

## BOOK REVIEW

*Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. By David J. Chalmers. New York, NY: W.W Norton & Company, 2022. Pp. xi + 520. Hardcover \$22.49, ISBN 978-0-393635-80-5.



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It isn't uncommon to think that virtual worlds, the worlds we engage with in video games, for example, are not real or at least less real than the ordinary world. After all, they are worlds that are created by us, and thus are less real than the world we didn't create, mind-independent reality. However, in *Reality+*, David Chalmers argues for the thesis that *virtual reality is genuine reality*.

*Reality+* is the twenty-first century equivalent of Bertrand Russell's twentieth century *The Problems of Philosophy*, published 110 years prior. Like Russell, Chalmers' goal is to explain the basic problems of philosophy to a wide audience.

The book's twenty-four chapters are organized into seven different parts: *virtual worlds, knowledge, reality, real virtual reality, mind, value, and foundations*. Each section has about three to four chapters. Having taught the book in an upper-division philosophy of mind course, I would say that the first nine chapters should be read together to get a good sense of the whole project, because they give shape and structure to Chalmers' basic arguments and positions. The following fifteen self-explanatory, self-contained, chapters, are independently engaging, and can be taught separately, as standalone works of philosophy.

Chalmers engages in what he terms *technophilosophy*, which is the combination of (1) asking philosophical questions about technology and (2) using technology to help answer traditional questions of philosophy. He claims that he draws inspiration for the project from Patricia Churchland's 1986 *Neurophilosophy*, where she does the equivalent of (1) and (2) with neuroscience. *Reality+* delivers clear arguments, referencing historical and contemporary philosophical work, while frequently drawing from science fiction, including several outstanding *Rick and Morty*-style illustrations. The use of science fiction helps to connect students to abstract ideas, while the robustly constructed arguments serve to instruct students on how to go about critically examining the ideas. My students found the book accessible and engaging. I imagine the book

will become even more relevant to successive classes, as the issues Chalmers discusses grow more dominant in the future.

Chapter 1, “Is this the real life?”, begins by discussing Indian and Chinese philosophy in relation to Greek philosophy with respect to theme of illusion/dreams vs. reality. In all three traditions, one finds discussion of the nature of reality and whether we can know it. Chalmers thinks that each of these traditions helps to formulate the basic questions of his book: the knowledge question, the reality question, and the value question.

*The knowledge question:* can we know whether or not we are living in a virtual world? In part 2, Chalmers argues that we cannot know that we are not living in a virtual world. He does so by defending his own version of Nick Bostrom’s simulation argument (2003), which *very roughly* goes as follows: (1) If there is nothing (technological or otherwise) that would serve to block the creation of a perfect simulation of a humanlike being into existence (what he calls a sim blocker), then most humanlike beings are simulations. (2) if most humanlike beings are simulations, we are probably simulations. So, (3) if there are no sim blockers, we are probably sims.

*The reality question:* are virtual worlds real? He argues that virtual worlds are genuinely real by examining a variety of definitions of what makes something real in chapter 6. I will examine this argument in more detail in the following section.

*The value question:* can you lead a good life in a virtual world? He argues that one can, in parts 5 and 6. He says: “In principle, life in virtual reality can have the same sort of value as life in nonvirtual reality. To be sure, life in virtual reality can be good or bad” (p. 311).

As successful as *Reality+* is, philosophical counterpoints arose in my mind. In the next section, I present a critical examination of Chalmers’ position on *the reality question*, from the perspectives of Abhidharma Buddhism, Advaita Vedānta, and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta.

## The Reality Question

Chalmers argues that it isn’t improbable that we are living in a simulation. However, it doesn’t follow that the objects that inhabit our simulation are real. Thus, Chalmers offers five definitions of “reality” and shows that virtual worlds satisfy these definitions in the same sense that any non-virtual entity does. This is meant to be a metaphysical claim about the nature of virtual worlds that shows that they are real.

