

Postanarchism and Meta-Ethics

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Abstract

Competing versions of anarchism are often identifiable through analysis of their distinctive normative ethical approaches. Individualist or ‘philosophical’ anarchisms, such as those influenced by Robert Paul Wolff or Robert Nozick, are often based on deontological theories, which privilege a discourse of ‘rights’ and ‘individual autonomy’. By contrast social anarchisms are often either consequentialist (for instance Sergei Nechaev) - and thus prioritise good social outcomes - or prefigurative (for example, James Guillaume) and as such are more consistent with practise-based virtue ethics.

More recently, postanarchists, such as Saul Newman, have highlighted important meta-ethical differences between the various anarchist constellations. In particular there is tension between the universalism of moral realism (that moral statements are objectively verifiable based on universal standards) and narrow subjectivist positions (right and wrong are based on individual opinion). The strengths and weaknesses of these competing meta-ethical presuppositions are assessed to show that neither moral realism nor subjectivism are a sufficient to ground anti-hierarchical ethics. In their place a multi-functionalist alternative (that values can be assessed in relation to particular arenas, which intersect, and whose standards adapt) is proposed.

1. Introduction

The realms of academic philosophy and anarchist activism rarely have much in common. However, where they both discuss and contrast anarchism with orthodox Marxism they do draw similar conclusions, namely that the historical determinism of the first prioritises economic discourse, whilst anarchism by contrast has foregrounded moral analyses and terminology.¹ Orthodox Marxists (Leninists), too, have identified this distinction as pivotal to the understanding of the difference between anarchism and other competing radical movements. For Leninists, the emphasis on moral evaluation is due to anarchism's ignorance of the determining nature of the economic base² or failure to apply the right scientific method.³

Anarchists such as David Wieck also accept the distinction between the moral discourse of anarchism in contrast to the alternative modes of address of rival traditions, but he celebrates the way that the 'anarchist tradition takes *ethical* premises as its point of departure.'⁴ David Graeber also identifies the different approaches, but sees merit in both: Marxism is at its best as an economic theory exploring the form of the commodity, whilst 'anarchism is mainly about the ethics of practice.'⁵ It should be stressed that heterodox Marxists, such as the Autonomist tradition, regard the assertion of *other values* separate to those of capitalism to be a fundamental feature of communism. Autonomists, thus, reject both Orthodox Marxism and the economics/ethics distinction between Marxism and anarchism.⁶

Discussion of the norms or standards used for judging between rival actions has long been a feature of anarchist discourse, although it has not always been identified overtly with the often elite practices of moral philosophy. Some anarchists use

¹ See for instance P. McLaughlin, *Anarchism and Authority: A philosophical introduction to classical anarchism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007): 50n; S. Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding* (London: Verso, 2007): 13; Andrew Flood, 'The Left (part 1): Ashes to phoenix?', *Red and Black Revolution*, No. 1: 7.

² Workers International League, 'Anarchism', *Socialist Appeal*, June 07, 2006, <www.socialistappeal.org/content/view/163/77/>, last accessed May 29, 2008.

³ MC5, 'Noam Chomsky' Secular Stairway to Heaven', *Maoist International Movement*, November 2005, <www.etext.org/Politics/MIM/bookstore/books/commie/chomskyanarchism.html>, last accessed May 29, 2008.

⁴ D. Wieck, 'Preface' to G. Baldelli, *Social Anarchism* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1972), 11.

⁵ D. Graeber, 'Articles and Interviews by Mark Thwaite', *Ready, Steady Book*, January 16, 2007, <<http://www.readysteadybook.com/Article.aspx?page= davidgraeber>> last accessed June 18, 2008.

⁶ See for instance Massimo De Angelis, 'Value(s), Measure(s) and Disciplinary Markets', *The Commoner* No. 10 (2005) <www.commoner.org.uk/10deangelis.pdf>, last accessed 2, June, 2008; John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power* (London: Pluto, 2002).

largely rights-based deontological approaches, others have proposed ends-based consequentialist criteria, others apply terms redolent of virtue theory (both in its social and individual forms), by reference to descriptions such as ‘bravery’, ‘integrity’⁷ and the identification of whether the speaker embodies the moral principles which she espouses (*ethos*).⁸ However, this interest in ethics has, in recent years, been supplemented by a renewed interest in meta-ethics, which has corresponded with the relatively recent development of *postanarchism*.

Postanarchism is itself a complex phenomenon, which is viewed either as a new hybrid of anarchism with poststructuralism⁹ or as a return to the radical political content of poststructuralism.¹⁰ As a result, the theorists who are associated with postanarchism have raised important questions about the metaphysical status of ethical claims, and in doing so have highlighted the moral context of metaphysical considerations. Amongst the core theorists in postanarchism are Lewis Call, Todd May and Saul Newman. This paper, however, concentrates on Newman’s useful critique of universalism, which is based on reasserting Max Stirner’s egoism in contemporary political analysis. Whilst Newman, through Stirner, accurately highlights many of the weaknesses in anarchist universalism, its alternative - a radical subjectivism - has a number of weaknesses which make it a questionable basis for determining moral action. Instead of Stirnerite egoism, a modest, multi-functionalist approach is proposed, that avoids the oppressive and hierarchical dimensions of traditional anarchist universalism, but also evades the limits of subjectivism.

