**Educating for Emotional Well-Being: The dual-edged nature of mindfulness meditation**

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**Abstract**

*As a means of inculcating in young people the capacity for emotional self-regulation, mindfulness meditation can be understood in Foucauldian terms as a technology of the self. Though self-technologies can (re)construct subjects in line with prevailing discourses, they can also enable artful self-constitution. The paper uses this distinction to disclose the dual-edged nature of mindfulness meditation. To understand how mindfulness discourse constructs subjects, the paper teases out the educational implications of Carl Cederström and Andre Spicer’s* Wellness Syndrome *(2015). By suggesting that all self-reflective practices are tainted by the ‘ideology’ of wellness, this critical-theoretic study bends the stick too far in one direction. Contra Cederström-Spicer, school-based mindfulness training has liberatory potential. The paper explores this point through the lens of Robert C. Solomon’s existentialist philosophy of emotion.*

Keywords**:** mindfulness, well-being, emotions, existentialism, politics, resistance

**Introduction**

Arising from the assimilation of elements of the Buddhist tradition into Western medical science, mindfulness meditation has been transmuted into a therapeutic technique. In the last decade mindfulness programs have been introduced into schools in England, Australia, Israel, Hong Kong and the United States (Kuyken et al., 2013; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Huppert and Johnson, 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Lau and Hue, 2011; Flook et al., 2010). Proponents of mindfulness training seek to inculcate in young people the capacity to self-regulate their emotions. One reason is to insulate them against affective conditions such as depression and anxiety disorders (Raes et al., 2014). No reasonable person would suggest that preventing or diminishing these problems is a bad thing. Yet, by targeting the seedbed of subjectivity – the emotions – mindfulness practice is not a neutral exercise in welfare-enhancement. In Foucauldian parlance, mindfulness is a technology of the self. The Foucault-inspired literature distinguishes between the effects of self-technologies in (a) constructing subjects in line with prevailing discourses, and (b) enabling artful self-constitution – or what Han (2002, p. 172) calls ‘subjection’ and ‘subjectivation’, respectively. In the paper I use this distinction to disclose the two-edged nature of mindfulness meditation. Put simply, inculcating mindfulness in schoolchildren has features of subjection *and* subjectivation.

To grasp the subjection side of the equation, I consider an argument against mindfulness training that Carl Cederström and Andre Spicer provide in their recently published *Wellness Syndrome* (2015). This is the latest in a series of studies, Binkley (2014) and Davies (2015) notable among them, which decry the oppressiveness of discourses of happiness, well-being, and positive thinking. Cederström and Spicer do not deal with mindfulness training supplied to young people in schools but rather to employees in work organisations. A word of explanation as to why I have chosen to discuss their work is therefore in order. There are two reasons. Firstly, the wellness emphasis aligns with concerns about the school as a vector for the medicalization of education (Harwood & Allen, 2014), and as a site where ‘therapeutic education’ creates vulnerable educational subjects (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). Secondly, Cederström and Spicer maintain that being personally preoccupied with wellness disenables a practical politics of resistance. On each of these counts *The Wellness Syndrome* has implications for teaching mindfulness techniques in schools. There is much that is admirable in this critical-theoretic study, but the totalising nature of wellness ‘ideology’, as the authors term it, results in mindfulness training being depicted in black-and-white terms. All practices of self-reflection are tarred with the same ideological brush.

That Cederström and Spicer disdain critical self-examination is no surprise. They begin their book by gently poking fun at a young Jean-Paul Sartre and his compatriots’ lifestyle habits. This is not undeliberate; for Cederström and Spicer, authenticity is risible and reflective consciousness is ideologically tainted.[[1]](#endnote-1) Interestingly enough, *The Wellness Syndrome* ends with an exhortation to political action. Between their bookends Cederström and Spicer miss the opportunity for understanding how mindfulness meditation potentially spills over to political activism by providing an emotional toolkit useful to young people as activists-in-the-making. My paper retrieves that opportunity by teasing out the self-constituting effects of mindfulness meditation and, in particular, how it can support the formation of resistant subjectivities. To do so, I use the work of Robert C. Solomon, the American philosopher who began his career by reworking key existentialist themes into a magisterial study of the emotions: *The Passions* (1977). As an existentialist, he is on a different philosophical wavelength from Foucault. Nonetheless, Solomon supplies a steppingstone to understanding school-based mindfulness training – in Foucauldian terms – as a self-technology that can nurture a politics of resistance.

