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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Are you praying to a videogame God? Some theological and philosophical implications of the simulation hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis that we may be living in a digital simulation is utilized as a 'thought experiment' to help clarify important questions in theology and philosophy, including the nature of God, the significance and importance of an afterlife, and the ultimate nature of reality. It is argued that a consideration of the simulation hypothesis renders problematic traditional conceptions of a personal, creator, omnipotent deity, makes the theological significance of a purported afterlife far less significant, and paradoxically undermines the very materialistic view of reality that underlies the simulation hypothesis in the first place. It is concluded that the simulation hypothesis renders 'science' virtually irrelevant to ultimate questions in philosophy and theology and elevates ethics and axiology to fundamental status for our understanding of reality and any defensible conception of the divine.

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In a celebrated and widely discussed paper entitled 'Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?', the Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom put forth a then startling but now familiar argument which suggests that we may not be the biological, material beings we think we are, but computer simulated minds, existing in a digital matrix:

Many works of science fiction as well as some forecasts by serious technologists and futurologists predict that enormous amounts of computing power will be available in the future. Let us suppose for a moment that these predictions are correct. One thing that later generations might do with their super-powerful computers is run detailed simulations of their forebears or of people like their forebears. Because their computers would be so powerful, they could run a great many such simulations. Suppose that these simulated people are conscious (as they would be if the simulations were sufficiently fine-grained and if a certain quite widely accepted position in the philosophy of mind is correct). Then it could be the case that the vast majority of minds like ours do not belong to the original race but rather to people simulated by the advanced descendants of an original race. It is then possible to argue that, if this were the case, we would be rational to think that we are likely among the simulated minds rather than among the original biological ones¹.

The 'simulation hypothesis' is grounded in the philosophical claim that consciousness and its associated mental states are a function of material events and processes. On one prevailing interpretation of philosophical materialism, mental states and consciousness are a function of the information that is processed in a biological system, the brain, 78 🔄 S. L. DROB

a system that in principle could be duplicated within a sufficiently powerful digital computer. As such, on this view it would be possible to construct a conscious, thinking mind in a purely digital medium. This possibility is the foundation for the view that it is theoretically possible, and will eventually be feasible, to construct a complex 'digital world,' containing multiple² conscious entities and that this world would be epistemologically identical to our own (presumably material) world. This has led Bostrom and others to argue that we may already be living in such a world without knowing it; that we are perhaps residing in an 'ancestor simulation,' created by what might be thought of as 'our' technologically superior 'descendants.' While the information that is accessible to us suggests that we are living in a natural, physical and biological universe rather than a digital one, there is no way of confirming this, since, if we are in a simulation the physicalist/naturalistic viewpoint would be programmed into our digitally based minds. If it is indeed logically and scientifically possible to create such simulations, we must conclude that unless we are certain that human life will be destroyed before simulations become technically feasible, or that our descendants will be incapable of constructing, unable to afford, or choose not to construct simulations, then there is a likelihood, with a probability greater (perhaps much greater) than '0' that we are currently in one of these digital constructions. Bostrom suggests that the majority of 'living worlds' are simulated, digitally constructed ones rather than natural biological ones, and that the majority of conscious entities in the universe are digital simulations. Indeed, in 2016, the billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk caused a stir when he argued that advances in computer technology will inevitably make our videogames indistinguishable from reality and that for this reason the odds that we are *not* in a simulation are one in billions!³ Musk even went on to argue that we should hope that we are in a simulation, for if we are not this likely means that civilization will be destroyed before simulations are developed.

It is even possible, and perhaps likely that simulations could be constructed within simulations. For example, on the assumption that we ourselves are in a simulation, we may soon reach a point in our own development when we become capable of manipulating information in such a manner as to create simulations ourselves. There may thus be n orders of such simulations: simulations within simulations within simulations, etc., perhaps, according to Bostrom, limited only by the potential for computing power within the original 'base' universe, which given the possibility of creating quantum computer systems of planetary size and unfathomably enormous power, would be quite vast indeed⁴.

