

Mindful Ethics and *Umwelt*

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For Philosophers in Jesuit Education, Wyndham Miami Beach Resort Hotel, Saturday Nov. 6th 2004, 1:30–3:30PM, Miramar North [M/3]

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In this discussion paper I explore the possibility of approaching ethics from the standpoint of mindfulness. Although the Buddhist tradition provides the fullest explicit elaboration of the idea and practice of mindfulness (e.g., Silananda 1990; Nhat Hanh 1987), Christianity has its equivalents (Rehg 2002; Newman 1996). Moreover, the idea appears in both philosophical and empirical contexts: in Gilbert Ryle's definition of thinking as "heedfulness" (Ryle 1949, chaps. 2, 5), possibly in Heidegger's notion of "thinking" (Heidegger 1968), in organizational psychology (Weick and Roberts 1993), in educational psychology (Langer 1989ab), and in clinical psychology (dialectical therapy). The versatility of the notion encourages me to investigate its potential uses in ethics. Indeed, particularist approaches to ethics (Hooker and Little 2000), with their emphasis on attentiveness to concrete situations, would seem to require something like a virtue of mindfulness.

After a word on the notion of mindfulness (sec. 1), I present the ethics of compassion that Buddhists have linked with the practice of mindfulness (sec. 2). My question is whether such an ethics provides a general framework for a virtue ethics that highlights attentiveness to the surrounding world, the *Umwelt*. I then ask whether mindfulness might also function as a heuristic for examining other ethical theories.

1 What Is Mindfulness?

At its core, mindfulness is a kind of reflexive awareness, namely an awareness that deliberately dwells in the present moment, attentive to its demands. Human awareness may be inherently reflexive, but it often fails to be mindful. Let us assume here that reflexive awareness exists only as engagement in a world or situation, which constitutes the primary object of awareness. A second, reflexive level of awareness normally accompanies this primary awareness: even when I act "mindlessly," I can usually answer questions about what I have been thinking about. I am normally both aware of something and aware of being aware. But in mindless states, reflexivity simply follows the tug of worries and external objects, and thus has little freedom or deliberate bearing on the primary object of awareness. Internal worries and restless activity drag my awareness along, so that it does not dwell in the present reality or situation. In other cases of mindlessness, I focus on the present, but in an unreflective and reactive manner rather than deliberately and mindfully.

Mindful reflexive awareness is reflexive awareness centered on the present moment in a manner free from the compulsions of worry and restlessness. As such, the mindful person (a) chooses to dwell in the present moment and situation, attentive to its demands, in such a way as to (b) notice the movement of awareness, including distractions that move awareness away from the present. First a word on mindfulness meditation, also known as "insight" meditation. I then say something about mindful living and the kind of interdependence it involves.

(1.1) As Newman (1996, 29) puts it, in meditative practices of mindfulness I aim "to be aware now of what I am aware of now as happening now. My second level of attention is always to be focused on the here and now, regardless of shifts in my first level of attention." As Buddhists explain it, mindfulness meditation involves a mix of concentration and openness. One attends to some focal object of attention (e.g., breathing) but in a way that does not screen out intrusions from the environment or one's internal states. The "insight" such practices foster is an insight into "no-self," that is, the insubstantiality of the constructed self. The idea, I suppose, is grasped best through the practice rather than theoretically, but we should not read "no-self as a nihilistic doctrine; both Buddhist and Christian commentators see close similarities with apophatic traditions in Christianity (e.g., Suzuki 1957; Nhat Hahn 1995; Johnston 1997). A more positive way of expressing the insight might call it an "insight into one's interdependence" with all reality (Nhat Hahn 1987, 45). More on this below.

(1.2) Mindfulness meditation aims to foster mindful living. By this I mean a mode of action that is fully engaged in the present moment and its task. The structure of such engagement mirrors the mix of concentration and its openness in mindfulness meditation. That is, one concentrates on the task as the focal object of attention, but in such a way as to remain open to the totality of the present moment—the complete, impinging environment or *Umwelt* that potentially includes the entire globe. As open to the present moment, one accepts whatever matter for awareness that moment brings, including distractions from the task; at the same time, one's commitment to the task brings one back from such distractions. One remains aware of the entirety of the present for the sake of a more deliberate concentration. The idea is that noticing a distraction as a distraction reminds one to refocus on the task; by contrast, we fail to refocus precisely when we are distracted but fail to notice the distraction as a distraction.

Thus we might say that the mindful person remains both attentively and openly engaged in the present situation. For example, in a conversation with someone, one's awareness maintains a disciplined or deliberate comportment that notices distractions or interferences in awareness of the situation: one attends to the other, but without losing sight of the quality of one's attending—how the conversation makes one feel, or when one is starting to lose focus—so that one can maintain a mindful focus on the conversation. Mindful awareness reflexively tracks awareness of the situation precisely in order to remain attentive to the situation—thus for the sake of free and total engagement.

