

# CONTR'UN



Bakunin's

## "GOD AND THE STATE"

and the Question of  
"Legitimate" Authority

*Writings and translations  
by Shawn P. Wilbur*



Mikhail Bakunin, "What is Authority" (1870)

NOTE: This passage is generally known as part of "God and the State" (*Dieu et l'État*, first published in 1882), but it appears in Bakunin's manuscript as part of "Sophismes historiques de l'école doctrinaire des communistes allemands," the second section of the unfinished book *L'Empire Knouto-Germanique et la Révolution Sociale* (*The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution.*)

This new translation seeks to clarify some passages that may appear contradictory in existing translations. In particular the verb *repousser*, which previous translators have tended to simply render as "reject," has been brought closer to its literal sense of "push back" and some attention has been given to distinguishing where Bakunin uses the word *autorité* to designate abstract authority and where he refers to particular experts or authority figures.

In the preceding section, Bakunin has been discussing, among other things, the idea of God, and the section ends with his reply to Voltaire's comment that *if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him*:

*If God really did exist, it would be necessary to get rid of him.*

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The severe logic that dictates these words is far too obvious to require a further development of this argument. And it seems to me impossible that the illustrious men, whose names (so celebrated and so justly respected) I have cited, should not have been struck by it themselves, and should not have perceived the contradiction into which they fell in speaking of God and human liberty at once. To have disregarded it, they must have considered this inconsistency or logical license practically necessary to humanity's well-being.

Perhaps, too, while speaking of liberty as something very respectable and very dear, they understood the term quite differently than we do, as materialists and revolutionary socialists. Indeed, they never speak of it without immediately adding another word, authority—a word and a thing which we detest with all our heart.

What is authority? Is it the inevitable power of the natural laws which manifest themselves in the necessary concatenation and succession of phenomena in the physical and social worlds? Indeed, against these laws revolt is not only forbidden, but is even impossible. We may misunderstand them or still not know them at all, but we cannot disobey them, because they constitute the basis and very conditions of our existence; they envelop us, penetrate us, regulate all our movements, thoughts, and acts, so that even when we believe that we disobey them, we do nothing but demonstrate their omnipotence.

Yes, we are absolutely the slaves of these laws. But there is nothing humiliating in that slavery, or, rather, it is not slavery at all.

For slavery supposes an external master, a legislator outside of the one whom he commands, while these laws are not outside of us; they are inherent in us; they constitute our being, our whole being, as much physically as intellectually and morally. We live, we breathe, we act, we think, we wish only through these laws. Without them we are nothing--we are not. From where, then, could we derive the power and the wish to rebel against them?

With regard to natural laws, only one single liberty is possible to man—that of recognizing and applying them more and more all the time, in conformity with the goal of collective and individual emancipation or humanization which he pursues. These laws, once recognized, exercise an authority which is never disputed by the mass of men. One must, for instance, be at base either a fool or a theologian or at least a metaphysician, jurist, or bourgeois economist to rebel against the law by which  $2 \times 2$  makes 4. One must have faith to imagine that fire will not burn nor water drown, unless one has recourse to some subterfuge that is still based on some other natural law. But these rebellions, or, rather, these attempts at or foolish fancies of an impossible revolt, only form a rare exception; for, in general, it may be said that the mass of men, in their daily lives, let themselves be governed by good sense—that is, by the sum of the natural laws generally recognized—in an almost absolute fashion.

The great misfortune is that a large number of natural laws, already established as such by science, remain unknown to the popular masses, thanks to the care of these tutelary governments that exist, as we know, only for the good of the people. There is another difficulty—namely, that the major portion of the natural laws that are inherent in the development of human society and that are every bit as necessary, invariable, and fatal as the laws that govern the physical world, have not been duly established and recognized by science itself.

Once they shall have been recognized by science, and then shall have passed, by means of an extensive system of popular education and instruction, from science into the consciousness of all, the question of liberty will be perfectly resolved. The most stubborn authoritarians must admit that then there will be no more need of political organization, direction or legislation, three things which, whether they emanate from the will of the sovereign or from the vote of a parliament elected by universal suffrage, and even should they conform to the system of natural laws—which has never been the case and could never be the case—are always equally deadly and hostile to the liberty of the masses, because they impose upon them a system of external and therefore despotic laws.

The liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has himself recognized them as such, and not because

they have been externally imposed upon him by any foreign will, whether divine or human, collective or individual.

Suppose an academy of learned individuals, composed of the most illustrious representatives of science; suppose that this academy is charged with the legislation and organization of society, and that, inspired only by the purest love of truth, it only dictates to society laws in absolute harmony with the latest discoveries of science. Well, I maintain, for my part, that that legislation and organization would be a monstrosity, and that for two reasons: first, that human science is always necessarily imperfect, and that, comparing what it has discovered with what remains to be discovered, we we might say that it is always in its cradle. So that if we wanted to force the practical life of men, collective as well as individual, into strict and exclusive conformity with the latest data of science, we should condemn society as well as individuals to suffer martyrdom on a bed of Procrustes, which would soon end by dislocating and stifling them, life always remaining infinitely greater than science.

The second reason is this: a society that would obey legislation emanating from a scientific academy, not because it understood itself the rational character of this legislation (in which case the existence of the academy would become useless), but because this legislation, emanating from the academy, was imposed in the name of a science that it venerated without comprehending—such a society would be a society, not of men, but of brutes. It would be a second edition of that poor Republic of Paraguay, which let itself be governed for so long by the Society of Jesus. Such a society could not fail to descend soon to the lowest stage of idiocy.

But there is still a third reason that would render such a government impossible. It is that a scientific academy invested with a sovereignty that is, so to speak, absolute, even if it were composed of the most illustrious men, would infallibly and soon end by corrupting itself morally and intellectually. Already today, with the few privileges allowed them, this is the history of all the academies. The greatest scientific genius, from the moment that he becomes an academician, an officially licensed savant, inevitably declines and lapses into sleep. He loses his spontaneity, his revolutionary hardihood, and that troublesome and savage energy that characterizes the nature of the grandest geniuses, ever called to destroy obsolete worlds and lay the foundations of new ones. He undoubtedly gains in politeness, in utilitarian and practical wisdom, what he loses in power of thought. In a word, he becomes corrupted.

It is the characteristic of privilege and of every privileged position to kill the mind and heart of men. The privileged man, whether politically or economically, is a man deprived intellectually and

morally. That is a social law that admits no exception, and is as applicable to entire nations as to classes, companies, and individuals. It is the law of equality, the supreme condition of liberty and humanity. The principal aim of this treatise is precisely to elaborate on it, to demonstrate its truth in all the manifestations of human life.

A scientific body to which had been confided the government of society would soon end by no longer occupying itself with science at all, but with quite another business; and that business, the business of all established powers, would be to perpetuate itself by rendering the society confided to its care ever more stupid and consequently more in need of its government and direction.

But that which is true of scientific academies is also true of all constituent and legislative assemblies, even when they are the result of universal suffrage. Universal suffrage may renew their composition, it is true, but this does not prevent the formation in a few years' time of a body of politicians, privileged in fact though not by right, who, by devoting themselves exclusively to the direction of the public affairs of a country, finally form a sort of political aristocracy or oligarchy. Witness the United States of America and Switzerland.

Consequently, no external legislation and no authority—one, for that matter, being inseparable from the other, and both tending to the enslavement of society and the degradation of the legislators themselves.

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Does it follow that I drive back every authority? The thought would never occur to me. When it is a question of boots, I refer the matter to the authority of the cobbler; when it is a question of houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer. For each special area of knowledge I speak to the appropriate expert. But I allow neither the cobbler nor the architect nor the scientist to impose upon me. I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and verification. I do not content myself with consulting a single specific authority, but consult several. I compare their opinions and choose that which seems to me most accurate. But I recognize no infallible authority, even in quite exceptional questions; consequently, whatever respect I may have for the honesty and the sincerity of such or such an individual, I have absolute faith in no one. Such a faith would be fatal to my reason, to my liberty, and even to the success of my undertakings; it would immediately transform me into a stupid slave and an instrument of the will and interests of another.

If I bow before the authority of the specialists and declare myself ready to follow, to a certain extent and as long as may seem to me

necessary, their indications and even their directions, it is because that authority is imposed upon me by no one, neither by men nor by God. Otherwise I would drive them back in horror, and let the devil take their counsels, their direction, and their science, certain that they would make me pay, by the loss of my liberty and human dignity, for the scraps of truth, wrapped in a multitude of lies, that they might give me.

I bow before the authority of exceptional men because it is imposed upon me by my own reason. I am conscious of my ability to grasp, in all its details and positive developments, only a very small portion of human science. The greatest intelligence would not be sufficient to grasp the entirety. From this results, for science as well as for industry, the necessity of the division and association of labor. I receive and I give—such is human life. Each is a directing authority and each is directed in his turn. So there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination.

