

## Final report

### Y2 Project - Experimental Philosophy

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#### Introduction

In comparison to the past, where we most widely referred to religion as guidance and justification, we increasingly use the term “True Self” to justify decisions in our modern everyday life. Because of this increased relevance, it has become more important to study the True Self scientifically. So far, research has found that the True Self is perceived as perspective-independent, cross-culturally stable, and good. They found that this is, because we need to have such a perception to be able to have interpersonal trust, predict others, and enhance our wellbeing. (Bench et al., 2015; Newman, Knobe, & Bloom, 2014; Strohming et al., 2017). Our intuition points to an additional feature of the True Self, namely that there might be a relationship between the values people hold and their perception of the True Self. Our research dives into this and investigates whether a person feels close to or far away from their True Self depends on the values they hold. We did this by interviewing people on “self-altering” medication, because medication can cause a radical shift in the perception of one’s own True Self.

We formulated the following research question: *How do people’s values in life influence their perception of whether medication moves them closer or further away from their True Self?* We hypothesised that values are the source of how we perceive our True Self and if we are close to it or not, for example when taking medication. These can be solely our own values, or a mixture of our own and societal values. For our research, we got inspired by the book ‘*Is It Me Or My Meds?*’ (Karp, 2007), which investigated “self-altering” medication, the people who take them, and how this influences their take on their identity and True Self. We additionally try to find how one’s values influence this relationship.

#### Results

In our study, we interviewed six participants, of which four are diagnosed with ADHD, one with depression and anxiety and one has experienced manic episodes and treatment. Among these participants, we found some recurring reasons for medication. For the participants with ADHD, concentration/motivation, communication, social interaction and problems at school were recurring reasons to take medication. For the other two participants medication was a tool for finding their way back to their self, or who they used to be before their mental illnesses. We also found some shared patterns of values: social (friends, family, interaction, communication), personal (independence, creativity, knowledge), societal (effectiveness, productivity).

When it comes to how close these participants feel to their True Self on medication, in comparison to without medication, we can split them into 3 groups: the same, further or closer to themselves. The first group consists of two participants (both with ADHD) who do not explicitly say to be further or closer to themselves on medication. For example, when a participant was asked if he feels closer to himself on medication, he answered: ‘No, not necessarily that. I just feel the same as when I’m not on medication. When I forget it for a day I feel exactly the same. It’s just that I cannot concentrate.’.

In the second group, we grouped three participants (2 ADHD, 1 manic). They explicitly say that they are further away from their True Self on medication because they feel like medication inhibited them in some way, for example, with being creative: “Everything that made me authentic was lost on Ritalin. The way that I get creative, the way I can get excited about little things, and seeing the beauty in small things; all these things I can now really appreciate, I now realize they make me myself”.

Lastly, one participant (depression and anxiety) said that he does feel closer to himself on the medication because it helped him to find back to the person he was before the mental illness. He said: “I feel like I lost myself in the depression and the anxiety, and then with the medication, I started to be more myself again.”

## **Discussion**

Our research aimed to find an explanation for why some people perceive that medication moves them closer to their True Self and others don't. We hypothesized that an underlying reason is the extent to which one feels able to fulfill their values.

Our research contained two participants that explicitly stated that they felt as close to themselves on and off medication. But at the same time, implicitly, they do state that medication helps them achieve their values and/or find themselves. Examples of this are: participant 3: “I didn't use to read but then I started reading and now I love books to read. I mean, then also a lot of worlds open for you. You just learn more, like, I was forced to go to school. And then afterwards, I liked going to school.”<sup>1</sup> Participant 3 also stated that he values education. In answers like these, implicitly, it does seem like they do feel closer to/found themselves on medication, because they are able to fulfill their values, which is a big part of their personal identity. However, it is difficult to make inferences from these implicit statements. Our hypothesis, that people who are able to fulfill their values with medication feel like they moved closer to their True Self, could hold, but it could also be that for some people there indeed is no relationship between fulfilling values and feeling close to their True Self. We believe that our hypothesis could still hold, because maybe they do feel closer to themselves, but do not want to acknowledge that they are less themselves without medication.

This is backed up by the one participant that explicitly said that medication moved him closer to his True Self, which confirms our hypothesis.

On the other hand, when participants felt like the medication inhibited some of their important values, they felt as if they were moving away from themselves. All participants stated this explicitly. This fits with the second part of our hypothesis (that people who are not able to fulfill their values through medication, or the medication inhibits their values, feel like they move further away from their True Self).

In conclusion, it seems like our hypothesis is true that people feel closer to themselves if medication enables them to fulfill their values, and further away from themselves, when medication inhibits their values. However, people were more explicit about that they felt moving away from themselves when medication inhibits their values, than they are about moving closer to themselves when medication helps them to fulfil their values. Future research could investigate why this is the case.

