

[Essay]

Becoming a Seer

Thoughts on Deleuze, Mindfulness and Feminism

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Abstract

This essay circles around two ideas. First, I try to answer the ethical question “What is the right thing to do?” through the application of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s affirmative philosophy. Second, I relate Deleuze’s philosophy to mindfulness. I do not wish to suggest that they are identical. They are not. Yet, mixing mindfulness with Deleuze leads to a philosophy of mindfulness. That is a philosophy that makes us less blind to our experiences, but also ethically responsible for what actually happens. Hereby, I move mindfulness from the sphere of psychology into philosophy, or from being primarily a practice of turning inward to one of turning outward, but also make Deleuze’s ethic more operational. The latter I will – briefly – illustrate by touching on elements of feminism.

Once one has to invent new concepts for
unknown lands, then methods and moral systems
break down and thinking becomes, as Foucault
puts it, a ‘perilous act,’ a violence whose first
victim is oneself.
— Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*.

1. Introduction

It begins with a problem. According to Ian Buchanan, “... it is difficult if not impossible to answer the question ‘what is the right thing to do?’ from a Deleuzian perspective” (2011, 7). This essay is an attempt to do just that. While Deleuze might not be the first name you think of when it comes to ethics, he weaves ethical concerns into all of his work (Bogue 2007, 7; Bryant 2011, 29).

For Deleuze, ethics is not moralism. It is an explorative way of living. As Michel Foucault said in the preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, “I would say that *Anti-Oedipus* (may its authors forgive me) is a book of *ethics* . . .

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being anti-oedipal has become a life style, a way of thinking and living” (Foucault in Deleuze and Guattari 2000a, xiii).

Ethics is a way of thinking and living—a lifestyle. In other words, if we live rather miserably, it must be because we think like that. Or if our thinking is too naive or banal, it is because we live like that. Linking living, thinking, and acting make this ethic therapeutic in the sense that it makes us see things, such as new possibilities and ways of living, which we may not otherwise have seen. It presents us with alternative forms of life. If I can think differently, I can also live differently. In thinking begins living; in living begins thinking. The term *therapeutic*—philosophically—does not refer to a process of normalizing—for example, seeing your past in a different shade. Rather, it is to make everything more real—not to explain, but to enhance, enlarge, and unfold.

Philosophy as “a way of thinking and living,” therefore, is not only oriented toward life but also integrates into and eventually *becomes* life. It resembles what Hadot (2006, 83) has called “the art of living,” which connotes concepts such as cultivating, nurturing, or gardening one’s life in interaction with life as such. For instance, wisdom in philosophy refers to being good at living, not necessarily being good at string theory.

Pearson writes:

... he [Deleuze] tells us, ‘life’ is not simply an idea or matter of theory but concerns a way of being, a style of life, and a manner of living. For Deleuze, if philosophy has a use it is to be found in the doctrine of Epicureans, as well as in later thinkers such as Spinoza and Nietzsche, namely, the creation of the free human being and an empirical education in the art of living well. An empirical education in the art of living requires, among other things, questioning how life works, not what it means (as if meaning was already given). (2014, 122)

To put it more simply, life requires that we pay attention, and that we approach what we experience with curiosity and questions. Thinking is an engagement with life. It vibrates in between what is *no longer* and *not yet*.

Three questions seem to be implicitly present: How do you *experience* the present living moment? How do you *experiment* with the present living moment? How do you *actualize* what is unknown—but nevertheless real—in the present living moment? Experience moves us from being passive to active. To affirm is

to be accountable for what you bring to life. Living these three questions, I propose, is doing the right thing. What answers these questions may produce, I do not know. The main point is that you go where life takes you, not where an objective is guiding you to go. To illustrate this process, I will relate Deleuze's thinking to mindfulness.

