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HOMO-EUDAIMONICUS: AFFECTS, BIOPOWER, AND PRACTICAL REASON

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If I want to be in the world effectively, and have being in the world as my art, then I need to practice the fundamental skills of being in the world. That's the fundamental skill of mindfulness. People in general are trained to a greater or lesser degree through other practices and activities to be in the world. But mindfulness practice trains it specifically. And our quality of life is greatly enhanced when we have this basic skill.

— Liam

Mindfulness is a term for white, middle-class values

— Gladys

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the topic of “global well-being” (as something distinct from global health or global mental health) through an emergent discourse in the science and politics of happiness on “subjective well-being.” It is argued that this discourse attempts to combine two traditions of thinking about well-being: the ancient eudaimonic tradition on the one hand, and the tradition of political economy on the other. Consequently, it examines a new configuration of both—a political economy of eudaimonia—and a new kind of person emerging at the center of that discourse, a paradoxical biopolitical figure I call homo-eudaimonicus. Through the example of mindfulness meditation, I offer a history and ethnography of that person as it turned up in science, politics and personal practice, highlighting in particular the importance of three kinds of “teleological affects” (mindlessness, tranquility and compassion) that, taken together, represent the affective dimensions of homo-eudaimonicus. Finally, through these teleological affects, I also argue for a rethinking of the *bios* in biopower, to include not just the concept of life itself, but the good life, and with that a teleo-power grounded in experiences of affective fullness.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

### **1.1: A Science and Politics of Happiness**

On April 2nd, 2012, the United Nations held a meeting in New York City to discuss solutions for a crisis thought to be worsening in the first decades of the twenty-first century: a crisis, as the organizers saw it, in global happiness. The event, entitled “Wellbeing and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm,” attracted over 800 guests, including two heads of state, numerous government ministers and diplomats, scientific experts from various disciplines, and spiritual authorities from several of the major world religions. The goal of the meeting: to issue an “urgent call” to nation states, and their various institutions, to develop interventions for raising happiness levels across the globe.<sup>1</sup> Just what kinds of interventions were needed exactly were not specified. As the organizers went on to say, happiness and well-being were both plural and holistic concepts, with a number of equally important determinants. Thus, in order to avoid promoting a one-size-fits-all theory of happiness, each state should, they said, work out their measures “at their own pace and on their own terms” (Royal Government of Bhutan 2012, 26). What was arguably less flexible, however, was the spirit in which that was to be pursued. Yes, each state had to decide on its own well-being future, but in doing so, they were also to make use of the latest scientific knowledge on the topic. And for those curious about where to find such research, there was fortunately help at

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the ground work for this support had been obtained a year earlier, when sixty-eight member states of the United Nations passed Resolution 65/309, committing themselves to pursuing “measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and wellbeing in development with a view to guiding their public policies” (Royal Government of Bhutan 2012, 13).

hand in the burgeoning field of the “science of happiness” (Royal Government of Bhutan 2012, 97).

Or perhaps that should be *sciences* of happiness, for there were, in fact, several bodies of knowledge represented at the conference and offered up as disciplinary contributions for knowing the good-life. At the top of the list was the economics of happiness, a discipline in development since about the 1970s, and which had since that time worked out alternative measures of state progress by taking into account such things as life satisfaction and positive affect, connecting them to traditional economic factors such as income, health, access to education, and so on. A close second was the cognitive science of happiness, represented most notably by positive psychology and positive neuroscience, and which provided interventions for cultivating “optimal” experiential states at the individual and population level. Alongside these contributions, there was also a loose network of scholars working in a field that had come to be known in some circles as “contemplative studies,” an up-and-coming discipline which had gained attention over the past few years for showing how psycho-spiritual practices contribute to mental health and well-being. As participants for that field pointed out, not only was there long standing testimony on the beneficial effects of adopting a spiritual or religious way of life throughout history, there now also existed much scientific data validating those accounts, especially data in relation to eastern inspired spiritual practices, and particularly Buddhism, which was generously represented at the conference.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Amongst those bringing a Buddhist perspective to the event were Richard C. Brown, Jane Carpenter and Valerie Lorig of Naropa University, Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, Neuroscientist Richard Davidson, Executive Director of Shambhala Carolyn Mandelker, founding chair of Shambhala Institute Michael Chender, Senior teacher at New York Shambhala Meditation Center Michelle Laporte, Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax Roshi,

The UN gathering was in some sense unprecedented—the first high level meeting to assess global happiness levels and to do so in the faith that a science of the good life now exists, even if in a nascent form. The report that followed months later therefore called it a “historic event” (Royal Government of Bhutan 2012, 10). But was it in fact “historic” in the sense intended? How did such an event come about and what were, are, or will be, its effects? Or, considering the issue more generally, since the conference itself is symbolic of something more wide-reaching, what is the importance of this scientific and political discourse on global happiness? It is too soon, of course, to talk about the long-term outcomes of this interest in international well-being, but it is not too soon for understanding its history, for following its progress, and for commenting on the changes that are occurring as happiness gains currency both politically and scientifically. Nor is it too soon for noting the promises that are being made, the intentions being shaped, and the self-understandings that are crystallizing, all in the name of well-being. What is needed, then, is an empirical and critical account of what is going on here—how such an orientation came to be, the multiple ways in which it is being articulated, and a questioning of whether, in the end, it is a good thing. What is needed, in other words, is a history and ethnography of the twenty-first century science and politics of well-being. This project attempts just that.

## **1.2: Global Well-Being**

Such a project is necessary because of the historically unique situation the West is currently in with regard to the governance of well-being. It has been a longstanding goal in the West to

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Founder and executive director of GPI Atlantic and practicing Buddhist Ronald Colman, and the conference organizers themselves, the Royal Government of Bhutan.

have a science of happiness, especially one that can be used to ground a secular politics of well-being. It is at least a couple of hundred years old (if one takes Bentham as a point of origin), and arguably a few thousand more (if one prefers Aristotle). Throughout that long history, however, the situation has always been the same: a science and politics of happiness has remained elusive. Not only has happiness resisted a universal definition (since there are many competing conceptions of what constitute the good-life), it has also withstood being measured (since feelings of happiness do not lend themselves to easy quantification). Hence, the tendency has been for states to adopt proxy measures of well-being instead, such as income, life expectancy, access to education, and so on—what are sometimes called measures of “objective well-being” (OWB) (cf. Gasper 2005). What has happened over recent years, however, is that this gap has allegedly been closed. There is a general consensus, in other words, that there now exists a science of experienced happiness, that is, of “subjective well-being” (SWB)—as Frey says, we can now “measure human well-being directly” (2008, 18).<sup>3</sup> And along with that consensus is the view that, for the first time in history, a genuine, scientifically based, secular politics of well-being is just around the corner.

If the past decades witnessed the emergence of something called “global health,” as well as something called “global mental health,” then it seems that what is happening here is the emergence of what one might call “global well-being.” But that is only half true. The idea of global well-being has actually been around for a long time, at least since the development of political economy, a discipline that deliberated frequently the meaning of happiness, how

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<sup>3</sup> And it seems there is something general about this belief if the glut of recent publications on the science of happiness is anything to go by (Bok 2010; David, Boniwell, and Ayers 2013; Diener 2009; Haidt 2006; Lyubomirsky 2008; Seligman 2011).

to measure it, and how to include it as the goal of governmental reason at both the national and international level. Political economy, however, as I show in chapter 1, eventually gave up on the goal of measuring subjective well-being in favor of more “objective” measures instead. It thus ushered in an age of global objective well-being (GOWB)<sup>4</sup>. By comparison, what has happened over recent years is the development “global subjective well-being” (GSWB), a field that takes seriously the possibility of measuring and promoting the actual *feelings* of happiness at the local, national and international level. It is this conceptualization of happiness that forms the focus of this dissertation.

The situation raises a number of questions, however. Where did the idea of global well-being, whether conceived objectively or subjectively, come from exactly? What histories shape its emergence? Moreover, what is meant by “well-being” in those traditions and what kind of technologies were developed to cultivate it? Chapter 2 attempts to answer those questions by following the history of happiness from the Ancient World to the present day. To put the answer in brief here, however, what I argue in that section is that there have been roughly three phases informing the emergence of global well-being, what I call, for convenience sake, the ancient, the modern, and the postmodern views of happiness. The first is largely influenced by Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia*—the idea that a flourishing happiness depends primarily on the cultivation of virtue and practical reason. The second comes from modern philosophy, and especially eighteenth century political economy, where the traditions of utilitarianism and liberalism defined happiness as grounded in pleasure, wealth, and eventually, a free market. Finally, the third comes from the post-World War II

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<sup>4</sup> A key development here is the general history of utility theory, but it is also found in more recent measures of social progress and human development through, for instance, the “social indicator movement” and “quality of life” studies of the 1960s and 1970s.

period, when a post-modern notion of well-being emerges, one which blends, in interesting ways, aspects from the previous two traditions. SWB is situated in that third phase, as I elaborate in Chapter 2.

### **1.3: Mindfulness as the Case Study**

The discourse on (global) subjective well-being, however, is not the result of a fully realized, self-conscious “movement,” despite what some of its advocates think or hope—though admittedly the UN Meeting does represent a high point in the attempt to create such a movement. Rather, it stems from the efforts of a group of disparate actors, institutions and epistemic cultures, each of which are connected insofar as they hope to extend the value of happiness (or one of its cognates: well-being, flourishing, life satisfaction, positive affect, quality of life, and so on) in science and society. Moreover, the conceptions of subjective well-being talked about in this discourse do not signify some universal object of experience, but are the outcome of a long process of construction, constituted at the confluence of particular histories, power dynamics, and everyday practices. Consequently, there are many ways one could study this global interest in subjective well-being. In order to do justice to the socio-historical specificity of understandings of subjective well-being, therefore, I choose here to focus on a particular type of practice that turns up frequently in the literature on subjective well-being, namely, a Buddhist inspired meditation practice called “mindfulness meditation.”

There are two main reasons for focusing on mindfulness. The first comes from the special place mindfulness has in the discourse on subjective well-being. Currently, it is something of a scientific fact amongst those working on happiness interventions that



practicing mindfulness improves the physical and mental well-being of practitioners, both as a form of therapy and as a method of enhancement. Thus, on the one hand, there are now a large amount of studies offering evidence that mindfulness alleviates a range of sufferings, including:

- addiction (Brewer et al. 2011; Brewer, Elwafi, and Davis 2013; Khanna and Greeson 2013; Vallejo and Amaro 2009; Witkiewitz, Marlatt, and Walker 2005)
- ADHD (Mitchell et al. 2013; Oord, Bögels, and Peijnenburg 2011; van de Weijer-Bergsma et al. 2012)
- anxiety, depression and stress (K. W. Brown and Ryan 2003; Cash and Whittingham 2010; S. Evans et al. 2008; Hofmann et al. 2010; Khoury, Lecomte, Fortin, et al. 2013; Kuyken et al. 2015; Strauss et al. 2014; Teasdale et al. 2000; Toneatto and Nguyen 2007)
- borderline personality disorder (C. J. Robins 2002; Linehan et al. 1999; O'Toole, Diddy, and Kent 2011; Wupperman et al. 2013)
- chronic pain (Chiesa and Serretti 2011; Grossman et al. 2004; Jon Kabat-Zinn 1982; Jon Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, and Burney 1985; Rosenzweig et al. 2010)
- inflammatory conditions (Kaliman et al. 2014; Rosenkranz et al. 2013)
- eating disorders (Kristeller and Hallett 1999; Kristeller and Wolever 2010; Wanden-Berghe, Sanz-Valero, and Wanden-Berghe 2010)
- obsessive-compulsive disorders (Fairfax 2008; Hanstede, Gidron, and Nyklicek 2008; Patel, Carmody, and Simpson 2007; Singh et al. 2004; Wilkinson-Tough et al. 2010)
- psychosis (Chadwick et al. 2009; Jacobsen et al. 2011; Khoury, Lecomte, Gaudiano, et al. 2013)
- PTSD and trauma (V. Follette, Palm, and Pearson 2006; V. M. Follette and Vijay 2009; Kearney et al. 2012; King et al. 2013; B. W. Smith et al. 2011)
- suicidality (Crane et al. 2008; Le and Gobert 2013; Mark, Williams, and Swales 2004; J. M. G. Williams et al. 2006)
- vascular disease (Abbott et al. 2014)

On the other hand, there are also a growing number of works suggesting how it goes beyond therapy, to enhance biological and psychological capacities, such as

- attention and cognition (Bajjal et al. 2011; Brefczynski-Lewis et al. 2007; Kerr et al. 2013; Moore and Malinowski 2009; Mrazek et al. 2013; Salomon and Globerson 1987; Siegel 2007; Valentine and Sweet 1999)
- executive function / self-regulation (Flook et al. 2010; Tang et al. 2007; Tang et al. 2012; Teper and Inzlicht 2013; Zeidan et al. 2010)
- the immune system (Davidson et al. 2003; Jacobs et al. 2011)
- perception (D. Brown, Forte, and Dysart 1984; MacLean et al. 2010)
- memory (Jha et al. 2010; Mrazek et al. 2013; van Vugt et al. 2012)
- prosocial emotions and behavior (Beddoe and Murphy 2004; Birnie, Speca, and Carlson 2010; Block-Lerner et al. 2007; Flook et al. 2015; Jacobs et al. 2013; O'Connor et al. 2015; Wallmark et al. 2012)
- general well-being (Roberts-Wolfe et al. 2012; Sahdra et al. 2011; Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor 2010; Shapiro et al. 2008)

The last of these is especially important, since it also aligns with the popular view, stemming from the testimony of expert meditators, that practicing mindfulness over the long term helps cultivate an abiding sense of happiness or flourishing in the practitioner (Ekman et al. 2005; Wallace 2005).

The success of mindfulness in each of these regards is borne out by its institutional presence. Since the 1980s, it has crossed over into a variety of settings, including clinical psychology, cognitive therapy, neuroscience, education, the law, politics and business. The number of studies devoted to it is also increasing rapidly. Not only does it have its own journal, but over the past decade, the number of articles published per year has gone from a

handful to several hundred (Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2011). A growing number of these come from the neuroscience of meditation, a relatively new field of study, which, besides providing much scientific legitimacy on the biological benefits of mindfulness to the scientific community over the past decade, has also cornered the market on the neuroscience of happiness in general, with the majority of experiments being done through neuro-imaging studies of expert and lay meditation practitioners (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007; Davidson 2012; Jazaieri et al. 2013). Though much of the above work on mindfulness stems primarily from biological and psychological studies of meditation, the knowledge about it has circulated much more widely than this, and has even found a place in the political-economic literature on happiness as well—including that of the aforesaid UN conference, where it was promoted as one of the determinants of the good life (Royal Government of Bhutan 2012, 150). Moreover, mindfulness has been taken up in a range of institutions, not just therapeutic, clinical and educational ones, but a surprising number of international corporations (for instance, AXA, Disney, Ford, Genentech, General Mills, Google, McKesson, and LinkedIn, amongst others). Indeed, it could easily be argued that mindfulness is a burgeoning social movement in the US, as was alleged at the beginning of 2014, when *Time Magazine* argued that America was witnessing a “mindfulness revolution,” something that had also apparently been predicted at the end of 2013, when the advertising agency JWT stated that 2014 would be the year of “mindful living.”<sup>5</sup>

The popularity of mindfulness is not just reserved for the US either. Although it is true that virtually every hospital in North America offers some kind of mindfulness-based therapy, and though it is also true that increasing numbers of businesses and schools are

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<sup>5</sup> As Purser notes, “mindfulness is now estimated to be a \$4 billion industry (2015, 10).

jumping on the mindfulness bandwagon, mindfulness has spread much farther than the US, and has been imported to clinical, educational and corporate settings all across the globe. All this makes mindfulness unique as an object, then, since it is arguably the scientific fact par excellence in the field of global subjective well-being, with no other practice having quite as much experimentation, institutional presence, or popularity as an everyday technology of happiness. It thus provides a concrete way of tracking and mapping the current discourse on global subjective well-being.

#### **1.4: Homo-eudaimonicus**

The second reason for focusing on mindfulness comes from what it reveals about that discourse on global well-being. To put in brief what I argue at length throughout this thesis, what I think it reveals is the development of a new figure of the human in global biopolitics, a paradoxical biopolitical subject I call “homo-eudaimonicus.”<sup>6</sup> I will say exactly what I mean by this, and in what ways it is paradoxical, further down, but before I do, I need to provide some context.

As stated above, there are three phases shaping the current discourse on global well-being: the ancient eudaimonic tradition, the modern political-economic tradition, and the more recent post-modern tradition—the last of which blends elements of the first two. The blending one witnesses in the post-modern period, however, is not by accident. Rather, it is, in some ways, the attempt to fulfill a goal that existed at the beginning of the modern tradition. That is to say, when political economy theorized a universal science and politics of

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<sup>6</sup> I am aware that the term “eudaimonicus” blends Greek with Latin, but the mix is justified insofar as the term eudaimonia, though originally a Greek term, was adopted into Latin unchanged.

happiness in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—and just to be clear, I see political-economy as the first real attempt to do that—many of its main theorists recognized the importance of eudaimonia as the ultimate political responsibility, and consequently spent much time theorizing the ethics of virtue and wisdom in service of the collective well-being (Nussbaum 1999). Over time, however, that goal of a science and politics of eudaimonia was, for numerous reasons, sidelined, and a narrower approach to well-being emerged. This narrower tradition—largely represented through utility theory—has since become, with the ascendancy of neoclassical economics, the main theory and technology for defining and measuring objective well-being at the global scale, and provides the main infrastructure in global politics supporting the development of public happiness.

The history of utility theory is obviously a long and complicated one, and it is outside the scope of this dissertation to go into that history in depth, but in general three things can be said of its “narrow” understanding of well-being. First, inspired by Bentham’s utilitarianism, it takes happiness to consist primarily in utility, itself traditionally a synonym for pleasure. Why was utility synonymous with pleasure? The reason comes from a theory of happiness popular in the modern period, which one might call “desire-satisfaction.” The desire-satisfaction theory of happiness states that human beings “normally” feel pleasure when they satisfy a desire, and that they “normally” satisfy desires by getting things that are useful to the ends being sought in those desires. Thus, there is a logical connection between pleasure and utility through the use value a thing has vis-a-vis one’s desires. As we shall see in chapter 2, the history of utility theory has gone through a long process of depsychologizing utility so that it no longer stands for feelings of pleasure. As such, utility now represents what are thought to be observable market forces, as theorized through the concept of “revealed

preferences.”<sup>7</sup> Behind that depsychologization, however, the specter of psychological hedonism still looms large, through an implicit assumption that whatever is represented by utility satisfies the desires of those consumers apparently attempting to maximize it.

Second, and following from this point, is that utility is often, though not always, measured through wealth. The reason follows from the desire satisfaction theory of happiness. If pleasure comes from utility, then one tends to, in a modern capitalist system, obtain useful things by buying them. Thus, if we satisfy desires by buying useful things, then the happiest life, according to this view, is the one in which we have access to an abundance of material conveniences, since they would provide us with a kind of perpetual satisfaction. A further outcome of this is that money comes to represent a subjective evaluation of how much one’s expected pleasure is worth. To put it simply, if person A is willing to pay X amount of dollars for a good, but not Y amount of dollars, then that person has, in that decision, revealed a subjective evaluation of what he or she thinks the good is worth, and thus how much the expected utility from the good is worth. A’s pleasure, in short, is worth \$X, meaning that the money in this case has provided a quantitative evaluation of a qualitative experience. Thus, one’s habits of spending can theoretically be correlated with one’s happiness levels—so long as consumers make prudent choices in the things that they buy, that is. Money is not the only way to measure utility, but it is a functionally useful one, particularly in terms of national statistics, and even more so given that it is the de facto entrenched means by which modern subjects realize their various images of the good.

Third, as a consequence of all this, and in order to make the measurements generalizable across all people, utility theory takes the human being to be a certain kind of

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the depsychologization of economic rationality see Morgan (2006) and Giocoli (2003).

hedonic actor, what is often called “homo-economicus.” What has been meant by homo-economicus has changed over the centuries (Dilts 2011; Dixon 2012; Morgan 2006; O’Boyle 2012; Persky 1995; Read 2009), but through the history of rational choice theory and neoclassical economics, it has generally come to mean a figure interested in his or her own happiness, by which is meant pleasure, and able to determine, using reason, the best way for bringing it about. This notion of homo-economicus, as Morgan points out, is obviously an “ideal type,” and it was recognized as such by its early theorizers, especially J.S. Mill, who said it represented man only in regard to his basic economic functions, as abstracted from the rest of his capacities (Morgan 2006, 4–5). No one person, then, actually corresponds to it fully. Nonetheless, it has come to serve as a useful summary for the assumptions written into the history of economics about what a human being is: a pleasure maximizing, self-interested rational agent.

In the post-World War II period, however, several theorists in economics, cognitive science, and philosophy began to critique the limits of the above approach by rejecting the idea of happiness as merely pleasure, and of the human being as a pleasure maximizing animal. The reason for the rejection was as much political as it was epistemic: the institutionalization of this image of the good life, it was often said, had drastic consequences for the world, leading to ways of life that are unsustainable and which are largely destructive to human minds, social relationships, and to the planet. Hence, in looking for an alternative theory of the good life, numerous scholars returned to the eudaimonic view of happiness as a solution, and thus took up the challenge of reintegrating virtue and wisdom back into political economy, arguing that what was needed to solve the economic, environmental and mental health crises of the late twentieth century was a “new” political economy, one that

synthesized elements of the previous two traditions. What they came to argue for was a political economy of eudaimonia, as opposed to a political economy of mere utility. The outcome were the post-modern theories of objective and subjective well-being that emerged during that time, and which blended the ancient and modern traditions in order to have the best of both. This hope for a new economic order, however, was not simply a wish for new institutional values, but a desire for a refiguring of the human, and thus a hope for a more sustainable way of life. In contrast to the reigning anthropological figure of homo-economicus, it was a desire to re-institutionalize a long-forgotten figure of the human in political economy, what I call homo-eudaimonicus.

And this is where mindfulness comes in. Mindfulness, as an illustration of the subjective well-being approach, also reveals such a post-modern blending of political economy and eudaimonia, but it also does something the other post-modern approaches do not: it brings that ideal not abstractly into political economy, by theorizing frameworks that support virtue in the hopes that people will embody it. Rather, it does it by actually developing techniques of the self, by which actors can supposedly bring eudaimonia into their everyday lives. To illustrate the point by means of a counterexample, the “capability” theories of Nussbaum and Sen, for instance, which are often taken as illustrating a eudaimonic approach to global objective well-being, were also developed with the hope of bringing eudaimonia back into political economy. Such technologies, however, are not directed at individuals—there are no eudaimonic techniques of the self in their approaches, in other words. Rather, their intention is to institutionalize a framework only, one in which eudaimonia is possible, but which can be actualized only if people seize the opportunity for it through whatever means they choose. In short, for the capabilities approach, having the



*opportunity* for eudaimonia is enough. It thus attempts to cultivate an image of homo-eudaimonicus indirectly, by providing the conditions in which life *might* flourish. Mindfulness, by contrast, entails a particular image of what eudaimonia is, and attempts to bring that to practitioners by asking them to integrate specific virtues, as well as a specific conception of the world and themselves, into their lives on a daily basis, through the adoption of certain psycho-spiritual exercises or techniques of the self intended to cultivate such ends. It thus attempts to cultivate an image of homo-eudaimonicus directly through a particular tradition.

### **1.5: An “Eastern” Eudaimonia**

What, then, is that image of homo-eudaimonicus that is found in mindfulness? What is the tradition that provides the conceptual backdrop for these eudaimonic practices? This is what the dissertation tries to answer through a thick historical and ethnographic description of mindfulness in America. But to anticipate some concerns, a few summary points should be made. First, a historical point: despite the fact that the term eudaimonia comes from the Aristotelian tradition, mindfulness scholars and practitioners generally do not turn to the writings of Aristotle for their guidance. Rather, as a consequence of various social movements beginning around the 1960s (particularly the countercultural revolution, the Tibetan diaspora in the US, and the development of New Age mysticism), “Eastern” philosophies and practices came to be seen as embodying a notion of happiness that was thought to have been lost with the rise of the modern account. And of the “Eastern” approaches, it was Buddhism in particular, as opposed to, say, Hinduism or Daoism, that became the main language for understanding that lost happiness. Hence, as a consequence of

that history, Buddhist virtue ethics—or at least a modernized Buddhist virtue ethics—and a “secularized” mindfulness practice, become a powerful set of referents for acquiring virtue, wisdom and eudaimonia in North America. And it was that tradition that a large number of subjective well-being researchers and practitioners drew upon when trying to understand and cultivate happiness in the late twentieth century.

Second, an ethnographic point: as a representative of the post-modern tradition, mindfulness continues to blend the ancient eudaimonic and modern economic views, relying on an “Eastern” inspired spiritual tradition to do so. But how does it blend the two? On the one hand, there is a bias in the ethics of mindfulness to favor the eudaimonic and critique the modern. This might be expected, insofar as mindfulness is inspired by a seemingly “Buddhist way of life,” an ethico-spiritual path which is often critical of capitalist modes of being (the fourteenth Dalai Lama is, after all, a self-avowed Marxist and has argued on numerous occasions that capitalism has destructive effects on global well-being).<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, however, and as I show throughout the dissertation, even though there is an ethical imperative to favor the eudaimonic over the economic, in order to bring mindfulness into the mainstream, it has often been translated to be in line with the economic. Thus, mindfulness is often done in environments in which asceticism is not an option, and by people who do not want to reject their middle-class comforts completely. At the most, they want to tone down their pursuit of wealth and pleasure, or at least get a balance between the eudaimonic and the

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<sup>8</sup> In that sense, the eudaimonic and economic are often represented, if not as polar opposites by contemplatives, at least as substantially disconnected. Economic conditions may for some contemplatives provide important resources for well-being, but they were far from considered sufficient for the good-life. By contrast, the eudaimonic life was both necessary and sufficient, and required seemingly few material resources. As I heard on numerous occasions, “happiness comes from within,” specifically from the moral sentiment of compassion, itself accessed through mindfulness meditation.

economic. To take one example from fieldwork: Kelly, a mindfulness practitioner, was learning how to apply mindfulness in both her life and her career to attain all-around fulfillment, and she attempted to achieve this through becoming a licensed “contemplative psychotherapist,” an identity which gave her opportunities for both earning a wage and for furthering herself as a moral agent. As she put it, “The reason I came to this program [in contemplative psychotherapy] was because I thought it would open more possibilities with a job. It just gives me more options for what to do. But it wasn’t just money motivated, it was about fulfillment. I wanted something that allowed me to grow as a person, and maybe help others at the same time. So it was about opening up possibilities all around.”

This yearning for balance, and therefore for greater fulfillment, was a common theme during fieldwork. As I also found, however, there were many additional institutional pressures unsettling that balance, tipping agents toward the economic and away from the eudaimonic. As I elaborate in chapter 4, one of the reasons mindfulness became so popular in the early 21st century—why it was taken up not just in meditation centers, healthcare, and education, but in industry too—was that it came to have a market value as a form of “mental and affective capital” (from its alleged ability to enhance productivity by, for instance, helping people deal better with affective disorders such as stress, depression and anxiety, or by cultivating forms of attention that were useful for complex forms of intellectual labor). Many businesses were quick to pick up on that power of mindfulness, rapidly bringing the practice into their institutions for the sake of the increased productivity that comes from having a happy workforce.

All that being said, I do not think the story here is merely a pessimistic one, one which only highlights the economic instrumentalization of a spiritual practice, for despite the

institutional pressures towards the economic, to what extent practitioners actually embraced the economic at the expense of the eudaimonic was contingent upon each person's biography. As will be seen, there was often a delicate, constant, and controversial fine-tuning of the two when practitioners tried to bring mindfulness into their own lives, with each person balancing the imperatives of each image of the good life (the modern and the ancient) in their own personal ways. It is this balancing act that I found to be the constant theme of the fieldwork, and one that I explore at length throughout the dissertation.

### **1.6: Thesis**

Given all that, it is time to restate and clarify my thesis. What the growing popularity of mindfulness in America reveals, I argue, is a new kind of paradoxical biopolitical subject in post-Fordist society, what I call homo-eudaimonicus: a being for whom the pursuit of "virtue" and "practical reason" supersedes that of wealth and pleasure as a path to a flourishing good-life, but who ironically has more value in political economy than the rationally self-interested homo-economicus, insofar as the affective and psychological skill set acquired as a result of certain eudaimonic practices enables that person to align more easily with the forces of post-industrial capitalism.

Homo-eudaimonicus, however, is no less an ideal type than homo-economicus. It thus requires a historical and ethnographic approach to show what is meant by it. Such a history has never been told. The research I have conducted will, then, fill that gap by looking at what this person was historically considered to be, and what shape that person actually takes in the West in the 21st century. Taken together, the dissertations thus offer a "critical eudaimonics" over the role of the flourishing life in post-modern practices of well-being, while describing

in historical and ethnographic detail a new figure of the human emerging in the discourse on global subjective well-being.

### **1.7: Biopower**

“the most important thing is not life, but the good life” (Socrates in *Crito* 48b)

Having introduced the historical and ethnographic contribution of the thesis, it is now time to discuss the theoretical significance of the project. The critical eudaimonics laid out here, I argue, is important insofar as it helps clarify a concept that has been highly influential over the past decades in theorizing the relation between life, science and politics. That concept is “biopower.” Though the word “biopower” has been around since the early twentieth century (Esposito 2008, 16; Lemke 2011, 8), I am referring specifically here to the more modern concept of biopower, which stems largely from the writings of Michel Foucault, and which through him inspired a whole series of philosophical, historical and ethnographic writing on the topic, a lineage of thought which has since become a dominant paradigm for understanding global health and mental health in the humanities and social sciences (especially as it relates to governance and sovereignty). What I will do here, then, is provide an overview of biopower, and the notion of *bios* presupposed by it, putting forward what I hope is a creative rereading of the concept, one which will open up potential avenues for future research. My argument, in brief, is that *bios* has, over the history of theorizations about biopower, been interpreted in a rather narrow fashion, as concerned primarily with biological life. In doing so, the other meaning of *bios* has been overlooked, namely, *bios* as referring to both “a way or life” and the “good life.” To make the argument, I focus on two authors influential for theorizing biopower in terms of biological life, namely, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben.

### 1.7.1: Foucault's Biopower

Biopower, according to Foucault, refers to a form of governmental reason and state power that emerged at the turn of the seventeenth century, and which was based in the management of “life and its mechanisms” (1978, 143). As a new type of power, it replaced what Foucault saw as the older classical form of sovereignty—as personified in the figure of the monarch—and which had been exercised primarily through a “right to decide life and death,” a right that was given through the monarch’s ability to send subjects to war in defense of the nation or condemn them to death in the event of treason (1978, 135). During the seventeenth century, this right was replaced, he argued, with a new set of rights over the management of life in its various forms. It was, as he put it, the emergence of “a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (1978, 137). Whereas the monarch had the right, in certain circumstances, “to take life and let live” (1978, 136), this new power was, he said, the state’s “right to make live and to let die” (2003, 241).

There were roughly two ways in which biopower played out for Foucault. On the one hand, there were the “anatomy-politics of the human body,” which encompassed a whole range of techniques for disciplining the body and optimizing its capabilities, including the development of institutions where such disciplining was carried out, for instance, the army, schools, hospitals and courtrooms (1978, 140). On the other hand, there were the “biopolitics of the population,” which encompassed techniques for supervising, measuring, intervening in and regulating the biological processes—considered at the level of national statistics—that maintained a population in existence, including such things as life expectancy, birth rates,

mortality rates, living conditions, and so on (1978, 143–144). These two dimensions of biopower (anatomy- and bio-politics) were, according to Foucault, “present at every level of the social body,” from that of the family, to education, state security, and medicine (1978, 141).

There is ambiguity in Foucault over the role of the good life in his conception of biopower. On the one hand, it seems that Foucault sidelines the issue of the good. That is, insofar as his conception of biopower operates largely on what one might call the “biological” conditions of existence, i.e., those things that allow life to happen and to survive, but which to some extent bracket life’s positive meanings and qualities, one might therefore conclude that biopower overlooks the “teleological” conditions of existence, i.e., those motivating factors for managing life in the first place, and which include such things as the hope for a better “quality of life” or the desire to achieve “happiness” or “the good life.” Indeed, the former is the most regularly noted aspect of Foucault’s biopower. And it is so noted for good reason, since Foucault often illustrates what is meant by a biopolitical invention through the technologies that govern such vital phenomena as life expectancy, births rates, mortality rates, and so on.

On the other hand, there are also various references to the teleological in his works, for instance, when he describes those elements of biopower which exert “a positive influence on life” by “optimizing” it toward certain ends (1978, 137); or when he talks about “technologies of power” in general as submitting individuals “to certain ends or domination” (1988, 18), such as “health, physical well-being and optimum longevity” (1984, 277); and most notably, when he discusses the history of technologies of the self, and defines the “telos

of the ethical subject” as aiming at “happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (1988, 18).<sup>9</sup>

One gets the impression, then, that Foucault embraced both dimensions, the “biological” and the “teleological” to some extent, feeling no urge to differentiate between the two dimensions of existence in his conception of biopower in any rigorous fashion, even if he did devote most of his analysis to the biological. That Foucault does not distinguish between these two dimensions of biopower, what one might call “life itself” and “the good life,” is not a problem. Rather, I raise it because of how it contrasts with the way biopower has been interpreted in the wake of Foucault. As I will show, the distinction that Foucault did not fully make has since been made explicit, leading to an influential reading of biopower as concerned primarily with the biological conditions of existence, a reading that has gone hand in hand with a sidelining of the variety of possible teleological dimensions that inform biopower. The person who set forth this now popular reading of biopower, I argue, is Agamben.

### 1.7.2: Agamben: A Critique

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben makes a distinction between what he calls “bare life” and “qualified life” through what he thinks is a “classic” Greek division between *zōē* and *bios*.<sup>10</sup> As he says,

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<sup>9</sup> A further confusion comes in at this point, for there is a distinction here between the teleology of biopower and the teleology of the ethical subject. Though the two may be related for Foucault (insofar as the teleology of biopower might provide norms that the ethical subject appropriates as their own telos giving rise to a biopolitical ethical subject), they are not the same. Biopower is a historical phenomena dating from the seventeenth century, while ethical and teleological subjectivity is a universal human capacity.

<sup>10</sup> As Finlayson (2010) points out, the correct rendering is *zōē*, whereas Agamben uses *zoē*.



The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word “life.” They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zōē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group (1998, 1).

This distinction between *zōē* and *bios*, between “bare life” and a “way of life,” mirrors a series of other dualisms that he also claims is found in Greek culture, first that between “home life” and “political life,” and second, that between “life” and the “good life.” As he says for the first,

In the classical world... simple natural life is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense, and remains confined—as merely reproductive life—to the sphere of the *oikos*, “home” (1998, 2).

Similarly, for the second, he writes,

when Aristotle defined the end of the perfect community in a passage that was to become canonical for the political tradition of the West... he did so precisely by opposing the simple fact of living (*to zēn*) to politically qualified life (*to eu zēn*): *ginomenē men oun tou zēn heneken, ousa de tou eu zēn*, “born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to the good life” (1998, 2).

These dualisms, *zōē/bios*, bare life/way of life, home life/political life, and the simple fact of living/the good life, are structurally homologous for Agamben. His argument can thus be reformulated as follows:

- 1) there exists in the classical world a distinction between *zōē* (bare life) and *bios* (way of life),
- 2) this distinction is a binary one—*zōē* is “excluded from” *bios*,<sup>11</sup> and
- 3) this distinction mirrors several other dualisms, including those between

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<sup>11</sup> Agamben describes Western politics as founded in “an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life (1998, 7). I interpret Agamben here as meaning that *zōē* is excluded from *bios*, i.e., that they are binary terms, but since Western politics defines itself based on this exclusion, it can ironically be considered, in some way, an essential component of Western politics, and thus an inclusion of *zōē* ultimately.

- a) “home life” and “political life” (*oikos* and *polis*—literally home and the city-state), and
- b) “life” and “the good life” (*zēn* and *eu zēn*).

Is, however, Agamben correct on these points? There seem to be grounds for being suspicious. For instance, if *zōē* and *bios* are mutually exclusive terms, as Agamben says they are, and if they map on to the other dualisms he mentions, then how is it possible for *zōē* to be used for both “bare life” (*zēn*) and “the good life” (*eu zēn*)? If the distinctions are mutually exclusive, as Agamben argues, then one would expect Aristotle to talk about a distinction between *zēn* and *eu bios* instead. That Aristotle does not do this suggests that there is something more complicated going on than Agamben acknowledges. Indeed, that is the point I wish to make. As I will argue below, (2) and (3) are not justified by the classical literature, but are actually misreadings of Aristotle. Moreover, (1), although justified to some extent, needs clarifying further since it has implications for how (2) and (3) are understood.<sup>12</sup> Highlighting these misinterpretations of Aristotle will have a dramatic impact for the rereading of biopower. I will take each issue in turn.

*i. The meaning of zōē and bios*

It is true that Aristotle uses the terms *zōē* and *bios*, and as Keyt points out, though they “are sometimes used interchangeably... they do not seem to be synonyms” (1989, 17). Moreover,

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<sup>12</sup> Finlayson also points out that Agamben is inferring the distinction between *zōē* and *bios* for the whole “classical world,” not just Aristotle, and that he makes this inference from his reading of Aristotle’s *Politics*. Propositions (1) to (3) are thus implausible since one cannot infer that such a distinction applies generally to ancient Greek society based on an analysis of Aristotle’s text alone. For a similar view see also Dubreuil and Eagle (2008, 85). Though I agree with the point being made, I will ignore that for the current purposes and focus simply on the reading of Aristotle.

as Dubreuil and Eagle say, “Aristotle has perhaps the tendency to place *bios* more on the side of particular life and *zōē* on the general” (2008, 85). Hence, though a too strict distinction between *zōē* and *bios* would be misleading, since Aristotle sometimes reverses his use of the terms, for the most part, commentaries do recognize, in a similar manner to Agamben, that a rough distinction between *zōē* and *bios* exists.

But what about the meanings of those terms? As Finlayson points out, *zōē* technically refers to beings that have the principle of life in them, namely, a soul (*psuchē*): “The noun *zōon*... literally means an ensouled, and in this sense living or animated, being” (2010, 108). *Zōē* thus includes anything with a soul, for instance, plants, animals, humans, gods, demons, “ensouled stars,” and even “the ensouled universe” (2010, 109). As Finlayson further points out, however, when used in relation to human life in particular, *zōē* generally refers to “the economic, biological, and instinctual bases of human association” (2010, 103). By “human association” here Finlayson is highlighting the fact that *zōē*, when applied to humans, is a necessary condition for the founding of human communities, particularly, the *polis*. As Finlayson points out, for Aristotle, the *polis* is made up of a community of villages; villages are made up of a community of households; and households of families. Each of these communities comes together for different reasons. Families come together, Finlayson says, as a consequence of “the natural (unchosen) desire of man and woman to couple,” households (which includes slaves and families) from a “mutual interest of self-preservation”, and villages from “the social instinct of naturally gregarious human beings to live in groups among their own kind; and... [because of] the economic and material interdependence of beings that are by nature needy, unlike gods and some beasts that are self-sufficing” (2010, 111). These elements, the natural desire for coupling, the mutual self-interests of masters and

slaves, the gregarious nature of humans, and the lack of self-sufficiency in terms of livelihood, constitute, Finlayson says “the economic, biological, and instinctual bases of human association” and they are “what Aristotle calls variously—but always in contrast to the good life—“life,” “mere life,” or “life itself”” (2010, 111).

Agamben is largely in agreement with Finlayson on these points. He likewise recognizes that *zōē* refers to the principle of life that animates beings—he admits, after all, that it applies not just to humans, but to animals and gods also (1998, 1). And he further recognizes that *zōē*, when applied to human beings, references the material conditions of existence (for instance, reproduction, subsistence, the keeping of a home and family). In that way, Agamben’s summary of *zōē* as bare life seems reasonable.

What about *bios*, then? As Sellars says, *bios* is “an individual’s way of life or manner of living” (2003, 21). Agamben agrees with this definition of *bios* as a way of life, though he goes beyond Sellars definition by acknowledging that *bios* refers not just to individuals, but also to groups. However, as Finlayson also points out, according to Agamben, *bios* implies specifically a human way of life, whereas for Aristotle *bios* includes nonhumans as well (2010, 107–108). Take, for instance, the following ways of life, as discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

- *bios theōrētikos* (the contemplative or theoretical life),
- *bios praktikos* (the life of practical virtue),
- *bios politikos* (the political life),
- *bios apolaustikos* (the life of pleasure), and
- *bios chrematistes* (the life devoted to gain).

According to Agamben, each of these would be specifically a human way of life. According to Aristotle, however, at least two of them (*bios politikos* and *bios apolaustikos*) belong also to animals, while a third (*bios theōrētikos*) also belongs to the gods. The political life, for instance, applies to a subcategory of what Aristotle calls of “gregarious” animals, i.e., those social animals that have an activity in common. As he says, “Animals that live politically are those that have any kind of activity in common, which is not true of all gregarious animals. Of this sort are: man, bee, wasp and crane” (Aristotle in Finlayson 2010, 108).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the life of pleasure applies to any being that has a soul capable of appetite or desire, namely, animals and humans. In fact, Aristotle even says that since humans have reason (which animals lack), the life of pleasure is really only suitable for “cattle” (NE i.5 1095b20). Finally, the contemplative life is exhibited by beings capable of possessing rational knowledge of eternal, universal truths, namely, humans and the Gods. It seems, then, that Agamben is on shaky grounds to think *bios* is a human phenomena, since there are several instances of nonhumans with capacities for *bios*.

*ii. The relation between zōē and bios*

This idea, however, that both humans and nonhumans exhibit *bios*, has deeper implications for Agamben, directly contradicting his initial idea that *zōē* and *bios* are mutually exclusive terms. To put the point briefly, *zōē* may indeed refer to an ensouled and therefore living being, and *bios* may be a way of life, but this distinction is not meant to be one of mutual exclusion, as some ways of life are ways of life precisely because of the soul’s potential to act in certain ways. To understand what this means, one needs a basic understanding of

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<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, History of Animals 1.1.488a8-10.

Aristotle's conception of the soul. For Aristotle, there are three kinds of soul: the nutritive, the appetitive, and the rational soul (NE i.12 1102a5-1103a). The nutritive soul is that which provides the basic vital capacities of nutrition and growth, and is common to all mortal living beings (plants, animals, humans, but perhaps not gods). The appetitive soul is that which has the capacity for appetite, desire and thus pleasure, and is common to animals and humans. The rational soul is that which has the capacity for reason, and is common to humans and gods. For Aristotle, the lower activities of the soul are preserved in the higher activities. Thus, rational souls have capacities for both appetite and nutrition, while appetitive souls have a capacity for nutrition only. As suggested above, however, some ways of life come into being precisely because the soul enables that way of life through its unique capacities. For instance, the life of pleasure is only possible because the appetitive soul has a capacity for desire and thus pleasure. That way of life, then, *bios apolaustikos*, is nothing other than the expression of the teleology of appetitive souls. Similarly with the contemplative life: humans and gods are able to partake in this way of life because their souls have the capacity for reason.

*iii. The relation between zōē, bios politikos and eu zēn*

Since it has already been established that no rigid distinction between *zōē* and *bios* exists in Aristotle (since some ways of life are grounded in the unique capacities of the soul), Agamben's argument that the former is excluded from politics is already under suspicion, since *bios politikos* is contingent upon the soul's capacity for a certain type of rational activity. Nevertheless there is another point showing that not only is *zōē* not excluded from

the *polis*, but that it is absolutely necessary to it. Agamben's theory of exclusion relies on Aristotle's statement regarding the origins of the *polis*. In that section Aristotle writes,

A complete community constituted out of several villages, once it reaches the limit of total SELF-SUFFICIENCY, practically speaking, is a city-state. It comes to be for the sake of living, but it remains in existence for the sake of living well (Pol. 1252b30, trans. Reeve (1998)).

Agamben translates the last line of the passage here as: "born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to the good life" (1998, 2). Since the *polis* exists "essentially" for the sake of "the good life," Agamben interprets this as meaning that bare life (*zōē*) is excluded from the *polis*. As Finlayson contends, however, Aristotle is not making this point. Rather, he is simply highlighting that the economic, biological and material conditions of human association are not sufficient to bring about the *polis*. Bare life is, in other words, a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the founding of a political community (2010, 111). As noted earlier, the *polis* is made up of a community of villages (and thus of households and families). Once a village has reached a level of self-sufficiency in terms of its material conditions of existence, the *polis* is able to come together for the sake of the good life (*eu zēn*). The *polis*, however, is not separate from those material conditions on account of being essentially formed for the sake of the good life. As Finlayson says, Aristotle explicitly states in another passage that "human beings congregate together and maintain the political community also for the sake of mere life" (2010, 111). Rather, one needs the bare life conditions as impetus for a community, but one transitions to a *polis* when the good life conditions are added to this. The *polis* could not exist, in other words, solely from a concern for the good-life, but needs both mere life (*zēn*) and the good life (*eu zēn*).

All this brings us to Agamben's third point concerning the distinction between *zēn* and *eu zēn* (Agamben glosses this latter term as both the political life and the good life). The

reason the *polis* can be both for the sake of mere life and the good life, according to Finlayson, is because *they represent different types of causes of the polis*. Aristotle's philosophy famously distinguishes between four types of causes: material, formal, efficient and final. Like everything in Aristotle's universe, the *polis* also has four causes. Two of those causes, the efficient and the final, relate to the two senses of life already discussed earlier, namely, "bare life" and "the good life." As Finlayson clarifies, "Broadly, Aristotle views... "mere life" as the efficient cause of the *polis*; its citizens, territory, walls, and so forth as its material cause; the constitution, laws, and so on as its formal cause; and *eudaimonia* or the happiness of its citizens and the *polis* as a whole as its final cause" (2010, 112). Thus, the distinction is one of means and ends. The *polis* requires the means of existence (the bare life conditions) in order to come into being, but it also needs the ends towards which life aims too (the good life). The idea confounds the last of Agamben's claims, as it shows that there is no relation of exclusion of life from the good life for Aristotle in terms of the founding of the *polis*, but are instead two different causes, both of which are needed for political community. As Finlayson puts it, "far from conceiving the relation between mere life and the good life to be one of exclusion or opposition, Aristotle thinks of them as two internally related and continuous, albeit qualitatively distinct, layers of life" (2010, 112).

All that being said, there is some legitimacy for Agamben to conclude that the good life (*eu zēn*) is expressed in the political life (*bios politikos*). What Aristotle means by the good life is discussed in depth in chapter 2, but to anticipate what is said there, what he means by the good life is happiness (*eudaimonia*). Insofar as Aristotle also argues that the political life is one of the ways in which human beings achieve this good life, Agamben's view that the good life and the political life are related is apt. But he fails to note that there



are actually two different ways of life that might constitute the good life for Aristotle. On the one hand, there is the practical life or the political life (*bios praktikos* or *bios politikos*), and on the other hand, there is contemplative life of the philosophers and the Gods (*bios theōrētikos*). The idea follows from Aristotle's concept of the soul. As mentioned, the human soul has three parts (the nutritive, the appetitive, and the rational). The rational part of the soul, however, can be exercised in two different ways, practically or theoretically. That is, reason can be applied to variable objects (particulars), and thus exhibit the capacity of practical reason, or to invariable objects (universals) and thus exhibit theoretical reason. The former belongs to the political life, the latter to the contemplative life. Agamben is correct, then, insofar as the political life is part of the good life, but he occludes the contemplative life from the notion of *eu zēn*, and thus overlooks that *zōē* and *bios* has a much richer range of meanings than he acknowledges.

