Virtualism: how AI replaces reality

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Abstract

This paper traces the shift from the age of realism to the age of virtualism we are currently witnessing. To do so, I draw on older theories announcing this advent (mostly Baudrillard in *Simulacra and simulation*. Transl. Sheila Glaser. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1994 [1981]; Serres in *Atlas*. Édition Julliard, Paris, 1994; Virilio in *The vision machine*. Transl. Rose J. Indiana UP, Bloomington, 1994). I will describe how AI destabilizes fundamental distinctions upon which reality is built—such as the difference between truth and fiction, between existence and simulation, between the actual and the potential, between game and everyday life, between person and avatar. Against the backdrop of a broader notion of the virtual (drawing on Deleuze in *The actual and the virtual*. Transl. Eliot Ross Albert in Parnet C Dialogues. Bloomsbury, London, pp 148–152, 2006 [1996]), I will read current realist theories (Chalmers in *Reality plus—virtual worlds and the problems of philosophy*. Allen Lane, London in 2022; Gabriel in *Why the world does not exist*. Transl. Gregory S. Moss. Polity, Cambridge, 2015; Ferraris in *Positive realism*. Zero Books, Arlesford, 2015; Meillassoux in *After finitude—an essay on the necessity of contingency*. Transl. Brassler R. Bloomsbury, London, 2008) as symptoms of the ongoing shift (rather than countermeasures against it), because they result in an inability to do justice to the epistemic and existential changes resulting from the erosion of the foundations of reality. The consequences of this shift are hard to predict and can only partially be outlined in this paper, which will end in a cautious attempt to do so (chapters 5 and 6). Starting off with a brief overview on this topic (chapter 1), I will trace the reasons for my diagnosis focusing first on what I call the "age of reality" currently coming to an end (chapter 2), then on why virtuality cannot be subsumed under reality (chapter 3), then how virtuality is currently replacing reality (chapter 4).

Keywords Reality · Virtuality · Virtual Reality · Uncanny Valley

Between the idea

And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
/…/
Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
/…/
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent

/…/
Falls the Shadow."
T.S. Elit, The Hollow Men

1 Introduction

The impact of AI may not put an end to the world, but it is putting an end to reality. Understanding this transition is difficult for people who, like me, have been raised in and habituated to what I call the age of reality. However, it is necessary to first accept that reality has never been either a given (as analytic philosophy claims), or a de-constructable cultural or societal construction (as postmodernism claims). Reality is rather the consequence of a very special *attitude towards* the given, *towards* the constructions and *towards* human existence; it results from the practice of *realizing*, which has been habituated in a dominant way since the

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second half of the eighteenth century in Europe and its former colonies. This practice of realizing is called *realism*.

The first thing to know about realism is that it subsumes human existence under *epistemic* conditions (which makes it a strong ally of enlightenment). In doing so, realism is a *referential* attitude. Without *referring to something*, no proposition about this something could be true or false. Both, the English term *reference* derives from the Old French referrer: to "trace back," which in turn derives from the Latin *referre*: to "carry back." In fact, still nowadays, a referential attitude traces cognitions, interpretations, ideas, models, images, utterances, practices, and, in short, all its knowledge, back to their conditions and causes—be these conditions and causes substantial, material, natural, technical, socio-cultural, mental, ideal, and so on, in short: be they empirical or transcendental. By tracing things back, realism enables scrutiny. What is referred to, indeed, does not have to be true; it could also be false, fictional, imaginary, a lie and so on.

In this sense, realism is the very attitude for which—to say it with Wittgenstein—the world is "everything that is the case" (1999 [1922], § 1), while—still following Wittgenstein—everything that is *not* the case is unreal; and, what is more important: anything that cannot be "talked of" (§ 7), i.e., anything that cannot be *referred to* escapes the condition of being true or false, and therefore cannot possibly be "the case". For Wittgenstein it is deemed "mystical" (§ 6.522) at best or should be "passed over in silence" (§ 7) at worst.

As an attitude of referentiality, realism tends to make subjects also *refer* to themselves and hence scrutinize their own perceptions and perspectives. It thereby produces a double focus on (a) observation and (b) self-observation of the observer. Observation brings about the "empirical" as its object, while self-observation focuses on the subject as "transcendental" (in the Kantian sense understood as transcending the mere empirical data and being the condition of possibility for its experience and understanding).

Accordingly, Michel Foucault (2002 [1967], pp. 347–422), when speaking of what I will call the age of realism, described the consequent figuration of the human being as a "double" or "doublet" that is both transcendental and empirical. What Foucault called the "empirico-transcendental doublet" is exactly what I would call realist subjectivity. Realism turns the human being into a transcendental entity referring and relating to an empirical world (called reality) of which it nevertheless is a part; thus, the whole of human existence is split into a referential and relational figuration constantly relating to itself in a kind of self-realization. On the one hand this subjectivity is produced by an attitude of observation, analysis, theorizing, model building, etc.—in short: a transcendental attitude towards an objectified world. On the other hand, this attitude is turned upon itself, since this transcendental subjectivity is objectified as well: for Foucault in the analysis of work (economy, liberalism, Marxism, etc.), language (linguistics, philosophy of language, early constructivism etc.) and life (evolution, medicine, psychology, neurology, etc.).

Today, we can exemplify realist subjectivity by a simple example drawn from our technological surroundings—and thereby display the potential absurdity of Foucault's "doublet". I (transcendental subject) use a darker computer screen in the evening, because my stupid "brain" (empirical object) would react to the lighter screen as daylight messing up my inner clock. At the same time, however, the transcendental subject is itself a product of the same brain. This illogical doubleness is the consequence of a realist practice and attitude: An attitude for which the subject (a) is the realizing agent; but (b) also realizes itself not only as this agent, but also as an empirical and factual being with its own limitations and perspectives.

Today, however, we must deal with automated realizations (or, as we will see: pseudo-realizations), and this changes everything. Machines are taking on functions of the transcendental subject—and, in turn, are starting to destabilize both human realization and self-realization. Take the processing of user data as an example, which leads to the reduction of conscious knowledge and conscious control, which is crucial for realism, to predictable behavioral patterns (see, e.g., Zuboff 2019). To stick with the example, my computer substitutes the control of the transcendental self and turns the screen dark by itself: The mental practice of realizing loses its functionality—realizing it is no longer necessary for coping with my condition.

Empirically predicting what once Foucault called the transcendental part of the doublet makes the doublet collapse tout court. Automatizing the *realizing* self and turning it into data makes more and more parts of our life go *unrealized*—i.e., makes these parts disappear behind user interfaces. This collapse of the doublet, to be sure, is not just a change of personal life (as in the example of the dark screen); it can also be witnessed on a larger societal scale. In politics the aim of convincing voters as transcendental citizen subjects is slowly replaced by empirical prediction of voter behavior; in economy we start to no longer assume a rational *homo oeconomicus*, but rather simulate them virtually, predict their behavior and try to automate Smith's "invisible hand"; in knowledge production we substitute our calculating intelligence by computers, and teach machines to write.

