Fallibilism and Givenness in Marx's Critique of Stirner
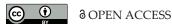
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Marx is a fallibilist. He holds that no commitment is immune to revision under pressure of rational scrutiny. His criticisms of rival thinkers often turn not just on their getting things wrong, but on their being too little observant of this precept. I examine one such episode: Marx's critique of Stirner in *The German Ideology*. Stirner is himself a fallibilist and understands his philosophy as a correction against earlier, less successful attempts to pursue a consistently fallibilistic program in philosophy. Marx argues, however, that Stirner is himself inconsistent in his fallibilism. Stirner treats one concept in particular—his central concept—as indefeasible, ostensibly because it stands in a privileged relationship to non-conceptual reality. Marx understands Stirner's inconsistency to result from his making covert recourse to a given element in knowledge. Marx holds that there is no given element in knowledge, and that confused appeals to the given serve to cover over assumptions and insulate commitments from scrutiny, all of which falls afoul of thoroughgoing fallibilism.

Marx's criticisms of rival thinkers often turn not just on their being wrong, but on their failing to adhere to a core fallibilistic precept I will argue he accepts: namely, that no belief or principle—no cognitive commitment of ours—is immune to revision under pressure of rational scrutiny. In this paper, I examine one such episode: Marx's criticism of his contemporary Max Stirner in *The*

German Ideology.[1] Stirner is himself a fallibilist. He rejects all 'fixed ideas' (Stirner 1995: 43) or 'spooks' (292), on grounds that no idea can be spared 'the searching knife of criticism' (44). Marx argues, however, that Stirner is inconsistent on this point. Stirner treats one concept in particular, his central concept, as indefeasible, ostensibly because it stands in a privileged relationship to extra-conceptual reality. Marx explains Stirner's inconsistency in terms of his falling prey to a misleading image or model of human cognition: 'the philosopher's stone' (Marx and Engels 1975c: 447). This model leads Stirner—unwittingly, Marx thinks—to justify his core beliefs by recourse to a *given* element in knowledge. Marx holds that there is no given element in knowledge and that Stirner's confused appeal to the given leads him to abandon his fallibilism.

Little has been written about Marx's critique of Stirner. Some readers, especially Hook (1962: 183–85), have stressed Marx's claim that Stirner's central concept is itself a 'fixed idea' (cf. also Paterson 1971: 113–15; Dematteis 1976: 130–31). However, these readers ignore or overlook Stirner's main line of defense against the charge: that his central concept, the 'unique,' is no concept at all, but something non-conceptual, or (alternately) an 'empty term' (Stirner 2012: 85) that names this non-conceptual something, but possesses no definite content of its own. Accordingly, these readers also overlook Marx's answer to Stirner's defense. There has been no detailed discussion of Marx's 'philosopher's stone' objection to Stirner. Indeed, only one reader mentions the passages essential for Marx's argument even in passing (see Murray 1988: 61–62).

I suspect this oversight owes to a variety of factors. First, the later sections of *The German Ideology* have been neglected by philosophers because they focus on forgotten intramural debates between Marx and his peers. They are sometimes tedious and often difficult. Nevertheless, they contain much that is of philosophical worth. Second, Marx's writings of this period have not been understood in context of the philosophical tradition to which he and his peers belong: the critical tradition. Thus, it has not been clear to Marx's readers what is at stake in the debate with Stirner. Third, Marx's final argument against Stirner relies on a pair of metaphors that obscure the argument's structure. I hold, however, that the

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1. Terrell Carver has argued that *The German Ideology* is an apocryphal text, on grounds that (1) it was never published as a book and therefore should not be understood as a book; (2) the famous 'Feuerbach chapter' was pieced together from scattered fragments by the editor David Ryazanov; (3) much of the finished manuscript, especially in the 'Feuerbach chapter,' is written in Engels's hand, not Marx's; and (4) the text likely also includes small contributions by Joseph Wedemeyer and Moses Hess (see Carver 2010; Carver and Blank 2014). Accepting all this, and conceding that we are very much in need of a new critical edition of the 1845–46 manuscripts, I find Carver's conclusion dubious. For present purposes, however, it is no matter: the key passages I rely upon from *The German Ideology* all come from the later sections of the manuscript, authored by Marx and untouched by Carver's worries. I cite the 'Feuerbach chapter' only in order to shed further light on points Marx makes in later parts of the text.

argument can be made intelligible (and correctly recognized as an argument) by reading these metaphors in their historical context.

By reconstructing Marx's critique of Stirner, I aim to draw attention to a neglected side of Marx: his sophisticated concern with problems in epistemology and metaphilosophy. Marx is an incisive methodological thinker, and a much better philosopher on matters of nuance than is often supposed. I proceed as follows. In the first section, I discuss the critical tradition in philosophy, up to and including Marx, and argue that the tradition is unified by a shared commitment to what I have been calling 'fallibilism.' In the second section, I present an outline of Stirner's philosophy, arguing that he is himself a fallibilist and that he criticizes his predecessors in the critical tradition on grounds that they are too little committed to fallibilism. In the third section, I examine Marx's critique of Stirner, showing that he criticizes Stirner in turn for failing to hold fast to fallibilism. I then conclude with some reflections on how this should inform our reading of Marx's philosophy.

1. Fallibilism and the Critical Tradition

Marx attaches special significance to the terms 'critical' (*kritisch*) and 'critique' (*Kritik*).[2] He employs the terms liberally from his earliest works (e.g., the "Critique of Plutarch's Polemic Against the Theology of Epicurus" in the appendix to the dissertation) through to his latest (e.g., *Capital* as *A Critique of Political Economy*). These words appear most frequently, however, and with greatest emphasis, in the writings of Marx's early and middle periods, up to and including *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*. There, Marx is animated by intramural debates with his contemporaries in the so-called 'Young Hegelian' movement. The language of 'criticism' and 'critique' has since been adopted (or coopted) by a host of competing intellectual traditions, with varying degrees of fidelity to Marx's usage. In this section, however, I will argue that Marx's own concern with criticism is best understood in light of the early debates out of which it emerged.

I will also argue that Marx's interest in criticism ultimately amounts to an interest in fallibilism—the idea that all of our beliefs are susceptible in principle to revision or abandonment. In the process, I will set up the discussion of Marx's critique of Stirner that follows. I do not understand my attribution of fallibilism

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2. I use the terms 'critique' and 'criticism' interchangeably throughout this paper. There may be contexts in English where it is important to distinguish the two. Certainly they have different connotations in the academy, where 'criticism' reminds more of John Ruskin or Stanley Fish than Marx or Engels. In German, however, there is no distinction between 'critique' and 'criticism'; there is only *Kritik.* I use each term, then, only as style demands.

to Marx to turn on any anachronism. Rather, I understand 'fallibilism,' as it is used by contemporary philosophers, to have emerged out of the critical tradition as a name for the core precept that unites all contributors to the tradition. Notably, 20ᵗʰ- and 21ˢᵗ-century discussions of fallibilism tend to focus more narrowly on its role as a principle for scientific inquiry. In Marx and his rivals, fallibilistic norms for inquiry are applied in every domain: in religion, in politics, in jurisprudence, and in ethics. The principle remains the same.

Among Marx's historical peers, the term 'criticism' is most readily associated with the philosopher Bruno Bauer, author of numerous historical critiques of the gospels, such as the *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte des Johannes.*[3] Bauer advocates for a definite notion of critique as the elimination of irrational prejudices by strictly rational criteria. This is the corrective function of criticism, suggested on most uses of the term. Bauer adds to this, however, the supplementary idea that in correcting our prejudices, we separate from ourselves all that is historically and geographically contingent and particular, retaining only those beliefs and principles constitutive of our common humanity. Thus, he writes in *Christianity Exposed* that, through the critique of religion, '[m]odern criticism has finally brought the human to himself' (Bauer 2002: 102).

It is also essential to Bauer's conception of criticism that it not only correct against error, but also enhance or ameliorate our epistemic lot. He claims that '[i]t is only in the beginning that criticism seems destructive,' as all rational inquiry ultimately contributes to the growth of human understanding. In Bauer's favored case, the criticism of the gospels, this understanding 'takes up into itself the entire content of the gospels' and 'reproduces the contents in a form which overcomes the limits of the previous conception' (1840: 182; translated in Moggach 2003: 70). Thus, though Bauer argues that the historical Christ is a myth, he still claims to retain what is true in Christianity, and in fact to bring it to better light by criticism. Even in Bauer's later, avowedly atheistic works, this ameliorative and knowledge-preserving function for criticism is retained.[4]

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3. Useful treatments of Bauer in English are rare, but include Hook (1962: 98–111), Löwith (1967: 105–10), McLellan (1969: 48–84), Brazill (1970: chap. 5), Mah (1987: chaps. 3–4), Brudney (1998: chap. 3), and Moggach (2003).

