Virtual Reality and the Meaning of Life

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(final draft of forthcoming chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life*, edited by Iddo Landau)

Abstract: It is commonly assumed that a virtual life would be less meaningful (perhaps even meaningless). As virtual reality technologies develop and become more integrated into our everyday lives, this poses a challenge for those that care about meaning in life. In this chapter, it is argued that the common assumption about meaninglessness and virtuality is mistaken. After clarifying the distinction two different visions of virtual reality, four arguments are presented for thinking that meaning is possible in virtual reality. Following this, four objections are discussed and rebutted. The chapter concludes that we can be cautiously optimistic about the possibility of meaning in virtual worlds.

Keywords: Virtual reality; technology; virtue; achievement; creativity; games; play; the sublime; the experience machine.

Introduction

Lots of people are anxious about virtual reality. This anxiety is often represented in popular media. Consider two classic films of the 1990s. In *The Truman Show*, the eponymous lead character lives his entire life on a complex TV set populated by paid actors. Eventually, Truman realises that there is something not quite right with his life. He exposes the ruse and escapes into the real world. In *The Matrix* the lead character Neo encounters a band of rebels who make him aware of the fact that his entire life has been lived inside a hyperrealistic computer simulation. In one of the central scenes of the film, Neo is offered a choice of two pills: a blue pill that will allow him to continue to live his life in the simulation, blissfully unaware of what is really going on; and a red pill which will reveal the uncomfortable truth. He takes the red pill.

In both of these films, the suggestion seems to be that we should sympathise with the lead characters' choices to abandon their illusions and find out what the real world is like. To live inside the illusion would, it is hinted, be to live a less meaningful life. This is an idea with deep philosophical roots. The traditional interpretation of Plato's allegory of the cave, for

example, is that one of the goals of the well-lived life is to shake free the shackles of illusion and get closer to reality. If this is right, then it seems to scotch any claim that a meaningful life can be lived in a virtual world.

In this chapter, I will challenge this view and defend two major claims: (i) that the binary choice facing the protagonists in *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix* is too simplistic and that it is not really possible to choose to live entirely in the real world or in a virtual world because our lives tend to blend elements of both and (ii) it is possible to pursue meaning in a virtual world. I will defend these claims in four stages. First, I will say a few brief words about the conditions that need to be satisfied in order to live a meaningful life. Second, I will discuss the nature of virtual reality, examining both its recent technological forms and its deeper historical roots. Third, I will present four arguments for thinking that meaning is possible in a virtual world. Fourth, I will explain and respond to four major objections to this claim.

Some Assumptions about Meaning in Life

Other chapters in this book have discussed the classic philosophical questions about the meaning of life. In this chapter, I will skirt these questions and make a few assumptions.

I will start with the assumption that it is possible for human beings to live a meaningful life. In doing so, I will assume a pluralist theory of the conditions of meaning (cf. Danaher 2019, ch 4). According to this pluralist theory, a meaningful life is one that satisfies a set of subjective and objective conditions of value (Campbell & Nyholm 2015). On the subjective side, the individual living the life must be satisfied and fulfilled by what they are doing. They must achieve things through their actions and perceive that their actions have value (Luper 2014; Bradford 2013 & 2016; Wolf 2010). On the objective side, the individual must make some positive difference to the world around them (Smuts 2013). In other words, they must contribute something of value to the world through their lives. What exactly must they contribute? Following Metz and others, I assume that contributions to the good, the true and the beautiful are the obvious pathways to meaning (Metz 2011). An individual can live a meaningful life if they do something that is morally good for the world, develop some form of human knowledge or insight, or produce something of aesthetic value. I also assume that among the things that can be morally good for the world are developing one's own moral

virtues, building satisfying relationships with others, and developing skills and abilities that can be used to produce things of objective value. To this extent, I assume that there can be a close connection between human well-being and meaning, even though it is common to see these as distinct aspects of the well-lived life.

I will not assume that meaning is a binary property. Lives are not either meaningful or not. Lives can, on my understanding, be more or less meaningful depending on the number of conditions of meaning that are satisfied within that life and also the degree to which any particular condition of meaning is satisfied.

These assumptions affect the analysis that follows. When assessing whether or not meaning is possible in a virtual reality I will be assessing whether or not it is possible to satisfy the conditions of objective and subjective meaning in such a world to a greater or lesser degree.

