Consciousness Beyond the Interface:

A Comparative Framework for Simulation and Theistic Creation

External Minds, Nested Realities, Personal Identity, and the Limits of the Simulation Hypothesis

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Conceptual Analysis, Not an Empirical Study

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Abstract

This paper develops an external-consciousness model of simulated reality and compares its interpretation under naturalistic and Christian metaphysical commitments. The central proposal is architectural rather than causal: a simulated environment could be designed to interface with subjects whose consciousness already exists outside that environment. Consequently, such a simulation would not need to manufacture consciousness internally to support conscious experience. This claim is conditional and does not explain the ultimate origin of subjectivity. The framework is extended to nested simulations and the distinction between a local designer and an ultimate ground of existence. A naturalistic version locates subjects in a parent physical world; a theistic version views creation as dependent on God while allowing, only analogically, that the observable world might possess information-like structure. The analysis identifies important constraints from neuroscience and from Catholic teaching on the unity of body and soul. It concludes that the simulation hypothesis is metaphysically underdetermined: it neither entails atheism nor confirms Christianity, and its most defensible contribution is to clarify the difference between the mechanism of experience and the ultimate explanation of reality.

Keywords: simulation hypothesis; consciousness; external subject; personal identity; metaphysics; nested simulation; creation; soul-body unity

1. Introduction: The Subject and the Experienced World

This paper asks two related questions. First, could a simulated world provide an environment for consciousness that already exists outside it? Second, could such a system be understood within both naturalistic and Christian accounts of reality? The proposed model assumes an external conscious participant who receives experience and acts through an interface. It does not attempt to explain why consciousness exists in the first place. That issue, central to David Chalmers's discussion of the hard problem of consciousness, lies beyond the model's scope. [1]

Contemporary simulation debates often assume that an entire world, including its apparently conscious inhabitants, would need to be generated inside a computational substrate. This paper

[1] David J. Chalmers, "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 200–219, https://consc.net/consciousness/.

examines a different possibility. A simulated world might supply sensory, bodily, and interpersonal content to a conscious participant who already exists beyond its computational boundary. In that case, the system does not create the observing subject; it creates an environment for the subject to inhabit. The model is analogous to an immersive virtual-reality interface, but taken to a much more radical hypothetical extreme.

This is a philosophical model, not a claim that such technology exists or that our universe is simulated. The contribution is to specify its assumptions, show its compatibility with more than one worldview, and identify the points at which a technological analogy ceases to explain the relevant metaphysics.

2. Conceptual Background and Definitions

2.1 Three different claims called "simulation"

World simulation: a system generates a structured domain containing objects, laws, events, and perhaps agents. **Experiential immersion:** an independently conscious subject receives experiences and exercises agency through an artificial interface. **Nested simulation:** a simulated civilization constructs a further simulation within its own environment. These claims can overlap but should not be conflated.

Bostrom's simulation argument concerns the distribution of observers under assumptions about advanced civilizations and ancestor simulations.[2] It is not, by itself, an argument that human consciousness must be externally injected. Putnam's brain-in-a-vat scenario supplies a distinct skeptical precedent: the subject may exist while experience is systematically engineered.[3] Chalmers further argues that virtual environments need not be devoid of genuine reality or significance.[4]

[2] Nick Bostrom, "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53, no. 211 (2003): 243–55, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.00309.

[3] Hilary Putnam, "Brains in a Vat," in *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625398.003.

[4] David J. Chalmers, *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* (W. W. Norton, 2022).

2.2 A boundary condition, not an origin theory

Let *S* denote an independently conscious subject; *W*, a generated world; *A*, an avatar or embodied point of interaction; and *I*, an interface mapping events in *W* to experiences of *S*, while mapping intentions or actions of *S* into events involving *A*. In this vocabulary, consciousness is an *input condition* of the specified architecture. It is not an output variable that the simulation must compute. This is a statement about how the proposed system is organized, not an explanation of why *S* exists or is conscious.