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<sup>1</sup> For more back-up quotes: see Appendix 1

*Accuracy, limitations and shortcomings*

We consider our findings valuable; regardless of our small sample size, we detected the True Self and its connection to values in people's intuitions, and found recurring patterns. Though, for scientific conclusions a larger sample size is needed. Our research is subject to a few other shortcomings; for example, that the investigation of different illnesses (ADHD, mania, depression) might make results difficult to compare. Prior research we were unaware of the differences in results this could lead to. Furthermore, all participants are from the same age group, which does not allow us to generalize over different ages. Additionally, participants sometimes struggled with clearly and explicitly phrasing their experiences, and our conclusions are mainly based on "reading between the lines".

**Relevance***Philosophical relevance*

Our research only focuses on subjective laymen experiences with the True Self and values. This, while philosophers are interested in what the True Self really is, objectively. These are two distinct concepts, and might seem like they do not directly relate. Though, our findings of ordinary people's views, can still be relevant for philosophy, because it can help in a philosophical understanding of the True Self. While laymen's views on the True Self may not be equal to what the True Self really is, it can inspire new thoughts in the field. Laypeople could bring up views that have never been philosophically investigated, or under investigated. Whilst our research only has preliminary findings, our research could inspire the philosophical field to investigate whether feeling close to the True Self equates to being able to fulfill values.

*Empirical relevance*

The empirical science our research mainly relates to is psychology. With the increasing use of the True Self within decision making, it is also becoming an increasingly relevant topic to discuss in therapy. Our research could be relevant for both psychologists that think about referring someone to a psychiatrist for medicine, and for psychiatrists themselves. If future research is consistent with our conclusion that people feel closer to themselves if medication enables them to fulfill their values, and further away from themselves, when medication inhibits their values, psychologists and psychiatrists can take this into account when considering whether they should give someone medication. It seems important for people to feel connected to their True Self, because it is necessary for justifying everyday decision making, and for wellbeing and self-assessment.

**Groundbreakingness**

We find our research to be groundbreaking on several levels; society, the research field, us as empirical researchers and us personally.

*Groundbreaking: for society*

Generally, we think that our research is highly relevant for society, with the increase of medication-prescriptions and diagnoses. Prospectively, it might help people decide whether to use medication or not or provide a framework for why medication prescription might not be the best way to handle mental illnesses. Furthermore, it might give incentive to reconsider our societal values and education system. Four out of six of our interviewees, who were all diagnosed with ADHD, claimed that the medication was there for them to work their way through the school system, which mainly focuses on a “average student”, even though every student learns differently. We found it quite alarming that the students who cannot manage to fit into the lanes of the education system, are advised to use medication in order to be able to learn. Some of the participants mentioned that if it was not for the school system (or societal expectations in general), they would have not taken the medication in the first place.<sup>2</sup> That suggests that societal values are imposed on us; for some people it seems to be more important than others to fulfill these values to feel like themselves; however, this opens the field for more explorative research into the relevance of societal values for medication use and for the True Self.

*Groundbreaking: for the research field*

We think that our research is adding a lot to the previous research about the True Self. The relationship of the True Self to medication has been made before, but our investigation of the connection to values, which is not yet very extensive, contributes greatly to understanding when people feel closer to or further away from their True Self. But also beyond our research question, we have found a lot of other interesting things that might be an incentive for future research. One important finding that we encountered was that every single one of our interviewees felt the need to stop with taking medication at some point in their lives, related to their perception of the True Self<sup>3</sup>. All of them mentioned that they strive to become independent from medication, wanting to ‘be themselves by themselves’. It shows the urge to engage with life and others *naturally*, and not with the help of a substance. Being someone on medication does not feel “as authentic” to us. Therefore, it seems like who a person becomes on medication, cannot fully be one's True Self, as this is not completely coming from the person themselves. People might not feel or want to admit that they can only be completely themselves, with the help of medication. So the values of independence, “own achievement” and authenticity seem to play a very significant role in the concept of the True Self. This finding is highly relevant for future research and philosophical engagement with the concept of the True Self.

*Groundbreaking: for us as empirical researchers*

Additionally, during our interviews, we realized the value of qualitative research. Even though we might not be able to draw as many bold scientific conclusions as we might have been able to draw with quantitative data, our choice for qualitative data turned out to be a good one, especially in connection with a research topic that is so personal and complex. We feel that for coming closer to philosophical topics, such as the True Self, it is necessary to talk about it with someone in real life. An online survey would not have handed us the same amount of depth and insight that we received from our conducted interviews.

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<sup>2</sup> For back-up quotes, see Appendix 2

<sup>3</sup> For back-up quotes, see Appendix 3

The implicit statements that the participants made were so valuable, for and beyond our research question, and would not have been included in an individually completed questionnaire. Since these concepts are still not exhausted, qualitative research in the form of interviews are a good way to explore the research field and find new incentives for related topics. Personally, we learned how to conduct interviews and how to treat such a sensitive topic. Since we mostly worked with quantitative research before, the different approach of qualitative research has really added a new experience and dimension to our understanding of research.

