Pataphors All the Way Up: Simulation Theory and the Persistence of Ultimate Questions

Abstract

This article examines the simulation hypothesis—the proposition that our reality is a computer simulation created by an advanced civilization—through the lens of pataphorical analysis. While the simulation hypothesis has gained significant traction in both philosophical discourse and popular culture, I argue that it exemplifies pataphorical thinking: a linguistic and conceptual process wherein a metaphor evolves into an elaborate reality system with its own internal logic, yet becomes increasingly detached from its foundational premises. By analyzing simulation theory as a pataphor, we gain critical insight into how it reframes rather than resolves fundamental questions about existence. This analysis reveals that simulation theory doesn't advance our understanding of reality's fundamental nature but rather shifts explanatory frameworks while maintaining the same core metaphysical mysteries, leading to an infinite regress problem—"turtles all the way up"—that undermines its explanatory power. The pataphorical approach offers a valuable methodological tool for examining how theoretical constructions can develop internal coherence while progressively detaching from empirical groundings. This paper situates pataphorical analysis within contemporary discussions of metaphor theory, possible worlds semantics, and the philosophy of language, demonstrating its utility for evaluating theoretical constructions across disciplines. Beyond simulation theory, the paper examines other examples of pataphorical thinking in scientific theorizing and philosophical discourse, establishing pataphorical analysis as a robust methodological framework with broad applications.

Keywords: pataphor, simulation hypothesis, metaphysics, ontology, Bostrom critique, Musk critique, hyperreality, infinite regress, pataphysics, extended metaphor, possible worlds, Baudrillard, digital ontology, epistemological limits, technological reframing, meta-figurative knowledge, conceptual analysis, explanatory frameworks, cognitive metaphor, recursive realities

1. Introduction

When Elon Musk declared that there's a "one in billions" chance we're living in "base reality," he gave mainstream visibility to a proposition that had been circulating in philosophical and scientific circles: that our entire universe might be an elaborate computer simulation (Solon, 2016). This simulation hypothesis, popularized by philosopher Nick Bostrom (2003) but with roots tracing back to Descartes' evil demon and Plato's cave allegory, proposes that what we

experience as reality is actually a sophisticated computational construct created by an advanced civilization.

The simulation hypothesis has captured public imagination, spawned countless discussions, and even influenced cultural works like "The Matrix" franchise. Prominent advocates include physicists such as Tegmark (2014), who suggests that mathematical structures might be the fundamental reality behind physical reality, and Tyson (2016), who has expressed that the probability of the simulation hypothesis being true is "very high." Computer scientists like Chalmers (2022) have argued that simulated worlds are not mere illusions but genuine realities in their own right. The hypothesis has even influenced methodologies in cosmology and quantum physics, with some researchers suggesting that certain anomalies might be evidence of computational constraints in a simulated universe (Beane et al., 2012).

Despite this widespread interest, examining the simulation theory through the lens of pataphorical analysis—a framework for understanding how metaphors evolve into self-referential reality systems—reveals something remarkable: the simulation hypothesis doesn't actually answer the fundamental questions it purports to address. Rather, it reframes them in contemporary technological terms while maintaining the same essential metaphysical mysteries. If we are in a simulation, this immediately raises the question: what about the reality of the simulators? Are they, too, in a simulation? This leads to an infinite regress problem—"turtles all the way up"—that undermines the explanatory power of the simulation hypothesis. As Brueckner (2008) notes, this regress problem suggests that simulation theory offers no substantive explanatory advantage over competing theories of reality.

This paper will analyze simulation theory as a pataphor, tracing its evolution from metaphorical comparison to elaborate reality system. By understanding the pataphorical nature of simulation theory, we gain critical insight into both the theory itself and the broader patterns of how human thinking constructs explanatory frameworks. The analysis will demonstrate how pataphorical thinking functions across philosophical domains, offering a methodological approach that can illuminate the epistemological structure of various theoretical constructions beyond simulation theory itself.

2. The Pataphor: A Theoretical Framework

2.1 Origins and Definition

Before analyzing simulation theory, we must establish what constitutes pataphorical thinking. The pataphor represents a linguistic and conceptual construction that extends beyond conventional metaphor to create a new ontological layer (Lopez, 1991). While a metaphor establishes a direct relationship between two referents (A is like B), a pataphor moves entirely into the secondary referent (B), establishing it as a new reality system with its own internal logic and reference points.

This analysis builds on the concept of pataphor first introduced by Lopez (1991) and further developed in Lopez (2025). As established in this prior work, the pataphor is defined as: "That which occurs when a lizard's tail grows so long it breaks off and grows a new lizard" (Lopez, 1991, p. 15). More formally, it is "that which extends as far beyond metaphor as metaphor extends beyond physics" (Lopez, 1991, p. 10). The concept draws partial inspiration from Alfred Jarry's concept of pataphysics—"the science of imaginary solutions" (Jarry, 1911/1996)—while extending it specifically into the domain of figurative language construction.