⁷ See for instance the defence of Bakunin’s proposal to develop public institutions which maintain and embody ‘integrity’ (Anarchist (Communist) Federation, *Basic Bakunin* (Coventry: Anarchist Communist Editions, 1991) available on line at *Spunk Press*, <<http://www.spunk.org/texts/writers/bakunin/sp001862.html>>, last accessed 2 June 2008; the description and assessment of activists resisting military action as ‘brave’ (Anarchist Federation, ‘War Resisters in Israel’, *Resistance* No. 35, <<http://www.afed.org.uk/res/resist35.html>> last accessed 30 May, 2008) whilst by contrast state institutions are referred to as ‘cowardly’ for systematically using force to belittle and subjugate those in deprived situations (Anarchist Federation ‘UK Terror HQ Found!’, *Resistance* No. 13 <<http://www.afed.org.uk/res/resist13.html>> last accessed 30 May, 2008).

⁸ Ian Bone, one of the founders of Class War, for instance, lambasts anti-elitist radicals for coming from, and using, their privileged backgrounds to attain leadership roles within supposedly anti-hierarchical institutions and social movements. See for instance ‘Fake Labour Toff Is A Toff!

⁹ S. Newman, ‘Is There a Postanarchist Universality? A Reply to Michael Glavin’, *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*, (Fall 2004): 40-53: 50 <<http://olymedia.mahost.org/vol8no2.pdf>>, last accessed June 2, 2008.

¹⁰ J. Adams, ‘Postanarchism in a Bombshell’, *Aporia Journal*, Issue 2, <<http://aporiajournal.tripod.com/postanarchism.htm>>, last accessed 23 June, 2008.

2. Anarchist Ethics - a Brief Overview

The different traditions of anarchism can be partly identified through their adoption of distinctive ethical traditions, the corresponding discourses and social apparatuses. The free-market, libertarian-right forms of anarchism propounded by Robert Nozick and Robert Paul Wolff, are based on a deontological ethical theory,¹ in which the negative rights of the liberal, sovereign agent take priority. Thus anarchism, as the commentator on Aristotle, David Keyt, proposes, is boiled down to the single objective of avoiding coercion,² even if it creates disparities in power. Within the realms of academic philosophy this version of anarchism has become so successful that the term is used almost entirely to refer to this form of right-libertarianism.³

By contrast, the other popular conception of anarchism comes from the insurrectionary tradition, often associated with Sergei Nechaev. Nechaev's consequentialism permits hierarchical and repressive interventions as they are justified if they efficiently bring about the millennial event - the social revolution.⁴ A similar ends-based normative anarchist ethic can be identified both in proto-anarchist writings, such as William Godwin, and more recently (though perhaps only as a rhetorical flourish) in Class War's slogan of achieving victory in the class conflict, 'through any means necessary'.⁵

A third, but less overtly theorised, alternative is that of an anarchist virtue ethics. This is based on the oft-repeated principle within anarchism that means have to be in accordance with (or prefigure) ends. Bakunin, for instance, criticised Nechaev precisely

¹ R. Wolff, *In Defence of Anarchism* (London: Harper Torchbooks, 1976); R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

² D. Keyt, 'Aristotle and Anarchism', in R. Kraut and S. Skultety, eds., *Aristotle's Politics: Critical Essays* (Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 203-22: 204.

³ See for instance D. Copp, 'The Idea of a Legitimate State', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter, 1999), pp. 3-45: 11; D. Knowles, 'The Domain of Authority', *Philosophy*, Volume 82 (Jan. 2007), pp.23-43: 42; F. Lovett, 'Can Justice be Based on Consent', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 12 (2): 79-101: 86.

⁴ S. Nechaev, *Catechism of the Revolutionist* (London: Violette Nozieres Press and Active Distribution, 1989): 9.

⁵ See Godwin's view that acts should be judged through a utilitarian calculation of the social good that is produced. For instance he assesses the right to private property on a utilitarian evaluation of its social goods and harms in W. Godwin, *The Anarchist Writings of William Godwin* (London: Freedom, 1986): 64-65 and 136.

because the latter could not ‘reconcile means with ends.’⁶ Prefiguration avoids the ends/means distinction of rights based and consequentialist ethics; instead the means used are supposed to encapsulate the values desired in their preferred goals.⁷

Prefigurative anarchism is consistent with the main features of Alasdair MacIntyre’s virtue ethics. Anarchist virtue theory stresses the immanent values of particular practices rather than the externally decided (consequentialist) values that will accrue, and these practices, which are rich in use-values, collectively build to the most fulfilling type of social-setting. It views goods as being inherent to social practices, rather than seeing goods as being external to the act. These practices have their own rules, which are negotiable and alter over time.⁸ Such an approach is rarely explicitly stated partly as a result of the decline in virtue theory due to the rise of Enlightenment approaches to Reason. Nonetheless, both as a cultural residue⁹ and as a more systematic approach to analysing moral choices, the language and aims of virtue approaches still arises in anarchist discourse. Virtue theory is consistent with Peter Kropotkin’s account of anarchism in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in which it is defined as including the:

development of all his [sic] faculties, intellectual, artistic and moral, without being hampered by overwork for the monopolists, or by the servility and inertia of mind of the great number. He would thus be able to reach full individualization, which is not possible either under the present system of individualism, or under any system of state socialism.¹⁰

Kropotkin’s virtue account is based on an essentialist view of human nature, in which appropriate behaviours are those that lead to the fullest development of the natural individual. Vices, by contrast are those that veer away from the innate goal. However, an account of virtues need not require such an essentialism, and can be based just on those practices that generate the fullest internal goods; vice-like behaviours, by contrast, would be those that undermine practices which have immanent goods, and lead to societal decomposition,¹¹ thereby requiring even greater managerial control.

⁶ M. Bakunin, ‘Mikhail Bakunin to Sergey Nechayev, June 2, 1870’ in *Bakunin on Violence* (New York: Anarchist Switchboard, 1993e), 9.

