

A Phenomenological Critique of Mindfulness

Abstract:

How do such normative affectivities as 'unconditionally intrinsic goodness', 'spontaneous compassion', 'luminosity', 'blissfulness', 'a calm and peaceful life guided by the fundamental value of nonviolence' emerge as ultimate outcomes of a philosophy of groundlessness? Aren't they motivated by a sort of 'will to goodness', a preferencing of one affective dimension over others? It would seem that groundlessness for Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson doesn't apply to the thinking of affect and desire. Despite their claim that nihilism cannot be overcome by assimilating groundlessness to a notion of the will, they appear not to recognize that the positive affectivities they associate with meditative practice are, as dispositions of feeling opposed to other dispositions, themselves forms of willing.

In *The Embodied Mind*, Varela and Thompson assert that Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger's phenomenologies produce 'after the fact' theoretical reflections that miss the richness of immediate concrete pre-reflective experience as present in the here-and-now. But Varela and Thompson's separating of being and becoming in their empirical approach leads them to misread these phenomenologists, and as a result to mistakenly give preference to mindfulness approaches which fall short of the radicality of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Varela and Thompson follow Husserl's method of reduction up to a point, stripping away acquired concepts associated with a naive belief in the independence of subject and object. They don't complete the reduction though, allowing subject and object to occupy separate moments. Varela and Thompson succeed in reducing materialist physicalism to fundamental co-dependency, but still find it necessary to ground intentional processes in a foundation of temporary self-inhering objectivities (the "arising and subsiding, emergence and decay" of transitional forms which inhere in themselves for a moment before relating to an outside).

Varela and Thompson found the affectively, valuatively felt contingency of particular acts of other-relatedness in what they presume to be a primordial neutral point of pre-reflective conscious auto-affective awareness. But the phenomenologists show that attention, as a species of intention, is sense-making, which means it is sense-changing. Attention is affectively, valuatively and meaningfully implicated in what it attends to as co-participant in the synthesis, creation, constitution of objects of regard. As auto-affection turns reflexively back toward itself, what it finds is not the normative sameness and constancy of a neutral positivity (blissful, selfless compassion and benevolence toward all phenomena) but a newly sensing being. Mindful self-reflexivity, expecting to find only what it put there, instead is confronted with the self-displacement of its being exposed to and affected by an other. The basis of our awareness of a world isn't simply compassionate, empathic relational co-determinacy, but the motivated experience of disturbing CHANGE in relational co-determinacy.

Introduction:

Enactivism, the Subject and the Object:

The innovative nature of the psychological concepts introduced within *The Embodied Mind* impelled Thompson and Varela to seek out a richer conceptual language than that available within cognitive science prior to the embodied turn. While the dualistic thinking of such figures as Descartes, Locke, Hume, Leibnitz and Kant formed the philosophical basis of first generation cognitivism, Varela and Thompson's rejection of the Cartesian separation of subject and object in favor of codeterminacy, embodiment and self-organization determined both the subjective and the objective aspects of the world to be groundless in themselves, that is, only meaningful in their dynamic interplay. The new reality for science of the loss of the Cartesian subject coupled with the fact of a radically interconnected world led them to incorporate ideas from two disparate traditions of thought. Pragmatist and phenomenological philosophy, in particular the work of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, make subject-object interdependency fundamental to experience. And the middle way of Mahayana Buddhism shows a path toward consciousness of universal empathic connection in a groundless world.

But while the enactive, embodied thinking of Varela, Thompson, and Rosch(1991)) made significant advances over the more traditional perspectives in psychology which they targeted (1st generation cognitivism, symbolic computationalism), a number of writers have argued that, despite their claims to have assimilated, and even exceeded the reaches of phenomenological insight, in relation to the work of Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and Heidegger, enactivism fails to depart from traditional philosophical assumptions in a number of respects. Their critiques focus on the claim that Varela and Thompson's approach to empirical methodology and corresponding mathematical idealizations remains within the naive attitude rather than being consonant with a transcendently reduced phenomenological access to the world according to Merleau-Ponty and Husserl.

For instance, Christopher Pollard argues that Varela and Thompson succumb to Merleau-Ponty's critique of the Gestaltists and Gelb-Goldstein, by founding relational interdependency in a form of objectivist naturalism.

"Gelb and Goldstein ... have never named this third term between the psychic and the physiological, between the 'for itself' and the 'in itself' to which their analyses always led them and which we call existence. Hence their earliest works often fall back on the traditional dichotomy of body and consciousness (p.140n)" (Merleau-Ponty and Embodied cognitive science, Christopher Pollard).

