

# **First Declaration of Georges Étievant**

Georges Étievant

1898

# Contents

I . . . . .	3
II . . . . .	5

Following the theft of dynamite at Soisy-sous-Etiolles comrades Faugoux, Chalbret, Drouhet, and Étievant were tried before the assize court of Versailles.

Comrade Étievant was to read in public the following declarations, but the tribunal quickly deprived him of the right to speak.

The bourgeois newspapers gave an incomplete version of a portion of it, which was reproduced in *Révolte*, and which resulted in the following letter from our comrade's father:

*Clichy, October 22, 1892*

*Comrade:*

As I promised, I am sending you the first part of the "Declarations" of my son Georges, all the more necessary because it elucidates the second one which, despite the blunders and irregularities pointed out, still has its own cachet and value. Your readers, generally enlightened, will doubtless understand with little trouble the ideas, sometimes poorly rendered by the *Cocarde*.

This first part is certified to be in conformity with the original *ne varietur*. I would only remind you that it must be reviewed by Georges who told me that he so to speak only gave a broad canvas, a summary of what he had in mind.

Yours truly,

Étievant père

Here then is the complete text of our companion's work.

## I

No idea is innate to us; they all come to us with the assistance of our senses, the environment in which we live. This is so true that if we lack a sense we can arrive at no idea of the facts corresponding to this sense. For example, no person born blind could have an idea of the variety of colors, because he lacks the faculty needed to perceive the radiance of objects. What is more, in accordance with the aptitudes that we have since birth we possess, either in the order of ideas or in some other, a greater or lesser faculty for assimilation, growing from the greater or lesser receptive faculty that we have for this subject. It is thus, for example, that some easily learn mathematics and that others have a greater aptitude for linguistics. This faculty for assimilation that we have within us develops in an infinitely varying proportion among people as a result of the multiplicity of analogous sensations perceived.

But just as if we were to exclusively use our arms the latter would obtain greater strength at the expense of other members or parts of our bodies, in exactly the same way the more our faculty for assimilation is exercised because of the multiplicity of analogous sensations developed in the order of ideas, the more, relative to all of our faculties, we would present a force of resistance to the assimilation of ideas coming from an adverse order. It is thus that if we have arrived at believing good such and such a thing or idea any contrary idea would shock us, and we would then put forth a powerful resistance against its assimilation, the same idea would seem to someone else so natural and just that he couldn't imagine that one would could in good faith think differently. We have examples of these facts every day, and I don't think that their authenticity is seriously contested. This posed and admitted, and since every act is the result of one or several ideas, it becomes obvious that in order to judge a man, to arrive at knowing an individual's responsibility in the accomplishing of an act, one must be able to know each of the sensations that determined the accomplishing of the act, appreciate their intensity, know which faculty of

receptivity or which force of resistance each encountered in himself, as well as the lapse of time during which he would in the beginning have been subject to the influence of each of them, then of several, and finally of all of them afterwards.

But who will give you the faculty to perceive and feel what others perceive and feel, or perceived and felt? How can you judge an individual if you can't precisely know the determining causes of his acts? And how can you know all these causes as well as their relationship, if you are unable to penetrate the arcana of his mentality and identify yourself with him in such a way as to perfectly know his self? But for this one must know his temperament better than you often know your own. Even more, you must have a similar temperament, be subject to the same influences, live in the same environment during the same period, which is the only way of realizing the number and the strength of the influences of this environment in relation to the faculty for assimilation that these influences met in this individual.

It is thus impossible to judge our like, the result of the impossibility of precisely knowing the influences they obey and the strength of the sensations that determine their acts in relation to their faculties of assimilation or their force of resistance. But if this impossibility didn't exist we would only arrive at realizing the play of influences which they would have obeyed, of their relationships, of the greater or lesser strength of resistance they would have to oppose to them, of their greater or lesser power of receptivity to submit to these influences. But for all that we couldn't know their responsibility in the accomplishing of an act, for the good and magnificent reason that this responsibility doesn't exist.

