What's Wrong with The Experience Machine?

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Does reality matter? Nozick's well known thought experiment involving the experience machine suggests it does. You can enter this machine for some lengthy period, after programming it to provide any series of experiences that you choose. Once in the machine, you'll believe things are real. Would you enter? Think about it, the claim goes, and you'll see that you wouldn't trade reality for a life in the machine. The argument is believed to threaten at least some forms of hedonism, or the view that we are - rightly - concerned with pleasurable experiences, with elements beyond this, notably here connections with reality itself, having only instrumental value, in furthering such experiences. And it is mostly well received. Benson, Griffin, Hanfling, Lacey, are among those who approve of Nozick's argument, insisting that it refutes 'the mental state account of well-being', shows how we wouldn't trade 'bitter truth for comfortable delusion', and underscores our wanting 'control over our lives'. I am unpersuaded. Claims made for this thought experiment are, I argue, massively overrated. Consider, first, our mix of desires. We want certain things to happen. I want Venice to be saved. But I can't save it. So my entering the machine will make no difference here. Or I want my children to do well at school. And I can help. It might be a mistake to neglect them and enter the machine, unless I first put in place other forms of assistance. We want, also, to do certain things. There's my best selling novel. But I know I'll never write it. Again, there's no reason here not to enter the machine. Or I want to travel to Genoa, and deliver this paper. Here there is a reason to stay out. And we want to have certain experiences. The machine can, of course, provide them, simulating whatever you choose. Notice, though, that it needn't be a pleasure machine. You want to experience not simply the pleasure of being at the top of Everest, but the struggle of the ascent. The machine can give you these experiences.

Consider now whether you'd enter the machine? Depending both on what you want, and on what you might expect to achieve, there could be some costs involved. Even so, you might choose to enter. The benefits might outweigh the costs. And we might make the following suggestion, imprecise, but still useful. For many people, having already good lives, there might be no compelling reason to enter the machine. But for others, whose lives are, and will continue to be bad, the machine could offer a welcome alternative. Contra Griffin, it isn't obviously a mistake to prefer comfortable illusion to bitter truth. It will depend in part on how bitter the truth is. Nor should those wanting control over their lives always reject the machine. You can control its sequence of experiences. But, often, you cannot control reality. And there's room here for a further point, connected with its not being a mere pleasure machine. Some of us might find reality just too comfortable, and something we can now too easily control. Perhaps illusions of discomfort, and of randomness are to be preferred. All in all, the case against the machine is far from made. Suppose defenders of Nozick offer a more cautious claim. Though it might, in certain circumstances, be outweighed, there is always some value to reality. Experience plus reality is better than experience alone. Is this correct? Imagine a very good life. Many will think, it's better to live this life than merely to seem to live it. But consider a wretched life. Is it better to be tortured, than merely to seem to be tortured? It's hard to see why we should believe this. So even this claim, that there is some measure of intrinsic value in connecting with reality, has only limited appeal. Suppose, instead, these defenders attempt something more ambitious. Nozick insists that anyone, in the machine would, after a while, be 'a mere blob'. The ambitious claim builds on this, invokes externalism, and argues that in the machine we have neither character, nor beliefs, nor experience. But there is no warrant for this blanket move in Nozick. He denies only that we could, after long in the machine, be properly said to be a person of such and such a character. Yet it's hard to see why this should be so.

Consider, finally, one further point. Suppose you are in the machine right now. A stranger persuades you of this, and gives you two options. One is to leave, and discover reality, whatever it is. Another is to forget the stranger, all that he's said, and continue the life of illusion. Some of us would take the first option. But it isn't clear that we'd be irrational in taking the second. Although it's tempting to believe that reality matters, and has value in itself, it's hard to uncover arguments in favour of this claim. And, certainly, reflection on Nozick's experience machine doesn't point to such arguments.