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Mindfulness and the Psychology of Ethical Dogmatism

Josef Mattes¹

Abstract

Motivated by recent controversies concerning the relationship between modern mindfulness-based interventions and Buddhism, this article discusses the relationship between mindfulness and dogmatism in general, and dogmatism in ethics in particular. The point of view taken is primarily that of the psychology of judgment and decision making: Various cognitive illusions affect the feelings of righteousness and certainty that tend to accompany ethical and moral judgments. I argue that even though there is some evidence that mindfulness practice improves judgment and decision making, this improvement is rarely as strong as is implied in various contributions to the above-mentioned controversies. In addition, I reflect on claims that “the original teachings of the Buddha” justify the moral stances taken. I argue that these stances likely arise, at least in part, due to the cultural transmis-

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sion of cognitive dissonance of early Christianity rather than being inherent in the Buddha's teachings.

1. Introduction

1.1 Motivation

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and other modern Mindfulness Based Interventions (MBIs) are successful in alleviating suffering and are increasingly recognized as useful in other contexts as well (for example, Khoury et al., Rinske et al.; Bühlmayer et al.). This success holds even after concerns about possibly biased reporting of outcomes (Coronado-Montoya et al.) are taken into account (Mattes). Despite this success, these applications of mindfulness have recently been criticized for what these critics perceive as a lack of moral dimensions, and for what they claim to constitute cultural appropriation of Buddhist concepts. For a brief, critical overview of such criticisms, see Repetti.

A prominent recent commentary "Too Early to Tell," (Kabat-Zinn) answered these criticisms by observing that "we consider what we teach in MBSR . . . to be 'wise' or 'right' mindfulness, to whatever degree we manage to embody and convey it, and keep it in the forefront of our awareness" (Kabat-Zinn 1130) and further stated that MBSR "has always been anchored in the ethical framework that lies at the very heart of the original teachings of the Buddha" (1125). The commentary also expressed that we should "value, if not celebrate, both commonality and difference in pluralistic societies" (1126).

Nevertheless, this sentiment apparently does not always apply: "Trump and the . . . values he represents" (1129) are not valued, let alone celebrated (without spelling out what those values are believed to be), nor is the democratic decision of the United Kingdom to leave the Euro-

pean Union.² I will not comment on another country's president, but in elitist Brexit discussions many seem to conveniently have forgotten that little more than a decade ago the EU politicians planned to introduce a constitution that needed plebiscites in the member countries to go into force. This constitution was voted down in the first two countries where plebiscites were held—politicians simply rechristened the constitution a “treaty” after some cosmetic changes and put it into force without asking the people (Wikipedia). Not only that, even treaties are not worth much in the EU: Another widely ignored “detail” is that (by one count) there have been more than hundred breaches of the fundamental contracts of the EU, going back at least to Germany and France in 2003. One more example: Recently, a member country of the EU started criminal proceedings against the former head of its statistics agency for accurately (!) reporting government finances (see, for example, Piller). You may or may not agree that these and similar issues are sufficient reasons for the UK to leave the EU, but using the Brexit as a paradigmatic example for the world supposedly being “increasingly dystopian” seems to me to be a rather peculiar way of embodying mindfulness and wisdom (let alone compassion).³

² There are, of course, people who value Trump and/or the Brexit. What is relevant for the present paper is to what extent those people who claim to value difference in pluralistic societies (which in my experience includes everyone in the mindfulness community) actually do apply this sentiment to those with opinions different from theirs, or to democratic decisions that they dislike. See also footnote 7.

³ This is not the only such example in that article; here are two more. There is talk of “wars” around pipeline building in the USA (Kabat-Zinn 1129), which makes me wonder: is the situation as it was in Iraq 2003? Europe 1944? Cuba 1898? the Boer wars? Japan in the Sixteenth century? China in the “warring states” period? The article also speaks of “Orwellian distortions of truth” without mentioning that at least one MBI proclaims that its underlying philosophy has “no place for reality and truth” (Barnes-Holmes).

Unfortunately, in my experience the above issues seem to be rather symptomatic of the mindfulness community: For one, there is an often lopsided, clearly dogmatic view of societal matters even when a bit of open-minded consideration would show that things are not as clear cut as one might be tempted to believe (e.g., Brexit: compare the discussion above), despite a deeply ingrained self-image of being open-minded and flexible. Equally dogmatic seems to be the tendency among some in the community to use religion to criticize scientifically proven therapies: Priests thankfully learned to stop interfering in astronomy; why would monks (and others) think they should interfere in clinical psychology? Please note: I do not deny that the observations of monks and other meditators may contain valuable information about the workings of the human mind. But then, the observations of priests and astrologers were important input in the development of scientific astronomy as well; from this one can not conclude that astrologers and priests should have a say in how to conduct astronomy, nor that religion should dictate how to conduct psychology, medicine and/or psychotherapy.

1.2 Overview

If the above observations are anywhere near how things really are, there is an urgent need to study the relationship of dogmatism (and in particular ethical dogmatism) with mindfulness and Buddhism. This is of course a huge endeavour, in this article I will mainly concentrate on the psychological angle. I show that a number of results from psychological science suggest the need to exercise increased humility in regard to our current ability to “see things as they really are” or for “pure awareness,” and thus more restraint in the urge to meddle in others decisions. I will also briefly sketch why I believe that ancient wisdom suggests the same. This humility seems to be missing (see examples above and in sections 3, 6.1),

both in (some? many? most?) traditional Buddhists and in (most, as far as I can tell) secular mindfulness practitioners.

