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The Philosophy of Mindfulness as a Mode of Being

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Philosophical Essay

Research in progress for PHIL 1301: Introduction to Philosophy

Faculty Mentor: John Macready, Ph.D.

The following essay represents student research produced in an Introduction to Philosophy course at Collin College. Introduction to Philosophy introduces students to metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical theories through critical readings of primary philosophical texts from ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Students practice textual and conceptual analysis of primary sources and learn methods for analyzing and evaluating arguments. As a final project, students compose a final research essay from their reading and research that develops a theory of reality, a theory of knowledge, and describes what it would mean to live a life consistent with what is known to be real.

In the following philosophical essay, Mara Headrick asks what it would mean to live a life that is consistent with what we know to be real in a world that seems increasingly unreal, and her answer is “mindfulness.” She conducts a close conceptual analysis of the metaphysical and epistemological theories of René Descartes, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant in order to develop an ethics of mindfulness—a way of attentive living that reconnects our minds and bodies to the external world of our experience. To justify this claim, Headrick conducts a conceptual analysis of Descartes’ rationalism, Hume’s empiricism, and Kant’s transcendental idealism to argue that we know reality through our minds *and* bodies. She concludes from her analysis that the practice of mindfulness offers us a way to cultivate a consistent awareness of our thoughts and sensations about the reality we know.

The Philosophy of Mindfulness as a Mode of Being

Mara Headrick

With a growing interest in artificial intelligence and augmented reality, our society has become plagued with anxiety about what is real. The public fascination with popular shows like *Black Mirror* and *Westworld* reveals how we are beginning to struggle to imagine how we might navigate a world where what we know to be real grows murkier. What then does it mean to live a life that is consistent with what we know to be real? In order to live a life consistent with what we know is real, we must live a life of mindfulness; that is, we must live in a state of focused awareness on our present thoughts, bodily sensations, and surroundings. To approach this argument, we must first note that thoughts, feelings, and sensations can be misleading. As this paper will show, the act of mindfulness is not a search for the objectively real, but an exploration of one's known reality.

To justify this kind of life, we must first understand what it means when we talk about what we know to be real. René Descartes is most famous for the statement *Cogito, ergo sum*, or "I think; therefore, I am." Descartes here is exploring doubt. He recognizes the fact that our senses may sometimes be misleading and cast doubt upon everything. Upon reflection, Descartes finds that it is the act of thought, in this case doubting, that confirms his existence. In short, we can only know with certainty that our minds are real, and everything else must be doubted. In his second meditation,

Descartes again attempts to reconcile the idea that everything must be doubted with the certainty of self. He writes, “I have already denied that I have any senses and any body. Still I hesitate; for what follows from this? . . . After everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement ‘I am, I exist’ is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind.”¹ Therefore, it is our consciousness that confirms our existence. Put in another way, Descartes concludes that in addition to the fact that we can only know that we exist, we know this because we are “thinking things.” For Descartes, known—not supposed or experienced—reality begins and ends in the mind.

In contrast to Descartes, David Hume views the body as an essential component to the existence and function of the mind, thus an integral part of the self. In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume argues that we are not simply a mind, but an embodied mind. He says, “It may seem at first sight that human thought is utterly unbounded . . . But although our thought seems to be so free, when we look more carefully we’ll find that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts merely to the ability to combine, transpose, enlarge, or shrink the materials that the senses and experience provide us with.”² Later, Hume gives two examples of how the mind exists only through the effect of bodily sensations upon it: “When we analyse our thoughts or ideas—however complex or

¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 18.

² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Early Modern Texts, trans. Jonathan Bennett, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1748.pdf>, 8.

elevated they are—we always find them to be made up of simple ideas that were copied from earlier feelings or sensations,”³ and,

If a man can't have some kind of sensation because there is something wrong with his eyes, ears etc., he will never be found to have corresponding ideas. A blind man can't form a notion of colours, or a deaf man a notion of sounds. If either is cured of his deafness or blindness, so that the sensations can get through to him, the ideas can then get through as well; and then he will find it easy to conceive these objects.⁴

For Hume, our thoughts are merely copies of sensations, and the thinking thing that makes up the self is categorically impossible without the input of the body. In order to truly 'be,' that is to exist as a mind as Descartes supposes, we must connect with our body and its sensations as part of our reality as well.

So far, Descartes and Hume's theories, although diametrically opposed, combined have shown that the experiences of both thought and bodily sensations may be accepted as real or known. Immanuel Kant's *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* critically expands on these concepts as he attempts to overcome the differences between Descartes and Hume. In the First Part of his *Prolegomena*, he states,

Idealism says this: Only minds exist, and the other things we think we perceive are only representations in us, with no external object corresponding to them. I say the contrary: Things are given to us as objects of our senses, existing outside us, but we know nothing of what they are in themselves; all we know are their appearances, i.e. the representations they cause in us by affecting our senses. So, I say that there are bodies outside us—i.e. things of whose nature in themselves we know nothing, knowing them only through our representations of them. We call such a thing a "body," meaning "the appearance to us of an

³ Hume, 8.

⁴ Ibid.

unknown thing which is nevertheless real.” Can this be called idealism? It is the very opposite of it.⁵

Thus, according to Kant, not only do our minds and bodies exist, but bodies outside of ours exist as well.⁶ Accordingly, we may know only ourselves with certainty, and we may also be certain of the existence of an external reality. What is uncertain for Kant are the essences of things or their inner, true natures that are hidden from perceptions. That is to say, what we know according to our senses may be proven false or may change. Take for example a stick submerged in water. To the naked eye, the stick appears bent due to the refraction of light in water. According to the senses, the stick is bent, and that becomes the reality of the viewer. However, once the stick is removed from the water, it is revealed to be completely straight. Although a simple example, this image reveals the complex interaction between mind, body, and external reality. What we experience informs what we think and what we know, but it can never tell us what *is*. For this reason, while the existence of external reality is a given through bodily senses, its exact nature remains obscured to the mind, and it becomes necessary to constantly assess an ever-shifting external reality.

How does all this play into the necessity of mindfulness? Mindfulness does two things: it allows us, through focused awareness on our present in thoughts, bodily sensation, and surroundings, to become aware of external reality, and it allows us to understand ourselves and our place in that reality. Descartes believes that external

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Early Modern Texts, trans. Jonathan Bennett, www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/kant1783.pdf, 21.

⁶ The existence of minds and bodies here refers to the work of Descartes and Hume discussed in the previous paragraphs.

reality is discoverable through intuition and reason (i.e. if the senses are passive to external objects, then these objects must exist). Hume does not guarantee the existence of external reality; instead, he uses the principle of probability to verify beliefs about an external reality through passive experiences or sense impressions. Kant also affirms the existence of external reality through the passive function of the senses but does not believe we can know the true nature of that reality. Despite their differences, all three affirm (or in Hume's case, merely verify the probability of) the existence of external reality through bodily sensation. In other words, together they have shown that we know ourselves to be real in both mind and body and that we know that there is an external reality that is real.⁷ Therefore, to live the most meaningful life under these circumstances, we must live in practice of constant awareness of the way these facets of our reality interact—a life of mindfulness as a mode of being.

Critics such as Ronald Purser, author of *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*, claim that the practice of mindfulness, or “McMindfulness,” is too popularized and thus loses its power or effectiveness as it is watered down for the masses.⁸ The claim is rooted in the misconception that the mindfulness approach is merely a passing fad destined to be forgotten as quickly as it

⁷ It is important to acknowledge the differences between what these three writers mean when referring to “the mind.” In Descartes' account, the sole nature of the mind is to think. When Hume refers to the mind it is defined by the experience of the body because thoughts and ideas are copies of bodily experiences. Kant characterizes the mind as having an active role in producing our conception of reality by acting as filter, organizer, and enhancer.

