

***Symontosis* and Conceptual Ambivalence in Worldmaking**

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v9i3.1>

Submission: October 30, 2020 Acceptance: December 27, 2020

Peter Aloysius Agbonoga IKHANE

Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

pa.ikhane@ui.edu.ng; peter.a.ikhane@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-0084-9480

Abstract

In this paper, I explore an African metaphysics of virtual reality (VR). The questions that guide my analysis include: (i) how are we to understand the changes the virtual world causes in how our knowledge and awareness of life are rooted? And (ii) how do we perceive our lived-reality as we go in and come out of a world generated by the computer? Though I take VR to denote a not-quite-actual world that stands in contrast to the physical or primary world, I show that VR is a variant of worldmaking. On this, I controvert the intuition to take African metaphysics of virtual reality to be concerned with an analysis of the ontological contrasts between VR and the primary world. Drawing on the principle of *symontosis*, I show that African metaphysics of VR is to be concerned with an analysis of the ‘harmony’ of both worlds. In this vein, I present the primary world as providing the metaphysical anchor for the virtual world, as wherefrom, we are rooted and can organise our lived-experience of VR.

Keywords: African metaphysics, Virtual reality, Worldmaking, *Symontosis*, Conceptual ambivalence

Introduction

Virtual reality (VR), unlike other forms of technology, has potentials to alter the way and manner we relate with the primary world. A basis for this is that VR enables the active engagement of the human body (not just the cognitive faculties) in the pursuit of knowledge; it rejoins the mind and the body in the pursuit for knowledge. Hence, it comprises a novel form of human experience that can impact the essence of the knowledge culture that results from its use. VR, however, continues to raise many concerns, among which are pertinent philosophical questions. For instance, because VR provides the opportunity to rehearse an action or event before it is performed in real-time, one wonders what becomes of a world wherein actions are practised in simulation before such actions occur in the primary world. Put differently, although VR gives opportunities for the advancement of knowledge in fields such as medicine and engineering, the question of the ontological status of virtual experiences remains. In brief, will actions in actual time lose their authenticity because they are a

repetition of simulated ones? How do we understand human experience in relation to VR? These questions are no longer taken as remote based on the possibility for simulated experiences that are as believable as those of the primary world. Although we are usually able to make distinctions between factual and nonfactual experiences, we are increasingly becoming the products of experiences of the latter sort, particularly in relation to VR. And as we go in and come out of a self-subsistent computer-generated environment, the pressing questions include, how do we perceive our-lived reality? And, how do we understand the changes the virtual world will cause regarding how our knowledge and consciousness are rooted?

In the bid to address these questions that can be reductively analysed to concern the nature of human experience in VR or in the virtual world, I explore, in this paper, an African metaphysics of virtual reality with the intent to conceive a framework for understanding human experience in VR. I begin the construction of my framework by arguing in defence of a ‘plurality of worlds’, evident in the idea of worldmaking, and show that all ‘world versions’ – science, religion, art – are contingent symbolic constructs that emerge from an interpretive distinction between ‘the world as it is in itself’ and ‘the world as we make sense of it’. The lure of this is the assumption that the sense of ‘many conceptions of the world’ provides the ground on which the world of VR and virtual experience may be understood. After this, I present VR, which I denote as a not-quite-actual world in contrast to the primary world, as a variant of worldmaking by drawing on insight from virtual world theory (VWT). I then turn attention to presenting a theory of African metaphysics of virtual reality. Against the intuition to take it as requiring the identification of the contrasts of worlds between VR and the primary world, I show that African metaphysics of virtual reality need not be separatist but a harmony that admits the contrasts of both worlds. I do this by drawing on the principle of *symontosis*, and argue that the physical world provides metaphysical anchor for the virtual world.

