Are You An Anarchist? The Answer May Surprise You!

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Chances are you have already heard something about who anarchists are and what they are supposed to believe. Chances are almost everything you have heard is nonsense. Many people seem to think that anarchists are proponents of violence, chaos, and destruction, that they are against all forms of order and organization, or that they are crazed nihilists who just want to blow everything up. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Anarchists are simply people who believe human beings are capable of behaving in a reasonable fashion without having to be forced to. It is really a very simple notion. But it’s one that the rich and powerful have always found extremely dangerous.

At their very simplest, anarchist beliefs turn on to two elementary assumptions. The first is that human beings are, under ordinary circumstances, about as reasonable and decent as they are allowed to be, and can organize themselves and their communities without needing to be told how. The second is that power corrupts. Most of all, anarchism is just a matter of having the courage to take the simple principles of common decency that we all live by, and to follow them through to their logical conclusions. Odd though this may seem, in most important ways you are probably already an anarchist — you just don’t realize it.

Let’s start by taking a few examples from everyday life.

If there’s a line to get on a crowded bus, do you wait your turn and refrain from elbowing your way past others even in the absence of police?

If you answered “yes”, then you are used to acting like an anarchist! The most basic anarchist principle is self-organization: the assumption that human beings do not need to be threatened with prosecution in order to be able to come to reasonable understand-
ings with each other, or to treat each other with dignity and re-
spect.

Everyone believes they are capable of behaving reasonably
themselves. If they think laws and police are necessary, it is only
because they don’t believe that other people are. But if you think
about it, don’t those people all feel exactly the same way about
you? Anarchists argue that almost all the anti-social behavior
which makes us think it’s necessary to have armies, police, prisons,
and governments to control our lives, is actually caused by the
systematic inequalities and injustice those armies, police, prisons
and governments make possible. It’s all a vicious circle. If people
are used to being treated like their opinions do not matter, they
are likely to become angry and cynical, even violent — which of
course makes it easy for those in power to say that their opinions
do not matter. Once they understand that their opinions really
do matter just as much as anyone else’s, they tend to become
remarkably understanding. To cut a long story short: anarchists
believe that for the most part it is power itself, and the effects of
power, that make people stupid and irresponsible.

Are you a member of a club or sports team
or any other voluntary organization where
decisions are not imposed by one leader but
made on the basis of general consent?

If you answered “yes”, then you belong to an organization
which works on anarchist principles! Another basic anarchist
principle is voluntary association. This is simply a matter of ap-
plying democratic principles to ordinary life. The only difference
is that anarchists believe it should be possible to have a society
in which everything could be organized along these lines, all
groups based on the free consent of their members, and therefore,
would go far beyond the scope of a little introductory text like this.
Suffice it to say, first of all, that a lot of people have spent a lot of
time coming up with models for how a really democratic, healthy
society might work; but second, and just as importantly, no anar-
chist claims to have a perfect blueprint. The last thing we want is
to impose prefab models on society anyway. The truth is we prob-
ably can’t even imagine half the problems that will come up when
we try to create a democratic society; still, we’re confident that,
human ingenuity being what it is, such problems can always be
solved, so long as it is in the spirit of our basic principles — which
are, in the final analysis, simply the principles of fundamental hu-
man decency.
Do you believe that human beings are fundamentally corrupt and evil, or that certain sorts of people (women, people of color, ordinary folk who are not rich or highly educated) are inferior specimens, destined to be ruled by their betters?

If you answered “yes”, then, well, it looks like you aren’t an anarchist after all. But if you answered “no”, then chances are you already subscribe to 90% of anarchist principles, and, likely as not, are living your life largely in accord with them. Every time you treat another human with consideration and respect, you are being an anarchist. Every time you work out your differences with others by coming to reasonable compromise, listening to what everyone has to say rather than letting one person decide for everyone else, you are being an anarchist. Every time you have the opportunity to force someone to do something, but decide to appeal to their sense of reason or justice instead, you are being an anarchist. The same goes for every time you share something with a friend, or decide who is going to do the dishes, or do anything at all with an eye to fairness.