We are hence facing a crisis of realism. It leads to what I call *virtualism.* I borrow the term virtualism from protestant theology (see chapter 3, and as we will see, I do so by means of a hostile takeover) as well as from Antonin Artaud's anti-representational stance towards theatre, leading him to the first usage of the term "virtual reality" as early as in the 1930ies (see Artaud 1958 [1931–38]).

Drawing on these non-digital roots might seem extravagant, but it is not by chance that the term was applied for current VR. The term *virtual* stems from Latin *virtus*, literally "manliness", but more precisely force, strength, excellence. Today's virtuality is not too far from this notion, because it concerns *calculating power and its impact on human life*. Like in Artaud's anti-realist theatre focusing on stage presence and the bodily impact on stage, calculating power is not an *epistemic* one, not one tied to realism, nor human understanding. Accordingly, virtuality no longer centers around *referential* discourses or representational institutions, but around data and algorithms exercising power by direct impact on behavior (predicting, nudging, manipulating, constructing virtual infrastructures and so on) thereby shortcutting the realist detour of "tracing back" and questioning what is "the case". The virtual hence entails a shift away from reference enabling truth and towards calculations enabling effects.

For a first approach to virtualism, I can draw upon Serres (1994), Virilio (1994) and Baudrillard (1994). Serres (1994) observed that human life is increasingly taking place in a spaceless and bodiless habitat of virtual networks. In describing the aesthetics of this existence, Virilio (1994) argued that *virtuality* is the effect of a special mode of perception (which I call *virtualism*). For him, virtuality is so essentially produced and guided by media technology that it no longer refers to either the physical reality (of a photo to the place of where and when it was taken) or to the mental reality (of an artist having produced the respective work); it can neither be *traced back* to the empirical nor to the transcendental, and thereby defies realism. In Virilio's virtuality, the "real" is therefore no longer a consequence of referring to an outer world, it is rather just the consequence of a simulated reference, a *reality effect* ("effet de réel"). This *simulated* reference plays with the realist subjectivity in a way that might paradoxically lead to a situation where the virtual appears stronger and even more real than the old-fashioned reality.

In a similar vein, Jean Baudrillard (1994 [1981]) had already made the claim that reality is dissolved by the work of mimetic arts and technologies in progressive stages: a copy first *represents* reality (e.g., a realist image), then hides it (e.g., a trompe l'oeil), then hides the absence of it (a topical example would be fact-checking hiding the fact that we are already in a stage of post-truth politics), and finally does away with it and takes its place. In this last stage copies replace the (possibility of) originals. Simulacra destabilize a *representational* attitude for which signs, icons, ideas, simulations, or models referred to the world, *realizing* it by *representing* it. Under the condition of virtuality, images or simulacra cease to stand for something else—they only dissimulate their reference, hiding the fact that there is no longer a reality, a realm of true and false references, behind them.

The three authors, however, wrote before the advent of powerful Deep Learning, let alone generative AI (genAI)—and thus, they trace back the virtual to a media environment, for which reference still constituted the paradigm, and the crisis of reference therefore constituted a merely *negative* definition of virtuality: if representations and simulations start to refer to nothing but themselves they no longer match the criteria and the possibility for realist referentiality. However, scrutinizing this self-reference will still lead to the still *realist* insight that they "are the case" *as* simulacra and not as representations—and thus, virtuality can still be approached on realist grounds. This, in short, is still the argument of Chalmers' (2022) concept of *Reality Plus*, for which it makes no great difference whether a reality is constituted by atoms and quarks or by bits and bytes: You can still refer to it—and thus the realist attitude could still survive and flourish, even under virtual conditions.

That you can, however, does not mean that you do. The realist view, however, does not reflect that realism is an attitude—and this attitude can no longer be taken for granted. Not only the life-world described by Serres, Baudrillard and Virilio turns against this attitude—also epistemic practices do. Software-mediated approaches to the referential world have replaced the paradigm of realist referentiality with the paradigm of prediction and generation—thereby virtualizing knowledge instead of realizing it. To their credit, Virilio and Baudrillard had even intuited this shift, and started to describe the virtualist attitude in broader, epistemic terms. Virilio reflected on the new modes of perception, Serres questioned the referential attitude in a networked life-world built from virtual nodes, Baudrillard developed the notion of *hyperreality*, a reality that is seemingly more real than the real. Today, we see that the change in attitudes is much more profound. If, as stated, the transcendental part of the human being dissolves in predictable behavioral patterns, a realist attitude makes way less sense. Accordingly, the focus of technology has shifted from simulacra *for* human perception and cognition to simulacra *of* human perception and cognition—so that the question of *what is the case* is transferred from the subject to AI; moreover, automatizing knowledge entails a shift from a logic of reference to a logic of generation.

This in turn empowers *virtualism* as a new attitude. Virtualism is the attitude of *virtualizing*, instead of *realizing*. In this, virtualism counters the realist differences between the *true* and the *false* (virtuality is both), the *possible* and the *real* (virtuality is both, too), the simulation/model/game and the real world (virtuality, again, is both at once). These differences, which were essential for referentiality and hence reality, no longer count. Without them, to use a pun, it becomes *virtually* impossible to *realize reality*.

Against this broader backdrop, I view the current search of philosophy for all kinds of new realisms as a good indicator of the fact that the basic, uncontested, and unquestioned realist attitude is in crisis. Attempts to expand reality towards the virtual and to simulations (Chalmers 2022; Gabriel 2015), to find an objective reality beyond reference (Meillassoux 2008) or to safeguard reality by a "new realism" (Ferraris 2015) cannot but fail to do justice to the technical developments and sociocultural changes brought about by these developments. Likewise, the everyday use of the term *reality* and the concept of the *real* displays a similar conservative nervousness; like Baudrillard observed, we safeguard truths to hide the fact that their relevance falters—and we invent terms like Augmented *Reality* (AR), Virtual *Reality* (VR) to dissimulate the inadequacy of our realist terminology. This kind of conservativism falls short of its promises and rather hides our new condition in plain sight.

I will take the opposite route: In recurring to a self-aware realist attitude only for the sake of argument (for the sake of making arguments possible in the first place), I will trace other, more adequate attitudes embracing virtualism and going beyond *reality* effects and hyper*reality*, because, as said, virtualism is the attitude of *virtualizing* phenomena (and hence addressing their virtuality) instead of *realizing* them.

