

Review of: "Beyond the Physical Self: Understanding the Perversion of Reality and the Desire for Digital Transcendence via Digital Avatars in the Context of Baudrillard's Theory"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The article raises important issues concerning the understanding of reality as it may be changed or challenged by the use of new digital technologies. With respect to advances in VR simulations and AI, the author claims that “mixed reality marks the dawn of a new epoch, where the binary oppositions of real/virtual, physical/digital are deconstructed” (8). Digital avatars, he contends, “are not just representations of our physical selves; [...] they have their own identities, experiences, and interactions that are unique to the virtual realm” (13). Humans are now able to transcend the physical world with all its limitations, something they are “longing” for very deeply (cf. 18) and are able to construct an entirely new form of reality for themselves (cf. 15). However, this now technological capability creates a dilemma for them, namely, the need “to navigate the boundaries between these two realms, seeking a delicate balance between the allure of the virtual and the authenticity of the physical” (19). While the author seems more optimistic about the enabling features of technology in the beginning of the article, the final section presents a more somber, “dystopian” picture. VR could lead to a “perversion of reality” which might make it difficult for human agents to establish genuine connections with others (20). For the author, this perversion is evident in the practice of online dating, where the cultivation of images of oneself is more important than the relationships themselves (cf. 23).

As a first comment, it seems that the article could provide a clearer balance between the optimistic and pessimistic attitudes toward technology. In many passages, the prevailing tone can be described as techno-optimism. Paradoxically, techno-optimism might also lead to an exaggeration of the risks that are identified, because the risks depend on the ability of new technologies to create a radically new form of reality for us. The risks, in other words, are just the inverse of the fascination with technology, both overstate the transformative impact it has.

It also seems that in the article, the idea of reality is taken for granted and not properly defined or at least explored in all facets of its meaning. The idea of a non-binary combination of the virtual and the physical, as well as the presumed need to “navigate” between the two realms, all presuppose that the virtual can present us with a fully sufficient, unreduced version of reality. Physical reality is supposed to be more “authentic,” but what exactly this means is not explained. It seems that the article suffers from the same problems that can be seen in recent philosophical approaches to the problem of simulations by Nick Bostrom and David Chalmers: the notion of reality is reduced, in a quasi-Berkleyian sense, to mere perceptions and hedonic experiences. This idealism, or anti-realism, then makes it possible to multiply the levels of reality

in which we live. However, the approach is question-begging, as it is far from clear that reality can be reduced to experiential or perceptive qualities. What remains unexplained is, among others, the existence of other minds, the persistence and resistance of material things, and the durability of physical conditions despite the changes in our subjective stance. What is also left out is the physical foundation of the virtual itself, which requires energy, technical maintenance, and financial means.

Philosophically speaking, the very idea that reality could be an object of choice and “navigation” and that there could be two types of reality existing in parallel ways is self-refuting (cf. again 19). First, what is chosen as reality is always chosen as the one reality in which one lives. If this is not the case, then virtual reality is chosen merely as a phantasy, which deflates the author’s claims. If it is chosen as all-sufficient, then it is implied that there can be only one reality, in which case the reality-status of VR has to be considered illusionary and false. Either way, the duplication of reality cannot stand.

One could also ask whether it is really the case that “individuals yearn for something beyond the constraints of their tangible existence” (18). Do we experience our bodily existence as constraining when we walk in a forest or swim in the ocean? At the very least, it seems that the experience the author has in mind cannot easily be generalized, which means that both the optimistic and the pessimistic effects of technology could be idiosyncratic and would not lend themselves to a broader theoretical account of the impact of VR.

Finally, the critical notion of a perversion of reality presented at the end of the article raises the question of causal order. Are people disconnecting from reality because of the infinite possibilities offered by VR technology, or are these possibilities becoming increasingly attractive because social reality is such that people want to disconnect? What comes first, the ability to disconnect or the desire to escape? As already said, exaggerating the transformative impact of digital technologies is a sign of techno-optimism which could have more to do with the creation of new avenues for commercial exploitation than with the ability to open up entirely new realities. At the very least, it seems important to consider technologies in their wider socio-economic context and to reinsert them into the one reality to which both its producers and users belong.