Furthermore, Varela's attempt to translate Husserl's notions of internal and absolute time into the naturalized language of complex non-linear dynamical systems doesn't succeed in thinking beyond third person clock time and formal geometrical notions of space. (Francisco Varela's neurophenomenology of time: temporality of consciousness explained? Esteban Vargas, Andrés Canales-Johnson, Claudio Fuentes)

In my own work(See *The Meaning of Feeling*(2011),<http://www.janushead.org/12-1/soffer.pdf>), I

have argued that, in comparison with certain phenomenological approaches, the capacity of enactivism to depict a meaning-making organization generating thoroughgoing affectation, interaction and novelty may be hampered by the reliance on a notion of psycho-biological and interpersonal entities as discrete states. Residing within each of the myriad temporary subagents and bits comprising a psychological system is a supposed literal, albeit near-meaningless, identity. While the role of identity in enactivism is less prominent than in classical cognitivist frameworks (it replaces the idea of a centralized, self-present identity with that of a reciprocal system of contextually changing states distributed ecologically as psychologically embodied and socially embedded), I have alleged that their failure to banish the lingering notion of a literal, if fleeting, status residing within the parts of a psycho-bio-social organization may be responsible for the covering over of a rich, profoundly intricate process of change within the assumed frozen space of each part.

What could be the basis of my claim that Varela and Thompson treat the parts of a psychological organization as ossified centers resistant to novelty, considering that the dynamical properties of enactive embodied systems specifically determine psychological processes as non-representational and non-decoupleable variables changing continuously, concurrently and interdependently over time?

The issue here centers on the understanding of the phenomenological experience of time, the philosophical discussion of which has been ongoing since Aristotle. Varela(1999b)) recognizes that the present is not properly understood as an isolated 'now' point; it involves not just the current event but also the prior context framing the new entity. We don't hear sequences of notes in a piece of music as isolated tones but recognize them as elements of an unfolding context. As William James wrote:"...earlier and later are present to each other in an experience that feels either only on condition of feeling both together" (Essays In Philosophy(1978) p.77).

The key question is how this 'both together' is to be construed. Is the basis of change within a bodily organization, interpersonal interaction, and even the phenomenal experience of time itself, the function of a collision between a separately constituted subjective context and present objects, or is it instead an interweaving of a subject and object already changed by each other, radically interbled or interaffected? I contend that for Varela and Thompson it is the former, that they conceive the 'both-together' of the pairing of subject and object as a conjunction of separate, adjacent moments. I am not suggesting that these phases are considered as unrelated, only that they each are presumed to carve out their own temporary identities.

This thematic appears within Varela and Thompson's psychological approach as a linkage of self-affectation to an embodied neural organization of reciprocally causal relations among non-decoupleable parts or subprocesses. While these components interact constantly (Varela(1996b) says "...in brain and behavior there is never a stopping or dwelling cognitive state, but only permanent change punctuated by transient [stabilities] underlying a momentary act"(p.291) , it doesn't seem as if one could go so far as to claim that the very SENSE of each participant in a neural organization is intrinsically and immediately dependent on the meanings of the others. I suggest it would be more accurate to claim that each affects and is affected by the others as a collision of temporary bodies. Varela(1999a) offers "...lots of simple agents having

simple properties may be brought together, even in a haphazard way, to give rise to what appears to an observer as a purposeful and integrated whole"(p.52). The bare existence of each of these agents may be said to PRECEDE its interaction with other agents, in that each agent occupies and inheres in its own state, presenting its own instantaneous properties for a moment, apart from, even as it is considered conjoined to, the context which conditions it and the future which is conditioned by it.

Mindfulness and the Living Present:

My aim in this paper is to show how Varela and Thompson's separating of being and becoming into discrete moments in their empirical approach leads them to misread Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological models, and as a result to mistakenly give preference to mindfulness approaches which, while in many respects consonant with the pragmatism of Dewey, James and Putnam, fall short of the radicality of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.

What do Varela and Thompson think mindfulness approaches have to offer that the phenomenological thinking of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger cannot provide? They assert that Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger's accounts produce 'after the fact' theoretical reflections that miss the richness of immediate concrete pre-reflective experience as present in the here-and-now.

"Husserl's turn toward experience and "the things themselves" was entirely *theoretical*, or, to make the point the other way around, it completely lacked any *pragmatic* dimension." "Indeed, this criticism would hold even for Heidegger's existential phenomenology, as well as for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of lived experience. Both stressed the pragmatic, embodied context of human experience, but in a purely theoretical way." (Embodied Mind)

Varela and Thompson's claim that Buddhist-originating practices of mindful awareness reorientate experiencing from a phenomenological 'after the fact' theoretical stance to the immediate here and now centers on its techniques of attentive meditation.

Let's take a look at the structural features and affective implications of Varela and Thompson's interpretation of mindful attention in relation to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and Heidegger's accounts of primordial consciousness.

Varela and Thompson distinguish two stages of meditation:

Mindful meditation selectively directs attention to either the focused observing of particular objects (concentrating the mind) or to a non-object centered panoramic perspective, a reflexive turning toward the "very nature of consciousness".

