

Does Mindfulness Make Any Difference? (D04)
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In recent years there have been a handful of books published on mindfulness and politics, such as Melvin McLeod's *Mindful Politics*, U.S. Congressman Tim Ryan's *A Mindful Nation*, and Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*. The U.S. Congress now has an informal Quiet Time Caucus, which meets to meditate weekly.¹ The British Parliament has an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Mindfulness.² Even the cover story of the January 23, 2014 issue of *Time* magazine was about "The Mindful Revolution."³ It seems that mindfulness is everywhere, and that the idea that it might have some relevance to politics is at least not seen as insane, though it may not yet be mainstream. Given this recent upsurge of interest in mindfulness and politics, now seems like an opportune time to investigate what effects mindfulness might have on politics, as well as what the limits of those effects might be.

In this paper I am especially concerned with what I fear is a likely misappropriation of mindfulness for political purposes: the attempt to use mindfulness to justify liberalism as a value-neutral political system capable of facilitating cooperation among people with different and even mutually conflicting value systems. As I argue below, mindfulness is perfectly suited to be seized upon for this purpose, but there are two strong reasons to resist that move: (1) it would distract us from the political contributions that mindfulness is better equipped to offer; (2) mindfulness is not capable of justifying liberalism because nothing is capable of saving liberalism from the problem of value conflict.

Mindfulness, Liberalism, and Politics

The word “mindfulness” is sometimes used as a synecdoche for Buddhism, but it is also commonly used to refer to a practice and disposition to achieve “moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness” (Kabat-Zinn 108). Mindfulness in this second sense is more than meditation but less than Buddhism, from which mindfulness has largely developed. That is, because mindfulness is a commitment to non-judgmental awareness of one’s experience at all times, it is more than a technique that is used only occasionally, but it does not commit one to the substantive beliefs of the Buddhist tradition, such as karma, reincarnation, the Buddhist cosmology, and so on. This paper is interested in mindfulness in this broader, thinner sense.

It seems obvious that Buddhism proper could have an influence on politics, for example if some number of people who had not been Buddhists previously were to adopt Buddhism as a religious or philosophical guide to life. Such a change would be likely to influence politics because Buddhism contains a variety of substantive normative principles—against the use of violence, in favor of toleration and harmony, and so on—that are relevant to political action.⁴ (Of course that’s not to say that all Buddhists accept or act on the same principles in the same ways, but just that adopting new normative principles is likely to change how one acts politically.) But could mindfulness alone affect politics?

Because the idea that mindfulness might have some relevance to politics is relatively new (indeed, the idea of mindfulness itself, as a practice separate from Buddhism, only goes back to the 1980s), not much has been said about it yet, and what has been said is pretty reasonable. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is largely responsible for popularizing the idea of mindfulness, emphasizes that

mindfulness practice could influence politics primarily by helping individuals to become less reactive, less stressed, and less caught up in self-righteousness:

As with every other aspect of this exploration, the aim in examining the domain of the body politic in relationship to mindfulness is not to change opinions, our own or others', nor to confirm them. Cultivating greater mindfulness in our lives does not imply that we would fall into one set of ideological views and opinions or another, but that we might see more freshly for ourselves, with eyes of wholeness, moment by moment. But what mindfulness can do for us, and it is a very important function, is reveal our opinions, and all opinions, *as opinions*, so that we will know them for what they are and perhaps not be so caught by them and blinded by them, whatever their content, even though we may sometimes adopt particular opinions quite consciously, and hold them strongly and with conviction, and act on them. (Kabat-Zinn 508-09)

Similarly, Tim Ryan, who identifies Kabat-Zinn and his work as an inspiration, mostly focuses on what we might call emotional and process benefits that might arise from applying mindfulness to politics:

But in each of these instances, with mindfulness we may do it just a bit less. We may see the humor in our mistakes and be able to laugh at ourselves more. We may be just a little less critical of others, and of ourselves. Or we may deal with our mistakes more quickly and with a more sincere and kind heart. We may more easily forgive the people who have hurt us. We may sit down and have civil political conversations with those who strongly

disagree with us. My goal is not that America will become a perfect nation. My goal is that America will be a kinder, more compassionate nation, because I know down deep in my heart that we are a kinder, more compassionate country than is evident today.

