

Virtual Theology

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Paper prepared for the Colloquium on Virtual Theology, Auckland, 11th-12th February, 2005.

In addressing a topic such as Virtual Theology, it is necessary to address first the question of the “virtual.” It’s a term that is used quite capriciously in relation to a range of things: virtual meeting, virtual university, virtual communication, etc., all of which are gathered under the concept that is important for this gathering, virtual reality. But how we think about the term has significant importance for thinking about the relationship of what we have known as theology to the major changes taking place in technologies and practices of communication and cultural life.

The nature of the virtual

The initial and most common impulse from a critical perspective is to consider virtual reality as a subordinate form of existence within a frame of unreality – illusion even. Virtual Reality is often considered a pseudo-reality, a deception or cheap variety that mimics the real. In Baudrillard’s terms,¹ a simulation, a deceptive substitution of a false for the real.

This approach suggests that when we consider a virtual form of something - virtual theology, for example – we’re dealing basically with a counterfeit or subordinate form of the “real thing.”

This framing of the question supports the position of most academic theologians, and most religious leaders for that matter, who through it dismiss discussions about virtual theology – theology connected with electronic forms of conceptualisation and communication, a second rate theology. “It’s not real theology, its virtual theology!”

I want to suggest that questions of the virtual are much more complex and nuanced than that. Virtual realities are not unrealities, or illusions, or pseudo-phenomena.

The term itself – “virtual” “reality” – connotes that the virtual is a form, one of the forms, of reality. We talk of virtual reality, not unreal virtuality.

Webster’s dictionary² defined “virtual” as “being in essence or effect, not in fact.” John Wood described the virtual as “anything that is the case, though not in the fullest sense.”³ This prompts the question, what would need to be added to a virtual reality to make it “the fullest sense of reality”? Or to use the Webster’s definition, what would need to be added to the essence of something to make it a fact?

Here a number of alternatives can be identified, none of them necessarily discreet from each other.

- One is physical reality – where the emphasis is on what is added to an idea or essence by embodiment within the constraining boundaries of the human body or the particular challenges encountered by the requirements of our physical

existence and functions. One could include here the physical demands and practicalities of a defined community.

- A second is material reality – similar to the first, but where the focus is on the realities experienced within the constraints of material resources and access to them, including time and space.

These two together suggest that the alternative to virtual reality is what could be called “actualised reality,” a set of conditions and experiences characterised or typified by concrete physical or material instances in time and space. I want to argue also that what we know as “reality” is most often a combination of the two: virtual and actual realities.

In practice it becomes difficult to identify clear boundaries between physical, material and virtual realities and the role each plays in the construction and interpretation of lived experiences and choices. Indeed, for much of human history, then and now, clear boundaries between the material and non-material have not been recognised or practised.

The idea that we can only describe as “real” that which has actual material existence or situated embodiment has never been held in human history by any but a tiny minority of thorough-going materialists. Margaret Wertheim, along with many others, has pointed out that throughout human history all cultures have had parallel “other” or virtual worlds, which were not separate from but continually intersected with the world of bodily experience.⁴ These virtual worlds were often more real and more influential in action and decision-making than the constrained material realities within which people were living. For many religions and ethical traditions, flesh passes away but it’s the spirit that lives forever: material existence is the subordinate value and virtual realities are what are real. This point should not need to be argued with theologians.

So my first observation is that it’s mistaken to see the virtual as a subordinate value and to compare it with “the real.” We need to see the virtual as one of the forms of reality we inhabit, along with but also merged with the actual, physical, material conditions we need to deal with.

Characteristics of the virtual

Calling something “virtual” suggests that what is conjectured is real enough and close enough to a set of material conditions or actual physical experiences that we can say it is “as if” it were the condition itself. Yet the virtual is sufficiently different from it that we need to qualify ourselves by saying, “but it is not the situation itself.” Virtual reality has the character of being “as if” but “not quite.”

But this “not quite” character is the source of the distinctive contribution the virtual plays. Because it is not constrained by the limitations of a specific actual instance, a virtual reality plays an imaginative and regenerative role in our being human and in developing ourselves beyond the specific constraints of practicality or time or space bound-ness. So Pierre Lévy described the virtual as “a fecund and powerful mode of being that expands the process of creation, opens up a future, injects a core of meaning beneath the platitude of immediate physical presence.”⁵

Reality, therefore, understood most fully, is not just an immediate, actual physical or material situation, but also its accompanying virtualities. Lévy gives the example of a seed, which is more than just its immediate material form. A seed is also understood in terms of its future potential which doesn't yet exist. What gives a seed its meaning and name are the interplay of the actual material reality and its virtual reality. The material reality of a seed is its cellular composition; the virtual reality of a seed is the bush or tree it will become. What distinguishes a eucalyptus seed from a piece of eucalyptus wood the same shape is not so much difference in their materiality but the difference in their virtuality – a very important difference.

