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The Relationship Between Virtual and Actual Reality: Phenomenological-Ontological Approach

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Abstract

The article addresses the relationship between virtual and actual reality as the external world of users. The objective is to study the relationship between two realities: virtual reality and actual reality in their ontological uniqueness and distinctness. The set objective implies that virtual reality should be seen as a specific conditional reality. The applied methodological principle incorporates concepts of ontological/ functional/ artistic conditionalities. The development of modern VR technology contributing to the formation of cyberculture is shown to bring the functional conditionality to the forefront, putting into action and emphasizing the leading part of an individual, the importance of his or her self-subject position (as the Participant or the Observer) in social construction of reality. The specific nature of the boundaries of conditionality as well as their penetrability/ impenetrability (characterizing openness or closeness of realities) make it possible to draw a demarcation line between the actual reality and other realities.

The comparative analysis given in the article revealed a number of distinctive features inherent in virtual realities. Due to these features, virtual realities can be differentiated both from the actual reality and the realities (mental, artistic) generally referred to as virtual by a number of scholars. As defined, the actual reality, as long as its social and regulatory pressure is imperative and unconditional, can compete with virtual realities, which, on the other hand, due to their interactivity can have such an impact on the actual reality that any concept of two autonomous worlds makes no sense.

Keywords: Virtual reality, Actual reality, Functional conditionality, Conditional reality, Cyberculture, Mass media, Ontological status, Social phenomenology.

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Introduction

The idea of multiple realities and the pluralistic approach to their diversity, which are postulated in the context of the present-day focus-on-reality thought, dictate the need for identification of ontological specific features both for virtual and actual realities.

As for the ontological status of the actual reality, its identification cannot be limited to the identification of modality of its existence, no matter whether it is real or imaginary, objective or subjective, actual or potential. This is the endpoint reached by classical ontology confined within the limits of traditional dichotomies: *consciousness* and existence, words and things, external and internal worlds. Here we are challenged with a question of physically objective existence of reality. Even if we get the answer to this eternal question, we still cannot be sure whether we deal with the conditional or actual reality. We can deal with really existing things or familiar social interactions, i.e. everything as in real life; yet, it is not actual reality. It is the conditional reality of an episode or play. Therefore, we cannot ignore an individual's attitude toward the action taking place or isolate an individual from thinking about the actual reality. It makes a strong case for ideas offered by leading representatives of social phenomenology (Alfred Schutz, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann).

Keeping in mind that the actual reality differs from the other realities not as much in terms of objective/ subjective, natural/ artificial, "first nature"/ "second nature", nature/ culture, what criterion can be more adequate for their distinction and identification of the actual reality as a specific reality? Remember that modern philosophy needed the concept of reality to distinguish between the unconditional (true) existence and the conditional existence. Therefore, the concept of reality (*as-existence*) acquired a dual meaning: Reality as certain conditionality (reality of conditionality) and reality as something that is unconditional.

The above duality can be observed in all sectors of life, and it is not irreality/realness of the object of perception, but rather the existence/absence of an ontological line separating the object of our perception from us. Undoubtedly, the dividing line can depend on our relation to the object. It gives room for play. The ontological boundaries of the events are not always clear or contextually understood. Take as an example the shout "Fire!" in a theater. Is it a line from the stage play (conditionality) or a warning about the existing threat (actual reality)? The criteria to define the boundaries are not always available, especially when the object of one ontological status exists in the context of another ontological status, or when one reality acts as an agent of another reality.

The concept of virtual reality (VR) also poses a great deal of challenges. The idea of virtuality can be traced back to ancient, Byzantine and medieval philosophies; however, it was put into action in modern interdisciplinary studies, science and technology. Therefore, we encounter so many philosophical approaches to the VR phenomenon: communicative (M. McLuhan (1964), M. Castells (2001, 2012)), differential (G. Deleuze (1994)), simulation (J. Baudrillard (2015) and S. Žižek (2005)), subject (I.G. Korsuntsev (2001)), polyontic (N.A. Nosov (2000)), symbolic (V.M. Rozin (2000)), technological (A.V. Yukhvid (2013), D. Deutsch (1997), M. Heim (1993)), phenomenological (Thomas K. Metzinger (2018)), etc.

