

To Plug or Not To Plug

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Facing the gigantic machine in front of me that could provide me any experience I desire, I face the dilemma of whether I should plug into it. The three renowned historic figures—Odysseus, Aristotle, and Zhuangzi—all shake their head, each for different reasons.

Odysseus first expresses his view, “Seeking truthfulness may override the sensation of having any desired experience.” While known for his bravery and skilful tactics in the war against the Trojans in the *Iliad*, little do people reckon his wise heart beneath.

You and I must plan how to kill our enemies. List them for me now so I can know who they are, and how many, and so I can weigh the odds and decide whether you and I can go up against them alone or whether we have to enlist some allies. (Homer 16: 249–253)

Odysseus knows it too well. While he does value dignity, glory and immortal recognition very much; he values their *authenticity* the most. This is because after all those years of misery and yearning for home, he highly treasures his *real* possessions, his beloved wife and grown-up son. Thus, the anger against

the suitors who try to devour what belongs to him is more than *real*. He needs *real* revenge and he wants the suitors to be *real* dead, paying for what they have done while he was gone. Plugging into an experience machine would never fulfil him, as it is the avenging act that he wants to conduct, experience is only a by-product. Odysseus has learned this from Calypso on her island. Although he was provided with anything he wanted and taken good care of,

... him sitting where the breakers rolled in.

His eyes were perpetually wet with tears now,

His life draining away in homesickness. (5: 150–152)

I suppose Calypso, the beautiful immortal nymph is also capable in producing a similar experiment machine or hallucinations for Odysseus upon his wish, as long as he is willing to stay. Yet, he has not asked for such favour, but desperately longed for the day to go back. “My heart aches for the day I return to my home” (5: 220). Even though a beautiful island could offer him whatever he wants, he still wants to go back to his real home. What is more, he needs to return home and brags about his adventure—one that is not a man-made scenario, but of reality and with real danger.

He began with how he overcame the Cicones

And then came to the land of the Lotus- Eaters,

...

He told the story all the way through. (23: 318–354)

Plugging in the machine could never provide the *true deal* of dangerous or hopeless situations, as the experience could be changed upon one’s desire.

Thus, Odysseus would not be a *real* hero who sustains in obstacles in this case. This is why Odysseus keeps roaring beside me how I am utterly foolish to plug into the machine.

Aristotle then comes forward and starts circling around me, proposing his idea that, “Happiness is not an item to be possessed, but a continuous pursuit that lasts a lifetime.” Some might argue that one should plug into the machine based on hedonism or utilitarianism. However, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that happiness is regarded only as “the *most* desirable of all things” (1097b17; *italic mine*), “not what is sufficient for oneself alone living a solitary life” (1097b8). Thus, there are other criteria that make a man fulfilled, not happiness alone. What is more,

the good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, . . . in a complete lifetime. . . . neither can one day, or a brief space of time, make a man blessed and happy. (1098a17–22)

Note how Aristotle goes with the words “pursuit” and “activity”, he enlightens me to see that happiness is gained through effort. The same applies to experience, we only feel fulfilment if we earned in achieving it, such as finishing a novel or finding a cure for a disease. If we can have whatever experiences we desire, they would not be so worthy. It would also be less anticipated, because the outcome is predictable with little ground of imagination. Furthermore, since we are limited to past experience that we humans collectively hold, there will be no breakthrough within the machine. After all, no new experience will be created. Thus, the sole fulfilment of pleasure in the machine would not make us self-sufficient but only degrade us to subhuman, as there are neither other social beings interacting with us nor barriers (what we do not desire) to

stimulate new creativity and innovations. For a philosopher like Aristotle, who values thinking out of the box, it would be unbearable to be confined in a place where new insights are lacking. Wanting me to develop my full potential and have better use of my brain power, Aristotle looks at me sternly and asks me to be careful with my choices.

Finally, the distant Zhuangzi speaks with words light but strong, “Stop running away from your fears but to transcend.” Zhuangzi is famous in his philosophy of “free and easy wandering”, where one is free from the bondage of traditions, self-imposed concepts and pride of being the centre focus of the universe. Instead of focusing on the benefits and drawback of plugging into the machine, he questions my deep motives behind. Only then I do I see, I want to be popular, I want to be famous, I want to try out on certain dangerous activities, etc. I want life to be what I want. I despise the unpredictability of life and hate how I am actually but trivial in this big universe. Yet, Zhuangzi encourages me that instead of escaping reality through caging myself in a machine, why not face it in courage and transform my worldview, so that life would still be something good? He is asking me not to plug into the machine so as to grow up, seeing that nobody or nothing in this world is of superiority or inferiority and be carefree.

[W]hether you point to a little stalk or a great pillar, a leper or the beautiful Xishi, thing ribald and shady or things grotesque and strange, the Way makes them all into one. . . . No thing is either complete or impaired, but all are made into one again. (36)

When one lust over certain experience, we are still controlled by it and are not set free. Zhuangzi wants me to stop being “the quail” who never fly more than ten or twelve yards but is confined by his own limited experience. He

wants me to be the “Peng”, who has achieved “free and easy wandering” and “cut[s] through the clouds and mist, shoulders the blue sky, . . . and turns his eyes south and prepares to journey to the southern darkness” (25).

My mind runs fast and I start deliberating their views. Odysseus makes me realize how much I do value truthfulness. In everyday life, I tend to seek truthfulness by pondering whether somebody *truly* loves me or is he only loving somebody's attention, are they my *true* friends or do they only want benefits, etc. Thus, I would never want to enter a machine that provides me fake experience. However, for people who have really bad circumstances and see no hope in changing—for instance, a boy who lives in slums and earn barely minimum daily necessity by picking up rubbish—they might rather plug into the machine to have unimaginable experience, e.g. taking an airplane or visiting France. Thus, Odysseus's argument might not apply to everyone.

Zhuangzi's saying is really ideal but it somehow reminds me of “the unbearable lightness of being”. “Free and easy wandering” is not what everyone can easily perform and the transformation process is painful. After all, temptation and people of different view is lurking everywhere. Furthermore, while it surely makes us worry-free, we might also view things overly “light” and lose the ability to cherish life's events.

Aristotle's argument seems the most pragmatic and convincing. In both individual and social perspective, humans need to unleash their creativity to feel productive and the society has to progress as a whole by innovations. Stepping into the machine would certainly provide humans with pleasure and freedom in life events, but at the same time, constrain humans from their potential and seeking better.

I admit that at certain times, I do want such an amazing machine which I could emerge in experience I like. Yet, plugging into it for a *lifetime* would

be too much of a risk. I still want to live up to my full potential and be a conqueror of real barriers. I have made up my mind.

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Teacher's comment:

In this paper, Chantelle tells us an interesting story of how Odysseus, Aristotle, and Zhuangzi would have responded to the question of the experience machine. In discussing their views, Chantelle explores the different values in our lives such as truthfulness, creativity and progress. Yet, she does not lose sight of the importance of our nature as social beings. To plug or not to plug, that is a question. (Ip Ka Wai)