

Suspending Certainty for Flow:
A Philosophical Analysis of Flow Psychology

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Introduction

Humans have struggled to comprehend their experience for as long as we have existed. Perhaps before words, there was less questioning of what human existence was. Over time, humans became increasingly self-aware through the evolution of language and philosophy attempted to follow. With the evolution of philosophy came the inevitable questions attempting to make sense of the experiential phenomenon. Humans consistently experience notions of body and mind in their lives but do not always consider their interaction as deeply as philosophy has. Philosophical lineages of thought ripple through history, affecting the development of psychology theories from past to present. When psychological theories are developed, choices must be made involving the grounding assumptions. Monism and dualism are two prominent philosophical lenses for understanding the mind-body phenomenon and have found their way into psychological theories. Monism, deeply integrated in Eastern philosophy, idealizes the interconnectivity in experience for the sake of forming one harmonious entity. Dualism, more common in Western philosophy, idealizes understanding experience through the division of mind and body as distinct and different substances. Some forms of dualism, like interactionist dualism, further explore the interaction between the two substances. Psychological theories often draw from either monism or dualism's mind-body assumptions in order to improve the health of a patient, but can neglect the seemingly opposing ideals in the process. Other theories entirely avoid discussing the body and mind for the sake investigating other conceptual framework.

Positive psychology is a relatively new area of study investigating positive human experience. Coming from the roots of positive psychology, flow psychology specifically focuses on how engagement creates positive experience and flourishing. Flow psychology expounds upon the creation of the flow state, where "people become so involved in what they are doing

that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing¹”. Flow psychology, named and developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, offers a thorough system for creating positivity and flourishing through optimizing engagement. The system is effective thanks to the ambiguity of the mind-body assumptions. Certainty over reality is not a necessity for positivity. By refraining from grounding his theory in absolutely dualistic or monistic ideals, Csikszentmihalyi’s framework systematizes how to optimize reality using an easily generalized system.

The Roots of Flow Psychology

The historical emphasis on diagnosis and problems in psychology can be wearing but comes from necessity. Identifying problems allows clients to better confront themselves internally and for therapists to classify populations for research. The human psyche is never going to be consistently positive and psychology should reflect the reality by researching the details of negative conditions, like depression and anxiety. Learning to understand and work with different disorders and dispositions is easier with the aid of diagnostic research. Disorders and symptoms can also be more easily separated from the individual thanks to diagnosis once they are identified. The mental conception of a disorder allows the client and therapist to more directly confront problematic behavior. Dismissing the theories identifying problems and symptoms seems unfair when there is pragmatic value within them but the rise of positive psychology theory does yield a warning to any psychology practitioners; therapy should never focus on the problems with so much intensity that positivity cannot be seen. Positive psychology approaches the psyche by studying how to make holistic and enjoyable experiences occur more frequently in day to day life. The following push for positive and flow psychology is not trying

¹ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 53

to devalue the efforts of older theories, but rather to offer an encouraging perspective that can work collaboratively with the old.

Positive psychology supplements the past research on how to identify and solve what is wrong by systematizing the synthesis of positive experience. Focusing on enabling positive experience and recreating holistically positive emotion is a change in tactics compared to the historical focus on diagnosing and solving problems. Being able to diagnosis cases of disorders or poor mental health is important but only identifying negatives can be potentially pessimistic and unbalanced. Shifting attention to the increase of a client's ability to recreate positive experience is naturally reinforcing and develops a self-rewarding mindset. As the client builds better skills for creating positive emotion, they directly enjoy the product of their labors. The connection between positivity and effort, which receives high attention in both positive and flow psychology, is best encapsulated by the concept of the *autotelic experience*. During an autotelic experience, the effort one puts out is implicitly self-rewarding. As Mihaly notes of energetically demanding activity, "most enjoyable activities are not natural; they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make."² Positive psychology makes a broader range of activities enjoyable, increasing positivity in daily life. Flow continues to push clients to develop even farther, empowering them to take their initial steps towards improvement and then to tackle increasingly challenging goals to maintain a continually flourishing mindset.

Flow and positive psychology both rely on awareness of self-reinforcing experiences, which engages the autotelic personality. The autotelic personality utilizes an intrinsic or inner sense of reward, instead of relying on the extrinsic rewards from the outside world. When an action is intrinsically rewarding to perform, the action becomes an end in itself, which is a key

² Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 68

feature of the optimal flow experience³. Martin Seligman, a prominent positive psychologist, developed the PERMA well-being model consisting of five elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments.⁴ All five elements are reliant upon the autotelic personality's ability to intrinsically enjoy the experience. When people act for the expectation of external rewards, the over-justification effect can creep in, reducing the power of naturally intrinsic motivators like enjoyment, interest, and mastery⁵. The autotelic personality can be trained to engage with the elements of PERMA, without expectations of the future but instead for the sake of engaging itself. PERMA's element of engagement has specifically developed deeply thanks to flow psychology.

Flow psychology relies upon the development of the autotelic personality which receives fulfillment from doing instead of the reward afterwards.⁶ The autotelic personality returns the focus to the action instead of following extrinsic rewards, optimizing the sense of engagement and intrinsic reward received. The autotelic personality is important to positive and flow psychology for compelling reasons. Society is often framed around external rewards like money and goods, training people to think in terms of extrinsic rewards. Living in a world of external rewards can reduce the psyches' connection to an internal sense of reward, wearing on mental health. Studies have shown low levels of intrinsic motivation could make the psyche more vulnerable to workplace stressors⁷. Increasing intrinsic motivation does more than build a

³ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 67

⁴ Goodman, Fallon R., David J. Disabato, Todd B. Kashdan, and Scott Barry Kauffman. *Measuring Well-Being: A Comparison of Subjective Well-Being and PERMA*. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. (2018), 2

⁵ Kunda, Ziva, and Shalom H. Schwartz. "Undermining Intrinsic Moral Motivation: External Reward and Self-Presentation." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45 (4) (1983), 1

⁶ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 67

⁷ Lloyd, Joda, Frank W. Bond, and Paul E. Flaxman. *Work-Related Self-Efficacy as a Moderator of the Impact of a Worksite Stress Management Training Intervention: Intrinsic Work Motivation as a Higher Order Condition of Effect*. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 22 (1): 115–27. (2017), 3

reliable sense of reward for individuals though. Promoting the connection to the autotelic personality can help increase healthy and helping behavior. External rewards can reduce future acts of spontaneous helping because they undermine the intrinsic reward for moral acts⁸.

Developing the autotelic personality can benefit both the individual and connected communities. Relying on the external can be unhealthy with all the flux in the world and the autotelic experience can minimize reliance on external rewards.

The previously mentioned theory of positive psychology built by Martin Seligman, PERMA, suggests the elements of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments are powerful contributors for having positive human experiences. Seligman collaborated with many researchers to synthesize a list of elements independently significant enough to address. The five elements are all intrinsically rewarding and bring attention to important features of human life, encouraging flourishing overall.⁹ Each element holds independent significance, but also helps each other. Positive emotion or optimism can be achieved independently of goals or other people, but relationships and accomplishments are both convenient paths to enjoyment. Engagement is also fundamental to getting fulfillment from relationships and accomplishments. And although the other elements do not inherently lead to the formation of meaning, finding meaning is often dependent upon them. Even when considering the interaction between elements, Seligman holds each to be crucial pillars of positivity. Practitioners can integrate the PERMA model or other positive psychology theories to further encourage positivity in their practice. Positive psychology significantly bolsters the long-cultivated knowledge of the human psyche with further research and theories by investigating another aspect of the therapeutic process. The hardships of the world sometimes feel like too

⁸ Kunda, et al. *Undermining Intrinsic Moral Motivation*, 8

⁹ Goodman, et al, *A Comparison of Subjective Well-Being and PERMA*, 2

much to bear and the struggle to find a reason to continue is a common struggle for many. Considering how difficult staying optimistic can be, developing, integrating, and publicizing theories designed to create positivity is worthwhile.

Flow as a concept can be identified across different histories, cultures, and backgrounds but flow in the explicit context of psychology was not comprehensively researched and organized in academia until recently. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi published his seminal work, *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, in 1990 which began a new chapter for psychology. Flow psychology ended up forming Seligman's understanding of engagement in PERMA theory later on. Flow attempts to optimize engagement to a potentially extreme, but not outlandish ideal. Actions embodying flow might be difficult to initially undertake, but with a maturely developed autotelic personality, an action can fill the individual with intrinsic reward. Optimizing engagement is crucial to developing the other PERMA elements, but if engagement is undertaken through flow psychology, the others elements naturally stabilize. Engaging in an action for the reward of doing will naturally yield positive emotion and meaning because the action becomes its own purpose. Engagement can be integrated on the individual or collective level, making flow compatible with the development of relationships. An action adhering to Csikszentmihalyi's ideals for flow also implicitly tackles the concepts of challenges and accomplishments, which further serve to produce positive experience. Engagement can be seen as the necessary foundation of any experience, positive or negative. Meaning or positive emotion might initially feel like the most important of the PERMA elements, but flow psychology's work on engagement provides the most universally applicable, holistic, and pragmatic material for human flourishing.