What is Virtual Reality?

To assess whether meaning is possible in virtual reality (VR) it is important to have some handle on what VR is. This is tricky since it is a slippery and nebulous concept. Nevertheless, I think we can distinguish between two major visions of VR: the *technological vision* and the *anthropocentric vision*.

The Technological Vision of VR

The technological vision of VR holds that a *virtual reality* is a *computer-simulated reality*. A virtual reality *life* is, consequently, one that is lived inside such a simulation. This is a common view of virtual reality. In most people's minds, use of the phrase "virtual reality" will conjure up the image of someone donning a headset ("head-mounted display" or HMD to use the jargon) that will project this computer-simulated reality directly into their eyes. This is sometimes combined with suits or gloves or other objects that allow people to project their bodily movements into the simulated space as well. It is also possible that people could use haptic technology to experience and transmit touch-like sensations through the computer simulation.

This technological vision of VR is captured by one of the most popular definitions of VR from Michael Heims (1998, 221):

"Virtual reality is a technology that convinces the participant that he or she is actually in another place by substituting the primary sensory input with data produced by a computer"

The key thing about this definition of VR is that it requires a technology that enables some degree of *immersion* into the simulated space. In other words, it requires a technology that creates an illusion, which can be more or less convincing, for the user that they really inhabit the computer simulation.

If we adopt a slightly looser technological definition of VR, we could abandon this need for immersive technology and include any technology that enables a person to live and act (if only temporarily) in a computer-simulated environment. Thus, we could say that people playing computer games and online multiplayer games such as *World of Warcraft,* live and act in a virtual reality. We could say the same about people who spend time in virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, which are not game-worlds but, rather, open-ended computer-simulated social spaces. This is despite the fact that people access these worlds through keyboards and computer controllers, and act via onscreen avatars, and not by wearing immersive headsets and suits. It may make sense to loosen the definition in this way since some users and creators of these platforms — perhaps most noticeably the users and creator of *Second Life* — often describe them as a form of VR.

We could also include other variations on the technological vision of VR. For example, the fictional Holodeck in *Star Trek* depicts a form of immersive VR in which the user does not wear any head-mounted display but, rather, walks into a large a room in which computer-simulated people, objects and environments are projected — through some technological MacGuffin — into the room around them. Whether such a technology is possible is unclear but if it were it would surely count as a type of technologically mediated VR.

Similarly, there is nowadays an increased interest in *augmented* reality technology. This involves projecting computer simulated objects or characters onto our experiences of the existing physical reality. At the time of writing, (the year 2020) the current generation of smartphones come with augmented reality features as standard and there are a variety of

games that make use of augmented reality applications. Augmented reality technology is interesting because it involves using technology to blur the boundaries between computer simulated worlds and the real world.

Whatever the precise technological form, the distinguishing feature of this technological vision of VR is that of the computer-simulated world. It is this computer-simulated environment that provides the 'virtual' aspect of the reality inhabited by the user. With computer simulations it is, in principle, possible for people to create vast fictional worlds that are free from many of the constraints of the real world. They can also interact with other humans that share the computer simulated space or with wholly computer-programmed or artificial characters. These features of the technological vision of VR become important when it comes to assessing the possibility of finding meaning in VR.

The Anthropocentric Vision of VR

The anthropocentric vision of VR takes a different perspective. Instead of seeing VR as something that is computer-simulated and accessed through technology it sees VR as something that is made possible by the human mind, sometimes assisted by culture and technology, and with much deeper roots in the human condition. In his expansive history of human ideas, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (2019) makes the case that the imagination is the most distinctive human trait. Memory gives us access to past experiences; anticipation allows us to predict future experiences; imagination is what happens when both of these things fail. Imagination is what allows us to see what isn't there; to invent fictional worlds and beings; and to interact with them.