⁷ A. Carter, *A Radical Green Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 1999): 26667; Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen, ‘Conclusion: How anarchism still matters’ in J. Purkis and J. Bowen, *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist theory and practice in a global age*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005, 220; See too Uri Gordon, *Anarchism and Political Theory: Contemporary Problems*, PhD Thesis, Mansfield College, Oxford University, 2006: 172 and 203, available at <http://ephemer.al.cl.cam.ac.uk/~gd216/uri/0.1_-_Front_Matter.pdf>, last accessed 30 June, 2007.

⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A study in moral theory*, second edition (London: Duckworth, 2006): 155-56.

⁹ See MacIntyre on the fragmentation of ethical discourse at the start of *After Virtue*: 1-2.

¹⁰ P. Kropotkin, ‘Anarchism’, *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910), available online at <<http://recollectionbooks.com/siml/library/anarchismEncyBrit.htm>>, last accessed April 2, 2007.

¹¹ MacIntyre, 2006: 194-95.

The development of greater managerial oversight is the result, argues MacIntyre, of the Enlightenment approaches to ethics. Modern morality seeks universal, rational grounds for decision-making, yet has produced only irresolvable disputes¹² and debilitating scepticism.¹³ Thus disagreements become settled on the basis of overt power or psychological ploys.¹⁴ MacIntyre's criticisms of Enlightenment moral theory are consistent with the meta-ethical concerns raised by postanarchists, though they diverge in terms of solution.

¹² MacIntyre, 2006: 6-8 and 152.

¹³ MacIntyre, 2006: 118.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, 2006: 71.

3. Anarchism and Universalist Meta-ethics

The two standard normative ethical approaches associated with Enlightenment and embraced by different constellations of anarchism have been the deontological approaches of the libertarian-right, and the consequential approach of Nechaev. The two have been combined in the Rawls-like anarchism of activists such as Baldelli. Baldelli's economic policy for instance, distinguishes between essential and non-essential goods and labour, and ensures that whilst an essential minimum is provided to all, non-essentials act as a spur for greater initiative which have minimal redistribution.¹ This not only corresponds with Rawlsian distribution but also anticipates Michael Albert's Participatory Economics (Parecon).²

By contrast, anarchists, in response to the deficiencies within mainstream Enlightenment thought, have either embraced amoralism or subjectivism. CrimethInc provide a good example of amoralism with their rhetorical question: 'should we serve employers, parents, the State, capitalism, moral law before ourselves?', which implicitly accepts that moral law exists but should have no binding power.³ Similarly, many postanarchists have been critical of the universalist claims that underpin the main normative ethical approaches, and have tended towards a subjectivist stance.

Universalism comes in three main forms within meta-ethics, and each is rejected on broadly similar lines by postanarchists. These three main forms are:

1. *Naturalism*: that standards for right conduct are independent of the observer and fixed by nature and discoverable through empirical observation;
2. *Rationalism*: that universal rules can be distinguished by the use of reason and reflection (Kantian rationalism);⁴
3. *Intuitionism* that these general, ahistorical principles can be determined through the use of a separate moral sense or intuition.⁵

Moral naturalism is most associated with utilitarianism. It assumes there is some natural phenomenon, like happiness or the satisfaction of desires, that constitutes an

¹ G. Baldelli, *Social Anarchism* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1972): 120-25.

² J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); M. Albert, *Moving Forward: Programme for a Participatory Democracy* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2001).

³ CrimethInc, 'No Masters', *CrimethInc*, <<http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/atoz/nomasters.php>>, last accessed 18 June, 2008.

⁴ Raphael, *Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 18-22.

⁵ Stuart Brock and Edwin Mares, *Realism and Anti-Realism* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007): 113-118.

identifiable grounds for the good. For naturalists, like John Stuart Mill, the good is scientifically identifiable. Mill argues that empirical observation demonstrates the veracity of utilitarian principles.⁶ Paul McLaughlin, whose recent contribution to the philosophy of anarchism, *Anarchism and Authority*, reiterates the classical anarchist position of meta-ethical universalism, claiming that moral statements are ‘facts’ like scientific propositions which refer to states external to human operators. Thus, they have the same status as objectively verifiable propositions, though like any scientific finding they are open to challenge and revision.⁷ This is what McLaughlin refers to as ‘anarchist realism’.⁸ The term ‘realism’, by contrast, is used here to refer to Immanuel Kant’s ethic, which is similarly universalist, but which rejects the view that fundamental ethical principles are distinguishable through scientific study. Kant argues that, as phenomena are transitory and observation uncertain, reason alone can identify the universal, categorical principles for binding, moral practice.

Intuitionism, the theory that universal moral truths are discovered not through observation but through a separate moral sense, can be found within anarchism, though rarely in an explicit form. The lack of overtly Intuitionist terminology in classical anarchism can be explained by the fact that G.E. Moore’s work, which first named and defended the theory, was published just after the main writings of the classical anarchist canon. However the main theme of intuitionism that there is a separate ‘moral sense’ that identifies the good is perhaps compatible with features of Kropotkin’s and Bakunin’s works, where they appear to propose that there is some instinct or drive which is the basis for, and identifies, socially benevolent acts.⁹

However, given the obvious weaknesses of intuitionism, it is largely ignored in favour of alternatives. Intuitionism regards moral truths to be universal and pre-given. Consequently, when there are normative and meta-ethical conflicts over whether positive rights exist, or whether the rights of the future generations take precedence of those existing now, appeals to intuitions cannot help, as they differ so widely. Indeed Bakunin, elsewhere, views claims to innate moral sense as an ‘absurdity’ that acts only to reinforce dominant, oppressive norms and takes moral principles into ‘theology’ - a domain outside of critical discourse.¹⁰ For the most part, much (but by no means all) of the classical anarchist canon proposes either a rationalist or scientific naturalist approach to identifying and verifying good action.¹¹

⁶ Mill argues that whilst the grounding framework of ethics, like the first principles of science, are not amenable to absolute scientific proof, observation, nonetheless, demonstrates that utilitarian modes of assessment are right (J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000: 50, 52, 81-82).

