

Van Til Versus *The Matrix*:

A Van Tilian Response to the Simulation Hypothesis

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“*Are we living in a computer simulation?*” That was the question posed in the title of a seminal article by Nick Bostrom, a philosopher at the University of Oxford, and published in the prestigious journal *Philosophical Quarterly* in 2003.¹ In that article, Bostrom seriously entertained what is now widely known as the *simulation hypothesis*: the theory that the physical universe we inhabit is in fact a highly advanced computer simulation created by beings with technological capabilities many orders of magnitude greater than our own. Since its publication, Bostrom’s paper has provoked considerable debate about its merits among scientists, philosophers, and public intellectuals. Some consider the proposal fantastical, if not laughable. Many, however, regard it as very much a live option to be weighed against what we might call the ‘commonsense’ view.

The thought that we might be living in a computer-generated virtual reality isn’t a new one. It has featured in science fiction stories since at least the first half of the twentieth century, most notably in the writings of Philip K. Dick, whose short stories have been the inspiration for movies such as *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, and *Minority Report*. But the simulation hypothesis was brought most forcefully and vividly into the mainstream of popular culture and public philosophy with the release of the movie *The Matrix* in 1999. Even those who have never seen the movie will

¹ Nick Bostrom, “Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?” *Philosophical Quarterly* 53, no. 211 (2003): 243–55.

be familiar with its basic premise and plot. The protagonist Neo discovers (rather abruptly and painfully) that the world he had always assumed to be real is in fact a near-perfect computer simulation known as “The Matrix,” while the real world turns out to be a nightmarish dystopia where human beings are bred to be organic batteries, plugged into the Matrix and systemically deceived about their experiences of the world.

Philosophy professors everywhere loved the movie, not only because of its ground-breaking special effects and eminently quotable dialogue, but because it finally gave them a fashionable pop-culture illustration for their lectures on Plato’s Allegory of the Cave and Descartes’ demonic deceiver. Indeed, such was the impact of the movie that skeptical challenges like, “How do you know you’re not dreaming right now?” or “How do you know you’re not being systematically deceived by an evil demon?” have been supplanted by the question, “How do you know you’re not living in the Matrix?”

I imagine that most readers are not troubled by such questions or by the challenge of the simulation hypothesis. If I were to ask you the question, “Are we living in a computer simulation?” you would give a simple and straightforward, “No!”—or perhaps a more incredulous, “Seriously?” And you might well be wondering, “What does any of this have to do with Van Til?”

So let me make the connection. This essay started life as a lecture at a conference entitled “Van Til and the Future of Reformed Apologetics.” One of the aims of the conference was to illustrate that a Reformed, Van Tilian approach to apologetics is as relevant and effective as ever and is more than equipped to meet not only current but also future challenges to the church and the Christian faith. I want to contend that while *you* might not take the simulation hypothesis seriously, there are many intelligent and influential people who do—and their number will only increase in the years to come. I will also explain why the simulation hypothesis has the potential to become a

competing worldview to the Christian worldview—a competing worldview that is paradoxically both *thoroughly secular* and *conspicuously religious*, and why Christians will need to have a cogent and compelling response to it. And I propose to outline how a Van Tilian apologetic can provide just that.

Here’s a basic roadmap for this essay. First, I’ll explain in greater detail what the simulation hypothesis claims and entails. Secondly, I’ll offer some reasons why I think the simulation hypothesis ought to be taken seriously as a cultural and apologetical challenge. Thirdly, I’ll summarize what I take to be a Van Tilian approach to apologetical critiques before discussing how that approach might be applied effectively to the simulation hypothesis.

1. What is the Simulation Hypothesis?

Let’s begin by trying to get a better understanding of the simulation hypothesis itself. As I indicated above, the simulation hypothesis is the idea that the cosmos we inhabit is in fact a computer simulation: a computer-generated virtual universe. But what *kind* of simulation are we talking about here? There are several different interpretations of the hypothesis, but I’m going to focus here on the specific version considered in Bostrom’s paper. That version turns out to be even more radical than the Matrix scenario.

In the movie *The Matrix*, Neo himself wasn’t a simulation. He wasn’t created or generated by the Matrix. Neo existed independently of the Matrix, but his sensory organs were being manipulated or bypassed so as to present him with experiences of an artificial world indistinguishable from the real world. The Matrix was a technological version of Descartes’ demonic deceiver.