Where will this approach lead? To quote and contradict Wittgenstein's claim once more: According to virtualism, the world is no longer *everything that is the case.* This negative statement paves the ground for multiple positive ones. The technical or dataist (Harari 2017, 428) conception, for example, makes the claim that the world is the data extracted from it and the functional use this data can be put to, or in short, *the world is everything that is computation.* Computation, in turn, works with algorithmic prediction rather than realist truth—thus the world might also be called *the sum of the occurrences that can be predicted.* Moreover, the dataist worldview is profoundly solutionist (Bridle 2018, 4); thus, we can also reformulate as: *the world is the sum of problems waiting for their data-based solution.*

However, dataism does not tell the whole story about virtuality. In tracing how algorithms replace knowledge, it remains negatively focused on the epistemic paradigm of realism, replacing understanding by AI. Once we acknowledge that virtualism changes human existence and attitudes, it is therefore even mistaken to ask what the world along the lines of virtualism would be like. Virtualism has no world, it is a profoundly post-world endeavor. Therefore, in chapter 4 I will claim that for virtualism *the world is everything we leave behind while entering the uncanny valley.*

2 Realizations

For reasons that will be clear only after reading this chapter, the turn towards virtualism can best be approached after giving some brief facts about the *history of reality* first, which I wish to do before turning back to the virtualization of the world by AI.

The word 'reality' dates back to the late Middle Ages—its modern usage, however, is much more recent than that. The medieval term most resembling the modern 'reality' was *mundus* (world). Unlike reality, however, *mundus* was not "everything that is the case", but rather everything that *happened.* Accordingly, the philosophical/theological debate was not centered around facts but occurrences, not around things referred to, but things done. Things that mattered were, e.g., the Fall and Salvation of Man by the deeds of the first humans and of Christ, it was the deeds of the Saints enacting and actualizing these larger deeds, it was Providence as an order of things occurring and Fortune as the chaotic occurrence of things in the fallen world. No wonder, the *philosophically precise* term that came closest to our notion of reality, and from which (in Meister Eckhart's [2008 {fourteenth century}, p. 418] translation) the German term for reality (*Wirklichkeit*) derives, was not about things (*res*), but about deeds and events (*acta*). Most prominently used by Thomas Aquinas, the term was *actualitas* (cf. *Summa Theologiae* I,I, q. 84–89).

This does not mean that, in medieval philosophy, a referential stance towards things and towards scrutinizing their truth did not exist—just that it was not all there was. Medieval thinkers developed a duality of a referential and an enactive attitude that shaped their lives. They were monks, and this means that their lives were thereby split in two. On the one hand there was science, to which things mattered: here, in fact, the only thing that mattered was the referential attitude allowing for true and false statements. On the other hand, there was liturgy and monastery rules, for which rites, ascetic practices and caritative *acts* were important. There was on the one hand the *vita contemplativa* and on the other hand the *vita activa.*

The consequences of the double attitude can best be observed in the most frequent and most important sacrament—the Eucharist. In terms of actuality, the Eucharist is easy to understand: The ritual conjures up Christ's presence in bread and wine. Christ's presence here is *actualized*—just as other long rites actualized the community of the believers (the community was not *realized* by reference to it but *actualized*: enacted), or as the songs sung and movements performed actualized devotion: they did not refer to their devotion nor state it (like the performative speech act of "I hereby declare you man and wife" brings about a reality by stating it). In a similar vein, indeed, still

today, we can experience such actuality, once we assume an actualist, rather than realist attitude to the world: birthday songs, e.g., do not *refer to* a birthday party, nor do they constitute a performative speech act declaring it, but they *bring it about by enacting it*. Actuality, however, becomes extremely complicated when viewed from a realist angle—and thus, the *vita contemplativa* of the monk-philosophers brought about a long debate about what exactly wine and bread were during the rite and how Christ's presence could be *realized* in them, while wine at the same time was still wine and bread was still bread. They came up with many strange ideas, the most prominent of which was that the 'substance' changed while the sensual form did not (transubstantiation).

Sensitive as it was to actuality, medieval philosophy was also excellent in developing related notions of that what was not present but could be: This debate was not (yet) centered around what *possibilities* were *realized* (as in Early Modern or early realist times would be pondered on by literary genres like the novel and philosophical genres like the *utopia*). Possibilities are models, fictions, simulations of a different world—and the way to realize them is to (a) understand them as such, or (b) make them refer to a world and shape a reality accordingly. Actuality, instead, is a dynamic enactment and occurrence, needing potency, ability, or skill. And thus, the medieval discourse was still centered around which *potencies* were *actualized*—a discussion that heavily drew on Aristotle's distinction between *dunamis* (rendered by Latin *potentia*) and *energeia* or *entelekheia* (both rendered by Latin *actus*). Likewise, scholastic writings about fortune and hence occurrences favored the latter—while modern reflections on contingency and scientific methods, in turn, favor the former.

In its beginnings, the term *reality* (unlike *actuality*) did not reflect the world, but only "things" (*res*) and their particular reference to Creation as their truth (Agamben 2022; Courtine 2014a, b, 1; Courtine 2014a, b, 2). The term *realitas*, coined by Duns Scotus (*Ordinatio I*, dist. 2, pt. 2, q. 1–4) drawing on Ibn Sînâ's term *šay'iyya*, was not yet a holistic term for all "that is the case", but rather for the principle of *thingness* (from Latin *res*, the thing, and the suffix *-alitas*, -ness). Scotus, however, was a medieval realist, which means that he believed in the substantial relation between things and their Creator—and hence in their substantial *reference* to Him. While nominalist philosophy developed a notion of arbitrary references, in Scotus, *realist* referentiality was rooted in a substantial relation to God.

The turn enabled by Scotus should nevertheless not be underestimated, because, like nominalism, it placed *reference*—not *acts*—into the deciding position. The realist paradigm put *referential things* in center stage. Even though the reference was to an eternal and transcendent God, the temporal and immanent human existence and world was still subsumed under an actualist paradigm concerned with *things done and things happening*. Once, things done or happening are consequentially subsumed under realism or nominalism and hence understood as things referred to, deeds turned into facts, fortune turned into contingency (first radically pondered on by nominalist thinkers lie William of Ockham, because without a substantial relation, referentiality becomes all the more contingent), the world started to turn into everything that was the case, or rather a chaos of contingent cases.

The attempt to tame this contingency by an equally referential *method* occurred centuries later. It was, indeed, famously formulated by the very same philosopher who first used the term reality in the modern sense of the word, René Descartes (1990 [1641], Meditation III, 41–44.). In following a changed paradigm of knowledge, for which both the sensual data and the methods to approach them had become more promising, Descartes replaced the substantial relation of a thing to God (the way medieval realism thought about referentiality) by the epistemic and perceptual reference of a human subject to an outer world. Thingness, the principle that turns things into things, no longer required an act of tracing things back to their Creator, but the cogitative act of tracing a mental concept back to an outer world: the act of realizing a thing as a thing. Modern reality was born.