The pataphor concept emerges from a rich tradition of examining the relationship between language and reality. While Lakoff and Johnson (1980) established that metaphors are fundamental to human cognition and not merely rhetorical devices, the pataphor takes this insight further, examining how metaphorical systems can evolve into autonomous conceptual domains. This connects to Wittgenstein's (1953) analysis of language games as creating their own forms of life and Goodman's (1978) exploration of how we construct "world versions" through symbolic systems.

2.2 Pataphors vs. Other Conceptual Tools

To clarify the distinctive nature of pataphors, it's important to distinguish them from other conceptual devices that might appear superficially similar:

Models vs. Pataphors: Scientific models, including what Cartwright (1983) calls "simulacra," are deliberately simplified representations constructed to explain or predict phenomena. Models maintain an explicit distinction between the representation and what is being represented. As Giere (2004) notes, models involve an intentional mapping relationship maintained by theorists. Pataphors, by contrast, occur when this intentional mapping collapses, and the theoretical apparatus begins to be treated as the primary reality rather than a representation of it. Where models say "this behaves as if," pataphors transform to "this is."

Analogies vs. Pataphors: While analogies, like metaphors, establish correspondences between domains, they typically maintain awareness of domain boundaries. As Gentner (1983) describes, analogical reasoning maps structural relationships from one domain to another while preserving the distinction between domains. Pataphors occur when these boundaries dissolve, and reasoning begins to operate entirely within the secondary domain, generating conclusions that have no correlate in the original domain.

Allegories vs. Pataphors: Allegories present sustained symbolic narratives where elements represent concepts outside the narrative. However, as Fletcher (2012) notes, allegories maintain a dual reference system where literal and symbolic meanings coexist. Pataphors, by contrast, abandon the original reference system entirely, becoming self-contained reality systems without sustained reference to their origin points.

Hyperobjects vs. Pataphors: Morton's (2013) concept of hyperobjects refers to entities massively distributed in time and space that resist conventional perception (climate change, nuclear radiation, etc.). While both concepts address reality beyond immediate perception,

hyperobjects exist in physical reality but exceed our perceptual capacities, whereas pataphors construct non-physical reality systems that operate according to their own internal logic.

Thought Experiments vs. Pataphors: Philosophical thought experiments, as described by Gendler (2000), create counterfactual scenarios to test intuitions or explore conceptual implications. They maintain awareness of their hypothetical status and are constructed with specific philosophical purposes. Pataphors, however, can emerge unintentionally when conceptual frameworks drift beyond their original purpose, developing autonomy from their foundations.

The distinctive feature of pataphors is their ontological drift—the way they evolve from representational tools (metaphors) into independent reality systems that operate according to their own internal logic. This makes them particularly valuable for analyzing theories that begin as explanatory analogies but gradually transform into comprehensive worldviews that are treated as literal rather than figurative.

2.3 Structure and Function

Consider this example progression:

Literal statement: "Tom's office is small and restricting." **Metaphor**: "Tom's cubicle was a prison." **Pataphor**: "Tom's cubicle was a prison; he sat facing the bars of his cell, meticulously shaping his nail file into a key that would unlock Warden Johanson's private office."

The pataphor has moved entirely into the prison reality, establishing new reference points (the warden's office) that have no direct counterpart in the original cubicle scenario. It creates an internally coherent reality system that emerges from but ultimately transcends its metaphorical foundation.

Another illustrative example:

Literal: "The highway was busy." **Metaphor**: "The highway was a flowing river." **Pataphor**: "The speeding cars on the I-10 formed a flowing river, where Becky's canoe was steadily gaining in the 1000m race." (Lopez, 2025, p. 2)

This pattern reveals significant parallels with Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) conceptual blending theory, where input spaces combine to create emergent structures. However, pataphors represent a special case where the emergent structure becomes so elaborate that it constitutes an independent reality system rather than merely a hybrid of its inputs. This connects to what Eco (1979) describes as the creation of possible worlds in literary texts, where fictional settings establish their own reference systems and truth conditions.

2.3 Epistemological Implications

Pataphors function as epistemological drifting mechanisms, where thinking progressively detaches from initial empirical or conceptual foundations while developing internal coherence. This framework provides a powerful analytical tool for examining how theories can evolve from grounded premises through metaphorical extension into self-referential systems.

As Stewart-Deane (2023) observes, "A pataphor takes you an additional step further, to the point where an entirely new context exists with no relation to the first." This critical function makes the pataphor not merely a literary curiosity but a valuable methodological tool for epistemological analysis across disciplines.