In Bostrom’s version of the simulation hypothesis, however, not only the external world but *we ourselves* are generated by the computer simulation. On this view, we can’t be ‘unplugged’

from the artificial world in the way that Neo was ‘unplugged’ from the Matrix. Instead, our minds—not merely our experiences, but ourselves as *subjects* of experience—are generated by the hardware of the computer simulation. The idea is that there would be something like a super-computer running the entire simulation, and parts of that computer (essentially a complex physical machine) are *conscious*—indeed, they are *self-conscious*. So, there are billions of conscious subjects generated by an underlying physical substrate. But the experiences of these conscious subjects don’t depict the *real* world, the world in which the super-computer exists, but instead present a simulated *virtual* world. That’s the version of the simulation hypothesis entertained in Bostrom’s seminal paper. It’s the version on which most of the academic debate has focused.

But why take it seriously at all? Bostrom makes two important arguments in his paper. First, he argues that a realistic simulation of our universe, and the experiences of billions of people, is *technologically feasible*—not today, of course, but at some indefinite point in the future, given the rate of technological advancement we can reasonably expect. As an evolutionary naturalist, Bostrom begins with the assumption that consciousness can arise naturally out of an underlying material or physical substrate (in our case, our brains).² He also makes what is called the *assumption of substrate-independence*: the idea that consciousness can arise from different kinds of physical substrate.³ In other words, you don’t necessarily need a carbon-based brain to produce a mind; a silicon-based computer with comparable structure and complexity could generate a mind just as well. Bostrom then makes some calculations to support the claim that there are more than enough computational resources in the universe to realistically simulate the entire mental history

² I think there are formidable objections to naturalistic accounts of consciousness, but I will set them aside for the purposes of this essay.

³ Bostrom, “Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?,” 244–45.

of humankind up to our time and beyond.⁴ Bostrom describes this scenario as a “posthuman civilization” running an “ancestor-simulation.” A posthuman civilization is one where “humankind has acquired most of the technological capabilities that one can currently show to be consistent with physical laws and with material and energy constraints.”⁵ An ancestor-simulation would be a simulation run by a posthuman civilization that replicates an earlier period in human history—a period like ours, for example, but possibly with some modifications.

Bostrom’s second significant argument is this: if a realistic ancestor-simulation is indeed technologically feasible at some point in the future, then at least *one* of the following three propositions must be true:

- (1) The human species is very likely to go extinct before reaching a posthuman stage (in which case, there won’t be any ancestor-simulations).
- (2) Any posthuman civilization is extremely unlikely to create a significant number of ancestor-simulations (because they won’t want to do it or won’t be allowed to do it).
- (3) We are almost certainly living in a computer simulation.

Bostrom’s reasoning isn’t too hard to follow. If the human species *does* reach a posthuman stage, and at least *some* people in that civilization create a significant number of ancestor-simulations, then the total number of *simulated* human beings will far exceed the total number of *non-simulated* human beings, and therefore—from a purely statistical standpoint—it’s far more likely that you and I are among the *simulated* human beings.

To see why this is so, imagine a large jar filled with red and blue beads. The red beads represent simulated humans, and the blue beads represent real (non-simulated) humans, *but the red beads*

⁴ Bostrom, “Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?,” 245–48.

⁵ Bostrom, “Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?,” 245.

outnumber the blue beads by a million to one. If you were to pick out a bead at random, what's the chance that it's a blue bead? Would you bet on it being a blue bead?

To feel the force of Bostrom's argument, you have to bear in mind that the experiences of a simulated human would be indistinguishable from those of a real human.⁶ You can't tell *from your experiences alone* whether or not you're part of an ancestor-simulation. But the problem, Bostrom argues, is that unless you have good reason to think that there won't ever be any ancestor-simulations, it's far more likely than not that you're in one right now!

Now, to be clear, Bostrom doesn't argue that we are *in fact* living in a computer simulation. But he does conclude that, given our current ignorance about whether there will be a posthuman civilization that runs large numbers of ancestor-simulations, the proposition that we are now living in a computer simulation is *at least as credible as the alternatives*. In other words, it's a live option.

2. Why Take the Simulation Hypothesis Seriously?

Still, you may be thinking, why should *we* take any of this seriously? Why should Christians pay any attention to these crazy secular ideas? Isn't this conspiracy theory territory?

I understand the skepticism, but in response I want to offer five reasons why the simulation hypothesis has both cultural and apologetical significance, and it therefore warrants a thoughtful response and critique.