**Educational Implications of Ideologizing Wellness**

Let me begin by clarifying what Cederström and Spicer mean by the wellness syndrome. Their opening move is to declare that ‘wellness has become an ideology’ (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 3). The ideological subsumption of wellness supposedly stems from capitalism’s requirement for healthy and ‘productive bodies’ (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 4), buttressed by neoliberalism’s fixation with individual self-responsibility. Further, as an ideology, wellness carries with it a binding ethic. They call this ‘biomorality’ (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 5), and it entails a moral duty to enhance one’s well-being. Issuing forth from this ideology is what they describe as ‘a wellness command’, which is experienced as an ‘impossible demand’ for constant self-improvement that zeroes in on the body (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 6).

If the wellness command is as forceful as Cederström and Spicer say it is, what instils it? Why do we try to obey the command? They provide no direct answer but, from what they have written, it can be inferred that people obey because they are immersed in a culture that prizes health and self-responsibility. On this point the authors appeal to authority – Christopher Lasch and Slavoj Žižek. From the former they derive the idea that we live in ‘a therapeutic culture’ (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 14). From the latter, that the ideals of this culture penetrate the psyche through ‘a postmodern superego’ which ‘tells us to do more, to be better, to be ourselves’, but ultimately ‘remains disappointed, constantly pointing out that we could have performed much better’ (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 15).

Cederström and Spicer (2015, p. 3) say that, as an ideology, wellness ‘offers a package of ideas and beliefs which people may find seductive and desirable’. More, that the ‘ideological shift’ associated with stigmatizing the ‘unhealthy individual’ is:

part of a larger transformation in contemporary culture where individual responsibility and self-expression are morphed with the mindset of a free-market economist. (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 4)

Clearly, Cederström and Spicer construe ideology in cultural terms as a widely held belief system. This is not inherently sociologically problematical (Swidler, 1986). But with regard to wellness ideology, what precisely are the cultural transmission mechanisms? Their *Wellness Syndrome’s* first two chapters are replete with examples of how the wellness command is conveyed at work through corporate wellness and fitness programs, including dieting regimens. Indeed, the corporation – notably Google – is the site where they open their discussion of mindfulness training. Yet, the command ‘is by no means confined to the workplace’ (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 132). They purport to show how the command seeps into everyday life through popular culture and the media, referring variously to television shows about food and cooking and self-help books and merchandise on dieting, health-tracking devices, and the like.

To summarise Cederström and Spicer’s position: wellness ideology comes to be embraced through training programs at work and through immersion in popular culture. Given the emphasis they place on culturally derived norms and beliefs, the transmission mechanism by which wellness norms become internalised, one can reasonably assume, is socialisation – *secondary* socialisation, in particular. Cederström and Spicer do not spell this point out, but my interpretation of their work is consistent with one of their source-texts, *The* *Culture of Narcissism*, in which Christopher Lasch stresses the importance of socialisation while noting the decline in the principal vehicle of *primary* socialisation: the family. Lasch (1991, p. 239) asserts that by the 1970s, at the time when he was writing, ‘families no longer played an important role in the transmission of culture.’

If secondary socialisation is the prime vehicle of cultural transmission, Cederström and Spicer’s neglect of education in general and schooling in particular is concerning. Institutionally, secondary socialisation and subject creation occur simultaneously within the education system (Willis, 1977; Besley & Peters, 2007). Given the burgeoning growth of mindfulness programs in schools and the development of therapeutic education more broadly (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009), if wellness truly is an ideology, as Cederström and Spicer maintain, then one of the locations where it seeps into consciousness must be the school. Yet, they fail to see that the school should have a place in their explanatory framework, preferring instead to shut off their analysis at the level of the workplace and media. Following Cederström and Spicer’s argument to its logical conclusion, when it comes to creating subjects who are disposed to answering the wellness command, schools are as important – if not more so – than corporate wellness initiatives and television.

