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PHILOSOPHY IN OUR TIME

Philosophical Explanations by Robert Nozick

Book Review by Mortimer J. Adler

With few exceptions, mostly recent and of German origin, the philosophical works contained in the *Great Books of the Western World* were not written by or for specialists in philosophy. The great philosophers in the Western tradition addressed themselves to questions they regarded as necessary for any thinking mind to confront. In this sense, it can be said that philosophy, unlike all other forms of inquiry, is everybody's business. That is why the great philosophical treatises, with some exceptions, have been written, as they should be, in a language and in a manner that makes their message accessible to the reflective intelligence of the ordinary thoughtful person. The technical terminology that special-

ists have recourse to in communicating with one another does not properly belong to philosophy. For the most part, the great books in philosophy have avoided it, though there are exceptions, as I have indicated.

I do not mean to say that the great books in philosophy are all easy to read. Some of them—some of Aristotle's treatises, for example, and some of the later dialogues of Plato—require special efforts of interpretation on the part of the reader. Nevertheless, even these yield up their message when that effort is made; it is not defeated by a technical vocabulary invented by the author for his own special purposes.

From the Greeks down to the end of the nineteenth century and even through the first quarter of this century (once again, with the exceptions noted above), philosophical inquiry remained the domain of the generalist—the thinking human mind. This is certainly true of the writings of the great stoic philosophers of ancient Rome—Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca. It is true of the philosophical content in the great theological treatises of the Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas, for example, in his Prologue to the *Summa Theologica,* says that, since his work is intended for beginners (by which, to be sure, he means those who have at least acquired the liberal arts) as well as for those who have advanced along the road on which he is about to set forth, he has tried to write "as briefly and clearly as the matter itself may allow."

The same intention has been evident in such modern philosophers as Hobbes, Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and John Stuart Mill, though it is somewhat less clear in Spinoza. It remains the objective when we come to most of the eminent philosophers writing at the beginning of this century—William James, Henri Bergson, George Santayana, Bertrand Russell, and John Dewey.

The rise of specialization in philosophy first became apparent in the 1930s and it had become more and more intense in every decade since the Second World War. Contemplating the possibility of adding to *Great Books of the Western World* a supplementary set of books to be entitled *Great Books of the Twentieth Century,* not long ago I assembled an editorial committee to select works that might be included in such a set. After two years of conference we gave the project up because the intensity of specialization in all the intellectual disciplines, including history and philosophy as well as the sciences, has produced since 1925 or 1930 only technical monographs intended by one specialist for the attention of others in the same narrow field of specialization.

Like the great works of philosophy, the great works in science and

history written in earlier times were written for the generally educated reader—not an unread person but not a specialist either. This is as true of Gilbert, Newton, Galileo, Lavoisier, Faraday, and Darwin (in the natural sciences), of Tacitus and Gibbon (in history), as it is of Hobbes, Locke, and John Stuart Mill (in philosophy), and of William James and Sigmund Freud (in psychology).

When we abandoned the project of trying to publish a set of great books of the twentieth century, we reluctantly acquiesced in the gloomy conclusion that great books may still be forthcoming in the field of imaginative literature—poems, novels, and plays—but the likelihood of their being produced in the future in history, the sciences, and philosophy has dwindled almost to the vanishing point.

This is not to say that great original work of the highest merit will not be done in all these fields; but when such work is done, it will be communicated by one specialist to another in the form of a technical monograph or treatise intended only for that kind of reader, as a truly great book never is, and in my judgment cannot be.

The general reader (as I have defined him or her) must from now on depend on secondary lines of communication. Instead of becoming acquainted with the great original contributions in history, science, and philosophy through the reading of works written by the contributors themselves, such a reader must depend upon what have come to be called "popularizations." Sometimes, as in the case of three great twentieth-century physicists—Einstein, Heisenberg, and Schrödinger—the great contributor has attempted to write an account of his discoveries and theories for the general public, but there are few if any other examples of this since the earlier part of this century.

