

Sølvmedalje NM filosofi 2024-25. Aukse Lekaviciute, Nydalen vgs 27.03.25 Candidate 27 - Task 3

“Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience that you desired. Superduper 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’s experiences?”

Robert Nozick (1974). Anarchy, State and Utopia. New York: Basic books 2013, p. 42.

To have total control of your life, to have endless opportunities and all the desires you wish for. Seems like a dream unfathomable, but what if that were the contrary? Robert Nozick articulates the possibility of this and presents the question “should you”?

Before trying to decide if this utopia is desirable, it is important Novick’s passage and understand the practice behind this choice of plugging in.

This ‘experience machine’ according to Nozick would be stimulated by ‘superduper neuropsychologists’. Nozick bestows that our wishes would be brought forth by experts using this machine, this presents the undeniable fact that we shall first, articulate our desired reality and from then on put it in the hands of other people or so called experts. Further on I want to note the word ‘preprogrammed’, this unravels the fact that the individual planning their life would not re-program it as if it were a reincarnation, but rather ‘pre’ program it, which presents two possibilities: 1. Sitting down and planning your whole entire life course immediately or 2. Having the constant possibility of choosing the desired outcome of all situations at any given moment. Both of these possibilities are equally dismissive towards spontaneity – one thing that I would argue is the defining factor of life. But what the individual rather does in this given situation according to Nozick is to freely stimulate ones brain towards the endless ecstasy of ‘desire’.

Desire, it is a longing for something or someone, powered by emotion. Therefore, it has no objective ethical value. This emotion has no standard setting and neither do the morals of humans have this: presenting an ethical problem. Nozick mentions the utmost innocent desires: reading, writing and making friends? Would this be the sole purpose of this machinery? No, for I have a grand idea: humans are more complicated than that. Therefore, this utopia could present itself as far more unpredictable and dangerous contrary to the simple practice of reading a fun book.

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I. A journey through Novick's utopia

Nozick's utopia has an underlying tone of loyalty and cheerfulness. The idea is centered around the individual seemingly denying all other factors: portraying individual 'desire' as the only defining factor in life. But what about the people behind it and in charge of funding and promoting this machinery, what about their *desires*? The utopia is not far from our own when we look at one growing philosophy: transhumanism. Exceeding everything with the help of innovation and technology. Super intelligence, super longevity and super happiness. The three supers – theoretically including these highly intelligent 'superduper neuropsychologists. Anyhow, today the western world is already becoming a pawn for technological innovation – or invasion. It has already seeped into our brains with undeniably dangerous algorithms that make dopamine zombies of us. Already presenting a parallel between Novick's utopia and our current reality. Transhumanists like Elon Musk are already trying to make this utopia our own, where the piercing human desire of eternal life is the defining factor. These tech dudes are already closing a tank around our brains with the constant rise of technological advancements and new tools. People buy phones to enhance global communication despite differentiating motivators: family, friends, influencing etc. Yet this simple motivating factor has long since been an illusion for our neglect of privacy, due to our biggest intersubjective truth. Money. Money buys freedom, literally. The problem is that buying undeniably means 'taking' too. If we buy into these transhumanist ideas and fund technological innovation we also take. We take from those that cannot buy freedom and desires, we steal the possibility of prioritizing equality rather than transcending the human race.

Money and resources is the defining factor of this ethical problem, not only by the means of prioritizing rich peoples desire of living eternally but also the intention of leaders. Manipulation and control is everywhere. Even in democracies, the ads, the data: we are being put into systems and used as pawns for economic growth and innovation. Therefore the problem of interest is present too. As mentioned, what are the intentions of those that stand behind such machinery. Do they get the power to control our desires? Hitler made a whole nation desire the extermination of jews and Bolsheviks. This ignorance of control is ever-present not only in these totalitarian regimes but also democracies. The clothes we wear are made by the bloody hands of minors that cannot even achieve the desire of labor-less childhood and a full stomach. Yet we do not go around weeping and bringing attention to the

