

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.

Post by "Don" of March 23, 2020 at 9:19 AM

I am so glad you started this thread! The Experience Machine argument against Epicureans has always struck me as specious, and I appreciate the opportunity for us to discuss it.

I would argue that if I was a Cyrenaic, I may indeed hook myself up to the Experience Machine. However, my perspective has always been that Epicurus calls us to experience pleasure by using our feelings of pleasure and pain to choose or reject actions based on our experience of the physical universe informed by our senses and prolepses. We exercise our free will in making those choices and rejections based on that sensory input to maximize pleasure in our lives.

The Experience Machine is merely a simulation of the universe that doesn't provide "real" pleasure or pain but merely the illusion of pleasure. If our physical body is floating in some vat of goo with wires hooked up to our brains *feeding* us sensory pleasures that the Machine is choosing for us, that doesn't strike me as true pleasure. We also don't have real friendships in this scenario. We have simulated friendships with "friends" designed by the Machine.

Ah! But then is the ability to choose and reject the highest good? Is the Faculty of Free Will to Make Choices and Rejections itself the Highest Good? I would say no, but I'm willing to entertain that that appears to be open to discussion. I counter that the very act of choosing is itself a pleasure.

I'm looking forward to reading everyone's posts!

Post by "Cassius" of March 23, 2020 at 9:40 AM

Thank you Eugenios! I share your enthusiasm to discuss this, especially given what you wrote here:

[Quote from Eugenios](#)

The Experience Machine is merely a simulation of the universe that doesn't provide "real" pleasure or pain but merely the illusion of pleasure.

LOL please take this constructively but my belief is that this is exactly the wrong approach. I do not find anything in Epicurus which would indicate that he considered there to be categories of "true pleasure" and "false pleasure," and in fact I believe that by following this path you will fall directly into the pitfall by which Plato trapped [Philebus](#) into abandoning our goddess of choice!



You may well have read [Philebus](#) much more closely than have I, so please correct me if I am wrong, but as I understand Plato's argument, Plato led [Philebus](#) into agreeing to divide pleasures into pure and impure, and therein is the peril. Check this exchange from [Philebus](#):

Quote

SOCRATES: These, in turn, then, I will now endeavour to indicate; for with the maintainers of the opinion that all pleasures are a cessation of pain, I do not agree, but, as I was saying, I use them as witnesses, **that there are pleasures which seem only and are not**, and there are others again which have great power and appear in many forms, yet are intermingled with pains, and are partly alleviations of agony and distress, both of body and mind.

PROTARCHUS: Then what pleasures, Socrates, should we be right in conceiving to be **true?**

SOCRATES: **True pleasures** are those which are given by beauty of colour and form, and most of those which arise from smells; those of sound, again, and in general those of which the want is painless and unconscious, and of which the fruition is palpable to sense and pleasant and unalloyed with pain.

PROTARCHUS: Once more, Socrates, I must ask what you mean.

SOCRATES: My meaning is certainly not obvious, and I will endeavour to be plainer. I do not mean by beauty of form such beauty as that of animals or pictures, which the many would suppose to be my meaning; but, says the argument, understand me to mean straight lines and circles, and the plane or solid figures which are formed out of them by turning-lathes and rulers and measurers of angles; for these I affirm to be not only relatively beautiful, like other things, but they are **eternally and absolutely beautiful, and they have peculiar pleasures**, quite unlike the pleasures of scratching. And there are colours which are of the same character, and have similar pleasures; now do you understand my meaning?

PROTARCHUS: I am trying to understand, Socrates, and I hope that you will try to make your meaning clearer.

SOCRATES: When sounds are smooth and clear, and have a single pure tone, then I mean to say that they are not relatively but **absolutely beautiful, and have natural pleasures** associated with them.

PROTARCHUS: Yes, **there are such pleasures.**

SOCRATES: The pleasures of smell are of a less ethereal sort, but they have no necessary admixture of pain; and all pleasures, however and wherever experienced, which are unattended by pains, I assign to an analogous class. **Here then are two kinds of pleasures.**

....

SOCRATES: And now, having fairly separated the pure pleasures and those which may be rightly termed impure, let us further add to our description of them, that the pleasures which are in excess have no measure, but that those which are not in excess have measure; the great, the excessive, whether more or less frequent, we shall be right in referring to the class of the infinite, and of the more and less, which pours through body and soul alike; and the others we shall refer to the class which has measure.

PROTARCHUS: Quite right, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Still there is something more to be considered about pleasures.

PROTARCHUS: What is it?

SOCRATES: When you speak of **purity** and clearness, or of excess, abundance, greatness and sufficiency, in what relation do these terms stand to truth?

PROTARCHUS: Why do you ask, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Because, Protarchus, I should wish to test pleasure and knowledge in every possible way, in order that if there be a **pure and impure element** in either of them, I may present the pure element for judgment, and then they will be more easily judged of by you and by me and by all of us.

PROTARCHUS: Most true.

SOCRATES: Let us investigate all the pure kinds; first selecting for consideration a single instance.