This suggests that in order for philosophical thought to be, in the twentieth century, what it has always been in the past and what it always should be, namely, everybody's business, the effort to make it accessible to the inquiring intelligence of ordinary men and women may have to resort to popularization. The way philosophy is now taught in our universities and the way it is now written by academic or professional philosophers (perhaps, it would be more accurate to refer to them not as philosophers but as professors of philosophy), render it inaccessible to all but a small number of students or readers who wish to become specialists themselves.

I say these things by way of a lengthy introduction to the two recent philosophical books I wish to consider here. Both are books written by professors of philosophy, well thought of by their professional colleagues. One book is *Philosophical Explanations,* by

Robert Nozick, of Harvard University. The other is *After Virtue,* by Alasdair MacIntyre, of Wellesley College. Both books, I am sorry to have to say, are failures, owing to the state to which philosophy has sunk in the twentieth century, although Nozick's, which I shall take up first, is in my judgment a much more egregious failure than MacIntyre's, which is not without its virtues.

Critics have praised Professor Nozick's book, calling it "a great work—marvelously inventive, deep, and profound," and, again, "an arresting, original, extremely brilliant work," as well as other distinguished things. Indeed, Professor MacIntyre himself, in a leading review in *The New York Times,* discussed the book with unstinting admiration, though in view of his own approach to moral philosophy he should, it seems to me, have been severely critical, at least of the nearly 200 pages that Professor Nozick devotes to the foundation of ethics.

Professor MacIntyre praised Professor Nozick's book for two other achievements as well, that would certainly make it noteworthy did it deserve such praise. He said Professor Nozick had succeeded in writing a philosophical work intended for the general reader as well as for his professional colleagues; and he said that, in this book, Professor Nozick had also introduced a new way of approaching philosophical questions. Neither of these things is true, however, as I will explain, taking them in order.

As to the first claim, that Professor Nozick has written a book for the general reader, let me quote Professor MacIntyre at length, because what he says makes clear his agreement, in part, with what I have said here myself about the current state of philosophy:

> Philosophers these days have every inducement to write only for one another. The conditions of academic appointment and reappointment coerce them when young into acquiring the style and idiom of the professional journal. Failure to publish in such journals generally spells professional disaster, while success generally produces a style of writing and a concentration upon topics inaccessible to the larger reading public. By so writing, philosophers reinforce the image of philosophy's irrelevance to the concerns of plain, practical people who in modern America tend anyway to believe that a hard-headed involvement in practical affairs precludes them from taking seriously what they perceive as the mere spinning of conceptual cobwebs. Thus the idiom of the mandarin and the prejudices of the philistine reinforce each other. It is unsurprising that philosophy has become ingrown, and that while John Stuart Mill and William James felt able to address the general educated public on the central problems of philosophy, Pro-

> fessor X now writes for Professor Y.
>
> There is good reason then to take notice when a first-rate philosopher writes an important book on these problems addressed simultaneously to his professional colleagues and to the common reader. When moreover the book is written in crisp, elegant prose and communicates its author's own excitement about both the problems and his solutions, as Robert Nozick's new book is and does, the common reader will be the poorer if he or she does not pay uncommon attention.

Now it is incomprehensible that Professor MacIntyre, having written the first of these two paragraphs, should then have thought it proper, or even possible, to write the second. For, in fact, nothing could be farther from the truth than what his second paragraph says. If it comes to that, Professor Nozick does not himself even *claim*, so far as I can find, to have addressed "the common reader," though if he somewhere makes that appear to be his intention, it is a promise that is not fulfilled. In view of what he has actually written, how could it be? For what he has written is a book of 700 pages that resorts frequently to a technical vocabulary and the symbolic devices of modern logic, that is accompanied by footnotes dealing with matters of no interest or intelligibility to the general reader. Nozick formulates arguments in the manner of twentieth-century linguistic and analytical philosophers who have no concern for their intelligibility outside their own circle. And that is followed, at the end of the text, by notes and comments clearly intended for just such other philosophers, Professor Nozick's colleagues.

