

Questions to Peter Railton
Law & Philosophy Workshop
USC, November 6, 2006

On the doubts about the intrinsic value of equality:

1. In using your examples of worlds Alpha and Beta are you offering the leveling-down objection to the claim that equality is of intrinsic value, or are you going beyond that objection? If you are offering it, why prefer your analysis of such examples to that according to which there is some reason to level-down in order to make the worlds equal, but there are stronger reasons not to? One might also object by noting the ways in which the intuitions about such examples are sensitive to seemingly extraneous pieces of information. There might appear to be reason for creating the worlds equal, for instance, even if there doesn't appear to be reason to alter things so as to make already created worlds equal.

On the delta-meter conception of subjective well-being:

2. By way of clarification, can you say more about the analogy between subjective well-being and the readings of the delta meter? The delta-meter measures acceleration, not velocity. What, in the human case, is the analogue of velocity? What is the analogue of acceleration? Also, you place emphasis on progress towards one's goals in relation to one's expectations. Is there anything analogous to expectations that is being measured by the delta meter? Or, more generally, where does the analogy break down?

3. On p 29, you suggest that the delta-meter conception would enable us to explain, among other things, the tendency of subjective well-being to return to set points. By way of clarification, can you say how this explanation is supposed to go? One might think that the explanation goes the other way around: perhaps it is because we tend to return to set points of pleasure and pain, for instance, independently of how well we are doing in pursuing our goals (we get used to the pain, for instance, even as we plummet in health) that we have the need for some independent way of measuring our degree of progress towards our goals.

On the moral conclusions:

4. You claim that given the facts about subjective well being, *inequality* is instrumentally valuable for the achievement of subjective well-being. Can you explain what kind of inequality you are referring to? Is it diachronic inequality within the life of a single agent? Diachronic inequality among distinct agents? Synchronic inequality across agents? All three? How does the delta meter conception of well-being entail these results?

5. The suggestion that there must be a certain game-like aspect to life, enabling people to be challenged and gain satisfaction from pursuit of goals, would seem to count in favor of some conceptions of equality: for example, it may justify equality of opportunity (leveling the playing field). After all, games would seem to be pointless if they are not fair. Do you think that some kind of fairness is also required if people are to achieve subjective well-being?

6. Given the fact that subjective well-being tends to return to a set-point, some may conclude that subjective well being is not what we should care about. Perhaps instead of caring about the futile pursuit of goals that only gain us temporary increases in well-being, we should care about aspects of our lives that are more lasting and more meaningful. And if so, perhaps equality might be valuable, at least instrumentally, because a culture of equality could be conducive to turning people's attention away from futile pursuits towards more important or valuable things in life. Can you explain why these kinds of conclusions would be wrong?

7. Broadly speaking, do you think the morals that you draw from the facts about subjective well-being are dependent on your commitment to consequentialism? Or could your results be accepted by someone averse to consequentialism?

On the empirical evidence about subjective well being:

8. Do you know of research about possible *direct* connections between equality and subjective well being? Perhaps, for instance, an egalitarian environment contributes positively to the level of subjective well being people experience and inegalitarian environments contribute negatively?

9. Some might look at the empirical results you describe and reach the conclusion that human beings are deluded creatures, susceptible to numerous cognitive and emotional biases that result in vast discrepancies between their subjective well-being and their actual levels of well-being. What reasons are there for preferring your conclusions to this one? In fact, the research you cite showing that people tend to have a rosier picture of their traits and accomplishments than others would paint of them seems to support this conclusion over yours.