*Groundbreaking: for us personally*

Apart from the societal, and research relevance of our research, we also found our research personally groundbreaking. Our research enabled us to come closer to the concepts that we had worked with in theory for the past semester. The concepts were never this vivid before, as we were, apart from our own discussions, not really confronted with them in real life. Having people talk about their intuitions about these concepts, either implicitly or explicitly, highly contributed to our understanding of them. As we could investigate the conceptions of values and the True Self in different kinds of contexts, and see them being related to multiple personal stories, this gave us the opportunity to get to know them better, and experience their “true nature” in everyday life, outside of the classroom. The interviews were personally challenging, on not only an academic, but also on an emotional and interpersonal level. The research really contributed to our own personal growth, and how we see ourselves, people diagnosed with mental illnesses or on medication, and society. It might even have sparked us to reconsider our own values and some connected decisions.

## **References**

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- Newman, G., Knobe, J., & Bloom, P. (2014). Value judgments and the true self. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40, 203–216.
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## **Appendix 1**

### Quotes from the participants to display their relationship with their True Self

"Well, I just don't necessarily believe that there is a more myself versus a less myself, I think, every mood that I have, and every decision that I make is equally myself. Which is why I don't think that there is a true self that Adderall is making me become or taking it away from me." (participant 2)

"So for me, the idea that there is, you know, a true self is a useful way to discuss things; it's a tool. But if we're going to think about it from a biological point of view...It's just, it's like, I can't imagine what it would be" (participant 2)

"I feel like I lost myself in the depression and the anxiety, and then with the medication, I started to be more myself again." (participant 4)

"Like, you don't really see it, but I think if you know me well enough, you would notice it. Yeah, same as when someone is tired. Like, oh, you act a little tired. Just a little bit off and in a different zone somehow. Not that active." (participant 5)

"I think the [things that were important to me] became less special. They were just the same as everything else. Yeah, like it was just a grey zone. like some things I was interested in of course, like I still liked things and it wasn't completely dead. But..." (participant 5)

"Everything that made me authentic was lost on Ritalin. The way that I get created, the way I can get excited about little things, and seeing the beauty in small things, all these things I can now really appreciate, I now realize they make me myself." (participant 6)

## **Appendix 2**

### Quotes from the participants about society and the school system

"So that's mainly work related, I guess or study related. like, if something is not stimulating enough, then it can give that extra boost to make it more stimulating. Okay, but if something is naturally stimulating enough, then I feel like it's unnecessary." (participant 2)

"I can work really hard and really long on something that I really like. And that just works better than medication. Like you're just a machine. Like look up, three hours passed. just get lost. But yeah, just all the things for school like, the way they were presented, I can't focus on that. Like, it's just too boring. There's no no challenge." (participant 5)

"It made me fit into this lane. So I was thinking, maybe I should continue taking it. But I guess I did sort of realize that then I was not doing it for myself, but that I was doing it for the system, or for other people, or whatever." (participant 6)

"If the school system would be the way that I idealize it to be, then I would never have taken Ritalin, cause it wouldn't have been necessary." (participant 6)

### **Appendix 3**

#### Quotes from the participants about independence

"I didn't want to take any medication. I didn't want to put anything in my body. [...] I wanted to be as natural as possible, in a sense." (participant 1)

"I guess my biggest fear was that I would start using it every time I needed to do something, and then if I ever felt like I needed to do something, I wouldn't feel like I could do it without it. Yeah. If I did that association enough times, then that was the main concern. I think that was why I didn't just take it every day." (participant 2)

"But like, I see myself in the future. I don't know living in some kind of community where we are like, self sustainable and that I don't need any medication or whatever." (participant 3)

"Basically, I was kind of against medication. So it really was like my last resort. Why was I against it? I'm not sure. I just feel like in this alternative scene of people, a lot of people say things against the use of it. And I also knew a few people that had bad experiences with it. And it just felt like it was the easy way out. You know, like, I kind of got myself into this mess. So maybe I should try and get my shit together and figure out, like, why this happens and how I can get out of it, instead of just taking something and it happening magically." (participant 4)

"I wanna eventually get off it, of course. Because it's not good for you. And I just want to reach the point in my life where I'm actually sort of self developed, so that I don't need it anymore. I can do my job. [...] Take care of kids. Like, I don't want to do that on that medication. I just want to grow. So I can, like, be that person without that." (participant 5)

"I didn't really feel like myself on Ritalin, you know. As if I was more sculptured in a way that I was supposed to be. Yeah. But not authentic to myself, which occasionally made me a bit sad." (participant 6)