

Robert Nozick

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1

Introductions

DAVID SCHMIDTZ

Robert Nozick's brilliance is nowhere more apparent than in the way he introduces his books. One theme runs through his introductory essays: a plea for noncoercive, contemplative, conversational, yet analytical, philosophy. In his first book, Nozick writes,

One view about how to write a philosophy book holds that an author should think through all of the details of the view he presents, and its problems, polishing and refining his view to present to the world a finished, complete, and elegant whole. This is not my view. . . . There is room for words on subjects other than last words. Indeed, the usual manner of presenting philosophical work puzzles me. Works of philosophy are written as though their authors believe them to be the absolutely final word on their subject. (ASU, xii)

What disturbs Nozick is an unarticulated consensus that the only way to do good philosophy is to present our work in a way that fundamentally distorts it. In truth, "Having thought long and hard about the view he proposes, a philosopher has a reasonably good idea about its weak points; the places where great intellectual weight is placed upon something perhaps too fragile to bear it, the places where the unraveling of the view might begin, the unprobed assumptions he feels uneasy about" (ASU, xii). When the time arrives to present our work, however, it comes out like this:

One form of philosophical activity feels like pushing and shoving things into some fixed perimeter of specified shape. All those things are lying out there, and they must be fit in. You push and shove the material into the rigid area getting it into the boundary on one side, and it bulges out on another. You run around and press in the protruding bulge, producing yet another in another place. So you push and shove and clip off corners from the things so they'll fit and you press in until finally almost everything sits unstably more or less in there; what doesn't gets heaved *far* away so that it won't be noticed. (ASU, xiii)

Why would we do such a thing? Nozick is not sure. “The reticence of philosophers about the weaknesses they perceive in their own views is not, I think, simply a question of philosophical honesty and integrity, though it is that or at least becomes that when brought to consciousness. The reticence is connected with philosophers’ purposes in formulating views. Why do they strive to force everything to fit into that one fixed perimeter?” (ASU, xiii). Perhaps there is no reason. We are that sort of creature, so we do that sort of philosophy. Nozick, though, aspires to transcend that way of doing things.

Philosophers often seek to deduce their total view from a few basic principles . . . one brick is piled upon another to produce a tall philosophical tower, one brick wide. . . . Instead of the tottering tower, I suggest that our model be the Parthenon. First we emplace our separate philosophical insights, column by column; afterwards, we unite and unify them under an overarching roof of general principles or themes. When the philosophical structure crumbles somewhat, as we should expect on inductive grounds, something of interest and beauty remains standing. Still preserved are some insights, the separate columns, some balanced relations, and the wistful look of a grander unity eroded by misfortunes or natural processes. (PE, 3)

Nozick would like to see philosophical work, especially his own, as a stage in an ongoing process of maturation. “The goal is getting to a place worth being, even though the investigation may change and deepen the idea of worth” (PE, 2). Note: the investigation *may* deepen our idea of worth. How sad if it does not. How sad if it remains true even of mature professional philosophers that, with only minor adjustments, “we are directed through life by the not fully mature picture of the world we formed in adolescence or young adulthood” (EL, 11).

NONCOERCIVE PHILOSOPHY

We might even wonder whether academic training limits rather than enhances our ability to avoid having our later thoughts be deformed and truncated by earlier ones. Nozick says, “Philosophical training molds arguers: it trains people to produce arguments and (this is part of the arguing) to criticize and evaluate them. . . . Children think an argument involves raised voices, anger, negative emotion. To argue with someone is to attempt to push him around verbally. But a philosophical argument isn’t like that – is it?” (PE, 4). Nozick answers his own question by saying that, often enough, it is very much like that.

