

# Analyzing Nozick's reasons against living in an Experience Machine

Author: Andrey Kazinich

Edited by: Ronen Cherniavski

Robert Nozick's goal in his chapter on Happiness from *The Examined Life*<sup>1</sup> is to demonstrate that there is something we value outside of how our life feels to us internally.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, he aims to demonstrate reality itself is a value on par with intrinsic experience. To this end, he introduced the *Experience Machine* (henceforth EM) thought experiment and provides three value-based arguments that ought to dissuade us from entering the EM. In this essay, I address each of the three values in turn, arguing that none of Nozick's suggestions are compelling reasons for not plugging-in to the EM. Before considering my response, we must first understand Nozick's EM thought experiment and consider the three values he posits.

Briefly, the EM allows for stimulation of the brain such that one believes they are truly experiencing a predetermined and hedonically ideal life, while really they are floating in a tank attached to electrodes.<sup>3</sup> Since the EM provides the best possible internal experience, in rejecting it we reject that it provides the best possible life and thereby affirm that something beyond internal experience is intrinsically valuable. Before going further, due to the nature of Nozick's experiment, it is important to distinguish the difference between true reality and the reality created within the EM. As such, anytime I need to distinguish between true reality and EM reality, I will indicate a concept relating to true reality with “\*,” e.g. reality\*. In *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Nozick posits three values which ought to dissuade us from plugging-in.<sup>4</sup> First, we want to *do* certain things, as opposed to just having the experience of doing them. Per Nozick, in some instances the desire to do precedes and causes the desire to

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 104-108.

<sup>2</sup> Nozick, *The Examined*, 104.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1974), 42.

<sup>4</sup> Nozick, *Anarchy*, 43.

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experience the doing. Thus, there must be a reason why we desire to do certain activities rather than just experience doing them. Second, according to Nozick, we have a desire to *be* a certain way – we care about what we are. In the EM, you are an *indeterminate blob*, and there is no way for you to have any personality – e.g., there is no way for you to be courageous. Finally, the EM is limited to a man-made reality; as Nozick puts it, “[t]here is no *actual* contact with any deeper reality.”<sup>5</sup>

Before addressing the three values, we must further consider the EM to understand its implications fully. Note that the experience is qualitatively identical to reality: the experience should feel just as real as my present being.<sup>6</sup> Anything short of that would certainly deter us from the EM for the wrong reasons (since we would be deterred from accessing the machine because it would not provide an internal experience of reality on par with our present one). Thus, while in the EM, we cannot imagine that we are influenced by a thought-limiting agent or anything else of the sort.<sup>7</sup> In reality, I cannot tell whether I have free will, but I act as though I do; the same must occur in the EM. As such, Nozick cannot claim that the EM offers merely a *movie* of some specific experience – that would be inconsistent with our experience of reality. Furthermore, the set of internal experiences we value extends beyond mere hedonistic pleasure as such. Particularly, we also value the challenge and journey and a myriad of other factors, all internal experiences, and all contributing ultimately to the original desire. Thus, the machine is not a simple simulation of achievement without obstacle. Such a conception misattributes where the internal value of experience lies in humans, and we ought to reject such a machine for misconstruing what the best internal life would be.

Given my analysis of the machine, we may reject Nozick’s second argument. If the internal experience is equally complex and nuanced as is real life, then we should equally be able to grow and

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<sup>5</sup> Nozick, *Anarchy*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> I use the expression “reflect reality” to refer to this idea of the EM experience being on par with reality\*

<sup>7</sup> For example, forced manipulation of consciousness into believing that the experience is not a simulation (the conviction that the experience is not a simulation should occur just as naturally as my conviction that I am not in a simulation does)

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change from it.<sup>8</sup> Our consciousness actively engages with the simulated reality, or else this reality is not akin to our current experience. Since I can become courageous from overcoming fear in this world, I should equally be able to become more courageous when I am the last one standing in a simulated gladiatorial arena. Note that the simulation is complex: I do not merely wish to experience the triumph, since the triumph is valueless without the struggle of preparation that precedes it. In *The Examined Life*, Nozick seems to agree with this view, stating that the EM "...might teach you things..." or otherwise transform you beneficially.<sup>9</sup> As such, we can be a certain way even in the EM, both while within it and if we unplug, and hence this worry should not dissuade our plugging-in.