None of this is appropriate for, or of any possible interest to, the "common reader" of whom Professor MacIntyre speaks. All of it makes clear that *Philosophical Explanations* is instead an esoteric work, which is *not* intended, as Professor Nozick explicitly allows, for the general reader. Nor is it easy to see why such readers should be expected to buy it for the substantial sum of $25.00, which is what it costs.

Another passage from Professor MacIntyre's review of the book not only indicates why the limited philosophical context within which Nozick's thinking moves made it impossible for him to write a book that might be intelligible to the general reader; it also makes the second of the two unfounded claims for the book with which I am concerned. Again, I quote at length because what Professor MacIntyre says is so revealing with regard to the limited frame of reference within which contemporary philosophers work:

> Many of the insights and arguments that Mr. Nozick puts to

such good use had their origin in highly technical discussions within the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind. Mr. Nozick helps to vindicate the importance of such discussions by the uses he finds for their conceptual end products, and in so doing he shows indirectly how Continental philosophers who have been explicitly concerned with human value and significance have too often presented us with impoverished and barren discussions on these great issues because they have neglected the more technical discussions of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. One way to characterize Mr. Nozick, not his own way, is as a philosopher who is answering the questions posed by such philosophers as Kierkegaard, Sartre, Marcel and Buber with the aid of tools produced by such very different philosophers as W. V. Quine, Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam.

There is however, one defect in this characterization. It does nothing to suggest Mr. Nozick's own striking and imaginative originality. For he does nothing less than propose a new way of doing philosophy. Philosophers since Heraclitus have sought truth. Since Plato they have supposed by and large that to possess truth was to possess absolutely certain knowledge. And from Euclid as well as from Plato they have for the most part inherited an ideal of proof as the only way of arriving at conclusions with the requisite degree and kind of certainty. Sometimes the barrenness of the search for demonstrative proof has turned them into skeptics who thought that because they could not discover the relevant proofs, they could have no well-grounded beliefs whatsoever. And occasionally the ideal of proof has itself been rejected more or less forcefully.

Mr. Nozick seeks to expel it from philosophy finally, replacing it by the notion of explanation. A philosophical explanation is an account that enables us to understand how certain things are possible, given other beliefs or suppositions. It answers questions such as: How is free will possible, if all human actions are causally determined? Or how is it possible for subjective experiences of thinking, feeling and perceiving to find a place in the objective physical world? The adherents of proof, as Mr. Nozick portrays them, aspired to find the one exclusively true and adequate answer to such questions. But the adherents of explanation will reject this attempt at victory for any one particular philosophy over all the others.

So Mr. Nozick asserts: "There are various philosophical views, mutually incompatible, which cannot be dismissed or simply rejected. Philosophy's output is the basketful of these

> admissible views, all together. One delimiting strategy would be to modify and shave these views, capturing what is true in each, to make them compatible parts of one new view. While I know of no reason in principle why this cannot be done, neither has anyone yet done it satisfactorily … . Are we reduced to relativism then, the doctrine that all views are equally good? No, some views can be rejected, and the admissible ones remaining will differ in merits and adequacy … . Even when one view is clearly best, though, we do not keep only this first-ranked view, rejecting all the others." For, in Mr. Nozick's account, we ought to be able to learn from the second- and third-ranked views, and indeed in time we might well come to change the order of the ranking.

Once more I remark that it is, if not incomprehensible, then at least very strange that Professor MacIntyre having described twentieth-century philosophy in these altogether justified terms, should then have found in Nozick himself a "striking and imaginative originality," amounting to nothing less than "a new way of doing philosophy."

