Mindful Decentering, and Attention as Selection for Action

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ABSTRACT   This article examines the compatibility between one of the central phenomena discussed in the literature on the theory and practice of secular mindfulness, decentering, and one of the most influential contemporary philosophical accounts of attention—namely, Wayne Wu's theory of attention as selection for action. I begin by presenting and critically examining Victor Lange's recent attempt to show that decentering constitutes a counterexample to Wu's account. I then argue that Lange's conception of decentering is inadequate, and propose an alternative understanding according to which decentering indeed serves as a counterexample to the view of attention as selection for action. Finally, I outline possible directions for further philosophical research on attention that accommodate the findings of secular mindfulness, particularly those concerning decentering.

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INTRODUCTION

Across a growing body of literature concerned with the practice of mindfulness[1] and its potential benefits for mental health and well-being, one can encounter the widely shared idea that the central aspect of this practice is a change in our attitude towards our thoughts and other mental states. This phenomenon is called "decentering" (see Segal, Williams and Teasdale 2012), "reperceiving'" (Shapiro et al. 2006), or "defusion" (Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson 2011).[2]

For Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2013, 91), to decenter "means to relate to thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and impulses to act as events passing in the mind and body, rather than identifying with them." In the decentered perspective, "thoughts and feelings are seen as simply passing events in the mind that arise, become objects of awareness, and then pass away" (Segal, Williams and Teasdale 2013, 73). They draw on the idea of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who, inspired by Buddhist ideas and practices, has developed mindfulness exercises in which "we intentionally practice letting go of each thought that attracts our attention" and "just observe them as thoughts, as discrete events that appear in the field of our awareness . . . [and—P.S.] we intentionally decline getting caught up in the content [of them—P.S.]" (Kabat-Zinn 1990, 68). According to Shapiro and colleagues, who also draw on Kabat-Zinn's idea, having attained the ability to reperceive, "rather than being immersed in the drama of our personal narrative or life story, we are able to stand back and simply witness it" (Shapiro et al. 2006, 377).

On the other hand, another crucial notion used in accounts of the mindfulness practice that leads to decentering is the notion of attention. The most

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1. I refer here, and throughout the paper, to the secular theory and practice of mindfulness. While secular mindfulness is deeply inspired by Buddhist ideas and practices, there is considerable debate over the extent to which the former remains faithful to the latter—not to mention the internal Buddhist debates about how to understand and practice Buddhist meditation (Arbel 2016; Bodhi 2011; Dreyfus 2011; Dunne 2011; Fernell and Segal 2011; Gethin 2011; Grossman and Van Dam 2011; Nyanaponika 1968; Olendzki 2011; Polak 2024). Entering into these debates not only lies beyond the scope of my paper, but is also unnecessary for my purposes, which are to identify a particular mental phenomenon and highlight its relationship to a particular theory of attention.

2. Below, I will treat these terms, borrowed from the literature cited, as synonyms. Engaging with those who interpret them as referring to slightly different mental phenomena lies beyond the scope of the present paper. What is important for my purposes is, once again, to identify a particular mental phenomenon that serves as a counterexample to a specific theory of attention. I take this phenomenon to be the one referred to by all three terms—decentering, reperceiving, and defusion—yet my argument does not depend on the truth of this latter claim. It would remain valid even if only one of these terms referred to a phenomenon with the characteristics I outline in the final part of the paper.

influential definition of this practice, formulated by Kabat-Zinn, states that mindfulness is defined as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn 1994, 4). This is why it is important to analyze how the phenomenon of decentering relates to philosophical accounts of attention. In this context, it is noteworthy that Victor Lange (2025) argues that decentering can be viewed as a counterexample to all those contemporary philosophical theories of attention that assume that "attending to a phenomenon implies selecting the phenomenon for further processing" (Lange 2025, 1552), and, in particular, to one of the most prominent among them—namely, Wayne Wu's theory of attention as selection for action (hereafter SfA).

Lange is not alone in his attempt: Wu's account is hotly disputed, and several authors have identified phenomena—such as attentional capture or automatic actions—that can be regarded as counterexamples to SfA (see, e.g., Buehler 2019, 2022; Watzl 2017, 2023). Nevertheless, Wu has responded to these critics, seeking to show that the phenomena pointed out by them do not, in fact, undermine SfA. His responses are not decisive but, I think, do possess a certain plausibility, particularly in light of the later development of his theory (Wu 2019, 2023b, 2025). Decentering, however, to which Lange points, is not only much more thoroughly developed in the literature than the rather sketchily described other cases, but has also not yet been considered in the ongoing philosophical debate as a counterexample to SfA. For this reason, it deserves particular attention.

