

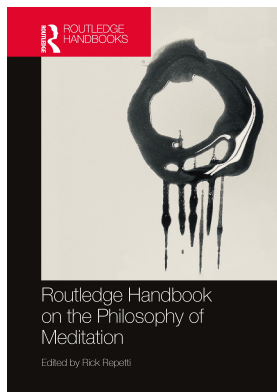
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BARE ATTENTION, DEREIFICATION, AND META-AWARENESS IN MINDFULNESS

A phenomenological critique

Odysseus Stone and Dan Zahavi

1 Introduction

Phenomenology has recently been invoked in a number of publications on both mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy.¹ In principle, we welcome efforts to engage with phenomenology as part of such interdisciplinary research and cross-cultural philosophy, but have elsewhere expressed some reservations about the widespread attempt to view phenomenology as a form of mindfulness. To argue, as a number of authors have done, that phenomenology is a kind of meditative technique or practice, which involves carefully attending to present moment experience, for example, is to misrepresent its proper focus, and to overlook its much broader, systematic, philosophical ambitions (Stone and Zahavi 2021).

In this chapter, we focus on a different issue.² As is well-known, recent years have witnessed an explosion of interest in mindfulness. Psychotherapeutic mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are now mainstream: For example, mindfulness is available as a standard psychotherapy in the United Kingdom, where a recent cross-party parliamentary report also recommended implementing MBIs in various areas of public life, including education and the criminal justice system (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group 2015). Mindfulness is also rapidly making its way into such diverse and surprising settings as military training grounds, corporate boardrooms, and stock-market trading floors. At the same time, scientific research on mindfulness has skyrocketed, particularly in clinical psychology and cognitive neuroscience. The wider cultural impact beyond this has been enormous: Many people now practice mindfulness in both non-clinical and non-Buddhist contexts worldwide via meditation apps like *Headspace* and *10% Happier*, and mindfulness and its discontents regularly feature in the pages of major international news outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

Given how widespread and influential mindfulness has become, we think it wise to subject some of its central ideas to closer philosophical scrutiny. Although often presented as a kind of secular, atheoretical technique, independent of the metaphysical, ethical, and soteriological

frameworks of Buddhism, it is our contention that the contemporary notion of mindfulness contains, often implicitly, a number of substantial and at times quite problematic philosophical assumptions and commitments. Rather than focusing on mindfulness and phenomenology qua ‘first-person methods’ that might be compared, contrasted, or combined (Varela and Shear 1999), our focus in this chapter will be on some of the implicit underlying assumptions and theoretical commitments of the contemporary mindfulness movement. We ask: What are the main ideas informing the contemporary notion of mindfulness, and should we accept them? In particular, our focus here will be on the way in which MBIs conceive of experience and the mind-world relation – topics about which phenomenology has a great deal to say.

Before we begin, a brief note on strategy. Anyone who decides to engage with mindfulness is immediately confronted with a number of tricky methodological problems. Mindfulness is a notoriously slippery concept. In the current psychological literature, there is little agreement about how best to define it (van Dam et al. 2018). Furthermore, one cannot simply resolve the issue by turning to Buddhist scholarship. For one thing, there are many traditions within Buddhism, and many Buddhist accounts of mindfulness (Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2013, Dunne 2015, Gethin 2015, Shaw 2020). In terms of Buddhist influences, the contemporary mindfulness movement is shaped by diverse traditions with different theoretical commitments. Furthermore, Buddhism (like all religions) changes and evolves. A growing literature has begun to shed light on the complex ways in which the contemporary mindfulness movement is shaped by what scholars and historians call Buddhist Modernism – a 150-year-and-running process of cultural transformation that began with Buddhism’s confrontation with modernity in the context of colonialism (McMahan 2008, Braun 2013, Thompson 2020). Faced with all this complexity, one has to make a choice. Our choice has been to engage primarily with more popular accounts of mindfulness. Insofar as we engage with Buddhist scholars, we focus on their work in collaboration with psychologists for secular and non-philosophical audiences. What view of the mind and its relation to the world do we find in such writings? An objection that someone might have to this type of approach is that we are picking rather low-hanging fruit. Would it not be more fitting for us to engage with one or another technical Buddhist account of meditation, or with adjacent issues in cross-cultural or Buddhist philosophy? There are surely many things one could criticize about the popularity of mindfulness, not least its late-capitalistic packaging, i.e., what David Loy and Ronald Purser call ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser and Loy 2013, Purser 2019). But – the objection continues – it isn’t clear that we need the resources of *phenomenology* in order to make these criticisms.