First, we should note that the simulation hypothesis has become a pervasive cultural meme, most notably in the form of references to *The Matrix*. For example, it's now commonplace to speak of someone having "taken the red pill" or having been "red-pilled," meaning that the person has come to understand that reality is very different from what they (and most everyone else)

⁶ Think here of Neo's experiences *before* he's unplugged from the Matrix.

previously assumed. Once a cultural meme becomes well-established, it can gain plausibility regardless of its intellectual merits. It becomes part of our cultural infrastructure, so to speak.

Secondly, for many people the simulation hypothesis has become increasingly credible in light of the remarkable advances in technology and computational capabilities they've witnessed in their own lifetimes. Just compare the computer games of the 1970s with those available today, some of which come disturbingly close to photorealism. If you doubt that it will be possible to create a 3D virtual world that is experientially indistinguishable from the real world, you haven't been paying attention to the astonishing advances in CGI over the last couple of decades. (Just go and see the recent *Avatar* sequel!)

It's not unreasonable for people to ask, "If we've accomplished this much in mere decades, how much further will we be able to go in centuries or millennia?" David Chalmers, one of the world's leading philosophers of mind and consciousness, proffers this opinion: "My guess is that within a century we will have virtual realities that are indistinguishable from the nonvirtual world."⁷

Thirdly, the simulation hypothesis already has some prominent and influential sympathizers. Elon Musk, the owner of one of the most influential social media platforms, and until recently the richest man in the world, has 'come out' in favor of the simulation hypothesis. In an interview with podcaster Joe Rogan, Musk made these comments: "If you assume any rate of improvement at all, [video] games will eventually be indistinguishable from reality. ... We're most likely in a simulation."⁸ Astrophysicist and media personality Neil deGrasse Tyson has also expressed

⁷ David J. Chalmers, *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), xiii–xiv.

⁸ Corey S. Powell, "Elon Musk Says We May Live in a Simulation. Here's How We Might Tell If He's Right," NBC News, October 2, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/mach/science/what-simulation-hypothesis-why-some-think-life-simulated-reality-ncna913926>.

sympathies for the simulation hypothesis (although he has backed away from it more recently).⁹ Richard Dawkins regards it as a “real scientific possibility.”¹⁰ David Chalmers seriously entertains the simulation hypothesis in his 2022 book *Reality+* which explores the philosophical implications of virtual reality.¹¹ Admittedly, this may only be a trickle—and perhaps a fickle trickle at that—but I expect that the number of secular public intellectuals taking the simulation hypothesis seriously will only grow in the next few decades.

Fourthly, some anecdotal evidence, for what it’s worth. As a seminary professor who teaches and writes on Christian apologetics, I regularly receive emails from people asking how I would respond to this or that challenge or objection. Up until around five years ago, no one had ever asked me about the simulation hypothesis. But since then, I’ve received a number of queries from Christians asking how to answer unbelievers who take the simulation hypothesis seriously, or how to respond to skeptics who wield the simulation hypothesis as a kind of defeater for Christian truth claims. After all, what difference does it make that a first-century Jew came back from the dead if the entirety of human history turns out to be a computer simulation by an advanced posthuman civilization? Perhaps the simulators just threw in that Jesus stuff to mess with us! The simulation hypothesis provides a convenient refuge for unbelievers who want to resist evidential arguments for Christianity. For example, there are already academic articles proposing that the fine-tuning of our universe is better explained by the simulation hypothesis than by theism.¹²

⁹ Powell, “Elon Musk Says We May Live in a Simulation.”

¹⁰ Richard Dawkins, “Are Our Heads in the Cloud? Science Fiction or Fact?,” accessed February 20, 2023, <https://richarddawkins.com/articles/article/are-our-heads-in-the-cloud>.

¹¹ Chalmers, *Reality+*.

¹² See, e.g., Moti Mizrahi, “The Fine-Tuning Argument and the Simulation Hypothesis,” *Think* 16, no. 47 (2017): 93–102. Cf. Chalmers, *Reality+*, 131–33.

Finally, the simulation hypothesis demands our attention because it isn't merely a scientific theory or a narrow philosophical thesis. It has the kind of global scope that qualifies it as a *metanarrative* or (to use a term more familiar in our circles) a *worldview*. Moreover, while it presents itself as a secular view, promoted by secular humanists, it has already begun to take on a distinctly *religious* character. This is evident even in the words of its own defenders. Consider this paragraph from Bostrom's seminal paper:

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.¹³

Even more strikingly, Chalmers confesses that although he considers himself an atheist, "the simulation hypothesis has made me take the existence of a god more seriously than I ever had before."¹⁴ Elsewhere, Bostrom remarks that the idea that we're living in a computer simulation "seems to foster a sense of absolute dependency," an expression that bears more than a passing resemblance to Friedrich Schleiermacher's famous claim that the essence of Christianity consists in "the feeling of absolute dependence."¹⁵

Bostrom and other writers have discussed ways in which we might be able to detect empirically whether we are living in a simulation, and if we are, how we might be able to infer things about

¹³ Bostrom, "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?," 253.

