

# **What is Authority**

Mikhail Bakunin

1870

# Contents

Translator's note . . . . .	3
What is Authority . . . . .	3

## Translator's note

This passage is generally known as part of “God and the State” (*Dieu et l'État*, first published in 1882), but it appears in Bakunin's manuscript as part of “Sophismes historiques de l'école doctrinaire des communistes allemands,” the second section of the unfinished book *L'Empire Knouto-Germanique et la Révolution Sociale* (*The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution*.)

This new translation seeks to clarify some passages that may appear contradictory in existing translations. In particular the verb *repousser*, which previous translators have tended to simply render as “reject,” has been brought closer to its literal sense of “push back” and some attention has been given to distinguishing where Bakunin uses the word *autorité* to designate abstract authority and where he refers to particular experts or authority figures.

In the preceding section, Bakunin has been discussing, among other things, the idea of God, and the section ends with his reply to Voltaire's comment that *if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him: If God really did exist, it would be necessary to get rid of him.*

## What is Authority

The severe logic that dictates these words is far too obvious to require a further development of this argument. And it seems to me impossible that the illustrious men, whose names (so celebrated and so justly respected) I have cited, should not have been struck by it themselves, and should not have perceived the contradiction into which they fell in speaking of God and human liberty at once. To have disregarded it, they must have considered this inconsistency or logical license practically necessary to humanity's well-being.

Perhaps, too, while speaking of liberty as something very respectable and very dear, they understood the term quite differently than we do, as materialists and revolutionary socialists. Indeed, they never speak of it without immediately adding another word, authority—a word and a thing which we detest with all our heart.

What is authority? Is it the inevitable power of the natural laws which manifest themselves in the necessary concatenation and succession of phenomena in the physical and social worlds? Indeed, against these laws revolt is not only forbidden, but is even impossible. We may misunderstand them or still not know them at all, but we cannot disobey them, because they constitute the basis and very conditions of our existence; they envelop us, penetrate us, regulate all our movements, thoughts, and acts, so that even when we believe that we disobey them, we do nothing but demonstrate their omnipotence.

Yes, we are absolutely the slaves of these laws. But there is nothing humiliating in that slavery, or, rather, it is not slavery at all. For slavery supposes an external master, a legislator outside of the one whom he commands, while these laws are not outside of us; they are inherent in us; they constitute our being, our whole being, as much physically as intellectually and morally. We live, we breathe, we act, we think, we wish only through these laws. Without them we are nothing—we are not. From where, then, could we derive the power and the wish to rebel against them?

With regard to natural laws, only one single liberty is possible to man—that of recognizing and applying them more and more all the time, in conformity with the goal of collective and individual emancipation or humanization which he pursues. These laws, once recognized, exercise an authority which is never disputed by the mass of men. One must, for instance, be at base

either a fool or a theologian or at least a metaphysician, jurist, or bourgeois economist to rebel against the law by which  $2 \times 2$  makes 4. One must have faith to imagine that fire will not burn nor water drown, unless one has recourse to some subterfuge that is still based on some other natural law. But these rebellions, or, rather, these attempts at or foolish fancies of an impossible revolt, only form a rare exception; for, in general, it may be said that the mass of men, in their daily lives, let themselves be governed by good sense—that is, by the sum of the natural laws generally recognized—in an almost absolute fashion.

The great misfortune is that a large number of natural laws, already established as such by science, remain unknown to the popular masses, thanks to the care of these tutelary governments that exist, as we know, only for the good of the people. There is another difficulty—namely, that the major portion of the natural laws that are inherent in the development of human society and that are every bit as necessary, invariable, and fatal as the laws that govern the physical world, have not been duly established and recognized by science itself.

Once they shall have been recognized by science, and then shall have passed, by means of an extensive system of popular education and instruction, from science into the consciousness of all, the question of liberty will be perfectly resolved. The most stubborn authoritarians must admit that then there will be no more need of political organization, direction or legislation, three things which, whether they emanate from the will of the sovereign or from the vote of a parliament elected by universal suffrage, and even should they conform to the system of natural laws—which has never been the case and could never be the case—are always equally deadly and hostile to the liberty of the masses, because they impose upon them a system of external and therefore despotic laws.

The liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has himself recognized them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any foreign will, whether divine or human, collective or individual.

