The Value Question:
Can You Live A Good Life in a Virtual World?

by David Chalmers

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In James Gunn's 1954 science-fiction story "The Unhappy Man," a company known as Hedonics, Inc., uses the new "science of happiness" to improve people's lives. People sign a contract to move their life into "sensies," a sort of virtual world where everything is perfect:

> We take care of everything; we arrange your life so you never have to worry again. In this age of anxiety, you never have to be anxious. In this age of fear, you never need be afraid. You will always be fed, clothed, housed, and happy. You will love and be loved. Life, for you, will be an unmixed joy.

Gunn's protagonist rejects the offer to hand over his life to Hedonics, Inc.

In his 1974 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, the American philosopher Robert Nozick offers the reader a similar choice:

> Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences?

Gunn's sensies and Nozick's experience machine are virtual reality devices of a kind. They are asking, "Given the choice, would you spend your life in this kind of engineered reality?"

Like Gunn's protagonist, Nozick says no, and he expects his readers to do the same. His view seems to be that the experience machine is a second-class reality. Inside the machine, one does not actually do the things one seems to be doing. One is not a genuine autonomous person. For Nozick, life in the experience machine does not have much meaning or value.

Many people would agree with Nozick. In a 2020 survey of professional philosophers, 13 percent of respondents said they would enter the experience machine, and 77 percent said they would not. In broader surveys, most people decline the opportunity, too—although as virtual worlds have become more and more a part of our lives, the number who say they would plug in is increasing.

We can ask the same question of VR more generally. Given the chance to spend your life in VR, would you do it? Could this ever be a reasonable choice? Or we can ask the Value Question directly: Can you lead a valuable and meaningful life in VR?

Ordinary VR differs in some ways from Nozick's experience machine. You know when you're in VR, and many people can enter the same VR environment at once. In addition, ordinary VR is not entirely preprogrammed. In interactive virtual worlds, you make real choices rather than simply living out a script.

Still, in a 2000 article in *Forbes* magazine, Nozick extends his negative assessment of the experience machine to ordinary VR. He says: "even if everybody were plugged into the same virtual reality, that wouldn't be enough to make its contents truly real." He also says of VR: "The pleasures of this may be so great that many people will choose to spend most of their days and nights that way. Meanwhile, the rest of us are likely to find that choice deeply disturbing."

Where VR is concerned, I'll argue (in chapter 17) that Nozick's answer is the wrong answer. In full-scale VR, users will build their own lives as they choose, genuinely interacting with others around them and leading a meaningful and valuable life. Virtual reality need not be a second-class reality.

Even existing virtual worlds—such as *Second Life*, which has been perhaps the leading virtual world for building a day-to-day life since it was founded in 2003—can be highly valuable. Many people have meaningful relationships and activities in today's virtual worlds, although much that matters is missing: proper bodies, touch, eating and drinking, birth and death, and more. But many of these limitations will be overcome by the fully immersive VR of the future. In principle, life in VR can be as good or as bad as life in a corresponding nonvirtual reality.

Many of us already spend a great deal of time in virtual worlds. In the future, we may well face the option of spending more time there, or even of spending most of our lives there. If I'm right, this will be a reasonable choice.

Many would see this as a dystopia. I do not. Certainly virtual worlds can be dystopian, just as the physical world can be, but they won't be dystopian merely because they're virtual. As with most technologies, whether VR is good or bad depends entirely on how it's used.

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Will you enter the reality machine?

You may well say no: the reality machine is simply an escapist fantasy. Life in a virtual world doesn't mean anything; at best, it's like spending one's life at the movies or playing video games. You should stay in the physical world where you can have real experiences and where you might be able to make a real difference.

Or you may say yes. The reality machine is on a par with the physical world. You can live a meaningful life there just as you did in the physical world. In the circumstances, it will be a far better life.

These answers reflect two different answers to the Value Question: Could you live a good life in virtual reality?