¹⁴ Chalmers, *Reality+*, 125.

¹⁵ Powell, "Elon Musk Says We May Live in a Simulation."

the simulators, those beings who stand in a god-like relationship to us. Isn't that just a secular version of natural theology?¹⁶

Similarly, some scientists have suggested that one way we could discover that we are living in a simulation is by looking for “gaps in the simulation” or “glitches in the Matrix.”¹⁷ These gaps or glitches would be events within the simulation that deviate from the natural laws and regularities that we ordinarily observe. Indeed, such an event would be what David Hume called “a violation of the laws of nature”—in other words, a miracle! It seems we're looking at a secular version of the argument from miracles: inferring a kind of supernatural agency from events that deviate from the natural order.

Bostrom, Chalmers, and others have discussed “simulation theodicies,” asking whether the simulation hypothesis helps to solve the problem of evil, and what moral justification the simulators might have for allowing so much pain and unhappiness to be experienced by people living in the simulation. There has even been speculation that if we are indeed living in a computer simulation, then it might be dangerous for us to try to reach a posthuman stage ourselves, because that would open the door to simulations within simulations within simulations, which might put too much pressure on the computational resources of *our* simulation, such that the simulators of our universe would have to pull the plug on us.¹⁸ In other words, if we were to try to become gods ourselves, our creators would have to intervene and put a swift end to our endeavors. Simulation theorists have their own Tower of Babel stories, it seems.

¹⁶ Chalmers explores what he dubs “simulation theology”: “the study of the nature of the simulator-as-God from the point of view of those within the simulation.” Chalmers, *Reality+*, 136–42.

¹⁷ Powell, “Elon Musk Says We May Live in a Simulation.”

¹⁸ Preston Greene, “The Termination Risks of Simulation Science,” *Erkenntnis* 85, no. 2 (2020): 489–509; Chalmers, *Reality+*, 140–41.

In several respects, then, the simulation hypothesis extends beyond science and philosophy into the realm of theology. Henry Van Til (nephew of Cornelius) astutely observed that “every culture is animated by religion,” such that culture is essentially “religion externalized.”¹⁹ Even an ostensibly secular culture cannot help but take on a religious character. Since we are religious beings by nature and by design, what John Calvin called the *semen religionis*—the seed of religion—will inevitably manifest itself even within a supposedly post-religious civilization.

3. A Van Tilian Response to the Simulation Hypothesis

It’s time to turn our attention to a distinctively Van Tilian response to the simulation hypothesis. In my view, the genius of Cornelius Van Til was his insistence that our apologetic method must be anchored to our theology; that is to say, our theological convictions should inform and direct not only the *content* of our apologetic (what we defend) but also our *method* in apologetics (how we defend it). We start with *theology*, on the basis of God’s authoritative revelation. Our theology then informs our *philosophy* (metaphysics and epistemology). Our philosophy then informs our *apologetic methodology*.

Furthermore, if we are committed to *Reformed* theology—if we think that Reformed theology faithfully expresses God’s self-revelation in Scripture—then that ought to lead us to a distinctly Reformed apologetic. **A truly Reformed apologetic must be consistent with a truly Reformed theology in both its *content* and its *method*.**²⁰ It must be consistent with our *doctrine of God*: the

¹⁹ Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Baker Book House, 1959), 44, 200.

²⁰ “Our concern throughout is to indicate the nature of a truly Protestant, that is a Reformed, apologetic. A Reformed method of apologetics must seek to vindicate the Reformed life-and-world view as Christianity come to its own. It has already become plain that this implies a refusal to grant that any area or aspect of reality, any fact or any law of nature or of history can be correctly interpreted except it be seen in the light of the main doctrines of Christianity.” Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (P&R, 2008), 118.

triune God is absolutely self-sufficient and sovereign over all things.²¹ It must be consistent with our *doctrine of man*: we are creatures made in the image of God, designed to think God's thoughts after him, in submission to his authoritative revelation. It must be consistent with our *doctrine of revelation*: God has revealed himself and his will for us clearly and consistently in the natural order, in the person of Christ, and in the self-attesting scriptures. It must be consistent with our *doctrine of sin*: all mankind is fallen in sin, alienated from God, under his wrath and judgment, and bent toward evil in every aspect of our human nature (including our rational faculties) such that we suppress God's clear self-revelation and commit intellectual idolatry. It must be consistent with our *doctrine of salvation*: redemption from sin and reconciliation with God are possible only by sheer divine grace, through the person and work of Jesus Christ, communicated to us through the covenant of grace.

