Virtue and positive psychology: Examining hedonism

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ABSTRACT
The field of Positive Psychology (PP) includes a list of virtues. While virtues can help identify behaviour considered to be excellent and is associated with a type of happiness called eudaimonia, behaviour associated with a different type of happiness called hedonism draws questions from some scholars. There is disagreement about whether those in PP should say that hedonistic behaviour, while creating happiness, is not good or moral. This article explores this argument further and uses examples of individuals from the post-traumatic growth literature to determine whether there are important differences that should be teased out in hedonistic behaviour. These examples serve as a platform for a discussion about whether judgements about what is considered good are appropriate within PP.

RÉSUMÉ
Le domaine de la psychologie positive (PP) englobe une liste de vertus. Alors que les vertus peuvent aider à identifier un comportement considéré comme excellent et qui est associé à un genre de bonheur appelé eudémonie, un comportement associé à un autre type de bonheur appelé hédonisme soulève des questions de la part de plusieurs universitaires. On ne s'entend pas à savoir si ceux en PP devraient déclarer que le comportement hédonisme, tout en créant du bonheur, n'est pas bon ou moral. Le présent article explore cet argument plus en profondeur et utilise des exemples de personnes dans la littérature de croissance post traumatique pour déterminer s'il y a des différences importantes qui devraient être démêlées dans le comportement hédonisme. Ces exemples servent de forum de discussion quant à savoir si les jugements sur ce qui devrait être considéré comme bon sont appropriés en PP.

The Positive Psychology (PP) movement was first introduced at the American Psychological Association's (APA) convention in 1999 by Martin E. P. Seligman (Joseph & Linley, 2008). The field has since grown exponentially and resulted in a wealth of research in the area (Carpenter, Brockopp, & Andrykowski, 1999; Frazier & Berman, 2008; Hart & Sasso, 2011; Harvey, 2008). Growing out of a reaction to psychology's focus on deficits and illness, PP can be defined as the scientific study of mental health and well-being (Joseph & Linley, 2008). Seligman identified five fundamental pillars represented by the acronym "PERMA": positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). In a recent discussion, Wong (2011) provided a discussion about key issues in PP such as how to define ambiguous terms like happiness, the fact the field is criticized for focusing too much on the positive to the exclusion of the negative, and the need for a classification system based on empirical evidence. He also discussed that while proponents of PP endorse the cultivation of virtues and strengths, they also agree that virtues can be valued in their own right, or in other words, that virtues and character strengths can primarily serve to benefit oneself. In the article, Wong (2011) asked whether there are times when those in PP may need to make a moral judgement, or may need to take a stance on whether a person should or should not act in a certain way. In the first half of this article, I define virtue, happiness, and the good life to provide an understanding of foundational terms in PP. In the second half, I draw on these terms and comment on Wong's (2011) question asking whether moral judgements are appropriate by discussing differences of hedonistic behaviour in three examples: a murderer, someone who maximizes personal gain, and a soldier.

Aristotle defines virtue as excellence and relates it to what is good, as he states that "the Good of man is the active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue..." (Aristotle, 1968, pp. 33, [1098a]). He defines good in three ways: that of external goods, such as wealth; goods relating to the soul, such as courage; and good of the body, such as physical strength (Aristotle,

1968). Virtue specifically, is only related to the good of the soul, and he further states that "of these three kinds of goods, those of the soul we commonly pronounce good in the fullest sense and the highest degree" (Aristotle, 1968, pp. 37, [1098b]). Essentially he is saying that while there are different types of good, good of the soul, which includes virtue, is seen as ideal behaviour. He also relates what is good and virtuous to ethical behaviour, or that which is considered right (Aristotle, 1968). In other words, virtue has also been described as "a moral map for how we ought to live" (Wong, 2011, p. 73).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) conducted research and developed a taxonomy of virtues. Their concept of virtue is similar to Aristotle's in the sense that they also believe it is related to what is right or moral (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). While it has been argued that what is moral is different depending on one's culture (Kristjansson, 2005), Peterson and Seligman (2004) attempted to address this issue by conducting an extensive review of virtues according to philosophers throughout history and the main cultural traditions of the world (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These traditions included Confucius, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). The six common virtues yielded from this review were wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Briefly defined, wisdom and knowledge are the cognitive ability to gather and apply knowledge; courage is facing and overcoming opposition; humanity is the interpersonal ability to bond with other people; justice means to help people or agencies within the community achieve equality; temperance is the ability to keep oneself from excess; and transcendence is to discover meaning and build connections between oneself and the larger universe (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

There are four different types of happiness in PP, but this article only address two, eudaimonia and hedonism, because they are the two types most frequently discussed in relation to virtue in the philosophical literature (Aristotle, 1968; Kristjansson, 2010;for definitions of all four types, see Wong, 2011). The first type, eudaimonia, is associated with virtue and the soul, and of having characteristics of good character (Bostock, 2000). It is happiness based on behaviour that enriches the person, and is often associated with Carl Roger's concept of self-actualization:

"[c]lose interpersonal relationships, good health, wisdom, maturity, charity, moral development, self-control, purposeful striving, creativity, and accomplishments represent just a few of these [examples of virtuous behaviour]" (King, Eells, & Burton et al., 2004). An example would be a person who worked in a profession helping others and felt a sense of happiness from benefiting someone.