Supplementing the historical emphasis on symptoms and diagnosis with positive psychology only strengthens understanding of the human psyche, improving practitioners' ability to shepherd clients towards well-being. And from within positive psychology, the branch of flow psychology can comprehensively address PERMA's other factors of positive experience using a focused and refined sense of engagement. By learning to optimally engage, positive emotion and a sense of accomplishment are expected. Relationships flourish and meaning naturally evolves. Csikszentmihalyi offers a simple but powerful system for engaging mindfully with life, which is foundational to positive experience. An important factor in the framework of flow is the careful reservation from making assumptions on the mind-body phenomena. The ambiguity of assumptions put forth by Csikszentmihalyi allows individuals to access the system from a multitude of perspectives, all leading to the same goal: optimal flourishing and engagement.

The Impact of Philosophical Assumptions

As the mind-body experience was examined in more depth, contradictory claims gathered and schools of thought split. A contradiction between monistic and dualistic claims attempting to systematize the mind-body phenomena forms a difficult aporia. An aporia is a group of claims that are individually plausible but collectively inconsistent.¹⁰ According to the absolute dualistic perspective, the mind and body are distinct and separate entities capable of interaction. From the absolute monistic perspective, the mind and body are a singular interdependent entity. Both claims are not necessarily true but independently sound like potential truth. The two historical perspectives for understanding mind-body phenomena clash, creating an aporia for anyone who chooses to engage.

¹⁰ Nicholas Rescher, *Philosophical Dialectics: An Essay on Metaphilosophy*. (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 17.

When faced with an aporia, two main paths can be taken for resolution. The first option is to approach the aporia and rework positions until correspondence is reached through the reframing of distinctions. Finding a conclusion through reframing often involves partially negating a perspective in order to balance contradictory positions. The second option is to embrace the aporia and admit ignorance to possessing absolute truth, choosing to instead admit to an informed but limited knowledge. Phenomenological questions involving metaphysical concepts like the mind may never be understood with absolute certainty. Perhaps embracing the inability to truly know can open up other avenues for exploring what we perceive as the self.

Therapeutic practitioners are charged not only with understanding what constitutes the human psyche, but how individuals achieve balance and flourishing in the greater contexts of life. To improve human well-being in a holistic context, identifying the isolated components of human experience is crucial. Any assumptions made by a psychological theory on the structure of the mind-body phenomenon will affect how practitioners view their patients and interact with them. What they see as worthy of addressing depends on how theories conceptualize human life. Working to understand the composition, organization, and interaction of the human experience yields a deep foundation for therapeutic practice. Not all therapeutic practitioners take the time to intensely evaluate their personal answers to these difficult questions but still take up theories and practices without being conscious of the implicit assumptions attached. In order to help make the impact of underlying philosophical assumptions more apparent for further analysis, a brief summary of select Western and Eastern historical answers to the mind-body aporia will be valuable to impart here.

Western philosophy recognizes multiple forms of Cartesian mind-body dualism, originating from Descartes' experiential notions in the historic *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

Cartesian dualism is based on the commonly experienced notions of a body moving through the world and a mind which interprets, pilots, and interacts with the body, and therefore environment. The mind and body are considered to be distinctly separate and are understood primarily through their division. Descartes is forced to detail their interaction in later dialogue with other thinkers, but uses a dualistic perspective to initially identify them. Eastern understandings of harmony, illustrated by the works of Xunzi on ritual and music, idealize the unification of mind and body through ritual. Harmony creates a monistic reality through unifying the myriad things despite their differences. Analogously to the concept of yin and yang, mind and body are essential reflections of each other, but more importantly part of the same entity. The myriad things and can be seen as a whole through ritual practice, which gives due measure to the differences. The metaphysical claims of Descartes' dualism and Xunzi's monism have weighty influence on present day psychology theories. However, both experiential realities can be used to synthesize an experience which balances the two. Without a committed attachment to being right, merely to observe potential, new awareness of experience can emerge. Understanding the constraints of both experiential lenses allows for a better avoidance of the limitations and a deeper commitment to the positive features of monism and dualism.

Dualism assumes the mind to be separate and distinct from the body, allowing individuals to recognize cognition as different from bodily sensation. Dividing conscious thought or mind from the body can give a higher sense of internal control and protection from the outside world. Understanding consciousness as distinct from the physical allows individuals to preserve their psyche in some sense. However, the ability to isolate the mental world from the physical is not without risk. Being able to address an isolated concept of body or mind is valuable in therapeutic contexts but can devolve into a world of categorical fixation. Too much separation can prevent

individuals from letting the mind and body reach a naturally harmonic balance. The psyche seeks homeostasis and healing energy is generated by the balance of an ordered mind-body experience. The concepts of harmony and balance can restore the naturally holistic order to the whole. However, making harmony the singular goal for experience can prevent individuals from investigating the mind or body using an isolated mindset. If the ideal of harmony consumes experience to the point of nullifying all divisive perceptions, focused attention cannot be paid to the isolated concept of mind. Harmony is an admirable ideal with healing value, but psyche can grow mindless through passive adherence to anything greater than the self. The ideals of harmony and division have much to teach for investigating experience, pitfalls of attachment to avoid, and a strong bearing on the therapeutic conceptualization of clients.

By suspending the aporia and not committing to an answer, absolute dualistic or monistic perspectives can be avoided. Refraining from responding with certainty lets the psyche explore the experiences both perspectives provide without being overly committed to any assumptions. However, wandering the world without any framework can quickly become unorganized and panicked. Theories and therapies will rarely strictly adhere to strictly monistic or dualistic perspectives, but they often lean heavily towards one. When a theory commits to an assumption, the psychological community ought to be cautious of the potential limits attached. Flow psychology manages to build an easily generalized framework for flourishing that respectfully maintains the body-mind aporia. The framework for the mind-body experience offered by flow psychology can honor the ideals of both perspectives. Without deeply committing to dualistic or monistic assumptions, their respective ideals of division and harmony can be accessed with minimal conflict. The goals of flow psychology can utilize one ideal over another, but still remain compatible and aware of both philosophies. In order to convey the high reverence held

for division and harmony by Descartes and Xunzi, a more detailed portrayal of their beliefs for ideal human organization is necessary. After exploring their ideals in more depth, it will be easier to understand how flow psychology can give honorable homage to both in therapeutic practice.

Descartes' Ideal of Division

Descartes establishes his dualistic understanding of human experience in his historically popular meditations titled *Meditations on First Philosophy in which are Demonstrated the Existence of God and the Distinction between the Human Soul and Body*. He begins the meditations with what has become known as Cartesian doubt. Cartesian doubt is an extreme skepticism held with vigor to all, reducing knowledge to only what can be known with absolute certainty. The skepticism leads Descartes to doubt the existence of the self and reality itself. As he begins to build trust in his existence again, a framework is needed to comprehend forms in the surrounding reality. Prominent concepts and dualistic pairs like clear and distinct, perfection, body/mind, finite/infinite, and creation/preservation run throughout the work. The conceptual pairs and terms explored within *Meditations on the First Philosophy* created an influential wave in the discussion attempting to organize the human experience. Much of Descartes' work is spent dividing, ordering, and layering what he perceives as the components of experience. Later on, when discussing the difference between creation and preservation, Descartes holds a unifying and monistic stance. Regardless, he mainly holds a divisive and dualistic mentality for the two dualistic pairs, mind-body and infinite-finite. Organizing experience through the extremes of the infinite and finite creates an orderly theoretical system for understanding the interactions between the concrete and metaphysical parts of an individual. Understanding the criterion

Descartes uses to determine division is crucial, but the division itself is a necessary ideal for creating order.

Many of the divisions hinge upon the clear and distinct perception of conceptual dualities. Understanding the specific semantics behind Descartes' phrase "clear and distinct" is an important for understanding how he conceptualizes the components of human experience, which is later highlighted in the second and third meditations. The criterion of "clear and distinct" allows Descartes to establish certainty of a mind and then body after further deliberation. Feeling certainty over the mind and body's distinctive difference leads to assumptions of the infinite and finite, but the entire exploration begins with establishing the criterion of *claram* and *distinctam*. In earlier works, Descartes describes the phrase in more detail:

"I call a perception *claram* when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something *clara* when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception *distinctam* if, as well as being *clara*, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that every part of it is *claram*."¹¹

In order to be *claram*, a perception must be apparent to the mind, just as clearly as we see objects with vision. Being *claram* is a prerequisite to being *distinctam*, but the key characteristic in Descartes' definition making a perception distinct is the sharp separation from all other perceptions. The chosen criterion for identifying these components has heavy influence on the way in which they are experienced. In the definitional framework of the argument, there is an intensive divisive ideal instead of a harmonic one. The divisive ideal created by the phrase "clear

¹¹ Rene Descartes. *Meditations on First Philosophy in Which Are Demonstrated the Existence of God and the Distinction between the Human Soul and Body*. Jonathan Bennett (2017), 9

and distinct” builds certainty, but the focus on division carries throughout the work. The focus on distinct division continues building as the same dualistic attitude is developed farther to frame Descartes’ reality.