Fernandez-Armesto doesn't make the connection between the history of human imagination and virtual reality explicit in his writings, but others have. André Nusselder (2014), for example, points out that ever since we have had the power of symbolic thought we have had to power to live in two worlds: the virtual world created by our minds and the physical reality in which we are embodied. Nusselder also argues that leading schools of philosophical thought focus on this phenomenon. For example, he argues that Kantianism is explicitly founded on the notion that there is a natural world — a world of necessity and scientific law, partly constructed by our minds — and a moral world — a world in which we use our wills to create a new reality (Nusselder 2014, 73-74). Similarly, he argues that existentialism is premised on the idea that we are beings that can imagine new realities and

bring them about through our actions. We thus have one foot in each reality at all times: the virtual world of our imaginations and the natural world around us (see also Kreps 2014 on the links between critical theory, postmodernism and VR).

We can narrow the gap between the imagined virtual world and the natural world in two ways. We can create cultural and social constructions that we layer over our experiences of the natural world. For example, we can create social institutions such as corporations, money and marriage that are not really 'out there' in the real world but are, rather, in our minds and made possible through collective agreement (Searle 1996 and 2010). We can also use technologies to narrow the gap between our imaginations and the physical world. One of the problems our early ancestors faced was that they had active imaginations but limited means of making those imaginations a reality. Modern humans have sophisticated and powerful technologies for making their imaginations a reality. Computer simulations are perhaps the most extreme manifestation of this technological capacity. They allow us to create wholly new worlds, free from many (though not all) of the limitations of the physical world. They are a blank canvas for the imagination.

One of the writers who has done the most to advocate this anthropocentric vision of VR is Yuval Noah Harari. He argues that humans have always lived large portions of their lives in virtual reality, projecting things from the mental world onto the physical world. He singles out religious beliefs and practices as perhaps the most obvious example of this (Harari 2016 & 2017). He then uses this observation to make the point that those who argue that our lives will be robbed of meaning if we live inside a computer simulation are wrong. We have been doing this for millennia anyway. The technology changes nothing.

It's time to lay my own cards on the table. In general, I agree with the proponents of the *anthropocentric vision*. The idea of a virtual reality is not new. It is something that has been with us ever since we developed the capacity for imaginative symbolic thought. Since then we have always lived in two worlds. Technology makes the distinction between the two worlds less phenomenologically noticeable. That said, unless humans transcend their physical, biological bodies (as some transhumanists and futurists hope) we will remain tethered in the physical world. We will always have one foot in both worlds and never live *completely virtual* lives. This tethering to physical reality may prove important when it comes to assessing the possibility of living a meaningful life in VR.

How Meaning Might be Possible in VR

Now that we have a clearer conception of VR in place we can turn to the main question: "Can we find meaning in a virtual reality?" The popular consensus appears to be against this idea but let me offer four arguments in favour of meaning in VR.

Argument 1 - The "No Difference" Argument

The first argument in favour of VR is that it is "no different" from our current reality. If we grant, for the sake of argument, that it is possible for humans to live meaningful lives right now, and that our ancestors have lived meaningful lives before us, and if we accept the basic thrust of anthropocentric vision of VR, then we should accept that it is possible to find meaning in VR. To make the logic more explicit, the argument would look something like this:

(1) Humans can live meaningful lives right now and have lived meaningful lives in the past.

(2) Much of human life as it is currently constituted (including the parts to which we attach most value and meaning) is lived inside virtual realities.

(3) Therefore it is possible for humans to live meaningful lives in virtual reality.

The first premise is relatively uncontroversial. It is not claiming that *all* human lives are meaningful. Many may not be. It is just claiming that it is possible for us to live meaningful lives right now and that at least some of our ancestors — Einstein, Florence Nightingale, Jonas Salk and so on — have lived meaningful lives. The second premise is the controversial one since it relies on the accuracy of the anthropocentric vision of VR. The idea is that, perhaps unbeknownst to yourself, you and your ancestors have already been spending your lives engaging with virtual ideas, concepts and things, and deriving meaning from those engagements. Why would you worry about the new technological manifestations of virtual reality? There is no significant difference between them and what is already possible.

As mentioned in the previous section, Yuval Noah Harari is perhaps the most vocal proponent of this view. He has argued that "the meaning we ascribe to what we see is generated by our own minds" (Harari 2017). In other words, meaning always has and always will depend on the virtual (imagined) world.