This same reason prohibits me, then, from recognizing a fixed, constant, and universal authority-figure, because there is no universal man, no man capable of grasping in that wealth of detail, without which the application of science to life is impossible, all the sciences, all the branches of social life. And if such a universality was ever realized in a single man, and if he wished to take advantage of it in order to impose his authority upon us, it would be necessary to drive that man out of society, because his authority would inevitably reduce all the others to slavery and imbecility. I do not think that society ought to maltreat men of genius as it has done hitherto; but neither do I think it should enrich them too much, nor, and this above all, grant them any privileges or exclusive rights; and that for three reasons: first, because it would often mistake a charlatan for a man of genius; then, because, through such a system of privileges, it could transform even a true man of genius into a charlatan, demoralize and stupefy him; and, finally, because it would give itself a despot.

in summary, then, we recognize the absolute authority of science, because science has no other object than the mental reproduction, well thought out and as systematic as possible, of the natural laws inherent in the material, intellectual, and moral life of both the physical and the social worlds, these two worlds constituting, in fact, only one single natural world. apart from this legitimate authority, uniquely legitimate because it is rational and in harmony with human liberty, we declare all other authorities false, arbitrary, despotic and deadly.

We recognize the absolute authority of science, but we reject [*repoussons*] the infallibility and universality of the representatives of

science. In our church—if I may be permitted to use for a moment an expression which I so detest: Church and State are my two *bêtes noires*—in our church, as in the Protestant church, we have a head, an invisible Christ, science; and, like the Protestants, more consistent even than the Protestants, we do not wish to suffer a pope, nor council, nor conclaves of infallible cardinals, nor bishops, nor even priests. Our Christ is distinguished from the Protestant and Christian Christ in this—that the latter is a personal being, while ours is impersonal; the Christian Christ, already fully realized in an eternal past, presents himself as a perfect being, while the fulfillment and perfection of our Christ, science, are always in the future: which is equivalent to saying that they will never be realized. Therefore, in recognizing no absolute authority but that of *absolute science*, we in no way compromise our liberty.

I mean by this phrase, “absolute science,” the truly universal science that would reproduce ideally, to its fullest extent and in all its infinite detail, the universe, the system or coordination of all the natural laws manifested in the incessant development of the world. It is obvious that such a science, the sublime object of all the efforts of the human mind, will never be realized in its absolute fullness. Our Christ, then, will remain eternally unfinished, which must considerably moderate the pride of his licensed representatives among us. Against that God the Son, in whose name they claim to impose their insolent and pedantic authority on us, we appeal to God the Father, who is the real world, real life, of which their God is only the too-imperfect expression, and of which we, real beings, living, working, struggling, loving, aspiring, enjoying, and suffering, are the immediate representatives.

But, while rejecting [*repoussant*] the absolute, universal, and infallible authority of the men of science, we willingly bow before the respectable, but relative, very temporary, and very restricted authority of the representatives of special sciences, asking nothing better than to consult them by turns, and very grateful for the precious information that they should want give to us, on the condition that to receive such information from us on occasions when, and concerning matters about which, we are more learned than they; and, in general, we ask nothing better than to see men endowed with great knowledge, great experience, great minds, and, above all, great hearts, exert over us a natural and legitimate influence, freely accepted and never imposed in the name of any official authority whatsoever, celestial or terrestrial. We accept all natural authorities and all influences of fact, but none of right; for every authority or every influence of right, officially imposed as such, becoming straight away an oppression and



a falsehood, would inevitably impose upon us, as I believe I have sufficiently shown, slavery and absurdity.

In short, we reject all legislation, all authority, and every privileged, licensed, official, and legal influence, even that arising from universal suffrage, convinced that it can only ever turn to the advantage of a dominant, exploiting minority and against the interests of the immense, subjugated majority.

It is in this sense that we are really Anarchists.

[Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur]



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(da un disegno di J. Lluch)

## God and the State: The Lost Paragraphs

It's generally known that "God and the State" is a fragment drawn from "Historical Sophisms of the Doctrinaire School of the German Communists," the second installment of *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution*, Bakunin's great, unfinished work. But as that work is still unpublished in English, the fact is simply one more mystery regarding the famous text. There are parts of the context that are not so easy to provide: the first section is over 40,000 words in length and "Historical Sophisms" contains at least another 40,000 words, of which less than 30,000 appear in "God and the State." And then there are pages and pages of additional sections and fragments, which were never fully incorporated into the larger work, plus the lengthy appendix, "Philosophical Considerations concerning the Divine Phantom, the Real World and Man." So there is a good deal of translation to be done before we can present "God and the State" in its full context, but, as it happens, we can establish its place in the flow of the "Historical Sophisms" with comparative ease. Once a pages-long footnote is removed, it turns out that there are only four paragraphs at the start of the text, before the text of "God and the State."

Here are those paragraphs:

### THE KNOUTO-GERMANIC EMPIRE AND THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION --- SECOND INSTALLMENT

#### Historical Sophisms of the Doctrinaire School of the German Communists

Such is not the opinion of the Doctrinaire School of socialists, or rather of authoritarian communists, in German; a school that was founded shortly before 1848, and which renders, it must be acknowledged, some distinguished services to the cause of the proletariat, not only in Germany, but in Europe. It is to that school that principally belongs the great idea of an International Association of Workingmen, as well as the initiative in its initial realization. Today it finds itself at the head of the Parti de la Démocratie socialiste des travailleurs in Germany, with the *Volksstaat* as its organ.

So it is a perfectly respectable school, which does not prevent it from showing a very bad character sometimes [\*], and especially from having taken as a basis for its theories a principle that is profoundly true when we consider it in its true light, from a relative point of view, but which, considered and posited in an absolute manner, as the unique foundation and first source of all the other principles, as that school does, becomes completely false.

This principle, which constitutes, by the way, the essential foundation of positive socialism, has been scientifically formulated and developed for the first time by Karl Marx, the principal leader of the school of German communists. It forms the dominant thought of the famous *Manifesto* of the communists that an international committee of French, English, Belgian and German communists, gathered in London, issued in 1848, under this title: *Proletarians of all countries, unite!* This manifesto, written, as we know, by Marx et Engels, became the basis of all the later scientific labors of the School, and of the popular agitation stirred up later by Ferdinand Lassalle in Germany.

This principle is absolutely opposed to the principle recognized by the idealists of all the schools. While the latter derive all the facts of history, including the development of material interests and the different phases of the economic organization of society, from the development of ideas, the German communists, on the contrary, wish to see in all of human history, in the most ideal manifestations of the life, whether individual or collective, of society, of humanity, in all the intellectual and moral, religious, metaphysical, scientific, artistic, political, legal and social developments, which were produced in the past and continue to be produced in the present, nothing but reflections or necessary repercussions of the development of the economic facts. While the idealists claim that ideas dominate and produce facts, the communist, in agreement in this with scientific materialism, say on the contrary that the facts give rise to the ideas that that the latter are never anything but the ideal expression of accomplished facts; and that among all the facts, the economic or material facts, the facts par excellence, constitute the essential basis, the principal foundation, of which all the other facts, intellectual and moral, political and social, are nothing more than the inevitable derivatives.

[The text of “God and the State” then begins with the question: “Who are right, the idealists or the materialists?”]

## The Three Lives of “God and the State”

I have been thinking about “God and the State” in terms of a choice between two texts: the fragment, “God and the State,” and the incomplete work from which it was drawn, “The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution.” This is the choice proposed by James Guillaume, when he suggested that the publication of the latter should be the occasion for no longer publishing in the former. But, if Guillaume’s suspicions were correct and Reclus and Cafiero knew what they were publishing, and engaged in a bit of “literary artifice” when they presented it as a fragment, what we have is the abandonment of the full text, which was being published piece by piece, for the decontextualized fragment.

I think there are good reasons to believe that Reclus was aware of the source of the fragment and that he made a choice roughly opposite to that of Guillaume. And that opposition is probably just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the complex history of conflicts among those who had a hand in presenting Bakunin’s work to future generations. But I also think that there is a third text that has to be considered: “God and the State” as presented by Max Nettlau, with its remarkable collection of introductions, afterwords, explanations and such.

It is that text that really interests me, particularly as the years have multiplied its far-flung appendices. There were undoubtedly reasons why Nettlau would not have been as explicit as Guillaume in emphasizing the conflicts, but they are probably not reasons that concern us much now. So it is possible, and almost certainly useful, to “complete” Nettlau’s work by gathering evidence of the conflicts and using that body of work as a starting place for the Bakunin Library.

This is perhaps a small insight, but I will admit that I feel more comfortable finding myself more completely in the camp of Nettlau, who was a fine theorist of *anarchy*, than in that of Guillaume, who considered the term “Proudhonian” and redolent of “rhetoric and bad taste.”