Nozick's third argument suggests that the machine is limited to "...man-made reality."<sup>10</sup> This is a problem of the thought experiment; the limits of the EM ought to be the limits of reality\*, lest it fails to be an identical simulation of reality\*. If my idea of the best experience is taking copious amounts of drugs, the machine should provide the transcendental experiences those drugs elicit. The machine should not be limited to only currently conceivable internal experiences – any hypothetically possible experience should be available. We can see that this is the case if we consider a long-period or even a permanent stay in the machine: I cannot conceive of what my future self would desire within the machine. Given I can change while within the machine, my desires too will change. I will require stimulation, challenge, and pleasure, amongst many other values – all of which are completely internal experiences. As such, the machine should reflect these developments and provide the appropriate simulation.<sup>11</sup> If Nozick denies this claim, then our justification for rejecting the machine should be simply that the same internal experience, no matter how great, will become boring.<sup>12</sup> Further, a myriad of internal experiences without connectedness amongst them

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, not physically, as our body\* is floating in a tank

<sup>9</sup> Nozick, *The Examined*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Nozick, *Anarchy*, 43.

<sup>11</sup> We can conceive of some advanced AI network as being able to handle this task

<sup>12</sup> Or otherwise repetitive or unrewarding (which factors into the pleasure that experiencing an activity elicits)

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(such as in the 10-year plug-in case) fails to create any continuity of existence. Nozick's proposition in this latter case is just blocks of internal experience, since if I go from one simulation to the next retaining my memory, then I recognize that I am in a simulation. Otherwise, if I go from one simulation to the next without retaining my memory of the previous block, then I am no longer myself\*, but merely a being experiencing disconnected pleasant experiences. The latter case fails to reflect reality; given this view, we may reject the EM because it demands that we forego the consistency of our self, i.e. the continuity of our internal experience.

It is worthwhile to note that by a deeper reality Nozick may mean something mystical or religious. Provided this reading, those who do not believe in any such deeper reality will not find this objection at all convincing. Perhaps there is a theological discussion to be had here about the nature and experience of faith, but it is certainly beyond the scope of this paper. I believe it enough to reiterate here simply that, insofar as experience is concerned, it will be identical in the EM.

Nozick's first argument, unlike the other two, cannot be refuted through a deeper examination of the EM. No matter how well the EM reflects reality, or how well it determines the best internal experiences, from the perspective of an external observer\* it remains the case that there is no real doing\*, merely an experience of doing. Per Nozick, "[w]hat we want and value is an actual connection with reality."<sup>13</sup> Nozick introduces the argument by suggesting that we would not want someone we care about to believe false premises. For example, we would think it terrible if our friend believed and were told they are talented, yet in truth everyone snickered behind their back about their poor performances.<sup>14</sup> However, this case is not analogous to the EM, since there the deception of the experience machine is complete. Beliefs held within the simulated universe are beliefs about that universe, and insofar as they are beliefs about that universe, they reflect that reality. The deception is of the entire universe altogether and thus happens at a different (higher) level.

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<sup>13</sup> Nozick, *The Examined*, 106.

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Thus, Nozick's scenario of deception is such that for the person holding the belief, in the reality where they hold it the belief is not true. In the EM case, the person holding the belief is correct in the reality where they hold the belief, but that entire reality is false (something that is inaccessible to the person holding the belief). As such, this epistemic motivation for connectedness to reality does not hold. Consequently, while this response rejects Nozick's explanation for why we desire connectedness to reality, it fails to adequately explain the underlying desire.

