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Author: Jean du Toit and Gregory Morgan Swer

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Keywords: Daniel O’Shiel; Martin Heidegger; fourfold; real virtualities; phenomenology

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Correspondence: Jean du Toit, e: jean.dutoit@nwu.ac.za, and Gregory Morgan Swer, e: gregswor@gmail.com.

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The virtual fourfold: reading Heidegger’s fourfold through O’Shiel’s phenomenology of the virtual

Jean du Toit¹ and Gregory Morgan Swer²

Abstract

Daniel O’Shiel recently identified four categories of virtuality, which he terms “real virtualities”, that are perpetually present in human perception. These virtual horizons (Self, World, Others, and Values) continuously structure our experience without themselves being directly experienced. This essay argues that O’Shiel’s four categories of the virtual correspond strongly to the concept of the Fourfold found in the writings of the later Heidegger, and that Heidegger’s Fourfold can be fruitfully understood as a phenomenological framework of the virtual.

Keywords: Daniel O’Shiel; Martin Heidegger; fourfold; real virtualities; phenomenology

Introduction

The virtual typifies our contemporary era, with individuals inhabiting not merely the world of the actual but increasingly online worlds as well. In line with Pierre Levy’s account, we argue that the virtual should not be understood as opposed to the real or as that which is illusory, false, or immaterial.³ We extend Daniel O’Shiel’s recent phenomenology of the virtual to Heidegger’s fourfold in order to recast it as a framework for the phenomenological analysis of online spaces. The fourfold allows for the investigation of the object through an opening or a clearing of new worlds – as a phenomenology of the virtual whereby virtuality is implied in its operation as a framework for understanding the presencing of things.

O’Shiel’s four real virtualities

In his work, *The Phenomenology of Virtual Technology* (2022), O’Shiel engages with the question of virtuality from a phenomenological perspective. Virtuality, virtual reality, etc. may appear to be newly minted concepts brought into existence by recent qualitative developments in digital technology. However, O’Shiel’s argues that whilst the terminology may have altered, the virtual and its operations have long been a central concern of phenomenology. In support of this claim O’Shiel revisits the work of canonical phenomenologists and their analyses of the constitution and perception of reality, with particular emphasis on such topics as image-consciousness, phantasy, and the real and the unreal.

O’Shiel identifies four categories of “real virtualities”– Self, World, Others, and Values – that continually structure our experience with-

¹ School of Philosophy, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. .

² School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa..

³ Pierre Levy, *Becoming Virtual: reality in the digital age* (New York: Plenum Trade, 1998).

out being themselves experienced. O’Shiel argues that these virtualities are “‘real’ because they are involved in, and thereby condition and influence, almost every perception we ever have”.⁴ He explicates the four categories as follows:

Self:

The self relates to the general sense and personality of the first-person subject, encapsulating “one’s physical make-up (Körper) and lived body (Leib), one’s drives ... and past, as well as one’s reflections”.⁵ This living body develops over time, and is situated in the here and now of a worldly situation. O’Shiel derives this from Sartre’s description of the “circuit of selfness”, as a virtual point of reference that can be accessed through our reflections and memories.

World:

The world relates to things, both physical and perceptual, in an environment that is perceived as a totality.⁶ Per his phenomenological method, O’Shiel describes how this world is inexhaustible due to the uniqueness of the individual’s perception (which provides a certain perspective through one’s situated and enactive body).

Others:

O’Shiel relates how this world is empirically populated by others.⁷ He describes how each perceptual object in the world is a “cultural object”, following Husserl, which in an intersubjective world presupposes the existence of another. The world overflows with Otherness,

which influences the subject’s personality. This echoes Heidegger’s *das Man* and the threat of the status quo. However, O’Shiel notes, the other is a real virtuality in that the other’s personality may be experienced through actual things and action in the world.

Values:

For O’Shiel, values pervade all of the above categories – values are the core of any object that one experiences.⁸ This draws on Scheler’s *Wertnehmung* (or “value-ception”), whereby values inhere in everything, including perceptual aspects of our self, world and others. Objects of perception have an evaluative quality implied, based in the immediate and pre-reflective experience of values.

