

Comments on the Article ‘Science and Anarchy’

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Kropotkin’s definition of anarchy – a definition to which Nino Napolitano¹ refers [in his article] as virtually beyond question – in spite of being accepted quite uncritically by many anarchists because of the great and deserved prestige of the author and his agreement with the scientific and philosophical ideas which were widespread when anarchism was first being propagated, seems to me both mistaken and harmful. Mistaken because it confuses different things; harmful because it obliges even those anarchists who accept it to debate those contradictions that weaken the reasoning of all or almost all those who subscribe to the positivist and naturalist schools of thought when they deal with moral questions.

In his attempt to fix ‘the place of Anarchy in modern science’, Kropotkin writes: ‘Anarchy is a concept of the universe based on a mechanistic interpretation of all natural phenomena, not excluding human society.’

This is philosophy. It may or may not be acceptable philosophy, but it certainly is neither science nor anarchy.

Science is the gathering and systematising of everything that is known or thought to be known. It explains an event and seeks to discover the law governing that event, i.e. the conditions under which the event occurs and recurs. This satisfies certain intellectual needs and at the same time is an extremely effective instrument of power. While it demonstrates the limits of the human will within the framework of natural laws, it increases the effective freedom of humankind, providing it with the means to turn those laws to its advantage. Science is equal for all and serves impartially both good and evil, both liberation and repression.

Philosophy can be either a hypothetical explanation of what is known or an attempt to guess at what is not known. It poses those problems which have, at least until now, eluded the competence of science and suggests solutions which, because they cannot yet be proven, vary and contradict one another from philosophy to philosophy. When it does not descend to mere word play and illusionism, philosophy may act as a stimulus or guide to science, but it is not science.

Anarchy, on the other hand, is a human aspiration which is not founded on any true or supposed natural law, and which may or may not come about depending on human will. Anarchy

¹ Nino Napolitano (1888-1958), Italian anarchist propagandist.

profits from the means with which science provides human beings in their struggle with nature and against contrasting wills. It may profit from progress in philosophical thought where this serves to educate people to reason better and to better distinguish between the real and the imagined, but it cannot, without falling into the realms of the absurd, be confused either with science or with any philosophical system.

But let us see if a 'mechanistic concept of the universe' really does explain the known facts.

We shall then see if it can at least be reconciled and logically coexist with anarchism, or indeed with any aspiration to a state of things different from what now exists.

The basic principle of mechanics is the conservation of energy: nothing is created and nothing destroyed.

A body cannot yield any given amount of heat to another without cooling by the same amount; one form of energy cannot be transformed into another (movement into heat, heat into electricity, or vice versa) without losing in one form what it gains in another. In short, the whole of the physical world is subject to this same extremely basic fact: if you have ten pence and spend five, you will be left with five — no more and no less.

And yet, if you have an idea you can communicate it to a million people and lose nothing in the process, and the more the idea is propagated the more it acquires in power and effectiveness. Teachers teach others what they know and, in so doing, do not become less knowledgeable; indeed, in teaching they learn more easily how to enrich their own minds. If a grenade tossed by a homicidal hand cuts short the life of a genius, science may explain what happens to all the material elements of which the murdered genius consisted when living and demonstrate that after the body has dissolved nothing remains of the old form, while at the same time, nothing is materially lost because all the atoms of the body, with all their energy, live on in other combinations. But the ideas and inventions which that genius gave the world remain and spread and can become enormously powerful, while those ideas that were still maturing and would have been further developed if the murder had not occurred are lost for ever.

Can mechanics explain this power, this specific quality that is the product of the mind?

But for goodness sake, do not ask me to explain in another way what mechanistic science has failed to explain.

I am no philosopher. But there is no need to be one to see some of the problems that, to a greater or lesser extent, torment all thinking minds. Not knowing the answer to a problem does not oblige one to accept solutions that seem unsatisfactory ... especially when the solutions that philosophers offer are so many and so contradictory.

Now let us see if 'mechanics' is compatible with anarchism.

According to the mechanistic view (and indeed the theist view), everything is programmed, determined, nothing can be different from what it is.

In fact, if nothing is created and nothing destroyed, if matter and energy (whatever they may be) are fixed entities subjected to mechanical laws, all phenomena must be immutably linked. Kropotkin says:

'Since man is a part of nature, since his personal and social life is also a phenomenon of nature — in the same way as the growth of a flower, or in the evolution of life in

the community of ants and bees — there is no reason why in passing from the flower to Man and from a colony of beavers to a human city, we should abandon the system which had hitherto served us so well, to seek another in the arsenal of metaphysics.’

And before him, at the end of the eighteenth century, the great mathematician Laplace said: ‘Given the forces that animate nature and the respective situation of the beings that comprise it, a great enough intelligence could know the past and the future as well as the present.’

This is pure mechanistic thinking: all that has been had to be, all that is must be and all that will be will necessarily be in every minute detail of position, movement, intensity and velocity.

In such a view what meaning can there be for the words ‘free will,’ ‘freedom’ and ‘responsibility’? The predestined events of human history cannot be changed, any more than we can change the orbit of the stars ‘or the growth of a flower.’ And then?

What has this to do with anarchy?

There was a time when anarchists would quote the declarations that a French comrade (Etievant) made in his defence speech before a Paris court. He could have limited his defence to a critique of society, demonstrating that if he had indeed committed a crime he had been driven to it by force of circumstance and that the main responsibility lay with others. But our poor comrade, who later fell victim to police brutality, was imbued with philosophy and, as a good determinist, he wanted to show that he could not be declared responsible or be punished because he was not a free agent — everything in nature is programmed and predetermined.

A hard-hearted but quick-witted judge could have replied: You’re right. I can’t in justice punish you or even blame you, for the reasons you have yourself given. But for the same reasons, the priest who deceived you is not responsible; neither are the employers who starved you or the copper who tortured you — and by the same token I am not responsible for sentencing you to hard labour or the guillotine. Everything that happens must perforce happen.

So, once again, where does Anarchy come into all this?

There are innumerable philosophical systems and, like everything that lacks a solid foundation, they also follow trends. At the end of the last century materialism was all the rage; today it’s idealism; tomorrow, who knows what our philosophers will have invented for us?

Should those who, like Kropotkin, face persecution and torture for Anarchy’s sake, those who are anarchists because they love and suffer and rebel against injustice and oppression, wait for scientists and philosophers to really explain this immense mystery that is the universe?

No matter what philosophical system you prefer, you can still be an anarchist. There are materialist anarchists as well as spiritualist ones; there are monist anarchists and there are pluralist ones, agnostics and those who, like me, without prejudice to the possible future development of the human intellect, prefer to simply call themselves ignorant.

It is certainly difficult to understand how some theories can be reconciled with the practical realities of life.

The mechanistic theory, like theism and pantheism, would logically lead to indifference and inertia, to the supine acceptance of all that is, both in moral or material questions.

But, fortunately, philosophical concepts have little or no bearing on behaviour.

Anyway, in spite of their own logic, the materialists and the 'mechanists' often sacrifice themselves for an ideal. For that matter, so do the religious folk who believe in the eternal joys of paradise, yet who look to their well-being in this world and who, when they fall ill, or fear to die, call in the doctor. Just as the poor mother who loses her little child believes, she is sure, that her child has become an angel and awaits her in heaven ... But in the meantime she weeps and despairs.

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The Anarchist Revolution: Polemical Articles 1924–1931, edited and introduced by Vernon Richards. Published by Freedom Press London 1995.

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