

The Valuable and Meaningful

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Philosophical Explanations, by Robert Nozick, *Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981. xii + 764 pp. \$25.00.*

Philosophical Explanations is an outstanding and important book in systematic philosophy. This praise relative to genre hardly would be worth making were it not for two factors. First, truly systematic contemporary philosophy is rare, and outstanding examples even more so. Second, it is wholly unexpected that an outstanding systematic philosophy would arise from the analytic tradition represented by Professor Robert Nozick. Analytic philosophy, of course, has had thinkers who sometimes are thought to be systematic because they have metaphysical theories; one thinks of Bergmann, Sellars, or Quine. But systematic philosophy for Nozick means what it has meant in the grand tradition: reflection on the widest possible range of fundamental questions with coherent attention paid to how that reflection gives rise to thematically connected fields and topics of inquiry. The book begins with the problem of what it means to be a self and ends with a splendidly imaginative chapter on the meaning of life. In between it deals with questions such as why there is something rather than nothing, how there can be true knowledge, free will, and normative ethics. The theoretical observations Nozick offers add up to a metaphysics and ontology, a cosmology of sorts, a theory of the person, an ethics, a theory of aesthetics, an axiology, and even a philosophy of religion. Coupled with his earlier *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, which develops a political theory, *Philosophical Explanations* provides a range of systematic philosophy comparable to Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, Hegel and Whitehead. Our culture, if not the profession, looks to philosophy for

wisdom about what is important in the breadth as well as the depth of life, and Nozick joins the small group of contemporaries who accept that cultural calling. Because he lives and works in the philosophical community that has abjured that cultural task and in fact has made it almost disreputable within academic philosophy, *Philosophical Explanations* is something of a bombshell in philosophical politics.

The contours of Nozick's system, as well as several of its most distinctive features, most closely resemble the philosophy of Paul Weiss (doubtless to the surprise of both). His closest contemporary colleagues in the enterprise of systematic philosophy are thinkers such as Charles Hartshorne, Justus Buchler, Edward Pols, Irwin Lieb, Leonard Feldstein, and David Weissman. Nozick's book mentions none of these people, however, and it shows no consciousness that there are alternate systems in conversation with his, or that there is a rich twentieth-century heritage of systematic philosophy, e.g., from Dewey and Whitehead, to which it stands comparison. The theme of this brief review is to welcome Nozick to the tradition of systematic philosophy.

It would seem obvious to ask of a philosopher who aims to think about everything, what counts in the everything. What a pleasure it is, for instance, to find that, for Nozick, Indian and Chinese philosophy count as philosophy. Nozick's own particular heritage is scriptural, rabbinic, philosophical Judaism; his affectionate and intelligent use of it to enrich his discussions reminds me of Peirce's or Whitehead's employment of the Christian West. For instance, his use of the phrase "Ein Sof" for something like the Infinite or Absolute suggests we ought to ferret out the traditional connotations of that term. Unlike many philosophers, Nozick not only reads outside

philosophy but also brings other fields to bear upon his problems. Physics, biology, mathematics, art, music, and world religions all provide problems and perspectives for Nozick's "everything." He writes for intelligent people in those fields as well, not only for professional philosophers.

The one serious reservation I have about Nozick's "culture" is its unconvincing sense of rootedness in twentieth-century history. Our philosophy is an art practiced out of the specific historical situation of our time, despite its perennial features. That Nozick recognizes and laments the book's failure here is indicated by a touching apology for his discussion of ethics because it does not register and resonate with the "searing" history of holocaust, totalitarianism, and nuclear war that marks our own time. The problem is very deep. Nozick has an admirably light touch in manipulating and assessing alternate hypotheses, always looking for the best possibility for making sense of his problem. He has a playful affection for science fiction as a philosophic tool, a fascination I share. But the price paid is to locate the philosophical center of gravity in possibilities rather than actuality, thus separating philosophy from those fundamental human activities whose subjective forms are lamentation and celebration. Nozick would agree, I think, that the price is ultimately not worth paying and that a road must be constructed from the hypothetical play that frees up dogmatism and opens inquiry to that thinking which is itself a root cultural movement.

