

Foreword

Reflections on Three Philosophies of Freedom and Self

Recent developments in my life have led me to pause, reflect, and return to three philosophies that have guided and shaped my thinking at different stages of my journey. Each came to me at a different time, in a different way, and spoke to a different question I was asking of life.

At one point, *Stoicism* helped me make sense of adversity - it taught me that serenity is not born from ease but from clarity; that we are never in control of the world, only our response to it. Later, *Objectivism* offered me a very different kind of strength - the conviction that reason, purpose, and creative achievement are not merely ambitions, but moral imperatives; that thinking and building are sacred acts of self-expression. And now, as I go deeper into *Advaita Vedānta*, I find myself drawn to something subtler and quieter - the inquiry into who or what the “*self*” really is, and the realization that perhaps the freedom we seek lies not in mastering or achieving, but in seeing through the illusion of separation altogether.

This document is born of that ongoing search - part reading, part reflection, and part attempt to bring coherence to the philosophies that have shaped me most. It is not meant as a scholarly treatise, but as a humble effort to understand and articulate what each of these great systems points toward: truth, self, and freedom.

Though they emerged in different times and cultures - the disciplined courtyards of Athens, the industrial optimism of 20th-century America, and the meditative forests of ancient India - they converge in their shared inquiry into what it means to live fully and consciously. They differ in direction: Stoicism turns inward toward *mastery*, Objectivism outward toward *creation*, and Advaita inward beyond the self toward *realization*. Yet, each in its own way, teaches that reason and awareness are the truest instruments of freedom.

This comparative reflection is, therefore, a way of seeing how these philosophies - these three *paths* - converse with each other. How one leads to another, and how all three together form a kind of continuum: from *ethical control*, to *existential creation*, to *spiritual dissolution*. I have tried to keep the tone simple, accessible, and sincere - so that this remains not a study *about* ideas, but a reflection *from within* them.

If there is any thread running through it, it is that each philosophy helped me, in its own way, to return to myself - to understand the balance between acceptance and assertion, between action and awareness, between reason and silence. And perhaps, in this intersection of Stoic discipline, Objectivist purpose, and Advaitic understanding, there lies a fuller picture of what it means to be human.

- Manu Sharma
October 2025

The Stoic, the Objectivist, and the Advaitin

A Comparative of *Three Paths of Reason, Freedom, and Truth*

1. The Question They All Ask

Every great philosophy begins with a question about how to live - not merely how to survive, but how to **be fully alive**.

Stoicism asks: How can I remain calm and virtuous amid the chaos of life?

Objectivism asks: How can I live purposefully and rationally, shaping the world by my mind?

Advaita Vedānta asks: Who is the “I” that lives, and what if the self I think I am is not real at all?

Each system points in a different direction - toward mastery, toward creation, or toward realization - but all three seek **freedom**:

- The Stoic seeks freedom **from disturbance**.
- The Objectivist seeks freedom **to act**.
- The Advaitin seeks freedom **from illusion**.

They represent three modes of awakening: **ethical, existential, and spiritual**.

2. Stoicism: Mastering the Inner Life

Origin and Essence

Stoicism began in Athens around 300 BCE with **Zeno of Citium** and later flourished through **Seneca**, **Epictetus**, and **Marcus Aurelius**. It emerged in an age of uncertainty - when empires rose and fell, and individuals sought order in a disordered world.

Its essence: **We cannot control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond.**

Core Ideas

1. The Dichotomy of Control

There are only two realms:

- What's *up to us* - our judgments, intentions, and actions.
- What's *not up to us* - everything else.

Freedom begins when we stop confusing one for the other.

2. Virtue as the Only Good

Virtue - wisdom, courage, justice, temperance - is the soul's alignment with reason.

Wealth and fame are not "goods," only conditions. Virtue is its own reward.

3. Living in Accord with Nature

Nature is rational order - the divine logic (Logos) that pervades the cosmos.

To live well is to act in harmony with that order - to be rational, just, and serene.

