

# PHILOSOPHICALLY AUGMENTED REALITY

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**Abstract:** In this article I argue that not only digital technology augments reality, but also philosophy. I interpret and outline philosophical practice by drawing on the concept of augmented reality. The focus is on the distinctive and unprecedented experience of augmented reality generated by philosophical practice. Rooted in thinking and dialogical resources rather than in the accumulation of data and information about things, philosophical practice opens up new perspectives on the world and on others, but also on oneself. The present text elaborates on the subject of the lecture I delivered at the 17th International Conference on Philosophical Practice, held in Timișoara in 2023.

**Keywords:** augmented reality, philosophical practice, imagination, superimposition, meanings.

## 1. DIGITALLY AUGMENTED REALITY

The concept of augmented reality originates within the domain of digital technology.

Digital technology augments reality by providing perception and/or knowledge with digital data that were not present in the initial context. Therefore, digital technology augments either perceived reality or known reality.

In his 2022 TEDx video talk *How we can save lives with Augmented Reality*<sup>1</sup>, digital entrepreneur Mattia Salvi brings a tiger onto the stage and displays information about a peach. These two items are taken from their original context (a). In the case of the tiger, this context may be their natural habitat – be it Siberia or Malaysia, or a fictional setting, such as a cartoon or book. Differently, information about the peach may derive from a botanical encyclopaedia or nutrition manual. Where necessary, the item is converted into digital content, provided it does not already have such a form. It is then superimposed in real time onto a new

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<sup>1</sup> Mattia Salvi, *How we can save lives with Augmented Reality*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85ZxdRUX8eQ>, accessed: 24 March 2026.

context (b), namely the stage on which the talk is delivered, through a video camera or a headset. The result is that the reality of the final context (b) is augmented.

In both cases, the audience (in the hall and at home) sees projected on the screen what the speaker overlays onto the real world with his smartphone.

Bringing the tiger onto the stage is just a little more exotic than displaying on stage the morphological or nutritional information about the peach.

The tiger is a model, it is always the same. No matter where you digitally superimpose it in the real world, be it the stage of the talk or your living room. In your living room, with your phone's camera you can also overlay (models of) elements more functional than the tiger, for example a new digital sofa.

Now, in the case of the tiger and of the sofa the point of superimposition is indifferent – it is neither the stage nor the living room that respectively activate the superimposition – whereas in the case of the peach the point of insertion of the superimposition, that is, the peach itself, is necessary. Only because this determinate point of insertion is required by design can the pertinent superimposed content be generated, namely the information about the edibility of the fruit.<sup>2</sup> The stage is not necessary for the augmented reality it receives; the peach, by contrast, is necessary for the augmented reality it activates about itself.

Examples of augmented-reality activators are some monuments and works of art, archaeological sites and museums. Augmented reality will provide specific information/animations about them – more rarely, and for didactic purposes, it is designed to provide information about general concepts (e.g., Doric column, Cubism). Some immersive exhibitions have features of augmented reality.<sup>3</sup>

Other examples of activators are places and objects framed within augmented-reality games.

Finally, I wish to mention the use of augmented reality in medicine, particularly in surgery, where the patient or the target organ is the activator. Directly on the patient's body, the surgeon sees digital data and images superimposed, which relate to the clinical examinations previously performed.

Thus, we may regard augmented-reality technology as a process that increases the epistemic data of the object that stands before us, or increases the perceptual data of the environment in which we are.

## 2. PHILOSOPHICALLY AUGMENTED REALITY

Using the concept of augmented reality to interpret philosophical practice entails abandoning the level of technical-digital intervention in the real world and turning instead toward the person in the world: the person who thinks, speaks, and undergoes experience. Consequently, there is a shift from digital devices to reasoning skills, and from the superimposition of data (which of course generates

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 11:00.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 5:50, on *immersive experience*.

information and meaning for the “user” of the digitally augmented reality) to the superimposition of meanings.

## 2.1 IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

Philosophical practice is an immersive experience that augments the reality of the self as well. This thesis relies on several theoretical references that must be made explicit.