Reviving our compassionate spirit will allow us to listen carefully to each other, find points of agreement, and recapture the unity of purpose that made America great. (Ryan 167)

As I argue in greater depth below, these claims seem to me quite reasonable. It seems likely that mindfulness practice could help people be calmer, less stressed, less reactive, and possibly even kinder and more compassionate. (That's not to say that mindfulness always or even ever succeeds at these things, only that it seems plausible that it could do so.)

But I fear that there is a danger that in the near future other, less careful commentators will try to connect mindfulness to more substantive political changes. In particular, I am concerned that mindfulness will at some point become part of the Liberalism Self-Justification Delusion Complex, because it is perfectly qualified for that dubious role. Here's the problem: liberalism is deeply, foundationally committed to the idea that people's inclusion in a political society must be voluntary rather than coerced. As John Rawls puts the point, liberalism insists that citizens be "members of society and not merely caught in it" (Rawls *The Law of Peoples* 50). From this perspective, citizens who are forced to participate in a political system against their will are being oppressed, and oppression is morally wrong. Indeed, it might be easiest to think of liberalism as simply *being* the belief that it is possible to create a political system in which all the citizens could be rational, voluntary participants (making the usual exceptions for the insane, incompetent, etc.). That's a very appealing ideal, since it reflects widely held beliefs

about individual rights and freedom, the importance of autonomy and agency, and so on. The problem is that it is unachievable, even in principle.

The problem arises when we have ostensibly liberal polities that include people with differing, and possibly anti-liberal, value systems. Every modern democracy is such a society, and of course any effort to exercise political power on a global scale, such as through the regime of international law, raises the same problems. It's obvious that some citizens could hold anti-democratic or anti-liberal ideals, such that they could not feel themselves to be voluntarily part of any liberal political system. Such a system would always fail to instantiate their moral beliefs, and would for that reason be unacceptable to them. Similarly, there are a variety of familiar logistical or relational problems that inevitably raise the same issue, for example the well-known problem of minorities within minorities: it is impossible to simultaneously protect the group rights of some collectivity (or the free-association rights of the majority of the individuals) and the individual rights of dissident members within that group. Either the group enjoys the autonomy to live out their own values, including using them to stifle or punish unacceptable dissent, or the individual rights of dissidents are protected, in which case the group's autonomy is restricted by the intervention of the larger polity.

If we respond to the problems of liberal plurality by restricting membership in liberal polities to people who hold appropriate, liberalism-friendly values, then we simply abandon the premise of value neutrality, admit that liberalism is just another set of substantive values, and either give up on having any system of global governance or acknowledge that any such system would inevitably be based on the coercion of some unwilling citizens. But that directly contradicts liberalism's self-conception as a political system that could be rationally accepted by everyone, and we continue to chase our tails. There really doesn't seem to be a way to create a

regime that is sufficiently value neutral that it could both be purely voluntary and consist of citizens with a wide variety of values.

It's easy to criticize liberalism for this internal self-contradiction, but the alternatives are not obviously more palatable. On the one hand, we could abandon the hope for value neutrality and simply impose substantive values on some (hopefully small) set of citizens, viewing their subjection as the price they must pay for the rest of us to be happy, voluntary participants. On the other hand, we could abandon the hope that people with very different values can live together peacefully, and retreat into more-or-less homogenous and isolated enclaves. Liberalism may be riven by self-contradiction, but it deserves respect for trying to come up with a principled way to resolve the dilemma of the voluntary cooperation of people with conflicting value commitments.⁵

Because liberalism's internal coherence is always threatened by value pluralism, liberal thinkers are perpetually tempted by various apparent solutions to the problem. In essence, there are two basic types of solution, though there are many subtle variations on the themes: identify a substantive belief that is in fact (or ought to be) universal and that in some way commits people who hold it to some version of liberalism; or identify some procedure for collective interaction that is value neutral, universally appealing (or at least defensible), and whose practice results in a liberal political system. Thus, for example, John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* attempted to identify a set of de facto universal beliefs (that self-interest dictates that everyone negotiating the creation of a political society would insist that all negotiators be treated as free, equal, and rational agents) and then show that those beliefs dictate a particular decision-making procedure (that self-interest leads everyone to prefer a negotiating method in which no one can advocate an outcome that disproportionately favors themselves, since doing so would inevitably lead to a

