

CURRENT BOOKS

SCHOLARS' CHOICE

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A Worldly Philosopher

THE EXAMINED LIFE: Philosophical Meditations. By Robert Nozick. Simon and Schuster. 308 pp. \$21.95

Given the technical bent of most philosophy written today, it is cause for celebration when a philosopher deigns to address the common reader, particularly if that philosopher is no less than Harvard's Robert Nozick.

In *The Examined Life*, Nozick intends to philosophize as Socrates did. That is, he sets out to find an understanding that one can live by. Nozick may not entirely agree with Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living. "Unnecessarily harsh," he says. However,

... when we guide our lives by our own pondered thoughts, it then is *our* life that we are living, not someone else's. In this sense, the unexamined life is not lived as fully.

The italicized *our* is an assertion nearly as extreme as Socrates', and it depends upon a system of values which the book takes largely for granted. The character of "our own pondered thoughts" is not clear. *My* thoughts may not be mine, but merely the residue of other thoughts. I may think them mine, but I may be deluded: In that case, the italicized *my* may be a chimera.

The Examined Life doesn't establish any of its terms. Its discourse is like a series of adjectives applied to nouns or values deemed to be self-evident. Nozick says, in effect: If you accept my terminology and the values that I would establish in another kind of book, or those I have established in my *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1975) and *Philosophical Explanations* (1982), I will show you how far toward your happiness an examination of this terminology and these values will bring you. Trust me. Stay close while I talk to you about dying, be-

queathing, parents and children, creating, the question of faith, the holiness of ordinary activities, the joyous rhetoric of sex, the bond of love, the nature of emotion, happiness, the meaning of selfhood, the conviction of being real, the question of meaning and value, the symbolism of darkness and light, the appalling fact of evil, the Holocaust, the status of wisdom, and the zigzag of politics. Nozick conducts these discourses in the spirit of the White Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass*. To stop Alice from crying, the Queen says:

Consider what a great girl you are. Consider what a long way you've come today. Consider what o'clock it is. Consider anything, only don't cry!

When Alice asks if one can keep from crying by "considering things," the Queen declares: "That's the way it's done: Nobody can do two things at once, you know." In 27 short chapters, Nozick keeps considering dozens of things. Only when he comes to the Holocaust does the considering yield to the tears.

If Nozick had put the chapter on the Holocaust at the beginning rather than near the end of the book, he would have had to write a different book. It is his prejudice that people (whom he too often calls "we") are fundamentally good-natured, decent folk who can be trusted to persist in that character. *The Examined Life* is, in that sense, a book of edification: It encourages "us" to have our lives and have them more abundantly by thinking about their quality, their procedures, their ends. The edification is not religious in any sense I can see, but it doesn't exclude anyone who chooses to live by a religious faith. The reader Nozick appears to have in view is a serious person who doesn't know what form her seriousness should take or how to choose one road over another.

God comes into *The Examined Life* only because someone has to be blamed for the Holocaust in particular and, in general, for letting evil men thrive. As a Christian, I believe in God, whose purposes I haven't the effrontery of identifying with mine. I also believe in Original Sin and Actual Sin, and regard Augustine's *Confessions* as the most convincing sequence of meditations on those matters. I accept the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on the relation between man, the world, and God; and on the redemptive mission of Christ. I have not discovered from *The Examined Life* what Nozick believes in, unless it is the natural goodness of men and women, an article of faith I do not find persuasive.

But if Nozick doesn't believe in God, I can't see how he can reasonably haul him into some Nuremberg Trial on a charge of having let the Nazis go ahead with the Final Solution. In a bizarre chapter called "Theological Explanations"—a chapter that might as well have been called "A Chapter of Explanations that Explain Nothing"—Nozick calls upon Jewish theologians to "drive issues about evil deep within the divine realm or nature in some way, leaving it deeply affected yet not itself evil." I don't see why Nozick has added that last half-saving phrase. If he can't bear to blame mere people for anything, it doesn't make sense to invent a God so that he can blame him or deal with the scandal of evil by foisting the guilt of it upon the nature God supposedly created.

Let me say at once, lest a doubt persist, that *The Examined Life* is an honorable book, eloquent, deeply felt. One rejoices to find a philosopher addressing at least some of the problems ordinary literate people care about. But I am troubled by the book nonetheless, especially by the credence Nozick asks me to give to his terminology. Take the word "we," for instance. I never know who Nozick's "we" are, or whether or not I am included. Sometimes he writes as if "we" were a man and a woman in love with each other. Delicacy suggests, in such a case, that I should absent myself from these intima-

cies. Sometimes I seem to be included, on the doubtful consideration that people will invariably be nice. But in several chapters the sentiments which Nozick ascribes to "us" are so lovable that they can be found, I assume, only in Nozick himself and a few of his friends at Harvard.

