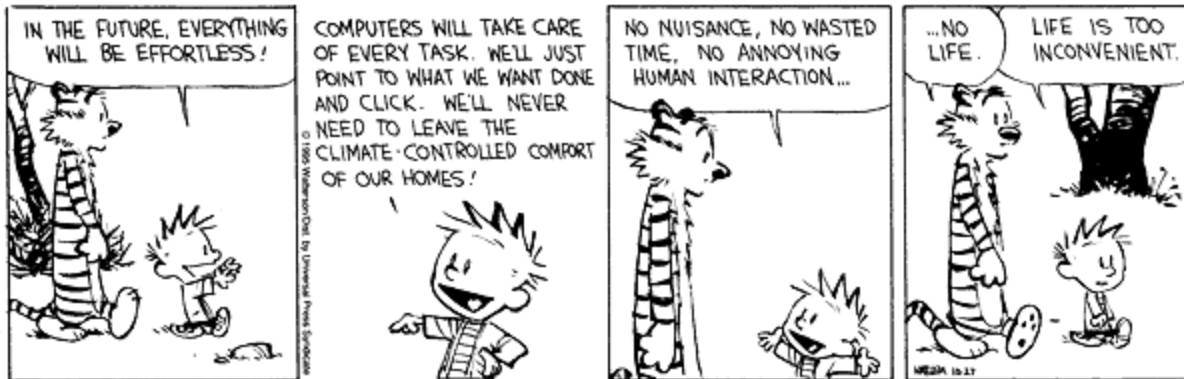


The Experience Machine

by Robert Nozick

“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 like you’re writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you were floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life’s experiences?”



NO



(according to Nozick.)

Nozick has three main arguments:

1. We want to do things, not just experience doing them.
 - “In the case of certain experiences, it is only because first we want to do the actions that we want the experiences of doing them or thinking we’ve done them.”
 - ‘Happiness’ may be a by-product of getting what we want, rather than being an end-goal in itself.

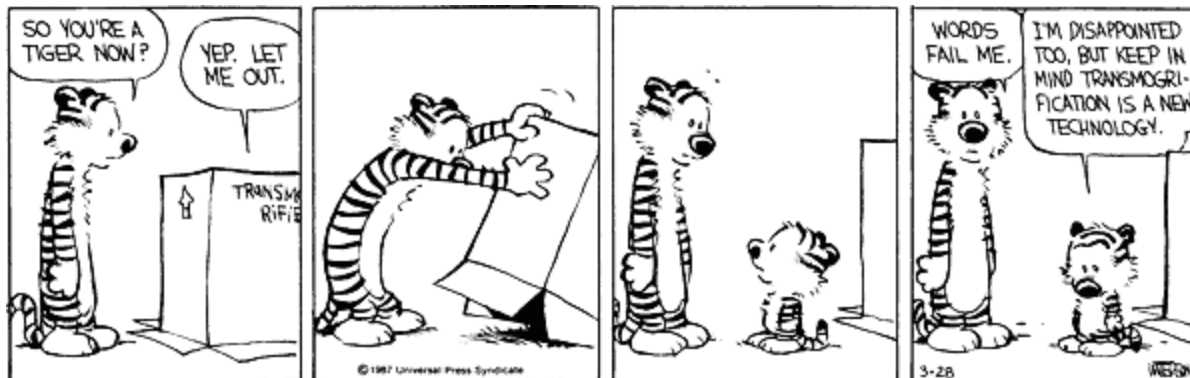
2. We want to be a certain person, rather than a floating brain
 - “Someone floating in the tank is an indeterminate blob.”
 - “Plugging into the machine is a kind of suicide.”
 - “Why should we be concerned with how our time is filled, but not with what we are?”
 - Plugging into the machine is a lower level of existence, where you are dehumanized.

3. We want to have actual contact with reality.

Nozick brings up another thought experiment: imagining a sequence of machines, each more capable than the last, and concluding we wouldn't plug into any of them.

- Since the experience machine doesn't allow us to “be someone”, try a transformation machine that does.
- Since we want to leave a mark on the world, try a result machine that will change the world the way we want.

“Perhaps what we desire is to live (an active verb) ourselves, in contact with reality. (And this, machines cannot do *for* us.)



Discussion Questions:

1. Why do we want to do things rather than merely experience doing them?
2. Do we do things to be happy? Or are we happy because we do things we want to do?
3. What does it mean to be someone? Why is “plugging in” less meaningful than living life?
4. Why is reality (or the illusion of reality) so important to us? Would we be more welcome to plugging in if we believed our experiences are real?
5. Would you plug in?