I think that Lange highlights the right problem and comes to the right conclusion: decentering does, in fact, pose a serious threat to SfA. His reasoning is, however, flawed: if decentering were what he takes it to be, it would not constitute a counterexample to SfA. In this paper, I first sketch Lange's argument and then show how Wu might respond to his reasoning. Finally, I present another account of decentering—one that is, in my opinion, much more faithful to what one encounters in the literature on mindfulness and experiences in its actual practice[3]—and show why it challenges SfA.

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3. See the caveat offered in footnote 1 above.

I

Lange (2025, 1532–38) defines decentering as follows:

> Undergoing a mental state, M, an agent, A, decenters from M if and only if A simultaneously
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> (a) introspectively attends to M (sub-operation 1)
> (b) detaches from M (sub-operation 2). (Lange 2025, 1532)

According to him, decentering is to be deployed only in pathological mental states,[4] and is constituted by two simultaneous sub-operations, the first of which consists in the intentional focusing of attention on the relevant mental state, thereby increasing the subject's awareness of that state, and the second of which results in an agent downregulating the influence the state has on her psychological processing. The second sub-operation, detachment, has two aspects. Lange, drawing here on Bernstein's model (Bernstein et al. 2015, 2019), describes them as disidentification and non-reactivity: "The process of disidentification involves an agent relating to the occurring mental state as external to herself and not as an expression of herself," while non-reactivity "means that a subject does not act bodily on the basis of the relevant state" and "avoids any mental interference with the state."

Lange understands disidentification from one's mental states as a subjective, practical stance toward those states. When a subject identifies with her mental state, "she views the state as a meaningful expression of herself," taking the content of the mental state seriously, "which makes it more prominent in governing her mind and associated actions." By contrast, when a subject disidentifies with a given mental state, "she (probably) does not view the state as meaningful or worth taking seriously," and "such subjective externalization (most likely) decreases a state's influence on one's mind and associated actions, compared to subjectively identifying with the state." Disidentification leads to non-reactivity.

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4. Given the Buddhist roots of secular mindfulness, it is worth making clear that Lange uses the term "pathological" in the contemporary Western, discriminative sense, in which only certain ordinary mental states are so classified—not in the Buddhist sense, according to which all mental states fall within the realm of samsara, meaning existence permeated by suffering (pathos). Later in this paper I show that, on this point (as on several others), Lange misreads the idea of decentering as it has been developed in the mindfulness literature. Be that as it may, he states plainly that "disidentification and non-reactivity are ways of relating to the *pathological mental state*. They are not ways of relating to any other mental state" (2025, 1538; italics in the original).

Lange criticizes the view—which he attributes to Puc (2019)—that bare attention suffices for decentering,[5] and argues for the claim that decentering should be understood as including the two conditions sketched above: i.e. as "something more than merely introspecting one's mental states." He holds that introspective attention and detachment may come apart; this is why he conceives decentering as "a complex operation where multiple, inter-related sub-operations work together," and not as "exhaustively a matter of an epistemic change in how one introspects."

Another crucial feature of decentering is, according to Lange, the direct-ness of the detachment. In cases in which detachment is indirect, "an agent detaches from a mental state, M, by upregulating another mental state, M*, such that her processing is determined by M* with the indirect effect or by-product that she detaches from M." But in decentering, Lange insists, detach-ment is direct: "in direct detachment, the downregulation of a mental state is not a side-effect of the upregulation of another mental state. The detach-ment is itself the instant operation performed by the agent." Lange holds that "describing the detachment of decentering as direct is the best way to make sense of the instructions and the phenomenology of decentering." Subjects who are taught how to decenter "receive no instructions in upregulating other . . . mental states. Neither does decentering involve the experience of upregu-lating another mental state. It involves the experience that the pathological state remains present but that there is an increased distance to it."

II

Decentering, understood in the terms sketched above, constitutes, Lange holds, a counterexample to Wayne Wu's theory of attention as selection for action (SfA).

