EDITORIAL

Introduction – Phenomenology and virtuality†

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Our age is typified by technology (Kroes & Meijers, 2016), but it is the question of the virtual that has particularly come to the forefront at the turn of the century. The contemporary era of emergent digital technologies has seen the multiplication of virtual spaces – our civilisations are indeed steeped in the virtual – which has resulted in complex changes to the dimensions of our existence and experience. While thinkers such as Baudrillard (1981) emphasise a dichotomous relationship between reality and virtual reality, the enmeshed character of modern individuals within emergent virtual spaces may call into question the continuing relevance of such oppositions.

The term virtuality (a conflation of the words *reality* and *virtual*) thus presents a challenge to dichotomous views on reality and the virtual. Virtuality does not merely refer to virtual reality, but rather – in a broader sense – circumscribes the many virtual spaces that arise from modern digital technologies within the life-world of the individual. Virtuality denotes not merely those "obvious" virtual spaces that one engages with via so-called VR headsets and goggles, but rather the multitudinous forms of the virtual that already find their occurrence through social media networking sites and data transfer technologies, through instant communication (words spoken or written by one person and sent to another), through cell phones and TV screens, through advertising (targeted or otherwise), and by means of geographical guidance via GPS systems. The modern individual is immersed within virtuality, and we are living in a world of technological appearances wherein making sense of virtuality is becoming increasingly pressing.

A danger of the technological expansion of the virtual, especially as the virtual heads inexorably towards omnipresence, is that everything seems to fall apart into mere appearances. Robert Sokolowski formulates the problem of appearances in our technological era in terms of three phenomenological themes: 1) parts and wholes; 2) identity in manifolds; and 3) presence and absence. He argues that we are

> flooded by fragments without any wholes, by manifolds bereft of identities, and by multiple absences without any enduring real presence. We have *bricolage* and nothing else, and we think we can even invent ourselves at random by assembling convenient and pleasing but transient identities out of the bits and pieces we find around us. We pick up fragments to shore against our ruin (Sokolowski, 2000, pp. 3–4).

Sokolowski suggests that, in our engagement with the virtual, we are caught up in a crisis of appearances. However, are other avenues open to us?

If phenomenology allows one to "return to the things themselves" (Husserl, 2001, p. 168), to "describe the basic structures of human experience and understanding from a first-person perspective" (Carman, 2002, p. viii), then the individual's encounter with virtuality is a problem that phenomenology is particularly suited to address. While phenomenology must be grasped for its historical significance in terms of German and French philosophy, and in terms of developments in 20th century theorising since it arose, the fact that it speaks directly to concepts such as perception, embodiment, intentionality, self-consciousness, intersubjectivity, and temporality, allows it to provide particular insight into the virtual that the empirical sciences do not or cannot (Zahavi, 2018).

Phenomenology describes not a central and delineated canon of texts that stand in agreement; rather, there are overarching philosophical concerns, and common themes unify its proponents. Phenomenology argues for the rehabilitation of the life-world – where human existence is described and understood as embodied, and socially and culturally embedded as being-in-the-world – in the face of scientism, objectivism, and reductionism. These insights may contribute to the continuing discussion of the virtual, and due to phenomenology's contribution to a wide variety of disciplines such as literary studies, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and other empirical disciplines, we today find that phenomenology is enjoying something of a renaissance in terms of renewed interest in the subject (Zahavi, 2018). It is therefore well-positioned to speak to contemporary issues, and particularly to the virtual.

It is the aim of this special issue to promote interest in the emerging field of the phenomenology of virtuality, and insights from a wide variety of phenomenological perspectives (and multi-disciplinary viewpoints in conversation with phenomenology) have been welcomed in addressing this topic for this special issue. Several questions have been addressed by the contributors, including the following: What is the relation between virtuality and phenomenology? In what ways may traditional phenomenological thought be redeployed to gain insight into virtuality? What is the relation/differences between non-virtual and virtual being? Is it possible to distinguish reality from virtuality? How is selfhood constituted in virtuality? It is the spirit of phenomenology that directs the articles that form a part of this special issue, and in the first three articles we find the phenomenological themes of spatiality and corporeality in relation to virtuality come to the forefront (as contributors also speak to questions of place, experience, body, and sensation).