## The “authority” of the bootmaker

I’ve remarked elsewhere on the curious phenomenon of self-proclaimed anarchists who are much more comfortable with the language of governmentalism and authority than they are with the concept of *anarchy*. It is curious, but it is far from inexplicable. After all, some of the most famous pioneers of anarchist thought muddled those waters rather enthusiastically at times. Over the years, I have spent quite a bit of time working through Proudhon’s complicated engagements with *property*, the *State*, *anarchy* and other terms. There are potentially cautionary tales there regarding just about any strategy we might take with these complex and contested terms.

I want to come back in a later post to some of the reasons that anarchist rhetoric has tended to be so convoluted, but we don’t have to look much farther than the declaration that “property is theft,” and its various aftermaths, to recognize that it has been so. And Proudhon certainly wasn’t the only offender in this regard. When we look at Bakunin, we often find Proudhon’s familiar provocations repeated in even more provocative, and sometimes baffling, forms. If we had to pick a phrase in Bakunin’s work that was his “property is theft”—one that gets at important concerns, but perhaps not in the most immediately helpful manner—perhaps “the authority of the bootmaker” would be a good choice. Certainly, the work from which it comes, *God and the State*, is just full of rhetoric that seems designed to provoke and confuse.

There are, of course, other good reasons to try to understand exactly what is being said in the discussion of this “authority of the bootmaker,” to which Bakunin admits he must “bow,” with the most prominent of those being the idea that Bakunin is arguing for a variety of “legitimate authority,” and doing so in a work where he defines his position as explicitly “anarchist,” thus making at least Bakunin’s “anarchism” (square-quoted, since the term itself is not Bakunin’s) something other than anti-authoritarian.

Is that what Bakunin is arguing? Let’s take a careful look at the relevant passages:

Perhaps, too, while speaking of *liberty* as something very respectable and very dear in their eyes, they give the term a meaning quite different from the conception entertained by us, materialists and Revolutionary Socialists. Indeed, they never speak of it without immediately adding another word, *authority* — a word and a thing which we detest with all our heart.

Perhaps Bakunin considers “a word and a thing which we detest with all our heart” to be legitimate, but, if so, we pretty obviously need

an explanation. So let's back up to the beginning of the text—itself just a section of Bakunin's great, unfinished work, *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution*—and see who Bakunin is talking about.

Who is right, the idealists or the materialists? The question, once stated in this way, hesitation becomes impossible. Undoubtedly the idealists are wrong and the materialists right. Yes, facts are before ideas; yes, the ideal, as Proudhon said, is but a flower, whose root lies in the material conditions of existence. Yes, the whole history of humanity, intellectual and moral, political and social, is but a reflection of its economic history.

It is the idealists who can't talk about liberty without talking about authority.

And, Bakunin has already told us, the idealists are wrong.

Indeed, they are so wrong that Bakunin gets distracted by his anger at their wrongness and has to apologize for the distraction a few paragraphs into the fragment, before returning to his main argument about the fundamental elements of human being:

Three elements or, if you like, three fundamental principles constitute the essential conditions of all human development, collective or individual, in history:

1. *human animality;*
2. *thought; and*
3. *rebellion.*

To the first properly corresponds *social and private economy*; to the second, *science*; to the third, *liberty*.

This argument, Bakunin assures us, enrages the idealists as much as the idealists anger him. And he takes some time to assure the reader that his materialism is not some mechanical theory of what the idealists might call "vile matter." And it is in the course of his discussion of the debate concerning these three elements or conditions that he finally comes to address the question of authority.

What is authority? Is it the inevitable power of the natural laws which manifest themselves in the necessary concatenation and succession of phenomena in the physical and social worlds? Indeed, against these laws revolt is not only forbidden — it is even impossible. We may misunderstand them or not know them at all, but we cannot disobey them; because they constitute the basis and fundamental conditions of our existence; they envelop us, penetrate us, regulate all our movements, thoughts, and acts; even when we believe that we disobey them, we only show their omnipotence.

His approach, however, is a bit roundabout. Rather than talking about what the idealists consider to be authority, he asks a question, in which we see a possible materialist definition. But this is an authority that would presumably eliminate one of those “essential conditions of all human development, collective or individual,” since revolt against it is impossible. Instead of liberty, it seems to offer an inescapable slavery.

Yes, we are absolutely the slaves of these laws. But in such slavery there is no humiliation, or, rather, it is not slavery at all. For slavery supposes an external master, a legislator outside of him whom he commands, while these laws are not outside of us; they are inherent in us; they constitute our being, our whole being, physically – intellectually, and morally: we live, we breathe, we act, we think, we wish only through these laws. Without them we are nothing, *we are not*. Whence, then, could we derive the power and the wish to rebel against them?

Obviously, there are rhetorical maneuvers underway. The “slavery,” it turns out, “is not slavery at all.” The “laws” we cannot break are internal to us.

This actually puts us on familiar ground, provided we have paid some attention to Proudhon. The final section of *What is Property?* includes a description of “liberty, the third form of society,” and in that description we find that:

Liberty is anarchy, because it does not admit the government of the will, but only the authority of the law; that is, of necessity.

And we are reminded that, however much Proudhon agonized over the vocabulary he used to discuss forms of property, he often simply redefined the language of authority in ways that suited his anti-authoritarian project. Now, having recognized this connection between Bakunin’s thought and that of Proudhon, some of what follows will hold few surprises for those who have read the latter.

In his relation to natural laws but one liberty is possible to man – that of recognizing and applying them on an ever-extending scale in conformity with the object of collective and individual emancipation or humanization which he pursues. These laws, once recognized, exercise an authority which is never disputed by the mass of men. One must, for instance, be at bottom either a fool or a theologian or at least a metaphysician, jurist, or bourgeois economist to rebel against the law by which twice two make four. One must have faith to imagine that fire will not burn nor water drown, except, indeed, recourse be had to some subterfuge founded in its turn on some other natural law. But these revolts, or, rather,



these attempts at or foolish fancies of an impossible revolt, are decidedly, the exception; for, in general, it may be said that the mass of men, in their daily lives, acknowledge the government of common sense — that is, of the sum of the natural laws generally recognized — in an almost absolute fashion.

This “government of common sense” seems to parallel Proudhon’s thoughts (again, from *What is Property?*)

All questions of legislation and politics are matters of science, not of opinion. The legislative power belongs only to the reason, methodically recognized and demonstrated. To attribute to any power whatever the right of veto or of sanction, is the last degree of tyranny. Justice and legality are two things as independent of our approval as is mathematical truth. To compel, they need only to be known; to be known, they need only to be considered and studied. What, then, is the nation, if it is not the sovereign,—if it is not the source of the legislative power?

The nation is the guardian of the law—the nation is the EXECUTIVE POWER. Every citizen may assert: “This is true; that is just;” but his opinion controls no one but himself. That the truth which he proclaims may become a law, it must be recognized. Now, what is it to recognize a law? It is to verify a mathematical or a metaphysical calculation; it is to repeat an experiment, to observe a phenomenon, to establish a fact. Only the nation has the right to say, “Be it known and decreed.”

I confess that this is an overturning of received ideas, and that I seem to be attempting to revolutionize our political system; but I beg the reader to consider that, having begun with a paradox, I must, if I reason correctly, meet with paradoxes at every step, and must end with paradoxes. For the rest, I do not see how the liberty of citizens would be endangered by entrusting to their hands, instead of the pen of the legislator, the sword of the law. The executive power, belonging properly to the will, cannot be confided to too many proxies. That is the true sovereignty of the nation.

There are some interesting tensions here. Both Bakunin and Proudhon insist on a place for “law” in their understanding of liberty, but it isn’t clear that what we conventionally think of as “legal order” is included. Their conception of law is limited to that which we cannot rebel against. This would seem to clear the decks of all governmental, statute law. But that sweeping away is easier said than done. In practice, even obeying the law of necessity may not be as easy as it might seem. To know the law requires science, but science is a work-in-progress and it has adversaries in the advocates and beneficiaries of other sorts of law.

The great misfortune is that a large number of natural laws, already established as such by science, remain unknown to the masses, thanks to the watchfulness of these tutelary governments that exist, as we know, only for the good of the people. There is another difficulty — namely, that the major portion of the natural laws connected with the development of human society, which are quite as necessary, invariable, fatal, as the laws that govern the physical world, have not been duly established and recognized by science itself.

That concern with “tutelary government” (*gouvernement tutélaire*) is an extremely common one in the early anarchist literature. Tutelage is guardianship, a paternal power over a people presumably unable to govern or “realize” itself. And that presumption of “external realization” was the thing that Proudhon opposed quite consistently (except, alas, where actual paternity was involved.)

Once they shall have been recognized by science, and then from science, by means of an extensive system of popular education and instruction, shall have passed into the consciousness of all, the question of liberty will be entirely solved. The most stubborn authorities must admit that then there will be no need either of political organization or direction or legislation, three things which, whether they emanate from the will of the sovereign or from the vote of a parliament elected by universal suffrage, and even should they conform to the system of natural laws — which has never been the case and never will be the case — are always equally fatal and hostile to the liberty of the masses from the very fact that they impose upon them a system of external and therefore despotic laws.

