

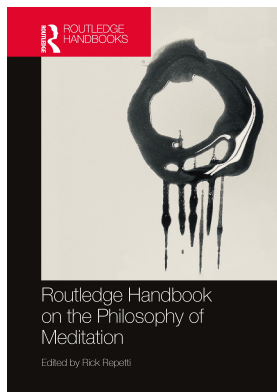
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Rick Repetti

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John Vervaeke

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HOW A PHILOSOPHY OF MEDITATION CAN EXPLORE THE DEEP CONNECTIONS BETWEEN MINDFULNESS AND CONTEMPLATIVE WISDOM

John Vervaeke

1 Introduction

It is a perennial promise of those who teach the practice of mindfulness and those who teach the practice of philosophy that their students will realize a comprehensive change in cognition and behavior that leads to wisdom. There was a longstanding relationship between contemplation and the cultivation of wisdom within the Platonic and Christian-Platonic traditions. However, it is quite unclear today what the relationships are between meditation, contemplation, philosophy, and the cultivation of wisdom. One central task therefore for a philosophy of meditation is to explicate and clarify these relationships. This chapter will undertake that task. This will involve the critical review of the relevant theoretical and empirical research from psychology and cognitive science, but it will also involve the unending task of philosophical reflection upon the nature and practice of philosophy. For we must ask, why is the previously unquestioned connection between contemplation and wisdom, found within ancient philosophy, now largely foreign to the modern practice of philosophy?

This chapter will argue that we must make an integrated use of current and ancient philosophical practice to properly pursue a philosophy of meditation. We must make use of the power of conceptual analysis and meta-theoretical critique that have been honed within academic philosophy, but we will also need to remember that philosophy is the *love* of *wisdom*. Love is not cultivated through analysis and critique, but through transformative practices and commitments that fundamentally alter one's relationship to oneself and to the world.

2 Reformulating the mindfulness construct

While mindfulness is becoming one of the most popular forms of meditation in the West, and is already a bona fide academic topic with a psychological journal dedicated exclusively to it, along with hundreds of published studies,¹ it is also the case that reviews of this literature have found serious methodological flaws (Vervaeke and Ferraro 2016). One plausible reason for this

pattern of results is a deep theoretical confusion within the mindfulness construct as found within psychology (*id.*). Vervaeke and Ferraro (*id.*) argued for four concerns that needed to be addressed in order to reformulate the mindfulness construct to better guide theoretical and empirical investigation of it.

The first concern is that the construct is typically explicated as a feature list. For example, mindfulness is often described as paying attention to the present moment without judgment, and that this practice will make one more insightful and less reactive in one's daily life. Research into the psychology of concepts shows that people typically think of the understanding captured in their concepts to be disclosed by such features lists (Murphy and Medin 1985). A bird has wings and feathers, and it flies. What that same psychology research shows is that such features lists do not contain most of the understanding contained in the concept. This is because such feature lists do not contain the relations between the features, and it is often difficult to express the structural-functional organization that carries a lot of the burden of the meaning of the concept. So, for example, simply gathering together some wings and some feathers, and then flinging them in the air does not constitute a bird. These components must be put together in the right structure so that they function in a bird-like manner.

Notice that reflecting on the psychology of concepts in this way can aid the philosophical project of conceptually analyzing the notion of mindfulness. For we can now ask about the relations between the features found in the standard psychological definitions of mindfulness. We can ask for causal relationships and part-whole relationships. Why would being present cause one to become more insightful? What is the relationship between being present and being less judgmental? As we address these questions, we can begin to distinguish between those features that are states of mind and those that are traits longitudinally acquired. In this way the philosophy of mindfulness can help to transform a misleading features list into a more helpful feature schema.

The second concern raised by Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016) is a failure to distinguish between the language of *training* and the language of *explaining*. Consider the language we use to *train* memory. For example, a powerful memory training technique is the method of loci, which involves memorizing the layout of a familiar building and visualizing or imagining placing relevant images in different rooms. One then remembers by imaginatively moving sequentially from room to room. We often import this spatial metaphor for memory into our language of trying to *explain* how memory works. So, we talk about retrieving a memory that might be close to another memory. However, work on memory seriously undermines the spatial metaphor for memory (Eysenck and Keane 1990). Memories are not stable objects in stable locations that are searched in a sequential manner. One immediately knows that 'splang' is not an English word without searching one's whole lexicon, and while 'blue' and 'grew' are 'close' and 'blue' and 'red' are 'close', we do not find that 'grew' triggers the memory of 'red'. Memories themselves are not stable objects in place. Memory is deeply reconstructive in nature, in which information from different times and contexts is blended together because it makes more sense,² and this makes the information more adaptively useful for the future. There is a clear lesson here, that the language of *training* should not be unquestioningly adopted into our attempts to *explain* a phenomenon, and yet very frequently the language by which meditation is taught is imported into our attempts to scientifically explain mindfulness.

One clear example of this is language around the instruction to focus on the present moment. Meditation instruction often involves the instruction to pay attention to the here and now. Within the dialogical context of the *training* of meditation, the vagueness of this can be pragmatically negotiated. The problem is that 'here' and 'now' are indexicals that are specified by implicit judgments about what is relevant to the speaker. One can use 'here' to indicate one is in

a room, a house, a city, etc. So, we can ask: What is the task to which the use of ‘here’ and ‘now’ are relevant such that the meditator knows the proper scope of paying attention? Answering that question requires that we get clear about what it is to pay attention. Let’s answer these two questions in an integrated manner by challenging the spotlight metaphor of attention, just as we challenged the spatial metaphor for memory.