Worldmaking and its Conceptual Ambivalence

I will begin this section by clarifying what I mean by ‘conceptual ambivalence’ in worldmaking. In brief, worldmaking refers to the process by which we put our perceptual experiences together to make sense of the world external to us. In the light of this, conceptual ambivalence refers to the variations and divergences in our encounters with the primary world that necessitates talks or proposals of a distinction between ‘the world as we perceive it’ and ‘the world as it is in itself’. So conceived, it manifests in, at least, two levels. The first and broader level concerns how it is that many versions (call these, contingent world constructs) of a supposedly single world (call this, the primary world) emerge in our daily lived-encounters; while the second and narrower level concerns whether the

properties of objects in a contingent world construct represents those of the objects of the primary world.

It is instructive to note that beyond the concerns of worldmaking, the idea of conceptual ambivalence stretches into the attempt to underscore the nature of experience in VR. In this context, conceptual ambivalence creates a condition of situational ambivalence, wherein the concern is whether there is a difference (conceptually and practically) in human perceptual experience between the computer-generated virtual world and the brain-generated virtual world.¹ In a sense, the condition denoted by situational ambivalence relates to the second narrower level because in determining whether the properties of objects in contingent world constructs represent those of the objects of the primary world, one also examines whether it is the case that it is possible to determine whether the perceptual experiences one is having are those of the virtual world generated by a computer or those generated by the brain. Let me state here that a robust examination of this point goes beyond the concerns of this paper as this has to do with justifying claims about perceptual knowledge.

In the attempt to address the concerns raised in relation to the idea of conceptual ambivalence, I will leave my analysis on the first level for the latter part of the paper. This is because my response relates to my argument for a plurality of worlds, which I examine in the section on ‘VR and worldmaking’. For now, I will examine the second level; but let me first begin with comments on the notion of worldmaking as this would help lay the ground for providing a robust analysis of the matter raised in the second level.

In the attempt to examine the idea of worldmaking, Robert Schwartz made the following clarifications that I suppose are expedient to my intent here. In the first instance, Schwartz noted that the idea of worldmaking is not to be understood as “the temporally prior physical putting together of material[s] ... any tenable thesis of worldmaking must construe the notion of ‘making’ more widely ...” (ROBERT SCHWARTZ 2000, pp. 151-152). To this, he adds the clarification that worldmaking neither asserts nor entails that if everyone accepts a certain proposition or conception about the world, then such is the case about the world. Rather, worldmaking allows for a variety of non-subjective approaches to ‘truth’ about the world. One way to read Schwartz’s requirements that the notion of ‘making’ be construed more widely, as well as the claim about non-subjective approaches to truth, is to take the notion of ‘making’ as

¹ Note that the reference to the condition denoted by situational ambivalence assumes that the brain-generated virtual world is different from *that* which it is in itself. The emphasis is intended not to take away anything in the distinction between ‘the world as it appears to us’ and ‘the world as it is in itself,’ on the understanding that the distinction retains much epistemic currency.

indicating that between our perceptions of the primary world and the primary world itself is the ‘interpretation’ we make of things in the primary world. Saying, for instance, “This is how I see it” as we usually do when we intend to provide clarity about certain descriptions we make of things, is, itself, an indication of this interpretive process in our cognition of the primary world.² It is, indeed, from this that, with respect to non-subjective approaches to truth, the many conceptions of the world emerge, with none of such conceptions bearing the privilege of being the better or more correct conception. Thus, Schwartz supposes that it is we who make truth of the world. This is, however, not to be understood as some indefiniteness in knowledge about the world. For, although we construe the world in varied ways, the truth about the world is not relative to us; it depends objectively on the world. Indeed, the thesis of worldmaking is consonant with the statement: a proposition, p , is true, if and only if, p ; that is, if ‘ p ’ is the case or fact (SCHWARTZ 2000, p. 152). With this brief explication of what I take as the foundation for examining the second level of the conceptual ambivalence of worldmaking, I will now examine the matter raised in the second level.

