VIRTUE ETHICS AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

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OVERVIEW

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

- Implications of the analysis for corporate social responsibility -- challenges identified
Cross-fertilization thesis

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

Mindfulness perspective enhances virtue ethics, bringing a practice dimension valuable for CSR.
Virtue ethics (Aristotelian)
--focus on character, inner motivations
--goal of *eudaimonia*
--emotions relevant to moral character
--individual happiness tied to happiness of others in community

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

• an *ethics of being*

• centered on idea of being good as persons

• stresses internal motives, attitudes, beliefs, inclinations and desires in moral choice

• addresses role of character in moral theorizing

• regard for internal existential dimension of a person’s life, as opposed to adjustment of behavior towards compliance with rules, precepts, duties

• Aristotle: virtue as quality or character that enables object or person to perform its function well; a virtue is a trait of character that enables one to flourish
INTERLINKING FACETS OF MINDFULNESS

Present-centered consciousness

Metacognitive flexibility

Moral virtuosity
Mindfulness is one of the cardinal virtues of contemplative practices.

Having such a virtue is more than having a dispositional state (e.g., a tendency to act according to moral rules or principles).

Even less so is such a virtue merely a brain state.
To be virtuous (e.g. compassionate) means having a certain inner disposition, awareness of what one’s values are, caring about the kind of person one is

Such mindful inner states are indeed fostered by contemplative practices

Being virtuous also engages substantial degree of rationality and interpretive judgment

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

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

**scientific**

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

**interpretive**
TWO KINDS OF EXPLANATION

• Not all cogent questions about human nature and conduct are scientific questions, concerning laws governing cause and effect.

• Most ethical questions (also legal issues) about persons and their doings are about interpretation: ‘why did she choose to help her friend – or that unknown stranger over there -- in time of need?’

• They are real questions, inviting disciplined answers. Virtue ethics is one nonscientific discipline that seeks to address them.

• Ethics involves reasoned attributions of freedom, responsibility, motives for action, right, duty, justice, mercy, guilt, liability -- using methods not reducible to explanatory science, not replaceable by neuroscience, despite scientific advances.
TWO KINDS OF CONCEPTS

criterial

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

interpretive

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

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

Note: Socrates’ dialogues treat ethical questions as centering around criterial concepts – leading to no satisfactory answers. Aristotle, on the other hand, characterizes ethics as more like arts of medicine, navigation, comedy – revolving around interpretive concepts; ethics is not mathematics.
Your colleague asks your opinion about an article s/he has written. Should you be blunt, say the truth about how sloppily researched and poorly written it is? Or should you be “discrete” and “positive” to protect her/his feelings?

Which approach is the more compassionate one?

Is it sometimes kind to be . . . . cruel?
A compassionate leader is disposed to do what is appropriate given some set of circumstances.

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

Without a proper philosophical frame of reference, are there risks of mischaracterization and undervaluation of contemplative practices when deployed as a resource for management decisionmaking and executive leadership?
CHALLENGE: SCRUTINIZING MORALITY-AS-PLAIN-FACT ASSUMPTIONS

- Persistent temptation to emphasize benefits of contemplative practices as awakening compassion, environmental awareness, other pro-social attitudes

- Yet poses risk of neglecting controversial nature of value questions and attendant need for justifying moral judgments

- Examples: compassion versus competitiveness dilemmas (Merck River Blindness case); “right vs. right” dilemmas (Roussel-Uclaf RU486 case)
Suppose after undergoing controlled meditation sessions (LKM), brain scans of participants show heightened activity in the right supramarginal gyrus -- a region of the brain associated with compassion. Suppose further that after reaching such a brain state of compassion, research subjects indicate

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

Would such a discovery settle the ethical controversies surrounding abortion?
CHALLENGE: USING CARE WITH INSTRUMENTAL TREATMENTS OF MINDFULNESS

- RISK: Disregarding intrinsic value of contemplative practices, in quest to deploy such practices as wellness programs for employee satisfaction & ultimately for boosting organizational productivity and profitability

  - The mindful sniper; training employees to endure stress; incompetent instruction
  - Gelles basically concludes that, so long as some overall good results, better than nothing
Similar to the idea that “ethics is good for business” – reduces ethics to a tool for profitability. Likewise, the standard debates concerning the “business case” for CSR

But ethics *questions*: is profitability the only or most important purpose of business?
Similarly, for mindfulness -- it’s significant not simply for enhancing traditional objectives of business – can support a radical rethinking of business and management

An ethic of mindfulness is of instrumental value to the good life; yet ethics leads one to question & contemplate what we mean by the good life – thus ethics has intrinsic value
CHALLENGE: SEEKING REASONABLE BALANCE BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC & INTERPRETIVE EXPLANATIONS

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

--Patricia Churchland, Neurophilosophy
BUT WAIT A SECOND . . . . .

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

- What of significance is added in saying that our brains are “wired” like this -- that “neurochemicals” are possibly involved in producing this pleasure?
“In the past, addiction was thought to be a weakness of character, but in recent decades research has increasingly found that addiction to drugs like cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine is a matter of brain chemistry”

--David Hirschman, “Your Brain on Drugs”
• Don’t we already know that drinking alcohol, taking drugs, etc. are habit forming? Don’t we already know the reason has to do with pleasure from these activities?

• A neuroscientific finding that such activities involve an increase in dopamine levels, which are associated with pleasure, is framed as a major breakthrough in “understanding” addiction.

• RISK: undermining beliefs in moral responsibility, accountability, and character.
CHALLENGE: DISCERNING PROPER LIMITS OF SCIENCE TO AVOID REDUCTIVISM (SCIENTISM, MATERIALISM)

- Some reductive epistemological standpoints regard fruits of contemplative practices as brain states and neural phenomena reducible to electro-chemical processes.

- Reductive approach devalues transcendent self-understanding provided by contemplative practices.
CHALLENGE: SEEKING BALANCE BETWEEN LETTER & SPIRIT OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

- Breaking News: Yoga Instructor fired for being a carnivore!!!
Dhyana: devotion, meditation on the Divine

Samadhi: union with the Divine

Yama: universal morality

Niyama: personal observances

Asanas: body postures

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

Pratyahara: control of the senses

Dharana: concentration and cultivating inner perceptual awareness
UNDERSTOOD AS A VIRTUE, MINDFULNESS CAN BENEFIT CRITICAL MORAL INQUIRY (INTERPRETIVE VIRTUOSITY)

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

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

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

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