perpetual stalemate), which itself leads inevitably to a set of political values that everyone should rationally accept as reflecting their own values and preferences (that everyone have access to the broadest set of rights and freedoms compatible with political stability, and that any divergence from equality of resources be dependent on its being acceptable to the person who would be the least well-off under the new distribution). In essence, this is an attempt to identify the thinnest possible set of universally shared beliefs that would nonetheless result in a liberal political system. As Rawls himself acknowledged in the later *Political Liberalism*, it didn't work, because it is not irrational for people to develop thicker sets of beliefs that would prevent them from fully participating in, or accepting the outcome of, such a negotiating procedure.⁶

In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls proposes a second method for solving the pluralism problem. Structurally, this second attempt is the same as the first, in that it also attempted to identify a thin set of universal beliefs that could anchor a liberal society, though this time Rawls identified those beliefs as being points of overlap among many different (and potentially otherwise mutually incompatible) thicker beliefs. Thus, for example, citizens may hold many different sets of beliefs, but it is possible that they all overlap in the belief that human beings should be treated equally in the political sphere, and so on. If the various belief systems overlap on enough beliefs that are basic to grounding a liberal society, then self-interest should lead everyone to recognize that they are better off compromising in other areas, or perhaps in relegating certain beliefs to their private life rather than including them in public life, so that they can gain the benefits of living in a society founded on principled, voluntary cooperation.⁷

This second theory ultimately founders on the same problem that wrecked the first: it is not irrational for people to develop belief systems that both include the overlapping beliefs Rawls hoped for but also rank the various beliefs in such a way that makes compromise or

relegating some beliefs to the private sphere impossible. Thus, for example, I may hold religious or moral beliefs that I feel I must attempt to convince others to adopt, even though they are not only not essential to social cooperation but in fact threaten social cooperation by increasing conflict, hostility, mutual distrust, and so on. In essence, I am forced to choose between getting the practical benefits of voluntary cooperation and getting the moral, religious, or eschatological benefits of attempting to convert others to my views. Rawls hoped that everyone would choose the former, but it's not irrational for someone to choose the latter, even if it means giving up the benefits of cooperation.

Could we avoid these problems by having a yet thinner degree of substantive agreement? That's the basic claim behind Chandran Kukathas's idea of the liberal archipelago. Kukathas's basic point is that individuals with common values have a strong interest in cooperating together to achieve practical benefits and to pursue their values, but also that groups with conflicting values have an interest in cooperating wherever their values in fact overlap. He envisages a highly decentralized confederation of more-or-less-value-homogeneous micro-states cooperating together on issues like trade, self-defense, and other common interests. They would cooperate only on issues on which there was consensus. The only universally accepted value would be the right to voluntary cooperation, and to be left alone otherwise. Kukathas believes that such a society could be liberal, because the principle of voluntary association that unites the states would also be applied to the individual citizens of each state. As critics have pointed out, it's hard to see how that could be possible, in part because the problem of minorities within minorities inevitably arises.⁸ In practice, when there is a conflict between a citizen and his or her state, either the confederation is powerless to intervene, in which case the citizen has no effective rights against a hostile state, or the confederation does have the power to intervene, in which case

the state's right (or the majority of the state's population's right) to voluntary association is abrogated. Despite this apparent contradiction, Kukathas's theory is very helpful because it clarifies what kinds of theories are possible. Clearly, no theories that offer less substantive agreement than Kukathas's can count as forms of liberalism, because they have no plausible means of ensuring that social cooperation is voluntary. Conversely, any theory that offers more substantive agreement falls into the same problems as the later Rawls, since it will always be rational for citizens to conclude that the moral costs of compromising their values outweigh the benefits of cooperation. There really doesn't seem to be a solution to the dilemma of liberalism that is rooted in substantive agreement.

