Negotiating Language Conflict in the Digital Era: Rethinking the Virtual

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Abstract

This study analyzes the transformations of the concept of the 'virtual' from metaphysical thought to the environment of digital technology, and on this basis, proposes a renewed articulation of its contemporary ontological implications. The virtual has often been understood as a lack or absence of the real; however, through the thought of Plato, Aristotle, and Deleuze, its meaning has expanded from a mere illusion to the potentiality for the generation of the real. For Plato, the virtual remained within a non-real domain as a mimesis distanced from the truth of the Ideas, whereas Aristotle provided the ontological foundation of the virtual by understanding δύναμις

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(*dynamis* "potentiality") as the latent condition of ἐνέργεια (*energeia* "actuality"). Deleuze goes beyond this tradition by defining the virtual as a field of creative genesis independent of whether it is actualized, rejecting its conflation with the possible, and affirming its autonomous reality. Historically, the virtual became popularized in the field of computer science through the concept of 'virtual memory,' and in the media environment of VR and AR, accompanying shifts in human subjectivity and corporeality. In the contemporary technological milieu, the virtual functions not as a mere representation or substitute, but as an inventive stratum that produces new forms of reality. However, perceptions that disparage the virtual as non-real exacerbate social, generational, and cultural conflicts and generate blind spots in legal and institutional frameworks. Accordingly, this study proposes to understand the virtual not as the antithesis of the real, but as the generative force of difference and repetition, and to reestablish it as an ontological condition that expands and reconfigures the real.

Keywords: virtual, Plato, Aristotle, Deleuze, digital technology, the real, language conflict

1. Introduction

The development of VR[1] technology has brought forth the emergence of a new world on Earth. While we live in a world where objects physically exist, we are at the same time closely connected to an invisible digital world. Mobile phones have become extensions of the self; in public spaces, people are often disconnected from their surroundings and absorbed in digital spaces. Moreover, the world now exists simultaneously on the plane where I sweat and labor, and on the

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[1] The following abbreviations are used in this paper: AR (Augmented Reality), MR (Mixed Reality), TFSV (Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence), VR (Virtual Reality).

plane of information that operates ceaselessly at the click of a button—ushering in a dimension unrestricted by the domains of land, sky, or sea. Yet as humanity enters this new realm and grows accustomed to technology, has our awareness and understanding of it deepened accordingly? The answer is no. The unrestrained expansion of technology has reached the point of setting humans and machines in competition, while its pro-capitalist orientation has produced a growing class of the digitally excluded.

Tracing the roots of this phenomenon reveals a fundamental force: the operation and efficiency of technology, which in turn points to the formidable reality of technology. The Real (Being) refers to the foundational notion of 'that which is.' In the history of thought, metaphysics generally refers to the inquiry into the ultimate nature of this Being. From the medieval to the modern period, the concept of the Real was not considered in practical terms, but rather as an abstract and speculative notion—understood as the contest over the essence and origin of the world. However, from the late modern period onward, the concept of the Real gradually shifted toward an existential perspective, seeking the essential within the phenomena of lived experience.

In contemporary times, 'visible phenomena' themselves have come to be regarded as the Real, while the 'invisible' is often dismissed as illusion or myth and thus devalued. As a result, not only in science and technology, but also in philosophy, religion, and psychology, discourse on the mysterious or non-visible has steadily diminished, and a cultural climate has emerged in which only the 'visible world' is accorded supreme value. This may rightly be called the age of visibility.

Here lies the starting point of the present study's examination of linguistic interpretation and conflict. As modern values concentrate on

what is visible, our language has shifted away from the classical and essential toward the immediate and utilitarian. In such a period of linguistic flux, the emergence of new terms driven by technological development is spreading and evolving as rapidly as neologisms born of cultural difference.

One prominent example is the term 'virtual,' which is the focus of this study. What is intriguing is that although 'virtual' is commonly perceived as a neologism arising with the technological revolution, it is in fact not a term newly created by technology. Rather, its usage can be traced as far back as antiquity, revealing a long history. Nevertheless, once combined with technology, the term 'virtual' has come to be regarded as a product of the technological revolution and as a concept evoking the dawn of a new era. This raises pressing questions: Is the term 'virtual,' as we use it today, employed correctly and appropriately? Has this word, in its long history, retained a consistent meaning? If its meaning and usage have shifted over time, do tensions or ruptures exist between its original sense and its contemporary usage?

This paper seeks to answer these questions. The concept of the 'virtual' can reshape how we understand it and its role in society. Ultimately, the concept of *the virtual* is neither merely the product of digital technology nor the exclusive creation of modern philosophy. It is deeply entwined with the history of Western metaphysics—bound up with reflections on possibility, potentiality, and the Real—and reflects the ontological and epistemological foundations of its respective eras. This chapter will trace the philosophical trajectory of the 'virtual,' from Plato to Deleuze, examining how it has been conceived and subverted, and will reassess its meaning within the conditions of contemporary technological culture.

