

Citation metadata

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Date: Spring-Summer 2009
From: Anarchist Studies(Vol. 17, Issue 1)
Publisher: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd.
Document Type: Book review
Length: 834 words

Main content

Article Preview :

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...

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Clark, Sam. "Anarchism and Authority: A Philosophical Introduction to Classical Anarchism." *Anarchist Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2009, p. 120+. Accessed 13 Nov. 2020.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A214471674

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