Thus far, I have developed an argument refuting Nozick's rational reasons for refusing to plug-in. However, one may respond that despite this view, there remains a strong conviction against entering the machine. Some internal concern fails to be dissuaded from opposing the idea of living in a simulated reality. Nozick recognizes this initial reaction and urges us to pay attention to it, especially those of us that, through rationality, later conclude that only experiences matter.<sup>15</sup> Nozick views this initial instinct as indicating the intrinsic value of connectedness to reality; no matter how thoroughly we rationalize the EM, the concern of living in a simulation cannot be fully shaken off. Nozick's *second reality principle* states that "[t]o focus external reality, with your beliefs,... is valuable in itself."<sup>16</sup> One possible interpretation of this principle is to adopt an organic unity view, wherein actuality itself would be necessary, but not sufficient, for value (and thereby may contain some intrinsic value). An alternative explanation, however, is to suggest the principle can be understood as aiming at the underlying psychological drive for connectedness to reality, apparent through our initial reaction to the experiment of dread or unease.

However, to conclude from this intuitive dread of a simulation that there is an intrinsic value to reality is an unjustified inferential leap. Imagine that science indisputably proves that we live in a simulation. Given such proof, what sort of reaction should we expect? I believe that the proof leads either to denial,<sup>17</sup> existential

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<sup>15</sup> Nozick, *The Examined*, 105.

<sup>16</sup> Nozick, *The Examined*, 106.

<sup>17</sup> Meaning no amount of proof could ever lead us to believe this suggestion – we would sooner reject science

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crisis, or some other equally radical reaction. In short, the consequences would certainly not be a meek acceptance of the fact; it appears that the fact is impossible to fully internalize in our reality. We can only ever formulate the concept but never truly grasp it. In this view, the dread of simulation is a consequence of our cognitive limitation as sentient beings; it is a psychological limitation. Given this alternative explanation for the dread we experience with regards to simulations, Nozick's inferential leap is unjustified without further motivation. The mere existence of dread of simulation should not convince us that reality has intrinsic value; an equally plausible explanation is just that human psychology is such that we cannot ever fully accept our being in a simulation and, as such, are deeply unsettled by the idea.

As such, there remains no value from Nozick's tripartite account which ought to motivate us against plugging into the machine. One may respond that my analysis is null given the status-quo rejection of the EM argument.<sup>18</sup> The status-quo rejection shows that biases influence our decision in the EM scenario, and with their removal more people are likely to plug into the machine (or remain plugged in). My responses instead demonstrate that even in the original, status-quo biased EM scenario, none of Nozick's reasons ought to deter us from plugging-in. This does not mean that no such reason exists. I believe that a large value that deters us from plugging-in, and which also dictates our decision to stay plugged-in in the status-quo modified case,<sup>19</sup> is our ties to other people (family, friends, loved ones). Nozick fails to recognize this fact when he allows for you to share your EM with people you value (wherein all can plug-in to one simulated world), and still claims we ought not to plug-in.<sup>20</sup>

In defence, Nozick may respond that my view here is merely a specific version of the connection to reality that I have so far been arguing has no importance. This reply misunderstands the motivations – the worry we experience for people we value in this

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<sup>18</sup> Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek & Peter Singer, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 256.

<sup>19</sup> Articulated in Lazari-Radek & Singer, *The point*, 257; and Dan Weijer, *Nozick's experience*, 523.

<sup>20</sup> Nozick, *The Examined*, 107.

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case very much reflects the worry we experience when we, for instance, move halfway across the world. We want to ensure people we care about remain safe and provided for. Knowing I am about to enter the EM, I do not wish to do so with the knowledge that my family will be left to suffer without me, e.g. perhaps I am their sole source of income. This worry is not one rooted in a grounding for reality. Instead, it is rooted in one's immediate context. The experiments demonstrating the status-quo rejection suggest that we would experience the same worry if we were in the EM and were asked to unplug from it after living there all our lives. Hence, my argument does not support a connection to reality but explains an important factor that impacts our decision.

Herein, I have provided alternative explanations for the strong intuitive dread or repulsion we experience when asked whether we would plug into the machine. Coupled with my analysis and rejection of Nozick's tripartite account, Nozick appears to provide no convincing reason why we ought not to plug into the EM.

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