Siegel, S. 2010. Do visual experiences have contents? In *Perceiving the World*, ed. B. Nanay. 333–368. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tye, M. 1995. *Ten Problems of Consciousness: A Representational Theory of the Phenomenal Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Westerhoff, J. 2020. *The Non-Existence of the Real World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williamson, T. 2000. *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

An Appearance–Reality Distinction in an Unreal World

ALLISON AITKEN

1. Introduction

When it comes to the structure of reality, foundationalist intuitions have predominated throughout the history of philosophy, and this remains largely the case in contemporary metaphysics, despite the fact that in contemporary epistemology, infinitism and coherentism are treated as serious theoretical contenders. Recently, however, a growing number of voices have challenged foundationalist presuppositions about the structure of reality, particularly construed as a structure of metaphysical grounding relations, with the possibility of coherentist and infinitist structures finding new defenders.[1] Jan Westerhoff's *The Non-existence of the Real World* is an important contribution to this conversation for his extended and systematic defense of the viability not only of a kind of first-order ontological non-foundationalism but also of a second-order non-foundationalism about truth.

In this compelling and engaging book, Westerhoff makes a case for a comprehensive non-foundationalism much like that defended by Nāgārjuna's (c. second century) Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy without ever mentioning Madhyamaka philosophers, texts, concepts or arguments. Instead, as he makes explicit in the preface, he sets out to establish a number of Madhyamaka conclusions using strictly contemporary conceptual resources. In this ambitious tour de force, Westerhoff brings together an imposing array

---

1 The metaphysical possibility of metaphysical infinitism has been defended by Schaffer (2003), Bohn (2009, 2018), Bliss (2013), Tahko (2014) and Morganti (2014, 2015). Barnes (2018) argues that ontological dependence is symmetrical, and Thompson (2018) that grounding is non-symmetric (rather than asymmetric), and Morganti (2018) makes a case for metaphysical coherentism.

of arguments in support of this comprehensive non-foundationalism, drawing not only from various fields of philosophy including metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of mathematics and philosophy of science but also from empirical sciences, including cognitive science, genetics, evolutionary biology and quantum physics.

As someone who works on the history of Madhyamaka philosophy, I have deep sympathies with Westerhoff's project and overarching argument. But since I assume here the role of critic, I will try to draw attention to some aspects of his work that could use clarification or would benefit from further discussion. *The Non-existence of the Real World* largely takes the form of an extended negative argument, consisting in the rejection of four targets: the reality of the external world, the reality of the internal world, the existence of ontological foundations and the existence of foundational truths. The success of the negative arguments, however, is linked with the viability of the positive picture that Westerhoff proposes as an alternative, a view that he refers to as 'irrealism'. In what follows, I will analyse several dimensions of irrealism and its implications and invite Westerhoff to say more to flesh out his characterization of the non-foundationalist world that remains when the dust of his negative project settles. I will begin by raising some clarificatory questions about the irrealist's account of human cognition as taking place in a brain-based representational interface. I will then turn to the question of how the irrealist accounts for an appearance–reality distinction. Finally, I will explore how we may (or may not) be able to understand irrealism as an ontological theory.

As noted, Madhyamaka is a kind of silent partner in this book. Westerhoff is explicit about the fact that he is not defending a specific interpretation of Madhyamaka here, and comments, 'Whether its outlines trace the contours of Nāgārjuna I leave for my readers to decide' (2020: xxix). Taking this as an invitation, I will bring an interpretation of Madhyamaka into the discussion from time to time.

2. The Irrealist's brain-based representational interface

Westerhoff denies the reality of an external world that exists independently of our representational frameworks by challenging common reasons for resorting to the existence of such an external world driven by epistemological considerations. He argues that a mind-independent external world is not required to account for the appearance of externality or in order to underwrite distinctions between veridical and illusory states, nor is it required to support a plausible epistemological theory. Drawing on elements of Donald Hoffman et al.'s (2015) interface theory, Jakob Hohwy's (2013) prediction error minimization theory and Thomas Metzinger's (2010) account of perception as a brain-based simulation analogous to virtual reality, Westerhoff argues for an

account of perception as a kind of brain-based representationalism, on which the supposition of a world of mind-independent material objects is entirely superfluous.

According to Westerhoff, 'The irrealist holds that our best empirical accounts of human perception and cognition imply that all human cognition takes place in a brain-based representational interface' (2020: 71). He argues that the postulation of anything existing beyond the veil of perception (viz. outside of the representational interface) is not only explanatorily useless but it also turns out to be incoherent. Based on similar considerations that led Berkeley to claim that it is incoherent to conceive of something unconceived, according to Westerhoff, any attempt on our part to represent something that exists independently of the representational interface is simply confused. Thus, whatever there is resides *within* the 'representational interface', and whatever resides within that interface lays no claim to mind-, language- or theory-independence, but is instead a mere appearance. Yet that means that the brain itself and the brain-based processes responsible for our perceptions must also be reframed in irrealist terms as simply parts of the representational interface along with the rest of the external-seeming world. In motivating the irrealist's accommodation of scientific explanations (such as understanding perceptions as grounded in neurophysiological processes) by reframing them as parts of the representational interface, Westerhoff draws parallels with the Berkeleyan idealist's accommodation of scientific physical theories by reframing them as theories about different kinds of mental entities (2020: 33, n. 61, 77). Thus, on irrealism, a brain-based scientific explanation turns out to be simply another 'layer' of representations, or another 'version' (to borrow Nelson Goodman's term of choice) of the representational interface.

