

Flow and Meaning in Life: Some Empirically Informed  
Practical Lessons

by

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## **Abstract**

On Susan Wolf's well-known account of meaning in life, activities can add meaning to our lives only if we are actively engaged in those activities. My aim in this thesis is to uncover empirically informed, practical lessons about meaning, given Wolf's requirement of active engagement. After examining Wolf's account and defending that requirement, I look at the psychological research on "flow," which is the conceptual equivalent of active engagement in psychology. I then draw three important practical lessons about meaning in light of this research—one about activities that take us outside of our comfort zones, another about stress, and a third about trusting intuition.

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## Table of Contents

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Abstract</b> .....  | <b>ii</b>  |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b> .....  | <b>iii</b> |
| <b>Table of Contents</b> .....   | <b>iv</b>  |
| <b>List of Illustrations</b> .....   | <b>vi</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b> .....  | <b>1</b>   |
| <b>Chapter 1: Wolf on Active Engagement and Meaning in Life</b> .....                  | <b>5</b>   |
| 1.1    Introduction .....  | 5          |
| 1.2    Wolf’s Conception of Meaning .....  | 7          |
| 1.2.1    Active Engagement .....   | 7          |
| 1.2.2    Projects of Worth .....   | 17         |
| 1.2.3    The Relationship Between Active Engagement and Projects of Worth.....         | 19         |
| 1.3    General Criticisms of Wolf’s Conception of Meaning in Life .....                | 20         |
| 1.3.1    Unknown Objective Worth .....   | 20         |
| 1.3.2    Objectively Good and Bad Projects (Adams) .....                               | 21         |
| 1.3.3    Objective Worth in the Arts (Koethe).....                                     | 23         |
| 1.3.4    Is an Objective Condition Really Needed? (Arpaly).....                        | 25         |
| 1.4    Specific Criticisms of Wolf on Active Engagement as Necessary for Meaning ..... | 27         |
| 1.4.1    Negative Attitudes (Metz).....  | 27         |
| 1.4.2    Mother Teresa Example (Metz) .....  | 30         |
| <b>Chapter 2: The Psychology of Active Engagement</b> .....                            | <b>32</b>  |
| 2.1    Introduction .....  | 32         |
| 2.2    A Brief History of Flow and Vital Engagement.....                               | 34         |
| 2.3    Aspects of the Phenomenological Experience of Flow .....                        | 35         |

|   |  |           |
|---|--|-----------|
| 2.3.1   | The Perceived Adventure .....            | 36        |
| 2.3.2   | Unwavering Concentration .....           | 40        |
| 2.3.3   | A Spiritual-Like Experience .....        | 42        |
| 2.4   | The Structure of Flow Activities .....   | 44        |
| 2.5   | The Autotelic Personality .....          | 47        |
| 2.6   | Levels of Flow .....                     | 48        |
| 2.7   | When Flow becomes Vital Engagement ..... | 51        |
| <b>Chapter 3: Contemporary Empirical Research on Flow .....</b> |  | <b>55</b> |
| 3.1   | Introduction .....                       | 55        |
| 3.2   | Perceived Adventure .....                | 56        |
| 3.3   | Unwavering Focus.....                    | 62        |
| 3.4   | Spiritual-Like Experience.....           | 65        |
| 3.5   | Conclusion.....                          | 71        |
| <b>Chapter 4: Practical Lessons about Meaning .....</b>         |  | <b>73</b> |
| 4.1.1   | Go Beyond Your Comfort Zone.....         | 74        |
| 4.1.2   | Don't Fear Some Stress.....              | 77        |
| 4.1.3   | Learn to Trust Your Intuition.....       | 80        |
| 4.2   | Conclusion.....                          | 83        |
| <b>Bibliography .....</b>                                       |  | <b>85</b> |

## List of Illustrations

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Illustration 1: Flow Model Developed by Csikszentmihalyi..... | 40 |
| Illustration 2: Adventure Experience Paradigm.....            | 50 |
| Illustration 3: Four Channel Flow Model.....                  | 51 |

## **Introduction**

If we are interested in living more meaningful lives, and we accept the plausible thought that we can add meaning to our lives by performing activities of certain sorts, then it would seem important to consider what those activities are like. In this thesis I defend Susan's Wolf's suggestion that the activities that add meaning to our lives must involve (among other things) what she calls 'active engagement', or what psychologists commonly call 'flow'. With the aim of uncovering some important practical lessons about the sorts of activities we should be considering if we want to add meaning to our lives, I go on to examine what the contemporary psychological literature has to tell us about active engagement/flow. The experience felt during a flow state, or what is more colloquially known as 'being in the zone', is often discussed by top-tier athletes, coaches and sports-psychologists.

A popular representation of flow can be found in the life and work of Bruce Lee. Bruce Lee is not only well-known for his unique style of martial arts, but also for the promotion of his philosophy in pop-culture which revolved around the concept of flow states before they were taken seriously in psychological research. Bruce Lee was more than a pop-icon, having studied both philosophy and psychology at Washington State he developed his own way of life, which in a sense revolved around activities that induced a state of flow, such as martial arts and other art forms. In his book, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (1975), Bruce Lee writes that expression through art had a way of becoming one with the soul (Lee, 1975, p. 10). His description of art is similar in nature to the activities of the sorts that Susan Wolf's discusses in her description of meaning in life. This is quite fitting as this thesis will be arguing that specific sorts of activity, which include martial

arts, can add meaning to our lives. As previously discussed, the types of activities that give meaning must involve a state of flow if Susan Wolf is right. This view is also found in Lee's writing, in the quote, "Bring the mind into sharp focus and make it alert so that it can immediately intuit the trust, which is everywhere." (Lee, 1975, p.14). This quote essentially covers the focal point of flow which is having complete absorption in the activity and fluidly moving from one motion to the next and trusting in one's intuition.

Although his philosophy is largely directed towards martial arts, his mindset is completely in line with Wolf's point about active engagement, that actions being done for the sake of themselves, without worrying about winning or losing or worrying about what others want from you. Lee and Wolf both promote the idea that meaningful activity involves being in the moment and an intuitive sense of rightness, which is the central focus of this thesis.

In the first chapter of the thesis I will explore Susan Wolf's general conception of meaning in life, according to which meaning occurs when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness. The subjective attraction of her conception of meaning is what will be of interest and more heavily focused on, as it is essentially the idea of active engagement, i.e. the philosophical equivalent of flow state, as a condition for meaning in life (Wolf, 2010, p. 9). I will then go on in the first chapter to explore and defend Wolf's view on the subjective element of meaning, with the aim of convincing the reader that she is right and that active engagement is indeed a necessary condition for meaning.

The second chapter will dive into the early psychological literature on flow as the conceptual equivalent of what Wolf means by 'active engagement', specifically looking at Csikszentmihalyi's initial work in 1975 to dissect the phenomenological experience of

flow for the purpose of understanding how one can experience it and why it is important to meaning. Csikszentmihalyi popularized flow in the academic world as it is known today. His findings suggest that flow is indeed necessary for a meaningful life, especially when it is deeply and consistently experienced in a singular activity. When flow is consistently experienced in a singular activity, such as when an athlete consistently trains in a given sport, the individual begins to take on the identity of the activity and becomes one with it, flow evolves into vital engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). As the name suggests, the engagement in the activity becomes a vital part of the person's existence, thus a vital part of a meaningful life. In this chapter I will try to convince the reader that flow is the conceptual equivalent of active engagement in the psychological literature and then proceed to review and organize the psychological concept of flow into its core aspects. The ultimate aim of Chapter 2 is to provide a foundation for the more recent work in psychology to be reviewed in Chapter 3.

As of now, there are approximately 360 specific and distinct aspects of flow that have been delineated since Csikszentmihalyi's initial research, however this thesis will not review all of these aspects and instead attempt to simplify flow to its core, general aspects (Sainz, 2004, p. 17). Through the simplification process I have discovered at least three general insights into the phenomenological experience of flow which will be discussed in further detail throughout the second chapter. In Chapter 3, these general insights will be further specified with help from more contemporary research which led to the development of three lessons on what flow-involving, and hence potentially meaning-adding activities consist of.

In my final chapter I bring these rich empirical insights together to draw three important practical lessons about meaning, given Wolf's philosophical perspective. One of these lessons concerns activities that take us outside of our comfort zone, another concerns stressful activities, and a third concerns the importance of trusting intuition, whether in the performance of individual or group activities. Thus, given Wolf's very plausible claim (defended in Chapter 1) that active engagement is necessary for meaning, and given that flow is the conceptual equivalent of active engagement in the psychological literature, this thesis ends with some very useful practical advice about meaning from an empirically informed, philosophically plausible perspective.

## **Chapter 1: Wolf on Active Engagement and Meaning in Life**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Most contemporary theorists of meaning in life think that the meaning of one's life depends primarily on what one does in their life. By performing activities of the right sorts, one can increase the meaning of one's life, and by failing to perform activities of these sorts, one does nothing to make their life more meaningful. One important task for contemporary theorists of meaning is thus to determine what the right sorts of activities are - in other words, to uncover the general conditions under which activities add meaning to one's life. According to one of the most prominent views on this topic, suggested by Susan Wolf, activities add meaning to one's life just in case they involve active engagement in projects of objective worth (Wolf 1997, p. 209).

Active engagement is that of a completely gripping and absorbing activity. Consider a hobby by way of illustration. A hobby is, roughly speaking: an activity that a person engages in out of pure interest in the activity. For example, a guitarist who practices for the sake of interest in playing the guitar (without any goal of becoming the leading guitarist of a rock band) can enter a state that is comparable to a meditative trance. The guitar is no longer just an object, but the central part of an experience that gives the person a sense of meaning in life. This experience is not restricted to music and can also be found in a variety of activities like stamp collecting, playing video games or partaking in a Dungeons and Dragons event. It is also not restricted to an activity that is done over the course of one's lifetime (although it can be). Active engagement can be found in any activity that grips and absorbs the attention of the agent, whether this activity is a one-time situation, or a life-long journey is irrelevant. Thus, the activities that

involve active engagement are endless, so long as it has the necessary quality of deeply engaging the agent.

The idea of active engagement is only one part of Wolf's conception of meaning in life. She explains that in her account, "...meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (Wolf 2010, p. 9). The subjective attraction is the active engagement element of her view. The idea of objective attractiveness in her account is the notion that the activities in which we become actively engaged must also be activities that have an objective value. This second condition, which introduces objectivity into her conception of meaning in life, is the most contested part of her view, for "who's to say" what counts as objectively valuable when considering meaning in life (Haidt 2010, p. 96). Explaining Wolf's objective attractiveness and addressing these objections are not of central importance for the purposes of this thesis but will still be worth mentioning to give a better understanding of her account of meaning as a whole. I will thus discuss them briefly later in this chapter.

Psychologists have also explored what Wolf calls active engagement, but they have called it "vital engagement" or alternatively, "flow". The interesting empirical insights that psychologists have discovered about active engagement will be explored in Chapter Two. In this chapter I will convey how Wolf thinks of active engagement in so far as it plays a central role in her account of meaning in life. In doing this I will note some similarities between her view of active engagement and an earlier philosopher's view on what meaning involves, viz. Moritz Schlick's view of what he calls "living in the moment." The similarities between past and present ideas of meaningful activities could prove useful in discovering some essential themes that support Wolf's view that active

engagement is a necessary condition for meaning. These overlapping themes will provide some support for active engagement as a necessary condition for meaning. To further support this view, I will be addressing major objections to it given by other leading contemporary philosophers in the meaning of life.

## **1.2 Wolf's Conception of Meaning**

The account of meaning in life that Wolf discusses in her book, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, is a two-part view that she calls the Fitting Fulfillment view of meaning. The Fitting Fulfillment view is the fusion of two popular views on meaning in life that explore the subjective and objective elements that are essential to a life well lived (Wolf 1997, p. 209). Active engagement, the first and subjective part of her view, was touched on in the introduction to this chapter and is nicely illustrated by relation to hobbies. Hobbying can take shape in many forms but the general idea is that it is an investment of time and energy into an activity that is important to the individual. Active engagement, as Wolf explains it, is not only found in hobbies but can also be found in a one-time experience. The next section will elaborate on Wolf's view of active engagement and its role in a meaningful life.

### **1.2.1 Active Engagement**

An actively engaging activity, Wolf tells us, is an activity that one is passionate about or deeply loves. As she says, it involves "Finding your passion and not settling for something just because it's expected of you" (Wolf 2010, p. 10). Getting a "9 to 5 job" that pays well because it is expected of you (rather than becoming a musician or

travelling the world, as you really want), would thus typically not involve active engagement. Wolf makes it clear that the activity needs to be fulfilling only to the subject and must be finally valuable (i.e. intrinsically valuable, and of itself) rather than merely instrumentally valuable, such as working a boring job for money in order for it to be actively engaged.

The type of passion or love involved in active engagement is not a superficial interest that occurs in the moment but must be a deep interest that motivates the individual to do the activity for the sake of doing the activity. For example, finding something cool for a moment and then moving on is not the sort of thing that would induce active engagement. There are multiple ways that this can play out. One way is through maintained engagement and excitement in a sort of life-long adventure that develops and grows over time. The result would be an expertise in the activity that would be personally fulfilling for the agent by giving them a sense of worth and accomplishment. While this can be considered a more meaningful activity it is not necessarily always the case. The activity can be a one-time fluke that ends is deeply engaging and significantly contributes to the quality of one's life. For example, Wolf tells the reader to imagine a mother who spends a whole night working on her daughter's Halloween costume. Creating the costume allows the mother to express her love in a way that also makes her child happy and this motivates her to work throughout the night (Wolf 2010, p. 4). Her ability to maintain interest and overcome the challenges that come with crafting and lack of sleep may come from the everlasting love a mother has for her daughter but the specific activity of creating the Halloween costume takes place for only one night but is an important contribution to the mother's life. This state of mind that

engages the mother so deeply because of her love for the child and interest in the project is the epitome of what Susan Wolf refers to as active engagement.