This last bit is wonderfully strong stuff. Even if a governmental legal order was in conformity with the laws of nature, presumably imposing only what is imposed by necessity—what cannot ultimately not be imposed—it would be “fatal and hostile” to liberty. It seems that even the inevitable can’t be accepted second-hand. If there is really something to “the authority of the bootmaker,” this is obviously a hurdle it will have to get over.

The liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has *himself* recognized them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any extrinsic will whatever, divine or human, collective or individual.

We are now in pretty deep waters, with a rather peculiar set of observations about *authority*. It is *detestable*, we have been told, and perhaps it is, at the same time (and in its materialist form), *equal to necessity*. It is a “slavery” that “is not really slavery.” It is “despotic” if

it does not come from within, but can't be opposed in any event, since (in some sense) it does.

Let's suppose that all of this is true, to some extent at least. Should we be surprised, or nod our heads sagely, as if this is exactly what we expected? Whatever our actual reaction, we probably have to circle back around (if we haven't already) to Bakunin's statements about human development and its conditions, and try to work out how this rather conflicted account of authority might fit in that development. Earlier in *God and the State*, he had said:

Yes, our first ancestors, our Adams and our Eves, were, if not gorillas, very near relatives of gorillas, omnivorous, intelligent and ferocious beasts, endowed in a higher degree than the animals of another species with two precious faculties — *the power to think and the desire to rebel*.

That's our starting point, and we are currently somewhere down the long, possibly interminable road of human progress. We remain *animals*, but *human* animals and we set off down the road to ever-greater humanity by exercising some combination of *thought* and *rebellion*. Bakunin's pleasure in the fact that the Biblical story of the Fall makes this argument for him is obvious, but, let's face it, triadic conceptions of human nature with Biblical references were hardly new by the time he got around to presenting his version of things. There's no need to dig too deep into the antecedents here, but there are certainly echoes of Pierre Leroux and Charles Fourier here—as there are so many other places in the early anarchist literature. What probably is necessary is to emphasize the extent to which some kind of internal tension between the constituent elements of human nature is to be expected in 19th century socialist writing. “Universal antagonism” and “justice” (in the form of balance) were, for Proudhon, “the fundamental laws of the universe.” We've already seen some of the ways that, for Bakunin, *animality* could come into conflict with *reason* and *revolt*. When we pick up the argument again, and Bakunin explores the shortcomings of “the government of science,” we can pick up more of the dynamic between those three elements.

Suppose a learned academy, composed of the most illustrious representatives of science; suppose this academy charged with legislation for and the organization of society, and that, inspired only by the purest love of truth, it frames none but laws in absolute harmony with the latest discoveries of science. Well, I maintain, for my part, that such legislation and such organization would be a monstrosity, and that for two reasons: first, that human science is

always and necessarily imperfect, and that, comparing what it has discovered with what remains to be discovered, we may say that it is still in its cradle. So that were we to try to force the practical life of men, collective as well as individual, into strict and exclusive conformity with the latest data of science, we should condemn society as well as individuals to suffer martyrdom on a bed of Procrustes, which would soon end by dislocating and stifling them, life ever remaining an infinitely greater thing than science.

The second reason is this: a society which should obey legislation emanating from a scientific academy, not because it understood itself the rational character of this legislation (in which case the existence of the academy would become useless), but because this legislation, emanating from the academy, was imposed in the name of a science which it venerated without comprehending — such a society would be a society, not of men, but of brutes. It would be a second edition of those missions in Paraguay which submitted so long to the government of the Jesuits. It would surely and rapidly descend to the lowest stage of idiocy.

But there is still a third reason which would render such a government impossible — namely that a scientific academy invested with a sovereignty, so to speak, absolute, even if it were composed of the most illustrious men, would infallibly and soon end in its own moral and intellectual corruption. Even today, with the few privileges allowed them, such is the history of all academies. The greatest scientific genius, from the moment that he becomes an academician, an officially licensed *savant*, inevitably lapses into sluggishness. He loses his spontaneity, his revolutionary hardihood, and that troublesome and savage energy characteristic of the grandest geniuses, ever called to destroy old tottering worlds and lay the foundations of new. He undoubtedly gains in politeness, in utilitarian and practical wisdom, what he loses in power of thought. In a word, he becomes corrupted.

Reason is not something that can be attained second-hand, but it is also not something that can be maintained if it is mixed with authority, if it is exercised against revolt.

It is the characteristic of privilege and of every privileged position to kill the mind and heart of men. The privileged man, whether politically or economically, is a man depraved in mind and heart. That is a social law which admits of no exception, and is as applicable to entire nations as to classes, corporations, and individuals. It is the law of equality, the supreme condition of liberty and humanity. The principal object of this treatise is precisely to demonstrate this truth in all the manifestations of human life.

A scientific body to which had been confided the government of society would soon end by devoting itself no longer to science at all,

but to quite another affair; and that affair, as in the case of all established powers, would be its own eternal perpetuation by rendering the society confided to its care ever more stupid and consequently more in need of its government and direction.

But that which is true of scientific academies is also true of all constituent and legislative assemblies, even those chosen by universal suffrage. In the latter case they may renew their composition, it is true, but this does not prevent the formation in a few years' time of a body of politicians, privileged in fact though not in law, who, devoting themselves exclusively to the direction of the public affairs of a country, finally form a sort of political aristocracy or oligarchy. Witness the United States of America and Switzerland.

Both privilege and obedience are presented as deadly to science and to human development. And when Bakunin finally draws the conclusions from this section, they are perhaps even stronger than we might expect from the opening question:

Consequently, no external legislation and no authority — one, for that matter, being inseparable from the other, and both tending to the servitude of society and the degradation of the legislators themselves.

“No authority.” That seems clear enough. We’ve had a glimpse of what anarchists might look to *instead of* authority, but there doesn’t seem to be much room left for authority itself.

And then this happens:

Does it follow that I reject all authority? Far from me such a thought. In the matter of boots, I refer to the authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer. For such or such special knowledge I apply to such or such a *savant*. But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect nor the *savant* to impose his authority upon me. I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and censure. I do not content myself with consulting authority in any special branch; I consult several; I compare their opinions, and choose that which seems to me the soundest. But I recognize no infallible authority, even in special questions; consequently, whatever respect I may have for the honesty and the sincerity of such or such an individual, I have no absolute faith in any person. Such a faith would be fatal to my reason, to my liberty, and even to the success of my undertakings; it would immediately transform me into a stupid slave, an instrument of the will and interests of others.

When we attempt to follow this real twist, in the context of the full fragment, all sorts of questions come to mind. First of all, it isn't entirely clear that the bootmaker is in the same category as the *savant* (scientist, learned individual, expert.) Elsewhere in the text, Bakunin makes a distinction between science, which "cannot go outside of the sphere of abstractions," and art, which "is, as it were, the return of abstraction to life." Indeed, science is characterized as "the perpetual immolation of life, fugitive, temporary, but real, on the altar of eternal abstractions," and this sets up Bakunin's famous declaration:

What I preach then is, to a certain extent, *the revolt of life against science*, or rather against the *government of science*, not to destroy science — that would be high treason to humanity — but to remand it to its place so that it can never leave it again.

Here, it is *animality* and *revolt* rising up against *reason*—at least when reason seems to have exceeded its share of the work. It is tempting to think that bootmakers fare better than scientists because they are, in some sense, as much artists as *savants*. But I'm not sure there's anything in Bakunin's text that let's us pursue that approach. Another question is whether Bakunin has not himself simply made a blunder here, confusing *expertise* with *authority*, letting the rhetorical play get the better of him. It happened at times, I am inclined to think. There is a passage, still down the page a bit, where Bakunin insists on referring to the practices of revolutionary socialists as the beliefs of "our church." Proudhon's masterwork, *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, certainly might have suggested a contrast, but Bakunin's language seems to take it all too far.

What Bakunin says about the "authority of the bootmaker" is all quite level-headed, and roughly what you would expect him to say if he simply refused to grant any "authority" at all in the case. He is clear that he will use his *reason*, to whatever extent he can, and then use the reason of others to reduce his chances of error. He is wary. He understands that acquiescence is a grave danger. And yet, he says, he "bows."

If I bow before the authority of the specialists and avow my readiness to follow, to a certain extent and as long as may seem to me necessary, their indications and even their directions, it is because their authority is imposed upon me by no one, neither by men nor by God. Otherwise I would repel them with horror, and bid the devil take their counsels, their directions, and their services, certain that they would make me pay, by the loss of my liberty and self-respect, for such scraps of truth, wrapped in a multitude of lies, as they might give me.

At least Bakunin, in “bowing” to the bootmaker, obviously still *detests* the the act of submission to authority. And here the fact that we are ultimately talking about concessions as small as trusting in skilled tradespeople becomes interesting. Bakunin doesn’t make the distinction we might expect between the bootmaker and the savant, so perhaps the scale of the act of submission is not so important. If the most perfect legislation is “fatal” if we have to take it second-hand, then we don’t seem to be in a situation where there is much room for “legitimate authority,” despite Bakunin’s assurance that he would never even think of *rejecting* all authority.

