Engaging mindfulness

PhD thesis

Odysseus Stone
Engaging mindfulness: A phenomenological investigation and critique

PhD thesis

Odysseus Stone

University of Copenhagen

Department of Communication

Section of Philosophy

Center for Subjectivity Research

Supervisor: Dan Zahavi

Word count (ex. bibliography): 42,287
Table of contents

Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................................. 4
Abstract (English) .............................................................................................................................. 6
Resumé (Dansk) ................................................................................................................................ 9
Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 12
Article summaries .............................................................................................................................. 21
Conclusion and future directions ....................................................................................................... 33
Article 1. Phenomenology and mindfulness ...................................................................................... 44
Article 2. Varieties of self-consciousness in mindfulness meditation. .............................................. 82
Article 3. Structuring embodied minds: attention and perceptual agency ....................................... 113
Article 4. Bare attention, dereification, and meta-awareness in mindfulness: a phenomenological critique .......................................................................................................................... 151
Acknowledgements

The period in which this PhD was carried out—September 2018 to March 2023—was one of many big changes in my life. In fact, it circumscribes almost perfectly another period, marked off on the one side by the death of my mum, Kate, who passed away from cancer in November 2018, and on the other, by the birth of my son, Aubrey, who was born October 2022. That period—bound by a loss on the one side, and new life on the other—is the context in which I have been thinking about the philosophical issues at stake in this thesis.

I could not have completed the thesis without the ongoing support and guidance from people in my life during this time. Some have provided intellectual support and guidance. Some have provided emotional support and friendship. Many have provided both.

I am especially grateful for the help of my supervisor Dan Zahavi, who has been an both encouraging and very patient as I have worked my way toward the finish line. I would also like to thank the many researchers who have been at the Centre for Subjectivity Research (CFS) over the years that I have been there. I have gained a great deal from being immersed in rich and vibrant intellectual environment of the CFS. Together, Søren Overgaard and Dan Zahavi—my teachers and mentors at the CFS since 2015—have been essential in shaping my thinking and general approach to philosophy over the years. If I manage to embody some of the many intellectual virtues they possess in this thesis, I will consider that a great accomplishment.

I would like to thank everyone who has read and given feedback on various drafts of the chapters that make up the thesis. This includes Joel Krueger, Tom Roberts, Lucy Osler, Jelle Bruineberg, Evan Thompson, Andreas Roepstorff, Sara Heinämaa, Shaun Gallagher, Sophie Loidolt, Julia Zaenker, Max Ribeiro, Tristan Hedges, Viktor Lange, and Bernhard Ritter.
I would also like to thank Joel Krueger for hosting me at the University of Exeter, and for his many kind offers of support and encouragement throughout the PhD. I would like to thank Sebastian Watzl and Thor Grünbaum for helpful discussions concerning mental action and attention, and James Jardine for helpful conversations about Husserl’s views on attention.

I would especially like to thank Jelle Bruineberg and Lucy Osler for many, many helpful (and interesting!) philosophical conversations, and for helping me to bring the PhD to completion stage. Likewise, I would like to give a special thanks to Tristan Hedges for his friendship and support during the very final stages of the PhD.

Most of all, I would like to thank my partner Anja, who has been by my side throughout, and weathered all the ups and downs with me. I dedicate this PhD to Kate, Aubrey, and Anja.
Abstract (English)

This PhD thesis is a philosophical study of mindfulness meditation. In the past two decades, mindfulness has come to occupy a conspicuous position in mainstream cultural life in Denmark, as in other countries in Europe and around the world. In fact, it difficult to overstate the extent to which mindfulness now pervades nearly every aspect of contemporary society, both public and private.

In parallel to these striking developments, there has been a longstanding and widespread tendency amongst philosophers and psychologists working on the topic of consciousness to argue that there are important similarities between mindfulness and the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. In this thesis, I argue against the various attempts to align and elide phenomenology and mindfulness. I propose a reorientation away from the narrow focus on the question of whether the two are equivalent “first-person methods” for the study of consciousness, toward the (rather different) intellectual task of engaging mindfulness phenomenologically, albeit as part of a broader philosophical conversation that includes voices from neighbouring disciplines such as the philosophy of mind, Buddhist philosophy, and enactivism.

Article 1. is a critique of recent attempts to view phenomenology as a type of (mindfulness) meditation, understood as a kind of nonjudgmental, open, and receptive awareness of the present acts (and/or contents) of consciousness, for the purposes of yielding fine-grained descriptions of experiential life. My co-author Dan Zahavi and I focus primarily on Husserl’s methodological tools of epoche and reduction, since comparisons between phenomenology and mindfulness tend to trade on what we take to be misinterpretations of these central methodological notions.
Article 2. is a critical discussion of claims in the literature concerning mindfulness and self-consciousness. According to some Buddhist scholars and philosophers, as well several contemporary phenomenological philosophers, rather than thinking of mindfulness as a form of introspection, reflection, or meta-cognition (thinking about thinking), we should think of it as involving an intensified form of what phenomenologists call pre-reflective self-consciousness and Buddhist philosophers call reflexive awareness (svasamvedana). I raise some objections to this idea. Next, I argue that the standard way of drawing the contrast between reflective and pre-reflective self-consciousness, does not exhaust the space of intellectual possibilities. I argue that much would be gained theoretically in the study of mindfulness by focusing on a different kind or mode of self-awareness operative in conscious life, one closely tied to the active character of attending. I develop these ideas from a phenomenological perspective.

In article 3. my co-author Jelle Bruineberg and I develop some of the central themes discussed in article 2., namely, attention and mental agency. Many philosophers hold that perceptual consciousness is not a purely passive affair but is (or can be) itself active. Such philosophers reject what has been call the sandwich model of the mind: cognition is the ‘filling’, sandwiched on one side by the passive input of perception, and on the other, by the output of an action. According to a popular way of dividing up the intellectual landscape, there are two possibilities for those who reject the sandwich model of the mind: either perception is active because it involves bodily action, or it is active because it involves the mental action of attending. We reject this as a false dichotomy, and argue that perceptual attention is what we call an embodied mental action.

In article 4. my co-author Dan Zahavi and I level a critique of some of the central theoretical ideas and assumptions of worldwide contemporary mindfulness movement, as exemplified in the writings of popular psychologists, therapists, and meditation teachers such as Jon
Kabat-Zinn (founder of Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction) and Mark Williams, John Teasdale, and Zindel Segal (founder of Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy). The themes we engage with, in particular, are the relationship between perceptual experience and judgment, intentionality (or the mind-world relation), and temporality – themes which are dominant in the mindfulness literature and about which phenomenology has a great deal to say.
Resumé (Dansk)

Denne ph.d. er et filosofisk studie af mindfulness meditation. I de sidste to årtier har mindfulness indtaget en iøjnefaldende position i det mainstream kulturelle liv i Danmark samt i andre europæiske lande og resten af verden. Faktisk er det svært at overdrive, hvor meget mindfulness i dag gennemsyrer næsten alle aspekter af det moderne samfund i både den private og offentlige sfære.

Parelelt med denne slående udvikling har der blandt filosoffer og psykologer, som arbejder med emnet bevidsthed, været en langvarig og udbredt tendens til at argumentere for, at der er vigtige ligheder mellem mindfulness og den filosofiske tradition kaldet fænomenologi. I denne afhandling argumenterer jeg imod forskellige forsøg på at ligestille og sammenblande fænomenologi og mindfulness. Jeg foreslår at vende opmærksomheden væk fra det smalle fokus på spørgsmålet om, hvorvidt de to er lignende “første-persons metoder” til at studere bevidsthed. I stedet vil jeg forsøge at bruge fænomenologien til at forstå mindfulness, omend som del af en bredere filosofisk samtale som inkluderer stemmer fra nabodiscipliner som bevidsthedsfilosofi, Buddhistisk filosofi og enaktivisme.

Artikel 1 er en kritik af mange nylige forsøg på at betragte fænomenologien som en type af (mindfulness) meditation, forstået som en slags ikke-dømmende, åben og modtagelig opmærksomhed mod bevidstheden i nuet med det formål at kunne lave en detaljeret beskrivelse af bevidstheden selv. Min medforfatter Dan Zahavi og jeg fokuserer hovedsageligt på Husserls metodiske værktøjer epoché og reduktion, da vi mener, at sammenligninger mellem fænomenologi og mindfulness ofte misforstår disse centrale metodiske koncepter.

Artikel 2 er en kritisk diskussion af centrale påstande i litteraturen om mindfulness og selv-bevidsthed. I følge nogle buddhistiske tænkere og filosoffer, samt flere moderne

I artikel 3 arbejder min medforfatter Jelle Bruineberg og jeg videre med nogle af de centrale temaer, som blev diskuteret i artikel 2: opmærksomhed og mental handling. Mange filosoffer mener, at bevidsthed ikke blot er en passiv handling, men selv er (eller kan være) aktiv. Disse filosoffer afviser den såkaldte sandwichmodel for bevidsthed, hvor kognition ses som ‘fyldet’ i mellem på den ene side opfattelse og på den anden side handling. I følge en populær måde at opdele intellektet er der to muligheder for dem, som afviser sandwichmodellen: enten er selve det at opfatte en aktivitet, som involverer kropslig handling, eller det er en aktivitet, fordi det involverer den mentale handling at give opmærksomhed. Vi mener dette er en falsk dikotomi og argumenterer for, at opfattelse gennem sanserne er det vi kalder ‘embodied mental action’.

I artikel 4 rejser min medforfatter Dan Zahavi og jeg en kritik af nogle af de centrale teoretiske ideer og antagelser, som florerer i den globale mindfulness movement, eksemplificeret i teksterne af popularpsykologer, terapeuter og meditationsundervisere som Jon Kabat-Zinn (grundlægger af Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction) og Mark Williams, John Teasdale, og Zindel Segal (grundlægger af Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy). De temaer vi særligt tager op er forholdet imellem bevidsthedsoplevelse og vurdering, intentionalitet (eller bevidsthed-verden
relationen) og temporalitet - temaer som er dominerende i litteraturen om mindfulness og som fænomenologien har meget at sige om.
Introduction

In the past two decades, mindfulness has entered the mainstream of cultural life in Denmark, as in many other countries in Europe and around the world. Derived and adapted from Buddhism, mindfulness is usually understood in this context as a kind of non-judgmental, open, and receptive awareness of present moment experience, accompanied by an attitude of curiosity and acceptance (Bishop et al. 2004). Mindfulness-based psychotherapeutic interventions (MBIs) such as Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) are now amongst some of the most popular forms of therapy for mild anxiety and depression, and applications are being made for more severe psychopathology (Wielgosz et al. 2019). Mindfulness is available as part of a treatment for stress in Denmark via Copenhagen Municipality (Københavns Kommune 2022) and as a standard psychotherapy in the UK via the National Health Service (Coyne 2015). In the UK in 2015 a cross-party parliamentary report recommended implementing mindfulness not just in hospitals but also in schools, prisons, and the workplace (Loughton and Morden 2015). There have since been largescale efforts to teach mindfulness to schoolchildren (Magri 2019).

Given these trends, one might expect the science behind mindfulness to be robust and compelling. There has been an exponential rate of growth in scientific research on mindfulness: the number of peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles or reviews on the topic remained under 100 until 2006; as of 2020, that number was 2,808 (Baminiwatta and Solangaarachchi 2021). Most of this research is in psychology and psychiatry, though mindfulness is also a hot topic in fields as diverse as educational science, nursing studies, business studies, and across the social sciences (ibid.). However, it would be a mistake to assume that quantity is an indication of quality in this case. As has been pointed out by concerned researchers in the field, the media-fuelled “hype” around
mindfulness, as well as the extent to which mindfulness is coming to pervade every aspect of society, is at odds with the quality of the scientific research, which is plagued by foundational conceptual and methodological problems (van Dam et al. 2018, Davidson and Kaszniak 2015).

In parallel with these developments, we have seen another (admittedly less substantial) intellectual trend in recent years. This second trend serves as an anchor point for the present PhD thesis. According to many philosophers and psychologists working on the topic of consciousness, mindfulness and the philosophical tradition of phenomenology are kindred spirits—namely, “first person methods” (Varela and Shear 1999) for the study of the mind. As one recent commentator has put it (even more radically) “mindfulness is phenomenology, and (good) phenomenology is a kind of methodological mindfulness” (Walach 2021).

Given the picture of mindfulness that we started out with, such claims are liable to sound puzzling to anyone with more than a passing familiarity with phenomenological philosophy. What does a Buddhist or Buddhist-derived meditation technique, which is currently available as a form of psychotherapy for stress and anxiety via publicly funded health services in Denmark and the UK, have to do with phenomenology—a tradition of 20th century European philosophy inaugurated by Edmund Husserl and developed in different directions by such thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edith Stein, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and many others? In the end, I will argue that the comparison is indeed flawed. However, to begin to see how such claims have come to be so widespread and influential, it is necessary to first say something about another aspect of the contemporary research on mindfulness.

Mindfulness has entered the modern world not only as object of scientific study and a psychotherapy, but also as a would-be science in its own right—namely, an “inner science” or a
“science of the mind.” Like the idea that mindfulness is a psychotherapy, the idea that mindfulness is a “science of the mind” is a modern one. As Buddhist scholars and historians have argued, it was first advanced in the late 19th and early 20th century in Asia by Buddhist reformers and modernisers who—in the face of the threat of British colonialism—attempted to frame Buddhism in Western, scientific (and especially psychological) terms. Unlike the claims of Christianity, these reformers argued, those of Buddhism are rational and empirical—they are based on the close observation of the workings of the mind in meditation (Lopez 2012: 10-11, McMahan 2008: §4, Thompson 2020: §1).

This process of modernisation was not only a matter of ‘repackaging’ mindfulness meditation, it also actually transformed the practices themselves. For example, via a process of selective emphasis and creative innovation, Theravāda Buddhist monks and meditation teachers developed and popularised genuinely new ways of practicing mindfulness meditation which were more closely aligned with the projected image of meditation as a “mind science.” The German-born Sri Lankan monk Nyanaponika Thera (who will feature prominently in article 1), for example, claimed that mindfulness (at least in its basic form) is what he called “bare attention”, by which he meant simply noticing what happens in experience without imposing one’s own subjective

---


preferences and prejudices. Nyanaponika called Buddhism a science of the mind and argued that “bare attention” is its method:

This method of Bare Attention… tallies with the procedure and attitude of the true scientist…. clear definition of subject-matter and terms; unprejudiced receptivity to things themselves; exclusion, or at least reduction, of the subjective factor in judgment; deferring of judgment until a careful examination of the facts has been carried out (Nyanaponika 1962: 39).

As Buddhist scholars have discussed, this picture of mindfulness differs in important ways from the classical Theravāda Buddhist sources on mindfulness meditation that Nyanaponika was drawing authority from (Gethin 2011, Bodhi 2011, Sharf 2015, Gethin 2015). For example, mindfulness in traditional Theravāda Buddhism—an example of what Dunne (2015) calls classical Buddhist mindfulness—involves judgments, such as evaluations of right and wrong based on Buddhist ethics and soteriology. The kind of reformed mindfulness practices Nyanaponika and other such figures were part of developing and popularising were then exported to North America and Europe, where they were further repackaged and revised (Wilson 2014).

Moving forward in time, and closer to our present concerns, in the late 1980s and 90s, the idea that Buddhism and Buddhist (or Buddhist-derived) mindfulness meditation is a “science of the mind”, or might be drawn upon in developing such a science, was taken up enthusiastically by philosophers and cognitive scientists showing a renewed interest in consciousness, a topic that had for a long time been regarded as off the scientific and philosophical research agenda. An important part of this story was the research community that formed around The Mind and Life Institute, which was set up in 1987 after Francisco Varela—a neuroscientist, philosopher, and Tibetan Buddhist practitioner—propositioned the Dalai Lama about a series of ongoing dialogues between
Buddhists and scientists. The Mind and Life Institute has been a major engine of academic research on Buddhist and Buddhist-derived meditation over the course of the last thirty-years.3

In their efforts to study consciousness, Varela and other researchers interested in consciousness sought out methods for yielding “first-person data” about the mind (Varela and Shear 1999, Depraz, Varela & Vermeersch 2003, Petitmengin 2009). One such method was mindfulness meditation. Another was phenomenology. Furthermore, the two approaches were often equated, favourably compared, and/or combined. A landmark publication in this area was Varela, Thompson, and Rosch’s now classic 1991 book The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience.4 The Embodied Mind is an ambitious work with many legacies. However, crucial for our purposes is its methodological use of mindfulness. This is how Eleanor Rosch has subsequently summarized the logic:

If you are going to look into personal experience in a manner sufficiently rigorous to make it relevant to science, you need some method for doing so. We turned to Buddhism because, in our judgment, it provided what both Western psychology and phenomenology lacked, a disciplined and non-manipulative method of allowing the mind to know itself—a method that we (in retrospect naively) simply called mindfulness (Rosch 2017: xli)

On the basis of mindfulness meditation, understood as “a disciplined and non-manipulative method of allowing the mind to know itself” (ibid.) or “a special kind of inner observation of a mental stream whose phenomenal character is supposed to be somehow independent of such observation” (Thompson 2017a: xxiv), the authors of The Embodied Mind argued for a number of substantial

---


4 The Embodied Mind will feature heavily in article 1. below.
philosophical conclusions. For example, they argued that although in ordinary experience time appears as a seamless flow, mindfulness meditation reveals it to be discontinuous and gappy, a view which is rejected in classical phenomenology but is corroborated by contemporary neuroscience (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991/2017: §4).

In the wake of *The Embodied Mind*, there was a surge in interest in the relationship and potential similarities between mindfulness and phenomenology, as well as in new forms of introspection. One development was the approach in cognitive neuroscience known as neurophenomenology (Varela 1996, 1997, 1999, Lutz and Thompson 2003, Thompson, Lutz, and Cosmelli 2005, Thompson 2007: §11, Thompson 2015, Colombetti 2013: §6, Bitbol & Petitmengin 2017). Neurophenomenology is guided by the working hypothesis that “Phenomenological accounts of the structure of experience and their counterparts in cognitive science relate to each other through reciprocal constraints” (Varela 1996: 343). Phenomenological accounts of the structure of experience here means a careful investigation and description of experience (i.e., the gathering of “first-person data”) and includes not just the philosophical tradition of phenomenology but also Buddhist contemplative methods like mindfulness (Thompson 2007: 474, fn. 11).

Another important approach in this vein, inspired by Pierre Vermersch’s “L’entretien d’explicitation” (explication or elicitation interview) (Vermersch, 1994/2014) is microphenomenology (Petitmengin, 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2011; Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009; Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013a; Bitbol & Petitmengin 2013b, Bitbol & Petitmengin 2015, Bitbol &

---

5 It should be noted that both Thompson (2017a) and Rosch (2017) are quite critical of some of their earlier claims in *The Embodied Mind*. Indeed, as anyone familiar with Thompson’s recent work on mindfulness and Buddhism will be aware, the present introduction owes a lot to his insightful analysis in Thompson (2020).
Microphenomenology is an interview method with an iterative structure that is designed to help the interviewee ‘evolve’ or ‘re-enact’ an already elapsed experience, and to come into close contact with pre-reflective aspects of the process of experiencing (the ‘how’ of experience) which are normally overlooked in favour of the objects or contents of experience (the ‘what’ of experience). Like neurophenomenology, microphenomenology draws inspiration freely from phenomenology and Buddhism, especially Buddhist meditation (e.g., Petitmengin 2006: 236, cf. Petitmengin 2021).

In a further twist, the phenomenology-inspired approaches of neurophenomenology and microphenomenology are now being used to study the experiences of mindfulness meditators. That is, not only is mindfulness meditation embedded in the design as part of the methodology of these two approaches, but the approaches are also now themselves being turned back onto experiences had in meditation. Two recent examples of this trend are an article by Petitmengin, van Beek, Bitbol, Nissou, and Roepstorff titled “What is it like to meditate? Methods and issues of a micro-phenomenological description of meditative experience” (Petitmengin et al. 2017) and another by Lutz, Saron, Dunne and Jha titled “Investigating the Phenomenological Matrix of Mindfulness-related Practices from a Neurocognitive Perspective” (Lutz et al. 2015).

In what follows, I will argue that the strong and abiding emphasis placed on the similarities between phenomenology and mindfulness qua “first-person methods” for the study of consciousness has been something of a mistake. An early criticism of the idea from the phenomenological camp came from Hubert Dreyfus (1993). A fellow phenomenologist-cum-cognitive scientist, Dreyfus argued that Varela, Thompson, and Rosch made the error of reading what they experienced in detached meditative reflection—which on Dreyfus’ view changes the experience—back onto their immersed being-in-the-world. In other words, although the authors of *The Embodied Mind* claimed that mindfulness gives us “direct insight into the structure and
constitution of experience” (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991/2017: 54) they were mistaking “the debris produced by passive contemplation” for an accurate phenomenological description of “everyday action and perception” (Dreyfus 1993: 544).

Though I have sympathy with aspects of Dreyfus’ critique, my own criticisms of the attempts to align phenomenology and mindfulness are somewhat different. I argue firstly that the claim that the philosophical tradition of phenomenology is a form of mindfulness meditation—in particular, a kind of nonjudgmental, open, and receptive awareness of the present moment, which is especially suited for yielding precise descriptions of experience—mischaracterises the nature, scope, and significance of phenomenological philosophy. To say this is to dismiss neither Buddhism, nor meditation. On my view, however, the proper conversation partner for the phenomenologist interested in Buddhism is Buddhist philosophy, rather than Buddhist (or Buddhist-derived) mindfulness meditation. The strong emphasis on trying to identify a common methodological component of mindfulness and phenomenology has also obscured what phenomenology as a philosophical tradition has to offer when it comes to the kinds of questions

6 For good recent examples see MacKenzie (2007, 2015, 2022), Coseru (2012), and the collection of chapters in Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi (2011). One complication here is that it is sometimes claimed that Buddhist philosophy is based on meditation. For example, the authors of The Embodied Mind write “We believe that the Buddhist doctrines of no-self and of nondualism that grew out of this method [mindfulness meditation] have a significant contribution to make to the dialogue with cognitive science” (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991/2017: 21). However, this view of the development of Buddhist philosophy is arguably mistaken (Lopez 2008: 210, Thompson 2017a). See Siderits (2007) Carpenter (2014) and Garfield (2015) for rich accounts of Buddhist philosophy that do not make the claim that Buddhist philosophy is based on meditation.
raised by mindfulness. Such questions are pertinent given the extent to which mindfulness has come to pervade contemporary society. Freeing up the rich philosophical resources of phenomenology will be essential for later parts of the thesis, where I will be concerned not with comparing phenomenology and mindfulness but with the quite different task of engaging mindfulness philosophically. In the middle part of the thesis (articles 2. and 3.) I draw on phenomenological analyses, as well as the philosophy of mind (and to a less extent enactivism and Buddhist philosophy), in order to elucidate a number of themes that are pertinent to a proper understanding of mindfulness, namely, self-consciousness, attention, and mental agency. Likewise, in the final part of the thesis, I draw on classical phenomenological analyses of the relationship between experience and conceptual thought, temporality and historicity, and intentionality in order to level a critique of mindfulness as presented in mindfulness-bases therapies like MBSR and MBCT.

There is another reason that the elision of phenomenology and mindfulness should be avoided, however. This second concern will also emerge more clearly in the middle part of the thesis. The comparison overlooks the fact that mindfulness meditation—both as classically conceived in Buddhism, and as widely practiced today in MBSR and MBCT—is not (or not only) a process of observing or becoming (more) aware of our conscious experiences but is (also) crucially a practice of actively shaping conscious experience in particular ways and in accordance with particular norms (Thompson 2020, Thompson 2017a, McMahan 2017, Kachru 2022). In a recent  

7 This points us to a tension at the heart of the contemporary notion of mindfulness. Nyanaponika Thera, for example, on the one hand presents “bare attention” as a kind of scientific observation of the mind. On the other hand, however, he claims that mindfulness is not limited to “theoretical knowledge of the mind” but also “aims at the shaping of the mind” according to the soteriological and ethical norms of Buddhism (Nyanaponika 1962: 41 see Thompson 2020: 31).
contribution on the role of meditation in philosophy, Sonam Kachru has argued that “meditation should be seen as a technology of transformation, not revelation” (Kachru 2022: 94). On his view, rather than thinking of experiences had in meditation as “proto-propositions” with “truth-evaluable” contents, generated by a (perception-like) reflection upon consciousness:

> We may think of meditation, instead, as some medieval Buddhists thought of exercises of attention: as part of the normative business of concentration and structuring the stream of thought, or ‘placing the mind and mental factors in an equable and right way on a single content for the establishment of… awareness’, as Buddhaghosa puts it in his *Path of Purification* (quoting Ñāṇamoli 2011) (Kachru 2022: 95).

