

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



# The Philosophy of Anarchism

Herbert Read

Herbert Read  
The Philosophy of Anarchism  
September 1940

Retrieved on March 1, 2010 from [dwardmac.pitzer.edu](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu)  
First published September 1940 by Freedom Press, 27, Red Lion  
Street, London, W.C.1,  
Second Impression, June 1941  
Third Impression, December 1941  
Fourth Impression, July 1942  
Fifth Impression, February 1943  
Sixth Impression, December 1944.  
Seventh Impression, November 1947.  
Originally printed in Great Britain by Express Printers, London.

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)

September 1940



# Contents

1 . . . . .	7
2 . . . . .	10
3 . . . . .	15
4 . . . . .	20
5 . . . . .	22

tion of spiritual values there can be no compromise. Half-measures have failed and now the inevitable catastrophe has overwhelmed us. Whether that catastrophe is the final paroxysm of a doomed system, leaving the world darker and more despairing than ever; or whether it is the prelude to a spontaneous and universal insurrection, will depend on a swift apprehension of the destiny that is upon us. Faith in the fundamental goodness of man; humility in the presence of natural law; reason and mutual aid — these are the qualities that can save us. But they must be unified and vitalized by an insurrectionary passion, a flame in which all virtues are tempered and clarified, and brought to their most effective strength.

The natural weapon of the working classes is the strike, and if I am told that the strike has been tried and has failed, I must reply that the strike as a strategic force is in its infancy. This supreme power which is in the hands of the working classes has never yet been used with intelligence and with courage. The general strike — our General Strike of 1926, for example — is an imbecility. What is required is a disposition of forces in depth, so that the vast resources of the workers can be organised in support of an attack on a vital spot. The State is just as vulnerable as a human being, and can be killed by the cutting of a single artery. But you must see that surgeons do not rush in to save the victim. You must work secretly and act swiftly: the event must be catastrophic. Tyranny, whether of a person or a class, can never be destroyed in any other way. It was the Great Insurgent himself who said: “Be ye wise as serpents.”

An insurrection is necessary for the simple reason that when it comes to the point, even your man of good will, if he is on the top, will not sacrifice his personal advantages to the general good. In the rapacious type of capitalism existing in this country and America, such personal advantages are the result of an exercise of low cunning hardly compatible with a sense of justice; or they are based on a callous speculation in finance which neither knows nor cares what human elements are involved in the abstract movement of market prices. For the last fifty years it has been obvious to anyone with an enquiring mind that the capitalist system has reached a stage in its development at which it can only continue under cover of imperial aggression — at which it can only extend its markets behind a barrage of high explosives. But even that realization — the realization that capitalism involves a human sacrifice beyond the lusts of Moloch — even that realization has not persuaded our rulers to humanize the social economy of nations. Nowhere — not even in Russia — have they abandoned the economic values upon which every society since the Middle Ages has vainly tried to base itself. It has only been proved, again and again, that on the ques-

*Ts'ui Chii said to Lao Tzu, “You say there must be no government. But if there is no government, how are men's hearts to be improved?” “The last thing you should do,” said Lao Tzu, “is to tamper with men's hearts. The heart of man is like a spring; if you press it down, it only springs up the higher... It can be hot as the fiercest fire; cold as the hardest ice. So swift is it that in the space of a nod it can go twice to the end of the world and back again. In repose, it is quiet as the bed at a pool; in action, mysterious as Heaven. A wild steed that cannot be tethered — such is the heart of man.”*

Chuang Tzu (Trans. Waley).

*Liberty, morality, and the human dignity of man consist precisely in this, that he does good, not because it is commanded, but because he conceives it, wills it, and loves it.*

Bakunin.

*A perfect society is that which excludes all private property. Such was the primitive well being which was overturned by the sin of our first fathers.*

St. Basil.

*If beans and millet were as plentiful as fire and water, such a thing as a bad man would not exist among the people.*

Mencius.

