Handout: John Danaher – *Virtual Reality and the Meaning of Life*

The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life, Ch. 32

I. Framing the Problem

Philosophical Anxiety About VR

- Popular media (e.g., *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*) and classic philosophy (e.g., Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*) express **skepticism** about lives lived in illusion.

- These narratives suggest that **truth and reality are preconditions for meaningfulness**.

- The worry: *Can a life be meaningful if it is entirely virtual?*

Danaher's Thesis:

1. The **binary opposition** between the "real" and the "virtual" is a **false dilemma**.

2. It is **possible to live a meaningful life in virtual reality** (VR).

II. Theoretical Framework

A. Assumptions About Meaning in Life

- Danaher adopts a **pluralist theory** of meaning (drawing from Campbell & Nyholm, Wolf, Metz):

  - **Subjective conditions**: fulfillment, engagement, perceived value.

- ○ **Objective conditions**: contributing to something **morally good, intellectually valuable, or aesthetically beautiful**.

- Meaning is a **scalar, not binary**: lives can be *more or less* meaningful depending on the degree to which these conditions are met.

III. What is Virtual Reality?

A. Two Visions of VR

1. **Technological Vision**

   - ○ VR as **computer-simulated environments**, often involving headsets, haptics, avatars, etc.

   - ○ Encompasses games like *World of Warcraft* or platforms like *Second Life*.

   - ○ Focus: **sensory immersion and simulation**.

2. **Anthropocentric Vision**

   - ○ VR as **mind-created worlds**, enabled by **imagination, culture, and symbolic thought**.

   - ○ Humans have always "lived" in dual worlds: the **natural** and the **imagined**.

   - ○ Links to Kantian dualism, existentialism, and social constructionism (e.g., Searle).

Danaher sides with the anthropocentric vision: VR is **not a modern invention**; digital tech is merely the **latest manifestation**.

IV. Arguments for Meaning in VR

1. The "No Difference" Argument

- Premise: Much of human life is already virtual (social norms, religion, symbolic systems).

- Conclusion: If meaning is possible in these domains, it is **already possible** in VR.

- **Caveat**: Future digital VR may differ **phenomenologically**, but the underlying mechanisms are continuous with past meaning-making practices.

2. The Conditions of Meaning Argument

- VR can satisfy both **subjective and objective** criteria:

  - Real friendships, moral actions (e.g., charity), skill development (e.g., gaming as craft), aesthetic performance, moral virtue cultivation.

- Analogies: lives of actors, athletes—structured, rule-based, partially fictive domains that can still foster rich meaning.

3. The (Meta-)Utopian Argument

- VR can support **utopian experimentation**:

  - Facilitates **plural visions** of the good life.

  - Evokes Nozick's "meta-utopia": not a fixed society but a **mechanism for world-building**.

  - In VR, such multiplicity is **technologically feasible** and **politically tractable**.

4. The Virtual Sublime Argument

- VR can offer **awe-inspiring or terrifying experiences** that evoke the **sublime**.

- Safe access to existential depth—akin to religious experience or encountering vast artworks (e.g., Bosch's paintings).

- Contributes to meaning by **transcending the mundane**.

V. Objections to Meaning in VR and Replies

1. "It's Not Real" Objection

- Cites Nozick's *Experience Machine*: simulated experiences are inherently **less meaningful**.

- **Replies**:

  - *Ontological ambiguity*: much of what we value (e.g., money, relationships) is already **symbolically constructed**.

  - *Phenomenological realism*: immersive VR triggers **genuine emotional and cognitive responses**.

  - *Experimental evidence*: resistance to simulation may stem from **status quo bias**, not genuine value judgments.

2. Immorality Objection

- Worry: VR enables **moral impunity** (cf. *Ring of Gyges*, *Westworld*).

- **Replies**:

  - Moral norms still apply: real harms, trust, and trauma can occur in VR.

  - Many virtual spaces **enforce moral codes** and social rules.

  - Games permit bounded moral freedom but **retain an internal morality** (MacIntyre, Suits).

3. Nihilism Objection

- **Passive Nihilism** (Nietzsche, Sartre): tech leads to overstimulation and passivity.

- **Metaphysical Nihilism**: VR exposes contingency of values.

- **Replies**:

  - Not all VRs promote passivity; *design matters*.

- ○ Embodied experience still anchors users in the **physical world**, preserving some existential structure.

4. Social Fragmentation Objection

- VR could lead to **epistemic bubbles**, polarization, and **decline of mutual understanding**.

- **Replies**:

    - ○ Not all users will isolate themselves.

    - ○ Creating and maintaining VR infrastructures **requires cooperation**, possibly increasing political engagement.

VI. Conclusion

- Rejecting the binary of "real" vs. "virtual" is essential.

- With a **pluralistic account of meaning**, Danaher argues that **VR can and does support meaningful lives**.

- The crucial variables are *design, agency, and our orientation toward value*.