

On The Subjectivity Of Reality And The Benefits Of A Simulated World

By: Ayush Ranjan

Essay Word Count: 1499

A religious scholar is giving a lecture to his students about how all reality is merely illusion. Suddenly, an elephant charges towards them and they begin to flee. After they have escaped, a student asks the scholar why he ran from the elephant. The scholar replies, "to run is an illusion, but to stand your ground is also an illusion." This parable demonstrates that the reality of the human subject is essentially the same in a simulated world as opposed to a physical one. The thesis that a simulated reality is preferable to a physical one is supported by three arguments. Firstly, understanding that all reality is constructed by the subject gives us a reason not to intrinsically prefer a physical reality. Furthermore, the radical freedom of a simulated world can be evidenced by comparing the determinism of a physical reality as opposed to the programmable nature of a simulated world. Lastly, there is more concreteness to a simulated world due to the knowledge about the noumenal world that is provided. Through these arguments it will be demonstrated that experience of reality remains the same, the subject is afforded more freedom and their reality has more concreteness in a simulated world, making it preferable to a physical reality.

We tend to believe that our reality is a direct perception of an objective existence. We conceive that this is abandoned when entering a simulation, which may cause us to believe that a simulated world is less preferable than a real one. However, understanding the process by which we experience our physical reality will indicate that a simulated universe would preserve the essential nature of our experience. Each of us experiences reality through senses from an inner dimension that is subjective. According to Kant, human understanding functions through the subject organizing this world of perceptions and sensations present only to them in accordance with a priori categories like space or time. The *primacy* is given to the subject and the categories, whereas the thing being experienced is *secondary*. The insight that Kant gives to us is that our reality is a constantly changing bundle of perceptions which the subject is organizing. In this sense, *even in a non-simulated reality we cannot know or experience reality directly and absolutely*. This leads us to ask, what precisely would be the difference if we lived in a simulated reality? Either way, our experience of reality is constructed and organized through subjectivity and applying a priori categories. The primacy of the subjective experience is preserved and the a priori categories are the same, therefore it follows that the experience of the subject is essentially the same in reality and in a simulation.

An opponent may respond that a simulated subject's interpretation of their reality is completely inauthentic. This counterargument is aimed at a specific conception of a simulated reality in which we are not entities plugged into the simulated universe but rather are entities that are created by it. In this case both the objects of our external world, and the inner-dimension of our subjective experience are simulated. The argument we made earlier presupposes that a "real" subject exists interpreting a simulated reality. However, if the "subject" itself is an entity generated by the simulation then their interpretation of reality is not the authentic experience of the human subject. They are merely a figment of the simulation rendered to interact with another part of the simulated world. If this is the case then human subjectivity is entirely removed, making all of our choices, freedoms and actions inauthentic. Thus, this response concludes that a base reality is more preferable to certain kinds of simulations.

A number of responses are warranted here. Firstly, the conclusion follows from an unlikely premise. It is implausible to assume a simulated consciousness can not have human subjectivity. Moore's Law predicts that processing power for computers doubles every two years, meaning that any technologically advanced civilization would have the means to simulate a sort of universe that grows *exponentially* in terms of the rendering of objects within the universe. It is therefore unlikely that the entities programmed by the simulation would be one without an internal subjective experience. Furthermore, even in the marginal case where the premise is true- without a highly complex internal dimension of experience, the subject would completely lack an awareness and would therefore not be worse off. We only seek an internal dimension of experience because it is something we *possess* and to exist in a simulation without this sort of inner dimension would not be a loss that is *felt*. Thus, you would be free to enjoy all the pleasures or pains programmed for your simulated consciousness, not feeling any loss because you lack the subjectivity to value human experience in the first place. As a result, the counterargument fails to prove that a simulated reality is less preferable than a real one.

Moreover, a physical world makes determinism unavoidable. The movement of matter, and ultimately our conscious decisions are reducible to deterministic laws of the physical world. Furthermore, our choices are also constrained by our local environment through social structure, economic status and the will of others, making our life less free. However, this is not true in a simulation. The computer scientists Toffoli and Margolus coined a term in 1991; programmable matter, which refers the hypothetical building block of a simulated reality. If we were in a simulated reality with a high enough computing power, there is a possibility that each individual would be given a higher level of agency to control every single material fact about their existence. A real world is made of a primary substance that is material, implying a deterministic and pre existing

pattern of movement. As a consciousness that emerges from this world, we are unable to be free from this. However, a simulated reality is made of a primary substance that may be programmable to respond to the will of the subject. Thus, a simulated reality has a possibility of being more free, affording us more agency.

Robert Nozick provides a counterargument to entering such a simulation when he says, “we want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them.” Nozick argues that even if there existed a sort of “experience machine” which simulated a reality that was tailored to perfection for you, this would reality would be undesirable because it generates merely experience and not *actuality*. This argument serves the purpose of devaluing simulated reality by drawing a distinction that cannot possibly exist. It is epistemically unjustified to divide *known* objects from the *experience of knowing* them. An insight from George Berkeley’s philosophy helps clarify why this is true. Berkeley posits that the world is made up of objects that are interpreted through an idea of sense. We are unable to ever step outside of this sensory experience and therefore all reality is mediated through this. If this is true then there is no distinction between doing something and having the experience of doing something. As a result, Nozick’s argument does not stand.

In our final argument, it can be demonstrated that there is *more* concreteness to a simulated reality than to a non-simulated one. The Kantian analysis we discussed earlier about the human construction of reality hinges upon a distinction between the phenomenal world, the world of perceptions, and the noumenal world which is the thing-in-itself that drive subjective perceptions. However, since we can not escape experience Kant draws a limit at our metaphysical reasoning stating that the world of the noumena can never be grasped or known. Thus he says that the only thing which can be stated about the noumenal world is that it drives our perceptions and phenomena which we are experiencing. The issue, of course, is how we can definitively state that a noumenal world exists if we draw a metaphysical limit to our reasoning beyond perceptions. This implies a problem for philosophy in terms of the substance of the world which is solved only in a simulated universe. By virtue of knowing we are subjects residing within a simulated universe, we apprehend the existence of the noumenal world that is providing the source for our perceptions in a manner which is simply not possible in physical reality. Thus, a simulated reality has more philosophical concreteness than a physical one.

In conclusion, our first argument demonstrates that all reality is constructed by the subject and because the a priori categories and primacy of the subject remain the same, an artificial reality is essentially the same as a physical world. Furthermore, it was established that individuals are afforded more freedom in a simulated universe because

a physical universe implies a form of materialistic determinism whereas a simulated universe is made up of programmable matter which interfaces with the subject. Lastly, our final argument demonstrated that the world of noumena is validated under a simulated universe providing a more credible ground for the basic metaphysical system that that underpins our philosophical beliefs.

Works Cited

McCormick, Matt. "Kant's Copernican Revolution: Mind Making Nature." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/kantmeta/#H2.

Strickland, Jonathan. "How Moore's Law Works." *HowStuffWorks*, HowStuffWorks, 26 Feb. 2009, computer.howstuffworks.com/moores-law.htm.

"Anarchy, State and Utopia." *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, by Robert Nozick, Basil Blackwell, 2017, p. 43.

Flage, Daniel. "George Berkeley: Idealism and Immaterialism ." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/berkeley/#H4.

Mattey, GJ. "Critique of Pure Reason Lecture Notes: Phenomena and Noumena." *UC Davis Philosophy 175 Lecture Notes on Kant: Phenomena and Noumena*, hume.ucdavis.edu/mattey/phi175/phenomlethead.html.