Reality+ Reality-

A review of Reality+: Virtual Worlds and The Problems of Philosophy by David J. Chalmers

Lucy Osler

School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University

OslerL1@cardiff.ac.uk

Even before David Chalmers' new book *Reality+* hit the shelves, media outlets were showering it with praise, dubbing it a "mind-bending philosophical investigation" (The Guardian) and "the most alarming and thought-provoking book I've read in years" (The Times). Josh Glancy, at The Sunday Times, concluded that "Everyone should read this important book".

Given the hype, I, like many others, eagerly awaited the arrival of my copy. When reading the book, though, the question I could not get out of my head was: *who exactly is this book for?* On the one hand, *Reality+* is an engaging and fun romp that introduces and updates traditional philosophical questions to those new to philosophy. On the other hand, *Reality+* purports to found a new strand of philosophy which, in explicit homage to Patricia Churchland's Neurophilosophy, is branded Technophilosophy. In doing so, I think it fair to conclude that Chalmers' book calls for, and even seems to court, engagement not just from people interested in philosophy but academic philosophers — especially, one might think, from those working in philosophy of technology. But, as all authors know, the audience matters and how one rates Chalmers' book hinges almost entirely on who you take the audience to be. As such, rather than attempting to provide a unified review of this book, I've written not one but two reviews — one aimed at a Pop-Philosophy audience and one at an academic one.

The Pop-Philosophy Review

"By the end of this book, you'll have been introduced to many of the central questions in philosophy". (Chalmers 2022, xxii)

In his new book, *Reality+*, David Chalmers uses virtual reality to rehouse and revitalize many of what we might call "the big philosophical questions". He outlines three major questions (p.17): 1. Are virtual worlds real? 2. Can we know whether or not we're in a virtual world? 3. Can you lead a good life in a virtual world? His answers, in turn, are: Yes, No, Yes. Through the lens of technology, Chalmers revamps meditations about Cartesian scepticism, the nature of reality and our knowledge of it, the existence of God, and ethical questions about the 'good life'. Through accessible and enjoyable prose, Chalmers takes us on this ambitious philosophical journey made up of 7 parts, 500 pages, and sprinkled with fun illustrations by Tim Peacock.

While *Reality+* encompasses multiple discussions and themes, the central aim of the book is to persuade us to adopt *virtual realism* — the thesis that "virtual reality is genuine reality" (p.106; ch. 6, 10, 11). Chalmers argues that if we were in a perfect digital reality, we would encounter digital cats, digital flowers, and digital boulevards that we could interact with, would affect us, have causal powers, and whose existence is independent from our minds. Digital cats may be made up of "bits and bytes" rather than flesh, blood, and fur but they are real cats that we can still snuggle up with on our digital sofas. As such, we should think of these as *real* objects, not *illusory* ones. Virtual realities, therefore, are *real* (just differently so).

From virtual realism flows the conclusion that we can lead meaningful and valuable lives even in worlds which happen to be generated by computer processes (ch. 17). At a moment in time where many of our interactions take place in digital spheres but prognoses about digitally-mediated interactions and experience being less valuable proliferate (e.g., Turkle 2017), Chalmers offers a more optimistic and perhaps more relatable view of the value that digital worlds and objects already have and could have in our lives.

Be warned, though, that the virtual realities that Chalmers seems primarily interested in are the not the kind of virtual realities that are currently available. Chalmers primarily talks of 'perfect' digital realities based on technology that does not, and may not ever, exist (though Chalmers predicts that within 100 years our virtual worlds will be "indistinguishable" from our nonvirtual ones (p.xiv)). If you pick up this book hoping to engage with philosophical questions about technology you might actually own and platforms you commonly use (e.g., Oculus 2 headsets, Apple watches, iPhones, Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook), you might be a little disappointed. However, you may be more than happy to dive headlong into the fantasy and enjoy the ride – thought-experiments are, after all, the bread and butter of many philosophical inquiries. Be prepared, though, for a lot of references to the Matrix.

Perhaps most praise-worthy is Chalmers' attempt to not simply update but decentralise many of the "big philosophical questions" from the classic cannon of male Western thinkers. Alongside the usual suspects – e.g., Plato, Rene Descartes, Robert Nozick, George Berkeley, Hilary Putnam, Bertrand Russell, Jeremy Bentham – readers will find Zhuangzi, Vasubandhu, Ursula Le Guin, Zhenming Zhai, Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, Phillipa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch. It would have been even better if adopting a more inclusive approach had also translated into an engagement with how issues of race, gender, ableism, and class come to bear on questions about experiencing, using, and designing technology. But Chalmers is certainly not alone in assuming a universal subject in the context of philosophical thought-experiments and, in making a concerted effort to do away with the kind of gatekeeping that keeps the Western canon alive, he does better than many.

In short, if you are interested in a contemporary route into philosophy, thinking about whether we could be living in a simulation and the metaphysical status of virtual objects, or looking for inspiration to update your "Introduction to Knowledge and Reality" course, *Reality+* is an entertaining and worthwhile read.