4. On Bauer's later approach, the content 'retained' by criticism is also transformed, such that it can be said, for example, that Christian theology criticized is no longer Christian theology. Thus, Bauer writes in *The Trumpet of the Last Judgement against Hegel the Atheist and Antichrist* that 'every knowledge not only develops a new form, but a new content as well' (Bauer 1989: 127). He also holds, however, that the successor content is in some sense contained already in the predecessor content: 'what should be' is contained already in 'what is,' but 'only the *should* is true and justified, and must be brought to authority, domination and power' (128). I interpret Bauer here as holding that successor contents are derived from their predecessors by some non-analytic but necessary mode of inference, such as the procedure Hegel calls 'Analysis' in the *Philosophical Propaedeutic*: '[t]he development of what is contained in the Concept, Analysis, is the evolution of different determinations which are contained in the Concept but are not as such immediately given, and

Accordingly, for Bauer, error plays an important role in the formation of knowledge. The critic does not abhor error but seeks it out and achieves new insights through its correction. What the critic does abhor, however, is dogmatism. The dogmatist seeks to render beliefs and principles immune to rational scrutiny. When a belief or principle is held dogmatically, '[i]t cannot ever be criticized because all the means of criticism that Science offers are prohibited and revoked,' such that 'criticism is unconditionally enslaved under an authority against which there is no possibility of appeal' (2002: 31). Bauer's program of criticism—the realization of a truly human set of principles—is possible only on condition that the dogmatists' efforts are everywhere frustrated. Accordingly, he writes in *Die gute Sache der Freiheit und meine eigene Angelegenheit* that, pursued successfully, '[c]riticism no longer knows dogmatism' (1842: 204, my translation).

Bauer, of course, was Marx's mentor and dissertation supervisor. We can plausibly infer just from this that Marx's earliest appeals to 'criticism' are informed by Bauer's thinking about philosophic method.[5] Bauer's influence can be scented in Marx's early call, in an open letter to Arnold Ruge printed in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, for a '*ruthless criticism of all that exists*' (Marx and Engels 1975a: 142). This criticism, Marx hopes, will 'find the new world through criticism of the old one,' carrying out the 'reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but by analysing the mystical consciousness that is unintelligible to itself' (142, 144)—that is, by correcting the errors of past thinkers while also bringing their half-grasped truths to better light. Marx agrees here with Engels, who writes in an early critique of Schelling that '[w]hat is genuine is proved in the fire' and 'what is false we shall not miss in our ranks' (Engels 1975: 187).

Moreover, in the Introduction to the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right,* Marx makes clear that he accepts something like Bauer's vision of criticism as an instrument for cultivating a form of consciousness that is truly human. He claims that '[r]eligion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again,' adding that 'criticism of religion disillusions man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will revolve round himself and therefore round his true sun' (Marx & Engels 1975a: 175, 176). Thus, Marx takes religious beliefs to be somehow contingent or accidental, and he takes their correction and overcoming through criticism to put us in better touch with those beliefs that are truly or essentially human.

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for this reason the procedure is at the same time synthetical' (Hegel 1986: 122; and see Dallman 2021: chap. 1 §§62–70). I hold, therefore, that criticism as Bauer understands it still involves the preservation of knowledge—for the transformed successor content is in some sense *already known*.

5. See Rosen (1977) and Kaan (2020) for detailed examinations of Bauer's influence on the young Marx.

In his early writings, therefore, Marx advocates for a very definite procedure of criticism—one characterized by corrective, ameliorative, and knowledge-preserving functions, which aims to bring out in us through criticism what is truly or essentially human, as opposed to what is historically or geographically contingent or accidental, and which is antithetical, given this aim, to all forms of dogmatism. I hold also that Marx inherits this conception of criticism from Bauer. However, this approach to criticism is not wholly unique to Bauer. In taking 'criticism' as their watchword, Marx and Bauer both place themselves in a definite philosophical lineage. They are contributors to the critical tradition, which traces back to Kant. Indeed, much of Bauer's thinking about criticism is present already in Kant's three *Critique*s and other works of the critical period.

Kant too envisions his method of criticism as a corrective against past errors. He makes clear in the *Prolegomena*, for instance, that the aim of his first *Critique* is to warn 'good minds' against 'the hitherto ill-directed and fruitless endeavor' of speculative metaphysics, insisting that 'no one who has thought through and comprehended the principles of critique . . . will ever again return to that old and sophistical pseudoscience' (Kant 2002: 4:365–66). Recent Kant scholarship has done well to show, however, that Kant never envisions his critique as having a purely negative significance; he aims, rather, to distinguish what is true in the traditional metaphysics from what is false (see de Boer 2020; Proops 2021).[6] His aim is to sketch an improved, successor metaphysics retaining only what survives 'the fiery test of critique' (Kant 1998: A406/B433). Indeed, in the *Prolegomena,* he imagines that this successor metaphysics will stand to the traditional metaphysics just as '*chemistry* stands to *alchemy*' (2002: 4:366). Thus, Kant understands critique as involving a crucial corrective function, but also an ameliorative and a knowledge-preserving function.

Likewise, Kant recognizes error as essential to the growth of knowledge. He writes in the *Metaphysics of Morals* that progress in knowledge 'does not detract from the merits of earlier moralists, chemists, and teachers of medicine, since without their discoveries and even their unsuccessful attempts we should not have attained that unity of the true principle which unifies the whole of philosophy into one system' (1996b: 6:207). Kant states explicitly that, at the end of the day, '[c]riticism . . . is opposed only to dogmatism' (1998: Bxxxv). He also draws a connection between his program of criticism and approximation to a truer or

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6. The long-prevailing tendency to read Kant's critique of metaphysics abstractly, as a simple rejection of pre-critical metaphysics rather than as a knowledge-preserving transformation of that tradition, might owe to the influence of more recent, more abstract critiques of metaphysics (e.g., Carnap's early verificationist critique of metaphysics as a confused empirico-descriptive enterprise or Heidegger's critique of metaphysics on grounds that it substitutes questions about 'beings' for questions about 'being,' thereby changing the topic or missing the point).

fuller humanity. He writes in his prize essay on the question 'What is enlightenment?' that the dogmatist who aspires to put humanity 'in such a condition that it would be impossible for it to enlarge its cognitions . . . and to purify them of errors' commits a 'crime against human nature,' for humanity's 'original vocation lies precisely in such progress' (1996a: 8:39). Criticism, again, helps to realize the human nature.

Those writing in Kant's wake reproduce many of these commitments. In an early essay co-written with Schelling, Hegel claims that true criticism 'is not a merely negative destruction,' but rather a 'preparation of the way for the arrival of true philosophy' (Hegel and Schelling 2000: 285). Likewise, in the second of the 'Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism,' Schelling asks whether 'criticism [can] achieve its own purpose of making humanity free' and identifies the dogmatist as 'a secret enemy' who hopes to 'massacre us, not in the open field of reason, but in the recesses of superstition' (Schelling 1980b: 161–62). In the same spirit, Hegel claims in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that 'the function of our own and every age' is 'to grasp the knowledge which is already existing, to make it our own, and in so doing to develop it still further and to raise it to a higher level,' claiming that this is what 'separates men from beasts' (Hegel 1983: 3–4). Through philosophical criticism, he thinks, humanity expresses its essence.

I have already noted the role played by a Kantian notion of critique in Bauer and Marx. We find similar remarks about criticism, however, in other representatives of their milieu, sometimes reductively labeled 'post-Hegelian.' Thus, Ludwig Feuerbach writes in the *Darstellung, Entwicklung und Kritik der Leibniz'schen Philosophie* that the 'true criticism of a philosophy lies in its own development, for it is made possible only by the separation of the essential from the accidental' (Feuerbach 1910: 2, my translation). Later, he frames his criticism of Christianity and of earlier philosophers as a turn away from theology (i.e., accidental principles) toward anthropology (i.e., principles grounded in the human essence), mirroring Bauer and Marx both in his claim that only through criticism has humanity 'found its way *back to itself*' (2012: 233).

None of this, however, is to suggest that all or any of the philosophers discussed thus far agree about how to implement the program of criticism. Disagreements on fine points of the method are rife within the tradition. In fact, one way we might define the critical tradition is as a generations-long dispute about how criticism, if it is to be at all successful, ought to be understood. Once it is recognized that principles and beliefs may fall afoul of criticism, it does not take long for methods of criticism themselves to enter under scrutiny. Thus, Bauer insists that '[c]riticism must . . . direct itself against itself' (Bauer 1841: viii; translated in Moggach 2003: 75) and Marx urges that we avoid taking up an 'uncriti-

cal attitude toward the method of criticising' (Marx and Engels 1975a: 327). This goes some way to explaining the sometimes-jarring abstract flavor of critical philosophy: it is more often than not concerned with questions in metaphilosophy.

Frequently, contributors to the critical tradition propose that we jettison certain elements of the Kantian approach to criticism in order to better stress or secure certain other elements, with the idea that these others are the more essential. Marx himself, though he begins by adopting Bauer's conception of criticism, abandons it in time—adopting a new method under the influence of Feuerbach, and yet another under the influence of Engels and Stirner (see Dallman 2021). Marx remains, however, through all these changes of approach, a strong advocate for criticism.[7]

These considerations raise the question whether there is not some single commitment (or cluster of commitments) accepted by all contributors to the critical tradition. I think that there is. The critical tradition is unified not just by a common vocabulary, an enmeshed reception history, a vague family resemblance relation, etc., but by shared animadversion to dogmatism. Advocates of criticism hold, with Kant, that the dogmatist's efforts to shelter our commitments from scrutiny must be stopped, and that, once they are stopped, some right method of criticism will succeed in ameliorating our cognitive (and perhaps even our practical) situation. Focused opposition to dogmatism has its origins in early modern enlightenment philosophy—Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Locke—but in Kant it takes programmatic and imperative form: to safeguard enlightenment, combat the dogmatists.

