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Against virtual inflationism

Jörg Noller

1 Since Michael Heim's book "The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality" from 1993 and his subsequent book "Virtual Realism" from 1998, the term "virtual reality" has often been used synonymously with more or less perfect, technically conditioned "immersion"[1], "illusion"[2], "simulation"[3] or "fiction"[4]. These three forms of media unreality culminate in the phenomenon of immersion in which simulated and faked appearances are perceived *as* reality (Heim 1993, page xi). Let us call this the *standard account* of virtual reality. Following Heim's standard account, the prevailing tendency has been to understand virtuality and reality as counter-concepts, which, while not categorically opposing each other, can be merged in a kind of continuum (Milgram and Kishino 1994). But even such a continuum theory of the virtual does not succeed in adequately understanding the ontological status of virtual reality beyond mere simulation or illusion. It creates ontologically hybrid realms that do not contribute to clarifying the relationship between virtuality and reality.

2 Recently, however, there has been introduced an *alternative account* that takes virtual reality more seriously from an ontological point of view. In his book *Reality+. Virtual worlds and the problems of philosophy,* David Chalmers coined the term "simulation realism" and explicitly linked it to Michael Heim's concept of "virtual realism" (Heim 1998; Chalmers 2022, 105). Like Heim, Chalmers defines virtual reality as "an immersive, interactive, computer-generated space" (Chalmers 2022, 470). However, Chalmers distinguishes his account from Heim's insofar as he opposes his account to what he calls "virtual irrealism", the opinion according to which virtual reality is just an *illusion*. Heim understands virtual reality as "a new form of human experience" (Heim 1993, page vi), which seems to be compatible with virtual irrealism. Chalmers has coined the term "virtual realism" (Chalmers 2017, 310) as opposed to "virtual irrealism" (Chalmers 2017, 310). He argues that virtual irrealists "hold that virtual worlds are fictional worlds". Chalmers calls this position "virtual fictionalism" (Chalmers 2017, 315). In opposition to this view, Chalmers argues that virtual objects are "digital objects, constituted by computational pro-

1. See for example (Heim 1993, page xi), (Chalmers 2017, 312), and (Danaher 2022, 510).
2. See for example (Krämer 1998, 33), (Welsch 2000, 201), (Lanier 2017, 176), and (Danaher 2022, 510).
3. See for example (Heim 1993, page xi)(Heim 1993, xi), (Lanier 2017, 216), and (Danaher 2022, 511).
4. See for example (Danaher 2022, 511)

Contact: Jörg Noller <joerg.noller@lrz.uni-muenchen.de> ORCiD: 0000-0002-1070-156X
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cesses on a computer" that can be perceived "by having immersive experiences" (Chalmers 2017, 309). However, by "virtual realism" Chalmers understands the thesis "that virtual reality is genuine reality, with emphasis especially on the view that virtual objects are real and not an illusion" (Chalmers 2022, 106). Chalmers explains his conception of virtual realism by means of his accounts of "simulation realism" and "virtual digitalism". Simulation realism entails that "[i]n a simulation, things are real and not illusions" (Chalmers 2022, 106). Virtual digitalism means that "objects in virtual reality are digital objects – roughly speaking, structures of binary information, or bits." (Chalmers 2022, 107) Thus, according to Chalmers, it is crucial that a perfect digital simulation has the same basic formal structure as physical reality that is grounded in quantum mechanical processes (Chalmers 2022, 107), so that in the end the "reality question" can be answered: "[I]f we're in a simulation, our world is still real" (Chalmers 2022, 107).

3 It follows from Chalmers' simulation realism and virtual digitalism that we can virtualize *virtually everything* that is physical as long as it is structurally identical – be it mountains, walls, cars, treasures, or even persons as avatars (Chalmers 2022, 198-199). Therefore, simulation realism implies an *inflationary* account of virtual reality: If we can make a perfect digital simulation s of a physical entity a, then s is a *virtual* reality. In what follows I shall challenge Chalmers' account and argue against what I call "virtual inflationism". I shall distinguish my alternative account of virtual realism from Chalmers', arguing that *not all* objects that Chalmers considers as virtual objects – such as "vitual treasures" (Chalmers 2017, 314) in computer games – are *really* virtual objects. Whereas Chalmers' simulation realism and its structuralism imply an inflationary conception of virtual reality, according to which we can virtualize virtually everything, I shall argue that objects (events, and processes) need to *qualify* for virtual objects, that is meet certain requirements in order to be virtual objects (events, and processes) beyond mere structural simulation. I shall call this the "normative account" of virtual realism. For this reason, immersion is not a sufficient criterion for virtual reality, since it is compatible with perfect illusion and therefore compatible with virtual irrealism or virtual anti-realism. Also, following Brey 2014, I shall argue that there are virtual objects that are *not* digital objects – such as paper-based banknotes.

4 In order to oppose Chalmers' account, I shall introduce an alternative conception of virtual reality that is not based on the structuralist paradigm of (digital) simulation and immersion but of teleological, rule-based *function*. My functionalist account will allow me to explain how virtual objects can have values, which Chalmers' structuralist account fails to explain. What is distinctive about virtual reality is not its immersive experience or perfect digital simulation – as Chalmers argues – but its *teleological function*. This, in turn, presupposes purposes and requirements that something needs to meet in order to be called virtual reality. Therefore, virtual reality is a normative concept.

5 Chalmers, however, understands virtual reality according to his simulation realism as independent of the concrete practice of acting subjects, but – in a physicalist analogy – dependent on the simulator working and generating in the background. Indicative of this problematic is an illustration which Chalmers subtitles "Plato's cave in the 21st century" (Chalmers 2022, 8). It shows

three people sitting in a dark basement, wired and wearing VR goggles on their heads. Behind them stands a person who inputs the simulations to them; a bright staircase leading upward points to the exit. According to Chalmers, "life in virtual reality can have the same sort of value as life in nonvirtual reality." (Chalmers 2022, 312) But this does not answer the question of how virtual values are being generated. Values cannot be explained by means of perfect simulation, for simulation always presupposes a normative standard that is *external* to it.

6 According to my normative account of virtual realism, we can only virtualize objects, processes or events that are of social nature or that are inherently *rule-based* – be the rules social or not.[5] It is not structure that explains virtual reality but rules, purposes and normativity. David Chalmers argues against Brey 2014 that not all virtual realities need to be of institutional or social nature and cites a virtual calculator as an example (Chalmers 2022, 487). However, virtual calculators, as virtual chess games, are restricted to the realm of mathematical rules or the rules of chess. Depending on whether one conceives of mathematics as being a construction or not, this shows that virtual reality is bound to objective rules – be they socially constructed or not. My account of virtual reality is therefore opposed to David Chalmers' account who argues that there can be virtual realities of literally everything that is physical if it is a perfect digital simulation. Therefore, simulation realism falls short when it comes to question of virtual value. Chalmers discusses the example of virtual treasures: "A virtual treasure may have the power to be scooped up." (Chalmers 2022, 198) However, Chalmers' conception of simulation realism and virtual digitalism doesn't allow to attribute a value to this virtual treasure, because he does not consider the role of social ontology, norms, and purposes for virtual reality.

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5. (Brey 2014, 48) emphasizes the social nature of digital virtual reality.

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