Passion and love should not be considered the archetype for active engagement. Although it is preferable that a person loves and is passionate about an activity, they are not all that is required to become actively engaged in an activity. The purpose is not that the individual has to be 'in love' with the activity but that the activity is so deeply interesting that it grips or absorbs them, i.e. gives them a sense of fulfillment (Wolf 1997, p. 209; Wolf 2010, pp. 14 & 122). There are many instances where one might become focused on a topic and do it for the sake of itself even if there's no passion for the activity at hand. Take for example a university student who is uninterested in a particular class but has to write an essay to get the degree. They choose a topic that they have never studied before but seems interesting, as they learn more about the topic, they become more interested and without realizing it they become deeply absorbed in the process of writing an essay. However, once the essay has been written and handed in, they never think about the topic again. It is arguable that there's no passion here, only interest, yet the student is able to get lost in their work without love for the topic. Despite the topic not being one that instills a sense of passion or love, the challenge and new-found knowledge would give a sense of meaning to the individual more so than a topic that they hate. Perhaps the student didn't choose to write a paper, but they did choose to write on that topic. This is an activity that is finally valuable in that the student is writing on a topic that they want to. In the moment of writing the paper the individual might not be passionate about the topic but they still become absorbed in the experience because it is not just of instrumental value. Active engagement would not be possible if the paper was

just considered a necessary part of the degree and the student felt forcefully compelled to complete it so that they can get the degree, that will then get them the job, that will then make them money, etc. There has to be something perceived to be finally valuable in the activity for the agent to become actively engaged in it.

Love and Passion are not necessary to becoming actively engaged in a project but it is an asset and could make the activity more meaningful than if there was no love for it. Wolf nicely describes active engagement in relation to meaning in life in the quote, "... a person's life can be meaningful only if she cares fairly deeply about some thing or things, only if she is gripped, excited, interested, engaged, or...loves something" (Wolf 2010, p.9). What she means by being gripped, excited, interested or engaged is not entirely the same as being passionate about something, as seen in the example of the student writing a paper on a topic, they are interested in but not passionate about it, yet it could still contribute something meaningful to their life by learning something new. To further explain this point, take for example, two strangers who meet in a pub and engage in an interesting conversation about a variety of things. The strangers don't need to be passionate about each other or the topics discussed but the circumstances somehow lead to them being engaged in a conversation that causes them both to lose track of time and leaves them with a deeply meaningful experience. Passion is not always going to be part of the experience but being gripped, excited, engaged *or* passionate about something is crucial to a meaningful life because it is the inspiration and motivation to live (Wolf 2010, p. 2). The more experiences one has in interesting and finally valuable activities, the more meaningful one's life will feel.

Existential and nihilistic thoughts lose their strength when there is excitement in a particular thing in life. Questioning the purpose of life or reasons to live are no longer of interest when life includes being actively engaged in baking a cake, horseback riding or whatever the case may be because these activities are so exciting and interesting that the rest does not matter. Engaging in these activities in the relevant way is enough to provide comfort despite the hardships in life because they are finally valuable.

Active engagement is an experience that is personal and intimate to the individual and thus difficult to describe in words, much like trying to explain what the colour red looks like to someone who has never seen the colour red or the feeling of love to someone who has never been in love. An example that I feel most accurately encompasses the experience of being actively engaged and one that I can personally relate to, is the life of an athlete. I will be using the experience of a competitive swimmer to give a detailed experience of being actively engaged. Imagine a swimmer who is at a swim meet and about to begin a race. They wait behind the block with their complete focus on the necessary components they need to win. Diving into the water as they partake in the activity, their love of the sport fills them with an excitement that motivates the athletes to overcome the pain, stress and anxiety to finish first. The deep focus and absorbing experience of racing provides the swimmer with a sense of meaning, they have a purpose and that purpose is to win in a sport that they feel deeply connected to.

Active engagement is not merely engaging in something pleasurable either, as Wolf clearly notes in her writing (Wolf 2010, pp. 14, 49 & 112; Wolf 1997, p. 209). Referring back to the competitive swimmer example, rather than being at a swim meet, they are in the middle of an excruciating practice. There is a lack of excitement, physical

pain, mental exhaustion most likely accompanied by the frustrated screams and remarks by the coach. In this moment, the competitive swimmer may not be happy or experiencing pleasure in the midst of this intense practice but succeeding as an athlete provides the swimmer with a sense of fulfillment that motivates them to continue to move and struggle for that goal. The specific focus that occurs when being “in the midst of an intense practice” is also an experience of active engagement that is part of what gives an individual a sense of meaning in life, despite it not containing any pleasure in the moment.

The 20th century logical positivist Moritz Schlick proposed an account of meaning according to which activities add meaning to one’s life just in case they amount to what he called ‘creative play’. The notion of play in Schlick’s account is interestingly similar to Wolf’s notion of active engagement, so it might be worth our while to compare the two notions here. When Schlick speaks of play he is referring to an activity that is perceived as finally valuable by the agent, i.e. the agent sees the activity as having a purpose and value within itself or as worth doing for its own sake (Schlick 1927, 58). In Schlick’s view, doing a job just because the pay is good is not engaging in play because the agent would perceive the job as instrumentally valuable rather than finally valuable. There would still be an element of play, if for example, the individual also found the job to be finally valuable as well as instrumentally valuable. Take for instance, the mindset of a teenager who is cleaning their room because they find it relaxing and would also make their parents happy versus the mindset of a teenager who is cleaning their room only to please their parents. In both cases, the teenager might become focused on the task at hand, but in the first case the individual is perceiving the task as being finally valuable

and instrumentally valuable while in the second case they are not. In the second example, the teenager would not be engaged in what Schlick considers 'play' as the activity is not viewed as worth doing in and of itself.

In Schlick's view, the individual must perceive the activity as finally valuable, not merely as instrumentally valuable, which is similar to how Wolf discusses active engagement. Doing a job you hate is not engaging in play but rather engaging in work; work is taking part in an activity for some external reason like money or parents expecting you to do it, thus work is an activity that is perceived by the agent to only be of instrumental value. Schlick does not consider work to be meaningful despite past philosophers arguing otherwise. Playing a video game, if it's purely out of interest is play because there is a desire to play the game and there is no other external motivation interfering with the reasons for doing the activity. The main purpose of play is for the individual to see the activity as having a *final value* that carries its purpose within the activity itself (Schlick 1927, p. 58).

Schlick argues that for an activity to add meaning to one's life, it must amount to play; mere work alone won't do it. This is because the very nature of work is to do it for something else or in hopes that you will get something in return for it and thus the individual will never be able to find satisfaction from the activity. For example, people who work for money so that they can use the money to buy what they want. There is no satisfaction within the job itself but a false satisfaction in what the job might provide you in the future. Schlick makes the great point that meaning in life cannot come from work, contrary to many views, because work is never satisfying but merely a tool to help one potentially achieve feelings of satisfaction but these feelings are rarely ever actualized. A

new car or a big house or paying the bills is not actually satisfying but falsely attributing meaning to meaningless objects. Play on the other hand is satisfying within itself because it is an activity that is done for the sake of itself. Therefore, in Schlick's view, work alone cannot add meaning to one's life because it consists of instrumentally valuable activities whereas engaging in play can add meaning to one's life because it consists of finally valuable activities.

Play, in Schlick's view, inevitably involves or leads to being genuinely focused on an activity which is, in essence, living in the moment. As such, he suggests, it is something most commonly found in youth or in those with a youthful mindset. Such "childlike" individuals don't question their meaning in life because they are so focused on 'living in the moment' of the activity that they are engaged in that they do not bother contemplating existential questions (Schlick 1927, pp. 56-58). The same point seems to apply to someone who is actively engaged in something, according to Wolf: the individual is so focused on the present activity that they forget about the what ifs of the past and future. A child building a sand-castle is so wrapped up in building the castle that they are not thinking about whether the tide will come and wash them away or whether they will be able to make a significant impact on the world before they die. There is no boredom that leads the child to daydream about all that they could be doing, similar to the daydreams an adult in a job they do not want to do may have. According to Schlick and possibly Wolf too, this is because the child is focused on what they are doing 'now' because what they are doing in the moment of building a sandcastle, it is all that they are thinking about.

Referring back to Wolf's example of the mother working on their child's Halloween costume, the active engagement that the mother was experiencing is quite similar to Schlick's idea of play, particularly to the extent that it involves "living in the moment". The mother was not focused on what her meaning in life is at the moment of sewing the costume because she was absorbed in the current activity, in the same way the child is focused on building a sandcastle.

Another similarity between Play and Active engagement would be that they both do not require that the individual feeling pleasure while playing or being actively engaged. Schlick argues that pleasure and joy are of different sorts and while pleasure "ruffles the soul" (Schlick 1927, 120), joy's "... a thought or feeling which fills the whole man, which sets him soaring above everyday life." (Schlick 1927, p. 120). It seems that according to Schlick, the feeling of joy is not merely something that 'feels good' but is stimulating and a motivating factor for life. Pleasure on the other hand merely feels good and is sedative. This description of joy is similar to how Wolf describes being actively engaged in something as being "gripped" and so "deeply absorbed" into the activity, while it is also not necessarily being pleasurable. The mother who spends the night creating a costume for her daughter or in my example of the strangers who meet at a pub and talk all night are experiencing joy while not necessarily feeling pleasure. This might sound odd because it seems hard to imagine that a swimmer in the midst of an intense practice is finding joy in the pain that comes with exercise, but when any fitness enthusiast or athlete speaks about the soreness or the pain they experience, it is typically described as a good kind of pain. It's part of the joy of the sport and the joy found in the satisfaction of seeing how far the body can go before it gives in. Schlick and Wolf seem

to agree that pleasure is not a necessary condition of meaning in life, but joy, deep interest and absorption in the activity is.

So the notion of play as it features in Schlick's account of meaning, is interestingly similar to Wolf's notion of active engagement in at least three ways: both notions suggest the idea of seeing one's activities as finally valuable or worth doing for their own sake, both notions suggest the idea of living in the moment while one performs one's activities. Lastly, pleasure is not a necessary condition for play or active engagement.

In Wolf's account of meaning, the sorts of activities that can add meaning to one's life, hence the sorts of activities in which one can be actively engaged, may be but need not be activities of any special moral value. In her book, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, she explains that attaching moral implications to meaning in life can undermine activities that are done out of self-interest. This creates the underlying assumption that participating in activities out of interest other than moral reasons to be selfish. This leads to ideas such as, activities which have some moral implications to be considered more meaningful (Wolf 2010, p. 49). Casting activities in this light can lead to decreasing the value of activities that are done out of self-interest despite them having a high level of importance. For this reason, it is unnecessary to suggest that a necessary condition for meaning in life and hence for active engagement, is to partake in morally worthwhile activities. Nevertheless, Wolf observes that due to human nature many activities which are moral are also meaningful and vice versa. To further support this point, Wolf shares the example of a woman who takes time off work to take a hot bath versus a woman who missed work to go to a philosophy lecture. In the first case, we find the woman to be

doing something purely for the pleasure of it, without any moral or meaningful applications. In the second case where it seems more natural to categorize attending a philosophy lecture as more meaningful activity even if there is no particular moral value in it (Wolf 2010, p. 54).

Wolf suggests that humans want to be moral because we have sympathy for others and thus lean towards finding meaning in moral activities. But danger arises when we eliminate the possibility of activities that do not have positive moral value from being meaningful. For example, a martial artist may find meaning in their art but whether competitive martial arts tournaments are of any moral value is far from obvious. Suggesting that meaning in life is derived solely from moral activities would probably eliminate the possibility of most, if not all sports from being meaningful. Morality may not be a necessary part of meaning in life, but according to Wolf there does need to be an objective element to a project that one is actively engaged in which she calls, a project of worth, which will be further discussed in the next section.

### **1.2.2 Projects of Worth**

In our previous discussion of active engagement, we have reviewed the nature of the activities in which one may be actively engaged according to Wolf. Doing drugs, counting blades of grass or watching goldfish could all constitute an activity in which one is actively engaged. However, many people would agree that these activities do not add meaning to one's life. To address this issue, Wolf suggests that all activities that one is actively engaged in must also be projects of objective worth in order for them to be able

to add meaning to one's life. This section will discuss the objective conditions for meaning, according to Wolf's view.

Projects of worth are activities which have an objective value. These are not merely activities that one thinks are worthwhile; they are really worthwhile, worth doing and worth investing one's life in. This description might seem vague and this is for a reason. The objective attraction is not meant to create barriers around what is considered a meaningful activity but merely to prevent obviously worthless or bad activities from being considered meaningful. A common example used is that counting blades of grass for no other reason than some unhealthy obsession with counting grass may be perceived as meaningful to the agent but it is reasonable to assume that others would not consider this activity worthwhile at all. In fact, it's more reasonable to believe that this individual is experiencing some delusion of meaning rather than the real feeling of it (Wolf 1997, p. 208). Wolf's approach to this problem is to say that the activity that one is actively engaged in must be of objective worth in order to be meaningful.

One way to think about a project of objective worth is for it to be an activity whose justification is beyond oneself. There needs to be some reason outside yourself to engage in the activity. To clarify, this is not necessarily related to any moral reason. The activity does not need to have any benefit to others but has to be something that removes focus from the self and onto something else or to better oneself, like painting or writing in a journal. Another way to think of this is that the activity should have a value that is acknowledged by others, in essence, an intersubjective value system that determines if the activity is meaningful or is worth loving (Wolf 2010, p.41). For example, a person may be deeply in love with her boyfriend but family and friends all unanimously agree

that he is not worthy of her love. He has frequent violent outbursts and a drug addiction. She claims that she knows he will change and that she derives some form of meaning from investing in their relationship but it is evident that this relationship is actually destructive to her life. The opinion that her boyfriend is not worth loving because of his actions is not meant to judge or harm anyone but to help cultivate a healthy life for the girlfriend.

Schlick also has an objective condition in his conception of meaning. In order for activities to add meaning to one's life, he maintains, this must not only amount to play, but also be "creative" in the sense that they create something of value to others. He uses the example of the scientist. The scientist who is wrapped up in simply *knowing* is just as playful as the child building a sandcastle, but the scientist moreover creates something of value to others with their play - knowledge (Schlick 1927, p.60) The idea of creative play is meant to eliminate useless forms of play such as counting marbles or blades of grass. The agent must be involved in the act of creating, where play would be just doing something for the sake of doing it with no value or end necessary. Schlick's creative play and Wolf's projects of objective worth are similar in that they are meant to remove useless or even bad activities

### **1.2.3 The Relationship Between Active Engagement and Projects of Worth**

Wolf's account of meaning in life, called the Fitting Fulfillment view, is laudable for its ability to incorporate subjective and objective elements in a way that feels intuitive. In this view, both the subjective and objective elements are 'suitably and inextricably linked' (Wolf 2010, p. 9). This essentially means that the most meaning in

life occurs when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness harmoniously in an activity (Wolf 1997, 211).

