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Philosophy and Theology: Mindfulness

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PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

Medical professionals are increasingly turning to mindfulness practices to support the mental and physical health of patients. Catholics have expressed rival views about the practice of mindfulness.¹ In this paper, I assess four evaluations of mindfulness practice, and I conclude that mindfulness practice—rather than being intrinsically evil or dangerous—in fact may be used as a form of prayer if done with the right intention.

But first, what is mindfulness? Let me begin by saying what mindfulness is not. It is not about emptying the mind. It is about focused attention. As the word itself suggests, mindfulness is not mind-*emptiness*, but mind-*full-ness*.² Jon Kabat-Zinn offers perhaps the most common definition of mindfulness: “The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.”³

To evaluate mindfulness, one must have an accurate description of the practice. The practice of mindfulness refers to a variety of exercises that focus the self-reflective attention of the practitioner on immediate experience. As the mind wanders, as it spontaneously does, the person refocuses attention on the words said, the steps walked, or the breaths inhaled and exhaled. For example, in one way of practicing mindfulness, a person sits statue-still and focuses attention on breathing in and out through the nose. With each breath, the practitioner takes note of whether the inhalation is short or long, whether the air is cool on inhalation

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1. For a positive evaluation of mindfulness as a practice, see Greg Bottaro, *The Mindful Catholic: Finding God One Moment at a Time* (North Palm Beach, FL: Beacon Publishing, 2018). For a negative view, see Susan Brinkmann, *A Catholic Guide to Mindfulness* (Bessemer, AL: Avila Institute for Spiritual Formation, 2017).
 2. Bottaro, *Mindful Catholic*, 38.
 3. Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future,” *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10.2 (June 2003): 145, doi: 10.1093/clipsy.bpg016.

and warm on exhalation, and the feeling of the air coming into the nose, down into the lungs, and then exiting the body. After counting to five breaths, the person begins again at one. As the mind wanders again and again, to what needs to be done that day, to what happened an hour ago, or to whatever else, the person refocuses again and again on the immediate experience of breathing. The practice continues for some set period of time, for example, twenty minutes.

Studies have shown that the benefits of mindfulness practice include emotional control, enhanced compassion for others, reduced pain, increased concentration, greater creativity, reduced anxiety, and benefit in treating depression.⁴ Other studies have indicated that for some people mindfulness can cause adverse side effects such as feelings of anxiety, loss of appetite, and insomnia.⁵ The empirical evaluation of mindfulness may turn out to be like the evaluation of medications. A particular medication, say Advair for asthma, is recommended for some people but not others. Doctors prescribe Advair for its intended beneficial effects, but like most medications, it also carries the risks of possible unwanted side effects. In my understanding of the current state of the research, the benefits of mindfulness seem to be greater than the risks for most people. Hopefully, further research will bring us to a better understanding of the benefits and risks of mindfulness practices and so will inform an overall evaluation of mindfulness practices.

But in addition to empirical questions, other questions arise that may not be determined by scientific studies. For example, how is mindfulness practice related to Christian faith and living?

Rival Views of Mindfulness

One view holds that the practice of mindfulness is intrinsically evil, an action that is *per se malum* and never to be done. Citing the Second Vatican Council, in *Veritatis splendor* Pope St. John Paul II provides a list of intrinsically evil acts:

Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity

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4. Paul Condon et al., "Meditation Increases Compassionate Responses to Suffering," *Psychological Science* 24.10 (October 2013): 2125–2127, doi: 10.1177/0956797613485603; Joshua A. Grant et al., "Cortical Thickness and Pain Sensitivity in Zen Meditators," *Emotion* 10.1 (February 2010): 43–53, doi: 10.1037/a0018334; Fadel Zeidan et al., "Mindfulness Meditation Improves Cognition: Evidence of Brief Mental Training," *Consciousness and Cognition* 19.2 (June 2010): 597–605, doi: 10.1016/j.concog.2010.03.014; Lorenza S. Colzato, Ayca Ozturk, and Bernhard Hommel, "Meditate to Create: The Impact of Focused-Attention and Open-Monitoring Training on Convergent and Divergent Thinking," *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (April 18, 2012): 1–5, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00116; Fadel Zeidan et al., "Neural Correlates of Mindfulness Meditation-Related Anxiety Relief," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 9.6 (June 2014): 751–759, doi: 10.1093/scan/nst041; and Filip Raes et al., "School-Based Prevention and Reduction of Depression in Adolescents: A Cluster-Randomized Controlled Trial of a Mindfulness Group Program," *Mindfulness* 5 (2014): 477–486, doi: 10.1007/s12671-013-0202-1.
 5. Mary Kathleen Lustyk et al., "Mindfulness Meditation Research: Issues of Participant Screening, Safety Procedures, and Researcher Training," *Advances in Mind-Body Medicine* 24.1 (Spring 2009): 20–30.

of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children; degrading conditions of work which treat labourers as mere instruments of profit, and not as free responsible persons: all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honour due to the Creator.⁶

It is difficult to imagine mindfulness practice being added to this list. Many intrinsically evil acts involve serious injustices done against one's neighbor, such as slavery, genocide, abortion, and euthanasia. Of itself mindfulness practice does not directly impinge on one's neighbor, let alone negatively impinge on one's neighbor. On the contrary, the research on mindfulness practice suggests that it enhances concern for one's neighbor. Other intrinsically bad acts manifest lack of proper self-love, such as suicide and mutilation. But the research suggests that mindfulness practices do not harm most practitioners. On the contrary, most people who practice mindfulness experience reduced pain, increased concentration, greater creativity, reduced anxiety, and benefit in treating depression. There are, of course, other intrinsically evil acts not mentioned in the list, such as adultery, perjury, and apostasy. But mindfulness practice is not a form of any of these actions.

Could mindfulness practice be considered intrinsically evil as a form of idolatry? Does it violate the first commandment that we must have no strange gods? "Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God," we read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Catechism continues, "Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc."⁷ If we understand idolatry as defined in the Catechism, it is difficult to construe mindfulness practice as a form of idolatry, since mindfulness practice does not honor or revere anything, let alone honor or revere something more than God. Mindfulness practice does not treat created beings as if they are divine. Mindfulness practice does not give divine worship to anyone or anything.

Let us now consider the second view, according to which mindfulness practices are not intrinsically evil but nevertheless are dangerous and to be avoided. Could there be a spiritual danger in mindfulness? There certainly could be, if, for example, mindfulness practices were to become a replacement for Christian spirituality. It would be problematic from a Christian perspective if a person thought, "Well, I've got my spiritual life covered because I've done my mindfulness practice and that's really all that is necessary."

It is problematic because spiritual growth (at least in the Christian sense) is always growth in *personal* relationships with God and with other people. The practice of mindfulness need not have any interpersonal element. Mindfulness practice simply is not, considered in itself, necessary or sufficient for growth in love of God

6. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes* (December 7, 1965), n. 27, cited in John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor* (August 6, 1993), n. 80.
7. *Catechism*, n. 2113. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ST) II-II.94.1.

and love of neighbor. Consistent atheists like Sam Harris engage in mindfulness practice. So could have Joseph Stalin.

Now it does not follow from a lack of interpersonal relationality that mindfulness meditation is to be rejected or that it harms spiritual growth. Swimming alone in a lake and eating an apple by oneself do not of themselves involve interpersonal relationships, but it does not follow that such activities harm the spiritual life. Indeed, inasmuch as eating an apple or swimming in a lake fosters physical health, either may be undertaken as part of the proper care for the human body. Likewise, practices that enhance mental health involve proper care for the human mind.