The characteristic political attitude of today is not one of positive belief, but of despair. Nobody seriously believes in the social philosophies of the immediate past. There are a few people, but a diminishing number, who still believe that Marxism, as an economic

system, offer a a coherent alternative to capitalism, and socialism has, indeed, triumphed in one country. But it has not changed the servile nature of human bondage. Man is everywhere still in chains. The motive of his activity remains economic, and this economic motive inevitably leads to the social inequalities from which he had hoped to escape. In face of this double failure, of capitalism and of socialism, the desperation of the masses has taken shape as fascism — a revolutionary but wholly negative movement which aims at establishing a selfish organization of power within the general chaos. In this political wilderness most people are lost, and if they do not give way to despair, they resort to a private world of prayer. But others persist in believing that a new world could be built if only we would abandon the economic concepts upon which both socialism and capitalism are based. To realize that new world we must prefer the values of freedom and equality above all other values — above personal wealth, technical power and nationalism. In the past this view has been held by the world's greatest seers, but their followers have been a numerically insignificant minority, especially in the political sphere, where their doctrine has been called *anarchism*. It may be a tactical mistake to try and restate the eternal truth under a name which is ambiguous — for what is “without ruler,” the literal meaning of the word, is not necessarily “without order,” the meaning often loosely ascribed to it. The sense of historical continuity, and a feeling for philosophical rectitude cannot, however, be compromised. Any vague or romantic associations which the word has acquired are incidental. The doctrine itself remains absolute and pure. There are thousands, if not millions, of people who instinctively hold these ideas, and who would accept the doctrine if it were made clear to them. A doctrine must be recognized by a common name. I know of no better name than Anarchism. In this essay I shall attempt to restate the fundamental principles of the political philosophy denoted by this name.

partly because it is always a mistake to build *a priori* constitutions. The main thing is to establish your principles — the principles of equality, of individual freedom, of workers' control. The community then aims at the establishment of these principles from the starting — point of local needs and local conditions. That they must be established by revolutionary methods is perhaps inevitable. But in this connection I would like to revive the distinction made by Max Stirner between revolution and insurrection. Revolution “consists in an overturning of conditions, of the established condition or status, the State or society, and is accordingly a political or social act.” Insurrection “has for its unavoidable consequence a transformation of circumstances, yet does not start from it but from men's discontent with themselves, is not an armed rising, but a rising of individuals, a getting up, without regard to the arrangements that spring from it.” Stirner carried the distinction farther, but the point I wish to make is that there is all the difference in the world between a movement that aims at an exchange of political institutions, which is the bourgeois socialist (Fabian) notion of a revolution; and a movement that aims at getting rid of these political institutions altogether. An insurrection, therefore, is directed against the State as such, and this aim will determine our tactics. It would obviously be a mistake to create the kind of machinery which, at the successful end of a revolution, would merely be taken over by the leaders of the revolution, who then assume the functions of a government. That is out of the frying pan into the fire. It is for this reason that the defeat of the Spanish Government, regrettable in that it leaves the power of the State in still more ruthless hands, is to be looked upon with a certain indifference; for in the process of defending its existence the Spanish Government had created, in the form of a standing array and a secret police, all the instruments of oppression, and there was little prospect that these instruments would have been discarded by the particular group of men who would have been in control if the war had ended in a Government victory.

lectives, just as the old minor court dealt with all offences against the peace of the parish. If it is true that certain dangerous tendencies will persist, these must be kept in check. "Kept in check" is the cliché that first springs to the mind, but it indicates the repressive methods of the old morality. The more fashionable word would be "sublimated," and by this we mean the devising of harmless outlets for emotional energies which, when repressed, become evil and anti-social. The aggressive instincts, for example, are expended in competitive games of various kinds — the most playful nation is even now the least aggressive.