The thesis of worldmaking has generated contrasting positions with some in support of the claim that in worldmaking we play a significant role in making the properties of the objects in the primary world, while others, who reject this assertion, claim that cognitive processes may organise ‘what-is-there’, but play no role in contributing to ‘what-is-there’ (CATHERINE Z. ELGIN 1997, p. 156). Opponents suppose that the processes of worldmaking only play constructive roles in delineating the categories of reality, while not affecting the real things; the objects themselves are kept free from human meddling in the process (ELGIN 1997, p. 156). Put simply, the debate concerns issues relating to properties and the role played by us in terms of what is known about objects of the primary world. The thesis of worldmaking is that the properties we ‘make’ of things or objects are sufficiently (but not necessarily) what they are for encounters with the primary world. Thus, worldmaking not only emphasises the incontestable claim that we make the world, and the truism that describing the world presupposes a system of representation, but includes the idea that in formulating descriptions, organisational schemes, and theoretical frameworks, we shape or give substance to the properties that things can have (SCHWARTZ 2000, p. 154). Indeed, from the worldmaker’s viewpoint, the unmade world is one without determined qualities and shape. Being, pure substance or this-ness, may exist; nonetheless, there is nothing, cosmologically speaking, that

² The distinction between phenomenological transparency and epistemic transparency is an emphasis of this.

gives it a specific or determinate character. In retorting, opponents suggestively argue that from the cosmological point of view, the worldmaking thesis cannot possibly be correct. On the basis that “one cannot make something from nothing,” they suppose that no amount of talk will bring worlds into being except there is something, most likely, cosmological, from which it is to be derived. There must be something basic – particles, waves, space-time points – on which all world construction in worldmaking supervenes. They conclude that a description of this foundation can justifiably be claimed to lay out the ready-made or primary world, pure and simple (ELGIN 1997, p. 156).

It may be helpful, in the attempt to address the contest between opponents and proponents of worldmaking, to say that the crux of the altercation resides in the intractable assumptions about the relation of the noumena to the phenomena – to borrow Immanuel Kant’s expressions – and our cognition of that relation. Proponents of worldmaking suggestively favour the elimination of the gulf between ‘what is known about the world’ and ‘what the world is in itself’, while opponents suppose the gulf to be non-eliminable in our dealings with the world, whether we are able or not to derive knowledge of ‘what the world is in itself’. Let me add here that I judge the claim of proponents of worldmaking that “the unmade world is one without determined qualities and shape ... there is nothing, cosmologically, that gives it specific or determinate character,” to be amiss, in as much as I suppose that the claim of opponents of worldmaking that “the processes of worldmaking only play constructive roles in delineating the categories of reality, while not affecting the real things,” to be too declarative of the supposed knowledge of “the world as it is in itself.” If, however, we take allusions about Kant’s noumena to represent a reference to natural kinds about properties, and phenomena to denote artificial kinds about properties, the contest in the claims of proponents and opponents of the thesis of worldmaking in relation to the properties of objects may be resolved if the metaphysical distinction between natural and artificial kinds is abandoned.³

For clarity, the metaphysical distinction here refers to the distinction between the outcomes of natural processes that are not the

³ I take the gulf to be more a metaphysical rather than a naturalistic one. As regards natural and artificial kinds, a kind (such as property) is said to be natural if it corresponds to a grouping that is reflective of the structure of the natural world, rather than the interests of humans; while to say that a kind is artificial is to imply a grouping that is invented or imposed on nature. It may be understood, minimally, that in the former instance of natural kinds properties reflect some relevant aspects of the world that are not the direct outcomes of the products of, or facts about, human interests; and in the latter instance of artificial kinds, properties are the products of the interests of the human mind. In short, natural kinds are not invented, and it is assumed that scientific investigations should discover them.

direct results of human meddling with nature, and the results of human interference with nature in a manner that suits the interests of man. Illustratively, the metaphysical distinction alluded to here may be gleaned from Plato's distinction between the nature of things according to ideas in the world of forms and the copies of ideas in the world of the senses. Taking in the context of my analysis, artificial kinds describe the supposed properties resulting from how we make the world in the phenomena, while natural kinds refer to those properties that are those of the objects as they are in the primary world/noumena. The point in alluding to abandoning the metaphysical distinction regarding natural and artificial kinds as means to address the challenge is that there is little reason to deny or doubt that the properties of things or objects as we make them now in the many-world versions of the primary world is insufficient to get us through the world (ELGIN 1997, p. 156). It is suggested here that the argument from sufficient reason suffices to make this claim tenable.

