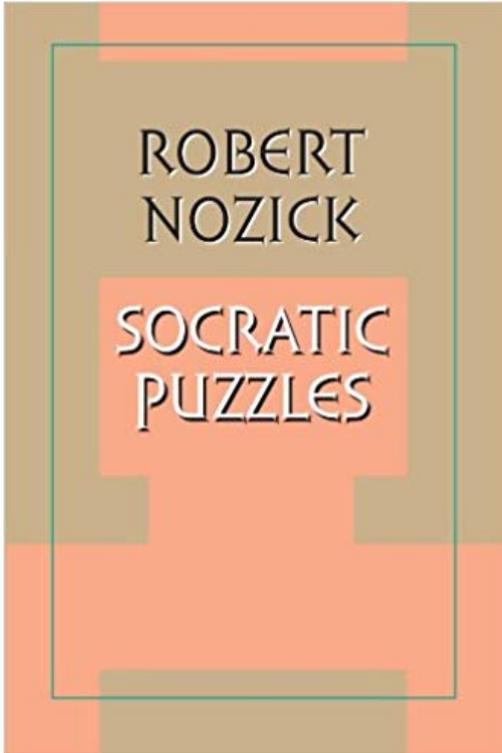


Socratic Puzzles *by* Robert Nozick



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One of the foremost philosophers of our time, Robert Nozick continues the Socratic tradition of investigation. This volume, which illustrates the originality, force, and scope of his work, also displays Nozick's trademark blending of extraordinary analytical rigor with intellectual playfulness. As such, *Socratic Puzzles* testifies to the great pleasure that both doing and reading philosophy can be.

Comprising essays and philosophical fictions, classics and new work, the book ranges from Socrates to W. V. Quine, from the implications of an Israeli kibbutz to the flawed arguments of Ayn Rand. Nozick considers the figure of Socrates himself as well as the Socratic method (why is it a "method" of getting at the truth?). Many of these essays bring classic methods to bear on new questions about choice. How should you choose in a disconcerting situation ("Newcomb's Problem") when your decisions are completely predictable? Why do threats and not offers typically coerce our choices? How do we make moral judgments when we realize that our moral principles have exceptions? Other essays present new approaches to familiar intellectual puzzles, from the stress on simplicity in scientific hypotheses to the tendency of intellectuals to oppose capitalism.

As up to date as the latest reflections on animal rights; as perennial as the essentials of aesthetic merit (doggerel by Isaac Newton goes to prove that changing our view of the world won't suffice); as whimsical as a look at how some philosophical problems might appear from God's point of view: these essays attest to the timeliness and timelessness of Nozick's thinking. With a personal introduction, in which Nozick discusses the origins, tools, and themes of his work, *Socratic Puzzles* demonstrates how philosophy can constitute a way of life.



Reviews of the **Socratic Puzzles** by Robert Nozick

Dondallon

This is one of the "easier reads" of Robert Nozick's thinking and articulation of his thought processes. While there are fewer of them in the selections in this work, the reader should not be daunted by the occasional use of what appear to be mathematical or equation type explanatory graphics. If I were to suggest anything as an enticement to the sale or distribution of this work, it would be to offer a preview of the introduction. It first came out in 1997, and my first exposure to it, with his marvelous identification of "wordsmith intellectuals," was shortly thereafter. After moving and packing away into storage earlier collections, I missed being able to refer to this work; not for citations, but rather for revisiting the intellectual stimulation of such pieces as "Invisible Hand Explanations" and "Who Would Choose Socialism?" - Not to slight the piece which gives the collection its title "Socratic Puzzles."

While I would probably rank Nozick's earlier (1989) "The Examined Life," which he subtitled "Philosophical Meditations," as the best and easiest to read of his books (and would recommend its purchase along with "Socratic Puzzles"), this latter work is worth a standalone reading. For those who want to go still further I would recommend the even earlier (1981) "Philosophical Explanations," which is entirely textual, extensive, but accessible in its treatment of the study and understanding Of Philosophy.

Many readers who are drawn to this field and to find parts of Nozick's works to be a bit of a slog, but are intrigued in the main, might probably wish for a publisher to assemble a "Collected Works" of Robert Nozick. Until then, reading into each of the works mentioned will provide that reward.