The simulation hypothesis and philosophy

Bostrom⁵ and others⁶ have suggested that the simulation argument provides a stimulus to philosophical and theological thought. In this paper, I will not address the question of whether we are living in a simulated 'matrix,' but will rather discuss some of the implications of the *logical* possibility that we are. The philosophical and theological considerations that I am about to discuss rely upon the simulation hypothesis as a *thought experiment* as opposed to an empirical possibility. The only requirement is that we conceive that such simulations are *logically* possible, and that it is thus logically possible that we exist in a computer simulated reality. There are several considerations (often ignored in the Simulation Argument literature) which make the simulation hypothesis more doubtful than it is often represented to be. First, in spite of great advances in brain research and artificial intelligence, there remains nothing like an adequate account of consciousness. While Bostrom and others have assumed that qualitative consciousnesses can be 'created in a retort' (to use Carl Jung's phrase) i.e., that it can be generated within a computer digital matrix, this may turn out to be *empirically* impossible. The entire information processing model of the human mind may turn out to be nothing more than a bad metaphor. Consciousness may turn out to be a function of specific events transpiring on the subatomic, quantum level, or as John Searle⁷ and Robert Epstein⁸ have argued, it may require a biological substrate. Further, consciousness may well be an element within the universe that is on a par with or more fundamental than matter and energy, and thus it may be completely beside the point to attempt to characterize or duplicate it in a material medium. However, in this essay, I will put these doubts aside, and assume that the simulation of conscious, sentient beings like ourselves is at least logically possible, and I will then draw out some of the philosophical and theological implications of that assumption. It will be seen that these implications are surprising and paradoxically create doubt regarding the entire worldview upon which the simulation hypothesis is based.

By treating the 'simulation hypothesis' as a thought experiment, I believe that we can arrive at a powerful method for adjudicating between contrasting views in philosophy and theology – views pertaining to the nature of any 'God' or 'Absolute' that we posit as beyond, inhering within or creating the universe, the essential nature of 'reality,' the theological significance of an "afterlife, and the place of values in the cosmos.

Two ideas guide my argument in this paper. The first, which I have already described, is that simulations are *logically possible*. The second is that any proposed philosophical or theological foundation, including any conception of God or the divine, must be valid for all worlds, simulated or not. While many philosophers over the last century have rejected the idea of ultimate foundations as an ideal for philosophy and/or theology, holding, for example, that religion is culturally relative, or that divinity is an inspiring metaphor, an approach to 'the impossible,' the call of the other, etc., traditional philosophical conceptions of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition have retained the idea that God is decidedly not 'local' or 'relative' but must be a universal foundation for all existence. (However, as I will discuss momentarily such an infinite foundational god must be distinguished from a 'creator God' who may or may not be ultimate in the required sense). Here I assume that there is indeed a single ultimate 'reality' and that Schellenberg's⁹ thesis that there are metaphysical, axiological and soteriological ultimates is cogent. I believe that my argument in this paper provides significant support for adopting the view that that there are metaphysical and axiological ultimates and that any deity worthy of our philosophical respect and religious worship must be universal and metaphysically and axiologically foundational.

I am proposing 'simulation compatibility' as a criterion for determining whether a particular philosophical or theological thesis or viewpoint is potentially valid for all worlds as opposed to being dependent upon certain 'local conditions' or empirical findings. My argument is that any proposed philosophical or theological foundation must be valid even if it is true that we reside in a 'simulation.' This will lead to the conclusion that divinity must be metaphysically and axiologically ultimate. Minimally, I argue that the 'simulation criterion' poses a problem for the sort of creator God depicted in traditional biblical exegesis.

Simulation and the nature of God

The possibility that we are conscious entities existing in a simulated matrix has important implications for our understanding of the God concept. An argument against the existence and/or value of a traditional creator God can be marshalled on the grounds that since we have no way of knowing whether or not our particular world is a simulation, (or perhaps even a second, third or 'nth' order simulation) we cannot determine whether our 'creator' is simply a finite (albeit super-advanced) being (biological or digital) that appears to us to have the powers of a god, but who is actually a finite being, existing in a (possibly simulated) world 'deeper'¹⁰ than our own. As Bostrom has put it:

In some ways, the posthumans running a simulation are like gods in relation to the people inhabiting the simulation: the posthumans created the world we see; they are of superior intelligence; they are "omnipotent" in the sense that they can interfere in the workings of our world even in ways that violate its physical laws; and they are "omniscient" in the sense that they can monitor everything that happens."¹¹

The architect of a simulation might even be conceived of as a future child or adolescent who created us as part of an unfathomably complex videogame (The philosopher David Chalmers has quipped, 'Our creator isn't especially spooky, it's just some teenage hacker in the next universe up¹²' or a massively intelligent computer that produced us for its own amusement.