That the representational interface is 'based' in the brain prima facie suggests a foundationalist story of some kind. This, of course, cannot be the picture that Westerhoff has in mind given the irrealist's commitment to a thoroughgoing non-foundationalism. So, while this is no doubt a purely linguistic qualm, it nonetheless prompts the question of how precisely we should understand the irrealist's dependence structure. What structural properties characterize the dependence relations within the interface? And indeed, what kinds of dependence relations do the brain and the interface itself stand in?

The brain clearly cannot be independent on irrealism; it can be neither an ungrounded nor self-grounding entity without violating the irrealist's first-order non-foundationalism. Westerhoff argues for the consistency of both coherentist and infinitist metaphysical grounding structures but seems ambivalent about which is the best model for characterizing the irrealist's world. If this picture conforms to a coherentist structure of some kind and the brain stands in symmetrical relations with representational interface, then how precisely does the brain depend on the interface? Alternatively, the fact that the interface is 'based' in the brain is suggestive

of an asymmetrical dependence structure, so perhaps a form of infinitism is more promising for the irrealist. But what would such a virtuous regress look like? What is the brain grounded in, and what is the brain's dependence base grounded in etc.? While Westerhoff ultimately argues that there is no one final, ultimately true theory about how the irrealist's virtual world exists, one would still wish to hear the irrealist's best-working theory.

A related worry about this brain-based representational interface story concerns a central feature of the irrealist's theory of perception: that it is phenomenally transparent. On this model, our brain engages in a range of hidden processes to which we do not have introspective access, and which we 'see right through' in order to arrive at the 'virtual' objects that populate our world (2020: 52). This is true not only in the case of our perceptions of apparently external objects but also in the case of our perceptions of our own mental events. Westerhoff claims that 'the hidden causes that bring about our perception of mental events are as hidden as the causes that bring about perceptions of external objects' (2020: 144). For the irrealist, 'None of this processing is introspectively accessible, and hence there is no privileged access to the internal' (2020: 145). The proposal of phenomenal transparency would, then, seem to presuppose a host of phenomenal invisibilia to which we lack direct epistemic access, but which stands outside our experience constructing it.

Yet irrealism is also a picture of representations/appearances all the way down, or alternatively all the way round. So, if we lack phenomenal access to how the virtual 'sausage' is made, is this not smuggling in a mind-independent external world of some kind through the backdoor? How can neurophysiological processes be phenomenally transparent (lurking behind appearances or perhaps in a phenomenally inaccessible domain 'between' us and appearances), be responsible for the production of appearances within the interface, and yet be nothing *but* appearances themselves?

Another worry for irrealism's brain-based representational interface is the spectre of solipsism. Westerhoff provides a helpful metaphor for understanding the irrealist model of perception on which we are located in the centre of a sphere, with all the activity on the inner surface of the sphere caused by events happening inside the sphere (2020: 54). As Westerhoff describes it:

> we are trapped inside a sphere, constituted by the veil of perception, such that the exterior of the sphere is explained away as a competing explanation of the world as it appears to us. (2020: 80)

The veil of perception is, then, constituted by the outmost set of states we need information about in order to construct the model we have constructed, and everything we perceive is constructed within the veil. But, as Westerhoff acknowledges, this picture may induce a sense of 'ontological claustrophobia' (2020: 73). He notes:

> If irrealism is true, we are suffering from a neurophysiological version of the locked-in syndrome. We cannot escape the virtual world generated by our brain because there would be no 'we' outside of the simulation. (2020: 73)

Westerhoff even accepts a qualified equivalence between irrealism and a version of Nozick's famous 'experience machine' thought experiment (2020: 75–76, Nozick 1974: 43–44). Of course, one important distinction between the two is that Nozick's thought experiment presupposes the existence of a real world outside of the artifice of the experience machine, while on irrealism, there is nothing *but* the world of the simulation. Now, Nozick's experience machine is intended to expose the shortcomings of hedonism and to pump our intuitions about the necessity of veridical experiences – including the possibility of our engaging in real actions in relation to real people – as constitutive elements of a good life. But, given that Westerhoff places metaphysics in the 'driving seat' of his philosophical theorizing, he bites the bullet when it comes to irrealist implications for ethics (2020: 78). So, while there can be no real ethical relations, real ethical agency and no connections with other real people, he nonetheless sees irrealism as supporting a kind of 'virtual ethics' (2020: 77–78). But in the absence of real connections with other real people, it would seem that the irrealist must bite the bullet when it comes to solipsism as well.