What, in any event, does it mean to “reject all authority”? Let’s look at the French text:

“S’ensuit-il que je repousse toute autorité ? Loin de moi cette pensée.”

“To reject” is certainly one of the ways to translate *repousser*. There are several others. *Rejeter* means to reject, but perhaps more in the sense that one would reject, or *throw back*, a fish that was too small for eating. *Refuser* is also sometimes translated as “to reject,” often in the sense of *turning down* an offer, although it may have a variety of other uses. *Écarter* has the sense of *pushing to the side*. But *repousser* is perhaps a little more active and aggressive; it sometimes means to *spurn*, but also to *repel*, to *push away*. This is the verb Bakunin used when he said “I would repel them with horror, and bid the devil take their counsels...” Perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that it is precisely Bakunin’s sense of revulsion concerning authority that makes *repousser* the right choice here. The reading has the advantage of presenting Bakunin as consistent in his attitude toward authority, even if his eventual capitulation to it has to be explained. He assures us that he is not compelled to submit, “neither by men, nor by God.”

I bow before the authority of special men because it is imposed upon me by my own reason. I am conscious of my inability to grasp, in all its details and positive developments, any very large portion of human knowledge. The greatest intelligence would not be equal to a comprehension of the whole. Thence results, for science as well as for industry, the necessity of the division and association of labor. I receive and I give — such is human life. Each directs and is directed in his turn. Therefore there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination.

In the end, it appears that, rather than bowing to “special men” or their “authority,” Bakunin bows to “human life,” to his own limitations as a human animal. He bows to the inevitable, which we know is the only law he will recognize. And if our reading of the nuances is not entirely incorrect, we have no reason, I think, to imagine that he bows, even to necessity, with particularly good grace. At the limits of his knowledge, *life*, *reason* and *rebellion* should, we expect, all be brought to bear. In the absence of “fixed and constant authority,” developing humanity might at least aspire to less of both authority and subordination.

In the remainder of the section I’m quoting here, which ends with the declaration that he and those around him are, in a particular sense, “anarchists,” Bakunin alternates between gratitude to the *savants* of the “special sciences” and new declamations against authority, with a recognition of the “absolute authority of science” (but not “the absolute, universal, and infallible authority of men of science.”) It isn’t clear if it all *quite* adds up. I suppose that one can weight those various elements of the text as you see fit, but, for me, it is very hard to make the usual leap from the views presented here to a denial that anarchism is, in principle, not just *anti-authoritarian*, but *resolutely so*. If we are forced by the law of necessity to bow to authority in small ways, in the context of that “continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination,” it cannot be, it seems to me, in any way that involves abandoning our *animality*, our *reason* or our tendency to *revolt*. Indeed, it would seem to me that it is when we are faced with our own limits that all of these elements need to be most actively involved. That means rebelling, if only inwardly, when we have to take even the bootmaker on faith, and bringing all our energies into play as the stakes rise. We can, of course, be gracious, as Bakunin was, and feel gratitude for the “special” knowledges that come from our specific characters and aptitudes. But every time we start to get too warm and fuzzy about even the “very restricted authority of the representatives of special sciences,” I suspect our best bet is to remember that if there is such a thing as “legitimate authority,” our only real access to it is still from within, from the force of necessity, expressed through our own human animality, even if it is only expressed through our limits.

Not that our limits, Bakunin reminds us, are all bad:

This same reason forbids me, then, to recognize a fixed, constant, and universal authority, because there is no universal man, no man capable of grasping in that wealth of detail, without which the application of science to life is impossible, all the sciences, all the branches of social life. And if such universality could ever be realized in a single man, and if be wished to take



advantage thereof to impose his authority upon us, it would be necessary to drive this man out of society, because his authority would inevitably reduce all the others to slavery and imbecility. I do not think that society ought to maltreat men of genius as it has done hitherto; but neither do I think it should indulge them too far, still less accord them any privileges or exclusive rights whatsoever; and that for three reasons: first, because it would often mistake a charlatan for a man of genius; second, because, through such a system of privileges, it might transform into a charlatan even a real man of genius, demoralize him, and degrade him; and, finally, because it would establish a master over itself.

The rest of the selection speaks, I think, largely for itself.

To sum up. We recognize, then, the absolute authority of science, because the sole object of science is the mental reproduction, as well-considered and systematic as possible, of the natural laws inherent in the material, intellectual, and moral life of both the physical and the social worlds, these two worlds constituting, in fact, but one and the same natural world. Outside of this only legitimate authority, legitimate because rational and in harmony with human liberty, we declare all other authorities false, arbitrary and fatal.

We recognize the absolute authority of science, but we reject the infallibility and universality of the *savant*. In our church — if I may be permitted to use for a moment an expression which I so detest: Church and State are my two *bêtes noires* — in our church, as in the Protestant church, we have a chief, an invisible Christ, science; and, like the Protestants, more logical even than the Protestants, we will suffer neither pope, nor council, nor conclaves of infallible cardinals, nor bishops, nor even priests. Our Christ differs from the Protestant and Christian Christ in this — that the latter is a personal being, ours impersonal; the Christian Christ, already completed in an eternal past, presents himself as a perfect being, while the completion and perfection of our Christ, science, are ever in the future: which is equivalent to saying that they will never be realized. Therefore, in recognizing *absolute science* as the only absolute authority, we in no way compromise our liberty.

I mean by the words “absolute science,” which would reproduce ideally, to its fullest extent and in all its infinite detail, the universe, the system or coordination of all the natural laws manifested by the incessant development of the world. It is evident that such a science, the sublime object of all the efforts of the human mind, will never be fully and absolutely realized. Our Christ, then, will remain eternally unfinished, which must considerably take down the pride of his licensed representatives among us. Against that God the Son in whose name they assume to impose upon us their insolent and pedantic authority, we appeal to God the Father, who is the real world, real life, of which he (the Son) is only

a too imperfect expression, whilst we real beings, living, working, struggling, loving, aspiring, enjoying, and suffering, are its immediate representatives.

But, while rejecting the absolute, universal, and infallible authority of men of science, we willingly bow before the respectable, although relative, quite temporary, and very restricted authority of the representatives of special sciences, asking nothing better than to consult them by turns, and very grateful for such precious information as they may extend to us, on condition of their willingness to receive from us on occasions when, and concerning matters about which, we are more learned than they. In general, we ask nothing better than to see men endowed with great knowledge, great experience, great minds, and, above all, great hearts, exercise over us a natural and legitimate influence, freely accepted, and never imposed in the name of any official authority whatsoever, celestial or terrestrial. We accept all natural authorities and all influences of fact, but none of right; for every authority or every influence of right, officially imposed as such, becoming directly an oppression and a falsehood, would inevitably impose upon us, as I believe I have sufficiently shown, slavery and absurdity.

In a word, we reject all legislation, all authority, and all privileged, licensed, official, and legal influence, even though arising from universal suffrage, convinced that it can turn only to the advantage of a dominant minority of exploiters against the interests of the immense majority in subjection to them.

This is the sense in which we are really Anarchists.

## Bakunin and Proudhon / Authority and Anarchy

If (in the passage from *God and the State* discussed in the last post) Bakunin has not simply changed the meaning of the word “authority” from one paragraph to the next, as he moves from his general critique to his consideration of “the authority of the bootmaker,” then we presumably have a case in which authority must indeed be *rejected* when considered in general, but cannot be *spurned* or *simply pushed away* (*repoussé*) in the messy realm of practice, where the limits of our knowledge and the limitations of our animality confront us on a regular basis. We find ourselves forced to reject authority and not spurn it because these same limitations apply to all human beings. So we are forced to accept, however reluctantly, apparent authority on a temporary basis and we seek to limit the damage by seeking confirmation from other sources. That’s “life,” Bakunin tells us: alternating instances of command and subordination, imposed but never legitimated by our material conditions and offset as much as possible by the division and association of labors.

This should all really look quite familiar. Think of Proudhon’s developing thought on the question of property. Only a couple of years had passed after his declaration that “property is theft” when, in his *Arguments to the Public Prosecutor of the Right of Property*, he argued that the way to neutralize property was to generalize it. His mock-reassurance to the members of the jury is probably one of the funniest things he ever wrote:

I have only written one thing in my life, gentlemen jurors, and I will tell you that thing right away, so there is no question: *Property is robbery*. And do you know what I have concluded from that? In order to abolish that species of robbery, it is necessary to universalize it. I am, you see, gentlemen, as conservative as you; and whoever would tell you the contrary, would prove by that alone that they have understood nothing of my books, and, I would say, nothing of the things of this world.

And, of course, as we see so many places in his work, the answer to injustice is equal distribution and balance, even when it is a question of distributing and balancing potential evils:

Thus, profit, interest, the right of increase, property or suzerainty, is a usurpation, a theft, as Diderot said, more than a century ago, and yet society could live only with the aid of that theft, which will no longer be one, as soon as by *the* irresistible force of institutions it will become general, and which will cease completely

when an integral education has rendered all the citizens equal in merit and in dignity.