The process of meditation, on Kachru’s view, involves an awareness of engaging in this structuring activity, as well as an awareness of the results of the activity (ibid.) The middle part of the thesis (articles 2. and 3.) develop a conception of attention, self-awareness, and mental agency, their relationship to the body that helps us to elucidate this second way of thinking about meditation.

**Article summaries**

**Article 1: Phenomenology and Mindfulness (co-authored with Dan Zahavi)**

Published in *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (2021)

In the first article of the thesis my co-author Dan Zahavi and I criticize recent attempts to view phenomenology as a type of meditative practice or technique, especially as (a kind of) mindfulness meditation, whose primary or even exclusive aim is to observe present experience in careful detail.
for the purposes of description. Our argument focuses largely on a discussion of the central methodological elements of Husserl’s mature philosophy, namely, the epoché and the phenomenological reduction, since comparisons between phenomenology and mindfulness invariably trade on specific interpretations of these methodological notions.

We trace the history of the recent comparisons between phenomenology and mindfulness to Varela, Thompson, and Rosch’s work in *The Embodied Mind* as well as subsequent work by Varela and colleagues. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch argue that what they call the Mindfulness/Awareness traditions of Asian Buddhism offer a practical guide for helping us do the very thing that the phenomenologists (in particular, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger) aspire to do and occasionally succeed in doing, namely, effectuate an unprejudiced turn towards lived experience. It is now common to find similar ideas being defended by philosophers, psychologists, and psychotherapists interested in mindfulness.

However, we argue that such comparisons trade on a questionable way of understanding the epoché and reduction, as well as of phenomenology more generally. We identify what we take to be two widespread (mis)interpretations of the epoché. According to the first, the epoché is supposed to help us disengage our attention from its absorption in worldly objects and situations (the ‘what’ of experience), in order to turn it to our lived experience or subjective perspective itself (the ‘how’ of experience). Phenomenology on this view is a *subjective turn*. According to the second, the epoché and reduction involve a kind of unprejudiced, open-minded, and receptive awareness of the *phenomena*. The key to phenomenology, on this second view, is that it is a descriptive enterprise, rather than, say, a form of speculative or constructive metaphysics.

While these claims might contain elements of truth, we argue that they ultimately mischaracterize the phenomenological method. In brief outline, we argue that:
I. The idea that phenomenology involves a narrow or exclusive focus on the ‘how’ of experience misses out on the proper theme of Husserlian phenomenological intentional analysis, which is the act-object (noesis-noema) *correlation*. What is crucial here is that the intentional object—which on our view is the same as the worldly object (as given in reflection)—is very much included in intentional analysis. Phenomenological reflection is thus importantly world-involving.

II. The narrow focus on phenomenology as a descriptive enterprise overlooks its systematic and philosophical character and ambitions. For example, it overlooks the important role of analysis and argumentation in phenomenological writings, not to mention the kinds of systematic philosophical themes that phenomenologists have traditionally grappled with.

III. Finally, we argue that the methodological tool of epoche is closely linked to the ‘transcendental’ character of phenomenological philosophy.

We conclude by arguing that two recent papers, one by Michel Bitbol (2019) and another by Natalie Depraz (2019), exemplify some of the mistakes we have been criticizing. We end by stressing a point made above: that a much more promising way of “engaging Buddhism” (Garfield 2015) for phenomenologists would be to focus on phenomenology and Buddhist philosophy, rather than Buddhist or Buddhist-derived mindfulness meditation.

**Co-authorship statement**

- Stone is the first author of the paper. Together with his co-author Zahavi he was centrally involved in developing the mains ideas in the article.
- Stone and Zahavi both developed the theory in the article. Stone primarily developed the theory in those parts of the paper that are concerned with mindfulness.
Stone wrote parts of introduction; the whole of section 2. titled “What is mindfulness?”; the whole of section 3. titled “Ambiguities”; the whole of section 4. titled “Mindfulness meets phenomenology”, made contributions to section 6. titled “Bitbol and Depraz” and wrote most of the conclusion.

• Stone read and commented on the final manuscript.

One important topic that remains unthematized in article 1. is self-consciousness. By self-consciousness I do not mean consciousness of a Self, but rather consciousness’ being (in some sense) aware of itself. However, if the relationship between phenomenology and mindfulness is to be clarified, then this lacuna must be filled in. As we will see, however, the discussion of self-consciousness in mindfulness will soon upon up a number of related themes, in particular, attention and mental agency.

**Article 2. Varieties of self-consciousness in mindfulness meditation**

*Forthcoming* in the Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology and Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a term with a broad semantic range. However, certain *styles* of mindfulness meditation are said to involve a kind of self-consciousness that is importantly distinct from introspection, reflection, or meta-cognition. Such self-awareness is said not to be a question of taking one’s mental or bodily states and processes as intentional objects in a higher-order act. This is especially the case for so-called *nondual* styles of Buddhist mindfulness, which, it has been argued, have had an influence on contemporary mindfulness (Dunne 2011, 2015). What philosophical tools do we have at our disposal to be able to elucidate this kind of self-awareness? This article is an exploration of this question.
An intriguing possibility presents itself if we look at recent cross-cultural or comparative philosophy. Philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition, including Husserl, and, more prominently, Sartre, hold that experiences both a) present (or represent) their intentional object, whilst also being b) self-presenting. In other words, experiences involve not only object-directed intentionality but also pre-reflective self-consciousness. On one prominent interpretation of this view, pre-reflective self-consciousness is not itself to be understood as a form of object-directedness. As comparative philosophers have argued, a similar view can be found in Buddhist philosophy (Coseru 2012, MacKenzie 2007, 2022, 2015, Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi 2011).

Might the notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness (or the Buddhist’s reflexive awareness, svasamvedana) help us to better understand mindfulness? A positive answer to this question has been defended by authors from both the phenomenological and Buddhist camps. For example, according to Dunne (2015, 2018, cf. Lutz et al. 2007), drawing on the Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti, we should think of mindfulness as involving a kind of “meta-awareness” (samprajanya), which is best understood not as a form of reflection or introspection but as an “intensified” or “enhanced” form of pre-reflective self-consciousness. Similar ideas have been defended by Zahavi (2011), Thompson, Lutz, and Cosmelli (2005), Petitmengin and Bitbol (2009), Legrand (2007) and others.

However, I argue that it is unclear how we could make sense of the idea that pre-reflective self-consciousness can come in degrees of intensity or be enhanced through practice. If pre-reflective self-consciousness is supposed (as is often claimed), to be a formal, structural feature of consciousness, it is unclear that it could admit of gradations. I consider two possible responses.
experience but (also) involves self-affection. The second option appeals to attention. However, I argue that both options face difficulties.

Next I consider and defend an alternative possibility that has been explored in the recent psychological and philosophical literature, which starts from the claims that a) meditation, and, in particular, meditative attention, is a (mental) activity or action, and b) the kind of awareness we have in meditation, or in meditative attention, is distinctive of the kind of awareness we have of our own (mental) activities or actions (Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler 2019, Zawidski 2018, Watzl 2017, Kachru 2022). More precisely, it is an “agential awareness” of attending (Watzl 2017, 2018). I conclude by developing the notion of agential awareness of attention from a phenomenological (more specifically, Husserlian) perspective (Husserl 1973, 2001).

We are now in a position to be able to bring together the distinct lines of inquiry pursued in articles 1. and 2. We already saw in article 1. that the idea that phenomenology and mindfulness are equivalent first-person methods should be rejected on the grounds that phenomenology is not simply a kind of nonjudgmental, open, and receptive awareness of the experiences of the moment, suitable for yielding careful descriptive findings about consciousness. A central argument developed in article 2. is that the picture of mindfulness that is often relied upon in such comparisons is also misleading. It is not misleading in a way that might bring phenomenology and mindfulness closer together as enterprises, however. Rather, what has become apparent is that mindfulness is better thought of as an a) activity of structuring the mind through practices of attention, and b) the kind of self-consciousness we have in engaging in such practices is a kind of action or agentive awareness.

The next article in the thesis picks up on the themes encounter in article 2—attention and attentional agency—and confronts them head on. The specific question that is discussed is
whether and to what extent we should think of attentional agency in perceptual consciousness as being embodied. In doing so, it brings the literature on mental action into dialogue with enactivism and embodied cognition.

**Article 3. Structuring Embodied Minds—Attention and perceptual agency (co-authored with Jelle Bruineberg)**

*Under review at Philosophical Studies*

According to a view that has recently been gaining traction in the philosophy of mind, perceptual consciousness is (or can be) an active, and not merely a passive encounter with the world. These philosophers reject what Susan Hurley (1998) famously dubs the sandwich model of the mind: cognition is the ‘filling’, sandwiched on one side by passive perceptual input, and on the other side by the output of an action. Instead, they hold that perception—or perceptual experience—itself involves (or can involve) the exercise of agency.

According to Eilan (2006) there are really two different views to be found in the literature. According to the first, perceptual experience is (or can be) agential because it involves (or can involve) bodily activity. This is the view of J. J. Gibson and contemporary enactivists, such as Hurley and Alva Noë (2004). It is also a view that one finds in phenomenology. According to the second, perceptual experience is (or can be) agential because it involves (or can involve) mental activity, specifically, the mental activity of attending. According to Eilan, William James is an early proponent of this view. A more recent defender is Watzl (2017).

This way of dividing up the intellectual landscape might be challenged, however. From the perspective of enactivism, the idea that there is neat divide between the mind and body is precisely what is in question. Additional support for this view comes from elsewhere too, namely,
the mental action literature, where it has recently been argued that there is no neat way to
distinguish between mental action and bodily action, and that at least some mental actions

In line with these concerns, in the third article of the thesis we analyse conscious
perceptual attention as what we call an embodied mental action. We take as our interlocutor Watzl,
who develops a novel account of perceptual agency in his recent book on attention Structuring
Mind: The Nature of Attention and How is Shapes Consciousness (Watzl 2017). Watzl argues that
his own ‘activity view’ of attention can capture enactivist intuitions about perceptual agency
without taking onboard their commitments about embodiment. We deny this. We divide our
argument up into two parts: a discussion of overt, and a discussion of covert perceptual attention.
We argue that a) Watzl’s account of overt perceptual attention cannot capture enactivists intuitions
about perceptual agency without committing to (at least some of) their claims about embodiment,
and b) the argument that Watzl uses to show that covert perceptual attention is disembodied does
not work, since many cases of covert attention involve an embodied “intentional omission”
(Shepard 2014) in which we, for example, actively inhibit foveation.

Co-authorship statement

- Stone and Bruineberg worked extensively and in close collaboration in developing the
  theoretical ideas and the arguments in the paper. Stone especially contributed to those parts of
  the theory which rely on knowledge of contemporary debates in the philosophy of mind.
- Stone wrote parts of the introduction, and the whole of the section titled “Watzl on attention as
  structuring mind.” He helped contribute to all the sections and arguments in the paper. Both
  authors have extensively edited and/or provided feedback on all parts of the manuscript.
- Stone read and commented on the final manuscript.
Let us now relate the findings of article 3. to the wider themes of the thesis. Article 2. proposed a reorientation away from thinking of mindfulness either as a kind of self-observation or as a kind of heightened pre-reflective self-consciousness, and rather toward a thinking of mindfulness meditation along the lines of self-conscious practice of attending. Article 3. has now offered some building blocks towards a move away from an internalist conception of the activity of attending toward anti-internalist or embodied conception. An upshot of the discussion is that we bring the analysis of active attention and agentive awareness discussed in article 2. into conversation with contemporary enactivism and—by extension—phenomenological discussions of embodiment.

In the final article, I switch focus somewhat to level a phenomenologically-informed critique of therapeutic applications of mindfulness.

**Article 4: Bare attention, dereification, and meta-awareness in mindfulness: a phenomenological critique (co-authored with Dan Zahavi)**

Published as a chapter in *The Routledge Handbook to the Philosophy of Meditation* edited by Rick Repetti (2022)

In article 4., my co-author Dan Zahavi and I develop a critique of the worldwide contemporary mindfulness movement, and especially the account of mindfulness that one finds in the writings of psychologists, psychotherapists, and popular secular meditation teachers, such as Jon Kabat-Zinn (the founder of MBSR) and Mark Williams, Zindel Segal, and John Teasdale (the founders of MBCT). Our reason for choosing this as our target is the influence and success of MBSR and MBCT. We ask: *What picture of the mind and its relationship to the world do we find in such
writers? How do they invite us to conceive of and view our own mental life? And should we accept these ideas?

According to the founders of MBSR and MBCT, our ordinary mode of experiencing and living out our lives embodies a kind of error, one which leads to a great deal of suffering, and leaves us profoundly existentially disconnected. The mistake is that we live our lives absorbed in emotionally-charged mind-wandering—that is, lost in thoughts about the past, future, or otherwise absent. Moreover, even our experiences of the ‘here and now’ are filtered through the lenses of our judgments, evaluations, opinions, which colour, distort, and detract from our direct, immediate experience. We mistake the concepts of the ‘thinking mind’ for what we find in experience.

Mindfulness by contrast can help us to overcome the perils of the ‘thinking mind’, and achieve a more direct, immediate presence to ourselves and to the world. The point of mindfulness is not, however, to supress thoughts. Rather, when thoughts do arise, the idea is to acknowledge and accept their presence within the field of awareness, i.e., to mindfully observe them. If we manage to do this, the thoughts themselves will be seen as what they really are—not (accurate takes on) on worldly reality itself, but rather “mental events” within the field of awareness. This is called the “self-liberation” of thoughts in Tibetan Buddhism and has been called “decentring” or “dereification” in the psychological literature on mindfulness, i.e., viewing thoughts (as well as other mental phenomena) as mental phenomena, rather than as what they purport to represent (Lutz et al. 2015, Dunne 2015).

In this article, we critique these ideas from a phenomenological standpoint. Firstly, as phenomenologists have long argued, what we encounter immediately in “pre-predicative experience” are not pure sensations or impressions but rather worldly objects and situations. As Heidegger famously claimed,
I hear a car: the psychologists say that I first have sensations of noise and sound that subsequently are apprehended as the noise of a car. But this is a pure construction.

What I first hear is not a sensation of sound, I first simply hear the car. (2007, p. 286).

Furthermore, that which we encounter in experience is always already meaningfully structured. For example, we see things as belong to certain general categories or types: “Things are experienced as trees, bushes, animals, snakes, birds; specifically, as pine, linden, lilac, dog, viper, swallow, sparrow, and so on” (Husserl 1973: §83). And we see them as having a certain value for us: we encounter them in experience “as useful, beautiful, alarming, terrifying, attractive, or whatever” (ibid. §12). Although we do find in phenomenological tradition an emphasis on the importance of perceptual experience and intuition vis-à-vis conceptual thought, we argue that it would be an error to equate this emphasis with the kind of immediacy the proponents of mindfulness seem to have in mind.

A second issue concerns temporality. The strong emphasis in MBSR and MBCT on the present moment is clearly at odds with the fundamental role that Husserl and other phenomenologists ascribe to temporality. The idea of a pure now is, according to Husserl, mythical: the experience of the now is always (essentially) pervaded by the yet-to-come (protentions) and the just-past (retentions). This threefold temporal structure is no illusion to be overcome; rather, it is required in order for experience and action to have coherence. Moreover, however, the phenomenologists stress the importance of historicity: we exist as historical beings, embedded within social world that pre-exists us, and which will outlast us.

Finally, we turn to the topic of dereification. We argue that the notion of dererification in the mindfulness literature appears to be committed to a problematic form of internalism about the world of experience. In particular, the idea that through mindfulness we can come to view or construe not only our thoughts but also our perceptions, emotions, and other
aspects of our experience as mere mental events looks deeply problematic. We also argue that there is an incoherence to some of the claims about decentering and dereification. On the one hand, we are supposed to view our thoughts as thoughts—i.e., as mere mental constructions. On the other hand, clearly we should achieve this perspective on our mental lives from a certain perspective. However, what should we say about the perspective from which our thoughts get dereified? Should it not also be dereified? We end the chapter by comparing the discussion of meta-awareness and dereification in the mindfulness literature to discussions of pre-reflective and reflective self-consciousness in phenomenology.

**Co-authorship statement**

- Stone is the first author of the paper. Together with his co-author Zahavi he was centrally involved in developing the central ideas in the article.

- Stone and Zahavi together developed the theory in the article. Stone’s contribution is primarily to those parts of the article concerned with mindfulness, though he also contributed theoretical ideas to the sections on phenomenology.

- Stone wrote the whole of the introduction; the whole of section 2, titled “Mindfulness in MBSR and MBCT”; large parts of section 3, titled “Bare attention and the phenomenology of perception”; some parts of section 4, titled “Dereification, intentionality, and meta-awareness”, and the whole of the conclusion.

- Stone read and commented on the final manuscript.
Conclusion and future directions

The present PhD thesis is an attempt to orchestrate a reorientation away from the widespread emphasis placed on the similarities between phenomenology and mindfulness conceived of as “first-person methods” for the study of consciousness. The phenomenological tradition of philosophy is, on the view defended here, fundamentally misrepresented if identified either with a purely descriptive enterprise lacking in wider systematic philosophical ambitions, or with a method that helps us turn away from our preoccupation with worldly objects and affairs in order to turn attention to or become (more) aware of experiential acts or processes. However, comparisons between phenomenology and mindfulness trade one or both ways of thinking about phenomenology. A consequence of all this is that the potential for phenomenology to contribute qua philosophy to the kinds of issues raised by mindfulness gets obscured. As I demonstrate in articles 2—4 of the thesis, however, phenomenological analyses of such things as self-consciousness, attention, temporality, intentionality, and embodiment are valuable resources for helping us to think through and critically engage with the kinds of questions and issue raised by mindfulness. As is evident from the approach I have taken, I do not envisage phenomenology as the sole arbitrator on such issues; rather, I think phenomenology must be part of a broader conversation that engages with related areas of philosophy.

In the introduction, I cited Kachru’s claim that we should think of meditation not (or not only) as technique for revealing the mind, but rather as a self-conscious activity of structuring the mind through skillful practices of attention. The narrow focus paid to mindfulness and phenomenology qua first-person methods for the study of consciousness depends not only on the objectionable conception of phenomenology just mentioned, but also on a picture of mindfulness as a matter self-
revelation. Those interested in the comparison might well deny this. For, as we saw in article 2.,
some such authors reject that idea that mindfulness is “a special kind of inner observation of a
mental stream whose phenomenal character is supposed to be somehow independent of such
observation”, to use Thompson’s (2017a: xxiv) phrase, and instead think of mindfulness as a
matter of cultivating an enhanced form of pre-reflective self-consciousness. However, the picture
here is still, we might say, quasi-revelatory or quasi-observational. As argued in article 2., however,
this is arguably not the right way to think about the kind of self-consciousness we have in
mindfulness meditation. Rather, we might think of such practices as involve an agentive awareness
of skillful attentive activity. In articles 2. and 3. I have tried to develop a set of philosophical tools
for helping us thinking more clearly about the connections between self-consciousness, attention,
and mental agency.

Let me briefly conclude by indicating some potential avenues for future research based on the
findings of the present PhD thesis. Firstly, as mentioned in the introduction, there have recently
been various attempts to draw on phenomenology and phenomenology-inspired approaches such as
micro-phenomenology and neurophenomenology to study the experiences of meditators
(Petitmengin et al. 2017, Lutz et al. 2015). One problem confronting these approaches is that they
embed some of the problematic ways of thinking about phenomenology (as well as how to apply it)
that we critically discuss in article 1. into their research methods. To take one example, Lutz et al.’s
(2015) ‘phenomenological matrix’ of mindfulness makes almost no references to classical
phenomenological concepts or analyses. Furthermore, (as we have seen in article 4.), a number of
the dimensions that are included in matrix seem directly opposed to central theoretical
commitments of phenomenology. A promising avenue of future research would involve a kind of
applied phenomenology of meditation and mindfulness, but one which depends on a sound understanding of phenomenology, and how best to apply it (Zahavi 2019, 2021).

Secondly, one of the central themes discussed in the middle part of the thesis (articles 2. and 3.) is attention. Attention has historically been much neglected topic in the philosophy of mind. However, in recent years there has been a growth of interest in the topic (Watzl 2017, Mole 2010, Jennings 2020). Moreover, Buddhist philosophy promises to contain a wealth of insights about attention (Ganeri 2017). A very promising avenue for future research would involve bringing the insights and analyses of classical phenomenological philosophers who have worked on attention to bear on these contemporary cross-cultural philosophical debates. An important related question here is how one might think about attention from an enactive perspective (a question broached but not sufficiently address in article 3.)

Bibliography


591


Varela, F.J. and Shear, J. (eds.)(1999a) *The View from Within: First-Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness*. Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic.


Article 1. Phenomenology and Mindfulness

Odysseus Stone & Dan Zahavi

Many philosophers, psychologists and cognitive scientists are currently using the term ‘phenomenology’ synonymously with ‘phenomenality’—that is, as a label for the qualitative character of experience. On this reading, phenomenology is a property of conscious mental states. According to another widespread use, any careful investigation and description of the experiential dimension merits the name phenomenology. Both of these lax uses differ from a more technical and historically appropriate use of the term, where phenomenology refers to a specific tradition in philosophy, namely the one inaugurated by Husserl and continued by thinkers such as Scheler, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and others. What does this canonical kind of phenomenology, philosophical phenomenology, have in common with mindfulness? If one were to take a cursory glance at recent literature on the topic, one would be forgiven for thinking quite a great deal (e.g. Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991; Depraz, Varela & Vermersch, 2003; Varela, 1996; Petitmengin, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011; Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009; Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013; Thompson, Lutz & Cosmelli, 2005; Shapiro et al., 2006; Thompson, 2007; Colombetti, 2014; Dunne, 2015: 260; Lutz et al. 2015: 640; Depraz, 2019; Bitbol 2019; Lundh, 2020). Our aim in this article is to subject that assessment to a closer scrutiny. More specifically, we will argue against the claim that phenomenology in the classical sense of the term is a kind of meditative technique or practice involving the careful observation of present moment experience for the purposes of description. In sections 1. and 2. we give an overview of the contemporary presentation of mindfulness, as well as

---

8 For an in-depth discussion of why this highjacking of the term has been detrimental to a proper appreciation of what phenomenology has to offer cognitive science, see Gallagher and Zahavi (2021).
pointing to some ambiguities that will be relevant to our subsequent discussion. Section 3. offers a brief survey of the various comparisons people have made between phenomenology and mindfulness. As will become clear, the majority have based their comparison on a specific interpretation of Husserl’s key methodological tools, the epoché and reduction. In section 4. we argue that said interpretation is mistaken, and that Husserl’s enterprise is very different from the practice of mindfulness, and then in section 5., we examine two examples of the claim we are criticizing, namely recent articles by Natalie Depraz and Michel Bitbol.

1. What is mindfulness?

Like phenomenology, mindfulness is a highly contested term. As one scholar has recently observed, ‘The word ‘mindfulness’ is itself so vague and elastic that it serves almost as a cipher into which we can read virtually anything we want’ (Bodhi, 2013: 22). While we do not pretend to be able to offer a comprehensive survey, it will be useful to give a sense of the theoretical landscape in order to orient our discussion.

The growth of interest in mindfulness over the last few decades, which has burgeoned in recent years, is due in large part to its integration into psychotherapeutic programmes known as Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs). This is only the latest in a series of attempts throughout the twentieth century to repurpose ideas and practices derived from Asian contemplative traditions for Western therapeutic ends (Harrington & Dunne, 2015). The perceived success of MBIs has encouraged a more general interest in mindfulness in psychology, where it is seen alternatively as an

---

9 E.g. Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and John Teasdale and Zindel Segal’s Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) programmes.
appropriate object of scientific study and occasionally even a kind of science in its own right—a ‘science of the mind.’ In this context, mindfulness is usually understood as involving a kind of ‘non-judgmental, present-centred awareness.’ This awareness is said to place the practitioner in a more direct epistemic relation to what ‘shows up’ in her experience, which, in turn, is supposed to have a therapeutic effect, liberating her from certain entrenched, psychologically harmful cognitive and affective patterns.