Nozick's discussion of the self begins with a constructive and dialectical metaphysical theory of continuity through time. Nozick's is a process philosophy, in a rough sense, because his problem of continuity has to do with connecting separate moments. His theory, which he calls that of the "closest continuer," cites causal dependence and the principle that there be no closer chain of states in order to identify the successor state in an enduring thing. His subtle discussion considers many metaphysical issues, such as reference and individuality, in current analytic philosophy. The discussion would have been far richer, however,

had it reflected the careful debates between Whiteheadian process philosophers and their critics over the last forty years. Nozick's view should come to terms with Whitehead's theory that continuity must have an "inside" as well as "outside" account. Nozick's reflections (with a few exceptions such as the discussion of "access") focus on the outside, on how we talk about continuity rather than experience it. The style of analytic philosophy which talks about how we talk rather than about the subject of talk not only founders on the assumption that the expressive form of language is the real form of things, but also sets the discussion at a second remove of objectification from its subject. When Nozick moves on to define a self as having "the capacity for reflexive self-reference," the discussion remains at too abstract a level compared with, say, Kierkegaard's development of a similar point. Furthermore, the discussion is prevented from grappling with concrete historical conditions of reflexive self-reference in the twentieth century; our vaunted anonymity is a special problem of reflexive self-reference. Or is it that the abstractness of Nozick's discussion, concerned with how we talk about ourselves, illustrates the very peculiarity of our abstract, modernist era?

The second chapter, "Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing," deserves special attention, for its central theme is whether there can be an ultimate explanation or ontological cause that is self-subsuming and cannot be transcended. Although the alternatives Nozick considers include a few silly ones that treat the boundary issues on models of inclusion and exclusion that make sense only internal to the world circumscribed by the boundaries, the chapter makes one of the most serious and concentrated attempts to deal with basic ontological and metaphysical issues as a system since Paul Weiss' *Modes of Being* in 1958. I read this chapter as Nozick's way of freeing up rigid modes of thought about issues in preparation for his own vision that emerges at the end of the book. (The aesthetic structure of the book is a bridge with concluding remarks about

philosophy completing the introductory discussion, treatment of the meaning of life paralleling that of the identity of the self, the ontology of value answering why there is something rather than nothing, ethics balancing epistemology, with free will the keystone.)

Nozick's central issue in this book, he says, is free will, and he entered into the question of knowledge in order to get at free will. Knowledge, he claims, is when a person's belief that p "tracks" the fact p . (P is a proposition, although Nozick sometimes treats it as a fact.) "Tracking" is a subjunctive relation: if p were not true, then the person wouldn't believe that p , and if p were true, then the person would believe it. The reasons for why the person's beliefs are connected positively or negatively with the positive or negative truth value of p are the various methods we use for connecting beliefs with facts, and Nozick's discussion of them is subtle and neat. The full force of the subjunctive theory of knowledge is not felt in the book, however, because of an underlying methodological assumption of what can be called "personal empiricism." Personal empiricism says that you make a philosophic case by pointing out things individual thinkers would recognize in their personal experience. Much of philosophy's use of counter-examples, for instance, depends on appealing to the intuitions and good sense of individuals. This assumption excludes from proper hearing the broad social and cultural forces that move no individuals wholly, that affect or color nearly everyone's experience, and that are recognized (only?) from some abstract discipline's vantage point such as intellectual history or philosophy of culture. The full force of Nozick's tying of knowledge to the subjunctives of tracking is that knowing is a political affair, not merely a logical one as logic is usually construed. Epistemology should be not merely about warranted beliefs, but about the social and cultural conditions constituting the concrete embodiments of the subjunctive conditions of knowledge. The political reality of knowledge can hardly be embraced within the

assumptions of personal empiricism.

Turning to free will, Nozick offers two alternate hypotheses without making a definite choice between them. One interprets free will as the assigning of weights to reasons so that, with the novel mix, the agent becomes an originator of value over and above the values inherited and mixed. The very value of the weigher, the worth of the free person, consists in creating originatory value as well as embodying or conveying intrinsic, instrumental, and contributory values. Nozick shows neatly how the weighing of values is itself a rational but non-coerced process, and this interpretation of freedom accords well with our experiential sense; it also is the point at which he most closely follows Weiss. Nonetheless, this theory of freedom is incompatible with determinism. Nozick's second hypothesis, then, takes as its condition that it be compatible with determinism. By a careful analysis of tracking rightness, analogous to tracking truth, he shows that much of our sense of freedom can be accounted for in consonance with determinism, namely those elements that say freedom consists in willing the best. The systematic discussion of tracking is indeed elegant, although I wish he had considered the hypothesis of determinism more critically. In his treatment of punishment and retribution, Nozick develops the theses that there are values, that people can link with them, and that it is valuable to link with values. This leads to the center of Nozick's system, his theory of value.

