

*FLOW: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OPTIMAL Experience*

by Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi

Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990

Reviewed by Henry C. Scuoteguazza

Have you ever been so engrossed in a book that when you finally notice the time hours have slipped by? Have you be in a game of tennis against a worthy opponent where the games seem to flow into one another? Or, have you be talking with someone at a party who stimulates your mind much the music, talking and laughter around you almost completely fade away? Almost all of us at one time or another have experienced being absorbed in an activity. You forgot all other concerns. Your attention is riveted on one thing for a long time. It's almost as though the rest of the world ceased to exist.

Even though all of us have experienced this at some time our life, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* is one of the few books I know of to deal with this in layman's terms. It summarizes the research of Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi (pronounced chick-sent-high-yee"), formerly the chairman the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago. Csikszentimihalyi studied various people involved in professions or activities such as surgeons, rook climbers and artists who have to concentrate intensely over an extended time. His book provides an explanation of what he calls "flow" and some ideas on how each of us can achieve *flow*.

Csikszentimihalyi describes flow as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." He found that even people who were thrown into normal unbearable situations, such as concentration camps, can achieve flow. "They survived by finding ways to turn the bleak objective conditions into subjectively controllable experience." One way they accomplished this was to become finely attuned to the details of their surroundings.

In fact, his research lead him to conclude that happiness "does not depend on outside events, but, rather, how we interpret them." Although this may sound ominously subjectivistic, he is merely saying this: you can't necessarily control what events will happen to you, but you can control how you will react to them.

*Flow* lists eight components necessary for flow experience (1) you have to feel you have a chance of completing the task that you have the ability to perform, (2) you have to be able to concentrate on what you an doing, (3) and (4) the task has to have clear goals and has to provide immediate feedback, (5) you act with deep but effortless involvement, (6) you need experience a sense of control, (7) self-consciousness disappears, but the sense of self emerges *stronger* after the flow experience, and (8) your sense of time is altered.

On the subject of control, Csikszentimihalyi learned that people who expose themselves

to fairly high risk of injury or death (such as rock climbers, hang gliders and race drivers did not do it to enjoy the danger or of defying the odds. They did it to *minimize* the danger. Instead of enjoying *being* in control, they enjoyed *exercising* control.

Taking these findings, Csikszentmihalyi offers some steps for getting into flow states. First, set an overall goal for the activity with as many sub-goals as possible. Setting sub-goals breaks goals into manageable bites that do not scare you into not acting. Then measure your progress to show yourself that you are moving ahead. Third, keep concentrating and making finer distinctions. This forces you into focusing more and more on what you are doing and less on distractions. Develop the skills necessary. And last, when the task becomes boring, raise the stakes: make it harder.

There is a reason for this. Csikszentmihalyi found an interesting relationship between skills and challenges that seems obvious, once it's explained. When your skill matches the challenge, you can achieve flow. When your skill exceeds the challenge, you will be bored. When your skill is not capable of meeting the challenge, you'll be threatened *and* feel anxiety. Flow requires matching your skills to the goal.

Given these conclusions, Csikszentmihalyi spends a large portion of the book applying them to the various spheres of life, such as work, relations, athletics and sex. His applications are illuminating. On philosophy, he says: "if one records ideas in response to an inner challenge to express clearly the major questions by which one feels confronted, and tries to sketch out answers that will help make sense of one's experiences, then the amateur philosopher will have learned to derive enjoyment from one of the most difficult and rewarding tasks of life."

Csikszentmihalyi ends with some observations on the importance of having a purpose in life, one that is more specific than being happy. We must have an idea what we want, as individuals, to accomplish with our lives. Indeed, when an important goal is pursued with resolution, and all one's varied activities fit together into a unified flow experience, the result is that *harmony* is brought to consciousness.

I agree with Csikszentmihalyi's conclusions, although I believe more can be said on the subject. Csikszentmihalyi's concept of harmony resembles Aristotle's work on the Greek concept of Eudaimonia. This term is often translated into English as "happiness" but the Greek meaning is far richer than the modern meaning. For Aristotle, eudaimonia is not an isolated emotion, but a continuing state resulting from living well. The Greek approach has been best summarized as the exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope.

To ensure we achieve flow, we have to choose greater and greater challenges as our abilities grow. In the process, we end up growing along lines of excellence because growth and achieving flow requires this. Flow also provides us with, reason for growing. It is not for the sake of being excellent as an end in itself, as Aristotle seemed to

advocate. It is to keep our life *interesting*. We avoid anxiety by setting realistic goals; we avoid boredom by setting challenging goals. To be in the "flow" means doing challenging things and doing them in such away as to keep our interest.

The question is how do I choose which direction to "flow"? That is, given all of the different opportunities in the world, how do I choose among them? Here *Flow* does not really help. As a hint of what I think the answer is, I offer three components.

Two of the components come from the ancient Greek's advice: "Know thyself" and "Become thyself. This means we first need to assess who we are today. What is my self-identity? What are my interests, temperament, strengths and weaknesses? Then we have to determine who we want to become *based on who we are today*. What do I want my future identity to be? (The Greeks called this your "daemon" and believed it was a specific, individual potential that resides in everyone. The Greeks believed your destiny was best fulfilled by trying to actualize this potential.) I emphasized "based on who we are today" because by the time we are adults our temperament, dispositions and interests seem to be well set. Therefore, it's difficult, if not nearly impossible, to set a future identity that *fundamentally* conflicts with who you are today. For example, if you love working by yourself with minimal contact with people, is it wise to project a future self which is the opposite? What purpose does this serve?

My last question introduces the third component, which Csikszentmihalyi mentioned. What do I want to accomplish with my life? What would I want to be engraved in my tombstone? In other words, what is my mission? These three components set the direction of my life and will help me choose which activities I should pursue flow. (They would also help in setting priorities among the various spheres of our life, such as our career, family, hobbies, and others.)

I have digressed from reviewing Csikszentmihalyi's book so let me return to it. I highly recommend *Flow*. Csikszentmihalyi supports his contentions with numerous references to his research. Better yet, he offers practical guidance on how to use his work. His style is straightforward and easy to read. It's a good book with which to get lost in the flow.

*FULL CONTEXT INDEX 1988-1990*