The pataphor's epistemological significance connects to Black's (1955) interaction theory of metaphor, which holds that metaphors create new meanings rather than merely comparing pre-existing similarities. Pataphors extend this creative function to generate entirely new domains of knowledge with their own internal logics. This aligns with what Rorty (1989) describes as the creation of new vocabularies that make possible new ways of understanding and engaging with the world.

Lewis's (1986) possible worlds semantics offers another relevant framework, as pataphors effectively generate a type of counterfactual space with its own set of truth conditions. However, unlike standard possible worlds, pataphorical constructions maintain a genealogical connection to their origin world while paradoxically developing autonomy from it—a unique ontological status that deserves philosophical attention.

2.4 Relation to Continental Philosophy

The pataphor concept has significant resonances with various strands of continental philosophy. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of deterritorialization—the process by which something is removed from its traditional contexts—provides a framework for understanding how pataphors move meaning beyond conventional domains. If metaphor represents an initial deterritorialization of meaning, pataphor enacts a second-order deterritorialization, creating what they might term a "line of flight" that escapes binary oppositions between literal and figurative language.

Similarly, Baudrillard's (1994) concept of hyperreality—where simulations precede and shape reality—offers analytical purchase on pataphorical thinking. Hillyer (2013) has drawn explicit connections between pataphors and Baudrillard's simulacra, noting that "his definition of the simulacrum as a copy for which there is no original coincides precisely with the definition of pataphysics" (p. 26). This suggests pataphors might function as microcosms of the broader hyperreal condition that Baudrillard identifies in contemporary culture.

3. Simulation Theory as Pataphor

3.1 The Pataphorical Progression

The simulation hypothesis demonstrates a clear pataphorical progression:

Initial metaphor: Reality is like a computer simulation. This metaphorical comparison draws from our understanding of computational systems and virtual reality technologies to suggest similarities between our universe and simulated environments. This initial metaphorical stage is evident in early formulations like Bostrom's (2003) simulation argument, which primarily establishes the probabilistic basis for the comparison.

Pataphorical extension: The key pataphorical move occurs when the metaphorical similarity is mistaken for ontological identity—when the "like" in "reality is like a simulation" transforms into "reality is a simulation." This leads to applying computational terminology to physical reality:

- "Glitches in the matrix" (explaining déjà vu, quantum phenomena)
- "Rendering limitations" (explaining physical constants)
- "Programmer intentions" (explaining fine-tuning of physical laws)
- "NPCs" (explaining differences in consciousness)
- "Patch updates" (explaining historical shifts in natural laws)
- "Optimization algorithms" (explaining why certain physical laws take the form they do)
- "Server limitations" (explaining the finiteness of lightspeed and quantum indeterminacy)

By taking the metaphor as an ontological claim, simulation theory treats computational processes as the literal underlying reality. The theory uses computational terminology not as comparative language but as descriptive language, creating a reference system that derives its meaning from the computational framework. As Chalmers (2022) acknowledges when discussing "constraints" in a simulated universe, these explanatory elements have no direct empirical basis but derive their meaning entirely from the simulation framework itself.

What makes simulation theory distinctly pataphorical is that these explanations create an entirely new reference system that operates according to its own logic. The theory exemplifies what Lopez (2025) describes as "pataphors [that] potentially disrupt conventional reference frameworks by creating references to entities that exist neither in immediate reality nor in the initial metaphorical comparison, but rather in a tertiary reality system" (p. 3).

3.2 Probabilistic Arguments and Pataphorical Extension

Bostrom's (2003) original formulation of the simulation argument presents a trilemma: either (1) civilizations typically go extinct before reaching technological maturity, (2) advanced civilizations lack interest in running simulations, or (3) we are almost certainly living in a simulation. This probabilistic approach might seem to place the simulation hypothesis on more rigorous footing than mere linguistic play.

However, as noted by Dainton (2012), the simulation argument rests on several assumptions that themselves constitute speculative extensions beyond established evidence. The moment we begin discussing the capabilities, motives, and constraints of post-human civilizations, we have already moved into the pataphorical domain. As Huemer (2016) observes, the simulation

argument relies on assumptions about computational capacity, consciousness implementation, and post-human psychology that extend far beyond current scientific understanding.

The pataphorical nature becomes even more evident when proponents like Moravec (1998) develop elaborate taxonomies of simulation types, hierarchies of nested simulations, and theories about the "physics" of the simulating system—all of which exist entirely within the simulation framework, with no empirical touchpoints in our observable reality.

3.3 Quantum Mechanics and the Search for "Glitches"

Some simulation theorists have attempted to ground their arguments in empirical observations, particularly in quantum physics. Beane et al. (2012) suggest that a simulatable universe would require discretization at some scale, potentially manifesting as constraints in the energy spectrum of cosmic rays. Similarly, Campbell et al. (2017) propose that information theory might detect the computational nature of reality.

