

# Research Master Thesis

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## A phenomenological intervention in the ADHD debate

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*How a phenomenological approach to ADHD can contribute to a better  
understanding of what it means to flourish in what you do*

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## Introduction

In the past few years, the prescription of the drug MPH (methylphenidate)<sup>1</sup> to people diagnosed with ADHD<sup>2</sup> has been explosive, both nationally and internationally, as Trudy Dehue, Dutch professor in philosophy of science, writes in 2014 in her work *Betere Mensen*.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, ADHD medication was prescribed to 215.000 (!) people in the Netherlands (Dehue 2014, 136-7). People who are diagnosed with ADHD suffer from concentration problems. The use of MPH often reduces or eliminates these concentration problems, which suggests prescribing MPH is a fitting solution for concentration problems. However, many ADHD patients who take MPH also report serious side effects, such as depression. As paediatric neurologist John Gordon Millichap writes in the *Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Handbook* (2011), ‘Depressive reactions to MPH occur...’ as well as mood changes in general. Parents often respond to these side effects by saying “My child looks like a zombie” (Gordon Millichap 2011, 127). Also, several organisations, such as the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), the Dutch Government and the Rathenau Instituut, expressed their worry for misuse of MPH. They even speak about ‘epidemic growth’ (Dehue, *Betere Mensen*, over gezondheid als keuze en koopwaar 2014, 136-7).

It is striking that so many people suffer from a psychiatric disorder and need to take a chemical to ‘fix themselves’. In his work *Identiteit* (2012)<sup>4</sup>, the Belgian professor of clinical psychology and psychoanalysis Paul Verhaeghe argues that in our current society, success is the norm, and failure is disorderly. If you are unsuccessful, you have a disorder. Consequently, according to Verhaeghe, failure has become a symptom of a disorder. This becomes apparent mostly in the case of learning disorders, which become visible mostly at school, such as ADHD. Verhaeghe’s point is that we have to view psychiatric diagnostic criteria as the result of high expectations from society (Verhaeghe 2012, 198-9).

It seems obvious that certain psychiatric treatments are based on a specific view on human beings and how they function optimally. In order to identify a problem in human functioning and label it an abnormality or a psychiatric disorder, there needs to be a view on what normal human functioning looks like. Thus, both the diagnosing process and the chosen treatment of ADHD are built on underlying assumptions of what an ideal functioning human being is.

In this thesis, I would like to identify these assumptions of human functioning on which the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD is based. I will investigate through a phenomenological approach what is possibly inaccurate about this idea of human

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<sup>1</sup> MPH is not the only drug being prescribed for AD(H)D, but is the most common. For reasons of simplicity, I will refer to AD(H)D drugs only by MPH.

<sup>2</sup> ADHD is short for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

<sup>3</sup> *Better Human Beings*.

<sup>4</sup> *Identity*.

functioning. The phenomenological approach seems to be relevant, because phenomenology is considered with describing phenomenon from the first person point of view. If we follow Verhaeghe's critique that there is a lack of attention for the problems that individuals experience themselves and that there is too much focus on successful functioning, that is, on the achievements of individuals, it should be the case that a phenomenological approach has something valuable to add or to correct regarding this view on human functioning (Verhaeghe 2012, 199).

In order to execute this phenomenological research, I will mainly (and selectively, relative to the purposes of my argument) use some basic concepts from Edmund Husserl's original approach to phenomenology. An important concept Husserl uses, is the concept *intentionality*, the idea that consciousness is always consciousness of something (Hua 3/1, p74). This concept reveals that we are always in a certain way intentionally related to anything we are conscious of, and thereby also of what we are doing. Husserl introduced the scheme of noesis-noema to describe the intentional structures of conscious experience. Applying these concepts to concentration will clarify what happens when we are concentrating or not concentrating on what we are doing.

As I intend to show, a phenomenological approach will shed new light on the problem of ADHD and will open the door to new solutions. Ultimately, I will argue that the structure of intentionality, noesis and noema, is crucial for psychiatry with regard to basing her diagnoses and solutions on a correct view of human beings. In this thesis, I will work descriptively as well as normatively. In the first place, I will describe what the current view on human beings of psychiatry is and what phenomenology has to correct in this view. Second, I will describe what kind of view on human beings is desirable, that is, how people flourish. My research question is how a phenomenological approach to ADHD can contribute to a better understanding of the problem of ADHD and its solutions.

In the first chapter, I will identify how the diagnosing process of ADHD and its treatment works and I will show that it is based on a system approach of human beings. It will become clear that there are some phenomena of ADHD that psychiatry cannot explain adequately. In the second chapter, I will intervene in the ADHD-debate through a phenomenological approach, using Husserl's scheme of noesis-noema and intentionality to show that concentration is part of an affective intentional relation towards what we are doing. Concentration is therefore inherently related towards our interest in the noema. I will show that currently, due to their system approach, psychiatry overlooks important phenomenological insights regarding concentration. In the third chapter, I will give a normative evaluation of the normal human, the way it is seen by psychiatry. I will present an alternative ideal of human functioning, which follows from valuing the intentional relationship that people have with what they are doing. The alternative I present is ultimately

based on an Aristotelian idea of human flourishing, in which enjoyment supervenes on an activity when it is exercised virtuously (Aristoteles, EN, 1174b33). I will compare the psychiatric ideal to what I consider to be human flourishing.

Since this is a rather large philosophical project that touches upon multiple philosophical disciplines, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address all the issues in depth. Therefore, this project remains a global and preparatory project which leaves many issues open, and which opens a perspective on a much broader research program that can only be suggested. The attempt is to contribute to an on-going debate in psychology and psychiatry and to intervene in that debate from a point or view that seems, to me, to be neglected; and to give purchase to a fundamentally different outlook on the phenomenon of attention and focus than what I will call the 'system approach'.

# 1. The psychiatrist's (mis)conception of concentration and ADHD

In this chapter, I start with surveying the psychiatrist's understanding of ADHD and the standard treatment. Second, I argue why a lack of insight into individual experience is problematic. I will describe the experience of ADHD patients themselves, patients receiving a diagnosis ADHD and using MPH, so as to show that there is valuable insight to be found in these descriptions. These descriptions will show that ADHD, in the psychiatrist's paradigm, is based on a specific understanding of the concept concentration. This specific understanding of concentration is based on a systematic view of human beings as systems, in which ADHD patients have a system failure that needs to be medically corrected. At the end of this chapter, it will have become clear why the psychiatrist's understanding of ADHD as having a lack of concentration is not part of the solution, but part of the problem. The conclusions of this chapter serve as a preparation for my phenomenological intervention in the ADHD debate in the second chapter.

## 1.1 How ADHD is officially defined

I will start by laying out how ADHD is officially defined in the professional psychiatric practices. ADHD is short for Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) published the fifth edition of the DSM, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders* (DSM-5). In this updated version, ADHD is defined as follows:

*'ADHD is characterized by a pattern of behaviour, present in multiple settings (e.g., school and home), that can result in performance issues in social, educational, or work settings. As in DSM-IV, symptoms will be divided into two categories of inattention and hyperactivity and impulsivity that include behaviours like failure to pay close attention to details, difficulty organizing tasks and activities, excessive talking, fidgeting, or an inability to remain seated in appropriate situations' (American Psychiatric Publishing 2013).*

Thus, the three main symptoms of ADHD are 1) concentration problems; 2) hyperactivity/restlessness and 3) impulsivity. There are three subtypes of ADHD: 1) the combined type (85%), attention deficit, hyperactivity and impulsivity; 2) only attention deficit (10%), sometimes also referred to as ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder and 3) only hyperactivity and impulsivity (3-5%).<sup>5</sup> Since attention deficit, that is, concentration problems, is a problem for 95-97% of people diagnosed with ADHD, I will often refer to the

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<sup>5</sup> These were the percentages in the folder I received from the firm PsyQ when I was diagnosed with ADD, more specifically ADHD type 2, in March 2011, at the age of 19.

group of people diagnosed with ADHD as people experiencing concentration problems. Since this thesis is about analysing concentration, I will not discuss hyperactivity and impulsivity.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the DSM, the most important change in the fifth edition is that for diagnosing adults, only five symptoms instead of six in the fourth edition have to be present. For children, six symptoms are still needed for diagnosis, but several symptoms have to be present before age 12 instead of before age 7, as was the case in the DSM-IV. According to APA, both changes are supported by research material, showing that ‘a significant number of individuals (...) continue to experience the disorder as adults’ and there is no clinical difference between children between 7-12 years of age (American Psychiatric Publishing 2013). So the definition in the DSM-5 has been broadened and thus applies to (even) more people.

Since Attention Deficit has been defined in the DSM, it has been defined as a disorder, which means the appearance in the DSM marks the moment it *became* a disorder. Dehue refers to this phenomenon with the term *reification* (Dehue, De Depressie-Epidemie 2008, 48). In the case of ADHD, reification is the mechanism that a couple of features are defined as a disorder, and then, in our use of language, this disorder is said to be the *cause* of the features. In this way, in our use of the term ADHD, we create a new reality – we reify it. For example, it is common to say when a child is very busy at school that this behaviour is caused by ‘their ADHD’. Here, ADHD is reified as a cause, when in fact, it was originally meant as a *description* of behaviour (Dehue 2008, 54; 2014, 106-8). In line with this, we create reality as a society by deciding what we consider as normal and what as disorderly. Defining attention deficit as a disorder brings it into the realm of medicine, which makes it something to consult a doctor about, and something about which only a doctor has knowledge and authority. If you add the word ‘disorder’ to a cluster of characteristics or properties, someone’s characteristics are viewed in an entire new light. Such a person becomes a patient (Dehue 2014, 157-9).

Consequently, the definition in the DSM mentioned above is best understood as a choice to perceive people who experience problems with concentration as patients. This view is opposed to the classical realistic view that science discovers the reality, while actually, science (also) shapes and interprets reality, for instance by labelling some behaviour as disorderly (Dehue 2014, 153). What we also see here is that the perspective is on the *performance* of the individual, there is no remark on the experience of the individual itself. ADHD is defined as a problem in human functioning, in other words, as a problem in the human system. Since I claimed there is too little attention to individual experience, in the

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<sup>6</sup> I use ADHD and ADD interchangeably in this thesis. Officially, ADD is a form of ADHD, which is why the term ADHD is sometimes also used to refer to ADD. Regardless of the terminology, I use both terms to refer to groups of people who have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit.

next section, I will describe the experience of patients with ADHD. In the remainder of this thesis, I will argue why attention for individual experience is so vital.

## 1.2 Experiencing ADHD

In a study conducted by Lauren Matheson about ‘Adult ADHD patient experiences of impairment’ (2013), she found that ‘In most participants diagnosed in adulthood, living with undiagnosed ADHD, had led to an accumulated psychosocial burden due to a chronic sense of failure and missed potential in many areas of life’ (Matheson 2013, 6). Most participants felt they were underachieving and had experienced a lot of criticism. In addition, ‘a chronic sense of disorganisation was particularly debilitating...’ The participants constantly struggled with prioritising and managing time, completing routine tasks, and chronic forgetfulness. From the participants who were employed, ‘many felt inefficient at work due to difficulties with procrastination, perfectionism and concentration and felt that their work output was poor’. For most of the participants, achieving either at school or at university had been a challenge. Participants also expressed they suffered from emotional distress. Many had difficulty coping with emotions and experienced emotional overwhelm. Some experienced periods of emotional breakdown and functional disability, due to their inability to complete simple tasks (Matheson 2013, 6).

In my view, there are two important conclusions to be drawn from Matheson’s findings. The first is that ADHD patients suffer from their concentration problems. The second is that the experiences they describe have to do with their achievements, that they somehow desire to be able to achieve better in at least some areas of their lives.

I would like to add on to these descriptions, by drawing on some of my personal experiences. I have experienced problems as described in the definition of ADHD in 1.1, which got me to receive an official ADD diagnosis at a firm called PsyQ, when I was 19.<sup>7,8</sup> For me, the problems I experienced with paying attention were mainly apparent at school. They manifested as problematic in secondary school. I struggled with exhaustion, headaches and tiredness. I had a lot of difficulty with paying attention in class and doing my homework. My lack of focus increased strongly when I had to do something I disliked. I was drained of all focus, unable to think at all. The consequence of my inability to focus was that I felt like I had no control over my life. Also, when I searched the internet on ADD for the first time, I was astonished to discover that a lot of what I considered to be my character traits, were listed as

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<sup>7</sup> ADHD is short for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. My diagnosis concerned only Attention Deficit, not Hyperactivity, which is why I refer to it mostly as ADD. PsyQ is a large Dutch firm that treats adults for AD(H)D and other psychiatric disorders, see also: <http://www.psyq.nl/Programma/ADHD-bij-volwassenen>.

<sup>8</sup> I am aware that my personal involvement in the matter could be considered a potential bias in academia. However, the purpose of describing my experiences is to show the problematic aspects of ADHD, not to talk about myself. Moreover, there will be many objectifying moments in my argument, which will become clear in the remainder of this thesis.

symptoms for ADHD, such as feeling overly sensitive and hazy, doing a lot of stuff at once without accomplishing them, having trouble organizing and planning, being dreamy, experiencing feelings of overwhelm by stimuli in the outside world and losing track of time (Til, Why MPH threatens authenticity 2015, 9).

A particular unpleasant activity for me had been trying to complete my chemistry homework. I would like to clarify what happened in what one might, in this stage of my exposition, call a naively phenomenological description.<sup>9</sup> I would read the lines in my book ten times without understanding what was being said. I was of course capable of deciding to sit behind my desk, but I would stare at my textbook for hours without actually reading, being completely lost in thought (Til 2015, 4). My body was situated at my desk, and my eyes were directed at my textbook. I was highly motivated, because I had failed multiple chemistry tests already, so I had made the conscious decision to complete my chemistry homework. Moreover, I kept telling myself repeatedly that I had to focus. I was trying to command and even bully myself into focussing. My eyes were going over the lines of the textbook, I was able to see and to look, I did have control over my body and my eye muscles, but my brain could not process the visual information. The words did not have meaning. It was as if someone had pulled the plug out of my head and my head was now empty.

Dr. Gabor Maté, an Hungarian-Canadian physician, who is widely recognized for his perspective on ADD, has written beautifully clear about his experiences as an ADD adult in his work *Scattered Minds, the origins and healing of Attention Deficit Disorder* (1999). The title of his book conjures up an image of a mind in pieces, with fragments floating anywhere except with the task at hand. Maté describes feelings of ‘floating in a different world, way above my body’ (Maté 2015). This is exactly how I felt in those moments. Often there was a fuzzy feeling involved, a not unpleasant dreaminess comparable to being slightly under the influence of alcohol or indeed, comparable to a dream state during sleeping. So I was looking at my textbook and seeing and at the same time not seeing, that is, understanding nothing. While I was looking, my mind was floating in different places, distant memories of my childhood for instance, or dreams about the future. The bodily experience has been put clearly by Maté, it was as though I was floating somewhere in the clouds, as if I had left my body. I did not feel grounded or connected to the earth. I was often unable to feel my body, let alone my feet. In those moments, I did not experience myself as inhabiting my body.