Discussions of mindfulness do not always specify whether mindfulness is a state, a more long-term trait or a practice. We take it that mindfulness is a practice that involves certain characteristic experiential states associated with different stages of practice (cf. Lutz et al. 2015). Typical MBI training initially involves: 1. Selecting and holding an object in attention without judgment or conceptual elaboration, 2. Remaining alert to distractions, 3. Nonjudgmentally noticing and disengaging from distractions if and when they occur, and 4. Reorienting towards the target object (Dunne, 2015: 254; Kabat-Zinn, 2005a: §4). The recommended objects of mindful attention can range from relatively simple ones during early stages of practice (e.g. the breath, bodily feelings, sounds) to more complex ones during more advanced stages (e.g. discursive thoughts: ‘Let go of the breath and just watch thoughts come into and leave the field of your attention… Try to perceive them as

---

10 Widely cited definitions from the psychological literature include ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally’ (Kabat-Zinn, 1994: 4) or ‘a kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is’ (Bishop et al., 2004: 232). As Lutz et al. observe: ‘in the psychological literature it is now generally accepted that, whatever else may be involved, mindfulness is necessarily present centered and nonjudgmental’ (Lutz et al. 2015: 636).
‘events’ in your mind’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2005a: 73)). Once the core skills of mindfulness (1—4) have been developed, a form of ‘objectless’ meditation—sometimes called choiceless awareness—is recommended. This involves dropping the prescription to attend to any particular meditation object and instead ‘just sitting with awareness of whatever comes up, not looking for anything in particular to focus on… simply being receptive to whatever unfolds in each moment’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2005a: 71), ‘completely open and receptive to whatever comes into the field of awareness’ (ibid. 74). Importantly, although taught in formal practice, mindfulness is supposed eventually to be integrated into daily life, suffusing quotidian experience with distinctive qualities of attention (e.g. Kabat-Zinn, 2005a: 431-9; cf. McMahan, 2008: §8).

The contemporary presentation of mindfulness has been the cause of considerable controversy (see the collection in Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Many Buddhist scholars have pointed out that it does not accord well with classical accounts of mindfulness based closely on the Abhidharma, an important early systematization of the Buddha’s teachings (Wallace & Bodhi, 2006; Gilpin, 2008; Dreyfus, 2013; Gethin, 2013; Bodhi, 2013; Sharf, 2015; Dunne, 2015). For example, in the context of the Abhidharma, the word usually translated as mindfulness—smrti (Sanskrit; Pāli; sati)—has the technical meaning ‘to remember’, not in the sense of recollective or episodic memory but in the sense of ‘bearing in mind.’ One is supposed to, in this sense, ‘remember’ one’s purpose while meditating; as Gethin puts it, ‘if one is instructed to observe the breath, one needs to remember to do this, rather than forget after a minute, five minutes, 30 minutes, and so forth’ (Gethin, 2013: 270; Gethin, 2015: 10-11). Furthermore, mindfulness practice, understood as involving the joint operation of smrti (mindfulness proper) and samprajanya (clear comprehension), arguably should not be thought of as a wholly nonjudgmental affair. While the practice does begin with exercises designed to help ‘still’

---

11 Kabat-Zinn picked up this phrase from Jiddu Krishnamurti (Kabat-Zinn, 2005b: 262).
the mind—i.e. disengage it from its compulsive, reactive tendencies to conceptualise and judge things from the point of view of self-interest—the aim is not to reach a wholly nonjudgmental state. Rather, a new set of judgements (including evaluative judgments) is to replace the reactive ones as the practitioner performs a series of theoretically-informed discriminations with respect to their experience (Dreyfus, 2013).

The dominant view amongst Buddhist scholars is that the modern notion of mindfulness is heavily indebted to a controversial interpretation of certain early Buddhist and Abhidharma sources by figures of neo-Theravāda ‘Vipassanā’ (Insight) lay meditation movement of the twentieth century (e.g. Gilpin, 2008; Braun, 2013; Gethin, 2011, 2015; Sharf, 2014, 2015; Bodhi, 2016).12 The neo-Theravāda influence can be seen if we consider Nyanaponika Thera’s popular book The Heart of Buddhist Meditation, which inspired important Western meditation teachers such as Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, who in turn taught Jon Kabat-Zinn (Braun, 2013: 166).13 Nyanaponika


13 A minority of voices have also stressed the importance of Mahāyana and Vajrayāna Buddhist influence on contemporary mindfulness, particularly that of the ‘nondual’ traditions of Tibetan Dzogchen and Mahāmudra, as well as Japanese and Korean Zen (e.g. Dunne, 2011, 2015; Watt, 2017; Husgafvel, 2016, 2018). Kabat-Zinn claims that ‘MBSR is mostly vipassana practice (in the Theravada sense as taught by people like Joseph [Goldstein] and Jack [Kornfield] etc.) with a Zen attitude’ or as ‘a mix of Zen and vipassana elements, now leavened by Dzogchen’ (Gilpin, 2008: 238).
characteised mindfulness (at least in its rudimentary manifestation) in terms of what he called ‘bare
attention’:

Bare Attention is the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens *to* us and *in* us, at
the successive moments of perception. It is called ‘bare,’ because it attends just to the bare facts of a
perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind which, for
Buddhist thought, constitutes the sixth sense. When attending to that six-fold sense impression
attention or mindfulness is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to
them by deed, speech or mental comment which may be one of self-reference (like, dislike etc.),
judgement or reflection (Nyanaponika, 1962: 30).

• There is some debate in the literature concerning whether or not Nyanaponika intended his
discussion of ‘bare attention’ simply as pedagogical device for meditation (Bodhi & Wallace, 2006;
however, it is treated as a theoretical account of an experience in which the practitioner, freed from
subjective and cultural conditioning, comes to ‘see and know things as they truly are.’

Normally man is not concerned with a disinterested knowledge of ‘things as they truly are’, but
with a ‘handling’ and judging them from the view point of his self-interest… [T]he normal visual
perception if it is of any interest to the observer will rarely present the visual object pure and
simple, but the object will appear in light of added subjective judgements, as: beautiful or ugly,
pleasant or unpleasant, useful, useless or harmful… It is the task of Bare
Attention to eliminate all those alien additions from the object proper that is then in the field of perception (Nyanaponika, 1962: 32-3).

1. Ambiguities

Before we advance any further, let us briefly dwell on what we take to be some rather troubling ambiguities in the contemporary presentation of mindfulness. These ambiguities will turn out to be important when it comes to our discussion of attempts to compare phenomenology to mindfulness in later sections. Consider first the claim that mindfulness amounts to paying attention to ‘present moment experience’ or to what is ‘present in experience’ etc. A recurrent problem is that such references to experience often fail to distinguish clearly between the intentional object and the intentional act. As a result, one can find rather conflicting views about what exactly mindfulness is supposed to involve. Does mindfulness amount to a distinct type of (reflective or reflexive) self-presence or self-awareness, or does it rather afford a particular kind of presence of (or to) the experienced world? As Puc (2019: 172) has recently observed, Nyanaponika’s presentation of mindfulness suffers from this very ambiguity: at times, it is clear that the phrase ‘bare attention’ is intended to refer to a form of self-awareness, e.g. ‘attending to the basic facts of the mental process’

---

14 Echoing this passage, Kabat-Zinn claims that, ‘Thinking and memory come in a bit later, but very quickly, on the heels of an initial moment of pure sense contact. Thinking and memory can easily color our original experience in ways that distort or detract from the bare experience itself’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2005a: 119).

15 Here not understood as involving an awareness of a Self but rather simply that consciousness is, in some sense, aware of itself.
(Nyanaponika, 1962: 36); at other points, however, it seems to refer to an awareness of the perceived object, prior to association, memory and conceptualization: ‘observation reverts to the very first phase of the process of perception when the mind is in a purely receptive state and when attention is restricted to a bare noticing of the object’ (ibid. 33).

Both of these interpretations can also be found in the current literature. For example, the editors of the *Handbook of Mindfulness* articulate what is no doubt the dominant view that ‘fundamental to classical and other definitions [of mindfulness] is clear-eyed attention to the workings of the mind, body, and behavior’ (Brown, Cheswell & Ryan, 2015: 1). However, the Buddhist scholar David McMahan rightly observes that for many it seems the list of appropriate objects of mindfulness can include not just mental and bodily states but also the ‘physical objects one encounters’ (McMahan, 2008: 216). While many early Buddhist contemplative techniques were developed with the express purpose of renouncing the world, there is a modern emphasis on refining the senses and ‘opening to what is closed’ (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987: 15; see McMahan, 2008: 216-8). Jon Kabat-Zinn’s famous MBSR exercise in which subjects are instructed to mindfully eat a raisin, carefully attending to its colour, texture and flavour as one brings it to one's lips and chews, is arguably a case in point. Aside from any reflective component that may be included here, it is difficult to deny that an important part of the process involves straightforwardly perceiving—feeling, seeing, tasting—the object, albeit in a more attentive and engaged way (Kabat-Zinn, 2005a: 27-8). As some of the leading psychologists in the field also put it, mindfulness is a tool that can help us, ‘[g]et out of our heads and learn to experience the world directly, experientially, without the relentless commentary of our thoughts’ (Williams, Teasdale, Segal & Kabat-Zinn, 2007: 46). Despite the importance of this ambiguity and the different interpretations of mindfulness implied in it, it is almost never discussed explicitly.

A second set of questions concerns judgment. The idea that mindfulness is nonjudgmental is
controversial in part because it is seen to have troubling ethical implications. However, it is not always clear what the term judgment is supposed to refer to in this discussion. Often what are explicitly discussed are evaluative judgments. For example, Alan Wallace worries that nonjudgmental implies ‘a kind of ethical neutrality that acknowledges no significant difference between wholesome and unwholesome mental states and rejects any attempt to favor one kind of mental process over another’ (Bodhi & Wallace, 2006). However, at other points, it is made clear that rather than being limited to evaluative judgments, the admonition should be extended to judgments about simple factual matters, including, e.g., perceptual judgments (Gunaratana, 2011: 132). But what is the relationship between experience and judgment on this picture? While there has sometimes been a tendency in analytic philosophy of mind to assimilate all experience to a kind of judgment (e.g. Dennett, 1991: 114-26), it is arguably much more plausible to think that we can perfectly well perceive and act on the world without explicitly judging it to be thus-and-so. If this is all that is meant by nonjudgmental, then it might well be thought of as a fairly pedestrian affair. However, in the literature on mindfulness, the category judgment often seems to refer to something much more basic and pervasive. In the passage from Nyanaponika quoted above, for example, judgment seems to extend to what philosophers sometimes call perceiving-as: the fact that I do not (for example) see things simpliciter but rather as beautiful or strange; or as objects of a such-and-such a kind; or (perhaps even) as climbable or edible. The idea would then be that mindfulness involves an awareness that does not conform to this as-structure—an awareness of something as such. 16 More generally, the term ‘judgment’ often seems to

16 Because ‘perceiving-as’ is often thought to involve concepts, mindfulness then sometimes gets assimilated to a kind of nonconceptual experience: ‘Mindfulness is nonconceptual awareness. Another English term for sati is ‘bare attention.’ It is not thinking. It does not get involved with thought or concepts. It does not get hung up on ideas or opinions or memories. It just looks.
be shorthand for any sort of discrimination or attribution of meaning whatsoever.\footnote{Cf. Shulman (2014: 114) who has recently argued that within early Buddhism mindfulness meditation ‘is anything but naked attention and is more concerned with seeing things as they are defined by Buddhist thought than with seeing them ‘as they really are.’”}

Highlighting these ambiguities is important since they illustrate some of the deep conceptual problems that lie just beneath the surface of the contemporary discussion of mindfulness. As we will see in a moment, related ambiguities also play out in recent discussions of phenomenology. Any attempt to compare phenomenology and mindfulness will ultimately need to get clear about how both stand on these central questions.

2. Mindfulness meets phenomenology

The earliest and most influential comparison between phenomenology and mindfulness can probably be found in Varela, Thompson & Rosch’s \textit{The Embodied Mind} (1991) and in subsequent work by Varela and colleagues. The authors of \textit{The Embodied Mind} turned to both Western phenomenology and Buddhist philosophy and practice (what they called the tradition of Buddhist Mindfulness/Awareness) in search of alternatives to the dominant computationalist paradigm in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. As Thompson has recently pointed out, nearly all of the

Mindfulness registers experiences, but it does not compare them. It does not label them or categorize them. It just observes everything as if it was occurring for the first time. It is not analysis that is based on reflection and memory. It is, rather, the direct and immediate experiencing of whatever is happening, without the medium of thought. It comes before thought in the perceptual process’ (Gunaratana, 2011: 134).

\footnote{Cf. Shulman (2014: 114) who has recently argued that within early Buddhism mindfulness meditation ‘is anything but naked attention and is more concerned with seeing things as they are defined by Buddhist thought than with seeing them ‘as they really are.’”}
Buddhist sources that the authors drew on in describing mindfulness meditation were indebted to the neo-Theravādan presentation (Thompson, 2017: xxiii). *The Embodied Mind* presented Buddhism and phenomenology as traditions that share the noble goal of rigorously and faithfully investigating lived experience. However, it also argued that Buddhism managed to succeed where phenomenology too often failed; lacking detailed instructions for how to actually practice phenomenological reflection, phenomenology tended to get bogged down in arcane theoretical issues. Even figures such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, who stressed the pragmatic dimensions of human experience, ultimately remained wedded to a limited theoretical paradigm in philosophy (ibid. 19). The Buddhist Mindfulness/Awareness traditions, in contrast, grounded its philosophy in meditative practice and experience, and thus managed to actually realize an ambition that phenomenology all too often only aspired to (ibid. 27-8).¹⁸

*The Embodied Mind* described mindfulness as a technique ‘designed to lead the mind back from its theories and preoccupations, back from the abstract attitude, to the situation of one's experience itself’ (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991: 22). The authors claimed that, ‘From the Buddhist perspective, it is only by means of natural mindfulness that Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty could ever have known about a normal mode of active involvement in the world’ (ibid. 32). In Varela’s subsequent work, mindfulness is explicitly compared to the crucial steps of the phenomenological method, the epoché and the reduction (Varela, 1996; Varela, Depraz & Vermersch, 2003). Like mindfulness, the reduction entails ‘a sudden, transient suspension of beliefs about what

---

¹⁸ Evan Thompson has subsequently revised various aspects of this overall assessment both in “Appendix A” of his *Mind in Life* (Thompson, 2007) and in his introduction to the new edition of *The Embodied Mind* (Thompson, 2017).
is being examined, a putting in abeyance our habitual discourse about something, a bracketing of the pre-set structuring that constitutes the ubiquitous background of everyday life’ (Varela, 1996: 337).

These ideas have subsequently gained wider acceptance, and it is now not difficult to find a variety of philosophers, psychologists and Buddhist scholars who either specifically highlight the similarity between philosophical phenomenology and mindfulness, or who argue that the method of phenomenology is (or is analogous to) a kind of meditative practice or technique (Petitmengin, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011; Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009; Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013; Thompson, Lutz & Cosmelli, 2005; Cogan, 2006; Shapiro et al., 2006; Thompson, 2007; Coseru, 2012: 171; Colombetti, 2014; Dunne, 2015: 260; Lutz et al. 2015: 640; Depraz, 2019; Bitbol 2019; Vörös, 2019; Lundh, 2020). A few examples must suffice. In an entry on the phenomenological reduction found on the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy it is claimed that the reduction is a ‘radical, rigorous, and transformative meditative technique.’ Far from being a mere theoretical shift of perspective, the phenomenological reduction is presented as a practical exercise that requires rigorous and persistent effort, and even certain outwards preparations: ‘one can assume the basic starting point of stilling the body, mind, and emotions while sitting in a comfortable position, having made provisions not to be disturbed’ (Cogan 2006). Likewise, psychotherapists interested in phenomenological psychology have claimed that the phenomenological reduction is a ‘radical self-meditative process,’ which helps the researcher obtain a ‘sense of wonder and openness to the world’ and allows her to ‘meet the phenomenon in as fresh a way as possible’ (Finlay, 2008: 2, 12). In a recent article entitled “Experimental Phenomenology in Mindfulness Research”, Lundh defines phenomenology as the scientific study of human subjectivity and argues that the aim of Husserl’s phenomenological method is ‘to turn our attention to conscious experience as such’ (Lundh 2020: 494). Thus, whereas we in the natural attitude focus on the objective world (as it appears from our subjective perspective), in the phenomenological attitude, we turn our attention to the subjective perspective as such. More
concretely, whereas we in the natural attitude might be concerned with different external objects such as hammers or nails, in the phenomenological attitude we focus on ‘bodily sensations, sense impressions, thoughts and feelings’ (ibid. 495). To engage in phenomenological practice is precisely to undertake this shift from attending to the world to attending to one’s experiences, and Lundh claims that it is this shift that Husserl labels the *epoché* (ibid. 494). Given this interpretation of what phenomenology amounts to, it is not hard to see why Lundh can argue that ‘mindfulness meditation represents one kind of phenomenological practice’ and that a ‘breathing meditation that simply involves attending to one’s breathing just as it is, with no instruction to change it in any way, is a pure phenomenological practice’ (ibid. 497).

As should be readily apparent, the very same ambiguity that we identified in the previous section on mindfulness recurs in the discussion of the phenomenological method. Is its aim to make us more attentive to and familiar with our experiential life, or rather to allow for a heightened awareness of and openness to the experienced world? Whereas Finlay seems to suggest that phenomenology seeks to allow for a more intimate and immediate encounter with the world, one freed from prior theoretical knowledge and presuppositions, and animated by a spirit of astonishment and wonder, Lundh claims Husserl’s method was designed to shift our attention away from the objective world towards subjective experience.

These ambiguities obviously suggest a certain amount of confusion about phenomenological methodology. But still, perhaps there is a kernel of truth to be found in the comparisons. After all, is it not well established that a central tenet of phenomenological methodology is that we adopt something like a ‘nonjudgmental’ attitude with respect to experience? Doesn’t this attitude precisely allow for special attention to a peculiar, well-circumscribed domain, either the realm of experiences or that of worldly objects? And isn’t there something to the claim that Husserl’s well-known injunction to jettison theoretical speculation and return to ‘the things themselves’ (Husserl 2001a:
I/168) mirrors the mindfulness movement’s preference for direct experience over abstract thinking? Let us now turn to assess these claims.

3. The epoché and reduction

As we have just seen, those who compare phenomenology and the phenomenological method with mindfulness practice often refer to the epoché and the phenomenological reduction and often take it for granted that both notions—whatever they actually mean—are crucial to the practice of phenomenology. But is this actually something that all (or even most) leading phenomenologists would agree to? Not really. Husserl was the one who introduced both notions, but even he didn’t always believe them to be indispensable. In Husserl’s early work, the monumental *Logical Investigations* from 1900-01, we find Husserl’s first full-fledged investigation of intentionality. This is also where we find Husserl’s famous slogan about the need for a return to the ‘things themselves’ (Husserl 2001a: I/168), and where Husserl insists on the importance of carefully attending to the phenomena instead of being side-tracked by various theoretical prejudices. *Logical Investigations* was a resounding success and basically triggered the launch of the phenomenological movement. The work, however, contains no reference to the epoché or the phenomenological reduction. These methodological notions and manoeuvres were simply not required in order to engage in the kind of descriptive phenomenology that was of concern to the early Husserl. Consider also the work of Adolf Reinach, one of the most talented early phenomenologists. Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, Reinach gave an influential talk entitled “What is phenomenology?” As Reinach makes clear in the lecture, rather than being a comprehensive system of philosophical propositions, phenomenology is a specific method of philosophizing, a particular philosophical attitude. What characterizes this attitude? For Reinach, the phenomenological return to “the things themselves” is a turning away from
theories and constructions, in order to obtain a ‘pure and unobscured intuition of essences’ (Reinach 1968). Reinach consequently understood the phenomenological method as primarily involving an intuition of essences, where one disregards the here and now of objects in order to focus on their essential features. Interestingly, Reinach by no means restricted the focus of phenomenology to an investigation of experiences, but mentioned that phenomenologists should also investigate time, space, numbers, concepts and propositions. Importantly, he didn’t mention the epoché or the reduction even once in his lecture.

What about later phenomenologists? Neither Heidegger nor Merleau-Ponty made many references to the epoché and the reduction. It is matter of ongoing debate whether this is so because they rejected Husserl's methodology (Carman, 2003) or because they simply took it for granted (Tugendhat 1970: 263). As for Sartre, he only mentions the epoché once in Being and Nothingness and that is in order to distance himself from it (Sartre, 2018: 370). The same holds true for the few occasions where Sartre mentions Husserl's phenomenological reduction. To insist that the epoché and the phenomenological reduction is the basic method of phenomenology is consequently a fairly controversial claim; a claim that needs to be supported and backed by substantial arguments and careful textual analysis. This is not to say that it might not be done, but those pushing the proposal that mindfulness practice and phenomenology have something important in common, and who seek to support this claim by a particular interpretation of the epoché and the reduction, might be on slightly safer ground if their claim is meant to refer specifically to Husserl’s mature phenomenology rather than to phenomenology broadly speaking. After all, none would dispute that the epoché and reduction play an absolutely fundamental role in the work of the later Husserl. For him, they were indeed essential to phenomenological philosophizing. But what does he then mean by both concepts? As we shall see, this is also something people sharply disagree about.
On one interpretation, the return to the things themselves is a turning away from theories, interpretations, and constructions. The aim of the epoché is consequently to suspend our various theoretical presuppositions. What the epoché should bracket are our preconceived ideas, our habits of thought, our prejudices and theoretical assumptions. By accomplishing that, by jettisoning our theoretical baggage, we can effectuate an unprejudiced turn towards the objects, and arrive at the scene with an open mind, in order to let the phenomena reveal themselves as what they are (Finlay 2008, 1–2). We should focus on the things as they are encountered in experience, rather than as we thought them to be, and then base our definitions on careful descriptions. On this reading, phenomenology is very much a descriptive rather than deductive or speculative enterprise, the core of which is its rigorous intuitive method.

On a quite different interpretation, the purpose of the epoché is to make our own conscious life the proper theme of investigation. We are normally absorbed by and preoccupied with worldly objects and events, with the what of experience. By performing the epoché, we bracket not only traditional theories and prejudices, but also, and even more importantly, our concern with and absorption in the world of objects. We reorient our attention towards the how of experience, thereby revealing aspects and dimensions of our subjective lives that we normally overlook and ignore (Petitmengin et al. 2019). On this reading, the aim of phenomenology is ultimately to reveal and describe those ‘margins… of our experience that are overlooked as long as exclusive concern for objects prevails’ (Bitbol and Petitmengin 2013: 179).

Both interpretations are quite widespread, but they are both wrong. The claim that we need the epoché in order to divert our attention from the objects of experience towards experiential acts is mistaken not only in suggesting that the phenomenological attitude should involve such a reorientation, but also in proposing that something like the epoché should be needed for one. Let us not forget that Brentano already in Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint from 1874 had defended
the legitimacy and importance of a descriptive psychology. Let us not forget the work of psychologists like James, Wundt and Titchener who all in different ways had insisted on the need for a careful study of inner experience. And let us not forget Husserl’s own early work, where he presented us with sophisticated descriptions and analyses of different intentional experiences, without ever mentioning and employing the epoché.

The claim that we need the epoché in order to bracket any preconceived beliefs, opinions or notions about the phenomenon being researched is likewise mistaken in that it conflates the specific contribution of the epoché (which we will return to in a moment) with a more general rejection of speculation and explanation in favour of description. It is again useful to point to the early Husserl, who in *Logical Investigations* wrote, ‘We can absolutely not rest content with ‘mere words’ […] Meanings inspired only by remote, confused, inauthentic intuitions—if by any intuitions at all—are not enough: we must go back to the ‘things themselves’’ (Husserl 2001a: I/168). When Husserl defended this approach, he had not yet introduced the epoché, and when he eventually did, it was certainly not simply in order to highlight the importance of attending to things as they are encountered in experience.

When Husserl later in life introduced the epoché and reduction, he did so for quite different philosophical reasons. If philosophy is to address a number of fundamental epistemological and metaphysical questions in a sufficiently radical manner it has to subject what Husserl calls the natural attitude to a critical examination. In the natural attitude, we take it for granted that the world we encounter in experience exists independently of us. But this natural realism cannot simply be presupposed if we want to do serious philosophy. What we need to do, according to Husserl, is suspend our basic and deep-seated confidence in the mind-independent existence of that world (Husserl 1982, 61). Husserl’s name for this specific suspension is epoché. By performing this
suspension, by no longer taking worldly reality as the unquestioned point of departure, we start to pay attention to how and as what worldly objects are given to us.

We perform the epoché — we who are philosophizing in a new way — as a transformation of the attitude which precedes it not accidentally but essentially, namely, the attitude of natural human existence which, in its total historicity, in life and science, was never before interrupted… It is through this abstention that the gaze of the philosopher in truth first becomes fully free: above all, free of the strongest and most universal, and at the same time most hidden, internal bond, namely, of the pregivenness of the world (Husserl 1970, 151).

Every historically available scientific discipline and even part of what normally belongs to philosophy, including formal logic, psychology and ethics, conduct their research in a natural – though in a certain way necessary – naivety. All their questions refer to a world which is given to us – with an obviousness belonging to life – prior to all science, but they fail to notice that this pre-givenness conceals a true infinity of enigmatic problems, which are not even noticed from within the natural perspective (Husserl 2001b, 7).

