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On Philosophical Anarchism

Nathan J. Jun

In this essay I argue that what has been called “philosophical anarchism” in the academic literature bears little to no relationship with the historical anarchist tradition and, for this reason, ought not to be considered a genuine form of anarchism. As I will demonstrate, the classical anarchism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is to be distinguished from other political theories in regarding all hierarchical institutions and relationships—including, but not limited to, the state—as incorrigibly dominative or oppressive and, for this reason, immoral. Lastly, I argue that defenders of such institutions and relationships must take the challenge posed by classical anarchism seriously by engaging substantively with actual anarchist positions.

I.

The term “philosophical anarchism” was popularized in the nineteenth century by the American individualists Benjamin R. Tucker, Victor Yarros, and various other writers associated with Tucker’s journal *Liberty*.¹ For Tucker and the *Liberty* circle, “philosophical anarchism” referred principally to a practical rather than a theoretical orientation. Like revolutionary anarchists, the philosophical anarchists rejected the state on principle² and, like socialists of all stripes, stood opposed to the exploitation of workers under capitalism.³ Where the philosophical anarchists differed

1. W. McElroy, *Debates of Liberty: An Overview of Individualist Anarchism, 1881–1908* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 2. See B. Tucker, *Instead of a Book, By a Man Too Busy to Write One* (New York: Benjamin R. Tucker, 1893; V. Yarros, *Anarchism: Its Aims and Methods* (New York: Benjamin R. Tucker, 1887).

2. McElroy, *Debates of Liberty*, 19.

3. Although Tucker and his circle generally preferred the egoism of Max Stirner and the mutualism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to the communism of Peter

significantly from their more radical peers was in their preference for peaceful “evolutionary” approaches to the abolition of oppressive institutions (e.g., popular education and the creation of alternative institutions) over the violent “revolutionary” approaches advocated by the likes of Bakunin.⁴

Over the course of the past several decades the anarchism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has seldom been discussed in mainstream philosophical literature.⁵ In contrast, a certain kind of “philosophical anarchism,” represented most prominently by Robert Paul Wolff’s *In Defense of Anarchism*⁶ and Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State and Utopia*⁷ has received significant attention.⁸ It must be noted, however, that the use of the

Kropotkin. See E. Stringham, *Anarchy and the Law* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2007), 515.

4. McElroy, *Debates of Liberty*, 103. See also W. O. Reichert, “Toward a New Understanding of Anarchism,” *Western Political Quarterly* 20.4 (1967): 856–65, 856.
5. Exceptions include C. Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); A. Carter, *The Political Theory of Anarchism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); J. Clark, *Max Stirner’s Egoism* (London: Freedom, 1976); J. Clark, *The Philosophical Anarchism of William Godwin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); G. Crowder, *Classical Anarchism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); R. B. Fowler, “The Anarchist Tradition of Political Thought,” *Western Political Quarterly* 25 (1972): 738–52; D. Herzog, “Romantic Anarchism and Pedestrian Liberalism,” *Political Theory* 35.3 (2007): 313–33; I. Kramnick, “On Anarchism and the Real World: William Godwin and Radical England,” *American Political Science Review* 66.1 (1972): 114–28; P. McLaughlin, *Anarchism and Authority* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); P. McLaughlin, *Mikhail Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Theory of Anarchism* (New York: Algora, 2002); D. Miller, *Anarchism* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1984); D. Miller, “Kropotkin,” *Government and Opposition* 18 (1983): 319–38; D. Morland, *Demanding the Impossible? Human Nature and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Social Anarchism* (London: Cassell, 1997); S. Newman, ed., *Max Stirner* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011); D. Novak, “The Place of Anarchism in the History of Political Thought,” *Review of Politics* 20 (1958): 307–29; T. Perlin, ed., *Contemporary Anarchism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1979); A. Ritter, *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); A. Ritter, “Godwin, Proudhon and the Anarchist Justification of Punishment,” *Political Theory* 3.1 (1975): 69–87; and P. Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London: Routledge, 1980). Anarchism has fared much better in non-philosophical academic literature, as Paul McLaughlin (among many others) has pointed out. See *Anarchism and Authority*, 15.
6. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.
7. New York: Basic Books, 1974.
8. Representative examples include R. Dagger, “Philosophical Anarchism and Its Fallacies,” *Law and Philosophy* 19.3 (2000): 391–406; W. Edmundson, *Three*

term “philosophical anarchism” in these contexts differs significantly from the original meaning cited above. In these cases, “philosophical anarchism” refers merely to a principled skepticism toward the legitimacy and authority of states that is generally articulated in two forms:

- (a) *a posteriori philosophical anarchism*, which contends that all existing states are illegitimate,⁹ and
- (b) *a priori philosophical anarchism*, which contends that states are illegitimate by definition.¹⁰

