

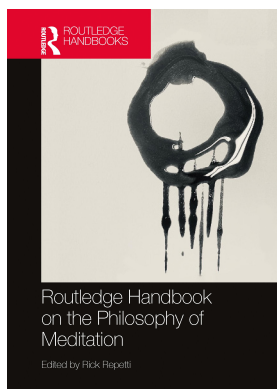
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Rick Repetti

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Richard Legum

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1

SKEPTICAL DOUBTS ABOUT MEDITATION AS PHILOSOPHY

Richard Legum

1 Introduction

A central question related to meditation and philosophy is whether meditation is philosophy. The question being raised here is not whether meditation should be of interest to philosophers and whether there are philosophical questions about meditation. The answer to these questions is obviously that there are philosophical questions related to meditation, as there are related to many practices, beliefs, and theories. The question at issue, from the analytic philosophical perspective I am presupposing but which also seems to be presupposed here, is whether practicing meditation is ‘doing’ philosophy – whether meditation is a tool or method of philosophy in the way that reason, logic, and arguments are tools of philosophy. I take it that any attempt to argue for the claim that meditation is a form of philosophy in this sense must address the question from within this perspective, or else it will not be attempting to show that meditation is philosophy in the relevant sense.

In attempting to address this question, I proceed in the following sequence. First, I clarify some conceptual questions about the nature of the sort of meditation that is under consideration and what data meditation may provide that make it a unique source of knowledge for philosophy. I examine two widely cited objections raised by Gilbert Ryle (1949) and Robert Nozick (1981) that may be taken to show that meditation is neither a source of data for philosophy nor a source of knowledge. I argue that the objections to meditation as philosophy based on Ryle’s work fail to cast doubt on viewing meditation as philosophy. I analyze the objection based on Nozick’s phonograph example and its purported consequences against thinking that meditative experiences are a unique source of data for philosophy. I consider a defense from Nozick’s objection based on Alvin Plantinga’s (1981) work on the epistemology of religious belief. And I conclude by arguing that there remain skeptical doubts concerning the import of meditation to philosophy and suggest that the proponents of meditation as philosophy need to provide an account of the justification of beliefs based on meditation to answer these skeptical doubts.

2 Philosophy and meditation: Clearing the conceptual field

The term ‘philosophy’ is derived from two Greek words roughly meaning the *love of wisdom*, and was adopted in the West (Europe, the Middle East, and the Anglophone world) as the title

of an academic discipline studying certain fundamental questions concerning the nature of knowledge, reality, and value. Many of these questions were addressed by thinkers in the East (Asia and Africa), some long before the rise of Western philosophy. For example, thinkers in the ancient Asian subcontinent weighed in on many of the very same questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics as Western philosophers. While the practice of meditation was central to many Buddhist and Hindu thinkers' answers to many of these philosophical questions,¹ meditation was largely relegated to the province of theologians, monastics, and religious mystics in the West, rather than philosophers, perhaps with some notable exceptions such as Maimonides and Aquinas.²

Beginning in the 17th century philosophy in the West went in two different directions becoming siloed between two traditions, the Anglo-American (analytic) tradition and the continental (phenomenological and existentialist) tradition. Despite having a common intellectual lineage, for a long period the works of analytic and continental philosophers were ignored by the other group. While this conflict was largely due to a fundamental difference in methodology, the lack of attention by Western philosophers to philosophical work in the East was largely due to a lack of exposure to these works. Moreover, much of the work on philosophical problems in the East was closely connected to what has been thought of in the West – perhaps not entirely accurately – as religious thought, rather than philosophical work.

Over the last half century or so, the analytic–continental and East–West barriers have lowered, opening up the study of Eastern thought. This was partly due to declining membership in Western religious institutions (e.g., churches and synagogues), resulting in people seeking meaning in their lives through the practice of Eastern religions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism, leading eventually to the contemporary popularity of yoga and meditation. Another contributing factor was the migration of peoples of various Eastern regions to the West. In addition, there has been a growing interest in Eastern martial arts such as judo, karate, ju jitsu, aikido, kung fu, tai chi, and tae kwon do, as well as other martial arts originating in Southeast Asia, all of which contributed to the growing interest in meditation.

Lastly, the medical profession has embraced yoga, meditation, and related practices as providing wholesome alternatives or adjuncts to wellness strategies, as have the mental health professions, and many other institutions of society, from the board room, to the classroom, law enforcement, and sports, among others. This explosive growth in the popularity of meditation in the broader culture and popular media has led finally to a growing interest in the examination of meditation by philosophers in the West. It is not likely that philosophers doubt that meditation has the sorts of benefits suggested by the many types of its practitioners implied by the just listed categories in which it has become popular, e.g., stress reduction, relaxation, wellness, etc. Rather, what is likely of greatest interest about meditation to philosophers are the many metaphysical, epistemic, and other philosophical claims that are often associated with expositions of meditation, e.g., as the main path to nirvana, philosophical and spiritual enlightenment, gnostic access to a more ultimate reality, and the like. Surely, questions about such matters are philosophical, just as the question whether there is a God is a philosophical question. But while engaging in philosophical analysis of any concept or claim counts as doing philosophy, doing so does not entail that the concept, claim, or activity itself is a form of philosophy. Thus, the question I focus on is whether the activity of meditation is itself a philosophical activity, a form of doing philosophy.

The question of whether meditation is philosophy, however, is not stated precisely enough to give a meaningful answer. The terms philosophy and meditation are in need of further clarification in order to provide a clear answer to the question. 'Philosophy', as I will be using it, refers to an academic discipline and the set of questions that are included in studying the

discipline. This sense of ‘philosophy’ should not be conflated with its sense in contexts like ‘philosophy of life’, where it refers to a set of life-guiding principles, practices, or beliefs. These principles, practices, or beliefs may be maintained with little rational justification. ‘Philosophy’ on my use refers to the discipline of examining beliefs, including life-guiding principles. A member of a cult may subscribe to a ‘philosophy of life’, but that may be principles or beliefs that are unreflectively, unjustifiably held or believed by the person. In that way cult members may *have* ‘a philosophy’ of life, but never examine the beliefs on which they base their life decisions and actions. In such a case, following the Socratic dictum governing philosophy, that *the unexamined life is not worth living*, such cult members arguably do not even truly *have* any philosophy at all.

