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Virtual Reality as Moral Ideal

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In the old Mickey Mouse cartoons from the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, by far the most prominent source of hilarity is the capacity of material stuff to generate frustration, or rather demonic violence. Fold-down beds, ironing boards, waves at the beach, trailers (especially when Goofy is at the wheel of the towing vehicle, on a twisty mountain road), anything electric, anything elastic, anything that can become a projectile, anything that can suffer termite damage that remains hidden until the crucial moment. Springs are especially treacherous, as are retractable blinds. Snowballs can be counted on to grow by a couple of orders of magnitude on their way down the slope toward your head. At any given moment, the odds of being seized by the collar by a severely overwound grandfather clock are nontrivial. Icicles: don't stand anywhere near them. Bicycles tend to become unicycles, unpredictably. And rubber cement is easily mistaken for baking powder. Why do the two have nearly identical labels?

These early cartoons present a rich phenomenology of what it is like to be an embodied agent in a world of artifacts and inexorable physical laws. The tendency of these things to thwart the human will is exaggerated, and through exaggeration a certain truth gets brought forward. As the stand-up comics say, only the truth is funny. In depicting the heteronomy (being ruled by something other than yourself) that the world of objects inflicts on us, the slapstick sufferings of Donald Duck acknowledge, and thereby seem to affirm, the human condition as it is, beneath the various idealisms that would transport us out of that condition.

The term "virtual reality," broadly conceived, may be taken to name just such an idealism. In contrast to the older cartoons, today's digital world is often one in which the pressures of physical matter against our wills are softened. Virtual reality is essentially plastic; abstracted from physical reality, it is free from the harsh necessities of stuff that have the tendency to conflict with our desires and actions. One of the pioneering

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researchers of virtual reality, Jaron Lanier, has described the field as a way of expanding human experience beyond the limits that physical matter imposes on human nature. To see this spirit expressed with greatest clarity, consider children's television once again.

The Disney cartoon franchise now has many departments. One of them, *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*, on the Disney Junior network, retains the same characters from the older shows. But the difference in how material reality is presented could not be more stark, and in this difference a shift in the relation between self and world becomes evident as well.

Each episode begins with Mickey looking into the camera and speaking directly to the viewer in tones of solicitous hypercongeniality, pausing every so often to elicit a response as he cups his hand to his ear. Once he has secured the viewer's consent, he speaks some magic words ("Meeska, Mooska…") and the Clubhouse rises up out of the ground in a psychedelically abstract, park-like landscape. There, the characters present themselves for review, each auditioning for the viewer's consideration with his or her own brand of delightfulness.

The Clubhouse is filled with amazing technology that always works perfectly. In the episode "Minnie's Mouseke-Calendar," a strong wind is blowing. You might think this is the setup for some slapstick. But when Goofy starts to get blown away, a retractable hand rises up out of a trap door (disguised as a paving stone) and gently pulls him back down to the earth.

The current episodes are all oriented not around frustration but around solving a problem. One does this by saying, "Oh Toodles!" This makes the Handy Dandy machine appear, a computer-like thing that condenses out of the cloud and presents a menu of four "Mouseketools" on a screen, by the use of which the viewer is encouraged to be a "Mousekedoer."

In the episode "Little Parade," some wind-up toy marching-band figures have been overwound and scattered, and must be retrieved. One of them ended up on the other side of a river that runs beneath the cliff Donald Duck is standing on. Donald says the magic words, and the Handy Dandy machine boots up and presents its menu of options; one of them is a giant slide. Donald chooses the slide. The slide is conjured out of the ether and settles gently into place to run from the cliff to the far bank, where Donald continues his chase after the errant toy.

There are four problems per episode, and each can be solved using one of the four tools. This assurance is baked into the initial setup of the episode; no moment of helplessness is allowed to arise. There is never an insoluble problem—a deep conflict between the will and the world. I

suspect that is one reason these episodes are not just unfunny, but somehow the opposite of funny. Like most children's television these days, *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* is doggedly devoted not to capturing experience—that is, to psychological truth—but to psychological adjustment. It is not a depiction so much as an intervention—on behalf of parents, teachers, and others who must manage children. The well-adjusted child doesn't give in to frustration; he asks for help ("Oh Toodles!") and avails himself of the ready-made solutions that are presented to him.

