On the Way to Mindfulness: How a Focus on Outcomes (Even Good Outcomes) Prevents Good Outcomes

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Introduction

Mindfulness, a novel distinction-making process in which a person does not act on the world from old and outdated categories, and instead stays in contact with ever-changing nature of reality (Langer 1989; Langer and Abelson 1972; Langer et al. 1978), is good for us (Langer and Modoveanu 2000). To start with, it is good for our health. Research shows mindfulness increases longevity among the elderly (Alexander et al. 1989; Langer et al. 1984), it decreases alcoholism, and it reduces arthritic pain (Langer 1997). It is also good for our cognitive functioning, since it improves attention (Carson et al. 2001; Levy et al. 2001), memory (Langer 1997), and creativity (Langer and Piper 1987). Given these cognitive effects, it is no surprise that it produces improvements in work productivity, while at the same time reducing burnout (Langer et al. 1988; Park 1990). Given such a wealth of remarkably positive outcomes, one cannot help but wonder why people are not more mindful. If mindfulness were a pill, would we not all be taking it? In short, what are some of the obstacles to mindfulness that prevents us from enjoying its beneficent effects, and what may be the path to overcoming them?.

Langer herself addressed these questions both from micro- and macro- perspectives. From the micro-perspective, there are a plentitude of means through which one may prevent mindlessness or promote mindfulness. Langer and Piper (1987), for example, showed that one could prevent mindlessness through a simple linguistic intervention. They introduced new objects by presenting them conditionally (this may be an 'x') rather than unconditionally (this is 'x'), thus increasing mindfulness, and with it participants' creativity. There is a plentitude of such simple interventions (varying perspective, increasing awareness of choices, introducing

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decision making, increased personal responsibility, etc.) that work, and yet are underutilized. From the macro-perspective, Langer (1983) argued that one reason people do not change is because being mindful is incompatible with the framework of stability and lack of ambiguity which brings comfort and a feeling of safety. This can be also seen as an aversion to the possibility of dysregulating one's emotional and personality system due to the perception of potentially unexpected or negative perceptions about the self or the environment (Djikic 2014). The second meta-reason of pervasive mindlessness, according to Langer (1983), could be apparent rewards inherent in maintaining old categories, and acting in the world as if they were still current. For example, a person happy with their marriage might ignore evidence that their marital partner is unhappy in an attempt to maintain a situation that is seen as self-benefiting. Mindlessness becomes a mean through which particular habitually obtained outcomes are habitually maintained. These motivational obstacles may thus interfere and prevent interest in, and implementation of, simple techniques through which one could reach a state of mindfulness.

To think of human beings (and institutions which they inhabit) generally as inert, passive, and fearful of negative perceptions and change may be accurate, but it does not shine a guiding light to the particular human being who is attempting to throw off the yoke of mindlessness. For that we need to supplement what is already known with a further analysis of motivational conflicts, which results in practical steps through which one can overcome what appears to be mindless inertia, but what I will later suggest is a tension between opposing motivational forces. But to better understand that tension, it is important to discuss the cognitive center of the field on which the motivational war is being waged: perceived control.

To Control or not Control…

Langer (1983), in her book, *The Psychology of Control,* showed how a sense of perceived control can have remarkable effects on one's outcomes. In this work, Langer (1983) presented experimental work showing that people are so motivated to make causal judgments and see themselves as causal agents (even in games of chance), that a single cue will suffice to make that attribution. Furthermore, she showed how negative or limiting labels, particularly ones which imply one is passive or has no sense of control, can have powerful negative effects on one's own performance and on perception and subsequent treatment by others. Finally, chronic loss of perceived control may have lethal consequences, particularly for the institutionalized elderly.

