

ARE WE **LIVING** IN A VIRTUAL WORLD?



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■ Andrew Sibley

ARE WE LIVING in a computer simulation? You might think this is an off-the-wall question. But some academics take the question seriously, e.g., University of Portsmouth associate physics professor, Melvin Vopson. They claim that the world in which we live might not be real, but only an illusion of reality; an artificially generated simulation overseen by a super-intelligence.

The concept of the universe as a simulation is well illustrated in *The Matrix* science-fiction films. CMI has previously commented on this.¹ Vopson's "simulated universe theory" implies that all of reality, from galaxies to life forms on Earth, are merely part of "a meticulously programmed computer simulation."² In that sense it is a form of intelligent design argument. But it is not the simplest explanation, and certainly far from biblical creation. The latest claims by Vopson have been reported in some online newspapers,³ and elaborated in a recent book.⁴

Support from the Bible?

In the *Daily Mail* article, Vopson even claims support for his ideas from the Bible, particularly John 1:1—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." He says this verse has "intriguing implications" for the simulation hypothesis. He suggests that the *Word* might be analogous to a controlling computer code, i.e., that letters and numbers determine the rules of the simulation. 'God' might also be part of the plan, he speculates:

The code running the simulation is not separate from the divine, but rather an integral part of it, perhaps an AI [artificial intelligence]. ... It implies a Creator who brought the simulated universe into existence through the Word (i.e., the code) ... It suggests that the act of creation, as described in the Bible, could be analogous to a divine act of programming and simulation.²

This, the article elaborates, may explain how the universe might have been created in six days—because it is only a simulated computer program.²

However, the Bible treats the world as a place of physical reality, one that actually exists. To create man—Adam—God took real dust from the ground and later breathed into his real nostrils the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). We must also consider the existence of truth and values, and of real emotions and suffering, wherein Christ, the *Word*, "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). He did this in order to save humanity from the real consequences of sin by enduring real suffering and death upon the Cross.

It is true that science has uncovered the genetic code of DNA, which strongly resembles a human language. But this DNA, a real molecule, leads to the formation of real molecular biomachines and real three-dimensional animals, plants, and human beings. The direct comparison between the genetic code and human languages reflects design—an order imposed upon real atoms and molecules by a super-intelligence 'external' to the tangible physical world, but able to operate within it.

Creation as per Genesis is the simpler explanation, rather than the proposal of another layer of simulated complexity. It is also what is clearly taught in the Bible,

which is the revelation of a real super-intelligence, God, who has communicated plans and propositions to those He created. Vopson's proposal, by contrast, involves an element of deception. His proposed super-intelligence has given mankind no clue what the purpose of this simulation would be, and has in fact let us believe that things are real when they are not. Taken further, one would have to doubt that we ourselves are real.

If we take the 'digital jargon' about computers and codes out of the picture, this concept that physical reality is an illusion has a long history in aspects of Eastern religion. In Hindu philosophy in the context of Advaita Vedanta, *Maya* refers to the illusion that makes individuals believe the world is real.

Further problems with simulation

If we were to believe that the world is merely a simulation, there would be less inclination to study the creation and do good science. The 'simulation' belief also has roots in the idealism of Greek philosophers such as Plato, as Vopson himself notes.² For Plato, the world was experienced in the mind; as such, intellectual endeavour was detached from the



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real world. It led to the priority of inner contemplation, with little interest in studying the creation in a material or real sense. Platonism even influenced many in the early Church to embrace some types of monasticism, where the devout tended to withdraw from the world for a life of prayer.

In fact, the abandonment of this focus on inner contemplation, through the Reformation and Early Modern Period, was important to the rise of science.⁵ Academics considered that study

of the created order through sensory experience *in a real way* was a means of discovering something of the mind of the Creator God. This led to a different outlook, and benefit to many people's lives, health, and life-expectancy.⁶

In addition, if we were being tricked by the 'simulation programmer' into thinking the world was real, when in fact it wasn't, how could we trust anything about our existence, and so do good science? And what would it say about the morality of such a 'super intelligence'?

Ancient Greek society never gave birth to modern science, despite the brilliance of its leading lights. One of the reasons is the pervasive belief in their gods. Unlike the lawgiving Creator God of the Bible ("the same yesterday, today and forever", Hebrews 13:8), these Greek gods were capable of deception

SUPPLEMENT (Technical)

Dubious science

Jonathan Sarfati

Some of Vopson's claims in relation to his 'simulation' idea don't make much scientific sense either. He claimed:

We know the universe is expanding without the loss or gain of heat, which requires the total entropy [related to disorder] of the universe to be constant. However we also know from thermodynamics that entropy is always rising [Second Law of Thermodynamics]. I argue this shows that there must

be another entropy—information entropy—to balance the increase.

There is no such requirement as his first sentence here states. There are well-known cases of isothermal (same temperature) processes that increase entropy—e.g., expansion of an ideal gas and mixing two gases. His whole theory depends on a law of informatics to balance thermodynamic entropy increase, to keep entropy constant. Since there is no requirement for constant entropy, his whole rationale collapses.

Groundbreaking German mathematician Amalie Emmy Noether (1882–1935).