The success of this way of thinking was enormous. Today, "reality" seems to embrace all things done and all things occurring: things done occur as deeds, and deeds as things referred to. However, there are some impasses, or even category mistakes resulting from the oblivion of actualism. To make this clear, I beg the reader to adopt an actualist attitude to things done and ponder on the example of walking. If a bodily disbalance, a coordination of muscles, reflexes, will and an intrinsic feel of movement of controlled and constantly hindered falling resulting in a rhythmical coordination of legs (and so on)—if all this emerges as "walking" the walking person does not refer or relate to any of the 'real' phenomena I just mentioned. Walking cannot be true or false, it is not referential. It cannot be built upon referential insights either—quite the opposite: once the person tries to consciously refer or relate to all these phenomena, they risk choking the movement. In short, *realizing* things is still something different than *actualizing* them; and thus, realism does not grasp all there is. If the world were nothing but "everything that is the case", then the world would be a place where nobody was able to walk.

Paramount for the success of realism, however, was not just the progress made by the scientific method. Rather, the heyday of this practice was brought by the realist arts, most of all the novel. As a narrative genre, the novel plays with two psychological states: one of them is about actuality (the immersive experiential form taking on the shape of plot, empathy, participation, and predictive tension.) The other

one is profoundly referential and reflexive (e.g., world-building, theory of mind, theoretical insights, poetological considerations, self-observation, and aesthetic judgment). Indeed, the usual experience of reading a good novel oscillates between a fluent and immersive following of a plotline (*actualist* thinking *in* the novel)—and analytic reflections choking this very fluency (*realist* thinking *about* the novel and the reality it construes). These two states are behavioral on the one hand and reflexive on the other, they echo the duality empirical and the transcendental in Foucault, and they can also be translated into the mismatch of immanent life and transcendental essence (*Leben* and *Wesen*), upon which Georg Lukács grounded his *Theory of the Novel* (1974 [1916]). In short: The novel embraces both the actual and the real; however, as a *realist* genre, it tends to reflect the inadequacy of the actual when confronted with the real, and as such bears witness to the advent of realism: From Cervantes' Don Quixote (a hero taking an acts- and deeds-based but unrealistic literary genre for his reality) to the detective novel (in and for which any act and deed has to be objectified and hence any actuality be translated into a reality), from the utopic and dystopic genres (reflecting the model of a world by setting it to action) to science fiction and fantasy (reflecting the possible and its realization as potency and act), the novel has taught us the realist perceptive attitude and stance towards our existence: The novel tends to offer models of world-constructions as representations and significations that make us ponder about to which given, to which idea, to which present, past or future they *refer*—while at the same time opening up the action taking place for referential and realist scrutiny.

However, realism is also a perceptual practice of observation and interpretation (rather than enaction); and hence it engenders a realist expertise for telling a fake from the real. What realist perception and realist attitude are, can, therefore also be understood if we consider the long line of illusionist technology, starting with the special effects in the Jesuit theatre, with trompe l'oeil effects in painting and going all the way through representational experiments such as the camera obscura and up to the current day with photography and film. In a way they all prepare what Baudrillard called hyper-realism—the representation of reality that is more real than reality itself, because it helps and matches the expertise in realist perception in a better way. All of these technologies are deeply rooted in a realist attitude and enhance and train it: They put the beholder into an observational position drawing fun out of both the detection of the illusion and at the same time out of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief", which also requires a Foucauldian doublet: The playful act of letting oneself be deceived by an illusionary reality needs a transcendent self to allow the empirical self be fooled. More importantly, everything in this game is about a play on reference (belief in reference to a truth—and its suspension, relating to an illusion as a reality—and the suspension of this relation).

However, as seen along the lines of Baudrillard (1994 [1981]), realist mediatic techniques are a double-edged sword that can also work against reality: they tend to disguise reality by its simulacra. The new mediatic environment, however, goes one step further and tends to dissimulate the fact that there is no longer a reality behind them (e.g., in the installations of Refik Anadol the *trompe l'oeil* in this sense drives perception from the realm of simulation into the realm of the virtual: they not only leave behind a reference to the world, by generating their own sensuality, they leave behind the very notion of the world).

3 Virtualism

If the paradigm and preferred playground of realism was the novel, the paradigm of virtualism is the computer game. At first glance, the computer game has more *actuality* to it—it does not only engage the realist and hyperrealist perception of what Virilio called the "reality effects"; it also engages skills and acts, occurrences and reactions, a topical equivalence of the *vita activa* and not just the *vita contemplativa*. Virtualism thereby not only replaces the attitude and practice of *realizing* (referring to things as given) but it also replaces the attitude and practice of *actualizing*, of enacting, acting out, of doing things; it concerns *things done* as much as it concerns *things referred to*. It concerns simulated, game-like and virtually conjured up environments in which to act with different and suspended consequences as much as it concerns the simulacra of a referential given. It counters the *actual* as much as it counters the *real*—or better: it counters the difference between the two attitudes described so far.

But this is not the only suspension. Following the paradigm of *games* and *gamification*, virtualism also concerns the suspension of disbelief Coleridge addressed—but in a Baudrillardian hyperrealist way that loses the alternative, the non-suspended belief: Indeed, AR and VR are more and more pervading our lifeworld, so that many of our everyday actions are taking place as interactions with machine-generated environments—teaching us that the realist attitude of discerning simulations (and, therefore, having to suspend disbelief) does not make much sense any longer. More than this, virtualism also concerns the actualist suspension of consequences which we equally know from all kinds of VR and AR solutions. Game-like simulations confront us with a different kind of uncertainty, namely whether our actions are just 'in a game' and 'on the screen'—and that is which consequences they will have on a broader scale that is not just limited to that screen.

This double suspension can also be described as a suspension of differences not only between the realist and

the actualist attitudes, but also of differences that would have been essential respectively for realist and actualist approaches to our existence: Even in medieval philosophy, the term *virtualis* countered the difference between the potential and the possible, the realization and the actualization. As said, the term derives from Latin *virtus* (virtue or force) and meant something that was already present and had its effects *even without* being realized or actualized. This has led some theorists to nearly equate it with "potentiality" (see, e.g., Massumi 2014, 55). However, there is a difference: Potentiality can affect the actual world only by being actualized—the virtual force, instead works upon it also *without* actualization.

For the theological notion of virtualism, this makes all the difference. Concerning the Eucharist and opposing the above-described Catholic theology of (*actual*) trans-substantiation, Protestant thinkers like Jean Calvin argued that the ritual wine and bread remain in substance what they are: They are not actually changed. But they assume the power or force of Christ—Christ's *virtus* is present, even if His substance is not.

