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NOZICK'S MINIMAL STATE IN POSTCOLONIAL NIGERIA: A HERMENEUTIC INQUIRY

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Abstract

This paper offers a hermeneutic engagement with Robert Nozick's theory of the minimal state as articulated in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. It situates it within the concrete political, constitutional, and socio-historical realities of Nigeria. Rather than treating Nozick's libertarianism as a prescriptive policy model, the paper reads it dialogically following Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons, where Nozick's late-twentieth-century libertarian critique encounters Nigeria's postcolonial statehood, federal structure, and constitutional commitment to security and welfare. The analysis examines key points of tension and convergence around coercion, redistribution, taxation, regulation, and consent, highlighting how Nigeria's expansive state functions challenge Nozick's night-watchman ideal while simultaneously exposing the normative limits of regulatory maximalism. The paper argues that although a strictly Nozickean minimal state is neither feasible nor normatively adequate for Nigeria's conditions of insecurity, inequality, and institutional fragility; Nozick's rights-based minimalism offers critical resources for diagnosing state overreach, patronage, and means-ends slippage. The study concludes by proposing a modified minimalism; one that preserves Nozick's emphasis on inviolable rights and limited interference while acknowledging Nigeria's constitutional, cultural, and historical imperatives of welfare, inclusion, and communal responsibility.

Keywords: Hermeneutic Analysis, Justice and Fairness, Libertarianism, Minimal State, Nigerian Governance.

Introduction

Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* remains one of the most provocative defenses of libertarian political philosophy in contemporary political thought. Against both anarchism and redistributive liberalism, Nozick famously argues that the minimal state (restricted to the protection of persons against force, theft, fraud, and the enforcement of contracts) is the most extensive form of state that can be morally justified. Any expansion beyond these narrow functions, he contends, constitutes an unjust violation of individual rights grounded in self-ownership and the separateness of persons. Nozick's project is thus not merely institutional but fundamentally moral: it seeks to delineate the ethical limits of political authority.

Yet, the apparent elegance of Nozick's minimalism raises a persistent question when read beyond its original context: how does such a theory fare when placed in dialogue with postcolonial states marked by deep inequality, fragile institutions, communal moral economies, and constitutional commitments to welfare and inclusion? Nigeria presents a particularly instructive context for this inquiry. As a postcolonial federation with an expansive bureaucratic apparatus, entrenched redistributive expectations, and ongoing security crises, Nigeria embodies conditions that appear, at first glance, profoundly inhospitable to Nozick's night-watchman state.

This paper does not approach Nozick's theory as a ready-made blueprint for Nigerian governance, nor does it dismiss it as culturally or historically unapplicable. Instead, it adopts a hermeneutic approach, inspired by Gadamer's account of understanding as a fusion of horizons. On this reading, Nozick's text acquires meaning through its encounter with Nigeria's constitutional order, political culture, and lived practices of governance. The task, therefore, is interpretive rather than merely evaluative: to examine how Nozick's libertarian commitments re-frame Nigerian state practices, and how Nigerian realities, in turn, expose the assumptions, limits, and blind spots of Nozick's minimalism. The paper demonstrates that while Nigeria's constitutional and cultural commitments render a strictly Nozickean state untenable, Nozick's insistence on inviolable rights and skepticism toward patterned coercion offers a powerful normative lens for critiquing state overreach, rent-seeking, and illiberal governance. In this sense, the encounter between Nozick and Nigeria is not one of simple rejection or adoption, but of critical cross-illumination.

Nozick's Libertarianism and Minimal State Thesis

Nozick is a thorough libertarian and his notion of justice (upon which his idea of minimal state is hinged) is edged on the core principles of libertarianism. Etymologically, the concept 'libertarianism' is derived from the Latin word *liber* or *libertas*, which means *liberty or freedom*. Liberty means "the absence of constraints and not the absence of restraints and limitation" (Johari, 2012). It is the extent to which the individual can determine his own destiny and act as he wishes, unconstrained by others. Liberalism/Libertarianism refers to a political philosophy first formulated during the Enlightenment in response to the growth of modern nation-states which centralize governmental functions and claim authority to exercise coercive power within their boundaries (Johari, 2012). One of its central theses has long been that a government's claim to authority is justified only if the government can show those who live under it that it secures their liberty. A core tenet of contemporary liberalism is that government must be neutral in debates about the good human life (Ryan, 1993). Libertarians also posit that the role of the State is to protect and ensure the sustenance of the rights and welfare of the citizens. This why Nozick described the just state as the minimal state; the one that does not unduly intervene in the lives of the citizens except such interventions is necessary to protect and ensure the rights of citizens.