PROTARCHUS: What instance shall we select?

SOCRATES: Suppose that we first of all take whiteness.

PROTARCHUS: Very good.

SOCRATES: **How can there be purity in whiteness, and what purity? Is that purest which is greatest or most in quantity, or that which is most unadulterated and freest from any admixture of other colours?**

PROTARCHUS: Clearly that which is most unadulterated.

SOCRATES: True, Protarchus; **and so the purest white, and not the greatest or largest in quantity, is to be deemed truest and most beautiful?**

PROTARCHUS: Right.

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Once you agree that some pleasures are pure and some are impure (or in your terms "true" or "false," or in Stoic terms such as noble and ignoble, or virtuous and debased, or good and evil or righteous or unrighteous) you are then impelled to recognize that the ability to judge between pure and impure (or true and false) is critically important.

I won't go into the details of the rest of Plato's argument but once you accept that distinction, you are then compelled eventually to recognize that the WISDOM to know the difference is essential to the best life, and must be added to pleasure, and then you are far down the rabbit rail to having to admit that Wisdom is therefore the ultimate good.

As I understand it Epicurus admitted only one measure of "pure and impure" pleasure - and that is PLEASURE UNMIXED WITH ANY PAIN.

That is why the focus on "absence of pain" in Epicurus! Not because "absence of pain" is something in itself, but because PLEASURE UNMIXED WITH PAIN is the definition of the best life possible.

Look at Socrates/Plato's last comment: He is setting up a concept of "**pure and impure**" against "**largest in quantity.**" And he is implying "pure and impure" is measured against some standard of purity that is outside of pleasure itself. And remember that "The Limit of Quantity of Pleasure" is exactly what Epicurus addresses in PD3! ("3. **The limit of quantity** in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once.")

Let me stop and this point and get your reaction to this, and I hope others will comment too!

Edit: I expanded the quote from [Philebus](#) so as to start with the reference to "**that there are pleasures which seem only and are not,**" which is much on point with Eugenios' comment.

Post by "Elli" of March 23, 2020 at 10:44 AM

I agree with Cassius who wrote : <<*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>>.

Nature creates us, with our faculties which are senses and feelings for living a pleasant life. We have been evolved and we still being evolve in accordance with the environment of Nature. Machines are just means that are created by us. However, we are not wiser than Nature, and there never were or will be perfect machines, perfect ideas and perfect worlds somewhere.

For the creation, Epicurus said that all things and the phenomena are proceeding in combination and in sequence on the basis of : and the need (laws of Nature), and the chance, and the swerve (freedom of our choices).

But really, what is higher we that we make the machines OR Nature? Nature of course. No one could replace Nature in the creation of things. She is the boss and the boss says to all beings, you have a limited time for living, thus DO such actions to feel pleasure and avoid pain, or sometimes chose pain for feeling a greater pleasure.

These are the machines as described poetically by D. Liantinis

The human hand and the machine

Opposite the hand of Man the machine stood in place. The machine was not molded by nature, but man is a creature of nature. The machine is a soulless, ungraceful, cold. But also, perfect. Its only imperfection is its perfection. As the only foible of invincible Achilles was his heel. The machine stares to us blankly. Her eyes are open wide like a dead man's eye. When she laughs she does it through closed lips, while her cheeks stay motionless. And she works blindly, opinion less, uninterested, mechanically. Her feet are awry and her hands cut on the wrists. Her nervous system looks like a bundle of red, yellow and black wiring. In place of her mouth she has a funnel without tongue. She eats without ever feeling hungry. And Nature with difficulty recycles her excrement.



The brain of the machine is not measured by volume but by area. And within the heat of her skull the surgeon operates on cross haired digits, squares, circles, indicators of every kind. Sometimes when she treads the streets looks like a tiger

Post by “Cassius” of March 23, 2020 at 10:49 AM

With your point there being, as I understand it Elli, that it is an error to look for "perfect" and "imperfect" pleasure, just as it is an error to look for "true" or "false" pleasures -- with the reason for the error being that there is no outside, Platonic "objective" standard by which to say that some pleasures are true and others false - there are only particular pleasures, no Platonic categories of "good/true" and "bad/false" pleasures.

And the "machine" analogy is that humans are creatures of nature, just like machines are creatures of men, and so we must play the cards we are dealt: Nature did not create "perfect" humans by which to judge ourselves, just as humans do not create "perfect" machines by which to judge all other machines: each human, and each machine, is an individual particular which must be evaluated on its own merits.

Do I follow you correctly?

Post by “Elli” of March 23, 2020 at 10:54 AM

Correctly, simply and clearly ! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of March 23, 2020 at 10:57 AM

Following up with Elli, in regard to machines, someone can say that there is a 'specification/blueprint' by which all machines of a particular kind are intended to be manufactured, and in that sense a particular machine as created by men can deviate from the specification/blueprint.

