

The other Godwin

William Godwin: Des Lumières à l'Anarchisme

Alain Thévenet

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William Godwin, the English political philosopher and novelist of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is certainly one of the theoretical giants in the history of anarchism. For his pioneering achievements in libertarian thought, and above all his classic work *Political Justice*,¹ he is often called the father of philosophical anarchism. Godwin was surrounded by an extraordinary circle of family members, friends and acquaintances. His wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the early feminist work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,² is sometimes called the founder of women's liberation, and their daughter, Mary Shelley, was, of course, the creator of *Frankenstein*. Also included in this milieu were Mary's husband Percy Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, and many other fascinating personalities. In addition to making a major contribution to anarchist thought, Godwin was also a significant figure in the history of ethics and political theory in general, and was a literary figure of some note, due particularly to his highly-regarded *Caleb Williams*,³ a work considered to be the forerunner of the Gothic novel and perhaps the first crime novel.

Alain Thévenet's very welcome book is the result of years of research that had already produced a collection of Godwin's writings in French translation and a comprehensive doctoral dissertation on Godwin's thought. Thévenet, a psychologist, political theorist and activist, has for many years been one of the central figures in the ACL (The Workshop for Libertarian Creation) in Lyon. The ACL has published a large catalogue of significant works on anarchism and related topics, and is certainly one of the most important centers of libertarian intellectual activity in the world today. Thévenet's *William Godwin: Des Lumières à l'Anarchisme* ('From the Enlightenment to Anarchism'), a recent addition to the ACL's impressive collection, is a notable contribution both to Godwin studies and to contemporary discussion in anarchist political theory. Thévenet is also in the process of finishing a complete French translation of Godwin's magnum opus, the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, which will be published by the ACL in a volume that also includes key chapters from *Thoughts on Man* and *Essays Never Before Published*, two of Godwin's late works.

GODWIN REVISITED

Thévenet's book is an excellent, thought-provoking introduction to Godwin and his ideas. On the one hand, the author presents to the reader the Godwin who is well known to historians of philosophy and political theory. Heir to the

Enlightenment, this Godwin is the defender of the power of reason, and the prophet of human perfectibility and the seemingly inexorable (if gradual) march of progress. Thévenet notes the various key aspects of Godwin's gospel of progress, including his emphasis on unfettered free expression, the sacred right of private judgment, the cardinal virtue of sincerity, the centrality of processes of education and enlightenment to social progress, and the place of culture, encompassing literature, art, and other forms of social expression, in such transformation. While these aspects of Godwin's thought have attracted much attention, Thévenet's discussion is notable for emphasising Godwin's considerable contributions to libertarian educational thought, which have seldom been given adequate recognition. As Thévenet shows, from Godwin's early 'Account of the Seminary' to his late *Thoughts on Man*, he explores the role of an oppressive educational system in creating a corrupt, authoritarian society, and the possibilities for education based on freedom and respect for individuality.

Where Thévenet's work makes the most distinctive contribution is in its emphasis on certain aspects of Godwin's work that have been almost entirely neglected previously. The standard view of Godwin presents him as a highly rationalistic and narrowly analytical thinker. For example, George Woodcock, in his classic history of anarchism, entitled his chapter on Godwin, 'The Man of Reason.'⁴ Thévenet, however, contends that 'throughout, [Godwin's] work quivers with what I would call *life*, in a sense that seems almost Nietzschean.' (p.9) He is concerned with revealing the subtle and wide-ranging nature of Godwin's thought, which he interprets as a complex whole in which markedly divergent tendencies lead not to unresolved contradiction, but to a deeper grasp of the intricate realities of existence. In Godwin's works, Thévenet says, there is an 'internal coherence' in which 'shadows and light, doubts and certainties intertwine endlessly.' (p.13)

Thévenet argues that Godwin was never the narrow 'cold rationalist' that he is often thought to be, especially in his earlier works. Rather, he consistently delves into and reveals much of the dark side of human existence, including such shadowy forces as the deep-seated fears and prejudices that are the legacy of an authoritarian social environment. Moreover, Thévenet sees Godwin as a subtle psychologist and philosopher of human nature who explored the non-rational aspects of the psyche, the physicality of our existence, and our integral place in the natural world.