2. Plato and Aristotle

2.1. Plato's Mimesis and the Idea

The first notion of the 'virtual' we encounter in Plato appears as a deficient shadow of reality. He defines the world of Ideas (ἰδέα) as the real, and the phenomenal world as its imitation (μίμησις) or counterfeit, regarding the sensible world as nothing more than a blurred reflection distanced from the truth of the Ideas. For Plato, the sensible world, as a mere counterfeit and hazy reflection, is an obstacle that must be overcome on the path to truth; philosophy, therefore, aims to escape this world of imitation and to contemplate the Ideas. Reality, for Plato, is a mere illusion, a deceptive phenomenon that veils the truth of essence.

Hence, he says: "Now then, imagine this, to see how our nature is enlightened or unenlightened" (Plato 2013: 514a–516c).[2] The world as perceived by an uneducated nature is precisely what Plato calls 'reality.' Since an uneducated world is far from the truth, Plato tells his interlocutor Glaucon that this world of reality must ultimately be turned toward the world of true reality (Plato 2013: 525c). Yet, did Plato explicitly refer to the imitation of reality as 'the virtual'? Not exactly. He primarily used expressions such as imitation or shadow, rather than the term 'virtual,' though the meaning parallels that of the virtual.

In Plato's allegory of the cave, which reveals the opposition between

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[2] In this paper, citations of classical philosophical works follow the traditional numbering systems of the original texts. For Plato, Stephanus pagination is used; for Aristotle, Bekker numbering is used. Each citation presents first the publication year of the translation consulted, followed by the corresponding original text reference. For example, Plato (2013: 514a–516c) refers to the passage in *Republic* appearing in the 2013 translation, corresponding to Stephanus numbers 514a–516c.

imitation and reality, the cave symbolizes the sensible world and represents a cognitive state that has not yet reached the reality of the Ideas. The shadows on the cave wall are distorted reflections of reality, and such a reality-as-imitation contains within it the concept of the false or illusory in opposition to the truth of the Ideas.

How, then, are Plato's concepts of imitation and counterfeit connected to the virtual? Plato understood the force that realizes the world of reality as a kind of inherent capacity within the human soul, namely *dynamis* (δύναμις). This capacity is the power to turn from the world of shadows to the world of truth—the power to be educated. It operates within the world of reality, which, as an imitation of the real world, is virtual in the sense that it differs in essence from the original reality.

At the same time, because this capacity leads the sensible world toward ultimate reality, its origin can be said to lie in the Idea of the Good. From this, the 'virtual' in Plato can be inferred as belonging to the false within the true–false framework—that is, as phantasma (illusion). Yet it is not mere fiction; it is a force immanent within the sensible world that seeks to elevate it toward the world of ultimate reality. This force can never fully coincide with the real world, but it maintains a certain connection with it. Thus, in Plato's thought, the virtual is an invisible power, dwelling in the sensible world as the imitation of the original, that is both the 'possibility of world-transformation' and, at the same time, a 'connection to an already open world.' If it operated only within a closed world (the world of shadows), transformation could never occur; the very possibility of transformation must already be situated in an openness toward another world. Therefore, the Platonic concept of the virtual, as inferred here, contains a non-being dimension opposed to reality, an untrue sensible world that nevertheless bears resemblance to reality.

To reach an ontological reflection on the virtual in Plato's thought, it is necessary to trace the philosophical origins of the term 'virtual' more precisely, and in doing so, we can find a point of connection between the virtual and being in Aristotle.

2.2. Aristotle's Potentiality and Actuality

The title 'Metaphysics' (Metaphysica), as we now call it, was given only in the 1st century, after Aristotle's death, when Andronicus of Rhodes, a Peripatetic scholar, collected and systematically edited Aristotle's works. Andronicus classified Aristotle's writings by subject—logic, ethics, politics, rhetoric, natural philosophy—and appended to the works on natural philosophy (Physica) a series of treatises concerning ultimate causes and principles. He called them 'meta ta physika' ('the things after the Physics') in the sense of 'coming after' in sequence. Later philosophers came to interpret meta not merely as an ordering term, but as denoting a science 'beyond' natural philosophy—that is, a transcendent inquiry into the ultimate grounds of being. Thus, metaphysics came to be regarded as the core discipline for questioning the ultimate source of being (Lee 2017).