The main purpose of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Nozick's major work) is to show that the minimal state, and only the minimal state, is morally justified. By a minimal state, Nozick means a state that functions essentially as a "night watchman," with powers limited to those necessary to protect citizens against violence, theft, and fraud (Duignan, 2025). By arguing that the minimal state is justified, Nozick seeks to refute anarchism, which opposes any state whatsoever. By arguing that no more than the minimal state is justified, Nozick seeks to refute modern forms of liberalism, as well as socialism and other leftist ideologies, which contend that, in addition to its powers as a night watchman, the state should have the powers to regulate the economic activities of citizens, to redistribute wealth in the direction of greater equality, and to provide social services such as education and health care (Duignan, 2025).

Nozick's starting point, as radical as it sounds, is a society in which no government exists. In this situation, he maintains that people largely, although not entirely, respect the rights and liberties of others. Among these rights are self-ownership and the right to acquire property; otherwise, economic liberty. This economic liberty is identified with capitalism. He regards economic liberty as central to other types of liberty like political and individual liberties. He argues, ". . . economic liberty is the most important kind of freedom, both in itself and as the supposed foundation of all the other kinds of liberty... that communism lacks freedom of speech and freedom of religion and so on, is because it restricts economic liberty" (Nozick, 1974, p. 149). Nozickian (libertarian) minimal state discourages taxation calling it a "legalized plunder. The argument here is that it limits the liberty of the individual to act as he wishes regarding that portion of his income. Nozick opposes vehemently the Rawlsian idea of 'redistribution of property' in order to rectify the injustices which were committed in acquiring some of them and balance up, a sort of, the inequalities among individuals. He condemns it since this position boils down to taxing the rich in order to help the poorer ones. We shall see this argument in detail latter.

Nozick believes that a state should be 'minimal' concerning itself only with narrow functions of protection of citizens against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on; that any more extensive functions given to the State would violate persons' rights not to be forced into doing certain things, and this is unjustified; and that the minimal state is inspiring as well as right (Boylan, 2001).

Freedom and Rights of Citizens as Persons

Regarding the maintenance of law and order, Nozick is reluctant in accepting it as included in the State's job. He suggests: "even police protection ought ideally to be paid for directly by those who wish to buy such protection and can afford it" (Teichman, 1991, p.127). Nozick consistently repeated his claims that the minimal state is the only morally justifiable form of government. This contention rests upon his

understanding of the separateness of each person, the existence of inviolable rights, and the side constraint that these rights impose on the behavior of others. He claims that persons are rational and they are moral agents, for they have free will. In addition, they have the ability to regulate and guide their lives in accordance with some overall conception of their choice. Nozick (1974) asserts, thus: "A person is a being able to formulate long term plans for its life, able to consider and decide on the basis of abstract principles or considerations it formulates to itself and hence not merely the plaything of immediate stimuli, a being able to limit its own behavior in accordance with some principles or picture it has of what an appropriate life is for itself and others and so on" (p. 49). He points out that when a person shapes his or her life in accordance with some overall plan, that person gives meaning to his or her life. Persons, as such, are separate entities capable of determining the meaning and direction of their lives. In other words, "we are all separate existences capable of leading separate lives" (Nozick, 1974, p. 33). For Nozick, the significance of each person's possession of self-ownership is that people should not be used as resources or as means of achieving some end. "It is wrong," he states, "to treat people as if they are merely of instrumental worth, or to sacrifice one person for another" (Nozick, 1974, p. 33). The separateness of each person means that each person's body and liberty are separate and distinct from those of others. They belong to each person and not to someone else. As such, Nozick argues that only each person has the right to decide what happens to her or his life, body, liberty or property. Being inviolable and exhaustive, these rights are absolute. He claims that the rights of others determine the constraints on our actions (Nozick, 1974, p. 29). That is, a person's rights are not merely superficial claims that can be overridden. Rather, they are boundaries not to be crossed without the free consent of the person whose rights they are. Elaborating on this, Nozick avers that "there are different individuals with separate lives and so no one may be sacrificed for others, and this underlies the existence of moral side constraints, but it also leads to a libertarian side constraint that prohibits aggression against another" (Nozick, 1974, p. 33). Therefore, a person cannot violate the rights of others through either interference or aggression. Nor can a person infringe upon other people's rights in pursuit of some object or goal, even if that goal is to achieve an overall minimization of the violation of rights. It is on this basis, therefore, that Nozick rejects utilitarianism.