Thévenet also questions the cliché of Godwin's extreme individualism. Godwin has usually been listed among the most radical individualists in the history of anarchist thought—though he was certainly rather unique in having proposed a form of 'individualist communism', in which unfettered private judgment is to lead all to devote all their resources to the maximum good of the community. Thévenet seeks to reveal Godwin's more social side. He cites, for example, Godwin's statement that 'the impressions I receive' from 'my intercourse with my fellow men' are the kind that 'say something to me; for they talk to me of beings like myself. My own existence becomes multiplied *in infinitum*.'⁵ Thévenet interestingly compares this view to Bakunin's famous dictum that the liberty of

others, far from limiting one's own, rather 'multiplies it to infinity.'

THE ANARCHIST CRITIQUE OF ANARCHISM

Thévenet, by means of Godwin, poses some challenging questions for anarchist theory. Godwin distrusted many of the forms of association typically advocated by radical social theorists and stresses weaknesses that are often glossed over. For example, though Godwin advocated a sphere of collective decision-making at the local level, especially for solving concrete, practical problems of the community, he was very suspicious of general assemblies in which 'abstract ideas' are proposed that cannot under such circumstances be fully 'assimilated by each individual.' (pp.193-94) Even today, certain anarchist theorists can only see such questions about dangers of assemblies as an anti-democratic attack on popular institutions. Yet Godwin, at the beginning of the development of modern anarchist thought, pointed out the problem that superficial agreement in large groups can often disguise lapses in communication, failure to achieve true agreement, and an absence of authentically voluntary agreement.

For Godwin, all political association 'holds to some degree the same vices as government: constraint, psychological if not physical violence, the fusion of individuals into a mass that operates in a manner contrary to the free thought of each person.' (p.197) Thévenet sees a commonality between the concern on the part of Godwin for individual autonomy and the authority of private judgment, and Nietzsche's often anarchistic suspicion of crowds and mass movements of all kinds. He notes Godwin's 'distrust of anything that might incorporate the individual in a group that is constituted *a priori*, of anything along the lines of collective emotion.' (p.204) Godwin's individual may have a social dimension but also must above all retain a sphere sovereign individuality.

No doubt Godwin's fears were well founded. But it must also be pointed out that there is a danger on the other side. Both individualists and radical democrats often fear, as a threat to individual or group self-determination, this *a priori* quality, or condition of givenness of certain aspects of our social being. Consequently many of these theorists (even some who claim to be 'holistic' and 'ecological' in perspective) fail to take fully into account the naturally and socially embedded dimension of human beings, the fact that while we are irreducibly socially creative and self-creating beings, we are also beings rooted in nature, with quite *a priori* natural relations to our human communities and to the larger matrix of life. Godwin does not, I think, entirely escape such a lapse.

Thévenet points out another crucial problem for Godwin: 'The establishment of [rational and fully voluntary] institutions presupposes an agreement and evolution of consciousness that they are charged with creating.' (p.53) Godwin is hardly alone in facing this conundrum. The question of 'who will educate the educators' has long haunted advocates of conscious radical social transformation. It was in fact in partial recognition of this problem that Godwin rejected the very idea of

cataclysmic revolution. The idea of such a social break is the very antithesis of the kind of gradual enlightenment and voluntary agreement that for him was the authentic basis of progress and freedom. Thévenet asks in the spirit of Godwin whether for anarchists the idea of revolution has not always been more a unifying myth than a reality that one believes capable of imminent realisation. As a myth it is 'foundational and federative' to the extent that 'it gathers together those who proclaim it in connection with the action that it justifies.' (pp.196-97) The implication is that though we may want to 'demand the impossible', Godwin was not entirely unrealistic in advising us not to hold our collective breath waiting for it to arrive.