Or course, according to the irrealist, *I* am no more real than the other people populating my representational interface insofar as I too am merely an appearance. But there is an important distinction between me and the other people *qua* representations in my interface: I alone enjoy the appearance of a first-person point of view and phenomenal subjectivity. I occupy the centre of the sphere after all, and there is something it is *like* to experience the interface from that perspective. Given that mine is the only first-personal perspective and the only phenomenal consciousness within this brain-based interface, there looks to be a very real sense in which I am alone in my interface.

So, do we occupy isolated representational interfaces or are our interfaces somehow connected up in a kind of multiplayer virtual reality experience? Or alternatively, is mine the only interface that there is – am I a single player alone in the world? The irrealist would likely say that there is something confused about all these scenarios insofar as they each suggest the possibility of saying something about what does or does not exist beyond one's representational interface. Westerhoff clarifies that irrealism is not a nihilism but an atheism about the external world. By this he means that irrealism does *not* claim that 'there is nothing on the right-hand side of the veil of perception' (2020: 55). After all, to make a claim about the existence or non-existence of something outside the representational interface would require adopting a position outside the representational interface, which the irrealist argues is incoherent.[2]

---

2   See Westerhoff's (2020: 49–50) discussion of Nagel's (1986: 54–61) centreless view.

Instead, 'the irrealist would want to say that the right-hand side exists *only* as part of *the* representational interface' (2020: 56; emphasis mine). Still, even if the irrealist refuses to engage in talk of anything outside of the representational interface(s), one would wish for clarification of how this picture can or cannot accommodate multiple first-personal perspectives and phenomenally conscious experiences – whether '*the*' representational interface is strictly singular or not.[3]

3. The irrealist's appearance–reality distinction

Many of Westerhoff's arguments against the fundamental reality of the external and internal worlds in Chapters 1 and 2 turn on demonstrating an appearance–reality distinction of some kind. In the case of the external world, he argues that, despite appearances to the contrary, we not only lack direct epistemic access to a world of mind-independent material objects but we also lack justifiable grounds for inferring that our perceptions are causally linked up with or meaningfully resemble such a world (2020: 53). What's more, despite appearances to the contrary, we are in no more direct epistemic contact with our inner states than we are with mind-independent external objects, nor are our introspection-based judgements concerning our own mental states incorrigible. As Westerhoff concludes, 'much of our introspectively gained knowledge is not indubitably certain; in fact we are often wrong about what we believe to be going on in our own minds' (2020: 145).

But beyond the variety of localized perceptual and introspective errors that Westerhoff recruits in his arguments against a real external or internal world, there is also what we might refer to as an 'unlocalized appearance-reality distinction' that lies at the heart of the irrealist project: despite appearances to the contrary, whatever there is lacks mind-, language- and theory-independent reality. This suggests a kind of global error theory, and indeed, Westerhoff claims that the irrealist is committed to 'not just the possibility but the actuality of massive error' (2020: 299). It should be clarified, however, that Westerhoff would resist a 'global' theory of any kind since that may suggest the possibility of absolutely general quantification, a possibility that he rejects at length in Chapter 4 and a point that I will returned to in §4. But if not global, this appearance–reality distinction and the widespread error concerning it are nonetheless unlocalized insofar as they apply to whatever subject one may take up; despite appearances to the contrary, nothing we could consider lays claim to mind-, language- or theory-independent reality.

---

3 A related question is how precisely we should understand the intersubjectivity criterion that is supposed to contribute to the reflective equilibrium that differentiates veridical from illusory experiences for the irrealist.

3.1 First-order questions about the irrealist's appearance–reality distinction

While the irrealist's unlocalized appearance–reality distinction prompts a number of pressing questions, I will focus on two, which, for ease of reference, I will refer to as the 'metaphysical question' and 'epistemological question':

(1) Metaphysical Question: If *everything* is merely an appearance within the representational interface and nothing is more real or more fundamental than anything else, in what sense can there be a distinction between appearance and reality *at all*?

(2) Epistemological Question: How does the irrealist (a) explain 'not just the possibility but the actuality of a massive error' and (b) differentiate veridical from non-veridical states?

Let's consider the metaphysical question first. Given that irrealism is an 'appearances-only' theory, you might think that the unlocalized appearance–reality distinction collapses, since there is no reality with which appearances might be contrasted. In other words, if there are only appearances, do appearances not simply become the de facto reality? In response to this worry, Westerhoff explains,

> the irrealist holds that what people believe they are epistemically directly connected with (mind-, language-, and theory-independent external objects) and what they are really epistemically connected with... [i.e., mere appearances] are different. (2020: 69)

Thus, despite the fact that there is no mind-independent reality with which appearances might be contrasted, there is nonetheless a distinction between how appearances *seem* to exist (as mind-, language- and theory-independent) and how they *do* in fact exist (as mere appearances that are dependent in all these manners). We might thus frame the irrealist's appearance–reality distinction entirely in terms of appearances as: the distinction between *appearance* (qua apparently mind-, language- and theory-independent objects) and *reality* (qua mere appearances that are dependent all the way down/round).

