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The Social Science Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/soscij



Exploring the potential contributions of mindfulness and compassion-based practices for enhancing the teaching of undergraduate ethics courses in philosophy

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 March 2017

Received in revised form 29 October 2017

Accepted 19 December 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Teaching undergraduate philosophical ethics

Compassion

Loving-kindness

Mindfulness

Education

Ethical action

Philosophy

ABSTRACT

There are numerous ethical theories from which faculty may choose to teach in undergraduate philosophical ethics courses. Whether learning such theories results in ethical behavior change remains an open question. If one of the goals of teaching ethics is to support ethical behavior, then alternative approaches are merited. Within the past decades, there has been a growing emphasis on mindfulness and compassion-based practices in particular, as applied to psychotherapy in the field of psychology. Such findings have bearing on ways in which compassion-based practices might be fruitful in the philosophical ethics classroom. This article will identify issues with the dominant approach to teaching philosophical ethics, focusing on the need for a bridge between theory and action. It will also explore the potential benefits of utilizing mindfulness in the classroom, with a focus on compassion-based practices such as loving-kindness, to contribute to meeting this need to enhance the teaching of undergraduate philosophical ethics.

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1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, there has been extensive interest in, and research on, mindfulness practices. More specifically, there has been a focus on mindfulness techniques for cultivating compassion. This research has occurred primarily within psychology, with a particular emphasis on the utilization of these practices in psychotherapy. These approaches, while originally derived from the Buddhist tradition, have now been systematically developed for use in contemporary, scientific, and secular contexts (Sears, 2014). Psychology has provided a

platform for offering these practices and establishing their benefits in promoting factors associated with psychological well-being. Numerous outcome studies have shown these programs to be generally effective for improving a multitude of physical and psychological conditions across a wide variety of populations. The application of these approaches has now expanded to areas of study beyond psychological science, including the enhancement of relationships and personal well-being, improving career performance and satisfaction, parenting and elder care, and the field of education (Sears, Tirsch, & Denton, 2011; Tirsch, Silberstein, & Kolts, 2015).

While mindfulness has broad applications for all levels of education (Burke, 2010; Diamond & Lee, 2011; Greenberg & Harris, 2011; Napoli, Kretz, & Holley, 2005; Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller 2010), the focus of this article is the potential benefit of mindfulness practices in university

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2017.12.003>

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classes, and more specifically in undergraduate philosophical ethics classes. There is a burgeoning literature on the intersection of mindfulness practice and enhancing the academic performance and emotional well-being of university students (Atkins, Hassed, & Fogliati, 2015; Byrne, Bond, & London, 2013; Ching, Koo, Tsai, & Chen, 2015). The focus of this article, however, is narrower in that it considers the potential benefit of mindfulness practice regarding teaching philosophical ethics. Moreover, it focuses on mindfulness practices oriented to developing compassion through, for example, loving-kindness techniques. The focus on compassion is due to the prosocial dimensions of this emotional orientation. The aim of this article is to illustrate that such practices warrant consideration as classroom tools for enhancing the efficacy and utility of philosophical ethics courses in higher education insofar as a priority or goal of such an education is to support prosocial behavior.

This article discusses current methods and measures for teaching philosophical ethics in academia. It goes on to illustrate limitations to current approaches and identifies potential methods for bridging to ethical behavior change. The article then focuses on providing a working definition of compassion and outlines techniques utilized to cultivate compassion; including loving-kindness and *tonglen* meditation. It then examines some of the psychological and psychotherapeutic benefits of these techniques and highlights the relationship between compassion practices and prosocial behavior. Finally, it considers future directions for integrating compassion practices into philosophical ethics education. The concluding discussion offers concrete suggestions for successfully integrating compassion practices in the classroom and discusses both the potential limitations of using such practices as well as areas for further investigation.

