

To plug in or not to plug in, that is the question: Simulacra and The Matrix

Suhan Asaigoli

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In the information age, concerns over the human-technology singularity are ever-prevalent. The ethical, moral, and existential quandaries about what defines reality and humanity are questions that have pervaded the minds of thinkers for millennia. As the world continually advances in technological innovation, we are increasingly pressed to arrive at a collective consensus and rationality for what distinguishes human nature and agency and if technology should allow us to change our nature. These are questions directly correlated with the hypothetical of whether we should be able to plug into a conscious experience machine. Robert Nozick describes the experience machine as a man-made simulation that could give any one person any experience they desire, simulating all the people within it, or a machine that provides the same illusion to everyone. In this case, everyone is subaltern to the one who is in control of the machine. This version of the experience machine is reflected in the film *The Matrix*, wherein vast populations subaltern to the machines collectively exist within a simulation, making up coordinate pieces of a simulated reality. In this paper, an experience machine will be defined as a virtual simulation that can create experiences wherein the agents who are a part of the simulation are subaltern. Subaltern is defined as a person who is under the control of an oppressor, like the humans in the matrix. An experience machine will be limited to a man-made reality. The human mind will be defined as finite. The man-made simulation will be defined as being distinct from reality before plugging in, as they are clearly two different things given that there is a choice between plugging in or not. Doing something will be defined as distinct from experiencing or thinking that we have done them.

Nozick stipulates that plugging into an experience machine limits us to a man-made reality, which can have no deeper reality than that which people can construct. Thereby, people are without such contact with deeper significance, and will not achieve the satisfaction of actually doing certain things. However, Nozick concludes his exploration into the subject by merely affirming his assumption that people desire to live in contact with reality, and only hinting at the implications of this including its connections to agency and causal theory of knowledge. This paper will take Nozick's thought experiment one step further, and explore these implications as I argue that humans should not plug into the machine, as the experience machine is insufficient to simulate reality and infringes upon human agency in creation of a subaltern.

In adhering to the assumption that the experience machine is a man-made reality, I conclude that the experience machine is a figment of the agent's own mind. So what happens if we find ourselves in our own experience machine, depicted by our own minds? Along the journey, we will reach a point where the machine is insufficient to address our desires. Concurrently, we will be compelled to iterate our experience machines, generating new versions to address the pitfalls of the former. Perhaps these changes would alter what kind of person we are, the nature of our relationships, or the outcomes and implications of certain actions. Interpreting this from a Nozickian lens, this search is compelled by desire to find knowledge pursuant of feeling reality. So, if we are able to change the experience machine to meet our desires, would this not create perfect reality? Goldman's theory of causal knowledge says that in order to have knowledge, one's understanding that something is "thus-and-so" can only be elicited if and only if a thing is causally connected with the fact that the thing is "thus and so."

Our beliefs are built upon finding causal nature, empirically interpolating meaning driven by epistemological questions. Due to the limitations of our own minds, there are a finite amount of experience machine iterations we can create bounded by our own understanding. If we inevitably reach the bound, then we will be unable to generate further propositions that make causal knowledge plausible; therefore causal nature is refuted, and belief is called into question. In continually augmenting the simulated reality of the experience machines, each former iteration is invalidated as reality as it is stripped of enigmatic features in order to create a more desirable reality. If the iterations culminate in a dead end, then all the realities are invalidated. Without concrete truths, as Descartes put it: “what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain.”

If the experience machine is driven to its limit, it creates a hyperreality. Continuing in our example of being within our own experience machine, elements of reality are slowly turned intelligible and indistinguishable. Plato expresses the extreme hyperreality and simulacra as a “becoming unlimited,” defining simulacra as infinite copies which result in a “slackened icon.” Metaphysical realism would argue here that independent of humans’ ability to perceive reality, it exists in the simulation nonetheless, due to the existence of objects with purpose and relationships. However, this is contradictory as it gets into the realm of externalism. In externalism, reality does not exclusively reside within the brain, or even within the body. Humans lean on external environmental supports in cognition, and this is a necessary element of reality. In their *The Extended Mind* thesis, Clark and Chalmers provide the examples of using pen and paper for multiplication, or rearrangements of letter tiles in Scrabble as examples. For

Metaphysical realists, it would be the aforementioned relationships, objects, and their natures. However, if all the elements of the experience machine are simulated elements of the agent's mind, then externalism cannot truly be simulated as it depends on taking place outside of the agent's mind. Therefore, there cannot be externalism within the experience machine, and the assertions of metaphysical realism would be flawed.