Another type of happiness is called hedonism, which is often contrasted with eudaimonia. Hedonistic happiness is associated with indulgence (King et al., 2004), and with a lifestyle that emphasizes "eat, drink, and be merry" (Wong, 2011, p. 70). People who are hedonistic are likely to look out for themselves and are not concerned with helping others. It is considered the opposite of virtue. An example would be someone who achieved happiness from making large sums of money and did not consider the impact his/her work had on others or the world around him/her.

According to Aristotle, what is good is associated with moral behaviour and excellence (Aristotle, 1968; King et al., 2004). Proponents of PP differ on this point. A problem that arises is "[t]he term "good" is loaded with a variety of meanings. When we refer to the good life, we may be talking about a life that is filled with enjoyment – "a life we'd like to have or that is morally good" (King et al., 2004, p. 41). In PP, Seligman outlines that happiness, or a good life, can be achieved in three ways, which are (a) the pleasant life, achieved by self-satisfaction; (b) the good life, by discovering one's virtues and strengths; and (c) the meaningful life, achieved by using one's virtues and strengths to improve something (Seligman, 2003). Seligman's categories illustrate that what is considered good can be defined both by a life that is thoroughly enjoyed (hedonism), and by one that is good in a moral way (eudaimonia). PP does not take a stance on whether self-indulgent behaviour (hedonism) in some cases may be bad, or immoral. In the following section, I use three examples to argue that there are times when it is appropriate to consider some hedonistic behaviour immoral and not conducive to what is good, and times when hedonism can be associated with virtue, or what is good.

There may be times when it is clear that hedonistic behaviour is not good. An illustration that has been used previously focuses our attention on an extreme example of the pleasure a person may get from murdering someone (Wong, 2011). A person may experience joy from murdering a person, which is not virtuous behaviour according to the aforementioned definition. Despite this however, if the person is happy because of his/her act, the fact the person is subjectively happy demonstrates hedonistic behaviour. Although this is an extreme example and it is unlikely someone would agree this behaviour is acceptable, according to the definition of the pleasant life even someone who commits murder can still be considered to be on a legitimate path to happiness if murdering someone made him/her happy (Wong, 2011). I use this example to illustrate that PP should not agree that all hedonistic behaviour is good just because a person is happy.

Just as there are times when it is beneficial to argue some hedonistic behaviour is not good, there may be times when it is beneficial to argue some hedonistic behaviour could be good, or virtuous. This possibility is discussed through the following two examples. The first is of a person who is happy with him/herself by "sitting on the couch watching TV, one hand on the remote, and the other in a bag of chips" (King et al., 2004). This person is engaged

in behaviour that is purely self-indulgent, makes him/her feel good, and is self-satisfying. This person's behaviour fits with the definition of hedonism, and is likely to be inconsistent with eudaimonia or any of the virtues.

Take a second example of someone who fought in the Vietnam War. The man explained that initially, he had never moved past what happened in the war, but years later, he changed after attending a ceremony honouring his service. He described that after the ceremony, he "felt pride for [his] country and...felt good that [he] can go home now and finally feel more alive again" (Pearsall, 2003, p. 189). His wife also described that since the ceremony, "I don't think I've seen him smile as much...[h]e used to sit around and cry a lot, [n]ow, the crazy old man even wants to try surfing" (Pearsall, 2003, p. 189).

This soldier's experience is close to the virtue of transcendence, yet he does not describe finding deep meaning, or connecting with a higher power, and so does not seem to quite fit within transcendence's definition. Even though this person is acting in his own self-interest, there is something different about him compared to the example on the couch eating chips, and it is possible he may be exhibiting virtuous behaviour.

One possibility of identifying the difference between the person eating chips and the soldier is to look at the motivations underlying their behaviour rather than the behaviour itself. In the first example, while the person is likely enjoying him/herself sitting on the couch, s/he is not doing so to make the most out of his/her life. In the second example, he describes feeling more alive, and it is very likely this motivation to live more fully fuels his desire to live in a different way, such as trying to surf. While it can be argued both are acting self-indulgently and fit within the hedonistic category, I argue their motivation and underlying intentions make their behaviour different.

As it stands right now, PP does not make a judgement about whether any type of hedonistic behaviour is good or bad. The example of the person who murdered someone and experienced happiness was meant to illustrate that there are times when it may be okay to judge hedonistic behaviour. The examples of the person eating potato chips and the war veteran also illustrate that hedonism can be more complicated than it appears. I argue that those in PP should pay attention to a person's intentions, as they may see that not all hedonistic behaviour is the same, and that in some cases, it may be okay to say some forms of behaviour is considered good (or virtuous), while others are not. The person's intentions may differentiate between different types of hedonistic behaviour.

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