
IN SEARCH OF THE DEMIURGE

EXPLORING THE ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND

SINGULARITY AND COMPUTER SIMULATION

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Abstract

This essay investigates the epistemological foundations of some computational visions of human destiny and unveils their unreligious character. To that end, this study travels across the waters separating Theology and Philosophy of technology paying special attention to the technological singularity and computer simulation hypothesis. An investigation within the transcendent orientation of the former and the absence of such orientation in the latter is offered to illuminate their deep and eventually hidden tendencies. It is argued that the technological simulation is the product of a positivist philosophy while the computer simulation hypothesis reveals a nihilistic impulse.

Keywords: simulation, gnosticism, nihilism, evil, transcendence

The apocalypse is finished, today it is the precession of the neutral, of forms of the neutral and of indifference ... all that remains, is the fascination for desert-like and indifferent forms, for the very operation of the system that annihilates us.

Jean Baudrillard

1. Introduction

After Charles Taylor, John Milbank, and Giorgio Agamben, it is possible to conceive the secular not as a natural state but as theology in disguise [1-3]. Theology is a key to the formation of secular reason, and conceptual artefacts are expression of such secular reason. This is also true when it comes to the most advanced conceptual artefacts of this technological era [4-8]. Once they are the object of deconstructive and genealogical strategies in tracing their formation, they may reveal a worldview that proves irreconcilable with Christianity but not necessarily nonreligious. For some scholars, this is the case of technological singularity and the computer simulation hypothesis. The technological singularity (or ‘Singularity’) is the theory about an evolutionary moment when we (humans) would create the capacity for superhuman intelligence that would transcend the

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human and take us into the posthuman world [9; V. Vinge, *Technological Singularity*, 1993, <http://www.frc.ri.cmu.edu/~hpm/book98/com.ch1/vinge.singularity.html>, accessed on December 16, 2019]. The computer simulation (or ‘Simulation’) is the hypothesis that we (humans) live in a simulation, a mastery of complex algorithms creating a cosmic artificial universe set up by programmers, the creators and administrators of the simulation [10]. There are interesting consequences for Metaphysics, Epistemology and Theology. The Singularity and the Simulation are now widely discussed in the media and online forums of various kinds. They are modern research programs and new categories of philosophical and sociological thought, and they shape the debate on the future of humanity in a technological age. Still, serious scholarly work on these subjects is in short supply.

In recent years, some scholars have argued that religious categories are at work behind the narratives of technological progress and digital transcendence embodied in the Singularity and the Simulation. More specifically, scholars have investigated the possibility that the Singularity is an artefact at the intersection of apocalypticism and Artificial Intelligence. In that view, the simulation hypothesis is the expression of a religious idea of the end and operates as an apocalyptic myth for the information age. At the same time, the Simulation has been addressed as a cosmogonic myth, that is, a myth of creation. It has been argued that the Singularity has roots in ideas and dreams almost identical to those of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions, while the Simulation presumes a fundamental computational cosmos led by benevolent programmers.

At first approximation, these theses seem sound and robust, probably because they belong to a much greater and more powerful thesis: at the beginning of the millennium, discarding the conventional view of the replacement of the religious worldview with the secular, the religious informs the technological. But this religious worldview has not the familiar face of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but rather that of a demiurgic consciousness shaped in Late Antiquity and emerging anew to re-divinize the human through technology. This is the greater thesis from which the computational visions of human destiny, including the Singularity and the Simulation, receive their strength - that the technological is a modern re-telling of the late antiquity (or ‘classic’) tradition of Gnosticism. I, however, do not think this view is quite right. I think instead that even if the technological is theology in disguise, the Singularity and the Simulation are not. While I cannot rule out the possibility that classic Gnostic informs the technological, I believe there is a line of reasoning that deems this incorrect with regards to Singularity and Simulation.

In this article I take seriously these ideas of Singularity as apocalyptic myth and Simulation as creation myth. First, I separate the Jewish-Platonic tradition of apocalypticism from the gnostic one and show they manifest distinct and dissimilar transcendental orientations. Then I investigate the Singularity in connection to its transcendental impulse. I show that the transcendental orientation of the Singularity exemplifies a positivistic tradition of Enlightenment thinking in which Reason is praised as an emancipating factor. Finally, I address

the Simulation, contributing to the conversation by arguing that the Simulation is an intellectual artifact belonging to a specific *modern* strand of Gnosticism, that is, Nihilism. In sum, I conclude that: (1) classic gnostic transcendence is alternative to the Jewish-Platonic transcendence as embodied in nearly two millennia of Christianity; (2) Singularity is a type of Enlightenment scientism; true, it shows transcendental impulses, but these impulses are neither gnostic nor Christian; (3) Simulation is not a form of classic Gnosticism, rather of modern Gnosticism without transcendence, that is, Nihilism; and (4) Simulation requires a theory of evil.

The reasoning in this paper does not offer a knockdown refutation of other interpretations, as alternative interpretations of Singularity and Simulation are left open. But I think it significantly strengthens the idea that classic Gnosticism fails to explain each and every technological idea concerning the computation destiny of humankind. I also believe that this essay proves that systematic analysis of the religious assumption of ideologies and cultural movements behind technological ideas such as Singularity and Simulation is necessary to reach a better understanding of the theology in disguise at work (or not) in these ideologies and movements.