### 1.7.3: Summarizing the Critique of Agamben

Why have I discussed at length the above three points? It has been important to critique Agamben's view at length because of the pervasive influence his reading of biopolitics has had on the historical, philosophical and ethnographic literature on biopower. Put briefly, in making the distinction between *zōē* and *bios*, and in arguing for a paradigm in Western politics grounded in the exclusion of bare life, Agamben influenced a reading of biopower as primarily concerned with how bare life, rather than the good life, enters politics.<sup>14</sup> In doing

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<sup>14</sup> There are numerous examples of Agamben's enduring influence (Campbell and Sitze 2013; Dumit 2012; Esposito 2008; Hayden 2003; Helmreich 2009; Lock 2001; Petryna 2002; Rabinow and Rose 2006; Sunder Rajan 2006). Post-Agamben theories of biopower are largely concerned with biological life concepts, specifically "life, death and health," seeing these vital phenomena as the key sites of representation and intervention for biopower and the

so, he also promoted the reading of biopower as concerned with the “efficient” conditions of politics, as opposed to its “teleological” dimension. As Esposito says,

If we want to remain with the Greek (and in particular with the Aristotelian) lexicon, biopolitics refers, if anything, to the dimension of *zōē*, which is to say to life in its simple biological capacity [*tenuta*], more than it does to *bios*, understood as “qualified life” or “form of life,” or at least to the line of conjugation along which *bios* is exposed to *zōē*, naturalizing *bios* as well (2008, 14).

The evidence for this concealment of teleology, in fact, can be found near the beginning of *Homo Sacer* itself, where Agamben writes,

it will be necessary to reconsider the sense of the Aristotelian definition of the *polis* as the opposition between life (*zēn*) and good life (*eu zēn*). The opposition is, in fact, at the same time an implication of the first in the second, of bare life in politically qualified life. What remains to be interrogated in the Aristotelian definition is not merely—as has been assumed until now—the sense, the modes, and the possible articulations of the “good life” as the telos of the political. We must instead ask why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life (1998, 7).

Here Agamben argues that instead of asking about the role of the good life, we “must ask instead” about the politicization of bare life. But why “must” we? Where does this obligation to answer the question of the efficient cause of politics at the expense of the teleological one come from? Agamben does not provide an answer for this, other than rhetorically, by saying the exclusion of *zōē* is more foundational to Western politics, an argument which itself is

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elements around which science, political strategies and modes of subjectification take place. This is not to criticize those works on those points. On the contrary, to say that Agamben’s view has inspired a host of readings on the topic of biological life is not to criticize the importance of those studies themselves. Just because Aristotle did not rigidly distinguish between *zōē* and *bios* does not mean that studies that look at how politics and life do come together are to be disregarded as invaluable. Much of those works still remain important, therefore, as accounts of contemporary interactions between science, politics and life. My point is that such approaches, however, are not the only way to think about biopolitics.

based on a problematic reading of Aristotle. But if there is no rigid opposition in Aristotle between *zōē* and *bios* in the first place, and thus between home life and political life, or mere life and the good life, then there seems to be no obligation for prioritizing the question of *zōē*.

One might object, at this point, that Agamben purposefully uses biopower in order to capture a narrower conception of politics, that based in bare life, rather than the good life. On this view, “biopolitics” would be reserved for studies of the governance of bare life, and “politics” reserved for the governance of the good life. Moreover, continuing from this line of thought, one might further point out regardless of what Aristotle thinks about the relation between *zōē* and *bios*, contemporary global health is certainly premised on a “politics of life itself.” Though I am sympathetic to both these points, I argue, however, that there are a couple of reasons for keeping the language of biopower for referring to both *zōē* and *bios*. First, as noted earlier, there are four causes to the *polis* in Aristotle's view. Two of these concern life, while the other two are not directly about life, but generally the *polis*. Hence, if politics captures the four causes, it is not unreasonable to use biopower to highlight a subset of those elements focusing on the efficient and teleological causes. Second, there may be some value of keeping the term biopolitics to talk about the teleological conditions of life, so as to connect the findings here to the previous literature—to challenge and further that tradition.

I argue, then, that both bare life and the good life need to be taken into account in any conception of biopower, and that neither takes precedent over the other. The current project focuses on the latter, however, in order to bring some balance back to the biopolitical debate. In offering a more inclusive view in which both *zēn* and *eu zēn* are involved in the founding of the *polis*, it thereby opens up a new avenue for exploring a concept that has been

frequently overlooked in the domain of power, namely, the good life, and along with that a range of related teleological concepts including happiness, well-being, way of life, quality of life, eudaimonia, wisdom, virtue, pleasure, and so on.

All this raises a necessary question, however: *what happens exactly when biopower acknowledges both “bare life” and “the good-life”?* That is, how does the inclusion of the well-being concept alter the historical and ethnographic understanding of biopower inherited from Agamben? That, in broad strokes, is what I hope to answer in this dissertation by examining how a teleology of well-being (as opposed to one of life and health) informs governmental, scientific and personal practice, that is, by trying to understand contemporary relations of power and teleology.

#### 1.7.4: Biopower and the Good-Life

Though some variation of the concept of “bare life” has been popular in philosophical, historical and ethnographic accounts of biopower since Agamben, this does not mean to say there has been no interest in the other dimension of *bios* at all in the humanities and social sciences. Focusing on anthropology in particular, for instance, the term “way of life” has long been a commonplace, and has often been used as an alternative for the word “culture.” Similarly, the phrase “the good life” has undergone rigorous scrutiny in the past decade or so, as it has become the focus of ethnographic interest in the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of morality. Thus, Ådahl (2007), Chua (2014), Farquhar and Zhang (2012), Fassin (2012), Fischer (2014), Jackson (2011), Jasarevic (2012), Jiménez (2008), Lambek (2008), Mattingly (2010; 2014), Robbins (2004; 2013), Rose (2007), Stoller (2014), Sykes (2009), Widlok (2004; 2012), and Zigon (2008) have each adopted the term “the good life” as

a way of exploration and furthering the ethnographic understanding of ethics, morality and well-being. To this one could also add several works in the humanities and social science more generally taking a critical, historical and sociological perspective on the discourse on subjective well-being or on the good life, for instance, Ahmed (2010), Berlant (2011), Binkley (2014), and Davies (2015).

Have, however, any of those authors discussed the relationship between biopower and the good life? No doubt several of them can be read as implicitly doing so, and others have at times raised the issue explicitly (Farquhar and Zhang (2012), Rose (2007), Berlant (2011), and Binkley (2014)). Rather than tease out the potential connections that can be made for each author here—such a project is beyond the scope of the current dissertation—I will make three points that I think are most relevant to that body of work.

The first point is that, contra to the views expressed by authors like Binkley (2014) and Davies (2015), the recent science and politics of happiness is not merely another form of neoliberalism. That critique has become a popular one in recent years, and though I am sympathetic to the economic instrumentalization of well-being, I am also suspicious of this totalizing analysis, and the totalizing use of the term neoliberalism. Admittedly, there are ways in which the happiness discourse looks neoliberal, but to label it as just that is to obscure all those commitments to the good life that are not captured in the neoliberal framework. Moreover, as I have mentioned already, there is a rich history that informs the current science and politics of happiness, which blends both economic and eudaimonic traditions, including a mixture of Eastern and Western notions of eudaimonia.

The second point is that although the more considered accounts of biopower and well-being (Berlant, Farquhar and Zhang, and Rose) are a welcome contribution to both the

literature on biopower and anthropology in general, insofar as they recognize that life and its value cannot be separated, and so notions of “the good life,” need to be discussed in relation to science, politics and practice, none of them take into consideration the “science and politics of happiness” itself. Neither do they contextualize pursuits of “the good” in the wider history and discourse of “global well-being.” Hence, I want to build upon those studies by looking at the kinds of secular and spiritual histories that have shaped that discourse, and to see how it influences the relationship between biopower and the good-life in the present.

And this brings me to the final point about the relationship between biopower and the good-life. What is at stake, I hope to show in this dissertation, is the emergence of a new power over teleology, and that this new power is manifest largely in contemporary experiences of affect. Let me turn to that point now.

#### 1.7.5: Teleology, Power, Affect

The question of whether there is a power not just over life, but over the good life, that is, over life considered teleologically, is a controversial one. From one perspective, modernity as a project has long abandoned the idea of governing teleology—the rise of anti- or ateleological representations of life and history in the natural and social sciences, as well as in the humanities, has seemingly removed the epistemic backing that a power of teleology needs to thrive. From another perspective, however, modernity is an inherently teleological project (Asad 1993, 17–18). Indeed, as Taylor has argued, what marks out modern secularity is precisely a teleological structuring of life in terms of eudaimonic, that is, flourishing well-being:

[T]he coming of modern secularity... has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism

came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing (2007, 18).

Moreover, one can also add to this the idea that ethics in general presupposes teleology through culturally and historically situated understandings of the good, a fact which anthropologists have forcefully argued (cf. Robbins 2012; Robbins 2013; Mattingly 2014, 48).

Before one can answer this question over whether a power over teleology exists, however, one needs to think carefully about the concept of teleology. And this is precisely where I think the problem arises, for there is, in the social sciences, much confusion about what is meant by that term. Let me take an example to illustrate. In the anthropology of morality, though there are many arguments for the irreducibility of teleology (insofar as human behavior is recognized as presupposing orientations towards various conceptions of the good), there is actually little clarification over what is meant by a “telos.” The idea of teleology is referenced often, but without criteria for identifying what actually constitutes an “end.” Rather, teleology is used as a catch-all for a range of hegemonic institutional norms or cultural values, leading to a conflation of hegemonic cultural values and the ends of life.<sup>15</sup> Thus, if a society or institution places great stress on a particular value, say wealth, then that value is said to constitute a “telos” or “end” for that institution. In this sense, the meaning of

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Robbins on hierarchies of value spheres (2012) and Lambek’s concept of meta-value (2008). A similar conflation is made by those working in the biopower tradition when they treat such vital phenomena as “life and health” as the “ends” of biopower, without asking about the conditions of finality that mark something as being an “end.”

telos depends primarily on a judgment by the social scientist about whether a particular value looks to be significant enough as to be considered an “end.”<sup>16</sup>

It is crucial to my argument, however, that teleology is not the same thing as a hegemonic and institutionalized cultural value. Rather, teleology marks out the sphere of “final ends.” Some cultural values might be final ends, but it is not to be taken for granted. Many hegemonic cultural values do not even try to pretend to be final ends. For instance, take the value of justice in the legal sphere. The law may put justice as the goal of its activities while also recognizing that although a highly important value, it is not the ultimate one, since justice serves some other value being worked out in culture more generally. Here justice operates as a pre-ultimate norm, or middle-range value, which facilitates a final value that is constantly being negotiated outside of that institution. On the flip side of that, even when some hegemonic values are said to be final, that is, when there is much rhetoric claiming that a particular value is a teleological one, it is not clear that that rhetoric alone is sufficient to illustrate a cultural conception of finality. As Aristotle makes clear, many people think wealth or pleasure or honor are the ends of life, but in his view this is simply a confused judgment: mistaking middle-range values for final ends.

Hence, in order to figure out whether a cultural value is a final end or simply a middle range value masquerading as an end, one needs *an ethnographic theory of finality*. In short, one needs criteria for assessing finality, for distinguishing what is an “end” of life in any particular way of life. Throughout this dissertation I argue for such an ethnographic theory amongst contemplatives grounded in Aristotle’s notions of completeness and self-sufficiency,

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<sup>16</sup> I suspect the confusion here comes from the ambiguous use of the term “end” which fails to distinguish between purposes and goals or ordinary actions and the final ends to which all action aims.



two concepts that are also central to Aristotle's definition of eudaimonia. I discuss these criteria in depth in chapter 5, but to put the argument in brief here, a value  $x$  is only final in Aristotle's account if it is *complete* (if value  $x$  is done for its own sake) and *self-sufficient* (if the addition of another value does not make value  $x$  any better).

I found that such criteria often turned up at my field sites and did so in certain experiences of what I call "affective fullness." Thus, the ethnographic understanding of finality amongst contemplatives was not a *conceptual* understanding of a complete and self-sufficient life—contemplatives did not have an *explicated theory* of finality in other words. Rather, the ethnographic understanding of finality was manifest in a series of embodied affective judgments, what I collectively call "teleological affects" and which were marked by various ethnographic experiences of "affective fullness." I outline the role of teleological affects at my field sites in the "chapter outline" below, but to define them briefly here: teleological affects are embodied ways in which persons, in this case contemplatives, appraise the ends of life. Or to put it more accurately, they are affective judgments about whether certain pre-existing and hegemonic cultural values constitute final ends. Insofar as these are wholly embodied and cultural affects, they constitute *a phenomenology of finality* (a *teleo-phenomenology*), and insofar as such experiences are tacitly performed, they are discoverable through my analysis of contemplatives' reported experiences, through which I produce *an ethnographic account of finality*.

How does all this relate to the question of power and teleology? The point I want to make is that the recent science and politics of happiness, by attempting to map experiences of affective fullness (which it did through the cognitive science of mindfulness meditation), and by attempting to bring those experiences into healthcare, business, education, and everyday

life, revealed a distinctly modern project: a power over teleology, expressed through a political economy of eudaimonia, and made manifest through experiences of affective fullness associated with mindfulness meditation practices. This teleo-power (or “biopower” in the sense described above) is, I am tempted to say, a new power, as it represents a point at which both science and politics have, for the first time in the modern period, tried to co-opt a technology of eudaimonia for the purpose of bringing a sense of fullness, that is, of a complete and self sufficient life, into the realm of governmentality. The surprising thing about all of this, is that it was attempted not through the re-establishment of an Aristotelian virtue ethics, but through a “modernized” Buddhism, which became the vehicle for contemporary eudaimonia, and a “secular” mindfulness practice, which provided practitioners with concrete techniques through which eudaimonia could be embodied.

## **1.8: Methodological Issues**

### 1.8.1: Terminology

In exploring the biopolitics of the good life, I focus on mindfulness practitioners in the US, a dispersed group of actors that I also refer to by the name “contemplatives.” The reason for using the term “contemplatives” stems from my wish to remain faithful to their own way of identifying with their practice. Although, admittedly, some had reservations about adopting the term “contemplative,” most of the people I met saw mindfulness in general as a “contemplative practice.” Many also described that practice as necessary for enacting a “contemplative way of life.” Some even formed scholarly communities dedicated to understanding and teaching that way of life, through the fields of “contemplative science,” “contemplative studies,” “contemplative psychotherapy,” and “contemplative pedagogy.”

One should, however, be careful not to become confused about the ethnographic use of the label “contemplative” here, for it departs in important ways from what has been meant by that term historically. As Arendt (1998) make clear, the phrase the “contemplative life” comes from the Latin *vita contemplativa*, itself a translation of the Greek term *bios theōrētikos*. The historical meaning of the term “contemplative” thus goes back at least as far as Plato and Aristotle. In fact, as Bénatouïl and Bonazzi point out (2012, 3–6), it is likely that Plato and Aristotle were actually the first to define the ideal of *bios theōrētikos*, so as to distinguish themselves (the philosophers) from the other dominant intellectual figures of the time (the sophists and orators). What was unique about philosophy, in their view, was two things: first, it involved dedicating one’s life to acquiring knowledge of the unchanging aspects of nature—universal truths—through rational study and thus the cultivation of intellect.<sup>17</sup> Second, it was to be contrasted with *bios praktikos* (the practical life), “the world of business and commerce, the world of farming and manufacture, the world of everyday life” (Louth 2004, 71), as well as the paradigm example of that life, the *bios politikos* (the political life) (see Chapter 5 for more on this). Both forms of life—the contemplative and the practical/political—were potential ways in which one might pursue happiness (*eudaimonia*). If one excelled in theoretical knowing, one could be said to possess the virtue of theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), a kind of flourishing happiness stemming from the virtuous application of one’s capacity for theoretical reason. This kind of happiness was the aim of the contemplative life and was associated most explicitly with the philosophers themselves (*bios philosophos*), who were, after all, the lovers of theoretical wisdom. By contrast, for those interested in the

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<sup>17</sup> As Husserl put it, philosophy was a life of “theōria and nothing but theōria” (1970, 280). It was thus different to the knowledge possessed by the sophists and orators, who famously had little interest in such universal truths.

practical life, there was practical wisdom (*phronesis*), a kind of flourishing happiness stemming from the virtuous exercise of one's capacity for practical reason, and illustrated most explicitly in the wise politician, who was the paragon of *bios politikos/praktikos*.

Despite using the same word, the “contemplative life” discussed by my informants broke away from the ancient tradition in a couple of ways. First, “modern contemplatives” were largely suspicious of the role of the intellect and theoretical reason as a path to the good life. As one practitioner put it, “I don't use contemplation in the sense of “to contemplate” as it's used in philosophy. That's just thinking, pondering. I'm not sure how to define contemplation exactly. But I think it's trying to describe a deepening of engagement away from analytical or merely mental engagement to a more embodied or full engagement.” As another put it, with some appreciation for intellect but an awareness of its limits:

For a while I thought mathematics was a great way to build structures in the mind and understand the world, and physics and things like that. But at some point it felt too thin. It brought me to a threshold and wouldn't bring me beyond that. Maths helps with a mental discipline, and that's important to engage a complex world or the complexities of experience. The same with science. The discipline of testing things out rather than believing anything you want to believe. Great disciplines. But that's based in thought. And thought doesn't account for everything, only for part of it. Our cerebral cortex is a very refined place, but there's a lot that goes on beyond that. So contemplative practice for me needs to engage that beyond.

Another professor described this “beyond thought” as an “open spacious awareness, where the contents come and go and it's the container that's more of interest”:

Take this conversation. There's three possibilities for how to attend to it. You can analyze the content of what's being said. That's what one might call an outer view and you can approach that contemplatively with a mindful or compassionate awareness. Then there's inner awareness: I look at myself and say, yeah, I'm talking to you, but I'll put 20% of my attention there, and the rest I'll put the rest on my body, my thoughts, what I might say, what I'm thinking of saying—that inner landscape—and I can be mindful of that. I think of that as contemplative-lite. And then there's a third possibility: I look inward but beyond the contents of my thoughts and my psychology. An opening beyond that. An opening beyond the outer and inner, where the outer-inner

distinction falls apart, and where I can rest in the vastness of space. That's the contemplative part for me.

Thus, although there was some confusion over the meaning of contemplative, it was often defined in opposition to the idea of *bios theōrētikos* and the virtue of *sophia*. A second difference, which is related to this, is that what mindfulness practitioners referred to as the contemplative life signaled more accurately the practical life and thus the virtue of phronesis, something I discuss at length in chapter 5.

All that being said, I stop short of defining the term contemplative in this dissertation. Instead, my strategy is to use it pragmatically, as an ethnographic term signifying those self-identifying contemplative practitioners, who were inspired by an eclectic mix of Eastern and Western wisdom traditions, but who tended to view those traditions primarily through the lens of their mindfulness practice. In doing so, I offer a “decentered” theory of contemplation, distributed over a variety of actors, inclusive of a wide variety of possible interpretations and definitions, yet grounded in ethnographic descriptions of mindfulness. I now turn to the sites where that way of life turned up.

### 1.8.2: A Multi-sited Approach to the Contemplative Life

Marcus (1995) argues that multi-sited approaches in anthropology are increasingly necessary in a globalized world in which ethnographic activity is dispersed across various sites. His view is very much applicable to mindfulness and well-being. Both are complex objects, the meanings and expressions of which shift across sites. They thus require a multi-sited approach to do justice to the range of ways in which they are articulated. For this dissertation I focused on three sites well-known for theorizing and disseminating mindfulness to the US public. They are:

- Naropa University, Boulder, CO
- The Center for Mindfulness (CFM), Worcester, MA
- The Contemplative Studies Initiative (CSI), Brown University, Providence, RI

There were three main reasons for choosing the above sites. First, each had a specific interest in the biology and psychology of mindfulness practice. Second, they had a substantial body of theorists and practitioners taking part in the practice (Naropa in particular has perhaps the largest concentration of contemplative practitioners in the U.S.). Third, they collectively represented a range of voices on the meaning of mindfulness and the contemplative life (for instance, Naropa offered a perspective indebted to the tradition of Shambhala Buddhism, CFM provided insights on the clinical interpretation of mindfulness, and CSI mixed neuroscientific and humanities understandings of contemplative practices). What follows is a brief overview of each site followed by an assessment of their significance in relation to the dissertation.

### 1.8.3: Naropa University

Founded in 1974 by the Tibetan monk Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Naropa is the only fully accredited Buddhist-inspired liberal arts university in the United States (Hunter 2008). Though the university now claims to be nonsectarian, much of its culture is still deeply immersed in the tradition of Shambhala Buddhism—a modernized Buddhism also founded by Trungpa Rinpoche—and their curriculum states that a meditative or contemplative

component is supposed to be part of all the courses they offer. Indeed, faculty members are employed based primarily on their skills in what they call “contemplative pedagogy.”<sup>18</sup>

I visited Naropa for seven months (Aug 26, 2013 to March 30, 2014), and spent most of my time in their department of psychology, which was home to their three year master’s degree program in “contemplative psychotherapy.” I joined the incoming cohort for that program in 2013, and though I also had access to faculty and students throughout the university, they were my primary community. When I first joined there were 30 students, an even mix of men and woman, and an age distribution between 21 to 55 (although several students did drop out not long after my time there had finished). During my visit I attended classes in Buddhist psychology, participated in meditation practicums, conducted informal, semi-structured interviews with faculty and students, used the archives and library to provide information on the history of Naropa as an institute, attended university meetings and events, and took part in a two week long meditation retreat at their “maître” retreat at the Red Feather Lakes in Boulder, CO.

#### 1.8.4: Brown University

The second site I attended was the “contemplative studies initiative” (CSI) at Brown University (Providence, RI). The CSI is not an academic department, but a committee of scholars interested in studying contemplative practices and bringing them into the framework of higher education. Though a small committee whose numbers regularly change, it is nonetheless made up influential academics in the field of religious studies and contemplative

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<sup>18</sup> As one senior faculty member put it: “Our unique mission is contemplative education. It’s a criteria we use for faculty promotion, faculty hiring - we look for faculty who have commitment to contemplative pedagogy, contemplative experience, and are committed to bringing it to their approach to teaching.”

neuroscience. That committee also worked with local practitioners and scholars on the East coast in general, providing contact with a loose network of contemplatives in the nearby area, and who came together to engage in dialogue primarily during conferences or through their publications. CSI is unique for two reasons: first, their committee is the first attempt to integrate the contemplative way of life into a mainstream ivy league school in the US, and second, they have designed the world's first undergraduate concentration in "contemplative studies."<sup>19</sup> I attended Brown for three months (April 1 to June 30 2014) during which time I took part in weekly classes and seminars, their summer "contemplative pedagogy workshop," conducted informal interviews with students and faculty, participated in meditation practices, and volunteered for one of the research projects in the neuroscience of meditation.

#### 1.8.5: The Center for Mindfulness (CFM)

The third site, the Center for Mindfulness (CFM) in Worcester, MA, is arguably the most important site for mainstreaming mindfulness practice in the US. CFM was founded in 1979 by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, and has since that time dedicated itself to the research and application of a now highly popular version of mindfulness called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which has frequently been adopted at hundreds of clinical settings across the globe, as well as in a large amount of the biological and psychological trials on mindfulness that take place in the US and in Europe. It is documented that over 18,000 people have taken this form of well-being intervention since 1979. The MBSR program itself is eight weeks long,

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<sup>19</sup> As I was just about to start fieldwork at Brown I discovered that Virginia University had received a large amount of private funding for a "contemplative studies" program. In comparison to Brown, they have much more money, and thus are likely to have more success in the long run at institutionalizing the discipline in higher education, though their activities are still very much in the early stages.



meeting one day a week, for three hours each time. Participants meditate together, discuss their experiences with suffering and mindfulness as a group, and share pleasantries for a short while before and after the session. For the most part, however, as I found out, people generally went home after the session ended and did not see each other till the next session. Moreover, when their eight week commitment was over, they often did not see each other ever again. Those at the Center for Mindfulness were aware of this problem, and they were taking active steps to strengthen their “community.” In 2014 they received funding to move into new premises, where they started to take steps to build up a community, by holding movie nights and social events to provide continuing support for those doing the MBSR program. In addition, a popular Facebook page dedicated to discussion of all things mindfulness, and which connected practitioners and scholars across the country, was migrated to servers under the Center for Mindfulness’s own domain in 2015. Besides community building at its own Center, CFM also organizes conferences on mindfulness and has a strong outreach program which attempts to bring mindfulness to business and education. Most of my time was spent, however, observing and participating in their eight week MBSR program, which I did alongside my time at Brown. In addition, I had the opportunity to take part in one of their ongoing neuroscience experiments.

#### 1.8.6: Relevance of sites

I originally conceived of this project as a multi-sited one. Mindfulness was a practice that was being undertaken at various places across North America, Europe and elsewhere, and so I thought it important to represent a range of different perspectives on mindfulness, by choosing three sites which I took to play an important historical and contemporary role in

shaping and disseminating notions of secular mindfulness in the West. These three sites, I thought, would allow me to capture the diversity of voices on the matter while still being able to draw generalizations.

I still consider the project a multi-sited one. But as I came to write up the results, one site in particular took on a greater salience than the others: Naropa University. One reason for this, no doubt, came from the amount of time I spent there, more than twice as long I did at the other sites. This fact alone meant I was more deeply integrated into culture there, and consequently had more ethnographic data than I did elsewhere. Another reason came from the size of the community at Naropa, which is arguably unparalleled as far as contemplative communities in the US and Europe go. Brown's contemplative community, for instance, was quite thin, built up of a small cohort of dedicated enthusiasts who were spread over the university and in neighboring states. The center for mindfulness, by contrast, was more centralized than that, but despite having regular attendees in one place, it was a rapidly revolving door, and participants did not spend that much time talking to each other outside of the class.

Naropa stood out in this regard. In comparison to CSI or CFM, its community was huge, housing at any one time around a thousand students, approximately 35% of which were undergraduate students, and 65% of which were graduates. In addition, there were around two hundred academic staff including adjuncts. Moreover, in contrast to CFM, the temporal commitment was radically different. Practitioners were at Naropa not for eight weeks, as they were at CFM, but up to three to four years depending on the type of degree they took (and if they didn't drop out), and sometimes many years longer if they did both undergraduate and graduate work, or if they went on to teach there, which some students did. Naropa provided

unparalleled access, then, to a rich and vibrant community of contemplative practitioners and therefore offered a deeper engagement with the meaning of the contemplative life from the practitioner's perspective, than did the other sites.

Naropa, however, was also interesting for another reason: it had become politically marginal in the past decades amongst the community of contemplatives. Though it is true that Naropa had been a historically significant site for the development and dissemination of mindfulness in the West, and that it continues to be an important gateway for mindfulness practitioners in the US, its significance had been eclipsed in recent years due to the high quality research on mindfulness coming out of the larger and more well-funded research institutions. Naropa is primarily a teaching institution, and it had, even in its own eyes, tended to isolate itself from the research universities. As one professor said: "we at Naropa tend to be very insular and tend to focus on our students; we don't go out there that much." One consequence of this is that its reputation had suffered. As one professor put it: "Naropa is often viewed as the lunatic fringe of higher education." Similar concerns were also voiced by students, who often had anxiety over their status vis-à-vis other institutions. Yet, despite these concerns, faculty administrators and students were nonetheless zealous for the mission of the university, even if they at times had misgivings over how that mission was carried out.

#### 1.8.7: Auto-ethnography: A Confession

By far the most important reason Naropa stood out for me, however, came from my own experience of the contemplative life there. Naropa was a strange place for me initially. I had no background in Buddhism when I went there. And I had limited experience with meditation in general (I had done some meditation in my pre-field work, but not before that). I was also

quite allergic to some of the new age mysticism that regularly came up in the language of mindfulness. Though the mindfulness movement had in many ways attempted to “secularize” the language of meditation in the past decades, there were still numerous references to “crystals,” “energies,” “altered states of consciousness,” “mysticism,” “unity,” and so on, as well as numerous criticisms of the faculty of “reason” as a path for exploring the good life, all of which I had little affinity with. I tried to keep my aversions in check, of course, by reminding myself that I was not there to judge but to understand that use of language. Still, each time I heard such terms, I would silently react.

As I spent more time with contemplatives, however, and got used to that language, I found that my initial reactions were blinding me to some of its more significant contributions. Over time I came to see that what Naropa was doing was something quite unique: providing students with the resources they needed for ethical development and for cultivating what Aristotle called “practical reason.” I outline my argument for this in the final section of chapter 5, but I want to offer an account of how I came to that view, which I think reveals much about the auto-ethnographic method employed in this project. As a participant observer I cannot ignore how my own experience at Naropa shaped the analysis. Despite my antipathy for its new age mysticism, and for its sometimes too quick dismissal of rational activity, and despite my complete lack of commitment to Buddhism, I found that my time at Naropa did raise my quality of life, and that it did so precisely because it provided me with new tools for navigating my own interiority. In fact, I would go so far as to say that I gained more insight into my own moral subjectivity (how to deal with my own pains, how to relate to myself and others, how to think about the ends of life, and so on) from seven months at Naropa than I did at any time before that—much more than I gained from my readings in philosophy,

anthropology and science over the past ten years, and a great deal more from my own culture over the past thirty-plus years. The point of saying this is not to sing the praises of Naropa. On the contrary, it is thrown out as a paradox, of what it means to have access to certain resources for practical reason. Despite whatever criticisms and skepticism I had of Shambhala Buddhism or Naropa, and despite the fact that I still do not adopt its metaphysical world view or continue its practices, the effect it had was palpable: it provided me with resources that I found useful for the good life even though the tradition of modern Buddhism was in many ways written in a language that I found controversial or problematic. This left me with a final and lasting question, one I continue to think through: what constitutes a “resource” for practical reason? Such a question cannot be answered here, and will be left open for a future project, though Chapter 5 attempts to show how specific resources work to that end.

### **1.9: Chapter Outline**

Having discussed all the key theoretical and methodological issues, it is time to give a sense of the structure of the dissertation. The introduction defined the key themes: global well-being; the political economy of eudaimonia; homo-eudaimonicus; and the relation between power, affect and teleology. The following chapters take up these themes in depth.

Chapter two provides a history of the first three concepts (global well-being, political economy of eudaimonia and homo-eudaimonicus) and is split into two parts. The first provides a *longue durée* history of happiness in the West, focusing specifically on the tension between eudaimonic and political economic approaches to well-being; the second part then looks at the more recent history of happiness in the form of SWB research, which I argue is

attempting to merge political economic and eudaimonic conceptions of happiness. The twist I highlight here is that SWB researchers have turned to modern Buddhist virtue ethics and a secularized mindfulness practice in trying to understand what eudaimonia is and how it fits into political economy, a theme which repeats throughout the rest of the dissertation.

Chapters 3 to 5 turn to the ethnography of mindfulness as a technology for the political economy of eudaimonia. Each chapter is framed in terms of a particular “teleological affect.” Thus chapter 3 deals with what I call mindlessness, a collective term for a range of dysphoric affective states unified by a sensed lack of affective fullness. Chapter 4 discusses experiences of tranquility associated with meditation practice, and how they have been co-opted in hospitals, businesses and schools in the past decades, as a way of bringing affective fullness into biopolitics. Chapter 5 then moves onto the moral sentiment of compassion as the vehicle of practical reason and affective fullness. Chapters 4 and 5 also illustrate two sides of the figure of homo-eudaimonicus. Chapter 4 thus discusses the affective and cognitive capital associated with this kind of person, while Chapter 5 looks at the cultivation of virtue and wisdom.

## **Chapter 2: Global Well-Being**

### **2.1: Introduction**

On July 28, 2011, I stepped into the office of a London based think-tank with the intention of finding out more about recent attempts at understanding, measuring and influencing well-being in the UK. Speaking with one of the representatives working on their well-being project, I asked why happiness had become such an important issue in the UK, as well as internationally, over the past years. “Well,” he said, slapping his hand on the table, as if to emphasize the authority of his answer, “we now have a science of happiness.” I pressed him further: “So, what does the science involve exactly? Having looked at your Web site yesterday, it seems mostly like surveys and statistics. Is that it, or are there other disciplines included?” He looked up, thought for a moment, and replied. “No, it’s pretty much surveys and statistics.” He paused again, and then added, “Actually, it’s just one survey really. And there are only four questions on it.” Then, continuing his frankness, he dealt what seemed like a final blow for the science of happiness. “And to be honest, I’m not happy with any of the questions either.”

How can one have a “science of happiness”? More importantly, how can one have such a science and not be “happy” with any of the methods used to pin it down? Indeed, what are those methods? And does the science of happiness really only refer to a few statistical techniques for measuring well-being? My goal in Part 1 is to answer those questions by looking at the history behind the belief that “we now have a science of happiness.”

It is a history told in two parts. The first details the *longue durée* of happiness in the West, looking at four theories that have dominated thinking about well-being over the past

two-thousand-plus years, namely, eudaimonism, liberalism, utilitarianism, and revealed preferences. What I argue there is that over that long history one can identify two broad traditions for how well-being has been theorized scientifically and integrated into governmental practice. On the one hand, there is the ancient view, stemming from Aristotle's theory of eudaimonia, and which sees virtue and wisdom as key components of a flourishing happiness, and on the other hand, there is the modern view, stemming from the history of political economy and utility theory, and which sees happiness as pleasure and brought about through wealth and a free market.

This historical overview provides the setting for the second part of this chapter, which discusses the most recent development in the science and politics of happiness, namely, research on subjective well-being (SWB). SWB research emerged during the post-World War II period, and over the next sixty years came to represent three kinds of theories of well-being, what are called "general happiness," "life satisfaction" and "positive and negative affect." Such views of happiness have their origins in the public opinion polls of George Gallup and Hadley Cantril, both of whom developed, from 1946 onwards, methods for measuring happiness at the level of population for the first time in history. The data from their polls, however, which were collected for the next several decades, were then appropriated in the 1970s in the economics of happiness, where they were used to criticize the "modern" understanding of well-being, namely, that happiness is pleasure and grounded in wealth and a free market.

Comparing SWB research with the argument in the first section of this chapter, I argue that what can be seen in the development of SWB research, and thus in the "science and politics of happiness" in general, is a desire for a "new" political economy, one that



overcomes the modern utility view of well-being in order to incorporate the ancient view: a political economy of eudaimonia no less. But it is also much more than that. Since the modern view of happiness presupposed a particular notion of the human being, I also argue that this hope for a political economy of eudaimonia is not simply a wish for new institutional values, but a desire for a refiguring of the human, an overthrowing of the all too common anthropological figure of homo-economicus, in order to establish the long forgotten figure of homo-eudaimonicus.

Finally, the chapter concludes by suggesting that the political economy of eudaimonia has largely been developed through the institutionalization of a particular kind of psycho-spiritual practice in state and non-state institutions, a practice that is seen as stemming from a “Buddhist” way of life—though to what extent the practice is “Buddhist” is a source of controversy. That practice is called mindfulness meditation. Thus I argue that it is not Aristotle that provides the focus for the ancient eudaimonic tradition, but that other great figure of the Axial Age, the Buddha.

## **2.2: Four Theories of Happiness**

### 2.2.1: Eudaimonism

Aristotle was not the first person to coin the term eudaimonia. It had, rather, been part of Greek culture long before he adopted it, and even turned up in the works of Hesiod, where it described a special kind of fortune received from the gods. As McMahan says,

Comprising the Greek *eu* (good) and *daimon* (god, spirit, demon), *eudaimonia*... contains within it a notion of fortune—for to have a good daimon on your side, a guiding spirit, is to be lucky—and a notion of divinity, for a *daimon* is an emissary of the gods who watches over each of us, acting invisibly on the Olympians’ behalf (2005, 3–4).

Aristotle accepted this traditional interpretation to an extent. “External goods” such as wealth, health, and fame, were often, he said, “necessary” for the cultivation of well-being (NE i.8 1099b). Insofar as these goods were the result of chance, fortune was, therefore, an essential aspect of happiness. Yet, Aristotle also altered the popular account of eudaimonia in two ways, first, by giving greater emphasis to internal goods over the external ones, and second, by placing greater emphasis on human intervention over the divine in securing these goods.

Internal goods, for Aristotle, referred primarily to the “virtues,” that is, personal qualities, or excellences, that allowed one to perform a certain activity well. Eudaimonia in particular, he argued, meant living a life “in accordance with virtue,” that is, living a flourishing life by engaging in activities to the best of one’s abilities (NE i.7 1098a15). Moreover, eudaimonia simply was that virtuous activity. It was not, in other words, feeling pleasure after the fact for having acted virtuously. Though virtues might be associated with feelings of pleasure, such pleasures did not equal happiness, since certain virtues, like courage, may lead to eudaimonia, yet at the same time, put one in situations in which pain, rather than pleasure, is the dominant sensation. As Nussbaum says, pleasure is more like “the bloom on the cheek of a healthy young person” (Nussbaum 2008, S88). Insofar as the bloom is not the same as health, although it tends to arise from it, so too with pleasure, which tends to follow happiness, though not always. Hence, one could be happy but not feel pleasure, a fact which is illustrated, for Nussbaum, through the example of the “Happy Warrior,” a person who is happy for having lived a life in accordance with virtue (through being, for instance, courageous and temperate), but who, because of the threats to his body that his violent life brings, experienced “little if any pleasure, and a good deal of pain” (Nussbaum 2008, S89). Thus, for Aristotle, eudaimonia simply was activity in accordance with virtue,

and though pleasure was often a natural accompaniment to it, there could be notable exceptions, meaning that there was a distinction between the two.

There were many such virtues for Aristotle: courage, sincerity, friendship, and patience, to name a few. One virtue in particular, however, stood out above all the others for him, namely, wisdom. What separated animals from humans, Aristotle argued, was the capacity for reason (NE i.7 1098a). Reason was not only the essence of the human life, but also our most divine attribute, the capacity that made humans most like the Gods. The happiest life, then, the most divine kind of life, was the contemplative life, the one in which the natural capacity for reason was pursued with the excellence of wisdom – coincidentally, the life also pursued most purely by Aristotle himself, and those like him: those lovers of wisdom, the philosophers (NE x.7 1177a10-1177b).

Although the internal good of virtue took precedent over external goods in securing happiness for Aristotle, the latter still had a role to play. One could not, after all, engage in virtuous activities without the means that made those activities possible. Thus, the contemplative life, he argued, was only possible where one had time to dedicate oneself to philosophical pursuits, something that could not happen if one had to spend all day laboring in the field. A certain amount of external goods were necessary, then, in order to make the seeker of the good-life free or self-sufficient enough so as to seriously engage in virtuous activities like contemplation (Vivenza 2007, 8–9). The goal of any political regime was, then, to help bring about those conditions that were most conducive to happiness, namely, self-sufficient wealth and, from there, the virtue of wisdom (Pol. vii.2 1323b40). This is what he called “politics,” i.e., the science of the good life (NE i.2 1094b).

Aristotle's understanding of eudaimonia influenced Western theories of happiness throughout the ancient, medieval and renaissance periods.<sup>1</sup> It was thus common for Greco-Roman and Christian philosophers to think of happiness as (a) the ultimate end of all human and political life, (b) to causally link it with the cultivation of virtue rather than with the accumulation of excessive wealth or pleasure, (c) to accept that it is, to some degree, within human control, and (d) to see it as, in some way, the most spiritual of human values, the one connecting human beings with the most divine or transcendent features of the universe (McMahon 2005, 64–65).<sup>2</sup> In this way, Aristotle inspired a long-standing concern over the cultivation of psychological and spiritual ideals within individuals so as to enable them to experience a higher form of happiness. He inspired, in other words, a psycho-spiritual politics as a necessary means for happiness.

### 2.2.2: Liberalism

During the Enlightenment, there came a challenge to Aristotle's science and politics of happiness, as scholars began to rethink the importance of wealth and pleasure for achieving happiness. Around the eighteenth century, numerous scholars and political economists across Europe began to rethink the possibilities of a politics of well-being through the notion of

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<sup>1</sup> As McMahon says, the four great schools of Athens all agreed "that happiness was an objective rather than a subjective state, to be measured in lifetimes, not in moments. Less a function of feeling than of rational development, happiness was virtue's compensation, the harmony of a well-balanced soul. Pleasure might accompany it, surely, but on the whole, sensual enjoyment was viewed even by Epicurus with a certain skepticism and even outright disdain. The product of perpetual craft, happiness required discipline and hard work, conducted always under the hand of reason" (2005, 64–65).

<sup>2</sup> McMahon does note that Aristotle's view was challenged during Christendom, insofar as it rejected (c). As he says, "whereas the ancients had conceived of virtue as almost entirely the result of human striving... Christians understood virtue as a divine gift" (2005, 137). I think, however, that, practically speaking, Christian philosophers still recognized the necessity of human intervention in some form, insofar as virtues needed to be cultivated in practice.

“public happiness.” Thus, in Italy, pubblica felicità was discussed by such figures as Ludovico Antonio Muratori and Antonio Genovesi, while in France, félicité publique was theorized by Rousseau, Liguët, Maupertuis, Necker, Turgot, Condorcet and Sismondi (Bruni 2007, 28). It is in the domain of British political economy, however, that concerns over public happiness played out most influentially. Though this lineage is a deep one, I will tell here the story of Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham. Respectively, their liberal and utilitarian theories of happiness complicated the Aristotelian tradition, first by putting a renewed focus on external goods as a means for achieving happiness, and second by reintroducing the possibility of using pleasure as a measure for well-being.

Like Aristotle, Smith too favored a teleological view of happiness. Happiness was the end God had in mind for humanity.<sup>3</sup> As such it was important for governments to take this end as their own, so as to further the Author’s original intention.<sup>4</sup> There were, however, two main ways in which one could bring this happiness about. On the one hand, one could achieve it through establishing security, that is, through satisfying one’s basic needs for health, fortune, rank and reputation (A. Smith 2002, 249). On the other hand, one could achieve it through virtue, particularly the virtues of justice, benevolence and prudence, which for Smith were the principle means for happiness (A. Smith 2002, 309; Busch 2008, 71). Unfortunately, since the virtuous path was the one least likely to be pursued by the majority

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<sup>3</sup> As he says, “The happiness of mankind, as well as of all other rational creatures, seems to have been the original purpose intended by the Author of nature” (A. Smith 2002, 193).

<sup>4</sup> “All constitutions of government... are valued only in proportion as they tend to promote the happiness of those who live under them” (A. Smith 2002, 216).

of mankind,<sup>5</sup> who instead see wealth as the way to obtain happiness, it is in relation to wealth that Smith sets about theorizing and cultivating happiness.<sup>6</sup>

For Smith, happiness meant tranquility and enjoyment. “Without tranquility,” he said, “there can be no enjoyment; and where there is perfect tranquility there is scarce any thing which is not capable of amusing” (A. Smith 2002, 172). Here, Smith is going against a modern philosophical notion of happiness, in which happiness is connected to the satisfaction of one’s desires, and is favoring instead the idea the happiness lies in the freedom from desires. The modern view of happiness, what one might call desire satisfaction, is seen most evidently in Hobbes, who, in the *Leviathan*, stated that happiness was found in what he calls “continual prospering,” i.e., in the perpetual satisfaction of desires, rather than in “tranquility,” or the freedom from such striving:

*Continuall successe* in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continuall prospering, is that men call FELICITY; I mean the Felicity of this life. For there is no such thing as perpetuall Tranquillity of mind, while we live here; because Life it selfe is but Motion, and can never be without Desire, nor without Feare, no more than without Sense (Hobbes 1991, 46).

Griswold calls Hobbes’ theory of continual prospering a theory of “contentment” (Griswold 1999, 221), and it differs from tranquility insofar as tranquility is a kind of peace that comes from not being caught in the endless pursuance of desires, i.e., from not having to worry about providing for one’s basic security. Hobbes did not think such tranquility was possible,

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<sup>5</sup> Virtue, he argued, was something usually only pursued by a select few. As he says, “They are the wise and the virtuous chiefly, a select, though, I am afraid, but a small party, who are the real and steady admirers of wisdom and virtue. The great mob of mankind are the admirers and worshippers, and, what may seem more extraordinary, most frequently the disinterested admirers and worshippers, of wealth and greatness” (A. Smith 2002, 73).

<sup>6</sup> It is not just wealth that is connected to happiness for Smith. Health, rank and reputation are also importance. The majority of people, however, also see such goods as connected with wealth (A. Smith 2002, 249). It makes sense, therefore, that Smith concentrates his analysis at the interface of wealth and happiness.

but Smith did. Yet, Smith also thought that the average person does not make any such distinction between contentment and tranquility, and in fact often confuses the two. As such, the average person sees happiness in the satisfaction of desires, that is, in contentment, and thus comes to view happiness as being contingent upon the possession of external goods—or, more accurately, in possessing the *utility* those goods have for satisfying the ends we seek through our desires. As he says, “The utility of any object... pleases the master by perpetually suggesting to him the pleasure or conveniency which it is fitted to promote. Every time he looks at it, he is put in mind of this pleasure; and the object in this manner becomes a source of perpetual satisfaction and enjoyment” (A. Smith 2002, 209).

Paradoxically, although it is commonly thought that rich people are happier because they have more things and thus conveniences by which to satisfy their desires, particularly their basic desires for security, all humans, rich or poor, have the things needed to satisfy these basic desires (A. Smith 2002, 209–213). As he says, “The wages of the meanest labourer can supply them” (A. Smith 2002, 61). The reason the poor pursue wealth and see in it a means for happiness, then, is not because the wealthy possess more things, but rather because wealth allows one to possess objects which satisfy one’s desires *in a more fitting way*. Though both a poor person and a rich person may possess a knife and thus be able to cut the bread they are about to eat, the rich person possesses a better knife, one with qualities more apt for cutting bread (for instance, through being sharper, or having a serrated edge). Thus, rather than gaining pleasure from an object simply because it satisfies a desire, the pleasure comes largely from how well one thinks it satisfies that desire. It is the perception that the rich possess *more efficient means* for securing their happiness, in other words, that explains the desire to gain happiness through wealth. Smith calls this aesthetic appreciation of

utility the “love of system” on account that we love, or take pleasure in, the fit between an object's function and its end—the relation between the two constituting the “system” (A. Smith 2002, 216). This aesthetic desire thus motivates the majority of people to emulate the rich in order to achieve happiness, in Smith’s view.

There are consequences—some good, some bad—to this motivation. In pursuing wealth, the aspirant undertakes a multitude of stresses and additional labors so as to enable him to realize his goals. As Smith says,

The poor man’s son, whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition, when he begins to look around him, admires the condition of the rich. He finds the cottage of his father too small for his accommodation, and fancies he should be lodged more at his ease in a palace. He is displeased with being obliged to walk a-foot, or to endure the fatigue of riding on horseback. He sees his superiors carried about in machines, and imagines that in one of these he could travel with less inconveniency. He feels himself naturally indolent, and willing to serve himself with his own hands as little as possible; and judges, that a numerous retinue of servants would save him from a great deal of trouble. He thinks if he had attained all these, he would sit still contentedly, and be quiet, enjoying himself in the thought of the happiness and tranquility of his situation. He is enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity. It appears in his fancy like the life of some superior rank of beings, and, in order to arrive at it, he devotes himself for ever to the pursuit of wealth and greatness. To obtain the conveniences which these afford, he submits in the first year, nay in the first month of his application, to more fatigue of body and more uneasiness of mind than he could have suffered through the whole of his life from the want of them (A. Smith 2002, 211–212).

On the negative side, this will to wealth is in some way to the detriment of the tranquility and thus happiness of the person pursuing wealth (and of society in general). As he says, “This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments” (A. Smith 2002, 72). Insofar



as these moral sentiments are instincts for furthering the end of happiness (A. Smith 2002, 193), this means that pursuing wealth in the wrong way can be counter productive for Smith.

