

1: Direct Experience

“The Machine is much but it is not everything. I see something like you in this plate, but I do not see you. I hear something like you through this telephone, but I do not hear you. That is why I want you to come. Pay me a visit, so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind.” (p. 2)

“‘Beware of first-hand ideas!’ exclaimed one of the most advanced of them. ‘First-hand ideas do not really exist. They are but the physical impressions produced by love and fear, and on this gross foundation who could erect a philosophy? Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element—direct observation. Do not learn anything about this subject of mine—the French Revolution. Learn instead what I think that Enicharmon thought Urizen thought Gutch thought Ho-Yung thought Chi-Bo-Sing thought Lafcadio Hearn thought Carlyle thought Mirabeau said about the French Revolution [...]’” (p. 18)

Philosophy Texts:

- ‘The Allegory of the Cave’, Plato, Excerpt from *The Republic*,
- ‘The Experience Machine’, Robert Nozick, Excerpt from, ‘Moral Constraints and the State’, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, US: Basic Books, 1974
- ‘Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles’, C. Thi Nguyen, *Episteme*, 13 September 2018
 - Popular Version: ‘Escape the Echo Chamber’, *Aeon Magazine*, 9 April 2018

Philosophy Prompts:

- Where are you with respect to Plato’s cave? It wouldn’t surprise me if most imagine that they are on the outside basking in the glory of the knowledge that is Plato’s sun. It also wouldn’t surprise me if few, if any, of them have ever been in that position epistemically. Even so, Plato is concerned that once knowledge is gained the chains need to be broken. So, where are you? Where are your friends and family? Are they still staring at shadows on the wall? Are they simply exploring the puppets, facades, and actors for answers? Or are they positioned toward returning from discovery to support the epistemic growth and liberation of their peers?
- Is there more to life than experience? That is, Vashti and the great majority of others in the world of *The Machine* seem content to experience ideas and seem solely or wholly (?holy?) motivated by the desire to experience ideas. Some will argue that to rest content with mere experience is to miss out on life. Some will go further and argue that mere experience—that is, the phenomenon of feeling like you’re doing something—is less valuable than feeling like you are doing something because you in fact are doing that thing. Finally, others will argue that being solely or wholly or holy motivated by the desire to feel like you’re doing something X is concerning. But, is there really anything beyond the feeling? When you feel like you’re riding in a car, is that because there really is a car there that you’re riding in? Negative answers to questions like those gives some reason to think that there isn’t anything more to the universe than experience insofar as there is no material

substance that we can causally interact with behind the feeling of things in our world. Is there more to life than experience? Is just looking to have experiences morally worrisome? What does it mean to miss out on life? Which is more meaningful—(a) a life in which an individual experiences love but were never actually loved, or (b) a life in which an individual experiences love and was actually loved?

- Are you in any echo chambers? Are you in any epistemic bubbles? What is the relation between Dr. Nguyen's concerns and Plato's—or his and Nozick's? It wouldn't be surprising to find ourselves in both. So, we might actually wonder about how we know whether we're in one or what we should do if we think that we are.

2: Who decided? Whose values or ends?

“She could not be sure, for the Machine did not transmit nuances of expression. It only gave a general idea of people – an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes.” (p. 3)

“It would be impious if it was not mad.” (p. 21)

Philosophy Texts:

- ‘Freedom of Action’, John Stuart Mill, Excerpts from chapters 1 and 3, *On Liberty*, 1859
- ‘Oppression’, Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, New York: Crossing Press, 1983

Philosophy Prompts:

