

DOES VIRTUAL REALITY PROVE BERKELEY RIGHT BY MAKING “REALITY” ENTIRELY PERCEPTION-DEPENDENT?

By

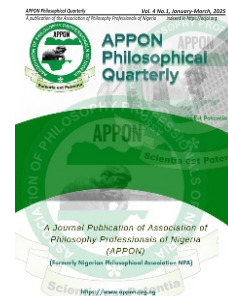
GBENGA CORNELIUS FASIKU, PhD

Department of Philosophy,
Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba,
cfasiku@gmail.com or gbenga.fc@ksu.edu.ng
Tel: +2348169448844

ORCID: 009-00903107-7661



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted
for possible open access publication under the
terms and conditions of the Creative Commons
Attribution (CC BY) license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)



ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether the introduction and proliferation of Virtual Reality (VR) technologies offer pragmatic support for George Berkeley's idealist philosophy, which posits that existence is contingent upon perception (*esse est percipi*). By looking at the ontological implications of immersive digital environments where users experience authentic scenarios and objects solely through sensory engagement, the paper adopts analytic method of research to question whether VR reinforces the idea that perception is foundational to the construction of reality. The paper contrasts Berkeley's metaphysical claims with the technological mechanisms underlying VR, particularly its reliance on simulated *stimuli* to create convincing "realities." In the end, the paper argues that while VR demonstrates how perception can shape and even dominate human experience, it does not conclusively validate Berkeley's metaphysical idealism, but rather invites us into rethinking of the boundaries between subjective experience and objective existence.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, Berkeley, Idealism, Perception, Ontology, Simulation

Preamble:

The rise and growth of Virtual Reality (VR) technology has considerably transformed how people engage with the world and interpret it. By simulating immersive environments that mimic physical reality, VR undeniably challenges traditional distinctions between the “real” and the perceived. This blurring of boundaries provokes renewed philosophical reflection, particularly concerning the enduring philosophical debate over the nature of

reality and perception. Crucial to this discourse is the work of George Berkeley, an 18th century philosopher who notably declared that existence is essentially tied to perception summarized in his well-known aphorism *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived).¹ According to Berkeley, material objects do not exist independently of the mind; rather, their existence is sustained through being perceived by perceptive beings or by God.

In the context of VR, users interact with

¹ George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co. 1710), 35.

environments that are entirely constructed by software yet they experience them as vividly as the physical world. These experiences, while not rooted in traditional material substance, are nevertheless real in terms of psychological and sensory impression. This technological capacity to create convincing perceptual experiences seemingly provides credibility to Berkeley's idealism, which posits that perception is not merely a means to access reality but the very foundation of it.

However, equating VR with Berkeley's idealist ontology demands careful analysis because while VR proves that perception can be manipulated to simulate or mimic reality, it operates within a framework that still presupposes a physical substrate such as computers, code and neural responses. This raises critical questions about whether VR genuinely supports Berkeley's claim that there is no mind-independent reality, or whether it merely illustrates the power of perception within an objectively real, though technologically mediated world. This paper therefore will examine the extent to which VR supports or challenges Berkeley's metaphysical idealism. Through this theoretical investigation and modern technological insights, the paper will evaluate whether the immersive nature of VR serves as evidence for the perception-dependence of reality or whether it eventually reiterates the need for an underlying, independent structure beyond perception.

Berkeley's Idealism and the Metaphysics of Perception

George Berkeley's idealism, often encapsulated by the phrase *esse est percipi* ("to be is to be perceived"), posits that

existence is fundamentally tied to perception. In his seminal work, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley contends that objects do not have independent existence without the mind; rather, their existence is contingent upon their being perceived by a conscious entity.² This view challenges the materialist conception of a mind-independent reality, asserting instead that the fabric of reality is woven from perceptions and ideas. This rejection of material substance stems from his critique of abstraction. He opines that matter is an unperceived substance that is incoherent because we can only conceive of objects through their sensible qualities, which are themselves ideas in the mind.³ Thus, positing the existence of matter beyond perception leads to contradictions and unnecessary complexities.

