

Robert Nozick's Experience Machine

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In his 1975 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert Nozick introduced a now famous thought experiment he entitled "The Experience Machine." Nozick believes that this intuition pump successfully demonstrates that hedonism is false and that human beings do value things other than happiness and pleasure as goods in themselves, namely "authenticity" and the like. In this paper, I will offer a thorough exegesis of the Experience Machine thought experiment and attempt to show that it fails to establish that something like authenticity could serve as a potential [normative](#) foundation.

II. Nozick's Experience Machine

Nozick [presents](#) us with the following scenario: "Suppose there were an experience machine," he says, "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's experiences?"

Nozick's machine would provide a "large library or smorgasbord" of experiences to

choose from, and while in it, we would not be aware in the least that what we were experiencing was not reality. Nozick has built his machine in such a way that all would be perfect bliss for us while inside, and he takes pains to assure us of the machine's adequacy. For people concerned about tiring of the experiences provided by it, for instance, Nozick suggests that they be given "ten minutes or ten hours" outside of the tank every two years to select their experiences for the next two years. In [addition](#), we could ignore problems such as experien...

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...perceive the world around them authentically. The way things stand now it does not appear that such a thing as an experience machine will ever be possible, at least not in the sort of scenario envisioned here, where all of society could potentially plug-in. Given this fact about our scientific limitations, Nozick has succeeded in demonstrating for us the overwhelming importance of living a life that we believe to be in contact with reality and truth in some sense. It is clear that this belief occupies a position of central importance in how we evaluate our own lives, at least in many cases, and for this reason it should be taken very seriously. This fact about our human psychology allows us to appreciate the difference, once and for all, between the experience machine in all its uniqueness, on the one hand, and ordinary methods of escape from reality, on the other.

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