

Chapter 7

A Framework for Utopia

Having demonstrated that the minimal state is justified but that *only* the minimal state is justified, Nozick also wants to show that the minimal state is morally inspiring, a positive good. He begins this discussion by considering what “utopia” might even mean. He says that it is “impossible simultaneously and continually to realize all social and political goods,” but that the idea is nonetheless worth investigating (p. 297). Why would it be impossible? Because everyone is different. “The world, or all those I can imagine, which I would most prefer to live in, will not be precisely the one you would choose” (p. 298). But underlying this problem, indeed what makes it a problem in the first place, is the idea that society consists of multiple people who have to have *some* way of living together. So utopia would have to be the best possible world that all could live in. The requirements of social living have to be reconciled with the fact of human pluralism and diversity.

In general, voluntary associations exist because people derive benefit from them, all things considered. To be a member of a gym, for example, one might have to pay membership dues. You might prefer it if the dues were lower or nonexistent, but it is unrealistic to expect someone to build a gym as a gift for you. But if the benefit of joining is substantial, then you will find it worthwhile to pay the dues. All voluntary associations have this characteristic—people join them for mutual benefit. The “protective agencies” which we might create to help protect our rights are an instance of this. This observation allows Nozick to develop a model for thinking about what utopia might actually look like.

Since people are so varied in their tastes, values, and preferences, what emerges as most ideal is “a society in which utopian experimentation can be tried, different styles of life can be lived, and alternative visions of the good

can be individually or jointly pursued” (p. 307). In other words, a sort of meta-utopia, wherein many utopias are possible. Nozick argues that humans are sufficiently different from one another that there cannot be one single form of association that is objectively best for everyone. “There is no reason to think that there is *one* community which will serve as ideal for all people and much reason to think that there is not” (p. 310). So the minimal state he has defended, which ensures that everyone’s rights are protected but also leaves everyone free to participate in whatever voluntary associations they choose, establishes not a utopia, but a meta-utopia, in which different sorts of communities can exist.

To demonstrate the profound diversity and pluralism that characterizes humanity, Nozick presents a litany of people including Elizabeth Taylor, Bertrand Russell, Frank Sinatra, Socrates, Ted Williams, Ralph Ellison, Buddha, Thomas Edison, Pablo Picasso, some 30 other historical figures, and adds “you, and your parents,” and then asks “Is there really *one* kind of life which is best for each of these people?” (p. 310). He also suggests we consider the rich portraits of human lives in literature. There just is not a sound basis for picking one social arrangement and assuming it would be ideal for all. People have differing priorities regarding art, sport, intellectual activity, sensual pleasure, family life, risk-taking, work, religion, and so on. Consider, for example, Amish communities eschewing electricity. While people outside those communities tend to think electricity improves their lives, the Amish voluntarily choose a different sort of life. As long as no one is held captive in those communities, there is no basis for disallowing them. More broadly, some people prefer urban life, others prefer rural life. Neither is universally “better” for everyone. Nozick says that the very idea that there is “one best society for *everyone* to live in, seems to me to be an incredible one” (p. 311). Utopian authors, he says, tend to be so assured of their own vision for society that they assume it can be universally applied. This necessarily overlooks the fact of human diversity.

What makes Nozick’s solution different, and presumably not incredible, is that it does not assume to know the “one best way” for all. “Given the enormous complexity of man, his many desires, aspirations, impulses, talents, mistakes, loves, sillinesses, given the *thickness* of his intertwined and inter-related levels, facets, relationships (compare the thinness of the social scientists’ description of man to that of the novelists), and given the complexity of

interpersonal institutions and relationships, and the complexity of coordination of the actions of many people, it is enormously unlikely that, even if there were one ideal pattern for society, it could be [designed by plan]" (p. 313). Hence the framework for a community of communities. Many types of consensual arrangements are possible, and it's futile to look for one-size-fits-all solutions in a world characterized by diversity and pluralism, so a framework protecting everyone's rights, everyone's capacity to join different voluntary associations, is the most utopia we can reasonably expect. As Nozick suggested in his discussion of justice, the attempt to bring about a pre-determined state of affairs is unworkable, but here again we have a focus on process rather than end-states. Even without invoking the concept of rights, the framework for utopia recognizes the pluralism of human nature. Pluralism could almost be a separate rationale, although Nozick sees freedom and pluralism as having intersecting roles. The minimal state's protections of rights ensures that contracts generally, and membership in the various possible communities, will be voluntary. This means that communities that turn out not to be beneficial can be abandoned, paving the way for new attempts.

Nozick notes that even if there were one kind of community that was best for everyone, "the framework set out is the best means for finding out the nature of that community," since it's virtually impossible that a designer could know it a priori and that instead it would need to be discovered (p. 318). But he adds that the argument for the framework is strengthened when we "drop the (false) assumption that there is *one* kind of society best for everyone" because then we can stop "misconstruing the problem" as a search for that one universal and totalizing ideal (p. 318). The framework is "compatible with the realization of almost all particular utopian visions," (the qualification "almost" ruling out ideals based on force and domination), so it can be seen as kind of common ground for different visionaries (p. 319).

One important ramification of the idea of the minimal state as a framework for utopia(s) is that it allows for communities that individually exceed the framework provided they do so consensually. "Though the framework is libertarian and laissez-faire, *individual communities within it need not be*, and perhaps no community within it will choose to be so... In *this* laissez-faire system it could turn out that though they are permitted, there are no actually

functioning “capitalist” institutions; or that some communities have them and others don’t or some communities have some of them, or what you will” (pp. 320-21). For example, one community might be organized with private property; another as a commune or kibbutz. One might make a particular form of worship central to public life while another would be ecumenical or secular. The framework allows for any sort of voluntary association, provided no one is coerced into joining or staying. “Anyone may start *any* sort of new community (compatible with the operation of the framework) they wish” (p. 324). Hence anyone may exit a community they find unsuitable.

The framework for utopia, therefore, just is the minimal state. The minimal state, Nozick reiterates, “treats us as inviolate individuals, who may not be used in certain ways by others as means or tools or instruments or resources; it treats us as persons having individual rights with the dignity this constitutes. Treating us with respect by respecting our rights, it allows us, individually or with whom we choose, to choose our life and to realize our ends and our conception of ourselves, insofar as we can, aided by the voluntary cooperation of other individuals possessing the same dignity” (pp. 333-34). This need not mean living in any one particular sort of community, but only that the available options are consensual, rights-respecting, and cognizant of the great diversity and pluralism of human nature.