Definition of Virtual Reality (VR)

We do not support the excessively generalized definition of virtual reality, which can frequently include mental quasi-hallucinatory realities, for example, dreams, as well as *quasi-reality of literature*, films, and other arts. The above tendency is typical of many Russian scholars: N.N. Karpitsky (no date), I.G. Korsuntsev (2001), N.A. Nosov (2000), V.M. Rozin (2000). To a certain degree, such convergence is justified, as there are qualities that these primarily conditional realities have in common. However, the vast variety of realities classified as virtual will interfere with the analysis of virtual realities and will hinder the clarification of their specific nature. In addition, their

characteristics are best explained by the social and phenomenological approach underlying our studies.

In their studies of an array of articles addressing VR P. Cipresso, I.A.C. Giglioli, M.A. Raya and G. Riva arrived at the following conclusion: "These definitions [of VR], although different, highlight three common features of VR systems: immersion, perception to be present in an environment, and interaction with that environment" (2018: 2). The above definitions agree that VR should be seen *first and foremost as a computer-generated reality interactively manipulated by the user*. This definition will serve as a basis for our research.

Theoretical fundamentals of research

It is assumed that the ontological status of actual reality is most inherent in the objective reality in which an individual lives all the time, even when the individual is consciously experiencing other realities, for example dreams. The individual does not live *like* in actual reality (like "living in a narrative", sympathizing with fictional characters, or as a character of their own story); the individual lives bodily and, most importantly, *through himself*, which, according to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, is achieved through full immersion of the self in reality, through its being totally self-forgetting. "The prevailing reality, the actual and truly lived event, would consequently be that in which you forget yourself" (Fichte, 2012: 42). The above thought is further developed in the works by pragmatists John Dewey and William James who assumed that "the sense of reality" depended on the direct contact with the reality; this contact shapes our relation to the event: As an actor directly involved in the world and modifying it through his actions or as a single observer. The above statement further develops into a concept assuming multiple realities or, as W. James calls them, subuniverses where the world of sense or physical things is identified as the paramount reality (see James, 1950: ch. XXI).

The pragmatists' ideas are developed in the context of social phenomenology where the paramount reality (when all other realities are treated as derivatives) is seen as the life-world or as the taken-for-granted world experienced, using the term offered by Alfred Schutz, within the natural attitude by the individual who acts within it and upon it (which corresponds to the level of the world of everyday life). It is "an inter-subjective world, common to all of us, in which we have not a theoretical but an eminently practical interest" (Schutz, 2004: 402). Thus, the actual reality is a social reality that *can be experienced directly*. Then, conditional realities can be defined as realities *confined* within ontological boundaries, which, in their turn, can serve as physical, mental or artistic boundaries of finite provinces of meaning. Moving from one province to another involves leaps, which, according to A. Schutz, are subjectively experienced as a shock during the transition from the paramount reality to other finite provinces of meaning (paradigms of participation or realities), with their systems of relevance, laws and rules. For example, transition from falling asleep to waking up, religious experience, or from the world of working to playing games or to the world of scientific theory, etc.