O’Shiel develops these real virtualities from the works of various phenomenologists, particularly Husserl and Fink’s account of the image and image consciousness. For Husserl, image-consciousness has three interlocking components: the physical thing (‘physical image’), the representing object (the “image subject”); and the represented object (‘image object’).⁹ Image-consciousness is the sensory stimulation by external physical phenomena which allows one to experience an object not properly and fully there in a perceptual manner – in contrast to consciousness, perception and phantasy.¹⁰ For Fink the “image world” “is always and essentially together with a real carrier”, two components that are fused in phenomenal experience that provide windows onto relatively determined image worlds that are essentially “presentative-impressional intuitability”.¹¹ For

⁴ Daniel O’Shiel, *The Phenomenology of Virtual Technology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

⁵ *Ibid*, 104–105.

⁶ *Ibid*, 105–106.

⁷ *Ibid*, 106–108.

⁸ *Ibid*, 108–109.

⁹ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 25–26.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 45.

Fink, image-consciousness collapses image object and subject into one – comprising a special subsection of perception.¹²

Next, O’Shiel absorbs Heidegger’s conceptualisation of “forked being”. He describes how perception and imagination are always dynamically working in unison.¹³ In essence there is no difference in kind between perception and imagination for Heidegger, but rather a constant interplay between that which is actually given and that which is not.¹⁴

O’Shiel also draws on the cloud of potentialities described by Bergson. For Bergson, everything is “an image” (what may be termed image monism) – there is no pure perception and pure memory in everyday lived experience. Virtuality thus accounts for large swathes of our experience, serving to bridge the poles of “real and unreal, present and absent, actual and potential”.¹⁵ Deleuze notes a basic dynamism between the actual and the virtual, leading Deleuze to argue that the virtual may not be opposed to the real, but rather to the actual.¹⁶

Lastly, O’Shiel considers the fundamental intertwinement of perception developed by Merleau-Ponty, who denies a difference in kind between perception and imagination.¹⁷ Instead, he argues that a fundamental intertwinement exists of these dual capacities in human experience that serves as the primordial ground for all human existence and experience. Presence and absence are mixed together in a temporal perceptual structure. Perception is therefore ambiguous and even “contradictory”, particularly in terms of perceptions and images – indeed, phantasies make absent phenomena present through the body.¹⁸

Thus, O’Shiel develops his argument that imagination and perception are in constant interplay in our perception of objects.¹⁹ In addition to arguing for a fundamental intertwinement between imagination and perception, he further argues that both are permeated with virtuality.

Per O’Shiel’s phenomenological framework, every single object entails a penumbra of potentialities. Thus, an object is not merely an object, but always appears to us surrounded by a virtual cloud of potentialities. When we experience the object, we are perceiving attitudinally and imbue our perception with values because perception of the lifeworld is structured culturally with the object as a nexus or node for the perceptual act. Consider a decorative pot, for example. Our experiences of it entail also a cloud of potentialities imbued with values (it may be an indigenous pot that intuits a people’s inhabiting of a space, or may be suggestive of legacies of colonialism). The real therefore relates to the actual, but always also includes more. Every experience of an object, such as the pot, will involve the four categories of the cloud (Self, World, Others, and Values) that O’Shiel sketches. In this regard, O’Shiel describes “the everyday perceptual real virtualities with their inherent “almost”, just-around-the-corner quality to all that we perceive, [and] the intrinsic and always horizontal elements of self, world, others and values that we never directly perceive even though we always assume and experience them through so many other related perceptual phenomena”.²⁰ Humans are directly implied in the perceptual experience of the object, as inherent constituters and con-

¹² *Ibid*, 71.

¹³ *Ibid*, 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 91.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 96–97.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 84.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

structors.

On O’Shiel’s account, virtual technologies make use of the fundamental capacities in our perception that are already part of our everyday life – we are already, before the use of technology, of the virtual. And in this manner technology functions as a revealing of ourselves as always virtual in that the virtual is a mode of perceptual experience that is fundamentally entangled with everyday human existence. Even though the virtual technologies we use are new, the perceptual capacities that make possible our experience of the virtual are necessarily prior to online spaces. Thus, when I make use of an Oculus Rift headset, I am not transcending my perceptual experience; rather, the artefact engages with the already pre-existing transcendent features of human perception. The use of virtual (and other) technologies suggests an experiential or qualitative difference, rather than an ontological one, and in this regard, technology represents a discrete and analysable node of changed perception.

Heidegger’s Fourfold

The fourfold, introduced in Heidegger’s later writings, “Building, dwelling, thinking” and “The thing”, consists of the earth and sky, divinities and mortals. They sketch a way of being with things that allow them to come forth as things instead of objects of representation.

