Unselfing, Suffering and Morality: Cultivating Non-Narrative Approaches to Ethical Development

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Abstract

A prominent perspective on the alleviation of suffering in ourselves and others – shared by both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions – involves the process of ‘unselfing’, the letting go of the self as a continuous and systematic life narrative. The cultivation of the sense of non-self is a key component of Buddhist ethics which views an attachment to self as a major source of suffering and a hindrance to the process of understanding ourselves and others in the context of our location in the moral universe. In Western traditions the move from self-regarding to other-regarding principles is a central feature of both consequentialist and deontological ethical systems. It will be argued that ethical development along such lines may be cultivated by means of training and education which foregrounds unselfing through the letting go of life as a continuous narrative. Drawing, in particular, on the work of Galen Strawson and Iris Murdoch, these issues are examined against the background of Buddhist mindfulness strategies aimed at waking up to the nature of the good life.

Keywords: Unselfing, Narrative living, Galen Strawson, Iris Murdoch, Buddhist mindfulness

1. Introduction: Perspectives on Self as Illusion

Is the full moon tonight a self?
No, it is not a self.
Is the moon viewer a self?
No, she is not a self.

How then can the moon viewer enjoy the moon?
It is precisely because the moon has no self
and the moon viewer has no self
that both moon and moon viewer are wonderful,
and that moon viewing is a wonderful thing.

Moon viewing is our practice.


After a lifetime’s study of consciousness and Zen meditation practice, the psychologist Susan Blackmore felt moved to assert that there is: no persisting self, no show in a mental theatre, no power of consciousness and no
free will, no duality of self and other – just the complex interactions between a body and the rest of the world, arising and falling away for no one in particular (2011, 165). Blackmore’s suggestion that neuroscience supports the notion that the self is an illusion is not, of course, intended to prove that the self does not exist. Our everyday experience of ‘me’, ‘mine’, and ‘ourselves’ is rooted in commonsense social/personal identity and relationships and, as such, has obvious immense utilitarian value and purpose. The illusory claim, therefore, is meant to show that the self is not what we ordinarily take it to be and to indicate how and why this is so.

This denial of a separate self has a long philosophical pedigree. Hume is best known as an opponent of the notion of a unique ‘I’ or ‘me’ and offered the famous observation that ‘I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception’ (1964 edn., 239). Chappell (2005) reminds us – in his examination of the ‘inescapable self’ as it applies to ethics, epistemology and philosophy of mind – that both Heracleitus and the Buddha had reached broadly the same conclusion as Hume as long ago as the 5th century BC. Indeed, the notion that the self as a subjectively constructed narrative can be found in diverse spheres of thought from history to psychology, political science and literary criticism. As Chappell puts it:

Humean, deconstructionist, Buddhist, Heracleitean, or Marxist historian: all of these different schools of thought move, in their different ways, towards the same conclusion about the self. The conclusion is that selves are causally and explanatorily inert because they do not actually exist as parts of the fabric of the world (220).

Moreover, recent studies in neuroscience have cast doubt on the concept of a centre of consciousness, a central and unified ‘self’ or ‘I’ directing all aspects of our behaviour. Blackmore discusses the counter-intuitive idea that – although we make the standard assumption that there is a unified centre to all our acts and experiences – this feeling is not supported by studies of consciousness. Neuroscientific research indicates that there are many facets of consciousness which can be linked to different brain states but little evidence of brain states which correspond to a single entity or source of consciousness (Libet 1983; Harris 2014). Certain fundamental assumptions – such as the notion of a fixed and unchanging self located in a conscious mind through which flow a ‘stream of ideas, feelings, images and perceptions’ – have, according to Blackmore (2011), to be ‘thrown out’ (128). So how are we to proceed? Blackmore suggests that we: start again with a new beginning. The starting point this time is quite different. We start from the simplest possible observation. Whenever I ask myself “Am I conscious now?”, the answer will always be “yes”. But what about the rest of the time? The funny thing is that we cannot know. Whenever we ask the question we get an answer – yes but we cannot ask about those times when we are not asking the question’ (ibid., 128).