In order to fully realize the non-existence of responsibility it suffices to consider the play of intellectual faculties in man. In order for responsibility to exist it would be necessary for the will to determine sensations, just as these determine thought, and these the act. But on the contrary it is sensations that determine the will, which gives birth to them in us and guides them. For the will is nothing but the desire we have for the accomplishing of a thing which will satisfy one of our needs, that is, to procure for us a feeling of pleasure, to put at a distance a feeling of pain. Consequently, it is unnecessary that these sensations were or are perceived in order for a will be born in us. And the will, created by sensations, can only be changed by new sensations, i.e., it can only take another direction, pursue another goal if new sensations give birth in us to a new order of ideas or modify in us the order of pre-existing ideas. This has always been recognized, and you yourselves tacitly recognize it, for does not pleading of the for and against prove that new sensations, reaching you through the organ of hearing, can give birth in you to the will to act in one way or another, or to modify your pre-existing will? But as I said in the beginning, if as a result of a long succession of analogous sensations we have become used to considering such and such an idea or thought as good and correct, any contrary idea will shock us, and we will put forth a great force of resistance to its assimilation.

It is for this reason that the elderly less easily adopt new ideas, given that in the course of their existence they have perceived a multiplicity of sensations emanating from the environment in which they lived, and which led them to consider as good the ideas in conformity with the sentiments on the just and the unjust within this environment. It is also for this reason that the notion of the just and unjust has ceaselessly varied over the course of the centuries, and that in our own time it strangely differs from climate to climate, from people to people, and even from man to man. And since these various concepts can only be relatively just and good, we must conclude from this that a great part, if not all of humanity is in error on this subject. This is also

what explains why such and such an argument that would convince one person leaves another indifferent.

But in one way or another, someone who has been struck by an argument could not arrange it that his will would not be determined in a given direction; and someone who would have been left indifferent by the argument could not arrange it so that his will not remain the same. Consequently, the one could not prevent himself from acting in one way and the other in a contrary way, unless new sensations were to modify their wills.

Even though this seems like a paradox, we do nothing good or bad, however small it might be, that we are not forced to do, given that every act is the result of the relationship between one or several sensations that come to us from the environment in which we live, and the greater or lesser faculty for assimilation that it might encounter in us. And since we cannot be responsible for the greater or lesser faculty for assimilation that is in us in relation to one order of sensations or another, or for the existence or non-existence of influences issued from the environment in which we live and the sensations that come to us from it any more than we are for their relationship and their greater or lesser receptive or resistance faculty, we also cannot be responsible for the results of that receptivity, since it is not only independent of our will, but also because it is determinant. Thus any judgment is impossible and any reward – like any punishment – is unjust, however slight it may be, and however great the benefits or harm.

We can thus not judge men or acts unless we have sufficient criteria. But these criteria do not exist. In any case, we won't find them in laws, for true justice is immutable and laws are changeable. It is the case with laws as with all the rest, for if the laws are good what use are deputies and senators to change them? And if they are bad, what good are magistrates in applying them?

## II

By the very fact of his birth every being has the right to live and be happy. This right to come and go freely in space, to the ground beneath your feet, the heavens over your head, the sun in your eyes, the air in your chest, this primordial right, anterior to all other rights, inalienable and natural, is denied to millions of human beings.

These millions of disinherited, from whom the rich have taken their land – the nourishing mother of all – can only take a step to right or left, eat or sleep, in a word take joy in any of their organs, satisfy their needs and live, with the permission of other men. Their lives are forever precarious, at the mercy of the whims of those who have become their masters. They can't come and go in the great human domain without encountering a barrier at every step, without being stopped by these words: don't go into this field, it belongs to so and so; don't go into these woods, they belongs to that other one; don't pluck these fruits, don't go fishing here: they are the property of yet another one.

And if they ask: Then what do we have? They hear in reply: Nothing. You have nothing, and already made small by means of laws and religion, their brains will be molded so that they accept this blatant injustice without a peep.

The roots of plants assimilate the sap of the earth, but their product isn't for you, they are told. The rain wets you like the others, but it isn't for you that it makes the harvest grow, and the sun only shines to gild the wheat and ripen the fruits you won't taste.

The earth revolves around the sun and alternately presents each of its sides to the vivifying influence of that star, but this great movement doesn't happen to the profit of all creatures, for the earth belongs to some and not to others: men purchased it with their gold and silver. But by what subterfuges, since gold and silver are contained in the earth?

How is it that part of the whole can be worth as much as the whole?

How is it that if they bought the earth with their gold that they still have all the gold? What a mystery.