Is this a compelling argument? Since I have already declared myself to be a fan of the anthropocentric vision of VR, I do find it somewhat compelling. I think Harari and other proponents of this view are right to say that large portions of our current lives are virtual and so to the extent that we already derive meaning from them we shouldn't worry too much about the new wave of VR technologies and the kinds of lives they might enable. Nevertheless, I do think one can go too far in pushing the "no difference" argument. In particular, I think it is wrong to assume that there is no difference between the forms of VR that were possible in the past and the forms that will be possible in the future with digital technology and AI. These phenomena lie on a continuum, and there is no sharp break between what our ancestors did and what we might do in the future, but this does not mean that there are not and will not be significant differences. While we have always had the power to imagine outlandish and fantastical worlds, our capacity to phenomenologically inhabit those worlds has been limited by our technologies. The level of technological control and freedom that is made possible by the new wave of VR technologies makes it possible to phenomenologically inhabit imaginary worlds in a new way. It may no longer be just those with strong imaginations or access to psychedelics drugs that can experience a vivid form of VR. It may now be possible for anyone with access to the relevant technology.

Argument 2 - The Conditions of Meaning Argument

The second argument in favour of VR is that it is possible to satisfy the conditions of meaning in virtual spaces. Recall from earlier that the conditions of meaning are both subjective and objective in nature. You have to be subjectively satisfied and fulfilled by what you are doing and you have to do something of objective value and worth. This second argument then claims that within a virtual world it is possible to satisfy both sets of conditions.

In Danaher (2019, ch 7) I argued that there are several ways in which this was possible. For one thing, in virtual worlds we can develop real friendships and alliances with other people who inhabit those virtual worlds. We can engage in moral actions with them – for

example, acts of charity, helping and the alleviation of suffering – by providing them with resources in the virtual world and conversing with them about problems they may be having through the virtual interface. We can develop skills and abilities in virtual spaces. For example, in a virtual game-world we can hone our skills at the game. We can look on it as a craft (Sennett 2008). The game provides an external structure which provides objective standards of performance. We can adapt our skills and abilities to those standards. There can also be great aesthetic beauty to these skilled performances (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011**).** We can also develop deeper knowledge of the game and how it works. This can enlighten and uplift ourselves and other players of the game. We can also see virtual worlds as opportunities to hone and develop our moral virtues. Many philosophers of sport, for example, have argued that sports are like moral laboratories or dramas (McNamee 2008**).** Virtual worlds — including computer simulated worlds — could perform the same function. In short, it seems possible that we can attain a version of the good, the true and the beautiful in virtual worlds as well as in physical reality.

There are some obvious objections to this argument. The most obvious is that a virtual life, for all its benefits, is missing something, namely 'reality'. We will deal with this objection in more detail in the next section. As a preliminary to this, however, we can turn to current and historical analogues of virtual life to bolster the argument. Consider, for instance, the lives of great sports stars or actors. To a large extent, the central focus of their lives is a virtual arena: the sportsfield, the stage, the movie screen and so on. In those arenas, the individual either lives a fantasy life (in the case of the actor) and accepts a constructed and arbitrary set of constraints upon their actions (in the case of the sportstar). Can these people live meaningful lives? It seems obvious enough that they can. They can achieve things within the respective arenas and derive a lot of personal satisfaction from these achievements. They can also create performances of great aesthetic beauty and diversity that have the power to uplift and alleviate the suffering of those that watch and take pleasure in those performances.

Argument 3 - The (Meta)-Utopian Argument

Another argument in favour of the virtual life is that it makes possible a utopian style of existence. We tend to think of utopians as naive and polyannish, at best, or dangerous, at worst. The great massacres of the 20th Century are, for example, sometimes attributed to misguided utopian projects (Popper 2002, ch 18). As Yorke (2016) describes it, one of the

main problems with these historic utopian projects is how they tried to impose a fixed blueprint of the ideal society on a reluctant population. There is, however, an alternative, ideal of utopia that focuses on trying to improve society and ensuring a dynamic and open future (Danaher 2019, ch 5; Yorke 2016). This ideal moves away from the 'blueprint' model of utopianism toward a 'horizonal' model, according to which there is no fixed destination for humanity but, rather, an unending project — or, indeed, multiple projects — of improvement (Wilde 198**1**). Being part of those ongoing projects can be a source of meaning.

This third argument then is that VR is to be welcomed because it enables us to pursue these utopian projects. At the most basic level, VR allows us to imagine a better world and, through technology or social constructions, narrow the gap between the reality we currently inhabit and our imaginations. On top of this, modern VR technology, with its scope for endlessly diverse computer-simulated worlds, opens up a vast horizon of possible worlds for us to explore. We can thus use VR technology to pursue a more ambitious set of utopian projects.

