

The Experience Machine— Analyzing a Modern Paradox from Ancient Philosophers’ Perspectives

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1. Introduction

Do you want to “control” your life? Are artificial experiences true experiences? In *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert Nozick raised a hypothetical question, perhaps a reflection on life—“suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired Should you plug into this machine for life, pre-programming your life’s experiences?” (44–45) With reference to Aristotle’s conception of the good life and his view on what it is to be human, plugging into the experience machine is not a desirable choice. According to Zhuangzi’s view of free and easy wandering, plugging into the machine should not be encouraged either. Nonetheless, also consistent with Zhuangzi’s theory, seeing all things as equal, whether plugging into the experience machine or not actually makes no significant difference.

Robert Nozick himself raised three arguments opposing the decision of plugging into the machine for life. First, “we want to *do* certain things,

and not just have the experience of doing them.” Second, “we want to *be* a certain way, to be a certain sort of person”, not an “indeterminate blob.” And third, “plugging in . . . limits us to a man-made reality.” (43) The three reasons are closely associated with Aristotle’s view on the good life (and will be examined in this article).

2. Aristotle’s View

i. Actualization through Actions

Aristotle raised the idea of “function” in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1098a). Function means characteristic task and activity. Aristotle suggested that we find that happiness is a virtuous activity of the soul. Human beings’ proper function or what is essential to them as human beings is to perform activities guided by reason throughout their whole life time (1097b31–1098a5).

However, plugging in the machine for life time is not an “activity” at all. This argument is related to Nozick’s first two arguments. Plugging in the machine implies the desire of outcome rather than the process or performance, referring to a Hedonistic view of pursuing “good life”. One plugging oneself into the machine simply “*experiences*” the thing but not “*does*” the thing. The conception of “virtue” raised by Aristotle suggested that one’s goodness and proficiency are considered to lie in the performance of that function (1098a17–19).

For instance, a discussion on friendship was raised in *Ethics* in explaining “virtues”. Aristotle suggested that friendship is an activity (1157b7). It requires a process of development. However, by plugging in the machine, one can only get the outcome of “friendship”. There is neither actualization by performance nor activity. Obviously, this kind of friendship is not real friendship from the eyes of Aristotle. Virtue involves activities, not passive experience.

ii. Life of Contemplation

Life of contemplation is the best form of life as suggested by Aristotle (1095b19–20). Supported by Socrates, an unexamined life is not worth living. The ability to think distinguishes human beings from all other living things. The virtue of human is the ability to find a life of contemplation. The highest virtue is the intellectual virtue (1177a10–1178a9).

Human beings are valuable because we can think. Nonetheless, when people simply plug themselves in into the machine, they fully “control” their life. Everything is within one’s expectation. That is, the third argument proposed by Nozick. It means that since the one who plugs himself in the machine will control what kind of experience that he is going to have, every experience he proposed is still created / imaged by him. There is nothing out of his mind/expectation. Therefore, there is no place for contemplation. He can never think out of what he can imagine in the machine. People can contemplate because we face something out of our expectation. There would be no surprising enlightenment in the experience machine because the machine can only project what one can imagine. Therefore, plugging in the machine means that there is no life of contemplation. Definitely, Aristotle would not encourage that form of life.

3. Zhuangzi’s View

i. Free and Easy Wandering

Zhuangzi suggested people should leave the baggage of conventional standards of values. By abandoning all forms of fixations, people can achieve free and easy wandering (23–30). The advocates of plugging in the machine supported the act because they can experience what they cannot do in the reality. This is a form of Hedonistic view in pursuing the “good”.

