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WHEN IS THE VIRTUAL REAL?

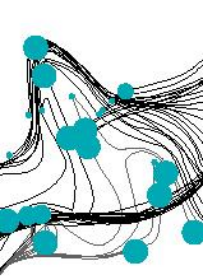
MEANING, RELATIONSHIPS AND WELL-BEING IN VIRTUAL WORLDS



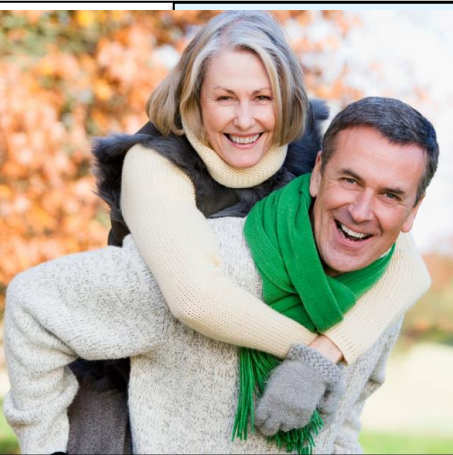
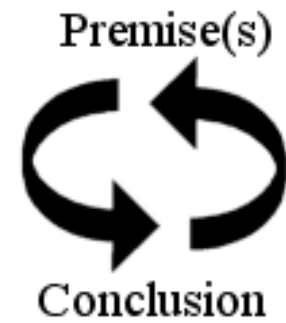
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IS A VIRTUAL X INFERIOR TO THE REAL X?

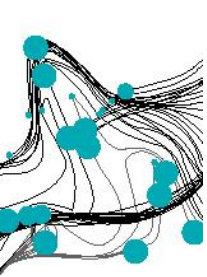


When claiming that the real x (e.g. friendship) ought to be pursued instead of its virtual counterpart, a number of inherently controversial assumptions are presupposed:
(I will mostly use x =friendship as example)



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



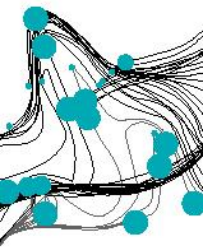
INHERENTLY CONTROVERSIAL PREMISES



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IS X GOOD? FOR WHAT?

GOODNESS AS CONTRIBUTING TO THE GOOD LIFE



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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

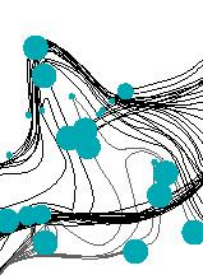
3) Objective list: List of items that constitute the good life.

→ Can support specific judgments of good and bad x.

Empirical:

Positive Psychology





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:

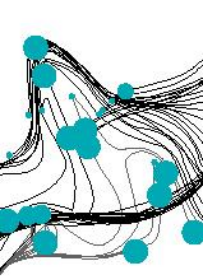
Cultural indicators, social status

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?





Physical



Digital

THE REAL X IS BETTER THAN THE VIRTUAL X?

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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.

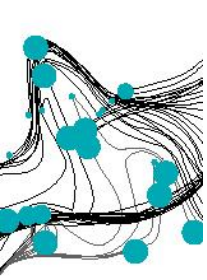
Social Reality:

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

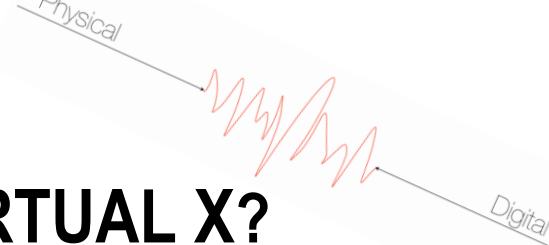
For Rx to be better than Vx, certain physical characteristics must be essential. For instance, is physical contact essential, important or unimportant to friendship?

→ this is ultimately an empirical question...





THE REAL X IS BETTER THAN THE VIRTUAL X?



