

Anarchism, Reason, and History

by [Joseph Sobran](#)

Can any state have a "right to exist"? The question has been raised anew by Professor Hans-Hermann Hoppe, in his book [Democracy: The God That Failed](#). He answers it with a resounding No.

Hoppe is only the latest thinker in the tradition of philosophical anarchism. His mentor, the late Murray Rothbard, was another. Both owe their ideas to a great but little-known nineteenth-century American, Lysander Spooner.

Spencer's position was simple. There is a moral law, which in essence we all learn in early childhood, even before we know our math tables. Basically it is this:

Don't harm other people. The principle is simple, even if its applications may occasionally be difficult.

From this, Spooner reasoned, it follows that no state should exist. Nobody can claim the power to change the moral law or a monopoly of the authority to enforce it. But the state claims the right to do both. It tries to change the moral law by legislation, which is falsely thought to add to the moral duties of its subjects; and it insists that only it may define, outlaw, and punish wrongs.

The results of the state's claims include war, tyranny, slavery, and taxation. Human society would be better off without the state.

The best argument for anarchism is the twentieth century. One scholar, R. J. Rummel, calculates that states in that century murdered about 177 million of their own subjects – and that figure doesn't even count international wars. It's inconceivable that private criminals could kill that many. It would be interesting to know how much wealth states have

confiscated and wasted.

But could society exist without the state? Is it a necessary evil of human existence? Can it even be a positive good?

Aristotle said that man is a political animal, but his conception of the community, or "polis," was very different from the modern state. He thought the community should be small enough that its members could all know each other. Sound like any state you know?

St. Augustine saw the state, along with slavery, as a consequence of Original Sin. It could never be a good thing, but it was inescapable for fallen men. But we may ask whether this is really so; in Augustine's day slavery seemed a necessary evil of social life, and a world without slavery was hard to imagine. Nobody could remember, and few could conceive, an economy without slaves.

Is it possible that we have likewise assumed that the state is inevitable only because we are used to it, and can hardly imagine a world without it? Just as the menial tasks once performed by slaves are now distributed differently among free men, perhaps, as anarchists argue, the functions of the state could be distributed among voluntary agencies.

The Renaissance philosopher Thomas Hobbes thought that anarchy – the "state of nature" – would be "a war of all against all," making human life "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." His solution was the state, which would quell quarrels among men. He didn't foresee that the state itself might aggravate conflict and make social order far more miserable than anarchy could ever be.

Hobbes's near-contemporary John Locke offered a more attractive alternative: the limited state, which would have the power to secure men's natural rights but would lack the power to violate them. But such a state has never existed for long. Once a monopoly of power exists at all, it tends to degenerate into tyranny; anarchists argue that this decline is inevitable, because tyranny is inherent in the very nature of the state.

Oddly enough, the great conservative Edmund Burke began his career with an anarchist tract, arguing that the state was naturally and historically destructive of human society, life, and liberty. Later he explained that he'd intended his argument ironically, but many have doubted this. His argument for anarchy was too powerful, passionate, and

cogent to be a joke. Later, as a professional politician, Burke seems to have come to terms with the state, believing that no matter how bloody its origins, it could be tamed and civilized, as in Europe, by "the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion." But even as he wrote, the old order he loved was already breaking down.

Whatever the truth is, the anarchists have much reason on their side. And much history.

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