What is strange about this is that Professor MacIntyre's own book makes it clear that he is himself much better read in the great tradition against which claims of philosophical originality must be measured than is Professor Nozick, whose frame of reference is largely, if not exclusively, provided by European existentialists and Anglo-American analytical and linguistic philosophers since 1945. That is hardly a large enough framework in which to do the job that MacIntyre tells us Nozick has attempted to do. If Nozick's aim is to present "the basketful of admissible views" relevant to major philosophical questions, then what he calls "philosophy's output" should have included an inventory of the thought of ancient and medieval philosophers, and of modern philosophers prior to the Second World War, carefully and conscientiously examined, at least to the same extent that Nozick's book examines the thought of his own contemporaries.

One need only check "the index to people mentioned" and the lengthy notes appended at the end of the book to discover that a great many philosophers who have propounded significant answers to the questions Nozick considers are either not mentioned at all (none of the great thinkers in the long period between Augustine and Aquinas is even cited, though in almost every case their views are highly relevant, and in most cases have greater merit than the views treated by Nozick); or, if such ancient philosophers as Aristotle and Plato are cited here and there, my examination of the passage in such of their works as Nozick refers to shows an inadequate reading of them and an even more inadequate understanding

of their thought.

That Professor MacIntyre found it possible to praise a book so deficient in its examination of the whole range of philosophical thought is all the more surprising in the light of his own book, *After Virtue,* in which, dealing with one of the major questions treated by Nozick, the question about the foundations of ethics, he himself covers that whole range of thought, most of which Nozick ignores or neglects.

One wonders about Nozick's own philosophical education at Harvard University, where he earned a doctorate and a position in the Philosophy Department; and perhaps one should also wonder about the standards of scholarship set by the philosophy department of a great university. It would certainly appear to be the case that one can become an eminent professor of philosophy in the contemporary scene even if one plainly exhibits ignorance or, what is even worse, disdainful neglect of one's predecessors prior to 1945. That the new turn philosophy took in the latter part of this century justifies ignorance or neglect of the great body of earlier thought is an outrageous and unwarranted assumption.

I turn now to the novelty or innovative feature that MacIntyre attributes to Nozick's book when he speaks of it as having "striking and imaginative originality" and as proposing "a new way of doing philosophy." I will try to explain why it is not only far from being a "new way," but also that, even if it were a new way, it would not be a new way of "doing philosophy."

To do this, I must call attention to Nozick's use of the word *explanation,* which appears in the title of his book. He uses that word as if it *always* connoted the opposite of a proof or demonstration, the opposite of an argument that has some degree of probative force, even if the conclusion established thereby has something less than certitude, which is the case with almost all philosophical arguments.

Nozick's reason for distinguishing between explanation and proof, or probative argument, is that he wishes to avoid making judgments that assert a particular philosophical view to be true, and opposite views false, or that assert that one particular view is truer than another. This, however, is precisely what a philosopher should do.

A survey of all relevant, diverse or incompatible, views about a given subject, without any consideration of which are true and which are false, or which is truer than another, is a dialectical, *not* a philosophical, undertaking. I will presently explain this distinc-

tion between being a dialectician and being a philosopher, but before I do so, let me comment on the distinction between explanation and argument having some degree of probative force.

If a philosophical proposition is self-evidently and necessarily true, because it is impossible to think the opposite, then its truth needs no explanation. Indeed, its truth, being self-evident, cannot be explained, since it rests on no reasons or premises antecedent to itself.

Hence all explanations must occur in the domain of things that either *are* known to be true or are thought of *as capable of being* true, i.e., are *possible,* truths. Only in the case of things already known to be true in the light of evidence and reasons, about which we then ask *why* they are true, do explanations differ from probative arguments that marshal evidence and reasons.

To know *that* something is true differs from knowing *why* it is true. Knowing *that* it is true depends on evidence and reasons that have some degree of probative force with respect so truth. Knowing *why* it is true depends upon being able to explain the truth of what is judged to be true on independent grounds.