But with Nature and humans, a "specification/blueprint" is **exactly what does NOT, and CANNOT (given our understanding of the Nature of the universe), exist!**

Post by "Cassius" of March 23, 2020 at 11:09 AM

References to the absence of a "pattern" (blueprint / specification / objective standard), even in

78 *Book II, ll. 373-404*

some difference between their forms. And in like manner we see the race of shells painting the lap of earth, where with its gentle waves the sea beats on the thirsty sand of the winding shore. Wherefore again and again in the same way it must needs be, since the first-beginnings of things are made by nature and not fashioned by hand to the fixed form of one pattern, that some of them fly about with shapes unlike one another.

192 *Book V, ll. 180-209*

in the ranks of the living, what harm is it never to have been made? Further, how was there first implanted in the gods a pattern for the begetting of things, yea, and the concept of man,ⁿ so that they might know and see in their mind what they wished to do, or in what way was the power of the first-beginnings ever learnt, or what they could do when they shifted their order one with the other, if nature did not herself give a model of creation? For so many first-beginnings of things in many ways, driven on by blows from time everlasting until now, and moved by their own weight, have been wont to be borne on, and to unite in every way, and essay everything that they might create, meeting one with another, that it is no wonder if they have fallen also into such arrangements, and have passed into such movements, as those whereby this present sum of things is carried on, ever and again replenished.

Post by "Elayne" of March 23, 2020 at 11:10 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1494-hypotheticals-would-an-epicurean-hook-himself-up-to-an-experience-machine-or-a-p/>

I think Cassius and Elli have put it just as I would.

The only things I have to add are that I prefer to dwell in reality and not imaginary hypotheticals like this, because the devil is in the details. Let's say that such a machine exists. Who designed it? How much do you trust both their motives and their skills-- is it really wise to hand over your sensory input to a machine which could be taken over by someone else and used to torture you? What if the machine breaks? And you can't access reality to extricate yourself? I do not think an Epicurean would typically accept a hypothetical where those things couldn't happen, because that takes the scenario out of reality as we know it. A decision would have no relevance to us or bearing on our real life philosophy.

Our ability to perceive through our senses is critical to being able to choose pleasure. In making this imaginary choice, a person typically tries to "double" themselves-- but they can't fully double. They can't really let go of the pre-machine condition of knowing that life would be going on without them-- that they wouldn't really be seeing their friends, only imagining it. That they would miss out on the pleasure of knowing they are really there for their friends-- the pleasure of being a friend. That creates a pain in the imagination which can't be removed in the hypothetical. It has nothing to do with valuing something other than pleasure. It is an inability to believe there would not be a feeling of painful loss in the machine. A sort of anticipatory loss. And no matter how many times you reassure a person that they won't know they've lost reality, they can't imagine it. So a normal person will not choose the machine.

Post by "Cassius" of March 23, 2020 at 11:16 AM

Here from Book I line 640 or so (Munro) is one of the reasons that we face the task of dealing with imaginary hypotheticals like this -- and the problem is not limited to "fools."

It is a natural human condition that we are fascinated with things - such as this hypothetical - that seem obscure, and conceal things under involved language, and can ***"tickle the ears and are varnished over with finely sounding phrase."***

For which reasons they who have held fire to be the matter of things and the sum to be formed out of fire alone, are seen to have strayed most widely from true reason. At the head of whom enters **Heraclitus** to do battle, famous for obscurity more among the frivolous than the earnest Greeks who seek the truth. For fools admire and like all things the more which they perceive to be concealed under involved language, and determine things to be true which can prettily tickle the ears and are varnished over with finely sounding phrase.

Post by “Don” of March 23, 2020 at 12:08 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Our ability to perceive through our senses is critical to being able to choose pleasure. In making this imaginary choice, a person typically tries to "double" themselves-- but they can't fully double. They can't really let go of the pre-machine condition of knowing that life would be going on without them-- that they wouldn't really be seeing their friends, only imagining it. That they would miss out on the pleasure of knowing they are really there for their friends-- the pleasure of being a friend. That creates a pain in the imagination which can't be removed in the hypothetical. It has nothing to do with valuing something other than pleasure. It is an inability to believe there would not be a feeling of painful loss in the machine. A sort of anticipatory loss. And no matter how many times you reassure a person that they won't know they've lost reality, they can't imagine it. So a normal person will not choose the machine.

Well, this thread started to fill up quickly! 😊

I would agree with this line of reasoning from [Elayne](#) (if I understand where she's coming from). To respond to [Cassius](#) from my original post and to rephrase some of my own terminology, I don't think I'm, in retrospect, advocating for "true" vs "false" pleasures. What I was trying to get at were pleasures received through the senses of taste, touch, smell, etc., as opposed to pleasures implanted directly in the brain, bypassing the senses entirely. If I remember correctly, Epicurus could not conceive of pleasures without these sensory inputs and likewise the pleasurable life cannot be lived "without living wisely and well and justly". The Machine takes away the ability to both sense things and to live "wisely and well and justly." This doesn't make Wisdom superior to Pleasure, it removes the entire possibility of sensing pleasure in any meaningful way. Epicurus says that one sense cannot override or contradict another sense (I

believe) so what the Machine is doing is tricking the nose into believing it is smelling, the eyes into believing they are seeing, etc. But the "mind"'s purpose is in comprehending ideas and concepts (mental images). I realize the brain senses everything but the Machine isn't sensing molecules of scent or light rays entering the eyes. That's the distinction I was attempting to get at with "true" vs "false."

