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What is virtual reality, really?

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Mary Timothy Prokes FSE, *At the Interface: Theology and Virtual Reality* (Tucson: Fenestra Books, 2004).

The worldwide web was a little more than ten years old when this book first appeared. Eleven years later, there are a plethora of books on cybertheology.[i] When I first read this book, I was still mulling over the hypothesis that the ever changing new mechanisms of voiceless electronic communication might become a new norm for human interaction. Today that form of questioning seems naïve, for a new generation is growing up in a world saturated with social media in a way that was inconceivable even at the very beginning of the millennium.

What kind of problem is virtual reality? It does little good either to hyperventilate about its excesses or to accept its ubiquity as a *fait accompli*. At the root of the problem lies the question of the essence of virtual reality and the uncovering of a proper method for making a judgment about it. What can something *be* that claims by its very definition *not* to be real? If virtual reality has always been something available for one's use, then how can one seriously raise a question about what and how it really *is*?

In appealing to the revealed Word, Prokes focuses on the theology of the flesh in the Eucharistic theology of John 6 and the embodied mutuality of the farewell discourses in that gospel (14-17, 86-87, 96, 122-23, 127, 138). Jesus' offer of "real food and real drink," she notes, remains a paradigm throughout his ministry of hospitality in Galilee and into his Resurrected life (86-88). Even the intimacy of the marital act does not compare with the offer to live within God that takes place when one receives the other as *real* food and *real* drink (96). The lure of virtual worlds collides with this teaching: "Participation in the increasingly sophisticated forms of 'the virtual' ...can bring about a disorientation and *loss of the capacity to know the difference between the real and the unreal, at least for a time*" (124). Moreover, the cybernetic theories of bundled information negate Christian personalism's continued openness to hylomorphism and thereby call into question the critical notion that we are whole persons as an embodied presence in the world (18, 46).

Another particularly insightful section regards the attempt by virtual reality to overcome transparent boundaries. It is not uncommon to link the disembodied nature of virtuality to a breakdown in real symbolic presence. But Prokes goes one step further. She unpacks how the confusion or blurring of presence and absence has consequences for other domains of life:

Literally, to cross the interface between persons, divine or human, is the ultimate call of every human being. Heaven is described as seeing God "face to face." This cannot be contrived, "called up" technologically.(74, cf. also 160)

Presence is a self-communication of love in the real interaction of persons. It cannot be replicated by other means. In Christ the sign and the mystery coincide. This witness goes beyond human understanding, and it points to the real deficiency of substituting carnal with virtual encounters. In the latter, material sign and personal self-communication have been transformed into a de-materialized presence and its projection through a networked system that we call “cyberspace.” The medium is not thereby demonic, but its hyperextension of boundaries stands at odds with the beautiful fleetingness of an off-screen facial gesture or the physical caress of love. If “interface” with God entails “perichoretic indwelling and compenetration” (160), then the virtual path to this form of encounter remains rather ambiguous.

The question of the essence of virtual reality still haunts us and raises questions about the topicality of truth in the age of the internet. In his letter to sculptor Eduardo Chillida of 1969, entitled “Art and Space” and originally available only in a limited edition of 150 copies, Martin Heidegger reflected on the plasticity of Chillida’s work of art. Heidegger wrote: “The Plastic arts: the incarnation of the truth of being in a work that establishes places [for the truth].”[ii]

A sculptor throws into the world an expressive form. It takes up space with its own specific materiality, and this space crafted by hand is then placed with necessary deliberation into a visual space. Michelangelo, for example, drew from the quarries of white marble in Carrara in order that his “David” could be placed on the roofline at the east end of the Florence Cathedral. The space and materiality of the work of art speak to its truth. These acts of making space are precisely the dimension of the work of art that attracts Heidegger’s attention in speaking to the event of truth that transpires in the plastic arts.[iii]

Virtual reality cannot imitate this truth because it is bereft of such localities of truth. Does it open up a new, immaterial venue for the event of truth? Its seeming boundlessness in space and time is its very appeal. Heidegger and Chillida agreed that spaces are not by definition empty but available for being indwelt by events of truth. The internet empties space of this kind of event.[iv] I would not say that this emptying is by itself an emptying of life of all meaning. But the incarnate truth of which Heidegger spoke is clearly invalidated. The real question is whether and how deeply we need to encounter truth incarnately.

The perspicacity of this work lies both in the author’s sapiential mode of questioning and in the cogent way that the author turns to revelation for a response. It has already achieved a prophetic importance that can only continue to grow over time.

[i] See, for example, Antonio Spadaro, S.J., *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). Spadaro says that he first began to think about the question in 2010.

[ii] Martin Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum* (Barcelona: Herder, 2009), 32. Translation my own.

[iii] According to Heidegger: “Räumen ist Freigabe der Orten [Making space is the free offering of places]” (*Die Kunst und der Raum*, 22).

[iv] See Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 65–74.

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