

---

# Review of Crispin Sartwell's, *Against the State: An Introduction to Anarchist Political Theory*

**Nathan J. Jun**

*Midwestern State University, Wichita Falls, TX, USA*

Crispin Sartwell, *Against the State: An Introduction to Anarchist Political Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 124 pp., paperback, \$14.95, ISBN 0791474488

‘Most political philosophers of the past few generations’, wrote the late David Mitrany, ‘have what the psychoanalysts might call a “state fixation”.’<sup>1</sup> This is certainly true within the mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy, which remains dominated in large part by Rawlsian liberalism, on the one hand, and Nozickian libertarianism, on the other. The most frequently cited exception is the ‘philosophical anarchism’ defended most notably by Robert Paul Wolff<sup>2</sup> and A. John Simmons,<sup>3</sup> both of whom argue that no legitimate states exist (where ‘legitimate’ means, roughly, having a moral right to rule over subjects who have a corresponding moral obligation to obey). The word ‘philosophical’ is an important qualifier here, since neither Wolff nor Simmons is an anarchist in the traditional sense of endorsing the abolition of states. Simmons is an even weaker ‘anarchist’ than Wolff in believing that legitimate states are in fact possible; he simply denies that any currently exist.

Crispin Sartwell is a trained philosopher (he studied under Richard Rorty) but he is not a philosophical anarchist. He is what we might call, for purposes of starkest comparison, a *real* anarchist and claims to have been one since the age of 12 (3). For Sartwell, the state is not just an abstract, philosophical problem but a genuine enemy. He harbors palpable disdain – perhaps even hatred – for the state that recalls the likes of Bakunin and Goldman in their most fiery moments. Why? Because, like all real anarchists, Sartwell despises coercion, and what is the state if not an enormous mechanism of coercion? This

---

**Corresponding author:**

Nathan Jun, Bea Wood Hall, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Wichita Falls, TX 76308, USA

Email: nathan.jun@mwsu.edu

is a rare and lethal combination: philosophical acumen, on the one hand, with genuine anarchistic passion on the other. In a milieu completely dominated by ‘state fixation’, one naturally expects grand things from such a philosopher, especially when his latest book is titled *Against the State*. Whether Sartwell delivers them, however, is a question open to considerable dispute.

As a real anarchist, Sartwell knows that the classical anarchist critique is directed not only at the state but at countless other forms of oppression – most notably the capitalist economic system – as well. Though personally sympathetic to the American ‘individualist’ tradition of Henry David Thoreau, Josiah Warren, etc., Sartwell is clearly familiar with the anarcho-communist tradition of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman and de Cleyre (he has coedited a collection of the latter’s essays). This immediately sets him apart from most Anglo-American philosophers, including the philosophical anarchists, for whom anarchism always means ‘anti-statism’ and little more. I am therefore a bit discouraged that Sartwell, despite knowing better, plays into this intransigent misconception by limiting his analysis to the state. Although Sartwell alludes to more comprehensive analysis in the book’s brief second part (‘Towards Something Else’), his commentary here is still mostly focused on political rather than economic, social, sexual, or racial oppression. It remains to be seen whether he will widen the scope of his critique in the promised sequel.

Sartwell begins his critique of the state by defining free action as voluntary (uncoerced) action, and proceeds to claim that ‘political liberty is the overall condition of a life over a segment of time in which one is not subject to coercion by political or state authorities, or is subject to coercion only to some limited extent’ (23). He then defines anarchism as ‘the view that all forms of human association ought to be voluntary, or . . . that people ought to have maximal human freedom’. If the basic assumptions of anarchism are true, he thinks, it follows that there ought to be no government. Because justifications for the state attempt either to undermine the basic assumptions of anarchism, or else to undermine the inference from those assumptions to the claim that there ought to be no government, Sartwell’s strategy is essentially to justify anarchism by refuting various arguments for the state. He focuses his attention on three classes of arguments – namely, social contract arguments (e.g. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau), utilitarian arguments (e.g. Bentham, Mills) and justicial arguments (e.g. Plato, Rawls).

I find Sartwell’s approach here disappointing, but not because his arguments are weak (they are, in fact, extremely trenchant). Those who are familiar with the literature will note more than a passing resemblance to the John Simmons’ *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (cited above). In that book, Simmons defines what he calls the ‘principle of voluntarism’, according to which the only morally significant relationships are those we voluntarily assume. He proceeds to argue that none of the major theories of legitimacy and political obligation in the tradition can adequately account for voluntarism, which in turn lays the groundwork for philosophical anarchism (there are no legitimate states because we have no general political obligations). Although Sartwell adopts a similar starting point – i.e. moral voluntarism – his individual arguments are, in fairness, quite novel, and he certainly does more than catalogue standard objections to arguments for the state. But as far as overall methodology is concerned, *Against the State* reminds me too much of Simmons’ more rigorously argued – and already classic – text. At best, Sartwell manages to bolster the general philosophic-anarchist critique of

the state but does not provide a case for its abolition. Because Sartwell's ostensive endorsement of the latter is what sets him apart from Simmons and Wolff, it is truly unfortunate that he does not address it. We can only hope, once again, that he will do so in future work. I therefore recommend this book as an excellent contribution to anti-statist philosophy but not, contrary to its title, as an introduction to anarchist political theory. A genuine introduction of this sort would make a greater effort to engage with the anarchist tradition, and this, in turn, would require a much wider critique than Sartwell provides.

### Notes

1. D. Mitrany, *The Functional Theory of Politics* (London: Martin Robertson, 1975), p. 98.
2. R. P. Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).
3. A. J. Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); and A. J. Simmons, 'Philosophical Anarchism', in J. Sanders and J. Narveson (eds) *For and Against the State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).