

Natural Law and Authority

Written by Michael Bakunin, circa 1871, as published in The Voluntaryist, June 1992.

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, it is impossible. We may misunderstand them or not know them at all, but we cannot disobey them; for they constitute the basic conditions of our existence; they envelop us, penetrate us, regulate all our movements, thoughts, and acts; even when we believe we disobey them, we are only showing their omnipotence.

Yes, we are the absolute slaves of these laws. But in such slavery there is no humiliation, or rather, it is not slavery at all. For slavery presupposes an external master, an authority apart from the subject whom he commands. But these laws are not something apart; they are inherent in us; they constitute our whole being, physically, intellectually, and morally; we breathe, we act, we think, we wish, only in accordance with these laws. Without them we are nothing, we are not. Whence, then, could we derive the power and the wish to rebel against them?

Man has but one liberty with respect to natural laws, that of recognizing and applying them on an ever-extending scale in conformity with the object 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 bottom ... a fool ... to rebel against the law by which twice two makes four. One must have faith to imagine that fire will not burn nor water drown, except, indeed, recourse be had to some subterfuge or, rather, these attempts at, or foolish fancies of, an impossible revolt, are decidedly the exception; for, in general it may be said that the mass of men in their daily lives acknowledge the government of common sense—that is, of the sum of 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 masses, thanks to the watchfulness of the 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 connected with the development of human society, which are quite as necessary, invariable, fatal, as the laws that govern the physical world, have not been duly established or recognized by science itself.

Once they are recognized by science, and have then passed into the consciousness of all men, the question of liberty will be entirely solved. The most stubborn authorities must

admit that then there will be no need either of political organization or direction or legislation, three things which are always equally fatal and inimical to the liberty of the people inasmuch as they impose upon them a system of external and therefore despotic laws. This is so whether they are imposed by a sovereign or a democratically elective parliament.

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 extrinsic will whatever, divine or human, collective or individual.

Suppose a learned academy, composed of the most illustrious scientists, were charged with the lawful organization of society, and that, inspired only by the purest love for truth, it framed only laws in absolute harmony with the latest discoveries of science. Such legislation, I say, and such organization would be a monstrosity, first, because human science is always and necessarily imperfect, since, comparing what it has discovered, it is still in its cradle. So that were we to try to force the practical life of men, collective as well as individual, into strict conformity with the latest data of science, we should condemn society as well as individuals to suffer martyrdom on a Procrustean bed.

Secondly, a society which obeyed legislation emanating from a scientific academy, not because it understood its rational character but because this legislation was imposed by the academy in the name of science which the people venerated without comprehending it, would be a society not of men but of brutes. It would be another version of those missions in Paraguay which submitted so long to the government of the Jesuits. It would surely and rapidly descend to the lowest stage of idiocy.

And there is still a third reason which would render such a government impossible—namely, that a scientific academy invested with absolute sovereignty, even if it were composed of the most illustrious men, would infallibly and soon end in its own moral and intellectual corruption. For such is the history of all academies even today, with the few privileges allowed them. From the moment he becomes an academician, an officially licensed “servant,” the greatest scientific genius inevitably lapses into sluggishness. He loses his spontaneity, his revolutionary hardihood and that troublesome and savage energy characteristic of the genius, ever called to destroy tottering old works and lay the foundations of the new. He undoubtedly gains in politeness, in utilitarian and practical wisdom, what he loses in power of originality. In a word, he becomes corrupted. ...

A scientific body to which has been confided the government of society would soon end by devoting itself no longer to science at all, but to quite another matter; and, as in the case of all established powers, that would be its own eternal perpetuation by rendering the society confided to its care ever more stupid and consequently more dependent upon the scientist’s authority.

But that which is true of scientific academies is also true of constituent assemblies, even those chosen by universal suffrage. They may change in composition, of course, but this does not prevent the formation in a few year's time of a body of privileged politicians exclusively intent upon the direction of public affairs as a sort of political aristocracy or oligarchy. Witness what has happened in the United States of America and in Switzerland.

Therefore let us have no external legislation and no (coercive) authority. The one is inseparable from the other, and both tend to create a slavish society.

Does it follow that I reject all authority? Perish the thought. In the matter of boots, I defer to the authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals, or railroads, I consult the architect or the engineer. For such special knowledge I apply to such a "savant." But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect nor the "savant" to impose his authority on 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 censure. I do not content myself with consulting a single authority in any special branch; I consult several; I compare their opinions and choose that which seems to me soundest. But I recognize no infallible authority, even in special questions; consequently, whatever respect I may have for the honesty and the sincerity of an individual, I have no absolute faith in any person. 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, the tool of other people's will and interests.

If I bow before the authority of the specialists, willing to accept their suggestions and their guidance for a time and to a degree, I do so only because I am not compelled to by anyone. Otherwise I would repel them with horror and bid the devil take their counsels, their directions, and their services, certain that they would make me pay, by the loss of my liberty and self-respect, for such scraps of truth, wrapped in a multitude of lies, as they might give me.

I bow before the authority of specialists because it is imposed upon me by my own reason. I am conscious of my inability to grasp any large portion of human knowledge in all its details and developments. The greatest intelligence would not be equal to a comprehension of the whole, whence the necessity of the division and association of labor. I receive and I give; such is human life. Each directs and is directed in his turn. Therefore there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual fluctuation of mutual, temporary, and above all voluntary authority and subordination.

To accept a fixed, constant, and universal authority is ruled out precisely because there is no "universal" man capable of grasping, in that wealth of detail without which the application of science to life is impossible, all the sciences and all the aspects of social life. And indeed if a single man could ever attain such an all-encompassing understanding, and

if he wished to use it to impose his authority upon us, it would be necessary to drive this 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 indulge them too far, still less accord them any special privileges or exclusive rights whatsoever, for three reasons; first, because it would often mistake a charlatan for a man of genius; second, because, through such a system of privileges, it might transform into a charlatan even a real man of genius, and thus demoralize and degrade him; and, finally, because it would establish a master over itself.

To sum up: we do recognize the absolute authority of science, for the sole object of science is the thorough and systematic formulation of all the natural laws inherent in the material, intellectual, and moral life of both the physical and social worlds, which are one and the same world. Apart from this, the sole legitimate authority—legitimate because it is rational and in harmony with human liberty—we declare all other authorities false, arbitrary, and deadly... .

But while rejecting the absolute, universal, and infallible authority of men of science, we willingly accept the respectable, although relative, temporary, and restricted authority of scientific specialists, asking nothing better than to consult them by turns, and grateful for their precious information as long as they are willing to learn from us in their turn. In general, we ask nothing better than to see men endowed with great knowledge, with great experience, great minds, and above all great hearts, exercise over us a natural and legitimate influence, freely accepted, and never imposed in the name of any official authority or established right; for every authority or established right, officially imposed as such, becomes at once an oppression and a falsehood, and would inevitably impose upon us...slavery and absurdity.

In a word, we reject all legislation, all authority, and all privileged, licensed, official, and legal powers over us, even though arising from universal suffrage, convinced that this can serve only to the advantage of a dominant minority of exploiters against the interests of the immense majority in subjection to them.

This is the sense in which we are all anarchists... .