Robert Nozick, "The Experience Machine"

I. The Machine!

Remember that Bentham claimed the following,

Pleasure and only pleasure is good.1

Now, consider the following thought experiment.

Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper 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 experiences? [...] Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening [...] Would you plug in? (44-45)

Do you want to plug in? As Nozick puts it, "What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?" (613).

Nozick provides the following suggestions:

- 1. We want to *do* certain things and not just have the experience of having done them.
- 2. We want to *be* certain people to plug in is to commit a form of "suicide" (613).
- 3. We are limited to a *human-created reality*.

We thus learn according to Nozick that there are things which matter to us more than simply having certain experiences.

In fact, we can learn what we truly want be considering an array of different machines.

The transformation machine – this machine transforms us into being any sort of person we'd like.

The result machine – this machine produces whatever results you like or your contribution vector to the combined result.

 $^{^{\}scriptscriptstyle 1}$ George Sher in his introduction to Nozick's article puts the view as "pleasure, and only pleasure, matters to us. However, I take this to inadequate since what matters to us and what is good do not necessarily coincide.

Nozick concludes, "Perhaps what we desire is to live (an active web) ourselves, in contact with reality." (614)

II. What Does Nozick's Argument Show?

Presumably, Nozick's argument is as follows:

- 1. If all that mattered to us was pleasure, then we would want to plug into the experience machine.
- 2. However, we would not want plug-in.
- 3. Hence, there are things which matter to us besides pleasure.

The problem with Bentham's view is that it does not make sense of our *considered moral beliefs.*² Any good normative theory of value should make sense of the views we hold. However, Bentham's views don't appear to do that. We can see this in the following way; consider the following two possible worlds:

In world₁, you are in love with a person A, and A loves you back. You have a variety of experiences with A, and these experiences make you extremely pleased.

In world₂, you are in love with A, but A only pretends to love you back. In this world; however, A hates you. A puts up with you only because you buy A things. A cheats on you on a regular basis, but you never catch on to this. In fact, the experiences you have in this world are identical to the experiences you have in world₁.

According to Hedonism, you have no reason to pick $world_1$ as opposed to $world_2$ since the amount of pleasure experienced with be the by hypothesis. But clearly, $world_1$ is *better* than $world_2$. This only makes sense *if* Hedonism is false. Thus, Hedonism is incoherent with respect to our considered moral judgments.

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² A *considered moral belief* is a moral belief you have after having reflected upon it or would have if you had reflected upon it.