Mole (2010) points out that we talk about attention as if it is something we directly do, like shining a light on some object. This is the spotlight metaphor for attention. However, note that paying attention is more like training or practicing, i.e., we do these activities by modifying *how* we are doing some more direct action. So, for example, one trains one’s martial art by sparring and one trains chess by playing several games. Training is in this sense inherently adverbial in nature. Similarly, one pays attention not just by seeing, but by looking, or not just by hearing, but by listening. One can pay attention by checking for mistakes in what one is saying or imagining a scene described in a book. There does not seem to be a single simple action that one performs by paying attention. Instead, one seems to be coordinating other processes so that they have more of what Mole describes as cognitive union, i.e., they are co-relevant to the same goal. This coordination process is often largely tacit, as Polanyi (1966) pointed out.

Consider an example used independently by both Polanyi (*id.*) and Merleau-Ponty (2011) of a blind person using a cane to tap on the floor so as to find their way around. Polanyi points out that attention is a relation between a subsidiary, tacit form of awareness and a focal, explicit form of awareness. The blind person is not directly aware of their cane or its tapping. Instead, they are aware *through* (in both senses of beyond, and by means of) the tapping of the cane on the floor. The sensations of movement and stoppage in the cane are coordinated and integrated to afford perception of the floor. Making use of a distinction from Apter (1982), the cane and its tapping movements are *transparent* because one perceives through them. However, one is focally aware of the floor. The floor is *opaque* in the sense that one is looking at it.

Of course, one can ‘shift’ one’s attention by becoming directly aware of the cane, and one thereby loses focal awareness of the floor. One can continue this focal retreat, and shift one’s awareness to focus on how one’s hand is moving to manipulate the cane, and then the cane drops out of focal awareness. One can perform a series of such transparency-to-opacity transformations, thereby disclosing the layers of integration that are going on within attention. Notice how the scope of attention is retreating or shrinking, and that people often express this with metaphors of moving more inward towards some center from which attention originates. One’s attention is becoming increasingly less representational about the world, and – inversely equally – increasingly more disclosing about the actual process of attention itself. This is a shift from *representing* the world to the making-present, or *presencing*, of the process of attention *within* attention. None of this richness of attention is indicated by the spotlight metaphor of attention, and we can now explain being present as reducing the representational content of attention while increasing awareness of the process of attention by performing a series of transparency-to-opacity shifts.

Attention also has another dynamic dimension according to the current psychology and cognitive science of attention. Attention can shift between features and more encompassing gestalts, i.e., structural-functional organizations. Consider the two words together, ‘THE CAT’. However, visualize what they would look like if they were depicted in a font with an *ambiguous* version of the letter ‘H’ that is exactly the same shape as an ambiguous version of the letter ‘A’.

In a non-ambiguous letter ‘A’, both side lines normally slope upward and inward toward the top and touch at their peaks. However, in the ambiguous letter, both side lines slope upward and inward toward the top, as an ‘A’ does, but *without* touching at their peak, as an ‘H’ does not. The ambiguous letter thus somewhat closely resembles both the ‘A’ and the ‘H’, or a hybrid letter

based on both of the otherwise non-ambiguous letters.³ What renders the ambiguous letter as an 'H' in the word 'THE' but renders the identical letter as an 'A' in the word 'CAT', yielding 'THE CAT' instead of, say, 'TAE CHT'?

Notice the dilemma that would arise if attention was thought to operate in a sequential manner. One must first pay attention to the letters (the features) in order to read to and form the word (the gestalt), but one must first pay attention to the word in order to disambiguate the middle letters, for that is how the same shape of the middle letter is interpreted as either an 'H' or an 'A'. Just as attention is operating in a parallel and self-organizing fashion within the transparency/opacity dimension, so it is operating in a parallel and self-organizing fashion within the feature/gestalt dimension. Here the metaphors used are not *in and out*, but *up and down*. Attention is bottom-up from the features and top-down from the gestalt. Note again how the spotlight metaphor of attention completely misses this second dimension of dynamic integration within attention. We can also reduce the representational content of our cognition when one shifts from the gestalt to the featural level.

Thus, being more present may also be explained as the reduction of representational content by the shifting of attention to a more featural level. This is accomplished by focusing on individual sensations rather than the perceptual gestalts that they can form. It is similar to how one could disrupt awareness of what a particular passage of text is conveying by focusing on the letters to the exclusion of the words and sentences of the text. Once again, this shift of attention would have the effect of disclosing the operations of attention as it attempts to make sense of the world. This would involve a shift from modeling the world to modeling the modeling/sense making process itself.

Finally, note that while these two processes are not analytically identical, they frequently causally interact and function together. One can step back increasingly into the mind while increasingly breaking up gestalts of perception and vice versa. These two processes can undergo cognitive unison when they share the goal of reducing representational content and disclosing the enactment of attention. Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016) propose that this is what is going on when one is engaging in being present within the practice of mindfulness meditation. An important strength of this proposal is that it aligns very closely with current proposals of the processes that afford insight. These proposals are independent from the study of mindfulness and therefore they provide powerful convergence with this proposal about mindfulness, while also making explicit how it is that being present could cause one to become more insightful in nature.

Insight research by Knoblich et al. (1999), discussed further in Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016), proposes that there are two processes that help to increase the chances of insight occurring. One is 'chunk decomposition', which is exactly the process of breaking up gestalts into their component features. Another process is 'constraint relaxation' or 'deautomatization'. This involves relaxing the implicit patterns of constraint that are automatically activated when one attempts to solve a problem and that are causing one to mis-frame the problem and thereby fail to solve it. So, for example, in the famous nine dot problem in which one is confronted with three sets of three dots, each three dots in a row or column of which form the shape of a line. The task is to connect all nine dots with four straight lines, and one must start every line other than the first one from the terminus of the previous line. People initially think this will be an easy problem, but they quickly find that each attempt leaves a dot unconnected. This happens because individuals automatically frame the nine dots as a square and that framing constrains their attention to the square and the space within it, while they also frame the problem as a standard connect-the-dots problem. One needs to break up the gestalt of the square while realizing that one can change direction in a non-dot location.

