

Can Stoicism Be Reconciled With Anarchy?

A comparative examination of Anarcho-Stoicism

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****How can Stoicism, a philosophy that has largely come down to us from the hierarchical, centralised, statist, Roman Empire and whose most famous adherent was an absolute Monarch, be reconciled with Anarchy?**

At first consideration Anarchy and Stoicism seem unlikely bedfellows. Much of Stoicism has come down to us through the Roman 'Late Stoa' of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Seneca was a Billionaire slave-owner politician, and Marcus Aurelius was an absolute monarch... but Epictetus was a disabled enslaved person, and, in terms of Stoic Philosophy, they were equal.

Modern Anarchic thought was forged in the crucible of a reaction against French Imperial power, Tsarist Russia, and Capitalist wage slavery in Nineteenth-century Europe.

Yet Stoicism and Anarchism both examine the relationship between individual moral responsibility and the wider community; and arrive at similar principles. The parallels struck me at an early point, but I quickly found out this was certainly not an original thought. There is a long history of Anarchists recognising Stoicism, and modern Stoics acknowledging Anarchy.

Kropotkin felt Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, was the closest to Anarchist thinking in the ancient world. More recently, Jimmy C. Tolbert has proposed that Anarchy is compatible with the Stoic virtue ethics of the individual in "Anarcho-Stoicism — A Primer" and Stoic Massimo Pigliucci states that Anarchy is the end goal of Stoicism.

As with Anarchy, the term 'Stoic' is much misused. Where Anarchy is mistaken for Chaos and disorder, 'stoic' has come to be used for emotionless and unfeeling — in both cases this is far from the truth.

What is Stoicism?

Stoicism, originating in Athens around 300 BCE, is a school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium, in Cyprus, who, after a shipwreck left him penniless in a foreign land, became a Student of Crates the Cynic. The name Stoicism comes from where the school met — the "Stoa" or Painted Porch, a public place in Athens.

Stoicism is an inherently practical philosophy based on virtue ethics. It is built on four cardinal virtues: Wisdom, Courage, Justice, and Temperance, and the belief that virtue is both required and sufficient for 'eudemonia'—flourishing or living well, sometimes referred to as "happiness." Eudemonia is not a fleeting emotion but a long-lasting state of well-being.

There are principles in self-sufficiency, living in accordance with nature, empathy, rationality and logic over emotion, the dichotomy of control, cosmopolitanism, personal responsibility and having discipline and moral worth come from within.

Stoicism recognises human nature's failures and frailties, especially emotional first impressions. While we cannot, and should not, eliminate emotions, we can, somewhat, choose how far to be ruled by them.

Stoicism is not dogmatic —if some modern scientific or neuroscience discovery disproves some aspect, then the philosopher should accept that new and better understanding of the world. There are overlaps with Victor Frankl's logotherapy, and Stoicism has been hugely influential on cognitive behavioural therapy.

Imagine the Ideal Society

- “Schemes of ideal States haunted the thinkers of Ancient Greece” — Pyotr Kropotkin

A common practice in the ancient world was to write a plan for an ideal state. Plato's Republic is the most famous of these books, often considered a foundational text of Western philosophy. The founder of Stoicism, Zeno, also wrote a sadly lost 'Republic' describing the ideal state, which has come down to us in Fragments.

Plato's Republic is strictly hierarchical and authoritarian, with a ruling class deliberately lying to the masses for 'the greater good' and rules enforced by unknowing 'noble puppies'. According to Donald Robertson, Zeno's Stoic Republic is best considered in context as a riposte to Plato. Kropotkin directly recognised the Anarchist principles of Zeno's Stoic Republic.

“The best exponent of anarchist philosophy in ancient Greece was Zeno (342–267 or 270 BC), from Crete, the founder of the Stoic philosophy, who distinctly opposed his conception of a free community without government to the state-utopia of Plato. He repudiated the omnipotence of the state, its intervention and regimentation, and proclaimed the sovereignty of the moral law of the individual — remarking already that, while the necessary instinct of self-preservation leads man to egotism, nature has supplied a corrective to it by providing man with another instinct — that of sociability. When men are reasonable enough to follow their natural instincts, they will unite across the frontiers and constitute the cosmos. They will have no need of law-courts or police, will have no temples and no public worship, and use no money — free gifts taking the place of the exchanges.” — Kropotkin — Anarchism

It's debated whether Zeno was outlining an actual perfect 'state'- a literal Stoic city-state in isolation, as Anton-Hermann Chroust believes—a view of the world, or was just conditionally and hypothetically thinking about what the world might look like if all the world were 'Sages'—that is, perfect Stoics, wise and acting in accordance with Nature and Virtue.