A philosophical argument is an attempt to get someone to believe something, whether he wants to believe it or not. A successful philosophical argument, a strong argument, *forces* someone to a belief. Though philosophy is carried on as a coercive activity, the penalty philosophers wield is, after all, rather weak. If the other person is willing to bear the label of “irrational” or “having the worse arguments,” he can skip away happily maintaining his previous belief. . . . Wouldn’t it be better if philosophical arguments left the person no possible answer at all, reducing him to impotent silence? Even then, he might sit there silently, smiling, Buddhalike. Perhaps philosophers need arguments so powerful they set up reverberations in the brain: if the person refuses to accept the conclusion, he *dies*. (PE, 4)

There is a grain of truth in the caricature, and Nozick probably has done more than anyone to draw our attention to it. We are taught to have a rather odd picture of what good philosophy must look like. Perhaps because of this, as Nozick says in his next book, “There are very few books that set out what a mature person can believe” (EL, 15).

What then should we expect from Nozick? What is his alternative? Will he demonstrate a different way of doing philosophy, such that his demonstration convinces us, making us say, “Yes! That’s how you do it!” Probably not. As Nozick says, “My thoughts do not aim for your assent – just place them alongside your own reflections for a while” (EL, 15).

To understand Nozick, we need to understand that when he says he is not aiming for your assent, he really means it. Such passages are charming. They are, in a word, disarming. But they are more than that. They are not merely an argumentative ploy. Nozickian disarmament is a genuine methodological shift.

Are we supposed to be converted to Nozick’s nonadversarial approach? Probably not. Again, when Nozick says his thoughts do not aim for our assent, *he really means it*, even when his thoughts concern philosophical method. Probably the most adult way of responding to Nozick’s method would be simply to mull it over, to judge it to be worth considering, worth setting alongside our own for a while. Better to come away from the exercise with a more mature version of our own approach than to try to adopt Nozick’s. It would be more serious – more adult – for us to reflect for a while on the idea of what a mature person can believe, and to reflect on what it would be like to read or to write a book like that.

Nozick stresses that, “it is not quite *positions* I wish to present here” (EL, 17). So, what is the alternative? One gathers that Nozick is, to some degree, simply trying to explain how life looks to him, as one rational mind

to another. Nozick wishes he could avoid presenting us with conclusions frozen in time, detached from the intellectual journey that leads to and from those provisional conclusions. And if that cannot be avoided when publishing a book, he at least can ask readers to be mindful of the relation between thought and printed page. It is a bit like the relation between a moving object and a photograph thereof.

Nozick wants us to see the “finished” product as a process – or part of a process – of mulling. He wants us to be aware of the scurrying around he did, trying to hide the leaks and bulges. Beyond that, Nozick wants to scurry a bit less. He does not want us to see his work as sloppy, but he does not want us to see it *merely* as a polished final product, either. He wants us to see it as an invitation to keep him company for a while in an ongoing journey. He wants us to accept this invitation, and to accept it in a certain spirit. His purpose is not to show us he is already at *the* destination. He is a fellow traveler, not a mentor. When we finish reading him, Nozick wants us to have ideas we did not have when we first sat down with him. The ideas will be our ideas, though, not Nozick’s, and that is how Nozick wants it. He is not trying to force us to choose between adopting his ideas and having a brain hemorrhage.

THE PROBLEM WITH BEING INFLUENTIAL

As Elijah Millgram suggests (in this volume), Nozick seems never to have wanted to cultivate disciples. Nozick is sufficiently concerned about the more subtle coercion latent in philosophical mentorship and scholarship to raise the topic again in *Socratic Puzzles*. There, he says,

[w]hen you approach a topic through the route of someone’s theories, that person’s mode of structuring the issues limits how far you can stray and how much you can discover. You think within their “problematic.” Psychologists have investigated a phenomenon they call “anchoring and adjustment.” For example, a subject is asked to estimate a person’s height by estimating how far that height deviates from a fixed benchmark – from, say, five feet tall. If he thinks the person is five foot seven, he says “plus seven inches.” The interesting fact is that the expressed estimates of a person’s height will differ, depending on the fixed benchmark. In theory, that particular benchmark should make no difference. If it is six feet instead of five feet, then the height of someone who is five foot seven can be said to deviate by “minus five inches” from that taller benchmark. Nevertheless, the estimate of a

given person's height by a group of judges who start with the five-foot benchmark will be less than the estimate by a group of judges who start with the benchmark of six feet. . . . It is similar, I think, when you approach a topic through the thought of another. Even when your own conclusions do deviate, they are "gravitationally" pulled toward those of your source. (SP, 8–9)