Although both the “*a priori*” and “*a posteriori*” forms of philosophical anarchism typically assert that citizens of illegitimate states lack general political obligations, not all philosophical anarchists understand illegitimacy *in terms of* the lack of general political obligations, nor are all philosophers who recognize the lack of general political obligations committed to philosophical anarchism.¹¹ Unlike Tucker, contemporary philosophical anarchists are usually silent on economic issues, although a few are committed to broadly libertarian economic perspectives.¹²

The literature frequently makes a distinction between philosophical anarchism and “political” (also known as “strong” or “practical”) anarchism, a view which claims not only that states are illegitimate by definition (ala *a priori* philosophical anarchism) but also that the illegitimacy of states obligates (or at least permits) us to abolish states. While the former is considered a credible position worthy of serious consideration, the latter

Anarchical Fallacies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); C. Gans, *Philosophical Anarchism and Political Disobedience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); L. Green, *The Authority of the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); J. Horton, *Political Obligation* (London: Macmillan, 1992); G. Klosko, *Political Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); R. T. Long and T. R. Machan, *Anarchism/Minarchism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); S. Nathanson, *Should We Consent to be Governed?* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992); J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman, eds., *Nomos XIX: Anarchism* (New York: New York University Press, 1978); J. H. Reiman, *In Defense of Political Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); J. Sanders and J. Narveson, eds., *For and Against the State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996); R. Sartorius, “Political Authority and Political Obligation,” *Virginia Law Review* 67 (1981): 3–17; A. J. Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); and A. J. Simmons, “Philosophical Anarchism,” in Sanders and Narveson, *For and Against the State*, 19–40; For additional references, see Simmons, “Philosophical Anarchism,” 34n2.

9. See, for example, Simmons’s *Moral Principles and Philosophical Obligations* and “Philosophical Anarchism.”

10. See, for example, Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism*.

11. See, for example, Edmundson, *Three Anarchical Fallacies*.

12. This is especially true of various libertarian philosophers.

is seldom defended.¹³ More commonly it is simply ignored or dismissed as crackpottery.¹⁴ As Paul McLaughlin notes by way of summary:

According to the academic stereotype, [political] anarchism is theoretically nugatory. . . . Anarchism is . . . all about instinctive rebellion—understandable and occasionally justified and illuminating, perhaps, but ultimately irresponsible, immature, and unrealistic—and therefore better suited to popular youth culture than refined academic circles.¹⁵

A major problem with all such discussions is their tendency to overlook the fact that anarchism is a living tradition of political theory and practice that has existed in various forms for at least two centuries and is probably much older.¹⁶ Anarchism is not an “ism” in the same way that externalism, cognitivism, or naturalism are “isms”—that is, an abstract descriptor used by academic philosophers to position themselves within philosophical debates. The term, along with the theoretical and practical orientations it designates, not only predates Benjamin Tucker’s “philosophical anarchism” but also the various academic discussions of “philosophical anarchism.” For these reasons, it is eminently appropriate to inquire (1) whether “philosophical anarchism” as discussed in the contemporary literature has any real relation to the anarchist tradition and, (2) if it does not, whether it ought to be called “anarchism” at all.

Many philosophers have answered (2) in the negative without explicitly taking up (1). Chaim Gans, for example, argues that “philosophical anarchism”—presumably in comparison to “political anarchism”—is a “toothless” doctrine devoid of any real practical implications.¹⁷ In response, John Simmons writes:

13. Examples of Anglo-American philosophers who work within the tradition of “political anarchism” include Alan Carter, Samuel Clark, Benjamin Franks, and Paul McLaughlin. See, e.g., A. Carter, “Anarchism: Some Theoretical Foundations,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 16.3 (2011): 245–64; A. Carter, “Beyond Primacy: Marxism, Anarchism and Radical Green Political Theory,” *Environmental Politics* 19.6 (2010): 951–72; S. Clark, *Living Without Domination* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); B. Franks and M. Wilson, eds., *Anarchism and Moral Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009); P. McLaughlin, *Anarchism and Authority* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

14. See, e.g., Edmundson, *Three Anarchical Fallacies*, 32. See also B. Franks, “Anarchism and Analytic Philosophy,” in *The Continuum Companion to Anarchism*, ed. R. Kinna (New York: Continuum, 2012), 53–74, 54. There are important exceptions, as Franks notes, including Bertand Russell.

15. McLaughlin, *Anarchism and Authority*, 13–14.

16. Franks, “Anarchism and Analytical Philosophy,” 53–54.

17. For example, Gans, *Philosophical Anarchism and Political Disobedience*, 90; Miller, *Anarchism*, 6–7, 15; Nathanson, *Should We Consent To Be Governed?*, 54, 57, 86; Reiman, *In Defense of Political Philosophy*, xxiii–xxiv, 48.