Thus, from the perspective of social phenomenology, an individual acts as an Observer towards the conditional world, i.e. in a rather detached way. The actual reality becomes real if we are involved in it as a Participant directly participating in events or *directly* (i.e. by ourselves, personally, not remotely or indirectly (by using communication media)) are watching them. Yet, the modality of passivity should not be equated with the position of the Observer, though there are certain grounds for this. For example, the mass media system as mass production of communication vehicles alienates the actual reality, making it conditional for the addressees having the status of *Observer*. As G. Anders notes, addressees of mass media communication turn into the type of mass-hermit, "each one separated from the others, but nonetheless the same as them – who are seated in their homes like hermits but not to renounce the world, but in order not to miss even a crumb of the world *in effigie* for the love of God" (Anders, 2005: 91). However, the world presented to us

is "adapted to our measure, as if it were our *simile* (...). We do not have to go to the events, the events are paraded before us" (ibid: 95). Instead of helping us discover the word, mass media alienate us from it, seducing us with a God-like power (we have access to it at any time we want; we can connect with it or disconnect from it), and instill a sense of security by offering the position of a "passive Observer" (transforming us into eavesdroppers and voyeurs, as G. Anders puts it). The more we are aware of our being personally *involved, concerned* and *influenced* by the event, and the more this awareness is dominated by the conditionality context alienating us from the possibility and, most importantly, from the need to interfere and participate, the easier it will be to perceive the actual reality as conditional. The actual reality loses its modality of *being real* when the individual loses his interest in it.

This fact is well demonstrated by mass media: "Film art (...) can make us discern the fictional aspect of reality itself, to experience reality itself as a fiction. We are shown what really happened, and suddenly we perceive this reality in all its fragility, as one of the contingent outcomes, forever haunted by its shadowy doubles" (Žižek, 2001: 18).

Alternatively, the involvement of personal existence, the individual's involvement in the events, due to which the individual can characterize the outlying reality as actual reality, extends to explicitly conditional realities. The complete merging does not take place as long as we are aware of the fundamental and non-downgraded meaning of the actual reality as *the reality demanding not only involvement from the individual, but also responsible involvement*, illusionary liberation from which we are looking for in rather irresponsible (game-like) involvement in conditional realities.

Here we move into the virtual realm producing "images of the desired identity" for the user fascinated by the fantasmatic dream world of virtual reality. The immersion and assimilation techniques underlying the VR effectiveness are built on inversion or elimination of dichotomies of meaningful/ meaningless, factual/ fictitious, real/ imaginary. From the perspective of the "natural attitude" compliant with the everyday practical approach to the world, these dichotomies place apart conditional and actual realities. Quoting Günther Anders, "when the *phantom becomes* real, reality *becomes* a *phantom*" (2005: 92), for VR events can look more meaningful than in everyday life.

The Concept of Functional Conditionality as a Methodological Principle for VR Research

It is necessary to introduce the concept of *functional conditionality* to understand the specifics of virtual reality better. The functional conditionality, when manifesting the penetrability of the physically impenetrable ontological boundaries, demonstrates mobility and flexibility of conventional criteria of conditionality/actual reality as well as their dependence on self-affiliation of an individual identifying himself as an agent of events of a certain reality, and thus acting as a Participant in conditional realities. The functional conditionality creates a fundamentally new pattern of interaction with reality: Being interactive, it opens the ontological boundaries without their elimination; alternatively, it closes ontologically open realities (for example, realities of theatrical action) with functional (usually, artistic) boundaries, which help an individual to distance himself from the event.

Such functional penetrability of ontological boundaries is a key feature of virtual reality where actual and conditional realities merge to the extent unattainable even in a dream. The individual acts both as an Observer and a Participant; both roles are mutually supportive and non-conflicting. "The never failing certainty about the unconditional conditionality of the virtual world allows the virtual user to live and act to the full extent without being afraid that he can be physically killed during simulated combat operations or that he will be held responsible for his actions in the virtual world" (Rozin, 2000: 73).

The Uniqueness of Virtual Reality

The uniqueness and paradoxicality of computer-generated VR is that it, without using any complex forms of identity, provides a means for *simultaneous* presence and participation in events taking place in *two ontologically separated realities*. In contrast to a dream, this participation is not produced by an illusion representing itself as an actual reality: In virtual reality, the illusion is not a condition, but a consequence of the individual's involvement in the events. Thus, the illusion does not obscure or disguise the ontological conditionality of VR.