Because of that apparent impossibility, other thinkers have attempted to show that we could achieve a liberal society without substantive agreement, by relying on various procedures whose operation would be both universally acceptable and adequate to ground liberalism. Yet, it seems obvious, as Rawls himself argued,⁹ that no neutral-procedure strategy could work. Ostensibly value-neutral procedures, like allowing every adult to vote on political decisions, are acceptable to liberals only and because they instantiate important liberal values like autonomy and equality, and precisely that same quality makes them objectionable to citizens with values hostile to liberalism. The bottom line is always the same: if it's rational for a citizen hostile to liberalism to prefer ideological purity over compromise and cooperation, then no belief or procedure consistent with maintaining a liberal system could be sufficiently neutral to make their participation in a liberal society voluntary.

It is at precisely this point of apparent defeat—and here we finally start to loop back towards mindfulness—that defenders of liberalism hope to succeed by moving the argument to a meta-level. The clearest example of this is the literature on value pluralism and liberalism, in

which thinkers like Isaiah Berlin, Bernard Williams, William Galston and George Crowder have tried to argue that the very impossibility of generating a universal justification of liberalism is itself a universal justification of liberalism. The reasoning goes like this: the self-contradiction of liberalism reveals two important facts about the world—(a) that people have irreconcilably conflicting value systems, and (b) that it is always rational for people to prefer ideological purity over compromise and cooperation, if such a position is consistent with their values. (And of course (b) is true of liberals as much as it's true of anti-liberals.) What that means is that no value system can be expected to either become universally accepted on substance or to be accepted as procedurally neutral among disparate value systems. Thus everyone is in the same position—they cannot expect to achieve the benefits of social cooperation on a wide scale unless they are willing to offer fair terms of cooperation with people who hold various, conflicting values. And the fair terms of cooperation most likely to be universally acceptable are that everyone be treated as a free, equal, rational agent interested in achieving the benefits of cooperation while also being left as free to pursue their values as is consistent with stable, peaceful cooperation. In other words, the solution to the problem of value pluralism is liberalism.

I've criticized this argument extensively elsewhere,¹⁰ so here I'll just cut to the chase: the same basic problem that makes it impossible to justify liberalism directly also makes it impossible to justify liberalism in this indirect way. It is always possible that someone's values lead them to prefer ideological consistency to the compromises required to achieve cooperation through liberalism, and it is always rational for such a person to choose to live out that preference by opposing liberalism, even at great cost. (If that seems implausible to you, think about what you would say about someone who opposed an authoritarian regime in defense of liberal values, even at great personal cost. You would almost certainly think that that person was

a moral hero and was to be admired for their devotion to principle.) Of course none of this means that it is impossible that people with different values will agree to compromise and work together in a liberal framework, nor even that it is unlikely. Indeed, personally I'd go so far as to say that the liberal framework has the best chance of succeeding in facilitating such cooperation, precisely because it seeks the widest possible cooperation on the thinnest possible basis of agreement. But it is to say that liberalism cannot provide the kind of self-justification that the theory itself demands, either through appeal to principle or through appeal to procedure or through the meta-level recognition of the fact of value pluralism.¹¹ And that lack of self-justification really bugs liberal theorists.

Which is why I'm afraid that they will eventually latch onto mindfulness, because mindfulness is just perfect to become the next meta-level liberal hero. Mindfulness appears to be value-neutral. Indeed, mindfulness has the great advantage that it encourages people with different values and beliefs to take their existing values and beliefs as their starting point. It does not encourage anyone to change anything, but merely to become aware of whatever it is that they currently experience, think, and believe. Presumably we could dream up a value system that disfavored self-awareness generally, or perhaps just for certain groups, and adherents of such a system might oppose mindfulness on principle. But everyone else should be either in favor of mindfulness, or at least neutral with regard to it, because it seems to encourage acknowledgement and acceptance of the facts about oneself and the world, whatever one understands those facts to be.

And yet...we can imagine that each mindfulness practitioner, having gained some new insight into what is real and true, silently assumes that if others also engage in mindfulness practice, they too will come to see what is real and true, and it will be just like what I see.

