

ETHICS – THE EXPERIENCE MACHINE

Issues:

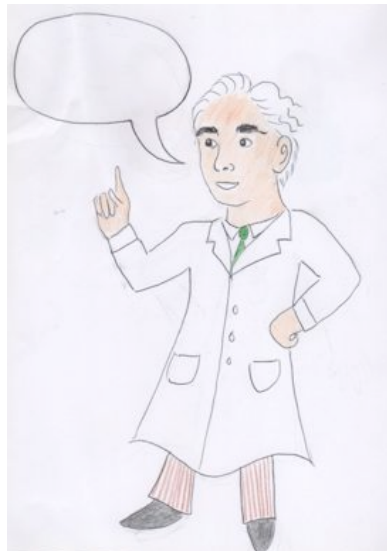
- What kinds of things give our lives value and meaning?
- Is having good experiences the most important thing in life?
- Do we know what is a good experience in advance of having it?
- Do we need bad experiences in order to truly appreciate the good ones?
- How important is the idea of chance in our lives?

Learning Objectives:

- Children will be able to use moral reasoning to reflect upon and evaluate what is most valuable in their lives and in the lives of others.
- Children will recognise that a good (i.e. valuable and meaningful) life may be the same thing as a life of pure pleasure.

Contents:

- Lesson Plan
- Notes and suggestions
- Resources:
 - Story, Ben, Christine and the Experience Machine.*
 - Real Life' and 'Experience Machine' Cards.



Activity	Activity Content	Outcomes
Introduction 5 mins	<p>Introduce the idea of what it is to have an 'experience' by asking pupils what they have experienced in the last few days.</p> <p>If needed, prompt the class with examples such as 'I had the experience of seeing a tiny dog in the park yesterday' or 'I had the experience of tasting a new kind of jam on my toast this morning'.</p> <p>Examples should primarily be of sense-based experience (i.e things seen, heard, smelt, tasted and felt).</p>	Comprehension
Story Round-the-circle 5 mins	<p>Read the first part of <i>Ben, Christine and the Experience Machine</i>, in <i>Resources</i>.</p> <p>At the break in the story, go around the circle getting each pupil to say whether or not they would use the Experience Machine. Each should try to give a reason for their answer. If the class is too large, use a think-pair-share exercise.</p> <p>Once you have gone around the circle, continue with the story.</p>	Independent thinking and decision making.
Debate preparation 5+ mins	<p>Once you have finished the story, ask everyone to think individually for a minute or two about whether or not they would go into the Experience Machine. If necessary, give a quick recap of the details of the story. (A recap can be found in Notes and Suggestions.)</p> <p>Lay out a 'Real Life' card at one side of the circle and an 'Experience Machine' card at the other.</p> <p>Ask the class to move to the side they would choose.</p> <p>Each group must now discuss the reasons for their choice, and agree their top three reasons. These should be noted by the elected group scribe..</p>	<p>Constructing a convincing argument.</p> <p>Using justification.</p>
Debate 15 mins	<p>Bring the class back together and have a reporter from each team read out the three reasons and place these by the 'real 'life' and 'experience machine' cards.</p> <p>Once the reasons have been given a discussion evaluating the relative strengths and weaknesses of each position can be conducted. This should follow the agree/disagree protocol.</p> <p>In facilitating debate, encouragement should be given to discussion exploring:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> --The short and long term consequences of a particular action. --Whether a life of pleasure is a life of value (to the person living it and to others). 	<p>Present a coherent manner.</p> <p>Evaluation.</p> <p>Thinking through consequences.</p>
Round-the-circle 5 mins	<p>End the discussion by going round the circle once more asking each pupil to give a final decision (for now) as to whether or not they would use the Experience Machine and giving just one reason why.</p>	Reflection.
Extended Activity 5-10 mins	<p>If there is time, or if the class elect to continue this topic in a second session, continue the discussion by posing one of the following questions.</p> <p>What, if anything, is the difference between real life and the experience machine?</p> <p>What would you experience if you didn't type anything into the Experience Machine and then got in?</p> <p>Is it possible that you already made the decision to go into the machine and are in it now?</p>	<p>Creative thinking.</p> <p>Reflection.</p>

Notes and Suggestions

Below is a quick recap of the details of the story. This can also be used as another approach to the lesson, where a thought experiment is set up in place of the story.

Scientists have created a machine that can produce any experience you want.

You type in what you would like to do for the next five years and then connect to the machine.

Once you are connected, the machine will create the experience you have asked for.

You will not know you are in a machine so it will feel just like real life.

But it will not be real life; all of the experiences you think you are having will be computer-generated simulations.

After five years, you will be able to come out and choose what you would like to do for the next five years.

Would you use the machine?

When thinking of the reasons for their choice, make sure that both groups are thinking of why they made that choice and not what they will do now that they have made this choice.

