Book Review: *The Phenomenology of Virtual Technology*

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As virtual reality technologies insert themselves more and more into our lives, coming to terms with the implications of such technologies is imperative. My son received an Oculus headset two Christmas's ago. He was completely immersed—so much so, that as he fell asleep he fell into the virtual reality world, mumbling and moving to the game. In the space where he would normally be drifting off, his brain was clearly on overdrive to process the experience. I was deeply troubled. Clearly, the virtual environment had affected him deeply. Wanting to make sense of this phenomenon, when I learned of Daniel O'Shiel's work, I was immediately drawn.

In *The phenomenology of virtual technology: Perception and imagination in a digital age*, O'Shiel's main premise that starts the book is that virtual technologies are impacting individuals and culture at large. In addition to shaping our reality and what we experience as real, he also argues that virtual technology changes "what is accessible to us, how it is accessible, as well as when and to whom[1]. O'Shiel was curious about the phenomenological underpinnings that could help provide insight into virtual reality. He claims at the beginning of the book that his work "provides a cohesive and systematic phenomenology of virtuality."[2] He builds this framework and then applies it to different contexts. Ultimately, what O'Shiel has tried to do and accomplished in this book is building a framework to help navigate our understanding of how and why our relationships are affected by virtual technologies.

The work is divided into parts. In the first part of the work, he does a deep dive into numerous different phenomenologists, piecing together like a puzzle the elements of their work that touch upon the foundations of virtual reality. O'Shiel exclaims on his website that he is an environmentalist; as such, I expected the work to draw significantly from Merleau-Ponty due to the strong movement in environmental philosophy that has drawn from his work. Merleau-Ponty is only one small voice in the greater conversation in this work. The first section is more of a chronology of the development and contributions to the main terms and theoretical concepts that vine out from Husserl. Using Husserl's work and the work of an assistant of Husserl's and phenomenologist in his own right—Eugene Fink—O'Shiel explicates his first major piece of the framework. He differentiates between two different ways that our world is presented to us. We receive the world through perceptions (more like experience of the real and the now) and "presentifications" (which are more like the elements of our experience

1 O'Shiel, *The phenomenology of virtual technology: Perception and imagination in a digital age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), loc 314.

2 O'Shiel, *The phenomenology of virtual technology*, loc 331.

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without physical representations in the now—that is, we imagine their presence). O'Shiel writes that "Our experience of presence comes to the fore in the former; our ability to evoke something absent in the latter."[3] In addition to perception and presentification, O'Shiel brings another important term to the table that is crucial to virtual reality experiences—image-consciousness.

Through Fink, O'Shiel argues that presentification and image-consciousness are two different experiences. An example of image-consciousness, he writes from the beginning, is watching a tennis match on television. When we watch television, there are three different elements to the experience that culminates in what we grasp. There is the physical object of the TV, the experience of the image (image object) and the actual scene on television (for example, a tennis match). What O'Shiel tries to uncover is how our consciousness of images fits into these schemes. He ponders whether image-consciousness is a hybrid. Through Fink, he lays the case that image-consciousness requires an actual object while presentification does not.

As part one continues, each chapter introduces a new phenomenologist. For a beginner in the study of phenomenology, this work would be very readable. Likewise, its depth is also well-suited for learned phenomenologists. It does a very good job introducing each of the scholars, explaining how their works and lives were connected, overviewing the major tenets of their work, then showing how their work informs the framework O'Shiel is creating. Incorporating the ideas of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Bergson and Deleuze, he is led to question whether imagination and perception, real and irreal, and several other dichotomies that he will then take up later in the book might best be understood as a spectrum. This paves the way for one of the major contributions of his work, that "societal and moral balance and betterment can only be realized through a proper understanding of virtuality and virtual technology."[4] Due to the nature of our communicative and social experience, all experience is a shared experience. As such, our interactions whether virtual or not deserve reflection.