Meditation is similarly vague. One type of meditation is reflected in René Descartes’s thinking about what is going on in his thoughts as he related in his classic, *Meditations on First Philosophy*. His meditations were clearly philosophical, reflecting on his beliefs and their justification. Other types of activities also fall under the rubric ‘meditation’, including the following. The Old Testament prophets reported on their being confronted with God’s message about what will happen in the future and/or God’s appraisal of people’s actions resulting from trance-like states; on certain interpretations, these experiences involved altered states, conceivably meditative (e.g., Persico, this *Handbook*). Religious mystics reciting prayers with great focus or concentration on the words report experiences of God (e.g., Terry, this *Handbook*). Buddhists sitting in meditation poses concentrate on attenuating their thoughts, volitions, and related mental activities to attain a state of enlightenment or to directly encounter reality (e.g., Coseru, Fasching, Spackman, and others, this *Handbook*). Martial artists practice meditation to improve their ability to either enter flow states (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) or, as is well known, to concentrate on moving their limbs fast and forcefully through a stack of boards or bricks and breaking them with their hands or feet. Suppose, arguendo, that – as I have heard – some blindfolded archers concentrate on holding their bow and arrow with their bodies under perfectly concentrated equipoise before they release their arrows precisely to direct the arrows into a target’s bullseye, or some artists, musicians, and other creatives meditate in order to tap into their muses. There may be other types, but these suffice to show that there are many different types of meditation.³

All of the following may be cataloged as examples of meditation, meditative practices, or the results of meditative practices:

1. René Descartes’s thinking carefully about what is going on in his belief system.
2. A phenomenologist focusing on her stream of consciousness, bracketing metaphysical conceptions, attempting to discover truths about the nature of experience and reality.
3. Martial artists concentrating on breaking boards.
4. Practitioners of tai chi, yoga, and the like, entering somatic flow states.
5. Whirling dervishes, tribal dance, and other forms of dance triggering flow states.
6. Blindfolded archers concentrating on their targets’ bullseye.
7. Creatives entering flow states.
8. Old Testament prophets in altered states experiencing prophecies.
9. Religious mystics reciting prayers with great focus, or concentration on mantras or other religious phrases, intending to develop a personal relationship with divinity.
10. Buddhist monks in sitting meditation poses to attain enlightenment or direct acquaintance with reality.
11. Students in a meditation session, seated, focusing on attenuating cognitive activity, triggering a state of non-doing, just being, and taking note of their sensations.

Descartes's meditations are philosophy in that he is reflecting on which of his beliefs are immune from doubt. While Descartes's meditations are clearly philosophy, and there is a family resemblance between what he is doing and the other items on the list, it is not at all clear whether there is a common set of characteristics shared by all and only forms of meditation and meditative practices. They all arguably involve focusing or concentrating the powers of the mind. However, they involve different ways of focusing the mind and of doing so for different purposes. A closer examination of these cases will help to clarify what constitutes what we mean by meditation, about which we are asking whether it is philosophy. While there are important differences and nuances within the various versions of each type of example, it will be necessary to set them aside and simplify them for purposes of showing the differences between the different types of meditation.

Descartes's meditations are a paradigm example of philosophy in my sense, studies in metaphysics and epistemology. His meditations are a process of identifying and conceptually purging all false beliefs in order to secure a foundation for scientific knowledge, a foundation which is immune from skeptical doubts, any problems with his methods or their outcomes notwithstanding. There is a stark contrast between the meditation of Descartes and that of the martial artist and the archer. Descartes's meditations have a cognitive goal and content. Meditation is a tool or method used by the martial artist and archer to accomplish the physical tasks of breaking boards and hitting a bullseye. There is no cognitive content to the meditative practices of the martial artist and the archer.

The mode of meditation engaged by the Buddhist monk, Old Testament prophet, and religious mystic are different from these. The Buddhist practice involves concentrating in order to calm all mental activity to achieve enlightenment or acquaintance with ultimate reality. The Old Testament prophet does not necessarily initiate his meditative (prophetic) state, but typically finds himself in the meditative state, while a certain type of religious mystic focuses on religious words uttered in prayer to meditate. While the means of meditation are different in each of these types of cases, the concentration they produce involves cognitive content. For the Buddhist, the cognitive content is about ultimate reality, and for the religious mystic and the Old Testament prophet the cognitive content involves God. In all three cases, the desired outcome is acquaintance with a supramundane being or reality. Some advocates of the view that meditation is philosophy regard cases like these as being primary examples of meditation as a source of a deeper or greater knowledge of reality.

In the case of the phenomenologists and students in a meditation class, the goal of meditation is to focus on certain experiences. Phenomenologists focus on the given qualities of experience, leading to the discovery of certain truths of metaphysics, e.g., about the nature of consciousness, of the world, and of their inter-relatedness. The same may be said of the student in the meditation class who is focusing on non-doing and instead becoming an objective observer of reality, practicing non-judgmental witnessing of the contents of the stream of consciousness. This may be similar to what the Buddhist monk is doing. Advocates of the view that meditation is philosophy or a special tool to be used in philosophy may regard these as cases where meditation is a unique source of knowledge. Meditation may be thought of as being a special form of ('yogic') perception.

While I haven't identified essential and defining characteristics of meditation, I have tried to clarify what it is about meditation and meditative processes that may be proffered as justifications for claiming that meditation is philosophy. Moreover, I have identified cases that, in my view, should not be considered counterexamples to this claim, precisely on account of their *not* having these cognitive, alethic, or otherwise philosophical aspirations. It is the subset of meditation types which *do* have cognitive, alethic, or otherwise philosophical aspirations that purport

to count as forms of philosophy, so it is only these latter types of meditation that will be evaluated in what follows.

I will now consider two classical objections to the claim that meditation is philosophy. The first is due to Ryle; the second, to Nozick.