Lange interprets Wu's SfA theory as being based on two fundamental theses:

SfA – attention. An agent, A, attends to an input, P, if and only if A selects P for action.
SfA – attention control. An agent, A, executes attention control if and only if A's relevant goals or intentions structure a selection of an input for action. (Lange 2025, 1540)

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5. Later in the paper, I argue that, contrary to Lange's view, bare attention suffices for decentering, albeit in a slightly different sense from that proposed by Puc. Engaging with Puc's position on this issue, however, lies beyond the scope of the present paper. I leave this question to future research, the direction of which I outline in the paper's conclusion.

For the line of argumentation developed by Lange (2025, 1540–44), it is crucial that attention control be understood as "restricted to the structuring of the selection of an input for action, not the direct execution of the action." Having interpreted SfA in this way, he points out that decentering involves attention but, at the same time, "this type of attention does not seem to be a matter of selecting the pathological state for an action." By contrast, it is "a matter of attending to a state with the purpose of it not being selected for an action": i.e. it amounts to selecting a mental state for non-action—which contradicts the *SfA-attention* thesis. A similar problem arises with respect to the second central thesis of SfA, namely *SfA-attention control*. In Lange's view, "(1) the detachment of decentering is intentional and direct, and (2) the detachment is an execution of attention control." This is why, "as an act of attention control, decentering is the operation of avoiding that a state produces or influences action": that is, the subject's intentions structure the selection of an input, but it is selected not for action—contrary to what *SfA-attention control* states.

Lange considers several possible replies on the part of the defender of SfA. The first one focuses on sub-operation 1, and consists in claiming that introspective attention is the selection of a given mental state (an input) for the action of increasing its conscious representation or salience. To this, he answers that "some philosophers have argued that it is hard to make sense of an increase in conscious representation or salience as a form of action." His main argument tackles, however, sub-operation 2. He argues that defenders of SfA should show "that we can adequately describe sub-operation 2 as an agent's intentions or goals structuring the selection of the pathological state for some action," and claims that they may try to do this in three ways—but none of those ways are successful.

One way is to claim that "sub-operation 2 involves the selection of the pathological state for the action of turning it off." Lange—silently assuming that turning off the mental state amounts to the inhibition of its neural correlate—answers that this proposal is hardly reconcilable with the theory that inhibition at the neural level is never direct but always involves giving priority to other neural mappings over that which is to be inhibited. Given this fact, if sub-operation 2 amounted to turning off the pathological mental state a subject wishes to detach from, the detachment in this case would be of an indirect character. But even if this difficulty could be resolved, the defender of SfA faces another problem. According to Wu—as interpreted by Lange—"an input is selected for action only if it implies that the input produces further effects in processing," whereas selection for turning off "involves that a state is selected for not producing further effects."

Another possible way of defending SfA considered by Lange is the claim that sub-operation 2 may be understood as "the structured selection of the pathological thought for the action of meta-representing it." He answers that "such meta-representation would plausibly not be sufficient for the detachment involved in sub-operation 2." According to him, it is possible for a subject to meta-represent a mental state as "external to me/not an expression of me" or "not to be reacted upon," and still fail to execute the intended psychological control over that state—for example, to act upon a state even when it is represented as "a state not to be reacted upon." From this perspective, decentering involves not only meta-representing but also some form of psychological control. He also rejects a further possible reply, according to which "the meta-representation involved in sub-operation 2 is of a non-propositional format such that if a mental state is encoded in this format, it ensures detachment." He is skeptical about the non-propositional character of meta-representation and, further, claims that even such non-propositional meta-representation cannot help here, for the same reasons that undermine the third possible SfA defender's reply—namely, that sub-operation 2 of decentering involves selecting a pathological mental state for a stance of disidentification and non-reactivity.

Lange (2025, 1545–46) regards stance as a form of activity, and agrees that before a subject establishes the intended stance toward the pathological state, she must select the relevant state for this stance. Nevertheless, he holds that after the maintenance of the stance is established, the subject's "mental operation is not primarily a matter of selection of the state for this stance," but is "primarily a matter of her executing, or we might say acting, the stance." He concludes that "it is by actively executing the stances that the subjects manipulate the grip the pathological state has in their processing and downregulates it. This is how sub-operation 2 involves phases that are not adequately described as a process of selection of pathological states for stances, but direct executions of the stances." Lange rejects a possible reply on the part of the defender of SfA based on the analogy between maintaining the stance toward a mental state and keeping the body frozen in a "freezing dance." He claims that even if keeping the body "frozen" may be explained as the selection of proprioceptive inputs for some action—because preventing the body from moving may demand active engagement of the subject (e.g., actively rejecting impulses to move)—this is not an adequate analogue for decentering. This analogy suggests that decentering can be conceived as freezing one's mental life. Lange remarks, however, that the analogy is flawed because "decentering is not about freezing or keeping your pathological state constant. It is about continuously downregulating

it. Upon successful decentering, the pathological state disappears over time and there is no need to introspect or detach from it."

