

Michael O'Donovan-Anderson, *The Review of Metaphysics*, June 1999

Nozick, Robert. *Socratic Puzzles* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. viii + 400 pp. Cloth, 35.00 — This collection of essays — all previously published — offers selections from the life work of Robert Nozick. The essays range widely both temporally, from 1969 to 1995, and topically, from an analytic study of coercion to thoughts of Socrates' profession of ignorance, to short "philosophical fictions." The themes and approaches will be familiar to those who know anything of Nozick's work; more than half the book is taken up by formal, analytic studies of topics of social, political and moral significance. Questions about how we might decide between competing individual preferences, or what strategies of decision making are the most rational and/or effective, or even how we come to judge certain actions immoral, are treated with remarkable precision and the maximum amount of formal, symbolic aid. Indeed, the occasional page packed with little but probability matrices, set theory and the like makes for slow and somewhat typographically intimidating reading. But in Nozick's hands these tools are well used, and offer to the patient reader both clarity and convincingness to a degree not likely available in another format. In fact, I think the formal essays offer the further advantage of being relatively self-contained, and thus fully accessible to anyone with sufficient education to read them (which, admittedly, means having at least some formal logic and/or probability theory). In contrast, some of the less formal work ("Experience, Theory, and Language," for instance, on Quine's epistemology) relies on the reader having a great deal of *philosophical* education and experience. Here to be capable of reading the essay is not sufficient for understanding it; one must also have read a good deal of Quine, and maybe some Hilary Putnam and B.F. Skinner just to be sure. For this reason, the audience for these essays must range, too. I can imagine having great fun reading "Newcomb's Problem and Two Principles of Choice" with a group of smart undergraduates, and certainly advanced students in the social sciences, with little philosophical training, could profitably work their way through "Coercion" and "Interpersonal Utility Theory," but most of the book is clearly designed for a rather highly trained philosopher. From this perspective, the chief value of the collection is the convenience of having so much interesting work in one volume. Less book than encyclopedia, it will make a useful reference volume for the serious student of philosophy, a place to turn for guidance in unraveling some of the intricacies of (say) codifying rational principles of choice.

One thing this volume does make clear is that Robert Nozick belongs on the short list for designation as greatest living producer of counterexamples. He makes from them art, philosophy and entertainment. Indeed, if this book has a tacit, unifying theme it may be methodological: *Socratic Puzzles* presents to us a way of doing philosophy which puts the counterexample at its substantive core. Without a doubt, letting the drive to capture and codify all cases shape one's thinking has its drawbacks. Nozick could never be happy with Aristotle's "always, or for the most part," and it might well be thought that Nozick's pursuit of exactness has therefore exceeded what is fitting for his subject. Both the power and the limits of analytic philosophy are in full evidence here. To the readers of *Review of Metaphysics* it surely needs no saying that there are many ways to do philosophy. But for those who doubt that the analytic style is one of those ways, Nozick has enacted a powerful counterexample.