And those immense forests buried for millions of centuries by geological revolutions, they can't have bought them or inherited them from their fathers, because at that time there was not yet anyone on earth. But it is theirs all the same for from the bowels of the earth and the bottom of the ocean to the high summits of the great mountains, everything belongs to them; it's so that this one can give his daughter a dowry that these forest grew in the past; it's so that this one can give a mansion to his mistress that geological revolutions took place. And it's so that they can drink champagne that these forests have been slowly converted into mines.

But the disinherited ask: How will we live if we have the right to nothing? Don't worry, they are answered. The haves are good people, and as long as you are calm, as long as you obey all their wishes, they will allow you to live, in exchange for which you must work their fields, build their houses, shear their sheep, chop down their trees, and produce machines and books: in a word, procure for them all the physical and intellectual pleasures to which they alone have a right. If the rich are good enough to allow you to eat their bread and drink their water, you should thank them infinitely, for your life, along with the rest, belongs to them along.

You only have the right to live at their pleasure and on condition that you work for them. They will direct you, they will watch you work, they will enjoy the fruits of your labor, for they have the right to. Everything you put to work when you produce also belongs to them. While they, born at the same time as you, will command all their lives, all of your life you will obey. While they can rest in the shade of trees, poeticize to the murmuring of a spring, revivify their muscles in the waves of the sea, find health in mineral baths, enjoy the vast horizon on the summits of mountains, enter into the possession of humanity's intellectual domain and converse with the sowers of ideas, the indefatigable seekers of the beyond, you, barely out of your infancy must, slaves from birth, begin to drag your ball and chain of poverty, you must produce so that others consume, work so that others can live at leisure, die at work so that others might live in pleasure.

While they can wander in all directions on the great domain, enjoy all horizons, live in constant communion with nature and draw from the inexhaustible well of poetry the gentlest sensations that a being might feel, you will have as your sole horizon nothing but the four walls of your attics, your workshops, the penal colony or prison. You must – human machine whose life is reduced to an ever repeated act – begin anew each day the task of the day before, until a gear breaks in you or, worn out and grown old, they throw you in the river for not bringing in sufficient profit.

Woe is you if you are laid low by illness if, young or old, you are too weak to produce to meet the wishes of the haves. Woe is you if you can find no one to whom to prostitute your brain, your arms, your body: you will tumble from abyss to abyss. Your tatters will be made into a crime, the rumbling of your stomach will be an object of opprobrium, society as a whole will cast an anathema on you, and authority, intervening with law in hand, will shout out to you: Woe on those without a home, woe on those who have no roof to shelter their heads, woe on those who have no bed on which to rest their painful members. Woe on whoever allows himself to be hungry when others have eaten too much; woe on those who are cold when others are warm;

woe on vagabonds, woe on the defeated! And it will strike them for having allowed themselves to have nothing while the others have all. This is justice, says the law. This is a crime, we answer: this should not be. This must cease to be, for this is not just.

For too long men have taken and accepted the expressions of the strong and mighty as a moral rule. For too long the wickedness of some has found an accomplice in the ignorance and cowardice of others. For too long men have remained deaf to the voice of reason, of justice and of nature. For too long they have taken falsehood for truth. And here is the truth: what is life if not a perpetual movement of assimilation and dis-assimilation that incorporates molecules and matter of diverse forms into beings and then wrenches them from them in order to combine them again in a thousand different ways; a perpetual movement of action and reaction between the individual and the natural ambient environment which is composed of all that is not him. Such is life. By their continuous action, the mass of beings and things perpetually tend toward the absorption of the individual, to the disaggregation of his being, of his death.

Nature only makes the new only with the old; it always destroys in order to create. It only ever makes death come from life, and it must kill what is in order to give birth to what will be. Life is thus only possible for the individual through the perpetual reaction of himself on the mass of beings that surround him. He can only live on condition of fighting the dis-assimilation that makes him come under the influence all that exists through the assimilation of new molecules who he must borrow from all that exists.

And so beings, on whatever step of the ladder they are placed, from zoophytes to men, are graced with faculties that allow them to fight the dis-assimilation of their organism by incorporating into themselves new elements borrowed from the environment in which they live. All are graced with more or less perfect organs which warn them of the presence of causes that might bring about a sudden dis-assimilation of their being. All are graced with organs allowing them to fight the disorganizing influence of the elements.

