‘It is more relevant than ever’
The Times

Flow

The Psychology of Happiness



Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Flow

Copyrighted Material

For Isabella, and Mark and Christopher

Copyrighted Material

Flow

The Psychology of Happiness

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi



Copyrighted Material



1

Rider, an imprint of Ebury Publishing,
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Rider is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © Milhaly Csikszentmihalyi 1992, 2002, 2022

Milhaly Csikszentmihalyi has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this
Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published in the USA by Harper & Row in 1990
First published by Rider in 1992
This edition published by Rider in 2022

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781846046957

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

Contents

Author's Note ix
Preface xi

1 HAPPINESS REVISITED 1

Introduction 1
Overview 6
The Roots of Discontent 10
The Shields of Culture 13
Reclaiming Experience 19
Paths of Liberation 24

2 THE ANATOMY OF CONSCIOUSNESS 28

The Limits of Consciousness 34
Attention as Psychic Energy 36
Enter the Self 40
Disorder in Consciousness: Psychic Entropy 43
Order in Consciousness: Flow 47
Complexity and the Growth of the Self 49

3 ENJOYMENT AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE 52

Pleasure and Enjoyment 54
The Elements of Enjoyment 58
The Autotelic Experience 81

Copyrighted Material

4 THE CONDITIONS OF FLOW 86

Flow Activities 87
Flow and Culture 93
The Autotelic Personality 101
The People of Flow 109

5 THE BODY IN FLOW 114

Higher, Faster, Stronger 116
The Joys of Movement 120
Sex as Flow 122
The Ultimate Control: Yoga and the Martial Arts 125
Flow through the Senses: The Joys of Seeing 129
The Flow of Music 131
The Joys of Tasting 137

6 THE FLOW OF THOUGHT 141

The Mother of Science 145
The Rules of the Games of the Mind 150
The Play of Words 155
Befriending Clio 159
The Delights of Science 161
Loving Wisdom 167
Amateurs and Professionals 168
The Challenge of Lifelong Learning 170

7 WORK AS FLOW 172

Autotelic Workers 173
Autotelic Jobs 182

Copyrighted Material

The Paradox of Work 189
The Waste of Free Time 195

8 ENJOYING SOLITUDE AND OTHER PEOPLE 197

The Conflict between Being Alone and Being with Others 198
The Pain of Loneliness 202
Taming Solitude 207
Flow and the Family 211
Enjoying Friends 223
The Wider Community 228

9 CHEATING CHAOS 232

Tragedies Transformed 233
Coping with Stress 239
The Power of Dissipative Structures 243
The Autotelic Self: A Summary 252

10 THE MAKING OF MEANING 259

What Meaning Means 261
Cultivating Purpose 263
Forging Resolve 270
Recovering Harmony 275
The Unification of Meaning in Life Themes 278

Notes 293
References 339

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Author's Note

Flow first appeared in the United States in 1990. For several years before that time, people had been urging me to collect the research that I had published in obscure academic journals, and to make it available to a wider readership. I finally heeded the advice and discovered in the process that writing for a lay audience was much more fun (as well as more difficult) than writing for fellow scholars. But even as I enjoyed writing this book, I never dreamt of the impact it would have in the many years since its appearance. For instance, so far *Flow* has been translated into 14 different languages, including Serbian, Portuguese, Japanese, and Chinese; a Korean translation is also being prepared. It was adopted by four book clubs in the US and more elsewhere. A great many readers from around the world have written letters containing eloquent accounts of how they have used the book to improve the quality of their own lives. In addition, the ideas contained in this book have found their way into a variety of applications, ranging from politics to education; from psychiatric hospitals to the Cirque de Soleil; from the manufacture of automobiles at Nissan and Volvo to the design of art museums.

Clearly, *Flow* has touched a nerve in the collective psyche. For too long psychology had been focused almost exclusively on the shadows of human existence. The behavior of men and women was seen as determined by biological inheritance and by outside forces, twisted by frustrated desire. Scant attention was paid to what makes life bearable, enjoyable, free. Into this near vacuum *Flow* brought a flicker of light, a message that life can be an exciting, enjoyable and creative adventure.