2. Teaching philosophical ethics in academia

2.1. Current methods and measures

Western philosophical ethics provides an array of theoretical approaches to ethical problems: feminist ethics, care ethics, virtue ethics, consequentialist ethics, and deontological ethics, to name but a few. In spite of this theoretical richness, there has been remarkably little focus on ethical behavior change in philosophical ethics. In philosophical ethics classrooms, abstract discussions of systems of ethics and their potential use for solving ethical dilemmas takes precedence over explorations of techniques or practices to support concrete behavior change in morally grounded directions. If universities in the West are interested in teaching not only a subset of theoretical ethical systems in philosophy classrooms common to the Western tradition, but also how to be ethical, then there needs to be a significant shift regarding current approaches to teaching ethics (Kretz, 2014). This does not imply that the theoretical study of moral theories is unnecessary. The study of moral theories serves multiple purposes, not the least of which is providing students with moral frameworks to help ground justification for both their own and other's particular approaches and points of view. However, the current

methods for teaching philosophical ethics in Western universities leave much to be desired in terms of facilitating ethical behavior change and empowerment.

The majority of current tools for measuring success in academic philosophical ethics rely on testing comprehension and application of theoretical ethics (Blizek, 2013). Philosophy students are primarily tested on their capacity to comprehend and apply philosophical moral theories, as well as construct arguments. Outside of philosophy classes, testing of student moral capacities often falls within the domain of psychology.

There are multiple tests available for testing moral reasoning capacities. The most widely used test of the moral capacities of university students is the Defining Issues Test (DIT) by Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, and Bebeau (2000). The DIT focuses on understanding moral development and function. It charts moral schemas and is recognized as being good at assessing the shift from a conventional/maintaining norms view to a post-conventional view of social cooperation (Thoma & Dong, 2014). Other domains, such as business and accounting, often adopt alternative methods of teaching and additional methods of testing are available. For example, the sensemaking method developed by Mumford et al. (2008) involves training scientists to use a specific set of metacognitive reasoning strategies and then testing for gains in these capacities—which are taken to indicate gains in ethical decision-making.

Rational development in schema use, and the ability to apply reasoning strategies, although very important, do not address in a robust way what many researchers suggest plays a key role in motivation for behavior—emotion. Although the DIT and sensemaking approach make room for emotion, specifically focusing on and harnessing the power of emotion for moral behavior is not the focus of that work. It also is worth noting that in ethics training generally, testing for behavior is not currently widely practiced. A meta-analysis of current practices in ethics training reveals that attempts to measure behavior represents only 3.1% of the criteria used to evaluate ethics training courses (Steele et al., 2016).

The connection between the capacity to articulate theoretical ethics, to rank at a certain level of moral development in the DIT, to correctly apply Mumford et al.'s (2008) sensemaking approach, and actually being or behaving ethically remains open to debate. Research in psychology and neuroscience reveals a dual processing approach to moral cognition, wherein both conscious and subconscious components play a role (Lapsley & Hill, 2008; Reynolds, 2006; Sloman, 1996). Affective systems serve as the substrate for distinctive, automatic processing, while higher cortical regions operate as the substrate for more controlled and effortful modes of functioning (Railton, 2014). Haidt (2001, 2006) hypothesizes that the motivating force of emotion is a primary driver of moral judgment and action. Regarding the relationship between moral reasoning ability and moral action, his research indicates that moral exemplars and non-exemplars had no significant difference in their moral reasoning ability. This suggests that additional factors beyond the ability to engage in moral reasoning set moral exemplars apart.

Sonenshein (2007) provides a view that challenges the privileged status of moral reasoning in rationalist models of ethics. Rationalist models suggest that individuals use deliberate and extensive moral reasoning to respond to ethical issues, such as applying abstract moral principles and weighing evidence. These rationalist approaches often fail to adequately address equivocality and uncertainty in natural settings. They also take deliberate and extensive reason to be a precursor for ethical behavior and claim that moral reasoning is used to make moral judgments while underemphasizing the constructive nature of ethical issues.

The over-emphasis on reason as a precursor to moral judgments and ethical behavior in rationalist models is problematic. Some theorists maintain that moral reasoning does not direct moral action, and suggest instead that moral reasoning primarily serves the function of explaining and rationalizing one's behavior after the fact (Blasi, 1980). For example, individuals may wish to view themselves in a particular light and therefore construct accounts of their behavior that support the preferred view. Further complicating the connection between moral reasoning and action are recent developments in theories about implicit bias. Concern regarding the ways in which subconscious biases impact behavior in ethically suspect ways is gaining traction in moral psychology and philosophy (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013; Maxwell, 2016; Mower, 2015). If emotion is a motivating driver of moral action, and moral action is one of the goals of teaching philosophical ethics, then tending to action requires tending to emotion.