By adopting the phenomenological attitude, we do not focus exclusively on subjective acts, regardless of whether those acts are taken to be located in a private inner sphere, or rather taken to be embodied, embedded and extended. Rather we look at how the world shows up for the subject. We pay attention to how and as what worldly objects are given to us. As Husserl insists, we need to attend to both the object in ‘the how of its determinations’ and in the ‘how of its givenness’ (Husserl 1982, 314-316). By doing that, we also come to discover the intentional acts and experiential structures in relation to which any appearing object must necessarily be understood. As Husserl already wrote in *Logical
Investigations, ‘the objects of which we are ‘conscious’, are not simply in consciousness as in a box, so that they can merely be found in it and snatched at in it; but that they are first constituted as being what they are for us, and as what they count as for us, in varying forms of objective intention’ (2001a: I/275). As he would later write in Ideas I, the greatest and most important problems in phenomenology are related to the question of how objectivities of different kinds, from the prescientific to those of the highest scientific order, are constituted by consciousness (1982, 209). Indeed, it ‘is therefore a matter of inquiring, in the most comprehensive universality, into how Objective unities of any region and category are ‘constituted in the manner peculiar to consciousness’’ (1982, 209). When Husserl subsequently introduced the notion of reduction, what he had in mind was precisely a systematic analysis of this correlation between world and subjectivity, one that leads from the natural sphere back to (reducere) its subjective foundation (Husserl 1960, 21).

In Crisis, Husserl describes phenomenology as the final gestalt (Endform) of transcendental philosophy (Husserl 1970: 70). Rather than merely amounting to a limited exploration of the psychological domain, for Husserl an in-depth investigation of intentionality paves the way for a proper understanding of reality and objectivity. This is why Husserl’s mature phenomenology should not be conceived merely as a theory about the structure of subjectivity, nor is it merely a theory about how we understand and perceive the world, rather its proper theme is the mind-world dyad. Husserl’s investigations of intentionality, his exploration of the correlation between experiential acts and objects of experience, ultimately led him to embrace a form of transcendental idealism that insists on the essential interconnection between reason, truth and being, and between objectivity and intersubjectivity (Husserl 1982, 340, Zahavi 2003, 2017, 2019a). Both the epoché and the reduction can consequently be seen as elements in a philosophical reflection, the purpose of which is to liberate us from our natural dogmatism and make us aware of our own constitutive accomplishment. In this way, according to Husserl, we will eventually be able to accomplish our main, if not sole, concern as.
phenomenologists, namely to transform ‘the universal obviousness of the being of the world—for him [the phenomenologist] the greatest of all enigmas—into something intelligible’ (Husserl 1970, 180).

Let us return to the two misinterpretations. As should just have become clear, phenomenology is neither a turn toward the object, nor a return to the subject. Both interpretations fail to grasp the proper scope of the phenomenological analysis. The aim of phenomenology is precisely not to investigate either the subject or the object, either the mind or the world, but to investigate both in their interrelation or correlation. This is why a phenomenology of knowledge is concerned both with the experiences in which the objects are given as well as with the objects themselves precisely as they are experienced (Husserl 1960: 69). That this twofold focus is absolutely crucial to Husserl was something he explicitly emphasized in a central passage in Crisis:

The first breakthrough of this universal a priori of correlation between experienced object and manners of givenness (which occurred during work on my Logical Investigations around 1898) affected me so deeply that my whole subsequent life-work has been dominated by the task of systematically elaborating on this a priori of correlation (Husserl 1970: 166).

In addition, by arguing that the main ambition of phenomenology is to offer detailed descriptions (of either objects or experiences), both misinterpretations fail to recognize the properly philosophical nature of phenomenology. It is no coincidence that a purely descriptive endeavour devoid of systematic ambitions is reported to have been dismissed by Husserl as a mere ‘picture-book phenomenology’ (Spiegelberg 1965: 170). Whether they pertain to objects, experiences or, indeed, even the correlation between the two, whether they pertain to the particular—this is what I am feeling here and now—or the more invariant and essential, simply amassing various descriptions is a poor
substitute for the systematic and argumentative work that we find in Husserl. A quick glance in works like *Ideas I* (1913), *Formal and transcendental logic* (1929), *Cartesian meditations* (1931) and *Crisis* (1936) will see Husserl preoccupied with topics such as the relation between perceptual intentionality and scientific rationality, the link between formal logic and formal ontology, the nature of objectivity, the fundamental structures of social reality, the connection between ethics, values and personhood, or the cultural crisis of Europe. Certainly, Husserl throughout also argued that topics like these can only be philosophically clarified and understood if we take subjectivity and experience seriously. But to focus only on subjective experience and to ignore the theoretical questions that Husserl was trying to address is to miss the nature of his philosophical project. Even if a certain amount of description might be necessary, a minute investigation of thin time-slices of experiences (as can, for instance, be found in Petitmengin’s microphenomenology) runs the risk of derailing the philosophical investigation and might in the end hamper our ability to elucidate the kinds of questions Husserl was concerned with.

One occasionally gets the impression that people who see strong similarities between Husserl’s phenomenology and mindfulness (as opposed to, say, affinities between phenomenology and strands of Buddhist philosophy) are prepared to side-line Husserl’s more systematic philosophical analyses and regard them as separate from phenomenology proper. The suggestion would be that Husserl’s work on ontology, epistemology, logic, ethics, value theory, etc. is independent of and extraneous to his phenomenology. A serious problem with this proposal is that it isn’t borne out by Husserl’s own writings. Husserl repeatedly makes it clear that his approach to different questions, be they ontological, epistemological or ethical, is a phenomenological approach. As he puts it in *Ideas III*:

‘Phenomenology in our sense is the science of ‘origins,’ of the ‘mothers’ of all cognition; and it is
the maternal ground of all philosophical method: to this ground and to the work in it, everything leads back’ (Husserl 1980: 69). 19

4. Depraz and Bitbol

Let us finally turn to two extensive recent attempts to bring mindfulness and phenomenology together. We will focus on Michel Bitbol’s article “Consciousness, Being and Life: Phenomenological Approaches to Mindfulness” and Natalie Depraz’s article “Epoché in Light of Samatha-Vipassanā Meditation” both of which were published in 2019. 20

The aim of Bitbol’s article is to explore the possibility of a productive cross-fertilization between the practice of mindfulness and the practice of phenomenology. Might phenomenological

---

19 We have focused on Husserl and his notions of epoché and reduction. The reason for this focus is that almost all those who make the comparison between phenomenology and mindfulness explicitly have Husserl and his methodology in mind. An anonymous referee suggested that this leaves it open to our opponent to point to affinities between mindfulness and some other (non-Husserlian) form of phenomenology. But what are the candidates for such a comparison? On the one hand, the similarities between mindfulness and the projects of other prominent phenomenological philosophers like Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty seem even harder to detect. On the other hand, someone might by phenomenology simply mean an examination of the what-it-is-likeness of experience. But we have already objected to this use of the term.

20 Depraz and Bitbol were both long time collaborators of Varela’s, and central parts of Depraz’ recent article were originally published as chapter 7 in a book from 2003, which she co-authored with Varela and Vermersch (2003).
tools and methods help us understand the practice and experience of mindfulness better? Might a phenomenologist who practices mindfulness become a better phenomenologist and be more likely to accomplish her philosophical goals (Bitbol 2019, 128)? An early hint of Bitbol’s own view can be found in his claim that ‘phenomenology seeks knowledge by basing it on a carefully channelled variety of spiritual exercise’ (2019, 131).

In support of this view, Bitbol initially offers some evidence that even the most charitable interpretation can only describe as quite circumstantial. He first argues that the French philosopher Maine de Biran (1766 – 1824), who has sometimes been heralded as an early thinker of embodiment, and who was a source of inspiration for the French phenomenologist Michel Henry, was a non-religious meditator who in some of his writings outlined ideas that seem to foreshadow the practice of mindfulness. On this basis, Bitbol concludes that one of the sources of the phenomenological project ‘appears closely related to the therapeutic project of mindfulness’ (2019, 132). Next, he points out that Husserl borrowed the term epoché from the Greek sceptics, and suggests that Pyrrho of Elis, who is often considered the first Greek sceptic philosopher, had travelled to India, and might therefore have been influenced by Buddhist thinkers (2019, 133). Finally, Bitbol points to a peculiar aspect of Husserl’s writing. Many of Husserl’s research manuscripts (daily manuscripts that Husserl often wrote in an attempt to try out new ideas) have a fairly cyclic and repetitive style. Bitbol argues that this supports the claim that there are similarities between Husserl’s method and both (neo-Theravada) vipassanā and mindfulness meditation, where one is to practice continually returning to the present moment whenever a distraction occurs (2019, 140).

How should one assess claims like these? We think it is fair to say that the evidence presented will hardly seem compelling to anybody who has not already bought into and accepted the idea that there is a deep similarity between mindfulness and phenomenology. If a more convincing
case is to be made, we obviously need further argumentation. Let us consequently look closer at Bitbol’s discussion of Husserl.

Bitbol first writes that for Husserl the aim of the epoché is to suspend and neutralize our tacit ‘natural’ belief in an objective world (2019, 134). We can readily agree with this description. Bitbol is also quite right when he argues that the suspension is supposed to allow us to overcome the short-sightedness (or one-sidedness) of the natural attitude. Importantly, what this means is that the epoché is not supposed to make us redirect our focus from ordinary worldly objects towards inner experiences, as if were simply replacing one limited domain with another (2019, 135). Rather the aim is precisely to widen our focus, which is why Husserl himself compares the performance of the epoché with the transition from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional life (Husserl 1970, 119). However, what Bitbol writes next is less convincing. Referencing Jon Kabat-Zinn’s definition of mindfulness, he claims that the epoché involves a suspension not only of ‘elaborate judgements, but even before that, the suspension of the semantic function of both mental and verbal activities’, a function that ‘tends to expel us from our present’ (Bitbol 2019: 36). It is not difficult to see why such a characterization might make a comparison to mindfulness seem more compelling, but is it really accurate? It is certainly correct to say that phenomenology is interested in the affective and cognitive processes that allow us to navigate the world. Rather than letting us remain absorbed in the objects of intentionality, part of its task is to make us more aware of the structures of intentionality. But it doesn’t achieve this end by suspending the meaning ascription that is so central to the life of intentional consciousness, but rather by critically reflecting upon it. As we have already seen, it seeks to motivate this reflection by suspending our belief in a pre-existing objective world. Bitbol further writes that mindfulness means seeing what unfolds in experience independently of the ‘filter’ of our beliefs, assumptions and desires (Bitbol 2019, 137). But that is definitely not the goal of phenomenology. Quite the opposite, the latter aims to make us realize the extent to which what we
encounter in experience is inescapably intertwined with our cognitive and affective contributions. Phenomenology thus rejects what the Buddhist scholar Robert Sharf calls the ‘filter theory’ of cognition, which pervades much of the literature on mindfulness, according to which ‘our normal sensory and discursive processes, rather than opening us to reality, actually serve to filter it out’ (Sharf, 2015: 477). Finally, it is briefly worth reflecting on the fact that one of Husserl’s decisive contributions to philosophy was to highlight the extent to which normal experience involves all three temporal modes (present, past and future). On his account, even a simple perception involves an interplay of not-now, now, and not-yet-now: a retaining of what has just happened, an openness to what is currently happening and an anticipation of what is just about to occur. Furthermore, in his later works Husserl increasingly focuses on the role of tradition and historicity. It is not at all clear how one should reconcile these central aspects of Husserl’s thinking with Bitbol’s claim that phenomenology is exclusively concerned with the present moment and with what is ‘flatly here’ (Bitbol, 2019: 136).

If we now move to Depraz’ article, her central claim is that Chögyam Trungpa’s presentation of the basic practice of samatha-vipassanā meditation, with its emphasis on simply sitting and connecting with one’s own experience, resonates remarkably with Husserl’s phenomenological descriptions and with his requirement for a return to the things themselves (Depraz 2019, 50-51). The article consists of three parts: a comparison of Trungpa’s nine stages of samatha meditation with

---

21 One referee objected to this conclusion and asked whether the natural attitude could not be viewed as a kind of filter that the phenomenological method seeks to remove. But we need to tread carefully here. The filter metaphor is suggestive of the possibility of a ‘filterless’ relation to the world. But such a proposal is quite alien to phenomenology. For a discussion of why this doesn’t commit phenomenology to a form of representationalism, see Zahavi 2018.
Husserl’s epoché and reduction (2019, 52-57); a suggestion for how samatha and epoché might be combined so as to complement each other (2019, 58-62); and a comparison of Trungpa’s presentation of vipassanā with Husserl’s way to the reduction through the lifeworld (2019, 63-67). For our purposes, the most relevant discussions can be found in the two first parts.

Depraz starts out by claiming that the aim of samatha meditation is to stabilize the mind and slow down the emergence and disappearance of thoughts such that it will be easier to observe them. She then introduces the epoché, which she claims involves a neutralization of the validity of thoughts that anchor us to the objects of experience, thereby allowing the subject to turn her attention to the experiential acts themselves (Depraz 2019, 52-53). This is followed by a rather extensive delineation of the stages of samatha set out by Trungpa. The stages take us from an initial placing and narrowing of attention on the sensations of breathing, through a gradual process of expansion of the duration of focused attention, which includes the overcoming of various distractions and obstacles, to an enduring state where effortless attentive presence is achieved (2019, 53-56). These stages are then compared to the following steps in Husserl’s method: 1) After becoming aware of the various beliefs and preconceptions that pervade his or her normal wakeful life, the phenomenologist proceeds to bracket or neutralize them. 2) This procedure leads to a novel appreciation of the status of the subject or ego, as a subject of rather than in the world. This then leads to the realization that 3) I, qua subject, am intrinsically related to the world, and that this world-(and object) relationship is constitutive of the subject, and 4) that the world is no longer simply there, but from the outset correlated to an intentional, meaning attributing, subject (2019, 56-7).

22 This final step, which in our view is a correct interpretation of Husserl, seems to contrast with Depraz’s earlier claim that the object ‘is no longer there for me’ as a result of the epoché (2019, 59). By performing the epoché, I precisely become aware of the fact that the objects, rather than simply...
One might ask whether the comparison doesn’t reveal more differences than similarities. Indeed, it is fair to say that it is not always entirely clear what Depraz thinks the extent of the ‘echoes and resonances’ (Depraz 2019, 51-2) between the epoché and samatha actually are. One overarching idea seems to be that the two help us become more aware of the acts, as opposed to the objects of experience. This claim, for example, remains in the background of Depraz’s extended discussion of the way in which samatha meditation might help us carry out the phenomenological method. The basic idea is that because of the tendency to get pulled in by the objects of experience, the phenomenologist’s purchase on the acts of experience is normally highly fragile and in need of constant renewal. Samatha can help strengthen and support this process by dramatically reducing the temporal gap between the emergence of an object-directed intentional act and our thematic awareness of it qua act (Depraz, 2019, 60-1). Again, we do not wish to deny that phenomenology is (partly) interested in intentional acts. But, for the reasons we have articulated, to overemphasize the act is to promote a rather one-sided understanding of phenomenology.

Both Bitbol and Depraz acknowledge that there are important differences between phenomenology and mindfulness. For example, the two authors agree that there are differences in the overall aims of the respective endeavours. For Bitbol, the goal of phenomenology is ultimately philosophical, whereas that of mindfulness is primarily psychotherapeutic (Bitbol, 2019: 142); similarly, for Depraz, the goal of phenomenology is scientific, whereas that of samatha-vipassanā is ethical and soteriological (Depraz, 2019: 51). Bitbol further stresses that whereas mindfulness contains a wealth of material concerning how to actually carry out the practical steps required for a being there on their own, are always there ‘for me.’ The point of the epoché is to make us bracket our tacit belief in a pre-existing objective world and make us attend to the fact that the objects are always there for us in various modes of givenness (e.g. as perceived, imagined, remembered etc.)
contemplation of experience, an equivalent in phenomenology is not to be found (Bitbol, 2019: 138). Depraz adds that whereas phenomenology is interested in the essential structures of experience, meditation is concerned with particular experiences (Depraz, 2019: 51). In our view, however, the differences touched upon are far more substantial than the two authors are prepared to acknowledge. Phenomenology is at core a philosophical endeavour which is concerned, in the first instance, with the mind-world correlation and its theoretical implications. Whatever might be said of mindfulness, it is clear that it does not fit this description.

5. Conclusion

Let us be clear about what exactly we have (and haven’t) argued for. We are not denying that it might be rewarding to compare phenomenology and the practice of mindfulness, as long as such a comparison is done on the basis of a sound understanding of both, and as long as one also acknowledges their significant differences. We are also not disputing that phenomenological reflections on consciousness and meditative practices occasionally converge in their descriptive findings (see, for instance, Fasching, 2008). Furthermore, we are not opposed to the proposal that a contemplative science of consciousness might gain by drawing on ideas from various traditions, and we think that the attempt to use and apply ideas from phenomenology in the context of meditation might well generate new insights and even lead to the development of new unorthodox methods.23 In recent years, a number of authors have offered what they describe as a phenomenology of mindfulness

23 To some extent, such an attempt mirrors other attempts to practice, use and apply phenomenology in a non-philosophical context. For recent discussions, see e.g., Zahavi 2020, 2021, and Gallagher & Zahavi 2021.
(or other forms of meditation) (Petitmengin et al. 2017; Lutz et al. 2015; Puc, 2019; Sparby, 2019; Brown & Cordon, 2009; Sawyer, 2018). Nothing in what we have said speaks against adopting such an approach, although some of the misgivings we have about the way phenomenology is often presented in the literature clearly carry over to some of these discussions as well (e.g. Petitmengin et al. 2017; Lutz et al. 2015; Sparby, 2019; Brown & Cordon, 2009). But what is it, then, that we are objecting to? Our target of criticism is the suggestion that phenomenology is at core a kind of meditative practice or technique, which, like mindfulness, aims at observing and describing our experience in careful detail. To put it quite simply, being a skilled practitioner of mindfulness is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a good phenomenological philosopher. In fact, if one is really interested in similarities between phenomenology and Buddhism, the right approach would on our view involve comparing phenomenology and Buddhist philosophy (see Siderits, Thompson, Zahavi 2011, Zahavi 2019b; Thompson, 2020).

The ‘Buddhism-science’ dialogues, exemplified by the Mind and Life Institute, have recently encountered resistance in some quarters. Buddhist scholars and philosophers have complained that, too often in such encounters, ‘Buddhism’ gets reduced to ‘mindfulness’ and mindfulness to the ‘nonjudgmental observation of present-moment experience.’ The result is that much of the theoretical sophistication of Buddhist philosophy gets left out of the picture (Ganeri, 2017: 345; see also Thompson, 2017). However, when articulating the concern, some authors have tended to treat the relevant question as one of whether or not Buddhism amounts to phenomenology. For example, in a recent article entitled ‘Is Yogācāra Phenomenology?’ Robert Sharf claims that, in contrast to Abhidharma, Madhyamaka and the early Yogācāra of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, the later Yogācāra of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti underwent a ‘phenomenological turn’ (Sharf, 2016: 777). According to Sharf, it is often precisely this limited phenomenological moment of the Buddhist tradition that is drawn upon in recent claims to the effect that Buddhism is a ‘science of the mind.’ Sharf presents
(Husserlian) phenomenology as an unremitting form of foundationalism that averred ‘to the authority of immediate experience,’ in its attempt to secure an indubitable and unassailable basis for science (Sharf, 2016: 801). For Sharf, this preoccupation with the pre-discursive immediacy of subjective experience and resultant sidelining of the domain of concepts and meanings, betrays phenomenology’s commitment to a fatally flawed version of the myth of the given (Sharf, 2016: 794, 801). Putting aside the question of Sharf’s reading of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, his presentation of phenomenology as being primarily a matter of pure observation suffers from some of the very shortcomings we have been discussing (see also Zahavi 2017). Our suggestion would be that just as we need to come to appreciate Buddhist philosophy as offering a wealth of theoretical resources, the same must also be said for philosophical phenomenology.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Evan Thompson, Sara Heinämaa, Sofie Loidolt and Joel Krueger and two anonymous referees for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
Bibliography


Odysseus Stone

Introduction

What is the nature of the kind of self-awareness we have during mindfulness meditation? Any answer to this question will, of course, depend on how one understands mindfulness. Unfortunately, there is no single, agreed up definition of mindfulness. However, on some accounts, at least, one thing is clear: certain forms of mindfulness meditation are not supposed to involve a detached or distanced self-observation but rather immersion in and intimacy with conscious life. For this reason, it might be thought that standard philosophical and psychological concepts intended to capture the garden-variety ways in which we can be aware of our own minds – introspection, reflection, and meta-cognition, for example – are ill-suited when it comes to mindfulness. Insofar as these terms imply a ‘stepping-back,’ self-division, or reification of consciousness, they seem incompatible with immersion and intimacy.

So how should we understand this kind of mindful self-consciousness then? This is one place where it has been argued that phenomenology may be of some help. As is well known,

---

24 See especially Dunne on ‘nondual’ styles of Buddhist mindfulness (Dunne 2011, 2015).
25 The topic of the relationship between phenomenology and mindfulness can, of course, be approached from different directions. One issue that has received a fair amount of attention recently is whether and to what extent phenomenology and mindfulness should be regarded as overlapping, analogous, and/or uniquely complimentary “first-person methods” for the study of consciousness (Varela and Shear 1999, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991, Colombetti 2013, Bitbol and Petitmengin 2009, Bitbol 2019, Depraz 2019, Petitmengin 2021). Elsewhere, I have criticized some
philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition distinguish between reflective and pre-reflective forms of self-consciousness. Whereas reflective self-consciousness involves *inter alia* taking one’s mental and bodily states or processes as intentional objects in higher-order or founded acts, pre-reflective self-consciousness has been described as an intrinsic, non-intentional (non-object-directed) feature of first-order experiences, a primitive form of self-acquaintance or self-presence built into conscious life. On this view, conscious experiences are complex wholes which both a) present (or re-present) their intentional object whilst also being b) self-presenting. As Sartre puts it,

\[
\text{[T]he object with its characteristic opacity is before consciousness, but consciousness is purely and simply consciousness of being consciousness of that object… We should add that this consciousness of consciousness—except in the case of reflective consciousness…is not positional, which is to say that consciousness is not for itself its own object (Sartre 1991: 40–41).}
\]

In a striking case of cross-cultural philosophical convergence, a number of comparative philosophers have found similar ideas in Buddhist philosophy (Coseru 2012: §8, MacKenzie 2007, 2017, Siderits, Thompson and Zahavi 2011, Finnigan 2017).26

The notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness might seem like a promising candidate for the beginnings of an understanding of mindful self-consciousness. Indeed, if the Buddhist scholar

---

26 C. The 5th century Buddhist philosopher Dignāga, for example, “Every cognition is produced with a twofold appearance, namely that of itself (svābhāsa) and that of the object (viṣayābhāsa)” (PS(V) 1.9a; Dignāga and Hattori 1968, p. 28).
John Dunne is correct, then pre-reflective self-consciousness – or, rather, its Buddhist equivalent, reflexive awareness (svasamvedana)\textsuperscript{27} – is key to an understanding of what he calls “nondual” styles of Buddhist mindfulness (Dunne 2011, 2015). More specifically, Dunne claims that we might think of mindfulness, in part, as a matter of cultivating an “enhanced” or “intensified” form of pre-reflective self-consciousness (Dunne 2018: 95, 101, Dunne 2015: 261-2, cf. Lutz et al. 2007, 2015, Dreyfus 2019). What should we make of this claim? Interestingly, contemporary philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition – some with Buddhist influences – have defended a similar view (Thompson, Cosmelli, and Lutz 2005, Zahavi 2011, Petitmengin and Bitbol 2009, Gallagher and Ilundain-Agurriza 2020, Legrand 2007, cf. Colombetti 2011, 2013). To expand upon a classical metaphor from Indian philosophy (MacKenzie 2007, 2017): if experiences involve not only other-luminosity (object-directed intentionality) but also self-luminosity (pre-reflective self-consciousness), perhaps we could think of experiences as coming with differing degrees of self-luminosity, and mindfulness as the act of cranking up the lights on such self-consciousness.\textsuperscript{28}

In the present chapter, I discuss this proposal and sound a skeptical note. However, I then conclude with another, more positive suggestion: rather than thinking of mindfulness as involving a higher degree of pre-reflective self-consciousness, I argue that much would be gained theoretically by shifting focus onto another kind or mode of self-awareness operative in

\textsuperscript{27} Reflexive awareness (svasamvedana) is understood in different ways by different philosophers, not all of which accord with the phenomenological notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness. Dunne in some places more or less equates the two, however (e.g., Dunne 2018).