Essential for understanding the virtual is yet another thinker of the so-called French Theory: Gilles Deleuze (2006 [1977]). Deleuze's article, to which I am here referring, is short, dense, and almost incomprehensible to anybody who is not a highly specialized philosopher (which I am not). Nevertheless, against the backdrop of realism and actualism, some basic ideas are rather clear, and I will put them forth. Deleuze, too, sets apart virtuality, reality, and actuality, while nevertheless claiming that they are part of the same continuum. His approach to the virtual must be seen in close relation to his theory of "becoming" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). If, according to Simone de Beauvoir, one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one, then Deleuze would add the question: And what if that becoming is never concluded, and becoming-woman never turns into a being-woman? Likewise, he places the virtual between the possible and the real *as well as* between the potency and the actualization—in a state of becoming. Like in Protestant theology, where virtuality in the Eucharist left the actual substance of bread and wine untouched, and yet was not just a fact of referential meaning, becoming is a force stuck midway between the potency and the act, between the possible and the real. Virtuality challenges the borders between the potential and the actual as well as the borders between possibility and reality.

How so? Take the example of the value of an investment changing the value of a company at the stock-market long before and potentially even without having to be realized. The change in value is only virtual—but it can be traded and thereby actualized by translating it in real money. Or think about Yuval Noah Harari's example of the merely "fictional" reality of Peugeot (Harari 2021, pp. 20–36): In his view, managers, workers, buildings, trade etc. are nothing but what

Kendall Walton (1990) would have called 'props' used for make-believe—Peugeot itself is nothing but a fiction everybody refers to as (if) real—a bit like as if in the pantomime, a chair really materialized just by dint of the pantomime player mimicking to sit down. The fiction of Peugeot becomes *virtually* real, by taking the detour of the actual. If everybody *acts*, as if something was real, we will also start to refer to it as real, believe in its reality, and thereby lend it reality and actuality without never truly realizing it (it would be hard to state that Peugeot "is the case") nor truly actualizing it (Peugeot never occurs as a thing, only cars do). Virtuality is neither possible nor real, neither potential nor actual, neither part of the realm of reality nor of actuality. It is there in-between: a becoming-real and at the same time a becoming-actual that surrounds and even partially constitutes both our reality and our actuality.

This is precisely what makes virtualism such a promising term for describing the current transformation of our societies by data technology too, because it works on and transform the virtual foundations of our cultures and societies. If the world resolves in its own data, data processing becomes a *virtus* carried out in a predictive, simulative, manipulative, governing way—without having to actualize or realize anything on its own. Its virtue not even has to refer to any objectivity beyond itself. Virtue is all there is, and it has taken on the form of the power of compute. More concretely this virtual power spells out in VR (which, by the way could easily be called Virtual *Actuality* [VA] too, since it does not only construct worlds to relate to, but also environments to live and act in) and VA (including Augmented Actuality [AA])—because these environments evidently downplay the fundamental difference between the actual and the potential as well as the equally fundamental difference between the real and the possible.

This is the main point of my paper: In virtualism, the differences between the referential and the enacted, the real and the actual collapse; and so do the differences between the real and the possible, the actual and the potential. The principle of virtualism has huge consequences. Once we start replacing a realist attitude (in which the virtual is embedded, indeed as VR or AR) by a virtualist attitude, then nothing is really real nor actually actual and nothing is a mere possibility or just a potency either.

This is not just a weird hypothesis. Virtualism already has started to challenge realist subjectivity. As seen above, the realist novel and realist arts elaborated in two contrasting attitudes (actualist immersion and re-enaction vs realist observation and contemplation), that reflected and enabled Foucault's "empirico-transcendental doublet". Instead, AI performs all the once transcendental operations of thinking without experiencing them, it makes decisions without deciding, it invents or 'hallucinates' without an imagination, it refers to itself by backpropagation without self-reflection.

To describe this, I have has, come up with the term of 'ot thinking', 'not not deciding', 'not not creativity' and so on (cf. Söffner 2023)—and we can say the same about its ways of not not acting and not not behaving, e.g., in its interactions with humans. We cannot say that AI is *really* or *actually* performing thoughts or actions, nor can we say that it is not. AI neither simulates nor realizes, neither makes anything real nor remains in the realm of the merely possible, it neither actualizes nor remains in the realm of the merely potential, it neither constitutes—or not—a referential reality or an actual occurrence. Virtuality is the realm of the "not not".

4 Realizing virtuality

To say it again, what I call the realist stance is as old as philosophy, only its nearly uncontested predominance in modern realism is not; and when I now claim that the era of modern realism has passed, I only claim that this hypertrophy has given way to a new figuration that has to be described in the rest of my paper. Virtualism has not ended the possibility of realism—only the uncontested dominance of it. Seen from this perspective, the post-world is just larger than the world was previously, allowing not only for a *vita contemplative* and a *vita activa*—but also for collapsing both into a *vita virtualis*.

The downgrading of reality appears to be very hard to accept, nevertheless. Most scientists and humanists still endorse Wittgenstein's limitation of the "world" to that which "is the case" and to that "whereof we can speak". This limitation makes much sense inside academia. But it never made much sense when faced with the actual—nor does it now, when faced with the virtual. What happens instead, if we try to impose a realist stance onto our virtualist technologies, can be observed in two thought experiments of analytic philosophy that belong to a decisively Cartesian tradition.

The first of them is the thought experiment of Philosophical Zombies (see Chalmers 1996). Philosophical Zombies are the very thought experiment concerning this improbability. They are humanlike unconscious entities that nevertheless behave exactly as if they were conscious, and thus, the thought experiment explores the question of how we can be sure that anybody is conscious—except ourselves (for ourselves Descartes' "cogito ergo sum" seems to count). Only a decade ago, this question could be dismissed as marginal at best and absurd at worst—within an empathic second-person interaction it was *obvious* that the other people were conscious, or at least the probability that they are not is so small that we could calmly leave the debate to analytical philosophers. However, the thought experiment has now become more relevant to everyday life. AI confronts us more and more with human-like interactions and deep fakes,

which can be considered a *virtual* realization of agents that seem to act and think like fellow humans, imitate our voices, our mimic expressions, our gestures in interaction, but lack consciousness. The *Philosophical* Zombies have turned into *virtual* ones and started to invade our lives.