In philosophical practice, the point is not to reflect abstractly on a concept, but to bring one’s lived experience into play. This may happen because someone draws our attention to examples of a concept within our own experience: “Look” – “...that what you are eating is meat!” or “...that what you are telling me is your boredom and not your depression!”; a circumstance that, in itself, might even significantly change our future experience. Or it may occur because, as is more often the case, we ourselves find examples of a concept within our own lives. Of course, having experience of a given concept – such as knowing what feelings entail, telling the truth, thinking of a number or of a holiday place – does not exhaust the logical-semantic possibilities of the concept under examination (reserve, truth, number, place). Nevertheless, it can contribute something new and useful to redefining it.<sup>4</sup>

In the interplay between concept and lived experience, philosophical practice connects the self to the inexhaustible possibilities of thought. The peculiarity of this immersion – unlike what one may experience, for example, in nature or in spirituality – lies in the very deferral of meaning, or, in other words, in semantic inconclusiveness and unsaturability.<sup>5</sup> The idea underlying these technicalities is that interpretation is an unstoppable process, whose closures are necessary yet provisional, and is, first and foremost, an unstoppable interpretation of ourselves. It takes place in dialogue and lasts as long as we remain in dialogue, both with others and with ourselves.

The self becomes more aware, including of itself, insofar as it grows through the exercise of its own capacities. The immersive experience that corresponds to philosophical practice is movement of the self rather than merely static, so to speak, acknowledgment of the self. The reality of the self augments not in the way the objects of knowledge increase, but in the way the possibilities for acting in the world expand. In other words, self-awareness is a matter of agency.

<sup>4</sup> Definition and re-definition constitute the fundamental aim of a specific methodology within philosophical practice, namely contemporary Socratic dialogue. See Michael Noah Weiss (ed.), *The Socratic Handbook. Dialogue Methods for Philosophical Practice*, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See Mario Ruggenini, *I fenomeni e le parole. La verità finita dell’ermeneutica*, Genova, Marietti, 1992, pp. 216–218, 225–226.

## 2.2 COMPETENCES

The main philosophical competences are *hard skills* in logic, argumentation theory, pragmatics, analytic philosophy, critical thinking, and creative thinking:

- argumentation
- problematisation
- conceptualisation
- exemplification
- definition
- distinction
- clarification
- analysis
- comparison
- reformulation (synonyms)
- recognizing fallacies
- identifying presuppositions and implicatures
- making (causal) hypotheses
- bringing contradictions to light
- imagination.

Digital technology reduces the concept of imagination to the archaic process of overlaying data that, in terms of cognitive load, is far more demanding than digitally augmented reality. Today we no longer need to make the effort to imagine<sup>6</sup>: the surgeon is no longer forced to picture inside the patient's body what he sees in radiological images. Augmented-reality technology surpasses imagination. Its results are powerful<sup>7</sup> and objective: anyone in the audience, whether in the auditorium or at home, sees the tiger on the stage, whereas not everyone would have the same ability to imagine it. And wherever we still imagine, that is, mentally transfer data – for example, from the screen to the road when driving with a GPS navigator – this is due to a gap that the progress of augmented-reality technology will eventually fill, for instance by projecting directly onto the asphalt the arrow meaning “this is your exit from the roundabout – take it now”.

Philosophy objects that imagination does not superimpose data, but meanings.

It is certainly not an objective performance; nevertheless, it is more powerful than augmented-reality technology, because it can go where the latter has not yet arrived. Additionally, above all, imagination should not be associated with effort, which evokes the realm of difficulty; on the contrary, imagination belongs to the horizon of complexity.

<sup>6</sup> See M. Salvi, *How we can save lives with Augmented Reality*, 10:15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, 5:56: “augmented reality is such a powerful technology” (transl. mine).

The thought experiment – in paragraph 2.3.1 I will focus on my *Working List Commands* – as well as the illustrated text<sup>8</sup> – in the following two paragraphs I will examine Grant Snider’s works<sup>9</sup> – are forms of imagination-based competence. Among philosophical competences, this one receives more space here, in order to provide arguments supporting a critique of the reductionism that affects the concept of imagination.

In the last of the example sections (2.3.4), I will instead introduce a case of reality philosophically augmented through the competence of hypothesis-making. Other cases could follow: participants in philosophical practice may be asked to conceptualize starting from a narrative, and so on.

Philosophical competences work like pop-ups: they open windows onto the reality of words and ideas. They pull them out of their obvious flow; they make you think of something that, you would say, wasn’t there. They reflect by prompting questions such as: What valid reason can I offer in support of what I am thinking? What concept can encompass what I am narrating? What doubt can I raise about this statement? What difference is there between these two words?