On the positive side, however, the toil of the aspirant also leads to the equitable distribution of resources, something which has the concomitant benefit of satisfying a collective need for security on the one hand, and of furthering the arts and sciences on the other, both of which tend to improve practical and spiritual life in general, and thus contribute to public happiness. As he puts it in arguably his most famous passage concerning the “invisible hand,”

It is this deception [that wealth brings happiness] which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. It is this which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth. The earth by these labours of mankind has been obliged to redouble her natural fertility, and to maintain a greater multitude of inhabitants. It is to no purpose, that the proud and unfeeling landlord views his extensive fields, and without a thought for the wants of his brethren, in imagination consumes himself the whole harvest that grows upon them. The homely and vulgar proverb, that the eye is larger than the belly, never was more fully verified than with regard to him. The capacity of his stomach bears no proportion to the immensity of his desires, and will receive no more than that of the meanest peasant. The rest he is obliged to distribute among those, who prepare, in the nicest manner, that little which he himself makes use of, among those who fit up the palace in which this little is to be consumed, among those who provide and keep in order all the different baubles and trinkets, which are employed in the oeconomy of greatness; all of whom thus derive from his luxury and caprice, that share of the necessaries of life, which they would in vain have expected from his humanity or his justice... The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their

improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species (A. Smith 2002, 214–216).

There is a tension, for Smith, between the negative and positive effects of pursuing wealth, in that pursuing wealth can either defeat and further the end of happiness. In the former case, it would be pursuing wealth to the point of misery, which for Smith is a kind of sin, since it would mean acting counter to, and thus frustrating, God's plan for us, namely, that we live happy lives (A. Smith 2002, 193). Hence, in order to prevent falling into this trap, one needs to pursue wealth in the right way, that is, virtuously. Virtue needs to be brought into the pursuance of wealth as a guide so as to prevent the negative aspects from materializing. The key virtue here is “prudence,” which is the virtue specifically associated with maintaining security, that is, with obtaining and managing one's basic needs, namely health, fortune, rank and reputation. As he says,

The care of the health, of the fortune, of the rank and reputation of the individual, the objects upon which his comfort and happiness in this life are supposed principally to depend, is considered as the proper business of that virtue which is commonly called Prudence... Security, therefore, is the first and the principal object of prudence. It is averse to expose our health, our fortune, our rank, or reputation, to any sort of hazard (A. Smith 2002, 249).

Smith advocates prudence, then, for it is the most sustainable way of satisfying our basic needs. “It is,” he says, “rather cautious than enterprising, and more anxious to preserve the advantages which we already possess, than forward to prompt us to the acquisition of still greater advantages. The methods of improving our fortune, which it principally recommends to us, are those which expose to no loss or hazard” (A. Smith 2002, 249). Prudence is, then, the most efficient virtue for bringing about happiness in that it does not expose us to unnecessary risk, but encourages growth cautiously. Since the majority of the population lack

the virtue of prudence, however, and tend instead to pursue wealth ferociously, like the poor man's son, the moral of the story is that the nation should possess this virtue. A prudent nation brings about wealth cautiously, so as to more efficiently enable happiness via a sustainable growth of security. In order to achieve this, moreover, there needs to be a science of that prudence, a science which studies the means of achieving happiness by searching for the most fitting way of bringing it about, namely, political economy.

In this way, Smith linked wealth with happiness, saw politics as the prudent accumulation of wealth, and political economy as the science that guides it. Though Smith had more to say on virtue and the state's role in cultivating it through moral education (cf. Griswold 1999), it is nevertheless this aspect of his view, his liberal political economy, that gets taken up more explicitly in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Before turning to that, however, we first need to look at that other giant in British political economy, Jeremy Bentham.

### 2.2.3: Utilitarianism

Smith saw the link between happiness and utility/wealth as ultimately an illusion—albeit a potentially productive illusion. In contrast, Bentham saw in utility the very definition of happiness. Happiness, Bentham argued, was nothing more than the feeling of pleasure—what he also called “utility” — and all actions, including governmental ones, were to be judged according to how much pleasure they produced.<sup>7</sup> As he famously said, the “principle of

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<sup>7</sup> Bentham treats happiness, pleasure and utility as virtually synonymously throughout most of his book. Technically speaking, however, utility is a property of the object that produces pleasure. As he says, utility is “that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered” (in Mill, 2003, p. 18). Thus, for Bentham, pleasure comes from utility, insofar as the usefulness of an object or

utility,” that is, “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” was indeed the “only right and justifiable end of Government” (in Mill et al. 2003, 20). The problem, for Bentham, was how to measure it, that is, to determine specifically how much pleasure or utility was associated with an action. Only then could one be certain whether, say, a specific piece of legislation or policy intervention had actually improved happiness levels or not. He thus developed a “felicific calculus,” that is, a method for measuring well-being *quantitatively* along dimensions such as intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, extent, and so on, in order to determine the hedonic value of any particular action (in Mill et al. 2003, 42).

Determining the value of a single action, however, was not enough by itself. Actions needed to be compared against each other, so as to determine which possessed the most utility and should therefore be chosen as a matter of policy. A comparison of utility was possible, for Bentham, for two reasons. First, it was possible because pleasures were, he thought, basically as good as each other—the pleasure of playing pushpin was, he famously argued, the same as the pleasure of writing a poem (Mill et al. 2003, 85). In fact, all that could separate those two acts for Bentham were the quantitative dimensions he laid out in his calculus. Writing poetry could have higher hedonic value, in other words, if it provided a more powerful pleasure (intensity), lasted longer (duration), or reached more people (extent) than, say, hurriedly playing a game of pushpin with a friend.<sup>8</sup> Second, comparison was also

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event causes pleasure to us through the satisfaction of a desire or need. Happiness is about balancing pleasure and pain.

<sup>8</sup> J.S. Mill famously critiqued this view. For Mill, the problem was not that happiness was equated with pleasure — Mill agreed with Bentham on this point. And he also agreed with him in saying that happiness should be the overall goal of society. Rather, the problem for Mill was thinking that pleasure was just one thing. Bentham took happiness to be synonymous with pleasure and presumed it to be a unitary experience, differing only in quantity. Mill, by contrast, thought that there were different kinds of pleasure (higher and

possible because of how Bentham conceived of the relation between utility and pleasure. Though he did not explicitly theorize it in these terms, Bentham's calculus presupposes what economists today call a *cardinal* measure of well-being. This is the idea that the amount of pleasure one gets from an object or event is intrinsic to that object or event: that, in other words, the object or event gives a set amount of pleasure or happiness for everyone, all other things being equal, and that, consequently, the pleasure being ascertained can be counted as a quantity, measured along a homogenous scale, and plotted with consistent intervals between them—as is the case with things like height, weight and temperature (Screpanti and Zamagni 2005, 224). Thus, the first game of pushpin gives, say, one measure of happiness for anyone playing it, a second gives two measures, a third a third, and so on. In a move reminiscent of Smith, Bentham also posited that money might be the best way to actually measure this homogeneous value. If pleasure is the satisfaction of a desire, and if a thing's utility satisfies that desire, then it is reasonable to assume, he thought, that purchasing an object with money represents, in a numerical way, a measure of pleasure (Guidi 2007, 71–72).<sup>9</sup>

Taken together, these aspects of the felicific calculus, the homogeneity of pleasures and the measure of cardinal utility through money, enabled a universal, comparative and objective science of happiness in Bentham's view. Yet, his calculus remained subjective in its content, since pleasure was, at its base, still something known only experientially. As Guidi

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lower pleasures), and that the attempt, therefore, to quantify them along an homogenous scale, as Bentham had, and then compare them, was misguided (Mill et al. 2003, 187).

<sup>9</sup> Eventually Bentham realized that money is only useful when talking about small quantities of goods since large quantities do not correspond easily with happiness. His reasoning was that happiness has a limit (you can only have so much happiness — it does not accumulate ad infinitum) while there is no limit for money (you can possess more and more money without end). Therefore there must be a point at which money is no longer correlated with happiness (Guidi 2007, 71–72).

says, “[a]t an individual level the quality of one’s own sensibility is known by introspection” (2007, 73). For Bentham, what prevented the measure from devolving into pure subjectivity, and enabled his calculus to have some claims to universality, was the idea that utility was something that could be measured cardinally, i.e., that objects or events provided a set measure of utility to all people equally.

Over time, Bentham became increasingly skeptical about the feasibility of the felicific calculus. He had doubts about the measurement and comparison of happiness in the end, and began to recognize qualitative asymmetries in pleasure and pain, as Mill did. He also began to think about the importance of virtue. This did not prevent, however, his views from being taken up by others.

#### 2.2.4: Revealed Preferences

During the nineteenth century, many economists tried to realize the ideals set by Bentham by devising something like a felicific calculus. The marginalist economists saw themselves, in fact, as carrying on the work set by Bentham, accepting both his definition of happiness as pleasure, as well as the cardinality of utility measurements (Bruni 2007, 41; Royo 2007, 155).<sup>10</sup> Some, like Edgeworth, even posited that satisfaction could “be measured in terms of its atoms by means of a type of ‘hedonimeter’” (Screpanti and Zamagni 2005, 224). With the development of welfare economics in the twentieth century, however, Bentham’s psychological hedonism and cardinality came under attack. The motivation for this was part of a general positivist turn in economics. Though the marginalists had themselves tried to

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<sup>10</sup> Where the marginalists primarily disagreed with Bentham was in the idea of diminishing marginal utility for which they are primarily known. Each game of push-pin did not provide an equal measure of well-being, as Bentham implied, since each subsequent game could, if played continuously to the point of boredom, give a smaller and smaller amount of utility.

make economics more scientific, the problem, according to later economists, was that they still clung to certain “metaphysical” beliefs, such as psychological hedonism, which took the feeling of pleasure as the domain of economic measurement, and the cardinal measure of utility, which assumed an intrinsic amount of utility to objects (Bruni and Guala 2001, 23).

The economist most influential in regard to the last point was Vilfredo Pareto. He replaced the cardinal measure of utility with an ordinal one based in the notion of preferences instead. One did not need, he argued, to measure pleasure in the way Bentham described. Rather, all that was needed was to “*distinguish if a pleasure is greater or smaller than another,*” i.e., that there were “beings who can tell whether they derive the same pleasure from two different combinations of joy... of economic goods” (in Bruni and Guala 2001, 30; emphasis added by Bruni and Guala). The “metaphysical” assumption, then, that utility was a fixed, intrinsic relation between a person and a thing could be jettisoned, according to Pareto, in favor of the simpler view that utility was simply a measure of how people ranked goods against one another according to their preferences (Screpanti and Zamagni 2005, 225). One could reject cardinality, in other words, in favor of an ordinal measure, as the question was no longer “how much pleasure does an object cause?” but “is object X preferred over object Y?”

Yet even this “preference-satisfaction” view was still too “metaphysical” for some, since it relied, as Pareto acknowledged, upon the subject’s awareness of their own preferences. To overcome the psychological hedonism of preference satisfaction, then, later economists, most notably Samuelson, argued that one need not invoke subjective feelings at all. Preferences, he argued, could instead be inferred from people’s behavior, by noting the choices they make, especially as those choices are revealed in market activity, i.e., through consumption (Royo 2007, 154). Thus, Pareto’s “preference-satisfaction,” which still had the

specter of subjectivism attached to it, gave way to an idea of “revealed preferences,” which was valued for being more “objective” and thus more fitting for the science of economics.

It is this theory of revealed preferences that provides the common interpretation of well-being in neoclassical economics today. As Frey says:

Standard economic theory employs an “objectivist” position, observing the choices made by individuals... Utility is inferred from behavior (or revealed preferences), and is in turn used to explain the choices made... Subjectivist experience... is rejected as being “unscientific,” because it is not objectively observable... The axiomatic revealed preference approach holds that the choices made provide all the information required to infer the utility of outcomes (Frey 2008, 15).

One consequence of this view, then, is that it legitimized a notion of objective well-being in economics. Utility no longer referred to a hidden psychological feeling but was an empirical phenomenon captured through behavior. There was no need, then, to rely upon the subjective evaluations of the population in order to develop an economics of well-being. As Screpanti and Zamagni say, “All references to happiness and individual satisfaction of needs disappear, while the underlying motivations for the choices lose their importance” (2005, 225).

A second consequence is that it solidifies a link between consumption and well-being and thus influences an international faith amongst politicians in growth as a measure of happiness. As Royo says, “The revealed preferences axiom has been taken as a basis for economics to carry out macroeconomic empirical studies which implicitly attach higher levels of well-being to increases in consumption. Consequently, economists tend to assume that as economies grow their consumption increases, and so does aggregate utility or well-being” (2007, 160). It thus provides “the theoretical basis for the general widespread support to endless increases in economic growth” (Royo 2007, 153). The term “implicitly” in the first quote is key here. Though well-being is presupposed, to some degree, in the pursuit of economic growth by virtue of the history of utility theory, the value of money seems to have



now eclipsed the original teleology of well-being, with large areas of governmental intervention focused on growing the economy as an end in itself, rather than raising well-being levels. Evidence for this comes most explicitly from the economics and politics of happiness itself, which, in recognition of the dominance of the growth mentality, has set itself the task of reinstating happiness as the ultimate goal of global politics (Diener and Seligman 2004).

#### 2.2.5: Sum

In sum, what we have seen over the *longue durée* of the science and politics of happiness in the West is an ancient view, stemming from Aristotle, and which sees virtue and wisdom as key components of eudaimonic happiness, followed by a modern one, stemming from the history of political economy, which sees wealth as correlated with pleasure. What we will consider in the next part, however, is that with the development of SWB research, the latter view has come under criticism. This takes the form of both a turning away from objective measures of revealed preferences and a critique of the wealth-happiness correlation, in order to return to more subjective measures of well-being and a revalidating of the original Aristotelian account of happiness. The “new economy” thus argues that what is needed is a political economy that incorporates the eudaimonic view.

### **2.3: The Development of Subjective Well-Being Research (SWB)**

On March 27th, 1972, the recently appointed President of the European Commission, Sicco L. Mansholt, held a news conference publicizing his intentions for the EC during his presidency. In the speech, he announced what he saw as a new political-economic goal for

Europe: “I don't pay much attention to gross national product,” he says. “In all our states, this has been something sacred. But it's the devil.” “Europe must slow down its “diabolical growth” and seek instead a “gross national happiness”” (*St. Petersburg Times* 1972). It is the first recorded use of the term Gross National Happiness (GNH) by a politician.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps it was due to the brevity of Mansholt's term (he only held office for one year), or perhaps it was the disdain for him among some highly regarded politicians (Nixon referred to him as a “jackass,” de Gaulle an “enemy of France” (Merriënboer 2011)), whatever the situation, GNH did not really take hold in the political imagination. Only a few news sources reported his critique-cum-pun on GDP, and only a few politicians took it seriously. GNH was little more than a blip in Mansholt's distinguished career, and quickly disappeared into political obscurity.<sup>12</sup>

Forty years later, however, the same idea rose again, this time with encouragement from the international legal community. Addressing the 66th Session of the UN General Assembly in 2012, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reiterated the same thought that had captured Mansholt's attention several decades earlier. “Gross National Product,” he said,

has long been the yardstick by which economies and politicians have been measured. Yet it fails to take into account the social and environmental costs of so-called progress. We need a new economic paradigm that recognizes the parity between the three pillars of sustainable development. Social, economic

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<sup>11</sup> It is frequently said King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan coined the term sometime after he became King in July 1972. Yet, Mansholt had used the term at least as early as March 27th 1972. Though his is the earliest mention of it by a politician, it is likely that Mansholt did not coin the term either, and that it most likely comes from the field of economics, perhaps from the Dutch economist Tinbergen (Barber and Reed 1973, 247; European Communities Press and Information Office 1972, 9).

<sup>12</sup> A year later, the idea also took hold in Australia, when the Premier of Victoria, Rupert Hamer, advocated the need for gross national well-being (Colebatch 1981). Other than these faint murmurings, however, I find little mention of the idea of GNH until the beginning of the twenty-first century.

and environmental wellbeing are indivisible. Together they define gross global happiness (Royal Government of Bhutan 2012, 28).

Unlike Mansholt, the Secretary-General was not speaking alone when he called for a “new economic paradigm,” one based in well-being rather than wealth. Rather, he was echoing the sentiments of a “movement” that had been steadily gaining momentum over the past years—a “new economics movement” to be precise—and the advocates for which had come together that week at the United Nations in order to kick start an international politics of happiness. This event was, however, not the first attempt to govern global happiness levels. Since early 2000, there had been numerous attempts across the world to put happiness back at the center stage of politics. This developing interest in happiness raises an historical question, however: What happened during the past forty years such that the dream of a political economy of happiness rather than one of wealth has become a legitimate goal of international politics? Why did an idea that, in the early 1970s, fell on mostly deaf ears, gain saliency again at the beginning of the twenty-first century and achieve such seriousness that it garnered the interest of the United Nations? The answer, in short, is that during those forty years something significant happened: a science of happiness was, allegedly, developed. What follows is a history of that development.

### 2.3.1: Easterlin’s Critique of the Liberal Theory of Well-being

The economics of happiness is generally seen as beginning with a critique of the view that wealth is correlated with happiness (Bruni and Porta 2007, xv). The article that had the most influence in this regard, and which is commonly the citational starting point for the economics of happiness, is Easterlin's “Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot” (Easterlin 1974). In that article, Easterlin took data on subjective well-being across the world

and compared it to income levels. For the period 1946 to 1970, he made three findings: first, when looking at a single country at a particular moment in time, there is a strong correlation between income and happiness (i.e., wealthy people are generally happier than poorer ones); second, when looking at international comparisons of income and happiness at a particular moment in time, there is a weak correlation between income and happiness (i.e., wealthier countries are sometimes happier than poorer ones, but not always); and third, when looking at one country (in this case, the U.S.) over the decades mentioned, there is no correlation at all (i.e., Americans have remained at the same levels of happiness over the twenty-four years that data was collected even though the US economy had grown by 60% during that time) (Bruni and Porta 2007, xv; Easterlin 1974, 99–111). The obvious conclusion for Easterlin, then, was that there was something quite wrong with the longstanding presumption that economic welfare led to social welfare (Easterlin 1974, 121).

Easterlin, however, had not himself collected the empirical data on subjective well-being. So where did he get his evidence from? As he admits, he was working with surveys that had been around since just after the Second World War and which had been collected by two of the most famous public opinion pollsters in the U.S., namely, George Gallup and Hadley Cantril.

### 2.3.2: Gallup measures SWB for the first time

George Gallup rose to fame during the 1930s, after his polling techniques correctly predicted that Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt would beat Republican Alfred Landon in the 1936 presidential elections. The event was noteworthy not simply for being correct, but also because it contradicted the predictions of the Literary Digest, which was the largest straw poll

in the U.S. at the time, polling over 10,000,000 people, and which was respected for having correctly predicted the outcome of the last four presidential races (Gallup 1948, 22; Igo 2007, 103–104).<sup>13</sup> Since that time, Gallup’s polling organization has been engaged in numerous polling activities designed to get at the “pulse” of the nation. It has thus measured, as Igo notes, everything from “old-age pensions to war in Europe to the American Communist Party” (2007, 120). It is unclear why, but sometime just after the second world war, Gallup also added “avowed happiness” to the list of polling questions. The addition was itself fairly straightforward and consisted of just two questions (Strunk 1946, 626):

“In general, how happy would you say that you are—very happy, fairly happy, or not very happy?”

“Will you tell me in your own words what the word ‘happiness’ means to you?”

The specific results of the survey are not important for the present purposes. Rather, what is of interest is how these questions provide a new method for understanding happiness at the level of population. What Gallup achieved, in brief, was to introduce the possibility of

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<sup>13</sup> The reasons for the Digest’s failure and Gallup’s success, Gallup argued, were several. First, the Literary Digest did not take a representative cross-section of the public in their data collection. As he explains, “The Literary Digest sent out its ballots by mail and, for the most part, to people whose names were listed in telephone directories or to lists of automobile owners. From the point of view of cross sections this was a major error, because it limited the sample largely to the upper half of the voting population, as judged on an economic basis” (Gallup 1948, 73–74). This in itself may not have been a problem, however. It was, after all, the method that had brought the Digest success in the preceding years. What the Digest had failed to recognize during the 1930s, however, was that there had been a demographic shift in the U.S. Poorer Americans were voting in increasing numbers and beginning, for the first time, to vote largely on lines different from the wealthier members of society. Gallup’s predictions were more successful, then, as they devised a method that included a more representative section. As Igo says, Gallup and his colleagues “gained access to the lower economic echelons, particularly “reliefers,” by supplementing mail-in questionnaires with personal interviews” (Igo 2007, 126–127). That Gallup successfully predicted the outcome using a fraction of interviews that the Digest relied on, only solidified the legitimacy of his polling methods.

measuring subjective well-being into economics, a possibility that had been raised by Bentham but pushed aside by the neoclassical economists. The measure was subjective in that it asked interviewees to isolate their own sentiment of happiness, evaluate it according to criteria already available in everyday language (very happy, fairly happy, not very happy), and finally to qualify that sentiment by stating what was meant by happiness in general (for instance, money, health, religion, and so on). It was then left up to the analyst to quantify their responses.

The quantification process, however, was an act of translation that turned the inherently subjective responses of a small fraction of the population into the opinions, or rather feelings, of the general public. Up to 5,000 people were interviewed for the 1946 poll, of which 32% stated they were “very happy.”<sup>14</sup> This percentage, however, was meant to be representative not just of the amount interviewed, but of the total U.S. population. According to Gallup, those who were chosen for the interviews came from a cross-section of society and thus represented the American public in general. The sampling strategy thus legitimized the idea that 32% of Americans, not just those interviewed, were “very happy” in 1946.

The validity of sampling methods are fairly well established today, and the fact that Gallup was able to predict the 1936 presidential election using them only added to their validity at the time. Some ambiguities, however, obviously remain. If, for example, an interviewee is asked how happy he or she is, even if he or she then qualifies what is meant by happiness later, it is still unclear just *when* this experience is supposed to have occurred: does it mean happiness right now, during a particular occasion, or throughout one’s entire life? The distinction is not made explicit. Thus, interviewee A may interpret the question as “how

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<sup>14</sup> It is not clear how many people were polled exactly but Gallup does say that, at the time, around 1,500 to 5,000 people were generally interviewed for each poll (Gallup 1948, 23).

do you feel *right now*?” while interviewee B might interpret it as “how happy are you *in general*?” One still gets two completely different answers to the same question (even if one has next *defined* happiness in similar ways), making interpersonal comparisons problematic. Hence, although Gallup’s question on happiness is influential for being the first to measure subjective well-being, and to do so in a way that is potentially generalizable, it still lacks a certain sophistication for analyzing the different meanings of happiness. It is Hadley Cantril that is seen as providing that missing sophistication.

### 2.3.3: Cantril and Life-Satisfaction

On first appearance, it seems that Cantril was not specifically interested in the topic of happiness. As he said, his concern was with measuring the whole “spectrum of values a person is preoccupied or concerned with and by means of which he evaluates his own life” (Cantril 1965, 22). Yet, this spectrum of values did take into account an idea of happiness, insofar as the values themselves were the kind of things people hoped to satisfy if they were to live a happy life. Moreover, like Gallup, Cantril also wanted to get at the subjective understanding of these interests, without sacrificing the goal of interpersonal and international comparison at the same time. As he says, “our problem has been to develop a technique which would permit us to learn about the concerns of individuals on their own terms yet in such a way that different individuals, groups of individuals, and societies could be compared in meaningful ways” (Cantril and Free 1962, 1). The main method he developed in order to get at this spectrum of values was what he called the “Self-Anchoring Scale.” In brief, this meant asking interviewees to define, *in their own terms*, the top and bottom anchoring points of a ten-point scale and then “to employ this *self-defined* continuum as a

measuring device” (Kilpatrick and Cantril 1960, 158; italics in original). The literal prompt that interviewers were to use went as follows:

(A) All of us want certain things out of life. When you think about what really matters in your own life, what are your wishes and hopes for the future? In other words, if you imagine your future in the *best* possible light, what would your life look like then, if you are to be happy? Take your time in answering; such things aren’t easy to put into words.

PERMISSIBLE PROBES: What are your hopes for the future? What would your life have to be like for you to be completely happy? What is missing for you to be happy? [Use also, if necessary, the words “dreams” and “desires.”]

OBLIGATORY PROBE: Anything else?

(B) Now, taking the other side of the picture, what are your fears and worries about the future? In other words, if you imagine your future in the *worst* possible light, what would your life look like then? Again, take your time in answering.

PERMISSIBLE PROBE: What would make you unhappy? [Stress the words “fears” and “worries.”]

OBLIGATORY PROBE: Anything else?

Here is a picture of a ladder. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder (POINTING) represents the best possible life for you and the bottom (POINTING) represents the worst possible life for you.

(C) Where on the ladder (MOVING FINGER RAPIDLY UP AND DOWN LADDER) do you feel you personally stand at the *present* time? Step number \_\_\_\_\_

(D) Where on the ladder would you say you stood *five years ago*? Step number \_\_\_\_\_

(E) And where do you think you will be on the ladder *five years from now*? Step number \_\_\_\_\_

(Cantril, 1965, pp. 23–24).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cantril also followed up this question with a similar one on the hopes and fears for one’s country, along with other general background information: “age, occupation, religion, education, whether or not he owned his own land or was an agricultural worker, marital status, political preference, economic status, and the like” (Cantril 1965, 24).



As with Gallup, the results of Cantril's questionnaire are less important than what he contributed to the study of public happiness. There are three main points to make in this regard. First, Cantril reframed happiness as life satisfaction. In particular, he measured what economists today call "domain life satisfaction" and "global life satisfaction," i.e., satisfaction in regard to particular domains, like work or family life, and satisfaction with life in general (Diener 1984, 545–565). He thus made life satisfaction, rather than the ambiguous term happiness, an essential component of well-being studies.

Second, although these questions were, like Gallup's, a subjective measure that relied on the interviewee evaluating and defining happiness for themselves, Cantril inverted the order of questions. Gallup asked interviewees first to evaluate their happiness and then to define it.<sup>16</sup> Cantril, by contrast, asked interviewees to define happiness first, and then to evaluate it. For Cantril, this makes sense given that he is not interested in measuring any particular value himself and instead wants to get at a subject's "spectrum of values." In that case, one needs to know what those specific values are, before they can be measured. It also counteracts, however, some of the problems in the Gallup question, which presupposed that a feeling of happiness exists prior to the understanding of it.

Thirdly, Cantril quantified the evaluation, increased the scale of measurement, and argued why such measures were generalizable. For Gallup the evaluation was based on a *qualitative* assessment of a three-category scale. With Cantril, the evaluation was a

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<sup>16</sup> It is not clear why Gallup did this but presumably it was done so as to prevent biases from entering into the results. That is, if the interviewee is first asked to define happiness, and they think money is essential to happiness, then when they are asked to evaluate their happiness levels, the question becomes, in the interviewee's mind, not "how happy am I?" but "how much money do I have." Thus, since one's definition of happiness is seen as affecting the evaluative answer one can speculate that Gallup found it more appropriate to ask the defining question last so as to obtain an answer to the evaluative question of happiness itself, and not a different one that the interviewee inferred from his definition of happiness.

*quantitative* assessment of a ten-point scale. Such an analysis, Cantril admits, is inherently subjective. As he says, “It should be emphasized over and over again that the ratings people assign... themselves... are entirely subjective: hence a rating of, say, 6 given by one person by no means indicates the same things as a 6 given by another person” (Cantril 1965, 25).<sup>17</sup> Yet he still gave reasons for why the quantities being measured were roughly equivalent and thus amenable to interpersonal and international comparison. In short, they were interpersonally comparable, he argues, as the definitions for the best and worst lives were “similar psychologically” (Kilpatrick and Cantril 1960, 161). Thus, the content of responses could be put into similar categories, and the categories themselves could then be compared.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, they were internationally comparable because the questionnaires were similar linguistically. Cantril, in fact, spent much time making sure this was the case, translating the survey into twenty-six different languages, and in each case, working hard with translators to keep the translated version faithful to the original English one. As he says:

Considerable time was spent with experts to be sure the translation contained the precise nuances wanted. One of the methods often utilized in this translation process was to have someone who knew the native language, as a native, for example, an Arab, and who also was completely fluent in English translate our questions into Arabic. Then someone whose native language was

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<sup>17</sup> The subjectivity of the evaluation is still evident in Gallup, of course, but it is obscured on account that his scale is both shorter and uses qualitative, everyday terms as a measuring device. That is, since “very happy” is a vague description of one’s feeling, it is much easier to say that one person’s “very happy” means pretty much the same thing as another person’s “very happy,” insofar as there are no specific criteria by which to distinguish one from the other. But, in truth, both Gallup and Cantril’s evaluative responses are equally subjective, since it is not clear that when one person says “very happy” or “6” that this is the “same feeling” expressed by another person when he says “very happy” or “6.” The only reason Cantril’s scale foregrounds the issue more explicitly is because of the increased intervals and the use of quantification.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, if one person defines one of their values as “a good living wage,” while another defines theirs as “enough money to support my family,” these can be grouped into the general category of “Economic stability” on account of their psychological similarity (Cantril 1965, 332). The comparisons then apply to the category of definitions.

English but who had a perfect command of Arabic would translate the Arabic back into English so a comparison could be made with the original question and, through discussion and further comparisons, difficulties could be ironed out (Cantril 1965, 26).

From 1957-63, Cantril measured the life satisfaction of over 20,000 people in 14 countries. As with Gallup, moreover, the use of cross-section sampling methods meant that the results of these surveys were generalizable beyond that, ultimately covering a third of the world's population (Gallup 1976, 459).

#### 2.3.4: Gallup and positive/negative affect

Two years after Easterlin's groundbreaking publication, in 1976, Gallup returned to measuring happiness, this time committed to providing a truly global science of happiness. Impressed with Cantril's survey, he added the self-anchoring question to his own on happiness. But he went further than Cantril, aiming to cover 60 countries this time, which, through the cross-section sampling technique, was understood to cover two-thirds of the world's population in total (Gallup 1976, 461).<sup>19</sup> In addition to extending the geographical reach of the survey, he also standardized it so as to be applicable to not just those countries, but to any possible future ones — or for the use of any future institutions. As he argued, the “global master sample” that he devised could be used by any future government or institution interested in happiness, and it would save them the time consuming, and highly expensive process of creating a new survey for themselves (Gallup 1976, 461). He also added plans for

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<sup>19</sup> One way Gallup achieved this standardization was by replacing Cantril's ladder with a mountain. Cantril had, in a footnote, observed how the ladder as an object was not familiar in all parts of the world and so, in one survey with the Bantus of S. Africa, a mountain had been used as a substitute (Kilpatrick and Cantril 1960, 171). Given its universal recognizability, then, Gallup decided to use the mountain scale exclusively.

international databank, which governments and institutions could use to find correlations between happiness and other aspects of life (Gallup 1976, 461).

After George Gallup's death in 1984, the Gallup organization continued to add to and refine their well-being poll. The most important of these changes came in 2009, when they started to measure what they called "daily well-being," that is, the balance of positive and negative affect people experience in their lives. Thus, in addition to happiness and life satisfaction, the Gallup poll now asks two additional categories of *hedonic* questions (Agrawal and Harter 2011, 4):

1. Positive Experience Index: Now, please think about yesterday, from the morning until the end of the day. Think about where you were, what you were doing, who you were with, and how you felt.

A. Did you feel well-rested yesterday?

B. Were you treated with respect all day yesterday?

C. Did you smile or laugh a lot yesterday?

D. Did you learn or do something interesting yesterday?

E. Did you experience the following feelings a lot of the day yesterday? How about enjoyment?

2. Negative Experience Index: Did you experience the following feelings during a lot of the day yesterday?

How about:

A. Physical pain

B. Worry

C. Sadness

D. Stress

E. Anger

These three measures of well-being (general happiness, life/domain satisfaction and positive/negative affect) currently constitute the general category of SWB (Diener 2000, 34). More importantly, they also provide the bedrock for all the major happiness studies and Gross National Happiness indices currently available internationally and nationally. They can thus be found in such international surveys as the Gallup Poll, the World Values Survey, the European Values Survey and the European Social Survey (cf. Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs 2012), as well as in the national statistics of SWB for Canada, France, Mexico, and the United Kingdom, amongst others (Durand and Smith 2013, 132). Moreover, in each case, the wealth-happiness link has been shown to be problematic at best. The question now, then, is how are the results of surveys like these being translated into the political arena in the twenty-first century?

#### 2.3.5: A Return to Eudaimonia

Gallup and Cantril were interested in measuring subjective experiences of well-being at the level of the population. They thus embraced, to some degree, the ideal set by Bentham — the ideal of measuring subjective happiness. They differed, however, in not limiting happiness to pleasure but also including within it a life-satisfaction notion of well-being. That said, they did accept the wealth-happiness correlation in general, arguing that their polls showed a correlation between them. It was not until the 1970s, however, when economists of happiness, starting with Easterlin, set about critiquing and contextualizing the wealth-happiness correlation. In critiquing the modern view of well-being, a new theory of well-being was needed. Consequently, researchers on SWB turned in increasing numbers to the ancient notion of happiness as grounded in virtue and wisdom, that is, the eudaimonic

tradition. This can be seen most clearly in the 2013 World Happiness Report. The World Happiness Reports began in 2012, the first being produced in preparation for the U.N. Conference on “Happiness and Wellbeing” mentioned in the introduction. The 2013 report was a way of updating the community of happiness scholars and politicians about the world data on SWB. In that Report, the editors had this to say:

In the great pre-modern traditions concerning happiness, whether Buddhism in the East, Aristotelianism in the West, or the great religious traditions, happiness is determined not by an individual’s material conditions (wealth, poverty, health, illness) but by the individual’s moral character. Aristotle spoke of virtue as the key to eudaimonia, loosely translated as “thriving.” Yet that tradition was almost lost in the modern era after 1800, when happiness became associated with material conditions, especially income and consumption... [This report] advocates a return to “virtue ethics” as one part of the strategy to raise (evaluative) happiness in society” (“World Happiness Report 2013” 2013, 5).

What we see here is a summary of the historical argument given in chapters 1 and 2, namely, that throughout the ancient and medieval worlds, the Aristotelian view took precedent, but in the post-Enlightenment world, the modern view of well-being as contingent upon wealth became popular. SWB research, however, argues that the correlation between wealth and well-being is much looser than originally imagined, and at times nonexistent. It likewise sees as problematic the image of the human that was presupposed in the modern conception of well-being, namely, homo-economicus. Their goal, then, is to globalize another way of life, what one might also call homo-eudaimonicus, i.e., the person of virtue and wisdom. As the authors continue,

A renewed focus on the role of ethics, and in particular of virtuous behavior, in happiness could lead us to new and effective strategies for raising individual, national, and global well-being (“World Happiness Report 2013” 2013, 82).

Consequently, there is a sense of optimism in bringing the Aristotelian tradition back into political economy, providing as it does a potential solution to the problem of individual and social well-being.

The irony, however, is that in attempting to ignite a political economy of eudaimonia, SWB does not turn to Aristotle for the most part. In an unexpected turn of events, and despite the fact that Aristotle provides such a strong point of reference in the historical development of the new science of happiness, it is not actually Aristotelian ethics that provides the orientation for how this new political economy will play out. Rather, as a consequence of various historical accidents, as well as some cultural understandings of the geopolitics of happiness, both of which the rest of this dissertation will explore, it is the other great figure of the Axial Age, the Buddha, and the tradition stemming from him, that has become the center of focus in the happiness discourse, and within that a practice seen as essential in the cultivation of Buddhist virtue ethics, namely, mindfulness meditation. In fact, Jeffrey Sachs, one of the editors of the World Happiness Report and a leading figure in international politics, refers to this political economy of eudaimonia as a “mindful economy.” But his is but one example of this. It will be the purpose of the rest of the dissertation to show how deep that influence goes.

## Chapter 3: Mindlessness

### 3.1: Introduction

I live in the United States. It's hard to beat the quality of life here if you're just looking at material things. And yet I'm completely miserable. There's just this depression that's there all the time.

— Mike

Mike is 43, white, middle-class, male, and American. He has many friends, and though as a single gay man he is looking forward to gaining more stability in his love life, he would seem well-adjusted to life as a bachelor. He is not rich, though at 43 he has had a number of jobs at which he has been successful over the years. As a consequence, he lives well enough. He owns a car, and though he does not own a house, he rents comfortable lodgings just a mile or so from the center of Boulder, CO. When I met him, he was also undergoing a change in his career. At one time, he had been a professional clarinetist in a well-known orchestra, a job that had earned him a decent income and also enabled him to cultivate his passion for music. After a succession of various other careers since then, however, some fulfilling, others less so, he moved, in 2014, to Colorado to further his new interest, meditation, and began working on his master's degree in contemplative psychotherapy at Naropa University, so that he could apply the skills he acquired from meditation to the service of helping others. In many ways, then, Mike's life is a good one. Certainly, he does not possess everything he wants, but he has a notable number of elements that would contribute to what one would call "quality of life": a decent income, a place to live, a healthy social life, career opportunities, and even passions. Demographically speaking, he even falls within the most fortunate class of beings that ever lived in terms of living standards: that of the white, middle-class, American male. And



though his sexual identity has impinged on the comforts of that class at times, through the various forms of prejudice he has sometimes had to endure, he also lived most of his life in liberal neighborhoods, known for their acceptance of LGBT communities.

Yet, for all that, Mike also falls within another class of less fortunate beings, in that he also suffers from what his therapist calls “chronic major depression”—a pervasive and constant “darkness” as he describes it, which regularly interferes with his ability to take pleasure in life, and some days, to even motivate himself to get up in the mornings:

There’s a depression that’s there all the time. Or, I should say, it’s cyclical. It comes and goes. But it comes often and stays for a while. I call it... I refer to it as the darkness. I just start to feel dark. And I can feel it coming. I don’t know how long I’ll be out of commission, but when it does come I think, well, I’ll do everything that’s not good for me. I won’t go to work or school. I won’t exercise. I don’t think it’s healthy to watch TV all day and I’ll say I don’t care, and do it anyway.

The sad truth about Mike’s condition, beyond the fact that it is often debilitating for him and has driven him to attempted suicide on more than one occasion, is that considered from a global perspective, it is apparently not out of the ordinary. The cohort of people suffering from such affective problems is, it is said, large, with depression increasingly topping the list of the majority of national and international measures of psychological health. In fact, in the most bleak accounts, provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), depression is currently the third leading cause of the “global burden of disease” (GBD) (if one limits the measures to middle and high-income countries, it is presently the first), and it is predicted to be, by 2030, the primary cause worldwide (Murray and Lopez 1996; Mathers et al. 2008).

And yet at the back of one’s mind, and with all sympathy to Mike’s case, a niggling doubt may have already arisen in the form of a question: how trustworthy are those statistics? According to Horwitz and Wakefield (2007), the answer is ‘not very.’ Depression, they argue, is a diagnostic category that is too broad in formulation, capturing more phenomena

than it should, including not just pathological states, but non-pathological emotions also—what they call cases of “normal sadness.” The apparent “global crisis in depression,” then, is for them primarily an issue of over-diagnosis in healthcare, itself the consequence of liberal definitional changes in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health* (DSM), which through its various iterations over the past decades has broadened the meaning of the term “depression” to include more instances of suffering within its purview. Indeed, that might be the case—Horwitz and Wakefield do marshal a persuasive argument in that regard. But even if one is sympathetic to Horwitz and Wakefield on this point—for I certainly am—all it seems to do is push the issue back a step, provoking another question: why are so many people, if not “pathologically depressed,” then self-reporting as living through chronic forms of everyday unhappiness?<sup>1</sup>

As I will argue, “depression” is a word, perhaps a useful one for some and less so for others, which in its current clinical definition captures a partial view of a more subtle form of affective experience. The crisis of mental health is not, on this understanding, a crisis of

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<sup>1</sup> The epidemiological studies, on which the WHO reports are based, rely on surveys of self-reports of dysphoria and other associated symptoms of clinical depression, as defined by the DSM or ICD. The WHO reports are based on surveys using a range of standardized measures, including the Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI), itself a modified version of the National Institute of Mental Health Diagnostic Interview Schedule (DIS), the revised Clinical Interview Schedule (CIS-R), the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), and the Schedule for Clinical Assessment in Neuropsychiatry (SCAN), amongst others. Each of these surveys translate categories of major depression into interview questions that leave it to the interviewees to report depressive moods or symptoms for themselves, as opposed to being diagnosed by a clinician. If Horwitz and Wakefield are correct, then, it raises the question of why in those self-reports many people testify to experiencing various forms of unhappy, that is, dysphoric mood. For more information on the epidemiological studies, see Üstün et al. (2004), Ayuso-Mateos et al. (2001), Kessler et al. (1994) and Bebbington et al. (1998). For samples of survey questions see Walford, Tucker, and Viswanathan (Walford, Tucker, and Viswanathan 2010, 244); Robins et al (1988); Beck, Steer, and Brown (1996); Janca and Chandrashekar (1995); and Thornicroft and Tansella (1996).

depression as such, but a deeper crisis in a “way of life.” Or, to put it more accurately, it is a crisis in the very conditions for having a “way of life” in the first place. What do I mean by that? It is easy to think that a “way of life” is a given, that human beings possess one automatically by virtue of being members of the species *Homo sapiens*. As Lear puts it, “Humans are by nature cultural animals: we necessarily inhabit a way of life that is expressed in a culture” (2006, 6). But as I will argue, a “way of life” is not a given. It is something more than being a cultural animal. It is something that requires investment in an end, as well as the acceptance of the means that enable us to explore or sustain that commitment. Such an idea is not the same thing as having culture, even if, when we do have a way of life, it is only ever expressed through culture. What can be seen in the unhappiness crisis, then, is an affective awareness and moral evaluation of that situation, of the separation between culture and a way of life in modern America, and of the absence, within liberal Western societies more generally, of the conditions for the latter.

To show this will require rethinking depression, abandoning the common view of it as a “disease” or “disorder,” and instead as a form of everyday affective experience that embodies a reflection on the possibilities for living—and which, in the suffering that attends that affectivity, also provides a proto-critique over those possibilities. To make such an argument, however, will require new conceptual tools. I thus borrow the phrase “existential feelings,” a concept coined by the philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe, in order to analyze the unhappiness crisis. Existential Feelings, or simply “moods” as I shall also refer to them, are according to Ratcliffe embodied affective experiences of certain ontological relationships, specifically those between self, world and other. I will, however, extend Ratcliffe’s account of existential feelings, by arguing that what is missing from his understanding of them, is the

notion of “a way of life,” what I will also call *bios*. The point is that existential feelings, as Ratcliffe defines them, though useful for understanding certain forms of ontological affect, fail to fully explore the movement towards “ends” that are presupposed in the existential feelings of self, world and other. By filling in that gap through the notion of *bios*, much progress will be made for understanding the moral dimension of unhappiness.

The choice of term “way of life,” or *bios*, is an important one, and situates the chapter in a long-standing tradition of theorizing “life” in anthropology, philosophy and science studies through the concept of biopower. In chapter 1 of the dissertation, I discussed at length this history of biopower and my take on it, but to restate that point briefly here, what I mean by *bios* is not what is commonly meant by it in the biopower literature (or in its growing semantic field of related terms: biotechnology, biocapital, biocitizenship, and so on). *Bio*, in those accounts, refers primarily to the material conditions of existence (biological existence, reproduction, sustenance, health, and so on). Such conditions may become a way of life, for instance, as it is with the concept of biocitizenship, but in those situations, the way of life in question is one that gets its meaning from the salience of the biological. This interpretation of *bios* famously stems from Foucault, who argued that modern power distinguishes itself by being “situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population,” that is, at the level of “biological existence” (1978, 137). And though Foucault did not conceptually distinguish between biological life and way of life in his writings, later theorists did. Thus, Agamben, who arguably represents the most influential reworking of Foucault’s conception of biopower, makes a distinction between two opposed conceptions of life that have supposedly run through Western politics since the Ancient Greeks, namely, *zōē* and *bios*, that is, “simple natural life” and “politically qualified

life,” or “bare life” and “way of life.” For Agamben, biopower referred to the power over bare life, that is, *zōē*, rather than a way of life, or *bios*. As Esposito says regarding the same point,

If we want to remain with the Greek (and in particular with the Aristotelian) lexicon, biopolitics refers, if anything, to the dimension of *zōē*, which is to say to life in its simple biological capacity [*tenuta*], more than it does to *bios*, understood as “qualified life” or “form of life,” or at least to the line of conjugation along which *bios* is exposed to *zōē*, naturalizing *bios* as well (2008, 14).

As I point out in chapter 1, the history of biopower, in focusing on *zōē*, has tended to overlook the significance of *bios* as “a way of life.” My goal, then, in this chapter, is to bring that meaning into the foreground. Since, however, a way of life also concerns the relationship between means and ends, as I will show, it also refers to a life that is teleologically structured by historically constituted and subjectively appraised notions of the good (see part C of this chapter for more on this). In this sense, the concept of “a way of life” is closely connected to that other Greek term *eu zēn*, or “the good life.” Hence, it is in both those senses, i.e., as “way of life” and “the good life,” that I use the term *bios* here.

In arguing for *bios* as the ground of existential feelings, I conclude that such feelings are moral sentiments, i.e., ethical judgments, at the level of affect, about what kinds of ways of life are worth living. Insofar as the question of how to live is key to ethics, this chapter is thus about the affective conditions for ethical action.<sup>2</sup> But more than this I also want to argue

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<sup>2</sup> As Nussbaum says, “If emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment, and if they contain in themselves an awareness of value or importance, they cannot, for example, easily be sidelined in accounts of ethical judgment, as so often they have been in the history of philosophy. Instead of viewing morality as a system of principles to be grasped by the detached intellect, and emotions as motivations that either support or subvert our choice to act according to principle, we will have to consider emotions as part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning” (2001, 1). I am making a similar point in relation to existential feelings, as opposed to emotions.

that, for many people, existential feelings function as a more abstract form of judgment, revealing more than simply an evaluation of a *particular* way of life, and instead signifying the possibilities for having a way of life *in general*. The story here, then, is about a conspicuous absence of *the conditions for bios* in American culture, that absence being revealed through dysphoric experiences that tend to be formally called depression, but which might be represented more precisely through a language of negative existential feelings.<sup>3</sup> Thus, existential feelings are closely connected to another Aristotelian concept, that of “practical reason,” or the art of appraising the means and ends of the good-life. As I intend to argue, in fact, existential feelings represent an affective moment in the development of practical reason. To put it neatly: *existential feelings, even seemingly depressive ones, function to arouse practical reason.*

One consequence of making all these moves is that it challenges the view of depression, suggesting that the WHO statistics reflect not the growth of a “disorder,” but a collective dissatisfaction with certain kinds of expectations for living (what I call a crisis in *bios*), as well as more positive stirrings toward the development of practical reason (which motivates the desire for overcoming that crisis). And to argue all this I offer as illustration the lives of several “contemplative practitioners” I met during fieldwork, who offered a potent example of the unhappiness crisis in the US, as well as the attempt to overcome it, in their commitment to a Buddhist inspired meditation technique called mindfulness meditation.

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<sup>3</sup> By “dysphoria” I include, following Kleinman and Good, such things as “sadness, hopelessness, unhappiness, lack of pleasure with the things of the world and with social relationships” (1985, 3).

