

Reality+ – Virtual Worlds and the Problem of Philosophy

David J Chalmers (2022). *WW Norton & Company*.

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Introduction

The premise of virtual realism is that virtual items, virtual minds, and virtual environments are real. In his book *Reality+*, prominent philosopher David Chalmers has recently revived this line of thought. He says that not only do we have knowledge of virtual reality, a claim that falls in the category of epistemology, but also that those objects have existence, a claim in the subject of ontology. This epistemological viewpoint of virtual realism, I argue, is coherent with non-realism, a position that holds that the existence of the world can neither be proven nor denied. However, anyone who is a virtual realist will have to first have to deal with the problems of existence, and if they do, be careful of making arguments for the same from the analysis of dreams.

Reviews of *Reality+*

In his latest book *Reality+*, David Chalmers (2022) revisits the claim that virtual reality is true reality. He devotes an entire chapter to addressing the question of reality in his book. Chalmers (2022, p. 105) addresses the public's assumption that virtual reality is not real and then stakes his claim that "[v]irtual reality is real – that is, the entities in virtual reality really exist". Chalmers (2022, p. 11) states there is a public perception about anything virtual being unreal. If virtual minds and objects are real, "we cannot know we're not in a simulation". He places his argument in line with Descartes' sceptical question that if we do not know whether we are in a virtual world, we will not be able to know much about the external world. Such a problem should technically affect non-realism as well, but as Ram-Prasad (2002) has argued, sceptical questions can arise only because of a prior presumption of a real world, a position the non-realist does not commit to. This review looks at *Reality+* through such a lens, i.e. one where an agent/philosopher commits neither to realism nor to idealism.

There have been numerous academic reviews of the book since its publication. Lucy Osler's (2022) review of *Reality+* is divided into two parts: a pop philosophy and an academic side. In the latter, she says that because of his very limited investigation into the phenomenology of virtuality, the reader gets "a relatively narrow philosophical analysis of virtual reality proper" (Osler, 2022, p. 3). In Aaron Kagan and Charles Lassiter's (2022) assessment of Chalmers' book, they also note that Chalmers fails to deal with the phenomenological aspects of virtuality. One particular point they present is "Pitfall #4: Treating ideal VR as nothing more than another way to talk about possible worlds, thought experiments, and other philosophical curiosities" (Kagan & Lassiter, 2022, p. 10). In trying to explain virtuality in terms of

philosophical aspects, they say that Chalmers ends up talking about those concepts and in the process virtuality itself takes a back seat. Miloš Agatonović (2023, pp. 1,2) points out that in Chalmers' version of virtual fictionalism, one can engage in a virtual world as virtual and not a real one. It still resembles a form of fictionalism "wherein fictional characters are real in situ story, to which we react as they are real while knowing that they do not exist in situ the actual world". The consequence of this claim is that real objects from the actual world would count as fictional in Chalmers' simulation hypothesis. Anand Vaidya (2023) does an excellent comparison between Chalmers and three Indian perspectives: Abhidharma Buddhism, Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja. I must note that my article, while also following the Śāṅkara route, has a line of argument that is different from and supplementary to his.¹ Vaidya (2023, p. 6) concludes that the perspective of virtuality having no reality is surpassed by Chalmers, Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja, and in comparison notes that "Chalmers gives the highest sense of reality to virtual worlds and objects, followed then by Rāmānuja, and then Śāṅkara". This article picks up from these criticisms and deals with the phenomenological aspects of virtuality through the gaps in the threads that Chalmers weaves. From Vaidya, it looks into the realism of the Śāṅkara school. It deals with the problem of differentiating virtuality from reality as dealt by Lassiter and Kagan, and gives a grounding to the cognitive aspects that would allow us to explain some experiences of virtual reality as called for by Osler.

Chalmers' criterion for reality

The general understanding of the simulation hypothesis is that the world around us is a simulation. The idea is that simulations have come to a stage where we can mimic actual reality and one would find it difficult to differentiate between the two. Chalmers' (2022) version is that we are currently in and always have been in an artificially designed computer simulation of the world. He says that there is no way to prove that we are not in simulation, for whatever evidence we provide might also itself be a simulation. This is because all evidence we can present would have to come from the world, which could be derived from a simulation itself. Assuming the validity of this argument has consequences on another claim that he makes. Chalmers asserts that reality exists independent of us. Regardless of whether we believe reality exists or not, if we use Chalmers' line of reasoning in the simulation hypothesis here and ask: what if

¹ Following Ram-Prasad (2002), I consider all followers of the Advaita tradition as non-realists.

there is no way to establish that reality exists independently of us?, it can be reasoned that any evidence that is given to prove that the world exists independently of us is ultimately dependent on us. The reason this counterclaim is brought is because for Chalmers, one criterion for what constitutes reality is that it must be independent of the mind. He says that

[i]f something exists in a way that's independent of anyone's mind, then it has an especially robust sort of reality. If something exists only in a way that depends on our minds, then it's less robustly part of the external world (Chalmers, 2022, p. 112).