Rather than being a cryptic poetic flourish in later Heidegger, the fourfold represents a central element of his program for addressing the Enframing (the technological disclosure of all beings as pure resource). The Enframing entails, for Heidegger, the forgetting of the essence of humanity, its “ek-sistent” nature. Heidegger writes that, “man occurs essentially in such a way that he is the “there”, that is, the clearing of Being.”²¹ Within the Enframing,

humanity forgets that its ordering of nature (as pure resource) is ordained by Being itself, rather than being imposed on nature by the human will. Humanity, uniquely in nature, can witness the presencing of Being, or the way in which a world holds forth – this unique ability reveals humanity’s essential nature. Humanity does not determine when and how Being manifests itself as a horizon of disclosure, and Being cannot “world” without a human Dasein to provide the space in which it can do so. Being both uses and needs humanity. Thus, the essence of an epoch of Being and the essence of humanity are linked.

Humanity forgets that the Enframing is but one mode of revealing among many, and for all the world reveals to us, it simultaneously conceals. Thus, humanity has forgotten the way in which world worlds, the role that they play in the worlding of a world, and their essential duty of stewardship to Being. However, as Heidegger following Hölderlin points out, “. . . where the danger is, grows the saving power also”.²² The danger is the forgetfulness of Being, and the power to save. When humanity sees the truth of Being, in its infinite fecundity as opposed to the static totality of the Enframing, humanity is called to its essential role of safekeeping the truth of Being as it discloses itself. Hereby humanity fulfils most essentially what it is. When the world worlds, i.e. discloses itself anew, then humanity will have again an appropriate relationship to Being, whereby the world’s disenchantment will have passed and the sacred will once more presence – humanity will again dwell within, tend and preserve the fourfold.

In “Building, dwelling, thinking” Heidegger defines the fourfold, consisting of sky and earth, mortals and divinities, as follows:

²¹ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”, in *Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 229.

²² Martin Heidegger, “The turning”, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Garland, 1977), 42.

Earth:

“Earth is the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal.”

Sky:

“The sky is the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year’s seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night, the clemency and inclemency of the weather, the drifting clouds and blue depths of the ether.”

Divinities:

“The divinities are the beckoning messengers of the godhead. Out of the holy sway of the godhead, the god appears in his presence or withdraws into his concealment.”

Mortals:

“The mortals are the human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death. Only man dies, and indeed continually, as long as he remains on earth, under the sky, before the divinities.”²³

Interpretation of the various elements of Heidegger’s fourfold is contested, and consequently we will lay out and justify our own interpretation of the fourfold. First, the concepts of earth and sky.

Harman notes that Heidegger cannot intend earth and sky to denote classes of things, with earth denoting things on the ground (rocks, water, plants) and sky denoting things not on the ground (stars, planets, clouds). Such a list of

beings, as opposed to a focus on Being, is contrary to Heidegger’s focus on the ontological rather than the ontic. Harman notes that Heidegger’s examples for “sky” are all discernible objects or processes, concrete presences in everyday life. The examples for “earth” are of a different nature. Thus Heidegger, rather than categorising types of beings, makes an ontological distinction between aspects of Being – between what is concealed, the earth, and what is revealed, the sky, both of which are part of *aletheia*. Heidegger introduces these concepts in his discussion of a Greek temple.

The temple opens up a world. “It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being”.²⁴ Thus the temple-object discloses a world in which things reveal themselves as certain kinds of things, by reference to which, human life is given purpose and direction. It creates a public space, a world of a people. The relations between objects and people that it enables and gives rise to, presents itself as physis.²⁵ However, unlike the Enframing, the world of the temple never strives for totality, never seeks to make everything manifest. The world set up by the temple is given by Being – it shares in the duality of *aletheia*. Beneath and behind the temple is the earth, the realm of unconcealed and unilluminated. It is the concealed plenitude of Being that gives forth and sustains the visible materials that comprise the world-gathering temple.²⁶ And the world-opening temple points back to the earth from which it has arisen, drawing attention to

²³ Martin Heidegger, “Building, dwelling, thinking”, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 147–8.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Origin of the work of art”, in *Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 167.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 168.

²⁶ Here we follow Mehta’s interpretation of earth as “the hiddenness involved in all unhiddenness, the closure out of which all disclosure arises and in which it is rooted and preserved.” J.L. Mehta, *The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 218.

the self-concealing nature of the earth. This “primal strife” between earth and world/sky, the concealing and the revealing of the temple, demonstrates the essence of truth for Heidegger.