Nozick's remark explicitly concerns working on historical figures, but of course we also are subject to the undue influence of people around us: classmates, teachers, and so on. Less obviously, teachers who become gurus are reciprocally subject to the undue influence of their disciples. As disciples compete for admission to the teacher's innermost circle by becoming ever more adept at treating the teacher's work as sacred text, the teacher becomes incapacitated, losing touch with the habit of assessing and reassessing earlier thoughts in a thoroughly critical way. Part of the problem with being unduly influenced by disciples, then, is that it makes us prone to undue influence by our own earlier selves. Potentially, philosophical argument is not merely coercive, but self-coercive. It is not only other people who exert gravitational pull on us. We pull ourselves as well.

In his first book, Nozick admits, "I do not welcome the fact that most people I know and respect disagree with me" (ASU, x). Nozick says (in SP), however, his reason for not defending the earlier work against the sometimes vicious commentary it generated was that he did not want defensiveness to define and constrain his future thought. He wanted to be more than an arguer. We may conjecture that "gravitational pull" is worse in political theory than in other areas. We do not simply *judge* Nozick's political views; instead, we judge them by judging how they deviate from our benchmark. And if we are unduly influenced by benchmarks even when judging something as simple as a person's height, how much worse must it be when we judge matters political? How much worse is the distortion when judging views like Nozick's, so very distant from the benchmarks of the academic mainstream?

So, we may worry about the influence particular philosophers have on us. We also may worry about being unduly constrained by our own earlier thinking. A further thought: Perhaps these worries connect. Worrying about the influence of our earlier thinking presumably is bound up with worrying that our earlier thinking was too much a product of those we studied, and studied with.

What about our students? Will they be themselves?

THE WORK AT HAND

Especially given Nozick's wish to have his work regarded as part of an ongoing journey rather than as his final word, it is easy to see why he would find it "disconcerting to be known primarily for an early work" (SP, 1). But he is, after all, known primarily for that work, and several of this volume's authors accordingly choose to focus on it. David Miller ponders *Anarchy*, John T. Sanders confronts the State, and Loren Lomasky explores *Utopia*. Miller explains what we can (and what we cannot) learn from the exercise of imagining a state spontaneously emerging from a hypothetical starting point. Sanders and Lomasky each consider the understated but crucial role that personal projects play in making life meaningful. To Lomasky, this role underscores the role that toleration must play in any utopia worthy of our aspiration. To Sanders, this role helps to explain why we have reason to respect property rights. Philip Pettit likewise sees meaningful personal projects as crucial but comes to different conclusions about the upshot for Nozick's theory of rights.

Gerald Gaus, like Sanders, Lomasky, and Pettit in their own ways, explores the relation between principles, goals, and (symbolic) meanings. Gaus sees that relation as pivotal to the theory of rationality presented in Nozick's later work, and wonders how well the later theory of rationality fits with the earlier theory of justice.

In the remaining essays, Michael Williams and Michael Bratman reflect on two of the most enduring contributions of Nozick's second book – his theories of knowledge and of free will, respectively. (Bratman also relates his discussion of free will's importance to Nozick's "closest continuer" theory of personal identity.) Elijah Millgram offers a radical alternative to interpreting Nozick's third book as the presentation of a theory. My essay on the meaning of life is a self-conscious tribute to Nozick, not only in terms of its topic but in terms of its method as well.

I will say no more, for these essays speak for themselves better than I could speak on their behalf. Perfunctory summary paragraphs cannot do them justice. Instead, this essay focuses on the larger picture. I use these pages to frame the essays within a general reflection on Nozick's philosophical method, hoping readers will find that this serves not only the immediate goal of understanding this volume but also the larger goal of understanding Nozick.

Regarding the approach of these essays, Nozick himself says he believes philosophers of the past would have preferred having their writing mined for insights rather than "having their views meticulously and sympathetically

stated in all parts and relations. The respect *they* paid their predecessors was philosophy, not scholarship” (PE, 8). The essays collected here take that thought seriously. We intend them to help readers understand Nozick but, to a large degree, the homage we pay is via philosophical engagement rather than meticulous reconstruction.