We can detect this shared animadversion in the fact that intramural debates within the critical camp almost always turn on claims of the following form: such-and-such principle, defended by erstwhile critic X, betrays the cause of criticism by falling prey, however unwittingly, to some form of dogmatism. This holds also for criticisms of rival methods of criticism. In *The Holy Family*, for instance, Marx writes of Bauer's method of criticism that 'despite all its invectives against dogmatism, it condemns itself to dogmatism' (Marx and Engels 1975b: 20).

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7. This point is obscured by the tendency to identify Kant's philosophy as a whole—including every peculiarity of his method of criticism—as 'Critique' or 'critical philosophy.' Thus, Hegel frames his criticism of Kant's method of criticism as a refutation of 'Critical Philosophy' (Hegel 1991b: §40). The responsibility for this confusion lies with Kant himself, who frequently refers to his entire philosophy as 'Critique.' The problem recurs throughout the tradition. As will be seen in section two, Bauer's philosophy, with all its peculiarities, comes also to be referred to by the proper name 'criticism,' such that its critics are easily misread as rejecting criticism outright. Again here, the responsibility lies with Bauer himself, who claims 'criticism' as his sole property. Neither Hegel nor Stirner reject criticism outright, however; they reject only the critical methods of Kant and Bauer respectively.

Consider a more concrete example: as early as *Faith and Knowledge* and as late as the *Encyclopaedia Logic,* Hegel dismisses Kant's method of criticism on grounds that it dogmatically presupposes that 'what we think is false just because *we* think it' (Hegel 1991b: §60 Ad 1). As William Bristow puts it, Hegel's complaint is that 'the procedure of justification of Kantian critique already implicitly presupposes subjectivism' (Bristow 2007: 50). Without reconstructing his argument in any detail, we can see that Hegel here criticizes Kant's idea of criticism on the premise that it in fact presupposes a dogmatic principle. Thus, he retains Kant's anti-dogmatism.

Opposition to dogmatism might seem too slippery a thing to unify a tradition. I think it is not, for the sort of anti-dogmatism essential to the critical tradition brings with it a definite positive content: the idea that no belief or principle, no matter how dearly held, is immune to revision or abandonment after rational scrutiny. This is what Charles Sanders Peirce calls 'fallibilism,' which he programmatizes by the maxim 'Do not block the way of inquiry' (Peirce 1931: 1.135). Peirce himself belongs to the critical tradition and cites Kant (see Levine 2004), Hegel (see Stern 2007), and Schelling (see Franks 2015) as influences. He writes elsewhere that 'we must not admit any specified proposition to be [beyond our powers of doubt] without severe criticism' (Peirce 1998: 433). We can understand his fallibilism as a distillation of the basic idea undergirding criticism.

When Marx first introduces his program of '*ruthless criticism*,' he insists that it must be 'ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be' (Marx and Engels 1975a: 142). Compare this to Peirce's remark on the fallibilist outlook in science: '[c]onservatism—in the sense of dread of consequences—is altogether out of place in science—which has on the contrary always been forwarded by radicals and radicalism, in the sense of the eagerness to carry consequences to their extremes' (Peirce 1931: 1.149). Dogmatism is, on this construal, extreme cognitive conservatism.

Where Hegel, Bauer, and Marx are critical philosophers, they are also fallibilists, and their debates often concern who among them is the most consistent fallibilist—who clings to dogmatic idols and who is willing to risk all in service of honest criticism.[8] Marx's enduring interest in criticism is best understood as an interest in defending a consistent fallibilism. Moreover, his almost uniformly

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8. Hegel's fallibilism is on display especially in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and can be detected, as Michael Forster brings out in his *Hegel and Skepticism*, in his ambition, informed by the ancient skeptics, to justify or rationalize his systematic philosophy by 'an unrestricted skepticism free of any dogmatism' (Forster 1989: 32). It is a more difficult thing to attribute a thoroughgoing fallibilism to Kant. Both Westphal (2004) and Chignell (2021) argue that Kant is a fallibilist, but only on a weaker definition than the Peircean one assumed here. For present purposes, it is enough to say that Kant is a fallibilist *of some stripe*, and that his writings inspire and inform a more radical fallibilism among his successors in the critical tradition. For another related discussion, see O'Neill (1992).

negative evaluations of rival philosophers, such as Bauer and Pierre Proudhon, usually turn on charges that the methods of criticism favored by these thinkers are inconsistently fallibilistic. In what follows, I will examine one such episode—Marx's critique of Stirner in *The German Ideology*—and in so doing I will highlight the importance of fallibilism for both thinkers.

2. Stirner's Fallibilism

Like Marx, Stirner began his philosophical career under Bauer's influence. In an early, notably positive review of Bauer's *The Trumpet of the Last Judgment against Hegel the Atheist and Antichrist,* he signals fidelity to the latter's revisionist reading of Hegel as well as to his broader program of criticism (see De Ridder 2007: 289; Welsh 2010: 11–12). However, Stirner's only major work, *The Ego and Its Own*, proves that this fidelity was not to last. It contains a prolonged and vituperative critique of Bauer's method.[9] Much of this critique is directed against 'criticism.' For instance, echoing Schelling in the "Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism," Stirner claims that 'the critic remains on one and the same ground with the dogmatist' (Stirner 1995: 131). This might lead us to suppose that Stirner is no critic at all, but an opponent to the critical tradition. I will argue in this section, however, that Stirner's critique of 'criticism' is in fact motivated by his fallibilism, and that he remains, like Marx, a (sometimes begrudging) proponent of criticism.[10]

Stirner frames his fallibilism in opposition to what he calls 'the *principle of stability*, the proper life-principle of religion, which concerns itself with creating sanctuaries that must not be touched' (298). In our established language, the principle of stability is the guiding idea of dogmatism: certain among our beliefs and principles must be exempt from revision or abandonment, lest the whole cognitive enterprise come tumbling down. Against this precept, Stirner holds that '[a]ll predicates of objects are my statements, my judgments, my—creatures'

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9. For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to stress those aspects of Stirner's critique that bear most on Bauer. *The Ego and Its Own* can just as plausibly be read as a close critique of Feuerbach. Thus, Douglas Moggach writes that '*Der Einzige* can be read as a sustained critique of Bauer's position' (Moggach 2010: 83) and Paul Thomas writes with equal plausibility that '*The Ego and Its Own* was an attack on Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*' (Thomas 2011: 119). This ambiguity owes, I think, both to underlying similarities between Bauer and Feuerbach's methods, and to Stirner's design: he hopes to position himself as successor not just to Bauer or to Feuerbach, as individual critics, but to the tradition as a whole. *The Ego and Its Own* even touches Marx at points.

10. Scholarly interest in Stirner's philosophy has undergone a revival in recent years. For helpful discussions of Stirner in English, see Hook (1962: 165–72), Löwith (1967: 103–5), McLellan (1969: 117–36), Brazill (1970: chap. 5), Paterson (1971), De Ridder (2007), Welsh (2010), Newman (2011), Jenkins (2014), and Stepelevich (2020).

and 'I must not merely allow myself to say that they are truths, but also that they are deceptions' (298). This is perhaps the most straightforward statement of commitment to fallibilism considered thus far. Stirner puts the point in many ways. I will introduce another formulation as we proceed

Stirner's principal aim in *The Ego and Its Own* is to search out these sanctuaries and expose them for what they are: dogmatic suppositions. He refers to such suppositions by turns as 'fixed ideas,' as 'spooks,' as 'fetters,' and as 'the sacred.' He includes among the fixed ideas 'morality, legality, Christianity, and so forth' (43), but also 'the fixed idea of the state itself' and 'the fancy that man was created to be a *zoon politicon*' (44), among numerous others. To have a fixed idea is to operate unwittingly under the influence of a dogmatic supposition. Once a fixed idea has been recognized as a fixed idea, it can no longer function as a fixed idea. However, until it is recognized as a fixed idea, and thus dispelled, it is '[u]ndislodgeable, like a madman's delusions' (44). With this in mind, Stirner defines 'fixed idea' as '[a]n idea that has subjected the man to itself' (43).

Here already Stirner makes himself out to be a friend to criticism. He even complains that those possessed by fixed ideas carry on thinking in accordance with them, 'without ever putting to these fixed ideas of theirs the searching knife of criticism' (44). He allows that criticism, even on Bauer's understanding, 'dispels prejudices,' 'clears away errors,' 'discovers truths' (119), 'criticizes anew every result that has been gained,' and 'raises man above everything that would like to dominate over him' (118). He clarifies that he is no special 'opponent of criticism,' that he is 'no dogmatist,' and that he does not 'feel . . . touched by the critic's tooth with which he tears the dogmatist to pieces' (132). Nevertheless, he comes out against what I have called the Bauerian idea of criticism. He does so, however, in a familiar way: by charging the critic with dogmatism.

In particular, Stirner claims that the Bauerian idea of criticism rests on two key dogmatic suppositions—two fixed ideas. The first is 'truth.' Stirner claims that, for the critic, 'thinking is a "sublime labour, a sacred activity", and it rests on a firm *faith,* the faith in truth' (268). Criticism subjects our beliefs and principles to scrutiny, questioning their truth, but it does not scrutinize the principle according to which truth is the measure of success in criticism. Bauer in particular accepts a coherence theory of truth. As Stirner puts it, he 'brings *coherence* into his tenets, and takes the coherence in turn for the scale to estimate their worth by' (303–4). As far as Stirner is concerned, however, Bauer gives no satisfactory account of why he chooses this criterion, nor even of its provenance. Ruge, much influenced by Bauer, says that 'truth is its own purpose' (Ruge 1983: 255). This sort of hand waving cannot satisfy the critic, who demands closer scrutiny.