2.2. Bridges to ethical behavior change

In attempting to bridge the divide between philosophical ethical education and behavior change, one needs to consider the failure of adequately bridging theory to action due to an overemphasis on reasoning alone while neglecting the essential role of emotional engagement. An underlying issue with current trends in teaching philosophical ethics is the knowledge–attitude–behavior model of education that assumes the acquisition of knowledge inevitably leads to behavior change. There is a widespread critique of the knowledge–attitude–behavior model of education, suggesting that knowledge alone fails to be sufficient for motivation (Goralnik & Nelson, 2011; Kretz, 2012, 2014).

What appears additionally needed is the engagement of emotion. Goralnik and Nelson (2011) contend that what neurobiology reveals about cognitive and affective responses to ethical dilemmas makes evident a need to attend to the necessary role of both reason and emotion in moral practice. Andreou (2007) argues that empirically oriented moral philosophers recognize the grounding of morality in sentiment, and that genuine moral judgments for humans depend on related emotional capacities. The mechanisms for helping behavior are primarily affective and include empathy, reflexive distress, sadness, guilt, and shame (Haidt, 2001). Such prosocial emotions can be cultivated to enable prosocial responses to the suffering of others.

There are multiple methods for seeking to generate moral emotions in the classroom, including promoting emotional literacy (where students accurately and reliably recognize emotions in self and other), contextual literacy (where students imagine hypothetical, morally charged scenarios vividly and realistically), and moral literacy (where students adopt first- and third-person roles and perspectives) through various role-taking exercises (Mower, 2008). The practice of role-taking is one of the most widely discussed methods for triggering new intuitions (Haidt, 2001). Another method of emotionally engaging students is to have them participate in action projects, wherein students work on identifying and remedying real-world problems (Hsu, 2004). Service-learning is another method for increasing awareness of social problems and provides an opportunity for developing capacities to listen, empathize, and sympathize (Leever, Daniels, & Zimmerman-Oster, 2006). Introducing moral exemplars can also serve to help motivate moral action (Colby & Damon, 1992; Haidt, 2000, 2002).

Additional methods are also worth considering. An instructional systems design model could be used to provide procedures wherein instructional strategies are selected to accomplish specific learning goals and are regularly assessed for their efficacy. In particular, emotional development relevant to ethical behavior could be identified as one such learning goal. Such an approach involves a needs assessment, instructional objectives, instructional development (with attention to the format and structure of instruction as well as content and learning activities), and evaluation (Antes, 2014). Also worth considering is the impact ethical culture has on cultivating ethical emotional capacities. For example, the impact of an integrated framework, wherein ethical instruction occurs across the curriculum and is further buttressed through extracurricular opportunities such that ethics is taken to be part of the culture of the department, may help support particular emotional frameworks (Dzuranin, Shortridge, & Smith, 2013).

Although certainly not dominant pedagogical techniques, these methodological approaches have begun to receive attention in the literature. In addition to these innovations, there remains an additional area of great promise that, to date, remains insufficiently addressed. This area, the application in philosophical ethics classes of mindfulness training focused on cultivating compassion to foster moral behavior change, warrants further study. Such approaches seem potentially advantageous in philosophical ethics courses that seek to support ethical action insofar as motivation ties to emotion, and compassion is a prosocial emotional orientation. Insofar as there is a differentiation between norm-based prosocial behavior (encountered in “cold”, reason-driven exchange situations) and compassion-based prosocial behavior (encountered in “hot”, emotion-provoking situations), and insofar as “many of our everyday interactions are not purely rational, but involve emotions”, compassion-training might be of great benefit for supporting moral behavior (Leiberg, Klimecki, & Singer, 2011). The following coverage of practices and suggestions that might encourage ethical behavior is not an argument for a comprehensive approach or panacea,

but rather as an illustration of one potentially beneficial direction for teaching practices and research.