Thévenet's Godwin is a truly radical libertarian, an authentic anarchist who challenges every *arche* to which even anarchists fall prey. For Godwin, anarchism 'depends on movement and incessant change', so to encourage them, 'he proposes political institutions that are the most flexible imaginable under the direction of reason, which is not something given once and for all, but rather a process that has neither beginning nor end.' (p.53) Though Godwin has never seemed to me to be a deeply dialectical thinker, I think that Thévenet is correct in attributing a certain dialectical moment to Godwin's thought. Various anarchist theories from Bakunin to Bookchin have tended to lapse into dogmatism in the name of a more or less codified system of anarchism in which internal contradictions must be suppressed rather than developed. The centrality to Godwin's thought of an ever-transforming, ever-negating reason gives it a certain immunity to the kind of rigidity of thinking that has plagued later theories that have attempted to speak authoritatively in the name of anarchism.

THE NIGHTMARES OF REASON

Whereas most commentators focus on Godwin's faith in the light of reason, Thévenet points out his enduring attention, extending from early works such as *Caleb Williams* to his final writings, to the dark side of human existence—a realm generally neglected by later anarchist theorists. In his view, the Godwin who is the prophet of progress and perfectibility is counterbalanced by a Godwin who is the chronicler of tragedy and misfortune, and their subterranean roots both in the psyche and in the underside of society. As Thévenet perceptively points out, Godwin the pure rationalist would probably not have attracted the attention of the Romantic poets, as this more complex Godwin certainly did.

For Thévenet an understanding of this aspect of Godwin requires an exploration of the psychological dimensions of his work, which Thévenet believes to be quite extensive. He contends that Godwin 'anticipates what would later come to be called the unconscious', (p.69) achieves 'a premonition of the discoveries later to come through psychoanalysis' and even at times proposes certain 'therapeutic techniques.' (p.120) Perhaps because of his background in psychology, Thévenet seems sensitive to passages in Godwin with psychological import that have

usually escaped notice. For example, he cites Godwin's statement in his novel *Mandeville* that all sickness of the soul, if revealed in a gentle manner, is on the way to being healed.⁹

Thévenet also examines the previously neglected topic of the place of the body in Godwin's thought. In *The Enquirer*, Godwin proclaims that 'all education is despotism', and laments the fact that the young are subjected to the 'tyranny of implicit obedience', being ordered to 'go there; do that; read; write; rise; lie down.' Thévenet notes that in this passage Godwin stresses the basis of authoritarian education in the training or disciplining of the body. He also cites a passage from *Political Justice* in which Godwin proclaims to oppressive government, 'It is yours to shackle the body ...' It should be noted, however, that Godwin goes on in this passage to stress the much greater significance of mental submission, in comparison to the physical constraint that is also habitually imposed by the state.

Thévenet contends that Godwin perceives that oppressive authority exerts itself initially through control of the body, and that it is equally through the body that the individual asserts his or her resistance. In addition, he recognises that mind and body exert a mutual influence, and 'on this point Godwin exhibits rather keen understanding of what would later become psychosomatic medicine and psychoanalysis.' (p.178) Indeed, Thévenet goes so far as to say that at times Godwin's comments are reminiscent of Wilhelm Reich's radical psychiatry, founded as it would be on the liberation of the body. I find Thévenet's speculations on this topic to be more suggestive at this point than fully conclusive, but they are very welcome for opening up a fascinating area for future study of Godwin's thought.

THE RATIONALIST AS PANTHEIST

Another quite original and provocative dimension in Thévenet's work is the discovery of an ecological Godwin who has been generally unknown to the history of philosophy. Thévenet asserts that Godwin had 'a great feeling for nature and in particular for the animal world.' He supports this contention by citing a striking passage in which Godwin notes that there is no living creature, even 'the maggot in the cheese' that is incapable of feeling pleasure and pain. Godwin goes on to lament the fact that we can't live without injuring other beings. (p.112) This statement is taken from one of Godwin's children's books, and one wonders to what degree it should be recognised as a significant tendency in his thought. How much evidence is there of his continuing concern for such issues and development of such ideas?