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In **Mathias Kofoed-Ottesen**'s article, an examination is conducted of Martin Heidegger's philosophy of dwelling (with a view to its importance for the concept of "place"). Kofoed-Ottesen shows how a phenomenological concept of place may elucidate the phenomenology of virtual reality through the contextualisation of Jeff Malpas' concept of the non-autonomy of the virtual (Malpas [2009, p. 135] remarks that the virtual is merely a "part or aspect of the everyday world"). Kofoed-Ottesen argues for a clearer understanding of the notion of causal non-autonomy of the virtual and contends that the autonomy, or lack thereof, in terms of virtual reality should not lead to the conclusion that virtual reality cannot be experienced and examined as a self-standing entity. In other words, Kofoed-Ottesen suggests that in order to properly understand virtual reality, we cannot limit ourselves to the reductionistic view presented by Malpas. Rather, they argue that we must account also for the phenomenology of experiencing virtuality – and under such a phenomenological consideration, the distinctions made between non-virtual and virtual reality are revealed to be more diffuse. They then argue that we can plausibly accept that places may exist in virtual reality, despite current technological and practical limitations, and go on to consider some possible metaphysical differences between virtual and non-virtual places. Kofoed-Ottesen conclude that, when dealing with the phenomenon of virtuality, we ought to consider both the causal-physical relations to non-virtuality, while at the same time recognising the experiential properties that can be examined through phenomenology.

Irene Breuer engages with the correlation between virtual and physical reality as they concern the body in continuation of this issue's reflection on the theme of spatiality and corporeality in terms of the virtual. They argue that the lived body, transposed into virtual reality, becomes a body without organs in Deleuze's terms. In other words, the lived body, a sensitive field of sensorial events immersed in a lived space, becomes a virtual body made up of intensities, of pure forces or magnitudes within a vector space, thereby losing its affective qualities. Breuer suggests that lived and virtual bodies build up a correlation bridged not by intentionality, as phenomenology would maintain, but by sensation. Virtuality is thus characterised by both the loss of corporeality and the simulation of the lifeworld. But, asks Breuer, how can the split between the real and the virtual body be bridged? On the one hand, in Deleuze's conception of sensation, real and virtual collapse into one another so that the real world "resonates" with its virtual double. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty's concept of form relates both realities in terms of a correlation of signification between the physical and the existential realms. Breuer concludes that both mechanism and finalism should be rejected in terms of the virtual, and that the physical and the vital (or phenomenal and the virtual) are not representative of different modes of being; rather, the correlation is ruled by sensation as a system of intensive forces and whose evidence in the body is explained by the notion of structure or form of behaviour.

The theme of spatiality and corporeality in terms of the virtual is also a theme that **Jean du Toit** (guest editor of this special issue) finds important in his description of the convergence of the virtual with contemporary existence. Du Toit considers Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenological account of embodiment invaluable for interrogating the question of the virtual because the virtual is encountered from the basis of the facticity of the embodied individual – a facticity that is closely related to perception and motor intentionality. Their article suggests that these characteristics of the body-subject should crucially be taken into consideration in order to develop a clearer description of the virtual that counters the empirical turn in philosophy of technology. However, argues du Toit, beyond Merleau-Ponty's embodied account that relates to early technologies, his later concept of the flesh describes the intertwining of the body-subject and the world in a manner that is suggestive of a new account of the individual's sensibility in relation to the virtual. Du Toit thus develops an original concept to describe the existential-ontological structure of the virtual from the basis of primordiality: The embodied screen. They argue that the embodied screen, as it arises in the engagement of the individual with the digital technology artefact, presents an alternative conceptualisation of the coincidence of the body-subject (who understands the world spatially) with the virtual (as non-spatial) that has specific existential implications.

