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Honesty and genuine happiness
Or why soft healers make stinking wounds (Dutch proverb)

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ABSTRACT

Genuine happiness is impossible without authentic concern for and corresponding behaviour towards the well-being of others. Such an incorporation of others into the self refers to a "democratic self" and the related regard for the common good. The author argues that the honesty of professionals who work in or for an educational or vocational setting is vital for the good of the individual and the common good. By introducing "democratic selves", recent advancements in Dialogical Self Theory (DST) point to an inclusion of the common good. However, given the importance of virtues for one's own and the common good, the theory and its applications are in need of integrating virtues and in particular honesty.

Introduction

Many psychologists assume that a happy life is a good life. However, critical scholars remark that those who embrace this thought too often have a blurred idea of genuine happiness and consequently, the good life. Often, there is a lopsided focus on individual happiness and this impedes a look at the importance of morality (see next section). Thus, many psychologists seem to overlook the prominent philosophical idea that an ethical or virtuous life is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for a genuinely happy or good life. According to Höffe (2007), such a life reconciles individual subjective well-being (*Eigenwohl* or own good) with authentic concern for and corresponding behaviour towards the well-being of others (*Gemeinwohl* or common good). Recently, psychologists Hermans, Konopka, Oosterwegel, and Zomer (2016) advanced Dialogical Self Theory (DST) by implicitly incorporating this idea: Genuine individual well-being requires a "democratic self", a self that takes the voices and needs of others truly into account.

This article contributes to the genuine happiness or good life debate by focusing on virtues and in particular a virtue that affects the own and common good, *honesty*. Even when facing unpleasant facts and the difficult actions these might demand and far-reaching consequences, "an honest person refuses to pretend that facts are other than they are, whether to himself or others" (Smith, 2003, p. 518). I argue that the honesty of professionals who work in or for an educational or vocational setting is vital for individuals own and the common good. After all, the aim of guidance and counselling is growth and those who support others development within the margins of collective customs, needs and practices have to provide truthful information about present issues that might block individuals learning and contribution to community. The next paragraph provides insight into honesty as a virtue and necessary condition for genuine happiness. Then a conceivable force for aligning

honesty and genuine happiness will be introduced, Hermans' (2017) Dialogical Self Theory (DST). DST implicitly assumes that honesty in the relationship with others and ourselves is crucial for individual and societal flourishing. As mentioned before, Hermans et al. (2016) advanced DST by introducing the "democratic self", a self that takes the common good into account. According to the authors, for arriving at genuine happiness a truthful (self-)dialogue is inevitable and two questions must be leading: "Do I have sound or realistic beliefs about my needs, aspirations and achievements?" and "Do I really take notice of and, if necessary, adapt my behaviour towards the customs, needs and practices of others?". Given the yet implicit, but central role of honesty in the theory, DST will be discussed in more detail. After this preliminary work it is possible to explore honesty in an educational and vocational setting. The concluding section focuses on the complexity of contemporary societies, associated challenges for supporting one's own and others' democratic selves and the contributing potential of honesty.

Honesty as a virtue and necessary condition for genuine happiness

What motivates humans? Philosophers, religious thinkers, economists (Sen, 1977; Smith, 1759) and sociologists (Parsons, 1937; Polanyi, 1944; Weber, 1922) dispute self-interest as an exclusive catalyst. The homo economicus is challenged and restricted by the *homo moralis* who is motivated by the right thing to do: If the homo moralis is really listening, he or she acts according to, whether or not institutionalised, collective norms and values that are vital for economic, political and social order. Doing the right thing is strongly related to virtues. A virtue is a "disposition or character strength that yields good consequences for the possessor and others" (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2016). Several philosophers consider a distinction between "self-regarding" and "other-regarding" virtues as a misconception. Virtues that seem self-regarding, for example, prudence and fortitude are also beneficial for others because a lack can yield negative consequences. Virtues assumed as only important for others such as humanity and justice also benefit the possessor because without them a genuine happy life, *eudaimonia* (Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics), is impossible (e.g. Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2016; Taylor & Wolfram, 1968).