This tight connection between theology, philosophy, and apologetic methodology has a number of important implications for Van Til (only some of which can be mentioned here). First, our understanding of God as the absolutely self-contained creator, sustainer, and director of all things implies that nothing in the creation—nothing in our human experience—is intelligible apart from God and his self-revelation.²² This is part of Van Til's motivation for transcendental argumentation, which aims to show that God is the necessary precondition of *any* intelligible experience, of *any* meaningful fact. As Van Til puts it, "the only argument for an absolute God that holds water is a transcendental argument."²³

²¹ As Van Til memorably put it: "God, the God of Christianity, is the All-Conditioner!" Cornelius Van Til, *Why I Believe in God*, updated ed. (Great Commission Publications, 1976).

²² "But surely the Reformed believer should stress with Calvin that *every* fact of history, here and now actually is a revelation of God. Hence *any* fact and *every* fact proves the existence of God and therefore the truth of Scriptures [sic]. If this is not the case, *no* fact *ever* will. Every fact proves the existence of God because without the presupposition of God and his counsel no fact has any distinguishable character at all." Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (P&R, 2007), 40.

²³ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1969), 11.

Secondly, we should recognize that the disagreement between the believer and the unbeliever isn't merely a dispute over facts, evidences, or theories, but rather a clash of entire worldviews or "philosophies of life." It is a collision of competing visions of *ultimate reality* and *ultimate authority*. It is a disagreement, not over mere facts, but over philosophies of fact.²⁴ It is a conflict of ultimate presuppositions about God, mankind, and the universe.

And that means, thirdly, that there can be no place for epistemological neutrality or intellectual autonomy in Christian apologetics. There is no neutral, autonomous, common ground on which the believer and unbeliever can stand together and settle their presuppositional differences. There is no *worldview-independent* vantage point from which we can determine whose worldview is true or rationally justified. Note well: that doesn't mean there is no common ground at all! It means only that the common ground isn't *neutral, autonomous ground*. Rather, the common ground is the objective fact that both believer and unbeliever are made in the image of God and are living in God's universe. It means that the common ground is actually *Christian* ground—more precisely, it is *Christ's* ground—and that is what the apologist seeks to demonstrate.

Now, one might well ask, how is a conflict at the level of worldviews, at the level of ultimate presuppositions, to be resolved? Does the presuppositionalist face some kind of Mexican standoff with the non-Christian, as John Warwick Montgomery suggested in his critique of Van Til?²⁵ Not at all. As Greg Bahnsen explains in his helpful summary of Van Til's presuppositional method:

To put it in compressed form, apologetical disputes hinge on the conflicting presuppositions (worldview) of the believer and the unbeliever, but the believer can argue for the rationality of his

²⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972), 5–6.

²⁵ John Warwick Montgomery, "Once Upon an A Priori," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), 380–92.

presuppositions (and demonstrate the irrationality of the opposing outlook) by means of an “internal comparison and critique” of the two contrary sets of presuppositions. This is what is known as an *indirect argument*—an argument “from the impossibility of the contrary.” ... The two fundamental theories or worldviews must be compared, being analyzed “from within” themselves, with a view to reducing to absurdity the position that opposes your own. The autonomous position of the unbeliever must be shown to be intellectually untenable on its own grounds.²⁶

Thus, the unbeliever’s worldview is subjected to an internal critique, to show that it fails *even on its own grounds*. It is irrational insofar as it undermines the very notion of ‘reason’ to which it appeals.

In his various writings, Van Til deploys several strategies for critiquing non-Christian positions and vindicating the Christian position. One strategy is to expose the *unstable rationalist-irrationalist dialectic* in non-Christian systems of thought. Another strategy is to show how, by their own principles and assumptions, non-Christian worldviews lead to a self-defeating *skepticism* and *nihilism* (the “internal critique” that Bahnsen describes). Van Til’s central strategy, however, is the kind of *transcendental critique* that seeks to expose the dependence of non-Christian systems of thought on Christian presuppositions, showing that non-Christian worldviews must borrow elements from a Christian worldview to account for their own intelligibility and to coherently express their own claims. Let’s briefly consider how each of these strategies might be applied to the simulation hypothesis.