⁷ McLaughlin, 2007: 40.

⁸ McLaughlin, 2007: 40n.

⁹ M. Bakunin, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (New York: Free Press, 1953): 146; P. Kropotkin, *Ethics: Origin and development* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1992), 11-12.

¹⁰ Bakunin, 1953: 125-27.

¹¹ For example Bakunin, 1953: 239-41; 415; Kropotkin, 1992: 20; 31. Caution is advised against interpreting the classical anarchists as akin to Positivists. The term ‘science’ in these texts need not

The political philosopher, George Crowder, claims that: rationalist, naturalist and to a lesser extent intuitionist, responses were adopted by classical anarchists such as Bakunin, Kropotkin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, because they provided an alternative to the hierarchical and statist moral teachings justified by the church.¹²

The assumption that natural moral laws can be discovered through application of scientific method or through a single universal reason might have an underlying egalitarian ambition. The shift of ethics away from religious institutions suggests that moral laws are discoverable by all and apply equally to all. However, as postanarchists such as Call, May and Newman, have argued, these claims to universal standards of morality (what is referred to as ‘universalism’) have other repressive characteristics, which make them incompatible with anarchism.

refer to the adoption of a singular hypo- thetico-deductive model of discovery, but could just refer to a range of systematic modes of study.

¹² C. Crowder, *Classical Anarchism: The Political Thought of Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991): 89.

4. The Postanarchist Meta-ethical Challenge

Amongst those, within the anarchist canon, whose anti-universalism is most developed is Max Stirner and his influential text *The Ego and Its Own*. It is regarded by Newman as providing the source for a distinctive (post)anarchism that avoids the restrictive essentialism of the classical anarchist canon.¹ Other postanarchists use more overtly Nietzschean sources, notwithstanding Nietzsche's professed distaste for any systemised political doctrine with which he identified 'anarchism'. Nietzsche's anarchist admirers readily admit to his aversion to programmatic anarchist strategies;² it is, however, his attacks on universalist political ethics that they find most useful. This is either directly through his primary texts themselves, or through poststructuralist interpreters such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.³ However, admiration for Nietzschean criticism is not confined to the postanarchists; it is also present in anarchist thinking from earlier anarchist traditions, as exemplified by Guy Aldred⁴ and Emma Goldman.⁵ More recently, social anarchists such as Daniel Colson have argued that Nietzsche has relevance for the tactical developments of more contemporaneous class struggle anarchism.⁶

For the sake of simplicity, the concentration will be on Stirner's critique, as Nietzsche's is more open to more social versions of anarchism, as the examples of Aldred, Colson and Sean Sheehan have suggested. Call, for example, explains that Nietzsche identifies how social forces play an important role in the construction of the aesthetic

¹ Newman, 2001: 51.

² Call, 2002: 40-42; A. Koch, 'Dionysian Politics: The anarchist implications of Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Western epistemology' in J. Moore, ed, *I Am Not a Man, I am Dynamite! Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition* (Williamsburgh, USA: Autonomedia, 2004): 49-63, 49; Newman, 2001: 48.

³ Bey, 2003:126; Lewis Call: 2002, 40-56; May, 1994: 89-91; Franco Riccio, 'The "Death of God"' in J. Moore, ed, *I Am Not a Man, I am Dynamite!: Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition* (Williamsburgh Station: Autonomedia, 2004), pp. 64-75.

⁴ Guy Aldred, 'Friedrich Nietzsche' in J. Moore, ed, *I Am Not a Man, I am Dynamite!: Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition* (Williamsburgh Station: Autonomedia, 2004), pp. 9-11.

⁵ L. Starcross, "'Nietzsche Was an Anarchist': Reconstructing Emma Goldman's Nietzsche Lectures' in J. Moore, ed, *I Am Not a Man, I am Dynamite!: Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition* (Williamsburgh Station: Autonomedia, 2004), 29-39; Kropotkin too admired Nietzsche's assault on the 'half-hearted moral conceptions' of the dominant powers (Kropotkin, 1992: 7).

⁶ D. Colson, 'Nietzsche and the Libertarian Workers' Movement', in J. Moore, ed, *I Am Not a Man, I am Dynamite!: Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition* (Williamsburgh Station: Autonomedia, 2004), pp.12-28.

project.⁷ This is a stance that is rejected by Stirner. This is not to suggest, as John P. Clark proposes, that Stirner is ‘validly’ placed within the individualist anarchism tradition,⁸ despite his evident influence on the individualist tradition.⁹ Stirner’s rejection of any fixed social principle, such as property rights,¹⁰ and his condemnation of free-market competition,¹¹ would rule out a direct correspondence with the philosophical individualist tradition of Wolff and Nozick.

Both Stirner and Nietzsche reject the universalism of realism - and both (according to Call and Newman) posit in its place that the creation of values is the product of an always changing individual project.¹² Thus many postanarchist theorists, like John Moore, place Stirner and Nietzsche together because of their shared rejection of realism and their subjectivist alternative.¹³ The postanarchists who follow Stirner (and Nietzsche) reject universalism in both its realist and naturalist forms on three main grounds. First, it would mean that external, universal standards would be shaping destinies, rather than individuals creating their own goals. Second, the application of universal principles promotes rather than eliminates hierarchies of power. Finally, there are no epistemic bases to universal rules, and thus the discovery and the promotion of such rules are, instead, the product of oppressive social powers. Each of these criticisms are addressed in turn.