2. Becoming a seer

Mindfulness is a fundamental aspect of Buddhist practice. Kabat-Zinn defines it as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (2014, 4). Stahl and Goldstein add that “Mindfulness is about being fully aware of what is happening in the present moment, without filters or the lens of judgment” (2010, 15). Some constant concepts surrounding mindfulness are *being fully aware*, *the present moment*, *nonjudgmentally*, and *memory of the present moment*. Keeping the present in mind is the opposite of forgetfulness (Huxter 2015, 31).

Deleuze shares—in principle—this approach to life. To some extent, of course, it is difficult to find a philosopher who does not believe that paying attention is mandatory for questioning, reflecting, analyzing, or even thinking. For example, following the classical schism between self-knowledge and self-deception in Western philosophy, many of today's current problems are related to a lack of self-knowledge as when we—many of us—deceive ourselves to believe that we are not egoistic, or not harming any other forms of life through our daily decisions. Simone Weil skillfully describes attention as something, “which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears” (Weil 2005, 233). The “I” becomes someone else. The process of becoming someone else can be considered ethical in a Deleuzian sense; it is a refusal of who we are, that is, refusing just to fit into an already existing network of control. In this aspect, philosophy resembles art, at least art in the romantic way that Deleuze and Guattari understand it when they claim: “The artist is a seer, a becomer” (1994, 171).

The artist has seen something—something that he or she passes on in a way that gives the reader enhanced access to this world. For instance, a novel is a communication of experiences that typically involve ethics and knowledge. A novel answers the question of how a character acts, reflects, thinks, and feels during certain circumstances. This is why literature can be a way of gaining experiences that make us more mature by allowing us to experience other forms

of life. The artist is a seer, and he or she confronts the reader with his or her ethical limitations. As Deleuze writes, “In the act of writing there’s an attempt to make life something more than personal, to free life from what imprisons it You write with a view to an unborn people that doesn’t yet have a language. Creating isn’t communicating but resisting” (1995, 143). Writing is resisting following the dominating fantasies and ideas controlling our lives. For example, the ideas of today’s neoliberalism are no longer defined by disciplining our biological essence, but are also focusing on optimizing our minds (Newman 2016, 37). An example could be how many seems under pressure to develop endlessly, or how our experiences, skills, thoughts, and ideas often are capitalised through the concept of “human capital” (see e.g. Janning 2015).

You write to give the unborn, in Deleuze’s terms, a possibility to live freely—that is, to live a healthy life. But that unborn doesn’t only refer to the next generation, it also refers to your own selves as something without essence. Writing is a struggle for a free life where you are not subjected to the existing power structures, for example, what is regarded as prestigious and which give status in today’s society. “The ultimate aim of literature is to set free, in the delirium, this creation of a health or this invention of a people, that is, a possibility of life. To write for this people who are missing . . . (‘for’ means less ‘in the place of’ than ‘for the benefit of’)” (Deleuze 1996, 4).

The writer is affirming. “*To affirm is not to take responsibility for, to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives.* To affirm is to unburden, not to load life with the weight of higher values, but *to create* new values which are those of life, which make life light and active” (Deleuze 2002, 185. Italics in original). To release, set free, and create values of life . . . this is why we want to spend time with certain writers; they extend our boundaries. There is also some political strength in this writing practice, but it can also be described as mindful. For example, Newman (2016), refers to Stirner who said, “I am free from what I am rid of, owner of what I have in my *power* or what I *control*” (63). This power to act, to accept what we can and can’t control is related to our approach or relationship with life.

The writer is generous when he or she passes on life. Both art and philosophy are practices that affirm life. They are impersonal. Life is not an essence of any kind. It is in a constant process of becoming. And this is exactly why I dwell so much on the artist. Because art and philosophy are both practices that share something crucial: They see. Seeing means making contact with what happens . . .

being connected with life. Seeing is also related to our capacity to be affected, which is crucial for experiencing, but also in order to experiment and transform—that is, create alternative ways of living, feeling, and thinking.