This can particularly affect the 'Experience Machine' group who might want to talk about what they would do with such a machine.

Some pupils may be concerned with technical issues, such as: the machine breaking down whilst they are in it; whether everyone could have their own machine; who will pay for the machine; how their body will be nourished, etc. It may be helpful to introduce the class to the idea of a thought experiment in advance to try and limit these kinds of misdirection at the outset

Key Concepts:

This lesson looks at what we value in life and what makes life meaningful to us. It takes as its starting point the, commonly held, belief that we should aim at achieving the maximum number of pleasurable experiences to give our life value.

The Experience Machine thought experiment challenges this assumption and the 'hedonist' thesis it rests upon. This challenges issues from the fact that some people would choose not to go into the machine.

Robert Nozick, the author of the original experience machine thought experiment, claimed that when we think more deeply, we discover that there is more to human life than the mere having of experiences. He suggests that, beyond having pleasurable sensations, human beings value the ability to shape and determine their own life. The experience machine offers no scope for the exercise of freedom, and that is why, according to Nozick, the chance to live in an experience machine would be rejected by the philosopher. This claim takes us back to the roots of Western Philosophy and Plato's claim that the unexamined life – a life where we simply have experiences – is not worth living.

Further Reading:

- Robert Nozick (1974) 'The Experience Machine', in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell [pp. 42-45]
- <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/>
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14789249>

Ben, Christine and the Experience Machine

It was another gloomy day. Ben sat at the window, looking at the park through the pouring rain. "I'll never get to go outside at this rate" he said to himself, wondering if perhaps this was the gloomiest day there had ever been. And there had been some pretty gloomy days already...

He was ready to go into a proper grump about this gloomy, rainy situation when his sister burst into the room in a raincoat and one welly boot on. 'IT'S RAINING!!!' she exclaimed 'Come on! There's huge puddles to splash in just down the road!' This was not Ben's idea of a fun day.

But Christine was so excited about the puddles, eventually Ben caved in and decided to tag along. He and Christine went down the road towards the puddles. Christine skipping in anticipation – she loved jumping in puddles, especially if she could splash somebody else – Ben stomping along, grumbling about the rain. But before they reached the puddles, they heard a loud bang coming from one of the houses nearby on their street.

'That came from Professor Nozick's house!' Ben said.

Professor Nozick was an old family friend who had known Ben and Christine for a very long time. He was also a mad scientist, spending most of his time making amazing inventions. Soap that explodes in water! Toilets that also work as fountains! And biscuits that feel pain!

Curious of what Professor Nozick's next creation might be, Ben and Christine rushed to the window to have a look inside. Even Christine had forgotten about the puddles; one of the professor's new inventions was much more exciting.

They peered through the window to see into the professor's laboratory. What they saw was a very large glass pool filled with what looked like water. Ben thought that it looked like a giant fish tank.

'Maybe he's invented a new type of shark!' Ben said. 'One that can see into the future!'

'Don't be silly Ben' replied Christine, 'it must be an invisible shark. That's why we can't see anything.'

'No sharks this time' came a voice from beside them.

Ben and Christine almost jumped out of their skin. Professor Nozick had opened the door and was looking at them from the doorstep. 'Would you like to come and see what it does?'

Of course they did. Before he had even finished the sentence, Ben and Christine had run through the professor's house, passing cages and bubbling jars and whirring machines and computers with things flashing on the screen and boxes saying 'DO NOT OPEN' – until they reached the laboratory, where they stopped and gazed at the large tank of water.

'What is it?' Ben asked in awe.

'It's an Experience Machine, first of its kind.' Professor Nozick replied, sounding pleased with himself.

'What does it do?' said Christine.

'Well, as the name suggests, it makes experiences. Maybe you would like to go to the beach or climb Mount Everest or even become an astronaut; Whatever you want to do, my machine will let you do it.'

Christine felt uneasy. 'But you wouldn't really be doing it, would you?' she said 'You would be in that machine.' It didn't look very appealing: the tank was cramped and it was filled with strange liquid. Ben, on the other hand, was shaking with excitement 'Wow!' he said, thinking of all the things the machine would let him do. 'But how does it work?'

'Very simple really,' said Professor Nozick. 'First—' he pointed to a keyboard—'first you type in what you would like to do for, say, the next 5 years. You then—' he grabbed a set of wires—'attach these wires to the brain, jump into the tank, pop off to sleep and the Experience Machine does all the rest. It takes over all the senses. Anything you see, hear, touch, taste or smell is now created by the Experience Machine.'

'Won't you know it's not real?' Christine asked, still not sure of this new invention.

'Not at all.' Professor Nozick replied 'it will all feel exactly the same as real life'

'But it won't be' Christine insisted. She didn't like the sound of getting into the machine. 'And besides, surely there's no way of experiencing what it feels like to climb Mount Everest unless you actually do it.'