Descartes’ two intuitively natural notions of a mind and of an extended body are easy enough to understand. The body is piloted by the mind but the meditations do not explore the details of their cooperative interactions, but rather their differences. Body and mind are both clear and distinct notions for Descartes. To strengthen his claim, Descartes begins contemplating the mind and body’s differing capabilities which he also perceives to be clear and distinct. The body functions with senses and occupies definite space and position, while the mind has the capacity to doubt, understand, affirm, deny, want, refuse, imagine, and sense.¹² Using Descartes’ previous explanation of clear or *clara*, the functions of mind and body he identifies can be experienced as *clara*. Part of the reason Descartes’ meditations had such wide influence is the epistemological appeal. Few would deny knowing the existence of mind and body. And if his definitions for God, *claram*, and *distinctam* are believed, the rest follows from the first two premises:

1. If A can exist apart from B, and vice versa, A is really distinct from B, and B from A.
2. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God (as I understand it).
3. If I can clearly and distinctly understand A apart from B, and B apart from A, then God can bring it about that A and B are apart (separate).
4. If God can bring it about that A and B are apart, then A and B can exist apart (and hence by 1, are distinct).
5. I am able clearly and distinctly to understand A apart from B, and B apart from A, if there are attributes *C* and *D*, such that I clearly and distinctly understand that *C* belongs to A, and *D* belongs to B, and I have a clear and distinct conception of A which doesn’t include *D*, and a clear and distinct conception of B which doesn’t include *C*.
6. Where A is mind, and B is body, thought, and extension satisfy the above conditions on *C* and *D* respectively.

¹² Descartes, *Meditations*, 5

7. Hence by 5, 6, 3, and 4, I am really distinct from body and can exist apart from it.¹³

The framework for his conclusions can be understood individually with clarity, making the full logical argument easy to grasp. However, logical structure does not always lead to absolute truth.

Humans can intuitively comprehend the faculties of mind or body as differing. The body and mind have different functions; most would not say a foot can understand or a mind can walk without another part to walk with. The semantic definition behind distinct or *distinctam* provides a problem with the meditations however. The relation between distinctness and separateness is important to understanding the limits of Descartes' argument. His argument only concludes the possibility of mind-body distinctness, not actual distinctness and separation in reality; "Descartes holds that two things *are* really distinct if it is *possible* for them to exist in separation. On this view, actual *distinctness* does not entail actual *separateness*"¹⁴. Having different faculties can prove distinct conceptualization is possible, but does not conclusively prove the two concepts are truly separate. The isolated faculties identified for mind and body are initially agreeable, but the analysis naturally grows more complicated over time because of their connection. Arguably, the two are more intertwined than many other concepts or entities, despite their differing faculties. As Descartes' tries to make sense of the two clear notions using larger language like infinite and finite, the divisiveness deepens.

The 17th century world Descartes lived in was far more religious than now, and the notion of God far more prevalent, pre-assumed, and influential. Descartes' personal understanding of God is "a substance that is infinite, eternal, unchangeable, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, which created myself and anything else that may exist"¹⁵. Even though Descartes attempted to begin the meditations discarding all past beliefs, there are still remaining

¹³ Margaret Wilson. *Descartes: The Epistemological Argument for Mind-Body Distinctness*. Noûs. (1976), 7

¹⁴ Wilson, *Descartes: The Epistemological Argument*, 8

¹⁵ Descartes, *Meditations*, 14

influences like past ponderings of the creative powers of the universe. When the meditations start, Descartes expresses fear of a malicious power, akin to a mad scientist, controlling his experience. The fear fades as his trust in the infinite source of his experience begins to grow. Partially due to the influence of the time period, Descartes jumps to believing in the concept of a creative and infinite god. He claims the mind is more infinite than the body due to the nature of its' faculties and gives God credit for the more infinite mind he experiences. The godly world composed of the purely infinite is considered to be more substantial and representative than the finite world he exists in. "The idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God—eternal, infinite, unchangeable, omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of everything that exists except for himself—certainly has in it more representative reality than the ideas that represent merely finite substances."¹⁶ Descartes' perception of god is above the limits of finitude and is the source of the partially infinite mind humans experience within the finite world. Pure infinity, equivalent to perfection for Descartes, is the generative force he believes created his mind and body.

Perfection is a key concept remaining undefined by Descartes and needs more discussion in order to understand the full implications of the meditations. Descartes considers God to be the most infinite entity and the most perfect as a result, yet never fully addresses what perfection entails other than infinitude. Perfection is used as additional criterion for ordering the dualistic perceptions of the mind and body. The ethereal mind is considered to be more perfect in its abstract infinitude. Body is considered to be the most finite and simple form, mind to be infinite yet limited by the finite form, and God to be the most perfect and infinite entity. Skeptics and atheists may disregard Descartes' argument upon the mention of God because "under sufficient

¹⁶ Descartes, *Meditations*, 12

conditions of ignorance, one can conceive almost anything”¹⁷. The objection is understandable when abstraction can conceive of the most impossible things, like a purple elephant. However, Descartes would claim there is not “mere conceivability, but... clear and distinct conceivability”¹⁸. Debate may always remain on the conception or existence of God, but people generally agree on the existence and fundamental conceptions of the mind and body. Descartes can clearly and distinctly perceive his mind and body as complete substances and the vividness of his individual perceptions keeps him feeling logically secure. However, because of the value Descartes places on God and infinitude, a hierarchy of support and perfection underlies the logical framework. The levels of finitude and complexity seem to be the only criterion for judging perfection and establishing the dualistic framework. Descartes’ God is of immeasurable significance to him and creates the precedent for valuing the infinite over the finite. The judgment of value based on perfection is important because the mind can be seen as the optimal means of organizing experience. Descartes sees the mind as more perfect than the body which leads him to find more value in the mind instead of the body.

Dualism must address how components interact even if they are substances of different natures and value. Descartes’ concept of mind relates to the body as a pilot relates to a vehicle. The difference between functions is used to infer the difference of substance as well. The mind has the ability to imagine, affirm, and deny; all of the mind’s abilities rely upon abstraction. The ability to abstractly construct implies a partially infinite substance. The body experiences the senses and moves through space, implying a finite substance. Descartes sees finite substance as limited when compared to the infinite. The mind’s ability to abstractly plan and guide the body is what leads Descartes to see the mind as most important. The experience is organized into a value

¹⁷ Wilson, *Descartes: The Epistemological Argument*, 8

¹⁸ Wilson, *Descartes: The Epistemological Argument*, 8

hierarchy, using the dualism of the infinite and finite to determine relative perfection. As the interaction and interconnectivity is brought into light, the shortcomings of the Cartesian mind may become clearer.

After the string of logical hierarchal organization, there is an irregular twist in the third meditation. The meditation on God discusses the concepts of preservation and creation, but echoes monistic thoughts of co-dependency between differing concepts:

“Anyone who thinks hard about the nature of time will understand that •what it takes to bring a thing into existence is •also needed to keep it in existence at each moment of its duration. So there’s no real distinction between •preservation and •creation – only a conceptual one – and this is something that the natural light makes evident”¹⁹

After spending the first two and half meditations dividing and ordering components of experience in accordance with the duality of finitude and infinitude, Descartes joins together the two differing concepts of preservation and creation. Claiming there is no distinction between the preservative and creative energies of the universe is different from his treatment of all other metaphysical conceptions, such as the infinite and finite. The only difference according to him here is a conceptual lens, which differs greatly in comparison with his division of other concepts throughout the meditations. The notion of one concept having more value than another is non-existent during the discussion of creation and preservation. They are instead woven together. The conceptual lens is a distinction of sorts, but a far more monistic minded and unifying frame. If the same unifying lens is reapplied to the mind-body and infinite-finite, the resulting conclusions could be vastly different. The body and mind could be seen as mutually dependent on each other for meaning and existence. The mind’s ability to create thought without a body or a body’s

¹⁹ Descartes, *Meditations*, 15

ability to direct action without a mind is questionable. The emphasis on the mind's value does not give proper credit to the body for the sensory experience it provides. The finite body provides "the cognitive materials for any reasoning about how to act, [which are] materials that the intellect is quite unable to procure on its own"²⁰. Phenomenological thought has suggested humans could be an unexplainable aggregate of functions instead of two separate or distinct substances. A pilot may exit the vehicle, but the human mind cannot exit the body because they are interwoven. Embodied human experience is more than just the concepts of mind and body but they are useful conceptualizations for focusing energy.