Also psychology and in particular moral psychology (e.g. Erikson, 1959; Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932) is concerned with the homo moralis. However, several scholars criticise the approach and the frequent neglect of morality and virtues in other fields of academic psychology, and especially positive psychology (e.g. Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Han, 2015; Kristjánsson, 2010, 2012; Slife & Richardson, 2008). A liberal individualistic approach towards virtues seems common. If it is at all discussed, psychologists often seem to think of virtues only as a means to an individualistic, self-interest end and neglect virtues meaning for the common good. Moreover, despite the fact that in a clinical setting counsellors' virtues seem to affect client improvement (Natale, 1973; Wilson & Johnson, 2001) and clients' understanding of virtues can contribute to psychological healing (Dueck & Reimer, 2003; Papanek, 1958), Fowers (2005) remarks that applied psychology falls short of virtue discussions.

This article concentrates on one virtue, honesty. "An honest person refuses to pretend that facts are other than they are, whether to himself or others" (Smith, 2003, p. 518). Smith (2003) remarks that we need guidance from others through truthful information, that is the honesty of others, for arriving at sound beliefs about ourselves. Therefore, dishonesty or lying towards others – giving false information, distorting true information or withholding information (Braginsky, 1970) – can be held co-accountable for others inability "to see facts related to the self as they are" (self-honesty). Consequently, without seeing the facts, the person acts, feels and thinks under false impressions. If these impressions are false positives delusional individual well-being might be the consequence. Moreover, dishonesty can also directly affect the possessor by evoking negative emotions like shame, fear of discovery and unhappiness (e.g. Lewis & Saarni, 1993; Ten Brinke & Porter, 2012). Thus, honesty contributes to realistic self-evaluation and reflection of possessors and recipients alike, an ability which is crucial for growth (Dewey, 1933) and is a premise for modifying unhealthy thoughts and behaviours that are a stumbling block to genuine happiness.

Because the aforementioned is based on the ideas of Western scholars, a certain question is legitimate: Do virtues and in particular the value of honesty differ between and within societies? Based on an extensive literature review of the most influential philosophical and religious traditions (Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, ancient Greece, Judeo-Christianity and Islam), Peterson and Seligman (2004) report a "surprising amount of similarity across cultures" (p. 36). According to the authors, this indicates the historical and cross-cultural convergence of six core virtues: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence and wisdom. Honesty (in combination with authenticity) is considered as integrity including the strength of courage. Those who study Moral Foundations Theory (e.g. Graham et al., 2011; Shweder & Haidt, 1993) have not yet identified honesty as a universal virtue. However, scholars in this field conducted research to determine if honesty, amongst other virtues, should be added as a distinct and universal moral category to the current list of five foundations (i.e. care, fairness, loyalty, authority and sanctity) (Graham et al., 2013).

Dialogical self theory: an aligning force for honesty and genuine happiness?

Before answering this question, a review into the concerns of individualism is inevitable. After all, the preceding sections pointed to objections against a conception of happiness as individualistic well-being: own good separated from common good. According to Dueck and Reimer (2003), a requirement for clients' understanding of virtues is an awareness of virtue by professionals and a preceding investigation into their own virtue paradigm. However, these authors argue that many psychologists are oblivious of the liberal tradition in the Western psychologists' education and training and that this can be harmful for clients anchored in a different tradition. Moreover, a liberal individualistic ideal is problematic in itself. Liberal individualism has been associated with, for example, a lack of solidarity, exclusion and social injustice (e.g. Fraser, 1997; Honneth, 2011; Taylor, 1979) and Ehrenberg (2004, 2010) argues that this "dictate of individualism" explains increased depression and narcissism in Western individualistic societies (see also Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003).

