

“Hearing the Father’s Witness: Knowledge, Testimony, and Glory”

John 5:30-47

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Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

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Last Lords Day, we read and considered in John 5:17-29 Jesus’s claim about his relationship to God the Father, and how it was through *him* that God the Father revealed himself and reached out to us.

But a question we did not address, as Jesus made the claims he did about his identity, was what our basis was for believing that Jesus was who he said he was.

In other words, we considered the testimony that Jesus bears to us about the Father ... but we did not ask who would bear witness that Jesus himself was trustworthy.

In the passage that follows, our passage for this morning, Jesus addresses that question.

So, with that in mind, we turn to John 5:30-47. Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{5:30} [Jesus said to them:] “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³¹ If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. ³² There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. ³³ You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. ³⁴ Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵ He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. ³⁶ But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. ³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, ³⁸ and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. ³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. ⁴¹ I do not receive glory from people. ⁴² But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. ⁴³ I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. ⁴⁴ How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? ⁴⁵ Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶ For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. ⁴⁷ But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”

This is the word of the Lord.

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, as the author of Psalm 119 does,
we too ask you to work now through this, your word to your servants,
the very word in which you have helped us to place our hope.

For our comfort in the afflictions we face in this world
is that your promises in your word give us life.
Though the world may deride us,
we do not turn from this your revelation to us.
Teach us from it now, we ask, in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:49-51]

When I was about 19 years-old and in college in New York City, I was walking down the street one day with a friend when we encountered a group of cult members preaching on the street. They were a somewhat militaristic cult – I later learned that some organizations have labeled them as a hate group. And they claimed to derive their beliefs from the Bible.

One thing they believed, and openly preached that day in New York City was that for certain people-groups salvation was impossible – that even if they repented and believed, God would not save them.

I was disturbed to hear their message, and more disturbed to hear them citing Scripture to support it. And then I was further upset to hear that according to them, I fell into one of the groups for which they claimed salvation was not possible!

So ... hearing this message from the leadership of a cult known for hate, I did what seemed to my teenage mind to be the logical thing to do ... I began to engage in a heated theological debate with them on a street corner in Manhattan where a small crowd had gathered.

For I was 19. And I was wise (or so I thought). And social media wasn't really a thing yet, so a street corner was one of the only places you could carry on such senseless debates with total strangers.

And being 19 I had a bit less self-control and care with my words than I have now.

So, I began to interact with the cult leaders. As I listened and as I and others in the crowd responded to them, I thought of a passage of Scripture that I believed would really knock a hole in their argument. But though I remembered the story, I could not remember the reference. Smart phones weren't a thing back then either, but I had a pocket Bible and started to turn through it, looking for the story I wanted to cite. And the cult leader who was speaking saw me, and he smiled, and he shouted to me to ask what passage I was looking for. I began to describe it, and before I was even done, the speaker for this group shouted out the citation – chapter and verse – and then another member standing to his right pulled out a Bible, turned to the passage and began to read it out loud. After the text had been read, the first speaker then interpreted the passage in a way that (to me) was clearly wrong, and which *reinforced* his point rather than contradicting it. I replied with my thoughts. They replied with theirs. I was fairly worked up by this point. And as the exchange heated up, the leader declared at one point that God was their Father, and I responded, pulling a line from Jesus as he dealt with the Pharisees, that based on the hateful things they were preaching, God was not their Father, but the Devil was. At which point the main speaker began to describe the physical violence he was going to do to me if I did not leave, and I took the cue and walked away.

I was involved with RUF then – the college ministry of the PCA. And a few days later I was meeting with my RUF campus minister, Vito Aiuto, and with his boss, John Stone, who was an area coordinator for RUF back then, but is now serving as a PCA pastor in Tuscon, Arizona.

And as I met with them, I recounted what had happened. They both gave me a pretty hard time for engaging with the cult leaders in the first place. I acknowledged and owned up to my foolishness.