The whole case for anarchism rests on a general assumption which makes detailed speculations of this kind quite unnecessary. The assumption is that the right kind of society is an organic being not merely analogous to an organic being, but actually a living structure with appetites and digestions, instincts and passions, intelligence and reason. Just as an individual by a proper balance of these faculties can maintain himself in health, so a community can live naturally and freely, without the disease of crime. Crime is a symptom of social illness — of poverty, inequality and restriction.<sup>8</sup> Rid the social body of these illnesses and you rid society of crime. Unless you can believe this, not as an ideal or fancy, but as a biological truth, you cannot be an anarchist. But if you do believe it, you must logically come to anarchism. Your only alternative is to be a sceptic and authoritarian — a person who has so little faith in the natural order that he will attempt to make the world conform to some artificial system of his own devising.

## 5

I have said little about the actual organization of an anarchist community, partly because I have nothing to add to what has been said by Kropotkin and by contemporary syndicalists like Dubreuil;

---

<sup>8</sup> See note 3

Let us begin by asking a very simple question; What is the measure of human progress? There is no need to discuss whether such progress exists or not, for even to come to a negative conclusion we must have a measure.

In the evolution of mankind there has always been a certain degree of social coherence. The earliest records of our species point to group organizations — the primitive horde, nomadic tribes, settlements, communities, cities, nations. As these groups progressed in numbers, wealth and intelligence, they subdivided into specialised groups — social classes, religious sects, learned societies and professional or craft unions. Is this complication or articulation of society in itself a symptom of progress? I do not think it can be described as such in so far as it is merely a quantitative change. But if it implies a division of men according to their innate abilities, so that the strong man does work requiring great strength and the subtle man does work requiring skill or sensibility, then obviously the corn unity as a whole is in a better position to carry on the struggle for a qualitatively better life.

These groups within a society can be distinguished according to whether, like an army or an orchestra, they function as a single body; or whether they are united merely to defend their common interests and otherwise function as separate individuals. In one case an aggregation of impersonal units to form a body with a single purpose; in the other case a suspension of individual activities for the purpose of rendering mutual aid.

The former type of group — the army, for example — is historically the most primitive. It is true that secret societies of medicine-men appear quite early on the scene, but such groups are really of the first type they act as a group rather than as separate individuals. The second type of group — the organization of individuals for the active promotion of their common interests — comes relatively late in social development. The point I am making is that in the

more primitive forms of society the individual is merely a unit; in more developed forms of society he is an independent personality.

This brings me to my measure of progress. Progress is measured by the degree of differentiation within a society. If the individual is a unit in a corporate mass, his life is not merely brutish and short, but dull and mechanical. If the individual is a unit on his own, with space and potentiality for separate action, then he may be more subject to accident or chance, but at least he can expand and express himself. He can develop — develop in the only real meaning of the word — develop in consciousness of strength, vitality and joy.

All this may seem very elementary, but it is a fundamental distinction which still divides people into two camps. You might think that it would be the natural desire of every man to develop as an independent personality, but this does not seem to be true. Because they are either economically or psychologically predisposed, there are many people who find safety in numbers, happiness in anonymity, and dignity in routine. They ask for nothing better than to be sheep under a shepherd, soldiers under a captain, slaves under a tyrant. The few that must expand become the shepherds, the captains and leaders of these willing followers.

Such servile people exist by the million, but again I ask: What is our measure of progress? And again I answer that it is only in the degree that the slave is emancipated and the personality differentiated that we can speak of progress. The slave may be happy, but happiness is not enough. A dog or a cat can be happy, but we do not therefore conclude that such animals are superior to human beings — though Walt Whitman, in a well-known poem, holds them up for our emulation. Progress is measured by richness and intensity of experience — by a wider and deeper apprehension of the significance and scope of human existence.

Such is, indeed, the conscious or unconscious criterion of all historians and philosophers. The worth of a civilization or a culture is not valued in the terms of its material wealth or military power, but

prevails over the whole economic life of the country, it should function better still and provide a standard of living far higher than that realized under any previous form of social organization.