Arguing along similar lines, Hood (2012) contends that ‘who we are is a story of our self – a constructed narrative that our brain creates. Some of that simulation is experienced as conscious awareness that corresponds to the self illusion that the average person in the street reports’ (Kindle edn., 116). This narrative theme is also maintained by Dennett (1991) who contends that ‘our tales are spun, but for the most part, we don’t spin them; they spin us. There is no self at the core, rather it emerges as the centre of a narrative gravity’ (19).

Harris (2014) also contends that the ‘sense that we are unified subjects is a fiction produced by a multitude of separate processes and structures of which we are not aware and over which we exert no conscious control’ (116), a line of thought which is connected to another common but perhaps necessary illusion that humans are capable of free will (this idea is brought up later in relation to moral development). Moreover, Harris goes on to assert boldly that:

The claim that we can experience consciousness without a conventional sense of self – that there is no rider on the horse – seems to be on firm ground neurologically. Whatever causes the brain to produce the false notion that there is a thinker living somewhere inside the head, it makes sense that it could stop doing this. And once it does, our inner lives become more faithful to the facts (ibid.).

Such perspectives on the self are by no means restricted to Western thought since uncannily similar ideas are central to a number of Eastern traditions, especially Buddhist philosophy and theory. Within the Buddhist dharma, ‘not-self’ (or non-self) – the idea that the self is a source of ignorance and suffering and, thus, needs to be transcended – is one of the three marks of existence along with impermanence and dukkha (the essential unsatisfactoriness of existence). As Olendzki (2010) puts it:
Teachings of non-self do not mean that the self does not exist, for anything given a name created to express an idea does exist, as such...What the Buddhists are challenging is a series of assumptions made about the self that are not sustainable by empirical observation. One assumption challenged is that the self has some sort of privileged ontological status as a substance an essence, or a spiritual energy that is something other than the manifestations of a person’s natural physical and mental processes. Self might be a useful world for referring to a person's body, feelings, perceptions, behavioural traits, and consciousness, but it cannot be construed as something underlying or transcending these manifestations (9).

Brazier (2003) explains that, according to the mano-vijnana model of Buddhist psychology, ‘everything that I perceive is a visitation or object. It is not me’ (49). This conception is linked to the idea that each of the senses – indeed all of the so-called aggregates of ‘form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness’ which ‘contain everything...in nature and in society’ (Hanh 1999, 176) – are conditioned and outwardly focused, clutching at experience with either desire or aversion. In Western culture, Brazier (2003) explains, ‘we are preoccupied with our mental processes and identify with them. We find it difficult to believe that our thoughts are not part of “me”. Buddhist approaches...tend to be outward-focused. The focus is not “Who am I?” but “How do I see the world?”’ (49-50).

The question of who “I am”, Batchelor (1998) argues, ‘appears coherent only because of the monologue we keep repeating, editing, censoring, and embellishing in our heads’. He continues:

The present moment hovers between past and future just as life hovers between birth and death. We respond to both in similar ways. Just as we flee from the awesome encounter with birth and death to the safety of a manageable world, so we flee from the pulse of the present to a fantasy world. Flight is a reluctance to face change and the anguish it implies. Something in us insists on a static self, a fixed image, impervious to anguish, that will either survive death intact or be painlessly annihilated (24-25).

The self-delusional, desperate and impractical nature of all this is brought out clearly and powerfully by Brazier: The self is a defence that we create against the uncertainties of existence. Faced with our day-to-day encounters with dukkha, the afflictions that we inevitably encounter as part of being alive, we find ways to protect ourselves from the natural feelings that arise and threaten to overwhelm us...we are constantly re-creating ourselves out of the patterns of reaction into which we fall...Although we refer to the self as if it were an entity, in fact this use of language reifies a process that does not result in anything substantial at all. Rather, the self is a collection of experiences that constantly forms and re-forms (2003, 39).

2. Self as a Source of Suffering

Chappell (2005) has analysed in some depth the philosophical problem of the ‘inescapable self’, a problem with implications for ethics, epistemology and metaphysics which challenges humans to discover ways of transcending subjective egocentricity in the quest for objective knowledge and understanding of the world. The argument by Chappell that the ‘solitary self’ can be the stuff of ‘nightmare scenarios’ (11) is pertinent though there is a more powerful sense in which the self can be the source of pain and suffering.