In the article I make my position intelligible through a circumstantial engagement with classic and modern Gnosticism, Jewish-Platonic tradition of Christianity, and Enlightenment. I must make it clear at the outset that this essay is in no sense a study of the whole theory of Singularity and Simulation. Instead, I am concerned here with one specific problem, which is defined after the background section, and with a hypothetical answer to this problem which, if well-founded, will serve to correct the significance of certain statements about the gnostic character of the Singularity and the metaphysical character of the Simulation.

A few explanatory remarks should be added about the method. I do not address directly the theoretical work on the Singularity and Simulation; I rather prefer to reframe both as myths. It is against such myths, assumed as backgrounds, that the non-religious character of the basic assumptions of the Singularity and the Simulation become all the more apparent.

This paper is divided in four sections: I first provide a background and a list of possible approaches; in the second section I offer a brief description of the Jewish-Platonic form of transcendence which is operating in Christianity; in the third I do the same, this time with the gnostic form of transcendence. I show how a gnostic transcendence unsuccessfully fits the phenomenon of the Singularity. Finally, I approach Nihilism and the nihilist character of the Simulation, then conclusive remarks end the study. The problem I seek to address is placed between the first and the second sections. I also provide working definitions of ‘classic Gnosticism’, ‘Enlightenment’, ‘Nihilism’, and other terms used in the manuscript. Translations from the Hebrew Bible are my own.

2. Background

It seems that the most pressing psychological need of the late modern man (i.e. human being, no gender preferences intended) is a form of assurance that some successful outcome exists for all this progress of technology on Earth for which he/she considers him/herself to be responsible and advantaged. Until such guarantee is lacking, that is to say, until the prospect of a total death ahead cannot be eliminated, then there is serious danger that progress falls apart and the entire enterprise of modernity comes to an end. Technology is in the business of providing such a guarantee. For some, the Singularity and the Simulation are components of such a guarantee, and they act on the crucial level of symbolic stories, specifically as apocalyptic and cosmogonic myths. With ‘apocalyptic myth’ I mean a metanarrative having as a focus the end of the world and the final destiny of the human in it. In short, an apocalyptic myth is a symbolic narrative of how the world ends. In the Simulation as an apocalyptic myth, a non-physical space-time and its contents are created by beings in the physical space-time at the end of time. This myth is the opposite of the more celebrated creation (or ‘cosmogonic’) myth: in fact, in the Singularity, a non-physical space-time and its contents were created by beings in the physical space-time at the beginning of time.

2.1. Singularity

In 1993, Vernor Vinge gave a talk at the Vision 21 symposium sponsored by NASA. On that occasion, he introduced the idea of the Singularity: “The acceleration of technological progress has been the central feature of this century. We are on the edge of change comparable to the rise of human life on Earth. The precise cause of this change is the imminent creation by technology of entities with greater-than-human intelligence.” [<http://www.frc.ri.cmu.edu/~hpm/book98/com.ch1/vinge.singularity.html>]

Around the idea of Singularity, a movement of thinkers and scientists working in the areas of genetics, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and robotics has born. In a nutshell, the Singularity is about freeing ourselves of bodily limitation, thus ensuring immortality and transcendence from the fragility of perishable human bodies, through a range of programs such as machine superintelligence and hybrid forms of human intelligence enhancement. A host of scholars, from the 1990s to today, have established the Singularity within longstanding religious traditions. The work of Stef Aupers and of Klaus Vondung marks one example of how scholars have not missed the religious aspects of technology [11-13]. Some scholars make no distinction between apocalypticism and Gnosticism. Authors like Geraci argue that gnostic and apocalyptic worldviews current in contemporary science undergird the Singularity [14-16]. In apocalyptic Gnosticism, the believer is trapped in a dualistic universe and expects a resolution in which he or she will be translated to a transcendent new world and live forever in spirit. This literature has supposedly illuminated the dual tendency

hidden in the Singularity: (1) the hope that humans might one day upload their minds into machines or cyberspace and live forever, and (2) the tone that resembles those of the apocalyptic traditions of Judaism and Christianity. In these authors' views, the singularity is the end-game of the evolution of humanity, from flesh to bits, through technoscience (the new gnosis).

2.2. Simulation

Some think that the Simulation is really a modern approach to thinking about problems of reality and knowledge [17-22]. Philosopher David Chalmers sustains that the simulation hypothesis is just a more modern iteration of a very old question such as, 'What is real?' and, 'How much of what I'm experiencing is actually real, or illusory?' Here, he maintains, the Cartesian Evil Demon comes to mind [23]. Philosophers call this 'the problem of scepticism'. The sceptic claims that perhaps he has been fooled by an evil genius to see reality as real when it is an illusion. Usually the problem posits the existence of a deceptive power that deceives human senses and undermines the justification of knowledge otherwise accepted as justified. While the Cartesian framework is an obvious, useful point of departure in an investigation of the simulation hypothesis in terms of philosophical terms, it is not the only possibility. Chalmers himself, among others like Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom, argues that it is wrong to think of the simulation in Cartesian and epistemological-cum-sceptical terms. These scholars reframe the simulation hypothesis as a metaphysical problem. For them, at stake in the simulation hypothesis is the underlying nature of reality [24]. The so-called 'creation hypothesis' addresses the Simulation in familiar terms: physical space-time and its contents were created by beings outside physical space-time [24].

