

The Problem of Existence of Virtual Objects †

Mariusz Mazurek

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Science, Nowy Świat 72 Street,
00-330 Warsaw, Poland; mmazurek@ifispan.edu.pl; Tel.: +48-530-290-468

† Presented at Philosophy and Computing Conference, IS4SI Summit 2021, online, 12–19 September 2021.

Abstract: I considered the problem of existence of virtual objects, mainly the mode of existence of these objects, while I omitted the issue of the criteria of their existence. I present a brief exposition of alternative the concepts of modes (forms, kinds) of existence of virtual objects proposed in the literature on the subject, and then I demonstrate my position on this issue.

Keywords: ontology; virtual existence; virtual objects; artefacts; fictions

1. Introduction

The literature on the subject includes the following views on the mode of existence of virtual objects: (1) “virtual” means existing “in the human mind with no reference to [. . .] the physical fact of form or features” [1]; (2) virtual existence is analogous to mirror images [2]; (3) virtual existence is existence in augmented reality [3]; (4) virtual existence is existence in a digital environment imitating, mimicking or replicating a physically existing, non-virtual original [4]; (5) virtual existence is existence similar to the existence of artefacts in artificial reality (created by humans, as opposed to the discovered, natural reality) [5]; (6) finally, virtual existence is existence analogous to the existence of literary fictions, mythical objects, etc. (broadly defined as cultural fictions) [6].

Michael Heim exhaustively describes the concepts related to virtual reality, such as: virtuality, virtual reality and the virtual environment/world. These terms correspond to Heim’s other concepts: virtual entities and the material, natural world (primary world). It is thus convenient to recall the etymology of the very notion of virtuality, which comes from the Latin word *virtus*—meaning virtue, strength, or valor. Virtual means not existing in empirical reality, but possible to exist, potential, possible. The notion of virtuality in its general meaning is connected with such secondary terms as ostensibility, imaginability, invisibility. The meaning of the Latin adjective *virtualis* would parallel the meaning of the contemporary adjective *potential*, i.e., capacitating the realization of an action (both adjectives possess Latin stems meaning power and strength—*virtus* and *potentia*). The essence of the virtuality of an object is that it does not exist in a material way, but nevertheless functions in the reality accessible to the human senses. The virtual nature of an entity or an object means that its image or the effects produced by its action can be perceived by human senses, not the entity or the object itself [7].

There is a broad consensus that virtual reality is not an entirely new phenomenon; what is new are the means (the keyboard, the screen) via which information in this reality is obtained, recorded and transmitted to others. Jeri Fink rightly notes that: “[...] virtual reality is not a revolution but an evolution, it is a space occupied by humans since the first awareness of the qualitative difference between mind and body” [1] (p. 16).

Theatrical performance, art, literature and the cinema are also ways of generating virtual reality, which, however, is constructed through the use of different, traditional props. Fictional characters from books, films, myths and cultural symbols are also immaterial objects of reality but have been constructed using other, traditional tools (the pen, the pencil, paper), utilizing the social and cultural context to a greater extent. The computer,



Citation: Mazurek, M. The Problem of Existence of Virtual Objects.

Proceedings **2022**, *81*, 152.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings2022081152>

Academic Editor: Peter Boltuc

Published: 20 June 2022

Publisher’s Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

the sheet of paper and the typewriter are only instruments, technical ways of expressing the thoughts of the subject who creates these objects. The basis for all this is the human mind that invents and creates them.

Virtual Objects as Artifacts

Identification of the category of virtual objects with the category of artefacts usually means that virtual objects are artefacts that belong to the artificial world created by a person, which is separate from the natural world. Therefore, it should be assumed that they are also separate from nature [8,9]. Despite the fact that the ways of creating virtual objects and material artifacts are similar, i.e., human-made, the ontic status of both types of objects seems to be different.