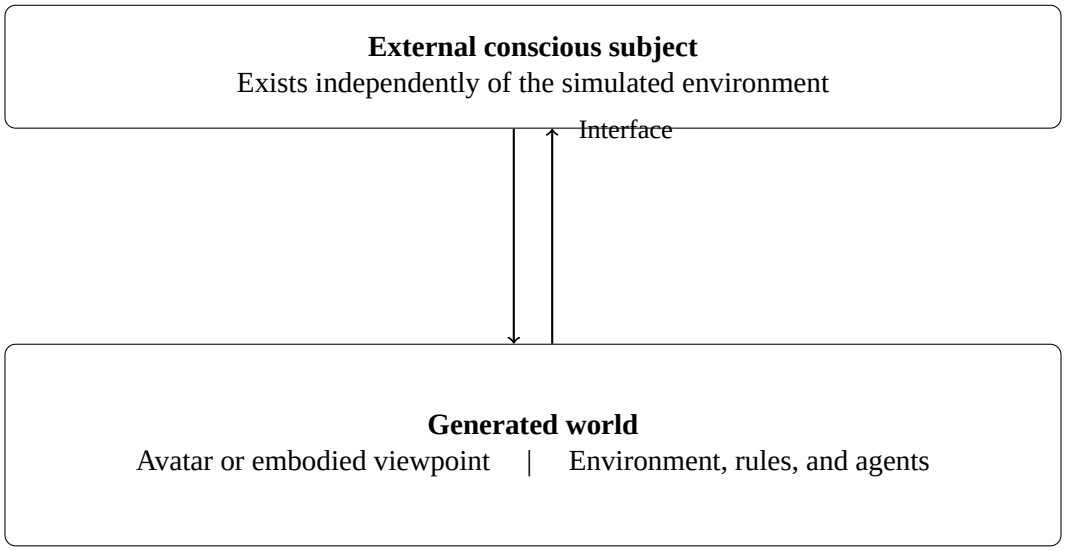


Figure 1: The proposed external-consciousness interface. Arrows represent a hypothetical mapping between experience and action, not an established mechanism.

3. The External-Consciousness Immersion Model

3.1 Minimal assumptions

The external-consciousness immersion model (ECIM) can be expressed as four explicit assumptions:

- **A1 — Prior subject:** at least one conscious subject exists outside the simulated experiential domain.

- **A2 — Generated environment:** the system generates a coherent world with stable enough regularities to support meaningful experience.
- **A3 — Interface:** a mechanism connects the subject's experience and agency to a represented body or viewpoint within that world.
- **A4 — Participation:** the connection is sufficiently integrated that the subject may identify with the avatar's experiences, memories, and perspective.

Conditional result: if A1–A4 obtain, the simulation itself need not originate the subject's consciousness. The result follows from the system's specified division of labor: generating experiential contents and possessing conscious subjectivity are assigned to different components.

This is not evidence that A1 is true of humans, and it does not show that every possible simulation needs an outside observer. Many simulations have no observer; others might, in principle, contain internally instantiated conscious agents. ECIM isolates one intelligible architecture rather than establishing a universal law.

3.2 Illustrative scenario

Suppose a future medical and neural system allows a participant in a parent reality to enter an artificially generated lifetime. The apparent person develops a history, forms relationships, experiences an embodied perspective, and may have no access to memories of entry. A large number of participants might share one coherent world, while some apparently human inhabitants could instead be artificial agents. Nothing about a shared environment alone decides whether those agents are conscious. The hypothetical interface also cannot be reduced to a sedative or coma-inducing substance: loss of ordinary awareness is not equivalent to engineered, coherent subjective experience.

3.3 The objection of explanatory displacement

A critic may object that the account merely relocates the hard problem: if the participant is conscious outside *W*, what explains that consciousness? The objection is correct against a total theory

of consciousness but does not refute the narrower engineering claim. A virtual-reality system can use a conscious participant without explaining the existence of consciousness. The model therefore claims *architectural sufficiency under an assumption*, not *metaphysical completeness*. Whether this is useful depends on the question being asked.

4. Nested Realities and the Limits of a Regress

If a simulated civilization acquires sufficient control over its own environment, it might construct a further simulated domain. One can write the hierarchy schematically as $W_0 \to W_1 \to W_2$, where each layer is created or hosted by resources in a preceding layer. This is a nesting relation, not evidence that the hierarchy is infinite. Resource constraints, simulation fidelity, or the absence of interested designers could terminate the sequence.

Nested worlds expose two distinct explanatory questions. **Local production:** what system or agent implemented this particular simulated world? **Ultimate grounding:** why is there any reality, mechanism, subject, or causal order at all? Discovering a local producer would settle neither the origin of that producer nor the ultimate grounding of the entire hierarchy.

The distinction also prevents an overly quick inference. If a world is a deliberately constructed artifact, a maker follows from the stipulation that it was deliberately constructed. But that inference does not establish that the maker is divine, singular, omnipotent, or metaphysically necessary. Nor does an unexplained world automatically prove it must have been intentionally engineered. The classical question of contingent existence is more ambitious than the narrower question of the author of a program.[5]

[5]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 45 and q. 76, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New Advent, `https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1045.htm` and `https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1076.htm`.

5. Two Metaphysical Interpretations of One Architecture

ECIM is compatible with more than one account of the underlying reality. In a **naturalistic interpretation**, the conscious subject could be a biological or otherwise physical entity in a parent universe, and the interface could be engineered technology. In a **theistic interpretation**, the entire order of contingent beings and worlds depends ultimately upon God. Neither interpretation follows from the mere existence of a simulated experiential environment.