3. Compassion

The general definition of compassion adopted hereafter reflects both the core historical insights of the Buddhist tradition as well as modern scientific analysis drawing from current discussions in psychology regarding the constitution of this emotion. Compassion refers to the “emotion one experiences when one feels concern for another’s suffering and desires to enhance that person’s welfare. . . [compassion is] an emotional as well as a motivational state, characterized by feelings of warmth, love, and concern for the other as well as the desire to help and promote the other’s welfare” (Leiberg et al., 2011, p. 1). Compassion is taken to be an offshoot of empathy. An initial empathetic response can develop in two different ways. The first is compassion, characterized as other-related emotion, positive feelings such as love, good health, approach, and prosocial motivation. The second is empathetic distress, characterized by self-related emotion, negative feelings such as stress, poor health and burnout, withdrawal, and nonsocial behavior (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Hence the focus on compassion as opposed to empathy.

3.1. Techniques for cultivating compassion: loving-kindness and *tonglen* meditation

The Buddhist tradition provides a helpful historical grounding for the development of techniques for cultivating compassion. In the Buddhist tradition, compassion and loving-kindness are qualities of an awakened mind and heart. Buddhist teachings promote these qualities because they are seen as consistent with, and supportive of, realizations and insights that extinguish habitual mental tendencies that create and sustain emotional suffering, thereby promoting liberation from psychological distress. In the Buddhist tradition, compassion and loving-kindness include the wish or aspiration that all beings, including oneself, are genuinely happy and free from all suffering. They are included in a traditional list of four attributes known as the *Brahmaviharas*, or “heavenly abodes,” along with the additional qualities of sympathetic joy and equanimity. This list is also commonly referred to as “The Four Immeasurables” or “The Four Limitless Ones” because the capacity for experiencing, developing, and expressing these qualities is seen as being limitless and immeasurable (Hanh, 1998; Rahula, 1974). While these qualities are considered natural states of consciousness that are effortlessly available in each moment, they are often not apparent due to conditioned habits of attachment, aversion, and ignorance that obscure their expression. The Buddhist tradition, therefore, includes techniques and practices for intentionally and systematically cultivating and strengthening the experience and expression of compassion (Salzberg & Goldstein, 2001).

Loving-kindness, referred to as *metta* in Pali and *maitri* in Sanskrit, is typically practiced through maintaining a sustained focus on the merits and benefits of wishing,

unconditionally, that all beings experience genuine happiness and that they are free from suffering. The person engaging in loving-kindness practice recites, either aloud or internally, phrases that affirm this aspiration, such as: “May all beings be free from danger. May they be happy. May they be healthy. May they live with ease” (Salzberg & Goldstein, 2001, p. 188). The person can use an even shorter script, such as “May all beings enjoy happiness and the roots of happiness; May they be free from Suffering and the roots of suffering” (Chodron, 2001, p. 119). There are varieties of wordings for loving-kindness practice; however, most important is not the specific wording or length of the script, but rather the sentiment being cultivated.

The person engaging in the practice of loving-kindness extends these wishes toward several categories of individuals, including themselves and individuals toward whom they experience warmth and regard, such as mentors, benefactors, or relatives. Ultimately these wishes are also directed toward other categories of people with whom the person practicing is neither currently familiar with, nor has a positive affinity towards. These wishes are also directed toward beings that the person engaging in loving-kindness finds difficult, negative, or with whom they experience conflict. Loving-kindness is then generated for all life, including animals, the environment, and the planet as a whole (Gunaratana, 2011; Salzberg & Goldstein, 2001).

An additional compassion training for loving-kindness is the practice of *tonglen*, a visualization meditation from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The term *tonglen* means to take and give, or to receive and send. The core focus of the practice is to identify with some aspect of suffering, to see it in one’s own experience, and to connect with the realization that all creatures share this experience. The person practicing *tonglen* then visualizes taking in or receiving this suffering and then gives or sends back to all afflicted by such suffering an offering that serves as an antidote to the suffering (Chodron, 2001; McDonald, 2005).