The well-being of those who suffer from depression and anxiety is far from good. Moreover, because of their frequent expression of antisocial behaviours, narcissists and other dark triad personalities such as psychopaths and Machiavellians (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) contribute to these conditions (e.g. Boddy, 2014; Hare, 1999; Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, & Babiak, 2014). Because of their indifference towards the common good, it could be reasonable to suggest that such egocentric or totalitarian selves (Greenwald, 1980) also suffer. However, several studies show that dark triad personalities can experience subjective well-being. These results tempt researchers to conclude that such selves may be quite happy (e.g. Egan, Chan, & Shorter, 2014; Rose & Campbell, 2004). In contrast, scholars who observe these disorders longitudinally are sceptical about narcissists' long-term well-being in particular. They need continuous bolstering from others for feeding their self-esteem needs, but due to their often destructive and antisocial behaviour losing positive feedback and social support is very likely (e.g. Fukushima & Hosoe, 2011; Zuckerman & O'Loughlin, 2009). Thus, eventually they harm themselves.

These considerations nourish the idea that genuine happiness is impossible without concern for the common good and Hermans' (2017) Dialogical Self Theory (DST) implicitly supports this conclusion. Moreover, although psychologists, Hermans et al. (2016) have something important in common with several philosophers (e.g. Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2016; Taylor & Wolfram, 1968): They remark that a separation between self and others, a mainstream conception in psychology, is a misconception. In Hermans' theory, the self is considered as social and socially constructed. Significant others, collectives and broader cultures are an intrinsic part of co-organising and constraining the self and others who occupy positions within the "I" contribute to a multivoiced or polyphonic inner dialogue (e.g. Hermans, 2001; Hermans et al., 2016; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). "Society is also in the mind" and therefore the theory suggests that the Western ideal of individualism is wishful thinking, because individuals can only function if others play a fundamental role in the self. However, when walking in the footsteps of Ehrenberg (2004, 2010), Hermans (2001) would conclude

that if powerful others dictate individualism, these voices can have a dysfunctional effect on the self (e.g. depression, narcissism) and others (e.g. Fraser, 1997; Honneth, 2011; Taylor, 1979).

By discussing a lack of conforming to established practices and customs of collectives and the verbalised judgments of collectives, Hermans (2001) points to others as vital for the moral development and functioning of the self. He acknowledges that others imagined whispers and audible roars co-create, structure, monitor and, if necessary, correct the *homo moralis*. Hermans et al. (2016) imply that in today's world former sharp contours become blurred and this demands more from self's moral authority than in the past. For the own good and the common good, the contemporary democratic self mentally has to cross cultural, gender, national and racial boundaries. Such a self transcends proximate powerful others by also including the voices of distant – alien and less dominant or opposing – groups in the self. Consequently, in the present and future, for the genuine *homo moralis*, listening without pre-judgment to dialogues about challenging ideas and opinions, norms and values is in demand.

Related to norms and values, Hermans and colleagues contrast with scholars who focus on universal virtues. Although Hermans and colleagues do not explicitly discuss virtues in their work, they stress increased diversity; those who focus on universality highlight the historical and cross-cultural convergence of virtues (e.g. Graham et al., 2011; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Shweder & Haidt, 1993). Listening to the voices of these scholars, it is plausible to assume that we should start to discuss traditionally shared norms and values, which link humans across time and space, before thinking and acting on what drives us apart. In doing so, we can activate the common denominators in our already global mind.

Dialogical Self Theory extends the self to a broad societal context by emphasising the need to listen to distant and alien voices. Moreover, the theory incorporates democracy, a concept that is endemic outside psychology (in philosophy, political science, sociology). In contrast, Valuation Theory and the self-confrontation method (e.g. Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Hermans, Fiddelaers, de Groot, & Nauta, 1990; Lyddon, Yowell, & Hermans, 2006), the precursors of DST, are more clearly anchored in social psychology and especially in motivational theories. Moreover, although Valuation Theory and self-confrontation method emphasise that besides personal strength or fulfilled self-interest unity with others is vital for well-being, both understand contact and union with others is a means to achieve the own good. In support of this conclusion, when discussing outcomes with the client, the main focus is on the clients' well-being and implications of and remedies against an unbalanced valuation system; it is not focused on the consequences such imbalances or an undemocratic self can have for others. Finally, in contrast to Valuation Theory, in DST and in particular the democratic self the range of others expands from proximate to include distant and alien others.