Why would they have these organs if not to use them, if they didn't have the right to use them?

Why lungs if not to breathe? Why eyes if not to see? Why a brain if not to think? Why a stomach if not to digest food? All this is true: through our lungs we have the right to breathe; through our stomach we have the right to eat; through our brains we have the right to think; through our tongues we have the right to speak; through our ears we have the right to hear; through our eyes we have the right to see; through our legs we have the right to come and go.

And we have the right to all this because through our very being we have the right to live. No being ever has organs more powerful than he must have; a being never has too piercing a vision, too fine a hearing, too glib a speech, a mind too vast, too good a stomach, legs, paws, wings or fins too strong.

As well, through our legs we have the right to all the space we can traverse; through our lungs all the air we can breathe, through our stomach all the food we can digest; through our minds all we can think and assimilate of other people's thoughts; through our faculty for elocution all we can say; through our ears all we can hear. And we have the right to all this because we have the right to life, and all this is what constitutes life. These are the true rights of man! There is no need to decree them: they exist in the same way that the sun exists.

They are written in no constitution, in no law, but they are written in ineffaceable ink in the great book of nature, and are inalienable.

From the tic to the elephant, from the blade of grass to the oak tree, from the atom to the star, everything proclaims it: Listen to the great voice of nature; it will tell you that everything in it

is connected, that the eternal general movement, which is the condition of life in the universe, is composed of the general eternal movement of these atoms, which is the condition of life for all creatures.

The movements of the infinitely small like those of the infinitely large have an effect and react indefinitely on each other. And since everything reacts to us we have the right to react to all, for we have the right to live, and life is only possible on this condition.

From the fact of our birth we become co-owners of the whole universe and we have the right to everything that is, everything that was, and all that will be. By the fact of our birth each of us acquires the right to all, with no other limits than those nature itself imposes, i.e., the limits to our faculties of assimilation.

Yet you say: This field is mine, these woods are mine, this spring is mine, this harvest, this house. To those of you who say this I answer: When you will have arranged it that your property, a fraction of the great all which by its never ceasing action on my organism pushes me like you to the tomb ceases to push me, I will then recognize that you alone have the right to enjoy it

When you will have arranged things so that the disaggregating influences of nature only act on you, you alone will have the right to draw from nature what you need to replace what nature takes from you. But as long as moisture acts on me as well as on you, the spring and the creek will be as much mine as yours.

As long as you will not have prevented the sun's heat from making me perspire as you do, it will ripen fruits and harvests for us as well as for you.

Know that a man of twenty has not within him a single one of the molecules that constituted his being ten years previously. And so when you will have arranged things so that either by the rain, the wind, or any other means what was mine is not incorporated in your properties you will have the right to prevent me from in turn incorporating into myself what comes to me of your properties.

But as long as you will not have arranged things so that we, the have-nots, the pariahs live without constantly assimilating the elements we take from the great all, like you we will have the right to this great all and each of its parts, for we are born like you, we resemble you, we have organs and needs like you, and like you we have the right to life and happiness.

If we were of a species of animal inferior to you I would understand this exclusion; our organization and our way of life would be different. But since we are organized like you it means that we are your equals and we have the same rights as yours to the universality of goods.

And if you tell me that such and such a thing is yours you because you inherited it, I would answer you that those who left it to you didn't have the right to do so. They had the right to enjoy the universality of goods during their lives, as we do during our lives, but they didn't have that of disposing of it after their deaths. For in the same way that by birth we acquire the right to all, by death we lose all our rights, for we then have no need of anything.

By what right would those who lived want to prevent us from living?

By what right would an aggregate of molecules prevent its own molecules from re-aggregating in one way rather than another? By what right would what was want to prevent what will be? What? Because a man whose life is but a minute in the immensity of time inhabited a corner of the earth he could dispose of it for eternity? Is there anything more stupid than this pretention of an ephemeral being making perpetual donations to fleeting beings and institutions?

We have no need to respect the pretentions of people who want to live though they're dead, who want to have rights over all goods though they have no need of them, and who after their



deaths want to dispose of things which during their lives they only had the right to dispose of in accordance with their needs.