Stirner presents his own theory of the provenance of 'truth.' First, he presents a general theory: he writes that each 'critic starts from a proposition, a truth, a belief,' taken as the guiding principle of criticism; this principle 'is not a cre-

ation of the critic, but of the dogmatist' and 'commonly it is actually taken up out of the culture of the time without further ceremony' (Stirner 1995: 309). Stirner takes 'truth' itself to be one such idea smuggled over from the commonsense vocabulary—something contingent, covertly borrowed from the broader culture. In particular, he takes it to be a disguised piece of Christian moralizing: 'morality demands "thou shalt not lie!"' and '[b]y morality those persons are vested with the right to expect the truth' (264). This does not require, of course, that critics who take truth as their principle recognize or respect its theological provenance. As Stirner points out, 'truth wears longer than all the gods; for it is only in truth's service, and for love of it, that people have overthrown the gods, and at last God himself' (311).[11,12]

The second fixed idea that Stirner detects in the critic's method is 'man.' In fact, he writes that '[t]he most oppressive spook is *man*' (69). The Bauerian critic supposes that there is some close relationship between the progress of criticism and the betterment of humanity, thus between progress of criticism and self-betterment. Stirner claims, however, that the critic fails to subject this concept of 'man' to adequate scrutiny. Like 'truth,' 'man' is taken up from the vocabulary of the time, in this case from the newspaper language of political liberalism, which 'exalts "man" to the same extent as any other religion does its God or idol' (158). This is a concrete, historically contingent concept of 'man,' which stands in definite relations to other concepts, such as 'nation' and 'human rights.' In particular, Stirner worries that we cannot separate this liberal idea of 'man' from the idea that 'the individual's human value consists in being a citizen of the state' (90).

According to Stirner, this particular fixed idea is especially dangerous because, in applying the concept 'man' to ourselves, we assign ourselves a 'destiny' (215) or a 'vocation' (158). Like many of his peers, Stirner takes over from

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11. See also this passage: 'Take notice how a "moral man" behaves, who often today thinks he is through with God and throws off Christianity as a bygone thing. . . . Much as he rages against the *pious* Christians, he himself has nevertheless as thoroughly remained a Christian, namely a *moral* Christian. . . . If one buffets single traditional truths (miracles, unlimited powers of princes), then Rationalists buffet them too, and only the old-style believers wail. But, if one buffets truth itself, he immediately has both, as *believers,* for opponents' (Stirner 1995: 45–46).

12. Readers familiar with Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* might detect similarities, here, to the account given by Nietzsche in the third treatise of that work. It is unclear how familiar Nietzsche was with Stirner's writings, but there are numerous similarities between Stirner's views and those defended by Nietzsche, on topics as wide-ranging as the provenance of truth (Stirner 1995: 45–46), the nature of morality (63), the vindictive tendency of the moralist (43), the primacy of might over right (149–51), the defamation of egoistic language by Christians (153), the need to carve a middle path between good and evil (52), the value of genius (147–48), the diminution of great minds by the common herd (192), and the danger of language for our thinking (305). Nietzsche was at least aware of Stirner's writings. The possibility that he might have plagiarized Stirner served as a point of sharp contention between followers of Nietzsche on the left (represented by Franz Overbeck) and right (represented by Nietzsche's sister, Elizabeth) in the period immediately following his death. On this, see Glassford (1999) and Brobjer (2003).

Hegel the broadly Aristotelian doctrine according to which a being's capabilities, its entitlements and obligations, and the norms that govern its goodness and badness, all follow from the kind to which it belongs, where this kind just is its concept. Thus, Hegel writes in the *Science of Logic* that the concept under which a thing falls is 'an *ought-to-be*,' to which it 'may or may not be adequate' (Hegel 1969: 657). By classifying ourselves under the kind 'man,' we attribute to ourselves definite capabilities, definite obligations, definite standards of health and right conduct—and all of these, Stirner thinks, are fixed ideas.

Thus, Stirner claims that Bauer's program, which aspires to criticize all beliefs and principles, nevertheless falls prey to fixed ideas where its own principles are concerned. Thus, he claims that 'even the most inexorable criticism, which undermines all current principles, still does finally *believe in the principle*' (Stirner 1995: 309), noting also that that if the critic genuinely 'wanted to criticize criticism, he would have to look and see if there was anything in its presupposition' (135). Stirner's arguments against criticism are motivated by his fallibilism. He rejects the ameliorative function of criticism because it turns on a fixed idea of 'truth,' and he rejects the relationship between criticism and human nature because it turns on a fixed idea of 'man.' He does this, however, in order to buttress his underlying commitment to fallibilism—the core idea of criticism.

Nevertheless, Stirner agrees with Bauer that 'truth' and 'man' are basic and unavoidable suppositions of human thought. He concedes that, just as '[t]he essence of human feeling, for instance, is love' and 'the essence of human will is the good,' the essence of 'one's thinking' is 'the true' (40). Likewise, he holds that '[i]t is human to look at what is individual not as individual, but as a generality' (246), and thus recognize ourselves as tokens of the type man, possessed of a definite nature. We may not have always taken for granted just these notions of 'truth' and 'man,' but it is an unavoidable feature of human thinking to take for granted some such pair of historically contingent fixed ideas. Thus, Stirner holds that Bauer's theory of the nature of thought—as a progressive or ameliorative enterprise governed by notions of 'truth' and 'humanity'—is in fact broadly correct. Accordingly, he writes that 'criticism is thought or the thinking mind itself' (131).

This concession, however, does not soften Stirner's outlook on criticism. Instead, it inspires in him suspicion of the thinking mind. He complains that the critic 'cannot decompose [one] thought until he has found a—"higher" in which it dissolves; for he moves only—in thoughts' (132). If all thinking is criticism, and all criticism runs afoul of fallibilism by taking for granted fixed ideas, then the only way to hold fast to fallibilism is to abandon thinking itself. This is the starting point of Stirner's positive theory—his favored approach to criticism—but it is also the source of a fatal confusion in his thinking: he concludes that we must somehow overcome or escape thinking itself, substituting 'thoughtlessness' for the critic's vaunted 'freedom of thought' (305).

I say that this idea is confused, and we will see in the next section that Marx agrees, but let us be clear about the bounds of that confusion: Stirner does not here propose to desist from the psychological activity of thinking. What he suggests, rather, is that we no longer take any higher thought—be it of 'truth' or of 'man'—as the principle or norm of right thinking. Instead, he proposes to 'make thinking an affair of egoistic option, an affair of the single person, a mere pastime or hobby as it were, and to take from it the importance of "being the last decisive power"' (134). To be thoughtless, therefore, is to think thoughtlessly (i.e., irresponsibly), without concern for any norm that would distinguish good from bad thoughts. He proposes to take up and abandon beliefs and principles not according to their truth, but according to his 'selfishness' and 'interest' (271), treating them as 'a material that [he] can use up' according to 'the measure of [his] own vitality' (313). No idea can function as a dogma if the thinker can abandon it wholly on a whim.

Here already a problem emerges. Are 'selfishness,' 'interest,' and 'vitality' not concepts, themselves saddled with historically contingent contents, standing in definite relationships to other concepts? It seems they must be. Stirner's solution, then, seems only to have kicked the can down the road, substituting one set of fixed ideas for another. Stirner anticipates this objection and cuts it off at the pass. The principle of thinking, he claims, is not 'interest' or 'vitality' *per se*, but the individual ego itself, which is not a thought or a concept at all, but something beyond thought. He writes: 'I am man, and you are man: but "man" is only a thought, a generality; neither you and I are speakable, we are *unutterable*, because only *thoughts* are speakable and consist in speaking' (275). To avoid the pitfalls of dogmatism, therefore, Stirner holds we must take as the principle of our thinking not one thought or another, but ourselves, as existing, occurrent, self-conscious egos.

The ego thus construed is not the 'thought-of ego . . . in which we are all equal' (275) as falling under the concept 'ego,' but an irreducible non-conceptual singularity or haecceity. Stirner refers to this singularity as 'the ego' or 'the unique' (*Der Einzige*). It is the central idea in his philosophy. He refers to himself first-personally as 'the unique,' claiming that 'no *concept* expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names'; he adds that, like God, he 'is perfect and has no calling to strive after perfection' (324). Being without concept and being without vocation (i.e., without striving) hang together. Accepting the Hegel-Aristotle theory of kinds glossed above, we can evaluate the goodness or badness of a thing only once we bring it under a definite kind or concept. Stirner writes: '*I* am my species, am without norm, without law, without model' (163). There are no criteria of right conduct for the unique.

Stirner argues that, once we recognize ourselves as the unique, rather than (say) as tokens of the type 'man,' our relationship to the world changes in turn.

Again in the first-person, he writes that 'now I take the world as what it is to me, as *mine,* as my property' (17). This notion of 'property' or what is one's 'own' (*Eigentum*) is the conceptual counterpart to the 'unique.' Where previously he was bound by norms distinguishing what was his from what was not, now, recognizing himself as unique, Stirner comes to hold that everything *in his power* is his own. He distinguishes this notion of 'property' from the legal one, claiming that the latter 'means *sacred* property, such that I must *respect* your property' (220). His notion of 'property,' by contrast, just picks out 'what is mine' (220), such that 'what my might reaches to is my property' (228). This concept of property applies also to ideas: once I recognize myself as unique, I am no longer bound by any norm, therefore no longer burdened by thoughts, for I am their 'creator and *owner*' (17).

