

Social implications of Virtual Worlds:

Duality of mind and body

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A virtual environment, with its all-pervasive notion of disembodiment and other cultural repercussions associated with modernity, is argued to be a great liberator of the mind and a place to ‘ultimately open up possibilities for creating new and autonomous identities’ (Poster, 1997). Referring to the philosophy of the mind, the author presents the mind-body problem in the form in which it exists today. The author argues that only limited disembodiment takes place in Cyberspace, as we create a symbolic representation that embodies ourselves in a new virtual form of being. Therefore, the virtual environment is far from a Cartesian dualism in its purest form. The author believes that disembodiment in Cyberspace does not provide us with a truly spiritual life of the mind, but just serves as escape from reality, which might have long-term social implications yet to be learned.

Every single day millions of users interact online, explicitly representing their thoughts and intentions, providing content and ultimately contributing to the experience. Second life, a multiplayer online role-playing game, was launched in 2003, but a long time before that Arthur Schopenhauer, in his work *“The Wisdom of Life”*, referred to ‘second life’ as the life of the mind, eloquently capturing the essence of its existence:

“Second life is not only a protection against the boredom, it also wards off the pernicious effects of boredom; it keeps us from bad company from the many dangers and misfortunes, loses and extravagances which the man who places his happiness entirely in the objective world is sure to encounter. Varying with the amount of superfluity, there will be countless developments in this second life, the life of the mind.” (Schopenhauer, 2007)

The life of the mind is not a new phenomenon—it is a part of us as human beings. We were granted such a spacious tool to develop and hone ourselves in the world of objective reality—reality defined by the majority. However, with help of modern technology we can construct our own reality, where we can vividly represent our fantasies to other people in a very explicit and common way, which was never possible before. Gillett (1986), in discussion of ‘Disembodied Persons’, provides us with two important questions. The first one is epistemic: under what conditions would we consider that a person was present in the absence of normal bodily cues? And the second is more metaphysical: could such circumstances arise?

Bering (2006), referring to the work of Bloom (2006), mentions that some scientists have already started examining the question of whether humans by default are “common sense Cartesian dualists”. Kuhlmeier et al. (2004) speculate that “infants do not readily view humans as material objects”. If it is true, then it is probably our life in the physical world that predefines our ability or inability to cope with disembodiment in the virtual world. The idea of disembodiment and creation of a virtual person without a physical shell is conceptually alluring. Dreyfus (2001) addresses this question by saying that our mortality will not let us escape the boundaries of our body through participation in virtual reality. But what about our perceptions? What if Kuhlmeier was right and psycho-

logical immortality is a cognitive default of our mind? If this is true and we are born “disembodied in our mind”, where we do not have a direct link between our consciousness and the real world (the physical environment), then our prior experience in the real world may be the only genuine reasons why we try to create a virtual identity “avatar” and require it for effective communication. There probably will be future babies to be born who will enroll in a virtual world before the real world and who will be able to be “a thinking think” (Almog, 2005), and will need no extra reference to the physical body in order to communicate efficiently. However, there are still many questions and very few answers.

Dreyfus (2001) states that on-line relationships are less stable as the participants are not embedded in the same day-to-day environment, and will not easily understand the context of information. The author would like to argue that this is not the case, as in a real world human relationships are also only periodically directly-observable and characterized by offline social events (Dunbar, 2004). Sometimes, people exist in our minds and we can tacitly assume their actions (Bering, 2006) without sharing the same space and time.

“I forced myself to stop thinking of her as someone still somewhere, if only in memory, still obscurely alive, breathing, doing, moving, but as a shovelful of ashes; as a broken link, a biological dead end, an eternal withdrawal from reality.” (Fowles, 1978)

What really distinguishes cyberspace is our initial perception of temporality and our default recognition of every new online encounter as a ‘dead’ agent (for explanation of the concept please see (Bering, 2006)). While we realize our own existence, we subconsciously perceive everyone in Cyberspace as a figment of our own fantasy – a product of our mind.