- What is the necessary condition of government interference in your life? John Stuart Mill argues that government intervention is only justified where that interference is done to protect others from the harm of an individual’s action. The Machine is essentially a significant government intervention. It is ostensibly established to save individuals from the deadly world outside. Does this fit with Mill’s Harm Principle? That is, is the threat to life significant enough or of the right type to justify implementation of the Machine?
- Are we oppressed? Do we oppress? What is oppression? For Marilyn Frye, roughly, gender oppression is centrally a matter of being without recourse to a blameless act. On her view, women are oppressed as women. As evidence, she points to a phenomenon that she calls, a ‘double-bind’. An individual is in a double-bind to the extent that they are scrutinized no matter what they do as blameworthy. Double-binds are oppressive to the extent that they limit one’s blameless options. Is Kuno oppressed? It’s true, he might be chastised, indeed killed or allowed to die as a result of his choosing to take a path beyond the permitted paths to Earth’s surface. Note, when he expresses his interest in living beyond the Machine, he is chastised as impious. However, if he falls in line, then he’ll be branded a sheeple. The main difference between Kuno’s oppression and gender oppression is that those who experience the latter are, on Frye’s view, are often double-bound by the same party. Kuno, however, is double-bound by two parties—one that worships the Machine as a deity—and one that praises resistance to it. Perhaps the nature of oppression is multifaceted insofar as it manifests in ways that are at once univocal and diverse. If so, what is the nature of Kuno’s oppression? Are we blameworthy for what we do under oppressive circumstances? Is Vashti oppressed? Should people in oppressive situations care about things and other people on grounds that go beyond their utility as idea givers? Vashti seemed to be using people as a mere means to her end, namely, the experience of an idea or set of ideas—is she forced here? There certainly seems to be a lack of complete freedom in the world of the Machine, especially within the Machine. Does a lack of complete freedom entail oppression? So, if Kuno and Vashti are oppressed, but a lack of complete freedom is not enough to show that they’re oppressed, what else must be present to constitute an oppressive situation? Is the world of the Machine an oppressive situation on those grounds?

3: Freedom

“I found out a way of my own. The phrase conveyed no meaning to her, and he had to repeat it. ‘A way of your own?’ she whispered. ‘But that would be wrong.’” (p. 11)

“The first of these was the abolition of respirators. Advanced thinkers, like Vashti, had always held it foolish to visit the surface of the earth. Air-ships might be necessary, but what was the good of going out for mere curiosity and crawling along for a mile or two in a terrestrial motor?” (p. 18)

Philosophy Texts:

- ‘Freedom and Responsibility’, Jean Paul Sartre, Excerpt from, *Being and Nothingness*, 1943
- ‘Agamemnon’, Martha Nussbaum, Excerpt from, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge University Press, 1986

Philosophy Prompts:

- To what extent are we free to do as we wish? Are we as radically free as Sartre suggests? On his view, we are not bound by much. Physics perhaps, but he sees us as unbound by any preexisting notion or concept of what it is to be—that is, free to constitute through our actions what is to be a man or a woman, what it is to be a sinner or a saint, what it is to be morally right or wrong, what it is to be human or inhumane or non-human. Are we that free? Or are we bound by an essential way that we are? Are we called by a mind-independent moral authority to be a particular way, to act in certain ways or else fail to act morally?
- Are we blameworthy for choosing to do something morally wrong if we only had a choice between two equally, morally wrong actions? Martha Nussbaum finds room for us to blame Agamemnon though he was constrained to choosing from amongst poor options arising from circumstances beyond his control. Is she right?

4: State of Nature

“He had harnessed Leviathan. All the old literature, with its praise of Nature, and its fear of Nature, rang false as the prattle of a child” (p. 7)

Philosophy Texts:

- ‘(leviathan)’ Hobbes
- ‘Ethical Anxieties about Geoengineering’, Clive Hamilton, *Ethics and Emerging Technologies*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014

Philosophy Prompts:

- Should we work toward a just society merely on the grounds that to do otherwise is to leave intact grounds to fear that your neighbor or co-worker is plotting against you? Does it make sense to see people as bound in the construction of community due to the fact that each worry that the other may kill them just to save themselves through a show of strength or via the acquisition of their property? Hobbes says, ‘Yes!’, to both questions. On Hobbes’s view, roughly we must give over political authority to a ruler strong enough to enforce peace between people. Is that the purpose or part of the purpose of the Machine? Is the Machine a morally appropriate choice for ruler? Is Kuno simply leaving an unjust state for a state of murder and treachery? Whether he is or not, does it matter? Why/why not?
- Should we respond to global climate change primarily with technology or with a forceful political action to sway public opinion and thereby the opinions of local or even federal government? Clive Hamilton argues for the latter. Kuno and Vashti live in a world where environmental catastrophe was mitigated by a technological intervention—the Machine. Forrester seems to suggest that those who opted for a different path were better off. Were they? If so, what was it in particular that made their situation better than the situation of those living contently in the Machine?

5: Value of Interpersonal Interaction

“People never touched one another. The custom had become obsolete, owing to the Machine.” (p. 9)

Philosophy Texts:

- ‘New Social Media and the Technomoral Virtues’, Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016

Philosophy Prompt:

- Are we allowing technologies to reduce our need to interact with other people? Is Vishti’s cultural group missing opportunities to build their moral character by avoiding interactions that go beyond idea-raising lectures or discussions through technological innovation? Shannon Vallor argues that they are. Vallor focuses on the way social media provides avenues to solitude. On her view, that solitude is sometimes valuable. However, she calls for caution. For instance, Vallor argues that those who use interaction with an application like Instagram to endure common social situations are missing opportunities to build the virtues of contextual integrity, self-control, humility, and empathy. Is it morally problematic for an individual to miss so many opportunities to build those virtues that they are significantly lacking in moral character? Is Vishti, vicious then?

6: Eugenics

“By these days it was a demerit to be muscular. Each infant was examined at birth, and all who promised undue strength were destroyed.” (p. 11)

“He paused, and absurd as he was, his last words moved her. For Kuno had lately asked to be a father, and his request had been refused by the Committee. His was not a type that the Machine desired to hand on.” (p. 12)

Philosophy Texts:

- ‘Selecting Children: the Ethics of Reproductive Genetic Engineering’, S. Matthew Liao, *Philosophy Compass*, 3, 2008: p. 1 – 19
- ‘Enhancing Justice?’, Tamara Garcia and Ronald Sandler, *Nanoethics*, 2, 2008: p. 277 – 287.

Philosophy Prompts:

- Is it morally permissible to genetically engineer human embryos? Kuno is denied reproductive rights on the grounds that some of his traits are undesirable. Was Kuno treated unjustly? Why/why not? Matthew Liao critiques what he understands as some of the strongest reasons to think that child selection is morally impermissible. Tamara Garcia and Ronald Sandler focus on the justice of using genetic engineering to enhance one’s human mental or physical abilities. They argue that human enhancement via genetic engineering may be morally neutral, but it would be unjust to allow use of such technology on grounds that it would exacerbate current unjust social and economic inequalities as well as introduce new ones.

7: Other Non-Directly Tech Issues:

Hierarchy

- “And if Kuno himself, flesh of her flesh, stood close beside her at last, what profit was there in that? She was too well-bred to shake him by the hand.” (p. 10)
- “The second great development was the re-establishment of religion.” (p. 19)

Euthanasia

- “She exchanged ideas with her innumerable friends and believed she was growing more spiritual. At times a friend was granted Euthanasia, and left his or her room for the homelessness that is beyond all human conception. Vashti did not much mind. After an unsuccessful lecture, she would sometimes ask for Euthanasia herself. But the death-rate was not permitted to exceed the birth-rate, and the Machine had hitherto refused it to her.” (p. 20)

Homelessness

- The globe went eastward quicker still, horrible accidents occurred, and the Committee of the Machine, at the time rising into prominence, declared the pursuit illegal, unmechanical, and punishable by Homelessness.” (p. 8)

Strict Equality

- “The bed was not to her liking. It was too large, and she had a feeling for a small bed. Complaint was useless, for beds were of the same dimension all over the world, and to have had an alternative size would have involved vast alterations in the Machine.” (p. 4)