Hermeneutic Engagement: Nozick and Nigeria in Dialogue

Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* presents a libertarian vision of the minimal state, arguing that governmental functions should be restricted to protection against force, theft, and fraud, with any expansion beyond these roles constituting an unjust violation of individual rights. However, applying Nozick's framework to Nigeria (a postcolonial state with an expansive bureaucratic apparatus, entrenched welfare expectations, and complex ethno-political dynamics) reveals profound tensions. This tension requires a hermeneutic engagement.

A hermeneutic reading does not treat *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* as a policy manual but as a text whose meaning is completed in dialogue with a new horizon- here, contemporary Nigerian governance. Following Gadamer, understanding arises as a fusion of horizons whereby the interpreter's world (in this case, post-colonial Nigerian statehood) meets the text's world (Nozick's late-20th-century libertarian critique). This demands reflexive awareness of our own "prejudices" and historical situatedness rather than bracketing them out (Gadamer, 2004). The payoff is not to domesticate Nozick to Nigerian realities, nor to dismiss him as inapplicable, but to test how the text re-frames practice and how practice re-reads the text.

Two starting theses from Nozick orient the dialogue. First, "the minimal state is the most extensive state that can be justified. Any state more extensive violates people's rights" (Nozick, 1974, p. 149). Second, patterned redistributions cannot be maintained without continuous coercion; as his famous "Wilt Chamberlain" example shows, voluntary exchanges will upset any prior pattern. He also insists that using people's holdings for social ends without consent stands in a deep moral tension with self-ownership (e.g., his contrast between taxing labour/leisure and forced service). Set against this, Nigeria's grand norm encodes a broad conception of state purpose: the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government and public authority must be exercised on the basis of *federal character* to secure inclusion (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN) 1999, s. 14(2)(b), s. 14(3)). Already the horizons diverge. In the sense that Nozick's night-watchman ideal foregrounds rights-constraint and protection; Nigeria's basic law yokes *security* to *welfare* and *representation* as coequal ends. Thus, bringing Nozick into Nigeria shifts the stakes of three claims:

Coercion and distribution

In a low-trust, post-rentier federation with large inter-regional disparities like Nigeria, redistribution is not a mere "pattern" but a stabilizing device of federal bargaining (e.g., constitutionally recognized 13% derivation for oil-producing states and regular FAAC sharing). The Revenue Mobilization Allocation and Fiscal Commission explicitly computes and monitors these transfers as a standing function of the federation. The hermeneutic question becomes whether Nozick's worry about continuous interference to maintain a distribution maps onto a system where distribution is the institutionalized background rule of the union, not a periodically imposed pattern.

Taxation and self-ownership

Nozick's memorable claim that taxing earnings is morally akin to appropriating a slice of a person's labour (Nozick, 1974, p. 170) loses some intuitive grip where the constitution charges the state to pursue welfare as a primary end (CFRN, 1999, p 14 (2)(b)). The meaning of taxation in Nigeria is mediated by the federation's distributive compact and by the attempt (however imperfect) to compensate for volatile commodity rents and grave horizontal inequalities (World Bank, 2022).

State neutrality and plural social orders.

Nozick's view presumes a robust civil society of rights bearing individuals engaged in consent-based exchanges. Nigeria political culture, shaped by colonial rule and post-colonial patrimonialism, exhibits what Peter Ekeh (1975) called the "two publics": a moral, particularistic "primordial" sphere and an amoral, extractive "civic" sphere (pp. 92-99). In such a setting, state action is constantly translated through communal obligations and identity claims- complicating any clean line between forbidding capitalist acts among consenting adults and legitimately regulating markets for public order.

Interpretative Comparative Lens: Security, Welfare, and Regulation

1. Security

Nozick's minimal state prioritizes rights-protection against force, theft, and fraud. Nigeria's security environment, by contrast, requires a thick repertoire of internal and external coercive capabilities due to protracted insurgency in the North-East (Boko Haram and ISWAP), rural banditry/kidnapping in the North-West/Central, and separatist tensions in parts of the South-East. These conflicts have forced the state into sustained counterinsurgency and stabilization roles, which far exceed Nozick's night watchman picture. The 2020 #EndSARS protests sharpen the hermeneutic test. A Nozickian state must not violate side constraints while protecting security; thus, the suppression of peaceful assembly and excessive force would be normatively disallowed even if motivated by order maintenance. Nigerian investigative processes (including the Lagos State Judicial Panel) documented serious rights violations and recommended remedies, revealing a gap between constitutional promise and on-ground practice (Lagos State, 2021). In hermeneutic terms, Nigerian practice re-reads Nozick to stress that the manner of security provision (accountability, proportionality, due process) is as constitutive of legitimacy as the fact of provision itself.

