Anarcho-Stoicism: A Primer

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Abstract

This paper explores the connections between and synthesis of Anarchist political philosophy with the ethical systems of the late Roman Stoics. Utilizing a dialectic virtue model, reminisce of Hegelian development, the analysis centers around the ways in which stoic virtue theory can be applied within anarchist social structure and the consequences of such a combination. Anarchism provides a particularly flexible framework for implementation; such a system's loose structure, with the primary thesis of anti-statism, varies greatly between individuals and groups. Stoic ethics share in anarchism's need to reconcile the individual moral agent with their role in the moral community, and this connection is one in which the individual sovereignty and the wider community may be brought into a greater degree of flourishing. Stoicism is oft perceived as mostly conservative, yet not out of necessity, while Anarchism's progressive libertarian nature allows for wide interpretation. A Dialectic Virtue Theory can be utilized as a vehicle to connect these two traditions—Stoicism being it's exemplar, and Anarchism's natural freedom of interpretation and practice. *Virtue* will then be explored as something which, when pursued in earnest, increases the flourishing of the individualist as well as the communitarian. Individual Liberty will take center stage, and as we will see this is echoed in the stoic conceptions of self-discipline; to discipline one's own individual attainment of virtue will have ripple effects when given the space to do so, and since this discipline does not come from a higher authority (ie. the state), this maps particularly well to anarchist political thought. Hereby the individual is given the utmost freedom to develop their own ethics of virtue while contributing positively to the generalized virtue of the larger community, and both grow evermore sophisticated via this dialectical exploration. This thesis asserts that the system which can be constructed from these traditions is not only preferable, but logically sound, just, and attainable. This then ushers in the newest in a long line of anarchist variance which we shall now call *Anarcho-Stoicism.*

I. Framework and Method

To begin this synthesis, much care must be taken to establish the modes and models used to structure the Anarcho-Stoic ethical system—to construct the system from the root. The first of these roots is the logical method applied, namely, *Dialectic Logic.* This will be chosen given a key feature: it is certainly historically relevant to anarchist thought, but more importantly it's dynamic approach to the structure of logic allows the freedom of form, as we will see, characteristic of anarchist conceptions of Liberty and stoic conceptions of Virtue. Dialectic logic is not a rigid code, but rather a methodology in which we may analyze and apply certain beliefs and systems. In opposition to competing models, the dialectic model will be preferred as it supplies a path forward which allows a greater degree of variable exploration and expression.

Much of philosophy generally owes it's success to a dialectic model, but for our purposes it must be known that many of the first anarchists were birthed from the writings of *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel,* the quintessential dialectician of the modernist period. The Young Hegelians of the late 19th Century, mostly political radicals, read Hegel's logic as a wholly progressive system which prioritized development, growth, and social revolution. Hegel's notion of *World Spirit* is as a self-actualizing force of history; global consciousness develops as it encounters *contradiction*. As contradiction arises, as is inevitable, the two opposing sides cave in on one another in what Hegel calls *Aufheben* (to sublate)*:* preservation, change, and advancement of the initial premise. Put simply, we may begin with premise *x*. Eventually, premise x is sublated by premise *y,* and the two struggle with one another until they "grasp the unity of the opposition between the first two [premises], or [create] the positive result of the dissolution or transition of those [premises]" (Maybee, 2020). This ushers in a speculative moment, where the synthesis of premise *x* and premise *y* becomes a new and novel premise: premise *z.* In short, there is a notion, it is challenged, and through the initial notion and this new challenger we reach a greater grasp of the truth, which becomes a new novel notion, and the process repeats.

It must be noted that Hegel's initial interpretation of the end of such a process, as espoused in his masterwork *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, is *The Absolute*, or, the final wholly and fully conscious world spirit achieving maximum self-consciousness, the unity of subject and object, and most importantly for our analysis, freedom. In his analysis of Hegel, J. N. Findlay writes that

"Everything we know must come before us in a living phase of experience (*Erfahrung*). The substantial, the solidly out there, must slowly be transmuted into the notional, the subjective. Time simply is the form of this self-realizing process. Until Spirit reaches the end of the requisite temporal process it cannot achieve complete self-consciousness"

(Hegel, 1977, p. 591).