We talked about my words and what I had said. They had some advice and loving but firm rebukes for me.

And as we wrapped up the discussion, one of the things I said towards the end was that what I especially found discouraging was that the speaker for this hateful cult knew the Bible better than I did. I didn't know the reference for the passage I wanted, and he knew it immediately off the top of his head, chapter and verse.

John Stone thought for a minute and then said – “No. You're wrong. He doesn't know the Bible better than you do.”

I don't remember if we spent any more time on that statement or if we just moved on to another topic at that point ... but John Stone's statement is one that stuck with me for years after that discussion. It's an important statement about what it means to really *know* something.

Pastor Stone's point is that you can possess a lot of data ... but if you miss the point of it entirely, you don't really *know* it. If, like that cult leader, you have memorized and studied the Scriptures, but have come away with a message that actually denies the gospel taught in the Scriptures, then you don't really *know* the Scriptures ... a bumbling 19-year-old who can't remember where the story he wants to read is, but who understands the truth of the gospel – he actually knows the Scriptures much better.

Pastor Stone's statement was about what it means to *know* something. And it's a statement that, in many ways, gets at the heart of our text this morning.

Jesus makes some astounding claims about his identity in John chapter five. He says that he is the Son of God. And then he anticipates the next question his hearers will have – he anticipates the question we will hear later in John's gospel: On what basis should they believe these claims about his identity?

Jesus tells them that there is One who serves as a witness to his identity. Jesus tells them that just as he bears witness to the identity and nature of God the Father, so God the Father bears witness to Jesus's identity as God the Son.

More than that, Jesus tells them that they already possess three pieces of testimony – three communications in which the Father has testified to the identity of Jesus as God the Son. They “know” those three pieces of testimony ... but they don't really *know* them.

They are aware of them. They have the data. They have studied some of them quite closely. But they have missed the point. They have utterly failed to see that these things are testimonies of the Father about the Son. And so though they “know” them ... they don't really *know* them.

And what are those testimonies they possess?

The first is the witness of John the Baptist. Jesus mentions that in verses thirty-three through thirty-five. And it's easy for us to miss the impact John had in his day. The Gospels highlight John's connection to Jesus and the way he pointed others to Jesus – which is right and true. But many who did not follow Jesus still heard and were stirred up in excitement by John the Baptist. We

know this from other historical sources of the time, like the writings of Josephus. [Brown, 224] Jesus's point is that John pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God, and he described Jesus in ways that fit with this identity as the Son of God. That said, Jesus is clear that it's not really *John's* testimony that is important, but that the Father has borne witness to Jesus's identity *through* John. John's ministry is the first piece of testimony from the Father.

The second are the miraculous signs and works that Jesus had done. It is of course true that God had performed mighty works and signs through others in the past. But many in Jesus's day admitted there was something different about the works Jesus performed. His works indicated that something greater had come – greater not just in power, but also in significance. And so Jesus points out that the works he does are the works the Father has given him to do – and it is not that the works themselves prove Jesus's identity, but that God the Father has borne witness to Jesus's identity *through* those works and signs. Jesus's miraculous works are the second piece of testimony from the Father.

The third testimony is the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, the Old Testament. Jesus tells them that the Scriptures bear witness about him – that the Scriptures are testimony from the Father to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. Which leads to the question of *how* they testify to Jesus.

We could say a lot on this, but for this morning we'll mention just a few ways. First, the Hebrew Scriptures specifically promised a Messiah like Jesus. Moses and the prophets spoke of a greater prophet, an Anointed one who was to come, and Jesus filled those predictions like no one else – those predictions were the testimony of the Father as to who Jesus was.

Second, the Hebrew Scriptures told a story of the world that was waiting for someone to enter the scene as Jesus does. The story of the Old Testament is one in need of a Savior – a story in need of One who would rescue God's people from sin and death, One who would crush the head of the serpent. The Hebrew Scriptures present a story that is left hanging at the time Jesus begins his earthly ministry. It is a story waiting for the next climactic chapter. And it is a story into which only Jesus truly fits.