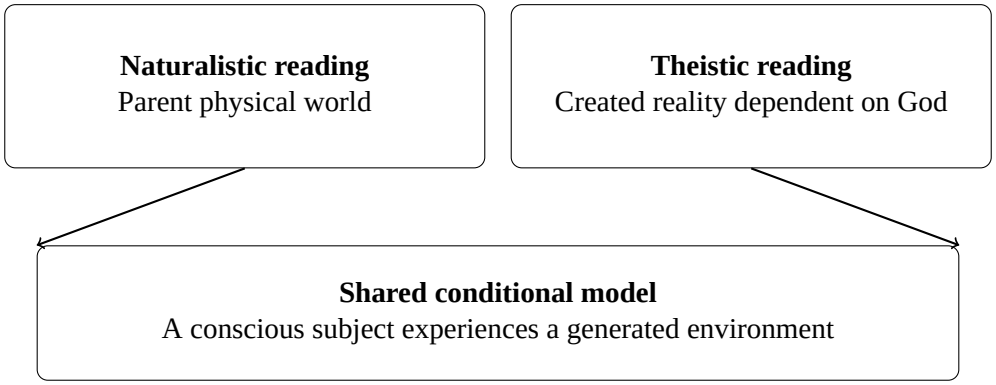


Figure 2: The same proposed experiential architecture permits distinct interpretations of ultimate reality.

Question	Naturalistic interpretation	Christian theistic interpretation
Source of order	Parent physical universe and its engineered environment	Created order ultimately dependent on God
Conscious subject	Preexisting physical or otherwise natural mind	Created human person, understood as body and spiritual soul
Experienced world	Artificial environment that mediates experience	Possible structural analogy, not doctrine
Remaining issue	Why does the parent world exist?	How does the analogy respect embodiment and creation?

Table 1: Contrasting metaphysical interpretations of the conditional model.

6. Christian Creation and the Limits of the Avatar Analogy

Christian belief affirms that God creates and sustains the universe. Genesis 1:1 and John 1:3 present creation as dependent upon divine agency; classical theological accounts do not identify a complete physical algorithm or implementation scheme for creation. Aquinas distinguishes creation itself from alteration of preexisting material and treats God as the first source of the being of created things (*Summa theologiae* I, q.45).[6] In that limited sense, an informational or computational description of observed regularities would not automatically contradict belief in a Creator.

However, the proposal that God "injects souls into avatars" is not a neutral restatement of historic Catholic teaching. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (362–366) presents a human being as a unity of body and spiritual soul; the soul is created immediately by God rather than existing first as an independent player awaiting insertion.[7] Aquinas likewise treats the rational soul as the form of the body, not merely as an operator controlling a detachable vehicle (*Summa theologiae* I, q.76).[8] Christianity also makes the resurrection of the body, not permanent escape from embodiment, central to its account of human destiny.

Accordingly, the strongest Christian-compatible formulation is modest: **the world may possess layers of order or dependence beyond those presently known, while embodied persons remain genuinely real creations of God.** A literal preexistent-player theory would be in tension with Catholic anthropology. An informational description of physical laws, by contrast, is a metaphysical analogy whose compatibility would depend on its detailed claims. The analogy must not reduce bodies, human suffering, responsibility, the Incarnation, or resurrection to disposable game mechanics.

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[6] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 45 and q. 76.

[7] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), secs. 362–66, `https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_one/section_two/chapter_one/article_1/paragraph_6_man.index.html`.

[8] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 45 and q. 76.

7. Personal Identity, Death, and Moral Significance

7.1 The continuity problem

If an external subject has one biography in a parent reality and acquires a second biography through an immersive avatar, what constitutes personal identity across the two? Several candidates compete: continuity of first-person awareness, continuity of autobiographical memory, psychological characteristics, embodiment, and causal dependence. None is automatically established by an interface model. An external participant who remembers a full simulated lifetime might be numerically continuous with the earlier participant while carrying a transformed personality. Alternatively, the apparent avatar identity might be a transient profile rather than a distinct subject.

7.2 What follows from apparent death?

The death of an avatar does not logically entail the death of an independently existing participant *within the stipulated model*. Yet the conclusion cannot be transferred to human biological death without evidence that humans possess such external participation. Moreover, an external participant might also perish, lose memory, or discontinue experience. ECIM therefore does not constitute scientific evidence for survival after death or provide a substitute for Christian doctrines of resurrection and judgment.

7.3 Ethical reality

If participants experience genuine joy, pain, duty, or relationship within a simulated world, describing the environment as artificial would not alone make their experiences morally inconsequential. This accords with Chalmers's claim that virtual worlds can contain genuine objects and meaningful lives.[9] The moral status of purely simulated agents remains separate and depends in part on whether they have subjective experience. Designating an entity an "NPC" does not prove either

[9] Chalmers, *Reality+*.

consciousness or its absence.

