

The background is a deep blue gradient with a subtle pattern of small white dots. Overlaid on this are several white geometric elements: a large circular scale on the left with tick marks and numbers from 160 to 260; several concentric circles of varying sizes; and curved arrows indicating a clockwise direction of movement.

VIRTUE ETHICS AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

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OVERVIEW

- ❖ Virtue ethics as philosophical standpoint for ethical dimensions of contemplative practices



- ❖ Implications of the analysis for corporate social responsibility -- challenges identified




Cross-fertilization thesis



Virtue ethics standpoint illuminates ethical dimensions of mindfulness & can mitigate potential distortions when applied to business context



Mindfulness perspective enhances virtue ethics, bringing a practice dimension valuable for CSR



The diagram consists of two light purple rounded rectangular boxes side-by-side. The left box is titled 'Virtue ethics (Aristotelian)' and the right box is titled 'Mindfulness'. Each box contains a list of bullet points. Two large, thick, purple curved arrows connect the boxes: one at the top pointing from left to right, and one at the bottom pointing from right to left, indicating a reciprocal relationship between the two concepts.

Virtue ethics (Aristotelian)

- focus on character, inner motivations
- goal of *eudaimonia*
- emotions relevant to moral character
- individual happiness tied to happiness of others in community

Mindfulness

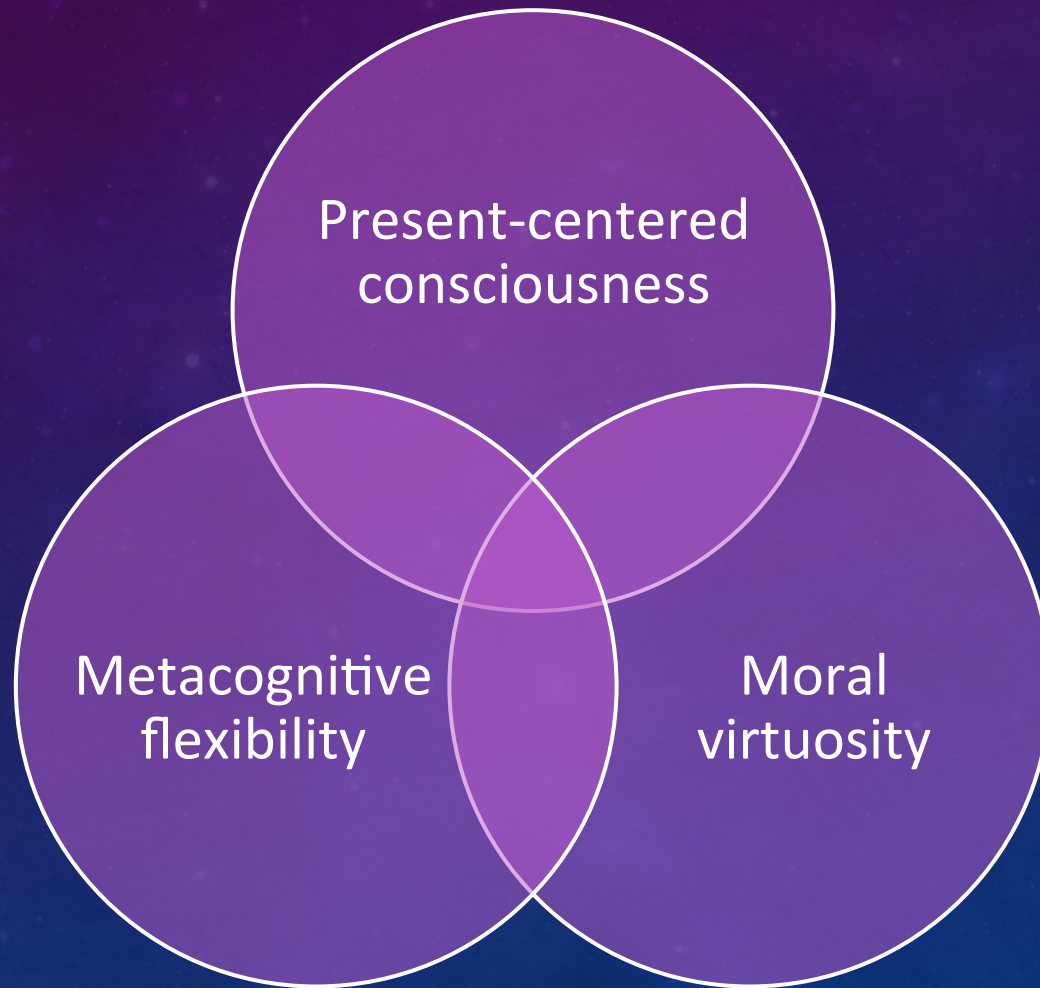
- focus on practice, inner states (e.g. yoga)
- goal of *samadhi*
- control of emotions
- expanded concern for others, movement from self to selflessness