To see either side of a dualistic pair as conceptual lenses illuminates a more sophisticated and interwoven understanding of experience. Viewing infinitude and finitude as lenses for the same picture assigns equal value, removing the hierarchy of perfection Descartes jumps to. Infinitude provides a sense of the unknowable larger picture while finitude provides a safe and limited position to consider infinitude from, but they reflect the same reality. Pragmatically, finitude has bounds which enable the focusing of energy. The purely infinite may not have use without the bounds of the finite as a conduit. When the body and mind are considered without a hierarchy of perfection based on the spectrum of infinitude and finitude, they can become equally important to the experience. Perfection can fade into the background and the focus can shift to experiencing the phenomenon, rather than classifying it. The experience can occur through any lens without concern for what is the most perfect. Experience can be ordered through the mind, body, or the collaborative phenomenon created by embodying an awareness of both. With neither mind nor body on a pedestal, simply appreciating them for what they are is easier. Both bodies and mind have a complex functionality to bring but the dualistic value hierarchy Descartes' develops can push towards relying on one lens over another, instead of the

²⁰ Alison Simmons. *Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics*. Philosophers' Imprint (2017), 13

totality of experience. There is a possibility Descartes intended “these texts ... to redirect us *from* metaphysics *to* phenomenology, from a study of mind and matter to a study of the embodied human being”²¹, but the psyche can easily get stuck categorizing the metaphysical. The hierarchal division underlying the meditations leaves an impulse to categorize experience, rather than embrace it holistically.

The value hierarchy developed from the perceptions of infinitude and perfection is the largest problematic piece of Descartes’ meditations. If an explicit hierarchy were to be abstracted from *Meditations on the First Philosophy* based upon infinitude, the most perfect is god, followed by mind, and finally body. The implied hierarchy can create fixations on the infinite Cartesian mind or god, leading people to strive for connection only with what is perceived to be greater. The meditations do not directly deny the value of the finite, but the lack of emphasis on the finites’ impact and significance affirms the value hierarchy and conceptual division more. The interplay between the concepts of mind and body are powerful and crucial to experience. If individuals take the time to connect to the finite, they may find an unexpected sense of comfort. The body persistently seeks homeostasis in complex and natural ways, which can provide the mind with a sense of reliability in flux. The body is an indispensable part of experience and its’ value should be optimized. Optimizing the health of the body is vital to optimizing the health of the mind and the inverse is equally true. If the problematic hierarchy can be filtered out, there are strengths to be drawn from the ideal of division. By reflecting upon differences, functions can be better isolated and focus can be drawn to isolated particulars. By identifying the particular, problems can be confronted more directly.

²¹ Simmons, *Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics*, 3

The conceptualization of the mind and body has led to a split of interests in psychology and medical biology. Understanding the differentiated parts of a human allows for health care practitioners to become specialized in treating a diverse and complex field. Practitioners find areas of interest to study in the mental or physical realms, although holistic health awareness is becoming increasingly appreciated in all practitioners. Cartesian dualism can empower the isolated mind by affirming the mind's ability to operate independently and alter experience. An isolated mind can be stoically protected from the external forces of the world, but must be careful to not neglect the concrete. *Meditations on the First Philosophy* is a significant philosophical work attempting to make sense of the human experience, primarily through dualistic divisions. The framework vividly realizes the strength of the mind, but lacks a similarly empowering reverence for the body. The division in Cartesian dualism is not inherently damaging, but the underlying value hierarchy can detract from the perceived value of the body. With some holistic revision, Cartesian dualism can improve the practitioners' reverence for the unique natures of body and mind which they are treating without detracting from experience.

Xunzi's Ideal of Harmony

During the Warring States period of Chinese history, numerous societal groups were locked in conflict and unable to agree for the sake of enduring harmony and community. Xunzi, a prominent philosopher of the time, saw internal harmony as one of the highest ideals for society and his teachings can be made useful to the individual. The conflict-filled society surrounding Xunzi led him to believe uncultivated humans are evil. When the human atrocities over history are tallied, Xunzi's pessimistic perspective can be seen with more sympathy. However, Xunzi did not find humans irredeemable. They can avoid the darker and misguided paths by embracing harmony-based ritual. Xunzi's standards for ritual during the Warring States

period focus on unification, resulting in an underlying monistic ideal. The reverence for monistic harmony is most apparent within his chapters on ritual and music, which he believed were essential tools for reestablishing peace between conflicting groups. Relating to the world through harmony can promote the unification of the myriad things despite their differences and help the whole flourish. Harmony-based ritual is driven by the monistic ideal of unification, and can allow individuals to see past division. Seeing past division allows for the experience of a greater whole to take primary control and potentially provide healing through already established systems.

In order to achieve harmony by Xunzi's standards, his understanding of harmony and several related concepts must be explored. The Way, ritual, and the mind-heart are all deeply integral to experiencing Xunzi's conception of harmony. The Way is a largely abstract concept, somewhat analogous to a divinely universal force or order in Chinese philosophy. Xunzi's work depends on being able to recognize the grand, abstract, and enigmatic Way of the cosmos. Ritual, coming from the mind-heart, is a tangible humanistic reflection of the Way's abstract of pattern-principle. Pattern-principle, or *li*, is the rational law which the Way follows to order the cosmos. The potential for ritual to bring harmony and balance is dependent on the ritual's ability to reflect the universal *li*. Rituals that sufficiently reflect *li* have a natural power: the ability to bring focus, balance, and harmony to the human experience. The relationship between ritual and the Way is what instills the restorative and unifying power. The mind-heart, or *xin*, of the individual is a unique combination of emotive, reactive, and reflective capacities, separate in nature from the body or spirit. According to Xunzi, proper ritual must come from a mind-heart connected to the Way. The harmony of the Way can be reflected through proper ritual only if the heart is connected and clear. Involved understanding of the Way and mind-heart are required to fully

receive the self-rewarding aspects of ritual. Fortunately, engaging in properly framed ritual brings the mind-heart to connect more with the Way. The deeper the connection to the Way, the greater the harmonious and self-reinforcing benefits produced by ritual will be.

The mind-heart is the connection to the Way for humans so understanding Xunzi's conception of the *xin*, or mind-heart, is important to detail. Like the concept of *li*, or pattern-principle, two differing concepts are seen more as one, making some historical translations less than fully representative. The mind-heart is the logical and emotional piece of humans, an intertwined concept. There are multiple unique qualities, functions, and problems of the mind-heart in daily life which Xunzi sees as noteworthy, such as the conceptual distinction from the body or spirit; "The [mind]-heart is the lord of the body and the master of one's spirit and intelligence"²². The mind-heart is perceived as a passive leader of both physical and mental worlds. The heart is a concrete biological center, helping to maintain the flow of energy throughout the body. Emotion has also long been linked to the heart, although the reasons are arguably more symbolic. However, the saying one's heart is heavy with sorrow is not necessarily completely colloquial. The body can instinctively react with emotion through the production of endorphins, deepening the experience of emotion. Through the biological reactions, the body can heavily influence the mind. Automatic emotional reactions can develop over time from frequent thought and behavior patterns, but there is always part of humans that reflects on the emotional response afterwards. As Xunzi states, "the mind-heart has the power to judge its' awareness"²³. Action does not occur without some level of self-awareness following behind and the psyche ought to capitalize on the ability to be self-critical. The overall value of the mind-heart is greatly

²² Xunzi. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 229.

²³ Xunzi. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 238.

diminished without proper self-reflection.²⁴ Without mindfully reflecting on the instinctive emotive reactions, the mind-heart can produce more harm than help. Xunzi's description of the mind-heart's abilities goes beyond purely emotive or cognitive reactions, including the ability to reflect. The combination of reactive, emotive, and reflective capacities together gives the mind-heart a crucial role to play in the human experience.

A consequence of Xunzi's mind-heart being able to reflect is the ability to influence future action and reflection. Awareness entails the ability to improve, but the potential to improve brings the potential to worsen. The mind-heart can easily be disordered by forces from the outside world. People can become fixedly obsessed with any differentiated object, concept, or group. Fixation is the common problem of the mind-heart.²⁵ Xunzi introduces the analogy of a pan filled with water in order to understand how fixations arise and settle in the mind-heart. When undisturbed, the sediment and particles in the pan settle to the bottom and the reflection becomes clear and ordered. If wind or motion from the outside stirs the undercurrents, the water becomes muddied and the quality of the reflection is ruined. When the inside of a mind-heart has been made murky, the heart's ability to distinguish correct patterns from wrong ones becomes diminished.²⁶ The importance of recognizing and settling the turbulence of the heart is made clear through the analogy of water and sediment. A settled and undisturbed heart is a prerequisite for having clarity on the internal self and external world. Many forms of ritual bring can bring clarity, like yoga or breathing meditation. Giving the mind-heart the time and setting to settle is of utmost importance for mindfully reflecting on experiences.