This brings us to the epistemological question of how to explain the possibility of widespread error and differentiate veridical from non-veridical states within the irrealist's virtual world. Westerhoff appeals to a reflective equilibrium between the three criteria of coherence, intersubjectivity and efficacy to distinguish between veridical sense perceptions and illusory states (2020: 15).[4] This may be an adequate method for determining whether there really is a (virtual) pool of water on the horizon or if I am instead experiencing a (virtual)

---

4   It is worth pointing out that the solipsism worry raised above has important implications for the coherence of the irrealist's use of the intersubjectivity criterion. Given that the irrealist reduces efficacy to the *appearance* of efficacy, they would likely cash out intersubjectivity as the *appearance* of intersubjective access and agreement, but it would nonetheless be desirable to hear more about the usefulness of such a watered-down criterion.

mirage, but a different strategy is called for to differentiate *ordinary* veridical perceptual states (which are uniformly mistaken about the ontological status of appearing objects, taking them to be mind-, language- and theory-independent) from the metaphysically accurate epistemic states of an irrealist.

These two kinds of veridical epistemic states – the metaphysically accurate epistemic state and the ordinary veridical state – track two senses of truth that Westerhoff brings into the discussion: (i) fundamental, metaphysical truth and (ii) truth in a manner of speaking. As he explains them:

> the fundamental, metaphysical sense is still called 'truth', while the second, in-a-manner-of-speaking sense, a sense that is useful for daily interaction but is not to be taken seriously so as to entail any existence statements, may be called 'correctness'. (2020: 146–7)

On irrealism, then, a reflective equilibrium of coherence, intersubjectivity and efficacy is a reliable method for verifying statements that are correct (i.e. true in a manner of speaking), but this strategy does not look to be sufficient for underwriting fundamental, metaphysical truths.

The standards for fundamental, metaphysical truths cannot be sourced from outside the representational interface, but Westerhoff suggests that we can reason our way to an understanding of the irrealist's unlocalized appearance–reality distinction from within the interface.[5] The rational process by which one arrives at the metaphysically accurate epistemic state of an irrealist would seem to be modelled by Westerhoff's largely negative dialectic in the first three chapters, which undermines the fundamental reality appearances.

It's worth noting that this model of two senses of truth tracks a familiar Madhyamaka account of two truths (*satyadvaya*), on which ordinary, every-day conventional truths (i.e. truths in a manner of speaking) can be verified by criteria such as coherence, intersubjectivity and causal/pragmatic efficacy, while the ultimate truth (i.e. the metaphysical truth that says that all things lack ontological independence (*svabhāva*), which we might think of as fundamentality) can be known from reasoning about the final nature of things. While Westerhoff initially seems to endorse a picture of this kind, he subsequently argues that there is no fact of the matter about how things exist and indeed that there can be no fundamental, metaphysical truths *at all*. In the final analysis, then, according to the irrealist, there *is* no ultimate truth; there are *only* conventional truths, viz. truth in a manner of speaking. So, although this account of two senses of truth initially seemed to support answers to both the metaphysical and epistemological questions about the irrealist's appearance–

---

5   As Westerhoff states, 'Through experience of the world presented to us inside the model we can arrive at an understanding that *the way the model exists differs from the way it appears*, though this does not of course affect the fact that it still appears to us in this way' (2020: 150, emphasis mine).

reality distinction, once an ultimate truth is rejected, these questions re-emerge.

3.2 Higher-order questions about the irrealist's appearance–reality distinction

In Chapter 4, Westerhoff argues that the thoroughgoing first-order anti-foundationalism that he made a case for in the first three chapters must be combined with a second-order anti-foundationalism, such that it is both the case that:

> Dependence-chains for things do not bottom out in fundamental things, and dependence-chains for grounding facts do not bottom out in fundamental facts. (2020: 249)

Westerhoff's rejection of fundamental facts rules out the possibility of any ultimately true theory, which he describes as:

> a theory such that its statements do not hold in virtue of anything else. It is basic insofar as the truths it contains do not require other truths to make them true. All the facts an ultimately true theory describes are brute. (2020: 254)

According to Westerhoff, ultimately true theories are possible only if there can be context-independent truths and absolutely general quantification, both of which he rejects. This means that irrealism itself is not an ultimately true theory insofar as it is not a global theory that quantifies over an absolutely universal domain, nor are its claims context independent.

The irrealist's higher-order anti-foundationalism, which denies the existence of any fundamental truths, presents us with higher-order version of the questions we started with concerning the irrealist's unlocalized appearance–reality distinction:

(1) Higher-Order Metaphysical Question: If there are no fundamental, metaphysical truths about how things exist, then how can the way things exist differ from the way they appear *at all*?

(2) Higher-Order Epistemological Question: If there are no fundamental, metaphysical truths about which we could be mistaken, how can the irrealist (i) account for 'not just the possibility but the actuality of a massive error', and (ii) differentiate ordinary veridical states that are under the sway of this error from metaphysically accurate states that are *not*?

