Anarchism and Authority: A Philosophical Introduction to Classical Anarchism
Paul McLaughlin
Ashgate 2007, 202pp including index

Arguing about the nature of anarchism is a popular anarchist pastime, and Paul McLaughlin here offers a provocative intervention in that debate, in the form of a 'philosophical introduction to classical anarchism'. While I don't in the end find his answer convincing, he does a good deal of valuable work in the course of arguing for it.

According to McLaughlin, anarchism is scepticism about authority. That is, the defining centre of anarchism is: philosophical not (necessarily) activist; critical rather than ethical; and focussed on questioning a particular species of supposedly legitimate power, especially as claimed by the State.

The conceptual Part I of the book draws on recent work in political and legal philosophy, especially by Richard De George and by Leslie Green, to clarify both of the main terms of McLaughlin's definition. First, the scepticism in question is neither Pyrrhonism (the essentially conservative suspension of judgment between competing knowledge claims) nor Descartes' strategic adoption of sceptical tropes as the first stage of his project of reconstructing knowledge. Rather, anarchist scepticism is Socratic questioning: faced with an assertion of authority, anarchists demand a justification. Second, authority is a form of domination (which is a species of social power, which is itself a species of power understood naturalistically as effective capacity). It is defined as involving a right to command (from the point of view of the authority-holder) and a correlative duty to obey (from the point of view of the person over whom authority is held). It is distinguished into moral, theoretical, and practical forms. McLaughlin here makes the important point that anarchism should not be understood as "authoritarianism: anarchists do not assume that all authority is unjustified; they ask for justifications where others tend to assume them, and are open to the possibility of justification. McLaughlin further argues that anarchists do typically regard, at least, parental authority and operative authority as - in principle - justifiable. The final chapter of Part I offers a neat taxonomy of attempted justifications for the authority of the state, together with brisk debunking responses.

Part II introduces some strands in the history of anarchist thought. McLaughlin identifies roots of anarchism in the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and Left Hegelianism, and claims Godwin's Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, Proudhon's What Is Property?, and Stirner's The Ego and Its Own as foundational texts. The history becomes sketchier and more polemical as it gets more recent - post-modern anarchism, in particular, is treated very rapidly and unsympathetically. A concluding chapter connects the conceptual work McLaughlin has done to some questions of current politics, including globalisation and terrorism, in a more popular style than the rest of the book.

The McLaughlin diesis diat anarchism is scepticism about authority is intriguing, and it's well worth having this picture of anarchism set out so clearly and precisely. But I want to raise some worries.

First, the claim that anarchism is centrally critical rather than ethical is implausible. McLaughlin gestures at the critical/ethical distinction in several different ways, and is never completely
explicit about it; but if I've understood correctly, the 'ethical' he rejects is a Utopian vision of anarchism possibility. He eventually claims that anarchism 'is not just non-utopian but even ^/>/-Utopian' (p. 171). But Utopian imagination is a form of criticism: the Utopian critic constructs an ideal alternative to current life precisely to foreground and attack what is wrong with that life. Even if McLaughlin rejects this, it's difficult to deny the utopianism of much anarchist thought. To use one of McLaughlin's own examples, William Godwin is certainly a critic of authority and a defender of individual rational judgment, but his criticism always takes place in the light of a Utopian vision of future perfected humanity.1

Second, and more generally: I'm unclear why we need a definition of anarchism, whether as scepticism about authority or as anything else. Anarchism is at best a loose family-resemblance concept; individual anarchists have ranged widely over several different axes of contrast; and continuing the anarchist tradition is not a matter of accepting some list of authoritative premises or practices. Overstating slightly: there is no such thing as anarchism; there are only anarchists.2

As an introduction to anarchism, Anarchism and Authority is, amongst other things, an attempt to shape future anarchist thinking. I share McLaughlin's view that such thinking will benefit from engagement with non-anarchist political philosophy, as with other disciplines, and I value the critical and conceptual work his book does. But I'm not convinced that a definition of the tradition is the right way to motivate such work.

Despite these objections, I recommend this book, and especially its first part: it's a careful, clearly-written example of what connections with the mainstream can do for anarchist philosophy.

Footnote

NOTES

1. See further my Living Without Domination (Ashgate 2007).

2. 'There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.' - E. H. Gombrich, The Story of Art (pocket edn, Phaidon 2006), p. 21.

AuthorAffiliation

Sam Clark
Lancaster University

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