We are now prepared to consider an alternative formulation of Stirner's fallibilism. On his account, I can be a consistent fallibilist only in case I recognize all candidate beliefs and principles as my property. He writes that a 'thought is my *own* only when I have no misgivings about bringing it in danger of death every moment' (302). Moreover, he adds that '[y]our thoughts [too] are *my* thoughts, which I dispose of as I will, and which I strike down unmercifully; they are my property, which I annihilate as I wish,' for 'I do not wait for authorization from you first' (302). I take this to be a statement of commitment to fallibilism every bit as clear as the first. Here, however, it is evident that Stirner's fallibilism survives his rejection of the Bauerian conception of criticism.

It can be seen, too, that though Stirner rejects Bauer's idea of criticism and heaps abuse on the critic, he remains committed to the broader program of criticism. He makes this explicit by distinguishing 'between *servile* and *own* criticism' (309). The former (Bauer's) is inadequate, he thinks, because it falls prey to fixed ideas. The latter is workable, as it takes only the non-conceptual unique as its principle, correcting beliefs and principles not in accordance with any higher norm, but just as the critic sees fit. Stirner even preserves, on his successor method, the knowledge-preserving and anti-dogmatic functions of previous methods. He writes: '*I* receive with thanks what the centuries of culture have acquired for me; I am not willing to throw away and give up anything of it' (295).[13] And elsewhere he writes: 'I am not willing to be a slave of my maxims,

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13. Stirner seems to take seriously the prospect that his 'own criticism' might in principle function as a legitimate successor to earlier modes of criticism, to the point of considering (though only in passing) the prospects for shoring up the truths of mathematics by 'own criticism.' He writes that 'an incontrovertible mathematical truth, which might even be called eternal according to the common understanding of words' is 'not . . . sacred,' for the reason that it 'is not revealed, or not the revelation of a higher being' (Stirner 1995: 38). This gives us little to work with—I suspect Stirner thinks that mathematical truths have their grounds in the unique's corporeal being, perhaps in its perceptual capacity *a la* Kant-Brouwer—but it makes clear that Stirner has serious ambitions for the method.

but lay them bare to my continual criticism without *any warrant*' (273). To seek a warrant for our criticism would subordinate the unique to an idea. Stirner fights dogmatism because he enjoys it.

Thus, Stirner rejects the ameliorative function of criticism on grounds that it presupposes a fixed idea of 'truth,' and he disavows the relationship between criticism and approximation to the human nature on grounds that it presupposes a fixed idea of 'man.' However, he retains the knowledge-preserving function of criticism and the typical critical animadversion to dogmatism. Moreover, his method of criticism remains corrective in its aims, though it corrects beliefs and principles not by rational or alethic criteria, but according to the whims of the non-conceptual unique. Criticism, on Stirner's account, is not an obligation, but a power: it is an instrument by which the unique converts fixed ideas into 'alienable property' (316). No overarching power can compel the critic to toil away at criticism. Still, Stirner proposes to 'accept criticism's lesson to let no part of our property become stable, and to feel comfortable only in—*dissolving* it' (127).

3. Marx's Critique of Stirner

Marx devotes the greater part of *The German Ideology* to a critique of Stirner. As Paul Thomas writes, this critique 'has been almost completely ignored,' despite the fact that 'many of the most important arguments that have long been associated with *The German Ideology* find their fullest expression in "Saint Max"'—the section devoted to Stirner (Thomas 2011: 113). This likely owes to a combination of factors, not least among them the fact that *The German Ideology* was never published during Marx's lifetime. The discussion of Stirner is also quite difficult compared to the aggressively curated 'Feuerbach chapter,' and has been subject to a great deal of bad press.[14]

Marx presents a variety of overlapping critiques of Stirner. He criticizes Stirner for ignorance of history (see Dematteis 1976: 124), for retaining too much from Hegel and Bauer by way of method (see Paterson 1971: 111–12), for fall-

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14. David McLellan writes that Marx delivers here 'a long and wearisome attack on Stirner enlivened by only occasional bright spots' (McLellan 1969: 134). Likewise, Franz Mehring complains that 'even when dialectical trenchancy does show itself it soon degenerates into hair-splitting and quibbling, some of it of a rather puerile character' (Mehring 1962: 110). Lawrence Stepelevich claims that the critique consists in 'relentless' but 'selective criticism,' involving a 'running series of *ad hominem* arguments and *petito principi* fallacies' (Stepelevich 2020: 152). Some of this is true. I suspect, however, that the real reason why Marx's critique has been so much neglected is the one identified by Sidney Hook: 'for the most part [Marx's arguments] are unintelligible unless read together with Stirner's text' (Hook 1962: 173). For this reason, those most likely to examine the critique in full have not been scholars of Marx, but of Stirner, and many of these have been more interested in defending Stirner than grasping Marx.

ing to the wrong side of various political divides (see Welsh 2010: 23), and for supposing that ideas can change the world (see Thomas 2011: 129). Being much better trained as a philosopher, he also plays professor, chastising Stirner for a whole range of 'offences against formal logic' (Marx and Engels 1975c: 482): 'carelessness of thought,' 'incoherence,' 'constant contradiction with himself' (272), 'exploit[ing] negation sometimes in one meaning and sometimes in another' (280), appeal to 'trashy distinctions' (273), and 'crude abuse of the conjunctions for, therefore, for that reason, because, accordingly, but, etc.' (272).

I will focus, however, on what I take to be Marx's central charge against Stirner: that, despite the latter's efforts to achieve a consistent fallibilism, he nevertheless falls prey to dogmatic suppositions. In particular, Marx claims that the central concepts 'unique' and 'property' remain, despite Stirner's protestations to the contrary, fixed ideas—every bit as historically contingent in their contents as the Bauerian notion of 'humanity' that Stirner rejects. This argument has been discussed by Hook (1962: 183–85) and others.[15] These discussions, however, tend to ignore Stirner's main line of defense against the claim: that the unique is not a concept at all, but a non-conceptual singularity. Thus, they overlook the core difficulties involved in Marx's argument.

With this in mind, I will focus, in particular, on the concluding section of Marx's discussion of Stirner in *The German Ideology*, entitled "Apologetical Commentary." There, Marx targets Stirner's pseudonymous defense of *The Ego and Its Own*, "Stirner's Critics." As far as I am aware, the only philosopher to discuss the key passages in this section, and even then only in passing, is Patrick Murray (1988: 61–62). However, this is the location of Marx's central move against Stirner. He claims that Stirner's insistence on the non-conceptual character of the unique is not, in fact, an effective response to the charge of dogmatism, but the cause of Stirner's falling prey to dogmatism—for the very idea of a non-conceptual ground for knowledge embodies a confusion.

In his criticism of *The Ego and Its Own*, Marx subjects Stirner's notions of 'uniqueness' and 'property' to scrutiny, concluding that each in its way amounts just to an 'embellishment of existing conditions, a little drop of comforting balm for the poor, impotent soul that has become wretched through wretchedness'

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15. See for instance Paterson (1971: 113–15) and Dematteis (1976: 130–31). Another shortcoming in existing accounts of Marx's critique of Stirner: they tend to claim both that Marx takes the unique to be an empty abstraction, devoid of any content, and that he takes it to be a holdover from middle-class consciousness. On their face, these claims do not hang together, for a concept cannot be contentful in some definite middle-class way and also vacuous, empty of content. The reality of the situation, as Marx argues, is that 'unique' is laden with content, but this content is disguised by Stirner's abstract treatment of the idea as pure abstraction. As Galvano Della Volpe, singular among 20th-century readers of Marx, aptly observes, the trouble 'is not just the "emptiness" of these abstractions . . . but rather their (*faulty*) *fullness,* a fullness of un-mediated, or *un-digested, empirical contents*' (Della Volpe 1978: 167).

(Marx and Engels 1975c: 439). Marx's claim is that the 'unique' and 'property' are fixed ideas, but fixed ideas whose nature has been disguised through abstraction. Marx takes Stirner's idea of 'the unique' just to be the confused concept of the individual cherished by the small capitalist, expressing 'the aspirations of the German petty bourgeois of today whose aim it is to become bourgeois' (411). Likewise, he takes 'property' to be nothing more, at bottom, than the 'modern-German interpretation of ordinary, special and exclusive private property' (406). Through philosophical abstraction, each of these fixed ideas is transformed into a further 'illusion about [the corresponding] illusion of the petty bourgeois' (414). By taking such illusions on board, even in philosophically abstracted form, Marx thinks, Stirner 'accepts in good faith the illusions of politicians, lawyers and other ideologists' (355).

If Marx can show that Stirner's key ideas in fact amount to 'speculative interpretations of middle-class wretchedness' (382), he will also have shown that they amount to '*dogmatic* premises' (434), thus that Stirner's commitment to fallibilism is inconsistent and that his method of criticism fails by its own lights. Marx states this argumentative goal explicitly, claiming that Stirner 'continues to strive for the famous Hegelian "premiseless thinking", i.e., thinking without dogmatic premises,' and that 'Stirner believed he could achieve this . . . and even surpass it by going in pursuit of the premiseless ego,' but 'both one and the other eluded his grasp' (434). Proving this, however, requires showing that Stirner's method is in fact guilty of dogmatism.