Extended this way, the Cederström-Spicer framework has clear educational implications. The most obvious one is that exposing kids at school to self-technologies such as mindfulness meditation can function to transmit the wellness syndrome down to them. This outcome depends, in large part, on how intensely mindfulness training inculcates the self-help and self-improvement ethos that lies at the wellness syndrome’s heart. Taking a step further, one could even argue that learning mindfulness techniques at school prepares children for the mediatised exhortations to wellness they will encounter as adults, and for work in organisations colonised by wellness ideology. Further still, as a form of therapeutic education, mindfulness training prepares kids to interact with what Standing (2011, p. 141) calls the ‘therapy state’: government agencies instrumentally using techniques such as cognitive behavioural therapy to help the unemployed cope with economic precarity, thus diverting attention away from its structural causes.

**Critique of Cederström-Spicer**

Taking Cederström and Spicer’s argument at face value and factoring education into the mix has its merits, not least of which simplicity. But I want caution against going too far down this track. The problem is that identifying schools as yet one more medium for transmitting the cultural norm of wellness and its therapeutic corollary risks exacerbating the mistakes Cederström and Spicer make: overemphasizing structure at the expense of agency and, in so doing, foreclosing on a politics of resistance. This section expands on each of these points.

For a taste of the determinism that pervades *The Wellness Syndrome*, consider the following excerpt:

the wellness command seeps into all aspects of our lives, at all times. It transforms every conceivable activity, including eating, meditating and even sleeping, into an opportunity to optimize pleasure and become more productive. (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 133)

People, the authors contend, are readily grasping that opportunity. Time and again they provide examples where individuals’ attempts to resist the wellness command only draw them further into its embrace. Being sick is a case in point. Though they make no mention of Talcott Parsons, their discussion of illness and its relationship to the wellness command reads like an updating of the American establishment-type sociologist’s structural-functionalist analysis of the ‘sick role’. Parsons (1985, p. 149) famously argued that the sickness is a ‘social role’ and that, like all roles, it is governed by ‘a set of social norms’ that are internalised and establish shared expectations of behaviour. Physical illness and psychological strain on individuals lead some to enter the sick role, which exempts them from the responsibility for performing ‘normal social obligations’ such as going to work (Parsons, 1985, p. 149). It also absolves them of responsibility ‘for the process of getting well’ (Parsons, 1985, p. 150). That responsibility falls to the physician-therapist whose social role is defined by therapeutic norms entrenched within the institutions of Western medicine.

Cederström and Spicer note that the sick person can be excused from the obligations of work and everyday life. But unlike the 1950s, when Parsons began to write about sickness, there has been a turnaround in the sick role. Incumbents are now no longer excused from getting well. Here is what they say:

Rather than creating and escape form the wellness command, illness might actually do the opposite. It may create a universe where the ill individual is dragged back into the imperative to become well again. It is no longer good enough for patients to rest. They must work on their health by thinking positively, participating in support groups, enduring special diets and much more. Illness might temporarily liberate us from work, but it certainly does not liberate us from working on wellness. (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 122)

There is another change too, one that Cederström and Spicer fail to draw out. Parsons is concerned to show that the physician’s role has an inherent element of psychotherapy, that there is an ‘essential continuity between the art of medicine and deliberate psychotherapy’ (Parsons, 1985, p. 153). The status of the medico-psychological professions was unassailable in the United States at the time he was writing. Today, however, responsibilizing discourses that promote the self-management of well-being challenge professional power. So-called ‘do-it-yourself’ therapies such as mindfulness meditation level the hierarchy of knowledge between psy professionals and laypeople (Barker, 2014).