\textsuperscript{28} Colombetti (2013) uses the phrase degrees of self-luminosity to indicate a kind of enhanced pre-reflective bodily self-consciousness in affective experience.
Mindfulness

A problem that anyone approaching the topic of mindfulness is immediately confronted with is that the term has a broad semantic range. Consequently, it is not particularly informative to speak in general terms of “mindfulness”; it really depends on what one has in mind. For example, mindfulness has recently been popularized as a kind of psychotherapeutic technique, where it is conceptualized as a nonjudgmental, open, and receptive awareness of the present acts and/or contents of consciousness, accompanied by an attitude of curiosity and acceptance (Bishop et al. 2004). How this definition relates to more traditional Buddhist understandings of mindfulness is a matter of ongoing scholarly debate, which debate is made more complex by the fact that there is a variety of different approaches to and definitions of mindfulness within the Buddhist tradition itself, not all of which are compatible (Dunne 2011, 2015, Gethin 2015, Shaw 2020).

One important distinction is between what John Dunne calls “classical” (e.g., Theravada Vipassanā) and “nondual” (e.g., Tibetan Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā, Japanese Zen) styles of Buddhist mindfulness (Dunne 2015, 2011). Importantly, rather different philosophical frameworks inform these different styles of mindfulness practice. Without going into details here, one crucial difference is that nondual mindfulness is (and classical mindfulness is not) influenced by the philosophical idea of reflexive awareness (svasamvedana) mentioned in the introduction. Contemporary mindfulness is something else again. On the one hand, it is a deliberate hybrid of modern Zen, vipassanā, and Tibetan Buddhist practices, [thus cross-cutting the classical-nondual divide], not to mention other influences, such as Sufism. In this sense, [contemporary mindfulness practices are]… “Buddhism-derived,” but they do not map back to any particular Buddhist tradition as their source (Dunne 2022: 617)
On the other hand, contemporary mindfulness is shaped by what Buddhist scholars and historians call Buddhism Modernism—a form of Buddhism practiced today globally which downplays traditional religious aspects of Asian Buddhism, while emphasizing the continuity between Buddhism and a modern, scientific worldview (Lopez 2012, Sharf 1995, Braun 2013, McMahan 2008, Thompson 2020, Gleig 2019). To give an indication of just how nebulous the term mindfulness is, some authors have recently urged researchers to stop using the term altogether, in favor of more fine-grained concepts (van Dam et al. 2018). Others suggest we treat mindfulness as an umbrella term for a range of different practice styles and cognitive processes (Lutz et al. 2015).

In what follows, I will continue to speak of mindfulness for the sake of convenience, but I will narrow the scope of the discussion considerably by focusing on a particular aspect of the Buddhist discussion of mindfulness that has been taken up in contemporary research, namely, mindfulness meditation practice understood as involving a) an attentional holding of the mind on something (smṛti) and b) an awareness of that attentive holding of the mind on something (samprajanya).

The English word mindfulness translates the Pali sati or Sanskrit smṛti, which originally meant “memory” but when used in connection with meditation generally has the sense “to bear in mind” or “hold in awareness” without distraction (Dreyfus 2013). Mindfulness understood in this way is an aspect of mind closely related to attention. In the context of mindfulness meditation (contemplative practice which trains and/or applies mindfulness (sati/smṛti)) mindfulness is said to work in conjunction with what in Sanskrit is called samprajanya (or in Pali: sampajanna). Like the word mindfulness itself, these terms have different meanings within the Buddhist tradition. However, in Sanskrit sources, especially as those sources are interpreted in Tibetan Buddhism, samprajanya is usually translated as ‘introspective vigilance’ (Garfield 2017) or ‘meta-awareness’
Dunne characterizes samprajanya as the aspect of a meditative awareness that monitors the quality of one’s attention, along with other mental and physical aspects of an ongoing meditative experience. For example, if one were stabilizing one’s attention on the breath, samprajanya [meta-awareness] is what enables one to notice that one has become distracted, such that instead of attending to the sensations of breath, one is now thinking about a beach vacation. In other words, samprajanya [meta-awareness] is what enables one to notice that mindfulness (in the technical sense described above [smrti]) has been lost (Dunne 2020: 361-2, cf. Lutz et al. 2007: 504).

The distinction between smrti and samprajanya means we need to distinguish between at least two ways in which mindfulness meditation practice might be thought to involve self-awareness. Firstly, it might involve self-awareness insofar as smrti (roughly, attention) is directed to and sustained on one’s own mental or bodily states or processes; secondly, it might involve self-awareness insofar as samprajanya (meta-awareness) involves an awareness of aspects of one’s meditative activity, especially of smrti (roughly, attention). I will be focusing primarily on the second of these in this chapter since, as we will see shortly, it is here that we find the connection with pre-reflective self-consciousness.

We can relate the foregoing discussion to a typology between two types of mindfulness meditation, which is widespread in current literature, namely, the distinction between Focused Attention and Open Monitoring (or Open Presence) styles of mindfulness meditation (Lutz et al. 2008, cf. Lutz et al. 2007, Lutz et al. 2015). Focused Attention mindfulness meditation involves a) smrti (attention or attentiveness) to an object (e.g., the breath or a visualized object) alongside b) samprajanya (meta-awareness) of one’s attentive intentional relation to the object (e.g., an
awareness of the quality of one’s attention to the breath). In Focused Attention meditation one directs attention to and sustains it on an object (e.g., the breath). When attention wanders – as it inevitably will, especially for the novice – the subject is supposed to notice that their attention has wandered, and gently return it to the breath. With practice, the more advanced and skilled practitioner becomes better at actively maintaining attentive contact with the object in a way that requires little or no effort.

A crucial role is assigned to meta-awareness (*samprajanya*) in this type of practice. However, to complicate matters further, it has been argued that there are really two distinct kinds of meta-awareness involved in Focused Attention meditation (Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler 2019). A canonical example of one kind of meta-awareness is evident in the example we just gave, namely, noticing that *in lieu* of focusing on the breath (say) one has, in fact, been mind-wandering. In such cases, there is a moment of explicit reflection as one notices what has happened—“Aha, my mind has wandered!”—which allows one to refocus on the breath. In these cases, which are common for the novice, we stand at a *reflective distance* from our own attention.

However, arguably it would be a mistake to limit the role of *samprajanya* to such instances. The more advanced, skilled practitioner is said to be able to “sustain”, a “nonpropositional” form of meta-awareness of the attentive intentional relationship to the breath *without* needing to introspect or reflect. Such a practitioner, alongside being directed attentively toward the breath, is said to be attuned to subtle fluctuations of affect (‘excitation’ (*audhatya*) and ‘laxity’ (*laya*) that, for instance, mark the on-set of a distraction, which allows them to adjust their practice prior to actually losing attentive contact with the breath (Dunne 2020: 362). Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler (2019) have recently conceptualized this difference in terms of a contrast between an “intermittent, propositional” and a “sustained, nonpropositional” form of meta-awareness.
Focused Attention mindfulness meditation can be contrasted with another style of practice, sometimes known as Open Monitoring (or Open Presence). The latter is said to be objectless; in particular, it involves no active focus on an intentional object. The practitioner instead ‘let’s go’ of any focus, and instead ‘allows’ whatever arises within experience to unfold without attempting to direct or steer the course of the attentive process. Importantly, the “sustained, nonpropositional” meta-awareness cultivated in Focused Attention is said to form a bridge to Open Monitoring/Open Presence mindfulness meditation. Such meta-awareness is said to be sustained while there is no corresponding active selective attention (Lutz et al. 2008). Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler describe the process as follows: “[a]s one gradually learns to drop attention to the anchor [or meditation object, e.g., the breath], one sustains meta-awareness, such that one is instructed to persist in the awareness of these off-object features of awareness without turning awareness itself into an explicit object of introspection” (Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler 2019: 309).

To summarize, we can distinguish between 1. Focused Attention and 2. Open Monitoring/Presence mindfulness meditation. Secondly, when it comes to 1., we can distinguish between a) attention to an object (e.g., the breath, a visualized object, a perceived object), and b) meta-awareness of that attentive relationship to the object. Thirdly, when it comes to b) it is important to distinguish between an i. “intermittent and propositional” meta-awareness of that attentive relationship to the object, and ii. a “sustained, nonpropositional” meta-awareness of that attentive relationship. Finally, ii. the sustained, non-propositional form of meta-awareness is also said to form a bridge to 2. Open Monitoring/Presence mindfulness meditation.

In a number of publications, Dunne has linked “sustained, nonpropositional” meta-awareness to pre-reflective self-consciousness (Dunne 2015, 2011, 2018, Lutz et al. 2007). He is not alone in making the connection between pre-reflective self-consciousness and mindfulness. Let us now turn to examine these claims.
Cranking up the lights on pre-reflective self-consciousness

In several important publications, Dunne has argued for the significance of the Buddhist concept of reflexive awareness (svasamvedana) for understanding what he calls nondual styles of Buddhist mindfulness (Dunne 2011, 2015, 2018, cf. Lutz et al. 2007: 513-517). The term reflexive awareness (svasamvedana) as used by Dunne is close to the phenomenological notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness (Dunne 2018: 88-90). Thus, it is important not to confuse reflexive awareness with reflective awareness.

Drawing on the work of the Buddhist philosopher Dharmakirti, Dunne claims that nondual mindfulness practices involve (amongst other things) “enhancing” or “intensifying” reflexive awareness, such that one gets “a stronger ‘signal’, so to speak, from the subjective side of an experience, and this thus provides greater opportunities for becoming aware of emotions, expectations, and other features that may require regulation” (Dunne 2018: 101). As he puts it,

29 In the same publications, Dunne also argues that there are key similarities between nondual mindfulness and what he calls “contemporary mindfulness.”

30 It should be noted though to that reflexive awareness (svasamvedana) is given different interpretations in the Buddhist literature. Other authors who align reflexive awareness closely with pre-reflective self-consciousness are Coseru (2012), Thompson (2011), and MacKenzie (2007). See Finnigan (2017) for a helpful useful discussion.

31 In a paper presented at the workshop “Mind, World, and Attention: Themes from Indian and Buddhist Philosophy Theory” in 2019 the Buddhist scholar Georges Dreyfus makes the same point, distinguishing between early stages of mindfulness where he claims the process is reflective, and more advanced stages which involve an enhanced pre-reflective self-consciousness.
from the Dharmakirtian perspective, the various features of subjectivity are always implicitly presented in any moment of cognition... Thus, on this model, if one wishes to monitor one’s affective states, it is not necessary for one to somehow engage in a constant introspective turn so as to inwardly observe one’s emotions and such. Instead, information about one’s affective states (and other aspects of one’s sense of being a perceiving subject) are constantly presented reflexively. An increased capacity for monitoring affect would thus not come from turning inward; instead, it would be developed by intensifying reflexive awareness (Dunne 2018: 95).

Dunne has further suggested that the idea of “intensified” pre-reflective self-consciousness can help elucidate the idea that mindfulness involves a kind of meta-awareness or “monitoring” (Dunne sometimes uses scare-quotes) of our attention itself while that attention remains focused on a primary meditation object (see section 1 above) (Dunne 2015: 261, cf. Lutz et al. 2007, Dreyfus 2019, Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler 2019).

What should we make of this suggestion? Interestingly, a number of related claims have been made by authors working in phenomenology (Zahavi 1999/2020, 2011, Bitbol and Petitmengin 2011, Thompson, Lutz, and Cosmelli 2005, Colombetti 2011, 2013, Legrand 2007, Gallagher and Ilundain-Agurrusa 2020). Before discussing the merits of the proposal, let us turn to consider some examples from the phenomenological camp.

In a number of publications, Dan Zahavi entertains the possibility that there might a form of self-consciousness – perhaps akin to Sartre’s notion of pure reflection (Sartre 2003) – that is really “nothing but a higher form of wakefulness”, a simple “intensification” or “accentuation” of the primary experience” (Zahavi 1999/2020: 190, 191, 2005: 88, Zahavi 2015, Zahavi 2011). Zahavi’s formulation varies in different places, but in one place he wonders (and this especially relevant for our purposes)
Is there a form of self-consciousness that rather than involving a relation between two distinct experiences (a reflecting and a reflected) amounts to an intensification, amplification or illumination of the primary experience? Is it possible, through practice, say, to acquire a higher level of ‘wakefulness’, or ‘mindfulness’, one that provides us with a stronger and richer and fully immersed self-familiarity with our experiential life? (Zahavi 2011: 12).

Zahavi is open to the proposal, though expresses doubt about whether it would make sense to call such self-consciousness a form of reflection, since (following Husserl) he thinks that reflection necessarily involves a distinction between two experiences (ibid.).

Dorothée Legrand has made similar claims vis-à-vis what has been call pre-reflective bodily self-consciousness (Legrand 2007, cf. Colombetti 2013, 2011). Legrand writes (against phenomenological orthodoxy): “body expertise like dance is associated with a particularly sharp pre-reflective experience of the “performative body” [whereby] bodily pre-reflective experience is “at the front” of dancers’ experience” (Legrand 2007: 505). Legrand distinguishes between the self-as-object and the self-as-subject, identifying the latter with the subjective character of consciousness (and hence with pre-reflective self-consciousness). She further suggests (albeit in passing) that we might understand the self-consciousness of meditators along similar lines to expert dancers:

Expertise (with one’s body as in dance, or with one’s mind as in some meditative states)... can put this subjective character of experience “at the front” of one’s experience without turning it into a mere intentional object (ibid. 512).

Now, an immediate weakness of these proposals is that the view is neither explicated nor explained. In fact, as far as I am aware, none of the authors who discuss “enhanced” pre-reflective self-consciousness actually give an account of it. This is unfortunate since, prima facie, it is unclear
how we could make sense of the idea that pre-reflective self-consciousness or reflexive awareness can come in degrees of “intensity” or be “enhanced” through practice. Consider, for example, that pre-reflective self-consciousness is sometimes described as a formal, structural feature of consciousness (e.g., Zahavi 1999/2020: 169-70, cf. Zahavi 2014: 23). The question is how a formal, structural feature of consciousness could come in “degrees of intensity” or be “enhanced” through practice.

One response here might involve appealing to a nuance (or ambiguity) in the notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness. Although it is sometimes described in formal, structural terms, pre-reflective self-consciousness is sometimes said to (also) involve an affective dimension, a “feeling… which permeates the experiential life and imbues the first-person perspective with a sense of self-presence” (Henriksen 2016, cf. Parnas and Henriksen 2016: 84, Zahavi 1999/2020: §7). Dunne, Legrand, and Zahavi could thus appeal to this notion of “self-affection” (Henry 1973) in order to flesh out their proposals. Afterall, it is undoubtedly easy to think of affect or feeling as coming in degrees of intensity. (We will return to this shortly.)

Another possibility might be to try to make sense of the idea of enhanced or intensified pre-reflective self-consciousness in terms of attention. One could argue that the a) pre-reflective vs. reflective self-consciousness distinction does not co-ordinate with the b) focal vs. marginal or the foreground vs. background awareness distinction (Legrand 2007, Colombetti 2011, 2013, cf. Zahavi 2005, 2015, 1999/2020). To unpack this a little, note that ordinally, what is given to pre-reflective

---

32 Henriksen (2016) and Parnas and Henriksen (2016) exploit this distinction in their account of converse phenomenon, namely, a disturbed or diminished pre-reflective self-consciousness (or in their terms minimal self) in schizophrenia. They claim in schizophrenia the formal structural feature of pre-reflective self-consciousness remains intact, whereas self-affection is compromised.
self-consciousness is in the background or margin of consciousness. That is to say, we do not normally focus our attention on our own experiential life, rather it tends to recede in favor of the intentional object. However, one could deny that this is a necessary feature of consciousness. So, for example, to quote again from a passage from Legrand cited above, this time in full:

the self-as-subject (or the subjective character of experience) is not necessarily peripheral, or marginal. Expertise (with one’s body as in dance, or with one’s mind as in some meditative states) can overcome this “self-forgetfulness” (as Husserl would put it) and put this subjective character of experience “at the front” of one’s experience without turning it into a mere intentional object (Legrand 2007: 512).

Colombetti makes a similar suggestion in a discussion of affective experience and embodiment. She distinguishes between what she calls foreground and background bodily feelings and then argues that this distinction does not map neatly onto the distinction between reflective and pre-reflective bodily self-consciousness. For although background bodily feelings are pre-reflective, and foreground bodily feelings can be reflective,

the body in emotion experience is often… in the foreground of awareness, without being an intentional object of experience… We can elaborate this thought further by appealing to the metaphor of the “self-luminosity” of consciousness, and suggest that the prereflective, subjectively lived body can come in different degrees of self-luminosity (Colombetti 2013: 121, cf. Colombetti 2011).

An example Colombetti gives is feelings of sexual intimacy, a case where “the body can move to the front of awareness” and be “highly present, even when one does not pay attention to it and is rather immersed in the situation” (Colombetti 2013: 122). Somewhat confusingly here and elsewhere Colombetti implies that something can be in the foreground of consciousness without our attending to it (cf. ibid. 132). But to my ear, at least, to talk of something of being in the foreground
is just another way of talking about our attending to it (cf. Watzl 2017). Perhaps Colombetti’s point is just that in such cases we do not attend to our body as an object; thus understood, it is still a proposal about attention.

Finally, a similar idea can be gleaned from something Zahavi says. In one place he writes, the relation between pre-reflective and [a form of] reflective consciousness could be structurally comparable to the relation between marginal and thematic consciousness. In both cases, the transition from one to the other can be understood in terms of an attentional modification (Zahavi 2005: 89-90).

Zahavi in fact rejects this proposal as an account of reflection. But suppose we set to one side the question of reflection for the moment (which may be a terminological dispute anyway). The remaining issue, in line with Zahavi’s suggestion in the 2011 article quoted above—and with that of Dunne, Legrand, and Colombetti—is whether there is a form of intensified or enhanced pre-reflective self-consciousness that we could make sense of in terms of an “attentional modification.”

A problem with all these proposals about attention is that the notion of attention is itself left unanalyzed, which means the issue is only really deferred. Consider accounts on which the phenomenon of attending to (Watzl) or thematically grasping (Husserl) something is analyzed as a modified way of being intentionally directed to it (Watzl 2017: 82-85, Husserl 2012 see Jacobs 2010). These views appear to rule out the idea we can attend to or thematically grasp our own

33 This is because he thinks that that attention is a modification of a primary experience, whereas reflection is a separate (founded) act. He also claims that the notions of attention and attentional modification come from the “domain of object-consciousness” but we should not think of our experiences as being in the background as marginal objects (Zahavi 2005: 90, Zahavi 1999/2020: 191-2).
experiences pre-reflectively, since pre-reflective self-consciousness is not a form of intentionality.\textsuperscript{34} This is not to say that a philosophical account of attention might not be given that could help us make sense of the idea of an intensified pre-reflective self-consciousness. However, much more would have to be said.

More generally, whether one tries to account for intensified pre-reflective self-consciousness in terms of attention or whether one tries to account for it in terms increased self-affection a challenge is to do so without collapsing pre-reflective self-consciousness into a form of object-directed intentionality. One picture that must clearly be rejected is one on which the experience which is unattended, or which has a low degree of self-affection, has ‘hidden’ parts (sides or profiles) which come to be revealed when attended to or when self-affection is increased. This would clearly be a case of object-directedness (according to a phenomenologist). Whether a plausible account can be given remains to be seen.

**Self-consciousness and the agentive character of attention**

We have been discussing the idea of intensified pre-reflective self-consciousness. As we have seen, one way of making sense of that idea is in terms of \textit{attentive pre-reflective self-consciousness}. However, there is another, closely related—though importantly distinct—question raised by our

\textsuperscript{34} Zahavi’s proposal could be read differently, namely, that heightened self-consciousness is \textit{like} attention just in the sense that it is an internal structural modification of an experience and not a distinct (founded) act. Cf. Sartre on “pure” reflection: such reflection “is not the appearance of a new consciousness directed on the for-itself but an intra-structural modification which the for-itself realizes in itself” (Sartre 2003: 215). On this reading, the proposal is not really about attention at all. Or at least there are two different kinds of attention.
discussion of mindfulness in section 2., namely, that of the kind of self-consciousness we have of 
(our own) attention. Recall that Focused Attention mindfulness meditation is said to involve a) 
attention to an object (smṛti) and b) meta-awareness of that attentive intentional relation to the 
object (sampajanya) (Dunne 2020, Lutz et al. 2007). This raises the question what sort of self-
awareness we have of (our own) attention. In the final section of this chapter, I will show that 
having a firmer grasp on the ordinary form of self-awareness we have of attention will put us in 
better position to understand this aspect of mindfulness.

The discussion so far might give the impression that there are only really two possibilities 
when it comes to understanding self-awareness of attention. On the one hand, we can reflect on our 
attention, and take it as an object. On the other hand, as with other aspects of our mental life, the 
lived attentive process is itself self-given in and through pre-reflective self-consciousness. However, 
according to a number of recent proposals that have been gaining traction in the philosophical and 
psychological literature on mindfulness, there is a further possibility, one which is not (at least not 
obviously) reflected in the above taxonomy. The proposals differ in important respects, but they 
have a shared emphasis on the idea that a) meditative attention is a (mental) activity or action of 
some kind, and b) the kind of self-awareness we have in meditative attention is distinctive of our 
awareness of our own (mental) activities or actions (Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler 2019, 
Zawidzki 2018, Watzl 2017, Kachru 2022). More specifically, it is a kind of “agentive awareness” 
(Watzl 2017) or, alternately, a form of self-conscious “know-how” (Dunne, Thompson, and 
Schooler 2019). So, for example, Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler suggest that “sustained, 
nonpropositional meta-awareness” in mindfulness 
is not focused on mental contents or processes themselves as the objects of propositional 
judgments. As noted above, intermittent meta-awareness involves conscious (usually verbal) 
judgments, whose contents are explicit objects in a process of ‘knowing that’ something is
the case (e.g. “my mind is wandering”). In contrast, this form of meta-awareness involves ‘knowing how,’ as when one is aware of how one is attending affectively to an object (Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler 2019: 309, cf. Zawidzki 2018).

The authors refer to Joelle Proust’s work on what she calls procedural meta-cognition or meta-cognitive know-how (Proust 2013, 2010). According to Proust, we have a non-representational and nonobservational awareness of our own mental actions, which is grounded in what she calls noetic feelings.35 Noetic feelings constitute implicit, embodied felt evaluations of one’s ongoing cognitive activity as one engages in a (first order) cognitive task. Examples include such things as feelings of certainty and familiarity, tip of the tongue phenomena, and feelings of knowing. Noetic feelings are felt evaluations of both a) the feasibility of engaging in a given mental activity in a particular context, and b) appreciating its relative success or failure (Proust 2013: 223). For example, the tip of the tongue phenomenon involves an awareness both that one is failing in one’s cognitive activity of recollecting something (b), and an awareness that it is worth keeping on trying (a) (Proust 2013: 224). Noetic feelings also directly guide ongoing cognitive activity. Finally, and importantly, according to Proust, such feelings do not involve meta-representation (thinking about thinking), a definition which “misses the engaged character of self-evaluation: when evaluating one’s performance in a cognitive task, one is thinking ‘with’ thinking, rather than ‘about’ it” (Proust 2013: 62). Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler are particularly interested in Proust’s idea that ‘noetic feelings… are presented as implicit yet conscious features of one’s explicit focus’ (Dunne, Thompson, and Schooler: 309).

Another, related suggestion has been made by Watzl (2017) in the context of his philosophical account of attention. According to Watzl, attention is the ongoing, dynamic process of

35 Note that use of the term noetic here is not the technical Husserlian notion.
structuring (and restructuring) consciousness into a center and a periphery. On his account, the process can either be actively guided by the subject or it can be passively guided by what Watzl calls *phenomenal salience*. One way to think about phenomenal salience is as a kind of solicitation: that which is phenomenally salient seems to say to us, “Make me central in your consciousness!” or “Turn towards me!” in a similar fashion to the way aspects of the physical environment might seem to say to us “Drink me!” or “Pick me up!” (Watzl 2014). Phenomenal salience has “felt motivational impact” (Watzl 2017: 213)—we feel pulled to attend to that which is salient. Watzl further argues that our basic awareness of our own attention is to be understood neither in terms of introspection, nor in terms of what we above called pre-reflective self-consciousness, but rather what Watzl calls “agentive awareness” (Watzl 2017, 2018, cf. O’Brien 2007, Peacocke 2007). According to Watzl, we have agentive awareness especially of *actively* guided attention. On his view, agentive awareness is a pre-cognitive (independent of belief and judgment), nonobservational form of self-consciousness, in which the self is experienced as subject (rather than as object). The agentive awareness we have of active attending is an awareness of being actively engaged in the process of structuring of consciousness into a center and a periphery. Watzl offers as an example of agentive awareness of attending certain forms of mindfulness meditation, which are centrally concerned with an active form of awareness of our own attention. Lutz et al. (2008), for example, suggest that Buddhist meditation is interested in “samprajanya, [which] involves a type of meta-awareness that is not focused on an object per se, but rather an awareness of that intentional relation itself” (quoting Lutz et al. 2007) (Watzl 2017: 233).

What might phenomenology have to offer when it comes to these recent proposals? In what follows, I will argue that it has a great deal to contribute.