Let C be any ordinary object you take to be real, such as a cup. Let V be any virtual object you take to be non-real, such as a character in a video game. Chalmers considers multiple definitions of reality and shows that, just as C exists, has causal powers, is mind-independent, non-illusory, and genuine, so is V. V exists in the video game, it has causal powers that players of the game interact with, it doesn’t depend on the mind of the player but on the video game, it isn’t

an illusion, and it is genuine (not a counterfeit). So, if C is real for those reasons, so is V. The argument is:

1. If C or V are real in either  $S_1, S_2, S_3, S_4,$  or  $S_5,$  then they are genuinely real.
2.  $S_1$ : X is real if and only if X exists.
3.  $S_2$ : X is real if and only if X has causal power.
4.  $S_3$ : X is real if and only if X is mind-independent.
5.  $S_4$ : X is real if and only if X is non-illusory.
6.  $S_5$ : X is real if and only if X is genuine.
7. C and V satisfy some of  $S_1$  to  $S_5$
8. So, C and V are both real.

Chalmers argues that virtual objects are real at least in four out of the five senses. That is enough on his account to say that they are genuinely real. Chalmers accepts two theses. *Virtual realism* is the view that virtual entities are indeed real, functional, and even central to life. *Simulation realism* is the view that if we are in a simulation, the objects around us are real and not an illusion. Simulation realism holds that even if we have lived our whole life in a simulation, everything around us in our simulation is real. He says the following about the *Reality+* view:

[R]eality contains many realities, and those realities are real. Or more mundanely: the cosmos (everything that exists) contains many worlds (physical and virtual spaces), and the objects in those worlds are real. (p. 108)

Let us now consider the position from three classical Indian viewpoints. Some, but not all, Abhidharma Buddhists hold the view that there are two truths: conventional and ultimate. The two truths correspond to two levels of reality: conventional and ultimate. Abhidharma Buddhists that hold this view claim that ultimate reality is fundamental, while conventional reality is in a sense a mere construction or fabrication. One place they make this move clear is through the distinction between simples and composites. They are mereological nihilists in the sense that they don't think that sums of simples are fundamental and ultimately real; they think simples are fundamental and ultimately real. This allows for another sense of reality. Consider the following argument:

1. C and V are both real only if they are real in sense  $S_6.$
2.  $S_6$ : X is real if and only if X is fundamental.
3. C and V are not fundamental.
4. So, C and V are non-real.

Thus, for some Abhidharma Buddhists, only those things that are fundamental are real. All the rest is emergent and non-real. To his credit, Chalmers does discuss the notion of something being real because it is fundamental. He does so because within contemporary analytic metaphysics the notion of something being real because it is fundamental is heavily discussed. In a sense, this makes the Buddhist

contrast to Chalmers' inquiry less striking as the one found in the Vedānta tradition.

The Advaita Vedāntin Śaṅkara's view is that reality is related to time. Consider:

1. C and V are both real only if they are real in sense  $S_7$ .
2.  $S_7$ : X is real if and only if X is permanent in time.
3. C and V are not permanent in time.
4. So, C and V are non-real.

How should the conclusion be interpreted? There are at least two distinct readings one can give of the view that ordinary and virtual objects are non-real from the perspective of Śaṅkara. On *the illusionist view*, Śaṅkara is saying that everything but *what is fundamental because permanent in time* is an illusion. His opponents often labeled him a *māyāvādin*, a person that holds that the world is an illusion. However, as Dalal (2021) points out, it is important to note that Śaṅkara is focused on the idea that the world is dependent on and an effect of brahman (pure consciousness). In addition, the world is not something other than brahman. This leads to an alternative reading I call *the levels of reality view*. Śaṅkara, on this reading, is saying that what is permanent in time is fundamental and real from all perspectives, but what is transient is less real. He is endorsing a graded conception of reality moving from more real to less real. He even distinguishes between two levels of reality: the conventional intersubjective empirical reality (*vyāvahārikasattā*) and the ultimate reality (*pāramārthikasattā*). On the levels of reality view, conventional reality is less real from the perspective of ultimate reality, and ultimate reality is most real. However, from within conventional reality, conventional reality is real.