Beautifully, this works no matter how you interpret “real and true.” On the one hand, if I believe that “real and true” refers to an objective reality that exists independent of my mind, then mindfulness seems like a magical agreement-inducing machine, since everyone who practices it will eventually all recognize the same truths, and plurality will be revealed to be the child of delusion and error. On the other hand, if I believe that “real and true” means “real and true *for me*,” then mindfulness seems like a magical disagreement-dissolving machine, since recognition of the subjectivity and idiosyncrasy of my perceptions and beliefs shows that although I may only be able to live in the world of my own delusions and errors, the same is true of everyone else, and thus we are all wrong to believe in the objective truth (or rational demonstrability) of our beliefs. But if our beliefs are all wrong (or at least incapable of being rationally provable to everyone), the liberals would argue, then couldn’t we all be a bit more flexible and tolerant, for example by agreeing to cooperate together in the system that promises the benefits of cooperation at the lowest (average) cost of moral compromise? Thus is mindfulness recruited into the liberal armamentarium.

But of course the relevant question here isn’t whether mindfulness *might* have this effect, for plainly it might, but rather whether it *is likely* to have it. Of course some mindfulness practitioners may, through their practice, come to believe that liberal toleration is the best possible political system, or at least that it is more acceptable than they had previously thought. But that isn’t the hard case. The hard case is whether mindfulness practice is likely, or even certain, to have that effect—that is, whether it can be used to dissolve the value pluralism problem. So now I turn to that question.

The Likely Effects of Mindfulness

To think through how mindfulness might affect politics, I find it helpful to think of there being four possible avenues by which it might affect practitioners. (Obviously any such schema will be arbitrary and artificial to some degree, and will be useful mostly as a heuristic.) Thus, mindfulness might affect one's non-political beliefs, one's non-political disposition, one's political disposition, and one's political beliefs. On this view, non-political beliefs are descriptive beliefs about the world that have no obvious (direct) connection to politics, government, policy choices, and so on. Such beliefs might touch on the questions of the origin of the universe, the nature of identity (am I an atomistic self or a manifestation of a greater, holistic something?), the explanatory power of science, and so on.

Non-political disposition refers to one's general approach to life, problems, conflict, decisions and so on, without direct reference to politics. Thus if one is generally rational or emotional, happy or sad, confident or uncertain, social or solitary, and so on all count as parts of one's non-political disposition. In contrast, one's political disposition is how one is inclined to act in specifically political contexts. For example, we can easily imagine someone who is congenial and conciliatory at home but pugnacious and partisan at a town-hall meeting, or when discussing certain political topics.

Finally, one's political beliefs are all those beliefs that are either about politics or are directly relevant to politics. I include in this category normative beliefs generally, since everyone has an interest either in having government reflect their normative beliefs or at least in having government not require them to violate their beliefs. Thus political beliefs could include things

like the belief that members of a particular political party are scoundrels and knaves as well as the belief that violence of any kind is deeply morally wrong.

Within this framework, it certainly seems possible that mindfulness practice might lead someone to change their non-political, non-normative beliefs. Mindfulness practitioners frequently report that their practice leads them to see personal identity as more porous and unstable than they had previously thought, or to come to believe that every phenomenon is both the result of innumerable previous causes and a partial cause of innumerable future phenomena, such that the universe is united in a complex web of interdependence, and so on. It seems obvious that such changes in belief might in turn affect my non-political disposition, for example by making me happier, less anxious, less afraid of death, and so on. And it seems possible that changes in my non-political disposition might lead to changes in my political disposition (more on that below).

Off the cuff, it seems extremely unlikely that changes to my non-political beliefs would lead directly to changes in my political disposition. If I am disposed to be more suspicious of the motives of my political opponents than of those of my political allies, there's no reason to think that changes to my general beliefs about the world would lead me to abandon that distinction. (I put off the question of changes to my political beliefs for the moment.)

So let's turn to the question of changes to my non-political dispositions, which might ultimately affect my political dispositions. Such changes might be due to changes in my beliefs (as above), or they might be their own independent phenomenon: for example, perhaps mindfulness practice leads me to become happier or less stressed, and that leads me to be more tolerant of disappointment and frustration. Would such changes be likely to change my political dispositions? We have to consider two possibilities. In the first, I do not make any distinction

between political and non-political contexts, such that my disposition is always the same. In that case, it's obvious that my behavior in political contexts will change if my overall disposition changes. That seems like a reasonable conclusion: if mindfulness makes people nicer, for example, it seems reasonable to think that it should make them nicer in all contexts.