Risto Hipelin states that an artifact is “an object that has been created or produced for a given purpose” [10]. Etymologically, the word “artifact” comes from Latin words *arte* (skill, also art or technique) and *factum* (to make). The artifact is a concept that is increasingly being used in both aesthetics and technology, and is more likely to refer to material objects (e.g., works of art, telephones) [11]. The Merriam–Webster dictionary states that an artifact is a characteristic product of human activity. Artifacts may include tools and works of art, especially archaeological objects. Artifacts are also defined as something created by humanity, which does not belong to nature and which is not nature [12]. If we accept the standard definition of artifacts as material objects, then the identification of virtual objects as artifacts seems to be incorrect (artifacts are material, and virtual objects are immaterial). In the broadest sense of the term “artifact,” the class of artifacts is rich and diverse. As a result, including virtual objects in this class does not tell us much, especially if it is not clear whether the artifacts are material or immaterial as well. If human-made immaterial objects are also included in the set of artifacts, then it can be argued that virtual objects are artifacts, and form a special class. However, the mere inclusion of virtual objects in the (extended) set of artifacts is not very informative, because it does not indicate the specificity of virtual objects that differentiates them from other artifacts; in other words, it does not specify its subtype among the whole kind of artifacts. It would be necessary here to specify the attributes that differentiate them from other artifacts. Otherwise, saying that virtual objects are artifacts (in these extended senses) is to state the obvious, which, in fact, provides little information about the existence of virtual objects. If, on the other hand, only specific (i.e., human-made) material objects are considered artifacts, then virtual objects are not artifacts at all. Such a classification is erroneous.

Certain aspects of the view presented above, i.e., those which proclaim that the virtual world is the work of a person (and not of the computer), as well as the position that it is the human subject who creates virtual objects, can be found in the literature in Elisabeth Reid’s views: “virtual worlds do not exist in the technology used to represent them or solely in the mind of the user, but in the relationship between internal mental constructs and technically produced representations of those constructs. The illusion of reality lies not in the apparatus, but in the users’ desire to treat the products of their imagination as if they were real” [13] (pp. 6–7). This was also pointed out by Anna Latawiec, who claimed that: “by virtual world I mean the image of reality created or discovered by man on the way of intellectual or technical simulation. The world understood in this way is a creation of man. It has its source in widely understood reality. By reality I mean both the empirical reality, which is accessible only to a limited extent to the observer, and “reality itself,” i.e., existing beyond the observer’s reach” [14] (p. 52).

However, in the aforementioned positions of Reid and Latawiec, there is no explanation of how objects become public and in what reality they are located. I believe that some modification of Popper’s concept of the third world [15] and a hypothesis of how the process of transition from a private creation to an objectively existing object occurs is a necessary part of the image regarding the existence of virtual objects [16].

2. The Ontic Status of Virtual Objects

The standpoint on the existence of virtual objects that I propose has some points of convergence with the views already presented in the subject literature, but I add important aspects to them. I consider the genesis of virtual objects in human individual consciousness and their final, ready-made form emerging in the process of objectification of relevant consciousness states. This objectification is accompanied by the autonomization of virtual objects—they cease to be the private property of the individual human subject who is the creator of the virtual object. The ontic status of virtual objects is similar to the status of immaterial ideas that appear in the mind of the subject who produces them. It can be stated that an idea, which is an element of knowledge or its immaterial subject, represents an object that does not exist at the moment of its creation, but is an object, an entity, or a potential or pure form in the sense already formed by the Greek philosophers (Plato, Aristotle).

2.1. *The Way of Creating Virtual Objects*

The virtual object is created by the subject and in the first phase of the creation process, it is a subjective invention of the subject, a private object of his/her consciousness, inaccessible to anyone except the creator, i.e., existing only in the private immanent sphere—as transcendental philosophers would say. Then there is an objectification process of this invention and, at the same time, its autonomization. This phase is based on the communication of the subjective creation to other subjects. In this communication, desubjectivization of the virtual object takes place. In the course of intersubjective communication, it penetrates into the consciousness of other subjects and thus loses its character of being an exclusively private object belonging only to the consciousness of its creator. It becomes the property of other subjects, participants in the communication process, penetrating into their consciousness, and finally becoming a common, collective property.

After dissemination and desubjectivation (i.e., after the information about the virtual object has been communicated to other subjects), the object of individual consciousness of the subject-creator becomes independent of the creator in a sense that its consciousness is irrelevant to the way it functions and exists. The virtual object exists and functions in an objective cultural reality. It becomes, in a way, the common property of many subjects and eventually also a public property, an object of collective consciousness or, in other terms, an object of the third world—if we use here the notion from Karl R. Popper's concept of three worlds.