In response, we would like to remind our readers of the influence and impact that secularized mindfulness is having. Given its popularity, it deserves its own critical examination. Were we instead to discuss the more technical Buddhist ideas, we would be missing our target. As for the question of whether the specific ideas we address are representative of other styles of mindfulness, including traditional Buddhist styles, or even of each and every aspect of the popular mindfulness movement, which is far from homogeneous, a comprehensive treatment is beyond the scope of this chapter. We leave it to the interested reader who may have the requisite knowledge of these practices and traditions to decide for themselves whether aspects of our critique carry over. In any case, it is not our intention to impugn any and all forms of mindfulness, let alone meditation more generally.

2 Mindfulness in MBSR and MBCT

The contemporary notion of mindfulness is heavily indebted to its framing within the context of Jon Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and John Teasdale, Mark Williams, and Zindel Segal’s mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). Kabat-Zinn developed MBSR

in the late 1970s and 1980s at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester in order to help patients suffering from chronic conditions, especially chronic pain. He has since published a number of books outlining and further developing this approach, which have been extremely influential in bringing MBSR to a wide international audience of clinicians, psychologists, and practitioners (e.g., Kabat-Zinn 1990, 1994, 2005). Teasdale, Williams, and Segal developed MBCT in the 1990s as a maintenance therapy for depressive relapse. The inspiration for MBCT came from certain perceived similarities between the Buddhist analysis of suffering and Aaron Beck's cognitive therapy approach to emotional disorder (Segal, Williams, Teasdale, Kabat-Zinn, and Clark 2013, p. 37).

What are the central claims of MBSR and MBCT? Kabat-Zinn offers a sweeping, Buddhism-inspired vision of the sources of ordinary human suffering in terms of the 'tyranny of the thinking mind' (Kabat-Zinn 1990, pp. 25, 34, 70, 342).³ According to this vision, the majority of our waking life is spent engaged in emotionally charged mind-wandering about the future and past, a result of which is that we miss out on much of the richness, texture, and specificity of life as it unfolds in the present moment:

we are perpetually preoccupied, lost in our minds, absorbed in our thoughts, obsessed with the past or the future, consumed with our plans and our desires, diverted by our need to be entertained, driven by our expectations, fears, or cravings of the moment, however unconscious or habitual all this may be. And therefore, we are amazingly out of touch in some way or other with the present moment, the moment that is actually presenting itself to us now.

(Kabat-Zinn 2005, p. 118, 1990, pp. 24–5, 135)

The trouble with the thinking mind, however, isn't limited to the costs incurred by such temporal displacement. Even our perceptual experiences of the here and now are often covered over and distorted by a "veil" of "thoughts and opinions" (*id.*, p. 36). For example, everyday experiences like looking at a beautiful sunset are often only brief and dissatisfying because we move quickly from directly experiencing the display of color and light to categorizing, judging, comparing, evaluating, it, i.e., "experiencing it through the veil of your own embellishments with past sunsets and other memories and ideas that it triggered in you" (*id.*, p. 24). In a sense, we often don't really see things at all because we are "'seeing' our thoughts about them" or our "concepts" (Kabat-Zinn 2005, pp. 41, 43). As a result, we are epistemically compromised and existentially disconnected. Our thoughts are often highly inaccurate and unreliable (Kabat-Zinn 2005, p. 261), they "distort or detract from ... bare experience itself" (*id.*, p. 119), creating a "distorted reality" which is at the heart of a great deal of ordinary suffering (Kabat-Zinn 1990, p. 70).

Mindfulness is then introduced as a kind of non-judgmental attending to present moment experience. By bringing a calm, accepting attentiveness to experience as it unfolds moment by moment, without passing judgment, the practitioner can come to liberate herself from certain entrenched and harmful psychological and affective patterns. What would such a non-judgmental awareness amount to? According to an influential and controversial Buddhist interpretation, it is a question of 'bare attention', i.e., "a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them by deed, speech or mental comment which may be one of self-reference (like, dislike etc.), judgement or reflection" (Nyanaponika 1962, p. 30). Here is one illustration from a popular meditation manual:

If a bell is rung, what do we hear? Most people hear a "bell," or if there's a noise outside, we might say that we hear a car or a truck going by. But that's not what we hear.

