

Rational vs Irrational Anarchism

On a mission deep in enemy territory, we discovered **this** Anti-state.com article by Lee McCracken, called *Two Kinds of Anarchy*.

McCracken outlines two broad schools of thought that, he thinks, all anarchists fit into. He calls them voluntarism and liberationist.

[Voluntarism] holds that while the state is evil and illegitimate, it does serve certain useful and important functions, however inadequately. Chief among these is the maintenance of some semblance of just law and order. Anarchists of this persuasion tend to have a pessimistic (they would say realistic) view of human nature similar to that expounded by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. According to Hobbes, human beings are fundamentally self-interested – they seek their own advantage, even to the detriment of others.

Such statements of human nature make no sense. Human beings make choices according to their (conscious or unconscious) ideas. So either human nature, in certain situations, prevents humans from making choices and controls them, or it is a statement about our ideas. However, we can change our ideas. The notion that some unexplained, nonphysical mechanism controls our behavior in some extensive but undefined class of situations, and that this mechanism contains knowledge of what 'self-interest' is, is pure mysticism.

Besides that, since when is self-interest divergent from morality?

The other defining bit on voluntarism states:

The idea is that since human beings are not going to achieve dramatic moral improvement any time soon, the existence and enforcement of rules necessary for common life has to be reconciled with human freedom.

In other words, voluntarists see laws as a necessary evil. Because humans are bad, they must be controlled by law, but because freedom is good, we should still strive to maximise it. And these goals are contradictory and must be balanced.

But are rules really a threat to freedom? No. To see why, imagine

two people with a chess set, but no rules. They might try to have a nice time with the board and pieces, but in itself, moving figures around on coloured squares has quite limited appeal. Now add rules to the picture – limits on what can legitimately be done with the pieces – and the players may, if the rules are good, flourish. Rather than find their lives limited by these rules, they find them enriched. Not all rules are a mechanism to oppress people, rather they are a mechanism to create consent in human interactions. Which is useful for the simple reason that humans are different.

Rather than seeing a conflict between laws and freedom, rational people should see laws as a potential force for good – an aid to freedom.

Next, liberationist anarchism:

[Liberationist anarchism] sees human nature as essentially reasonable and tending toward social cooperation without the need of external sanctions. It deems authority and institutions to be impediments to the full flowering and development of individuals. For the liberationist, human beings are governed by reason, and rational individuals will be able to avoid conflict on their own.

Liberationists are no better than voluntarists in their view of human nature; although they pick a more optimistic one, the above criticism still applies, namely that there isn't really such a thing. Furthermore, in a liberationist's warped view, our chess players would still be better off without rules. Why? Because liberationists think that rules are an impediment to the full flowering and development of the players. If only they weren't so constrained, they would promptly discover an even better game than chess!

However, creating fulfilling, consensual interactions is not a matter of good intentions or fiat. Rather, it requires knowledge and creativity. And therefore, for all practical purposes, it requires tradition. It would be folly to begin every discussion from first principles (including, we suppose, working out a language to use from scratch).

Fortunately, there *is* actually another kind of anarchist: a rational one. Rational anarchists respect the valuable knowledge that exists in current traditions, and wish for gradual improvement. They know that every function of government can, in the limit, be privatised, but also know that such a change, rather than being the difference between a bad society and a good one, will only be one step among many on the endless road of evolution.

Mon, 04/14/2003 - 23:25 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

You said: are rules really...

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This raises the issue of when rules are rational and when they are merely anti-rational impediments to the furtherance of intellectual and emotional flourishing. How do we tell the difference?

by a reader on Tue, 04/15/2003 - 01:12 | [reply](#)

Which Rules Are Rational?

I think the right approach is to look not at the content of the rule, but at how it was created and what tradition it is a part of. (Content can be a rough indicator too -- arbitrary (not false!) rules tend to be bad.) Rules that are part of rational traditions, rules that are open to criticism and evolution, are fine even if rather false. And unquestionable rules, created by fiat or dice, *even if mostly true*, are bad.

