

Simulate Your True Self

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Abstract

That the world we seem to experience around us might be nothing but a simulation – perhaps generated by a demon or super-computer – is a perennial theme in science fiction movies. Muriel Leuenberger explores a recent example.

Spoiler warning: this article contains major spoilers for the movie *Don't Worry Darling*.

Philosophical thought experiments often find their way into cinemas, but hardly any as commonly and successfully as the simulation theory. The idea that reality might be nothing but a simulation has spurred cinematic explorations into the nature of reality and perception, the meaning of life, as well as who you and the ones around you truly are. *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show* and *Inception* are probably among the most famous examples. The most recent movie following this trope is *Don't Worry Darling* by Olivia Wilde.

In this movie, the main character, Alice, discovers that her idyllic 1950s-style housewife life in the company town of Victory, California, is a simulation. About half of the inhabitants of Victory, mostly the men, are aware of this. Among them is Alice's husband Jack, who forced her into the simulation. Most women, however, share Alice's unawareness. In the course of the movie, her memories of her real life return, and Alice manages to escape the simulation.

Movies use philosophy to tell engaging and meaningful stories, but philosophy can also use movies to explore philosophical questions. One question we may ask after watching *Don't Worry*

Darling is whether living in a simulation, with a simulated and potentially altered body and mind, would entail giving up your true self or if you could come closer to it by freeing yourself from the constraints of reality. What does it mean to be true to yourself in a simulated world? Can you be real in a fake world with a fake body and fake memories? And would there be any value in trying to be authentic in a simulation?

One dimension of authenticity entails that you should know yourself, not be self-deluded and face uncomfortable truths. Living in a simulation is inauthentic if it is done to escape reality. Alice's friend Bunny is aware that she is in a simulation. She chose to live in the simulated town because there she could be with her children (a simulation of them, to be precise) who passed away in real life. The Victory project is a form of escapism for her. The self-awareness and self-knowledge required for authenticity extends beyond knowing your character, intentions or actions to knowledge about what occurred in your life. You do not need to know every detail about your life to be authentic but Bunny's choice to delude herself about the death of her children seems like a failure to acknowledge fundamental realities about her life and thereby a



failure to be authentic. (This is not to say that it isn't understandable and, in some cases, maybe even beneficial to one's mental health to delude oneself in highly traumatic circumstances.)

In contrast, Alice is unaware that she is in a simulation until the end of the movie. She is forced into the simulation by her husband Jack. Her memories have been manipulated – she no longer remembers that she used to be a surgeon who was supporting her unemployed husband. Her personality, values and other characteristics also seem to have been altered to make her fit into the role of a 1950s housewife and give up any personal ambitions beyond fulfilling her husband's wishes. In principle, even quite radical changes can be authentic (unless you want to hold on to the idea that everyone has an unchanging, essential true self). The problem with Alice's change is that she did not choose it herself. Her new life and character were imposed upon her without her consent. Authenticity demands independence in the sense that one should be free from certain pernicious external influences. Such extreme forms of brainwashing

and manipulation prevent Alice from making independent choices about who she is and wants to be. Thereby, they certainly limit Alice's capacity to be authentic.

Her husband Jack also changes upon entering the simulation. He upgrades his looks and probably also his skill set, given his exceptional dancing abilities in the simulation. However, in his case, those changes occur by his own choice. They can be understood as a project of self-creation. As a transgender character in the movie *All About My Mother* by Pedro Almodóvar says while showing off her silicone implants, 'you are more and more authentic the more you look like someone you dreamed of being'. This existentialist dimension of authenticity demands that you take your life into your own hands and create yourself freely. It seems that such self-creation could also occur within a simulation that allows you to embody those changes. Thus, Jack can be considered more authentic within the simulation. He seemed to be failing to take his life into his own hands in the real world. In the simulation, he is much

more in charge of his life (and his wife's) and of who he is. Moreover, it seems unlikely that he is self-deceived regarding his real-world looks and abilities since he almost daily returns to the real world to work and check on his and Alice's real-world bodies. The only dimension of authenticity Jack seems to be lacking is authenticity as a truthful expression of one's thoughts and emotions. Because he constantly lies to his wife about their lives and what he did to her and does not openly stand for his own actions, he lacks authenticity as truthfulness.

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A remaining question is whether there is any value in pursuing the ideal of authenticity within a fake, simulated world. Philosophical and empirical research suggests that authenticity is closely linked to meaning in life. More specifically, authenticity may lead to three key facets of meaning in life: coherence, purpose and significance. The dimension of significance seems to be particularly affected by leaving the real world for a simulated one. Significance represents how important, worthwhile and inherently valuable life seems and whether your life matters in the sense that it has a lasting influence on the world. By living in a simulation, you are disconnected from the physical world and can no longer influence it. Children, who are for many people central to constitute meaning in life and a way to make a lasting impact on the world, are nothing

but simulations in the Victory project. The love and energy Bunny invests in her children run empty as there is no consciousness at the receiving end and they will cease to exist as soon as she leaves the programme. Life in the simulation does not bear any fruits, a theme picked up in the movie's rather heavy-handed symbolism of empty eggs and a barren landscape.

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The only opportunity for real impact in this world is on the minds of the others who are plugged into the simulation. It seems possible to form meaningful and personally significant relationships within a simulated world. Thus, a meaningful and authentic simulated life could be feasible. However, at least in *Don't Worry Darling*, the relationships seem to be highly superficial. The conversations among the men don't go beyond work, cars and other possessions, and those between women revolve around shopping, household and gossip. The relationships of the couples are strained by dishonesty, manipulation and power asymmetry. The nature of the simulation seems to make real connections very unlikely, if not impossible. Because life in this Victory simulation is so utterly limited in significance and appears largely meaningless, the purpose of authenticity is also in question. The end at which the ideal of authenticity aims – meaning in life – is out of reach anyway, so why bother?

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