Then there is the word "self." In one place Nozick speaks of the self as "an entity with a particular partitioned and appropriative structure." That seems compatible with the notion of the self as agent, and indeed Nozick refers to the self elsewhere as "the nonstatic agent of its own change." Compatible, too, with the idea of the self as sole owner of its experiences: "The self is born, then, in an act of appropriation and acquisition." In another place, the self is constituted in the capacity

of knowing itself *as itself*, not just when it thinks about what happens to be itself. All of these references imply that the self is an agent. But there are other passages in which the agent is demoted: It becomes "a locus of processes of transformation," indeed "a funnel through which information can pass and be examined . . ." These changes cause Nozick's terminology to wobble at points where wobbling is the last thing I want to deal with. Besides, hasn't Kenneth Burke shown, in *A Grammar of Motives*, the difference a move from "agent" to "agency" makes: all the difference in a world of values?

The last word that troubles me in *The Examined Life* is "reality." Much depends upon this word and upon the adjective "real" that accompanies it. Nozick claims that the reality of this world "is reality enough," and would still be enough even if "earthly life is followed by a next realm." In either realm, we are to "encounter reality and become more real ourselves through a spiral of activities, and together



enhance our-relating-to-reality." With an air of decisiveness, Nozick adds:

Love of this world is coordinate with love of life. Life is our being in this world . . . We want nothing other than to live in a spiral of activities and enhance others' doing so, deepening our own reality as we come into contact and relation with the rest, exploring the dimensions of reality, embodying them in ourselves, creating, responding to the full range of the reality we can discern with the fullest reality we possess, becoming a vehicle for truth, beauty, goodness, and holiness, adding our own characteristic bit to reality's eternal processes.

Faced with sentences as noble as these, it would be churlish of me to dissent from them or in any way to impede their flow. But I have to dissent in one particular: What Nozick takes as ultimacy, I take as mediation. Besides, I am not sure that my best endeavors—or what I deem such—will make me more real, in any sense of the word that I understand. One probably has a better chance of being real, or of becoming real, by not specifying it too insistently as one's aim.

—*Denis Donoghue, '89, holds the Henry James Chair of Letters at New York University.*

How British are We?

ALBION'S SEED: Four British Folkways in America. *By David Hackett Fischer. Oxford. 946 pp. \$39.95*

At first glance, one may be tempted to call David Fischer's *Albion's Seed* an oddly reactionary interpretation of American history. Most historians today live by the dogma that change alone, not change and continuity, defines their discipline. Fischer, a professor of history at Brandeis, goes against the grain by taking seriously an idea long thought dead and buried: namely, that our culture is British through and through.

Fischer thus appears the unlikely heir of the 19th-century American historian, Herbert Baxter Adams, who dignified his genteel conservatism by celebrating the English motherland's noble past. Resurrecting Adams's "germ theory" of history while rejecting its racist implications, Fischer revives the premise that our British origins continue to shape American culture today.

Those origins consist of four different cultural strains, established here, as Fischer shows, in four discrete migrations: East Anglicans to New England, 1629–40; south and western English Royalists to Virginia, 1629–1642 (he sets aside James-

town's frail founding); North Midlanders, largely Quakers, to the Delaware Valley, 1675–1715; and British "Borderers" from Scotland, northern England, and Ireland to the Appalachian backlands, 1715–1775.

Each subculture, he argues, had its own distinctive character on both sides of the Atlantic. The Quakers, for example, fostered democracy through both their laws guaranteeing "liberty of conscience" and their plainness of dress and manners; by comparison, the Puritans looked autocratic and rank-conscious. For their part, the borderland "Celts" retained in America their fierce clannish spirit, while their notions of warrior heroism and individual freedom underlay their understanding of the term "liberty."

Indeed, each of the four groups carried over from their particular region of England quite distinct ideals of freedom. By contrast with the Celts of Appalachia, the Puritans of New England perceived liberty in terms of community life—"ordered liberty": The Puritans could thus ruthlessly suppress Quakers and other heretics even while claiming religious freedom for themselves. The Virginians maintained a quite different combination of freedom and intolerance. The slaveholders made liberty almost synonymous with honor—