With each passing decade this message becomes more and more relevant. For, as esoteric technologies proliferate and increasing

Copyrighted Material

powers of creation and destruction fall into the hands of our species, the responsibility for using such powers wisely is becoming ever more urgent. Are we going to exhaust the resources of the planet heedlessly while we could have a much more fulfilling life with less waste? Is greed going to split humanity into the obscenely rich and the abysmally poor, fuelling irreparable social conflicts? And, as we move into the age of genetic engineering, what kind of human beings are we going to create? Blood and flesh copies of our machines and computers? Or individuals with a consciousness open to the cosmos, organisms that are joyfully evolving in unprecedented directions? These are not questions that *Flow* deals with directly, but its description of the principles of a fulfilled life—one full of enjoyment and constantly growing in complexity—suggests ways to prepare ourselves for the difficult choices that tomorrow will bring. But whatever its usefulness for confronting the future might be, I hope reading this book will be its own reward, here and now.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Claremont, California

Copyrighted Material

Preface

This book summarizes, for a general audience, decades of research on the positive aspects of human experience—joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life I call *flow*. To take this step is somewhat dangerous, because as soon as one strays from the stylized constraints of academic prose, it is easy to become careless or overly enthusiastic about such a topic. What follows, however, is not a popular book that gives insider tips about how to be happy. To do so would be impossible in any case, since a joyful life is an individual creation that cannot be copied from a recipe. This book tries instead to present general *principles*, along with concrete examples of how some people have used these principles, to transform boring and meaningless lives into ones full of enjoyment. There is no promise of easy short-cuts in these pages. But for readers who care about such things, there should be enough information to make possible the transition from theory to practice.

In order to make the book as direct and user-friendly as possible, I have avoided footnotes, references, and other tools scholars usually employ in their technical writing. I have tried to present the results of psychological research, and the ideas derived from the interpretation of such research, in a way that any educated reader can evaluate and apply to his or her own life, regardless of specialized background knowledge.

However, for those readers who are curious enough to pursue the scholarly sources on which my conclusions are based, I have included extensive notes at the end of the volume. They are not keyed to specific references, but to the page number in the text where a given issue is discussed. For example,

Copyrighted Material

happiness is mentioned on the very first page. The reader interested in knowing what works I base my assertions on can turn to the notes section beginning on page 293 and, by looking under the reference to page 1, find a lead to Aristotle's view of happiness as well as to contemporary research on this topic, with the appropriate citations. The notes can be read as a second, highly compressed, and more technical shadow version of the original text.

At the beginning of any book, it is appropriate to acknowledge those who have influenced its development. In the present case this is impossible, since the list of names would have to be almost as long as the book itself. However, I owe special gratitude to a few people, whom I wish to take this opportunity to thank. First of all, Isabella, who as wife and friend has enriched my life, and whose editorial judgment has helped shape this work. Mark and Christopher, our sons, from whom I have learned perhaps as much as they have learned from me. Jacob Getzels, my once and future mentor. Among friends and colleagues I should like to single out Donald Campbell, Howard Gardner, Jean Hamilton, Philip Hefner, Hiroaki Imamura, David Kipper, Doug Kleiber, George Klein, Fausto Massimini, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Jerome Singer, James Stigler, and Brian Sutton-Smith—all of whom, in one way or another, have been generous with their help, inspiration, or encouragement.

Of my former students and collaborators Ronald Graef, Robert Kubey, Reed Larson, Jean Nakamura, Kevin Rathunde, Rick Robinson, Ikuya Sato, Sam Whalen, and Maria Wong have made the greatest contributions to the research underlying the ideas developed in these pages. John Brockman and Richard P. Kot have given their skillful professional support to this project and have helped it along from start to finish. Last but not least, indispensable over the past decade has been the funding generously provided by the Spencer Foundation to collect and analyze the data. I am especially grateful to H. Thomas James, Lawrence A. Cremin, and

Copyrighted Material

Marion Faldet. Of course, none of those mentioned above are responsible for what might be unsound in the book—that is exclusively my own doing.

Chicago, March 1990

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Flow

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1 Happiness Revisited

Introduction

Twenty-three hundred years ago Aristotle concluded that, more than anything else, men and women seek happiness. While happiness itself is sought for its own sake, every other goal—health, beauty, money, or power—is valued only because we expect that it will make us happy. Much has changed since Aristotle's time. Our understanding of the worlds of stars and atoms has expanded beyond belief. The gods of the Greeks were like helpless children compared to humankind today and the powers we now wield. And yet on this most important issue very little has changed in the intervening centuries. We do not understand what happiness is any better than Aristotle did, and as for learning how to attain that blessed condition, one could argue that we have made no progress at all.