Many thinkers cite hedonism as the reason to plug in to the experience machine. Nozick himself acknowledges the value that the experience machine could provide in hedonism. If hedonism is the primary goal of plugging in, the experience machine could theoretically provide an optimal experience. If the quality of life is quantified by the amount of happiness, with greater being better, then the experience machine could engineer circumstances to foster such conditions. We see this possibility in Ciphers character in *The Matrix*, in how he chooses to betray the hackers in favor of greedily plugging back into the matrix. Thinkers like Baudrillard, Deleuze, and Foucault don semiotic power, desire, sexuality, and seduction as simulacra. Happiness is included within this cohort. When these powerful constructs such as Foucaudian power and Deleuzian desire are made hyperreal, instrumentalizing them and using them as symbols of power, they actually end up losing their power and effectiveness. However, Ciphers is promised by the sentient programs that his memories of being whisked out of the matrix would be wiped, and that he would be able to happily live without any concern. He would know nothing else but unfettered bliss. Nonetheless, even with a memory wipe, being in your own solo experience machine does not have anyone else to share hedonistic experiences with. Being in a matrix style experience machine where you are in control, but you may include many people you

care about will ultimately end up being insignificant. Even if all members of an experience machine make up coordinate points of reality, because they themselves are limited by the capacity of the bounds of your own mind, relationships themselves become obscene and you would be unable to foster deep, intrinsic connections that are not bounded as would be possible in actuality.

Building upon this understanding, if your experience machine is incapable of allowing the other people in your simulation of advanced thought, would this reality be ethical? Nettle's conclusion is that based on the platonic allegory of the cave, two camps are created. The prisoners within the cave are of lesser understanding and unable to seek wisdom. As the facilitator of the experience machine, you are a philosopher, an intellectual that knows the glories of the real world. Though your experience machine may not naturally subvert the others who make it up, this effect is naturally achieved. As they are merely manifestations of your own mind, they have never seen the real world, they merely take up the world that they are placed in. However, they are still able to go about their lives within this simulated reality. So in order to assess whether this simulation is ethical, I will be primarily looking at whether the humans of the experience machine have agency.

In order to contextualize my line of reasoning for this, I begin by briefing the Indian Caste system under Imperial Britain. The Indian Caste system has its roots in assigning titles and grouping people in society based on the concept of Dharma - one's inherent duty based on their living. It was not intended to be used as a mechanism of social stratification. The British

introduced this stratification as a way to assume dominance in the region. In turn, systemic disparities in the social strata were entrenched in British India, and the workers' class experienced great struggles. In the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak," author Gayatri Spivak discusses how Deleuze acknowledges these struggles as problematic as they are derived from the simulacra of desire and power. These struggles are defined by the limitations that the oppressors put onto them as the subaltern. Deleuze and Foucault contend that realism and agency is achieved by representational realism. All those events which take place in struggles and labor through human action are the things that constitute concrete experience and reality. So they would say that in these struggles, the subaltern defines their reality, and has agency by proxy. As such, Spivak contends that these articulations are problematic, as the intellectual who is in control of the subaltern defines the divisions of this labor in the first place, and the way that the subaltern is able to live. She offers the example of the British outlawing of the practice of sati - where widowed husbands were burned on the funeral pyre with their late husbands. By organizing people into subaltern classes, they must take up the language of their oppressors. While they are able to use this language for themselves, they are not able to generate their own, rendering them metaphorically mute - subordinate with hyperreal desires. Plato echoes this sentiment in his conclusion that simulacrum is constructed on a fundamental disparity. While this disparity between oppressor and subaltern exists, the subaltern does not have free will and agency, and they are incapable of distinctively human action whilst existing as a subaltern class.

This case is a foil for the subaltern class in the matrix, and would be the same as the people who are not in control present in our hypothetical experience machines. In *The Matrix*,

sentient programs and the machines have the ultimate control, and in our cases our minds assume control. In order for the experience machine to be ethical, the subaltern must have agency.

In this paper I have shown that the experience machine is an insufficient model of reality. In the limitations of a man-made simulations, a hyperreality is created, and causal theory of knowledge is rejected. Creating this simulation is creates vast disparities between the controller of the experience machine, and the subaltern, striking down the agency of the subaltern. By plugging in we are agreeing with this unethical reality, and creating a reality that is insufficient and inadequate for our human desires. To be able to answer critical causal questions of our reality is necessary, and the limitations of hyper reality are incompatible with our own satisfaction.