These approaches represent attempts to bridge the pataphorical domain back to empirical reality. However, as Barrow (2007) notes, the interpretations of these potential "signatures" themselves rely on the simulation framework for their meaning. When Campbell (2019) describes quantum indeterminacy as a "processing shortcut" to save computational resources, he is not making an empirically falsifiable claim but rather extending the pataphorical system's internal logic.

This pattern aligns with what Kuhn (1962) describes as the theory-ladenness of observation, where theoretical frameworks determine what counts as evidence. The difference is that simulation theory's pataphorical nature means its "evidence" exists primarily within its own reference system rather than in independently observable phenomena.

3.4 Consciousness in the Simulation Framework

Perhaps no aspect of simulation theory reveals its pataphorical character more clearly than its approach to consciousness. The theory generates unique conceptual entities like "consciousness subroutines," "subjective experience modules," and distinctions between "player characters" and "non-player characters"—concepts that have no referents outside the simulation framework.

As Chalmers (2022) acknowledges, simulation theory doesn't solve the hard problem of consciousness; it reframes it. Instead of asking how physical processes generate subjective experience, it asks how computational processes generate subjective experience—maintaining the fundamental mystery while shifting its context. This exemplifies the pataphorical tendency to repackage rather than resolve foundational questions.

4. The Recursive Problem: Turtles All the Way Up

4.1 Infinite Regress in Simulation Theory

The pataphorical analysis reveals a critical insight: while simulation theory purports to explain our reality's fundamental nature, it merely shifts the explanatory burden to a different level. If we are in a simulation, we still face the question of what created the simulators' reality. This creates a potential infinite regression—are the simulators themselves simulated? What about their simulators?

In philosophical terms, this is akin to the problem illustrated by the anecdote of "turtles all the way down"—or in this case, "turtles all the way up"—where the world is supported by a turtle, which stands on another turtle, and so on infinitely. The simulation hypothesis doesn't resolve the foundational questions about existence and reality; it merely reframes them in computational terms.

This issue has been acknowledged by simulation theorists themselves. Bostrom (2003) proposes a "base reality" that runs the simulations, but this merely pushes the ontological question back one level. As Brueckner (2008) points out, the regress problem undermines any explanatory advantage the simulation hypothesis might claim over competing theories of reality. Similarly, Jenkins (2006) argues that simulation theory creates an "explanatory vertigo" where each apparent solution generates the same problem at a higher level.

4.2 The Illusion of Explanatory Progress

This recursive problem highlights how pataphorical thinking can create the illusion of explanatory progress while actually just repackaging the original mystery in more elaborate terms. The simulation hypothesis doesn't answer "why does reality exist?" but transforms it into "why did the simulators create this reality?"—maintaining the same essential mystery while adding a layer of technological framing.

As Mizrahi (2017) observes, the simulation argument exhibits a pattern common to many metaphysical theories: it appears to explain a phenomenon by positing entities that themselves require the same type of explanation. This pattern has been identified by philosophers of science like van Fraassen (1980), who notes that explanations often create new explanatory burdens rather than eliminating them entirely.

This pattern aligns with what has been described as pataphorical thinking in scientific contexts: "String theory may be said to be a kind of mathematical pataphor, insofar as it is 'supposition based on supposition'" (Lopez, 1991, p. 28). Like string theory, simulation theory builds speculative frameworks upon theories that are themselves speculative, exemplifying how reasoning can move from metaphorical to pataphorical domains.

4.3 Responses to the Recursion Problem

Defenders of simulation theory have attempted various responses to the recursion problem. Moravec (1998) suggests a hierarchy of simulations that might eventually loop back on itself, creating a closed system. Steinhart (2014) proposes that the regress could terminate in a necessary being similar to the one posited in classical theological arguments.

However, as Weatherson (2003) points out, these responses don't eliminate the fundamental issue but rather incorporate the regress into the theory itself. The simulation hypothesis ends up facing the same metaphysical challenges as traditional theological and cosmological arguments—the need for either an infinite regress, a necessary being, or a brute fact at the foundation of reality.

This resembles what Rescher (2001) identifies as the "metaphilosophical problem of ultimate explanations"—the challenge of explaining fundamental features of reality without generating new explanatory requirements. Pataphorical analysis reveals that simulation theory doesn't solve this problem but rather shifts it into a technological framework while maintaining its essential structure.

4.4 Pataphors and Explanatory Frameworks

The regress problem exemplifies why pataphorical thinking can be both illuminating and potentially misleading. As Dennett (1991) argues about "skyhooks" in explanation, theories that appear to offer solutions by appealing to entities outside the established explanatory framework often merely relocate the problem rather than resolving it.