“Zeno had full confidence in the human instinct for sociality and drew brilliant, anarchist conclusions from it.” — Max Nettlau — History of Anarchy (translated into English by Michael Schreiber)

John Sellers suggests that Zeno was suggesting not an isolated polis or a single global polis but a state existing in parallel with the current system, where the wise have opted out of it.

“Sages — whether geographically separate or together in one location — would acknowledge each other as fellow citizens. The ideal state is not a place but a state of mind.” — John Sellers — Stoic Cosmopolitanism and Zeno’s “Republic”

This idea appeals to me. I see in it the practical prefigurative politics of New Anarchism and others who seek to build and live by Anarchist values in the world as it is as a means to effect change.

Plato’s Republic, by design, had a strict hierarchy, creating class tensions and warfare. It said we could not have a good state until either Philosophers were kings or King Philosophers. With Zeno, all the citizens should be philosophers.

“It is true indeed that the so much admired commonwealth of Zeno, first author of the Stoic sect, aims singly at this, that neither in cities nor in towns we should live under laws distinct one from another, but that we should look upon all men in general to be our fellow-countrymen and citizens, observing one manner of living and one kind of order, like a flock feeding together with equal right in one common pasture. This Zeno wrote, fancying to himself, as in a dream, a certain scheme of civil order, and the image of a philosophical commonwealth.” — Plutarch.

The comparison between Plato and Zeno foreshadows the divisions first international between the Anarchist Bakunin and Statist Marx. Plato has been called proto-fascist but may be better interpreted as proto-totalitarian.

It is the old argument of the benefits of a central hierarchy against the equality of a bottom-up model.

Discipline and Personal Responsibility

One common criticism of Anarchism is that, in the real world, people are not disciplined enough to govern themselves. Bakunin and others argue that a certain kind of discipline is necessary and that this discipline should be voluntary and self-imposed rather than enforced by the state. This aligns with Stoic ideas of self-control and personal responsibility. The discipline must come from within the individual because they understand how to behave correctly.

Discipline imposed is coercion, but discipline will come naturally to those who understand the world.

Cosmopolitanism

Both Anarchism and Stoicism advocate for an ordered community without hierarchy. Through mutual aid, anarchism envisions a society where individuals freely cooperate and support each other, transcending hierarchical structures. This vision aligns with the Stoic idea of a cosmopolitan community, where all human beings are part of a single, universal community, bound by shared rationality and empathy, with a duty to support each other. and worth comes from within — it is not reliant on your class or place in some external hierarchy, or how much capital you hold, but only on your own thoughts and actions — the disabled slave, Epictetus, is equal to the Emperor.

Stoics are Cosmopolitans (literally ‘Citizens of the world’). As Cosmopolitans, it is logical to reject the nation-state as the default political unit. Stoics see humanity as one interconnected community, and we should act in the wider community’s interests before the self or state. This equates with Anarchist views on identity and humanity.

Compare these quotes from Proudhon and the Proto-Stoic Cynic Diogenes, whose Cosmopolitan worldview shaped Stoic thought.

“There will no longer be nationality, no longer fatherland, in the political sense of the words: they will mean only places of birth. Man, of whatever race or colour he may be, is an inhabitant of the universe; citizenship is everywhere an acquired right.” — Joseph Proudhon — *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*.

“Whenever someone asks where you are from do not say ‘this place’ or ‘that city-state’ — say instead you are a ‘Citizen of the World’ (Cosmo-politan).” — Diogenes of Sinope

I also see the Stoic value of empathy with the whole community as expressed by Marcus Aurelius in the work of Bakunin-

“No man can achieve his own emancipation without at the same time working for the emancipation of all men around him.” — Bakunin

“What isn’t good for the hive, isn’t good for the bee.” — Marcus Aurelius — *Meditations*

We see Anarchists and Stoics using similar language and metaphors to explain the concepts of their overlapping worldview. Thinking again of humanity as a single interconnected community, consider these two quotes

“...all (travel, communication, literature etc.) have drawn mankind into an ever tighter single body whose constituent parts, united among themselves, can only find fulfilment and freedom to develop through the wellbeing of the other constituent parts as well as of the whole.” — Errico Malatesta — *Anarchy*

“We were born to work together like feet, hands and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on him: these are unnatural.” — Marcus Aurelius — Meditations

Malatesta outlines a Cosmopolitan worldview and uses Marcus Aurelius’s same analogy of the individual being merely a part of a single larger body.

Hierarchy and Hierocles

The key Anarchic value is the removal of central coercive hierarchy—visualising a flatter organisation of human society. How does that match with Stoicism’s ways of seeing the world?

The Stoic concept of *oikeiōsis* — from *Oikos* — meaning the house or home (*οἶκος*), the same root word from which we get economics — is literally about understanding “what belongs to us” — but not in the sense of ‘property’ — perhaps rather ‘understanding what we should be concerned with.’ and ‘how to act appropriately’ part of which can be seen to align with another key Anarchist principle of Mutual Aid.

