

REVIEWS

NOZICK, Robert : *Philosophical Explanations*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1981.

If it is a truism that no review can really do justice to the depth, nuances and the scope of a work, then it is ever more true of a review of Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations*. The book is immense in size (752 pages including footnotes) and wide-ranging in scope (covering metaphysics, epistemology and value theory): the review cannot be any of these. The book is original, controversial and at once appealing and irritating. To take up the theses advanced in the book and discuss them one by one would be a hopeless job; anything else would be an insult to the book. If Nozick's intention was to silence all reviewers excepting those at the extremes of either praise or damnation, then he could not have done a better job. The book is, in short, simply overwhelming. If one is seduced, ever, to write the shortest review ever written, then Nozick's work qualifies as the most apt seducer of the last decade or so.

However, what makes a review of Nozick's book a thank-less job is not the displayed erudition alone, which is considerable, but the suggested ideas regarding the nature and goal of philosophy and philosophical arguments. Philosophical discussion is a senseless and dangerous enterprise à la Nozick. The goal of interpersonal persuasion through the means of defense and criticism of ideas is "a philosophically pointless task" (p. 18). Such an enterprise is "coercive philosophy" (p. 4), because it entails the "forcing" of others to behave 'rationally'. "A successful philosophical argument, a strong argument, *forces* someone to a belief" (p. 4) and, asks Nozick, "(i)s this a nice way to behave towards someone?" (p. 5)

What *would* be a nice way to behave towards someone holding beliefs different from our own? Nozick's answer has two elements. The first of these has to do with the significance others have to our selves. Beliefs different from those of ours function merely as an invitation to reflect upon the internal coherence of our own set of beliefs. Setting one's house in order, settling "the domestic problem presented to our own beliefs" (p. 18) by those of the others, is the only worth-while philosophical task.

Thus edified one then turns one's attention towards the relatively uninteresting question of "foreign relations" (p. 16). Here, and this is the second element, one does not "refute" the beliefs held by others by providing "knock-down" arguments either. No. One titillates the reader. One presents thoughts the "reader has had (or is ready to have), *only more deeply*" (p. 7, my emp.). The reader is thus guided into the labyrinths of knowledge. Aroused by this wise guide, the reader penetrates into the mysteries of life: he does so slowly, pausing now and then to savour the thrill and the glow, until he is ready for *that* ecstatic and glorious moment.¹ In this enticement, in this seduction, is there no manipulation involved? Not so, says Nozick: "Not every way a teacher can help someone to see something himself, more deeply, counts as manipulation, especially when the activity is acknowledged mutually." (p. 7).

Of course, this *motif* is familiar to readers of Nozick's previous work *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. Then we were born into the world having rights to,

and possessing, private property, And now, as it transpires from the work under review, it appears we are also born possessing reason, beliefs, world-view and such like. Apparently, we are all born as philosophers. As with private property, so with reason: some of us have 'more' of it than others (more wisdom, sagacity or ingenuity may be?). With private property, you go for ostentatious display of what you own. What do you do when you possess more ingenuity than your neighbour? Why, write a book of course! The motive is the same here as well: a vainglorious display of your possessions. Why bother with a review then? You may well ask!

The book is divided into three parts of uneven size. The first part, titled metaphysics, takes up two questions: self-identity and the existence of something rather than nothing. The second part, on epistemology, discusses the problems of knowledge, scepticism and probability. Value theory, which is the third part, is about free will, determinism and punishment; the foundations of ethics; and philosophy and meaning of life. What I propose to do, in the space of this review, is to say a bit more about these parts by taking up one question from each of them.

