

Why Anarchism?

A prolegomenon on political scepticism

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Why anarchism?

Anarchism is a dirty word. It carries a great deal of weight that is difficult to shake at the first time of asking: bomb-chuckers, rebels, violent outsiders, etc. that seek to disrupt society towards their own particular ends. Although the (presumable) majority of secular anarchists today would want to distance themselves from these notions, there is a certain historical truth to them. In the broad history of anarchism—that the secular anarchist picks and chooses what to appropriate into their historical apologia—there are many tendencies which have promoted and continue to promote concepts, ideals, and tactics which are, first and foremost, the use of violence and nihilistic destruction towards particular ends, if they are towards any ends whatsoever. The historical tendency to refer to the “propaganda of the deed” alone is enough to turn away the non-anarchist thinker in disgust, having justified a great deal of political violence throughout history—often with disastrous consequences for the anarchist and the non-anarchist alike.

In that sense, I am not an anarchist. Many people have tried to inform me that I am mistaken about my own beliefs, that I am, for some reason, obviously on fire with enthusiasm for bloody revolution and radical reappropriation from the world for the Kingdom—this news from the interlocutor always coming as a surprise to me. While I would usually expect a well-informed critique to roll out *Schwärmer* in their tirade, I have sadly found that these figures generally lack the proper understanding of their intellectual heritage’s own enthusiasm for the slaughter of the innocent¹. Regardless, I find myself distinctly not an anarchist in most senses that both anarchists and non-anarchists alike would take the word to mean.

I offer little credit directly to the intellectual tradition beginning with Godwin, Proudhon, or Bakunin. My earliest contact with anarchist thought was through a misguided appropriation of Marxism and, therefore, extremely critical of the anarchist theory that emerged from under the shadow of the controversial German’s work. Despite the appearance of a radically utopian reformulation of society in its materiality, the notion of a society that changes first collectively and then individually (if the individual, as a concrete entity, is ever considered at all) jars with the Christian message delivered to, first and foremost, *that individual who has ears to listen*. But, despite all that, there is something in the swelling Romantic musings of those humble anti-authoritarians, those earnest propagandists, those fundamentally communitarian thinkers who rejected that any particular individual—whether by creed, station, or wealth—could hold rank over his fellow man that could inspire the Christian who does not simply take the biblical stories of the apostles as “something that happened to someone else” and, instead, views them as the fruits of God’s love letter to humanity². It is not a matter that we believe too much, but rather that we believe too much that this message is for someone else.

The purpose of the anarchist thinker

Firstly, anarchism can be seen as a kind of political scepticism: the doubt that existing political philosophy can satisfactorily answer the problems of governance, justice, etc. that our societies

¹ “True Christian believers are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter. They must be baptized in anguish and affliction, tribulation, persecution, suffering and death. They must be tried with fire... And if you must suffer for it, you know well that it cannot be otherwise. Christ must suffer still more in his members.” *The Theology of Anabaptism*, p. 131, R. Friedman

² *For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourselves! and Three Discourses (1851)*, p. 51, S. Kierkegaard

require. In some respects, this makes uncomfortable bedfellows of anarchists and conservative thinkers: a general disbelief in the validity of political philosophies to the point of distrust in the existing status quo places the individual, the person, as the *locus* for sociological and political thought. While both would rather be seen dead than with the other, this does not mean that we need to reject their correspondence outright, lest we become the detached moralists that our critics accuse us of being. In the illogical flow of existence, where serious thinkers with serious agendas offer us the solution in pure ideality, the first response to doubt that i) *this* is a good structure of society and ii) proposals for new good structures of society are things which can be objectively known to us seems like a reasonably sophisticated position for the Christian to take. Knowing that the Kingdom is both “at hand” and also clearly not the world we live in (although, we would be wise to stop short of the incoherent liberal theological position that there is some kind of “tension” between these notions³), the person who understands Christ’s message would presumably place a great deal of suspicion in the idea that any worldly offering could suffice as “the Good”.