Traditionally, texts talk about two stages of practice: calming or taming the mind (Sanskrit: *shamatha*) and the development of insight (Sanskrit: *vipashyana*). Shamatha, when used as a separate practice, is in fact a concentration technique for learning to hold ("tether" is the

traditional term) the mind to a single object.. The purpose of calming the mind in Buddhism is not to become absorbed but to render the mind able to be present with itself long enough to gain insight into its own nature and functioning.” (Embodied Mind)

It is the insight stage that forms the core of Varela and Thompson’s claims for the ethical force of mindfulness. The following are some of the structural-formal features of this stage of supreme contemplative consciousness that Varela and Thompson mention:

infinite, eternal, non-conceptual, internal, sheer awareness, no sensory objects, sustained attention to the here and now, mindful awareness as panoramic perspective, essential nature, transcending existence and non-existence, free of conceptual mediation, non-intentional (non object-directedness), self-reflexive, self-luminous, undifferentiated awareness, no sense of distinct subject aware of a distinct object, non-reflective and open awareness, free of thoughts and images, intense mindfulness of what arises from moment to moment in the mind to undo conditioned habits.

Implicit in Varela and Thompson’s mindfulness account is a theory of attention. Contemplative attending is a neutral observational gaze occurring prior to and separate from intendings of specific objects, but which provides the primordial condition of possibility for all intentional acts, habits, objectivities.

“...meditation is thought to support a “bare attention”, or “passive observational stance”, unobtrusive enough to avoid disturbing target experiences or coloring their description with theoretical preconceptions” (Thompson, Lutz and Cosmelli, 2005, pp. 69-75).

Mindful meditations is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn 1994, p. 4).

” 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 which 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, 2002, p. 168). (Davis and Thompson)

“...with the full achievement of Samatha, one disengages the attention from the previous meditative object, and the entire continuum of one’s attention is focused single-pointedly, non-conceptually, and internally in the very nature of consciousness.... Only the aspects of sheer awareness, clarity, and joy of the mind appear, without the intrusion of any sensory objects (Wallace, 1999, p. 182). (Thompson, Empathy and Consciousness, 2001)

Varela and Thompson’s dissatisfaction with the phenomenologies of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger stems from their belief that phenomenology begins from intentional and reflective acts as derived and secondary constructions built on top of the immediate neutral pre-objectifying awareness performed by the act of mindful attention. Phenomenological approaches can only indirectly point to this immediacy ‘from the outside’ via theoretical reflective and intensive modes. Intentionality is the formation of conditioned habit, and attention is the mind’s immediate access to the field of experience prior to the construction of causal relations. Varela

and Thompson's belief that the neutral observational awareness of groundlessness afforded by mindfulness techniques gives immediate access to the here and now makes mindfulness an observation rather than a creation mechanism. That is to say, meditative attention gives neutral access to the immediate richness of changeable experience without itself comprising a constitutive, sense-making activity. It is instead a sense-observing process.

Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on Attention:

Contrary to Varela and Thomson's assertions concerning the primacy of neutral attention, Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's discussions of the philosophical history of the concept of attention would appear to place Varela and Thompson's theory of attention within the context of empiricist and idealist orientations put into question by phenomenology.

In their depiction of an independence between the objects of awareness and the mind's attending to it via a neutral re-objectifying observational stance, Varela and Thompson share features with empiricist(sensualist) and idealist(intellectualist) philosophical approaches to the concept of attention.

Merleau-Ponty states:

"We must now show that its intellectualist [idealist] antithesis is on the same level as empiricism itself. Both take the objective world as the object of their analysis, when this comes first neither in time nor in virtue of its meaning; and both are incapable of expressing the peculiar way in which perceptual consciousness constitutes its object. Both keep their distance in relation to perception, instead of sticking closely to it. This may be shown by studying the history of the concept of attention."

"...in a consciousness which constitutes everything, or rather which eternally possesses the intelligible structure of all its objects, just as in empiricist consciousness which constitutes nothing at all, attention remains an abstract and ineffective power, because it has no work to perform. Consciousness is no less intimately linked with objects of which it is unheeding than with those which interest it, and the additional clearness brought by the act of attention does not herald any new relationship. It therefore becomes once more a light which does not change its character with the various objects which it shines upon, and once more empty acts of attention are brought in, in place of 'the modes and specific directions of intention'.(Cassirer)

Merleau-Ponty explains that to attend to any experience is not merely to shine a neutral light on it, but to articulate a new sense, the 'active constitution of a new object'. It is to identify a new figure and in doing so, to transform the sense of the previous figure along with its background.

"Attention, therefore, as a general and formal activity, does not exist." Rather than there being a general capacity for neutral observation, a universal kind of attention necessary for any moment of consciousness, "it is literally a question of creation. " "Attention is "a change of the structure of consciousness, the establishment of a new dimension of experience, the setting forth of an a priori... To pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as figures. "

"The miracle of consciousness consists in its bringing to light, through attention, phenomena

which re-establish the unity of the object in a new dimension at the very moment when they destroy it. Thus attention is neither an association of images, nor the return to itself of thought already in control of its objects, but the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon.”

Husserl, like Merleau-Ponty, sees attention as an intensive act of creation rather than “a light which does not change its character with the various objects which it shines upon.”