Having discussed some of the experiences of ADHD patients, it seems safe to conclude that ADHD has a huge impact both on your quality of life and, linked with this, your ability to function in society. ADHD patients often feel like they do not achieve sufficiently,

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<sup>9</sup> Contrary to some common views, I do not mean phenomenological descriptions based on ‘introspection into the particularities of one’s personal feelings’, such as ‘I felt very sad when my brother died’. I mean to describe in an intelligible way general structures of meaningful experience from the first person-perspective.

which causes stress. These descriptions however do not yet clarify at all in what sense the general medical approach to ADHD is problematic, especially since patients themselves actually also seem to experience the problem as being a concentration deficit that needs to be fixed. In the next section, I will zoom in on a specific property of ADHD, in which we will encounter to the first problem in the general approach to ADHD.

### **1.3 Hyperfocus: gift or symptom of a disorder?**

Even though the property of hyperfocus is not mentioned in the short APA definition that I quoted in 1.2, many clinicians and researchers recognize it as a symptom of ADHD, as psychologist Elizabeth Mika states in ‘Giftedness, ADHD and overexcitabilities’: ‘individuals diagnosed with ADHD frequently exhibit a tendency to hyperfocus...’ (Mika 2006, 239).<sup>10</sup> I consider it to be part of ADHD as well. The property of hyperfocus refers to a mental ‘state’ in which an ADHD patient is executing an activity he or she loves or is really passionate about, enabling that person to focus on that activity to an extreme level for a longer period of time. Interestingly, even though it seems intuitive to refer to hyperfocus as a ‘state’, this reference implies that your ‘state of hyperfocus’ does not change when you start another activity, while actually, it is linked with executing a specific activity and is therefore temporarily linked to that activity. Take for instance the activity of reading a novel. We see that one can read a novel in a ‘hyperfocussed’ state, or in a distracted state. The presupposition of the word ‘state’ is that when I quit reading the novel, I am still ‘hyperfocussed’ or distracted, but that seems strange. In the remainder of this thesis, I will elaborate on the question how a state of hyperfocus relates to a specific activity. Considering hyperfocus as a part of ADHD also means that someone who is diagnosed with AD(H)D is not someone who is never able to focus – on the contrary, they seem to be able to focus to an extreme extent when they are executing an activity they enjoy.

In my view, it is not so clear whether or not this state of hyperfocus is good or bad: is it, indeed, a symptom of the inability to regulate attention, as Maté suggests, or is it a temporal blessing in which you are able to function and achieve optimally? My personal experiences with this state were very positive. I was struck by the fact that when I was passionate about something, I *was* able to focus for hours. These were highly fulfilling moments: finally being able to finish something and being completely engaged in what I was doing. The awful feeling when reading my chemistry book could be gone the moment I turned to my reading my favourite book (Til 2015, 9). In my experience, the state of hyperfocus closely resembles how psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, who spent decades

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<sup>10</sup> For example: Larry Maucieri, PhD, Kathleen Nadeau, PhD and psychologist, Larry Silver M.D., psychiatrist Dr. Ari Tuckman, psychologist. See also <http://www.additudemag.com/adhd/article/612.html>, visited June 12, 2016; and Sklar, Rony H ‘Hyperfocus in adult ADHD: An EEG study of the differences in cortical activity in resting and arousal states’ (2013).

researching happiness and enjoyable experiences, describes a state of *flow* in his work *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1991): ‘optimal experience’ occurs when we are fully and actively engaged in an activity, ‘oblivious to distractions’ and able to ‘concentrate for as long as it takes to achieve a goal’ (M. Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 31).

However, a state of hyperfocus can also be a more ‘passive’ state, for instance when a child is watching television for hours and she cannot hear her parents calling dinner is ready. She is completely oblivious to her surroundings. In my view, such a state might not be adequately referred to as flow, because active engagement is lacking.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the term hyperfocus suggests an overkill of focus that is not beneficial, as opposed to flow in which your concentration lasts only as long as needed to complete an activity. I will elaborate more on the concepts of flow and optimal experience in 2.6.

Why is this property of hyperfocus important for understanding and analysing ADHD and concentration problems? The property of hyperfocus shows that your ability to concentrate is closely linked to *what* you do. It is important to note that this holds for everyone, not only for those diagnosed with ADHD. If we take into consideration that for everybody, regardless of their (in)ability to concentrate, executing activities they like is easier than executing activities they do not like, a problem arises. When ADHD individuals execute an activity they like and are able to focus on, do they still have ADHD? Do they need treatment? ADHD patients are informed through folders that ‘they have ADHD all the time’ as an argument that they need to take medication all the time, but this does not seem to fit with the property of hyperfocus. Personally, I was also advised by my psychiatrist to take MPH every day all day. In the remainder of this chapter, when I discuss the effects of medication, and in chapter two, I will inquire into this issue further.

Given the analysis of hyperfocus above, the description Attention *Deficit* Disorder is not entirely accurate, in my view. A slightly better description would be the one of Maté, who speaks about ‘poor attention *regulation*’ [emphasis mine] (Maté 2015). I prefer to think of ADHD as people whose focus is mostly on extremes of a focus scale: being more or less able to focus. In the case of ADHD, these people are either completely unable to focus, in which case they suffer from attention *deficit*, or it is really hard for them to stop focussing on what they are doing, in the case of hyperfocus. When we speak only about Attention Deficit, we do not take the property of hyperfocus into consideration. In the next section, I will discuss the process of diagnosing ADHD.

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<sup>11</sup> Within this context, I understand active engagement to be referring to for instance watching a documentary about healthy food and actively thinking about how to implement the findings of the documentary into your life. One can however also watch television in a more passive state, for instance in the case of the child: she is watching the Lion King without thinking about whether there is a meaning to the story and what that meaning might be, sitting behind the television immovable, staring at the screen.

#### **1.4 How the diagnosing process of ADHD works**

As mentioned, a typical way of treating ADHD is through prescribing medication. MPH, also commonly known under the brand name Ritalin, is the cognitive stimulant that is prescribed the most for individuals diagnosed with ADHD. A psychiatrist prescribes a person with medication after he or she is diagnosed. The diagnosing process takes place through questionnaires and interviews. As we have seen in the definition of DSM-5 in 1.1, symptoms have to already be present before age 12. The treatment program following in a diagnosis is a standardized program, according to a protocol (Verhaeghe 2012, 199).

Dutch psychiatrist Sandra Kooij, founder and chair of the *European Network Adult ADHD*, has written, in cooperation with many of her colleagues, the open access article 'European consensus statement on diagnosis and treatment of adult ADHD' (Kooij 2010). In this statement, we find information on the standardized treatment methods. With regard to diagnosis, it says in the statement that

*'Assessment starts with self-reported symptoms. The physician should perform an in-depth diagnostic interview to look for the characteristic psychopathology by careful questioning about childhood and current behavioural patterns. Although the patient appears to be the best informant, comparison with parent and partner reports in order to provide more information on severity and pervasiveness of symptoms, is desirable' (Kooij 2010, 7).*

Generally, if you want to apply for ADHD treatment you first need to have a referral letter from your general practitioner. You can then apply for treatment at a specific firm, for instance PsyQ, through an online form. After you have applied, you make an appointment for an intake with your psychologist and you bring a family member. In this appointment, you are being diagnosed. In my case, I had to bring both of my parents to a three-hour appointment at PsyQ, in which a psychologist interviewed both me and my parents regarding my behaviour as a child and young adult. In the interviews with the psychologist, I also mentioned feelings of underachievement that correspond to patients' experiences in Matheson's research (Matheson 2013, 6). The reason my parents had to come was to verify how I behaved as a child. Before I was invited to the interview I had to fill in multiple questionnaires. A couple of weeks after the diagnostic interview, one gets an appointment with the psychologist, who informs you whether or not you are officially diagnosed with ADHD. If you get an official diagnosis, you come back for 'an advice interview' with the psychologist who is going to be your main treatment officer.

In this advice meeting, the various options of treatment are discussed: individual coaching with a psychiatrist, group counselling and medication.<sup>12</sup> I chose all three options. It then took a couple of months before I could meet with a psychiatrist, for a 15 minutes appointment. After asking some general questions about my health, he prescribed me with MPH. From the beginning of my treatment, I had always expressed a strong interest in trying medication. I considered them to be the magical solution for my feelings of underachievement. What is interesting is that there was no observation of me working or studying involved in the diagnosing process. My psychiatrist did ask me if it could also be the case that I simply had taken on too much workload. I denied.

What we can conclude from the diagnosing process is that the patient self-perception is an important factor in identifying the severity of the concentration problems, which is a potential problem for objectivity. Kooij recognizes this problem, which is why she stresses the importance of other informants such as parents or partners. She adds that self-reports of past and current behaviour can be reliable if the patient has ‘good insight in the condition’ (Kooij 2010, 8). She considers the current assessments as posing a risk for underdiagnosis and states that there is no evidence that they lead to overdiagnosis, though she recognizes that this possibility exists (Kooij 2010, 8). It seems rather unwarranted and potentially biased that Kooij considers the risk for underdiagnosis to be higher than the risk for overdiagnosis, especially since the self-perception of the patient is so decisive. According to Dehue, many people believe they are responsible for their own functioning and are inclined to blame themselves when they do not perform as they desire – which is often unreasonable, in Dehue’s view. In line with her analysis, I too had already self-diagnosed myself after having completed online tests, as many others have done as well. I already considered myself as someone suffering from a medical disorder, which is why I was so keen on trying medication (Dehue 2014, 160). I considered my brain as having a system failure that needed to be fixed.

We see the focus on performance appear as well within this diagnostic protocol. Consequently, as Verhaeghe claims, there is little attention for the problems patients experience themselves, as I already mentioned in the introduction (Verhaeghe 2012, 199). In general, we see a tendency to look at ADHD from an outside perspective, how an individual is behaving. It seems that the focus on performance and functioning is related to the reification aspect of ADHD mentioned in 1.1. The diagnosing process is placed within the medical sphere, in which a professional has the authority to diagnose on the basis of ‘objective evidence’, or at least as objective as possible. The objectivity is mostly drawn from the personal answers from ‘the patient’ and his or her parents and the kind of questions that are asked in the interview. The questions in the interview are about behaviour in certain

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<sup>12</sup> We see here that it is not the case that medication is the only treatment option. I would like to stress here that my criticism of the general treatment of ADHD refers only to medical treatment, not to any other form of treatment.

situations, and not so much about the personal feelings or experiences of ‘the patient’. The answers are combined and crossed on a scoringlist of symptoms from the DSM-5. On the one hand, the objectivity lies in the ‘self-reporting’ in relation to the checklist of criteria. On the other hand, there is no observation of the patient involved, in which behaviour could be more combined with personal feelings in diverse activities en social contexts, and workload experiences. Therefore, it is questionable to what extent the term ‘objectivity’ is appropriate in this situation. In the described and *prescribed* way of diagnosing, ADHD becomes an ‘object’, which prevents looking at the perspective of experience and encourages the tendency to focus on successful performance only. After having discussed the official diagnosis, I will continue by discussing the effects of MPH, the most commonly used drug in a medical treatment of ADHD.

### **1.5 The effects of MPH: (un)satisfactory?**

The most common way of treating ADHD is by prescribing medication. The cognitive stimulant that is used mostly is MPH.<sup>13</sup> ‘Stimulants (methylphenidate and dexamphetamine) are first choice medication treatments for ADHD in children and adults...’ According to the European consensus statement, stimulants are effective in 70% of patients. The longest study that has investigated the effects of MPH lasted six months (Kooij 2010, 12). In general, ‘stimulants are the treatment of choice for adults with ADHD’ (Kooij 2010, 15). In this section, I will discuss the effects of MPH through describing experiences of ADHD patients, using Dehue and Matheson’s findings on the effect of MPH and some of my personal experience as an illustration.

Dehue describes the experiences of Anne-Marie van der Gouw, one of the first people who got an ADHD diagnosis as an adult in the Netherlands, in 1998:

*“Ik slikte die Ritalin en kon alleen nog maar focussen; echt zo’n hyperfocus; ik was alleen nog maar bezig met die computer, kon alleen maar typen, vertalen, typen, vertalen”. Ze kwam niet meer naar buiten, zag haar vrienden niet meer en viel enorm af. Daar kwam bij dat alles wat ze deed, in het teken van ADHD ging staan. “Ik was gewoon ADHD geworden: niet meer iemand met een probleem, ik was zelf een probleem geworden”. (...) Ze begon zich (...) verslaafd te voelen: “telkens als een pil uitwerkte kreeg ik vreselijke afkickverschijnselen, waardoor iedereen, inclusief ikzelf, vond dat ik die medicatie echt nodig had. Toen ik me ineens realiseerde dat de pillen zelf het probleem waren, ben ik ermee gestopt.” (Dehue 2014, 161).<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> MPH is considered an amphetamine, which increases the transmission of dopamine and noradrenaline in the nervous system. According to some, the effects of MPH are similar to cocaine, see also Dehue, 143.

<sup>14</sup> “I was taking that Ritalin and all I could do was focus; that kind of hyperfocus really; my computer was the only thing I was interested in, all I was doing was typing, translating, typing, translating”. She did not go out any more, she lost a lot of weight. Apart from that, everything she did became about ADHD. “I had

An important part of Van der Gouw's description is recognizable for me. I vividly remember the first time I took MPH. Indeed, it was like a hyperfocus. It felt like I was given a huge energy boost and I felt stronger and more secure. According to my psychologist, many people compared it with speed. As such, I experienced the effect of MPH as a system change, something we also see in Van der Gouw's description, being in a different state in which her 'system' was only able to focus.

Chemically, the theory is that MPH restores a chemical imbalance in the brain. Supposedly, there is a lack of neurotransmitters that needs to be supplemented. MPH leads to the increased neurotransmission of dopamine and norepinephrine. It is a stimulant of the central nervous system – and as such, it changes the 'system' of the user. This highly popular idea of a chemical imbalance, first written down by the American psychiatrist Joseph Schildkraut in 1965, is after all these years still a hypothesis, albeit a massive popular one, Schildkraut's article being referred to over 3000 times (Dehue, *Het 'ontbrekende stofje in het brein'* 2016, 9-10). In the case of ADHD, medical treatment also departs from the hypothesis that there is a lack of the hormones dopamine and norepinephrine.

Regarding my experience when I started using MPH, it was like I was given a large source of concentration, available for me to use for whatever activity I wanted. I could hardly cut myself loose from my study book. I felt as if I was a sponge and I could soak up all the information in my book without any problems. For the first time, I understood what people meant if they said 'just do it'. I was able to study for my history test, just because I had made the mental decision to place my now available concentration there. I could control my concentration with my mind, as if I had a lot of control over my attention, as I could rule it. The strange thing was that I did not need an inner motivation to do this. It did not really matter if I liked what I was doing or not. Thus, on the surface, everything seemed perfect: I could concentrate and function well and simply do the things on my to-do list. In the beginning, MPH gave me a feeling of control over my life I had never experienced before. These experiences seem to support the idea of an enhanced human system as helpful for ADHD patients. Dehue also describes experiences of a student who reports that studying is less dreadful and that she can study for a longer period of time (Dehue 2014, 164).