My answer to the Value Question is yes. In principle, life in virtual reality can have the same sort of value as life in nonvirtual reality. To be sure, life in virtual reality can be good or bad, just as life in physical reality can. But if it's bad, it won't be bad simply because it's virtual.

Other philosophers say no. Some support for a negative answer was given by Robert Nozick's 1974 fable of the experience machine … Nozick's 1974 book, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia,* is mainly a work of political philosophy, advocating a sort of libertarianism, but along the way he wanted to reject certain views of what a good life involves. To do so, he introduced his machine for generating experiences. To continue the passage from Nozick that we quoted [above]:

> You can pick and choose from their large library or smorgasbord of such experiences, selecting your life's experiences for, say, the next two years. After two years have passed, you would have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank, to select the experiences of your next two years. Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there is no need to stay unplugged to serve them. Would you plug in?

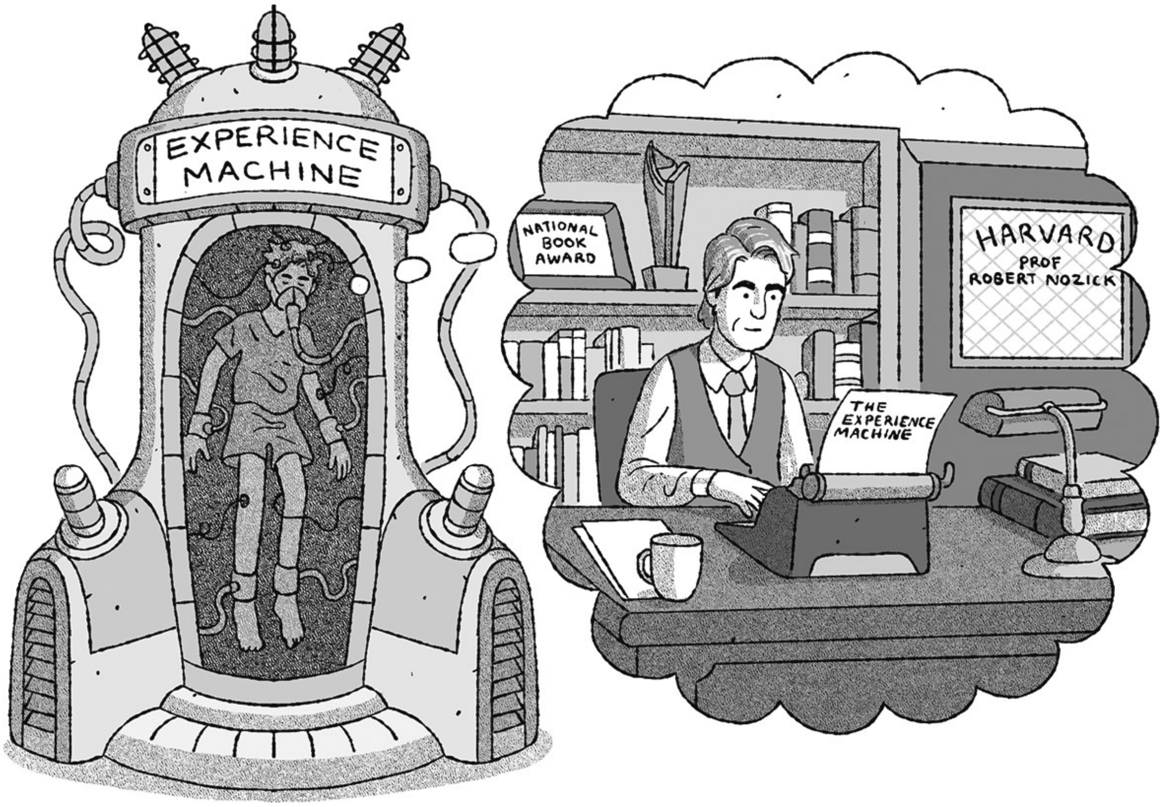

Figure 43 Robert Nozick in the experience machine.