It's important to note that two rules, *that say the same thing*, may not be equally good. For example, imagine one company decrees that all employees must eat lunch from 12-12:30 exactly, and no other systems may be considered, and lots of people are resentful, and the management doesn't listen to complaints. Then imagine another company, where the employees found they would get back from lunch at different times, and this was making them less efficient, and in an effort to improve productivity by better coordinating everyone's schedule, a lunch time rule, from 12-12:30 is created. Same rule, different value.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Tue, 04/15/2003 - 06:24 | [reply](#)

Anarchists are boneheads

Actually it was a good post. But please drop the word "anarchist"!!!! "Real" anarchists (and they will blab for hours explaining it to you) are leftist/marxist/communist/socialist/anti-capitalist/etc etc. As you describe in the post, "fake" anarchists - market-anarchists, etc - are also a crock. why in heavens would a LIBERTARIAN want to be associated with these trash?

by a reader on Tue, 04/15/2003 - 11:28 | [reply](#)

Anarchism is a fine word

Why would you trust someone dumb enough to be a marxist/communist/socialist/anti-capitalist to be an authority on what "anarchist" means???

See this [FAQ](#) for a discussion of this dispute as well as other aspects of anarcho-capitalism.

by [Gil](#) on Tue, 04/15/2003 - 17:27 | [reply](#)

yeah then read the Anarchist FAQ

So what? There many dueling faqs out there on the true meaning of the word "anarchist." The mere fact that socialists use it means it is soiled, just like the word "liberal" has been. "Libertarian" is somewhat more clean -- though many during this war have chosen to stink it up.

Really the labels are less important than the ideas, but it is the case that "market anarchists" seem more hip to prove their anarchy than to espouse anything resembling Liberty. Hence they are un-libertarian boneheads.

by a reader on Tue, 04/15/2003 - 18:24 | [reply](#)

Some thoughts by (I)An-ok

I am of the belief that anarchism is against being against any and all forms of authority and domination, ie, systemic forms of coercion (TCS definition - <http://www.tcs.ac/FAQ/FAQShortGlossary.html>). And as a result of which, it is naturally opposed to all forms of the State, capitalism, coercive parenting, etc, because authority exists within these. It is not opposed to these because they are the State, capitalism, etc., it is opposed to these because of the authority and domination within them.

As far as anarchism being "libertarian", I would say that it is very much so, in the small-"L" sense of the term. Anarchism is all about individual liberty - individual liberty goes hand-in-hand with non-coercion.

by [AnarchoTCS](#) on Thu, 04/17/2003 - 14:27 | [reply](#)

If you are against all author...

If you are against all authority and any form of coercion in principle, then the rational position to hold is to be **for** government as it stands in the West. The reason is that Western Democracy/Capitalism is the best system known to man for facilitating freedom. Furthermore, it contains within its tradition, a capacity to improve and to become progressively less coercive, less authoritarian, less statist...If you care about this, there really isn't any alternative.

by a reader on Thu, 04/17/2003 - 14:57 | [reply](#)

Being against all authority means **all authority**

I don't see how one can be against all authority and domination and still support **any** kind of authority-based system. Whether it be "Western Democracy/Capitalism", or any other government or authority system in the world, it is STILL an authority-based system. If one is against all authority, then one is against all authority - full stop.

For anarchists, there's no playing favorites, there's no half-assed attempts, there's no compromises, there's no capitulation - the whole damn "authority" thing has gotta go.

"If you care about this, there really isn't any alternative."

Maybe that's how things seem for you, but I see a whole world of possibilities out there just waiting to be played with.

by [AnarchoTCS](#) on Sat, 04/19/2003 - 00:30 | [reply](#)

Why be against **all** authority?

What is it about authority that makes it always bad?

Why is it bad to voluntarily participate in a project where more decision-making authority is given to some people than to others so as to help the entire project progress and succeed?

If this works, by the lights of everyone involved, better than all of their alternatives, why would you want to deny them this option? And how could you stop them from doing this without exercising the bad sort of authority?

I think you've chosen the wrong enemy in "authority". Perhaps coercion would be a better target.

by [Gil](#) on Sat, 04/19/2003 - 21:57 | [reply](#)

Good comments, but slightly off

I think you slightly misinterpreted what I was getting at here. The "voluntarist" does not see rules as a necessary evil, but necessary, *simpliciter*. There is, in my view, no such thing as a necessary *evil*. In fact, I quote C.S. Lewis to the effect that "There cannot be a common life without a *regula*. The alternative to rule is not freedom but the... tyranny of the most selfish member." Rules are, in my view, a positive good that make civilized life possible.

The constraints of human nature that I identified with the voluntarist position is simply that self-interested individuals will sometimes seek to defect from cooperation and that rules (or laws if you like) are necessary to act as a check upon their actions. This is because there will always be people a) whose rational self-interest is served by taking advantage of their fellows and/or b)

who simply do not act out of enlightened self-interest, but wanton

impulse. I take this to be a fact about human beings that, at least under present conditions, is ineradicable. This is not an appeal to "nonphysical" invisible entities, but simply empirical observation.

