

PHILOSOPHER

**Robert
Nozick vs.**

*by Randall
Rothenberg*

PHILOSOPHER

**John
Rawls**

Give me
liberty
or
give me
equality

ANOTHER DAY IN THE CONTENTIOUS KINGDOM OF ZOG, AND you, the mighty F'bob, are required to rule on yet another matter in the Court of Justice. But this case is different from the normal, run-of-the-mill robberies, traffic violations, and civil suits. Today the problem is one of balance. The issue is simple. Half your kingdom is, by virtue of a strange malady, unable to learn to read. These citizens are relegated to menial jobs and are a drain on welfare funds. A device has just been invented that will enable them to read and thereby help them to become full members of society, but equipping all the unfortunate means taxing the upper half of the kingdom a third of their income.

There's no way to avoid the decision. You are the judge, and your ruling cannot be appealed. Is it fair to take money away from those who have freely and legitimately earned it? Or do you feel that it is worse to allow those who are terminally deprived to remain that way even though a cure now exists for their condition?

Equality versus liberty. It's a conflict not only found in Zog but endemic to American society—embedded, in fact, in the first paragraph of the Declaration of Independence. On the one hand, we're "created equal"; on the other, we are endowed with "unalienable Rights" to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Just look at our great national debates—Jefferson versus Hamilton, North versus South, the Great Society versus the New Federalism—and you'll get the picture.

The latest, greatest war to take place between equality and liberty is being fought neither on the fields of Gettysburg nor in the halls of Congress. It's being battled on the blackboards, by the two most important philosophers of our era. Not content to molder away in encyclopedias,

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these two concept crunchers have won converts to their theories, attempting—and succeeding at—a revision of the way in which influential Americans deal with the notions of freedom and justice. Their ideas are diametrically opposed. Their thoughts are discussed in the White House and in the chambers of the Supreme Court. They are a Baltimore WASP and a Brooklyn Jew. Their offices are separated by a single floor at Harvard.

But here's the ultimate irony: each supports the principle you would expect the other to promote. Robert Nozick, by way of Brooklyn's Brownsville and East Flatbush sections and Columbia University, is the intellectual bedrock behind latter-day libertarianism, a do-your-own-thing, laissez-faire capitalist darling of the Right. John Rawls, late of Baltimore, the Kent School, and Princeton, is the greatest exponent of democratic egalitarianism in this century, affirming that government has a right, a duty, to raise the status of society's downtrodden, even at the expense of other classes. The battle lines have been drawn. Says supply-side theorist and conservative author Jude Wanniski, "You're always headed toward paradise or hell, toward expansion or contraction. Yin and yang—there's always a tension. There's always a Rawls, and there's always a Nozick."

Rawls and Nozick, Rawls and Nozick, Rawls and Nozick. Everything in political and legal philosophy these days is Rawls and Nozick. There was even a course offered at the Yale Law School called... you guessed it. And even if you never have to concern yourself with these two fellows, rest assured that when your kids are struggling through Philosophy 103—The History of Western Thought—the tail end of the course, after Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Marx, will be Rawls and Nozick.

Bob Nozick is a sensitive Jew. His dark and limpid eyes, framed by prematurely graying, shaggy hair, burn intently, begging you to tell as much about yourself as Nozick confides in you. And he addresses the criticism that he's not profound, that he never teaches the same course twice by admitting, "Maybe I *am* a superficial character. I have one crack at a thing, and then that's the best I can do." An academic product of the Sixties, a jeans-and-turtleneck teacher, the forty-four-year-old Nozick wears his heart, his soul, and his guilt on his sleeve.

There is another Nozick, however: the seminar leader who treats interlocutors with contempt, whose remarkably quick mind gleefully throws questioners into conundrums. "Nasty," says a former undergraduate; "a charlatan," she claims. A

graduate student claims that Nozick "tries as much as possible to be a public figure."

But where Nozick seeks notoriety, sixty-one-year-old Jack Rawls avoids publicity, refusing to be quoted and only grudgingly granting audiences, preferring to discourse in soft tones on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant to a roomful of undergraduates who only partially understand what he's talking about. Rawls's

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distance stems not from haughtiness but from a profound shyness, one that befits his ascetic, classically academic look (thick glasses, overbitten smile, unkempt stringy hair, button-down shirt, and tweed jacket). His lectures are delivered in a light monotone in his disturbing lifelong stutter. Yet Rawls is as revered by his students as Nozick is dismissed. A grad student took to referring to him as one of the thirty-six pillars of Christian wisdom; another compares him to Socrates. His kindness is legendary: sitting in his office, interviewing a nervous prospective junior faculty member, he will suddenly leap from his chair to pull the blinds, solicitously declaring, "The sun is in your eyes!"