Related to this, it is possible to argue that VR technologies can make Robert Nozick's vision of the 'meta-utopia' a more practical reality (Nozick 1974; Bader 2011). Nozick's meta-utopia is a distinctive take on what the utopian project should be. Nozick argues that a utopian world is one that is judged by its members to be the best possible world. But it is impossible to create a single utopian world: values are plural and people have different preference rankings over the set of plural values. So, instead of trying to create a single utopian world, we should focus on creating a world-building mechanism that allows people to create and join worlds that best match their own preferences. This world-building mechanism would be the meta-utopia. Nozick himself argues that a libertarian minimal state is the closest real-world analogue to the meta-utopia. But there are problems with this: there is limited space in the physical world and policing the boundaries between different libertarian associations can be difficult. It's possible that moving into computer-simulated spaces would alleviate some of these practical problems. Computer-simulated spaces allow for relatively unlimited expansion of virtual worlds and it is easier to separate and keep the peace between the different virtual worlds.

Argument 4 - The Virtual Sublime Argument

The final argument in favour of VR is a little bit different from the preceding ones. Whereas they focused on the possibility of humans having better (or at least no different) experiences in VR this one focuses on the possibility of them having worse experiences. How could this provide the basis for meaning? Answer: because it could give humans visceral phenomenological access to the sublime. Hunter and Mosco (2014) have argued that the idea of the *sublime* is a key idea in philosophical and religious thought. The sublime is something that is both awe-inspiring and terrible. It transports us from the mundanities of life to something radically different and astonishing.

Having experiences of the sublime is attractive to human beings. Some of the most celebrated artworks, for example, depict awe-inspiring and terrible realities. Hunter and Mosco point, specifically, to the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch which depict hellish and terrifying landscapes. One of the things that attracts us to such depictions, however, is that they are relatively safe to experience. We want to get close to the sublime but we don't want to be at risk.

If we grant that having experiences of the sublime is something that can contribute to a meaningful life, then we can make an argument in favour of VR, particularly in the form of immersive, but dystopian, computer-simulated worlds. These worlds can be astonishing and terrifying. They can transport us away from and transcend the mundanities of the real world. They can, as Hunter and Mosco put it, "offer a type of sublime transcendence that allows people to deal with horror, without "actually" having to experience it" (Hunster and Mosco 2014, 727).

Objections to VR

In this section I will discuss four major objections to the idea that meaning is possible in VR.

Objection 1 - The "It's Not Real" Objection

The most obvious objection to the idea of meaning in VR is that VR, by its essence, is not fully real. It is a simulation of reality or a poor, imaginative, cousin of reality. It's not the proper thing. We need the proper thing in order to live a meaningful life.

One of the most famous thought experiments in philosophy — Robert Nozick's *Experience Machine* thought experiment — highlights the basic problem (Nozick 1974; 1989; Bramble 2016). In that thought experiment, Nozick asks us to imagine that we have the option of plugging ourselves into an experience machine — i.e. a highly sophisticated and realistic virtual reality simulator. Once plugged into the machine we can have whatever experiences we would like to have. We can live out our fantasies and dreams and forget about the lives we leave behind. If we had that choice, would we plug ourselves into the machine? Nozick's intuition is that we wouldn't**.** Nozick uses this intuition to make the case against hedonism because he thinks it shows that having good experiences is not all that matters in living the good life. But it can also be used against the idea of meaning in virtual reality insofar as it suggests that most people think there is something important missing from a wholly simulated life (Metz 2019, 404-405).

There are four things to be said in response to this objection. First, as should be clear from the earlier discussion, VR is an ontologically slippery concept. It's not quite fair or true to say that the things we do or the experiences we have inside a virtual reality are not real. There is a blurry boundary between virtual reality and physical reality. On the anthropocentric vision of VR, we always inhabit both realities. It is not easy to separate out the real from the virtual elements. Furthermore, even on the technological vision of VR, any computer simulations we might inhabit are going to be highly dependent on and interactive with physical reality. Our bodies will remain tethered in physical reality. We will perform actions with them and interact with other physically tethered users of the virtual worlds. We can, consequently, have real interactions, conversations and friendships with humans through the virtual medium.

