

The Experience Machine

by Robert Nozick (1974, 1989)

Excerpt from *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974)

What matters other than how people's experiences feel "from the inside"? Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience that you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences? If you are worried about missing out on desirable experiences, we can suppose that business enterprises have researched thoroughly the lives of many others. You can pick and choose from their large library or smorgasbord of such experiences, selecting your life's experiences for, say, the next two years. After two years have passed, you will have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank, to select the experiences of your *next* two years. Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? *What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?* Nor should you refrain because of the few moments of distress between the moment you've decided and the moment you're plugged. What's a few moments of distress compared to a lifetime of bliss (if that's what you choose), and why feel any distress at all if your decision *is* the best one?

What does matter to us in addition to our experiences? First, we want to *do* certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them. In the case of certain experiences, it is only because first we want to do the actions that we want the experiences of doing them or thinking we've done them. (But *why* do we want to do the activities rather than merely to experience them?) A second reason for not plugging in is that we want to *be* a certain way, to be a certain sort of person. Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob. There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has been long in the tank. Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving? It's not merely that it's difficult to tell; there's no way he is. Plugging into the machine is a kind of suicide. It will seem to some, trapped by a picture, that nothing about what we are like can matter except as it gets reflected in our experiences. But should it be surprising that what *we are* is important to us? Why should we be concerned only with how our time is filled, but not with what we are?

Thirdly, plugging into an experience machine limits us to a man-made reality, to a world no deeper or more important than that which people can construct. There is no *actual* contact with any deeper reality, though the experience of it can be simulated. Many persons desire to leave themselves open to such

contact and to a plumbing of deeper significance. This clarifies the intensity of the conflict over psychoactive drugs, which some view as mere local experience machines, and others view as avenues to a deeper reality; what some view as equivalent to surrender to the experience machine, others view as following one of the reasons *not* to surrender!

We learn that something matters to us in addition to experience by imagining an experience machine and then realizing that we would not use it. We can continue to imagine a sequence of experience machines each designed to fill lacks suggested for the earlier machines. For example, since the experience machine doesn't meet our desire to *be* a certain way, imagine a transformation machine which transforms us into whatever sort of person we'd like to be (compatible with our staying us). Surely one would not use the transformation machine to become as one would wish, and thereupon plug into the experience machine! So something matters in addition to one's experiences *and* what one is like. Nor is the reason merely that one's experiences are unconnected with what one is like. For the experience machine might be limited to provide only experiences possible to the sort of person plugged in. Is it that we want to make a difference in the world? Consider then the result machine, which produces in the world any result you would produce and injects your vector input into any joint activity. We shall not pursue here the fascinating details of these or other machines. What is most disturbing about them is their living of our lives for us. Is it misguided to search for *particular* additional functions beyond the competence of machines to do for us? Perhaps what we desire is to live (an active verb) ourselves, in contact with reality. (And this, machines cannot do *for* us.) Without elaborating on the implications of this, which I believe connect surprisingly with issues about free will and causal accounts of knowledge, we need merely note the intricacy of the question of what matters *for people* other than their experiences. Until one finds a satisfactory answer, and determines that this answer does not *also* apply to animals, one cannot reasonably claim that only the felt experiences of animals limit what we may do to them.

Excerpt from *The Examined Life* (1989)

Some theorists have claimed that happiness is the *only* important thing about life; all that should matter to a person—they say—is being happy; the sole standard for assessing a life is the amount or quantity of happiness it contains. ... [I]n these moments, almost everything seems wonderful: the way the sun shines, the way that person looks, the way water glistens on the river, the way the dogs play (yet not the way the murderer kills). ... Happiness can be precious, perhaps even preeminent, yet still be one important thing among others.

There are various ways to nibble away at the apparent obviousness of the view that happiness is the one thing that is important. First, even if happiness were the only thing we cared about, we would not care solely about its total amount. ... We would care also about how that happiness was distributed within a lifetime. Imagine graphing someone's total happiness through life; the amount

of happiness is represented on the vertical axis, time on the horizontal one. ... If only the total amount of happiness mattered, we would be indifferent between a life of constantly increasing happiness and one of constant decrease, between an upward- and a downward-sloping curve, provided that the total amount of happiness, the total area under the curve, was the same in the two cases. Most of us, however, would prefer the upward-sloping line to the downward; we would prefer a life of increasing happiness to one of decrease. ... (Which life would you prefer your children to have, one of decline or of advance?)