Although Watzl acknowledges a number of affinities between his account and views in phenomenology (Watzl 2017: 101-102, 198-202, 208-210), he fails to mention that the idea that
attention can involve agentive awareness has precursors within the phenomenological tradition. In
Ideas I, Husserl famously argues that attention exhibits the ‘character of subjectivity’ (Husserl
2012: §92). Consider cases such as concentrating on a task, struggling to recall a name, or, indeed,
attentively focusing on the breath. Husserl’s view is that it is difficult to capture what is going on in
these kinds of experiences without appealing to their agential character. As he puts it in one of his
later writings on attention, “The turning-toward [of attention] itself is characterized by an “I do”;
and the wandering of the rays of the attentive regard, or regard in the mode of turning-toward, is
likewise an “I do” (Husserl 1973: 85).

As a number of Husserl’s commentators have recently pointed out, it would be a mistake to
conflate the kind of self-consciousness Husserl has in mind when he speaks of the “I do” of
attention with the kind of self-consciousness that characterizes our lived experiences as such
(Jansen 2016, Jardine 2022: 31, Zahavi 2019, Jacobs 2021). What is important is the specifically
agential dimension that pertains to the former but not to the latter. As Julia Jansen puts it, for
Husserl, attention is part of “agentive cognitive phenomenology” (Jansen 2016).36

The claim that attention has an agential dimension must, however, immediately be tempered
by the observation that there are clearly passive moments and/or instances of attention. In his
mature, genetic phenomenology, Husserl increasingly emphasizes the interplay between activity
and passivity within experience (Husserl 2001, 1973). He eventually concludes that every activity
of the subject is dependent upon a prior passive affection (Zahavi 1999/2020: 119). The active

36 Consequently, we might say that experiences come not only with a minimal sense of ownership
but also—when actively attending—with sense of agency (see Gallagher 2007 and 2012 for this
distinction). In a recent discussion of Husserl’s account of self-consciousness, Jardine (2022: 31)
similarly contrasts for-me-ness and by-me-ness in experience.
turning-toward of the subject in attention is necessarily dependent upon an affection issuing from the side of the object (or, more precisely, a pre-given ‘object-like’ configuration in the background). Husserl describes such affections as an ‘allure (Reiz) given to consciousness: the peculiar pull that an object given to consciousness exercises on the ego; it is a pull that is relaxed when the ego turns toward it attentively’ (Husserl 2001: 96). Thus, like Watzl, Husserl makes room for the idea that our attention can be solicited (see also Merleau-Ponty 2012: 70, 275). However, unlike Watzl for whom episodes of attentional activity are either guided actively by the subject or passively by solicitations or salience, for Husserl, one and the same episode of attention will often have both passive and active moments. In other words, attention can involve the transformation of a passive tendency toward an object into an active turning-towards and contemplation of it: the subject “complies” with the affective tendency (solicitation) issuing from the object (Husserl 2001: 276). In such cases, attention can be thought of as a “response” or perhaps as “lying at the very threshold of activity and passivity” (Jansen 2016: 167, cf. Husserl 2001: 276). For example, in our example of Focused

What about cases where attention is not a response, however, but is rather best described simply as caught or captured? Such cases seem hard to deny. Furthermore, presumably Open Presence meditation involves something like this. A complication here is that Husserl argues that attention is always in a certain sense active insofar as it is ‘receptive.’ And, as he puts it, receptivity is not pure passivity but is rather the lowest level of activity. When receptive, the subject “consents to what is coming and takes it in” (Husserl 1973: 79). How exactly to understand Husserl’s notion of receptivity is controversial. Hanne Jacobs finds in Husserl the view that ‘the receptivity that is characteristic of our attentive experiences is active in that when I attend to something, I am receptive to it in the sense that I accept how something appears to me (or not)... Receptivity is here characterized as an accepting, taking on, or taking up, which is in turn characterized as a doing...
Attention meditation on the breath, I might experience myself as both solicited by the object, and continuously ‘answering’ its solicitation, so to speak.

An important connection can likewise be seen between Husserl’s account of attention and Proust’s account of the role of noetic feelings in nonobservational awareness of mental action. Consider Focused Attention meditation for illustration. When Focused Attention meditation is going well, the object I am supposed to be attending to has become my “theme” (in the “specific” or “pregnant” sense) (Husserl 1973: 86), which means that my thematic “interest” in it the object has been “awakened” (ibid. 82). As Husserl points out, interest here is an affective phenomenon. Such interest means I am continuously affected and solicited by the object to take up and maintain an active (attentive) conscious relationship to it: I “execute uninterrupted consciousness”, and thus have a “firm orientation on the object” (ibid. 82). Husserl also describes cases which take us beyond merely actively holding an object in attention in this manner. For example, in cases of attentive perception of an object in my environment, I may become teleologically oriented toward gaining a more complete, enriched, and differentiated view of it. In such cases, I “strive” to uncover more and

(Verhalten) that is already a form of spontaneity’ (Jacobs 2020: 288). This would imply distinguishing between a) the sense in which we are active—because receptive—even when our attention is caught, and b) the sense in which we are active when we dynamically orient or “steer” our attention—even if we do so in response to solicitations issuing from the object (Jacobs 2021: 288, Jansen, 2016: 167, Jardine 2022: 40-4). I set aside Jacobs rich discussion of attention as a ‘receptive action’ here.
more the object though my ongoing attentive perceptual engagement, which, of course, requires my
embodied movement (kinaesthesis).\(^\text{38}\) As Husserl notes,

a feeling goes hand in hand with this striving, indeed a positive feeling, which, however, is
not to be confused with a pleasure taken in the object. To be sure, it can also be that the
object itself touches our feelings, that it has value for us, and that for this reason we turn to it
and linger over it. But it can just as well be that it is disvaluable and awakens our interest

In this kind of case, there is “a feeling of satisfaction” (Husserl 1973: 85), which attaches to the
enrichment of the perceptual sense of an object as I attentively perceptually explore it. Conversely,
there can feelings of dissatisfaction, corresponding to the felt disparity between my current ‘view’
of the object and the more complete view towards which I strive. As Husserl perceptively notes, the
kind of affects he is interested in here have an “entirely peculiar direction” (Husserl 1973: 85). That
is, they are not intentionally directed at, and thus do not contribute to the sense of, the experienced
object in the way in which emotions like happiness, fear, or anger do. When we live through an
emotional episode such as fear, the feared object is experienced as having a certain value for us—
for example, it is given as threatening or dangerous (for us). However, the “joy” and “satisfaction”
we experience in progressively attentively perceiving something need in no way be in conflict with
our apprehension of its disvalue for us, according to Husserl. More generally stated, we can say that

\(^{38}\) This raises a complex issue about the relationship between the activity of attending, and the
kinaesthesis. For two recent views on this issue in Husserl scholarship see Jardine (2022) and Lotz
(2007: §2). For a recent defense of the idea that the mental activity of perceptually attending is itself
embodied, from the perspective of philosophy of mind and enactivism see Bruineberg and Stone
(under review).
perceptual consciousness is, on Husserl’s view, thoroughly saturated by and integrated with affective phenomena—moments of unease/ease, displeasure/pleasure, tension/resolution, dissatisfaction/satisfaction—which are importantly unlike emotions directed at the objects attended to. The structured interplay of such affects guides and modulate attentional activity.

Such affects bear obvious similarities to Proust’s noetic feelings. That is, although Husserl does not himself put it this way, it seems clear that they amount to felt evaluations of our own ongoing cognitive (attentive) engagement with a theme. For example, the progressive feeling of satisfaction I experience as I bring an object into focus, and, from there, disclose more and more of it through my attentive engagement, is a positive felt evaluation of my own performance or enactment of the activity, rather than positive feeling toward the object per se. However, nor are we dealing with self-directed emotions. Rather, as Husserl says, such affects are “part of the essence of normal perception” (Husserl 1973: 85).

Conclusion
Might these insights be drawn upon and developed in order to elucidate self-consciousness in mindfulness meditation? By expanding our phenomenological toolkit beyond the standard distinction between pre-reflective and reflective self-consciousness, we are in a better position to offer a more fine-grained analysis of the kind of self-consciousness we have of attention. In particular, what comes into view is a picture of meditating subject as situated within a field of tension pertaining to the dynamics of attentive activity and affection. Thus, we can tentatively sketch the following picture of Focused Attention mindfulness meditation. In addition to the pre-reflective self-givenness (or reflexive awareness (svasaṃvedana)) of the experiential episodes I undergo as I direct and sustain my attention on an object in meditation, we must also mention the agentive awareness I have of engaging in the active process of attending itself. On the Husserl-
inspired view I have developing, such agentive awareness is grounded in a type of affect (noetic feelings), which are felt evaluations of one's attentive activity.

However, some questions remain. One question is what, if anything, is distinctive about the self-consciousness we have in Focused Attention mindfulness meditation. According to Dunne, for example, “sustained, nonpropositional” meta-awareness (samprajanya) is something that can be trained, such that it eventually can be “sustained” throughout one’s meditative practice. However, the kind of self-consciousness I have been discussing, as already mentioned, according to Husserl, “belongs to the essence of normal perception” (Husserl 1973: 85). How should we square these two thoughts?

While I would not pretend to have a fully worked out or satisfying answer to this question, Dunne’s suggestion that the skilled mindfulness practitioner is more attuned to the subtle fluctuations of affect (‘excitation’ (audhatya) and ‘laxity’ (laya)) that mark the onset of a distraction prior to actually becoming distracted (Dunne 2020) is helpful here and could potentially be accommodated within the account I have sketched. The idea that there might be more or less skillful ways of attending, and that part of the development of such attentional skill is a matter of sensitivity to and mastery of the affects that pervade attentive consciousness, is congenial to Husserl-inspired view I have been developing.

A closely related second question is what sense we are dealing here with meta-awareness. Again, the claim that affects (or noetic feelings) Husserl has in mind already belong to the essence of normal perception suggests that the term meta-awareness is inappropriate, insofar as meta-awareness (even if “nonpropositional”) implies a distinction between two experiences or cognitions. However, it is also important to distinguish this kind of self-awareness from the idea that we are Cranking up the lights of pre-reflective self-consciousness.
A final issue concerns how to understand Open Presence (or Open Monitoring) meditation. The account we have been developing provides resources for helping us understand the difference between Focused Attention and Open Presence styles of mindfulness meditation. In particular, one important distinction between the two is that the former will feature, while the latter will lack agentive awareness of attending. Thus, in successful Open Presence meditation, I will not have the distinctive dynamics of affect and attentive activity that characterize thematically interested consciousness.

Bibliography


Abstract

Perception is, at least in part, something we do. This paper is concerned with how to account for perceptual agency (i.e., the active aspect of perception). Eilan divides accounts of perceptual agency up into two camps: enactivist theories hold that perceptual agency is accounted for by the involvement of bodily action, while mental theories hold that perceptual agency is accounted for by the involvement of mental action in perception. In Structuring Mind (2017), Sebastian Watzl aligns his ‘activity view’ with the mental action route and develops the view that the mental activity of attending infuses perceptual experience with agency. Moreover, Watzl claims that his view can accommodate enactivist intuitions, while rejecting their claims about embodiment.

In this paper, we scrutinize the relevant notion of mental action involved in the mental action route. We analyse the involvement of the body in overt acts of attention (like sniffing and smelling) and argue that a constitutively embodied account of mental action provides a more parsimonious analysis of overt attention than a conjunctive account in which overt attention involves a bodily and a (separate) mental action. We furthermore argue that the standard cases of covert attention (i.e., the Posner paradigm) also involve the body in multiple ways.

In closing, we discuss the relevance of our analysis for the debate on perceptual agency and the embodied mind thesis. We conclude that the embodied mental action route to theorizing perceptual agency provides the best analysis of perceptual agency but comes with significant commitments about the embodiment of attention.
Introduction

Perceiving is, at least in part, something we do. Consider cases of looking, listening, and sniffing, rather than merely seeing, hearing, and smelling. In these cases, there is simultaneously something passive and active about perceptual experience. How best to reconcile these features of perception has been called the ‘puzzle of perceptual agency’ (O’Shaughnessy, 2003; Watzl, 2017).

Accepting that there is such a thing as perceptual agency requires giving up on a familiar story about the mind according to which perception is on the purely receptive end of our mental lives. According to this story, perception supplies us with mere input, ready for further processing, eventually leading to the output of an action. Susan Hurley (1998b) dubs this standard view the ‘classical sandwich model’ of the mind: cognition is the ‘filling’, sandwiched on either side by perception and action (ibid. 401).

How one accounts for perceptual agency is indicative for one’s broader positioning in philosophy of mind. Naomi Eilan recently suggested that we can distinguish between two broad approaches to thinking about perceptual agency (Eilan, 2006, pp. 85–86). On the one hand, there are those like J. J. Gibson who emphasize the role of bodily action in perception. For Gibson (J. J. 1979) in fact presents three options. The third option locates the active component in the rational exercise of concepts in perceptual experience and is exemplified in recent philosophy of mind in the work of John McDowell. Eilan quickly dismisses this option because the kind of activity that she is looking for – an essentially processive phenomenon – does not fit with the capacity for rational thought (Eilan 2006: 85). We will follow Eilan’s lead in this paper and put to one side this third option.
Gibson, 1976, 1979), perception is active because it involves moving around in the environment, picking up observer-relative information. On this view, perception is to be analyzed in terms of affordances (i.e., possibilities for action). More recent work in this direction emphasizes the role of sensorimotor know-how in bringing about – or ‘enacting’ – perceptual experience (Noë, 2004). To see not just a picture-like snapshot of a tomato, but the tomato as a voluminous object with unseen sides, requires the possession, and maybe even the exercise, of sensorimotor skills.

On the other hand, there are those who approach the issue of perceptual agency by emphasizing the role of mental action in perception, especially the role played by attention. Consider intentionally focusing your visual attention on some aspect of your environment. According to a widespread view, this is an example of a mental action. The central idea behind the second approach to the puzzle of perceptual agency then is to appeal to a form of attention-based mental agency. Eilan names William James as an early representative of this approach; Sebastian Watzl is a contemporary defender of the view.

Eilan’s sorting presupposes a coherent distinction between ‘mental action’ and ‘bodily action’. But how should we understand this distinction? On some accounts mental and bodily action are mutually exclusive categories. In a debate with Richards (1976), Gibson (1976) conceives of mental activity as “operations of the mind upon the deliverances of the senses” (p.234, emphasis added), while bodily activities involved in perception occur “before sensations have been aroused by stimuli” (p.235, emphasis added). Gibson’s distinction reflects a familiar conception of the mind in which the mental/bodily distinction is aligned with the inner/outer distinction. In Richard’s terms: “the data [of the senses] are acted upon by the mind or brain so as to provide elements of structure that are not antecedently present” (219). The mental is then a kind of ‘inner realm’, and mental action a kind of ‘inner action’ operating upon inner mental elements (e.g., representations).
The alignment of the mental with an inner realm has been criticized extensively in the literature on embodied cognition (Dreyfus & Taylor, 2015, pp. 11–12; Hurley, 1998b). Dreyfus and Taylor (2015) see this mutually exclusive sorting as an expression of what they call a “mediational” worldview. This worldview sees the contact between mind and world as mediated by intermediaries (such as mental representations). Rejecting the mediational worldview implies a rejection of a neat sorting between mind and body: “What we think of as mind and body interpenetrate” (Dreyfus & Taylor, 2015, 12). Embodied cognition is therefore an attempt to overcome the opposition between mind and body, and to rethink the mind as embodied.

In the literature on mental action an understanding of mental action as ‘inner action’ has likewise been criticized on the grounds that canonical mental actions such as thinking, calculating and counting do not always respect the inner/outer boundary: they can involve bodily activity (Levy, 2019; Melser, 2004; A. Peacocke, 2021; Soteriou, 2009). Rejecting the mental-action-as-inner-action picture, it far from obvious that bodily action and mental action are mutually exclusive categories. Recent philosophy of action disagrees sharply over the nature, scope and demarcation of mental action. For example, Soteriou (2009) proceeds rather cautiously and states that “at least a variety” (233) of mental action can be demarcated by considering actions that “do not seem to require for their successful performance the performance of any overt bodily action” (233).

This development in the mental action literature points to a possibility we would like to explore in this paper, namely, that perceptual attention is not an inner mental action, but an embodied mental action: a mental action that is, in part, constituted by bodily activity. In line with the mental

---

action route, perception is active because it involves a form of attention-based mental agency. But, in line with enactivists and embodied cognition theorists, mental action itself can be constituted by bodily movement.

In considering this question, it is important to distinguish between two metaphysical relations that are at stake in the literature: we need to distinguish between whether perceptual attention essentially involves bodily activity and whether perceptual attention can be constituted (in part) by bodily activity. The first question seeks the minimal supervenience base of a type of phenomenon (in Block’s terms: the metaphysically necessary part of a metaphysically sufficient condition” (Block, 2005, p. 264, emphasis in original)), while the second is after the constitution of a particular phenomenon or subtype. In what follows we focus on the latter. We spell out the distinction in more detail in Section 2.

We develop our argument by engaging with what we take to be the most sophisticated articulation of the mental activity view of perceptual agency, namely, Sebastian Watzl’s *Structuring Mind* (2017). Watzl positions the mental activity route explicitly in opposition to the embodiment route:

The activity view of attention helps to account for many intuitions that motivate enactive views of perception and takes on board much of what these views say without commitment to their claims about embodiment. The activity view locates the active
element in perception in a mental activity, attending, which infuses perceptual experience with agency. (45-6)⁴¹

In this paper, we want to challenge the idea that the mental activity view can accommodate enactivist intuitions without taking on board their commitments about embodiment. On the contrary, in order to capture the intuitions that motivate enactivism, Watzl needs to commit to the idea that perceptual attention involves what we call embodied mental action: mental action that is (in part) constituted by bodily activity. Our analysis denies the forced choice between either the bodily or mental activity and opens up the possibility for a third route to solving the puzzle of perceptual agency: perception is active because it is infused with embodied mental action.

The paper is organized in the following way. First, we briefly introduce Watzl’s account of attention and situate his position vis-à-vis enactivism. In the second section, we investigate the role of the body in overt attention. Here we argue that overtly perceptually attending to something is a mental action that constitutively involves the body. In the third section, we will investigate the role of the body in covert perceptual attention. Contra Watzl, we argue that the standard cases of covert attention (i.e., the Posner paradigm) do implicate the body in multiple ways.

**Watzl on Attention as Structuring Mind**

---

According to Watzl, although we have rich folk-psychological sense of what attention is and the role it plays in our lives, and although attention has been major topic in the empirical mind sciences, we lack a satisfying and unifying philosophical account of the phenomenon. Watzl aims to provide just such an account. On the view he develops, attention is a holistic phenomenon that cuts across many of the standard divisions in the philosophy of mind and instead concerns how the elements of mind hang together (cf. Mole, 2011). On his view, attention is something we do. More specifically, it is the personal-level activity of organizing or structuring the mind. To develop the view, Watzl introduces the technical notion of a ‘priority structure’, which is a system of occurrent, personal-level psychological phenomena (states, events, and processes, and their parts) organized by a relation of relative priority. When the psychological phenomena in question are conscious, they form what Watzl calls a ‘centrality system’. The basic idea is that conscious experience exhibits an organization: roughly, some parts of the experience are more central, whereas other form a periphery. A simple case of this is foreground-background structure in perceptual experience. As Watzl points out, this organization is constantly undergoing dynamic changes – now this is central and now that. Attention is the ongoing activity of regulating – creating, changing, and maintaining – priority structures.

Consider the example of going to see a jazz concert. Your auditory attention might first be directed towards the sound of the trumpet, then the drums, then you might briefly visually attend to the audience around you, to see if they are enjoying the show, then your attention might wander to thoughts about what you will have for dinner, etc. Watzl thinks we should account for these changes not purely in terms of differences in appearances (i.e., the objects or contents of consciousness) but

---

42 Although Watzl accepts that there can be unconscious attention, in what follows we will focus on the conscious cases. For simplicity’s sake, we can think of a centrality system as a phenomenally conscious priority structure.
also in terms of the structure of experience. When I attend to the trumpet, for example, I make the trumpet central vis-à-vis the drums, and this is a structural relationship pertaining between parts of the phenomenal field.

Importantly, this is all something that we as subjects do. Attention is an activity we are constantly engaged in. According to Watzl, the activity of attending can either be actively guided by a complex hierarchy of goals, action plans, and intentions, which are said to make up the subject’s ‘executive control system’, as in the case of so-called top-down endogenous attention shifts (ibid. 138-49), or it can be passively guided by the salience (understood in terms of imperatival content) of personal-level phenomena that are not part of the executive control system (e.g., perceptions, emotions etc.), as in the case of so-called bottom-up exogenous attention shifts (e.g., attention capture) (ibid. 114-35). The former case is seen by Watzl as a paradigm example of a full-blooded voluntary, intentional mental action (ibid. 139). However, even in the latter case he thinks the subject is doing something: just as tapping one’s foot absent-mindedly to the sound of music in the next room is an example of a (subintentional) activity of a person (cf. O’Shaughnessy, 1981), so too is having one’s attention drawn or held by something. In such cases, the relevant activity is not guided by the subject’s intentions but is rather guided directly by, e.g., perceptions of the environment (Watzl, 2017, p. 115) (cf. Watzl, 2014): it is the subject-level state of hearing a loud bang that guides the bystander to attend to the car crash.

To summarize: a priority structures consists of multiple psychological elements and a priority relation that holds between them. Attending is the activity of regulating the evolution of such priority structures.
Let us now reconstrue Watzl’s commitments about the involvement of bodily activity in perceptual attention, and how he contrasts his position with enactivism. As noted above, it is important to distinguish between the claim that perceptual attention is essentially embodied and the claim that perceptual attention can be constituted (in part) by bodily activity. The first is a view about the minimal supervenience base of perceptual attention, the second is about the realisers of a particular instance or a subtype of perceptual attention. Settling on the minimal supervenience basis of a phenomenon does not determine which factors are constitutive of it and which are causally impinging on it. To draw an analogy: one can easily deny that cardamom is essential to what makes a cake a cake; it is after all entirely possible to make a cake without cardamom. But once you have added cardamom to the dough, cardamom does not just causally impinge on the cake but becomes a constitutive part of the particular cake you are making (cf. De Haan, 2020). Analogously, it is possible to accept that bodily activity is not essential for perceptual agency, but still accept that when the body is involved, it is constitutively involved. In other words, the claim that bodily activity is not essential for attention does not amount to the claim that bodily activity can never be a constitutive part of attention. There is therefore a further question about whether parts of the environment and the non-brain body could, in principle, be realisers of mental phenomena.

Watzl takes enactivists (like Noë, 2004) to make a claim about the essence of perceptual agency: “Enactive theories locate the active element of perception in overt, bodily behavior and in implicit knowledge of sensory-motor contingencies” (Watzl, 2017, p. 42). Against enactivism, Watzl points to cases where “perception is active even when we do not move our bodies” (Watzl, 2017, p. 42), such as when you are listening to a friend without moving your body. Such cases of covert perceptual attention involve perceptual agency without involving bodily activity. Hence, for Watzl, bodily activity cannot be part of the essence of perceptual agency. We will return to the putative non-involvement of the body in covert perceptual attention in Section 4, but for now let us bracket it.
Watzl can then accept that many instances of perceptual attention do involve bodily movement, but that such bodily involvement is not necessary:

In some cases attending involves the body: there is overt visual attention (where you do move your eyes), tactile attention (“feeling”), gustatory attention, (“tasting”), and olfactory attention (“sniffing”). But such involvement of the body need not be present in all forms of perceptual activity” (Watzl, 2017, p. 46).

Elsewhere, he formulates the point as follows:

Purity: Consciously attending to something does not necessarily involve (a characteristic) bodily movement or posture, or an awareness of such a bodily movement or posture (Watzl, 2011, p. 147).

However, it is not clear to us whether enactivists are committed to the claim that all forms of perceptual agency involve bodily activity. Hurley (1998a), for example, investigates the question whether token-explanatory vehicles of thought can go external. Vehicle externalism is a claim about what constitutes a particular token of thought, not about the minimal constitution basis for thought of that type. Hurley sees an interesting contrast between her position, vehicle externalism, the thesis that vehicles can extend, and vehicle internalism, the thesis that the vehicles of thought are essentially brainbound.

43 Furthermore, although Watzl does not formulate the point explicitly, on his view bodily activity is not sufficient for attention. To use an example for Ryle, ‘Perhaps knitted brows, taciturnity and fixity of gaze’ are evidence of attentiveness, but they can also be ‘simulated, or they can be purely habitual’ (Ryle, 1949, p. 133).
The question about the involvement of the body in attention is therefore not settled by Purity. A further question can be asked about the nature of contribution of bodily activity in those cases where bodily activity is involved in perceptual attention: Is this involvement only ever causal, or can bodily activity be constitutive of perceptual attention? If the former, then Watzl subscribes to the view that perceptual attention is essentially an inner action.