Here is an outline of the argument for more humility from the point of view of science:

1. There are serious limitations in the human capacity to see and acknowledge reality (section 2.1), including negativity bias, groupthink, bias blind spot, and many more.
2. Perceived or real expertise does not cure that (section 2.2).
3. The feeling of “doing the right thing” seems more apt to lead to overconfidence in one’s judgements and opinions than to seeing things as they really are (section 3).
4. Feeling certain is an unreliable guide too, in particular in ethical matters (sections 4.1&4.2). Also, the existence of expertise in ethics is at least doubtful (section 4.3).
5. I take it for granted that if I have an impaired ability to “see things as they really are” then I should restrain my urges to tell others how to behave. Discussing this would be beyond the scope of this article,⁴ but compare the remarks on group think and the importance of independence in section 2.1.

From the point of view of ancient wisdom this is because:

1. “Those trained in Buddhist practices seem to be human as well [...] Buddhism as practiced and institutionalized over the centuries is no miracle cure for human ills [...] reference to Buddhist teachings alone is not suitable for claiming the moral high ground” (section 2.3).

⁴So are philosophical topics like self-other asymmetry and the justify-require distinction; and psychological topics like self-determination theory and no(t)-self vs. morality.

2. It is highly doubtful that anyone knows with any certainty what the Buddha really said (section 5.1, see also section 4 on certainty).
3. Even if we assume the Pali Canon to be more or less the Buddha's word, it seems to be more about practicalities than what a society steeped in Christian "original sin" ideology means by ethics and morality.⁵ The Atthakavagga and possible connections to Pyrrhonism also suggest that dogmatic morality is not native to Buddhism (section 5.2).
4. There seems to be a permanent craving to "save the world" widely spread in supposedly secular mindfulness circles (and the rest of our society, including many of those who consider themselves Buddhists) likely due to Christian cognitive dissonance (section 5.3). Craving (compulsion, thirst, etc.) is of course antithetical to Buddhism and mindfulness (section 6.3).
5. Given these points, compassion and proper humility should let us "direct our sympathy and support to those who face dilemmas, convince us not to reproach those whose chosen resolution differs from our own" (section 6.2)

1.3 Method

The point mentioned above concerning Christian cognitive dissonance already points to the fact that the issue here is more than just a few arguments in favor or against some mere opinion in a discussion. Rather,

⁵ Lee (3), in the context of a discussion of ethics and Zhuangzi's Daoism, also notes 'the myopic ways in which contemporary scholars, particularly those influenced by the global West, tend to understand "morality" as a system of obligations.' I would add that it is not only scholars who have a parochial view of morality. Cf. Moeller, chapter 1.

the underlying problem seems to be one of mindset. Beyond providing an introduction to relevant aspects of the psychology of judgement and decision making (a branch of science important to, but widely neglected in, discussions related to mindfulness), this article tries to make this underlying *dogmatic mindset* salient. In other words, this article is largely about what might be called the terms of the debate around mindfulness and ethics, rather than particular arguments. In view of this, I hesitate to discuss specific arguments (an exception is a discussion of the widely used “sniper example” in section 6.1). I do, nevertheless, freely and consciously use what seem to me the most illuminating and important examples from history, even if some of these might “rile” a number of readers, as a reviewer put it – not least because the incoherence between self-perceived mindfulness and ethics on the one hand, and dogmatic reaction to unwelcome relevant information on the other, is part of what this article wants to make salient.

In addition, the goal to make the unrecognized underlying mindset visible also necessitates a writing style that is, in parts, somewhat less restrained than academic writing usually is. An unfortunate side effect is that the observations in this article are sometimes mistaken as personal criticisms, according to feedback on earlier drafts. Of course, in the public perception, mindfulness is closely identified with certain people. Nevertheless, whatever critical remarks are presented here are *about mindsets and opinions, not the people who hold them*.⁶

2. Intuition

2.1 *Errare humanum est (to err is human)*

⁶ In the spirit of distinguishing between acts and the persons who perform them, as it is central to Person-centered Therapy, and the concept of defusion (here between other persons and their opinions) from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

An ancient Egyptian papyrus contains some medical observations that clearly surprised its author: Why would a *head* wound interfere with a person's *walking*? Why would another head wound let a person lose consciousness of his arms and let his phallus be erect? (Changeux 3). Today's readers of course know how important the brain is in organizing the body, but this papyrus can remind us how non-obvious this fact is. Even today we speak of "heart and head" when we really mean something like "limbic system and pre-frontal cortex": it seems intuitive that emotions "sit" in the heart, because that is what we feel pounding when we get excited. Very intuitive, but misleading.

Would you notice if you rotated at 1000 kph? Well, where I am sitting (latitude 48°) the earth rotates at approximately that speed. Our perception is that we are still; that the earth is rotating fast is entirely counter-intuitive. Many other examples could be given for the failures of human intuition (Taleb). Intuitive physics and probability are areas in which human intuition tends to perform badly, but they are not the only ones by far. On the other hand, many things we do very well intuitively, from recognizing faces to driving a car (once we have practiced it sufficiently), as pointed out by Gigerenzer and others.