Thus, for Śaṅkara, the conclusion is *not* that C and V are fictions or illusions, or that they don't exist, or that they don't have causal powers. Instead, C and V are non-real because they are impermanent. Śaṅkara would agree that both C and V have some degree of reality. However, he would deny that they are most real. For Śaṅkara, the most real thing is pure consciousness, since it is the only thing that is permanent in time.

In contrast to Śaṅkara, the father of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Rāmānuja, holds that everything is dependent on the supreme person, Viṣṇu. The dependence relation is expressed through the Sanskrit term *ādhāra* which means ground or support. The supreme person is the ground of each finite self and its material body as well as of the world, which is constituted out of the totality of material bodies and finite selves. The supreme person is the ground of these in a hierarchical relation. Rāmānuja holds that there are different kinds of reality, although they are equally real. The kind of reality an entity inhabits is marked by duration. The body passes in time; each conscious finite self as consciousness and bliss does not. The supreme person, of which each finite self is a part, is itself beyond time. On Rāmānuja's view, we must grapple with the idea that although

*y* is dependent on *x*, it doesn't follow that only *x* is real, and *y* is an illusion. While Śāṅkara can be read as an illusionist who holds that all dependent existence is illusory or as a relative realist who holds that that all dependent existence is less real than what it depends on, Rāmānuja holds that dependence does not drain objects of genuine reality.

With respect to grounding (*ādhāra*), the following inference pattern, which Śāṅkara would appear to accept, does not hold for Rāmānuja:

X is the ground of Y.  
So, Y is unreal or illusory, but X is real.

Rāmānuja does not hold that each conscious finite self is illusory, qua finite self, and only the supreme person is real. Instead, Rāmānuja endorses the following inference pattern:

X is the ground of Y.  
So, Y is a different kind of reality, and equally real to that of X, but not unreal or illusory.

As a consequence, where MB is an individual's material body, FS is an individual's finite self, and SP is the supreme person, the following holds:

Each MB is grounded in its corresponding FS in the FS's embodied state.  
Each FS is grounded in SP.  
So, each MB has a different kind of reality than its corresponding FS, but is equally real.  
And FSs inhabit a different kind of reality than SP, although they are equally real.

The core of Rāmānuja's conception of ground is that of a locus and support in an *enlivening emanation* sense, where the supreme person sustains the world and its inhabitants. The conception of ground is not spatial for Rāmānuja. It is not as if each conscious finite self with its material body is spatially supported by the supreme person. Rather, each conscious finite self is metaphysically dependent on the supreme person for emanation and enlivening.

Thus, for Rāmānuja, it would be true that virtual worlds and virtual objects are equally real to the actual (non-virtual) world. However, there is an asymmetric dependence of virtual worlds on the actual (non-virtual) world. The actual (non-virtual) world is the ground and source of virtual worlds. The actual (non-virtual) world does not depend on any virtual world, but all virtual worlds ultimately depend on the actual (non-virtual) world.

While both Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja would agree with Chalmers that virtual worlds and their objects are real, they would disagree with each other and him about the exact sense in which they are real. For Chalmers, virtual worlds are real because they satisfy many of the core notions of reality that we employ, such as existence and causal power. For Śāṅkara, virtual worlds and objects would be real, but not as real as pure consciousness, since they are not permanent in time like pure consciousness. For Rāmānuja, virtual worlds and objects would be real,

however their reality would be dependent on the supreme person (the actual non-virtual world). All three go beyond the illusionist view that would hold that virtual worlds and their objects are either illusions, fakes, or lesser ways of being than those that are real. Perhaps, Chalmers gives the highest sense of reality to virtual worlds and objects, followed then by Rāmānuja, and then Śāṅkara. In this sense Chalmers comes out as a strong realist about virtual worlds, while Rāmānuja and Śāṅkara offer competing conceptions of how to understand the reality of virtual worlds in a form of moderate realism.

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