This sense of self is arguably a chief source of what Schopenhauer (1995 edn) called the ‘suffering of the world’ caused ultimately by the ‘blind striving will’. As the arch philosopher of pessimism explains:

The great vehemence of the will is of itself and immediately a constant source of suffering. In the first place, because all volition arises from yearning for something one does not possess; that is, from suffering...Secondly, because, through the causal connection of things, most of our desires must remain unfulfilled, and the will is more often thwarted than satisfied; therefore much intense volition always entails much intense suffering (ibid., 225).

Schopenhauer’s relentless pessimism and misanthropy about the human condition is, however, relieved by optimistic glimpses of a number of potential escape routes from this designated evil. Overcoming evil in the sense of gaining release from the thrall of the will may be achieved in three main ways: through philosophical reflection and understanding, through artistic/aesthetic appreciation, and through Eastern forms of wisdom and contemplation (Gardiner 1967; Hyland 1985).
Gardiner (1967, 148-9) notes that, as an avowed admirer of Hume, Schopenhauer almost but not quite endorses Hume’s famous ‘bundle of perceptions’ denial of a fixed and permanent self (there is some evidence that Hume may have been aware of the Buddhist perspectives on not-self; see Gopnik 2009). However, the overriding interest in the tension between the intellect and the will leads Schopenhauer away from this issue towards questions concerned with how the will may be subdued in the quest to overcome human suffering.

As he asserts: ‘The will to life cannot be suspended except through knowledge. Thus the only path to salvation is the one by which the will may appear without restriction, so that in this manifestation it may recognise and know its own nature. Only as a result of this knowledge can the will suspend and cancel itself, and thereby end the suffering inseparable from its manifestation’. (1995 edn., 253). The quest for knowledge to achieve such a salvation involves both philosophical and aesthetic forms of education and training, and, for Schopenhauer, the cultivation of the ‘inner life’ and ‘self-renunciation’ qualities associated with spiritual traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism (ibid., 241).

3. Constructing the Self through Life Narratives

In a series of related writings, Galen Strawson (2009, 2018) has pointed to the intriguing idea of the difference between narrative and non-narrative conceptions of personhood alongside making recommendations about the social, individual and ethical advantages of living a non-narrative existence. It is acknowledged by Strawson that ‘self-experience’ seems to be a brute fact of human existence but that – although we can make perfect sense of notions such as my ‘inmost self’ or the ‘secret self of inner experience’ – he concludes that ‘selves don’t exist in the ordinary sense...but are useful fictions or abstractions that help us to organize our experience when we think about our lives’ (2009, Kindle edn, 246).

The self is, thus, socially constructed through upbringing and life experiences, a process which Hood (2012) refers to as the ‘looking-glass self’ by means of which the ‘existence of others defines who we are’ (Kindle edn., 150). As Kosslyn (in Brockman 2005) suggests, the development of mind draws on ‘the brains of other people’ (154). The idea is that ‘social prosthetic systems (SPS), through which we depend on others to extend our cognitive and affective development, are crucial to the growth of mind and brain. In an observation that speaks directly to the role of self and other in moral development, he notes that:

A key element of serving as an SPS is learning how best to help someone. Those who function as your SPS’s adapt to your particular needs, desires and predilections. And the act of learning changes the brain (ibid., 155).

In a similar vein, applying recent developments in cognitive neuroscience to learning theory, Goshwami (2008), argues that ‘learning is social’ and explains that:

We have social brains. The wealth of studies of infant and animal cognition are showing more and more clearly that the complex mammalian brain evolved to flourish in complex social environments (391).