The Young Hegelians were enamored with this developmental process of world spirit/consciousness, and were inspired by it to enact their own historical theories; most notably that *The Absolute* had yet to be realized, and that there was much work to do. The goals of many of these thinkers was to push Spirit further along it's destined path, typically through historical change by the aforementioned dialectic method. Edgar Bauer, the most anarchistic of the Young Hegelians, wrote that "Only with revolution, which begins the destruction of the forms of the state, does genuine history commence, because here it becomes conscious" (Bauer, 1842). Here we see the beginnings of the anarchist dialectic manifest, of the insufferable struggle between free persons and the state. The Hegelian logic, the Hegelian dialectic, will thus be our starting point.

We now have our logical framework, but we must now take hold of our second root: an ethical system in which to utilize our logic. Classical utilitarian or deontological models will be insufficient, for there is little room for dialectic development. For the utilitarian, the end is always "utility," while to the deontologist the end must necessarily be "duty." These ethics are much too rigid to apply a dynamic logic to, and thereby we arrive at *Virtue Ethics. Virtue* is itself a developmental ethic, which makes it invaluable for our system. One begins vicious, and through practice and growth one arrives at greater virtue; there is a constant vigilance that must be

undertaken in such a practice, as keeping vices at bay and virtues in sight requires consistent application and re-examination.

Aristotle, the father of the Virtue Ethics tradition, defines Virtue as "a state apt to exercise deliberate choice, being in the relative mean, determined by reason, and as the [person] of practical wisdom would determine" (Aristotle, 2005). In his ethics, Aristotle directs us towards relative means between excess and defect, so that we may someday acquire true self-mastery. The Stoics later take this methodology and use it to create their system of ethical theory in which to achieve a good life (Eudaimonia); herein they name four Cardinal Virtues: "temperance, courage, justice and practical wisdom" (Pigliucci, 2022). Through diligent self-reflection, the stoic arrives at a greater expression of the virtues, and provide a model in which to live their life by emulating and aspiring towards ideals. As Seneca writes: "you can never straighten that which is crooked unless you use a ruler" (Seneca, 1925). The stoic virtues are the ruler in which to measure progress, and they are arrived at through earnest practice and application.

These two models, dialectics and virtue ethics, marry well together, and give us not only a method of analysis of conditions but also a metric in which to measure success. We have begun our synthesis of Anarchism and Stoicism by first connecting each respective discipline's philosophical roots, and how these roots are complimentary from the onset. *Dialectic Virtue* is hereby our framework and method.

II. The Individual

Important to both the stoic and the anarchist is the primacy of the individual (though not entirely, as we will see in section III). Building upon our stoic ethic, we can borrow from one of the most notable stoic philosophers of the Roman period: Epictetus. The primary contribution to stoic ethics made by Epictetus was what is now known as the *Dichotomy of Control.* In *The Enchiridion, or Manual,* he writes that

"Of things some are in our power, and others are not. In our power are opinion (ὑπόληψις), movement toward a thing (ὁρμή), desire, aversion (ἔκκλισις, turning from a thing); and in a word, whatever are our own acts: not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices (magisterial power), and in a word, whatever are not our own acts"

(Epictetus, 1877).

This cements the common stoic notion of *discipline*. A good stoic practitioner, and any virtue ethicist for that matter, must rest their laurels on discipline to achieve a higher moral aptitude; it is through discipline which an individual is able to actualize.

This is related to a common critique which is often raised against Anarchism: that most ordinary people are not self-disciplined enough to self-govern. This has been addressed by various anarchist philosophers throughout history; Mikhail Bakunin, member of the First Internationale alongside his long-time rival Karl Marx, wrote in his essay *On Discipline* the following:

"Hostile as I am to the authoritarian conception of discipline, I nevertheless recognize that a certain kind of discipline, not automatic but voluntary and intelligently understood, is, and will ever be, necessary … Power is diffused to the collectivity, and becomes the true expression of the liberty of everyone, the faithful and sincere realization of the will of all … this is the only true discipline, the discipline necessary for the organization of freedom"

(Bakunin, 2002, pp. 414-415).