8. Objections, Evidence, and Epistemic Limits

8.1 Neuroscientific dependence

Ordinary brain processes are strongly implicated in reported conscious contents, cognition, and levels of awareness. Seth and Bayne survey competing neuroscientific theories that seek to explain these observations through different mechanisms.[10] An external-subject model must therefore explain why injuries, anesthesia, stimulation, and ordinary neural changes systematically affect experience. It could *stipulate* that the interface imposes these dependencies, but a stipulation without independently testable support adds complexity rather than evidence.

8.2 Underdetermination and unfalsifiability

An indefinitely adjustable simulation can be made consistent with every conceivable observation: any apparent anomaly is explained as a rule of the program, and every ordinary observation as faithful rendering. A hypothesis with that flexibility has limited scientific utility. It becomes experimentally useful only if it specifies distinctive predictions that ordinary physical models do not also predict. No verified observation presently establishes that our universe is an externally generated simulation.

8.3 Probability and observer counting

Bostrom's trilemma is a conditional probability argument about simulated observers and posthuman civilizations.[11] ECIM changes its underlying observer assumptions: if all consciousness must be external, simulations would not multiply conscious observers merely by spawning software char-

[10] Anil K. Seth and Tim Bayne, "Theories of Consciousness," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 23 (2022): 439–52, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41583-022-00587-4.

[11] Bostrom, "Computer Simulation," 243–55.

acters. Additional independent participants would have to exist in the parent reality. Consequently, one cannot import Bostrom's high simulated-observer counts into ECIM without a new argument.

8.4 An equivocation about "creator"

The word *creator* can mean an engineer who configures a preexisting substrate or the ultimate source of contingent existence. The former is a causal and technical role; the latter is a metaphysical claim. A simulation architect, however powerful relative to a simulated world, is not thereby the God of classical theism. Conversely, Christianity does not require that divine creation resemble a computer program. The distinction prevents the proposal from becoming either a disguised proof of God or a disguised refutation of God.

9. A Disciplined Research Agenda

The framework suggests questions more precise than "Are we in a simulation?" A productive inquiry would separate the *conceptual coherence* of external-consciousness immersion from its *physical feasibility* and from claims about *actual cosmic history*.

- **Conceptual:** specify whether the external subject supplies only phenomenal awareness or also memory, agency, personality, and moral responsibility.
- **Technical:** investigate the theoretical requirements for coherent two-way sensory and motor interfaces without treating existing neural technology as proof of complete immersion.
- **Empirical:** require a risky, independently confirmable prediction that distinguishes ECIM from ordinary neurophysical explanations; absent such a prediction, retain its status as metaphysical speculation.
- **Theological:** test proposed analogies against creation *ex nihilo,* human embodied unity, the Incarnation, and bodily resurrection rather than inferring doctrinal compatibility from verbal similarity.

10. Conclusion

An external-consciousness simulation is logically conceivable as a system that generates a world for conscious subjects whose existence it presupposes. The proposal can therefore answer a limited architectural question—how a conscious observer might experience an artificial world—without purporting to explain why consciousness exists. Nested simulations then introduce a hierarchy of local makers, but no number of nested levels by itself resolves the question of ultimate existence.

A naturalist could place the observing subject in a parent physical universe; a Christian could affirm that every contingent level remains dependent upon God. This overlap is real but narrow. Catholic teaching on the unity of body and soul sharply limits the idea of preexistent souls piloting disposable avatars. At present the entire proposal remains a philosophical thought experiment, not a demonstrated description of reality. Its chief value is analytical: **it separates the source of conscious subjectivity, the mediation of experience, the production of a world, and the ultimate ground of existence.**

Notes on Scope

The external-consciousness immersion model (ECIM) presented here is an original conceptual framework synthesized from a philosophical discussion. It has not been peer reviewed or empirically established. Its principal claim is conditional: *if* an already-conscious participant is connected to an artificial environment, the environment need not originate that participant's consciousness. It does not establish that our universe is a simulation, that biological death involves disconnection from an avatar, or that the model constitutes Christian doctrine.

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The initiating hypothesis and central conceptual distinctions were supplied by Dylan J Carty, including the proposal that a simulated environment may presuppose an already-conscious participant rather than create consciousness, and the comparison of naturalistic and Christian interpretations. The formulation and synthesis of those ideas are presented as the author's own work, without claiming that all their constituent concepts are unprecedented. Prior scholarship is acknowledged in the notes and bibliography. The author retains responsibility for the final argument and any errors; ChatGPT is not credited as a coauthor.

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12. ChatGPT (GPT-6), OpenAI, responses to multiple prompts concerning the drafting, organization, and revision of *Consciousness Beyond the Interface*, November 16, 2026; generated prose edited and adapted for this manuscript. No publicly archived conversation URL was supplied.