It is here that mindfulness can help make people, in general, become more sensible and aware. Hereby, I do not wish to claim that we can all become artists or philosophers—of course not. It is not the artist, or art, or even philosophy as such that matters, but how the artist and philosopher are affected and affect life. They see. That is interesting.

Thus, before we can even begin to experiment, perhaps even transform or create alternative ways of living and thinking, we have to be capable of seeing the state of reality. So, what I aim at is mindfulness as an internal motor of exploring life. Both our internal life as well as the external life that always affects us. What I propose is that once we begin paying attention, we also begin questioning.

Thus, mindfulness can help me affirm myself as a process of becoming qua being alive. A philosopher of mindfulness is refusing to let the dominating power and control systems affect him or her—such as the norms and ideals guiding today's society. Rather, it is a liberating refusal to let, for example, capitalism take charge of his or her mind.

3. Believe in this world

A philosophy of mindfulness, as presented here, is pre-positional; it aims to be worthy of the present living moment—that is, to experience it fully. Being worthy is also a creative act that resists ordering, structuring, or categorizing; instead, it unfolds. “Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing is to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers so we can elude control,” Deleuze said (1995, 175). Art opens a new territory through notions such as sensation, encounter, minor, affect, virtual, and becomings. Art reveals the general state of our receptivity and sensibility. It shows the conditions of experience. It challenges us. How do you go on from here?

This question emphasizes a responsibility because a philosopher (or any person) exposes himself or herself to get in contact with life and not some predefined idea or knowledge about life or how life should be lived. This is risky. Yet, philosophy is about trusting this life that we live in this world. “Belief is no longer addressed to a different or transformed world. Man is in the world as if in a pure optical and sound situation. The reaction to which man has been disposed

can be replaced only by belief. Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears” (Deleuze 2000, 172).

Establishing such belief is an ethical process, which again requires that we actually pay attention to what is happening. That is, what we are doing, why we are doing what we are doing, how we are doing what we want to do, and other questions about our actions.

To live ethically is not to be unworthy of what happens. Ethics is normally understood as a branch of philosophy; however, what I propose is that ethics is a form of life worthy of accepting what life has to offer. Therefore, philosophy qua being the art of living is ethical. Being worthy does not refer to “worthy” in the sense that you should live up to certain ideals or norms, but rather that you are capable of embracing what actually takes place. Carry your experiences with you. Regardless of what happens, you should still believe in this world. There is no other world. Mindfulness shares this acceptance, which it tries to cultivate or nurture through the training of your concentration, attention, and observation (Kabat-Zinn 2014). It matters whether you pay attention or not. So, seeing mindfulness as both an inward and outward practice, it may help us to comprehend what happens to us but also release or set free the becomings of what is happening. By doing so, we become the result of relating or connecting with these becomings, not of our actions. Our actions are responses to what is happening. For this simple reason, you also care for what takes place while it takes place.

Awareness and affirmation go hand in hand. Before you actualize what is in the process of coming into being, you register it. “We need an ethic or a faith, which makes fools laugh; it is not a need to believe in something else, but a need to believe in this world, of which fools are a part.... The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us” (Deleuze 2000, 173, 171). Thus, the right thing to do is to believe in a world that is constantly becoming something else. This requires awareness.

To establish or re-establish a belief “not in a different world, but the link between man and the world, in love or life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which none the less cannot but be thought: ‘something possible, otherwise I will suffocate’” (Deleuze, 2000, 172.). In order not to suffocate, you must breathe. Breathing may not establish a belief in this world, but it is vital. It keeps you in this world. This is it. After a while, most people accept that this is

the only life we get; if not, your life crumbles away while you are planning something magnificent or feeling sorrow for all your losses. What does it mean to believe in this world? One answer is to experience how everything is interconnected. This emphasizes that the ethical approach to life is founded on the metaphysics of becoming that claims that there is no essential truth or unchangeable base to our world (Janning 2017, 41-46). The guiding metaphor is not one of trees and roots, but the rhizome without beginning and end. We are always in-between, which is exactly where life takes up its speed and grandeur.