We hear certain sounds, certain vibrations, and then immediately the mind names it as “bell,” “cat,” “truck,” or “person.” We confuse the concepts of the thinking mind with the reality of direct experience.

(Goldstein and Kornfield 2001, p. 25)

In line with this interpretation, Kabat-Zinn’s self-professed motivation for emphasizing non-judgmental awareness is that we rarely experience things “without the lenses of our likes and dislikes and opinions, which are usually colouring and filtering direct experience” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, p. 291).

It might be tempting to think that the goal of mindfulness is to reach a state in which judgments and interpretations no longer arise. According to one critic, for many the goal is “to put an end to the ceaseless inner chatter of the mind – to stop thinking” (Sharf 2015, p. 477). However, the picture in MBSR and MBCT is somewhat more complicated. Kabat-Zinn insists that the idea is not so much to *stop* the flow of thoughts and emotions, but to *mindfully observe* it as if from the perspective of a neutral bystander. To do this, we simply apply the same non-judgmental, present-centered awareness to the thoughts themselves:

When your attention is relatively stable on the breath, try shifting your awareness to the process of thinking itself. Let go of the breath and just watch thoughts come into and leave the field of your attention Try to perceive them as “events” in your mind.

(Kabat-Zinn 1990, p. 70)

The trouble with thoughts and feelings is not so much their occurrence *per se* as it is the kinds of errors we normally make with respect to them. One of the main errors is to mistake our thoughts for ‘the truth’ or ‘reality’. We often simply take our thoughts and feelings at face value and act accordingly (Kabat-Zinn 1990, p. 69). However, “thoughts and feelings are actually discrete events within the field of awareness, tiny and fleeting occurrences that are usually at least somewhat if not highly inaccurate and unreliable” (2005, p. 261; *cf.* Williams, Teasdale, and Segal 2007, pp. 35, 59). This aspect of mindfulness is closely tied to its therapeutic and ethical potential: “It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and that they are not ‘you’ or ‘reality’” (Kabat-Zinn 1990, p. 69). In MBCT, this idea takes on a particularly prominent role, where it is referred to as ‘decentering’ (Segal, Williams, Teasdale, Kabat-Zinn, and Clark 2013).⁴ While the focus in MBCT is primarily on discursive thoughts (in particular, rumination), the authors ultimately claim that decentering shouldn’t be limited to such thoughts but applied “*also* to feelings, body sensations, and impulses to act, that is, to the whole mind-body state” (Segal, Williams, Teasdale, Kabat-Zinn, and Clark 2013, p. 55).

In a recent paper, four leading figures in the field of mindfulness, the psychologists Antoine Lutz, Amishi Jha, and Clifford Saron, and the Buddhist scholar John Dunne, have attempted to further clarify this process of decentering in terms of what they call ‘dereification’ (2015). To first shed light on *reification*, Lutz et al. provide the following examples:

For example, during rumination, a script including thoughts such as “I am a failure” may arise, and when it does, it can appear to be an accurate description of oneself such that a depressed mood is enhanced or sustained ... Or when thinking about a stressful conversation that occurred yesterday, the series of thoughts that represent the event in one’s mind may present themselves as a replaying of the memory of the conversation, to the point that a physiological stress response is induced. Likewise, when thinking about one’s favorite food, the thoughts that represent the food can be taken to be real

in such a way that one salivates These are all instances of high reification, in that thoughts present themselves as if the objects or situations they represent are occurring in the present moment.

(Id., p. 639)

These cases are then contrasted with experiences said to exhibit a high degree of *dereification*, such as those had in certain mindfulness practices, where ultimately “thoughts lose their representational integrity and are experienced simply as mental events, situated and embodied within a field of sensory, proprioceptive, affective, and somatic feeling tones” (*id.*, 639). In their view, dereification through mindfulness plays a key role in reducing psychological and physical suffering. For example, “dereifying the memory of a stressful argument, one perceives the recollection of the event as actually a series of thoughts; experienced in this way, the memory no longer induces stress” (Lutz et al. 2015, pp. 640, 647). Whereas dereification in novice practitioners will often happen as a result of an explicit cognitive reappraisal such as ‘This is just a thought’, it can, according to Lutz et al., occur spontaneously in more advanced practitioners and be sustained as a general stance towards all experience (2015, p. 640).

