

PHI315 : Virtual and Artificial Worlds

Today I want to talk about the philosophical discourse surrounding the possibility of virtual and artificial worlds. We will look at how philosophers have addressed it, and what the implications are. We will do this on Monday as well, so even if this is a lot of info, do not worry—we will cover all of it in detail over time.

Recall that when thinking about the term artificial, many of you opted to define it as being fake. Maybe this still sticks in your mind as an intuitive classification and you would not be the only one. All of the philosophers to date, sans David Chalmers, have assumed that some kind of artificial world to inhabit would be a fake one, one that is *less* than the real world in some meaningful way.

This brings me to the following—we have talked about artificiality, but does that differ to you from virtuality? What comes to mind when you hear the term virtual?

Platonic Origins

So in philosophy, there is a tradition of thinking that the world as it exists is a fiction, a mere appearance, behind which is the real deal world. In other words, in philosophy, it was common to draw a distinction between the world that you know, calling it some lesser deformed version, in contrast to the world that you suspect beyond all appearance, the real world. This is the premise of the film *Matrix*, for example.

This sort of thinking has origins in Plato. Truthfully, prior to Plato, in both Heraclitus and Parmenides, but it is best articulated by Plato in his Allegory of the Cave, a story he tells in the *Republic*. But I will mention first Heraclitus and Parmenides.

In life you see things change, yet you still call them by the same name. Heraclitus thought that the only permanent thing was impermanence itself. The world of stability that you pretend is there, that you reinforce by calling things the same name, this world does not exist. It is artificial. The real world is the world of constantly shifting and changing substance. Parmenides thought the opposite. The true world is the world of an unchanging Being—when we perceive change, we perceive an artificial appearance, in truth, what is, is—it is timeless, changeless, and perfect.

Plato synthesizes both in a sense. The Allegory of the Cave goes something like this. Imagine 4-5 prisoners trapped inside a cave. There, they are chained, their heads so arranged so that they only see the wall in front of them. They have been there since their youth. Behind them is a raised walkway and behind that, a fire. Between the walkway and the fire, there are people walking, carrying objects on their heads - statues of men, animals, and other assorted shapes. These objects cast shadows on the wall which the prisoners see. Having never seen the outside world or the actual objects, the prisoners believe these shadows to be the only reality.

One day, one of the prisoners is somehow freed or his chains break. He turns around and sees that in fact, the shadows he thought for all of his life to be

the true reality are merely the product of the objects and fire behind them. He realizes that the shadows were an artificial by-product of the objects the men carried on their heads being illuminated by the fire behind them. Naturally, he probably thinks this is the reality that is true, and the past one was mere artifice. Yet, there is more.

Drawn by a light from the cave's entrance, the freed prisoner ventures outside. Initially, the brightness of the sun overwhelms and blinds him. He is only able to see shadows and reflections in water. This is reminiscent of the shadows inside the cave, but he begins to realize that even these are clearer and more distinct than what he saw inside. As his eyes adjust, he starts seeing objects in their true form under the sun's light. He sees trees, rivers, animals, and finally, he gazes upon the sun itself, understanding it as the ultimate source of light and truth. This world is so much more vibrant, real, and expansive than the limited view he had inside the cave.

There is more to this story. For example, he goes back and tries to share what he has seen. But they try to kill him instead, taking him for a madman. This is meant to be an analogy for doing philosophy chiefly, the idea being that we are constantly surrounded by false notions, and once you start doing philosophy, you are like the prisoner who broke out as saw the sun. But when you try to share it with others, they ridicule you. Socrates was killed, for example, by the Athenians for questioning everything.

But for now, I want to focus on this idea that the world around you is artificial. This ties into Plato's metaphysical system that draws a distinction between the world of appearance, the lesser world, and the world of forms, the higher world from which all truth stems. The world we live in is an artificial one, for him. He discusses elsewhere, namely in *Theatetus* and *Statesman*, his view that the world that we inhabit was crafted by an artificer, a demiurge, and that material things are mere copies, artificially made, by the demiurge and other humans, based on the True Forms that exist only at the intellectual level.

Notice the importance of the terms. The world that we live in, for Plato, is artificial. It is artificial because it is a material construction by the artificer, it is an artifact, made in the *image* of the perfect forms, but because it is not identical to the forms, it is imperfect. So from Plato onward, given his influence, the idea that the world around us is artificial, becomes embedded in philosophy. The artificiality of the world, the idea it was crafted by the demiurge, undermines its reality, since the source of the world is Forms, and not the material itself.

Empiricism, Transcendental Idealism, Return of Reality

This sort of trend-of thinking of reality that we inhabit as being artificial—was dominant until the rise of **empiricism** which is a technical terms that denotes thinking that all knowledge of the world comes from experience. It is the epistemological paradigm, epistemological meaning pertaining to the foundation of knowledge, that underlies science for example. You start by observing the world, you come up with a theory, then the world tells you if that theory works when you try it out via experiment. But the issues remain—we obviously have senses, and so the world that we experience is experienced through sensations. Because it is filtered, as it were, it becomes a question of what it is exactly that

we know. In other words, suppose that empiricism is true and that we do indeed learn everything via experiences and senses—what is to say that what we learn is not just the way in which this shared artificial hallucination works instead of reality as such?

This is where the systematic philosophy of Immanuel Kant comes in. In brief, Kant allows for the distinction between the world of appearance (Phenomena) and the world of things in themselves (Noumena). The noumena is unknowable, since it is the ground of phenomena. But, the phenomena is constituted in accordance to universal rules, and though it is in a sense constructed, the way in which it is constructed ensures a certain reality for it. In his later works, he grants that we can have some limit-knowledge of the noumenal, such as when it comes to freedom and purpose. But that is beside the point.

What matters is that the world of appearance, the world around you, though it is constructed by all of us, this world is still real, since (1) the noumena is the ground, and (2) we construct it in the exact same way structurally, and (3) the noumena is unknowable anyway. So, it follows that the world around us is as real as any, and the notion of artificiality is dispensed with. We will discuss this more on Monday in relation to Nozick, the experience machine, and some other related notions.