

# The Reality Question: Are Virtual Worlds Real or Illusory?

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Whenever virtual reality is discussed, one hears the same refrain. *Simulations are illusions. Virtual worlds aren't real. Virtual objects don't really exist. Virtual reality isn't genuine reality.*

You can find this idea in *The Matrix*. In a waiting room inside the simulation, Neo sees a child apparently bending a spoon with the power of his mind. They engage in conversation:

CHILD: Do not try and bend the spoon. That's impossible. Instead . . . only try to realize the truth.

NEO: What truth?

CHILD: There is no spoon.

This is presented as a deep truth. *There is no spoon.* The spoon inside the Matrix is not real but a mere illusion. The implication is that everything one experiences in the Matrix is an illusion.

In a commentary on *The Matrix*, the American philosopher Cornel West, who himself played Councillor West of Zion in *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, takes this line of thinking a step further. Speaking of awakening from the Matrix, he says "What you think you're awakening to may in fact be another species of illusion. It's illusions all the way down." Here there is an echo of Vishnu: Simulations are illusions, and ordinary reality may be an illusion, too.

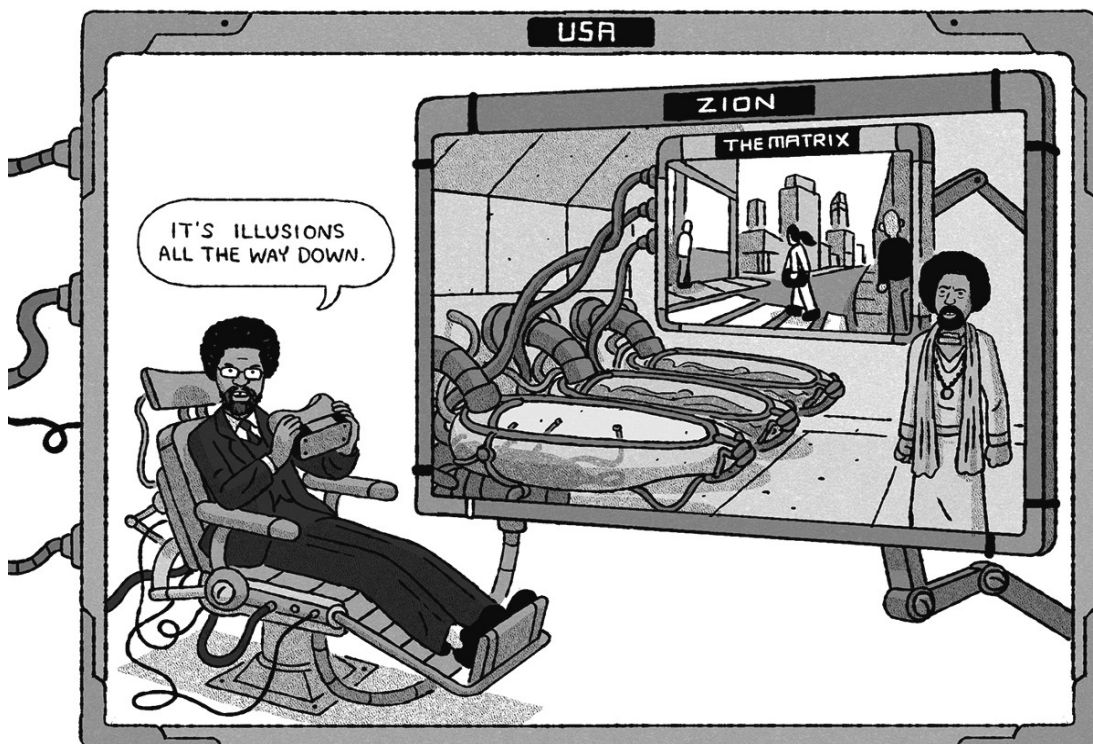


Figure 4 Cornel West, awakening from life as Councillor West of Zion, on illusion and reality.

The same line of thinking recurs in the TV series *Atlanta*. Three characters are sitting around a pool late at night discussing the simulation hypothesis. Nadine becomes convinced: “We’re all nothing. It’s a simulation, Van. We’re all fake.” She takes for granted that if we’re living in a simulation, we’re not real.

I think these claims are wrong. Here’s what I think: *Simulations are not illusions. Virtual worlds are real. Virtual objects really exist.* In my view, the Matrix child should have said, “Try to realize the truth. There is a spoon—a digital spoon.” Neo’s world is perfectly real. So is Nadine’s world, even if she is in a simulation.

The same goes for our world. Even if we’re in a simulation, our world is real. There are still tables and chairs and people here. There are cities, there are mountains, there are oceans. Of course there may be many illusions in our world. We can be deceived by our senses and by other people. But the ordinary objects around us are real. ...

What about ordinary virtual reality, experienced through a headset? This can sometimes involve illusion. If you don’t know you’re in VR and you take the virtual objects to be normal physical objects, you’d be wrong. But I’ll argue in chapter 11 that for experienced users of VR, who know they’re using VR, there need be no illusion. They’re experiencing real virtual objects in virtual reality.

Virtual realities are different from nonvirtual realities. Virtual furniture isn’t the same as nonvirtual furniture. Virtual entities are made one way, and nonvirtual entities are made another. Virtual entities are *digital* entities, made of computational and informational processes. More succinctly, they’re made of bits. They’re perfectly real objects that are grounded in a pattern of bits in a computer. When you interact with a virtual sofa, you’re interacting with a pattern of bits. The pattern of bits is entirely real, and so is the virtual sofa.

“Virtual reality” is sometimes taken to mean “fake reality.” If I’m right, that’s the wrong way to define it. Instead it means something closer to “digital reality.” A virtual chair or table is made of digital processes, just as a physical chair or table is made of atoms and quarks and ultimately of quantum processes. The virtual object is different from the nonvirtual one, but both are equally real.

If I’m right, then Narada’s life as a woman is not entirely an illusion. Nor is Morty’s life as a football star and carpet salesman. The long lives that they experience really happen. Narada really lives a life as Sushila.

Morty really lives a life as Roy, albeit in a virtual world.

This view has major consequences for the problem of the external world. If I’m right, then even if I don’t know whether or not we’re in a simulation, it won’t follow that I don’t know whether or not the objects around us are real. If we’re in a simulation, tables are real (they’re patterns of bits), and if we’re not in a simulation, tables are real (they’re something else). So either way, tables are real. This offers a new approach to the problem of the external world, one that I will spell out over the course of this book.