The two-part description of Wolf's view may cause some confusion because it is unclear how aware an agent must be of the objective value of their activity. It may seem that if one is completely gripped and interested in something but unaware that this activity takes part in something that is larger than oneself, then one is not doing something that really adds meaning to their life. Imagine an individual who studies insects because they are so deeply interested in insects but are unaware of the consequences of their studies. Years after their death, their notes lead to the discovery of a way to compost all forms of garbage using certain insects. Did that individual's study add meaning to their life? In Wolf's conception, it seems the answer is yes. Perhaps this individual's life would have felt more meaningful had they known the worth of their notes, but since the studying of insects is an activity that is larger than oneself it still fully satisfies the objective worth condition of Wolf's Fitting Fulfillment view.

### **1.3 General Criticisms of Wolf's Conception of Meaning in Life**

#### **1.3.1 Unknown Objective Worth**

Various criticisms may be directed at Wolf's Fitting Fulfillment conception of meaning in life. One has to do with the discussion of 1.2.3. Consider another hypothetical scenario involving another entomologist who was just as passionate about studying insects but his notes do not lead to any objectively useful discovery, would this mean that he has a less meaningful life than the first entomologist? Can the varying levels of objective worth lead to a hierarchy of meaningful activities and does that cause some

moral implications? Who is to say that one activity is more meaningful to an individual than another?

I would argue that this criticism is irrelevant because the purpose of Wolf's objective worth is not to create a hierarchy or to discriminate against certain valuable activities but rather prevent harmful or delusional activities from being deemed meaningful. Wolf holds that even baking is an activity that can add meaning to one's life. The baker has pride in her skills and wishes to share her enthusiasm with others. She may be drawn by a particular value in baking that is both subjective (the pride she takes in her baking skills) and objective (the value in baking a delicious chocolate cake is that it has a value outside of oneself), but a baker may not realize the objective worth of her baking in the moment. Baking a cake is not the sole activity that contributes to a meaningful life but it can be one element in a sea of activities that vary in both their subjective attractiveness and objective attraction but collectively result in a meaningful life. It is only important that each activity has the quality of active engagement and objective value to enhance the meaning of one's life.

### **1.3.2 Objectively Good and Bad Projects (Adams)**

Another criticism of Wolf's conception has to do with the fact that some activities can be both of (objective) worth and immoral, as Adams has pointed out (Adams 2010, pp. 75-84). Consider, Adams asks us, the patriotic activity of Claus Von Stauffenberg, a German army officer who attempted to assassinate Hitler but failed. It was Von Stauffenberg's patriotism that motivated him to organize the plot to assassinate Hitler and Adams' asks us whether this sort of activity, which hinges on the pride of one's country

and immoral deaths of other people in other countries, can be both of object worth and immoral. Adams' point is to show that there can be activities that are of objective value but contain that are, or are nonetheless immoral in some way, as in the case of Von Stauffenberg. Adams wants to clarify whether actions such as these can, according to Wolf's conception add meaning to one's life. I think another example that illustrates Adams' point can be found in martial arts, specifically boxing. According to CNN, on average 13 boxers die due to injuries caused by the sport each year (Morse 2019. Each Year.). Many more suffer permanent damage. The boxers enter the ring with the intention of fighting and winning. They may not have the intention to kill but there certainly is the intention to cause great harm. It is hard to argue that there's even a source of good here except that it is a legal sport in most places, yet boxing is usually considered an activity of objective worth by the very fact that it does still exist with little resistance from others.

Boxing may thus have some objective (i.e. aesthetic or athletic) value but it is partly immoral because it aims to cause harm onto others. However, I think that the solution to this issue is found in the fact that some immoral activities may be perceived as a necessary evil to succeed in the greater good and are therefore not outright evil (or at least don't have evil intentions). Boxing and the actions of Von Stauffenberg are, at least in my view, only apparently but not really immoral. Causing injury is considered part of the sport of boxing. It is necessary to win and both athletes agree to the terms and conditions of the sport; boxers only cause injury because it is in the spirit of sport, not through evil intent. Engaging in war may be necessary to stop the war, as was the case in Claus Von Stauffenberg. He only engaged in immoral actions because he saw it as the only solution to stopping an even greater evil. Not including morality in meaning in life is

more compelling than to include it because it would restrict activities that have good intentions but contain a necessary evil from being considered meaningful.

### **1.3.3 Objective Worth in the Arts (Koethe)**

Another interesting criticism of Wolf's conception of meaning comes from John Koethe (Koethe 2010, pp. 67-74), who argues that the criteria for the success of a project may not be as easy to measure for artistic activities compared to scientific ones. The question of whether abstract art, for example, is considered real art is the center of many controversies. A canvas painted entirely one shade of red may be considered art to some but not to others. Whereas a cure for cancer or new scientific discovery is usually universally considered as having objective worth in that there is a certain goal that has a clear measurable value. For example, the worth of a cure for cancer is measured by how many lives it saves. The case is not as clear for abstract art and Koethe wonders if in cases such as the judgement of aesthetic projects the application of objective attraction might have negative consequences.

Koethe agrees that an artist finds meaning in their work because they become actively engaged in it. Koethe notes that determining whether art is objectively attractive is difficult to assess, unlike in other disciplines or activities where there is more of a clear line indicating whether a result is useful or the product of delusion. There is also the possibility of a project being considered delusional at the time but years later being considered a masterpiece, such as Henri Rousseau whose art was originally considered to be fraudulent by journalists but who is now regarded as a central figure in modern art. An artist who becomes actively engaged in their work may take pride and find meaning in

their painting and view it as having a personal value to them. However, others may disagree and consider his painting to not be art at all and value it as worthless. This is also often seen when parents gear their young towards the sciences rather than the arts because they believe that artistic pursuits only result in the 'starving artist'. What would the objective attractiveness criteria be for activities such as aesthetic ones which have no easily measurable value?

To defend against this sort of criticism I would suggest that the objective worth in Wolf's account of meaning does not necessarily imply 'precisely measurable worth' as seems to be Koethe's main concern. It is true that science can be considered more objective as it has a more precise measurement system than the arts. However, that does not mean that something like art does not have a success criterion. There are many ways that activities can be projects of (objective) worth. For example, if an abstract artist were to have the goal of wanting his art to invoke confusion in the audience and for the most part succeeds in bringing out those emotions, that can be considered objectively successful to the same degree that most sciences are. As previously mentioned, Wolf's conception of projects of objective worth is not very rigid but is used merely to deter the possibility of delusional activities, such as counting blades of grass. In the case of someone who is not yet good at art or perceives their ability to be better than it is, constructive criticisms and failure is not necessarily a bad thing and would still be considered objectively valuable in Wolf's view because it is providing the potential artist with feedback on what they need to improve. The success of an activity does not make it any more or less valuable, it is just a part of the process to becoming successful in that particular activity.

#### **1.3.4 Is an Objective Condition Really Needed? (Arpaly)**

Nomy Arpaly presents another criticism of Wolf's conception of meaning (Arpaly 2010, pp. 85 - 91). According to Arpaly, Wolf should not include a Projects of Objective Worth condition because normal people would not engage in delusional actions. Arpaly claims that it does not seem reasonable to have an objective condition for the purpose of omitting delusional behaviours and actions from being perceived as meaningful because a 'normal' adult would not find meaning in delusions. Arpaly notes that a person who spends their days actively engaged in interacting with their goldfish, and perhaps even "marrying" it because it is the only living creature who understands them, would be unusual to say the least. A normal person would not engage in such activities and thus the objective attraction would not be necessary.

To address Arpaly's main objection, while it is true that most normal people would actively engage only in activities of value, there are nevertheless some otherwise normal people that may have some form of obsession with something that can be considered delusional. Therefore, we cannot rely on merely 'normal' to prevent unusual behaviour and Wolf's theory is meant to be a general one, not simply for "normal" people. For example, in the case of an individual with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), they may be perfectly normal in every sense but have the constant need to repeat certain activities to comfort their anxieties. An individual with OCD becomes uncomfortable with thoughts that may be considered normal to others but are perceived as profound and a judgement of their character to them. For instance, an intrusive thought such as 'I can't remember if I locked my door' occurs every now and then for everyone. It's either brushed off as something to think about later or an individual may return to

their living space and check to see if their door is locked. Someone with OCD however may check that their door is locked three times, every single time they leave the house because if they do not then the door might not be locked for sure and then someone could steal their dog. In the mind of an OCD individual, turning the knob three times is perceived as meaningful to them in that it relieves their anxiety by ensuring the safety of their loved ones, but checking that the door is locked three times every time they encounter their front door is objectively delusional. This activity would not satisfy Wolf's objective condition and is therefore not a meaningful activity. If an activity, like triple checking that the door is locked, is merely important because it is encouraging an individual's OCD (which can regularly lead to an individual engaging in repetitive, meaningless behaviour that appears meaningful to them) then there needs to be an objective element of some sort to eliminate this from the otherwise normal activities that this individual might engage in without eliminating potential meaningful, yet non-delusional activities. Relying merely on 'normal' is problematic because, checking that a door is locked is normal behaviour but repeatedly checking it is not. A normal person can also still actively engage in something completely worthless, like getting high from any form of drug. Wolf keeps the explanation of projects of worth purposefully vague to provide some structure that eliminates toxic behaviours from being perceived as meaningful while also being flexible in what is considered valuable.

It is also quite unfair to assume that normal people always find meaning in normal activities. Assume that those who are not psychologically normal to become actively engaged in not normal things. Humans come in a range of normalcy and this varies throughout one's life and life circumstances. To trust in the conditions of what is

considered a normal human would not be fair and thus it seems wiser to place conditions on the activities themselves, as Wolf is suggesting, rather than the human.

#### **1.4 Specific Criticisms of Wolf on Active Engagement as Necessary for Meaning**

It is especially important for me to support active engagement as a necessary condition for meaning in life because it is central to the fundamental argument of this thesis, which is that a lack of meaning in life comes from situations that interfere with active engagement, i.e. from sources of disengagement. Addressing the criticisms that active engagement is important to add meaning to one's life will be necessary to eliminate the possibility that my thesis doesn't really touch on meaning. Contemporary theorist of meaning, Thaddaeus Metz, presents the main extant criticisms of Wolf's insistence that active engagement is necessary for meaning in what I will call the Negative Attitudes criticism and the Mother Teresa criticism.

##### **1.4.1 Negative Attitudes (Metz)**

The first criticism that Thaddeus Metz's suggests is that negative attitudes, rather than positive ones such as active engagement may be involved in meaningful activities, such as in the case of people fighting for injustice. Metz' is assuming that active engagement is a positive attitude. He states, "I do not have in mind the idea that some other pro-attitude, such as desire, might rather be involved; instead, my first point is that negative attitudes towards undesirable conditions such as injustice, sickness, and poverty might be factors relevant to the subjective aspect of meaning" (Metz 2013, p.181).

While he is right to suggest that these situations may be relevant to the subjective aspect of meaning, although the agent probably does not have a positive attitude towards being sick or poor, I would argue that when Wolf used the example of passion and love for the activity that one is engaged in, she used it more so as an example rather than the central point. She does not necessarily mean that activities that provide us with meaning are *pleasurable* but merely interesting, gripping and absorbing in the eyes of the agent. It's not necessarily pleasurable to be actively engaged, in the same way that eating a cake is. As previously discussed, Schlick's difference between pleasure and joy can allow for painful or non-pleasurable things to still bring joy and while Metz is right that this is a positive attitude and that negative ones can also bring meaning to one's life, activities that are perceived to be fueled by negative emotions exist to motivate a person to change their circumstances to contain positive emotions. Active engagement can be said to feel satisfying rather than emotionally positive. To use Metz's example, take someone protesting for something that they believe in. There is a joy that comes from doing good and in the eyes of the protesters, they are protesting for the greater good which has a necessary bad involved in it. This can be compared to how boxers enjoy boxing but do not enjoy hurting others. In another example, one could take an instance of a bad break-up, where the partner, while fueled with anger takes out her rage at a punching bag. There are of course negative emotions at play, but the now ex-girlfriend is now hungry for the positive emotions that come from being actively engaged and finds that in the focus that comes from her interest in punching things. Active engagement works hand-in-hand with negative attitudes, as it appears to work as a means of getting one out of the negative attitude and thus contributing to a meaningful life. Meaning is felt when a negative

experience becomes positive, such as a lesson learned from a negative experience or the accomplishment of providing more justice in an unjust society. Meaning in life cannot be felt through consistently being in a negative situation with negative attitudes, there must be some positive (however slight it might be) that comes out of the negative for the negative to have any sort of meaning.

With that being said, the main defense from Metz's criticism here is that a negative attitude always comes with a pro-attitude. Metz suggests that in the case of an individual deriving meaning from fighting injustice, individuals do not have a pro-attitude towards fighting injustice because the individual hates injustice and their hatred and actions to create a better world gives them a sense of meaning and purpose. To hate injustice, one must also have a deep interest in justice and engaging in an activity that strives to achieve the goal of creating a just world. The negative attitude serves as a motive for the positive attitude. Therefore, the situations that Metz discusses as objections to active engagement do not actually contradict Wolf's active engagement condition. This is found even in sports; individuals usually hate to lose and are fueled by their hatred of losing but this source of hatred can also be framed as the individual loving to win. If the activity is inherently evil and coupled with a negative attitude, such as cold-blooded murder, I do not think that this would constitute a meaningful activity. As previously mentioned, Wolf argues that it is not human nature to find meaning in immoral activities, and therefore would not be considered active engagement even if it appeared to the individual to be meaningful (this is where projects of worth come into play). In essence, that even though these negative attitudes may be present in cases of

meaningful activities (so long as they are activities of objective value), they still always seem to be present along with what Wolf calls active engagement.