On the assumption that we are in a simulation, our 'creator' could appear to have the characteristics of a traditional God but would hardly be the absolute deity that many believe is required by philosophy and theology, and which serves as the absolute in many mystically oriented religious traditions - e.g. Brahman-Atman in Hinduism and Ein-sof in the Kabbalah. This would be the case even, and perhaps especially if such a god were to reveal itself in miracles, or we encountered this 'God' in 'heaven' after our death etc. For such a 'god' might well be nothing more than a 'computer programmer,' or an autonomous computer program operating on a deeper level providing us with such 'revelations'. Such a 'god,' like the "demiurge of the Gnostics, might be evil, and even if benevolent would certainly not be the 'Infinite God' of philosophy and mysticism, and we would have no more reason to worship it than we would have reason to venerate a powerful earthly monarch¹³. While prayer and supplication might be effective with our videogame 'god,' such prayer would not be philosophically distinct from the prayer or supplication we address to, and which might move a very powerful earthly potentate. In short, the simulation argument suggests the rather unpleasant possibility that when I pray to the traditional god I am actually praying to a (highly intelligent, but neither infinite nor worthy) videogame operator¹⁴. Such an operator or engineer might not be constrained by any moral or other value standards, and as Beltramini has put it, this would make 'a simulation contingent to the accidents of the Engineers' will.¹⁵

My argument is that any conception of God or the Absolute that could lead us to venerate a finite, if highly advanced, biological, or digital creator is not a conception worthy of our theological or philosophical interest or respect. It follows that all, or nearly all, conceptions of a creator, commanding, miracle-making, heaven-residing, personal God, are unworthy of our veneration precisely for this reason: such a God may very well not be absolute – not the origin or foundation of the universe in its widest sense, and its actions could very well be the result of the whim or fancy of a (highly-advanced) videogame operator or computer. The narratives about God, promulgated in the Bible and other scripture do not seem to pass muster under the test of 'simulation compatibility.'

Previous discussions of the theological implications of the simulation hypothesis focus either upon the role of the computer programmer at the level below our own¹⁶, or a computer at the deepest level as a foundational absolute¹⁷. Steinhart, for example, has endeavored to resolve the problems associated with a 'finite' engineer or videogame operator by positing an 'infinite computer' that lies outside of, and is the origin of the presumed nested hierarchy of simulated worlds. In his reformulation of the cosmological argument for the existence of God, Steinhart follows Leibniz in holding that in order to prevent an infinite regress of causes, a creator God must be beyond the cosmos¹⁸. In some ways this is reminiscent of Plato's claim in Book 6 of The Republic that the good is beyond being and yet the source of all being. Steinhart describes this as a self-programming 'infinite computer,' which he equates with God and the traditional philosophical idea of an infinite mind¹⁹. He holds that such an infinite computer lies beyond all simulations and is yet the source of them. Not only does this not make sense within the context of the simulation hypothesis, which ex hypothesi posits a base computer within a foundational natural world as the source of all simulations, but Steinhart's infinite computer is an ad hoc hypothesis that remains a digital apparatus and, as such, is indistinguishable from empirical (earthly) computer that are poor candidates for gods. Why, we might ask, should we acknowledge, revere, obey or pray to such a 'god?' The fact that we are created and manipulated by even an infinitely powerful self-programming computer program hardly guarantees its *divinity*, as such a program (or programmer) might well be unethical, even sadistic, in its intent. Something other than 'infinite power' is necessary to distinguish the true God from a videogame one.

There have, of course, been philosophers and mystics who in their own idiom, have recognized that any God characterized by 'empirical traits' cannot be the infinite, all-knowing and benevolent deity that is required by philosophy. The simulation argument is simply a way of underscoring the futility of defining God in empirical, 'local,' or voluntaristic terms. I will later argue that an alternative is to define God or the Absolute in much broader terms that are applicable to the entire cosmos, whether simulated or not, and applicable to all simulations and layers of simulation that may be deeper than the world we reside in. Such a conception must be applicable to all 'possible worlds,' and, in effect, be binding upon and 'transcend' any so-called 'god' that has merely *created* and directs our world²⁰. Further, I will argue that even a 'trans-world' god is not worthy of our veneration unless it too is subject to the ethical and axiological order.