²⁴ Xunzi. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 224.

²⁵ Xunzi. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 224.

²⁶ Xunzi. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 231

The heart, when settled, naturally knows the Way through three less frequently attained states. In order to know the Way deeply, the heart must regularly engage in emptiness, single-mindedness, and stillness.²⁷ Emptiness is often combated by the constant desire of the psyche to be stimulated and fixate. Learning to experience and appreciate the lessons of emptiness in the mind-heart brings one closer to the Way. Knowledge of the new requires the space of emptiness. Xunzi also claims the mind-heart will always know what being single-minded is instinctually, but when humans use their awareness to see differences, they become two-minded. The mind-heart has the ability to see reality without division, but sociological influences like education and language inject categorization into thoughts. By learning to be single-minded from the mind-heart, the psyche can minimize conflicting energy and build a unified experience. Stillness is another state in opposition with the constant motion of the psyche through sleeping dreams and waking plans. However, the human inclination towards constant motion does not mean stillness does not or cannot exist within the mind-heart as well. When neither dreams nor worries create dysfunctional thought, Xunzi considers an individual to be still.²⁸ Taking the dedicated time to embrace the lessons of emptiness, single-mindedness, and stillness allows the heart to recognize and experience subtleties of human states with more comprehension.

Through the regular engagement with these rarer yet achievable states, the mind-heart will begin to align action with the Way. A mind-heart aware of the Way is necessary for the good ordering of life.²⁹ Emptiness will allow the mind-heart to let more in. Single-mindedness will allow the mind-heart to pursue the Way more intently. And stillness will allow the mind-

²⁷ Xunzi. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 228.

²⁸ Xunzi. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 228.

²⁹ Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 228.

heart to discern what the Way is with increased accuracy.³⁰ Once the mind-heart is deeply connected to the Way, deviating from the Way seems foolish. Whatever is not in accordance with the Way will lose the enticing illusion of pleasure. Only pleasure in accordance with the Way becomes worthwhile. “For a person to know that there is nothing as great as the Way and yet not follow the Way – there are no such cases”³¹. With reflective practice, the mind-heart can be settled and will readily remind individuals of their connection to the Way. The external world can bring disorder and distraction, pushing the mind-heart towards misalignment, but reconnecting to the Way is always possible. The mind-heart can intuitively shine light on the Way and recalibrate the whole system to seek harmony through properly framed ritual practice.

Ritual allows people to simplify experience for a brief time through focused organization. By engaging the mind-heart in ritual, individuals can get closer to the underlying principles of the Way, which has multiple benefits. Understanding the principles, rather than becoming fixated solely on the manifest patterns, allows individuals to see relationships and patterns in larger contexts outside of ritual. Despite each distinct thing having a unique nature, there are overarching principles guiding the formation and interaction of groups. Chaos and harmony work together to create, destroy, and preserve the myriad things in all their various forms. Chaos causes disorder, allowing for new creations. Harmony enables the synergistic functioning within and between groups, linking together what might otherwise be sporadic and unorganized energy. Principles like chaos and harmony set the stage for the development of rituals intended to mimic the natural patterns-principle of the cosmos. Ritual acts as a facilitator of peaceful society by establishing agreeable conventions but simultaneously tests those conventions for compatibility,

³⁰ Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 229.

³¹Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 224.

both with humanity and the Way³². Without properly formed ritual, poor conventions can develop in society and there is no way to test how connected the conventions of a society are to the universal *li*.

Harmony is a powerful transformative element of the Way and is of particular interest to Xunzi with the surrounding conflict in his time. Ritual has powerful influence largely because of the harmonic and monistic goal: attempting to bring unity to the diversity the of the cosmos' manifestations. For Xunzi, well-formed ritual addresses the diversity of the community or individual through an organized framework for the greater purpose of transformation. Harmonizing ritual should nourish all the differentiations of age, wealth, and status with the proper and appropriate weight.³³ The actual manifestation of ritual reflects the current cultural code, but can also prompt people to reconsider what acceptable treatment is. Not only does ritual need to respect the unique differentiations of the myriad things when determining what appropriate and proper means, but the manifestation of ritual should ideally be formal and pragmatic as well. Xunzi's ideal rituals harmonize differentiations through culturally accepted formalities, but simultaneously serve a functional demand for the participants.

“To honor the fundamentals is called good form and to take care of the practical needs is called good order. When the two combine and form a pattern, so as to return to a greater unity, this is called the great exalted state”³⁴

Having increased awareness of harmony's importance to the Way can change the entire experience of ritual. Harmony is what brings a system into greater unity. Mindfully experiencing

³² Paul Goldin. *Rituals of the Way: The Philosophy of Xunzi*. Peru, Illinois: Carus Publishing Company. (1999), 74

³³ Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 201.

³⁴ Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 203.

the harmony in ritual enhances the perception of harmony in daily life. Ritual naturally forms around monistic ideals of unification because they are attempting to put the differentiations of the universe in harmonic patterns to reach a greater state of unity. Idealizing the unification of differences is a primarily monistic mindset. Monistic ideals do not have to deny differences however; Xunzi repeatedly idealizes giving the proper weight to all the myriad things despite their differences. Music is the most prominent example of harmony-producing ritual for Xunzi. He believes music unites what is the same by providing an unchangeable harmony, while ritual differentiates by providing unchanging order³⁵. When the traditional ritual and music work in tandem, harmony is brought to all the differentiations. Enjoying or creating music is a sort of ritual and order in its' own right and holds incredible power to produce ritualistic harmony in communities or individuals.

Music is a source of eternal and unchangeable harmony. There is a set pattern intended to enhance and change the experience of the listener, providing a stable harmonic base. Music naturally fills an attentive listener and brings a state of order to experience. Human emotion is universal and cannot be ignored so the structure of ritual must create space for emotion. Music provides an excellent channel for emotional expression. If the expression of people is not in accordance with the Way, there will be chaos. However, ritual in accordance with *li* takes raw human emotions and reworks them to fit with the appropriate “standards for the myriad generations”.³⁶ Thankfully, music helps to express emotion and establish order in agreement with the Way. The songs of the ancestral temples brought people into states of harmonious affection, respect, and cooperation according to Xunzi.³⁷ The principle of harmony can be amplified

³⁵ Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 221.

³⁶ Goldin, *Rituals of the Way*, 77

³⁷ Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 218.

through music to bring out the mutual feelings of affection, respect, and cooperation in the psyche, dissolving what might be perceived as differentiations at a different time. One of the qualities Xunzi notes about music is its' ability to fix a harmony through the observation of a single standard. The standard was established by the older kings for the people; sounds must be combined in order to create beautiful patterns capable of leading people in unified fashion and bringing order to the myriad differences within.³⁸ The only goal of music is to make art from sound for the enjoyment of humans. The old kings of Chinese history had standards for what was considered proper music because they believed only music in alignment with the Way would bring peoples mind-hearts towards the Way as well³⁹. The modern standards for beauty in music, art, and ritual are far more subjective than the standards of the ancient kings, but people should still reflect on their own standards and perception of the Way. Despite the reality of differences, music can establish a baseline of harmonic order. The ability of music to bring order rests heavily upon the monistic ideals of unification and harmony.

Rituals, in musical form or otherwise, allow the mind-heart and total experience to reset around a single standard of harmonic order. Monistic ideals do not require the assimilation of differences though. Bringing myriad things into order requires not just the recognition of the differences, but a drive to see compatibility as well. Understanding differences is actually crucial to being able to properly bring harmony to the myriad things. Monism boldly aims to give a fitting position for each of the various differences in one all-encompassing, functional, and synergistic system. Monistic framing has different effects on communities and individuals. For communities, ritual is used to provide an ordered pattern, validating the place and efforts of the people. For individuals, harmonizing ritual is used to settle the mind-heart and unify the personal

³⁸ Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 218.

³⁹ Goldin, *Rituals of the Way*, 79

experience. The conception of a Cartesian mind and body are not to be ignored or downplayed, but their synergy between the two will always rely on the ability to act as one. There are benefits and pitfalls to taking on the ideal of a monistic harmony, and like the ideal of dualistic division, the positives and negatives should be made apparent.