The Academic Review

"Technophilosophy is a combination of (1) asking philosophical questions about technology and (2) using technology to help answer traditional philosophical questions" (Chalmers 2022, xviii)

In the Introduction to his new book *Reality+*, David Chalmers lays out his vision of what he dubs Technophilosophy. Technophilosophy aims to do for technology what Patricia Churchland's Neurophilosophy (1989) does for neuroscience. The promise is two-pronged: Technophilosophy will (1) undertake a philosophical inquiry of technology and (2) consider how technology can influence and refine our answers to traditional philosophical questions.

On promise (2), Chalmers comes good. The book opens with nearly 100 pages of updated Cartesian scepticism and Bostrom-inspired speculations about the probability that we are in a simulation, but things really get going as Chalmers introduces the central interest of the book in Parts 3 & 4: how we should think about the status of virtual objects and virtual realities. In line with his recent article "The virtual and the real" (2017), Chalmers persuasively argues against virtual fictionalism in favour of virtual realism: the thesis that virtual objects are *real* digital objects.

While much of the book engages with thought-experiments about how to think of digital reality when we are in a perfect simulation, the arguments, in my opinion, are most interesting when Chalmers turns his attention to virtual realities that are closer to our current-day technology. Here, Chalmers engages in what he dubs "phenomenology of virtuality" (p.216) and considers how users (or at least expert users) experience space, objects, and colours when wearing VR headsets. He argues that skilled users do not (typically) experience virtual balls and dragons as physical balls and dragons in physical space but rather as virtual objects in virtual space. In doing so, he contests the idea that VR headsets are "illusion machines" and argues instead that they are "reality machines" (p.206).

Through the lens of technology, then, Chalmers persuasively motivates our return to questions about how we should think about realit(ies) and what counts as 'real'. In doing so, Chalmers once again paves a new and exciting path for engaging with age-old philosophical questions – this time not on the topic of consciousness but in metaphysics.

I am, however, sceptical about Chalmers' success when it comes to promise (1): asking philosophical questions about technology. First, Chalmers' approach provides a relatively limited investigation of the "phenomenology of virtuality". His preoccupation with questions about visual perception, reality, and illusion leave aside a wealth of philosophical explorations about technology and sound, touch, affectivity, embodiment, and intersubjectivity. One is left, then, with a relatively narrow philosophical analysis of virtual reality proper. My suspicion is that this, at least in part, stems from the unusual choice (especially from a clear tech enthusiast) to engage primarily with ideas about current and future virtual reality, rather than grounding analysis in real-world tech.

Second, although Chalmers rightly points out that we need to ask philosophical questions about technology to help us "make decisions right now about how we use video games, smartphones, and the internet" (p. xxi), it isn't clear that *Reality+* really helps us in this way. One wonders if Chalmers rather misses the mark about what people's concerns about technology are really centred upon. Are people really worried about virtual reality not being 'real' or are they worried about what kind of realities technology offers when we think about who has the power, money, and control to create and manipulate such worlds? Exploring the metaphysical status of virtual objects does not seem to address many of the pressing and real fears people have about technology that drives much of the techno-pessimism that Chalmers seems to want to quell.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, are the large gaps in references to those working in philosophy of technology. Never mind the burgeoning number of people engaging with philosophy of technology that have been publishing in the last couple of years, even the big hitters in the field are missing. Martin Heidegger, Hubert Dreyfus, Peter-Paul Verbeek, and Don Idhe don't feature at all. Admittedly these writers are primarily situated in phenomenology and post-phenomenology (not Chalmers' normal wheelhouse), but they are hardly unknown figures if you are acquainted with philosophy of technology, even if you typically reside in more 'analytic' quarters.

Perhaps we should forgive the thin referencing given that this book aims at a broad readership and too many references can bog down the text. But, for those not familiar with philosophy of technology and who missed the fleeting reference to the field in the introduction, there is a serious risk that this gives the impression that Chalmers is one of the first people ever to turn their philosophical attention to technology. For those working in philosophy of technology, this lack of engagement cannot fail to irritate. Engaging with this work would not only enrich Chalmers' own musings about how philosophy can help us understand technology, it would also reveal that many of those working in philosophy of technology already are thinking about how technology influences how we engage with traditional philosophical questions – the supposedly novel dimension of Technophilosophy. For instance, philosophers busy revisiting our conceptions of perception (e.g., Macpherson 2020), embodiment (e.g., Idhe 2002; Ekdahl & Ravn 2022), cognition (e.g., Maiese 2021; Smart et al. 2017), affectivity (e.g., Bortolan 2021; Tanesini 2022), self (e.g., Heersmink 2019), intersubjectivity (e.g., Fuchs 2014; Osler & Zahavi 2022), ontology (e.g., Harraway 2006), space (e.g., Berger 2020), and ethics (e.g., Verbeek 2011; Miller 2015) in light of technological innovations.

While *Reality+* will no doubt make a splash in metaphysical discussions, I was left with the concern that despite its ambitious scope, the book ultimately provides a rather constrained vision of what (Techno)philosophy can, and already does, offer to those interested in and working in tech. It presents philosophy as primarily occupied with ivory-tower thought-experiments about the nature of reality in imagined digital worlds, rather than an engaged and applied practice that can have societal impact. In a very real world where philosophy and philosophers are increasingly being asked to prove their worth to society, to

governments, and to funders, this undersells the promise of the discipline and, ironically for a book about the future, risks making us look stuck in the past.

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