

Podcast Episode 18: Are we living in a simulation?

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Teaser

Hey everyone! Welcome to the new episode of the Life Extension Podcast – technology & magic, society & business. The simulation hypothesis is hotly debated among a few philosophers, physicists, engineers, and economists. Continue listening to hear about the nature of reality and a new magical belief system which fits remarkably well to artificial intelligence and certain religious narratives. Also compare an apparently useless debate about the simulation hypothesis with its enormous significance to transhumanism as a developing posthumanist mythology.

The simulation hypothesis

In this episode we will look at the question, if the reality in which we live is what we think it is, or if we live in a simulation. We all know “The Matrix”. Recycling an older philosophical theme, the movies describe humanity as living in a computer simulation created by machines. In view of ever-increasing computer power, the Matrix appeared at the right time to trigger an intense debate about the nature of reality.

A short google search of “do we live in a simulation” will produce a number of articles in publications which are read by people interested in science and digitalization. Most of them go back to ideas and public statements, made by Nick Bostrom, a philosopher who is one of the pillars of transhumanist thought, David Chalmers, a philosopher of consciousness, Neil deGrasse Tyson, a celebrity astronomer, and Elon Musk, the famous builder of various tech-companies.

The so-called simulation hypothesis was formulated by Nick Bostrom. It claims that if future humans have sufficient computer power to run simulations of historical human worlds, then statistically we are almost certainly living in one of those simulations instead of in the original reality.

So could it be that we just imagine to live in reality, that all of us, our thoughts, perceptions, and feelings are just the product of some artificial intelligence in a simulated universe?

A useless debate

The simulation hypothesis is intellectually exciting, but at the same time entirely useless. For a start, as a scientific proposition it is not falsifiable and lacks therefore scientific relevance. There are mainly two strategies of proving or disproving that we do live in a simulation: the first one is shaped by thinking like a software or gaming developer: looking for glitches or limitations in the fabric of physical reality, which shouldn't be there (Templeton 2016). That could e.g. be the limited number of available particles enabling quantum calculations of the universe (Galeon 2017, McDonald 2018). The second is philosophical scepticism, a line of philosophical thought questioning, if we can know anything for sure at

all. That starts with the Daoist story of the Butterfly dream, about the impossibility of knowing if we dream or are being dreamt by others. It continues with Descartes who proves the existence of reality by the fact of his own thought - "I think therefore I am", but which could well be based on a delusion caused by a deceiving god. And it ends with contemporary thought experiments about the probability of living in a simulation compared to a real world by including infinite time into the equation. Let's look at the hypothesis again: It says that 'in the future technology will be advanced enough to simulate reality. Once this technology exists, it would be used for all kind of purposes. In that case more simulated worlds than realities should exist. And the likeliness that we live in a simulation is higher than living in base reality'. That line of thought is quite elusive. Any kind of thought model could be stretched in a radical way by assuming unlimited time and a few ifs, and still appear superficially logical, although the open framework makes any rigorous reasoning almost impossible. Anyway, the simulation hypothesis can neither be proven nor disproven at the moment.

The philosopher David Chalmers side-steps the technical questions of physicists by providing a different perspective. He points out that even if we are in a simulation or a matrix, our world would be no less real than we thought. It just has a different underlying nature of reality (Chalmers 2005).

Another argument against the simulation hypothesis from economics goes like this: Any simulation necessarily would take up resources to produce and to maintain. Why would anyone create a simulation at the scale and complexity of the universe to conduct human ancestry research, as suggested by Nick Bostrom? And why would the simulated universe include hidden levels of complexity which the simulated humans do not understand anyway? From an economical point of view that would be an incredible waste of time and resources!

What appears a bit of an ivory tower exercise, physicists and philosophers are engaged in a highly theoretical and technical debate about whether we live in a simulation or not. As consumers and citizens in this world that debate will get us nowhere. Let's stick to what appears to be closer at home. The whole discussion of living in a simulation compared to reality appears silly, not only because it is useless and irrelevant, but also because it is entirely anthropocentric. Do we still believe that the world was built for humanity at its center? Furthermore, the simulation hypothesis is not just an interesting metaphysical idea. It also qualifies as a conspiracy theory, even as the mother of all conspiracy theories. In case we really live in a simulation, then the intent of that simulated reality's creator would be to deceive us about absolutely everything (Kham 2021).

Importance for life-extension

Are we living in a simulation? Why do I discuss this question at all in the Life Extension Podcast? Because the simulation hypothesis is an important philosophical backdrop of mind uploading and immortality through digitalization promoted by transhumanists.

The strength of transhumanism as an intellectual thought model is that it entirely builds on well-established Western cultural history, and complements it with a futurist trajectory of technological development. Its allegiance to traditional thought, especially humanism, liberal capitalism, and a few metaphysical concepts from Christianity, gives it a familiar feel. Its radical interpretation of the human condition in view of current developments in science and technology on the other hand makes it attractive to the growing number of people involved in engineering and IT, tech-based businesses, as well as consumers who hope to live longer. Particularly in Western cultures, transhumanism provides a

philosophical and, as some would argue, a religious mold for the ongoing digitalization and its expected dramatic repercussions on human societies.

The simulation hypothesis supports utopian expectations of transhumanists with regards to immortality in digital form, driven by A.I. The other side of the coin, equally supportive, is its religious interpretation, which is being promoted by several religious groups, among them a sub-group of Mormons, called the Mormon transhumanists. Their belief in theosis, that man can become god, leads them to similar ideas as the simulation hypothesis. Once man, through his own accomplishment, has become god, he might create other men, who can become gods and create more men, and so on (Bialecki 2017, 2019). Very interesting how thoughts from IT and religious circles support and complement each other so well. One could of course argue, that both lines of thinking have developed within the same mold of American culture, which makes their alignment less surprising after all.

The idea that simulations of reality are possible is very important to the transhumanist narrative of the human becoming posthuman, and ultimately superhuman or god-like, based on expected progress in artificial intelligence. This story looks rounder, more rational, and less preposterous, if complemented by the simulation hypothesis directed at IT-minded people, or its religious analogue to cover the metaphysical side. Putting two beliefs together, confirming each other within the same belief system, makes each of them more convincing. Or to say it with Evans-Pritchard, an anthropologist who in his classic ethnography about the Azandes described the astonishing rationality of a magical belief system: “Magical fact is explained by magical fact” (1976).

But no matter the genesis, rationality, or truth of the transhumanist narrative, it has the potential to develop into one of the great mythologies of the posthuman age. In contrast to most other contemporary visions of the future, if those can be called visionary at all, it has great potential to shape our engagement with digital technologies. The question if we live in a simulation does not need to be answered. It will be enough that it stimulates our imagination how we want to use our new technological capabilities to create the type of life we want.

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