As we have seen, Stirner has a response prepared. In "Stirner's Critics," he puts the point clearly: the unique has no 'thought content' or 'sentence content' at all (Stirner 2012: 59). The phrase 'human being' has a 'conceptual content of its own' and 'is capable of being defined' (55), such that, when I recognize you as a human being, I know just what it is that you therefore are. By contrast, '[w]hat you are cannot be said through the word unique, just as by christening you with the name Ludwig, one doesn't intend to say what you are' (56). The phrase 'unique,' then, is just the name of a non-conceptual indicandum—a singular this. Stirner concludes that '[o]nly when *nothing* is said about you and you are merely *named,* are you recognized as you,' for 'as soon as *something* is said about you, you are only recognized as that thing' (58). Thus, the unique is specially qualified to pick out the singular individual without any conceptual baggage.

In its outlines, this is the same account we find in *The Ego and Its Own*. Marx, however, notes an interesting development: where previously the unique was not a concept because it was itself something non-conceptual, here the unique is not a concept because it is the name of something non-conceptual. Marx jests that, 'not satisfied with ordinary names,' Stirner now seeks 'the philosophical, abstract name, the "name" that is above all names, the name of names' (Marx and Engels 1975c: 447). We might take this to mark a slide: Stirner, under pres-

sure from his critics, covertly abandons his position and takes up a new one. Marx, however, thinks there is something more interesting going on. He claims that, in taking the unique to constitute 'the transition from the expressible to the inexpressible,' Stirner thinks he has discovered a 'word which is simultaneously more and less than a word' (449). The unique, then, is both name and named.

3.1. The Redeeming God-Man

Marx's argument against Stirner's notion of unique as word and not-word is somewhat obscure in its structure. The argument is diagnostic in character. Marx classifies Stirner's claim—that the unique is not a concept and is therefore unproblematically immune to criticism—as a particular sort of discursive move. In doing so, he takes himself to have made the absurdity of the argument self-evident, and thus to have neutralized its blocking implication for his own, broader critique of Stirner on grounds that the latter falls prey to fixed ideas. This diagnosis comes out in two key metaphors: in order of their appearance in *The German Ideology*, the 'philosopher's stone' and the 'Redeeming God-Man.' I begin here with the second metaphor, as it is both the more suggestive and the more puzzling of the two, and it can be clarified in turn by the first.

Marx introduces the image of the 'God-Man' in the course of a long, mocking reconstruction of Stirner's argument. In the most important passage, he writes the following:

> . . . the whole problem of the transition from thought to reality, hence from language to life, . . . insofar as it at all entered the minds of our ideologists, was bound, of course, to result finally in one of these knights-errant setting out in search of a word which, as a *word*, formed the transition in question, which, as a word, ceases to be simply a word, and which, as a word, in a mysterious superlinguistic manner, points from within language to the actual object it denotes; which, in short, plays among words the same role as the Redeeming God-Man plays among people in Christian fantasy. (Marx and Engels 1975c: 449)

Here, then, Marx expands upon his characterization of Stirner's unique in three ways. First, he makes clear that he understands the unique as a candidate solution to the 'problem of the transition from thought to reality.' Second, he characterizes Stirner as supposing that the unique solves this problem by 'pointing from within language to the actual object it denotes.' And third, he likens the unique to Christ, to the 'God-Man': a man who, as a man, forms the transition between the mundane and the sacred, and who, as a man, in a mysterious super-

human manner, points from within the realm of men to the sacred and divine. The intended structural analogy, at least, is clear.

Talk of the 'God-Man' has a long history in the critical tradition, tracing back in particular to David Friedrich Strauss's *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. Marx evidently means to invoke something like Strauss's idea that '[i]n an individual, a God-man, the properties and functions which the church ascribes to Christ contradict themselves' (Strauss 1902: 780). Similar treatments of God and God-Man as contradictory entities are rife in critical treatments of religion after Hegel. Bauer, for instance, complains of 'the violence of a religious consciousness in which two qualities puffed-up into a bizarre infinity are held tightly together in the idea of God' (Bauer 2002: 23). Stirner himself uses the phrase 'God-Man,' and seems to have something like this in mind. As Lawrence Stepelevich argues, Stirner thinks 'both Feuerbach and Bauer . . . simply replaced the Christian "God-Man," the individual Christ, with the universal "Man-God" of radical humanism' (Stepelevich 2014: 56). Thus, Stirner holds that there still remains, in the concept 'man' championed by Bauer and Feuerbach, something of the contradiction we find in 'God-Man.' It describes what we are but also what we are not, or not yet, functioning as a norm or ideal.

We might then conclude that Marx's worry here amounts just to the idea that Stirner's unique contains a contradiction; and we might then recognize in Marx's critique of Stirner the same preoccupation with the identification and overcoming of contradictions that we find in Hegel and Bauer. Marx does display this preoccupation in some of his earlier writings. In "On the Jewish Question," for instance, he criticizes Bauer for 'becom[ing] entangled in contradictions' (Marx and Engels 1975a: 138) and presents his own view as a disentangling of those contradictions. As I have argued elsewhere, however, by the time of *The German Ideology*, Marx rejects this method of criticism as insufficiently fallibilistic (see Dallman 2021: chap. 5). He complains that methods of this sort simply assume that criticism is 'a matter of resolving the ready-made nonsense they find into some other freak, i.e., of presupposing that all this nonsense has a special *sense* which can be discovered' (Marx and Engels 1975c: 56). He ultimately dismisses the method of overcoming or sublating contradictions as a defective bit of 'theoretical equipment inherited from Hegel' (183).

I suspect, in any case, that Marx means to achieve more by his diagnosis of the unique as God-Man than to reiterate his earlier identification of its contradictory nature. It is essential that he introduces the analogy to the God-Man only after clarifying the unique's role as a candidate solution to the 'problem of the transition from thought to reality.' This is the problem, identified by Schelling in the *Berlin Lectures*, of how the critic can leave off talking only about concepts and focus instead on how the world actually is (see Schelling 2007: 131). Thus, it is an epistemological or methodological problem. By introducing his analogy, Marx

apparently means to suggest both that Stirner attempts to solve this problem in a way analogous to how the Christian attempts to solve the problem of cleavage between human and divine, and that Stirner's attempted solution fails in a way analogous to how the Christian's attempted solution fails. The analogy is double.

The historical key to Marx's meaning, I think, is to be found in Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*—a book well known to both Marx and Stirner. In an appendix entitled "Contradiction of the God-Man," Feuerbach agrees with Strauss that, in the God-Man, by first appearances, two natures 'are united in one personality, in an incomprehensible, miraculous, i.e., untrue manner, in contradiction with the relation in which, according to their definition, they stand to each other' (Feuerbach 1989: 334). He concludes that this has terrible significance for Christianity not because it is impossible to believe a contradiction—the believer has recourse to images when ideas contradict—but because Christian faith is grounded, at bottom, in the redemptive suffering of Christ on the cross, and 'if Christ was God, if he was at once man and another being conceived as incapable of suffering, his suffering was an illusion,' for 'his suffering as man was no suffering to him as God' (332).[16] His claim is not just that the concept 'God-Man' contains a contradiction, but that the tacit judgment contained in the concept—that Christ was in fact both man and God—is false. He claims that 'the union of the divine and human natures in the incarnation is only a deception, an illusion' (334), for Christ was never God; he was only a man.

Feuerbach's treatment of Christianity here is likely to strike modern readers as reductive and uncharitable. What is important for our purposes, however, is the structure of the argument. Christians believe many other things in addition to the idea that the God-Man died for our sins. To be Christian is (at least) to accept some framework of inferentially related doctrines, all of which connect back somehow to the God-Man's suffering. The Christian does not take these beliefs to stand on the same ground (say) as their belief that the weather will clear up before month end. They take the doctrines to be privileged, as it were, by their connection to Christ's suffering; and Christ's suffering can play this vouchsafing role because Christ is both man and God: he belongs to the secular world of inductive uncertainty and doubt, but also to the sacred world of eternal deductive truths. If Christ does not in fact enjoy this hybrid metaphysical and epistemological position, then the justificatory standing of all Christian theology is very much in question.

Christian believers carry on believing, however, and they do so in good epistemic faith, because their critical instincts are neutralized by the confused idea of a foundation for belief that is both sacred and mundane. Though the concept 'God-Man' contains a plain contradiction, the believer is permitted to ignore this

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16. Strauss discusses this issue as well. See Strauss (1902: 687–88).

fact by substituting images for concepts. As Feuerbach writes elsewhere in *The Essence of Christianity*, 'man cheats his reason by material images which screen the contradiction' (131). Thus, Christian believers in fact revere a mundane 'human individual as a supreme being, as God,' but they do not do this 'consciously, for it is the unconsciousness of this fact that constitutes the illusion of the religious principle' (336). The contradictory concept 'God-Man' short-circuits the believers' capacity for rational scrutiny, securing certain dogmas or fixed ideas against any possible rational criticism on the false premise that they stand in a special certifying relation to a domain of sacred truths beyond the reach of ordinary fallibilistic doubt.

Marx employs the 'God-Man' metaphor elsewhere in his writings, in ways that suggest clear influence by Feuerbach. In the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, for instance, he claims that 'Hegel is concerned to present the monarch as the true "God-man", as the *actual incarnation* of the Idea' (Marx and Engels 1975a: 24). He goes on to dismiss the authority of the monarch as justifiable only by recourse to this confused definition, classifying it as 'illusion' (28). He even claims that believers, like Hegel, make the contradictory idea plausible to themselves only by retreating to images—such that the sovereign's authority is 'something not derivable from the understanding but only from the imagination' (27). Much later, in the *Grundrisse,* Marx likens the concept of 'wealth,' as it appears in classical economics, to 'Christ the mediator between God and man—mere instrument of circulation between them—[who] becomes their unity, God-man' (Marx 1986: 257). In this case, Marx's concern with the mediating role of capital echoes Feuerbach's central conviction that '[t]he real God of any religion is the so-called Mediator' (Feuerbach 1989: 74).