Here we see that discipline arrives as a necessity within the anarchist program—individual responsibility over oneself ripened with virtue. It perhaps may not be the case that many individuals are exemplars just yet, but upon adopting the method may dialectically assimilate themselves to a wider scope of self-control and Liberty.

It is important to note that Bakunin, like many anarchists of his time, advocated for a *Social Revolution*: the progressive adaption of the wider culture towards a more libertarian and free mode of consciousness. The Stoics, in microcosm, accomplish this feat by default; the ardent stoic progressively tunes their own sense of virtue and vice until they arrive at a mean in which they are

rewarded with greater mental freedom and Liberty. Being unhindered by those things outside of our control and focusing with moxie on those remaining things which are provides an immeasurable benefit to overall well-being and peace of mind. Extended outwardly, this makes one a more effective and resourceful political actor by way of taking direct action over one's political existence.

The anarchists call not for anarchy in the immediate sense, but a slow dialectic burn in which individuals are able to self-actualize towards a more complete Anarchism. There is a sense of self-regulation that is inherent to anarchist political theory, or else vice would run rampant—this is a common topic among many contemporary anarchists as the desire for self-management necessitates *temperance*, whether that be abstention from intoxicants, consumerism, technology, etc.. It must be stressed that this process is not a clean-cut methodology in the classical sense. Self-actualization will manifest differently as long as there are varieties of selves. This appears, at first, as a weakness of the theory, yet I argue it is it's greatest strength. In a socio-political program designed from the ground up to maximize Liberty, it is only natural that individuals will be given the freedom to explore these concepts in their own novel ways, sharing the knowledge and skills they learn to maximize freedom for all. In building such a system, the individual must be given sovereignty over their own affairs, and on principle be barred from exercising their will upon others without explicit consent.

The strength of the stoic model is in it's assertion of the individual will upon itself. Much of stoic literature is littered with allusions to individual freedom and taking life into one's own hands. Marcus Aurelius, philosopher and last of the great emperors of Rome, tells us that "No man will hinder thee from living according to the reason of thy own nature: nothing will happen to thee contrary to the reason of the universal nature" (Aurelius, 2002). Taking dialectic virtue as our universal nature, it is only natural that while The Absolute marches towards freedom, so too does the individual person; this freedom cannot by it's nature be hindered by others.

Herein we have established a tie between the stoic and anarchist interpretations of discipline, and how these must be a necessary component for our theory. This applies universally to all peoples: true and ultimate Liberty and freedom to develop on one's own path toward mental and political liberation. But it is true that people do not exist within a vacuum. Self-consciousness must inevitably come into direct contact with other self-consciousnesses.

III. The Moral Community

The goal of any socio-political program must confront the issue of reconciling the individual with the whole. We have seen how the individual can be self-justified by way of our Anarcho-Stoic theory, but what of the larger moral community? It is important that one exist within a thriving social environment in which to attain self-actualization, and the stoics and anarchists have key insights into how this should be arranged.

Beginning with the stoics, we see that the writings imply a moral duty to oneself and to the community. Seneca wrote to his good friend Lucilius that "There is not a man who, when he has benefited his neighbour, has not benefited himself" (Seneca, 1925). Within the stoic virtue of *Justice* there is serious attention given to acting in the better interests of not only ourselves but of others as well. Marcus Aurelius reminds us that we should attain "a mind governed by justice, deeds directed to the common good, words that never lie, and a disposition that welcomes all that happens, as necessary, as familiar, as flowing from the same kind of origin and spring" (Aurelius, 2002). A contemporary stoic exercise influenced by the writings of Marcus Aurelius is the *View From Above*, in which one meditates on oneself, then extends that mindfulness towards one's family, friends, community, humanity, and finally the Earth itself from the perspective of world spirit (see Ralkowski, 2017). This practice, a mainstay in modern stoicism, emphasizes the interconnected nature that our lives have on the wider moral community, and encourages us to extend our pursuit of Virtue to inspire those around us.

