



The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society

Nozick, Robert



Key Concepts: Role of the State, Rights of the Individual
Specific Arguments: Minimal Role of State, Libertarianism



Influential Work: *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974)

Robert NOZICK

(1938 to 2002)



Nozick in Context

Nozick is widely regarded as one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century.

First and foremost, Nozick was a **libertarian** – a proponent of the belief that the less a government intervened in the lives of its citizens, the better. Second, he fervently **opposed welfare state policies**, believing them to be on par with theft. Finally, Nozick took a **rights based approach** to political philosophy and he evoked (and cited) John Locke as a significant influence.

John Rawls and Justice

The academic antagonism that existed between his work and that of his fellow Harvard professor, **John Rawls**, is central to understanding his argument.

Nozick's most notable work *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974) emerged to directly challenge the assertions made by his colleague John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

In the above, Rawls outlined his belief that justice is founded upon two principles. He advocated the importance of **fairness** in distributing

amenities and opportunities. He put forward the idea of social and natural lotteries. The **social lottery**, he believed, was the lottery of birth: the circumstances one is born into varies greatly across the world. Thus, some people benefit from social privilege while others suffer disadvantage. This, he believes is unfair and must be addressed. The **natural lottery**, Rawls argues, is quite similar, and concerns issues such as physicality and intelligence, favourable aspects in the human condition which are, again, randomly allocated to people at birth.

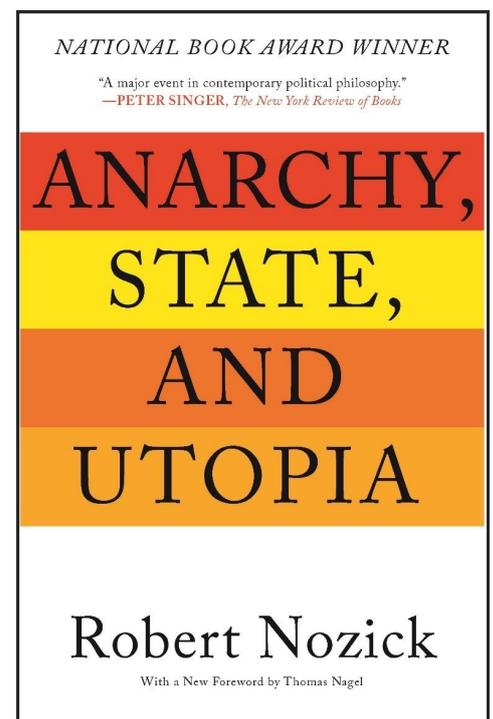
Rawls sought to overcome these injustices through the two principles of justice:

The First Principle of Justice

'Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others'

The Second Principle of Justice

- 1) Social and economic inequalities are to be addressed in a manner that benefits the least well off.
- 2) Society should provide fair and equal opportunity for all and social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are of greatest benefit to the least advantaged. Here, Rawls introduces the **difference principle**: a belief that inequality is only permitted when it addresses and favours the needs of the least well off. So he argued for the redistribution of wealth where it benefitted the least well off.



Nozick and the minimal state

Like Locke, Nozick asserts that the individual has certain inalienable rights, namely liberty, life, justice, and property. However, as these cannot be protected by anarchy or a state of nature, Nozick acknowledged the need for a state but he was very keen to curtail its role.

Starting from Locke's state of nature, Nozick argues that it is inevitable for individuals to try to improve their lot, and when this occurs, they invariably arrive at the point of a **minimal state**. He calls this the **'invisible hand' principle**. This minimal state, Nozick argues has legitimate grounds for providing only the most basic of amenities: namely **law and order**, and their ancillaries of police, army, judiciary, etc. These are necessary for the protection of an individual's life, well-being, and property.

In the minimal state, these are the only services for which an individual can be taxed, as they are a necessity to maintain order. Nozick did not believe it was legitimate to demand taxes for other purposes. Furthermore the state should not concern itself with redistributing wealth or interfere with the individual's right to own property/wealth. Within this state, the individual is free to practice free exchange of goods and services without the interference of the state so long as these properties have been justifiably and legitimately attained.

Thus, for Nozick, the minimal state is the only justification of a state.

Nozick and the rights of the individual

Imperative to Nozick's interpretation of the right of the individual is property. Rights based reasoning was central to his arguments with regard to the individual. It is argued that his reasoning comes from an individualist rights tradition, and this is quite clear when considering Nozick's hostility toward taxation, wealth distribution, and the welfare state. Wealth belongs to individuals in Nozick's view. If the state taxes earnings in order to redistribute them, this is really in engaging in a kind of *'forced labour'*, because individuals are forced to spend some of their time working to pay the government.

Opposing Rawls' two principles of justice (most emphatically the latter), Nozick argues that talk about *'distributive justice'* is inherently misleading, because it seems to imply that there is some central authority who distributes to individuals shares of wealth and income that pre-exist the distribution, as if they had appeared like *'manna from heaven'*.

He roundly criticises anything relating to Marxism or wealth redistribution and regards such practices as a 'lack of understanding' of economics.



'Our main conclusions about the state are that a minimal state, limited, to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on, is justified, but any more extensive state will violate persons' rights not to be forced to do certain things, and is unjustified; and that the minimal state is inspiring as well as right'.

Robert Nozick

Utopia

Nozick argues that a minimal state constitutes a kind of *utopia*. For, among all models of political order, it alone makes possible the attempt to realize *every* person's and group's vision of the good society. If some individuals or groups want to live according to socialist or egalitarian principles, they are free to do so as far as Nozick is concerned; indeed, they may even establish a community, of whatever size, within the boundaries of the minimal state, and require that everyone who comes to live within it must agree to have a portion of his wealth redistributed. All they are forbidden from doing is *forcing* people to join or contribute to the establishment of such a community who do not want to do so.

The minimal state thus provides an overarching system within which any number of social, moral, and religious utopian visions may be realized. It thereby provides a way for people even of radically opposed points of view - socialists and capitalists, liberals and conservatives, atheists and religious believers, whether Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus - to develop different ways of living in communities, while living side by side in peace.

In summary

- Nozick's work arose as a challenge to the work of John Rawls
- Rawls believed it was just to redistribute wealth in the interests of those who were the least well off. He justified this under his 'two principles of justice'
- Nozick disagreed and believed that only a minimal state was justified
- The role of the minimal state was to protect the natural rights of the individual (including property)
- Nozick was critical of taxation, wealth redistribution and welfare as he believed these impinged on the rights of the individual

Material Consulted

Heywood, A. (2007) *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wolff, J. (1991) *Robert Nozick: Property, Justice, and the Minimal State*. Oxford: OUP

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://www.iep.utm.edu/nozick>



'Utopia is a framework for utopias, a place where people are at liberty to join together voluntarily to pursue and attempt to realize their own vision of the good life in the ideal community but where no one can impose his own utopian vision upon others'.

Robert Nozick