⁸ Ronald E. Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (London: Repeater Books, 2019), 11.

gained popularity. This idea is shaken by the foundation of mindfulness practice, which is rooted in Buddhist theory. In Buddhist traditions, Satipatthana serves as a framework for meditation and refers to the practice of sustained awareness of sensory experience as a path toward purification and the realization of nirvana. The sensory experience described in this tradition is fourfold and includes mindfulness of the body, feelings, sensation of the mind, and of mental objects called dhammas. Further, the practice is fundamental in modern Theravada Buddhist teaching. However, critics like Purser do not ignore this foundation in their critiques of mindfulness. Instead, they argue that the Buddhist foundations of mindfulness practice are greatly diminished in its popularization. That is to say, in order to distribute the theory of mindfulness to the masses, its Buddhist foundation and spiritual roots have been removed, leaving merely a new marketing tactic for the self-help industry.⁹ The problem with this line of critique lies in the conflation of mindfulness practice with twelve step programs and guides on how to be happier or become successful. What differentiates mindfulness from the self-help market is that it lacks an external driving purpose or goal. Instead, the aim of mindfulness is to create a state of bare awareness. In other words, the goal of the practice is to become aware of one's (at least partly) subjective reality without judgement. What people do with this awareness is their business, but as a practice with mass appeal it maintains this purpose.

If mindfulness is, according to Buddhist philosophies, absorbing sensory input without judgement, how does this figure into daily life? We tend to think of life in terms

⁹Purser, *McMindfulness*, 2.

of doing and not in terms of being. We ignore the act of being for the sake of all the activities—work, school, family, chores—so that when our being is presented to us, we are uncomfortable and uncertain. It is for this reason that when *Black Mirror* shows how our reality can be manipulated or how our existence might be an illusion, we become uncertain of ourselves regardless of the veracity of the show's implications. The implication itself can cause destabilization in a mind that has, at best, largely relegated thoughts of its own being to the background. In order to address these anxieties, we must make real change in how we actively participate in our reality. Mindfulness is a practice that brings the mind back into the body, connecting it to the body's experience with reality. If the body mediates between the mind and reality as is shown above, then it is through the experience of the body that we can ease our anxieties and find clarity of being.

How does it address the anxieties produced by a life focused on doing rather than being? In order to accept the philosophy of mindfulness as practice, we must forget the "all or nothing" mentality. Instead of sitting down to "be mindful" or "do mindfulness," which would fall into that trap of doing rather than being, we must instead make an effort to live in the actual moment—that is to be fully present in each moment. But what does this mean in practice? Instead of going about daily tasks with wandering minds, mindfulness requires an intentional focus on tasks. That is to say, we must live fully in the moment of every task. Take for example the daily task of a shower. According to the old philosophy of doing rather than being, I take my shower as fast as possible. I perform the tasks of washing in a perfunctory fashion, mindlessly, as my thoughts focus

on everything else I need to do for the day. I never fully allow myself to exist in the moment of showering. In this focus on the future, my mind is effectively cut off from reality. These moments that are not moments build upon one another to shape an entire life that is cut off from reality. In contrast, with mindfulness practice, the act of showering becomes a moment that takes my full attention. I consider my actions and my experience of my senses in this moment rather than allowing them to pass me by. By slowing down and shifting my mind from the future to the present, I exist in the moment of showering. Showering is no longer a space for mindless washing and shower thoughts, but a space for full acknowledgement of the task. My mind in this moment is connected with my body, and through my body with external reality.

Just as the old way of experiencing moments leads to a disconnect from external reality, a life lived mindfully can lead to a connection with external reality. However, this practice does not promise to make us happy; instead, it opens the mind to take in a subjective experience without judgement. What we do with that experience and how we feel about it is a choice, but it is only through the practice of mindfulness that we can have that choice.

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