VIRTUE ETHICS PERSPECTIVE



- an *ethics of being*
- centered on idea of being good as persons
- stresses internal motives, attitudes, beliefs, inclinations and desires in moral choice
- addresses role of character in moral theorizing
- regard for internal existential dimension of a person's life, as opposed to adjustment of behavior towards compliance with rules, precepts, duties
- Aristotle: virtue as quality or character that enables object or person to perform its function well; a virtue is a trait of character that enables one to flourish

INTERLINKING FACETS OF MINDFULNESS



VIRTUE ETHICS & MINDFULNESS



- Mindfulness is one of the cardinal virtues of contemplative practices
- Having such a virtue is more than having a dispositional state (e.g., a tendency to act according to moral rules or principles)
- Even less so is such a virtue merely a brain state

To be virtuous (e.g. compassionate) means having a certain inner disposition, awareness of what one's values are, caring about the kind of person one is



Such mindful inner states are indeed fostered by contemplative practices

Being virtuous also engages substantial degree of rationality and interpretive judgment



This is not to say that a compassionate moral agent needs to provide an airtight definition of compassion or to prove beyond doubt that a certain act is compassionate

TWO KINDS OF EXPLANATION

scientific

- Dealing with laws governing cause & effect
- Aristotle: material cause & efficient cause

interpretive

- Dealing with questions about meaning, responsibility, reasons for acting
- Not concerned with explaining aspects of human condition, but rather *understanding*, according to its own internal procedures
- Aristotle: formal cause & final cause

TWO KINDS OF *EXPLANATION*

- Not all cogent questions about human nature and conduct are scientific questions, concerning laws governing cause and effect
- Most ethical questions (also legal issues) about persons and their doings are about interpretation: ‘why did she choose to help her friend – or that unknown stranger over there -- in time of need?’
- They are real questions, inviting disciplined answers. Virtue ethics is one nonscientific discipline that seeks to address them
- Ethics involves reasoned attributions of freedom, responsibility, motives for action, right, duty, justice, mercy, guilt, liability -- using methods not reducible to explanatory science, not replaceable by neuroscience, despite scientific advances

TWO KINDS OF *CONCEPTS*

criterial

- meaning given by defining criteria; disagreement centers around whether the criteria are satisfied, as with scientific definitions of natural kinds, and with mathematical concepts
- e.g., triangle, book, tiger

interpretive

- no fixed criteria or instance-identifying decision procedure, but normative/evaluative considerations that best justify total set of practices at hand
- e.g., compassion, courage, justice

COMPASSION AS AN INTERPRETIVE CONCEPT

Moral principles underwriting virtuous conduct as comprehended by contemplative practices are best understood as *interpretive concepts*

Note: Socrates' dialogues treat ethical questions as centering around criterial concepts – leading to no satisfactory answers. Aristotle, on the other hand, characterizes ethics as more like arts of medicine, navigation, comedy – revolving around interpretive concepts; ethics is not mathematics

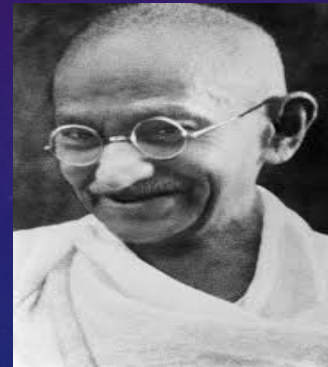
HYPOTHETICAL: INTERPRETING COMPASSION

Your colleague asks your opinion about an article s/he has written. Should you be blunt, say the truth about how sloppily researched and poorly written it is? Or should you be “discrete” and “positive” to protect her/his feelings?

- Which approach is the more compassionate one?
- Is it sometimes kind to be cruel?



- A compassionate leader is disposed to do what is appropriate given some set of circumstances



- But rationality and interpretation are engaged too. A compassionate leader can distinguish compassion from an excess like dotiness, and knows why compassion is a good thing and vices like besottedness and indifference are not good

IMPLICATIONS FOR CSR

Without a proper philosophical frame of reference, are there risks of mischaracterization and undervaluation of contemplative practices when deployed as a resource for management decisionmaking and executive leadership?



CHALLENGE: SCRUTINIZING MORALITY-AS-PLAIN-FACT ASSUMPTIONS

- Persistent temptation to emphasize benefits of contemplative practices as awakening compassion, environmental awareness, other pro-social attitudes
- Yet poses risk of neglecting controversial nature of value questions and attendant need for justifying moral judgments
- Examples: compassion versus competitiveness dilemmas (Merck River Blindness case); “right vs. right” dilemmas (Roussel-Uclaf RU486 case)

HYPOTHETICAL: NEUROSCIENCE & COMPASSION

Suppose after undergoing controlled meditation sessions (LKM), brain scans of participants show heightened activity in the right supramarginal gyrus -- a region of the brain associated with compassion. Suppose further that after reaching such a brain state of compassion, research subjects indicate

strong approval for anti-abortion (pro-life) viewpoint

OR

strong approval for an abortion rights (pro-choice) viewpoint

- Would such a discovery settle the ethical controversies surrounding abortion?