Very likely Zhuangzi would not agree with the Hedonistic view. The classification of the good and bad is a form of conventional standard. This kind of fixation cannot help flourishing human life. In contrast, Zhuangzi suggested free and easy wandering, making no traditional view over good and bad. He believed that life is desirable because you make it desirable, depending on your understanding. For instance, from a Hedonistic view, life is good while death is bad. Nevertheless, referring to Zhuangzi's view, life is not necessarily desirable and death is not necessarily undesirable (43–44). Plugging into the machine simply makes the stereotype of “good and bad” more significant. With the conception of free and easy wandering, there is no reason to plug into the machine.

ii. Seeing All Things as Equal

From the view of free and easy wandering, it is likely that Zhuangzi would not suggest plugging into the machine. Nevertheless, from the view of seeing all things as equal, it makes no significant difference in whether to plug into the machine or not. Seeing all things as equal can be interpreted as a conception of relativism. All discrimination and classification are relative to some changeable context.

Zhuangzi had raised a famous paradox of not knowing if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou (43–44). Perhaps Zhuangzi suggested that it is not possible for one to distinguish whether he is experiencing in the reality or the dream. When all things are considered equal, there is no differentiation between the reality and the dream. From this holistic view, plugging into the experience machine actually makes no significant difference since people will not be able to distinguish between artificial experience and real experience. Therefore,

if the view of seeing all things as equal is adopted, it does not seem that Zhuangzi would absolutely reject the idea of plugging into the machine.

4. Evaluation

Comparatively speaking, Aristotle’s view is more reasonable. Plugging into the machine means giving up life in reality, considering that Hedonistic pleasure is more desirable than the “virtues” in the real life. Aristotle clearly raised the radical difference between the experience produced by the machine and the experience in the reality while Zhuangzi did not. Aristotle’s view can better reflect the true human nature/virtues in a more comprehensive way. Thus, it is more convincing.

Aristotle clearly suggested that performance and process are more important than outcome (1098a). Thus the Hedonistic view suggested by the experience machine should not be encouraged. His arguments rebut the Hedonistic view of what the “good” is. His view can reflect the human nature in a more comprehensive way. Aristotle suggested in a good life, we have to consider friends, the society and politics, etc. This is a process of pursuing virtues (1177a10–1178a9). This comprehensive way of considering good life is closer to the reality. Human beings are species being, living in a collective way. Some kinds of virtues can only be obtained by public activities. Obviously, one can never gain those kinds of virtues by plugging into the machine.

Nonetheless, Zhuangzi’s theory is mainly focused on one individual. In his view of life, friends, societies and other collective activities were seldom or even not mentioned. This cannot fully reflect the reality of the human nature. In fact, human beings are living in a collective life style. In the reality, one can never simply consider one’s view. If the view of seeing all things as

equal is considered, it is suggested that it makes no difference in plugging into the machine or not. However, this view cannot reflect the true pursuit of the virtues as mentioned.

After all, plugging into the machine is a matter that closely associated human virtues and good life. Plugging into the machine for life means giving up the real life experience. Therefore, as Aristotle's view is more comprehensive in reflecting the true human virtues and nature, it is more convincing.

5. Conclusion

All in all, the experience machine is representing the Hedonistic view of the good life, suggesting that the good things give people pleasure while the bad things cause pain. The writer, Robert Nozick, suggested three arguments against plugging in the machine. The three arguments are closely connected to Aristotle's view on good life. Aristotle suggested that people need actualization through activities and contemplation. The experience machine can only provide the outcome rather than the process or performance. On the other hand, Zhuangzi is likely to give different conclusions under two theories. If the view of free and easy wandering is adopted, plugging into the machine is discouraged. However, if the view of seeing all things as equal is adopted, it makes no significant difference between plugging into the machine or not.

Works Cited

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Teacher’s comment:

This is a thoughtful and elegant paper which demonstrates the author’s ability to analyze the arguments offered by ancient philosophers and apply them to a hypothetical issue. In this paper, Kwong Kin tries to argue that the decision to plug into the experience machine ultimately means a rejection of our humanity. He has also correctly identified a complication in Zhuangzi’s text with regard to this question. Although the experience machine is actually not a “paradox,” this is an intriguing question and Kwong Kin’s reflection on this question sheds light on what it means to be human. (Ip Ka Wai)