Second, there is a technical point to be made about the ontological nature of different kinds of things. Some things are purely *physical kinds*: they depend for their existence on the presence of certain physical properties. Chairs, tables, and apples would seem to be physical kinds. Other things are functional kinds: they are defined by the role they perform and not by their physical properties. Functional kinds break down into two sub-categories: physical functional kinds, which require a reasonably specific physical instantiation to exist (e.g. a lever); and non-physical functional kinds, which do not not. Non-physical functional kinds are capable of existing — in a real form — in digital or computer simulations. A classic

example is money. Money performs a function in human society and is often tracked and counted using physical tokens (notes, coins). But it does not need those physical tokens to perform its function. It can exist in a purely digital or, indeed, mental form. As long as people believe it exists, and they can keep track of its volume and exchange, it *really* exists. This is important because it highlights the fact that some kinds of things don't need a specific physical presence in order to really exist. Their simulated existence can be just as real as their physical existence. The philosopher Philip Brey (using previous work done by John Searle) has argued that large chunks of our social realities are of this form and they can *really* exist inside digital simulations (Brey 2014; Searle 1996 & 2010). Consequently, the "it's not real" objection doesn't work against all the kinds of things that exist in VR.

Third, there is experimental evidence to suggest that the phenomenological experiences that people have inside VR simulations can stimulate the same emotional and physiological responses as those experiences might have in the real world. This is possible because the human brain naturally constructs a virtual model of the real world based on a handful of perceptual cues (Slater and Sanchez-Vives 2016). VR environments can exploit this feature of human cognition and trick us into thinking that unusual things are happening to us (Meehan et al 2002; Madary and Metzinger 2016). Thus, there is some phenomenological weight to the experiences we have in VR, which improves the more immersive the VR happens to be. This means that virtual experiences can take on a significance and importance in our lives that enables them to feel important and significant to us. This could suffice for practical meaning in VR even if the phenomenological weight may not be enough to satisfy philosophers such as Nozick.

Fourth, and finally, there are some specific problems with Nozick's thought experiment. In the way in which it was originally described, Nozick's thought experiment biased the anticipated intuitive response in various ways. For example, by assuming that we would go from our current reality to a new, simulated one, Nozick may have been appealing to loss aversion (a bias in favour of maintaining the status quo) rather than any strong negative intuition against a simulated life. Several researchers have now run experiments in which they test people's reactions to alternative versions of the thought experiment that play around with these biasing features (e.g. getting people to plug out from their current reality and so forth). When they do so, the results are quite mixed, suggesting that there isn't as strong an intuitive resistance to living inside a simulation as Nozick supposed (De Brigard 2010;

Weijers 2014**).** Relatedly, Nozick's thought experiment could be criticised for blurring the boundaries between irreversible deception and voluntary simulation. We might balk at the idea of being deceived into thinking that virtual reality is the same thing as physical reality — like Neo in the *Matrix* or Truman in the *Truman Show* — but if there is no deception, if we freely choose to live inside the virtual world, and if we retain the freedom to "plug out" at any moment, then things may not be so bad.

All this said, it is still important that there are some differences between virtual worlds and the physical world. Without those differences, the creativity and innovation that is possible in the virtual would cease to exist. Likewise, we wouldn't have access to the digital sublime if the terrifying experiences we had in a virtual world put us at some real risk. But just because there are differences between what happens in virtual worlds and what happens in the physical world does not mean that the former is somehow less real, or less conducive to a meaningful life, than the latter.

Objection 2 - The Immorality Objection

A second common objection to a virtual life is that it would be a playground for immorality: in virtual worlds people will believe that they are free from the ordinary requirements of morality and that they can do as they please. In book 2 of the *Republic*, Glaucon presents a thought experiment involving the mythical "Ring of Gyges", a ring that grants its wearer invisibility. Glaucon argues that if we had the power of invisibility we would engage in the most heinous and unjust acts because we would be free from the threat of punishment. Some authors have suggested that digital environments create something like the Ring of Gyges effect on their users, allowing them to act with moral impunity and anonymity (Vallor 2016, 188). This is also a long-standing trope in science fiction. This is perhaps best illustrated by the novel, movie and TV series *Westworld*, which depicts a virtual playground that allows users to engage in wanton acts of cruelty, rape and murder.