In the second possibility, I do distinguish between the two contexts, and I have different dispositions when I act politically and when I act non-politically. In that case, while it seems plausible, even likely, that changes to my non-political disposition would affect my political behavior in some way, there is no reason to think that mindfulness practice would lead me to modify or abandon the political/non-political distinction, and there's no reason to think that changes to my non-political disposition would change my political behavior in different ways than it would change my non-political behavior. Thus, I might be nicer to everyone, but there's no reason to think that I would be *even nicer* to people who had previously been my political opponents, nor conversely that I would be nicer to everyone except them. Similarly, if previously I had had the disposition that it was good to be agreeable except when important political issues were at stake, there's no reason to think that my new attitude would erase that distinction, though it might make me more agreeable, to different degrees, in both kinds of situations. Thus changes to my non-political disposition might lead to changes in my political disposition, but the two dispositions seem likely to remain distinct.

Is it likely that mindfulness practice would lead directly to changes in my political disposition (assuming that I have one distinct from my non-political disposition)? To distinguish this question from the issues we've already considered, here the question is whether my political disposition would change independently of changes to my non-political beliefs or non-political disposition. Thus, for example, I would have to become disposed to be more trusting of my

political opponents but not because I had become disposed to be more trusting of everyone, nor because I had changed my beliefs about, for example, human nature. Here, I think, it seems completely plausible that mindfulness practice might change my disposition. Perhaps mindfulness will help me realize that I am especially inflexible in political contexts because I am afraid that the power of government will be used against me. It's a familiar experience that recognizing and being able to articulate a fear often results in the fear becoming less powerful. Thus I might become less fearful, and consequently less inflexible. Obviously, this change doesn't arise *because* my fear is related to politics—there is no special connection between mindfulness and politics—but rather because mindfulness may be especially helpful at teaching us to recognize and cope with fear, and my particular fear happens to arise in the context of politics.

To summarize the argument so far, it seems reasonable to think that mindfulness practice might lead to changes in our non-political beliefs, non-political disposition, and political disposition, either directly or by inciting changes in one area (non-political disposition) that spread to another (political disposition). But now we get to what I think is the hardest question: is mindfulness likely to change my political (and normative) beliefs? Here, I think the answer depends on what those beliefs rest upon. Thus we can imagine that some beliefs ultimately rest on personal feelings or habits, some upon factual beliefs, and some upon what for the moment I want to call existentially basic beliefs or attitudes. For example, I might believe (more or less consciously) that members of a particular social group are generally good and trustworthy people primarily because I have had pleasant experiences with some members of that group, and those experiences have given the group a positive emotional valence in my mind. In contrast, I might believe that members of some social group are unusually likely to be engaged in criminal activity

because of what (I think) I know about arrest and conviction statistics. Finally, I might believe that members of some socially disfavored group deserve greater respect and/or equality because I am committed as a matter of principle to treating all people as equally worthy of respect and as deserving a chance to flourish. (The distinction among emotional, factual, and existential beliefs is intended to be illustrative rather than categorical; presumably most of our beliefs in fact blend all three elements together.)

Given those distinctions, it seems plausible that mindfulness practice could affect beliefs rooted in emotion, primarily by making the basis of the beliefs more accessible to conscious recognition and evaluation. That doesn't necessarily mean that such beliefs would change, but only that it seems plausible that they might change. In contrast, it seems less likely that mindfulness practice would affect beliefs based on factual information. Indeed, if anything it seems more likely that mindfulness would reinforce fact-based beliefs, by encouraging conscious recognition of and reflection on the underlying facts and their relationship to the belief. To the extent that the facts are false, or that our understanding of the facts is influenced by emotion, then change becomes more likely, but beliefs rooted in true facts whose recognition is relatively free of emotional distortion seem unlikely to be affected.

By "existentially basic" I mean normative beliefs that are fundamental to our understanding of the world. (There are also non-normative beliefs that are existentially basic, but for our purposes they're included in the non-political beliefs category). Although such beliefs are obviously influenced by emotions and facts, they aren't logically derived from them. For example, following Hume (and G.E. Moore), the wrongness of murder doesn't appear to depend logically either on our feelings about murder or on any facts about murder (that it makes others deeply unhappy, that it is socially disruptive, etc.). Even in a case in which the facts or the

feelings were different, we are inclined to say, murder would still be wrong. In this category we would include moral beliefs, metaphysical and eschatological beliefs about the existence of god, the soul, the afterlife, and so on, and beliefs that are logically derived from such beliefs. An example of the latter is a situation in which I believe that freedom of speech is morally right because I believe that it is essential for achieving human dignity, the moral rightness of which is an existentially basic belief that I hold.