Heraly

If you want to see where Libertarianism started getting codified, start here. :-)

Runemane

My knowledge of philosophy is somewhat limited and is probably best categorized as a passionate hobby for the past three to four years. Take that into consideration when reading my review of this book and my choice of two stars for a rating. I freely admit that this book is beyond my capacities in at least some topics.

This book is not for the idly interested philosophy reader. This is the only book by Nozick I have read. It would appear that Nozick loves equations and wants Philosophy to be as mathematical as possible. If you undertake to read this book then you will do well to be warned of the equations. A second warning to the non-technical, the issues Nozick writes about are not broad topics that can be approached by the average person. His topics are very specific and technical and as such require a good deal of preparation on the part of the reader in order to follow along. I also found it rare to see

positive definitive conclusions on the topics he raises unless his conclusion is that there is not yet a conclusion and of that he is certain. You might then ask what the point of the book is if his typical conclusion is that there is no definitive conclusion? It seems to me that the point in most cases was to explore the topics and take a swing at possible solutions or find problems with existing proposals. A typical pattern in his writing is this, "suppose a valid theory existed for such and such, it doesn't exist but that is okay, lets assume it does; now I'm going to propose something on top of that theory which doesn't exist." For an example of what I mean see page 119, top of the last paragraph.

I'm going to break up my thoughts based on how Nozick presents his papers, by number and title.

1) Coercion

If you are expecting to see the issue of rights in this discussion of coercion then go somewhere else. You won't find it in this writing. From my perspective the omission of rights is strange and telling of Nozick. I could be reading into the omission. Without mentioning rights one could interpret Nozick as suggesting that the conclusion of whether behavior is classified as coercion or not does not require rights. One could further interpret Nozick as suggesting that his game theory (row/column table constructs) are antecedent to rights. Possibly that game theory somehow determines your rights.

I was a little confused with Nozick's use of negative terms. For instance, "unfree". He uses without definition so I'm assuming that it simply means the opposite of free, but does that mean you have to do it? In other words, unfree == compelled? Here is a quote from page 15 "He was unfree to rob the bank, though he was not coerced into not doing so.". I'm still not sure I understand what he is trying to say. Was he forced to rob the bank? I think what "unfree" means here is that he was not allowed to rob the bank though he was not prevented from robbing the bank.

Nozick's rational man pg 39 is not defined. Without definition it could be used as a floating abstraction when applied to a "threat" as Nozick covers it. At one point he uses an example of a drug dealer threatening to end sales of drugs to a customer. I would say that is a funny use of the word threat as the customer has no claim on the drugs. The two simply have an informal and temporary agreement to do business together. Implicit in that agreement is the understanding that circumstances can change and at any time either could choose to attempt changing the terms of the agreement. The customer doesn't own the drugs and the drug dealer does not own the money held by the customer. To me a threat would involve violating rights or at least an attempt at it.

2) Newcomb's problem ...

This is very equation heavy paper. I'll be honest I pretty much skipped every page with an equation on it. I did appreciate the explanation of Newcombe's problem and I think Nozick by pages 67-70 does present an interesting question about how to evaluate this kind of problem and it does seem fair to search for principles based on the classification of a particular problem.

3) Reflections on Newcomb's problem

This is one of the more interesting and generally graspable chapters. Nozick covers common responses to the problem and even explores for a bit the relationship of determinism to the question. It's a little frustrating that Nozick avoids taking a personal stance on determinism. He seems to think its possible with the correct interpretation.

4) Interpersonal Utility Theory

I'll be honest I skipped most of this. It's a very technical and an equation heavy topic.

5) On Austrian Methodology

You should already be familiar with "Austrian Methodology" and B.F. Skinner before approaching this chapter. Nozick does provide some background but it's terse. If Nozick is accurately presenting

“Austrian Methodology” then it would seem to me that there are holes that need filling. See top of page 129 first paragraph for a good example.

I’m not familiar enough with either Nozick or the Austrians to say but as presented by Nozick it would seem that the Austrians don’t have a strong explanation for what a “rational man” is or a theory of emotions and how the two interact.

