

What is Anarchism and Why are we Anarchists?

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The Anarchist contention is that, though many of the evils existing in human society are grave and deplorable, those of them that result from the idea “government” and from the institution called by that name far outweigh in their disastrous effects on human happiness and prosperity all the others put together.

Now, of course, this contention, like all contentions not open to fairly simple demonstration or verification, may be right or it may be wrong. But it is, at least, a clear, plain, unambiguous, and comprehensible contention. What, then, are the grounds on which it is based? They are three—perhaps four.

Firstly, the temperamental. It is found in practice that in the lives of the individuals composing society, domination, self-assertiveness, the overbearing determination to “boss the show” are offensive, cause friction, give rise to opposition, and so grow cumulatively on themselves, and are not, except in special circumstances, justified by any superior knowledge or capacity on the part of those who are able to dominate. As a matter of fact—and this subdivision is the possible fourth basis of Anarchism—the only series of historical events which almost all parties agree to regard as *progress* is that which has consisted in reducing, limiting, or circumscribing the power of the powerful. That autocratic power was concentrated in few hands, or in the hands of a single person, may have made its destruction more easy, but many of its enactments were precisely similar in essential quality to those of democracies. The Anarchist contends that what is found to be true in smaller groups of human individuals must be and is true when applied on a larger scale. If domination of three persons by one saps the initiative and destroys the intelligence and resourcefulness of the three, if it undermines their self-reliance and debilitates their sense of responsibility, if it creates the spirit of revolt and the determination to dominate in turn, then so also must and does the same cause produce the same effects, regardless of the proportions or numbers of dominated and dominators. And this just because the temperament of human beings is what it is. If we were treating of bees, the facts would be different, and therefore the argument would be different. Bees, *and very slavish slaves*, LIKE TO BE DOMINATED.

Secondly, Anarchism is based on the experimental argument or the argument from history. On this head it is only necessary here to point out that in nine cases out of ten when a believer in government is asked to name some good thing that a Government has done, he alludes to the

repeal of some law or the *removal* of some disability; that is, of course, to some bad thing done by a Government and (alas! all too tardily and after the infliction of incalculable injury) undone again. When he does not quote a *repeal* or a *removal* he often instances something which a Government is still doing, the good or bad effects of which have yet to be proved, the results of which are still matter of dispute, and all private agencies and enterprises for which have been destroyed, bought out, or made illegal or impossible, so that nothing in the nature of a comparison is available. The governmentalist will then declare the results of Government action to be good, forgetting that nothing is either good or bad except in comparison with something else.

The third argument in favour of the Anarchist contention may be called the logical or abstract. A. is held to have no moral right (and deems himself to have no moral right) to do the action X. B. has no right to do the action X. Similarly right through the alphabet, and, if necessary, fifty alphabets or five million. No single person in a given community is deemed to be morally entitled (according to the then and there existing instinctive moral code) to, let us say, compel his next-door neighbour to go and insure himself or to refrain from purchasing a certain beverage at a certain hour in the day, or from selling a certain commodity without making a certain payment other than that involved in the purchase itself, or to enter into a conflict in which he may lose his life, or to hand over a proportion of his possessions or earnings for other things than those which lie himself desires to purchase. These and other actions (actions X) are held to be outside the range of duties which one human being may morally and justifiably enforce upon another. It is held justifiable for one to endeavour to *persuade*, in fact, to go a very long way by the method of propaganda (example, the Salvation Army), but, so long as one cannot convince or persuade another, it is held that he must not coerce except where his own or other people's safety, security, comfort, or liberty is obviously and indisputably encroached upon. Now, says the Anarchist, by what method of election do you extract a certain right, the right which you imagine yourselves to hand over to the Parliamentary representative, from a number of voters, however large the number may be, *no one of whom has this right to give! Ex nihilo nihil fit*. If the governmental superstition were not, in the Anarchist view, productive of consequences too sad for mirth, one would almost feel inclined to joke at so palpable an absurdity. One would almost feel inclined to ask the believer in government, "How many cows, not in milk, would be necessary to obtain a bucket of milk?" Perhaps, following along a line which has neither breadth nor thickness, some metaphysician has arrived at an indivisible quantity with position but no parts where he is able to discern that zero multiplied by infinity equals unity, and so the "no moral right" of each individual man becomes the "some moral right" of a multitude of men. If this is so, *how much "some"*? Am I perfectly within my moral right in cutting off another man's head if I can get a sufficient number of persons to vote for me, or must I only steal his purse?

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