Skeptical doubting and mindful self-reflection

Abstract   The skeptic argues that we cannot have any external world knowledge because we cannot know that we are not brains in a vat. The intuitive appeal of this skeptical argument is essentially based on the comprehensibility of the process of skeptical doubting, where we focus our attention on our experiences and experience-based beliefs and raise questions about the sources of these experiences. I propose that skeptical doubting is an instance of a mental attitude that contemporary psychology characterizes as mindfulness. I suggest that mindful self-reflection is not a single phenomenon but rather a cluster of related phenomena that are characterized by an epistemic gap of one kind or the other. I conclude that the persuasiveness of the skeptical argument is based on undergoing the mental process of mindful self-reflection. The undesired skeptical results are gained by overemphasizing the epistemic force of this mental attitude.

1   Descartes on doubting

Descartes (1984) famously characterizes the method of doubting as follows:

> Suppose [a person] had a basket full of apples and, being worried that some of the apples were rotten, wanted to take out the rotten ones to prevent the rot spreading. How would he proceed? Would he not begin by tipping the whole lot out of the basket? And would not the next step be to cast his eye over each apple in turn, and pick up and put back in the basket only those he saw to be sound, leaving the others? In just the same way, those who have never philosophized correctly have various opinions in their minds which they have begun to store up since childhood, and which they therefore have reason to believe may in many cases be false. They then attempt to separate the false beliefs from the others, so as to prevent their contaminating the rest and making the whole lot uncertain. Now the best way they can accomplish this is to reject all their beliefs together in one go, as if they were all uncertain and false. They can then go over each belief in turn and re-adopt only those which they recognize to be true and indubitable. (Replies 7, AT 7:481)

According to Descartes' understanding of doubting, we abandon all our beliefs "as if they were all uncertain and false" and, consequently, also all our *external world* beliefs, despite still having experiences.

2   Mindfulness through meditation

The concept of mindfulness is an essential part of Buddhist meditation. It is nowadays used in clinical psychology and psychiatry in various fields including stress reduction. The method of reaching the status of mindfulness is meditation. Bishop et al. (2004, 235) point out that though only a few processes have been explicitly conceptualized "each has generally been described as a process of stepping outside of the automated mode of perceptual processing and attending to the minute details of mental activity that might otherwise escape awareness."

Mindfulness approaches teach various meditation practices, but they are similar in their basic procedures and goals. Bishop et al. for example describe them as follows:

> A description of sitting meditation will illustrate the basic approach. The client maintains an upright sitting posture, either in a chair or cross-legged on the floor and attempts to maintain attention on a particular focus, most commonly the somatic sensations of his or her own breathing. Whenever attention wanders

from the breath to inevitable thoughts and feelings that arise, the client will simply take notice of them and then let them go as attention is returned to the breath. This process is repeated each time that attention wanders away from the breath. As sitting meditation is practiced, there is an emphasis on simply taking notice of whatever the mind happens to wander to and accepting each object without making judgments about it or elaborating on its implications, additional meanings, or need for action […] The client is further encouraged to use the same general approach outside of his or her formal meditation practice as much as possible by bringing awareness back to the here-and-now during the course of the day, using the breath as an anchor, whenever he or she notices a general lack of awareness or that attention has become focused on streams of thoughts, worries, or ruminations.
(Bishop et al 2004, 231f)

Bishop et al. characterize the resulting state of mindfulness as follows:

These procedures ostensibly lead to a state of mindfulness. Broadly conceptualized, mindfulness has been described as a kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is. […] In a state of mindfulness, thoughts and feelings are observed as events in the mind, without over-identifying with them and without reacting to them in an automatic, habitual pattern of reactivity. This dispassionate state of selfobservation is thought to introduce a "space" between one's perception and response. Thus mindfulness is thought to enable one to respond to situations more reflectively (as opposed to reflexively).
(Bishop et al 2004, 232)

Through the process of meditation we reach the cognitive state of mindfulness which is according to Bishop et al. (2004, 234) a "mode of awareness" that can also be characterized as a particular cognitive attitude we have towards our own mental states. Bishop et al (2004, 235) point out that there has been some speculation that "effective psychotherapy may also enhance the capacity to evoke and utilize mindfulness to gain insight and alternate responses to subjective inner experiences."

3   Varieties of mindful self-reflection

Mindful self-reflection is characterized by the fact that the reflecting person establishes a certain gap between the mental states about which she reflects and the judgements she makes about these mental states. This gap can be established in various different ways. Hence, mindful self-reflection is rather a family of cognitive phenomena than a single phenomenon. Accordingly, we can distinguish various cases. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on mindful self-reflection about experiences and beliefs and exclude other mental states such as emotions. However, many of the following cases can also be modified in a way to apply for emotions.

The following cases are examples of cognitive gaps that can occur as a result of mindful self-reflection about one's own experiences and beliefs:

1. S has an experience as of p and S believes that she has an experience as of p, but S does not believe that p.

2. S believes that p and S believes that she believes that p, but S does not believe that her belief that p is true.

3. S believes that p and S believes that she believes that p and S believes that her belief that p is true, but S still considers that her belief that p might not be true.

4. S believes that p and S believes that she believes that p but S does not accept that p.

5. S believes that p but S does not act according to this belief (given certain desires).

This list of cognitive gaps is not meant to be complete. Moreover, several cases can constitute single stages of a complex process of mindful self-reflection.