Watzl isn’t particularly clear on this. In an earlier publication, he states that “conscious attention is associated with and probably causally connected with bodily movement” (Watzl, 2011, p. 149), which suggests his view is that the question of constitutive bodily involvement in perceptual attention is not even worth considering. However, a careful reading of Structuring Mind reveals a different picture. In fact, although he does not explicitly say as much, we read Watzl as being committed to a substantial version of the embodied or extended mind thesis (Clark & Chalmers, 1998; Menary, 2010) when it comes to attention. In his analysis of overt visual attention, Watzl writes:

What it is for \( s \) to overtly visually attend to \( o \) is for \( s \) to regulate a priority system \( S \) such that a state of foveating on \( o \) is of top priority in \( S \).

Where foveating on \( o \) is a state where one’s eyes are pointed so that \( o \) is visually represented at the fovea (roughly: the part of the eye with the highest visual resolution).

In other words, to overtly visually attend to something in your environment is to prioritize a particular embodied mental state (a state of pointing your eyes so that \( o \) is visually represented at the fovea). Hence, embodied mental states can be elements in our priority structures. Watzl does not elaborate on the consequences of this; he does not even flag it as a philosophically interesting move. This is surprising since elsewhere he considers the possibility of there being extended priority structures, i.e.,
structures that are ‘realized partly by processes outside the subject’s brain’ but chooses remains neutral on this issue, commenting that ‘This may seem implausible to some theorists (though others may find it congenial.)’ (Watzl 2017: 88). But Watzl’s separate discussion of overt visual attention reveals that he is in fact committed to there being extended priority structures.

This does not yet, however, settle the issue of the nature of the involvement of the body in perceptual attention. More specifically, it does not settle the issue of whether we should conceive of the mental action of perceptual attention as an inner action. Recall that on Watzl’s view attention is a complex phenomenon with different parts. On the one hand, there are the elements of the structure, which are mental states, processes, and activities. On the other hand, there is the structuring relation of priority, which pertains between the elements. Furthermore, there is the ongoing activity of regulating those structures. It is the mental action of actively regulating our priority structures that gives perceptual experience its agential character. Watzl’s discussion of overt visual attention reveals that he is committed to embodied or extended priority structures in the following sense: the elements of our priority structures can be embodied mental states, such as foveating on o. However, he does not say anything about the possibility of the priority relation itself or the activity of regulating those priority structures being embodied. As we will see, this is a mistake if he wants to be able accommodate enactivist intuitions about perceptual agency.

**Overt attention and the body**

Consider some of the cases Watzl wants his account to do justice to: ‘moving your fingers across the fabric of a new coat and actively feeling its softness’ (ibid. 17), ‘sniffing something’ (ibid. 45), ‘looking for… a blackbird’ (ibid. 45). As Watzl points out, the body is clearly involved in such cases
of perceptual agency (ibid. 46). The question is how we should think about the nature of the involvement.

Let us focus on the case of (voluntarily) sniffing something. The OED defines sniff as follows: ‘An act of sniffing; a single inhalation through the nose in order to smell something, usually accompanied by a characteristic short snuffling sound.’ So sniffing is a bodily action. But how might we square the bodily nature of sniffing with the idea that olfactorily attending to something by sniffing can be a mental action?

There are arguably two options available for Watzl. The first option is to claim that the case of olfactorily attending to something by sniffing breaks down into two separate component actions: the outer bodily action of inhaling through the nose sharply (or something similar), and the inner mental action of prioritizing the olfactory experiences. On this view, the bodily and the mental action are distinct (though closely causally related) events or processes. The movements of the body facilitate the act of olfactory attention but are not themselves part of accomplishing it. Analogously, the act of prioritizing the state of foveating on \( o \) requires two actions: the bodily act of moving one’s eyes to foveate on \( o \) and the mental act of prioritizing the state of foveating on \( o \).

Alternatively, one might argue that the sniffing is a mental action with an overt-bodily action vehicle. On this view, the movements of the body in sniffing partly constitute the mental action of olfactorily attending to something. Analogously, the bodily act of foveating on \( o \) partly constitutes the mental action of prioritizing foveating on \( o \). Although the type of mental action in question does not necessarily involve the body (i.e., the action could have been executed without sniffing) in the sniffing case the body is constitutively and not just causally involved in the action.\(^{44}\)

\(^{44}\) Although not available for Watzl, a third option would be to deny that acts of overt perceptual attention are mental actions, but are bodily actions instead. This seems to be the position endorsed by
We propose to call the first option the *Conjunction Account* (see Table 1). The account implies a particular division of labor between the bodily action and the mental action. The bodily action plays a role in delivering psychological elements to the mind, the mental action of paying attention organizes those elements into a priority structure. The body provides the input, the mind actively structures the elements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Conjunction Account</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bodily action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saying $x$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sniffing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving eyes to foveate on $o$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Schematic outline of the conjunction account

There are problems with the Conjunction Account. Notice that the account has the implication that we end up having to deny that sniffing something can itself be part of the activity of attending, and hence a mental action. The Conjunction Account separates overt olfactory attention into a separate bodily and mental action. Once that separation is in place, we have to say that sniffing something

Wu (2022): "The contrast to visual covert attention then is visual overt attention which does entail that the eye has moved or at least is controlled to maintain contact on the target, and so is a bodily action." Separating overt and covert attention in this way implies a disjunctive view of attention, in which attention is *either* an overt bodily action, *or* a covert bodily action. However, this option would give up on the unity of attention and makes it difficult to see how Wu can maintain a close connection between attending and mental action (as exemplified by the title of his paper).
falls on the bodily side of the distinction. But then we must deny that the sniffing is itself part of the 
attentional action, and hence a mental action. This need not itself be a problem for Watzl (though he 
would need to change some of his formulations). However, once we get clear on this it becomes far 
from obvious that activity view of attention can accommodate ‘many of the intuitions that motivate 
enactivism’ (cf. Watzl, 2017, p. 45). The central examples that motivate enactivism are of a kind that 
Watzl invokes, e.g., sniffing something or running one’s hands across the surface of something so as 
to feel its softness. However, the intuition that such cases involve ‘active’ perception derives from 
the role played by the body. But on the Conjunction Account, as we have seen, the bodily movements 
have exactly nothing to do with what makes the perception active: it is inner mental (and not outer 
bodily) action that infuses perceptual experience with agency.

Secondly, the Conjunctive Account is needlessly complicated. When I attentively sniff 
something, it is not as though I do two things in quick succession or simultaneously: inhale sharply 
through the nose and place olfactory perceptions on top of a priority structure. Recent work on the 
philosophy and psychology of olfaction supports the idea that there is a much tighter connection 
between the embodied act of sniffing and olfactory attention than that (Barwich, 2020, pp. 153– 
160). Furthermore, as a piece of descriptive phenomenological psychology, the Conjunctive 
Account looks false. As Watzl persuasively argues, we have agentive awareness for perceptual 
attention. Agentive awareness is a kind of non-observational and pre-cognitive awareness of engaging 
in an activity and forms core part of our sense of agency (Watzl 2017: 229-232). Watzl argues that 
we have agentive awareness not just for bodily actions but also for mental actions, such as attendings

45 Barwich’s book contains many examples of how olfactory spaces are enacted by bodily actions, 
such as sniffing. Her point is that sniffing is not just a transportation from stimuli to the brain, but 
that the bodily activity plays “a formative element in the generation of perceptual content”.

127
(232-4). However, the Conjunction Account would predict that in cases of overt perceptual attention we have agentive awareness for engaging in two distinct actions: one mental and one bodily. But this is incorrect. In overt perceptual attention, we experience ourselves as engaged in a single unified action.

Despite these problems, it can seem like the Conjunction Account is the only game in town. After all – the reasoning goes – perceptual attention can be doubly dissociated from bodily behavior. On the one hand, the very same bodily action of sniffing (i.e., inhaling through the nose sharply) can be performed with or without an act of attention: I might sniff to attend to the smell of the brandy, but I might also sniff without attending olfactorily, say, because I have a cold. If the bodily movements are identical in both cases, then what makes the difference? The obvious answer is that the difference maker is something external to the bodily action itself: a separate mental action. An example of this kind of reasoning can be found in McClelland (2020, p. 17):

But is attending a mental act? Overt attention is the bodily activity of directing one’s sense organs toward a particular stimulus, property or region. Covert attention is the mental act of concentrating on a particular perceived stimulus, property or region... what makes the warning light distracting is that it pulls one’s concentration away from one’s work, not just one’s eyes.

On the other hand – the argument goes – there are cases of covert perceptual attention (i.e., cases of perceptual attention that do not involve a characteristic bodily action or posture). The temptation then is to generalise from cases of covert to cases of overt perceptual attention, and claim that even in cases where the body is involved, the nature of the involvement can only ever be causal.

---

46 It is admittedly hard to make sense of the idea of covert olfactory attention. However, there are other forms of perceptual attention such as visual or auditory attention are more clear-cut cases that support the intuition.
and never constitutive. In other words, we have a case of two actions causally interacting. In the next section, we will look in some detail at covert perceptual attention. There we will undermine the standard considerations put forth in favor of the claim that covert perceptual attention does not constitutively involve the body, which in turn will block the above generalization. For now though let us focus on the argument that the double dissociation between bodily and mental activity provides a reason for going the conjunctive route.

There is an instructive parallel to be drawn here between the case of overt perceptual attention and a related case in the literature on mental action. When discussing the phenomenon of ‘thinking out loud’, Soteriou (2013) considers a version of what we have called the Conjunctive Account. As he points out, saying things out loud is not sufficient for thinking out loud, since it is possible to say things out loud without thinking them. Moreover, it is possible to think something without saying it. Thus, we can be tempted to think that the missing ingredient in the case of saying things without thinking is a “distinct ‘inner’ process” of thinking (p. 240), and that the thinking out loud case involves ‘the conjunction of two separable actions – mental action plus bodily action.’ (p. 240).

However, as Soteriou then observes, this rests of a mistaken inference.47 The point is that we are not compelled to adopt the Conjunctive Account based on the double dissociation. There is another option available, which is to claim that the verbal utterance instantiates two kinds of activity—overt bodily (talking out loud), and mental (calculating whether p)—in virtue of the fact

47 In more prosaic form his argument can be found in Wittgenstein (1953, p. 218): “There are important accompanying phenomena of talking which are often missing when we talk without thinking, and this is a characteristic of talking without thinking. But they are not thinking.”
that it instantiates a third, basic, non-reducible kind of activity, namely a mental activity with an overt-bodily-action vehicle (in this case, calculating whether p out loud) (Soteriou, 2013, p. 241).

In other words, on Soteriou’s analysis there is only one fundamental kind of activity, a mental activity with an overt-bodily-action vehicle, in virtue of which talking out loud instantiates both a bodily and a mental action. The same conceptual move is available in the case of overt olfactory attention. From the fact that there are both cases of covert attention and of bodily activity that does not involve attention, we do not need to conclude that in the overt cases of perceptual attention we find two separate actions occurring in parallel or in quick succession. Rather, the more parsimonious option is to say that the act of olfactory attending instantiates two kinds of actions—overt bodily (inhaling through the nose sharply) and mental (prioritizing the olfactory perceptions) in virtue of instantiating a third, irreducible kind of action: a mental action with an overt-bodily-action vehicle. Let us call this the Constitution Account, and call such actions embodied mental actions (see Table 2).
The Constitution Account

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Embodied mental action (i.e. mental action with an overt-bodily-action vehicle)</th>
<th>Bodily action</th>
<th>+ Mental action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thinking out loud that (x)</td>
<td>Saying that (x)</td>
<td>+ Thinking that (x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overtly olfactory attending</td>
<td>Sniffing</td>
<td>+ Prioritizing olfactory experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overtly visually attending to (o)</td>
<td>Moving eyes to foveate on (o)</td>
<td>+ Prioritizing state of foveating on (o)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Schematic outline of the constitution account

The Constitution Account requires giving up on the idea that bodily and mental actions are mutually exclusive. Instead, the same event can instantiate both a mental and a bodily action. This raises some puzzles about how mental and bodily actions are to be distinguished. One proposal, offered by Soteriou, is that although mental actions can be constituted by bodily events, they are not exhausted by them. For an observer, it is directly observable that an agent is inhaling through their nose, but whether the bodily activity constitutes a mental action is not observable in the same way. This does not mean a distinct action over and above the bodily action is going on, however, just that mental
actions are not exhausted by observable bodily activity. Ultimately, we do not require a sharp criterion for identifying mental actions. The cases that we have focused on – thinking and attention – are prototypical mental actions. The question is how to construe the kind of involvement of the body in cases where the mental action is accompanied by bodily activity: thinking out loud and overt attention.

Let us take stock for a moment. In this section we have investigated the role of the body in overt attention. We have presented the Conjunction Account and the Constitution Account as two different ways in which mental and bodily action can be linked in overt attention. We have suggested that the Conjunction Account has a number of drawbacks that the constitution account lacks: it is needlessly complicated and attributes the active element in perception exclusively to the inner mental act. On the Constitution Account, overt acts of attending become embodied mental actions.

This result seems to put pressure on Watzl’s solution to the puzzle of perceptual agency, and the way he contrasts his solution to enactivism. It is far from obvious that the Conjunction Account can accommodate ‘many of the intuitions that motivate enactivism’ (Watzl, 2017, p. 45). The central

---

48 Soteriou’s analysis is reminiscent of Ryle’s analysis of ‘heed concepts’ (Ryle, 1949; Soteriou, 2013, p. 240). According to Ryle, when we say that someone is paying heed to his driving, he is not doing two things at once (i.e. driving and paying heed), but is rather doing one thing: driving attentively. The difference between merely driving and driving attentively is one of ‘thickness’: driving attentively makes more specific conditional predictions about hypothetical situations, these include, as Soteriou notes, answers to questions like “what are you thinking about”? Soteriou’s and Ryle’s analysis helps to see how indistinguishable bodily behaviors can support different actions (attentive vs. inattentive driving).
examples that motivate enactivism are of a kind that Watzl mentions, such as sniffing something or running one’s hands across the surface of something so as to feel its softness. The intuition that enactivists rely upon is that the active or agential character of these experiences derives, at least in part, from the involvement of the body. However, on the Conjunction Account, bodily movements have exactly nothing to do with what makes perception active: it is an inner mental (and not an overt bodily) action that, to use Watzl’s term, ‘infuses’ perceptual experience with agency.

If Watzl accepts the Constitution Account, then the opposition between the mental and bodily action break down: the mental and the bodily “interpenetrate” (Dreyfus and Taylor, 2015). In particular, it leads to the commonsense view that the relevant form of activity in overt perceptual attention are activities like looking, listening, touching, tasting, and sniffing. This is exactly what proponents of the bodily action route have been claiming (see J. J. Gibson, 1976, p. 234). The activity view ends up as a rather close cousin of enactivism and Gibsonian ecological psychology.

However, arguably there is something dissatisfying about the conclusion thus far. Afterall, the disagreement between the bodily activity and the mental activity views about perceptual agency can best been appreciate by considering the covert perceptual attention. Let us therefore turn to examine covert perceptual attention.

**Covert attention and the body**

In this section, we will investigate the philosophical import of the existence of covert perceptual attention. Does covert perceptual attention vindicate an account of mental action as ‘inner’ action? We argue that it does not.

---

49 According to Watzl, covert attention is attention without any overt bodily signs (Watzl, 2017, p. 26). This focus on bodily signs seems to indicate that overt attention is associated with observable
The argument from covert attention for the mental action route to perceptual agency is the following: covert perceptual attention is a form of attention that does involve perceptual agency but does not involve bodily action. Consequently, whatever it is that makes perception active or agential in covert perceptual attention, it cannot be bodily action and therefore must be the inner mental action of attending. This shows that whether perception is active and whether perception is embodied are independent questions. This argument is premised on the assumption that a coherent analysis of covert perceptual attention can be given without making recourse to embodied states or bodily actions. It is this assumption we will question.

The main motivation for thinking there is covert perceptual attention are cases like the Posner paradigm (Posner, 1980).\textsuperscript{50} The Posner paradigm (Figure 1) is standardly introduced in the literature to motivate the very existence of covert attention (Watzl, 2011; Wu, 2014). In the Posner paradigm, the eyes are kept fixed at a fixation point and the subject is cued to visually attend to a region of space without moving their eyes. The cue can be either shown at the point fixation (endogenous cues) or shown outside of the point of fixation (exogenous). After the cue disappears, a stimulus arises either congruent with the cue (valid cue) or incongruent with the cue (invalid cue). The subject then responds as quickly as possible to the onset of the stimulus.

\textsuperscript{50}In this section, we limit ourselves to covert visual attention in the form of Posner cases. Covert attention exists in other perceptual modalities as well, most prominently in the auditory domain. The visual cases have received most attention in the literature (Watzl, 2011; 2017).
Figure 1: Schematic depiction of the Posner paradigm. See text for explanation.

When the subject is presented with a left cue, a stimulus presented to the left is responded to quicker than when the stimulus is presented to the right (and vice versa).

The philosophical significance of the Posner paradigm is that the same bodily posture – the eyes fixated at the cross – can support different visual attentional states. Watzl takes examples like the Posner cases to support the view that although overt visual attention does involve the body, bodily activity is not an essential part of perceptual attention. Moreover, as we mentioned above, he could reason as follows: because the body is not involved in this specific form of perceptual attention, we should conclude the body is only causally, and never constitutively, involved in perceptual attention in general.
However, while it is true that cases like the Posner paradigm demonstrate clearly that in order to visually attend to an item one need not point one’s eyes in its direction, there are other ways in which the body can be involved in covert visual attention.

Firstly, it is important to point out that Posner’s definition of covert attention differs from Watzl’s. Posner defines covert attention as ‘attention to a position in visual space other than fixation’ (Posner, 1980, p. 3). Posner’s definition of covert attention holds that a subject can attend to a position in visual space distinct from the fixation point of the eyes. Watzl’s definition of covert attention holds that the subject can do so without any observable bodily movement. This is a much stronger claim. And while Posner’s definition is fully compatible with the empirical literature, Watzl’s definition runs into problems.

There is a rich literature on the role of microsaccades in the literature on covert attention. Microsaccades are small eye movements that happen during fixation. Initially they were thought to be random artifacts of the oculomotor system, but research has shown that they are directly correlated with the direction of covert attention (Hafed & Clark, 2002). If this research holds, and there is considerable evidence that to back up this claim (Barnhart et al., n.d.; Engbert & Kliegl, 2003; Hafed & Clark, 2002; Rolfs, 2009; Ryan et al., 2019; Yuval-Greenberg et al., 2014) then microsaccades are overt bodily signs associated with covert shifts of attention. This makes covert attention (in Posner’s sense) a case of overt attention (in Watzl’s sense).

Secondly, there is a deeper worry about Watzl’s use of Posner cases to support his conclusion that the body is not always involved in perceptual attention. Whether we opt for Watzl’s definition or Posner’s, the fact that in order to attend visually to something one need not point one’s eyes at it does not support the conclusion that we have a case of a disembodied, inner mental action.

A historical precursor of this debate can be found at the end of the 19th century in discussions between Helmholtz and James. In the Attention chapter of The Principles of Psychology
(1890) James writes (although he does not call it that) about covert attention: “we may attend to an object on the periphery of the visual field and yet not accommodate the eye for it” (p.437). In this passage, James discusses the interpretation of Helmholtz’s experiments on what we now call covert attention. For Helmholtz, the fact that we can direct our attention without moving our eyes means that:

> [o]ur attention is quite independent of the position and accommodation of the eyes, and of any known alteration in these organs; and free to direct itself by a conscious and voluntary effort upon any selected portion of a dark and undifferenced field of view.

This is one of the most important observations for a future theory of attention. (Helmholtz, as quoted by James, 1890, p.438)

Helmholtz here endorses what we have called an inner action view of perceptual attention. Attention can be directed at will independently of the position of the eyes. James is skeptical about this interpretation. He approvingly cites Hering:

> Whilst attending to the marginal object we must always attend at the same time to the object directly fixated. If even for a single instant we let the latter slip out of our mind, our eye moves towards the former […]. (Hering, as quoted by James, 1890, p.438)

James adds:

> Accommodation exists here, then, as it does elsewhere, and without it we should lose a part of our sense of attentive activity. In fact, the strain of that activity (which is remarkably great in the experiment) is due in part to unusually strong contractions of the muscles needed to keep the eyeballs still, which produces unwonted feelings of pressure in those organs (James, 1890, p. 438)

James is making two points here. Firstly, there is the physiological point that strong contractions of the muscles are needed in order to inhibit foveating towards the peripheral object. Secondly, there is
the descriptive phenomenological point that part of the “sense of the attentive activity” in this case derives from the felt strain of keeping the eyes fixed. Recall Watzl’s claim that we have a sense of agency for attending. James can be read as making the argument that our sense of agency for covert visual attention includes the sense of actively inhibiting foveation.

James analysis’ allows us to provide an alternative interpretation of Posner cases. Covert visual attention requires the (demanding) action of keeping one’s eyes fixated at the cross and inhibiting foveating towards the marginal object. It seems uncontroversial that keeping the eyes fixed is a voluntary intentional action. If this is right, then covert visual attention involves intentional omission (Clarke, 2010; Shepherd, 2014). Shepherd (2014) argues that intentional omissions are describable as intentional actions. For example, when a child plays hide and seek, she may hold still for several minutes. Holding still in this case is both an intentional omission and an intentional action: “it requires the sending of a pattern of motor signals to certain muscles, perhaps the inhibition of other motor signals, the maintenance of balance, with fine adjustments made in response to feedback” (Clarke, 2010, p. 159). Building on James, we propose that keeping your eyes fixed during covert attention functions analogously to standing still during hide and seek: it is an effortful intentional action. Both cases involve a characteristic bodily posture and are thus examples of intentional embodied mental action.

An objection here might be that we should think about this case as involving two distinct actions a) the action of holding the eyes fixed and b) the action of paying visual attention to the marginal object. If so, then it would seem natural to describe the first action as bodily, and the second as (inner) mental action. However, this would be a mistake. The case of covert visual attention is not analogous to other cases where you perform two actions at once, such as raising your arm whilst wiggling your toes. This analogy fails to capture the relationship of dependence that exists between the holding of the eyes in place and the covert attention. Performing a Posner-style act of covert visual
attention requires holding one’s eyes in place. Indeed, it is part of what you are doing when you covertly attend visually. We propose to analysis this case as a single, complex embodied mental action.

Finally, let us consider another reason to reject the idea that Posner cases are disembodied inner mental actions. We can distinguish between a number of possible ways of thinking about Posner cases. On one extreme, one might think that what Posner cases show is that the mental action of visually attending is independent of the eye movements in the sense that the subject is able to direct their visual attention to any part of the visual field regardless of the positioning of the eyes. This is the view Helmholtz expresses when he writes that visual attention is “free to direct itself by a conscious and voluntary effort” in a way that is “quite independent of the position and accommodation of the eyes.” Call this the Independence View. On the other extreme, the movement of the eyes in the direction of the attended to item is required in order to visually attend to it. Call this the Naïve Embodied View. The pre-motor theory of attention occupies a middle position: in order to visually attend to something, it is not required that we direct our eyes towards it, but it is required that there is motor-preparation of the relevant eye movement. In covert cases, the actual movement is inhibited, but attention still bears the traces of the motor process. Call this the Sophisticated Embodied View.

It should be clear that the very possibility of Posner cases blocks the second option, namely, the Naïve Embodied View. Visual attention is possible without foveating on the attended item. The choice then is between the Independence View and the Sophisticated Embodied View. One elegant line of argument the latter comes from a slight variation of the Posner paradigm. In their experiment, (2004) compared the original Posner paradigm with a condition in which the subject was rotated with respect to the screen on which the stimuli were shown. Because the eyes rotate along with the screen, the stimulation of the retina was exactly the same in both conditions (see Figure 2).
The consequence of this rotation is that although the subject could still see the stimulus boxes in their visual field, they could only foveate toward the nasal stimulus box (i.e., towards the nose), while the temporal stimulus box (i.e., towards the temple) could not be foveated.

![Figure 2: The rotated Posner paradigm (from Craighero et al., 2004).](image)

If the Helmholtzian Independence View is right, covert attention should not be dependent on the position of the eyes. If the Sophisticated Embodied View is right, however, then covert attention would be mediated by whether the attended region of space is foveatable. The authors found that in the rotated condition, the Posner effect remains intact for the nasal condition (in which the target is foveatable) but breaks down for the temporal condition (in which the target is not foveatable). They conclude that visual “attention cannot be directed toward spatial locations that are difficult for the eyes to access” (p.332), supporting the pre-motor theory of attention and hence the Sophisticated Embodied View.