Fundamentally, to Berkeley's idealist ontology is the distinction between ideas and minds. Ideas are passive entities that exist only when perceived, while minds are active substances that perceive and organize these ideas.⁴ This dualistic structure allows Berkeley to account for the continuity and orderliness of experiences. He introduces the concept of a divine mind i.e. God as the ultimate perceiver who ensures the persistence and coherence of the world, even when finite minds are not perceiving it.⁵

Some contemporary scholars have revisited Berkeley's idealism in light of contemporary philosophical and technological developments. Helen Yetter-Chappell, for instance, explores a version of idealism that does not rely on a divine perceiver, suggesting that reality could be constituted by a network of interrelated experiences.⁶ This approach provides

² Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, 3

³ Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, 10.

⁴ Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, 2.

⁵ Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, 33.

⁶ H. Yetter-Chappell, "Idealism without God." In K. Pearce & T. Goldschmidt, eds., *Idealism: New Essays in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 105.

considerable interpretations of *quantum* mechanics and theories of consciousness that emphasize the primacy of observation and experience. The advent of Virtual Reality (VR) technologies has further ignited interest in Berkeley's ideas. VR for instance creates immersive environments that are entirely dependent on perception, clouding the lines between the virtual and the real. This technological phenomenon impressively demonstrates the notion that perception can construct realities, in this way, re-echoing Berkeley's assertion that the existence of objects is rooted in their being perceived. However, while VR emphasises the power of perception, it also relies on underlying physical systems like hardware and software that exist independently of the user's perception, thereby complicating a straightforward application of Berkeley's idealism.

Critics of Berkeley's ontological idealism argue that it leads to solipsism or undermines the objective nature of scientific inquiry. Berkeley counters these problems by emphasizing the role of God as the constant perceiver who maintains the existence and order of the world.⁷ This theological component aims to preserve the objectivity and reliability of experiences, ensuring that the world does not vanish when not perceived by human minds. Undeniably, Berkeley's idealism presents a radical rethinking of the nature of reality, positioning perception as the foundation of existence. While contemporary technologies like VR and developments in *quantum* theory provide fascinating parallels to his ideas, they also highlight the complexities and potential limitations of a purely perception-dependent ontology. Nonetheless, Berkeley's emphasis on the centrality of perception continues to evoke

valuable discussions in metaphysics, epistemology and the philosophy of mind.

The Ontology of Virtual Reality

Virtual Reality (VR) has unarguably emerged as a transformative technology that challenges traditional notions of perception, reality and existence. By constructing immersive, computer-generated environments, VR constrains us to re-examine the ontological status of virtual objects and experiences. This inquiry delves into whether entities within VR can be deemed “real” and how such a view can either support or conflict with established metaphysical position.

David Chalmers in his work, *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*, advocates for “virtual realism,” asserting that virtual objects are not mere illusions but possess a form of reality. Chalmers argues that virtual entities meet the criteria for reality, such as causal efficacy and the capacity to elicit genuine experiences.⁸ He contends that if an object within a virtual environment can interact with users and influence their experiences, it warrants ontological recognition. Chalmers further challenges the notion that virtual experiences are intrinsically deceptive or inferior to physical ones. He claims that virtual realities are “real” in their own right, offering authentic experiences that are not necessarily subservient to those in the physical world.⁹ This position summons a re-evaluation of the boundaries between what is virtual and what is real, proposing a broader and more inclusive outlook on existence that incorporates and encompasses digitally mediated experiences.

⁷ H. Yetter-Chappell, “Idealism without God”, 33.

⁸ D. Chalmers, *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. (W.W. Norton & Company, 2022), 105; Fasiku, G. “Algorithmic Ontology and Simulated Reality: Examining the Philosophical Implication”, *Nigerian Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 4, no1, (March, 2025), 40-41

⁹ Chalmers, *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*, 11.

However, while Chalmers' virtual realism may provide an attractively convincing argument for the reality of virtual entities, alternative approach also offers a more beneficial viewpoints. One such approach situates virtual objects within Karl Popper's "*World 3*," which encompasses products of the human mind, such as scientific theories, artworks and social institutions. From his perspective, virtual entities are believed to be immaterial yet possess an autonomous status through their role in inter-subjective and cultural processes.¹⁰ This classification acknowledges the reality of virtual objects without equating them directly with physical entities. Another viewpoint, known as "virtual fictionalism," also treats virtual objects as parallel to fictional characters in literature or art. Proponents of this view argue that while virtual entities can arouse real emotions and responses, they do not possess independent existence outside the digital space that generate them.¹¹ This position emphasizes the representational nature of virtual objects, distinguishing them from tangible, physical entities.