Among the central topics of this metaphysics, Aristotle posed the question 'What is being?' and proposed the framework of *dynamis* (δύναμις "potentiality") and *energeia* (ἐνέργεια "actuality"). Unlike Plato, Aristotle valued the sensible world over the realm of pure principles and emphasized the importance of matter and the physical world rather than a strict opposition between Ideas and reality. In doing so, he did not limit *dynamis* to what is already actualized (*energeia*), but also included that which has not yet been actualized yet can be—things in a state of possibility—as a mode of being. Here, potentiality is not mere lack or absence, but an immanent force or capacity for realization within existing things, whose meaning

emerges only in relation to actuality (Aristotle 2022: 1949b)[3].

In this way, *dynamis* in Aristotle is developed more precisely and intricately than in Plato. Rather than relying on a separation between the Idea and its imitation, Aristotle interpreted reality in terms of stages of realization, transforming *dynamis* into the concept of possibility existing within things themselves. Thus, whereas for Plato the force (*dynamis*) aimed at turning toward the Ideas through education, for Aristotle it became the potential existence of what is not yet actualized—a philosophical starting point for the concept of the virtual.

In Metaphysics, Aristotle defines *dynamis* as "a principle of motion (archē kinēseōs) existing in another thing, or in the same thing qua other" (Vitali-Rosati 2010: 181–182, Aristotle 2022: 1019a), and describes it as an ontological principle immanent in things. In his translation of *Metaphysics*, Kim Jinsung comments in the translator's note that the primary meaning of *dynamis* is 'power' (ability, potency), and secondarily it is 'potentiality.' He further explains that *dunaton* (δυνατόν) signifies 'that which is possible.'

The term *dynamis* can be summarized in three senses: Capacity as a principle of change—either active or passive—such as the active capacity to build a house or the passive capacity to receive change. The ability to perform something well, i.e., a teleological or intentional capacity. A static, enduring capacity that is not exhausted, such as the ability to remain in a state of rest.

Corresponding to these, dunaton also has several meanings. In Latin, it was translated as virtualis, forming the etymological basis of the modern concept of the 'virtual,' but also as 'potential (*potentialis*)' and 'possible (*possibilis*).' The multiplicity of translations has led to

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[3] The translation by Jinsung Kim was primarily consulted, with H. Tredennick (Aristotle 1938) when necessary.

conceptual ambiguity in how 'the virtual' has been used.

2.3. The Ontological Meaning of the Virtual

To summarize, *dynamis* refers to the capacity itself, while dunaton refers to 'that which' possesses the capacity. Aristotle's notion of potentiality—what we may call the 'virtual'—thus encompasses both. The fact that *dynamis* has three senses while dunaton has four, without a strict one-to-one correspondence, reveals the difficulty of defining the virtual. While the first meaning of *dynamis* (capacity as principle of change) corresponds to the first meaning of dunaton (dynamic potentiality already immanent in activity), the fourth meaning of dunaton is less ontological and more logical, referring to "that which is not necessarily false" (Vitali-Rosati 2010: 181–182, 187).

On this logical view, if a proposition is not necessarily false, it can be judged possible. 'That which may exist' thus possesses a bidirectional potential—it may or may not exist—and cannot be declared false merely because it is not actualized. Potentiality, therefore, even when unrealized, retains a mode of existence by suspending the judgment of truth value (Aristotle 2018: 1050b).

> Some things that do not exist in actuality exist in potentiality; they are non-existent only in the sense that they are not actualized, not in the sense of being utterly nothing.

What is unseen is not necessarily non-existent. Aristotle thus contemplated the 'being' of the non-visible as an ontological category. His understanding of the relation between *dynamis* and *energeia* allows for philosophical reflection on the virtual and serves as a starting point for distinguishing between the virtual and the possible. This analysis, beyond the scope of ancient philosophy, remains valid

even in post-Deleuzian discourse, as a philosophical precursor to the notion of 'virtual being.'

When Aristotle states that 'what exists in potentiality also exists,' he affirms the ontological possibility of potentiality prior to actuality. Just as one may call someone a 'thinker' even when they are not presently thinking, being should be understood as a dynamic category that includes the whole range of realizable possibilities, not merely what is here and now.

> For instance, if one defines the proprium of being as 'the capacity (dunaton) to act or to be acted upon,' one describes that proprium according to potentiality and thereby reduces it to the proprium of being itself—since whatever exists must also have the capacity to act or to be acted upon (Aristotle 2022: 1049a).

Thus, the proprium of being lies latent within the potentiality of dunaton; the latent potentiality exists as the enabling condition for actuality. Yet, conversely, actuality allows us to infer the existence of potentiality: by seeing what is actualized, reason can deduce the possible state that preceded it. Hence, actuality is prior to potentiality both temporally and in definition—for example, a human comes from another human, and the musical from the musical. Aristotle states that potentiality is that which, when actualized, does not bring about the impossible (Aristotle 2022: 1049a), underscoring the teleological orientation toward actuality. Nevertheless, although Aristotle affirms the ontological priority of actuality, he does not dismiss the possible state itself as false (Vitali-Rosati 2010).