The claim that “society could live only with the aid of that theft” should probably be read, in Bakunin’s language, as a recognition of conditions imposed by our individual limitations.

So, perhaps, rather than an instance of Bakunin’s sloppiness or a “legitimate” exception to our general anti-authoritarian stance, we are looking at a clue to something fundamental about the anarchist project. Anarchism is, after all, the ongoing and ever more rigorous application of an anti-authoritarian ideal to conditions that are anything but in harmony or sympathy to it. The question becomes: What does the advance of that project look like? How does we oppose authority in practical terms? Proudhon framed the project in terms of “the elimination of the absolute.” Now, the character of the *absolute* is that it does not mix and mingle, does not offer itself up for comparisons and second opinions, and encourages us to make the leap (in the terms we’ve been using here) from *necessity* to *legitimacy*. But the *necessary* is (in those terms) just *the stuff we have to deal with, right here and right now*. If we cannot simply push it away, without leaving the realm of good or common sense, we need not give it any power not imposed by very specific, generally transitory circumstances.

The anarchist project, then, would not be some doomed opposition to the inevitable, but a matter of knowing the very narrow limits of any particular inevitability. This is perhaps some of what Proudhon was getting at when, in the “Study on Ideas” in *Justice*, he said:

I intend to suppress none of the things of which I have made such a resolute critique. I flatter myself that I do only two things: that is, first, to teach you put each thing in its place, after having purged it of the absolute and balanced it with other things; then, to show you that the things that you know, and that you have such fear of losing, are not the only ones that exist, and that there are considerably more of which you still must take account.

The various parts of this program are in large parts simply different sides of the same act. When we really “put each thing in its place,” the spell of the absolute is necessarily broken. As we identify that “place” in time and space, other times and spaces, other things, naturally emerge as alternatives. Anarchy emerges less in the form—or formlessness—of specific institutions, but in the practical application of a perspective that refuses to linger too long or grant too much significance to any of the things the world presents to us. And that restless perspective—something like Fourier’s *papillon* passion—

is probably nothing more than a sane response to the real conditions of what Bakunin called our *human animality*.

But what about the children? (A note on tutelage)

It's a question again of "legitimate authority" and "justified hierarchy," and specifically of the favorite example used by those who want to leave a space within anarchist theory for those things: the care of very young children. The argument I have encountered repeatedly is that parenting is, at least in the case of those very young children, a necessarily authoritarian relation: children must be ordered about in order to protect them from hazards; parents have a duty and presumably also a right to dictate to their children; and children have an obligation to obey.

It's one of those debates that all too often comes down to: "WHY WON'T SOMEONE PLEASE THINK OF THE CHILDREN!!!" And we know all too well all the dodgy uses to which that appeal has been put. But it should also be clear that the underlying questions, regarding our relations with those individuals with substantially different capacities for self-determination, are important on their own and probably have some connection to how we organize our relations with non-human nature. So we have to try to get to the bottom of what's really at stake, despite the difficulties. Unfortunately, the terms that seem most useful to make the kinds of distinctions we would need are the very terms that seem to have been extended to encompass all sorts of potentially conflicting ideas, so we have to try to find other vocabularies.

The general distinction that critics of all authority arguably need to make is between *the capacity to act* and *various sorts of social permission or sanction for action that include some right to command others*. It's a distinction that we make regularly: the capacity to kill another individual does not generally carry with it any right to do so, nor does the capacity to understand complex social relations itself grant any right to arrange them for others. The expert has to possess something more than mere expertise in order for there to be authority (in the strong sense) vested in them. That *something more* is social in character, and indeed structures the sort of society that can exist between individuals.

The question becomes where, in relations presumably guided by anarchist principles, that extra, social something could come from. The case of the parental relation is at least useful as a place to examine the possibilities. In order to be particularly careful, it may be useful to first address it in terms of the question of "legitimate authority" and then again in terms of "justifiable hierarchy."

There are some possible source of authority, such as *ownership* of the child by the parents, that we can probably set aside without much comment. Similarly, there seems to be little sympathy for the notion

that the parental relation might be one in which might makes right. In general, even those who consider the parental relation necessarily authoritarian seem inclined to also treat it as a relation of care. Indeed, they often characterize parental guardianship as a duty, although it is often unclear to whom the duty is, or could be, owed. We'll return to the dynamic of duty and obligation. First, we should see if perhaps parental authority could just be a matter of superior capacity and expertise, and perhaps one that could make us think differently about "the authority of the bootmaker."

Certainly, one of the elements of the parent-child relation is that adults have a significantly greater experience of the world and the business of making our way through it relatively unscathed. They have capacities that are more developed in a variety of ways. If we were to assent to the notion that the difference between knowing how to make boots and not having those skills could be a source of authority, then certainly the difference between the skills and capacities of parent and child could be a similar source. The question becomes how a difference in capacities is transformed into a right to command on the part of the more capable and a duty to obey on the part of the less capable.

Let's imagine a society of talented generalists, where skills and capacities are widely distributed and each individual is relatively self-sufficient. It is hard to imagine the rationale by which we would say that interference by certain individuals in the lives of others could be considered justified or legitimate. Perhaps the case of plucking someone out of harm's way would be the sort of exception we might note, but, in the case of individuals of equal capacities, it seems hard to characterize the act as one of authority. Under these circumstances, the intervention has to be considered one that we make on our own responsibility and if we find it was unwelcome, it isn't clear that we could justify our interference in any way that the recipient/victim should feel obliged to accept. Certainly, in a society of competent bootmakers, no particular bootmaker could be said to have much in the way of authority.

Let's consider then what happens if, in this society of competent bootmakers, one individual becomes expert. It still isn't clear that the additional capacity translates into any sort of authority. There are certainly likely to be economic effects as we begin to see specialization in a society, but there's no obvious way in which any power or right to command emerges from the scenario.

But let's consider the other end of a certain spectrum, in a society where we have a great deal of specialization—so much, in fact, that individuals are constantly confronted with the need to consult others to complete the most basic of tasks. The dynamics of the society will

obviously be more complex, but it isn't clear that this extreme divvying-up of expertise provides much greater footholds for the establishment of authority, at least in the realm of principle. Here, every individual is, in theory, a potential authority when it comes to their particular specialization and a dependent in most other contexts, but in fact the complex interdependence means that all of that authority remains largely potential, since the social leverage available to each narrow specialization is minuscule in comparison to the combined importance of all the other forms of specialized expertise.

Now, in a more complex society there are more opportunities for equal interdependence to break down. That means that some of our specialists might find themselves gaining relative advantages as circumstances gave their skills particular importance. The various weapon-producers or food-producers might collude, under favorable circumstances, to transform their expertise into the power to command, but we would be hard put, I think, to find an anarchist principle to justify their actions. And I think we would have to say that the source of that possibility was more in the general incapacity of the population with regard to specific skills and the specific environmental circumstances than it was in the expertise of the individuals able to capitalize on the situation.

Obviously, we live in societies where the distribution of expertise lies between these extremes and where the existing conditions already structure which sorts of expertise have access to the power to command, whether it is a matter of commanding wealth in the market or obedience in a wide range of authoritarian institutions. But it isn't clear how our own societies differ from these extreme examples, where the question of "legitimate authority" arising from expertise is concerned. The power to command seems to emerge from just about every element in society *except* individual expertise: already existing political authority, economic monopoly, the comparative incapacity of others, accidents and "acts of God," etc. We can't seem to make the leap from "I can..." to "I may and others must..." but that is precisely the leap we have to make in order to establish some principle by which expertise itself really establishes some authority vested in the expert.

Add to these considerations Bakunin's comments on the corrosive effects of authority on expertise, and perhaps we can acknowledge we have to look elsewhere. The ultimate sanction of expertise is presumably truth, but practical truth in a developing context is not the sort of thing that stands still, so that sanction has to be renewed and tested by new study and experiment. So even if we could establish the present legitimacy of an authority based on the most rigorous sort of scientific truth, in some way that the non-expert could verify (and



this is not at all clear), we have no guarantee that the legitimacy would remain as circumstances changed, while the exercise of the authority as such is itself at least potentially a break from the exercise of the practices of the field of expertise on which it is presumably based. Once crowned an expert, it is easy to stop renewing one's expertise.

When we apply these considerations to the parental relation, it doesn't seem any easier to explain why the greater capacities of the parent would alone establish a power to command or an obligation to obey in this instance than it is in the relations between adults. At the same time, there seem to be other explanations for why we might act in their defense that don't depend on either authority or even on the relative differences in capacity between adults and children. We might, after all, act to save another adult, without any attempt to establish authority or permission. We might do so out of specific relations of care or simply on the basis of our experience of what constitutes intentional and accidental behavior in our own societies. The major difference with children is that we can be fairly certain that nobody, except the child, is likely to make much fuss if our exercise of real or imagined authority seems to be "for the good of the child." And the reasons for that may have more to do with our tendency to think of children and their actions as existing within a "justifiable hierarchy" beneath adults and the ordinary workings of adult society.