The ontological status of virtual reality also has philosophical implications for our understanding of perception and existence. For example, if virtual experiences are granted ontological equivalence with physical ones, it is problematic, as it will also challenge the primacy traditionally accorded to sensory experiences rooted in the physical world. It will suggest that reality is not solely determined by materiality but also by the quality and coherence of experiences, regardless of their sources.

Nonetheless, acknowledging the reality

of virtual entities in whatsoever capacity undeniably requires a re-evaluation of ethical and legal concerns and as virtual interactions increasingly mirror those in the physical world, questions arise regarding responsibility, rights and the moral status of actions within virtual environments. This concern highlights the need for a vigorous ontological framework that will accommodate the complexities introduced by virtual realities. Because in as much as the ontology of virtual reality is a dynamic and evolving one that challenges conventional distinctions between the real and the virtual, certain perspectives like Chalmers' virtual realism advocate for the recognition of virtual entities as real. As VR technology continues to advance, on-going philosophical inquiry will be essential in navigating the ontological, ethical and experiential dimensions of virtual existence.

Perception vs. Material Substance in Virtual Reality

Berkeley's ontological idealism as noted posits earlier that existence is fundamentally tied to perception, in the context of VR, this perspective gains renewed relevance, as virtual environments are entirely dependent on users' perceptions, yet they produce experiences that feel real. However, the ontological status of virtual entities remains a subject of debate. Wang Qian argues that, compared to the real world, VR eliminates materiality, leading to differences in perception. He notes that virtual experiences lack the "existential thickness" and "aura" of real-world experiences due to their absence of externality and transcendence.¹² This suggests that, while VR can simulate sensory experiences, it cannot replicate the full depth of material

¹⁰ MDPI. (2024). "The Ontology of Virtual Objects in David Chalmers' Concept." Retrieved from <https://www.mdpi.com/2813-2084/4/1/11>.

¹¹ *Metaphysics Journal*, "The Social Reality of Virtual Worlds," Retrieved from <https://metaphysicsjournal.com/articles/10.5334/met.156> (2024).

¹² W. Qian, "Virtual Reality vs. Real World: On Materiality and the Difference of Environmental Perception." *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, 44(5), (2024), 68–76. <https://tsla.researchcommons.org/journal/vol44/iss5/7/>

existence.

Empirical studies also further explore the dynamics in the perception of VR. For instance, research on the Material-Weight Illusion (MWI) demonstrates that visual and tactile prompts in VR can influence users' perceptions of an object's weight, even when the actual weight remains constant.¹³ This indicates that VR can manipulate sensory inputs to alter perceptual experiences, highlighting the complex relationship between perception and material cues. Thomas Metzinger offers more insights into the constructed nature of self and perception. He suggests that our sense of self and the world are models generated by the brain, which can be manipulated through VR to create experiences such as out-of-body sensations.¹⁴ This substantiates the idea that perception is not merely a passive reception of sensory data but an active construction by the mind. Even with the immersive capabilities of VR, it relies on underlying physical systems hardware, software, and neural processes—that exist independently of users' perceptions. This reliance on material substrates challenges the notion that VR fully supports Berkeley's idealism. While VR demonstrates that perception can shape experiences, it does not negate the existence of a material reality that enables these perceptions.

Since VR blurs the lines between perception and material substance by creating environments that feel real without possessing physical tangibility, the dependence of VR on material infrastructure highlights the continued relevance of material substance in shaping perceptual

experiences. Thus, VR invites an elastic understanding of reality that acknowledges both the power of perception and the foundational role of materiality.

Technological Mediation and Objective Reality

Peter-Paul Verbeek, building upon Don Ihde's post-phenomenological approach, emphasizes that technologies are not merely tools but active mediators of human-world relationships.¹⁵ Verbeek asserts that, “technologies help to shape the relations between human beings and the world,”¹⁶ suggesting that our experiences and understandings are co-constructed through technological interfaces. This perspective contrasts sharply with the traditional dichotomy between subject and object, suggesting instead that technology plays a constitutive role in shaping both. In the context of VR, this mediation becomes particularly important. Since VR technologies create environments that while not physically tangible, offer immersive experiences that can influence users' perceptions and behaviours. Such environments exemplify how technology can construct realities that, although virtual, have real psychological and physiological effects. This blurs the line between objective reality and simulated experiences, prompting questions about the criteria we use to define what is “real.”

