

the least. This is the principal difficulty in the evaluation of this subtle book, as in the evaluation of mysticism as a whole.

#### REFERENCE

<sup>1</sup>Richard Taylor, *With Heart and Mind* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973). Proem plus 147 pages. All numbers parenthesized in the text refer to pages in this book.

### THE MYTH OF THE SUPER PLEASURE HELMET

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What if there were a shortcut to true happiness? What if true happiness could be provided artificially? Would it be good to take the shortcut? In a recent contribution to *Thought*, William Davis argues that if there were such a shortcut, it would be good to take it; Davis quickly dampens get-happy-quick schemes, however, by suggesting that the envisioned shortcut will probably never be found.<sup>1</sup>

Davis's argument emerges from a thought experiment. The first step is to imagine a pleasure helmet--a machine which would attach to the brain and simulate various neural impulses from the body which produce pleasurable sensations, a machine capable of administering "a jolt of great pleasure every second on the second." Such a machine could provide much happiness, but it provides no shortcut to true happiness. The pleasure helmet fulfills only the basest of human needs. Even intensely pleasurable impulses must fail to fulfill human needs "for adventure or for variety, or for knowledge or love or creativity. [The pleasure helmet] might quench those needs, but that's not the same as fulfilling them."

But the thought experiment goes "one horrible step further. What if . . . a super pleasure helmet could be developed which not only gave

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us great sensual pleasure, but also fulfilled all our deeper needs and gave us a deep sense of satisfaction? . . . Can we possibly claim that this is anything but good?" Davis grants a deep-seated human prejudice against giving into artificial satisfaction of one's deepest needs, but Davis maintains that the prejudice is due to past experience with imperfect artificial satisfactions:

These artificially induced experiences have taught us that in the long run they do not work; that they meet only superficial needs and even those only for a short while; that they are destructive of other and higher potentials; and that they are an escape from the reality which we hope may somehow be able to satisfy us fully.

But the super pleasure helmet is no ordinary artificial satisfier; it is not subject to the same sort of shortcomings. By hypothesis, the super pleasure helmet fulfills our deepest needs, so it must be good. By hypothesis, the super pleasure helmet provides everything that we could possibly ask for. "Let's face it. . . . This is what we want."

The thought experiment is interesting. Davis's main thesis is not. When the rhetoric is peeled away, a trivial claim remains: If there were a machine that could fulfill all our deepest needs, that machine could fulfill all our deepest needs; in other words: Suppose that someone invented a machine that could give us everything we really want in life. Wouldn't that machine give us everything we really want in life?

Davis's other point is that it is not likely that a super pleasure helmet could ever exist, since "it is not likely that such cheating of reality is possible." As Davis points out, all of our past experience with cheating reality supports that claim. I think that Davis is right in this last claim. But what Davis suggests is that the super pleasure helmet is a practical impossibility. I want to press a stronger claim by arguing that it is a conceptual muddle.

Davis is a sort of super hedonist. The satisfaction of one's deepest needs is, for him, a matter of attaining a certain psychological state; that is, of feeling in all respects as if one has just done something that would really (not artificially) satisfy a deep need. Davis's pessimism about the possibility of a super pleasure helmet derives from the belief that it will never be possible to develop a machine which can bring about the required psychological states.

I disagree with Davis's super hedonism. I believe that there are legitimate and important cases of needs which cannot be fulfilled merely by attaining a certain psychological state. If I am right, then

super hedonism is false; and since the super pleasure helmet is supposed to be a machine that fulfills man's deepest needs by artificially arousing certain psychological states, if super hedonism is false, the super pleasure helmet is logically impossible.

Why suppose that super hedonism is false? Consider two of my needs that are fundamentally different. I have a need for sexual gratification<sup>2</sup> which is satisfied when I experience sexual intercourse. I have a need to make my family happy which is satisfied when I make my family happy. Satisfying the former is a matter of achieving a certain psychological state: If I can be made to feel as if I am experiencing sexual intercourse, whether I am actually participating in sexual intercourse or not, my need for sexual gratification will be fulfilled. However, even if I can be made to feel in all respects as if I am making my family happy, my need to make them happy is not satisfied unless I really do make them happy. The point is that satisfying needs is not in every case merely a matter of gaining a certain feeling; sometimes satisfaction of a need depends upon something in the world outside of the individual. No pleasure helmet, no matter how super it is, can satisfy the latter sort of needs.