It is . . . a matter of only terminological interest whether we call philosophical anarchism a form of true anarchism or instead argue that it is misnamed. I have located the essence of anarchism in its thesis of state illegitimacy; others might argue that its essence is rather advocacy of active opposition to and elimination of the state—in which case “philosophical anarchism” would be an unhappy name for a still perfectly defensible political philosophy.¹⁸

Although Gans’s judgment is accurate in my view, the problem isn’t just that Simmons’s brand of anarchism is practically inert, but that his characterization of anarchism—and, indeed, the prevailing understanding of anarchism in contemporary philosophical literature in general—lacks any real connection to the historic anarchist movement, let alone to the philosophical anarchism of Benjamin Tucker (a position that had a legitimate place, however marginal, within that movement). This is not merely a terminological issue, but a historical issue.

As I noted previously, anarchism is not an academic abstraction but a historical tradition comprising at least two centuries worth of thought and practice. None of the major thinkers in this tradition defend the sort of view that Simmons calls “anarchism.” Furthermore, although all major thinkers within this tradition—not just a handful of academic philosophers, as Simmons suggests—are committed to “advocacy of active opposition to and elimination of the state,” none of them regard such advocacy as the “essence” of anarchism. On the contrary, anarchism for these thinkers entails a rejection of *all* oppressive social, economic, and political institutions and relationships—not just the state (where “rejection” is understood not just as an abstract moral judgment, but also as the concrete advocacy and pursuit of their abolition). This is by way of saying that all forms of classical anarchism, including Tucker’s “philosophical” anarchism, are unquestionably “political” or “practical.”¹⁹ In fact, the distinction between “political anarchism” and “philosophical” anarchism” does not exist in the tradition; it only emerges in the rarefied context of twentieth-century academic philosophy.

On the most charitable interpretation, Simmons’s account, alongside other mainstream philosophical discussions of “anarchism,” rests on a kind of composition fallacy in which a necessary (but minor) part of anarchism—viz., the belief that all existing states are illegitimate under some description or other—suffices for the whole of anarchism. To refer to *anyone* who happens to have this belief as an “anarchist” strikes me as more than terminologically idiosyncratic; it is, rather, a straightforward category mistake. Again, believing that no legitimate states exist under some description or other may be a necessary condition for being an anarchist, but it

18. Simmons, “Philosophical Anarchism,” p. 28.

19. Novak, “The Place of Anarchism in the History of Political Thought,” 311.

doesn't come close to being a sufficient condition. Anarchism involves and has always involved much more than principled skepticism regarding the legitimacy of existing states and, for this reason, the answer to (2) above is unequivocally "no." The term "philosophical anarchism" as used in mainstream philosophical literature is an egregious misnomer that ought to be abolished in favor of a more accurate descriptor.

One of the only attempts to deal seriously with this problem has been made by Paul McLaughlin, who argues that anarchism is best understood as (a) a principled skepticism toward all forms of authority—including, but not limited to, the authority of the state—that (b) seeks to eradicate illegitimate forms of authority.²⁰ Anarchists, according to this view, claim to have strong and justifiable reasons both to doubt the legitimacy of authorities in general as well as to confront authorities that are demonstrably illegitimate. Although they do not necessarily contend, *ala a priori* anarchism, that legitimate authorities, political or otherwise, are logically or empirically impossible,²¹ they do believe, *ala strong anarchism*, that demonstrably illegitimate authorities are wrong and should be resisted. By framing anarchism in terms of authority rather than the state, McLaughlin avoids the terminological and conceptual confusion that besets other views, and his account is considerably more faithful to the historical anarchist tradition. For McLaughlin, skepticism toward authority is both a necessary as well as a sufficient condition for being an anarchist in a way that believing that no legitimate states exist is not—anyone who is an anarchist is necessarily a principled skeptic regarding authority as such, and anyone who is a principled skeptic toward authority as such is an anarchist. As skeptics, moreover, anarchists are not necessarily committed to *a priori* anarchism; McLaughlin's philosophical anarchism is essentially a form of *a posteriori* anarchism that differs from Simmons's and Wolff's views by (a) broadening the scope of anarchist critique; and (b) emphasizing the importance of resisting demonstrably illegitimate authorities (*ala strong anarchism*.)