In order to address the reality of the virtual, this study began with Plato's theory of Ideas and concept of imitation. If Plato saw the

relation between the sensible and the real in terms of the opposition 'imitation–truth,' Aristotle reformulated it in ontological terms as 'potentiality–actuality.' This study accepts Aristotle's structural insight, but seeks to reinterpret it not as a teleology of completion and finality, but in terms of the virtual's characteristic focus on becoming and difference. In Aristotle, potentiality is granted ontological status, but its ultimate orientation lies toward completed actuality; thus, even if potentiality contains bidirectional openness, its directedness toward actuality limits the scope for thinking free becoming and transformation in a reciprocal relation.

In the technological age, the concept of the virtual must be grounded in multi-layered reciprocal relations; hence, there is a need to overcome this actuality-centered structure. Accordingly, this study aims to move beyond the traditional limitation that 'the virtual cannot differ from completed actuality,' and instead to explore the value of becoming and difference as generative forces, thereby seeking a point of contact with the relational meaning of the virtual in contemporary contexts.

Through this approach, the ontological genealogy of 'possibility' will be extended into the concept of the 'virtual,' establishing a new ontology that recognizes unrealized possibilities as real. In short, while Aristotle defines potentiality within a teleology oriented toward actuality, this structure constrains the autonomy of potentiality—its 'unrealized reality.' This paper seeks to go beyond that constraint, reestablishing Deleuze's 'virtual' as a non-subordinate ontology of potentiality.

3. Deleuze's Interpretation of the Virtual

3.1. The Virtual and the *Simulacrum*

Gilles Deleuze subverts the classical notion of the virtual as a mere shadow of being, an illusion, or something not yet fully realized, by instead focusing on the generative significance contained within its incompleteness, thereby developing an original metaphysics. This line of thought can be seen as having emerged through a critical engagement with the discussions of Plato and Aristotle. Deleuze's philosophical project begins with an attempt to correct the misconceptions surrounding the concept of the 'virtual,' undertaking a close analysis of the relation between potentiality (*dynamis*) and actuality (*energeia*) as articulated by Plato and Aristotle, as well as the possibilities and virtualities immanent within potentiality itself.

In his essay 'Plato and the Simulacrum,' Deleuze seeks to overturn Plato's conception of the *simulacrum*. By constructing a positive philosophy of the *simulacrum*, he aims to establish the ontological foundations of virtuality. The term *simulacrum* derives from Plato's use of phantasma when discussing imitation; it refers to a resemblance produced not by direct connection to an essence or original, but through optical effects or perceptual illusions generated from the standpoint of the observer. For Plato, the *simulacrum* was an entity to be rigorously repressed, something that ought to remain chained deep within the cave. Deleuze, however, redefines the *simulacrum* not as a mere 'counterfeit' but as a creative force that denies both model and copy alike, a 'Dionysiac machine' that disrupts the order of the system itself.

The simulacrum is not a degenerate copy but rather contains a

positive force that denies both the original and the copy, both the model and the representation. … This is because no model can resist the vertigo induced by the simulacrum. The privileged point of view no longer exists, and neither does the object that all points of view are thought to share. … Resemblance continues to exist, but it is produced as an external effect, constructed upon the divergent series internalized within the simulacrum and brought into resonance with one another. Identity is also maintained, but only as a law that complicates every series and returns within each series as a process of compulsion. In the subversion of Platonism, … resemblance and likeness now possess as their sole essence the condition of being 'simulated'; that is, their essence lies in expressing the operation of the simulacrum. … Simulation likewise cannot be described merely as appearance or illusion. Simulation is illusion itself—that is, the effect produced by the operation of the simulacrum, functioning as a Dionysiac machine. … It swallows all foundations … and occurs as 'de-founding' (effondement). (Deleuze & Krauss 1983: 53)

This extended passage represents a decisive moment that symbolically encapsulates several core theses of Deleuze's philosophy: the 'power of the false' (*pseudos*), the positive force of the *simulacrum*, and the complete dismantling of Platonism. What Plato called imitation is, in its essence, incomplete, an endeavor to approach the real through resemblance and identity. Yet this movement inevitably produces copies of the Idea, calling them illusions; but within the repetitive process of imitation, every foundation collapses, and the cycle of collapse and generation becomes settled as essence itself. In this way, the effects produced by the 'Dionysiac machine'—the movement that

seeks to create by departing from the center, the abyss that emerges where there is no foundation, and the virtual field that generates difference through repetition—come into view. This is the moment in which the incompleteness of the virtual is reinterpreted as a creative order, and what tradition had defined as false is, in fact, declared to be true.