In this context, Dialogical Self Theory can be considered as a preliminary, but clear starting point for incorporating the common good into the Valuation Theory and self-confrontation method. By merging own good and common good, theoretical, client-centred and other-centred enhancement towards genuine happiness is possible. A precondition necessary for this endeavour is not yet a subject of the work of Hermans and his colleagues and involves a critical theoretical discussion and incorporation of virtues as well as conscious and purposeful application in counselling. Concerning the reciprocal dialogical relationship between the counsellor and the client in the self-investigation, it can be assumed that for both ideas of one's own and other virtues are essential. Referring to honesty, this means that the counsellor's honesty or truthful information about a valuation and the valuation system is vital for developing and/or supporting clients' ability to see personal meanings and their emotional impact and underlying motives as they are, that is self-honesty (e.g. Papanek, 1958; Putman, 1997; Smith, 2003; Wilson & Johnson, 2001). As mentioned before, honesty of others and self-honesty is crucial for growth and the modification of unhealthy thoughts and behaviours, which can be a stumbling block to genuine happiness.

Honesty in an educational and vocational setting

The development and maintenance of knowledge and skills is essential in an educational and vocational context and professionals such as counsellors, educators and supervisors are vital for the

associated learning processes. Dewey (1933) argued that the interference of professionals in such contexts should go further and that they should play an active role in the development of democratic or ethical selves (see also Kristjánsson, 2012). Combining Dewey's idea with assumptions from the Dialogical Self Theory, this means that the efforts of professionals who work in or for such contexts should transcend a contribution to individuals own good – supporting the individual in fulfilling self-motives (self-maintenance and self-expansion) and other-motives (contact and union with others) – by also providing guidance for and monitoring of individuals authentic concern and corresponding behaviour towards others.

Feedback is a powerful force for learning and growth and can be defined as "information provided by an agent regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 81). Hattie and Timperly's literature review shows that information about task performance and how to become more effective, also termed feedforward, has the highest effect on learning. Lower effects were related to praise, reward and punishment. The authors also mention the positive effects of negative feedback or disconfirmation. In combination with information on how to improve (feedforward), negative feedback can be effective when people have little or no motivation towards a task, they learn new skills or tasks and for stimulating students' enhancement of their own performance goals. However, Hattie and Timperly do not discuss the importance of virtues for performance and understanding-related or other feedback. As mentioned before, in a clinical setting counsellors' virtues seem to affect individuals' improvement. Therefore, it can be assumed that virtues also play an important role in all other environments where improvement like learning and growth is relevant including educational and vocational settings. Natale's (1973) and Wilson and Johnson's (2001) conclusions on virtues important for individual improvement show strong similarities: Natale mentions empathy, genuineness (which includes honesty and openness) and care; Wilson and Johnson describe care, integrity and courage. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004) honesty, in combination with authenticity, means integrity and integrity is a strength of courage.