Leaving the tree of knowledge and roots behind is also a way of liberating thinking from representation, or what is known as identity politics.¹ For example, the problem of discrimination and repression of women is based on the incapacity to think, not whether one is born male or female. Feminism, of course, is a broad and complex philosophy. Yet, seen from a distance, it seems to operate with an unhealthy dualism. Not just the two genders, but also, and more specifically, their difference in relationship to the mind-body dualism. Is the male repression and violence based on the idea of physical strength equals mental strength? Is there actually any difference in what men and women are capable of doing, at least mentally?

Regarding the second question, I lean towards answering no. I do not believe that there is anything that men can do mentally or philosophically that women cannot do as well. Basically, I think that most of the current problems are based on the metaphysics of being, for example, the assumption that being a man is good, whereas the metaphysics of becoming would be more liberating, for example, becoming other (see, for example, Janning 2017). What is interesting, therefore, is not the gender per se, but rather what the human being is capable of doing. Thus, if everything is connected, then to repress or violate anyone is basically to repress or violate yourself. In that sense, men who are repressing women are not only doing so because they might be afraid, but due to pure ignorance or stupidity.

Another way of stressing this point of identity politics and feminism could be through how Deleuze and Guattari tried to overturn Platonism. The two Frenchmen urged us to stop our tendency to look for unchangeable and universal blueprints of how things should be; instead we ought to focus on difference and becoming. This is also why they abandoned the metaphor of the tree with its roots.

¹ This brief example serves to illustrate that mindfulness is paying attention, not to certain categories or agendas, but to life as such, whereas an identity politic tends to generalize and make us less aware of what actually happens in-between our all too familiar points of identity.

In alignment, they don't speak of philosophy as cultivation or sowing of seeds; rather it's as destructive creation.² The tree metaphor proposes that here is a metaphysical order, an underlying master-plan that we can refer to when looking for justice or truth. To overcome this problem, Deleuze and Guattari (2000b, 3-25) introduce the concept "rhizome" (among other concepts). Rhizomes don't have seeds; they break off, connect, and grow again, each time a little different. It's a machinic process. The rhizome emphasizes how things are interconnected horizontally, each "line of flight is part of the rhizome" (9). Similar, it can illustrate how a concept of gender, for example, does not refer to the same identity. They are no "normal" human beings. Or, when some people wishes to categorize or label a work of art as feminism, which, of course, has happened with many female authors, most recently with the Italian writer Elena Ferrante (2016, 15), who has said: 'I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors.' Her morale is: Just read it. Do not look for a particular meaning, but see what the book does with you, how it works, what it makes possible, etc. Ferrante has succeeded in becoming an author without a face, she quotes Keats for saying that 'the poet is everything and nothing, that he is whatever there is that is most unpoetic' (272). Instead of preoccupying herself with whether she should be masculine, feminine or neuter (all these perfect ideas), she writes to become imperceptible. She refuses to be part of those 'women who practice a conscious surveillance on themselves' (103). This kind of self-surveillance is a subtle form of self-control that may exemplify how a too rigid identity thinking represses the process of becoming other, becoming someone else. 'Every women novelist, as with women is many other fields, should aim at being not only the best women novelist but the best of the most skilled practitioners of literature, whether male or female. To do so we have to avoid every ideological conformity Writer should be concerned only with narrating as well as possible' (265).

Perhaps, therefore, as Foucault said, the first victim of philosophical thinking is oneself (see Deleuze 1995, 103). Can you leave your comfortable identity behind? Overcoming male dominance is not achieved by introducing another ideal, for example, the woman. Rather it is a creative destruction of a system or culture that accepted and even legitimized oppression. If we blindly accept the dominating consensus of what is normal, right or true, then it hinders us in becoming free and autonomous human beings. Overcoming repression is not just

² This does not contradict with the fact that mindfulness is a way of cultivating our attention to life; it would if "I" was trained to pay attention to something specific beforehand (e.g. identity).

of interest for women, blacks, or sexual minorities, but for all living beings.

