

This is an excerpt from a report on the workshop on mind and attention in Indian philosophy at Harvard University, on September 21st and 22nd, 2013, written by Kevin Connolly, Jennifer Corns, Nilanjan Das, Zachary Irving, and Lu Teng, and available at: http://networksensoryresearch.utoronto.ca/Events_%26_Discussion.html

3. Can meditation give us moral knowledge?

In the workshop, Jake Davis argued for a moral epistemology grounded in the early Buddhist dialogues of the *Pāli Nikāyas*. The Buddha denies that faith or reason give us access to moral facts. What else is left? Contemporary western answers include moral intuition, moral perception, emotions, etc. Davis adds another answer: mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*,) cultivated through meditation.

Davis argues that mindfulness meditation modifies our attentional and/or memory processes (Davis and Thompson, 2013, develop these arguments at length). Expert meditators are alert to stimuli that would ordinarily elude consciousness. For instance, subjects who completed a three-month meditation retreat had a reduced “attentional blink” (Slagter et al., 2007). The attentional blink occurs when two targets are presented in rapid succession. Presumably because the first target occupies attentional resources, subjects are unaware of the second. Mindfulness also attenuates affective biases within attention and memory. One study on memory showed that subjects could recall positively valenced words better following twelve-week meditation training. Prior to (but not after) training, the subjects in question were best able to recall negative words, followed by neutral, and finally positive ones (Roberts-Wolfe et al., 2012).

Davis argues that mindfulness plays a role in moral epistemology on the following grounds. Lack of alertness and affective biases result in ordinary individuals being unreliable judges of what motivations (e.g. good will, friendliness, hatred, or greed) bring about ease and

unease. Mindfulness therefore puts one in a better epistemic position to discover what motivations cause ease and unease. To avoid relativism, Davis claims that morality must be based in an ethical project all humans share, and all humans share the basic ethical project of avoiding unease. Thus, mindfulness puts one in a better epistemic position to discover which motivations are (ethically) good and which are (ethically) bad to have. Given this, we should either become meditators ourselves or treat the community of mindfulness meditators as moral experts.

Many philosophers will reject Davis' thesis that people share an ethical project of avoiding unease. In her commentary, Sharon Street worried that Davis allows only for enlightened self-interest, not genuine morality. For Davis, motivations like friendliness and greed are good or bad only insofar as they further the self-interested goal of living with ease. Relatedly, Street asks whether we would still defer to mindfulness meditators if they converged on the conclusion that hatefulness and greed lead to more ease than other motivations. Doing so would seem to give us the wrong moral theory. So even if we should defer to mindfulness meditators on authorities about what reduces unease, we should not ipso facto defer to them as moral authorities.

In a question to Davis, Susanna Siegel objected that unease can be ethically good. For example, anger feels good in some contexts and is politically necessary. Yet even righteous anger often leads to unease. Righteous anger creates two potential problems for Davis. We can tease these problems apart using D'Arms and Jacobson's (2000) distinction between two ways that emotions can be appropriate. First, having an emotion can make one better (or worse) off in some way. Emotions can be expedient, spur you to action, or reduce unease. Insofar as righteous anger spurs you (or your peers) into action, it can make you better off (this was Siegel's point).

And sometimes, the benefits of action outweigh the costs of unease. Second, emotions can fit (or fail to fit) their objects. Arguably, anger is fitting if and only if you are angry at something unjust (e.g. political corruption or betrayal). Someone who responds to betrayal with (genuine) friendliness may live a life of greater ease. Yet her emotional responses to betrayal are arguably unfitting; the unjust deserve our anger. One could therefore argue that we ought to feel unease in ethical situations where unease is fitting.

Davis makes a first-order normative commitment—reducing unease is always good—that many philosophers will also reject. Can we divorce Davis’ moral epistemology from this commitment? Perhaps one would judge all sorts of moral questions more reliably if one were more alert and less biased. For example, affective biases may lead one to ignore evidence that one’s friend has committed a crime or to misclassify the pliers in a black man’s hand as a gun. If Davis’ moral epistemology is dissociable from his first-order normative commitments, mindfulness could add to any ethicist’s epistemic toolkit, regardless of how normative ethics turns out. Arguably, Davis would still have made a significant discovery about moral epistemology (and perhaps epistemology more generally). Davis would have discovered a new epistemic tool (distinct from reason, intuition, emotions, etc.) that it is within our power to improve (through meditation).

However, there is room to resist the claim that Davis’ moral epistemology and normative commitments are separable. It will be useful to draw an analogy with Keya Maitra’s talk on yogic attention in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In a response to Nico Silins’ commentary, Maitra argued that the manner and object of yogic attention are interdependent. The yogi attends to the conscious self (as opposed to external objects) in a non-attached manner. And the yogi cannot attend in this manner to anything but the self (perhaps because one becomes attached to any

external object she thinks about). So the success of yogic practices depends on how, and so what, one attends to.

Similarly, perhaps the success of mindfulness meditation depends on your first order normative commitments (a reply first suggested by Sean Smith). Consider an example to illustrate this claim. Courtney believes that she ought to maximize cognitive and/or affective stimulation (even if this brings tremendous unease). Courtney may lack (and believe she ought to lack) the requisite mental discipline and/or motivation to become an expert meditator. For instance, she may believe that sitting silently for eight hours a day over twelve days is a tremendous waste of affective and cognitive stimulation (and therefore not worthwhile). So individuals with certain normative commitments might be unable or unwilling to become mindful because of those commitments.

Davis may therefore have good reason not to divorce his moral epistemology and normative theory. But this could create further problems for his epistemology. For example, if the success of meditation depends on normative commitments, then there may be a type of normative selection bias in mindfulness meditators. People who become expert meditators will tend to share certain antecedent normative views. Thus, expert meditators may converge in their moral judgments because of their shared antecedent commitments, not their ability to detect ethical facts.

References:

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