On another note, Nozick argues that the state must hold a monopoly on legitimate force to prevent anarchic private enforcement. However, Nigeria's security apparatus is fragmented, with state forces competing with vigilante groups (e.g., Amotekun in the Southwest, Ebube Agu in the Southeast) and insurgents (Boko Haram, bandits). The state's failure to provide security has led to localized self-help mechanisms, which Nozick might classify as "dominant protective association" (Nozick, 1974, p. 15). Yet, these groups often operate outside legal frameworks, raising questions about legitimacy- a problem Nozick's theory does not fully address in contexts of state fragility.

2. Welfare

For Nozick, mandatory redistribution for patterned ends (e.g., to meet a target of equality) will continuously abridge liberty; where aid occurs, it should be through voluntary transfers or, at most, very limited rectification of past injustice (Nozick, 1974, pp. 150-153). Nigeria's constitutionally framed welfare charge plus federal transfers and special derivation insert a standing redistributive architecture

into the state's identity. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) regularly reports FAAC disbursements to all tiers, including the 13% derivation to oil-producing states, underscoring how welfare adjacent redistribution is woven into fiscal federalism (NBS, 2022). The hermeneutic shift is that "pattern maintenance" is not episodic coercion but the federal background rule by which the political community holds together. A concrete policy example is the reform of petroleum subsidies. A strict Nozickian would applaud lifting a distortionary transfer (a coercively funded pattern), but would also insist that whatever follows respects voluntary exchange and strong property rights. Nigeria's removal of fuel subsidy (2023) was coupled with promises of targeted social investment- an attempt to square efficiency with constitutional welfare commitments (BBC, 2023). The interpretive upshot is a hybrid: price liberalization plus compensatory transfers to buffer shocks on the most vulnerable within a constitutional welfare horizon.

In a nutshell, Nozick vehemently opposes redistributive policies, framing them as "forced labor". Nigeria, however, has numerous welfare programs (e.g., N-Power, TraderMoni, Conditional Cash Transfer, National Social Investment Programme, Student Lone Scheme, etc) aimed at poverty alleviation. While these programs are often inefficient and politicized (Ojo, 2020), their existence reflects societal expectations of state welfare, rooted in communal African values that prioritize collective well-being over strict individualism (Gyekye, 1997). Nozick's rejection of redistribution clashes with these cultural norms, illustrating how his libertarian assumptions may not align with Nigerian socio-ethical frameworks.

3. Regulation

Nozick (1974) warns that maintaining patterned ends leads to recurrent prohibitions on mutually consensual transactions. Nigeria's regulatory reach is conspicuous: e.g., the NIN-SIM linkage policy requiring all mobile lines to be tied to a national ID as a security and anti-fraud measure (NCC, 2020/2024); and the 2019-2020 land border closure to curb smuggling and protect local production- imposing a sweeping constraint on otherwise legal cross border commerce (World Bank, 2022). From a Nozickian lens, such measures look like overreach unless justified as narrowly tailored rights protection. From a Nigerian constitutional lens, they are intelligible as instruments to realize "security and welfare," but their legitimacy turns on proportionality, transparency, and measurable efficacy.

Nozick's minimal state would oppose Nigeria's heavy economic regulations, such as import restrictions and currency controls. Yet, Nigeria's regulatory interventions are often responses to external pressures (e.g., IMF-imposed structural adjustments in the 1980s) and internal crises (e.g., inflation, capital flight) (Adebayo, 2018). While Nozick would argue for market self-regulation, Nigeria's historical experience with exploitative trade relations (from colonialism to neoliberalism) complicates the feasibility of a laissez-faire approach.

Convergence, Divergences and Cross illumination

Nigeria's 1999 Constitution (as amended) formally enshrines principles of limited government, rule of law, and democratic accountability. Yet, in practice, the Nigerian state is expansive, interventionist, and frequently dysfunctional. In the following, the paper hermeneutically examines the convergences (where Nozick's theory and Nigerian governance align), and divergences (where they fundamentally conflict), while also demonstrating how Nozick's libertarian model could realistically function in Nigeria's postcolonial context.