Third, the Hebrew Scriptures already feature Jesus as their main character. In the New Testament, Jude verse 5 casually mentions how *Jesus* saved a people from Egypt. In other words, Jude is telling us that when God, when Yahweh, brought Israel out of Egypt in the book of Exodus, well over a thousand years before the incarnate birth of Christ ... it was Jesus, it was God the Son, in pre-incarnate form who did it. Jesus, as God the Son was already active throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. His words and deeds were recorded there. And so, when he showed up incarnate in the first century, those who had read of his words and deeds in the Hebrew Scripture should have recognized him.

Finally, the Hebrew Scriptures foreshadowed the life and work of Jesus again and again. Again and again patterns emerge in the Hebrew Scriptures which foreshadowed what Christ would say and do. In each occurrence, the Father was testifying to the Son, who was to come in human flesh.

In these ways and more, the Father bore witness to the identity of Jesus Christ as his Son, through the Hebrew Scriptures.

Now, when Jesus identifies these pieces of testimony from the Father, witnessing to his identity, he is not saying that each piece of testimony gives the full picture of who he is.

He's not saying that John the Baptist's teaching contained the fact that he, that Jesus, is both fully God and fully man.

He's also not saying that the miraculous signs he has performed, all by themselves, make it clear that he is the Eternal Son of God.

And he's also not saying that before his incarnation, a faithful believing Jew could have sat down with the Old Testament – with the Hebrew Scriptures – and come up with the Nicene Creed – the full Orthodox Christian understanding of the Trinity and the identity of Jesus within it.

Jesus's point is not that all that information is contained in each piece of testimony, but that each piece points at the truth so that when Jesus reveals his identity, it all fits together. Each piece of testimony corroborates Jesus's self-revelation.

So the Jews may have been puzzled when John the Baptist said that Jesus, a man younger than he was, existed before he did [John 1:30]. They might have wondered how Jesus could “take away the sins of the world” as John said. But then, when Jesus revealed his identity as the eternal Son of God, the proper response was “Of course!” “That fits!” “That makes sense of the testimony we received through John!”

And in a similar way, the first-century Jews may have struggled to know what to make of the mighty deeds and signs that Jesus did – signs that pointed to something greater than the prophets who had come before. God the Father's testimony through those works pointed to the fact that something greater was here among them. And so, when Jesus revealed his identity not just as another prophet, but as God the Son, the proper response, again, was: “Of course!” “That fits!” “That makes sense of the testimony we received through the signs he performed!”

And when the first-century Jews read the Scriptures, when they read of the one that Moses and the prophets predicted would come to them in the future, when they read the story of Scripture and saw the kind of rescue they needed from sin and death, when they observed the character of Yahweh their God in their Bible, when they read the pattern of redemption again and again ... they were being given an outline of what to expect. God the Father's testimony through the Hebrew Scriptures told them about the need for a Savior, it told them the character of that Savior, it showed them the pattern he would live by, it left them hanging, waiting for the next chapter of the story to be written. And then, when Jesus arrives, and reveals his identity in both word and deed, as the long-awaited King and Savior, as the Son of God, then the proper response, once more, was “Of course!” “That fits!” “That makes sense of the testimony we received in the Scriptures about everything we were to expect!”

Those who responded by recognizing Jesus, those who responded with an “Of course!” (or some lesser form of recognition), each of them *knew* the testimony of John the Baptist, they *knew* the works Jesus had performed, they *knew* the Hebrew Scriptures. And those who failed to recognize the Father's witness about the identity of Jesus in each of those things, they didn't really *know* them ... no matter how well they “knew” the words and the data they contained.

