

■ Reading

"The Experience Machine"

ROBERT NOZICK

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In this excerpt Nozick explores what matters to us most, ultimately.

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 . . . 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 . . . Would you plug in? *What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?* . . .

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. . . . (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. . . . 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. . . .

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. . . . 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. . . . 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. . . . 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. . . . 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[,]. . . we need merely note the intricacy of the question of what matters *for people* other than their experiences.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Although Nozick is not explicitly addressing utilitarianism here, in what way(s) might this excerpt constitute a fundamental challenge for utilitarianism?
2. Would *you* go into the machine, for any extended period of time? Why not?