#### **1.4.2 Mother Teresa Example (Metz)**

Metz's second main criticism of Wolf's insistence that active engagement is necessary for meaning is simply that there seem to be cases in which meaningful activities do not involve active engagement. Metz says that he doubts people are actively engaged in activities that are painful or not enjoyable, i.e. he believes that there can be meaning in activities that are not pleasurable. He uses Mother Teresa as an example and says, "It is unlikely that Mother Teresa would have been terribly cheerful emptying bedpans and putting bandages on lepers" (Metz 2013, p. 183). I think this might be a slight misinterpretation of Wolf's theory as she explicitly states that active engagement needn't involve pleasure. As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, a competitive swimmer or a boxer may not be experiencing pleasure during practice or a competition but they are still focused and 'in the zone'. Active engagement could be better described as a deep focus on the goal at hand. Pleasure is not necessary for active engagement and it is quite often than not that an activity that one becomes actively engaged in is not entirely pleasurable or enjoyable. So even if the activities of a Mother Teresa are derived of pleasure, they can still be ones that involve active engagement in Wolf's sense. Something similar could be said of the mother creating a Halloween costume, she most likely did not enjoy every moment of creating the costume but she was so absorbed in the activity that the lack of pleasure or the frustration does not really occur to her. Mother Teresa goes out of her way to help others, which must require active engagement to

survive mentally and physically. In these moments, it is similar to an athlete being in ‘the zone’. This has been discussed earlier in the example of the swimmer training for the Olympics. To achieve one’s goals, it is not necessary to continuously feel pleasure but it is necessary to be actively engaged in the activity. To overcome the hardships, a deep interest in the art of what one is doing is all that is necessary. In the end, pleasure is not necessary for a meaningful life in Wolf’s view of a meaningful life. There may be cases where the activity is pleasurable but, in many cases, it is not or contains an element that is not pleasurable. It’s not that the agent enjoys the pain but that the pain is worth the reward.

## **Chapter 2: The Psychology of Active Engagement**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter discussed the experience of 'active engagement' as a condition of meaning in life from the perspective of philosophers. In the psychological literature there exists an experience similar to active engagement called flow. This concept was made popular in contemporary psychology by Csikszentmihalyi, who coined the term 'flow' to represent an experience that is similar to what is colloquially known as being in the zone. In reply to Wolf's (2010) lectures on active engagement, Haidt introduced the similarities between active engagement and what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'vital engagement'. Vital engagement being the sense of personal meaning that develops through repetitive experiences of flow in a particular activity (Haidt 2010, p.94). For example, flow may occur in a game of chess or during a meaningful conversation between friends but vital engagement is when the agent's life purpose revolves around an activity that gives them the experience of flow in every instance. The activity becomes part of their identity, such as swimming to a swimmer.

As will be demonstrated in this chapter, flow is, in essence, the conceptual equivalent of the philosophical notion of 'active engagement'; whereas vital engagement is not just a single experience but emerges through many experiences with flow or active engagement. Vital engagement can be viewed as a more intense and prolonged state of flow, one that envelopes the individual's whole existence. A swimmer does not need to be swimming to be vitally engaged but she does need to engage in the act of swimming to experience flow. Although vital engagement is similar to active engagement, as discussed by Haidt (2010, p.94), after reviewing the widespread research on both concepts, it

appears that flow, rather than vital engagement is the psychological equivalent to active engagement and thus will be the central focus of this chapter.

Flow may be characterized as being drawn into an activity when the agent's perceived skills are met with a proper level challenge (Haidt 2010, p.94). This characterization was based on Csikszentmihalyi's description of flow in his earlier studies, which continues to be used today. Many studies that have recently emerged confirm his initial definition and have merely specified the experience even further, however the overall idea remains the same. Flow according to the literature is most often described as a state of deep concentration on an activity of interest that removes the everyday worries from the mind. This state can only occur when one judges their skills to be capable of achieving the activity at hand (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Araujo and Hein, 2016). This definition merely scratches the surface of the flow experience but more on it will be elaborated on throughout this chapter.

From the foregoing characterization, it is quite clear that flow and active engagement are at least greatly similar, especially in the phenomenological experience of flow. In the previous chapter, active engagement was described as being similar to the experience one has in taking up a hobby, in that the activity is perceived to be so interesting to the individual that it grips and absorbs them. Recall the examples in the previous chapter of the mother working on a Halloween costume for her daughter and being able to work throughout the night, or the athlete who overcomes physical pain during practice and competitions. In all the examples provided by Wolf and the description of active engagement provided in her lectures, it seems that active engagement can be replaced with flow and the meaning would not change.

In Csikszentmihalyi's view, the main difference between flow and active engagement concerns the intensity and quality of being in the zone where nothing else matters but the challenge at hand. This and the following chapters' main purpose will be to elaborate on the nature of that experience regardless of its intensity and duration with the help of psychological literature. This chapter will specifically focus on the historical accounts of flow in psychology while the following chapter will address the most recent literature on the topic.

## **2.2 A Brief History of Flow and Vital Engagement**

In 1975, Csikszentmihalyi wrote a book called *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* in which he recounts the findings from his studies on flow. In this book he notes that flow was originally called 'optimal experience' or 'optimal state' and this term is still sometimes used in research today. Csikszentmihalyi thought the term 'flow' suited the experience primarily because 'optimal state' made the experience sound static and convoluted to the general public. On the other hand, *flow* is simple and encompasses the effortless motion of the experience.

Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura were the early pioneers of flow and vital engagement as it is known today. In 1975 Csikszentmihalyi conducted many studies on joy and motivation. In the initial studies, Csikszentmihalyi performed both qualitative and quantitative analyses on chess players, rock climbers, surgeons and dancers. He asked them various questions regarding the experiences they had when engaged with their activity of choice, which revealed that the experience of flow was the motivating factor for the engagement in these activities in the first place. People find flow in these

activities because it is rarely found in everyday life, as the environmental factors of everyday life do not promote a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, p.73).

Csikszentmihalyi concluded that there's a certain structure to certain activities that are more conducive to flow experiences such as games and activities that have clear boundaries. The research showed that these activities are used as a form of positive escape from real life problems. Usually activities that are used to escape from reality are often perceived as negative, however that is not the case here. Flow experiences are positive and contain meaning in that they can help the individual develop a positive sense of self through the feedback received when engaging with the activity (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Provided other conditions are met, flow experience can accumulate into the creation of a meaningful life through vital engagement.

### **2.3 Aspects of the Phenomenological Experience of Flow**

In his initial research, Csikszentmihalyi uncovered many aspects of flow to better describe the complex experience. It became clear through the research that the structure of an activity can help facilitate a flow experience. However, it's important to note that although it can affect the depth of flow, structure and environment are not necessary for flow experience to occur. This is partially due to the autotelic personality of some individuals, which allows them to more easily engage in flow despite the structure of the activity. Csikszentmihalyi found that it is possible that genetic and environmental factors can influence the growth of an autotelic personality but his initial research left it unclear what these factors were. As mentioned above, the structure of an activity can impact the depth of flow that one experiences. Games, for example, seem to be designed to

specifically initiate a flow state. When studying various flow experiences, it became clear that there were varying levels: deep-flow, shallow-flow and microflow.

There were various experiences expressed through the interviewees' recollection of flow experience that led to the description of certain key phenomenological aspects of flow (the description was primarily developed based on deep-flow and shallow-flow experiences). There were many categories that emerged within the description but they all fall into three main categories. It's important to note that although these are discussed as individual aspects, they overlap greatly and are more like the intersections of a web than mutually exclusive aspects. The three categories: a) the perceived adventure, b) unwavering concentration, and c) the spiritual-like experience. The next sections will address the three categories of flow-aspects as they were discussed in Csikszentmihalyi's initial research with the intent of saving the current literature on these topics for the next section.

### **2.3.1 The Perceived Adventure**

Csikszentmihalyi's study found that an activity had to be autotelic for it to induce a state of flow. An autotelic activity is one that is done for its own sake, i.e. it is perceived to be finally valuable. From the experiences reported by his participants, Csikszentmihalyi concluded that an autotelic activity is one that is perceived to be one of discovery, exploration and "a stretching of one's self towards new dimensions of skills and competence" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, p.33). From this explanation, it is reasonable to suggest that at its core, an autotelic activity is an activity that is perceived to be an adventure of some sort. An adventure is fun, exciting, not boring and typically done for

the sake of itself. Those who seek adventure want to discover and explore for personal growth rather than for superficial and material things. As Csikszentmihalyi explains, discovery and exploration imply transcending what one knows and is capable of. This can lead to the discovery of new territory in the mind (by learning a new skill) or physically (through pushing the body to its limits). A chess player finds the possibility of discovering new techniques to be exciting and the rock-climbers are thrilled by the exploration of their art. To be clear, the definition of 'adventure' here is not limited to a form of travel or something dangerous in the typical sense. As will be discussed in the next section, there is a risk in flow, the risk of failure due to lack of concentration or a lack of skill. I would like to think that adventure can be of the intellectual or physical sort without ever having to leave one's seat. For example, reading a book or watching a movie can stimulate a sense of adventure. Thinking deeply about philosophical concepts can very well lead to feeling like one has gone on an adventure as well. It is also important to differentiate between a healthy adventure, such as the one experienced when in a state of flow versus an unhealthy reason, such as to escape reality in the overuse of hallucinogens. Adventure in flow is not limited to a sense of freedom or escape in autotelic activities (although this can often be included in the experience) but more so for the reason of expanding the mind and soul. Thus, adventure will be discussed here as a form of personal growth and novel discovery from entering uncomfortable territory.

This is quite similar to Schlick's conception of play as discussed in the previous chapter which as we saw was also connected to Wolf's notion of active engagement. Autotelic activities or activities that are finally valuable are exciting and enjoyable in and of themselves. An autotelic activity feels like playing, it feels like an adventure. Whether

the adventure is simply overcoming an intellectual or physical challenge, exploring new heights (as is the case with rock climbers) or creating something new. What all these activities have in common is learning something new and thus this personal growth is more intrinsically rewarding than any external reward. In the case of rock climbers, adventure and discovery is in its very nature. Anyone who has been rock-climbing, even in an indoor rock-climbing center knows that the very place itself gives a sense that one is an adventurer. Climbing to the top of the rock wall or a cliff is the exploration of new heights through visually experiencing the world from a different perspective. Rock climbers reported "exploring a strange place" and "designing or discovering something new" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 79). The adventure in rock climbing does not need further explanation but in other activities, such as chess, it may not be as clear. However, I will argue that the sense of discovery and adventure is still there.

In the study on chess players, Csikszentmihalyi found that "The primary reward of the activity is clearly the flow experience which results from the intellectual challenge of the game itself" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, p.67). Secondary reasons were for the social experience which included travelling to tournaments (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, p.68). In both the primary and secondary reasons exploration, discovery and adventure are a central part. The challenge of the game is a form of discovery and transcending what one thought they were capable of. Travelling to tournaments is a clear adventure that physically takes the individual into new territory. There is an excitement that is felt when engaged in an intense chess game. It's not entirely comfortable, yet the agent still has a sense of control. The chess board becomes a new world to explore with the opponent as the rival that one is trying to overcome.

Perhaps adventure is not the forethought of the chess player but that sense of positive anxiety from excitement yet worry, being in control while knowing that the outcome is unpredictable. All these senses that are being stimulated are similar to the chess player as in the case of the rock climbers. These senses were found to be greater in female players than male players due to the male dominant nature of the game. Women players tend to "...see themselves as pioneers in a strange territory, almost overwhelmed by the odds but proud and excited to have survived" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, p.72). These feelings are not unlike the ones you would expect Tolkien's Frodo to feel when travelling to Mordor to destroy the Ring. On the other hand, when playing chess men tend to feel relaxed and have more friends interested in the game than women did. Csikszentmihalyi attributed these differences to the strong gender stereotypes associated with the game and felt at tournaments. Chess tournaments at the time appeared to be obviously more uncomfortable and unwelcoming to women, cultivating the feelings of anxiety that female chess players often experienced. Nonetheless, in the study 74% of participants shared that what they enjoyed the most about chess was the sense of being in another world and the different experience that each chess game brings (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, p.64). Thus, the awareness of the adventure-like nature of the game is a reason for playing in the first place to the majority of players as well as all the other individuals who were interviewed. Flow is enjoyable and makes tasks that may otherwise be perceived as unenjoyable intensely satisfying and fun.

### 2.3.2 Unwavering Concentration

This next type of aspect of the experience of flow deals with the intense, focused concentration that is the pinnacle of the experience. The moment the agent becomes in the zone and one move flows seamlessly into the next without breaking concentration or thought is part of what makes it so enjoyable. An activity that is challenging and also of interest requires the agent's full attention and energy and thus distracts them from the boring and problematic nature of reality (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 50). A chess player recalls that when in flow, "The roof could fall in and, if it missed you, you would be unaware of it" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 66). The concentration is so powerful that the sense of time and space disappear. This overlaps with Wolf's active engagement in that they are both discussing the pinnacle of the experience as being so absorbing that the individual loses sight of all else. The mother working on the Halloween costume lost her sense of time and feelings of exhaustion due to the unwavering focus she had directed towards the challenge at hand.

What causes this to happen is slightly unclear but part of the reason was found to be that there was a balanced skill-to-challenge ratio. Csikszentmihalyi found that a balanced skill-to-challenge ratio led to individuals being better capable of entering deep focus. However, the skilled do not only need to be objectively capable of accomplishing the task, the agent also needs to judge themselves capable of being able to accomplish the skill for a flow state to occur. There's a risk associated with this judgement because it could be incorrect and lead to failure and feelings of inadequacy. Whenever a person is entering a state of flow, they are challenging their judgement of themselves and what they are capable of, which is a very delicate matter. When a chess player was reflecting

on his experience, he would deem himself capable of beating the opponent during the games in which he experienced flows (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 43-44). The chess player, whether consciously or unconsciously, at the beginning of the game felt that he was capable of taking on the challenge which gave him the confidence to continue. In the case of the dancers, perceived skill is necessary for focus due to the nature of the activity. A lack of confidence showed that the dancers were less able to experience flow. Those who rated themselves as having the required dancing skills to achieve the challenges were more likely to engage in flow in that particular activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, p.120).

