

Think Pieces

MINDFUL VIRTUE, MINDFUL REVERENCE

by Ursula Goodenough and Paul Woodruff

Abstract. How does one talk about moral thought and moral action as a religious naturalist? We explore this question by considering two human capacities: the capacity for mindfulness, and the capacity for virtue. We suggest that mindfulness is deeply enhanced by an understanding of the scientific worldview and that the four cardinal virtues—courage, fairmindedness, humaneness, and reverence—are rendered coherent by mindful reflection. We focus on the concept of mindful reverence and propose that the mindful reverence elicited by the evolutionary narrative is at the heart of religious naturalism. Religious education, we suggest, entails the cultivation of mindful virtue, in ourselves and in our children.

Keywords: mindfulness; morality; religious naturalism; reverence; virtue ethics.

This essay represents an intellectual and spiritual collaboration. Ursula Goodenough is a cell biologist whose recent book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998), explores the religious potential of our scientific understandings of nature and advocates an orientation called religious naturalism. Paul Woodruff is a moral philosopher whose recent book, *Reverence* (2001), explores the concept of reverence in the context of virtue ethics. Because reverence is often invoked in *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, it became apparent that we were pursuing a similar quest, and further conversation has led to the crafting of this shared perspective.

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The core question we will consider is: How does one talk about moral thought and moral action as a religious naturalist?

Scientists are expected to approach this question in a scientific fashion, and many have done so. From such research have emerged such useful concepts as kin altruism and reciprocal altruism, concepts that use genetic and game-theory algorithms to describe how we negotiate the allocation of favors and retribution (Ridley 1998). But most people, including most of the game-theory scientists themselves, understand that these economic algorithms are not what we seek as religious persons. Rather, we seek ideals and values. We want to understand how best to be good. We want to know what to say to our children.

In this essay we first consider the human capacity known as mindfulness and suggest that the development of mindfulness is a precondition for morality. We next consider the human capacity known as virtue and suggest that a morality based on the development of mindful virtue is an approach that seems particularly compatible with religious naturalism. We conclude with a focus on the virtue of reverence and propose that the pursuit of mindful reverence is fundamental to the moral life of the religious naturalist.

MINDFULNESS IN THE RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS

To get into thinking about mindfulness, we can start with Aristotle. Aristotle begins his treatise on *Metaphysics* with a strong assertion: "All human beings by nature reach out for knowledge" (*Metaphysics* 1.1, 980a21). Most of us, if asked to give a description of human nature, would probably include something along these lines in our response, and indeed, it is embedded in the biological name we have given to ourselves, where the *sapiens* in *Homo sapiens* means "having wisdom." Wisdom and knowledge are entailed by mindfulness, but we suggest that mindfulness demands more of us. Mindfulness is knowledge or wisdom that pulls the whole mind and heart of the knower toward a connection with the way things are in all their exciting particularity. You cannot be mindful and know things in a purely academic way; as you become mindful of something, your feelings and your behavior toward it will not be untouched.

Mindfulness is both a state of mind and a practice. The practice, popularized in the West by Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, is summarized by his famous epigram "Washing the Dishes to Wash the Dishes" (Nhat Hahn 1975, 3). That is, one trains oneself to keep one's consciousness alive to the present reality, to focus attention on the here and now, on the miracle of the soap and the water and the dishes and the process, rather than rushing through the chore mindlessly to get to whatever is next. In his sutra on Mindfulness (*Satipatthana Sutta*, reprinted in Nhat Hahn 1975,

111), the Buddha refers to mindfulness as one of the enlightenment factors, along with such others as joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. The mindful person, Buddhism tells us, assumes the attitude of pure observation, freed from all false views, and apprehends a reality that is not only objective but also becomes subjective. The mindful person really sees.

Three features of mindfulness are encountered not only in Buddhist thought but also in the writings of the ancient Greeks and the Chinese Confucians.