The virtual world is often seen as a great liberator, providing us with an opportunity for liberation through disembodiment and identity construction. One can create a new virtual-self that is not limited by previous conscious experiences—in a virtual environment a professor can become a rock star (Nardi et al., 2004). Our identity can possibly be flexible

(Dreyfus, 2001) and we can pretend to be someone else, while still being ourselves. However, can 'one' really be 'many'? Aristotle states—the property of being many and the property of being one are contradictory. Thomas Nagel (2004) in his work "What is like to be a bat?", describes the problem of sensory experiences and argues that to know is not enough in order to be alike, e.g. even with scientific knowledge about a bat's sonar system we would still not know what it is like to be a bat.

The mind-body dualism and ideas of personal liberation stretch as far back as the time of Plato. Ideas of liberation and personal freedom are some of the most powerful concepts that have inspired humanity over the centuries; furthermore, these ideas have been a fruitful inspiration for imagining new types of utopian societies. Today, with technology in place, we can actually see these fantasies taking shape in virtual worlds. Virtual identity construction can hardly change what a man 'is itself' or what 'the man has'. Nevertheless, it can help to change how 'man stands in the estimation of others' (Aristotle, 2000), as identity is one of the most important elements in virtual worlds. Hence, disembodiment can liberate us from our own existence that is predefined by our own life. However, if we construct our identity to please our own fantasies, are we, in the words of Schopenhauer (2007), producing not a virtual-self but a virtual-slave of what other people think, instead of what we are 'in and for ourselves'?

When we talk about liberating ourselves by enrolling in a virtual world and escaping the boundaries of the human body, we have to ask ourselves—what in fact are we liberating; can we really have a disembodied experience in a cyber world? Kant (1999) provided us with his transcendental concept: 'the mind and body become one in order to pursue a unified goal, and if either is missing, the result is the non-existence of the experience' (Btihaj, 2004). Even earlier, Descartes conceived body not solely as subdivision of 'who we are' but as inseparable part of the world, as substance that has to be controlled (Seidler, 1998). Schopenhauer (1995) goes even further, arguing that the mind by itself, if not controlled by the *will*, can produce fantasies that are sometimes vulgar and of fleeting importance, just to feed our satisfaction for being (Hegel, 1979). So does participation in a virtual world liberate us, or enslave us in the interplay of our own fantasies?

The author believes that while we can play with our physical representation online, virtual reality is not a tool to help one escape from the mediocrity of one's own existence. We can never hide our true self behind our virtual identity and imagine that we are someone else, as there is a strong isomorphism between constructing and representing; hence, our constructed identity will always mimic our true self. Virtual space makes us even more transparent to others, as our behaviour is less limited by social norms and rules imposed on us in real life. Participation in a virtual world can be seen as just an escape from reality, a tickling of the will, and insubstantial reflection of self into self (Schopenhauer, 2007). However, reflection and thinking are commonly treated as a similar/constituting actions, as René Descartes (1991) stated – 'cogito ergo sum' - I reflect (think) therefore I am. Hence, by thinking we reflect what is in our minds, but what distinguishes virtual environment is that it makes what is in our minds more explicit than ever. A virtual world can be seen as a mirror that reflects and magnifies all the good and bad in a

person—'if a sinner looks in into the mirror of the virtual reality you don't expect an Apostle to look back' (adapted from St. Augustine (2002)).

Today, more and more people are spending most of their life on-line, but do they really live their lives, or just dream online? Possibly, it is just a new form of sleep, or even "death" of a conscious citizen, a burial of a living man where his mind is absent from the physical world while participating in this illiterate leisure—'otium sine litteris mors est et vivi hominis sepulture' (*leisure without literature is death, or rather the burial of a living man*) (Seneca, 1974).

In a virtual environment people are able to represent their fantasies explicitly for others to observe and furthermore, allow others to interact with their fantasies. How can we distinguish between the imaginary—something that just "is" - and what is genuine—"real"? Do we really construct a virtual kingdom of the spirit and liberate ourselves, or perhaps we are just enslaving ourselves in a virtual kingdom of deception? This dilemma reflects the obvious problem: "that through our conscious experience of introspection we are unable to conclude the existence of any third-personal fact, as to conceive that would require something far beyond the purely subjective contents of the mind" (Williams, 1990). However, in neither a virtual nor in a physical world does such mechanism exist.

Hence, are people taking it too far by putting/playing their fantasies 'out there'? Yet, we do not fully realize the long-term consequences of dealing with the *virtual* in the same way that we deal with the *real*. Sometimes this seems like insanity on a global scale, but who is in charge of the asylum?

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