

# Thought Experiments as a Source of Philosophical Knowledge - Critical Reflections on Robert Nozick's "Experience Machine"

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## Abstract

Thought experiments design hypothetical scenarios that convey important philosophical insights despite their often highly fictional nature - think, for example, of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, René Descartes' genius malignus, Hilary Putnam's brains in a vat, Derek Parfit's teletransporter, Donald Davidson's Swampman, as well as a thought experiment that will be the focus of this talk: Robert Nozick's *experience machine*. With this thought experiment Nozick intends to refute a certain form of hedonism and to show that we intrinsically value an authentic life.

After a brief discussion of the various epistemic functions of thought experiments in philosophy, a critical reflection of Nozick's experience machine thought experiment will be used to demonstrate the potentials, but also the dangers of thought experiments as a method of philosophical argumentation: On the one hand, thought experiments can stimulate critical engagement with philosophical positions through cleverly devised example cases, and thereby serve as a driving force of philosophical knowledge. On the other hand, thought experiments can be misused as mere "intuition pumps". In these cases, they do not convincingly achieve their intended argumentative goals.