It further involves the obligation, the duty, the imperative even, deriving from the Law of Nature for man to do whatever within his power to maintain his life. Even though this idea has been an old one, it was reintroduced in a more sophisticated form by modern philosophy as no longer a cruel necessity of life but ontologically tied to Reason and Natural law. It was with Hobbes that the idea of self-preservation was put at the core of his anthropological narration (with well known political connotations) and with Spinoza that conatus was delved into within his ontological universe. Regardless of their ontological starting points, both philosophers ended up eventually in a resolution with regard to that primary anthropological tension between individuals, whether this was a common legislator, the political society or the state. Somewhat radical at the beginning, Hobbes and Spinoza had to make some mitigations in order to arrive at a resolution. Yet, that was not Stirner's case. On the contrary, Stirner's opening ontological statement was rather too extreme and inconceivable even: it is also the newborn child that gets to war with the world and not only the other way around. It is the purpose of this paper to argue that this extreme trailhead leads the Stirnerian egoist to his fulfillment as the Unique One through ownership and that this agonistic tremendous striving constitutes the Stirnerian notion of conatus. That notion offers no resolution to the ontological animosity between individuals; on the contrary, that animosity is required as ontological precondition and prefiguration of conatus' conclusion as well.*

**Keywords:** *conatus; Stirner; Hobbes; Spinoza; egoism; property*

## I. Stirner in the making

This would be a rather short essay if Stirner had quit reading Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* right after its first pages and, in particular, this passage: "Our first priority must be to lay down certain rules for living, as being good rules [first of which is]: To speak to the understanding of the multitude and to engage to all those activities that do not hinder the attainment of our aim. For we can gain no little advantage from the multitude, provided that we accommodated ourselves as far as possible to their level of understanding."<sup>1</sup> To begin with, even the appeal for a set of good rules for living would be something rather unacceptable for Stirner, let alone that first rule being engaging with the multitude and its degree of understanding. This is of course an imaginary scenario and, for the sake of it, we may suppose as well that Stirner was a careful reader. Therefore, he could not but have noticed a passage prior to the above mentioned which probably made him rather angry:

I shall state briefly what I understand by the true good, and at the same time what is the good true. In order that this may be rightly understood, it must be borne in mind that good and bad are only relative terms, so that one and the same thing may be said to be good or bad in different respects.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, Stirner must have also gotten in touch with Spinoza's thought through its Hegelian interpretation. Spinoza was, for centuries, one of the most notorious philosophers, whose thought came to be synonymous with the notions of atheism and materialism. Surely this would be another reason for a young Stirner – a notorious thinker in the making – to continue reading the works of his predecessor. Stirner declared his philosophy as a (non)system that radically breaks up with every philosophy prior to him. Such a disputatious declaration, not only in its sharpness and radicalism but also in its structure, reflected his unwillingness to acknowledge anyone as his philosophical ancestor. However, while continuing to read the Spinozist *Treatise*, he would discover a precious ally in his major endeavour, i.e., the radical undermining of abstract thinking and of the various *phantoms* that enslave the human mind.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, rejecting theoretically abstract thinking

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<sup>1</sup> Baruch Spinoza, "Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect," in *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, Selected Letters*, ed. Seymun Fedman, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Hackett Pub. Co., 1992), 236.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>3</sup> He would have read, for instance: "Starting from universal axioms alone, the intellect cannot

along with its consequent ideological and political implications could either be the deliberate outcome or the ultimate goal of a philosophical structure that had to arrive there through specific reasoning, based on the grounds of a corresponding ontology. If this rejection was an outcome which, in order to be accomplished, required the previous rejection of the basic ontological dualism, i.e. the mind/body dualism, Spinoza was Stirner's man of interest, as was also Hobbes for that matter. Nevertheless, even the rejection of the mind/body separation, however deep in uprooting traditional and highly respected notions and dangerously radical with regard to its political implications, was not as radical as the one that preceded it: the interpretation of man as a creature with the sole primal duty of self-preservation, of survival. This was by no means a modern idea, not even an early modern one, as it originated way back in Western thought. We would not oversimplify the matter if we suggested that it has not served as the basic ontological layer until the first major ontologies of modern philosophy introduced by Spinoza and Hobbes. In Hobbesian anthropology, man's duty for self-preservation was declared as the first natural law:

The Right of Nature, which writers commonly call *Jus Naturale*, is the liberty each man hath, to use its own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own Nature; that is to say of his own Life; and consequently of doing anything, which in his own Judgment and Reason he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.<sup>4</sup>

So, "What is radical about it?" one may ask and that would be a fair question. However, we should not forget that the unquestionable duty of man to preserve his existence by all means necessary was now accompanied by, or, better put, was now grounded on its ontological parallel, i.e. the interpretation of man as mere matter, mere body, mere existence, as *res extensa*. Spinoza's version of that radical ontology, the one-substance doctrine, was rather more sophisticated than Hobbes's. It nevertheless served the same goal or, at

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descent to particulars, since axioms are of infinite extension and do not determinate the intellect to contemplate one particular thing rather than the other," *ibid.*, 257. The political implications of that undermining of abstract thinking and of ideological phantoms was by no means sprang out of just one source, no matter what Stirner would had to say about that: "From seeing [liberals] individuals as primary and society secondary, from seeing individuals as more 'real' than society and its institutions it is not a great step to seeing social institutions as 'logical fictions' [...] it follows that no rational person could elevate the supposed interests of fiction above the real interests of real individual people," Anthony Arblaster, *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), 90.

least, led to the same consequences: the materialistic interpretation of man. This consisted an absolute necessity for the anthropological premises of the polemical ontology of the Enlightenment and, more precisely, of the Radical Enlightenment:

Spinoza [...] was perfectly aware of the radical implications of his ideas and the violent reaction they were likely to provoke, since his philosophy stood in total contradiction to the tenets of all forms of Christianity, as well as Cartesianism and the mainstream of the western tradition since the end of antiquity [...]. Spinoza and spinozism were in fact the intellectual backbone of the European Radical Enlightenment everywhere.<sup>5</sup>

Israel, rather fairly, stresses the importance of Spinozism with regard to the political radicalism of Enlightenment.<sup>6</sup> However, that radicalism took various forms and expressions, sometimes awkward and, most times, dangerous. In order to, at least, do justice to Hobbes's intentions – the English philosopher may be regarded as the “philosopher of the weak”<sup>7</sup> – that Hobbesian ontological starting point was the beginning of a line that traversed Enlightenment's body and connected some strange figures such as Meslier, La Mettrie, Sad, and Stirner as well for that matter.

## II. But, at the beginning was Hobbes. And Spinoza

As above mentioned, the idea that all things and later also man have an innate inclination to maintain their existence was not new. The Stoics had entertained it, but Aristotle had already said something about it too. In Medieval philosophy it was connected with motion and, as expected, it got characteristically complicated and debated upon. However, in regard to our issue here, it was by Descartes that the idea of *conatus* (as the technical term

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93, vi.

<sup>6</sup> “Spinoza with his one-substance doctrine [...] extends this ‘revolutionary’ tendency appreciably further metaphysically, politically, and as regards man's highest good than do [...] Hobbes,” Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind. Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>7</sup> That is Martinich's characterization of Hobbes: “Nietzsche celebrates the exercise of power for its own sake [...] Hobbes praises that the exercise of unrestrained power inevitably ends in premature death [...] Nietzsche is the philosopher of the strong, Hobbes is the philosopher of the weak,” Aloysius Martinich, *Hobbes. A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 351.

came to be) was reintroduced in a modern physics' mechanistic sense.<sup>8</sup> That was undoubtedly a big step, for a distinct part of that mechanistic universe was man. Yet, Descartes' dualistic mind/body notion held back this radical potential which modern physics embodied, i.e. materialism. Hobbes was much more determined with respect to that matter and, regardless of his personal and theoretical ambiguities, he could not but have foreseen the radical outcome of his theories, at least with regard to his conception of the body. For Hobbes the body was just *extensia*, a corporeal substance, mere matter. Furthermore, as all substances are material, then they are all bodies:

According to that acceptation of the word, *Substance* and *Body*, signifies the same thing; and therefore *Substance Incorporeal* are words, which when they are joined together destroy one another.<sup>9</sup>

So, man has/was one substance, a material one, a body, and, furthermore, has a duty ordered by the Law of Nature to preserve it in any case and within its power. If there is one attribute that we can ascribe to the body, that is motion. As a result, every human action can be explained as elementary movements of the body. Hobbes distinguishes between two kinds of motion:

There are two sorts of *Motions* [...] one called *Vital*; begun with generation and continued without interruption through their whole life [...]. The other is *Animal Motion*, otherwise called *Voluntary Motion* [...]. These smalls beginnings of Motion, within the body of Man, before they appear in walking, speaking, striking and other visible actions, are commonly called Endeavor.<sup>10</sup>

*Endeavor* is Hobbes's technical notion for *conatus*. Furthermore, as motion is the beginning of everything and, according to Hobbes's analysis,

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: "It is important to note the gloss Descartes gives to the *conatus* [...] where an attribution to a *conatus* to a body is said to mean that the body will in fact travel in a rectilinear direction, unless it is prevented by doing so by another cause," Daniel Garber, *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 354.

<sup>9</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 236. For his and Descartes' agreement on mechanism, see: "Descartes' Dualism and Hobbes's materialism notwithstanding, their theories of the world are very similar in that each tried to give a mechanistic explanation of all physical phenomena," Aloysius Martinich, *A Hobbes Dictionary* (London: Blackwell, 1995), 10. Hobbes focuses on the concept of *conatus* in *De Corpore* as the most important element of his "rational mechanics." Leibniz's own version of the notion reflected Hobbes's precedent, see Howard R. Bernstein, "Conatus, Hobbes and the Young Leibniz," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 11, no. 1 (1980): 26. Leibniz referred to *conatus* as the gate to philosophy.

<sup>10</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 44.



imagination is the first internal beginning of every voluntary motion, it comes as a consequence that the separation of mind and body as well as of their faculties is undermined and rejected.<sup>11</sup> At this point, it is important to bear in mind that this tendency for motion is not some inherent power of the body. It is rather determined by the movement of other bodies. Moreover, whatever is in motion maintains this motion, unless something hinders it, or, to better put it, regardless or despite of, or even against the opposite power exercised on it by the other body.<sup>12</sup> According to the most awkward but also significant application of the notion of *conatus* in man's State of Nature, bodies – meaning people – are moving in order to preserve their lives, turning against each other as their motion inevitably meets the motion of others. This is a highly individualistic state, a natural habitat where moving monads collide and all of them are being involved in a constant war against every other. However, even if the problem is presented in an individualistic world, its solution is only plausible within a world of collaborating citizens/subjects.

Hobbes's individualistic ontology resolves into the totality (of the sovereignty) as a way out of that frightful state of nature must be offered. Namely, that state where autonomous and isolate individuals wage war against each other in order to fulfill their primary duty, self-preservation. Surely one might notice that prior to that frightful individualistic state stands the universality of the self-preservation duty common to all people. In any case, this is what Spinoza says:

I've demonstrated all theses conclusions from the necessity of human nature, however it may be considered. That is, I've demonstrated from that universal striving all men have to preserve themselves, a striving in all men, whether they're wise or ignorant. So however we consider men, whether as guided by an affect or by reason, the result will be the same. For the demonstration is universal.<sup>13</sup>

The issue here is necessity – universal by its nature and particularized within human nature – and, furthermore, another layer of universality, that of the striving for “all men to preserve themselves.” Layers of universality,

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<sup>11</sup> Bernstein stresses the importance of *conatus*’ “initial appearance in Hobbes as a means to resolve the mind-body problem,” and in a reversed direction from Leibniz’s emphasis, i.e. from mind to body, see Bernstein, “*Conatus*,” 37.