There are three things to say in response to this objection. First, the assumption that life in a virtual world will be free from the ordinary constraints of morality needs to be questioned. In response to the previous objection, I made the point that on both the anthropocentric and technological visions of VR there is a close relationship between the virtual and the real. Some things that happen in the virtual world are every bit as real as they would be in the

physical world; and many things that happen in virtual worlds are dependent on and interconnected with what happens in the physical world. If this is right, then many of the actions we perform in virtual worlds will have the same properties that would render them moral or immoral if performed in the physical world (Tillson 2018; Ostritsch 2017). For example, relationships of trust and dominance can exist in virtual worlds. The norms we apply to such relationships in the physical world would continue to apply in the virtual world. Likewise, things we do in virtual worlds can be really traumatising or harmful to people in the physical world due to the phenomenological weight of these experiences (Soraker 2010; Danaher 2018a). Similarly, the assumption that acts in virtual worlds will necessarily be anonymous or free from the threat of punishment is one that can be questioned. Many digital platforms, for example, have internal governance structures and codes, have the capacity to track and trace users, and apply punitive sanctions to them (e.g. banning them from the platform). Indeed, depending on their design, there may well be less anonymity and impunity in digital virtual spaces than there is in the real world.[1]

Second, to the extent that virtual worlds have a "game-like" aspect to them, they may well be freed from some of the ordinary constraints of morality. This is a common phenomenon. Many sports and games allow us to do things that would, outside of the game context, count as immoral. For example, contact sports such as rugby or American football permit acts that would otherwise count as physical assault. Likewise, games of chance and strategy, such as Poker and Diplomacy, encourage and reward deception. This is part of the fun. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these games are free from all moral constraints. For one thing, there is often an *internal morality* to the game, one that determines virtuous and fair play (MacIntyre 2007). There are also limits to how much moral freedom can be afforded to gameplayers. For example, if actions within games have harmful effects beyond the boundaries of the game, then this can sometimes provide reason to change their internal rules.

Third, although what I have just said implies that virtual worlds are not playgrounds for immorality, there is perhaps one interesting quirk when it comes to morality in a virtual world. This quirk applies specifically to computer-simulated forms of virtual reality. In

[1] Some digital spaces do encourage and facilitate anonymity but this is a design choice. If we are worried about people treating these spaces as playgrounds for immorality we can design against this.

simulations, people act through avatars in computer projected spaces. Sometimes those avatars can interact in ways that simulate physical violence to other simulated characters and objects. However, this damage is often easily repairable and replaceable. You could 'kill' my virtual avatar and I could quickly restore it from a backup copy. You could steal my virtual property, but I could replace it with equivalent property in the blink of an eye. The freedom that comes with our control over the digital environment means that the consequential harms of actions within those environments are often trivial. According to most moral theories, the consequences of our actions do matter to some extent. We may then worry that living a virtual life strips away something normatively significant from our actions. This may well be true and may mean that morality within virtual worlds is necessarily more deontological in nature than morality in the physical world. It may mean that virtual morality is more focused on the intrinsic nature of the virtual acts and less on their consequential harms. But this does not mean that virtual worlds are playgrounds of immorality; nor does it undermine the point that some actions in computer-simulated spaces have spillover effects in the real world. For any action with such spillover effects, consequential harms will, again, become a relevant moral constraint.

Objection 3 - The Nihilism Objection

A third objection to life in VR is that far from fostering meaning it may facilitate nihilism. The term 'nihilism' is multiply ambiguous. Broadly construed, it signifies some scepticism about the possibility or practicality of value in different domains. Beyond that, there is considerable disagreement about its exact parameters (Joyce 2013). Two versions of the nihilism critique are worth considering here.

The first focuses on *passive nihilism*. This is a form of nihilism that features in the work of Nietzsche and Sartre. It arises from an inability to shape one's own destiny and take responsibility for the values that guide one's own life. Instead of actively shaping who we are, we passively accept values imposed on us by others. Nolen Gertz (2018**)** has recently argued that technology in general, and virtual reality in particular, encourages passive nihilism. The problem is that technology fragments our attention and gives us too many options. We are encouraged to "tune out" from reality; to watch endless streams of entertainment; to live inside virtual bubbles in a wanton and hypnotic state; and to become

alienated from our true selves. We are consequently overstimulated, listless and compliant. We cannot become the masters of our own fate.