Westerhoff addresses both of these questions at the conclusion of Chapter 4, but I am not entirely persuaded that the puzzle is resolved. Let's start with the first question: If there are no fundamental, metaphysical truths about how things exist, then how can the irrealist coherently maintain that the way things

exist differs from the way they appear? The short answer is that they can't. Westerhoff concedes:

> Our criticism of naïve realism in Chapter 1 suggested a distinction between appearance, the way the world seems to be, and reality, the way the world is. If we abandon the idea of ultimately true theories, this position can no longer be maintained. (2020: 297)

The irrealist must give up the possibility of a genuine appearance–reality distinction on the final analysis because he denies that there *is* such a thing as reality, i.e. a way that the world ultimately is. As Westerhoff explains,

> there is no way the world truly is, ... there is appearance only, without some underlying final turtle that shoulders all the ontological burden. The non-existence of the world referred to here is no 'existence as something else', but precisely the denial of the world's ontological status. (2020: 297)

This is a reprisal of our earlier question: If appearances (or phenomena) are all that there is, do they not become the de facto reality? Now that the irrealist has jettisoned the possibility of there being a fact of the matter about how appearances exist, this question re-emerges as a more serious threat.

Since there is 'no way the world truly is', we are no longer permitted to say that 'the way the model exists differs from the way it appears'.[6] Yet despite rejecting ultimately true theories and thereby a bona fide appearance–reality distinction, it nonetheless seems to me that the irrealist remains implicitly committed to the actuality of *some kind* of unlocalized appearance–reality distinction that is underpinned by an at least implicit commitment to *some kind* of unlocalized ontological theory.

Irrealism is 'the denial of the world's ontological status' only if we understand an ontological status to mean a strictly mind-independent, fundamental mode of being, but ontology need not be understood so restrictively (Westerhoff 2020: 297). Despite denying that there is a way that the world truly is, the irrealist continues to claim that there are appearances only and that there are no ontologically independent, fundamental entities, both of which are arguably unlocalized ontological theories of a sort. And both these claims might be construed as an actual manner of existence that could be contrasted with an apparent manner of existence. So although rejecting the possibility of fundamental, metaphysical truths, the irrealist still looks to be committed to the actuality of a distinction between *appearance* (qua apparently mind-, language- and theory-independent objects) and *reality* (qua mere appearances that are dependent all the way down/

---

6 Westerhoff argues that the irrealist may nonetheless meaningfully talk about appearance–reality distinctions insofar as our having a dichotomy of mutually defined concepts such as <appearance> and <reality> does not require both sides of the dichotomy to be instantiated (2020: 305). I will leave aside the semantic question of whether or not 'reality' can be a meaningful term in the event that it is never instantiated, and we are never epistemically connected with it.

round), and thus to *some sort* of unlocalized ontological theory.[7] It would seem, then, that the irrealist wishes to have his cake and reject it too.

Although Westerhoff ultimately jettisons an appearance–reality distinction, he nonetheless maintains the actuality of a massive error, which brings us to the second question: If there are no fundamental, metaphysical truths about which we could be mistaken, how precisely can the irrealist (i) account for 'not just the possibility but the actuality of a massive error' and (ii) differentiate ordinary veridical states from metaphysically accurate states? Westerhoff acknowledges this concern but argues that 'There is no inconsistency between anti-foundationalism about truth and the assumption of widespread error' and that the irrealist's standards for judging truth and falsity 'are nothing else but the standards we commonly accept when settling arguments' (2020: 303).[8] When it comes to philosophical theorizing, since the irrealist rejects the possibility of an ultimately true theory, he also denies the possibility of a best theory. Instead, there are only better and worse theories based on a variety of criteria for theory choice, such as, 'explanatory power, simplicity, elegance, coherence with other theories, pragmatic success, and so forth' (2020: 298). This means, of course, that irrealism itself cannot be the best theory. So, if a naïve realist revises their beliefs based on considerations of the kind just suggested and becomes an irrealist, it's not altogether clear that we are entitled to say that they were wrong before and are right now. At best, we could say that they previously had a worse theory and now have a better one.

Westerhoff suggests that, 'Intersubjective truths that hold relative to a sufficiently large body of subjects seem to be a reasonable substitute for objective truths' (2020: 306–7). Yet, for good or ill, I fear that it is unlikely that the radically counterintuitive central insights of irrealism itself are, or ever will be, held by a 'sufficiently large body of subjects' to earn the status of intersubjective truth. And it's not evident that the criteria for theory choice that Westerhoff cites, such as pragmatic success and explanatory power, would even recommend irrealism, which instead looks most promisingly supported by reductio arguments that deduce contradictions or absurd consequences from contending foundationalist theories.

---

7   Westerhoff argues that irrealism does not amount to the naïve realism that he initially set out to reject because: 'the naïve realist and the irrealist have different views of what the world is like. The former believes there to be a comprehensive theory of the world as it is in its most basic features, the latter can offer only local theories that describe specific aspects of the world (and needs to assert that the claim "there are no comprehensive theories" is not itself part of a comprehensive theory)' (2020: 306). However, it is difficult to see how the irrealist can explain the radically different view they have of the (entire virtual) world using strictly local theories.

8   Westerhoff gives voice to the question, saying: 'the possibility of massive error is usually connected with a realist understanding of the world. We can be massively deluded about how the world exists if it is – objectively – one way, and we perceive it as being some other way entirely. But if there is not one ultimately true way, one objective way, that is the way things are, how can we be massively mistaken about this way?' (2020: 299).