Despite leaving their implicit update of Parsons’ account of the sick role half-complete, Cederström and Spicer retain the sociologist’s infamous cultural determinism. There is a well-known critique of Parsonsian sociology as housing an ‘over-socialized conception’ of the individual (Wrong, 1966). To be sure, Cederström and Spicer’s use of the Freudian concept of superego, via Žižek and to a degree also Lasch, gives them a possible way to avoid making a sociological blunder of Parsonsian proportions. As Dennis H. Wrong points out in his classic paper:

in psychoanalytic terms to say that a norm has been internalized, or introjected to become part of the superego, is to say no more than that a person will suffer guilt feelings if he fails to live up to it, not that he will in fact live up to it in his behaviour. (Wrong, 1966, p. 89)

Doubtless Cederström and Spicer’s response to my claim that they are closet Parsonsians would be to play up the Freudian element of internalised norms causing internal conflict and provoking guilt, rather than shaping actual conduct. But they lack wriggle room because their analysis suggests people *do* actively and constantly try to conform to the norms of wellness. The guilt Cederström and Spicer say people experience is not because they fail to try – behaviourally – to live up to these norms. Rather, the guilt derives from wellness as a slippery ideal, and from ‘inevitable slip-ups’ when dieting or failing to achieve a life goal (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 133). Riffing on Freud, Wrong (1966, p. 89) insightfully observes that ‘it is precisely the man…who has most thoroughly internalized and *conformed to* the norms of his society, who is most wracked with guilt and anxiety’ (emphasis added).

How much Cederström and Spicer regard behaviour as being determined by internalised cultural norms becomes apparent when they press into service Dean’s (2009) study of ‘barebackers’ – gay men who, by eschewing condoms, willingly seek to expose themselves (as ‘bug chasers’) and others to HIV. Cederström and Spicer are comfortable with Dean’s (2009) quasi-sociological description of barebacking as a ‘subculture’; likewise they agree that its norms brush against the grain of the dominant norm of wellness. Yet, in the barebacking behaviour Dean carefully documents, Cederström and Spicer find other culturally derived norms to which the barebackers conform:

Pursuing authenticity, expressing one’s own individuality, distinguishing oneself from others and developing one’s networking skills – these are all vital aspects of the self-work that we find in the wellness syndrome. It is the labour on our selves which, in spite of being pitched against wellness, risks tying us closer to the very ideology we seek to escape. While barebackers present an intriguing resistance to health imperatives, they may be struggling to escape the demand to actualize themselves, a demand which rests on the pernicious illusion that one day we will win our true authentic selves. (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 127, emphasis added)

In other words, by deviating from one dominant norm (wellness) the barebackers are conforming to another (authenticity) that typifies the wellness syndrome. Notwithstanding the equivocation (‘risks’ and ‘may’) in the above quotation, we are left with the impression that the wellness syndrome is inescapable.

Given Dean (2009, p. 69, emphasis added) unambiguously states that ‘bug chasing represents a way of *eluding* super-egoistic imperatives’, it is difficult to see how the barebackers are acceding to social demands in the manner Cederström and Spicer maintain. Let me reframe my criticism of their work in Foucauldian terms. Tellingly, Dean (2009, 39) invokes Foucault to argue that ‘bareback subculture involves modes of aesthetic self-fashioning’ – of active subject-constitution and subjectivation. By contrast, the conclusion to be drawn from Cederström-Spicer is that the wellness syndrome entails a powerful form of subjection. It is but a short step to argue that mindfulness training in school is a starting mechanism for the lifelong process of subjects being rendered susceptible to the wellness command.