So, what we commonly think of as “reality” is a dynamic process of constant movement and interplay between the dimensions of virtualisation and actualisation. When we are in an actual situation, the press is constantly towards identifying a virtual reality by abstracting from a specific situation and linking to other abstractions in order to create meaning, as a way of escaping from the mundane confines of the immediate instance fixed in time and space. We create virtual realities in order to identify and explore other possibilities as a basis of generating new actualities.

On the other hand, when we're in a virtual reality, the dreaming or speculating, the press on us is towards wanting to actualise a reality in acts of creation, as a way of concretising the ineffable, converting and experiencing the mental state into bodily experience, or testing and consolidating identity.

Far from being unreal or illusion, virtual realities are a crucial dimension of our humanity. In practice, the boundaries between what is virtual and what is actual are extremely fluid and undefined. In everyday living, we are constantly moving back and forth between actual situations we have to deal with and virtual possibilities that are conjured by the situations.

Major processes of virtualisation

Pierre Lévy has identified three main processes of virtualisation that have characterised and lead to the emergence of humanity.⁶

- *Virtualisation associated with signs.*
Language leads to a virtualisation of real/actual time through a process of detaching ourselves and events from the immediate time and space in which occur, intensifying the immediate experience through questioning and stories, and creating a virtual reality that can be carried across time and space. An account of an event is not the event itself but a virtualisation of it.
- *Virtualisation associated with technology*
Technology produces a virtualisation of action, of the body and of the physical environment. Humans have always sought means to extend themselves beyond the practicalities of their immediate situations in the process both of survival and making meaning. Fiochra Long notes this in his discussion of technology as monumental history:

”Even in pre-capitalist cultures people have used artefacts to resist the forgetfulness prevalent in human experience concerning friends, heroes and actions and the general dissipation of one’s life energy into disconnected and unrepeatable moments.”⁷

- *Virtualisation associated with social relations*

Pierre Lévy sees such things as ritual, religion, morality, law, economics and political regulations as social mechanisms for virtualizing violence and for dealing with relations of force, impulse, instincts and desires. An agreement or contract, for example, is a virtual reality: a means of defining and ordering actual situations in terms of a constructed reality that is independent of any of the actual situations to which it applies.

The importance of virtual realities

When we see the virtual, or virtual realities, in this way, it becomes apparent that, far from being mere illusions or pseudo-realities that distract from the real thing, virtual realities fulfil a number of important functions crucial to human life. Again, these are not mutually exclusive of each other.

- *Creation*

It is first in virtual space that we generate virtual new realities that become the material of experimentation, testing and implementation in new actual realities. This process works through a transformation from particular solutions within the confines of an actual situation into a more general problematic in a virtual situation that is amenable to more fluid imagination, experimentation and transformation.⁸ Creative problem-solving, experimentation, artistic creation, and drama in its many forms fits in here. Dramatic story-telling is creation of a virtual reality through a sympathetic exploration of other experiences.

- *Exploring potential and testing limits*

In addition to being a site for creation, virtual spaces are deterritorialized spaces in which there is freedom to explore alternatives, potential and limits in situations free of the confines, demands and requirements of the actual situation. This function is often associated with the virtual reality of cyberspace because of the Internet’s particular characteristics of disembodiment, anonymity, etc.

- *Safety*

The virtual is a device we use in search of safety and control in the war against fragility, pain, wear, and morality. Theory – and here I include theology – is a virtual reality we construct and participate in as a device for countering the potential of chaos. Culture likewise is a virtual construct comprising “a range of material practices and technical and intellectual works, also reflected in individual ideas, desires and aspirations” that serve to “shield us from the brute reality of certain aspects of our embodiment.”⁹