What of the divinities and the mortals? Heidegger’s statement that the god “withdraws into his concealment” defines the nature of divinities for Harman – the basic mode of the god is concealment.²⁷ Mortals, contrastingly, being capable of death as death, are thrown out into the “nothing”, and “openly comport themselves towards it”.²⁸ This, for Harman, suggests that the basic mode of the mortals is appearance. Consequently, Harman concludes that whilst earth refers to general concealment, the divinities refer to specific concealment. Conversely, the sky denotes general revealing, whilst mortals refer to specific revealing.²⁹ We argue instead that the divinities denote the numinous or sacred. Whilst Heidegger states that the gods conceal themselves, Heidegger also says that the gods appear in their presence – the gods can be both concealed and unconcealed. As we saw earlier Heidegger states quite categorically that “the god also is – when he is – a being and stands as a being within Being and its coming to presence, which brings itself disclosingly to pass out of the worlding of world”.³⁰ The god, by virtue of being a being within Being, *disclosingly* comes to presence in the worlding of the world.³¹

We argue that the concept of mortals refers to Dasein, to human beings. That mortals are

capable of death as death, Young rightly argues, refers back to Heidegger’s description of Dasein in *Being and Time*, in that they are beings for whom the inevitability of their own death makes existence an issue for them.³² Indeed, Heidegger argues that “mortals dwell in the way they preserve the fourfold in its essential being, its presencing”.³³ How does this statement refer to individual entities, unconcealed or otherwise, given that the preservation of the fourfold is the essential human duty? An individual entity might well serve as a focal point for the gathering of the fourfold to manifest itself, but such a manifestation would always require a human being to experience its presencing.

In summary then, we understand the fourfold as follows. The earth is understood as “the serving bearer”, that which generates and supports.³⁴ It is from the earth that all else is generated, and in which it “remains embedded as its sustaining principle”.³⁵ The earth is that which grounds and makes possible the presence of a world, understood on our account as a horizon of disclosure within which things can be encountered as things in the first place. This horizon appears within the fourfold as sky, “the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars”.³⁶ The lighted face of Being is the open space in which beings emerge as that which they are. The divinities are understood as the “beckoning messengers of the godhead”.³⁷ These are immanent messengers

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, “Building, dwelling, thinking”, 148.

²⁸ Graham Harman, *Tool-Being*, (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 198.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 203.

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, “The turning”, 47.

³¹ Indeed, though there is not space here to discuss it, it is key to Heidegger’s strategy for overcoming the violence of modernity that the gods can return to presence and exert a definite influence.

³² Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Later Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 92.

³³ Martin Heidegger, “The turning”, 149.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Building, dwelling, thinking”, 147.

³⁵ J.L. Mehta, *Heidegger*, 218.

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, “Building, dwelling, thinking”, 147.

³⁷ Martin Heidegger, “The thing”, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 176.

who signal to us the unwritten constitution of the horizon of disclosure, the implicit ethos that is appropriate to those who dwell within it. And the mortals, we argue, are *Dasein*, the only beings “capable of death *as* death” and thus the only beings for whom being and non-being can be a concern.³⁸

From real virtualities to the virtual fourfold

As mentioned earlier, a major implication arising from O’Shiel’s analysis of the virtual is the denial of a difference in kind between perception (real) and imagination (irreal) – both axes being permeated with virtuality. Objects, whether perceptual or imaginary, always appear to us surrounded by a virtual cloud of potentiality. A thing is not something apart from the virtual cloud around it, it encapsulates our perception of a thing as a thing. We argue that O’Shiel’s description of the virtual cloud of potentialities, and its operation, is proximate to Heidegger’s fourfold but articulated in a more conventional phenomenological manner. Furthermore, O’Shiel’s concept of the virtual cloud offers a convenient way to access and apply Heidegger’s insights.

There are two potential objections to the suggestion of any meaningful correspondence between O’Shiel’s account and Heidegger’s. The first, and weaker, regards how O’Shiel’s real virtualities are designed to facilitate the phenomenological analysis of virtual technology and its structuring and mediation of our perceptions – to provide a phenomenological view from within the technology, in effect. For the later Heidegger, however, modern technology is entwined with the Enframing, an extractive and exploitative mode of world-disclosure that reduces everything to the status of standing reserve. The fourfold represents, in con-

trast, the antithesis of the Enframing. It is a way of hearkening to things *as* things, as a nexus of relations, rather than compelling them to reveal themselves in terms of their utility-potential to the will of the technologised subject. Consequently, using the fourfold to understand the world revealed within a technological perspective seems rather contradictory.

