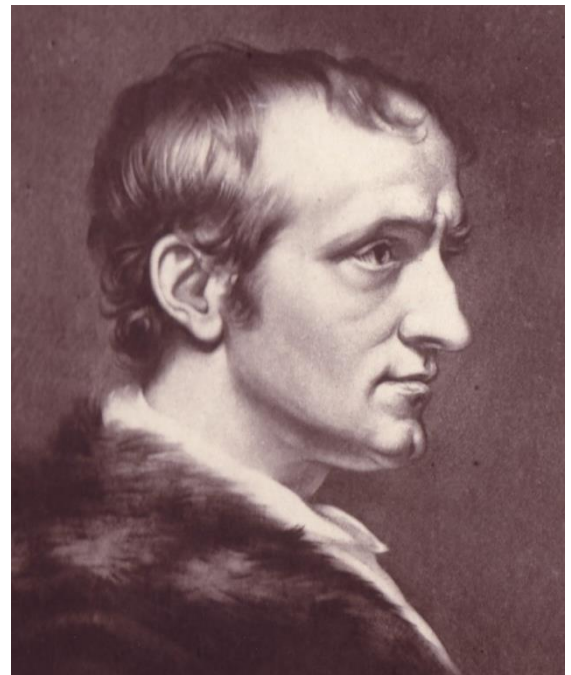


WILLIAM GODWIN

William Godwin was the founder of philosophical anarchism. His rejection of political parties and authoritarian action and control in favor of education and discussion were among the reasons for his lack of influence

he argued that government is a corrupting force in society, perpetuating dependence and ignorance, but that it will be rendered increasingly unnecessary and powerless by the gradual spread of knowledge and the expansion of the human understanding. Politics will be displaced by an enlarged personal morality as truth conquers error and mind subordinates matter. In this development the rigorous exercise of private judgment, and its candid expression in public discussion, plays a central role, motivating his rejection of a wide range of co-operative and rule-governed practices which he regards as tending to mental enslavement, such as law, private property, marriage and concerts.



He argues that character is a function of experience and that the type of government under which people live has an overwhelming impact upon their experience — bad government produces wretched men and women. Although he is initially prepared to endorse the *philosophe* and republican view that government can have a positive impact on the development of virtue, this view is soon set aside in favor of the argument that moral and political improvement flows from progress in our understanding of moral and political truth — a process to which there is no limit.

Godwin advocated for universal benevolence

Godwin argued that the link between politics and morality had been severed

Instead of force Godwin contended that progressive enlightenment would free man from his social organization and from the political, economic and social deficiencies of society. Once true values were inculcated in the individual -- through candor, benevolence and sincerity -- and sufficient goods were produced to meet the physical needs of society, the desire for opulence, ostentatious behavior and the need for coercion would disappear. The reduction of wants by the reordering of individual priorities would, Godwin hoped, remedy the unequal distribution of wealth and, with the assistance of machines, most manual labor might even be abolished. State control of education was unacceptable. Education based on freedom, rather than on deception, collective action or force by parent or teacher, would lead to moral progress and the general reform of society. The goal was not to impose knowledge, but rather to strengthen qualities of the mind that would turn the student toward wisdom and guard him against hostile forces.

For Godwin, the philosophic anarchist, nothing was more productive of vice than blind obedience to external authority. Hence government and law receive his most compelling censure.

William Godwin's philosophy embraced all the essential features of an anarchist doctrine. He:

- ⇒ Rejected any social system dependent on government.
- ⇒ Put forward his own conception of a simplified and decentralized society with a dwindling minimum of authority, based on a voluntary sharing of material goods.
- ⇒ Suggested his own means of proceeding towards it by means of a propaganda divorced from any kind of political party or political aim

He explored themes of immorality in his early works

His basic contention was that man ought to be guided by the laws of truth, benevolence, candor and justice

His religious views – Christian in his upbringing – will transform through his life to agonistic, reaching an atheist attitude, and later rekindling a deist view.

Godwin was no revolutionary and he did not advocate the physical destruction of government. Violence and tumult was anathema to a man like Godwin since they were contrary to human reason. He preferred talk and discussion to action and martyrdom.

Godwin's attitudes concerning sex and marriage were quite unconventional for the time. He believed the sole purpose of marriage to be economic and that it did not represent anything sacred between the two spouses. Godwin also believed that sex was rather trivial and did not have to be tabooed as something forbidden outside of marriage. Godwin introduced the concept of "political justice." By the words "political justice" he meant "the adoption of any principle of morality and truth into the practice of a community," and the work was therefore an inquiry into the principles of society, government and morals.

It has been claimed that Godwin's works laid the foundations for the mutually contradictory doctrines of communism and anarchy. In fact their germ, though undeveloped, is to be found in two separate elements in his thinking. He advocated neither the abolition nor the "communalization" of property; property was to be held, a sacred trust, at the disposal of him whose need was greatest. His most powerful personal belief was that "everything understood by the term co-operation is in some sense an evil," from which proceeded his most influential anarchic doctrines.

Godwin's believed that the evil actions of men were solely reliant on the corrupting influence of social conditions, and that changing these conditions could remove the evil in man

Godwin did not believe that all coercion and violence was immoral per se, as Bakunin and Tolstoy did, but rather recognized the need for government in the short term and hoped that the time would come when it would be unnecessary. Thus, he was a gradualist anarchist rather than a revolutionary anarchist

Godwin when "Speaking of property, he stated that the rights of every one 'to every substance capable of contributing to the benefit of a human being' must be regulated by justice alone: the substance must go 'to him who most wants it' (This hints to 20th century communism)

Professor C.H.Herford (1853-1931) of University College of Wales:

"... Godwin saw in government, in law, even in property, and in marriage, only restraints upon liberty and obstacles to progress. Yet Godwin was not, strictly speaking, an anarchist. He transferred the seat of government from thrones and parliament to the reason in the breast of every man. On the power of reason, working freely, to convince all the armed unreason of the world and to subdue all its teeming passion, he rested his boundless confidence in the 'perfectibility' of man --."

"Since government even in its best state is an evil, the object to be principally aimed at is that we should have as little of it as the general peace of society will permit." Godwin foresaw a time when "there will be no war, no crimes, no administration of justice, as it is called, and no government. Besides this, there would be neither disease, anguish, melancholy nor resentment. Every man will seek with ineffable ardour the good of all."

He was not as egalitarian as most anarchists are, but he simply thought that discrimination on grounds other than ability was immoral.