The afterlife

Steinhart has described several ways in which digital technology might enable humans to achieve immortality, including the 'promotion of our lives into some higher-level

computational reality.²¹ However, while the possibility that we are living in a simulation increases the likelihood of an afterlife²², it diminishes its philosophical and theological significance. If we are indeed digital beings residing in a digital matrix it would seem to be a simple matter for the videogame god who controls our matrix to provide us with a postdeath digital consciousness, just as it has provided sentience to our lives within the simulation. However, any experience we had during such a post-death existence, including any 'revelations' about the 'true nature of reality' would be of limited significance, as such revelations would, again, consist of information that is programmed into our consciousness by a being existing at a deeper level of 'information organization.' It would, in fact, be one more simulation, and tell us nothing about the true nature of things, i.e., the actual foundation of reality - the origin of all levels of existence. Besides, it would not be a veritable immortality as it would be subject to such things as the whims of the engineers and the continued functionality of the base computer sustaining it. Again, as I have argued above, the only truths or principles that can serve as a foundation for philosophical and theological insight are those that exist independently of any 'information/epistemological' position or world that we happen to be in. In other words, such truths must apply both to 'real' and 'simulated' worlds. Candidates for such foundations include the open economy of truth, discourse and experience, the possibility of rational thought, perhaps the truths of mathematics and logic, and, as I will explain in some detail below, certain ethical and axiological principles like truth, love, and compassion that have trans-world application; candidates that in some ways correspond to the eternal objects or *eide* described in Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy.

The possibility that we are living in a simulation diminishes the value of the afterlife as a window into ultimate truth and reality, regardless of whether we are living in a simulation or not. This is because any information or revelation regarding the true nature of things imparted to us in an afterlife would be subject to the same epistemic doubts that all 'empirical phenomenon' are subject to in our current lives. A theology or philosophy that aims to be grounded in 'eternal things' cannot rely on miracles, after lives, or any other *empirical* phenomena.

Simulation and metaphysics

Previous discussions of the metaphysical implications of the simulation hypothesis, have in many cases focused upon the 'metaphysics' programmed into our world from a deeper level of simulation rather than on a discussion of the metaphysics underlying the entirety of all simulated and non-simulated worlds. David Chalmers²³, for example, seems to be of the view that the 'metaphysics' of a simulated world is constituted by what underlies that world in the computer that generates it, and he does not consider the question of the metaphysics of the widest possible cosmos within which all computers and simulations reside. However, the hypothesis that we are generated by and effectively reside within the workings of a computer in a deeper level of the informational universe is an ordinary scientific/empirical/factual hypothesis, although one that is particularly difficult, if not impossible, to verify. It is *not*, in my view, a metaphysical hypothesis, as metaphysics applies to the foundation and structure of all realities and not just the origins of the particular 'information show' within which we happen to find ourselves. We might indeed conclude that the origins of our universe are in the digital operations of the videogame god who generated and controls us, but this does not resolve any ultimate metaphysical questions; it only pushes them back into the videogame god's world. While I believe that the simulation hypothesis can provide metaphysical insight it needs to be pushed beyond the limit of the next deepest world.

When we do this, it becomes clear that the possibility that we are residing in a computer simulation paradoxically casts doubt upon certain key assumptions of the very scientific materialist understanding of our universe that leads us to posit the possibility of a simulation to begin with. The reason for this doubt is that in a simulation matter, energy, the laws of physics etc., at least as they are understood by science within the simulation, cannot be regarded as foundational. The scientific laws one discovers within such a world would simply be the result of information programmed into the simulated reality. As Bostrom puts it: 'If we are living in a simulation may or may not resemble the physics of the world that we observe.'²⁴ While none of the specific scientific theories and findings within a simulation would be placed in doubt (after all, they would remain true for the simulation) they would have to be understood as local to the (simulated) universe and would thus be inadequate to support a doctrine of scientific materialism that purports to be ultimate and foundational, thus removing a key basis for this metaphysical theory.

While one residing in a simulation might *speculate* that the simulated or informationbased world must be rooted in computer hardware existing in an ultimate material world – this would just be a hypothesis entertained within the parameters of the program that directs our simulation. The materialist-computer-digital theory of consciousness is certainly the vehicle that prompts us to consider the possibility that we reside in a purely informational reality, but if it is indeed the case that we are in a simulated universe, we would have no evidence one way or the other regarding the existence of quantum computers sustaining our reality, nor for the ultimate validity of materialist philosophy!²⁵

The conclusions we draw here may be dependent upon our understanding of the nature of digital information. If as some have claimed (Vopsin, 2019), information is itself a form of matter, materialism may even hold directly in a simulation²⁶. On the other hand, if as Floridi has argued, the understanding of information in digital terms is itself dependent upon a 'level of abstraction' imposed upon experience by an epistemic agent, and information always has a semantic, interpretive component, this might suggest that the "local" metaphysics in the simulation, and perhaps even any ultimate metaphysics, involves a sentient 'design' or creative process not radically assimilable to a materialist or mathematical reduction²⁷. Indeed, Beltramini and Diller have each suggested that the simulation hypothesis undermines materialism or may lend new credence to the claim that reality is essentially phenomenal or ideational²⁸.