Strawson (2018) draws clear parallels between this social construction of selves and the idea of living lives defined by stories and narratives. It is taken as a given that – for reasons linked to nature or nurture – people come to lead either narrative lives (defined by continuities of life stories) or non-narrative ones (which he does) which are defined by disparate memories and a discontinuous sense of self and personal identity. Acknowledging the contingency of this, Strawson is highly sceptical – in the face of considerable philosophical and literary/cultural insistence to the contrary – about the pragmatic or moral value of the ‘storied’ life. Arguing with the support of the Buddha, Montaigne, James Salter and Otto Frisch among others and taking issue with the narrative leanings of Proust, John Updike, Alice Munro, and others, Strawson wants to say that:

It’s not just that some of us aren’t naturally narrative in our experience of life. What needs to be added is that some of us are naturally – deeply, positively – non narrative. Some of us are profoundly ant-narrative – by fundamental constitution. It’s not just that the deliverances of memory may, for us, be hopelessly piecemeal and disordered...the point reaches beyond memory. It embraces all parts of what Henry James calls the “great shambles of life”. (178).
Blackmore’s Buddhist take on self and free will was mentioned above. This leads her directly to a particular view about consciousness. Neuroscientific research indicates that there are many facets of consciousness which can be linked to different brain states but little evidence of brain states which correspond to a single entity or source of consciousness. Strawson (2018) has broadly similar views about his own consciousness which – supported by the writings of William James and James Joyce – result in the following observation:

When I’m alone and thinking and consider my thinking I find that my fundamental experience is one of repeated launches of consciousness that suggest an immediately prior state of complete, if momentary, non-consciousness...It’s as if consciousness is continually restarting. It keeps banging out of nothingness. It’s a series of comings-to (38).

These seminal views about narrative/non-narrative living are linked by Strawson to another human dichotomy between ‘transient and endurant self-experience’ (ibid.,47). Endurers tend to think in terms of fixed selves relatively unchanging over time whereas transients – whilst accepting the ordinary sense of evolving personhood – do not appear to require such a definite sense of past/future continuity. Although there are correlations between endurers/transients and narrative/non-narrative individuals – transients, for example, ‘are likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in narrative terms’ (ibid.,48) – there are also divergencies, since differences in upbringing, culture and life experience will tend to inculcate particular and indeterminate attitudes and feelings about past and potential future selves in people. Empirical research in this sphere will likely have to be as nuanced and complex as that concerned with introversion/extroversion or optimism/pessimism in human behaviour (Carver & Scheier 2009).

Strawson (2018) uses his distinctions and their key characteristics to analyse a diverse range of writings and cultural perspectives before going on to emphasise the joys and advantages of the transient and non-narrative forms of life said to be typified by people such as Montaigne, Stendhal, Coleridge, Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch (49-50). Moreover, when it comes to the ethical life, Strawson contends that the transient attitude has an advantage over the endurant. This is justified by offering trenchant critiques of alternative views – particularly that offered by MacIntyre – which claim that a ‘good life is one that has narrative unity’ (ibid., 56). It may, of course, be the case that some people (endurers) actually require some sort of psychological narrative unity to support an ethical life though, for Strawson, there are more limitations than strengths in narrative living. For one thing, personal memories which underpin our stories are often self-serving and subject to constant revision which is not always accurate. It is possible to be deluded by fictions which can distort moral judgement and reasoning. We can discover coherence, form and pattern in our lives without the need for continuous narrative-seeking. Quoting V.S. Pritchett’s notion that “we live beyond any tale we happen to enact”, Strawson concludes that:

endurance is neither a necessary condition of a moral existence nor of a proper sense of responsibility. As for narrativity, I suspect that it is, in the sphere of ethics, more of an affliction or bad habit than a prerequisite of a good life (51).

It is this notion that narrative living may be ethically counter-productive that is directly linked to the perspectives on the self outlined earlier and points towards the desirability of some degree of ‘unselfing’ as part of general moral development.

4. Unselfing and Non-Narrative Living

It was mentioned in the previous section that Iris Murdoch was identified by Strawson as a stereotypically transient person, in spite of her lifelong tendency towards story-telling. There was, however, a radical non-narrative aspect to her own life, particularly in her writings, both fictional and philosophical, on the role of the self in human affairs (Laverty 2007). Recent work in philosophy of education (Olsson 2018; Bakhurst 2018) has fore grounded Murdoch’s work to illustrate how a process of ‘unselfing’ may assist in the process of moral transformation and the development of other-regarding values and dispositions. Murdoch (2003) was insistent that learning and, indeed, much purposeful intellectually activity was essentially moral in character in the sense that ‘learning is moral progress because it is an asceticism, it diminishes our egotism and enlarges our conception of truth’ (179). Olsson argues that the notion of ‘unselfing’ is central to Murdoch’s particular conception of education and moral transformation. There is an overriding requirement for a ‘decreased egocentricity and for a
greater sensitivity towards other beings and objects in the world’ with the aim of cultivating a ‘morally oriented manner of relating to others in the world’ (2018, 165).