It seems very unlikely that mindfulness practice would affect existentially basic beliefs. On the one hand, such beliefs are foundational to our understanding of the moral universe. Changing them would require a significant reorganization of our moral personalities, which experience suggests is rare (if not impossible). On the other hand, since such beliefs are not logically dependent on other, non-fundamental beliefs or feelings, changes to our other beliefs, or to our disposition, seem unlikely to change our existentially basic beliefs. To make the point in simple and concrete terms, can you imagine learning or experiencing something that would convince you that murder (or punishing the innocent, or torturing infants) was morally good?

There is sometimes confusion about the distinction between changing one's beliefs and changing one's view about the epistemological status of one's beliefs. Thus, you might switch from a Platonic to a Wittgensteinian-conventional understanding of the status of normative beliefs, but there's no reason to think that that would change the content of those beliefs. Again, can you imagine learning anything about the status of your beliefs—for example, becoming convinced that they are merely deeply held cultural norms—that would lessen your revulsion at the thought of some profound moral wrong?

Indeed, it seems more likely that mindfulness practice would deepen and strengthen our commitment to our existentially basic beliefs. Paying careful attention to our experience, and

learning to distinguish between transient emotions and more durable beliefs, seems likely to make the beliefs relatively more important. Mindfulness practitioners often say that mindfulness helps us see what is real or true, and to learn to pay less attention (or to give less power) to the constant and highly changeable flow of passing thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Existentially basic beliefs seem very likely to emerge from that process as part of what is true and real. Obviously, this is not to say that no changes to our existentially basic beliefs ever happen, nor to deny that they might sometimes happen as a result of mindfulness practice, but only to argue that there is no reason to think that mindfulness practice is likely to result in such changes.

Is Interdependence an Exception?

Many mindfulness practitioners report that the practice leads them to recognize that all human beings (and everything else) are profoundly interdependent upon one another. Off the cuff, it seems possible that such a recognition might lead people to change their political beliefs, for example abandoning or tempering a radically individualist worldview. However, on closer inspection that possibility is less likely than it might first appear. Presumably recognition of interdependence would not do much to change the political beliefs of someone who was already inclined to see society as a network of cooperation, or to conceive of human relationships as involving reciprocal obligations. So let's look at the case where that recognition would pose the starkest contrast to someone's prior views—the case of a radical libertarian who, through mindfulness, came to appreciate interdependence. We could imagine such a person having a profound insight into the ways in which her life was interconnected to, and interdependent upon, not only the rest of humanity, but also non-human nature, and the cosmos as a whole. We might

congratulate her on the experience. But should we expect her political views to change? I think the answer is No. It seems perfectly possible to acknowledge the interdependence of human beings, and to think that the best way to both sustain that complex web of cooperation and prevent it from becoming tyrannical or suffocating would be to conceive of individuals as having absolute rights that can be asserted against other individuals and collectives. Similarly, it seems perfectly reasonable to believe that the complex web of cooperation works best as an emergent phenomenon that arises from free individual choices about how to spend one's time or resources, and that the whole system works best when individuals have private property rights and access to relatively free markets. And it also seems reasonable to believe that every contributor to the ineffable web of being should be rewarded for their contribution and enabled to continue contributing, and that the best way to do that is to allow free exchanges to determine prices for the various contributions, based on how much those who benefit from them value them, perhaps with the caveat that market failures would need to be resolved through collective action. In other words, it seems perfectly reasonable for Milton Friedman to be mindful and still be Milton Friedman.

Mindfulness and Politics

Given what I've just argued about how mindfulness is and is not likely to affect practitioners, what can we conclude about how it might affect politics? The basic conclusion seems to be this: to the extent that politics is affected by the emotional dispositions of political actors, or by factual beliefs subject to rational investigation and confirmation or correction, then mindfulness could affect politics, and seems likely to do so in a helpful way. If mindfulness

could help political actors be more reflective and less reactive, happier and less stressed, it seems likely to be very helpful. Such changes would be eminently worth achieving.