Following our terminology, we deal with the reality distinct in its ontological closeness and functional openness. The significance of this definition is that VR is seen as a conditional reality combining qualities of ontologically closed realities (first of all, worlds of art) and functionally open mental realities, without merging with them.

Although the functional openness unlocks the ontological boundaries between the user and VR (to the extent of a deceptive feeling of absolute presence in the cyberspace), it is not able to eliminate the ontological nature of the boundaries. VR is limited by its ontological status of conditional reality.

Results

Below you can see interrelated characteristics proving that VR, by virtue of its conditionality, cannot be identified with reality:

- 1) Ontological closeness, which does not allow full-featured bodily presence and participation in the event, thus dismissing any absolute certainty in it. It makes the user feel invulnerable and offers him an opportunity to "start over again". In addition, VR simulators protect the user against the threats simulated by VR with the ontologically impenetrable boundaries. The offered possibility of playing over and creating a new scenario implies variability and multi-modality of the virtual world. By the way, present-day teenagers' obsession with deadly games is frequently explained by their loss of ability to see the difference between computer games and real life where there are no respawn checkpoints. Besides, the ontological closeness seduces with illusory power over the world (you can get connected to it or disconnected from it at any time).
- 2) The VR pressure is way below the pressure (physical, mental, social and political, regulatory, etc.) of real life, through submission and resistance to which an individual sets and becomes aware of his own boundaries – the boundaries of the individual sharing social and cultural real-life space with other individuals and being responsible for his doings.
- 3) Entities of ontologically closed realities (including virtual realities), according to Roman Witold Ingarden, are characterized by "*heteronomous* (non-autonomous)" (1962: 101) rather than actual existence. In other words, in order to exist they need a physically available medium (or, using the term offered by N.A. Nosov, "constant" reality (see Nosov, 2000: 33) providing them with a sensuously perceived form. According to S.S. Khoruzhi, "virtual phenomena are always characterized by partial or under-externalized existence, by lack or absence of entity properties inherent in phenomena of conventional empirical reality. They possess incomplete and diminished occurrence unable to reach stable and abiding, self-supporting presence and existence" (1997: 54).
- 4) The "framework" nature, i.e. the ontological constraints of VR set by the program parameters. Therefore, when we operate a car simulator, we are not able to get off and walk into the stores we see through our windshield.
- 5) Actuality (see Nosov, 2000: 33). VR exists only "here and now", as long as the parent (constant) reality generating it is active. In this way, virtual events resemble mental phenomena – fantasy, imagination, etc. However, there are differences:

A) VR is not created spontaneously or by a human mind; it is created with software.

B) VR is experienced through representation, not through imagination.

C) Extreme privacy of the mental state (till its exteriorization), which allowed Cartesians and analytical philosophers to refer to it as the reality of "*privileged access*". Therefore, it cannot be identified with other realities, including VR, accessible to public perception. On the other hand, Thomas K. Metzinger believes that "a deep confluence of neurotechnology and VR" (2018: 5) can remove the juxtaposition of the mental reality and VR. Moreover, "the maximal realization of social VR would therefore consist in creating an artificial platform on which whole individual biological minds can merge, thereby transcending the principle of local determination" (ibid: 5).

6) Ability to generate a world. The virtual world is characterized by the autonomy (having its own chronotope, logic, laws, meaning), images, captivation (to complete *self-forgetfulness* of the individual) comparable to worlds of art, while surpassing them in interactivity.

