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Schmidt, Andreas T.

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## PAPER

## The ethics and politics of mindfulness-based interventions

Andreas T Schmidt

**Correspondence to**

Dr Andreas T Schmidt,  
University Center for Human  
Values/Woodrow Wilson  
School, Princeton University,  
315 Wallace Hall, Princeton,  
NJ 8544, USA;  
andreas.schmidt@princeton.  
edu, andreastschmidt@gmail.  
com

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**ABSTRACT**

Recently, there has been a lot of enthusiasm for mindfulness practice and its use in healthcare, businesses and schools. An increasing number of studies give us ground for cautious optimism about the potential of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) to improve people's lives across a number of dimensions. This paper identifies and addresses some of the main ethical and political questions for larger-scale MBIs. First, how far are MBIs compatible with liberal neutrality given the great diversity of lifestyles and conceptions of the good characteristic of modern societies? It will be argued that the potential benefits of contemporary secular mindfulness practice are indeed of a sufficiently primary or all-purpose nature to qualify as suitable goals of liberal public policy. Second, what challenges are brought up if mindfulness is used in contexts and applications—such as military settings—whose goals seem incompatible with the ethical and soteriological views of traditional mindfulness practice? It will be argued that, given concerns regarding liberal neutrality and reasonable disagreement about ethics, MBIs should avoid strong ethical commitments. Therefore, it should, in principle, be applicable in contexts of controversial moral value. Finally, drawing on recent discussions within the mindfulness community, it is argued that we should not overstate the case for mindfulness and not crowd out discussion of organisational and social determinants of stress, lowered well-being, and mental illness and the collective measures necessary to address them.

**INTRODUCTION**

Recently, there has been a lot of enthusiasm for mindfulness practice and its use in healthcare, business and education. Increasing empirical evidence makes mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) seem promising across a broad range of applications, particularly so for the treatment and prevention of anxiety and depression. This paper introduces some of the ethical and political issues surrounding MBIs to academic population-level bioethics.<sup>1</sup> Particularly, it discusses how far such interventions are compatible with liberal neutrality; how far it is a problem that mindfulness is applied in settings whose goals are incompatible with the ethics of traditional mindfulness practice; and what role such initiatives should play in situations in

which stress and mental illness have social determinants.

**MINDFULNESS AND ITS BENEFITS**

Although contemporary secular mindfulness practice draws in important ways on the Buddhist tradition, I will distinguish between Buddhist mindfulness and *contemporary* mindfulness practice.<sup>2</sup> The term 'mindfulness' encompasses a range of concepts and practices, all of which have important aspects in common but also differ in significant ways.<sup>3</sup> A core idea of contemporary mindfulness is *bare attention*, the state of mind and metacognitive skill of directing attention towards, and being receptive to, whatever is happening in the present moment both externally and internally. Bare attention is usually combined with the attitude of non-judging acceptance, of being curious and accepting towards thoughts and experiences as they occur.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) was originally developed by John Kabat-Zinn as a group intervention to assist patients with chronic pain.<sup>4 5</sup> Taught in an 8 week course, MBSR typically includes body scanning, simple yoga poses and mindfulness meditation exercises. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) combines MBSR with elements of cognitive therapy. MBCT was originally designed to prevent relapse in patients with remitting depression.<sup>6 7</sup> One of the aims is to see negative thoughts as mental events instead of taking them at face value so as to prevent that such thoughts have dysphoric effects. Similar to MBSR, MBCT is usually taught in an 8 week course. Besides MBSR and MBCT, other methods exist that integrate mindfulness with other measures.<sup>ii</sup>

MBIs are used in the treatment of depression, anxiety and relapse prevention.<sup>10–12</sup> A growing number of studies also look at other benefits of mindfulness, including, but not limited to, its benefits in terms of emotion regulation;<sup>13</sup> its use for the treatment of substance abuse, problem gambling and binge eating;<sup>14 15</sup> and its use for the treatment of somatic conditions such as chronic pain.<sup>5</sup> Encouraging results have also been reported regarding the benefits of MBSR for healthy individuals.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, effectiveness studies of MBIs show promising results across a number of applications. There is good evidence that MBIs are effective in the treatment of depression, anxiety and relapse prevention.<sup>10–12</sup> Increasing evidence has led the National