First, mindfulness is described as a path, a work in progress, rather than as an endpoint or achievement. This is because the mindful person is prepared to perceive each particular situation in its uniqueness and respond to it appropriately, while knowledge (as the ancient Greeks understood it) aims at grasping universal principles and applying them uniformly in all cases. Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is an ethical sort of mindfulness. It is a kind of wisdom because it is a capacity to get a great many things right, and it is practical because it is the link between our minds and our moral character. He tells us that mindfulness, so understood, entails a long process of living and choosing, a process that develops a person's resourcefulness and responsiveness (Nussbaum 1986, 305). And Confucius, in the course of describing the various life stages leading to sagehood, offers a wonderful epigram, variously phrased as "At sixty, my ear was attuned," or, "At sixty, my ears became subtly perceptive" (Analects 2.4—see Leys 1997; Huang 1997).

Second, mindfulness is described as "freed from all false views" (Nhat Hanh 1975, 56). Pure observation, the perception of reality, cannot occur through the lens of one's own needs, biases, and prejudice. Rigidity, dogmatism, and fundamentalism are fatal to mindfulness from one direction, while inattention, fickleness, and carelessness can destroy it from another. Aristotle tells us that mindfulness is constantly evolving, ready for surprise (Nussbaum 1986, 305).

Third, mindfulness entails an immersion, a personal appropriation of reality. Aristotle describes it as a complex response of the entire personality; Nhat Hahn writes (1975, 46) that when we practice mindfulness of objects outside ourselves, the knowledge of these objects becomes mind; and the Confucians tell us that we must attain a deep personal understanding of our own being and the being of others if we are to respond faithfully to their reality. What is sought, they explain, is self-transformation through a personal grasp (Kalton 1988).

The fascinating concordance between Greek, Indian, and Chinese perceptions of mindfulness, as sketched in the above passages, is especially remarkable given that they were originally articulated thousands of years ago and independently of one another. To us this indicates that we are

considering a facet of human aspiration that is of fundamental importance. The quest for mindfulness, we would say, is a core human hope, a core human ideal.

MINDFULNESS IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

In the broadest and deepest sense, the naturalism part of religious naturalism is all about mindfulness. Scientists, trained in a particular kind of “pure observation,” have provisioned us with stunning understandings of the natural world, and these understandings then provision the religious naturalist with countless substrates for mindful apprehension. So, for example, mindfulness of the body is no longer just about breathing and walking as in the original Buddhist practice; we are now able to contemplate as well the molecular and genetic underpinnings of the body and its evolution from simpler forms. When the Dalai Lama visited Washington University several years ago, he insisted on a visit to the neuroimaging laboratories where brains are being analyzed as they think and feel. There emerged a photograph of the Dalai Lama in his robes talking with the neuroscientists in their lab coats—an icon to mindfulness.

The religious naturalist is called to be mindful of the following understandings from biology:

- mindful of our place in the scheme of things
- mindful that life evolved, that humans are primates
- mindful of the dynamics of molecular life and its emergent properties
- mindful of the fragility of life and its ecosystems
- mindful that life and the planet are wildly improbable
- mindful that all of life is interconnected
- mindful of the uniqueness of each creature
- mindful of future generations

and from psychology and anthropology:

- mindful that our thoughts and feelings are neural
- mindful of the evolutionary continuity between our minds and other animals' minds
- mindful of human diversity, including diversity of temperament
- mindful of human creativity and its wondrous manifestations
- mindful of the influence of ethnic and family roots and tribal connection
- mindful that children best flourish when loved and nurtured
- mindful of the human need for personal wholeness and social coherence

Similar lists can be drawn from the physical sciences and the earth sciences, from cultural history and imaginative literature, and so on. All such lists are expected to be incomplete and open-ended. They are offered here to remind us of what is at stake.

If we have been successful in communicating what mindfulness is about, then it should be possible to recognize the difference between *knowing about* the listed items and *being mindful* of them. Knowledge is of course essential: there is much nuts-and-bolts information to absorb, for example, about how nerve cells communicate with one another in the body and in the brain. But one can learn facts and remain unmindful of these facts, as evinced by the tragedy of many of our educational systems. There is much to learn, and then there is also much to consider.