In related work, DeYoung, Flanders, and Peterson (2008) provide evidence that one's ability to break frame in this manner is predictive of insight. One needs to direct attention to break up gestalts and to deautomatize one's tacit framing of the problem by doing a transparency-to-opacity shift that discloses that framing. By reformulating the mindfulness construct, we can replace the language of training with the language of explaining, and then address the causal relations between elements of a features list, and thereby start converting said list into a feature schema. We can explain how being present affords insight because being present involves the frame-breaking that promotes insight.

However, it is apparent that we can direct attention not only to break frame, but it can also be directed to making a new or unfamiliar frame. We can see objects and events as features within larger gestalts through which we can become aware of underlying patterns and principles. We can move from feature to gestalt while also going from looking *at* things (opacity) to looking *through* them (transparency) to an underlying reality. The ancient Greek word for this directing of attention is '*theoria*', and it is the etymological root of our word 'theory', because in a theory we form larger gestalts through which we see deeper realities. However, when '*theoria*' was translated into Latin it was translated as '*contemplatio*', from which we get our word '*contemplation*'. Originally, *theoria* was a contemplative activity in which one was directing one's attention to catch a vision of ontologically deeper patterns and principles. This directing of attention to make a larger frame is also predictive of an insight.⁴ One such example is work done by Baker-Sennett and Ceci (1996) in which participants were tested on their ability to cognitively leap.⁵ Participants were given dots on a computer screen. At regular intervals, more dots were added. Eventually a picture would form, say, of a sofa. Good leapers were the ones that could both leap earlier and more accurately. Notice that such cognitive leaping requires gathering the dots into a gestalt, and to go from looking at the dots to looking through them to what they represent. Such cognitive leaping is predictive of insight problem solving.

This confirmation makes good sense. Consider again the nine-dot problem. Simply breaking the frame is necessary, but not sufficient, for insight. One must also move attention outside the projected square and realize how making a non-dot turn can allow one to connect the dots in a new way. Let us differentiate between meditation and contemplation, while both acknowledging the multiple possible meanings of these terms, some of which overlap, on the one hand, but setting aside other possible meanings, and only focusing on the different senses of the two terms needed to make the following point, on the other hand. Thus, if *meditation* involves taking off the metaphorical glasses of our mental framing to look at our mental lens for distorting factors, then *contemplation* involves putting them on again to see if we can see the world anew and better.

Meditation in this sense thus directs attention to break up gestalts and do transparency-to-opacity shifting that can break up misleading framing. And contemplation in this sense directs attention to form new larger gestalts through which one can realize deeper patterns and principles by doing an opacity-to-transparency shift in a way that is analogous to the blind person not looking at their cane but at the world through it. In this way contemplation affords a new framing of reality. Each process corrects and constrains the other, and them working together increases the probability of the reframing that generates the 'aha!' moment of insight. Breaking frame and making frame are coordinated into reframing.

Consider again the analogy of the eyeglasses. One cannot tell if one has removed a distorting factor from one's glasses until one puts them back on to see if one can now see the world better than before. More clearly seeing through one's glasses sensitizes one to noticing the possibility that there may be something on the lens that is distorting one's vision. Many Buddhist traditions do not just teach a meditative practice such as *vipassanā* (literally, 'insight'; non-literally, 'mindfulness'), but they also teach contemplative practices such as *metta* (loving-kindness, a compassion/

benevolence cultivating practice) and contemplating the three marks of existence (impermanence, impersonality, unsatisfactoriness). In these practices attention is directed outward into more comprehensive and deeper patterns. Very often mindfulness-cultivating practices form an ecology of practices in which the components are coordinated together in mutual constraint, affordance, and correction.

This brings up the fourth concern Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016) raised about current mindfulness research. (The third concern about development will be addressed below in the discussion about wisdom.) Mindfulness research has reduced the phenomenon to the practice of meditation and thereby lifted meditation out of a broader ecology of mindfulness practices that interdependently function together. In original cultural settings, meditation is often combined with contemplation, and both are often combined with movement practices and ethical practices that train the transfer of mindfulness skills to real-life situations and problems. In this way, the skills can become virtues. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address the topic of transfer in detail. Suffice it to say that it is important to train processes in a transfer-appropriate manner, and explaining how this works involves investigating a central process of memory, viz., transfer-appropriate processing (Morris, Bransford, and Franks 1977). It is worth remembering that the Sanskrit word for mindfulness, '*sati*', means 'to remember' in the sense of reminding oneself, i.e., it has to do with memory being used in the real-life application of acquired attentional skills that translate in application into ongoing virtues of character. Deikman (1982) argues that mindfulness is ultimately not about altered states of consciousness, but altered traits of character.⁶

Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016) also argue that the complementary skills trained in the meditative and contemplative directing of attention also converge with processes emphasized, again independently from mindfulness research, by current research into self-regulation. Breaking frame helps people to delay gratifying self-destructive impulses, while making frame helps one to cognitively unify one's current situation with one's future goals and self. Making frame helps one to know when to challenge an impulse, and challenging the right impulse at the right time and to the right degree is how one achieves one's long-term goals. This argument affords an explanation of how mindfulness can train reduced reactivity, increased equanimity, and increased self-regulation, and thereby furthers the construction of the theoretical feature schema in place of the mere features list, discussed above. This schema in turn launches an explanation of how mindfulness practices could lead to the cultivation of wisdom.

It is notable that insightfulness and enhanced self-regulation are typically thought of as central traits of the wise individual. It seems very odd to say that someone is wise but not very insightful, or that they are wise but impulsive and lacking in self-control. We deem wise people to have also integrated insight and self-regulation in such a way that they do not self-regulate in an overly ascetic fashion; think of the Buddha's famous middle path or Socrates's ability to attend a symposium. Their self-regulation unfolds insightfully, and this self-regulation affords their insights the ability to constellate into an integrated course of action. However, it is also clear that while insightfulness and self-regulation are necessary for wisdom, they are far from sufficient. Wisdom also requires a significant process of self-transcendence and transformation, and it also has connections to knowledge and the sort of *rationality* presumed within the acquisition of knowledge.