CHALLENGE: USING CARE WITH INSTRUMENTAL TREATMENTS OF MINDFULNESS

- RISK: Disregarding intrinsic value of contemplative practices, in quest to deploy such practices as wellness programs for employee satisfaction & ultimately for boosting organizational productivity and profitability
- Some of these briefly discussed in D. Gelles, *Mindful Work: How Meditation Is Changing Business from the Inside Out* (2015)
 - ✧ The mindful sniper; training employees to endure stress; incompetent instruction
 - ✧ Gelles basically concludes that, so long as some overall good results, better than nothing

USING CARE WITH INSTRUMENTAL TREATMENTS

Similar to the idea that “ethics is good for business” – reduces ethics to a tool for profitability. Likewise, the standard debates concerning the “business case” for CSR

But ethics *questions*: is profitability the only or most important purpose of business?

USING CARE WITH INSTRUMENTAL TREATMENTS

Similarly, for mindfulness -- it's significant not simply for enhancing traditional objectives of business – can support a radical rethinking of business and management

An ethic of mindfulness is of instrumental value to the good life; yet ethics leads one to question & contemplate what we mean by the good life – thus ethics has intrinsic value

CHALLENGE: SEEKING REASONABLE BALANCE BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC & INTERPRETIVE EXPLANATIONS



“The brains of social animals are wired to feel pleasure in the exercise of social dispositions such as grooming and co-operation, and to feel pain when shunned, scolded, or excluded. Neurochemicals such as vasopressin and oxytocin mediate pair-bonding, parent-offspring bonding, and probably also bonding to kith and kin”

--Patricia Churchland, *Neurophilosophy*

BUT WAIT A SECOND



Don't we already know that people feel pleasure in grooming and co-operating?

- What of significance is added in saying that our brains are “wired” like this -- that “neurochemicals” are possibly involved in producing this pleasure?



"In the past, addiction was thought to be a weakness of character, but in recent decades research has increasingly found that addiction to drugs like cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine is a matter of brain chemistry"

--David Hirschman, "Your Brain on Drugs"





HOLD ON



- Don't we already know that drinking alcohol, taking drugs, etc. are habit forming? Don't we already know the reason has to do with pleasure from these activities?
- A neuroscientific finding that such activities involve an increase in dopamine levels, which are associated with pleasure, is framed as a major breakthrough in "understanding" addiction
- RISK: undermining beliefs in moral responsibility, accountability, and character

CHALLENGE: DISCERNING PROPER LIMITS OF SCIENCE TO AVOID REDUCTIVISM (SCIENTISM, MATERIALISM)

- Some reductive epistemological standpoints regard fruits of contemplative practices as brain states and neural phenomena reducible to electro-chemical processes
- Reductive approach devalues transcendent self-understanding provided by contemplative practices

CHALLENGE: SEEKING BALANCE BETWEEN LETTER & SPIRIT OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES



❖ **Breaking News: Yoga Instructor fired for being a carnivore!!!**



Dhyana:
devotion,
meditation
on the
Divine

Samadhi:
union with the
Divine

Yama:
universal
morality

Niyama:
personal
observances

Asanas:
body
postures

Pranayama:
breathing
exercises and
control of
prana, life force
energy

Pratyahara:
control of the
senses

Dharana:
concentratio
n and
cultivating
inner
perceptual
awareness



UNDERSTOOD AS A VIRTUE, MINDFULNESS CAN BENEFIT CRITICAL MORAL INQUIRY (INTERPRETIVE VIRTUOSITY)

- 1) Fostering openness & a questioning spirit
- 2) Enhancing ability to deal with contradictions/opposites (financial/nonfinancial)
- 3) Broadening awareness & concern for multiplicity of stakeholders
- 4) Facilitating calm reflection (non-impulsive decisionmaking)
- 5) Stimulating moral imagination, moral courage
- 6) Supplies key element of noninstrumental motivation for CSR

CHALLENGE: KEEPING OBJECTIVITY IN ETHICAL DIALECTIC

- ❑ Keeping virtue-ethics-and-mindfulness in touch with objective moral principles
- ❑ Avoiding lapse into “discretionism” or “subjectivism”
- ❑ Yet without:
 - getting hobbled by formalism (Kant)
 - remaining too theoretical (as with most Western philosophical treatments of ethics)
 - misrepresenting inner motivation for ethicality as compliance with rules and principles, abstract duties

CONCLUSION



Virtue ethics perspective on mindfulness helps accord value to & avoid some pitfalls/distortions of mindful-CSR applications



Mindfulness perspective enhances virtue ethics (and other ethical theories) by adding a vital practice dimension – making it more amenable to CSR application