The biggest risk with monistic ideals is created by the assumption that a single unifying organization can be appropriate and sufficient. Any thoughtfully formed ritual will be an attempt to organize behavior and thought in an optimally harmonizing way, but organization involves defining what proper and relative places means for all the differentiations. Enacting proper and relative honor for the differentiations of people sounds great until the various definitions of proper must be detailed. People regularly disagree over what proper value means, like determining how much someone should be paid for their contributions to society. The value of a teacher may feel enormous to some and small to others. What proper means can be hard to specifically quantify. Analogously on the individual level, the exact level of mental or bodily engagement required for proper ritual can be difficult to specify. The proper ritual or frame of experience can differ depending on the context. No ritual will ever be sufficient for all situations. As Xunzi says of the Way, any human perspective will never manage to cover everything the Way is.⁴⁰ The diversity of reality is too great for any singular frame. Partially because of the risk entailed when organizing a societal system, cultures tends to look backwards into history for strong and enduring rituals which have served humanity well. History shows what has repeatedly resonated with people positively over time. Searching into the records of history, well-formed and harmonizing ritual can be found, but no ritual from the past will ever be enough for the ever-changing present world. Engaging in creative spontaneity is important instead of depending on

⁴⁰ Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. 227.

ritual which can bring mindless practice. A ritual is not inherently good or substantial because it can function, but the functional rituals are what endure and influence society. The responsibility lies on the individual to mindfully choose rituals and stay adaptable in order to keep up with the flux of life.

Among the most comforting qualities of ritual is the reliability. Ritual gives place, order, and meaning to a potentially chaotic experience. When a ritual is based on monistic and unifying principles, everything has an ideal place and relationship. The constant organizing of experience in day to day life can be draining on the psyche. Ritual allows individuals to relax into a restorative and harmonizing pattern of organization. Whether the practice is for communities or individuals, ritual temporarily imposes order on the system it is framed around. As previously mentioned, no singular framework for ritual will be adequate and sufficient enough for all situations. However, if the rituals for establishing harmony are adaptive and accessible, more experiences can be ritualized and made comfortable. The established connection to ritual provides a safe retreat from the entropy and chaos of life. Being able to step back and engage in a connected, purposeful, and organized state gives many people a sense of comfort and power over their own lives. The ability to integrate harmonic ritual and thought into daily life gives people a method to connect to larger systems and method to bring order to their own experience.

The concept of harmonizing ritual Xunzi puts forward encapsulates the ideals of monistic thought. Some standards for ritual are stuck in the time of the Warring States but Xunzi was attempting to restructure mass chaos. When his ideas on harmony and ritual are extrapolated, the reverence for unity and harmony through ritualized practice shines through. Differences and distinctions are used to form order, but the overall goal is for everything to have a place in one synergistic system. Staying reverent to tradition while staying flexible enough for reform is the

key to avoid being locked in mindless cycles of ritual. If people can be vigilantly self-aware of what provides authentic harmony to their mind-heart when reflecting on their practices, they can avoid thoughtlessly going through the motions of ritual. With the careful organization and selection of ritual using Xunzi's monistic ideals, an enduring order can rise from the myriad things: unity and harmony for all.

Flow as Framework for Exploring Experience

Addressing the metaphysical realities of embodied experience is a weighty task and one which may never be answered with certainty. Humans could be a fusion of the Cartesian mind and a finite body or a holistic conglomerate beyond categorical understanding but knowing the answer with certainty is not important. However, being able to conceptualize both possibilities allows the exploration of the functions and capacities human experience has to offer. The exploration naturally deepens perception and understanding; individuals can find themselves seeing new details in their experience through monistic and dualistic mindsets. Instead of debating metaphysics indefinitely, the mind-body aporia will be bracketed and an exploration of how flow explores human experience interrelate can take the stage instead.

Psychology differs from philosophy by avoiding the phenomenological questions of the human experience. Practitioners instead focus on the betterment of others using accepted theories from their academic communities. A competent theory must explore conceptions of the human experience which can be analyzed and bettered through treatment. The style of analysis and treatment a theory employs can be strongly influenced by philosophical assumptions hidden beneath. Theories and approaches from psychology like Behaviorism, cognitive behavioral therapy, and mind-body therapy can be limited due to their underlying assumptions. Overbearing assumptions cause theories to lose the innate ability of humans to optimize life into harmonic,

yet dynamic, rhythm. Flow psychology, as outlined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, sets up an easily generalized framework which aims to systematize the optimal exploration of the human experience.

Behaviorism was an early development in psychology which focuses on physical behaviors instead of internal thoughts. Pure behaviorists remain skeptical of the ability to record thought accurately and would not necessarily say thoughts are of no importance, but that thoughts are too ethereal to reliably use as part of therapy. They believe addressing observable behavior allows therapy to influence the more abstract and mental side sufficiently for healing. Behavior-focused treatment simplifies the therapeutic process by identifying concrete marks of progress, assuming healthy thought will follow from healthy behavior naturally. Instead of guessing at internal processes like intent or emotion, behaviorism relies on the empirical past to build understandings of the client. A client may not know their own beliefs and thoughts, making behavior the only clear observations for the practitioner⁴¹. By thoroughly analyzing past behavior, a comprehensive picture can be painted of the client's strengths, weaknesses, motivations, and purpose. The analysis focuses only on the physical because of the doubt in the mental world's reliability, drawing a clearly dualistic border for practitioners. Behaviorism puts the research of inner psychological processes into the domain of neuroscience, while observing overt behavioral patterns is put forth as the domain of psychology⁴². The focus of the treatment remains concretely behavioral and physical as a result of the dualistic mindset, leading practitioners to neglect the realm of thought humans vividly experience. Behaviorism is suggested to be monistic because consciousness is sometimes assumed to be just another feature

⁴¹Howard Rachlin. *In Defense of Teleological Behaviorism*. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* (2017), 5

⁴² Rachlin, *In Defense of Teleological Behaviorism*, 5

of the physical world, but the mental world is affirmed through the elaborate nature of human expression too strongly to deny. Explicit concepts and thoughts can be extrapolated from abstract discussions about cognition, not just the analysis of behavior. Behaviorism claims the mental world should not be analyzed because thinking is a slippery phenomenon and remains dualistically blind as a result. The theory instead chooses to focus on the observation and change of manifested thought, believing the mental world will fall in order if the behavioral world is made healthy. The mental world of thought and the physical world of action are starkly divided, and the dualistic division is the key feature of Behaviorism.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) does not buy the simplified claim of the Behaviorism. CBT seeks to detail the other side of the dualistic foundation Behaviorism creates. The cognitive side of CBT asks the client to reflect on their internal experience and look for prominent attitudes or language. Trusting the client to be honest about their thoughts can be a gamble but allows for discussion and analysis that may otherwise not be accessible. The correlations between seemingly automatic mental responses and the physical behavioral responses can be honed in on. Purely behavioral therapists treating a client attempting to quit smoking might only ask the client to engage in invigorating behavior when cravings begin, like washing their face or going for a exercising. A CBT therapist might instead ask the client to try and recall the initial thoughts paired with the cravings. They look for de-motivating and negative internal dialogue (“There’s no way I can actually quit”, “I don’t want to do this anymore”, ect.) and then attempt to instill positive thought and behavior through suggestions, like mindfully walking without smoking or mantras. The mantras can be designed to directly combat the de-motivating dialogue, intending to inspire and empower the client (“I can quit eventually if I put my mind to it”, “One day and thought at a time”, ect.). CBT’s traditional objective is to observe

cognitive and behavioral patterns, and then consciously and collaboratively educate the client on how to change the content of the patterns.

A study in 2001 investigated individuals attempting to quit smoking who also had past diagnosed major depressive disorder. The study compared standard therapy treatments with CBT framed treatment and found individuals who received CBT as treatment were 2.62 times more likely to abstain from future smoking and MDD than those who received standard treatment⁴³. Despite the absence of a traditionally statistical difference between standard treatment and CBT treatment, the CBT treatment did still have a higher rate of long-term abstinence. Both of the non-pharmacological treatments had relatively successful long-term abstinence rates which could explain why CBT was not prominently statistically significant.⁴⁴ The study would have benefitted from running an exclusively pharmacological treatment for added control. Another study tested the efficacy of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) which is similar to CBT in the observation of cognition and behavior but emphasizes an element of mindfulness as well. MBCT was compared to Cognitive Psychological Education and treatment as usual. Mindfulness is normally practiced through meditation and attempts to draw attention to all the details of experience. MBCT did not perform significantly better than the other two treatments but still performed the best, indicating no negative risks of including mindfulness. Additionally, MBCT did demonstrate statistically significant reductions in risk of relapse for individuals with a history of childhood trauma when compared to the other two treatments⁴⁵. CBT and related

⁴³ Brown, Richard A., Christopher W. Kahler, Raymond Niaura, David B. Abrams, Suzanne D. Sales, Susan E. Ramsey, Michael G. Goldstein, Ellen S. Burgess, and Ivan W. Miller. *Cognitive-behavioral Treatment for Depression in Smoking Cessation*. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (2001), 5

⁴⁴ Brown et al, *Cognitive-behavioral Treatment for Depression in Smoking Cessation*, 8

⁴⁵ Williams, J. Mark G., Catherine Crane, Thorsten Barnhofer, Kate Brennan, Danielle S. Duggan, Melanie J. V. Fennell, Ann Hackmann, et al. *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Preventing Relapse in Recurrent Depression: A Randomized Dismantling Trial*. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. (2014), 7

therapies are an effective and professionally accepted means of approaching many problems and disorders, particularly because of the relapse prevention built in. The analysis and treatment within CBT are developed from a mindset similar to interactional dualism; the therapy investigates the client's internal mental world and behaviors in the external world but strives to have a nuanced understanding of the interaction when analyzing the whole person. Studying the connections between the dualistic categories allows cognitive behavioral therapy to understand and capitalize on the interactive potential.