And as we consider the three forms of testimony Jesus mentioned for the first-century Jews, we should begin to ask what forms of testimony the Father has given to us ... and how have we responded to them? How is God the Father bearing witness to us about the identity of Jesus Christ his Son, and how do we respond to those pieces of testimony? Do we truly *know* them and see them for what they are? Or do we only “know” the information without grasping what it really is?

The Scriptures mention many ways God testifies to us. Let me briefly mention three.

God the Father testifies to us of his identity, and the identity of Jesus Christ his Son, through the Scriptures, through creation, and through our own nature.

Let's spend just a few minutes on each of those.

First, God the Father bears witness to the identity of Jesus Christ his Son through the Scriptures.

And we have addressed how this was so for the first-century Jews, so we can be brief on this point.

The Scriptures, from beginning to end, bear witness about Jesus Christ. That is what we read in verse thirty-nine. Yet, as Jesus explains in verse thirty-nine and forty, it is possible to search the Scriptures, to study them diligently, to believe that the Scriptures offer us eternal life, and yet still to miss that point – to miss that they point us to Jesus. And that has serious implications.

It means that if we as individuals read through the Bible every year, if we memorize the Scriptures, if we read books on Christian living and Biblical interpretation, but the ultimate thing we see in the Scriptures, the ultimate thing we find there is *not* Jesus Christ, then we don't really *know* the Scriptures at all ... and we could fail to obtain the eternal life they offer.

It means that if we as a church are careful and diligent in our study of the Bible's ethical commandments for us, of its systematic theology, of its liturgical requirements, of its historical and philosophical claims – if we are careful and diligent in all those things, but we do not see how each of them, how each passage we read, both reveals Christ to us and drives us to Christ, then we are not really a church that *knows* and is shaped by the Scriptures ... and we could fail to obtain the eternal life they offer.

It means that if we teach our children, or others whom we are discipling, to memorize the Bible and the catechism, if we teach them what the Bible tells them to do and how they should do it, if they learn how they are to act in the church, the household of God ... but we then fail to teach them in such a way that they see clearly who Jesus is and run into his arms, then our children and those we disciple don't really *know* the Scriptures at all ... and they could fail to obtain the eternal life the Scriptures offer.

God bears witness to us about who he is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, through the Scriptures. If we fail to see that and respond by coming to him, then we do not *know* the Scriptures.

Second, God bears witness to us of who he is through creation.

The Apostle Paul writes that those who live in this world and do not believe in the God of the Bible “suppress the truth.” He goes on to explain – he writes: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.”

David puts the same idea a bit more poetically in Psalm 19. David writes: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

The creation is testimony, speaking not only to the fact that God exists but to some of his attributes. The creation speaks to the fact that there is a God and that he is a personal God who made the world in a personal way.

And though humans in their sinful hearts have a tendency to suppress that truth ... it takes a lot of work to suppress it fully.

Which is one reason why, I think, as popular as Richard Dawkins and many of the other New Atheists may be ... for many non-believers even, they fail to convince. The picture that Dawkins paints of a purely materialistic world, a world with no personal Creator – with no Creator at all – it takes a lot of effort to suppress the testimony of the creation long enough to believe that consistently. The creation testifies that it has a personal Maker ... and while many fail to truly appreciate that testimony and how it points to the God of the Bible, the God who is Jesus Christ, even so, *fully* suppressing that testimony is hard to do.

And so as individuals and philosophers have recognized the ways that the creation points to a Creator, they have come up with a number of ways to try to explain just how we have found ourselves to be living in a universe whose physical laws seem fine-tuned for life.

One such theory that has grown in attention is called “Simulation Theory” (or “The Simulation Argument”). I was actually pressed to engage more with this theory by a young man from our congregation, back when I was teaching his Bible class at Springfield.

The foundational paper on Simulation Theory was written by the Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom. Bostrom is a philosopher at the University of Oxford, and the director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford.