VIRTUE

Virtue ethics is particularly well developed in Greek and Confucian thought and, notably through Aquinas's encounters with Aristotle, in Christian thought as well (Crisp and Slote 1997; MacIntyre 1981, 154–68; Hauerwas 1981, 111–28). The idea is that a virtuous person will in most circumstances do the right thing, make the right choice, without necessarily asking how moral rules apply to the case. Virtue has this result consistently only if certain conditions obtain: (1) the virtuous person must be mindful of the relevant circumstances (the Samaritan must see the victim who needs help), and (2) the virtuous person must be sustained by a virtuous community (the brave deep-sea fisherman needs to work with a brave crew).

Rules may be hard to follow, either because they don't seem to fit a given case very well or because rules in and of themselves aren't very exciting. Rules don't make us feel like following them. Virtues, by contrast, belong to our emotional life; they are rather like habits of feeling, and the virtuous person feels like doing the right thing, whatever that turns out to be. Therefore, the most enduring way to develop morality is to develop virtue.

Obviously this approach depends critically on how virtue is understood. We won't have anything to say in this essay about where we think the virtues might "come from"—whether they have antecedents in primate mentality and/or whether they are manifestations of the divine. While these are interesting questions, our intent here is to explore how the virtues support and explain our moral choices. Wherever the capacity for virtue comes from, we believe that it is poised to play a fundamental role in our search for global ethical consensus.

Virtue is an all-but-unused word in our times. It sounds old-fashioned, even quaint, and has come to connote a judgmental self-righteousness, a puffed-up rigidity, that up-to-date intellectuals have learned to eschew. Displacing virtue concepts from our vocabulary is the notion that what's most important is to be tolerant and accepting and nice—a notion that

leads to the sense that one can say nothing of consequence about ethics. From our perspective, this path, however well meaning, is arrogant, lazy, and an evasion of responsibility. It's time, we would say, that we return to the search for virtue. There need be nothing old-fashioned or conservative about this. True, some advocates of virtue ethics are conservative in politics, but others are liberal, and many are openly critical of rigid moral codes.

So how is virtue defined? It's hard to pin down a particular virtue, because a virtue is wonderfully sensitive to context. But Aristotle gives us a useful framework for thinking about virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 2 (see Ostwald 1962). A virtue, he suggests, is an element in a person's character that tempers emotions at the source. Virtue is the capacity to experience emotions well—that is, at the right time and at the right level. For example, the more you have of the virtue that tempers fear and confidence, the better your levels of fear or confidence will be each time they are called for. You will not be too timid to take necessary risks nor so bold as to destroy yourself. The virtue that accomplishes this balance, according to Aristotle, is courage (*Nicomachean Ethics* 3.2).

Many lists of the virtues have been compiled. We offer four that appear to be cardinal virtues, both because of their importance to us and because we think it will prove to be the case that they are found in a wide variety of cultures. They are:

- humaneness (the capacity to see, with appropriate feeling, how similar other people's situations are to our own; the capacity for love, in an important sense of love)
- courage (the capacity to balance confidence and fear; the source of creativity)
- fair-mindedness (the capacity to recognize what is just and to be angry at what is unjust)
- reverence (the capacity for awe and respect)

The quest to attain these virtues, like the quest to achieve mindfulness, is a humbling quest. Therefore, to be self-righteous about one's virtue is to not understand the concept. Moreover, the virtues cannot exist as stand-alone items—they are all of a piece. Cowardice will undermine fair-mindedness, and injustice is incompatible with humaneness. Therefore, to be virtuous is to develop capacities that are interwoven and interdependent. This extends as well to our communities: we depend on each other to sustain an atmosphere in which virtue can flourish.

Virtues are ideals, visions of the good. They are ways that we can't think better than. A particularly attractive feature of the virtues is that, as with mindfulness, there is a universality about them that suggests their deep rootedness in who we are as human beings. In cultures and religions and

archetypal images throughout the world and throughout history, the same virtues show up again and again, addressing the same sets of feelings and suggesting the same kinds of strategies for resolution. This is not surprising, of course, since our most basic emotions, and hence our feelings, are common to us all, and the virtues represent the theaters wherein these emotional endowments are forged into moral choices. The ubiquity of the virtues suggests their core importance in defining our aspirations and, hence, our hopes.

