

Philosophical anarchism: The view that there is no duty to obey the state, and that the State is not morally legitimate

We should be careful, first and foremost, to distinguish this view from other views that might be called “anarchist”. The philosophical anarchist position does *not* endorse overthrowing the state, nor does it say anything about any particular response that we ought to have to the existence of certain states.

Contemporary philosophical anarchist John Simmons claims that “Philosophical anarchists hold that there are good reasons not to oppose or disrupt at least some kinds of illegitimate states, reasons that outweigh any right or obligation of opposition. The practical stance with respect to the state, the philosophical anarchist maintains, should be one of careful consideration and thoughtful weighing of all the reasons that bear on action in a particular set of circumstances.” Cited in Wetman, Christopher Heath. Is There a Duty to Obey the Law? Cambridge University Press. 2005. pp. 24-25.

We’ll be looking at some arguments for the main PA position a little later on, but for now it will be of interest to say what advocates of PA might have to say about the State of Nature.

Why exactly is the state of nature to be avoided, according to the views we’ve seen so far?

- War of all against all (Hobbes)
- Disagreements about how to exercise the “Executive Power” that we all have to punish the wrongdoings of others will lead to unrest between people. (Locke)
- Our drive for self-improvement will eventually lead us to a situation in which we are not well-suited to survive without political arrangements (Rousseau)

But is the state of nature really that bad?

Anarchist suggestion: The problems that we encounter in civilized society are generally *caused* by the existence of government, and not *solved* by it

Let’s take this claim at face value. Does it look like the kind of view that we can consistently maintain?

It seems that a problem arises.

- 1) Suppose that the state really is an oppressive force that does not serve the interests of its citizens. How does it get to be that way?
- 2) Presumably, we’ll say this is because it has been influenced or corrupted by greedy individuals, or persons who are not willing to act for the benefit of all.
- 3) But how did those people get to be that way? We can’t say that the *State* made them that way, because then we’d be opening ourselves up to circular reasoning. But if we say that something *else* made them that way, then

shouldn't we really be focusing on that other thing to explain the source of human problems?

- 4) It seems like we need *some* mechanism to keep our (perhaps occasional) self-interested tendencies in check.

Illustrate circular reasoning: Appealing to the legitimacy of religious scripture by quoting passages from that very scripture.

Anarchist suggestion: Social control mechanisms can arise without the institution of a governmental authority. These might include things like peer pressure, shame, and the like.

What would this kind of scenario look like? We might have experts to assist with specialized questions and needs, and we might even have organized, cooperative schemes for the occasional military defense, etc.

Here's a question: What *distinguishes* this kind of situation from a state-regulated situation?

In the anarchist picture, participation in community schemes is strictly, and at all times, voluntary. No one has the authority to *force* you to do anything at all, on this model.

But now we've got a problem, no?

It seems that we have to concede that it's possible (if not highly likely) that at least some folks in an anarchist community will attempt to exploit and/or harm others. If we utterly refuse to do anything to actively restrain the behavior of these people, then the tenability of our community will be severely threatened? Hobbes has explained why this is—it only takes a few 'bad seeds' to give rise to suspicion and aggression. If, on the other hand, we *do* actively restrain their behavior, then we lose the distinctive feature of our community that makes it in any sense 'anarchistic'.

Maybe there are some small communities where no political authority, legitimate or otherwise, is required to enable the flourishing and secure the well being of participants. But it doesn't seem like this is the kind of thing that can be sustained in larger communities over long periods of time. It doesn't look like there's a non-governed situation that would be very pleasant to live in.

There's a separate issue that we haven't considered, though. Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau have given us hints so far as to why we might think the state is justified, but do they really hold up? This is something we're going to take up again.