<sup>12</sup> See Juhani Pietarinen, “Hobbes, *Conatus* and the Prisoner’s Dilemma,” *The Paideia Archive: Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 11 (1998): 144.

<sup>13</sup> Baruch Spinoza, “The Political Treatise,” in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, v. I, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 524.

ontologically structured the one upon the other, result in an interpretation of the world as a universality of necessity. It is at this exact point that Spinoza discovers the only plausible meaning of human freedom through the following reasoning: man has no free will because he is free only to the extent of his obligation to preserve himself in order to be his own master. Thus,

a man can't be called free on the grounds that he can *not* exist, or that he can *not* use reason; only insofar as he has the power to exist and have effects, according to the laws of human nature, can he be called free.<sup>14</sup>

Even so, one should pay attention at this point, because no matter how universal that necessity or that strive might be, it is the individual, the human monad, that this necessity and striving apply to. After all, Spinoza's thought is not so far apart from Hobbes's since, according to his State of Nature, people are enemies – as they are for Hobbes – because they are for the most part guided by their passions. Therefore, people are “by their nature enemies.”<sup>15</sup> Additionally, each one is governed by his own right, as long as he is capable of fending off every force that threatens him and of living according to his mentality. This procedure is clearly connected with or guided by the striving for self-preservation defined by one's power. Even in the Spinozist version of that common idea, each one's right applies as far as his power does. At this point – as was also the case with Hobbes – an answer must be offered, a way out has to be demonstrated. Thus, Spinoza proposes what would be expected from him to, which is the foundation of a civil society, a state that will enforce a common law, a universal right above the contradictory particular rights. However, this is not merely a technical solution as one might think of that of Hobbes's. On the contrary, it is grounded on an ontological assumption:

Since it's futile for one person alone to try to protect himself from all others, it follows that as long as human natural right is determined by each person's power, and belongs to that person, there is no human natural right. What's more, it's certain that each person can do that much less, and so has that much less right, the greater the cause that has for fear. To this we may add that men can hardly *sustain their lives* and *cultivate their minds* without mutual aid.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 510.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 513.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. (emphasis added), 513. Here is Spinozist *conatus* in its both senses, self-preservation and the cultivation of mind. In the next paragraph Spinoza states his agreement with Stoic's notion



We have to admit that the necessity of men joining together in order to sustain their lives is an ad hoc ontological condition, one that someone may as well argue that is only a practical method connected to the ontological obligation of *conatus*. After all, what is happening at the primal ontological level is that men are “bound to live and to preserve themselves, as far as they can by their own power.”<sup>17</sup> Still, at the same time, it is necessity that bounds people to collaborate in order to succeed. Since necessity constitutes the universal ontological condition, it comes as a result that it is man’s unique ontological condition. Necessity dictates that without mutual help men live in utter wretchedness, and are inevitably debarred from the cultivation of reason; [so in order] to live safely and well men had necessarily to join together, which could only happen within a state.<sup>18</sup> What is really at stake here is the cultivation of reason, naturally, as man ought to adjust his living to the dictates of reason. What comes next is something that would probably make Stirner very angry: A man who is guided by reason should be more free in a state, where he lives according to a common decision, than in solitude, where he obeys only himself.<sup>19</sup>

### III. The unique hand of the Unique One

Whatever their differences, Spinoza and Hobbes hold something in common that was of much importance: the idea that there is no such thing as free will. That idea may be explained in terms of the absolute predominance of necessity, provided that necessity is framed within the broad cosmological notion of Nature.<sup>20</sup> Whether Nature is God, as in Spinoza, or God is matter,

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of man as a social animal. The same in *Ethics*: “[Men] can hardly live a solitary life; hence, the definition which makes man a social animal has been quite pleasing to most,” Baruch Spinoza, “Ethics,” in *The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 217. In this of course Spinoza departs from Hobbes.

<sup>17</sup> Baruch Spinoza, “The Theological-Political Treatise,” in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, v. I, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 283.