“Attention is one of the chief themes of modern psychology. Nowhere does the predominantly sensualistic [empiricist] character of modern psychology show itself more strikingly than in the treatment of this theme, for not even the essential connection between attention and intentionality-- this fundamental fact: that attention of every sort is nothing else than a fundamental species of *intensive* modifications-- has ever, to my knowledge, been emphasized before.”

“Dazed by the confusion between object and mental content, one forgets that 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...One forgets that... an intending, or reference is present, that *aims* at an object, a consciousness is present that is the consciousness *of* this object. The mere existence of a content in the psychic interplay is, however, not at all this being-meant or being-referred-to. This first arises when this content is ‘noticed’, such notice being a look directed towards it, a presentation of it. To define the presentation of a content as the mere fact of its being experienced, and in consequence to give the name ‘presentations’ to all experienced contents, is one of the worst conceptual distortions known to philosophy.”(Ideas I).

The co-dependent, embodied nature of the enactive mind would seem to insulate mindful attention from Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s critiques of sensualist and idealist approaches to attention. Varela and Thompson have insisted that the meditative mind that is attending to the rising and passing away of temporary forms is not a box in the sense of a Cartesian theater in which contents display themselves before a passive onlooker. On the contrary, with regard to concentrated attention, they have pointed to the conditioning effect of selective attention on objective appearance. For instance, concentrated attention on the thought of an object can have an anticipatory effect, ‘priming’ the perceived object for more rapid identification, while focused attention can determine which of two competing images will be seen, and for how long, in binocular rivalry studies (From the Five Aggregates to Phenomenal Consciousness. Towards a Cross-Cultural Cognitive Science. Jake H. Davis and Evan Thompson).

But these examples concern the use of attention to alter the circumstances of the appearance of content whose constitution cannot be said to be inseparable from the act of attention itself. Specifically in the case of non-object directed attention, according to Varela and Thompson intentional acts are not involved, there is no ‘aiming at’ objects. The mind’s attention to the FACT of irreducible inter-determinacy (pre-reflective reflexive auto-affection) and change in the SENSE of embodiment over time (through reflective and intentional acts of selective attention) are treated as distinct and separable moments, with the latter being constituted out of the former

in a second step of aiming at objects. To the extent that non-intending, non-object-oriented primordial awareness is not implicated in, that is, does not participate directly in the moment to moment constituting and re-constituting of the sense of what arises and passes away, and instead maintains itself as a distanced neutrality, it encapsulates and totalizes this experience of arising and passing away in an idealism.

For Husserl, concentrated attention does not simply prime, select, reinforce or condition the appearance of objects. Rather, the focused attention on an object is a synthesis of creative acts which first constitute and then continue to alter the nature of the object that is being 'noticed'. The object in itself is transcendent, never seen as an actual whole, but rather from moment to moment as a changing concatenation of retentive memory, protentional anticipation and impressions of immediate sense. Turning toward and heeding an object implies a belief in its continuity, a continuity which is nothing other than this constantly changing flow of sensations synthetically held together as unitary via memory and anticipation. Thus, the initial 'turning toward' an object is already a synthetic act of constitution. Attention, as a species of intention, is sense-making, which means it is sense-changing. Attention is affectively, valuatively and meaningfully implicated in what it attends to as co-participant in the synthesis, creation, constitution of objects of regard..

“ We are continuously directed toward the object itself; we execute the uninterrupted consciousness of experiencing it. The consciousness of its existence is here a belief in act; by virtue of the accord in which the perceptive appearances flow off in original presentation, retention, and protention, an accord of continuous self-affirmation, belief is continuous certainty of belief, which has its certainty in this originality of the object in its living being-present.”(Experience and Judgement)

Attention involves itself in the co-creation of sense as a striving, an intending beyond itself.

“ In general, attention is a tending of the ego toward an intentional object, toward a unity which “appears” continually in the change of the modes of its givenness and which belongs to the essential structure of a specific act of the ego (an ego-act in the pregnant sense of the word); it is a tending-toward in realization.

“...in the continuity of the experience of the object, there is an intention which goes beyond the given and its momentary mode of givenness and tends toward a progressive plus ultra. It is not only a progressive having-consciousness-of but a striving toward a new consciousness in the form of an interest in the enrichment of the “self” of the object which is forthcoming eo ipso with the prolongation of the apprehension. Thus the tendency of the turning-toward continues as a tendency toward complete fulfillment. “the inception of an act of turning-toward, of paying attention to what exists, puts into play an activity with a tendency, a striving. It is a striving toward realization, a doing which includes different forms of discontinuance and completion.”(Experience and Judgement)

Derrida captures the primordial nature of awareness as sense's intending ahead of itself in the following passages:“The coincidence between the constituting and the constituted moments is “the absolute unity of sense's movement, i.e., the unity of the noncoincidence and of the indefinite co-implication of the constituted and constituting moments in the absolute identity of a Living Present that dialectically projects and maintains itself.”