3.2. Possibility and Virtuality

Another crucial point in Deleuze's account of the virtual is the distinction between the possible and the virtual. He was critical of the view that equates the virtual with the possible. Earlier, we examined the meaning of *dynamis* (potentiality) in Aristotle's concepts of actuality and potentiality. Unlike Plato's theory of imitation, Aristotle criticized the notion that the possible and the actual correspond in a one-to-one fashion. If potentiality means that 'AA' is latent within matter as the possibility of becoming 'A,' the virtual means that 'AA' can exist regardless of whether it is actualized in reality. For Plato, since 'AA' is merely the imitation of 'A,' only 'A' truly exists. Yet insofar as both master and disciple shared the conviction that only *energeia* (actuality), the stage of realization, is complete, Aristotle placed the emphasis on actuality as the finished state, such that what exists potentially must face no hindrance in becoming actual (Aristotle 2022: 1049b–1051a).

Deleuze, however, defines the virtual as a reality that has not yet been actualized but operates in an emergent and creative way. Aristotle's framework presupposes that the virtual develops into an individual of the same species in accordance with the essence of that species. An acorn has the possibility of becoming an oak tree, and this possibility does not change when it is actualized. Yet from an evolutionary perspective, it is by no means impossible that a seed,

under long-term environmental change, mutation, and selective pressure, might develop into a form other than its original species. Deleuze's notion of the virtual refers precisely to this kind of case, where transformation and difference inevitably intervene in the path toward actualization, such that the outcome may not preserve its original identity. In other words, the virtual is not confined to the framework of 'destined to become an oak tree' under a fixed species identity, but acknowledges as real those possibilities that may move toward entirely different trajectories of becoming in relation to their environment.

> The only danger to be avoided in all this is to confuse the virtual with the possible. The possible stands in opposition to the real, and thus the process it undergoes is 'realisation.' In contrast, the virtual does not stand in opposition to the real, but possesses its own full (ontological) reality. (Deleuze 1994: 211, 2004: 455)

In Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, the 'virtual' (*le virtuel*) is not merely a concept denoting the absence of reality or a state of non-actualisation. He challenges the structure of thought in traditional metaphysics that, by dichotomising possibility and actuality, has reduced the virtual to an unrealised possibility (*possibilité non réalisée*). For Deleuze, the virtual does not exist prior to realisation but operates as the very dynamic potentiality (*puissance dynamique*) that conditions the constitution of the real. He inherits this concept from the philosophy of Henri Bergson.

According to Deleuze, Bergson saw the concept of 'possibility' (*le possible*) as arising from a false problem—one that confuses 'more' (*plus*) and 'less' (*moins*) and ignores differences in kind. Deleuze

regards Bergson's identification of this as the 'problem of the false' (*le problème du faux*) as one of his greatest contributions. Traditionally, the false has been associated with a merely possible state that has not been actualised. Whenever two opposed existents are assumed to be revealed through a simple act of realisation, the notion of possibility emerges (Deleuze 1996: 20). For example, the concept of disorder is not simply the absence of order but contains within it a motive to negate order. When we encounter an order we do not desire, we are able to call it disorder precisely because the concept of order is already presupposed. In this way, order is understood as if it organises a pre-existing disorder, just as the real is treated as if it were the realisation of a possibility, and disorder is embedded within order and measured as something 'less ordered.'

However, there is a contradiction here. While Deleuze acknowledges that being, order, and existence may be regarded as truth, he also sees in the problem of the false a movement of regression within this truth. In this movement, being, order, and existence are retrojected into the possibilities, disorders, and non-beings they implicitly contain. In other words, order cannot be constituted without taking into account the disorder embedded within it. Consequently, the 'possible concept of order' contains not something less than the actual but, on the contrary, something more, at which point possibility shifts into the concept of the virtual.

Thus, the concept of nonbeing contains more than the concept of being, the concept of disorder more than that of order, and the concept of possibility more than that of the real (Deleuze 1996: 20). Furthermore, although Deleuze does not explicitly state this in the section dealing with the real and the possible, he reinforces it through his claim that the very act of posing a problem already contains its answer. In other words, a well-posed problem already exists with its

answer concealed (*couverte*), thereby radically reworking Bergson's argument.

3.3. From Resemblance and Identity to Difference and Becoming

Deleuze points out that there is a 'trick' at work in the relationship between the possible and the actual. When we encounter something that has come into being and think that the actual resembles the possible, this is because we have *retroactively* projected the image of the actual onto the possible. In reality, however, it is not the actual that resembles the possible, but rather the possible that resembles the actual. Thus, the very concept of resemblance here is itself an illusion—a philosophical sleight of hand (Smith 2009: 36).

If the possible is an already existing alternative that merely acquires the attributes of being and realises itself while maintaining its identity, then the virtual denotes a situation of openness and dynamism that already exists but at a different ontological level. In the process of actualisation, change occurs, and the actualised virtual gives rise to something new that did not exist before (Vitali-Rosati 2010: 165). Consequently, the concept of the possible must be understood as containing dynamically more than what is found within the concept of the real.