On the plausible idea that Marx's reference to the 'God-Man' contains an allusion to Feuerbach's discussion in the "Contradiction of the God-Man" appendix, we might then reconstruct his diagnostic argument against Stirner as follows. Stirner's claim that his method of criticism proceeds 'without *any warrant*' (Stirner 1995: 273) really amounts to the claim that the results of this method—the beliefs and principles it selects for—are warranted just by their being grounded in the unique. This claim, in turn, depends on the idea that the unique, as both a word and not a word, stands in a 'mysterious superlinguistic' relation to non-conceptual reality. As a matter of fact, this is false; the unique is just a word. The concept 'unique' is plainly contradictory, for nothing can be both a word and not a word. Stirner has recourse to images, however, likening the unique to the human individual—something with which we are all familiar—to subdue our critical instincts (and his own). This leads Stirner to treat fixed ideas like 'property' as immune to criticism on grounds that they enjoy a privileged justificatory status. Marx rightly diagnoses this discursive move as absurd and concludes on that basis that Stirner is in fact guilty of dogmatism.

3.2. *The Philosopher's Stone*

My interpretation of Marx's argument against Stirner is supported by the other metaphor he employs: 'the philosopher's stone.' By both this and the 'God-Man,' I will argue, Marx targets the same conceptual error, though with different emphases. Here, Marx writes that Stirner, 'who follows the philosophers through thick and thin, must inevitably seek the *philosopher's stone*, the squaring of the circle and the elixir of life, or a "*word*" which as such would possess the miraculous power of leading from the realm of language and thought to actual life' (447). As in the case of the 'God-Man,' Marx's meaning is not obvious. It should be noted that he introduces two additional metaphors in the same breath: 'the squaring of the circle' and 'the elixir of life.' I take these to be less interesting: the first would seem just to refer to the contradictory character of the unique; and the second would seem just to be another gloss on the 'philosopher's stone' image.

The philosopher's stone itself has a long history as a philosophical metaphor. It appears in Kant (1997: 27:1428) as well as in Hegel (1991a: 12). In both cases, the image of the philosopher's stone is used to characterize a particular philosophical move as absolutely decisive, such that, were one to pull the move off, all discussion would be settled. Perhaps the most instructive precedent to Marx's pejorative usage, however, is in J. G. Hamann's "Metakritik." Hamann criticizes Kant for chasing after the sort of deductive metaphysical certainty that would render everyday inductive reasoning superfluous—for seeking after 'that universal and infallible Philosopher's Stone, so indispensable for Catholicism and despotism' (Hamann 1951: 284; translated in Dahlstrom 2000: 80).[17] To seek after the philosopher's stone, therefore, is to search for some single element that can function as a guarantor for all knowledge, securing it incorrigibly against rational scrutiny.

Knowledge afforded by the philosopher's stone would be *given* knowledge: knowledge arrived at not through criticism or discursive activity, but simply received, as it were, from without, thus immune to such scrutiny as applies to ordinary discursive knowing. We can understand 'philosopher's stone,' therefore, as an early name for the misleading model of human cognition that Wilfrid Sellars later refers to as 'the myth of the given.' In "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," Sellars characterizes the myth of the given as the image of discur-

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17. As far as I know, the only Hamann whose name appears in the *Marx-Engels Collected Works* is one J. H. W. Hamann, a 'cashier of the metalworkers' union' (Marx and Engels 1988: 629–30 n. 439), and even he appears only in the editors' notes. I do not claim, therefore, that Marx takes his use of 'philosopher's stone' from Hamann, nor even that Hamann is responsible, however distantly, for transmitting the pattern to Marx—though perhaps he is. I claim only that the two uses rhyme, and that there is precedent, in the German philosophical literature of Marx's time, in the critical and language-critical traditions, for the pejorative epistemological use Marx makes of the phrase.

sive knowledge as finding justificatory bedrock in something non-conceptual (see Sellars 1991). The sense in which the given is *given* is that it comes to thought from elsewhere. We arrive at a given not by exercising our conceptual capacities, but by some other means, perhaps by exercising non-conceptual capacities—capacities of the sort Kant refers to as faculties of 'intuition' (Kant 1998: B72).

Curiously, Stirner himself recognizes the dangers involved in taking certain among our ideas as given. In *The Ego and Its Own,* he ridicules the notion that 'thought is *given* to me,' such that 'the *truth* is already found and extant, only I must—receive it from its giver by grace' (Stirner 1995: 303). His critique of truth as a principle for criticism rests in part on an argument that all seeking after truth shares in common with the idea of the given the corollary idea that 'the truth (the true thought) lies outside me, and I aspire to *get* it, be it by presentation (grace), be it by earning (merit of my own)' (303). Stirner also holds, however, that 'language brings up against us a whole army of *fixed ideas*' (305). Suspecting that all reliance on language leads to dogmatism, he seeks a special non-linguistic inroad to reality in form of the unique, and thus—if Marx is correct—falls prey, without recognizing that he has, to the illusion of givenness in knowledge.

Marx rejects the idea that there is any element in human knowing that is non-conceptual or non-linguistic. He makes this point most explicit later on, in the methodological introduction to the *Grundrisse,* where he claims that 'the assimilation and transformation of perceptions and images into concepts,' which generates a 'conceptual totality [i.e., a framework or theory],' is entirely 'a product of the thinking mind' (Marx 1986: 216).[18] This conviction is present already, however, in Marx's claims in *The German Ideology* that '[l]anguage is as old as consciousness,' that 'language *is* practical, real consciousness' (Marx and Engels 1975c: 44) and that '[l]anguage is the immediate actuality of thought' (446). I take these abbreviated claims to suggest that wherever there is consciousness or awareness there is language, and—because language and thought are one on this account—wherever there is awareness, so too there is conceptualization.[19]

We might compare Marx's stance, here, to the view Sellars calls 'psychological nominalism,' on which '*all* awareness of *sorts*, *resemblances*, *facts*, etc., in short all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is

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18. There is a discussion of empiricism in *The Holy Family*, in which Marx attributes to Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac the 'fundamental principle' of 'the origin of all human knowledge and ideas from the world of sensation' (Marx and Engels 1975b: 216). However, that discussion is strictly historical. Farr (1983) has argued that the *1844 Manuscripts* contain an argument against empiricism. Though Marx makes clear, there as elsewhere, that he takes all empirical knowledge to be mediated by concepts, it is not clear to me that this amounts to an argument.

19. These commitments do not entail that non-conceptual factors like sensation play no role in the formation of knowledge. They suggest only that such factors are never present *in* knowledge (i.e., when analyzing our knowledge, we never arrive at any element that is not itself a concept or a combination of concepts). Likewise, no non-concept plays any justificatory role.

a linguistic affair' (Sellars 1991: 160). The idea that awareness even of particulars involves language turns on the deeper idea that awareness of particulars involves recourse to genera. This commitment, defended by Sellars, is present also in Marx's claim, derived from Feuerbach, that in consciousness the human inquirer always 'adopts the species (his own as well as those of other things) as his object' (Marx and Engels 1975a: 275; cf. Feuerbach 1989: 1–2). On this view, to become aware of the black ottoman in front of me is to recognize some x as both an ottoman and as black—thus, to recognize *this* black ottoman in particular as an instance or realization of two kinds or species (i.e., genera).

Hegel, too, makes this point. In the opening section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, on 'Sense-certainty,' Hegel presents an argument against any theory of knowledge that would treat knowing as an '*immediate* or *receptive*' relation to a particular or even singular 'object as it presents itself' (Hegel 1977: 58)—that is, as it is given to us. He holds that no such given knowledge is possible, for in apprehending what is given, we necessarily draw upon conceptual capacities that subordinate the singular thing presented to universals, even if only the barest and most abstract of universals, such as 'external object' or 'actual thing' (cf. 66). Likewise, in the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel dismisses the sort of 'scientific empiricism' that attempts to found our knowledge of nature directly on what is given to us, because it always tacitly 'uses the metaphysical categories of matter, force, as well as those of one, many, universality, and the infinite, etc.,' and does so 'in a totally uncritical and unconscious manner' (Hegel 1991b: 78).[20]

On this approach, Stirner's appeal to the unique as a non-conceptual foundation for criticism involves two distinct but closely related mistakes. He makes his first mistake by postulating an entity that is at once general and non-conceptual. Stirner himself denies that awareness of the unique involves any awareness of genera. He claims that 'since the unique is a completely empty term or category,

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20. Stirner sometimes invokes the language of Hegel's warnings against appeals to givenness directly in his characterizations of the unique, suggesting that, in developing his account of the non-conceptual unique as foundation for knowledge, he is not ignorant of or indifferent to Hegel's proscriptions, but rebelling against them. Recall that Stirner describes the unique specifically as 'unutterable' (Stirner 1995: 275, 314). It is telling, in this connection, that Hegel rejects as illicit any appeal to non-conceptual items that are 'absolutely *singular, wholly personal, individual things,* each of them absolutely unlike anything else' on grounds that these '*cannot be reached* by language, which belongs to consciousness,' concluding that 'what is called the unutterable is nothing else than the untrue' (Hegel 1977: 66). Likewise, recall Stirner's claim that all thoughts 'are my property, which I annihilate as I wish' (Stirner 1995: 302). In his critique of Friedrich Schlegel in the *Lectures on Aesthetics,* Hegel rejects as vacuous the idea that '[w]hatever is, is only by the instrumentality of the *ego*, and what exists by my instrumentality I can equally well annihilate again' (Hegel 1975: 64). In the unique, Stirner takes himself to have discovered an exception to Hegel's rule—a discovery that *makes licit* ideas previously thought to be illicit. Thanks to an anonymous referee for directing my attention to Hegel's critique of the romantics, which produced this second example of allusion to Hegel's critique.

it is therefore no longer a category' (Stirner 2012: 85). Marx avers, however, on grounds that all awareness is awareness of generalities, and insists that Stirner's 'unique' is just 'name as a category' (Marx and Engels 1975a: 447). Moreover, Stirner uses 'unique' in ways that support Marx's charge: he clearly supposes that 'unique' applies not only to himself but also to everyone else *qua* self-identical singular (see Stirner 1995: 38, 42, 114, 120). Thus, the unique is something general, something repeatable, even if it is not a concept.