The living present as the absolute of intentionality “is passage, wherein every adventure is a change of direction [conversion] and every return to the origin an audacious move toward the horizon . ” “Being “is a "sense, " a teleological ought-to-be which constitutes being as movement ” (Introduction to Husserl’s Origin of Geometry)

Heidegger also speaks of the intentional structure of motivated attending to as a letting oneself be affected, being-ahead-of-oneself (the moment of awareness as foreign and familiar at the same time). “One cannot construct being-in-the-world from willing, wishing, urge, and propensity as psychical acts.”(Zollikon).The desire for this conversation is determined by the task I have before me. This is the motive, the "for the sake of which" [*Weswegen*]. The determining factor is not an urge or a drive, driving and urging me from behind, but something standing before me, a task I am involved in, something I am charged with. This, in turn—this relation to something I am charged with—is possible only if I am "ahead" [*vorweg*] of myself.” (Zollikon). This relation with something standing before me isn’t my passive observing of an object passing through my field of awareness, but a meeting between what confronts me and what I project ahead of me from my having been. My intending isn’t a theoretical but a temporal process underlying the neutrality of passive attention, and revealing the latter as a naive (inauthentic) mode of awareness.

How would Husserl reinterpret the notion of mindful attention as “ the acknowledgment and acceptance as it is, of each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field”? (Bishop, Lau et al. 2004, p. 232).”).

As a phenomenological process, the achievement of such a condition of mind involves acts of reflection and abstractive intention constituting a relational totality out of separately experienced parts, events, objects. The acknowledging and accepting of each particular takes place as a series of constitutive steps , beginning with a change of interest away from the grasping of each particular, toward an abstracting away of everything meaningful about the parts except their belonging to a relational whole. The achievement of this whole requires a reflective, retentive-protentive holding together of past parts simultaneously with newly appearing ones. Whereas for Varela and Thompson, this panoramic awareness of co-determinacy is the primordial basis of consciousness in general(“the very nature of consciousness”), for Husserl arriving at the consciousness of groundlessness only achieves a partial reduction of naturalism. Varela and Thompson follow Husserl’s method of reduction up to a point, stripping away acquired concepts associated with a naive belief in the independence of subject and object from each other. They don’t complete the reduction though, allowing subject and object to occupy separate moments.

As a result, the achieving of Varela and Thompson’s optimal state of ‘sheer’ groundless awareness is the attainment of an intentionally based empiricism. That is to say, Varela and Thompson have succeeded in reducing materialist physicalism to fundamental co-dependency, but still find it necessary to root intentional processes in a foundation of temporary self-inhering objectivities (the “arising and subsiding, emergence and decay” of transitional forms which inhere in themselves for a moment before relating to an outside). “in the logic of Darwin’s account of evolution and the Buddhist analysis of experience into co-dependent arising, we are concerned with the processual transformation of the past into the future

through the intermediary of transitional forms that in themselves have no permanent substance.” (Embodied Mind). Husserl’s admonition to Franz Brentano may be apropos here:

“Anyone who misconstrues the sense and performance of transcendental phenomenological reduction is still entangled in psychologism; he confounds intentional psychology and transcendental phenomenology.. he falls a victim to the inconsistency of a transcendental philosophy that stays within the natural realm . ”(Cartesian Meditations, p.86).

A thoroughgoing phenomenological reduction would reveal the ‘sheer awareness’ of the ‘very nature of consciousness’ as the object of an intentional noesis that, in this act of sense, is at the same time striving, intending beyond itself toward a more unitary fulfillment. No reduction is complete without including this anticipative self-exceeding within any act of awareness. Furthermore, as an intention, the sense act which makes appear the relational whole is temporal, meaning that from one moment to the next new sense acts supercede it. Thus, each moment each new act of ‘sheer awareness’ has its retentive and reflective background in the form of immediately previous, but not identical, acts of sheer awareness. There is no immediate panoramic experience of the groundless whole that maintains itself over time without resting on a changing reflective referential basis. In short, the experience of ‘neutral’ attention unfolds as intentional activity whose objective sense of ‘neutrality’, ‘accepting’ and ‘acknowledging’ will subtly , or not so subtly(depending on circumstances), shift meaningfully, valuatively and affectively from moment to moment in the ongoing flow of temporally constitutive intentional synthesis. Any vantage claiming to be both an immediate pre-reflective experiencing of the ever changing ‘now’ and neutrally observational exposes itself as naive.

What Varela and Thompson recognize about the shortcomings of the Cartesian self can be turned back against their depiction of immediacy of awareness as reflexive and inhering in itself as auto-affection.

“If there were a solid, really existing self hidden in or behind the aggregates, its unchangeableness would prevent any experience from occurring; its static nature would make the constant arising and subsiding of experience come to a screeching halt.” (Embodied Mind)

Just as there is no solid self, there is no neutral, panoramic vantage from which we can totalize the changeableness (constant arising and subsiding) of experience. The contemplative experiencing of co-dependent relating is, from moment to moment, itself a unitary meaning or sense (with concrete, affective and valuative dimensions), as THIS panoramic sense of relational co-determinacy. It is an intentional act, and therefore intends beyond itself into new sense in every moment of its instantiation. If this were not the case, if the transformative impetus of the ‘intending beyond itself’ were not allowed to insert itself in the very heart of contemplative neutrality, self-reflexivity and internality, then the contemplative insight of endless relational changeability would reduce to pure identity. Varela and Thompson say mindfulness is about opening oneself to practical immediate embodied activity and change, but they found actual activity on a totalizing ideal of activity based on the idealized ‘nows’ of neutral clock time.