Enjoying the discussion!

Post by “Cassius” of March 23, 2020 at 1:31 PM

Eugenios then as usual we are not so very part after all. You are focusing on the aspect of the machine as bypassing of the natural sense mechanisms by implanting directly in the brain, which removes the natural functioning controls. In that context then I can see more application of "true and false" to pleasures, but if we are talking within the terms of the hypothetical then all bets are off anyway and the discussion is just a pure mind game with all the downside that is inherent in such activity. Here is the machine as stated at Wikipedia:

The thought experiment [\[edit \]](#)

Nozick asks us to imagine a machine that could give us whatever desirable or pleasurable experiences we could want. Psychologists have figured out a way to stimulate a person's brain to induce pleasurable experiences that the subject could not distinguish from those he would have apart from the machine. He then asks, if given the choice, would we prefer the machine to real life?

Nozick also believes that if pleasure were the only intrinsic value, people would have an overriding reason to be hooked up to an "experience machine," which would produce favorable sensations.

So now we are talking issues as to how much of the hypothetical to accept, and how far to go along with its premises. The further we go, the more hazardous it is to switch back and forth between real life and the hypothetical, or to draw real life conclusions from the hypothetical.

The issue that I would want to emphasize is that in real life there is no such thing as "true" or "false" pleasure. Pleasure is pleasure, and the question is much more focused on "Is it sustainable?"

So the danger in allowing the pleasure machine hypothetical to lure us into abstracting out the characteristics of pleasure, so as to consider there being true and false types, and they sliding that distinction back into the real world. So long as we guard against that we are ok, but we are now squarely into the realm of "Stay away from hypotheticals!" that Elayne has emphasized.

Post by “Don” of March 23, 2020 at 2:02 PM

I guess it all depends then on how we specifically define "experience machine." It seems the Experience Machine is in the same realm as unicorns and centaurs.

Post by “Cassius” of March 23, 2020 at 2:30 PM

Despite (or maybe because) it is in the land of unicorns and centaurs, the thought experiment does serve a useful purpose, though not always with the result intended by its proponents. It does force us to take a stand on the nature of pleasure as the guide of life by dramatizing the question. Many who are faint-of-heart will draw back from the logical implications of Epicurean theory and look for a way out - a way to water down pleasure as the goal. Probably the most predominant way of doing so is to retreat to "happiness," the always-ambiguous word that means anything anyone wants it to mean. Such is also the motivation, in my mind, behind the dominant interpretation of "absence of pain." NOBODY knows what that means, so it's even safer than happiness!

I am of the opposite mindset as to Pleasure (or for this purpose, better stated as Our Patron Goddess Venus, as that will irritate the Platonists and other non-Epicureans even further):

Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead! 😊

Quote

SOCRATES: Then let us begin with the goddess herself, **of whom [Philebus](#) says that she is called Aphrodite, but that her real name is Pleasure.**

PROTARCHUS: Very good.

SOCRATES: The awe which I always feel, Protarchus, about the names of the gods is more than human—it exceeds all other fears. And now I would not sin against Aphrodite by naming her amiss; let her be called what she pleases. But Pleasure I know to be manifold, and with her, as I was just now saying, we must begin, and consider what her nature is. She has one name, and therefore you would imagine that she is one; and yet surely she takes the most varied and even unlike forms. For do we not say that the intemperate has pleasure, and that the temperate has pleasure in his very

temperance,—that the fool is pleased when he is full of foolish fancies and hopes, and that the wise man has pleasure in his wisdom? and **how foolish would any one be who affirmed that all these opposite pleasures are severally alike!**

[NOTE FROM CASSIUS --- An attempt to intimidate [Philebus](#), ultimately successful, because he does not insist, as did Epicurus, that PLEASURE IS PLEASURE - ALL PLEASURE IS GOOD, BECAUSE IT IS PLEASING - " letter to **Menoceus**: And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided.]

....

[PHILEBUS](#): You magnify, Socrates, the importance of your favourite god.

SOCRATES: And you, my friend, are also magnifying your **favourite goddess**; but still I must beg you to answer the question.

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Post by “melkor” of March 26, 2020 at 10:09 PM

So to summarize the response, essentially an Epicurean ought not plug oneself into this machine that promises pleasure, in part because our understanding of pleasure extends beyond the physical and sensual, into mental and emotional pleasure, as well as the fact that we find pleasure from nature, and an experience machine would deny us this, and therefor not bring us to pleasure as we would want. The experience machine therefor does not refute hedonism because hedonism indicates that pleasure is the ultimate end of existence, so rejecting the experience machine would also be on a matter of seeking pleasure for oneself outside such a machine. Even if we value wisdom, it's really because it leads us to pleasure. Not because wisdom is intrinsically valuable or virtuous.