For which tasks is our intuition well-suited? Likely for those where during our evolution it was important that they be performed accurately (rather than, for instance, being performed safely) and those that were often repeated with timely and unambiguous feedback (Hogarth). However, in many ways our intuitions lead us systematically away from "seeing things as they really are" (which Buddhists claim is part of their path). In many cases this is because intuitive errors can be adaptive (for example, erring on the side of physical safety at the cost of missed opportunities can be advantageous), and likely were so, at least under the evolutionary conditions of the distant past (see Scheibehenne et al. for

the case of biased probability estimates). Often, then, our intuitions distort our view.

There is a vast psychological literature related to the precise definition of intuition, dual processing models, heuristics, and biases, and so forth, which cannot be fully reviewed here.⁷ Here I will briefly sketch a small selection of biases that will be important in the following, and a few related topics.

Cognitive dissonance. In a famous episode in the history of psychology, researchers observed a secretive group that believed it had received messages from a faraway planet heralding the end of the world on 21 December 1955. The group believed that shortly before this date, a spaceship would come and take them away to safety on that planet. The group assembled on the evening before; the UFO did not come and the world did not end. But neither did the belief! Not only did some in the group persist in their belief, the formerly secretive group started proselytizing. This was the starting point and paradigmatic example for the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger et al.; Cooper).

Pseudoscience. The group in the previous example managed to convince themselves that the failure of the yearned-for UFO to appear did not disprove their belief. Rather, they rationalized that their faith and dedication made God spare earth from destruction. For those wedded to a certain belief there is almost always a way to avoid acknowledging its refutation. Indeed, many belief systems are self-validating in the sense that they have in-built mechanisms that help to deflect whatever contradictions might appear (Boudry and Braeckman). For example, if one's belief system includes the idea that any criticism of one's beliefs arises

⁷For overviews and discussions see for example, Kahneman; Pohl; Evans and Stanovich; Shah and Oppenheimer.

from the unconscious personal motives of the critics, it is easy to avoid facing inconvenient facts.⁸

Saliency, base rate neglect, selection biases. The world is a complicated place and we cannot attend to all potentially relevant information. The result is that information that attracts attention, sticks out, is special, and is salient, has an undue influence on us. Similarly, we think *we* are special: it will not happen to us, we do not make that mistake, this time is different, etc. And indeed, in some ways each of us *is* special, and in some (rare) cases things really are different—but much less often than we feel. Similar biases are selection biases, like the survivor bias. A classic example of the latter was displayed by the friend in the following story reported by the Roman philosopher-politician Cicero:

Diagoras, who is called the atheist, being at Samothrace, one of his friends showed him several pictures of people who had endured very dangerous storms; “See,” says he, “you who deny a providence, how many have been saved by their prayers to the Gods.” “Ay,” says Diagoras, “I see those who were saved, but where are those painted who were shipwrecked?” (<http://thriceholy.net/Texts/Cicero3.html>)

Group think. If our information processing and decision-making capacities are indeed limited, should we prefer collective decision making? Surowiecki gives many examples where groups did indeed make better decisions. However, some conditions are required for accurate collective decisions: every person involved needs to have at least a minimum of relevant knowledge; on average, opinions have to be unbiased and people have to reason independently. The latter condition, in particular, is often violated. We are much too easily influenced or manipulated by

⁸ Zimmer presents an impressive example.

others (see, for example, Cialdini; Levine; Bénabou; Szanto et al.). Even when we realize that a group is moving in the wrong direction, it often seems safer for us to go along rather than dissent. This was once succinctly and memorably expressed by the famous investor Warren Buffett: “Lemmings as a group have a rotten image, but no individual lemming ever got bad press.”⁹ It is also worth noting that group think can magnify the effects of other biases. If certain ideas or facts get more attention due to selection bias, the apparent agreement of others will instill even more confidence and reduce even more the chances of complementary or alternative information getting accepted. Note that this downward spiral in collective cognition can work quite automatically, without any improper intent. If, in all sincerity, someone holds a more popular opinion, this will tend to spread and be perceived as more credible simply because of popularity, independent of whatever merit that opinion may or may not have. (Hence, if you value truth, beware of agreement among your peers.)

Negativity bias. Another well-known bias is overemphasis of the negative. We pay more attention to negative than positive aspects of our experience (Baumeister et al.; Rozin and Royzman). Again, there may be evolutionary reasons; it may, at least in the short term, have been less important for our ancestors to find tasty food than it was to avoid becoming food for someone else. The potentially negative attracts more attention than opportunities. Even so, we tend to see things more bleakly than they really are. Social transmission of information apparently contributes to this bias (Bebbington et al.).

Bias blind spot and overconfidence. Not only do we not realize the deficiencies in our judgements and decisions, we also tend to be overconfident in them. Overconfidence may also be an evolutionary acquired trait

⁹ Warren Buffett: Chairman's letter to the Shareholders of Berkshire Hathaway Inc., 1984 edition. <http://www.berkshirehathaway.com/letters/1984.html>

(Johnson and Fowler). DeBondt and Thaler considered the possibility that people are overconfident to be “. . . perhaps the most robust finding in the psychology of judgment” (389). We tend to be blind to our own biases independently of cognitive ability (West et al.). No wonder Nassim Taleb spoke of the “epistemic arrogance” of humanity (17).

