



Conceptual and Educational Foundations of an Integrated Virtual Contemplation

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Abstract

In recent years, educational studies have demonstrated the increasing emergence of two important directions in pedagogical theorizing and implementation. On one hand, technologies such as virtual reality (VR) have begun to occupy teaching discourses with regards to its implications in enhancing (or obstructing) the immersive/interactive dimensions and therefore, the effectiveness of the learning process. On the other, teachers are progressively grasping the importance of “alternative” pedagogical environments for learning rooted in contemplative-based activities/perspectives such as integrating “mindfulness” as part of subject curriculum. At the outset, much of broader educational discourses have discussed the emergence of immersive technologies and contemplative pedagogies as fundamentally indifferent to each other at best or in direct opposition against each other at worst. However, I propose that the relationship between educational immersive technology such as VR and contemplative pedagogies need and ought not be confined to a contentious status. Specifically, I elaborate a conceptual (or reconceptualizing) framework that reveals a valuable integrative potential between VR and contemplative principles within education. The elaboration involves establishing their shared conceptual foundation as transformative learning – particularly rooted in the educational potential of cognitive/affective states of awe. That is, the conceptual chasm between contemplation and VR can be bridged under shared articulated principles toward states of awe as a potential educational good. This conclusion stands upon framing awe as importantly facilitating learning dispositions that simultaneously reflect educational goals of both VR (i.e., stimulating cognitive openness and curiosity) and contemplative pedagogy (i.e., deriving “spiritually” meaningful experiences and transformations). By synthesizing transformative learning paradigms, contemporary research on states of awe, contemplative approaches, and their potential pedagogical integrations, it is hoped that the valuable potential of their convergence can be further illuminated – and perhaps even embraced – within current and future educational discourses.

Keywords: *virtual reality, contemplative pedagogy, mindfulness, immersive learning.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, educational studies have demonstrated the increasing emergence of two important directions in pedagogical theorizing and implementation. On one hand, technologies such as virtual reality (VR) have begun to occupy teaching discourses with regards to its implications in enhancing the immersive/interactive dimensions and therefore, the effectiveness of the learning process [1]. On the other, teachers are progressively grasping the importance of “alternative” pedagogical environments for learning rooted in contemplative-based activities/perspectives such as integrating “mindfulness” as part of subject-curriculum [2]. At the outset, the potential relationships between VR technologies and contemplative pedagogies have yet to be explored significantly and particularly as pedagogical reflections and research. At best, their relationship seems to harbour a condition of mutual indifference, and at worst, a contentious understanding facilitated by seeming active resistance against potential integrations.

I propose that neither condition of their relationship is sound or beneficial for the broader educational discourse. Rather, I believe that their integration represents a valuable possibility for radically enriching the experiences and outcomes of learning, particularly with regards to its transformative and moral dimensions. In this essay, I will briefly elaborate upon the dominant reasons behind their contentious/indifferent relations and argue that such reasons stand upon questionable presumptions of both VR technology and contemplation for education. Ultimately, I conclude that their valuable integration rests within framing contemplation is as the fundamental pedagogical framework that directs, and therefore, defines the utility and meaning of VR applications.



2. The Challenged Relations Between VR and Contemplation

In order to understand the relations between VR and contemplation, it is important to establish a preliminary grasp of the notion of contemplation itself. Briefly put, contemplation can be usefully understood from its arguably contrasting conceptions of 'optimal learning' from more traditional paradigms of schooling, particularly with regards to its emphasized directions of deliberated attention. That is, where traditional approaches to learning put expected focus *outwardly* towards certain objects of study, contemplation fundamentally seeks to direct the learner *inwardly* [3]. Instead of only facilitating familiarity/mastery over informational contents/skills mostly external to the learner's idiosyncratic internal processes and experiences, contemplation seeks to direct the attention upon the learner's inner experiences of cognitive, emotional, and embodied processes as objects of study themselves. A general ideal of contemplation, therefore, is to render such inner objects of study as sources of *attentive* and *transformative* learning that are led by aims of moral cultivation. Practices such as mindfulness of the body, breathing, emotional experiences, and so forth can act as insightful windows into the nature of their reality and moral implications of their impacts upon self and others [4].

Through such considerations, the challenged relations between VR and contemplation can become a bit more clarified. For contemplation is fundamentally rooted in the educational aims to minimize stimulating and distractive elements for committed attention and therefore, forwards an ideal faculty of learning to be defined by a mind of stilled and cleared attention [5]. Additionally, much of contemplative pedagogies harbour conspicuous aims of moral cultivation, such that its practices can facilitate affects and dispositions of compassion, empathy, acceptance, and so forth [6]. VR technologies, on the other hand, *seem* to oppose such ideals where its educational aim is not rooted in the minimization of stimulation but of its deliberate inducements and interactive possibilities. And although VR applications can, at times, be utilized to stimulate "pro-social" affects and dispositions, its implementation is not necessarily strongly concerned with long-term outcomes of moral cultivation in terms of transforming behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes towards specific ethical directions.

As such, from the perspective of contemplative-based discourses, VR technologies and applications can simply appear to be unnecessary and even harmful tools that reinforce the chaotic daze and shallowness of our already distractive modern educational environments [7]. As well, without its arguably explicit focus upon the ideals for moral cultivation, the utilization of its technology can be vulnerably judged as simply an extension of the amoralism (or even arguably the immoralism) of the implicit neoliberal fixation upon maximizing productivity/efficiency in learning/schooling [8]. Insofar as VR technologies *can* indeed harbour the appearance of facilitating irrelevant distractions and questionable aims for efficiency, contemplation's indifference to and critique against its usage can be justifiable on the basis of its fundamental educational ideals. However, their challenged relation does not necessarily reflect some objective conflict of unmoveable ideals as much as a particular framing of each paradigm that presumptuously overshadows the possibilities of their integration.