Given this overwhelming experimental show of evidence supporting the benefits of perceived control, it is important to note Langer's explicit statement that "the psychology of control is about the control of oneself and one's perception of reality." (1983, p. 13) It implies an important distinction regarding the value of 'more perceived control is better' statement. It is accurate only to the extent that the control one is trying to exert is over oneself and one's own perceptions, and not

over others, or over particular outcomes in the world. The reason why that is important is because of the overwhelming need humans have to control the outcomes, and to believe that if they just do the right thing, their outcomes will be positive. This idea is represented well in a 'just world hypothesis' (Lerner 1980) according to which people are rewarded for good behaviors with good outcomes and punished for bad behaviors with suffering. The hypothesis, or the delusion, as Lerner (1980) called it, gives individuals a sense of control over the outcomes in their lives.

The desire to control others plays itself out in all situations in which multiple individuals are involved in goal-oriented manner, and have to do things together to obtain joint outcomes—in marriages, school and work teams, sports teams, and organizations. Those who want different things, have different values, or simply a different way of being, are often seen as obstacles unless they behave in exactly the manner in which we would like them to behave. It is easy to see why this attempt to control others (for example, nursing home administrators who want strictly scheduled meals, in order to make the meal times faster and more efficient for the staff, and thus more economical for the institution) would conflict directly with individuals' desire to have control and choice regarding their meal times. Working in a team, likewise, can be an excruciating experience for many, particularly those who believe that the project must have only one (most successful) outcome.

Even when other people are not involved, outcome focus can become a serious detriment. For example, it has been shown that cancer patients' sense of perceived control is associated with a number of positive psychosocial outcomes, but only if the sense of control extended over daily emotional reactions and physical symptoms, but not the course of the illness (Thompson et al. 1993). This is important because if the patient believed that she can control the course of illness, and the illness continued to advance, it would have a deteriorating consequence on her psychological and physical well-being. Imagine, after all, feeling that you are not getting better from cancer because it is *your choice*, despite all the suffering.

The riddle then becomes a motivational one. How does one exist in a state in which they exercise choices with regards to oneself and one's perceptions, while at the same time not insisting on the outcome that evolutionary theorist claim is the ultimate outcome, the motivation underlying all others—survival of one's genes (Buss 1995). One might argue that a person may want survival, but also understand that whether or not they will survive is not entirely under their control (unless it is, of course). Yet, even a simple overview of human behavior shows us that if we want something very much, we will want to control ourselves, others, and circumstances, in order to make it happen. It is this apparent paradox that needs to be resolved in order to allow us an insight into why and how one can be mindful and have control over the self while not wanting to dominate others and the world. To do so, I shall reexamine (from an existential perspective) a theory by a humanist godfather of motivational theory.

Tipping the Maslow's Pyramid

Maslow's (1954/1970) theory of hierarchy of needs, as represented by a pyramid that has D or deficiency needs (such as physiological needs, safety, belonging and love, self-esteem) below B or being needs (all needs related to self-actualization) is perhaps one of the most easily recognized by psychology students and lay persons alike. Any mention of Maslow's name in a conversation will be followed, in almost a Pavlovian fashion, with a rhetorical question: 'the guy with the pyramid, right?' The only problem with Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs is that it turns out to be incorrect (Wahba and Bridwell 1976). It is not the conceptualization of the needs themselves that is incorrect, but rather their organization into a hierarchy and the subsequent implication that a sufficient satisfaction of D needs will lead inevitably to at least some satisfaction of B needs. No matter where we look in everyday life, Maslow's hierarchy assumption appears to be violated. Many wealthy individuals with loving families and iron sense of self-esteem appear to struggle with self-actualization, whereas many artists who have to couch-hop from one friend to another, are in incessant struggle with lack of funds, shelter, food, and security, and have a train-wreck of turbulent relationships behind them, often experience blissful prolonged periods of self-actualization.

Treating the needs from an evolutionary perspective obscured the existential component in the motivational field—choice. It turns out that Maslow himself went down this existential route in his book *Toward the Psychology of Being* (1962/1968). In it, he has a simpler, and perhaps a less catchy diagram, but one that in its essence, tips his pyramid to the side.