I do not intend to repeat in any detail the syndicalist proposals for the organization of production and distribution. The general principle is clear: each industry forms itself into a federation of self-governing collectives; the control of each industry is wholly in the hands of the workers in that industry, and these collectives administer the whole economic life of the country. That there will be something in the nature of a parliament of industry to adjust mutual relations between the various collectives and to decide on general questions of policy goes without saying, but this parliament will be in no sense an administrative or executive body, It will form a kind of industrial diplomatic service, adjusting relations and preserving peace, but possessing no legislative powers and no privileged status. There might also be a corresponding body to represent the interests of the consumers, and to arrange questions of price and distribution with the collectives.

Admittedly there will be all sorts of practical difficulties to overcome, but the system is simplicity itself compared with the monster of centralized state control, which sets such an inhuman distance between the worker and the administrator that there is room for a thousand difficulties; to intervene. Once you make subsistence and not profit the motive for association and mutual aid, there it everything to be said for local control, individual initiative and absolute equality. Otherwise we may be sure that some *deus ex machina* will be controlling things for his own benefit, and perhaps putting a spoke in the wheel for his own sadistic satisfaction.

The only other practical problem to consider at this stage is what I will call the interpretation of equity rather than the administration of justice. Obviously the great mass of civil and criminal proceedings will simply disappear with the disappearance of the profit motive; such as remain unnatural act of acquisitiveness, of anger and self-indulgence — will to a great extent be dealt with by the col-



chists. In that country of potential renaissance anarchism has inspired, not only heroes but even saints — a new race of men whose lives are devoted, in sensuous imagination and in practice, to the creation of a new type of human society.

#### 4

These are the resounding phrases of a visionary, it will be said, and not the practical accents of “constructive” socialism. But the scepticism of the so-called practical man is destructive of the only force that can bring a socialist community into existence. It was always prophesied, in the pre-war years, that State socialism was a visionary ideal, impossible of realisation. Apart from the fact that every industrial country in the world has been moving rapidly towards State socialism during the last quarter of a century, there is the example of Russia to prove how very possible a central organization of production and distribution is, provided you have visionaries ruthless enough, and in this case inhuman enough, to carry an ideal into practice. I do not believe that this particular kind of social organization can endure for long, simply because, as I have already suggested, it is not organic. But if such an arbitrary (or, if you prefer the word, logical) form of society can be established even for a few years, how much more likely it is that a society which does not contradict the laws of organic growth can be established and will endure. A beginning was being made in Spain, in spite of the Civil War and all the restrictions that a condition of emergency implied. The textile industry of Alcoy, the wood industry in Cuenca, the transport system in Barcelona — these are a few examples of the many anarchist collectives which were functioning efficiently for more than two years.<sup>7</sup> It has been demonstrated beyond any possibility of denial that whatever may be the merits or demerits of the anarcho-syndicalist system, it can and does work. Once it

---

<sup>7</sup> See note 3

by the quality and achievements of its representative individuals — its philosophers, its poets and its artists.

We might therefore express our definition of progress in a slightly more precise form. Progress, we might say, is the gradual establishment of a qualitative differentiation of the individuals within a society.<sup>1</sup> In the long history of mankind the group is to be regarded as an expedient — an evolutionary aid. It is a means to security and economic well-being: it is essential to the establishment of a civilization. But the further step, by means of which a civilization is given its quality or culture, is only attained by a process of cellular division, in the course of which the individual is differentiated, made distinct from and independent of the parent group. The farther a society progresses, the more clearly the individual becomes the antithesis of the group.

At certain periods in the history of the world a society has become conscious of its personalities: it would perhaps be truer to say that it has established social and economic conditions which permit the free development of the personality. The great age of Greek civilization is the age of the great personalities of Greek poetry, Greek art and Greek oratory: and in spite of the institution of slavery, it can be described, relatively to the ages which preceded it, as an age of political liberation. But nearer our time we have the so-called Renaissance, inspired by this earlier Hellenic civilization, and even more conscious of the value of free individual development. The European Renaissance is an age of political confusion; but in spite of tyrannies and oppression, there is no doubt that compared with the previous period,<sup>2</sup> it also was an age of lib-