3 Bare attention and the phenomenology of perception

Criticisms of contemporary mindfulness are legion. A number of Buddhist scholars have pointed out that contemporary mindfulness diverges in significant ways from certain classical Buddhist accounts (Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2013). Others complain that it is ethically dubious, since it seems to suggest we ought to drop even ethical evaluation (Wallace and Bodhi 2006). Some go further, arguing that contemporary mindfulness, with its emphasis on a kind of passive acceptance of the *status quo* and its highly individualized approach to human suffering, is an unlikely bedfellow of late capitalism and conservative politics (Purser 2019).

Our own concern in the following is with the plausibility of the underlying metaphysics and epistemology of mindfulness. Let us start by considering the idea that mindfulness involves a non-judgmental awareness of present moment experience. There are obviously different ways of interpreting such a claim. On one interpretation, the idea is simply to highlight the epistemic importance of intuition and perceptual experience *vis-à-vis* conceptual, discursive thought. By itself, this emphasis would have a certain affinity with ideas found in phenomenology. For example, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty both highlight the significance of perception, arguing that perceptual experience presents us with the object directly and immediately – ‘in the flesh’ (e.g., Husserl 1997, §5) – in contrast to its *re*-presentation, e.g., in recollection, imagination, or symbolic thinking. Indeed, part of the original impetus behind phenomenology was to turn away from theories, interpretations, and constructions, and return to the phenomena themselves. As Husserl declared, “We can absolutely not rest content with ‘mere words’ ... Meanings inspired only by remote, confused, inauthentic intuitions – if by any intuitions at all – are not enough: we must go back to the ‘things themselves’” (2001, I, p. 168).

However, we need to tread carefully here, since the relationship between experience and conceptual thought is a vexed philosophical issue, which plagues both Western philosophy (analytic and continental) (Schear 2013) and Indian Buddhist philosophy (Sharf 2018, Thompson forthcoming). Now, there is a *way* of conceiving of perceptual experience, conceptual thought, and their interrelation, which one finds in the popular mindfulness literature, that ought to be rejected on phenomenological grounds. On this conception, our sensibility supplies us with neutral data onto which structure and significance must be imposed in the form of concepts.

Consider again the idea that we don't *really* hear the bell, but only some pattern of sound sensations or physical vibrations, to which we then apply a label.

The Buddhist scholar Robert Sharf has claimed that the epistemology and philosophy of mind at play in this aspect of the contemporary mindfulness movement is what he calls a 'filter theory of cognition', according to which "our normal sensory and discursive processes rather than opening us to reality, actually serve to filter it out" (2015, p. 477). On this view, the epistemic goal of mindfulness is to remove the conditioning provided by cognition, and to come to see things 'as they really are', independently of our subjective or culturally specific perspective.

This is a philosophically contentious view, and one that phenomenologists have objected to. Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty all dispute that what we initially experience are mere sense-data. As Heidegger writes,

I hear a car: the psychologists say that I first have sensations of noise and sound that subsequently are apprehended as the noise of a car. But this is a pure construction. What I first hear is not a sensation of sound, I first simply hear the car.

(2007, p. 286)

Perhaps the founders of MBSR and MBCT would deny the charge that they think mindfulness involves experiencing pure sensations or sense-data. However, there is a more important point in the background. The advocates of mindfulness consistently highlight the *discontinuities* between direct experience and conceptual thought, preferring to view the latter in terms of a distortive overlay. The phenomenologists, by contrast, would argue that there is a *continuity* between sensibility and understanding, between pre-predicative experience and judgment. On their view, our pre-predicative experience already contains an implicit intentional 'as-structure', which prefigures the structure of judgment. As Husserl puts it, things "are given in immediate sense experience as useful, beautiful, alarming, terrifying, attractive, or whatever" (Husserl 1973a, p. 53). This kind of significance is not something that emerges only first at the level of explicit judgment and predication; to uphold the latter view would make it incomprehensible how the perceived could ever function as a guide for linguistic articulation. Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty writes, rather than constituting a distortion, linguistic and conceptual articulation ought to be viewed as a consummation or completion of the experience (2012, p. 183).