Safety ← Person → Growth (Maslow 1968, p. 47)

In this work Maslow (1968) goes on to propose that individuals are inherently caught between their needs for safety and growth, and that their motivational state will finally depend on the act of choosing. Tipping Maslow's hierarchy has an effect of giving us much more useable psychology of motivation. I will now propose an extension of this theory that might be helpful in understanding better obstacles to process-oriented motivation that is essential to mindfulness.

Unrelenting Conflict, Innumerable Choices

If we look at the animal world, Maslow's conflict between safety and growth can be illustrated by an image of a gazelle hiding in the forest, unable to access water (or other nourishment) in the clearing, on account of prowling predators. In that scenario, we imagine that the sophisticated evolutionary mechanism would have determined exactly how much danger should gazelle endure to reach nourishment, that is, what is the optimal level of risk for the ultimate survival of the gazelle. In this case, we have an animal with conflicting needs, but with a clear evolutionary objective: survival. Thus, in animals, there is a final principle based on which all

other needs are reorganized. An example involving humans would be much more complicated. For clarity, let us replace Maslow's need for safety with an instinct for survival, and his need for growth, with an instinct for development (and not just physical development, as implied by the term 'growth').

Survival ← Person → Development

Let us posit the survival instinct to comprise all the needs we have in common with our evolutionary cousins: status, wealth, security, empathy toward family members only, and emotions of sadness, anger, happiness, humiliation, etc. When governed by this motivational cluster, we are no different than our pets—we have the same appetites, needs, and objectives. Let us furthermore posit that the other (developmental) set of instincts is more uniquely human, in that it includes a cluster of needs, such as the need to develop one's potential in various domains, ability to be guided a vision, empathy toward strangers, and emotions such as joy, awe, inspiration, regret, and tragedy, all of which are not as readily exhibited by our animal cousins. The essential conflict, of course, is that pursuing one's development (emotional, occupational, or otherwise) may come at the price of survival. That configuration of instincts would be illogical in the rest of the animal world. Based solely on the survival outcome, a young journalist wanting to fulfill her occupational potential would subjugate her need to work as a war correspondent in Syria and stay at home, taking on challenges that provide her opportunity for some development, all the while maintain the safe location. But, that is not what always happens in real life.

In everyday life, people often take survival risks for the sake of development, or forego development for the sake of survival. In order to act, it appears that a human being needs to make a choice whereby one instinct will predominate and drive the motivational system. It is as if the survival instinct literally incorporates (swallows up) the development instincts, or vice versa. That means that the motivational conflict does not end even while we are dominated by one set of instincts. The artist will still have to worry about the rent, and the person with safe, mind-deadening job, will still have pangs of suffering, since his developmental needs will still voice themselves, no matter how muffled that voice may be. A similar conflict pervades choosing relationship partners, where individuals feel torn between partners who are 'good for us' (survival/safety) versus the ones that challenge and excite us, but may lead to failed relationships. There are many situations in which focus on development will naturally increase the chances of survival outcomes (such as money, wealth, health, and status) being reached, but the important point here is that it is not a certain outcome, and one must engage in the development knowing that it may not necessarily lead to survival outcomes. Otherwise, we would not have a motivational conflict; we would all just focus on development, get survival needs met as a matter of fact, and would have no trouble not focusing on outcomes (since we know they are forthcoming anyway). When young people ask, 'Won't all turn out well if I just follow my passion?' one must honestly answer with 'It depends what you mean by "well". You will be joyful and fulfilled, but may end up broke, alone, or dead.' It is not the answer most people like. Choosing development (or

'passion' in the modern parlance) is a difficult choice precisely *because* development is not *necessarily* paired with survival outcomes.

The central difference between these two sets of instincts is that the survival one focuses on outcomes (being happy to have achieved the outcomes of money, status, lasting relationship, etc.), while the development instinct focuses on the process (the joy of doing something or being with someone for its own sake). That means that we are continually choosing, caught in the conflict between powerful but relentless motivational forces, being governed by the outcome or the process. Maslow (1968) himself noted, ruefully, that most people spend most of their lives making safe choices, chasing the survival-oriented outcomes. No wonder, given our evolutionary history. Yet the very same people are puzzled and frustrated as to why they cannot reach the survival outcomes promised by mindfulness (better health, productivity, etc.). The short answer is that those outcomes presuppose mindfulness, which in turn requires relinquishing the focus on the outcomes.