### 3.2: Mindfulness

Why am I using mindfulness practitioners to illustrate the unhappiness crisis and the strategies for dealing with it? It is true that many people suffer from putatively depressive symptoms, and therefore that many people's stories might illustrate the crisis in *bios*. Mindfulness, however, has a number of advantages for exploring the issue. First, as will be shown below, mindfulness has become an increasingly common way in which those suffering from depression (as well as many other conditions) are working with and understanding their own suffering. This has been particularly true over the past decade, as mental health professionals began to recognize the effectiveness of mindfulness techniques in treating a number of "disorders," though most notably depression and anxiety. Second, mindfulness is not just seen by practitioners as a therapeutic practice in a narrow sense. For those who commit themselves to mindfulness, it frequently extends into a way of life, what is often called "the contemplative life," on account of the indebtedness of mindfulness-based therapies to what are seen as the "ancient" arts of "contemplation" in the world's wisdom traditions, particularly Buddhism, from which mindfulness is said to originate. Finally, following from this idea of a "contemplative way of life," mindfulness also offers a unique style of therapeutic treatment, one which contrasts with pharmaceutical and psychotherapeutic approaches to mental health. It contrasts with the former in that, although not dismissive of the use of pharmaceuticals, nevertheless sees such interventions as having limited efficacy, arguing instead that well-being can only come from larger transformations in one's way of life. In that sense it may seem no different to other forms of psychotherapeutic practice, since the majority of approaches available today acknowledge that pharmaceuticals need to be augmented with other behavioral and cognitive interventions

to be truly effective. Mindfulness contrasts with psychotherapies in general, however, by offering not just cognitive-behavioral techniques, but explicitly ethical and metaphysical ones too.

But what is mindfulness, in that case? In the first instance, it is best described as a Buddhist inspired meditation practice. The common image of mindfulness is thus one of the meditator sitting cross-legged in the lotus position, eyes half open, and focusing on the breath in order to cultivate a sense of calm or peacefulness. That image is not altogether unfounded, as mindfulness practice, as will be shown in the chapter 4, does often involve such techniques. To focus on just that image, however, obscures the various somatic, psychological and spiritual technologies that fall within the range of mindfulness practices. I will discuss these techniques at length in the following chapters. For now, however, as a way of giving a general overview of the meaning of mindfulness, and for how it is connected to the crisis in *bios*, it would be beneficial to give a brief account of its history, along with a summary of how it came to be an alternative, yet increasingly influential, therapeutic modality in the West.

### 3.2.1: Mindfulness in the West

The term “mindfulness” has been part of the English language since the sixteenth century, and since that time it has acquired both a narrow and a broad meaning. In the narrow sense, it was part of a technology of divine remembrance, and referred to the need to keep God continuously in mind, so as to live one’s life in His presence. As Sun puts it,

In early usages, mindfulness was seen as important in supporting Christian ways of being, through maintaining a ‘habitual’ or ‘continual’ mindfulness of God’s presence... This is because thinking frequently of God, keeping him in mind, and being aware of his presence helps to prevent sin.. and to increase devotion and spiritual growth (Sun 2014, 2).



In the broad sense, however, mindfulness was also a general concept for a miscellany of mental faculties and moral sentiments, including, as Sun says, “memory; attention, alertness, watchfulness; intention, purpose; and thoughtfulness, regard or care” (Sun 2014, 2). Though the Christian account of mindfulness may have fallen out of widespread usage, that broader meaning is still part of the English language, and can be seen in the infinitive “to be mindful,” which continues to connote such qualities as paying attention, keeping something in mind, and showing care or concern, depending on the context in which it is used.

Around the late nineteenth century, however, another meaning of mindfulness emerged, when the influential Buddhist scholar T. W. Rhys Davids used the term mindfulness to translate the Pali term *sati* (Sanskrit: *smṛti*) (Gethin 2011, 263). Though not every use of the term mindfulness necessarily refers to *sati*, mindfulness has become the standard translation for that term in Buddhist studies. Consequently, the modern notion of mindfulness has been powerfully shaped by it.

So what is *sati*, in that case? Though *sati* is generally understood to have referred to the faculty of “memory” in India during the sixth century B.C., several scholars agree that in the canonical Buddhist texts *sati* had a much broader meaning than the capacity for recollection, and instead referred to the ability to “keep something in mind.” As Dreyfus says, *sati* referred to both “the act of remembering and keeping in mind, as well as to what is kept in mind” (Dreyfus 2011, 45). As the capacity for “keeping something in mind,” *sati* might at times require memory, for instance, if the object in question was a past event, but otherwise it differed from memory on several accounts. First, *sati* referred not just to things remembered, but incorporated present experiences also. As Anālayo says, “*sati* can be understood to represent the ability to simultaneously maintain in one’s mind the various elements and facets

of a particular situation. This can be applied to both the faculty of memory and to awareness of the present moment” (Anālayo 2003, 47–48; Bodhi 2011, 25–26). Second, *sati* was not merely a passive ability to keep something in mind, as in the experience of being captivated by, absorbed in, or obsessed by an object, but was an active and deliberative intention to hold the object in thought. *Sati* was, as Dreyfus says, the ability to “keep the object in the ken of attention without losing it,” what he calls “retentive focus” (Dreyfus 2011, 47). Finally, *sati* was also associated with its own particular kind of phenomenological knowing. Thus, it was, according to Anālayo, a “non-reactive awareness” or “detached observation” (Anālayo 2003, 56), a kind of “pre-conceptual” attention, whereby one notices the object in question without subsuming it within any prior conceptual scheme. Similarly, for Bodhi, it was a “lucid awareness of the phenomenal field” (Bodhi 2011, 22), a form of observation in which one brackets the everyday frame of reference for the intentional object, in order to allow the object to stand out on its own terms.

More importantly, however, *sati* was also significant because of the role it played in the cultivation of a Buddhist way of life. It was thus one component of a larger system of Buddhist ethics, metaphysics and philosophy of mind, all of which were important insofar as, when taken together, they facilitated the ultimate goal of the cessation of suffering. Considered from this perspective, *sati* was more accurately called *sammāsati* or “right mindfulness,” which was the holistic use of *sati* in development of the Buddhist path, as distinguish from the mere attentional capacity for sustained perceptual or conceptual salience.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As Anālayo (2003, 72) notes “*sammā*... literally means “togetherness”, or “to be connected in one””; while as Buswell and Lopez say (2013, 762), *sammā* denotes whatever brings about “a decrease in the net suffering experienced by oneself and others.” Thus, *sammāsati*

It would be too complicated to go into the various ways *sati* connected to Buddhist ethics, metaphysics and philosophy of mind (for those interested in that, see Anālayo 2003 for an excellent account). In order to show the interconnectedness of right mindfulness, however, two concepts in particular are worth considering, since they have become essential for understanding modern mindfulness, namely, *samatha* (*śamatha*) and *vipassanā* (*vipaśyanā*). Thus, *sati* has often been seen as closely related to *samatha*, what is often translated as “calm abiding.” This is a state of calm, tranquility or bliss that is supposed to follow from certain forms of focused attention. *Sati*, insofar as it involves holding an object in mind, is an attentional technique, but it can technically be done on any object of experience, whether it be a stable continuous object or numerous ephemeral or abstract ones. As Bodhi says, “Mindfulness may be focused on a single point of observation, as in mindfulness of breathing, especially when developed for the purpose of attaining concentration... But mindfulness may also be open and undirected, accessing whatever phenomena appear” (Bodhi 2011, 28). Cultivating *sati* by focusing on “a single point of observation,” as Bodhi points out, is part of the practice of concentration. One of the alleged effects of extended concentration practice, however, is what is considered to be stability of mind. That is to say, by maintaining a ritualistic focus on an object, there is, it is said, little opportunity for other cognitions to arise and therefore to disturb one’s attention. Such concentration may take a great deal of effort at first, since disturbances from a wandering mind are to be expected, but one can, with repeated and sustained commitment, reach a point when those disturbances cease to arise in the first place, and one enters into a flow state of

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suggests a holism in which all the components of the Buddhist path come together as one in bringing about the ends of the Buddhist path, namely, the cessation of suffering.

effortless concentration, during which one is able to rest attention on the object in question, and sometimes to become absorbed in it to the point of tranquility or bliss.

As implied by terms like tranquility and bliss, such states can be highly pleasurable. The meditator, however, is not to confuse those pleasurable feelings with freedom from suffering. As many scholars point out, *sati* and *samatha* are not important in themselves, but only insofar as they facilitate the cultivation of a further quality, which *is* valued for its ability to bring about the goals of Buddhist ethical training. That quality is *vipassanā*, also called “insight.” As Buswell and Lopez note (2013, 978), insight involves understanding the world and the objects in it in terms of Buddhist metaphysics and ethics, most notably, according to the principles of impermanence, nonself, and the four noble truths. Comparing *vipassanā* to *sati* and *samatha*, then, one could say that if *sati* and *samatha* are primarily techniques of attention, in which the cultivation of meta-awareness skills is a key practice, with the development of insight, it is the meanings of the meditation object that are of primary significance, and the meanings in question are the “truths” of Buddhist metaphysics and ethics, what are collectively called the *Dhamma*. Since it is through this insight into the *Dhamma* that one achieves freedom from suffering, *sati* and *samatha* thus gain their significance from their ability to support the acquisition of insight.<sup>5</sup> As Dreyfus says:

The practice of retentive focus (mindfulness proper) is not the goal but a means to a more explicitly cognitive end. Its main point is not to obtain a calm and focused state, however helpful such a state may be, but to use this state to gain a deeper understanding of the changing nature of one’s bodily and mental states so as to free our mind from the habits and tendencies that bind us to suffering. In classical Buddhist scholastic terms, this means that mindfulness and concentration are developed for the sake of gaining insight... into the

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<sup>5</sup> As Bodhi says, *vipassanā* is when “the meditator clearly comprehends the nature and qualities of arisen phenomena and relates them to the framework defined by the parameters of the Dhamma, the teaching as an organic whole” (Bodhi 2011, 22). And as Buswell and Lopez say, “*Vipassanā*, when fully developed, leads to enlightenment... and *nibbāna*” (2013, 978).

impermanent, suffering, and no-self nature of our bodily and mental aggregates so as to free our mind from defilements (2011, 51).

*Sati*, *samatha* and *vipassanā* are thus interconnected in the teleology of the Buddhist path, by their ability to facilitate the cessation of suffering.

*Sati* has a long standing textual presence in the discourse on Buddhism. It was not, however, until the 1970s, that the practice of mindfulness became popular with Westerners. There were two main routes by which mindfulness entered the West. The first was through secularized *Theravāda* practices of SE Asia and Sri Lanka, where, in an era of colonialism, various indigenous Buddhist modernizers taught secular versions of mindfulness practice to the Buddhist laity, including several European and American Buddhist converts. Those same converts returned to their home countries over the following decades exporting the practice with them in the process (cf. Braun 2013; Fronsdal 1998). The second entryway was through the *Vajrayāna* tradition of Tibet. Following the Uprising of 1959, a Tibetan diaspora gradually made its way Westward, arriving in North America in the 1960s and 1970s, bringing Buddhist philosophy and practice with them as they did. One of those who took this journey was Trungpa Rinpoche. From his base in Boulder, CO, Trungpa set up a pervasive and longstanding presence in the US, which, as Coleman says, more than any one, save perhaps the Dalai Lama himself, “shaped the face of Tibetan Buddhism in the West” (Coleman 2001, 73).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The fourteenth Dalai Lama has arguably had a more pervasive influence in the long run. However, the Dalai Lama did not visit the US until 1979, at which point Trungpa had already laid many foundations for Tibetan Buddhism in America. Moreover, Trungpa Rinpoche’s shambhala Buddhism has had a pervasive and unparalleled institutional presence in the West since then, having founded Shambhala centers in nearly all states in the US, and in many countries across Europe.

In the case of North America, these influences also mixed with several other powerful domestic forces to provide a context in which mindfulness could take root and grow. Included in this were the counterculture revolution and the biological and psychological sciences, each of which found inspiration in the epistemic, psychological and spiritual possibilities of meditation practice.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, several communities emerged in the US mixing the countercultural aspirations with the scientific. For instance, there were the studies of Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert and David McClelland at Harvard's psychology department; Herbert Benson's investigations of transcendental meditation at Harvard's Thorndike Memorial Lab and Beth Israel Hospital; and Trungpa Rinpoche and Francisco Varela's influences at Naropa Institute in Boulder, CO. In the 1980s and 1990s, these communities expanded, contracted, broke apart, and formed new groups, leading to the continual transformation of mindfulness in the public sphere. One highly important development during this time was the founding of clinical mindfulness practice in the form of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), originated by Jon Kabat-Zinn at University of Massachusetts Medical Center.

It would be hard to underestimate the significance of MBSR on the popular conception of mindfulness in the US. Developed in the early 1980s, and institutionalized at the Center for Mindfulness in Worcester, MA, MBSR has since been exported to hospitals all over the world. It is also the practice most commonly used in the burgeoning number of cognitive science studies on mindfulness that have been appearing since the late 1990s. The

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, during the countercultural revolution, meditation was an alternative and more sustainable means of self-cultivation and pursuit of the good life than that offered by either the American Dream or psychedelics; while for those in the academy, meditation provided resources for understanding the relations between the mind and body, and for developing therapies useful for mental health problems.

success of MBSR stems from a number of important developments, but perhaps the most distinctive is the standardization of mindfulness practice itself, which facilitated its exportation to numerous institutional contexts. In Kabat-Zinn's hands, mindfulness went from being a spiritual exercise cultivated between student and teacher over the long term, to a more formalized set of attentional practices pragmatically adopted in institutional contexts for the purposes of healthcare and wellness. It was packaged into an eight week course (so as to be easily adopted by time-sensitive Americans), was shown to be therapeutically effective for a number of conditions through clinical trials, and was made replicable through the MBSR training program offered to other clinicians. Most significantly, through these transformations, it was also given a particular definition, as a meta-cognitive practice of attention. As Kabat-Zinn puts it,

An operational working definition of mindfulness is: the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment (J. Kabat-Zinn 2003, 145).

This definition of mindfulness as the willful, nonjudgmental, and present-moment application of attention has influenced practitioners for several years, and has also provided scholars with a phenomenological referent for measuring and assessing the effects of mindfulness in the lab. Since the early 2000s, however, numerous scholars have also criticized this account, particularly the notion of "nonjudgmental" awareness presupposed by it. To think of mindfulness as "nonjudgmental," it is said, gives the appearance that the metaphysical and ethical dimension of mindfulness are irrelevant. As mentioned earlier, *sati* was valuable because of its place in a Buddhist way of life. One was not cultivating *sati*, but *sammāsati*, or "right mindfulness," a capacity that ultimately involved the skillful ability to make ethical judgments concerning the nature and causes of suffering. Consequently, there has arisen a

tension for many practitioners and scholars over the meaning of mindfulness, whether it is *sati* or *sammāsati*. Such connotations have deep implications. If mindfulness is construed as mere *sati*, it starts to look like an instrumentalized attentional practice that could be used to all manner of ends, perhaps even immoral ones—a concern that is not without warrant for many given the appropriation of mindfulness in the military. If it is construed as *sammāsati*, however, one is left in the situation of whether institutions are surreptitiously promoting Buddhism in the guise of a healthcare practice, itself a problem in environments which place a premium on the separation of religion from the public sphere. Practitioners and scholars are divided on the issue, and even Kabat-Zinn has acknowledged this tension in recent years, arguing that what he originally meant by mindfulness was not the narrow conception it has come to have, but “an umbrella term” referring to “a universal *dharma* that is co-extensive, if not identical, with the teachings of the Buddha” (Jon Kabat-Zinn 2011, 290).

### 3.2.2: Mindfulness as a Popular Therapeutic Modality

Despite the controversies over the historical meaning of the term, mindfulness has gained increasing legitimacy amongst mental health professionals as a therapeutic intervention over the past two decades, largely as a consequence of Kabat-Zinn’s operationalization of mindfulness in clinical settings and the subsequent laboratory studies testifying to its impact on the structure and function of the brain (discussed in Chapter 1 of the dissertation). In fact, mindfulness has come to be recognized as a key part of what are called the “third wave” of cognitive behavioral therapies. If the first wave was inspired largely by behaviorist paradigms of classical conditioning and operant learning, and the second wave by various notions of cognitivism in which pathology was seen as a problem in information processing, what marks



the third wave is a blending of these traditions and an augmenting of them with a rather heterogenous set of meta-cognitive skills, including “mindfulness exercises, acceptance of unwanted thoughts and feelings, and cognitive diffusion (stepping back and seeing thoughts as just thoughts)” (Hunot et al. 2010, 3). In this sense, mindfulness has become a popular method of intervention in a range of therapies including, Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT).

Moreover, the apparent increasing evidence base for the therapeutic efficacy of mindfulness has facilitated its extension beyond meditation centers and therapist's offices, to hospitals, corporations, schools, and universities across the world, where it has been increasingly adopted as a practice useful for improving the health and well-being of the populations served by those institutions. It is for this reason that, in 2014, Time Magazine published a special issue arguing that America was going through a “mindfulness revolution,” something that had also apparently been predicted at the end of 2013, when the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson (JWT) stated that 2014 would be the year of “mindful living.”

I stumbled across mindfulness in early 2009, at a moment when it was becoming mainstream, and I spent the next several years following it as it gained ascendancy in not just North America, but Europe and elsewhere. During that time I found a certain rhetoric amongst mindfulness scholars reappearing over and over again: that mindfulness was therapeutic precisely because it provided practitioners with control over attention, and thus offered a way of managing cognitive habits seen as common to a variety of psychological disorders, such as cyclical negative judgments, aimless mind wandering, and distraction. By

repeatedly returning “to the present moment,” it was alleged, contemplatives were able to acquire a meta-cognitive skill which balanced out the tendency for thoughts to spiral out of control in this way.

I soon found out, however, that such explanations were incomplete, touching only the surface of what was a deeper cultural problem. Also important for understanding the rising popularity of mindfulness, as I came to see it, were the resources it gave practitioners for exploring what a way of life could be and thus for developing practical reason. I came to this conclusion after numerous in depth interviews with practitioners, during which I focused on their reasons for coming to mindfulness, and inquired into what their experiences of “life” and “mind” were like prior to participating in the practice, a condition I summarized by the word “mindlessness.” What I found was that most people did not talk about “mindlessness” as an experiential state. The term admittedly did come up now and again, but infrequently, and I could perhaps count on my hands the number of times I heard it used over the years. For the most part, then, though contemplatives embraced the language of mindfulness, they did not narrate their lives as progressing from mindlessness to mindfulness, or as oscillating between those two states. Rather there was something called mindfulness, which was used variously to describe a state of awareness, a practice for achieving that state, or an ethical and psychological norm to aspire to, and then there were the numerous lived experiences that would not count as being mindful. I continue to use the term mindlessness here, then, not as an actor’s category, but as a shorthand for the variety of non-mindful experiences and what I see as common to those experiences, namely, a collective concern over the insufficiencies of enacting a way of life in the US, and thus of the possibilities for joyous affectivity. I begin the story, therefore, with the first person who acquainted me to that idea, namely, Eric, a 30

year old aspiring therapist who I met during fieldwork and who had suffered from “cyclical major depressive disorder” since he was 11.

### **3.3: Mindlessness**

I met Eric in late August 2013, during my first week at Naropa. I was immediately impressed by his wit. He was good-humored, amiable, and seemingly gifted with an ability to describe his inner states without embellishment. He struck me as a person who considered what he would say before he said it, and took into account the person he was speaking with, selecting the words that would make sense to them, so that he could communicate his experiences all the more clearly. He was also well-educated. Having already graduated from college with a double major in Molecular Biology and Theatre, he was now taking a three year master’s degree course at Naropa University in “contemplative psychotherapy,” hoping to become a therapist, and to use contemplative techniques like mindfulness to help other people cope better with their mental health issues.

It was also obvious, however, that he suffered just as much as any of his imagined future clients, and that his studies in contemplative psychotherapy were as much about helping himself as it was about learning to treat others. This fact was often revealed during post-meditation group discussions, during which time his eyes would often fill with tears, and his face flush red, as he talked about his experiences with loss and depression. At the age of three his father had died of leukemia, and six years later, a week after he turned nine, his mother had passed away too. He had handled his father’s passing, he said, with his mother’s support, but when she too passed away a few years later—also from cancer—things fell apart for him. He started seeing a therapist, and at age eleven was diagnosed with “major depressive disorder,” and put on the anti-depressant Zoloft. The “depression,” he said, would

recur for him “every year and a half to two years,” and each time he would go back into therapy and start taking anti-depressants again.

Eric, now 30, identified as having a case of cyclical major depressive disorder; or, at least, as having had it—he was uncertain whether in recent years mindfulness had “cured” him of it or not. Whether his depression was cured or simply lying dormant, however, he had acquired the label at a young age, and it had followed him ever since. “Some years before Naropa,” he confided to me at one point, “I had this realization that depression was a big part of my life, that it was no small thing at all, and that it was something that I had to regularly take into account. It still is in many ways.” It was not simply that every two years he had periods of despair, then, and for the rest of the time he was in good spirits. Rather, suffering was part of his life, an almost constant background expectation which accompanied him for many years, and which his mindfulness practice was now provisionally guarding him against.

In talking about the cause of his depression, however, it was clear that there was more going on than grief over the loss of his parents. As he said to me during an interview: “it’s hard to say what the cause was exactly. It’s something that needs to be teased apart. The depression itself was very existential in nature, and had a lot to do with the meaninglessness of life.” What did Eric mean by that exactly—to say life was meaningless? How was depression as grief and depression as meaninglessness related? I will come back to Eric’s story shortly to answer those questions. For the moment, all that is necessary to point out is that his account of how and why he suffered was not out of the ordinary, his own biographical experiences of loss notwithstanding. On the contrary, his explanation of his suffering exemplifies something that I found to be typical amongst mindfulness practitioners. What was common was not the fact that they suffered from “depression.” In fact, I found that

contemplatives were a motley crew in this regard, some coming with labels of depression, others with labels of ADHD, addiction, anxiety, PTSD, and so on. Rather, what they had in common, and what Eric illustrated in his own unique way, was the distinction made between two types of negative experiences: on the one hand, there were those experiences associated with conditions found in the DSM—in Eric’s case, major depression—and on the other, there were those concerns that were primarily existential and which fell below the radar of the DSM categories—in his articulation, a sense of meaninglessness.

What is to be made of this distinction, popular amongst contemplatives, between DSM disorders and existential dilemmas? Starting with the DSM first, it should be noted that it is not just a list of mental sufferings, but incorporates a paradigm of illness, as revealed in the notion of “disorder.” As mentioned, contemplatives came to mindfulness with a variety of DSM conditions. What marks out the terrain of such experiences as a *sui generis* category, however, is that such conditions are considered “pathologies,” that is, as dysfunctions in “the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning” (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 20). Taken in that sense, then, the conditions contemplatives presented with would be classified as a failure in some kind of adaptive process—in Eric’s case, an inability to self-heal from loss perhaps, or a chemical imbalance in the brain.

All I had to do, however, was to ask a few questions on the source of these apparent psychopathologies and I would be met with explanations that went much further than a medicalized breakdown in mental functioning. In Eric’s case, he talked about life as being “meaningless,” but I also heard many similar descriptions during fieldwork, the most common being the feeling that there was “something missing” in life, because contemplatives

often felt “dissatisfied” with existence itself. It was just such an explanation that Mike used to describe the source of his depression. As he said,

I’ve just always felt that there was something missing in life. I’ve felt like that for a long time. When I was younger, I certainly would not have been able to articulate at all what I was lacking. It was more of a feeling. It was just a sense of this-does-not-feel-right.

And similarly, from another contemplative, Patrick:

I’m not sure what triggered it, but I just always had this sense that something wasn’t right, a big theme of being dissatisfied. I was dissatisfied with existence. I saw it in myself and others. And as I’ve been speaking with friends and families and clients over the years, I’ve found it’s such a common experience in our society: just going along with the flow, but something seeming really really wrong at the same time.

If one takes these accounts seriously, then the suffering starts to look less like a mechanical dysfunction, and more like an affective response to a chronic concern with the value of life and the world. As Horwitz and Wakefield point out (Horwitz and Wakefield 2007, 34), for pathology two things are necessary: a notion of dysfunction and one of harm. Contemplatives like Eric, Mike and Patrick certainly agreed on having experienced the latter, but if the conditions that caused their suffering were similarly chronic, and if their feelings of the world as “meaningless,” “missing something,” or “lacking connection” were *prima facie* reasonable given their understanding of the world, then it is doubtful they were admitting to dysfunction. In that sense, all that can be concluded was that they were suffering from “negative existential affect” as opposed to an “affective disorder.”

### 3.3.1: Negative Existential Affects

But what is meant by the terms “affect” and “existential” exactly and how do the two concepts relate to each other? There has been a great deal written on the topic of affect in the past two decades in the humanities and social sciences, so much so that some have posited a

general “affective turn” in those fields (Clough and Halley 2007). More recently, such work has also been subject to various kinds of critique, perhaps most vigorously through the writings of Ruth Leys (2011a; 2011b; Leys and Goldman 2010).<sup>8</sup> Leys has argued that affect theory, or at least the dominant strand of the “new” affect theory, as she calls it, and which is represented by such theorists as William Connolly, Paul Ekman, Brian Massumi, and Antonio Damasio, misconstrues the ontological basis of what constitutes affect. The crux of Leys’ argument is that these new affect theorists make a distinction between affects on the one hand, and emotions on the other, positing the former as precognitive (but not pre-social) bodily feelings, and the latter as cognitive and social appraisals of objects in the world. As she says, affects, according to the new affect theorists

must be viewed as independent of, and in an important sense prior to, ideology—that is, prior to intentions, meanings, reasons, and beliefs—because they are nonsignifying, autonomic processes that take place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning. For the theorists in question, affects are “inhuman,” “pre-subjective,” “visceral” forces and intensities that influence our thinking and judgments but are separate from these. Whatever else may be meant by the terms affect and emotion... it seems ... affects must be noncognitive, corporeal processes or states (Leys 2011a, 437).

Leys’ point in highlighting the distinction between precognitive affect and cognitively constituted emotions is twofold: that in embracing this view the new affect theorists smuggle into their analysis an ontological distinction between mind and body, and more importantly, that they also ignore the role of intentionality in the shaping of affective experiences. Hence, she argues “what fundamentally binds together the new affect theorists... is their *shared anti-intentionalism*” (Leys 2011a, 443; italics in original).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For other critiques see Hemmings (2005), Mazzarella (2009), and Papoulias and Callard (2010).

<sup>9</sup> To what extent this is true of affect theory in general is questionable. Leys admits that she is only referring to one influential strand of affect theory. Alongside that strand, however, are

By intentionality here Leys does not mean just the fact that human beings have goals and purposes and that those intentions are important for shaping affects—though, as we shall see, it does include that idea within it. Rather, she is making use of a more inclusive concept of intentionality, one borrowed from the history of Western philosophy and which, in her view, refers to the idea that mental content and the manner of attending to that content are inextricably linked. As she says, “I use the term *intentionality* in the spirit of Brentano to refer to states of mind that are directed towards an object and that include beliefs, judgments, wishes, and cognitions” (Leys and Goldman 2010, 669; italics in original).<sup>10</sup> Thus, intentionality “involves concept possession... [and] carries with it the idea that thoughts and feelings are directed to conceptually and cognitively appraised and meaningful objects in the world” (Leys 2011b, 802). Her point, then, is that affects are wholly intentional in that broad

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many other scholars of affect who, like Leys, are critical of the anti-intentionalism in affect theory and who see a place for signification and meaning in the shaping of such experiences—see, for instance, Berlant (2011), Cvetkovich (2012), Leys herself (2000), and Mazzarella (2009; 2013). Taking this insight into account, then, one can say that there are a spectrum of positions one can take to affect, a spectrum that is bordered by anti-intentionalists on the one side, and intentionalists on the other. Those Leys cites—Connolly (2002), Damasio (2003), Massumi (2002), etc.—do seem to advocate a broad anti-intentionalism, but for any particular author it will be an open question to how much weight they give to one side or the other. I leave it to others, therefore, to judge for themselves where specific affect theorists fall on the spectrum.

<sup>10</sup> Leys appears to render intentionality here primarily in terms of mental activity, despite the fact that intentionality, as a concept, has a range of manifestations, and does not neatly fall into categories of either body or mind. One could argue that in doing so she presupposes the very distinction she sets out to critique, namely, that between mind and body. I do not think that interpretation is entirely justified for her. Though I am not fully sure what Leys means by intentionality, whatever it is, she must be adopting an expansive notion of intentionality, since she recognizes that intentionality is not just a property of humans but of animals too. In contrast to Leys, I adopt a neutral stance, bracketing the ontological categories of body and mind in relation to intentionality so as to focus on the particular manifestations of intentionality through capacities such as attention, feelings, and so on. I leave open the question of whether attention, for instance, is a mental or bodily capacity, even though I suspect it can profitably be described as belonging to both.



sense. Thus, affects *presuppose* a subject who is aware of the world, conceptualizes it, and who puts value on the objects in it—who, in short, appraises things.

I am sympathetic to Leys' critique of affect theory and her advocacy of intentionality as a precondition for affective experiences. Her argument, however, misses a complexity about intentionality that needs to be taken into account if one is to understand the distinction between affects and existential affects, namely, that there are different forms of intentionality. That is to say, Leys talks about intentionality in the sense of "the mind's" directedness towards specific objects. But one can broadly distinguish two different types of intentionality here—there may be more, but two will suffice for now. On the one hand, there is the intentionality she talks about and which concerns specific, meaningfully appraised objects, and on the other hand, there is a more fundamental, ontological form of intentionality, which involves an understanding of general categories of being—in this case, the categories of "self," "world," and "other." The point I would like to make is that this second kind of intentionality is necessary for understanding existential affects and thus Eric's appraisal of meaninglessness. In order to show that, however, I need to turn to the work of Matthew Ratcliffe (2008).

Like Leys, Ratcliffe also criticizes affect theory for its anti-intentionalism. He, however, goes further than Leys by arguing for a distinct subcategory of intentional affects that he calls "existential feelings." Like affects, existential feelings are, he argues, felt bodily experiences. But what makes them stand out on their own as a unique kind of feeling is that they have their own peculiar kind of intentionality. In contrast to Leys' view of affect, which sees intentionality as concept possession, or meaningful appraisal of specific objects in the world, Ratcliffe's existential feelings are not about specific objects as such, but about the

general “structure” of experience itself.<sup>11</sup> As he says, existential feelings “are *feelings*, in the sense that they are bodily states of which we have at least some awareness” (2008, 2; italics in original) but they are also “ways of experiencing the self, the world and also the self-world relation, the three aspects being inextricable” (2008, 37). (It should also be noted that Ratcliffe includes the categories of “others” in the “structure of existential feelings.”) The idea is that the basic structure of human experience—what phenomenologists call being-in-the-world and which Ratcliffe glosses here as the self-world-other relation—is not a neutral phenomenological presupposition (that is, it is not merely what is analytically presupposed in order to have an experience); rather, that relation between self-world-other enters into awareness as a form of affective experience. One’s ontological relatedness, in other words, is itself experienced as a *feeling*, one that is fluid and transitory. As he says,

The world as a whole can sometimes appear unfamiliar, unreal, distant or close. It can be something that one feels apart from or at one with. One can feel in control of one’s overall situation or overwhelmed by it. One can feel like a participant in the world or like a detached, estranged observer staring at objects that do not feel quite ‘there’ (2008, 37).

Such feelings are numerous, according to Ratcliffe, and can be seen in ordinary language. As he says, existential feelings can be found when we talk about feeling

‘complete’, ‘flawed and diminished’, ‘unworthy’, ‘humble’, ‘separate and in limitation’, ‘at home’, ‘a fraud’, ‘slightly lost’, ‘overwhelmed’, ‘abandoned’, ‘stared at’, ‘torn’, ‘disconnected from the world’, ‘invulnerable’, ‘unloved’, ‘watched’, ‘empty’, ‘in control’, ‘powerful’, ‘completely helpless’, ‘part of the real world again’, ‘trapped and weighed down’, ‘part of a larger machine’, ‘at one with life’, ‘at one with nature’, ‘there’, ‘real’ (2008, 37).

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<sup>11</sup> By “structure” here I understand Ratcliffe to be referring to the basic analytical components of experience. They are analytical insofar as they can be abstracted only conceptually. Many phenomenologists use the term “structure” in a similar sense. See for instance Heidegger (1978, 24) on the structure of being-in-the-world, by which he means basic analytical components presupposed in having an experience.

All of these would be examples of existential feelings for Ratcliffe insofar as what the feeling references is not a particular object, but the general relatedness between basic ontological domains. That is, what the intentionality is *about* is not a particular concept, but the more subtle conditions of self, world, other, and *the relation* between the three.

Moreover, though existential feelings are not initially about particular objects, they nonetheless shape how people interpret the world and the entities in it. As he says, existential feelings are “spaces of possibility, which determine the various ways in which things can be experienced. For example, if one’s sense of the world is tainted by a ‘feeling of unreality’, this will affect how all objects of perception appear; they are distant, removed, not quite ‘there’” (2008, 38). Such terms are metaphorical, and more often than not they are also vague, but they nonetheless point to something important, an experience that is felt but which is not about any specific external object, even though the feeling pervades the way objects are themselves experienced.

I am largely in agreement with Ratcliffe’s account of existential feelings. I think he highlights a type of affective experience that is often overlooked in academic analyses of affect, but which commonly turned up in my fieldwork. As noted earlier, mindfulness practitioners were not only seeking a remedy for traditional DSM conditions, but hoping to resolve such feelings of “meaninglessness” and “disconnection.” And there were many more efforts to name existential feelings than just those two. There was also much talk about feelings of “groundlessness,” “emptiness,” “numbness,” “alienation,” “unfamiliarity,” of feeling “generally unsettled and uncomfortable,” “not present” and even “unsynchronized.” Collectively one might call these “negative existential feelings,” and could be contrasted with correlative “positive existential feelings,” such as “groundedness,” “connection,” “fullness,”

being “alive and awake,” “safe and secure,” “present to oneself, the world and others,” and “synchronized.”

It is at this point, however, that a problem opens up for Ratcliffe. Though I make use of his analysis, I also think he fails to fully explore a concept that is essential to his account of existential feelings, and which is necessary if one is to explain why there can be a distinction between positive and negative varieties in the first place. What is under theorized, I suggest, is the role of “the good.” To put the argument as succinctly as possible, in defining existential feelings, Ratcliffe argues that they are non-conceptual (since they are not about specific objects, but are about general categories of being). Consequently, he also suggests that they are non-evaluative (since they are not appraisals of specific objects). As he puts it, “They are non-conceptual feelings of the body, which constitute a background sense of belonging to the world and a sense of reality. *They are not evaluations of any specific object*” (2008, 39; my italics). To say they are “not evaluations of any specific object,” however, may give the misleading suggestion that they are not evaluative in a broader, ontological sense. Using the example of mindlessness, however, I will argue that existential feelings are evaluative in that sense, and that intentionality is not merely a freely transforming set of relations between self-world-object, but a teleological one aimed at the good. *Existential feelings are, in short, normative, and thus evaluative of the good-life.* Indeed, from a phenomenological perspective, the very fact that we have a “world” is evidence of this teleological structure of intentionality and of affect since the “world,” or more accurately the structure of significations that make up the world, is organized in relation to the good. I think that such an idea can be shown for the phenomenologists themselves, particularly Heidegger, whose notion of “readiness-to-hand” goes some way to revealing this teleological structure of the

world (1978, 98).<sup>12</sup> Rather than make this point through analysis of classic phenomenological texts, however, I want to make it empirically, by showing how negative existential feelings amongst contemplatives presuppose an understanding of “the good.” To do so, I will return to Eric’s sense of meaninglessness.

### 3.3.2: Meaninglessness

It is no doubt true that the loss of both parents was deeply painful for Eric. But it is also true that his suffering was more than just this grief, for what added to his concerns was the apparent lack of meaning to be found in it:

When my mom passed away everything was lost. Everything was dark. I couldn’t understand why I was born into this world. I used to think why am I alive? Just to suffer? Just to experience these things? I remember all the adults telling me these things about why it happened, where my mom was, and all these other things. And it just became so clear to me that no one knew what

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<sup>12</sup> The kind of being belonging to equipment is what Heidegger calls readiness-to-hand (1978, 98). Such entities are the familiar everyday items that Dasein concerns itself with, uses and manipulates. Readiness-to-hand thus refers to Dasein’s ability to encounter objects as familiar and useable. Equipment, however, is encountered in terms of our projects. It has, he says, the character of the “in-order-to.” For example, when looking around for something in-order-to achieve something else (as when one needs an item of equipment in-order-to hammer a nail into a wall), one finds equipment suitable to that particular task (in this case, a hammer). This kind of looking around for something in order to achieve or produce something else Heidegger calls circumspection (1978, 98). What we want to achieve is the task at hand or the work to be produced, namely, the “towards-which” (1978, 99). In this way, equipment has a referential value for Heidegger, which he calls the assignment-context of entities or a work-world (1978, 101). By this he means how a totality of equipment belong to that totality by virtue of being collectively orientated towards a particular task at hand. Ratcliffe recognizes this teleological aspect of intentionality. As he says, “This world is not an object and it is not the totality of objects. It is a teleological background structure, a realm of practical significance that one finds oneself bound up with before one looks upon or uses anything. The experience of being there is not a matter of being plonked into a spatial location but of being practically situated in an interconnected web of purposes, an appreciation of which is inseparable from practical activity. We are not in the world like peas sitting passively in a pod. Our activities and our sense of being part of the world are inextricable; the world shows up as a space of practical, purposive possibilities that we are entwined with” (Ratcliffe 2008, 46). The problem, however, is that it’s unclear how this aligns with his claim that existential feelings are not evaluative.

they were talking about. I had a complete disillusionment with the platitudes that adults were feeding me. There was nothing any adult could say that could trick me into feeling ok about what had happened to me.

What can be seen here is that Eric's vision of meaninglessness was not just due to the loss of his parents, even if their passing was a catalyst for it. It also stemmed from a questioning over his own feelings about that loss, his efforts to find meaning in the tragedy he experienced, coupled with the fact that he found no satisfactory answer to that question. Both this search and the failure to find a secure answer exacerbated a growing sense of meaninglessness, he admitted, one that eventually colored his perception of both himself and the world as a whole. "It was," he said, a kind of "emptiness, horror and disgust at what the world is. Emptiness not in the Buddhist sense, but the bad emptiness, the nihilistic emptiness. What I felt was a total rejection of that world, but also a total rejection of the self. Yeah, everything was worthless, including myself."

When asked about the experience of what it was like to live that meaninglessness he noted how it was manifest largely through his "depression," itself a shorthand for a variety of painful subjective experiences that encompassed difficulties socializing and expressing emotions, a diminished sense of agency or will, a narrowed attention focused on his own suffering and the conditions for getting rid of it, an inability take pleasure in the world, and most notably, a vicious inner voice, which was constantly berating himself and the world:

There was so much judgment to it. Knowing things were wrong, bad, imperfect, broken. And also not feeling like I could be myself, feeling like, not even knowing who I was. What was I? These thoughts that were repeating over and over again? These thoughts of self hatred? Is that what I am? And then there was hating myself for feeling those things and not being able to fix myself. A lot of cyclical thinking, a lot of repetitive thinking about how to fix myself and being totally unable to fix myself. Just suffering and suffering and not being able to do anything about it. There was a real quality of no escape and of spiraling.

I got to know Eric well during my research, and we had many discussions on the history of his depression, his feelings of meaninglessness, and how his mindfulness practice helped him to cope with both. His default narrative, in each case, was this story about the loss of his parents and how it had triggered a pervasive sense of meaninglessness in him. On one occasion, however, he surprised me (and himself) by offering a further explanation. We were reaching the end of an interview, and I asked him if there was anything he wanted to ask me—a courtesy I'd given most interviewees as a way of transitioning out of the interview. He asked me if I could clarify my research to him again (apparently, he had either not fully understood when I first explained it, or had forgotten its content). I told him about it in general terms, mentioning my interest in negative affective states, and whether they were connected to wider social issues. "Many people," I said, "either talk about such things in terms of their brains being broken, for instance, or through traumatic early life experiences shaping future ones." "Such explanations are all well and good," I added, "but as an anthropologist I am particularly interested in whether I can connect those explanations or the affects themselves to wider social issues." His response struck me.

"That makes me think," he said, "it wasn't that the world was wrong, but the way that we live was." It was not the first time I had heard Eric talk about the object of his meaninglessness as "life" as opposed to "himself" or the "world." He had, however, often used those terms interchangeably and had not fully parsed the distinctions between them for himself. I asked for clarification: "What do you mean by that?" "Well," he answered, "it wasn't the world that I hated as such, as nature could often make me feel better. It was really the way humans lived and treated each other, the values adults had, all that struck me as meaningless. It was seeing how we live, and how empty it is. Yeah, there's really something

to that, it makes a lot of sense to me.” From both the tone of his voice and the content of his words, it was obvious that the realization was in the moment for him, and that despite having used the terms life, self, world and others interchangeably in the past, he had apparently not given much thought to the meaninglessness of “life” or “others,” but had imagined it primarily in terms of the “world” or “self.” This was a moment, then, that was pregnant with the memories of past experiences of meaninglessness, memories which he had overlooked for a long time, but which now came rushing into view for him as he spoke:

That’s such a new way of looking at it for me. This is like—oh my god, yes, thank you. I was overgeneralizing when I said ‘the world’ was meaningless, because nature often soothed me. It was the human world that depressed me, and that was institutions and culture and society. When I think about the things that really depressed me: commercials, unbelievably depressing. Just how banal and stupid and nakedly about greed and ambition they are. But that’s people being people, that’s people being what they are. And I thought about what working life was like, that you had to work 40 hours a week till you retired. I saw it as this meaningless and endless corridor, with the only release found in death or retirement. I couldn’t understand why we had to do it. Yeah, this is—I’ve never really thought about it this way before, I never even considered that I was responding not just to my family situation but to the societal situation as well.

Several things surprised me about this brief moment with Eric, and I spent the next several weeks thinking about it—as, apparently, so did Eric. What struck me the most, however, was not how his mood of meaninglessness referenced a relation to such ontological categories of self, world, or others, but how it also contained an implicit teleology. The “world” and “self” were both meaningless, and so too was the “way of life” both he and “others” were expected to live. Each of the ontological domains that Ratcliffe placed under existential feelings, then, were subsumed into a general imaginary, in which the unifying feature was the lack of a sufficient notion of the good (referred to as “meaning”) which could ground those existential domains and thereby provide a teleological structure for living.



Eric sharpened my awareness to that concern, and how negative existential feelings might presuppose a certain conception of a way of life and of the good. I kept it in mind over the next months as I interviewed other contemplatives about their reasons for pursuing mindfulness. I found it to be a sentiment that came up again and again. Thus, when Mike said, as mentioned earlier, that he “just always felt that there was something missing,” he also said that what was missing for him was the meaning needed for living a happy life:

It can't just be about going to school and going to church. There is something missing. This is not a healthy society in which we live. When I look at what is influencing the development of the person—religion, family, school, society at large—meaning is being taught yet it's not being reinforced. If we replace 'meaning' with 'happiness', then I've had one of the best educations money can buy, but it didn't bring happiness. I've had top level positions with companies, both for profit and non profit, which brought a good level of monetary comfort and that didn't bring happiness. So all the clichés we're told about what will bring happiness—a great career, a nice house, a car, money, travel, education—they still didn't bring happiness.”

Similarly, when Patrick said he “just always had this sense that something wasn't right” he also added that he became aware of this problem from the need to conform to a particular teleologically structure, one insufficient for grounding a way of life:

I kept wondering why we have so much dissatisfaction, why are we in so much pain. And it just clicked one day how I was interpreting all these messages from television and parents and society about how to live and what to do. All this pressure to conform to society, go through the school system, develop a career. Then what? Feel lost? Have a mid life crisis? Then death of a salesman style off-yourself because you feel so out of place? Our current system wants to make us think we're all individuals, we all need to go off and be Donald Trump. That value system is so life denying. But this is what we do in this culture if you want to exist: you consume, you work, punch your time clock, distract yourself from all that through entertainment, or by hanging out in the bar. It's just mindless.

What for Eric and Mike had been referred to as meaningless, however, Patrick had explicitly referred to as being mindless. Why did Patrick focus specifically on the mind as the site in which the insufficiency of telic existence plays out? As mentioned earlier, the term

mindlessness did not come up regularly. But when it did, the reason, I suspect, was due to the importance given to the category of “mind” in the traditions contemplatives followed in order to find meaning. That is to say, the subjective experiences of suffering that many contemplatives complained of, particularly when discussing the label of depression, included such things as a fatigued sense of agency, the narrowing of attention, cyclical negative judgments, dysphoric moods, etc. However, the faculties of agency, attention and inner voice presupposed in those experiences were all understood, in the psychotherapeutic and modern Buddhist traditions they followed, to belong to the category of “mind.” The absence of an appropriate good for grounding a way of life thus became translated into a cognitive failing, the lack of some important mental capacity that, if they had it, would facilitate a better life. “Mindlessness,” then, as I came to understand it, could be used for a wide variety of non-mindful experiences, but the important point was that these experiences acquired their unity through an affective awareness of the absence of certain goods. Whether meaninglessness or mindlessness, it was about the lack of a notion of the good that could sufficiently ground a way of life for contemplatives; an affective awareness, in other words, of a crisis in *bios*.

### 3.3.3: Rediscovering Bios

But what was that “mindless” life like? What were its purported means and ends? For Eric, it was largely an economic life—as he said, the meaninglessness he experienced was a response to the dominance of consumerist greed, or the Sisyphean working life, both of which seemed to typify aimless human existence for him. And Eric was not alone on this point. Being asked to conform to conventional economic values was a problem for many others I spoke to also. But mindlessness was also more than that. For instance, for those who had attended a

Catholic high school, like Mike, it had been the apparent emptiness of the Christian values that he had to live with for so long. For others, like Patrick, it was the emphasis given to individuality over community in American culture, as well as the perennial concern that seemed to define human existence more generally, namely, the desire to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. As he said, “We go for instant gratification by chasing impulses, chasing what we want, or by running away from things we don’t want. And that’s where the disconnection comes in. We get disconnected from our deeper true needs.”

The irony, however, was that at the same time as they bemoaned this mindless life, contemplatives also found themselves caught up in it. And the consequence had been for many a life of suffering. Thus, a few weeks after our conversation Eric sent me a paper he had written reflecting on the social origins of his sense of meaninglessness. In it he clarified how the economic values he disparaged had motivated his life choices, in particular his career goals, even though he found them meaningless at the same time. Reflecting on his time at university and his decision to study Molecular Biology and Theatre, he wrote: “On the one hand, I envisioned myself as a wealthy and highly-regarded scientist, while on the other hand, I could see myself as a poor and happy actor-playwright. Ultimately, the role of scientist became associated with my childhood vision of an endless hallway and I devoted myself wholeheartedly to the theatrical world of improvisational comedy. However, even in this decision I found my pursuit of peace and happiness appropriated by a gnawing desire for fame, acclaim, and wealth. As I cycled through depression in this stage, I saw with clarity the emptiness of these cultural values and yet they remained powerfully embedded and actively motivating, despite my idealistic proclamations to the contrary.”

Thus, Eric's awareness of the insufficiency of the mindless life was first experienced through a sense of meaninglessness and depression, which informed him that there was indeed something lacking in life, an absence he summarized through the ambiguous term "meaning," but he continued to pursue the values associated with that mindless life in the hope that it might bring him "peace and happiness" eventually. He might have continued that way forever, desperately groping for satisfaction in economic terms, while simultaneously sensing the insufficiency of those values at an affective level. But in 2010 something happened that made the need for change more pressing. In early March, his brother died from an overdose of DXM at the age of twenty-three. "The loss," he said, "was traumatic and a major turning point in my life. I realized I couldn't pretend anymore that I wanted my life to be about money, status or fame." A year later, on the first anniversary of his brother's death, he attended his first meditation retreat seeking a more sustainable path for coping with suffering and pursuing the good-life.

What led Eric to meditation in particular is a complicated story. At first, his entryway was, as it is for many people, through psychedelics, which highlighted to him the liberating effect of psycho-spiritual technologies. As he said:

Eric: There's something about suffering that narrows things down. It focuses you on what is because you want to escape it so badly. I was aware I needed to expand my consciousness somehow. I had to experience what is described as expanded awareness, because I intuitively recognized that as one of my problems, how narrow my awareness was. I was suffering. I took some psychedelic mushrooms with a couple of friends of mine, thinking it would be just an interesting powerful experience, but in this case I experienced a loss of ego.