Now, you might object that all this is well and good as a way for small groups of people to get on with each other, but managing a city, or a country, is an entirely different matter. And of course there is something to this. Even if you decentralize society and put as much power as possible in the hands of small communities, there will still be plenty of things that need to be coordinated, from running railroads to deciding on directions for medical research. But just because something is complicated does not mean there is no way to do it democratically. It would just be complicated. In fact, anarchists have all sorts of different ideas and visions about how a complex society might manage itself. To explain them though that all top-down, military styles of organization like armies or bureaucracies or large corporations, based on chains of command, would no longer be necessary. Perhaps you don’t believe that would be possible. Perhaps you do. But every time you reach an agreement by consensus, rather than threats, every time you make a voluntary arrangement with another person, come to an understanding, or reach a compromise by taking due consideration of the other person’s particular situation or needs, you are being an anarchist — even if you don’t realize it.

Anarchism is just the way people act when they are free to do as they choose, and when they deal with others who are equally free — and therefore aware of the responsibility to others that entails. This leads to another crucial point: that while people can be reasonable and considerate when they are dealing with equals, human nature is such that they cannot be trusted to do so when given power over others. Give someone such power, they will almost invariably abuse it in some way or another.

Do you believe that most politicians are selfish, egotistical swine who don’t really care about the public interest? Do you think we live in an economic system which is stupid and unfair?

If you answered “yes”, then you subscribe to the anarchist critique of today’s society — at least, in its broadest outlines. Anarchists believe that power corrupts and those who spend their entire lives seeking power are the very last people who should have it. Anarchists believe that our present economic system is more likely to reward people for selfish and unscrupulous behavior than for being decent, caring human beings. Most people feel that way. The only difference is that most people don’t think there’s any-
thing that can be done about it, or anyway — and this is what the
faithful servants of the powerful are always most likely to insist —
anything that won’t end up making things even worse.

But what if that weren’t true?

And is there really any reason to believe this? When you can
actually test them, most of the usual predictions about what would
happen without states or capitalism turn out to be entirely untrue.
For thousands of years people lived without governments. In many
parts of the world people live outside of the control of governments
today. They do not all kill each other. Mostly they just get on about
their lives the same as anyone else would. Of course, in a complex,
urban, technological society all this would be more complicated:
but technology can also make all these problems a lot easier to
solve. In fact, we have not even begun to think about what our
lives could be like if technology were really marshaled to fit human
needs. How many hours would we really need to work in order to
maintain a functional society — that is, if we got rid of all the use-
less or destructive occupations like telemarketers, lawyers, prison
guards, financial analysts, public relations experts, bureaucrats and
politicians, and turn our best scientific minds away from working
on space weaponry or stock market systems to mechanizing away
dangerous or annoying tasks like coal mining or cleaning the bath-
room, and distribute the remaining work among everyone equally?
Five hours a day? Four? Three? Two? Nobody knows because no
one is even asking this kind of question. Anarchists think these are
the very questions we should be asking.

Do you really believe those things you tell
your children (or that your parents told you)?

“It doesn’t matter who started it.” “Two wrongs don’t make a
right.” “Clean up your own mess.” “Do unto others...” “Don’t be
mean to people just because they’re different.” Perhaps we should
decide whether we’re lying to our children when we tell them
about right and wrong, or whether we’re willing to take our own
injunctions seriously. Because if you take these moral principles
to their logical conclusions, you arrive at anarchism.

Take the principle that two wrongs don’t make a right. If you
really took it seriously, that alone would knock away almost the
entire basis for war and the criminal justice system. The same goes
for sharing: we’re always telling children that they have to learn to
share, to be considerate of each other’s needs, to help each other;
then we go off into the real world where we assume that everyone
is naturally selfish and competitive. But an anarchist would point
out: in fact, what we say to our children is right. Pretty much every
great worthwhile achievement in human history, every discovery
or accomplishment that’s improved our lives, has been based on co-
operation and mutual aid; even now, most of us spend more of our
money on our friends and families than on ourselves; while likely
as not there will always be competitive people in the world, there’s
no reason why society has to be based on encouraging such behav-
ior, let alone making people compete over the basic necessities of
life. That only serves the interests of people in power, who want
us to live in fear of one another. That’s why anarchists call for a
society based not only on free association but mutual aid. The fact
is that most children grow up believing in anarchist morality, and
then gradually have to realize that the adult world doesn’t really
work that way. That’s why so many become rebellious, or alien-
ated, even suicidal as adolescents, and finally, resigned and bitter
as adults; their only solace, often, being the ability to raise children
of their own and pretend to them that the world is fair. But what
if we really could start to build a world which really was at least
founded on principles of justice? Wouldn’t that be the greatest gift
to one’s children one could possibly give?