

# Would the experience machine give you the best life possible? What does this tell us about the plausibility of hedonism?

Risto Uuk

The London School of Economics and Political Science

r.uuk@lse.ac.uk

19 January 2020

## 1 Introduction

Robert Nozick came up with the following original experience machine thought experiment in his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*:

Suppose that there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper 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? If you are worried about missing out on desirable experiences, we can suppose that business enterprises have researched thoroughly the lives of many others. You can pick and choose from their large library or smorgasbord of such experiences, selecting your life's experiences for, say, the next two years. After two years have passed, you will have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank, to select the experiences of your next two years. Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's all actually happening. Others can also plug into have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in). Would you plug in? What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside? Nor should you refrain

because of the few moments of distress between the moment you've decided and the moment you're plugged. What's a few moments of distress compared to a lifetime of bliss (if that's what you choose), and why feel any distress at all if your decision is the best one?<sup>1</sup>

This thought experiment raises the following questions: (i) would the experience machine give you the best life possible? and (ii) what does this tell us about the plausibility of hedonism<sup>2</sup>? Nozick thought that the answer to the first question was “no” and that it would give a strong reason to reject hedonism.<sup>3</sup> According to him, most people would choose not to step into the machine, because they value reality.<sup>4</sup> People want more from life than just good experiences.<sup>5</sup> They don't just want the experience of falling in love, they want to actually fall in love.<sup>6</sup> A lot of other philosophers have agreed that the thought experiment makes hedonism implausible.<sup>7</sup>

In this essay, I argue that although most people think that the original experience machine wouldn't give them the best life possible, this doesn't make hedonism implausible. In the first section, I describe an argument claiming that the original experience machine thought experiment doesn't make hedonism implausible, because it is methodologically flawed. In the second section, I consider the objection that when the original experience machine thought experiment is reconstructed, it still indicates that hedonism is implausible.

## 2 Argument

In this section, I develop an argument claiming that the original experience machine thought experiment doesn't make hedonism implausible, because it is methodologically flawed. Here is the argument:

(1) If the original experience machine thought experiment is methodologically flawed, then the original experience machine thought experiment doesn't make hedonism implausible.

---

<sup>1</sup>Dan Weijers and Vanessa Schouten, “An Assessment of Recent Responses to the Experience Machine Objection to Hedonism,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 47, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 463.

<sup>2</sup>According to Andrew Moore, “Hedonism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/hedonism/>, “[Hedonism] claims that only pleasure has worth or value and only pain or displeasure has disvalue or the opposite of worth.” This is the account I use and more can be read from the reference.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Rowland, “Our Intuitions About the Experience Machine,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (September 28, 2017): 110.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Jason Kawall, “The Experience Machine and Mental State Theories of Well-Being,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 33, no. 3 (September 1, 1999): 384.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Belshaw, “What's Wrong with the Experience Machine?,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 4 (2014): 573–92.

(2) The original experience machine thought experiment is methodologically flawed.

(3)  $\therefore$  the original experience machine thought experiment doesn't make hedonism implausible.

## 2.1 Why should premise (1) be accepted?

Premise (1) says that if the original experience machine thought experiment is methodologically flawed, then the original experience machine thought experiment doesn't make hedonism implausible.

If a scientific experiment is methodologically flawed and it concludes that a hypothesis H is true, then it doesn't actually mean that H is true. For example, researchers in the Stanford Prison Experiment concluded that "normal people could behave in pathological ways even without the external pressure of an experimenter-authority"<sup>8</sup>, but this conclusion cannot be considered true, because it is believed that there had been cases of external pressure of an experimenter-authority.<sup>9</sup>

By analogy, if a philosophical thought experiment is methodologically flawed and it concludes that a hypothesis H is true, then it doesn't actually mean H is true. The original experience machine thought experiment claims that H 'hedonism is implausible' is true. If it is methodologically flawed, then H cannot be considered true. A flawed methodology cannot reach a true conclusion, because the results may be due to other factors than the purported factor.