Two more-disparate individuals would be difficult to find. But it is not their bearing or their demeanor that has made them the two most important political philosophers of our time. It is their philosophies. "The dispute between them, it is so *palpable!*" declares Charles Fried, a professor of law at Harvard Law School, who helped bring Rawls to the attention of the legal community in the late Sixties.

Twenty years ago, the catch phrase in scholastic circles was, Political philosophy is dead. Because of the Rawls and Nozick dispute, no one says that today.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY HAD BECOME a stagnant discipline before Jack Rawls came along. In the early part of the

twentieth century philosophers could, and often did, make waves in their own time. John Dewey in particular went out of his way to sell politicians and the public on his philosophy of pragmatism. But in the aftermath of World War I there came into existence an approach known as logical positivism, and this approach began to dominate what is still known as the Anglo-American Analytic School of philosophy.

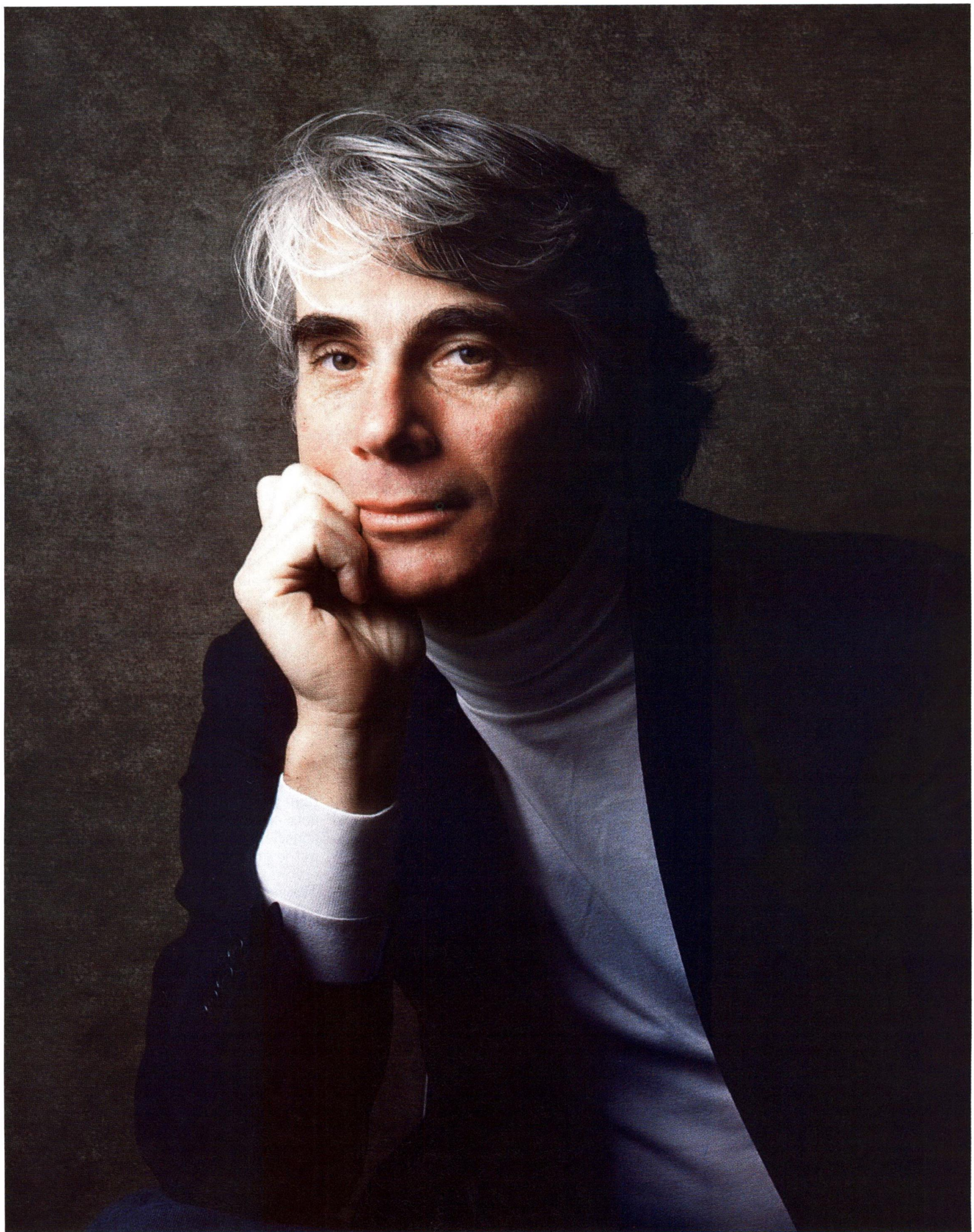
In philosophy, one reviewer has remarked, it is not the destination that counts but how one gets there. The logical positivists threw all sorts of blocks in the road. They said, in effect, that any statement that could not be proven empirically didn't make sense. The positivists rejected metaphysics. They scoffed at epistemology—the theory of knowledge—calling it little more than a branch of psychology. They asserted, in fact, that most philosophy could be reduced to science; what could not be was worthless. This "verify or bust" dismissal very nearly killed ethics and political philosophy.