<sup>18</sup> Spinoza, *ibid.*, 284. In *Ethics*, as well: “To man there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than should all so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body,” Spinoza, “Ethics,” 210. See also, “It is true that Spinoza proceeded from the alienated individualism of *The Prince* to the communitarianism of the *Civitas Dei* [...]. It is part of Spinoza’s ethical philosophy to lend a helping hand to others and together with them to form a social and political life in which [...] the the goals of individual freedom and the brotherhood of man are merged,” Robert J. McShea, *The Political Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1968), 204.

<sup>19</sup> Spinoza, “Ethics,” 238.

<sup>20</sup> Thus, “the very notion of a defence of necessity was indelibly associated in most eighteenth-century minds with Hobbism, Spinozism, fatalism, immortality, and atheism.” It is quite

i.e. nature, as in Hobbes, the crucial idea here is that man is an inseparable part of Nature. There is no room, in both theories, for a concept of *human exceptionalism*, meaning that man is of another ontological status compared to every other thing within the natural world. Spinoza stated it like this:

Most of them who have written about the affects, and man's way of living, seem to treat not of natural things [...] but of things that are outside Nature. Indeed they seem to conceive man in Nature as a *dominion within dominion*.<sup>21</sup>

So, if man is mere nature, mere matter, if what distinguishes him is a matter of degree and not of quality, then it follows that he is subject to the inescapable laws of nature which is to say to the natural necessities. There is a not-so-distant echo of that interpretation of man in Feuerbach's critic against Stirner, as the latter describes it:

Feuerbach raises the question: [...] can you sever masculinity form what you call mind? Are your feelings, your thoughts unmanly? Are you merely a mere animal? What is your unique, incomparable and consequently sexless I?<sup>22</sup>

Stirner was rather amused by the "sexless" allegation, but nevertheless natural preconditions of man were quite absent, or hardly visible, in his *The Unique and His Property*. His reply to Feuerbach's critic, however, is illuminating about his thoughts on the matter. To "realize the species" is not prior to the realization, and the more important that realization is a "realization of your own." Stirner provides a clear example:

Your hand is fully realized for the purposes of the species [...]. But when you train your hands, you do not perfect them for the purposes of the species [...] but you make of them how and what you want and are able to make them; you shape your *will* and *power* into them.<sup>23</sup>

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characteristic that Samuel Clarke titled one of his books *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God: More Particularly in Answer to Mr. Hobbes, Spinoza, And their Followers. Wherein the Notion of Liberty is Stated, and the Possibility and Certainty of it Proved, in Oposition to Neccessity and Fate!* See James A. Harris, *Of Liberty and Necessity. The Free Will Debate in Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 86, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Spinoza, "Ethics," 152 (emphasis added).

<sup>22</sup> Max Stirner, *Stirner's Critics*, trans. W. Landstreicher (Oakland: LBC Books & CAL Press, 2012), 89.

<sup>23</sup> Stirner, 91 (emphasis added).

That is not a species hand no more, that is a *unique* hand shaped by the *Unique One*. Stirner's Unique One is a *dominion within*. By doing so, Stirner departs from what had seemed to be the main goal of Left Hegelians, especially Feuerbach and Marx, which was the resolution of the individual/community problem in the form of the *species-being* [Gattungswesen]. One specific Hegelian route

followed by Strauss and Feuerbach leads to the affirmation of universality as community or shared interests, while placing less emphasis on the formal side, the element of individual willing. [That route], in the political application which Feuerbach together with Marx gave to it, leads to the notion of a collective substance or species-being.<sup>24</sup>