It was however harder to reflect on the information in my book. This correlates with a description of Leopold Meyer, a side effect specialist, who stated in the *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* in 1960 that 'amfetaminen slechts onverschilligheid vergroten, wat bij het beroep van soldaat misschien de bedoeling is, maar niet bij studenten die bij

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*become ADHD: No longer was I someone with a problem, I had become the problem myself". (...) She started to feel addicted: "every time the medication wore off, I got huge withdrawal symptoms, which is why everyone, myself included, believed I really needed those pills. Until one day I realized that the pills were the problem. That was the moment I quit."*

examens juist kritisch moeten kunnen denken' (Dehue 2014, 141).<sup>15</sup> In my case, feelings of indifference became prominent when I used MPH for a longer period of time, a week, or two weeks – which coincided with a decrease in feelings of control. I experienced much less enjoyment, or even none at all, in my daily activities. A lot of things had lost their meaning. Regarding my studying, I sometimes felt like passing a test was not important at all. So now, the problem was not that I was not able to concentrate, but simply that a lot of tasks felt meaningless, so I did not bother to complete them (Til 2015, 10). This was a very strange, painful and alienating experience. Dehue describes a similar experience from websites as drugsforum.nl: 'Bovendien vind ik Ritalin een middel wat je dwingt een ander persoon te zijn. Ik heb het een tijd gebruikt (...) en tijdens die periode was ik niet meer de vrolijke ik. Ik was altijd rustig toen en ging als een zombie de dag door' (Dehue 2014, 164-5).<sup>16</sup>

Before having ever used MPH, the things I was able to focus on, were always meaningful. Those were the things I liked, I was good at or passionate about, I had positive memories about and that became even more enjoyable the more I did them. In that sense, these activities were linked to my personality, my history and my competences. A significant example for me is dancing. I used to dance about twice a week. It was very important to me. I could really feel a deep connection with the music and feel it like it sounded inside my body. I could lose myself in the music and in the movements. I could enjoy music much more without MPH, and I was able to dance wholeheartedly and experience a harmony of mind and body. With MPH, it did not feel as meaningful and joyful anymore. The unity was gone, for I now experienced my mind as ordering my body what to do, without being able to lose myself in the movements. Many participants in Matheson's research also reported a great variety of side effects. I would like to mention some of these:

*'A few reported severely impairing side effects such as paranoia and many experienced daily withdrawal symptoms as medication wore off. Some participants perceived a loss of self-identity, and felt that medication diminished positive aspects of ADHD, such as sociability'. A couple also mention a reducing effect from the medication in the long-term* (Matheson 2013, 6).

What we have seen in this section is that even though MPH does enhance concentration, it creates new problems, most importantly, a state of indifference, at least for some people. There is a lot more to be said about the effects of MPH, both about the positive and the

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<sup>15</sup> 'Amphetamines merely increase a feeling of indifference, which might be the purpose for the work of soldiers, but not for students, who should be able to think critically during exams'.

<sup>16</sup> 'Besides, I consider Ritalin to be a drug that forces you to be someone else. I used it for a while (...) and during those times I was no longer my happy self. I was always calm then and I went through the day like a zombie.'

negative aspects. It is however beyond the scope of this thesis to cover all of them, which is why I focussed on the effects that are relevant to the argument I aim to develop, about the importance of a meaningful relationship with what you do. We have seen that even though MPH indeed enhances concentration for many, there are also serious side effects, most importantly indifference and depression, which are symptomatic of not experiencing a meaningful relationship to what you do. In the next section, I will show that understanding ADHD as having a lack of concentration is an important part of the problem.

### **1.6 The understanding of concentration: problem or solution?**

When we look at the etymological origin of the word concentration, we see that the Latin word *concentrare* means bringing to a common centre. We see this reflected in the definition of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary for instance: ‘the ability to give your attention or thought to a single object or activity; or the act of giving your attention to a single object or activity’.<sup>17</sup> The second part of this definition suggests that attention is something you *have* and is yours to give, similar to money for instance. Yet it is also possible that your attention is drawn by a phenomenon you find attractive. In this case case, you do not give something, you are rather pulled towards something. I will elaborate on this mechanism in the second chapter.

For my analysis, the first part of the definition, concentration understood as ability, is the most important. If it is an ability, it is something you can be good at, or not good at. Thus, it might be something like a skill. As Julia Annas writes in *Intelligent Virtue* (2011), a skill involves learning, and it can be learned only by practice. In other words, it is something that can be trained (Annas 2011, 16). This idea seems contradictory to how we use the term concentration in everyday life.<sup>18</sup> We can say to someone who cannot concentrate: you should practice more, but most people will not say such a thing. In addition, ability is context-specific: you are able to do *something specific*, you are not ‘just able’, but *able to ...*

Maren Wehrle and Thiemo Breyer write in ‘Attentionale Horizonte zwischen Phänomenologie und Psychologie’, that in psychology und philosophy, concentration is sometimes understood as a limited capacity or resource (Breyer, Attentionale Horizonte zwischen Phänomenologie und Psychologie sd, 1). In my view, having the ability to do something could also be understood as having the capacity to do something. For instance, we could say someone has leadership capacity, or a capacity to remember facts about the history of Germany. This shows you always have a capacity to do something specific, for instance to retrieve the dates of the Franco-German war. However, concentration might not be related to something specific. It might be more accurate to view concentration as a resource that is

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concentration>, visited April 28, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Even though, as meditation and mindfulness becomes more mainstream, some people might suggest training concentration through ‘meditation training’. In 3.1, I will discuss how meditation relates to my argument.

somehow available in a certain amount to a particular individual and is independent of a specific purpose, similar money or time.

Such an understanding of concentration would mean that if you have a certain 'amount' of concentration at your disposal, you can apply this to any activity. In addition, the meaning of the word concentration stresses the continuity of an activity. The word concentrating evokes images of a person studying for a longer period of time, for instance. It seems to be a conscious choice to use your available concentration for a specific activity for a longer period of time, for instance by saying to yourself 'I am going to read a chapter of Husserl for one hour'. The implication of such a decision is that the decision in itself is sufficient to ensure you can indeed read Husserl in a concentrated 'state' for one hour. However, the availability of your concentration depends on many factors, temporary factors such as being fit or tired, or more general factors such as genetic or cultural aspects. If you are tired, or ill, this capacity decreases. If you consume coffee, or take MPH, it increases. There are also contextual factors that could distract you, there is a background that could stand out, for instance when you suddenly hear loud noises. So even though on the one hand, it seems to make sense to understand concentration as a resource, this does not yet enhance our understanding of how this resource is actualized in executing an activity. For this we should pay more attention to the general motivational patterns in individuals.

What if we would compare concentration to time, another resource? It seems undeniable that if you have more time, you can choose how to spend it. The same goes for concentration, understood in this way, if you have more concentration available, you can choose for what purpose to use it. The essential aspect of this understanding of concentration presupposes that it does not really matter what activity you execute, the concentration will be there, as a resource for you to use. The same goes for time: there will always be 24 hours in a day, no matter how you spend them. However, the different ways you spend your time have a tremendous influence on your experience of time – they are not arbitrary.

Consider the example of Steve. Steve is a houseman who is passionate about crime novels but detests doing his taxes. When he reads his favourite crime novel, he experiences time flying. When he does his taxes, he experiences time slowing down. Similarly, it will be much easier for him to concentrate on his crime novel than it will be for him to concentrate on his taxes. What this means is that Steve does not actually experience himself as having a certain amount of concentration available as a resource. When we understand concentration in this way, it is no longer accurate to say about Steve that he is able to concentrate on his novel, for if this were so, he would equally be able to direct his available amount of concentration to his taxes – which he cannot.

Thus, we see that if we understand concentration as a resource, this does not explain why the concentration available to an individual differs from activity to activity, even though

it is clear that in Steve's case, and in many others, it makes a huge difference what kind of activity we execute, and, as we shall see in the remainder of this thesis, how we relate to what we do. We also saw this with ADHD patients: someone who is diagnosed with ADHD is not an individual that is never able to focus, because a state of hyperfocus enables an ADHD-patient to focus to an extreme level for a longer period of time.

What are the consequences of this analysis for the general approach to ADHD, that is, prescribing MPH? We see that a problem arises, since MPH does enhance your concentration, but it is unable to make you like doing your taxes, for instance. My claim is that MPH can never enhance this content-specific relationship: it cannot be that a pharmaceutical makes you love doing taxes and detests reading a novel. A medical treatment is not aimed at changing your relationship with *what* you are doing – it is not able to – even though this has a huge influence on your performance. A medical treatment aims at enhancing *you* as a person in a particular respect, for instance boosting your immune system or in this case your capacity to concentrate, thereby assuming that your inability to concentrate stays the same independent of the context you are in, as though you are a brain in a vat. MPH only changes your being-in-the-world, as Heidegger would say, it changes the 'Befindlichkeit', the psychic way of engaging with reality as an 'existential dimension'. If you would compare it to a system, it changes the way your system works.

However, as we have also seen, changing your being in the world also changes your relation *to* the world. This seems to be an opposition: on the one hand, MPH does not change your relation with the world, because it does not support you to experience an activity as nicer or more meaningful. On the other hand, it does change yourself as a 'system' and this in turn changes your relation to the world, because your concentration is better and this is a state you might enjoy, probably partly because you experience more control. You can however also experience indifference or alienation to what you do. Thus, the question is how focus and attention is related to what you are doing and to what extent you experience what you do as meaningful.

The consequence of Steve's example is that we might need to reframe the problem. According to psychiatry, the problem is a concentration deficit. Yet enhancing concentration in ADHD patients is unable to truly solve the problems individuals with ADHD are facing, which is not necessarily a lack of concentration, as we saw in Steve's case, but doing activities they do not 'like' – bearing in mind that this is still an oversimplification which needs more analyses. I suggested above that the actual problem might have to do with the relation you have towards what you are doing, which would present the enhancement of this *relation* as a solution, as opposed to the enhancement of concentration.

Indeed, it may sound strange to interpret the problem of ADHD as having to enhance the relationship to the activities you do not like, such as chemistry homework or taxes. I will

clarify what I mean by developing this mainly in chapter three, but for now I would like to point out that I am not suggesting you have to like everything you do in the sense that it gives you a kind of pleasure, but that it is about regarding activity as meaningful enough and consequently, enjoying it sufficiently to be able to complete it. We could also phrase this more neutrally as not resisting to do it. In order to clarify this further, I will analyse the concepts of concentration, focus and attention in the next chapter. In the final section of this chapter, I offer some concluding remarks.

### **1.7 The misinterpretation of psychiatry?**

In this chapter, I have shown that a medical treatment of ADHD is aimed at changing you as a system, and I have argued that within this treatment, there is too little attention for individual experience of ADHD patients. I claimed that the individual experience is an important phenomenon that should not be ignored. The question remains how this can be addressed. So far, psychiatrists cannot explain why a patient experiences both hyperfocus and a lack of concentration, which is why they defined the problem as a lack of concentration. Their treatment of ADHD with MPH enables an individual to perform his tasks successfully, which would be considered successful treatment. As mentioned in the Introduction to this chapter, it is very well possible that such an individual does not enjoy his activities and might even experience feelings of alienation and/or depression.

In my view, the psychiatric understanding of ADHD is a part of a psychiatric paradigm that does not take into account individual experience, the first-person perspective, even though – as I will argue – a high quality of individual experience is key to attention, and interest and motivation are basic to both the experience of meaning, and the ability to focus and ‘attend to’ the meaningful activity. Having identified this problem, I want to look at ADHD from a different point of view in the next chapter. I would like to understand this phenomenon from a phenomenological perspective. I want to take individual experience more seriously, and I will describe what happens when one is able and unable to concentrate. These descriptions or phenomena will enhance our understanding of what is going on in these processes. I consider phenomenology to be highly relevant, since it *values* the individual experience from the point of view of intentional relationships with a meaningful world. What these analyses mean subsequently in terms of ‘treatment’ remains to be seen and will be addressed in chapter 3.

## 2. A phenomenological intervention in the ADHD debate

In the previous chapter, I have shown that the understanding of concentration as a resource in the psychiatric praxis leads to a problem: the supposedly deficit source of concentration cannot explain why someone is able to concentrate on activity A and not on activity B. Consequently, the most common solution, MPH, which enhances concentration in a general way and along a pharmaceutical, mechanistic route, does not provide a fitting explanation for the ADHD ‘syndrome’. The side-effects of MPH offer an additional objection to the claim that MPH resolves the general problem for the ‘patient’ and underlines the interpretation that the psychiatric praxis takes the patient more or less as a deficient or dysfunctional system.<sup>19</sup>

In this chapter, it is my aim to understand what goes wrong with the conceptualization of concentration in the psychiatric praxis. I will do so by intervening in the ADHD debate through a phenomenological approach of ‘attention’ and ‘concentration’. The relevancy of phenomenology will have become clear at the end of this chapter, after having presented these analyses. Thus, in this chapter, I leave the psychiatric paradigm behind and I try to understand concentration from within a general phenomenological perspective. I will only use a couple of phenomenological concepts, namely intentionality, and my interpretation of the so-called noesis-noema-scheme. It is not my ambition to offer a phenomenological account of the *eidōs* (being/essence) of attention or concentration (Ierna sd, 14) or, for that matter, a general account of phenomenological principles such as the background or horizon of our experiences (especially perception). My phenomenological intervention will mainly exist in pointing out that we should take the phenomenological insights of Husserl into account in our understanding of concentration, to better understand ADHD. I will not offer in any way a detailed or thorough account of Husserl’s phenomenology, as that is beyond the scope of this thesis. Let me start with providing some context to introduce the idea of a phenomenological approach.

### 2.1 Phenomenology: intentionality, noesis/noema

The method or discipline, or as Husserl’s practiced it, the disciplined method, of phenomenology, can be defined as the study of the appearances of ‘things’, i.e. phenomena, in our experience. Phenomenology studies ‘the meaning things have in our experience’ (Smith, Phenomenology 2013). According to phenomenology, what we perceive always already has meaning for us. For example, as in language just saying red without any context is meaningless, in the same way, perceiving ‘red’ as such is meaningless, but for the fact that in perception ‘red’ is always already perceived as the red (the property) of something, such as the red of a carpet. This red can then be further evaluated as too red, or ugly red. These evaluations build on the meaning of a carpet having a function to you and the meaning of

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, this does not mean that the psychiatrist or doctor does so.

colour within the context of the carpet. The redness does not freely float in the sea of a meaningless consciousness: consciousness always has to be consciousness *of* something (Ierna sd, 19) (Hua 3/1, p74). Central to phenomenology is the concept *intentionality*, the idea that consciousness is always directed toward something: ‘Mit Intentionalität bezeichnet Husserl die Grundeigenschaft des Bewusstseins, immer Bewusstsein *von etwas*, d.h. immer auf irgendeine Gegenständlichkeit gerichtet zu sein’ (Gander 2010, 153).<sup>20</sup> Thus, what phenomenology does, is analysing the structures of conscious experience from within the subjective -, that is, the first person point of view (Smith, Phenomenology 2013).

Husserl has introduced the conceptual scheme of noesis-noema to describe the program of phenomenology as a search for the structures of conscious experience and intentionality (Hua, Ideen I, Kap.3). According to him, phenomena need to be understood as constituted within a scheme of intentionality that correlates the subjective consciousness with a noema: a content or object of intentional consciousness, that is, ‘the intended as such’. The noesis refers to the mode of consciousness, the act of consciousness, to be directed towards a noema. Noetic modes are, for instance perceiving, remembering, comparing, judging, etc. Examples of noema would be the perceived as such – a chair, the remembered as such – the house in which I was born, etc (Gander 2010, 209). For instance, if I perceive an orange cup, the noesis refers to the perceiving and the noema refers to the cup, that is, how the cup *appears* to my consciousness. Thus, the noesis is the act of constituting meaning of the subjective consciousness, and the noema is the constituted meaning. Since I am considered in this thesis with *doing*, that is, with practical intentionality, I will try to apply the noesis-noema scheme to practical intentionality, actions such as riding my bicycle. Practical intentionality always presupposes ‘mental’ intentional modes such as perceiving, attending to, etc. I can only steer my bicycle while cycling, if I have a clear and correct perception of the way ahead, where I need to go, and am attentive to all clues that are significant for me getting there safely, such as the traffic lights, the cars, and the other cyclists.

