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MAJOR CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERTARIAN THINKERS

EDITED BY JOHN MCDONCKOTT

ROBERT NOZICK

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Robert Nozick

Ralf M. Bader



Major Conservative and
Libertarian Thinkers

Series Editor: John Meadowcroft

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Robert Nozick

The *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* series aims to show that there is a rigorous, scholarly tradition of social and political thought that may be broadly described as 'conservative', 'libertarian' or some combination of the two.

The series aims to show that conservatism is not simply a reaction against contemporary events, nor a privileging of intuitive thought over deductive reasoning; libertarianism is not simply an apology for unfettered capitalism or an attempt to justify a misguided atomistic concept of the individual. Rather, the thinkers in this series have developed coherent intellectual positions that are grounded in empirical reality and also founded upon serious philosophical reflection on the relationship between the individual and society, how the social institutions necessary for a free society are to be established and maintained, and the implications of the limits to human knowledge and certainty.

Each volume in the series presents a thinker's ideas in an accessible and cogent manner to provide an indispensable work for both students with varying degrees of familiarity with the topic as well as more advanced scholars.

The following 20 volumes that make up the entire *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* series are written by international scholars and experts:

<i>The Salamanca School</i>	Andre Azevedo Alves and José Manuel Moreira
<i>Thomas Hobbes</i>	R. E. R. Bunce
<i>John Locke</i>	Eric Mack
<i>David Hume</i>	Christopher J. Berry
<i>Adam Smith</i>	James Otteson
<i>Edmund Burke</i>	Dennis O'Keeffe
<i>Alexis de Tocqueville</i>	Alan S. Kahan
<i>Herbert Spencer</i>	Alberto Mingardi
<i>Ludwig von Mises</i>	Richard Ebeling
<i>Joseph A. Schumpeter</i>	John Medearis

<i>F. A. Hayek</i>	Adam Tebble
<i>Michael Oakeshott</i>	Edmund Neill
<i>Karl Popper</i>	Philip Parvin
<i>Ayn Rand</i>	Mimi Gladstein
<i>Milton Friedman</i>	William Ruger
<i>Russell Kirk</i>	John Pafford
<i>James M. Buchanan</i>	John Meadowcroft
<i>The Modern Papacy</i>	Samuel Gregg
<i>Murray Rothbard</i>	Gerard Casey
<i>Robert Nozick</i>	Ralf Bader

Of course, in any series of this nature, choices have to be made as to which thinkers to include and which to leave out. Two of the thinkers in the series – F. A. Hayek and James M. Buchanan – have written explicit statements rejecting the label ‘conservative’. Similarly, other thinkers, such as David Hume and Karl Popper, may be more accurately described as classical liberals than either conservatives or libertarians. However, these thinkers have been included because a full appreciation of this particular tradition of thought would be impossible without their inclusion; conservative and libertarian thought cannot be fully understood without some knowledge of the intellectual contributions of Hume, Hayek, Popper and Buchanan, among others. Although no list of conservative and libertarian thinkers can be perfect, it is hoped that the volumes in this series come as close as possible to providing a comprehensive account of the key contributors to this particular tradition.

John Meadowcroft
King’s College London

To my brother

Series Editor's Preface

In the second half of the twentieth century libertarian and conservative ideas enjoyed an enormous resurgence. The fact that twelve of the twenty subjects in this series published their major works after 1940 is evidence of this revival. No thinker contributed more to this development than the Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick. Nozick's book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* moved libertarianism from a relatively neglected subset of political philosophy to the centre of the discipline as one of the most cogent critiques of social democracy and egalitarian liberalism. Indeed, the publication of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* in 1974, along with the publication of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, is widely credited with revitalizing the discipline of political theory which many scholars felt had become stale and largely detached from real world concerns of policy and politics.

In this outstanding volume Ralf M. Bader of the University of St Andrews shows why Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* proved to be so important and so influential. In *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Nozick developed a rights-based account of libertarianism to show that a minimal state can legitimately arise, that nothing more than a minimal state is justified, and that the minimal state is not only morally right but can also be an inspiring 'meta-utopia'. It was in particular the second part of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*,

written as a response to Rawls' similarly groundbreaking *A Theory of Justice*, that turned out to have a lasting impact on political philosophy. There, Nozick argued that justice could only ever be procedural and any attempt to achieve a particular pattern of distribution must infringe people's basic rights to dispose of their justly-acquired resources as they saw fit. Nozick used the memorable example of the wealth acquired by the basketball player Wilt Chamberlain in a fictional scenario to illustrate his 'entitlement theory of justice', showing how Chamberlain had acquired his wealth via a series of just steps and that therefore his new wealth (and the new overall distribution of wealth) must be considered just.