My argument about the cogency of plural versions of the world is suggestive of the claim that in worldmaking we 'make' the properties that are sufficient for our engagement with the world, while leaving out the question of from what or where the properties we 'create' emerge from. In suggesting that we abandon the metaphysical distinction between natural and artificial kinds, I do not intend to imply that we deny the possible existence in the difference of the reality of things as, say, Kant suggested. My intent is to provide a way to circumvent the intractable challenge of having to determine what the properties of objects in the noumena are and still be able to make tenable claims about the properties of objects in the phenomena. So, I am aware of, and concede to, the claim that "nothing can be made out of nothing," though it remains a debate what the nature of that from which things are made is (JAN WESTERHOFF 2016, p. 507.)

Virtual Reality⁴ and Worldmaking

From the preceding section, the following points are discernable: (i) it is sufficiently reasonable to do with the properties of objects in the phenomena on the grounds that (ii) we are not unquestionably able to identify the properties of objects in the noumena. My intent in this section draws on (i) and (ii) to show that virtual reality (VR) is a type of worldmaking, making it a version of contingent constructs, wherein the nature of human experience is not qualitatively (though, quantitatively) different from that in the primary world. I do this by making recourse to virtual world theory (VWT), understood to claim that "conscious experience is a type of virtual reality, a virtual world generated by our brain that constitutes a model of the real world" (WESTERHOFF 2016, p.

⁴ Though the coinage of the concept is attributed to Jaron Lanier, the concept is traced to Myron Krueger, and even much earlier to Ivan Sutherland and Morton Heilig.

507). I suppose from this that the quality of experience generated by our brain is not dissimilar to the quality of the experience (though not in actuality) generated by a computer. From the foregoing, I argue that it is tenable to take virtual reality generated by a computer as a type of worldmaking since we take virtual reality generated by our brains to also be a type of worldmaking. My approach here supposes that in showing that VR is a type of worldmaking, it also says how it is that many worlds of contingent constructs of the primary world emerge from our experiences. But before I elucidate on this, it is expedient I expound on VR.

Given the challenges associated with providing a wholistic definition of VR in the literature, it seems more expedient for me to expound on a number of features that are usually included in the definition of VR. These include, but are not limited to, artificial reality, immersion, and telepresence. Moreover, I hope that by identifying the features of VR so listed, I would have provided an operational or working definition for my purposes in the paper. In expounding on the meaning of VR this way, I will begin with immersion and take my explication to telepresence and lastly to artificial reality. The reason is that artificial reality is the feature that I consider aptly describes VR.

As a vital characteristic of VR, immersion describes the submerging of the participant in the sight, sounds and tactility that is specific to the virtual environment. It produces the sense of being in a virtual world, a sense that transcends awareness of the input and output mechanisms. It depicts how the bio-body turns out to be a cyber-body when in cyberspace. Immersion is made possible with the use of a head-mounted device that enables the participant to have a view of a three-dimensional animated world (MICHAEL HEIM 1994, p. 154). Telepresence describes the condition wherein the participant has sensations of being present in a virtual environment, while it is computerised machines that affect the participant's agency at a different location, usually in the primary world (HEIM 1994, p. 159). With telepresence, though the participant is not bio-bodily present in the virtual environment, the participant is able to experience similar sensations as those of being present in the primary world. It is through telepresence that a bio-body becomes a cyber-body, as well as being able to make the distinction between both worlds. Artificial reality (AR) is usually considered an instance of virtual reality. Artificial reality, according to Myron Krueger, is a computer-regulated reactive environment, where computerised sensors "perceive human actions in terms of the body's relationship to a simulated world. The computer then generates sights, sounds, and other sensations that make the illusion of participating in that world convincing" (MYRON KRUEGER 1991, p. xii). In AR, participants are in an unencumbered environment and do not need the use of goggles or datagloves; AR systems comprise full-body movements that excludes the wiring of participants to

an interface (KRUEGER 1991). In the context of VR, however, the way the sensory inputs that participants receive in AR are replaced by information generated by a computer in VR. This is usually enabled by input-output (I-O) devices which help to create three-dimensional graphics that closely resemble the participant's usual encounter of the primary world. The most common I-O devices are gloves and head-mounted displays.