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For something to be “better” it must be different

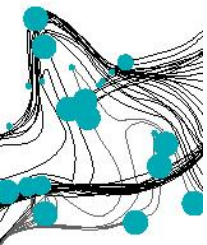
Two conceptual differences that might make a difference for virtual relationships (not empirically supported):

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



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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:

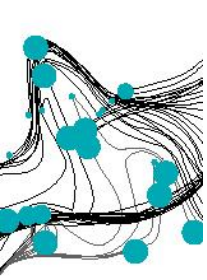
Minimize possible loss, i.e. Vx is better than no Rx

Maximax:

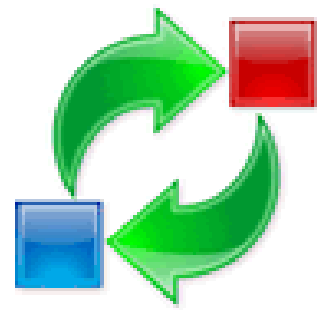
Maximize possible gain, i.e Rx is better than Vx

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?



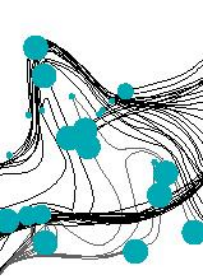
1. X is good
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6. Vx has 'opportunity costs'

	Rx is good	Rx is bad
Vx replaces Rx	V(relationships) <i>replace</i> R(relationships)	V(acts of violence) <i>replace</i> R(acts of violence)
Vx encourages Rx	V(relationships) <i>encourage</i> R(relationships)	V(acts of violence) <i>encourage</i> R(acts of violence)

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')



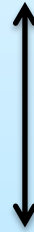


DOES VX HAVE OPPORTUNITY COSTS?

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'**

High opportunity cost:

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

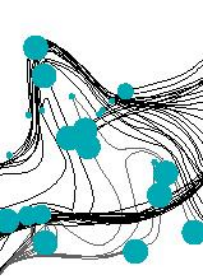


Low opportunity cost:

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)





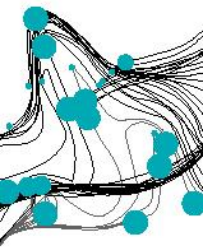
DOES THE CONCLUSION FOLLOW FROM THE PREMISES?

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
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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...

