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Key Thinkers in Practical Philosophy: Robert Nozick

Stan van Hooft

Robert Nozick died on January 23rd, 2002 while this brief essay was in preparation. Perhaps it may serve as a testimonial to him.

Although Nozick may not come immediately to mind as one thinks of 'Key Thinkers in Practical Philosophy', his book, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1989) addresses the sorts of issues that practical philosophers are concerned with. Although he urges towards the end of his book that we should not attempt to summarise it since doing so would lead too readily to vulgarising his theses, I will attempt in what follows to indicate how this book might be used by practical philosophers and, especially, philosophical counsellors.

The book might be useful in either of two ways. It could be a text which non-professional philosophers or lay people could read for their edification or inspiration, or it could be a scholarly text intended to raise the kinds of issues that are likely to be discussed in philosophical counselling sessions: issues about the meaning of life and the significance of key events or problems that arise in life.

Nozick certainly wants his book to be relevant to a broader range of issues than is typical of professional philosophy. He addresses questions that are broadly existential in nature and he does so with a minimum of scholarly apparatus. He meditates on human relationships, on religion, on metaphysics, on parenting, on ethics, on wisdom, on happiness, and on the life of philosophy. His thinking is deeply informed by the western philosophical tradition but without making a display of that scholarship. And yet he employs a style of writing that is very familiar in contemporary Anglo-American academic philosophy. There is a use of abstruse thought experiments and science fiction scenarios, there is a fondness for the rationalistic language of economic theory, and there is frequent use of mathematical models to illustrate ideas. Moreover, Nozick does not illustrate his points with reference to real life examples as often as he might. As a result, his text

would be a difficult read for the average lay person. While there are a number of meditations that clients of counselling could be given to study and discuss with their counsellor, the book as a whole remains a work of professional academic philosophy.

To illustrate the richness of his individual meditations, I offer a few remarks on his piece on sexuality. This meditation is marked by a rich phenomenological description of the experience of one's own body and the body of the other in sex. Nozick evokes the feelings of exploration and risk that is involved, as well as the deep levels of communication that are laid open. He describes the heightened forms of attention to the other that allow an orgasm to be a statement rather than just a pleasurable physical event enjoyed within oneself. Sex is just one of the several phenomena which contribute to what Nozick calls the 'holiness of life'.

While many of the chapters stand alone as complete meditations on a theme, a central set of them develops a thesis of remarkable richness and complexity which takes a number of meditations to expound. This thesis develops an idea which Nozick has put forward in his book *Philosophical Explanations*: namely, that being happy, in the sense of undergoing pleasurable experiences, is not enough for the living of a fulfilling human life. He has illustrated this by envisioning an 'experience machine' that could deliver pleasurable experiences that might be illusory. Would such a machine make its beneficiary happy? Nozick argues that it would not because we want our experiences to bring us into contact with reality rather than merely being pleasurable. The central meditations of this book explore what this notion of 'contact with reality' amounts to, what 'reality' is, and how it makes our own lives more real. While some of Nozick's suggestions are somewhat schematic and in need of further exposition, they are certainly highly suggestive. Once again, however, I would suggest that philosophical counsellors might study them in order to enrich their own thinking and practice rather than transmit them directly to clients.

At the risk of not honouring his own strictures against summarising him, here are a series of 'reality principles' which Nozick puts forward to expand on his central thesis that only contact with reality can make us happy:

1. Freud's Reality Principle: that one should delay or avoid certain pleasures in order to escape painful consequences or in order to gain greater pleasure later. (p. 102)

2. 'To focus on external reality, with your beliefs, evaluations, and emotions, is valuable *in itself*, not just as a means to more pleasure and happiness.' (p. 106)

3. 'Just as our feelings should be proportionate to our evaluations when our attention is focused, so too in the focusing we should pay attention to the things around us in proportion to their importance.' (p. 119). Notice that the judgements that are required to put this principle into effect are philosophical in nature and help us to understand what the relevance of philosophy is to the living of life. Philosophers ask, What is the basis of the importance of things? How do we define the proportionality between that importance and our responses to it?

4. Be more real (p.132), where 'reality is a general notion that encompasses value, beauty, vividness, focus, integration' (p. 137).

5. Connect with actuality in a way that has some impact on it (p. 171). Nozick acknowledges that this principle raises the issue of what sort of impact is ethically worthy. One can have destructive impact as well as positive impact.

6. Become a vessel of light (p. 215). It is impossible to explicate this principle without offering a full exposition of Nozick's ideas. Suffice it to say that the metaphor of light is used to indicate how a person's ethical stance transmits itself to others through mutual responsiveness so as to constitute an interpersonal world of goodness, truth, beauty, and holiness. 'Light cannot be separated from its shining' as Nozick puts it in a phrase that will bring Heidegger to mind (p. 214). This notion connects with his ideas on reality as a value admitting of degrees rather than being mere brute substance or unknowable *noumenon*. It also solves the ethical problems raised by his fifth principle since the impact on reality of a 'vehicle of light' cannot but be ethically positive.

7. Connect to the very highest and deepest reality (p. 258). Although this steers Nozick towards theology, he

rejects a metaphysically realist conception of such reality preferring the poetic and somewhat Platonic vision of light and goodness.

8. Be connected with and fully responsive to all of reality, not only the deepest and highest (p. 258). This principle is the antidote to the Platonic rejection of ordinary reality which some may think is implied by principle seven.

This mere sketch may serve to give us a glimpse both of the interest and the difficulty of Nozick's ideas. Along the way we get fascinating insights on a large range of issues including death, wisdom, the holocaust, and politics. (Nozick rejects his earlier libertarian views, published in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, in favour of a conception of politics as the expression of the concerns of a people so as to legitimise welfare and other community-centred policies.) I would suggest that this is a book that counsellors and other philosophical practitioners should read and learn from. Some of the more self-contained meditations may be recommended to clients to read, but the central thesis is more likely to inform the counsellor's practice than inspire immediate understanding and response in clients.

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