The next two articles deal broadly with the themes of identity and intersubjectivity in terms of virtuality, and these articles reflect on the questions of family, media, and the digital divide. **Michael F. Deckard and Stephen Williamson** employ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and Bernard Stiegler as a response to John Locke's theory of personal identity. Deckard and Williamson identify in Locke, who has been foundational in the fields of philosophy and psychology, two fundamental threads intertwined in terms of identity that they describe as the flux of perception-thought-action (i.e. continuity of consciousness) and memory. Through reference to Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and Stiegler, they show how these dual threads constitute a phenomenological self (*l'ésprit*), a lived experience of our identity that is not only perhaps the most essential component of one's humanity, but also the most threatened in contemporary commercial convergence of the real and the virtual in the "Age of Disruption". Deckard and Williamson suggest that in taking up the social imaginary, in which fantasies influence one's desires and one's reactions to external stimuli, we should recognise that cinema and media in general have more power over our actions than most of us realise. They impose a kind of "normality" between what is viewed, saved, programmed and how we act, think, or buy. However, Deckard and Williamson suggest that this normality can be questioned.

In continuation of this issue's phenomenological engagement with the question of identity and intersubjectivity in terms of the virtual, **Thando Nkohla-Ramunenyiwa** speaks to the African context by way of the Aristotelian term "koinonia" (as denoting a political community which aims to achieve a common good for society as a whole) via Schmidt, Jacobsen, and Brunner, extending "koinonia" to the tenets of community values and the common good (including values such as justice, fairness and reciprocity, grounded in good will and fellowship). They argue that goodwill and fellowship among African parents in a community allows such parents to assist each other in raising children in the community and ensures that children are grounded in African values – hence the African proverb "a single hand cannot raise a child" in which particularly the elderly not only sustain order in the community, but also function as the custodians of African value systems that should ground younger generations. The digital divide, Nkohla-Ramunenyiwa argues, may present a challenge in terms of solidarity of African parents, as a village, raising their children. Hence, they suggest,

a strategy is required for modern African parents to not abandon the solidarity afforded by their cultural values. The communal way of raising their children should persist in order to preserve the African value of parental solidarity in raising children, even in the midst of what technology and the digital divide presents to the African community, argues Nkohla-Ramunenyiwa.

The final two articles engage with specific forms of virtual technologies and virtual reality from within the framework of phenomenology to lead to broader insights as regards virtuality and embodiment in contemporary society. **Jonathan Harth** and colleagues argue that virtual reality (VR) offers new possibilities to alter the perception of reality, and that these possibilities are mainly related to the feeling of presence in a virtual environment. With reference to the VR performance "The Machine to be Another" (TMTBA), they describe an innovative embodiment system that enables a virtual body swap between two users. They conceptualise the performance as a form of breaching experiment that allows for the alteration of self- and body perception. With the use of TMTBA and a qualitative research approach, Harth et al. hope to gain a closer insight into the formation, alteration and persistence of body images. In turn, this challenges the phenomenological idea that one's sense of bodily presence is essentially anchored in one's physical or "objective" body as one knows it, potentially expanding the notion of bodily presence. For Harth et al., these types of experiments have the potential to make elaborate use of another's experiencing, thinking and feeling in order to shed light on one's own embodiment.

The final article addresses the phenomenological implications of specifically virtual, augmented, and mixed reality technologies. **Daniel O'Shiel** argues that while reality and virtuality might still be very much phenomenologically distinguishable, such may not be the case forever. They argue for two main types of virtuality – one inherently involved in the dynamic horizons of perceptual experiences, while the other is all of our experiences of digital images – in order to show that a particular possible instantiation of the latter type, namely "pure" mixed reality (MR), might come to blur and collapse various experiential categories in the future, not least real and irreal, like never before. To show this, O'Shiel presents, firstly, their understanding of the two basic types of virtuality, as understood from a classical phenomenological analysis. Secondly, they give an account of the most important family of "virtual technologies" relevant to the question at hand, namely virtual, augmented and mixed reality (VR, AR and MR respectively) technologies. With specific reference to MR, they explain what "pure" MR is and how, through tactile holograms, this category might change even basic experiential distinctions going forward, and not necessarily for the better. In fact, argues O'Shiel, these distinctions have already been blurred and sometimes inverted in the order of our values and use in our current virtual technology, screen-culture age.

In summation, this special issue gathers together a variety of insights that address the highly significant and impactful question of the virtual from the basis of phenomenology. These articles reveal both emancipatory and delimiting potentialities of the virtual, in general and in terms of specific technologies, while again emphasising the inherent value of phenomenology in contributing to philosophical reflection and discussion on this important and contentious subject. What is revealed is that, in critically engaging with the virtual, phenomenology provides an avenue for sustained description of and critical insights into the technologies that shape contemporary society.

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