The Stoic Philosopher Hierocles proposed that we consider the world in several circles — with ourselves in the middle, then our close family, fellow citizens of our direct community — out to humanity.

“Hierocles bases his investigation of appropriate acts on what is ‘in accordance with nature’. According to his view, each of us has a duty of mutual aid towards every other human being—but a weightier duty towards those who are socially closer than those who are more distant.” — Ralph Wedgwood — Hierocles’ concentric circles.

The Stoics’ duty is to try and draw the circles together— where you would consider the needs and actions of humanity as important, or nearly as important, as the needs of yourself and your family; because you have a duty to them.

“...it is the province of him who strives to conduct himself properly in each of these connections to collect, in a certain respect, the circles, as it were, to one centre, and always to endeavour earnestly to transfer himself from the comprehending circles to the several particulars which they comprehend.” — Stobaeus

The Modern Stoic Dr. Kai Whiting has extended the concept beyond humanity to consider the earth. This aligns with Green Anarchy. Notably, *Oikos* is also the root of our word ecology.

Tanner Campbell, with Dr. Kai Whiting, has extended the conceptual idea of the concentric circles into a “Pyramid of Concern”, with the environment, then humanity at the bottom row, and the self at the top, to show why the oikiosos responsibilities are important. While Campbell states that this isn’t a hierarchy — it does not show the self at the top in a ‘superior’ way. Nevertheless, there is a useful comparison to be made.

In various anarcho-socialist class-hierarchy diagrams the workers form the bottom strata. “We feed all”. With higher levels showing landlords, capitalists, and ruling elite, capped by a Monarch: the lowest tier, equating to the outermost circle, supports the rest.

Just as the Stoic seeks to bring the circles together, flattening the hierarchy from the individual point of view, the Anarchist seeks to do the same for society.

Anarchist Individualism and the Dichotomy of Control.

Stoics do not recognise that coercive external control holds any power over you. You are an individual, and you always have a choice to obey or not — while accepting that there will be consequences. This is the moral imperative to act in accordance with virtue regardless of the consequences.

“Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing.” — Epictetus,

The dichotomy of control instructs us to accept the things that are outside of our power to change—but that is not passivity. It is a powerful mental tool that will strengthen us if we can accept that no matter how hard we try, things beyond our control may cause us to fail—but this is not a reflection on us and is not an excuse not to try.

For example, a Stoic must accept that they do not have the power to make a dictator or a fascist a good person, and they cannot overthrow them. It is important to accept that, but it does not at all stop you from acting correctly yourself or trying to change them or try to overthrow them!

If the state threatens you with prison or execution to coerce you into doing something, both Anarchy and Stoicism will recognise the injustice in that. Stoicism will say that the state (or whatever authority) cannot compel you to comply, and if you know it is not right, the sage would refuse, whatever the consequences.

However, even when we do choose to comply — for example being coerced by the threat of poverty to sell labour below its profit value in a capitalist system — we are

forced to consider that as part of the decision process and accept that take the stains our character by deliberately choosing to be complicit.

And if we have the rare courage to not be complicit — Epictetus records the fate of Helvidius Priscus, who was killed for vocally opposing Vespasian.

“Helvidius Priscus saw this, too, and acted on the insight. When Vespasian told him not to attend a meeting of the Senate, he replied, ‘You have the power to disqualify me as a senator, but as long as I am one, I’m obliged to attend meetings.’ ‘All right, then, attend the meeting,’ says Vespasian, ‘but don’t say anything.’ ‘Don’t ask me for my opinion and I’ll keep quiet.’ ‘But I’m bound to ask you.’ ‘And I’m bound to say what seems right.’ ‘But if you speak, I’ll have you killed.’ ‘Did I ever tell you that I was immortal? You do your job and I’ll do mine. Yours is to put me to death and mine to die fearlessly. Yours is to send me into exile and mine to leave without grieving.” — (Epictetus, Discourses, 1.2.19)

What about the State?

Most of what we know of ancient Stoicism comes from the late Stoa — in the context of the Roman Empire. Hardly Zeno’s ideal Stoic state! Marcus Aurelius has been described as the closest thing we have to a ‘Philosopher King’, yet Marcus made decisions in his role as emperor that could be argued to conflict with his ideals — for example, the defensive wars on the Empire’s border he felt he had a duty to protect.