Proper methodology for scientific experiments is to keep all other variables as fixed as possible and study how the quality or quantity of one variable under scrutiny (i.e. predictor variable) changes another variable's quality or quantity (i.e. outcome variable). The same makes sense for thought experiments. In the case of the experience machine thought experiment, the predictor variable is stepping into the experience machine or not and the outcome variable is intuition about whether experiences need to be real or not to be valuable.

## 2.2 Why should premise (2) be accepted?

Premise (2) says that the original experience machine thought experiment is methodologically flawed. Very few people think that it would be optimal to step into the experience

---

<sup>8</sup>Thibault Le Texier, "Debunking the Stanford Prison Experiment," *American Psychologist* 74, no. 7 (2019): 823–39. I wasn't able to access the publication directly and instead relied on this website: <http://human-rights.efpa.eu/download/dd215f245c76aa04f9d2386c4df3e84c>. It may be a different version from the one published in *American Psychologist*. See page 3.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, 4. The paper refers to 'demand characteristics', which according to Wikipedia means that "participants form an interpretation of the experiment's purpose and subconsciously change their behavior to fit that interpretation." See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demand\\_characteristics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demand_characteristics).

machine. A lot of philosophers who have written about hedonism think that the experience machine thought experiment makes hedonism implausible.<sup>10</sup> In one study, only 16% of people said that they'd step into the experience machine<sup>11</sup> and in another, only 28% said that they'd step into the experience machine permanently.<sup>12</sup> The latter study found that only 19% of people with philosophy PhDs would step into the original experience machine.<sup>13</sup>

There are many other factors than people finding hedonism implausible for why so few people would choose to step into the experience machine, such as fear of the machine breaking down, leaving loved ones to suffer in the real world, fear of a complete change of life, practical details about who is going to be running the machine, repugnance to the image of floating in a tank, and many others.<sup>14</sup> Ideally, the thought experiment should elicit intuitions only related to the difference of real experiences in the experience machine compared to the real world, while keeping the amount of pleasure in both conditions the same.

There have been reconstructions of the original experience machine thought experiment, which indicate that when some of these issues have been taken care of, then people are much more likely to want to step into the experience machine. For example, in one study the participants were asked to imagine a stranger instead of themselves to choose whether to step into the experience machine or not and 55% thought that the stranger should indeed step into the experience machine.<sup>15</sup> This modification is thought to have eliminated the status quo bias and fear of changes.

### 3 Objections

In this section, I provide an objection that says that a reconstruction of the original experience machine thought experiment is able to show that hedonism is implausible. This criticism says that if my argument is interpreted very narrowly to be only about the specific thought experiment set-up Nozick used, then the argument is sound, but on a wider reading, premise (2) can be rejected. As a reminder, premise (2) says that the original experience machine thought experiment is methodologically flawed, but this

---

<sup>10</sup>Weijers and Schouten, "An Assessment of Recent Responses to the Experience Machine Objection to Hedonism," 462.

<sup>11</sup>Frank Hindriks and Igor Douven, "Nozick's Experience Machine: An Empirical Study," *Philosophical Psychology* 31, no. 2 (February 17, 2018): 280.

<sup>12</sup>Guido Löhr, "The Experience Machine and the Expertise Defense," *Philosophical Psychology* 32, no. 2 (November 2, 2018): 257–73. I wasn't able to access the publication directly and instead relied on this website: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328610706\\_The\\_experience\\_machine\\_and\\_the\\_expertise\\_defense](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328610706_The_experience_machine_and_the_expertise_defense). It may be a different version from the one published in *Philosophical Psychology*. See page 1.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 9.

<sup>14</sup>Ben Bramble, "The Experience Machine," *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 3 (2016): 139-140.

<sup>15</sup>Hindriks and Douven, "Nozick's Experience Machine," 281-282.

criticism rejects premise (2)', which says that the experience machine thought experiment is methodologically flawed.