“Christianity is indifferent toward each and every form of government; it can live equally well under all of them.”⁴

However, the difference between anarchist thought and conservative thought is that the latter party stops short of making a positive political claim, i.e., its convictions can only ever be negative and relative to an existing counter-philosophy, e.g., liberalism. This is, incidentally; why a conservative philosopher can only ever paint in strokes of metaphysical abstraction as opposed to offering a concrete programme of reforms and, predictably, why political outsiders in virtual spaces prefer to take on conservative perspectives—it is easier to simply act as a negation than to ever have to venture out into providing a positive theory of action; it is easier to criticise that it is to create. The genuine conservative—presuming, of course, that they are not swept up in the aesthetic ideal reorientation of conservative thought into an equally aesthetic real reorientation into neoliberalism or neoconservatism—is then, as such, only a facsimile of a political figure, a nervous hanger-on to what has come to pass as opposed to a cautious sojourner. The conservative position, then, is one of irrational reasonability: while they might adopt political scepticism towards the ends of disbelief in utopianism, they also do so as a childish indulgence in the anxiety of the existential⁵; attempting to appropriate the Eleatics into their political cosmogony, all motion is brought to a halt in the confining factor of the despair of finitude⁶, a demonic admission of the disbelief that God could clear away the ugliness of culture and history—much as He had done with slavery, feudalism, and monarchy. The conservative hedges their bets⁷ on the divine, in the knowledge that his teachers are the lily of the field and the bird of the air, yet more impressive to the aesthetic heart is the root of all evil. Of course, in the knowledge that *Deus dixit*, we cannot be contented with such a “hedged bets” approach to theological thought and, by extension, political theological action.

³ “Jesus and the Social Embodiment of the Peaceable Kingdom”, from *The Hauerwas Reader*, p. 128n, S. Hauerwas, ed. J. Berkman and M. Cartwright

⁴ *JP* IV 4191

⁵ *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, p. 96, [V. Haufniensis]

⁶ *Sickness Unto Death*, p. 37, [Anti-Climacus], ed. S. Kierkegaard

⁷ *Fear and Trembling: a Dialectical Lyric*, p. 40, [J. de silentio]

Moving beyond the sceptical polemicism of the conservative, the anarchist not only views political philosophy with a fundamental doubt but then takes the far more difficult leap into saying that all existing political philosophy is in error, i.e., regardless of whatever particular political philosophical claims are made, the claims are, themselves, false by virtue of the disbelief that a government could ever satisfy and satisfactorily answer the problems of governance, justice, etc. that our societies require. Here, we no longer hedge our bets and find comfort in the contingency and immediacy of the historical possibility of reason that is in our given actuality⁸—the desire for existence and the desire for necessity must find expression! Blood must flow through the veins and strength must be found! From that point, potentially out on the “70,000 fathoms of the deep”⁹, the positive claim is to simply do away with political solutions and attempt to build something without politics—a task easier said than done. However, even though this is difficult, it is not impossible. In fact, we might go as far as to suggest it is essential—that we put away our childish things of a premoral life and commit to a “manliness”, as S. K. put it, that means we hold ourselves to a measuring stick which isn’t simply the “as we are”, but learn to become transfigured in the body of Christ.

When all theories are sceptically pushed into equality with all other theories, there is no obvious path out on purely rational grounds. The problem here, for the conventional theorist, is that they may then divorce the passionate commitment that comes with being alive with actually living—we become unreasonably reasonable.

Philosophically, this is a dangerous position to be in. It is a very strong, passionate claim that borders on political romanticism—a tendency that is not warmly received by the baying masses in philosophical modernity, for many good reasons and many not very good reasons. Thumbing through the books and leaflets produced by the likes of Pyotr Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, and Abel Paz is enough to see that at least some of this political thought is nothing more than glassy-eyed utopianism, a will to capture the commonwealth of the common man, a radical belief in the innate or sociologically possible goodness of the downtrodden and degenerate. It is little wonder that the tendency, in its absolute and extreme claims, has historically found its foothold only in the collapsing or collapsed classes of societies in motion as well as the outsiders, the *Untermenschen*, who sit in the peripheral wings of society, an eyesore and a political nuisance. In some respect, the unlovable object of our humble anarchist rebel is the same object of the Christian teaching: the neighbour who we would otherwise have no reason to love¹⁰. The anarchist, *contra* the conservative, is prepared to step out in the space of ridicule, the dangerous area where we escape “the ethical” and become *homo viator*¹¹ in spirit, by proposing a positive case to move forward and chase God’s plan to clear away the injustice of the world¹². This santification is anarchism outright; transformed by the Lord, the great annals of human law are shown to be mere paper—they have no power over a man who sees himself as a moral agent and not merely a premoral child.