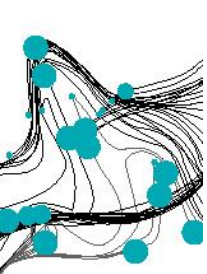




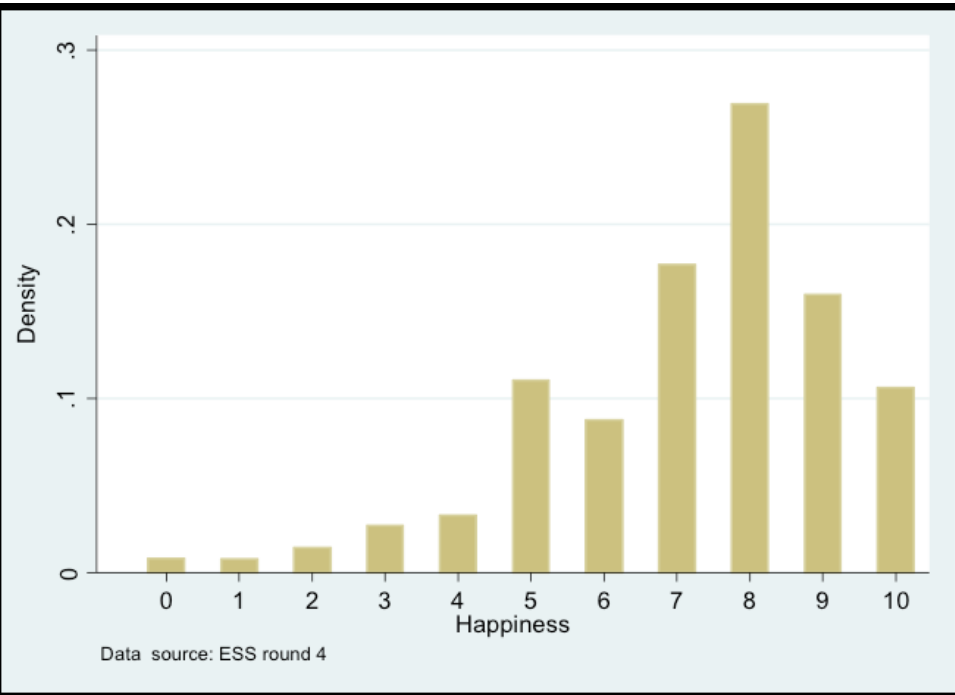
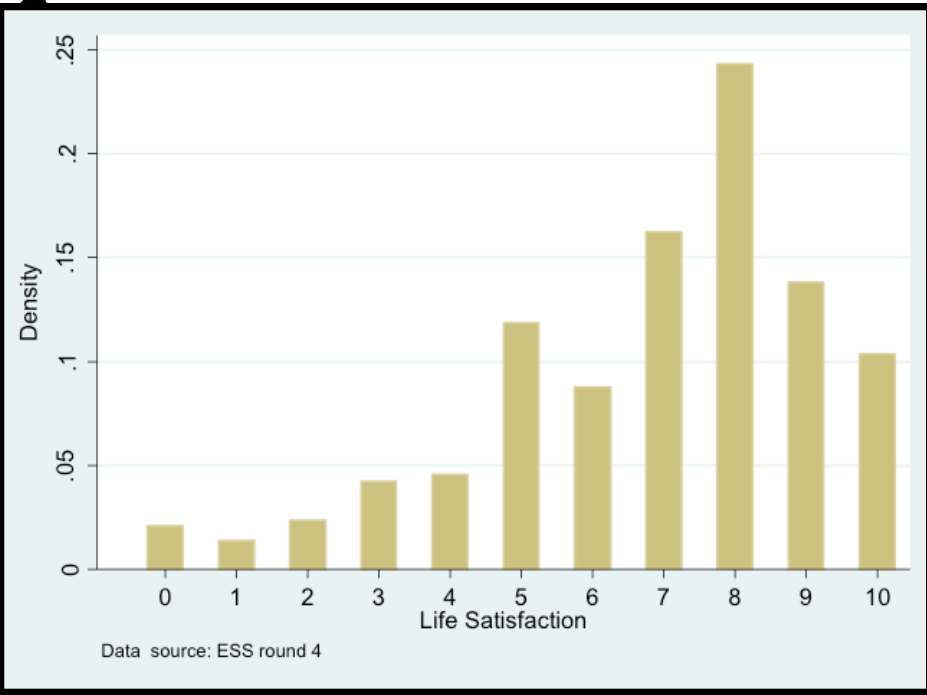
THEORETICAL BASIS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

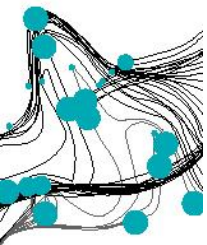
- The most common method for measuring life-satisfaction is Ed Diener's Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS). On a scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', five items are investigated:
 - In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
 - The conditions of my life are excellent.
 - I am satisfied 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





EMPIRICALLY GOOD?

CAN WE MEASURE HAPPINESS?

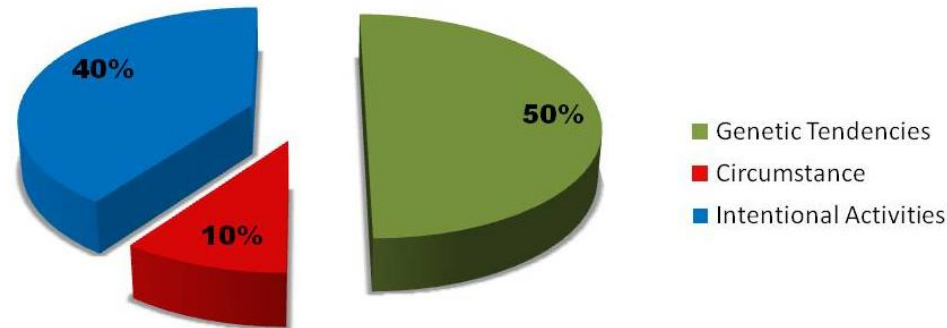


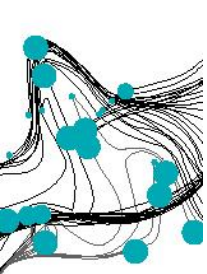
➤ Positive psychology: The scientific study of what constitutes subjective well-being and how it can be enhanced (Seligman)

➤ 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,...