Another possible difficulty with mindfulness practice which may make it dangerous for Christian belief is the contention that it leads willy-nilly to a rejection of the notion of the self as real. The worry is that if a person does mindfulness practice consistently and for a long enough time, the person will become convinced that the boundaries between self, other selves, and God are all illusory. If someone comes to believe that the self, other selves, and God are all illusions, then this person (if consistent in belief) will also believe that the Christian creed is mistaken, since Christian belief presupposes the reality of self, other selves, and God.

I am unaware of any empirical evidence for the claim that mindfulness practice leads those who do it to reject the reality of the self, other selves, and God. Such evidence, if it exists, would be a reason to reject mindfulness practice. I would not be surprised if mindfulness practice, if done in excess, *does* turn out to lead its practitioner to beliefs or actions that are incompatible with Christianity. This would be a good reason not to do mindfulness practice in excess. But, of course, almost any practice (running marathons or drinking wine or doing mathematics) may be done to excess and so damage someone's faith or morals. Even distinctly Christian practices like fasting can become an obstacle to the spiritual life if done in an unreasonable, excessive way.⁸ So the objection from excess is not an objection to mindfulness practice in itself, but rather a warning that holds true for all practices.

Does mindfulness in withholding judgment of thoughts as good or bad lead its practitioner to reject moral judgments in the moral life? Do those who practice mindfulness go down the road past good and evil such that they will come to conclude that murdering an innocent girl is not wrong and loving their elderly neighbor is not right?

I know of no evidence that mindfulness practice has this consequence. We already do many practices, like mathematical calculations, in which we suspend our ethical judgment. Five hundred plus five hundred equals one thousand, whether we are adding up murders of children or donations to charity. The batter trying to hit a fastball must totally focus on hitting the ball without becoming distracted by thoughts like, "Wow, what a good fastball he threw" or "I wonder if the pitcher is in a state of grace right now." Withholding judgment during the practice of mindfulness is, I believe, done to facilitate total focus on the immediate experience. When other thoughts arise about tomorrow's pizza lunch or yesterday's walk by the lake, the mindfulness practitioner refocuses attention on the breath going in and out of the lungs. If someone engages in judging the thoughts as good or bad, then that

8. Aquinas, *ST II-II.147.1 ad 1 and ad 2.*

person moves beyond the focus on immediate experience. In fact, far from transforming people into amoral agents who consider themselves beyond good and evil, mindfulness practice may enhance the moral life by mitigating perhaps the most common cause of moral failure, weakness of will.⁹

Is Mindfulness Practice Ethically Indifferent or Potentially Prayerful?

If it is true that mindfulness practice is not intrinsically evil, and if mindfulness practice is also not inherently dangerous to the spiritual life, then it seems to follow that mindfulness practice is at least ethically indifferent. Mindfulness practices, on this view, are a form of exercise for the mind. Much like playing the piano or reading a book, as the studies mentioned earlier indicate, for most people mindfulness practice strengthens mental well-being. Ethically indifferent activities, like walking, can be done at the wrong time, in an inopportune place, and with bad motives, and the same is true of mindfulness practice. Just as someone could walk to a perch as an assassin, so someone could practice mindfulness to more accurately fire a rifle at an innocent person. But such cases do not show that walking or mindfulness practice is wrong. Even an action good in kind, such as giving money to the poor, can be done with an evil motive or in circumstances that make an otherwise good action unwise. So if the evaluation given earlier in this essay is correct, then mindfulness practice is an ethically neutral kind of activity like walking.

But if mindfulness practice is an ethically neutral kind of activity, then mindfulness practice *could* be a form of prayer. Physical exercise can be a way of being in communication with God. As Eric Liddell said in *Chariots of Fire*, “I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure.”¹⁰ Since we can communicate by means of the body, we can pray by means of bodily postures—such as kneeling, receiving Holy Communion, or making the Sign of the Cross. But even bodily movements that are not explicitly tied to religious practice—such as swimming or playing soccer—can be done for the glory of God as a way of growing closer to him. For example, we might undertake physical exercise so as to take care of our bodies as part of God’s creation and to be better physically able to serve others.