4.1 Disempowerment: Universal Principles and Agent Freedom

Postanarchists reject universalism because if there were universal laws for social interaction it would foreshorten the possibilities for moral subjects to determine their own ends. If there are universal, set standards then moral agents would have to live up to these, and thus be denied the freedom to determine their own values.¹⁴ Postanarchists, such as Newman (through Stirner), suggest that anarchism is not just limited to freely choosing between right and wrong action (traditional Humanism), but requires

⁷ Call, 2002: 48-49; Sheehan admits such a progressive reading would constitute a ‘selective interpretation’ (2003: 77).

⁸ J. Clark, *Max Stirner’s Egoism* (London: Freedom, 1976), 93.

⁹ Clark, 1976: 89-91.

¹⁰ M. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own* (London: Rebel Press, 1993): 259.

¹¹ Stirner, 1993: 260-63

¹² Call, 2002: 51 and Newman: 2001: 61.

¹³ John Moore, ‘Lived Poetry: Stirner, anarchy, subjectivity and the art of the living’ in J. Purkis and J. Bowan, eds., *Changing Anarchisms: Anarchist theory and practice in a global age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004): pp.55-72.

¹⁴ May, 1994: 127-28; N. J. Jun, ‘Deleuze, Derrida and Anarchism’, *Anarchist Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2007), pp.132-56: 138-39; a view also held, if somewhat inconsistently, by Bakunin (Bakunin, 1953: 125).

being able to influence what constitutes ‘the right’. The universalising of moral rules regulates human activity and restricts agent freedom and self-creation.¹⁵

There are possible replies to this. Some anarchist thinkers who do appeal to universal standards claim this does not necessitate a commitment to their coercive imposition. There is, as Crowder discusses, a difference between claiming that there exist universal principles of moral action and the claim that others have the right to impose them.¹⁶ This distinction opens up the possibility of an anarchist *amoralism*: that there are universal standards of right or wrong but that they have no binding power on the individual.¹⁷ Bakunin’s account in *God and the State* provides a noteworthy instance: even if there was a God, and therefore God-given, universal laws, it would not mean that we would have to obey them.¹⁸

There are a number of replies to both amoralism and the moral universalist. The first is that it is simply inconsistent. Apparent amoralists like Bakunin and CrimethInc collective do appeal to moral standards in their writings that seek to guide and inspire action against hierarchies of class and gender and propose alternatives to the deadening tedium of managed activity.¹⁹ The amoralist is right that moral discourse need not provide binding regulation, but this does not mean it does not influence human action through guidance, provocation or warning. The problem is that for moral universalists, if norms are fixed and absolute then the degree of autonomy is nonetheless restricted.

By identifying certain standards as eternally ‘the good’, universalists do prescribe, even if it is just through social pressure, or norms of behaviour, and because these are universal, there is no possibility for adaptation or change. Thus, the criticism of anarchist realist moral philosophy still stands, as it allows for the coercive power of public opinion, even if such opprobrium of public opinion is more diffuse than state imposed sanctions.²⁰ Further, by having moral standards outside of social deliberation, it means that individuals are not free to influence the production of norms and values. A virtue theory, which sees valuative principles generated in social practices, and open to deliberation and alteration, avoids this problem.

4.2 Realism and Hierarchy

The second criticism of moral universalism - namely that it is inevitably hierarchical - appears, at first glance, to be somewhat counterintuitive. For a single, categorical

¹⁵ S. Newman, *Unstable Universalities: Poststructuralism and radical politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 123-24.

¹⁶ Crowder, 1991:171-72.

¹⁷ CrimethInc, ‘No Masters’, 2008.

¹⁸ Bakunin, ‘God and the State’, *Anarchism.Net*, <<http://www.anarchism.net/godandthestate.htm>>, last accessed 30 May, 2008.

¹⁹ CrimethInc, 2008; Bakunin, 2008.

²⁰ R. Amstell, ‘Chasing Rainbows? Utopian Pragmatics and the search for Anarchist Communists’, <www.geocities.com/collectivebook/rainbows.html> last accessed 12 April 2008.

law applicable to all, regardless of class, gender or ethnicity, appears to support the egalitarian motives that the major classical anarchists professed. It is for this reason that ethical realism still has advocates within sections of the radical egalitarian movements.²¹ However, identical universal rights or attempts to impose one single law of value (such as the hedonic calculus, or the governance principles of the free-market) onto all would privilege those whose desires fitted this natural order.

An example of the ways in which universalist claims can result in hierarchies of power comes from Kropotkin's description of mutual aid as 'an empirically discovered law of Nature' which determines moral principles.²² If this view of the origins of ethical principles is read as a form of moral realism, as Crowder does,²³ then it prioritises those individuals who are most able to develop and practise mutual aid. Those who lack 'natural sympathy' are no longer classed as humans but as 'monsters'.²⁴ Rules which apply to all regardless of context ignore, and therefore disadvantage, those who are in an unequal position to begin with.