Thank you Nozick for the gem of a quote from Rothbard, see middle of page 135. However, Nozick lacks two obvious counter examples, namely eating good food and having good sex. Rothbard basically claims that we fundamentally “prefers his end to be achieved in the shortest time.” A good meal should last a long long time and sometimes waiting for it makes getting it all the more satisfying. You can make the parallel with sex too.

6) Socratic Puzzles

With all the counter argumentation and questioning that Nozick does I’m surprised he never touches on axiomatic principles (ie. A is A). Spending so much time on other attacks seems to suggest that Nozick doesn’t think they are worth mentioning.

7) Experience, Theory, and Language

If you aren’t familiar with Quine and Duhem consider skipping this one. By page 158-159 I began guessing that Quine and Duhem are some kind of nominalist/subjectivist as they seem to lack a theory of concept formation that is based on sense-perception, unit reduction and hierarchy. Nozick, mentions evolution at second to last paragraph pg 158 as an explanation for what I think is his dichotomy between reality and language and his puzzlement about the interactions. This seems to deny a free-will consciousness resting on top of valid sense perception. Oh and don’t worry there are equations unless you got confused without them. Call me mistaken but what I took from this paper was that the three of these thinkers doubt the senses, doubt any valid connection of conceptual representations to reality and finally words aren’t connected to concepts.

8) Simplicity as fall-out

I’m surprised that Nozick doesn’t reference Occam's razor. Also surprised that he doesn’t mention the idea of arbitrary constructs being inadmissible on the grounds that the data doesn’t require them to exist, therefore throw out complexity when not needed. My thoughts around page 184/185 are that if you really want a simple explanation that fits the data then use arbitrary assertions. This is not to say that the arbitrary is valid, but that it’s easier to make things up then find out what the underlying cause is of the data. Along those lines I could say that what he thinks of simple actually is very complicated because it has to describe a very complicated and real existence.

I found myself wondering why Nozick never describes the non-contradictory integration of proposed solutions to one’s body of knowledge as a guide to identifying plausible theories nor does he explore identifying causes underlying the data. Start with a plausible theory then ask and try to answer with experimentation the why the data is one way and not some other way. Then go back to you theory and see if you find contradictions.

At the top of page 185 he claims there are an infinite number of explanations for any given data set. My take is that it’s only infinite if you allow for arbitrary assertions (that fit the data) and avoid integrating those theories with your existing knowledge.

By page 186-187 Nozick does destroy the idea that some link exists between simplicity and truth, his path there is complicated.

9) Invisible-hand Explanations

Nozick examines multiple situations where the idea of an invisible hand seems appropriate. I found this interesting mostly because Nozick exposes his views. Pg 192 last paragraph he prefers evolution over a rational response to wealth as life serving. Pg 193 first whole paragraph, evolution is used to explain necessary truth and the a priori, 2nd paragraph shows that Nozick is at least not a full

skeptic philosopher as he sees truths relating to reality. However he feels that evolution just helps us select truths. Pg 193 second to last paragraph, rationality might be evolutionary?

10) Moral Complications and Moral Structures

I was worried I wouldn't see any equations in this chapter. Oh wait it's Nozick we are talking about of course there will be equations. Overall it seems Nozick was not concerned with establishing the standard of right and wrong. Pg 204 Nozick's thinking about morality is circular, despite his structure he never is able to describe what is morally permissible, and that seems to be his goal judging by his opening remarks. Odd to place structure over standard. Pg 207 middle paragraph, Nozick is not concerned with what makes a feature wrong or right and doesn't see virtually no issue as exclusively right or wrong. His structures explicitly allow for wrong featured actions to be chosen so long as the sum of right and wrong is positive.

11) On the Randian Argument

Overall it would seem based on his presentation that Nozick read a handful of quotes by Rand and then decided to build a deductive chain from those few quotes. This leaves one who has studied much of Rand's philosophical writings questioning the value of this examination. It's especially troubling that he chooses the immortal robot quote for his examination. As this was mostly an illustration. In the references section pg 378, he claims to have read two of her novels, her essay on Objectivist ethics and Intro to Objectivist Epistemology among a few other references. This leaves me wondering if OPAR had been written before his critique would that have changed Nozick's representation.

Pg 250 "II" Nozick does not properly draw a distinction between life and conscious life, if the living being in his chain could be an ameba then this treatment of Rand's ideas is faulty.