By setting out Nozick's thought in an extremely lucid and accessible manner, this volume makes a crucial contribution to the *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* series. It presents Nozick's contributions to political philosophy in the context of his work in analytical philosophy. It also provides a biography of Nozick and considers the initial reception and long-term influence of his work. Certainly no account of libertarian thought would be complete without a thorough treatment of the contribution made by Nozick. This volume will prove indispensable to those relatively unfamiliar with Nozick's work as well as more advanced scholars.

John Meadowcroft
King's College London

Note on Citation

Unless otherwise indicated, all citations refer to Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Nozick: 1974).

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Biography

Nozick's life

Robert Nozick was born on 16 November 1938 in Brooklyn, the son of a Russian Jewish immigrant family. He became interested in philosophy as an undergraduate at Columbia. In particular, it was as a result of taking an introductory course on Western Civilization by Sydney Morgenbesser that Nozick began to be seriously engaged with philosophy. Morgenbesser was a highly respected philosopher who was well known for his wit and sharp criticism. He did not publish very much, but had a huge impact on his students. Nozick was fascinated by Sydney Morgenbesser and greatly admired his skill in finding problems and dealing with philosophical issues. Nozick attended as many courses by Morgenbesser as possible and described his degree as a 'major in Morgenbesser'.

After completing his degree at Columbia in 1959, Nozick went to Princeton for graduate studies. There, he received his M.A. in 1961 and completed his Ph.D. in 1963 under the supervision of Carl Hempel. Hempel was a famous German philosopher of science and an important advocate of logical empiricism. Nozick's dissertation, *The Normative Theory of Individual Choice*, is a technical work which deals with issues about the rationality of theory

choice in science. The dissertation is much inspired by Hempel's work on explanation and scientific theories. Later on, Nozick would return to some of these themes in his book *The Nature of Rationality*.

From 1963 to 1965, Nozick taught at Princeton as an assistant professor. He then moved to Harvard where he stayed for two years, followed by two years of teaching as an associate professor at Rockefeller University from 1967 to 1969. After his short stay at Rockefeller, Nozick returned to Harvard to become a full professor in 1969, at the age of 30, where he remained for the rest of his life. He was the chair of the Philosophy Department from 1981 to 1984. In 1985 he was awarded the Arthur Kingsley Porter Professorship of Philosophy and in 1998 he was named Joseph Pellegrino University Professor.

Nozick acquired fame through the publication of his masterpiece *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* in 1974. In this book, Nozick advances his libertarian political and moral theory. Together with John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, it constitutes a keystone of twentieth-century political philosophy that was crucial to the revival of the discipline. His work made libertarianism respectable and helped to set the agenda for political theory up to the present day. It has generated much discussion and has been taken seriously by a broad range of thinkers.

Early on Nozick was a committed socialist. At school, he joined Norman Thomas's Socialist Party. While an undergraduate at Columbia, he founded the local chapter of the Student League for Industrial Democracy (which would later change its name to Students for a Democratic Society). Growing up, he had simply taken socialism for granted and was never confronted with well-worked out arguments in favour of capitalism. It was only after starting

graduate studies at Princeton that he was introduced to pro-capitalist ideas. In particular, arguments with his friend Bruce Goldberg had familiarized him with libertarian theory. An important catalyst in his shift towards libertarian political philosophy was a conversation with Murray Rothbard around 1968 (cf. p. xv). Goldberg invited him along to a meeting of the Circle Bastiat, where Nozick's discussion with Rothbard made him realize the strength of libertarianism and the importance of the anarchist's challenge to the idea that states can be legitimate.

Initially, he wanted to refute libertarian views. Yet, ultimately he was convinced by the arguments, becoming a libertarian with reluctance. Many of the considerations and arguments that led to this change are presented in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. The book was mostly written while Nozick was a fellow at the Center for the Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences at Palo Alto in 1971–1972. While in Stanford, he intended to work on the problem of free will and he describes *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* as 'an accident' (Nozick: 1997, p. 1).