But The Problem could not be wished away. (Philosophers constantly refer to The Problem, expecting us mere mortals to catch their drift. Occasionally, someone will stoop to define it.) "The Problem," says Bruce Ackerman, a well-known second-rank philosopher formerly at Yale Law School and now at Columbia Law, "is, what should we think of the bureaucratic state? Logical positivism was mere bullshit. People were compelled, eventually, to reflect on this new thing we had in America, the bureaucratic state. It didn't exist before Franklin Roosevelt, and it took a little time for it to sink in. So what is it we're trying to accomplish with it?"

"The Problem," adds Ackerman, "is inescapable."

Yet no one had the courage to face The Problem until John Rawls. Superficially, he was an unlikely champion of political philosophy, especially of the social-liberal variety. Rawls's Princeton—he arrived in 1939—was the last ember of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Old Nassau, the prewar playground for rich kids. Jack Rawls conformed well. A preppe from Baltimore, he was by birth a member of the school's uppermost social stratum, and he accepted a bid to join the Ivy Club, the oldest, crustiest, and most exclusive of Princeton's social institutions. A college friend remembers him as "the best jitterbugger on Prospect Avenue," the street that houses the clubs.

But something happened to Rawls. It may have been World War II, in which he served as an infantry platoon sergeant in the Pacific theater. Some members of the philosophical community point out that as



Robert Nozick at Harvard: One half
of philosophy's academic dynamic duo

an island-hopper in the battle zones of the East Rawls saw firsthand the horrors of wars based on domination. Whatever the reason, the Jack Rawls who returned to Princeton to study for his doctorate was the antithesis of the clubman.

"I well remember him as a graduate student," recalls James Ward Smith, a faculty member since the postwar years. "Rawls was *sui generis*—like nobody else. I've never known anybody to work harder. He was ahead of the game in a way: as a graduate student, he was poring through torts. Rawls was going through law before anybody else was."

Rawls understood *The Problem*. Today it's routine for philosophers to study law, and for law students to study philosophy. But Rawls was the first. He knew, somewhere in the recesses of his ample mind, that in 1933 a creature was born that had never existed in the United States—the modern bureaucratic welfare state—and that it was created not out of any preexisting philosophy but out of sheer necessity. The Depression had rocked all extant social and governmental institutions, and something—who knew what?—was needed to send America back to work, to put food into American mouths, to keep this country functioning. A New Deal was haphazardly slapped together, a panoply of transfer programs born one after another after another.

And so *The Problem*: Why did we do it? What "considered judgments" (to use a Rawlsian term) existed within us that saw fit to create this New Deal, that required us to alleviate suffering in such specific ways? What kind of *justice* will we—will the redistributionist state—promote? "It is," says Bruce Ackerman, "a philosophical and legal problem."

In the plodding style for which he is known, Rawls began issuing tentative answers to *The Problem*. In 1958 the germ of his theory, entitled "Justice as Fairness," appeared in *The Philosophical Review*, followed by "The Sense of Justice" in the same journal five years later.

Meanwhile, a storm was brewing in academic circles. Rawls has a meticulous nature. ("He even takes eating seriously," remarks a grad student. "Lunch with him is *always* milk and wheat germ.") Rawls took care to mail mimeographed copies of his articles (parts of his larger work-in-progress) to his colleagues throughout the Anglo-American philosophical community. The word went out: "Jack Rawls has defied the rules of logical positivism!" He had constructed a system based on carefully argued but, in the end, scientifically unverifiable first principles. Although logical positivism had been reeling from a mass of

internal contradictions—the positivist's seminal statement "The meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification" isn't a scientific proposition itself; and this *could* be rejected as meaningless—it hadn't been firmly challenged from the outside. Rawls's work was so elegant, and so rigorous, that it helped logical positivism crumble under its own weight.