For Deleuze, therefore, the virtual is distinct from *potentiality*—that which 'can be actualised.' The latter is static, already determined in form, and merely appears over the course of time. By contrast, the virtual is an indeterminate structure that inherently contains multiple pathways of actualisation; it is the power that produces difference and the ground that makes the genesis of the real possible. In this sense, the virtual is both the precondition of the actual and the field of creation, regarded as a 'real ontological stratum' distinct from realisation. In moving beyond Aristotle's concept of *dynamis*, Deleuze's notion

of the virtual subverts Plato's Idea, rethinking the real not as a return to the same but in terms of difference and repetition. The virtual is 'something that already exists but is not actualised,' and within the real, it is ceaselessly concretised through the process of 'becoming (*devenir*)' (Deleuze 1994).

4. The Meaning of the 'Virtual' in the
Technological Environment

The development of digital technology and media environments has provided a crucial impetus for extending the concept of the 'virtual' from philosophical discourse into popular language. The term 'virtual' re-emerged in the 1960s within the field of computer science. During the development of Atlas, the world's first supercomputer, engineers implemented a memory system that did not physically exist but was functionally realised through the combined operation of hardware and software, naming it *virtual memory*.

In the domain of what is now widely known as *virtual reality*, Morton Heilig developed the early mechanical prototype *Sensorama Simulator*, an attempt to reproduce two-dimensional images with greater realism. Later, Myron Krueger explored the concept of the virtual from a philosophical perspective, and in the 1980s, computer scientist Jaron Lanier popularised the term by commercialising virtual reality products (Heim 1997: 23).

In technical terminology—whether VR, AR, or MR—the 'virtual' is often understood as a reproduction, imitation, or alternative space to reality. From this perspective, the virtual is frequently defined in opposition to the real: as that which is not actual, not physically

present, or merely an illusion. However, such a simplistic binary fails to account for how the virtual actually operates, particularly its impact on cognition, emotion, and interaction. For example, a user's sensory immersion, affective response, and transformations of identity within VR environments are not simply events occurring in a 'fake reality,' but rather new, real conditions that participate in shaping life and world.

In this respect, technology is not merely a tool but an ontological agent that mediates the individuation of being, and the virtual acquires a new mode of reality within the technological environment. Reflecting this status, Pierre Lévy defines the virtual as "unlike the static and already-formed possible, the virtual is a complex of problems endowed with a tendency or force that calls for actualisation" (Révy 2002: 20), while Vitali-Rosati describes it as "the ontologically prior condition of the thinkable" (Vitali-Rosati 2010: 217). Accordingly, the technological 'virtual' is not a state of lack with respect to the real, but a field that produces new forms of reality—an understanding that resonates with Deleuze's position. Technological devices and images do not merely replicate reality but constitute an inventive stratum that generates genuine sensory experience, thereby functioning as forces that actively compose the real.

This can also be applied to modern digital language. In the computer age, thanks to the virtuality of signs, movement can be programmed into letters. A symbol such as ⋯➤, though merely a character, can be endowed with motion (movement) within a software context. In other words, it is connected to the directive capacity of programming languages. Digital signs thereby acquire a double layer of meaning: the meaning of the sign itself and that of movement. Thus, the virtuality of the sign is a potential force that can be actualized. By containing the virtual potential to program movement, digital signs

reveal a generative layer of meaning in addition to their symbolic meaning. Here, *virtuality* does not simply mean 'imaginary,' but refers to the operative potential that a sign can possess. That is, a symbol once static now comes to encompass the very possibility of movement (Maun 2013: 176).

Such virtuality urges a transformation also in human existence, and the subjectivity of the human being within the technological environment is likewise altered. Rosi Braidotti, in *Metamorphoses* (Braidotti 2020: 405), describes the human subject in virtual technologies as a 'fractal subject.'

> The human being is a fractal subjectivity—no longer a geometrically centred, self-regulating body, but rather a design aesthetic necessary for operation, a technology of bodily immunity, and a set of key features within the libidinal economy that produces toxic bodies. This is no longer a univocal perspective but one that has been fatally disrupted in the cyberspace of virtual technologies.

In the posthuman era, the human subject is no longer a singular and unified being but one that is fractured and continually generated within virtuality and technology. This means that a single, unified concept of the human can no longer be sustained. Furthermore, what if technology were to become part of the human itself? Can we still call 'mechanical beings'—the hybrid of machine and life— 'transhumans' and 'posthumans'—"human"? It is now "historically, scientifically, and culturally impossible to distinguish between technologically mediated bodily extensions and bodies themselves" (Braidotti 2020: 405). As technology becomes embedded within the body, the dichotomy between nature and technology can no longer be

maintained, and the connection between body and technology renders the boundary between the biological and the artificial increasingly ambiguous. Now the human body depends on data; the virtual world has become a part of the human; and the link to the virtual world has itself become a part of the body.