Same page, "1" not all living beings can choose, Rand makes this distinction clear. Nozick falls in line with many other improper examinations of Rand by entering her Philosophy in the middle and assuming that is just as good a place as any, see Pg 251 by neglecting the epistemology and more. That foundation is where the idea of effecting the self is derived. Nozick arbitrarily opposes the self as a focus in second sentence of pg 251 and claims the the fault of arbitrary choice on Rand. His reference to god briefly after seems to show his lack of deeper understanding of Objectivist epistemology. His reference to dis-care of others being impacted on same page seems to neglect part of the meta-ethics about an isolated person still needing ethics. Further, neglecting meta ethics at mid page with a distraction from one's survival on hypothetical others unreachable to the subject. Later he demonstrates misconstruing the illustration as concrete by hypothetical counter example of transition to immortal state by the robot. Nozick's question at the end of Pg 251 "What's all that to me" makes the assumption that you already chose life, dead men don't ask questions. Pg 252 "II" Rand is not claiming life must be a value, death is an option and could be desirable in the proper context and Rand points this out elsewhere. Rand also takes care to identify life and its destructibility as a precondition of value. Pg 252 second paragraph, dead people do no valuing. Death as a value is the ending of valuing. Pg 258 Nozick believes there is no justification for Rand's social conclusion related to life as the ultimate value. Pg 259 It's Nozick's opinion that Rand offers an insufficiently "clear and forceful" argument for "1" he does not attempt a thorough research of statements and dissection of why they lack clarity or force or even what he means by that. Lower on Pg 259, one response to why should one respect the ultimate value of another, heard from Peikoff is the idea that denying what you require, namely unobstructed access to live would contradict your own conclusion about yourself. Nozick also shows his lack of reading Rand's theory of rights. Otherwise he would not have claimed that Hitler had a right to do what he did. Pg 260 Nozick ignores Rand's qualification about the absence of conflict between interests, namely that rational (as Rand defines that term) individuals do not conflict in their interests.

12) Weighted voting.

Dull. I moved on.

13) Goodman, Nelson on Merit, Aesthetic

Nozick doesn't seem to take aesthetics seriously.

14) Who would choose socialism?

Nozick can't make a compelling argument about Kibbutz given the altruist backdrop of Judaism. He tries to extend the 6% acceptance ratio with taking into account the pool from which he is sampling.

15) Why do intellectuals oppose capitalism?

This is possibly dated and society has changed enough to explain my disagreement. To me it seems that animus towards capitalism is widespread and not just isolated to intellectuals. Possibly Nozick's professorship is skewing his view. His arguments are not as convincing as the claim that Capitalism has not really existed, this being unnoticed by most allows for a convenient scapegoat. All problems are blamed on Capitalism, after all that is what we have right?. Also Nozick treats sacrosanct the content and philosophical basis of what schools provide to students. What if the schools are teaching the product of years of philosophical bankruptcy? Not mention given to society's dominant philosophic views either.

16) The characteristic features of extremism

1, describing a position far at the right or left of some spectrum says nothing of its content or correctness, Nozick might be committing *ad verecundiam* here.

2. Nozick's argument falls flat when considering people like Hitler. He also doesn't seem to think people put forth the arbitrary as if it's evidence.

3. Again should we compromise with slave owners in the south prior the civil war?

4. Depends on the context and what rights are considered valid. Am I violating the economic rights of some by not hiring them?

5. I can agree that unrealistic goals are obviously irrational.

6. So it is extreme to be organized?

7. Still very close to *ad verecundiam*

8. I can agree that whimsically dropping ones principles to replace with different ones is irrational.

17) War, Terrorism, Reprisals

Pg 301, no discussion of the plausible culpability that a citizen non combatant has for voting, funding, sitting idly by while their nation aggressively threatens or attacks another country.

18) Do animals have rights?

This is a short treatment of the subject and only serves as a brief introduction to the question. He does touch on the idea of essential differences between species but drops it quickly.

19) Not sure how to interpret Nozick. Did a talented philosophy professor commit begging the question on pg 313 and top of 314.

20) R.S.V.P

A short fiction story. Interesting idea.

21) Testament

A short fiction story.

22) Teleology

A short fiction story. I think written from the perspective of God?

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