



## VIRTUAL EXISTENTIALISM. MEANING AND SUBJECTIVITY IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

GUALENI, S., VELLA, D.: *Virtual Existentialism. Meaning and Subjectivity in Virtual Worlds*. Cham : Palgrave Pivot & Springer Nature AG, 2020. 123 p. ISBN 978-3-030-38478-4 (eBook).

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Digital media, including videogames, bring considerable changes into human lives. It is quite possible to say that the virtual world of digital media offers a new existential dimension. The old existentialism (between WWI and WWII) saw people only as natural beings, living in a certain time-space and at certain socio-cultural coordinates. Even though this early existentialism did study human imagination, dreams or possibly even developing technology of that time, it did not and could not study what comes with the new digital technology of today – the virtual world of cyberspace, which is becoming a component of human existence. This is the reason why it is very important for modern philosophy to study these new existential circumstances. It is encouraging to see such a reflection among philosophers, for example in the book *Virtual Existentialism. Meaning and Subjectivity in Virtual Worlds*, written by Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella. This monograph is an attempt to understand virtual worlds through old existential schemes and also construct a new existentialism that also includes virtual existence of human.

The presented book consists of six chapters, not counting the introduction and conclusion. In the first two chapters we find the authors' personal insights into the matter of virtual existence (1. *Virtual Subjectivities and the Existential Significance of Virtual Worlds*; 2. *En-rolling and De-rolling in Virtual Worlds*), while the four remaining chapters are dedicated to discussion with key existentialist philosophers (3. *Helmuth Plessner and Virtual Worlds as Existential Complements*; 4. *Peter W. Zapffe and the Virtual Tragic*; 5. *Jean-Paul Sartre and Escaping from Being-in-the-World*; 6. *Eugen Fink and Existential Play*). In the last part of the introduction, the authors also include a terminological dictionary, which helps to better understand their approach to the given matter.

In the opening chapter, titled *Virtual Subjectivities and the Existential Significance of Virtual Worlds*, the authors utilise M. Heidegger's and especially J.-P. Sartre's approaches to study the existence of a subject in a virtual world. It is characteristic for human beings to project their existence freely, so it is never definitive and only ceases with one's death. It is similar also in a virtual world. However, the authors do realise there is a difference and hierarchy in the systems of the real v the virtual world, as they say: "virtual worlds are experientially and existentially subordinate to the actual world, and virtual experiences can be considered a subset of actual experiences". (p. 9). Even though a virtual world is subordinate to the real world (the authors use the word 'actual' here), it is equally real in terms of experience. The real and virtual worlds meet in one individual subject – a person. The desire to play, whether in the real, or a virtual world, is equal and generally speaking describes the desire to exist. We can also agree with the idea that both the real and virtual worlds bring opportunity to construct different versions of one's own personality (p. 15).

The second chapter, titled *En-rolling and De-rolling in Virtual Worlds* is about the inputs and outputs of a virtual world. In their effort to study these transitions, the authors also borrow cultural practices described by cultural anthropologists, for example

by V. Turner and A. van Gennep – they specifically analyse transmission rituals. A player becomes someone else, identifies as a character from a game and adapts their life. This leads to a double role – on the one hand such a person realises their true identity, but on the other, lives the life of the character from the game. Such a change in subjectivity (if not a pathological one) may bring psychotherapeutic effects. It offers the possibility to liberate oneself from the existential burden. The authors also claim that there is generally no psychological ‘guidebook’ that would offer a helping hand when one leaves this virtual world. They use an example – actors that undergo psychological trauma caused by acting in certain roles: “the theatre scholar Sally Bailey reports having known many actors—and having read about others—who had been bothered by playing particularly intense roles. According to Bailey, those roles led to alterations in their personality, sometimes leading to depression and heavy drinking, precisely because they did not adequately de-role at the end of the acting sessions” (p. 30). I agree with the authors that “better understanding of techniques and effects of en-rolling and (especially) de-rolling will significantly contribute to the mental well-being of the next generations and become a factor in the ways in which they will lead their progressively more fragmented, multiplicitous existences” (p. 58).

In the third chapter, *Helmuth Plessner and Virtual Worlds as Existential Complements*, the authors promote their approach to virtual existentialism, mentioning Helmuth Plessner, a German philosophical anthropologist. H. Plessner, similarly to Arnold Gehlen, thought of a human as an incomplete and unready being that compensates this handicap using culture and especially technology. A human, in Plessner’s eyes, is an open being that is pushed forward by something as ‘unreal’ as daily dreams, fictions, playing and so on (p. 70). Human nature has therefore always been accompanied by technology (man has always been a cyborg), but also something as “unreal” as fantasies, dreaming and so on. The authors believe a part of this ‘unreal matter’ is also something that we call the virtual world, which is a place where we can be freed of the alleged reality (p. 73).

In the fourth chapter, named *Peter W. Zapffe and the Virtual Tragic*, the authors study virtual existentialism using Peter W. Zapffe’s approach. In his work *The Last Messiah* (1933), this Norwegian philosopher starts with an assumption that human existence is nothing but absurdity. When we realise this absurdity, we start panicking, so we developed various defensive strategies. Zapffe describes four remedies: isolation, anchoring, distraction and sublimation. The first three methods either directly silence the feeling of futility (isolation) or shift it indirectly towards cultural principles (anchoring) or simply limit our attention - reducing thinking. The fourth method, sublimation, refocuses, or transforms our thinking from something fruitless to something meaningful. In Zapffe’s case, it led to his work *The Last Messiah* (p. 84). We can agree with the authors that a virtual world could also function as a technique to suppress the absurdity of human existence.

In the fifth chapter, named *Jean-Paul Sartre and Escaping from Being-in-the-World*, the authors build on phenomenology or imagination, developed by J.-P. Sartre in his book *The Imaginary* (1940). According to Sartre, everything that we perceive becomes a fragment of a universal, global and everlasting sum of experience (p. 90). This perception of the world covers also its own ‘annihilation’ because we can turn away from it in our imagination (p. 90). The authors believe that imagination, including virtual imagination, frees us of the world. This imagination horizon then offers us a way to make free decisions about a new course (p. 95). However, as the authors say, this new decision may take two directions – either positive or negative.

In the sixth chapter, *Eugen Fink and Existential Play*, the authors use some of E. Fink’s approaches to games, found in his work *Play as Symbol of the World* (1960). His idea of a ‘mask’ is especially usable in the virtual world of avatars. A mask, or identification with new identities and roles in a game, enables one to cross the boundaries of their own life and thus widen and multiply the possibilities of one’s own existence.

In the final part, called *Conclusions*, the authors synthesize the ideas covered in their book, stating that virtual technology brings new experiences that would otherwise be impossible. Its positive impact is in offering something beneficial, while the negative aspect is the fact that this technology may initiate addiction, dissociative disorders and social exclusion (p.115). They compare the virtual world to a medicament – *pharmakon* – as its etymology reveals that it may serve not just as a remedy, but also as poison.

*Virtual Existentialism. Meaning and Subjectivity in Virtual Worlds* is a monograph written by Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella. It is a valuable contribution to existential philosophy, broadening our knowledge of the virtual world. I recommend this monograph not only to philosophers and specialists active in human science disciplines, but also everybody who is interested in this topic.

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