4. Our obligation to explore

Mindfulness is the preferred English translation of the Pali word “sati” (in Sanskrit *smṛti*), which refers to an activity (Gunaratana 2014, 131). The translation of the Pali word “sati” was not always mindfulness; other terms were “watchfulness,” “well awake,” “correct memory” and so forth. It is achieved, trained, or cultivated (Kabat-Zinn 2014).

Mindfulness is called the heart of Buddhism—the Buddhist practice, a broad and complex religious as well as philosophical tradition. In *The Spirit of Buddhist Meditation*, Sarah Shaw writes, “One of the greatest strengths of Buddhism is that it lacks a centralized authority and even a single body of core text, containing many in a number of different languages in various regions” (2014, 9). Buddhism is not one but many. Deleuze and Guattari further emphasize this connectedness: “Buddha’s tree itself becomes a rhizome,” they write (2000b, 20). Any point of a rhizome “can be connected to anything other, and must be There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines” (8).

Some of these lines intersect with Deleuze’s philosophy, whereas some of them seem to point in the opposite direction. In Buddhism, you ascend the mountain of life to reach enlightenment or nirvana. Nirvana is the state of the cessation of all suffering and rebirth (Shaw 2014). Deleuze may not be a mountaineer, he may not know where he is heading (regarding how he should live his life before he actually lives it), yet, he shares the Buddhist premise that change, renewal, and transformation emerge due to our encounters with life because life is changing.

A philosophy of mindfulness, as presented here, is not a matter of judging life in the name of a higher authority, which would be the good, the true, the just, and the beautiful. Nothing is given per se; nothing remains the same in all eternity. Instead of judging, we evaluate every being, action, and passion and even every value in relation to the life they implicate. It is considering one’s affect as a means of immanent evaluation instead of judging as transcendent value. It’s a more direct and unsophisticated approach saying: “I love” or “I hate” instead of “I judge” (I paraphrase Deleuze 2000, 141).

Becoming alive begins with paying careful attention. Weil describes it

beautifully when she says that attention “consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object.” Then she adds, that attention is “. . . not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it” (Weil 2005, 8). That is, attention is readiness to receive life. For Weil moral change comes from attention, she goes as far as speaking of our obligation to interact with life, not just following rights (see e.g. Murdoch 2003, 52). The obligation is related to the process of becoming worthy to what happens to you, which also touches upon the stoical idea of not wanting what you don’t have or wishing for something else; rather to wish for what you have, wish for what takes place as it takes place. All of this addresses our obligation to explore our relationship with other human beings as well as other sentient beings.

5. Affirmative practice

Being involved also means knowing when to accept—that is, when to let go. It may be useful to accept your life conditions, for example, if you have lost your legs after an accident. In that instance, such difficult acceptance confirms that time is irreversible. Still, it would naïve to accept how many kids and women are mistreated unfairly in the world by referring to religion or cultural differences, although these explanations just try to cover up repression. Sometimes doing nothing is unacceptable because we then pass on current problems, repression in this case, to future generations. As Nietzsche suggested, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” (Nietzsche 1974, 274). And, as Deleuze proposed, “*whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return*” (Deleuze 2002, 68. Italics in original; see also Deleuze 1994, 7).

The main element of a philosophy of mindfulness is its affirmative approach to life that consists, I propose, of four phases: paying attention, problematizing, making a sustainable decision, and transforming. This approach, I believe, incorporates the best from philosophy and mindfulness: a love of wisdom related to action, that is, where our actions or responses are based on the wisdom we have acquired together.