4. Amor Fati and Acceptance

Love your fate, not just tolerate it.

Whatever happens is part of a larger unfolding you do not yet see.

The Stoic Ideal

The **sage** - steady, disciplined, inwardly free.

Does not suppress emotion, but transcends its tyranny.

Is unshaken not because the world is kind, but because they have mastered themselves.

Recommended Texts and Thinkers

- *Meditations* - **Marcus Aurelius**
- *Letters from a Stoic* - **Seneca**
- *Discourses* - **Epictetus**
- *A Guide to the Good Life* - **William Irvine** (modern interpretation)
- *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor* - **Donald Robertson** (modern Stoic psychology)

3. Objectivism: The Morality of Reason

Origin and Essence

Ayn Rand (1905-1982), born in St. Petersburg and exiled from Soviet collectivism, created a modern philosophy that united Aristotelian realism with Enlightenment rationality. She called it **Objectivism**. Its essence: **A human's highest moral purpose is the pursuit of his own rational self-interest.**

Core Ideas

1. Reality Exists - Independent of Our Feelings

- Existence is objective and absolute.
- Facts are not negotiable; wishing does not make them so.
- The task of the mind is to *perceive* reality, not invent it.

2. Reason as Absolute

- Reason is the only means of acquiring knowledge.
- Faith and emotion are not substitutes for thought.
- To act against reason is to act against life.

3. Rational Self-Interest (Egoism)

- To live for others is not virtue; to live by reason is.
- True self-interest is not greed or whim, but the disciplined pursuit of one's own rational values - creation, independence, love, and joy.

4. The Virtue of Productivity

- Work is the expression of self.
- Through productive achievement, humans translate thought into existence.
- Every creation - a bridge, a book, a company - is the materialization of mind.

5. Capitalism and Individual Rights

- Freedom is moral, not political convenience.
- The only just society is one that protects the individual's right to think and act.
- Capitalism is not exploitation but voluntary exchange of value for value.

The Objectivist Ideal

The **heroic human** - independent, creative, rational.

Refuses to live second-hand.

Stands not in rebellion but in self-assertion: "I will not live for another being, nor ask another to live for me."

Recommended Texts and Thinkers

- *Atlas Shrugged* - **Ayn Rand**
- *The Fountainhead* - **Ayn Rand**
- *The Virtue of Selfishness* - **Ayn Rand**
- *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* - **Leonard Peikoff**
- *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* - **Chris Matthew Sciabarra** (contextual exploration)

4. Where They Differ - and Overlap

Concept	Stoicism	Objectivism
Goal of Life	Inner peace through virtue	Happiness through rational self-interest
Focus	Mastery of emotion	Mastery of reality
Virtue	The only true good	A means to achieving values
Emotion	To be moderated	To be understood and integrated
View of Others	All humans share reason and duty	Each individual is sovereign
View of Wealth/Success	Indifferent (not evil, not good)	Moral and desirable, if rationally earned
Ideal Figure	The Sage	The Creator/Producer
Freedom	From passion and external control	From coercion and irrationality

Despite their contrast, both celebrate **reason, integrity, and self-command** - the quiet courage to act by principle, not impulse.

5. Advaita Vedānta: The Knowledge of Nonduality

Origin and Essence

Advaita Vedānta is among the highest expressions of Indian philosophy - articulated most profoundly by **Ādi Śaṅkarācārya (8th century CE)**, rooted in the **Upaniṣads**, **Bhagavad Gītā**, and **Brahma Sūtras**.

Its essence: **The individual self (*Ātman*) and the ultimate reality (*Brahm*) are one and the same.**

The suffering of human life arises not from emotion or irrationality, but from *ignorance (Avidyā)* - the mistaken belief that we are separate from the whole.

Core Ideas

1. The Nondual Reality (*Brahm*)

Brahm is not a god or entity, but the infinite, unchanging reality that underlies all appearances.

It is existence itself (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*), and bliss (*ānanda*).

Everything else - all multiplicity, change, and identity - is appearance (*māyā*).