The difference between the older slapstick cartoons—and the physical reality they depict through exaggeration—and the newer, virtual reality cartoons is in some important sense moral. It is a difference in how we conceive the self, and its relation to the world beyond our heads. This difference becomes apparent in the kinds of human action that are possible in each of the two rival pictures.

Embodiment, Skill, and Agency

If you have children, you know that the will of a toddler has a kind of purity to it: he wants what he wants, and refuses what he refuses, without reference to any fact that might inconvenience his will. It is freezing outside, but he doesn't want to wear shoes to the park. By contrast, the will of an adult is shaped by his interactions with material reality. To say that the will is shaped by the world means that putting on shoes, for example, is no longer experienced as an accommodation. It is just what one does, as a condition for the possibility of doing anything else.

Beyond such minimal conditions, we enter the realm of skill. In skilled action, there are a lot of contingent facts about *stuff* that have to be learned at a deep level if we are to achieve our purposes: catching a fly ball, hitting a slap shot, cornering a motorcycle. Further, these are purposes we didn't even have before we began our initiation into the skill, and started to perceive the "affordances" for action this skill revealed in a particular setting. This setting may be understood as a new ecological niche that we have begun to inhabit. Acquiring skills, we acquire new motivations, a new space of reasons for action.

The idea of affordances comes from psychologist James J. Gibson. In his 1979 book *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, he says that what we perceive, in everyday life, is not pure objects of the sort a disinterested observer would perceive, but affordances: what the environment "*offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill." Affordances elicit and guide action. Gibson suggests they also organize

perception. Things in our environment show up in the vivid colors of good and bad.

Though Gibson doesn't emphasize the fact, our perception of possibilities for action depends not only on the environmental situation, but also on a person's skill set. A martial artist faced with a belligerent man at a bar sees the way the man is standing, and his distance, as affording certain strikes and foreclosing others, should it become necessary. Because of long practice and habituation, when he looks at the man's stance, this is what he sees. He may also perceive the furniture nearby, and the objects lying within reach on the bar, in terms of their affordances for combat. He sees things that people like you and I don't.

The will of the adult, unlike that of the toddler, is not something self-contained; it is shaped by a person's history of acting in the world. The kind of self that accepts this elemental fact contrasts with, and therefore brings into clarifying relief, the more fragile kind of self that seems to be assumed in much of contemporary culture. The freedom and dignity of this modern self depend on it being insulated from the contingencies of the physical world by layers of representation, now often accomplished via media technology. As Thomas de Zengotita points out in his beautiful book *Mediated* (2005), representations are *addressed* to us, unlike dumb nature, which just sits there. They are fundamentally flattering, placing each of us at the center of a little "MeWorld," as de Zengotita calls it. If the world encountered as something distinct from the self plays a crucial role for a person in achieving adult agency, then it figures that when our encounters with the world are increasingly mediated by representations that soften this boundary, this will have some effect on the kind of selves we become.

To be a Mousekedoer is to abstract from material reality as depicted in those early Disney cartoons, where we see the flip side of affordances. Perhaps we should call unwanted projectiles, demonic springs, and all such hazards "negative affordances." What they offer us is harm and frustration. The thing is, you can't have the positive without the negative; they are two sides of the same coin. The world in which we acquire skill as embodied agents is precisely that world in which we are subject to the heteronomy of things, to the hazards of material reality. To pursue the fantasy of escaping heteronomy through abstraction is to give up on skill, and therefore to substitute technology-as-magic for the possibility of real agency.

This cartoon magic may be fanciful, but one would be hard pressed to find any meaningful distinction between it and the utopian vision

by which Silicon Valley is actively reshaping our world. As we "build a smarter planet" (as the IBM advertisements say), the world will become as frictionless as thought itself; "smartness" will subdue dumb nature. Perhaps even thinking will become unnecessary: a fully smart technology should be able to *leap in* and anticipate our will, using algorithms that discover the person revealed by our previous behavior. The hope seems to be that we will incorporate a Handy Dandy machine into our psyches at a basic level, perhaps through some kind of wearable or implantable device, so that the world will adjust itself to our needs automatically and the discomfiting awareness of objects as being independent of the self will never be allowed to arise in the first place.