MINDFUL VIRTUE

We can now circle back to our initial account of virtue in which we wrote about doing the right thing and making the right choice and having the right feelings. How are all these “rights” to be ascertained?

It is here that we can bring in mindfulness, and talk not about virtue but about mindful virtue. The pursuit of virtue, we would say, will bear fruit only in the context of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a precondition for virtue—or, rather, the development of mindfulness and the development of virtue must go together as an essential collaboration.

Let’s look at an example. In the absence of mindfulness, one might be led to believe in the superiority of one’s own ethnic group and to believe that it is just to persecute those in other ethnic groups. But mindful consideration of human evolution and human interrelatedness and human commonality is thoroughly incompatible with the concept of ethnic superiority. To hold on to that conclusion, therefore, one would have to allow one’s needs and biases to cloud and then subvert one’s perception of reality, and such violations of mindfulness would encourage the development of fundamentalist dogma.

MINDFUL REVERENCE

As our final topic, we will consider the virtue known as reverence, which we would now want to call mindful reverence. Reverence turns out to be a particularly complex virtue to define, but it is worth the effort.

In his book on the subject, Woodruff (2001, 117) defines reverence as the capacity to carry the sense that there is Something larger than a human being, and hence Something larger than one’s self, a Something that possesses one or more of the following properties: (1) it cannot be changed or controlled by humans; (2) it is not fully understood by experts; (3) it is not created by humans; and (4) it can be described as transcendent, where transcendence is itself a complicated concept (we will come back to this shortly).

Because virtues are about the balance of feelings, we can ask, What sets of feelings are negotiated during the development of reverence? We would

say that reverence allows us to balance our personal ambitions with the sense that we are in a context that is vastly larger and more important than our selves. This generates awe and respect for that context, meaning that mindful reverence can also be defined as the capacity to feel awe and respect when these are the right feelings to have. Reverent persons experience awe in the presence of something transcendent but not in the presence of something base. They accord respect to the dignity of other persons, but only when respect is the right attitude: the most reverent response to a tyrant, Woodruff suggests, is to mock him (2001, 5). Fatal to mindful reverence are pomposity and self-absorption. To speak of self-reverence is to not understand the term.

Reverence is also about shame and outrage. When we desecrate an object of reverence we are ashamed, and when we witness irreverence toward that object in others we feel outrage and even contempt towards the irreverent persons. It is important, from our perspective, not to cave in to modern attacks on shame and outrage. They are crucial manifestations of reverence, measures of the depth of our commitment to what we revere. "Life without shame would be a disaster" (Woodruff 2001, 73). This is an exciting and invigorating aspect of mindful reverence, and of the mindful virtues in general, since the virtuous person also experiences outrage at unfairness, cruelty, and cowardice. Virtue, from this point of view, is not some passive goody-two-shoes state of self-anointed superiority. It entails active engagement and strong character and a sense of honor. As kids today might say, virtue is not for a wuss.

Reverence is often shared with other persons in the form of ceremony, such as the ceremonies that undergird reverent family life, reverent political systems, and reverent cultural and religious practice. Reverence is about celebration as well—about offering praise, lighting a sacred candle, drumming and dancing far into the night. We bow our heads in the presence of that which we revere, not so much in deference as in gratitude.

Reverence is commonly associated with the supernatural, as in reverence towards a deity. Similarly, the word *transcendence* is commonly associated with the supernatural, as in a transcendent deity. But both words also work in the context of the natural. Most religions offer ways to express reverence toward the Earth, and transcendence is something that we can experience not only in the vertical sense, as in something "up on high," but also in the horizontal sense, as in the quiet thrill of belonging to a truly spectacular universe (Goodenough 2001).

This puts us in a position to make a central claim. For the religious naturalist, whether theistic or nontheistic, the natural world, the material world, represents a wondrous object of mindful reverence. It meets Woodruff's definitional criteria with flying colors:

- It is larger than a human being (indeed, it is our source, if not our Source).
- It cannot be changed or controlled by humans (we can manipulate nature, to be sure, but we cannot change its fundamental properties).
- It is not fully understood by experts (we do not understand, for example, how nature becomes human nature).
- It is not created by humans (it is our given, if not our Given).
- It can be described as transcendent (the transcendence on offer here being both vertical and horizontal).
- It elicits awe and respect and, hence, humility. When we desecrate the natural order of things, we feel shame; when we witness its desecration by others, we experience outrage and voice protest.