One might consider the fact that other utilitarian theorists such as Bentham and Mill also advocate a kind of 'moral extensionism' in which our moral consideration for human beings is enlarged to encompass other sentient beings. Yet these thinkers never really developed an ecological perspective, and granted moral status only to separate, individual beings. Thévenet contends, however, that Godwin goes further than they do. He notes that there are at least 'several passages'

that express a true feeling for nature, and contends that Godwin's nature is not something that is merely 'contemplated passively' but rather a reality in which one 'participates in a sensuous way', so that Godwin's reflections thus 'prefigure ecological sensibility.' (p.113)

It seems to me that the hypothesis of Godwin's proto-ecologism is on the whole an intriguing one. It has perhaps not yet been fully verified but remains a useful project for further investigation. Thévenet marshals further evidence on its behalf by drawing attention to the neglected pantheistic tendencies in Godwin's thought—tendencies that become much more explicit in his later writings. The case for the 'ecological Godwin' is bolstered by passages such as one in which he states that 'I have always been of opinion that a certain portion of what may be called the 'religious sense' is necessary to the sound condition of the human mind ... That we should behold the works of nature with wonder and awe, that we should stand astonished at the symmetry, harmony, subtlety, and beauty of the world around us, is natural and reasonable ... But I think that religion encroaches too far on the human understanding, when it proposes to deprive us of our senses, or prohibits in whatever direction the use of our reasoning powers.'⁸ This passage is very interesting in exhibiting Godwin's early effort to synthesise a kind of nature spirituality with a deep faith in human reason, an undertaking that is exemplified rather strikingly in the later work of the great French anarchist theorist Elisée Reclus, and in some contemporary eco-anarchism.

ANARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

It must, I think, still be concluded that in Godwin's thought, rationalism does in the last instance triumph. As Thévenet himself notes, Godwin's solution to the maladies of the human condition lies in 'relieving human beings of the prejudices that burden them, compel them to make false choices, and are the cause of their unhappiness.' (p.177) If this can be done, then the 'natural course of history' toward amelioration and general happiness can proceed. And Godwin must still be remembered above all for his magnum opus *Political Justice*, a work that in many ways exhibits the strength of his enlightenment heritage and betrays a strongly Promethean sensibility. This dimension is exhibited in his speculations concerning the indefinite extension of human life, an end to death and sexual reproduction, and an effective end to human labor. It has been suggested, not without reason, that Godwin's daughter Mary Shelley subtitled her book *Frankenstein* 'The New Prometheus' in part as a reaction to the elements of technological utopianism and revolt against nature in her father's early thought.

Nevertheless, Thévenet is very convincing in exploring the fascinating complexities and rich ambiguities of Godwin's thought. The themes of rationalism and progressivism in Godwin have often been explored, but what makes Thévenet's book so unique and welcome is that he shows that there is much more to Godwin than this. I must admit that occasionally when reading a passage on psychology,

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nature, or freedom, I wonder whether Godwin has not come belatedly under the influence of Alain Thévenet - though if so it is an influence that is invariably salutary. But another way of looking at this is that Thévenet is engaged in a practice of 'anarchaeology.' By this I mean the investigation of the often fragmentary, often merely incipient beginnings of themes and ideas that will develop and come to fruition in later anarchist thought. From this point of view, Thévenet's work is invaluable.

Above all, Thévenet deserves recognition for his noteworthy success in discovering and exploring the 'Other Godwin' - a Godwin who is much more complex than the conventional one, and who has greater insight into the depths of human psychology, the subtleties of social reality, and the richness of the natural world.

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NOTES

1. William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (London: G.G. and J. Robison, 1798; reprint of the third edition with variant readings of the first and second editions and a critical introduction and notes by F.E.L. Priestley, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).
2. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men with A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
3. William Godwin, *Caleb Williams, Or, Things As They Are* (Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
4. George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Harmondsworth, UK: Pelican Books, 1975).
5. William Godwin, *Thoughts on Man: His Nature, Productions and Discoveries* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1831; reprint ed., New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969), p.447.
6. William Godwin, *Mandeville: A Tale of the Seventeenth Century* (Edinburgh: A. Constable and Co. and Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1817), Vol. II, p.117.
7. William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Vol. I, p.236.
8. William Godwin, *Essays Never Before Published* (London: Henry S. King and Co., 1873), pp.12-13.