Salon culture: Nozickian hairdressers, functionalist social anthropology, and cultural studies audiences

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Abstract. Libertarian Robert Nozick, on my reading, responds to Bernard Williams by saying that if Williams thinks the way we should distribute medical goods is based on medical need, he is analogously committed to the distribution of haircuts based on need. As I read him, Nozick wonders why other aims to do with haircuts matter less for Williams than the "proper aim" of getting a haircut: can't a barber set up a business because he likes conversation with a variety of people and give haircuts according to whom he likes conservations with? I argue that a socially just attempt to distribute opportunities for haircuts will have to take into account other aims of a haircut than reducing inconveniently long hair. Haircuts have social functions, including subtly signalling sexuality. More subtle signals may be important in imperfectly liberal societies. This paper challenges an assumption which may be widespread on this database (or maybe not - I am the last one disposed to make it?): one assumes that a Williamsian approach applied to haircuts is all about preventing inconveniently long hair.
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Is this paper easy to write?
Perhaps for the right kind of "bright,"
It reads like daylight but is written by "night"

1. Introduction. In this paper, I shall discuss Robert Nozick versus Bernard Williams in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. My aim is not purely philosophical though. I want to write a paper which is of interest also to old-fashioned social anthropologists and cultural studies audiences, if permitted. I was prompted to write this by a conversation with a friend, in which she referred to a certain haircut as indicating a certain sexuality, a subtle indication it seems to me. In the next part of this paper, I will present relevant material from the Williams-Nozick debate. Nozick argues that haircuts should not be distributed based on need, contrary to Williams, or his Williams. In the third part, I will challenge a tempting assumption, at least for some audiences, maybe many on this database: that distribution based on need is about

cutting inconveniently long hair. Haircuts may well have a social function which contributes to ensuring a stable society. In the fourth part, I argue that the realization of this function is a barrier to the obvious way of realizing distribution based on need.

2. Nozick versus Williams. Nozick quotes Bernard Williams as saying:

> Leaving aside preventative medicine, the proper ground of distribution of medical care is ill health: this is a necessary truth. (1974: 233)

Nozick actually quotes much more of Williams and after a few sentences writes:

> Presumably, then, the only proper criterion for the distribution of barbering services is barbering need. (1974: 234)

What is Nozick's argument? When I have read him before, without magnifying this material, I supposed it is this: "Williams is saying that for any good (or service), there is a proper use of that good and the way to distribute the good is based on who needs to use it in that proper way: those who have the relevant need should have the good and those who do not have the relevant need should not. Thus the proper use of psoriasis medicine is to counter psoriasis and it should be available to people with psoriasis, not to people without psoriasis. But then we have to distribute haircuts based on need and that is surely a mistake."

Nozick complains that he might have misunderstood Williams: "No doubt many readers will feel that all hangs on some other argument." But perhaps there are others who will feel that Nozick himself is also mysterious (or that he is the mysterious one). I shall work with the interpretation of Nozick above. It may be useful to spell matters out in premises and a conclusion. This is the argument Nozick thinks Bernard Williams must accept given what Williams says.

(1) If a haircut is a good/service, then a haircut must be distributed on the basis of need: you have the opportunity for a haircut, if you need the haircut, otherwise you do not.

(2) A haircut is a good/service.

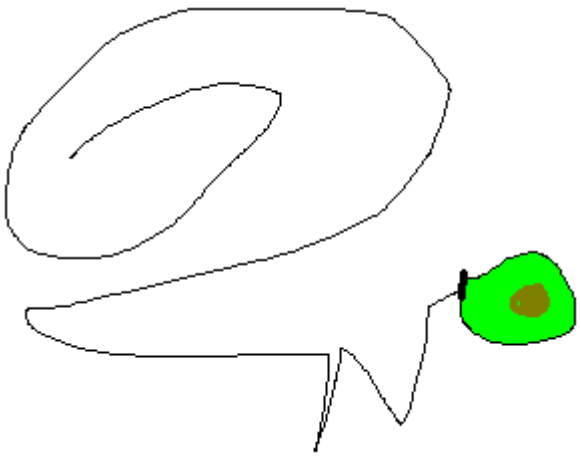
Therefore (by modus ponens):

(3) A haircut must be distributed on the basis of need: you have the opportunity for a haircut, if you need the haircut, otherwise you do not..

Nozick thinks premise (1) is false. It is within his (or her) rights for a barber to set up a business because he likes talking to a variety of people and, furthermore, to distribute his services based on whom he prefers talking to. Anyway, I want to contest an assumption.

3. The longhair assumption. When I read Nozick before, I thought of how you need a haircut when your hair was inconveniently long: it gets into food or it is so long that you trample on it. That was my *assumption* when engaging with the debate. But it occurs to me from experience, from conversation, and from learning social anthropology that haircuts can have important social functions, or other important social functions. A haircut can subtly indicate a non-mainstream sexual preference, for example homosexuality in a predominantly heterosexual society. Maybe it will cause considerable disruption to some societies if this subtle indicator is not available. People will leave or perform worse at work. “But are we not all liberal now?” We may not live in ideally liberal circumstances. Various people from various communities still feel uncomfortable with open expression of preferences in a widely understood language. (“You feel uncomfortable with expressing anything, it seems to me.” I am not sure if my speech is fully governed by economic rationality, e.g. “Just take a side in a debate and assert it firmly, because it is too much use of resources to think carefully about what is really the case.”)

4. A problem. If you think that the distribution of goods/services should only be on the basis of need and so haircut distribution should only be on the basis of need, then you probably think the government should be responsible for the distribution: for who gets to have a haircut (in a given period of time, e.g. this week!) and who does not. But what if people need certain haircuts or society needs certain haircuts as a subtle indicator of sexuality. How can the government get involved with subtle indicators of sexuality by means of haircut? A government policy in a liberal society should ideally be transparent and justifiable to all citizens.



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