III

In the present section, I will argue that decentering, as Lange understands it, does not in fact constitute a counterexample to SfA—especially as the concept is developed in Wu's more recent works. Lange's argument amounts to the claim that decentering is a case of *attention without action.* Wu responds to such an argument by claiming that:

> Once it is clear what acting comes to, namely input-output coupling in an action space, then it seems that guidance is present in every movement, even the subtlest movements of the mind. . . . In general, my response to putative counterexamples that attempt to show attention without agency is to ask whether the form of attention at issue can be part of intentional action, and then to uncover the structure of such expressions of intentional agency, revealing its component action-relevant capacities. Putative counterexamples will then be revealed to have the relevant structure, often unnoticed when we focus on the automatic forms but brought to light once we recognize that action has its own internal architecture. (Wu 2023b, 82)

When considering the (in)compatibility of SfA and decentering, it is crucial to understand Wu's view on both action and selection. The basic structure of action is connected to the fact that action is possible in situations in which a subject faces multiple possible behavioral paths. Action differs from mere reflexes in that reflexes occur when there are "no additional behavioral paths beyond the one path taken (this includes the path of not acting). Thus, the behavior space consists of a simple one-one mapping from target to response." This passage indicates that, according to Wu, such a plurality of options includes situations in which the only possible alternative is between acting in a specific way or not acting at all. When one has to choose between acting or not acting in response to X, one selects X for action: "for agency to be possible, there must be behavioral options, even if it is just the option of not acting" (Wu 2014, 89–90).

While explaining the notion of behavioral space, Wu uses the notions of input and output. The behavior space "is constituted (1) by inputs, which are the agent's psychological states at that time, such as her seeing, feeling, remembering, entertaining, and so on, and (2) by outputs, which can be further psychological states." In the behavior space, there are many possible paths from inputs to outputs, so when a subject acts, "one of the potential

paths is actualized," and her action is "a specific input guiding a response, given what the agent intends" The course of action is set by the intention—"the agent responds in light of how she *takes things*" (Wu 2023a, 62–65).

In the case of mental action—what Wu calls "movement of the mind"—such traversal along a particular path in the behavior space, from an input mental state to an output mental state, "is best depicted in terms of intentional content." During the course of mental action, such content is transformed over time (Wu 2023a, 70–71). If the change in content is small, a movement of the mind may be considered "short." Wu regards covert perceptual attention as "the shortest movement," in which "the input state is modified in the output state." Wu leaves open the question of "how one precisely draws a distinction between states that change and states that induce distinct states"; what matters for him is "changes in intentional content as a way to track the progress of a mental action" (Wu 2023a, 71). In the case of movement of the mind, "there can be a small distance between input and output, e.g., while the input might be the flashing of a specific visual image, the output would be the maintaining of that very image. Input and output are nearly identical, the latter simply involving a response to the image" (Wu 2014, 93). In other words, even if there is no change in intentional content, but there is some subjective response to the input state—such as maintaining that mental state—attention is still present, even in "the limiting case of maintaining attention on a target." It can be counted as mental action because the subject, by maintaining a particular mental state, intentionally remains on a particular path in the behavior space. According to Wu, it is this case—not decentering—that can be considered analogous to keeping one's body "frozen" (Wu 2023a, 75).