<sup>i</sup>Some work has been done on ethical questions arising at the individual level, for example, those confronting mindfulness teachers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>ii</sup>Such as Acceptance and Commitment Theory<sup>8</sup> and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy.<sup>9</sup>



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Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK to recommend MBIs for the treatment of patients with three or more episodes of depression.<sup>iii</sup> There is also reason to believe that MBIs might be effective for a number of other psychological conditions and have benefits for healthy individuals. MBIs are therefore also gaining popularity outside medical contexts, such as mindfulness programmes for schools,<sup>17</sup> businesses and prisons.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, existing empirical studies give us reason to be optimistic about the potential of MBIs to reduce stress, deal with psychological conditions and increase well-being. In this paper, I will assume there is sufficient reason for *cautious optimism* about the effectiveness of MBIs as well as sufficient reason to start thinking about the ethical and political questions that MBIs might bring up. I will not assume that questions regarding the effectiveness of MBIs are settled or that we have a very clear sense of the precise magnitude of its potential benefits.

Effectiveness is of course a central element for an overall ethical evaluation of MBIs. But there are other ethical and political questions that MBIs might bring up to which I will turn now.

### LIBERAL NEUTRALITY

One set of worries concerns the question as to whether MBIs constitute an illegitimate promotion of a particular worldview or way of life. This is illustrated by criticism that has been voiced when some schools in the USA and other countries started integrating MBIs in their curricula. One of the most common objections is that mindfulness practice is a religious practice in disguise and thus has no place in secular education.<sup>19–23</sup> In a number of cases, parents' objections have led schools to discontinue their mindfulness programmes. In the USA, it is unconstitutional to teach religious practice in public schools. Pupils also do not have much choice over whether they want to participate in such mindfulness practices or not. So, worries about the historical religious roots of MBIs arise first and foremost in educational settings, particularly for public schools. To some extent, however, similar worries might also arise for MBIs in healthcare settings. We might worry about publicly funded healthcare systems, such as the National Health Service in the UK, using MBIs as standard treatments to promote particular ways of living. Besides their religious roots, MBIs also seem a potentially very far-reaching and intrusive type of treatment. Mindfulness practice is supposed to be integrated throughout the day, potentially turning even trivial activities—such as brushing your teeth—into mindful activities. By changing the way you think, MBIs try to change the way you live. This makes MBIs, in a sense, more intrusive and far-reaching than other treatments. For example, prescribing medication, or incentivising smoking cessation, does not require a change in how people think and how they go about their daily business.

Finally, similar worries might arise, though again to a lesser extent, when mindfulness programmes are made mandatory for employees in private companies, particularly if these companies have diverse workforces. We might worry about companies exercising too much influence over how employees should lead their lives—particularly outside of work.

Underlying these worries might be the belief that it is not the business of such institutions, particularly state institutions, to promote particular lifestyles or conceptions of the good. Philosophically, this can be expressed by a concern with *liberal neutrality*: public policies should not aim to promote particular conceptions of the good and in justifying institutions and public policy we should only rely on reasons acceptable to people with differing (reasonable) conceptions of the good.<sup>24–25</sup> iv A strong version of liberal neutrality would hold that a policy is strictly *impermissible*, if it conflicts with liberal neutrality. However, such a strong form is typically considered implausible, even by those working within the liberal tradition.<sup>27–29</sup> I will thus assume, for the sake of argument, that while neutrality is desirable, a concern for neutrality can be overridden by other normative considerations.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, if MBIs were in conflict with liberal neutrality, this would be a *consideration* but not necessarily a decisive argument against MBIs.

