

Where You Gonna Turn? (Matthew 4:1-11)

In 1974, philosopher Richard Nozick proposed a famous thought experiment. He called it the EMTE (Experience Machine Thought Experiment). After its subsequent revision in 1989, [here's](#) how the experiment goes:

Imagine a machine that could give you any experience (or sequence of experiences) you might desire. When connected to this experience machine, you can have the experience of writing a great poem or bringing about world peace or loving someone and being loved in return. You can experience the felt pleasures of these things, how they feel “from the inside.” You can program your experiences for tomorrow, or this week, or this year, or even for the rest of your life ... Upon entering, you will not remember having done this; so no pleasures will get ruined by realizing they are machine-produced ... You can live your fondest dreams “from the inside.” Would you choose to do this for the rest of your life? If not, why not?

If you're having difficulty wrapping your head around this, consider it a forerunner to *The Matrix*.

In other words, would you rather live in a perfect simulation of real-life—one where there's no pain, no war, no disease, no poverty, no

racism or sexism, no xenophobia or homophobia or transphobia, no disability, no disappointments, no awkward teenage years, no ravages of aging, no career disappointments, no zits, no taxes—or would you rather have a real, authentic life, where your experiences come not from inside your imagination, but from the cold hard reality of everyday life?

If you had the choice, would you choose the blue pill that promises a pain-free existence? Or would you choose the red pill that promises no extra pleasure or an absence of pain—but only the mundane reality of real life—filled with all the suffering and disappointment being human entails?

Not an easy one to decide, is it?

We like the heroic *idea* of trusting the real and committing ourselves to authentic lives of truth instead of simulated lives of distraction, don't we?

But I don't know if our ideals always match our sense of ourselves as the heroes of our own stories, as the fearless pursuers of truth over

distraction. One could argue, of course, that our addiction to our smartphones and the Internet they deliver demonstrate that we've already taken the first steps to plug into the Experience Machine.

In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's epic novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the brothers, Ivan, introduces a similar thought experiment. But instead of projecting our lives into the future, his thought experiment looks back to the dark days of the Spanish Inquisition in Spain.

As Ivan lays out his story for his brother, Alyosha, he sets the stage by saying that in the 1500s in Seville, Spain, at the height of the Inquisition, "when, for the greater glory of God, stakes were flaming all over the country," Jesus finally returns. Except, he doesn't return with the trumpets sounding and the skies being torn open. Instead, Jesus mysteriously shows up in the Spanish countryside in the same form as in his **first** appearance on earth—quietly healing everyone who touches the hem of his garment.

In Ivan's tale, even though Jesus says only two words, the whole world recognizes who he is, and people flock to him because of the love that radiates from him, touching almost everyone.

In the middle of all this furor over Jesus' return, a procession emerges from the cathedral bearing the tiny white coffin of a seven-year-old girl. The dead child's mother pleads with Jesus, "If it really is you, bring my child back to life."

Jesus raises the coffin's lid to see the little girl surrounded by flowers and holding a bouquet of white roses. Then, in the only two words Jesus speaks in the whole 10,000-word parable, he recalls the Gospel stories: *Talitha cumi*, which means, "Little girl, get up!"

And, just as in the Gospel story, the little girl sits up. Ivan says that this miracle overwhelmed the crowd. They were "violently excited." But, unfortunately, witnessing all this is the Cardinal, who becomes the head of

the Inquisitionary Gestapo. The Grand Inquisitor immediately orders the guards to arrest Jesus and throw him in prison.

The crowd, which has all grown to fear and cower before the power of the Inquisition, once again shrinks back in fear.

The rest of the story is set in Jesus' prison cell, where the Grand Inquisitor shows up to have it out.

Of course, the setup to Ivan's story strikes most people who read it as improbable. I mean, after all, if Jesus came back to **us**, we like to think that we'd **welcome** him. So why throw Jesus in jail for ... you know, being Jesus? What's the problem?