Taking a number of factors into account, which includes the fact that our world does appear to be designed and fine-tuned for life, Nick Bostrom gives an argument regarding the probability that we are, every one of us – we are each actually a computer-simulated consciousness, living in a computer-simulated universe, created by an advanced race as part of an ancestor simulation. While this theory was originally developed to answer other questions, one additional benefit for many is that it makes it possible to explain the appearance of design in the world we live in, without having to allow for God.

Rather than deny the testimony of the universe we live in that it was in fact designed and fine-tuned by an intelligent being, Simulation Theory lets one accept those claims without belief in God. It is instead proposed that our universe is a simulation created by super-intelligent beings from the future. Bostrom even reflects in his paper on how these creators of our simulation would be like gods to us. [Bostrom, “Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?”]

And as far out as this theory may sound to many of you, it is growing in popularity. The theory was popularized by Elon Musk, the founder and CEO of both Tesla and SpaceX, as he has publicly stated that he believes we almost certainly live in a computer simulation. And just a month ago, in *The New York Times* ran an op-ed on the topic. Apparently some scientists have come up with experiments that they think they could run, and which they claim might be able to determine if we actually are in a computer simulation. The purpose of this op-ed was to urge scientists not to run such experiments, and to warn us, I quote, that “conducting these experiments could be a catastrophically bad idea — one that could cause the annihilation of our universe.” The argument goes that if we are in a simulation, the simulators probably don’t want us to find out we are in a simulation, so if we prove that we are, then they will likely shut down our simulation, thus

annihilating our entire universe. My point is that the theory is gaining enough traction with enough people that a piece like that can run in *The New York Times* about it. [Greene]

Now, Simulation Theory has problems, particularly that it relies on a materialistic understanding of consciousness that philosophers like Thomas Nagel have so effectively critiqued. [Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*] But that is not the point for which I bring it up.

And the larger point, the point for which I bring it up, again, is this: *Creation is testimony*. It bears witness to a Creator and to the nature of that Creator. And people know it. They know it enough that for many people a theory of the universe without a Creator does not sit right. They know it to the extent that theories like the Simulation Hypothesis have to be devised in order to explain how the world we live in can be what it is, without a Divine Creator. And each attempt, while knowing something of the testimony, completely misses the point.

God bears witness to us about who he is *through creation*. If we fail to see that, if we fail to respond by coming to him, then we do not really *know* the world around us.

Third, God bears witness to us of who he is through our own nature.

This was something especially appreciated by those who converted from pagan philosophy to Christianity in the ancient world.

The puzzle of humanity had troubled thinkers for so long in the ancient world. How could humanity be so good ... but also so bad? How could humanity seem to possess such high and lofty traits ... while also being so depraved? And in any case, how could humanity be freed from this depravity and grow in goodness?

Many theories were proposed. Few were ultimately satisfying.

And then came the story of the Gospel. And as many heard the Christian claims of how humanity was made in the image of God, but had corrupted itself through rebellion – as they heard the Christian account of how humanity longed (on some level) for reunion with God, but remained enslaved to sin – as they heard the story of Jesus Christ, God become man, who came to rescue humanity from this condition, many said in one way or another: “Of course!” “That fits!” “That makes sense of what we have seen in our own hearts!”

And James K. A. Smith, a Christian philosopher at Calvin College, has argued that the same should be true for us. Many Christians, he points out, complain that people today are too inward-focused. Smith suggests that maybe they aren’t inward-focused enough. He points out that Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* is in many ways the tale of how Augustine found the God of the Bible by turning inward – by observing both the vast interior world within him, and its broken state. No worldly philosophy he engaged with could make sense of the inward testimony of his own nature – until he came upon the message of Christ. [Smith]

And so for us. The person who is inwardly focused but denies the God whose image they are made in and the Savior who came to rescue them – their problem is not that they see too much of themselves, but not enough. They miss the point. They fail to see the testimony. They need to grasp their inner world better.