FM: What do you mean by that?

Eric: That was a major milestone for me, especially in trying to understand my identity. It was like remembering my true nature, a nature beyond the form we inhabit as human beings. The main thing I took away from it was that I am existence knowing itself. And when I say existence knowing itself, I mean

exactly that. It wasn't a theoretical "Aha." Eric wasn't there, I'll say that. The identity of Eric, and his characteristics, I wasn't that. Eric was something I created. Instead, I was part of the universe, the part of the universe that had become self-aware. That gave the universe meaning to me. Or not meaning. Was life meaningful or meaningless? After this experience, I didn't have an answer to that question, but I also didn't have a question anymore. It resolved some paradoxes for me.

This experience, however, was six months before his brother died. The inappropriateness of trying to cope with the passing of his brother from an overdose of drugs by using psychedelics was not lost on Eric, and so he was looked for alternative means of finding meaning. Soon thereafter, however, he stumbled upon some popular works of Eastern philosophy and realized an affinity between those writings and the loss of ego he had experienced during his trip: "I thought, oh, this is describing what I experienced. So I knew that if I was going to survive what happened, losing my brother, after losing everyone else, I had to try meditation." He signed up for a *vipassanā* retreat to try it out for a week. On that retreat, however, he went through what he called a "major energetic experience":

When you're on these retreats you can't express yourself, you're sitting there doing nothing. You actually just sit in your shit for a long time. So all the rage and despair I'd been feeling for years and repressing, it all came up at once and it was the most agony I'd ever been in in my life. I'd never wanted to kill myself before, but I did want to kill myself at this retreat. And I wanted to kill everyone else around me. And I wanted to kill the whole universe. I was so angry and it kept coming and coming and coming. And then finally it broke. I started spasming uncontrollably for hours, all through the night. And I starting laughing hysterically. Alternating between hysterical laughter and sobbing. Hysterical on both sides. All the while unable to control what was happening in my body. And the next day I felt like a piece of me had left and I knew that piece of me was that depression that was always there. And since then I have not had any depressive episodes. So it was like wow, it was total evidence that there is release, relief and peace to be found in Buddhist meditation practice.

Eric's sense of meaninglessness had been triggered by the death of his parents, through not being able to justify their loss, and not being able to explain why he suffered so much as a consequence of it. But it was in the prospect of living an economically maximizing life that

his experience of meaninglessness persisted and grew. Psychotherapy and Zoloft did little to shift his sense of meaninglessness. Pursuing culturally approved values of pleasure, prestige and wealth also failed to shift it. His own embodied sense of that meaninglessness signified the insufficiency of the values of the economic life in an ambiguous way, but did not force him to change his path. Rather, it was the trauma surrounding the death of his brother that somehow fully revealed to him their inadequacy, that allowed him to reject those values as a principle, and which inspired him to search for an alternative path to the good-life. He quit his job, and started to pursue meditation. If everyday life was normatively deficient, the contemplative life, it was hoped, was not. On his first try, he got some confirmation of that through the practice of mindfulness.

#### 3.3.4: Hope: An Analogy

In his book *Radical Hope* (2006), Jonathan Lear explores the history of the Crow people, a group of native American nomads, hunters and warriors spread across Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota during the nineteenth century. He notes how the Crow experienced a dramatic change in their way of life and their conception of the good during the 1860s, as their livelihood became threatened through wars with neighboring tribes and through the loss of their hunting grounds to the US government. Their increasing insecurity in the North American landscape during that time meant that they were forced to live on a reservation to avoid being wiped out as a nation. As Lear argues, however, in doing so, their nomadic, hunting and warrior lifestyle came to an end—warfare with neighboring tribes was forbidden and they no longer had access to the land they needed to pursue a nomadic and hunting existence (2006, 26–27). In moving to the reservation, then, the people who identified as the Crow had managed to preserve their physical existence, but in the process their way of life

had ended. The ending coincided with what Lear calls the loss of a “livable conception of the good” (2006, 57):

the Crow had a conception of happiness, a conception of what life was worth living for... This was an active and unfettered pursuit of a nomadic hunting life in which their family life and social rituals could prosper. Because the tribe was threatened by other tribes, they developed a warrior culture to defend their way of life. The martial values... were important constituents of happiness as understood by the Crow. With the destruction of this way of life came the destruction of the end or goal—the telos—of that life. Their problem, then, was not simply that they could not pursue happiness in the traditional ways. Rather, their conception of what happiness is could no longer be lived. The characteristic activities that used to constitute the good life ceased to be intelligible acts. A crucial blow to their happiness was a loss of the concepts with which their happiness had been understood (2006, 57).

Without a conception of the good by which to direct their life, the Crow lost their way of life, and were thus reduced to a mode of practical livelihood that bordered on bare existence. As he adds,

The Crow no doubt thought about how to obtain food and shelter in these new circumstances, about whether it was proper to send their children to the white man’s schools, and about how to sustain whatever pleasures might be available on the reservation. Nevertheless... In the absence of a livable conception of the good life, the scope of practical reason became attenuated... with the destruction of the telos, there was no conception of the good life to provide a larger context for the significance of one’s acts. People continued to prepare meals, but now it was only cooking-in-order-to-survive (2006, 57).

The Crow way of life, according to Lear, was defined by its conception of the good life. Hence, with the loss of a “livable conception of the good” came a crisis in *bios*. One consequence of this crisis was, however, the impoverishment of what he calls “practical reason.” In philosophy, “practical reason” is a term used to translate the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, a concept that is also variously called “practical wisdom, moral discernment, moral insight, and prudence” (Noel 1999, 273). As Aristotle says, practical reason is “a true and practical state involving reason, concerned with what is good and bad for a human being” (NE 1140b). And as Schuchman clarifies, it is “the capacity to think well for the sake of

living well” (in Noel 1999, 275). Thus, practical reason involves a variety of skills, including the ability to discern or evaluate what the good might be, the ability to judge between competing possible outcomes, to deliberate on what kind of action might bring the good about once it is identified, and to act on that deliberation by choosing the right course of action. Lear’s point, then, is that without a cultural conception of the good to serve as the telos of practical reason, the very capacity for practical reason itself became impoverished for the Crow. Their crisis in *bios*, in other words, which corresponded to the loss of a sufficiently teleological existence, entailed a diminished capacity to appraise and enact the good-life.

The point I would like to make, however, is that according to Lear, the Crow also sensed this crisis in *bios* affectively, through both negative and positive existential feelings. As their Chief, Plenty Coup, is reported as saying, “when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again” (2006, 2). The Crow, one could imagine, could have continued to dwell in their dispiritedness indefinitely. But they also managed, according to Lear, to find the conditions for *bios* once again through a radical hope, one that persisted in the face of an irrevocable loss. “What makes this hope radical,” he says, “is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it” (Lear 2006, 103). Both affects, then, dispiritedness and hope, were ways of coping with the loss of *bios*, and provided a pathway to preserve and extend, as far as their circumstances would allow, the opportunity for practical reason.

I introduce this situation with the Crow because, as analyzed by Lear, it serves as a useful analogy for what Eric and other contemplatives went through, and more generally for a



situation that typifies modern biopolitical existence. The Crow, it would seem, were in an in-between zone, not quite *zoē*, but not quite *bios* either. They had lost their conditions for a way of life and the good life, but in the reduction of their collective practical reason to bare existence (cooking-in-order-to-survive), they had managed to create new conditions for a way of life in the form of hope. When contemplatives talked of their existential feelings, they spoke to a similar absence of a conception of the good to ground a teleological existence. But their affective suffering highlighted to them not just the insufficiency of the goods associated with a particular way of life, it also signified the lack of foundations for alternatives, that is, resources for imagining and enacting alternative livable conceptions of the good. It was not until they stumbled upon the contemplative life, and the practice of mindfulness, that they found the conditions for hope again. But it was the motivation for searching for the good, as given through their affective disposition that something was missing in life, that provided an important entryway to it, by conditioning the development of practical reason.

### **3.4: Affects and Practical Reason**

There are three points that I think are important to draw out of the above story about the lives of contemplatives: (1) that *bios* requires goods that are historically constituted, yet subjectively appraised, (2) that one powerful way in which this appraisal occurs is through the affects (in the example given by contemplatives, through a variety of negative existential feelings I collectively called mindlessness), and (3) that those feelings are not simply useless sufferings, but have a positive function in the arousal of practical reason. I will look at each of these in turn.

### 3.4.1: The Good

As Barham argues (2011, 2), life is teleological and agentive: organisms have ends, purposes, and goals, and act by virtue of them. But life is also, as he adds, normative: the ends, purposes and goals are conceptually understood through various notions of “the good.”<sup>13</sup> Barham is here talking about life *per se*. But this chapter avoids the controversies of teleological vitalism by limiting itself to human agents. For cultural animals like ourselves, the good is an abstract term for the numerous historically constituted notions of the good found in everyday life and which include, for instance, such things as pleasure, virtue, prestige, well-being, health, family, love, god, happiness, meaning, rightness, morality, and so on. From a logical standpoint, it seems that any value could provide the content for the good. In this sense, the good is, I would argue, a concept with an empty content, waiting to be filled by the historical forms of the good available in one’s culture.<sup>14</sup> For many, one or two of these values might even seem self-evident as ends, as is often the case with pleasure. But not everyone means the same thing by pleasure, and not everyone puts the same stock in it. As Eric pointed out, pleasure can be just as insufficient for providing a normative content for the good-life as wealth or power. And as many an addict might testify, if pursued in excess, pleasure itself can become a source of suffering.

Such historical goods may be institutionalized, and thus become hegemonic representations for a way of life, as pleasure has been in rational choice theory. But historical goods, one should be clear, otherwise do not determine any one person’s sense of the good in

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<sup>13</sup> See also Kohn: “mean-ing (i.e., means-ends relations, significance, “aboutness,” telos) is a constitutive feature of the world and not just something we humans impose on it” (2013, 16).

<sup>14</sup> Note for committee: I am not sure about this claim anymore. After reflecting on MacIntyre’s work, I now wonder if there are conceptions of the good that are not strictly speaking historical, but grounded in the capacities of biological beings. This is not a question I can answer yet, however.

their life, for those goods need also to be subjectively appraised. *Bios* thus requires “historically constituted” and “subjectively appraised” conceptions of the good. If we take Eric and Mike’s cases to illustrate. In trying to discover the meaning they thought were lacking, both turned to the image of the good-life they saw around them and pursued the goods of pleasure, wealth, and prestige. Such goods were readily available to them as potential ends for a way of life, and the path to them was found primarily in the world of work. Despite being fairly successful in attaining these goods, however, both Eric and Mike ultimately found these ends insufficient, unable to provide normative content for a teleological life. Consequently, they also found the path to it as meaningless.

The obvious question arises, then: where did this sense of insufficiency come from? My point is that *subjects appraise the sufficiency of the good in the first instance affectively, in this case, via existential feelings*. That is to say, teleology is not just a conceptual understanding of the ends of life. Rather, *teleology expresses itself first and foremost as affect, and that even the absence of a sufficient end finds expression in affect*. With Eric and Mike, their “feeling of meaninglessness” preceded their ability to pin down what they thought was meant by “meaning.” That is, the affective awareness of the lack of an unspecified good became a powerful symbol for an unknown, yet potentially knowable, telic object. For contemplatives in general, the feeling was symbolized not necessarily as meaninglessness, but as a vague absence, as some unknown value missing from life. What was missing might be “meaning,” or it might be something equally ambiguous like “connection,” “fulfillment,” “depth,” or “groundedness.” Whatever the case, the evaluation of insufficiency happened, in the first instance, affectively, through negative existential feelings, and the suffering

associated with those moods was interpreted as indicating that something was not quite right with the way of life on offer and which they were trying to participate in.

The affectivity, however, did not tell them much more than that. Rather, what their affective suffering did was narrow their attention so as to seek out the causes of suffering and for figuring out ways of determining an alternative way of life. Their suffering did not tell them what those causes were, nor how to intervene. For that, they turned to other hermeneutic practices (the therapeutic arts and the wisdom traditions), so as to make use of the knowledge contained there to figure out what the good was, and what the path towards it should be. As Patrick said, “We have this existential realm where we need meaning. And spiritual traditions are goldmines for this. That’s not to say you can’t get it from a scientific perspective or an atheistic perspective, but spiritual traditions are very good for it. There is a lot to be found there. That’s where the contemplative comes in, the Buddhist teaching of the four noble truths, that life is suffering.” For various biographical and historical reasons, all the mindfulness people I spoke to had turned to cognitive science and Buddhism for their main resource for exploring a new way of life.

#### 3.4.2: Practical Reason

If practical reason is taken as the art of appraising and enacting the good-life, then what can be seen is that existential feelings are not merely negative affectivity, but an important moment in the development of practical reason.<sup>15</sup> This is because, as shown above, a powerful way in which the appraisal of the good-life occurred was via those feelings. It is possible that both positive rather than negative existential feelings could function in this way,

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<sup>15</sup> A similar argument is made by Adam Smith, when he acknowledges that moral sentiments are instincts for furthering the end of eudaimonic happiness (A. Smith 2002, 193).

insofar as feelings of meaningfulness, fulfillment, satisfaction, can powerfully shape understandings of the good. However, for the contemplatives I met, who told me that they came to mindfulness after many years of suffering, it was the negative forms that had a greater initial motivating role. Through them contemplatives appraised the appropriateness of telic objects, and aroused their practical reason by a recognition of the insufficiency of certain goods as a path to *bios*.

#### 3.4.3: Returning to Depression

If I am correct, the view has consequences for the understanding of depression I opened up with. When the good is sensed as a disappearing horizon, or as an absent value, it is understandable that a whole society might despair. This may have happened for the Crow, and it certainly happened for the contemplatives. It also happens, I suspect, for many of those people whose affective experiences are captured by the WHO measures of depression. It is hard to say that definitively of course. Hence, I leave with the following question: Might it be that those statistics reflect not simply cases of a pathological depression, but of more subtle feelings, symbolizing the loss of the conditions for a way of life in general? If so, then the rates of depression paradoxically obscure, maintain and signify all at the same time a crisis in *bios*. They obscure that situation because, in labeling affectivity as pathological, the language of depression re-narrates the causes of suffering as biological or psychological dysfunctions, as opposed to an embodied reflection on the absence of cultural resources for exploring the good. They maintain that situation because, insofar as one of the apparent effects of “depression” is a fatigued will, it leaves one unable to summon the inner resources needed for imagining and enacting change. Yet despite all that, it also provides important path to

practical reason, insofar as those feelings themselves provide an important entryway into becoming aware of the insufficiency of telic objects.

All that being said, change is never easy, and when locked in a seeming impasse, people find themselves with few choices: some give up on life, taking permanent measures to end it; others continue forever grasping onto the same life hoping it will right itself in the end, all the while enduring their misery; and still more others find themselves, for whatever reason, taking more unexpected routes to what they hope will at some point lead to a better life. In that sense, the crisis continues to exist, as it did for the Crow, in that zone of ambiguity that covers a spectrum of affective states from depression to hope. In some ways, those I spoke to were the lucky ones in that regard. They had managed to stumble on a new set of resources for cultivating practical reason, for undergoing the ethical transformation that put them on the path to a way of life, and for providing them with hope for the good-life again. In the next chapter, I turn to that path.

## **Chapter 4: Tranquility**

### **4.1: Introduction**

In January 2013, the World Economic Forum held its annual meeting at Davos, Switzerland, attracting, as it does every year, the world's elite to discuss issues of global economic importance. It is not easy to get access to Davos. It is a select club, and unless one has membership in the forum, a privilege that would set one back over fifty thousand dollars per year, the only way of attending is by invitation, made more likely if one can offer something of value to the global economy (Pigman 2007). From 2013, however, representatives for mindfulness were happily in attendance by invitation. Why would mindfulness, a practice claiming roots in ancient Buddhist texts, and which was once popular among members of the counterculture, be of interest to the global elite and seen as important to the world economy? According to the report for the 2013 Annual Meeting, the theme for that year's forum was "resilient dynamism," a term chosen to highlight two values considered important in the wake of the recent economic crisis, namely, the ability to endure and adapt to the vicissitudes of the post-crisis period while maintaining the "strategic agility" needed for entrepreneurship and growth (World Economic Forum 2013, 4). There were, as one might expect, many panels at that year's forum discussing the ways in which institutional dynamic resiliency might be cultivated. It was for its ability to cultivate dynamically resilient subjects, however, that mindfulness found a place at the table.

Two years later, in 2015, mindfulness was at Davos again, this time as a technology for resiliency against certain mental health problems. The panel, called "The Human Brain: Deconstructing Mindfulness," was held by Thomas R. Insel, the Director of the National

Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), and Richard Davidson, one of the world's most respected researchers in the neuroscience of mindfulness and human well-being. Davidson began the session describing the meaning of mindfulness via its opposite, mind-wandering, or "mindlessness" as he also called it. An influential study shows, he told the audience, that the average American spends "47% of her or his waking life not paying attention to what they're actually doing." The interesting thing about this finding, he added, is that the same study also shows that people generally self report as being "less happy" when "not in the present moment." Mindfulness is one solution to this problem, he added, for it is about "not getting carried away by our thoughts and emotions, which often hijack our attention," but is about "bringing our attention back to the present moment" instead. Insel furthered the point in relation to depression and anxiety. If you think about what depression and anxiety are, he says,

clearly these are brain disorders. But in terms of subjective experience, people when they're depressed are mostly locked in the past, they're ruminating about something that happened, that they can't let go of. When they're anxious they're ruminating about the future. It's that anticipation of what they can't control and the angst about what might happen.

If one could train oneself to focus on the "here and now," he added, "that begins to sound like a very important vehicle and a very important part of what it takes to recover from these really debilitating disorders."

Resiliency—the ability to recover from or adapt to harm—has, according to Evans and Reid (2014), become an increasingly common value of neoliberal crisis response. What is distinctive about resiliency, however, is that rather than attempt to protect subjects from harm by providing the conditions for security—the traditional goal of liberalism—resiliency paradigms instead normalize crisis as a permanent feature of the world, asking the population to cope with or adapt to that insecurity "as a means by which to live well" (B. (International



relations) Evans and Reid 2014, 4). Given the refocusing of neoliberal interventions for well-being back upon the subject, the situation raises, they recognize, an important anthropological question, namely, “What kinds of subjects do demands for resilience produce?” (2014, 2).

In this chapter, I outline, through the example of mindfulness, what I see as one important answer to that question—an answer that also represents the main claim of this dissertation. The resilient subject being produced in the discourse of subjective well-being, I argue, is a paradoxical biopolitical figure I call homo-eudaimonicus (see chapter 1 for definition of homo-eudaimonicus). Given, however, the dual nature of this person, who lives at the intersection of economic and more-than-economic norms, I focus here only on the economic aspect, looking at the emotional and psychological skill set associated with mindfulness practice, and the mental capital associated with the states of affective tranquility that are said to follow from that practice (the next chapter will take up the additional role of virtue and wisdom in mindfulness practice through the moral sentiment of compassion). Before I do that, however, I first need to describe what mindfulness practice is.

#### **4.2: Mindfulness: A Reconstruction**

I begin this chapter with a phenomenological “reconstruction” of mindfulness meditation, focusing on the techniques and meaning of “present moment” experience associated with it, and the states of “calm” or “tranquility” that are reported to follow from that experience. After that I move on to the larger historical and ethnographic context in which such an experience gains economic value. By “reconstruction” here I mean something like a collage, taken from several years of field work, to tell a story about key moments in the cultivation of mindfulness for the sake of tranquility. Although the story documents my stay at Naropa University’s contemplative psychotherapy department, and the transformations undergone by

practitioners there, many of these moments nevertheless occurred at different times and places. I stitch them together here, then, to create an abridged narrative about the long term development of practice. The abridgment is necessary, for although contemplatives commit themselves to their mindfulness practice in varying degrees, for most it is a daily practice, and one that may be undertaken for many years—decades even. This fact, which should be borne in mind when reading the account below, means care should be given to avoid overgeneralization. As Dunne (2015) points out there is a difference between what theorists say about the practice of mindfulness and how communities and individuals actually practice it. Representations of meditation practice therefore need to function more like ideal types, while accepting a wide halo of diversity around them. The representation below is of sitting meditation practice. But it should also be remembered that mindfulness is undertaken on and off the cushion. Not only is there a technique of walking meditation, there is a distinction between formal and informal practice, the latter of which is the attempt to bring mindfulness into one’s daily life during routine activities of eating, showering, walking, washing the dishes, and so on. Formal sitting meditation was described as a focused “laboratory,” a site for practicing mindfulness and strengthening it without the burden of distractions that come from other everyday activities. I start the story, then, with a typical introduction to sitting meditation.

#### 4.2.1: Choosing Seats

The meditators enter the room. The room itself could be any room. During my time with contemplatives, I have meditated in everything from meditation centers, hospitals, and workplace offices, to the living room or basement of someone’s home. This particular venue is a classroom. And though it lacks the usual classroom paraphernalia (this is a Naropa

classroom after all, and students tend not to sit at desks, but on meditation cushions), it is a classroom nonetheless, indicated largely through the presence of the white board, and the fact that everyone is there with the intention of fulfilling their course requirements for an MA in contemplative psychotherapy.

There are twenty-eight meditators in total at today's session, including the instructor and one anthropologist. Everyone removes their shoes and takes a seat. There are several seating options available: soft round cushions called *zafus*, firm rectangular ones called *gomdens*, floor chairs with back support, and upright folding chairs. Each practitioner takes either a *zafu* or *gomden* depending on their preference, as well as a large square mat, called a *zabuton*, to place under their cushion and to provide padding for the knees and lower legs. Some chairs are placed in the corners of the room for those who find the cushions uncomfortable or impractical, but no one uses them this time.

The meditators lay their cushions out in rows facing the spot where the instructor will soon be. As they wait for the session to begin, some engage in stretching and breathing exercises, others talk to friends. The teacher arrives and sits facing the students. "Let's bow in together," the teacher says.

#### 4.2.2: The Bow

The bow is a Naropa tradition. One does it at the beginning and end of every event at the university, whether those events are classes, office hours, faculty meetings, live performances, or celebratory events. There is no obligation to do the bow. Rather, it is said to be an act of awareness and a voluntary offering to one's peers. As I heard it put on my first day, "It's a way of noticing that a transition is happening. It's about entering into the same present moment together." The bow can be done either sitting or standing, though usually the

former. In either case, head and shoulders are upright and the hands are placed palm downwards on the top of the thighs. At the moment one actually performs the bow, one is also supposed to generate an intention to “feel, hold and give.” It was described to initiates as follows:

the bow has three parts. The first part is to feel. You might pay attention to what you’re feeling in your heart, or something in your body or the cosmos. Whatever the feeling, it’s about tuning in to present moment experience... Then in the second part there’s a sense of holding that, containing it, a sense of intentionally being with it for a moment... And then the third part is to incline our torsos forward, and to give it away, with a sense of offering or letting go.

How contemplatives practice this intention differs. “I visualize a colored ball melting into the center of the room,” said one contemplative describing what he did during the bow. “I like to feel my feet on the ground, and the gravity of earth holding me in my seat” said another. For my own part, I could never quite get the hang of it. It all happened too quickly for me to generate any particular intention. Once I remembered what I was supposed to do, it was already over—though I continued to bow each time out of respect to my hosts.

#### 4.2.3: Posture

After the bow, the teacher introduces the class, takes attendance, and talks about the plan for the day’s lesson. After a general Q and A session with the students on the past week’s assignment, she begins the mindfulness practicum.

Take a comfortable posture. Begin by settling on to your cushion. The idea is to be grounded, to make a relationship with the earth itself.

The teacher then slowly directs the students to various parts of their bodies, leaving some time between each instruction so that the student might linger a little on the sensations of each part:

Feel your body...

feel your legs...

then your feet...

and then the lower torso...

the upper torso...

your back...

arms...

hands...

shoulders...

neck...

head...

Let your chin be tucked in a little...

Notice your jaw, and let it relax...

Notice your tongue and relax it...

Hold your gaze softly about six feet in front of you on the floor, not concentrating on anything in particular.

Attaining a good posture is the first practice in formal sitting meditation. Though it is usually only discussed during an introductory class on mindfulness, it is a practice that continues to play an essential role for meditators throughout the remainder of their contemplative life. The summary instruction at Naropa was to find a “comfortable” and “alert” sitting position, what was also sometimes called “grounding.” The idea was that since one may be sitting for long periods of time, a “grounded” position is necessary in order to prevent disturbances during the meditation. There were many possible disturbances too, everything from feeling too relaxed and consequently falling asleep to perhaps feeling too restless or distracted by pain to actually sit and concentrate.

Numerous techniques were therefore offered, involving the micro-adjustment of the body from head to toe, so as to facilitate a comfortable and alert posture. As the instructor went on,

If you have a tendency to lean over, see if you can sit up straight. It will make it easier, as your chest will open up. The idea is to have a soft front and a strong back...

The head should be resting above the spine. Imagine that a piece of string is attached to the top of your head and that you're being lifted gently to the sky. That will give you a sense of how to hold yourself in a relaxed and comfortable upright position...

Ideally in the Buddhist tradition the eyes are half open. If you open your eyes it's easy to get stuck in the visual field, but if you close them, it usually leads to going into a fantasy. When the eyes are half open it's boring in a way. If you feel comfortable keeping your eyes half open, let your gaze fall about six feet away from you...

Feel the sensation of your weight on the cushion and allow yourself to contact it. You can find your center on the cushion by swaying a little bit. That can also give a sense of the dynamic quality of posture and it might remind our bodies that it's not a rigid practice.

Though a comfortable posture is necessary to prevent short term interruptions to the practice, it is also intended to prevent physiological issues over the long term. I heard of numerous complaints about back and knee problems that were suspected to be caused by a lifetime of questionable meditation posture. Such discomforts generally did not stop contemplatives from meditating (I only ever saw one person quit a retreat due to profound physical pain in sitting, and even then it was after several days of self-described agony), but it did serve as a reminder of the importance of maintaining the first stage of practice throughout one's contemplative life.

It can take a long time for meditators to find a position that they find comfortable. I met many participants who went through months of practice without ever successfully finding a sitting position they could settle in. For my own part, it took me about half a year to

find a posture that I could be in for extended periods with reasonable ease, and I sat through hours of uncomfortable practice before figuring that out:

FM: Surprisingly difficult to sit. It took a lot of effort. Very painful. Even a few minutes was hard. My chest felt tight and my breathing was labored. I noticed my jaw was constantly clenched. Discomfort in the right leg from leaning on it during the sitting and which persisted throughout the meditation session.

Diane: I remember struggling a lot with sitting. I just remember hell. It was painful. Every bone and muscle in my body seemed to ache.

To counteract these problems some meditators perform stretching exercises or take up yoga to help them sit for longer.

I like the idea of meditation but I just couldn't sit there comfortably. It was just so uncomfortable for me to sit. I'd sit for three minutes and have a lot of lower back pain. Yoga made it possible for me to sit for longer. It helped me adjust so that I wasn't screaming in pain while sitting.

Comfort, however, is not the only element of good posture. "Dignity" was also at stake. I heard a few times the instruction to sit upright in a "dignified" position, and the importance of this value was stressed to me on one occasion in particular, when I was reprimanded by a meditation instructor about my own careless posture. Having taken the advice to find a comfortable posture too literally, I found myself increasingly adopting a rather lackadaisical position, hunched over with my hands in my jacket pockets. After witnessing this posture of mine on several occasions, an instructor told me in no uncertain terms that I was not showing the proper "respect" to the practice and that sitting upright with hands resting on the legs was much more "dignified" than the position I had adopted. His frustration with my stance signified that through my careless posture I was "disrespecting" the practice, and in doing so had failed to give deference to the other practitioners and the tradition in general. Though posture was voluntary and for the sake of comfort, then, my own image of comfort was apparently interpreted as lack of commitment to the practice and thus

disregard for the tradition, something that was later rectified by adopting the proper “dignified” position.

#### 4.2.4: “Mindfulness”

The bell rings to signify the start of meditation. The teacher guides the students in “mindfulness,” offering instructions over its meaning and what meditators should do with their “minds” in order to cultivate it:

The technical meaning of mindfulness is the ability to put your mind on an object and keep it there. In a more general sense, it is paying attention without judging. Or, since you can’t stop your mind from judging, at least not showing you’re judging. The point is to recognize our judgments as judgments and not to impose them on others. That’s mindfulness: being present, simply paying attention to details moment by moment, as they arise and dissolve.

In order to pay attention to moment by moment details, students are also advised to focus on the breath.

Simply be with your breathing, however your breathing is. Just be with that... Just bring your attention to the breathing, mindfully, without trying to change it... experience breath directly in your body, don’t just think about it.

During the instruction, students are reminded that there are several reasons for focusing on breath in particular. First, the breath is useful as it is always available as an object of meditation:

As long as one is alive, the breath will always be there for you. One does not need to search it out.

Ironically, however, the breath is also ephemeral and thus an ideal object for noticing the arising and dissolving of phenomena:

Focusing on the breath is good because you can’t hold on to it. It arises and passes. So you can rest with the arising and the passing, the inhale and the exhale, and continually do that.



The breath is also a relatively neutral object to behold. That is, except in special cases (such as with trauma victims), the breath, it is said, tends not to trigger emotional reactions when focused on, making the “non-judgmental” element of the practice theoretically easier to access. Because of its availability, ephemerality and neutrality, the breath thus provides the ideal anchor for manifesting and focusing on the simplicity of the “present-moment.”

By focusing on the breath, you are training yourself to live in the present moment, so you can rest in it and be more open to the present moment in your life.

The meditator soon learns, however, that there are many different ways one can “be with” the breath. One can, for instance, focus on the sensation that arises at the tip of the nose when breathing in and out. Alternatively, one can bring attention to the expanding and contracting of the abdomen, or the entire sensation of the body as it lifts and falls with each breath. One can even track the movement of the sensation of breath as it flows through the nose, to the back of the throat and into the lungs. There is, it is often repeated, no correct way of attending. “The only bad practice,” one instructor said, “is the one where you don’t get to the cushion at all.”

Though there may not be, in some instructor’s eyes, a “wrong way” to meditate, there is nonetheless a rich tradition of teachings on the “right way” to practice, as well as commentaries on the various difficulties a meditator might encounter, including advice on how to overcome those difficulties. It may not be obvious to the uninitiated, but breathing meditation is hard—very hard—and numerous obstacles can impede one’s ability to actually do the practice. For instance, one obstacle that is frequently said to come up for meditators is practicing too stringently, by trying to make sure attention never wavers from the breath, something that is not only exhausting for practitioners, but often futile, since mind wandering is to be expected at some point. On those occasions, the meditator is advised to relax their

practice, and to “only put 25% of the attention on the breath—without trying to quantify exactly how much that is,” so as to cultivate the “right” kind of effort needed. Another obstacle might be to go into the meditation with an unhelpful intention, doing it for the sake of “enhancing” or “fixing” oneself, for instance. On those occasions, meditators might be asked to remember that mindfulness is supposed to be a “non-judgmental” practice, and that they should therefore put aside any intention they may have for the practice, and instead “simply notice what arises.”

Such guidance, however, never holds in every case and there are numerous exceptions to each of these instructions. For instance, not all meditations focus on the breath. There are, in fact, many different meditation objects, and each may have subtly different functions. As one meditator put it,

A meditation object can be anything. It can be the body, it could be a candle, a point like a dot, a memory or emotion, the image of your Buddha, a mandala. It can really be anything you want. What’s important is how you use it and what you’re using it for.

Moreover, there are forms of mindfulness practice that require much more concentrated effort than the stated “25%” of attention (as is the case with concentration practices—see *samatha* section below), while there are also numerous practices that require “setting an intention” for meditation (see compassion section in the following chapter). That there were exceptions to every technique could cause much confusion for students, and much of their training came in figuring out for themselves the occasions when such practices were relevant.

C1: I’m still struggling with what I perceive as conflicting instructions: just the sheer amount. I’ve no idea what I’m supposed to be doing. I’ll sit down, and try grounding, and also the breath, and also 25%, and also relax, and also, etc. etc.

C2: I’m confused all the time. I’m not sure if I’m meditating because of it.

C3: I don't know what I'm doing. I think it's different things to try out and then see what you connect with more. I feel it's what comes up for you. Maybe today I'll try one thing, and another day something else. Otherwise it's being too strict with the practice.

C1: Yeah, probably. I think I'm trying to make it too coherent, into a theory.

C4: Maybe it would help if I say how it works for me. When I first sit in the cushion I check in with my body as it's really easy for me to lose track of my body. I just feel it. Then the breath. Then a piddling thought might come up and I touch into it, then something stronger like an emotion and I'm like 'oh, feel it, but remember the breath.' There's no formula for me. It's definitely not formula like or agenda like.

C1: I guess I just wanna hear the basic instruction over and over again.

C5: For me I feel like everything I've heard or learned all boils to paying attention to what's happening and being kind to yourself about it. Every time I hear a new technique, it's just the same thing, it just adds more depth to it. It's just a different way of looking at it or different set of words to label it, but in the end it's all the same thing.

C4: I spoke to my meditation instructor about this. I said to him how we were told to do all these things and that it's really mixed in my mind. She said, slow down, these are tools to help you. You get to decide when you reach into your tool bag and what tool you're going to use. That's the beauty of meditation, you get to decide which tool to use. Some days you can take something out of the tool bag and put it back in and take something else out, something that will help train your mind and help continue your practice.

For many, then, meditation instructions offered them a tool kit of techniques, and it was up to them to figure out what tools to use in order to work with their own "minds."

#### 4.2.5: Returning to the breath

After several minutes of silent meditation, the instructor interrupts the students to offer some advice:

At some point, you may find that you have become lost in thought, that you're no longer focusing on the breath, but are elsewhere. When you notice your mind wander, simply and gently bring your attention back to the breath. Just bring your attention to the breathing, mindfully, without trying to change it.

The practice of returning attention to the breath is arguably the centerpiece of mindfulness meditation. It is a practice that is both highly complex and deceptively simple at the same time. For those who have never practiced it, a useful analogy can be found in the experience of rereading a passage from a book. As anyone knows, there often comes a time in reading when attention wanders from the content of the page (sometimes in spite of the fact that the eyes continue to scan the text and one's inner monologue continues to "voice" the words). At some point this "mind wandering" may become conspicuous (the reader becomes aware of his or her inattentiveness), at which point it is not uncommon for the reader to admonish him or herself for not having actually "read" the last several sentences or paragraphs. The reader might then also recommit to reading those sections again by bringing attention back to the page and engaging in the effort to understand the actual content of the overlooked passages. Here, as with meditation, the mind wanders, one notices the wandering, and one recommits attention back to the original practice. The major difference, of course, is that in rereading one goes back to understanding the content of the page, whereas the invitation in mindfulness is simply to "observe the breath."

Again, there is much guidance on how to do this, since this act of returning attention to the breath is not an easy thing to do. For instance, it was not uncommon for meditators to have "mind wandered" for large portions of the meditation session. When they noticed that they had wandered, it was also not uncommon for meditators to criticize themselves for not being "mindful enough."

I found meditating really hard at first, and was doing that internal dialogue of "oh, I'm so bad at meditating, I'm not doing it right," and getting really stressed out because of that. I just felt really frustrated that my mind was wandering, and I had all these high expectations and I just didn't enjoy it, and felt I'm bad at meditation.

— Eve

As a way of countering this tendency to mind-wander, many beginning meditators recommit their attention to the breath through rather stern instructions to pay attention. Instructors are well aware of this tendency to be too austere in one's commitment, however, and they therefore often advise meditators to bracket their negative evaluations of their practice and their tendency to be too headstrong in their effort. As the instructor clarified,

In this practice we do not say 'stop wandering you idiot.' Instead we simply notice that the mind has wandered, and we gently and kindly bring our attention back without judging it.

This effort of returning to the breath, however, is itself a practice that requires cultivation. For instance, recommitting to the breath is often at odds with what might be a captivating thought process occurring during a moment of mind wandering. That is to say, even though one has noticed the wandering, some streams of consciousness are so "juicy," as one contemplative put it, that there may be a desire to continue thinking those thoughts rather than abandon them for the sake of the breath:

Katie: There was one sit when I had this idea that time is flexible, and it was just a fascinating thought, and I just thought about it every time I sat over the next few days.

Diane: I didn't feel my mind would settle down. It was constantly generating all kinds of thoughts and questions. Having that much time to sit with myself, all kinds of great ideas came up. So I thought I wish I could have a notepad, but you're not supposed to do that. So learning how to let go was one of the first lessons.

To counter this desire, instructors emphasize the importance of "letting go," the need to drop one's interest in whatever activity one is "caught up" in, and to submit to the abandonment in the recognition that no longer entertaining those thoughts is part of what it takes to practice mindfulness.

I heard contemplatives describe this process of "letting go" in different ways. For some, it meant simply ceasing to engage in the thought stream and returning to the breath.

For others, it meant embracing a technique called “touch and go,” that is, noticing what the mind wandered to and allowing themselves to observe and “experience” that for a moment, before gently returning to the breath.

With ‘touch and go,’ a distraction will come and you experience that distraction, feel it in the body. You ask yourself: how does it make you feel, what kind of thought is it? But you don’t reject it or grasp on to it. You don’t push it away as a scary thought and you don’t hold on to it either. You just inquire about it - what is this thought, how does it make you feel, where do you feel it? And you just gently watch it for a moment and let it go.

— Liam

In letting go, then, one is not necessarily “ignoring” whatever comes up in consciousness. Rather, one is, as a technique, temporarily putting attention on a small section of the possible objects available in the stream of consciousness, namely, the breath, to keep the noticing in check and thereby to make it more likely to happen. The stream of consciousness does not cease to exist, in other words. On the contrary, it would not be an exaggeration to say that every meditator recognizes its persistence. But the process of wandering and returning serves to highlight the processes of interiority with greater salience for the meditator, by making the act of noticing an essential and important moment of transition between the two.

To facilitate the practice of letting go a further practice of “labeling” is also advised.

As the instructor continued,

At some point, you’ll become distracted, lost in thought. This is not regarded as a problem. Thinking is just one of the things minds do. Minds think. When you notice you’re lost in thought, use the label “thinking” to acknowledge that thinking just happens, then just gently return your attention to the breath. This label “thinking” is just information. There’s no judgment here. It’s just thinking. So when you notice you’re thinking, label it, and come back to the technique of being present with your breathing.

Labeling practice allows one, it is said, to objectify the content of one's "mind," changing the description of the contents of consciousness from "my thoughts" to "thoughts *per se*." For some, this distinction may even open up a phenomenological gap between "the self" and the act of cognition, as they generalize their discernment between the two different experiences of "mind." As one contemplative put it, "I have this view that I am not my ideas or thoughts processes. I'm not even the author of my thoughts. Thoughts simply arise. Whatever I am, it's something else."

In addition to techniques for letting go, there are also techniques to cultivate the act of "noticing" itself. As it is often said, in the mind-wandering stage, one simply gets caught up in thoughts, and that flight into fantasy can last an indefinite amount of time. At some point, however, one notices the wandering and this noticing is often said to occur of its own accord.

At some point I remember to come back to the breath, but it doesn't require any effort as it just happens. And then I might get lost for 20 minutes, but I always notice it at some point, and when I do it reminds me to come back to my body and the breath.

— Kay

Given the apparent spontaneity of the act of "noticing," some instructors therefore ask meditators to abandon the effort to notice in the first place, and rely on the fact that the mind will always, at some point, notice this wandering of its own accord. That said, though noticing is thought to occur spontaneously, many techniques nevertheless exist to increase the likelihood of it happening. Sometimes, for instance, an instructor will actively interrupt a meditation session explicitly asking students to notice whether they have wandered or not, and if so, to return to the breath. At other times the meditation bell will be struck at specific instances during the session, the ringing of the bell serving as an aide memoire to contemplatives to engage in the practice of noticing. Many meditators also testify that the act

of repeatedly coming back to the breath over and over again itself trains the mind to notice the wandering more frequently. Here the oft told view is that mindfulness actually trains the spontaneity itself, and thus increases one's ability to notice their "minds" in general, a skill that is also said to carry over from the meditation cushion into daily life.

#### 4.2.6: Samatha-Vipassana

After several minutes of silent meditation, the instructor introduces the concept of *samatha*.

Mindfulness is closely related to *samatha*. By itself *samatha* is paying attention to a particular object—such as the breath—and just coming back again and again to that one particular object. It's very focused in that sense. Sometimes it's called concentration. Whatever you call it, it brings relaxation to the mind.

On the above description, it may seem that there is no difference between *samatha* and mindfulness, insofar as both require wandering, noticing and returning to the breath. Such confusion over the terms is reasonable, as sometimes they are used interchangeably. In general, however, there is a subtle difference between the two concepts, for *samatha* is specifically a teleological concept. Mindfulness, one could say, is ateleological. Even though many people come to it with a specific goal or intention (such as to reduce suffering), having an intention for practice is not a prerequisite to participate in mindfulness meditation, and sometimes an intention may even be considered an obstacle to practicing insofar as it goes against the advice to bracket judgments—as mentioned, the advice is to “just notice,” with no goal or end implied in that noticing. By contrast, *samatha* is specifically directed towards the cultivation of certain types of experiences, the most important being a range of experiences of tranquility: peace, calm, relaxation, equanimity, and so on. Thus, any mindfulness practice that brings about, or intends to bring about, one of these analogous experiences would count as a *samatha* practice. As one contemplative put it,



*Samatha* is living in a place of calm or peace. You rest your attention on a central point of focus and still the mind to create that space of calm. So distractions occur. You'll have emotions, thoughts, and they'll distract you. You let go of them. Then you guide yourself back to the point of focus. And if you do that repeatedly, the distractions subside, you develop a deep focused concentration, and your mind settles.

— Liam

As a teleological concept, *samatha* could be used to refer to several types of meditation practice.<sup>1</sup> There are, for instance, practices of “concentration” or “focused attention” (in which attention is placed continuously on the same object with the purpose of cultivating a sense of calm or tranquility.) Alternatively, there are practices involving “mindfulness of peace” (mindfully paying attention to feelings of “calm” or “peacefulness” themselves). Moreover, there are practices of “calm abiding,” or “open monitoring,” in which one allows attention itself to manifest peacefulness by simply observing whatever arises without struggling with that or pushing it away.

The most familiar type of *samatha* practice, however, is arguably the first of these, the concentration practice. During concentration practice one cultivates a focused non-wandering attention in order to settle one's attention and thus manifest a quality of peacefulness. I was first introduced to concentration practice at a meditation group in Chicago, specifically dedicated to the cultivation of *samatha*. Here the instructor told the attendees to pay attention to the breath through three different techniques of “counting, following and touching.” In the counting stage, meditators were asked to track the breath in and out of the body, counting

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<sup>1</sup> As will be seen in the following chapter, MacIntyre makes a distinction between different types of teleology: those relative to practices, and those relative to the whole of life. Here we are dealing with the teleology of a practice. As will also be argued in the following chapter, MacIntyre's notion of “internal goods”—that is, goods that are inherent to and therefore only accessible through a particular practice—defines the teleology of a practice. Tranquility, then, can be seen as an internal good and thus as the telos of mindfulness practice in MacIntyre's scheme.

from one to nine on the in-breath, and nine to one on the out-breath. During the meditation session the lengths of the breath would then get shorter over time. After five minutes of counting up to and down from nine, the practitioner would shift to counting up to and down from five, then several minutes later would shorten further to three, then finally to one. The counting was a strategy intended to occupy the inner voice in a structured task to prevent it from wandering (the strategy, one could say, is not dissimilar to the advice of “counting sheep” to get to sleep, which also calms and settles the discursive activity of the inner voice to facilitate relaxation). Moreover, in shortening the length of the count, the strategy was supposed to progressively limit that voice to fewer and fewer words, in order to continually settle one’s inner chatter. With “the mind” reasonably quieted in this manner, the meditator would then go on to the “following” stage, during which he or she did the same thing (i.e., observe the breath as it travelled through the body) but this time without counting. The idea here was that, if one had successfully limited the inner chatter through the counting technique, one should then be able to progress to the practice of only following the breath, with few distractions from the inner voice. Finally, in the touching stage, one limited attention even further still, by focusing attention “on the point where the breath enters the body—usually the tip of the nose, sometimes the upper lip.” These techniques were cultivated over the course of several weeks, with the advice that one should never learn more than two new techniques per session. Considered cumulatively, however, through them one was supposed to have ideally reached the point at attempting “one-pointed concentration” on the breath at the site it enters the body.

*Samatha* might be said to be present at each of the stages of counting, following and touching, as in each case the mind is concentrating on a single point of focus, namely, the

breath, with the hope of settling the mind in a state of relaxation. One can see, however, that in the touching stage the precision of attention is more concentrated, with attention being placed, if all goes well, on one point on the tip of the nose for an indefinite amount of time. Concentration practice thus requires a much tighter commitment to returning to the breath, and a much narrower focus on what constitutes an object than other forms of mindfulness practice.

Doing concentration practice over an extended period, it is said, allows one to become fixated on the object in question and to enter into a highly pleasurable state of attention called “absorption”:

In *samatha*, what actually happens is that you develop these absorption states, you develop this unwavering, one pointed concentration, so you can sit in meditation for as long as you want. I practiced *samatha* for years and I’ve heard of people doing it their whole lives. When I was doing it I reached these pinnacle states of, ok, I’m sitting for as long as I want, and I’m absorbed in this sensation or point of concentration so much that I don’t feel suffering. It’s like disassociating. But it’s amazing, it’s very pleasurable. It’s still and peaceful. And if anything comes in and tries to distract me, it’s easily absorbed.

For some, this state of absorption had highly therapeutic effects, and was well known for enabling a deep resilience against forms of physical pain:

I’ve had experiences of sitting for 2 or 3 hours straight without moving. The pain can get extreme when you do that. And it also kicks up a storm of narrative and imagery on top of it: worrying, panicking, thinking ‘Christ, I’m injuring myself.’ I’ve sat through those to the point that there’s such a high degree of concentration, *samatha* basically, that the pain remains at the same level but it’s no longer pain. Literally it doesn’t hurt anymore. It’s pure sensation. It’s still pain in a way, but it’s just not experienced as pain.

“Touching” concentration practice, however, was not how *samatha* was taught at Naropa. Rather their approach was analogous to the “following” practice, something which made it largely indistinguishable from mindfulness practice in general, a fact that was confirmed in the frequency with which the two terms were used interchangeably:

Samatha—mindfulness—is paying attention to what’s going on without struggling, letting attention be with whatever is.

Samatha was seldom done on its own at Naropa, however. The core teaching, it was said was not samatha, but a dual practice called *samatha-vipassanā* or mindfulness-awareness as it was also called:

Samatha stabilizes the mind. And if you do it long enough you will experience bliss. Bliss—sorry, but that’s not the practice we’re teaching here. We’re teaching *samatha-vipassana*. And when we use vipassana in the contemplative psychotherapy program, we mean awareness... panoramic awareness.