There may very well be – as Westerhoff puts it – 'numerous ways of being wrong for an inhabitant of the virtual world', but those would seem to be confined to ordinary illusory states that fail to meet the criterion of a reflective equilibrium of intersubjectivity, consistency and efficacy (2020: 303). Mediating between non-ultimately true ontological theories, on the other hand, is a matter of simply better or worse, not right or wrong (or true or false). But if that's right, then irrealism would seem incapable of supporting the possibility of widespread error. And if irrealism itself is neither an inter-subjective truth nor an ultimately true (or even best) theory, then there looks to be no way to underwrite the particular massive error that the irrealist claims to be actual.

If there is only truth in a manner of speaking (or conventional truth) but no fundamental, metaphysical truth (or ultimate truth), and if there are only better ontological theories but no best theory, the irrealist would seem to lack the resources to meaningfully distinguish between (i) the error of an or-dinary illusory state (such as a perceiving a hallucination) and the massive, unlocalized error brought to light by the irrealist's project, or conversely be-tween (ii) ordinary veridical states that are standardly mistaken about how objects exist and metaphysically accurate epistemic states.

4. A lightweight ultimately true ontological theory?

Westerhoff notes that, as it turns out, irrealism is not even an ontological theory, at least in the traditional Quinean sense, insofar as it does not provide an absolutely general and exhaustive account of 'what there is' (2020: 284). But by rejecting fundamental metaphysical truths, ultimately true theories and unlocalized ontological theories *outright*, I worry that the irrealist is throwing the baby out with the bathwater, threatening to leave him incapable of explaining the thoroughgoing anti-foundationalism that he sets out defend.

I wonder if admitting some kind of lightweight ultimately true ontological theory could render irrealism more coherent by endowing it with the resources to explain both the unlocalized appearance–reality distinction and the unlo-calized error theory to which the irrealist seems committed. I will enquire into the possibility of a mitigated ultimately true theory, which I see as compatible with a common interpretation of Madhyamaka that resists the move to reduce the ultimate truth to the conventional truth.[9] On this reading, despite the fact

9 Here, I have in mind Mādhyamikas such as Śrīgupta (c. seventh/eighth century), Jñānagarbha (c. early eighth century), Śāntarakṣita (c. eighth century), Kamalaśīla (c. late eighth century) and others, who would subsequently be classified as *Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas by Tibetan doxographers and who are contrasted with so-called *Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamikas such as Buddhapālita (c. fifth century) and Candrakīrti (c. seventh century). The move to reduce the ultimate truth to the conventional truth is commonly motivated by Nāgārjuna's famous and interpretively vexed statement that he has no thesis (*Vigrahavyāvartanī* verse 29; see also

that the ultimate truth (as the universal negation of ontological independence) is itself not ontologically independent or fundamental, there are nonetheless (at least) two important senses in which it can be regarded as 'ultimate': (i) it is unlocalized insofar as it is true of whatever there is and (ii) it is the termination point of our ontological analysis.[10]

Westerhoff clarifies the implications of his denial of absolutely general quantification for the possibility of ultimately true ontological theories, writing,

> The key claim of the denial of absolutely general quantification is that there cannot be a final theory of the world, since such a theory would encompass the totality of what there is, and since the primary status of its claims can only be spelt out in terms of a collection of all truths. But since there is no such totality, there cannot be such a theory. (2020: 292)

He identifies two possible responses to the denial of absolutely general quantification: (i) to reject its denial or (ii) to accept its denial but argue that the consequences for the possibility of ontological theorizing are not as severe as he suggests (2020: 287). In what follows, I will explore a version of the second response.

It should be emphasized that Westerhoff himself does not give up on ontological theorizing altogether but offers his own version of the second response by proposing 'a revised conception of ontology compatible with a world where absolutely general quantification is impossible' (2020: 295). But his revised conception of ontology is restricted to localized theories concerning, for instance, 'causation, probability, properties, and so on' (2020: 306–7). Nevertheless, it seems to me that a comprehensive (or at least unlocalized) ontological theory is precisely what the irrealist is up to. Westerhoff points out earlier on in the book that the 'aim of our discussion is first and foremost ontological', and he is explicit about putting metaphysics in the 'driving-seat' of his theorizing (2020: 78, 147). And the irrealist regularly makes prima facie unlocalized ontological claims, such as:

Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā verse 50) as well as Candrakīrti's claim that emptiness itself (as the ultimate truth) is also empty (*Madhyamakāvatāra*, 6.186). See Westerhoff's (e.g. 2009: 183–98, 2010: 61–65) discussion of various interpretations of Nāgārjuna's 'no-thesis' position. It is worth noting that Candrakīrti's statement about the emptiness of emptiness can be naturally read as claiming that emptiness is not a *first-order* foundation (i.e. it is not an ultimate or fundamental 'being' (*bhāva*), or ground of reality), which does not preclude emptiness' being a second-order fact that one arrives at whenever one looks for a fundamental being (even that of emptiness itself).