I will now argue that including MBIs in schools, healthcare settings and organisational settings is compatible with a concern for neutrality. Discussing this point will also give us good reason to promote strongly secular and 'axiologically thin' versions of mindfulness practice—something that will prove important in following sections.

First, as mentioned above, many worry about the Buddhist roots of mindfulness. Liberal neutrality implies that the state should not promote particular *religions*. However, this oft-expressed worry is not a problem for contemporary mindfulness practice. While MBIs in healthcare and schools draw on and resemble traditional Buddhist meditative practices in various ways, they do not make any metaphysical or religious assumptions and are specifically designed to be secular.

Second, the goal of MBIs is to introduce mindfulness into all areas of one's life. So, while not promoting a particular religion, one might worry that MBIs promote a particular *spiritual* and/or *meditative* lifestyle. But, again, these worries are unfounded for contemporary versions of mindfulness as used in schools, businesses and healthcare settings. While MBIs include meditation exercises, these exercises are not meant to replace other activities we might find valuable. Instead, by incorporating techniques into everyday life and by strengthening particular meta-cognitive skills, mindfulness aims to facilitate (among other things) that people are receptive to and aware of the experiences they have in the present moment. Whatever one's activities and goals, MBIs are intended to help people pursue them in a more focused manner, experience them more directly and often enjoy them more. Importantly, MBIs are not intended to *replace* our current activities or projects with meditation or spirituality. So, while MBIs might have far-reaching effects on people's lives, it is compatible with a very broad range of lifestyles and not at all committed to a spiritual, meditative or self-denying lifestyle.

Third, many liberals believe that the state should not be in the business of 'making people happy'. A worry about promoting mindfulness, particularly in healthy populations, might be that it seems that the state—or other public institutions or

<sup>iv</sup>Neutrality is typically considered to be about *state policies*. Accordingly, worries apply first and foremost to MBIs in public education and, to a lesser extent, publicly financed healthcare. Nonetheless, while maybe not a strong 'justice constraint' for private social institutions (eg, businesses), neutrality might still be valuable. (Alternatively, we could hold that such institutions are part of the Rawlsian 'basic structure' or reject the idea that concerns of justice apply only to the basic structure.<sup>26</sup> I will not try to solve these complex issues here.)

<sup>iii</sup>National Institute of Clinical Excellence (2004). Depression: Management of Depression in Primary and Secondary Care. National Clinical Practice Guidelines, Number 23. London, HMSO. Updated 2009.

corporations—takes it upon itself to make people happier. Does this not seem like smuggling utilitarianism (or some form of perfectionism) in through the backdoor? I think we can address this worry without committing ourselves to utilitarianism or perfectionism. Rawlsian liberals often believe that the goods provided by just institutions and public policy should be such that individuals have reason to want them whatever their respective reasonable conception of the good (so-called ‘primary goods’).<sup>31</sup> I think it is plausible to believe that the psychological skills and benefits potentially facilitated through MBIs are of such an *all-purpose* or *primary* nature. Some of the presumed benefits relevant in this context are reduced anxiety, less stress, better emotion regulation, improved interpersonal skills, better attention and improved self-esteem.<sup>13 32</sup> These benefits will improve one’s ability to pursue one’s conception of the good—more or less—whatever the precise content of that conception might be. Therefore, if the psychological all-purpose benefits of mindfulness are real, they seem compatible with neutrality. This also means we have reason to pursue MBIs, even if we do not believe that the state (or private companies) should try to make people happy.

Finally, we might worry that mindfulness promotion fails the neutrality test, because it carries a certain *ethical* message. It is sometimes argued that liberal neutrality also implies being neutral on a class of ethical questions that are not considered part of justice but to be decided within a person’s comprehensive view of the good (one’s view on abortion is sometimes given as an example). Is mindfulness committed to specific ethical commitments that should be left to individuals to decide? Here, we should again distinguish between more traditional Buddhist practices and contemporary secular approaches. Buddhism often includes relatively specific ethical prescriptions (such as not to work in the meat industry). Contemporary approaches, on the other hand, are not committed to substantive ethical standards about what is good, bad, right or wrong. While such practices often include compassion exercises, I think the ability to be compassionate and mindful of those around one should again be considered a general moral and social *skill* rather than a particular, contentious ethical viewpoint.