Suppose an academy of learned individuals, composed of the most illustrious representatives of science; suppose that this academy is charged with the legislation and organization of society, and that, inspired only by the purest love of truth, it only dictates to society laws in absolute harmony with the latest discoveries of science. Well, I maintain, for my part, that that legislation and organization would be a monstrosity, and that for two reasons: first, that human science is always necessarily imperfect, and that, comparing what it has discovered with what remains to be discovered, we we might say that it is always in its cradle. So that if we wanted to force the practical life of men, collective as well as individual, into strict and exclusive conformity with the latest data of science, we should condemn society as well as individuals to suffer martyrdom on a bed of Procrustes, which would soon end by dislocating and stifling them, life always remaining infinitely greater than science.

The second reason is this: a society that would obey legislation emanating from a scientific academy, not because it understood itself the rational character of this legislation (in which case the existence of the academy would become useless), but because this legislation, emanating from the academy, was imposed in the name of a science that it venerated without comprehending—such a society would be a society, not of men, but of brutes. It would be a second edition of that poor Republic of Paraguay, which let itself be governed for so long by the Society of Jesus. Such a society could not fail to descend soon to the lowest stage of idiocy.

But there is still a third reason that would render such a government impossible. It is that a scientific academy invested with a sovereignty that is, so to speak, absolute, even if it were

composed of the most illustrious men, would infallibly and soon end by corrupting itself morally and intellectually. Already today, with the few privileges allowed them, this is the history of all the academies. The greatest scientific genius, from the moment that he becomes an academician, an officially licensed savant, inevitably declines and lapses into sleep. He loses his spontaneity, his revolutionary hardihood, and that troublesome and savage energy that characterizes the nature of the grandest geniuses, ever called to destroy obsolete worlds and lay the foundations of new ones. He undoubtedly gains in politeness, in utilitarian and practical wisdom, what he loses in power of thought. In a word, he becomes corrupted.

It is the characteristic of privilege and of every privileged position to kill the mind and heart of men. The privileged man, whether politically or economically, is a man depraved intellectually and morally. That is a social law that admits no exception, and is as applicable to entire nations as to classes, companies, and individuals. It is the law of equality, the supreme condition of liberty and humanity. The principal aim of this treatise is precisely to elaborate on it, to demonstrate its truth in all the manifestations of human life.

A scientific body to which had been confided the government of society would soon end by no longer occupying itself with science at all, but with quite another business; and that business, the business of all established powers, would be to perpetuate itself by rendering the society confided to its care ever more stupid and consequently more in need of its government and direction.

But that which is true of scientific academies is also true of all constituent and legislative assemblies, even when they are the result of universal suffrage. Universal suffrage may renew their composition, it is true, but this does not prevent the formation in a few years' time of a body of politicians, privileged in fact though not by right, who, by devoting themselves exclusively to the direction of the public affairs of a country, finally form a sort of political aristocracy or oligarchy. Witness the United States of America and Switzerland.

Consequently, no external legislation and no authority—one, for that matter, being inseparable from the other, and both tending to the enslavement of society and the degradation of the legislators themselves.

---

Does it follow that I drive back every authority? The thought would never occur to me. When it is a question of boots, I refer the matter to the authority of the cobbler; when it is a question of houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer. For each special area of knowledge I speak to the appropriate expert. But I allow neither the cobbler nor the architect nor the scientist to impose upon me. I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and verification. I do not content myself with consulting a single specific authority, but consult several. I compare their opinions and choose that which seems to me most accurate. But I recognize no infallible authority, even in quite exceptional questions; consequently, whatever respect I may have for the honesty and the sincerity of such or such an individual, I have absolute faith in no one. Such a faith would be fatal to my reason, to my liberty, and even to the success of my undertakings; it would immediately transform me into a stupid slave and an instrument of the will and interests of another.

If I bow before the authority of the specialists and declare myself ready to follow, to a certain extent and as long as may seem to me necessary, their indications and even their directions, it is

because that authority is imposed upon me by no one, neither by men nor by God. Otherwise I would drive them back in horror, and let the devil take their counsels, their direction, and their science, certain that they would make me pay, by the loss of my liberty and human dignity, for the scraps of truth, wrapped in a multitude of lies, that they might give me.