Therefore, in the age of digital technology, the 'virtual' must return to its ontological sense. Its being is neither a mere duplication nor a state of lack, nor is it centred on identity and resemblance. By grounding its essence in the generative value of difference and repetition, the nature of the virtual lies in becoming, and technology assumes the characteristics of a *simulacrum* born from the effects of repeated phantasmata. As Deleuze notes, the virtual is not defined by the 'more' or the 'less' between the possible and the actual. Rather, as a dynamic field within the creative process that generates new realities, the virtual in the technological environment occupies the position of an autonomous concept of the real.

5. Misunderstandings and Conflicts Surrounding the Concept of the Virtual

In everyday language, the term 'virtual' has often been misunderstood as implying a lack or absence of reality. This misunderstanding stems from the Western metaphysical tradition since Plato, which has been dominated by dichotomous thinking between phenomenon and essence, possibility and actuality, reality and illusion. For Plato, imitation was not truth but falsehood, and falsehood belonged to the realm of illusion and semblance rather than reality. Especially after Aristotle, the potentiality (*dynamis*) of possibility

was distinguished from actuality (*energeia*), with the traditional emphasis placed on the superiority of actuality. As a result, possibility and the virtual were reduced to what is as yet unrealized, the non-real.

However, Aristotle's concept of *dynamis* allows for another interpretation. Potentiality, even if not actualized, is 'true' in the sense that it exists potentially; it is not false. Although Aristotle defines potentiality as something not yet actual, he did not define it as non-existent falsehood. Rather, potentiality already contains within itself the movement and form that make actualization possible. At this point, the present author comes to agree with the conclusion that the virtual, subsumed under potentiality, can be more primordial than the state of completion. Nevertheless, in the traditional sense, the virtual, because of its non-identity and dissimilarity arising from the difference between imitation and actualization, has failed to fully reveal the dynamism and generative value inherent to virtuality itself.

Meanwhile, when the concept of the virtual was reintroduced into the technological world through the development of modern technology, it was still used primarily to mean 'representation of reality' or 'realization of imagination.' In such cases, the virtual was understood less as a philosophical concept than as a technological one—referring to invisibly implemented storage media, new spaces unfolding in digital environments, and technological settings that stimulate the senses of the user to produce effects similar to, or even more dramatic than, reality. In this context, the technological environment and the virtual in classical philosophy share a strong association with imitation intended to approximate an original, or with an incomplete stage prior to actualization.

At precisely this point, contemporary society faces several conflicts. First, the undervaluation of the virtual's worth and influence leads to the dismissal or underestimation of the real effects—

psychological, economic, and political—that occur in online spaces, digital assets, the metaverse economy, and remote communities.

Second, there are generational and cultural conflicts over the boundary between reality and the virtual. In education, political participation, and labor practices, perceptions of what constitutes a 'real' experience often collide: the older generation tends to regard the virtual as 'fiction,' while the younger generation experiences it as an 'extension of reality.' For example, disputes arise over whether e-sports should be recognized as 'real sports' or how to set boundaries and institutional criteria for online professions and economic activities.

Third, self-expression in the virtual world is often assumed to be a 'false self' or 'disguise,' leading to distrust of relationships and identities formed in virtual environments, and the perception of these as inferior to real-world relationships. This can result in the delegitimization or devaluation of political movements, religious activities, and social movements formed in online communities. Such perceptual divides are also evident in the media sphere; for instance, in Korea, during the 2024 martial law crisis, online personal and small-scale media outlets exerted far greater influence in raising awareness and overcoming the crisis than legacy media, yet media authority continues to be predominantly recognized in favor of traditional outlets.

The attitude that perceives the virtual as non-real not only deepens social conflict but also significantly affects the institutions and laws intended to address such issues. If cyberbullying, virtual currency fraud, or fake news are dismissed or approached lightly under the pretext that 'it's not real,' the gap between victims and perpetrators, and between law and social norms, will only widen.