(1.3) What does interdependence mean in the context of daily life? I make no claim to understand or defend the Buddhist idea. But the general idea of interdependence of self and non-self is philosophically quite plausible, as numerous philosophical traditions—from critical social theory through phenomenology and pragmatism to feminist theory—have shown (e.g. Honneth 1995; Bergmann 1977; Mead 1962; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). Here I point out how the structure of mindfulness as a practice favors awareness of interdependence.

George Eliot provides a good opening to the basic idea. In *Middlemarch* she writes, "Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know of no speck so troublesome as self." In the novel itself we see that the problematic "self" of which she speaks includes not only one's interests but also one's noble ideals, sense of social status, fears, inclinations, and so on. Thus the self includes not only one's self-understanding (life history, ideals, life-projects) but also one's deeper psychological make-up (body image, unconscious motives, and so on). As a construct of coping devices and interpretive grids that make one's awareness of reality manageable, the self in this sense is both necessary for daily life and a potential obstacle to noticing the present moment in all its complexity. Moreover, these elements of self give rise to internal states (internal objects of awareness, such as memories, feelings, anticipations) that can either distract one from the focal task or, at

the least, color the quality of engagement (e.g., by leading one to project one's own needs onto another person).

Practices of mindfulness counter problematic blockages set up by a self-understanding that delimits reality according to familiar categories, habitual modes of acting and reacting, and other badges of identity. By combining a committed focus on the task at hand with an openness to everything in the present moment that impinges on that focus, one continually orients oneself outward, toward the situation and its demands, in a way that places the demands of the self into question. One does not deny material arising out of oneself but rather notices it as such, for what it is, thereby relativizing it, tacitly challenging its authority to control one's awareness or lead one away from one's focal task mindlessly.

This relativization can occur because practices of mindfulness foreground the present reality, what is happening now, as that which alone endures throughout the vicissitudes of mindful awareness; by contrast, the contents of the present are all impermanent, even fleeting. These contents include whatever comes into one's present awareness, the objects of awareness that arise from the self (feeling states, memories, anticipations, etc.) and objects in the world. We need not interpret this metaphysically. The idea, as I intend it here, refers simply to what has authoritative status in *the practice* of mindful living. Insofar as I attend simply to what is happening now *as* happening now, I place both internal and external objects of awareness on a par: both occur together, as elements of a single awareness of the now. Hence both inner and outer objects of awareness are equally "internal to" my awareness as contents of that awareness. At the same time, we can also say that both inner and outer contents are "external to" awareness in that the latter, as the enduring site at which contents appear and disappear, transcends all contents.

Do not misunderstand the freedom this relativization brings. Mindfulness aims not at maximal self-control but rather at maximal presence to the current reality. By fostering a relativization of self-understanding so as to heighten one's openness to the current task—for example, to the conversation and person with whom one is conversing—the boundaries and blots of self can begin to melt away. An insight into interdependence emerges from the structure of mindfulness with the acceptance of one's awareness, including all the contents of the self, as situationally immersed, as co-constituted by the present situation. The structure alone does not guarantee this insight, but it makes it possible.

2 Compassionate Mindfulness: A Template for Virtue Ethics?

Mindfulness in daily living is something like a habit of attentive engagement. But engagement to what end? The analysis up to this point does not dictate any particular set of tasks or foci, nor does it tell us exactly what constitute the moral demands of the situation or present moment. To what features of our hypercomplex *Umwelt* ought we attend? If mindfulness is to count not simply as a habit but as a virtue, we need to orient it toward some kind of moral purpose.

Buddhists typically link mindfulness with compassion. We could also speak here of love as the core orientation. On such an approach, mindfulness as a virtue and moral practice requires one to be fully, freely, and *lovingly* engaged in the present situation, which means that one must ongoingly maintain a commitment to remain lovingly engaged with the situation by monitoring what is happening now, in oneself and others, as happening now. But what makes up the content of loving engagement? One approach that some Buddhists take involves the "five mindfulness trainings," which represent an updated version of the

ancient Buddhist precepts.¹ Even if one does not agree with the details, these precepts provide an interesting template or model for a virtue ethics based on mindfulness. Each precept directs attention to a particular kind of suffering, and then links that focus with specific practical commitments:

First Mindfulness Training. Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.

Second Mindfulness Training. Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to cultivating loving-kindness and learning ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I will practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on the earth.

Third Mindfulness Training. Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

Fourth Mindfulness Training. Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering.. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain and will not criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I am committed to make all efforts to reconcile all conflicts, however small.

Fifth Mindfulness Training. Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. [This training goes on to make specific prescriptions about what not to eat or drink (e.g., alcohol, anything containing toxins, etc.); it also prohibits any “TV programs, magazines, books, films, and conversations” that poison the mind. Taking in such physical and mental poisons is considered as a betrayal of “my ancestors, my parents, my society, and future generations.”]