The mirror cosmos

As I mentioned earlier, the possibility of a simulated cosmos leads to the potential for 'simulations within simulations,' i.e., simulated worlds created through the manipulation of information by conscious entities who themselves reside in a simulation. One interesting implication of such 'simulations within simulations,' is that the simulations (inversely) mimic the character of spiritual worlds within worlds that are spoken of in

certain mystical and theosophical traditions²⁹. As we have seen, it would be virtually impossible for anyone within any of the simulated 'worlds within worlds' to test or verify the hypothesis that there is an ultimate material ground to their being in the sense required by simulation theory. While philosophers in a simulated world might *speculate* that there is such a material ground, in the same way that some philosophers in our (presumed) material world have speculated that there is a spiritual or ideational ground to our own world³⁰ there would be no way of deciding the ultimate nature of reality. It might, for example, be the case that our information-based simulation is ultimately grounded in a physical universe with computer hardware, that it is a function of a purely mathematical universe, or that it has been generated in a mental or spiritual medium.

Simulations and values

The possibility that we are living in an information-based 'simulation' provides us with a fresh approach to the problem of 'ultimates." This is because the simulation hypothesis provides us with a means for distinguishing between what is accidental and hence limited to one or some worlds from what is essential and necessary in all possible worlds. Indeed, as I will argue in a moment, it provides the basis for a strong argument that ethics and values (which many philosophers have in the past held to be emotionally based ephemera) are metaphysically foundational; more 'real' than matter, and more universal than the 'laws of nature.'

As we have seen, on the assumption that we are living in a simulation, there is no pressing reason to hold that things like the laws of physics, the speed of light, the nature of black holes, the origins of the universe in the 'Big Bang' must be true for all worlds – no reason to assume that these are anything more than the parameters that have been programmed into our simulation. As the cosmologist Max Tegmark puts it, '... if we are living in a simulation, we have no clue what the laws of physics are. What I teach at MIT would be the simulated laws of physics.'³¹

On the other hand, we would have good grounds for believing that the values of morality, truth, justice, compassion, beauty, etc. hold equally in simulated and nonsimulated realities, and are the same across all simulations. Interestingly, while those who write about higher order simulations acknowledge that the laws of physics programmed into them might well be different from those in our own (simulated) world, they tend to assume that the morals and values governing these simulations are the same as our own, an assumption made by Bostrom when he writes:

... if nobody can be sure that they are the basement-level, then everybody would have to consider the possibility that their actions will be rewarded or punished, based perhaps on moral criteria, by their simulators ... Because of this fundamental uncertainty, even the basement civilization may have reason to behave ethically [adding] to everybody else's reason for behaving morally, and so on, in truly virtuous circle."³²

Jenkins, writing about artificial intelligence (AI) both in our own and simulated worlds, holds that:

The fact that the AI's consciousness resides in a different substrate ... than human consciousness is not a valid reason to deny it equal status ... AI would have the right to

life (i.e. not to be unplugged) and not to be subject to intentional infliction of emotional distress . . . and the right to receive critical medical care."³³

The point to be made here is that we can conceive of a possible (perhaps simulated) world in which the speed of light or the gravitational constant are different from that in our own world and if we somehow found ourselves in such a world, we would find evidence for these differences and become convinced that they are true. However, if we found ourselves in a world inhabited by individuals delighting in and giving moral praise to those who tortured innocent women and children (as is often the case in our own world), or who celebrated 'mathematicians' for promulgating mathematical errors we would not be convinced by any amount of evidence regarding the values being upheld. While we can conceive of worlds in which the inhabitants believe that it is morally or axiologically correct to torture children and systematically promote lies and error over truth (in fact we live in such a world!) we cannot conceive of a world in which (all other things being equal) *it* would be *right* to do so. This is because the values of ethics and truth are transworld and cannot be altered by a computer program.

The possibility of a simulation provides ammunition for the view that ethics and axiology precede, and are more fundamental than empirical science, metaphysics and ontology. Indeed, it can be argued that a whole 'firmament' of values, including truth, justice, beauty, freedom, meaning, forgiveness, hope, etc. have universal applicability to all worlds, simulated or not.