²⁶ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (P&R, 1998), 484–85.

3.1. The Rationalist-Irrationalist Dialectic

Van Til frequently observed that in a Christian theistic worldview, rationality has its foundation in a God who is both *absolute* and *personal*.²⁷ The mind of God serves as the ultimate standard of what is true and reasonable. (As Van Til put it, God is “the final reference point in human predication,”²⁸ that is to say, in assertions about reality.) But if one rejects the foundation of an absolute personal God, one will either relocate that ultimate standard to the mind of man—the *rationalist* position—or deny any ultimate standard at all—the *irrationalist* position.

According to the rationalist position, the human mind is the final reference point for knowledge. On this view, the universe is (in principle) explicable in terms of autonomous human reason. According to the irrationalist position, the universe is fundamentally inexplicable. There is no unifying rational order to the universe because reality is ultimately impersonal in nature. There is no absolute mind behind it.

Van Til astutely observes that non-Christian worldviews or philosophies tend to reflect a mixture of rationalism and irrationalism, even oscillating between the two extremes as the problems of one or the other become apparent. And I think we can see exactly this rationalist-irrationalist dialectic in the simulation hypothesis—at least in the version that Bostrom entertains.

²⁷ One of the earliest statements of this conviction appears in Van Til’s 1930 review of Albert C. Knudson, *The Doctrine of God*, published in *Christianity Today* and reprinted in *Christianity and Idealism*: “The only alternative to a theory of reality of which God as absolute personality forms the controlling concept is a metaphysical relativism. ... Corresponding to and involved in this theory of reality is an equally theistic theory of knowledge. If God is absolute personality he is completely self-conscious. ... It is this absolute self-consciousness of God that forms the basis of certainty for our knowledge. Possibility for us is deeper than the deepest sea. If it were so also for God the whole of our coherent experience would be adrift on a shoreless, bottomless void. Our thought would be operating in a vacuum. If there is to be any rationality or coherence anywhere there must be absolute rationality somewhere. Our rationality rests upon God’s rationality.” Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1955), 126–27.

²⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Westminster Seminary Press, 2023), 2.

On the one hand, there's a kind of *rationalism*. We're to suppose that the simulators are a 'posthuman' civilization. They are beings like us, only far more technologically advanced. They are the future, more highly evolved versions of ourselves. So, on this view, the universe we inhabit is (in principle) entirely explicable in terms of *human* reason—perhaps we should say *posthuman* reason—because it is designed and directed by the mind of man. There is a rationality behind it, but not a *divine* rationality, not an *absolute* rationality.

On the other hand, however, there's a kind of *irrationalism* here too. We find ourselves trapped (as it were) on the inside of the simulation. We're behind a veil of ignorance, not really able to know anything about the nature and intentions of the simulators—that is to say, the 'gods'. Remember that the simulation, in the nature of the case, is meant to look from the inside as though it's *not* a simulation. The simulators are hidden *by design*. They are concealed, rather than revealed. There's no doctrine of revelation here, as there is in the Christian worldview. So, there are *divine beings*, in a certain sense, but there is no *divine revelation*.

What's more, these quasi-divine beings—the simulators—are not themselves the ultimate reality. Either they themselves exist within a simulation—in which case they're hardly in a better position than us—or they exist in what has been dubbed "base reality," the bottom-level reality, the 'basement' reality. But that base reality, according to the simulation hypothesis, is a godless naturalistic universe, and the original simulators are assumed to be the products of blind evolutionary processes that generate life from non-life, intelligence from non-intelligence. That base reality is ultimately *impersonal*, which is to say, ultimately *irrational*. There is no singular, unified, rational order at the most fundamental level of reality.

We might therefore sum things up like this: in the simulation hypothesis, there is a *proximate rationalism* but an *ultimate irrationalism*. A raft of rationalism bobbing aimlessly on an ocean of

irrationalism.²⁹ Indeed, there's a sense in which the simulation hypothesis is just a sophisticated modern version of ancient pagan polytheism.³⁰ The 'gods' may be like *superhumans* compared to us. But they're still finite beings and subject to ultimate impersonal chance.

3.2. Internal Critique

Let's turn now to the second Van Tilian strategy, a more direct internal critique, to see how the simulation hypothesis leads to a kind of self-defeating skepticism. Recall Bostrom's central argument: if there's any likelihood that our descendants reach a point where they are able to create realistic ancestor-simulations with conscious beings, and if there's any likelihood that at least some of those descendants create such simulations, then it's far more probable than not that we are in one of those ancestor simulations. But notice this: if we *are* in a simulation, then the simulators are not our actual descendants, because if they were, they would *also* be in the simulation! We are not *actually* their ancestors. Rather, we are simulations that *represent* their ancestors. But in that case, we have no good reason to think that the simulators want to run simulations that represent their ancestors rather than some very different kind of being.