When we come to the realm of the merely possible (distinct, on the one hand, from the necessary and the impossible and distinct, on the other hand, from the actual), there is no difference whatsoever between explanation and probative argument. As we have just seen, in the domain of the actual (where we judge that something is true or fake, or truer than something else), probative argument precedes explanation and is independent of it. But in the realm of the merely possible (where we judge that something *may be* true and, perforce, must concede that views incompatible with it *may also be* true), an effort to explain why we think a certain view *may be* true is identical with giving a probative argument for its possible truth.

This being so, we can now properly understand the project that Nozick set for himself by dealing with what he calls "philosophical explanations." The project is an attempt to present an inventory of views arguing for, and thus explaining, philosophical possibilities—views that may or may not be true—without attempting to determine whether they are actually true; in short, an examination of all relevant points of view, without taking any of them as one's own or defending one against another.

A project of this sort, well-executed, would obviously be of some service to progress in philosophical thought, since it would provide anyone who wanted to think originally about a given subject with the background needed for that effort. But when it is thus under-

stood, Nozick's project is not in any way novel, or a new departure, except for those who are ignorant of what was proposed much earlier in this century and ignorant of what has already been done along these very lines. I must be personal in this connection, though I hasten to acknowledge that my contribution to such work owes its inception to the late Professor Arthur O. Lovejoy.

In his Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association in 1916, Professor Lovejoy discussed the conditions of progress in philosophy and proposed the project of a careful and thorough inventory of the fundamental philosophical issues (or the questions to which there are a range of diverse or incompatible answers), together with a setting forth of all these possible answers in a way that indicated their relationship to one another, without trying to assess the truth of any one view in relation to the truth of other views in answer to the same question.

That paper by Professor Lovejoy, published in the Proceedings of the Association in 1917, became, some years after I first read it in the early twenties, the inspiration that led me to propose the establishment of a special research institute to undertake the dialectical project that Professor Lovejoy had in mind.

My proposal was accompanied by extensive quotations from Professor Lovejoy's extraordinary paper. It succeeded in 1952 in getting the financing needed to establish the Institute for Philosophical Research, staffed by a group of collaborative workers who cooperated in the production of a number of purely dialectical books, the first of which was two volumes of *The Idea of Freedom,* published in 1958 and in 1962. Professor Lovejoy, by the way, had explicitly insisted that while purely philosophical work can be done by a solitary thinker, the dialectical enterprise he had in mind required the cooperative work of a group of collaborators.

With this experience in mind, I feel justified in making the following observations about Nozick's book:

(1) There is nothing at all novel or innovative about it. Nozick himself, if not MacIntyre, could have realized this, because he himself refers to *The Idea of Freedom,* which he cannot, however, have read very carefully. If he had, he would have found that Book I of *The Idea of Freedom* not only cites Lovejoy's 1917 paper and quotes from it, and also outlines in detail the nature of the dialectical project; in addition, it explains the distinction between the philosophical and the dialectical task.

Philosophers engaged in solitary thought have the obligation to make judgments about the true or truer answers to any question

they consider. If they do not discharge that obligation, they are not philosophers. Dialecticians working collaboratively or cooperatively have the obligation to bring to light all the possible answers to a given question and to examine the arguments for those possible answers that constitute the explanation of their possible truth.

The Institute, of which I have been the Director since 1952, should have been called "The Institute for Dialectical Research" (a point explicitly made in the General Introduction to *The Idea of Freedom*); and the title of Nozick's book would have been more accurate, though doubtless very cumbersome, if it had been "A Dialectical Examination of Philosophical Explanations."

(2) If Nozick had fully understood the nature of his project, he might have realized that he could not execute it by himself—that it required, as the dialectical projects undertaken by the Institute have required, a group of collaborative workers. It is almost impossible for a single person to examine all the relevant philosophical answers given to important philosophical questions over the last twenty-five centuries and to do so with the requisite dialectical neutrality, avoiding favoritism or partiality in the way in which they are set forth and related.