We would be willing, moreover, to give up some amount of happiness to get our lives' narratives moving in the right direction, improving in general. Even if a downwardly sloping curve had slightly more area under it, we would prefer our own lives to slope upward. (If it encompassed vastly greater area, the choice might be different.) Therefore, the contour of the happiness has an independent weight, beyond breaking ties among lives whose total amounts of happiness are equal. In order to gain a more desirable narrative direction, we sometimes would choose *not* to maximize our total happiness. And if the factor of narrative direction might justify forgoing some amount of happiness, so other factors might also. ...

We also can show that more matters than pleasure or happiness by considering a life that has these but otherwise is empty, a life of mindless pleasures or bovine contentment or frivolous amusements only, a happy life but a superficial one. "It is better," John Stuart Mill wrote, "to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." And although it might be best of all to be Socrates satisfied, having both happiness and depth, we would give up some happiness in order to gain the depth. ...

Since pleasure alone seemed too much tied to immediate sensation or excitement, some philosophers modulated the pleasure principle by distinguishing some kinds of pleasure as "higher." But even if this distinction between higher and lower pleasures were adequately formulated—something that hasn't yet been done—this would only add complications to the issue of choice: Can some amount of lower pleasure outweigh a higher pleasure? How much higher are the higher pleasures and do they too differ in their height? What is the overarching goal that incorporates this qualitative distinction? The distinction does not say that something different from pleasure also is important, just that the one thing that is important, pleasure, comes in different grades. ...

By a pleasure or a pleasurable feeling I mean a feeling that is desired (partly) because of its own felt qualities. The feeling is not desired wholly because of what it leads to or enables you to do or because of some injunction it fulfills. If it is pleasurable, it is desired (in part at least) because of the felt qualities it has. I do not claim there is just one felt quality that always is present whenever pleasure occurs. Being pleasurable, as I use this term, is a function of being wanted partly for its own felt qualities, whatever these qualities may be. On this

view, a masochist who desires pain for its own felt quality will find pain pleasurable. This is awkward, but no more so than masochism itself. ...

We care about things in addition to how our lives feel to us from the inside. This is shown by the following thought experiment. Imagine a machine that could give you any experience (or sequence of experiences) you might desire. When connected to this experience machine, you can have the experience of writing a great poem or bringing about world peace or loving someone and being loved in return. You can experience the felt pleasures of these things, how they feel "from the inside." You can program your experiences for tomorrow, or this week, or this year, or even for the rest of your life. If your imagination is impoverished, you can use the library of suggestions extracted from biographies and enhanced by novelists and psychologists. You can live your fondest dreams "from the inside." Would you choose to do this for the rest of your life? If not, why not? (Other people also have the same option of using these machines which, let us suppose, are provided by friendly and trustworthy beings from another galaxy, so you need not refuse connecting in order to help others.) The question is not whether to try the machine temporarily, but whether to enter it for the rest of your life. Upon entering, you will not remember having done this; so no pleasures will get ruined by realizing they are machine-produced. Uncertainty too might be programmed by using the machine's optional random device (upon which various preselected alternatives can depend).

The question of whether to plug in to this experience machine is a question of value. (It differs from two related questions: an epistemological one—Can you know you are not already plugged in?—and a metaphysical one—Don't the machine experiences themselves constitute a real world?) The question is not whether plugging in is preferable to extremely dire alternatives—lives of torture, for instance—but whether plugging in would constitute the very best life, or tie for being best, because all that matters about a life is how it feels from the inside.

Notice that this is a *thought* experiment, designed to isolate one question: Do only our internal feelings matter to us? It would miss the point, then, to focus upon whether such a machine is technologically feasible. Also, the machine example must be looked at on its own; to answer the question by filtering it through a fixed view that internal experiences are the only things that *can* matter (so of course it would be all right to plug into the machine) would lose the opportunity to test that view independently. One way to determine if a view is inadequate is to check its consequences in particular cases, sometimes extreme ones, but if someone always decided what the result should be in any case by *applying* the given view itself, this would preclude discovering it did not correctly fit the case. Readers who hold they *would* plug in to the machine should notice whether their first impulse was *not* to do so, followed later by the thought that since only experiences could matter, the machine would be all right after all.