Philosophical *hard skills* are accompanied by *soft skills* such as openness, attentiveness, active listening, and slowness. They are also accompanied by what I call *phenomenological and existential skills*, or originary dispositions, such as wonder and the awareness that language is made up of interpretation.

### 2.3 SUPERIMPOSITION OF MEANINGS

The specific quality of philosophical superimposition belongs to this horizon. It is true that to superimpose means to enrich, expand, fertilize, transform – in short, to augment; and this connotation cuts across both the digital world and the philosophical one. However, in philosophical practice, superimpositions are not based on anything digital. After all, for many concepts and words we would find it impossible to create a digital version: “trust” does not behave at all like “tiger”.

Moreover, superimpositions are shaped by the specific work of philosophical competences on the meanings of the concepts and words we use. Thus, superimposing can amount to movements of thought such as problematizing or bringing contradictions to light, as well as clarifying. Meaning is then clearly superimposed when one analyzes and narrows the field down to the fine detail of a word or concept – for example, through the semantic cross-references opened up by an etymological nuance. Diminution is qualitative augmentation (as opposed to

<sup>8</sup> See Sofia Pirandello, *Emersioni. Realtà aumentata e poteri dell’immaginazione*, Milano, Meltemi, 2025; the illustrated text is a proto-form of augmented reality.

<sup>9</sup> From his website: Grant Snider, *Hitting a Wall*, <http://www.incidentalcomics.com/search?q=hitting+a+wall>, accessed: 24 March 2026; G. Snider, *My Questions*, <http://www.incidentalcomics.com/search?q=my+questions>, accessed: 24 March 2026. From one of his books: G. Snider, *The Shape of Ideas. An Illustrated Exploration of Creativity*, New York, Abrams ComicArts, 2017, pp. 34–35.

quantitative). This dynamic is at play in reformulation or in the use of synonyms, and in translation, where meaning is superimposed through substitution. The same holds when one distills the essential qualities of something by eliminating everything else – that is, in conceptualizing. The paradoxical result is that, in philosophical terms, to superimpose precisely means to remove just as much as to add.

To conclude, at times, as a manifestation of the philosophical *hard skills* at work, superimposing amounts to interrupting meanings – that is, replacing meanings by interrupting them – as we will see in two exemplary cases (2.3.2 and 2.3.4). When there is no interruption but rather the continuity of a meaning – univocity – superimposition may operate across different contexts (2.3.1) or with different qualifications (2.3.3).

### 2.3.1 Univocity across two contexts of use

Now I will introduce my philosophical-practice exercise *Working List Commands*.<sup>10</sup>

The first part involves brainstorming on actions/commands available in a file or document within context (a): the computer. The task is to produce a list: copy, cut, paste, resize, edit/modify, create, save, format, justify, delete, undo, help, new, import, export, break, replace, insert, view, etc.

In the second part, one imagines superimposing the same list onto the new context (b): your life. And choosing just one of the commands, receiving it at its highest possible degree (as a superpower). Philosophically augmented reality comes into view here.

In the third and final part, the discussion opens on how you would make use of the superpower: you are asked to give examples, to evaluate it in relation to other commands, to deepen it, to problematize it, to say whether you would be willing to share it, and so on. Further philosophical competences insist upon the superimposition produced by imagination.<sup>11</sup>

In interpreting this exercise, let us not be distracted by the digital connotation of the context (a) from which the list of commands originates – it is merely incidental. The superimposition is of such a nature that it leads you to think of your life as augmented. Naturally, it is your thinking about your life that ends up being augmented, not your life itself. The superpower remains, after all, fictitious. One is invited to imagine using it at will, and, typically, participants in the philosophical practice choose a superpower with the aim of enhancing the quality of their own or

<sup>10</sup> See Annalisa Rossi, “Filosofia e consulenza filosofica con Wittgenstein”, in Roberta Dreon, Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero, Gian Luigi Paltrinieri, Elena Valeri (eds.), *Senza trampoli. Saggi filosofici per Luigi Perissinotto*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis Edizioni, 2023, pp. 341–352.

