

## On Chase Agheli’s “An Intentionalist Refutation of the ‘Experience Machine’ Debate”

JENNIFER SLOYAN

Let’s say technology has advanced to the point of “experience machines”: machines that you can plug yourself into to simulate any experience you want. They never malfunction, they require no maintenance, and once plugged in you won’t remember you’re in a simulation at all. Would you plug in? Many people wouldn’t.

This is Nozick’s experience machine thought experiment. Its aim is to show that there are aspects of life that matter to us apart from “how [our] experiences feel ‘from the inside’” (Nozick 42). Agheli’s “An Intentionalist Refutation of the “Experience Machine’ Debate” analyzes it as an argument against hedonism, which we can reconstruct as follows:

- (1) The most hedonistically rational action is that which results in the most pleasure “from the inside.”
- (2) Plugging into the experience machine results in the most pleasure “from the inside.”

*Jennifer Sloyan will graduate from the University of Oxford during the Summer of 2024 with bachelor’s degrees in philosophy and French. Her philosophical interests include philosophy of language, ethics, and Hellenistic philosophy.*

- (3) Plugging into the experience machine is the most hedonistically rational action.
  - (4) Many people wouldn't choose this action.
  - (5) If many people wouldn't choose this action, then something exists that matters more to them than what is most hedonistically rational.
- ∴ Something exists that matters more to many people than what is most hedonistically rational.

Agheli refutes (1), whereupon the rest naturally collapses. Yes, hedonism sees pleasure as the only good. But pleasure isn't just a sensation experienced from the inside. *Intentionalist* pleasure also encompasses what I have interpreted as three intertwined components: "real effort" (Agheli 25), "fulfillment of potentiality" (24), and "directional focus to [an] object outside of the body" (28).

"Real effort" can be understood as the inherently pleasurable exertion of our various faculties<sup>1</sup> when acting (Agheli 25–26). "Fulfillment of potentiality" can be understood as the realization of the acts we choose to put effort into. As Agheli puts it, "the act of *achieving* an experience is in itself a source of pleasure" (29). "Directional focus" can be understood as the surrounding context of our acts. This again includes our exertion when realizing them—"the directedness of an experience...can be defined as the act of actually creating the experience" (32)—but also includes our motivations, expectations, and preferences for the specific objects our acts are directed towards.

What sort of thing is the pleasure you get from reading a good book? It isn't just some detached pleasant sensation that could have equally come from something else; it's the way you read and imagine the story, the fact that you're choosing to do so at all, and everything that motivated you to pick up this specific book. But in the experience machine, there is only predetermined sensation. Plugging in means forgoing an essential part of pleasure: the active fulfillment of your intentions towards specific

<sup>1</sup>Agheli's aim in the section referenced here is to reconcile Mill's higher and lower pleasures with intentionalism. As such, he only actually discusses 'higher faculties', e.g. 'the use of intellect and imagination' (Agheli 25). Extrapolating, I assume that the intentionalist view he advocates involves other faculties as well, e.g. the senses we exert when enjoying a meal. This is because he surely wants to claim that all pleasure is intentionalist, not just Mill's higher pleasures.

objects. As long as real life isn't too miserable, not plugging in is the most hedonistically rational action.

Let's assume Agheli is right. The sensationalist account of hedonism is wrong. Nozick's thought experiment refutes this and only this account. Therefore, it fails against the stronger intentionalist account. Nonetheless, I argue that this refutation rests on a narrow reading of the experiment that, once expanded, obliges him to defend increasingly unintuitive forms of hedonism that are no longer "generally supported by the hedonist tradition" (Agheli 24). Nozick's thought experiment isn't "established . . . on a principle of pleasure versus potentiality," but of pleasure versus *reality*, and Agheli doesn't clearly connect the two (31). I then take this further with another thought experiment opposing pleasure and *knowledge* of reality. Overall, the hedonism Agheli defends needs much stronger theoretical support before we can judge whether it refutes the experience machine.

### Potentiality and Reality

As an argument against hedonism, Nozick's strategy is to prove that there is something we value about real life<sup>2</sup> that is 1) not found in the experience machine and 2) therefore not valued by hedonism. In rejecting 2), Agheli must argue that any value the experience machine lacks is also a kind of pleasure.

What do we value about real life? What is the difference between real life and machine-life? Here, Agheli focuses on the aforementioned "real effort" and "fulfillment of potentiality" that come with real life action. According to Agheli, Nozick's thought experiment "suffers from a misunderstanding of the precepts of hedonism as hedonism relates to action", "[separating] the end state of pleasure from the possibility of pleasure through means of obtaining the end state" (Agheli 32). The "primary distinction" between machine-life and real life is "the actual act or sequence of acts involved in creating or realizing a real-life experience" (24). This is because actions experienced in the machine are predetermined and require no effort, precluding exertion or "the act of *achieving*" as sources of pleasure (29).