As with loving-kindness, there are varieties of approaches to practicing *tonglen*. Most approaches, however, involve a multi-step process. The person practicing *tonglen* first focuses on and identifies with some experience that creates suffering for themselves and others, such as feeling anxious. They then contemplate how all beings, including those who lived in the past, those currently alive, and all those who will live in the future share this experience. This contemplation offers a wider perspective on suffering and a shared sense of identification and connection. The person then focuses on the wish that this suffering—theirs and others—be resolved or abolished. They then visualize the aspect of suffering—*anxiety* in this illustration—in some form. This could be picturing it as dark smoke or as some hue of light. While breathing in they visualize taking in or receiving this suffering into themselves and that doing so alleviates the suffering. Then, on the out breath, the person visualizes releasing the suffering, now in a transformed form or image. They also visualize, while breathing out, freely providing to all those who are suffering whatever inner resources they may possess that might serve as an antidote, such as offering any sense of calm or confidence

they might possess to soothe the emotional distress generated by anxiety (Chodron, 2001; McDonald, 2005).

3.2. Psychological and psychotherapeutic benefits

Contemporary researchers investigating the application of these compassion-based practices derived from the Buddhist tradition have developed systematic programs incorporating these historical practices to help individuals intentionally cultivate and strengthen their sense of compassion. Often, these trainings consist of multi-week, curriculum-based programs that introduce a variety of techniques. Neff and Germer (2013) created an eight-week program called Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) and found that participants in both a pilot study and a randomized control trial of MSC (versus waitlist) demonstrated increases in mindfulness, compassion, self-compassion, and life satisfaction while indicating decreases in depression, anxiety, stress, and emotional avoidance on standardized, self-report measures of these variables. Impressively, these changes continued to be present at both six-month and one-year follow-ups, and life satisfaction scores had increased substantially at the one-year review period.

Jazaieri et al. (2013) developed a nine-week program called Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) and observed in a randomized controlled trial of CCT versus waitlist that participants demonstrated increases in each of the three separate domains of compassion they measured, those being compassion for others, receiving compassion from others, and self-compassion. Later analyses of this trial (Jazaieri et al., 2014) found that participants reported increases in mindfulness and happiness, as well as decreases in worry and emotional suppression, and that the amount of formal compassion practice was directly related to these decreases.

While MSC and CCT incorporate a variety of compassion-based techniques, these same trends have also been observed in research on programs that focus on the practice of loving-kindness mediation (LKM) in a more limited way. Kearney et al. (2013) explored the effects of LKM on military veterans diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and found that participants in a 12-week LKM program demonstrated decreases in PTSD and depression symptoms and increases in self-compassion and mindfulness, and that these gains persisted at a three-month follow-up. Shahar et al. (2015) found that participants practicing LKM over the course of seven weeks demonstrated decreases in measures of self-criticism and symptoms of depression while increasing ratings of self-compassion over a waitlist control group, and that these gains were maintained at three months. More broadly, Galante, Galante, Bekkers, and Gallacher (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of thirty-three, randomized controlled trials involving LKM and found that programs utilizing the practice showed generally positive results, though they acknowledge methodological issues with and across various studies.

In addition to changes in self-report measures of symptoms or psychological qualities, recent research has also shown that individuals who engage in compassion and

loving-kindness exercises display physiological changes in response to their practice. Compassion practices have been shown to be associated with signs of reduced stress response, including increased vagal nerve and parasympathetic response (Stellar, Cohen, Oveis, & Keltner, 2015). Experienced loving-kindness practitioners in a neuroimaging study also showed increased gray matter volume in areas of the brain associated with empathy and affect regulation compared to novice practitioners (Leung et al., 2013).

3.3. Compassion practices and prosocial behavior

Operationalizing altruistic behavior and attempting to measure behavioral changes in response to prescribed training has proven challenging, but researchers have made progress, for example, by having participants gauge their degree of intent to help others in particular situations of need or record the amount they would allocate to provide compensation for individuals unfairly treated during a redistribution simulation. Welp and Brown (2014) conducted two studies in which they examined the effects of self-compassion and empathy on a willingness to help someone in need. Participants were given a scenario describing someone in need and asked to rate the likelihood they would help the person in that situation. While ratings of empathy were positively correlated with a willingness to help (consistent with previous findings), they found that ratings of self-compassion were most associated with a willingness to help, even when ratings of empathy were lower. Further exploration revealed that those rating higher in self-compassion were not necessarily less empathic, but that they scored lower on experiencing personal distress in response to the suffering of the other. This finding suggests that while both empathy and compassion are important aspects of altruistic responding, they are separate yet inter-related processes. By lowering negative emotional reactivity to the suffering of the other, which tends to overwhelm the person and can lead to avoidance, individuals with higher ratings of compassion are more likely to behaviorally respond (Hoffman, 2000).