⁸ *The Concept of Irony*, p. 246–264, S. Kierkegaard

⁹ *Works of Love*, p. 363, S. Kierkegaard

¹⁰ *A Vexing Gadfly: The Late Kierkegaard on Economic Matters*, p. 174, E. Pérez-Álvarez

¹¹ “Gabriel Marcel: The Silence of Truth”, J. B. L. Knox, from *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, p. 208, ed. J. Stewart

¹² The Christian anarchist is in agreement with the conservative, however, that the liberal is an intentional nihilist. While a “classical liberal” is somewhat rare to find, the ubiquity of neoliberalism presents a uniquely dangerous case for Christianity in that it proposes no values and discourages the proposal of values via the tyranny of “the public sphere.”

From this position, it is clear that we must *say something* whilst at the same time recognise that we must *do something* as well. Neither the idealist nor the Marxian materialist has understood the task at hand: it does not matter whether the idea or the action precedes the other, but rather that they become united. The ideal may appear to simply be the flower which grows from the material conditions of existence¹³, but to insist that is as such is question-begging; when we are willing to wade out into the space of ridicule, over the “out on the sea of thought, out on the “70,000 fathoms deep,” before one learns to be able, when night comes, to sleep calmly, away from the thoughts, in the confidence that God, who is love, has them in abundance, and to be able to wake up confident to the thoughts, assured that God has not been sleeping”¹⁴, the flight from responsibility into history, the would-be flagbearer for an army of dead men, the subjectivist despair over the loss of some unknown, untouchable past is no solace for the Christian who has seized morality and rejected “the ethical life”. Sojourners, free from the curse of the Law, venture out not in romantic imagery and armed with books of interest to no one but with the simple eschatological promise of the Lord held in their hearts. In that dangerous space, we hold the necessary fact that grinds up against each and every contingent truth presented to us: *Deus Dixit*.

Seven Theses on the Proclamation of the Christian Anarchist Ideal

1. The transcendental imperatives to “love thy God” and to “love thy neighbour” are ethical maxims that undercut the immediacy of political thought—they are impossible through the mode of politics (the political agent neither acknowledges nor recognises the neighbour due to their objectivity), therefore to act politically is to act against—or, at very least, indifferently towards—Christ’s commandments. It is to relate relatively to God and to relate absolutely to politics.
2. Politics then absolves us from responsibility to the other, to the neighbour, and to God; first, we hide from the responsibility to become a self by integrating into the anonymity of collective action, thereby allowing us plausible deniability about any and all of our actions; secondly, from this selfless position, understood to mean “lacking a self”, it becomes impossible to make a genuine connection with the neighbour as the neighbour is met with the willing love to recognise the face of Christ in the unlovable object—something that cannot be done without the will, therefore it must proceed from a self¹⁵; and thirdly, in this position without a self and without love for the neighbour, there is no love for God in that there is no recognition of God, His Son, and His presence amongst us. Many will say His name, but their saying could well be indistinguishable from falsehood or superstition—and they would have no mode by which to identify if it was as such.
3. While the Christian ideal is, in part, the Christian community working together as an expression of the love for God and the love for the neighbour, we do not live in the Christian ideal; as such, Christians are called to create the Christian community that captures the

¹³ *God and the State*, p. 6, M. Bakunin, quoting J. P. Proudhon

¹⁴ *Works of Love*, p. 363, S. Kierkegaard

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84

ideal as best as is possible when within the world. The deliberation we must make between the immovable ideal presented in the Sermon on the Mount and the human condition of fallenness, where the Christian runs up against the non-Christian.

4. The Bible has nothing to say to the secular world. It could not because they do not understand the notion that faith precedes ethics, metaphysics, and all other Christian thought. To speak as a Christian is to speak from faith as a fact; to speak as a Christian in secular terms is to speak from a position which is not Christian.
5. Neither speaking as a Christian nor speaking from a position which is not Christian has any effect on the absolute relation (or lack thereof) that undergirds the central message of the gospel.
6. In running up against the non-Christian as a Christian, the Christian acts kerygmatically.
7. When Christianity is held as a theory, faith then becomes exposed as nihilism.

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