'I think it sounds great!' Ben interrupted. 'Can you make it sunny?'

'If you want, it can be sunny every day.' Professor Nozick replied, walking over to the Experience Machine.

'So, who would like to give it a try? Tell you what, because you're my friends, I'll let you have the first five years for free. 'FIVE YEARS?!' Christine exclaimed. 'IN A TANK?'

'No,' said Ben. He walked towards the giant tank. 'It isn't five years in a tank. It's five years doing whatever you want.'

'But Ben!' Christine could not believe what she was hearing 'you'll be late for dinner!'

'It's cauliflower cheese for dinner tonight. No thanks. I think I'll have... Chocolate pudding!' Ben said as he cheerfully typed what he would be doing for the next five years into the Experience Machine. He had a lot to think about. Did he want to be prime minister, or the world's best footballer, or a rock star, or the first man on Mars, or the richest man in the world? He laughed to himself when he realised he could do all these things. Enjoy your cauliflower, Christine,' Ben said. 'But if you'll excuse me, I've got some things to do. I'm going to spend five years being the world's richest footballing rock star space explorer who's also the richest man in the world. And prime minister.'

'What will I tell Mum and Dad?'

'Tell them that I'm having the time of my life doing everything I ever dreamed of.'

'Well suit yourself Ben, I'm going to go play in the REAL WORLD. See you in five years!' And with this Christine stormed out into the pouring rain.

Ben wasn't listening. He racked his memory for every fantasy he had ever had. He had never taken his dreams seriously, but now, thanks to Professor Nozick, he had a chance to experience them all. He attached all the wires and jumped into the tank.

'See you in five years,' Professor Nozick said with a smile. 'They'll be the best five years of your life.'

Within seconds Ben was unconscious, experiencing the world that he had planned for himself.

STOP HERE.

GO ROUND THE CIRCLE ASKING THE CLASS WHETHER THEY WOULD USE THE EXPERIENCE MACHINE OR NOT.

MAKE SURE THEY GIVE A REASON FOR THEIR ANSWER.

Five years later, Christine was walking back from secondary school towards Professor Nozick's house. She was going to pick up her brother Ben. She had missed her brother in the five years he had been in the tank, and couldn't wait to tell him about all the amazing things she had done since. She was sure Ben would regret wasting five years in the Experience Machine.

When she got to the house, Ben was just coming out of the tank. Ben looked as though he had just come off the world's fastest roller coaster.

'Are you okay?' Christine asked.

'Okay? I'm better than that; I just rode on the world's fastest roller coaster. It was in my house. Well, one of my houses. I'm fantastic!' Ben was still dazed from all the things he had experienced.

He looked around at Professor Nozick's house and gave his sister a hug. This was disgusting because Ben was covered in smelly goo from the tank, but Christine was glad to see him again all the same.

'I've got so much to tell you about,' he said. 'You should try it out in the tank. It's amazing.'

'Well why don't you tell me all about it at home and I'll tell you what I have been up to in the real world.'

Christine was still sure that Ben had made a mistake. He would realise it once she told him everything she had achieved in real life while he had been wasting his time in a horrible tank.

When they got back home Christine told Ben what she had been doing for the last five years. Christine had worked very hard and managed to get into one of the best secondary schools. She had joined the school rugby team and was one of the top players; her team had even come in second in last year's school cup.

Ben didn't look impressed.

'Yeah, that sounds all right' he casually replied. 'I got the best marks in school for all the exams. They were so good that I was selected for junior astronaut training, it was tough but I passed all the tests with flying colours and then went to Mars. What with being the richest man in the world and a famous footballer as well as prime minister, it was all quite difficult to juggle, but I learned to manage my time well.'

'But you didn't really do that, though, did you?' snapped Christine.

'It felt like I did. So what's the difference?'

'Because it's not REAL! It's not really you, it's just what you want and what you wished you were like. You can't really pass all those exams in real life because you didn't study.'

'Who cares? It feels like me and by the sounds of things it was a lot more interesting than what you did.'

It was becoming clear to Christine that Ben wasn't going to be so easily convinced. 'But, if you go back in that machine, you won't ever learn anything. You won't deserve any of the things you get. It's not good for you'

'Why isn't it good for me?' Ben countered 'I'm getting to do everything I want to do. What could be better than a perfect life.'

Both Ben and Christine looked stuck in their ways.

'Professor Nozick, has offered me another fifteen years free of charge if I go back today so I'm sorry but I have to get back. He told me that he could offer you the same if you want. Why don't you come and try it out?' Ben offered.

'No thanks Ben, I have rugby training tomorrow, I don't want to miss it.'

And with that, Ben was off, not to see Christine again for fifteen years.

By John Thomson. Based on a philosophical thought experiment by Robert Nozick.