The appeal of magic is that it promises to render objects plastic to the will without one's getting too entangled with them. Treated at arm's length, the object can issue no challenge to the self. According to Freud, this is precisely the condition of the narcissist: He treats objects as props for his fragile ego and has an uncertain grasp of them as having a reality of their own. The clearest contrast to the narcissist that I can think of is the repairman, who must subordinate himself to the broken washing machine, listen to it with patience, notice its symptoms, and then act accordingly. He cannot treat it abstractly; the kind of agency he exhibits is not at all magical.

Kant's Metaphysics of Freedom

The creeping substitution of virtual reality for reality is a prominent feature of contemporary life, but it also has deep antecedents in Western thought. It is a cultural project that is unfolding along lines that Immanuel Kant may have unwittingly sketched for us: trying to secure human freedom by filtering material reality through abstractions.

In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes that "Autonomy of the will is the property of the will through which it is a law to itself (independently of all properties of the objects of volition)." The parenthetical remark is critical. Kant continues that "If the will seeks that which should determine it…in the constitution of any of its objects, then *heteronomy* always comes out of this." In such a case "the will does not give itself the law but the object through its relation to the will gives the law to it." Autonomy requires that we "abstract from every object to the extent that it has no *influence* on the will, hence practical reason (will) does not merely administer some other interest, but merely proves its own commanding authority as supreme legislation."

These pronouncements only make sense if we recover some historical context and understand them as a response to a problem. Consider the alarm that must have come naturally to thoughtful people beginning in the seventeenth century. The new natural science offered a mechanistic account of nature from which there seemed no reason to exempt human beings. The naturalistic psychology of Thomas Hobbes and others threatened to subsume human freedom to the deterministic realm of material causation. Thus "free will" became a problem that had to be addressed. The foundations of morality seemed to be at stake. In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant means to put the freedom of the will on a new footing, where it will float free from all natural necessities.

As the title of Kant's book suggests, he tries to lay out not the actual content of moral principles, much less a detailed account of our obligations to others, but rather to establish what *kind* of thing morality is. He insists that it exists in the realm of the ideal, not the empirical. This is crucial for the possibility of moral freedom, as against naturalistic determinism. So it is not a realistic picture of experience so much as a lawyerly argument, in which Kant tries to construct a fortress in which moral freedom is not threatened by the dumb causation of nature. But this leads Kant into some strange assertions.

"The object through its relation to the will" cannot be allowed to determine the will, if the will is to be free. I take Kant to be talking about relations of *fit* between a person and the field of objects that he deals with in his environment—precisely those affordances through which the world shows up for an embodied agent who inhabits a particular ecological niche of action. Kant's prescription would seem fitting only for a disembodied, purely receptive being who encounters the world through a screen. Kant builds a high wall between the empirical world and the purely intellectual, where we discover *a priori* moral laws. Reasons to act must come only from the latter if we are to be free, and the will is to remain pure, "unconditioned" by anything external to it.

Yet the affordances that we begin to perceive in the environment when we become skilled provide not just handles for actions previously decided upon by pure reason, but new motivations; a new space of reasons for action. The challenge posed by Gibson's "ecological psychology", and more broadly by the movement in certain dissident quarters of cognitive science that is variously called "embodied," "embedded," or "grounded" cognition, cuts deep into our culture and its guiding enthusiasms, because Kant's metaphysics of freedom is at the very core of our modern understanding of how we relate to the world beyond our heads. *Mickey Mouse*

Clubhouse merely presents an exaggerated version of this understanding, and like most caricatures it brings to prominence the defining features of the thing caricatured.

The Handy Dandy machine would teach us that it is not essential to human agency that you understand *how* your choice is realized or that you in fact *do* anything to realize it. The intervention of magic allows the moment of choice to be isolated from the (mysterious) process by which that choice is to be made effective in the world. It is also isolated from what comes before choice: the options for action that you are to choose from are already there, presented to you without involvement on your part. Yet in reality your skill set determines in large part what possibilities for action you perceive in your environment, as in the case of the trained martial artist. How we act is not determined in an isolated moment of choice; it is powerfully ordered by how we perceive the situation, how we are attuned to it, and this is very much a function of our previous history of shaping ourselves to the world in a particular way.