The modification of the thought experiment where 55% thought that the stranger should step into the experience machine isn't actually a good modification. In the set-up, the participants were told that „Nearly all of Boris' most enjoyable experiences occurred while he was in an Experience Machine and nearly all of his least enjoyable experiences occurred while he was in reality.“<sup>16</sup> This means that the thought experiment doesn't hold enjoyable experiences fixed. What might be happening in this thought experiment is that people care about both reality and happiness, but they are supposed to choose between a very happy life in the experience machine and quite an unhappy life outside of it even though it is a real one.

Such a modified thought experiment has actually been conducted. The participants were asked to imagine a stranger who found out that they have been in an experience machine half of the time and in the real life another half of the time and both conditions had the same amount of enjoyable experiences.<sup>17</sup> It was found that 90% of the participants thought that the stranger should choose the real life, not step into the experience machine.<sup>18</sup>

This seems to be a much better methodological set-up for the experience machine thought experiment than the original one and could provide a much stronger objection against it. There is, however, reason to be suspicious of it. Even when a true hedonist is provided with this situation, they are probably not going to choose the experience machine option, because they could be indifferent between these two options due to their equal sum of pleasure over pain<sup>19</sup> and because the word 'real' could have some impact on their decision. 'Real' might mean to them that they still have more expected control over their own lives as explained above. Furthermore, when participants are making a snap judgment, then the words 'real' and 'experience machine' could have a lot of force on the judgment.

## 4 Conclusion

Would the experience machine give you the best life possible and what does this tell us about the plausibility of hedonism? Although most people think that the original experience machine wouldn't give them the best life possible, this doesn't make hedo-

---

<sup>16</sup>Dan Weijers, “Nozick's Experience Machine Is Dead, Long Live the Experience Machine!,” *Philosophical Psychology* 27, no. 4 (July 4, 2014): 525.

<sup>17</sup>Rowland, “Our Intuitions About the Experience Machine,” 114-115.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 115.

<sup>19</sup>Rowland discusses this in their paper. They say that the participants had to justify their choice and only one person said that they are indifferent between the experience machine and the real world. Unfortunately, the paper doesn't specify what reasons other participants gave for choosing the real world over the experience machine.

nism implausible. This is because the original experience machine thought experiment is methodologically flawed. A methodologically flawed thought experiment cannot confirm the implausibility of a philosophical view. A reconstruction of the thought experiment to set up a proper methodology may, however, be able to achieve that.

## Bibliography

Belshaw, Christopher. “What’s Wrong with the Experience Machine?” *European Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 4 (2014): 573–92.

Bramble, Ben. “The Experience Machine.” *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 3 (2016): 136–45.

Hewitt, Sharon. “What Do Our Intuitions about the Experience Machine Really Tell Us about Hedonism?” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 151, no. 3 (2010): 331–49. Hindriks, Frank, and Igor Douven. “Nozick’s Experience Machine: An Empirical Study.” *Philosophical Psychology* 31, no. 2 (February 17, 2018): 278–98.

Kawall, Jason. “The Experience Machine and Mental State Theories of Well-Being.” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 33, no. 3 (September 1, 1999): 381–87.

Le Texier, Thibault. “Debunking the Stanford Prison Experiment.” *American Psychologist* 74, no. 7 (2019): 823–39.

Löhr, Guido. “The Experience Machine and the Expertise Defense.” *Philosophical Psychology* 32, no. 2 (November 2, 2018): 257–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2018.1540775>.

Moore, Andrew. “Hedonism.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2019. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/hedonism/>.

Rowland, Richard. “Our Intuitions About the Experience Machine.” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (September 28, 2017): 110–17.

Weijers, Dan. “Nozick’s Experience Machine Is Dead, Long Live the Experience Machine!” *Philosophical Psychology* 27, no. 4 (July 4, 2014): 513–35.

Weijers, Dan, and Vanessa Schouten. “An Assessment of Recent Responses to the Experience Machine Objection to Hedonism.” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 47, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 461–82.