In this article, I define the simulation as follows: there is the physical world. Underlying this physical world is a giant computation, and creators created a digital world by implementing this computation. These creators (or 'programmers') are relatively ordinary being in the 'next universe up,' who used - but not in *this* time - the latest world-making technology available in that universe to build the simulation. We (humans) are in a computer simulation without a separate cognitive system attached. Instead, the creators just run the simulation, including a simulation of brains, and minds emerge within it. For those minds within the simulation, the digital world is real.

2.3. Approaches

At least three alternative approaches can be adopted to mount a critical conversation on the Singularity and the Simulation. Each somehow mirrors the framework of the more general scholarly studies on the relationship between religion and technology. In the context of that relationship, in fact, scholars have investigated categories such as the technological progress, singularity, simulation, the virtual, and the artificial, including specifically the Singularity and the Simulation.

2.3.1. *First approach - plausibility*

In the first approach, the Singularity and the Simulation are investigated *in principle*, as a theoretical reality. The aim of such an investigation is to evaluate the plausibility of the idea. An example of this approach is the ‘simulation argument’, a statistical argument (see below). In this context, the speculation has moved from the technological to the philosophical to the religious, with some scholars arguing that the technological is the new residence of religion, so that the latter integrates the premises of a religion and supernatural phenomena (including superintelligence, virtual existence, and mind uploading), but without deities. With this background in mind, the Singularity can be equated to a technological simulacrum - i.e. the representation of a technological worldview - that operates as a religious simulacrum [25-30].

2.3.2. *Second approach - assumptions*

In the second approach, the object of investigation becomes the assumptions of the Singularity and the Simulation. The scope of this approach is to study the motivations behind the idea. From this perspective, some scholars have detected ancient transcendental impulses at work in the ideologies behind technological advancements. These technological advancements are at once saturated with secular, scientific, and technological assumptions and governed by assumptions of the reality of the supernatural dimension. This thesis, of course, contests technology’s self-image as a secular discourse. Because of this, the Singularity and the Simulation are late modern reincarnations of more traditional theological-spiritual concerns [31, 32].

2.3.4. *Third approach: Simulation as cultural phenomenon*

Finally, in the third approach the simulation hypothesis is addressed as a cultural phenomenon. Here the aim is to detect the effects of the idea on popular culture. In this approach, the simulation hypothesis is a literary invention, reliant upon some scientific advancements, which wrestles with the deep questions of contemporary life, including the existence and meaning of the human being. Among other things, scholars have noticed that the simulation is a human simulacrum in which some qualities traditionally located within religion are displaced. To put it differently, some transcendent components transmigrate from religion to popular science, to the point that the virtual is a powerful catalyst for the return of transcendentalism to the overt mainstream worldview [4, 33-39].

2.4. *Simulation argument*

Some, like Bostrom, go further to think we may already in fact be artificially simulated consciousness inside such a simulation. Moreover, the simulation hypothesis has recently received a boost due to the so-called

‘simulation argument’, a statistical argument [40-44]. The argument puts the hypothesis in a statistical condition and works as follows: simulation technology is getting better and better, to the point that we no longer run video games but immersive realities of cities and societies [45-49]. One day we will run simulated universes, which are indistinguishable from ordinary reality. With the same idea of technological escalation in mind, we can imagine that one day, one civilization will run several simulated universes with many simulated beings in it. In this context, the simulated universes will outnumber the original universe and the simulated beings will outnumber the un-simulated beings so that for every un-simulated being there will be many simulated beings. The question is: how do we know that we are un-simulated? It is more likely that we are, in fact, simulated. This statistical argument has increased the degree of plausibility of the simulation hypothesis.

This article can be seen as an extension of the scholarship of the second approach. It treats the Singularity and the Simulation not as technological hypotheses or as allegories of the true reality of our world but rather as a worldview, a philosophical standpoint, a theological perspective.

3. Problem

Singularity has been linked to Christianity. Simulation has been seen as creation myth. I do not think either view is quite right. I think that even if the Singularity is an apocalyptic narrative and it expresses a strong orientation to the liberation of humankind *through* transcendence, it is not Gnostic (and *a fortiori* it is not Christian). I believe there is a line of reasoning that shows that. I also think that even if the Simulation is creation myth, it does not work in the way scholars think. In fact, I believe that the Simulation is more precisely the manifestation of a nihilist impulse for the liberation of humankind *from* transcendence. I’ll present the line of reasoning that has convinced me that it is correct.

Before I start my analysis, readers may be aware that:

- (1) Not every transcendent impulse is the same. The Christian transcendent impulse, for example, is about reunification: the unity was broken after the beginning and it is reunified at the end. The classic gnostic impulse, instead, is about elevation: the lower level is abandoned in favor of the higher one.
- (2) Not every transcendent impulse concerning elevation is Gnostic. The Enlightenment project, for example, is transcendental, but it also invokes a process of evolutionary change that is alien to gnostic thought. On the contrary, classic Gnosticism is transcendental for sure, but in the sense of leaving behind evil and ignorance, which are concepts that are alien to Enlightenment.
- (3) Gnosticism is not only and always about transcendent impulse regarding elevation; Nihilism, for example, is Gnosticism without transcendence. It goes without saying that not each and every form of dualism is gnostic, or that Gnosticism is always and only dualistic.

4. Christianity

As said, scholars address the Singularity and the Simulation through the lens of symbolic stories, respectively as cosmogonic and apocalyptic myths. With ‘apocalyptic myth’ I mean a metanarrative having as a focus the end of the world and how the human comes to an end. I build my notion of apocalyptic myth in opposition to the one of ‘cosmogonic myth’, that is, a metanarrative having as a focus the beginning of the world and how the human first came to inhabit it. In this section I briefly consider the elements of the cosmogonic and apocalyptic myths according to the Jewish-Platonic form of transcendence as embodied in nearly two millennia of Christianity.