LATER WORKS

Do Nozick’s later books continue the same project of distancing himself from coercive philosophy? I am tempted to push and shove the leaks and bulges into a shape such that the result appears to support a resounding Yes. The truth: while the theme is still there, it is more implicit. Perhaps Nozick felt he had already said enough about his methodological aspirations.

Nozick says rationality “is a crucial component of the self-image of the human species” (NR, xii). However,

Evolutionary theory makes it possible to see rationality as one among other animal traits, an evolutionary adaptation with a delimited purpose and function. This perspective can yield important consequences for philosophy. . . . If rationality is an evolutionary adaptation with a delimited purpose and function, designed to work in conjunction with other stable facts that it takes for granted and builds upon, but if philosophy is an attempt of unlimited scope to apply reason and to justify rationally every belief and assumption, then we can understand why many of philosophy’s traditional problems have turned out to be intractable and resistant to rational resolution. These problems may result from attempts to extend rationality beyond its delimited evolutionary function. (NR, xii)

This discussion seems in keeping with Nozick’s earlier explorations of the prospects for a more humanly engaging philosophical method. Nozick remains a firm believer in the power of reason for all that, however, and appears in more combative mode when he goes on to say,

In recent years, rationality has been an object of particular criticism. The claim has been put forth that rationality is *biased* because it is a class-based or male or Western or whatever notion. Yet it is part of rationality to be intent on noticing biases, including its own, and controlling and correcting these. (Might the attempt to correct for biases itself be a bias? But if that is a *criticism*, from what quarter does it come? Is there a view that holds that bias is bad but that correcting it is bad too? . . .) Charging a bias in existing standards does not show that one exists. . . . It is not sufficient merely to say

that we (all) see the world through our conceptual schemes. The question is: in what specific ways, and by what exact mechanisms, do our particular conceptual schemes and standards distort? (NR, xii–xiii)

Another possibly discordant note appears in *Socratic Puzzles*, when Nozick declares that he thinks of Socrates as “the philosopher” (SP, 2). Why would this note be discordant? My thought: Is not Socrates more or less the patriarch of coercive philosophy? Is it not from Socrates, first and above all, that we learn how admirable it is, how much fun it is, to beat up our interlocutors, proving they are our intellectual inferiors? Is this not precisely the style that Nozick has so eloquently rejected as a model for his own work?

Of course, this is not at all what Nozick had in mind. In the title essay of *Socratic Puzzles*, Nozick indicates that what impresses him is Socrates’ unflinching willingness to admit what he does not know and to embrace philosophy all the same, confident there is something worthwhile to be learned, even while suspecting that what we learn will never be the final word. Nozick admires Socrates because, unique among philosophers, Nozick says, Socrates teaches with his *person*. We learn what beauty of soul is, “not by being presented with an explicit theory but by encountering Socrates” (SP, 155). See Millgram’s essay for a discussion of philosophy as the presentation of a persona.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout all of his work, Nozick’s objective is to produce more literally an examined life than a debate-tested proposition. In all of his introductions, observe the probing, tentative quality of the thoughts expressed. Nozick does not try to win debates. Instead of trying to stop the conversation, Nozick tries to raise the level of the conversation. Those who read him as an adversary are already misreading him before we even begin to interpret the content. Nozick does not write for adversaries.

Philosophy without arguments, in one mode, would guide someone to a view. . . . At no point is the person forced to accept anything. He moves along gently, exploring his own and the author’s thoughts. He explores together with the author, moving only where he is ready to; then he stops. Perhaps, at a later time mulling it over or in a second reading, he will move further. . . . Such a book could not convince everybody of what it says – it wouldn’t try. (PE, 7)

With characteristically reflective humility, though, Nozick cautions that his own work does not live up to this ideal, “even though I would like to present a philosophical view in this way, author and reader traveling together, each continually spurting in front of the other. Not only do I lack the art to do this, I do not yet have a philosophical view that flows so deeply and naturally” (PE, 7). Perhaps. Yet, Nozick’s introductions undeniably provide a glimpse of what attaining this ideal would be like. They are, simply, works of art.