2. The Illusion of the Ego (*Avidyā and Māyā*)

We live under the spell of separation - believing "I am this body," "I am this mind," "I am different from you."

This is ignorance. The ego-self (*Ahaṅkāra*) is a construct, not the truth of who we are.

3. The Knowledge that Liberates (*Jñāna Yoga*)

Liberation (*Mokṣa*) is not achieved through action but through knowledge - the direct realization that the self and Brahm are not two.

When one awakens to this truth, the world continues as before, but the experiencer is free from attachment and fear.

4. The Three Stages of Realization

- *Śravaṇa*: listening to the teachings.
- *Manana*: reflecting upon them through reason.
- *Nididhyāsana*: meditative assimilation - direct seeing.

5. Ethical Implication: Compassion as Oneness

When one knows all beings as one's own Self, compassion arises naturally.

It is not moral duty but recognition - seeing the same consciousness in every form.

6. The Advaitin Ideal

The *Jivanmukta* - liberated while living.

Acts in the world without attachment, enjoys without craving, and rests in the unshakable awareness that *all is one*.

Recommended Texts and Thinkers

- *Bhagavad Gītā* - translation by **Easwaran, Chinmayananda, or Prabhavananda & Isherwood**
- *Upaniṣads* - translated by **Ekknath Easwaran** or **Swami Nikhilananda**
- *Vivekachūḍāmaṇi* and *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* - **Śaṅkarācārya**
- *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* - **Ramana Maharshi**
- *I Am That* - **Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj**
- *Be As You Are* - **David Godman** (modern introduction to Advaita through Ramana Maharshi)

6. Triadic Comparison: Three Modes of Freedom

Concept	Stoicism	Objectivism	Advaita Vedānta
Ultimate Goal	Tranquility through virtue	Happiness through reason and achievement	Liberation through realization
Nature of Reality	Rational, ordered cosmos	Objective physical reality	Nondual consciousness (Brahm)
Nature of Self	Rational moral agent	Independent ego-self	Pure consciousness (Ātman = Brahm)
Source of Suffering	Misjudgment and attachment	Irrationality and self-sacrifice	Ignorance of true Self
Means of Freedom	Discipline and virtue	Reason and creation	Knowledge and realization
Ideal State	Serenity	Self-assertion	Self-dissolution
Emotional Attitude	Acceptance	Aspiration	Equanimity
Ethical Basis	Duty to reason and nature	Rational self-interest	Compassion born of oneness

7. The Deeper Integration

Seen together, these three philosophies form a progression - from **ethical control**, to **existential creation**, to **spiritual realization**.

- The **Stoic** learns to **govern the self** - to bring order to emotion.
- The **Objectivist** learns to **express the self** - to bring mind into matter.
- The **Advaitin** learns to **transcend the self** - to see that there was never separation to begin with.

The Stoic **disciplines desire**,
The Objectivist **fulfills desire**,
The Advaitin **dissolves desire**.

Each is a stage of maturity:

Stoicism cultivates **inner mastery**;
Objectivism cultivates **outer mastery**;
Advaita culminates in **transcendental mastery** - the end of duality itself.

8. In Practice

To live as a **Stoic** is to wake and ask:

“What can I control today, and how can I act with virtue regardless of what unfolds?”

To live as an **Objectivist** is to ask:

“What will I create today, guided by reason, in pursuit of my highest values?”

To live as an **Advaitin** is to inquire:

“Who is this ‘I’ that acts, feels, and seeks - and what if it was never separate to begin with?”

9. Final Reflection

The Stoic finds **peace** by **mastering the storm**.

The Objectivist finds **purpose** by **shaping the world**.

The Advaitin finds **freedom** by **realizing the ocean was never divided into waves**.

Stoic says: **Accept what you cannot change**.

Objectivist says: **Change what you can and must**.

Advaitin whispers: **There is no ‘you’ to change, and no ‘world’ apart from you**.

Reason leads all three -
but where Stoicism ends in **serenity**,
and Objectivism in **sovereignty**,
Advaita ends in **silence**.