In his discussion about personal identity Nozick defends the "closest continuer" view. This view "holds that y at t_2 is the same person as x at t_1 only if, first, y 's properties at t_2 stem from, grow out of, are causally dependent on x 's properties at t_1 and, second, there is no other z at t_2 that stands in a closer (or as close) relationship to x at t_1 than y at t_2 does" (p. 36–7). This is the closest that Nozick comes to in giving an explicit definition of what a 'closest continuer' is. The result is obvious: the weight of the discussion falls inevitably on the *type* of continuity whether psychological or physiological. What, however, is original in Nozick's account of personal identity is not his discussion of the 'closest continuer' view. This, as he says it himself, is more an account of the persistence of an 'object', an attempt at saying what identity-through-time consists of. Personally, I find this the weakest section. It is most dissatisfactory because, however intuitively appealing the idea of a 'closest continuer' may be, Nozick's discussion of it suffers from some basic weakness. The source of it is the following: Nozick is unable to discuss the notion of "spatio-temporal identity" or "persistence of an object" separately without tying it up, inextricably, with the sortal categories we use. While Nozick is, on the whole, correct in claiming that "the existing literature usually hasn't been concerned with the problems special to personal identity" (p. 70), he fails though in giving us a convincing account of "the general problems that apply to *any kind* of thing's identity through time" (ibid., emp. added). But this problem engages Nozick's attention for more than 40 pages (p. 29–70). The general problem of identity-through-time applicable to *any kind of thing requires, surely, an account of identity that is not dependent upon the use of specific sortal categories?*

It is a sortal-neutral account of persistence, or continuity, of an object that enables us to speak of, or trace, a succession of object-stages as beginning and ending.² When a car is compressed into a lump of steel, for example, we can still continue to trace a succession of object-stages through the event of compression by means of some sortal-neutral criterion for being stages of the same object. Yet because we regard the object-stages upto the compression not just as stages of an object, but as stages of a car, we may say that that the previous

object, a car, has ceased to exist and been transformed into a lump of steel. Think of, in this connection, examples of disassembly and reassembly (of, say, a watch).

Such an account, which later on could be topped up with appropriate sortal categories, also allows us an insight into the relationship that obtains between persistence, or continuity, of an object on the one hand and the way we divide up the world (our substance conceptions) on the other. Such an account would enable us to incorporate into our theories about personal identity the way we acquire and use sortal categories.³

A refusal, or unwillingness, to make such a distinction in the process of providing an account of spatio-temporal identity is liable to make one vulnerable to a host of counter-examples, as in the case of Nozick. The situation of a pregnant mother dying at child birth, with some modifications, with the child living on would force us to consider that the child and the mother are the same since the former is the closest continuer of the latter.

The originality in Nozick's discussion, then, lies in his attempt at grappling with self-consciousness and in incorporating it into an account of personal identity. "To be an I, a self, is to have the capacity for reflexive self-reference" (p. 78). However, the self itself is synthesized around this act: "I know that when I say 'I', the reference is to myself, because myself is synthesised as the thing which the act refers to ... and that thing is synthesised for the purpose of being referred to, by the very act of referring to it" (p. 90). That is why, "selves are special among the entities in having their identity over time be (partially) self determined" (p. 107). What, in other words, is "special about people... is that what their identity through time is partially determined by their own conception of themselves" (p. 69) and this is what lends value and dignity to us.

Many philosophers have recently attempted to salvage the notion of knowledge as justified true belief, in response to the Gettier problem, by adding some sort of causal condition.⁴ It is an attempt at postulating a causal connection between belief condition and truth condition by saying, roughly, that a belief is justified true belief when a belief *p* is causally connected with the truth of *p*. Nozick rejects this approach for two reasons. Firstly, he thinks that it is difficult to formulate the causal condition properly; secondly, it offers no explanation of mathematical and ethical knowledge (p. 172). Instead, Nozick offers us the following account:

(1) *p* is true

(2) *S* believes that *p*

and the following two subjunctive conditionals replace the causal condition,

(3) not-*p* → not-(*S* believes that *p*)

(4) *p* → *S* believes that *p*.

(3) tells us what *S*'s "belief state would be if *p* were false" (p. 176) i.e., "if *p* weren't true, *S* wouldn't believe that *p*" (p. 172). Condition (4) tells us "(n)ot only is *p* true and *S* believes it, but if it were true he would believe it" (p. 176).