The question arises whether decentering, as Lange describes it, should be regarded as a mental action in the sense explained by Wu. Decentering, Lange holds, involves a particular intention: a subject identifies a particular mental state as a pathological one and intends to downregulate its influence on her processing—in other words, she intends to respond in some way to that state. Some initial taking up of mental states sets the introspective attention: the subject focuses on a pathological mental state as a particular input chosen from among many possible inputs. This is sub-operation 1, which, according to Lange, increases the subject's awareness of that mental state. The subject then intentionally—in the light of how she takes things—responds to that input by performing sub-operation 2. In this stage, she detaches from that state; to put it in Lange's words, she performs an act of "not taking it seriously," interpreting the relevant state as "not an expression of herself" or "not meaningful," and then actively executes the stance

of non-reactivity toward the relevant state. All of Lange's descriptions of what occurs during both sub-operations constitutive of decentering indicate that it involves a change in intentional content sufficient, in Wu's view, for detecting a movement of the mind. Moreover, as Lange explicitly states, this movement is brought about intentionally by the subject, as an actualization of one among many possible paths in the subject's behavior space. This becomes even clearer when one considers what Lange insists on—namely, the directness of the downregulation of the relevant mental state.

Lange claims that detachment, being the direct execution of a stance toward a pathological mental state, excludes the possibility of understanding decentering as the selection of the state for this stance. The question, however, is what the role of sub-operation 1 is in decentering. In Lange's view it is a necessary component of decentering. If so, then decentering involves the selection of the pathological mental state—attention to it (sub-operation 1)—for the action, i.e., execution of the particular stance toward that state (sub-operation 2). Lange (2025, 1551–52) insists that SfA (like any other theory of attention) must take into account the two-dimensional, complex nature of decentering, which "involves agents intentionally manipulating two causal relations of the same mental state at the same point in time": i.e. "the causal relation of increasing conscious representation of the state and the causal relation of the state's determination of further processing." I think, however, that this conception of "decentering as a multi-dynamical unit of attention and attention control, in which agents relate to the same mental state in two different ways" poses no problem for Wu's theory.

To see this, it is sufficient to notice that Wu distinguishes attention as (mental) action (atten*ding*) and attention in action (atten*tion*) (Wu 2023a, 75; Wu 2023b, 63). When we are considering attending as mental action "it will have the complex structure that is revealed by reflection on the behavior space and the non-deliberative Many-Many Problem" (Wu 2023a, 75), meaning that "attending as action involves a coupling of input to output" within the action space (Wu 2023b, 62). Wu acknowledges, however, that we frequently "isolate attention in the context of action, as when we speak of doing things in a way that depends on attention," and in that case, when we treat attention as a component of action, "we need only have in view the input that will inform action" (Wu 2023a, 75). With the above distinction in place, one can easily explain decentering (as Lange presents it) in SfA categories. The whole process of decentering has the structure not of a reflex, but of an action—it is a particular path, intentionally taken by the subject, within a behavioral space constituted by many possibilities. Even if it may be disputable whether the whole process can be counted as attending as action, it—as Lange himself

insists—includes as its necessary component sub-operation 1, attention to the pathological state, where this guides sub-operation 2, detachment from that state (explained by Lange as downregulating the influence that this state has on the subject's further mental processing).

The account of decentering (as Lange describes it) in SfA terms will be even clearer if one includes Wu's development of the crucial notion of selection. Wu acknowledges that his slogan "attention is selection for action" has come in for critique (Watzl 2017) on the basis of the observation that its grammar suggests accomplishment at a particular point in time ("I selected this mental state for action at noon"), whereas attention is instead a continuous process ("I've been attending to this mental state since noon") (Wu 2023a, 66). Wu responds to this critique by acknowledging the ambiguity of the slogan and explaining that the notion of selection should not be understood as implying such a non-processual nature of attention. He agrees that attention is a process; this is why he considers the very term "attention" to be unfortunate, since it suggests a state. Therefore, he prefers to use the term "attending" (Wu 2023b, 63–64). This is why, in his later writings, he uses the term "guidance" instead: "Attention is mental guidance in action, the agent's taking things informing response" (Wu 2023b, 65). Or, to put it in more elaborate terms:

> To speak of attention as selection for action is to speak of a way that the subject is attuned during action to relevant information such that it is deployed to inform the subject's response . . . action is constituted by a response guided by the agent's attunement to certain features of the world, including features of the subject him- or herself. There are, then, two necessary "aspects" of attention so conceived: (1) the attunement ("selection"), and (2) the link between the response and that to which the subject is attuned ("for action"). (Wu 2023a, 67)

In light of the above explanation, one may account for Lange's decentering by saying that sub-operation 1 amounts to attunement to the relevant mental state, whereas sub-operation 2 constitutes the link between the response (detachment) and the mental state to which the subject is attuned.