3 The objection to meditation derived from Ryle's philosophy of mind

Ryle (1949) argues against 'the Official Doctrine' or 'Descartes's Myth', i.e., Cartesian mind-body dualism. Ryle contends that Descartes, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, argues that people are composite beings made up of the union of two types of substances, a physical body and a ghost-like non-corporeal mind or soul. A person's physical body is located and extended in space and is governed by the mechanistic laws of physics. The corporeal body or physical existence is publicly observable. Ghost-like minds are not located or extended in space. The workings of the mind may not be observed by anyone in the physical domain. They are only privately observable to the person in his or her own 'inner theater'. Others may only infer about the workings of another's mind by observing its behavior and effects on the body. Moreover, the operation of minds is not mechanical, i.e., are not explained by cause and effect.

Ryle explains that Descartes's Myth is based on what he calls a 'category mistake', i.e., an equivocation. Ryle writes:

It is perfectly proper to say, in one logical tone of voice, that there exist minds and to say, in another tone of voice, that there exist bodies. But the expressions do not indicate two different species of existence, for "existence" is not a generic word like "coloured" or "sexed". They indicate two different senses of "exist", somewhat as "rising" has a different sense in "the tide is rising", "hopes are rising", and "the average age of death is rising". A man would be thought to be making a poor joke who said that three things are rising, the tide, hopes, and the average age of death.

(1949, p. 23)

Ryle appears to be appealing to the principle of parsimony, Ockham's razor, that there is no reason to assume the existence of more types of entities than required to explain the phenomena in question. He argues that Descartes's Myth, the myth of the non-physical mind, is based on the misconception that statements about the mind are to be taken to refer to the existence of mysterious, ghostly mental substances which are not subject to the laws of physics. Ryle sets out to dispel the myth of the 'ghost in the machine' by showing that statements referring to minds, mental events, and mental properties "can be translated, without loss of meaning, into subjunctive conditionals about what the individual will do in various circumstances" (Tanney 2021), i.e., translated into statements referring only to the behavior of physical objects.

At first blush, one might think that Ryle's program, if successful, would at best impact only the practice of meditation by those who claim that its philosophical importance is contingent on the truth of a dualistic ontology, e.g., those who maintain that meditation reveals something about the non-corporeal mind or soul. This would at best suggest which forms of meditation or meditative practices are correct and which are not. However, Ryle devotes considerable attention in *The Concept of Mind* attempting to explain how various mental concepts, including self-knowledge, consciousness, and introspection, are properly understood as dispositions of physical objects – people – to behave in various ways in given circumstances. The underlying objection to meditation as philosophy or as a source of knowledge, derived from Ryle's work, would be that meditation erroneously presupposes that people have certain reflective mental processes,

consciousness, and introspection. In the erroneously conceived process of meditation, according to a Rylean critique, the person putatively introspects and examines her consciousness, which in turn reveals or justifies her believing in the truth of certain propositions, thereby producing knowledge, but this putative process rests on a false presupposition about the mind.

The argument against the thesis that meditation is philosophy which is based on Ryle's view may be characterized as follows:

1. Meditation and meditative practices are tools of philosophy or a source of knowledge only if there is a process of introspection through which people can examine the contents of their consciousness.
2. There is no process of introspection through which people can examine or be aware of the contents of their consciousness.
3. Therefore, meditation and meditative practices are not tools of philosophy, nor are they a source of knowledge.

This argument is clearly logically valid, but if it has an 'Achilles' heel', it is in the truth of the second premise. Ryle would support this premise by claiming that there are no non-physical objects that are the contents of consciousness and thus that there is no reason to think that there is any special kind of non-physical observation or introspection. As there are no such entities and no reason to think that there is this special kind of perception enabling a person to 'view' the private contents of their own mind, meditation cannot reveal any such facts.

4 Ryle's argument against consciousness and introspection

Following his program of showing that statements referring to mental concepts, e.g., consciousness and introspection, should not be taken to mean that there are these ghost-like entities that are 'observed' in a private theater, Ryle argues that self-knowledge, consciousness, and introspection are properly understood as dispositions of the body. He claims that actions that are clever or intelligent are often thought to express that they are guided by consulting propositional knowledge, knowledge of certain truths, i.e., the person knowing that certain things are true (propositions) uses this information to guide actions. Ryle argues that these are really cases of *knowing how*, i.e., actions displaying the person's dispositions or abilities to do something, which actions and abilities display intelligence.⁴

Ryle supports this claim citing an example of playing chess. According to Descartes's Myth, the person's chess moves are deemed intelligent because he/she consults propositional knowledge about the rules of chess and winning chess strategies while using this knowledge to choose which moves to make. One concludes that certain moves are intelligent or clever by consulting what goes on their own private theater, and infers that similar ghost-like processes are occurring in the mind of the chess player which explain his/her moves. Ryle argues that there are not two things going on as suggested by this account, i.e., some things going on in the mind which result in a second type of thing happening, namely, bodily actions. He argues that it is the bodily action itself which displays the intelligence, cleverness, or 'know how'. There is no set of facts or truths about chess being consulted in the ghostly process of the mind of the skilled chess player from which his moves are inferred.

Ryle sees a similar problem with the way we ordinarily talk about consciousness. For example, suppose we are looking at a tree. On this account, there are two types of things going on: (a) we have sensations in our eyes causing things to happen in our brain, and (b) there is consciousness of certain occurrences in our visual field. If someone were to ask us what we

are conscious of, we would describe the sensation in terms of visual characteristics of the tree. Ryle claims that there is only one event occurring, namely our seeing the tree. In response to this claim, we might say that our consciousness of visual sensations in our minds, unlike the physical events in our eyes and brains, are such that they are self-illuminating or self-justifying. In addition, we might say that our being consciously aware of these mental occurrences is such that we cannot be mistaken about them, i.e., they are incorrigible. Ryle claims that after the fact we can describe what we were sensing, but that there is no reason to think that we were conscious of how things appeared to us and from that we made inferences about the physical world. Moreover, Ryle asserts that we can be mistaken about our sensations, i.e., they are neither incorrigible, self-illuminating, nor self-justifying. This appears to be an appeal to a behaviorist philosophy of mind.