So, overall, MBIs do not seem committed to any contentious conception of the good. Instead, they can provide psychological goods of an all-purpose or primary nature.

However, one might object that while the benefits of MBIs are potentially valuable for the great *majority* of conceptions of the good, they might still be incompatible with *some* very specific conceptions. Imagine, for example, your conception of the good requires overthinking everything and leading a life of anxiety and constant self-doubt. Think of the character George Costanza in the sitcom *Seinfeld*, for example. Now, mindfulness practice does seem incompatible with such a lifestyle. Is this a problem?

To answer this worry, consider different ways in which theorists spell out liberal neutrality.

First, *effect neutrality* requires that policies not have the effect of making one particular conception of the good more successful or widespread than another. Successful MBIs are indeed incompatible with effect neutrality, as they are likely to reduce the number of people leading lives like George Costanza (or other ‘mindless’ lifestyles). However, in the literature, effect neutrality is typically considered an implausible rendering of neutrality. It would rule out too many policies we intuitively believe should not be ruled out by a concern for neutrality. For very rarely do public policies have the effect of preserving the exact proportion of followers for different conceptions of the good.<sup>30</sup>

Second, an alternative rendering is *neutrality of procedure*: public policies should be justified without appealing to the ‘intrinsic superiority of any particular conception of the good life’.<sup>24</sup> Do MBIs fulfil neutrality of procedure? Above I argued that the potential benefits of mindfulness are valuable across a very broad range of conceptions of the good. Accordingly, with respect to these conceptions of the good, we need not make contentious assumptions regarding their intrinsic value. But nor do we have to assume that ‘mindless’ lifestyles are intrinsically worse. For MBIs typically leave it to the individual to pursue mindfulness or not. Mindfulness practice is in some respect similar to exercise: doing mindfulness regularly and incorporating it into one’s life is not easy and requires effort and persistence. If you do not want to practice it—and prefer a ‘mindless’ life—MBIs will not impose any meaningful obstacles. This holds even if MBIs are a mandatory part of a school curriculum. For even then, whether you adopt mindfulness as part of your lifestyle is largely voluntary, as being mindful requires effort and practice. So, the justification of MBIs could simply be that it enhances opportunities to pursue conceptions of the good for a very broad range of conceptions of the good while also leaving it open to the individual to pursue other, incompatible lifestyles. Such a justification foregrounds the opportunity-enhancing aspect of MBIs and does not assume that one conception of the good is superior to another.

Third, *neutrality of aims* requires that public policies not intentionally *aim* to favour or disfavour specific (reasonable) conceptions of the good. MBIs are compatible with this rendering of neutrality for the same reasons proffered above: first, the *aim* of MBIs is to extend opportunities to pursue conceptions of the good—more or less—whatever those conceptions are; second, MBIs do not intentionally disfavour mindless lifestyles in an objectionable way, because they leave it to the individual whether to pursue mindfulness or not.

Finally, *treatment neutrality* requires that policies not treat different people and their conceptions of the good differently by placing disproportional obstacles or by providing disproportional resources to one conception over another.<sup>30</sup> Here, we would again hold that while MBIs promote opportunities to pursue a very broad range of conceptions of the good, they do not make it significantly difficult to pursue conceptions of the good incompatible with mindfulness. Because pursuing a mindful life requires effort and persistence, MBIs do not impose significant or disproportionate burdens on those wishing to lead ‘mindless’ lives.

Overall, MBIs, even those used in public schools, are compatible with liberal neutrality. MBIs might contribute towards primary psychological skills and benefits that are valuable—more or less—whatever one’s life plans might be. This also gives us reason to keep MBIs religiously, axiologically and ethically non-committal so as to accommodate concerns of diversity and liberal neutrality, something that will prove relevant for the objections I discuss now.