In sum, there are a number of reasons to think that covert visual attention is embodied. First, contra Watzl, covert visual attention is not covert in the sense that it does not involve any bodily signs: covert visual attention involves microsaccades that are correlated with the direction of covert attention. Second, following James, we argued that holding the eyes fixed in Posner cases requires actively not moving them. This effort to inhibit the tendency to foveate can itself be construed as an
intentional omission, which is an embodied action. Third, we have presented evidence that suggests that covert visual attention is strongly coupled to the preparation of motor-processes, since Posner phenomena are diminished when the cued region cannot be foveated to.

According to our analysis, the existence of covert visual attention does not show that bodily involvement is not required for perceptual agency but actually highlights the involvement of the body in covert visual attention in multiple ways. Accepting our analysis blocks the most prominent argument in favor of the mental action route to thinking about perceptual agency.

**Revisiting perceptual agency**

We started out the paper by introducing two routes to resolving the puzzle of perceptual agency. Either perception is active because it is entangled with *bodily* action, or it is active because it is infused with *mental* action. The former position is associated with embodied approaches to cognition, while the latter is associated with internalist approaches to cognition. However, this sorting presupposes a coherent distinction between ‘mental action’ and ‘bodily action’. In classical debates about the active nature of perception, the mental/bodily distinction is aligned with the inner/outer distinction. Mental action is then an ‘inner action’ operating on internal elements (e.g., representations) (J. J. Gibson, 1976; Richards, 1976).

The association of the mental with an inner domain has been criticized in the literature on both enactivism and mental action: mind and body interpenetrate. We have argued that on analogy with thinking out loud overt perceptual attention should be understood as *embodied mental action*. Overt acts of attention such as sniffing and visually orienting are not made up of a conjunction of two separate actions (an ‘inner’ mental and an ‘outer’ bodily) but are unitary actions that instantiate two act sub-types: a bodily and a mental act. The fact that it is possible, for example, to both move one’s
eyes in the direction of o without visually attending to o, and to visually attend to o without moving the eyes in its direction, does not warrant the conclusion that we have here two separate actions: mental and bodily.

Allowing that there are such things as embodied mental actions has substantial implications for the debate on perceptual agency. We can now articulate two different versions of the mental action route to thinking about perceptual agency. On an essentially internalist understanding of mental action, it is an inner action that makes perception active. This is the view of mental activity advocated by Richards (1976) and which has a long history in both philosophy and psychology. The inner mental action route is wedded to analysing overt attention as a conjunction of two separate actions: overt bodily and inner mental. The (counterintuitive) consequence of this view is that bodily action does not contribute to perceptual agency in overt attention: if the mental and bodily action are distinct, and it is mental action that infuses perception with agency, then bodily action is screened off from perception and does not contribute to its agential character. You can peer and sniff all you like, but your peering and sniffing will have exactly nothing to do with what makes the vision or olfaction active.

The embodied mental action route gives rise to a third option to solving the puzzle of perceptual agency: perception is active because it is infused with embodied mental action. The embodied mental action route combines the strengths of the other two. It agrees with the inner mental action route both that mere bodily movement is not sufficient for perceptual agency (after all, we can move our body without a corresponding act of attention) and that in order to pay perceptual attention to something it is not necessary that we orient our perceptual organ towards it (after all, there are cases of covert perceptual attention). But it agrees with the bodily action view that when we are overtly attending, our active embodied movement contributes to our perceptual agency. Furthermore,
the view can be expanded so as to capture the important sense in which canonical cases of covert perceptual attention are not inner mental actions but rather constitutively depend on our embodiment.

The embodied mental action route to thinking about perceptual agency is not committed to each and every form of perceptual attention being an embodied mental action. In particular, covert auditory attention is difficult to capture on the model of our analysis of covert visual attention. On the other hand, we would warn against assuming that each and every form of overt perceptual attention in its different modalities has a covert equivalent. For example, it is not clear that there is covert olfactory or covert gustatory attention. Likewise, it is probably highly misleading to think there is a covert equivalent of tactile attention in anything like the sense that there is a covert equivalent of overt visual and auditory attention.

In principle then, it should be possible to make a typology of necessarily embodied, contingently embodied and disembodied acts of attending. However, we suggest that in the end pursuing such a typology would not be helpful. It is better to give up on the idea that the mental action/bodily action distinction tracks a philosophically deep distinction when it comes to perception. In a discussion of mental action, Levy (2018) ends up with a similar conclusion: “Either the distinction between mental and bodily acts is specious, or it is unimportant” (Levy, 2018, 984). On the one hand, if we try to draw a contrastive definition, it will end up being specious, since we will fail to capture cases of so-called mental action where the body is part of the activity (e.g., multiplying two numbers using pencil and paper or thinking out loud). On the other, we might treat the distinction as shallow, in which case it will not do much explanatory or philosophical work. Levy’s point is that mental and bodily acts “exhibit key functional and explanatory similarities” (Levy, 2018, p.984). Whether you are engaging in a thoughtful inner monologue with or without moving your lips will

---

51 We would like to thank Tom Roberts for pressing us on this point.
only make a difference in explaining behaviour in highly contrived circumstances. Levy goes on to suggest that whereas the mental action/bodily action distinction is a not deep and philosophically significant one, there are important questions about the possible philosophical significance of the distinction between overt and covert forms of activity. As he points out, ‘Such topics as the nature of covert acts, the possible significance of their being covert, and the implications their covertness may have for understanding agency and related notions are currently much under-explored’ (ibid. 987).

An exception to this trend, as Levy points out, is Dennett’s discussion of *sotto voce*. In line with Dennett’s suggestion that *sotto voce* may have developed because it is useful “comprehending conspecifics were within earshot” (Dennett, 1991, p. 197), we propose that so too can covert auditory attention come in handy when listening in on one’s conspecifics without them noticing. This is fully consonant with work in developmental psychology in which covert attention is an achievement that requires the voluntary control of attention. In contrast to stimulus-driven attention, voluntary controlled attention is developmentally late (E. Gibson & Rader, 1979) and mediated by the agent’s sociocultural environment (Vygotsky, 1979). Accepting the claim that perceptual attention does not necessarily involve an overt bodily movement or posture (i.e., the Purity claim) does not reveal something deep about the metaphysics of attention.

Returning to perceptual agency, although Watzl and Eilan set up the contrast between the enactive and the attention-based approaches to perceptual agency in terms of the difference between bodily and mental action, as we have seen, this would only be a philosophically significant distinction if it we understood mental action as inner action. It this notion of mental activity that is at stake in the
debate between Richard and Gibson.\textsuperscript{52} However, as we have shown, in order to avoid the pitfalls of the Conjunction Account of overt attention, Watzl must adopt the Constitutive Account. This means that he will have to accept the embodied mental action, rather than the inner mental action, route to theorising perceptual agency. In other words, he ends up closely aligned with enactivism and other embodied approaches.

The embodied mental action route comes with substantial commitments about the embodiment of attention. To say that the mental can interpenetrate with the body is a departure from the orthodox view in which mental activity is an internal activity. The activity of structuring mind – of attending – can be constituted, in part, by embodied mental actions. The consequence of endorsing the embodied mental action route is vehicle externalism (Hurley, 1998a) about the mental act of perceptually attending.

Finally, in the spirit of further bridging the activity view of attention and embodied and enactive theories of cognition, we would like to point out a number of points of convergence. Occasionally Watzl comes close to concepts that are at the heart to enactive and embodied theories, namely, those of affordance and solicitation. For example, he claims that the activity of structuring the field of experience is sometimes guided by phenomenal salience, which is similar to a solicitation (Watzl, 2014). Moreover, salience is not experienced individually but has a holistic field-like

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{52} See for example: ”The only kind of perceptual activity that my critics are willing to admit is mental activity, that is, the operations of the mind upon the deliverances of the senses. […] The kind of activity, however, that seems to me important is the looking, listening touching, tasting, and sniffing that goes on when the perceptual systems are at work. These acts involve adjustments of organs, not mere stimulation of receptors. They are not mental. Neither are they physical, for that matter, but functional.” (Gibson, 1976, 234)
\end{footnote}
organization (Watzl, 2017 Chapter 9). Watzl’s suggestion here fits in with a growing interest in the philosophy of mind in the idea of affordances for both mental and bodily actions (McClelland, 2020). However, according to our argument the idea of a (disembodied) mental affordance is inappropriate when it comes to perceptual attention. We suggest that the idea that embodied mental action plays a role in structuring the field of experience is congenial to recent enactive work on the field of affordances (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014). Rather than defining itself in contrast to enactive approaches, the activity view of attention could benefit from the conceptual apparatus provided by embodied and enactive approaches (Dreyfus, 2002; E. Gibson & Rader, 1979; J. J. Gibson, 1979; Hurley, 1998b; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014; Thompson, 2007).

References:


https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0582-14.2014
Article 4. Bare attention, dereification, and meta-awareness in mindfulness: A phenomenological critique

Odysseus Stone and Dan Zahavi

1 Introduction

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

In this chapter, we focus on a different issue. As is well-known, recent years have witnessed an explosion of interest in mindfulness. Psychotherapeutic Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) are now mainstream: for example, mindfulness is available as a standard psychotherapy in the United Kingdom, where a recent cross-party parliamentary report also recommended implementing MBIs in various areas of public life, including education and the

---


54 We are grateful to Andreas Roepstorff, Shaun Gallagher, Rick Repetti, and especially Evan Thompson for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
criminal justice system (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group 2015). Mindfulness is also rapidly making its way into such diverse and surprising settings as military training grounds, corporate boardrooms, and stock-market trading floors. At the same time, scientific research on mindfulness has skyrocketed, particularly in clinical psychology and cognitive neuroscience. The wider cultural impact beyond this has been enormous: many people now practice mindfulness in both non-clinical and non-Buddhist contexts worldwide via meditation apps like Headspace and 10% Happier, and mindfulness and its discontents regularly feature in the pages of major international news outlets like The New York Times and The Guardian.

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

Before we begin, a brief note on strategy. Anyone who decides to engage with mindfulness is immediately confronted with a number of tricky methodological problems. Mindfulness is a notoriously slippery concept. In the current psychological literature, there is little agreement about how best to define it (van Dam et al. 2017). Furthermore, one cannot simply resolve the issue by
turning to Buddhist scholarship. For one thing, there are many traditions within Buddhism, and many Buddhist accounts of mindfulness (Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2013, Dunne 2015, Gethin 2015, Shaw 2020). In terms of Buddhist influences, the contemporary mindfulness movement is shaped by diverse traditions with different theoretical commitments. Furthermore, Buddhism (like all religions) changes and evolves. A growing literature has begun to shed light on the complex ways in which the contemporary mindfulness movement is shaped by what scholars and historians call Buddhist Modernism—a 150-year-and-running process of cultural transformation that began with Buddhism’s confrontation with modernity in the context of colonialism (McMahan 2008, Braun 2013, Thompson 2020). Faced with all this complexity, one has to make a choice. Our choice has been to engage primarily with more popular accounts of mindfulness. Insofar as we engage with Buddhist scholars, we focus on their work in collaboration with psychologists for secular and non-philosophical audiences. What view of the mind and its relation to the world do we find in such writings? An objection that someone might have to this type of approach is that we are picking rather low-hanging fruit. Would it not be more fitting for us to engage with one or another technical Buddhist account of meditation, or with adjacent issues in cross-cultural or Buddhist philosophy? There are surely many things one could criticize about the popularity of mindfulness, not least its late-capitalistic packaging, i.e., what David Loy and Ronald Purser call ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser and Loy 2013, Purser 2019). But—the objection continues—it isn’t clear that we need the resources of phenomenology in order to make these criticisms.

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

2 Mindfulness in MBSR and MBCT

The contemporary notion of mindfulness is heavily indebted to its framing within the context of Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and John Teasdale, Mark Williams, and Zindel Segal’s Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Kabat-Zinn developed MBSR in the late 1970s and 1980s at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester in order to help patients suffering from chronic conditions, especially chronic pain. He has since published a number of books outlining and further developing this approach, which have been extremely influential in bringing MBSR to a wide international audience of clinicians, psychologists, and practitioners (e.g., Kabat-Zinn 1990, 1994, 2005). Teasdale, Williams, and Segal developed MBCT in the 1990s as a maintenance therapy for depressive relapse. The inspiration for MBCT came from certain perceived similarities between the Buddhist analysis of suffering and Aaron Beck’s Cognitive Therapy (CT) approach to emotional disorder (Segal, Williams, Teasdale, and Kabat-Zinn 2018, p. 37).

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

we are perpetually preoccupied, lost in our minds, absorbed in our thoughts, obsessed with the past or the future, consumed with our plans and our desires, diverted by our need to be entertained, driven by our expectations, fears, or cravings of the moment, however unconscious or habitual all this may be. And therefore, we are amazingly out of touch in some way or other with the present moment, the moment that is actually presenting itself to us now (Kabat-Zinn 2005, p. 118, 1990, pp. 24-5, 135).

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

55 See the collection in Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2013) for the controversies surrounding the Buddhist origins of this concept of mindfulness.
they “distort or detract from…bare experience itself” (id., p. 119), creating a “distorted reality” which is at the heart of a great deal of ordinary suffering (Kabat-Zinn 1990, p. 70).

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

If a bell is rung, what do we hear? Most people hear a “bell,” or if there’s a noise outside, we might say that we hear a car or a truck going by. But that’s not what we hear. We hear certain sounds, certain vibrations, and then immediately the mind names it as “bell,” “car,” “truck,” or “person.” We confuse the concepts of the thinking mind with the reality of direct experience. (Goldstein and Kornfield 2001, p. 25)

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

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

When your attention is relatively stable on the breath, try shifting your awareness to the process of thinking itself. Let go of the breath and just watch thoughts come into and leave the field of your attention. ... Try to perceive them as 'events' in your mind. (Kabat-Zinn 1990, p. 70)

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

While the focus in MBCT is primarily on discursive thoughts (in particular, rumination),

---

56 Arguably, two quite distinct ideas are included under the heading of decentering in MBCT. The first is the idea that we should experience our thoughts and perceptions merely as mental events, rather than as (accurate takes on) reality; the second is the idea that we should disidentify from our thoughts and perceptions, i.e., experience them as neither part of, nor owned by, a self. These are not always distinguished clearly. We focus on the first idea.
the authors ultimately claim that decentering shouldn’t be limited to such thoughts but applied “also to feelings, body sensations, and impulses to act, that is, to the whole mind-body state” (Segal, Williams, Teasdale, and Kabat-Zinn 2013, p. 55).

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

For example, during rumination, a script including thoughts such as “I am a failure” may arise, and when it does, it can appear to be an accurate description of oneself such that a depressed mood is enhanced or sustained… Or when thinking about a stressful conversation that occurred yesterday, the series of thoughts that represent the event in one’s mind may present themselves as a replaying of the memory of the conversation, to the point that a physiological stress response is induced. Likewise, when thinking about one’s favorite food, the thoughts that represent the food can be taken to be real in such a way that one salivates… These are all instances of high reification, in that thoughts present themselves as if the objects or situations they represent are occurring in the present moment. (Id., p. 639)

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

3 Bare Attention and the Phenomenology of Perception

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

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

However, we need to tread carefully here, since the relationship between experience and conceptual thought is a vexed philosophical issue, which plagues both Western philosophy (analytic and continental) (Scheer 2013) and Indian Buddhist philosophy (Sharf 2018, Thompson forthcoming). Now, there is a way of conceiving of perceptual experience, conceptual thought, and their interrelation, which one finds in the popular mindfulness literature, that ought to be rejected on phenomenological grounds. On this conception, our sensibility supplies us with neutral data onto which structure and significance must be imposed in the form of concepts. Consider again the idea that we don’t really hear the bell, but only some pattern of sound sensations or physical vibrations, to which we then apply a label.

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

No phenomenologist has endorsed such a view. Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty all dispute that what we initially experience are mere sense-data. As Heidegger writes,

I hear a car: the psychologists say that I first have sensations of noise and sound that subsequently are apprehended as the noise of a car. But this is a pure construction. What I first hear is not a sensation of sound, I first simply hear the car. (2007, p. 286).

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

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

Recall, however, that mindfulness is supposed to be integrated into mundane activities like washing dishes, doing laundry, etc. It is precisely here – in the throng of ordinary life, and not on the meditation cushion – that mindfulness is supposed to bear its therapeutic fruits. As Kabat-Zinn points out, “The heart of the practice in MBSR lies in what we call informal meditation practice, i.e., mindfulness in everyday life” (2000, p. 240). But it is difficult to understand how the mindful subject could navigate the vicissitudes of ordinary life if experience lacked the kind of significance provided by the as-structure. As Dale S. Wright says of the Zen master:

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

The repeated reference to present-centered awareness and the insistence that one ought to be exclusively concerned with the present moment is also in deep tension with the absolutely fundamental role that phenomenology ascribes to temporality. One of Husserl’s decisive philosophical contributions was his analysis of inner time-consciousness, his discovery of the extent to which normal experience involves all three temporal modes (present, past, and future). On his

account, even a simple perception involves an interplay of not-now, now, and not-yet-now: a retaining of what has just happened, an openness to what is currently happening, and an anticipation of what is just about to occur. Temporal structures are crucial to perception and action, and for making sense of everyday experience. We live in a coherent and meaningful world precisely because we are able to navigate through time.

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

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

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

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

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

However we may decide the question of the existence or non-existence of phenomenal external things, we cannot doubt that the reality of each such perceived thing cannot be understood as the reality of a perceived complex of sensations in a perceiving consciousness (Husserl 2001, II, p. 342).

The phenomenalism that Husserl is objecting to can not only be found in the mindfulness literature on decentering and dereification, but has also recently gained momentum in cognitive neuroscience, where its supporters defend a form of radical neurorepresentationalism – radical because the claim isn’t simply that our access to the external world is mediated by neural representations, but rather that the world of experience is itself a representational construct, a brain-generated simulation. As Frith puts it, “My perception is not of the world, but of my brain’s model of the world” (Frith 2007, p. 132). Whatever we see, hear, touch, smell, etc. is all contained in the brain, but projected outwards and externalized, such that we in normal life fail to recognize it as a
construct and mistake it for reality itself (Metzinger 2009, pp. 6-7). The visually appearing sunflower, the touched ice cube, the heard song, etc., are all brain-generated representations, internal to and contained in the brain. Our experience is transparent, in the sense that we do not appreciate its de facto representational nature: “even if we believe [that the world-model] is an internal construct, we can experience it only as given and never as constructed” (id., p. 44).

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

A mental event is said to be transparent when we have conscious access to its content, but not to its non-intentional structure or construction process. Crucially, transparency provides the phenomenal quality of being directly ‘in touch’ with the represented entity, and is therefore linked to our subjective confidence in its ‘reality’. The opacification of mental events during meditative practice is thus equivalent to fostering their dereification (Lutz et al. 2015), so that their provisional, constructed, dependent and ultimately impermanent nature begins to be intimately realized. (2019, pp. 169-70)

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

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

We must admit that we find these formulations somewhat surprising. After all, they invite an obvious objection, namely: Is the account not self-undermining? On the one hand, we are being asked to view our intentional, object-directed thoughts and experiences with a certain suspicion, as mere mental events, as opposed to accurate takes on reality. On the other hand, according to the formulations above, we are supposed to gain this insight from a particular point of view on our psychological life. But isn’t this point of view precisely a perspective consisting of intentional thoughts and experiences, and therefore something of which we should also be suspicious? If we are to be consistent, should we not also dereify our meta-cognitive thoughts, and abstain from viewing them as accurate reflections of (psychological) reality?
One possible retort to this objection might involve distinguishing between different types of meta-awareness. Indeed, a recent paper distinguishes between an intermittent, propositional, and representational form of meta-awareness, and a sustained, non-propositional, and non-representational form (Dunne et al. 2019). The authors suggest that the latter form of meta-awareness is trained in certain styles of mindfulness, and might ultimately be nondual, i.e., involve no intentional object-directedness whatsoever (cf. Dunne 2011, 2015). Introducing this distinction opens up a potential route for Lutz et al. to handle our criticism, since they could claim that it is precisely the latter form of meta-awareness that is supposed to undergird dereification. Since this type of meta-awareness does not itself involve any sort of reification, it need not be dereified itself.

Whatever the merits of this kind of response may be, it would obviously entail Lutz et al. biting the bullet when it comes to the claim that dereification might also occur via the former, representational type of meta-awareness. Recall their claim that in order to achieve dereification a novice practitioner might begin by using a cognitive reappraisal such as “This is just a thought” (Lutz et al. 2015, p. 640). Given the way Lutz et al. conceptualize dereification, this claim is incoherent. Why should we take the cognitive reappraisal to be any bit more revealing of reality than the initial world-directed thought? Furthermore, one might wonder how we are supposed to articulate any of the insights that are supposed to be gained via nondual meta-awareness on this account. Afterall, even if it were possible to remain in a purely nondual state, the moment one begins to think about the experience in question, including conceptualizing it in terms such as ‘dereification’, ‘nonduality’, etc. one is back in the domain of propositional metacognition (cf. Thompson 2020, p. 138-9). Given the extreme implications of Lutz et al.’s (2015) views on dereification, this is no minor problem, and indeed seems to threaten their overall project in a quite fundamental way.
The question, of course, is whether the contrast between the different forms of meta-awareness isn’t being drawn in too stark terms to begin with. The parallel with phenomenology is once again instructive. Earlier we pointed out how, in contrast to Kabat-Zinn et al., the phenomenologists would highlight a certain continuity between our pre-predicative and our conceptualized experience of the world. A parallel point has been made with respect to the relationship between pre-reflective and reflective self-experience. For example, most phenomenologists recognize that, rather than merely copying or repeating the original experience, reflection actually transforms it, or, as Husserl explicitly admitted, it alters it (1960, p. 34). However, Husserl also speaks about reflection as a process that – in the best of circumstances – discloses, disentangles, explicates, articulates, and accentuates those components and structures that were implicitly contained in the pre-reflective experience (2008, p. 242). It might consequently make sense to view the phenomenological position as being situated between two extremes. On the one hand, we have the view that reflection merely copies or mirrors pre-reflective experience faithfully; on the other, the view that reflection distorts lived experience irredeemably. The middle course is to recognize that reflection involves both a gain and a loss.

For most phenomenologists, reflection is constrained by what is pre-reflectively lived through; it is answerable to experiential facts and is not constitutively self-fulfilling. But at the same time, they recognize that reflection qua thematic self-experience does not simply reproduce the lived experiences unaltered, and that this may be precisely what makes reflection cognitively valuable (Zahavi 2003, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2020). Accepting this middle way – to borrow a phrase – when it comes to reflection would open up a route for Lutz et al. to articulate the insights that are supposed to be gained via nondual meta-awareness, a possibility that is paramount to their overall project. However, notice that in the very same move they would be forced to give up the extremely general and highly pessimistic conclusion they draw about our intentional thoughts and experiences,
since they would have to concede that at least some forms of reflective self-awareness actually involve a continuity with pre-reflective experience, rather than a distortion of it. In the end, one wonders whether the account of dereification and the notion of intentionality implied in it don’t require some rather major revisions in order to accommodate all of these concerns.  

5 Conclusion
As we have seen, the contemporary notion of mindfulness contains a number of more or less explicit metaphysical and epistemological proposals about experience and the mind-world relation. One idea is that our discursive thoughts, interpretations, memories, etc. ‘veil’ or ‘filter’ our access to reality, whereas mindfulness involves somehow lifting or neutralizing this layer so as to be able to enter into a more intimate and immediate relationship with things ‘as they really are.’ Another related idea, implicit in the notion of decentering and spelled out in detail in Lutz et al.’s (2015) account of dereification, is that the intentional objects of experience are, in fact, mere psychic

58 Perhaps someone might seek to deflate this criticism by claiming that the relevant question to ask when it comes to MBIs concerns their efficacy, which is an empirical matter. However, it is perfectly legitimate to target the theoretical claims of MBIs independently of the empirical findings. Conversely, it is illegitimate to argue straightforwardly from the efficacy of therapeutic interventions to the truth of their theoretical claims. (Compare the case with psychoanalysis). There is considerable evidence, moreover, that the efficacy of therapeutic interventions is partly an effect of the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the therapist and the patient (Jørgensen 2019), and evidence that the efficacy of MBIs, in particular, may be partly a matter of ‘common factors’ such as instructor alliance and group therapeutic factors (Canby et al. 2021). And in any case, the empirical evidence for the efficacy of MBIs is itself a mixed bag (van Dam et al. 2017).
phenomena, mental events, or constructions, which we habitually mistake for worldly reality itself. According to this second story, mindfulness involves gaining cognitive insight into the mentally constructed nature of our lifeworld. In our view, both of these positions mischaracterise experience and the mind-world relation, and both face serious difficulties. Phenomenology offers an alternative picture. Our subjective and affective contributions, including those of the thinking mind, do not corrupt an otherwise pure encounter with reality, but rather serve to disclose the latter in its meaning. And the world of experience is not a mental event, psychological construct, or constellation of sensations, but is rather the world itself.

**Endnotes**
References


