

Happiness and Forgetting (The Lotus Eaters)

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The experience of a lifetime



The American philosopher, Robert Nozick (1938-2002) came up with a now famous idea - or thought experiment - called 'the experience machine'. He asked us to imagine that in the future there is a special machine that plugs into your brain called an experience machine. When you are plugged into the machine it makes you have experiences that seem completely real but aren't. We're going to try out Nozick's experience machine for ourselves.

A Perfect Day

First of all, I want you to imagine that you are going to plug into the experience machine for *just one day*. What experience would you programme the machine to give you for just one day?

Let's take an example; let's imagine that you chose to 'climb Mount Everest' for your one day plugged into the machine. Now you get to choose whether A] you climb Mount Everest *through the experience machine* or B] whether you will climb Mount Everest *for real*.

Will you choose A or B, and why?



By the way: any harm that comes to you in the experience machine will seem real but will not harm you in real life. You'll be perfectly safe when you unplug at end of the day.

The Game of Life

Okay. Now let's up the stakes.

This time, you're not going to be plugged in for just one day, but *for your entire life*. And what's more, when you plug in, you will *believe* that the life you experience will be your real life - you won't know it's an experience produced by the experience machine.

If you plug in, you can have your life *just how you want it*. You can be rich if you want or famous if you want, but alternatively, you can be poor if you want or anonymous. You choose!

However, if you choose to live life for real, not plugged in, then you get real life 'warts n' all'. So, if you want to be a good singer then how good you are will depend, as it does in real life, on a combination of hard work and talent. But if you're not born with a talent for singing then it will be very difficult for you to become a good singer. In the experience machine however, if you choose to be a good singer before you plug in and this is programmed into your experience machine life, then that's what you'll be!

So, what do you choose - A] life through the experience machine? Or B] life for real? And why?

By the way: you don't need to worry about food. There will be a machine attached to your real body providing you with all the nutrients you will need to survive whilst you lie on a bed plugged into the experience machine. You will live a normal length of life.