## MCMINDFULNESS

Recently, some strong criticism of contemporary mindfulness practice has come from *within* the mindfulness community. The charge is that contemporary mindfulness leaves out too much of the original ethical and soteriological elements of Buddhist practices necessary for *right* mindfulness. Contemporary mindfulness thus turns an old and rich worldview into ‘McMindfulness’—a watered-down marketable fashion fad bearing little resemblance to its Buddhist origin.<sup>2 33 34</sup>

There are, at least, three different ways to read such criticism.

First, we might understand it simply as the charge that contemporary mindfulness is insufficiently true to its Buddhist



origins. I hope the discussion on liberal neutrality shows that rather than being a problem, this should be considered a positive feature. To promote mindfulness in health policy and diverse educational and organisational contexts makes religious, axiological and ethical neutrality desirable.

Second, maybe the objection is rather that such watering down comes at a cost, namely that contemporary mindfulness is less effective than Buddhist mindfulness. Monteiro *et al*<sup>2</sup> argue that contemporary mindfulness offers at best symptomatic relief, whereas 'traditional mindfulness approaches liberation from suffering through a path of ardent practice focused on understanding and uprooting the fundamental causes of suffering'. Such a claim might be true. But it is hard to assess without empirical evidence. As argued above, contemporary mindfulness should not in principle be constrained in its development by Buddhist tradition. But, of course, that does not mean that traditional mindfulness might not continue to be a source of inspiration that can be integrated into new evidence-based secular practices.<sup>35</sup>

Third, maybe moving away from Buddhist tradition comes at a different cost, namely that MBIs are being used for *unethical* purposes.<sup>36</sup> One discussion revolves around the adaptation of mindfulness techniques to military contexts, something that seems at odds with Buddhist ethics. How should we respond when mindfulness is used for purposes that conflict with Buddhist ethical tenets? The main problem is that there is great disagreement surrounding matters of morality. For example, most people believe that sometimes the use of military force is justified. Others disagree. Also, many believe it to be morally permissible to work in the alcohol industry (which many Buddhists will not). It is unlikely we will reach agreement on these issues any time soon. But this does not imply that we should not use mindfulness in contemporary pluralist societies to improve the lives of even those who work for organisations of controversial moral value. As seen earlier in my discussion of neutrality, we have good reason for MBIs to be somewhat 'non-committal' to ensure that MBIs are widely applicable. Moreover, there is little reason to expect that promoting contemporary mindfulness will make people do more bad than good on balance. If anything, preliminary evidence suggests that contemporary mindfulness practice can improve ethical decision-making.<sup>37 38</sup>

## THE POLITICS OF MINDFULNESS

A more systematic objection to the recent mindfulness trend is that mindfulness in its stripped-down contemporary form can be instrumentalised to keep exploitative, stressful or otherwise unhealthy conditions alive. Writing on the use of mindfulness in corporate settings, Purser and Loy hold:

Curiously, the mindfulness movement has yet to engage in seriously questioning as to why stress is so pervasive in modern corporations. Instead, corporations have jumped on the mindfulness bandwagon because it conveniently shifts the burden on to the individual employee; stress is framed as a personal problem, and mindfulness-based interventions are offered as means of helping employees cope and work more effectively and calmly within such toxic environments.<sup>39</sup>

Presumably, precarious employment situations, longer work hours, more inequality, less stable social ties and so on might all result in reduced well-being, more stress and higher prevalence of mental illness. Mindfulness, it could be argued, is being instrumentalised as a coping mechanism for issues whose real (or morally relevant) aetiology lies elsewhere. At its worst, mindfulness might shift the burden of responsibility towards the

individual and might even lull them into accepting inhospitable social conditions.