Despite the fact that we are now healthier and grow to be older, despite the fact that even the least affluent among us are surrounded by material luxuries undreamed of even a few decades ago (there were few bathrooms in the palace of the Sun King, chairs were rare even in the richest medieval houses, and no Roman emperor could turn on a TV set when he was bored), and regardless of all the stupendous scientific knowledge we can summon at will, people often end up feeling that their lives have been wasted, that instead of being filled with happiness their years were spent in anxiety and boredom.

Is this because it is the destiny of mankind to remain unfulfilled, each person always wanting more than he or she can have? Or is the pervasive malaise that often sours even our most precious moments the result of our seeking happiness in the wrong

Copyrighted Material

places? The intent of this book is to use some of the tools of modern psychology to explore this very ancient question: When do people feel most happy? If we can begin to find an answer to it, perhaps we shall eventually be able to order life so that happiness will play a larger part in it.

Twenty-five years before I began to write these lines, I made a discovery that took all the intervening time for me to realize I had made. To call it a "discovery" is perhaps misleading, for people have been aware of it since the dawn of time. Yet the word is appropriate, because even though my finding itself was well known, it had not been described or theoretically explained by the relevant branch of scholarship, which in this case happens to be psychology. So I spent the next quarter-century investigating this elusive phenomenon.

What I "discovered" was that happiness is not something that happens. It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather, on how we interpret them. Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person. People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.

Yet we cannot reach happiness by consciously searching for it. "Ask yourself whether you are happy," said J. S. Mill, "and you cease to be so." It is by being fully involved with every detail of our lives, whether good or bad, that we find happiness, not by trying to look for it directly. Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist, summarized it beautifully in the preface to his book *Man's Search for Meaning*: "Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue . . . as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself."

So how can we reach this elusive goal that cannot be attained by a direct route? My studies of the past quarter-century have

Copyrighted Material

convinced me that there is a way. It is a circuitous path that begins with achieving control over the contents of our consciousness.

Our perceptions about our lives are the outcome of many forces that shape experience, each having an impact on whether we feel good or bad. Most of these forces are outside our control. There is not much we can do about our looks, our temperament, or our constitution. We cannot decide—at least so far—how tall we will grow, how smart we will get. We can choose neither parents nor time of birth, and it is not in your power or mine to decide whether there will be a war or a depression. The instructions contained in our genes, the pull of gravity, the pollen in the air, the historical period into which we are born—these and innumerable other conditions determine what we see, how we feel, what we do. It is not surprising that we should believe that our fate is primarily ordained by outside agencies.

Yet we have all experienced times when, instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we do feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fate. On the rare occasions that it happens, we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like.

This is what we mean by *optimal experience*. It is what the sailor holding a tight course feels when the wind whips through her hair, when the boat lunges through the waves like a colt—sails, hull, wind, and sea humming a harmony that vibrates in the sailor's veins. It is what a painter feels when the colors on the canvas begin to set up a magnetic tension with each other, and a new *thing*, a living form, takes shape in front of the astonished creator. Or it is the feeling a father has when his child for the first time responds to his smile. Such events do not occur only when the external conditions are favorable, however: people who have survived concentration camps or who have lived through near-fatal physical dangers often recall that in the midst of their ordeal they experienced extraordinarily rich epiphanies in response to such simple events as hearing the song of a bird in the forest, completing a hard task, or sharing a crust of bread with a friend.

Copyrighted Material

Contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times—although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we *make* happen. For a child, it could be placing with trembling fingers the last block on a tower she has built, higher than any she has built so far; for a swimmer, it could be trying to beat his own record; for a violinist, mastering an intricate musical passage. For each person there are thousands of opportunities, challenges to expand ourselves.

Such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur. The swimmer's muscles might have ached during his most memorable race, his lungs might have felt like exploding, and he might have been dizzy with fatigue—yet these could have been the best moments of his life. Getting control of life is never easy, and sometimes it can be definitely painful. But in the long run optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery—or perhaps better, a sense of *participation* in determining the content of life—that comes as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine.

In the course of my studies I tried to understand as exactly as possible how people felt when they most enjoyed themselves, and why. My first studies involved a few hundred "experts"—artists, athletes, musicians, chess masters, and surgeons—in other words, people who seemed to spend their time in precisely those activities they preferred. From their accounts of what it felt like to do what they were doing, I developed a theory of optimal experience based on the concept of *flow*—the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.