Post by “Cassius” of March 27, 2020 at 6:04 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1494-hypotheticals-would-an-epicurean-hook-himself-up-to-an-experience-machine-or-a-p/>

[Quote from melkor](#)

essentially an Epicurean ought not plug oneself into this machine that promises pleasure,

I think Melkor's summary is correct, but in reading it I think it's important to understand that we are making presumptions about the pleasure machine scenario that are very important. Is it inherent in the scenario that the issue with the pleasure machine is lack of variety? (IE, that there are pleasures we would want that the pleasure machine would not provide?)

If we presume that that is the case, then yes an Epicurean would not choose the pleasure machine.

However I do think we need to be careful to state that detail of reasoning, because if we agree that pleasure is at least somewhat subjective, then it might well be acceptable for an Epicurean to decide that the pleasures provided by the pleasure machine would provide him a better life than some other alternative, and choose the machine.

Stated differently, "if" we found that we derived great pleasure from staring at a candle, and "if" we could postulate that we had circumstances which allowed us to sustain that pleasure indefinitely, would Epicurus say that Nature requires or guides us to reject that option?

Remember [PD10](#): "10. 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."

It seems to me that this is a reminder that our problem with being a worm or staring at a candle is not that being a scientist or an astronaut or a great artist provides "intrinsically" superior or more intense pleasure that is choiceworthy for everyone because of its superiority or intensity. It seems to me that as a practical matter, and from the "point of view of Nature," staring at a candle is not a human-sustainable lifestyle, while pursuing a career as a great artist or astronaut or scientist is or can be both intensely enjoyable and sustainable. So while I don't think we can say that the candle-starer is "objectively" wrong to pursue a life of that kind of pleasure, at least for myself I can and do state emphatically that a life of five years of being an astronaut is something I would choose over 50 years of staring at a candle.

But to repeat one more time, "IF" we stipulate that the person staring at a candle is indeed experiencing pleasure, then we may not personally be impressed, but there's still no god or realm of platonic forms justifying us in saying "that person isn't living right."

Post by "Don" of March 27, 2020 at 7:36 AM

Quote

[Cassius](#) says: Is it inherent in the scenario that the issue with the pleasure machine is lack of variety? (IE, that there are pleasures we would want that the pleasure machine would not provide?)

No, not from my perspective. My issue with the pleasure machine is that it puts itself between the person hooked up to it and Nature. The pleasure machine serves as the mediator. Whoever built the machine is putting themselves between the user and Nature. There is no way for the senses to sense *real* sensations coming *from* Nature. Therefore, there's no way for the person to apply the Canon. Therefore, there's no way to lead an Epicurean life which, at its most basic definition, is the best life to lead (PD 21) since it calls us to sustained pleasure. Ah, but "sustained pleasure" is what is provided by the Machine one might say! Okay, maybe "sustainable" is a better word. That question is harder to answer since we're dealing with a unicorn of a machine. What if the machine breaks down?

I think what we're trying to decide is if it is "right" or "just" to hook oneself up to the pleasure machine. Probably in the grand scheme, we can't make this determination FOR anyone. I would assert that we cannot hook people up without their consent. That seems to me to go against the precept of not wanting to be harmed or to be harmed. Can we stop people from hooking themselves up? No, I don't think that's just either. Do I think someone trying to live a life in accordance with Epicurus' teachings SHOULD hook themselves up. No, because it removes the ability to apply the Canon, to apply wisdom in making choices and rejections, and to allow each of the senses to do what they do without trying to have one sense override the sensations of the others.

My personal "prolepsis", if you will, of the pleasure machine is the Matrix (for those who have seen the movie): Shut off from reality, having sensations fed to you, floating in a vat of goo. And the one who wanted to be re-hooked up to the Matrix after being freed was the villain in that movie... So that may be coloring my opinion.

Additionally, I still think PD 10 is talking about applying the Canon to our pleasures so they are sustainable - not sustained or unlimited - as I tried to lay out over on that thread. It's not a matter of superior or inferior pleasures, but a matter of whether they are sustainable. The life of the profligate is not sustainable. It leads to pain. I don't think the candle-starer is leading an inferior life. Are they meeting their necessary desires? Are they experiencing both ataraxia and aponia? Are they applying the Canon? Are they living wisely, justly, and virtuously? It's sounds like it.

To bring this back to this thread: Given a choice, I would take the life of the candle-starer over the pleasure machine hands-down.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 8, 2022 at 7:00 AM

Well, my take on this whole issue is from another perspective. (Crosspost from [There](#) 😞)

Let's imagine that someone managed to develop a machine, like Nozick's machine, which would be able to produce pleasure while we were plugged in. In case that we're unplugged from it periodically, the answer should seem clear: the pain about my miserable life where I haven't achieved anything, except hanging onto a machine, outweighs the pleasure by a large amount. Even if that pleasure is real- which seems very difficult to implement for me-, I would be so shocked about the waste of my life that the only possible answer for me would be to reject such a machine. Also, the pleasure would be non-natural (because induced by a machine) and non-necessary (by obvious reasons), and firmly rejected.