The Grand Inquisitor explains his displeasure at seeing Jesus return. At bottom, the Grand Inquisitor makes an argument that God had it right when humans lived in the Garden of Eden—they didn't have to worry about anything because all their needs were taken care of. But the sin of

Adam and Eve—eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—reveals to them the possibility of their own freedom. And now, having that freedom will ultimately make Adam and Eve dissatisfied with the perfection of the Garden of Eden. So, God kicks them out, allowing them to embrace this newfound freedom.

But, according to the Grand Inquisitor, the descendants of Adam and Eve are cattle who soon realize that freedom doesn't come with a guaranteed meal plan. Working by the sweat of their brow, even though they do so freely, soon pales compared to having all the goodies the Garden had to offer. So, according to the Grand Inquisitor, humanity's yearning to return to the Garden of Eden is merely humanity once again longing to put away freedom in favor of a reliable and touchless existence where every physical need is provided for. People don't have to think for themselves, worrying about how they'll put this freedom to work. Instead, they can just plug back into the Matrix, let their eyes glaze over, and live like the cattle they are.

The Grand Inquisitor returns to his disagreement with Jesus by saying that Jesus almost messed everything up for humanity. In the temptations in the wilderness, Satan offered Jesus the keys to returning humanity to its place in the Garden, to take away their freedom and give humans the reliable and soulless existence God created them for. He says to Jesus:

“Meantime, every chance of success was offered to you. There are three Powers, three unique Forces upon earth, capable of conquering for ever by charming the conscience of these weak rebels—humans—for their own good; and these Forces are: Miracle, Mystery, and Authority.”

Essentially, the Grand Inquisitor says, “Look, you had a chance. You could have helped humanity by turning stones to bread—restoring its easy life in Eden. You could have taken away doubt and overwhelmed humanity by doing something so outrageous (like jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple) that humans would have no choice but to sacrifice their freedom to blindly follow you by plugging back into the Experience Machine. Satan

offered you Caesar's sword and the unquestioned obedience that comes with it to take humanity's cursed freedom **away** from them. You could have done all that. But, instead, you chose to allow humanity the unwanted freedom to make their **own** way in this world, deciding for **themselves** whom they should trust."

"You done messed up, Jesus. But luckily for humanity, we were there to save the day. For 1,500 years, the church has had to clean up your messes. Humans are now happy because we've given them easy food in exchange for their freedom and eliminated the need to waste any time imagining they'd be better off chasing their own way forward. Instead, we've forced them to give up their freedom. In the bargain, they get predictable lives, and we, of course, bear the thankless task of being in power.

"Now, you could argue that we've taken something central to what it means to be human—that is, freedom—and replaced it with a predictable existence **without** all that troublesome freedom. And we won't let you

mess that up by coming back here and trying to free people all over again. You're no longer needed here.”

With this short parable of the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoyevsky cleverly parodies the church as an institution whose primary tools have often been domination and coercion. He makes the argument that Christianity always gets it wrong when it believes that nothing is so messed up with humanity that the application of power can't solve it. Indeed, there are plenty of religious leaders around today who seem to believe that their greatest job is to control everybody else's lives—usually focused on the time-tested bugbears: sexuality and reproduction and reminding the powerless that all the problems they experience in life could be fixed if they'd only try harder ... and pray and trust God more.

Of course, if you happen to be one of those who don't enjoy the privileges of straight, middle-class White men, this often sounds like, “Look, if you don't like the life you have, you should have been born into better situations ... like us. Or, you could win the Lottery. That'd change things

up for you. Otherwise, we don't know what to tell you. Our job is to make you look, talk, and think as much like us as possible. It's what God wants."

But perhaps the most common way this story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness has been used is as a model to show us how to withstand our **own personal** temptations. Jesus enters the wilderness, faces down the devil, quoting scripture and exercising a little willpower, kind of like a case study from your spiritual life coach.

"Do this, and you can conquer **your** demons too."

But I'd like to suggest that this story, like so many other Gospels, isn't written primarily to individuals to help them be spiritual superheroes. Instead, the Gospels are written to specific communities of faith to give them a handle on how to navigate the tough religious, social, economic, and political waters of a hostile Roman Empire.