According to Susi Ferrarello in *Husserl’s Ethics and Practical Intentionality* (2016), ‘all acts that can be considered ‘willing’ are modes of practical intentionality’. Husserl distinguishes between action intentionality (*Entschlußwille, decision-will*) and the intentionality of action (*Handlungswille, action-will*) (Ferrarello 2016, 102-3). In this thesis, I am considered with action-will, that is, how one is intentionally related to what one is doing. In that context, I propose to understand the noesis in the way of ‘practical intentionality’ that presupposes the willing and active involvement of the subject, in activities such as reading, or writing. This means that for instance in the example of writing a thesis, according to Husserl,

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<sup>20</sup> ‘With *Intentionality*, Husserl signifies a founding property of consciousness, to always be conscious *of* something, that it, to always be directed to a certain concreteness’

the noesis might be 'willing' directed to the thesis as it appears to consciousness, that is, the noema. I would propose to rephrase this 'willing to' as 'writing'. The noema refers to a phenomenon, to an object as it appears to consciousness, bearing in mind this 'object' can also be immaterial. In the case of 'reading' as a noesis, the noema could be an apparent crime novel. In playing basketball, the noema might be the ball as it appears to the player, in the specific moment that a player perceives it. Another possible noema might be the intention of scoring a goal, which in the context of basketball is the 'willed' as such. The noesis would then be the willing. Within a practice, multiple phenomena could be the noema at a given moment. Within a specific practice, such as basketball, the different noema are all related to the general 'willed' as such, which is to win the game, that is, as parts of the meaningful whole of winning the game. For instance, in dancing, the noema could also be the stage, your body, the dancer in front of you – again, not as objects, but as appearances to consciousness. In the case of basketball, the noema could also be the hoop, the court, a player of the other team, etcetera.

We should note here that within the context of practical intentionality, *how* a phenomenon appears to consciousness is directly connected to *what* one *intends* to do with it. If a professional cook in a busy restaurant would, during cooking, suddenly stop to admire a fly on the window, while risking the lentils to burn, this would be considered strange, and probably incompetent. Furthermore, in describing the noema as something that appears to consciousness, the way it appears to consciousness is not similar to looking at a cinema. The noesis, the mode of consciousness, such as reading, is active, it is something you *do*, and in that way, consciousness is actively intentionally directed to a noema. There is a difference between how a stage will appear to a professional dancer during a performance, than to a spectator watching the ballet – the dancer is practically intentionally related to the stage, whereas the spectator is 'merely' in a perceptive mode towards the stage. Thus, both the spectator and the dancer perceive the stage, but only the dancer is also practically intentionally related to it. This is however an oversimplification, since perception in general always has to do with the practical, insofar that attention is selective and that what one sees and how one perceives something is always related to what one intends to do with something. For instance, in the case of the spectator, the stage is something to look at, to direct his body to, which is in that sense also an active mode.

Thus, we can say that a practical intentional relationship already presupposes a more 'passive' perceptive mode. For instance, when Steve has actively decided to do his taxes, he has already passively perceived the taxpapers on his desk as taxpapers, so whenever Steve actively engages with the taxes, these actions are founded upon these passive perceptions. In that sense active is founded in the passive synthetic mode of perceiving. The possibility of

actively engaging with an intentional object<sup>21</sup> is founded upon passively perceiving the intentional object in question as a unity, as a distinct object in itself. Husserl's noetic analyses were mainly concerned with the noesis of perception, referring to the act of perception, bringing perception into the active sphere. In this thesis, I am not concerned with passive perception, this is a layer I will presuppose. I am interested in the practical intentional relationship, that is, our actions, which are founded on these 'passive' perceptions, by which I mean seeing the tax-papers as tax-papers, for instance.<sup>22</sup> So I will apply Husserl's analyses of perception to practical intentional relations. When analysing practical relations, wanting to engage in what you passively perceive, the larger dimension of *motivation* also plays a role, that is, having a kind of desire to engage in the world, or being affected by something in the world and finding it attractive, or on the other hand viewing the tax-papers and having negative memories about filling them in last year. These motivations and affections strongly influence how you execute an activity. I will elaborate on these notions in 2.5.

After having introduced the phenomenological concepts of intentionality, noesis and noema, I will analyse the concepts 'concentration', 'focus' and 'attention'. In everyday life, these concepts are often used interchangeably and this does not cause any confusion. They can all be used to describe an ability to pay attention, for example in statements like: 'in general I have problems with focussing/concentrating/paying attention'. They can also be used to point to a concrete example: 'I am perfectly able to focus/concentrate/pay attention when my favourite professor gives a lecture'. Additionally, we consider it adequate for a person diagnosed with *Attention Deficit Disorder* to say about himself: 'I have so much trouble concentrating/focussing'. Yet the everyday use of these descriptions does not provide us with a deeper understanding of their meaning and how to deal with these phenomena, especially from a moral or practical point of view. My hypothesis in this chapter is that they can be made out to point to relevant different aspects of the phenomenon of paying attention. Understanding these differences will help us understand the very different experiences Steve had when concentrating on the taxes and focussing on the novel.

## **2.2 Experiencing an actual (in)ability to concentrate**

In this section, I will analyse why the understanding and use of the conception of concentration as a resource, does not work. I will start out by exploring the example of Steve, who loves reading crime novels but detests taxes, further. Suppose Steve has a habit of putting off doing the taxes, but he decides that today is the day that he cannot put it off any longer. At 9 o' clock in the morning, when the kids are off to school, he sets down at his desk

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<sup>21</sup> Referring to an object as it appears to consciousness, not an object in the naturalistic sense.

<sup>22</sup> Husserl developed this 'practical side' of phenomenological studies rather early, see: Hua, Band XXVIII *Vorlesungen über Wertethik und Wertlehre*, 1908-1914, Hrsg. U. Melle, Kluwer Academics, Dordrecht, 1988. But in his later work, published posthumously, he deepened these analyses by adding elements of genetic description about how these practical intentionalities are constituted by learning and experience.

with a cup of coffee and he tries to start to do his taxes. However, he has a hard time paying attention. With a lot of sighing, he tries to place his attention with his taxes again and again. He does move forward, but it takes a lot of effort and the progress is slow. It seems as though his attention is constantly pulled away from his taxes. Items he sees on his desk are pulling his focus, thoughts about groceries, the movie he watched last night, and what his wife will say to him tonight if he has not finished the taxes. However there is one thing that absorbs his attention the most: the new crime novel that arrived in the mail yesterday. It is sitting on his desk, and Steve feels as though he is literally drawn to the book and he has to use all of his willpower to refrain from reading it. After two hours of filling in tax forms, he decides he has deserved a break. He picks up the book and opens the first page. Immediately, he gets sucked into the story and before he realizes, one hour has past and he has read three chapters. It takes him all his willpower to quit reading and continue with his taxes, which he finally manages to do. Eventually, after six long hours that felt like eternity, he is done. His only breaks were the moments in which he read two more chapters, moments in which time seemed to fly. At the end of the day, when his wife comes home from work, Steve is happy to tell her that he finished the taxes, but he also complains how difficult it had been for him to concentrate on the job.

This example is probably highly familiar to most of us. Most of us know what it is like having to perform a particular task we do not enjoy doing, but which still requires a significant amount of attention. For students it could be reading a history book in order to study for an exam, for children it could be math homework, for others it could be reading a report to prepare for a meeting at work. When trying to complete tasks that require a certain amount of attention but at the same time do not interest you, for many people, it is a challenge to not shift to other activities that we do like. In that sense, Steve's attitude is very normal and these struggles with concentration do not necessarily qualify for an ADHD diagnosis. In Steve's case, the interesting paradox is that Steve was both able and unable to concentrate. When he was reading his novel, he was able to concentrate, but when he was doing his taxes, concentrating was a lot harder for him and he got distracted easily.

In the first chapter I suggested to view ADHD patients as people who experience such attentional differences to an extreme extent, that is, people who might not at all be able to focus on activities they do not like and on the other hand are able to access a huge source of available concentration when executing an activity they enjoy. Comparing this to Steve, I understand the problem of ADHD to be something like the state of mind that Steve was in when reading his crime novel, but in a more extreme way, meaning that if Steve were to have ADHD, he would very likely be unable to focus on his taxes at all, and he would not stop reading his novel until he had finished it. He would not even notice the passing of time, or the doorbell ringing. He would only be in the world of his book.

What does Steve's example teach us about an (in)ability to concentrate? In my view, the relevant point is the difference between a theoretical idea of concentration as a resource, as being available in a certain amount – versus an actualization of this capacity to concentrate. In 1.6, I stated that regarding concentration as a resource does not help us understand how and when this source is actualized/realized in specific intentional modes of conscious activity. This is so, because the actualization of concentration is inherently connected to what you are concentrating *on*. In the same way that your money becomes only meaningful the moment you choose how to spend it (in whatever way), concentration becomes content-related and specific as soon as it is 'applied to' or 'used for' an activity. Yet, the comparison with money does not seem to hold completely, for if you have 330 euros in your account, you can buy anything that costs up to 330 euros. You cannot concentrate on everything, as is both intuitive and shown in Steve's example, since there is no specific amount of concentration you can apply to any activity. Again, it seems false to say that Steve is unable to concentrate, that he somehow does not have this resource, because in reading his crime novel, his capacity to concentrate is made manifest. It therefore makes more sense to say, in Steve's case, that a general capacity to concentrate can only become actualized if it is directed to an activity that you like – keeping in mind that 'liking' is an oversimplification: I will try to argue further on that an activity has to be experienced as having intrinsic value for the subject, as being meaningful.

After having elaborated on Steve's problem, I will now point out the problems of the psychiatric understanding of concentration. Analysing concentration, we see that when Steve says 'I had trouble concentrating on the taxes', he places the attention on himself as a subject, that is, on the person concentrating, as opposed to the intentional object. The way concentration is used here, we could say that it refers to Steve's thought-processes, which we may call his 'mental acts'. Paradoxically, if he would have been able to *actually* concentrate, he would not have referred to his mental act of trying to concentrate, but he would have pointed to what he had *actually* done: the taxes. In other words, in the case of 'failed concentration', it makes sense to refer to your *mental* act, however, if you have *actualized* something in the material world, for instance the taxes, that is what counts, and that is what you would refer to. Thus, when you are able to concentrate, the effective material outcome counts, as opposed to the mental act. The mental act is ineffective without any kind of physical realization to actualize it, for instance having completed the taxes.

If we try to describe what Steve is doing when he fails to concentrate, we might say that he is 'trying to concentrate'. If we would rephrase this phenomenologically, we might label 'trying to concentrate' as the noesis – which we could understand also as 'willing to concentrate'. This shows us that Steve is somehow motivated to concentrate. Since I defined the noesis as the act of consciousness, we might also think that trying/willing is the noesis

and ‘concentration’ the noema, implying that Steve is intentionally directed towards concentrating. However, ‘concentration’ can neither be a noesis nor a noema. This becomes clear when we rephrase the statement into what Steve is *actually* trying to do, which is ‘trying to concentrate *on*’ his taxes. We see here that the noesis is neither trying to concentrate, nor concentrating, but filling in the tax forms. The noema are the tax forms.<sup>23</sup> Consider another example. When a student says she experiences trouble concentrating writing her thesis, it may appear as though concentration has become the noesis and writing the noema. However, this does not lead to anything: concentrating cannot result in writing, because concentrating is understood here as a kind of mental object. Actually, it should be understood phenomenologically as a *property* of the noetic practical mode of writing, in general: as a mode of being intentionally directed towards something, the text to be written, as opposed to a noesis in itself. Thus, ‘trying to concentrate’ cannot be understood as a noesis, but as a property that can be applied to a noesis, in order to be more effectively directed to the noema, for instance in the sentence ‘trying to concentrate (properties of a noesis) on writing (practical noesis) my thesis (noema). Seeing ‘concentrated-ness’ as a property of a noesis also shows that there can be ‘concentrated writing’ and ‘unconcentrated writing’.

Having said this, this does not mean that concentration can never be a noema, because for instance in this thesis, ‘concentration’ as a theme, be it a resource, a property, a capacity, is an object of phenomenological analysis, and in that sense, I am intentionally directed to concentration in this thesis. The problem is in treating concentration as a ‘mental object’, because there can only be such a thing as a concentrated intentional relation towards something versus an unconcentrated intentional relation.

In this way, phenomenology shows us what goes wrong in the psychiatric use of concentration. Phenomenology shows us that it is problematic to define concentration as a resource, for the resource interpretation cannot account for the fact that people seem to be able to concentrate on activities they like/enjoy, neither for the effects on and relation of both concentration and MPH to the meaningfulness of activities. Also, concentration can never be either a noesis or a noema when being practically intentionally directed towards something. Therefore, if psychiatry had used phenomenological analysis in trying to understand concentration problems, they would have never adopted the system-paradigm on human beings. They would have directly acknowledged the importance of our intentional relationship with what we are doing.

When psychiatry frames concentration as if it is something we should strive for when we experience trouble doing something, we are unable to understand what it is about a specific activity and our intentional relation with that activity that causes our problems concentrating. For instance, we still cannot understand why Steve had trouble with his taxes.

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<sup>23</sup>Again, not the tax forms in the naturalistic sense, but as they appear to consciousness.

The psychiatric paradigm tells us that we should ‘concentrate’ on enhancing concentration, that concentration is the goal. When concentration has become the goal, consequently, the actual activity has disappeared from view. Thus, after having analysed concentration phenomenologically, it has become clear that there are serious limits to the psychiatric understanding and use of the concept concentration. In the next section, I will investigate if the concept of focus is more effective in understanding Steve’s problem.

### 2.3 Focus

Even though the concept focus is not often used within the context of ADHD treatment (the main concepts are concentration and attention), I would like to investigate whether it can shed some light on Steve’s issue. Focus can be used in a general sense, synonymous with concentration.<sup>24</sup> However, in daily life, it is often used as being directed towards something concrete, something specific. Husserl characterizes focus as that with which consciousness is primarily involved in in a given moment (Gander 2010, 37).<sup>25</sup> In visualizing focus, images come up of arrows or spying glasses, or of focussing a lens of a camera. In the example of the lens, focus is used in a merely ‘registering’ or perceptual directedness, but focussing can also be used in a practical, volitional or conative directedness: as a photographer I am focussed on making a beautiful picture, for instance. In any case, both of these conceptions of focus are being directed towards something, focussing *on* something specific, which is indeed how I propose to understand focus for the purpose of this thesis. In this way, it is very similar to intentionality. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines focus as follows: ‘a subject that is being discussed or studied: the subject on which people’s attention is focused; a main purpose or interest’.<sup>26</sup> Here, the concept focus draws the attention to the *direction* of focus, which is phenomenologically speaking the noema, as opposed to concentration, which draws your attention to the ‘mental state’ of the subject as if this is an (naturalistic) object, or so I have argued, instead of a property of a noesis.