Cheers,

Lee McCracken

by a reader on Tue, 04/22/2003 - 17:26 | [reply](#)

Epistemology Is Neat

It's not possible to observe explanations.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Wed, 04/23/2003 - 04:32 | [reply](#)

Look I Wrote More

To be a bit clearer, the notion that the things you observed are *because of human nature* is an explanation that you didn't actually observe, you just made up.

And also, you seemed to have missed the point that attributing personality to "human nature" is nonsense.

And also, the idea that there will necessarily always be people who intentionally, wrongly hurt others for their own gain, is either the idea that morality does not exist, or some sort of strange theory about the impossibility of progress.

And also, what's acting out of "wanton impulse"? Doesn't it just mean having a certain collection of personality traits (theories)? Don't you know that any particular theory is not a necessary part of the world?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Wed, 04/23/2003 - 05:37 | [reply](#)

Not quite there

No, you're missing the point. "Human Nature" in this instance is not a hypothetical entity that purports to *explain* phenomena--it just *is* those phenomena. "Human nature" is just shorthand for those traits that human beings exhibit (or tend to exhibit). In this case, acting with disregard for the rights of others.

If assuming, in constructing any hypothetical anarchist social arrangements, that these traits will always be with us means denying Progress--at least inevitable Progress--then, so much the worse for Progress.

Acting out of wanton impulse just means acting without regard to

one's enlightened or long-term self interest (as when someone commits a crime where the likelihood of getting away with it is nil-- which happens all the time, or acting irrationally on a momentary impulse--so-called crimes of passion, etc.). Children and animals are the paradigm cases, but many adults exhibit this kind of behavior as well.

Lee McCracken

by a reader on Wed, 04/23/2003 - 17:49 | [reply](#)

First get a theory of the mind, then talk about minds

Personality/behavioral traits = theories/ideas = totally changeable
= no reason to think they will "always be with us"

btw, how do you plan to *get to* an anarchist society? isn't the basic route to change people's personalities (theories) by espousing anarchist ideas? and if that can work, why can't espousing good moral ideas work?

-- Elliot Temple
<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Wed, 04/23/2003 - 21:54 | [reply](#)

A=A after all...

You seem to be embracing a form of extreme nominalism wherein one cannot make any generalizations about the behavior of classes of entities.

I take it as obvious that humans have (within admittedly wide parameters) an enduring cluster of traits/capacities/dispositions to behavior. That's what makes them things of a particular kind, after all. And it's far from obvious that personality traits can be equated with ideas. One's personality is far more than just ideas; it's also a function of biology, heredity and environment (among other things). They are not "totally changeable."

I suspect an anarchist society, were it ever to come about, would require a critical mass of people to be convinced of the basic soundness of anarchist ideas. But this by no means requires a society of saints.

--Lee McCracken

by a reader on Thu, 04/24/2003 - 00:10 | [reply](#)

Subject Lines Are Fun

Errr, ok, I get that you don't like my theory of minds (that personality traits are ideas/theories),
but can you present a coherent one of your own please? One that

explains stuff, and doesn't violate our theories of physics, logic, or

epistemology.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Thu, 04/24/2003 - 00:29 | [reply](#)

Rejecting rules

Just like most people who're born into a religion and somehow get convinced that is the only right religion, [i'm not atheist btw], most people also get inculcated with systems of power from the time they're born.

Case in point: blind respect for parents as opposed to anyone in the same age group, respect by age, respect and subservience to religious leaders and omniscient omnipotent God/s.

Govts are no less. They play god all the time. Anarchy then is the flawed utopia. A system of power sets up the entire infrastructure, but after that, even without centralised power, people will just carry on their normal way of life.

The problem with using chess set rules to talk about reality is that there is no iterative prisoner's dilemma inherent in chess. But that is the sort of game we've been playing throughout the evolutionary cycle. It's not win or lose, some people go by the motto, "if I'm going down, I'm taking you with me." that behaviour is NOT seen in chess. There is never thoughts of collateral damage. Ideally every move is for maximal effect, immediately or in the long term.

The problem with using vanilla rule sets to describe an imperfect authority is very clear in the penal system for example. Murder is individually wrong, but as a govt they own your life sufficiently to decide to take it away?

Criminals have little to stop them from committing crime except the veiled threat of legal punishment, but once they're caught, the system actually protects them! Free food, good clothes, safety from grieving relatives. Imagine this happening in a live and let live world. No purchase.

<http://iandravid.wordpress.com/2008/03/22/think-anonymously/>

by **iandravid** on Sat, 03/22/2008 - 03:57 | [reply](#)