This objection rests upon a rather simplistic view of Heidegger as a technological Ludite, and neglects Heidegger own statements that technology, in the sense of technological artefact or system, will not disappear in a post-Enframing epoch. Nor will the technological disclosure of beings as resource. Rather it is the technological metaphysics that absolutises the disclosure of beings as resource that will be overcome.³⁹ Thus the technological artefact as a thing gathers the fourfold in its own way, as do all things. And to explore the ways in which it a particular technology gathers the fourfold is in no way a perversion or misappropriation of Heidegger’s concept. As Dreyfus and Spinoza note, for Heidegger the contemporary highway bridge gathers the fourfold just as surely as does the stone bridge of medieval times.⁴⁰ And, consequently, so too does a VR headset or smartphone. To hearken to the way in which a technological artefact discloses a world, and the ways in which we are claimed by it *without* being compelled to see the world or ourselves as standing reserve, is a key part of the Heideggerian project. And in so far as O’Shiel’s real virtualities enable us to engage in this process, by rendering the fourfold comprehensible as a phenomenological framework for the analysis of the virtual dimensions of things, it is in accord with Heidegger’s project.

A second, more significant objection to understanding the fourfold through O’Shiel’s real virtualities is that O’Shiel’s account lacks the ontological dimension so central to Heidegger’s

³⁸ Martin Heidegger, “Building, dwelling, thinking”, 148.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, “The turning”, 38.

⁴⁰ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Charles Spinoza, “Highway bridges and feasts”, *Man and World*, 30, (1997): 159–177.

philosophy. O'Shiel's analyses draw on a selection of canonical phenomenological thinkers (primarily Husserl and Sartre). And perhaps for this reason, his level of analysis remains resolutely focussed on the ontical, on the constitution of objects of knowledge in subjective consciousness. O'Shiel engages with Heidegger's work in a very limited fashion, using Heidegger's account of "forked being" to highlight the dynamic relation between perception and imagination in our experience.⁴¹ In any case, O'Shiel's real virtualities do not seem to reflect the concern with ontological structures that dominate Heidegger's thought. One may ask, therefore, where the earth is in O'Shiel's phenomenology of the virtual?⁴²

We contend that O'Shiel's real virtualities give us conceptual purchase on the fourfold. Grasped as a phenomenological structure for the analysis of the self-presenting of things, the fourfold ceases to appear as a nebulous poetic concept and instead becomes a framework for phenomenological analysis of the virtual. It becomes clearer how one could apply the fourfold to the constituents of technological modernity with the same facility that one applies the Enframing as a mode of analysis. However, if the price of this practical purchase on Heidegger's fourfold is the loss of its ontological depth, then one might well feel that the advantage is outweighed by the cost. It is at this point that Heidegger can be used to grow O'Shiel's framework, by modifying it to accommodate the earth.

O'Shiel's real virtualities – Self, World, Others, Values – are constantly operative at the perceptual level. We propose that these four virtualities correspond with three aspects of Hei-

degger's fourfold, namely sky, divinities and mortals. O'Shiel's World refers to the things around us and the wider environment that pervades them. It represents our perception of our surroundings as a unity. It is the environment in the sense of that which I perceive to surround *me*, a combination of direct sensory experiences, and knowledge of the world beyond the limits of my perceptual field. It is an intersubjective environment always already structured in terms of capacities towards which we are oriented. O'Shiel's World can be seen to correspond to Heidegger's sky as the experiential unity of our environment, the sum total of all the things and people in my perspectival world and the relations between them. It is both the horizon of disclosure that makes it possible for us to have a world filled with intelligible beings, and the contents of the world thus disclosed.

O'Shiel's Values refers to the values that he argues inhere in everything and which we experience without perceiving directly in all dealings with objects. They are, "the immediate and pre-reflective experience of values that we automatically experience in perception of our selves, aspects of the world and others".⁴³ This corresponds to Heidegger's divinities, the background ethos that pervades a world and gives it its numinous dimension, intersubjective norms and models. As Heidegger said of the gods of the Greeks, these values do not "command" or appear to us directly but rather "point".⁴⁴ They become apparent to us in the presence of a thing as signs, never directly perceived but intimated. And act as hints that point away from themselves to the holy, the ethos of the world in which they are situated. In so do-

⁴¹ Daniel O'Shiel, *Phenomenology*, 75–81.