As mentioned in chapter 3, *vipassanā* practices traditionally involve cultivating “insight,” what is also translated as “clear seeing.” Like *samatha*, *vipassanā* is a teleological concept, but it is an epistemic and ethical one too: through the practice of *vipassanā*, one aims at an experiential understanding of the core Buddhist teachings of non-self, impermanence and unsatisfactoriness. This is not to say that *samatha* lacked epistemic or ethical importance, but that it acquired those functions by being a means to *vipassanā*. Thus, *samatha* and *vipassanā* were connected insofar as *samatha* facilitated the acquisition of a “settled mind” so that investigation into the dharma, through *vipassanā* meditation, could take place. Some teachers thus refer to *samatha* as laying the foundations for *vipassanā*, by creating a mind without distractions or prejudices, so that one can see things “as they really are,” that is, according to the truth of the Dharma. As one contemplative said,

The vipassana side of it is the clear seeing awareness that comes from a calm mind and non judgmental awareness. It’s trying to seek an awareness or grasp perception or have some insight. So when we’re practicing samatha and we see what this thought is and see how it affects us, and if it is particularly insightful, there is a sense that a new perception on the world is gained, a new understanding is had, an insight through this vision. Sometimes I’ll have thoughts that come up and they’ll be in the background and make me feel a little unsettled or upset, but I’m still focusing on my breath, and that’s fine. But other times there’ll be a thought that has to do with something relevant or with some kind of practice or principle that I’m studying and something just flips and it’s amazing, like a breath of fresh air. I see the world in a new way.

That's vipassana. It affords you this entirely new experience of relating to the world.

Though not blind to this meaning of *vipassanā*, teachers at Naropa nevertheless had their own twist on it. Inspired by their Founder, Trungpa Rinpoche, they translated vipassana as “awareness.” They thus asked students to cultivate, in addition to the precision of focused mindfulness practice, an appreciation for *vipassanā* as the “space within which experience arises” (Wegela 2009, 59–60).

Both mindfulness and awareness were fundamental aspects of attention, and thus the skillful adoption of both were necessary for successful participation in all manner of activities. As the teacher went on,

You need both mindfulness and awareness in life. If you're a waiter, for instance, you need precision—you need mindfulness or samatha—otherwise you'd bring the wrong order to the wrong table. But to be good as a waiter you also need vipassana, an awareness of the whole situation, so that you can balance all the different tables you have. A therapist needs both too. A therapist needs to be aware of what's going on with the client as they're talking, and he also needs an awareness of the whole biographical context, what's gone on in the past for them.

The teacher thus went on to provide instructions for doing both at the same time, so that they could cultivate these qualities in their everyday life. This joint mindfulness-awareness technique was called “going out with the out-breath”:

Just begin by noticing the whole room, the environment you're sitting in. With your eyes open, gradually narrow your attention down so you notice your breath.

In this practice there's no special instruction for the in-breath. You don't have to ignore the in-breath. There's simply no instruction for it.

As you sit here. You'll notice that you're breathing. Notice your breath as it goes out. You will naturally breath in, you don't have to do anything about that.

Then just rest your attention lightly on the breath as it goes out. When the breath goes out, it will dissolve into space. There's nothing you can do about that. That's what it will do. It goes out and dissolves.

As you place your attention gently on that, your attention and breath mix together. So as your breath dissolves, the attention you placed on it dissolves as well. Sometimes there's a feeling of letting be or at the end of the breath, a sense of letting go of that breath. There's a quality of letting go and gentleness that's associated with it. We're not pushing the breath out; we're just noticing it as it goes.

And as always, as you're sitting in, have a sense of your body, feel your body, feel what you feel as you sit here. Your sense perceptions are open. You see what you see. Hear whatever sounds. But we don't go after them; we just let them be.

When the next out-breath comes, go out with it. And we actually say, you go out with it, because you and your attention are not separate again at this point.

As can be seen, mindfulness/samatha was conducted on the breath as it went out of the body, but then, as the out-breath reached its end, instruction was given to focus on the "space" between the in-breath and the out-breath, the site of dissolution where the breath ceases for a moment, and with it attention "dissolves," as it was described. Then, as the lungs automatically took the next breath in, the meditator was then instructed to engage in the practice of abandoning the mindfulness technique, so as to continue participating in the sense of "space" that lingered from the moment between the in-breath and out-breath. As the meditator expelled their lungs the next time, they once again returned to focus samatha. The method was to be attempted repeatedly, for fifteen minutes, with momentary interruptions from the instructor offering tips about labeling and letting go as they continued the practice—though, of course, as an ideal instruction, practitioners differed in how they managed to participate and enact it.

After several more minutes of silent meditation, the instructor then closed the session with advice on how to transition to the post-meditation environment:

As we transition out of the practice, remember to bring that sense of peacefulness and calm and mindfulness with you into your daily life. Let it continue with you as you stand up and leave the room. Just see if you can keep that awareness with you.

The bell rings three times to signal the end of meditation.

#### 4.2.7: The Inner Journey

Through cultivating *samatha-vipassanā*, contemplatives testified to developing their “awareness” of their interiority. As Kelly said,

When I first started practicing mindfulness, it was the first time I saw the working of my mind very clearly. It was the first time I recognized the constant narrative and busyness and grasping and pushing away. I just didn’t realize I was so messed up and had all this stuff going on. I had no awareness of it before.

More advanced practitioners also testified to how this awareness continually expands.

Mindfulness lifts your resting awareness higher, and it builds you slowly, in a way that you can handle. Your awareness continually deepens, because every meditation builds on the last. The feeling I now get from meditation is not the same as the one I experienced when I first started. It’s a powerfully deepening process over time. I would have had to meditate multiple times a day a couple of years ago to reach the resting state I have now without meditation.

— Liam

How does the practice work to “deepen” awareness? The answer to this is not easy. One reason for this difficulty stems from the fact that there is much more going on behind the scenes than the above description of sitting meditation practice recognizes, for there is also a constant and personal “inner journey” that occurs for each meditator as they engage in mindfulness.

The whole idea is that we have this inward journey where we start using attention to bring awareness to our mind. It’s a type of awareness around what’s happening in oneself, and it goes on continually.

— Jane

What exactly is this space of the “inner” where the journey of mindfulness is said to take place? As Rapport says, “interiority” refers to a wide domain of subjective experience, including “rational and irrational projections into the world, emotional reactions, aspirations and intentions, discernments of worth, moral choices, loves and hates, sensations of pain, touch and smell” (2008, 332). All of these, moreover, are constantly being expressed, sometimes partially and obliquely, through what is called an “inner voice” or even “inner voices.” Such a domain of experience, he argues, marks out a sphere of “individuality,” a space in which people figure out themselves and their world. As he says, “in inner voice we find the individual communing with ‘itself’, construing and inhabiting its world-views, working out and furthering its life-projects” (2008, 332). One should not be misled by the word “individual” here, however, for interiority is likely also a wholly social space. As he adds,

it might be contended that what is conversed about, and how and why, have entirely social or cultural ontologies. Individuals’ inner lives, in other words, are thoroughly overdetermined versions of their outer placements; at best, here are sites of individual accommodation to, and possessing of, socio-cultural norms (Rapport 2008, 332).

It is this space of “interiority” that contemplatives are attending to during their mindfulness practice. But it is hard to generalize how the practice plays out for individual meditators, since there is an irreducible subjective element to how the practice proceeds internally. Not only does mind-wandering occur indefinitely, but during that time the meditator goes from thought to thought, sensation to sensation, all the while questioning, reflecting, remembering, perceiving, evaluating, anticipating, and planning all manner of things. And in certain moments, he or she catches that briefly, and hopefully in that moment also remembers to embrace the techniques learned from the instructor and act on them. The “inner journey” is never static, then. Every meditation is different from the last, and some people meditate for a



lifetime and still find surprises. No matter how many times a person has practiced, then, there is still the potential to be surprised by the content of one's interiority.

The only thing that puts some limits on this irreducible subjectivity is practice. Commitment to practice is thus key. One must practice, and practice often—at least several times a week, usually daily, and sometimes more than once a day if conditions allow. I never heard a practitioner admit to the possibility that one could meditate too much. Generally the truism held: the more, the better.<sup>2</sup> Meditation retreats are a testament to this need for practice too. Retreat time for many is a privilege, an opportunity to meditate all day, every day, unburdened by the disturbances of everyday life.

Through the regular iteration of the techniques, meditators thus cultivate what Stoller (2013) calls the “inner senses,” the ability to observe, through close attention, the various phenomena that arise in the space of interiority. The simple instruction to “just notice,” for instance, entails the commitment to neither judge nor react to that interiority, but to simply watch. In noticing, one is bracketing judgments, and thereby separating the faculties of judgment and perception so that one can focus on and thereby cultivate the latter. This act of separation, which is never perfect but only one of degree, is said to become more frequent as a result of practice, and for many, allows one to become more acquainted with the contents of their interiority over time, facilitating a more nuanced observation of it in the process, by virtue of simply attending to it as an object of perception without getting caught up in usual interpretations of one's interiority at the same time. Moreover, since interiority here is, as was noted, not meant to be separate from the exterior, but includes all phenomena that arise in the

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<sup>2</sup> Only in special circumstances might a meditator be advised to stop meditating or to practice less, but usually then because they had become confused in their practice and needed the perspective that comes with taking a break.

stream of consciousness, it also thereby cultivates the “exterior senses” too: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell are all said to heighten to some degree as a result of practice, that is, insofar as the nuances regularly glossed over in life became more conspicuous.

What gets noticed in particular, however, what becomes salient, and what stays around in the working memory in the post-meditation period, is largely contingent. What is noticed, one could argue, is at the intersection of what one is instructed to look for by the teachers, the cultural mappings of practice found in the textual sources, one’s hopes for the practice, one’s background, the learned habitus of one’s interiority, and the general unpredictable arisings that appear in the field of interiority during that particular sit.

#### **4.3: A Surprising Tranquility**

When I first went to the field, I did not really consider that one of the consequences of working alongside people trying to improve their well-being levels might be that I too would reap similar benefits. My goal for spending time with contemplatives was generally a modest one, namely, to gain an understanding of mindfulness, and more specifically, to see if I could work out why the categories of Buddhist ethics, metaphysics and philosophy of mind were becoming a powerful heuristic for many Americans navigating their own experiences of suffering and well-being. I had not really thought too much about whether I would end up feeling “happy” as a consequence of my participation. Something about the word “happy” just did not seem real enough to take very seriously. On the odd occasion I did think about it, I had presumed that I might actually be inhibited from experiencing some of the peak feelings of well-being that were supposedly associated with meditation practices, on account of having a different background and orientation. I was not there, in other words, as a Buddhist,

nor did I have any plan to convert (I still do not). Rather, my intentions were academic. This difference, I thought, would be more than enough to disqualify me from obtaining whatever “spiritual” or “peak” experiences were normally associated with a contemplative way of life.

It was surprising, then, to find myself, about 7 months in, having the most powerful and unexpected feelings of good mood. The change was all the more noticeable on account that “feeling good” is definitely not my default position. Far from it, in fact. I knew from experience that a constant low mood was my norm, and that when I had respite from that chronic base unhappiness, it was usually because I had entered a much worse state of ill-being instead. I have always referred to the general affective tenor of my life pragmatically as “depression,” though I had never received any diagnosis in that regard. Psychotherapy was not really part of the culture I grew up in, and so I had never felt inclined to seek a psychological description from a professional. Moreover, it seemed obvious to me that the problem was ontological. Like Eric in the previous chapter, for much of my adolescence and young adulthood I too had thought that the world or life was meaningless. It was only natural, I told myself, that my moods would reflect that. Only infrequently did I second-guess myself and wonder if, perhaps, really it was just me after all, a feature of my brain chemistry or some such thing, since at times those moods seemed to arise regardless of circumstance. It was not too hard to shake such hypotheticals, however. The bizarre exigencies and common let downs of life had a way of convincing me that the world was skewed toward the random and unfulfilling.

Despite a twenty-plus year history of that self-consciousness, however, several months into fieldwork, I started to feel a strange kind of pleasure, one I had not really felt before. Daily life became infused with a wider feeling of peacefulness and satisfaction. A

subtle joy was taken in just being alive, in participating in the world. All of the niggling thoughts, doubts, worries, and expectations that generally burdened my everyday existence (and of which I thought there were many) ceased to be such a big deal. All could seemingly be handled without becoming a source of dissatisfaction. “Resilience” did not capture this ability to handle worries—not in the slightest, in fact. This was something prior to resilience. Nothing bothered me in the first place such that I would have to endure it or make resilience an issue. The only word that seemed to do justice to this state, I thought, was “tranquility,” inspired as I was at the time by my reading of a line by Adam Smith, which I coincidentally stumbled across during those months:

Happiness consists in tranquility and enjoyment. Without tranquility there can be no enjoyment; and where there is perfect tranquility there is scarce any thing which is not capable of amusing (A. Smith 2002, 172).

There were other benefits of this mood too, besides the pervasive feeling of enjoyment that attended it. I was less “reactive” for one, or at least so it seemed. Habits that I had been performing for a long time had less momentum to them, and in some cases simply ceased to arise in the first place. In addition, there was also a sense of what I could only describe as “vitality.” I would wake up feeling wide awake and ready to start the day, a stark contrast to my usual routine of reluctantly emerging out of a warm bed and struggling to motivate myself to begin whatever chore I thought was a pressing issue for the day. There was a kind of effortlessness in participating in the world, an ease of being that expanded not only into everyday life, but into work too, as procrastination faded away to virtual non-existence, and I became more productive in my studies and everyday tasks as a consequence.

Of all the unexpected qualities that attended this mood, however, two in particular stood out and puzzled me the most. On the one hand, this new mood—and it was new for me—seemed at the same time perfectly ordinary. It was not a “peak” experience, at least as I

understand what is meant by that term. It was not a “high” or sense of “mania,” for instance, but was much more sedate than that. Rather mundane in fact, as though this is what life otherwise might be like if low mood had not colored my perceptions to begin with: simply enjoyable. On the other hand, it was persistent, lasting for several months. During that time I even went through some difficult life experiences, which in the past I probably would have responded to by sinking into a deep state of dysphoria, but which during this time were handled with what I thought was much more ease—still with sadness over the loss I experienced, but not ontologizing that sadness as a feature of the world or life.

Was this the notion of bliss or peacefulness that I had heard was a consequence of certain meditation practices? I was not sure. By this point I had been told a lot about cultivating such experiences through mindfulness-awareness techniques, and had been practicing a variety of such techniques daily for about seven months. But it was also unclear to me that the mood I experienced was an outcome of that. Not only was I not very good at the practice in my estimation—I was a relative novice to mindfulness after all—but the mood seemed to come from nowhere. Rather than arising during or after a meditation session, it would be there as soon as I woke up in the morning. And it would be there throughout the day till I went to sleep at night. If I skipped that day’s meditation session, no matter, the mood persisted nonetheless. I was unclear, then, whether it was an outcome of practice, as I was unable to discern any noticeable cause and effect between my meditation practice and my altered mood.

I tried hard to communicate the inner changes I was going through to the other contemplatives. I wondered what they would say about it. “It sounds to me like it’s what we’re taught happens,” one beginning practitioner optimistically replied. Another more

advanced student nodded and smiled in response to this, adding, “welcome to the path; you’re one of us now.” As I mentioned it to others, in each case I received a similar response: this mood was not something out of the ordinary, but something expected. What I was going through was apparently, according to most practitioners, part of the course of practicing mindfulness, something many people had already had analogous experiences of or, if not, something they were hoping to achieve at some point.

#### 4.3.1: A Flourishing Tranquility

“Every person, and every society,” writes Charles Taylor, “lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is” (2007, 16). Views of flourishing, he argues, are multiple. They are whatever answers the questions “what constitutes a fulfilled life? what makes life really worth living? What would we most admire people for?” (2007, 16). For Taylor, these various images of what he calls “fullness” powerfully orient moral and spiritual development. As he says,

We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be (2007, 5).

For some this image of fullness may exhibit different degrees of clarity—it may be vague, not well worked out, or it may have been subject to intense scrutiny, outlined in fine detail. Similarly, it may exhibit differing degrees of actualization. For some it may reside merely in the imagination, a kind of utopia or fantasy, while for others there may be times when that fullness is experienced. In either case, fullness tends to be associated, he argues, with deep feelings of satisfaction and empowerment:

This [place of fullness] is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there... There may just be moments when the deep divisions, distractions, worries, sadnesses that seem to drag us down are somehow dissolved, or brought into alignment, so that we feel united, moving forward, suddenly capable and full of energy. Our highest aspirations and our life energies are somehow lined up, reinforcing each other, instead of producing psychic gridlock (2007, 5–6).

Such experiences, however, are seldom experienced for long, if at all. Far more common are experiences in which that fullness is perceived to be lacking. Thus, directly opposing fullness, are places of what he calls “exile.” Here the good life often seems too far away to be experienced or even imagined, leaving one dissatisfied and disempowered to the point where all might seem hopeless. As he says,

This [experience of fullness] can help define a direction to our lives. But the sense of orientation also has its negative slope; where we experience above all a distance, an absence, an exile, a seemingly irremediable incapacity ever to reach this place; an absence of power; a confusion, or worse, the condition often described in the tradition as melancholy, ennui (the “spleen” of Baudelaire). What is terrible in this latter condition is that we lose a sense of where the place of fullness is, even of what fullness could consist in; we feel we’ve forgotten what it would look like, or cannot believe in it any more. But the misery of absence, of loss, is still there, indeed, it is in some ways even more acute (2007, 6).

In between these two limit states of exile and fullness, however, lies a fertile middle ground, a space in which feelings of lack are minimized and consoled through the availability of a path towards fulfillment, which provides the conditions for hope. As he puts it,

there is a kind of stabilized middle condition, to which we often aspire. This is one where we have found a way to escape the forms of negation, exile, emptiness, without having reached fullness... it is essential to this middle condition, first that the routine, the order, the regular contact with meaning in our daily activities, somehow conjures, and keeps at bay the exile, or the ennui, or captivity in the monstrous; and second, that we have some sense of

continuing contact with the place of fullness; and of slow movement towards it over the years (2007, 6–7).

This middle ground is not a fixed position. In it one can oscillate between greater or lesser feelings of hope and satisfaction, depending on the conditions of that life, and the resources available for enabling progress towards fulfillment. At times, the place of fullness and the middle condition might seem synonymous, to the point that “life is fully satisfying” (2007, 7). At other times, life might constantly border on frustration, providing a constant feeling of what Robert Desjarlais calls “struggling along” (1994) or Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism” (2011). In order to stay in the comfortable in-between zone, then, one needs a way of keeping in contact with fullness through everyday meaningful activity. As he says,

We come to terms with the middle position, often through some stable, even routine order in life, in which we are doing things which have some meaning for us; for instance, which contribute to our ordinary happiness, or which are fulfilling in various ways, or which contribute to what we conceive of as the good. Or often, in the best scenario, all three: for instance, we strive to live happily with spouse and children, while practising a vocation which we find fulfilling, and also which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare (2007, 6–7).

Regardless of the seeming comforts of this happy middle ground, even in the most fortunate of circumstances, there may still be, however, a yearning for something more than the in-between, a desire to reach that place of fullness one has experienced perhaps only in glimpses. On those occasions, Taylor notes, routine commitments are not enough. For that one also needs a way of transforming oneself into fullness, through the embodiment of a mediating factor, what he calls a “power,” and through conceptual and practical resources, which enable the subject to get in contact with that power, and thus ensure the inner transformation needed to experience fullness. Historically, there have been, Taylor argues, various candidates for “the source of the power which can bring us to this fullness” (2007, 10). In Christendom, that power was God, for the Enlightenment tradition, that power was



reason, while for the Romantics, it was found in feeling or intuition (2007, 9–10). For the contemplatives I spoke with, that power was mindfulness.

#### 4.3.2: Mind-Fullness

As discussed in detail in Chapter 3, Contemplatives came to mindfulness from what Taylor would call a place of exile. This exile was conceptualized, in the first instance, through the various categories of the DSM—*anxiety, depression, PTSD, ADHD, and so on*. Presupposed in those categories, however, were a range of sentiments of absence, described through such metaphors as *meaninglessness, mindlessness, disconnection, and so on*—what I collectively called “negative existential feelings.” For those who committed themselves to the practice, then, mindfulness became the “power” (in Taylor’s sense) that got them out of that place of exile. It did so, moreover, in two main ways: as a path into either a comfortable middle ground or to a place of fullness. Often it achieved both, as it did with Sarah.

Sarah had come to Naropa after many years suffering from a mixed addiction to alcohol, heroin, and oxycotin. She arrived at Naropa a little after getting sober, hoping to sort her life out by going back to college and getting her BA in psychology. When I met her she had already done that, had continued on for graduate research at Naropa, and was in the final year of her master’s degree in contemplative psychotherapy, specializing in addiction counseling. She had been sober for around six years at that point. Her initial motivation to “get clean” was not, she said, inspired by contemplative practice. Rather, it stemmed from a moment of desperation in which she realized that she needed to turn her life around. Nevertheless, around the same time, and by happenstance, she also discovered Buddhism and mindfulness, and found in them a powerful set of concepts and practices to help her

understand and work with the sufferings she had been going through as an addict—as well as the new struggles she was experiencing while occupying the unfamiliar terrain of sobriety.

One day I woke up and I thought I just can't do this anymore. A shift came over me. I just gave up trying to get out of myself. That realization that I couldn't continue in the same way was so profound. My entire worldview shifted in that moment. And it was terrifying and uncomfortable. I was anxious. Every moment was gnawing at me. But at the same time I was reading and studying the dharma and it just made sense to me. I thought this Buddha guy is really on to something. I was engaging with the teachings. And it was being filtered through my experience of addiction and what was happening. When I eventually got sober the seriousness with which I took the teachings increased. It probably took me 4 months after getting sober to get the nerve to sit. My body was going through a lot of withdrawal and acclimating to itself. Awarenesses were coming online in a way that they hadn't before. So it took a while. But once I picked up meditation, from that day on, it has been a huge part of my life, a daily practice.

Meditation allowed Sarah to exist in the middle ground. But even in that semi-comfortable position, she continued to feel a sense of lack, of something missing.

Even now, in different intensities on any given day, there is this sense of something missing. It doesn't have anything to do with material things. All my bases are covered when I look at my life right now. I'm taken care of technically. I'm working on relationships, and I've no idea what my job will be after graduation, but for the most part, especially in comparison to how my old life was, things are great now. So what is this felt sense of this missing thing? I don't know. I don't know. It feels mysterious.

Though unclear about where this sense of lack came from, there were, however, times when the lack itself was absent, times when she experienced a “fullness” in life, and which she found primarily while meditating.

I can say though that I've experienced times when that 'something missing' is not there. In most of the past solitary retreats I've been on I've felt that in fact. Times when I've felt so full and at home in just everything. Entire days of feeling so at home. The simple practice I was doing and the attention I was giving, being silent, noticing my thoughts and body—that's the closest I've experienced in a more consistent temporal way, longer than just a flash, the quality that nothing's missing, that this is it, a love for every single thing, every moment, every sound, all of it being good. There's no thinking of what will happen next. It's just being with the moment, just more fullness, more connection to everything.

Sarah was not alone in having experienced an affective fullness as a result of mindfulness. Eve had suffered from panic attacks, she said, since she was in high school and she had continued to have them for the next ten years. In her late 20s, however, she took an MBSR class on the advice of a family member. The experience, she said, allowed her to obtain some control over her anxiety.

A lot of the unhappiness I was experiencing came from thinking the world was a certain way. When I started doing mindfulness, it was like undoing all those things I created in my mind and that made my life harder. It's not like I stopped having this intense body anxiety reaction ever, but there's space for it now, there's a way of understanding it. I feel like I have this tool I can use and I feel safer having this tool. I don't call them panic attacks anymore. Although I feel anxiety in my body still, it's not a catastrophe, it just passes. I just work with it and it passes. Mindfulness helped me to build up a tolerance in that respect—not trying to eradicate it so it'll never happen again, but being able to feel it and accept it without flying off the handle.

Eve spoke to the significance of mindfulness in making her more resilient in the face of her anxiety, and this resilience enabled her to exist more comfortably in a middle ground. But more than that, mindfulness also introduced her to a place of fullness, she admitted. This was not some far off place either. Rather, it was there all the time, in the “present moment,” as she put it, and thus a resource to draw upon at any point through the discipline of the practice. As she said,

Mindfulness is just paying attention, witnessing, experiencing, being aware. It's funny to me that mindfulness is so simple, yet so transformative. It changed the way I looked at my own life. Just realizing how much I live in the future or the past, and how enjoyable it can be to just be in the present moment, even the moments that aren't so great. There's so much going on that we're not aware of. One is the simplicity of... this is so cheesy... the basic joy that can be found in living. When you're doing it, things just feel as though everything is as it should be. It's almost like this body and mind state that just happens: life is happening now, and you don't need a reason for it. I'm enjoying it and it's great. It is beyond meaning. It's just being. It's just there. I'm just there. That experience to me feels joyful.

Images and experiences of fullness were common amongst contemplatives I found, and there were numerous ways in which they had been introduced to them. For Sarah and Eve, they had gained awareness of those states through mindfulness. Others, however, had first come to it through the peak experiences associated with drug use, which they had then tried to replicate through mindfulness. The euphoria that sometimes came with substance abuse had not only given some contemplatives glimpses of fullness, but the drugs themselves had provided them with a technological short cut for going straight to it, escaping exile, and bypassing the middle ground. As Lauren said,

I think one of the big things that jump-started me into mindfulness and Buddhism more generally was my background with psychedelic drugs. I had done drugs and realized my mind could achieve these states of consciousness, which now I understand as non-duality, egolessness, etc. When I did DMT—a heavy psychedelic—I remember thinking, wow, I can find peace in my life. Even when I did ecstasy—that was so spacious and compassionate. Drugs gave me a glimpse into these states: this peace, this happiness, this connection with others. Because these drugs had given me glimpses, I knew that if my brain could do that on drugs, it could do it off drugs. I figured meditation and mindfulness practice was a way to make those states part of my life daily; that I wouldn't have to use drugs to feel compassionate or connected or egolessness.

As Lauren also implied mindfulness had become a route preferred to that of drug use on account of being more sustainable, a theme that was also echoed by Jane:

LSD was a major factor for me. It threw the doors open. What I realized pretty soon was that I was on a search to experience these more expanded states of consciousness. And pretty soon I realized I didn't want to do it with drugs anymore. I wanted to find a genuine path for it. I just realized that it wasn't a sustainable path. It lost its appeal as something sustainable. You go up, you come down, but where's the wisdom that lasts?

Some, however, still thought psychedelics might be a complement to meditation. Liam put the issue as follows:

Psychedelics kind of do it for you. There's this sense of being deeply connected and time starts to slow down a bit, and it's very similar to a meditation experience, or a meditation "after-high". If you're just taking

psychedelics to take you there, you get high, and then you get low, then high, then low, but you're not really changing much, you're unstable. It's unsustainable. It's madness actually. Psychedelics aren't to be played with. They're not toys. If you're not mentally prepared, they're going to kick your ass. If you're not prepared for them, if you don't have the proper mental stability in place—mindfulness being the root teaching, the most fundamental skill we can have as human beings—if we don't have non-judgment to what comes up, and stillness of mind, if we don't have these basic tenets of living, when the psychedelics do it for you, and open up your awareness so you can see things about yourself in different ways, if you haven't done the proper work beforehand, they will make you go crazy.

According to Liam, then, drugs could theoretically be a path to some experiences of fullness, but only if one first had a stable mindfulness practice to begin with. In that sense, mindfulness was the “root teaching,” and it was only by possessing it that one could handle the transformations that came from pharmacological approaches.

#### 4.3.3: Ill-being

As can be seen, numerous contemplatives testified to the importance of mindfulness as both the power and resource for escaping exile and experiencing fullness. It should be pointed out, however, that not everyone was so lucky. For some, in fact, mindfulness could move them in the opposite direction. As I discovered during fieldwork, there was a hidden history in mindfulness practice about how it might actually harm practitioners to the point of severe disability or psychological distress.

I first inquired into this question about the negative effects of meditation practice long before I knew anything about the potential painful moments of mindfulness or the psychological harm it might bring. In my first weeks at Naropa, I asked one of the professors whether there were any “side effects” from practice. I was speculating—I did not know of any, but it seemed to me possible insofar as most therapeutic interventions have some unwanted outcomes—psycho-pharmaceuticals being a particularly potent example (cf.

Martin 2006). I wondered whether the same held true for mindfulness. The professor knew well that meditation did not always feel good, that it can be a very painful process at times, and if it is not taught skillfully, will not be supportive of inner transformation. Nevertheless, in general, he was of the opinion, as were many others at Naropa, that mindfulness was a good in itself, and that any pain experienced during it was overall worthwhile because of the ultimate benefits that came from it. He knew of no instances, he said, of the kind of debilitating side effects I was speculating about.

As I later observed, he was right, mindfulness could indeed be painful. As Julie pointed out,

When I first started doing meditation it was relaxation stuff: anti-stress, progressively relaxation, those happy place kind of things. But then I came to Naropa and it was no longer about that, but about whatever comes up. And what comes up most of the time sucks. The meditation here is not about making you feel wonderful, it's about being with "what is." And when "what is" isn't pretty, which, for me, it usually hasn't been, that can be really painful.

Yet, despite the fact that many contemplatives testify to the fact that meditation can oftentimes be a painful practice, that pain is also said to be worthwhile, as a necessary part of the process of transition toward fulfillment. If a practitioner complained about the pain they were going through, then, it was not uncommon for a teacher to respond: "good, keep practicing, that means its working." One mindfulness instructor, I once overheard, even informed a student who had left the room in tears during a meditation session to "bring it to the cushion" on account that "everything is welcome on the cushion." For many meditators, then, suffering is simply part of the path, and consolation for enduring that pain comes from the hope that one will, at some point, transcend it:

When you sit, you have to look at the way your mind really works, and to see all the horrible things you do and say to yourself, that hurts. Coming out here hasn't felt wonderful or joyous or like I'm realizing my true destiny. It's been incredibly hard every step of the way. And I think it will continue to be hard.

At some point I might come around to that beautiful place of peace and self love, but it takes a while. I think I'm on the way to a place where it will be nicer later.

This idea that “all is part of the path,” however, obscures the fact that meditation might cause great harm at times. Since I did not have many opportunities to speak to contemplatives on this hidden aspect of practice, let one case serve to illustrate what is undoubtedly a wider phenomenon:

About 10 years into doing mindfulness, I started having very interesting shifts in my consciousness. I had a lot of emotional unloading, lots of memories, emotional stuff from childhood. Then I started seeing lights in my practice. Then later having periods of time when I didn't recognize things. My house would look unfamiliar—like when you go away on a vacation and come back and see things with fresh eyes. Everything was strangely unfamiliar. I wouldn't have the thought of it as being mine. I was having strange shifts in my sense of self too. I didn't recognize myself in pictures or in the mirror. My teacher said it was a sign of my mind becoming more concentrated and that I should do some serious retreat time. I was getting lots of feedback that I was getting momentum from my practice. I was already doing 3 hours of practice a day at that point, but I went to a forest refuge anyway for some serious retreat time. But that retreat kicked off this entire other process where I had a complete dissolution of everything. My sense of self, my body, any kind of value system whatever seemed to break down, and I became completely disabled, dysfunctional. I lost 30 pounds. I spent the next year in bed and going to doctors. I went to many teachers and got a whole bunch of advice. I went to Tibetan doctors, a psychic, I got acupuncture twice a week. I did everything the teachers told me to do. I did the practices they wanted, and nothing helped. It was an awful time. That went on for about 3 years where I was incapacitated. The first year I couldn't even leave my house. For a long time I limped along. I didn't tell anyone that was happening. But as I started to come back together, I also met a number of other people who this had happened to, through trying to find people who could help me. There are many people who go through this I later found out.

It is surprising that little discourse exists on the harmful effects of mindfulness. As far back as 1975, Herbert Benson, a professor at Harvard University and pioneer in meditation research, acknowledged that more studies were needed on whether meditation has negative side effects (Benson 1975). Yet no such studies were done. Over the past couple of years, however, largely due to the work of Willoughby Britton and Jared Lindahl at Brown

University, there has been growing recognition of the potentially distressing effects and long term psychological harm that can occur as a result of mindfulness practice. Their studies are yet to be published, but their work is gaining wide recognition for raising an issue that has until now been largely hidden.

#### **4.4: Mental and Affective Capital**

Despite the at times profoundly disabling effects of practice, the testimony of numerous meditators implies that positive transformations do take place. The question I am interested in here, however, is what is the economic value of those transformations? As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, mindfulness is a technology for furthering the political economy of eudaimonia. Moreover, as was shown at the beginning of this chapter, mindfulness was shown to be a key technology of resilience amongst those at the World Economic Forum. Mindfulness has thus become a key way in which public and private institutions have attempted to align their populations with the affective and cognitive demands of global capitalism by appropriating a eudaimonic technology for the purposes of resilience. Hence, the question I ask here is: “what economic value does this quasi-eudaimonic-resilient psycho-spiritual technology have when it is institutionalized in places like hospitals, schools and especially businesses?” Or, to put it another way, “what is the biopolitical dimension of mindfulness, and of the sense of affective fullness associated with it?” To answer that question it is necessary to look at the three avenues by which mindfulness has been incorporated into public and private institutions over the past forty years, namely, as a therapeutic intervention, as a form of enhancement, and as a technology for tranquility.



#### 4.4.1: Mindfulness as a Therapeutic Intervention in Global Mental Health

As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3, mindfulness has been shown to be a powerful therapeutic for a range of mental health problems, though most notably for affective disorders such as stress, depression and anxiety. Mindfulness-based therapies (MBTs), as they are called, have thus entered healthcare through a range of different interventions, for instance, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and so on. In doing so, mindfulness has gained much respect in institutional settings as a technology of resilience, enabling practitioners to cope with, tolerate, and adapt to whatever suffering they are going through. Such resilience, however, is not just a contribution to the well-being of individual sufferers, but has significant potential, it is said, for the economy. A report by the World Economic Forum put the problem as follows:

Mental disorders are the most important cause of disability in all regions of the world... The economic cost to society is substantial with depression alone estimated as absorbing 1% of Europe's GDP... mental ill-health alone in the next 20 years is estimated to account for a cumulative US\$ 16 trillion of global output loss (Anderson et al. 2012, 6).

To counteract this dire state, it was argued, techniques for cultivating subjective well-being should be brought into various public and private institutions. Doing so would not only improve people's emotional lives, but it would strengthen the economy too, by minimizing sick days and disability benefits due to mental health problems, and by providing the workforce with mental qualities understood to be beneficial for productivity. As the authors put it,

Organizations can avoid considerable costs by managing their operations in a way that promotes well-being among their workers. However, that is only part of the prize to be gained because happy and healthy employees are more innovative, more productive and relate better to customers (Anderson et al. 2012, 8).

This idea is not a new one *per se*. Health and wellness programs have long been part of employment practices, as part of the need to maintain productive bodies and minds.<sup>3</sup> What was different on this occasion, however, was the credit given to a new “science of happiness,” in the form of subjective well-being research, which could be relied upon to help ease the pressures of the joint economic-unhappiness crisis. Mindfulness was not mentioned in that report of the World Economic Forum. But it did not take long for it to be folded into that same logic, and consequently it turned up at Davos for the next three years. In doing so, it reflected a wider trend of mindfulness being appropriated as a therapeutic for mental health problems in hospitals, business, schools, and elsewhere, for the sake of, what one contemplative called the “double bottom line”: economic productivity and personal well-being.

#### 4.4.2: Mindfulness as a Method of Enhancement in the Attention Economy

Though mindfulness initially gained institutional support as a therapeutic intervention, it has also been increasingly appropriated as a form of enhancement, particularly in relation to the faculty of attention. Thus, mindfulness is often said to improve focus, by providing practitioners not just with concentration skills, but also embodied knowledge about how to prioritize attention, how to multi-task, and how to stay on task for longer (by delaying attentional fatigue or by enabling a quicker recovery from that fatigue). Here mindfulness acquires value as a form of mental capital in relation to what has been called the “attention economy,” that all-pervasive “bio-political reality,” as Crogan and Kinsley (2012, 12) put it,

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, English-Lueck (2010) who documents well-being practices and technologies in post-industrial contexts, Murphy (2006) on the history of infrastructural well-being design, and Cooper and Dewe (2004) on the history of occupational psychology and stress management.

which treats attention as a scarce and thus valuable resource—itsself a consequence of the overabundance of information and knowledge streams that need to be attended to in post-industrial and media saturated environments—and which thus encouraged the development of a range of technoscientific interventions, intended to cultivate attention in more healthy, and profitable, directions (Beller 2006; Caffentzis 2011, 24; Cooper 2010; Franck 1999; Fuchs 2011; Hayles 2007; Moulier Boutang 2011; Peters and Bulut 2011; Stiegler 2010). Of these, two types of technologies have gained wide appeal. The first, and arguably the most influential, are pharmaceuticals such as Ritalin. The problems of neurochemical approaches, however, are legion, with much concern around their efficacy and sustainability. The second, less well-known but increasingly validated in the biological and psychological sciences, are meta-awareness practices, the most successful being mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is thus offering a renewed sense of hope in the politics of attention formation, providing, as it is said, a more “sustainable” means for intervening in consciousness. It is thought to be “sustainable” precisely because it involves the subject doing something with his or her own attention rather than outsourcing that skill to a biomedical technology. It is, in other words, a form of “self-regulation” rather than neurochemical regulation, and since such self-regulation requires discipline (putting attention at the service of the will), it entails the development of a skill set that is compatible with workplace demands of self-efficacy. On this point it is not surprising, then, that two of the avenues by which mindfulness has been made accessible to the public is through education (see, for instance, the increasing number of mindfulness at school programs), and through post-industrial working environments (see, for instance, the

growing industry of mindfulness at work programs), both of which stress the importance of resilient and enhanced attentional capacities amongst their students and employees.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.4.3: Mindfulness as a Technology for Eudaimonia in Post-industrial Capitalism

Though therapy and enhancement are both important, there is, however, an overlooked dimension of the practice, one that reveals, I argue, its most unique biopolitical dimension. Here it is important to note that mindfulness has acquired value not only as a form of therapy or method of enhancement, but also as a technology for cultivating affective fullness through practices of tranquility. On first glance, this may seem to be no different than the first point made about mindfulness as a therapeutic intervention, insofar as experiences of tranquility (for instances, calm, relaxation, equanimity, or bliss) are powerful therapeutic technologies, especially when dealing with affective problems such as stress, depression and anxiety. There is, however, something more complicated going on than that. As noted earlier, one of the goals and outcomes of mindfulness practice is an experience of affective fullness variously called calm, bliss, peace, relaxation, and so on (what I collectively called experiences of tranquility). What can be seen in the biopolitics of mindfulness, then, and the thing that makes it quite unique in technologies of resilience, is the appropriation of a culturally situated eudaimonic practice (mindfulness), for the sake of cultivating affective fullness (via experiences of tranquility), and which has been coopted in numerous public and private institutions for the sake of resilience, and particularly in the workplace for overcoming forms of post-industrial alienated labor. In so doing, mindfulness has in short done something that I

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<sup>4</sup> In regards to the second of these points, it is particularly significant that mindfulness has been adopted by numerous businesses in silicon valley, where it is presently being used in order to both counter the stress of working long days with digital technologies, and for enhancing attention so that employees can continue to engage in more complex computational tasks.

find no precedent for in workplace well-being programs, namely, it has discovered a way of harmonizing political economy and eudaimonia through the affective fullness associated with the eudaimonic practice of mindfulness. Since this claim provides the main point of this chapter, it would be useful to expand why I think this is unique, first by exploring the history of tranquility in the West, and second by explaining further its place in post-industrial capitalism.

First of all, it is important to point out that the concept of tranquility should not be thought of as referring to any one specific feeling. Rather, as Striker points out, it is better thought of as a collective term for a range of seemingly analogous experiences: tranquility comes from the Latin *tranquillitas*, itself a translation of a range of Ancient Greek terms, such as *ataraxia* (“freedom from trouble or anxiety”), *euthymia* (“cheerfulness or being in good spirits”), *athambia* (having a “mind free from terror”), *eustatheia* (“stability”), *galene* (“the calm or stillness of the sea”), and *hesychia* (“quietness”) (Striker 1990, 97–98). To say what is meant by tranquility, it would be useful to look briefly at one of those key concepts: *ataraxia*.

For Epicurus tranquility was *ataraxia*, freedom from *tarachē*, that is, from troubles, anxiety, worry, irritation, and it was the psychological analog to “aponia,” the state of being free from bodily pain (Annas 1993, 336; Striker 1990, 99–100). This was, as Annas points out, a highly pleasurable state—the ultimate pleasurable state in fact—it was the “pleasure of being in a state where you are functioning with no interference” (Annas 1993, 238). Striker thus summarizes Epicurus’s view of tranquility through the concept of “unperturbedness” (1990, 100), which he contrasts with the stoic view of “imperturbability.” As he says for Epicurus

Epicurus did claim that the happy person will always enjoy tranquility, but he did not claim that nothing could disturb him: one will mourn the death of a friend, for example, but since such grief can be overcome or outweighed by pleasant thoughts and memories, including grateful remembrances of the past joys of friendship, peace of mind will generally prevail (1990, 100).

By contrast, for the Stoics, tranquility was a permanent state of being unaffected by psychological distress, itself made possible by the cultivation of virtue, and the specific virtue of wisdom:

the wise person's mind is not just free from trouble, but imperturbable, beyond the reach of fortune's changes (1990, 101).

For the Stoics, this freedom from suffering characteristic of the wise person was called *apatheia* (literally freedom from the passions), and it led to its opposite sentiment: *eupatheia*—joy or tranquility. As Striker continues (in reference to Seneca in particular),

Seneca dwells at great length upon the pleasures... that come with tranquility, which is treated rather like a virtue. He enthusiastically describes the immense joy and infinite serenity of the person who has finally achieved virtue. The sage will rejoice in a wonderful sense of relief and freedom, realizing that he has reached absolute security—nothing in this world can present a danger for him any more (1990, 101).

As implied here, tranquility was not an unachievable ideal, but a real experience. Though it might be difficult to realize it in practice, it was not impossible. What it required was commitment to the virtue of wisdom, itself possible by dedicating one's life to philosophy. Indeed, there was even living proof of the possibility of such a life in the case of several philosophers who acted as exemplars of tranquility. Arguably the most famous of these was Socrates himself, who illustrated on numerous occasions how a commitment to virtue and wisdom led to a state of imperturbability—it was he, after all, who calmly waited for death in his prison cell, his commitment to virtue eclipsing any fear or worry about his final moments. But it can also be found in others, such as Pyrrho. As Striker says, "Pyrrho is described by ancient biographers as a living paradigm of *ataraxia*... Pyrrho obviously impressed his

contemporaries—not just his followers—by his detachment from everything that tends to be of concern to ordinary human beings” (Striker 1990, 102). In either case, the point is that tranquility was the mark of one’s commitment to virtue and wisdom, of the contemplative life, and thus of eudaimonia.

The notion of tranquility has always had some place in Western theories of happiness. The theme can be found not only in ancient, medieval and renaissance thinking of happiness, but in modern thought too, where it took a prominent place among the writings of the romantic poets (for instance, Wordsworth and Coleridge) and the American transcendentalists (for instance, Emerson and Thoreau). Around the nineteenth century, however, an important change occurred in the meaning of tranquility outside of the arts. This change came from the biological and psychological sciences, and was influenced largely by the history of stress research. Through that history, tranquility was changed in several ways: first, it was retranslated into the notion of “calm” or “relaxation”; second, it was defined as a temporary mode of affect as opposed to being a permanent state of being (in contrast to the Stoic view of imperturbability); finally, and most importantly, it was shown to be cultivated through different means (rather than being the outcome of virtue and wisdom, this new physiological calm was cultivated through everyday biological and psychological activities designed to temper the activation of the central nervous system).

This change in the meaning of tranquility owes much to the theory of homeostasis—the theory that the body maintains itself in a relatively stable, though not fixed, physiological state, as a result of the adaptive mechanisms of the central nervous system. As Walter Cannon, one of the earlier theorizers of homeostasis, describes that concept:

“The coordinated physiological processes which maintain most of the steady states in the organism are so complex and so peculiar to living beings -

involving, as they may, the brain and nerves, the heart, lungs, kidneys and spleen, all working cooperatively - that I have suggested a special designation for these states, homeostasis. The word does not imply something set and immobile, a stagnation. It means a condition - a condition which may vary, but which is relatively constant” (Cannon 1939, 24)

For Cannon, then, basic to the idea of homeostasis was that of self-regulation: the body was able to regulate itself through specific adaptive mechanisms, which allowed it to respond to the constant disturbances from the external environment. As Cooper and Dewe put it, “For this internal environment to be consistently maintained, every change and every reaction in relation to the external environment must be accompanied by a compensatory process in the inner environment of the person” (Cooper and Dewe 2004, 15). A key process here was stress. External stressors, in the form of perceived or imagined threats or actual bodily harm, upset the balance of the body, and thus required a series of compensatory mechanisms to bring back the body to stasis. The first such response was the fight or flight mechanism. This was the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, and it functioned to allow quick judgments and action to be made so that speedy decisions could be taken to avoid the harm in question (by either fleeing that harm or subduing it). By itself, however, the fight or flight response did not bring the body back to stasis. On the contrary, since this “stress response” could be harmful to the body over the long term, it was in many ways an example of a bodily disequilibrium. But that disequilibrium had an important function: to remove the agent from any immediate harm coming from the external environment. It was not until much later that a second compensatory mechanism was identified in what was called the “relaxation response.” If the fight or flight response was the activation of the sympathetic nervous system in conditions of stress, there was, it was argued, a corresponding compensatory mechanism from the parasympathetic nervous system, which inhibited the actions of the fight or flight



response, and thus brought the body back to a state of calm or rest, which in biological terms was conceived of as returning to homeostasis.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of the “relaxation response,” however, is firmly located in the history of meditation research. In 1968, Herbert Benson was studying the psychology and physiology of stress at Harvard Medical School. He was interested in the growing rates of hypertension in the US, and its connection to atherosclerosis, heart attacks and strokes. Hypertension, he thought, was the outcome of long-term stress, and long-term stress was itself caused by the pressures of modern life, which was constantly triggering in subjects a chronic and involuntary fight or flight response. Inspired by the work of Neil E. Miller, who had shown that involuntary mechanisms might be influenced by biofeedback, Benson started to look at how biofeedback might counter hypertension (Harrington 2008, 214–215). In 1968, however, he was, by chance, approached by members of the Transcendental Meditation community.<sup>6</sup> They told him that they could control blood pressure not through biofeedback, but through will, and they suggested that he study them (Harrington 2008, 215). Though reluctant at first, Benson agreed. His results were profound. Meditation, he found, could induce states similar to the hypometabolism found in sleep or hibernation, as well as decreased blood lactate levels, alpha wave production in the brain, and heart rate and breathing rate. He named this

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to point out that this physiological theory of tranquility is still conceived of in eudaimonic terms, for it is only by being in a state of rest, and thus free from the conditions of stress (including worries and anxieties—the Greek *tarachē*) that one could cultivate higher faculties of “imagination, insight, and skill” (Cannon in Cooper and Dewe 2004, 16).

<sup>6</sup> The reasons for the encounter are complicated. The full story is told in Harrington (2008). In short, after a period of success in the US, the image of TM began to decline in popular imagination through association with the counter culture. In order to strengthen their image, the TM community turned to science to validate their practice, and started to seek out scientists who could show the truth of it through laboratory experiments.

set of mechanisms the relaxation response, and in 1975 published a book on this topic under the same name (Benson 1975).

Benson is important for a number of reasons. First, he was the first person to really show that meditation could calm the body after it has been activated by stress. As he put it, “the Relaxation Response *decreases* and *counteracts* the increased sympathetic nervous system activity that accompanies the arousal of the fight-or-flight response” (1975, 102; italics in original).<sup>7</sup> Second, given that he also saw chronic stress as being triggered by “modern life,” particularly modern working life, he opened the door for meditation as a health and wellness practice in the workplace. Third, he showed that involuntary mechanisms could be brought about through voluntary techniques – that, in cultural terms, the “mind” (or will) could control the “body.” Fourth, and following from this, he provided an argument for a practice based approach to stress reduction, as opposed to a pharmacological one through anti-hypertensive drugs, which were costly and have side effects as he recognized. Finally, and most importantly, however, he retranslated meditation into a language of biology. This last point is important, and so it would be useful to look more closely at it.