Consider next the extent to which what we see is influenced by feelings, past experiences, and frameworks of reference and interest. Depending on my previous experiences and current interests, I might see my new laptop as a necessary working utensil, source of enjoyment, headache and economic drain (because it is not working properly), product of late capitalism, etc. All this makes up the richness and complexity that is distinctive of human experience. Why consider it a distortion to be overcome? The many admonitions in the mindfulness literature to stay with what immediate sense experience has to offer and to dismiss the contribution of categorization, discriminative discernment, judgment, evaluation, memory, and the like, threaten to leave us with impoverished stratum, devoid of the enrichment offered by our own experiential learning, history, culture, and community.

Of course, the advocate of mindfulness might respond by saying that everyday experience does, indeed, contain all this richness, but that mindfulness precisely offers us the possibility of something extraordinary, namely, a more profound encounter with reality.

Recall, however, that mindfulness is supposed to be integrated into mundane activities like washing dishes, doing laundry, etc. It is precisely here – in the throng of ordinary life, and not on the meditation cushion – that mindfulness is supposed to bear its therapeutic fruits. As Kabat-Zinn points out, "The heart of the practice in MBSR lies in what we call informal meditation

practice, i.e., mindfulness in everyday life” (2000, p. 240).⁵ But it is difficult to understand how the mindful subject could navigate the vicissitudes of ordinary life if experience lacked the kind of significance provided by the as-structure. As Dale S. Wright says of the Zen master:

One must be able to perceive those lines on the wall *as* a door in order to know how to exit the meditation hall. Inability to understand these sounds *as* a question, that sound *as* a meditation bell, and so on would render even the most basic functions of the Zen master impossible. Inability to experience a monastery fire “immediately” *as* a fire, *as* a threat, *as* a demand for action, *as* requiring the evacuation of others, *as* extinguishable by water, and so on would render the Zen master helpless and incapable of spontaneous, Zen-like response. (1992, p. 122)

The repeated reference to present-centered awareness and the insistence that one ought to be exclusively concerned with the present moment is also in deep tension with the absolutely fundamental role that phenomenology ascribes to temporality. One of Husserl’s decisive philosophical contributions was his analysis of inner time-consciousness, his discovery of the extent to which normal experience involves all three temporal modes (present, past, and future). On his account, even a simple perception involves an interplay of no-longer-now, now, and not-yet-now: a retaining of what has just happened, an openness to what is currently happening, and an anticipation of what is just about to occur. Temporal structures are crucial to perception and action, and for making sense of everyday experience. We live in a coherent and meaningful world precisely because we are able to navigate through time.

Furthermore, in Husserl’s later works, we see an increasing recognition of the importance of historicity. Historicity means not simply that I am located at a certain point in history, but that I carry my history around with me. I do not simply exist in the present and happen to have the capacity to envisage the future and remember the past; rather, the temporal horizon forms and shapes the present. Past experiences inform, enable, and constrain future experiences. As Heidegger would say, to be human is already to be situated in the world, born into it without having chosen to be so, to be present to one’s surroundings, to be ahead of oneself in future projects (1962).

As social beings, we have been among others for as long as we remember. We see things the way others see them. We learn what is normal from others, and we thereby partake in a common tradition which stretches back through a chain of generations into a dim past. The world of human existence is made up not only by overlapping pasts belonging to individuals, but also by shared pasts belonging to groups and communities (Husserl 1973b, p. 223). But whereas phenomenology highlights and emphasizes the importance of these social, communal, and transgenerational dimensions of the human lifeworld, and insists that a proper grasp of what is distinctive of human existence must accommodate these dimensions, the contemporary mindfulness movement does not seem to have much interest in or room for them.

4 Dereification, intentionality, and meta-awareness

As has been observed elsewhere, a fundamental ambiguity in the mindfulness literature is that it often fails to distinguish clearly between the objects of experience and the subjective acts of experiencing (Stone and Zahavi 2021). When admonishing us to attend to “bare experience itself” (Kabat-Zinn 2005, p. 119), for example, is the idea that we should attend to our mental processes, and that we are normally prevented from doing so by various distracting thoughts and memories, or is the idea rather (or perhaps also) that we should learn to attend to how worldly objects present themselves in experience prior to being clothed in a distorting veil of conceptual classifications?