What Merleau-Ponty says about the ‘in-itself’ empirical object may apply equally to Varela and Thompson’s ‘for-itself’ mindful subjectivity as sheer self-reflexivity self-luminosity, and

peaceful rest in itself.

Thompson writes “for the Advaitins, cognition consists in a reflexive awareness of its own occurrence as an independent prerequisite for the cognition of objects (Ram-Prasad 2007). In other words, the defining feature of cognition is reflexivity or self-luminosity, not intentionality (object-directedness), which is adventitious.”(Dreamless Sleep, the Embodied Mind, and Consciousness,2015)

In contrast to these sentiments, Merleau-Ponty argues:

“...the identity of the thing with itself, that sort of established position of its own, of rest in itself, that plenitude and that positivity that we have recognized in it already exceed the experience, are already a second interpretation of the experience...we arrive at the thing-object, at the In Itself, at the thing identical with itself, only by imposing upon experience an abstract dilemma which experience ignores”(p.162)“The relation between what I see and I who see is not one of immediate or frontal contradiction; the things attract my look, my gaze caresses the things, it espouses their contours and their reliefs, between it and them we catch sight of a complicity” (The Visible and the Invisible, p. 76)

Mindful Attention and Primordial Value Feeling:

Having delineated the differences between mindfulness thinking on attention and that of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, we are now in a position to understand the basis of the affective, valuative and ethical claims that Varela and Thompson make concerning the outcome of proper immersion in mindfulness. They provocatively assert that a thoroughgoing understanding of the decenteredness of personhood, and of reality as a whole, can lead, through the use of contemplative practice of mindfulness, to the awareness of universal empathy, compassion and benevolence.

‘In Buddhism, we have a case study showing that when groundlessness is embraced and followed through to its ultimate conclusions, the outcome is an unconditional sense of intrinsic goodness that manifests itself in the world as spontaneous compassion.’(Thompson, Neurophenomenology and Contemplative Experience) “Our natural impulse is one of compassion, but it has been obscured by habits of ego-clinging like the sun obscured by a passing cloud. “(Embodied Mind)

Sebastjian Voros articulates this in the following way:

“ Someone who has realized the emptiness of things (sunyata), i.e. who has directly experienced that things have no independent existence, but emerge in mutual co-determination, will be permeated with boundless compassion (karuna); and someone who has realized boundless compassion (karuna) towards all sentient beings, will grasp the emptiness of all things (sunyata).” (Voros 2014)

“The chasm of the groundless ground – of the dialectical betwixt – that opens up in such practices can be terrifying at first, but is ultimately comprehended as the existential wellspring of boundless compassion and limitless peace. When there are no more boundaries between myself and the other – when I am the other and the other is me – there can be no animosity, hatred, or anxiety between

us. This is the crux of St. Augustine's famous saying: *Ama, et fac quod vis* (Love, and do what you will). Love – understood in terms of the Christian selfless love (agape), analogous to Buddhist compassion (karuna) – is the cohesive force of interbeing, the (groundless) ground of genuine peace and co-existence. "(Voros 2014)

The optimal state of mindful awareness manifests and expresses itself by a chain of valuative-affective-ethical sentiments that include:

unconditional, intrinsic, spontaneous compassion and benevolence, fundamental warmth toward the phenomenal world, concern for the welfare of others beyond mere naive compassion, joy and of the mind, quiescent, blissful, peaceful and tranquil sentience, guided by the fundamental value of nonviolence .

How do Varela and Thompson get from groundlessness of self to such positive valuations as selfless compassion? We can derive these affective and valuative modes of sensing directly from the supposed neutrality of the mindfully attentive gaze ("the acknowledgement and acceptance of each thought and feeling that arises within the attentional field" (Bishop, Lau et al. 2004, p. 232).

The first observation we can make is that, while on the one hand attention is affectively and valuatively neutral and, on the other hand benevolent compassion is affectively positive, the positive values achieved through mindful awareness share with attention a constancy of valuative tone. Attentional neutrality is not the absence of affective sense but a particular mode of valuative sensing that is presumed to perpetuate itself. What gives mindful awareness the temporal constancy of its valuative positivity is the same feature that allows for the supposed ongoing neutrality of the attentive gaze. As we have seen, Varela and Thompson split off the attentive regard from the objects of its regard, according subjective attention and objective appearing their own moment of neutral self-inherence as for-itself and in-itself. For Varela and Thompson the mind's attention to the FACT of irreducible inter-determinacy (pre-reflective reflexive auto-affection) and change in the SENSE of embodiment over time (through reflective and intentional acts) are treated as distinct and separable moments.