With the help of this theoretical model my research team at the University of Chicago and, afterward, colleagues around the world interviewed thousands of individuals from many different

Copyrighted Material

walks of life. These studies suggested that optimal experiences were described in the same way by men and women, by young people and old, regardless of cultural differences. The flow experience was not just a peculiarity of affluent, industrialized elites. It was reported in essentially the same words by old women from Korea, by adults in Thailand and India, by teenagers in Tokyo, by Navajo shepherds, by farmers in the Italian Alps, and by workers on the assembly line in Chicago.

In the beginning our data consisted of interviews and questionnaires. To achieve greater precision we developed with time a new method for measuring the quality of subjective experience. This technique, called the Experience Sampling Method, involves asking people to wear an electronic paging device for a week and to write down how they feel and what they are thinking about whenever the pager signals. The pager is activated by a radio transmitter about eight times each day, at random intervals. At the end of the week, each respondent provides what amounts to a running record, a written film clip of his or her life, made up of selections from its representative moments. By now over a hundred thousand such cross sections of experience have been collected from different parts of the world. The conclusions of this volume are based on that body of data.

The study of flow I began at the University of Chicago has now spread worldwide. Researchers in Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Australia have taken up its investigation. The concept of flow has been found useful by psychologists who study happiness, life satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation; by sociologists who see in it the opposite of anomie and alienation; by anthropologists who are interested in the phenomena of collective effervescence and rituals. Some have extended the implications of flow to attempts to understand the evolution of mankind, others to illuminate religious experience.

But flow is not just an academic subject. Only a few years after it was first published, the theory began to be applied to a variety of practical issues. Whenever the goal is to improve the quality of life, the flow theory can point the way. It has inspired

Copyrighted Material

the creation of experimental school curricula, the training of business executives, the design of leisure products and services. Flow is being used to generate ideas and practices in clinical psychotherapy, the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents, the organization of activities in old people's homes, the design of museum exhibits, and occupational therapy with the handicapped. All this has happened within a dozen years after the first articles on flow appeared in scholarly journals, and the indications are that the impact of the theory is going to be even stronger in the years to come.

Overview

Although many articles and books on flow have been written for the specialist, this is the first time that the research on optimal experience is being presented to the general reader and its implications for individual lives discussed. But what follows is not going to be a "how-to" book. There are literally thousands of such volumes in print or on the remainder shelves of book-stores, explaining how to get rich, powerful, loved, or slim. Like cookbooks, they tell you how to accomplish a specific, limited goal on which few people actually follow through. Yet even if their advice were to work, what would be the result afterward in the unlikely event that one did turn into a slim, well-loved, powerful millionaire? Usually what happens is that the person finds himself back at square one, with a new list of wishes, just as dissatisfied as before. What would really satisfy people is not getting slim or rich, but feeling good about their lives. In the quest for happiness, partial solutions don't work.

However well-intentioned, books cannot give recipes for how to be happy. Because optimal experience depends on the ability to control what happens in consciousness moment by moment, each person has to achieve it on the basis of his own individual efforts and creativity. What a book can do, however, and what this one will try to accomplish, is to present examples of how life can be made more enjoyable, ordered in the framework of a theory, for

Copyrighted Material

readers to reflect upon and from which they may then draw their own conclusions.

Rather than presenting a list of dos and don'ts, this book intends to be a voyage through the realms of the mind, charted with the tools of science. Like all adventures worth having it will not be an easy one. Without some intellectual effort, a commitment to reflect and think hard about your own experience, you will not gain much from what follows.

Flow will examine the process of achieving happiness through control over one's inner life. We shall begin by considering *how consciousness works, and how it is controlled* (chapter 2), because only if we understand the way subjective states are shaped can we master them. Everything we experience—joy or pain, interest or boredom—is represented in the mind as information. If we are able to control this information, we can decide what our lives will be like.

The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is *order in consciousness*. This happens when psychic energy—or attention—is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives (chapter 3). A person who has achieved control over psychic energy and has invested it in consciously chosen goals cannot help but grow into a more complex being. By stretching skills, by reaching toward higher challenges, such a person becomes an increasingly extraordinary individual.

To understand why some things we do are more enjoyable than others, we shall review the *conditions of the flow experience* (chapter 4). "Flow" is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake. In reviewing some of the activities that consistently produce flow—such as sports, games, art, and hobbies—it becomes easier to understand what makes people happy.

Copyrighted Material

But one cannot rely solely on games and art to improve the quality of life. To achieve control over what happens in the mind, one can draw upon an almost infinite range of opportunities for enjoyment—for instance, through the use of *physical and sensory skills* ranging from athletics to music to Yoga (chapter 5), or through the development of *symbolic skills* such as poetry, philosophy, or mathematics (chapter 6).