The motive for what we do is key. In the words attributed to St. Martin de Porres, “Everything, even sweeping, scraping vegetables, weeding a garden and waiting on the sick could be a prayer if it were offered to God.”¹¹ As St. Paul said, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Not just physical activities, but also mental activities, can be done for the greater

9. Kelly McGonigal, *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 24–28.

10. *Chariots of Fire*, directed by Hugh Hudson (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 1981).

11. Mary Fabyan Windeatt, *Saint Martin de Porres: The Story of the Little Doctor of Lima, Peru* (Charlotte, NC: Tan Books, 1979), 51. Similarly, “Their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.’” Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium* (November 21, 1964), n. 34.

glory of God. “An hour of study,” said St. Josemaría Escrivá, “is an hour of prayer.”¹² In mindfulness practice, focus and refocus of mental attention can be ordered to the same goal. Indeed, any legitimate activity—work, play, and leisure—can be a way of serving God and neighbor, a way of praying.

Does the non-Christian origin of mindfulness meditation, either as arising from Buddhism or secular psychology, rule it out as a way to grow closer to God? The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) points out that non-Christian origins do not make a practice unacceptable for Christian usage: “The majority of the *great religions* which have sought union with God in prayer have also pointed out ways to achieve it. Just as ‘the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions,’ neither should these ways be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian. On the contrary, one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured.”¹³ Wedding rings, Christmas trees, and liturgical candles all have non-Christian origins, but they were all adopted and adapted for legitimate Christian uses.

How could mindfulness as a prayer be done? In speaking of prayer by rhythm in his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius of Loyola writes: “With each breath or respiration, one should pray mentally while saying a single word of the *Our Father*, or other prayer that is being recited, in such a way that from one breath to another a single word is said. For this same space of time, the attention is chiefly directed to the meaning of the word, to the person who is addressed, to our own lowliness, or the difference between the greatness of the person and our own littleness.”¹⁴ The prayer by rhythm advocated by Ignatius is arguably a form of mindfulness practice. The breath is used to bring focus in the present moment to the word said, to the One to whom the word is said, or to the relationship between the one praying and the One to whom one prays.

Another possible example of mindfulness prayer from the tradition of Catholic spirituality is the Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer repeats the words “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” on breathing in and “have mercy on me, a sinner” on breathing out. As the CDF notes, “The exercise of the ‘Jesus Prayer,’ for example, which adapts itself to the natural rhythm of breathing can, at least for a certain time, be of real help to many people.”¹⁵

Finally Eucharistic adoration may be a form of mindfulness. As the mind gets distracted, the person at adoration returns again and again to Jesus in the Eucharist. Rather than focusing on the breath, as do secular forms of mindfulness, the person at adoration focuses on Jesus; but like focusing on the breath, focus must be recast again and again as the mind wanders. St. John Vianney once asked an old man who

12. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way* (1934), n. 335, Studium Foundation, http://www.escrivaworks.org/book/the_way-point-335.htm.

13. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian meditation (October 15, 1989), n. 16.

14. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951), n. 258.

15. CDF, Letter on Christian meditation, n. 27.

spent hours in adoration how he spent the time. The man replied, “I look at him and he looks at me” (*Catechism*, n. 2715).

Like any form of private prayer, these ways of praying may not be the best way of praying for a particular person. But the prayer by rhythm, the Jesus Prayer, and Eucharistic adoration are examples demonstrating that mindfulness, not just as a practice but as a prayer, may be considered already a part of the rich and diverse treasure house of Catholic spiritual traditions.

Mindfulness practice is neither intrinsically evil nor in itself dangerous to the spiritual life. If I am correct, mindfulness practice is ethically indifferent but may be used as a form of prayer if done with the right intention.

CHRISTOPHER KACZOR