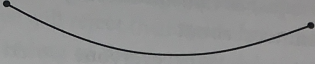


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THE EXPERIENCE MACHINE



Would you swap your real life, marked as it is by frustrations and disappointments, by partial successes and unfulfilled dreams, for a life of experiences that were desirable but entirely artificial, being occasioned by chemical or mechanical means?

Suppose there existed a machine that could enable you to live every form of experience that you wished to have.

Brilliant neuropsychologists would be capable of stimulating your brain in such a way that you would be able to believe and feel that you are engaged in writing a great novel, making a good friend, reading an interesting book, or doing whatever else your heart desired. But, in actual fact, you would be permanently in the machine, with electrodes plugged into your skull. It is you who decides the program of experiences that you wish to have for, say, two years. Subsequently you would have a few hours out of the machine to choose the program for the following two years. Of course, once in the machine, you would not know that you were there; you would think that everything was really happening.

Would you plug yourself in?

Do not worry about minor details, such as knowing who would run the machines if everyone were plugged in!¹

This thought experiment has been used to demonstrate that so-called hedonistic conceptions were false.²

In actual fact, for the hedonists what counts is the having of agreeable experiences or, more broadly, experiences that correspond to our preferences. The fact of these experiences being real or illusory, deep or superficial, chemical or natural, their being fixed upon a person with a stable character or not ought not to have any sort of moral importance. Artificial paradises are just as valuable morally as natural ones, and a loss of self has nothing immoral about it.

But if the hedonists were right, everyone would be tempted to plug into the experience machine!

Now, according to Robert Nozick, the inventor of this thought experiment, we (humans) will not be tempted to plug ourselves into the experience machine. He advances three reasons of an intuitive kind in favor of this hypothesis:

1. We want to do things and not only have the experience of doing them.
2. We want to be a certain kind of person and not an indeterminate object into which electrodes are plugged.
3. Contact with reality and authenticity have a crucial importance in our lives.

Suppose the main hypothesis is correct, that is, the majority of people will not be prepared to plug themselves into the experience machine. Suppose even that, in a large-scale investigation, it appears that 100 percent of respondents refuse to plug themselves into the experience machine. One question would remain unresolved. For Nozick, the only possible interpretation of this general refusal would be that pleasant experience is not the only thing that counts in our lives. Is this really the only possible interpretation?

No! One could suppose, for example, that this refusal has its origin in an irrational psychological revulsion toward everything that is not "natural," or in an anxiety at the idea of having electrodes plugged into the brain, and so on. But the best "alternative" explanation has cropped up only very recently. A good deal of cunning was needed on the part of a philosopher to propose it.³

THE TENDENCY TOWARD INERTIA

If we refuse to plug ourselves into the experience machine, it is not because experience counts less than reality or authenticity. It is because we would change too much the state in which we are currently if we were to agree to plug ourselves in.

In actual fact, we have a certain *tendency toward inertia*. We do not want to undergo too violent a change of state, and this is what justifies the prediction that we will reject the experience machine.

Nevertheless, according to the same model, if we were plugged into the experience machine, we would not be willing to leave it. That too would be too violent a change, and one that would contradict our tendency toward inertia.

The philosopher's cunning lay in having thought of this pair of hypotheses, and above all of the second, which, if it were confirmed, would prove that *we are not at all opposed in principle to living in an experience machine*.

Now if it is true that we are not at all opposed, in principle, to living in an experience machine, Nozick is wrong, as are all those philosophers who have been persuaded over almost half a century that he dealt hedonism a knockout blow.

This hypothesis is founded upon an explanatory model inspired by certain works by economists, which they call the *bias in favor of the status quo*. In order to verify it, we simply have to change the way in which the thought experiment is presented. The question would no longer be: "Are you prepared to leave your real life and to plug yourself into the experience machine?" It would be: "Would you prefer to stay in the experience machine or to return to your real life?" This is what was done with a set of students with no particular expertise in philosophy. The thought experiment of the experience machine was reformulated as three scenarios according to the principle: You are in the experience machine. You are given the option of returning to real life. Do you accept?