Klimecki, Leiberg, Ricard, and Singer (2014) also observed this dynamic of decreased negative affect being associated with increased compassion in a neuroimaging study. In this study, researchers trained participants to use an empathy response and exposed participants to video images of suffering. Viewing the suffering not only led to increased activity in regions of the brain associated with empathy, but it also increased negative affect. This was followed by participants either training in a memory task or in compassion. They found that while the empathy training was associated with increased empathic response and the experience of distress in response to the suffering of others, training in compassion was associated with decreasing negative affect and increasing positive affect, and that the compassion training led to increased activation in brain areas associated with compassion.

Weng et al. (2013) conducted another neuroimaging study examining the relationship between compassion training and functional changes in the brain. In their study, they additionally explored whether these changes demonstrated a connection to an increased likelihood of altruistic

behavior. They compared changes in functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans in response to images of suffering both before and following either training in compassion practice or an active control condition of training in a reappraisal approach. The reappraisal approach was selected because it provided a response to experiencing the suffering of others that helped the individual to regulate affect and lower the negative affect of the individual but did not encourage the participants to connect with the suffering of the other and wish to alleviate that suffering as the compassion practice did. Separately, they had all participants engage in the redistribution simulation on compensating unfairly treated individuals. They found not only that compassion training was associated with changes to brain regions connected to social affiliation, emotion regulation, and compassion, but that the compassion training increased altruistic giving in the simulation and that this increased altruism was related to changes in these brain regions. A notable feature of this study was that participants in the compassion group were not long-term experienced meditators and only had two weeks of training in compassion practices prior to the follow-up fMRI.

Hutcherson, Seppala, and Gross (2008) found that a seven-minute LKM was able to increase both explicit and implicit positivity toward neutral strangers. Given the automatic, implicit, and affective responses to others that can appear resistant to change and that are often difficult to detect or control consciously, the team was interested in how to increase feelings of connection at an automatic level. Rather than follow the trend to try to counteract antisocial behaviors or implicit prejudice through acts of ratiocination, the focus of the experiment was on fostering positive prosocial emotions and behaviors at an automatic level through LKM. To control for nonspecific effects of meditation on general (nonsocial) emotional responses, they also assessed responses to a nonsocial object (a lamp). For the LKM condition participants completed a guided LKM in which they imagined a loved one on either side of them sending them love, and after four minutes participants were told to redirect those feelings of love toward a photograph of a neutral stranger and repeat phrases to bring attention to the other and wish them well-being, health, and happiness. In the imagery condition, participants imagined acquaintances they neither knew well nor had strong feelings toward standing on either side of them, and were told to focus on each acquaintance's physical appearance. They were then asked to look at a photograph of a neutral stranger and focus their attention on the visual details of the stranger's face and imagine details of the stranger's appearance. The investigators observed significant effects from LKM on both explicit and implicit positivity toward neutral strangers. On an explicit level, the LKM significantly increased positivity level toward the target and other strangers. On an implicit level, the LKM had effects most pronounced for its target while having little to no impact on responses toward non-target neutral strangers.

Additional findings also support the benefit of LKM regarding both conscious and unconscious forms of bias. Lueke and Gibson (2015, 2016) found that 10 min. of mind-

fulness meditation reduced discrimination and implicit age and race bias through weakening automatic associations. Kang, Gray, and Dovidio (2014) found that engaging in LKM practice over a six-week period significantly decreased implicit bias towards African-Americans and those who were homeless. Stell and Farsides (2016) also found that when LKM is directed toward a member of a racial out-group, even for as little as seven minutes, it decreases racial bias toward that group. Bias decreased in this circumstance through both increasing controlled processing and decreasing automatic processing. Such studies suggest that spending even relatively brief periods on LKM and other related compassion practices can reduce both implicit and explicit bias. This is promising in that the time commitment is not substantial and therefore can be introduced as a supplement in the classroom setting. The potential benefits, however, are substantial.