4.1. Garden of Eden

A cosmogonic myth is a story of creators and creatures and the relationship between the two. It tells us who we are and how we came to live and what is our destiny. The most famous and influential cosmogonic myth in the West is told in the Book of Genesis. Some scholars know that the Book of Genesis offers not one but two stories of creation. One is the famous creation in six days (Genesis 1.1-3). The other is the similarly celebrated story of the Garden of Eden. After making Earth and heavens - that is, the whole universe in its physical and spiritual components - and after filling it with rain and water (Genesis 2.5-6), God “formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostril the breath of life, and the man became an animate living thing” (Genesis 2.7-8). The man (*adam*) is ‘formed’ (*yatzar*); another possible translation is ‘shaped’. Here the word stands for a potter working with clay. The divine making of man is a combination of ‘forming’ (or ‘shaping’) through dust and breathing the breath of live (spirit). In the phrase “formed the man of dust from the ground” (Genesis 2.7), the link between man (*adam*) and ground (*adamah*) describes man’s essential bond to the Earth. In English, the bond should be named ‘groundling’ from the ‘ground’, or ‘earthling’ from the ‘Earth.’ This translation, however, forces the syntax of English language. A good substitute to describe this essential bond between man and Earth is ‘human’ from the ‘humus’. It is clear at this point that to be human is to be, at the same time, grounded in the earthly reality and inhabited by God’s spirit.

Immediately after, the book of Genesis continues as follows: “And the Lord planted a garden in Eden aforetime, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed” (Genesis 2.8). This sentence is difficult to translate. It may mean that Eden came into existence either beyond the bounds of Earth (in terms of space) or in the most ancient of times. The suggested translation covers both lines of interpretation. After a vague description of the location of Eden (Genesis 2.9-14), the text addresses the role and goal of man’s presence in the garden: “And the Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Genesis 2.15). Scholars who know their Bible well are aware that this sentence, and more specifically the Hebrew word *shamar*, has been the source of

important debates in the history of interpretation. The Hebrew word *shamar*, in fact, can be translated in terms of ‘keeping’, ‘guarding’ (like a shepherd watching his sheep), ‘taking care’, ‘preserving’, and ‘protecting’. Depending on the interpretation, man is either an administrator, a protector, or a steward.

In this primeval context, man is supposed to have an immediate understanding of nature; he is innocent, that is, he is spontaneous; no reflexivity is considered. In fact, it is only after man’s disobedience that he knew that he was naked (Genesis 3.7). In the garden, in fact, God commands the man to do not eat of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...for on the day to eat of it you must surely die” (Genesis 2.16-17). Here the sense is of both punishment and factuality: it is a punishment and a fact that you will die. Death comes more as a necessity than a prediction. Now the serpent in the garden raises a doubt: “No, it is not ‘you must surely die’. For God knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3.4-5) I stop here.

In Eden, the human is completely and totally natural. Theologians, however, suggest that this ‘natural status’ cannot be understood in the modern sense of pure nature. In Eden, in fact, not only do animals and man live together, but also the Lord is said to be “walking about in the garden” (Genesis 3.8), a passage that implies proximity. In the garden, therefore, the human, the natural, and the divine are not separated. They all live in unity, although in distinction, that is, without confusion: animals are animals and humans are humans and of course God is God. To put it differently, in the garden, nature is united with the supernatural. In sum, in Eden, the human is innocent, that is, not self-conscious. The disobedience and the consequent acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil transform the man into a conscious being.

I may add another element: the serpent of Genesis 3 is not a snake, but a reptilian, a serpentine, a divine being. Noted Hebrew and ancient Semitic language scholar Michael S. Heiser has put forth the notion that the Hebrew word for ‘serpent’, *nachash*, means shining bronze. So Heiser concludes that the serpent may have been a shining serpentine spiritual being. If that’s the case here, *nachash* could mean ‘shining one’ [50]. The serpent is one of these divine beings, gods, so to speak, created by the one and unique uncreated Almighty God. That said, now the reader can better understand the phrase “your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil”. The serpent is saying to the man: to know good and evil you will become divine. This interpretation is supported by the following sentence: when God discovers that the human knows good and evil, He says: “see, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3.20). On the contrary, when God is commanding man not to eat from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...for on the day to eat of it you must surely die”, He is saying that man will become mortal. It is clear at this point that the human condition in Eden is that - to borrow a definition from Hans Urs von Balthasar - of the ‘suspended middle’ between divinity and mortality. Man is caught between total nature and total divinity. Scholars who know their Bible well know all of this.

4.2. Apocalyptic myth

In this article, I deal with cosmogonic and apocalyptic myths. A cosmogonic myth is a symbolic narrative of how the world begins and works. An apocalyptic myth is a symbolic narrative of how the world ends. Let me go back to the Book of Genesis, the cosmogonic myth. In a traditional reading of Genesis 3, man disobeys God and becomes mortal. The Jewish-Platonic transcendent impulse that has been embodied in nearly two millennia of Christianity is basically the return of man to the original condition he/she lived in Eden. It is the return of the 'suspended middle', the condition between unconscious animals and conscious gods. Here the transcendent orientation is more precisely a propensity to unity, in which the integrity of creation as well as of the human is recomposed. If God is the true final destination of man, meeting God is a reunion, not an elevation. In an effort of reconciliation, the natural and the divine are brought together (not merged but reunified in distinction).