Therefore, mindful reverence has everything to do with religious naturalism. Indeed, we can take religious naturalism, translate *religious* as “reverent” and *naturalism* as “mindfulness,” and recognize that the orientation we are calling religious naturalism can be said to be embedded, at core, in reverent mindfulness.

And now, to the heart of things. When we say that we hold in mindful reverence certain ideals, we are saying that we care about them. Care, in turn, generates commitment: To say that I care about my ideals is to say that I feel an obligation toward them, a responsibility toward them. Obligation and responsibility are manifestations of mindful reverence in the same way that brave deeds are a manifestation of courage and acting justly is a manifestation of fair-mindedness and acting with compassion is a manifestation of humaneness. Shame and outrage come in here as well. When I fail to meet my obligations I feel shame at my shortcomings. When I witness someone acting irresponsibly towards something I revere, I feel outrage and speak out in protest against that behavior. The virtues are not just about how we think and feel. They represent the wellsprings of our moral action.

At this point we have started along the path of a virtue ethics for religious naturalism. We are suggesting that our human nature includes capacities to understand, cultivate, and revere the goodness of being courageous and fairminded and humane and reverent and mindful. This is not to say that this is all that we are. We are also beings who laugh and imagine and make love and create and play. But when we turn to thinking about the basis for our ethics, we find that rich ethical resources are embedded in our nature, coexisting, *mano à mano*, with other facets of our nature such as fear and greed. Developing our natural capacity for mindful virtue helps us not only to resist fear and greed but to rise above them as we learn to heed the “better angels of our nature” (Lincoln 1861).

VIRTUE ETHICS AND COMMUNITY

Virtue ethics carries with it a vulnerability, a voluntary vulnerability. By assuming agency for my own actions rather than just going along with the rules of the system, I open myself to shame at my failures and outrage at the failures of others. The more openly I respond to the world with mindful virtue, the more deeply distressed I am by acts of injustice and cowardice and cruelty and self-centeredness. The more I care, the more I am vulnerable to feelings of violation.

Relief from this vulnerability is best found, we believe, in communities of persons who join us in the pursuit of mindful reverence, who share our perspectives and values, and who offer love and support when we are devastated by discouragement. We are called to find and sustain communities wherein we can suffer and celebrate with kindred spirits, sharing our reverence for all that we hold in awe, toward all that we find, in our common search, to be transcendent.

CODA

We close with a particularly beautiful example of mindful reverence. The example comes from Geoffrey Miller's new book, *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (2000). In the chapter "Courtship in the Pleistocene" he suggests that many of our "most human" traits, such as the crafting of music and poetry and the cultivation of virtue, are the product of sexual selection. Whether or not one agrees with this thesis is beside the point here. Of importance are the last two paragraphs of this chapter (p. 222), an eloquent instance of how mindfulness—in this case, an understanding of human evolution—can couple with reverence—in this case reverence for our human connectedness.

It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway: all of the significant evolution in our species occurred in populations with brown and black skins living in Africa. At the beginning of hominid evolution five million years ago, our apelike ancestors had dark skin just like chimpanzees and gorillas. When modern *Homo sapiens* evolved a hundred thousand years ago, we still had dark skins. When brain sizes tripled, they tripled in Africans. When sexual choice shaped human nature, it shaped Africans. When language, music, and art evolved, they evolved in Africans. Lighter skins evolved in some European and Asian populations long after the human mind evolved its present capacities.

The skin color of our ancestors does not have much scientific importance. But it does have a political importance given the persistence of anti-black racism. I think that a powerful antidote to such racism is the realization that the human mind is a product of black African females favoring intelligence, kindness, creativity, and articulate language in black African males, and vice versa. Afrocentrism is an appropriate attitude to take when we are thinking about human evolution.

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