

# Hypotheticals: Would An Epicurean Hook Himself Up To An "Experience Machine" or a "Pleasure Machine"?

Post by "SimonC" of January 8, 2022 at 3:39 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from SimonC](#)

if we accept that parameters of the thought experiment as given, that using the machine

The parameters don't seem so cut and dried. Here is Nozick's excerpt: <https://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil3160/Nozick1.pdf>

I haven't had a chance to read the paper yet but am putting it here for reference.

I hadn't either, but I did now, so thank you.

I still get the impression that he intends to convey that the experiences in the experience machine would in fact be highly pleasurable from the point of view of the person in the machine. The reason you are expected to not want to go in the machine is that you would end up being deceived, and live a fake life.

A couple points relevant to the current discussion, from the later source, *The Examined Life* (1989):

Quote

The question is not whether to try the machine temporarily, but whether to enter it for the rest of your life

would seem to weaken the VR headset counterargument.

Quote

Notice that this is a *thought* experiment, designed to isolate one question: Do only our internal feelings matter to us? It would miss the point, then, to focus upon whether such a machine is technologically feasible.

one might of course insist that thought experiments that are counterfactual to physics are invalid (is this one? I can't tell), but the premise is clearly that the machine does exist.

#### Quote

Readers who hold they would plug in to the machine should notice whether their first impulse was not to do so, followed later by the thought that since only experiences could matter, the machine would be all right after all.

I can be an adherent to a particular philosophy yet not be practiced enough / have phronesis / be sage enough that my first impulse is the correct one or the one I end up following. But is this really ethically relevant? This reads a bit like shaming people out of the machine.

#### Quote

Few of us really think that only a person's experiences matter. We would not wish for our children a life of great satisfactions that all depended upon deceptions they would never detect: although they take pride in artistic accomplishments, the critics and their friends too are just pretending to admire their work yet snicker behind their backs; the apparently faithful mate carries on secret love affairs; their apparently loving children really detest them; and so on. Few of us upon hearing this description would exclaim, "What a wonderful life! It feels so happy and pleasurable from the inside."

I was amused that Nozick did in fact use a similar cheating wife argument. I would say about the life described in the quote that it seems easier to say "what a pleasurable life!" than "what a happy life!". Provided of course that the person does in fact not detect the deceptions.

I would guess (but I do not know since I'm not well-read enough) that it is significant that Epicurus bases value on pleasure rather than happiness. Pleasure is a direct experience, it is not possible to be deceived about whether you are feeling pleasure. On the other hand happiness is a very difficult and hard to pin down concept. Apparently Aristotle thought you could become unhappy even after your death if for example all your children die after you died.

#### Quote

Of course we wish people to have many such moments and days of happiness.... Yet it is not clear that we want those moments constantly or want our lives to consist wholly and only of them. We want to experience other feelings too, ones with valuable aspects that happiness does not possess as strongly. And even the very feelings of happiness may want to direct themselves into other activities, such as helping others or artistic work, which then involve the predominance of different feelings. We want experiences, fitting ones, of profound connection with others, of deep understanding of natural phenomena, of love, of being profoundly moved by music or tragedy, or doing

something new and innovative, experiences very different from the bounce and rosiness of the happy moments. What we want, in short, is a life and a self that happiness is a fitting response to—and then to give it that response.

And would not the above quote seem rather silly if we replace "happiness" with "pleasure"? I read the above as saying that the problem with happiness is that it is only part of a pleasurable life. Which is probably true, but it is not an argument against pleasure as being the basis of value.

e: do tell me if I'm wildly off base here, this is something I've been thinking about for a bit so I wanted to jump into the discussion.