5. Gnosticism and Singularity

Late Romanian scholar Ioan P. Cullianu rightly address Gnosticism with the image of *The Tree of Gnosis* to magnify the extended variant strains of classic gnostic narrative and the specific ramifications of modern Gnosticism, including Nihilism [51]. The origins of Gnosticism have not been traced, but it seems that gnostic strands have been detected in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Greek philosophy. Premodern forms of Gnosticism have been found in the Renaissance. A contemporary expression of Gnosticism is Modern Nihilism and some ramifications of philosophical existentialism [51-54]. Three of the most relevant characteristics of classic Gnosticism are: (1) an intrinsic dualism, (2) the extreme and extremist affirmation of transcendence at the expense of the physical world, and (3) that transcendence can be reached through knowledge. *Gnosis* is the Greek word for knowledge and for the religious and philosophical tradition of Gnosticism, knowledge is the path to freedom.

5.1. Cosmogonic myth

The gnostic view of the origins and of the end of humankind works differently than in Christianity. In Christianity, a traditional reading of Genesis 3 claims that man disobeys God and becomes mortal. Gnosticism, however, signals a reversed exegesis of the Scriptures that runs right up against tradition. In a gnostic reading, in fact, man disobeys God and is liberated. Moreover, the God who punishes the man for disobeying His order in Genesis 3 is the same God who protests that the man has knowledge about good and evil and, therefore, has become 'like one of us'. This is not the Good God of the tradition; He is the God of Evil. Evil rules the world. Accordingly, the world is a piece of evil work. Most people are too weak to face this truth, but some are conscious of this situation.

Here comes the first basic idea of Gnosticism: this is not a good world. Evil exists under a good world. The good is somehow superimposed over evil, and when stripped away, evil is visible in all its depravity. Thus, in the gnostic reading of Genesis 3, humans are caught between the unconscious automatism of the animals and the conscious freedom of the gods. In classic Gnosticism, a human being must be a self-conscious being to acknowledge the lack of freedom. An ignorant being cannot know he/she is unfree. But ignorance is not innocence. Ignorance can be a blessing, a state of mind in which human estrangement from the world is experienced without conflict. The curse of humans is that they know, i.e. they are conscious of their condition; the gift of humans is that they can leverage knowledge to escape their condition. True, when he ate from the tree of knowledge, he fell from grace and became mortal. But the fall was necessary to reach consciousness. In short, the fall need not be final. Here comes the second basic idea of Gnosticism: humans can escape their condition of entrapment.

5.2. Apocalyptic myth

In his essay *The Puppet Theatre* (1810), German writer Heinrich von Kleist addresses the theme of the lost innocence of man and how it can be recovered. In a dialogue between the narrating voice and a main character, Herr C., the following exchange is reported: “Should we have to eat again of the Tree of Knowledge to fall back into the state of innocence? Indeed, he replied, that is the final chapter of the history of the world” [55]. This is the apocalyptic myth: when humankind eats again of the tree of knowledge, it will fall back into the state of innocence; this time, however, it will be a state of *conscious* innocence. When this happens, it will be the final chapter of the history of the world. The keyword in this dialogue is ‘knowledge’. This is the third main idea of Gnosticism: knowledge saves. In Kleist’s dialogue, ‘to eat again of the Tree of Knowledge’ means to acquire that specific knowledge that makes evil vanish. That will be the final chapter of the history of the world. Thus, evil and ignorance are one and the same: when ignorance is won, evil disappears. When knowledge is lost, evil returns. In sum, in Gnosticism a distinct transcendence is pursued, based on knowledge rather than faith (like in Christianity). This is a transcendence of elevation, an escape from a horrible condition of prison and sufferance; it is not transcendence of reconciliation (like in the Jewish-Platonic form of transcendence). This is the reason why Gnosticism is an alternative to Christianity: for Gnostics the Christian form of transcendence is the *false* transcendence that must be unmasked and demolished in order to proclaim the *true* transcendence.

5.3. Singularity

As an apocalyptic myth, the Singularity is a story of the end. In the end, the humans will be totally technologized. They will live in a totally digitalized world. At this point, however, a better understanding of the relationship between classic

Gnosticism and modern Enlightenment is required. In classic Gnosticism, the good world of the Good God has been replaced by a world of death and dissolution of a God of Evil. It is precisely because the world is evil that humans must exit from this world. And because this world is a world of matter, they must exit from the material world. Moreover, classic Gnostics believe that an evil creator God causes human ignorance with regards to human condition in this world. In order to move from the world of evil to the world of good, Gnostics believed they had access to secret wisdom (as said, *gnosis* is Greek for 'knowledge'). Because many Gnostics saw matter as evil and spirit as good, they believed that the spirit needed to leave matter. Some moderns, in common with the ancients, find the world, in a sense, created by, and ruled by, an 'evil god', and, like the ancients, believe that salvation from the evil of the world is possible. Some scholars have held the view that the Singularity is an expression of classic Gnosticism. If they are correct, then the Singularity should show the traditional orientation to move humans from the dominion of the flesh to one of spirit through knowledge. In modern times, the project of liberating the spirit from the material world has reappeared as the belief that humans can cease to be biological organisms. A case in point is Ray Kurzweil, the director of engineering at Google, who wrote a book titled *The Singularity is Near*; the subtitle of Kurzweil's book is, in fact, *When Humans Transcend Biology* [9]. No matter the technologies involved, the idea remains the same: free the human mind from confinement in matter. Singularity looks like Gnosticism: one can say that in classic Gnosticism, humans act the part of a demiurge who finds the way out from a material world in which humans found themselves by chance. In the Singularity, instead, the machines act the part of a demiurge who rescues humans from the material world - a world from which humans cannot escape except in death. Moreover, in classic Gnosticism, human beings are thinking matter; in the Singularity, they are thinking machines.

