I. Introduction

Our mind tends to wander. Some folk wisdom suggests that such mind-wandering is bad or vice versa. A recent empirical study claims to have found that this common lore is correct at least insofar as mind-wandering is bad for you, the mind-wanderer. Mind-wandering, the study claims, causes unhappiness.

In this poster, we call into doubt the generality of that claim, and articulate ways in which mind-wandering might be good for you, as well as virtuous.

Can Mind-Wandering be a virtue?

Curran, “Sunshine and Haze”

II. Mind-Wandering and Unhappiness

The Study

Subjects used an iphone application which prompted them to answer questions at random intervals throughout the day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPhone Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Well-Being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“How are you feeling right now?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What are you doing right now?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whether their Mind is Wandering</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Are you thinking of something other than what you’re currently doing?”</td>
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III. Killingworth & Gilbert’s 4 Claims:

1. Mind-wandering occurs in almost half of the samples.
3. Mind-wandering likely a cause of unhappiness (studied by a detailed correlation analysis).
4. Mind-wandering is a major factor in explaining between and within subject variances in happiness.

The Pessimistic Conclusion:

“A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind.”

IV. Types of Mind-Wandering

Different Types of Mind-wandering

Ruminating, being distracted, or daydreaming

Unclear whether these all have the same effect.

Mind-Wandering with and without Endorsement

Sometimes you do not endorse your mind-wandering, but sometimes you do!

Acratic Mind-wandering =

You are mind-wandering, and either you reflexively desire not to be mind-wandering, or you believe that you ought not to be mind-wandering.

V. What is Mind-Wandering?

Our Proposal:

You are mind-wandering if you leave almost all of your attentional resources available outside your main task.

Compare:

You are fixated if you leave none of your attentional resources available outside your main task.

VI. Mind-Wandering, Creativity and Insight

Mind-wandering, by definition, cannot be directly controlled. Like other skillful activities such dance or sport, it can, though, be endorsed, and may be skillfully employed without direct control.

If endorsed and skillfully employed mind-wandering might make you happy:

“Reading and sauntering and lounging and dozing, which I call thinking, is my supreme happiness.” (David Hume)

Mind-wandering is necessary for realizing other virtues:

○ Creative Problem-Solving

○ Open-mindedness

An Optimistic Conclusion:

“Free your mind and let it wander!”

References