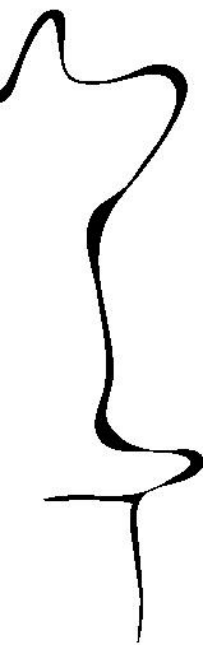
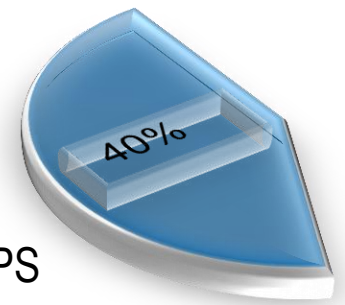
➤ An equally consistent finding is that many intentional activities can bring us beyond our well-being “default”



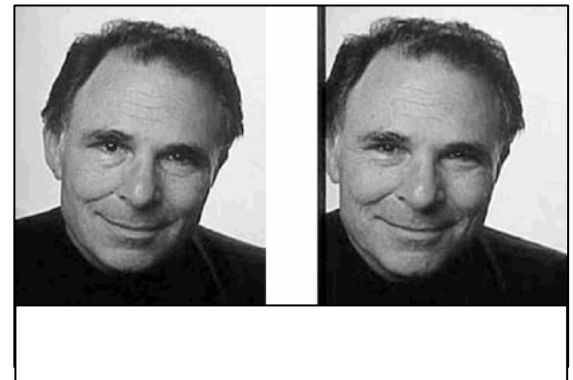


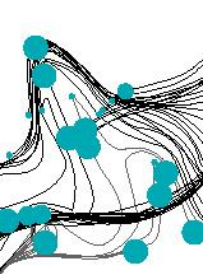
POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

SOME CONSISTENT FINDINGS RELATED TO VIRTUAL RELATIONSHIPS



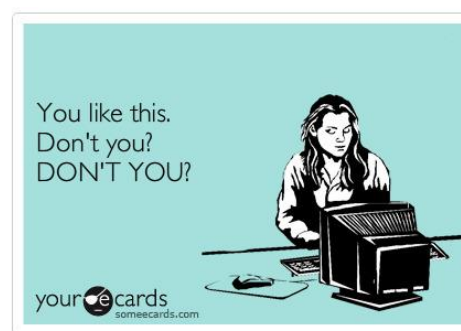
- Being social and belonging to community is among the strongest determinants of well-being (Seligman: necessary for ~ 99%).
- ‘Authenticity’ is not essential. Simulations of real pleasurable stimuli (e.g. nature) *less* conducive to well-being, but still positive
→ Technological surrogates may not be 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





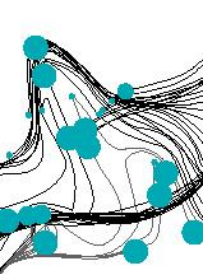
IMPLICATIONS

IT ALL DEPENDS ON YOUR SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTION



- 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, ...).





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**?

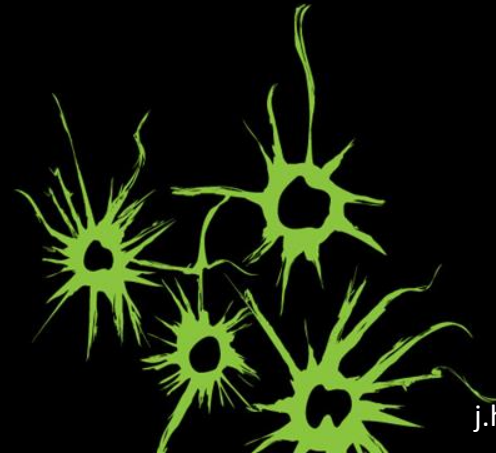
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COMMENTS, QUESTIONS, CRITICISM?

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