If mind independence cannot be established, then this project he advances – that is the motive to establish virtual reality as reality – falls into jeopardy. The problem here is not about the hierarchy of robustness that Chalmers devises, but rather how he establishes the independence of one's mind in the first place. There may be multiple routes to explaining mind independence and some may be legitimate, but Chalmers' arguments do not seem to hold ground. Chalmers used Vasubandhu's argument, but did not address the historical response from the non-realist: that is that externality is a fundamental feature of experience.

Chalmers' notion of robust reality also has drawbacks. Let us look at three cases:

1. In the desert, Clyde and Bonnie are strolling. Bonnie alerts her partner when she spots water. "We're in a desert, stupid", Clyde exclaims as he halts his steps and turns to face Bonnie. Now the water Bonnie observed was independent of her perception, and Clyde's assessment was reliant on his perception. The reality of Bonnie's deceptive mirage would be stronger than Clyde's allegation that it did not exist.
2. Someone observes smoke on a hill and infers the presence of fire. The fire here would have a less robust sort of reality since as an inferred property, it is mind-dependent.
3. If one follows an emission theory of perception, then, when someone observes smoke on a hill and infers the presence of fire, the power that goes out of the eye captures the smoke but not the fire. The levels of reality are again distorted.

To define one criterion of reality, that is mind independence, Chalmers necessarily needs to invoke another criterion, namely existence, something he considers as a separate criterion. From the two criterions mentioned, mind independence can be reduced to an aspect of existence. If we assert that being a cow means having skin and also having a dewlap, an argument might be presented for not reducing the dewlap in terms of skin. We could argue that among mammals, the dewlap is an essential feature of the cow, but to maintain that irreducibility, we would need to accept that skin is not a necessary criterion for determining a cow. Chalmers could also do away with existence as a criterion if he wanted to maintain the role of mind independence, but since he asserts both, the reduction ought to follow. Chalmers admits that there is a difficulty in defining existence, and mentions that other philosophers have also come to similar conclusions. Regardless, he says that perceptibility and measurability are a rough method to determine what exists. Chalmers' argument assumes that by explaining certain features of existence, one will arrive at existence. However, this

seems insufficient because existence in itself simply cannot be accepted due to an understanding of the features of existence (Ram-Prasad, 2002).²

The non-realist does not deny existence, but is fine with the assumption of existence or the cognition/knowledge of it. The non-realist, in keeping up with the assumptions of Occam's razor, wishes to minimise one's ontology as much as possible. It does not imply that the non-realist sees the world as non-existent, because they are committed to explaining the conditions of our phenomenal experience, which they claim is not coherent in the systems of anti-realism and idealism. When Chalmers explains the criterion of reality as existence, the non-realist reduces this to an epistemological problem by saying that all one needs is the knowledge of existence and not existence itself (Ram-Prasad, 2002). Chalmers would say that Joe Biden exists and Santa Claus does not. The non-realist would argue that all an agent can have is knowledge of Santa Claus' non-existence and Biden's existence. Sthaneshwar Timalina (2009) says that the validity of knowledge, according to this idea, is not dependent on an object, because what verifies the existence or absence of entities is not intrinsic to the object itself, but rather to knowledge of that object.

Why the non-realist is not an idealist

While explaining idealism, Chalmers studies the views of Descartes, Berkley and Vasubandhu. Descartes represents the sceptic who uses dreams to doubt the externality of the world. Berkley does address dreams, but he does not make an idealist argument out of it. Instead, he distinguishes it from what is real based on its lack of order, i.e. its inability to display steadiness, vivacity and distinctness (Downing, 2011, para 3.2.1). Chalmers' reading is that Vasubandhu argues on similar lines as Berkeley in claiming that reality is made of minds. One fundamental difference which Chalmers misses is that Berkeley – though he shares the fundamental anti-physicalism stance as Vasubandhu – believes God's will shapes the objects of our reality, while Vasubandhu is content with using the dream argument to conclude his idealistic argument (Ram-Prasad, 2002). Another difference is that for Vasubandhu, reality is veridical only if it is necessarily intrinsic to cognition. However, for Berkeley, reality can be veridical only if God exists beyond our minds. Regardless, Chalmers (2022, p. 70) finds the problem in their positions:

The underlying problem for idealism is that...to explain the regularities in our appearances (the fact that we see an identical tree day after day, say), we need to postulate some reality that lies beyond these appearances and sustains them.