VR may further be understood in relation to the notion of virtual environment or virtual world. This refers to an environment wherein a participant has sense impressions by using computer-controlled input-output devices. Cyberspace contains many kinds of virtual worlds. Virtual worlds generally attempt to mimic the primary world; though, in the literature, debates about the value and degree of various levels of resemblances persist. The debate may be understood to have emerged as a result of the occurrence of divergence (or disorientation) in VR experiences between the cyber-body and the bio-body. Thus, an ontological gap is taken to appear as there is a discrepancy between the felt world of VR and that of the primary world. Images and impressions from the virtual world upset those of the primary world, increasing the likelihood of human errors (HEIM 1994, p. 148). In examining this, some (call them separatist of the ontology of VR), argue that virtual worlds are not ontologically 'tied' to the primary world, since it is the case that it is not only the events or experiences that are actualised in the primary world that can also be realised in a virtual world; rather, there are events and experiences that cannot be actualised in the primary world, but are realisable in the virtual world. Even if an experience in VR 'imitates' that in the primary world, they further retort that it is possible to decide on the part of the participant whether an experience in VR should ape that of the perceived world of the phenomena (HEIM 1994, p. 160.) As a result of this, these theorists of VR may be read to conclude on a separate ontological grounding for experiences in the physical or primary world from that of the virtual world.

Conversely, others (call them harmonists of ontology)⁵ may be suggestively read to suppose that events and experiences in the virtual world are known to be such only by reference to those of the physical or primary world. The basis of their claims seems to be grounded on the nexus of epistemic considerations that relates to the ontological grounds for both the virtual world and the physical world. By focusing on epistemic

⁵ Thaddeus Metz and Innocent Asouzu hold this view about ontological relations. See Metz's "Afro-Relationality" in Thaddeus Metz. 2019, "What is the Essence of an Essence? Comparing Afro-Relational and Western Individualist Ontologies," *Synthesis Philosophica*, 65(1): 209-224; and Asouzu's complimentary reflection in Innocent Asouzu. 2004, *Methods and Principles of Complementary Reflection in and Beyond African Philosophy*. Calabar: University of Calabar Press.

considerations in reference to the virtual world, they intend to show that there is a connection of the ontological grounding for both the virtual world and the physical world. I will return to this in the next section as I try to provide an argument that supports the views of the harmonist of VR.

Let me now turn my attention to showing how VR is a type of worldmaking. I draw insights from VWT for this. In brief, the assumption in VWT is that we live in a virtual world generated by our brains that is similar to that of a computer simulation. Three prominent exponents of this theory include Thomas Metzinger, Richard Dawkins, and Steven Lehar. In his book, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*, Thomas Metzinger contends that the contents of conscious awareness are the contents of a simulated world in our brains. He claims that our brains generate a simulated world that is so perfect that we do not recognise it as an image in our cognitive process (THOMAS METZINGER 2010, p. 23). In deploying this to underscore the nature of human experience, Metzinger argues that our conscious experience of the world is systematically externalised as the brain constantly creates the experience that we are present in a world that is outside the brain. This, he says, is made possible by the brains neural systems. For Richard Dawkins, “we move through a virtual world of our own brains’ making. Our constructed models of rocks and of trees are a part of the environment in which we animals live, no less than the real rocks and trees that they represent” (RICHARD DAWKINS 1999, p. 284). In a similar vein, Steven Lehar claims that “every aspect of the solid spatial world that we perceive to surround us is primarily a manifestation of activity within an internal representation, and only in secondary fashion is it also representative of more distant objects and events in the external world” (STEVEN LEHAR 2003, p. 8).⁶ What this implies is that beyond the limits of our perceptions is located the operations of our brains. Also, beyond the brain is the plenitude of a world that far exceeds the primary world, which the brain recaptures in imagination.