Ryle points out that ‘introspection’ is used to refer to a special sort of perception. Just as a person hears piano music, sees a tree, and tastes coffee, similarly she may be attending to her current mental state. The music, the tree, and the coffee are things perceived through the senses; similarly, her feeling pleasure or pain is perceived through introspection. Sense perceptions involve the functioning of bodily organs, e.g., eyes, ears, etc., but introspection, on the Official Doctrine, involves no bodily organ. Sense perceptions, on this view, are mediated and thus subject to being mistaken, while observing one’s mental processes is unmediated and thus cannot be mistaken. They possess ‘epistemic privilege’.

Reflecting on his series of examples of mental events, Ryle concludes that self-knowledge, consciousness, and introspection are not correctly portrayed by Descartes’s Myth, i.e., as ghost-like processes played out on the private theater of one’s mind and the source of private first-person knowledge. By contrast, he concludes from his reflections on his examples that self-knowledge, consciousness, and introspection are observable states of the physical objects, the body, played out on the public stage, accessible to third parties.

5 Problems with Ryle’s arguments against consciousness and introspection

Ryle’s points that are taken to pose serious objections to the claim that meditation is philosophy or a tool for use in philosophy all rely on the plausible claim that meditation involves introspection. This suggests the following three reasons for a Rylean to reject the view of meditation as philosophy: (a) introspection is impossible because it requires that a person does two things at once; (b) introspection is impossible because it relies on the possibility of an infinite regress of introspections; and (c) introspection is impossible because it is impossible to observe certain mental events from an objective point of view. A close examination of these arguments will reveal that none of them poses an insurmountable threat to the “meditation is philosophy” thesis.

The arguments based on the first two Rylean arguments – (a) and (b) above – proceed as follows:

1. Introspection is possible only if a person can perform a mental activity, while at the same time performing a second mental process of observing the other mental activity.
2. People cannot introspect, i.e., direct their attention to something, while at the same time doing something that requires their attention.

Therefore,

3. Introspection is not possible.

The first premise of this argument appears true, as introspection is an activity in which a person directs his or her attention on some mental activity, e.g., sensing, thinking, etc. The second premise is alleged to be true because when you are directing your attention to something, you are concentrating only on that one thing. Hence, if you are concentrating your attention on something, you cannot at the same time concentrate on something else. However, the claim about attention being on only one thing appears dubious. Consider that when we are driving a car, especially at high speed, we seem to be concentrating on several things, e.g., the position of the car in relationship to vehicles in front, on the left side, and on the right side, if not also in the rear mirror. Moreover, we may be at the same time having a conversation with a passenger and focusing on making a specific point, if not also smoking a cigarette. Whether attention is rapidly shifting from one of these to another or simultaneously distributed is a cognitive science question, but regardless of the details of the neurological networking or modules involved and the like, whatever the explanation turns out to be does not seem to be one that will preclude our ability to focus on more than one thing robotically at a time.

While these considerations fall short of proving the premise in question to be false, they certainly provide at least a *prima facie* reason to doubt its veracity. At a bare minimum, they leave a large opening for the defenders of the claim that “meditation is philosophy” to provide an explanation of what is going on when one meditates properly, and hence, they provide strong reasons for rejecting the Rylean premise.

Ryle’s next argument against introspection is based on the absurdity of there being an infinite regress of introspecting. This argument is a variant of an argument against infinite regresses, similar to the ‘Third Man’ argument against Plato’s Theory of Forms (Vlastos 1954). Ryle’s version of this argument proceeds as follows:

1. Introspection is possible only if it is a special mental process of observation.
2. Introspection is a special mental process of observation only if it is possible to observe via introspection the process of introspection.
3. If it is possible to introspect one’s introspecting, then there can be infinitely many levels of introspection.
4. But, there cannot be infinitely many levels of introspection.

Therefore,

5. Introspection is impossible.

This type of argument has been employed, by Ryle and others, against various mental states or propositional attitudes, including the question in epistemology about ‘the KK principle’, i.e., the principle that, if you know a proposition, then you *know* that you *know* a proposition. While the KK principle may be dubious, it is not because of the infinite regress problem.⁵

The problem with the argument, rather, stems from the claim made in the third premise, that if it is possible to introspect, then it is possible to introspect that you are introspecting, ad infinitum. Perhaps an intelligent being, having much greater intellectual powers than humans, would be capable of introspecting that it introspected, that it introspected, ad infinitum. However, this recursive power of introspection may be limited by the mental capabilities of the person introspecting. While this ‘Third Man’ type argument suggests an intriguing plot for a philosophical fiction movie like *Inception*, where a team of operatives gets inside a person’s dreams to delete part of the person’s memory, and gets caught in dreams within dreams within dreams, it poses no real problem for meditation as philosophy.

The final Rylean objection to meditation as philosophy was originally raised by David Hume (Ryle 1949, p. 166). Hume claims that some states of mind cannot be ‘coolly’ inspected, e.g., panic and anger. His point is that in examining one’s own states of passion, such as panic and anger, from a neutral, objective, or level-headed perspective, the state of passion is invariable altered. So, for example, one’s examining one’s state of anger from this perspective will mollify one’s anger. In doing so, one will inevitably miss some essential characteristics of the state that one was trying to discover. Ryle concludes that some mental states can only be examined objectively in retrospect.

It should be noted that this is a different kind of objection to introspection than Ryle’s other objections. It appears that Ryle’s other objection were intended to show that there is really no such thing as introspection, while this objection seems to be claiming that introspection is possible, but that it is not an objective source of information, i.e., it cannot be a source of knowledge. It cannot be an objective source of information and hence of knowledge because introspection changes the content of what is being observed. However, this is not exactly what Ryle concludes. Rather, he concludes that when we think we are considering a case of introspection, what we are in fact considering is a case of retrospection, i.e., recalling our experience and examining these memories. Moreover, for the reasons already cited by Hume, these retrospections are not reliable.