And if you tell me that they had the right to dispose of them since they were a portion of the product of their labor that they had saved, I would answer you that if they didn't consume the entire product of their labor it was because they didn't have to; if they had no need they had no right, and consequently couldn't dispose of it in your favor and grant you rights that they didn't have.

A right ceases where a need ends.

In the same way, if you tell me that such and such a thing is yours because you purchased it, I would answer you that those who sold it to you didn't have the right to sell it to you. They had the right to use it in accordance with their needs, as we have the right to use it in accordance with ours. They had the right to alienate their part of enjoyment and life, but not to alienate ours. They could renounce their own happiness, but not for us, and we don't have to respect transactions that occurred outside of us and against our rights.

Nature tells us to take, not to buy. In every purchase there is a duper and a duped – one who profits by the transaction, while the other is wronged. But if everyone takes what he needs no one is wronged, given that each thus having what he needs, he also has everything he has a right to.

The commercial transaction is certainly one of the principal causes of corruption for humanity.

It is useful to remark on this subject that everything that in the current functioning of society is contrary to the rules of natural philosophy is, at the same time, a source of evil and crime, and if all individuals had at their disposal the universality of goods, if they were sure of having, tomorrow and afterwards, what they need in order to live and be happy as is their right, nine-tenths of all crimes would be suppressed, for their motive is what you call theft.

We must fully realize this truth, that from the moment a man sells something it is because he doesn't need it; that from that point he has no right to dispose of it and prevent those who need it to take it, given that by the very fact that they need it they have right to it.

As is the case with theft, prostitution would disappear through the application of our philosophical theories. Why would a woman prostitute herself when she would have at her disposal everything that could ensure her existence and happiness? And how could a man purchase her since he could only give her what she would have the right to have? And it would be thus with all crimes, all vices, which would disappear because their cause would have disappeared.

The human being is only free and complete through the free exercise of his will.

Where do falsehood, duplicity, and ruse come from if not the constraints imposed by some on others? They are the weapons of the weak, and the weak only have recourse to them because the strong force them to.

Falsehood is not the vice of the liar, but rather of he who forces him to lie. Remove constraint, coercion, and punishment and we'll see if the liar won't tell the truth.

Let the ones cease to contest the rights of the others to life and happiness and prostitution and murder will disappear, for all men are born free and equal<sup>1</sup>. It is social laws that make them evil and unjust, slaves or masters, despoiled or the despoilers, executioners or victims. Every man is

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note- it would perhaps be more correct to say that man is born neither good nor evil, and only becomes what the environment and circumstances make of him.

an autonomous, independent being. This is why the independence of all must be respected. Every attack on our natural liberty, every constraint imposed is a crime that calls for revolt.

I know full well that my reasoning in no way resembles the political economy taught by M. Leroy-Beaulieu, or the morality of Malthus, or the Christian socialism of Leo XIII, who preaches the renunciation of wealth from atop a pile of gold, and humility while proclaiming himself to be the first among all. I know full well that natural philosophy goes head on against all received ideas, be they religious, moral or political, but its triumph is assured, for it is superior to every philosophical theory, to every other moral concept because it demands no right for some that it doesn't also demand for the others, and being absolute equality it bears within itself absolute justice. It doesn't bow before the circumstances of a time or environment, nor does it alternatively proclaim good or evil the same act.

It has nothing in common with the two-faced morality common among the men of this time and which arranges matters so that a thing is good or evil according to the latitude and longitude.

For example, it doesn't proclaim that the fact that taking a thing and leaving in its place only the corpse of the preceding owner is now terrible and now sublime. Terrible if the event occurs in or near Paris, sublime if it takes place near Berlin. And since it admits neither punishment nor reward it doesn't demand, in the first case, the guillotine for some, apotheosis for the others. It substitutes for the countless and changing moral rules invented by some to enslave others – which prove by their very number and changeability their fragility – natural justice, the immutable rule of good and evil, which is the work of no one, but is the result of the intimate organism of each. The good is what is good for us, what procures us pleasurable sensations, and since it is sensations that determine the will, the good is what we want, the evil that which is bad for us, that which procures feelings of pain, what we do not want. "Do as you wish;" this is the sole law that our justice recognizes, for it proclaims the liberty of each as part of the equality of all.