1. Recognition of the Need for State Protection of Rights

Nozick's justification for the state rests on the necessity of a monopoly of force to prevent societal collapse into violent anarchy. Similarly, Nigeria's constitution explicitly mandates state protection of life, property, and security (Section 14(2)(b)). Both frameworks acknowledge that without a state enforcing basic order, individual rights become precarious. However, the Nigerian state fails spectacularly in this role. This failure is exemplified in the following: Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and communal violence demonstrate state incapacity (Campbell, 2011); police brutality (e.g., #EndSARS protests) and military abuses reveal that state forces often become predators rather than protectors (Human Rights Watch, 2020); vigilante groups (e.g., Amotekun, Hisbah) emerge to fill security voids, mirroring Nozick's "private protective associations," but without evolving into a legitimate monopoly. All these suggest that while Nigeria formally accepts and constitutionally operates based on Nozick's premise of state-protected rights; in practice, it resembles a failed minimal state- one that is weak, corrupt, and unable to fulfill even its most basic functions.

2. Formal democratic structures and the illusion of consent

Nozick (1974) argues that a legitimate state must arise from individual consent. Nigeria, as a democracy, theoretically operates on popular sovereignty, with elections serving as the mechanism for collective consent. In this way, Nigeria technically or even theoretically aligns with Nozick's idea of consent. Yet, Nigerian democracy is deeply flawed:

- i) Elections are marred by rigging, violence, and voter suppression (Madueke, 2025).
- ii) Low voter turnout and public apathy reflect widespread disillusionment (INEC, 2023).
- iii) The state's colonial origins mean it was never truly formed through voluntary association but imposed by British rule (Mamdani, 1996).

Thus, while Nigeria formally resembles Nozick's consensual state; in reality, it operates more as an extractive oligarchy where governance is imposed rather than voluntarily accepted. In other words, even in the subtle ways Nigeria governance system converges with Nozick's minimalist blueprint, the system still faces several grave challenges that undermine the democratic culture that Nozick's 'minimalism' presupposes.

The minimal state may appear “too thin” for a federation grappling with insurgency and structural poverty. Yet Nozick reminds Nigeria that even expansive aims are bounded by rights, and that means/ends slippage (using illiberal means for social ends) corrodes legitimacy. Nozick’s skepticism about patterned ends helps diagnose regulatory maximalism (e.g., border closures) that impose large deadweight losses without proportional public-order gains. His critique cautions that “pattern maintenance” can become a standing justification for needless encroachments (Nozick, 1974). This is evident in Nigeria, where in the name of federal revenue derivation and allocation, the great oil reserves in the Niger Delta is used to serve the interests of other regions more than those of Niger Deltans. In terms of the right political culture, Ekeh’s (1996) “two publics” and Nigeria’s federal character principle alert Nozickians to the fact that justice in holdings cannot be unpacked without attention to historical injuries, representational inclusion, and trust. Conversely, Nozick pushes Nigerian debates to distinguish rectification and welfare from rent seeking and patronage, demanding rigorous rights-based justification for each coercive measure.

Nozick’s Minimalism and the Nigeria Polity: Tension and Synthesis

Nigeria’s 1999 Constitution, particularly Chapter II, outlines socioeconomic rights, including the right to education, healthcare, and economic welfare. These provisions reflect a commitment to distributive justice, aligning more closely with John Rawls’ theory of justice, which prioritizes fairness and support for the least advantaged (Rawls, 1971). Nozick’s minimal state, by contrast, rejects such obligations as violations of individual liberty. This creates an ethical tension: implementing Nozick’s framework would require amending or ignoring constitutional mandates, raising questions about legitimacy and public consent.

Philosophically, Nozick’s libertarianism prioritizes negative liberty (freedom from interference) over positive liberty (access to resources enabling self-actualization). In Nigeria, where systemic poverty limits positive liberty, Nozick’s approach could be seen as ethically inadequate. Amartya Sen’s capability approach, which emphasizes enabling individuals to achieve valued functioning, offers a counterpoint, arguing that freedom is meaningless without access to basic needs (Sen, 1999). Nigeria’s constitutional framework aligns more with Sen’s perspective, suggesting that a minimal state could undermine the state’s moral obligations.

The feasibility of a minimal state in Nigeria hinges on balancing libertarian principles with practical realities. While reducing bureaucratic corruption and empowering private initiatives are compelling benefits, the risks of deepened inequality and neglect of vulnerable populations are significant. Nigeria’s ethnic diversity and history of communal tensions necessitate a state capable of mediating conflicts and ensuring equitable resource distribution. A purely Nozickean state, by withdrawing from redistributive roles, could exacerbate ethnic and regional disparities, potentially fueling violence. For instance, the Niger Delta’s agitation over resource control highlights the need for state intervention to

address historical injustices, which Nozick's rectification principle might not adequately resolve in practice.