O'Sheil introduces four main "real virtualities" in the next part of his work: self, world, others and values. He explains that they are real in the sense that they infiltrate all perception and virtual in the sense that they are never fully given or present. The discussion of these sets the stage for the final part of his work where he uses his framework to understand virtuality and the implications for specific technologies: social media, gaming, and virtual/augmented/mixed reality systems.
My interest was in social media, and it was the section of this part of the work that I spent the most time reading. It was in this part that I struggled to grasp a major claim of his work. Based on the framework he developed, he claims that when it come to the four virtualities, relationships, and interactions on social media engagement cannot be real and that conduct is imaginary in social media spaces. He does

3 O'Shiel, *The phenomenology of virtual technology*, loc 331.

4 O'Shiel, *The phenomenology of virtual technology*, loc 368.

exceptionally well examining the dichotomies of terms often pitted against one another in philosophy of technology scholarship. The major dichotomies he examines are true/false, natural/artificial, presence/absence, perceptual/nonperceptual presence and actual/potential. Ultimately, he finds the presented technologies to be virtual. The reason they are virtual, he notes, is because they "allow us to interact with objects, people and worlds that are not actually there"[5] and also because of their "power and sophistication to represent and impart digital phenomena into our worlds to the extent that this latter come to supplant the real and the perceptual, if not in experience then in terms of function and value."[6] He asks us to consider an important question, How far can they supplant the real?

One of the hesitancies I had about this argument is that the use of the language, "real" and "imaginary," despite his presented awareness of the limitations of thought associated with the dichotomies, is still problematic. A new language is necessary to examine and discuss relationships in our worlds of mixed virtuality. Elsewhere I have noted Deacon's work that looks at the physical and physiological impacts of "ententional phenomenon."[78] Ententional phenomenon are those that are characterized by their absence. Deacon presents his own version of virtual reality by examining the neural activities associated with someone skipping a stone over a body of water, particularly when imagining and experiencing the skipping of the stone. Deacon notes that the actual neural activities are not tangible and instead equates them with words in the sense that, "They are both representations of something not-quite-realized and not-quite actual" and instead calls these "bits of virtual reality" which are "the contents of these representations."[9] These irreal bits "are as critical to events that will likely follow as the energy that will be expended.[10]" His work provides a helpful addition to O'Shiel's—examining virtualities invokes that which is not existent in our physical world.

In my own work, I have tried to emphasize the actual tangible and physical impacts along the spectrum of technology-mediated relationships.[11] There is a harm that can be done in trying to pit online against offline when it comes to our interactions. The reality of our experience is that technology infiltrates all our relationships in infinite ways today. A colleague of mine recently wrote an account of the experience of a virtual reality based game. He wrote:

5 O'Shiel, *The phenomenology of virtual technology*, loc 3913.

6 O'Shiel, *The phenomenology of virtual technology*, loc 3915.

7 Tiffany A. Petricini, "Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter, Terence W. Deacon (2011), *Explorations in Media Ecology* 20, no. 1 (2021): 107–110.

8 Terrance. W Deacon, *Incomplete nature: How mind emerged from matter* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

9 Deacon, *Incomplete nature*, 19.

10 Deacon, *Incomplete nature*, 19.

11 Tiffany A. Petricini, "Explorations in the noosphere: Hermeneutic presence and hostility in cyberspace," *Explorations in Media Ecology* 18, no. 1–2 (2019): 57–71; Tiffany A. Petricini, *Friendship and technology: A philosophical approach to computer mediated communication* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2022).

> I do not question which reality is more real. I can always remove the goggles to firmly ground myself back in my bodily subjectivity. The question presented is not whether the virtual game is more real than my material existence, but whether my material existence contains any mechanisms that mask access to reality. [12]

I appreciated this thought because it truly hits at the heart of the matter of all rhetoric of social media and relationships. The concern is not whether they are "real," or even whether they supplant the real, but instead whether these experiences "mask access to reality."

When I think back to my son that night and his strange entry into dream world, that is ultimately what laid at the heart my concern. It was important to me that his ability to be able to distinguish between real and not real stay intact and remain transparent, and without yet having a long history from which to study impacts of these technologies on the developing brains, we need to remain mindful of the potentialities. As a parent, and an instructor, part of what O'Shiel's work has brought to the forefront of my attention is that my guidance is imperative for helping those in my care navigate both the real and the irreal, the potential and the actual, the virtual and the perceptual. The technologies that impact us, for indeed they do—whether virtual or real, whether online or offline, whether perceptions or presentifications—cause tangible effects in our lifeworld—both positive and negative. Ultimately, O'Shiel's work provides a firm background to think through these effects and how they will shape our future.

12 Brian Onishi, "The wonder and terror of getting lost in the Room," *Studia philosophica wratislaviensia,* (Forthcoming).

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