Most people spend the largest part of their lives working and interacting with others, especially with members of their families. Therefore it is crucial that one learn to *transform jobs into flow-producing activities* (chapter 7), and to think of ways of making *relations with parents, spouses, children, and friends more enjoyable* (chapter 8).

Many lives are disrupted by tragic accidents, and even the most fortunate are subjected to stresses of various kinds. Yet such blows do not necessarily diminish happiness. It is how people respond to stress that determines whether they will profit from misfortune or be miserable. Chapter 9 describes *ways in which people manage to enjoy life despite adversity.*

And, finally, the last step will be to describe how people manage to *join all experience into a meaningful pattern* (chapter 10). When that is accomplished, and a person feels in control of life and feels that it makes sense, there is nothing left to desire. The fact that one is not slim, rich, or powerful no longer matters. The tide of rising expectations is stilled; unfulfilled needs no longer trouble the mind. Even the most humdrum experiences become enjoyable.

Thus *Flow* will explore what is involved in reaching these aims. How is consciousness controlled? How is it ordered so as to make experience enjoyable? How is complexity achieved? And, last, how can meaning be created? The way to achieve these goals is relatively easy in theory, yet quite difficult in practice. The rules themselves are clear enough, and within everyone's reach. But many forces, both within ourselves and in the environment, stand in the way. It is a little like trying to lose weight: everyone knows what it takes, everyone wants to do it, yet it is next to impossible

Copyrighted Material

for so many. The stakes here are higher, however. It is not just a matter of losing a few extra pounds. It is a matter of losing the chance to have a life worth living.

Before describing how the optimal flow experience can be attained, it is necessary to review briefly some of the obstacles to fulfillment implicit in the human condition. In the old stories, before living happily ever after the hero had to confront fiery dragons and wicked warlocks in the course of a quest. This metaphor applies to the exploration of the psyche as well. I shall argue that the primary reason it is so difficult to achieve happiness centers on the fact that, contrary to the myths mankind has developed to reassure itself, the universe was not created to answer our needs. Frustration is deeply woven into the fabric of life. And whenever some of our needs *are* temporarily met, we immediately start wishing for more. This chronic dissatisfaction is the second obstacle that stands in the way of contentment.

To deal with these obstacles, every culture develops with time protective devices—religions, philosophies, arts, and comforts—that help shield us from chaos. They help us believe that we are in control of what is happening and give reasons for being satisfied with our lot. But these shields are effective only for a while; after a few centuries, sometimes after only a few decades, a religion or belief wears out and no longer provides the spiritual sustenance it once did.

When people try to achieve happiness on their own, without the support of a faith, they usually seek to maximize pleasures that are either biologically programmed in their genes or are thought of as attractive by the society in which they live. Wealth, power, and sex become the chief goals that give direction to their strivings. But the quality of life cannot be improved this way. Only direct control of experience, the ability to derive moment-by-moment enjoyment from everything we do, can overcome the obstacles to fulfillment.

Copyrighted Material

The Roots of Discontent

The foremost reason that happiness is so hard to achieve is that the universe was not designed with the comfort of human beings in mind. It is almost immeasurably huge, and most of it is hostilely empty and cold. It is the setting for great violence, as when occasionally a star explodes, turning to ashes everything within billions of miles. The rare planet whose gravity field would not crush our bones is probably swimming in lethal gases. Even planet Earth, which can be so idyllic and picturesque, is not to be taken for granted. To survive on it men and women have had to struggle for millions of years against ice, fire, floods, wild animals, and invisible microorganisms that appear out of nowhere to snuff us out.

It seems that every time a pressing danger is avoided, a new and more sophisticated threat appears on the horizon. No sooner do we invent a new substance than its by-products start poisoning the environment. Throughout history, weapons that were designed to provide security have turned around and threatened to destroy their makers. As some diseases are curbed, new ones become virulent; and if, for a while, mortality is reduced, then overpopulation starts to haunt us. The four grim horsemen of the Apocalypse are never very far away. The earth may be our only home, but it is a home full of booby traps waiting to go off at any moment.

It is not that the universe is random in an abstract mathematical sense. The motions of the stars, the transformations of energy that occur in it might be predicted and explained well enough. But natural processes do not take human desires into account. They are deaf and blind to our needs, and thus they are random in contrast with the order we attempt to establish through our goals. A meteorite on a collision course with New York City might be obeying all the laws of the universe, but it would still be a damn nuisance. The virus that attacks the cells of a Mozart is only doing what comes naturally, even though it inflicts a grave loss on humankind. "The universe is not hostile, nor yet is it friendly," in the words of J. H. Holmes. "It is simply indifferent."