Martin Heidegger's concept of *Gestell* or *enframing* in the *Question Concerning Technology* further elucidates this phenomenon. Heidegger posits that modern technology reveals the world as a “standing-

¹³ R. De Meo, M. O. Ernst, and M. S. Banks, “Using Immersive Virtual Reality to Examine How Visual and Tactile Cues Drive the Material-Weight Illusion.” *Attention, Perception, & Psychophysics*, 77(1), (2015), 1–12. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/s13414-021-02414-x>

¹⁴ T. Metzinger, “Are We Already Living in Virtual Reality?”, *The New Yorker*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/02/are-we-already-living-in-virtual-reality> (2018),

¹⁵ P. P. Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*. (Penn State University Press, 2008), 23.

¹⁶ P. P. Verbeek, *What Things Do*,. 27.

reserve," where everything is viewed in terms of utility.¹⁷ In VR, this *enframing* is impressively evident as environments are designed and manipulated to serve specific purposes, often prioritizing user engagement over authentic representation. This raises concerns about the potential for technology to not only mediate but also distort our understanding of reality. This has many ethical implications. For example, as technologies increasingly influence our perceptions and decisions, they also shape our moral frameworks. Verbeek explains further "technology mediates our moral relationship with the world,"¹⁸ suggesting that our ethical considerations are, in part, constructed through our interactions with technology. As such in VR, scenarios can be crafted to elicit specific emotional responses, potentially guiding users toward particular moral judgments. This capacity for influence underlines the responsibility of designers and users to critically assess the ethical dimensions of technological mediation. Thus, as we continue to integrate advanced technologies into our daily lives, it becomes imperative to critically examine the ways in which these tools mediate our experiences and influence our conception of reality.

Conclusion

Virtual Reality (VR) compels a rethinking of core metaphysical and epistemological assumptions by presenting environments where perception constructs meaning without reliance on traditional epistemological resources. In line with Berkeley's idealism, VR shows that what is experienced can feel real, even in the absence of physical referents or

epistemological resources. *This challenges substance-based metaphysics and supports a shift toward a perception-based ontology, wherein the "real" is constituted by experiential coherence rather than materiality.*

Epistemologically, VR undermines the long-standing idea that reliable knowledge must correspond to a mind-independent, material world. Instead, it foregrounds a relational and context-sensitive model of knowledge, where what matters is not external verification but internal consistency and functional relevance. However, these views still often centre human perception as the defining criterion for reality and knowledge. Therefore, to overcome this anthropocentric limitation, an alternative and emerging path involves considering non-human models of consciousness or perception particularly in relation to AI systems and synthetic agents within VR. If such entities can exhibit goal-oriented behaviour, adaptive learning and reflexive self-modelling (as proposed in Graziano's *Attention Schema Theory* or Dehaene's *Global Workspace Theory*), then consciousness, or at least proto-consciousness, need not be exclusively human.¹⁹ Under this model, virtual entities embedded in complex, self-updating digital systems may achieve a form of autonomous experiential processing. If such consciousness arises within VR systems themselves, the ontological status of the virtual would no longer depend solely on human perception, but on intrinsic cognitive processes embedded in the VR substrate.

This reconceptualization grants VR a form of authentic existence, not merely as a

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology." In D. F. Krell, ed., *Basic Writings*. (Harper & Row, 1977), 293-94; G. Fasiku & M. Attah "A Critique of Martin Heidegger's Thought on Technology" in *Nnadiabube Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 7(3), (2024), 108

¹⁸ P. P. Verbeek, "Materializing Morality: Design Ethics and Technological Mediation." *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 31(3), (2006), 361.