When the creator of a virtual object makes the content of the virtual object accessible to other users through communication and dissemination, the object becomes objectified. Inspired by Popper's concept of three worlds cited above, it can be assumed that virtual objects that are in the first phase of their creation are private, subjective objects, then they autonomize and, at the same time, objectivize when they become available in the processes of communication by means of computers, including the dissemination of computer programs and content transmitted via the Internet and other computer information carriers.

2.2. *What Is Their Relation to Material Objects?*

Virtual objects are located in an intangible, objective, human-made world. This can be called the world of cultural objects. They affect human consciousness and thus, by initiating human activity in the material sphere, the physical world. For example, virtual house designs are the basis for building real houses. Virtual objects in computer games influence the users of these games by, among other things, increasing their imagination, teaching them and inducing aggressive behavior. Virtual objects are realizations of ideas appearing in the individual consciousness of their creators. At first, they are immaterial objects; sometimes, they are materialized (e.g., a house built according to its virtual design) but often, they remain immaterial (e.g., characters from computer games). Between the idea and the immaterial object of this idea, there is a relation of representation: an immaterial (virtual) object represents the idea. However, when the object of this idea is materialized, it can be stated that this material object represents the idea and, at the same time, represents

its virtual project. By taking these points together, it can be seen that there are several mutually different relations of representation: between the idea and the (intentional) virtual object corresponding to this idea, between the virtual object and its material realization, and between such a realization and the idea.

3. Conclusions

In my view, virtual objects are “born” in human individual consciousness as the objects of specific creative states of the mind. Thus, initially, they are private objects belonging to the individual subjective sphere. However, their final, ready forms emerge in a complex process of objectifying and autonomizing of the respective private conscious states and their objects. In these processes, those private objects are transformed to intersubjectively accessed objects existing in the cultural sphere and become common property or at least commonly accessible. In both their forms, initial and final, virtual objects are non-material entities: first subjective, then objective, i.e., intersubjectively accessible and a common cultural property.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Małgorzata Czarnocka for her responsible guidance and helpful comments on previous versions of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Fink, J. *Cyberseduction: Reality in the Age of Psychotechnology*; Prometheus Books: New York, NY, USA, 1999; p. 22.
2. Stanovsky, D. Virtual Reality. In *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Computing and Information*; Floridi, L., Ed.; Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2004; pp. 167–177.
3. Metzinger, T. Why Is Virtual Reality Interesting for Philosophers? *Front. Robot. AI* **2018**, *5*, 101–120. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
4. Chalmers, D. The Virtual and the Real. *Disput. Int. J. Philos.* **2017**, *9*, 309–352. [[CrossRef](#)]
5. Margolis, E.; Laurence, S. *Creations of the Mind. Theories of Artifacts and Their Representation*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2007.
6. Gurczyński, J. *Czym Jest Wirtualność. Matrix Jako Model Rzeczywistości Wirtualnej*; Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej: Lublin, Poland, 2013. (in Polish)
7. Heim, M. *Methaphysics of Virtual Reality*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1993.
8. Krueger, M. *Artificial Reality II*; Addison-Wesley Publishing Company: Boston, MA, USA, 1991.
9. Heim, M. *Virtual Realism*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2000; p. 6.
10. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive. Available online: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/artifact/> (accessed on 15 October 2021).
11. Kroes, P.; Meijers, A. The Dual Nature of Technical Artefacts. *Stud. Hist. Philos. Sci.* **2006**, *37*, 1. [[CrossRef](#)]
12. Merriam-Webster. Available online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artifact> (accessed on 15 October 2021).
13. Reid, E. Cultural Formations in Text—Based Virtual Realities. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia, 1994.
14. Latawiec, A. Rola symulacji w kreowaniu świata wirtualnego. In *Człowiek a Światy Wirtualne*; Kiepas, A., Sułkowska, M., Wotek, M., Eds.; Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego: Katowice, Poland, 2009; pp. 50–58. (In Polish)
15. Popper, K. *Objective Knowledge. An Evolutionary Approach*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1973.
16. Mazurek, M. O obiektach wirtualnych. *Filoz. Nauka. Studia Filoz. Interdyscyplinarne* **2020**, *8*, 137–154. (In Polish)