Still, the Singularity is not Gnosticism. This form of liberation through transcendence is ultimately based in the Enlightenment's belief in *Reason*. Classic Gnosticism can be seen as a champion of transcendence: humans can transcend their condition through knowledge. Enlightenment, however, starts with a powerful substitute for transcendence, which is belief in the emancipating power of Reason. Another difference between Gnosticism and Enlightenment lies in the role of history. In classic Gnosticism any fundamental alteration in the human condition is understood as involving no movement through time. It happens. Classic Gnosticism lacks the notion of increasing emancipation. Enlightenment, however, borrows its idea of progress from Christianity in the sense that in Judaism as well as in Christianity, salvation is played out in history. It is in the context of this idea of progress that human destiny consists in moving from the physical world into a reality of total digitalization [56]. Can we (humans) accept that our life is shaped by a succession of unrelated (to us) events, rather than looking for design in everything that happens to us? And is God's intervention part of history or outside of it? In the Singularity, there is this propensity to think of evolution as a succession of stepwise advances, as if history is a series of

incremental improvements. Happily, evolution reveals the implicit assumption that history must have a design, and this design is the opposite of the erratic and discontinuous. Thus, the Singularity manifests the propensity for an acritical embracement of Enlightenment's belief in Reason. In this view, Reason operates as a powerful substitute for transcendence: the only salvation of humankind is to abandon false transcendence and become centred in Reason. Once the option of human being acting the part of demiurge (classic Gnosticism) is left behind, the replacement option of humans building higher versions of themselves is considered. In brief, in the Singularity, liberation is reached through transformation: humans become machines. This option produces a narrative that only vaguely resembles gnostic orientation.

It could be argued, however, that Singularity is Gnosticism because Enlightenment, or at least a type of Enlightenment scientism more related to technology, is salvation through the exercise of 'positive science'. That is, Enlightenment (or at least positivist philosophy) is Gnosticism. As contemporary philosophy tends to have mixed feelings on the matter, I cannot rule it out conclusively.

5.4. Singularity as apocalypticism

If human history has taught the readers anything, it is how tenuous are the assumptions on which these theorists of the Singularity base their hope of progress. According to Kleist, "to eat again of the Tree of Knowledge" stands for acquiring that specific knowledge that makes evil vanish. That will be the final chapter of the history of the world. It is a good example of apocalyptic myth. As said, apocalyptic myths are about the end of the world and of the humans in it. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is a good example of apocalyptic myth that ends badly [57]. When humans take the place of nature as an attempt to defy natural laws and build an artificial human being, things end badly. To put it differently, to build a higher version of themselves, humans must design such a version free of flaws, that is, a version that possess only *good* features. The idea that a higher version of the human must be exempt from human flaws is an old one. But it leaves unresolved a question: how can the artificial human escape the limitation of its human creators? How can flawed humans build an unflawed version of themselves? In the Book of Genesis, the Creator is seen as flawless; this quality guarantees the perfect man, a perfect man who only be ruined by man himself. Contemporary evangelists for human empowerment, trans-humanism, and techno-future promote the project to dividing matter from the mind through a special kind of knowledge, i.e., technology. Thus, the demiurge will no longer be the humans themselves, but the machine. But this option raises the same question: who are the creators of the machines? Is it possible that faulted and flawed humans can invent perfect machines? And how will the perfect machines that the flawed humans have invented develop perfect humans? And why would machines bother creating higher versions of humankind rather than higher versions of themselves, a point already raised half a century ago

by the father of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener? Here is the quote: “Man makes man in his (sic!) own image ... what is the image of a machine? Can this image, as embodied in one machine, bring a machine of a general sort, not yet committed to a particular specific identity, to reproduce the original machine, either absolutely or under some change that may be constructed as a variation?” [58]

The point is that the liberating power of knowledge has less to do with Gnosticism and more with the perennial human dream of a life without restraint.

6. Nihilism and Simulation

The relationship between Gnosticism and Nihilism is particularly important for the sake of my argument: while Gnosticism is a non-nihilistic form of dualism, Nihilism shares the dualistic attitude of Gnosticism. However, Nihilism is Gnosticism without transcendence. In this section I propose to see the simulation in term of cosmogonic Nihilism. I share with other scholars the notion that the simulation operates as a cosmogonic myth for the information age. I go deeper into this interpretation of the Simulation as cosmogonic myth and I address it in terms of Nihilism.