Similarly, Hofstadter (2007) discusses how our thinking often gets caught in "strange loops" where hierarchies fold back on themselves, creating the appearance of transcending one level while actually remaining within the same fundamental structure. Simulation theory exhibits this pattern, appearing to transcend physical reality while actually reframing the same ontological questions in computational terms.

From a pataphorical perspective, this pattern is unsurprising. Pataphors, by their nature, create internally coherent reality systems that appear to transcend their origins while ultimately remaining conceptually dependent on them. The simulation hypothesis, as a pataphorical construction, creates a reality system that appears to explain fundamental reality while actually generating the same explanatory requirements in a new domain.

5. Technological Reframing of Ancient Questions

5.1 Historical Antecedents of Simulation Theory

What makes simulation theory particularly interesting is how it represents a technological reframing of ancient philosophical questions. The fundamental inquiries it addresses—the nature of reality, the reliability of perception, the existence of a creator—have been central to philosophy since its inception:

- Plato's Cave allegory (c. 380 BCE) questioned whether our perceptions represent true reality
- Descartes' evil demon hypothesis (1641) proposed we might be systematically deceived
- Berkeley's idealism (1710) suggested reality exists only in perception and God's mind
- Kant's transcendental idealism (1781) proposed that we can only know phenomena, not things in themselves

As Huemer (2016) observes, these historical antecedents reveal simulation theory to be less a novel hypothesis than the latest iteration of skeptical and idealist traditions in Western philosophy. Similar ideas also appear in Eastern philosophical traditions, with the Hindu concept of māyā and Buddhist notions of sunyata (emptiness) suggesting that conventional reality is illusory or lacks inherent existence (Garfield, 1995).

5.2 The Appeal of Technological Framing

Simulation theory repackages these enduring philosophical questions in the language and concepts of contemporary technology. This technological reframing accounts for much of the theory's appeal—it makes ancient metaphysical questions seem more tractable by connecting them to computational concepts familiar to modern audiences.

As Chalmers (2022) acknowledges, simulation theory offers no substantial advantages over traditional idealism or skepticism in terms of explanatory power or evidential support. Its distinctive appeal lies in its technological framing, which aligns with what Geraci (2010) identifies as "apocalyptic AI"—the tendency to reframe religious concepts in technological terms that appear more credible to contemporary sensibilities.

Simulation theory exemplifies what Hayles (1999) describes as our culture's movement toward "posthuman" conceptions of reality, where computational metaphors increasingly structure our understanding of consciousness, society, and existence itself. The computational framework provides what Kuhn (1962) would call a new paradigm—not because it offers better answers, but because it reframes the questions in terms that resonate with contemporary technological culture.

5.3 Conceptual Translation Without Resolution

The pataphorical analysis reveals that while the language and conceptual framework have changed, the fundamental questions remain unresolved. Simulation theory doesn't advance our understanding of reality's fundamental nature but rather shifts explanatory frameworks while maintaining the same core metaphysical mysteries.

This pattern aligns with what Rorty (1979) describes as the replacement of one vocabulary with another, rather than progress toward truth. The simulation framework provides what Blumenberg (1985) calls a new "absolute metaphor"—a root conceptual model that structures our understanding of reality without itself being susceptible to further rationalization.

As Dennett (2017) notes in his critique of consciousness theories, new frameworks often give the illusion of progress by renaming mysteries rather than resolving them. Similarly, Floridi (2011) observes that digital ontologies tend to repackage traditional metaphysical problems in computational language without substantively addressing them.

5.4 The Cultural Context of Simulation Theory

The appeal of simulation theory can be better understood within its broader cultural context. As theorists like Baudrillard (1994) and Virilio (1994) have argued, contemporary society is increasingly characterized by the proliferation of simulations and the blurring of boundaries between reality and its representations.

In this cultural environment, simulation theory emerges as what Žižek (2006) might call an "ideological fantasy"—a narrative that both reflects and structures our relationship to reality. The theory resonates with what Fisher (2009) identifies as "capitalist realism," where technological systems increasingly mediate our experience of the world, making computational metaphors seem not just plausible but inevitable.

The simulation hypothesis thus functions as what Taylor (2004) calls a "social imaginary"—a background understanding that enables and constrains how we conceptualize our world. Its technological framing doesn't resolve ancient questions but rather translates them into terms that align with contemporary forms of life and systems of knowledge.

6. Epistemological Implications

6.1 Meta-Figurative Knowledge Systems

Analyzing simulation theory as a pataphor has important epistemological implications. The theory creates what we might call "meta-figurative knowledge"—knowledge that emerges from extending figurative comparisons beyond their initial domains (Lopez, 2025, p. 6). This type of knowledge presents unique challenges for traditional epistemological frameworks that focus on truth as correspondence to reality.

As Putnam (1981) argues in his critique of metaphysical realism, the idea of a single, mind-independent reality against which all claims can be evaluated becomes problematic when we consider how conceptual frameworks structure our access to reality. Simulation theory exemplifies this problem by creating an explanatory system that, while internally coherent, refers to entities and processes that transcend empirical verification.