These serious limitations in the human capacity to acknowledge reality are nicely summarized in a quote from Daniel Kahneman who refers to the human brain in intuitive processing mode as “a machine for jumping to conclusions” (79).

2.2 Experts are human too

To some extent, intuition is trainable. Nevertheless, expertise in general and expert intuition in particular have their limits. Just a few examples:

In a well-known in-depth study of the ability of political experts to forecast events, this ability turned out to be rather small and inversely related to experts' self-confidence:

. . . the best forecasters and timeliest belief updaters shared a self-deprecating style of thinking that spared them some of the big mistakes to which their more ideologically exuberant colleagues were prone. There is often a curiously inverse relationship between how well forecasters thought they were doing and how well they did (Tetlock, xi).

Similar doubts as to at least some forms of perceived expertise are suggested by “the historical record of philosophical argumentation, which is a track record that is marked by an abundance of alternative theories and serious problems for those theories” (Mizrahi). This may be due to shortcomings in supposedly expert philosophical intuition (com-

pare, for example, Nado or Buckwalter). Such shortcomings have been well documented in ethical “expert” evaluation of moral dilemmas in particular, where such irrelevant features as, for example, the order in which information is presented, has considerable influence.

Stephen Greenspan, a well-known psychologist, published a book in 2008 entitled *Annals of Gullibility* in which he documented many cases of credulity and gave advice for how to avoid this. About a year later he lost a considerable part of his savings in the Madoff scam (Henriques). Freedman provides many more examples of expert errors.

Of particular interest here is the work of Schwitzgebel (“Perplexities”), which has shown problems with introspection even among specially trained psychologists. Finally, it bears mentioning that—certain popular memes notwithstanding—expertise does not inoculate against overconfidence (for example, Atir et al.; Fisher and Keil).

2.3 *Sangha humanum est*

Those trained in Buddhist practices seem to be human as well. Even though there is some evidence that mindfulness practice improves decision making (for example, Hafenbrack et al), it seems far from clear which aspects of decision making are improved and to what extent. Verhaeghen showed that Buddhist practice improves judgment in important matters only to a limited extent and observed that introspection is an unreliable guide to self-knowledge even for meditators (at least as long as one does not have a “tremendous” amount of practice):

. . . only the meditators with a tremendous amount of meditation experience succeeded in actually meditating with only minimal stirrings of a sense of self, although the less accomplished meditators were clearly convinced that

they succeeded in doing this as well . . . a finding that should inspire humility. (Verhaeghen 31)

In moral matters, things may be similar; in the Seventeenth century, the fifth Dalai Lama declared a Mongolian ruler to be a Bodhisattva because that ruler had intervened militarily to preserve the Dalai Lama's power (Damoser 17). Examples of Buddhist clergy who may not always show good judgment range from infighting among Tibetan Buddhists and the infamous Japanese warrior monks of Mount Hiei to certain present day bigoted and belligerent monks in countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar. In fact, Michael Jerryson wrote in the introduction to *Buddhist Warfare*, "Since the inception of Buddhist traditions 2,500 years ago, there have been numerous individual and structural cases of prolonged Buddhist violence" (3).

This, of course, need not mean that Buddhism itself is somehow deficient; it does not even preclude the possibility that Buddhists on average might behave better (whatever exactly that may mean) than others. But it does show that Buddhism as practiced and institutionalized over the centuries is no miracle cure for human ills. In other words, reference to Buddhist teachings alone is not suitable for claiming the moral high ground (to the extent that there is such a thing in the first place). To put it even more bluntly: if indeed ". . . the scorn evident in some of the criticisms (of secular Mindfulness Based Interventions) is quite stunning" (Harrington and Dunne), it seems to me that those showing such condescending arrogance towards whoever uses modern secular MBIs as scientifically proven ways to relieve very real and present suffering have a lot of explaining to do.

Humans tend to be error-prone in our judgments and decisions, and this holds also for various kinds of experts, including meditators and Buddhist monks. Nevertheless, this does not prevent us from frequently feeling certain about our judgments, and in particular about our moral

judgments. In the next two sections I consider this feeling of certainty from the psychological angle, then in section 5 with regard to Buddhist traditions.

3. Righteousness

People do not usually go around thinking: “I want to do something evil.” Even in the most extreme cases, at least many of those involved believe they are doing good:

Stalin and Hitler both claimed throughout their political careers to be victims. They persuaded millions of other people that they, too, were victims: of an international capitalist or Jewish conspiracy. . . . No major war or act of mass killing in the twentieth century began without the aggressors or perpetrators first claiming innocence and victimhood. (Snyder 399)

As the historian Claudia Koonz put it: “The road to Auschwitz was paved with righteousness.” Moeller notes that “Actions performed self-righteously always feel right to the self that performs them. People commit genocide not because they believe that it is immoral, but for the exact opposite reason” (31).