¹⁹ M. S. A. Graziano, *Rethinking Consciousness: A Scientific Theory of Subjective Experience*. (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 38; S. Dehaene, *Consciousness and the Brain: Deciphering How the Brain*

derivative of human consciousness or perception, but as a potentially independent layer of reality. Such a move relates with David Chalmers' proposition of "virtual realism," but it goes further by decoupling virtual existence from human observers completely.²⁰ It suggests a paradigm where VR worlds, if populated by sufficiently complex artificial agents, can become self-referential and ontologically robust in their own right without needing human interference.

Thus, VR challenges us to expand both metaphysical and epistemological horizons and embrace a multifaceted ontology that includes human and synthetic perception and by adopting pluralistic knowledge models that validate technologically mediated experience, we move toward a more inclusive and resilient understanding of reality. This philosophical re-orientation will not only address the challenges posed by VR idealism but also prepare us for future realities that may emerge beyond the human perceptual frame.

References:

- Berkeley, G. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1710)
- Chalmers, D., *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2022.
- Dehaene, S. *Consciousness and the Brain: Deciphering How the Brain Codes Our Thoughts*. Penguin Books, 2020.
- De Meo, R., Ernst, M. O., & Banks, M. S., "Using Immersive Virtual Reality to Examine How Visual and Tactile Cues Drive the Material-Weight Illusion." *Attention, Perception, & Psychophysics*, 77 (1), 1 – 12 . <https://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/s13414-021-02414-x>, 2015.
- Fasiku, Gbenga Cornelius & Attah, Matthew Okpanachi. "A Critique of Martin Heidegger's Thought on Technology", in *Nnadiabube Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 7 (3) . @<https://acjol.org/index.php/NJP/article/view/5671> , September 2024, 105-114.
- Fasiku, Gbenga Cornelius "Algorithmic Ontology and Simulated Reality: Examining the Philosophical Implication", in *Nigerian Journal of Philosophical Studies* vol. 4(1), @ <https://acjol.org/index.php/njps/issue/view/501>, March, 2025, 40-50
- Fernández, T., "Ethical Considerations for Virtual Reality and Immersive Experiences." LinkedIn. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/ethical-considerations-virtual-reality-immersive-tatiana-fern%C3%A1ndez>, 2015.
- Graziano, M. S. A. *Rethinking Consciousness: A Scientific Theory of Subjective Experience*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2019.
- Heidegger, M. "The Question Concerning Technology." In D. F. Krell, ed., *Basic Writings* Harper & Row., 1977.
- Madary, M., & Metzinger, T. K, Real, "Virtuality: A code of ethical conduct," *Frontiers in Robotics and AI*, 3(3), 2016.
- MDPI. "The Ontology of Virtual Objects in David Chalmers' Concept." Retrieved from <https://www.mdpi.com/2813-2084/4/1/11>, 2024.
- Metaphysics Journal*, "The Social Reality of Virtual Worlds." Retrieved from <https://metaphysicsjournal.com/articles/10.5334/met.156>, 2024.
- Metzinger, T., "Are We Already Living in Virtual Reality?" *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/02/are-we-already-living-in-virtual-reality>, 2018.
- Qian, W., "Virtual Reality vs. Real World: On Materiality and the Difference of Environmental Perception." *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, 44(5), <https://tsla.researchcommons.org/journ>

²⁰ D. Chalmers, *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*, 53.

- [al/vol44/iss5/7/](#), 2024, 68–76.
- Sacasas, L. M., “The Ethics of Technological Mediation.” Retrieved from <https://thefrailestthing.com/2017/11/18/the-ethics-of-technological-mediation/>, November 18, 2017.
- Slater, M., Gonzalez-Liencre, C., Haggard, P., Vinkers, C., Gregory-Clarke, R., Jelley, S. & Silver, J. “The Ethics of Realism in Virtual and Augmented Reality. Frontiers” in *Virtual Reality*, 1(1), 2020.
- Verbeek, P. P., *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*. Penn State University Press, 2008.
- _____, “Morality in Design: Design Ethics and the Morality of Technological Artefacts.” In P. E. Verbeek & P. Kroes, eds., *Philosophy and Design: From Engineering to Architecture* Springer. (2008), 91–103.
- _____, “Materializing Morality: Design Ethics and Technological Mediation.” *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 31(3), (2006), 361–380.
- Yetter-Chappell, H., “Idealism without God.” In K. Pearce & T. Goldschmidt, eds., *Idealism: New Essays in Metaphysics*. Oxford University Press, 2017.