6.1. Modern Gnosticism and Nihilism

In classic Gnosticism, the basic idea is to leverage a special kind of knowledge to promote the liberation of humankind from a lower status of existence. Classic Gnosticism is, in fact, a transcendental movement, although not only and always a transcendent movement. Gnosticism, or at least a modern strand of Gnosticism, i.e. Nihilism, can be seen as liberation of humankind from transcendence. In Nihilism, the liberation of humankind is not *through* transcendence but *from* transcendence. If modern Nihilism is the state that ensues from the denial of transcendence and classic Gnosticism is the attitude that pursues transcendence, one is entitled to notice that Gnosticism is the obverse of Nihilism. As a matter of fact, classic Gnosticism is metaphysical Gnosticism; modern Nihilism, by contrast, is anti-metaphysical. Nevertheless, a common instance of both Gnosticism and modern Nihilism is the fact that, for purposes that are the inverse of each other, the two actively reject the same transcendence, namely, the Jewish-Platonic one as embodied in nearly two millennia of Christianity. According to Cullianu, “for Western dualism this [the Jewish-Platonic form of transcendence that informs Christianity] is the *false* transcendence that has to be unmasked and demolished in order to proclaim the *true* transcendence; for modern nihilism this transcendence is equally *false*, because it is a mental construct that shielded us from the hard fact of nihilism for well over two millennia; it likewise has to be unmasked and ‘built down’” [51, p. 249-250].

This account speaks loudly of the many traits that the two forms of Gnosticism - the metaphysical one and the anti-metaphysical one - share, the most conspicuous being their constant attack on the Christian Scriptures, the embodiment, for both of them, of a fallacious transcendence.

6.2. Simulation as cosmogonic myth

The Book of Genesis is the establishing of an order in the same way that the apocalypse is the end of disorder and the return to order. Genesis is a cosmogonic myth in which the passage from chaos to order is told; in fact, it is the establishment of a primeval order. However, this order is broken and chaos returns. An apocalyptic myth tells the story of the end, that is, how order is restored. For Christianity, for example, the order is re-established at the end of history. As a cosmogonic piece of work, the Simulation operates as a technological version of Eden. While in the Garden of Eden the human is one with nature, in the primeval condition of total naturality, in the Simulation the human is one with technology, in the primitive and definitive status of total digitalization.

6.3. Simulation and transcendence

The dualism in the Simulation is evident: the humans live in the digital world, while their creators live in sunlight. The only demiurge available, the creators, however, can activate no form of transcendental operation: the human cannot leave the Simulation. There is no evident transcendental movement into a higher world in the Simulation. For those in favour of the simulation hypothesis, in fact, the base reality operates solely according to natural laws, including the ones that govern the ability to build artificial realities. For simulation advocates, all nested realities remain natural in that they are governed by the natural laws of base reality. They don't see why living in a computer-generated, rules-based world is necessarily different in this regard from a physical law-generated, rules-based world. "If I were a character in a computer game, I would also discover eventually that the rules seemed completely rigid and mathematical", objected Max Tegmark, a cosmologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) "That just reflects the computer code in which it was written." [C. Moskowitz, *Sci. Am.*, April 7 (2016), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/are-we-living-in-a-computer-simulation/>] Despite the differences, the common point of these views is that there is no elevation, liberation, or disentanglement from a lower level of reality. The Simulation is not the picture of a metaphysical exercise of transcendence, rather the opposite - the denial of transcendence.

6.4. Simulation as Nihilism

In the Simulation there is not transcendence; there is neither reunification (Christianity) nor elevation (Gnosticism). The Simulation is a modern strand of Gnosticism, Gnosticism without the transcendence. In the Simulation, the only and real demiurge, i.e. matter is banned, and transcendence is consequently denied. The only option available at this point is to accept Nihilism as an active force and to become its instruments. Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* is a philosophical treatise describing reality as we know it as a simulation of reality.

The simulacra to which Baudrillard refers are the signs of culture and media that create the reality we perceive: a world saturated with imagery, infused with communications media, sound, and commercial advertising. These simulacra of the real surpass the real world and thus become hyperreal, a world that is more-real-than-real, presupposing and preceding the real. These simulacra are not merely mediations of reality, nor even deceptive mediations of reality. They are not based in a reality nor do they hide a reality; they simply hide that nothing like reality is relevant to our current understanding of our lives. This Nihilism, according to Baudrillard, is “destruction of meaning through simulation”, that is, “deterrence machine” [59]. In the Simulation, therefore, there is only disorder. Wiener once wrote about the Evil God of Nihilism in terms of chaos, or ‘disorganization’. He rhetorically asked if this Evil God is “Manichaeism or Augustinianism...is it a contrary force opposed to order or is it the very absence of order itself” [60]?

6.5. *Evil creators*

Theorists of the Simulation seem to believe this totally digitally world, i.e. the Simulation, is a world of order driven by benevolent programmers. “We in this universe can create simulated worlds and there’s nothing remotely spooky about that” Chalmers argues. “Our creator isn’t especially spooky, it’s just some teenage hacker in the next universe up.” [<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/are-we-living-in-a-computer-simulation/>] Yet the question needs to be raised whether, after all, the teenage hacker is a good hacker or an evil hacker? A good creator or an evil creator? A Good God or a God of Evil? In the Book of Genesis, the Creator is described as totally good; how is he in the Simulation? Before I answer, at least another point deserves clarification: why should the creator of the Simulation care about the humans? Why is he not simply indifferent (the epigraph at the beginning of this article introduces this option)? Imagine a creation that was not made for the sake of the humans. The world is a creation of a creator who has in mind something quite other than the destiny of humans. When humans are either pleased or hurt, pleasure or suffering are integral to the way the world works. Alternatively, the God of Evil is an agent, not some kind of pain that is built into the scheme of things, and acts accordingly.