10 I take it that being the termination point in ontological analysis is a sufficient condition for being an ultimately true theory, but that being unlocalized is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Arguably, the conventional truth that everything is ontologically dependent on something else might be an unlocalized truth in the sense I discuss below, but it is *not* a terminus of ontological analysis.

(1) There are appearances only.
(2) Appearances lay no claim to mind-, language- or theory-independence.
(3) Whatever there is lacks ontological foundations.
(4) Things are dependent all the way down or all the way round.
(5) We are inhabitants of a virtual world.

Although Westerhoff takes the rejection of absolutely general quantification to have damning ramifications for the enterprise of unlocalized ontological theorizing, this need not be the case provided we make qualifications to ontological theorizing and/or the properties of unrestricted quantification.

One might, for example, reject a quantificational view of ontological theories altogether. While it is commonly accepted that ontological questions are quantificational questions, this need not be the case, and the irrealist could take a non-quantificational approach to ontological questions (see Fine 2009: 165). Existence need not necessarily be understood in terms of quantification.

Alternatively, the rejection of an all-inclusive and determinate domain does not necessarily preclude there being some quantifiers that are nonetheless *unrestricted* (see, for instance, Fine 2006, Hellman 2006 and Parsons 2006). We might, for instance, draw a distinction between *absolutely* unrestricted quantification and *merely* unrestricted quantification, where the latter is a lightweight quantifier that does not presuppose that the objects quantified lay claim to fundamental reality.[11] We could also reject the All-in-One principle, which says that an unrestricted domain is comprised of a set or a set-like object, and use plural talk rather than singular talk to refer to the members of the domain, such that when we speak of a domain of objects, we are speaking only of those objects themselves, and in this way sidestep worries about indefinite extensibility.[12,13] A further distinction could be drawn between determinately and indeterminately unrestricted quantification, where the latter accepts the arguments levelled against absolutely general quantification from semantic

---

11 Parsons (2006), for instance, argues that absolutely unrestricted quantification should be contrasted with merely unrestricted quantification, where only the former commits one to metaphysical realism. Chalmers (2009: 91, n. 8) similarly emphasizes that absolute quantification should be distinguished from unrestricted quantification, of which it is a subtype, and that unrestricted quantification also includes lightweight quantifiers such as those used in ordinary existence assertions.

12 The All-in-One Principle, which was identified, though not endorsed, by Cartwright (1994), is defined up by Rayo and Uzquiano as follows: 'The objects in a domain of discourse make up a set or some set-like object' (2006: 6).

13 As Uzquiano explains, 'One application of plural quantification, which is explored by Cartwright (1994), is to abandon the All-in-One principle and to understand talk of a domain of quantification not as singular talk of collections but rather as plural talk of its members. To speak of a domain of certain objects is just to speak of the objects themselves – or to speak of a first-level concept under which they all fall; and to claim of a given object that it lies in the domain is to claim of the object that it is one of them' (2020). See also Rayo (2007).

contextualism. And we might adopt a version of expansionism (as opposed to universalism) about unrestricted quantification, and thus reject the presupposition that the objects in the unrestricted domain are actually, mind-independently infinite or complete (Fine 2006: 38). Instead, this *merely* and *indeterminately* unrestricted domain of quantification could include a mind-dependently and potentially infinite (or indefinite) quantity of objects of any sort, such that there are always more objects than one may specify, and there is no one right way to carve up the domain (Fine 2006: 43).

I won't explore the technical details of the various components of this (tentatively and preliminarily) proposed strategy. I only wish to suggest that there seem to be multiple avenues for developing a lightweight account of unrestricted quantification that could be used to advance a lightweight ultimately true theory. And we need not look outside of the virtual world for the truth conditions to underwrite such a theory, nor must we rely on the standards for conventional truth, such as considerations of intersubjectivity, pragmatic efficacy etc. Instead, a lightweight ultimately true theory could be verified by its being (a certain kind of) termination point in our ontological analysis. And we might look to the aforementioned Mādhyamika (for whom the ultimate truth is non-reducible to conventional truth) for a story about how a lightweight ultimately true theory might be the termination point for our ontological analysis without itself being ontologically independent or fundamental. Roughly speaking, one such story might say: the ultimate truth is not a termination point in our ontological analysis in the sense that we found what we were seeking, viz. a fundamental entity/fact/truth. Neither is the ultimate truth a positive description such as 'all things depend for their existence on something else'. As Westerhoff points out, any such positive claim of universal dependence will itself plausibly always depend on some further fact and thus fail to conclude our analysis (2020: 254). Rather, the ultimate truth is simply an exclusion negation of ontological independence (or foundations).[14] Upon *not* finding a final ungrounded or self-grounding ground in our ontological analysis, the conclusion is the very absence of a final ground. The fact that our ontological analysis never meets with an end is itself the conclusion of ontological analysis.