This particular route from Hegel, according to Bauer's interpretation, was a Spinozist one. Bauer detected also a Fichtean trend in Hegel's thought but – curiously enough given Fichte's ontological emphasis in the Ego – he read Stirnerian thought as derived from the Spinozist route. And that is why Stirner took up the one side of Spinoza's attributes of substance, that of thought (the attribute of extension was taken up by Feuerbach). Bauer ascribes to Stirnerian Unique One being a substance without any content, "neither physical nor physis,"<sup>25</sup> and, by doing so, that substance becomes the greatest abstraction. Stirner would be happy with the former and unhappy with the latter. In addition, Stirner would be unhappy if someone traced back to Spinoza some ontological trends implicit in his thought (and to anyone, for that matter). Yet, what could be more Stirnerian than Spinoza's notion of substance as that, which is the cause of itself, *causa sui*. Additionally, what could be more Stirnerian than that substance, which has an internal inclination to self-preservation, a striving to maintain itself, the *conatus*.<sup>26</sup> And this is

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<sup>24</sup> Douglas Moggach, "The Subject as Substance: Bruno Bauer's Critique of Stirner," *The Owl of Minerva* 41, nos. 1-2 (2009-2010): 65. See also: "Bauer derived his notion of infinite self-consciousness from Hegel's philosophy of subjective spirit, and opposed it to the pantheistic Hegel readings of Strauss and Feuerbach. Hegel had stressed the concept of substance as the pure universal that absorbed the particularity of the self and this 'Spinozist moment' misled a number of Young Hegelians into granting substantiality a certain independency over consciousness," Widukind De Ridder, "Max Stirner, Hegel and the Young Hegelians: A Reassessment," *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008): 287.

<sup>25</sup> Moggach, "The Subject as Substance," 69.

<sup>26</sup> Moggach claims that, "the application of this idea to Stirner, as an account of his concept of 'ownness' is highly illuminating, and I take it that this is what Bauer is proposing. The *conatus* of Spinoza is the secret of Stirnerian 'ownness,'" Moggach, *ibid.*, 73. See also, in more general terms: "The concept developed by Stirner [...] regarding the *owner* or the *one and only* is a

Stirner's archetypical formulation of it: "Only when I am under obligation to no being is the maintaining of my life – my affair."<sup>27</sup>

Already in the first paragraph of the book Stirner provides us with his thoughts on man as a newborn existence in the world. Those lines, by the way, are the closest we will come to some kind of Stirnerian anthropology. Man is since the time of his birth in constant and permanent war with everything that surrounds him. And when in war, there are only two options: *victory* or *defeat*. Stirner describes man's entry in the world in rather existential terms:

From the moment when he catches sight of the light of the world a man seeks out *himself* and gets hold of *himself* out of its confusion, in which he, with everything else, is tossed about in motley mixture.<sup>28</sup>

The idea that man is in war with his surroundings is for sure too old to make any difference. Still, Stirner continues with some rather tempestuous description of the attitudes of the newborn: "Everything that comes in contact with the child defends itself in turn against his attacks, and asserts its own persistence!"<sup>29</sup> Hence, *conatus* is Stirner's opening ontological statement. The striving for persistence is something of an ontological sparking, still in accordance with former formulations of the notion. But only Stirner, as far as we can tell, was so bold or idiosyncratic as to declare that the world is in a state of defense against a child. That was indeed an opening ontological statement that made the way for what would follow: warlike motion was directed from inwards, from the individual, towards the world and not the opposite. Stirnerian man was ontologically attacking its surroundings, not defending himself against them. And that constant combat was about the *conatus*: "Because each thing *cares for itself* and at the same time comes into constant collision with other things, the *combat* of self-assertion is unavoidable."<sup>30</sup> That was not an abstract description, since Stirner was obliged to set man – the child – in that state of immediate offensive war as there was no way around the primal social condition of man, i.e. family. There is a natural state and that is the society

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more straightforward implementation of a monadological ontology. In Stirner's philosophy the owner is conceived as a monad whose *conatus* is manifested as the tendency to appropriate and to consume the world and the other monads," Nicos Psarros, "Monadological Ontologies in the Wake of Spinoza: Leibniz, Hegel, Stirner, McTaggart, Tarde and Weil," Conference Paper (2017), <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319967914>.