This strength of focus relying on one's perceived skills was also found in surgeons. Depending on the complexity of the case they either felt anxious, relaxed, bored or flow. The complexity of a case is relative to skill, and depending on the skills of the surgeon one may find a case so easy that it's boring while another finds the same case to be a challenge. If their skill is not adequate, they may feel anxious and thus not capable of fully focusing on the surgery. To help initiate a flow state and remove anxiety, the surgeons perform surgery in a specific environment that narrows their field of focus to just the task at hand. This concentration is reported to be further exemplified by the constant feedback and clear goals they have in the operating room. During the operation the surgeon receives feedback and can adjust wherever necessary. It is not just in the surgeon case that feedback and ability to adjust accordingly was important, all cases require this for flow to occur (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, pp. 41, 82, 106, 133). The feedback loop and goals for a surgeon come from experience and the preparation work that occurs before the surgery. The surgeon often knows from beginning to end the details of the surgery before it happens and any distraction could lead to detrimental

results, therefore the most focused concentration is necessary. Rock dancing (a popular type of dancing in the 70's that was similar to swing dancing except done to rock music) and rock climbing do require the same type of focus due to the dangerous nature of the situation. Chess has the danger of losing, which inspires their complete focus. This focus could be just as strong as a life or death situation. The ability to act properly on feedback, in any activity, requires skills built through experience which provides further insight into the importance of having the required skills to experience complete focus and thus experience flow. In this regard, there is a stressful element to the flow experience. The activity is challenging their self-perception which could make or break their spirits depending on the outcome.

### **2.3.3 A Spiritual-Like Experience**

The flow state is paradoxical in nature. In some cases, time speeds up while in other times it slows down. The individual feels in control of their body and the activity while also feeling like they are not in control. Despite the stressful nature of flow experience, people report feeling relaxed. The individual enters a state that is both hyper aware, yet unaware. By zoning in their focus on a particular problem unnecessary sensory stimulation is removed from their senses. This is quite comparable to the absent-minded philosopher discussed in the *Theaetetus*. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates explains that the Philosopher looks absent-minded to the common folk but in reality, they are actually absorbed in complex and high-level thinking that consumes their entire attention. The philosopher is so absorbed in their own thoughts and capable of exploring ideas that were never thought of before and yet, they cannot make their own bed or in Thales case, avoid

falling into a well. The complex experience of flow can be mistaken for a spiritual one and thus, I have categorized the final aspect of flow to be feeling like a spiritual experience, despite it not being one. I initially labeled this aspect as a creative experience and although this adequately describes certain parts of the experience that I'm trying to capture it does not encompass the entirety of it. The spiritual-like experience of flow is not just the expression of creativity or the experience of pure beauty, it has a way of taking the mind outside of oneself in a way that could lead to the belief that mind-body dualism undoubtedly exists.

In one of the interviews, a rock climber explained his experience of flow as, "...so involved he might lose the consciousness of his own identity and melt into the rock...You become a robot- not more like an animal. It's pleasant. There is a feeling of total involvement... you feel like a panther powering up the rock" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 43). The experience discussed here of losing one's identity or self occurs frequently throughout the descriptions of flow. A dancer recalls her experience and shares that "... I'm more conscious of my body because it's in action and doing things that it doesn't usually do and behaving in ways it doesn't usually behave, and it seems to take on a life of its own, kind of. And I'm so much a part of it, but I'm also separate from it in a way" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 116). The concentration necessary for flow states leads to these paradoxical feelings about the body. A loss of consciousness of one's body yet being in control of it is often reported. There is a universally agreed out-of-self-experience that occurs while simultaneously having control and lack of control of one's body. There is the immediate control of one's person in regard to the task at hand but there is a loss of self as the intense focus removes whatever is unnecessary from the senses. The chess

players discuss the importance of not losing focus because it could cause a blunder and end the game. They feel both confident, smarter, cleverer yet still humble and in control by the necessity in maintaining focus and composure to win.

The most commonly reported out-of-self-experience, perhaps because it contains an objective measure, is the distortion of time or hyper-awareness of time depending on who is asked and what activity it is. Surgeons have recorded feeling that time speeds up in a difficult surgery but in one case a surgeon recalls being extremely hyper-aware of the time due to it being necessary for his art. He shares that he is subconsciously aware of the time to the minute throughout the surgery in a way that does not occur outside operations (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 135). Chess players reported time passing faster, others slower and some reported feeling like time did not exist. The experience of time when engaged with flow is interesting because unlike our consciousness or awareness, time can be objectively measured. We have all experienced a moment where our perceived time did not match the clock. Our awareness is skewed during these experiences because our concentration is so deep that it does not have the ability to create an accurate representation of ourselves within time and space. This can make one feel like they are floating, timeless or not in control while simultaneously feeling in control and this is part of what gives flow the feeling of a spiritual-like experience.

## **2.4 The Structure of Flow Activities**

Csikszentmihalyi developed a Model of Flow (see Illustration 1) that shows part of the structural factors (these can include both environmental and subjective factors) that are necessary for flow. The first factor has already been discussed and that is the need for an

activity that has the proper skill-to-challenge ratio. Flow is the perfect balance between action opportunities (challenges) and action capabilities (skills). If challenges are too demanding and skills are not strong enough to meet it, the result is anxiety. Feelings of inadequacy occur in this situation that infringes on the person's ability to focus on the task at hand. On the other hand, if the challenge is not demanding enough for the skill level of the individual the doors to the outside world of worry and anxiety are left open. Although it is necessary for one's skill to match the challenge at hand, Csikszentmihalyi notes that it's also the individual's perceived skill level that is important as well. Thus, when the individual has the skills necessary *and* perceives themselves to have the required skills, the individual is partially set up for flow potential.

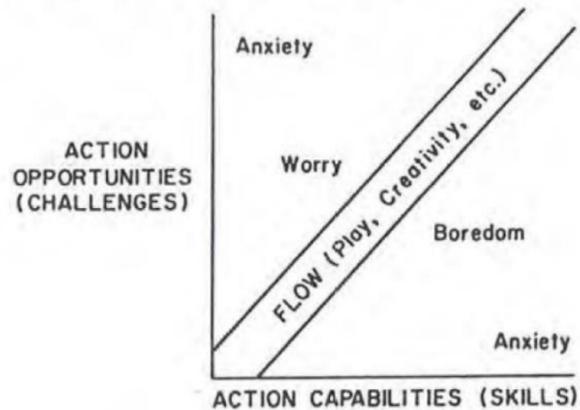


Illustration 1: Flow Model Developed by Csikszentmihalyi

Any activity can lead to a flow experience but it appears that the sole purpose of games, art and rituals is to induce flow. Structured systems of action are more likely to cultivate flow because a limited stimulus field merges action and awareness. The reason for this is that they have clear rules, goals and boundaries that allow people to concentrate their actions on the immediate task at hand (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 49). This creates an

environment where the individual feels in control. A concrete structure creates boundaries that sets the limits of where the mind can wander in order to succeed at the task, temporarily forgetting external problems (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 48).

What is more important than the permanent environmental factors previously mentioned, is the ability for an individual to be able to manipulate part of their environment to conform with the requirements of a flow experience. Certain people are able to engage in a flow episode can also start just by manipulating their environment to conform with the characteristics of a flow episode (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 49). For example, a swimmer can be in their room and in front of the mirror and put themselves in the mindset of being at practice and focus on analyzing their stroke by pretending to swim while staring at themselves in the mirror. This allows them to analyze their stroke and requires the same amount of focus, if not more than what occurs in a pool. When lying in bed, they may visualize swimming because they are familiar with the feel of the pool and know how many strokes it takes for them to get from one end of the pool to the other.

A person is also capable of controlling their environmental factors to better suit their activity for flow. If the challenge is too difficult then reducing the challenge or increasing one's skill can help with inducing flow. If the activity is too easy then increasing the challenge or handicapping a skill would manipulate the environment to become more favourable to inducing a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 53). I would term those who have learned the cognitive tools to manipulate their environment to promote an enjoyable mental state as the 'Flow enlightened'. Those who are flow enlightened are consciously aware of the usefulness of the flow state, whether they are

aware of the specific terminology or not, they are capable of getting into the zone anywhere and anytime. Csikszentmihalyi notes the importance of the ability for some to control their flow experience because it likely indicates that there is some way to teach people how to do the same which can create a happier community (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1,53).

## **2.5 The Autotelic Personality**

Although he recognized that it is possible that an autotelic personality exists and should be further explored, Csikszentmihalyi, himself did not delve into too much research on the autotelic personality. Previously, I used autotelic to apply to activities that are finally valuable. In this sense, an autotelic personality finds final value in activities more easily than others do. There's a distinction between what I call the flow enlightened and what Csikszentmihalyi calls the autotelic personality. One who is flow enlightened has realized the value of engaging in flow and can control it, usually for a specific activity like the artist towards their art, but they are unable to experience flow in unrelated activities despite it having an autotelic structure. This typically occurs after years of practice and learned discipline. Flow enlightenment comes when an individual is vitally engaged in an activity and has learned how to control their flow state. An example is, a swimmer who is vitally engaged in her sport and is able to tap into flow during her practice despite having practiced for years. On the other hand, an autotelic personality seems to live their life for the enjoyment of it, can find flow in almost anything they do and does not seek to do things for fame, money or power (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 22). An autotelic personality can enjoy activity even if the activity does not have a structure or

environment that promotes flow. There are people who refuse to live for external rewards and simply seek fulfilling lives full of flow experiences. An autotelic personality is one that can be found travelling the world and/or learning everything they can without any external motivation.

## **2.6 Levels of Flow**

Csikszentmihalyi created levels of flow to explain the variance in our range of flow. In circumstances where the environment, personality and interest in the activity are ideal, the deepest state of flow can be experienced. Csikszentmihalyi considered chess, rock climbing and other intellectually stimulating games and sports to have the ultimate conditions for a deep and consistent state of flow called deep-flow. These activities have periods of intense and uninterrupted moments until the climax which is usually the end of the activity. After a deep flow experience, the individual typically feels satisfied and relaxed.

Rock dancing was categorized as a shallow-flow activity because there are constant interruptions due to song changes and the social nature of it makes it difficult to engage in a proper deep-flow. In addition to those two factors, rock dancing is typically not choreographed and practice as is the case with other forms of dancing, thus making it more dependent on trust between two parties than skill. Csikszentmihalyi finds that in rock dancing, one is dependent on the actions of the other, it is difficult to engage in a true flow experience because of the unpredictable nature of it. However, he still considers it to have some of the necessary structures of a flow activity such as rules, goals and a balanced skill-challenge ratio. Csikszentmihalyi found that those who felt they were more

skilled and had more experience rock-dancing found it easier to enter a flow state than those who doubted their skills and had less experience. In essence, most of the findings showed that deep-flow and shallow-flow contain many of the same elements just varying levels of it due to environmental conditions. On the other hand, the study on microflow led to interesting findings on human nature and behaviours.

Microflow activities are done in our everyday life and can be used to enter a flow state or a form of relaxation. Microflow, just like other flow states, are done for the sake of doing them but do not require as much concentration. Doodling during a boring lecture to help with focus was one example of a microflow activity. Another one is taking a smoke or snack break to think about ideas for an essay. It's common for students to wander to the fridge in search of a snack in the middle of studying; eating when not hungry is engaging in the activity for the sake of doing it. These activities are just as important to a positive mental state as other flow activities because they can help with promoting deep or shallow states of flow or help with relaxation, such as reading a book or people watching at a cafe. The most popular form of microflow that people engage in is social. According to the research 28.6% of microflow activities were social with attending social events taking up 21% of the total (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 146). Other categories of microflow activities include, kinesthetic (25.5%), imagining (18.9%), attending (16.2), oral (7.5%) and creative (3.5%). The next most popular form of microflow was in kinesthetic activities which are the typical fiddling, walking and other forms of physical movement that was done on their own. Imagining includes daydreaming and talking to self, plants or animals. 'Attending' simply refers to activities such as watching tv, people or listening to music. Oral activities include biting and eating

and lastly, creativity includes anything creative from writing poetry, doodling or playing an instrument.

Csikszentmihalyi collected this data in part by asking people to keep a journal when they have engaged in playful and non-instrumental activities that had no external rewards for 48 hours. Four personality and six cognitive tests were given before and after the 48-hour period. Along with these tests, the participants filled out an alienation scale and a week later the participants were asked to abstain from engaging in any microflow activity for 48 hours and journal their experience. The same personality and cognitive tasks were given before and after the 48 hours this time but instead of an alienation scale they filled out a questionnaire and participated in an interview regarding their flow deprivation experience. The results from the second half of the study on flow deprivation will be discussed in the next chapter (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 143).

This study on microflow led to the preliminary understanding of microflow patterns and their functions. The surprising conclusion of this study was that those who engaged more in social activities than in kinesthetic ones felt less alienated but showed increased self-consciousness and negative emotions. Typically, alienation and negative emotions are highly correlated so these results showed the opposite of the predicted outcome based on previous studies. Highly kinesthetic microflow individuals reported feeling more in control, satisfied and free compared to their social microflow peers who reported the exact opposite (constrained, resentful, and out of control). It was also observed that those who relied on social interactions scored lower on cognitive tasks that required an open and flexible approach to solving a problem.

In conclusion, Csikszentmihalyi discovers that those who rely on feedback from interactions with one's body and an object leads to feelings of alienation but increased mental flexibility and independence while relying on social feedback leads to less alienation but increased mental rigidity towards problem solving and increased dependence on others (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 158-159). Thus, the types of microflow we engage in throughout our daily habits can influence our feelings of meaning in life. With kinesthetic microflow being more important than social microflow as it increases feelings of control of one's life, increased confidence and overall positive feelings.

## **2.7 When Flow becomes Vital Engagement**

Flow itself can occur in almost any activity regardless of how trivial, such as biting the end of a pencil. Flow is, in the most basic sense enjoyment but not necessarily fun, and that can occur even in activities that are not of any significance to the individual and are not vitally engaging. The question is then, when does an experience of flow become vital engagement? In the article, *The Construction of Meaning Through Vital Engagement* (2003), Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi suggest that, "The answer proposed [to the question of when flow becomes vital engagement] is that meaning can grow out of flow in the context of a sustained relationship with an object. We view long-term engagement with art or science as a model for vital engagement in other spheres of life" (p. 94). From this quote, there seems to be no particular moment when flow becomes vital engagement, but overtime the distinction between human and activity melt together until the activity becomes the human's identity. This is expressed in our use of language as well, a person who is vitally engaged in swimming calls themselves a 'swimmer' or a

person who is vitally engaged in poetry is a 'poet'. In the mere use of language alone, the human and activity become one. The moment the individual feels such a strong connection to what they do that they take on the activity as their identity is perhaps the moment they have grown out of mere flow and into vital engagement with the activity.

Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues discovered that each path to vital engagement was relatively similar. It began with an interest in something, followed by many flow experiences that lead into a type of expertise in a particular topic that everyone dreams of achieving (Haidt 2006, 223). Tony Hawk, Michael Phelps, Bill Gates and Arnold Schwarzenegger, to name a few individuals who have tapped into vital engagement, have at least one thing in common and that is that they have discovered their calling and pursued it without any external motivation. Vital engagement is, according to both Haidt and Csikszentmihalyi, the love of an activity made visible (Haidt 2006, 224; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2003, 86). An artist is swept away by the art experience. The artists that Csikszentmihalyi studied would work incredibly hard on a piece, only to not care about it once it was finished. He found that expert artists rarely attend art museums, decorate their homes with art or are interested in talking about the aesthetic qualities of their own or their friends' artwork. Instead they take great interest in discussing new techniques and methods. This validates the theory that there is a deep relationship between experts and the *experience* of creating art than the satisfaction in completing the artwork itself (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, xii). To fulfill vital engagement, it is necessary for the activity to have subjective importance to the individual.

The term vital engagement is meant to capture the relationship between the individual and the world around them. "Engagement" represents the relationship with the

objects of the world. “Vital” represents the significance of the self and the world and the experience of vitality when the experience is going well (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). “An experience that draws a person into participation in the world yet holds little subjective significance may be absorbing—but not vitally engaging” (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 94). The extent to which an activity is vitally engaging is representative of the extent to which the activity is meaningful to the individual. Although it seems that Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi are describing a subjective sense of meaning, it is unclear whether this is actually the case. In the article, they spoke of vital engagement as being the optimal outcome of human development only if flow experience is one that, “entails something beyond moments of enjoyment, in particular, a sense that one’s pursuits serve a larger purpose or otherwise hold vital meaning,” (p.94), and earlier we mentioned that they used artists and scientists as models for the vital experience. While this is not overtly stating that one’s pursuits must serve a larger purpose, or that arts and sciences are the only fields in which vital engagement can occur, it is arguable that these ‘model’ the experience for a reason. The arts, sciences, athletics (which are consistently mentioned as leading to vital engagement) bring the individual outside of themselves. Recall Susan Wolf’s projects of objective value in part two of her fitting fulfillment view, she discussed that the objective element was not very stringent but simply has to serve the purpose of bringing the individual outside of oneself (Wolf, 2006, 42). Wolf’s suggestions on activities of objective worth overlap with the purpose of the subjective meaning characteristic of vital engagement. This could very well be overlapping with Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura’s discussion on the relationship between vital engagement and meaning in life. It seems like they agree that

there is some sort of objective value to the activities that people become vitally engaged in as well as a subjective sense of meaning.

Pursuing something greater than oneself as a quality of vital engagement is also evident in the way that the person takes on the activity as being part of their identity. In the midst of experiencing flow, the activity removes self-consciousness and directs the focus to the activity at hand. Similarly, in vital engagement, consciousness is no longer on the self and the focus continues to be placed on the activity, even when the individual is not directly engaging with it. A swimmer may be eating a meal, but the meal has been specialized to suit the specific needs of a swimmer. A scientist may be daydreaming about a solution to a problem while watching tv. An artist is absorbing the details of nature while on a walk with his partner. Thinking and acting in a way that promotes the progress of their preferred activity becomes as integrated into their daily lives as breathing.

## **Chapter 3: Contemporary Empirical Research on Flow**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter reviewed the early studies of flow which built the foundation of how psychologists understand it today. Focusing specifically on the phenomenological experience of flow, the previous chapter laid out three general, core aspects of it: perceived adventure, unwavering focus and spiritual-like experience. The results of Csikszentmihalyi's research have captured the attention of psychologists, and since his initial studies further studies have been performed on the topic in more recent years which give us insight into the three phenomenological experiences discussed in the aforementioned chapter. Thus, the purpose of this chapter will be to reflect on a few of the more contemporary studies that provide insight into the phenomenological experiences of flow. I focus on these because they are the most relevant studies to my aim of illuminating the nature of flow itself, in accordance with its three general aspects discussed in the previous study; I will not, therefore, also consider contemporary studies concerned more with correlations between flow and other things, possible predictors of flow, and so on. There are three main branches of psychological research on flow. The first branch is perhaps the most relevant to this thesis, and involves the attempt to understand what flow is, how to define it and how to control it. Another branch attempts to understand flow as a clinical tool to improve meaning and feelings of fulfillment in life. Lastly, there is the branch that takes flow to be an important educational tool, and tries to use it to improve the quality of education, promote self-learning and increase productivity in everyday life. After reviewing studies in all three branches, I will discuss the implications of these studies along with Csikszentmihalyi's work with respect to

possible threats to flow, hence to active engagement, hence to meaning, in Wolf's account.

### 3.2 Perceived Adventure

As discussed in the previous chapter, perceived adventure is an important factor in the experience of flow. It appears that an element of risk is necessary for deeper flow states to occur, which was illustrated by the reflections of chess players and rock-climbers in Csikszentmihalyi's work. The importance of risk in flow experience is also emphasized in more recent work on flow, some of which will be reflected here. Adventure, as it is used here, is not only the physical experience of risk-taking and discovering something new, but also as the transcending of what one knows and is capable of. This is an element that was included in the Adventure Experience Paradigm, which is considered to be a form of optimal experience introduced by Martin and Priest (1986).

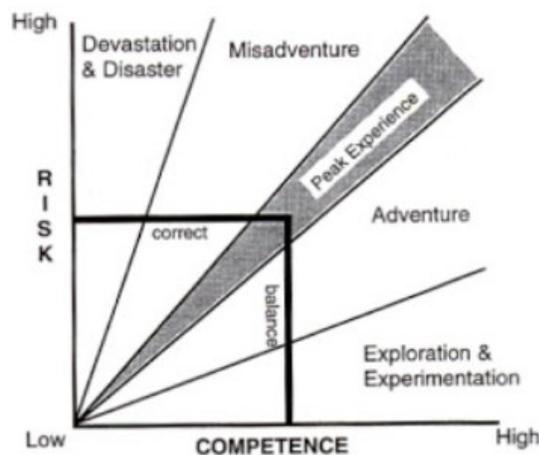


Illustration 2: Adventure Experience Paradigm

This paradigm is meant to describe a sort of optimal state that Martin and Priest (1986) argue occurs in the state of adventure which is likened to flow. Within the

adventure experience paradigm, there are five categories (see Illustration 2). Disaster & devastation occurs when the competence is low compared to the risk at hand leading to potential injury or even death. Misadventure is the experience of competence being slightly off from the risk, for example an experienced snowboarder losing their balance. Peak adventure occurs at the crux of risk-to-competence, it is the 'razors edge' between safety and injury. Recall that flow also values a balanced skill-to-challenge structure as discussed in the original flow channel model discussed in the previous chapter (Figure 1). Adventure is the category of one's competence slightly exceeding the risk. Lastly exploration and experimentation is a low risk situation yet allows the individual to practice their skills.

As indicated by these descriptions, rather than the skill-to-challenge ratio found in flow, in Martin and Priest's research this variable was modified as a judgement of risk-to-competence. However, the definitional differences are little to none. Risk overlaps in many ways with challenge, for example, challenges and risks both typically contain an emotional or physical obstacle as they are meant to push our capabilities to the limit and provide feedback on the quality of our skills. Competence and skill are essentially synonyms, especially in the usage here. If one is competent enough to achieve a challenge it merely means that they have the required skills to complete it.

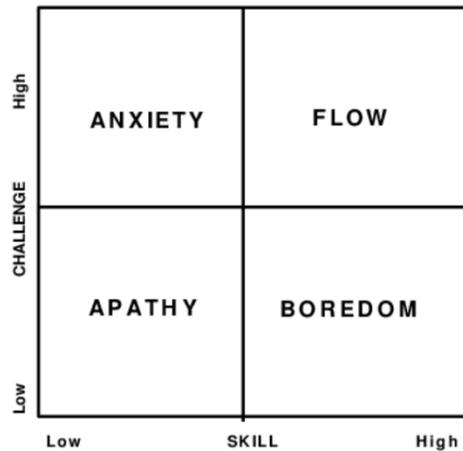


Illustration 3: Four Channel Flow Model

In the previous chapter, the Channel Flow Model was discussed as a possible structure of flow experience. Since 1975, the Channel Flow Model (See Illustration 1) has been updated to the Four Channel Flow Model (See Illustration 3). In the original model, a balanced skill-to-challenge ratio was of value to achieving flow experience but in Massimi & Carli's (1986) work, it was found that peak flow experience occurs when the challenge and the skills required for the challenge are above one's average skill (as cited in Jones, Hollenhorst, & Perna., 2010, p. 20). Therefore, staying in one's comfort zone is not an ideal environment for cultivating flow. In light of this realization, the original Flow Model was updated to the Four Channel Flow Model. This does not negate any of our discussions previously mentioned on the required balanced skill-to-challenge ratio; it rather specifies what a proper balance is, namely one that still provides a challenge slightly above one's current skill. However, unlike the flow model, the categories of the Four Channel Flow Model are all varying levels of flow. In the case of the original Flow Model, flow only occurs in the central channel.

Both flow models and the Adventure Experience Paradigm attempt to predict an optimal experience using some form of challenge and skill as variables. On paper, the Four Channel and the Adventure Experience Paradigm appear to have similarities. However, if they are very similar, the Adventure Experience Paradigm has to be able to predict a flow experience as well. This was of interest to Jones, Steven, Hollenhorst and Perna (2010) who performed a study to determine the predictive value of the Adventure Experience Paradigm for flow experience.

Jones, et al., (2010) performed an empirical comparison of the two models to see if they predict flow experience. If it is the case that the two models predict a similar construct, then it is likely that perceived adventure is a necessary component of the flow experience. Jones, et al., (2010) performed this study by collecting data from participants of whitewater kayakers through a series of questionnaires which included the variables from both models. The results of this study showed that both models performed similarly in predicting flow experience, suggesting that both models do indeed predict a similar phenomenon. Admittedly, whitewater kayaking is an experience that would be perceived as adventurous to many, but the likeness of the variables in the Four Channel Flow Model and the Adventure Experience Paradigm does provide insight into the phenomenological experience of flow as containing a sense of adventure.

Jones et al (2010) found that the Four Channel Flow Model and the Adventure Experience Paradigm were similar in their ability to predict a condition of optimal experience showing that flow and peak adventure experience have similar properties, specifically overlapping in the area of the skill-challenge variable of flow and the risk-competence variable of the peak adventure experience. Since it is true that the Adventure

Experience Paradigm predicts a similar experience to flow, it is reasonable to assume that risk-competency is also a factor of flow experience. There was a moderate correlation between skill-challenge and risk-competency when predicting flow states indicating that the flow experience could be a survival instinct in a sense. When there is a perceived risk, for example, in whitewater kayaking or even during a chess game, focused concentration is vital to completing the task without injuring oneself. There is the risk of physically injuring oneself when kayaking or causing emotional damage by being defeated in a chess match. Despite the risk individuals are still willing to participate in these activities because they judge themselves as having the skills or competency to complete the task safely. This is evident in the research as the self-judged competency scores did not change in the kayakers from the easiest to the most difficult tides.

An interesting finding of the study showed that both models were similarly lacking explanatory power of flow experience, i.e. how the model works to predict flow. The researchers suggested that this is due to the rareness of deep-flow state. Shallow-flow and microflow were not entirely considered in the study either, therefore even in situations where perceived skill and competency is high but challenge and risk is low there could be a flow state that is of a lesser version than the deep-flow state. This is an important factor to consider and further research should look into the varying levels of flow in relation to the risk/skill-to-competence/challenge part of the flow experience.

In an entirely different setting from the adventurous nature of whitewater kayaking, educational researchers and psychologists have been studying the consequences of implementing flow into classrooms to improve learning in students. The Aim of Anderson's (2016) study is to discover the value of incorporating Future Learning

Labs into STEM learning facilities. These labs are built based on predictors of flow to stimulate flow in students learning about STEM research. The Flow class was organized into four physical zones: workshop, focus, arena and model. The workshop is an exploration zone where students can experiment with normal workshop equipment. The focus zone allowed students to move to and from freely and was used to store books and equipment. It contained areas for students to read and take notes as well as prepare for the distributions of roles for group work. In the arena, students were encouraged to present their results to the class and it is the area where teachers begin and end the learning course. The model zone was the dedicated 'independent flow zone' for students to perform more focused activities and experiment by themselves. There is an element of independence that is aimed at self-learning through exploration and experimentation which is of central focus to this classroom and in line with the exploration and experimentation element of the Peak Adventure Experience Paradigm. In conclusion, the study found that students who were given more room to explore and engage in hands on learning were not only more capable of entering a flow state but more excited to learn. When students are left to explore and encourage the use of full body movement to learn, a boring lesson is turned into something more akin to a fun adventure. This does not necessarily have to be a safe environment as the 'arena' zone requires an element of risk and challenge. Sharing what one has learned can be intimidating and lead to embarrassment if it fails, therefore there is an importance in a risk of some sort to the flow experience.

This research on Future Learning Labs provides further support that an underlying factor of the flow experience is the perceived adventure even if only in a classroom, and

that perceived adventure requires a risk and therefore flow experience also requires an element of risk-taking. This is perhaps further exemplified by the recent incorporation of video games and technology in classrooms. For example, rather than learning via traditional means, inclusion of video games are being used as tools for learning in some classrooms which allows students to take risks in an adventurous way over the traditional memorization and test taking methods (Annetta, Murray, Laird, Bohr, & Park, 2006).

### **3.3 Unwavering Focus**

In the previous chapter we also noted that, those in flow enter a state of complete and active concentration that occurs when a task requires the agent's full skill capacity. Often described as deep and effortless concentration, a central element of flow is the dedicated focus on an activity. It is only reasonable that the stress hormone, cortisol, would be elevated in moments of flow because it is responsible for improving concentration and energy via enhancing blood-glucose levels and removing unnecessary stimuli from the sensory field (Peifer, Schachinger, Engeser, & Antoni, 2015).