Gertz's worries about technology have been echoed by many others, myself included (Frischmann and Selinger 2018, Vallor 2016, Danaher 2019). They are worth taking seriously but they are not fatal to the prospect of meaning in VR. The argument I have developed in this chapter is that VR doesn't *necessarily* undermine meaning, but particular manifestations of VR very well could do so. If Gertz and other technology critics are correct, then current trends in VR technology could be counter-productive to meaning insofar as they encourage passivity, lack of autonomy, listlessness, overstimulation, fragmentation of attention and so forth. There are no easy fixes for these problems. But two points are worth bearing in mind. First, they are, to at least some extent, problems that can be rectified through good design and regulation of VR technology. Second, as per the anthropocentric vision of VR, not all forms of VR are reliant on modern digital technologies. There are other ways of accessing virtual spaces that can still be highly conducive to meaning.

The second way of running the objection focuses on *metaphysical nihilism*. This is the more radical thesis that there is no objective value in the world at all. If true, then our hopes of living meaningful lives are forlorn because we cannot realise the appropriate conditions of value in our lives. One might be inclined to think that metaphysical nihilism is either true or not. Nothing about VR or VR technology could possibly change that. This is probably true. Still, there are some forms of metaphysical nihilism that might become more practically salient as a result of technology.

Consider, for example, the Thomas Nagel's analysis of the absurdity of life (Nagel 1971**).** According to Nagel, our lives are absurd because everything we do within them is contingent and questionable. We can always take the view from nowhere and question the worthwhileness of what we are doing. All the constraints we seek to impose on our lives are challengeable from this perspective. Now, in a sense, Nagel's analysis is either correct or it is not. But, in another sense the practical significance of Nagelian absurdity might be heightened by technological advances. If we can live inside simulated worlds that are unconstrained by physical reality, then everything we do is not just contingent and renegotiable in theory; it is also contingent and renegotiable in practice. There is no stable, external structure that can provide meaning in our lives.

This could be a major practical problem for proponents of a meaningful life in VR: users of VR simulations may experience a more profound sense of the absurd than others. That said, it is somewhat extreme. At least for the time being, any manifestation of VR will be constrained by physical reality in some respect. We will remain embodied physical beings with one foot in physical reality. This tethering to the physical world will provide some limits on the renegotiability of our lives. In addition to this, as discussed above, some moral norms or constraints may apply irrespective of how we choose to live our lives. These could continue provide the stable structure that we need for meaning (Danaher 2014).

Objection 4 - Political and Social Fragmentation

A final objection to VR is that it could create significant social and political problems. These problems are somewhat orthogonal to the question of whether meaning is possible in VR, but could have some bearing on it. The primary concern here might be that if we can each choose to live in the virtual world that best matches our own preferences — a la the Nozickian meta-utopia — then this will lead to increased political polarisation and social isolation. We won't need to interact with others anymore. We won't need to tolerate others, compromise with them or reach mutual agreement. For many people this is a problem since improving our social and political interactions is at least part of what it takes to live a meaningful life.

As with Gertz's fears about passive nihilism, there is something worth taking seriously in this objection. But two points should be borne in mind. First, many people will not choose to live inside their own virtual world. They will choose to live with others and will have to fashion some mutual *modus vivendi* with them. Second, and perhaps more importantly, creating the technological infrastructure that would allow for the creation of something akin to the Nozickian meta-utopia would not obviate the need for political and social agreement. On the contrary, it would probably require more political and social agreement to govern and maintain such an infrastructure. Indeed, contra Nozick, sustaining the meta-utopia might well require a larger and more powerful government than any we have ever created before.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this chapter I have suggested that there are at least two different visions of what a virtual life might be: the technological vision, according to which a virtual life is a life lived inside a computer simulated world; and the anthropocentric vision, according to which a virtual life has always been a core part of human existence, fashioned by our minds and our cultures. The distinction between these two visions is not sharp and they ultimately blur together. Taking this onboard, and working with a pluralistic conception of the conditions that need to be satisfied in order to live a meaningful life, I have argued that it is possible to find meaning in VR.

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