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simplest immoralities we conjure every day. Yes we can use our speech, we can protest and we can change the origins of our clothing. But who allows these ads and who allows the market to be all about money and cheap resources even though it involves taking the freedom of people withing third world countries? The democratic state right? No matter how much freedom we experience we are illusioned by the costs of it. Desire, the ever steering emotion of Novick's machinery is already present in the western world. I may not be able to get an interesting book in my lap by a snap of the fingers, but I can succumb to the economical system and do so. I can succumb to the machinery of desires. Today we are disillusioned with utopias like Novick's. We see the sun and we see the possibilities of equality and revolution yet we fumble back into Plato's cave and willingly chain ourselves to the reality of shadows. The problem of knowledge is not the issue, we have enough knowledge waiting for us on the internet, yet we do as the people in Novick's utopia, we fulfill desires and we seek comfort. Here resides the problem of ignorance and the philosophy of our own, unless one is the utmost nihilistic pessimist we do not wish to burden our every choice with the endless amounts of consequences it can cause. Utilitarianism as a defining approach to our world is more utopic than Novick's programmed brain tank.

II. The connecting element

Through the journey of interpreting Novick's idea I have changed the narrative. Novick demands us to "suppose there were" and asks us "should you plug in", yet I have proclaimed ramblingly that this is no supposing. Novick articulated his enquiry in 1974, at the peak of the civil rights movements and the lurking of 'Reagonomics' right around the corner. Therefore he set up a seemingly utopic and innocent warning for people at the time of a decade already embarking on the journey of transhumanism and the growing power of money and the western desire for *more*. Therefore his utopia has transcended into a mirroring of what we are plugging into, marking the supposing factor of his question as no longer a speculation but an act of making us conscious of our increasing speed towards this reality.

Let's suppose we implore relevant metaphysical descriptions of stimulating one's brain and programming one's reality. We already have a simulation of endless opportunities towards achieving pleasure and desirable life's through capitalism, therefore we program reality through superduper neuropsychologists whom are unfortunately employed by superduper sketchy tech dudes. Capitalism is the simulation and the mysteries left out of Novick's excerpt are the intersubjective truths behind it all, which are impelled by the west. We value investing

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in estates and expanding garages for the ever growing collection of cars more than we value investing in our connection to nature and philosophy. The cost of living today is by believing in the machinery of desires, the machinery gives us all, yet what we don't notice is that the machinery creates and shapes our values. Jean Paul-Sartre says that existence exceeds essence, presenting the existential freedom we have in forming our own essence, yet this freedom is illusionary and the only freedom we have is to chose which product, which house and which brand matches us best. The machinery of desires that we seek therefore is the branch of capitalisms greed and ability in making us feel unfulfilled. Novick's utopia and the way is articulated is almost identical to the paradoxical manipulation we are met with every day. Buy this, invest in this – that is freedom. If one wants more one can donate themselves to this machinery and achieve every desire.

Therefore, the binding factor of transhumanism and capitalism is greed. That is why there is no transhumanism without capitalist thought and vice versa. If one has already gained the top 1% of all money in the world what's next? The lense shifts from one intersubjective thing such as money to one detrimental subject – the human, the person, the individual. Greed exceeds its limits in money and materialism, and it starts eating off humanity and what we are. Our freedom has already been stolen by the infiltration and manipulation of what we should desire. Now it shifts to the act of stealing bodies. We may have autonomy but what about the literal anatomy? *Pay a little sum everyday and we will freeze and protect your body if you were to die.* Doesn't this sound pretty similar to floating in a tank and simulating the brain?

There is no conclusive matter to Novick's enquiry and whether we should plug in, I state that It is the matter of having to plug into the substance of the question and interrogate it until the curtain falls and it deems itself as a projectory of our own world.

III. Honey

I would prefer to end this with a take on Leo Tolstoy's eastern fable. In his book *On Confessions*, he illustrates death symbolically. A man falls into a well and clings on to a branch, because beneath him awaits the drop into a dragon's gaping mouth. As the man hugs the branch he notices that mice are gnawing at his branch, bringing him progressively closer to his gruesome faith. Yet, on the branch opposite resides a source of intoxicatingly sweet honey. It comforts and distracts. Imagine every person in the world clinging onto the same branch with the same dragon residing beneath them in their very own well. Tolstoy uses this

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metaphor to illustrate the concern of death and how different people deal with it and how one shall.

What if the intoxicating honey that extinguishes the thought of the dragon does not come in endless amounts for every individual clinging unto the branch? The transhumanists they weep and wail while they kick at the mice in an effort to get as much honey as possible. Defeat will not be accepted and the mice must be eliminated in order for the branch to hold the hungry individual, the one that *desires* for all the honey there is.