Let us look at the implications of these points on the view of meditation as philosophy. Presumably, meditation on this view is dependent on people’s ability to view their mental states and events objectively through introspection. Hume’s point is that examining certain of one’s own mental states or events, passions like panic and anger, changes the characteristics of the mental state; hence, these observations cannot provide reliable evidence as to the nature of the observed mental state. It appears that Hume should concede that one can introspect, but maintain that introspection, in contrast to perception, cannot be an adequate or reliable source of knowledge.⁶

The problem with this objection is that, at best, it shows that introspecting certain sorts of mental states and events does not afford reliable sources of knowledge. These may not be, and usually are not, the subject of examination provided via meditation. However, meditation is taken by many of its proponents and practitioners to be a calming of mental activity. It would not be a problem that any meditation of this sort would not be a source of knowledge of any agitated mental states, as this consequence of meditation is conceived by these practitioners as doing one of the things meditation is intended to do. Moreover, it is not at all clear that Hume’s claim is true of introspection of many mental states and events. It is certainly correct that one can sometimes become agitated to the point of not thinking correctly about his or her current mental state. However, at other times, a person finding himself angry may in fact rightly conclude that they should be angrier than they actually find themselves. But that implies that they are correctly perceiving their state of anger.

Ryle goes further than Hume does with this example. Ryle is asserting that what is going on is not introspection, because it is really retrospection, i.e., recalling one’s being in a certain mental state. The consequence for meditation as philosophy, then, is that meditation is not examining what is currently going on in one’s mind, but is remembering what went on in one’s mind in the past. Moreover, Ryle seems to imply that, because of the considerations raised by Hume, these retrospective observations are unreliable; hence, meditation is not a reliable source of knowledge.

Ryle’s objection not only suffers from the problem suggested above with respect to Hume’s objection, but the problem is compounded by its dependence on the claim that introspection is and must be retrospection. Ryle fails to provide a convincing reason for this claim. Of course, what Ryle also seemed to have overlooked in this line of thought is that one cannot remember

what one was not conscious of when one experienced it, in which case retrospection of past mental state contents implies past introspective cognition of the then-current mental state contents. Thus, there is no reason for a defender of meditation as philosophy to be riled by Ryle's objections. However, it is worth noting that the earlier objections raised by Ryle are based on metaphysical considerations, while this last point is based on epistemological grounds, i.e., that meditation does not provide reasons to justify a person's beliefs, e.g., about any supramundane reality.

6 Nozick's phonograph example

A stronger objection to meditation as philosophy based on epistemological grounds was raised by Nozick's discussion of mysticism (1981, pp. 157–63). Nozick's objection is directed against

assertions of something beyond existence and nonexistence, infinite and unbounded, appear[ing] in the writing of (some) mystics, not as hypotheses to answer questions of cosmogony, but to describe what they have experienced and encountered.

(Id., p. 157)

Nozick questions whether it is rational or reasonable for the practitioner of Zen Buddhism to believe that he is experiencing an ultimate reality and its nature based on his or her meditative experiences. If Nozick's argument is sound, it casts doubt on whether the experiences meditation provides are sources of reasonable belief or knowledge about the purported facts of reality or God.

Nozick uses the example of the meditative practices of Zen Buddhism which quiet the stream of thoughts going through one's mind. In quieting down the cacophony of thoughts in one's stream of consciousness, meditation is claimed to reveal a deeper – if not a supramundane – dimension of reality. Nozick agrees that those who have these kinds of meditative experiences sincerely report their revelations and feel psychological certainty about these beliefs. However, he questions whether their meditative experiences make it reasonable to believe that these experiences are veridical with respect to their alleged apprehension of the nature of ultimate reality.

Nozick considers an example of what might be analogous to having a meditative experience, which example undermines the idea that meditation has any cognitive content.⁷ I will explain his example first, then modify the example, for readers for whom a more contemporary case might be more intuitive. In the original case, Nozick compares meditation, as non-cognitive activity, contrasted with non-meditative cognitive activity, on the one hand, with a stereo system that is on but not playing any music, contrasted with one that is on and playing music, on the other hand, to make the analogical point that perhaps meditation affords nothing more than an experience of what it is like when our cognitive equipment is attenuated, yet we remain conscious – perhaps what it would be like for a conscious soundless stereo system. In my updated example, Nozick would argue that meditation is analogous to what it might be like for a soundless music system, consisting of working headphones attached to a smart phone that is on, tuned to a music source, but not actually playing the music – perhaps the music is simply paused. We can hereafter refer to either version of the example as the soundless sound system.

From Nozick's perspective, it would not seem rational or justified for anyone in this meditative state to think they are having (or had) a special sort of sensation of or acquaintance with some ultimate reality beyond the contrastive experience of music when the sound system is operating normally. Perhaps it would be rational for the listener to believe that they heard

the sound of silence, as in the Simon & Garfunkel song. But, poetic license – and what Dennett would call ‘deepities’ (van Leeuwen 2018), propositions appearing profound only because they equivocate: either they are true but trivial, or false, but would be deeply meaningful if true – aside, silence (the absence of sound) has no sound, and thus cannot be heard. By analogy, mental silence (the absence of cognitive activity) has no cognitive content, and cannot be cognitively processed. Shouldn’t one conclude, then, with Nozick, that the meditator is not rational or reasonable in believing that meditation has revealed anything about any supramundane reality?

Nozick considers a possible objection to this argument, noting a relevant difference between the meditation example and the sound system example, which may account for the rationality of belief based on the meditative experiences, but not the silent sound experience. He explains that “there remains something special about the mystical experience whereby it evades this general argument. Because this mystical experience is ineffable, powerfully (if not indelibly) remembered but inadequately described, the mystic knows something” (1981, p. 161) that the listener to the silent sound does not.

