The Virtual Life: well-being, simulation, and reality

(1) Aldous was a young working-class American in the year 2085. His day-to-day experiences were drab and depressing, spent datamining E-Coin in a huge office building. He had a few casual friends, but no-one he really cared about, and no living family he was close to. His life was dedicated to saving up enough money to retire and take *Soma*. This revolutionary drug created an experience of intense physical and emotional satisfaction, unrivalled by any real life equivalent. It was also cheap to manufacture and had no serious health consequences. Users of the drug describe it as instilling 'pure euphoria', 'a sense of wonder and deep satisfaction', a 'loss of self', and 'a feeling of oneness with the universe'. People who took the drug typically lay semi-comatose for extended periods, waking up only briefly to eat and sleep, though never usually spent enough time off the drug to stop feeling its effects. By the time he was 30, Aldous had saved up enough for money to pay for a micro-apartment, a lifetime supply of food, water, and basic utilities, and a life-time subscription to the drug Soma. He spent the next 50 years continuously high off the drug feeling bliss and wonderment, until he died aged 80 of a sudden heart attack.

(2) Belinda was an isolated young woman in the year 2050. She struggled in social situations and had no luck in romance, and most of her life was spent working a mediocre entry-level computer science job where she performed adequately but did not excel. She dreamed of falling in love with a handsome mysterious stranger, travelling the world, and becoming a famous ballerina, but all of these aspirations were completely unrealistic. Finally, aged 28, after receiving a cash lump sum (approximately $100,000 at 2016 prices) following the death of a relative, Belinda saw a way out of this drudgery in the form of a new completely immersive virtual reality game called *Another Life*. This game used direct brain stimulation to create a completely believable set of virtual experiences, allowing users to live out all their fantasies within a pre-programmed environment featuring pseudo-intelligent NPCs. Her $100,000 bought her a lifetime subscription to this service. She was plugged into a VR tank, with all her food and bodily needs taken care of, while her memories of her past life were wiped away. She lived out her new life in the game, in which she was a star ballerina caught in a love triangle between the handsome brooding artist 'Marco' and the charismatic billionaire 'Aaron'. In the game, she had experiences of travelling the world, enjoying intense romances, becoming a parent, and achieving incredible professional success. She died suddenly and unexpectedly aged 75 after a catastrophic gas explosion in the building where her body was housed.

(3) Clive was a teenager growing up in the 2030s who had always wanted to be an orc. Obsessed with the works of Tolkein, he had always dreamed of leading a clan of savage but noble orcs in a war of conquest. As a child, he played games like *World of Warcraft*, and made many friends online. He was also an extremely gifted programmer, selling his first app at the age of 16 for $250,000, and was expected to go on to study computer

science at a top university. Instead, aged 18, he decided to plug in to the new more immersive version of *World of Warcraft* called *Life of Warcraft*. It was similar to Belinda's game and used direct neural input to create a wholly believable world. It differed, however, insofar as it featured other real people roleplaying orcs, elves, and gnomes. Although to begin with, Clive would only spend a few hours a day plugged into the game, it quickly took over his life, and by age 25, he was spending upwards of 100 hours a week playing the game. He never went to university, and became estranged from family and real life friends. However, he didn't care – he was a highly respected warlord in the game, with many friends. Ultimately, he decided to buy a lifetime subscription to the game and entirely commit to it, arranging for feeding tubes and diagnostic machines to look after his body while he played. He spent most of the next forty years living out adventures in the world with other players, leaving the game at most once or twice a year to briefly check his health and finances. His life in the game wasn't always plain sailing – for example, he was deeply distressed after his guild broke up due to player infighting – but on the whole he felt personally satisfied that he was finally living out his orcish dreams. When he died aged 70 of a brain hemorrhage, his virtual funeral was attended by almost one thousand other players.

(4) <u>Daphne</u> was a young woman growing up in the late 90s who had a long commute to work. It was sometimes annoying sitting in traffic, but she was comfortable in her climate controlled luxury SUV and enjoyed listening to music as she drove. She would even sometimes treat herself to a caramel latte at the drive-thru. As she drove to work, she would look forward to her day at work with a normal mixture of human emotions – excitement at the prospect of getting a raise, worries about deadlines, and so on – and when she drove home in the evening she looked forward to relaxing with her family with a glass of wine. In fact, however, Daphne was a highly sophisticated computer program being run on a mainframe in the year 2150 as part of a research project into transport and urban life in the late 20th century. Her entire conscious life consisted of driving to and from work – her memories of other experiences were artificially generated and implanted into her program. After her program was first initiated, the research team did not interfere with Daphne's behavior – her interactions were all autonomous and voluntary. The other drivers in the simulation were also real conscious programs, but their social interactions with each other were limited to typical highway behavior and did not include conversation. When asked about the ethics of running this simulation, the research team noted that they consistently ensured that Daphne's commuting experiences on average contained consistently more good experiences than bad ones. After running continuously for 45 years, Daphne's program was finally mothballed after the research program lost its grant.

(5) <u>Elaine</u> lived a perfect life, she thought. Growing up with loving parents in the early 21st century, she excelled at school, especially at science. She was popular and much loved, and had many close friends and romantic partners. At university, she was incredibly

successful, and went on to become a research biologist who discovered the long-sought after cure for cancer, a discovery which won her a Nobel prize. Rather than rest on her laurels, however, she decided to go into politics, and was later elected President of the United States. Hugely respected as a world leader, she helped negotiate the end to numerous conflicts and put a stop to climate change. When she finally died aged 120, she was mourned by people all across the world as the greatest human who had ever lived. Or so it seemed. In fact, all of her experiences were virtual, and the people she thought she was interacting with were simple non-conscious NPCs. Instead, Elaine was one of some 500 trillion broadly identical conscious simulations running on a galactic mainframe in the year 3000AD. The 'real Elaine' was a historical figure called Elizabeth McDowell whom future generations widely admired as having lived one of the greatest and happiest lives of all time. Records of her life were used (along with some creative tweaking by programmers) to create a set of trillions of computer simulations which were housed in a set of mainframes in the outer solar system. Though there were minor differences between these simulations due to the probabilistic nature of the underlying computational processes, all were very similar, and any major deviations in the program were corrected by automated software processes. All 500 trillion simulations lived more or less identical lives full of profound happiness and achievement, and 'the Elaine project' (as it was called) was credited with having done more good for the universe than any prior scientific project.

Some questions for discussion

(1) Which of these lives sounds best? Which sounds worst? Why these differences?

(2) What would the major theories of well-being say about these lives? (Reminder: hedonism; subjective & objective desire satisfaction theory; objective list theory)

(3) Would future civilizations be doing a morally positive, morally negative, or morally neutral thing by creating simulations like Daphne?

(4) Was the future society described in (e) right to think that they had achieved an incredible moral good with The Elaine Project?

(5) Would you be tempted to pick any of these lives over your own?