Unselfing is viewed as both a goal and as a process ‘wherein one learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself’ (Murdoch, 2003, 17). Olsson suggests that central to this process is the concept of attention which is described by Murdoch (1998) as a ‘just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality’ (327). It is here that the links between education, morality and unselfing are brought into prominence. As Murdoch writes in her well-known thesis which emphasises the sovereignty of good over other concepts:

If I am learning, for instance, Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me...The honesty and humility required of the student – not to pretend what one does not know – is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damn his theory (ibid., 373).

But it is not just the qualities developed through such an attitude to learning but the very process of attending to something beyond and independent of our own egos and concerns which makes learning of such significance. As Olsson argues, the attention that Murdoch recommends invites us to move beyond our obsessions as ‘narrating creatures’ by becoming ‘wrapped up in something’ which involves the ‘experience of spontaneity, immediacy, being touched and moved’. Such a process may be ‘induced by a careful attention, freed of requirements, and by the concrete experience of the world’ (2018, 173). Murdoch (2003) agrees with both Kant and Schopenhauer that the pursuit of aesthetic knowledge and experience is a moral enterprise which may help to overcome the egotistic impulse by ‘inducing, at least a temporary, state of selflessness’ (179). As she goes on to observe:

Any artist, or thinker, or craftsman knows of crucial moments when an aggregate of reflection and skill must now be pressed a little harder so as to achieve some significantly better result...Ideas break the narrow, self-obsessed limits of the mind. The enjoyment and study of good art is enlarging and enlightening in this way. We may add to this that as mathematics ‘stands for’ any high intellectual discipline, we may, without breaking faith with Plato, suggest that the carpenter ‘stands for’ any careful attentive self-forgetting work or craft, including housework, and all kinds of nameless ‘unskilled’ fixings or cleanings or arrangings which may be done well or badly (ibid.,179-180).

The idea of particular forms of learning and training of the mind as means of escape from the self and suffering was, as mentioned earlier, a principal feature of Schopenhauer’s philosophy and is, of course, also central to Buddhist teachings, especially in the increasingly popular mindfulness strategies informed by Buddhist philosophy (Hyland 2011; Ergas 2019). It is possible that, like Schopenhauer, Murdoch gained insights about the importance of particular forms of training attention from such Buddhist sources since there are remarkable parallels between – as Olsson and others have noted (Mole 2006) – the centrality of the role accorded to selfless attention in her general philosophy and the idea of Buddhist mindfulness as the ‘self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience...an orientation that is characterised by curiosity, openness and acceptance’ (Bishop 2004, 232).

Iris Murdoch’s husband, John Bayley, notes in his memoirs that his wife was fond of Buddhist ideas and people (1999), and Peter Conradi (2001) reports in his biography of Murdoch that she was fascinated by both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism in which she found ways of transcending ‘resentful states of being’ to discover an ‘amazement at the world’ (544). Conradi also notes that she had conversations with Krishnamurti and with Japanese Zen Buddhists on the Bayleys’ several visits to Kyoto, in addition to meditation instruction which she sought from the Buddhist Society in London (ibid.,545). Even though Murdoch sometimes claimed that she did not set out to write philosophical novels (Levenson 2001), her twenty-six novels are self-evidently replete with philosophical ideas, typically concerned with moral and metaphysical matters. Buddhist concepts are present in The Nice and the Good, Bruno’s Dream and The Green Knight, according to Conradi’s reading of these novels (2001, 546) and, in his introduction to the Vintage edition of The Sea, The Sea, Burnside (1999) notes the overarching structural influences of Tantric Buddhist themes. In relation to the cultivation of the attention required for unselfing, Henry and Cato provides paradigm illustrations of its importance. As Sodre (2001) notes in her introduction to the Vintage edition of the novel:
Attention is a central concept in Murdoch’s philosophical thinking – a word she uses in Simone Weil’s sense of the active movement away from the self and towards reality. At the centre of her moral conception of Good is that capacity to be focused on the other (xiii-xiv).