As Harrington notes, Transcendental Meditation is a mantra meditation: in that practice, one repeats a word over and over again as the object of the meditation (Harrington 2008, 211). Moreover, this is no ordinary word according to TM. The word itself is said to have divine properties, and when used as an object of meditation, it puts one in contact with the deities (Harrington 2008, 211). However, through his studies, Benson showed that the meaning of the word carried no special significance for bringing about the relaxation

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, as she adds, “Benson liked to talk about the fact that, by serendipity, the discovery of this reversal effect had been made in the very same laboratory where, two generations earlier, Walter B. Cannon had discovered the fight or flight response itself” (Harrington 2008, 216).

response. All one needed to trigger that response, Benson argued, was four things: a quiet environment, a mental device (to be repeated), the adoption of a positive attitude, and a comfortable position (1975). Repeating the mental device in the appropriate context for ten to twenty minutes would, he argued, regulate the autonomic nervous system back into a state of homeostasis. The relaxation response was thus a biological property used by cultures all over the world, and was not specific to transcendental meditation in particular, even if that meditation was a powerful way in which it could be triggered. Benson, in short, made the spiritual meaning of the word, or any meaning for that matter, irrelevant. The relaxation response was a universal capacity of the body, and it had no connection to meaning, and thus to the ethical formation of the subject.

Benson came to his results by studying transcendental meditation. It was, however, the pioneering work of Jon Kabat-Zinn that applied Benson's perspective to mindfulness meditation. Unlike Benson, who had no personal commitment to meditation, Kabat-Zinn was a practicing meditator and had been participating in and teaching meditation in and around the Cambridge area since being a graduate student at MIT in the late 1960s. It was not until 1979, however, during a two-week retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Boston, that he had the idea of an institution dedicated to using mindfulness for the sake of therapy. As he puts it:

I had a 'vision' that lasted maybe 10 seconds... It was rich in detail and more like an instantaneous seeing of vivid, almost inevitable connections and their implications... I saw in a flash not only a model [of mindfulness] that could be put in place, but also the long-term implications of what might happen if the basic idea was sound and could be implemented in one test environment (Jon Kabat-Zinn 2011, 287).

That test environment was the hospital. Hospitals were convenient sites, he reasoned, as they generally attracted people in such states of suffering that they would be willing to try out this

seemingly exotic and spiritual practice (Jon Kabat-Zinn 2011, 288). Even with this willingness to participate, however, Kabat-Zinn also knew that in order for his vision to succeed fully, he would need to translate meditation for the public: to make it “so commonsensical that anyone would be drawn to it”, and to represent it “without ever mentioning the word ‘dharma.’” (Jon Kabat-Zinn 2011, 287–288). Inspired by Benson’s work, he chose the term “stress reduction,” rather than meditation, to make it more palatable to a public who might otherwise be put off by the Buddhist overtones of meditation practice. And though he later added “mindfulness-based” to the “stress reduction,” he was keen to emphasize that mindfulness here simply referred to the basic phenomenological technique of “moment-to-moment awareness” rather than any kind of esoteric or mystical activity stemming from an unfamiliar Eastern religion (Jon Kabat-Zinn 1991, 2). He also changed the goals of mindfulness. Instead of being for the sake of nirvana or enlightenment, the intention was now a therapeutic one, done for the sake of alleviating suffering and promoting well-being. And perhaps most significantly of all, he also made it fit in with the lifestyles of the average American whose time was largely spent at work and who, therefore, had little time for other non-economic activities. Thus, rather than commit to a lifelong ascetic spiritual practice, participants could now obtain the benefits of mindfulness after a simple eight week course of instruction and one which required as little as thirty minutes of practice a day during that time.

The same year he had his “vision,” Kabat-Zinn established the Stress Reduction Clinic at the university of MA medical school in Worcester and taught his highly secularized version of mindfulness to the public for the first time in the form of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. The program proved highly successful over the next

decades, as it was taken up in hundreds of hospitals across the U.S. and Europe. Moreover, more recently the program has been exported beyond the clinical environment to the laboratory. The majority of studies in the neuroscience of happiness, and in contemplative studies more generally, are, in fact, done using the kind of mindfulness practice formalized by Kabat-Zinn. His eight-week program has become, therefore, the gold standard for meditation practice in the experimental laboratory research on contemplative practices, as well as in the clinical setting.

It was Benson and Kabat-Zinn's research that kickstarted the whole process of studying meditation in the lab. It was also their research that opened the door to mindfulness being brought into public and private institutions as a health and wellness practice, and as a technology of resilience for workplace affective problems (particularly as a way of overcoming stress and of returning subjects to physiological homeostasis—what in phenomenological terms was called calm, rest, or relaxation). In doing so, however, mindfulness was thus retranslated from being a eudaimonic practice involving the cultivation of tranquility, and which was contingent upon virtue and wisdom, to simply being a biological mechanism triggered regardless of meaning, context or world view. Through their influence, then, what can be seen in the biopolitics of mindfulness is an attempt to bring affective fullness (and thus eudaimonia) into the workplace, but which has been achieved largely by retranslating that fullness into a language of stress reduction, resilience and calm.

All this raises a question: Is this adoption of mindfulness in the workplace a genuine biopolitics of eudaimonia, the successful integration of tranquility into the economy? There are two reasons for being doubtful. First, though it is possible that practitioners sometimes obtain experiences of affective fullness through stress reduction practices, it seems for the

most part that physiological calm is not the same thing as a kind of tranquility stemming from the cultivation of virtue. Second, as I will discuss next, it is important to note that experiences of affective fullness are not the ends of mindfulness practice. Rather, practices of tranquility, though they are often attended by a sense of fullness, are insufficient for the good life according to contemplatives, since such experiences are ethically neutral at best. As we shall see in the next chapter, what is missing from tranquility is the value of compassion. It is only when tranquility is a means for the compassionate life that it gains eudaimonic value.

#### **4.5: Conclusion**

I began this chapter with a discussion of mindfulness as a technology of resilience in global capitalism, illustrating this initially through the adoption of mindfulness by the World Economic Forum. After thickly describing an ideal mindfulness practice over the long term, I concluded that mindfulness gained economic value for a number of reasons: first, as a technology of resilience in global mental health (by providing practitioners with skills to cope with costly and debilitating affective disorders like stress, depression and anxiety); second, as a technology of enhancement and resilience in the attention economy (where it took the form of affective and mental capital); finally, and more importantly, as a technology of eudaimonia in political economy more generally (where, through the history of stress research, eudaimonic tranquility was retranslated into the language of physiological calm, in order to attempt to bring affective fullness into the workplace, so as to overcome affective problems of modern working life and post-industrial alienated labor).

## Chapter 5: Compassion

### 5.1: Introduction

February 20th, 2014: two years after the United Nations conference on global well-being (see chapters 1 and 2), a similar event is held by the conservative think tank the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) entitled “happiness, free enterprise, and human flourishing.” As with the UN event, the AEI conference was concerned with the possibilities of a political economy of eudaimonia. In contrast to the UN event, however, this concern did not include a desire for a “new economy” as such, but rather examined how the already existing free market economy could improve human flourishing across the globe. The president, Arthur C. Brooks, put the question as follows: “Is the free enterprise system still the best system to pursue our happiness, to lead a good life?” (AEI 2014).

Notice the “still the best” here. That the free market was the best system for ensuring global well-being was without doubt. Yet there were also reasons for thinking the free market had in recent years failed to live up to this standard, particularly in North America. As Arthur C. Brooks put it (in an op-ed piece following the event):

Historically, free enterprise has done this [provided opportunities for the good life] to astonishing effect. In a remarkable paper, Maxim Pinkovskiy of M.I.T. and Xavier Sala-i-Martin of Columbia University calculate that the fraction of the world’s population living on a dollar a day — after adjusting for inflation — plummeted by 80 percent between 1970 and 2006. This is history’s greatest antipoverty achievement.

But while free enterprise keeps expanding globally, its success may be faltering in the United States. According to research from Pew’s Economic Mobility Project, men in their 30s in 2004 were earning 12 percent less in real terms than their fathers’ generation at the same point in their lives. That was before the financial crisis, the Great Recession, and years of federal policies that have done a great deal for the wealthy and well-connected but little to lift up the bottom half (Brooks 2014).

For the AEI, then, the purpose of the conference was clear: to investigate the challenges to, and solutions within, the free market system in place today in order to further promote human flourishing across the globe.

The conference itself featured just two panels, one on “moral free enterprise,” criticizing the common view of the free market as inherently either amoral or immoral, the other titled “unlocking the mind and human happiness,” examining the latest neuroscientific and psychological knowledge about flourishing. What was perhaps surprising about both panels, however, was the guest of honor: the main speaker at the event was the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. And supporting him, providing insights on the latest “science of happiness,” were leading members of the Mind and Life (Diana Chapman Walsh, Richard Davidson, Otto Scharmer, and Arthur Zajonc), as well as various scholars and business leaders interested in free market capitalism and global well-being (Jonathon Haidt, Glenn Hubbard, Daniel S. Loeb).<sup>1</sup>

It was a strange thing to see the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people—a self-avowed Marxist—in conversation with neoconservatives on the topic of “human flourishing.” And it was a point of controversy for many: “I’m not happy about it,” one contemplative told me, echoing what seemed to be a common mood at the time (Heuman 2014). Despite the apparent clash of ideologies, however, the dialogue was apparently cordial—one might even say productive—with both sides recognizing the need to tackle the problem of global well-being without rejecting or overthrowing the free market per se.<sup>2</sup> Even the Dalai Lama was reported as saying, as several online reports following the event were quick to point out, that he had

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<sup>1</sup> The Mind and Life Institute (Hadley, MA) is the world’s premier institution organizing scholarly research on mindfulness and contemplative practices in the West.

<sup>2</sup> An apparent exception here was Diana Chapman Walsh, who was largely critical of the role of the free market in relation to global well-being.



“more respect about capitalism” as a result of the talks—although how much respect that was exactly was unclear, since he almost immediately retracted that compliment by saying “just my impression, capitalism only takes the money, then exploitation” (AEI 2014).

That the conference was in many ways a collegial one is not surprising. The Dalai Lama is a pragmatic politician. Though his political sympathies are socialist in outlook, that rarely precludes him from engaging in dialogue with parties seen as being at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum to him. In fact, in his public speaking arrangements, he regularly stresses the need to undercut ideological splits, which he tends to do by framing his arguments about the good life in terms of a “common humanity” and a “secular ethics.” The AEI no doubt also saw no contradiction in hosting the Dalai Lama. As Brooks pointed out “The founding principle of the American Enterprise Institute is that the competition of ideas is fundamental to a free society” (AEI 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the truth behind these characterizations, however, the collaboration reflects something more than simply respect for the ideals of dialogue or competition of ideas. Rather, it highlights how there is, across both the left and the right, a concern over the possibilities of a political economy of eudaimonia, that is, of human flourishing, in the twenty-first century. That concern, moreover, is not limited to the Dalai Lama, the Mind and Life Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, or, as mentioned in chapter 1, to the United Nations (although in that last case, even if it was, that would be enough, since the United Nations conference itself represented the intentions of over fifty nations). On the contrary, there have been, in recent years, a growing number of institutions which have taken up the

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<sup>3</sup> As Robichau notes, despite the AEI’s deserved reputation as being “libertarian and conservative,” its research activities are nonetheless supposed to be “nonpartisan, apolitical, and objective,” according to its own mandate at least (Robichau 2010, 26).

challenge of figuring out how to bring flourishing happiness back into the economy, including such agencies as the Koch Foundation (Koch 2014; Young 2014), the Gallup Organization (Harter and Rath 2010); and the World Health Organization (2013). That a wide variety of public and private institutions are invested in advancing global well-being through a political economy of eudaimonia shows that its absence is something felt quite generally.

But more important than that, it also shows that, for some reason, in many of those cases, an important vehicle for bringing eudaimonia back to society comes from a modernized Buddhism, especially as that Buddhism has been embodied in a secular mindfulness practice: as noted, the AEI turned to the Dalai Lama and the Mind and Life Institute for an understanding of the “science” of human flourishing and its relationship to the free market; the UN turned to the Buddhist nation of Bhutan as a model of gross national happiness; the World Happiness report (published for the UN conference) cited both Buddhism and mindfulness as key examples of eudaimonic ethics; and, as was illustrated in chapter 4, the World Economic Forum has offered over the past several years numerous panels on mindfulness as a technique for workplace well-being. There are other examples too, which, although less influential than these, are no less symbolic. For instance, in 2013, the World Bank invited Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh to lead a day of mindfulness, as part of their drive to “manage and balance the stresses of daily life” in the workplace (Kamen 2013); in 2012, the Templeton Foundation, whose core funding areas include both “Individual Freedom and Free Markets” as well as “Character Virtue Development,” awarded the Templeton Prize to the Dalai Lama for his work bringing together science and religion in the promotion of human flourishing; and since 2010, Harvard Business School, through the efforts of Bill George, has advocated forcefully the power of mindfulness as a way of

creating more mindful business leaders and thus working environments more conducive to the flourishing well-being of their employees.

How did a “modernized” Buddhism and a “secular” mindfulness practice become the referent for human flourishing in the twenty-first century, and the vehicle by which eudaimonia might be reintroduced into political economy? Eudaimonia, after all, is not a Buddhist concept, but an ancient Greek one. How, then, did an Eastern psycho-spiritual tradition find a prominent place in theorizing a Western notion of happiness? I have already touched upon these ideas in chapter 2 and chapter 4. Now it is time to expand further upon what was said in those chapters and, in doing so, provide the final missing piece from my thesis. As stated, homo-eudaimonicus is a being for whom virtue and wisdom are necessary for a flourishing life, and a being for whom those qualities are more valuable than either wealth or pleasure. But he or she is nonetheless also someone with great economic value in the West due to the affective and psychological capital associated with certain eudaimonic practices. Chapter 4 discussed only the affective and mental capital of that skill set, as gained through eudaimonic practices aimed at realizing tranquility. This chapter rounds out the argument, then, by discussing the role of virtue and wisdom as a path to a fulfilling life, and by showing how both of those capacities relate to economic and beyond-economic values in post-industrial society.

In making this argument, I note that there are three key reasons why Buddhist modernism has become an important vehicle for reintroducing eudaimonia back into political economy. The first is historical and has to do with the demise of the Aristotelian eudaimonic tradition in the West, and the need for a conception of eudaimonia to replace it (discussed in sections 5.2 and 5.3). The second concerns the history of science and has to do with the

success of the “contemplative science” movement in the past twenty years in making the case for mindfulness as a technology of eudaimonia (section 5.3). The third is ethnographic and has to do with the fact that mindfulness can, as it is practiced today in North America and Europe, be interpreted as a technology of eudaimonia (5.4). This last point provides the cornerstone to this chapter, so it is important to say a little more on it right now. As just noted, the epistemological point above is that contemplative science has, in recent years, made a case for mindfulness as a practice that leads to eudaimonia. Admittedly, contemplative science is not altogether incorrect in making this claim. It is important to point out, however, that the reasons given for it are problematic. In short, contemplative science neither offers a theory of what eudaimonia is, nor does it provide any biological, psychological, historical or anthropological evidence that mindfulness actually cultivates a flourishing happiness. It simply makes the claim that it does, repeating it enough times such that it has started to solidify as true in the imagination of contemplative scholars and practitioners. This does not mean, however, that no evidence exists for such a claim. In fact, that is what I will show through my own historical and ethnographic investigations of mindfulness in real world settings, namely, that mindfulness can indeed be interpreted as a technology of eudaimonia.

Making that claim, however, is not easy, due to an apparent problem of translation: as already mentioned, eudaimonia is not a Buddhist term, but an ancient Greek one, something that the majority of mindfulness scholars seem to have overlooked. Hence, it raises questions about the translations that have occurred in order to lead mindfulness scholars to the claim that eudaimonia is the ultimate goal of Buddhist ethics, as well as the translations that are

needed if I am to also make a similar claim in relation to contemporary mindfulness practices in the US, namely:

1. what is eudaimonia?
2. how did an ancient Greek term become the referent for Buddhist ethics?
3. what evidence is there to say that modern Buddhist practice cultivates eudaimonia?

Let me now address each of those questions in turn.

## **5.2: The Meaning of Eudaimonia**

Since the beginning of the dissertation I have been working with an open definition of eudaimonia as the theory that virtue and practical reason are necessary for flourishing well-being. This, I maintain, is a good preliminary definition. As moral philosophers Hursthouse and Annas point out, virtue, practical reason and flourishing are the three key terms required for any theory of eudaimonia (Annas 2011, 1; Hursthouse 1999, 9–13). I have, however, for the sake of the development of the argument, largely bracketed what was meant by those terms, as well as their relationship to each other. In this section I will close that gap by examining further what is meant by each. The intention is to provide an analysis that ultimately takes those categories beyond their Greek frame of reference, so that they can function as analytical categories that might be applied to a range of historical and ethnographic phenomena—in short, to make them useful for cross cultural analysis. In doing so, I draw on the field of virtue ethics. In contemporary analytical philosophy, it is far more common to hear discussions about “virtue ethics” than it is “theories of eudaimonia.” I suspect that part of the reason for this comes from the idea that “eudaimonia”—a Greek term—sounds ethnographically limited, as though it might only apply to ancient theories of

happiness, while “virtue,” though deriving from Greek via Latin, insofar it has been adopted as a general term of art in the English language, has greater cross-cultural applicability. In practice, however, I see no real difference between the two. Virtue ethics and theories of eudaimonia are largely synonymous, in that they both capture the idea that virtue and practical reason are necessary for a flourishing happiness. In this dissertation, I have tended to use eudaimonia as the favored term, since a political economy of eudaimonia seemed to represent the language of my fieldwork more closely, and foregrounded how in the discourse of global well-being it is the end that is important—the end in question being the flourishing happiness of the world’s population. Since, however, the means for accessing this kind of happiness are, as will be shown below, found in the cultivation of virtues, particularly the virtue of practical reason, one could just as easily have referred to it as a political economy of virtue, with little change in meaning, other than perhaps a greater stress on the “means” rather than the “ends” of global well-being.

Whatever one calls it, the field of virtue ethics provides the main inspiration for my analysis of the political economy of eudaimonia. Hence, I draw upon two classic accounts of virtues in philosophy which I see as having the most relevance to the current topic (Aristotle and MacIntyre), comparing them with more recent work in the “anthropology of virtue” to highlight the concept of eudaimonia as a concept fit for ethnographic research.

### 5.2.1: Aristotle

Virtue (*virtus* in Latin, *arete* in Greek) is usefully translated, in the first instance, by the word “excellence.” As Frede points out, in the ancient Greek world, virtue “originally designated any kind of outstanding ability or talent, whether it was of a physical, moral, or intellectual

kind” (2013, 126). Aristotle followed the Greek tradition in conceiving of virtue as an excellence. As he says, every virtue causes that of which it is a virtue to be in a good state, and to perform its characteristic activity well (NE ii.6 1106a15; trans. Crisp (2000)). But what does it mean to do an activity well exactly (postponing, for later, the question of what is specifically meant by characteristic activity)? To do something well, he says, is to do it “at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way” (NE ii.6 1106b20). It is thus about rightness of action. And so what is rightness of action in that case? As he clarifies, it is about achieving the mean between two extremes. Any action, Aristotle notes, can be done in extremes: “fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity, and in general pleasure and pain can be experienced too much or too little, and in both ways not well” (NE ii.6 1106b17). If too much, an action is done to excess, if too little, it is done deficiently. A virtuous action, however, avoids these extremes, and instead hits the mean between them.

An example would probably be helpful to illustrate. Take anger. One can no doubt imagine a person who gets too angry or gets angry too quickly, becoming tempestuous at the slightest upset. Alternatively, one can no doubt also imagine a person who is unable to summon the resources for anger even when the occasion demands it. Either of those imagined persons would not excel in the exercise of their anger. Their anger, on the contrary, would be a vice, a failure to enact anger in the right way. Aristotle’s view, then, is that the virtuous person falls in neither category, but is the kind of person who knows how to skillfully exercise anger in terms of the required mean for a given situation.

Virtue, as Aristotle points out, however, is hard to achieve, and there are two things in particular that make it so. First, as Aristotle says, the mean “is not one single thing, nor is it

the same for all” (NE ii.6 1106a32). Thus, what counts as right action is not fixed. What is considered as too much anger in one context, might be just the right amount in another, or even for another person in the same situation (MacIntyre 2007, 154). Second, following from this, there is no set of formalized rules one can rely on in order to ascertain what the mean is and so engage in right action. Rather, figuring out the mean, that is, figuring out what a particular situation requires in terms of right action, instead requires one to think about that situation and to make a judgment about it. And how does one judge, in that case? As Aristotle says, “one should rationally choose the mean” (NE vi.1 1138b18). It is the virtuous exercise of this capacity for rational thinking, what he calls practical reason (*phronesis*), that allows one to judge well.

There are three key elements to practical reason for Aristotle: desire, deliberation, and a rational choice based upon that deliberation. First, desire: all desires aim at what is seemingly good for a person. But desires might also be mistaken about the good. People desire all kinds of things, and not always what is best for them. Hence, Aristotle distinguishes between what one thinks (pre-reflexively) is good for oneself, and what actually is (and one knows is) good for oneself as a result of careful deliberation. As MacIntyre puts it, there is in Aristotle, “a crucial distinction between what any particular individual at any particular time takes to be good for him and what is really good for him as a man” (2007, 150). Given this discrepancy, however, one needs a way of distinguishing which desires are the “correct” ones, i.e., which desires are those that genuinely aim at the agent’s good, and those which do not. For that one needs deliberation. In deliberation one rationally judges whether something is good for oneself or not. Such deliberation is holistic and teleological. It is not, in other words, concerned merely with individual decisions, such as what I should have for lunch



today, or how I should complete a particular task, but with what I should aim for in life in general. As Aristotle says, “It seems to be characteristic of the practically wise person to be able to deliberate nobly about what is good and beneficial for himself, not in particular respects, such as what conduces to health or strength, but about what conduces to living well as a whole” (NE vi.5, 1140a25). Since, however, what is good for a whole life determines the particular decisions one needs to make in that life, deliberation also entails rationally appraising not just the end of life, but also the means for achieving that end. Thus, with a deliberative understanding of what the good is, one needs to judge what actions would most likely bring that about, given one’s circumstances. As he says, “good deliberation will be correctness with regard to what is useful towards the end” (NE vi.9, 1142b30).

Once the agent has deliberated about the ends and means of his or her life, a “rational choice” is then made based upon that practically wise understanding. Rational choice thus leads to action. As he says, “Practical wisdom gives commands, since its end is what should or should not be done” (NE vi.10 11439). Significantly, this rational choice has all the force of logical necessity. As MacIntyre points out, practical reason is a kind of logic, a teleo-logic, which for Aristotle takes the form of a practical syllogism, in which the action (the conclusion) is entailed by the premises and the reasoning about those premises (which was provided by the deliberation on desires) (2007, 161–162).

Thus, practical reason, one might say, is *the intellectual virtue of correctly appraising and enacting the good life*, insofar as it provides true premises, valid reasoning, and therefore sound conclusions about what is in one’s best interests. That said, as Aristotle points out, “practical wisdom cannot be scientific knowledge” (NE vi.5 1140b). What prevents it from being a science is the fact that judgment concerning the good is irreducible. That is to say,

just because one might know what the good is through deliberation, does not mean one can deduce from that what one should do on any particular occasion. There are no formalized rules for how to live the good life. Rather, knowledge of how to proceed toward the good relies on judgment, and good judgment comes from virtue, specifically the intellectual virtue of practical reason, something which itself comes only from experience or from the teachings of other experienced and practically wise persons (NE vi.8 1142a).

As noted before, practical reason involves an understanding of the good. The question, then, is what is that conception of the good that is revealed to the practically wise person? It is important to point out here that Aristotle is not interested in any kind of good, but what is *ultimately* good for a person. What is ultimately good for a person is a person's *telos*, that is, his final end. Evidence that human beings have an end is revealed through their behavior. Human action is purposive, but the goals presupposed in such actions are nested: one does a to get b, one gets b to achieve c, and so on. There must be, then, some point at which those nested goals reach a terminus in an end point that provides the ultimate context for all the other actions. Such is the final cause of one's actions.

This raises a problem, however: if ends are nested, how can one discern what the end in question is? That is, how does one know that a specific value under interrogation is actually the final end and not simply another means masquerading as an end? Such confusion is no doubt possible for Aristotle, since, as he points out, many people often think, incorrectly, that wealth or pleasure are the ends of life, whereas in reality they are simply means. There needs to be, then, criteria for distinguishing means from ends. These criteria he finds in what he calls *completeness* and *self-sufficiency*. To genuinely constitute an end, a

specified good must be complete (i.e., pursued for its own sake) and self-sufficient (i.e., unimprovable by the addition of any other good).

As it turns out, for Aristotle, most goods are *not* like this, i.e., they are neither complete nor sufficient. For instance, all extrinsic goods (such as wealth and material objects generally) are never valued for their own sake, but because they enable the acquisition of other goods. They are therefore incomplete and cannot be the ultimate good. By contrast, what Aristotle calls intrinsic goods, though they are valued for their own sake (for that is the definition of an intrinsic good), the majority of intrinsic goods are only complete in a qualified sense. That is to say, although intrinsic goods are pursued for their own sake (and in that sense complete), they are also sometimes valued because they enable the acquisition of other intrinsic goods. In this category he puts virtue in general, which is a good in itself, but also allows the virtuous agent to acquire other intrinsic goods.

There is, however, a category of good which is “always worth choosing in itself and *never* for the sake of something else” (NE i.7 1097b; my italics). This latter good he calls “complete without qualification” (NE i.7 1097b35). Moreover, there is, he says, only one thing that seems to satisfy the criteria of being complete in this sense, and that is happiness (eudaimonia). As he says, making the distinction clear:

Happiness in particular is believed to be complete without qualification, since we always choose it for itself and never for the sake of anything else. Honour, pleasure, intellect, and every virtue we do indeed choose for themselves (since we would choose each of them even if they had no good effects), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, on the assumption that through them we shall live a life of happiness; whereas happiness no one chooses for the sake of any of these nor indeed for the sake of anything else (NE i.7 1097b).

In addition to being complete without qualification, happiness is also self-sufficient. To be self-sufficient, for Aristotle, means that nothing can be added to the good in question to make

it better. It is, as Crisp puts it, to be “unimprovable” (2000, xii).<sup>4</sup> Thus, if one can think of something which, when added to a particular good, makes that good better, then the good in question is not self-sufficient. (For instance, if one thinks a life of pleasure is the ultimate good, but one also thinks such a life would be better if one was also wise, then pleasure cannot have been the ultimate good, since it would not be self-sufficient, i.e., it would be improved by the other good of wisdom.) As with completeness, then, there is only one good that is genuinely self-sufficient for Aristotle, and that is also happiness, or *eudaimonia*.

There are several things to note about Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* at this point. The first concerns the relation between virtues and the ultimate good. As mentioned, virtues are intrinsic goods. They are pursued for their own sake. But they do not represent the ends of life. They are qualifiedly complete and insufficient. But virtues do allow one to acquire completeness and self-sufficiency, that is, they allow one to reach one’s *telos*, the ultimate good, a good called happiness. Indeed, that is the primary function of the virtues. They are, as MacIntyre puts it, “precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* and the lack of which will frustrate his movement toward that *telos*” (MacIntyre 2007, 148).

The second point follows from this, and concerns the relation between happiness and teleology. It is common to interpret Aristotle’s claim about happiness being the final goal of all human life (the “teleological axiom”), as merely an empirical claim that human beings always pursue happiness as their end. That may or may not be true as an empirical claim about human beings, but it does not quite do justice to Aristotle’s point. Rather, the point is a logical one—or, as I have said, a teleo-logical one. Human beings have purposes and goals,

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<sup>4</sup> As Aristotle puts it, the good “cannot become more worthy of choice by anything’s being added to it” (NE x.2 1172b30)

and insofar as these goals are nested, there is some end that provides the final cause for all the sub-goals. Human beings are thus by nature teleological, and this is the fundamental axiom that structures Aristotle's thinking. Often, however, humans are often unclear about what their final goal is and so one needs criteria by which to recognize what genuinely counts as a final end, and this is found in the criteria of *completeness without qualification* (never being for the sake of something else) and *self-sufficiency* (of being unimprovable). The claim about eudaimonia being the final end, then, is not simply an empirical point, but a teleo-anthropological one arguing that human beings are indeed purposive; that those purposes are given meaning in respect of their final end; that an end is only genuinely an end if it is complete and self-sufficient; that a conception of a complete and self-sufficient end does indeed exist; and, finally, that this end often goes by the name of eudaimonia, or happiness. Thus, happiness, in this view, is less a universal feeling toward which all human beings aspire, but more a folk psychological category for a universal aspiration for, and experience of, teleology. It may have the consequence of implying that all human beings desire happiness as their ultimate goal, so long as one realizes that it is completeness and self-sufficiency that mark that end and that happiness just so happens to be the psychological referent that most plausibly describes this. Does the distinction matter? For Aristotle it does. The distinction matters because happiness, as a general psychological term, is ambiguous. It has multiple meanings. Sometimes it is used to refer to what provides completeness and self-sufficiency to life, but other times it can be used to describe ways of life possessing intrinsic goods that are only qualifiedly complete, or sometimes ways of life obsessed with achieving merely extrinsic goods. Examples of these are when one confuses happiness with honor,

pleasure or wealth. In such instances one does not have teleological happiness, but social norms masquerading as ends.

That the ultimate good is eudaimonia, however, does not tell us what that is exactly. Neither does it tell us what it means to pursue that good as a way of life, nor which virtues are needed to acquire it. So the question now is what specifically is meant by eudaimonia? What way of life is both complete and self-sufficient? And how does one reach it? That is, which virtues are definitive of happiness? To understand that one needs to return to the notion introduced at the beginning of this section, namely, that of a “characteristic activity.”

As mentioned earlier, a virtue “causes that of which it is a virtue to be in a good state, and to perform its characteristic activity well.” By characteristic activity Aristotle means the essence of the being in question. And the essence of human beings, Aristotle notes, can be determined by noting which characteristic belongs only to that species of being and no other. For Aristotle, that characteristic for human beings is the capacity for reason, since it is what separates humans from animals and plants. As he says,

living is obviously shared even by plants, while what we are looking for is something special to a human being. We should therefore rule out the life of nourishment and growth. Next would be some sort of sentient life, but this again is clearly shared by the horse, the ox, indeed by every animal. What remains is a life, concerned in some way with action, of the element that possesses reason (NE i.7 1098a).

Although reason is the characteristic activity of human beings, there are two ways in which reason may be exercised for Aristotle. Reason may be practical, that is, applied to particulars. But reason can also be theoretical, that is, applied to universals. As such, each application of reason has its own corresponding virtue. In the former case, there is, as has been said elsewhere in the dissertation, practical reason (*phronesis*)—the ability to reason well in the realm of the practical for the sake of the good. In the latter case, however, there is what

Aristotle calls intellectual wisdom (*sophia*)—the ability to reason well about non-practical matters. As noted, practical reason cannot be the ultimate good, because it is only qualifiedly complete. It is not just for its own sake, but also for the sake of something else. Hence, one's telos must therefore be found in intellectual wisdom. And since the exercise of that virtue comes through contemplation, it is contemplation that is the most complete and self-sufficient life. As he says, “contemplation alone seems to be liked for its own sake, since nothing results from it apart from the fact that one has contemplated, whereas from the practical virtues, to a greater or lesser extent, we gain something beyond the action” (NE x.7 1177b). Thus, it is the *bios theoretikos*, or the contemplative life, that is the most eudaimonic for Aristotle.

Many authors have noted a tension between practical and intellectual wisdom in Aristotle, based on the fact that he seems to have equally good things to say about both virtues, and by the fact that the latter life looks to be the polar opposite of the former. For Aristotle, *phronesis* is concerned with worldly affairs, where as *sophia* is the most disengaged of activities, concerned with the logic of pure thought. One way out of that tension, however, is to recognize, as Aristotle does, that both are necessary: practical reason, in the form of political activity, supplies the resources that are needed to develop intellectual wisdom. According to Aristotle, both virtue and eudaimonia need resources in order to be exercised. There are two main types of resources. On the one hand, there are the material conditions of existence, and on the other hand, there are certain social values that appear to be necessary for cultivating virtue. The former is illustrated when he says that “happiness obviously needs the presence of external goods... since it is impossible, or at least no easy matter, to perform noble actions without resources” (NE i.8 1099a30) and when he says

“because the happy person is human, he will also need external prosperity; for human nature is not self-sufficient for contemplation, but the body must be healthy and provided with food and other care” (NE x.8 1178b35). The latter, however, can be seen when he says: “being deprived of some things—such as high birth, noble children, beauty—spoils our blessedness. For the person who is terribly ugly, of low birth, or solitary and childless is not really the sort to be happy, still less perhaps if he has children or friends who are thoroughly bad, or good but dead” (NE i.8 1099b). It seems, then, that the basic material conditions of existence, as well as certain social norms of beauty and prestige, or having friends and family, are all important to eudaimonia. That said, although they are necessary conditions, they are not sufficient. One needs a certain amount of those goods as means, but possessing them does not ensure that one will live a flourishing, contemplative life. The sufficient condition is intellectual wisdom. But it too relies upon the satisfaction of some basic needs, since the practice of contemplation cannot occur without them.

Practical reason provides those resources by figuring out what things are needed for eudaimonia, and in what amounts. Indeed, the amount is crucial since one needs just enough to satisfy the basic needs. As Aristotle says, “we should not think that someone who is going to be happy will need many substantial things, just because one cannot be blessed without external goods. For neither self-sufficiency nor action depends on excess, and we can do noble actions without ruling over land and sea, because we can act in accordance with virtue even from modest resources” (NE x.8 1179a). Practical reason, however, does not just allow one to determine the amount of resources one needs for oneself. Practical reason can also be applied for the sake of the community. Thus, practical reason is the intellectual virtue that the



politician needs in order to provide the resources the polis needs to enable its citizens to reach the final cause of eudaimonia.

### 5.2.2: MacIntyre

Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia is grounded in what MacIntyre calls a "metaphysical biology" (2007, 148). It is biological insofar as human beings, by virtue of their nature as a species, do have a final cause, and it is metaphysical insofar as that final cause is found in an activity that is seemingly disengaged from the practical affairs of life. This last point is illustrated most clearly when Aristotle connects contemplation with the activity of the gods.

As he says,

Such a life [the contemplative life] is superior to one that is simply human, because someone lives thus, not in so far as he is a human being, but in so far as there is some divine element within him. And the activity of this divine element is as much superior to that in accordance with the other kind of virtue as the element is superior to the compound. If the intellect, then, is something divine compared with the human being, the life in accordance with it will also be divine compared with human life (NE x.7 1177b26-31).

The contemplative life is thus the most divine life; through it humans share in the divine. This contemplation is therefore seemingly impractical and apolitical. As MacIntyre says,

the metaphysical contemplation... which furnishes man with his specific and ultimate telos... is nothing other than thought timelessly thinking itself and conscious of nothing but itself (2007, 158).

Such a conception of teleology runs counter to modern thought in a variety of ways. For instance, grounding teleology in biology goes against the presupposition of modern evolutionary theory, as well as post-modern rejections of grand narratives, while the specific image of metaphysical contemplation is ill-fitted to "secular" Western thought, which is largely skeptical about notions of the divine. The question, then, is whether Aristotle's account still has any use today. That is, if Aristotle offers the first systematic and influential

account of eudaimonia, but his conception relies on premises fundamentally at odds with contemporary thought, how can one think about eudaimonia without that framework? In short, how does one think about virtue, practical reason, and flourishing in the absence of his metaphysical biology? This is the challenge that MacIntyre takes up, offering a conception of teleology, and thus eudaimonia, that is grounded in history and culture instead.<sup>5</sup> Essential to his argument is a definition of virtue in terms of practice, narrative and tradition. I will take each of these in turn.

### *i. Practice*

MacIntyre defines a practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (2007, 187).

The definition is dense, and so it will be useful to unpack each of its components using a familiar example to illustrate, namely, that of playing the piano. First, as MacIntyre argues, to be a practice, an activity has to be sufficiently complex and coherent. It is unclear what constitutes sufficiency exactly in MacIntyre, or what the threshold is separating complexity from simplicity, or coherency and incoherency. At the most, he offers some common sense intuitions in order to at least represent the extremes. As he says, “Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is

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<sup>5</sup> In his later writings, MacIntyre realized he actually did need a biological and metaphysical conception of teleology. I will not address those arguments here, but for those interested see *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999).

not a practice; farming is” (2007, 187). Thus, although one can conclude that playing the piano is a practice, and striking a key is not, it is left unspecified when a particular arrangement of struck keys transitions into a practice. Second, the activity itself is socially and historically constituted. Playing the piano has a deep social history: the theorization of musical knowledge, the technical industry for producing pianos, the artistic communities that teach, write and perform different musical styles, and so on. One can play the piano alone (the social here does not preclude solitary practices), but such mastery is only possible against the background of that social history. Third, practices have what one might call intrinsic values. That is, a practice aims at the acquisition of goods that are internal to the practice itself—at goods that can only be reached through that practice and by no other means. Such goods are of roughly two kinds: the actual products of the activity and the skills the producer acquires in the process of creating that good. Thus, in the case of the piano, there is the musical performance or the composition on the one hand, and the enhanced skills the musician acquires through playing the piano on the other. These are internal goods as one can only acquire them by playing the instrument in question. Fourth, there are rules and standards of excellence by which the goods are acquired, such that, in order to achieve those goods, the practitioner must initially acquire familiarity with those rules or standards. Thus, playing the piano involves both learning established practical techniques, knowledge of music theory, as well as standards for what constitutes a good player in any particular musical genre. Finally, practices provide opportunities for developing new intrinsic goods. For instance, the piano player, once he or she has acquired a sufficient level of skill, acquires abilities that open new opportunities, such as writing a new musical composition, inventing a

new style of playing, or enhancing performance skills through a new technique or by improving an old one.

Many activities might constitute a practice, then, according to this scheme. As he says, “the range of practices is wide: art, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life, all fall under the concept” (MacIntyre 2007, 188). The point of providing this definition of practice, however, is not simply to highlight what a practice is, but to offer a preliminary definition of virtue. Practice based virtues are, he argues, the capacities that allow the practitioner to acquire the internal goods belonging to the practice. As he says,

A virtue [in terms of practice] is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods (MacIntyre 2007, 191; italics in original).<sup>6</sup>

As can be seen, such a definition of virtue is multiple. What constitutes a virtue depends on the practice, and since practices are multiple, so too are the virtues needed to acquire the internal goods. In being multiple, however, they are also disunited. There are many different kinds of practices (playing football, playing the piano, engaging in politics or science, and so on) and the virtues required by each of these practices may often be very different in kind and sometimes incompatible with one another (as, for instance, “justice and compassion” might be incompatible with each other in legal practice, a point made by Lambek (2008, 145)). Moreover, it is also clear that, insofar as practices are wide ranging and pervasive, there are ample opportunities to acquire at least some practice-based virtues in one’s life. In fact, it would be highly unlikely to meet anyone who has not acquired at least one kind of practical

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<sup>6</sup> Thus, practice based virtues are similar to what one might call a skill, and indeed, recent authors have argued such a thing (Annas 2011; Widlok 2004).

virtue. That said, there is, MacIntyre notes, another level of virtue development, which although related to these practical virtues, also goes beyond them. These are the virtues relative not to a specific practice, but to the whole of life. In contrast to practice-based virtues, these are not disunited, and not everyone attains them. Their unity is, he says, found in narrative and tradition.

*ii. Narrative*

In order to have virtues relative to the whole of life, there needs to be some conception of the “whole of life” in the first place, to which the virtues can apply. In the absence of a metaphysical biology, MacIntyre thus turns to what he takes to be the universal capacity for narrative to highlight how such a unified notion of the self is possible. By narrative, MacIntyre is referring to the fact that human beings conceive of themselves and their agency in terms of narrative, that is, as having a beginning, middle and end. Both the “self” and “agency” involve narrative in this sense, insofar as they involve telling stories of life as being bookended by birth and death on the one hand, and of aiming from a situated position towards goals and purposes on the other. Indeed, all intelligible human actions are what he calls “enacted narratives” (MacIntyre 2007, 211). And these enacted narratives are “teleological” in nature:

We live out our lives, both individually and in our relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us, some seem already foreclosed and others perhaps inevitable. There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a *telos*—or of a variety of ends or goals—towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present (2007, 215-216).

As he also notes, however, narratives involve unpredictability: “it is crucial that at any given point in an enacted dramatic narrative we do not know what will happen next” (2007, 215). Thus life involves both a move toward a telos, and the inevitable disclosure that the path there is uncertain, filled with mystery and sometimes even great pain through the various obstacles that prevent one from reaching that goal. Unpredictability can also stem from one’s own vague conception of the ends of life. That is, though life involves movement toward a future telos, often the conception of that telos is unclear beforehand, and even when we get some concrete idea of it, it may shift on the course of pursuing it and in light of the practicalities of what one thinks is achievable given one’s circumstances. But this lack of clarity and unpredictability over our ends is itself not a problem. Rather, it is what moves us to refine our conception of our telos, to give it definite shape, and thus identify ourselves as specific kinds of moral agents. As he says, “It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge” (MacIntyre 2007, 219).

This is where the virtues acquire their significance. The virtues that are relative to life (as opposed to practice) are those dispositions that provide the agent with a knowledge of what the good life is as well as the means for achieving it. As he says, the virtues

sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good... the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is (MacIntyre 2007, 219).

Aristotle referred to this capacity for judging the means and ends of life specifically by the term practical reason. As MacIntyre makes clear here (and in doing so echoes a point made also by Aristotle), practical reason is not simply one virtue among many, but represents the unity of the virtues, and what is needed to develop one's awareness of the means and ends of life.

### *iii. Tradition*

Though the virtues facilitate the development of an understanding of the means and ends of life, it does not occur blindly. The virtues relative to the whole of life require a conception, however preliminary, of the ends of life in order to get started. Without an early conception of the good, the agent would not be able to take the first step toward it and engage in the deliberation over the viability of that good or how to achieve it. As he says,

Without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists (2007, 221).

One acquires that conception not by inventing it oneself. As with practices, moral particularities are also socially and historically based. Rather, one acquires it from what MacIntyre calls a "tradition," which provides the moral agent with the conceptual and practical resources for making such judgments about the means and ends of life. As he says, "the individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life" (2007, 222).

What is a tradition exactly? MacIntyre describes it as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which

constitute that tradition” (2007, 222).<sup>7</sup> By the term argument, however, MacIntyre is not referring to the vexed attempt to prove others wrong, but to an ongoing dialogue about what the proper goods are for life. This argument may occur over long stretches of time. As he says, “Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations” (2007, 222). It is, then, a living discussion, one that is not fixed. The conception of the good life will likely shift over time, especially as it responds to changing historical circumstance. Moreover, like practices, the tradition is not closed. There is within it room for critique, and thus the extension of conceptions of the good. As he says, “all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition” (2007, 222).

As with practices, examples of traditions are wide ranging. It may apply to the world’s religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and so on). Equally, it may include the tradition of western politics as a shared discourse about what the democratic good is. Similarly both philosophy and science collectively represent a range of traditions. While education, healthcare and agriculture may also represent traditions of thinking about the good life. As he says, “when an institution—a university, say, or a farm, or a hospital—is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is” (2007, 222).

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<sup>7</sup> It is hard to say what a moral tradition is beyond this. As Porter acknowledges, “even though MacIntyre discusses tradition extensively, he never defines the term... nor does he situate his account of tradition in the context of other recent discussions” (Porter 2003, 38).



The virtues also have a role to play in relation to tradition. Virtues, in short, sustain traditions and the institutions that embody those traditions (2007, 223). As he says,

The virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in which that individual may seek out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context. Lack of justice, lack of truthfulness, lack of courage, lack of the relevant intellectual virtues—these corrupt traditions, just as they do those institutions and practices which derive their life from the traditions of which they are the contemporary embodiments (2007, 223).

It is important, then, on MacIntyre's scheme that virtues acquire their meaning from a tradition which provides conceptual and practical resources for deliberating about the good life, and that those same virtues extend that tradition into the future for the sake of coming generations.

### 5.2.3: The Anthropology of Virtue

This idea of MacIntyre's, that virtue, practical reason, and the good life acquire meaning only through a "tradition" in which they are embedded has led to a more general claim in philosophy about the need to contextualize virtue in its historical and ethnographic context.<sup>8</sup> This foregrounding of culture and history as a necessary component of the good life has, in fact, been for many a defining feature of modern virtue ethics, the element that distinguishes it from other moral theories such as utilitarianism and deontology, both of which are said to

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<sup>8</sup> As Mattingly says, "Philosophy's virtue ethics provides conceptual support for a historically and culturally shaped understanding of ethics grounded in social practice" (2014, 39).

reject historically situated ethics in favor of a universal moral system of rational principles.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the emphasis given to culture and history has also inspired a view that moral philosophy needs the tools of the qualitative social sciences, such as history and ethnography, in order to carry out the project of a “situated virtue ethics.” As Laidlaw says, “it has been natural for virtue ethicists to express the view that philosophy requires ‘a dimension of social explanation’ (Williams 1985: 131) or ‘an ethnographic stance’ (Williams 1986: 203-4), or presupposes ‘interpretive ethnography’ (Moody-Adams 1997: 169), or should be ‘descriptive anthropology’ (Baier 1985: 232)” (2014, 47–48).

Over the past ten years, that call for a situated virtue ethics has been explored through the anthropology of religion, moral anthropology, and medical anthropology (See, for instance, Asad (1993), Hirschkind (2006), Laidlaw (2014), Lambek (2000; 2008; 2010), Mahmood (2005), Mattingly (2010; 2014), Pandian (2009), Robbins (2004; 2013), and Widlok (2004; 2012)). This progressively emerging “anthropology of virtue,” as one might call it, owes much to the Aristotelian-MacIntyrean framework discussed above. Thus, from Aristotle, it acquires the concepts of “virtue,” “practical reason,” and “flourishing” well-being as key components of pursuits of the good life, while from MacIntyre it borrows the notions of “practice,” “narrative” and “tradition” to contextualize those concepts found in Aristotle. In doing so, the anthropology of virtue has come to argue for a historically and culturally situated account of moral subjectivity in terms of the cultivation of virtues. In addition to the Aristotelian-MacIntyrean influence, however, the anthropology of virtue has also been inspired by the writings of Foucault, especially those on discourse, techniques of power,

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<sup>9</sup> Not everyone agrees with that conceptualization, however. As Martha Nussbaum argues, the idea of virtue ethics as a distinct tradition situating ethics in relation to culture, tradition, and historical communities is a “confused story” (1999, 164).

techniques of the self, and ancient practices of *askesis*. Thus, by adding Foucault to the mix, anthropologists have situated virtue ethics not just in relation to history and culture, but to power too (Laidlaw 2014, 48; Mattingly 2014, 35). Several authors have, in fact, attempted to merge the insights of Aristotle, MacIntyre and Foucault in this way. Most notable amongst those is Talal Asad, whose notion of a “discursive tradition” (which combines MacIntyre’s concept of tradition and Foucault’s notion of discourse) has influenced a number of theorists in the anthropology of virtue on just these points (see, for instance, Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006), who likewise adopt and extend Asad’s notion of a discursive tradition). For Asad and his followers, a discursive tradition is an authoritative epistemic and moral framework, one that provides the context in which practices of virtue acquire their meaning and standards of performance. As he says, “A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice” (Asad 2009, 14). These discourses, moreover, are situated in a time and place. As he adds, they “relate conceptually to a *past* (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a *future* (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or the long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a *present* (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions)” (Asad 2009, 14). What can be seen in Asad and his followers, then, is a blending of Aristotle, MacIntyre, and Foucault to highlight the fact that discursive traditions, and thus virtue ethics, are separate neither from culture nor power.