So, in order for the experiment to be more convincing, I shouldn't have the possibility to be unplugged. Once plugged in, plugged in forever. But then, which role does the machine take? It controls my world, it controls my life, my happiness and unhappiness, so **it's God**. When I become plugged in, the machine becomes my own, personal God; she controls every aspect of my experience.

In that case, the whole Epicurean argument- which states that there can't be any omnipotent God-, **doesn't work**. It's like applying Scepticism to a world in which it has (by whatever means) been proven that truth exists. Or Christianity to a world where it has been proven for certain that there can't be a God.

The Epicurean argument is alien and ineffective to a world where it has been proven that there is a God; but because this machine is God itself, we have to employ other philosophical traditions in order to determine if we should surrender to a God. Epicureanism is a real-life philosophy, not one built on hypothesis.

So tl;dr- such a "bliss machine" doesn't destroy the hedonistic argument, simply because the hedonistic argument never claimed to know the ultimate truth. It's designed to live everyday life, not to answer every possible philosophical question. And, as [Don](#) already stated, this mind experiment is- and will stay for the foreseeable future- a mind experiment. In case that someone discovers a perfect experience machine which provides only natural pleasures without any drawbacks, let me know- I would love to try it out 😊

Post by “SimonC” of January 8, 2022 at 8:43 AM

I discussed this with my wife the other day. She said she would not use the experience machine because it would not be "real" which I think is a common viewpoint. I asked her if a person who believe that they are in a happy marriage but in fact are being cheated on is happy or not, and she agreed that such a person would in fact be happy. So it seems that the "reality" of the pleasure is not consistently taken into account in some peoples valuation.

My opinion on the experience machine is that if we accept that parameters of the thought experiment as given, that using the machine will IN FACT be more pleasurable than not doing so, an Epicurean should always use the machine.

@smoothiekiwi your argument seems to be "but it wouldn't be pleasurable because A, B, C" which is avoiding the thought experiment which states that using the machine is IN FACT more pleasurable than not doing so.

I think the thought experiment boils down to "have you considered that hedonism.... is HEDONISM???" and relying on the other person to react "eww, hedonism". It is not a problem for a committed hedonist.

Other points of the experiment might be "most people living today are not committed hedonists", or "ascetics might judge hedonists severely", none of which are news.

Further there is empirical evidence against Nozick at this time since VR headsets now exist and are being used by people. Most people who use VR headsets would not think "but the things in the game are not REAL" or "you could do other things with your time" are valid arguments against using them. They use the headsets because they like it and that is all the justification needed.

Post by “Don” of January 8, 2022 at 9:49 AM

[Quote from SimonC](#)

. I asked her if a person who believe that they are in a happy marriage but in fact are being cheated on is happy or not, and she agreed that such a person would in fact be happy

The wife in that scenario can only work with the evidence she has at hand. If the evidence to which she has access to gives her the impression she is in a happy marriage, that's not really

an argument for or against the machine from my perspective.

[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.

[Quote from SimonC](#)

hedonism.... is HEDONISM????

Tautologies are rarely a discussion-ending slam dunk. I have no doubt the Cyrenaics would jump at the chance to plug in. I'm still not convinced the Epicureans would. And they're both classified as hedonistic schools.

[Quote from SimonC](#)

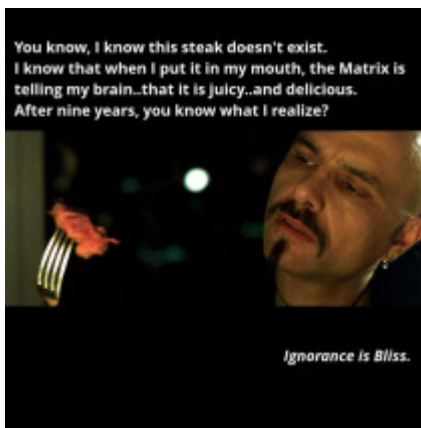
They use the headsets because they like it and that is all the justification needed.

But it's not an all or nothing proposition with VR although it could easily lead to addictive behaviors like anything else. Using something that gives a pleasurable experience for a time, I got no problem with. There are numerous substances and experiences that provide pleasure from time to time.

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 8, 2022 at 11:17 AM

Never. It requires that we willfully accept ignorance.

Source: the character Cypher from the movie The Matrix, a troubled, weak individual who prefers the ignorance of a "blissful" life in the Matrix as opposed to confronting his problems and improving the real world.



Post by “Matt” of January 8, 2022 at 11:49 AM

Epicurus argues against UNNATURAL desires. Such things, though they might be saturated with pleasure, can lead to pain. This machine idea seems to be the ultimate theoretical unnatural construct. It’s a “gotcha” trap...

Instead of a machine it could be a “pleasure drug” that comes in pill form.

