WHEN IS THE VIRTUAL REAL?
MEANING, RELATIONSHIPS AND WELL-BEING IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

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IS A VIRTUAL X INFERIOR TO THE REAL X?

When claiming that the real x (e.g. friendship) ought to be pursued instead of its virtual counterpart, a number of inherently controversial assumptions are presupposed:

(I will mostly use x=friendship as example)

1. X is good
2. Vx is easier to attain than Rx
3. Rx is better than Vx
4. We ought to follow a Maximin strategy
5. Vx tends to replace Rx
6. Vx has ‘opportunity costs’

Conclusion
INHERENTLY CONTROVERSIAL PREMISES

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IS X GOOD? FOR WHAT?
GOODNESS AS CONTRIBUTING TO THE GOOD LIFE

What does it mean that ‘x is good’? In what way, for whom?
If “good for you”, a theory of the good life is presupposed

Philosophical:
1) Hedonism: Greatest balance of pleasure over pain
   → Subjective experience of pleasure/pain
2) Desire-satisfaction:
   Satisfaction of desires (you would have had if informed)
   → Subjective preferences
3) Objective list: List of items that constitute the good life.
   → Can support specific judgments of good and bad x.

Empirical:
Positive Psychology

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VX IS EASIER TO ATTAIN THAN RX?

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Easier to attain because physical obstacles to x are removed:

**Physical appearance:**
Age, gender, looks

**Physical status functions:**
Cultural indicators, social status

**Physical limitations:**
Geographical distance, disabilities, etc.

If 1) x is good and 2) Vx is easier to attain than Rx, doesn’t this mean that Vx contributes to greater well-being?
THE REAL X IS BETTER THAN THE VIRTUAL X?

1. X is good
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3. **Rx is better than Vx**
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**For something to be “better” it must be different**

Physical properties cannot be ‘ontologically reproduced’. Difference (in value) between Rx and Vx related to necessity of physical properties.

**Social Reality:**

- Screwdriver: physical properties are essential.
- Church: physical properties are important.
- Money: physical properties are unimportant.

For Rx to be better than Vx, certain physical characteristics must be essential. For instance, is physical contact essential, important or unimportant to friendship?

→ this is ultimately an empirical question...
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For something to be “better” it must be different

Two conceptual differences that might make a difference for virtual relationships (not empirically supported):

Intrinsically: Voluntary vs Involuntary self-disclosure.
For genuine relationships to occur, it seems we must have experienced the others’ “true self”, as disclosed involuntarily.
However, research suggests that we tend to disclose more about ourselves voluntarily to our virtual relations.

Instrumentally: Friends give you experiences you would not otherwise have had, and there are fewer experiences to have in virtual worlds.
**MAXIMIN VS MAXIMAX**

RISKY VS. SAFE LIFE STRATEGIES

Maximin or Minimax?

Let’s suppose that 1) **x is good** and 2) **Vx is easier to attain than Rx** and 3) **Rx is better than Vx**. Does conclusion follow?

**Maximin:**
Minimize possible loss, i.e. Vx is better than no Rx

**Maximax:**
Maximize possible gain, i.e Rx is better than Vx

Pursuing Vx at expense of Rx can be criticized primarily on the basis of a Maximin strategy.
DOES THE VIRTUAL X REPLACE THE REAL X?
... OR DOES THE VX ENCOURAGE RX?

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<tr>
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<th>Rx is good</th>
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<td>Vx replaces Rx</td>
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For instance, critics have pointed to teenagers playing with virtual animals who consequently neglect their real pets (replacement) as well as teenagers harming virtual animals who consequently harm their real pets (encouragement).

Claiming that there is a strong causation between Vx and Rx presupposes lack of rational reflection (‘social intuitionist model’).
DOES VX HAVE OPPORTUNITY COSTS?

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**High opportunity cost:**
Persons who do not have significant problems acquiring the real x, even if slightly more difficult than the virtual.

**Low opportunity cost:**
Persons whose ability to achieve the real x (e.g. relationships) is severely limited.

Not a matter of objective principle, but a matter of threshold. When the optimal solution (Rx) is not available, Vx is often much better than no x at all (e.g. social isolation).
DOES THE CONCLUSION FOLLOW FROM THE PREMISES?

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The conclusion that virtual x (e.g. friendships) are inferior to actual x rests on all these premises, most of which are inherently controversial.

The most crucial question is (3). In order not to take the answer for granted, we should investigate what the actual consequences are by looking to empirical research, in particular ‘positive psychology’, which is the scientific study of what makes people happy...
The most common method for measuring life-satisfaction is Ed Diener’s Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS). On a scale from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’, five items are investigated:

- In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
- The conditions of my life are excellent.
- I am satisfied with my life.
- So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
- If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

These measurements are often complemented by:

- Real-time pings (what are you doing, and how happy are you now)
- Statistics and welfare markers (education, income, safety, ...)
- Neuroscience and evolutionary psychology
- Tremendous attention to reproducibility, meta studies, etc.
LIFE SATISFACTION/SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING SCORES

Data source: ESS round 4
Positive psychology: The scientific study of what constitutes subjective well-being and how it can be enhanced (Seligman)

One consistent finding is that we have a “set point” which partly determines our level of well-being. 30-50% determined by genetic predisposition (twin studies), in particular related to extroversion, aggressiveness, depression,...

An equally consistent finding is that many intentional activities can bring us beyond our well-being “default”
Being social and belonging to community is among the strongest determinants of well-being (Seligman: necessary for ~ 99%).

‘Authenticity’ is not essential. Simulations of real pleasurable stimuli (e.g. nature) less conducive to well-being, but still positive → Technological surrogates may not be optimal solution, but may often be much better than nothing at all (cf. ‘nirvana fallacy’).

Acts of kindness (as long as you think you’re doing something good)

Spread of happiness in physical proximity → But how does it work? Body and facial gestures seem to be central for spread of happiness
Sharing good and bad experiences beneficial, but only if met with response perceived as genuine → Generational?

Spread of happiness in virtual worlds can be increased by mapping body and/or facial gestures onto avatar (Research ↔ Implementation)

Computer-mediated responses can be random, which could lead to negative effects from variable-ratio conditioning → Obsessive-compulsive sharing.

Meaningfulness is also entirely subjective, but typically entails contributing to some purpose you regard as greater than yourself (God, community, ‘immortality’, but also open source communities, wikipedia, ...).

IMPLICATIONS
IT ALL DEPENDS ON YOUR SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTION
CONCLUDING REMARKS
SO, ARE VIRTUAL RELATIONSHIPS GOOD FOR YOU?

- Depends crucially on whether you already perceive them as meaningful and genuine – most likely generational.
- Self-disclosure seems necessary, but it can be done voluntarily or involuntarily. The biggest obstacle lies in reduced confidence. Can you really be certain that the other reveals his/her real self? (matter of degree)
- We need to take contingencies into account. The value of VX depends on availability of RX and interaction between the two
- It all boils down to an informed choice, dependent on all these premises, and more. Most premises depend on your unique life conditions, but you can (and should) learn from others (empirical research).

1. What is the good life – for you?
2. Is VX easier to attain than RX – for you?
3. Is RX different from VX – for you?
4. Do you follow a Maximin strategy?
5. Will VX replace RX, for you?
6. Are there ‘opportunity costs’ – for you?
COMMENTS, QUESTIONS, CRITICISM?
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