If the line of reasoning offered here is sound, then Lange's rejoinders to the possible SfA defender's replies are questionable. His rejoinder to the idea that sub-operation 2 of decentering is the selection of a pathological mental state for a stance of disidentification and non-reactivity is based on an understanding of selection as taking place at a particular point in time. It is only such an understanding that enables one to say that a subject attends

to the pathological state towards which the stance of disidentification and non-reactivity is to be adopted just before establishing the intended stance toward that state, but not while maintaining the stance. If one understands selection as a continuous process of guidance, one should acknowledge that this process of selection (or, better, selecting) constantly guides the active execution of the stance. Similarly, with regard to the idea that decentering may be conceptualized as the selection of a pathological mental state for turning off, it can be said that Lange (2025, 1544) wrongly perceives a discrepancy between the idea that "an input is selected for action only if it implies that the input produces further effects in processing" and the claim that selection for turning off "involves that a state is selected for *not* producing further effects." The further effects the selected input produces in processing are changes to the input itself: i.e. changes in the intentional content of the relevant mental state—changes brought about during action (movement of the mind) guided by the input selected for that action.

IV

Lange's failure to show that decentering challenges SfA does not mean that there is no discrepancy between decentering and Wu's account of attention. This is because Lange's understanding of decentering is problematic: if decentering had the nature Lange claims it has, any attempts to decenter from one's thoughts would have to fail. For, as the experience of many mindfulness practitioners suggests, and as empirical studies confirm (Wegner and Erber 1992; Wegner 1994), attempts to directly detach from any mental state result not in downregulating the influence of that mental state—much less in turning that state off—but, contrary to the subject's intentions, in upregulating its role in further mental processing (and frequently in further outer behavior) on the part of the subject who tries to detach from it. This is why, in many mindfulness schools, the process of decentering is conceived and taught quite differently from how Lange describes it. And it is this process that, I will try to show, poses a serious challenge to the SfA theory of attention.

   First of all, contrary to Lange's claim, decentering does not apply only to pathological mental states. As Jon Kabat-Zinn writes, in mindfulness practice "we treat all our thoughts as if they are of equal value" (1990, 68). Moreover, as Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2013, 150) insist, "the issue is not learning how to switch thoughts off, but how best we can change the way we relate to them: seeing them as they are—simply—as streams of thinking, events in the mind, rather than getting lost in them." The crucial point, however, is that the aim described above is not achieved by any

direct intervention on the part of the subject. On the contrary, the only way to decenter is to "leave the thoughts alone," without creating even "a hidden agenda that will get rid of unwanted experience if we simply allow it" (Nairn, Choden and Regan-Addis 2019, 74). The process is aptly described through a metaphor used by Dahl and colleagues:

> To illustrate the difference between meta-awareness and experiential fusion, let us consider an example. Imagine that you are watching an enthralling movie. In one moment, you might be experientially fused with the movie, to the point when you are no longer consciously aware that you are sitting in a movie theater. In the next moment, you might suddenly become aware of your surroundings and the fact that you are viewing images on a screen. In both moments, you may be attentive to the movie, but only in the second moment are you also aware of the process of watching the movie. (Dahl, Lutz, and Davidson 2015, 516)

The above image clearly illustrates what occurs during decentering/reperceiving/defusion. In the "fused" state, one is focused on a particular thought at the expense of other stimuli (especially present bodily and perceptual ones; Smallwood and Schooler 2006; Smallwood, Baracaia, et al., 2003; Smallwood et al., 2007; Schooler et al., 2011). A subject focused on that thought tends to experience its content as reality itself. For instance, if the thought is about an emotionally significant past event, the person reacts emotionally as if the event were occurring in the present. In extreme cases—such as flashbacks in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—the emotional reaction may be identical to that experienced during the original traumatic event. As described by Hayes and colleagues (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson, 2011), one looks at the world *from* the thought without looking *at* the thought itself; that is, while thinking about something, one loses awareness of the process of thinking—loses the awareness that these are merely one's thoughts about something. This is why the core of the process of decentering/reperceiving/defusion is a broadening of the field of awareness. That is achieved by dispersing attention so that it is not focused on any particular stimulus (i.e. mental state), whether a thought, bodily sensation, or perception of some external stimulus, but rather embraces as wide a range of experiences as possible. Such dispersed attention, which results in simultaneous awareness of both thought and bodily experiences (e.g., the breath) and the actual external surroundings of the subject, brings about the experience of the thought as merely a mental event passing through the mind, which in turn fosters an attitude of non-reactivity.