The first phase is *paying attention*—that is, where you intermingle with what happens, carefully unfolding everything. Second, *problematizing*—that is, to bring decisions out in the open where no road map exists. These two phases emphasize that knowledge doesn’t refer to a textbook; rather, it functions and

intermingles with the world. To know is to get dirt under your fingernails. You do not become a cook by watching a cooking program on television but by sticking hands, mind, and senses into the dough. This hyper-attentiveness, awareness, or mindfulness enhances your power to be affected—affected by life. The first two phases are intimately related because to problematize is neither to position nor to oppose. Rather, it is a process of exposing yourself; make yourself vulnerable, gradually acknowledging your failures and successes. This approach is different from any kind of self-development because you are not developing yourself. Actually, you are trying to overcome yourself by becoming another. The decisions we make can only liberate if they are not guided by vanity or egoism. Instead, becoming is always an impersonal and collective process.

An affirmative approach, therefore, doesn't follow an objective; rather, it ends all goal setting. To learn is to bring the unconscious out; that is to say, becoming always takes place as an examination within a certain experience. It is a relational competence. To live a life worth living is never to reach a conclusion. It is not a quiz show; it is the act of staying patiently with the open questions. It is an inconclusive process that may, at first, seem hard—mainly because we are so well trained in objective thinking and resolutions—but it is a part of becoming free.

In continuation, the third phase is the *decision-making* that follows the previous steps. Paying attention helps you problematize, which clarifies the possible choices. The point is that by paying careful attention with a curious, critical, and open mind, you are able to create choices that you may not have thought were possible. To problematize and pay attention can help you make sustainable decisions, the kind of decisions you would not mind based on your current knowledge. Making a decision is a way of liberating you, leaving behind what is dying or what needs to die in order to cultivate and bring into life something more fruitful.

The fourth step is *transformation*. It is related to the main role of philosophy: Knowledge transforms. “Philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts.... All concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 2, 16). The primary task of philosophy is to confront the illusion that problems are something to be solved by choosing between options A, B, or C. Instead, problems are invented every time we do not know right from wrong. How to go on? How can we create a politic of acts rather than identities? Or as Stark (2017) asks in relation

to feminism: “What can we make together?” (111). All of us.

These four phases (paying attention, problematizing, decision-making, and transformation) are not something abstract but take place in a concrete and complex life condition. “We are dealing here with a problem concerning the plurality of subjects, their relationships, and their reciprocal presentation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 16).

To problematize, pay attention, decide, and transform. It is not merely a four-phase process because, at the very least, the process of problematizing demands that you pay attention and vice versa. Instead, the phases inform each other. Sometimes, the way we problematize, we become conscious about other aspects. New possibilities emerge; perhaps, what we thought was problematic has dissolved by looking more thoroughly at the situation. This, at least indirectly, proposes an answer to Buchanan’s question, “what is the right thing to do?” Pay attention, problematize, decide, and transform (i.e. become).

6. Conclusions

What I have proposed is that doing the right thing is related to the way we live, that is, living a careful and attentive life, exploring and experimenting with what happens, what it makes possible, our other actions, and so on. Each encounter with life releases the present living moment beneath and beyond representation. There are no boundaries for life to respect other than what enhances life. This is why paying attention to how certain social settings and structures may affect us can improve our level of self-awareness. We then ask ourselves how we can enhance our power to act?

Sensation, therefore, is not the same as perceiving because we typically perceive through identification—looking for the same, the known, and the comfortable. Sensation is difference. Becoming deals with intensity, tension, suspense, and excitement—to experience life as movement while it moves you. To say it through the words of Deleuze, our relationship with life is evaluated beyond a fixed set of norms; “only the subject that incarnated [a life] in the midst of things made it good or bad” (Deleuze 2006, 288). Here I briefly illustrated that parts of feminism tends to limit itself by being an identity politics that maintain rigid dualistic categories such as male and female.

In short, a philosophy of mindfulness puts emphasis on experience, experiment, and actualization or affirmation. Each experience matters; life is the

experience of making contact or being connected with what is in the midst of becoming—that is, life—and then passing it on to the next generations. It is a generous ethic. We pass on what is sustainable by affirming what is alive.

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