

PUTTING THE BUDDHISM/SCIENCE DIALOGUE ON A NEW FOOTING

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MINDFULNESS AND MINDLESSNESS: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERFORMANCE



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Mindfulness and Mindlessness: The Phenomenology of Performance
Shaun Gallagher

Gallagher introduced himself as a non-Buddhist philosopher whose work focused on phenomenology and cognitive science, and specifically on embodied-enactivist cognition, intersubjectivity, and social cognition. He is interested in mindfulness in action, in contexts beyond sitting meditation.

Gallagher marshaled various critiques of Dreyfus's well-known conception of expertise, in which a novice begins by consciously following a set of rules and progresses toward expertise through stages that involve gradually leaving the rules behind and responding to context in an intuitive way. Dreyfus describes this progression as becoming mindless in a highly proficient bodily coping. Gallagher reported how Dreyfus has resisted accounts from experts that describe how a process of introspection enhances automatic performance skills. He also criticized Dreyfus' lack of attention to the intersubjective or social dimension of embodied practice, which he traced back to the influence of Samuel Todes' *Body and World*. Gallagher saw this as the source of problems in Dreyfus's understanding of phronesis, which lacks the moral and deliberative aspects of Aristotle's interpretation.

He summarized Dreyfus's debate with the analytic philosopher John McDowell who insists that perception, agency, and embodied coping in phronesis all involve conceptual and rational processes that cannot be mindless. McDowell claims these processes do not conflict with Heidegger's notion of *zuhanden*, which Dreyfus leans on in his interpretation of phronesis, or the related concept of affordances that emphasizes how objects' functionality, including socially and culturally determined availability and roles, affects our perception of them. Gallagher positioned Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied intelligence midway between Dreyfus and McDowell, and suggested that certain kinds of situated mindful self-awareness or reflection may be dimensions of expert performance rather than disruptive of absorbed coping.

Studies of highly skilled experts in athletics, dance, and musical performance support John Sutton's model of "applying intelligence to the reflexes" where context-sensitive judgment is applied to skills that are fast enough to be considered reflexes: "Skill is not a matter of bypassing explicit thought, to let habitual actions run entirely on their own, but of building and accessing flexible links between knowing and doing." This kind of awareness would include goals and parameters of execution such as timing, force, and variations of sequence, in a "meshed" architecture that integrates perceptual and cognitive elements with body-schematic control.

Questioning whether this is a kind of low-level awareness or higher order reflective thought, Gallagher turned to the philosopher Dorothee Legrand who distinguishes between three types of awareness of one's body. Opaque awareness, which characterizes novice performance, is thematic, reflective, and objectifies the body. Transparent awareness is nonthematic and pre-reflective, as an aspect of the acting subject, as in everyday walking. Performative awareness, which occurs in expert dancers for example, is also pre-reflective but intensively heightens awareness of the body as subject or agent rather than object.

In Barbara Montero's study of professional musicians, she acknowledges that expert performers occasionally enter a mindless zone during optimal performance, but it

is generally true that optimal performance is also thoughtful performance. Simon Høffding's phenomenological interviews conducted with the Danish String Quartet reveal a broad variety of different experiences during the best performances. He identifies four different states of awareness in expert performance: absentminded or automatic playing; playing under stress, as when recovering from interruption; deep absorption without self-awareness, described as blackout; and deep absorption with heightened awareness of self and surroundings. (Clifford Saron later questioned the value of the term "blackout" in this context, which he saw as insufficiently nuanced to describe expert musicians' experiences.)

In both types of deep absorption there is a sense of letting go and passivity. Even with heightened awareness, the performer observes the process without intervening. Høffding identifies four factors that enable this sense of passivity in musical performance: the body schema where motor control processes are attuned by practice; emotional expression (which distinguishes absorption in artistic performance from athletic absorption); the music itself, which engages the body schema through its links to rhythm, material resonance, muscle movement, and action; and the other players, who may cause the body schema to extend into peripersonal space and also trigger intersubjective experiences of musical communication.

Gallagher suggested that the experiences described by expert performers involve a variety of different types of mindfulness which could be categorized as a step towards further study, and which echo the proliferation of varied meanings of mindfulness in the Buddhist literature.

In the discussion that followed, Ken Paller provided information on how different memory systems interact in the learning of expert skills, allowing for working memory resources to be freed in a way that supported Gallagher's description of mindful awareness during expert performance.