3 Contemplative wisdom

When we turn to the dimension of self-transcendence and transformation, we immediately confront two paradoxes. The first is the paradox of transformative experience that has been

articulated and addressed by L.A. Paul (2014). The second is the paradox of self-creation/self-transcendence articulated by Galen Strawson (1994) and addressed by the work of Callard (2018). In this section I propose an integrated answer to both problems by means of the concept of contemplation developed in the previous section. This will be done by means of a specific contemplative practice drawn from the Platonic-Stoic tradition known as the ‘View from Above’ (Hadot 1995).⁷

In order to understand the conceptual difficulty that we face in explaining transformative experience, Paul (2014) asks us to consider a thought experiment. In this thought experiment, suppose your friends come to you and provide you with irrefutable proof that they can turn you into a vampire, and they offer to do so. The question that we now confront is whether one should do it. A crucial philosophical question is: Can this decision for transformation be made in a rational manner? The problem is that the standard proposal for how to make rational decisions is that one first assigns a probability to the alternative outcomes, presumably based on inductive predictions, and then one assigns a value to each of the predicted outcomes. Then one chooses the outcome with the highest product of probability and value. These sorts of inductive and probabilistic calculations, however, involve essentially *inferential* processes. However, here is the crux of the problem with transformative experience, viz., one cannot use this sort of inferential procedure, because one cannot adequately determine the probabilities and values, due to irresolvable ignorance. Let me explain why this ignorance is irresolvable.

The first form of ignorance is that one does not know what it is like to be a vampire. Of course, one may have various true propositions about being a vampire, but this is not the same as having the perspectival knowing of what it is like to have the states of mind and situational awareness (Vervaeke and Ferraro 2016, Nagel 1974), in this case, of a vampire. This is part of what is meant when Wittgenstein stated that even “if a lion could speak, we could not understand him” (1953). What is relevant to a lion and how that translates into what is salient to a lion is not accessible to us because we are not lions, and we cannot take a lion’s perspective on a situation.

This example also points to the second form of ignorance. We would have to be lions in order to understand what lions are saying. We would need the psychological identity of a lion. To be a lion is to have a set of characteristics and skills that fit a particular kind of environment in a specific and adaptive manner. The agency of the lion determines and is determined by a particular niche construction of the environment, so that the lion has a determinate arena for its action. This agent/arena relationship opens up affordances for the lion’s behavior (Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Miscevic 2017). We humans dwell in a different agent/arena relationship, so we participate in different networks of affordances. This participatory knowing is also different between us and a vampire. We are ignorant of the participatory knowing of a vampire, i.e., of the lifeworld that is opened up to the vampire by its sets of skills, preferences, structure of self, etc., that go into its agent/arena relationship. So, one does not know what the alternative life would be like, nor does one know by what values, patterns of relevance and salience, and affordances for action it is to be judged. Notice that this ignorance is bi-directional. If one does not choose to take the transformation, then one does not know what one is missing. If one chooses to take the transformation, then one does not know what one will be losing by not taking it. Standard inferential decision procedures completely fail.

Paul’s point is that this fantastic thought experiment is relevantly analogous to many of the transformative decisions we confront. Suppose, e.g., one is deciding if one should have a child. Being a child does not provide the perspectival and participatory knowing that constitutes being a parent. What it will be like, and who one will be, cannot be inferred from what it is like to be oneself now or to participate in one’s identity now. The problem is, once one has a child, one

cannot back out of the decision easily or without serious moral repercussions. If you don't have a child, you will never know what you missed. If you decide to have a child, you cannot fully foresee what you are going to lose. To be clear, one can state accurate propositions about what one will miss or lose, but that is not the relevant issue here, since states of mind and the character of one's identity cannot be reduced to the possession of true propositions.

One will never know what it is like to be a swimmer until one actually swims and identifies with swimming as a central feature of one's identity (Frankfurt 1988, 2006), even though one can state many true propositions about being a swimmer. In addition to the problem of deciding to have a child, one can see the same problem when one considers getting into a committed romantic relationship with another person. One does not know what it is going to be like until one is in the relationship, and one does not know who one will become until one assumes the identity of being someone's committed partner. The list of such decisions requiring transformative experience is both large and contains many of the most important decisions of one's life.

Two interlocking questions now immediately emerge: How do we do it, and can we do it rationally, given that we cannot rely upon inferential argumentation? One can note that this is structurally similar to asking how one can think outside the box. Of course, the insight sought here is not a single insight into how to reframe a specific problem. It is more like what Wright (2005) calls 'sensitivity transcendence'. Sensitivity transcendence involves an insight into a pattern of problematic behavior and therefore a whole system of problems. It also reciprocally requires an insight, not an insight into a particular framing of a particular problem, but an insight into one's overall manner of framing such problems. This is an insight into patterns in one's perspectival knowing and how one may habitually identify with such patterns.

Wright makes use of Murdoch's (1970) example of a mother-in-law who initially dislikes her daughter-in-law because she sees her as not good enough for her son. A whole series of conflicts concerning how the daughter-in-law appears brash, aggressive, and impulsive is the background of this description, as is an implicit identity assumed by the mother-in-law of being a sophisticated and cultured person, and that this identity is shared with her son. However, one day the mother-in-law realizes that she has been treating her daughter-in-law unfairly. As Murdoch makes clear, the mother-in-law has not been *paying attention* to her daughter-in-law in a just manner. As she adjusts her attention, she begins to see her daughter-in-law not as brash, but as outgoing, not as aggressive, but as enthusiastic, and not as impulsive, but as spontaneous.