One can contrast this focus on discursive traditions, however, with more recent writings in moral anthropology on the topic of “ordinary ethics.” Though similarly arguing for a situated virtue ethics, they nonetheless depart from framing that project primarily in

terms of “discursive traditions,” and instead locate practices of virtue in what Mattingly calls “cultural resources” (Mattingly 2014, 26). From this perspective, the concept of tradition is a specialized notion, a subset of the more general concept of culture, and to focus just on that concept of tradition would be to overlook the variety of everyday resources available in one’s culture that people draw upon in their cultivation of the good life. In that sense, tradition implies a degree of coherence that may be lacking in everyday commitments to virtue. As Pandian puts it, “certain postulates in MacIntyre’s work concerning the necessary coherence of a vital moral tradition—the unity of its canonical foundations, of its narratives of selfhood, and of its collective practices—ought to be loosened for a fuller realization of this possibility” (2008, 466). Pandian’s point is that the ways in which subjects cultivate virtue in everyday life is much more fragmentary than the idea of tradition suggest (2008, 467). This fragmentation is not a problem for anthropology of virtue, he admits. Virtue can still be cultivated in the absence of a “tradition.” Rather, the point is that the anthropology of virtue needs to widen its gaze to take into account the multiple cultural resources that subjects draw upon in the development of an everyday virtue ethics.<sup>10</sup>

In moving from tradition to culture, from disciplined virtue to everyday virtue, however, a certain tension has arisen in the anthropology of virtue about the capacity of

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<sup>10</sup> Mattingly’s (2014) “first person virtue ethics” amongst poor African American families in the US tells a similar story. Though deeply indebted to MacIntyre’s concepts of tradition and narrative, Mattingly is critical of the Foucauldian strain in the anthropology of virtue, which she sees as focusing too much on technologies of power and not enough on the experiences of those persons attempting to cultivate virtue in their everyday lives. Hence, she argues for a shift away from “third person” virtue ethics to “first person” virtue ethics. In the domain of first person she focuses specifically on the everyday virtues associated with familial care—the virtues of good Motherhood in particular—and situates the cultivation of these virtues in general cultural understandings of care (the “superstrong black mother”), and in relations of power (for instance, in the unequal access to health and healthcare). In doing so she offers a situated virtues ethics of the everyday.

practical reason. As Asad says, discursive traditions are “authoritative”: they instruct practitioners on the correct forms of the good life and they possess a variety of resources for that end. For instance, they have institutions (the authoritative center for that tradition); moral exemplars, teachers and general authority figures; texts (canonical writings plus commentaries on those writings); actual techniques of the self intended to embody virtues (prayer, imitation of moral exemplars, study of texts); conceptual frameworks for understanding the relative value of competing virtues (tables and hierarchies of virtue, for instance), all of which are oriented in terms of a specific conception of the good-life, which the tradition holds as the telos of self-disciplinary practices, and which practitioners reflect upon and adopt as the ends of their practical reason.<sup>11</sup> This, however, is where the problem comes in for the anthropologists of virtue. In the sophistication by which traditions map out paths to the good life and through the authority they possess on the matter, traditions are also thought to take the burden of practical reason off the subject (at least to some degree), and place it in the hands of the tradition itself, which comes to represent a kind of collective practical reason concerning the means and ends of life, and which the subject then internalizes by participating in the way of life it advocates. Thus, the capacity of practical reason (as the art of appraising and enacting the good life) becomes depsychologized, relocated and reified in the tradition itself, the structures of which the practitioner embodies by following its teachings. One could argue that this is not a problem in itself. A tradition’s

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<sup>11</sup> Thus, as Asad points out, in the tradition of Christianity, there is the institution of the medieval monastery or the Church itself (as well as the ritual practices that occur within those institutions: sermons, liturgies, etc.); the moral exemplar of Jesus Christ and the authority figures of the Church Fathers; the canonical texts (the Bible or the Rule of St. Benedict); commentaries written about these foundational texts; and the practices of faith, hope, charity, humility, prudence, obedience, and so on, that allow one to embody the virtues of that tradition.

collective practical reason, as the historical sedimentation of thinking about a way of life, does indeed provide important resources that practitioners draw upon in developing practical reason. Some of those writing in the anthropology of virtue, however, do not limit their arguments to that, and have taken the idea of a depsychologized practical reason much further. Let me give an example from one of Asad's students, Saba Mahmood, to illustrate.

Here is what Mahmood has to say about the practices of virtue cultivation amongst the members of the women's mosque movement in Egypt:

Even though I focus on the practices of the mosque participants, this does not mean that their activities and the operations they perform on themselves are products of their independent wills; rather, my argument is that these activities are the products of authoritative discursive traditions whose logic and power far exceeds the consciousness of the subjects they enable... The women are summoned to recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these traditions, and they come to measure themselves against the ideals furbished by these traditions; in this important sense, the individual is contingently made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions she enacts (2005, 32).

On first glance, it may seem that Mahmood here is simply arguing for the important role traditions have in cultivating virtue. She goes beyond that, however, to argue that discursive traditions are authoritative to the point that practical reason is reduced to *mere habit*. As she says, drawing upon Aristotle's notion of habitus to explain:

Habitus... is concerned with ethical formation and presupposes a specific pedagogical process by which a moral character is acquired. In this understanding, both vices and virtues—insofar as they are considered to be products of human endeavor, rather than revelatory experience or natural temperament—are acquired through the repeated performance of actions that entail a particular virtue or vice, until all behavior comes to be regulated by the habitus. Thus habitus in this tradition of moral cultivation implies a quality that is acquired through human industry, assiduous practice, and discipline such that it becomes a permanent feature of a person's character. Premeditated learning is a teleological process aimed at making moral behavior a *nondeliberative* aspect of one's disposition (2001, 838; my italics).

Thus, in Mahmood's view, the subject's practical reason is actually a nondeliberative habitus. Contrast this, however, with what Laidlaw says on the matter: "for Aristotle the

cultivation of virtuous dispositions is not the same as the inculcation of bodily reflexes, and so despite Mahmood's own protestations to the contrary... what she describes is closer to Bourdieu's habitus than it is to Aristotle's hexis... The habit of thinking of habit as unthinking is not an Aristotelian one" (2014, 75). Laidlaw's point is that Mahmood has misinterpreted Aristotle here. Practical reason is not mere habit. Rather, deliberation and judgment remain irreducible to ethical subjectivity. As a consequence of this interpretative slippage, there has been a growing number of voices in the anthropology of virtue arguing for the irreducibility of deliberation in navigations of the good life. As Mattingly puts it:

people do not deliberate about everything all of the time. Any adequate virtue ethics that takes moral experience seriously must recognize the importance of its habitual and nondeliberative aspects... However, if moral life concerns ongoing attempts to realize ground projects, if we take the *temporality* of morality seriously, in other words, then we can see that small moments and routine activities that, at first glance, appear repetitious, prereflective, or inconsequential come to take on depth as episodes in unfolding narratives of moral striving and as part of conscious commitments to realize particular versions of the good life (2014, 205).<sup>12</sup>

Let us call these ideal types in the anthropology of virtue, then: the first—the discursive tradition approach—desychologizes practical reason into the structures of tradition, structures which the practitioner internalizes through habit forming practices; the second—the ordinary ethics approach—though not blind to the importance of habit and tradition nonetheless gives greater weight to the faculty of practical reason as involving an irreducible element of deliberative judgment and which thus argues for a constantly vigilant subject who draws upon a fragmented set of cultural resources in figuring out the path to the good life.

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<sup>12</sup> A similar point is made by Lambek when he says: "Practice theory needs to attend to more than power, habit, or competitions of honor and taste and should attend to reasoned judgment as developed in recent accounts of Aristotle's *Ethics*" (2000, 310).

Below I look further at the role of practical reason amongst contemplatives in terms of these ideal types. My argument will be that one need not think of virtue practices in such a dualistic manner (tradition providing habitus, everyday life encouraging deliberation). Rather, in contrast to the discursive tradition approach, I want to argue that practical reason, in the form of deliberative judgment, can be cultivated through tradition, and that this is precisely what is happening with contemplatives, who are learning how to transform a habituated affect into a form of reflexive practical reason. In addition, however, and in contrast to the ordinary ethics approach, I also want to show how this practical reason is indeed a virtue. To put it another way, though I am highly sympathetic to the ordinary ethics approach of privileging deliberative judgment and criticizing the interpretation of practical reason in terms of habitus, I also think the ordinary ethics approach fails to distinguish the normative element of practical reason sufficiently. Practical reason is not just deliberating about the good life, as it claims, but about doing that *well*. It is a virtue, and as such an excellence, which enables the person to make well grounded judgments about what is in his or her best interests and in the interests of others. As a descriptive enterprise, the anthropology of virtue tends to fall short of such claims, perhaps seeking a scholarly neutrality as well as an anti-elitism. Consequently, it treats the faculty of practical reason as something basic—as something everyone has the capacity for—and not of admitting degrees of skill. What follows is an attempt to bring in that normative element. My point will be that traditions can provide practitioners with the tools for deliberating well, and that skill is beyond both habitual practical reason, and mere deliberation in everyday ethics. Before I show that, however, I first need to examine the history of Buddhist eudaimonia to clarify on what grounds mindfulness can be considered a technique of eudaimonia and practical reason.



### 5.3: Translating Eudaimonia: From neo-Aristotelian to neo-Buddhist virtue ethics

It has, in recent years, become something of a truism amongst contemplatives that mindfulness practice leads to a deep and lasting sense of eudaimonia or flourishing well-being amongst practitioners. Evidence for this can be found in a number of places. Consider, for instance, the following, taken from conversations I had with various contemplative scholars and practitioners over the past years:

Mindfulness uncovers our natural state free from suffering. When you get rid of suffering there's contentment, ease, and equanimity. And when equanimity is strong, you don't need anything, you're fine. So there's joy in the air too. You're not jumping up and down, but there's a taste of it, and you know it's there and it can't go away unless you forget about it. Either way, it's there still. Eudaimonia—I think that's there. Joy, ease and equanimity are the ingredients of that

— Judson Brewer<sup>13</sup>

If you go into the mental health field, if you ask what sanity is, people generally don't have an answer for that. There's positive psychology, and that partly comes out of the mindfulness movement, but otherwise the model is medical and pathological. That's not a view that allows us to understand what flourishing looks like. I think the view of contemplative psychotherapy and its practices provide the possibility for a working understanding of that flourishing, of deep sanity, as well as deep confusion.

— Paul Bialek<sup>14</sup>

What practice I do depends on what I need. I have a flexible attitude: I do whatever I need to flourish that day.

— Helen

As can be seen, eudaimonia, or flourishing as it is more commonly translated, has seeped into the imagination of contemplatives as a powerful referent for talking about the sense of well-being supposedly associated with mindfulness practice.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Contemplative psychotherapist, Naropa University.

Now consider the counterpoint, offered by Willoughby Britton of Brown University's Contemplative Studies Initiative:

There is no canonical referent for flourishing in Buddhism. Buddhism isn't about that. It's pretty much something we've made up. In fact there's a lot of Buddhism that is not about happiness.

Here it is useful to reiterate the point that eudaimonia is not a Buddhist term at all, but an ancient Greek one. As evidence for this lack of a Buddhist eudaimonia, one need only look at the Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, which has no mention of the term eudaimonia or anything similar to it anywhere in its 1300 pages (Buswell and Lopez 2013). It seems, then, that the idea of mindfulness leading to a lasting sense of eudaimonia is a fairly recent development. The question that now arises is: how did eudaimonia become the referent for the kind of well-being associated with modern Buddhist practice? There are two main points to consider here.

The first relates to the loss of Aristotelian virtue ethics in the West and the need for a conception of eudaimonia to replace it. Though it was not discussed in the above section on MacIntyre, one of the key arguments of *After Virtue* is that there has been, since around the eighteenth century, a gradual decline in virtue ethics in the West, as Aristotelian inspired virtue ethics was eclipsed by Enlightenment theories of rationality—deontology and utilitarianism most of all—premised in rational and objective principles for judging right action. As those accounts of morality gained influence over the next two centuries, virtue ethics was, MacIntyre argues, pushed to the fringes of moral culture, marginalized to the point of ineffectuality. Though one may want to question the exact mechanisms by which

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<sup>15</sup> For similar arguments about mindfulness as a path to eudaimonia, see Flanagan (2011), Ricard (2006, 19), and Wallace (2005).

virtue fell into decline, MacIntyre's broad thesis—that virtue ethics no longer has the dominant position it once had as a moral theory in the West—is generally accepted amongst philosophers (Frede 2013; Slote 2015).

During the middle of the twentieth century, however, virtue ethics started to reemerge as a topic of academic interest in the field of moral philosophy. This reemergence of virtue was influenced largely by Anscombe's classic paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958), but her insights were developed, extended, and criticized, by a range of philosophers from the 1970s onwards, for instance, Murdoch (1970), Geach (1977), Foot (1978), MacIntyre (1981 [2007]), Williams (1981; 1985), Nussbaum (1986; 1994), Taylor (1989), Slote (1992); Annas (1993), McDowell (1998); and Hursthouse (1999). This interest in virtue ethics in philosophy was also complemented by a growing interest in virtue and eudaimonia in other fields. The first was in economics and cognitive science where, since the 1970s, there has been an increasing number of empirical studies on "subjective well-being" (SWB), particularly around the idea of flourishing, fulfilling or satisfying lives. What is common to this tradition, one could say, is a greater reliance on empirical research methods as a way of understanding the elements of eudaimonia (especially as it is considered at the level of the population), and thus a greater engagement with public policy, insofar as the knowledge produced about eudaimonia is hoped to steer political decision making in a direction more conducive to the flourishing of the population at the local, national and international level. (For an early summary of works in this area see, for instance, Ryan and Deci (2001). For more recent examples, see Huppert and So (2013), Lewis et al. (2014), and Vittersø and Søholt (2011).) The second, and more recent development, is the study of virtue ethics in science studies (cf.

Daston and Galison (2007), Jones (2006), Shapin (2008)) as well as in anthropology (already discussed in the previous section).

Around the same time that this neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics was gaining credibility in academia, however, a neo-Buddhist virtue ethics was also gaining a foothold in North America largely through the psycho-spiritual politics of the countercultural revolution. As mentioned in Chapter 3, through such figures as Trungpa Rinpoche, Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, David McClelland, Herbert Benson, Francisco Varela, the Dalai Lama, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Pema Chödrön and so on, Westerners in increasing numbers became familiar with the wisdom traditions of the East—as they had been translated into a Western idiom—and particularly the practice of mindfulness meditation, as a path for cultivating a sense of long term sustainable well-being. These early writers never used the term *eudaimonia* to describe that sense of well-being. In fact, it was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century, when Buddhist virtue ethics crossed over with the research being done on subjective well-being, through the biological and psychological studies of mindfulness, that both languages started to collide, and *eudaimonia* became increasingly used as a key term for describing the sense of well-being that was supposedly associated with Buddhist practice (with those studies allegedly confirming that claim). The simple explanation for the emergence of a Buddhist *eudaimonia*, then, is simply one of cultural borrowing: in translating mindfulness for the public, contemplative science borrowed from the language of Aristotelian virtue ethics, in order to translate conceptions of Buddhist well-being into terminologies that a Western audience might better understand.

There have been two consequences of this appropriation of Aristotelian virtue ethics: the first is that contemplative science has installed as scientific fact the idea that mindfulness

practice leads to flourishing well-being; the second is that it has done so without describing what eudaimonia is—that is, without offering a cross-cultural theory of eudaimonia that would enable such a translation. It simply makes the claim that it does, repeating it enough times such that it has started to solidify as true in the imagination and experience of contemplative scholars and practitioners.

Despite having no theory for translating mindfulness into terms of eudaimonia, however, contemplative science is, I would argue, not altogether wrong on the first point. Indeed, what this dissertation has tried to show is that mindfulness can, in many ways, be seen as a technology of eudaimonia. Thus, chapter 3 emphasized affective strivings for teleology and the good life, chapter 4 discussed experiences of affective fullness as potential ends of life, and this chapter shows, as I soon argue, that mindfulness can be understood as a technique for cultivating virtue, and specifically the virtue of practical reason. Moreover, I will argue that mindfulness operates as a technique of practical reason primarily by working on affect, that is, by turning a pre-reflective understanding of compassion into a deliberative and reflective moral sentiment of compassion. Thus, a compassion-infused-practical reason becomes the necessary and sufficient condition for flourishing happiness amongst contemplatives. In contrast to chapter 4, then, which discusses affective fullness as a potential end of life, this chapter looks at an ethico-affective fullness. I turn to the example of Jay to illustrate.

## **5.4: Mindfulness, Compassion and Practical Reason**

### 5.4.1: Jay

I first met Jay in August 2013. At that time, he had just recently become a father, and had gone back to school at the age of 41 in order to train to become a therapist. His reasons for changing careers so late in life were several. In the first instance, he was looking for a job that could provide him with a decent income so he could take care of his family in the future. Since he and his partner had just had a child, they would be incurring more expenses, and Jay hoped for a career with some economic stability so that he could manage that. Yet, he also aspired for work that he could be stimulated by, and given his own personal interest in mental health from a lifetime of being a patient (Jay had been diagnosed as having “bipolar disorder” twenty years earlier), he reasoned that being a therapist would be a more intellectually satisfying experience than his previous jobs. There was also an ethical component added to his decision too: the desire to relieve the suffering of his imagined future clients. As he put it, “one reason I want to be a therapist is that people are suffering and they don’t know why they’re suffering. And it’s your job to sift through what they say, and their emotions, and identify what their problem is. It’s the idea of compassion, the feeling of wanting to help people.” Jay settled on the idea of becoming a therapist, then, as it was a way for him to balance out two competing imperatives in his life: to gain satisfaction in his economic conditions while simultaneously gaining fulfillment in a eudaimonic sense, by cultivating both the intellectual and moral sides of himself.

Jay was not interested in just any kind of therapy, however. Rather, he was exclusively focused on becoming a “contemplative psychotherapist,” and had consequently signed up for the only course that offered that in the US, at Naropa University’s department

of psychology. His reasons for choosing this path in particular stemmed from his own personal commitment to Buddhism, which had been growing steadily in him since he was an undergraduate student in psychology in his early twenties. As he told me,

While I was at university, my sister was doing meditation and would talk to me about Buddhist ideas. I didn't know much about Buddhism, but talking to her took it from this place of 'I would never do this strange, oriental practice' to 'this is pretty cool stuff.' As a result I took a class at the university on Buddhism, and started meditating as well. At some point I realized: my god, this is psychology.

Around the same time as he was introduced to Buddhism, however, Jay was also diagnosed with having "manic depression," what is now called "bipolar disorder." "It started when I was 22," he said.

Back then it was everything from beautiful visions, to sheer terror. It was paradoxical. I'd feel good, even though I was messed up inside. What I was getting from the inside was not coherent. And on the outside, people were totally thinking there was something very wrong with me.

Given his new diagnosis, his interest in Buddhism turned out to be fortuitous, for it offered him a way to navigate his illness experience, or so it seemed to him at the time. Though he was unclear to what extent mindfulness could treat "bipolar disorder" in general, he nonetheless admitted that meditation helped him to "stabilize his mind," to encourage "deeper awareness" of the contents of his own thoughts, and thus give him "some control" over his mental tendencies. As he summarily put it, "one reason I am able to function is that I've been involved in meditation." This was in contrast to the other traditions he had been exposed to growing up, which he felt had done the opposite:

Both Western psychology and Christianity caused a lot of problems for me, as there was no idea about how to work with my experience. Psychology just said we have drives and motivations, an unconscious, but there was no idea about how to work with that other than, say, talking to a therapist or taking a pill. Christianity on the other hand just said believe in Jesus, and that didn't offer any path either as far as I could tell. Buddhism gave me a path for learning to deal with my experience.

Although Buddhism helped Jay to navigate his mental health situation, his interest in it was also much more than that, for it was through Buddhism that he also acquired the means for exploring what the good in life might be. As above, he conceived of this in terms of a comparison with his prior religious background. Jay had been raised Christian, and was very much committed to that way of life at one point, to the extent that he had seriously considered embracing it as his calling. As he put it,

My family was very involved with the Church, and I was too. Being from a rural community in Montana there's a sense of Churches drying up to the point that there's a pastor that has to travel around. And so there's that sense that if we need to preserve this way of life then we need help doing it. I was way into it, and was considering a vocation as a priest. I was even thinking of going to seminary instead of college.

Over time, however, Jay gradually became disillusioned with the Church, and found in Buddhism an alternative tradition that supported him in his explorations of the good.

Buddhism started this process of me thinking about how to see the world and how to be in it. Until that time I had been Christian. But, for me, what the Buddha had to say in his teachings and the approach of the religion, it just seemed more truthful to me. There wasn't a whole lot of power play or unnecessary psychological garbage, which I felt growing up with Christianity.

How did the tradition support him in this regard? By the time I met Jay, he had been heavily invested in the teachings and practices of modern Buddhism for around twenty years, and had acquired an appreciation for a wide variety of its offerings during that time. In the first instance, Jay drew much inspiration from its framework of virtue ethics, which he saw as being represented primarily in the value of compassion. As he put it, "In Buddhism, love and compassion are the central tenets. My brain agrees that that's the way to go." Indeed, embodying compassion was the sufficient condition for achieving the ends of life: the cessation of suffering and thus the realization of long term well-being. "Compassion," he said, was "*the* path to happiness." But more than simply provide him with a conception of the



end of life and the virtue needed to reach it, Buddhism also provided him with a set of resources for embodying that virtue.

It would be useful to pause on this idea for a moment to see clearly the challenge confronting Jay. Jay struggled with his emotions. As he said, “A lot of what I feel is not clear.” Not only did he struggle with the alternations of low and high mood that were associated with his diagnosis, but he also felt he lacked access to a range of other emotions. As he said, “Emotionally I’m stunted, and that has to do with going through my childhood and being in a house where emotions were flaring - a lot of yelling and screaming. What I learned from that was that I don’t ever want to do it. So I have this approach within me that I need to be in control of my emotions.” Given these difficulties balancing his emotional life, how could Jay enact compassion as a virtue?

Most people, early in childhood, acquire some capacity for compassion on account of the cultural instruction they receive on moral sentiments while growing up. They thus acquire general expectations for what something like compassion might be and when it is needed. In that pre-reflective habitus, compassion is often understood to be a “feeling,” one which might also be conflated with a variety of other moral sentiments like sympathy, pity, empathy, and so on (that is, if the person has not taken the time to reflect on the subtle distinctions between those capacities). Attached to this “feeling” might also be an embodied understanding of the standards for when and how to express that compassion. I do not want to say that Jay lacked this important cultural knowledge, but it was also no doubt true that he saw himself as struggling to exercise the moral sentiments due to the dominance of other moods in his life. What would it take exactly to not only feel compassion, but to embody it to the point of excellence, such that it could orient a way of life in which Jay would be flourishing through

the moral sentiments? Moreover, even if Jay had not had any of these difficulties, the challenge would be no less significant. There is, after all, a big difference between simply having the capacity for compassion in an everyday sense, and raising the standing of compassion in one's hierarchy of values, such that it operates as the sufficient means to the ends of life.

At this point, a whole series of questions arises: what is specifically meant by compassion exactly (how does it differ from seemingly similar moral sentiments such as sympathy, pity, empathy, and so on)? What constitutes an act of compassion (is compassion merely having a feeling of concern or does one need to actually interact with the object of compassion in some way)? If one does interact with the object of compassion, how does one know that the interaction in question is really a compassionate one (that is, how does one discern compassionate actions from actions that could be taken another way—is, for instance, spanking a child when he misbehaves an act of compassion or one of meanness)? Continuing that line of thought, can there be forms of “compassion” that are not actually virtues, but vices (for instance, is indulging a child by giving them whatever they want whenever they want it an example of compassion as a vice, being kind to a fault so to speak)? Moreover, how wide is the scope of compassion (does it apply only to oneself, to family members, to one's countrymen, to all humans, or to all living beings)? And are there any limits to who can embody that compassion (can anyone adopt it—for instance, including those diagnosed with “affective disorders,” as Jay was—or is it reserved for only a select few, a moral elite, who specialize in it and take on the burden of helping others for the sake of everyone else)?

#### 5.4.2: Cultivating Compassion

All these questions about the meaning of compassion, which arise as a consequence of taking seriously compassion as a virtue, came up for Jay and for contemplatives more generally. Moreover, it was in the tradition of modern American Buddhism that they explored the answers to those questions, by participating in its way of life and drawing on its numerous resources so as to think through the meaning of compassion and what it takes to enact it. For instance, there were the various texts of Buddhist metaphysics, epistemology and ethics—an expansive written and oral tradition that stretched as far back as the canonical writings of Buddhism, to the more recent commentaries by the leading figures of the modern mindfulness movement. In those offerings, contemplatives found frameworks for thinking through moral agency, and advice on how this framework could be applied to everyday life. In fact, for many contemplatives, this had been their entryway into the contemplative life: a happenstance stumbling upon a book of modern Buddhism—for instance, Trungpa Rinpoche's *Spiritual Materialism* or Pema Chödrön's *When Things Fall Apart*—in which they had found much inspiration and which had led them to inquire further into the tradition.

Diane: When I read Trungpa's writings they were so simple and yet so direct. There was something about that directness that really got me. It was what I was looking for: how to manifest in a way that really makes contact with myself and others. That to me was important and I had been longing for it.

Mike: When I first read Pema Chödrön, it was the first time everything she said, everything, every time I heard it, resonated as a true statement about being human that I've ever heard.

In addition to those texts, there were also moral exemplars: persons, real or fictional, who, on the one hand, illustrated through their character the possibility that such a framework could be actualized in one's life, and who, on the other hand, offered guidance through their example and their teachings. For Jay, one important exemplar was the living embodiment of

compassion himself, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, who he greatly admired for being able to embody the moral virtues: “The Dalai Lama is able to have true compassion for somebody, to look at the situation from their point of view and work with their language in order to spiritually progress.” But there were numerous other examples too: the Buddha, the founding figures of the different varieties of Buddhism, the authors of canonical texts and their commentaries, numerous long time practitioners and teachers in positions of authority dotted across the landscape of American Buddhism. More generally, however, it was an abstract person that provided the main exemplar for Jay: the ideal of the Bodhisattva. As he put it,

The Bodhisattva is a person in Mahayana Buddhism who generates compassion and gives his life to the happiness of others—and in that way he becomes happy... compassion being the path to happiness. It’s a kind of right livelihood, as the Bodhisattva sits and figures out where they can be helpful, which isn’t very productive in the current sense of productive, but he is necessary for getting people to wake up. That figure moves from productivity to happiness for others.

For Jay, then, the bodhisattva was the embodiment of “right livelihood,” the ethical subject who gives up on the everyday means of his life to dedicate him or herself to relieving the suffering of others. The Bodhisattva was, then, the moral exemplar of self-transcendence, as made possible through the full embodiment of virtuous compassion. Such a model was, however, not an easy one to emulate. As he added,

A while ago I perhaps naively wanted to be a Bodhisattva. And even at Naropa they say we’re creating Bodhisattvas. In theory it sounds perfect, but it’s hard to do it in practice. I’m nowhere near having removed myself from the situations of life. I still have an agenda, I want to pursue my own ends. These things mean I’m nowhere near being a Bodhisattva. It takes hard work and it takes many lifetimes to get to that point. Just like enlightenment.

En route to becoming an ideal bodhisattva, however, Jay had managed to find a middle ground, a way to keep in touch with that image without rejecting the economic altogether, which still had a hold on him. This he found in the image of the therapist, who embodied that

commitment to compassion as a form of right livelihood in an everyday sense. Through the art of therapy Jay could dedicate his life to compassion without fully transcending those desires of the everyday that had a hold on him.

Besides exemplars, there were also the institutions where those figures resided, where their teachings were given, and where communities of practitioners could gather in order to acquire and internalize the Dharma (for instance, monasteries, retreat centers, stress reduction clinics, wellness centers in schools and universities, bookshops, meditation centers, and so on). For Jay the contemplative life had been found largely at meditation centers and retreats in the past, and they provided him with periodic and fragmentary access to the institutional and communal resources of the contemplative life. At Naropa, however, that way of life was woven into every aspect of the curriculum, providing him with long-term access to his tradition and to a community that seemed to be dedicated to the same path as he was.

The most salient resource, however, besides the texts, exemplars and institutions, was the practice of mindfulness meditation itself. It was through mindfulness that one “discovered,” as it was said, the truth of the dharma, and thus the answers to questions about the meaning of compassion. How did mindfulness do this exactly? Before answering that question, it is important to recall what has already been said about the practice. As noted in the previous chapter, there were numerous highly valued moments in the cultivation of mindfulness, the most notable being the cultivation of experiences of tranquility, forms of affective fullness that occurred as a result of different types of absorption in a meditation object. Such experiences, however, were not the ends of meditation, even if they did lead to experiences of fullness. Teachers and advanced practitioners were, in fact, well aware of the problem of mistaking states of affective fullness as the ends of practice. To conflate the two

made mindfulness appear like a quietist or egotistical practice: solely about becoming immersed in a state of pleasurable absorption, something that lacked any ethical significance. To avoid this charge, tranquility was said to be a kind of means, not the end, of meditation, the purpose of which was to stabilize attention, to free one's "mind" from the distractions and distortions that came from everyday life, and to enter a state of quiet equanimity, from which one could see more clearly the truths of the Dharma—in this case, the truth of compassion.

Tranquility was thus the means to compassion. Having quieted the mind, one continued the practice of mindfulness with the hope of "discovering" a compassion that was said to already exist in the space opened up by tranquility:

Karen: Meditation is a tutorial in making friends with yourself. It's about training the mind. But training the mind for what? To reveal the qualities it already has; to uncover those qualities, like compassion.

Paul: This is the point in Buddhism: in your experience what do you find? In your own mind, what do you find? What tends to happen when you investigate what factors seem wholesome? What do you find when you progress towards the direction you're going in? Definitely in terms of Buddhist psychology there are values like non-harm, peace, and compassion. But in that tradition it is said if you investigate your own experience through mindfulness you'll come to the same conclusion.

This uncovering was described at Naropa as revealing one's "brilliant sanity," a term coined by their founder Trungpa Rinpoche to describe how, no matter what one's affective and psychological tendencies were, the basic ontology of mind was clearness, calm and compassion. The mind was inherently sane, so went the philosophy at Naropa, and that sanity was inherently compassionate.

What were the techniques of uncovering this inherent sanity and compassion through mindfulness? Since tranquility and compassion were, to borrow MacIntyre's term, "intrinsic goods" of mindfulness practice, if one practiced mindfulness with the right kind of effort and intention, then, such goods were guaranteed. That being said, there were also many

techniques for making sure one could realize those intrinsic goods. An essential first step was the deconstruction of habit. Habit was considered, in fact, the very opposite of mindfulness.

As one teacher put it,

Jenny: What is mindlessness? It's operating out of habit. That's what it is. Operating out of habitual states of mind, which when unexamined feel perfectly normal and accurate, but which are largely learned and lead to all kinds of suffering through reactivity. We spend much of our lives saying "this is ok, but that's not ok," or "I'll do that, but not this." That's the kind of reactivity I'm talking about. But when you start to rest and relax in this open way, any state of mind can arise, and there's a sense of growing ok-ness about it all, basic ok-ness. And then it just starts to expand like that. Basic ok-ness that you could also call great compassion and great joy.

Mindfulness, then, broke down those "reactive" habits. By inviting the meditator to "simply observe" those patterns, mindfulness opened up a space between the habits of interiority, and the tendency to enact whatever behaviors were ordinarily projected by those habits.

It's a matter of bringing awareness to habits; we keep expanding the arena of our awareness without shutting down into habit. As you observe them, you realize that those habitual states of mind cease to have control over you. And as you experience whatever the states of mind or habits are, you start to see that you're not controlled by them, as there's a spaciousness around them.

The next step was to learn how to read that "space" opened up between thought and action in terms of affect, and of compassion in particular. Mindfulness meditation practices were, in fact, constantly embedded in a discourse that directed the practitioner to read that space of interiority in terms of compassion. To that end there were explicit meditations on compassion. Here contemplatives mediated on the feeling of compassion itself, using imagery of loved ones and of memories of compassionate moments, to relive that sentiment in one's body and use it as an object of mindfulness practice. An important practice in this regard was Tonglen meditation, which involved projecting an image of suffering on to the breath as one breathed in, and then imagining the release of that pain as one released the breath. One contemplative, Diane, described what she did as follows:

Tonglen instruction—that's breathing in the pain and breathing out the medicine. I remember during a three week retreat I was given that instruction and when that happened it was so easy to breath in the pain of someone I really cared about, and breath out the remedy or medicine. It was a powerful experience. I can't remember what I did the first time, because it was such a long time ago, but what I do now is... I do it in different ways... I see that person, I visualize them. For instance, with my father, who had a lot of heart issues, I would breath in what I thought was his pain based on how he described it and I would feel it in my heart, and then I would breath out relaxation for him or kindness. Sometimes I would breath in physical pain and emotional pain. I would just work on those different levels. And I would actually feel it. It's very much based on feeling for me. And if it isn't then it's only mental and not much happens for me. So yeah, it's about feeling it. I would then do the same practice for others, imaging strangers in similar pains, or even my enemies. If someone who I didn't get along with set me off, I could breath in some kind of pain and breath out the antidote. And this leads to a kind of emotional generosity that allows me to think about other beings who I don't even know who have heart issues.

In Tonglen, then, by progressing through different types of objects of suffering (oneself, family members, enemies, strangers), a practitioner widens the scope of compassion. In so doing, he or she learns about, and comes to embody, the meaning of compassion as an ethical virtue: the wish to limit or end the suffering of all beings, and the commitment to which marks the ideal of the Bodhisattva.

Compassion was not just an ethical virtue, however, but an epistemic one too. That is, it included not merely a desire to end the suffering of all beings, but the knowledge of how to do that.

Paul: When you have that quality of non-struggle you know much better what to do in the relative world of appearances because you're not fixed in your views. You're able to respond to the relative world of appearances, not based on your memorization of different categories, but based on what needs to happen. Compassion is the capacity to tend to what needs to happen in the relative world based on the clarity of your mind, or heart, or whatever you want to call it.

Liam: So you notice and notice and notice, and it's boring, and you notice the boring, and then the frustration, then all of a sudden it just falls away. It's incredible, it just falls away. All of a sudden you enter into the world differently, you hear sound differently. The same person will interact with you



and you'll feel different. You'll interact with them in a new way, in a way that's effortless. That's doing by non doing, action through non action; doing, and all gets done. It's very ordinary. But all of a sudden there's this effortless ease that you go through life with.

In compassion, then, one knew what the goal of life was (to end suffering), but one also knew how to act so as to bring that about. This knowledge was not one based in habit, but in reflection on the nature of suffering and a judgment about how to work with that. This knowledge was described as an effortless knowing of what to do, and which led automatically to the required action through that knowledge.

#### 5.4.3: Hospitalization

When I first met Jay he was doing well. Granted, he had his ups and downs, but for the most part things were progressing well for him: not only did he gain much fulfillment from being a father, he was steadily realizing his goal of becoming a therapist, and was connecting to a tradition of modern Buddhism through which he was exploring the good life. If to flourish is, as Mattingly says (2014, 9), to live a good life, or at least to be in reach of the resources for imagining and actualizing what a good life could be, then Jay seemed to be flourishing in some sense.

Several months later, however, Jay was in hospital, recovering from a “manic episode,” as he put it, which had left him “delusional,” and “incapacitated.” It is unclear, he told me, what caused it exactly. He admitted that he had stopped taking his medication (against the advice of his doctor) just prior to the event, but he was in general ambivalent about whether this was significant or not. Whatever the cause, the effects were dramatic. “My life was utterly destroyed,” he said, “and now I have to start from scratch again. I lost everything: my home, wife, car, possessions.”

I was not around when Jay was hospitalized. By that time I had finished fieldwork at Naropa, and had moved elsewhere to continue my research. I did not find out about Jay's hospitalization, in fact, until several months later, after he had recovered. We talked at that time, and he was eager to tell me about his experiences. He told me about the lead up to the event: how he had become increasingly "delusional," convinced that he was a person of great importance—a third party candidate, as he said, for the presidency, and someone who the secret service was protecting. He told me about how, after he recovered, he was embarrassed about these delusions, and at having been so "irrational" for so long: "Delusions are embarrassing. You come back to reality and realize what you did and said, and you're embarrassed that that's what you thought or did. I just lost touch with reality at some point. How the hell was I thinking that way for so long?" He also told me of how, in the recovery period, it was largely because of the care his nurses and doctors that he was able to return to his old self.

I can't tell whether medication or meditation helped me. But Boulder Community Hospital helped me a great deal. They had a lot of compassion, and whenever a mental health professional has compassion it makes a big difference in recovery. When you have a mental health issue, you're fragile, and how the therapist responds to that makes a big difference to being able to process things. If the therapist has a loving attitude towards you, they're not going to shatter your peace of mind. And they can see things from your point of view. Believe me, that contemplative piece makes a big difference.

As he was telling me all this, it struck me how reliant on others he had been during that moment in his life, and how the hospital staff had taken over primary responsibility for managing his well-being. It also struck me how disconnected he had become from his tradition. Not only had he needed to drop out of school because of the hospitalization, meaning he had no contact with either the community of Buddhist practitioners at Naropa or the material resources of the university, but he also lost connection to his mindfulness

practice. “Mindfulness is largely gone in extreme states,” he said. “That’s what happened to me, I lost that awareness. I used to meditate an hour a day, I couldn’t do that now.” In fact, so severe was his situation, that all he could do each day was to manage himself little by little: he would take his meds, eat, sleep, rest, talk with his doctors, and so on.

As he continued his story, however, it also became clear that things were not as bleak as they seemed, for something of his tradition had still remained with him.

There were times when I was just delusional, and my awareness sensors and stuff were “out there,” making me vulnerable to all the stuff going on. But this was combined with a sense of the people, places and things around me that marked this particular cluster of symptoms as having an awareness. I was delusional at the hospital and had a number of things going through my head, like turning off lights and screwing with the night person’s system, but I still remember the cops coming to take me and put me in the ambulance. In the past, that awareness and that maintaining of consciousness would have gone away with these delusional stories I had going on in my head. But, I really remember quite well a lot of what actually happened. And that was not common in my earlier experiences.

It was not, however, this continued sense of “awareness” that intrigued me the most, but a more subtle capacity, that even he had not considered the value of. Expanding on the story about the importance of compassion to his recovery, he told me of another occasion when he used that same compassion with a fellow patient.

I was in a group therapy session at the hospital and the man who sat next to me was telling the group about his life. He started to tear up, so I reached out to him, and held his hand for a while. We’re not supposed to do that. We’re not supposed to touch each other in the room. That’s kinda against the rules. But afterward, the guy told me how much he appreciated it. It’s funny though, because at the time I just knew that was what he needed. Even though we’re not supposed to do things like that in the group meetings, I just knew I needed to hold his hand to show him someone cared.

This act of reaching out may seem like a relatively trivial detail, a small act of courtesy given to a fellow patient. But given Jay’s state during the recovery period, it revealed something much more significant than that. Despite the fact that Jay was still struggling with his own

rationality, and was reliant on the care of others, he still possessed resources for virtuous compassion. Where did this compassion come from? It might seem that this was a case of emulation, Jay exhibiting the same compassion his caregivers had shown him during his illness episode. This could not have been the case, however—Jay understood that touching broke the rules and presumably he had not witnessed his doctors act like that. The compassion he had admired in them had been their ability to listen and understand where he was coming from without judging him. Neither was this an expression of habit for Jay. On the contrary, this reaching out was out of the ordinary for him. Something he had not done before. It was also apparently not an explicit calculation either. Even disregarding the fact that Jay considered that his own abilities to think clearly had been impoverished due to his illness, there was no deduction that could have led him from the premises “I must minimize suffering” to the conclusion “I must hold this person’s hand.” Too many other possibilities were available for such a deduction to occur. I don’t know what led Jay to choose holding hands. He said that he “just knew.” He made a judgment about what was needed, and in an instant, acted upon it. And from his account, it was the right judgment to make, confirmed by the warm thanks his neighbor gave him afterward for showing such kindness and for alleviating his pain.

Jay’s story highlights something important I think about the relationship between tradition and practical reason. Jay initially found the conditions for virtue, wisdom and well-being in modern American Buddhism, a tradition that he had been dedicated to for many years and which, when I met him, had led him on a path that seemed to be nourishing him in numerous ways, providing him with resources for navigating both his economic and eudaimonic concerns. As a result of his hospitalization, however, both the inner and outer

resources of his tradition were largely stripped away from him. Unable to connect with the community of contemplatives, and unable to meditate, he relied largely on the support of the hospital staff in navigating his illness. Stripped of both his inner and outer contemplative resources, and entertaining a series of “delusions,” his practical reason had been impoverished, to the point that others had to be responsible for his overall well-being, and to make judgments on his behalf. At the same time, however, he was not completely without support, for in his embodied memory lingered a kind of affective knowledge about how to act for the sake of the good of others. What can be seen in his decision to hold his neighbor’s hand was a small act of compassion. But it was also much more than this. It was the virtuous exercise of that compassion, and a kind of practical reason: a compassion-infused-practical reason, which he obtained from his earlier training in mindfulness, and which he continued to have access to despite the loss of a range of other faculties. Through the memory of his tradition, Jay could be seen to artfully appraise the means and ends of life, not through reason or habit or emulation, but through the virtuous application of an affective-practical reason.

## **5.5: Conclusion**

I began this chapter noting how mindfulness had become associated with the concept of eudaimonia in recent years. I have tried to show why I think such a claim is a reasonable one, even if the reasons for it have been lacking until now. Mindfulness, I argue, can be considered a technology of eudaimonia, insofar as it belongs to a general set of resources equipping contemplatives with capacities for practical reason. To put it briefly, in cultivating mindfulness, one is not applying rules of the type “never or always do x in situation y,” nor is it acting upon habit, or deducing what to do next. Rather, with mindfulness one is learning

how to encounter (interpret and work with) one's own subjectivity, and to cultivate one's subjectivity in terms of a moral framework aimed at compassion. One practices the variety of forms of mindfulness of breathing, then, to become familiar with the complexity of inner experience, the different types of mindfulness practices, the conditions of suffering and well-being, the depth of moral sentiments, and to learn how to skillfully apply that in daily life to make good judgments about how to live. As Deb put it,

Meditation helped me to get to know myself better. There has been a slow understanding of my internal workings over time. And with that there has been a gradual acceptance of qualities in myself, qualities that at other points I would either have rejected or not even known they existed.

The reason mindfulness has grown in popular culture in the past decade, then, is not merely because it simply provides techniques for dealing with mental health problems, as it is common to point out in clinical psychology, but because it provides practitioners with an enriched set of cultural resources for developing practical reason. What is interesting about this development, however, is the historically situated character of this form of practical reason itself. Through the tradition of modern Buddhist virtue ethics, contemplatives acquired a culturally specific form of practical reason deeply connected with a cultivated sense of compassion. As Deb continued,

Another thing the meditation has helped with... this is going to sound sappy, but my heart is more open. Meditation has definitely helped with that. I can relate because when I can be ok with my own suffering, then I'm much more able to be ok with other people's suffering, and recognize it in a different way than I've been taught. I can act to change things with a compassionate heart.

Practical reason thus became, in the hands of contemplatives, an ethico-affective capacity, and a joint epistemic and moral virtue, grounded in the moral sentiment of compassion, and by which contemplatives artfully appraised the means and end of life.

## Chapter 6: A Concluding Vignette

Economists are in the process, it seems, of refashioning their central economic character. It is not yet quite clear which way this will go. In conducting experiments with him and observing how he behaves, economists have come to treat economic man more like a laboratory rat than a mathematical construct. But by conducting experiments upon him to map his portrait via his brain waves, they seem to be in the process of creating a new biological model organism, one more like the laboratory mouse than the laboratory rat. All this activity will surely create a very different portrait of economic man. Judging by these recent developments, he may be a more well-rounded and more interesting character—a man who can learn, bargain, act strategically, has memory, and may even be happy (Morgan 2006, 25).

Imagine the following: A psychology professor is conducting a lab experiment. It is a classic one called the “ultimatum game.” There are two players. Player A has a sum of money, say \$100, and has the opportunity to share a portion of that money with player B. Actually, player A *must* share the money, but what percentage he offers to player B is completely at his discretion. The only constraint on his offer is the knowledge that player B also has the right to refuse whatever offer he makes, and the knowledge that, if that happens, both parties get nothing. The experiment is supposed to test the extent to which human beings actually behave like prototypical rational economic actors. If player B is the fictional homo-economicus, it is said, he would always take the offer, since otherwise he gets nothing. When humans actually participate in this game, however, even when the trials are blind (both parties are unknown to each other and cannot see each other), this tends not to happen. When an offer is perceived to be unfair by player B, it is not uncommon for player B to refuse the offer out of spite and frustration at the perceived unfairness. The point: human beings are not just “rational” economic actors. Ethical norms govern economic behavior. If an offer appears unfair, real people tend to reject it as an affront to other values they hold dear, such as honor, equality, dignity, and so on.

Now imagine player B is a self-identifying contemplative, trained in mindfulness meditation, able to cultivate a tranquil mind in order to better access an inherent compassion. What would happen? From one perspective, one would expect that the contemplative would continue to exhibit deviation away from the fictional homo-economicus: a calm compassion, not instrumental reason, motivates his life, and so how he behaves would be unlike that of the rational actor, and may even reveal a critique of such a person. As Tania Singer, director of the Department of Social Neuroscience at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig, Germany, puts it, in a rather revealing passage:

Integrating new findings from contemplative sciences into economic models and policies could help replace old notions of a selfish and single-minded “homo economicus” and lead to new models of a more “caring economy” that promotes the well-being of all global citizens and the environment they are living in for future generations to come (Singer 2014).

It is this idea that is motivating recent work in the economics and cognitive science of subjective well-being: the use of mindfulness to challenge the reigning image of homo-economicus in order to reveal a more fully ethical human actor, one still rational by all accounts, but whose rationality is at the service of the moral sentiments. Not homo-economicus strictly speaking, but homo-sapiens (the wise-human), or more accurately – I have suggested – homo-eudaimonicus.

Now consider the fact that the above experiment was actually performed. In a study by Kirk, Downar and Montague (2011), subjects trained in mindfulness practice were subjected to the trial of the ultimatum game. What were the results? Mindfulness practitioners were more likely to accept offers that non-mindfulness controls deemed unfair. The irony: the



decision making of mindfulness practitioners more closely resembled the abstract and rational homo-economicus than did that of “normal” (control) subjects.<sup>1</sup>

Why do I mention these studies? The reason I bring them up is because they summarize a theme that turned up throughout my dissertation: an emerging science of happiness, and at the center of that science, a paradoxical biopolitical subject, positioned between two grand traditions of thinking about well-being, the economic and the eudaimonic. In contrast to these studies, however, I have tried to go beyond discussing homo-eudaimonicus as a laboratory subject. Instead, I have attempted to reveal it in its ethnographic richness, showing why people turn to mindfulness, how they actually practice it, how it is connected to experiences of affective fullness through the cultivation of tranquility and compassion, and how such experiences are connected to a historical and embodied form of practical reason, which has increasing value, both economic and eudaimonic, in a post-industrial world.

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<sup>1</sup> The reason for the increased rate of acceptance of unfair offers, it was hypothesized, came from the control mindfulness practitioners apparently had over their emotions. They were more easily able, the authors argued, to separate the emotional reaction to the unfair offer from the offer itself. They could, in short, bracket their disgust from their decision making. A similar finding was also made by Hafenbrack, Kinias, and Barsade (2013). Here training in mindfulness was found to limit the tendency to fall for the “Sunk Cost Bias.” Again, those with apparent higher levels of measured “mindfulness” behaved more like the abstract economic actor.

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