When we consider the difference between concentration and focus in Husserlian terms, we could say that the term focus seems to imply an intentional relation towards what you are focussed on, which brings the noema into the foreground, thereby making the noema relevant. Both focus and intentionality refer to having a direction towards something specific. For the purpose of my argument, we may perhaps safely equate ‘being focussed on ...’ with intentionality. What this means in a formal sense is that focus always has an intentional, content-specific relation towards an ‘object’ of focus/noema. Since focus is then understood as being intentionally directed towards something, this opens up the possibility that being able to focus *on* reading a crime novel does not imply also being able to focus *on* filling in tax

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<sup>24</sup> See also the Introduction to this chapter.

<sup>25</sup> See also the quote in 2.4.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/focus>, visited April 28, 2016.

forms. This is the main advantage that the analysis of focus shows in accounting for the phenomena that we found in cases such as Steve's, which are related to ADHD and concentration problems. Of course, in actualized concentration, such as 'Steve is concentrating on the taxes', there is also a reference to a content-specific relation. However, the point is that in our use of the term focus, it is immediately understood as inherently intentionally related toward something concrete, which is not the case in concentration understood as a resource.

After having understood that being able to focus on a crime novel does not mean without further ado to also be able to focus on the taxes, we have discovered through phenomenological analyses that focus is not about trying to achieve an active *state* of concentration, but rather about *how* you are intentionally related towards what you do. Saying this immediately brings into the foreground that the motivating interest taken in the noema is what comes to matter much more than in the approach of 'attention disorders' as we found it in chapter 1. I will elaborate on motivation in 2.5. In the next section, I will analyse how the contrast between focus and concentration relates to attention.

## 2.4 Attention

Attention must be somehow involved in these concepts, for attention is needed both to concentrate and to be focussed on something. In addition, the concept of attention is present in the definition of ADHD – the attention part is presumably what is disorderly. Husserl has produced some interesting analyses about the concept attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*). He analyses how the capacity of attention presents its object. He makes a distinction between primary and secondary (and even tertiary) objects of attention:

*'Das primär Aufgemerkte steht voll im Fokus des Bewusstseins, während das sekundär Bemerkte nicht direkt im Fokus steht, im räumlichen Sinne aber als noch zum fokalen Thema gehörig wahrgenommen wird oder im zeitlichen Sinne retentional noch im Gegenwartsbewusstsein vorhanden ist'* (Gander 2010, 37).<sup>27</sup>

For instance when you pay attention to something, let us say a ballet performance in a theatre, the movements of the two solo dancers and the music are your main 'objects' of attention. Secondary objects of attention, within the timely realm, are the movements performed a moment before, which still linger in your consciousness, making you aware of the movement of dance. This awareness of what happened slightly before also allows you to experience the performance as a totality, as opposed to isolated moments in time, as Maxine

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<sup>27</sup> The primary object of attention is in full focus of our consciousness, while the secondary object of attention is not in direct focus, however, in a spacious sense it is still perceived as belonging to the theme of focus, or, in a timely sense, as retented, it is still present in consciousness.

Sheets analyses in *Phenomenology of Dance* (1966): ‘it is not an externally related series of pasts, presents, futures (...) it is in flight, it is in the process of becoming the dance which it is, yet it is never the dance at any moment’ (Sheets 1966, 22). Within the spatial realm, secondary objects of attention may be the background dancers and the stage setting. Tertiary objects of attention could be the people sitting next to you. These secondary and tertiary objects of attention are *potentially* primary objects of attention, if they somehow distract you from the primary object of attention, in this case the ballet performance. For instance, the person next to you could become your primary object of attention if she sneezes. These primary, secondary and tertiary objects of attention refer also to Husserl’s idea of a horizon of experience, which refers to everything that is in your attention, whether it is primary, secondary, or tertiary, actually or potentially (as is mostly the case with tertiary objects of perception). The things you are unaware of are in the dark. Connected to these primary and secondary objects of attention is Husserl’s conceptual scheme of a foreground-background relation. Primary objects of attention are in the foreground, secondary object of attention are more in the background (Hua, Ideen I, §82-3) (Gander 2010, 133).

In my view, the example above about the ballet performance could be considered as ‘appropriate attention regulation’. With this idea I mean that one’s attention is directed as desired, for instance: you go to the theatre with the intention of watching the ballet performance, and during the performance, your attention is indeed directed towards the performance. A counterexample would be that your body is in the theatre, but your attention is with a fight you had with your neighbour – then you are in the noesis of remembering. In that case, your attention is on another noema than what is present for perception and action in that moment. There is still a primary sphere of attention, which is the memory of the fight. If this is the case, you are focussed on something, however this focus does not have anything to do with the activity you are executing. This means that you are not really executing the activity you intend to, since you seem to be unaware of where you are. We sometimes perceive this in other people, when the look in their eyes suggests they are far away, typically daydreaming, like students staring out the window during class, but also people staring at their mobile phone on a bicycle and not paying attention to traffic.

In the case of poor attention regulation – which is how I proposed to understand ADD in 1.3, the direction of attention is often not directed to the activity you want to perform. In my view, in poor attention regulation, you often swing between two scenarios, either you are in a hyperfocus and there is no secondary sphere of attention, or your focus is all over the place and your first sphere of attention shifts very rapidly from one thing to another, which is often the case in daydreaming. The main problem with this poor attention regulation is not being in control of where you direct your focus. Being hyperfocussed on something could mean for instance playing a videogame and not being able to hear your roommate coming

home and talking to you, or not noticing it has started to rain. In the case of listening to a lecture as a student, being unable to focus could mean only hearing the words without being able to give them meaning, perhaps in combination with hearing the students talk next to you or being focussed on the large nose of the lecturer and forgetting about his words. In this case, you are paying attention to something that has nothing to do with what you are trying to do. We might consider this something like ‘inappropriate attention’, where you want to direct your attention to the activity before you, but you are unable to. In the case of hyperfocus, the horizon might be very small, since there may be only one primary object of focus and no secondary ones. In the case of distraction, the horizon might be completely unrelated to what you are doing in that moment or where you are, for instance when you are daydreaming.

Having analysed the concept of attention, it has helped us understand that being attentive happens within a certain attention sphere, in which some phenomena appear to stand out more than others. In general, the analyses of concentration, focus and attention through a phenomenological approach has helped us see that Steve’s problem is not so much concentration, but *how* he is intentionally related toward what he is doing, possibly along several interconnected dimensions, that is, dimensions of willing, motivation, practicality, effort, etc. Intentionality is related to which phenomena you perceive and which ones are able to capture your primary focus. However there is not yet much clarity on what it was about the intentional relation with the taxes that made Steve dislike doing them. In other words: how did the taxes relate to Steve’s lack of motivation? What was the motivational meaning of the taxes to Steve? This is a topic I will turn to in the next section.

## **2.5 The meaning of an activity: motivation, affection, volition**

In the case of Steve, his crime novel was meaningful to him in a more than one sense: on a perceptive level he made sense of the book by perceiving it as a book – this was the non-emotional ‘meaning-giving’. There was however also the affective level of meaning: the book stirred feelings of excitement in Steve, and it was those feelings that motivated him to read it. As I mentioned in 2.1, I am interested here in the practical intentional relations founded upon the basic level of perception by dimensions of feeling, striving and willing. These practical intentional relations are active, and affection and volition/motivation are important dimensions of these relations. Husserl made a distinction between attention as actively directed from the subject towards an apparent object, which I would understand as a matter of volition, and attention that is excited through a passive ‘being affected’ by an apparent object. In the case of the book, the second thing is going on. In my view, it makes sense to say that the book was attracting Steve. There was something in the book that made him want to engage in reading it –one could say, the book was seducing him. We also know this mechanism from people who are extremely talented, for instance: Mozart spending a lot of time at the piano from age three or four. In Mozart’s case, the piano had a huge pull on him.

In my view, being affected by something could also be understood as being pulled towards something. If we would use a metaphor to visualize this, it would be like the book or the piano would be shining brightly in their appearance to consciousness. In being pulled towards something, an intentional and meaningful relation to a world is revealed. When Mozart is pulled by the piano, there is a practical intentional relation with the piano. This is very different from a push, for instance having the drive to make money. Such a drive in itself is not intentionally related to something yet, however it might become a pull if you come across a job opportunity. The problem with Steve is that he *tries* to push himself to do the taxes, yet the taxes do not pull him, which is why the pushing does not become actualized in a productive intentional relation with the taxes: they become an object of frustration instead.

Husserl has also made some interesting remarks about passive affection: ‚Die Attention-Lenkung geht hier nicht mehr vom Ich als über das Vermögen der Attention verfügende Instanz aus, sondern vom affektiven Reiz, der einen Zug auf das Ego ausübt‘.<sup>28</sup> According to Husserl, the object exerts a certain power over the consciousness of an individual, so that the object becomes attractive in the sense that it comes into the foreground as contrasted with a background. The reason a particular object is perceived as attractive is coming from the being affected, an object touches us on an emotional level (Merz, Staiti en Steffen 2010, 37-8). According to Husserl, what draws our attention is what moves us.

Another aspect of Husserl’s investigation into attention is related to this being affected. According to Husserl, we need to make a distinction between attention as *Meinen* and as *Interesse*. The difference between these two modes lies in their ‘*Erfüllungscharakteren*’: ‘Die Meinung ist ein objektivierender Akt, der “keine Gefühlsbasis und keine darauf sich gründende Intensität hat”. Seine Erfüllung ist eine Bestätigung für das erlebende Subjekt. Das Interesse hingegen ist ein Gemütsakt, d.h. seine Erfüllung bedeutet eine Befriedigung’.<sup>29</sup> In my understanding, Husserl means with *Meinen* ‘to be of the opinion, to think or mean’, which he contrasts with *Interesse* as a more emotional relation, referring to ‘interest, attraction or engagement’, see also (Gander 2010, 158). As Husserl says, the difference between these two kinds of attention is in their level of satisfaction. For instance, when I have directed my attention to a person far away, and I seem to recognize that person as a relative, when that person comes closer and this assumption becomes affirmed, this *Meinen* is erfüllt: I know I was right. However, if the relative of someone I have longed to see,

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Here, the attention-pull no longer departs from the I as a controller of the attention, but from an affected power of attraction, that exerts a pull on the *ego*.’

<sup>29</sup> ‘Level of fulfilment; “This opinion is an objectifying act, that “does not have an emotion as a starting point”. His fulfilment [of the opinion] is a confirmation for the experiencing subject. Being interested however, is an emotional act, which means that his fulfilment [of the interest] results in a satisfaction’.

seeing that it really is them, would also evoke an emotional kind of satisfaction, as opposed to simply verifying my expectations.

Thus, something pulls you; touches you on an emotional level. Then, when you ‘answer’ that pull by engaging with the intentional object, an experience of satisfaction occurs in the end. This can occur in many different ways. Reading a crime novel can be satisfying if one is eager to find out who was the murderer. However when one is reading the novel and one should actually do one’s taxes (because the deadline is near), the novel is used as a means of avoidance. The reading is not done entirely for its own sake. Doing the taxes might be experienced as boring in itself, but having completed them can still be satisfying in the sense that one can be proud of one’s accomplishments, maybe even more so if it was a challenge to devote one’s attention to something boring. Alternatively, it is possible to be motivated by the perspective of saving money, in the case of taxes, or having a desire to cross something off your to-do list. Thus, the intentional object of our focus, our noema, can have a large variety of affective meanings and motivational aspects.

At this point, the concepts external - and internal rewards become relevant. When an activity is experienced as having intrinsic value, there is an internal reward in executing the activity. When an activity is experienced as being valuable for the sake of something else, for instance if Steve wants to complete the taxes in order to save money, there may be no internal rewards in filling in the tax forms themselves, which might make it harder for Steve to focus on them. In the case of taxes, it may sound strange to even consider the possibility of filling in the tax forms as being intrinsically valuable, that is, as somehow enjoyable, however, I do believe this is possible and I will elaborate on this in the third chapter.

How do these descriptions relate to volition/motivation? I understand this mode to be a kind of desire to engage in the world coming from individuals themselves, we could see it also as a ‘push’, for instance the desire to graduate, or the desire to be a good partner, or the desire to be a good dancer. When describing such general, long-term desires, there are also pulls involved, for instance, when I have the desire to be a good dancer, I am pulled towards dancing classes, teachers, music, etc. So I am pulled towards specific objects or activities, and the volitional push is more general. In Steve’s case, the volitional and the affective could be intertwined –which is a phenomenon I also explained with the push/pull metaphor. Steve could have the inner motivation to come to know a lot about crime novels, or perhaps even a desire to become a crime writer himself one day – these are pushes. This desire could be part of why Steve is affected by the crime novel – why he is pulled.

In any case, as Husserl pointed out, something that moves us does so, because it has a certain emotional meaning for us. This meaning does not originate out of nowhere. In the case of the book, it moves Steve because he has read crime novels before and he has experienced enjoyment in reading them. If you have studied Aristotle for years, reading his

Nicomachean Ethics would have deeper layers of meaning to you than to someone who has never done any philosophy, reading the NE for the first time. For this reason, the NE probably has a much larger pull on you than on someone who has never heard of Aristotle.

Coming back to Husserl's distinction between attention coming from the apparent object and attention coming from the subject, in the case of taxes, there is still another thing going on. It is clear that there is no pull or affection from the taxes, it is more as if Steve is pushed away from them. At the same time however, he is pushing himself towards the taxes, since they are an activity that he has to perform as an obligation of a citizen. When it comes to the taxes, there is thus a conflict in Steve's experience: he is pulled away and the same time trying/willing to push himself towards them. What he is trying to do, it seems to me, is to control his focus by making the conscious decision to place his attention with the taxes, which means he is trying to actively direct his focus from himself as subject to an apparent object. However, it is not working properly.

In general, focus is not something that can be enforced merely by 'willing' to focus. Focus requires more than 'willing', however, there may be individual differences to what extent trying/willing to focus is effective. In my view, the problem in Steve's case is that there is too little motivation, or internal rewards, to complete the task. Even though Steve is aware of some advantages, and linked with that, some form of satisfaction when he has completed the taxes, the prospect of having to do them is so awful that he has great difficulty motivating himself to do them. There is something about the intentional relation Steve has with the taxes, that makes them terrible for him to do. The rewards of being done with the taxes do not outweigh the negative feelings and the unpleasant experience of doing the taxes in Steve's experience.

It seems that in the case of the crime novel, there is both affection and volition, and in the case of the taxes, there is volition but no affection. To put it differently, there is the will to push yourself, but there is no pull coming from the outside, from the thing itself. As humans, we are capable of doing activities we do not like. However, that Steve is not positively affected by the taxes, is an important factor that lead to the taxes taking up so much of his time. So to have volitional control over your focus, there needs to be more than volition, there needs to be some form of inner motivation for the task you want to complete. This is part of the reason I mentioned in 2.2 that the framework of 'liking' or 'disliking' is an oversimplification. What we see here is that Steve's problem needs to be understood in terms of a lack of internal rewards when doing the taxes, which is a shift in the identification of the problem: it is not about a lack of concentration. From this it follows that there needs to be a positive internal reward when filling in the taxes, about which, as mentioned above, I will speak in chapter three.