Anarchists write at much greater length as to how society ought to function—this is unsurprising as Anarchism is a political ideology. Individual Liberty is surely an important facet, but arguably more important is the community of free individuals brought together for common cause. Anarchist prince Peter Kropotkin wrote at length about the nature of what he called *Free Agreement* (Also sometimes called Free Association). In his most-known work, *The Conquest of Bread*, he defines it as such: "… volunteers organizing in committees and local groups; by mutual aid and agreement" (Kropotkin, 2015, p. 130). A society rooted in free agreement and association will better meet the needs of it's members than any top-down organization on virtue that all members take an active role in shaping it at all stages.

This is echoed in various anarchist writers, and many demand that when something concerns an individual that that individual ought to have a say in how it is run. Likewise, American anarchist Errico Malatesta asserts that we should have an

"Organization of social life by means of free association and federations of producers and consumers, created and modified according to the wishes of their members, guided by science and experience, and free from any kind of imposition which does not spring from natural needs, to which everyone, convinced by a feeling of overriding necessity, voluntarily submits"

(Malatesta, 2014, p. 281).

This is why the majority of anarchists are also anti-capitalist, for even the most studious of business unions today are not *directly* managed by the workers themselves. This maps well onto the aforementioned stoic Dichotomy of Control, for the focus of one's efforts must necessarily be those things in which one has direct control over (viz. one's life and livelihood). This free society, no doubt built upon some form of direct democracy, would empower all individuals to take charge of their lives and the development of their communities.

Here we return to Virtue. For this system to be successful, it is imperative that we have individuals pursuing Virtue and avoiding vice in their own lives, and if this is successful it will

inevitably ripple into wider society. Marcus Aurelius writes that "That which is not good for the swarm, neither is it good for the bee" (Aurelius, 2005). The virtuous or vicious acts we undertake affect directly our own lives, but more pertinent to this discussion they affect the world in which we live. A world of virtuous acts is a more virtuous world by the transitive property. As the Social Revolution develops dialectically, it inches closer and closer to absolute freedom and Liberty.

This is not to say that things will always progress smoothly. There will be disagreement, dialogue, and contradiction, as is necessary by the method. In contemporary anarchist theory, much emphasis is placed on open communication, consensual agreement, and consensus. A consensus model of politics guarantees that all voices are heard in debates which concern the directly affected polity. In an anarchist zine cataloged online by Sprout Distro, consensus is defined as:

"… a process for group decision making. It is a democratic method by which an entire group of people can come to an agreement. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve a better solution, but also to promote the growth of community and trust"

(Anonymous, 2012).

This will no doubt sound familiar to our exploration of dialectics (*dialectic* itself etymologically related to *dialogue*). When an individual perfects their Virtue, they dialogue with themselves to reach a greater mean of truth, while when a community creates the space for open dialogue among members it will reflect the greater perfection of the Virtue of the collective.

We have seen how the stoic and anarchist interpretations of social life mesh well together. To answer the question of "how we reconcile the individual with the whole" we have developed a system which promotes Virtue within individuals and the communities comprised thereof. A collection of evermore virtuous individuals will manifest an evermore virtuous society.

IV. Objections

Admittedly, more objections are typically raised in opposition to the Anarchist than the Stoic. For instance, what do we do when, in a large community, a single obstinate individual halts some social aim? If we are to take the consensus model seriously, and no consensus can be reached, what's to stop one person from pumping the brakes whenever they wish? One place where we may find solace is to return to Kropotkin's principle of free association. It would be unjust, naturally, for any majority of community members to forcefully assert their will upon the individual without their consent, but it must be remembered that the community and individual retain the Liberty to *refuse* association as well. If an individual does not advocate the decisions of a certain community they can, by virtue of free association, remove themselves from the equation as far as is possible; likewise a community may separate from an individual. The community/individual may pursue their own goals insofar as the results of which do not inhibit the Liberty of the other.

It must be emphasized here that both Anarchism and Virtue Theory denounce vapid discrimination such as sexism, racism, and other such kinds of unjust prejudice. Andrew Fiala writes that "A thorough-going anarchism would thus offer a critique of anything and everything that smacks of hierarchy, domination, centralization, and unjustified authority" (Fiala, 2021). The realms of sexism and racism are social structures in which there are unjustified hierarchies of peoples from arbitrary distinctions. To the stoic, we would see such prejudices as a breach of the virtues of *practical wisdom* and *justice,* for it would be unwise to unfairly discriminate against a person due to arbitrary characteristics beyond their control. Thereby the right to free association, as discussed above, would not welcome bigotry as a means to any end (ie. ostracizing or segregating members of the community on such grounds).