In one study, the stress hormones, cortisol and adrenocorticotrophic hormones, were reported to be higher in individuals who were in a flow state than those in a state of boredom. It was also found that those who were in a flow state had a stronger stress response than those who were overwhelmed by the challenge (Keller, 2016). Across various games and tests, such as an arithmetic test and games of Tetris and chess, Keller noticed that when the individual felt that the game was too challenging, the participants would break their focus by giving up and waiting for the challenge to become manageable again. This break would lower the cortisol levels of the overwhelmed

individuals while those who remained in flow continued to have elevated levels of stress. Elevated cortisol does support our theory that risk is a necessary element for at least deep-flow experiences because stress is a factor of risk-taking activities. However, too much stress seems to interfere with flow experience causing the agent to give up. This is an important factor to consider as an interference with flow experience and perhaps meaning in life. If one finds themselves in a situation that is overwhelming, a defense mechanism would manifest itself in the form of quitting. This provides great insight into the mentality of "quitting" which gives possible explanations for the reason people stop pursuing something that is meaningful to them. From this, it can be noted that there is important information in the feedback between the belief in one's skills and the environmental factors that are part of succeeding in one's flow activity.

Keller (2016) suggests that flow challenges the maximum capacities of our skills and that causes a stress reaction. Due to the adverse consequences of extended periods of stress, he is unsure how healthy flow is for extended periods. It is important to note that this research does not take into consideration the various levels of flow and the rarity of true deep-flow states (Jones, et al, 2010). The other levels of flow experience may not induce such a high stress response, for example, people watching is considered a microflow activity and does not demand the same amount of stress as playing Tetris. Thus, further research should look at the stress levels of various flow levels to determine its role for these states as well.

Although cortisol aids with energy and concentration and thus would be present in flow experience, it seems paradoxical that increased cortisol would result in the "relaxed" feelings associated with flow as was reported in Csikszentmihalyi's work. Perhaps this is

because flow is, in a sense, a mental workout. Much like lifting weights causes stress on muscles, which then repair and become stronger, flow could be a form of good stress that strengthens the mind after the episode.

Another study did look at the relationship between severe stress and flow experience. This study looked at the ability of participants to enter a deep state of focus during flow periods (Peifer, et al., 2015). In this double-blind study, the researchers alternated between giving the participants a placebo pill (control) and a high dose cortisol pill before playing pac-man. The participants were unable to differentiate between the placebo and cortisol pill and yet when they took the high dose cortisol pill, flow experience was non-existent compared to when they were on the placebo. The study found that when levels of stress were at a moderate level participants were able to focus on the task at hand and as stress increased (from the moderate level) there was a negative correlation between flow and high levels of cortisol, specifically in the ability to become 'absorbed' in the activity and feelings of control. High cortisol levels specifically reduced the agent's ability for cognitive absorption which is the ability for an individual to direct their full concentration on a challenging task. The researchers suggest that a moderate level of stress is 'activator' that facilitates flow whereas stressors that are strong or enduring hinder flow-experience. Further studies need to look in more detail at the relationship between stress levels and flow experience, as suggested by Peifer, et al., (2015) giving incremental doses of cortisol would be beneficial in understanding the value of stress to flow-experience in more detail.

However, the current research does provide two important insights on the role of stress in flow experience. First, if the task is so difficult that it becomes excessively

stressful, the agent gives up and purposefully diverts their concentration away from the task. Secondly, if the agent's stress levels are too high going into the challenge, they're less able to access the necessary concentration required for a flow state. Imagine competing in an event that you are untrained for, perhaps the realization that the event is too difficult does not hit you until the middle or end of the challenge. At that point, the mindset might shift from performing one's best to just trying to 'make it out alive'. In another situation, imagine going into the event already worried or stressed due to extreme self-doubt or focused on family issues, rather than focusing on what one can do, they may be focusing on what they can't do. This insight provided in this research is of great importance to factors that could interfere with flow experience and thus should be further investigated.

### **3.4 Spiritual-Like Experience**

I argue that the final aspect of the phenomenology of the flow experience discussed in this thesis is the spiritual-like nature of the experience. Spirituality in this sense does not necessarily mean a religious experience or a connection with any form of the supernatural. Spiritual-like experience is meant to explain the paradoxical feelings that occur in flow experiences, such as the feeling of connectedness between agent and object/activity and the loss of connection with time and self-consciousness that is often reported in experiences of flow. For instance, recall the rock-climber in Csikszentmihalyi's study who felt that he lost his identity and felt like a panther, or the surgeon who became more in tune with time as it passed by. Individuals commonly find that they lose their sense of time and space when in the midst of a flow experience.

Agents also find their sense of identity as they build a relationship with the activity or object at hand. If this is the case, then an element of spiritual-like experience may be part of flow.

An explanation for the spiritual-like experience found in flow states could be the reliance on intuition for decision making as suggested by Jarvilehto (2016). The use of intuition is likely at least part of the fluid experience between one action to the next. Jarvilehto (2016) takes intuition to be the non-discursive use of our past experiences to motivate and guide our behaviour. Philosophers sometimes mean something a bit different when they talk about intuition (e.g. sometimes they mean pre-theoretic judgments about whether a concept of philosophical interest applies to particular cases), but Jarvilehto's sense of the term is the most relevant to my present concerns. In this sense, intuition typically refers to the capability to create new ideas or make decisions without conscious thought. Intuition typically gives rise to paradoxicality more often than discursive reasoning and therefore might help explain the spiritual-like experience of flow. In the case of flow experiences the agent is often describing the situation as the connection between mind and body to be both incredibly in tune and yet not feeling connected to one another. If the agent is acting on intuition rather than consciously making decisions, it is only during the acting out of the movement that the agent may realize that their decision to move a certain way was based on past experiences. Thus, giving the sense of disconnectedness and connectedness simultaneously. As Jarvilehto explains, intuition is often mistaken for some form of spiritual experience, often feeling as if the knowledge came to the individual based on something inexplicable. He states that, "Flow can be thought of as intuitive action, whereas intuition in turn can be

construed as cognition in flow” (Jarvilehto, 2016). Jarvilehto is making the suggestion that flow involves the acting out of intuition, which does line up with what we know of flow so far. As it does seem to be some form of state that occurs in individuals who are experienced in the task at hand, intuition would necessarily be some form of guiding source for their actions. The research on the relationship between intuition and flow is still in its early stages and thus further research should be done but it does seem reasonable that intuition is part of the process and perhaps an explanation for the spiritual-like sense reported to occur in flow states.

More recent research on the relationship between flow and spirituality, is still in rather nascent state, but it has been documented that many researchers are aware of the relationship between the two experiences. Monson (2012) notes that both experiences contain similar characteristics such as feelings of distorted time, feelings of unity and feelings of control (yet not being in total control). Spiritual experience gives a sense of unity between body and soul or between the agent and the universe or some form of higher power. Within the flow experience, action and awareness merge which can give a sense of unity with the self or the self and activity. This unity can come in the form of a mind-body connection or with the activity or object itself. As seen in the description given by the rock-climber in the previous chapter, his body melts into the rocks and he loses his sense of identity.

Also recall the dancer in the previous chapter discussing her feelings of being united with her body but also separated in a way she had never felt before. In flow, the agent must have some sense of control in that they believe that they are capable of fulfilling the task at hand, however the use of intuition to drive decisions can make one

feel like their decisions are happening out of their control since intuition is more of a subconscious process. In spiritual experiences, one is often seeking some form of control but not willing to take full control. Having the free-will to make decisions that would give a sense of fulfilment while also being able to explain unexplainable situations on a higher power of some form is also paradoxical in nature in a similar way to what has been reported in flow. There is a clear overlap between spiritual experience and flow. For the purpose of this thesis it's not relevant to determine whether it is because flow occurs in spiritual states or whether they are different states entirely that merely have similar features. What does matter, is they are phenomenologically similar.

Rufi, Wlodarczyk, & Paez. (2016) look at flow in social contexts, which include both secular and religious group events. It was found that flow was found in interactive and coactive collective ritual and positively correlated with Sunday celebration of Catholic mass, Zen Buddhist meditation practice and secular Sunday group activities, specifically in Zen meditation practice. The specific aspects of flow which were found in these social situations were positive emotions, loss of self-consciousness, and social identity. Interestingly, there was more flow experience reported in the collective gatherings, Catholic mass and Sunday group activities than the independent activities. Csikszentmihalyi notes that due to its social nature, dancers were most likely not capable of experiencing deep flow. However, Rufi, et. al., (2016) research suggests that there is the possibility to enter a deeper flow state in activities with others even more so than independently in certain situations. It is important to note, that although interesting, this finding could have been due to the nature of the activities. Meditation is not necessarily

as stimulating as the other activities, such as chess, rock-climbing, or church because the goal is to become 'unstimulated'.

Perhaps meditation should be looked into as a different type of flow, since it is structurally different than the typical activities that have been said to give the deepest flow states, yet as an experience, it is characteristically similar to flow. Surprisingly, meditation was found to give more inspiration than Sunday mass but less serenity and calm than initially predicted by the researchers. In this thesis, pure meditation would not have been thought of as an activity that could induce flow primarily because it does not seem to emit the same sense of adventure and stress as flow experience, but this study does shed light on the challenges and stress involved in the activity.

There is a value to flow as a social activity because it can cultivate a sense of connectedness within the community which can feel like a spiritual experience. Being in flow with another human can create an interpersonal connectedness that is unparalleled to mere teamwork. This would improve the quality of work in the workplace, partner relationships and sport team collaboration. Van der Hout, Davis and Walrave (2016) write a report on the precursors and components for team flow to work based on the general conditions of flow that are merely adapted to a team environment. These conditions include the team sharing the same common goals and aligned personal goals, high skill integration, open communication, safety and mutual commitment. Sharing the same common goals is fairly obvious, the team must be striving for the same goal to work together. The alignment of personal goals is part of the process of coordinating the personal goals of each member to help with the process of reaching the common goal. Similarly, high skill integration is valuing the skill of each player and integrating these

skills seamlessly to achieve both common and personal goals. Open communication and safety work together in that the team is capable of communicating effectively with one another, this includes a shared trust between members that creates a safe environment for all to fail and succeed. Lastly, the degree of commitment is an important mechanism to performance, and it is important that the team members share a similar commitment to the goal. These are simply the essentials to creating a flow environment in a team setting, the aspects of flow that occur when team flow is achieved is more interesting in relation to the spiritual feelings that occur in flow experiences.

A holistic focus, sense of unity, trust and sense of joint progress are created from the components previously mentioned to form a collective ambition and shared identity between teammates (van der Hout, et al., 2016). For the purpose of this section, holistic focus, sense of unity and trust are of interest. As noted by the researchers, holistic focus is "the realization that there is a collective consciousness among team members to promote the collective ambition" (van der Hout, et al., 2016). The sense that the consciousness of the team is uniting into one collective is an experience that can be felt as greater than life, especially in combination with a sense of unity that occurs when a group expresses their shared ambitions. The researchers suggest that a large part of what makes team flow possible is a safe environment where the individuals trust each other to make the right decisions and support others if they fail. This parallels with the initial discussion on intuition as a factor of the spiritual experience felt in individual flow experiences.

To act on one's intuition one must trust it enough to act on it. In the book, *How Well Do Executives Trust Their Intuitions*, Liebowitz, Chan, Jenkin, Spicker, Paliszkievicz and Babiloni (2019) suggest that based on empirical research for

executives or those in higher positions to make good decisions, they must use a combination of analytics and intuition that requires a level of trust in themselves. Since flow is the acting of intuition and trust is necessary for the intuition to be followed through into action, it seems reasonable to suggest that trust would be the bridge between intuition and flow. For example, in order to experience deep flow, a chess player must give into their intuition to make the decisions for them. If the chess player does not trust themselves to make the correct decision then there would be less fluid movement between one act to the next and thus getting into flow would be impossible. Trusting in one's intuition can often be difficult to achieve unless one feels safe in the environment and learns to trust in themselves. Therefore, trusting in oneself to do what is right in the particular activity could be a factor in what makes flow feel like a spiritual experience.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

To conclude, the three general phenomenological themes found in Csikszentmihalyi's research that were discussed in chapter two were further specified in this chapter. As previously discussed, the general insight from Csikszentmihalyi was that flow typically involves a sense of adventure and this requires one to move beyond their comfort zone by taking risks. The more specific insights from psychological research on flow (Massimi & Carli, 1986; Jones et al., 2010; Anderson, 2016) showed that provided one does not get too far out of one's comfort zone, the more risks one takes, the more flow one will typically experience because the closer they get to achieving peak perceived adventure.

Csikszentmihalyi's research led to the general insight that unwavering focus was integral to flow. The specific insights drawn from the research indicate that provided one does not get too much of it, the stress hormone cortisol is typically required to reach the required unwavering focus on the task at hand (Keller, 2016; Peifer et al., 2015).

The final specific insight drawn from the more contemporary psychological research is in regard to the paradoxical experiences that lead to spiritual-like experiences which were brought out from Csikszentmihalyi's research. A possible explanation for the spiritual-like experience that I suggested was based on the relationship between intuition and flow suggested by Jarvilehto (2016). Because intuition requires trust in oneself in order to actually do what one's intuition is guiding them to do, I suggest that that trust is a bridge between the intuitive thought and the flow action as discussed by Jarvilehto. The idea that trust is a bridge for flow to occur was further supported by research on team flow which suggests that for team flow to occur, there must be trust between team members in Van der Hout, Davis and Walrave (2016). Therefore, three lessons that could lead to flow states are drawn from this contemporary research: stepping outside one's comfort zone, engaging with some stressful activities and learning to trust oneself and others. The next chapter will further elaborate on these applied lessons on how to avoid meaningless activities in our lives, given Wolf's Fitting Fulfilment view that active engagement (and therefore flow) are a requirement for meaning.

## **Chapter 4: Practical Lessons about Meaning**

### **4.1 Three Practical Lessons**

If Wolf is correct, as I have argued in Chapter 1, then in order for activities to add meaning to individuals' lives, the activities must have the right sort of subjective attraction to the individuals. The activities must be enjoyable (though not necessarily pleasurable in a superficial sense) by the individuals who perform them, be perceived as finally valuable, or worth doing for their own sake, by those individuals, and allow the individuals to live in the moment. As Wolf puts it, the activities must be ones in which individuals are actively engaged.