<sup>27</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. Steven Byington (London and New York: Verso, 2014), 303.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

of the child with his mother: "Society is our *state of nature*. Not isolation or being alone, but society, is man's original state [...]. We are already living with our mother before we breathe."<sup>31</sup> That primal strong bond had to be broken because man should freely choose his contacts and set himself free from the family bonds that he had not chosen. This was the beginning of an astounding course towards *egoism* through the exercise of self-will, which led to self-ownership:

The politicians, thinking to abolish *personal will*, self-will or arbitrariness, did not observe that through *property* [Eigentum] our *self-will* [Eigenwille] gained a secure place of refugee. The Socialists, taking away *property* too, do not notice that this secures itself a continued existence in *self-ownership*.<sup>32</sup>

The *egoist* is not *man*, he is the mature, conscious and settled formation of the individual as a conquered potentiality. He has no right to his existence, he becomes an *egoist* only through his own effort of conquering himself. Only then he becomes an *Owner* because *ownership* is the exclusive possession of the self. To be an *Owner* is not to be free. Stirner is too careful to distinguish between the two. He admits that a certain level of coercion and restriction is necessary and unavoidable.<sup>33</sup> Thus, in order to declare a field of unrestricted independence he moves from the field of freedom to that of ownership. The *egoist* can remain the owner even within the dominion of the State, provided that state sovereignty remains in the periphery of his ownership. Hence,

that a society (such as a society of the State) diminishes my *liberty* offends me little. Why, I have to let my liberty be limited by all sorts of powers and by everyone who is stronger [...]. But *ownness* I will not have taken from me.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, ownership is not freedom because freedom is the passive avoidance of something. It is rather the energetic possession, the outcome and the creation of the individual's power. Being the outcome, ownership can only be

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>33</sup> "Limitation of liberty is inevitable everywhere, for one cannot get rid of everything [...] *Liberty itself, absolute liberty* was exalted into an ideal and thus the nonsense of the impossible to come glaringly to the light," *ibid.*, 288.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 286, 287. It comes as a result that for the *egoist* the State is indifferent, as long as his ownership remains *untouched* by the State, and only when the State tries to interfere only then the *Owner* "takes an active interest in it." Otherwise, the *egoist* "has nothing to say to the State except 'Get out of my sunshine,'" 217.

the manifestation of power's application. Yet, "my power is *my* property, my power *gives* me property, my power *am* I, and through it I am my property."<sup>35</sup> Hence, through power I own my property, therefore I own myself. The Stirnerian notion of property is not that of the possession of things. On the contrary, property in Stirner has an extensive meaning, because "property depends on the *owner*."<sup>36</sup> This is firstly because it is only through power that the claim for something is sanctioned. Consequently, the strength of the power defines the extent of the ownership. Secondly, it is because property is whatever lies within the individual at some specific point and makes it whatever it *is* at that particular time. Lastly, it is because property is not static nor fixed, but constantly and potentially expanding wherever the owner has the power to do so, i.e. other people's properties. The Owner declares: "I do not step shyly back from your property, but look upon it always as *my* property, in which I need to 'respect' nothing."<sup>37</sup> Stirner, unlike Proudhon, considers possession and property to be coinciding. As a result, whatever I *can* possess, I *own* it and that remains *mine* for as long as I have the power to possess it.<sup>38</sup> This unlimited and dynamic notion of ownership leads to the idea that everything surrounding the egoist constitutes a potential possession, a field for the egoist to expand, to exploit, to *consume*. This is the definite reverse of the Kantian imperative: "For me no one is a person to be respected, but solely, like other beings, an *object* in which I take an interest or else do not."<sup>39</sup> Thus, Stirnerian egoism moves away from even radical forms of individualisms in the sense that he does not recognize a series of separate – though adjoining – individualities, but only one unique ego which consumes whatever is in its power and moves inwards in order to become the Unique One. This creates an extended circle from birth till the creation of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 171. It is on that notion of property that Stirner's egoism is seen, as Nathan Jun puts it, an "extremely radical form of classical liberalism," Nathan Jun, *Anarchism and Political Modernity* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 132. See also, Costas Galanopoulos, "Man, 'Quite a World of Federations.' The Incompatibility of Anarchism and Individualism," *Anarchism Studies* 25, no. 2 (2017): 75-88. Stepelevich on the contrary argues that "in holding that mere ego, abstract personality, must find its freedom, happiness and concreteness in ownership, Stirner plainly follows Hegel," although he adds that "it is no accident that Stirner's last literary efforts were directed to translating Adam Smith," Lawrence Stepelevich, "Max Stirner as Hegelian," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46, no. 4 (1985): 611.