This brings me to my second major point of criticism, concerning politics. Worryingly, following the Cederström-Spicer argument’s logic, mindfulness training in school can inoculate schoolchildren against the development of resistant subjectivities. This implication – call it a vaccination effect – arises because the authors contend that embracing wellness ideology shuts off not just the pathway to radical politics, but any political action with the goal of social transformation. The picture they paint is bleak:

As authorities lose faith in structural reforms, they become more interested in small-scale behavioural interventions. In place of politics, we are left with corporeal babble and increasingly invasive lifestyle tweaks. As a result, *we abandon political demands*. In place of politics, we are left with corporeal babble and increasingly invasive lifestyle tweaks…Citizens don’t get the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives; they get a mindfulness session. (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 133-4, emphasis added)

The authors’ reference to mindfulness training is more than a throwaway line. For them, the popularity of mindfulness meditation is symptomatic of an obsessional focus on the body that deadens the citizenry’s political sensibilities and dulls politics generally. In order to bring ‘inequality, discrimination and authoritarianism’ back into the political frame, Cederström-Spicer exhort us to ‘stop obsessively listening to our bodies’; and further to:

forget about our bodies for a moment, stop chasing after happiness and realize that, as human beings, we are not just defined by our potential to be healthy and happy. Wellness is not always our lot…Instead of forever dwelling on our own sickness, we would do better to look at and act on the sickness of the world. (Cederström and Spicer, 2015, p. 134-5)

There is no hint of irony in the final sentence; they are serious. I will leave aside the problem of how the chronically ill might catch the ball they set in flight. My main concern is that Cederström and Spicer throw the baby out with the bathwater. By diverting attention from the body, they foreclose on the possibility that embodied practices such as mindfulness meditation can support young people’s involvement in a politics of resistance. The mediating link is the emotions, an existentialism-inspired philosophy of which I explore in the next section.

**American Existentialist: Robert C. Solomon’s Philosophy of Emotion**

Ultimately, I want argue that school-based mindfulness training can help members of the younger generation to develop an emotional repertoire that is congruent with oppositional political action. Let me frame the discussion with an excerpt from *The Passions*, philosopher Robert C. Solomon’s classic study of emotion:

The task of reflection is to force our often clandestine choices of emotional strategies into the light, where they can be cross-examined and confronted with the evidence, compared to their alternatives and ultimately, if they are acceptable to us, taken hold of as our own fully deliberative and gladly chosen commitments. (Solomon, 1977, p. 420)

In contrast with Cederström-Spicer’s assertion that self-work is oppressive, Solomon maintains that reflexive work on the emotions is liberating in a double-sense. It enriches our lives; and it propels us to act politically. As we shall see, this is no casual philosophico-political dalliance on Solomon’s part.

Solomon developed a distinctive philosophy of emotion over a 30 year period; much of it he spent mining the existentialist tradition. His touchstone is Sartre’s refreshingly brief book, *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory* (Sartre, 1993). First published in French in 1939, its central message is ‘that the emotions are to be viewed as “essentially” acts of consciousness, and therefore as intentional and as purposive’ (Solomon, 2006, p. 96). Intentional here means that emotions are *about* the world and things in it; purposive means they are goal-directed and thus ‘strategic’. In a fine essay on Sartre’s *Outline*, Solomon (2006, ch. 4) accepts much of Sartre’s critique of both William James (on emotions as sensations) and Sigmund Freud. In fact, Solomon (2007, p. 142) call Freud’s model of emotions ‘hydraulic’ – connoting a mechanistic system beyond the will’s control. By contrast, emotions are not ‘passive disruptions, invasions from a Freudian “id”’ (Solomon, 2006, p. 105). Chiding Sartre for overemphasising in the *Outline* ‘emotions as forms of escapist denial’ (Solomon, 2006, p. 110), he proceeds in the essay’s latter part to draw from Sartre’s magistral *Being and Nothingness* and writings in the years when he (Sartre) engaged with Marxism. Unsurprisingly, Solomon’s resulting perspective on the emotions is politically inflected. In a nutshell:

It is through our emotions that we constitute not only the magical world of frustration and escape but also the living and often radical ideologies of action and commitment that Sartre spent his life defending and amending. (Solomon, 2006, p. 110)

A fine-grained analysis of how Solomon revises Sartre would make for an interesting study in turn-of-the-century American existentialism, but it is something I will have to take up elsewhere. By the same token, I do not intend to rehearse the debates about the finer philosophical points of Solomon’s writings about emotion(cf. Slaby & Wüschner, 2014). Rather, in the following discussion, I will use Solomon’s work as a method for understanding how school-based mindfulness training can provide an emotional toolkit young people can draw on when engaging in radical activism.

