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"Phenomenology and the Challenge of the Virtual"

Phenomenology has an incredibly rich theory with regard to the differences and similarities between acts of presentation (Gegenwärtigung) and acts of 'presentification' (Vergegenwärtigung). Perception is the paradigmatic example of the first type, where notions of presence and reality predominate. Imagination or 'phantasy' (Phantasie) is a paradigmatic kind of the second variety, where notion of irreality and absence—and in particular their evocation—really come to the fore. This project seeks to explicate fundamental differences and similarities between acts of perception and imagination in order to show that a very significant 'challenge of the virtual' surfaces both within, as well as outside of, the phenomenological tradition. This issue is of chief relevance today, where the relationship between perception and imagination, real and unreal, as well as presence and absence, are becoming increasingly vague because of new technologies and the intrinsic virtualities involved in them. The question then is: Where does the virtual fit in in such a picture?

In order to carry out my overarching goal, I envisage three main steps to this paper.

First of all, I will enact a phenomenology of perception and imagination in order to show both their fundamental relationship, as well as their crucial differences. Here I will summarise insights from Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre to show that there are indeed different structural laws constantly being enacted between acts of perception and acts of imagination. Starting with Husserl, we will see that perception is governed by laws that have presence, both physical and temporal, at their centre. Here, although phenomenology is aware of the 'horizontal' nature of perceptive experience, whereby elements of absence—and maybe even virtuality—are indeed experienced, phenomenology also proves that absence and irreality are only properly evoked and aimed at in acts of phantasy, where through reality and its presence are neutralised. Sartre even goes as far to claim that it is impossible to perceive and imagine at the same time, with daily acts like surfing the internet, or playing a computer game, in the realm of the latter. This stark opposition will be nuanced with Heidegger's notion of 'forked being', which shows that human reality is always balancing what is present and what is only virtually so. This point then opens up the question of the virtual in general, what it is and what place it might have in both our perceptive and imaginative experiences.

Phenomenology will show us that although perception and imagination are intrinsically different, they are also dynamically intertwined. Little explicit, however, is said about the virtual in phenomenology, even though it most certainly could help, especially with regard to this dynamic. In this manner, a second main section will then question the preceding phenomenological theory through some metaphysicians (viz. Bergson and Deleuze) that have a concept of the virtual at the heart of their philosophies. Indeed, here I will introduce the 'challenge of the virtual', both within phenomenology's own discourse, as well as in the work of Bergson and Deleuze, in order to see whether the oft-stark opposition between perception and imagination can be maintained, or whether it must be somewhat nuanced. In other words, in raising this challenge I wish to see whether phenomenology can account for the notion of the virtual within its framework, whether it might actually change or improve the framework, or whether we might need to go beyond phenomenology for a more comprehensive understanding of our experiences that involve so many variations of virtuality. Indeed, Bergson's invaluable challenge is that there is no such thing as a pure perception in reality; pure perception is on one conceptual pole of a highly complex dynamic that is ceaselessly played out between the dualistic realms matter and memory, whereby the latter nevertheless always already informs and formats our lived, material, and bodily experiences. Deleuze's analyses build upon such an insightful point. With him, the virtual is not opposed to the real at all—indeed there are both real and ideal virtualities—but to the 'actual' (actuel). Hereby, virtuality plays a key structuring role in the various metaphysical processes of actualisation that govern not only our experiences, but also the very constitution, of both our realities and irrealities.

Phenomenology shows clear differing structural laws between perception and imagination. It also departs, methodologically, from concrete first-person experiences. The metaphysical analyses of Bergson and Deleuze will supplement, develop, and indeed challenge this basic phenomenological stance through a rich notion of the virtual which shows phenomenology's strengths, but also one or two of its blind spots and methodological impasses.

Indeed, a final, third section will study some virtual technologies (e.g. online gaming) in the light of the two preceding theoretical sections, in order to show that there is a constant and complex interplay between the real, unreal, and the virtual in many of our everyday experiences. Here, even very basic structures of perception and imagination are becoming less clear-cut, whereby virtual technologies use their ever-increasing powers to create and maintain images which increasingly approximate and encroach upon our everyday perceptions. Indeed, the new generation of humanity might be the first where imagination and virtuality are

the basic modes of experience, supplanting the previously predominant perceptual layer. Online gaming is a case in point here, where whole webs of people from all over the world become united through so many virtual networks, even to the point of addiction. Contemporary philosophy thus needs to take the issue of virtuality very seriously, because ever-innovative technologies are changing the very structures of some of our most basic conscious experiences, not least the perceived and imagined. I will claim that it is still very important to know this distinction, so that individuals and groups are less prone to get carried away with the numberless irrealities (e.g. a fanatical ideology) that are constantly being fed to us across the virtual wavelengths.

I anticipate that such a case study will allow me to identify two main strands of the virtual. Firstly, the virtual can denote real perceptual events which have become memories that nevertheless continue to condition and influence many of our daily actions and thoughts. Here, a phenomenological theory of the virtual can be made more dynamic and robust from the insights of Bergson and Deleuze, whereby a rather general horizontal theory of perceptive potentialities may be filled out with so many specific conditioning virtualities, not least those of enactive memory (e.g. body memory and familiar objects of experience), as well as the predominance of social opinions and norms, which are always virtually conditioning our choices and actions. Here the virtual would be all those phenomena that are (or at least have been) anchored in real events, and because of this they still influence and condition the real in crucial ways. In other words, many of our foundational experiences only exist because of the virtual: our social and physical realities are always already pre-formatted by past and co-present experiences that continue to constantly exert their influence.

Secondly and finally, there are the latest brand of virtual technologies that, although strictly speaking their core remains imaginary (i.e. irreal objects—images), they have become increasingly anchored in webs of actual people and machinery that ultimately wish to annul the distinction between real and irreal. Here, I will end by reflecting upon the normative issues with regard to this point, highlighting the vast importance, but also a number of increasing dangers, of our increasingly complex relationship to the virtual.