This ambiguity is also apparent in the discussion of decentering or dereification. When asking us to stop reifying our thoughts, i.e., to stop experiencing them “as real objects in the world” (Wielgosz et al. 2019), and when urging us to instead experience our thoughts, emotions, and perceptions as mere mental events or processes, one must ask oneself whether the target is the subjective act of thinking, feeling, or perceiving or rather that which is thought, felt, or perceived, i.e., the intentional object. To claim that we normally take our subjective act of thinking or perceiving as a real object in the world, and that it would be a matter of cognitive insight to realize that this act is in fact a psychological process, is rather odd (to put it mildly). In everyday experience, we don’t make the error of confusing our psychological processes for worldly objects – that kind of mistake would seriously compromise our ability to act in the world.

Presumably, then, the target of dereification must be the *intentional object*. The idea would then be that, rather than seeing that which is thought, felt, or perceived, i.e., the craved food, the remembered argument, the anticipated exam, etc., as real objects and events, we should treat them as psychological processes or constructs, i.e., as nothing but “mental events, situated and embodied within a field of sensory, proprioceptive, affective, and somatic feeling tones” (Lutz et al. 2015, p. 639). But is this really a reasonable epistemological or metaphysical proposal? It is certainly not in keeping with what phenomenology teaches us. For Husserl, we should not identify the perceptually appearing object with the act of perceiving, i.e., the heard bell with the hearing of the bell, or the perceived tomato with the perceiving of the tomato. The Christmas tree that I perceive is quite different from my perception of it and has utterly different properties. The Christmas tree is green, weighs 25 kilograms, can be decorated, and can wither. My perception of the tree, by contrast, is colorless, does not weigh anything, cannot be decorated, and cannot lose its needles. And whereas the tree is not directed at or about anything, the perception of the tree is exactly about something, namely the tree. As Husserl argued in his classical analyses, whenever we see, hear, remember, imagine, think, hate, or fear, our seeing, hearing, remembering, imagining, thinking, hating, and fearing are *about* something. Consciousness has a directedness – an *aboutness* – to it: It is a consciousness *of* something; it is characterized by *intentionality*. In being intentional, consciousness is neither self-enclosed nor exclusively self-presenting, but is also world-involving, occupied with objects and events that, by nature, are utterly different from consciousness itself:

However we may decide the question of the existence or non-existence of phenomenal external things, we cannot doubt that the reality of each such perceived thing cannot be understood as the reality of a perceived complex of sensations in a perceiving consciousness.

(Husserl 2001, II, p. 342)

The phenomenism that Husserl is objecting to can not only be found in the mindfulness literature on decentering and dereification, but has also recently gained momentum in cognitive neuroscience, where its supporters defend a form of radical neurorepresentationalism – radical because the claim isn’t simply that our access to the external world is mediated by neural representations, but rather that the world of experience is itself a representational construct, a brain-generated simulation. As Frith puts it, “My perception is not of the world, but of my brain’s model of the world” (Frith 2007, p. 132). Whatever we see, hear, touch, smell, etc., is all contained in the brain, but projected outwards and externalized, such that we in normal life fail to recognize it as a construct and mistake it for reality itself (Metzinger 2009, pp. 6–7). The visually appearing sunflower, the touched ice cube, the heard song, etc., are all brain-generated representations, internal to and contained in the brain. Our experience is *transparent*, in the sense that we

do not appreciate its *de facto* representational nature: “even if we believe [that the world-model] is an internal construct, we can experience it only as *given* and never as *constructed*” (*id.*, p. 44).

It is difficult not to see echoes of Metzinger’s view in Lutz et al.’s (2015) discussion of dereification. Indeed, in a recent paper on meditation and predictive coding, Lutz, Mattout, and Pagnoni describe dereification in terms of ‘phenomenal opacification’ (a concept they borrow from Metzinger):

A mental event is said to be transparent when we have conscious access to its content, but not to its non-intentional structure or construction process. Crucially, transparency provides the phenomenal quality of being directly “in touch” with the represented entity, and is therefore linked to our subjective confidence in its “reality”. The opacification of mental events during meditative practice is thus equivalent to fostering their dereification (Lutz et al. 2015), so that their provisional, constructed, dependent and ultimately impermanent nature begins to be intimately realized.