The tenets of Solomon’s modified Sartrean approach are not hard to grasp. Following Sartre, Solomon cautions against psychologism which connotes emotions as unruly inner forces that need to be controlled, a position he (Solomon) categorically rejects. Emotions are not head-bound, fleeting sensations, or uncontrollable energetic surges emanating from deep within the unconscious, but rather strategic and sustained ways of making intelligent judgements about – and thereby deliberately engaging with – the world and the people in it (Solomon, 2007). Expressed with an existentialist inflection, emotions are choices and we are responsible for them (Solomon, 2003).

The idea that there is intelligence within emotions themselves, as forms of judgement, puts Solomon in the self-described ‘cognitivist’ camp within the philosophy of emotion, members of which include Martha Nussbaum (Solomon, 2006, p. 225, n. 10). Nussbaum’s (2008) *Upheavals of Thought* is a cognitivist tour de force. Solomon and Nussbaum share the view that emotions have intelligence, and that our capacity to reflect on emotions means emotions have their own inbuilt forms of rationality. Like Nussbaum (2013) in another regard too, Solomon regards emotions as central to politics. [[2]](#endnote-2) Reflecting on, evaluating and redirecting our emotions is not just possible, it is required for self-understanding. This understanding, in turn, is a prerequisite to transformative social change. This perspective gives both philosophical depth and direction to the seemingly trite epithet, ‘We must change ourselves before we change society’ (Solomon, 1977, p. 8). Indeed, Solomon regards the transformational impulse as being inherent to emotion as an ‘ideology’. He uses the term unconventionally, but the meaning is obvious:

every emotion has a part of its essential structure an *ideology*, a set of passionate demands regarding how the world *ought* to be changed. Some of these – for example, moral indignation and anger, love of mankind and Rousseauesque “sympathy” – may have straightforward political ramifications….In anger and indignation, we demand rectification, vindication, the righting of a wrong, whether it is a minor personal affront or a social injustice embedded in the political structures of the contemporary world. (Solomon, 2006, p. 111, original emphasis)

The implication is clear: if emotions are fundamentally choices, when we choose a particular – sustained – emotional engagement with the world we are choosing an ideological frame with which to engage it. As a politically-charged emotion, anger is not on the negative side of an emotional ledger. From a Solomonian standpoint, there simply is no hard-and-fast ledger.

Solomon uses the idea of emotions as containing judgements to reject the straightforward splitting of emotions into ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ baskets. As evaluative judgements, emotions are complex in ways that simple binary oppositions – the idea ‘that all emotions are either “positive” or “negative”’ (Solomon, 2007, p. 171) – do not capture. As he explains:

most emotions are ‘mixed’ in terms of their constituent judgments, even those of a straightforward pro or con nature. Hate, to take a prominent example, may well combine intense dislike with grudging respect. (Solomon, 2007, p. 171)

Because emotions differ in the attitudes they engender, for example, to the object of the emotion and to self, steadfastly labelling an emotion ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ risks oversimplification. To clarify:

An emotion may be positive both in its attitude towards its object and toward the subject (as love enhances both the beloved and the lover), but an emotion may be positive in its attitude towards its object but quite negative toward oneself, or it may be negative in its attitude toward its object but quite positive toward itself. Contempt, for instance. In short, there are very few emotions that can be characterized in terms of simple [positive or negative] valence. (Solomon, 2007, p. 173)

The idea of emotions as ‘mixed’ helps me avoid being caught on the horns of a dilemma. The problem is this: bifurcating emotions is inherent to positive psychology. This discourse seeps through positive education initiatives into schools and can be used to legitimate mindfulness training. Positive psychology’s starting point is that the accentuation of positive emotions – such as optimism – has beneficial psychosocial effects (Seligman, 2006). Extrapolating from this point, the pedagogical implication is that the curriculum and teaching methods can be adapted so that ‘[p]ositive emotions mobilize to replace negative emotions that emerge throughout the school day’ (O’Grady, 2013, p. 23). Drawing on Solomon, I eschew the one-dimensional view of emotions underlying this emotion-substitution argument. I am not alone; some positive psychologists who specialise in education object to the simple sorting of ‘emotions into two loose bags of positive and negative’ (Boniwell, 2012, p. 14). Can it be argued that mindfulness training still has liberatory potential even if positive psychology hard-liners’ classification of emotions into two groups – positive and negative – is wrongheaded?