God bears witness to us about who he is through our own nature. If we fail to see that and respond by coming to him, then we do not really *know* ourselves.

So ... God reveals himself through the Scriptures, through creation, and through our own natures. Each of these contain testimony so that when we hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, when we hear him reveal his identity to us, the proper response is “Of course!” “That fits!” “That makes sense of what I have read in the Scriptures – that makes sense of what I have seen in the world around me – that makes sense of what I see in my own heart – that is just what I should have expected!”

The extent that we see the testimony of God in each of these things is the extent to which we know them – whether the Scriptures, our world, or ourselves. And to the extent that we don’t see the testimony of God, we do *not* know those things.

But if that is the case ... then why so often do we and others fail to *know* what we should know? Why so often do we miss the testimony?

Jesus addresses just that question in our text. And he doesn’t say that it’s a matter of brains. He doesn’t say that it’s a matter of secret knowledge. He says instead, that it is all a matter of where we seek glory – where we seek approval.

Take a look at verses forty-two through forty-four. Jesus confronts his audience with the fact that they are rejecting him while being willing to accept others with far less weighty testimony than the testimony the Father has provided about Jesus. And why are they doing that?

Jesus says: “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?”

The deeper problem is *where we want to receive glory – where we most want to receive approval.*

Finding Christ in the Scriptures deepens our relationship with Christ, and so brings us to experience more and more the love, and glory, and approval of the only true God. But Bible knowledge for its own sake, Bible knowledge that wins theological arguments, Bible knowledge that can pull out a chapter and verse to embarrass a nineteen-year-old college student – while such knowledge can and should be used in good ways ... *that* is also knowledge that can be used to get glory from, to seek approval from, human beings – particularly from other Christians.

If we want the approval of God above all else, then we will seek the testimony about Christ in the Scriptures, and all our studies, all our theological work, all our memorization, will be an extension of seeking Christ and a right relationship with him.

But if we desire approval and glory from human beings above all else, then we will skip the testimony about Christ and run to the knowledge that can impress others.

If we desire the glory of a right relationship with God, then we will marvel at creation and how God testifies to himself through it.

But if we most desire glory in this life, we will approach creation only in terms of what we can do with it, and we will work to brush aside or explain away creation’s testimony to the One who made it.

If we desire the glory of approval from God, of a right relationship with God, then we will marvel at how God has made us, and let our brokenness and sin drive us to him.

But if we most desire approval and glory from others, then we will brush that testimony aside, hiding our imperfections and taking credit for the marvels and gifts of our nature.

The foundational question behind what you will *see* and what you will *know* is what you *want*. Do you *most want* the approval of God or the approval of human beings? *That* will determine what you see.

So ask yourself first what you see. What do you see in the Scriptures, in the world around you, in your own nature? Do you see the testimony of the Father to the Son? Do you see God's witness to who he is? If not ... whether you see it not at all or just not as much as you should see it ... then ask yourself whose glory and approval you most desire. Do you care more about approval from God or from the people around you?

And answering that question, remember that the grace of the gospel extends to our disordered desires. And so, if you see your disordered desire that longs for the glory and approval of other people above the glory and approval of God, then you can bring that to Christ. You *must* bring that to Christ. You must confess it to him as sin. You must ask him to forgive you. And then you need to ask him *to change your heart* – to grow your desire for his glory and approval, so that you might see him as the Father testifies to him all around you.

Then we can truly know the Scriptures. *Then* we can truly know our world. *Then* we can truly know ourselves.

But most importantly of all: *Then* we can truly know Jesus Christ, whom God the Father bears witness to, in each and every one of those things. And receiving his witness, we can receive him more fully, and live for his glory.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bostrom, Nick. "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?" *Philosophical Quarterly*, 2003. Vol. 53, No. 211, p. 243-255. Online at: <https://www.simulation-argument.com/simulation.pdf>
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