Notice how this reframing of her daughter-in-law is bound up with her reframing of her own character as being capable of the vice of treating someone unjustly. The two insights reciprocally open up each other: As the mother-in-law sees more deeply into her son's wife, she sees more deeply into herself. She transforms who she is and how she sees the world in an integrated fashion. She undergoes transformation through sensitivity transcendence that is driven by a system of perspectival insights and new ways of participatorily knowing herself. In this way, a new affordance network is disclosed and made salient to her. A new way of life with her daughter-in-law is now possible. In this way, sensitivity transcendence is transformative insight. The reframing has become a process we can call 'reframing', i.e., a reciprocal reframing that affords self-transcending transformation.

Recall the rationality question, concerning how to proceed rationally when inferential processes alone were shown insufficient in the vampire thought experiment, and the like. Now, however, the rationality question can be reposed: Is there a rationality of insight and sensitivity transcendence? Notice how problematic this would be if one's model of rationality only considered inferential methods of argumentation as the possible vehicles of rationality. Insight, however, makes use of significantly non-inferential disruptive and constructive attentional strategies that do not fit inferential paradigms of rationality. One *participates* in an insight in which

one's perspectival knowing is transformed by self-organizing processes that do not proceed in a linear, sequential manner.

Imagine using such linear argumentation about our previous example of reading the words 'THE CAT'. One must first read the letters in order to read the words. But one must first read the words to disambiguate the letters. Therefore, reading would require contradictory first procedures, and thus reading would be logically impossible! Insight and transformative self-transcendence are central to wisdom, however. If we limit rationality to inferential rationality, then wisdom becomes an irrational virtue, since it depends on processes other than inference, and those processes can disrupt our inferential procedures. In a recent consensus paper on the nature of wisdom, the central feature of wisdom was described as a meta-perspectival ability that affords transformation and more wise reasoning (Grossman et al. 2020).

How do we bring insight, transformation, sensibility transcendence, rationality, and wisdom together into a coherent whole? In order to answer this question, we need to turn to the work of Callard (2018), and how she addresses the paradox posed by Strawson (1994). Let us first describe Strawson's paradox.

Strawson poses the paradox of self-creation thusly: What makes the new self is either the old self, in which case it is not really creation, but part of the development integral to every self, or else it is creation by something other than the self, in which case it is not self-creation, but creation by something other than the self. So, it seems we can either have self, or creation, but not the two together in self-creation.⁸ Transformative self-transcendence is just a species of self-creation.

Callard addresses this problem by extending the work that Paul did on transformative experience. The solution will not be found in any inferential decision process. Instead, Callard argues for a process she calls *aspiration*. In aspiration, one takes up a relationship to one's future self – making a more expansive frame, as in self-regulation – in which the current self undertakes to cause the future self, while the future self acts as the normative constraint on the causal process. Callard is not interested in the psychological question as to how one does this. However, we can supply an answer on her behalf. One does not make or receive a new self; one participates in a self-organizing process of sensibility transcendence that makes new perspectival knowing within a new field of affordances possible. One 'transframes' into one's future self. What can drive the systematic and reciprocal insight of sensibility transcendence is an ecology of mindfulness practices, because such an ecology dynamically coordinates breaking frame, making frame, self-regulation, and transfer-appropriate processing.

Callard is not interested in the psychological question of how one aspires because she is interested instead in the epistemological question of whether or not aspiration is a rational process that we can justify using and recommending precisely because it is rational, which we should contrast with the insufficient purely inferential processes discussed in the vampire thought experiment and the like. The core of her argument is that the process of becoming more rational is itself an aspirational process. We are trying to create a new self that appreciates reason and has the attendant virtues for reliably deferring to reason's authority. We are undertaking a transformative process requiring significant sensibility transcendence. Now, if this aspirational process were itself irrational, we would have the performative contradiction of recommending a non-rational and potentially irrational process for acquiring rationality. We would also have the epistemological problem of positing a cause of rationality that cannot be rationally justified. Callard proposes that we solve these problems by ceasing to identify rationality solely with inferential processes, and instead broaden our notion of rationality to include what she calls *proleptic* rationality (2018).

There is precedent for this proposal of proleptic rationality in ancient philosophy, in which wisdom was not identified with discursive reasoning alone, but also, and more importantly,

with a process of intellection, of understanding. Intellection was trained in *theoria*, so that the mind transcended discursive reasoning by means of something much more like a comprehensive insight into reality, and this insight drove the sensibility transcendence of the individual. Intellection was a process of reframing. This intellection did not destroy rationality; it fulfilled it, by enhancing the processes of self-correction, of cognition, and of cognitive alignment with reality that are at the core of discursive reasoning. It was the deepest reciprocal reframing of the world and oneself that solved the deepest set of problems facing one when one is trying to reduce foolishness and trying to rationally live the best possible life. Understanding this ancient philosophical practice requires reconceptualizing philosophy such that it is no longer centered upon discursive argumentation, but upon what Hadot (1995) calls 'spiritual exercises' that afford such sensibility transcendence. What is the nature of these spiritual exercises of *theoria*?

One central component are attentional practices of contemplation already discussed. However, we need to situate these practices within a proper aspirational framework in order to fully capture what Hadot intends with the idea of spiritual exercises. We noted that contemplative practices – integrated with meditation practices and ethical practices – can afford sensibility transcendence. However, we need to realize that a practice of identity transformation needs to be integrated with mindfulness practices in order to realize the proleptically rational sensibility transcendence that is more fully at the heart of the cultivation of wisdom. If we return to Paul's examples and integrate them with a central finding from developmental psychology, we can explicate this practice of identity transformation.