⁴² None of the above should be seen as undermining O'Shiel's achievement in constructing his phenomenology of virtual technology. O'Shiel himself is also clear that he views his work as a preliminary effort in the field, rather than an exhaustive account.

⁴³ Daniel O'Shiel, *Phenomenology*, 108.

⁴⁴ Gregory Swer, "Nature, physis and the holy", *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2008): 248–250.

ing they direct our thoughts to the appropriate compartment to this ethos, a reflection which in turn structures our dealings with things and other mortals.

O'Shiel's other virtual axes, Self and Others, we argue can both be considered as aspects of the same feature of the Heideggerian fourfold. O'Shiel describes the Self as our embodied point of view, and our awareness of ourselves on the "most basic, pre-reflective and perceptual experiential plane".⁴⁵ This corresponds to Heidegger's *Dasein*, the fundamental experience of being-in-the-world, and thus correlates with the feature of the fourfold that Heidegger terms mortals. O'Shiel's fourth virtual axis, Others, also corresponds to Heidegger's mortals. O'Shiel states that our experience of the world is one that "simply overflows with otherness at every turn and thing" – other humans and their products.⁴⁶ Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein*, [being-with], that human existence is essentially communal (also an aspect of the mortals within the fourfold), is crucial here. Heidegger states that the dwelling of mortals on the earth always includes a "belonging to men's being with one another".⁴⁷

So O'Shiel's World corresponds to Heidegger's sky, his Values to Heidegger's divinities, and his Self and his Other to Heidegger's mortals. What then of the fourth aspect of Heidegger's fourfold, the earth? This feature of the fourfold is not to be found in O'Shiel's four axes of the virtual. And yet, as noted above, it is vital to understanding the operations of the fourfold and the ways in which it represents an alternative to the appearance of entities within the technological Enframing that typifies late modernity. Central to Heidegger's history of the epochs of Being is his account of truth as *aletheia*, as uncovering. On such an account truth, understood as unconcealment, always re-

mains in a dynamic tension with concealment – the revealing of one facet of a thing obviates the other facets. The history of metaphysics then for Heidegger represents a succession of attempts to absolutise a horizon of disclosure, and to enshrine its mode of disclosure as revealing the "reality" of the objects thus disclosed. And in so doing it forgets the fundamental role played by absence, by concealment, in the appearance of the world and the things found within it. The fourfold points to a way of being, of dwelling on the earth, beyond the metaphysical project.

Through the fourfold the absencing of the world is retained in thought during the presencing of the world, the earth along with the sky, whenever a thing is encountered as a thing. And in this sense, that of a present absence, of possible presences, that appear along with and as part of a thing, that earth in Heidegger's sense in fact pervades O'Shiel's real virtualities, which are themselves an attempt to co-ordinate our thinking around the axes in which we experience, knowingly or otherwise, the presences and absences, the actualities and potentialities of things and other humans. O'Shiel's four real virtualities point to the earth, just as they point to each other in turn. In other words, though it lies outside the ontic focus of his phenomenological framework, the earth is necessarily implicit in O'Shiel's real virtualities. And by relocating O'Shiel's virtual axes within the play of the fourfold, they now appear in relation to one another "not [as] terms of an ontic relation, but rather moments of the being of the thing".⁴⁸

Conclusion

Understanding the fourfold as a phenomenological framework for the analysis of the vir-

⁴⁵ Daniel O'Shiel, *Phenomenology*, 105.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 106.

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, "Building, dwelling, thinking", 147.

⁴⁸ James M. Damske, *Being, Man, and Death: a key to Heidegger* (University Press of Kentucky, 1970), 151.

tual removes it from the quasi-poetic realm of Heidegger's brief and cryptic references to it, which as Harman puts it are "infamous for their obscurity and preciousness".⁴⁹ Instead it renders it philosophically accessible and amenable to application. Understanding the virtual as components of the fourfold that inhere in all our experiences with things directs our analysis away from the realm of virtual technology, which was the focus of O'Shiel's analysis, and back to the mundane objects of everyday offline existence. And likewise, understanding the fourfold as a framework for the phenomenological analysis of the structuring of the virtual in our encounters with things invites its application to the things of the virtual technological world. For the virtual thing (such as a non-fungible token or a DALL-E 2 digital image) also gathers the fourfold.

Authors' contributions

Gregory Swer and Jean du Toit contributed equally to the conceptualisation, planning, research and writing of this paper.

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Correspondence: Jean du Toit, e: jean.dutoit@nwu.ac.za, and Gregory Morgan Swer, e: gregswer@gmail.com.

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