While Chalmers has shown the problem in Berkeley's argument, he has not shown the trajectory in the history of Indian philosophy that responded to Vasubandhu. This is where the non-realist comes in, and as we will see, the response is quite different from Chalmers' reading of the problems of idealism. The Śāṅkara (8th century) response to Vasubandhu's claims of idealism from the argument of dreams come from two aspects. (Ram-Prasad, 2002, pp. 38–79; 162–200). One was the ability to

² This is written by Śrī Harsa, a twelfth century Advaitin, in his *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā*.

distinguish a waking state from dreams, and the second was the assumption of externality.

Any individual who upon waking from sleep having experienced a dream knows that they are awake and sublates the dream. They may continue to experience the objects of the dream, but they are aware that those are dream objects and they do not deny the experience of the dream objects. Thus, upon waking, an agent has the cognitive ability to recognise that dream items are untrue and do not deny their experience. According to non-realists, this cognitive skill would allow one to distinguish between what was a dream and what was not, but this does not imply that the waking state indicates the actual world, but only a reality external to our self. Just because cognitive experience can take place without external objects, one cannot argue that waking experience occurs without recourse to externality. This is because one can only speak about the nature of dreams by first knowing the nature of waking experience, and externality is a fundamental feature of experience. Chakravarty Ram-Prasad (2002) has clearly argued that before dreams may be rationally deprived of externality, the concept of externality must be experienced while awake. Therefore, it is illogical to dispute the externality of the waking experience that served as the foundation for the very idea of externality and dreams.

Chalmers (2002, p. 70) asks, "but now we have created a gap between our own perception and reality, so the sceptical problem arises. How can we know about the reality (whether God or an external world) behind the appearances?". If one assumed a physical atomistic reality behind our appearances and sought to prove it, the non-realist argues – like Vasubandhu – that the world is non-atomistic. If it is atomistic and physical, then the sceptical argument arises. This is because an atomist and physical world is considered real and mind-independent. Berkeley's claim also has the same sceptical problem that Chalmers highlights because Berkeley's God is a sort of proof for externality. But as the non-realist is a non-atomist, they are not looking for any proof of externality, but merely an assumption or knowledge of it.

Some non-realists have equated the waking state with a dream. The idea behind this thought is that for the non-realist, knowledge of the self is not dependent on the senses, and the senses are necessary to experience the world. Thus, if we are in a self-aware state, we will not have sense experience-based knowledge, and then the world we perceive through our senses can be falsified just like the waking state sublates a dream. However the entailment of this position is that in this case, there is no difference between waking state objects and dream objects, and idealism entails. The non-realist's point is that the world as an appearance is supposed to imply that we can be in states that are not dependent on this world, which in the soteriology of the non-realist, is knowledge of the self (Timalsina, 2009). As Timalsina (2013, p. 593) mentions of one non-realist, that "to dream is not to reject the phenomenality of entities, but only to argue that just as a dream is but consciousness, so is the world. Consciousness, in this presentation, projects reality, as if outside, just like in a dream". He argues that when seen from this angle, dream does not deny the reality of what is being dreamed; rather, it rejects its phenomenological separation from the dreamer: dream entities do not exist outside of the dreaming person. Instead of seeing dream arguments as metaphysical, they must be viewed as epistemological (Timalsina, 2013).

From the point of ordinary experience, the distinction from the dream ought to be made from the waking state. From the point of view of the metaphysics of the non-realist, the world is not the end, because self-knowledge is the end, and so the status of this ordinary world from the point of self-knowledge is illusory. Yet a person having self-knowledge would perceive the world that we are observing like a persistent illusion, i.e. as false. So while Chalmers, like Descartes, is desirous to know about the reality behind the appearance, it is only because they presume that the world perceived is determinate and physical and that there is nothing beyond it. The non-realist, unlike Vasubandhu, uses dreams to show that whatever is experienced, even in a waking state, cannot be validated. Even if we have the epistemic capacity for verification, there is no proof that our current experiences are fundamental (Ram-Prasad, 2002). The non-realist would ask Chalmers if it is possible to claim that we are and always have been in a certain cognitive state.