Although clearly an improvement over other views, McLaughlin's account is not without shortcomings. In the first place, although it is unquestionably true that anarchists are skeptical of authority as such, I do not believe skepticism of this sort is *sufficient* for being an anarchist—that is, I do not believe that skepticism by itself adequately distinguishes anarchism as a political- theoretical position. Although it is certainly true that many if not most anarchists in the tradition have adopted principled skepticism towards authority in general, they have also regarded certain kinds of authority as illegitimate by definition. In fact, it is not authority *per se* that anarchists regard with skepticism—or, more commonly, reject outright—but

20. McLaughlin, *Anarchism and Authority*, 29.

21. *Ibid.*, 26.

rather certain kinds of hierarchically-organized institutions and relationships which anarchists regard as incorrigibly oppressive and, for this reason, immoral. (I will say more about this below.)

In the second place, however, I agree with Michael Freeden that the attempt to narrowly define anarchism (or any ideology or political-theoretical orientation) in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is misguided. According to Freeden, political ideologies are best understood, not as uniform, self-contained systems of thought, but as “clusters of ideas, beliefs, opinions, values, and attitudes usually held by identifiable groups that provide directives, even plans, of action for public policy-making in an endeavour to uphold, justify, change or criticize the social and political arrangements of a state or other political community.”²² As such, ideologies “display strong similarities [with political philosophies] in their morphology and that may overlap considerably in many of their normative and recommendatory features.”²³ He continues:

Traditionally, the exploration of political thought has been organized around the persons who have best expressed coherent political thinking, around the main overarching themes with which it has been concerned, around the formulation of philosophically valid political utterances, or around particular historical periods. But the basic units of thinking about politics are the concepts that constitute its main foci, just as words are the basic units of language, and . . . the argument is put forward that the analysis of political thought, as a scholarly enterprise related to the methodological interests of students of social phenomena, is most usefully promoted by proceeding from the conceptual morphologies it displays.²⁴

On Freeden’s view, ideological or political-theoretical orientations should be regarded as dynamic conceptual languages rather than static “belief systems.” Although various thinkers, theories, and texts may be described as speaking a common conceptual language (because they share certain “core” concepts), they do not all speak this language in the same dialect (because they do not share the same “adjacent” or “peripheral” concepts). All speakers of the anarchist language regard authority (including political authority) as a “core” concept, but this is scarcely the only concept that populates and ultimately distinguishes that language. In addition to other core concepts, there are various adjacent and peripheral concepts that help us to delineate the various “dialects” of anarchism (e.g., collectivism, communism, syndicalism, insurrectionism, and so on). Below I discuss one concept in

22. M. Freeden, “Ideology, Political Theory and Political Philosophy,” in *Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. G. Gaus and C. Kukathas (London: Sage, 2004): 3–17, 6.

23. M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1.

24. *Ibid.*

particular—opposition to hierarchy—that occupies a central place in the anarchist language.

II.

If my account thus far is correct, then what has been called “political anarchism”—the strong and typically *a priori* anarchism of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Tucker, *inter alia*—qualifies as genuine anarchism, whereas most of what has been called “philosophical anarchism” appears to be a counterfeit. Although “political anarchism” has not been taken seriously in the literature, as I noted previously, this is surely a result of its being so consistently misunderstood and misrepresented. Among the most common errors is the aforementioned tendency to conflate anarchism with anti-statism which, in fairness, may be partially attributable to etymological considerations. “Anarchism” comes from the Greek word ἀναρχία (*anarkhia*), which can be translated roughly as [the state of being] “without a ruler.” *Anarkhia*, in turn, comes from ἀναρχός (*anarkhos*), which can be translated variously as “without chief, ruler, leader, or authority,” “without a top or head,” or “without a beginning or first cause.”²⁵ Taken by itself, this would lead one to assume that anarchism is solely concerned with the rejection of political authority.

Although anarchists do believe that the authority of the state is arbitrary, oppressive, and, for these reasons, immoral, anarchism is not solely, or even chiefly, a principled rejection of the state. It is a principled rejection of all political, social, and economic institutions and relationships—including capitalism and organized religion, as well as the state—that are founded upon hierarchical or “top-down” authority. Proudhon writes, for example: “The economic idea of capitalism, the politics of government or of authority, and the theological idea of the Church are three distinct ideas, linked in various ways, yet to attack one of them is equivalent to attacking all of them.”²⁶ In a similar vein, Kropotkin writes, “It is not only against the abstract trinity of law, religion, and authority that we declare war. By becoming anarchists we declare war against all this wave of deceit, cunning, exploitation, vice—in a word, inequality—which they have poured into our hearts.”²⁷ Countless other examples could be provided. For present purposes, we may represent the authentic anarchist position in the form of a simple syllogism:

- Domination and oppression are necessarily immoral;
- Hierarchical institutions and relationships such as the state, capitalism, and the church necessarily dominate and oppress people;

25. P. Kropotkin, *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, ed. M. A. Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 284.

