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Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
Unanimity
Universal Consent
1852

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Unanimity

Universal Consent

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

1852

There are things, in the moral order, about which the human race is *unanimous*; there are even many of them.

So isn't it possible that all the questions of politics, economics and morals could be simplified or clarified in such a way that the response to them would be unanimous?

In this way, the *direct* government of the people would be possible.

It is according to that idea, confirmed by the testimony of the sciences, that [Pierre-Napoléon] Domenjarie [1852] has written his pamphlet, *La loi morale, loi d'unanimité*, which we have read in prison.

That philosophical thesis [reveals] the ignorance of the author, but it is nonetheless useful to clarify it.

The things about which there can be unanimity (it is not a question of *facts/deeds*) are all *definite* abstractions, whatever order of ideas they may belong to.

Thus, *is it not permitted to kill a man: Non occides.*

But the disagreements begin when it is a question of *practical cases*:

Is it permitted to kill in legitimate defense?

Is it permitted to kill in war?

Is it permitted to kill judicially?

Is it permitted to kill deserters?

Is it permitted to kill a man or woman caught *in flagrante delicto* in the act of adultery?

Is it permitted to kill a tyrant?

Is it permitted to kill the abductor of a minor child? etc.

Now, on the practical cases, there is necessary flexibility, and as the circumstances alone make the *law* or *non-law*, it follows that one cannot posit an absolute principle, and that unanimity is impossible.

Thus, on a principle of abstract mathematics, there will be *unanimity*.—But if it is a question of assessing the results of a business, of an enterprise, of an experiment, etc., opinions can vary infinitely.

Similarly, in the moral realm, there is unanimity on principles, because the principle expresses an ideality, an abstraction. Only do to others what you would like others to do to you: everyone is unanimous on this precept, which we find expressed spontaneously everywhere.

It is an abstract, ideal formula.

But what should I want for myself? What can I demand? What is my right? That is where unanimity ceases to exist, and it is necessarily replaced by free debate, which ends in the transaction or the Contract.

The value of a product is a common example: it summarizes all cases.

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Now, Reason asks itself:

Is there a science for undefinable things, on which unanimity will never practically exist, as there is one for definite things?...

It is this question to which the economic science responds.

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From this previous explanation, it is easy to deduce and *a priori* judgment that declares void the so-called science of Fourier, which aspires to [resolve] everything, *mathematically*, that is to say abstractly, and by means of definitions.

From this as well, the elimination of the Communist thought, which, supposing unanimity, suppresses debate, competition, contract; the very principle of conventional right!...

It is time to open the eyes of the public in that regard and especially to repress the [] presumption of these poor Devils who believe they have found the secret of the world when they have produced a [] gross naïveté.

What then is the science of indefinable things, of things on which there remains unnecessary doubt, and where unanimity is impossible?

It is the science that teaches us to know the [causes], the reason, the *laws* that rule this very variability: and how by judicious and equitable convention, we arrest that variability, and convert into something definite a thing that is not of that nature.

Sic Notion of dead weight [*poids mort*];—variable.

Notion of maximum load [*poids utile*];—variable.

Relation between one and the other;—variable.

What are the causes of these *variations*?—How do they come about?—What is their mode, their character?—What utility [can we] draw from them for the conduct of life? etc., etc. How to behave with them? etc.