5. Moral development, Not-Self and the Unstoried Life

Given the discussion of perspectives and arguments set out above, it should be clear that I would wish to recommend, with Strawson, Murdoch and others, the positive advantage of an unstoried life characterised by a discontinuous and impermanent conception of self such as that favoured by Buddhism and supported by the cognitive neuroscientific evidence outlined by Blackmore and others (Libet 2003; Blackmore 2011; Harris 2014). The chief advantages of such a life follow directly from the accounts of the self and suffering explained in earlier sections. The construction of life narratives is a form of ‘selfing’, a reification of the self in the face of the suffering that is inseparable from being alive. Such a seemingly instinctive and natural process of defence, however, typically proves counter-productive since it leads to the pursuit of ways of self-aggrandisement which serve to increase suffering and, thus, stand in the way of the authentic cultivation of moral goodness. Gethin (1998) reminds us that, according to Buddhist thought, the three ‘defilements of the mind’ – greed, aversion and delusion – tend to ‘combine and interact’ in a way which serves to perpetuate suffering (74). The construction of life narratives around an illusory fixed self thus maintains an attachment or clinging which fuels such false consciousness and stands in the way of alleviating suffering in ourselves and others (Hahn 1999).

According to Buddhist mindfulness practice, the way out of such a vicious cycle of suffering is the development of an ‘understanding of how distress is created and re-created in our minds so these processes can be seen and transformed’ (Feldman & Kuyken 2019, 115). The training of attention – through contemplative strategies or by means of aesthetic and craft pursuits – has been referred to already in a range of different contexts. Such training – similar to contemporary apprenticeship models of learning (Hyland 2014) – will be a pre-requisite for transforming suffering and cultivating moral vision for both narrative and non-narrative lives since, as already suggested, upbringing and social conditioning delimits our choices in this respect. A key aspect of such training – and the crucial complementary partner of attention – is ‘intentionality in how attention and awareness are deployed’ (Feldman & Kuyken 2019, 14). Such intention – a necessary stabilising and protective aspect of unselfing – is rooted in the ‘ethical dimension of mindfulness’ which ensures that attention and awareness are ‘deployed and trained in the service of understanding, lessening suffering, enhancing joy, increasing compassion, and providing greater opportunities to lead a mindful life’ (ibid.,15).

The stabilising presence in the unselfing process – which for Murdoch is ‘by definition morally desirable’ (Olsson 2018, 174) – is an intentionality rooted in ‘moral vision’ (Bakhurst 2018) which incorporates the ‘disciplined overcoming of the self...the clarification of vision and the domination of the selfish impulse’ (Murdoch 1998, 378, 382). The protective shelter of this moral vision – which, for Murdoch is inseparable from her well-known thesis about the ethical life which draws on Platonic ideas to transcend both virtue and duty ethics in the overarching conception of ‘generalised goodness’ (Murdoch 2003, 482) – is crucial given the nature of the human condition driven by the craving and willfulness outlined in earlier sections. As Olsson (2018) puts this:

I have argued that unselfing is an experience of spontaneity, immediacy, being touched and moved. It is a process induced by a careful attention...However, because humans are narrating creatures, the experience of refraining from explanations and of devoting attention to what is present is most often very brief, perhaps even just a fraction of a second (173).

6. Unselfing and Education – Implications for Practice

The vulnerability of the human condition which leads to the reification of the self as a defence against the vicissitudes of life presents a major obstacle (whether we tend towards narrative or non-narrative living) to the alleviation of suffering and the cultivation of moral principles and behaviour designed to benefit others. Such self-defensive tendencies are so stubborn and deep-rooted that systematic strategies for overcoming them are fore grounded in both Western and Eastern ethical and spiritual traditions. Schopenhauer and Murdoch favour artistic and intellectual engagement, and both these writers draw inspiration from Buddhist traditions. Such strategies – which the Buddhist psychologist, Olendzki (2010) describes as a ‘science of liberation’ (27) – require specific
forms of training in order to cultivate wholesome and other-regarding values. Batchelor (2015) insists that this project is essentially pragmatic since the ‘point is to gain practical knowledge that leads to changes in behaviour that affect the quality of your life...In letting go of self-centred reactivity, a person gradually comes to dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity’ (Kindle edn.,430). The development of this knowledge and the cultivation of such cardinal virtues are routinely referred to as ‘trainings’ in Buddhist writings (Hahn 1999; Bodhi 2000) and, as such, not unlike Aristotle’s (1981 edn) recommendations for developing the virtues since:

Anything that we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it: people become builders by building and instrumentalists by playing instruments. Similarly, we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones (91-2).