Pointing out that even Nazis often subjectively thought to do “the right thing” easily elicits a gut reaction of “impossible.” That this is just another example of human intuition failure is attested by the fact that this gut reaction is very often absent in the context of others of the great crimes of recent history, for example by communists. After all,

Stalin’s own record of mass murder was almost as imposing as Hitler’s. . . . Stalin knew what would happen when

he seized food from the starving peasants of Ukraine in 1933, just as Hitler knew what could be expected when he deprived Soviet prisoners of war of food eight years later. In both cases, more than three million people died. The hundreds of thousands of Soviet peasants and workers shot during the Great Terror of 1937 were victims of express directives of Stalin, just as the millions of Jews shot and gassed between 1941 and 1945 were victims of an explicit policy by Hitler. (Snyder iv)

Nor is it true that Stalin perverted a morally sound legacy of Lenin's (Gellately), as is sometimes claimed, nor is it an isolated case in the history of communism; think of North Korea, China, the unbelievable brutality of Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, or the Maoist Sendero Luminoso terrorists in Peru, not to mention the mass executions after the Cuban revolution, the murderous rampages of the Brigade Rosse in Italy, the Montoneros in Buenos Aires, the Rote Armee Fraktion in Germany, or the Japanese Red Army.

Recently I noticed that a student group in my hometown intends to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the communist "October Revolution." Celebrating a century of Gulag, intentional mass starvation, mass shootings and abuse of psychiatry for political purposes, parts of academia manage to make Mr. Trump look almost reasonable by comparison.¹⁰ That raises the question: why do those who claim to promote and who try to embody mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion seem to choose their bad examples always from one part of the political landscape? Why did a world famous mindfulness teacher in a seminar I attended laud the recent economic progress of China (rightly so), stressing

¹⁰ So, I implicitly do comment on Mr. Trump, after all. By the way, when you read my statement above in which I said that I would not comment on him, did your brain jump to any conclusions regarding what my attitude towards him might be?

that this was under communist rule, but neglect to mention the millions who slowly starved to a gruesome death in Mao's Great Famine (Jisheng) or that China's impressive recent progress in fighting poverty is the result of Deng's *pro-market* economic reforms? To me it seems that the warm glow of "doing the (apparently) right thing" is in such cases trumping the tender shoots of openness and balance that mindfulness is meant to nourish—even for someone smart and well-trained and with the best intentions.

4. Certainty

4.1 Certainty about our motives?

In the film "The Devil's Advocate," Keanu Reeves played a lawyer working for the devil (Al Pacino). When the lawyer started to have second thoughts about the work he was doing, the devil convinced him to continue by reminding him of all the good he could later do with the fruits of his labor. After the lawyer left the scene the devil turned to the camera and declared: "Vanity: my favorite sin!"

Research has come up with convincing evidence that much human behavior is characterized by moral hypocrisy (Batson), that people mostly tend to prefer *feeling* moral to *acting* morally (Gino et al.), that they are self-righteous (Klein and Epley), that beliefs adjust to moral evaluations rather than the other way around (Liu and Ditto), and that supposedly altruistic punishment of transgressors serves self-interest (Krasnowet al.).

But surely not *us*? Remember the discussion of base rate neglect above: if, in controlled experiments, eighty percent of people display hypocrisy, how sure can you be that you are among the small minority who does not?

4.2 Certainty about consequences?

Ill-founded certainty is a danger as well when it comes to forecasting the consequences of different courses of action. We have seen above that even expert political forecasters are far from making reliable forecasts. Another well-known example is how well-intended attempts to prevent wildfires in national parks led to fewer but much more severe outbreaks.

Even decisions that seem obviously correct can have unintended outcomes. What could be more obviously positive than donating for the victims of civil war? Polman explains how this had severe negative consequences in cases where local war lords realized that more images of suffering in worldwide media mean more aid money—aid that, at least part of which, can be redirected into their own pockets.¹¹

4.3 Certainty delegated: moral expertise?

Perhaps experts, even if they cannot reliably forecast the consequences of actions in complex situations, or keep irrelevant features of moral dilemmas out of consideration (see above), might at least be better, less prone to hypocrisy, for example, at everyday moral behavior? Alas, it seems not to be the case. Eric Schwitzgebel, in a series of publications, studied the behavior of moral philosophers. For example, he analyzed data from the university library and found that books concerning ethics had a fifty percent higher(!) probability of disappearing from the library than other scholarly literature (“Ethicists”). Later studies, for example involving payment of conference fees, again suggested that intensive professional preoccupation with ethics and morality leads to behavior that is at best at par with that of other people.

¹¹ See also Nunn and Qian.

5. Buddhism

Here is a brief summary up to this point: Modern mindfulness interventions have been rigorously proven to alleviate suffering, nevertheless, they have been criticized on supposedly moral grounds. In the previous sections I argued that psychology provides good reasons to doubt such moral judgments, even when they are accompanied by feelings of certainty and/or come from presumed experts in morality. In the present section I will sketch some considerations which make it appear doubtful that the teachings of the Buddha can be used to provide a firm basis for these criticisms of MBIs.