Those who think that no one would want to work if he wasn't forced to forget that immobility is death, that we have forces to expend in order to ceaselessly renew them, and that health and happiness are only preserved at the price of activity. That no one wanting to be unhappy and ill, everyone must occupy all their organs in order to enjoy all their faculties, for a faculty we don't make use of doesn't exist, and it makes for one less portion of happiness in the life of an individual.

Tomorrow like today men will want to be happy. They will always expend their activity, they will always work, but the labor of all being productive of social wealth, the happiness of each and all will be augmented by it, and everyone would in this way enjoy the luxuries to which he has right, for the superfluous does not exist, and everything that exists is necessary.

Man is not only a belly, he is also a brain. He needs books, paintings, statues, music, and poetry just as he needs bread, air, and the sun. But just as in his consuming he should only be limited by his faculties of consumption, in his production he should only be limited by his productive faculty and, consuming in accordance with his needs, he should only produce in keeping with his strength. And who better than he can know his needs? Who better than he can know his strength? No one; consequently, man should only produce and consume in accordance with his will.

Humanity has always had the latent awareness that it will only be happy and that its noblest qualities will only flourish under communism.

It was thus that the golden age of the ancients was founded on common property, and it never occurred to any of the elite natures among them who poeticized the past, that man's happiness was compatible with private property. They knew both intuitively and by experience that all of humanity's ills and vices flowed for the antagonism of interests created by private appropriation not limited to needs, and they never dreamed of a society without war, without murders, without prostitution, without crime, and without vice that was not also without those who possess.

It is because we no longer want either wars, murders, prostitution, vice or crime that we fight for human liberty and dignity. Despite all the gags imposed, the word of truth will resound upon the earth, and men will come alert at its sound; they will rise up at the cry of liberty in order to be the artisans of their happiness. And so we are strong in our very weakness, for whatever might happen to us, we will win!

Our enslavement teaches men that they have the right to rebel, our imprisonment that they have the right to liberty, and by our death, they will learn that they have the right to life.

When in a little while we return to prison and you to your families, superficial spirits will think that we are defeated. This is wrong! We are the men of the future, and you are the men of the past.

We are today and you are yesterday. And it is in the power of no man to prevent this passing moment from bringing us closer to tomorrow and further from yesterday. Yesterday has always wanted to block the road to tomorrow, and it has always been defeated in its very victory, for the time it passed in winning brought it closer to its defeat.

It is yesterday that made Socrates drink the hemlock, made Galileo abjure under torture, that burned Jan Hus, Étienne Dolet, William of Prague, Giordano Bruno; that guillotined Hébert and Babeuf, that imprisoned Blanqui, that executed Flourens and Ferré. What were the names of Socrates' and Galileo's judges? Those of Jan Hus? Of William of Prague? Of Giordano Bruno? Of Étienne Dolet? Of Hébert? Of Babeuf? Of Blanqui? Of Flourens? Of Ferré? No one knows them. They are the past, and they were dead while still alive. They don't even have Herostratus' glory, while Socrates is eternal, Galileo is still standing, Jan Hus exists, William of Prague, Giordano Bruno, Étienne Dolet, Hébert, Babeuf, Blanqui, Flourens, and Ferré all live.

And so we will be happy in our misfortune, triumphant in our misery, victors in our defeat. Whatever happens, we will be happy, for we are certain that from the inspiration of revolutionary ideas others will arrive at truth, that other men will continue our interrupted task and carry it to its conclusion. Finally, that a day will come when the star that gilds the harvest will shine on a humanity without armies, without cannons, without borders, without barriers, without prisons, without judges, without police, without laws and without gods: finally free both intellectually and physically. And that men, reconciled with nature and themselves will be able, in universal harmony, to quench their thirst for justice.

What does it matter that the dawn of this great day is colored by the glow of flames; what does it matter that on the morning of that day that the dew will be bloody?

A tempest too is useful for purifying the atmosphere. The sunshine is brightest after the storm. And it will glow, it will shine, the beautiful sun of liberty, and humanity will be happy.

And then, each sheltering his happiness beneath the happiness of all, no one will any longer do harm, for no one will have an interest in doing harm.

The free man in a freed humanity will be able to march without hindrance from conquest to conquest, for the profit of all, towards the limitless infinite of intellectuality.

The modern riddle: Liberty, equality, brotherhood, posed by the Sphinx of the Revolution, will be answered: Anarchy!

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