When people are considering having a child, they sometimes rely on the strategy of adopting a pet dog and treating it like a child. Or when they are considering a potential long-term romantic relationship, they will sometimes travel on a fairly substantial trip with the person they are considering for partnership. They engage in a form a symbolic behavior that gives them a taste of the perspectival knowing and participatory knowing that constitute the potential new life. They enter a liminal place where they are not fully committed, but committed enough so that they pretend what it would be like to fully commit to the change. In short, they engage in serious play. This is serious play because they are playing with the machinery of identity and the formative structures of a way of life that could have significant consequences if fully enacted. It is play nevertheless because it involves symbolic pretense that can drive developmental change.

Such serious play, as in the play of children, is a primary engine of development. Serious play does not end with childhood, and that is why adults still go to plays and play music, etc. Going from being a child to being an adult is a process of aspiration powered by sensibility transcendence. Maturity is the result of extended sensibility transcendence in which a child aspires to becoming a functional adult. There is an adage from ancient philosophy that says, as the child is to the adult, the adult is to the sage. The process of going from being a fool to a sage is also such a process, and it too requires serious play. It requires pretense for the sake of development. We can see the attentional processes of contemplation and the serious play for the development of wisdom within the ancient Platonic–Stoic practice of the View from Above.

4 The View from Above

In the View from Above one imagines that one is rising above the earth and seeing from increasingly extended elevations. So, one first imagines that one is above one's body and seeing the room one is in, then the building, then the city, then the planet, and then from farther out in space. One can also extend the temporal scope and imagine the view extending into the deep past and the far future, *sub specie aeternitatis*, so to speak. In order to understand – if not also to practice – this well, it is important to make use of Corbin's (1972) distinction between

the imaginary and the imaginal. The imaginary is the practice of forming mental pictures. It is what one does when one pictures, say, a sailboat in the mind's eye. The imaginal is interactional pretense. It is what a child does when they tie a blanket around their neck, pick up a stick, and pretend to be Zorro. The child need not, and is probably not, considering mental pictures in her mind's eye. Instead, she is trying to adopt the skills, the perspective, and the identity of Zorro, or, one could say, she is simulating *being* Zorro. She is not forming mental pictures; she is enacting a way of seeing and being in the world. It is not adjectival: It is adverbial in nature. In this way, the imaginal invokes play. It involves acting *as if*, instead of viewing a mental picture. Such play can constitute the very serious business of altering perspectival and participatory knowing in order to acquire new skills and insights.⁹

Recent work on NASA scientists using the rovers on Mars is a clear instance of this (Chiappe and Vervaeke 2018, 2021). In order to carry out the fieldwork on Mars, the researchers look for individuals who can cultivate the sense of being on Mars as if they are the rover, i.e., seeing and being the rover, like the child's simulating being Zorro. It is important to note that the scientists do not have joystick control of the rovers, due to time delays in signaling. They get flat black and white pictures. They then engage in what Vertesi (2012) calls *drawing as*, in which they mark up the pictures with color and draft drawings in order to draw out a felt experience of the environment. They also identify with the robot, saying things such as "we need to go here", "we need to move our arm", etc. In addition to anthropomorphizing the robot, they 'technomorphize' (Vertesi 2012) themselves.

Vertesi describes one scientist trying to decide how to move the robot by placing her phone on the desk in front of her to represent the rock under investigation. She then places her open hands, palms facing out at her temples to be her camera-eyes. She then twists her torso while moving on her wheeled chair in order to figure out and demonstrate how the rover needs to move and adjust its cameras in a coordinated fashion. One can see the perspectival transformation in this example, but this type of behavior also leads to participatory transformation. One scientist interviewed by Vertesi said,

I was working in the garden one day and all of a sudden, I don't know what's going on with my right wrist, I cannot move it – out of nowhere! I get here [to the planning meeting], and *Spirit* has, its right front wheel is stuck! Things like that, you know? I am totally connected to [*Spirit*]!

(2012, p. 402)

This behavior creates a sense of presence (Chiappe and Vervaeke 2018, 2021) that is also sought in virtual games. Just as virtual displays can be used in augmented reality in order to enhance sense making, the scientists are generating imaginally augmented reality in order to bring about the perspectival and participatory transformations needed to acquire and refine skills, and afford the insights needed to solve very difficult problems in a strange and novel environment.

Another example of such serious imaginal play is the phenomenon known as 'Jeepform' (Wrigstad 2014) that is emerging in Nordic countries. This is a form of live action role playing in which there is a director that assigns roles to the participants and gives them everyday objects and asks them to use them as imaginal props within a scene that the director sets. The director may suddenly switch props, scenes, or roles, so as to break frame and afford insight. The goal of the play is to achieve 'bleed', in which what is happening in the play bleeds over into real life and vice versa. The director manipulates the parameters of the play so as to afford insight within transfer-appropriate processing. Adults play with perspectival and participatory knowing in order to imaginally augment their framing of real life.

While the View from Above probably initially involves the imaginary, the intent is that it is practiced imaginally in order to transform perspectival and participatory knowing. Here we can see mindfulness skills of attention being integrated with the imaginal augmentation of sense making in order to afford the reframing that drives sensibility transcendence. The intent is to afford the same sort of ‘bleed’ from the practice into the real-life cultivation of virtue and wisdom. It invokes reciprocal reframing of oneself and reality. The View from Above often generates the overview effect (Yaden et al. 2016), which induces a sense of awe. Awe reduces the sense of self (Bai et al. 2017), accompanied by powerful positive affect. The positive affect broadens and builds attentional scope and skills according to the work of Fredrickson (2001). This happens within a participatory framework in which the reduced sense of self reduces egocentrism. It decenters one and brings about a self-distancing that enhances wise reasoning (Grossman and Kross 2014).

According to Construal Level theory (CLT), such movement to a higher level of construal affords a host of epistemic and aspirational transformations connected to its affordance of a form of psychological distancing, such as making challenging tasks seem easier, generating self-insight, increasing emotional self-control, affording one an increased ability to resist social influence, and increasing creativity (Dean 2012).¹⁰ The Neoplatonic tradition’s emphasis on the process of intellection (understanding) that supersedes discursive reasoning with something like sensibility transcendence can be understood as the cognitively unified set of transformations that are activated in a spiritual exercise such as the View from Above.

