

In Defence of the Simulation

The debate of whether “reality” is as “real” as its name implies is one of the most fundamental problems of metaphysics. Given that it has been tackled by countless preeminent philosophers, my essay is far from a complete treatment of the question. Nevertheless, I hope to elucidate some reasons in support of the position that it does not matter whether we live in a real world or a simulation. I will take into consideration the subjectivity of reality and thus the impracticality of skepticism, the difficulty in defining “reality” and “simulation,” and the possibility of possessing a genuine self in a simulated existence.

I will begin by considering the problem as it would likely apply to our world, which seems “realistic” and logical to us. I will argue that to question the authenticity of our reality serves no practical purpose.

If we were to doubt reality, the doubt would have to continue indefinitely. This is rooted in the subjectivity of one’s experience with “reality.” Imagine a skeptic who likes to hop through different realities, each of which appears identical in every way. No matter how long he continues, he would still apply the same skepticism to each reality. Even if we grant that he began his journey in a simulation and has now entered the real world, he is still to himself stalemated in the same situation. At which point can he know that he has reached the ultimate reality, and therefore allay his doubts? An objective and external observer would be necessary to determine the nature of the reality that the skeptic exists in. Not only would it be impractical in this context to assume the existence of such an omniscient observer, its existence also cannot eliminate the skeptic’s conundrum. The skeptic must have access to the omniscient being’s verdict, but in such a case, he remains skeptical regarding the being’s omniscience and

trustworthiness. If reality is ultimately dependent on subjective judgement, then it becomes meaningless to strive for the objectively real.

It may be argued that the skeptic need not seek in vain any physical experience of “true reality,” or even gain any mental knowledge of it. Instead, the very fact that he has a certain idea of an objective reality implies its necessary existence. However, what is this reality, and what is its purpose? Clear definitions of “reality” and “simulation”—or the lack thereof—would be central to an understanding of the problem.

The very question of whether we exist in a simulation assumes the reasonable existence of an objective reality. This assumption should be scrutinized. “Reality” appears to have a meaningful definition, but in fact carries no inherent characteristics. Attempts to move past its basic role as “something real” and to visualize “reality” would append to it attributes we have empirically derived from the world in which we exist. In this case, we have effectively assumed that the purpose of the concept “reality” is to define our world. Is it possible to invoke the concept of reality without irrevocably tying it to our own? If we detach our reality from the term “reality,” it becomes synonymous with “external world.” In this case, “external” is not “spatially outside,” but rather “inaccessible.” The purpose of such a definition is therefore our inability to gain knowledge of “reality” rather than any qualities associated with “reality” itself. The idea we may have of the external reality is merely an idea of the unknown. If “reality” cannot refer to anything, it is not as much a true concept as it is a null placeholder. There is no point in assuming the necessity of an empty concept. Therefore, there are no grounds to assume the necessary existence of a corresponding physical reality.

If reality is not defined, then simulation cannot be defined in contrast with reality. A simulation is an imitation of reality, and would therefore be difficult to classify without its object

of imitation. Moreover, “simulation” connotes an inadequacy when compared to reality. This is derived from the assumption that worlds may be compared to determine which possesses a “higher ontological status.” This measure would be difficult to construct. If the simulation is realistic to us in the way our physical world is realistic to us, then in which way would it be lacking when compared to “true reality?” Would we apply a purely ontological examination that is unable to be quantified, or measure the degree to which the simulation resembles its template? This would then lead to the problem that if there is to exist an ultimate reality, the simulated reality might not bear any resemblance to it at all. Similar to how a cupcake mold determines shape of the cake but is not regarded as a “better cake,” reality may very well be a disparate set of guidelines that in some unknown way enable the simulation to exist, without being necessarily more real. All these difficulties arise from the imprecision of qualities generally ascribed to “reality” and “simulation.”

It can be seen that it is hard to move past the epistemic uncertainty as well as the semantic confusion in evaluating the relative merits of reality and simulation. In order to continue to examine other aspects of the problem, I am willing to for the moment take as a truth the existence of an ultimate reality “out there.” It is entirely accessible and we are now aware that our world is a simulation, whatever it means. However, I argue that this does not change my thesis that it does not matter whether one knowingly continues to exist in a simulation.

It could be argued that if one realizes he is the only person subject to the simulation, he would no longer find the simulation palatable. One’s social interactions are seemingly fabricated and meaningless. Though, in a hypothetical “real” world, it is also impossible to access the thoughts and emotions of others, and thus the core of another person’s personhood. The other person, however close they may be, is still “the other,” much like a simulated external world.

From an epistemic standpoint, other people are just as real as they are simulated. Our considerations may also turn to the intention of the simulation “creator.” I argue that the intention of the simulation creator is much like the intention of God. If it is known that our world was created by a divine power who wished for us to suffer, or conversely wished for us to be happy, our world would not become either more real or more false. Perhaps it would change the philosophies of how we lead our lives and organize ourselves socially, but the metaphysical question of reality is unaffected.

It then becomes the choice of the “gamer” to decide whether one world is preferable to the other. I do not think that either choice must be metaphysically correct. This is because one’s mind is still one’s own regardless of the world one exists in. I recognize that the internal self is not alienated from the external world. Memories and sensations constitute an integral part of our identity. If our sensations are not the product of the real world, then are we also by extension fraudulent? I believe this is not so. A false world nevertheless produces intelligible impressions upon our minds much like a real world would. It is arguably not the cause or even the content of the sensations that legitimize our existence, but rather the way we are affected by and process such sensations. We are not purely made of sensory information. To string together such information, we would also need a mind. I find that this signifies the existence of a self which underlies all experience, and is capable of reacting and changing in its own personal manner. Even subject to a simulation, we possess a degree of self-determination. Regardless of whether we are acted upon by “reality” or “simulation,” our identity is what we create.

I concede that there are questions which I have not addressed. In particular, there exist many pertinent concerns that do not fall within the conventional domain of metaphysics, such as whether reality or simulation would more compatible with our psyche, whether it is ethically

acceptable to live in a simulation and neglect “real” society, whether there exists a spiritual goal for humans to reach some measure of “reality,” and so on. However, these considerations would require more information than given regarding the nature of the simulation and real world alike, which is beyond the scope of this essay.

I have argued that it would be impossible to determine the existence of an objective reality, or even derive meaning from such a reality, and that the prospects of living in a simulation are not as daunting as they may sound. Though it may never be resolved whether we live in a simulation, our world—simulated or not—is a lot richer for the debates sparked by this problem.