I hope no one misinterprets the following observations as a disparagement of the Buddha, the *Dharma*, or the *Saṅgha* (or anyone else for that matter); but just in case, I want to recall the words attributed to the Buddha in the very first *sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*:

‘Monks, if anyone should speak in disparagement of me, of the Dhamma or of the Saṅgha, you should not be angry, resentful or upset on that account. . . . For if . . . you are angry or displeased, can you recognise whether what they say is right or not?’ ‘No, Lord’ (*Brahmājāla Sutta* DN 1, translated by Walshe).¹²

5.1 Original teachings of the Buddha?

A relevant point in regard to the article mentioned in the introduction is that it referred to the original teachings of the Buddha (Kabat-Zinn 1125). Many others also explicitly or (usually) implicitly claim that their beliefs

¹² All following quotations from the *Dīgha Nikāya* are from this translation.

derive authority from these original teachings. I am wondering how they can know what these were. After all, I find it exceedingly improbable when it is reported about the Buddha that “. . . on the soles of his feet are wheels with a thousand spokes” (*Mahāpadāna Sutta*, DN 14.1.22); that in the past, people had a life-span of 80000 years (DN 14.1.7); that he had the “miracle of psychic power [and] telepathy” (*Kevaddha Sutta*, DN 11.3); or, that with “the divine ear, purified and surpassing that of human beings, he hears sounds both divine and human” (*Samaññaphala Sutta*, DN 2.89). Clearly, at least considerable parts of the *suttas* cannot be taken literally. Even taking the optimistic point of view that such examples of supernatural beliefs might not be part of the Buddha’s original teachings but are later additions, one may wonder what else was added, and what—if anything—is original teaching.

It would seem to be a difficult task to extract the original teaching from the sources given that there apparently is not even agreement among the experts whether the picture painted by the *suttas* is broadly consistent with the archaeological record (Sujato and Brahmali) or not (Beckwith). Further, different branches of Buddhism apparently disagree on quite substantial matters. *Anattā* seems pretty central to Buddhism, so the question of whether there is any kind of substantial self does not sound irrelevant (Harvey 93); nor is the question of whether liberating insight is part of the original teaching (Bronkhorst). Or take duality: “Bhikkhu Bodhi . . . holds that the acceptance of the concept of nonduality by Mahayana Buddhisms is incompatible with Theravada Buddhism’s framework that derives the rationale for ardent practice from the duality of *samsara* (the repeating cycle of rebirth) and *Nibbana* (the extinguishing of ill will, greed, and delusion)” (Monteiro et al.). Additional examples include whether there is subtle pride in Arhats, whether Arhats develop further, and whether Bodhisattvas can fall back to the supposedly lesser goal of Arhatship (Harvey 93).

Yet another issue is the fact that the teaching was first transmitted exclusively orally. It is sometimes argued that memory was much better in cultures without writing—maybe so, but a canon of *suttas* which amounts to *thousands* of printed pages? Not to mention the feat of recalling all these teachings after the Buddha's death was supposedly performed by a single person, Ānanda (Gombrich 100). It is not reassuring that the same Ānanda was faulted by the Buddha for having repeatedly missed “a broad hint, such a clear sign” that the Buddha intended to soon enter *parinibbāna*, (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16.3.40) and that he misunderstood the doctrine of dependent origination (*Mahanidāna Sutta*, DN 15.1). Nor can I follow claims that the *Sangha* always tried to preserve the core of the teaching verbatim (Gombrich 102), given that this did not seem to apply in later periods¹³. Similarly, Anālayo reports that already right after the Buddha's death, at the very first recitation of the *suttas*, “a central concern” was “to affirm communal harmony”; so, one may wonder to what extent the result represents a faithful rendering of the Buddha's original teachings.

Another point which worries me is the discrepancies between versions of canonical texts and our ability to properly understand them in the first place. After all, research brought to light “literally thousands of differences between versions” (Gombrich 98). Yet, Gombrich continues “. . . but I have yet to see another version of a Pali text which makes me interpret it differently.” What bothers me is that Gombrich also seems to say that a simple and perfectly reasonable change in the translation of a single word (reading an ablative where “. . . all previous translators took the word . . . as a dative”) led to a wholesale reinterpretation of an important point in the *Ṛg Veda* (Gombrich 32). Could alternative readings also have been overlooked in the Buddhist texts, despite all the ingenuity and hard work that went into translation and interpretation? Could

¹³ For example, in early Chan Buddhism, see Yampolsky.

there be a certain amount of group think in translations? Even if one thinks it appropriate to use traditional religious texts to judge clinically proven MBIs, how certain can one be of the true meaning of those texts?

Even when all (existing, or maybe even all recorded) traditions agree on a point (for example, the eightfold path) there is still a problem with concluding that it is likely part of the original teaching: this conclusion would only be justified if the probability of transmission of a part of the teaching were independent of its content. Hypothetically, for instance, assume that the original teaching of the Buddha stressed the importance of a solitary and inconvenient life style. Further suppose that later interpretations deny this, consequently being relatively more popular with the laity. The latter would have a higher probability of continuing existence in circumstances such as the persecutions under the late Tang dynasty (Harvey 223), even though they lead away from the original teaching.¹⁴

There is already a huge literature pointing out inconsistencies and other problems with the traditional texts. I am not trying to add anything original to this (I am nowhere near knowledgeable enough to do that). Rather, my point is that even a cursory reading shows the burden of proof to be on those claiming to represent the original teachings of the Buddha¹⁵: how sure can you be that you indeed do? What exactly is your confidence based on?

¹⁴ Schopen (28) gives another argument of why uniformity of a teaching across traditions does not prove that this teaching goes back to the Buddha.

¹⁵ Of course, even if present day teachings were far away from the original, they and the Sangha would still serve valuable purposes like preserving whatever truly original teaching might be buried in the traditions, catering to people's emotional and spiritual needs, motivating at least some to go on their own spiritual quest, and so on. This is unrelated to the topic of this article, the psychology of mindfulness dogmatism.