---

<sup>1</sup> It is worth observing that this is Plato's measure of progress in the *Republic*, II, 369 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Stylistically it is no longer possible to regard the Renaissance as an epoch which begins arbitrarily about 1400. Giotto and Masaccio can fairly be regarded as the culmination of Gothic art no less than as the forerunners of Renaissance art. There was actually a continuous process of growth, which began imperceptibly as the new force of Christianity penetrated the dead forms of late Roman art, which

eration. The individual once more comes into his own, and the arts are cultivated and appreciated as never before. But still more significantly, there arises a consciousness of the very fact that the value of a civilization is dependent on the freedom and variety of the individuals composing it. For the first time the personality is deliberately cultivated as such; and from that time until to-day it has not been possible to separate the achievements of a civilization from the achievements of the individuals composing it. Even in the sciences we now tend to think of the growth of knowledge in particular and personal terms of physics, for example, as a line of individuals stretching between Galileo and Einstein.

## 2

I have not the slightest doubt that this form of individuation represents a higher stage in the evolution of mankind. It may be that we are only at the beginning of such a phase — a few centuries are a short time in the history of a biological process. Creeds and castes, and all forms of intellectual and emotional grouping, belong to the past. The future unit is the individual, a world in himself, self-contained and self-creative, freely giving and freely receiving, but essentially a free spirit.

It was Nietzsche who first made us conscious of the significance of the individual as a term in the evolutionary process — in that part of the evolutionary process which has still to take place. Nevertheless, there exists in Nietzsche's writings a confusion which must be avoided. That it can be avoided is due mainly to scientific discoveries made since Nietzsche's day, so Nietzsche must to some extent

---

reached maturity in the Gothic style of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and which then grew in richness and complexity as it became more personal and individual during the 14<sup>th</sup> and succeeding two centuries. From an esthetic point of view the earlier and later phases of this process (Gothic and Renaissance) cannot be judged absolutely: what the one gains from co-operative unity it loses in variety, and vice versa.

Mexico, perhaps in Spain, perhaps in the United States: it is impossible to say where, because even the germ of such a new society is nowhere evident and its full formation lies deeply buried in the future.

I am not a Christian revivalist — I have no religion to recommend and none to believe in. I merely affirm, on the evidence of the history of civilizations, that a religion is a necessary element in any organic society.<sup>5</sup> And I am so conscious of the slow process of spiritual development that I am in no mood to look for a new religion, much less expect to find one. I would only venture one observation. Both in its origins and development, up to its zenith, religion is closely associated with art. Religion and art are, indeed, if not alternative modes of expression, modes intimately associated. Apart from the essentially aesthetic nature of religious ritual; apart, too, from the dependence of religion on art for the visualization of its subjective concepts; there is besides, an identity of the highest forms of poetic and mystic expression. Poetry, in its intensest and most creative moments, penetrates to the same level of the unconscious as mysticism. Certain writers — and they are among the greatest — St. Francis, Dante, St. Theresa, St. John of the Cross, Blake — rank equally as poets and as mystics. For this reason it may well happen that the origins of a new religion will be found in art rather than in any form of moralistic revivalism.<sup>6</sup>

What has all this to do with anarchism? Merely this: socialism of the Marxist tradition, that is today, state socialism, has so completely cut itself off from religious sanctions and has been driven to such pitiful subterfuges in its search for substitutes for religion, that by contrast anarchism, which is not without its mystic strain, is a religion itself. It is possible, that is to say, to conceive a new religion developing out of anarchism. During the Spanish Civil War many observers were struck by the religious intensity of the anar-

---

<sup>5</sup> See note 3

<sup>6</sup> See note 3

litical or racial policy to make a nice convenient creed. A prophet, like a poet, is born. But even granted your prophet, you are still far from the establishment of a religion. It needed five centuries to build the religion of Christianity on the message of Christ. That message had to be moulded, enlarged and to a considerable extent distorted until it expressed what Jung has called the collective unconscious — that complex of psychological factors which gives cohesion to a society. Religion, in its later stages, may well become the opium of the people; but whilst it is vital it is the only force which can hold a people together — which can supply them with a natural authority to appeal to when their personal interests clash.

