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Further Thoughts on Science and Anarchy

Necessity and Liberty

Errico Malatesta

February 1926

Some comrades have been horrified by the observations I have made here and there recently on the relation between Science and Anarchy, and particularly by my having described, as absurd, Kropotkin's definition of Anarchy: *Anarchy is a concept of the universe based on a mechanistic interpretation of the phenomena which embrace nature as a whole, not excluding society.*

These comrades fail to understand what I meant, and clearly the fault is mine. Since they make me to have said that I believe science and philosophy have nothing to do with anarchism; and have indulged in demonstrating the great merits of science. Anarchism, they say, is a general concept of life, therefore a philosophy, without touching in any way upon the point I was really trying to raise for discussion.

I will try to explain myself more clearly.

Let's forget about philosophy, of which there are a thousand different definitions — and which often, and in fact, to quote the words of a philosopher who is himself not distinguished for exces-

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sive clarity — *is the art of obscuring what is clear*. As a layman I empirically, for my own personal use, divide what ‘philosophers’ say into two parts: what I understand and what I do not. As regards the part I understand I find truths, errors, doubts, hypotheses and problems — all of great interest but which, in the end, can all be subsumed under the heading of scientific inquiry — if, that is, logic and psychology may be included among the sciences. As regards the part I don’t understand, I sense daydreams, tautologies, arguments about words ... but since I don’t understand it is prudent to abstain from making judgements.

So let us remain on the solid ground of science proper.

The aim of scientific research is to study nature and discover events and the ‘laws’ that govern them; that is, the conditions under which an event *of necessity* occurs and *of necessity* re- occurs. A science comes into being when it can foresee what will happen, irrespective of any whys and wherefores. If an event does not occur as foreseen, then this implies error and abandonment of a particular line of inquiry. Chance, whim and caprice have no place in science, which is a quest for the inevitable, for what cannot happen in any other way, for what necessarily occurs.

But does such necessity, which links all naturally occurring events in time and space, and which it is the task of scientific endeavour to probe into and discover, embrace everything that happens in the universe, including psychological and social truths?

In saying yes to this, the mechanists believe that everything is subject to the same mechanical laws. Everything is predetermined by the laws of physics and chemistry — thus, the course of the stars, the blossoming of a flower, a lover’s heartbeat, the evolution of human history. And I freely admit that such a model seems beautiful and grandiose, less absurd and incomprehensible than the metaphysical models, and that if it could be proven it might give full spiritual satisfaction. But, despite all the pseudo-logical efforts of the determinists to reconcile the model with life and moral sentiment, there is no room at all for free will and liberty. Our life, and

that of society as a whole is, it seems, completely predestined and foreseeable, *ab eterno* and for all time, and in the minutest detail, and free will is illusion pure and simple, like Spinoza's stone which, falling, is aware that it falls and believes it does so because it wishes to.

If that is the case — and mechanists and determinists cannot fail to believe it without contradicting themselves — it is clearly absurd to wish to control one's own life, to desire to educate and be educated or to re-organise society in whatever manner. All this rushing around, preparing for a better future, stems from nothing but futile illusion, and would cease as soon as we had realised the fact. True, even illusion, even the absurd, would have to be seen as the inevitable products of the mechanical functions of the brain and as such would be recycled into the system. But, I repeat, what place is there then for free will and liberty, for the role of human endeavour in the life and destiny of humankind?

Since human beings believe, or at least hope, that they can be useful in their lives, there clearly does exist a creative force, a first cause, or first causes, independent of the physical world and of mechanical laws, and this force is what we call will.

Of course, to recognise the existence of such a force would mean to deny that the principles of causality and sufficient reason can be generally applied, and our logic is then thrown into confusion. But is that not always the case when we want to return to the origin of things? We do not know what free will is, but then do we know what matter and energy are? We know that events occur but not the reason behind those events. However hard we try we invariably come up against an effect without a cause, against a first cause — and if to explain events to ourselves we need first causes to be ever present and ever active, we shall accept their existence as a necessary, or at least convenient hypothesis.

Viewed in this light, the task of science is to discover what is determined (natural laws) and to set the boundary where the inevitable ends and freedom begins; and the great advantage of this

is in freeing human beings from the illusion that everything is possible and that they can endlessly increase their effective liberty. When the laws that subjected all matter to gravity were not known, people could believe they could fly at will, yet remained on earth. When science discovers the means of remaining in and moving through the air, then we shall have gained the genuine freedom to fly.

In conclusion, the main thrust of my argument is that the existence of a human will, able to produce new effects, independent of the mechanical laws of nature, is a *necessary precondition* for those who believe in the possibility of reforming society.