Notice that each precept begins with a specific target in the *Umwelt* on which to focus mindful attention, namely the suffering that stems from a specific kind of wrongdoing or human failure. Notice too that the scope for mindfulness is potentially global in its reach: mindful living is not limited to awareness of the immediate surroundings. The precept then calls for a set of specific responses in the face of such suffering. First, each precept calls for the cultivation in oneself of specific behaviors. If we think of these as cultivated dispositions to act in certain ways, then we can read each precept as calling for the cultivation of virtues. Thus the first precept calls for the virtue of compassion, the second for that of justice (among

¹ I take this list from Boccio (2004, 47-49), who attributes it to Thich Nhat Hanh without citing a specific book.

others), and so on. Each precept then spells out the kinds of positive action and restraint that realize the associated virtue (or virtues). Because the precepts, on this interpretation, make the call for virtue primary and have the actions follow from virtues, these five trainings represent a kind of virtue ethics.

Each precept contains a number of specific prescriptions. Some of these may be debatable. But I present this model not for its details but as a possible template for a virtue ethics, which one might fill out in various ways. We might schematize the template suggested by the Five Trainings as follows:

- 1 specific foci for the virtue of mindfulness;
- 2 imperatives to cultivate practical virtues that enable to respond morally to the demands linked with those foci;
- 3 positive actions, self-restraints, positive and negative rules of behavior, etc., which realize those practical virtues.

Would such a template be helpful for elaborating a virtue ethics? Its advantage, as I see it, lies in the manner in which it links character and conduct with a more general virtue of mindfulness as their prerequisite. In today's world, the discipline of attention has become a crucial precondition for the moral life. This was always the case, but two contemporary developments heighten the importance of mindfulness. First, the growing surfeit of information on the morally urgent needs of our world necessitates choices regarding our foci of attention and moral concern: no one can tackle everything all at once, or even over a lifetime. Second, it seems to me that our private and public environments have increasingly become dominated by corporation-sponsored noise — advertisements and entertainment piped into every public space, demanding our attention and taking us out of the immediate reality, whether we like it or not. The first development can tempt us to limit our attention to the local level, just when the second development makes mindful presence to the local environment all the more difficult.

3 Mindfulness as Ethical Heuristic

In this final section I simply suggest some questions that we might address to a moral theory in order to uncover possible connections between the theory and the idea of mindfulness. The assumption is that any given moral theory, or account of moral action, presupposes specific directives for the appropriate exercise of mindfulness. I propose the following with a teaching context in mind, that is, an introductory course on ethics.

Three main questions, I think, unlock the mindfulness presuppositions of a given approach to the moral life:

- (1) To what domains of life, experience, human existence, etc., does the theory have us pay attention?
- (2) When we pay attention to a given domain, what features does the theory have us notice as morally salient?
- (3) How does the theory have us describe or talk about the features to which we pay attention?

Two further questions then link the mindfulness directives with substantive practical responses and their justificatory basis:

- (4) How does the theory have us respond to what we notice and describe in the domain to which we attend?
- (5) What values, norms, principles, etc. guide our paying attention, noticing, describing, and responding?

In most theories, the items in the fifth question guide the overall approach. That is, once you know what values or norms morality requires, you can then figure out how to be appropriately attentive. Given the rather open-ended character of mindfulness, this order of discovery should not surprise us. Mindfulness does not provide a theoretical basis for a given moral theory, but only a set of presuppositions about one's *practical moral cognition*, that is, what features one must adequately cognize in order to act morally.

How would we use such questions to query a moral theory? I can see a couple of possibilities. One might start with the specific set of norms or rules of conduct advocated by the theory. For example, one could work through the various duties of virtue in Kant's 1797 *Doctrine of Virtue*. In fact, Kant himself helps us here when he divides up the possible domains of duty into four areas: duties to self, to God, to animals, and to other human beings. Although this typology is very abstract, it answers the first question above and leads Kant to more specific areas to which we must pay attention, morally speaking. For example, among the duties to self we find prohibitions against forms of excess that represent his version, I suppose, of mindful eating and drinking.

Alternatively, one might ask what method the theory gives us for making moral decisions and how that method directs us to pay attention. If we take Kant's first formula of the Categorical Imperative as a procedure, then we would ask whether that procedure presupposes certain mindfulness directives. Requiring the agent to formulate her personal maxim might be read as a directive to be mindful about one's interior aims and motives. More fruitful, I think, is the second formula of the Categorical Imperative. As a procedure, it would seem to require a high level of mindfulness toward other people, insofar as one's actions and omissions affect their exercise of autonomy.

Whether such questions are useful for opening up, perhaps expanding or criticizing, a moral theory still remains unclear to me. I have not yet tested this idea educationally. The hope is that such questions could give students a critical perspective on different moral theories. At the same time, raising such questions about theories might stimulate students to reflect on what they themselves, in their personal lives, pay attention to and ignore.

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