So far, I have shown in this chapter that enhancing our general mental capacity of concentration does not automatically improve our intentional relation towards what we do, as far as attention/*Aufmerksamkeit* is concerned: enhancing a capacity/resource forgoes important elements of motivation and practical intentionality in the Husserlian sense. General enhancement by way of medication does not enhance our affective motivation for completing a task, as I have shown in the analysis above.<sup>30</sup> In addition, we discovered that the key to understanding these differences is the practical-noetic relationship towards the noema that the person doing the focussing has: it is about the affection. Husserl even says that the will ‘lives on in the act’, and this makes sense: you can perceive the difference between somebody enjoying what he is doing and another person being forced to do it.

Your intentional relation to an activity on an affective level can be deepened through continuous practice and through your history with the activity. For instance, in the case of dancing, you can practice it for instance because you are good at it, you are passionate about it, you have positive memories of practicing and performing, and the more you dance, the more enjoyable it becomes, because you keep getting better and adding meaning to the practice. In this way, your intentional relation with the noema deepens, the more you engage in this activity. This is an idea that we also find in Aristotle’s ethics in another form, about which I will speak in the third chapter. After having made some general analyses about motivation, I will now discuss a phenomenon which will shed more light on what Steve experienced when reading his crime novel in 2.6: *flow*.

## **2.6 Effortless attention: focus flow**

In this section, I will explain what it means to experience an activity as having intrinsic value, using the concept focus flow.<sup>31</sup> If we would describe Steve’s experience in terms of effort, we have seen that focusing on the taxes takes a lot of effort, while focusing on the crime novel seems effortless. In this section, I analyse what it means to do an activity effortlessly, which I consider to be an important part of being in the optimal state of doing something. Executing an activity effortlessly is then contrasted with executing an activity with effort. In order to argue for this, I would like to present some analyses, which, although they are regarded as belonging to the domain of psychology, differ from the psychological perspective on ADHD that we saw in the first chapter, in that they are actually drawn from phenomenology. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, an American-Hungarian professor of psychology, has done important research on what effortless attention means:

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<sup>30</sup> Unless the context implies otherwise, I use the context of ‘affective’ or ‘affection’ as ‘positive affection’.

<sup>31</sup> I have taken the concept ‘focus flow’ from Andy Puddicombe, a former Buddhist monk who created the online platform ‘headspeace.com’. Users can follow thirty mediation audio lessons on establishing a steady, curious, moving focus, which he describes as focus flow.

*'There is a phenomenological difference between subjective experience when full attention is effortful and when it is effortless, and we hypothesize that it is specifically the experience of complete but also effortless attention that is associated with being in the enjoyable state of flow' (M. a. Csikszentmihalyi 2010, 182).*

Csikszentmihalyi is famous for introducing the concept of flow to psychology. He has studied what it means to have an *'optimal experience'*. He found that 'when people enjoy most what they are doing', this can be anything from reading a book to having a conversation to playing music, 'they report a state of effortless concentration so deep that they lose their sense of time, of themselves, of their problems. We have called this the 'flow experience' because so many of the persons describing it used the analogy of being effortlessly carried by a current – of being in a flow' (M. a. Csikszentmihalyi 2010, 181). We could also say about these experiences that there are apparently many internal rewards.

In his book *Flow, Psychologie van de Optimale Ervaring* (1999)<sup>32</sup>, Csikszentmihalyi describes this state of flow as a state of order in consciousness (*Csikszentmihalyi 1999, 21*). Interestingly, ADHD patients often report experiences of inner chaos, which seems to be the opposite of such order in consciousness, thus being an opposite of the optimal experience of flow. Csikszentmihalyi makes a point similar to mine in 2.4 about not being able to experience something if your focus is completely elsewhere: 'attention is needed to have experience in the first place' (*M. a. Csikszentmihalyi 2010, 181*). This means that a state of inattentive chaos makes it impossible to experience doing the taxes; if you are not able to pay attention to them at all, you do not experience doing them. This however does not mean that you have no experience, you experience something else which is unrelated to the taxes, for instance what happened in chapter two of the crime novel and who might be the killer. As I have shown in 2.5, being able to focus on doing something requires at least volition/motivation, preferably also affection. In my view, a will, a motivation to do something is part of what creates an experience of order in consciousness.

As characteristics of the flow experience, Csikszentmihalyi researched a couple of dimensions of experience, which were high in the optimal flow state: feeling involved versus feeling detached, feeling clear and in control of the situation versus feeling confused, not feeling self-conscious or embarrassed. In addition, research participants indicated experiencing finding the activity interesting, not wishing to do something else and enjoying what they were doing (*M. a. Csikszentmihalyi 2010, 183*). The part of not feeling self-conscious is interesting. Consider the activity of dancing. Sheets speaks about the harmony of the dancer and the dance: 'it is clear that on the pre-reflective level, the dancer and the dance are one' (*Sheets 1966, 36-7*). In addition, she mentions that when this harmony, this unity

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<sup>32</sup> Flow. The Psychology of Optimal Experience

between dancer and dance is not there, it is immediately seen: 'as soon as she becomes self-conscious, the audience is aware of a separation of the dancer from the dance' (*Sheets 1966, 37*). This coincides with what Csikszentmihalyi said about flow, there is an experience of a loss of self, you are not aware of yourself. As soon as you become considered with yourself, you are no longer one with the activity. This also goes for other activities, for instance reading. If you are fully into the story of the book, you do not think about yourself, you are not aware of your body, you are completely 'in' the book, so the moment you become concerned with yourself, there is less attention left for the book. We could also see this within an intentionality scheme, when I am focussed on (noesis) the story in the book (noema), there is no 'room' in the intentionality scheme to be also focussed on myself. This is different than for instance focussing on (noesis) myself reading (noema), which could be the case if I am pretending to read when I do not want to be disturbed by a colleague I do not like.

Csikszentmihalyi also researched the conditions for a flow experience, which I already mentioned in 1.3: 'clear goals, immediate feedback and a balance between opportunities for action and the individual's ability to act'. The first condition, clear goals, does not mean the overall goal of the activity 'but rather that the activity presents a clear goal for the next step in the action sequence, and then the next, on and on, until the final goal is reached' (*M. a. Csikszentmihalyi 2010, 187*). However presenting these conditions does not mean that always when these conditions apply, a state of flow will occur. These conditions, clear goals, immediate feedback, and a balance of the task with your abilities, might for instance also apply to forced military training. The way I understand Csikszentmihalyi is as saying that if an experience of flow occurs, it means that these conditions are met, not the other way around. In addition, Csikszentmihalyi seems to consider flow as a subjective experience. This becomes apparent when he discusses an example of a flow experience: a surgeon operating. According to Csikszentmihalyi, there can even be flow if the surgeon pauses during operating to reflect on his next step. As long as the surgeon is clear on what his next step is, and this can also be pausing to think, and as long as he keeps engaged in operating, he is in a flow. To an outsider however, this may not look like a state of flow. The same goes for reading Heidegger: you might pause to think more often than not about what you have just read, and not reading on and on in the case of reading a crime novel. However, if you reflect on what you have read, you are still concerned with reading Heidegger, which means you could potentially be in a flow.

The consequence of this analysis is that there is not much clarity as to what extent flow is useful as an objective concept and if an outsider can see whether someone is in a state of flow or not.<sup>33</sup> However, the concept is useful in clarifying that there is something like an

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<sup>33</sup> It might be possible in some cases to distinguish whether someone experiences flow, for instance when watching arts such as dancing, or sports. I believe Friedrich Schiller was on to something when he

optimal experience in which attention is effortless and that this has to do with enjoying what you are doing. In my view, the challenge is to strive for focus flow or at least enjoyment in what you are doing. The way to achieve this is by enhancing the affective intentional relationship towards what you are doing.<sup>34</sup> I will elaborate on this in 3.3.

In this chapter, I have argued that psychiatry can learn from a phenomenological perspective in order to understand ADHD. The practical intentional object of focus, taken as the actualization of your capacity for concentrating in a particular noetic relation with a noema, can be analysed by way of the structure of intentionality that Husserl disclosed. This means that in actualized form, concentration always has a touching-point with reality, while it is only a generalized resource *in psychiatric theory*. The current psychiatric understanding of ADHD is therefore only a theoretical understanding on the basis of scientific presumptions of the workings of the human organism. It is desirable that this understanding is complemented by a practical understanding from the perspective of the first-person-consciousness and its basic structure of intentionality. In that sense, it is an incomplete understanding, due to the fact that psychiatrists have not sufficiently studied *the phenomenon* of ADHD, or so I have argued. The current treatment of psychiatry for ADHD has only directed its analysis to the mental condition of the ADHD patient. They have not taken into account the affective and volitional aspects of human functioning.

In the final chapter, I propose an alternative to the use of MPH based on Aristotle's remark in his Nicomachean Ethics, that one has only achieved excellence in an activity when one enjoys executing it: 'to take pleasure in virtuous action is the mark of true virtue, with the self-mastery of the one who finds virtue difficult only a second best' (Foot 1978, 171).<sup>35</sup> I aim to show that striving for a healthy relationship in our activities, in which there is room for enjoyment, can serve as an alternative to medication, because it has the possibility of creating flourishing human beings, as opposed to aiming at human beings as systems functioning in relation to externally given purposes, such as war and education situations.

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described that when we perceive a certain lightness and playfulness – which is at least in the respect of effortlessness similar to flow - in for instance a rope dancer, we have an aesthetic experience. Thus, according to Schiller, the fact that we have an aesthetic experience when watching the artist, means the artist has achieved lightness and harmony – a kind of flow, I would say – in his activity (Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, 1795, 15th letter).

<sup>34</sup> With this 'enhancement', I do not refer to a kind of forced 'making yourself like something', but developing a different relation to an activity.

<sup>35</sup> This quote is considered with acting virtuously, however, in my view, it also applies to activities in general.

### **3. Developing a better intentional relation with your activities**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss possible counterarguments to my argument and, by way of conclusion, to present a general idea of what I mean when speaking about developing a better intentional relation to what you do, that is: an improved grasp and realization of the ‘noema’ as it comes to practical intentionality, as an alternative to MPH.

At the end of the previous chapter, I introduced the concept ‘flow’ and I presented it as the optimal state of doing something. When we would indeed consider flow as an optimal state, it would make sense to strive for being in a flow, which, in a way, is similar to striving for ‘enjoyment’, since flow is enjoyable. There are still a couple of issues to clarify with this analysis however. First of all, Csikszentmihalyi introduces flow as a state, and I have neither clarified nor questioned this way of referring to flow as a state, I have simply iterated it, which seems to obscure the intentional relation again. In 3.1, I will clarify if and to what extent flow should be considered a state and how flow is related to intentionality. This analysis will further clarify why flow cannot be achieved through MPH.

In 3.2, I turn to the notions of habit and disposition. Since some people are much better at concentrating, getting things done, sports, etc., than others, this could be interpreted as implicating that some people have different inner ‘systems’ than others, which would again bring us back to prescribing MPH as a solution. This is why I will explain the difference between a system approach and acknowledging the acquisition of habits and dispositions in an intentional way. Finally, in 3.3, I will turn to the issue of enjoyment/liking what you do. I have claimed that this is what you should strive for. This also needs clarification, because one might think that I argue to strive for a kind of pleasure in a modern hedonistic sense, while actually, I have an Aristotelian interpretation of enjoyment, which is related to Aristotle’s theory of virtues and what a good life is. With Aristotle, enjoyment is not an internal (brain-) state of the ‘desire-system’ that an organism is, but an experience that accompanies the well-functioning of the organism with respect to its activities ‘in the world’.

#### **3.1 Why using MPH does not result in flourishing/flowing human beings**

In this section, I will elaborate on the notion of flow, as introduced in 2.6, and I will explain why the use of MPH does contribute neither to people’s flourishing nor to their flow experiences. In order to do so, it is important to bring some nuances into the description of flow as presented in 2.6. I mentioned that I am interested in optimal human functioning in the sense of flourishing, and that I consider experiencing flow as an example of flourishing. However, one could easily think that what is meant with flow, is also that it is a kind of ‘state’ or ‘mood’, in the same way as for instance depression or euphoria of a subject/individual might be states or moods, or in the same way that concentration might be a state. And if we would indeed consider flow a state, it might again make sense to try to ‘simulate’ or ‘achieve’

such as state by taking MPH, similar to the way in which taking LSD leads to a state in which perceptions are much more outspoken and experiences of reality seem to deepen.

However, if we would consider flow a state, we would make the same mistake as with concentration, which is that we view humans too much as a system and we deny the importance of the character of the intentional relation with what we are doing. It is exactly this intentional relation that is crucial in understanding flow. Therefore, flow should not be understood as a state, but as a *relation*. As Csikszentmihalyi says, a characteristic of flow is being fully engaged in the activity, which points to an intentional relation, being directed *to*, being engaged *with* ... What this means is that for instance, writing a poem in a kind of blind trance which might feel great, does not at all mean that you were in a state of flow. Compare this to being drunk and suddenly believe that you have a great idea for a book.

Enthusiastically, you write down your ideas. You think you have a brilliant mind. The next morning, you reevaluate your idea and you discover it was pretty bad. What was lacking in this state of 'being drunk' was the active engagement with what you were doing. Such an active engagement, which is also a relation to what you are doing, requires a critical mind, it requires you to not be blind to the quality of your work. It also requires you to be able to judge your work adequately, which is ensured by the active engagement and a critical mind. It might of course be that it happens on one occasion, you discover that your ideas that were produced in a state of being drunk, were brilliant. This however does not mean that your state of being drunk led to a state of flow. Sometimes it happens that, even without a critical mind, great ideas come up. Great results do not necessarily mean that you were in a state of flow, because for flow this active engagement is crucial. Thus, in my view, although Csikszentmihalyi seems to present flow as *subjective*, there needs to be an objective awareness to the quality of your work. So I disagree with Csikszentmihalyi in this respect.

I interpret Csikszentmihalyi as capturing this relational, thereby intentional, aspect by presenting 'immediate feedback' as one of the three conditions for flow. If you have written one sentence for a poem, you yourself should be able to review and reflect on what you have written adequately, and then take the next step. This is why flow is different from a kind of blind trance. The problem is that in a kind of blind 'trance' in which you write down everything you think, you skip the essential feedback step. You do not reflect adequately on what you have written. There can only be such a thing as 'feedback' when you have a relation with what you are doing in the sense that you are fully engaged, as opposed to simply putting it out there without reflection. Note that one can also write a brilliant poem as a result of an incredibly hard and painful process. There can be a gap between the experience and the quality of the outcome: bad experience, good outcome; good experience, bad outcome, but these are not examples of flow. As mentioned in 2.6, characteristic of flow is the experience of effortlessness, of being one with the activity and not feeling self-conscious. Thus there would

be no self-conscious thought of 'I don't like doing this at all'. When discussing flow, I refer to the combination of a good experience and a good outcome.