(3) Nozick's failure to understand the dialectical nature of his project and the requisites for carrying it out adequately and fairly are responsible for the inadequacy of its execution, a judgment that I think would be made by anyone who did not make the assumption that philosophical thought about the various subjects covered in this book began in 1945, or even as late as the seventeenth century.

Let me be clear. Even if Nozick's book is not a book for the general reader, as a dialectical work tends not to be, and even if its claim to be a novel and innovative approach to philosophy is without foundation, it still might have been a good book, a worthy dialectical effort. It is not, mainly because of the narrow context or relatively small frame of reference in which Nozick carried on the operation—mainly that of twentieth-century philosophy, and even there only some portion of it.

The questions with which Professor Nozick deals are important philosophical questions: Wherein lies the identity of the self (or for that matter of any individual substance)? Why is there something rather than nothing? How can our claim to know be defended against the skeptic? Do we have free will? What are the foundations of ethics? I omit mention of his final section on "the meaning of life," because I do not think that that loose phrase is associated with any genuine philosophical questions, despite the fact that Professor MacIntyre advises the nonprofessional reader to begin with

the book's last chapter.

To all these good questions, there are many possible answers, together with good arguments to support or explain them—many more than Nozick includes in his survey, many more than he appears to be aware of.

Let me give just three examples:

(1) With regard to the question of why something exists rather than nothing, Nozick mentions in a footnote that Leibniz explicitly raised this question, but he does not discuss Leibniz's answer to it; nor does he consider all the answers given to that question in the realm of philosophical theology, not only in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, but also in modern times.

(2) With regard to the question whether we have free will, Nozick's coverage of the possible answers and of the controversy that revolves around that question is even more inadequate and its inadequacy is even stranger. As I said earlier, footnote references indicate that he was aware of the existence of the second volume of *The Idea of Freedom,* in which more than four hundred pages are devoted to a dialectical survey and examination of the diverse affirmative answers to the question, and the incompatible negative answers to it. This range of answers can be read as explanations of the possible truth that free will exists and of the possible truth that it does not exist.

The hundred pages on free will in Nozick's book ignore or neglect most of these answers, especially the most important ones, which were formulated in the Middle Ages and have been lost to modern thought because of its ignorance of that period. Yet, in this case, the dialectical work was already done for him. All he had to do to take advantage of it was to read carefully and with an open—a truly dialectical—mind those four hundred pages in Volume II of *The Idea of Freedom*. This he obviously did not do.

(3) With regard to the question about the foundations of ethics, we find the same inadequate coverage of the possible answers; and here once more there is the same strangeness about the inadequacy. Nozick's footnote references indicate that he was aware of at least one argument, my own, to the effect that Aristotle, and only Aristotle, had correctly laid the foundations for moral philosophy—for the treatment of such values as the good and the right—showing at the same time why the other major answers to the question failed where Aristotle succeeded. But Nozick does not make use of this argument where he stands in need of it.

So much for Professor Nozick and *Philosophical Explanations*. What I have just said about the unique status of Aristotle's *Ethics* in the field of moral philosophy (that it is the only sound, practical, and undogmatic moral philosophy in the whole Western tradition) is a view that is shared to some extent, but not wholly, by Professor MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue,* to which I now turn. I will try to explain why I do not agree with his less than complete recommendation of Aristotle's *Ethics* as the one sound approach to that subject.

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Robert Nozick (1938-2002) was an American philosopher and Pellegrino University Professor at Harvard University. Nozick, schooled at Columbia and Princeton, was among the leading figures in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, making significant contributions to almost every major area of philosophy. His *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974) was a libertarian answer to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971. He was married to the American poet Gjertrud Schnackenberg.

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