The imposition of a single, universal set of moral principles, as

Newman points out, again with reference to Stirner, means creating institutions capable of imposing this standard.²⁵ It extends the power of the state and its functionaries, and also restricts the areas for difference and pluralism.²⁶ By contrast, a view of the good which is based on social practices does not promote uniformity, as distinctive practices have different norms (and agents) and would not require a universal set of regulations to be imposed from outside. For instance the rules of chess, which are different to those of football or poker, are not required to be imposed on the players (though of course it is also possible to coerce people into playing); participants merely must share and abide by these principles in order to gain the benefits from the game, such as improved concentration and patience.²⁷

²¹ See for instance Norman Geras's defence of Enlightenment 'universalist values' in 'Marxism, the Holocaust and September 11: An Interview with Norman Geras', *Imprints: A Journal of Analytical Socialism* Vol. 6 no. 3 (2002), online at <<http://eis.bris.ac.uk/~plcdib/imprints/normangerasinterview.html>>, last accessed 13 May, 2008 and N. Geras *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind* (London: Routledge, 1995); G. Purchase, 'Anarchy in the UK #2', *Rebel Worker*, Vol. 27 No. 2 (199) (April-May 2008), pp. 15-20: 15.

²² Kropotkin, 1992: 21.

²³ Crowder, 1991: 157-68. Other commentators, such as Jesse Cohn and Shawn Wilbur, have suggested that Kropotkin is merely trying to open up a space for benevolent social action against the realism of conservative social Darwinists, who held that the battle for survival determined all social behaviour, J. Cohn and S. Wilbur 'What's Wrong With Postanarchism?', *From the Libertarian Library*, July 8 2007 <<http://libertarian-library.blogspot.com/2007/07/cohn-and-wilbur-whats-wrong-with.html>> last accessed 8 March 2008.

²⁴ Kropotkin, 1992: 40.

²⁵ Stirner, 1993: 98-99.

²⁶ S. Newman, *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought: New theories of the political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 17.

²⁷ MacIntyre, 2006: 188.

4.3 Epistemological Problems

The final criticism, one pursued most rigorously by Newman, through Stirner, is that there are no ultimate grounds for claiming universal truths. Newman initially concentrates on the anti-essentialist grounds for rejecting universal claims to truth, that there is no natural entity or intuitive pre-given quality which constitutes the ‘good’. Appeals to external authorities such as God or abstractions such as ‘society’ rest on unknowable, untestable constructions: ‘a new spook, a new “supreme being”’.²⁸ Even appeals to essential human attributes are inevitably incomplete: ‘nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me’.²⁹ For whatever is imposed as a definition of the essential self can always be transcended. Instead these appeals to abstractions hide the fact that moral rules (or ‘fixed ideas’) are simply the result of unchallenged irrational traditions³⁰ that frequently serve the interests of powerful individuals.³¹ In their place, Stirner argues, the individual should concentrate only on their everchanging needs and desires, and take responsibility for constructing an account of the good which meets these desires: ‘Ownness *created* a new *freedom*; for ownness is the creator of everything.’³²

Even the realist assumption that reason can identify universal criteria for the good is open to critique by postanarchists. Foucauldians identify how different social practices have their own distinctive discourse and mode of reasoning.³³ The questioning of a universal form of reason (*logos*) is of no surprise to logicians. There are a multiplicity of different logics, which have distinctive semantics, syntaxes and axioms: from the binary classical logics to the many-valued intuitionist logics, plus modal logics, temporal (linear and circular) logics, fuzzy logics and the numerous variations and cross-pollinations of these. It is curious that reason is assumed to be singular.

Rejection of a singular account of *logos* does not necessarily mean embracing irrationalism, though some poststructuralists might occasionally slip into such an incoherent and facile position. An alternative is to recognise that social practices and forms of knowledge have their own logics, which may overlap. The underlying rules that govern the discursive features of these practices are largely stable although contestable and changeable.³⁴ Rather than adopt irrationality or rely upon a single *logos*, reason is regarded as contextual, being generated by and supportive of, the social practices or traditions of which it is a part. Whilst the axioms of classical logic are likely to

²⁸ Stirner, 1993: 130; Newman, 2001: 60-61.

²⁹ Stirner, 1993: 366.

³⁰ Stirner, 1993: 43-44; Newman, 2001: 65-66.

³¹ Stirner, 1993: 4; Newman, 2001: 64.

³² Stirner: 1993: 163; See also Newman, 2001: 69

³³ See Foucault’s descriptions of the development of clinical diagnosis, anatomy and pathology, with their constructed medical gazes and distinctive, albeit overlapping, principles, institutions and discourses in *Birth of the Clinic* (London: Routledge, 1997); May, 1994: 98-99.

³⁴ Call comes close to this account in his description and endorsement of Derrida’s critique of a single universal reason (*logos*), Call, 2002: 71.

be stable features of most established social practices, this does not mean they are universal. Even logicians identify that the axioms of classical logic do not apply in each and every domain of human social enquiry - such as sub-atomic particle physics. It would seem to misunderstand romantic attachment if it was expected that love was only meaningfully expressed in the form of (for example) the syllogism or propositional formula.

5. Against Subjectivism

Stirner and Newman, against the dangerous hierarchical and oppressive account of morality offered by the universalists, propose in its place a form of subjectivism. The individual is freed from the constraints of universal laws to create their own morality. However, whilst the critique of universalism is convincing, there are problems with this proposed subjectivist solution. The belief that the individual (or individual consciousness) is the fundamental basis for the construction of, and justification for, moral values has a number of fatal flaws for an anarchist or any proponent of meaningful social action: 1) that it is fundamentally solipsistic, denying dialogue and discourse and the possibility of moral evaluation; 2) it recreates social hierarchies of the form rejected by the core principles of anarchism; and 3) that Stirner's own meta-ethical account is epistemologically unsound as it ignores its own social construction.