Why is an honest person courageous? Because the honest person refuses to pretend that facts are other than they are even when facing unpleasant facts, and considering difficult actions that might be demanded and far-reaching consequences (Smith, 2003, p. 518). In a recent article, Ehrmann (2017) discusses grade inflation in German and US education, its negative consequences and the potential sanctions for educational professionals who want to counteract. Research shows that intelligence, knowledge and competences have not increased and possibly have even decreased but grades are higher than in the past. Thus, Ehrmann implies that present grades are less honest and they seem to contain more false positive feedback. Although his focus is on education, it can be assumed that Ehrmann's sketch of consequences is transferable to a vocational context. From a student perspective, investing effort in good grades is less rewarding. Moreover, because many desire high grades, they may opt for less challenging courses. Consequently, individuals' complex knowledge could decrease. Employers' respond to false positive feedback with an increased distrust towards the value of educational institutions evaluations, implement more sophisticated assessment procedures and complain about students' qualities and hubris. Strongly related to hubris, it can be assumed that false positive feedback contributes to a Dunning-Kruger effect or illusory cognitive superiority. Those who suffer from this effect face a double burden: Expertise deficits lead them to make mistakes and these deficits also make them unable to recognise when they are making mistakes (Dunning, 2011, pp. 260–261). Manifestations of hubris often seem to mask task incompetence and are commonly mistaken for leadership potential (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013). Thus, hubris can catapult the wrong person into a leadership position and false positive feedback can contribute to such a decision error. Without a doubt, selection errors for leadership positions can have a more far-reaching negative impact on the common good than for less powerful positions (Berglas, 2002). Ehrmann refers to another negative effect of unrealistic positive feedback for the common good. Strongly affected by educational institutions grade inflation, employers have increased investment into more sophisticated assessment procedures which widen the inequality gap and therefore

undermine democracy. Those with a high socio-economic status can financially invest in preparations for such procedures and therefore can prevail over less wealthy individuals with equal or even better cognitive and social abilities. In other words, compared to moneyed people, people with less means have an added financial obstacle to fulfil their self-motives.

In sum, the contribution of educational institutions to the common good and self-motives related to the own good is at stake. Referring to the own good, false positive feedback from educational and vocational professionals can be held co-accountable for individuals' false beliefs about their performance and therefore fulfilment of self-motives. Overrated students' growth can suffer: After all, they miss a realistic insight into the adequacy of their competences including possible deficiencies and learning needs, which is a stumbling block to genuine happiness. Given the negative consequences for the common good, it is not surprising that Ehrmann advocates revisions and re-strengthening of government interventions in educational policy including protecting those who are and want to be honest about students' achievements. Based on research and common knowledge, he states that educational professionals' honesty about performance is at risk. Honest educational professionals are under pressure from students and parents with the threat of bad assessments and court cases on improving grades. In addition, there is pressure from their employers regarding target agreements for grades and relating grades to faculty financing as well as educators' job security.

Berglas (2002) shows that honest professionals who are focused on union with others (other-motives) and democratic selves can also face dire straits. Although Berglas does not address honesty explicitly and concentrates on executive individuals, his conclusions are partly transferable to others (e.g. students, employees without leadership responsibilities) and point to the challenges honesty contains. Based on his experiences, it can be assumed that the honesty of professionals who work in or for an educational or vocational setting is especially challenged in dealing with individuals with problems. This includes, for example, individuals who suffer from anxiety and/or depression or have a dark triad personality. As mentioned before, the latter can be considered as totalitarian or undemocratic selves and, due to their behaviour, can negatively contribute to the aforementioned debilitating conditions of others.

In contrast to problem individuals who can be trained relatively quickly and painlessly, individuals with problems can best, if at all, be helped by long-term and complicated psychological interventions. Because of their powerful positions and often far-reaching impact on others, according to Berglas, executives with a problem and in particular totalitarian executives are a real and the greatest danger for the common good and claim most from those who intervene. Dark triad personalities are not necessarily incompetent. Regardless of whether they are competent or not, they frequently perceive themselves as good leaders and being high in emotional intelligence (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). They are often also convinced of their spotless functioning. Such a belief in relation to malfunctioning refers to hubris and the related negative consequences described before. However, the moral disengagement or low moral development of such "dark leaders" (Stevens, Deuling, & Armenakis, 2012) can cause severe problems around them including aggressive and deviant behaviour, psychological distress, work-family conflict and a decrease of job performance, satisfaction and organisational commitment (e.g. Boddy, 2014; Mathieu et al., 2014).

