

Book Review of March 24, 2004

Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Harper Perennial, New York, 1990.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has studied happiness for many years. A professor of psychology and management at Claremont Graduate University in California, he has investigated the conditions that lead to enjoyment for many groups of people in varying circumstances. He has found that regardless of external circumstances individuals experience the most enjoyment when they are actively engaged in an activity in which the effort that is required matches the demand of the endeavor. If the challenge is insufficient (as when a game is too easy) an individual will be bored. If the skill level is insufficient to meet the challenge (as when a person is given an assignment he can't complete) that person will feel anxious. When the match is right, an individual enters a state of "flow," a condition in which his attention is directed fully to the activity. There is no room in his mind for extraneous thoughts; he may even lose a sense of himself and of the passage of time, and his activity becomes effortless.

An autotelic person is one who is able to engage actively with all aspects of her environment and who therefore spends most of her time in flow. Because her responses to situations come from within, they are authentic, and in responding actively to challenges she continually develops her skills and capabilities.

One of Csikszentmihalyi's findings was that people more often experience flow at work than at leisure, yet while at work they wish they were somewhere else. He attributes this to the cultural expectation that leisure is supposed to be more enjoyable than work. However, the categories of work that he described did not include the self-employed. We know that despite the enjoyment that work may bring to employees, it will almost always be contaminated by the constraint created by the fact that they have a boss. The self-employed are more autonomous.

Are those who work for a superior doomed to feel constrained? Not necessarily. Csikszentmihalyi describes the experience of a welder in a plant where railroad cars were manufactured. This man did not wish to be promoted because he didn't want to boss anyone else, but he occupied himself by learning how to do all the other jobs as well as his own and also by learning how to fix all the various pieces of machinery. He maintained an ongoing state of flow. He was considered indispensable and treated with great respect. In this way he became autonomous.

Csikszentmihalyi describes the discomfort and ennui that people feel when they are not in flow, and encourages readers to strive for this goal by focusing on conceptualizing their various activities as challenges. Those who develop an Inner Guide will experience flow effortlessly because, in working to maintain an optimal stimulus level, an Inner Guide will recruit the skills and capabilities that optimally address whatever level of stimulation is present at any given time.