5.1 Disempowerment: Solipsism

Stirner's critique of moral realism, however, is replaced by a commitment to the self as the sole and ultimate source of moral knowledge. Stirner posits a radical individualism, with the self creating its own values: 'If it is right for me therefore it is right'.¹ Newman stresses that Stirner's 'self' is not the fixed, rational accumulating ego of deontological ethics; it is one which is in constant flux, making and remaking itself.² This is because any description is bound to be incomplete because the creativity and subversiveness of the ego can undermine or transform any definition.³

However, it is only this self, abstracted from any social commitments or prior concerns, which is the source of moral knowledge. It alone decides what constitutes moral action, and it decides on its own terms. 'I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything'.⁴ Thus, Stirner's ego can legitimise theft or any other action that the ego at that moment requires to fulfil its temporary project. So too, for Call, Nietzsche's creative subject constructs its own laws and values.⁵ There can be no external challenge to it from outside, as the self is the ultimate source, and arbiter, of moral knowledge. This would foreclose all debate and mean that no values

¹ Stirner, 1993: 191.

² Newman, 2001: 67-68.

³ Stirner, 1993: 366.

⁴ Stirner, 1993: 5.

⁵ Call, 2002: 51.

could be challenged. But clearly anarchists do have meaningful ethical debate, and this requires a shared moral discourse that can evaluate and select between rival tactical options.

5.2 Recreation of Hierarchy

The Stirnerite postanarchists like Call and Newman rightly identify how the claim to be acting on behalf of abstract universal values provides the grounds for coercively imposing practices onto (less powerful) others.⁶ However, a criticism raised by universalist theorists like McLaughlin is that Stirner's anarchism recreates social hierarchies, in which the only morally worthwhile entity is the egoist. Even in the voluntary union of egoists, the *other* has no external status and can be used instrumentally according to one's power.⁷ If the universalist criticism of Stirner's subjectivism is correct, then this recreation of social hierarchies constitutes a rejection of one of the core principles of anarchism. There are two grounds for this criticism, one largely defended by Newman, the other less easily accommodated.

The first is that this account of Stirner views him as proposing a Hobbesian 'ego' selfishly pursuing its own interests without regard to others. This account seems consistent with McLaughlin's criticism of Stirner. There are certainly textual references that support such an interpretation.⁸ Newman, who identifies this line of criticism within Clark's older scholarly study,⁹ provides a defence.¹⁰ Newman replies that Stirner's project concerns individual liberation from the tyranny of others and the fixing of one's identity to set ideas rather than the subjugation of the less powerful to the dictates of the powerful ego.¹¹

However, this response, which is not entirely consistent with Stirner's writings,¹² is a more persuasive and interesting argument. It does, however, give rise to a second criticism: that Stirner creates a binary divide between the liberated ego with whom one can have temporary union on one side and, on the other, the common herd. By concentrating on the development of the individual subject's own development (or 'becoming') it ignores, as Frank H. Brooks identifies, the situation of the unenlightened

⁶ Call, 2002: 49 and 55; Newman, 2001: 61.

⁷ McLaughlin, 2007: 154.

⁸ For instance: 'Let me say to myself, that what my might reaches to is my property; and let me claim as property everything that I feel strong enough to attain ... Here egoism, selfishness, must decide' (Stirner, 1993: 257).

⁹ Clark argues that by prioritising the individual's own values Stirner 'still exalts the will to dominate, and still accepts the authoritarian consciousness'. (Clark, 1976: 94).

¹⁰ Newman, 2001: 71; Clark, 1976.

¹¹ Newman, 2001: 71.

¹² See for instance Stirner's rejection of state-imposed equality for relationships in which others become 'my property, my creatures'. (Stirner, 1993: 179).

subject. It thus creates a hierarchy of enlightened egos who can and should act for themselves and the rest: the benighted masses.¹³

5.3 Epistemological Problems

Stirner's critique interests Newman precisely because it opens up space for the creative ego, one unconstrained by a single set place within the social order.¹⁴ However, Stirner's critique does not just provide room for a critical consciousness, but also denies it has any place within the social order, as nothing substantive exists beyond the ego. It is this universal abstraction of the ego from the social context that is subjected to one of the oldest assaults on Stirner, in the voluminous polemic by Karl Marx in *The German Ideology*. Marx ridicules both the form of the argument, which he claims is based on the fallacious shift of the quantifier,¹⁵ as well as the conclusion that the ego and the concepts it develops can be divorced from the social circumstances in which they arise.¹⁶

The central liberatory feature of Stirner's critique is, oddly, one compatible with Marx: that the individual should be free to develop, creating and recreating itself, according to their desires. But this, as Marx recognises, requires material resources. As Paul Thomas points out in his review of Marx's critique of Stirner, a person can only freely create themselves - for instance, to use Marx's example - as a 'cattle-rearer' or a 'critic' if there are the social institutions (without bourgeois divisions of labour) that allow the individual to pursue these fluid, temporary goals.¹⁷

An individual, and their critical consciousness, is built out of social resources.¹⁸ As Stirner identifies, the ego requires the social resources of language in which to reinvent itself, and to think of itself anew, but in doing so, becomes a *subject* of language.

I can only make use of *human* means, which are at my command because I am at the same time man. And really I have thoughts only as *man*; as I, I am at the same time *thoughtless*. He who cannot get rid of thought is so far *only* man, is a thrall of language, this human institution, this treasury of *human* thoughts. Language or 'the word' tyrannizes hardest over us, because it brings up against a whole army of fixed ideas.¹⁹

¹³ F. Brooks, 'American Individualist Anarchism: What it was and why it failed', *The Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1996), 85.

¹⁴ Newman, 2001: 71-72.

¹⁵ K. Marx, *The German Ideology* (Moscow, USSR: Progress, 1976), 295-97.

¹⁶ Marx, 1976: 305-08.

¹⁷ P. Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 148-49; Marx, 1976: 53.

¹⁸ Marx, 1976: 231.

¹⁹ Stirner, 1993: 345-46.