SCENARIO 1

One morning, you hear someone knocking at your front door. You open it. An official makes the following announcement:

"We are very sorry to inform you that you have been the victim of a grave error. You have been plugged into an experience machine by some brilliant neuropsychologists able to stimulate your brain. You believed that you made friends, that you were engaged in writing a great novel, reading some interesting books, or doing whatever else your heart desired.

"But in reality it was all merely cerebral stimulation. You were permanently in the machine, with electrodes on the skull.

"We have realized that the request to be plugged in had been put to us by someone else.

"We therefore propose to you, with our sincere regrets once again for everything that has occurred, the following two possibilities: either stay in the machine or else return to your real life."

Choose.

Tell us why.

SCENARIO 2

The same story as in scenario 1. But at the end it is specified:

"In real life, you are in the high-security wing of a prison.

"Do you prefer to stay in the experience machine or to return to real life?"

Choose.

Explain why.

SCENARIO 3

The same story as in scenario 1. But at the end it is specified:

"In real life, you are a stupendously rich artist living in a palace.

"Do you prefer to stay in the experience machine or to return to your real life?"

Choose.

Explain why.

To summarize, the three scenarios are as follows:

1. *Neutral*: Do you prefer to stay in the experience machine or to return to your real life?

2. *Negative:* Do you prefer to stay in the experience machine or to return to your real life, in which you are in the high-security wing of a prison?
3. *Positive:* Do you prefer to stay in the experience machine or to return to your real life, in which you are a stupendously rich artist living in a palace?

In the negative scenario, if you choose real life you return to the high-security wing of a prison.

Of respondents, 87 percent declare their preference for staying in the experience machine.

This result can hardly be said to be very startling. The fact remains that it could be enough in itself to prove Nozick wrong. Reality is not *always* preferred!

In the neutral scenario, 46 percent only prefer to remain in the machine.

In addition, 54 percent prefer the return to real life without asking themselves any questions as to its quality, which seems to send the pendulum in the other direction.

But the positive scenario should give the ultimate advantage to the idea that reality is not necessarily preferred.

In this scenario, if you choose real life, you return to a palace as a multi-millionaire. Nonetheless, 50 percent do prefer to remain plugged into the machine. This result is disconcerting. Knowing that you will be able to live like a nabob, why remain in the experience machine?

This is where the hypothesis of a preference for the status quo, whatever it may be, intervenes.

You have a somewhat irrational preference for the state in which you already are, which means that you will choose to remain in the experience machine, even when the prospects offered by a return to real life are splendid.

From this investigation we can draw certain conclusions as to the validity of hedonism simply by noting that Nozick's experiment is not sufficient to refute it.

But it seems that we can also derive from it a more general and more important conclusion, regarding the validity of our moral intuitions.

If we ask, "Are you prepared to plug yourselves into the experience machine?" people are supposed to answer, "No."

We must conclude that human intuitions do not agree with hedonism. If we ask, "Are you prepared to leave the experience machine?" the answers are more various. But by and large, the tendency is toward inertia. We prefer to remain in the machine.

We must conclude that human intuitions agree with hedonism.

We are therefore saddled with two contradictory conclusions: *our intuitions are and are not hedonistic.*

It is possible to rescue consistency by bringing in the hypothesis of the status quo. In both cases, violent changes of state are rejected owing to conservatism.

But if the hypothesis of a preference for the status quo holds, that means that our moral intuitions are systematically affected by a psychological flaw: conservatism or inertia.

Does that deprive them of all value as a means to moral knowledge? That would have to be proved.

In any case, if we reckon that this tendency toward inertia is irrational, we are the heirs to a problem in moral epistemology.

How could irrational intuitions serve to confirm or invalidate a moral theory, be it hedonistic or of another kind?