26. P. J. Proudhon, *What is Property?* (London: William Reeves, 1969), 43.

27. P. Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Pamphlets* (New York: Dover, 1970), 99.

- Necessarily immoral institutions and relationships ought to be abolished in favor of morally legitimate institutions and relationships;
- Therefore, hierarchical institutions and relationships are necessarily immoral and ought to be abolished in favor of morally legitimate institutions and relationships.

In order to analyze these claims we must first examine what is meant by the terms domination and oppression.

Domination may be understood, following Iris Marion Young, as “institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions.”²⁸ Anarchists such as Bakunin take for granted that a rational adult is autonomous, i.e., “competent to deal not only with the management of his or her personal life, but with its most important context: the *social* context.”²⁹ They also take for granted that rational, autonomous adults are moral equals; when Smith dominates Jones, she is preventing or inhibiting Jones from managing her own life—in other words, she is treating Jones as less than morally equal, thus violating Jones’s autonomy, her ability to think and act for herself in accordance with reason and conscience.³⁰ On the anarchist view, there can be no moral justification for Smith’s behavior if Jones is truly her moral equal. To dominate, or to allow oneself to be dominated, in this way is necessarily immoral.

Oppression can be defined, following Iris Marion Young and Ann Cudd, as a form of “systematic domination . . . which limits peoples’ freedoms, choices, and abilities.”³¹ Oppression operates by means of an asymmetrical exercise of power by one group over another group in a way that harms the latter to the benefit of the former.³² This can involve direct physical harm, as when the oppressor group uses violent coercion or force against the oppressed group,³³ or indirect harm, as when the oppressor group exploits, marginalizes, or disempowers the oppressed group, or when the oppressed group is denied significant political, social, or economic advantages.³⁴ Young

28. I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 38. There may be exceptions, as in the case of small children or others who are incapable of reasonably and responsibly choosing their own actions.

29. M. Bakunin, *Selected Writings*, ed. A. Lehning, trans. S. Cox and O. Stephens (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 202.

30. E. Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Mother Earth, 1910), 62–63; *Red Emma Speaks*, ed. A. K. Shulman (New York: Humanity Books, 1998), 435.

31. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 38; A. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52.

32. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 52.

33. *Ibid.*, 25.

34. *Ibid.*, 50.

makes it clear that oppression and domination are distinct. Domination is arbitrary when there is no morally justifiable reason why the dominated should be inhibited or prevented from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. Arbitrary domination is oppressive to the extent that it operates by means of the asymmetrical perpetration or threat of (direct or indirect) harm. For this reason anarchists regard oppression as an especially egregious form of domination that is to be opposed for the same reasons. If it is wrong to for Smith to dominate Jones because Jones is an autonomous being, it is at least as wrong, if not more so, for Smith (or the various social, economic, political, etc. groups to which Smith belongs) to personally benefit from harming Jones and others like her.

For the classical anarchists, certain kinds of institutions and relationships—viz., *hierarchies*—are dominative and oppressive by their very nature. An institution or relationship is hierarchical just in case the distribution of political, social, economic, etc. power among its parties is unequally distributed in a way that favors one group (e.g., politicians, bosses, whites, heterosexuals, etc.) over another group (citizens, workers, blacks, homosexuals, etc.) In such contexts, those with the larger share of power possess a kind of *de facto* authority over others that clearly inhibits or prevents them “from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions” and “limits [their] freedoms, choices, and abilities.” The authority in question is an example of what Richard Sylvan calls “opaque” or “closed” authorities, which

simply stand on their position or station . . . [or] appeal to a conventional rule or procedure (“that is how things are done” or “have always been done”) without being able to step beyond some rule book . . . which has been enacted (for reasons not open to, or bearing, examination) by a further substantially opaque authority.³⁵

Paul McLaughlin notes that “opaque” authorities are content-independent—i.e., their directives are self-justifying, serving as a reason for believing or acting independently of the action or belief prescribed.³⁶ If it turns out that there are not, or cannot be, content-independent reasons for recognizing and obeying opaque authorities, then opaque authorities are essentially arbitrary, which is precisely why they must compel recognition and obedience through arbitrary domination—i.e., they act without a morally legitimate reason to inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. As we have seen, anarchists reject this kind of domination on principle.

35. R. Sylvan, “Anarchism,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Goodin and P. Pettit (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993): 215–43, 221.

