

ANARCHY,  
STATE,  
AND  
UTOPIA

Robert Nozick



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with Chapter 8 easier than Chapter 7.) Part II closes with a hypothetical description of how a more extensive state might arise, a tale designed to make such a state quite unattractive. Even if the minimal state is the uniquely justifiable one, it may seem pale and unexciting, hardly something to inspire one or to present a goal worth fighting for. To assess this, I turn to that preeminently inspiring tradition of social thought, utopian theory, and argue that what can be saved from this tradition is precisely the structure of the minimal state. The argument involves a comparison of different methods of shaping a society, design devices and filter devices, and the presentation of a model which invites application of the mathematical economist's notion of the core of an economy.

My emphasis upon the conclusions which diverge from what most readers believe may mislead one into thinking this book is some sort of political tract. It is not; it is a philosophical exploration of issues, many fascinating in their own right, which arise and interconnect when we consider individual rights and the state. The word "exploration" is appropriately chosen. One view about how to write a philosophy book holds that an author should think through all of the details of the view he presents, and its problems, polishing and refining his view to present to the world a finished, complete, and elegant whole. This is not my view. At any rate, I believe that there also is a place and a function in our ongoing intellectual life for a less complete work, containing unfinished presentations, conjectures, open questions and problems, leads, side connections, as well as a main line of argument. There is room for words on subjects other than last words.

Indeed, the usual manner of presenting philosophical work puzzles me. Works of philosophy are written as though their authors believe them to be the absolutely final word on their subject. But it's not, surely, that each philosopher thinks that he finally, thank God, has found the truth and built an impregnable fortress around it. We are all actually much more modest than that. For good reason. Having thought long and hard about the view he proposes, a philosopher has a reasonably good idea about its weak points; the places where great intellectual weight is placed upon something perhaps too fragile to bear it, the places where the unravelling of the view might begin, the unprobed assumptions he feels uneasy about.

One form of philosophical activity feels like pushing and shoving things to fit into some fixed perimeter of specified shape. All those things are lying out there, and they must be fit in. You push and shove the material into the rigid area getting it into the boundary on one side, and it bulges out on another. You run around and press in the protruding bulge, producing yet another in another place. So you push and shove and clip off corners from the things so they'll fit and you press in until finally almost everything sits unstably more or less in there; what doesn't gets heaved *far* away so that it won't be noticed. (Of course, it's not all *that* crude. There's also the coaxing and cajoling. And the body English.) *Quickly*, you find an angle from which it looks like an exact fit and take a snapshot; at a fast shutter speed before something else bulges out too noticeably. Then, back to the darkroom to touch up the rents, rips, and tears in the fabric of the perimeter. All that remains is to publish the photograph as a representation of exactly how things are, and to note how nothing fits properly into any other shape.

No philosopher says: "There's where I started, here's where I ended up; the major weakness in my work is that I went from there to here; in particular, here are the most notable distortions, pushings, shovings, maulings, gougings, stretchings, and chip-pings that I committed during the trip; not to mention the things thrown away and ignored, and all those avertings of gaze."

The reticence of philosophers about the weaknesses they perceive in their own views is not, I think, simply a question of philosophical honesty and integrity, though it *is* that or at least becomes that when brought to consciousness. The reticence is connected with philosophers' purposes in formulating views. Why do they strive to force everything into that one fixed perimeter? Why not another perimeter, or, more radically, why not leave things where they are? What does having everything within a perimeter do for us? Why do we want it so? (What does it shield us from?) From these deep (and frightening) questions, I hope not to be able to manage to avert my gaze in future work.

However, my reason for mentioning these issues here is not that I feel they pertain more strongly to this work than to other philosophical writings. What I say in this book is, I think, correct. This is not my way of taking it back. Rather, I propose to give it

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**T**HE first nine chapters of this essay were written during 1971–1972, while I was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Palo Alto, a minimally structured academic institution bordering on individualist anarchy. I am very grateful to the Center and its staff for providing an environment so conducive to getting things done. Chapter 10 was presented in a symposium on “Utopia and Utopianism” at a meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association in 1969; some points from that delivered address appear scattered in the other chapters. The whole manuscript was rewritten during the summer of 1973.