We can connect Thompson's depiction of the meditating mind reposing, "awake and alert, in the sheer 'luminosity' of consciousness (its quality of non-reflective and open awareness), without attending exclusively to any particular object or content" with his empirical description of pre-reflective consciousness:

"The fact that there is felt experience—the fact that there is something it is like for the subject—depends on the basic alerting function [distinct from the higher-level mechanisms of selective attention that come into play in determining what one is conscious of]. In contrast, the particular contents of consciousness—what it is like for the subject—depends also on how this consciousness is directed to particular objects and properties through selective attention. Put another way, the particular contents of phenomenal state consciousness can be seen as modifications or modulations of a basal level of creature consciousness dependent on the alerting function (see also Searle, 2000))."(Davis and Thompson 2015)

Arriving at mindfulness from everyday modes of awareness is an achievement and the result of a training process, but once this mode of consciousness has been attained, the ongoing flow of compassionate, non-objectifying awareness is not considered as being in itself the continued goal-directedness of an intentional achievement. In other words, one must work toward the goal of getting back to the natural state of being that one has drifted away from through ego-clinging habits. Because the boundless empathy of integrative ideality is presupposed as preceding and underpinning the possibility of all intentional acts, residing in this manner of ordinary awareness is not a dwelling within intentionality and achievement-orientation, but an empty, goal-less self-reflexive movement of thought (non-intentional and non-object-directed), a constant background thematic and valuative-affective tone which does not change its positive sense (empathetic and peaceful) over time, just as attention does not lose its distanced neutrality over time as it observes the constantly changing particularities that flow into and out of the now of awareness.

If we subject Varela and Thompson's dualism of 'fact of consciousness' and 'intentional sense' of awareness to a Husserlian reduction, we get the following:

It is one thing to say along with Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Husserl, that co-determinacy is primordially built into the structure of awareness. It's another thing to claim that a particular valuative tone (the neutrality of the sheer fact of what it is like, or the self-reflexive positivity of compassion) is *essentially, normatively* associated with this primordial structure of awareness. Where Varela and Thompson find only the FACT of irreducible inter-determinacy at the core of primordial awareness, Husserl reduces this supposed constant ongoing essence to the temporality of a momentary intentional act determined via a unique object and manner of givenness. "In the essence of the mental process itself lies not only that it is consciousness but also whereof it is consciousness, and in which determinate or indeterminate sense it is that. (Ideas I)",

For Husserl, a specific shift in interest is involved in generating the positive valuative regard of selfless compassionate, benevolent, joyful feelings toward others. This shift in sense involves a specific achievement, a move from a lesser sense of relational intimacy to that of greater relational interdependency. Affectivities such as 'unconditionally intrinsic goodness', 'spontaneous compassion', 'luminosity', 'blissfulness', 'a calm and peaceful life guided by the fundamental value of nonviolence' are normative valuations motivated by a sort of 'will to goodness' (the goodness of interdependence), a preferencing of one affective experience (totalizing integrative unity) over others (disconnection and isolation). In order for an awareness of co-determinacy to maintain itself as positive affectivity, it must think itself as more, and other than, the self-reflexive repetition of the initial achievement of this state of being. It must continue to strive, aim to achieve, intend beyond itself. As I argued previously with regard to attention, the experience of co-determinacy unfolds as intentional activity whose objective sense of 'peaceful benevolence' and empathy will subtly, or not so subtly (depending on circumstances), shift meaningfully, valuatively, affectively from moment to moment in the ongoing flow of temporally constitutive intentional synthesis.

If for Varela and Thompson there is no subject object independence, for phenomenology there is no co-dependent unity without vector of elsewhere defining the unity as a unity beyond itself.

Varela and Thompson's positive valuative-affective-ethical terms recognize and celebrate only relation, integrity, reciprocity, interdependence, belonging. Phenomenology recognizes the fact that groundless interdependence and relationality are only possible as a disturbing renewal. Meaning, as existing, is an exiting from itself. As Merleau-Ponty says:

“In all uses of the word *sens*, we find the same fundamental notion of a being orientated or polarized in the direction of what he is not, and thus we are always brought back to a conception of the subject as *ek-stase*, and to a relationship of active transcendence between the subject and the world.” (Phenomenology of Perception, p.499).

“Action is, by definition, the violent transition from what I have to what I aim to have, from what I am to what I intend to be.”, “When I say that I know and like someone, I aim, beyond his qualities, at an inexhaustible ground which may one day shatter the image that I have formed of him. This is the price for there being things and ‘other people’ for us, not as the result of some illusion, but as the result of a violent act which is perception itself.” (Phenomenology of Perception, p.444). “

Would Merleau-Ponty want us to believe there is an awareness (the mere fact of what it is like) expressed as peaceful, blissful compassion (sheer luminosity, non-attentive to particular objects) that founds the violence of perception? On the contrary, I think Merleau-Ponty would insist that his gestalt-based, ‘same world for everyone’ can be seen as only manifesting itself in primordial awareness as a pre-reflective feeling of being alive if we understand that feeling of the living present as a departure as well as an arrival, as an exposure and a violation, as a being-connected-with compassionately that disturbs a prior order of intimacy and connection. In other words, not a subjective moment of connection subtending difference but a simultaneously subjective and objective difference-in-connection, which is another word for striving, motive, affectivity, passage, transit, signification, temporality, history.