36. McLaughlin, *Anarchism and Authority*, 56.

Opaque authority is in direct contrast with “transparent” or “open” authorities:

Consider, for example, the relation of a student to an authority in some field of knowledge, who can in turn back up expert judgments by appeal to a further range of assessable evidence. . . . [A]nyone with time and some skill can proceed past the authority to assess claims made.³⁷

Bakunin summarizes the anarchist position well when he writes: “In the matter of boots, I refer to authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer. . . . But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect . . . to impose his authority upon me.”³⁸ In other words, although anarchists are skeptical of authority in general, they only reject those forms of (closed or opaque) authority that dominate and oppress people, whether accidentally or by definition. They are skeptical toward authority as such, moreover, precisely because authorities have, as a rule, a general capacity (or even tendency) to become oppressive, particularly in the context of hierarchical institutions and relationships.

Opaque authority, like oppression more generally, is typically implemented and enforced through direct harm (such as coercion and violence) or else indirect harm (such as disempowerment and disenfranchisement). Bakunin notes, for example, that opaque authority that purports to be “privileged, licensed, official, and legal, even if it arises from universal suffrage” is typically enforced through violence “to the advantage of a dominant minority of exploiters”³⁹—in other words, opaque authority necessarily “denotes violence, oppression, exploitation, and injustice raised into a system and made into the cornerstone of the existence of any society.”⁴⁰

Political anarchists like Bakunin oppose opaque authority for the same reason they oppose arbitrary domination and oppression more generally: because it violates the “self-respect and independence” of the individual.⁴¹ Compelling obedience to, or recognition of, authority through the direct or indirect perpetration of harm or the threat of harm constitutes a fundamental denial of individual autonomy, particularly when this harm is disproportionately applied against the dominated to the benefit of the dominator—i.e., when it functions as oppression. Since this is exactly how the *de facto* authorities that constitute hierarchies operate, there is no question that

37. Sylvan, “Anarchism,” 221.

38. M. Bakunin, *Selected Writings from Mikhail Bakunin* (St. Petersburg, FL: Red and Black, 2010), 32.

39. *Ibid.*, 35.

40. M. Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. and trans. S. Dolgoff (New York: Knopf, 1972), 134; cf. R. Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938), 17.

41. Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, 67.

hierarchies violate the dignity, self-respect, independence, and worth of the oppressed and, for this reason, should be regarded as immoral.

In short, anarchists oppose hierarchy because it presupposes opaque authority; opaque authority because it presupposes arbitrary domination coupled with the direct or indirect perpetration of harm or the threat of harm—i.e., oppression; and oppression because it is by definition at odds with individual autonomy and moral equality.

In this way, classical political anarchism, unlike philosophical anarchism, is more than a negative doctrine defined in terms of what it doubts or opposes. As Bakunin points out, for example, “we are convinced that anarchy, meaning the unrestricted manifestation of the liberated life of the people, must spring from liberty, equality, the new social order, and the force of the revolution itself against the reaction.” Likewise Kropotkin:

Anarchism, contrary to authority, is the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government—harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.⁴²

For the classical anarchists, the alternative to hierarchical institutions and relationships that dominate and oppress is, simply put, the creation of non-hierarchical (thus non-dominative and non-oppressive) institutions and relationships—i.e., institutions and relationships founded on voluntary association and mutual aid in which power is distributed equally and horizontally among free individuals. As far as the state is concerned, classical political anarchism may be understood as combining what A.J. Simmons calls “*a priori* anarchism”—the belief that states are illegitimate by definition—with what he calls “strong anarchism”—the belief that the illegitimacy of states provides a moral reason to oppose or abolish them. When states are seen as illegitimate by definition, it is precisely because they are hierarchies that operate by means of opaque authority and arbitrary domination. It must be reiterated, however, that the state is only one of many institutions that operate in this way and, for this reason, that anarchists oppose. Their real enemy is not the state—nor any particular social, political, or economic institution—but rather hierarchically-organized institutions and relationships in general.

As Paul McLaughlin notes, liberalism has traditionally “assume[d] the necessity of [opaque] political authority . . . or attempt[ed] to vindicate or provide a ‘certain foundation’ for a more or less limited form of it.”⁴³ A simi-

42. Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Pamphlets*, 284.

43. McLaughlin, *Anarchism and Authority*, 35–36.

lar attitude is taken toward private property in general and capitalism in particular. Some forms of socialism reject private property and capitalism while arguing that political authority is necessary—in this case, as a condition of possibility for abolishing capitalism and instituting socialism. Neither political philosophy can be said to exhibit a general opposition to, nor even a fundamental skepticism of, hierarchy and opaque authority; at best, they are interested in minimizing the deleterious effects of *certain* kinds of hierarchy. Anarchism, in contrast, rejects both political domination (in the form of the state) as well as economic exploitation (in the form of capitalism), to say nothing of the various other forms of institutional hierarchies that have existed and continue to exist (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) This is because anarchists are opposed to political, social, and economic hierarchies *as such*, i.e., regardless of the particular forms which these hierarchies take. For anarchists, it must be reiterated, hierarchically-organized institutions and relationships are dominative and oppressive by their very nature and are, for this reason, morally unjustifiable. Hierarchies violate the self-respect and autonomy of the individual and are egregiously harmful as well as thoroughly unnecessary. These claims are crucial in understanding and evaluating the foundational commitments of classical anarchism.