The nature of God revisited

Earlier I argued that a creating, directing, commanding God fails the 'simulation compatibility test.' I believe that several other seemingly "ultimate" conceptions of God may not pass the simulation test, because they limit God to *this universe*. This would be the case, for example, for Peter Forrest's notion that the universe as a whole is itself a conscious entity worthy of worship³⁴. Even if such a pantheistic deity existed, it would, in a simulated universe, presumably be limited to the simulation and be no more (and perhaps even less) absolute than a videogame God operating in the next world up from our own. Most pantheistic (and panentheistic) efforts to identify God with the natural order (i.e. our universe) will suffer from this problem, as only a conception of the divine that holds for *all worlds*, ie. throughout the multiverse, can be regarded as truly ultimate. (Yujin Nagasawa's 'modal panntheism' is a clear exception as he regards God to be the totality of logical space - of all 'possible worlds.'35) Of course, some may wish to settle for a 'local deity,' as many civilizations did in the past. However, I think that the considerations put forth in this paper suggest that to do so creates problems that potentially render such a local deity unworthy of worship and veneration. I believe that it is only a universal God or divinity, i.e. one rooted in concepts that apply across all worlds, simulated or not, that is worthy of our philosophical consideration.

Earlier, I tentatively offered several conceptions of divinity that are at least candidates for passing the simulation test: the open economy of truth, discourse and experience, the possibility of rational thought, the truths of mathematics and logic. I would now like to consider one of these candidates in some detail, one that I consider the most promising, – the identification of God with mind in general and, especially, the totality of values that are attendant to mind. John Leslie's 'axiarchism,'³⁶ which entails that the world exists because 'it should,' i.e. for the realization of values, in some ways accords with my own position.

As we have just seen, one thing that the simulation argument shows is that contrary to what is often assumed, values actually have a greater claim to trans-world or universal 'reality' than either material objects or the laws of physics, a view shared by philosophers as widely divergent as Plato, Sorley³⁷, Husserl³⁸, Levinas³⁹, and Leslie⁴⁰. On the assumption that we are living in a simulation, the laws of physics and the material objects that we encounter are programmed into our matrix and are arbitrary and can be changed at will through the computational activities of those who created the simulation. However, values such as truth, kindness, compassion, etc. are assumed to applicable to all conscious or sentient beings, whether in a 'natural' world or a 'simulation.' Even if my and others' consciousness are a function of a computer simulation, they nevertheless have the characteristics that we have always associated with consciousness and sentience and I am no less obligated to show compassion towards other simulated minds then I am towards so-called 'natural minds' that exist in a presumably natural (non-simulated) world⁴¹.

It would thus seem that unlike matter, consciousness or 'mind' and an array of transworld values may be candidates for foundational categories in philosophy and theology. As Steinhart (2010) has argued on the basis of the simulation hypothesis, we might even go so far as, to identify it with the One or the 'Good' of Neoplatonic philosophy⁴². We have used the simulation argument to introduce the notion of something that is deeper, more enduring and transcendent than the material world, and more foundational then the 'Big Bang' and the laws of physics. That 'something' is the consciousness and values that are attendant to mind⁴³. Mystical traditions such as the Kabbalah have long held that such 'modes of mind and value' are both the essence of the divine and the building blocks of the universe⁴⁴, and their view is supported by our realization that such modes are 'valid' and 'non-arbitrary,' and hold for any sentient world, simulated or real.

We have arrived at a solid absolute or foundation for the universe in the notion of trans-world values that are attendant to *any* sentience or mind, and while this absolute is close to certain conceptions of God, it is not readily assimilable to the creator or personal God of traditional religion, who is typically understood to have created morality and values by his command. This is a question that is too involved to enter into here, but it would seem that if a conception of a personal-creator God is to withstand the simulation compatibility test I have proposed it must have 'the good' (and by this I am suggesting a range of trans-world values) written into it as part of its essence and not produced by its will or command⁴⁵.

And what if a simulation is empirically impossible?

If a simulation is not an empirical possibility – for example, if it turns out that the computer model of the human mind is misguided, and qualitative experience cannot be simulated by any computer – does this vitiate the theological and philosophical implications I have a drawn from its logical possibility?

