Virtuality as a Basic Concept of Postrealism
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Abstract: The article argues that the concept of virtuality, associated with contemporary technologies of digital virtual worlds, has in fact roots in medieval ontology. By returning to the roots of the concept of virtuality, the author attempts to propose a philosophical framework for analyzing virtual reality that would move beyond simply labelling it as hollow and artificial.

For a long time the concept of "virtuality" has been associated exclusively with computer virtual reality. This is not surprising, because the term "virtual reality" was first introduced in the early 1980's by Zharon Lanier – the founder of the first company, producing household virtual machines, which created a computer virtual reality. So, virtual reality was initially associated with computers (Nosov 1998, 19). The Essential English Dictionary defines the term "virtual" as follows: "The term "virtual" is used when one wants to say, that something has all the characteristics of a particular thing, although technically it cannot be defined as particular thing" (Sevalnikov 2004, 53).

Generally speaking, all possible interpretations of virtual reality can be organized in the three categories:

1. Technical (objectivist), according to which the virtual reality is a reality of illusory three-dimensional world, created by means with help of computer technology. In this case, the virtual reality systems can include animation, computer graphics, and so on.

2. Psychological (subjectivist), according to which the virtual reality is a psychological phenomenon, which creates some specific space-time images in the human mind.

3. Abstract (generalized), according to which the virtual reality includes both an objective reality, existing outside of man, and the subjective reality, existing inside the human consciousness (Akchurin 2004, 50).

All these definitions are united by one trend — they are trying to define a fundamentally new phenomenon in terms of a bygone era. Attempts to describe virtual reality as something "illusory" or reduce the term to computer technology are directly derived from the worldwide of the modern epoch. The scientific worldview, that was formed in the Age of Enlightenment, tends to reduce the diversity of the world to a single ontological reality: atoms, energy, the mind, the spirit and so on (Demin 2011, 56). The combination of two realities in one phenomenon seems inconceivable for a modern mentality. For example, the question of the existence of the psyche (soul) in humans has become a big problem. Modern science tends to see the psychological activity as a demonstration of mental activity of the body (brain), and the body — as a demonstration of the activity of the protein molecules and protein molecules – as a demonstration of the activity of atoms, and atoms — as an expression of the activity of elementary particles and just elementary particles really do exists for science and are active in nature. We can take, as an example, one of the basic paradigms of a modern society – atomism, which states that everything is made of atoms. That means, only atoms have the state of existence, and everything else is a product of atomic interactions. In other words, everything else doesn't actually have an existence of its own.

However, the ontology of the world in the view of humanity was not always the same. So, the term virtus has already existed in the Middle Ages. Scholastics considered "virtus" as a deep relationship between different levels of reality in the hierarchy of being, or as the ratio of the potential to the actual. The "virtual" of Thomas Aquinas's works refers to the presence of the soul and the coexistence of the hierarchy of souls (Aquinas 2001, 106). For Nicholas of Cusa "virtus" is an absolute power, basic reason, giving its being to everything that exists, and, that is, ultimately, God: "You're the truth, and the prototype of life" (Cusa 1937, 45). So, the medieval "virtus" were assumed as a presence of multiple realities that are not reducible one into another. The mind of the medieval scholastic insisted on the idea of multi-reality (Nosov 1996, 70).

The same worldview began to lose its relevance with the development of capitalism and the industrial society. Capitalism had a preconception that the research of the physical laws of nature that became an essence of modern European science) can be of great importance. Based on this knowledge, one might create huge quantities of production and make massive profits. Western European society entered into an industrial phase of "steel and flesh" at the time, when social progress was measured by actual physical production. All other realities except the physical one decreased in their importance, and became the secondary realities generated by the primeval physical reality (the most characteristic concept here is the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx).

And that is no wonder, because post-industrial society is characterized by a decrease of the value of the actual economy. Corporations, the basic pillars of capitalism, started to change rapidly. Today, the corporation's image has its own self-sufficient value and it is an essential part of a corporation's market value. The value of its shares is determined by the image of the company. The process of virtualization also embraced money. Today, money represents not actual goods, but borrowing rights. People don't demonstrate their money anymore, they demonstrate their paying capacity, and that is what the modern

credit system is based on. Virtual product, virtual manufacturing, virtual corporations, virtual money – all of them contribute to the transformation of computer networks into the environment of economic activity. Nowadays, global electronic economy is actually based on computer networks. Now economists don't work with real money, but with numbers in a computer. Similar things happen to other sectors of society, for example, politics. The struggle for political power in modern society is not a fight of parties or competition of political programs. It is a struggle of political images. Political parties initially emerged as the representatives of the specific class, ethnic, religious, and regional interests, but now are becoming just "brands" — logo and advertising slogans, attracting electorate.

All these changes could not help but cause a crisis of the idea of a single ontological reality. It can be argued that today the medieval view of reality is more relevant than the one that was formed in the epoch of modernity. Radical changes that were occurring to society and social institutions throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can no longer be described adequately in terms of the worldview of the Enlightenment. Nowadays, if we use the terms of the "one-dimensional" physical world for describing multidimensional contemporary reality, we create irrelevant scientific models. More than 30 years ago, the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard suggested that modern society is a society of total simulation. He pointed out that in contemporary Western society activities of all major institutions are simulated. However, this verdict once again indicates an attempt to describe the modern multidimensional world in terms of single-reality. Baudrillard used a traditional modern postulate of the existence of the one basic physical reality "everything else he perceived as a simulation". Baudrillard's argument in «Simulacra and Simulation» isn't just tricky to get our heads around; it's also pretty freaky. He's telling us that modern-day culture has come to the point where "reality" doesn't exist anymore; we've killed it, because all we do is participate in an endless circulation of signs and simulacra that have no meaning of their own. So what's real then? Not much. We've created the impression of reality, but it's hollow underneath (Baudrillard 2011, 78).

In my opinion, it is much more useful to revive the medieval concept of "virtus", rework it in the sense of contemporary realities and mark the ontological independence of virtual reality as its basic feature, along with its ability to interact with other realities. It is important to point out, that virtual reality has its own laws of time, space and existence. For a person in virtual reality, there is no past or future, except for that which lies inside it.

To use such a new paradigm of multi-reality will emphasize the specific nature of the relationship between different layers of reality in today's post-modern post-industrial society, and will help to create relevant humanitarian model of the world, adequate to the modern realities.

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