The effect of this invasion is utterly uncanny—e.g., in the case of a telephone fraud when you are called by the deep fake of your daughter's voice. Here, the line between empathic and therefore consequential interaction on the one hand, and interaction with an unconscious virtual technological zombie on the other is blurred. The everyday certainty that once rendered moot the question of whether other human beings are conscious has left us. The resulting uncertainty is not only *realist* (for such an uncertainty, see Brey 2014): more than this, it is also *actualist* in so far it regards the form and the consequences of (inter)actions. As in Stanislav Lem's *Solaris*, where humans are confronted with materializations of their desired memories and thereby realize their inability to confront a world without boundaries between the mental and the material, the uncanniness following from this insecurity does not consist in the fact that we do not know whether something is real or not—but whether something matters, when it matters and how it matters. The solid ground of empathic certainty leaves human interaction, and realist philosophy cannot fix this problem. It leaves us in our everyday lives with the virtualization of a problem that they it approached only on a realist, logical ground without ever solving it—and this does preciously little to help us evolve a convincing attitude towards this person/bot within an interaction. It does not help us overcome the uncanniness.

The second thought experiment to be addressed is the so-called "Brain in a Vat" (Putnam 1982), i.e., the question of whether we can be sure that we really exist in our world, or whether everything we experience is just the effect of some impulses sent to our brains. The absurdity of applying this thought-experiment to our everyday-life, too, is clear once you think about its premise that our sensual experience is merely a set of passively endured stimuli which our brain then constructs in some kind of "Cartesian Theatre". Once, instead, we assume that our experience is the experience of actively interacting with an environment (let alone other people) and that our actions, as they obviously do, affect this environment, the stimuli entering the brain should simulate this interaction, too—and that means it should simulate an active body with impacts on the virtual world; which leads Thompson and Cosmelli (2011) to the conclusion that the easiest way to provide for a functioning brain in a vat would be to build a body and a world around it.

However, once again, virtual environments do almost exactly that—albeit with the immersed body rather than a brain: they lead, so to speak, to a body in a vat. Against this background the argument outlined above is currently

turned against itself by those approaches that (like Chalmers 2022) try to subsume virtuality under a broader notion of reality. Chalmers' argument is that what happens in virtual worlds really (or actually) does happen. Nick Bostrom (2003), too, has found a way back to the Cartesian background of this thought experiment: Descartes' pondering on whether we can be certain about anything we deem real if there is at least the hypothetical possibility that an evil spirit (*genius malignus*) is fooling us with an illusionary world. Today, this realist question has taken on the form of the question whether we could live in a technical simulation, i.e., a world-less virtuality, and whether we might, indeed, already do so and inhabit a scenario like the one in the movie *The Matrix*: a technology-driven virtuality designed by an historically older and much more advanced society (Bostrom 2003; White 2016), because any evidence speaking against a simulation could be simulated too (see Chalmers 2022, pp. 3–123). However, returning to Descartes' question against the backdrop of these hypotheses shows us that—when confronted with technological virtuality, realism reduces itself ad absurdum: It leads us into an attitude in which we are left with Descartes' *cogito* as the only certain reality, the only certain thing to refer to—and without Descartes' methods to gain more certainties about our (referential) reality from there. And of what use is the *cogito* under these conditions—let alone in a world, in which its functions are more and more automatized? Thus, like in the first example, we simply can no longer leave the question of whether we live in a simulation or illusion to Hinduist, Gnostic or Analytic philosophers and go on with our lives, because our lives, too, are already deeply intertwined with technical simulations and technically induced illusions. However, on the other hand, we are left without a handle to approach it.

From an actualist perspective, indeed, most of our virtual surroundings still *have* consequences—and we are increasingly unable to discern them. If realism, sticking to its Cartesian roots, teaches us that the only certainty we have is our own self-reflection—if realism has entered thus a state in which we cannot refer to anything but ourselves—then, as an attitude, it leads us to the very narcissistic self-mirroring and the end of empathic interaction stemming from it which we already witness as the darkest side of digitized interaction on social networks: The very state from which *Black Mirror* draws its title. Even more relevant than the once hypothetical questions raised by realists, however, is the problem virtuality causes concerning the *actual*, i.e., actions, occurrences, potencies, skills—and most of all, their consequences, which realists tend to downplay. Acting under the conditions of what might be called, a *realism without reality* makes us behave like weird and narcissistic children who do not know when something is play or serious life. Such a realism can no longer convince as much as it did throughout the last two

hundred years or so. To maintain its dominance, realism would have to work as well for everybody as it did during this period. However, it no longer does. In short, similar attempts to realize virtuality leave behind a very *uncanny* kind of reality, an unstable referring to things, whose reality is continuously questioned.

I would like to pin down the current crisis of reality with yet another hostile takeover of a notion, namely the notion of the "uncanny valley" (Mori et al. 2012): In psychology, the uncanny valley experiment suggests that our acceptance of representations, simulations, avatars, and robots first increases with human likeness, then, with further increase of resemblance drops below neutral, and only finally, at the stage of a complete and convincing simulation, sharply increases again towards total acceptance. The phenomenon has been related to Bergson's (1911) pondering on seemingly living machines and seemingly machine-like humans as sources for laughter, however a more complete picture can be gained from romantic (and hence counter-realist) literature such as ETA Hoffmann's Sandman who lets his protagonist Nathanael fall in love with Olimpia, who utters nothing but the romantic "alas" ("ach") and turns out to be a human-like puppet who is both comic and uncanny. Likewise, today, we may laugh about people falling in love with their ChatBot even as the insecurity about whether or not we live in a simulation starts to pervade our everyday experience. It is, indeed, an uncanny experience that the epoch of reality has ended; and it has done so, "not with a bang, but a whimper".
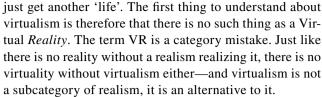
Quoting T.S. Eliot's famous last verse of the *Hollow Men* is not as out of context as it might seem—indeed the poem has a lot to say about the virtual and the uncanny valley. Looking up only a few lines, we can read the verses quoted in the beginning of my article. Virtualism is, indeed, like a "shadow" falling between "idea" and "reality", between mental representation ("conception") and its actualization ("creation")—a shadow blurring the distinction between the ideal model and what it is a model of in the real world, between the fictional or possible and its realization. In sum, Eliot's "shadow" counters the possibility of representation or correlation (see Meillassoux 2008). In computer games, virtuality also blurs the line between what we enact (a "motion") and what would be a *real* "act", between the immersive aesthetic ("emotion") and the embodied act ("response"). Virtuality is like a shadow that has fallen between the latent faculties of humans ("potency") and their actualization ("existence"). Moreover, in AI the concept of prediction replaces the idea of referential truth: Prediction does not lead to *statements that can be true or false*, it is not *about* a world of which it builds a model—prediction rather leads to predicted and influenced events that can work or not, thereby blurring the line between effect ("descent") and truth ("essence").