While it may be true that consciousness cannot be simulated in a computer, or that, if it appeared to be simulated and computers 'claimed' that they actually had 'qualitative'

experiences, we would never be able to ascertain if this was true, there appears to be no logical bar against digital or some other form of artificial consciousness. And while we don't know if we or anyone resides or will reside within a computer simulation, it would be thoroughly ad hoc and unwise to develop our theology and philosophy on the assumption that such a simulation is impossible and that we are not in such a 'Matrix' ourselves. Philosophy, in my view, should never rely on the validity of our assumptions about the empirical world. Our fundamental philosophical principles should be applicable to all possible worlds, simulated or not. However, even without entertaining the possibility of digital simulations physicists have found reason to speculate about a 'multiverse' consisting of a vast array of universes, each with its own set of physical laws and constants⁴⁶, and philosophers following David Lewis have posited the existence of an infinite multiplicity of worlds corresponding to every logically possible universe⁴⁷. Regardless of the reality or even feasibility of simulated worlds, the simulation argument prompts us to develop our philosophical principles in a manner that is not constrained by our local world and our current assumptions and theories about it, and to strive towards an understanding that is universally applicable across all possibilities.

As we have seen, the simulation hypothesis helps make clear that our knowledge of values may be more certain than our scientific knowledge about the natural world. However, even without the simulation hypothesis, it can be shown that we are far readier to abandon our convictions about the speed of light or the gravitational constant than we are to surrender our convictions about the wrongfulness of wanton torture, or the value of truth and justice. The simulation hypothesis clarifies these degrees of certainty by assuming the very opposite of what we initially believed! We assumed that our conscious experience is secondary, derivative and totally dependent upon our material nature. This led us to hypothesize the possibility that we are living in a computer simulation. But the simulation hypothesis, which begins as an extension of materialism and determinism, results in the conclusions that that experience and values are more 'objective' (i.e. transworld) than the facts and principles of science, and that matter may not be the ultimate ground of existence⁴⁸.

Notes

- 1. Bostrom, "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?", 1.
- 2. On the above assumptions it would also be possible to create solipsistic "worlds" with a single conscious entity and the illusion of multiplicity.
- 3. Musk, "Full Interview".
- 4. Bostrom ("Are You Living in a Computer Simulation", 6) notes that a rough estimate of the computing power of a "planetary mass computer" would be sufficient to "simulate the entire mental history of humankind. . .by using less than one millionth of its processing power for one second."
- 5. Bostrom, "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?"
- 6. Steinhart, "Theological Implications", Beltramini, "Simulation Theory", Dainton, "Natural evil".
- 7. Searle, Mind.
- 8. Epstein, "The Empty Brain".
- 9. Schellenberg, "God for All Time".
- 10. The term "deeper" with regard to a simulated world is interchangeable with "higher." Both terms refer to a world whose inhabitants have engineered our world or a world that is at or

closer to the "base computer" upon which the entire system of nested simulations is dependent.

- 11. Bostrom, "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?", 1.
- 12. Moskowitz, "Are We Living."
- 13. A "believer" might counter that while it may be possible that the creator/personal God is "video" and non-ultimate, this is the God one must pray to in an hour of need, and if such prayer is efficacious (or even comforting) why should it matter that this god is not "absolute" in the philosophical sense. My response here is that this is precisely the position taken by pre-philosophical peoples who prayed to their "local" gods and idols, the very people that the Judeo-Christian tradition refers to as "heathens" for their failure to accept the one true deity.
- 14. A second traditionalist response might be that while it is, again, theoretically possible that the God of the Bible is the videogame god I have described, faith leads one to believe that the biblical God is indeed the creator and foundation of the entire universe, and is both absolute and personal. This is certainly an option but it is not one that is philosophically defensible, as it fails to provide reasons for thinking that such a god is absolute as opposed to just one level deeper than ourselves. This was precisely the concern of those Gnostics who held that the "demiurge," which they identified with the God of the Bible, was limited and corrupt.
- 15. Beltramini, "Simulation Theory", 45.
- 16. Bostrom, "Are You Living", Chalmers, "Matrix as Metaphysics"
- 17. Steinhart, "Theological Implications", Steinhart, "Is the Resurrection Virtual?". Zizo, "Simulation Argument".
- 18. Steinhart, "Theological Implications", 26ff.
- 19. Steinhart, "Theological Implications", 28.
- 20. Amongst the candidates for such a transcendent God or absolute, might be "the foundation of all being," "the basis for morality and ethics," "the ground of reason," or, as I will argue, "the ground of truth, value and the infinite open-economy of inquiry, thought, feeling and experience." This is closer to the God of mystics and of philosophers who have had the vision to think beyond the limitations of our parochial "reality." This is close to the Plotinian "One" and "Good," the Hindu's *Brahman-Atman*, and the Kabbalist's *Ein-sof*.
- 21. Steinhart, "Digital Theology", 133.
- 22. Bostrom, "Why Make a Matrix".
- 23. Chalmers, "Matrix as Metaphysics".
- 24. Bostrom, "Are You Living," 11.
- 25. Further, if "matter" and the "laws of physics" are programmed into us by the next universe up in a chain of simulations it is very speculative to utilize science based on these laws to construct the simulation hypothesis regarding what's going on in worlds above us to begin with.
- 26. Vopsin, "Mass-energy Equivalence".
- 27. According to Floridi the fundamental nature of the world cannot be regarded as digital because digitality is itself a level of abstraction (LOA) assumed by an "epistemic agent." It is the manner in which we model reality as opposed to a feature of reality itself. Floridi understands the underlying nature of reality in terms of informational structures and relations as opposed to discreet individual objects, digital or analog. He holds that the underlying sources of our knowledge are unknowable not in the fully Kantian sense of being inaccessible but in the more constructivist/hermeneutic sense of being infinitely malleable, (Floridi, 2011, p 356). There is an agential component to Floridi's thinking. He writes that knowledge is neither "discovering and describing" nor "inventing and constructing," but rather a question of "designing and modeling reality, its features and behaviors into a meaningful world as we experience in it." (Floridi, "A Defence" 249)"
- 28. Diller ("Review", 906) writes that the simulation argument has prompted her to take idealism more seriously and Beltramini suggests that the upshot of the simulation argument is that corporeality and matter "should never existed in the first place," and that according to