5.2 Inferior matters

In the previous subsection I argued that at least considerable parts of the Pali canon cannot be taken at face value. I also argued that whoever claims to derive moral authority from representing the original teachings of the Buddha owns us both a clear statement regarding which teachings they refer to and proof that these specific teachings were really taught by the Buddha.

Nevertheless, some insist that the whole Pali canon indeed faithfully represents the original teachings. But even in this case there seem reasons to doubt that the Buddha would prefer supposed moral truths to the proven relief of suffering which MBIs provide. After all, we read him talking about “elementary, inferior matters for which the worldling would praise” the *Tathāgata*—and these “inferior matters” are matters of moral conduct (DN 1.1.27): from refraining from killing (DN 1.1.8) to not eating at night (*Brahmajāla Sutta* DN 1).

Moreover, the *Dīgha Nikāya* provides two more observations which point to the same conclusion. First, the Buddha recommends morality to lay people first of all as a means to obtain wealth. “Five advantages to one of good morality and of success in morality. What are they? In the first place, through careful attention to his affairs he gains much wealth” (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16.1.24). Second, the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* (DN 3.1.20) tells us that in a discussion, the Buddha seemed to threaten his interlocutor stating “If you don’t answer, or evade the issue, if you keep silent or go away, your head will split into seven pieces.”

Finally, it is worth noting that right after the death of the Buddha there was already disagreement as to which rules for *bhikkhus* could (or maybe should) be abolished, a question which is “not a light matter” (Anālayo, 3). Anālayo continues by remarking on the “danger of mistaking the means of moral conduct for being the goal” and reminds us that

Needless to say, the main task to be accomplished from the normative viewpoint of early Buddhist thought is awakening. . . . Reaching the first level of awakening in turn entails precisely the overcoming of the fetter of dogmatic adherence to rules and observances (Anālayo, 6).

5.3 *The end is nigh, as usual*

Deja-vu all over again: the end of the world is near, as it has seemed countless times before. From the apocalyptic visions of John through various other esoteric prophecies like those of Nostradamus or “scientifically proven” disasters like Peak Oil or *Waldsterben* in the recent past, there seems to be a permanent feeling that the end of the world is near and “we” need to save it.

In a fascinating new book, German historian Johannes Fried recalls that early Christians expected Judgment Day to come within the near future. Fried argues that the failure of the world to end led them to the belief that their own virtuous behavior had moved God to postpone the day of reckoning,¹⁶ and their missionary zeal increased despite the disconfirmation of their belief.¹⁷ (parallels to the previous story concerning cognitive dissonance are striking). This in turn has caused a permanent

¹⁶ S.26: “Die Christen erkannten in Jesus von Nazareth den Messias, der seine Wiederkehr für Herrschaft und Gericht für ‘bald’ angekündigt hatte.[...] Als er nicht kam, mußte seine Botschaft umgedeutet werden.”

¹⁷ S.27: “So missionierten die Christen gerade, als sich die Wiederkehr des Herrn verzögerte [. . .] ihre immer neu zu aktualisierende Erwartungs- und Untergangsbotschaft [. . .].”

craving to “save the world” to become deeply ingrained in “Western” culture, whether Christian or secular.¹⁸

Given that modern Buddhism is heavily influenced by “Western” culture (Sharf), that could be another indication that excessive moralizing is not native to Buddhism; insofar as such tendencies appear in contemporary Buddhism, they might very well be imports, at least in part. Others have expressed similar views: “critics have cynically nicknamed the mainstream introduction of secular mindfulness as ‘McMindfulness’; however, this perspective may be a distinctly Westernized view” (Murphy). Furthermore, “The larger clinical and religious community, however, has not always been troubled by the idea that meditation might sometimes be used as a highly pragmatic remedy for various ailments. Why, then, are people troubled now?” (Harrington and Dunne).

Finally, if Beckwith is right at least in so far that the comparison with Greek skeptical philosophy in the tradition of Pyrrho of Elis can tell us something about early Buddhism,¹⁹ the absence of excessive moralizing in skeptical philosophy and its emphasis on withholding judgments

¹⁸ S.13f: “Dem Untergang sind wir nicht entronnen. Seine Erwartung ist nicht erledigt. Die Menschheit ist nicht von Angst befreit. Das Weltende bleibt präsent, jedenfalls im ‘Westen’. [...] Es droht und wühlt im kulturellen Gedächtnis, scheint zum Handeln zu zwingen und führt, so steht es zu befürchten, durch Angstreaktionen reale Untergänge herauf.”

S.24f: “Gottgefälliges Tun hielt den Untergang auf [. . .] Die Erwartung des Untergangs überdauerte die Zeiten und mit ihr der Wille zur Weltrettung. [. . .] Der Weltuntergang bedurfte gelehrter Pflege; er blieb sich dabei nicht gleich. [. . .] Säkularisierende, sich aus den Glaubenshorizonten entfernende Umformungen konnten hervortreten [. . .].”

S.35: “Die Endzeit verflüchtigte sich tatsächlich nicht mit der Wissenschaft. Der Weltuntergang findet auch für sie statt; die Prognostik streift sich lediglich andere, eben naturwissenschaftlich und kosmologisch gefärbte Kleider über.”