Nozick replies as follows. What is relevant in the case of meditation is not the experience itself, but the effect of the experience on the person’s ‘evidential base’. The question is whether the character of the experience makes the belief reasonable. Meditators often appear gullible with respect to other things they accept. While this may not make their beliefs unreasonable, as their general picture of the universe is different from the picture had by others who have not had these experiences, we must be careful to distinguish a meditator’s beliefs about their experiences from “other statements that he introduces as hypotheses to connect the deep underlying reality he experiences with the superficial one he normally inhabits” (*id.*, p. 162). As the claims about the connections are not part of the meditative experiences, they do not provide the support required for the meditator to be judged rational or reasonable in his or her beliefs based on the meditative experience.

7 Plantinga’s defense against Nozick’s objection⁸

There is a line of defense against Nozick’s objection which merits examination based on Alvin Plantinga’s ‘reformed epistemology’ (1981), a theory inspired by John Calvin’s reformed theological tradition. Plantinga defends the rationality of belief in God from an argument of a similar form to Nozick’s that proceeds as follows:

1. Reasonable belief in *x* depends on the proper sort of evidence to support the belief.
2. There is no proper evidence to support the belief in *x*.

Therefore,

3. No one is reasonable in believing *x*. (*Id.*)

The *x* that is the object(s) purportedly *evidenced* concerns Plantinga, for, in his case, God is the *x* in question, while the *belief in x* we are addressing is the object(s) purportedly *experienced* during meditation.

The first premise of this argument appears to be a trivial assumption: that whether or not a belief is reasonable, rational, or justified depends on the evidence or reasons that a person has supporting the belief. This is the basic postulate of evidentialism. Nozick’s sound system example is intended to show an example of a belief that has no evidence to support it. The analogy between the meditative experience and the experience of the non-functioning sound system

is intended to demonstrate that, just as there is no evidence that supports any claims that the person is experiencing an object of the sound recording experience, such as the sound of silence as opposed to the absence of any sonic content, analogously there is no evidence supporting the claim that a meditator is experiencing any supramundane reality or God. This analogy is intended to show that the second premise above is true. Plantinga objects that the first premise – which asserts evidentialism – is false. He supports this claim by explaining how a person's belief can be reasonable in the absence of any supporting evidence.

Plantinga argues that the view that the reasonability of a belief is dependent on the evidence one possesses and the strength of support the evidence provides for this belief – evidentialism – is derived from a widely held but misguided epistemology, i.e., *classical foundationalism*. He argues that classical foundationalism assumes that “some of one's beliefs may be *based upon* others; it may be that there is a pair of propositions *A* and *B*, such that I believe *A* on the basis of *B*” (*id.*, p. 41). Thus, for example, I believe that it is 1:23 PM EDT on the basis that I see that time displayed on the clock. He continues: “[s]ome of my beliefs, however, I accept but don't accept based on any other beliefs. Call these beliefs basic” (*id.*). He uses the example of his belief that $2 + 1 = 3$ as an illustration of a properly basic belief, a belief that he has but does not believe on the basis of any other belief. Other examples of his properly basic beliefs include the propositions (referring to himself) that *I am seated at my desk* and that *there is a mild pain in my right knee*, emphasizing that he does not believe these on the basis of any beliefs.

Plantinga notes that Reform thinkers and theologians, thinkers in the Protestant tradition tracing its roots back to John Calvin, reject what Plantinga and other philosophers of religion term *natural theology*, the attempt to prove the existence of God through arguments. Not only do they reject the attempts to prove the existence of God in this way, but they claim that the enterprise is radically misguided. They claim that “it is perfectly rational to accept belief in God without accepting it on the basis of any other beliefs or propositions at all. In a word, they hold that *belief in God is properly basic*” (Plantinga 1981, p. 42).

We should clarify at this point that their claim is not that belief in God is reasonable based on religious experience. Rather, they hold that belief in God does not require any evidence at all – that evidentialism does not apply to basic beliefs. Plantinga notes that the evidentialist objection to theistic belief is rooted in:

classical foundationalism, according to which a proposition *p* is properly basic for a person, if and only if *p* is either self-evident or incorrigible for [that person] (modern foundationalism) or either self-evident or “evident to the senses” for [that person] (ancient and medieval foundationalism).

(*Id.*, p. 44)

Plantinga readily admits that belief in God is not properly basic for anyone according to this criterion, but argues that this is an overly restrictive criterion for a properly basic belief. Plantinga claims that perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs which ascribe mental states to other persons, such as:

1. I see a tree,
2. I had breakfast this morning,

and

3. So and so is hungry,

are properly basic beliefs. These propositions may be justified even though they are not believed on the basis of any other beliefs or proposition. These beliefs are examples of propositions that are properly basic while failing to meet the foundationalist's more stringent criteria for being properly basic. He explains that seeing someone's display of hunger behavior, having remembering eating breakfast in the morning, and seeing a tree, justify his believing those propositions, though he does not take these facts as evidence for the belief, nor does he infer these propositions from others he believes. Rather "in each case there is some circumstance or condition that confers justification ... [which] in each case will be some true proposition of the sort:

4. In condition *C*, *S* is justified in taking *p* as basic" (*id.*, p. 45).

Plantinga thinks that as there are various conditions that account for justified belief in each of these sorts of cases (perception, memory, mental states, etc.), there are many principles of this sort that account for various kinds of propositions being properly basic for people in these circumstances. (Arguably, these are 'externalist' principles: that is, the epistemic agent need not engage in an internal process of consciously entertaining or reasoning about them; it suffices if the justificatory principles are satisfied from a perspective external to the epistemic agent.)

Plantinga explains that analogous points can be made of belief in God. Following Calvin, he thinks that:

God has so created us that we have a tendency or disposition to see his hand in the world about us Upon reading the Bible, one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is talking to him. Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked, I may feel guilty in God's sight and form the belief *God disapproves of what I have done.*

(*Id.*)

Plantinga maintains that these conditions are analogous to the conditions of perception, memory, and mental states which make a person justified in taking as properly basic propositions like:

5. God is speaking to me,
- and
6. God disapproves of what I have done.

And these two statements (5 and 6) being properly basic would also justify their self-evident (akin to his self-evident belief *that* $2 + 1 = 3$) logical consequence that:

7. God exists.

If Plantinga's explanation is correct, then the first premise that Nozick's argument relies on is false, i.e., that reasonable (or justified) belief in *x* does not depend on the person's having evidence supporting the belief that *x*. A Plantinga style epistemology may be applied to the case of meditative experiences. For example, the meditating Zen Buddhist, to keep with Nozick's example, has an experience which would make the proposition,

8. I experienced nirvana,

properly basic for them, thus rendering reasonable their believing in nirvana,⁹ even though the person does not believe this on the basis of any other evidence (akin to believing they are seeing a tree).