Barbara Nozick’s objections to some of the positions defended here helped me to sharpen my views; in addition she helped enormously in innumerable other ways. Over several years, I have benefited from Michael Walzer’s comments, questions, and counter-arguments as I tried out on him ideas on some topics of this essay. I have received detailed and very helpful written comments on the whole manuscript written at the Center from W. V. Quine, Derek Parfit, and Gilbert Harman, on Chapter 7 from John Rawls and Frank Michelman, and on an earlier draft of Part I from Alan Dershowitz. I also have benefited from a discussion with Ronald Dworkin on how competing protective agencies would(n’t) work, and from suggestions by Burton Dreben. Various stages of various portions of this manuscript were read and discussed, over the years, at meetings of the Society for Ethical and Legal Philosophy (SELF); the regular discussions with its members have been a source of intellectual stimulation and pleasure. It was a long conversation about six years ago with Murray Rothbard that stimulated my interest in individualist anarchist theory. Even

## POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The fundamental question of political philosophy, one that precedes questions about how the state should be organized, is whether there should be any state at all. Why not have anarchy? Since anarchist theory, if tenable, undercuts the whole subject of *political* philosophy, it is appropriate to begin political philosophy with an examination of its major theoretical alternative. Those who consider anarchism not an unattractive doctrine will think it possible that political philosophy *ends* here as well. Others impatiently will await what is to come afterwards. Yet, as we shall see, anarchists and anarchists alike, those who spring gingerly from the starting point as well as those reluctantly argued away from it, can agree that beginning the subject of political philosophy with state-of-nature theory has an *explanatory* purpose. (Such a purpose is absent when epistemology is begun with an attempt to refute the skeptic.)

Which anarchic situation should we investigate to answer the question of why not anarchy? Perhaps the one that would exist if the actual political situation didn't, while no other possible political one did. But apart from the gratuitous assumption that everyone everywhere would be in the same nonstate boat and the enormous unmanageability of pursuing that counterfactual to arrive at a particular situation, that situation would lack fundamental theoretical interest. To be sure, if that nonstate situation were sufficiently awful, there would be a reason to refrain from dismantling or destroying a particular state and replacing it with none, now.

It would be more promising to focus upon a fundamental abstract description that would encompass all situations of interest, including "where we would now be if." Were this description awful enough, the state would come out as a preferred alternative, viewed as affectionately as a trip to the dentist. Such awful descriptions rarely convince, and not merely because they fail to cheer. The subjects of psychology and sociology are far too feeble to support generalizing so pessimistically across all societies and persons, especially since the argument depends upon *not* making *such* pessimistic assumptions about how the *state* operates. Of

tions persons must do to set up and operate a state are themselves morally permissible. Some anarchists have claimed not merely that we would be better off without a state, but that any state necessarily violates people's moral rights and hence is intrinsically immoral. Our starting point then, though nonpolitical, is by intention far from nonmoral. Moral philosophy sets the background for, and boundaries of, political philosophy. What persons may and may not do to one another limits what they may do through the apparatus of a state, or do to establish such an apparatus. The moral prohibitions it is permissible to enforce are the source of whatever legitimacy the state's fundamental coercive power has. (Fundamental coercive power is power not resting upon any consent of the person to whom it is applied.) This provides a primary arena of state activity, perhaps the only legitimate arena. Furthermore, to the extent moral philosophy is unclear and gives rise to disagreements in people's moral judgments, it also sets problems which one might think could be appropriately handled in the political arena.

#### EXPLANATORY POLITICAL THEORY

In addition to its importance for political philosophy, the investigation of this state of nature also will serve explanatory purposes. The possible ways of understanding the political realm are as follows: (1) to fully explain it in terms of the nonpolitical; (2) to view it as emerging from the nonpolitical but irreducible to it, a mode of organization of nonpolitical factors understandable only in terms of novel political principles; or (3) to view it as a completely autonomous realm. Since only the first promises full understanding of the whole political realm,<sup>1</sup> it stands as the most desirable theoretical alternative, to be abandoned only if known to be impossible. Let us call this most desirable and complete kind of explanation of a realm a *fundamental* explanation of the realm.

To explain fundamentally the political in terms of the nonpolitical, one might start either with a nonpolitical situation, showing how and why a political one later would arise out of it, or with a