A pleasure machine doesn’t exist naturally, it must be made to be manifested into reality. So it already is outside of natural processes that lead to pleasure. Everything has consequences, actions and reactions in reality. So a thought experiment where there are no consequences based on observable experiences isn’t reality and is now beyond the scope of Epicurean philosophy. This line of abstract argument is for adversarial Idealist philosophers attempting to trap Epicureans...the answer for the Epicurean is don’t play the game and don’t step into the idealist arena because THAT isn’t real. The world of the pleasure machine doesn’t exist, just like the the world of pink fluffy invisible dragons that grant wishes doesn’t.

There are many unnatural unnecessary things we might desire...people say that heroin feels like the greatest pleasure, but we all know what happens when someone goes down that road. Consequences. Consequences in reality. And since hooking yourself up to a “pleasure machine” in reality must also like heroin have consequences then we must accept this machine is an UNNATURAL and UNNECESSARY desire that will lead to pain. Given the testable and observable evidence for people who have addictions to the cyber world: VR, social media, pornography, video game addiction, there is very good evidence that this machine idea is a red herring.

Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2022 at 1:27 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1494-hypotheticals-would-an-epicurean-hook-himself-up-to-an-experience-machine-or-a-p/>

I am sorry but I am too running around to be sure where to post on the latest comments on the pleasure machine issue. I'll try here:

My observation is that the big disagreement between everyone is deeper than the issue as stated. Some people are not willing to play the hypothetical game at all, so they reject the proposal because they refuse to accept the hypothetical. I think I saw SimonC make essentially that point, and I think Matt is echoing it in the post just above.

Failing agreement on whether we should accept the facts of the hypothetical, we can't fairly proceed to the ultimate question being asked.

And that's where it seems the discussion is at an impasse.

This *might* be related to Epicurus' refusal to accept the question of whether Metrodorus would be alive or dead tomorrow. He seemed in that case to be rejecting the facts of the hypothetical.

However would Epicurus reject ALL discussion by hypothetical? I doubt it.

Post by “Matt” of January 8, 2022 at 2:03 PM

I just feel like this hypothetical is in the realm of it being entirely implausible given the particular parameters. Its an idealist abstraction that doesn't take into account reality. How reality works, how nature works, how human behavior works.

To argue against this you'd need far more detail, by the person positing this absurdity. So is this universe one where humans don't need social interaction? Need to have sex? Need to reproduce? Need to eat? Need to work? Need to exercise? Are the effects of the machine identical to actual tactile experiences in reality? Is the effect on the brain the same? If the idea is just being posited in a vacuum then no, this question is an absurdity because it refuses to take into account reality and it's akin to any idealist abstract hypothetical. It's a trap...

Post by “Matt” of January 8, 2022 at 2:21 PM

Saying this hypothetical machine exists, it has to exist in the same universe where the natural pleasures ALSO exist, otherwise by what standard would the machine or person judge what a perfect “artificial” copy version of the pleasure is? Without the natural version as a standard?

Then the person could judge whether the real thing is better. This universe is a necessity for the machine to exist. In a universe where pain is also present to contrast with pleasure. So it cannot just exist hypothetically in a paradise-like vacuum where there are no problems or pain humans experience on the regular...that would necessitate a "magical" pleasure machine to escape them. And if it does exist here the parameters must change.

It can't be both ways for the person positing this... it has to exist in this natural universe and if it does it has to operate exactly how nature operates here. Otherwise we might as well be talking about how many feathers are on Cherubim wings as opposed to Seraphim wings....or if two headed dragons are more likely to live in mountain caves as opposed to underground caves.

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of January 8, 2022 at 2:42 PM

[Quote from SimonC](#)

Your argument seems to be "but it wouldn't be pleasurable because A, B, C" which is avoiding the thought experiment which states that using the machine is IN FACT more pleasurable than not doing so.

Nah, I wouldn't say that it wouldn't be pleasurable, but I did avoid the question, that's true 😊

Quote

Further there is empirical evidence against Nozick at this time since VR headsets now exist and are being used by people. Most people who use VR headsets would not think "but the things in the game are not REAL" or "you could do other things with your time" are valid arguments against using them. They use the headsets because they like it and that is all the justification needed.

That's a very good point, which invalidates the whole argument of Nozick! Thank you, I didn't even thought about that for one second, but you're right!

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 rosininess 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.

Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2022 at 4:23 PM

I think in general a "feeling of happiness" because it is a feeling is well within the category of pleasure. It's when people start to embellish "happy" with all sorts of other definitions that are not feelings that the problem comes.