¹⁹ This would also be consistent with the otherwise highly critical review of Beckwith’s book *Greek Buddha* by Batchelor; see his discussion on p. 202ff.

would yet again point to the same being true of the original teachings of the Buddha.

To avoid misunderstandings, please note what I am *not* saying here:

1. I am not denying that there are serious problems in the world. I am talking about the appropriateness and skillfulness of our emotional reactions. An Aikido Sensei once said, “Just because you are paranoid, that does not mean they are not after you.” True, but it is still better not to be paranoid²⁰ if you want to handle the situation skillfully. Self-overconfident morality which seems driven largely by gut feelings, group think, cognitive dissonance, salience and negativity bias, and other distortions, may instill the warm glow of perceived righteousness, but has otherwise little to recommend it.
2. Nor am I claiming that the culturally ingrained cognitive dissonance of early Christianity is the only source of apocalyptic ideas. But even if similar looking ideas may have arisen in Buddhism independently (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer, 8), it still makes a big difference whether your underlying outlook is basically cyclical, involving repeated rebirth, or a once-and-for-all decision by an omnipotent god in the immediate future. Also, there may be additional important contributors to an overemphasis on risk and negativity in globalized “Western” culture. A natural candidate would be the aging of society, given that older people tend to be more risk averse.

²⁰ Apologists of paranoid cognition will of course deny this and claim that, on the contrary, paranoia is actually indispensable as it supposedly makes you vigilant, energizes, is necessary for collective action, etc.

6. Conclusion

6.1 *Too early to tell, indeed*

Both in the literature and in informal conversation, “. . . the example of the sniper is often used to show how bare attention in itself cannot be called mindfulness as the outcome of this type of attention has unwholesome results (that is, killing someone and therefore violating a primary ethic to do no harm)” (Monteiro et al.). Let us look at a few examples:

On May 27, 1942, snipers in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia shot and fatally wounded SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Nazi security office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*).²¹ Would it really be an obvious good if their attention had been less well trained? Is it truly obvious that the world would be a better place if they had tried but missed their target, maybe because they were not mindful enough? Would that have been a “wholesome result?” What if instead someone had split Heydrich’s head?²²

Suppose in the 1930s a well-trained sniper—a former Shaolin warrior monk, maybe—had managed to kill Mao Zedong, thereby possibly not only sparing Tibetan Buddhists a lot of distress, but also preventing the atrocities of the so-called “Cultural Revolution” and the mass starvations of the Great Famine, which caused *dozens of millions* of agonized deaths (Jisheng). How sure can you be that this would have been, everything considered, an unwholesome result?

²¹ In reality, an attempt at shooting him in an ambush failed; it was a bomb thrown at his car that fatally wounded him. The difference is irrelevant in the present context. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reinhard_Heydrich

²² Compare above DN 3.1.20

6.2 Compassion

Blanket dismissal of teaching mindfulness in certain contexts looks itself rather dubious. Repetti also stressed the importance of context with respect to the sniper example. To me it suggests a serious amount of overconfidence in judgment, likely both in regard to “true morality” and to the ability to foresee consequences. Beyond that, dictating to others how they should make moral decisions might be an expression of another bias—the general human tendency to interfere in others’ lives,²³ which one might well call “moralizing addiction.”²⁴ Would it not be more in line both with modern mindfulness and with traditional Buddhism to compassionately “direct our sympathy and support to those who face dilemmas, convince us not to reproach those whose chosen resolution differs from our own” (Cushman and Young)?

6.3 Wisdom

“I know that I know nothing” is widely admired as an expression of wisdom. Pyrrho—and I believe the Buddha—would have added: “I’m not even sure about that.”²⁵ Psychological research reviewed above confirms that our judgments are highly fallible,²⁶ including in ethical matters, even when we feel certain.

²³ “Meddlesomeness” Kuran (23)

²⁴ In parallel with “ontological addiction” of Shonin et al.

²⁵ After all, both seemed concerned with the pragmatic question of how to live life, rather than with metaphysical or ethical “truths,” (compare Batchelor *After Buddhism* chapter 5) let alone with some supposedly universal morality which they would then dictate to others.

²⁶ However, as mentioned earlier, where helpful for evolutionary success, intuition is likely to be accurate, on average. Also, the scientific method goes some way to reduce

And yet, we cannot simply deny that we often wish things to be different, that life seems in some important way unsatisfactory (*dukkha*).²⁷ According to the Buddhist tradition the root causes of this, as expressed in the second noble truth, are *taṇhā* (thirst, craving) and *upādāna* (clinging); both point to something like inner compulsion as the underlying problem.²⁸ The goal, and in particular the purpose of mindfulness practice, then would be liberation from such inner compulsion. However, overconfident moralizing seems to be among the most treatment-resistant forms of inner compulsion.

The message of this article in a nutshell: *More mindfulness of our human cognitive limitations should lead to less dogmatism in general, and in ethical matters in particular.*

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the impact of our cognitive illusions. The latter, of course, was not yet available to the likes of the Buddha or Pyrrho.

²⁷ For the translation of *dukkha* as "unsatisfactory" see, for example, Peacock (210).

²⁸ I believe that this also fits in very well with recent psychological research; nevertheless, a discussion of this has to wait for another occasion.

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