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### The Mistaken Assumptions Undermining the Experience Machine Argument

Philosophical discussion of value theory is the attempt to define what things are “good,” good in this sense meaning what makes one’s life go best. One such value theory is hedonism. Parfit divides hedonism into two categories, namely narrow (classical) hedonism, and preference hedonism. According to Bentham, narrow hedonism defines the psychological feelings of pleasure and pain as ends in themselves, with the pleasure experience being the axiomatic “good.” Preference hedonism again takes pleasure as axiomatically “good,” however goes beyond the psychological feeling of pleasure or pain, and instead defines pleasure as living desired experiences, and pains as living unwanted experiences.

Nozick argues against the hedonist idea that pleasure is the sole “good” by using the thought experiment of the existence of a machine that can provide an individual with simulated pleasurable experiences, of their choosing, for an indefinite amount of time (and with no memory of an outside world while in the machine). He assumes that most people would not want to ‘plug in,’ citing three reasons to explain why – reasons that he takes to be other “goods” that the value theory of hedonism excludes. He states firstly that we want to *do* things, rather than just have the experience of doing them. Secondly, he says that people want to *be* a certain way, and that solely the character of our experiences does not define who we are. Thirdly, he argues that people want to have contact with a *deeper reality* that transcends the man-made brain stimulation available from the experience machine. I contend that “The Experience Machine” does not offer a good

argument against hedonism. To argue this point, I show that the “goods” described by Nozick as supplementary to pleasure are actually concordant with preference hedonism. I then respond to Nozick’s objection that we would not want to ‘plug in’ to the experience machine by explicating an underlying fault in his argument, namely his assumption that a lifetime spent in the experience machine is not “real.”

The first reason that Nozick gives for why one would not want to ‘plug in’ to the experience machine is a desire to *do* things as opposed to just having the experience of doing them. Given that one retains no memory of their “real” life when in the machine, however, having the experience of doing things in the machine would be no different than having the experience of doing them in “real” life. There is no further constituent of *doing* something than having the experience of doing it, and experiencing the effects of having done it on the surrounding world – both suitable experiential pleasures concordant with the preference hedonism viewpoint (and both experiences that can be provided by the experience machine in the same way that they are provided by living our “real” lives). For example, imagine a woman who wanted to write a novel. This desire can be broken down into wanting to actually write it, and wanting to see the fruits of having a published novel when finished. Both of these are desires for experiences (the experience of writing, and the experience of seeing the novel in the world) which when lived, constitute pleasures under the preference hedonism value theory (and furthermore, experiences that can be delivered by the experience machine).

The second reason Nozick gives for why one would not want to ‘plug in’ to the experience machine is a desire to *be* a certain way. He claims that because the machine simulates experiences, and we know ourselves based on what is reflected back to us from our experiences, one commits a type of suicide by plugging into the machine. I would suggest, however, that

because one knows oneself through his or her lived experiences the desire to *be* a certain way can be equated to the desire for a certain set of experiences (in a way similar to his first reason) – experiential pleasures concordant with preference hedonism. To say that we desire to *be* a certain way is to say that we desire the experience of interacting with the world in a way indicative to us that we are that certain way, experiences that can be provided by the experience machine in the same way that they are provided to us by our “real” lives. For example, we know we are funny because we experience people laughing at our jokes, we know we are handsome because we experience other people complimenting us, and we know we are strong because we experience lifting heavy loads. All of these experiences indicative of us *being* a certain way constitute pleasures under the preference hedonism value theory (and additionally, experiences that can again be delivered by the experience machine).

The third desire Nozick thinks would prevent us from ‘plugging in’ to the experience machine is the desire to contact a deeper reality. His reasoning on this point is doubly faulted. Firstly, we have no proof that any deeper reality exists than that which is man-made, nor that there is even the possibility for transcendence to a world deeper than what people can already see and construct. Secondly, the desire to tap into a deeper reality is again equivalent to a desire to have experiences (experiences that in this case show us a ‘deeper’ reality) – experiential desires that are again consistent with preference hedonism. To say that we desire to transcend reality is really to say that we desire the experience of interacting with a world beyond the ordinary – this experience can be provided by the experience machine in the same way that it might be provided to us by our “real” lives.

Having demonstrated that “The Experience Machine” does not provide a good argument against hedonism (by showing that the “goods” described by Nozick as supplementary to

experiential pleasures are actually concordant with preference hedonism), I will now address an objection that supporters of Nozick's position might level against my argument. My critic might argue that even if the three reasons presented by Nozick as supplementary "goods" can actually be attributed to preference hedonism, we would still not want to plug in because of an overriding need to live in reality. I would respond to such a criticism with the position that the belief that life outside the machine is any more real than life within it is fallacious. Concordant with the philosophical theory of solipsism as well as current psychological knowledge regarding sensation and perception as they relate to internal mental states, our lived experience and internal biochemical makeup are the sole constituents of what we might call personal reality. Although one might intuitively believe that artificial brain stimulation represents a less legitimate reality, because one retains no memory of a past life while in the experience machine our lives at present and a life in the experience machine are equally real *to us* – can be taken to be the only qualifier of reality. As such, given that there is no external reality beyond lived experience and internal brain chemistry, to argue that living in the "real world" is a "good" separate from pleasurable experience is to arbitrarily argue in favour of one method of delivering experience over another when both are equally real in the context of a personal reality, as discussed above.

To defend my position that Nozick's argument does not demonstrate the implausibility of hedonism, I have argued that the three "goods" he describes as supplementary to pleasure (to *do* certain things, to *be* a certain way, and to access a *deeper reality*) are actually concordant with preference hedonism. Furthermore, I addressed the criticism that people would still not want to 'plug in' because the experience machine lacks reality by explaining that life inside the machine is no less real than life outside it. At first glance "The Experience Machine" offers a compelling case against hedonism in both its narrow and preference formulations, however, on closer

examination the assumptions underlying Nozick's claims do not hold, and his argument fails to demonstrate that hedonism is not a plausible value theory.

Works Cited

- Bentham, Jeremy. "Classical Hedonism." *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948.
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