There is recent experimental evidence that mindfulness induces movement to a higher level of construal (Chan and Wang 2019). Chan and Wang note that this seems odd because of the way mindfulness involves focus on the present moment. However, they cite Dreyfus’s (2011) argument that mindfulness is more about considering everything that arises in the mind that is relevant to the focal object, i.e., it is much more about cognitive unison. They argue “the term *present* is a misnomer as it may not represent low psychological distance in CLT terms” (Chan and Wang 2019, p. 5; emphasis added).

I argued above that mindfulness is the awareness of such attentional processes and the resulting reduction in representational processing is what is meant by ‘being present’. The importance of this presencing of attentional processes is shown by Chan and Wang’s specific finding that it is the “openness to experience” component of mindfulness that is driving the movement to a higher level of construal (2019). This involves not judging whatever arises in the mind, i.e., it involves de-automatizing one’s framing of such mental events and taking a more psychologically distanced stance towards them. One has stepped back and is looking *at* them, rather than automatically looking *through* them. In this way, one is ‘open’ to them. One stays neutral in response to their content. What this means is that mindfulness both directs one to the concrete and moves one to a higher level of construal at the same time. Just as there is a meditative aspect in contemplation in that one is focusing one’s attention and becoming aware of one’s framing, there is a contemplative aspect to meditation in that one is opening up a space for the sort of cognitive leaping that occurs in contemplation. We should also note that the View from Above deliberately plays with the ambiguity of the indexical terms, ‘here’ and ‘now’. It expands both of them in order to afford leaping into higher levels of construal and driving sensibility transcendence.

Contemplation integrates mindfulness with the serious play of imaginally augmented sense making that is designed to afford the sensibility transcendence that powers the aspiration to wisdom. Given this analysis, we can address the third concern that Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016) raised about mindfulness research, viz., the lack of theoretical attention given to the developmental aspects of mindfulness. Mindfulness develops wisdom. Of course, this means mindfulness is to be understood within the context of an ecology of meditative, contemplative, ethical, and

imaginal practices. We should also note the reverse, that the cultivation of wisdom helps to guide mindfulness practice. There is a developmental interlocking between mindfulness and wisdom within the practice of contemplative wisdom.

5 The integration of mindfulness practices and wisdom cultivation

Such wisdom is important because contemplative practices such as the View from Above have the potential to induce a sense of absurdity while meditative practices have the potential to induce what Velleman calls the ‘reflectiveness gap’ (2008). Nagel (1971, 1986) has pointed out that meta-perspectival self-transcendence has the ability to induce a sense of absurdity that has the potential to rob life of all of its meaning.¹¹ This would be anathema to most conceptions of wisdom that link the cultivation of wisdom to happiness, especially in the sense of *eudemonia* (the sort of flourishing or well-being that goes beyond momentary states of joy). Nagel points out that as we move to higher levels of construal, we may reach “the view from nowhere”, which is the stance beyond all perspectives. Whether such a state is ultimately achievable is not strictly relevant here. All that matters for the current argument is concerted movement towards it. One moves to a cosmic perspective. It is this perspective that can drive what Nagel calls ‘cosmic absurdity’. Nagel explains cosmic absurdity by comparing it to everyday absurdity.

Everyday absurdity is not produced by many of the arguments that are purported to induce the sense of absurdity, such as the line of reasoning according to which nothing matters because a million years from now nobody will remember us, much less care about our concerns. As Nagel points out, these arguments are all technically invalid, yet realizing this does not dispel their attendant sense of absurdity. Nagel argues that the arguments are actually after-the-fact expressions of something that is not propositionally generated. Instead, he argues that absurdity, like humor, is driven by a perspectival clash of relevance. He gives an example of someone on a telephone finally courageously declaring their love for the first time, after great hesitation, only to realize that they were not speaking to their beloved, but to an answering machine. There is pathos and humor in this everyday example. From the first-person perspective of the speaker, everything they are saying and doing at that moment is very relevant and important to them. However, from the impersonal third-person perspective of the answering machine, the actions have no relevance or importance. Here we see that moving to the third-person perspective that so powerfully affords insight and self-control can also rob one of relevance.

It is true that moving from things being too relevant to us in egocentrism can afford wisdom, but such movement can also rob our actions of all relevance to us and thereby undermine action itself. In short, absurdity is a result from the perspectival clash that can arise through perspectival self-transcendence. It is apparent that the View from Above could move one towards the view from nowhere and induce not the absurdity of a particular situation, but a cosmic absurdity for all possible situations.

In a related manner, meditation can produce the reflectiveness gap. Velleman (2008) points out that initially our ability to step back and reflect on our perspective can reduce the impulsivity that can undermine agency. In explaining this, Velleman explains how meditation can reduce impulsivity and delay gratification (*id.*). Imagine someone who is quite thirsty. They are experiencing from within a thirsty perspective on the world, i.e., they are looking at the world thirstily, and potable things are being made salient to them according to that perspective. It is quite possible that they are not aware of their thirst in a focal manner. They are aware *through* their thirst (transparently) of the world (opaquely). In this state, they are compelled to search for water. However, if they step back mindfully and notice the thirst-perspective as a focal object, i.e., if they do a transparency-to-opacity shift, then their motive from this mindful perspective is

not thirst, but interest, curiosity, or wonder. These motives do not urge the search in the world for water, but they motivate the search within attention for its processes and principles. In this way, the meditative movement of mindfulness can realize a delay of gratification by shifting the center of motivation.