But this isn't quite the distinction Nozick draws. Although he is vague about the experience machine overall, part of this vagueness is surely to keep the possibilities of which values machine-life lacks broad,

<sup>2</sup>Assume an intuitive definition: "real life" or "reality" as opposed to dreams, hallucinations, simulations, etc.

and certainly broader than just potentiality. For example, he contrasts the machine's "man-made reality . . . no deeper or more important than that which people can construct" with real life's "deeper reality," which many people aspire to (Nozick 43). But surely whether our world is man-made or "deep" has little bearing on whether we, individually, choose to pursue and achieve things within it.

Consider the film *The Matrix*. Unlike with the experience machine, the people unknowingly stuck in this simulation ("The Matrix") do not decide how their Matrix-lives unfold beforehand. Therefore, whatever they do in said lives has potentiality, requiring exertion of their minds and Matrix-bodies to be fulfilled. Moreover, as the Matrix perfectly copies the real world, pleasure as directed motivation towards specific objects must exist as well; people have normal brains to direct motivation and a manifestly normal world to direct motivation towards. So it seems that intentionalist pleasure is compatible with the Matrix. But between 1) the perfect Matrix-life (or any comparable simulation-life, if pop culture isn't neutral enough) and 2) our hopefully real lives right now, many people would intuitively choose to live 2)—and so the argument returns, replacing "experience machine" with "the perfect Matrix-life" and "pleasure from the inside" with "intentionalist pleasure."

A major difference between real life and both Matrix- and machine-life, then, is that one takes place in actual reality, and one does not. Agheli does briefly try to connect reality and potentiality: "when [the object one's pleasure is directed towards] does not *actually* exist, and instead is rather just a bundle of sensory variables imitating the object, the act of directionality collapses" (Agheli 28). For you to derive pleasure from fulfilling your intentions towards an object, it has to be real in some ontological sense. But he does not elaborate (why can't we direct intentions towards illusions? Why should anything like physical existence matter?), and some might already find that this stretches their intuitions about what constitutes "pleasure" a bit far. For example, I don't know that I'm not in the Matrix now. The burden is still on Agheli to explain why, if I am in the Matrix, I'm currently deriving less pleasure from drinking my coffee and writing this essay than if I'm not.

### Potentiality and Reality and Knowledge of Reality

Let's grant Agheli the connection anyway: the main difference between real life and Matrix- or machine-life is contact with reality, which is inherent to potentiality, which is an essential component of pleasure. If people choose mundane real life over amazing Matrix-life because they want

contact with reality, what they actually want is this essential component of pleasure, and so their choice is hedonistically rational. Still, nothing is stopping us from developing a third thought experiment for a third version of Nozick's argument, making Agheli push yet another condition onto intentionalist pleasure if he wants to keep rejecting versions of (1).

Consider the film *The Truman Show*. Truman is not in a virtual simulation, floating in a tank as wires feed sensations into his brain. Instead, everyone around him is lying to him in order to produce a TV show about his daily life. Truman experiences daily life as we do—he has not predetermined the results of his actions, and is even in contact with the real world, even if he doesn't know that the part of the world he resides in is, in fact, a TV set. So if the production team maintains the lie, he is also eligible for intentionalist pleasure as defined so far. But between 1) a perfect life stuck unknowingly on *The [Insert Your Name Here] Show* and 2) actual real life, again many people—including Truman himself, in the finale—would intuitively choose to live 2). Less fancifully, consider the extremely happy and successful man who, unbeknownst to him, is hated by his family and mocked by his colleagues and friends. If the hedonist wants to endorse our distaste for these circumstances, what pleasure can they say the happy man lacks?

Let's recap. To keep the hedonist out of the Matrix, Agheli must restrict intentionalist pleasure ontologically. Now, to keep them out of *The [Insert Hedonist's Name Here] Show*, he's presumably obliged to restrict it epistemologically as well. To derive pleasure from fulfilling your intentions towards an object, it has to be both 1) actually real and 2) actually what you think it's like, neither of which we as epistemic agents can ever confirm. Again, this stretches our intuitions—I can accept that pleasure is not just an end state sensation, but is it really the sort of thing that allows for components we can never detect? Agheli does gesture to Mill as an important externalist about pleasure, who “characterises higher pleasures in part by their external circumstances” (Agheli 25). But he does not elaborate here either, nor does he address the considerable controversy around Mill's own hedonism.

We value more than what we feel from the inside: we value the reality of our surroundings, our understanding of our surroundings, and so on. If Agheli's refutation of the experience machine debate means compressing all of this into one convoluted, radically externalist theory of pleasure, then for now, I think the status quo bias argument he spends the rest of the piece critiquing remains preferable.

## Works Cited

- Agheli, Chase. "An Intentionalist Refutation of the "Experience Machine" Debate." *Aporia*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2020, pp. 23-33.
- Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.