Given these potential impacts, it seems clear that timely and adequate intervention is important, but why do individuals with problems demand more from a professionals' honesty than problem individuals? Berglas suggests three reasons. First, those who are negatively affected by malfunctioning individuals demand change as quickly and painlessly as possible. When dealing with individuals with problems, honest professionals cannot promise relatively cheap, rapid and shallow solutions such as behavioural training. As a consequence, the potential client and/or those who pay for interventions might choose a professional who offers an incorrect but relatively inexpensive, fast and superficial solution. Second, professionals who honestly address severe problems can expect ostensible cooperation or severe resistance when the individual is in denial of any personal and/or work-related problems. Finally, individuals with possible deep-rooted problems require self-honest

professionals. "Do I possess the right competences and knowledge for guiding this person appropriately?" must be the leading question. Despite potentially jeopardising current and future assignments, incomes, occupational self-esteem and/or reputation, when the answer is in the negative the professional should make a difficult decision and refer the client to an expert and/or completely withdraw from the case. These actions are also appropriate if the professional concludes that a client cannot be guided, because he or she is not willing or has a very destructive and untreatable form of a dark triad personality. As mentioned before, realistic self-evaluations are not self-evident and Berglas points to the very real dangers of professionals who do not see an underlying deeper problem and overestimate their competences: The psychological problems of the client can be exacerbated and the consequences for his or her surroundings can be disastrous. Thus, professionals who are unable "to see facts related to the self as they are" (self-honesty) and/or are unable or unwilling to provide truthful information to others (honesty towards others) can additionally damage clients' own good and the common good. Although not mentioned by Ehrmann or Berglas, but suggested by Dewey, when professionals legitimately engage to help an individual with problems and in particular if his or her behaviour can pose an imminent or potential future danger for others, they should be "unsolicitedly courageous" by verbalising concerns. This means that professionals have an enlarged responsibility: Their focus has to transcend the own good by also providing guidance and monitoring for the common good.

Conclusions

This article shows that honesty towards ourselves and others is a pre-condition for genuine happiness. Without guidance from others through truthful information about ourselves seeing facts related to our self as they are is impossible. Both forms of honesty are crucial for growth and are a premise for modifying unhealthy thoughts and behaviours that are a stumbling block to genuine happiness. Therefore, honesty must be considered as a distinctive and universal virtue. Honesty not only contributes to the own good, the authentic fulfilment of self-motives and other-motives, but also to the common good, the authentic concern for and corresponding behaviour towards the well-being of others, and we have to reconcile both factors for arriving at genuine happiness. However, honesty might be distressing for both the sender and recipient. Therefore, the "how to?" question should be discussed or, in other words, the virtues of honesty. Independent of the context or universally applicable, those who want to contribute to others genuine well-being, learning and growth by providing truthful feedback and information have to take other virtues into account. Based on research about virtues in clinical settings (Natale, 1973; Wilson & Johnson, 2001) and universal virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), it can be assumed that honesty towards others has to be fair, humane – showing care and empathy for the other – and combined with information on how to adapt or improve thoughts, emotions and behaviour (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

According to Hermans et al. (2016), currently the common good and the development and continuation of the necessary democratic self, are more difficult to attain than in the past. The world's diversity is more proximate and difficult to ignore. Therefore, contemporary democratic selves, at least mentally, have to cross cultural, gender, national and racial boundaries by truly listening to dialogues on challenging ideas and opinions, norms and values. This also means that today genuine happiness might be more difficult to achieve than in the past, a past characterised by a more distant world with less information about complex and diverse realities and more opportunities to close one's eyes to these truths. For ensuring the approachability of the precious goal of "genuine happiness" for as many as possible, it is vital to reflect on honesty and other universal virtues that we share with people close to us and those who live on real and symbolical continents apart. The orientation towards this already global part of us, our largely shared virtues, can never start too early and should receive a more important role in clinical settings, education and work life for the sake of democracy and genuine happiness. This is also true for Hermans Dialogical Self Theory and its precursors: Although with respect to democracy and in particular democratic selves, very

recent developments are promising (Hermans et al., 2016), the theory is in need of profound consideration and application of virtues.

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Notes on contributor

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