Back to the question: A Good God or a God of Evil? How should one answer this question? This depends on just how the creators (programmers) work. Simulation theorists would probably resist this idea that the simulation hypothesis is nothing but evil order, not because they can prove otherwise, rather because of their repudiation of the idea of evil. Yet the question can be raised: why can these creators, i.e. programmers of the simulation, not be evil? Eventually, they can be either Augustinian programmers, that is, their order is absence of disorder, or Manichean programmers, i.e. their order is a disorder. For sure, simulation advocates benefit of a near-universal modern assumption, that is, human advance. Invoking a process of evolutionary change, however, is to embrace a thought that is arbitrary (and alien to gnostic tradition). The belief that evolution - or history -

is advancing towards some desirable end in the Simulation is mixed with the idea that such evolution is under the guidance of a benevolent programmer who make sure that human beings in the Simulation enjoy a higher level of perfection. Simulation scholars don't know whether the creators of the Simulation are Good Gods or Gods of Evil; while they think the creators are Good Gods, they can't rule out the possibility that they are Gods of Evil. The alternative is coherent, if speculative, and it cannot conclusively be ruled out.

Now the readers are in the position to fully appreciate the complexity of the question left unanswered: is God of the Simulation a Good God or a God of Evil? Is evil an agent or a simple internal mechanism of the simulated world? I summarize the vision of the world in the Simulation as follows: (1) the empirical world is not quite real, but only seemingly real; (2) its creator(s) cannot be appealed to for a rectification of the imperfections; and, (3) its creator can be malevolent or benevolent or even ignorant, that is, he is not necessarily knowledgeable about the implication of his acts. Underlying these questions there lurks the problem of evil and specifically the problem of evil creators.

If Simulation is a work of Nihilism, the problem of evil, especially with regard to the creators, i.e., the programmers, is inevitable. The problem is that Simulation lacks a theory of evil. Traditional religions know evil cannot be expelled from the world by human action. Lacking this crucial insight, Simulation scholars dream of creating a higher species. They have not noticed the fatal flaw in their scheme: any human condition inside the Simulation will be created by either good or evil creators. Without a theory of evil, they face an insoluble difficulty, although they may not think so.

6.6. Humans in the nihilist simulation

I investigate a specific feature of the Simulation, namely, the status of the human within the simulation, in order to show how the problem of evil affects our understanding of the reality in the Simulation. What is to be human in the simulation? Another way to put it is this: what is human existence in the simulation? What is human life in the simulation? My argument works as follow: the simulation hypothesis is about a time and place in which the human has been completely and totally technologized, that is, digitalized, to the point that the human - as we (humans) know it - simply no longer is. Yet, the question needs to be raised whether this digitalized human is still capable of self-reflective thought (intentionality, consciousness). Those authors who claim we live in a simulation agree with the claim that real AI (Artificial Intelligence) minds exist even if those aren't tethered to physical brains somewhere. As a consequence of that, those who live in the simulation exist so to speak. However, the opposite option is theoretically possible, that is, no independent structure of intentionality is conserved in a simulated environment. As a thought experiment, one can imagine a predetermined simulation in which individuals only think themselves independent when in fact they simply act out the program. But one can also imagine a simulation that has no predetermined outcome and that is inhabited by

distinct AIs with their own intentions and free will. Why would the simulated human beings be conscious rather than simply behave according to the natural outcome of the programmed laws of the simulation? Are human beings really subjects rather than objects because they might be AIs? What necessarily dictates that AIs have free will in a simulation? Assuming that our world is, in fact, base reality, then it operates according to a set of rules that we could just as easily label 'the program'. In this context, it is certainly plausible that humanity have free will, although some people believe that we do not. It all depends on the primary assumption, that is, that the mind is always aware of its own activities. If we think we have some kind of privileged access to our own motives and intentions, there is no doubt that the human in the simulation, although totally digitalized, is still conscious. Yet, another question arises: why should the creators allow their simulated creatures to be aware of their situation of complete dependence? Conscious humans entrapped in a nihilist simulation may dream of transforming themselves into the plucky band of outsiders and rebels fighting for freedom against the oppressive powers of the programmers and their evil disorder.

7. Conclusions

In first approximation, the Singularity and the Simulation distil in an unpremeditated fashion a primordial scepticism about nature, a sense of profound unease with the human body, and finally, a conception of the cosmos as an all-encompassing miscarriage. In this view, the Singularity and the Simulation echo a powerful speculation, in which the original mistake is not that this material world and this body persist in spite of all the questions raised on its finitude and unpleasantness, but that they should never have existed in the first place. Matter is a mistake from the very beginning. Of course, this has something to do with the common Neoplatonic orientation.

And yet, this is only a partial understanding of the Singularity and the Simulation. What is in the Singularity that goes well beyond its inherent dualism? For example, the fact that in classic Gnosticism the transcendent impulse happens outside the realm of history. Even though it employs the Neoplatonist system, the Singularity is neither a Christian nor a gnostic compulsion. The simulation hypothesis is, in short, an apocalyptic myth based on Enlightenment's premises. As for the Simulation, the nihilist origins of such a position are quite evident. In classic Gnosticism, the deliverance rests upon the triumph of spiritual over and against the matter outside the interregnum of historical time; in the Simulation, however, there is no triumph; the demiurge has reached the highest level of power. The original eschatological pathos directed against the existence of the world is transformed in the Simulation into a new interest in the condition of the existing. How will it be in Heaven?

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