

Robert Nozick, 1938-2002.

(Originally appeared in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, November 2002: Volume 76, Issue 2.)

Robert Nozick, Pellegrino University Professor at Harvard University, died on January 23rd, 2002, following a long and courageous battle against stomach cancer.

Professor Nozick was born in Brooklyn on November 16th, 1938, the son of Jewish immigrants. From an early age he exhibited a strong interest in politics: he joined the youth wing of Norman Thomas' Socialist Party and, after enrolling at Columbia College, founded the local chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). It was also at Columbia that he was first drawn to the serious study of philosophy. His interest in the subject was ignited when he found himself enrolled in a required general education class which (as it happened) was taught by Sidney Morgenbesser. By the time he graduated from Columbia in 1959, Nozick had "amassed enough courses to 'major in Morgenbesser'" (as he later put it) and had resolved to pursue graduate study at Princeton University.

At Princeton he worked closely with Carl Hempel and Paul Benaceraff, among others. His doctoral thesis "The Normative Theory of Individual Choice" was notable for containing the first scholarly discussion of Newcomb's Problem. The thesis thus foreshadowed his later seminal paper "Newcomb's Problem and Two Principles of Choice", which introduced Newcomb's Problem to the philosophical world, an event which initiated a revolution in the foundations of decision theory.

It was also as a graduate student at Princeton that he first began to seriously question his early socialist beliefs, a process that was prompted largely by his reading of

economists such as Ludwig von Mises, Friederich Hayek, and Milton Friedman. (A willingness to subject his earlier views to critical scrutiny was a trait that he would retain throughout his life.) This process of reconsideration ultimately culminated in the writing of his most famous work, Anarchy, State, Utopia (1975). Its uncompromising libertarianism quickly made Nozick an intellectual hero to economic conservatives. But even many of those unsympathetic or hostile to its emphasis on economic liberty found value in its memorable thought experiments (such as that of “the Experience Machine”, which sought to make vivid the fact that what we value is not exhausted by the felt quality of our subjective experiences) and its probing discussions (e.g., its account of natural rights as “side constraints”). The book was widely praised for its lively, accessible style, a feature which contributed to its winning a National Book Award.

Although the tremendous attention which Anarchy, State, Utopia generated essentially guaranteed that Nozick would be best known as a political philosopher, he never thought of himself as such. His second book, Philosophical Explanations (1981), provided vivid testimony to the great range of his philosophical interests: in a massive work of over 750 pages, he explored the metaphysics of personal identity, knowledge and skepticism, the foundations of ethics, the possibility of free will, and the question of “why there is something rather than nothing”. His “closest continuer” theory of identity through time and his “tracking” account of knowledge each generated a substantial literature. The book received the Ralph Waldo Emerson Award of Phi Beta Kappa.

Later books include The Examined Life (1989), The Nature of Rationality (1993), and his collected papers, Socratic Puzzles (1997). His last book, Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World (2001) underscores the degree to which his intellectual curiosity

extended beyond philosophy: there, he draws upon fields as diverse as evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, game theory, quantum mechanics, welfare economics, and cosmology in an attempt to illuminate traditional philosophical problems.

Apart from a brief stint at Rockefeller University, Nozick spent his entire professional career at Harvard after leaving Princeton in 1965. He attained the rank of full Professor by 1969, at the age of 30. In 1985 he was named Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Philosophy and in 1998 the Joseph Pellegrino University Professor. The title of University Professor is the highest academic honor that Harvard can bestow upon a faculty member: those granted such status are authorized to teach classes in any department or school in the University.

He participated vigorously in the intellectual life of the Harvard community. His teaching interests ranged as widely as his intellectual ones. As a lecturer, he was famous for never repeating classes, and over the years he team-taught with many other local luminaries, including Amartya Sen, Alan Dershowitz, Stephen Jay Gould, and Michael Walzer. He taught classes not only in the Philosophy department, but also in the Economics department as well as in the Law and Divinity schools. He served as a Senior Fellow in the Harvard Society of Fellows and was among its most active members.

Among his many honors, he was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a corresponding fellow of the British Academy. He held fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. He served as the president of the American Philosophical Association's Eastern Division from 1997 to 1998.

He was a brilliant conversationalist who would eagerly and insightfully discuss any topic broached. He carried himself with what often seemed like boundless energy and enthusiasm. His curiosity was insatiable and there seemed to be no domain to which it did not extend. He loved the arts, but he also enjoyed action movies and spy novels, and he was a sports fan. (Any mention of the old Brooklyn Dodgers would bring a twinkle to his eye.) He was fiercely loyal to his students.

He was first diagnosed with stomach cancer in 1994. In the ensuing years, he underwent a number of major operations and suffered several devastating medical setbacks. Through it all, he remained remarkably optimistic and hopeful, and his desire to continue living never wavered. Indeed, he often astonished those around him with his energy and his utter refusal to reduce the pace of his thinking, reading, and arguing. His mind remained brilliant and sharp to the very end.

Thomas Kelly
Harvard Society of Fellows