One of the pressing social issues today is deepfake technology. The

term deepfake—a portmanteau of 'deep learning' and 'fake'—refers to technology that produces fake videos that appear real. According to reports by Rabble and Equality Now, deepfake production has become easier than before, allowing anyone to create such content without source material, and it is predominantly misused against women. A 2019 study found that 96% of distributed deepfakes were pornographic, with the victims primarily being U.S. and U.K. actresses (46%) and Korean K-pop singers (25%) (Nicoll 2023, Equality Now 2024). Such deepfake sexual crimes, along with other forms of digital sexual abuse, are described as TFSV, which includes the non-consensual distribution of sexual images and online sexual harassment, and is understood to inflict psychological, social, and physical harm. These digital crimes cause victims shame and anxiety and reinforce social stigma, yet current legal systems fail to address them adequately. Furthermore, cross-border legal gaps, compounded by the anonymity characteristic of the digital realm, exacerbate the problem, making legal reform, as well as education, policy, and awareness improvement, an urgent necessity (Henry & Powell 2015).[4]

From this perspective, a shift in how we understand the concept of the virtual is essential. The virtual is not merely the non-real but a condition that generates reality, qualitatively distinct from possibility. Possibility is a 'concept within linear time' that merely actualizes an already predetermined form, whereas the virtual is the generative force that brings reality into being through indeterminacy and the movement of difference. The virtual is not the state of 'not yet,' but the expansion of reality in the sense of 'already existing otherwise.' This must remain the case even in technological contexts.

In contemporary virtual technologies and media, the actualization

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[4] For a philosophical reflection on the social problems of fakes, see Yoon's study (2025: 337–372).

of the virtual can be explained through Brian Massumi's concept of *emergence*. Massumi describes emergence as the 'two-sided coin' of the virtual and the actual. Here, the virtual means the 'autonomy of relation,' while the actual refers to 'functional limitation.' He identifies the channel through which digital technology can access the virtual as what he calls 'analog continuity.' This notion of analog continuity holds that while the digital is inherently discrete and segmented, the virtual is a continuous field of sensation-affect; thus, the only channel through which digital technology can access the virtual is via analog continuity (Stival 2004: 147). This is because, even in digital technological environments, the virtual operates effectively only within the analog continuum of sensory connection and continuity. Hence, the analog and the digital must be thought together, asymmetrically, acknowledging their entanglement (Stival 2004: 143). As a result, the virtual possesses a multi-layered and varied topology, unlike the limitations of the actual. The virtual has this singularity because it is not 'what is not yet' but 'what already exists, yet differently' (Stival 2004: 146).

6. Conclusion: A New Horizon of Reality, the Rediscovery of the Virtual

Conflicts over the concept of the virtual have deepened in the emerging technological horizons of digital media, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology. In an environment where the boundaries between reality and non-reality have grown increasingly blurred, the virtual is no longer regarded as a negation of reality but is being re-envisioned as a crucial constituent of it. In this way, the virtual moves beyond a

mere theoretical dispute to become a key concept in the political, ethical, and ontological reconfiguration of our time.

> The long history of error is, in fact, the history of representation, the history of images. The same -identity- possesses an ontological meaning: it is the repetition within the eternal return of difference (the repetition of each series that it implicates). The similar likewise bears an ontological meaning: it is the eternal return of what deviates from resemblance (the repetition of the series that are implicated therein). Yet precisely here, the eternal return, within its return, engenders a certain specific virtuality, and in that virtuality, it reflects its own image. Moreover, the eternal return delights in that virtuality and, through it, redoubles its affirmation of difference. (Deleuze 2004: 627–628)

Deleuze, through Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, [5] critiques the traditional notion of reality that privileges identity. The eternal return repeats what is 'different' toward a purpose, yet in the course of this repetition, people fabricate illusions such as 'this is the same,' 'this is similar,' 'this must be negated,' or 'this is the goal.' All such illusions, however, are nothing more than by-products generated by the repetition of difference itself; genuine reality lies not in the illusion but in difference as such. Difference is not presupposed between identity and chaos; rather, it generates, repeats, and exists in and of itself. The eternal return, through this difference and repetition, dismantles even the illusions, symbolizing a process of decentering

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[5] "One must not forget that the power of eternal return is never a power that brings back 'sameness' in general, but a power that creates while selecting and excluding, and that produces while destroying." (Deleuze 2004: 46)

within a recursive play.

This perspective reorients the concept of the virtual in today's digital environment. The virtual is not merely the opposite of the real but an active agent that imparts new forms and structures to reality. For example, identity formation online, remote interaction, and sensory immersion do not simply replace reality; instead, they reorganize it and expand the horizon of the real. The virtual is intimately intertwined with the constitutive elements of life— embodiment, affect, memory, relationality—thereby transforming our very perception of reality. According to Deleuze's notion of multiple reality (*réalité multiple*), digital virtuality can be regarded not as 'false' or 'illusory' but as one of the multiple pathways through which reality is produced.

Ultimately, this reconceptualization of the virtual compels a radical rethinking of the conditions of human existence and the modes of world-construction. It is not a lack of reality, but a field of potentiality that generates and expands the real. Moving beyond the view that treats the virtual solely as the counterpart to the real, we must recognize it as a new horizon of ethical and ontological reality.

The virtual is not only related to digital technologies, but also constitutes a condition for shaping both our view of the world and our being, in analog as well as digital dimensions (Colombo & Ferro 2023).

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