David McMahan observed how Gallagher's presentation offered valuable perspectives on the differences in Buddhist meditation practices, where the Zen, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen traditions valorize non-conceptual responsiveness, in contrast with the instructions on mindful awareness of the body in the Satipatthana Sutta.

Saron noted the relevance of neuroplastic changes that occur with expert skills, where the limits of human perception and performance are malleable as a result of many thousands hours of practice. He also remarked on the absence of any account of the musicians' engagement with the analysis of the composition, which involves varied relationships to emotional expression as well as intersubjective understanding within the group.

Sean Smith also expanded on the subject of affect in musical performance, speaking from his own experience of bodily affect, interoceptive feedback of tension and compression in the body, and how the pleasant and unpleasant sensations that arise in the body modulate performance the sense of agency in a profound way. Gallagher noted that this was covered in his forthcoming book.

Linda Heuman commented on how, by adding nuance to the concept of flow, Gallagher's presentation served to demystify and desacralize flow, and by extension meditation, which are sold as methods for overcoming the self and dualistic perception.

Claire Petitmengin raised a concern about Gallagher's interpretation of mindfulness involving reflective thought, given that her interviews with experts on the

experience of creative ideas emerging consistently and precisely evoked a bodily rather than rational awareness. Gallagher responded that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of rationality was embodied, and Saron added Esther Thelen's propositional calculus of motor movements in infants as an example of pre-verbal, embodied rationality.

Gallagher then questioned the status of self-awareness in Høffding's account of blackout, trance, or non-dual experience: if these experiences are selfless, then how can they be reported? He linked this to the notion of pre-reflective self-awareness in phenomenology, which is a minimal, marginal, or recessive awareness of one's experience, where one's experience is not taken as an object. This pre-reflective self-awareness is considered to be part of the actual structure of experience itself, and carries an implicit sense that it is part of one's stream of consciousness—a sense of ownership or “mineness” that involves no reflective, second-order metacognition.

Phenomenologists, going back to Husserl, see this pre-reflective self-awareness as a requisite condition for reflective consciousness: you cannot reflect upon your experience unless it's there for you to begin with. This position conflicts with some interpretations of schizophrenic experience where the sense of ownership of an experience appears to be missing. It also contradicts Hume's classic introspective attempt to find the self.

Gallagher then reviewed a study of meditational trance states, which claimed that “The meditation styles directly aimed at achieving such states ... target the implicit belief that the self is static, enduring and unitary and replacing identification with it by identification with the phenomenon of experiencing itself.” Aside from concerns about the neuroscientific methods used, Gallagher questioned the premise of the phenomenological descriptions of a self-less state, and concluded that the possibility of reporting on such states suggests that there is always some degree of pre-reflective self-awareness with some implicit and minimal degree of mineness in such “non-dual” or “selfless” processes. Others observed that the language of the reports was laden with Buddhist concepts and did not suggest a direct phenomenological account. Bill Waldron noted the continuing debate about whether mystical experiences are constructed or discovered.

David Germano offered some reflections from a 14th century Dzogchen text by Longchenpa, which contrasts two forms of intelligence. One is the ordinary cognition of conceptual consciousness, and the other is described as awareness (*rigpa*), primordial consciousness, or primordial knowing (*yeshe*). *Rigpa* or *yeshe* is considered to be present at the embryonic beginning of life, associated with the body, and unconstrained by habituation—i.e. the opposite of automaticity. It is spontaneous, effortless, profoundly creative, and the opposite of deliberative thought or top-down planning. It is described both as entirely self-aware and 100% unconscious even while constantly operative.

Gallagher saw parallels between this and Merleau-Ponty's notion of the pre-personal. Waldron added that it builds on Yogacara claims that in every moment of awareness there is an identification with a sense of “I am” as the ongoing stream of consciousness, though it is very subtle and difficult to discern. Petitmengin asked whether a phenomenological study of a meditator's process of dissolution of normal awareness into a non-dual state was feasible. Germano explained the difficulty of knowing whether traditional accounts of non-dual awareness were in fact phenomenological, given the difficulty of descriptive language in this context, and how the texts shift between

metaphors, aphorisms, and very precise calls to experience. He compared the Tibetan texts to Heidegger in the sense that they may be using unusual terminology to describe unusual phenomena of experience.