As referred to above, there is a possibility of a scenario in which you write a poem that does not in any way meet the quality standards for a good poem and is therefore considered 'bad' by others. However, if you, as a poet, write a poem while being actively engaged in the writing, and the poem does not turn out to be brilliant, but you have made important progress in your personal development as a poet, for instance by learning new things about the rhythm in poetry, it might be fitting to speak of having been in a flow while writing. Then, the result of this flow was not a brilliant poem, but development as a poet – at the exact level you were at. In my view, it is not the case that flow can only occur when you have achieved excellence in some particular field, such as poetry, it can also occur before that, if you develop yourself at your own level.<sup>36</sup>

It is therefore not the outcome that counts as a standard of whether or not an individual experienced flow – it is about the character of the intentional relation with which you 'take the small steps' in the activity. If you are engaged with every single step – say, writing down every letter – and there is a progress on your own level, and you reflect on the steps you have taken, this I would consider possibly being in a flow. In general, there might be situations in which it is difficult to assess whether or not an individual is in a flow. There might be a false consciousness involved, in which someone is unable to see that there was no progress in their activities. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to address this problem in detail. For my argument, it suffices to say that what is needed is an intentional relation and an active engagement with every single step of the activity. The point is that there can only be flow in an intentional relation with what you are doing, therefore it should not be considered a state. Since medication can never enhance such an intentional relation, it cannot support someone in experiencing flow in their activities. Thus, even though Csikszentmihalyi does not speak in phenomenological terms and does not mention intentionality, and he seems to be speaking mainly about a subjective experience, in my view, his construct of flow is in line with having an intentional relationship with a meaningful world, since it can only be realized in a specific, actual activity.

Let us consider another possible example that can help to expand on my argument: meditation. One could also think that in order to enhance concentration, practicing meditation is a good solution – this idea is actually also proven by science (see among others Semple, 2010). I mentioned in the first chapter that some people might suggest enhancing

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<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that flow is not something that can be a direct aim, something that can be actively sought for, it is, as the word says, not something that can be forced. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss this issue in depth. I would suggest however that the 'way' to flow has to do with identifying your resistances to certain activities and trying to overcome these resistances, which is similar to trying to enhance the affective intentional relation towards what you are doing.

concentration through ‘meditation training’. This idea is distinct from the psychiatric system approach in that it does not consider concentration as a systematic deficit that needs to be supplemented. However, it does suggest that you can somehow enhance yourself independently of what you are doing. One might think that trying to enhance concentration through meditation works the same way: if you meditate a lot, you might be able to stay attentive in whatever I do for a certain period of time. This would however be a misunderstanding of meditation.

With meditation, the point is not that you train to be in a particular, intention-less state, but to be present in the moment *in* what you are doing. You train to notice quicker when your attention has shifted away from what an activity and you invite yourself to gently come back with your attention to what you are doing. Although meditation, reconstructed this way, might seem similar to concentration, since it also has to do with attention, meditation is about more than ‘mere’ attentiveness. The idea of practicing meditation is to cultivate a certain openness and curiosity towards your activities, a certain wonder. If you are able to wonder about something as, one might say, ordinary, as the breath – which is often the object of meditation, you will probably also be able to wonder about other activities such as taxes. Practicing meditation therefore has as an aim to cultivate a habit or disposition of something like ‘curious attentiveness’.

Seeing that meditation has to do with curiosity and wonder, it becomes apparent that it is always also directed *at* something, there has to be noema in this intentional relation. When you meditate, the ‘noema’ usually is the breath, for instance, you could count the breath. The ‘noesis’ would then be the counting. I would propose to understand ‘meditation’, similar to concentration, as a property of the noetic mode. The phenomenological structure would then be: I am meditating on (property of a noetic mode) counting (noesis) the breath (noema). We see in this reconstruction that in meditation, a practical intentionality structure is present, similar to the reconstruction of concentration I presented in 2.2.

Thus, in this section, I have argued flow should be considered a relation, since an intentionality structure is present. The character of this intentional relation determines if a state of flow occurs, not the outcome. I have also shown that meditation should not be considered a state, but a property of a noetic mode, thereby fitting into a practical intentionality structure. In the next section, I will discuss how the notions of habits and dispositions relate to my argument that flow is an intentional relation. A possible argument for the system approach is that some people do seem to be better at concentration, or organizing, etc., which amounts to the claim that they have a general habit or disposition to engage in all activities. The question is how these notions of habits and dispositions relate to my argument.

### 3.2 On Habits

In this section, I would like to discuss another important possible counterargument to my thesis. It is hard to deny that some people do seem to be better at getting things done, for instance people who are very organised and always fill in their tax forms in time, this might . Moreover, some people are better at particular activities than others, sports and arts being obvious examples. As Dermot Moran says in ‘Edmund Husserl’s Phenomenology of Habituality and Habitus (2011) ‘Some people have a more or less “innate”, “natural”, or “given” sense of balance, an ability to feel their way through water when swimming, a joy in hearing sounds...’ (Moran 2011, 56). As Moran says, some people seem to possess gifts or talents related to some activities, which come to them ‘naturally’. Saying this makes room for the idea that such people might be ‘systematically or naturally’ ‘programmed’ so as to always do things a certain way, for instance with concentration, which then can be seen as a sort of generalized ‘talent’, or a capacity, of the system.<sup>37</sup>

As Moran points out, ‘Husserl introduces the term *habitus* as an enduring “state” (Moran 2011, 61). At this point, the term ‘state’ becomes problematic, because I have argued in my thesis against this notion as typical for concentration, since it seems to obscure the intentional relation, or at least the relation with the content/noema of the intentional relation. Yet I do not want to deny Husserl’s point about habits. So far, my implicit understanding of a state has been as non-intentional, system-bound – either episodic, as in being tired, or enduring, as in a person who can concentrate very well all the time. The episodic state of ‘being tired’ could be countered by using caffeine as a substance that counters or mitigates this state. I do not consider this specific understanding of a state adequate when speaking about habits and in fact Moran’s interpretation of Husserl clearly shows how habits are *not* non-intentional states of a system:

*‘Experiences are awakened in us, something (a new noise or smell) is experienced against the background of the unnoticed familiar, and has the effect of being a “stimulus” or “allure” (Reiz) on the conscious ego that apprehends it. In apprehending the stimulus, the ego turns towards it and its “interest” is awakened. (...) Husserl offers a deep and careful account of how primary “awakening” experiences become registered in a way that they eventually are incorporated (like a snowball gathering snow as it is rolled across the snow-covered lawn) and become a lasting possession. There is a genuine sense of Habitus here as evolving downwards from alert experience into somnolent lasting tradition.’ (Moran 2011, 65)*

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<sup>37</sup> For reasons of simplicity, I do not make a distinction between ‘habits’ and ‘gifts’ in my thesis, even though I recognize that habits are ‘acquired’ and ‘gifts’, as the word says, more ‘given’. I do, however, consider gifts also as something that needs to be developed, in the same way as a habit does. For instance, Mozart worked all his life to develop and enhance his natural given talent to play the piano, and in this developing, playing the piano also became a habit.

As Moran says, according to Husserl, when we perceive something new, we always already perceive it against our background of experiences, against what we already know. When we perceive something as pulling or attractive, we turn towards it in a more active and practical way. When we turn towards something that interests us over and over, eventually, it becomes a habit, and in that sense, ‘incorporated’. This analysis relates to my descriptions of Mozart in 2.5 experiencing a pull from the piano as a child, which eventually evolved into the ‘habit’ of playing the piano a couple of hours each day, and composing, and later on it broadened when performing became part of the praxis. I also mentioned dancing in 2.5: the more you dance, the more deepen your affective intentional relation with dancing as the noema. In general, the more you do something you like, the more enjoyable it becomes. Apart from the affective intentional relation, there is a practical aspect too. For instance, you can deepen your affective relationship with dancing also by going to the ballet every month, but there is no practical element of dancing involved there. The ‘incorporation’ that I mentioned above in the case of a dancer, only happens when he or she actually dances, and possibly performs.

Since Moran speaks about the awakening of interest, his interpretation seems to exclude the possibility of a habit as doing the dishes every day while disliking it a lot. Reconstructing a habit this way, it seems to be directly connected to an activity that we are interested in from the outset. In that sense, habit seems to be linked with affection, one can only develop a habit if one is affected by the activity, that is, if it is tied to emotions. However, it seems to me that it is also very much possible that one develops the habit of doing the dishes every day while disliking it, so I do not agree with Moran’s interpretation here, even though it is obvious that one is more inclined to develop habits in activities in which one is somehow interested.

The interesting question is how a habit relates to the system approach. Developing a habit seems to be intertwined with developing as a person. If you develop the habit of becoming a professional dancer, it changes who you are to a certain extent. It seems inappropriate to speak about the development of a system in a similar way. Even though a system can change, in the sense that it can be upgraded and reprogrammed, this development is different with regard to the agent aspect: an individual can develop herself through developing habits, while a system can only *be* developed, it cannot act of its own accord.<sup>38</sup> For this reason, I consider it accurate to speak of a system change and a personal development. Consequently, development as a person, for instance through developing a habit, requires an active engagement and being involved in your relationship to an (experienced) outside world. Changing a human being as a system does not require such active engagement. One of the main advantages therefore of moving away from the system approach is that it opens up the possibility for training and learning and an active

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<sup>38</sup> This is also expressed in using the passive verb form.

engagement with the ‘problem’ of attention deficit. Saying this does not mean that a system approach never works, for instance, it is easy to imagine that a woman with severe headaches is helped by pain medication, which in turn enables her to be more engaged in her activities, as opposed to being distracted or even paralyzed by the pain. My point in this thesis however has been that concentration is different, as Steve’s example has showed, because enhancing concentration does not result in an enhanced affective relation towards your activities. The inconsistency in the effect of MPH shows that the system approach falls short in this respect, whereas it is much clearer and without controversy that the human ‘system’ functions better when an individual’s physical pain is relieved. Another difference with a system is that a habit can only be realized when it is actualized: Mozart only realized the habit of playing the piano when he actually did, so when he was actually intentionally engaged with playing the piano, not at other moments. It would therefore not make sense to say Mozart was ‘programmed’ to play the piano, since that would suggest he was doing it all the time.

This would mean there might be also the possibility for humans to develop themselves with respect to their concentration. What is furthermore relevant with regards to habit, is that ‘Habit is responsible for the organization of experience into horizons of familiarity and unfamiliarity...’ (Moran 2011, 68). In the same way blindness is probably unfamiliar to seeing people, flow can be unfamiliar to those who have never lived through it. In general, Moran mentions that Husserl understands habit as the way one lives through an overall ‘*Einstellung*’ (attitude/collective mindset). I understand this to refer to a general attitude of perceiving the world, i.e. a scientist sees the world from a scientific perspective, whereas the attitude of the photographer might be a general focus on how the light is in every situation (Moran 2011, 69).

With regard to my argument, one consequence of this analysis of habit could be that since Steve might have never in his life experienced anything similar to flow, or a kind of enjoyment, when filling in his tax forms, he might not even consider the possibility of trying to enhance his affective intentional relation with the taxes. Avoiding them as much as possible might be the only reasonable solution to him. Experiencing flow when doing the taxes is a *Fremdwelt* for Steve, as Husserl would say, versus problems with focus when filling in tax forms are in his *Heimwelt* (Moran 2011, 67-8). However, this does mean that experiencing more enjoyment when doing the taxes is impossible through a kind of ‘training’ or ‘personal development’. I will discuss this further in 3.3.

Csikszentmihalyi mentions as a condition for flow that it cannot occur in situations that are too difficult or too easy. For instance, when you have the habit to do the dishes every day, this is some part of your *Heimwelt*, but since it is not a complex activity but routine, you might not experience flow. In the same way, it is difficult to achieve flow in doing the taxes when you have to do a lot of calculations and have dyscalculia. I agree with Csikszentmihalyi

that it is easier to achieve flow when you execute an activity that has the right level of complexity, because these activities are rewarding in that they realize the best of your capacities in a particular respect. However, I do consider it a possibility enjoying or even experiencing flow when doing an ordinary activity such as doing the dishes. It is not inconceivable that someone enjoys every day seeing the dirty pile of plates and cups getting smaller and smaller, or that someone enjoys doing a very difficult puzzle even though progress is slow.

It is important to mention that people with a strong volition might be able to execute activities they do not like in a very efficient and effective manner, thus doing them without affection. This could even be the case with people who have the ‘habit’ of always filling in their tax forms in time. Consider the example of Rose, a woman who detests filling in the tax forms and answering her e-mails and paying her bills, who is nevertheless able to always do this on time. She differs from Steve in the sense that she does not have a problem with focus, and she does not have a problem with motivating herself to do certain things. However, in my view, she does have an unhealthy intentional relation with what she is doing, because there is no affection. She might even feel alienated or depressed, because she is not engaged in what she is doing. In general, not being able to focus is only one of the symptoms that can point to an unhealthy, non-flourishing relation to what you are doing. This also means that I consider flourishing and flow to be only possible when the emotional engagement is an integral dimension of the phenomenon.

So what I have argued in this section is that the notion of a habit could be understood as being pulled towards something that interests you again and again, and engaging practically in this interest. A habit in this sense has no place in a system approach, because active engagement of the agent is required. In 3.3, I will outline my ideas about how this striving for a better intentional relation with your activities should be addressed, discussing what it means to ‘like what you do’ in an Aristotelian sense and if there is hope that Steve will ever dislike filling in his tax forms any less.

### **3.3 Why we need to strive for flourishing/flow**

In this final section, I will explain why I consider it to be a good thing to strive for flourishing, by which I mean striving for engagement in your activities, experiencing what you do as rewarding and sometimes experiencing flow. For a large part, I agree with Aristotle’s view on a good life, as John Drummond has expressed it in the chapter ‘Aristotelianism and phenomenology: ‘Aristotle’s ethics is centered around the notion of the good realized in action. The ultimate good for Aristotle is human happiness, i.e. a flourishing human life, as realized in the exercise of the virtues’ (Aristotelianism and Phenomenology, 2002, p. 16). Bringing virtue theory into my argument, the question arises to what extent phenomenology is

compatible with virtue ethics. I will first briefly discuss the relation between Husserl and Aristotle, after which I will return to striving for flourishing and flow.

There seems to be an opposition in Husserl and Aristotle, since Aristotle is a naturalist, a philosopher about which Husserl would say he is in the '*natuurlijke instelling*'<sup>39</sup>, as Carlo Ierna phrases it in 'De methode van de fenomenologie': 'De natuurlijke instelling kent dus aan de wereld een bestaan toe dat volstrekt onafhankelijk is van ons bewustzijn' (Ierna sd, 12).<sup>40</sup> This *natuurlijke instelling* is precisely what Husserl brackets in his phenomenological method. The existence of the world is postponed, the world is only there insofar as a first-person experiences, perceives, remembers it, etc. (Ierna sd, 13).

Drummond has brought forward some interesting insights into the relation between Aristotle and Husserl's phenomenology. He points out that 'Aristotle might well be called the first phenomenologist of moral experience', for he has devoted so much attention to how the phenomena of virtues and happiness are understood by the large majority of people (*oi polloi*) (Drummond 2002, 15). In my view, it makes sense to follow Drummond's suggestion to 'consider the ways in which some phenomenological approaches to moral philosophy manifest such Aristotelian themes as *eudaimonia*' (Drummond 2002, 16). I mentioned that Aristotle's practical philosophy is considered with the good, while phenomenology is considered with values, meaning that a phenomenological approach would be to offer a theory of valuing, that is, how we come to regard things as good or bad, rather than an account of the good life. This means that when we want to understand the relation between Aristotle and phenomenology, we need to understand how the good is related to valuing (Drummond 2002, 16). According to Drummond, in an evaluative experience, there is both a 'cognitive' moment and a 'feeling' moment, which are united so that 'the overall character of the experience is an affective response to the worth of the thing.' (Drummond 2002, 19)

According to Aristotle, emotions have a cognitive content as well as a moral significance. The good, that is, the virtuous person, performs the right action as well as has the right feelings about it, which means that the overall affective response to a phenomenon should be appropriate to our moral judgment. A virtuous person is someone who has the right feelings about what he or she experiences and does (Drummond 2002, 20).