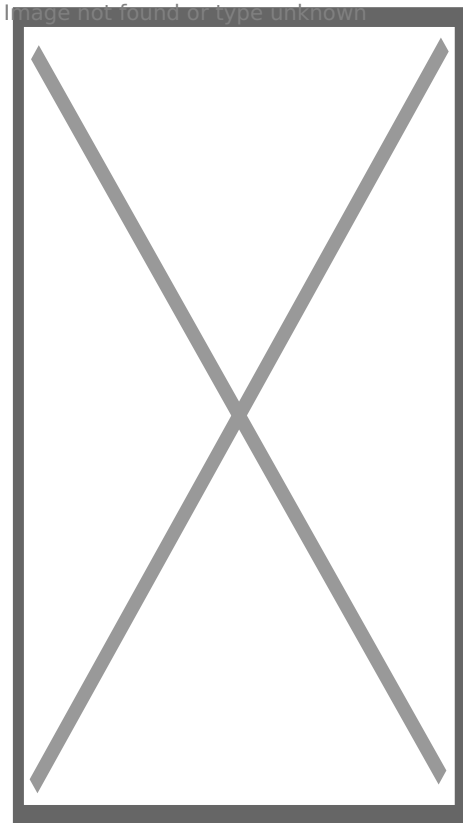
[Quote from Matt](#)

I just feel like this hypothetical is in the realm of it being entirely implausible given the particular parameters. Its an idealist abstraction that doesn't take into account reality. How reality works, how nature works, how human behavior works.

And I think you are describing Platonism / Stoicism / virtue exactly: "idealist abstraction that doesn't take into account reality, how reality works, etc."

Post by “Cassius” of December 4, 2025 at 2:50 PM

As another way of revisiting the same question in this hypothetical, I recently rewatched the Star Trek original series two part episode: "The Menagerie." I would say that this story sets up the question pretty well.



[The Menagerie \(Star Trek: The Original Series\) - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Menagerie_(Star_Trek:_The_Original_Series))
en.wikipedia.org

In that episode, the Christopher Pike, the first captain of the Enterprise has been tragically injured in a radiation accident and injured to the point where he is a total invalid with a fully working mind but the with the inability to move over than to blink one for yes and two for no through light bulbs on his wheelchair. Spock kidnaps Pike and hijacks the Enterprise and takes him to a planet where the occupants have incredible powers of illusion. On that planet they have a female human (who like the [Epicurean gods](#), did not have a pattern by which to reassemble her remains after she crash-landed on the planet) and that want Pike to be her mate. In the original pilot Pike refused to stay, but in the Menagerie he is so injured and disfigured that it becomes debatable whether he should return to the planet and live "under the illusion" of perfect health, or reject the opportunity in favor of his existing reality.

All variations of this hypothetical require that you grapple with the question of who evaluating who is running the machine, and this scenario is no different.

But for those who like Star Trek this is an interesting way to ask the question of choosing between something that is apparently an "illusion" as opposed to "reality."

The final words of the second episode are something to the effect:

"Captain Pike has his illusion and you have your reality. May your way be as pleasant."

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1494-hypotheticals-would-an-epicurean-hook-himself-up-to-an-experience-machine-or-a-p/>

Post by “Don” of December 4, 2025 at 5:18 PM

There's a little more of a twist to the original "experience machine" hypothetical that your Star Trek episode brings up.

I wouldn't necessarily see this as a straight "Would you hook up to the pleasure machine?"

I would see this as more of a question of "exiting the stage" if your life is filled with pain, which Capt. Pike's is arguably at the time of The Menagerie episode.

Pike himself decides to return to Talos IV to live "unfettered by his natural body" (as the Talossians put it). So, this is more a decision to end his current life; and, after a fashion, enter a more pleasant "afterlife" "unfettered by his natural body." This seems more of a commentary on an afterlife than a pleasure machine in many respects. The Talossian even says that "Captain Pike has his illusion..." The life he lives is not real but it can be pleasant for him. What happens to his physical body? Does it matter since it's so damaged?

An interesting take on the original hypothetical, but I'm not so sure it resolves much in the end for the everyday person living their real life. I certainly don't think it's a cut and dried argument for hooking up to the machine (which I don't think you're saying btw!).

Post by “Cassius” of December 4, 2025 at 7:44 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I certainly don't think it's a cut and dried argument for hooking up to the machine (which I don't think you're saying btw!).

Right. I generally see the experience machine hypothetical as geared toward the normal ordinary person to test their views of pleasure. This set of facts focuses more on someone who is in a very difficult situation with no realistic hope of improvement. But it does deepen the question in my view, because once you break down the barrier of "I would *always* choose reality no matter how bad it is" then you start to ask questions about what circumstances would justify such a decision.

Post by “Don” of December 4, 2025 at 8:09 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1494-hypotheticals-would-an-epicurean-hook-himself-up-to-an-experience-machine-or-a-p/>

I would go further in saying the "experience machine" hypothetical in all its forms is NOT about choosing pleasure over pain/reality, it's about choosing reality for the *promise* of a blissful alternative existence. The person/entity offering the experience machine is *promising* you pleasure, an alternative experience from the one you're living now filled with your subjective pleasure. You have no way of evaluating those claims -- until you're hooked up.

Post by “kochiekoch” of December 6, 2025 at 2:41 PM

Right. None of the hypotheticals in this scenario let you take the machine out for a spin! 😄

Doing something like that might change your whole way of thinking about it.