From this vantage the ‘middle way’ is less an overcoming of dualism than a re-situating of it as a subjective totalization of dialectical relationality.

It is instructive to compare the mindful ethic of ‘concern for the welfare of others beyond merely naive compassion’ with Heidegger’s concept of primordial care. Heideggerian Care is not warmth, nor is it positive concern, compassion or benevolence. Care is ‘taking care of’, being in relevant relationality with something or someone, and presupposes and implies all variants of mood and affective comportment. Heideggerian care, as desire for the other, is a relation to the other composed of anticipation and loss, connection and disconnection, disclosure and concealment. Heidegger describes the care structure as something being understood with regard to something else. This relation is a “confrontation that understands, interprets, and articulates, [and] at the same time takes apart what has been put together”(Being and Time). If we apply this thinking to Varela and Thompson’s mindfully aware unity of differences, we see that they recognize the putting-together (as Voros 2014 put it, “When there are no more boundaries between myself and the other – when I am the other and the other is me – there can be no animosity, hatred, or anxiety between us”), but ignore the taking-apart, the dislocation with respect to the previous moment’s awareness of relationality. From this vantage, it would appear that Varela and Thompson’s notion of compassionate concern as positive sentiment is what Heidegger’s care is meant to unravel and complicate.

In their complicity with the supposed self-constancy of neutral non-preferential, non-intentional attentional awareness, (*satipa.hāna* functions to decrease affective biases of attention and memory towards pleasant as well as unpleasant stimuli, (Davis and Thompson 2015)), mindful compassion, benevolence and generosity essentialize and privilege one pole (the 'goodness' and 'bliss' of unity) of the primordially relational basis of experience over the objective pole of foreignness and dislocation. Varela and Thompson ground the affectively, valuatively felt contingency of particular acts of other-relatedness in what they presume to be a primordial neutral point of pre-reflective conscious auto-affective awareness. . But the phenomenologists show that as auto-affection turns reflexively back toward itself, what it finds is not the normative sameness and constancy of a neutrality or positivity, but the surprise of a newly sensing being. Put differently, self-reflexivity, expecting to find only what it put there, instead is confronted with the self-displacement of its being exposed to and affected by an other.

What mindfulness ignores in empathy is that primordial phenomenological relationality is split within itself as a becoming beyond itself. For Husserl, this split takes the form of the foreignness to self of what affects the ego as object. For Merleau-Ponty it is the violence of perceptual ek-stase, while Heidegger conceives it as the anxious uncanniness of destabilizing Being-with-others. For all three writers the particularization of self-other relationality as always a new relation renders com-compassion as at the same time a form of alienation.

Thompson's depiction of the mind reposing, "awake and alert, in the sheer 'luminosity' of consciousness (its quality of non-reflective and open awareness), without attending exclusively to any particular object or content", is a form of desire and intentionality in that in simple self-reflexive awareness, it is at every moment relating to a new object (its own changing sense of non-objectifying awareness of the arising and passing away of temporary forms), and being affected, disturbed, by it. Disturbance, desire and dislocating becoming is prior to, that is, implicit but not noticed in 'neutral' compassionate awareness.

Compassion is at the same time the violation of a previous relation. Sense is always determined by the particularity of the phenomenon itself (the thing itself). The basis of our awareness of a world isn't simply relational co-determinacy, but the experience of motivated, desiring CHANGE in relational co-determinacy. For Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, every moment of return to the thinking of totality conjures a different affect and a slightly different motivated meaning of the whole. Feelings of compassion and benevolence belong to an infinite spectrum of always changing affectivities of positive and negative valence. Phenomenal awareness as transition from one kind of relational unity to another can just as well be malevolent as benevolent. Within the range of kinds of relationality, a particular phenomenal awareness may be a lessening of compassion or a strengthening of it. We can not say it is always benevolent, only that it is always a new sense of the correlational, that it is never without co-determinacy. Becoming is the restless anxiety of desire, striving, motivation, and the ground of all affect and valuation. Primordial awareness is from moment to moment a new way of being -affected-by the world, and thus, what ever else it is affectively in its particular and contingent experience of 'now', a kind of astonished terror.

I'll conclude with these thoughts from Heidegger concerning the complex affective basis of

fundamental awareness as thrownness and transit:

“Thus thrown in this throw, man is a transition, transition as the fundamental essence of occurrence. Man is history, or better, history is man. Man is enraptured in this transition and therefore essentially 'absent'. Absent in a fundamental sense-never simply at hand, but absent in his essence, in his essentially being away, removed into essential having been and future-essentially absencing and never at hand, yet existent in his essential absence. Transposed into the possible, he must constantly be mistaken concerning what is actual. And only because he is thus mistaken and transposed can he become seized by terror. And only where there is the perilousness of being seized by terror do we find the bliss of astonishment-being torn away in that wakeful manner that is the breath of all philosophizing.”

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