Like the Munchkins rejoicing at Doro-

SUPERFICIALLY, Rawls was an unlikely champion of political philosophy, especially of the social-liberal variety. Rawls's Princeton was the last ember of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Old Nassau, the pre-war playground for rich kids.

thy's dispatching of the wicked witch, political philosophers and legal scholars celebrated Rawls's astounding new formulations. They did more: they wrote commentaries. In 1968 an article even appeared in the prestigious *Harvard Law Review* "introducing" Rawls to the legal community—before he had penned a single book. Finally, in 1971, Harvard University Press published *A Theory of Justice*.

The New Republic called it "an indigenous American philosophical masterpiece of the first order," a view shared, in equally glowing terms, by *The Nation*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Economist*, *New Statesman*, *The Washington Post*—basically by the entire liberal press in this country and in Britain.

Any work greeted with such acclaim, particularly a six-hundred-page academic tome only barely accessible to the general public, must be close to revolutionary. *A Theory of Justice* (or *TJ*, as philosophers call it) was. Rawls showed that first principles, rigorously argued and defended, could (in the words of a colleague) "tell us what to do about tort law or about the distribution of milk to schoolchildren." Others saw *TJ* as the intellectual justification for a negative income tax, welfare rights, government health care, subsidized higher education, and government support for the arts. Coming at a time when liberal institutions were under thunderous attack from both the Nixonian right

and the student left, the book gave an electric, invigorating jolt to liberalism.

Rawls had remained aloof from the right-left turbulence around him. He had worked on his book, sending out mimeographed drafts and carefully considering the counterarguments during the era of the civil-rights and antiwar demonstrations that enveloped Cambridge. Harvard's philosophy department was the main center of student unrest at the time, its stencil machines running off not only chapters of *TJ* but broadsheets against the Vietnam War as well. Many of Harvard's faculty members became actively involved in the movement, but Rawls still largely confined his lectures to Kant and Hume and his developing theory, much to the frustration of his more radical students. He *did* sign one single antiwar petition, fretting over its wording so much and calling its sponsor, a philosophy professor at Columbia, so often to check on the meaning and intent of each phrase, that his colleagues soon learned to bypass him. Still, there emerged from his office draft chapters on conscientious refusal and civil disobedience, which eventually found their way into his book—proof, say his partisans, that Rawls did externalize his opposition to the war.

Rawls's theory, which he labeled Justice as Fairness, rests on two simple equations that are defined, redefined, and proved throughout the 587 pages of dense text. The first principle states that each person is to have an equal right to the basic liberties (enumerated by Rawls as the right to vote and run for public office, freedom of speech and assembly, freedom of conscience, and the right to own property) to the greatest degree consistent with everyone having these freedoms equally. The second, the famous Difference Principle, requires that economic and social inequalities be arranged in such a way that they are of the greatest benefit to society's least advantaged.

Dwell a bit on the Difference Principle, and accept for the moment that Rawls makes the case for it better than you or I can dispute it. It says simply that whatever government does, it has to do for the poor. Whatever benefits government allows the upper class must be granted only to raise the status of the lowest class. The Difference Principle became a rallying cry for Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. So explicit was the connection between Rawlsian theory and the liberal dogma of the day that Robert Lampman, a member of Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisers and a consultant to Johnson's council, has written that "all domestic policies came to be asked the question, 'What Does It Do For



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The Poor?"—a thinly veiled rewording, admits Lampman, of Rawls's Difference Principle.

"I was... surprised at the book's reception," Rawls says. Yet intimates know that the acclaim left him cold—his highly academic work was being treated as a *polemic*, greeted gleefully by the Left and scornfully by the Right. In fact, *TJ* served as the missal of reform for those reformers of the day who had been the advance guard of the Great Society, their criteria for virtue—almost a religious tract. *TJ* was to the lawyers what The Force was to Luke Skywalker. Addressing his book's impact, Rawls said in his maddeningly elliptical way, "Philosophers help to build society as a picture of itself. A constitutional regime like ours has to have some conception of itself in order to function well. The influence is on other people—lawyers, economists, others in public life."

Then, the inevitable denouement, the disclaimer of his own influence. "But perhaps they only hear of it thirddhand. I'd be the last one to say philosophers have a major influence."

Robert Nozick, on the other hand, revels in influence. He has appeared in the pages of *The New York Times* debating, and baiting, liberal economist and Nobel laureate James Tobin and sociologist Daniel Bell on social justice in the Reagan era and has even authored some thinly disguised political tracts. His libertarian credo, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, won a National Book Award in 1975, and he has never shied away from using the notoriety that resulted from that first public exposure.