Practical Steps to Process Orientation

Langer (1983) argues that a meaningful sense of perceived control, and thus mindfulness, is inextricably bound to a process orientation—a focus on the process rather than outcomes. This is because the outcome orientation produces in a person preoccupations and judgments about whether the self can accomplish the goal or not, whereas a process orientation produces in a person a focus on how to accomplish the goal. Similar benefits of process versus outcome orientation have been found by Seligman (1975) in his study of learned helplessness, and Dweck and Leggett (1988) in their study of how different implicit beliefs about the self (incremental vs. entity) produce mastery versus helpless response in learning. In the end, it is the inability to stably inhabit process orientation that constitutes the main obstacle to mindfulness, and precludes all positive outcomes associated with it. This is rather ironic, given that it is the outcome (the potential of enhanced well-being associated with mindfulness) with which this paper began, which may make individuals interested in being mindful in the first place. This paradox is at the core of why many people remain mindless in the face of punishing consequences.

From the practical perspective, two things need to happen for a person to stay in a motivational state that is cognitively compatible with mindfulness. First, they need to understand the survival versus development conflict, and *choose* development, knowing that the positive survival-related outcomes are not ensured. This prevents reversion to outcome focus as soon as the process does not yield survival-related outcomes. Given that life presents us with innumerable choices, it would be important that this choice be continually made across the time span for which we would like to be mindful.

The second necessity would be a feedback loop that alerts an individual she is no longer in the 'developmental' motivational state—that she has unconsciously fallen back to survival-related motivation. The best signaling tools in our evolutionary

history, of course, are our emotions. Emotions signal to us where we stand in relations to our goals, and given that motivational and development instincts yield a different set of goals, it is reasonable that the emotions for the two systems will differ. For example, knowing the difference between happiness (I'm closer to achieving, or have already achieved my set goal) and joy (I'm in the midst of an activity that is developing me), can be very informative, particularly since happiness is a short lasting signal that follows evidence of success, and joy a continuous signal irrespective of evidence of failure or success. Failure to develop will produce suffering (opposite of joy), even if a person is successful and happy at achieving their goal. Learning how to distinguish between such emotions, as well as understanding complex emotional states such as being happy and suffering at the same time, is a skill that can be learned and would be useful to maintain oneself in a developmental motivational field.

The second potential feedback loop that would prevent reversion to outcome-focused motivational state is noticing whether one treats oneself as an object or a subject (Djikic and Langer 2007). When in survival motivational state, individuals will treat themselves as objects, and consequently compare themselves continually to others around them; when in a developmental state, the respective location in comparison to others will be irrelevant, and individuals will only compare themselves to their future (or past) selves. The very common act of comparison with others would immediately signal to us that we are not in a motivational state compatible with mindfulness.

The practical steps toward process orientation require both making an informed choice for development rather than survival-related goal, and a feedback mechanism that prevents one from reverting to the outcome-focused motivation. It is only then that mindfulness becomes possible.

Conclusion

Three decades ago, Langer (1983) presciently highlighted process orientation and perceived control over self, but not others or outcomes, as key factors without which mindfulness cannot exist. We need to be reminded both of this, and the fact that mindfulness is not only a state of mind, but a way of being that requires a particular existential choice. Most of us want mindfulness mindlessly, wanting the positive outcomes, heedless of the choice that mindfulness demands. Yes, we all may want the existential jackpot of experiencing joy and fulfillment of being governed by our instinct for development, being mindfully present, while at the same time having all our survival-based needs met. It does happen, and when it does, life can be an extraordinary, beautiful thing. You can start a business for the love of it, and become rich doing it. You may start the relationship for the love of it, and keep your love. But, you may also lose everything. The price of mindfulness is having the courage to choose a way of being in which things may not go just as you have wanted or planned, but which allows you to develop mindfully nontheless.

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