I bow before the authority of exceptional men because it is imposed upon me by my own reason. I am conscious of my ability to grasp, in all its details and positive developments, only a very small portion of human science. The greatest intelligence would not be sufficient to grasp the entirety. From this results, for science as well as for industry, the necessity of the division and association of labor. I receive and I give—such is human life. Each is a directing authority and each is directed in his turn. So there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination.

This same reason prohibits me, then, from recognizing a fixed, constant, and universal authority-figure, because there is no universal man, no man capable of grasping in that wealth of detail, without which the application of science to life is impossible, all the sciences, all the branches of social life. And if such a universality was ever realized in a single man, and if he wished to take advantage of it in order to impose his authority upon us, it would be necessary to drive that man out of society, because his authority would inevitably reduce all the others to slavery and imbecility. I do not think that society ought to maltreat men of genius as it has done hitherto; but neither do I think it should enrich them too much, nor, and this above all, grant them any privileges or exclusive rights; and that for three reasons: first, because it would often mistake a charlatan for a man of genius; then, because, through such a system of privileges, it could transform even a true man of genius into a charlatan, demoralize and stupefy him; and, finally, because it would give itself a despot.

in summary, then, we recognize the absolute authority of science, because science has no other object than the mental reproduction, well thought out and as systematic as possible, of the natural laws inherent in the material, intellectual, and moral life of both the physical and the social worlds, these two worlds constituting, in fact, only one single natural world. apart from this legitimate authority, uniquely legitimate because it is rational and in harmony with human liberty, we declare all other authorities false, arbitrary, despotic and deadly.

We recognize the absolute authority of science, but we reject [*repoussons*] the infallibility and universality of the representatives of science. In our church—if I may be permitted to use for a moment an expression which I so detest: Church and State are my two *bêtes noires*—in our church, as in the Protestant church, we have a head, an invisible Christ, science; and, like the Protestants, more consistent even than the Protestants, we do not wish to suffer a pope, nor council, nor conclaves of infallible cardinals, nor bishops, nor even priests. Our Christ is distinguished from the Protestant and Christian Christ in this—that the latter is a personal being, while ours is impersonal; the Christian Christ, already fully realized in an eternal past, presents himself as a perfect being, while the fulfillment and perfection of our Christ, science, are always in the future: which is equivalent to saying that they will never be realized. Therefore, in recognizing no absolute authority but that of *absolute science*, we in no way compromise our liberty.

I mean by this phrase, “absolute science,” the truly universal science that would reproduce ideally, to its fullest extent and in all its infinite detail, the universe, the system or coordination of all the natural laws manifested in the incessant development of the world. It is obvious that such a science, the sublime object of all the efforts of the human mind, will never be realized in its absolute fullness. Our Christ, then, will remain eternally unfinished, which must considerably

moderate the pride of his licensed representatives among us. Against that God the Son, in whose name they claim to impose their insolent and pedantic authority on us, we appeal to God the Father, who is the real world, real life, of which their God is only the too-imperfect expression, and of which we, real beings, living, working, struggling, loving, aspiring, enjoying, and suffering, are the immediate representatives.

But, while rejecting [*repoussant*] the absolute, universal, and infallible authority of the men of science, we willingly bow before the respectable, but relative, very temporary, and very restricted authority of the representatives of special sciences, asking nothing better than to consult them by turns, and very grateful for the precious information that they should want give to us, on the condition that to receive such information from us on occasions when, and concerning matters about which, we are more learned than they; and, in general, we ask nothing better than to see men endowed with great knowledge, great experience, great minds, and, above all, great hearts, exert over us a natural and legitimate influence, freely accepted and never imposed in the name of any official authority whatsoever, celestial or terrestrial. We accept all natural authorities and all influences of fact, but none of right; for every authority or every influence of right, officially imposed as such, becoming straight away an oppression and a falsehood, would inevitably impose upon us, as I believe I have sufficiently shown, slavery and absurdity.

In short, we reject all legislation, all authority, and every privileged, licensed, official, and legal influence, even that arising from universal suffrage, convinced that it can only ever turn to the advantage of a dominant, exploiting minority and against the interests of the immense, subjugated majority.

It is in this sense that we are really Anarchists.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Mikhail Bakunin  
What is Authority  
1870

Retrieved on 2020-03-27 from [www.libertarian-labyrinth.org](http://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org)  
Translated by Shawn P. Wilbur.

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