simulation theory, "matter is a mistake from the very beginning" (Beltramini, 'In search of,' 52).

- 29. Most prominently in the theosophical kabbalah
- 30. See for example, Findlay, The Transcendence of the Cave.
- Quoted in Olivia Solon, "Is our world a simulation? Why some scientists say it is more likely than not." The Guardian, Tue 11 October 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/ technology/2016/oct/11/simulated-world-elon-musk-the-matrix Downloaded, 6 February 2018.
- 32. Bostrom, "Are You Living", 12.
- 33. Jenkins, "Historical Simulations," 32.
- 34. Forrest, "Personal Pantheist".
- 35. Nagasawa, "Modal Pantheism". However, Nagasawa's view of God is more cognitive than axiological.
- 36. Leslie, "Existence Because Ethically Required".
- 37. Sorley, Moral values.
- 38. Husserl (*Ideas*, 158) wrote of "values extending indefinitely" as an "Absolute" that transcends both the world and absolute consciousness, and in his *Nachlass* we find: "The ultimate meaning of being is the Good, and that is the divine activity toward which the All of divine action is directed...God as will of the good is ultimate reality" (quoted in Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries* 19). Wyschogrod cites Husserl's Nachlass, BII, 2, 54, 146, as cited in James G. Hart, *Essays in Phenomenological Theology*, SUNY Press, 1986.
- 39. Emmanuel Levinas (*Totality and Infinity*, 103) held, "The Place of the Good above every essence is the most profound teaching, not of theology, but of philosophy."
- 40. Leslie, "Existence Because Ethically Required".
- 41. On the assumption that I am the only consciousness in my simulation, I would at least remain obligated or minimally concerned to show compassion to myself, and to avoid pain, appreciate beauty, etc.
- 42. Steinhart, "Theological Implications", 36.
- 43. There is almost universal agreement that ethics and values are contingent upon sentience or mind. Sam Harris writes in *The Moral Landscape* (32), "We can know, through reason alone, that consciousness is the only intelligible domain of value" Charles Siewert (*The Significance of Consciousness*, 329) is of the view that without conscious experiences there would be no values and life would be "little or no better than death." The physicist, Max Tegmark (*Our Mathematical Universe*, 391) has written that the condition for value and meaning is that "through us humans and perhaps additional life-forms, our Universe had gained an awareness of itself". These views echo the earlier observation of Ross (*The Right and the Good*, 140) that all "intrinsic goods" are "states of mind" or the relations between them.
- 44. Drob, "The Sefirot", 5.
- 45. One would, of course, also have to consider the problem of the viability of an *essentially* good trans-world deity in light of the problem of theodicy.
- 46. Tegmark, Our Mathematical Universe' Ch. 6.
- 47. Lewis, On the Plurality of Worlds.
- 48. Our analysis of the simulation hypothesis results in the paradoxical view that a foundation for a humanistic, theological conclusion rests upon a decidedly non-humanistic/theological premise, the idea of the computers can have consciousness and perfectly simulate minds. This, I believe is endemic to philosophy: apparent opposites, as Hegel held, pass into one another and are interdependent. See S. Drob, *Archetype of the Absolute: The Unity of Opposites in Mysticism* (Santa Barbara, Ca., Fielding University Press, 2017).

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