I call religion a natural authority, but it has usually been conceived as a supernatural authority. It is natural in relation to the morphology of society; supernatural in relation to the morphology of the physical universe. But in either aspect it is in opposition to the artificial authority of the 'State. The State only acquires its supreme authority when religion begins to decline, and the great struggle between Church and State, when, as in modern Europe, it ends so decisively in favour of the State, is from the point of view of the organic life of a society, eventually fatal. It is because modern socialism has been unable to perceive this truth and has instead linked itself to the dead hand of the State, that everywhere socialism is meeting its defeat. The natural ally of socialism was the Church, though admittedly in the actual historical circumstances of the nineteenth century it was difficult to see this. The Church was so corrupted, so much a dependency of the ruling classes, that only a few rare spirits could see through appearances to the realities, and conceive socialism in the terms of a new religion, or more simply as a new reformation of Christianity.

Whether, in the actual circumstances of today, it is still possible to find a path from the old religion to a new religion is doubtful. Christianity has so compromised itself that any reformation that would be drastic enough is almost inconceivable. A new religion is more likely to arise step by step with a new society — perhaps in

be excused. I refer to the discoveries of psycho-analysis. Freud has shown one thing very clearly: that we only forget our infancy by burying it in the unconscious; and that the problems of this difficult period find their solution under a disguised form in adult life. I do not wish to import the technical language of psycho-analysis into this discussion, but it has been shown that the irrational devotion which a group will show to its leader is simply a transference of an emotional relationship which has been dissolved or repressed within the family circle. When we describe a king as "the Father of his People," the metaphor is an exact description of an unconscious symbolism. Moreover, we transfer to this figure — head all sorts of imaginary virtues which we ourselves would like to possess — it is the reverse process of the scapegoat, who is the recipient of our secret guilt.

Nietzsche, like the admirers of our contemporary dictators, did not sufficiently realize this distinction, and he is apt to praise as a superman a figure who is merely inflated with the unconscious desires of the group. The true superman is the man who holds himself aloof from the group — a fact which Nietzsche acknowledged on other occasions. When an individual has become conscious, not merely of his "Eigentum," of his own closed circuit of desires and potentialities (at which stage he is an egoist), but also of the laws which govern his reactions to the group of which he is a member, then he is on the way to become that new type of human being which Nietzsche called the Superman.

The individual and the group — this is the relationship out of which spring all the complexities of our existence and the need for unravelling and simplifying them. Conscience itself is born of this relationship, and all those instincts of mutuality and sympathy which become codified in morals. Morality, as has often been pointed out, is antecedent to religion — it even exists in a rudimentary form among animals. Religion and politics follow, as attempts to define the instinctive conduct natural to the group, and finally you get the historical process only too well known to us, in which

the institutions of religion and politics are captured by an individual or a class and turned against the group which they were designed to benefit. Man finds his instincts, already deformed by being defined, now altogether inhibited. The organic life of the group, a self-regulative life like the life of all organic entities, is stretched on the rigid frame of a code. It ceases to be life in any real sense, and only functions as convention, conformity and discipline.

There is a distinction to be made here between a discipline imposed on life, and the law which is inherent in life. My own early experiences in war led me to suspect the value of discipline, even in that sphere where it is so often regarded as the first essential for success. It was not discipline, but two qualities which I would call initiative and free association, that proved essential in the stress of action. These qualities are developed individually, and tend to be destroyed by the mechanical routine of the barrack square. As for the unconscious obedience which discipline and drill are supposed to inculcate, it breaks as easily as eggshell in the face of machine-guns and high explosives.

