

## Nozick's "secret" macro-micro objection to Rawls

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*Abstract.* In a section of his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* entitled "Macro and Micro," Nozick makes objections of a certain kind to Rawls. In this paper, I draw attention to a macro and micro objection that scattered material in that book entails.

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Robert Nozick's book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* has a section entitled "Macro and Micro." It is about using small-scale examples to make philosophical points versus evaluating principles of justice by reference to a large whole society. Nozick makes some objections to Rawls which have to do with this theme.

But there is another macro and micro objection that one can extract from the book. If we do not confine ourselves to the section entitled "Macro and Micro" and bring together scattered material, we can identify the following combination of propositions:

- (a) John Rawls objects that utilitarianism does not take the distinction between persons seriously (1974: 228).
- (b) The full justification for taking the distinction between persons seriously involves micro-analysis: attending to small-scale situations and drawing conclusions from them (1974: 28, 33).
- (c) When we assess one of Rawls's principles of justice by reference to small-scale situations, he implies that we should not do that, rather we should focus on the whole – we should engage in macro analysis (1974: 205).

The objection is that Rawls commits himself to macro analysis as the way to assess principles of justice (1974: 205), but then he cannot make his separateness-of-persons objection to

utilitarianism, because it depends on the legitimacy of assessing principles of justice by micro analysis.

I shall briefly comment on (b). I think Nozick is committed to this proposition but the commitment is not very explicit in his text. To justify taking the distinction between persons seriously one draws attention to some wrong done to an innocent individual, such as that they were killed or enslaved without their consent. One judges that this was wrong when focusing on the small scale situation: those actions of physical violence were wrong, or were wrong given what the individual did (1974: 28). But if one looks at the larger whole one finds some gain, such as greater happiness for the society as a whole if this individual dies.<sup>1</sup> The objector argues that the actions were simply wrong. Shifting the focus to a broader perspective cannot ever override that conclusion. One may remove a tooth for the good of an organism, given appropriate circumstances, but a person should not be treated like that: they are a distinct entity in their own right and are not to be treated as a mere part of a social organism. The macro is irrelevant (1974: 33). But how can Rawls make this argument given his rejection of micro analysis when it is used to evaluate one of his principles?

## Reference

Nozick, R. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.

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<sup>1</sup> Here we can understand utilitarianism in the classical manner: as a moral doctrine which recommends producing the maximum amount of happiness.