(2019, pp. 169–70)

To claim that the world of experience is a mental construction, to claim that my chess board, my iPhone, and the moon I observe in the horizon are in reality mental events and processes, is just the start. Presumably, the process of dereification should not only be applied to cultural artefacts and natural objects, but also to historical events, social phenomena, and other living beings. Ultimately, we never get out of our own minds: World War II, the civil war in Syria, the COVID-19 pandemic, your partner, children, parents, and best friends are all constructions in your mind. The contrast with phenomenology could not be starker. A common feature running through much phenomenological theorizing has been the attempt to redeem and rehabilitate the lifeworld, the world of everyday care and concern, the world we live in and share with others – to return to the things themselves.

Given the high price entailed by the view Lutz et al. (2019) seem to be advocating, they carry a heavy burden of proof. And this brings us to our second objection. For how is it that we are supposed to obtain the insight that the intentional objects of our thoughts and experiences are merely psychic phenomena, rather than what we ordinarily take them to be, namely, part of the fabric of worldly reality itself? Metzinger and other radical neurorepresentationalists buy into the view because they think it is supported by neuroscientific evidence, a line of reasoning that comes with its own set of problems (Zahavi 2018). But how are we supposed to gain the insight through *mindfulness*? According to Lutz et al. (2015), dereification is supposed to occur through meta-awareness or meta-cognition (cognition about cognition). As it has occasionally been put by some of the leading figures in the field, dereification amounts to a “metacognitive insight” (Dunne et al. 2019, p. 307), and has been described as a process which involves seeing thoughts and perceptions no longer as inherent representations of reality, “but rather as mental objects that are subject to examination in their own right” (Wielgosz et al. 2019, p. 289).

We must admit that we find these formulations somewhat surprising. After all, they invite an obvious objection, namely: Is the account not self-undermining? On the one hand, we are being asked to view our intentional, object-directed thoughts and experiences with a certain suspicion, as *mere* mental events, as opposed to accurate takes on reality. On the other hand, according to the formulations above, we are supposed to gain this insight from a particular point of view on our psychological life. But isn’t this point of view precisely a perspective consisting of intentional thoughts and experiences, and therefore something of which we should also be suspicious? If we are to be consistent, should we not also dereify our meta-cognitive thoughts, and abstain from viewing them as accurate reflections of (psychological) reality?

One possible retort to this objection might involve distinguishing between different types of meta-awareness. Indeed, a recent paper distinguishes between an intermittent, propositional, and representational form of meta-awareness, and a sustained, non-propositional, and non-representational form (Dunne et al. 2019). The authors suggest that the latter form of meta-awareness is trained in certain styles of mindfulness, and might ultimately be nondual, i.e., involve no intentional object-directedness whatsoever (*cf.* Dunne 2011, 2015). Introducing this distinction opens up a potential route for Lutz et al. to handle our criticism, since they could claim that it is precisely the latter form of meta-awareness that is supposed to undergird dereification. Since this type of meta-awareness does not itself involve any sort of *reification*, it need not be *dereified* itself.

Whatever the merits of this kind of response may be, it would obviously entail Lutz et al. biting the bullet when it comes to the claim that dereification might also occur via the former, representational type of meta-awareness. Recall their claim that in order to achieve dereification a novice practitioner might begin by using a cognitive reappraisal such as “This is just a thought” (Lutz et al. 2015, p. 640). Given the way they conceptualize dereification, this claim is incoherent. Why should we take the cognitive reappraisal to be any bit more revealing of reality than the initial world-directed thought? Furthermore, one might wonder how we are supposed to articulate any of the insights that are supposed to be gained via nondual meta-awareness on this account. After all, even if it were possible to remain in a purely nondual state, the moment one begins to think about the experience in question, including conceptualizing it in terms such as ‘dereification’, ‘nonduality’, etc., one is back in the domain of propositional metacognition (*cf.* Thompson 2020, pp. 138–9). Given the extreme implications of Lutz et al.’s (2015) views on dereification, this is no minor problem, and indeed seems to threaten their overall project in a quite fundamental way.

The question, of course, is whether the contrast between the different forms of meta-awareness isn’t being drawn in too stark terms to begin with. The parallel with phenomenology is once again instructive. Earlier we pointed out how, in contrast to Kabat-Zinn et al., the phenomenologists would highlight a certain continuity between our pre-predicative and our conceptualized experience of the world. A parallel point has been made with respect to the relationship between pre-reflective and reflective self-experience. For example, most phenomenologists recognize that, rather than merely copying or repeating the original experience, reflection actually transforms it, or, as Husserl explicitly admitted, it alters it (1960, p. 34). However, Husserl also speaks about reflection as a process that – in the best of circumstances – discloses, disentangles, explicates, articulates, and accentuates those components and structures that were implicitly contained in the pre-reflective experience (2008, p. 242). It might consequently make sense to view the phenomenological position as being situated between two extremes. On the one hand, we have the view that reflection merely copies or mirrors pre-reflective experience faithfully; on the other, the view that reflection distorts lived experience irredeemably. The middle course is to recognize that reflection involves both a gain and a loss.

