



# Philosophical Aspects of Virtual Learning

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# 0. Three different usages of “virtual” (Wolfgang Welsch)

## 1. technical usage

Used to describe

- a simulation of a process or a device

## 2. Internet-related usage

Used to describe

- an electronic generation of things
- Internet-related things

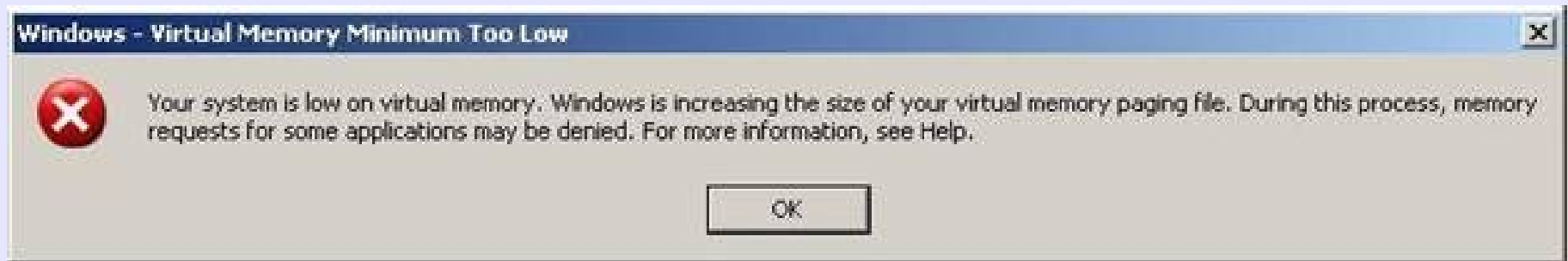
## 3. environmental usage

Used to describe

- virtual reality in the narrow sense

Welsch, Wolfgang. «Virtual to Begin with?.» Subjektivität und Öffentlichkeit: Kulturwissenschaftliche Grundlagenprobleme virtueller Welten. Ed. by Sandbothe, Mike; Marotzki, Winfried. Köln: Harlem, 2000. 25-60.

# 1. Technical usage of “virtual”



*Error message from Microsoft Windows.*

- Simulation of physically not present device in computer technology
- Refers to the distinction between software and hardware



# 1.1 The technical usage as an aspect of “virtual learning”

“virtual” as the opposite of “real”: The distinction of software and hardware is transferred to the distinction of “virtual” and “real”.

Example:

*The virtual on learning software is, that the interaction partner of a learner is simulated by software. The function of the interaction partner is not exercised by a real person, but from software. (Mader; Stöckl, 1999)*

Philosophical issues:

- Tendency to replace the real by the virtual

Mader, Günter; Stöckl, Walter. “Virtuelles Lernen: Begriffsbestimmung und aktuelle empirische Befunde”. Innsbruck: Studien-Verlag, 1999.



## 1.2 The “virtual” inclusion

Philosophical sources:

- Thomas Aquinas: “virtualis continentia”
- Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: “Les effects sont tousjours enveloppés virtuellement dans leur cause totale”

The “virtual” inclusion demonstrates the usage of “virtual” in another ontological order than the confrontation of “virtual” and “real”. “Virtual” things are included in the world just as “real” things.

## 2. Internet-related usage of “virtual”



“Virtual” indicates a new and electronic generation of things “happening” on the internet.

Example: “virtual communities”

*www.youtube.com as an example for a virtual community.*



## 2.1 The internet-related usage as an aspect of “virtual learning”

The term “virtual” is often used as a synonym for the internet.

Examples:

- Rolf Schulmeister’s distinction of different forms of “virtual learning”
- “virtual teaching (online and offline)” (Schulmeister, 2003)

Philosophical issues:

- The common usage of “virtual” as a synonym for the internet is exceeded
- A philosophical view is too abstract to understand “virtual” as a synonym for the internet

Schulmeister, Rolf. “Lernplattformen für das virtuelle Lernen: Evaluation und Didaktik”. München: Oldenbourg, 2003.



## 2.2 Act, potency and “virtual”

A Thomistic ontology distinguishes between actual and potential being. According to Edith Stein, the potential being is arranged to be actualised (Stein, 2005).

The “virtual” things in the internet are not arranged to be actualised. They can be considered to be completed as they are.

Stein, Edith. “Potenz und Akt: Studie einer Philosophie des Seins”. Freiburg: Herder, 2005

### 3. Environmental usage of “virtual”



*Meeting of a learning group in second life.*

“Virtual” refers to the technology of “virtual reality” (VR): a technological realisation of immersion.

Example: Second Life



## 3.1 The construction of reality as an aspect of “virtual learning”

The word “virtual” indicates that our reality is a product of construction.

Examples:

- “reality was already virtual to begin with” (Welch, 2000)
- “virtual” refers to the epistemological question if there is a world independent from an observer (Schindler, 2001)

Philosophical issue:

- “virtual” does not necessarily belong to this epistemic position

Schindler, Wolfgang. «Virtuelle Wirklichkeit. Abschied vom Wunsch nach Objektivität.» Bildung in virtuellen Welten. Ed. by Schindler, Wolfgang; Bader, Roland; Eckmann, Bernhard. Frankfurt am Main: Gep Buch, 2001. 318-326.



## 3.2 Is “virtual” concrete enough for this aspect?

The quarrel between Leibniz and Locke: Leibniz uses the word “virtual” to describe a kind of knowledge that is present even if it is not actual knowledge.

Contrast: According to Leibniz the “virtual” sphere consists of principles independent from the observer.



## 4. Conclusion

Aspects of “virtual” with a significance for education and learning:

- representation
- potentiality
- implicit knowledge
- immersion

*We need to know more about the virtual as it is the necessary philosophical category of all innovation. (Shields, 2003)*

Shields, Rob. *The Virtual*. London: Routledge, 2003.



# Thank you for your attention!

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