To suppose that knowledge of genera can be arrived at without the help of concepts requires positing the existence of some class of general but non-conceptual entities apprehensible through some organ of non-discursive intuition, be it sensory or intellectual. Entities of this sort make frequent appearance in the writings of early 20th-century empiricists, as in H. H. Price's 'sense-data' (Price 1932: 3) or C. I. Lewis's 'given data' (Lewis 1929: 42). Sellars rejects such notions as contradictory on grounds that nothing can be both general and non-conceptual; everything that is general is also conceptual.[21] Thus, he diagnoses the 'classical concept of a sense datum' as 'a mongrel resulting from a crossbreeding of two ideas' (Sellars 1991: 132), much as Marx diagnoses the unique as a mongrel, as something that is both a word and not a word.

The second mistake Stirner makes is his apparent reliance on some mode of non-discursive intuition, specifically intellectual intuition. He seems to follow Fichte and Schelling in supposing that the unique is known to the human beings who realize it through something like 'intellectual intuition of their own selves' (Schelling 1980a: 86). We see this in Stirner's claim that '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' (Stirner 1995: 135). This account matches Kant's understanding of intellectual intuition as 'mere self-activity' (Kant 1998: B68)—the sort of intuition enjoyed by God, for whom intuiting a thing and bringing it into being are indissociable acts. More to the point, Stirner here invokes Fichte's idea that 'the self *originally* comes to exist for itself' through an 'act' of 'mere intuition,' such that '[f]reely, and by his own choice, [the self] brings [the self] about in himself' (Fichte 1970: 34–35). For Stirner, the unique brings the unique about in itself through intellectual intuition.[22]

If Stirner in fact arrived at the notion 'unique' through intellectual intuition, perhaps he would be innocent of dogmatism. He would not be taking 'unique'

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21. This is a simplification. Sellars's argument in fact turns on the claim that the sense-datum theorist commits himself to an 'inconsistent triad' (Sellars 1991: 132) of propositions. In his own approach to perceptual knowledge, however, Sellars is guided by the idea that only what is conceptual can be general, and this commitment shapes his treatment of the inconsistent triad.

22. Stirner himself recognizes the link between his program of criticism and Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. See Stirner (1995: 163).

for granted, because he would be creating it anew each instant through the act of intuiting it.[23] Given his psychological nominalism, however, Marx must deny that any such non-discursive capacity exists or could exist. He will insist, rather, that Stirner comes to know himself through ordinary discursive means—by describing himself in a language 'that exists for other men as well' and is thus 'from the very beginning a social product' (Marx and Engels 1975c: 44). By imagining that self-consciousness involves the apprehension of a non-conceptual genus through intellectual intuition, however, Stirner ends up treating the concept 'unique' as *de facto* immune to criticism: whatever is arrived at through intellectual intuition is incorrigible; we cannot be wrong about it. Thus, whether it is meant to or not, Stirner's appeal to intellectual intuition functions as an appeal to givenness and his unique functions as a given element in knowledge.

In his critique of the myth of the given, Sellars makes clear that the effort to ground knowledge in non-conceptual genera is just one 'form of the myth' (140) and that the critique of this form in particular is only 'a first step in a general critique of the entire framework of givenness' (128). Elsewhere, in "Scientific Realism or Irenic Instrumentalism," Sellars writes that 'to reject the myth of the given is not to commit oneself to the idea that empirical knowledge as it is now constituted has no rock bottom level of observation predicates proper,' rather only to claim that 'even if it does have a rock bottom level, it is *still* in principle replaceable by another conceptual framework in which these predicates do not, *strictly speaking,* occur' (Sellars 1967: 353). As recent readers of Sellars have stressed (see Macbeth 2002; Kremer 2019; O'Shea 2021), to reject the myth is to reject the idea that there are certain concepts inquirers cannot but deploy in their descriptions of the world—concepts immune to revision or abandonment after rational scrutiny. Thus, rejection of the myth is of a piece with what Michael Williams calls Sellars's 'radical fallibilism' (Williams 2009: 148). The fallibilist cannot countenance given knowledge.

By comparing Stirner's unique to the God-Man, Marx suggests not only that the unique is a concept, and an internally contradictory concept at that, but also that Stirner's use for this concept turns on a false supposition: that the unique, being both a word and not a word, stands in a privileged relationship to extra-conceptual reality, such that it can function as a justificatory guarantor immune to criticism. By comparing the unique to the philosopher's stone, Marx gives us

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23. Stirner seems to hold, therefore, that the problem with appeals to givenness is only that they involve deference to some criterion for the adequacy of judgment that is external to the self. This explains why he takes knowledge that is 'earn[ed]' (Stirner 1995: 303)—arrived at by truth-seeking rational criticism—to be similarly flawed. In both cases, he thinks, the inquirer defers to an external standard, thus relies on something 'given.' Different interpretations of the error involved in the myth of the given produce different candidate solutions. The question which of these solutions in fact dissolves the myth of the given is a variation on the question which method successfully realizes the program of anti-dogmatic criticism.

a clearer sense of the unhappy philosophical outcome this confusion leads to. By relying on the unique as his principle for criticism, Stirner unwittingly hangs the success of his method on an appeal to the epistemic given. Because there is no given element in knowledge, this effort fails. Rather than institute a more radical form of critique, Stirner unwittingly falls prey to dogmatism: he treats certain among his ideas as intrinsically justified, thus exempt from criticism.

4. Concluding Remarks

Allow me to review. Both Marx and Stirner are contributors to the critical tradition, as evidenced by their shared commitment to fallibilism. Just as Stirner criticizes Bauer and other earlier contributors to the critical tradition on grounds that their methods take for granted certain fixed ideas, thus demonstrating too little commitment to fallibilism, Marx in turn criticizes Stirner on grounds that his 'own criticism' involves dogmatic suppositions of its own. In particular, Marx diagnoses Stirner's appeal to the unique as a principle or norm for criticism as a covert form of appeal to the epistemic given. As a matter of fact, Marx thinks, there is no given element in knowledge. Confused appeals to the given like Stirner's function to cover over our assumptions and insulate our commitments from scrutiny, and thereby fall afoul of thoroughgoing fallibilism.

The fallibilism Marx defends is more radical than the fallibilism taken for granted by many contemporary philosophers. It comes with no auxiliary 'maxim of minimal mutilation' (Quine 1986: 7, 85) or 'principle of epistemic conservatism' (Harman 1980: 169). Marx's debates about criticism and dogmatism—and those of the many other contributors to the critical tradition—can be understood as inquiries into the tenability of unchecked fallibilism. Moreover, Marx applies his fallibilistic method to a much broader range of subject domains than do most contemporary philosophers: his investigations touch upon (at least) metaphysics, natural science, historiography, anthropology, politics, economics, jurisprudence, and ethics. The breadth of Marx's investigation provides us with an enormous pool of test cases for the fallibilistic method of criticism he defends.

Since there are few modern defenders of Stirner, the argument I have examined might be supposed to have a very limited historical significance. I have examined it with the aim of drawing attention to a neglected side of Marx: his sophisticated concern with methodological and epistemological questions. In his critique of Stirner, Marx displays a more sophisticated grasp of issues relating to knowledge and method than is often attributed to him. This is partially obscured by his reliance on metaphors at key points in the argument and by his broader tendency to resort to mocking, elliptical language when expressing his

more technical objections to rival thinkers. Marx's early interest in questions of method has been, for many years at least, overlooked. For this reason, his over-arching investment in defending a fallibilistic method has also been missed.

In the critique of Stirner, Marx's concern with fallibilism takes shape in a critique of epistemic givenness. Elsewhere, it takes very different forms: the critique of idealism, the critique of methodological apriorism, the critique of empiricism in science, and the critique of ideology. Understanding the role that Marx's commitment to fallibilistic criticism plays in shaping his philosophical outlook can also put us in better position to understand his views on these more familiar topics, which have, I think, been imperfectly understood. The criticism of Stirner in *The German Ideology* is only one possible inroad to these issues. It is an advantageous starting position, however, because it forces us to move over largely uncharted terrain, and thus allows us to go on relatively unencumbered by received ideas about what Marx does and does not care about.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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