

Class Three: The Value of Reality

Philosophy and Science Fiction - Ryan Simonelli

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1 The Experientialist Impulse

- **The Curious Case of Cypher:** Most of the people Morpheus “saves” are happy to be freed from the illusory world of the Matrix, having their eyes opened to reality. Cypher, however, desperately wants to be plugged back in:

Cypher: [to Neo] I know what you’re thinking, because right now I’m thinking the same thing. Actually, I’ve been thinking it ever since I got here: *Why, oh why didn’t I take the blue pill?*

Cypher: I know this steak doesn’t exist. I know that when I put in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realized? [eats steak, blissfully] Ignorance is bliss.

Smith: Then we have a deal.

Cypher: I don’t want to remember nothing. *Nothing.* You understand? And I want to be rich. You know, someone important—like an actor.

- **An Important Fact:** Cypher takes it that, as far as his subjective experience goes, his life back in the Matrix (eating delicious steak and whatnot) will be *better* than his life outside of the Matrix, on the Nebuchadnezzar (eating yucky gruel and whatnot).
- **The Question:** Assuming that Cypher is right about the respective qualities of the subjective experiences, considered in themselves, is he rational? In other words, is *subjective experience* the only thing that matters when it comes to determinate how to live one’s life? Or does it also matter that one’s life be lived in *objective reality*?
- **Experientialism:** Call the view that subjective experience is the only thing that matters when it comes to determining the value of one’s life *experientialism*. The question, then, is: is experientialism true?
- **Some Preliminary Suppositions:**
 - **Self-Concern:** Let us suppose that we are principally self-concerned. That is, we are considering the question of how to live our lives such that we are to live the best life we can live *for our own sake*, not for the sake of others.
 - * It may be that living the best life for oneself necessarily involves helping others—in which case it’ll give us an answer to this question—but let us suppose, in asking our question, that our principle concern is our own sake.
 - * **A way to get the right frame of mind:** Don’t think of *yourself* but *your children* (if you can imagine yourself having children) for whom you simply want the best. Would you prefer it if they were plugged into the Matrix and had subjectively better experiences or lived in objective reality but had subjectively worse (though still decent, not terrible) experiences?
 - **Tweaking the Examples:** If the specific scenario in the Matrix seems to real for this question to have any real bite, let us tweak the example so that the scenario is more like the Rick and Morty “Roy” scenario, where we have a set of experiences for each person, and not an intersubjectively experienced virtual world. We’ll go back to the specific Matrix scenario shortly.

2 Nozick on the Value of Reality

- **Nozick's Experience Machine:** "Imagine a machine that could give you any experience (or sequence of experiences) you might desire. When connected to this experience machine, you can have the experience of writing a great poem or bringing about world peace or loving someone and being loved in return. You can experience the felt pleasures of these things, how they feel "from the inside." You can program your experiences for tomorrow, or this week, or this year, or even for the rest of your life. [...] You can live your fondest dreams "from the inside." Would you choose to do this for the rest of your life? If not, why not?"
- **Question:** Given Nozick's description here, would you choose to do this for the rest of your life? Show of hands?
- **A Sociological Point:** When polled on this question, the vast majority of people say that they would not.
- **An Argument Against Experientialism:** Taking these intuitions at face value, we have the following argument against experientialism:
 1. If experientialism is true, it'd be rational to plug into the experience machine for the rest of your life.
 2. It's not rational to plug into the experience machine for the rest of your life.
 3. So, experientialism isn't true.

Of course, Cypher *does* think it's rational to plug into experience machine, so he'd just Moorean shift this argument. So, we need to say a bit more about *why* it's irrational to plug into the machine.

- **Nozick's Basic Thought:** "[W]e want to *do* certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them. [...] [W]e want to *be* a certain way, be a certain sort of person [not merely seem to be]. [...] Plugging into the machine is a kind of suicide," (1974, 43).
 - Recall Neo: "I have these memories from my life. None of them happened."
- **The (Second) Reality Principle:** Being connected with reality in certain key ways is *intrinsically* (not merely instrumentally) valuable:
 - "To focus [in the technical sense, like binoculars] on external reality, with your beliefs, evaluations, and emotions, is valuable *in itself*, not just as a means to more pleasure or happiness.
 - Knowledge is an *intrinsic good* because it involves an intrinsically valuable connection with reality—"tracking the facts."
 - "We do not, of course, simply want contact with reality; we want contact of certain kind: exploring reality and responding, altering it and creating new actuality ourselves."
- **A Qualification:** "Notice that we have not said that one should never plug into such a machine, even temporarily. It might teach you things, or transform you in a way beneficial for your actual life later. It also might give you pleasures that would be quite acceptable in limited doses. This is all quite different than spending the rest of your life on the machine; the internal contents of *that* life would be unconnected from reality," (1989, 108).
 - Consider: the "Construct," the training program for the Matrix (which, as Mouse suggests, can also be used for intrinsic pleasures).
- **Discussion Question:** What about real life "experience machines"? Consider video games (VR games especially)—single-player ones for now. Do we have the same intuitions here? Nozick (1974, 43-44) also mentions psychoactive drugs as potential real life "experience machines"?
- **Discussion Question:** What about thinking of these scenarios in epistemological terms, as skeptical scenarios, as we did last class? Nozick says that plugging into the machine is a kind of suicide. But shouldn't Nozick acknowledge that he actually *might* be plugged into the machine? So would Nozick admit that he might be (for all intents and purposes) dead?