This connects to Quine's (1951) thesis of the indeterminacy of translation and ontological relativity, where theoretical frameworks can be equally compatible with all possible empirical evidence yet posit radically different ontologies. The simulation framework creates what Goodman (1978) would call a "world version" with its own standards of correctness and

coherence, raising questions about how we evaluate knowledge claims across different conceptual systems.

6.2 Internal Coherence vs. Empirical Grounding

Simulation theory develops a coherent explanatory framework within its own reference system. Concepts like "glitches in the matrix" to explain unusual phenomena become meaningful within the simulation framework, even though they refer to no empirically verifiable entities. This demonstrates how pataphorical thinking can generate internally consistent knowledge structures that nevertheless lack direct empirical grounding.

This pattern aligns with what Kuhn (1962) identifies as the circular relationship between paradigms and the evidence that supports them: paradigms determine what counts as evidence, which in turn validates the paradigm. Simulation theory exemplifies this circularity, as potential "evidence" for the hypothesis (such as quantum indeterminacy or universal constants) is meaningful as evidence only within the simulation framework itself.

As van Fraassen (1980) argues in his constructive empiricism, theories can be useful without being literally true. By extending this insight, we might understand simulation theory as what Vaihinger (1924) called a "useful fiction"—a conceptual framework that, while not corresponding directly to reality, provides cognitive tools for navigating certain questions and problems.

6.3 Beyond Dismissal: The Value of Pataphorical Thinking

This isn't to say that simulation theory is "just" a pataphor in a dismissive sense. Rather, recognizing its pataphorical nature helps us properly situate its epistemological status. The theory might provide valuable conceptual tools and frameworks even while lacking direct empirical verification—much as fictional worlds can contain truths about human experience despite referring to non-existent entities and events.

As Friend (2007) argues in her work on fiction and knowledge, non-actual representations can generate genuine insights and understanding despite their fictional status. Similarly, pataphorical constructions like simulation theory might offer valuable heuristic tools, thought experiments, and conceptual frameworks that illuminate aspects of reality, consciousness, and technology.

Dennett's (1991) concept of "heterophenomenology" offers a useful parallel here—a method for studying consciousness that neither accepts subjective reports as literal truth nor dismisses them as meaningless. Similarly, we might approach simulation theory not as a literal account of reality but as a revealing expression of how computational metaphors structure contemporary thought about existence and consciousness.

6.4 Pataphors and the Limits of Knowledge

As Lopez (2025) notes, "The knowledge generated through pataphorical thinking raises questions about its epistemic status. If pataphors create their own reference systems, what relationship does knowledge within those systems have to knowledge about the external world?" (p. 8). This question is particularly relevant to simulation theory, which creates a comprehensive explanatory framework that operates according to its own internal logic while remaining empirically unverifiable.

This connects to broader questions about the limits of human knowledge that have been central to philosophy since Kant's (1781/1998) identification of the bounds of possible experience. Simulation theory might be understood as what Meillassoux (2008) calls "correlationism"—the view that we can only know reality as it relates to us, never as it exists independently.

However, as Harman (2018) argues in his object-oriented ontology, the inaccessibility of things-in-themselves doesn't mean we should abandon the attempt to think beyond human access to reality. Similarly, the pataphorical nature of simulation theory doesn't invalidate it entirely but rather requires us to recognize its specific epistemological status—not as a straightforward empirical claim about reality but as a complex conceptual construction that reveals as much about our cognitive frameworks as about reality itself.

7. "We Are Not in a Simulation. Or If We Are, We Always Were."

7.1 The Paradox of Simulated Existence

The title of this paper points to a paradoxical insight revealed by pataphorical analysis: the simulation hypothesis, despite its contemporary technological framing, ultimately returns us to the same ontological questions humans have always faced.

If reality is indeed a simulation, then that fact has always been true—our existential condition hasn't changed, just our conceptual framing of it. The mysteries of consciousness, the nature of reality, and the question of why anything exists at all remain equally profound whether we frame them in terms of divine creation, fundamental physics, or computational simulation.

This paradox connects to what Nagel (1986) calls "the view from nowhere"—the attempt to conceptualize reality beyond our specific perspective. Simulation theory offers what appears to be an external vantage point on our reality, yet as Wittgenstein (1921/1961) noted about language and world, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Our conceptualization of the simulation necessarily remains within the bounds of our existing conceptual frameworks.

7.2 Unchanging Ontological Status

This leads to an important insight: the fundamental condition of human existence—our relationship to reality, our questions about origins, our experience of consciousness—remains unchanged regardless of which explanatory framework we adopt. We are not "more" in a simulation now than we were before the theory was proposed—our ontological status hasn't shifted, only our descriptive language.