The answer, I believe, is yes. When juxtaposed with Solomon’s philosophical take on emotions, Terry Hyland’s work on mindfulness education provides a way forward. For one thing, Hyland (2014) demonstrates that mindfulness training is an effective means of teaching emotion management strategies to young people in school settings. Hyland (2015) also argues that seeing merit in teaching mindfulness does not entail subscribing to the principles of positive psychology holus bolus. Rather than accentuating so-called positive emotions in the service of some vague notion of happiness, mindfulness training is a way of inculcating the capacity to probe, assess, reflect upon and label emotions of all kinds:

The aims of secular, therapeutic mindfulness are concerned – not with cultivating any particular state of mind, happy or otherwise – but with providing us with the means of investigating and influencing our states of mind[.] (Hyland, 2015, p. 10)

Dismissing mindfulness as merely a vehicle for delivering simple ‘instructions for boosting self-esteem or simply thinking positively’, Hyland (2015, p. 10) notes that therapeutic mindfulness techniques are frequently ‘aimed at helping people deal with difficult emotions by simply being with them rather than trying to escape them through pointless rumination or experiential avoidance’.

For Solomon (2007, p. 168), ‘managing our emotions is not an issue of control…but literally a matter of intelligence and good sense.’ This sense does not always just come naturally. Though Solomon refrains from talking much about education, good (emotional) sense can be acquired by *learning* to reflect upon one’s emotions. Schools are a prime site for this personal learning. There is an inherent element of reflection involved in mindfulness practice that can be developed and refined in school settings through teaching quite simple techniques. Once again, Terry Hyland is clear on this matter:

Mindful strategies – non-judgemental, present-moment awareness of our mental states developed through stillness, breath meditation or mindful movement – can help to develop the reflective skills through which self-knowledge and empathy become embedded in the curriculum. (Hyland, 2015, p. 17)

If we hold in abeyance the reference to ‘mental states’, which risks psychologism of the kind Solomon warns against, complementarity between their positions shines through. Based on Hyland’s account of mindfulness and his denunciation of positive psychology, it is not a stretch to suggest that educational programs employing mindfulness techniques can encourage young people – even just minimally – to take the Solomonian emotionally reflective stance expressed in this section’s opening quotation. As O’Donnell (2015, p. 196) remarks, albeit in a different connection, training in mindfulness is a set of ‘beginner practices’. It starts the process of developing an emotional repertoire that those who make the transition to activism can find helpful.

**Concluding Discussion: Mindfulness and the Politics of Resistance**

By preparing young people for the emotional demands and challenges of activism, mindfulness training as a method of teaching emotional self-reflection and self-awareness in schools constitutes a ‘beginner practice’ that ramifies beyond the school gates. I call this the spillover effect. Young people equipped with mindfulness training during their schooldays bring to protest a pre-existing capacity for emotional self-reflection – as they are equipped to reflect on, amend, or stick with their current emotional strategies. This preparedness helps solve a problem pinpointed by Barker, Martin, and Zournazi (2008). On the one hand, ‘it is important for activists to deal skillfully with their emotions’ (Barker et al., 2008, p. 423). On the other, notwithstanding the efforts of activists acknowledge the importance of emotion management strategies, not infrequently they have ‘little theory, formal practice, or training in emotions’ (Barker et al., 2008, p. 433). The authors present a cogent argument for learning mindfulness techniques in order ‘to foster desirable emotions, both as instruments for better activism and as ends in themselves’ (Barker et al., 2008, p. 433).