However, therein also lies the danger. For, as Velleman points out (2008), one can keep stepping back and stepping back, perhaps, until one reaches what Forman (1999) calls the pure consciousness event,¹² in which one is not conscious *of* consciousness, one just *is* consciousness,¹³ pure participatory knowing. In this state, and even states adjacent to it, one experiences the reflectiveness gap in which one is so disconnected from the world that agency is lost. One becomes like Hamlet, so reflective that one does not act. It is interesting that at the meditative and contemplative poles of mindfulness one can enter into mystical states that may dissolve away the sense of personal agency (Vervaeke and Ferraro 2016).

However, there is a third mystical state in which one is beyond both the meditative and contemplative poles (*id.*). One can achieve a state of nonduality that simultaneously goes to the center of the mind and the circumference of the world. The movement towards realizing such nonduality can bring about the state referenced by Blake (1988, p. 490) as seeing the world in a grain of sand, and by Spinoza as the *scientia intuitiva* (1985), intuitive knowing, a sort of gnosis in which in a flash of systematic insight one sees the whole of an argument in its premises and each premise within the argument. For Spinoza, doing that with the argument of his *Ethics* affords one seeing God in all things and all things in God, and this was blessedness. Both Blake, from the romantic tradition, and Spinoza, from the rationalist position, are describing a state of intellection driving sensibility transcendence that alleviates suffering. Such a state can alleviate both absurdity, by transcending the perspectival clash, and the reflectiveness gap, by overcoming both impulsivity and disengagement through the interpenetration of perspectives.

There are two plausible reasons why such a state is achievable. One is that attention is a dynamically self-organizing process of integration that is operating in a *parallel* fashion in at least two dimensions (transparency ↔ opacity, and gestalt ↔ featural), and we know that people, irrespective of age, gender, socio-economic status, culture, etc. (Vervaeke, Ferraro and Herrera-Bennett 2018), are able to enter into the flow state. In a flow state one feels radically at one with one's environment, there is an ongoing sense of discovery and super-salience, the narrative ego drops away, and yet one is acting at one's best. One's agency is not diminished, but instead enhanced. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) notes that mindfulness training enhances one's ability to get into the flow state. Vervaeke et al. (2018) develop this line of thought, and argue that this is because the flow state is really just a cascade of insight experiences, an extended 'Aha' moment, and this is why it can be afforded by mindfulness. If we put these two points together, then it is plausible to see states of nonduality, or at least states of *scientia intuitiva*, are possible.

Such states have tremendous aspirational power (Yaden et al. 2017). They can induce people to transform their lives and their identities in order to come more in conformity with the sense of presence and realness found in such states. So, not only can such states alleviate threats to agency, but they can motivate a profound longing and love for greater conformity to such clarity of realization. They can motivate *philosophia*, the *love* for *wisdom* expressed in real and substantial self-transformation.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that a philosophy of meditation will explicate and articulate the relations between meditation and contemplation, and the relations between the cultivation of mindfulness and the cultivation of wisdom. It has further argued that this requires us to integrate

contemporary philosophy, with its analytic skills, with ancient philosophy, and its transformative skills of wisdom cultivation. Such a philosophy of meditation thereby offers both a deep explanation of mindfulness and a deep motivation to undertake it, and to undertake it wisely.

Notes

- 1 See Vago (this *Handbook*, Chapter 11), for an in-depth analysis of the majority of that research.
- 2 See Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016) for a more extensive presentation of this material.
- 3 If you are having difficulty visualizing this, please go to <https://tinyurl.com/rtmt9c>, to see an enlarged image of this ambiguous 'H' in both words.
- 4 See Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016) for a review of this literature.
- 5 Baker-Sennett and Ceci (1996) refer to 'inductively' leaping, but since the process involved was not obviously any kind of inferential process, I contend that the use of the adjective 'inductive' may be misleading. Thus, I have chosen the more neutral term, 'cognitive'.
- 6 See Goleman and Davidson (2017) for an accessible, in-depth discussion of the difference between meditative states and meditative traits, based on their meta-analysis of the 50 most-cited research studies on mindfulness.
- 7 See Pigliucci (this *Handbook*, Chapter 24), for an in-depth discussion of the View from Above and other Stoic meditative practices.
- 8 Strawson (1994) describes the impossibility of self-creation, of being a self-caused being or *causa sui*, for purposes of arguing against the idea that we have the sort of moral-responsibility-entailing free will that is often assumed in moral philosophy, but his argument is relevant here. Intuitively, it seems, one would have to perform a literal act of *prolepsis*, that is, one would have to pre-exist the act of self-creation in order to be its author, which is logically impossible, since if one pre-existed, then one existed already. See Repetti (2019), for a rebuttal to Strawson's argument based on the idea that successful Buddhist practice deconditions the mind, with eventual attainment of nirvana traditionally described as unconditioned, a process enabling a sort of gradual self-deconstruction and thus a gradual self-creation that circumvents Strawson's paradox.
- 9 Repetti (2010) argues that the child's simulation is on an evolutionary spectrum that includes primate mimicry, toward one end, and the sort of hypothetical reasoning we just engaged in when considering the vampire thought experiment, toward the other end, and which may contribute to the development of our ability to take occurrent mental states (relatively) functionally 'off-line' in self-regulative processing, and in meditation practices, which ability is enhanced by such practices.
- 10 Repetti (2010) argues that a host of the same sort of distancing phenomena play a role in any practices that take one functionally 'off-line' from the typical sort of coupled engagement in the mind/world causal nexus, such as simulation, hypothetical or counterfactual reasoning, meditation, etc., thereby affording greater self-regulative cultivation.
- 11 See Huebner and Hayman (this *Handbook*, Chapter 17) for a discussion of some of the possible pitfalls of meditation practices not undertaken with the proper caution, as well as suggested remedies.
- 12 See also (Vervaeke and Ferraro 2016).
- 13 Cf. Fasching (this *Handbook*, Chapter 9) for a development of the argument and evidence in support of a version of this claim.

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