<sup>11</sup> This will indeed be the case with *My Questions* (2.3.3); whereas it will not be so with *Hitting a Wall* (2.3.2), even though, in principle, that case/exercise could also be developed in such a direction.

others' lives, alleviating emotional suffering, and resolving relational conflicts as well as various kinds of problems in the world.

The meaning of each individual command remains the same: "delete" still means "delete," "edit" still means "edit," and so on. Nonetheless, imagining their use in life rather than on a computer, as one is accustomed to, requires a creative challenge – more or less pronounced – from the transferred sense of "save your memories" to the metaphorical "paste someone to their responsibilities".

### 2.3.2 Multivocality

*Hitting a Wall* by Grant Snider – a deeply reflective cartoonist – consists of six pairs of strips, each accompanied by the following texts:

- 1) Hit a Wall repeatedly / and it becomes music.
- 2) To scale a steep Wall / change your frame of reference.
- 3) A Wall that seems to go on forever / is often an illusion.
- 4) Others may help you over the Wall / or keep you further from the top.
- 5) Some Walls are conquered not by force / but by improvisation.
- 6) Once you realise the Wall is a metaphor / it becomes a door.<sup>12</sup>

1) First illustrated text. There is only one character, who strikes the wall with his head. Next the frame opens, as if to include three musicians performing and the audience. It is no longer a wall to injure oneself against; the wall becomes a musical instrument.

2) If you have a wall to climb and you turn the reference plan ninety degrees clockwise, the wall is no longer in front of you but under your feet. And a wall under your feet is no longer a wall, but a road.

3) The wall seems tall from end to end, yet the closer you walk along it, the lower it gets, until it reaches below your knees. It is no longer a wall, but simply a fence.

4) Others may help you reach the top of the wall, or they may keep you from ever reaching it. It is no longer a wall, but a social relation.

5) The crenellated walls of the castle, or of the fortified city, are transformed into the bar for a knight's leap (a kind of improvised catapult). The wall is no longer a wall, but a bar to vault over.

6) Sixth and final illustrated text. The moment you recognise the wall as a metaphor, it turns into a door you can step through. It is no longer a wall; the wall becomes a door.

You think that a situation or a person in your life is a wall you collide with. The wall marks the point at which a process comes to an interruption: for example,

<sup>12</sup> G. Snider, *The Shape of Ideas. An Illustrated Exploration of Creativity*, pp. 34–35.

a creative process – the block; or a communicative one – the other proves impenetrable. In the imaginary associated with the wall, we can oscillate between psychological aspects and political connotations: the wall stands for the interruption of the free circulation of ideas, emotions, gazes, sounds, persons, air, and light.

In the case illustrated by *Hitting a Wall*, which serves as the sole context of reference, philosophically augmented reality consists in the superimposition of alternative meanings of “wall” onto the prevailing meaning of “wall”. The wall ceases to be conceived as an obstacle and a dividing element, and becomes a variegated ensemble of other things: musical instrument, road, fence, social relation, bar, door. In this case, the superimposition collides with the mainstream meaning and strikes it. This is why hitting a wall gives the title to the entire panel and does not concern only the action illustrated in the first frame.

And this is why “hitting a wall” reveals itself as a metaphor for philosophically augmented reality: the metaphor, therefore, is not only the wall as uttered in the frame of the final pair. The superimposition of new meanings is not a juxtaposition – it is not a copy-and-paste operation, to recall the terminology of our previous case. Superimposition requires an attitude of openness to re-signification and entails the suspension of the validity of the initial meaning, or rather its interruption. In this way, philosophically augmented reality shows that the multivocal, rather than univocal, meaning of “wall” offers new possibilities for rethinking an existential problem – whether it be writer’s block or speaking to someone who is a brick wall.

Well, I like to think that it is no accident that, among all the concepts that could have lent themselves to exemplifying re-signification, Snider handed us the concept of the wall – as if to say that the meaning to be interrupted is interruption itself.