As the experience of many mindfulness practitioners shows, attention is repeatedly captured by particular thoughts; that is, it becomes focused on a single thought at the expense of the rest of one's ongoing experience. Mindfulness practice consists in the subject's gently broadening the focus of her attention whenever she notices that she is "lost in thinking." A key strategy for avoiding "getting lost in thinking" or "getting caught up in thinking" is to use "mindfulness support": i.e., to retain some peripheral awareness of, for example, one's own breath (Nairn, Choden and Regan-Addis 2019, 27–29; Choden and Regan-Addis 2018, 60–61). It is important, however, that awareness of one's breath does not block out "awareness of other things going on in and around us", because "maintaining peripheral awareness is a key element" of this process (Nairn, Choden, and Regan-Addis 2019, 27). As a result of such repeated practice, one can develop the ability to stabilize dispersed attention. When such dispersed attention is stabilized, and one simply registers all incoming stimuli in one's awareness without any further bodily or mental reaction toward them, one can "let go of support" and "rest in the midst of all" (Nairn, Choden, and Regan-Addis 2019, 28–29 and 181–84). Contrary to Lange's account, it is the broadening of the focus of one's attention resulting in non-conceptual meta-awareness of the mental states being attended to (Dunne, Thompson and Schooler 2019) that, in turn, brings about decentering/reperceiving/ defusion without any additional actions on the part of the subject. In the context of this perspective, I suggest understanding these three terms as expressions of three simultaneous and interrelated aspects of one process: the broadening of the focus of one's attention means that no mental state occupies the center of the attentional field (decentering); as a result, one becomes aware of one's mental states as just mental events passing through one's mind (reperceiving); this, in turn, results in not being fused with the content of those mental states (defusion).

I think that even if, in the practice leading to the decentered state of mind, one can detect some selection for action (in Wu's sense), those periods in which one successfully rests in the decentered state of mind pose the real challenge for the SfA theory of attention. Wu (2014, 93) himself comments on the case in which "an embarrassing image of last evening's faux pas might involuntarily flash in one's head," stating that "if the thought amounted to nothing more than that, no attention emerges. There is just the fleeting image." From his perspective, "it is only when that image engages further activity—when one ponders it, laments it, or just sustains the image as one internally cringes—that attention emerges." Indeed:

[Even—P.S.] in attentional capture, attention enters the scene when the item that does the capturing not only alters the shape of one's mental states, but does so in a way that engages a response. Otherwise, there is only the mental registering of a change but no attention to it. The point, then, is that attentional capture is more than one's mental states changing in response to a sudden stimulus. Attention is not just a shift in consciousness or an alteration in one's mental states given a new stimulus. Rather, it is only when this change in one's mind engages with something further that attention comes on the scene. Without this further ingredient, attention is not present. The proposal is that this ingredient is selection for action: the change engages a response. (Wu 2014, 93)

Such a view, Wu admits, assumes that "one can be conscious of X without attending to X" (Wu 2014, 107)

I suggest that, in the above passage, Wu adequately describes what is going on in one's mind when one successfully decenters or defuses from one's thoughts. From his perspective, however, this is a case in which there is no attention involved in the process: one attends to nothing in particular—that is, one does not attend at all. Why not agree with Wu, and why align oneself with the view of many authors writing on mindfulness, who describe such a decentered state as involving the work of attention?

There are several reasons to invoke the notion of attention here. First, it is necessary to distinguish the state of mindful decentering—defined as a state in which a subject possesses a vivid and clear awareness of what is occurring in her mind, a state that it is tempting to describe as *an attentive* one—from the dull state of mind in which a subject does not attend to anything in particular and, as a consequence, is (almost) unaware of her mental states. This seems to be the difference between not attending at all (attending to nothing) and attending to everything in a balanced way. The use of the notion of attention in explaining the above difference can be justified by the empirical, neuroscientific work of Posner and Petersen (1990; 2012), work on which Wu himself draws. As Wu himself remarks, "Posner and Petersen identified three networks associated with functions commonly attributed to attention: '(a) orienting to sensory events; (b) detecting signals for focal (conscious) processing; and (c) maintaining a vigilant or alert state'" (Posner and Petersen 1990, 26; cited in Wu 2014, 27–28). It is the necessity of taking into account the last function—maintaining a vigilant or alert state—that makes invoking attention in decentering indispensable.

