

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 16, 2003,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Robert Nozick  
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **ROBERT NOZICK**

BORN: November 16, 1938

DIED: January 23, 2002

Seven years before Robert Nozick's death, at the age of 63, on January 23, 2002, he had been diagnosed with an advanced stage of cancer. The story circulated that in presenting Robert with the permission form for the sudden surgery called for, his doctor's hand was trembling so strongly that Robert had to take hold of it to steady the doctor as he took the pen from him and signed the form. The story's plausibility was confirmed in the further recurrences and therapies in store over the ensuing years, as Robert's friends seemed to take courage from him more than the other way around, from his love of the life given to and made vivid by him—his marriage, his children, his friends, his sense of satisfaction in his celebrated work, and his continuing to write and talk philosophy passionately and memorably until virtually the end—that allowed him to face leaving life without unnecessary regret.

Nozick's work spans the full range of the fields of philosophy, a rare fact in contemporary philosophy, particularly in the analytical dispensation of the subject, a fact perhaps somewhat obscured by the immediate and continuing fame of his first book, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, for which he won the National Book Award in 1975. Rather than list the titles of his further six books, which are part of the permanent philosophical record of our time, we might illustrate what he meant, in once answering a reporter's question about the development of his interests, by saying, "It's a good idea to look up my courses in the Harvard Catalogue of Courses." Opening some of these catalogues from the past ten years, one finds such titles, announced by Nozick, as "Truth and Necessity", and "Social Philosophy", and "Philosophy and Neuroscience", and "Philosophy and the Law" (taught in the Law School), and "Socrates, Buddha, Jesus", and "Thinking About Thinking" (the course he taught with Alan Dershowitz and Stephen Jay Gould) and, two courses announced for his last year, "Philosophy and Literature: Dostoevsky," and "The Russian Revolution." And like all original and ambitious philosophers, Nozick philosophized about philosophy. He came to express himself against what he took to be the dominant motivation of analytical philosophy, in which he was reared, namely to deploy arguments that are meant to coerce belief, that seek to close every alternative to the thesis in favor. His early articles were brilliant examples of this style. But later, in *Philosophical Explanations*, he made a decisive turn to a different

conception of philosophical writing, one that aimed not to force his reader to a particular conclusion, but rather to advance his reader's understanding by laying out competing explanatory constructions of the different possibilities that any serious human issue is bound to exemplify. Thus he sought to link the quest for truth with the quest for freedom.

One story, famous among philosophers, concerning Nozick's teaching (this one indeed reported in a scholarly journal) goes this way. In 1967, his second year as assistant professor, Nozick announced a course on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, a text he had until then never studied. A student in that course reports that when the time came Nozick had absorbed the new, path-breaking work on Kant's achievement, as well as the classical commentaries, and completed a first-rate course—or almost completed it. Upon reaching Kant's perpetually controversial presentation of the "Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding," Nozick postponed the class in order to work out more to his satisfaction what he wanted to say. One week later he reconvened the class and according to the student witness (who has since become an internationally renowned Kant scholar) the resulting presentation ranked in originality and lucidity with any existing account of this material. The story continues. A few weeks later Nozick declared that he felt he had gotten everything he was likely to get out of Kant's monument and asked the students' indulgence to use the remaining class meetings to go into other matters on his mind, such as his forthcoming paper on coercion, which would prove to establish his national reputation. (In fact, Kant would later appear as a deep influence on Nozick's work.) Nozick's international reputation is marked by his delivering the Locke lectures at Oxford and his spending a year in residence at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, to which—following his death—his library was given.

Robert Nozick was born November 16, 1938, in Brooklyn, New York to a Russian immigrant family; he graduated from Columbia College in 1959 and was awarded a Ph.D. from Princeton four years later. His distinguished career at Harvard—putting aside his further professional awards and honors (including the presidency of the American Philosophical Association [Eastern Division] in 1997–98)—was capped by his ten year service as a Senior Fellow in the Society of Fellows and his appointment in 1998 as University Professor.

He married Barbara Fierer in 1959 and had two children, Emily and David, both graduates of Harvard College and both lawyers, who reciprocated the unswerving devotion he showed them. Although Robert Nozick and Barbara Fierer divorced in 1981, they remained lifelong friends.

In 1985 he read, standing in Harvard Bookstore, a book of poems entitled *The Lamplit Answer*. His quest to meet the author led to his marriage to Gjertrud Schnackenberg and to a notable, intensely shared life of art, philosophy, writing, and travel. Two geographies played a key part in nearly every year of the last two decades of his life. One was the urban

world of Italy and Italian art, architecture, and sculpture; the other was the rough and pristine geography of Idaho, whose Alpine meadows and lakes he and Gjertrud inhabited for a full month each August.

Respectfully submitted,

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