Nozick willingly draws the connection between his service as libertarian gadfly and his cultural background, his Jewishness. "There's a long experience of being a minority," says Nozick, who injects his religion into his conversation and his books. "For this reason, so many of the most articulate liberal writers were Jewish. But there's also this characteristic one finds in the Jewish community of being articulate about *principle*. So even among people who were within the small libertarian group, there were quite a number of prominent Jews, like Murray Rothbard."

Small is an overstatement when applied to libertarianism's coterie of supporters. For years, libertarians were considered kooks, anarchists-without-portfolio who deemed any government too much government. Nozick was the first American thinker to give this philosophy credibility. But a former student of his thinks Nozick's philosophy has less to do with his religion than with his hometown. "My mother, who's from Brooklyn, typed up parts of my dissertation," says Bill Puka, a professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, who wrote a portion of his Harvard Ph.D. thesis about Nozick. "And while she was typing, she'd be reading and saying, 'I know where

this guy is coming from. He's from Brooklyn. He's saying, Don't tread on me, it's my property, get out of here." Professional philosophers may turn up their noses at what they call the genetic fallacy—attributing philosophical principles to the thinker's upbringing—but just as it's difficult to dismiss Jack Rawls's noblesse oblige birthright and his Brahmin fairness, it is impossible to ignore the Brooklyn in Robert Nozick.

Because of his sharpness and an unwillingness to suffer fools gladly, Nozick was already a known quantity long before he received his Ph.D. At Columbia he had been a founder of the left-wing Students League for Industrial Democracy, a precursor to the SDS, but after entering Princeton he began to change his stripes. Nozick was part of a trio of grad students who arrived in 1959, a trio still recalled as a Three Musketeers of brilliance. One of them—Bruce Goldberg, who now teaches at the University of Maryland—began tormenting the lefty Nozick (who had come to study not political philosophy but philosophy of science) with libertarian theory.

"It was wrenching," recalls Nozick. "Goldberg put me onto these books by [conservative economists] Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman—and I didn't like those views. They seemed wrong to me. But it wasn't so clear to me exactly what was wrong with them. So I decided to delve into them more deeply to find out what was wrong."

The attempt failed. James Ward Smith, who was (and still is) teaching a course called Philosophical Foundations of Democracy, had Nozick as a teaching assistant in one of the course's small undergraduate discussion groups. He was shocked when the kid from Brooklyn asked if he could assign his students the works of Ayn Rand, the late literary doyenne of laissez-faire capitalism, whose own brand of libertarianism has been labeled the Philosophy of Selfishness. According to Smith, Nozick was the first person he met who took Ayn Rand seriously.

There's no real evidence that the Rawls-Nozick dispute embroiling the philosophical and legal community has spilled over into any sort of personal enmity between the two men. Nozick is currently the chairman of Harvard's philosophy department, and Rawls is its eminence grise. They like each other, although the difference in their styles is pronounced enough to rule out any deep and lasting friendship. Still, each thanks the other rather pointedly in the introduction to his book, although one senses just a mere touch of jealousy—as well as some intellectual outrage, and maybe a bit of patronizing—when Nozick de-

scribes his reaction to the final proof of *TJ*: "I was in California, on a sabbatical, when Rawls sent it to me. I had seen and commented on portions of it over the course of time, but now reading the whole thing, I just got fired up. I knew there was another side, and I wanted to tell it. That's when I decided to do my book. There was a real critique possible of Rawls's theory.... I didn't want to send an entire critique back

together in the pursuit of mutual goals—will arise naturally within geographic boundaries and that one such agency will become dominant in a territory and arrogate to itself the responsibilities of the "minimal state." The minimal state differs from an anarchic free-for-all in that "it [has] the requisite sort of monopoly over the use of force in a territory and... it protect[s] the right of everyone in the territory, even if this universal protection could be provided only in a redistributive fashion." That is to say, taxation is legal *only* for the purpose of providing protection.

To Nozick, nothing more than this minimal state is morally justified. This leads him to devise his Entitlement Theory, which states that "the holdings of a person are just if he is entitled to them by the principles of justice in acquisition and transfer, or by the principle of rectification of injustice.... If each person's holdings are just, then the total set [distribution] is just." This boils down to a carefully crafted set of aphorisms that define the Nozickian world view, such as "From each as they choose, to each as they are chosen," "Taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor," and "The socialist society would prohibit capitalist acts between consenting adults."