For most phenomenologists, reflection is constrained by what is pre-reflectively lived through; it is answerable to experiential facts and is not constitutively self-fulfilling. But at the same time, they recognize that reflection qua thematic self-experience does not simply reproduce the lived experiences unaltered, and that this may be precisely what makes reflection cognitively valuable (Zahavi 2003, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2020). Accepting this middle course when it comes to reflection would open up a route for Lutz et al. to articulate the insights that are supposed to be gained via nondual meta-awareness, a possibility that is paramount to their overall project. However, notice that in the very same move they would be forced to give up the extremely general and highly pessimistic conclusion they draw about our intentional thoughts and experiences, since they would have to concede that at least *some* forms of reflective self-awareness are continuous with pre-reflective experience, rather than amounting to a

distortion of it. In the end, one wonders whether the account of dereification and the notion of intentionality implied in it don't require some rather major revisions in order to accommodate all of these concerns.⁶

5 Conclusion

As we have seen, the contemporary notion of mindfulness contains a number of more or less explicit metaphysical and epistemological proposals about experience and the mind-world relation. One idea is that our discursive thoughts, interpretations, memories, etc., 'veil' or 'filter' our access to reality, whereas mindfulness involves somehow lifting or neutralizing this layer so as to be able to enter into a more intimate and immediate relationship with things 'as they really are'. Another related idea, implicit in the notion of decentering and spelled out in detail in Lutz et al.'s (2015) account of dereification, is that the intentional objects of experience are, in fact, mere psychic phenomena, mental events, or constructions, which we habitually mistake for worldly reality itself. According to this second story, mindfulness involves gaining cognitive insight into the mentally constructed nature of our lifeworld. In our view, both of these positions mischaracterize experience and the mind-world relation, and both face serious difficulties. Phenomenology offers an alternative picture. Our subjective and affective contributions, including those of the thinking mind, do not corrupt an otherwise pure encounter with reality, but rather serve to disclose the meaningfulness of the latter. And the world of experience is not a mental event, psychological construct, or constellation of sensations, but is rather the world itself.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Bitbol (2019), Bitbol and Pettitmengin (2013a), Bitbol and Pettitmengin (2013b), Colombetti (2014), Depraz (2019), Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch (2003), Lundh (2020), Lutz et al. (2015), Varela and Shear (1999), and Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991).
- 2 We are grateful to Andreas Roepstorff, Shaun Gallagher, Rick Repetti, and especially Evan Thompson for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
- 3 See the collection in Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2013) for the controversies surrounding the Buddhist origins of this concept of mindfulness.
- 4 Arguably, two quite distinct ideas are included under the heading of decentering in MBCT. The first is the idea that we should experience our thoughts and perceptions merely as mental events, rather than as (accurate takes on) reality; the second is the idea that we should disidentify from our thoughts and perceptions, i.e., experience them as neither part of, nor owned by, a self. These are not always distinguished clearly. We focus on the first idea.
- 5 Cf. Kabat-Zinn (1990), p. 134; see also McMahan (2008), §8.
- 6 Perhaps someone might seek to deflate this criticism by claiming that the relevant question to ask when it comes to MBIs concerns their efficacy, which is an empirical matter. However, it is perfectly legitimate to target the theoretical claims of MBIs independently of the empirical findings. Conversely, it is illegitimate to argue straightforwardly from the efficacy of therapeutic interventions to the truth of their theoretical claims. (Compare the case with psychoanalysis.) There is considerable evidence, moreover, that the efficacy of therapeutic interventions is partly an effect of the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the therapist and the patient (Jørgensen 2019), and evidence that the efficacy of MBIs, in particular, may be partly a matter of 'common factors' such as instructor alliance and group therapeutic factors (Canby et al. 2021). And in any case, the empirical evidence for the efficacy of MBIs is itself a mixed bag (van Dam et al. 2018).

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