Copyrighted Material

Chaos is one of the oldest concepts in myth and religion. It is rather foreign to the physical and biological sciences, because in terms of their laws the events in the cosmos are perfectly reasonable. For instance, "chaos theory" in the sciences attempts to describe regularities in what appears to be utterly random. But chaos has a different meaning in psychology and the other human sciences, because if human goals and desires are taken as the starting point, there is irreconcilable disorder in the cosmos.

There is not much that we as individuals can do to change the way the universe runs. In our lifetime we exert little influence over the forces that interfere with our well-being. It is important to do as much as we can to prevent nuclear war, to abolish social injustice, to eradicate hunger and disease. But it is prudent not to expect that efforts to change external conditions will immediately improve the quality of our lives. As J. S. Mill wrote, "No great improvements in the lot of mankind are possible, until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitution of their modes of thought."

How we feel about ourselves, the joy we get from living, ultimately depend directly on how the mind filters and interprets everyday experiences. Whether we are happy depends on inner harmony, not on the controls we are able to exert over the great forces of the universe. Certainly we should keep on learning how to master the external environment, because our physical survival may depend on it. But such mastery is not going to add one jot to how good we as individuals feel, or reduce the chaos of the world as we experience it. To do that we must learn to achieve mastery over consciousness itself.

Each of us has a picture, however vague, of what we would like to accomplish before we die. How close we get to attaining this goal becomes the measure for the quality of our lives. If it remains beyond reach, we grow resentful or resigned; if it is at least in part achieved, we experience a sense of happiness and satisfaction.

For the majority of people on this earth, life goals are simple: to survive, to leave children who will in turn survive, and, if possible, to do so with a certain amount of comfort and dignity. In the

Copyrighted Material

favelas spreading around South American cities, in the drought-stricken regions of Africa, among the millions of Asians who have to solve the problem of hunger day after day, there is not much else to hope for.

But as soon as these basic problems of survival are solved, merely having enough food and a comfortable shelter is no longer sufficient to make people content. New needs are felt, new desires arise. With affluence and power come escalating expectations, and as our level of wealth and comforts keeps increasing, the sense of well-being we hoped to achieve keeps receding into the distance. When Cyrus the Great had ten thousand cooks prepare new dishes for his table, the rest of Persia had barely enough to eat. These days every household in the "first world" has access to the recipes of the most diverse lands and can duplicate the feasts of past emperors. But does this make us more satisfied?

This paradox of rising expectations suggests that improving the quality of life might be an insurmountable task. In fact, there is no inherent problem in our desire to escalate our goals, as long as we enjoy the struggle along the way. The problem arises when people are so fixated on what they want to achieve that they cease to derive pleasure from the present. When that happens, they forfeit their chance of contentment.

Though the evidence suggests that most people are caught up on this frustrating treadmill of rising expectations, many individuals have found ways to escape it. These are people who, regardless of their material conditions, have been able to improve the quality of their lives, who are satisfied, and who have a way of making those around them also a bit more happy.

Such individuals lead vigorous lives, are open to a variety of experiences, keep on learning until the day they die, and have strong ties and commitments to other people and to the environment in which they live. They enjoy whatever they do, even if tedious or difficult; they are hardly ever bored, and they can take in stride anything that comes their way. Perhaps their greatest strength is that they are *in control of their lives.* We shall see later how they have managed to reach this state. But before we do so,

Copyrighted Material

we need to review some of the devices that have been developed over time as protection against the threat of chaos, and the reasons why such external defenses often do not work.

The Shields of Culture

Over the course of human evolution, as each group of people became gradually aware of the enormity of its isolation in the cosmos and of the precariousness of its hold on survival, it developed myths and beliefs to transform the random, crushing forces of the universe into manageable, or at least understandable, patterns. One of the major functions of every culture has been to shield its members from chaos, to reassure them of their importance and ultimate success. The Eskimo, the hunter of the Amazon basin, the Chinese, the Navajo, the Australian Aborigine, the New Yorker—all have taken for granted that they live at the center of the universe, and that they have a special dispensation that puts them on the fast track to the future. Without such trust in exclusive privileges, it would be difficult to face the odds of existence.