3. Reframing Contemplation and VR as Integration

Insofar as VR technologies are nevertheless educational and interactive *tools*, the contemplative critique upon its distractive feature is arguably a presumption that riskily conflates VR with the ideals and aims with which direct its application and utility. That is, to critique and resist VR as inherently distractive is to already presume its fact of being a technological tool as entirely responsible for inducing contents of stimulation. To the degree that the nature of stimulation greatly varies in terms of its interactivity and designed contents, the fact of stimulation is not necessarily a homogeneous situation/process. Rather, the fact of stimulation is a broad categorization of the great diversity of designed VR contents that all serve to facilitate distinct interactive experiences, aims, and consequently, degrees of 'distracting' stimulations. In other words, VR is simply the tool with which stimulation *can be* induced and that such distractibility is necessarily enabled not by the tool itself but by the fundamental ideals/aims that frame how VR ought to be used by utilizing its medium to deliver the particular aims of its contents.

Understood this way, a good portion of contemplation's resistance/indifference to VR is arguably not of its fact as a tool, but of the chronic systems of ideals and aims with which questionably define its applications and therefore, its general technological meaning. To regard VR as a target of resistance itself, therefore, would be to erroneously conflate the tool with the ideals that frame its usage/meaning. If VR can be approached as a neutral tool that can be (re)directed and (re)defined by a broader moral paradigm, then



the frictional relation becomes eased where VR is not a conflicting ideal but an opportune tool open to contemplative aims.

However, contemplation's resistance to VR stimulation can also be understood as not necessarily an objection to the varieties of its inducement, but to the basic fact of stimulation period. That is, VR deliberated stimulation might be regarded as inherently distractive by virtue of its *added elements* of sensorial immersion, which can be in contrast to contemplation's intention to *reduce* elements of stimulation through stilling attention. However, such contrast might not necessarily point to different degrees of stimulation as much as simply different mediums to which immersion itself can be delivered. For contemplation is not just about the reduction of experience, but also the engagement of *certain experiences* in relation to broader transformative and moral ideals [9]. Practices such as focusing upon the breath, visualizations, embodied/yogic movements are all arguably deliberated exercises to *immerse* the practitioner in certain experiential states. VR, therefore, is not necessarily an opposition by virtue of its fact of stimulated experience per se, but by virtue of the *type* of immersive stimulation. Once again, such conflicts stand upon some implicit conflation between VR as a tool and as the ideals that define its meaning.

3.1 The Awe of Integrated Contemplative VR

The neutral fact of VR as a tool, however, does not inherently imply some integrative advantages with contemplation. As VR can simply be a tool that is not necessarily useful for contemplative ideals and aims. Yet, if we can understand both VR and contemplation as fundamentally harbouring processes/mediums that can stimulate immersive transformative experiences, then the neutrality of VR represents an enriching contemplative potential. An opportune starting point of their integration is rooted in their similar experiential outcomes of *awe*. For contemplation, practices for stilled attention/reflection can very much inspire and immerse practitioners in states of awe, particularly through the contemplative facilitation of the understanding of *interconnectedness* between perceived phenomena [10]. It is through such affectivity of awe that accompanies the experience of interconnectedness that underlies transformative learning towards moral cultivation. For the awe of interconnected experience represents an affective stimulation for beliefs and behavioural habits to be enacted in accordance with the moral meaning of interconnection, where one's psychology/behaviours are recognizably both the expressions and reinforcements of broader systems of consequences [11].

If contemplation can be understood as harbouring 'spiritual technologies' in facilitating certain experiences of interconnectedness, then VR's immersive power represents an opportunity for such spiritual technologies to be radically enhanced to unprecedented heights. VR's immersive quality involves comprehensive involvements of sensorial and perceptual engagements. That is, virtual experiences are interactive with and sensitive to bodily sites of proprioception crucial for enacting upon the world, and therefore, rendering its perceptual stimuli as a lived reality *embodied* by natural and purposive movements [12]. As such, users are not distantly witnessing digital stimuli, but are living through its reality by embodied interactions and sensitivities. This represents a fundamental condition for powerfully stimulating awe, whereby designed stimuli that otherwise depart from conventional perceptual paradigms can be holistically *lived through* in manners that elicit transformative experiences [13].

4. Conclusion

In sum, given that 1). contemplation arguably immerses practitioners within transformative experiences of interconnectedness for moral aims and that 2). VR demonstrates unprecedented immersive powers that can elicit radical transformative experiences, contemplation and VR can be valuably integrated on the basis of framing VR as a 'spiritual technology' that is part of the moral vehicle for contemplation. Framed in such a manner, VR's stimulating powers become contemplatively channeled towards the moral goods of interconnection. As well, contemplation's aim towards transformative experiences can be rendered accessible to greater degrees, ease, and impact by virtue of the immediacy of VR's immersive stimulations.

Their potential integration, however, does not necessarily mean that VR can operatively replace the spiritual technologies of contemplative practices themselves. Rather, the openness to their integration points to the opportunity where they can start to be creatively and appropriately collaborative towards mutual enrichment. VR can popularly inspire spiritual sensitivities and sensibilities of its users without explicit contemplative involvements, thereby normalizing otherwise atypical dispositions and moral



understandings of awe and interconnection. As such, the contemplative dimensions to living can be potentially sustained precisely through rendering contemplation as no longer esoteric interests but conventional experiences that inspire moral cultivation and contemplative transformations in a variety of degrees.

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