Starting—quite properly in my view—from aesthetic considerations, Nozick observes that values are matters of degree involving diversity and unity. The greater the diversity, other things being equal, the greater the value. The greater the unity, other things being equal, the greater the value. Organic unity admits of degrees as it enhances or diminishes either or both of its diversity and unity, within the limits of many kinds of qualifications for harmony. Although Nozick does not press the analysis of organic unity itself very far, he has a superb discussion of the ways in which a notion like that captures our sense

of value and can be modified and nuanced so as to answer fundamental questions. I applaud this metaphysical strategy and have reservations only about whether Nozick realizes its powerful generality. If value is the abstract structure of organic unity, then anything embodying that abstract structure is of worth. Would Nozick agree that to be a definite thing is to have some degree of organic unity, such that all things have some degree of value? Since any experiential response to the world involves integrating the world's fragments into at least the rough organic unity of the experiencer, isn't all experience therefore a form of valuation, the selecting and organizing and bearing of value? If these general metaphysical hypotheses are consonant with Nozick's system, then he need not ask, as he does, whether to link with values, but only how to link in the best ways. Instead of his puzzling discussion in Chapter 5 of the hypothesis that we choose that there be value, but not what value consists in, an hypothesis needed to bridge the fact-value split, he could deny the assumption of a fact-value split and therefore the need to bridge it. The fact-value split is a function of modern cosmology, and by developing an alternate cosmology of values in organic unities and in the responses to such unities, he would obviate the need for a bridge. Of course, such a cosmology hypothesizes a value-laden reality prior to more abstract domains of fact and values, and this stands on a logical par with the assumption of the fact-value split as basic. But the latter too is only a cosmological hypothesis, one to which we can now see an alternative that better accords with our valuational experience. The systematic philosophers nourished by Whitehead and Dewey have wrestled with these alternate approaches and I mean to nudge Nozick to join them.

Nozick's theory of ethics raises two main questions: what is the value of being ethical (the "ethical push")? and how do others impose obligations upon us (the "ethical pull")? His theory of value addresses both, and I highly recommend his thorough and enlightened discussion. But the most in-

teresting appearance of those questions is their analogues in his treatment of the meaning of life. Whereas the value of life is some sum of its various values, including the value of being ethical, the meaning of life is a relation to something outside it, a transcending of limits. Whereas classicism emphasizes value, romanticism emphasizes meaning, and both are true. In his last chapter, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," Nozick's speculations soar, presenting the values and meanings he intends. In a brilliant discussion of *Ein Sof*, the Unlimited, he asks how the regress of finding meaning in relationship to something beyond can be stopped so that there is something meaningful in itself, and so that meaning can get started on the finite level. Not since Tillich has Harvard had a thinker so willing to ask the well-spring questions of philosophy in such a disciplined way.

Value and meaning together Nozick calls "worth." It is the task of the humanities, he says, to be responsive to meaning and value as such, not just objectively analyzing what they are but articulating and presenting them in terms of their meaning and value. Philosophy too is part of the humanities because one of its tasks or modes is to respond to things as valuable and meaningful. In this it is an art, and it should aim not to be reductionistic (Nozick has a splendid discussion of the value and limits of reductionism), but to weave a complex pattern in which all the other perspectives or theories about life find intelligible relationship to one another. This is comprehensive philosophical theory, the usual interest of systematic philosophy. Of course, a system is but one more approach to understanding life, even if non-reductive, and it may be impossible to find satisfactory comprehensive theories that provide a sufficiently intelligible pattern. Then we are left with a "basketful of alternative explanatory views." Philosophy is an art precisely because of the ways by which it shapes and harmonizes those alternatives, even when harmony means not bringing them into a tightly integrated system.