Perhaps, then, an irrealist lightweight ultimately true ontological theory might similarly take the form of an exclusion negation of mind-, language- and theory-independence of any given thing in a merely and indeterminately

---

14 Here, I have in mind so-called Svātantrika Mādhyamikas such as Kamalaśīla who explicitly classify the negation of ontological independence (*svabhāva*) in the context of arguments for emptiness as a non-implicative, or verbally bound negation (*prasajyapratiṣedha*), which, as Westerhoff (2009: 69ff) has elsewhere pointed out, may be helpfully understood as a kind of exclusion negation; see, for example, Kamalaśīla's *Madhyamakāloka* (Keira 2004: 25, 132, 196–97, 235). The ultimate truth understood as a negation of this kind is simply the exclusion of the property of ontological independence without any presuppositions about the sortal specifications of the subject.

unrestricted domain. By allowing for a lightweight ultimately true ontological theory of this or some other kind, and preserving two senses of truth – a lightweight metaphysical truth arrived at by ontological analysis and truth in-a-manner-of-speaking verified by a reflective equilibrium of coherence, intersubjectivity and efficacy – the irrealist might also (i) preserve a commitment to an unlocalized appearance–reality distinction, (ii) underwrite a distinction between ordinary veridical states and metaphysically accurate epistemic states and (iii) provide an explanation for the massive error that characterizes ordinary cognitions.

5. Conclusion

I have raised a number of questions about the irrealist's positive picture of the world together with worries about the implications of the unqualified denial of ultimately true theories for the overall coherence of the irrealist's project. However, I must emphasize that I have not, by any measure, been able to do justice to the complexity and scope of Westerhoff's case for irrealism. I wish to conclude by underscoring the exciting and significant contributions that *The Non-existence of the Real World* makes not only to discussions in contemporary metaphysics and epistemology but also indirectly to the field of Madhyamaka studies by providing a wealth of conceptual resources to support and more precisely articulate Nāgārjuna's anti-foundationalist conclusions.

Columbia University
New York, NY, USA
allison.aitken@columbia.edu

References

Barnes, E. 2018. Symmetrical dependence. In *Reality and Its Structure: Essays in Fundamentality*, eds. R. Bliss and G. Priest, 50–69. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bliss, R. 2013. Viciousness and the structure of reality. *Philosophical Studies* 166: 399–418.

Bohn, E.D. 2009. Must there be a top level? *Philosophical Quarterly* 59: 193–201.

Bohn, E.D. 2018. Indefinitely descending ground. In *Reality and Its Structure: Essays in Fundamentality*, eds. R. Bliss and G. Priest, 167–81. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cartwright, R. 1994. Speaking of everything. *Noûs* 28: 1–20.

Chalmers, D. 2009. Ontological anti-realism. In *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, eds. D. Chalmers, D. Manley and R. Wasserman, 77–129. New York: Clarendon Press.

Fine, K. 2006. Relatively unrestricted quantification. In *Absolute Generality*, eds. A. Rayo and G. Uzquiano, 20–44. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fine, K. 2009. The question of ontology. In *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, eds. D. Chalmers, D. Manley and R. Wasserman, 157–77. New York: Clarendon Press.

Hellman, G. 2006. Against 'absolutely everything'! In *Absolute Generality*, eds. A. Rayo and G. Uzquiano, 75–97. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hoffman, D.D., M. Singh and C. Prakash. 2015. The interface theory of perception. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 22: 1480–506.

Hohwy, J. 2013. *The Predictive Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Keira, R. 2004. *Mādhyamika and Epistemology: A Study of Kamalaśīla's Method for Proving the Voidness of All Dharmas: Introduction, Annotated Translations and Tibetan Texts of Selected Sections of the Second Chapter of the Madhyamakāloka*. Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, Heft 59. Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien.

Metzinger, T. 2010. *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*. New York: Basic Books.

Morganti, M. 2014. Metaphysical infinitism and the regress of being. *Metaphilosophy* 45: 232–44.

Morganti, M. 2015. Dependence, justification and explanation: must reality be well-founded? *Erkenntnis* 80: 555–72.

Morganti, M. 2018. From ontic structural realism to metaphysical coherentism. *European Journal for Philosophy of Science* 9: 1–20.

Nagel, T. 1986. *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nozick, R. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.

Parsons, C. 2006. The problem of absolute universality. In *Absolute Generality*. eds. A. Rayo and G. Uzquiano, 203–19. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rayo, A. 2007. Plurals. *Philosophy Compass* 2: 411–27.

Rayo, A. and G. Uzquiano. 2006. Introduction. In *Absolute Generality*, eds. A. Rayo and G. Uzquiano, 1–19. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schaffer, J. 2003. Is there a fundamental level? *Noûs* 37: 498–517.

Tahko, T.E. 2014. Boring infinite descent. *Metaphilosophy* 45: 257–69.

Thompson, N. 2018. Metaphysical interdependence, epistemic coherentism, and holistic explanation. In *Reality and Its Structure: Essays in Fundamentality*, eds. R. Bliss and G. Priest, 107–25. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Uzquiano, G. 2020. Quantifiers and quantification. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), ed. E.N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/quantification/>, last accessed 10 January 2022.

Westerhoff, J. 2009. *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Westerhoff, J. 2010. *Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī: The Dispeller of Disputes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Westerhoff, J. 2020. *The Non-existence of the Real World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.