This connects to Heidegger's (1927/1962) concept of "thrownness" (Geworfenheit)—the fact that we find ourselves already in a world with established structures and meanings. The simulation hypothesis doesn't change this fundamental condition but merely reframes it in technological terms. As Taylor (2007) argues, different metaphysical frameworks don't alter the basic structure of human experience but rather provide different interpretations of it.

Parfit (1984) makes a similar point when discussing personal identity—that certain truths about our existence remain unchanged regardless of how we conceptualize them. The simulation hypothesis might change how we think about reality, but it doesn't change the fact of our experience or our relationship to the fundamental mysteries of existence.

7.3 Reframing vs. Revelation

The phrase "if we are, we always were" highlights this crucial point: if simulation theory is true, it represents a discovery about our existing condition, not a change in that condition. This perspective helps demystify some of the more sensationalistic implications of simulation theory by reminding us that it represents a reframing rather than a fundamental revelation.

This aligns with what Rorty (1989) describes as the replacement of one vocabulary with another, rather than progress toward a more accurate representation of reality. The simulation vocabulary offers new ways of articulating questions about existence, consciousness, and reality, but it doesn't resolve those questions or fundamentally alter our condition.

Similarly, Sellars (1963) distinguishes between the "manifest image" (our everyday understanding of reality) and the "scientific image" (theoretical explanations of underlying structures). The simulation hypothesis offers a new "scientific image" without changing the "manifest image" of our lived experience. As Dennett (1991) notes about consciousness theories, the explanatory framework might change without altering the fundamental phenomenon being explained.

7.4 Nested Ontologies and Interpretative Frameworks

This aligns with the nested ontology suggested by Lopez (2025): "The world as it exists independently contains phenomena beyond our perceptual capabilities... Our species-specific sensory apparatus creates a shared 'metaphorical' layer of reality—an interpretation of the physical world adapted to our biological needs. Finally, our individual consciousness creates unique interpretative frameworks that constitute pataphorical realities" (p. 7). From this

perspective, simulation theory represents yet another interpretative framework—a pataphorical layer—rather than a discovery about the fundamental nature of reality.

This nested structure resembles what Wilber (2000) calls the "spectrum of consciousness" and what Bohm (1980) describes as the "implicate order" underlying manifest reality. Both suggest that what we experience as reality involves multiple layers of interpretation and manifestation, with no single framework capturing the whole.

As Borges (1964) suggests in his story "The Circular Ruins," the revelation that one is a dream in another's mind doesn't change one's essential condition but merely reframes it. Similarly, the simulation hypothesis, even if true, wouldn't change our fundamental existential situation but would simply provide another conceptual framework for interpreting it—a framework that, like all others, remains limited by the boundaries of human thought and language.

8. Additional Pataphorical Theories in Contemporary Thought

Before concluding, it's worth examining other theoretical constructions that exhibit pataphorical patterns similar to simulation theory. These examples strengthen the case that pataphorical analysis offers a broadly applicable methodological framework rather than a critique specific to simulation theory alone.

8.1 Multiverse Theories as Pataphors

Certain interpretations of multiverse theory demonstrate clear pataphorical progression. Beginning with the metaphorical concept that our universe might be one of many, these theories develop elaborate taxonomies of universe types, mechanisms for universe generation, and speculation about inter-universal dynamics.

As Greene (2011) acknowledges, most multiverse models remain empirically unverifiable, yet they generate extensive theoretical frameworks with their own internal logics. Tegmark's (2014) four-level multiverse classification, for instance, extends from empirically grounded concepts (Level I: regions beyond our cosmic horizon) to increasingly speculative domains (Level IV: all mathematically possible structures) that exist primarily within the theoretical framework itself.

Like simulation theory, multiverse theories often address ancient philosophical questions—why our universe has the properties it does, why anything exists at all—by reframing them within contemporary scientific vocabulary. As Ellis (2011) notes, these theories raise significant epistemological questions about the boundaries between physics and metaphysics, highlighting how theoretical physics can evolve from empirically grounded models to increasingly speculative frameworks.

8.2 Memetics and Cultural Evolution

8.2 Memetics and Cultural Evolution

Memetics provides a striking example of pataphorical progression in contemporary thought. Beginning with Dawkins' (1976) metaphorical comparison between genes and cultural ideas ("memes"), this concept has evolved into a theoretical framework with its own terminology and explanatory ambitions. What started as an illuminating analogy between biological and cultural transmission has generated a field that increasingly treats cultural elements as self-replicating entities with their own evolutionary dynamics.