We can now reflect on these cases in more detail:

Case 1:

In case 1, there is a gap between what S experiences and what S believes. For example, I have the experience as of a computer in front of me, but by mindfully reflecting on this experience, I do not come to believe that there is a computer in front of me based on this experience. This is the case, if we treat our experiences like an inner movie, watched through our inner eye. In mindful meditation, we can establish this gap either by not forming a belief that p based on the experience as of p or by abandoning a belief that p, which we earlier formed on the basis of our experience as of p. Furthermore, it is possible to establish a gap between our thoughts that p and our beliefs that p. In this case, thoughts (maybe about future events or memories) pop up during our stream of consciousness but we do not take the doxastic attitude of believing (i.e. of taking as true) towards them.

Case 2:

In case 2, S performs mindful self-reflection about her belief that p, but maintains this belief. The resulting gap is one between her belief that p and her judgment about her belief that p. I can, for example, have an experience as of p, believe that p on the basis of this experience but still do not believe that this believe is true. Such a gap can also be established for beliefs that are not experience-based.

There is a crucial difference between this instance of mindful self-reflection and unconscious beliefs. In case of unconscious beliefs, there also exists a gap between believing that p and believing that this belief is true, but this gap is established by the missing higher-level belief that I believe that p. In case 2, in contrast, S does not believe that her belief that p is true, despite believing that she believes that p.

Case 3:

In case 3, the cognitive gap arises between S's believing that her belief that p is true and her considering that her belief that p might be false. This situation can occur, for example, as a first step of a process of psychotherapeutic reflection, when a client has a belief that p and still believes that this belief is true, but the therapist makes the client taking the possibility hypothetically into account, maybe as an exercise, that her belief might be false.

Case 4:

Case 4 is based on the distinction between *believing* that p and *accepting* that p, which some authors draw. Lehrer (2000), for example, distinguishes "accepting something for the *epistemic* purpose of attaining truth and avoiding error" from mere believing, which one can also do for other reasons. For example, S can believe that her brother did not commit the crime for the psychological reason of avoiding painful insights about her brother, although S does not accept that her brother did not commit the crime, since S has significant evidence that he is guilty. In this case, S might be aware of the non-epistemic nature of the reasons for which she believes, but still cannot help maintaining this belief. This kind of epistemic gap not only can arise between believing that p and not accepting that p, but also between believing that p and accepting that *not-p*.

Case 5:

In this case, the gap is established between one's beliefs and desires on the hand and one's actions on the other hand. One can, for example, desire to have a hotdog, think that he can get a hotdog around the corner, but still does not

walk around the corner. This case is slightly different from the cases presented before, since the gap is not established on the theoretical level of one's beliefs, but on the practical level of one's beliefs and desires and one's actions.

These cases of not acting according to one's desires and beliefs can also occur because of a gap between one's first-order desires and one's higher-level desires. I can, for example, desire to have a chocolate and believe there is one in the kitchen, but still keep working, because I do not desire to have this desire, and, therefore, do not follow this first-order desire.

The presented cases can be related to each other in different ways. For example, some can constitute stages of one single process of mindful self-reflection. A client, for example, can first consider that one of her beliefs might be false, although she still beliefs that this belief is true, which is an instance of case 3, and in a second step, abandon her higher-level belief that her belief that p is true, while still maintaining her belief that p, which is instance of case 2. The client might then, in a third step, abandon her belief that p, which means to close the cognitive gap. Moreover, a client can move from case 2 to case 1 during mindfulness mediation, when she first abandons her belief that her experience-based belief that p is true, and second, abandons her belief that p, only maintaining her experience as of p. In this respect, the cases above can manifest different stages of a single process.

4   Doubting and mindful self-reflection

The main thesis of the paper is:

- Cartesian doubting is a cognitive process where we perform mindful self-reflection about our experiences and experience-based external world beliefs.

By performing the process of Cartesian doubting, we give up our ordinary 1st-person perspective, which automatically leads from our experiences and experience-based beliefs to beliefs that these experiences are veridical and that the experience-based beliefs are true.

The shift of perspective away from our ordinary 1st-person perspective to the perspective of mindful self-reflection can be understood as shifting the focus away from my seeing a computer and focusing on the fact that I have a computer *experience* and a computer *belief*.

I argued that mindful self-reflection is not a single phenomenon but rather a bundle of phenomena which can be characterized by a gap that we establish between our experiences (and beliefs) and our judgements about them. Accordingly, this gap can be established in different ways. The same holds for Cartesian doubting. I do not claim that Cartesian doubting always establishes the *same* cognitive gap. Rather, we have to understand it as a bundle of phenomena and each process token of doubting leads to one of these cognitive gaps. This means that when we perform the process of Cartesian doubting, we establish a cognitive gap of a particular type.

According to this interpretation, Descartes might think that doubting has to be interpreted as an instance of case 1, where S has an experience as of p and S believes that she has an experience as of p but S does not believe that p. However, this is one possible instance of skeptical doubting among others. For psychological reasons, it seems hard

or nearly impossible for most of us to actually abandon our experience-based beliefs about our current surrounding; still we are able to perform the process of skeptical doubting. When performing the act of doubting, most of us do not actually abandon their beliefs about their current surrounding, but rather maintain these beliefs, but abandon their higher-level beliefs that these beliefs are true or at least consider that they might be false. Hence, in most cases, skeptical doubting is rather an instance of case 2 or case 3, than one of case 1.[1]

References

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