Consider needs and desires. We can distinguish between mediate desires and ultimate desires. Mediate desires always occur in the context of a belief and some further desire. My desire to eat a chocolate is a mediate desire; I desire the chocolate because I desire (further) a certain pleasurable feeling and I believe that I can achieve that feeling by eating the chocolate. Ultimate desires are desires that are not mediate. The desire for the pleasurable feeling is an ultimate desire. It is not the case that I desire it because I believe that it will bring about something else that I desire. I simply desire it.

Typically, one wants his mediate desires satisfied because that will satisfy some ultimate desire. The *raison d'être* of a mediate desire lies in its connection with an ultimate desire. If an alternative way of satisfying the ultimate desire becomes feasible, a way which precludes satisfying the original mediate desire, that is perfectly all right, since what is important is satisfying the ultimate desire. Satisfying the original mediate desire becomes unimportant; in fact, that desire disappears.

How do needs fit into the picture? Needs have got to be related to ultimate desires. To fulfill a need is to satisfy an ultimate desire. There may be ultimate desires which do not constitute needs, because they are insignificant, or something like that, but I shall ig-

nore them here because my arguments will concern only significant ultimate desires.

The un-super pleasure helmet fulfills some needs--some ultimate desires. But it leaves other needs unfulfilled. The possibility of a super pleasure helmet depends upon the nature of ultimate desires. Davis's model of ultimate desires is the psychological state model: Davis implies that all ultimate desires are desires to attain a certain psychological state. On that model, my need to be creative is a need to achieve a feeling of creation. My desire to create is a mediate desire. I believe that by creating I can achieve the feeling of creation, and I desire that feeling. The psychological state model accurately describes a large group of needs; the question that I have tried to raise is whether it is true for all needs. In particular, is it true for the need to make my family happy?

In order to show that the psychological state model does not accurately describe my need to make my family happy, let us suppose that it does, and consider the results. On the psychological state model, my need to make my family happy is really a need to achieve a certain feeling--a feeling of familial altruism, a feeling in all respects as if I have made my family happy. The desire to make my family happy is, on this model, a mediate desire: I believe that by making them happy, I can achieve the feeling of familial altruism, and I desire to achieve it. Thus, on the psychological state model, my need might be fulfilled even if my family never becomes happy, since it might be possible to artificially achieve the feeling of familial altruism.

Now, if the psychological state model is accurate, and if my desire to make my family happy really is a mediate desire, then as long as I fulfill the ultimate desire of achieving the feeling of altruism, it shouldn't matter to me whether the particular mediate desire to make my family happy is fulfilled or not. Given a choice between having the feeling of familial altruism artificially stimulated in me, and gaining the feeling by pleasing my family, there should be no rational reason for choosing the latter over the former, if the psychological state model is accurate. Or further, consider these alternatives: Either I can have the feeling of familial altruism artificially stimulated in me, and thus be certain that the ultimate desire will be fulfilled, or I can live in the real world where I have only a reasonable chance of making my family happy, and thus, only a reasonable chance of gaining the feeling of familial altruism. If the psychological state model is accurate, then the rational choice is the former, since in that case it is a sure bet that my need will be fulfilled, and

the rational person will choose in a way that will fulfill his ultimate desires--his needs. Certainly, I do want the feeling of familial altruism; the feeling is immensely pleasurable. But it is absurd to be forced into concluding that the rational choice for a person who has a need to make his family happy is the former. In this sort of case, even a slim chance in the real world is better than the perfect illusion. My need to make my family happy cannot be satisfied unless I really do make them happy. Thus, the desire to make my family happy is not just a mediate desire; it is an ultimate desire. But since it cannot be fulfilled by bringing about a certain psychological state in me, it cannot be fulfilled by a super pleasure helmet.

Let us extend this reasoning to one of Davis's own cases. Consider the need for creativity. Davis maintains that if one feels as if he has created something of real value, and if he is made to believe that he has, then his need to be creative is fulfilled. I think that Davis is wrong. Suppose one is given the following alternatives: Either he can be guaranteed the feeling of creation and the requisite cognitive correlate, both by means of artificial stimulation, or he can have an even chance of achieving the feeling of creation and the belief that he has created. The choice is harder in this case, but there is no doubt that the latter is the rational choice. What that proves is that there is a connection between the need to be creative and the world beyond the individual. It is that sort of connection between needs and the real world that proves the super pleasure helmet to be a myth.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>William H. Davis, "The Pleasure Helmet and the Super Pleasure Helmet," *Journal of Thought*, 10 (November, 1975), 290-293. All quotations below are from this work.

<sup>2</sup>I am construing sexual gratification as purely sensual pleasure which ordinarily is derived from appropriate sex acts.