Mindfulness has become something of a boom industry over the last few decades thanks largely to the work of Kabat-Zinn (1994) who developed a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme in his work at the Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. Since then the work of Kabat-Zinn and associates has been responsible for a massive global expansion of interest in mindfulness-based interventions in a diverse range of domains including work in prisons, workplaces and hospitals, in addition to widespread applications in psychology, psychotherapy, and education. Ergas (2019) cites a recently completed meta-analysis of 447 peer-reviewed papers on mindfulness applications in general education published between 2002 and 2017, and interest continues to burgeon in psychology, mind-body medicine, leadership/management programmes, and general public discourse and culture (Purser, Forbes & Burke 2016).

Unfortunately, many such applications – challenged by critics as forms of ‘McMindfulness’ (Hyland 2017; Purser 2019) – have involved commodified forms of mindfulness which divorce the practices from Buddhist ethical foundations and, in educational settings, this has resulted in using mindfulness solely to enhance classroom discipline or improve academic performance. Given the proposals about unselfing outlined above, it will be crucial in the context of moral education to avoid such impoverished versions of mindfulness and to follow the recommendations of Ergas (2019) in supplementing mindfulness in education (that is, the strictly instrumentalist applications noted above) with mindfulness as education and of education which are grounded in ‘ancient and contemporary conceptions of education as a path and a holistic endeavour that concerns character, virtue, self-knowledge and social engagement’ (348).

References


Unselfing, Suffering and Morality: Cultivating Non-Narrative Approaches to Ethical Development. Prof. Terry Hyland. The cultivation of the sense of non-self is a key component of Buddhist ethics which views an attachment to self as a major source of suffering and a hindrance to the process of understanding ourselves and others in the context of our location in the moral universe. In Western traditions the move from self-regarding to other-regarding principles is a central feature of both consequentialist and deontological ethical systems. It will be argued that ethical development along such lines may be cultivated by means of training and education which foregrounds unselfing through the letting go (1997) have outlined a different approach to moral development, which posits three ethics that are central to the moral belief systems in the majority of cultures around the world: autonomy, community, and divinity. This method of differentiating types of morality not only shows different domains of morality, but also gives us insight into cultural variations (Shweder et al., 1997). People around the world may share the same moral foundations ethical codes, and moral reasoning, but there is much disagreement about their relative importance across cultures. This paper applies a cultural approach to studying morality by focusing on how cultures develop specific ways of thinking and foster certain values (Norenzayan and Heine, 2005). Unselfing, Suffering and Morality: Cultivating Non-Narrative Approaches to Ethical Development. International Journal of Social Policy and Education, 2, 71-79. has been cited by the following article: TITLE: Telling Moral Tales: Exploring Ways of Enhancing the Realism and Explanatory Power of Ethical Thought Experiments. AUTHORS: Terry Hyland. Such supplementary support including references to the current Coronavirus pandemic for the ethical thought experiments is intended to enhance teaching and learning in moral education and philosophical ethics at all levels. Related Articles: Open Access. Articles. On the Management of College Students under the Concept of Cultivating Morality and Cultivating People. Approaches to ethics. Philosophers nowadays tend to divide ethical theories into three areas: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Meta-ethics deals with the nature of moral judgement. The problem for ethical realists is that people follow many different ethical codes and moral beliefs. So if there are real ethical truths out there (wherever!) then human beings don't seem to be very good at discovering them. One form of ethical realism teaches that ethical properties exist independently of human beings, and that ethical statements give knowledge about the objective world. Non-consequentialism is concerned with the actions themselves and not with the consequences. It's the theory that people are using when they refer to "the principle of the thing".