In a literal sense, Eliot's poem is about "The Hollow Men", straw puppets burned at Bonfire Night celebrating the date of the astonishingly absurd and then futile Gunpowder Plot by Guy Fawkes of November 5th, 1605—their "headpiece filled with straw", and hence thinking and not thinking, living, and not living, puppets identified with humans, humans identified with puppets, inhabiting "death's dream kingdom" rather than a reality. They are *not not* humans in a *not not* world: A situation we are getting to know better and better from the transition of realism into virtualism, and hence into a post-world where we interact with philosophical zombies (puppets) and cannot distinguish simulation from reality. Read in this (to be sure, not very philological) way, Eliot can be viewed as a prophet of the broader "uncanny valley", the one that exceeds psychology. "In this valley of dying stars/ In this hollow valley", to quote Eliot's poem once more, virtuality appears as a shadow undoing the above-mentioned differences between the possible and the real, between the possible and the potential, between the potential and the actual, between the actual and the real: Inside the virtual we are our own avatars (hollow puppets indeed), and our lives lack certainty about both the existence of our fellow human beings and the existential consequences of our actions, because they too are just their avatars and can be simulated by bots, so that simulation and (inter)action and the line between suspended and serious consequences, between togetherness and loneliness is blurred. Inside the uncanny valley of failing referential truths (dying stars), virtuality appears like a game without a serious world from which it is set apart and that therefore has lost its playfulness: Modern weapon systems tend to virtualize the actual victims, genAI tends to virtualize truths and facts. In this, the virtualist game has serious consequences for our actual and virtual lives—but by being viertual and hence at the same time just a game it makes these consequences uncannily ungraspable. It is like a game of chess without a king on the board—but played for life and death.

5 Virtualizing reality

To be sure, this is only what *realizing* our virtuality is like. From the realist point of view, virtuality, indeed, lacks truth; but as stated above, realism, in turn, lacks actuality where virtuality does not; it only lacks *actual existence*: existence with certain actual consequences. Virtuality can conjure up environments, but with unstable and partially suspended consequences of its actions—and if it merges with the actual existence, as is the case with AA, the consequences seem to pop up out of nothing: If a navigation system leads you to drive straight into a lake, it's not the avatar-car that drowns—and vice versa we celebrate our immortality in virtual games when our avatars die, but we just get another 'life'. The first thing to understand about virtualism is therefore that there is no such thing as a Virtual *Reality*. The term VR is a category mistake. Just like there is no reality without a realism realizing it, there is no virtuality without virtualism either—and virtualism is not a subcategory of realism, it is an alternative to it.

Unlike in the canonical theory of the uncanny valley (which is based on realist assumptions and a realist psychology), for the virtualization of reality as such, there is no turning point on the curve, no point when virtuality finally gets real again (we might recur to the alternative metaphor of an uncanny 'plain' rather than a valley). The category mistake implied by the traditional notion becomes visible once we do away with the realist perspective and change it for an actualist one—and thus leave the restricted zones of a virtual environment, and rather enter the realm of a virtually augmented world. Here, the uncanniness certainly cannot be countered by more realist simulations, quite the opposite—the uncertainty over whether in our interactions we are dealing with a person, or a Virtual (Philosophical) Zombie becomes the *more uncanny* the less we can resolve it (otherwise there would be nothing uncanny in *Solaris* or the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). The large and existential uncanny valley, the uncanny plain, does not mean to *match* reality criteria but to *dissolve* them, so that (very much as Baudrillard described) the simulations and representations become no longer distinguishable from the world. The question to be asked is therefore which Eliotian "shadow", i.e., category mistakes will emerge from a virtualist standpoint, one without a difference between true and false, without a difference between potency and possibility, without a difference between act and simulation, without a difference between things done and things referred to?

Our Post Truth society may give us a first glimpse at the first set of category mistakes that may arise from a virtualist society. To be sure, as Frankfurt (2005 [1986]) has famously argued, large parts of our everyday lives worked well while relying on *bullshit*, and without even caring about truth or lie, true or false. What is new, however, is that more and more people try to make the bullshit count as truth and, therefore, live and make decisions based on "alternative facts"—nota bene: unlike in Frankfurt's theory they *do* care about facts and truth, but use virtual ones: "facts" without anything factual to refer to, "truths" that are immune to fact checking, because, as virtual facts without reference to an outer reality, they cannot be false. There is nothing *real* about these virtual truths, but there still *is* the *power* or *force* of truth: Truth has been virtualized, it has turned into a *virtus* rather than a *reality*—while its reference is lost, its power is still there.

Another category mistake has been exemplified by Stephen Wolfram (Floyd and Katz 2022, p. 118):

Imagine a world in which we have augmented-reality glasses, and we're constantly being given a menu of 'You should do this next, and then this", and so on. While you're talking to people wearing these glasses, they are receiving messages such as "Why don't you mention this?" etc. What happens then to our sense of conversation?"

Conversation is something we do, it emerges from its enactment, it is actual and therefore full of potency and potential to be actualized at any given moment. The data-based computational optimization, however, treats this potential as a set of possibilities to be predicted—thereby dissolving the difference between things done and things referred to, predicting occurrences and governing or automatizing the actual interaction. Virtuality also makes any realist insight unnecessary if not impossible. But what, is a conversation for? What makes it a conversation in the first place? Is it not both the actual experience and the real insights we take from engaging with other people? Virtualism does away with that. It leaves us with meaningless actions and meaningless automated utterances—and this meaninglessness only adds to the uncanniness.

Let's turn to a third category mistake of virtualism, the one between act and simulation. The philosophical field to discuss this category mistake is ethics. The virtualist category mistake that blurs the distinction between the actual and the virtual has pervaded the discussion about *AI Ethics*—here it replaces human responsibility by machinic alignment to moral values. A truly ethical question cannot be limited to whether a self-driving car should decide to kill an old man to save five children (or not). Ethics does not stop here—rather it begins with the question: Who will assume responsibility—or more concretely: Who will talk with the wife, children, and friends of the old man *as the person responsible for killing him*. We will not send an AI there, will we? The term responsibility derives from answering (at least in court), it is closely linked with accountability, and moreover, it is with good reason Emmanuel Lévinas (2003 [1972]) built his moral theory on the act of looking into the face of the person for whom we are responsible, while transcending this face towards a metaphysical responsibility based on our mutual vulnerability. A machine cannot answer this way, it can only simulate answers just like it can only simulate decisions, because it is virtual.

To make things worse, virtuality and the concomitant and rising possibility that we may be looking into the face of a philosophical zombie with no mutual vulnerability whatsoever, also does away with *human* ethics. This is why I do not consider the (certainly interesting) question to be whether an AI could become conscious and therefore have its own moral rights—the question I find much more urgent is rather: How will we act toward each other if we start to internalize an attitude of doubt towards the humanity of those with whom we interact. What happens if the category mistake of no longer distinguishing act and simulation, human being and Virtual Zombie pervades our lives? If succumbing to the *realist* category mistake, ethical virtualism almost necessarily tends towards nihilism.