- **Sidenote:** Nozick is actually also well-known for an influential response to skepticism: denying what's called the "closure principle:"

Epistemic Closure: If you know that p , and you know that p entails q , you know that q .

We assumed this principle in thinking about the arguments from last class. For instance, if you know that you're holding a waterbottle, and you know that your holding a waterbottle entails that you're not in the Matrix, then you know that you're not in the Matrix. Reasoning contrapositively, since you don't know that you're not in the Matrix, you should conclude that you don't know you have hands. That's the skeptical argument, and Nozick rejects this sort of reasoning we used in making it. But this doesn't actually help Nozick in connection to this question.

3 Back to the Matrix Scenario (and Back Again)

- **Nozick on Something Quite Like Matrix Scenario:** "[W]e can imagine that the experience machine provides the very same illusion to everyone (or to everyone you care about), giving each person a coordinate piece of it. When we are all floating in the *same* tank, the experience machine may not be *as* objectionable, but it is objectionable nevertheless," (1989, 107).
- **The Basic Thought:** Intersubjectivity, while it makes things slightly less bad, is insufficient for reality, and reality is what we desire for our lives.
- **The Key Question (in the words of Morpheus):** "What is *real*? How do you define *real*?"
- **Can the Metaphysical Question be Bracketed?:** Nozick suggests this metaphysical question can be bracketed:

"The question of whether to plug into this experience machine is a question of value. (It differs from two related questions: an epistemological one—Can you know you are not already plugged in?—and a metaphysical one—Don't the machine experiences themselves constitute a real world?),"

But don't we need to answer the metaphysical question in order to know whether to plug into the machine? Shouldn't Nozick say more on just what is required in order for something to count as real in order to draw the conclusions that he does?

- **Back to the Single-Person Case:** Might the original experience machine work in such a way that the way it feeds you experiences of interacting with other people through having artificially intelligent programs of people that virtually interact with you? In such a case, might those people and your relationship to them, be considered real?
- **Can Even the Scientific Question be Bracketed?:** Nozick quickly disregards questions of how such a machine would actually work, technologically:

Notice that this a *thought* experiment, designed to isolate one question: Do only our internal feelings matter to us? It would miss the point, then, to focus

By contrast it seems that taking the machine seriously, as a genuine technological possibility, might actually shape how we think about the thought experiment's philosophical purport.

- **A Main Theme of The Course:** Taking the science in sci-fi philosophical thought experiments seriously can actually have a major impact on the philosophical conclusions we draw from them.
- **Dennett (2013) on "Intuition Pumps":**
 - **Intuition Pumps:** "little stories designed to provoke a heartfelt, table-thumping intuition—'Yes, of course, it has to be so!'—about whatever is being defended," (2013, 6).
 - **Dennett's Advice:** "consider the intuition pump to be a tool with many settings, and 'turn all the knobs' to see if the intuitions still get pumped when you consider variations."

4 Some Related Cases

- **The Case of Quail:** The main character of Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember It for you Wholesale," Douglas Quail, wants nothing more than to go to Mars. Realizing that he'll never be able to afford an actual trip to Mars, he goes to Rekal Incorporated to have memories of having gone to Mars implanted, providing him with very rich but illusory experiences of having gone there.
 - An interesting contrast to the experience machine, because it's not clear that Quail will actually have these experiences. At the very least, he won't experience them as happening in the present, though he will be able to relive them as experiences that happened in the past. How do Nozick's criticisms end up looking in this case?
- **The Case of Truman:** In the film *The Truman Show*, Truman Burbank is unknowingly the star of a reality TV show, and all the people he knows are really actors. Now, we may suppose that Truman's life, though a sham in this sense, is, subjectively speaking, very good, very happy. Indeed, let us suppose that Truman lives the happiest, most enjoyable life of anyone.
 - Would you want to be Truman?
 - There is a sense in which we want to say that Truman's life isn't "real." What exactly do we mean by this?
- **The Case of Thom:** In the *Love, Death, and Robots* episode "Beyond the Aquila Rift," space captain Thom continually relives a stretch of experiences in which he is on his ship, having gone off course, and is reunited with an old friend, Greta. These experiences are quite enjoyable. In fact, however, he is not on his ship, and these experiences are fed to him by an apparently altruistic, telepathic, spider-like alien whose hive his ship has crashed into.
 - This scenario is interestingly different from both the Matrix scenario and the totally-virtual scenarios in that it is neither other physical, envatted humans nor digital human-like AI programs that Thom is interacting with. Rather, it is a single very alien non-human intelligence simultaneously interacting with many people in parallel.
 - * Is a personal relationship with such a thing possible?
 - Consider Nozick's earlier remarks in the "Happiness" chapter about the total area of the happiness graph not being all that matters in evaluating the value of a life. If it did work this way, there'd be no problem with the "looping" of the experiences that we are led to believe happens in the episode, as long as the experiences looped are good. But, intuitively, it seems that there's something wrong with such a looping.
- **The Case of Yorkie and Kelly:** In the *Black Mirror* episode, "San Junipero," love interests Yorkie and Kelly end up, upon death, having their minds uploaded to a virtual reality where they can live their lives together. The ending seems quite happy. Should it?