The Canadian philosopher Jennifer Nagel has suggested that Nozick should have taken seriously the idea that *he* was in the experience machine. After all, as a handsome Harvard professor whose books received widespread acclaim, Nozick was living just the sort of life that the experience machine might provide. Still, Nozick expected that most readers wouldn't choose to plug in to the machine. He gave three reasons.

First, Nozick says, we want to *do* certain things. We want to write books and make friends. In the machine, we merely have the *experience* of writing books and making friends. We don't really do these things.

Nozick's underlying worry here seems to be that the experience machine is *illusory*. Or at least, our actions in the experience machine are illusory. It seems that we write books and make friends, but this doesn't really happen. More generally, Nozick's line suggests that most of what happens in the experience machine is a sort of illusion. As he put it in *The Examined Life* (1989): "We want our beliefs, or certain of them, to be true and accurate; we want our emotions, or certain important ones, to be based upon facts that hold and to be fitting. We want to be importantly connected to reality, not to live in a delusion."

Second, Nozick says, we want to *be* a certain sort of person. For example, we may want to be courageous or kind. In the experience machine, we're not courageous or kind; we're not any sort of person. We're just indeterminate blobs.

The underlying problem here is perhaps that the experience machine is preprogrammed. What happens there is decided in advance. When we seem to be courageous, or kind, this is just part of the program. We're not exercising any sort of autonomy; we're just along for the ride.

Third, Nozick says, we want to be in contact with a deeper reality. In the experience machine, we're limited to a human-made reality. Everything we experience was constructed by humans.

The underlying problem here is that the experience machine is *artificial*. We value contact with the *natural* world, but we cannot get that in the experience machine. At best, we're in contact with a simulation of the natural world. The simulation is not itself natural; it's artificial.

Are these reasons for resisting the experience machine good reasons for rejecting life in the reality machine? As the philosophers Barry Dainton, Jon Cogburn, and Mark Silcox have observed, the experience machine is unlike standard VR in a number of ways. There are at least three important differences between the experience machine and the reality machine. First, you don't know you're in the experience machine while you're in there, but you know you're in the reality machine. Second, the experience machine preprograms all your experiences, but the reality machine does not. Third, while you enter the experience machine on your own, the reality machine allows your friends and family to share a reality with you.

Once we're clear about these things, and about the status of virtual worlds more generally, I don't think any of Nozick's reasons to reject the experience machine are good reasons to reject life in the reality machine.

They're also not good reasons to reject life in VR.

First: VR is not illusory. I've already argued that objects in VR are real and not illusions. The same goes for actions in VR. People in virtual worlds perform real actions with their virtual bodies. In the reality machine, you can really write a book. You can really make friends. None of this is illusory. A conversation between two sims in *Free Guy* gets this right. One asks: "If we're not real, doesn't that mean nothing you do matters?" His friend replies: "I'm sitting here with my best friend, trying to help him get through a tough time. . . . If that's not real, I don't know what is."

Nozick himself may have been skeptical about this. In his 2000 *Forbes* article extending the experience machine to real-life VR, he said that the contents of VR are not "truly real." But if my arguments in this book are right, then he's wrong about this, and the illusion issue gives no reason to reject VR.

Second: VR is not preprogrammed. Typically, it's open-ended. A user in the reality machine exercises choice, and what happens there depends on the choices the user makes. Even in a simple video game like *Pac-Man*, the user chooses which direction to go in. In a more complex virtual world like *Minecraft* or *Second Life*, the user has all sorts of choices. Crucially, VR is interactive by definition. What the user does makes a difference to what happens in the world. So users can indeed be genuinely courageous or genuinely kind in the reality machine.

Third: VR is artificial, but so are many nonvirtual environments. Many of us live in cities that are largely human-made, but we still manage to lead meaningful and valuable lives. So artificiality of an environment is no bar to value. It's true that some people value a natural environment, but this seems an optional preference: it's equally possible to prefer an artificial environment, and there's nothing irrational in doing so. Even for people who prefer a natural environment, life in an artificial environment will often be a life worth living.

Nozick's experience machine nevertheless raises important issues about the value of life.