- *Hope*
An important function of virtual reality is to provide a space in which we can explore the possibility of a situation in which the threats, frustrations and limitations of our actual life do not exist; as a basis for believing that our actual life may one day be free of those threats, frustrations and limitations. It is no accident that most of the religious theories of hope, for example, are strongly eschatological in character, offering people motivation and courage based not on actual realities but on future virtual realities that not yet exist, or may never exist.
- *Meaning-making*
Meaning does not exist *per se* in any individual event. Meaning is constructed by the distillation of selected essences from individual situations and through the creative process of theorising or virtualisation – whether that be in concept, narrative or visual representation. Though all aspects of any meaning system may be contradicted in part or at different times by actual situations, the importance and tenacity of virtual reality at times is such that people will hold to the virtual reality in the face of at times overwhelming apparent contradiction by actual reality.
- *Play*
One should not underestimate the important role of virtual realities in human playfulness. Whether the purpose is brainstorming for problem-solving, tension release, imaginative exploration beyond boundaries, distraction or physical pleasure, entering and playing in virtual realities plays an important role in human coping, creation, problem-solving and development.

It is these important functions that distinguishes virtual reality from artificial and pseudo-realities. I would see pseudo-realities as imitations or counterfeit situations that simulate the real. As such, artificial and pseudo-realities are diminutions and worthy of the sort of dismissal offered by such as Baudrillard. Virtual realities do more than just mirror or imitate – they are also creative. As well as an “as if” but “not quite” character, they also have a “what if” quality as well.

What makes this creativity possible is that virtual reality is not bound by the constraints of a specific time or place. The character of virtual reality is that it is reality that is deterritorialized and de-historicised. It is reality unconstrained by specific time-bound and place-bound demands and limits. For that reason, virtual reality plays an important role in the development of identity. We develop a continuing narrative of ourselves through a continual process of conceiving optional possibilities (the virtual), testing those options (the actual) and reviewing those performances in relation to a continually developing virtual narrative.

Theology as a virtual reality

Within that framework, I would argue that theology is a form of virtual reality. For that reason, it's mistaken, therefore, to talk about “virtual theology” and “real theology.” Like any

theory, theology is a virtualizing enterprise, serving particular functions, having particular strengths because of that, but also having particular weaknesses or limitations.

What is implied then by the title of this colloquium, "Virtual Theology." Certainly the intention is to stimulate thinking about the place of theology or what theology might be in a digitally-based symbolic and communication environment. But naming a colloquium "Virtual Theology," could also be misleading because (1) the term suggests that there is another kind of theology that isn't virtual (a common argument of book-based theologians), which there isn't ; and (2) the term hides the fact that all theology is mediated and the ways in which it is mediated become part of its meaning.

Naming theology as a virtual reality can be useful because it opens up our consideration of the relevance of theology by considering how more recent virtual realities are being considered and how theology fits with these. Seeing theology as a virtual reality also identifies the fact that there are a range of competing virtual realities which in broad or specific ways address the same human needs that theology seeks to do.

When one considers Lévy's schema of processes of virtualisation, thinking about theology as a virtual reality also allows us to analyse in what ways theology may be locked into particular culture-bound forms of signs and language, technology and patterns of social relations that may be passing because of changes in the fundamental media building blocks of culture.

The second half of my paper, which was posted earlier and I haven't yet had a chance to integrate, identifies what I think are some of those culture-bound processes of theology that are challenged by digital technologies and their communication implications.

¹ Baudrillard, Jean. 1993. The evil demon of images and the precession of simulacra. In *Postmodernism: A reader*, edited by T. Docherty. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

² *The Living Webster encyclopedic dictionary of the English language*, Belair Publishing Co., 1981, p.1108.

³ Wood, John. 1998. Curvatures in space-time-truth. In *The virtual embodied: presence/practice/technology*, edited by J. Wood. London: Routledge, p.4.

⁴ Wertheim, Margaret. 1999. *The pearly gates of cyberspace: A history of space from Dante to the Internet*. Sydney: Doubleday.

⁵ Lévy, Pierre. 1998. *Becoming virtual: Reality in the digital age*. Translated by R. Bononno. New York: Plenum Trade, p.16

⁶ Lévy, Pierre. 1997. *Collective intelligence: Mankind's emerging world in cyberspace*. Translated by R. Bononno. New York: Plenum Press and Lévy Ibid.

⁷ Fiochra Long, "Technology as monumental history," pp. 82-102 in M.Breen, E.Conway and M.McMillan, *Technology as transcendence*, Blackrock, Dublin: The Columba Press, 2003, p.84.

⁸ Lévy, *Collective intelligence*

⁹ Hillis, Ken. 1999. *Digital sensations: Space, identity and embodiment in virtual reality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.xvi.