The parent-child hierarchy is often cited as one of a class of educational or tutelary hierarchies. Tutelage is guardianship and in tutelary relations the assumption is that the subordinate (child, pupil, apprentice, etc.) is at least temporarily incapable of protecting themselves and their interests, so the right to exercise the power of command is based on the assumption that it is exercised for the subordinate—or at least "for their own good." Bakunin left open the possibility of exercising authority over very young children, because he understood human development as in part characterized by a progressive increase in humanity, at the very beginning of which children are effectively not yet human and need to be given the tools to take on their own development before they can start that progressive development on their own terms.

Even this may not be entirely defensible as a matter of principle. The familiar example of pulling a child back from traffic already assumes a particular sort of "adult world" in which the spaces for free exploration are dramatically limited by the business as usual of the institutions we have created. It isn't clear what could justify the busy street, in principled terms, so it is at least a little bit hard to know how that busy street contributes to the principled legitimization of the parental act.

But if we assume that, specifics aside, there will always be some set of coping skills that need to be acquired before children can assume responsibility for their own safety and development, we still have to work out just what form the tutelary hierarchy really takes—and then whether it amounts to evidence in favor of retaining some space for “legitimate authority” and “justified hierarchy” within anarchist thought.

Early in our examination, it was suggested that parental care might be a *duty*. Now, if this was the case, the parent would presumably be superior to the child because they were inferior to some other power that imposed the duty. We might certainly think of familiar circumstances, under which the care of children is indeed dictated by law and by specific social norms, but I suspect we can also think of reasons why most of those factors which presume to dictate to the individual might not be consistent with anarchist principles or present in an anarchist society. We could also think of the duty as a duty to the child, but that puts us in the strange position of imagining a hierarchy in which the superior interest is that of a being elevated to that status by their incapacity. If there is a hierarchy here, it is an odd one, disconnected from our usual understanding of authority, since the child who cannot manage their own interests is hardly in a position to exercise a right to command.

Instead of a hierarchy, we seem to be left with one of those complicated relationships, like the guest-host relation of hospitality, where the roles are fluid and the usual rules are suspended. In this case, we have some of the forms of command and rule, but without any of the usual authoritarian or hierarchical rationales. Rather than being an exception to anarchist principles, perhaps we should understand the parental relation as a most accessible example of how anarchists principles ought to be applied in our struggle towards a more genuinely free society, characterized by more thoroughly anti-authoritarian and non-hierarchical relations.

After all, the parental relation, with all of its negotiations between the rights and needs of children and those of parents, is not the sort of thing that we intend to maintain forever, assuming that we value our children as developing human beings. Confronted with the limited capacities of the child, our action is directed toward increasing those capacities. We teach and, in those instances where our teaching has not caught up with the needs of the day, we intervene more directly. But the hope, assuming that desire to see children grow up to be independent, is that the tutelage is a very temporary thing. And child-rearing is, like every other kind of expertise, itself a matter of practice and developing expertise. The specific difficulties of negotiating rights and interests mean that it is necessarily a work of trial-and-error.

There's nothing easy or comfortable about the relation, particularly for those who concern themselves with the principled critique of authority, so there's even some strong incentives to move things along and reduce the quasi-hierarchical elements of the relation.

That doesn't sound like a set of reasons to make space in anarchist theory for any more extensive acceptance of hierarchy—and perhaps quite the contrary. It would seem to me that each time we are confronted with an imbalance of expertise and the opening to authoritarian relations, the logical anarchist response would be to work, on our own responsibility, to cultivate greater, more widespread knowledge and skill, rather than accommodating ourselves to the imbalance. There will, of course, be times when we have to move forward with the limitations imposed on us by hard necessity. That was, after all, the one law that anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin would acknowledge. But the point of necessity-as-law was not to grant authority to any particular response to the inevitable, but to emphasize that we must respond. How we respond will seldom be entirely dictated by our circumstances, which is precisely the reason that our principles need to be clear, so that we can advance most effectively, given our real limitations, toward the beautiful ideal of anarchy.

## Anarchy and its Uses

Fundamental to everything I've been saying about *anarchy* and *anarchism* over the last couple of years is a sense that anarchy works as a useful guiding principle only when we take it very, very seriously. I'm not interested in an argument about language or ideas, so much as one about the conditions under which we attempt to produce alternatives to existing authoritarian systems. All the references to assembling a *toolkit* aren't accidental or rhetorical, and all of the sometimes fussy play with very specific aspects of our analytical and rhetorical tools is at least aimed at very practical ends.

You can't properly choose a saw until you know the kind of cutting you need to do. You can't properly sharpen it until you understand how the teeth are arranged. A woodworker who refused to concern themselves with this sort of thing might be expected to run into problems. I think it is safe to expect the same sort of difficulties for would-be anarchists who won't wrestle with the details where *anarchy*, *authority*, and the like are concerned. I'll go so far as to suggest that much of the ineffectiveness of the anarchist movement has arisen from a failure to make certain that we're using the right tools for the job—or, slightly more perversely, from the failure, having presumably chosen our tools, to make certain that we're doing the right job for the tools.

This has led me to pursue what I think of as a “hard line” with regard to the centrality of anarchy to any meaningful anarchism, but in the sense that the stands we take and the lines we draw in defense of anarchy have to be properly *anarchic* stands and lines. The anarchist tradition began not just as a revolt against existing governments, but as a revolt against every governmental alternative that might be proposed. If we are to maintain that aspect of the tradition, it is vital that anarchism not solidify into any sort of fixed *system*—but it is at least as important that our thinking about anarchy does not coalesce into any sort of hard and fast *rule*.

There are tasks for which we almost certainly do not believe that *anarchy*—or any of the *anarchisms* or *anarchist practices* derived from it—is the right tool. We don't try to build bridges or bind books with anarchy, nor do we pretend that it is this or that anarchic practice that lets us write clean code or tie tight knots. In the real-world practice of any number of skills, there are moments when our core concerns as anarchists may be raised, but those moments almost always involve social organization—or they involve the pervasive influence of the dominant ideas about social organization, as they have been applied, correctly or incorrectly, in other domains. In the latter case, part of being very, very careful with our tools is knowing

when we have allowed our thoughts to slide from one domain to another.

Of course, we can't always avoid certain kinds of conceptual slides. Indeed, anarchist critique has often made powerful use of unacknowledged distinctions and opportunistic conflations in the dominant discourses. Proudhon's claim that "property is theft" depends on this sort of play with already existing uncertainties. And Bakunin's "God and the State" is full of examples, some more successful than others, of attempts to use the language of authority to illustrate anti-authoritarian ideas. For example, he connects human freedom to the notion of a "slavery" to natural laws, which ultimately isn't slavery at all, as an alternative to authoritarian notions that freedom arises from obedience to the law.

It's probably safe to say that not all of Bakunin's rhetorical maneuvers are as elegant as "property is theft," but they are certainly not indecipherable. We just have to find some relatively fixed reference points that we can use to guide ourselves through the maze. So, for example, when we're going to try to make sense of the section of "God and the State" dealing with authority, we need to recall that it starts as a continuation of a discussion of the absolute opposition between the idea of God and human liberty. The idealists can talk about the two in the same breath because of the way they think about human liberty:

Perhaps, too, while speaking of liberty as something very respectable and very dear, they understood the term quite differently than we do, as materialists and revolutionary socialists. Indeed, they never speak of it without immediately adding another word, *authority*—a word and a thing which we detest with all our heart.

Bakunin sort of buries the lead here, but the point seems to be that *authority* is the missing link that allows the idealists to link *human liberty* and the idea of God, which Bakunin has been treating as necessarily implying *human slavery*. Then he simply moves, with no transition, to a discussion of the one instance in which authority and human liberty might be fundamentally in harmony with one another, and with a certain kind of "obedience to the law"—even a certain kind of "slavery"—eventually concluding that if liberty and authority were brought into this kind of hierarchy, they would prove the assertions of the anarchists:

The most stubborn authoritarians must admit that then there will be no more need of political organization, direction or legislation, three things which, whether they emanate from the will of the

sovereign or from the vote of a parliament elected by universal suffrage, and even should they conform to the system of natural laws—which has never been the case and could never be the case—are always equally deadly and hostile to the liberty of the masses, because they impose upon them a system of external and therefore despotic laws.

Then he turns to showing how this sort of natural authority and political government are fundamentally incompatible, since making science (the always ongoing process of understanding that natural authority) the basis for political authority would be deadly to both human liberty and science itself.