But Malatesta answers this. The state’s very existence systemically corrupts — that there can be no such thing as a truly benevolent dictator no matter their good intentions. Indeed, he might have had Marcus and his wars against the rebels in mind when he wrote:

“And even if men of infinite goodness and knowledge existed, and even supposing, what has never been observed in history, that governmental power were to rest in the hands of the most able and kindest among us, would government office add anything to their beneficial potential? Or would it instead paralyse and destroy it by reason of the necessity men in government have of dealing with so many matters which they do not understand, and above all of wasting their energy keeping themselves in power, their friends happy, and holding in check the malcontents as well as subduing the rebels?” — Malatesta, Anarchy

Others have understood Zeno’s philosophy to praise a stateless society. The state must inevitably restrict the individual’s freedom, and the individual must both be free to act and have the wisdom to act wisely.

“In relation to the community of goods and state omnipotence for the purpose of the highest moral community life, as Plato preaches, Zenon, the founder of the Stoic School (342–270 BC), praised the free stateless community for the same purpose as the ideal of the future. “States want to have something to do. The wise man — was his reasoning — knows no more precious good than freedom and must therefore seek to withdraw from state life, which at least partially suppresses individual freedom. Why a fatherland at all, “when every piece of earth is equidistant from Hades [the place of the dead]”? — Prof. George Adler

A Society of Sages

“...it is hard to imagine a truly borderless, anarchic, and at the same time functional and peaceful world. At least not in the near future. Nevertheless, that does remain the goal.” — Massimo Pigliucci — Figs in Winter.

It is hard to imagine the practical global success of an anarchic world. Practicality is one of the objections often thrown against Anarchy. From how things will get done if there’s nobody telling us what to do to the scalability of consensus decision-making to dealing with anti-social activities, defending borders, and all sorts of other issues, many people suggest many different solutions. I don’t think we have the answers yet.

The intersection of Stoicism strengthens Anarchy through the framework of the Stoic Role Model—the sage. The Stoics recommend considering a “Sage” who is the perfect Stoic or some role model and thinking about what they would do in a situation when we are making decisions and considerations. But they also recognise that we are not sages; we are wretches—hence, “More Wretch Than Sage.”

“...the only “us” and “them” divide in Stoicism is that of the sage and the non-sage, with most of humanity, if not almost all, falling into the second category.” -* -**Whiting, K., Konstantakos, L., Sadler, G., & Gill, C.

While “We can’t all be Cato” a Roman saying, meaning we can’t expect everybody to be as morally upright as Cato the Stoic -the point is we can try. Even if it leads to ridicule or worse;

“He (Cato) acts as if he is living in Plato’s Republic, not Romulus’s Shit hole” — Cicero

(While Cicero doesn’t say ‘Zeno’s’ republic, Plato’s Republic was often used as a shorthand for ‘Utopia’ or ideal state; the same usage is seen in other writers.)

Zeno’s Republic — recognised by thinkers as an ideal Anarchic state, imagined what the world would be like if everyone was a sage — so, of course, there would be no need for law courts or borders because everyone would act kindly and wisely all the time.

It was not a practical suggestion of something that could be brought about — People are human, emotional, misguided, selfish, and misinformed—any view of the world must consider that.

Yet it is still the goal.

“In the long run, men only hit what they aim at. Therefore, they had better aim at something high.” — David Thoreau — Walden

This Stoic concept of the individual as a role model aligns with ideas of prefigurative politics for Society. We can't instantly usher in a global state where everyone is wise and there is no centralised coercive control, but people can organise things along the principles of such a society—like cooperative businesses, trade unions, Occupy Sandy, or the Rojava Experiment.

As the Stoic asked “what would a sage do in this situation” the Anarchist can ask “how would we address this in an anarchist society”. Starting where you are, with what you have, and doing the best you can.

Are Stoicism and Anarchism reconciled?

If they are not fully reconciled, they are flexible enough to be considered compatible: However, there is no single dogmatic definition of Anarchy, and there are different interpretations of Stoicism.

For example, different Anarchist approaches may call for violent revolution, or may advocate non-violence. For the Stoic, there will be a value judgement of what action is just in the circumstance: for example a defensive war, but not an expansionist one.

Stoicism places responsibility on the individual but stresses the duty to the community. That aligns with much socialist anarchy, yet more right-wing libertarian views -(which many don't consider actually Anarchy whatever they may call themselves) would prioritise individual freedom over the duty to the community.

Notes on Stoicism

If you are interested in finding out more — Modern writers on Stoicism are very accessible and give a good foundation before going back and reading the big three of the late Stoa and earlier fragments. But, much like Anarchy, it's also a term that is much abused and misused. For further reading, check out Donald Robertson's “How to Think Like a Roman Emperor” While I know some are now criticising Massimo Pigliucci, I also enjoy his book “How to be a Stoic” as an introduction: I have gifted both these books many times. These provide insights into both the historical context and modern applications of Stoicism. I sometimes write about Stoicism, along with other topics, on my blog “More Wretch Than Sage”.

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