Additional evidence attests to increases in prosocial behavior. To explore the impact of compassion training on prosocial behavior, Leiberger et al. (2011) developed the Zurich Prosocial Game, which allowed for repeated, ecologically valid assessments of prosocial behavior following compassion training. Helping behavior increased in participants who received short-term compassion training, but not in participants who received short-term memory training. The compassion training was a one-day training for six hours (with a forty-five minute lunch break in between) using a compassion meditation technique to foster an attitude of loving-kindness, positive emotion, benevolence, and friendliness toward self and others. There was a sequence of developing warm, positive feelings toward oneself, a loved person, a neutral person, a difficult person, and all human beings, while silently repeating phrases like "may you be happy" and "may you be safe." In contrast, the memory control group underwent a one-day training workshop to learn how to use a technique called loci to memorize items in an ordered sentence. Participants of both groups were invited to keep a diary of their practice and continue training before the post-test (one to three days), and were asked to join in the daily one-hour evening training session, or if this was not feasible to train at home. The study provided evidence of a positive impact on prosocial behavior toward strangers derived from short-term compassion training.

4. Future directions

4.1. Integrating compassion practices into philosophical ethics education

Given the previously articulated concerns regarding how philosophical ethics tend to be taught in the West, and given the benefits of compassion and loving-kindness practice, it appears that incorporating mindfulness with a focus on compassion and loving-kindness practices into philosophical ethics courses might better engage students in ethical response than stand-alone theoretical teaching. As argued above, engaging solely in discussions of ethical systems does not necessarily lead to changes in ethical action. Nor does the traditional approach to teaching ethics necessarily encourage prosocial, ethical action. Insofar as

the ability to be present with suffering and the experience of the other with an open-minded, non-judgmental stance supports ethical action, then mindfulness and compassion practices offer a new window into teaching ethics.

Adopting an open-minded and non-judgmental stance allows one to try on various moral perspectives and deeply engage with those experiential positions that are sometimes radically different from one's own. The ability to adopt multiple perspectives advantageously helps one to see various ways of constructing and resolving moral problems (Johnson, 2005; Sherwin, 1999). When one brings the deep connectivity of all living creatures to the forefront, experiences of isolation and disconnect decrease while the sense of connectivity increases. Hutcherson et al. (2008) found that LKM increased feelings of social connection and positivity toward novel individuals on both implicit and explicit levels. They take this to be crucial because human survival depends on the ability to build mutually beneficial relationships with others. Feeling connected, trusted, and loved, as well as to trust and love in return, are essential to survival. Moreover, a sense of connectedness increases the morally relevant emotions of empathy, trust, and cooperation, all of which are necessary for social affiliation and engagement.

To the degree that mindfulness practices increase compassion, they also encourage more ethical ways of being. These practices have the potential to increase this prosocial emotion, which affects ethical appraisals and decision-making. The efficacy of compassion practices is evident through self-reports, third-party assessments using neuroimaging, and testing of behavior change. Insofar as teaching students methods for behaving morally are desirable, and insofar as compassion techniques afford methods for supporting moral behavior, teaching compassion practices in addition to ethical theories is a promising approach to utilize in university undergraduate philosophical ethics courses.

4.2. Suggestions for successfully integrating practices

There are a variety of ways in which such practices might be implemented. The studies discussed above provide evidence that training sessions can vary greatly in length and still have a worthwhile impact, though further longitudinal study is needed. One way in which mindfulness practices might be introduced into philosophical ethics courses is to discuss ethical traditions wherein such practices are common, review the rationale for the practices and evidence supporting the benefits of such practices, and offer the opportunity, in class, to engage in compassion-based techniques. Practicing the techniques could be followed by an intentional reflective discussion or assigning reflective journaling. Engaging in brief periods of practice could expand creative methods for teaching ethics without creating any significant disruption to traditional methods for teaching philosophical ethics. One could also try different practices over the course of the semester. Another possibility could be for guest presenters to introduce and lead these practices, either during class or during outside presentations.