8 Plantinga and Chisholm on the status of epistemic principles: A shortcoming of Plantinga's response

Plantinga's solution to the sort of problem raised by Nozick's example is somewhat complex and deserves careful and clear-headed consideration to evaluate whether it is acceptable. We may recap Plantinga's argument as follows:

1. If a person's belief is properly basic, then the belief is justified (rational or reasonable) even in the absence of any evidence supporting it.
2. There are meditative experience propositions that are properly basic for certain people who do not have any evidence to support these propositions.
3. Therefore, some people are justified in believing meditative experience propositions even though they have no evidence that justifies those beliefs.

Plantinga maintains that the first premise in Nozick's argument is false because beliefs may be justified (rational or reasonable) for a person even though the person does not possess evidence that supports the belief, i.e., if they are properly basic. The concept of a belief or proposition being properly basic is rooted in foundationalism, the view, rooted in Descartes's philosophy, maintaining that there is a class of propositions having a privileged epistemic justificatory status, i.e., in some sense they are self-evident or incorrigible. These properly basic or foundational beliefs, at least in part, justify all other propositions which are not properly basic. Plantinga maintains that propositions, such as *that God is speaking to me*, are properly basic when, for example, I am reading the Bible. Similarly, a defender of Zen Buddhism could, following Plantinga's example, maintain that the proposition, *that I am experiencing nirvana*, when the person is having a certain experience when meditating, is justified (rational or reasonable). In this way, Plantinga claims these propositions are justified for the person having the experiences, but the person does not base his belief on evidence supporting the beliefs.

Plantinga's objection to Nozick's argument rests on the assumption that certain theological and meditative beliefs are properly basic, i.e., they require no evidence. His concept of properly basic propositions is borrowed from classical foundationalism, in particular citing Roderick Chisholm (1966) as a proponent of the view. Plantinga thinks that classical foundationalism's criteria for being properly basic are unjustifiably restrictive, but the corrected criterion would countenance the theological beliefs as being properly basic even though there is no evidence justifying them. The meditator, following Plantinga's lead, could make similar claims about her meditative experience.

Plantinga has failed, on my analysis, to make his case that theological beliefs are justified even in the absence of evidence. This is due to his assertion that he justifiably believes them even though he does not base them on any evidence. In examining the classical foundationalist's (e.g., Chisholm's) account of the justification of properly basic propositions, we will see that Plantinga has failed to make the case in his examples, i.e., that the putatively justified beliefs that he has are not based on any evidence.

Chisholm claims that when one is justified (rational or reasonable) in believing a proposition, the evidence that one has to justify believing the proposition is discovered by the person's answer to the Socratic question 'What justifies my believing this proposition?'¹⁰ Suppose for

example that a person sees something white. Her answer to the Socratic question of what justifies her in believing the proposition 'I see something white' is usually based on another proposition, 'I seem to see something white'. This second proposition is her evidence for believing the first proposition. On Chisholm's view, the account of having a justified belief provides a two-part answer to the Socratic question of 'What justifies the person in believing the proposition?' These two justificatory components include: (a) the evidence one has that supports the belief, and (b) a rule of evidence or epistemic principle.

In the case under consideration, our person's evidence, the first part of the answer to the Socratic question would be the proposition 'I seem to see something white'. The second part of the answer, on Chisholm's analysis, would be an epistemic principle to the effect that if a person is justified in believing that I seem to see something white, then the person is justified in believing that I see something white, provided that the person has no evidence that would count against the justification that I actually see something white. More generally, the second part of the answer to the Socratic question will always be a rule of evidence or epistemic principle to the effect that a person's justification in believing a type of proposition under consideration is based on evidence of the type that was cited in the first part. Chisholm continues that there are two kinds of epistemic principles, principles of the following forms: (a) if I am justified in believing a proposition of a certain type, then I am justified in believing certain propositions of another type, like the one we used in the preceding example, or (b) if a proposition of a certain type is true, then I am justified in believing that proposition.

Chisholm claims foundationalism's initial plausibility stems from the fact that if we ask the Socratic question with respect to a proposition that we are justified in believing and continue the process of asking Socratic questions about the proposition cited as evidence, this process will reach a proper stopping point, a foundation on which our epistemic edifice may be grounded. This proper stopping point will be when we have a proposition cited as evidence and the corresponding epistemic principle will be of the second type. The principle will state that the proposition's being true, by itself, justifies the person in believing the proposition. When we reach this answer to the process of Socratic questioning, we will have discovered a proposition that is properly basic, according to Chisholm. It is properly basic because the truth of the proposition is the only evidence needed to justify believing the proposition.

Let's continue with the example above to see how this justificatory process works. When we ask our subject the Socratic question about the justification of the proposition offered as evidence for the proposition *that I see something white*, that answer is often that 'I seem to see something white'. When we ask the Socratic question about what justified the person in believing the evidence, the proposition *that I seem to see something white*, often she will not cite a different proposition but will cite that very proposition, *that I seem to see something white*. The epistemic principle that accounts for our subject's being justified in believing that she seems to see something white will be something like the following: If it is true that a person seems to see something white, then the person is justified in believing that she seems to see something white.

This, then, is what makes a proposition properly basic on Chisholm's classical foundationalism: that the proposition's being true constitutes its own evidence or is self-presenting (in Chisholm's terminology). It should be emphasized that the epistemic principle is an externalist principle, that is, it is not necessarily part of the evidence that the person consciously possesses: The person may never have considered the epistemic principle. It is the truth of the epistemic principle that completes the account, answering the Socratic question. Recalling our discussion of the non-necessity of the KK principle above, to *know* that one *knows* the proposition *that I seem to see something white*, the person must know the epistemic principle. However, to reiterate,

the epistemic principle does not need to be known by the person for the person to know the properly basic proposition.