To express his radical subjectivism, Stirner requires inter-subjective resources, such as language and institutions such as publishers and readership. To transcend the restrictions of existing modes of thought or existing social practices Stirner needs both to recognise their limits, and the materials they provide - though this ultimately produces new institutions. Thus, the individual cannot be wholly abstracted out of his social context in the manner required for Stirner's subjectivism to be consistent.

6. An Alternative to Subjectivism

The alternative to the radical subjectivism of Stirner must not only avoid those features of egoism which make it internally inconsistent or irreconcilable with a meaningful anti-hierarchical political practice, but must also keep those elements of the subjectivist critique that identify the oppressive features of moral universalism. Whilst a comprehensive account of such an alternative is impossible in the limited space remaining, a brief sketch can be presented and at least some initial assessment of whether these features are mutually compatible.

One alternative is a prefigurative or practical anarchism, based on a social account of the virtues (based on a revision of MacIntyre's virtue theory). This identifies goods as being inherent to social practices,¹ which have their own rules, which are negotiable and alter over time.² It stresses the immanent values of particular practices rather than the externally decided (consequentialist) values that will accrue.

Thus, those tactics which are consistent with anarchism are those that are rewarding in their own terms rather than on the basis of external benefits alone. The different approaches to political-social organisation provide an illustration, in which Leninism exemplifies the instrumental approach, whilst a case from contemporary anarchism provides a contrast. Leninism concentrates on the external goods of the disciplined party, its success is primarily judged on its efficiency in reaching the desired goal of revolution.³ However, a different non-consequentialist approach to political organisation is to view political structures as the manifestation of internal goods, such as enhancing wisdom and the embodiment of social relationships that disperse social power.⁴ Standards are generated by, and help to form, anti-hierarchical social practices. For instance the norms required for secretly subverting corporate advertising or state propaganda are not identical to those required to maintain an inclusive, multi-functional social centre. Whilst different, the norms of both are open to those entering these practices; they are open to critical dialogue and can alter over time.

Each anarchist practice produces their own standards, which overlap with others. The norms by which a successful social centre is run will be different to, but bear some

¹ MacIntyre, 2006: 187-88.

² MacIntyre, 2006: 190-91.

³ See for instance V I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963): 149.

⁴ See for instance many of the methods discussed by the Trapeze Collective, *Do it Yourself: A handbook for changing our world* (London: Pluto, 2007), which not only promote productive, social goals, but which are internally rewarding, as they produce creative dialogues, amusement and expand knowledge and skills.

similarities with, an inclusive, participatory website or periodical. Thus the standards for the goods, the types of social relationship that constitute (and are constituted by) non- or anti-hierarchical practice are observable and assessable within a domain - and between adjacent domains. So that the relatively stable, and common, norms of bravery (opposing dominating power), solidarity (reciprocal assistance between those in a subjugated position) and wisdom (coming to understand the structures of oppression and the means by which 'other values' can be created) are identifiable within anarchist practices, but are not necessarily universal. Similar practices involving subtly different actors will generate distinctive other goods (or bads).

Like the Stirnerite subject, there is no universal agent of change, but one in constant flux, resisting, challenging or fleeing the changing dominating powers within a given context. Within these radical practices, the subject produces its own immanent values. Because social practices are not distinct but overlap, there are possibilities for links of solidarity across the different domains between different agents, although there is no universal agent who participates in all practices. A narrative of anti-hierarchical liberation might provide a link between different practices, and provide routes for new social practices (and new agents to develop). The contestation of hierarchy, however, does not represent a new universal value. There are contexts in which goods are immanently developed but a challenge to structures that maintain inequalities of power is not generated - for instance, children playing in a sandbox. Thus, the rejection of hierarchy is not a universal guide to action, although, given the persistence of economic structures and institutions that enforce and legitimise these inequalities of power, it is highly likely that the contestation of hierarchy will remain a core anarchist value.

7. Conclusion

Whilst many of the main constellations of anarchism, such as individualist and social anarchisms, differ in fundamental aspects, they do share a commitment to prioritising ethical discourse. The differences, however, are best illustrated through unpicking the distinctive forms of normative, applied and meta-ethics. Both strict consequentialist and deontological anarchisms share similar weaknesses in that their commitment to moral universalism restricts agent freedom, recreates hierarchies and cannot provide an adequate account for the generation and identification of these universals. However, the alternative adopted by some egoist individualists and postanarchists, i.e. radical subjectivism, is inadequate on similar grounds. If subjectivism is right, then it restricts the possibility of meaningful ethical dialogue, recreates hierarchies between the liberated ego and the rest, and cannot adequately account for the creative ego, without recourse to the social forms it rejects.

In place of a subjectivist ethic, this paper has sketched out an alternative, based on a social account of virtues (but without the underlying essentialism usually associated with neo-Aristotelianism). This alternative suggests that values are observable and assessable, and open to discussion, but are non-universal. They are immanent to the practice or practices in which they are formed (and which they constitute). These standards are not unique to discrete practices, but can be found in adjacent social contexts. In anarchism these virtues are usually addressed in a shared ethical discourse, which prioritises the contestation of hierarchies, but also promotes the production of other goods.

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Exclusive!!!', Ian Bone <<http://ianbone.wordpress.com/2008/05/18/fake-labour-toffis-a-toff-exclusive/>> last accessed, 3 June 2008 'More *Guardian* Nepotism-Monbiot Horror!', February 28, 2008 <<http://ianbone.wordpress.com/2008/02/23/more-guardian-nepotism-monbiot-horror/>> last accessed 3, June 2008, and his book *Bash The Rich* (Bristol: Tangent. 2006).

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