The law which is inherent in life is of an altogether different kind. We must admit "the singular fact," as Nietzsche called it, "that everything of the nature of freedom, elegance, boldness, dance, and masterly certainty, which exists or has existed, whether it be in thought itself, or in administration, or in speaking and persuading, in art just as in conduct, has only developed by the means of the tyranny of such arbitrary law; and in all seriousness, it is not at all improbable that precisely this is 'nature and 'natural.'" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §188.) That 'nature' is penetrated throughout by 'law' is a fact which becomes clearer with every advance of science; and we need only criticise Nietzsche for calling such law 'arbitrary.' What is arbitrary is not the law of nature, in whatever sphere it exists, but man's interpretation of it. The only necessity is to discover the true laws of nature and conduct our lives in accordance with them.

activity," and therefore to throw suspicion on any social philosophy which arbitrarily excludes religion from the organization it proposes for society.

It is already clear, after twenty years of socialism in Russia, that if you do not provide your society with a new religion, it will gradually revert to the old one. Communism has, of course, its religious aspects, and apart from the gradual readmission of the Orthodox Church,<sup>4</sup> the deification of Lenin (sacred tomb, effigies, creation of a legend — all the elements are there) is a deliberate attempt to create an outlet for religious emotions. Still more deliberate attempts to create the paraphernalia of a new creed are being made in Germany, where the necessity for a religion of some kind has never been officially denied. In Italy Mussolini has been far too wily to do anything but come to terms with the prevailing Catholic Church. Far from scoffing at these irrational aspects of communism and fascism, we should rather only criticize them for their stupidity — for their lack of any real sensuous and aesthetic content, for the poverty of their ritual, and above all for their misunderstanding of the function of poetry and imagination in the life of the community.

We may be sure that out of the ruins of our capitalist civilization a new religion will emerge, just as Christianity emerged from the ruins of the Roman civilization. Socialism, as conceived by its pseudo-historical materialists, is not such a religion, and never will be. And though, from this point of view, it must be conceded that Fascism has shown more imagination, it is in itself such a phenomenon of decadence the first defensive awareness of the fate awaiting the existing social order — that its ideological superstructure is not of much permanent interest. For a religion is never a synthetic creation — you cannot select your legends and saints from the mythical past and combine them with some kind of po-

---

<sup>4</sup> For the present relations between the Soviet Government and the Church, see A. Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma* (Routledge, 1940), pp. 160–5.

peded by all those legal and economic prejudices which the present organization of society entails.

It will be said that I am appealing to mystical entities, to idealistic notions which all good materialists reject. I do not deny it. What I do deny is that you can build any enduring society without some such mystical ethos. Such a statement will shock the Marxian socialist, who, in spite of Marx's warnings, is usually a naive materialist. Marx's theory — as I think he himself would have been the first to admit — was not a universal theory. It did not deal with all the facts of life or only dealt with some of them in a very superficial way. Marx rightly rejected the unhistorical methods of the German metaphysicians, who tried to make the facts fit a pre-conceived theory. He also, just as firmly, rejected the mechanical materialism of the eighteenth century rejected it on the grounds that though it could explain the existing nature of things, it ignored the whole process of historical development — the universe as organic growth. Most Marxians forget the first thesis on Feuerbach, which reads: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism that of Feuerbach included — is that the object, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively." Naturally, when it came to interpreting the history of religion, Marx would have treated it as a social product; but that is far from treating it as an illusion. Indeed, the historical evidence must tend altogether in the opposite direction, and compel us to recognize in religion a social necessity. There has never been a civilization without its corresponding religion, and the appearance of rationalism and scepticism is always a symptom of decadence.

Admittedly there is a general fund of reason to, which all civilizations contribute their share and which includes an attitude of comparative detachment from the particular religion of one's epoch. But to recognize the historical evolution of a phenomenon like religion does not explain it away. It is far more likely to give it a scientific justification, to reveal it as a necessary "human sensuous

The most general law in nature is equity — the principle of balance and symmetry which guides the growth of forms along the lines of the greatest structural efficiency. It is the law which gives the leaf as well as the tree, the human body and the universe itself, an harmonious and functional shape, which is at the same time objective beauty. But when we use the expression: the law of equity, a curious paradox results. If we look up the dictionary definition of equity we find: "recourse to principles of justice to correct or supplement law." As so often, the words we use betray us: we have to confess, by using the word equity, that the common statute law which is the law imposed by the State is not necessarily the natural or just law; that there exist principles of justice which are superior to these man-made laws-principles of equality and fairness inherent in the natural order of the universe.