The questions we need to ask, in other words, are the following: would *S* believe *p* if *p* were false? and if *p* were true would *S* believe *p*? We explore these two subjunctive possibilities by considering how changes in the background circumstances might, or might not, affect *S*'s belief. Such a situation where a person's belief is subjunctively connected to the fact is called "tracking" by Nozick. "Let us say of a person who believes that *p*, which is true, that when

3 & 4 hold, his belief tracks the truth that p. To know is to have a belief that *tracks* the truth" (p. 178). However, if this is the case, I do not quite see what 'tracking' is, if it is not some kind of causal relation. Or, more appropriately, what is it except a subjunctive account of the causal condition?

One of the reasons that Nozick has to insist upon the difference between tracking on the one hand and causal relations on the other is to "defang determinism" (p. 171) thus allowing a newer, fresher look at the intractable problem of free-will. The conditions of free-will, roughly, parallel the conditions of knowledge: S's action tracks the rightness or bestness

"When (1) A is right

(2) S believes that A is right

then S's belief tracks that truth when

(3) If A weren't right, S would not believe that A was right

(4) If A were right, S would believe it was" (p. 321).

Nozick's claim is that such an account of free act is specified in terms of outcome and hence differs from the ordinary view which "holds that a free action is one that results from a process of free choice" (p. 352). I do not quite see how it is so: even here, it is a choice; the choice is a choice that has "tracked bestness", albeit non-causally.

The long chapter on the foundations of ethics is an attempt to answer the question: "why should we be moral?". It is Glaucon's challenge to Socrates in Plato's *Republic*. Nozick claims that the immoral person is worse off and that there is a cost to immoral behaviour. "It is a *value* cost. The immoral life is less valuable life than the moral one, the immoral person is a less valuable being than the moral one. The sanction is a value sanction" (p. 409). I do not know whether Glaucon would have been satisfied with this answer; I certainly am not. Equally unsatisfactory is the suggestion that value consists in some kind of organic unity (p. 415-47).

As readers familiar with *Anarchy, State and Utopia* know, the burden of supporting the conclusion that a redistributive state is unjustified had fallen squarely on an absent moral theory in general, and on an absent theory of individual rights in particular. The book under review is to be seen as an attempt at providing the outline of such a theory. There he had suggested that the moral basis of rights had to do with the capacity to live a meaningful life without being able to elaborate on it much promising, however, to return to grapple with this issue.⁵ Now that he has done so, the question as to its sufficiency arises: has he provided us with that moral theory, or that moral foundation for individual rights, which will support his political philosophy? I do not think so; arguing it out, though, is a separate task falling outside the purview of this review.

On the whole, though Nozick's book is not without its considerable merits, one wishes that we were given a more evenly balanced book. The style of the book, throughout, is headily informal and borders on the conversational. Despite Nozick's explicit anathema for polemics and discussions, the best parts of the book are precisely those where he indulges in 'coercive' philosophy. It could, in any case, do with a severe pruning. Despite all the problems that one may have with the book, one has to acknowledge that a fine, sensitive and creative philosophical mind is at work here.

All said and done, Robert Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations* is destined

to become a contemporary philosophical classic. You will find yourself going back to it several times, emerging from each encounter just that little bit richer, just that little bit grateful, just that little bit awed which seems to make both life and philosophy appear worthwhile.

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¹The sexual imagery is Nozick's own suggestion (p. 24). So, I guess, one might legitimately ask the following question: If discovery of a new idea (which pertains to the sphere of domestic relations) is akin to orgasm (ibid.) what would he the correlate in the sphere of foreign relations? An erotic novel? Pornography? A first person account of a sexual odessey? Perhaps. May be philosophy can titillate and arouse only thus. Does one have to be a 'puritan' in order to find this analogy distasteful?

²See Hirsch, Eli, *The Concept of Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982 for such an account.

³See, in this regard, the interesting work of Keil, Frank C., *Semantic and Conceptual Development*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979. He focusses upon the way children acquire and use sortal categories.

⁴A good overview and a critical discussion of the various proposals made in epistemology in response to the Gettier problem is to be found in Shope, Robert K., *The Analysis of Knowing: A Decade of Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

⁵*Anarchy, State and Utopia*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974, p. 50-51.