Mind-body therapy involves practices like yoga and meditative breathing, which are intended to occupy both the mental and physical. Yoga, mentioned as a form of bodily flow by Mihaly, creates a state of order and control, first over the body and then over the mind⁴⁶. By first learning to hold poses and then thought, all of experience can be brought back to natural rhythm. Meditative breathing is another ancient mind-body therapy and is able to occupy our concentration fully in the process of oxygenating the body and returning to homeostasis. Yoga and breathing both have beneficial effects, but they all function around a similar mechanic: harmonizing the physical and mental world can naturally produce homeostasis. When therapy trains the mind and body together, “the stress-related physical and emotional symptoms, such as tension, frustration, anger, depression, and somatization” are more holistically alleviated⁴⁷. The common ground between mind-body practices is the monistic ideal of harmony. Mind-body therapies assume if awareness is raised to an intuitively holistic place, a healthy balance will arise from disorder. MBT has been integrated into workplaces with varying degrees of success, recognizing the wear of psychological stress on the worker's health and productivity. A simple

⁴⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Broadway, New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1990), 104

⁴⁷ Jung, Ye-Ha, Tae Min Ha, Chang Young Oh, UI Soon Lee, Joon Hwan Jang, Jungwon Kim, Jae-Oh Park, and Do-Hyung Kang. *The Effects of an Online Mind-Body Training Program on Stress, Coping Strategies, Emotional Intelligence, Resilience and Psychological State. PLoS ONE* (2016), 13

2012 study investigating the integration of MBT into the workplace had one control group, one Viniyoga group, and one mindfulness meditation group. All saw statistically significant reductions in perceived stress and sleep difficulties compared to the controls as well as marginal improvements in breathing rates and heart rhythm coherence⁴⁸. The modest inclusion of yoga or breathing exercises in weekly life resulted in empirically significant benefits. Even a study using an online MBT program as intervention saw statistically significant improvement in psychological capabilities like managing anger, developing healthy coping habits, and emotional resilience⁴⁹. While there is truth to natural awareness producing balance, relying on monistic ideals may ignore the specifics defining the problem at hand. Losing the ability to tailor treatments to specific thoughts or situations is a large limit of mind-body therapies. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapists would benefit greatly from offering mind-body therapies because they engage the body in mindful activity, giving a stable position to have mindful cognitive activity from. Regardless, the abilities of MBCT and MBT on their own can be lacking thanks to dualistic and monistic assumptions.

Flow psychology offers a framework which is compatible with all of the above therapies to some degree yet produces enough of a nuanced perspective to design treatments for a wide variety of contexts. Pinning down explicit mind-body assumptions in flow-focused therapy is harder because the theory echoes both monistic and dualistic perspectives. Csikszentmihalyi proposes that by exploring otherwise ignored features and capacities of life through active and mindful goal setting, flow psychology can guide the client into the flow channel and improve the quality of life as a result. Flow in the body and thought both help to maintain internal order

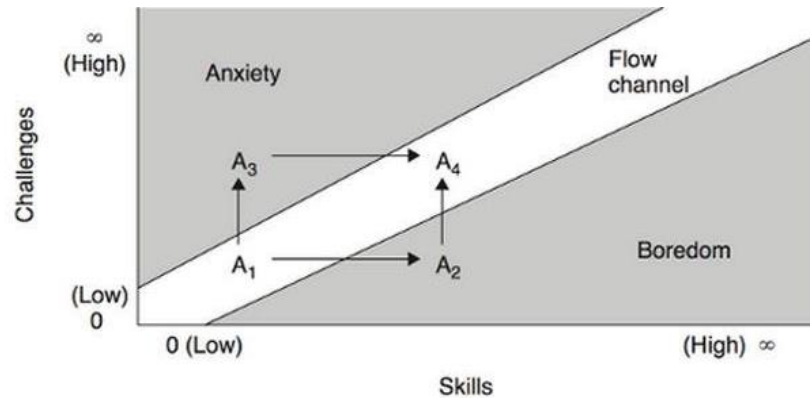
⁴⁸ Wolever, R. Q., Bobinet, K. J., McCabe, K., Mackenzie, E. R., Fekete, E., Kusnick, C. A., & Baime, M. *Effective and viable mind-body stress reduction in the workplace: A randomized controlled trial*. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, (2012), 10

⁴⁹ Jung et al. *Effects of an Online Mind-Body Training Program* (2016), 13

despite the constant influence of outside forces. Goal setting is a mental capacity, but mental thought means little without a physically manifested action in the external world. The structure of the mental world could theoretically rely on physical perceptions. A purely mental world, previously thought of as infinite by Descartes, is limited if the individual wants to interact with the external world and actualize goals. The external world has infinite possibilities that can be actualized, but they require the ordering of the mental world in a balanced and meaningful fashion. Pragmatically, abstract thought is only useful if the symbolism helps us interact with the external world. Instead of engaging in meaningless abstraction, flow psychology seeks to find ways to harness mental energy to work with the experience, rather than standing in the mental world's isolated independence. Harnessing energy to create flow requires the perception of distinctions but overall awareness of the complete picture.

The necessary conditions for flow are explicitly detailed using a variety of contexts in Mihaly's most comprehensive work, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. The universal appeal of the conditions hint at a monistic assumption underneath, but the subsequent chapters discuss flow in the dualistically divided mental or bodily worlds. The entirety of the experiential substance has differing capacities within the physical and mental worlds, but both realms desire the enjoyment of flow through the variables of skill and challenge. The two related variables are explained by Csikszentmihalyi as broadly applicable to human life; they help keep the risks of anxiety and boredom at bay⁵⁰. When the level of skill harmoniously matches the level of challenge, humans tend to naturally fall into a contented state of flow for the duration of activity, practice, or ritual.

⁵⁰ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 74



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As we learn, if the skill level becomes high, but the challenge level remains low, we enter a state of boredom (A2). On the other hand, if we encounter higher challenge levels before our skill level has increased, we enter a state of anxiety (A3). As Mihaly notes, when at position A3, one could choose to reduce challenges to return to A1 but will reach boredom quickly if unexplored challenges exist⁵². A musician playing the same songs repeatedly will achieve high prowess with those songs but will soon reach boredom if the songs are not challenging enough. Learning new tunes, practicing old ones, or otherwise raising the challenge level will bring some anxiety as the musician learns. By mindfully adjusting the challenges set or developing skills, an optimal balance can be created, and flow naturally ensues.

Enjoyment and flow come naturally when the required skills and complexity of challenge is positively balanced. The optimal flow state begins at any point where skill and challenge are balanced. There should always be some level of anxiety and boredom, but the range of positions in the flow channel minimizes the negatives through harmonious relations. The difference between position A1 and A4 (or any other position within the flow channel) in enjoyment or fulfillment is dependent on the complexity of the challenge and skills involved. A musician who has played for ten years will likely get more fulfillment from their practice than a beginner. The

⁵¹ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 74

⁵² Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 75

beginner can still be fulfilled by achieving goals, but not to the same degree of a veteran musician. The universal criterion for flow, in body or mind, treats the analysis and treatment from a more monistic perspective. If the natures of mind and body were truly separate and distinct, one might expect differing criterion for them, but flow psychology offers one universal criterion for optimizing mind or body centered experiences. Another monistic leaning quality shows as the quest for optimal flow is undertaken. Optimizing flow will almost always involves the bodily and mental worlds working in tandem. As Mihaly further explores specific forms of flow in human experience, flow psychology's interrelated view of mind and body becomes strongly apparent.