7) The multichannel perception underlying the effectiveness of most VR technologies (in contrast to the two-channel perception (vision and hearing) inseparable from traditional arts). Anyway, these technologies are still not able to compete to the fullest extent with the effect of reality generated by real life. Yes, it is just a matter of time. "Although the visual experience both in virtual environments and in the actual reality is still dominating, the tactile experience starts acquiring utmost importance. This transition offers a new level of certainty: Visual illusions and hallucinations are believable, but the touch cannot deceive, the body cannot lie. (...) In contrast to the theater and cinema, the sensory and sensible experiences overlap, thus making it possible for the Agent to exist in a virtual reality, to be present *there*" (Mazin & Turkina, 1997: 134). The possibilities (still only foreseeable) of the immersive reality look so impressive and frightening that they bring to life Descartes' "epistemological skepticism". As is commonly known, Descartes explained the existence of the objective reality by the existence of God who cannot be a deceiver. Can it be that our actual reality is a certain immersive reality, which its numerous digital doubles are trying to compete with, though without any success? We can see the artistic representation of this theme in the film "The Matrix" (1999). Even if we admit that the "global skepticism" towards the objective existence of the external world has good grounds, the conditions of our existence, both physical and social, make such skepticism incompatible with the everyday life experience.

Certainly, the actual reality, like VR, reveals the features of simulativeness, the other side of which demonstrates nostalgia for something that is "true", real, everlasting, causing the urge to go back to the roots: The lack of confidence about the present turns into *fetishization of the past*. Yet, though displaying its simulativeness, the actual reality, in spite of the radical opinion expressed by Jean Baudrillard (2015), is not replaced with a simulation of reality, as we have to take it seriously, we even have to live by it being an "unbearable burden of daily life", not just play with it, for example, in a computer simulation game.

Speaking about "qualitative characteristics of the daily life" and pointing out such of them as "materiality, objectivity, immediacy, three-dimensionality, interactivity, consistency, and stability" (Kiryushin, 2012: 89-90), A.N. Kiryushin notes that the first four fundamental characteristics are not inherent in virtual reality. Therefore, "the most promising strategy in creation of virtual worlds is creating new realities, rather than simulating those that already exist" (ibid: 90).

Conclusion

Thus, the effect of reality, maximum in its absoluteness and certainty (associated with the ability to deceive two – vision and hearing – channels of perception), which no VR can have so far, is produced by the actual reality, at least, in the eyes of the individual who is present in it. It is explained by its ontological and functional openness connected with its ontological status of a physically objective reality providing the possibility for full bodily presence in the immediate and shared existence with others. Most importantly,

the above superiority of the actual reality is caused by its pressure – physical (material) and social, imperative and dominant presence of which, according to P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann (1966), cannot be ignored. Just as the solipsist has to deal with the pressure of the external world, the objective existence of which he denies, so any nihilist or deviant has to respect the regulatory pressure, even though they may question its rightfulness and even though their criticism may have grounds. Virtual realities can both fight against this pressure and work for it. Yet, the degree of freedom, abuse of power and irresponsibility in VR should not be exaggerated. It serves for building a new sociality that should be taken into consideration.

Nevertheless, interactivity, being a distinctive feature of any VR, not only helps "drag" the user into VR and have him confined in the computer cyberspace, but also helps bring VR into the "external world". "Today, it is becoming inappropriate to speak about online and offline worlds as separate environments. Virtuality as an opposition to reality and materiality is coming to an end" (Gribov, 2012: 50).

The implementation of the feedback principle, which makes it possible to functionally overcome (though not to eliminate) the ontological boundaries between the world of users and VR, does not give any ground, in spite of the common opinion, for their opposition. There are no different worlds; there is the reality of everyday life intertwined with VR influencing basically all its sectors. We encounter evidence of unbreakable bond between the reality of everyday life and virtual reality when we realize that *cybercriminals* (hackers) are not virtual criminals and that the consequences of their actions in VR are far from being illusory or imaginary for their victims in the real world. The problem is not limited to computer pranks destabilizing the operation of software. Crimes committed within VR and falling beyond its scope are much more serious. For example, the threat of acts of terrorism through an unauthorized access to the computer system responsible for environmental safety or energy security.

Therefore, we can make a conclusion that the expansion of the information environment through the worldwide network implies growing interference and mutual influence of physically objective and virtual realities comprising the reality of our everyday life and shared existence with others.

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