Moreover, Nigeria's weak institutional framework poses challenges to implementing a minimal state. Nozick assumes a robust legal system to enforce contracts and protect rights, but Nigeria's judiciary and police are often compromised by corruption and inefficiency. Without addressing these structural weaknesses, a minimal state could lead to a power vacuum, where private entities or militias assume state-like functions, as seen in parts of Nigeria controlled by non-state actors (Lenshie et al, 2024).

Nozick's theory offers a radical critique of Nigeria's bloated state apparatus, which often serves elite interests rather than the public good. However, its application in Nigeria raises practical and ethical concerns. The potential for reduced corruption is appealing, but without a strong institutional framework, privatization could lead to cronyism, as seen in Nigeria's past privatization efforts (e.g., the power sector reforms of 2013). Similarly, while private initiatives could drive growth, Nigeria's market is not sufficiently developed to replace state-provided services for the poor.

Ethically, Nozick's libertarianism clashes with Nigeria's communal values, where solidarity and collective welfare are culturally significant. The Igbo concept of *Igwebuike* (strength in unity) and the Yoruba emphasis on *omoluwabi* (communal responsibility) suggest a cultural preference for collective support systems, which a minimal state might undermine. Philosophically, Nozick's focus on individual rights overlooks the structural inequalities that shape Nigeria's socioeconomic landscape, aligning more with Western individualism than African communitarianism. A hybrid approach might offer a compromise: a leaner state that prioritizes anti-corruption measures and private-sector growth while maintaining targeted social programs. This would align with Nozick's emphasis on liberty while addressing Nigeria's constitutional and cultural commitments to socioeconomic rights.

Essentially, the idea of a *modified minimal state* (one that remains minimal in political interference yet strong in rights protection) offers a pragmatic middle ground for Nigeria's democratic realities. While Nozick's model strictly limits state functions to rights enforcement, Nigeria's 1999 Constitution enshrines socioeconomic objectives under its Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy (FRN, 1999, Ch. II, s. 16), implicitly mandating the state to address inequality and social welfare. A purely Nozickian state, shorn of these redistributive duties, could risk exacerbating Nigeria's already sharp inequalities (Aigbedion & Anyanwu, 2025). Thus, a modified approach would emphasize the Nozickian core (non-intrusive governance in economic decision-making) while strengthening state institutions that protect citizens' civil liberties, property rights, and access to justice. This is especially relevant given Nigeria's persistent challenges with arbitrary arrests, land disputes, and bureaucratic corruption (Okafor & Eze, 2025). In practice, this could mean maintaining private-sector-led growth while constitutional safeguards ensure that rights violations are met with swift and impartial redress. This modification may be achieved by blending Nozick's minimalism with African communitarianism.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Robert Nozick's theory of the minimal state, when read hermeneutically and situated within Nigeria's postcolonial context, reveals both its enduring normative force and its practical limitations. A strictly Nozickian night-watchman state (one that eschews redistribution, welfare provision, and broad regulatory authority) is neither feasible nor ethically sufficient for a polity grappling with pervasive insecurity, structural poverty, and historically entrenched inequalities. Nigeria's constitutional commitment to security and welfare, its federal redistributive arrangements, and its communitarian moral traditions all place substantial distance between Nigerian statehood and Nozick's libertarian ideal.

Nonetheless, this distance should not obscure the critical value of Nozick's minimalism. His emphasis on the separateness of persons, the inviolability of rights, and the moral dangers of treating individuals as instruments for social ends offers a sharp diagnostic tool for interrogating Nigeria's expansive and often illiberal state practices. Nozick remind us that welfare-oriented goals do not automatically legitimate coercive means, and that state legitimacy is undermined when security, redistribution, or regulation is pursued without proportionality, accountability, and respect for basic rights.

The hermeneutic encounter between Nozick and Nigeria thus yields neither wholesale endorsement nor outright rejection, but a qualified synthesis. A modified minimalism (one that remains minimalist in political interference yet robust in rights protection) emerges as a more plausible normative orientation for Nigeria's democratic realities. Such an approach would preserve Nozick's core insight that liberty sets moral limits on state action, while recognising Nigeria's constitutional obligations, historical injuries, and communal values that necessitate targeted welfare and redistributive mechanisms.

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