Few of us really think that only a person's experiences matter. We would not wish for our children a life of great satisfactions that all depended upon deceptions they would never detect: although they take pride in artistic accomplishments, the critics and their friends too are just pretending to admire their work yet snicker behind their backs; the apparently faithful mate carries on secret love affairs; their apparently loving children really detest them; and so on. Few of us upon hearing this description would exclaim, "What a wonderful life! It feels so happy and pleasurable from the inside." That person is living in a dream world, taking pleasure in things that aren't so. What he wants, though, is not merely to take pleasure in them; he *wants them to be so*. He values their being that way, and he takes pleasure in them because he thinks they *are* that way. He doesn't take pleasure merely in *thinking* they are.

We care about more than just how things feel to us from the inside; there is more to life than feeling happy. We care about what is actually the case. We want certain situations we value, prize, and think important to actually hold and be so. We want our beliefs, or certain of them, to be true and accurate; we want our emotions, or certain important ones, to be based upon facts that hold and to be fitting. We want to be importantly connected to reality, not to live in a delusion. We desire this not simply in order to more reliably acquire pleasures or other experiences. ... Nor do we merely want the added pleasurable feeling of being connected to reality. Such an inner feeling, an illusory one, also can be provided by the experience machine.

What we want and value is an actual connection with reality. ... To focus on external reality, with your beliefs, evaluations, and emotions, is valuable *in itself* not just as a means to more pleasure or happiness. And it is this connecting that is valuable, not simply having within ourselves true beliefs. Favoring truth introduces, in a subterranean fashion, the value of the connecting anyway—why else would true beliefs be (intrinsically) more valuable within us than false ones? And if we want to connect to reality by knowing it, and not simply to have true beliefs, then if knowledge involves tracking the facts—a view I have developed elsewhere—this involves a direct and explicit external connection. We do not, of course, simply want contact with reality; we want contact of certain kinds: exploring reality and responding, altering it and creating new actuality ourselves. Notice that I am not saying simply that since we desire connection to actuality the experience machine is defective because it does not give us whatever we desire—though the example is useful to show we *do* desire some things in addition to experiences—for that would make "getting whatever you desire" the primary standard. Rather, I am saying that the connection to actuality is important whether or not we desire it—that is *why* we desire it—and the experience machine is inadequate because it doesn't give us *that*.

No doubt, too, we want a connection to actuality that we also share with other people. One of the distressing things about the experience machine, as described, is that you are alone in your particular illusion. (Is it more distressing that the others do not share your "world" or that you are cut off from the one

they do share?) However, we can imagine that the experience machine provides the very same illusion to everyone (or to everyone you care about), giving each person a coordinate piece of it. When all are floating in the *same* tank, the experience machine may not be as objectionable, but it is objectionable nevertheless. Sharing coordinate perspectives might be one criterion of actuality, yet it does not guarantee that; and it is *both* that we want, the actuality *and* the sharing.

Notice that we have not said one should never plug in to such a machine, even temporarily. It might teach you things, or transform you in a way beneficial for your actual life later. It also might give pleasures that would be quite acceptable in limited doses. This is all quite different from spending the rest of your life on the machine; the internal contents of *that* life would be unconnected to actuality. It seems too that once on the machine a person would not make any choices, and certainly would not choose anything freely. One portion of what we want to be actual is our actually (and freely) choosing, not merely the appearance of that. ...

Still, we might grant that happiness is not the whole story yet wonder whether it isn't most of the story, the most important part. How can one try to estimate percentages on a question like this? Judging by happiness's small role in my own reflections—much of my thinking here was called forth by the weight others have given to it—it is only a small part of the interesting story.

Nevertheless, I want to recall near the close of this meditation how undeniably wonderful happiness, and a happy disposition, can be. How natural then that sometimes we think happiness is the most important thing in life. Those moments when we want to leap or run with exuberant energy, when our heart is light—how could we not want to have our life full of moments like these? Things feel just right, and with its optimism happiness expects this to continue and with its generosity, happiness wants to overflow.

Of course we wish people to have many such moments and days of happiness. ... Yet it is not clear that we want those moments constantly or want our lives to consist wholly and only of them. We want to experience other feelings too, ones with valuable aspects that happiness does not possess as strongly. And even the very feelings of happiness may want to direct themselves into other activities, such as helping others or artistic work, which then involve the predominance of different feelings. We want experiences, fitting ones, of profound connection with others, of deep understanding of natural phenomena, of love, of being profoundly moved by music or tragedy, or doing something new and innovative, experiences very different from the bounce and rosiness of the happy moments. What we want, in short, is a life and a self that happiness is a fitting response to—and then to give it that response.