Plantinga's claim here, then, would be that, for example, the proposition *that God is speaking to me* is, under the right conditions, properly basic in the sense that it requires no evidence for it to be justified for a person. Moreover, he has claimed that, under certain conditions, there are many true instances of propositions of the form 'God is speaking to me' that are justified. Moreover, Plantinga seems to think, this sort of proposition is justified even if the person has no evidence that supports the belief that God is speaking to them.

However, it seems that if a person is justified in believing that God is speaking to him when reading the Bible, there are answers to the Socratic question which need to be different from the proposition *that God is speaking to him*, for the latter would be circular (i.e., I believe P because P). A related Socratic question that betrays the need for justification with such beliefs – contrary to Plantinga's analysis – might be, for example: 'What reason do you have for thinking that it is actually God, and not some less powerful being, that is talking to you?' In the absence of any evidence that it is actually God and not some other being doing the talking, the person would not be justified in believing the proposition. If the meditator takes a similar line to Plantinga's, claiming that meditative experience beliefs are properly basic, the very same type of question will remain unanswered, e.g., 'What reason do you have for thinking that this is actually an experience of some supramundane reality and not some illusion, delusion, or misperception?' Or, as Nozick might put the question, applied to the soundless stereo case, 'What reason do you have for thinking that this is actually an experience of the sound of silence, as opposed to an experience of the absence of sound?'

9 Plantinga's remaining skeptical doubts

Plantinga argues that Chisholm's view is defective in that the epistemic principles that he proposes concerning properly basic propositions are not themselves obviously true, self-evident, or self-justifying. In that case, these principles are no more reasonable than are the principles that he cites in defense of the claim that the epistemic principles that he invokes to show that propositions about what a person is perceiving or remembering are justified in the absence of any other evidence. Plantinga has written a series of books defending his epistemological views. I think that it would not be fair to dismiss his claims without a more in-depth analysis of his epistemology, one that goes beyond the scope of this chapter, to engage the sort of careful analysis that they deserve.

Nonetheless, I think that I have shown enough to suggest that there are outstanding questions and reasons for having skeptical doubts concerning Plantinga's claims and about the corresponding claims to be made about meditation experience propositions. Nozick has raised the same sorts of questions concerning meditation experience propositions, i.e., what justifies the meditator in believing that she is experiencing something about a deeper reality as opposed to the 'sound of silence' when meditating? Perhaps there is a plausible answer to this question to be found elsewhere in this *Handbook*, one that would answer the Socratic questions that may be raised to the meditator in accounting for the justification of her belief.

While there may be other criteria that may be needed as adequacy conditions on any account asserting that meditation is a form of philosophy, I believe I have made a plausible case for the claim that at least one condition of adequacy on any such account would be that it must answer the Socratic question Chisholm used in his account of classical foundationalism, and which at least poses a challenge to any Plantinga style attempt to circumvent it by way of weaker criteria for properly basic beliefs. If I am correct, then for defenders of the thesis that meditation

provides a unique source of knowledge (providing data to be used in answering philosophical questions) to reply to these skeptical doubts, they would need to provide a theory of knowledge that accounts for how we would be justified in believing meditation experience propositions on the basis of the meditation experience.

Notes

- 1 See, e.g., Kachru (this *Handbook*, Chapter 5), Thapliyal (this *Handbook*, Chapter 7), and Timalina (this *Handbook*, Chapter 20), for discussions of meditation relating to these two Asian philosophies.
- 2 See, e.g., Terry (this *Handbook*, Chapter 25) and Persico (this *Handbook*, Chapter 26) for discussions of meditation relating to these theological/philosophical luminaries; see also Pigliucci (this *Handbook*, Chapter 24) for a discussion of meditation in the West appearing as far back as Stoicism.
- 3 See Repetti (2020) for a fairly comprehensive analysis of the different types of meditation.
- 4 See Gowans (this *Handbook*, Chapter 10) for an argument that meditation is precisely knowledge how (procedural skill), rather than knowledge that (propositional knowledge).
- 5 As one who believes, as many do, that while the justified true belief analysis of knowledge does not provide a sufficient condition for knowing, it does provide necessary conditions for knowing a proposition. Hence, the real principle in question should be a “JJ principle”, i.e., if you are justified in believing a proposition, then you are *justified* in believing that you are *justified* in believing the proposition. The point being, that while these epistemic principles may be questionable, they are not generally considered questionable among epistemologists because of this infinite regress problem. The serious objections to the principle stem from the fact that it is not clear that because you are justified in believing a proposition, that you are justified in believing that you are justified in believing the proposition. You may require additional reasons for believing that this sort of evidence is good evidence.
- 6 Ironically, this Humean argument undermines Hume’s own claim that, on the basis of his own introspections, there is no self, but only a cluster or bundle of mental phenomena, e.g., sensations, passions, thoughts, etc.
- 7 Repetti (this *Handbook*, Chapter 2), Kachru (this *Handbook*, Chapter 5), and Pigliucci (this *Handbook*, Chapter 24), each discuss this example from different perspectives.
- 8 As noted earlier, the objection Nozick raises is to a slightly different, but related, claim, that meditation is philosophy or meditation as philosophy (i.e., meditation provides a unique datum to be used in philosophy). Instead of talking about a Nozick style objection, I will talk of Nozick’s objection to meditation as philosophy, understanding that Nozick never directly addressed this question. I will also talk of Plantinga’s objection as a shorthand for a Plantinga style objection.
- 9 As Plantinga’s claims about theological beliefs can be made, *mutatis mutandis*, about meditative beliefs, henceforth I will just refer to this as Plantinga’s position with respect to meditative beliefs as well.
- 10 See Chisholm (1966), Chapter 2, “The Directly Evident”. For a comprehensive overview of Chisholm’s epistemology, see Legum (2021).

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