<sup>36</sup> Stirner, *The Ego*, 230.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>38</sup> "Property is conditioned by might. What I have in my power, that is my own. So long as I assert myself as a holder I am the proprietor of the thing; if it gets away from me again, no matter by what power, then the property is extinct," *ibid.*, 234.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 291. Also: "Where the world comes in my way [...] I consume it to quiet my hunger of my egoism. For me you are nothing but my food, even as I too am fed upon and turned to use by you. We have only one relation to each other, that of *usableness*, that of utility, of use," 277.



the Unique One, which now comes to its closure: “I am not an ego along with other egos, but the sole ego; I am unique. Hence my wants too are unique, and my deeds.” It is this same *conatus*, which obliged the child to be at war from the very first moment of its life, that makes the Unique One:

It is only as this unique I that I take everything for my own, as I set myself to work, and develop myself, only as this. I do not develop men, nor as man, but, as I, I develop myself. This is the meaning of the Unique One.<sup>40</sup>

This is the meaning of the Stirnerian *conatus*.

#### IV. Conclusion

Is the Stirnerian *conatus* all about the self-creation of the Unique One? If this agonistic striving comes to its fulfillment, to the Unique One, is that all for Stirner and his notion of *conatus*? Certainly not. After all, careful examination of the inner structure of that course towards Uniqueness reveals that there is more to it. For Stirner, it is not enough and even means nothing for the egoist to just preserve his existence, to just secure the continuation of his life. On the contrary, he states that

I enjoy myself at my pleasure. I am not longer afraid for my life, but “squander” it. Henceforth, the question runs, not how one can acquire life, but how one can squander, enjoy it; or, not how one is to produce the true self in himself, but how one is to dissolve himself, to live himself out.<sup>41</sup>

A qualitative level of living is therefore referred to by Stirner, *self-enjoyment*, which involves a meaningful expansion of life, not just its prolongation: “He who must expend his life cannot enjoy it.”<sup>42</sup> So, what about politics? Ultimately even the Unique One will be obliged to live within a specific political dominion, within a State. In addition, in spite of his principal indifference towards it, he will have to engage at some point in some sort of political struggle in order to defend and preserve his ownership. The *insurrection* [Empörung] is the “political” application of the Stirnerian *conatus*. That is because insurrection has nothing to do with the establishment and its overthrow, but only with the individual and its striving to exclude himself from it.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 301.

The insurrection, says the egoist, starts from men's discontent with themselves, its a rising of individuals [It] leads us no longer to *let* ourselves to be arranged, but to arrange ourselves [...]. It is only a working forth of me out of the establishment [...] my elevation above it.<sup>43</sup>

Stirner declared the ontologically inconceivable; he did not put at war the world against the individual (man), but, on the contrary, the individual (child) against the world. The world must defend itself against the offensive warlike attitude of the newborn. From that point on, a tremendous agonistic striving begins in order for the individual to become – by its own will and power exclusively – the true egoist, the Owner, the Unique One; and also, in order to preserve its life through the expansion of its property by consuming and exploiting whatever is in his power and to *enjoy* and *spend* his life at his own pleasure as well. That is the Stirnerian notion of the *conatus*. Unlike his predecessors – notably Hobbes and Spinoza – Stirner creates a conative ontology that never ends up with a resolution of that primary ontological tension between individual human beings. All in all, no one before or after him dared to depart from such a radical and inconceivable ontological trailhead!

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