

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

Post by "Cassius" of March 23, 2020 at 2:05 AM

This thread is for discussion for the FAQ Entry Located here: <https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/index.php?faq/#entry-33> which as of 03/23/20 reads as follows:

[Would An Epicurean Hook Himself Up To An "Experience Machine" or A "Pleasure Machine" if Possible?](#)

Let's first look at the Wikipedia entry for the Experience / Pleasure Machine thought experiment:

"The experience machine or pleasure machine is a thought experiment put forward by philosopher Robert Nozick in his 1974 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.^[1] It is one of the best known attempts to refute ethical hedonism, and does so by imagining a choice between everyday reality and an apparently preferable simulated reality. If the primary thesis of hedonism is that "pleasure is the good", then any component of life that is not pleasurable does nothing directly to increase one's well-being. This is a view held by many value theorists, but most famously by some classical utilitarians. Nozick attacks the thesis by means of a thought experiment. If he can show that there is something other than pleasure that has value and thereby increases our well-being, then hedonism is defeated."

This can be approached in many ways, but this is probably the most obvious:

First, we can quibble about application of the word "directly," but Epicurus is very clear that we sometimes choose pain in order to avoid worse pain, or to achieve greater pleasure. Therefore we start by noting that Epicurus does not maintain that "any component of life that is not pleasurable does nothing directly to increase one's wellbeing."

Ultimately, however, Epicurus does indeed say that there is nothing on its own that is desirable except pleasure. Pleasure, however, is widely and fully defined in scope to include all experiences of both body and mind that we find to be pleasurable. Epicurus in no way limits pleasure to immediate bodily sensations, and in fact it is stated specifically that mental pleasures are frequently of greater significance to us than physical ones. Anything in life that we find desirable - from food to sex to art to music to literature - is desirable because it brings us pleasure in some form.

The intent of the "Experience Machine" is to pose a logical trap much as did Plato in his "[Philebus](#)." Once you accept (as did [Philebus](#), who started out as an advocate of pleasure) that anything in life is desirable of and for itself *other* than something we find pleasurable, then it makes logical sense to conclude that the best life would include not only pleasure but also that other thing. Further, the wisdom to know the right combination of pleasure and this other thing will be ultimately be seen to be more important than either pleasure or the other thing on its own. Thus the person who is beguiled into accepting the [Philebus](#) / Experience Machine argument, which is that there are things in life which are desirable but do not bring us pleasure, is led by logic to conclude that wisdom is the ultimate good, the standard Platonic conclusion. And that's just the start of discarding pleasure as any value at all, which is what the Stoics did in concluding that virtue is its own reward, and that to seek pleasure in compensation for virtue would negate any value in virtue.

Epicurus responds to this argument by consistently observing that pleasure alone is desirable in and of itself. This is the premise throughout the Epicurean texts but is stated particularly clearly by the Epicurean speaker in Cicero's "On Ends":

"We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict. Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"

Of course the experience machine argument is intended to embarrass the listener into thinking "of course not," but it's really just another way of asking if you would indulge in sex drugs and rock'n'roll every moment if you could get away with it without painful repercussions.

And to this Epicurus answers very plainly, "Yes you would, but you CAN'T":

[PD10](#): "If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of

life."

And ultimately it is the "can't" which is important, because Epicurus always looks to the facts of reality as established through the senses, feelings, and anticipations for all the proof that we need that a pleasure/experience machine is nonsense. "Experience machines" are suited only for purposes of confusing young philosophy students and persuading them to abandon the practical world that Nature makes available to us.

Also:

It is a trap, not totally unlike the experience machine itself, to accept as valid that there are objective standards of 'higher pleasure' and 'lower pleasure', because in order for that to be the case there would have to be an objective list somewhere outside of the scope of pleasure itself to serve as that reference point, and the Epicurean universe in which the only things that are eternal and unchanging are the ultimate particles does not allow for such an objective test of how everyone should judge pleasure and pain. The trouble with admitting such a list is that (as Plato will lead you) knowledge of that list becomes more important than pleasure itself (without that list, how would you know what pleasure to choose?) and so you end up seeing wisdom itself as the goal rather than pleasure.

This is likely why Epicurus held, according to Diogenes Laertius, that "the feelings are two, pleasure and pain..." and that all feelings fit within one designation of the other. And we know from the letter to Menoeceus explicitly that all good and evil come to us through sensations, which are things that are felt. Put it all together and you have the framework by which to analyze the experience machine or any other challenge to pleasure. Then, no Platonist logician will be able to trick you into thinking that "wisdom" (which of course they claim to be able to show you) or "virtue" (the Stoic specialty for those who are into "glory") are desirable in and of themselves.

If you keep in mind that (1) "pleasure" includes the full spectrum of human activity, not just the lower bodily pleasures that people ridicule as "base" but also "the highest mental pleasures that people praise as "sublime," with everything in between, and (2) that if a thing is desirable it is because it leads to pleasure, and that there is no other reason outside of pleasure to desire anything, and it is much easier to avoid confusion.