Concerns about introducing compassion techniques include the possibility that teaching meditation practices in philosophy courses might inadvertently exclude or marginalize certain students from full participation. Given the Buddhist origin of these practices, this could be especially true if students view the inclusion of such practices in courses as a direct or indirect endorsement on the part of the instructor for a particular religious tradition (Geisz, 2016). Students from other religious heritages or backgrounds that are more secular might resist such practices and see them as antithetical to their worldview and belief systems. While the practices themselves neither require one to have a particular religious affiliation nor advocate specific articles of faith, it is important for teachers introducing these practices to be sensitive to and honor and respect any hesitations that students might have (Paulson, 2015; Sears, 2015). Geisz (2016) suggests making participating in any such initiatives or activities optional for students, as opposed to participation in the practices being required for successful completion of the course.

4.3. Areas for further investigation

Further research will need to be conducted to determine whether adding mindfulness and compassion practices to the teaching of philosophical ethics is beneficial. Future directions of investigation could start with including the practice in a course or courses in some manner followed by a qualitative investigation into students' experiences with the practices and their views on how the practices influenced their learning, participation in the course, and ethical behaviors outside of the course. A professor teaching multiple sections of the same ethics course could also use one course as a control and the other to implement some compassion-based mindfulness practices as a compliment to existing teaching methods in class. Alternatively, students in philosophical ethics courses could also be offered the concurrent opportunity outside of class to engage in more formal, structured, and extensive practice. They could participate in one of the previously mentioned multi-week curriculum-based training programs, such as the Mindful Self-Compassion (Neff & Germer, 2013) or Compassion Cultivation Training (Jazaieri et al., 2013). Varying the duration of the training used, be it a seven-minute training over a week, a seven-minute training at the beginning of each class over the semester, or a more rigorous curriculum offered as a compliment to an existing traditional philosophical ethics class, will provide evidence of the effect of duration on enhanced compassion. Noting differences when the practice occurs over a semester-long or year-long course or when condensed in a summer course would also be telling. Depending on the complexity of the study before, during, and after self-reported measures of mindfulness and compassion could be used, as well as other methods such as neuro-imaging and measuring differences in performance on responses to altruistic scenarios or to the suffering of others (Klimecki et al., 2014; Welp & Brown, 2014; Weng et al., 2013). Ideally, differences could be examined across multiple courses, instructors, and institutions.

5. Limitations and conclusion

There are notable concerns and limitations to utilizing such practices as part of philosophical ethics courses that deserve consideration. The relationship between conscious and unconscious responses in ethically charged situations needs a closer and more nuanced analysis. Further research is also needed for understanding what generates short-term versus long-term bias reduction. Continued investigation into the relationship between self-reports, activation of particular regions of the brain, and behavior change is also warranted. Furthermore, the potential benefits and negative impacts of teaching compassion-based practices in university philosophical ethics classrooms needs experimental evaluation.

An important point to emphasize is that these practices do not define or encourage a finite list of ethical actions. Instead, the recommendation is to explore methods for supporting ethical action through engagement in activities empirically shown to support the prosocial emotion of compassion. The actions pursued would be those articulated by the students themselves, based on their understanding and application of the practices and their own identified beliefs and values. The goal is to empower students by enabling them to put into practice their own ethical beliefs, as opposed to seeking to bring to fruition a set of predetermined actions taken to be ethical. Although the intended move is toward generally supporting prosocial behavior, the students themselves identify the specific nature of that behavior.

The aim of this article has been to make evident that mindfulness and compassion practices can be of potential benefit as a supplement to philosophical ethical education at the university level. The connection between the ability to articulate and apply theoretical ethics and being more ethical in one's own actions is not robust. A bridge is needed between theoretical ethics and ethical behavior change. Compassion-based practices identified in multiple studies have demonstrated benefits that support ethical practice through encouraging the prosocial emotional orientation of compassion. Compassion techniques encourage the adoption of more open-minded and non-judgmental stances, as well as deepening a sense of interconnectivity while decreasing explicit and implicit biases. Mindfulness and compassion practices hold great potential for helping to bridge the theory–action gap in philosophical ethics courses.

Disclosure

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgements

Gratitude is expressed to Joe Couture for his editorial assistance and Vaughn DeCoster for reviewing an earlier draft of the manuscript. The authors wish to thank the Uni-

versity of Evansville and the University of Southern Indiana for their institutional support.

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