Drummond goes on to analyse what it means to have the 'right' feelings in moral cases. He rightly remarks that having the right feelings about doing what is morally right, does not at all mean this is always pleasurable. We cannot relate all our values to a single feeling, i.e pleasure or love, meaning that when Aristotle points to pleasure being an end supervening on exercising virtues, 'he must be using "pleasure" in the broadest and most equivocal sense' (Drummond 2002, 22). In order to clarify this, Drummond introduces an

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<sup>39</sup> 'Natural state of mind'

<sup>40</sup> 'The method of phenomenology': 'The natural state of mind thus allocates to the world an existence that is independent of our consciousness'.

excellent example to clarify that our affective lives are more complicated. In order to understand this example, we must first understand Aristotle's famous distinction between the continent person and the virtuous person: both act in the same way, but the continent person is not yet virtuous, because acting virtuously goes against his attachments and feelings. According to Annas, the importance of this difference is clearly expressed through the example of the person who hands out money while being indifferent to the person receiving it. Of such a person we would not say he possesses the virtue of generosity (Annas 2011, 66-7).

Here is Drummond's example.<sup>41</sup> Suppose the parents of a college student, let us call her Layla, have been killed in a car accident. The police come to her college dormitory to inform her about this, but Layla is in the library to study. Her best friend and roommate is home however. She tells the police that she would like to tell Layla the news herself, because she rather have Layla hear the terrible news from her than from a stranger. While we might consider this praiseworthy, we can hardly consider it 'pleasant'. Maria might be 'glad' that she can and will be the one from which Layla hears the news, because she experiences it as the right thing to do and better for Layla as when Layla would hear the news from a stranger, but she will certainly not be cheerful or excited in the way that she would be when she would tell Layla she had won the lottery. According to Sokolowski, if Maria is a virtuous student, she will recognize that telling Layla is the good thing to do and will therefore "want" to do it, even though it is not a pleasurable act. If Maria would be a continent student, she will recognize in the same way that telling Layla is a good thing, but she will not want to do it. She will nevertheless do it and be 'strong', in the sense of decisive and clear, in the telling. If Maria would be an incontinent student, she might also recognize the telling as good and not want to do it. This does not necessarily mean that she will not tell Layla, but that if she does, she will be 'weak' in the telling in the sense of not being able to control her emotions, she might cry hysterically when she tells Layla the news (Drummond 2002, 21-2).

This example points exactly to what my argument has been about. According to the 'psychiatric view' - which I have constructed as viewing humans too much as systems, whose job is to achieve a certain output while disregarding their internal process and experience - there might not be a huge difference between the virtuous and the continent version of Maria, since both have the same outcome: Maria tells Layla the news in a strong way, which in my view would mean telling the news decisively yet attentively. I argue however that the difference is crucial: it is the difference between flourishing and being alienated from what you do. In my view, the continent and the incontinent person are actually more similar, because they both do not 'want' to tell Layla. I agree with Annas that being virtuous requires

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<sup>41</sup> Actually, the example is in Drummond's text, but he mentions he owes it to Karen Stohr and Robert Sokolowski.

a kind of affective commitment to what you are doing, which in that sense goes beyond 'skilled' or 'tactful' action (Annas 2011, 67). Such 'skilled' or 'tactful' action cannot be achieved by taking medication, or so I suppose. As Verhaeghe analyses, as a society, we seem to expect mere productivity and functioning of people, as opposed to flourishing (Verhaeghe 2012, 199). To me, it seems rather strange that the focus is so much on the 'outside' as opposed to how people *experience* what they are doing.

The way Annas puts it, virtuousness is about bringing your feelings and emotions into harmony with your deliberations about what to do (Annas 2011, 68). Interestingly, she links virtuous activity with Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow (Annas 2011, 70-77). According to her, 'Virtuous activity, at least in those past the stage of the learner, exhibits the same combination of direct engagement and loss of self-consciousness that we find with skills' (Annas 2011, 74). As I mentioned in 2.6, one characteristic that Csikszentmihalyi has attributed to flow is effortlessness. Annas agrees to this and explains how effortlessness relates to a virtuous character. According to her, what it means to do the right thing as a 'continent' person, means to still have 'other commitments and values that conflict with the exercise of virtue', which cause someone to experience the activity as effortful and self-conscious (Annas 2011, 75).

For example, doing charity work while at the same time worrying about your own to do list, prevents you from being fully engaged with the charity work and from being fully focussed. Suppose your charity work is to have a cup of coffee once a week for an hour with an old lady, whose family has already passed away, to relieve her loneliness. If, while talking to the lady, you are constantly repeating the grocery list in your head, thinking about what to have for dinner, worrying about what to buy for your partner's birthday, it is clear that, in the moment that you are supposed to be friendly, your other commitments prevent you from being fully committed to this friendliness. You might tell yourself that you need to focus on what the lady is telling you, that you need to smile, that you need to look into the lady's eyes, and this might actually work to a certain extent. However, it would be inappropriate to say that your friendliness in that situation is effortless. I would therefore consider this as trying to be friendly as a continent person, and definitely morally praiseworthy. In general, giving an effort to do something morally good, such as charity work, is definitely praiseworthy. With regard to flow, I would propose to understand this as striving for flow. Since there are still other commitments while doing the voluntarily work, it is not fitting to consider the friendliness as effortless or virtuous. Only when there is no other commitment, when you are completely engaged in what the old lady is telling you, you are interested in her story, you want to know about her life and you smile because you like to be in her company, you are not considered with yourself, relevant questions come to you easily – indeed, effortlessly, the friendliness comes to you in such a natural way that you are in a 'friendliness flow'. This is

why, in my view, *striving* for flow could be understood as continence, and *being* in a flow could be understood as virtuousness.

The value of the concept of flow and the importance of virtuousness has for a large part to do with the characteristic of effortless. As Annas explains, someone who is honest, 'will not only be honest in her own actions, she will feel disgusted by dishonesty. Kind people are appalled by cruelty; generous people are distressed by stinginess' (Annas 2011, 67). In the same way, the virtuous Maria will be distressed by the incontinent Maria who is only able to tell Layla the terrible news all hysterically. It is only in exercising an activity virtuously and therein effortlessly – bearing in mind that effortless refers here *not* to Maria *enjoying* telling Layla terrible news, but to Maria doing so without hesitation or resistance, knowing that this is what needs to be done – that there can be an enjoyment, or pleasure, if you will, supervening on the activity, as Aristotle would say.

Again, as I mentioned above, I agree with Drummond's interpretation that Aristotle must use pleasure in the most equivocal sense, which means that experiencing a kind of enjoyment in what you know needs to be done, has nothing to do with enjoying the *circumstances*. Drummond has already captured this adequately by saying that the virtuous Maria will be 'glad' that Layla does not hear the news from a stranger, and in that sense there is enjoyment in her ability to do what needs to be done, and enjoyment supervening in the not-resisting, but this does not mean that she is cheerful she has to bring Layla terrible news. It also does not mean that the virtuous Maria is considered with herself mainly and enjoys being such a virtuous person, thinking for instance 'I am so glad that I get to be the one to tell Layla the news' or 'I am such a good person', for this would not be virtuous, but egotistical. Because of Maria's virtuousness, she is able to be fully present with Layla, to be attentive and kind. In that sense, she is in a flow, because there is effortless, the steps are clear, and she is free from thoughts about herself, so hundred percent of her attention and kindness is available for Layla. One could say her ego has disappeared in the experience.

Finally, let us consider how of all this relates to Steve and his 'terrible taxes'. I have claimed already in the second chapter that I consider it possible to experience filling in the tax forms as intrinsically valuable. However, since filling in tax forms is a highly unpopular activity for many people, one could easily think that only peculiar people with calculation fetishes would be able to enjoy filling in their tax forms, and that is 'normal' to 'hate your taxes'. There might also be some lack of clarity as to what could possibly be intrinsically valuable about filling in tax forms. Perhaps it is the hope of getting your money back – but this cannot be the case, since this would be an external reward, a desired outcome, and we are interested here in an internal reward, the activity being valuable for its own sake. It is also not about experiencing the taxes as a source of pleasure in the way that one could experience

ice cream as a source of pleasure – it is clear that taxes cannot give you such pleasure.<sup>42</sup> Thus, it is not about hedonistic pleasure, but about an equivocal pleasure as a result of the way you relate to filling in the tax forms. The reward of the taxes is not experiencing pleasure in the sense of feeling an extreme amount of joy, it is much more subtle. In my view, the enjoyment is the lack of resistance, seeing that filling in the taxes is what needs to be done, and therefore doing it without hesitation or resistance. The non-resistance makes room for enjoyment in filling in the forms. The enjoyment could also be experiencing a certain curiosity and openness towards the questions on the tax forms, similar to my descriptions of meditation. To me, that is what flourishing as a human being means in the case of filling in your tax forms. There is no resistance, and therefore, it is (almost) effortless. The internal reward is to enjoy that you are filling in the taxes virtuously, that you are doing the right activity at the right moment.

To conclude, I have argued that flourishing is about experiencing flow in your activities. In my view, a life with many flow experiences is a flourishing life. A flourishing life however does not mean to be always in a state of flow, this seems rather unrealistic, for that would mean to always have an optimal experience. It is about a life in which there are episodes of flow as a part of a flourishing life, in which the flow experiences are related to intentional activities in which one is deeply engaged and which are effortless. As I have argued, flow will bring a kind of enjoyment in everyday activities. Not in an hedonistic sense, but a more Aristotelian sense: experiencing flow in your activities means a lack of resistance and an open attitude towards this activity, just doing the activity because you know that it is what needs to be done, thereby doing them virtuously.

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<sup>42</sup> Except perhaps when you *do* have a calculation fetish.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have inquired how a phenomenological approach to ADHD can contribute to a better understanding of the problem of ADHD and its solutions. I have problematized the current understanding of ADHD and its most common solution, prescribing MPH. The problem I have identified is that the common treatment of ADHD defines ‘good functioning’ as a successful treatment. This view points to regarding human being as a kind of systems, in which good functioning is measured in terms of specific desired output. However, ‘good functioning’ does not help us understand why ADHD ‘patients’ can concentrate and experience happiness, enjoyment or fulfilment in what they do, as they regularly report to do with respect to specific activities. It has been my assumption that healing ADHD means experiencing *what* you do as having intrinsic value, that is, as giving internal rewards, as opposed to your activities being (only) aimed at achieving a specific output.

As I have argued, flourishing as a human being is about *how* you do what you do, not about *what* you do, that is, it concerns more how you are intentionally related to what you do, as opposed to merely looking at the results of your actions. We see this problematic understanding of ADHD reflected in how ADHD is defined: there is a concentration deficit in the human ‘system’, which prevents it from functioning properly. This deficit needs to be medically complemented. The core of the problem is that psychiatry understands being concentrated as a state that lasts as long as the resource of concentration is available. In describing the property of hyperfocus in 1.3, we have seen how viewing human beings as a system does not work. I have explained this elaborately as ‘Steve’s problem’, Steve being someone who is able to focus on activity A and not on activity B, an experience I assume most people recognize, regardless of their ability to concentrate. Therefore, it makes more sense to view ADHD as a problem with *regulating* attention, as opposed to understanding it as a deficit. When we view ADHD as a problem with regulating attention, it becomes immediately apparent that we are not systems as humans: in circumstance A, we are able to focus, while in circumstance B, we are not. Regarding MPH as a solution is trying to enhance a human system, not to improve the person to deal with his capacities and activities in relation to a pattern of life that motivates him or her and enables flourishing.

After having identified this problem, I have introduced a phenomenological approach to understanding concentration and related concepts and phenomena. I have shown that when we take Husserl’s phenomenology seriously, it becomes problematic to define concentration as a general ‘resource’. The resource interpretation fails to clarify first the difference in concentration when people do something they like, as opposed to doing something they do not like, and second how concentration and MPH effects the experienced meaningfulness of activities. Additionally, when we approach concentration through a

practical intentional noesis-noema scheme, it becomes apparent that concentration can neither be a noesis or a noema, but that we should consider it as a property of a noetic mode. This means that it does not necessarily follow to enhance concentration, but rather, to focus on the affective intentional relation towards what you are doing. If psychiatry uses a phenomenological approach to understanding concentration problems, it would help to put into perspective a system approach on human beings.

Up until this point, my thesis has been descriptive in the sense that I described the psychiatric view on normal human functioning, and I argued how phenomenology should correct this view. In the final and normative part of my thesis, I have argued that following from the phenomenological conclusions, the idea of human functioning needs to be redefined in terms of developing a good intentional relation towards what you do, which, in my view, should be based on an Aristotelian idea of human flourishing, in which there is room for enjoying what you do, that is, having an affective interest in the noema, when you exercise an activity virtuously. I have linked the idea of flourishing with the concept of focus flow, the optimal experience, in which you experience what you do as having intrinsic worth, and where you are really in the moment and actively engaged in and enjoying what you are doing. I have explained that this flow should not be considered as a state, but that flow is essentially a relation, in which you are practically intentionally related to what you do.

Ultimately, my argument could be summarized as that human beings are not system-dependent beings, but relational beings. To exaggerate the point: in a strictly mechanistic worldview, there are no 'actions', but only human 'systems' that lead to a specific 'output' – intentionality does not exist in this world. It is clear that this cannot be the case, we are always in a way intentionally related to what we are doing, and the medical approach to ADHD seems to have obscured this, since it undervalues individual experiences of happiness and meaningfulness.

In order for people to function optimally, they need to focus on the practical intentional relation to what they are doing, as opposed to (merely) focussing on the improvement of a state or the supplementing of a supposed resource. In that sense, the example of ADHD that is used as the ethical case in this thesis, points to a more general point about optimal functioning. This means that my argument also has not been that you need to strive always for a 'state' of flow or enjoyment as such, or pleasure as such, but to realise a positive affective and motivated intentional relation towards what you are doing.

The fundamental problem with the system approach to ADHD is that there is no causal link with the activity you are doing or want to do, and therefore, no actual enhancement. Enhancing concentration through MPH artificially creates a state of concentration without establishing any kind of love, passion, interest, curiosity, or any other kind of affective and motivated relationship. This could result in being able to concentrate on

things that do not mean anything to you, rendering *what* you concentrate on to become arbitrary. Something you loved before, such as playing the piano, becomes less fun, and something you have hated before, such as French grammar, becomes less awful. The experience of doing different activities becomes less distinct, which could lead to feelings of alienation, emptiness and indifference.

Since my argument has been about moving away from the system approach and going towards an approach that takes into account the importance of the practical intentional relation in activities and values virtue theory and Aristotelian enjoyment in what you do, this thesis has been an attempt to fuse different multiple philosophical disciplines into one argument. Many issues I have addressed, would require more in-depth philosophical analyses and also the raising of the question as to how one could realize enhancing an affective relation with an activity, has only scratched the surface. It is my hope that this thesis serves as an inspiration for philosophers and psychiatrists to take phenomenology and virtue theory more seriously when reflecting on good human functioning.

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