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Political ideas

How to write an Edexcel-style essay on anarchism

To what extent do anarchists agree on the nature of a future anarchist society?

This article should be read alongside *Ideas and Thinkers: 'Anarchism in context'* by Simon Lemieux, in issue 4 (April 2023).

Anarchism essay questions will focus on the divisions between collectivist and individualist anarchism and how they link to the core themes of human nature, society, state and the economy. It is important to remember that beyond this division, both collectivists and individualists are divided into further strands. This can help you prove how very divided anarchists are. The linked article in *Politics Review* shows how anarchism can be understood better through analysing its historical context. This helps us to make further sense of the divisions within anarchism.

Political ideas essays must include the following elements:

- Agreement and disagreement within the idea (balance) in relation to the theme of the question. The strands allow you to do this.
- Thinkers used to explore the debate, but not to replace a discussion of the strands.
- A judgement that runs through the essay. Is there more agreement than disagreement?

Introduction

Anarchists are united in their rejection of the state and all forms of authority. They believe that a future anarchist society would be made up of free and sovereign individuals. However, there are significant areas of disagreement between collectivists (who believe in human sociability and community) and individualists (who argue that the individual has no responsibility or duty to others, unless it is in their own interest). These differences are more significant than the areas of agreement as they suggest at least two, and potentially more, contrasting visions of a future society.

This introduction addresses the question directly – note all the references to society. It explains both sides of the debate and suggests a line of argument.

Paragraph 1

Theme: collectivism versus individualism

Anarchists reject all laws and the structures and institutions of the state. Proudhon argued that no one has any right to govern another, and that any form of government would become tyrannical.

Anarchists agree that human nature, although rational, will be corrupted by power, and that liberal

ideas of limited government are a sham. Therefore, there is agreement within anarchism that a future society would be stateless, and each individual would take responsibility for themselves. Anarchists believe that each person is the best manager of their own affairs, capable of making their own decisions on how to live. Without authority, natural harmony would arise spontaneously. However, there are significant areas of disagreement within anarchism over how this society would operate. Collectivist anarchists believe that individuals would live in small self-managed communities, working together on the basis of cooperation. Kropotkin looked to the animal kingdom to show that the most successful species are cooperative, such as ants. However, individualist anarchists believe that human nature does not naturally lead us to form bonds with others. We are selfish and egoistical, but can live peacefully and cooperate when necessary, as that is rational. Unlike Kropotkin, Stirner argued that individuals are entirely self-serving. This shows that there are major divisions over how the future society would operate, and these are more significant than the areas of agreement, because they are linked to disagreements over human nature.

This paragraph starts by showing the examiner that there are some areas of agreement over the future of society: all anarchists believe that individuals can live peacefully and harmoniously without the need of the state. It then goes on to explain that there are significant areas of disagreement over how this society would function. Would it be based on community and cooperation or on selfish individuals focusing on their own needs? The paragraph makes clear the line of argument and Kropotkin is contrasted with Stirner, to show the level of disagreement.

Paragraph 2

Theme: implications for the economy

Anarchists reject all economic systems that involve state management and intervention. In a future anarchist society, they believe that individuals can enter and form contracts voluntarily, without the need for oppressive political and economic structures. However, there are significant disagreements, both between individualist and collectivist anarchists and within each strand. Collectivists seek to replace capitalism with a system based on equality and community. Private property would be abolished and held in common, and communities would enter into mutually-beneficial contracts, based on face-to-face negotiation, to provide goods and services. Anarcho-syndicalists focus on the role of grassroots democratic trade unions in this area. However, mutualists argue that there should be some form of private ownership, in order for skilled craftspeople to flourish. Proudhon argued that it was necessary to differentiate between property and possessions. In contrast, Kropotkin rejected all forms of private property. This shows that even within collectivist anarchism, there is significant disagreement over how the future society would operate. Individualists reject all forms of organisation and structure and would see the community-based approach as a violation of human nature and the start of a new oppressive system. Anarcho-capitalists favour a free-market approach, where sovereign individuals compete without restriction. To collectivists, this would be the route to inequality and exploitation. Clearly, there are fundamental differences in anarchism over how the economy would operate in their future society and these differences are impossible to reconcile.

This paragraph takes a different theme: how the economy would operate in the future society. It shows that, while there is some agreement over the rejection of state intervention, beyond that there are a range of contrasting views over what would replace it. Using two contrasting key thinkers helps to illustrate this disagreement, but the essay remains focused on the strands rather than the thinkers, which is important. Although this paragraph discusses the future economy, it links this to society, so remains focused on the question.

Conclusion

Although it may appear that the anarchist optimistic belief in the harmonious nature of the future stateless utopia suggests there are major areas of agreement within anarchism, the divisions over human nature and the economy mean that anarchism is greatly divided in terms of how the future utopian society would function.

The conclusion dismisses the counter-argument and reaches a supported (rather than just stated) judgement which will come as no surprise to the examiner. The essay has examined the debate, with arguments on both sides, but made it clear throughout which side of the fence it is on.

Student task

Rewrite this essay to take the opposing line of argument.

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