The Gospel of Matthew, for instance, was most likely written to a church of Jewish Christians in the Syrian capital of Antioch sometime after 80 C.E. — which is to say, after Rome destroyed Jerusalem and demolished the Temple in 70 C.E. For a group of Jewish Christians, the aftermath of that destruction lingered for years. It would have been as if Matthew was writing to a church of former New Yorkers in the aftermath of 9/11 — except, in Matthew’s case, the terrorists weren’t a ragtag group of foreign nationals; it was the **government** that ruled their lives. When Matthew wrote his Gospel, the church he addressed was still in shock, terrified of what might become of them because of the empire that ruled them.

The humiliating signs of Roman control over their lives were everywhere. Rome had even minted new coins to commemorate Jewish disgrace. These new coins, called *Judea capta* coins, were issued first by Vespasian and then by his son, Titus. They depicted various figures, especially a bound female personifying Judea, to celebrate the defeat of the Jews by

making them use a currency that was a constant reminder of their powerlessness.

Someone might argue that, you know, of course, there was some **bad** stuff, but the presence of the Roman Empire did more good than harm, right? As Reg, the leader of the Judean People's Front of Judea in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, reluctantly admits that while they oppose Rome, they have to give credit to the Romans for providing "better sanitation, medicine, education, irrigation, public health, roads, fresh water system, baths, and public order."

These benefits are often called the *Pax Romana*, touted as proof that Roman occupation was a net gain for the countries they dominated. As Warren Carter points out, "Such a positive assessment of ***Pax Romana***, though, begs consideration of who benefits from empire. [This] is a very selective view 'from above.'"

To get a sense of how the locals experience this great “gift” from Rome, Tacitus has Briton chief Calgacus give an impassioned speech decrying the heavy burden borne by the provincials. Things like enslavement, conscription, taxes, tribute, forced labor, and Roman arrogance. Calgacus says, “To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire: they make a desolation, and they call it peace.”

This hatred of the Romans and the resentment it inspired sits very close to the surface of the congregation Matthew writes to and is, therefore, at the heart of the story of Jesus’ temptations. As Dostoyevsky reminds us, the story of Jesus’ temptations is about power and who wields it to dominate others.

Just listen to the speech Nero gives in Seneca’s writings:

Have I of all mortals found favor with heaven and been chosen to serve on earth as vicar of the gods? ... Without my favored grace, no part of the whole world can prosper; all those many thousands of swords which my peace restrains will be drawn at my nod, what nation shall be utterly destroyed, which banished, which shall receive the gift of liberty, which have it taken from them, what kings shall

become [my servants] and whose head shall be crowned with royal honor, what cities shall fall and which shall rise—this is mine to decree.

In Matthew's hands, the devil is supposed to be a clever stand-in for Caesar and his empire, who argues that all the kingdoms of the world are his to dispose of as he sees fit.

So, the question posed by this story to the congregation at Antioch struggling with where to put its trust, given the annoying fact of all of Caesar's persistent and humiliating reminders of who's in charge, is: Where does the church place its trust?

Does the church trust the old regimes and their systems of domination to solve people's problems, or does it trust the means of producing equity and abundance available in God's new realm where power remains in **God's** hands and never in the hands of the giant babies who holler like scalded cats to let everyone know **they** get to be boss?

A realm that provides bread for everyone—not to pacify a herd of cattle, but as a gift that highlights the dignity of being human and God’s desire for us to live in a world where everyone has access to the resources they need to live and thrive.

A realm where people don’t have to be manipulated, dominated, or oppressed so that the privileged few can continue to enjoy their hold on power.

A realm in which God invests us with the freedom to be and become who we really are

But the thing is, it’s ***precisely*** the old empires and their systems of domination that produced the problems Caesar has been trying to convince us that he alone can solve.

So, the question posed to those who would follow Jesus is, “Who do you trust to create a world where everyone can finally be freed to live the lives God intends for us?

Where you gonna turn?

The Matrix and the pacified cattle it produces or the new, authentic world God is creating where we’ve been freed from bonds of oppression?

Satan or Jesus?

Caesar’s kingdoms of domination and oppression or God’s new reign of liberation and abundance?

It’s a group question. So we’ll have to decide that answer together.

—Amen