This is as it should be. But there are times when the feeling that one has found safety in the bosom of a friendly cosmos becomes dangerous. An unrealistic trust in the shields, in the cultural myths, can lead to equally extreme disillusion when they fail. This tends to happen whenever a culture has had a run of good luck and for a while seems indeed to have found a way of controlling the forces of nature. At that point it is logical for it to begin believing that it is a chosen people who need no longer fear any major setback. The Romans reached that juncture after several centuries of ruling the Mediterranean, the Chinese were confident of their immutable superiority before the Mongol conquest, and the Aztecs before the arrival of the Spaniards.

This cultural hubris, or overweening presumption about what we are entitled to from a universe that is basically insensitive to human needs, generally leads to trouble. The unwarranted sense of security sooner or later results in a rude awakening. When people start believing that progress is inevitable and life easy, they may

Copyrighted Material

quickly lose courage and determination in the face of the first signs of adversity. As they realize that what they had believed in is not entirely true, they abandon faith in everything else they have learned. Deprived of the customary supports that cultural values had given them, they flounder in a morass of anxiety and apathy.

Such symptoms of disillusion are not hard to observe around us now. The most obvious ones relate to the pervasive listlessness that affects so many lives. Genuinely happy individuals are few and far between. How many people do you know who enjoy what they are doing, who are reasonably satisfied with their lot, who do not regret the past and look to the future with genuine confidence? If Diogenes with his lantern twenty-three centuries ago had difficulty finding an honest man, today he would have perhaps an even more troublesome time finding a happy one.

This general malaise is not due directly to external causes. Unlike so many other nations in the contemporary world, we can't blame our problems on a harsh environment, on widespread poverty, or on the oppression of a foreign occupying army. The roots of the discontent are internal, and each person must untangle them personally, with his or her own power. The shields that have worked in the past—the order that religion, patriotism, ethnic traditions, and habits instilled by social classes used to provide—are no longer effective for increasing numbers of people who feel exposed to the harsh winds of chaos.

The lack of inner order manifests itself in the subjective condition that some call ontological anxiety, or existential dread. Basically, it is a fear of being, a feeling that there is no meaning to life and that existence is not worth going on with. Nothing seems to make sense. In the last few generations, the specter of nuclear war has added an unprecedented threat to our hopes. There no longer seems to be any point to the historical strivings of humankind. We are just forgotten specks drifting in the void. With each passing year, the chaos of the physical universe becomes magnified in the minds of the multitude.

As people move through life, passing from the hopeful ignorance of youth into sobering adulthood, they sooner or later face an

Copyrighted Material

increasingly nagging question: "Is this all there is?" Childhood can be painful, adolescence confusing, but for most people, behind it all there is the expectation that after one grows up, things will get better. During the years of early adulthood the future still looks promising, the hope remains that one's goals will be realized. But inevitably the bathroom mirror shows the first white hairs, and confirms the fact that those extra pounds are not about to leave; inevitably eyesight begins to fail and mysterious pains begin to shoot through the body. Like waiters in a restaurant starting to place breakfast settings on the surrounding tables while one is still having dinner, these intimations of mortality plainly communicate the message: Your time is up, it's time to move on. When this happens, few people are ready. "Wait a minute, this can't be happening to me. I haven't even begun to live. Where's all that money I was supposed to have made? Where are all the good times I was going to have?"

A feeling of having been led on, of being cheated, is an understandable consequence of this realization. From the earliest years we have been conditioned to believe that a benign fate would provide for us. After all, everybody seemed to agree that we had the great fortune of living in the richest country that ever was, in the most scientifically advanced period of human history, surrounded by the most efficient technology, protected by the wisest Constitution. Therefore, it made sense to expect that we would have a richer, more meaningful life than any earlier members of the human race. If our grandparents, living in that ridiculously primitive past, could be content, just imagine how happy we would be! Scientists told us this was so, it was preached from the pulpits of churches, and it was confirmed by thousands of TV commercials celebrating the good life. Yet despite all these assurances, sooner or later we wake up alone, sensing that there is no way this affluent, scientific, and sophisticated world is going to provide us with happiness.

As this realization slowly sets in, different people react to it differently. Some try to ignore it, and renew their efforts to acquire more of the things that were supposed to make life good—bigger cars and homes, more power on the job, a more glamorous life-style.

Copyrighted Material

They renew their efforts, determined still to achieve the satisfaction that up until then has eluded them. Sometimes this solution works, simply because one is so drawn into the competitive struggle that there is no time to realize that the goal has not come any nearer. But if a person does take the time out to reflect, the disillusionment returns: after each success it becomes clearer that money, power, status, and possessions do not, by themselves, necessarily add one iota to the quality of life.