We can know the falsity of dream states only once we are in a waking state, implying there is a form of reality which we did not have access to while dreaming but only when awake. They may, however, ask whether there could be a similar form of reality that we do not have access to while we are in a waking state. If this is the case, then one can invalidate our current experience and allow us to doubt what we experience. This is how Chalmers is able to raise issues of a global illusion. However, the non-realist argues that our ability to make judgments on valid cognitive states occurs only because our experience is designed this way. What this means is that dream states can be negated by waking states, but there is no state commonly available to ordinary cognitive life such that it negates waking states. The methods of validity we use are formed out of our ordinary means of experience. And for that very reason, we are unable to speak of any other state that invalidates our waking state, only because our experience is of a waking state only. It is only because experience precedes validation of that experience that we would be unable to use our current means of validation to test our own current experience (Ram-Prasad, 2002). Having such fears would be misleading ourselves. Error comes only from what is already experienced, and to say that our current experience is already an error from the point of our waking state goes against the fundamental features of our cognitive life. This would allow the non-realist to question the third criterion for reality that Chalmers brings up: non-illusoriness. Chalmers (2022, p. 113) says that to be non-illusory is to say that something is real "when they're roughly as we believe them to be". The non-realist agent also believes things to be how they are, but would claim it as an assumption, not a proof.

Are non-realists following the simplicity rule?

The rule of simplicity is a philosophical tool to evaluate multiple theories and prefer the most economical option (Guha, 2012). Western philosophers call this Occam's razor, while Indians refer to it as *lāghava tarka*. Chalmers (2022) writes that a theory that posits a real world is simpler than a simulation world because the real world posits a lesser number of worlds. He then argues that this need not always be the case. He says that a letter if found on Mars might indicate rock scratches, while the same letter found on Earth might indicate human involvement, and the options would sound bizarre if their locations were reversed.

Chalmers sees this as a case where simplicity is overridden by possibility.

I think that the actual rule that would have to be applied here is not the rule of possibility, but rather the rule of default or specific value. To claim something is possible – at least in ordinary usage – is to ask if something is plausible. It is clear that we would say that the letter found on Mars could not be written by an intelligent being, because we presume that there are no intelligent beings on Mars. If a society has a community-based belief that there is intelligent life on Mars, then when they read the news that a letter was found on Mars, they would not have any doubts, and this is because they have a different set of presumptions. Thus the dependence of the rule is not based on possibility, but rather on the default presumptions of an epistemic agent. The example Nirmalya Guha (2012) gives is that when someone spots a King cobra in the Sundarbans of West Bengal and in Berkeley Square in London, England. No one would doubt the sighting in the Sundarbans, but if the same case is claimed in Berkeley Square, one definitely would be confronted with an invalidating doubt that what the person saw might not have been a cobra. This is because the British community presumes the unavailability of cobras in the UK, while it is a fairly common sight in the Sundarbans of West Bengal, India. This does not mean that it is not possible to have cobras in Berkeley Square, but just that our epistemic considerations question its actuality, not its possibility.

The rule of simplicity, just like the default or specific value rule, are cognitive validators that are helpful in philosophical argumentation. Stephen Phillips (2019, p. 45), while writing on Gaṅgeśa's study of these cases, says that he "joins a consensus across the classical schools that such arguments are not in themselves knowledge-generators, although they can swing the balance concerning what it is rational to believe". Chalmers is doing exactly that. Let us read Chalmers through the default or specific value rule. By default, we assume that we are not in a simulation, and that we are in a perfectly real world. However, the specific scenario arises where one realises that one might be in a virtual world. Chalmers is asking the specific to become the default. How this can and will be done is something Chalmers does not address. This point is also brought up in Lassiter and Kagan's (2022, p. 11) review in which they say that "we don't actually have the technology at present to make virtual experiences indistinguishable from non-virtual ones, and whether we ever will is an open question". While Lassiter and Kagan doubt the possibility of distinguishing virtuality from reality through the perspective of technology, the non-realist route is to ask the same from the perspective of experience.

Conclusion

The non-realist agrees with Chalmers' claims that reality has causal power and genuineness, but whether it is mind-independent, existent and non-illusory is something that cannot be judged by the given standards of experience that ordinary humans have.

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