From the foregoing, if it is taken for granted that the world of conscious awareness (that is, the primary world), which I ordinarily live in, is a brain-generated virtual world, making it a type of worldmaking, then it is tenable to say that the computer-generated virtual world is also a type of worldmaking. A case can be made for the claim that our primary world experience is a sort of worldmaking by recourse to counterexamples, such as the ‘Barn Façades,’ wherein an individual, Henry, supposes (upon seeing some barn façades) assumes that what he is seeing are truly barns because he is in the countryside where barns are usually found. But of

⁶ It instructive to note that R. G. Muhlhauser has also made allusions to this in his *Mind out of Matter: Topics in the Physical Foundations of Consciousness and Cognition*. Dordrecht; Kluwer, 1998.

course, what he saw was a façade of barns and not real barns.⁷ In the same light, our experiences of the primary world and what we make of it represent types of worldmaking.

It may, however, be retorted that conscious awareness in the primary ‘virtual’ world is not the same as that of the computer virtual world. That is, the way consciousness relate to the experience of the primary world generated by the human brain is quite different from how it does in the case of the virtual world generated by a computer. For one, in the former case, conscious awareness has to do with supposing that one is having a real-world experience, while in the latter it is one of being aware of having a computer stimulated experience. We like to think this way because we enjoy phenomenological transparency about our self-presentation that allows us to make the distinction of both worlds, particularly as we are aware that we are about to move from the primary world to the virtual world.

Let us, however, suppose for a moment that we are not aware of this movement; that we are not aware that we are putting on datagloves or goggles or have assumed a cyber-body, would we still be able to make the distinction? Suppose there is any force in my assumptions here, then, taking Nelson Goodman’s idea of ‘world’ as a plural concept in his *Ways of Worldmaking* (NELSON GOODMAN 1978), I assert that each ‘world’ of worldmaking is a type of the primary world, and each ‘world’ makes its context and grounds for intelligibility.

***Symontosis*⁸ and an African Metaphysics of Virtual Reality**

In this section, I attempt responses to the questions: (i) how are we to understand the changes the virtual world will cause in how our knowledge and awareness of life are rooted? and (ii) how are we to perceive our-lived reality as we move in and out of a computer-generated world? To this, I deploy the idea of *symontosis* as a principle of metaphysics derived from the African experience and worldview of how expressions of being are co-dependent to construct an African metaphysics of VR.⁹ The African worldview of being, to be sure, relates to how the African describes his

⁷ I have only given an insufficient summary for my purposes here. See, Alvin Goldman, 1976. “Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73. 20: 771-791, for more on the Barn Façade Counterexample.

⁸ I derived *symontosis* from symbiosis, by replacing ‘bio’ with ‘onto’, which means ‘being’. As such, ‘symbiosis’, which refers to the biological condition between two or more organisms that live closely together in a co-beneficial and symmetrical relationship, is implicated in *symontosis* to indicate this relationship at the ontological level.

⁹ I do not suppose here that Africa is either specially or culturally homogenous. However, I contend that a universal idea of African metaphysics (particularly, South of the Saharan) in relation to the worldview about can be construed. This is on the basis of similarities in the belief systems of different African cultures South of the Sahara on the hierarchy of being.

experience of the world in terms of the hierarchy of being that goes from the supreme being through the lesser deities to the world of the ancestor (the world of the living dead) to the world of the living (the primary world of the living) and that of the world of the yet to be born (JOHN S. MBITI 1969). I take *symontosis* as a metaphysical principle that describes the relationship that exists among these worlds. Thus, I conceive *symontosis* (sym-onto-sis), within the African ontological scheme, as a view that sees reality as ‘whole’, defined by the co-relatedness and co-dependency of being. These notions portray reality as a community of beings whose existences are inter-dependent.