But to the extent that politics is affected by people's existentially basic beliefs, and particularly (presumably) by conflicts among those beliefs, mindfulness seems unlikely to have much effect. If it does have an impact, it seems likely to make conflicts clearer and more intractable, which isn't to say that it makes them more important, or more aggressive or unpleasant—just that by making people more committed to their conflicting beliefs, it would make resolving the conflict less likely.

To summarize, perhaps we could say that mindfulness is likely to help us with political problems that are rooted in *mindlessness*, but not with problems that arise from differences among people's considered beliefs. If it turns out that most political problems—or the most important political problems—arise from mindlessness, then mindfulness should be very helpful. If it turns out that those problems arise from conflicts among people's settled beliefs, then mindfulness seems unlikely to be helpful with those problems.

Conclusion

So is mindfulness likely to be the next Great Liberal Self-Justification Hope? The answer is that it shouldn't be, logically, but logic does not always stand in the way of hope. If my arguments above are correct, we should not expect mindfulness to resolve liberalism's value pluralism problem, for two reasons. First, it seems unlikely that mindfulness will lead practitioners to change their existentially basic beliefs, so it seems unlikely that pluralism will be converted into universal agreement. Second, even with the benefits of mindfulness, it is always

rational for someone to order their values such that they prefer ideological purity to securing the benefits of peaceful cooperation. Because that's true, there is no possible solution to the value pluralism problem: there is no substantive argument, no allegedly neutral procedure, and no meta-level logical jujitsu that can make liberal cooperation normatively preferable to every alternative rational ordering of values. Mindfulness can't do it because nothing can do it.

If we are able to protect mindfulness from the unreasonable hope that it can do the impossible, then we might be able to allow it to do what it is likely to be good at: helping us to become aware of the underlying causes of political conflicts that are (at least in part) not rooted in conflicts among beliefs, helping each of us individually to become less unhappy and impulsive, perhaps helping everyone to see the benefits of cooperation where it is possible, and possibly even encouraging us to make the territory of intractable conflict as small and isolated as possible.

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Notes

¹ (Seitz-Wald)

² (Halliwell)

³ See the associated article: (Pickert).

⁴ See (Moore "Political Theory in Canonical Buddhism").

⁵ Elsewhere I suggest that there is another alternative, which I called "layered pluralism." See (Moore "Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism"; Moore "Wittgenstein, Value Pluralism, and Politics"; Moore "Immanence, Pluralism, and Politics").

⁶ "Now the serious problem is this. A modern democratic society is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all, citizens. Political liberalism assumes that, for political purposes, a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime" (Rawls *Political Liberalism* xviii).

⁷ "In some cases the political conception is simply the consequence of, or continuous with, a citizen's comprehensive doctrine; in others it may be related as an acceptable approximation given the circumstances of the social world." (Rawls *Political Liberalism* xxi).

⁸ See (Klosko), (Hawkins), (Moon).

⁹ "It is a common oversight...to think that procedural legitimacy (or justice) tries for less and can stand on its own without substantive justice: it cannot" (Rawls *Political Liberalism* 425) See also Emanuela Ceva's discussion of this issue in (Ceva).

¹⁰ See (Moore "Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism"; Moore "Wittgenstein, Value Pluralism, and Politics").

¹¹ We see similar efforts at meta-level justification based on moral relativism and epistemological contextualism. All such efforts fail for related reasons. See: (Moore "Wittgenstein, Value Pluralism, and Politics").

“Mindfulness” is a word we hear a lot these days, but what exactly does it mean? Find out what it is, what the benefits of mindfulness are and how you can start to practise it. Before reading. Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises. Preparation task. Match the definitions (a–d) with the vocabulary (1–4). Vocabulary. Mindfulness Day is celebrated on 12 September, so maybe that would be a good day to try a few mindfulness techniques and see if they make a difference. But, of course, you can try these on any day of the year. A very simple technique that you could try right now is to close your eyes for a couple of minutes and count how many sounds you can hear. This will help to focus you on what is happening right now.