

## Elizabeth Zhu - "Reality is a Shared Hallucination"

Einstein once remarked, "Reality is an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." Odds are, he is right. According to simulation theory, believed by notable philosophers and scientists, there is a reasonable chance we are living in a computer-generated simulation. This begs the question: what is reality? I will argue that living in a simulation would be no different from reality given that what we know of reality is determined by what we perceive. Throughout, I will critique a series of counterarguments, exploring differences in relationships, free will, and the meaningfulness of our lives under a simulation as opposed to reality.

Proponents of a materialist philosophy argue that an objective reality does exist, and is made up of physical matter. Even if I concede that a physical reality exists outside of the mind, since everything we can know about this reality must be perceived by our senses, our knowledge of the world is largely constructed by our mind. Though in reality observable objects would be composed of matter, whereas in a simulation all objects would be computer-generated, failing to "exist" in a materialist sense, they would still *appear* to exist to its inhabitants. This can be illustrated when regarding a piece of art; what is the difference between the real painting and an exact reproduction of that painting? I argue that they are the same insofar as we perceive them to be the same, and are able to appreciate the beauty of each to the same extent.

To analyze this further, the question must be asked - how do we make sense of the objects around us? We are able to perceive objects through seeing, touching, and hearing our surroundings, replicated in a simulation as programmed sensory inputs to our brain. When we "see" an object, our brain must process what it is using information we have collected in the past or concepts ingrained in us. Without our senses, objects would appear to not exist. An individual

who is colorblind will only see a tree with different shades, influencing their version of reality. Stripped of our sense of sight, colors would be no more than wavelengths of light; our minds create the sensation of color where it does not exist. Just as easily, our minds are able to visualize realistic images and scenery; one only has to look to dreams as an example. Perception is also highly subjective; while one person may feel cold, in the same weather another may feel warm. An individual's subjective view of the world is more precise to them than an external reality composed of matter. Importantly, we cannot know the details of this objective reality. Humans can only envision "reality" as a shared hallucination, which can be precisely replicated by a computer simulation by penetrating into our neural networks.

If the current world were a simulation, would our relationships with others change? What if I was the only person subject to the simulation? I am assuming that this is applied to our current world, where the most we can be sure of is a *possibility* of being in simulation. Some would argue that such a realization would undermine the purpose of developing relationships. However, we are still able to interact with people on a consistent basis, hold realistic conversations with them, and touch them; given this, we are inclined to think of our peers as real. We are likely to find meaning in these simulated interactions due to a visceral need for love and belonging, especially since our immediate judgements and feelings would remain the same. Assuming that the simulation is so advanced as to be able to create consciousness within computer-generated characters, it would also be able to replicate the workings of the different parts of the brain responsible for conjuring emotions. Given they are fully conscious, why should a non-biological human be less worthy of being loved? If I was the only human subject to the simulation, those closest to me would express affection in the same way, meaning that even if their love was programmed, by virtue of being in the simulation I would never know. To

illustrate this, consider the real instances where humans have fallen in love with AI generated characters, proving that so long as someone, regardless of how “human” they are, is capable of showing us love, we could realistically love them back (Bidshahri, 2016).

Would free will exist to the same degree in a simulation? Some argue that it would not given that the simulation’s creator controls the full extent of our lives and choices. Furthermore, it is daunting to think that the creator can end the simulation at any point or implant fabricated experiences into our minds. After all, a creator could assign us a perfectly deterministic path, while giving us the illusion of having free will. However, whether or not the inhabitants of the simulation have free will is of little importance; what matters is that they *feel* as though they are exercising free will in choosing different paths within a simulation. Even in reality, free will is unlikely to exist to the extent we think it does, given the theory of causation or our inheritance of decision-making genes from our parents, yet that has had little effect on our belief in free will. In fact, research has shown that we only experience a feeling of deciding how to act *after* electrical activity predetermines the decision our brain will make (Cave, 2016). This goes to show that regardless of whether we are in reality or a simulation, what matters is our belief that we consciously made the choice.

This begs another question - why did the creator invent the simulation? Their intention to create the simulation could range from entertainment purposes to scientific research, and it will determine important features of the simulation. For example, certain laws of physics may be imposed for testing purposes or difficulties may be intentionally placed to see how we would react. Are their intentions malign, as stipulated in Descartes’ Evil Genius hypothesis? This hypothesis proposes that we inhabit a world controlled by a God-like Evil Genius bent on deceiving our senses, tricking us into thinking we live in reality (Stanford Encyclopedia of

Philosophy, 2004). The prospect of living in a simulation created with bad intentions breeds nihilistic thought: what is the meaning of life if we are all doomed by the creator? However, given that we are comparing a simulated version of our world and a “real” version of our world, the same events would unfold, rendering the intentions of the creator meaningless in the context of our daily lives. As well, being the inhabitants of the simulation, we can never be sure of the creator’s intentions, and can only hypothesize possible intentions. Yet I question if this is any different in reality. Many of us believe in God or some sort of higher power who may influence our fate - thus, the existence of a creator would not be unique to a simulated world.

Some argue that living in a subset of reality gives life in a simulation far less meaning, especially when placed in the context of simulation theory, which assumes that we are in one of millions of simulations. This is illustrated in Nozick’s rejection of the Experience Machine, a hypothetical machine that is capable of simulating pleasurable experiences. He argues that we should not plug in to the simulation because we want to *do* certain things and *be* certain people, rather than merely have the experiences of having done so (Nozick, 1974). The problem with this argument rests in *perspective*; objectively, the inhabitants of a simulation do not influence reality, but from the perspective of someone within the simulation, they appear to live a meaningful life. I have already argued that we can never know the details of an objective reality, meaning that our view of the world is largely based on our subjective experiences of it. As the inhabitants of the simulation, the immediate reality that we perceive around us is more likely to be meaningful to us than vague existential questions about the existence of a base reality somewhere out there.

Whether we are currently living in reality or a technologically advanced simulation is a question to be debated for ages to come. In the end, it does not matter which is true. In both

worlds we are convinced that we exist as conscious beings. In both worlds we interact with the same people, sense the same objects, and feel the same emotions. The only reality we can be certain of is one that we have constructed in our mind; a simulated reality may be just as “real.”

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