Active engagement, more commonly known as flow in the psychological literature, was studied by Csikszentmihalyi's who developed the first research on this particular experience. As I noted in Chapter 2, Csikszentmihalyi's research drew attention to three general features of flow, which I labelled "the perceived adventure," "unwavering focus" and "the spiritual-like experience." In Chapter 3 I noted that the more contemporary psychological research on flow has led to further specification of these three general features into three more specific aspects of flow: risk-taking, stress, and trust. Given Wolf's subjective condition on the activities that add meaning to individuals' lives, and given what the contemporary psychological research tells us about activities that meet this condition – about activities that involve flow or active engagement – we are now in a position to draw some important practical lessons about meaning, in other words, lessons about the sorts of activities in which we should (or should not) engage for our activities to be meaningful in the sense of adding meaning to our lives. I will draw three such lessons here.

#### **4.1.1 Go Beyond Your Comfort Zone**

In Csikszentmihalyi's early research, the perceived adventure aspect of flow, was one that pertains especially to risk-taking. This idea was further developed and made more precise by Jones, et al., (2010), who showed the similarities between the Adventure Experience Paradigm and Four Channel Flow Model. According to the Four Channel Flow Model, flow occurs when a challenge is slightly above the agent's skill level but still within their capacity. This was found to be similar to the notion found in the Adventure Experience Paradigm that suggests that one must judge their competency to be capable of handling the risk. If the agent perceives themselves to be competent enough (i.e. skilled enough) to tackle the risk (i.e. challenge), then this leads to peak adventure. As was discussed in chapter three, the skill-to-challenge ratio used in the Four Channel Flow Model overlaps greatly with the competency-to-skill ratio in the Adventure Experience Paradigm. It was found that higher risk (that was still manageable) allows one to enter flow, thus suggesting that an element of risk is necessary for flow. Thus, to engage in flow, an activity should involve an appreciable risk for the person engaged in it, so long as the risk is not too great that it results in disaster. From this, we can derive our first practical lesson about meaning: seek out activity that does, and avoid activity that does not, take you outside your comfort zone to any appreciable extent.

To illustrate this point, take the case of overprotective parents who do not allow their child to take risks. These parents do not allow their child to learn such things as how to ride a bike because they are perceived as being too dangerous. The parents fear that friends will negatively influence their child and thus they encourage the child to learn to

enjoy his own company in the safety of his bubble-wrapped life, and so on. As this child grows older, they would experience a less meaningful life in comparison to the child who was allowed to take risks according to our first practical lesson. Not only is the overprotected child experiencing a less meaningful life, but in their own parental activities the parents are also not taking the risks that are necessary to the meaningful experiences of parenthood. It is necessary for the child to take the risk of getting hurt (which would most likely only be a few scrapes and bruises) for them to experience the true joy of learning and working towards a new skill. Although the parents may be taking a risk by letting their child learn an activity that has risks, the joy of seeing their child succeed at an activity would give their experience as parents more meaning than trying to prevent risks all-together.

It's possible that one may get injured or fail during the process of engaging with an appropriately risky activity, an activity that takes a person appropriately outside of their comfort zone, but only doing what is easy or what feels safe is not an activity that is likely to involve flow or active engagement, according to the research.

To take another case in point, consider creative writing: it is not physically risky but it can be psychologically risky, for example to the extent that it involves sharing one's work with others, which could lead to embarrassment if the work is not liked. It can also be embarrassing to re-read one's own work and notice the mistakes. However, the process of trying and failing is part of the necessary risk to become better at a particular skill. Risk is useful in that it both stimulates the individual to mimic a feeling of adventure and is necessary to reach expertise and therefore, active engagement or flow. Of course, failing to accurately judge one's competence can lead to taking a risk that is

beyond what the individual can safely succeed at and thus damage the physical and mental self. However, according to the research to reach flow experience, taking these risks are necessary and given that flow is a necessary condition for meaning, risk taking is thus necessary for meaning.

Csikszentmihalyi's research looked into the characteristics of flow in a variety of different activities. Even chess players found themselves to be in environments that challenged their skill to a degree that felt like a life-or-death situation. I suggest that going beyond one's comfort zone, when experienced properly, is thrilling and thus gives off the feeling that one is experiencing an adventure of some sort. The adventure experience here does not necessarily need to be physically dangerous, of course; it only needs to have an element of diving into a new world.

To illustrate our first practice lesson about meaning with another example, take reading a fictional novel - a highly mental or intellectual activity. If the novel is enjoyable to the reader, then it brings the reader into its world. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is a well-known novel for its fascinating adventure that brings children and adults into a mythical experience that is full of dangerous adventure. The way J.K. Rowling expresses the emotions and sensations that the characters are experiencing makes one feel as though they are driving flying cars and fighting off mythical creatures from the comfort of our own bed. There is a sense of adventure that occurs when reading this novel by living vicariously through Harry himself. An activity that has a sense of adventure is one that humans would naturally enjoy for the sake of itself because if one did not enjoy it then there would be no motivation for the risk involved. Therefore, I suggest, with evidence from Csikszentmihalyi (1975) and Jones et al.'s (2010) research is

that a sense of adventure is necessary for flow as it makes an activity worth doing for the sake of doing it. If an activity is worth doing for the sake of doing it, then it is an autotelic one and flow can only be found in autotelic activities.

With that being said, every individual is unique and has their own preference of adventure. What is exciting to one may seem boring to another, this is where the subjective attractiveness of an activity that Wolf discusses becomes of importance to a meaningful life. Wolf suggests as the subjective part of her view on meaning that one should “figure out what turns you on, and go for it” (Wolf, 2010, p.10). Finding something that you want to put effort in, that is so enjoyable it rationalizes the risk involved and actually taking that risk (given that it’s not greatly disproportionate to one’s competence) is part of what makes life more meaningful. Therefore, don’t fear engaging in activities that are risky and do the things that make you feel like an explorer. Explore whatever activity drives your curiosity and gives you energy and refuse to only partake in activities that are expected of you.

#### **4.1.2 Don’t Fear Some Stress**

It is well known that experiencing too much stress is not healthy, however, experiencing too little stress can lead to a life of meaninglessness. Csikzentmihalyi's research found that a necessary condition of flow is to enter a state of complete and unwavering focus. According to the research, increased levels of cortisol (the primary stress hormone) are at least partially responsible for the increased energy and narrowing of the field of focus that helps one escape stressful situations. This makes sense as stress is part of a fight or flight response and the focused energy that results from this response

would be more likely to help one out of a stressful situation. However, the obvious argument against this is that too much stress can damage physical and mental health and therefore periods of flow should be done in moderation.

It was interesting to find that in research conducted by Keller (2016), it was found that individuals in the overwhelmed group actually had less stress (or the same levels of stress) as those in the flow groups. The increased stress in the flow is caused by the challenge being ever so slightly above the individual's mean skill level, thus requiring them to use all their mental resources while still feeling that they are capable of accomplishing the challenge. However, in the group where individuals were purposefully overwhelmed, the participants would give up to reduce the uncomfortable amount of stress that they were experiencing from not being able to keep up with the challenge or perceiving themselves as never being able to complete it. This suggests that some stress is needed to enter a flow state and thus, counter to what one would assume, experiencing some stress is conducive for a meaningful life. It seems as though the stress in flow is a positive type of stress compared to the stress found in an overwhelming situation.

To see the plausibility of this explanation, imagine yourself in these two situations. In the first situation, you are running a marathon and are dead last. You are exerting as much effort as possible but realize that there is no way for you to catch up to the person in second last. There may not be a reason to fully quit the race, it is still possible to try the best that you can and perhaps get a personal best or finish the race, but it would be mentally and physically difficult to do. In the second scenario, you are running the same speed, in the same race, with all the same conditions as described in the first scenario but are in second place and very close to catching up to the runner in first. It

is presumably easier to narrow one's focus and drive oneself to continue pushing at the same pace and continue to narrow one's focus would be much stronger in the second scenario than the first. It would be mentally and physically more enjoyable and exciting to push oneself past the limit when one perceives themselves to be capable of accomplishing the goal and physically able to keep up with the challenge than in the opposite situation. Even though external physical stressors are the same in both situations, the perception of one's ability in the second situation leads to a manageable and enjoyable type of stressful activity than in the first. It seems that the type of stress that is found in flow states, such as those experienced by the runner in the second scenario is a safer type of stress.

A practical implication of this research, then, would be to invest one's time into learning how to manage belief in oneself and confidence to help aid in entering and maintaining flow while at the same time learning when the external factors are actually too great for one's skill and ability. As it was found already having too much stress can not only lead to 'quitting' an activity involving flow but can also prevent one from entering flow state in one's activity at all (Peifer, et al., 2015). By having confidence in oneself, the individual may be more capable of handling stressful situations as well and therefore less likely to avoid them or resort to spending their life drinking and doing drugs to avoid the stress all-together.

Referring back to Wolf's example the mother working all night to complete her child's Halloween costume, there is an element of stress that Wolf suggests the mother overcomes because of her complete absorption in the activity. As she was working all night to complete her child's Halloween costume, lack of sleep and problem solving

involved in costume making is a stressful situation. With the help of Csikszentmihalyi (1975), Peifer et al. (2015) and Keller's (2016) research it can be hypothesized that the stress involved in this situation is part of what helped with the feeling of complete absorption of the activity, yet it wasn't too stressful of a situation that had the mother giving up.

Thus, it seems that stress can be beneficial in moderation and that perceptions of one's stress can lead to differing results. This yields our second important practical lesson about meaning: if you want more meaning in your life, don't fear some stress in your activities. The stress found in flow can be similar to that which is experienced when exercising. Working out does place your body under some stress but in moderation, this is a positive type of stress. In the same way, flow may be the mental equivalent of working out by giving the brain a dose of positive stress. Therefore, in moderation, stress is a valuable tool in giving life meaning because it helps one experience the concentration necessary for flow. Finding that particular activity which carries a positive type of stress and eliminating negative stressors is healthy for the development of a meaningful life.

### **4.1.3 Learn to Trust Your Intuition**

The third lesson can be summarized as, engaging in activities that rely on trusting one's intuition, whether these are individual or group activities. Essentially, activities that create a sense of meaning are ones that engage in self-trusting and non-discursive activities. This does not necessarily mean that the activity is irrational or that one should not do discursive and rationalization-based activities, but rather one should focus on engaging in activities where they can trust their intuition. As discussed in chapter two, a

spiritual-like feeling is a part of flow experienced as a result of the paradoxical nature of flow found in Csikszentmihalyi's research. Participants had specific experiences of flow which included losing track of time and space and concurrently losing and gaining control of their body in a way that does not occur outside of flow.

In contemporary research, Jarvilehto (2016) suggests that intuition plays an important role in the cognition of flow experience, specifically suggesting that intuition is the cognition behind flow action. If intuition is the precursor to the fluid action of flow, it would explain the sense that participants experience of being able to fluidly move from one action to the next without much discursive thought. It also makes sense in that it explains why flow is experienced more if a person is an expert in an activity. The experience drives the intuitive action, much like walking does not need much thought for an adult who has walked for years. An individual who is recovering from an accident that temporarily paralyzed them may have to relearn the movements by forcefully thinking about the specific details involved in walking that we take for granted.

If a person is relying on their intuition during flow then there would be little to no reliance on discursive thinking to make decisions on what move should happen next which could give the illusion that one is in control while simultaneously feeling as though they are not in control. It was also found that in group activities, flow was experienced in states where the individuals trusted and felt safe with the group that they were engaging in the activity with. A safe environment where everyone knew and understood their role, led to a sense of unity and trust among teammates. Thus, it appears that trusting one's intuition plays a certain role in achieving the feeling of a spiritual-like experience in flow states. Trusting in one's intuition is important for fluidity in action. If one is deliberating

on the next move then one is not using their intuition. Some form of discursive thought is necessary, even in flow states. Such as the next move one should take in a chess match, but to enter a deeper flow state the decision that is acted out would have to be based on some form of gut feeling that it is the best move at that given moment. This takes a lot of trust in oneself, since going with a move that is against one's intuitive feeling would be a sign that the individual has more trust in something else other than what they felt like they should do.

An example to illustrate the role of trust in flow could be found in the example of a move called a flip-turn in swimming which is a method of switching directions in the pool, where the individual does an underwater flip just before reaching the wall, pushes off with their feet and swims in the other direction. One may think that the swimmer can see the wall and that's how they know when to flip, but this is not the case as our eyes must be looking down to ensure the fastest turn. It certainly takes a level of trust in one's intuitive sense as to when to flip as any discursive thinking or worry regarding the flip increases the risk of racing full speed, headfirst into the wall. Instances like these are what makes the sport risky, stressful and heavily reliant on trusting our instincts and therefore perfectly fitting for flow.

This sort of trust in one's intuition can also be found in group activities, such as those found in Sunday mass. Although individuals may not be in deep-flow states, as found in Csikszentmihalyi suggestion that these types of social situations are in the category of shallow-flow, the individuals have some collective goal. This goal is partially built in the trust they have in a higher power and in others who believe in this higher power. That social connection is built around a trust in others and giving oneself over into

this feeling that there is something out there that is bigger than us, which makes it a perfect candidate for some level of flow-inducing activity.

## **4.2 Conclusion**

Finding meaning is an important part of the human condition because it gives the necessary motivation that is required to overcome the adversity that everyone experiences in life. In this thesis I have argued that Wolf is right and that what she calls 'active engagement' is necessary for meaning in life. I have further argued that the psychological literature on flow, the conceptual equivalent of active engagement in psychology, leads us to more helpful understanding of the implications of this requirement on meaning for our everyday lives. It leads us more specifically to three practical lessons about meaning that I have laid out above. I have no doubt that future psychological research will yield even more applied philosophical lessons about meaning.

Empirically informed philosophy theses, such as this one, have endless pragmatic value. This type of philosophy, which combines the diligently performed research of the scientists and the creative minds of the philosophers, has the potential to provide truly meaningful research with a different and unique perspective both to those inside and to those outside the academy. A beautiful result of combining empirical research and philosophy is that the results feel intuitive and yet, are supported by science. The findings of this thesis are not unheard of; engaging in activities that take us outside our comfort zone, induce a healthy type of stress, and have us learn to trust intuition are typically promoted as being good things, but coming to this conclusion via philosophical analyses

of empirical research provides a more objective validation of the truth within age-old wisdom.

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