III.

Political anarchists do not deny that hierarchical institutions such as the state, capitalism, and patriarchy are capable of providing some benefits to society as a whole, including to the individuals they dominate and oppress. (States provide citizens with safety, order, and security; capitalism protects even the most exploited worker from starvation; and so on.) In many cases, these so-called benefits are outweighed by significant disadvantages to the dominated or oppressed that are proportionally advantageous to the oppressor. (For example, the more women are disempowered, the more social power accrues to patriarchy; the more citizens are repressed, the more political power accrues to the state; the more workers are exploited, the more economic power accrues to the capitalist class, etc.) In other cases, the benefits may be taken to outweigh the disadvantages. For political anarchists, however, what matters is not what hierarchical institutions do or are capable of doing in spite of being dominative or oppressive, but the fact that they *are* dominative or oppressive by their very nature. Political anarchists reject institutions and relationships that are based on asymmetrical distributions of power in practice, procedure, and process; they believe that such institutions and relationships are morally unjustifiable regardless of the “benefits” they provide or are capable of providing because, again, domination and oppression are morally wrong in themselves.

Although it is morally wrong to dominate and oppress others even if for the sake of some alleged greater good, this by itself does not provide a reason to abolish hierarchical institutions and relationships. If such institutions and relationships are or can be beneficial, then it is surely more reasonable to reform them in such a way as to make them non-dominative or non-oppressive. If it turns out, on the other hand, that these institutions and relationships provide little or no benefits for the dominated or oppressed, then we have no reason to reform them; we ought simply to abolish them. The same is true if it turns out that otherwise beneficial instances of domination or oppression cannot be reformed. In such cases, it no longer matters that they are or can be beneficial; because they are incorrigibly dominative or oppressive, and thus morally wrong, they ought simply to be abolished. As has been stressed repeatedly, however, political anarchists believe that some otherwise beneficial political, social, or economic hierarchies (e.g., the state and capitalism) cannot be reformed because they are dominative or oppressive by definition. If this is true, then we have a strong moral reason to abolish some otherwise beneficial political, social, or economic institutions or relationships.

Now it might be argued that merely recognizing that an institution or relationship (such as the state) ought to be abolished does not give one sufficient reason to actively pursue its abolition—a view that approximates what Simmons calls “weak anarchism.” After all, there may be strong prudential reasons for refraining from such activity; oppressive institutions are often extremely powerful, for example, and to oppose them may place oneself or others at risk of significant harm. Many political anarchists would argue, however, that to recognize that an immoral institution or relationship needs to be abolished is, at the same time, to recognize that it is morally right to abolish it and morally wrong not to abolish it. However, because the only way that immoral institutions or relationships can be abolished is if individual people take means to abolish them, and because any individual who is unwilling to take such means, or who takes contrary means, is effectively working to protect the institutions or relationships in question, it follows that any individual who recognizes that an institution or relationship needs to be abolished but fails to take active means to do so is working to protect the very institution or relationship that she recognizes needs to be abolished. At the same time, because she recognizes that it is morally right to abolish the institution or relationship in question, her failure to take active means to do so is itself morally wrong, regardless of the reasons.

One might object that this sets the bar too high. Suppose, for example, that one could immediately abolish the state simply by wishing it. Such a wish obviously would not eradicate *all* hierarchically-organized institutions and relationships; in fact, the sudden disappearance of states would arguably make at least some of these institutions and relationships even

more dominating and oppressive than they are at present. (For example, the abolition of state-sponsored labor and environmental regulations, public education, social welfare programs, etc. would facilitate greater and more egregious exploitation of workers and the poor by capitalist firms.) If an anarchist refused to make this wish, he or she would, in effect, be working to protect the state. However, it is not clear that there is anything wrong with this, particularly if it turns out that the sudden abolition of the state would increase the overall balance of domination and oppression existing in the world. On the contrary, limited support for, a toleration of, certain forms of hierarchy might be justified to the extent that this reduces the overall balance of domination and oppression in the short term, or if it is part of a long-term strategy to reduce and eliminate domination and oppression.