The largest difficulty that arises is in those who go against the grain, but this reveals itself to be perhaps a benefit. No one is forced to associate with anyone they do not wish to, and this paradigm allows the possibility for an expression of individuality as well as communitarianism. If

all members of a society take an active role in organizing said society, it will inevitably reflect their preferences quite well, and those who disagree may branch off to start their own communities which better reflect their needs.

As for Virtue Ethics, there is some uncertainty as to whether or not the anarchists will adhere earnestly to the stoic model. The model as expressed herein is presented as an optimal moral theory for the preferred application, yet there will inevitably be deontologists and utilitarians who may object to the moral system itself. This is perhaps a subject ideal for an entire book, but I will address common concerns here. The most espoused, is in Virtue Ethics' anti-codifiability—that is, it is not a strict and definite doctrine which can give us absolutely conclusive answers to what decisions we ought to make. To respond, we must remember that Virtue is a developmental practice. On the onset, many of the virtues discussed may appear vague, yet we are dealing with the development of *character*, first and foremost. A virtuous character will know *intuitively* what right actions there are to take, and the emulation of such characters will inform the course for others; this is a continuous process, and while it may lack codified rules, so to speak, it must be remembered that morality is not such a simple matter of having a definitive rule for all moral actions, as demonstrated by the many criticisms of more rigid ethical theories. Moreover, the Virtue Ethics model allows for *independent* moral growth, where competing theories leave no such room for adaptation in their rigid adherence to law, authority, utilitarian analysis, or universal maxims— recall the words of Bakunin in that we may seek earnest advice from others without being subject to them as ultimate authorities, viz. we can emulate the Virtue of others on our own terms.

One may then ask "how will we know when we've identified a truly virtuous and exemplary character?" This is another common criticism of Virtue Theory, and one which requires a certain degree of exploration in the virtues discussed. There are clear cases in which someone violates moral virtue; for example, we know that a pathological drunkard is not exercising *temperance*, and we know that a person who avoids responsibility out of fear is not exhibiting *courage*. As

mentioned above, it is evident that a person who is bigoted does not embody the virtues of *practical wisdom* or *justice*. It is admittedly simpler to spot vice (as it is sadly more apparent), but this leads us to wonder in which ways such individuals may better express Virtue. We can view a person's character in such a way to ascertain in what virtues they are exemplars, and in which they may need improvement. It may be rare to find an individual who is wholly virtuous by all accounts, but we can find individual instances of moral expertise in which to serve as a role model for ourselves. If a person is found to be acting courageously, we can ask "in what ways can I act courageous in a similar scenario?" Similarly, if we encounter an especially vicious person, we can use their example as a way *not* to be.

V. Conclusion

To create a truly free philosophical and political system is no easy task, yet we see the beginnings of hope within the laid out conclusions of the Anarcho-Stoic model. Building upon foundations of Dialectic Theory and Virtue Ethics, reconciling individual Liberty with societal freedom and cooperation, we arrive at a quite promising path in which to move forward. This "no-state" of affairs is not only desirable, but perhaps the consequent stage in the development of world history. In a world which asserts itself as overtly authoritarian, advocating for an alternate world in which personal Liberty and free association are truly attainable beckons to us as a utopian dream not yet manifest. To quote Kropotkin once more: "That we are utopians is well known" (Kropotkin, 2015, p. 54). There is value in striving for utopia, if only to dialectically march closer towards it over time, to achieve self-mastery and embrace individual and worldly progress. In our synthesis we have found that Anarcho-Stoicism, while incredibly ambitious in its goals, is not a logical impossibility; it requires only that we personally create the conditions for our Social Revolution rooted in the name of Virtue. Epictetus has some words of encouragement for us: "Everything has two handles, the one by which it may be borne, the other by which it may not" (Epictetus, 1877).

Let us hereby grasp the handle of Liberty, freedom, and self-determination, and in doing so create a

more virtuous world.

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