Prejudice against women in academia meant her first seven years' work following her doctorate was without salary.

Dismissed in 1933 by the Nazis as part of a wholesale purge of Jewish academics, she moved to the US to teach.

and capriciousness. So, if things behaved one way today, there was no certainty that this would continue in the future. It might be the gods playing tricks to fool us. Clearly, a simulation operator could also change the rules at any time. Without the certainty that the laws of nature are fixed and unchanging, experimental science is impossible.

Science also requires the belief that our senses are experiencing the world correctly, which only follows if the world is real. So, whether it is the Greek gods, the illusion of Eastern religion, or the more ‘modern’ simulation idea, the result is the same: it effectively undermines the foundations on which science is based.

Escape from the spiritual?

While we uphold the realist’s perspective, we also need to keep in mind the spiritual dimension. The belief that we are in effect in a computer game undermines the Gospel, and the Bible cannot be used to support it. In today’s Western world people are encouraged to avoid the full reality of human existence through audiovisual distractions of many kinds. This includes computer games becoming ever more complex, with online interactive and increasingly immersive worlds aided by virtual reality headsets and AI. Beliefs like this ‘simulation’ blossom with such technological developments. But such things lead people to not think seriously about the call of God upon their lives and so face up to the spiritual aspect of life. It is endless material entertainment to distract from our God-given conscience.

He is also mistaken that the universe expands without loss or gain of heat. Even big bang cosmologists accept that universe expansion absorbs heat, and that photon energy gets lower over time (red-shifted). Dr Russell Humphreys proposed that universe expansion could absorb some excess heat produced in accelerated radioactive decay during Creation Week.²

Many might wonder: doesn’t this violate the Law of Conservation of Mass-Energy?³

Symmetry at the heart of the universe

However, conservation laws are really derivations of symmetries in nature. This was discovered by the leading mathematician Emmy Noether (1882–1935), probably the top female mathematician of all time. Noether’s theorem can be summarized as follows:

If a system is symmetrical in some sense, then there is a corresponding quantity that is conserved over time.

For example, if an experiment gives identical results even when performed in different parts of the universe, then the system has *space-translational symmetry*. Under Noether’s theorem, *conservation of linear momentum* is a consequence of space-translational symmetry. A *symmetry in the quantum mechanical wave function* leads to *conservation of electric charge*. If the system is invariant no matter which way it’s oriented, i.e., *rotational symmetry*, then *angular momentum will be conserved*.

In particular, *conservation of energy is a consequence of time-translation symmetry*. I.e., you don’t get a different result if you perform your experiment today, tomorrow, or even a thousand years from now. On small scales like a lab, and even the solar system and galaxy, this is true.

However, an expanding universe means that *time symmetry does not apply to the universe as a whole*. E.g., a photon traversing the universe becomes red-shifted, thus loses energy. Where did the energy disappear to? It didn’t disappear *anywhere*; the universe as

Conclusion

While it might be intriguing that an academic such as Vopson would advocate for a form of intelligent design and use Scripture in this way, his claims only lead further away from truth. Our existence is not just a mental construct. The first man, Adam, was directly created by God as a real physical being, sinned, and brought death into the world. The last Adam, Jesus Christ, died a real physical death so that human beings might, by grace through faith, receive forgiveness, and be reconciled to God (Genesis 2:7; 1 Corinthians 15:45–49). ■

References and notes

1. Doyle, S., Is the universe a simulation? creation.com/simulator, 25 Feb 2017.
2. Vopson, M.M., Do we live in a computer simulation like in *The Matrix*? My proposed new law of physics backs up the idea, theconversation.com, 18 Oct 2023.
3. Chadwick, J., Are we living in a simulation? Scientist claims we’re simply characters in an advanced AI world—and says the proof is hidden in the Bible, dailymail.co.uk, 30 Sep 2024.
4. Vopson, M.M., *Reality Reloaded: The scientific case for a simulated universe*, IPI Publishing, Portsmouth, 2023.
5. See also Sarfati, J., The biblical roots of modern science, creation.com/roots, 29 Sep 2009.
6. Some theologians, such as George Berkeley (1685–1753), remained idealists, considering that only mind and ideas exist—it was a way of overcoming scientific and materialistic skepticism, but it fails to balance the literal and symbolic reading of Scripture. See: Flage, D.E., George Berkeley (1685–1753), *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, iep.utm.edu, 1 Oct 2024.

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a whole doesn’t conserve energy because it is not time-translation symmetric. Dr Humphreys’ proposal is consistent with Noether’s theorem.

It doesn’t mean that chaos rules, because the energy changes are not random. Indeed, symmetries of the universe are a *real* design feature at the heart of a *real*, not simulated universe. That is, while most scientists, including CMI, usually treat conservation laws as fundamental, they are a reflection of something even more fundamental: symmetry of the universe. Noether’s theorem unifies apparently unrelated conservation laws under a single framework.

References and notes

1. Ref. 2 main article.
2. Vardiman, L., Snelling, A.A., and Chaffin, E.F. (Eds), *Radioisotopes and the Age of the Earth*, ICR and CRS, 2000.
3. The total amount of mass and energy in the universe is constant. Mass and energy can be converted into each other, but they cannot be created or destroyed.