Despite the initial monistic treatment, the lengthy explorations of the capacities within flow psychology are organized into classically dualistic mind and body categories. The activities which commonly bring flow through the body were further sectioned into joy through movement and joy through the senses. Practices such as dancing, yoga, and sex are all bring flow through bodily motion⁵³. There is a certain innate enjoyment which comes from motion, and the more disciplined, passionate, or artful, the more enjoyed the motion becomes. However, Csikszentmihalyi takes care to highlight the impact of mental factors like passion on physical practices. The mental perceptions during sex most starkly illustrate the ability of thought to shape experience⁵⁴. Sex can be a meaningless interaction, insidious violation, or beautifying ritual and the classification depends solely on the mental world of the people involved. Sports similarly have a mental side, involving emotional attitudes and structured ways of training. All bodily actions can be enjoyable, but the emotion and mental structuring given is what raises the

⁵³ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 100

⁵⁴ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 101

skills and challenges involved. The inescapable mental side of flow in the body is crucial to the shaping of the overall experience.

Mindfully enjoying senses also provides a bodily flow. The mental meta-framing of the senses changes the enjoyment of the experience significantly here as well. Learning to appreciate the subtleties of hearing music or looking at art on more complex levels comes from a mindful appreciation of the experience, rather than simplified hedonistic enjoyment⁵⁵. Taking the time to reflect on the emotions which arise during different sections of a song can amplify the experience. An artist is going to naturally see art through more appreciative lenses, guided by thoughts of composition and style. Again, the bodily pleasures are improved through the mindful framing of the mental world. While flow has a simplistic interpretation of the purely mental world's capacities, they are a crucial functional feature involved in improving perceptions of the physical world and the overall quality of life.

Flow solely within the mental world relies on the language of memory and symbolic thought. The symbolism comes in forms such as words, numbers, episodic memory, or images and is used to help order memory and thought. The long-reaching possibilities of thought is reliant upon the development of these symbolic languages. Organized memory and symbolic thought are used together to provide order to an otherwise naturally chaotic state: entropy⁵⁶. Reading and writing are both intensely mental flow activities using the symbolic world of language instead of mental imagery. Reading and writing allows information to be organized and manipulated in order to build increasingly complex understandings of the external world. The variables of challenge and skill can be used to reach flow in the world of language. A flow psychologist seeing a block in the mental world of their client may recommend journaling in the

⁵⁵ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 107-110

⁵⁶ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 119

morning and evening, giving them the challenge of organizing their day using language⁵⁷. Order comes from good practice and allows for the mental world to flow with more ease. The practice of words can be strengthened by the tangible flow produced by writing or the auditory flow created by reading aloud. In order to enjoy the layers of sensory experiences, the mindful appreciation of our bodily input is needed. If individuals explore the ignored intertwined capacities of the mental and physical worlds with active goals, the quality of life will naturally improve as internal understanding and order grows. The two worlds, mental and physical, can be intertwined despite their distinctions through the mindful and contextual education of the client.

Flow psychology holds a universal conditional criterion for flow but does not categorize activities based on the involvement of bodily perceptions. Mihaly transparently remarks the only reason any division was made in his chapters was because despite flow demanding the blend of the bodily perceptions and mental world, some seemed capable of ordering the purely mental world.⁵⁸ Otherwise, he avoids drawing distinctions between the body and mind, instead drawing them together to normalize integrating flow into the overall experience. The meanings of the tangible and abstract worlds are reduced without the other as a supplement. Hierarchies neglecting the importance of the physical seem illogical when the interrelation of the capacities is made so clear here. And relying on the healing of harmony MBT brings could fail to attend to the explicit details of the internal. Flow psychology strikes the necessary balance between division and harmony ideals by creating dualistic categories that rely on monistic assumptions to optimize. Csikszentmihalyi appeals to both dualistic and monistic conceptions within his theory of human psychology, keeping the theory flexible enough for numerous forms of integration.

⁵⁷ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 131

⁵⁸ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 118

Csikszentmihalyi's conceptualization of flow is heavily backed by empirical records of individual experience and systematically conveys a rather abstract conceptual state. Instead of only defining the abstract variables necessary for flow, large portions of *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience* is dedicated to how the individual can experience flow using common and accessible human capacities. The work gives a balanced abstract framework to interact with the finite form. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi intended the work to be psychological rather than philosophical, but his conception of flow prods the previous philosophical aporetic discussion of mind and body. There is a sense of separateness and wholeness between the body and mind simultaneously. Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow gives humans a framework to explore the phenomenological and paradoxical two perceptions. Humans can experience the physical or mental in pseudo-isolation for a brief time, but the two will inevitably interact. Whether the metaphysical reality of humans is dualistic with interactions or one monistic system, finding healthy, nuanced, and purposeful ways to explore the mind and body is important. No single system will ever be enough for all situations, but flow psychology gives an adaptable framework to add to the toolkit. Exploring flow may not provide confident metaphysical answers but provides a framework which functionally embraces the aporetic paradox of mind and body.

Conclusion

For psychology practitioners, considering the underlying assumptions of underlying the implemented treatments or theories is a responsible practice. More committed assumptions can create conflict with other theories and framework. There will always be conflict among the collective plethora of psychological theories, but some frameworks are more compatible than others. Identifying the main assumptions of a theory makes the limitations and compatible qualities clear for practitioners. Flow psychology is a theory with few committed assumptions,

instead communicating a great amount from a surprisingly small and stable foundation. The proposed relational criterion for achieving optimal engagement, involving challenge and skill, is a logical system which can be flexibly generalized in numerous ways. The minimal assumptions of flow psychology result in the fluid adaptation of the criterion and makes for valuable compatibility with other theories.

The goal of optimized engagement can be reached on many contextual levels through many paths, encouraging a holistic and individualized pursuit of health. Using the minimal structural assumptions, flow psychology can be utilized by therapists to enhance treatments which remain individually limited, like cognitive-behavioral or mind-body therapy. As therapists assign behaviorally activating homework or goals, they can guide their client towards the flow channel by keeping the variables of challenge and skill in mind. MBCT and CBT both involve educating the client on the healing process, allowing them to independently prevent future relapse. Flow can similarly teach a useful framework for the clients to integrate into life outside therapy. Flow can be reached through the mind, body, or overall experience, making for a relatively open-ended path of healing for the client. Despite the flexibility to specifically target the mental or physical world, flow will always require some collaboration between the two realms. Infusing flow into other therapies is simple because any aspect of experience holds the potential to flow. Flow exists in private life, communities, or work places. A person with complete understanding of the flow channel would be able to consistently experience flow in all the diverse areas and situations of life, rather than just in select contexts. Individual growth can be optimized in an innumerable number of paths and contexts with the lens of flow psychology. The diverse areas of life, coupled with the diverse means to create flow, allow therapists and

clients to develop individualized treatment plans to for sustainable routes to health and happiness.

The most significant but avoidable shortcoming of flow psychology lies in the positive goals for flourishing and order. Flow psychology is a founding branch of positive psychology and was intended to create reliable positive experience. The purpose of flow psychology is not to work with intense traumas or confront existential crisis. Even if flow psychology could help trauma patients in specific contexts, flow does not have the proper structure to take the primary lead for handling more deeply ingrained issues. Trauma and the existential crisis are better left handled with CBT or MBCT taking the reins. Recognizing the goals of positive psychology will help practitioners to stay realistic about the limits flow has when processing pure negativity. While flow should not take the lead in trauma therapy, there may still be ways to introduce flow into the healing process. The 2014 study on MBCT cited earlier empirically demonstrates the increased efficacy of MBCT in cases of childhood trauma, but flow could be incorporated into meditations intended to relax the body and give the traumatized individual a sense of control. Regardless of the helping role flow psychology could play in trauma healing, there is not enough structure or empirical research for any substantial claims to be made.

The framework for flow developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi gives psychologists an invaluable conceptual tool, capable of focusing on problems in detail or seeing a broader holistic picture. The dualistic division between the mind and body pragmatically sorts the perceived experiences of flow in humans to help engage the psyche with experience more directly. By observing the mental or physical differentiations of experience, the use of energy can be more carefully chosen to induce flow. For example, participating in harmonizing ritual can bring flow to the whole through monistic ideals. Ritual creates a flow to engagement, where the use of

energy has directive order and structure. Thoughtfully formed and mindfully enacted ritual will naturally herd energy in a healthy direction, but partaking in ritual is not enough for sustained healing on its' own. The healing parts of the ritual must be made understood in broader contexts. In therapy, existing or potential flow can be identified and then made accessible to the whole. The abstraction of flow can guide the myriad components of experiences into harmoniously flourishing order despite their distinctions. The practice of clinical psychology would be greatly strengthened by incorporating the academic understanding of the subtle principle known as flow. No singular theory will ever be sufficient for all cases, but flow psychology gives a strong system to approach most situations from. Psychologist practitioners should always stay open to the full range of treatment options like cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and mind-body therapies, but integrating the lens of flow psychology only further reinforces the client's ability to grow.

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