This objection can be interpreted in different ways. We might first interpret it as saying that promoting individual mindfulness practice *makes matters worse*, because it prevents necessary social change. Marxists, for example, often believe that religion and spiritual practice are part of the superstructure—the 'opium of the people'—that prevent rather than instigate real social change. Writing from an epidemiological (not a Marxist) perspective, Pickett and Wilkinson argue that growing social inequality is an important driver of stress and mental illness. In a spirit similar to the above objection—though writing on a different topic—they argue:

The solution to problems caused by inequality is not mass psychotherapy [or in our case: mass mindfulness intervention] aimed at making everyone less vulnerable. The best way of responding to the harm done by high levels of inequality would be to reduce inequality itself.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, is it not fundamentally wrong-headed to try to solve social ills through mindfulness promotion? While I think the worry about instrumentalising mindfulness is serious, this should make us reflect on *how* rather than *whether* we should promote mindfulness.

First, MBIs cannot be the *only* measure to deal with stress, mental illness and so on. But promoting mindfulness is of course *compatible* with also promoting wider social change. This is indeed a good argument not to overstate the role and effectiveness of mindfulness. While mindfulness promotion is a plausible part of a mix of policies, presenting it as a panacea might risk either undermining its credibility or crowd out a discourse about necessary social change.

Second, even if the above argument—that we should look primarily to the systematic drivers of stress and mental illness—is correct, this does not mean there is no independent role for mindfulness (and other similar interventions). Even in a social utopia, most people would still experience personal hardships and stress at some point in their lives. If mindfulness helps deal with hardships and provides individuals with psychological all-purpose benefits, then we have good reasons to consider its promotion. This gives us a strong response to a 'Marxist' critique of mindfulness.<sup>41</sup>

But we can also understand the objection differently: if mindfulness were practiced in richer and ethically committed ways, as it was originally intended by Buddhists, mindfulness itself would have the potential to be *socially transformative*. The recent watered-down versions of mindfulness are problematic, precisely because they undermine the potential that Buddhist mindfulness has to transform problematic social conditions.<sup>39 42</sup>

How should we evaluate this critique? First, it is of course an open empirical question as to whether Buddhist mindfulness actually has such transformative potential. This is hard to determine from the philosophical armchair. But, second, I think it is a methodological mistake to expect Buddhism to provide us with the moral and explanatory resources to identify our social ills as well as the psychological and social toolkit to address them. I think it preferable to keep MBIs ethically and axiologically non-committal while also drawing on secular social

<sup>41</sup>Moreover, some of the drivers of stress—such as a growing number of distractions and choices—might also have benefits worth keeping. Learning how to 'find peace in a frantic world'<sup>41</sup> might thus also help one reap the benefits that come from the world being frantic.

science, psychology, epidemiology and philosophy to help us identify and address social ills. Finally, our worry about diversity and liberal neutrality resurfaces again. If we seek the promotion of mindfulness as a matter of public policy or in business environments with diverse workforces, we have good reason not to commit ourselves to substantial ethical and soteriological views. This will of course not solve all our social problems. But expecting mindfulness promotion to affect great social change in contemporary pluralist societies might strike one as unrealistic in the first place. Achieving modest yet significant improvements of people's lives through MBIs, on the other hand, might be a real possibility.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mindfulness interventions hold good promise as public policy measure to improve people's lives across a number of dimensions. I have discussed two main areas in which ethical and political questions arise. First, is mindfulness promotion compatible with liberal neutrality? I have argued that it is, if we avoid tying mindfulness to any specific views on ethics, religion and the good life. The potential psychological benefits of mindfulness even qualify as psychological 'all-purpose' goods such that one has reason to want them, more or less, whatever the content of one's conception of the good life. Second, a number of questions arise about the role of mindfulness interventions in their social, political and economic setting. In promoting mindfulness, we should be careful not to overstate its case and not to crowd out discussion of other (particularly social) causes of stress, lowered well-being and mental illness. So, there is ample reason to be hopeful about the benefits of mindfulness interventions. But the current hype around it should not make us less mindful of inhospitable social conditions and the collective measures necessary to address them.

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