The import of this, especially as conceived within the African perspective, is that reality is an integrated whole of discrete modes of beings (THADDEUS METZ 2019, pp. 209-224). The sense of its wholeness is depicted as a continuum; a continuum of heterogeneous discrete and separate individual beings that interact to constitute an aggregate whole. It is this sense of wholeness that describes the community-based conceptualisation of the ontological nature of beings by *symontosis*. This, it is to be noted, does not undermine the hierarchical nature of the African worldview of being. Rather, much like the ecosystem of relations that various life-forms bear on one another, *symontosis* conceives this hierarchy as involving the sustenance of one life-form, say, that of the world of the living, as inter-dependent with those of the world of the ancestors and those of the yet to be born. More specifically, the inter-connectedness of, say, the world of the living and that of the yet-to-be-born, as conceived in *symontosis*, may be seen to play out in beliefs regarding the efficacy of rituals. In this way, when a woman visits certain shrines to perform conception rituals that attract the yet-to-be-born, she becomes pregnant.

In my analysis of a framework to explicate VR, I do not intend to create an irrealism where virtual worlds become indistinguishable from the real world. Rather, my aim is to provide a basis for how experience in VR may be understood by connection with that of the primary world. Hence, though we use ‘virtual’ in the adjective to denote the world of virtual reality as a not-quite-actual world that exists beyond the primary one, it may be considered as a reality that evokes our power for creative *imagination*. In this vein, VR becomes an imaginary reality that exhibits the power of symbols. As regards imagination, Michael Heim claims that:

Imagination allows us to take what we read or hear and reconstitute the symbolic component into a mental vision. The vision transcends the limits of our bodily reality, so that, from the viewpoint of bodily existence, imagination is an escape – even though imagination often introduces new factors into our lives which sometimes cause us to alter our actual circumstances. (HEIM 1991, p. 30)

When viewed in relation to VR, imagination becomes an effort to construct a reality, whereby we perceive and articulate the hidden nature of Being (that is, what is); indeed, the entities of imagination become ‘real’ and meaningful. This reflects an understanding of the metaphysics of VR, which examines issues such as the relation of mental realities to sensory/material realities, degrees of reality, simulation as against reality, presence and the idea of possible worlds, teleology, causality in traditional metaphysics (HEIM 1991, p. 30).

When we deploy this understanding of the metaphysics of VR and *symontosis* to construct a theory of VR, an African metaphysics of VR is seen to emerge. This metaphysics is one that takes the primary world to provide an anchor for human experience in VR, contra the intuition to suppose a separate ontological grounding for both worlds. This anchor, which is one of interdependence, derives from the ‘harmony’ of being that exists among the entities in the ontological worldview of the African. This is what *symontosis* emphasises as a principle in African metaphysics. As an anchor, the primary world “imposes existential parameters on reality, providing us with a sense of rootedness ...” (HEIM 1991, p. 30). These existential parameters include, among others, the human experience of mortality, temporality and fragility. As focal anchors, they regulate human experience in VR in ways that are not just different from human experience in the primary world but are refreshing of human experience. That is, they generate sensations, impressions and ambiances that ‘breathes’ freshness into our lived-experiences. For instance, one is able to appreciate what it means to live, ‘die’ and live again through VR, as the cyber-body does not experience mortality as the bio-body does; one is able to have ‘beyond space-time’ experiences since the limitations associated with the bio-body in the space-time continuum is transcended in VR; and the experience of fragility associated with the cyber-body is not that of the bio-body – as the experiences, say, of injuries to the cyber-body results in a different and refreshingly kind of experience from that to the bio-body. In the light of this, an African metaphysics of VR shows that VR contains the informational equivalent of experiences in the primary world, making us feel as if we are dealing with the primary world, though in some sort of a surrealist manner. Thus, our experiences in VR relates to the externally fixed essences of things by these things providing an anchor for how we encounter the virtual world. Human experience in VR coincides with some aspects of our experience of the primary world, such that the ontological basis on which we structure the primary world suffices for how we are to understand human experience in the virtual world.