Just think about it for a moment. If you could create a massive virtual reality universe, why would you populate it with humans rather than, say, elves or Ewoks or Romulans or something never conceived of before? The sky's the limit! For any given species of simulator, there's a virtually unlimited number of different species of simulated beings, which means that the likelihood that the simulated beings are the *same species* as the simulators is vanishingly small. In

²⁹ One is reminded of Van Til's vivid illustration of the man made of water who tries to climb out of "an infinitely extended and bottomless ocean of water" by making a ladder of water. In the case of a multi-level simulation hypothesis, we might adapt the illustration to depict a man made of water being lifted by another man made of water, who is being lifted in turn by another man of water, and so on, all ultimately resting on the infinite ocean. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 124.

³⁰ Cf. Chalmers, *Reality+*, 128. Chalmers also compares the simulator to the demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus*.

other words, we have no reason to think that the simulators are anything like us at all. Moreover, once you allow for the possibility of multiple levels of simulation (i.e., nested simulations) there's no reason to think that at any level the simulators are the same kind of beings as the simulated agents. Every level adds an extra layer of ignorance.

However, I think there's an even deeper problem here. Bostrom's argument depends on some scientific calculations about the computational resources of our universe. That is to say, it relies on some *scientific* knowledge of our universe, which it extrapolates into the future. But if our universe is merely simulated, there's no reason to think that scientific knowledge of *our* universe reliably applies to the *outer* universe that's running the simulation. There's no basis for the assumption that the laws of our (simulated) universe are also the laws of the outer (simulating) universe. In that case, how can we trust the scientific reasoning that led to the simulation hypothesis in the first place? It looks like we've run headlong into a variant of Wittgenstein's ladder: once we've climbed up the ladder to reach the simulation hypothesis, we have to kick away the ladder as an unreliable means of ascent!

It's worth noting that our internal critique here bears some similarities to Alvin Plantinga's famous Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism.³¹ Plantinga contends that evolutionary naturalists who reflect on the implications of their worldview are vulnerable to a global epistemic defeater: if evolutionary naturalism is true, then they shouldn't trust the cognitive faculties that led them to believe in evolutionary naturalism. I'm suggesting that something similar goes for anyone who believes in the simulation hypothesis on the basis of an argument like Bostrom's: if the

³¹ For the most mature statement of the argument, see Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 10.

simulation hypothesis is true, then they shouldn't trust the scientific reasoning that led them to believe in the simulation hypothesis.

The root of the problem, once again, is that in the worldview of the simulation hypothesis, the 'gods' are hidden behind a veil of ignorance. They exist in a kind of Kantian noumenal realm. We posit their existence, yet we can know nothing useful about them.

3.3. The Transcendental Argument

Finally, let's consider how we might apply the most powerful Van Tilian strategy: the transcendental argument. I'm sure many readers will be familiar with this quotation from Van Til's *Survey of Christian Epistemology*:

It is the firm conviction of every epistemologically self-conscious Christian that no human being can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or in affirmation, unless it were for God's existence. Thus the transcendental argument seeks to discover what sort of foundations the house of human knowledge must have, in order to be what it is.³²

With the simulation hypothesis in view, we might update Van Til's words as follows:

No *posthuman* being can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or in affirmation, unless it were for God's existence. The transcendental argument seeks to discover what sort of foundations the house of *posthuman* knowledge must have, in order to be what it is.

After all, according to the assumptions of the simulation hypothesis, the posthumans are only more advanced extensions of humans: they are also finite, contingent, material, spatiotemporal beings of some kind or other. But in that case, there must be a deeper, self-sufficient, self-contained reality

³² Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 11.

that accounts for *their* knowledge, for *their* rational faculties, for *their* ability to engage in scientific research, and so forth.

A transcendental critique of the simulation hypothesis could be developed in various complementary directions.³³ In the first place, we could make an **argument from scientific knowledge**. We could observe that the simulators at every level have to rely on some kind of scientific knowledge of their universe, but any scientific knowledge presupposes some kind of rational order in the universe and some kind of uniformity of nature principle.³⁴ Neither of these can be explained *immanently* (that is, by appeal only to causes or agencies within that universe). At the foundational level of reality—at “base reality”—there must be a transcendent, self-existent, personal, absolute creator of everything else. There must be an *absolute* rationality to ground any ultimate rational order.