A COLLEAGUE remarked that Nozick was still trying to impress his first date, but while that may account for his outrageousness, it does not explain his views. This much is sure: Bob Nozick believes everything he says.

to him, though, because, knowing Rawls, it might have prevented his book coming out for another couple of years."

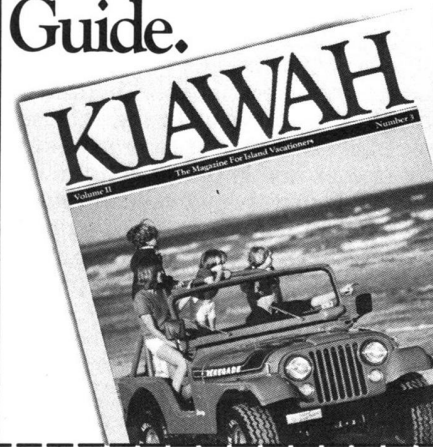
Nozick's fire created a book in the space of a year (it had taken Rawls more than twenty years to produce *TJ*), and the public acceptance was so overwhelming that it has spilled over into nearly unanimous acclaim for his latest, almost entirely non-political, and much more difficult-to-digest work, *Philosophical Explanations*. But it is more than fire that has made him the most quoted philosopher of our day. Tie it instead to his personal style, the homeyness of that Brooklyn accent in the land of the Locust Valley lockjaw, the earnestness of those penetrating eyes, and the simplicity of his carefully constructed paeans to liberty and freedom. Ascribe it also to the same societal searching—this time mixed with a negative view toward the excesses of liberalism—that motivated the reaction to Rawls. But give Nozick credit for two other factors as well: the clarity of the main thrust of his libertarian argument and his willingness to use material examples to bolster his theory.

Nozick's first principle is that each individual is endowed with three fundamental rights: the right not to be physically injured, not to have his liberty limited, and not to have his property taken without his consent. Using a standard libertarian device, he claims that "protective associations"—groups of people engaged to

ANARCHY, STATE, AND UTOPIA is by no means filled with one-liners; there are many technical sections that harken back to Nozick's science background. What's more, whereas Rawls takes pains to place *TJ* on a level far removed from the reader's experience, Nozick delights in smacking his readers with contemporary illustrations, involving sports stars and ray guns, that by their very comprehensibility, their ease of language, force his audience to deal directly with his conclusions—a Socrates with a sneaky streak.

The centerpiece of the book is the famous Wilt Chamberlain example, in which Nozick posits the basketball player's having signed a contract giving him twenty-five cents from each ticket sold for each game. The society of potential basketball fans is one in which some form of distributive justice—that is, a defined share for each and every person, no more and no less—is the rule. "Let us suppose," writes Nozick, "that in one season one million persons attend his home games, and Wilt Chamberlain winds up with \$250,000, a much larger sum than the average income and larger even than anyone else has.... Each of these persons chose to give twenty-five cents of their money to Chamberlain." The dilemma: Is it fair, simply because of the system of distributive justice (which is, Nozick nee-

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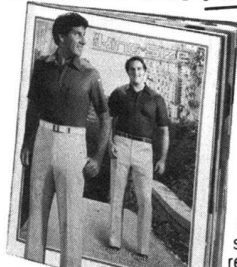
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dles, a *Rawlsian* concept), to take from Wilt money that was freely given to him because of his talent, merely to meet some predetermined notion of what the final picture (an equal share for everyone, or whatever) should look like? Such a predetermined picture is called an end-state principle, and Nozick's answer is clear: "The general point illustrated by the Wilt Chamberlain example is that no end-state principle or distributional patterned principle of justice can be continuously realized without continuous interference with people's lives." Translation: It ain't kosher.

By such sentiments are controversies made. Just as Rawls, during the course of the Sixties, had molded adherents to his theory, so now was Nozick a force to be reckoned with—the perfect philosopher for the Me Decade. The juxtaposition of the two conceptions of justice began almost immediately. The conservative *National Review*, no doubt champing at the bit waiting for an intellectual young right-winger to come along, labeled *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* "more cogent than John Rawls's magisterial but plodding *A Theory of Justice*." Why? "It favors liberty rather than the equality Rawls prefers."

The Nozickian formulation is alluring. It catches the pain, the anger that propelled Proposition 13 and the rest of the national tax rebellion. "You can't say that Nozick created the climate of opinion," muses Sheldon Wolin, editor of *democracy*, the leftist political-theory journal, "but I think you can say that, because his is the most sharply defined attack on Rawls, he's really provided the intellectual justification that has introduced the newest phase of American *politics*, which is, in effect, the reaction *against* Rawls."