The principle of equity first came into evidence in Roman jurisprudence and was derived by analogy from the physical meaning of the word. In a classical discussion of the subject in his book on Ancient Law, Sir Henry Maine points out that the *Aequitas* of the Romans does in fact imply the principle of equal or proportionate distribution. "The equal division of numbers or physical magnitudes is doubtless closely entwined with our perceptions of justice; there are few associations which keep their ground in the mind so stubbornly or are dismissed from it with such difficulty by the deepest thinkers." "The feature of the *Jus Gentium* which was presented to the apprehension of a Roman by the word *Equity*, was exactly the first and most vividly realised characteristic of the hypothetical state of nature. Nature implied symmetrical order, first in the physical world, and next in the moral, and the earliest notion of order doubtless involved straight lines, even surfaces, and measured distances." I emphasize this origin of the word because it is very necessary to distinguish between the laws of nature (which, to avoid confusion, we ought rather to call the laws of the physical universe) and that theory of a pristine state of nature which was made the basis of Rousseau's sentimental egalitarianism. It was.

this latter concept which, as Maine dryly remarked, “helped most powerfully to bring about the grosser disappointments of which the first French Revolution was fertile.” The theory is still that of the: Roman lawyers, but the theory is, as it were, turned upside down. “The Roman had conceived that by careful observation of existing institutions parts of them could be singled out which either exhibited already, or could by judicious purification be made. to exhibit, the vestiges of that reign of nature whose reality he faintly affirmed. Rousseau’s belief was that a perfect social order could be evolved from the unassisted consideration of the natural state, a social order wholly irrespective of the actual condition of the world and wholly unlike it. The great difference between the views is that one bitterly and broadly condemns the present for its. unlikeness to the ideal past; while the other, assuming the present to be as necessary as the past, does, not affect to disregard or censure it.”

I am not going to claim that modern anarchism has any direct relation to Roman jurisprudence; but I do claim that it has its basis in the laws of nature rather than in the state of nature. It is based on analogies derived from the simplicity and harmony of universal physical laws, rather than on any assumptions of the natural goodness of human nature — and this is precisely where it begins to diverge fundamentally from democratic socialism, which goes back to Rousseau, the true founder of state socialism.<sup>3</sup> Though state socialism may aim at giving to each according to his needs, or, as nowadays in Russia, according to his deserts, the abstract notion of equity is really quite foreign to its thought. *The tendency of modern socialism is to establish a vast system of statutory law against which there no longer exists a plea in equity. The object of anarchism, on the other hand, is to extend the principle of equity until it altogether supersedes statutory law.*

---

<sup>3</sup> This is clearly demonstrated by Rudolf Rocker in *Nationalism and Culture*. (New York, 1937.)

This distinction was already clear to Bakunin, as the following quotation will show:

“When we speak of justice, we do not mean what is laid down in codes and in the edicts of Roman jurisprudence, founded for the most part on acts of violence, consecrated by time and the benedictions of some church, whether pagan or christian, — and as such accepted as absolute principles from — which the rest can be deduced logically enough; we mean rather that justice which is based solely on the conscience of mankind, which is present in the conscience of each of us, even in the minds of, children, and which is simply translated as equalness (equation).

“This justice which is universal but which, thanks to the abuse of force and to religious influences, has never yet prevailed, neither in the political nor in the juridical, nor in the economic world this universal sense of justice must be made the basis of the new world. Without it no liberty, no republic, no prosperity, no peace!”

(*Oeuvres*, 1 (1912), pp.54–5.)

### 3

Admittedly a system of equity, no less than a system of law, implies a machinery for determining and administering its principles. I can imagine no society which does not embody some method of arbitration. But just as the judge in equity is supposed to appeal to universal principles of reason, and to ignore statutory law when it comes into conflict with these principles, so the arbiter in an anarchist community will appeal to these same principles, as determined by philosophy or common sense; and will do so unim-