### 2.3.3 Different qualifications within univocity

In the panel *My Questions*<sup>13</sup> Snider names and literally illustrates the types of questions. I often use this material as a stimulus for a philosophical practice. I ask what types of questions we know, initially receiving mostly technical answers such as: there are open and closed questions, rhetorical ones, direct and indirect ones. Then I inquire further and, at that point, different categories begin to surface in the responses: good questions, stupid and intelligent ones, easy and difficult ones, embarrassing ones. I proceed by revealing the drawings of the questions: easy ones, like relaxing on a *chaise longue*; deep ones, like angling<sup>14</sup>; nagging ones, like when someone keeps tugging at your sleeve; open ones, like a jack-in-the-box; impossible ones, like the task of Sisyphus; giant ones, like the beanstalk in the fairy tale; magic(al) ones, as if emerging from the genie’s lamp; buried ones, like a turnip

<sup>13</sup> G. Snider, *My Questions*.

<sup>14</sup> See Plato, *Sophist*, translated by Nicholas P. White, in Plato, *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 235–293.

root; and then late-night questions, radical ones, impenetrable ones, and finally questions as beautiful as a flower.

The illustrations of these types of questions suggest lines of reflection that generate further specific questions: Why is the impenetrable question represented as a thicket of tall question marks, which the comic-strip character tackles with strokes of a sickle whose very shape is itself a question mark? Why is the buried question, in every respect, a garden plant being watered? How far does it grow – perhaps far enough to become a giant question? And why are some questions ridden – the stalk of the giant questions, just like the wave of the radical ones? Finally, is there a red thread running through these types, one that might outline an ideal path for philosophical practice – for example: starting from an easy question, moving through the impossible one, and arriving at the beautiful question?

The types of questions touch one another, intermingle, and share overlapping areas of meaning. In this third case, after *Working List Commands* and *Hitting a Wall*, reality is philosophically augmented by the different qualifications that the meaning of “question” takes on. Imagination creates them, and other hard skills – problematization, distinction, and those with which we built our provisional list (in paragraph 2.2) – sustain their immersive play, shaped by the ideas and lived responses of each participant in the philosophical practice. The philosophical practitioner asks: Can you formulate the question that grips you in the middle of the night?

### 2.3.4 Non-univocity of the causal link

I would like to offer one final example of superimposition of meanings, in which philosophical practice begins by bringing into play a philosophical competence different from imagination: the formulation of hypotheses. Unlike imagining, hypothesizing is constrained by the requirement of plausibility in relation to the lived reality it seeks to explain.

A few years ago, as part of Prof. Lobont's course *Theory and Practice of Philosophical Counselling* in the Master's Programme in Philosophical Counselling and Consultancy at West University of Timișoara, I was invited to present my own analysis of a philosophical-counselling case study.

The counselee had drawn a particularly alarming inference about her own health condition following certain events that had occurred during a doctor's appointment. My philosophical-analytical work aimed to break the univocal link between the facts and the inference drawn by the counselee. I therefore presented an alternative hypothetical scenario that could account for the events without resorting to the alarming hypothetical cause. A student objected, essentially pointing out that, in doing so, I was merely replacing one interpretative hypothesis, the counselee's, with another, namely my own. Objection sustained: true! Was my hypothesis meant to be preferred on the basis of some principle of authority? Certainly not.

Nonetheless, the substitution of meaning that I proposed – one among many within a multivocal framework, and which, moreover, in a real situation I would have elicited from the counselee – was functional to the interruption, and can in turn be interrupted.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The category of augmented reality is borrowed from a scientific field of application – digital technology – which operates on data (univocal in themselves).

In the transition from digital technology to philosophical practice, the very nature of augmented reality changes.

Philosophical practice augments a person's reality – as relationality in the world and with others – insofar as it expands the available perspectives of meaning.

Philosophically augmented reality cannot be an end in itself, because it is a practice and not an intellectual exercise. As philosophical practice, it can be said to offer a significant contribution to reasoning and to relationships with others, provided that this is understood in the following way. Philosophically augmented reality is itself a different way of reasoning and of being in relation to others, within the augmented reality of interpreting, taking a stance, choosing, and acting.

Philosophically augmented reality performatively reveals the epistemological limits of the very domain from which the idea of augmented reality originates: it simply does not belong to the remit of digital technology to take into account the philosophical quality of the superimposition of meanings, whether in univocity or, still less, multivocity. Indeed, philosophical practice could, in principle, augment a reality already digitally augmented. As a matter of fact, it is straightforward to conceive of using the tiger on the stage – or, analogously, an augmented-reality installation – as a stimulus to initiate a philosophical practice. But not vice versa: augmented-reality technology could not augment philosophically augmented reality.