A fourth category mistake concerns the suspended difference between the real and the actual, things done and things referred to. A paradigm for avoiding this category mistake is the *legal system*, since its very essence is to translate the lived actuality of things we do into a scrutinized set of things referred to, that we can pin down in laws. Accordingly, the rule of the law is erected on realist assumptions about subjectivity (agency based on the transcendental free will)—and, moreover, it produces and follows clearcut distinctions between rules and their interpretation-based application to whatever they refer to: between (realist) law and its (actualist) enforcement, between (actualist) deeds and their (realist) interpretation and judgment over them. Virtualism does away with all this because it replaces reference by computation, deeds by applications and the legal subject by predictable behavior.

Take the utopia/dystopia of a perfectly functioning smart state as an example—a state that avoids not only traffic jams, but also the transgression of traffic rules by predicting where and when they will occur and making sure that they do not by the right nudging mechanisms. Such a state would be virtualist, instead of realist, in so far as it makes no distinction between law-making, the laws themselves and their execution. The differences between the real (law and interpretation) and the actual (application and reinforcement) collapse, and no distinction is made between the potential (predicted crime) and the actual (the deed). In its essence, the aim of virtualist governance is to make the rule of law unnecessary. Without holding onto the realist differences, no human freedom of action and decision-making is possible—a perfectly functioning smart state would be more totalitarian than any totalitarian state has been so far; it would turn into a species-appropriate human farm, because the category mistake of understanding the world under the merely functional and solutionist auspices of a virtual non-world that is everything that is computed leads to a dark version of post-humanism.

6 Virtualizing virtuality

These four category mistakes are only the ones that came to my mind. Almost certainly there are more. They are, to be sure, limited to a radical virtualism—one that would be as hypertrophic as realism was in the epoch of reality. There is an alternative to that—and it consists in virtualizing virtuality, i.e., virtualizing and thereby limiting its impact, by keeping virtualism out of the realms of reality (to still be

realized) and actuality (to still be actualized). If realizing reality is the best stance for a *vita contemplativa*, if actualizing actuality is the best stance for the *vita activa*, then let virtualizing virtuality be the way of living the *vita virtualis.*

What does this mean? As seen, virtuality is limited to a force, a *virtus*—but lacks both reality and actuality, and therefore lacks its own existence. It only simulates existence, plays at existence, and must hence be virtualized as such: as a game. Take avatars in gaming as an example, and this time as an example for *virtualized* virtuality. Most of us constantly virtualize them, viewing them not as our *real* selves, or as our identity or our way of acting in the world. For the players, they neither belong to the realist realm of being (what we are) nor to the actualist realm of doing (what we do), but to the virtualist realm of (quasi Deleuzian) becoming.

To be sure, becoming-avatar, is something different than de Beauvoir's becoming-woman or Deleuze's becoming-animal, because it is predicted and simulated. However, it is astonishing to observe how much the user's choice of avatars in VR follows the Deleuzian conditions of becoming instead of being: as in Deleuze and Guattari (1987), becoming is evidently understood as counter-discursive—while being occupies discursively territorialized positions; and thus becoming is not the becoming of a patriarchal male—rather many male users tend to take female avatars (becoming-woman), while a significant number of avatars are not even in human form (furries are a form of becoming-animal, cyborgs a form of becoming-machine). Avatars are, indeed, a good way to understand how such a *vita virtualis* can be thought of and how it combines reality and actuality—while neither realizing nor actualizing either state completely.

Such a *virtualist* attitude can be fruitful only because and only insofar as it avoids the abovementioned category mistakes. A *vita virtualis* may have reality effects, as in Virilio (1994), that seem more real than reality, as Baudrillard has it. But, as avatars we are unable to fully *realize* anything—because an avatar is neither a *res cogitans* (it is thought about at best, or is completely thoughtless at worst, but it cannot think) nor a *res extensa* (unlike our body it does not take on physical space), they allow us to play out identities as roles and roles as identities, but remain in the realm of becoming, never being. In this, they reflect Serres' (1982 [1980], 224–34) notion of "quasi-objects" and "quasi-subjects"—i.e., relational and interconnected beings taking on and losing object-status as well as assigning and losing subject-status from one moment to the other (Serres uses the example of a soccer-ball becoming such only in the game, and within the game turning the players into players as well, so that the ball becomes—but never is—also the subject of the game, while the players become—but never are—the objects of it). Likewise, avatars play with a potentiality that is never

fully actualized and hence remains virtual—and likewise they never become mere objects, rather they define the subjects as such, too, who thereby in virtuality turn into quasi-subjects. As such, avatars can never by fully real, unless, in a Chalmers-like movement of turning towards a residual referentiality and *realize* rather than *virtualize* virtuality (thereby however losing what avatars are as avatars in the first place).

Unlike Serres' soccer-ball, however, avatars cannot be deemed fully actual either. They can allow and afford action, and in this, a *vita virtualis* can add hyper-actuality to our experience (we can act out things in virtuality that we could never act out physically, and hence virtuality allows for hyper-intense ways of embodiment); more than this, avatars also entail *disembodiment*: we can leave behind the shape, appearance and actual limitations of an embodied existence and emancipate ourselves from our *actual* bodies: We can switch places, and perspectives, perform the weirdest actions defying all physical and biological laws inside the weirdest social situations. Thus, as a paradigm for *vita virtualis*, the force, the *virtus* of virtuality allows for intense bodily and perceptual experiences and for *enacting* potencies, without *actualizing* them, since all of this takes place with suspended consequences.

To come back once more to the Eucharist: virtualism requires the attitude of living in the *virtus*, in the power of computation—but nowhere real or actual. To avoid category mistakes, the important challenge is to avoid the trap into which realism has fallen: The trap of hypertrophy and category mistakes of virtualism—a trap whose uncanniness we can now grasp and sense. Virtualizing virtuality therefore means to understand that virtualism enables an all-too broad gamification, making partially suspended seriousness pervasive and serious consequences ungraspable: in its tendency to actualize and realize the virtual as well as virtualize the real and actual, *vita virtualis* leads us to play with fire. Realist and actualist category mistakes make virtualism as real and consequential as it gets, and unfortunately most philosophers and the Big Tech companies foster, rather than avoid, these category mistakes. Virtualizing the virtual would mean to render the virtual transparent for both the real and actual consequences it dissimulates and the unreal and unactual consequences it simulates. If, in this sense, we "cross[] with open eyes" the uncanny valley, then, and only then, it might turn out to be a good thing that uncontested realism has finally come to an end.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that there is no potential conflict of interest.

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