A key part of transformative self-work is to distinguish appropriate emotional strategies to sustain activists in their activism. As a basis for practical political action, however, which emotions are desirable? This is where Solomon’s politically inflected theory of the emotions supplies a helpful corrective to that of Barker and his colleagues. I part ways with them at the point where they buy into the positive psychological emphasis on the so-called positive emotions – in particular ‘joyful hope’ – and neglect anger. Their treatment of anger is shot through with the binary oppositions (positive/negative; rationality/emotion) that Solomon demolishes. The authors insist that even ‘righteous anger’ – as opposed to garden variety anger at personal slights – can lead to activists to ‘react hastily’; it is better, they say, to have that anger ‘transformed into a tactically appropriate compassionate action’ (Barker et al., 2008, p. 425). The implication is that righteous anger is impulsive and, in consequence, lacks rationality; it must be transmuted into compassion. There is simply no reason to think this is case.

From a Solomonian standpoint, whether an emotion is rational or not is contingent. As judgements, emotions have rationality when they find the right ‘target’; that is, the object of the emotion is the right one and the judgement involved ‘is warranted by evidence’ (Solomon, 2007, p. 181). Righteous anger about social inequalities, for example, is not inherently hasty or friable, nor is it irrational; and it is important for changing the world. Citing the example of the women’s rights movement – correctly in my view – Solomon (2007, p. 175) insists that ‘women had both a right and a reason to get angry’. The importance of anger is well-known as a motivating force for resistance to deep-seated bases of oppression, such as ethnicity, class and gender, and their exacerbation by the neoliberal configuration of contemporary capitalism. Indeed, Critchley (2007, p. 130) describes anger as ‘the first political emotion’ insofar as it is the emotion ‘that moves the subject to action’ at injustice and the plight of others. Activating and channelling the ideological element of anger – impassioned demands for the betterment of the world – is central to framebreaking social change.

Undoubtedly, as a means of achieving social justice, compassion is a highly politically useful emotion (Nussbaum, 2013). Yet, there is no reason to privilege it over anger as a motivation for activism aimed at transformational social change. Compassion has a downside too. Rousseauian compassion can turn into the pity of the ‘reluctant spectator’ who, far from being moved to act to ameliorate the unfortunate other’s situation, is simply glad not to be in their shoes (Boyd, 2004). Slippage is a risk inherent to any emotional strategy, as one emotion shades into another. Righteous anger must not be allowed to dissipate or deteriorate into destructive rage blindly directed at authority figures; but compassion must not be allowed to slip into pity and, in so doing, passivity. Forestalling slippage of an active politically useful emotion into a politically uncongenial or passive one is precisely where the heightening of activists’ conscious reflection on their wilfully chosen emotional strategies, achieved through mindfulness training, is worthwhile. The key practical political-philosophical question is how much the spillover effect, which stems from encountering mindfulness first at school, counterbalances the vaccination effect.

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1. **Notes**

   The relationship between, on the one hand, the pre-reflective and reflective modes of consciousness set out in Sartre’s (1957) *Being and Nothingness*, and self-knowledge on the other, is a matter of keen philosophical debate (Hatzimoysis, 2011). I have not the space to go into the matter here, but Matthew C. Eshleman offers a helpful clarification:

   In a (secondary) reflective act of consciousness, one can redirect (pre-reflective) consciousness from the world and reflect upon conscious experience itself. In this way, one can try to make explicit our implicit awareness of what it is like to be such and such a being or have such and such an experience. (Eshleman, 2011, p. 35) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. By being agnostic on emotions as a source of value, Nussbaum demarcates her position from Solomon’s existentialism. In contrast with Solomon who ‘thinks of emotions as involving value-positings that are willed’, Nussbaum (2003, p. 22, n. 2) explains that her ‘approach does not take a stand one way or another on the nature of value’. I side with Solomon on this issue; others do not. The terms and tonality of the philosophical debate can be discerned in the contributions to Roeser and Todd’s *Emotion and Value* (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)