Liberty makes for strange bedfellows. Alan Dershowitz, the hotshot civil liberties advocate on the faculty of Harvard Law, calls Nozick "a very important bridge" between libertarians (most of whom are right-wingers) and civil libertarians (most of whom step with their left foot first). "I don't share all of Bob's economic philosophy," admits Dershowitz, "but there is a common core. We agree strongly on free speech, medical experimentation using human subjects, and other civil issues. It's crucially important for civil libertarians, through people like Bob, to make connections on the right." While this may be wishful thinking, Dershowitz's active campaigning did lead to Nozick's election to the board of the Massachusetts Civil Liberties Union, not a natural haven for a man who believes taxation and slavery to be roughly equivalent.

Then again, maybe not so unnatural. The tension between liberty and equality ingrained in the American psyche can create uncomfortable paradoxes for people who think for a living. The libertarian movement has attracted a good share of right-wing nuts, even anti-Semites, but

Nozick, reacting to the burgeoning movement's adulation in the Seventies, went with it, falling in with what a liberal friend of his calls "the wrong crowd." Of late, he's been trying to extricate himself, "searching," says his friend, "for a new crowd."

But don't think for a minute that Bob Nozick is turning his back on libertarianism. There's still that startling public approach, the willingness, as one philosopher noted, "to come off as a slightly quirky Reaganite." A colleague of his once remarked that Nozick was still trying to impress his first date, but while that may account for his outrageousness, it doesn't explain his views. This much is sure: Bob Nozick believes everything he says. When Jack Rawls said, "Balancing liberty and equality *I* took to be a contemporary issue," the implication was clear: he's come down on one side and Nozick on the other. Cordial as they are to each other personally, there's guerrilla warfare taking place in the blackboard jungle of Emerson Hall.

But this battle has been raging for two centuries outside Harvard Yard, with equality always having a slight edge. Alexis de Tocqueville recognized it when he traveled these shores 150 years ago. "It is not that peoples with a democratic state naturally scorn freedom," wrote the Frenchman in his classic *Democracy in America*. "On the contrary, they have an instinctive taste for it. But freedom is not the chief and continual object of their desires; it is equality for which they feel an eternal love; they rush on freedom with quick and sudden impulses but if they miss their mark they resign themselves to their disappointment; but nothing will satisfy them without equality, and they would rather die than lose it." In modern terms, you might say we have a love-hate relationship with the two. If nothing else, it keeps the philosophers employed.

AND YET, DESPITE EQUALITY'S edge, liberty just can't be dismissed as the province of reactionary cranks, no matter what social democrats would like to believe. Bob Nozick proved it to me. Raised in a classically liberal democratic household, I snorted at liberty. Brought up in a Jewish family not unlike Nozick's, I thought I could shame him into admitting what I considered the basic flaw in his argument: his unwillingness to come to terms with deprivation, even starvation. What if there existed in his ideal society, I asked Nozick, people who did not have what they needed in order to survive?

"I don't say that in a libertarian society everybody will be able to live the life they want to live," he responded. "Suppose I wanted to live in a community that has everybody reading *Finnegans Wake* aloud every night in a public recital. [Bizarre counterexamples, I had been warned, are the trademark of one trained in the philosophy of science.] There might not be

enough people around who wanted to do that. With regard to other people, no society is going to be able to provide everybody with what they want."

Nozick had willfully sidestepped the question by confusing wants and needs. What if they didn't have the resources they needed, I wanted to know?

"Might there be people who wanted to live a certain way but don't have the resources to do it?" repeated Nozick. "That's clearly possible. Even if there were enough people who wanted to spend the rest of their lives sailing around on four-hundred-foot boats, there wouldn't be the resources to provide them."

I got miffed. "Forget about the four-hundred-foot boats and *Finnegans Wake*," I said. "Suppose there's a group that just wants not to starve. Suppose there's a tribe living peacefully in the Southwest, and all of a sudden a devastating drought wipes out all the food supplies. Is it just for the government to allow them to starve?"

Nozick paused. "Does the government let them starve, or do *we* let them starve?" he asked. "I don't know—do you make a contribution? *I* make a contribution. [Voluntary charity is a cornerstone of Nozick's libertarianism.] On those few occasions when one needs to have action like this, then those people who would vote for it in a referendum would be able to carry it out by private, charitable means."

But what if there *weren't* enough?

"Then a democratic society doesn't do it," he affirmed. "Not through the government. What's your alternative? If the majority of people don't want to do it, what do you say?"

