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Political ideas

To what extent do anarchists agree on society?

This Edexcel-style essay advice should be read alongside ‘How does anarchism view society?’ (pp. 21–23)

In the linked article, David Tuck argues that anarchism is a deeply divided ideology, revealing that even within the two main strands, there are significant areas of disagreement. This sample essay agrees with such a point of view and draws on the information provided in the article to reach this judgement.

Top tips for answering Edexcel 24-mark political ideas essays

- Explore agreements and disagreements within the idea, focusing on whatever the theme of the question is. Some are more specific than others. Don't ignore areas of agreement or dismiss them immediately. Around one-third of your essay should focus on the point of view that you do *not* agree with; this is what the mark scheme confusingly means by 'balance'.
- Thinkers should be referred to briefly to explore the areas of agreement and disagreement but not to replace the strands, which are the focus of the essay. All strands should be included if possible, although the many strands of collectivist anarchism might make this challenging. Contemporary evidence is not required. Thinkers provide the support to your arguments instead.
- There must be a supported judgement. Is there more agreement or disagreement on the topic? How much more, and most importantly, why? This line of argument needs to be clear in your introduction, in each paragraph (the mini-judgement) and in the conclusion. Use language such as 'fundamental', 'superficial' etc. to show this.
- Each paragraph should focus on a particular theme. You can then weigh up the significance of the agreement and disagreement within that theme.

Question: To what extent do anarchists agree on society?

Introduction

All anarchists share the view that hierarchy and authority must be rejected, as they are inherently limiting to individual freedom. However, this is where the agreement ends. Anarchism is a deeply divided ideology, with significant areas of disagreement over how and why our present society is flawed, methods to change it, and whether an anarchist future society should be individualist or collectivist.

Paragraph 1

Theme: rejection of authority

Anarchists reject all forms of authority in society. This is the most significant area of agreement within anarchist thought and defines what is meant by 'anarchism'. Both collectivists and individualists agree that any form of state, hierarchy and law is a form of coercion and they aim to create a society without any of these forms of restriction. Anarchists agree that human nature is corruptible. As rational individuals, if given power, we will abuse it through self-interest, so this must be prevented. However, there are significant areas of disagreement over what the rejection of all forms of authority in society would mean. For collectivists, this would consist of the abolition of capitalism to create economic and social equality. But collectivists are divided over how this would operate. While anarcho-communist Bakunin argued that society should be based on self-governing communes, syndicalists believed in replacement of traditional authority by grassroots-based trade unions. In contrast, individualist anarchists are not interested in equality in society, seeing that as another form of imposed authority. Anarcho-capitalists embrace inequality and competition between individuals as central to their future society. They reject any forms of cooperation. However, Stirner – an individualist – rejected capitalism as a form of authority like any other. This shows that although all anarchists reject hierarchy, they reject it for very different reasons and are deeply divided over what to replace it with.

Paragraph 2

Theme: freedom

Freedom is the fundamental purpose of anarchism. The belief in personal autonomy and liberty is central to the anarchist view of society. Anarchists agree that in a stateless society, natural order would arise without the need for any form of authority. However, anarchists have differing views on what freedom means. For collectivist anarchists, positive freedom is linked to collectivism and equality. They see human nature as social and altruistic, so an anarchist society will naturally be based on cooperation and community. Anarcho-communist Kropotkin believed in a society based on mutual aid, where decentralised communities operate without private property. Contrastingly, Mutualists took a more moderate approach, accepting the need for personal possessions and a trading system based on labour value. So, even within collectivist anarchism, there are differing views on freedom. Individualists favour negative freedom. They aim to create a society based on personal liberty and autonomy, where no one has any duty or responsibility towards others. Self-interest is key to the individualist view of human nature, and a future society would be egoistical. Stirner argued that any form of collective activity (such as the theatre) is an infringement of personal liberty. This shows that although anarchists see freedom as essential to their future vision of society, they do not agree on what freedom means, and how it would operate.

Conclusion

Although anarchists share a belief in the core principles of liberty and freedom in society, these agreements are limited. There are much more significant differences in how an anarchist society would function, and what exactly is wrong with the status quo. These reveal that fundamentally, although anarchists share some superficial principles and ideas on society, there are many more areas of division.

Student tasks

- 1 Add another paragraph with a different theme, for example, voluntary association or how to create an anarchist society. Stick to the same line of argument.
- 2 Rewrite this essay to take the opposing line of argument: that anarchism has more significant areas of agreement than disagreement. How can you support your arguments and make your essay convincing?

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