The pataphorical nature becomes evident as memetic discourse develops concepts like "memeplexes" (Blackmore, 1999), "memetic engineering" (Brodie, 1996), and discussions of "meme fitness" that exist neither in biological evolution nor in conventional cultural analysis, but emerge specifically within the memetic framework. As Dennett (1995) and Blackmore (1999) extend the framework, memes are often characterized as having properties analogous to genes—"replicators" with copying fidelity, fecundity, and longevity—concepts that take the initial metaphor so seriously that they create a distinct conceptual domain with its own internal logic.

Like simulation theory, memetics reframes ancient questions about cultural change, human agency, and the nature of ideas in neo-Darwinian terms, often shifting rather than resolving fundamental questions about intentionality and meaning. As critics like Sperber (2000) have noted, memetic discourse tends to reify its central metaphor to the point where the framework becomes increasingly independent from empirical grounding while maintaining internal coherence—a characteristic pattern of pataphorical thinking.

8.3 String Theory and Mathematical Pataphors

String theory represents what Lopez (1991, p. 28) explicitly identified as a "mathematical pataphor"—a theoretical framework built on multiple layers of speculative extension. Beginning with the metaphorical concept of subatomic particles as vibrating strings, string theory develops an elaborate mathematical framework including extra dimensions, branes, and complex symmetry structures.

As Smolin (2006) notes, string theory has progressively detached from empirical grounding while developing remarkable internal coherence and mathematical sophistication. The theory generates entities and properties—Calabi-Yau manifolds, supersymmetry partners, compactified dimensions—that exist primarily within its own reference system.

Like simulation theory, string theory addresses fundamental questions about reality by reframing them within a specific conceptual vocabulary. As Woit (2006) argues, the theory's persistence despite limited empirical confirmation demonstrates how theoretical frameworks can develop momentum that carries them beyond their evidential foundations through internal consistency and mathematical elegance.

9. Conclusion: The Value of Pataphorical Analysis

9.1 Summary of Key Insights

Pataphorical analysis provides a valuable methodological framework for understanding the simulation hypothesis and similar theoretical constructions. By recognizing simulation theory as a pataphor—a metaphorical comparison that has evolved into an elaborate reality system with its own internal logic—we gain critical insight into both its appeal and its limitations.

This analysis has revealed several key features of pataphorical theories:

- They begin with metaphorical comparisons but extend into self-contained reality systems
- They generate novel entities and explanations that exist primarily within their own reference frames
- They often reframe rather than resolve fundamental philosophical questions
- They develop internal coherence that can outpace their empirical grounding
- They frequently shift explanatory burdens rather than eliminating them

The "turtles all the way up" problem of simulation theory exemplifies this last point. By shifting the explanatory burden to a higher level (the simulators' reality), the theory creates an infinite regress that undermines its explanatory power. As Weatherson (2003) and Brueckner (2008) have noted, this regress problem means simulation theory offers no substantial explanatory advantages over competing metaphysical frameworks.

9.2 Beyond Dismissal: The Constructive Value of Pataphors

This analysis doesn't invalidate simulation theory or suggest it lacks value. Pataphors can be powerful cognitive tools for exploring otherwise inaccessible conceptual territories. As Black (1962) argues about metaphors more generally, they can generate new insights and understanding precisely because they create new conceptual connections rather than merely describing pre-existing similarities.

Pataphorical constructions like simulation theory might serve valuable functions beyond literal truth-claims. They can function as what Elgin (2017) calls "felicitous falsehoods"—representations that, while not literally true, advance understanding through exemplification, perspective-shifting, and conceptual exploration. Similarly, they might provide what Dennett (1991) calls "intuition pumps"—thought experiments that help us explore complex philosophical problems from new angles.

9.3 Epistemological Humility and Conceptual Analysis

Recognizing the pataphorical nature of simulation theory helps us properly situate its epistemological status and understand its relationship to more empirically grounded forms of knowledge. This recognition promotes epistemological humility—an awareness of the limits of our conceptual frameworks and the ways they structure rather than merely represent reality.

This connects to what Nagel (1986) calls "the view from nowhere"—the recognition that our understanding of reality is always situated within specific conceptual frameworks that both enable and constrain what we can know. Pataphorical analysis reveals how these frameworks can develop internal momentum that carries them beyond their evidential foundations, creating the illusion of explanatory progress through conceptual elaboration.

9.4 Persistent Mysteries and Changing Frameworks

The simulation hypothesis demonstrates how contemporary thinking often reframes ancient philosophical questions in technological terms. While this reframing might make these questions seem more tractable to modern minds, the fundamental mysteries remain. We are not in a simulation—or if we are, we always were. The mystery at the heart of existence persists, regardless of which conceptual framework we use to approach it.

As Wittgenstein (1953/2009) suggests, philosophical problems often arise from the "bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language." Pataphorical analysis helps us recognize when our theoretical constructions are generating rather than resolving conceptual puzzles, allowing us to maintain both intellectual curiosity and epistemological humility in the face of reality's enduring mysteries.

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