Part I of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* arose out of a talk given to a Stanford student group in which Nozick presented some thoughts on how a state would arise out of the state of nature. The first part tries to take up the anarchist's challenge by showing that it is possible for a state to arise in a legitimate way. Part II is the result of a series of lectures given at Harvard as part of a course entitled 'Capitalism and Socialism' that Nozick co-taught with Michael Walzer. In this part, Nozick develops his entitlement theory of justice and criticizes his colleague John Rawls, responding to his book *A Theory of Justice* which was published in 1971. Nozick tries to draw the boundaries of legitimate state action, by arguing that considerations regarding

justice do not warrant any extension of the state beyond the minimal state. Part III is based on an essay on utopia that was presented at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association. In this part, Nozick sketches a libertarian utopia, whereby the utopia amounts to a framework for utopia, that is, a framework in which people can pursue their own utopias.

Anarchy, State, and Utopia was awarded the National Book Award in 1975 and is widely acclaimed as one of the most important contributions to political philosophy in the twentieth century. The Times Literary Supplement named it as one of 'The Hundred Most Influential Books Since the War'. Nozick's theories have been subjected to much criticism and a huge amount of secondary literature has been generated. Nozick never responded to any of the criticisms on the basis that he 'did not want to spend my life writing "The Son of Anarchy, State, and Utopia," "The Return of the Son of . . .," etc. I had other philosophical questions to think about' (Nozick: 1997, p. 2).

These other questions were concerned with more abstract philosophical issues, which he discusses in his book *Philosophical Explanations*, published in 1981. This book was Nozick's next big project. It was awarded the Ralph Waldo Emerson Award of Phi Beta Kappa. Again, Nozick managed to produce a wide-ranging and fascinating book that has had an important impact on the philosophical landscape. In particular, his truth-tracking theory of knowledge and his closest-continuer account of personal identity have created large secondary literatures and have been reprinted in many anthologies and collections.

Philosophical Explanations is divided into three main sections: Metaphysics, Epistemology and Value. In the Introduction, Nozick sets out his characteristic philosophical methodology. For him, philosophy should not primarily

be concerned with arguments that are aimed at proving a particular thesis. Philosophers should not focus on convincing opponents of the theory, but rather be concerned with the exploration of conceptual connections, as well as with explanations of how things can be possible. In Part I, Nozick tackles some of the fundamental problems of metaphysics, including the question why there is something rather than nothing. He also proposes his influential closest-continuer approach for dealing with problems of personal identity. In Part II, he is concerned with epistemology and puts forward his famous truth-tracking account of knowledge and his discussion of scepticism. Part III is based on the theme of value, which includes discussions of free will, the foundations of ethics and the meaning of life.

The Examined Life was published in 1989. This is an accessible, popular, non-technical and wide-ranging book that is concerned with the meaning of life. Nozick discusses a broad range of issues, such as politics, happiness, love, reality, democracy and meaning. As we will see later on, in this book Nozick distances himself from the extreme form of libertarianism that he had espoused in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.

His next book, *The Nature of Rationality*, was published in 1993. It incorporates his Tanner Lectures on Human Values, entitled 'Decisions of Principle, Principles of Decision', that Nozick gave at Princeton University in 1991. It is a technical work that focuses on rational choice theory, decision theory and game theory. In this book, Nozick provides the canonical form of Newcomb's Problem which he had already discussed in his Ph.D. dissertation and which had a significant influence on decision theory. It also includes an important discussion of symbolic value that influenced his approach to political philosophy. It was

as a result of thinking about decision theory that Nozick would come to appreciate the symbolic value of certain political actions, such as outlawing voluntary slavery, which then served to moderate his libertarianism.

In 1997 a collection of essays was published under the title *Socratic Puzzles*. These essays cover a broad range of topics, including discussions of coercion, Austrian methodology, moral structures, Newcomb's Problem, animal rights, as well as philosophical fiction.

In the spring of 1997 he delivered the prestigious John Locke lectures at Oxford University. The title of his lecture series was 'Invariance and Objectivity'. This was later to become the core of his final book *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World*, which was published in 2001. This is a technical and specialized book that deals with questions about objectivity and truth. More precisely, Nozick provides a discussion of relativism about truth, an account of objectivity as invariance under various transformations, a sceptical discussion of necessary truths, as well as an evolutionary account of consciousness and ethics. The book includes a number of discussions of recent scientific theories and discoveries, in particular of quantum mechanics. A reviewer in *The Economist* nicely described the experience of reading this book as feeling 'like a social chess player accompanying a grandmaster down the tables at a simultaneous display, struggling to follow each game while listening to him explain how chess would work in six dimensions'.

During his career, Nozick received many academic honours. He was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a member of the Council of Scholars of the Library of Congress, a corresponding fellow of the British Academy and a senior fellow of the Society of Fellows at