Conclusion

In concluding this paper, I would begin with a remark from Myron W. Krueger, who has been described as the ‘father’ of virtual reality. He says:

We ... embrace [virtual reality] not because it will cost us nothing, but because it is our destiny to redefine ourselves. In the world of the book, the truth is an immutable thing to be captured and recorded. But as the age of electronic information matures and the age of artificial experience commences, we recognize that we are on a journey and while we may question whether the next destination is better than the place we left, we realize that the journey is ours, for we must see what it is – that what we have made, makes us. (MYRON W. KRUEGER 1994)

The key points to be noted in Krueger’s statement include that the ‘age of the book’ radically differentiates from that of the electronic age, wherein in the latter, we are part of a world that is created and creates. This connects with the supposition that an imperative for reflectively engaging VR is that it has the potency to impact the essence of the culture that emerges from its use. As it appears, then, the (primary) world as we know it is changing; the computer and its allied technological age is generating new dimensions to how we perceive Being. What this indicates is that a reflection of the (an African) metaphysics of VR, reveals an ontological shift involving movements from the world of physical symbols to that of digital symbols. For some clarity, an ontological shift is a modification of the entire context within which our knowledge and consciousness are rooted. VR opens up our experiences to refreshingly imaginative possibilities that differ from primary world experiences in kind and quality, connecting us to worlds of new and unending possibilities. I would like to end here by stating that what I provide in this paper is an ontological grounding of how the technological community sort of relates the virtual world to the primary world. I provide something like a theory-grounding of the technological practice driving virtual reality.

Relevant Literature

1. ASOUZU, Innocent. [Methods and Principles of Complementary Reflection in and Beyond African Philosophy], 2004. University of Calabar Press: Calabar.
2. DAWKINS, Richard. [Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion, and Appetite for Wonder], 1999. Penguin Books: London.

3. ELGIN, Catherine Z. [Between the Absolute and the Arbitrary], 1997. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York.
4. GOLDMAN, Alvin. "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," [The Journal of Philosophy], pp. 771-791, 1976. Vol. 73. No. 20.
5. GOODMAN, Nelson. [Ways of Worldmaking], 1978. Hackett Publishing: Cambridge, Massachusetts.
6. HEIM, Michael. "The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality," [Theory, Practice and Promise], Sandra HELSEL and Judith ROTH Eds. pp. 27-34. 1991. Meckler Publishing Westport: Connecticut.
7. HEIM, Michael. [The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality], 1994. Oxford University Press: New York. E-book.
8. KRUEGER, Myron. [Artificial Intelligence], 1991. Addison-Wesley: Reading, Massachusetts. E-book.
9. LEHAR, Steven. [The World in Your Head: A Gestalt View of the Mechanism of Conscious Experience], 2003. Lawrence Earlbaum: Mahwah, New Jersey.
10. MBITI, John S. [African Religions and Philosophy], 1969. Heinemann: London.
11. METZ, Thaddeus. [What is the Essence of an Essence? Comparing Afro-Relational and Western Individualist Ontologies] *Synthesis Philosophica*, 65(1) 2019: 209-224.
12. METZINGER, Thomas. [The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self], 2010. Basic: New York.
13. MUHLHAUSER, R. G. [Mind out of Matter: Topics in the Physical Foundations of Consciousness and Cognition], 1998. Kluwer: Dordrecht.
14. SCHWARTZ, Robert. 2000, "Starting from Scratch: Making Worlds," [Erkenntnis], pp. 151-159, 2000. Vol. 52. No. 2.
15. WESTERHOFF, Jan. 2016, "What it Means to Live in a Virtual World Generated by Our Brains," [Erkenntnis], pp. 507-528, 2016. Vol. 81. No. 3.