

THE EXPERIENCE MACHINE

There are also substantial puzzles when we ask what matters other than how *people's* experiences feel “from the inside.” Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience 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 long been 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.¹⁰ 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 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.

Again, let us examine a class of pleasures which occupy a very important place—according to some judges, the most important—in our sensitive existence : the pleasures of *pursuit*. These illustrate

peculiarly well the difference between the extra-regarding and self-regarding impulses, and also the dependence of pleasure on desire, instead of *vice versa*. Take, for example, the favourite amusement of rich Englishmen. What is the motive that impels a man to fox-hunting? It is not the pleasure of catching the fox. Nobody, before entering on the chase, represents to himself the killing of the fox as a source of gratification, apart from the eagerness produced by pursuit. It is upon this eagerness that the pleasure depends; the desire, stimulated to a strange intensity by vehement action, is the prior fact; and the pleasure arising when the desire is gratified is proportioned to the pre-existing desire. It will be said, however, that what the fox-hunter desires is, not to kill the fox, but to enjoy the pursuit. And, no doubt, this is his rational motive, that, in a tranquil state of his mind, initiates the whole series of actions. But the peculiarity of the case is that of these pleasures at which he rationally aims, the irrational desire to catch the fox is an essential condition. Before we can enjoy pursuing, we must temporarily want to catch—want it very vehemently and absorbingly. Hence the often-noted paradox which such activities present to the prudential reason: we cannot attain the prudentially rational end of maximum pleasure without exciting what are now* highly irrational impulses.

Another very important observation suggests itself in connection with these latter pleasures. In the case previously discussed, although we could distinguish appetite from the desire of the pleasures consisting in the satisfaction of appetite, there appeared no incompatibility between the two. The fact that the gourmand is dominated by the desire of the pleasures of eating in no way impedes the development in him of the appetite which is a necessary condition of these pleasures. But when we turn to the pleasures of the chase, we seem to perceive this incompatibility to a certain extent. In all forms of pursuit a certain enthusiasm is necessary to obtain full enjoyment. A man who enters on it in too epicurean a temper, thinking too much of the pleasure, does not catch the full spirit of the chase; his eagerness never gets just the sharpness of edge which imparts to the pleasure its highest zest and flavour. Here comes into view what we might call the fundamental paradox of hedonism, that the self-regarding impulse, if too predominant, defeats its own end. This effect is not visible, or at any rate is scarcely visible in the case of purely sensual pleasures; and also where there is a very keen, natural susceptibility in any direction, the operation of the general

* I do not enter into the history of these impulses. In dealing with questions of which the decision depends, as Mr. Mill says, on "practised self-consciousness and self-observation, assisted by observation of others," it seems to me important to put carefully aside the necessarily hypothetical method of historical psychology.

law is counteracted. Hence we see, first, why epicureanism has always had, practically, in ordinary minds, a tendency to sensualism, which it certainly has not theoretically, because sensual pleasures are least of all diminished by directly pursuing them; and, secondly, why it has not had this tendency in philosophic minds, because in them the intellectual impulse is so strong originally as to resist the corrosive effect of the epicurean principle. But of a great part of our more refined enjoyments, intellectual and emotional, it seems true to say that in order to attain them, at any rate in their best form, the direction of our impulse must be objective, extra-regarding, not fixed upon our own sensations as its end. The activities upon which the pleasures attend seem to require a certain self-abandonment, incompatible with the conscious predominance of self-love. For example, the pleasures of thought and study (which the materialist Hobbes declares to be "far exceeding all carnal delights") can only be enjoyed by those who have an ardour of curiosity which carries the mind temporarily away from self and its sensations. In all kinds of Art, again, the exercise of the creative faculty is attended by intense and exquisite pleasures; but in order to get them, one must forget them; the gaze of the artist is always said to be rapt and fixed upon his ideal of beauty. Still more clearly does the law appear when we contemplate the sympathetic activities and susceptibilities. Even Professor Bain admits that the desire to give pleasure to, and remove pain from, others constitutes an exception to his general theory that each individual's volition is determined by his own pleasures and pains, actual or ideal; and it is upon the existence of this strictly unselfish impulse that the much-commended pleasures of benevolence depend.

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Why Hedonism is False

The most obvious problem with existing hedonistic theories is that they are too inclusive: all sorts of shallow, fleeting pleasures are made to count towards happiness. Yet such pleasures manifestly play no constitutive role in determining how happy a person is. One's enjoyment of eating crackers, hearing a good song, sexual intercourse, scratching an itch, solving a puzzle, playing football, and so forth need not have the slightest impact on one's level of happiness (though, of course, they may). I enjoy, get pleasure from, a cheeseburger, yet I am patently not happier *thereby*. Conversely for superficial displeasures. The problem does not concern the intensity of such pleasures: an orgasm may well be intensely pleasurable, yet still fail to move one, to make one any happier (consider anonymous sex or masturbation)." Might the brief duration of the event be misleading our intuitions here? Not likely: it is not just that any particular superficial pleasure seems irrelevant. Even the whole pattern of such pleasures over time appears to be. We would certainly expect that someone who underwent an unrelenting succession of minor irritations would not be very happy at the end of it all. But this expectation is based not on the aggregation of particular pleasures but rather on the likely effect of these pleasures on some deeper aspect of one's psychology: one's mood, perhaps inter alia. Intuitively, the trouble seems to be that such pleasures don't reach "deeply" enough, so to speak. They just don't *get* to us; they flit through consciousness and that's the end of it.

This consideration alone appears to undermine any hedonistic account of which I am aware...