This section of “God and the State” is both fascinating and maddening, precisely because, while Bakunin makes a bunch of fascinating observations and draws a series of useful conclusions about “authority,” he seems to have stitched them together without much indication of which conclusions should be drawn from which observations. But, in the interests of making some simple observations of our own, we can pretty safely say that there are at least two different notions of authority in play: a purely internal authority, representing the inescapable power of the laws of nature; and a range of external authorities, of which God and the State can be considered prime examples.

We would be tempted, given this division, to make the simple distinction that Bakunin himself makes in the essay and say that only internal authority could be considered “legitimate”—except that we already know that this particular variety of authority is indeed inescapable, and it seems silly to involve ourselves in a debate about the legitimacy of the inevitable.

How we proceed depends on what we want to take for a fixed point. If “authority” refers only to the inevitable consequences of natural laws, then “legitimate authority” seems to be a useless notion. On the other hand, if “authority” refers to externally sanctioned, a priori legitimacy, then “legitimate authority” is essentially redundant. The difficulty is that there seems to be *something* that still has to be addressed in “the authority of the bootmaker” and all the other specialists we encounter. It does not at first appear to be the sort of internal authority that is “vested” (to the extent that this remains a useful term) within us, but does not grant us a right to command others. Nor does it appear to be the sort of external authority that is vested in others and gives them a right to command us. And yet, Bakunin says, he is compelled to “bow.” And, whatever this authority is, it is not uncommon, as this newly retranslated passage makes clear:

I bow before the authority of exceptional men because it is imposed upon me by my own reason. I am conscious of my ability to grasp, in all its details and positive developments, only a very small portion of human science. The greatest intelligence would not be sufficient to grasp the entirety. From this results, for science as well as for industry, the necessity of the division and association of labor. I receive and I give—such is human life. Each is a directing authority and each is directed in his turn. So there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination.

We are dealing with a really *ubiquitous* sort of authority, which, in the best case, is both voluntary and beneficial. It is imposed on us, inescapably, by the laws of our nature, but it manifests itself in others in the form of some power (however limited) to command. Is this then “legitimate authority”? It that was the case, I think it would put us an awkward position with regard to principles. The reason that we might willingly bow to the expert is thoroughly social, in the sense that it requires the encounter between the capacities of the expert and our relative incapacity in the same areas to create the appearance of an external authority validated by internal necessity. But it isn’t clear how this hybrid authority would work: the very limited “legitimacy” created by inevitability, when used as a rationale for a real power to command could only resemble a principle like “might makes right,” which hardly seems like the sort of principle to which anarchists should voluntarily bow, with the expectation of mutually beneficial outcomes.

Honestly, I just don’t see how an authority imposed by our own reason doesn’t simply remove “legitimacy” as an interesting question. And, when it comes right down to it, most of the evidence that we are dealing with authority, or obedience, or any of the concepts that we associate with *archic* society, seems to arise from the slightly perverse metaphors that anarchists have used to compare authoritarian and anti-authoritarian relations. When Bakunin describes what “obeying natural laws” actually means, it is hardly passive. Even when he talks about the practice of “bowing” to experts, it involves a lot of verification and testing. The simplest answer to the problem of “legitimate authority” seems to be to say that if there is an “authority” that fits within anarchist theory, there is nothing to say about its “legitimacy.” It’s simply not a question that makes any sense.

But there is still something—something *real*, if not *legitimate*—that is at least *reflected* in the expert. We know that this question of authority-as-reflection was something that Bakunin and his contemporaries were familiar with. The critique of God as merely a reflection of human excellence, along with the subsidiary critiques of

Man, Humanity, etc. as mere displacements of this sort of projection, were commonplace. We find Bakunin rejecting God as the illusion of a universal authority, but also any real instance of universal expertise:

This same reason prohibits me, then, from recognizing a fixed, constant, and universal authority-figure, because there is no universal man, no man capable of grasping in that wealth of detail, without which the application of science to life is impossible, all the sciences, all the branches of social life. And if such a universality was ever realized in a single man, and if he wished to take advantage of it in order to impose his authority upon us, it would be necessary to drive that man out of society, because his authority would inevitably reduce all the others to slavery and imbecility.

If there is room, in between the universal man and the divine symbol of that universality, for something real and potentially positive, I'm not sure we're going to get a clear look at it through the lens of authority. But that's not the only lens available to us. To think of the cobbler as "the person who can make the shoes that I can't make" is not necessarily to raise them up in any sort of hierarchy. After all, the cobbler may be looking back at "the person with language and research skills I don't have," rather than, say, "the person who needs my shoes." But perhaps they're just looking at a person with a particular set of skills, drawn from the vast number of skills distributed among human beings.

It just seems to be the continued dominance of the principle of authority, and our old habit of recognizing it, that keeps us focused on the expert as a "special man," when the *specialness* of the embodied expertise is almost always going to be dependent on circumstances external to the natures of all the human actors involved. Face it: the times when we're actually going to want to bow to the cobbler are likely to be limited to when we *really, really* need shoes, but at those times we may be happy to bow most reverently, if the alternative is to go unshod. The cobbler and our relation to them in the realm of expertise remain unchanged, while other factors introduce a new urgency to the proceedings.

Still, I'm no believer in post-scarcity, so it seems likely to me that all sorts of urgency will continue to press at least the appearance of authority upon us, for at least the foreseeable future. So if we're going to have to continue to deal with the messy details of when we bow to cobblers and when we find other people bowing to us, and if we can sometimes at least partially transform the situation by consciously rejecting authoritarian interpretations, there are almost certainly also going to be plenty of instances where the stakes are too high to pretend that we can simply think ourselves out of our predicament.



So what do we do when faced with instances of authority that seem inescapable?

It seems to me that there are two basic responses, both of which should be available to anarchists. The first is fairly obvious: we can remind ourselves that “legitimate authority” is a weird, hybrid notion at best—and probably too muddled to take very seriously. The second takes us way back to our discussion of tools and their uses, and perhaps isn’t so obvious, but try it on for size:

*Faced with real-but-not-“legitimate” authority, the kind that arises from the intersection of differing individual capacities and material exigencies of various sorts, and having reminded ourselves that the principle of authority seems to be built on no firm basis, and further having done our best to reconsider our position in accordance with some more consistently anarchistic lens and surveyed the possible consequences of our future actions in terms of their impact on the degree and quality of the freedom we can expect to enjoy in the various available cases, perhaps the work of anarchy is done for the moment—and we have to pick up other tools.*

A lot of the problems that emerge in our debates seem like non-problems. There are people in the world who know not to touch the stove when it’s hot and not to run into traffic, while others do not, just as some people know how to make boots or do open-heart surgery, while others do not. We hardly think about how “authority” plays in all of this until other circumstances raise the stakes to the point where someone can exercise a right to command, even if it’s just the “right” to command an exorbitant wage in the capitalistic market. If we manage to eliminate more and more of the ways in which exploitation plays a key role in our societies, the necessity of addressing these attempts at command will certainly decrease. Given the artificial, systemic sources of many of the exigencies we face, we’ll be eliminating opportunities for command in large blocks, should we ever make any headway toward anarchy.

But until we’ve destroyed the foundations of those systems of authority and exploitation, we’re going to keep running into reminders of how little anarchy we really have, in contexts where there isn’t a heck of a lot we can do about it. In those instances, there isn’t going to be any way to choose “correctly” among options all tainted to some degree with the kinds of relationships we oppose and abhor. We’re going to have to recognize when and where anarchist theory isn’t the tool we need—or at least isn’t a tool we can use—and concentrate on getting boots made, or building bridges, or whatever practical task is facing us. Anarchy is a goal and anarchist theory is at least a decent alternative to the hegemony of the principle of

authority, but sometimes we just need to get stuff done, because we simply don't live by liberty alone.

I think that this is the approach we should take to the question of the relationship between *anarchy* and *democracy*. If we affirm anarchy as a goal and oppose the principle of authority, it's hard to see how we can have much good to say about democracy as a *principle*, beyond perhaps considering it a better sort of governmentalism than others, but, at the same time, sometimes we have to make decisions when real consensus is impossible. Under those circumstances, sometimes the least worst imposition on the interests and desires of dissenting minorities will be some kind of vote—and we'll just have to hold our noses, recognizing that this is not one of those instances when anarchy is a tool we can use, and deal with the circumstances imposed on us.

But let's be clear about what is imposed on us—and what most definitely is not. We may have to make use of this or that imperfect tool for decision-making, but that that doesn't make those tools a part of our specifically anarchist toolkit. That toolkit has real limitations. Sometimes we will approach the goal of anarchy indirectly, by balancing clearly un-anarchistic practices, as Proudhon suggested in much of his mature work. Understanding the existence of real limitations on our options, recognizing that while authority can probably never be "legitimate," it may still exert some real influence on our practices, we need to remain clear about the nature of our goals, the qualities of the available means and the specific limitations presented by our material and social contexts.

My sense is that this demanding mix of requirements imposes that "hard line" on us, according to which notions like *anarchy* have to be maintained with whatever clarity and purity we can manage intact, so that they provide useful guidance when we're neck-deep in the complexities of a world still very much dominated by the principle of authority.