

When Philosophers Disagree

Anthony Gottlieb, reply by Thomas Nagel
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In response to:

How They Wrestled with the New from the September 29, 2016 issue

To the Editors:

I am grateful to Professor Nagel for the attention he has paid to my book *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy* [NYR, September 29], and for his qualified recommendation of it. He writes that I am “not a philosopher but a philosophical fellow traveler,” alluding, presumably, to the fact that I am not (nor have I ever been) a card-carrying member of the professoriat. Although the term “fellow traveler” is usually pejorative, I rather enjoy the thought of playing *poputchik* to Professor Nagel’s Trotsky.

Most of the thinkers in my book were not academics either, and would probably have been puzzled to learn of some of the ways in which their work is presented in universities today. Professor Nagel rightly notes that “our world has been significantly formed by them,” and claims that I exaggerate “the intellectual distance of these figures from us.” I reckon he underestimates the extent to which today’s conventional picture of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers has been shaped by intervening developments and perspectives.

For example, nineteenth-century historians spread the idea that these thinkers could be divided into two warring teams, the Rationalists and the Empiricists. The labels stuck, even though the philosophers themselves had not recognized them. Locke did not know that he was an Empiricist, and Spinoza did not know that he was a Rationalist—just as Plato had no idea that he was an “ancient” philosopher, and Aquinas was blissfully unaware of the fact that he lived in the Middle Ages.

Nagel writes that “it is a weakness of Gottlieb’s account that he does not understand and therefore dismisses the importance of...the opposition between rationalism and empiricism.” But my quarrel is not with the opposition between rationalism and empiricism, which is a fairly useful way of talking about the distinction between a priori and empirical methods of finding out about the world. My beef is rather with the oversimplified division of early-modern philosophers into two exclusive classes,

Empiricists and Rationalists. These labels obscure, for example, the powerful strains of rationalism in the thought of “Empiricists” such as Locke and Hobbes.

The moral philosophy of Hobbes is another topic that, according to Nagel, I have not managed to grasp. As Nagel puts it, Hobbes refused “to appeal to any concern for the good of others or the collective good *as a basis for moral motivation*” (my emphasis). This is true and important; contrary to what Nagel implies, I do not dispute it. But I think it is also important to point out that Hobbes was innocent of the charge of advocating selfishness, which is a quite different matter. In a nutshell: it seems to me that Hobbes gave a selfish rationale for unselfish behavior.

Perhaps it is true, as Nagel writes, that “Gottlieb doesn’t understand Hobbes.” But I feel I should alert your readers to the possibility that Nagel has not understood Gottlieb.

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Thomas Nagel replies:

I didn’t mean “philosophical fellow traveler” pejoratively. On the contrary, I find it admirable that Gottlieb, though not himself a contributor to philosophy, has the interest, sympathy, and commitment to undertake the difficult task of making its history widely accessible. Often he succeeds, but not always. In my review I explained what was missing from his treatment of the opposition between empiricism and rationalism. His letter remains on the surface. Gottlieb thinks it significant that

Locke did not know that he was an Empiricist, and Spinoza did not know that he was a Rationalist—just as Plato had no idea that he was an “ancient” philosopher, and Aquinas was blissfully unaware of the fact that he lived in the Middle Ages.

Can he really believe that there is an analogy between names for historical time periods that can only be applied retrospectively and the names given to philosophical theories on the basis of their content? In both cases the terms did not exist at the time to which they are applied, but terminology is not the issue. In spite of the complexity of their views, Locke knew very well that he had fundamental disagreements with Descartes, which have remained at the heart of the subject ever since, in the works of Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and their successors. This is not a retrospective illusion.

As for Hobbes, I believe the text of Gottlieb’s book conflicts with the reading he offers in his letter. For example, in the book he concludes his summary of the move from self-preservation to the “unselfish Golden Rule” by saying, “So it does not seem to be true that self-preservation trumps every other consideration for Hobbes.” This refers not just to unselfish behavior, but to non-self-interested motivation. Here and at other points, Gottlieb turns Hobbes into a less rigorous thinker than he is.

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