Kant does concern himself with the kind of judgment that requires experience with the world around us, but he treats this in a separate book, the *Critique of Judgment*, and it is significant that he segregates this topic from his argument about the will's freedom. Moments of attending to the world are separable from the moment of moral choice, and indeed the freedom of the will depends on such separation. Experience is always contingent and particular, and for that reason "unsuited to having moral laws grounded on them. For the universality, with which they are to be valid for all rational beings without distinction . . . drops out if the ground of these principles is taken from the *particular adaptation of human nature* or from the contingent circumstances in which it is placed." For Kant, to be rational—to act morally—is precisely *not* to be situated in the world.

The Pliable Chooser

Whether you regard it as toddler-like or as the highest achievement of the European mind, what we find in Kant are the philosophical roots of our modern identification of freedom with choice, where choice is understood as a pure flashing forth of the unconditioned will. Thus understood, choice serves as the central totem of consumer capitalism, and those who present choices to us appear as handmaidens to our own freedom. I am speaking now not of anything intended by Kant, but of the *fate* of his ideas in the West, where they have trickled down and become a set of cultural reflexes.

When the choosing will is sealed off from the fuzzy, hard-to-master contingencies of the empirical world, it becomes more "free" in a sense: free for the kind of neurotic dissociation from reality that opens the door wide for others to leap in on our behalf, and present options that are available to us without the world-disclosing effort of skillful engagement. For the Mousekedoer, choosing (from a menu of ready-made solutions) replaces doing, and it follows that such a person should be more pliable to the "choice architectures" presented to us in mass culture.

The absence of the real from *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*—indeed the dissociative or abstract quality of children's television in general these days—makes it an ideal vehicle for psychological adjustment; for constructing and managing the kind of selves that society requires, without meddling interference from the nature of things. The particular adjustments to be carried out will have to be determined by a Disney script supervisor, or some other functionary of the modern self.

The basic thrust of these interventions is not something that Kant *caused*. But when dumb nature is understood to be threatening to our freedom as rational beings, it becomes attractive to construct a virtual reality that will be less so, a benignly *nice* Mickey Mouse Clubhouse where there is no conflict between self and world, no contingency that hasn't been anticipated by the Handy Dandy machine. Kant tries to put the freedom of the will on a footing that secures it against outside influence—so it will be "unconditioned," a law to itself. But he can do this only by removing the will to a separate realm, from which it can have no causal effect in *this* world, the one governed by natural laws. The fantasy of autonomy comes at the price of impotence.

A self whose dignity as a free and rational being depends on insulation from the hard-to-master contingencies of the material world would seem to be a fragile self, one that has a hard time tolerating conflict and frustration. And this fragility, in turn, makes us more pliable to whoever can present the most enthralling representations that save us from a direct confrontation with the world. Being addressed to us, these representations allow us to remain comfortable in a "me-world" of manufactured experience.

It has been said that advanced economies are moving away from producing goods or even providing services, in favor of creating experiences. Video games, porn, psychoactive drugs, intense and well-curated ecotourism adventures—these are the goods of "affective capitalism." The world of regular old experience may come to seem not only frustrating, but unbearably drab by comparison. Human experience is becoming a highly engineered and therefore manipulable thing.

The alternative would be to reclaim the real.

The word "attention" is based on a Latin root that means to stretch or make tense. External objects provide an attachment point for the mind. A sufficiently involving object that demands skillful engagement can pull us out of ourselves to join the world beyond our heads, not as passive consumers of manufactured experiences, but as people who act in the world. Doing so requires *submitting* to things that have their own intractable ways, whether the thing be a musical instrument, a garden, or the building of a bridge. Things can serve as a kind of authority for us, by way of structuring our attention.

But terms like "submission" and "authority" are jarring to the modern ear, and that is precisely the issue. Cooking an elaborate meal for an important occasion, playing sports, playing music with other people, building things, fixing things—such practices establish ecologies of attention that can give coherence to our mental lives, as against the mental fragmentation that has become a defining feature of contemporary life. The skilled practitioner's perception is tuned to the affordances for action that present themselves in the particular niche of skill he inhabits. His activity organizes his perception of the world, and dampens extraneous information. Thought and action become unimpeded by the proliferation of choices. Time itself seems to dilate, and becomes something to savor.

To reclaim the real we may need to reinterpret what are taken to be sources of unfreedom, in the morality of the virtual, and view them rather as the framing conditions for many of the most worthwhile human performances. This would be to shift one's concern from freedom to agency. The imperative then is not to guard one's independence, but to become skilled.