Redistribute, I answered.

"I don't understand," responded Nozick. "Get rid of elections? Get rid of a democratic society?!"

I was flustered. "Then why," I blurted, "when people are starving, would we uphold democracy?!" I raised my hand to my mouth in shock. I had been out-Socratized. I had just questioned one of my most cherished notions.

Nozick had me, and he was going to let me twist on the spit for a while. "Aha!" he laughed. "You were taken aback. *That's* how deeply it cuts."

And that is what political philosophy is about—cutting deeply, not with knives but with ideas. Maybe Ronald Reagan doesn't call Bob Nozick every night, and maybe Teddy Kennedy thinks Jack Rawls is a rhythm-and-blues singer. But political change doesn't depend wholly on the politicians, and great works of philosophical import don't just end up stagnating in college curricula. They change the world.

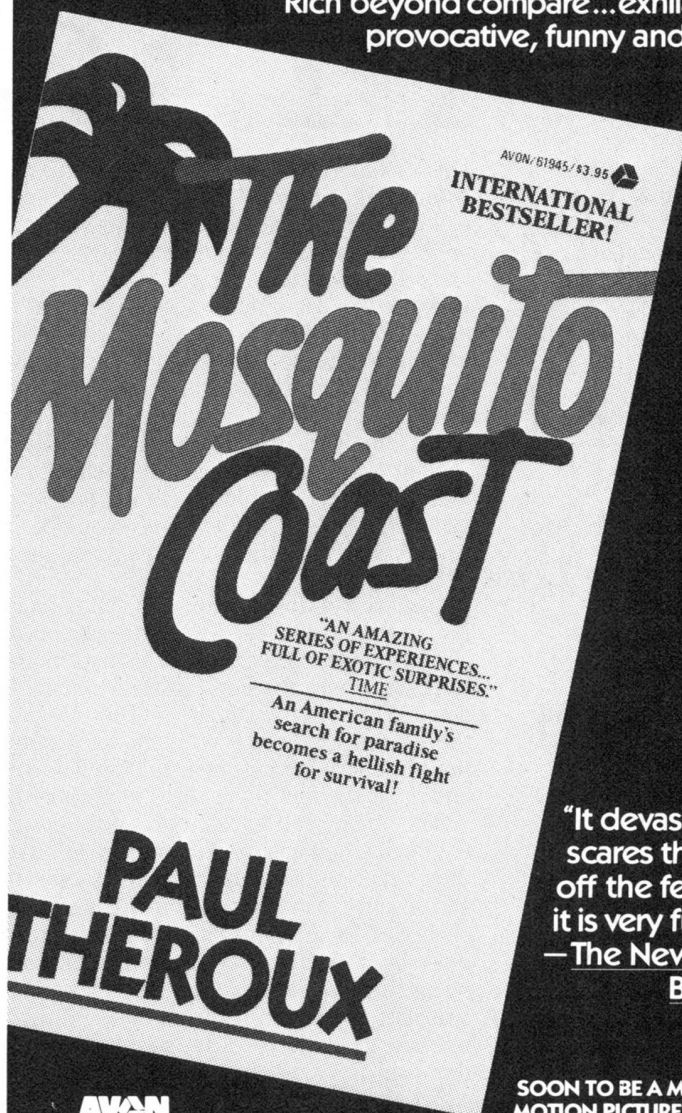
Ideology is bustin' out all over, egging on the nuclear-freeze debate, heating up the budget battle, spurring talk of safety nets. Rawls and Nozick—they may not be the reason, but these days they are (in Aristotle's words) the prime movers. **E**

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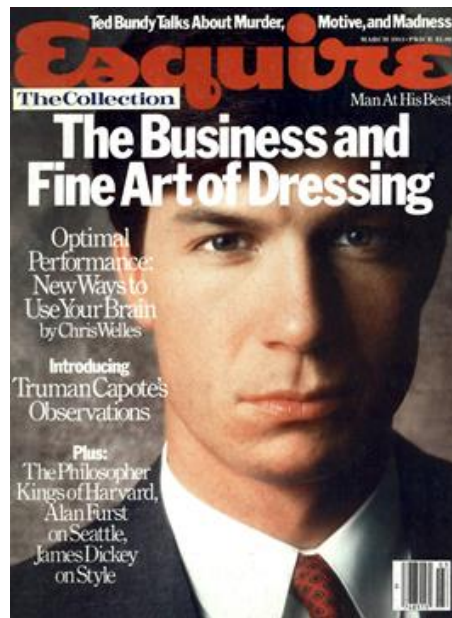
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