Secondly, "resting in the midst of all" and remaining in the decentered state of mind is—even if it sounds somewhat paradoxical—a form of activity or action, albeit not an activity involving the selection of something for

action.[6] It is not a reflex (in Wu's sense), for it occurs within a behavioral space that includes other possible behavioral paths. A mindfulness practitioner who, in the decentered state, rests in the midst of all can, at any moment, cease to do so and instead select a particular stimulus for further action—for example, she may select an unpleasant thought that has just arisen in her mind in order to downregulate it. This process can naturally be described as involving the narrowing of one's previously dispersed attention and its focusing on a particular stimulus. From this perspective, both possible courses of action—continuing to rest in the midst of all and selecting something (for further action)—may be regarded as forms of the same activity: namely, the exercise of attention in different ways.

Wu might try to answer that, in the case of mindful decentering (resting in the midst of all), a subject exhibits vigilance but not attention (one does not pay attention but is vigilant), but I think he will not succeed in this way. He presents us with two slightly different accounts of vigilance, but neither of them is suited to the task. In Wu (2014) he states that in most accounts of vigilance the notion of attention is used. He further remarks that "a change in vigilance is typically measured by the vigilance decrement, and the latter is tied to certain properties of task performance, namely changes in detection rate and reaction time," and suggests that "it looks like vigilance, even if it is different from selection from action, supervenes on it," for "*changes* in vigilance are measured by changes in selection for action as measured by behavioral outcomes" (2014, 94). His conclusion there is that "vigilance is a property of selection for action over time: vigilance is a measure of how effective subjects are in selecting for action. One assesses vigilance by assessing how subjects sustain selection for action in an experimental setting." On the other hand, in Wu (2023b) he presents a slightly different account of vigilance, claiming that it is "a propensity to attend to task-relevant targets" and holding that "vigilance's expression is attention . . . but to be vigilant regarding X is not yet to attend to X" (2023b, 110). As an example of a vigilant person, he describes a detective who watches for a thief at a moment when the latter has not yet appeared at the crime scene. A vigilant person has a propensity to attend, but is not attending, for there is no item to attend to yet.

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6. It is important to distinguish between the claim that attention is selection for action and the claim that attention—or, more precisely, attending—is itself an activity or an action. Wu endorses both claims (as I have discussed above), whereas some of his critics—for example, Watzl—accept only the second. This is why, in the case of decentering, one can indeed identify a form of activity: decentering may be conceived as a specific mode of attending. This is not, however, to suggest that this activity or action constitutes selection for action.

It is evident that both of Wu's accounts of vigilance fail to explain the alert state of a mindful subject. In both accounts, vigilance is connected with attention in such a way that the more vigilant a person is, the more probable it is that she will attend to—i.e. select for action—the particular stimulus. In the case of mindful decentering, a person is alert (vigilant, attentive) in a way that makes the selection of a particular stimulus for action (i.e. attention in the SfA sense) less probable. That is why, if alertness/vigilance is connected to attention—as Posner and Petersen hold, and as teachers of mindfulness suggest—attention should be explained in a way other than the one Wu proposes.

Conclusion

Mindfulness practice, and the mental phenomena that mindfulness practitioners experience during such practice, may provide important data for philosophical theories concerning issues connected with consciousness, attention and the like. But philosophers must adequately understand what is experienced during mindfulness practice. Otherwise, they may find themselves in a situation comparable to that of Lange, who highlights the real problem—namely, the discrepancy between decentering and SfA—but has come to the right conclusion for the wrong reasons. Nevertheless, his initial observation stands: decentering (even if conceived differently than in his account) constitutes a threat to Wu's theory of attention as selection for action.

Given what has been written above about decentering—especially the fact that its key aspect consists in dispersing one's attention as widely as possible, as opposed to keeping it focused on a particular stimulus—I suggest that we look for a theory according to which attention is understood as an activity of structuring one's mental life, such as Sebastian Watzl's account (Watzl 2017) or certain phenomenological conceptions (see, e.g., Arvidson 2006; Gurwitsch 2010). It is, of course, possible that these theories, too, will need to be refined in order to accommodate decentering—or perhaps other forms of mental experience characteristic of mindfulness practitioners. In any case, a broad field of research lies ahead.

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