Secondly, borrowing some insights from the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga, we could make an **argument from cognitive proper function**. According to Plantinga’s analysis, our ability to know anything at all requires that we have cognitive faculties that are reliably aimed at truth and function properly in our cognitive environment.³⁵ But that notion of cognitive proper function presupposes a *cognitive design plan*. If the simulation hypothesis were true, we might attribute that design plan to the simulators (since they would be our immediate creators). But according to the assumptions of the simulation hypothesis, the simulators are *also* finite, contingent, material, spatiotemporal beings, and thus their knowledge would *also* presuppose some

³³ I have suggested elsewhere that there is no single version of the transcendental argument, but rather a ‘family’ of arguments with a distinctive theme and goal. James N. Anderson, “No Dilemma for the Proponent of the Transcendental Argument: A Response to David Reiter,” *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 1 (2011): 189–98.

³⁴ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 125–26; James N. Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Plantinga and Van Til,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (2005): 65–67.

³⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 194; Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 153–56; Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God,” 53–55.

kind of cognitive design plan—and so on up the levels (if indeed there are multiple levels). At some point, however, all cognitive proper function has to be grounded in a non-finite, non-contingent mind that transcends any material spacetime universe. In other words, it has to be grounded in an *absolute* mind—a *divine* mind.

As a third example, we could press an **argument from logic**.³⁶ We could point out that any argument for the simulation hypothesis must presuppose laws of logic, but laws of logic cannot be material in nature and cannot be reduced to laws of physics. Such laws must transcend not only our universe, but *any* physical universe. The laws of logic must govern the simulators just as they govern us. If they don't apply to the simulators, then all bets are off; if the simulators aren't governed by logic, they're logically unintelligible to us. But now we need to ask, what worldview can account for the existence of transcendent laws of logic that govern every finite mind? Christian theism offers a coherent answer to that question, whereas the implicit metaphysical naturalism of the simulation hypothesis does not.

Further avenues could be explored here, such as transcendental arguments from the existence of truth and from the possibility of predication. But here's the overarching point: insofar as the simulation hypothesis presupposes such things as scientific knowledge, finite rational minds, and laws of logic, it has to borrow resources from a *Christian theistic* worldview to even get off the ground. The house of human knowledge—and the house of *posthuman* knowledge—needs solid foundations that can actually support it.

³⁶ James N. Anderson and Greg Welty, "The Lord of Noncontradiction: An Argument for God from Logic," *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 2 (2011): 321–38; James N. Anderson and Greg Welty, "In Defense of the Argument for God from Logic" (Evangelical Philosophical Society, 2013), [https://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Anderson-Welty%20\(In%20Defense%20of%20the%20Argument%20for%20God%20from%20Logic\).pdf](https://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Anderson-Welty%20(In%20Defense%20of%20the%20Argument%20for%20God%20from%20Logic).pdf).

What's more, the strength of Van Til's transcendental argument is that if it works, it works *even if we're actually living in a computer simulation*. God's existence is a presupposition of the very intelligibility of the simulation hypothesis. If the simulation hypothesis is *false*, then God exists. If the simulation hypothesis is *true*, then God exists. The only escape (if you can call it that) is to renounce objective truth and rationality altogether—to embrace a kind of Nietzschean nihilism.

Conclusion

Cornelius Van Til was “promoted to glory” on April 17, 1987. In that year, the best-selling home video game console was the Nintendo Entertainment System, which featured an 8-bit 1.79MHz processor, 2KB of RAM, and a display resolution of 256 x 240 pixels. The best-selling video game that year was *The Legend of Zelda*. The very first Pixar film, *Luxo Jr.*, had been released the previous year.

The technological advances we've witnessed over the last four decades are truly remarkable. Van Til was ahead of his time in many respects, but as far as we know, he didn't foresee the rise of the simulation hypothesis or anything like it. Nevertheless, he bequeathed to us a methodological framework and an apologetic toolkit that is well-equipped to deal with the philosophical and cultural challenges of the twenty-first century and (dare I say) beyond. It seems fitting, then, to conclude with these words from John Frame:

Van Til ... gives us the courage to take “cultural sea-change” in stride, not to be terrified by every new ideology that comes down the pike. In a fundamental sense, there is nothing new under the sun. And students who learn their apologetics from Van Til, if they learn it well, will be prepared

for the next development when it comes; they will not have to learn their apologetics all over again.³⁷

³⁷ John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (P&R, 1995), 238.