This objection strikes me as sound. Even if it is true that anarchists are perforce obligated to take active means to abolish dominating and oppressive institutions and relationships in general, this need not imply an “all or nothing” commitment to abolishing all such institutions and relationships at once. Anarchists have always acknowledged the existence of what Patricia Hill Collins calls “the matrix of domination”—a network of independent and mutually irreducible forms of domination which are nonetheless capable of intersecting and colluding with one another. There is no question that capitalism, for example, derives much of its power to oppress from the state, where the state, in turn, relies upon capitalism for much of its military power. If the goal is not to eradicate this or that form of hierarchy, but rather hierarchy as such, and if it is true that the capacity of a given hierarchy to dominate and oppress depends wholly or in part on its relationship to other hierarchies, then it is surely justified in some instances to support (or at least tolerate) some hierarchical institutions for the sake of reducing the overall balance of domination or oppression in the short-term, or for the sake of eradicating domination or oppression in the long-term. What forms this support (or tolerance) might take, or how much of it is appropriate, are tactical questions which have historically been the subject of rich and spirited debates among anarchists.

At the same time, the broader question of whether it is morally obligatory, or at least justifiable, to actively oppose hierarchy is all but settled for anarchists. Thinkers in the classical anarchist tradition—including non-revolutionaries such as Godwin and Tucker—take it for granted that immoral institutions and relationships should be abolished and that those who recognize this are morally obliged to take means to accomplish this end. In other words, even those classical anarchists who may be broadly described as “philosophical anarchists” endorse “political” or “strong” anarchism. This is another important sense in which contemporary iterations of “philosophical anarchism,” most of which endorse “weak anarchism,” diverge sharply from the historical anarchist tradition.

To their credit, philosophical anarchists of this sort have offered compelling reasons for believing that the benefits or advantages of the state are strongly outweighed by the disadvantages, not least of which that it is impossible (or at least very difficult) to reconcile opaque political authority with human freedom. Political anarchists go a step further by arguing that there are many kinds of hierarchical institutions and relationships—not just the state—which are incorrigibly dominating and oppressive and, for this reason, ought to be abolished.

Although philosophical anarchism, on the one hand, and various forms of radical egalitarianism, on the other, have enjoyed varying degrees of support in the literature, political anarchism has been consistently ignored or dismissed. There is no clear explanation for this, but one obvious problem, it seems to me, is the paucity of Anglophone philosophers who have actually bothered to engage the historical anarchist tradition. As a result, prejudice and caricature abound but there is precious little understanding of what anarchists really believe and why they believe it. Those philosophers who have done their homework have often failed to approach the anarchist tradition on its own terms—that is to say, they have gone looking for a formal academic tradition of the sort to which Marxism gave rise. Not finding one, they abruptly conclude that anarchism has nothing to offer philosophically. This is a mistake. The anarchist tradition has always been and continues to be revolutionary and propagandistic in character; even its most ambitious theoreticians tended to write with practical goals in mind. For this reason, reading anarchist texts often requires modes of interpretation and critique that are very different from the kinds used in conventional academic philosophy.

If I am right that one of the “core concepts” of historical anarchist theory is a principled rejection of and opposition to hierarchical institutions and relationships, then there at least two ways in which philosophers could (and should) engage substantively and honestly with genuine anarchism—first, by asking whether, why, and to what extent hierarchies are immoral; and second, by asking whether the hierarchical institutions and relationships that anarchists identify as incorrigibly dominative and oppressive are as anarchists describe them. If there is at least one instance of an oppressive hierarchy that could be shown to be morally justifiable on balance, this would certainly undermine classical anarchism. The same is true, albeit to a lesser extent, if one or more of the traditional objects of anarchist critique—e.g., the state or capitalism—could be shown to be non-dominative or non-oppressive, or at least capable of being made non-dominative or non-oppressive.

While it may be possible for one or both of these approaches to succeed, I do not believe that success is guaranteed or even easily attained. There are good reasons to believe that hierarchies operate by means of domination

and oppression, as defined above, and that domination and oppression are intuitively and self-evidently odious. This does not mean, of course, that they could not be morally justified in some instances, but it does suggest that any such justification would be the exception rather than the rule. The task of vindicating institutions and relationships that anarchists have identified as incorrigibly dominative or oppressive strikes me as arduous as well. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that many of the hierarchies anarchists have in mind (e.g., sexism and racism) could be anything other than dominative or oppressive. The same is true, albeit not as obviously, with regard to exploitative economic systems (such as capitalism) and opaque political authorities (including, *ex hypothesi*, all known instances of the state). In these and many other cases besides, the burden is very clearly on those who would defend the moral legitimacy of such institutions and relationships—either by demonstrating that they are not, in fact, dominative or oppressive, or else that their being dominative and oppressive is compatible with their being morally legitimate. If it is true that anarchism levels a clear and unambiguous challenge to the state, capitalism, and the like, those who would defend and advocate for these institutions cannot afford to dismiss anarchism out of hand.