Others decide to attack directly the threatening symptoms. If it is a body going to seed that rings the first alarm, they will go on diets, join health clubs, do aerobics, buy a Nautilus, or undergo plastic surgery. If the problem seems to be that nobody pays much attention, they buy books about how to get power or how to make friends, or they enroll in assertiveness training courses and have power lunches. After a while, however, it becomes obvious that these piecemeal solutions won't work either. No matter how much energy we devote to its care, the body will eventually give out. If we are learning to be more assertive, we might inadvertently alienate our friends. And if we devote too much time to cultivating new friends, we might threaten relationships with our spouse and family. There are just so many dams about to burst and so little time to tend to them all.

Daunted by the futility of trying to keep up with all the demands they cannot possibly meet, some will just surrender and retire gracefully into relative oblivion. Following Candide's advice, they will give up on the world and cultivate their little gardens. They might dabble in genteel forms of escape such as developing a harmless hobby or accumulating a collection of abstract paintings or porcelain figurines. Or they might lose themselves in alcohol or the dreamworld of drugs. While exotic pleasures and expensive recreations temporarily take the mind off the basic question "Is this all there is?" few claim to have ever found an answer that way.

Traditionally, the problem of existence has been most directly confronted through religion, and an increasing number of the disillusioned are turning back to it. But religions are only temporarily successful attempts to cope with the lack of meaning

Copyrighted Material

in life; they are not permanent answers. At some moments in history, they have explained convincingly what was wrong with human existence and have given credible answers. From the fourth to the eighth century of our era Christianity spread throughout Europe, Islam arose in the Middle East, and Buddhism conquered Asia. For hundreds of years these religions provided satisfying goals for people to spend their lives pursuing. But today it is more difficult to accept their worldviews as definitive. The form in which religions have presented their truths—myths, revelations, holy texts—no longer compels belief in an era of scientific rationality, even though the substance of the truths may have remained unchanged. A vital new religion may one day arise again. In the meantime, those who seek consolation in existing churches often pay for their peace of mind with a tacit agreement to ignore a great deal of what is known about the way the world works.

The evidence that none of these solutions is any longer very effective is irrefutable. In the heyday of its material splendor, our society is suffering from an astonishing variety of strange ills. The profits made from the widespread dependence on illicit drugs are enriching murderers and terrorists. It seems possible that in the near future we shall be ruled by an oligarchy of former drug dealers, who are rapidly gaining wealth and power at the expense of law-abiding citizens. And in our sexual lives, by shedding the shackles of "hypocritical" morality, we have unleashed destructive viruses upon one another.

The trends are often so disturbing that we tend to become jaded and tune out whenever we hear the latest statistics. But the ostrich's strategy for avoiding bad news is hardly productive; better to face facts and take care to avoid becoming one of the statistics. There are figures that may be reassuring to some: for instance, in the past thirty years, we have doubled our per-capita use of energy—most of it thanks to a fivefold increase in the use of electric utilities and appliances. Other trends, however, would reassure no one. In 2018, there were still over thirty-eight million people in the United States who lived below the poverty line (defined as a

Copyrighted Material

yearly income of $25,700 or less for a family of four), a number that has changed little in generations.

In the United States the per-capita frequency of violent crimes—murder, rape, robbery, assault—increased by well over 300 percent between 1960 and 1986. As recently as 1978 1,085,500 such crimes were reported, and by 1986 the number had climbed to 1,488,140. The murder rate held steady at about 1,000 percent above that in other industrialized countries like Canada, Norway, or France. In roughly the same period, the rate of divorce rose by about 400 percent, from 31 per 1,000 married couples in 1950 to 121 in 1984. During those twenty-five years venereal disease more than tripled; in 1960 there were 259,000 cases of gonorrhea, by 1984 there were almost 900,000. We still have no clear idea what tragic price that latest scourge, the AIDS epidemic, will claim before it's over.

The three- to fourfold increase in social pathology over the last generation holds true in an astonishing number of areas. For instance, in 1955 there were 1,700,000 instances of clinical intervention involving mental patients across the country; by 1975 the number had climbed to 6,400,000. Perhaps not coincidentally, similar figures illustrate the increase in our national paranoia: during the decade from 1975 to 1985 the budget authorized to the Department of Defense climbed from $87.9 billion a year to $284.7 billion—more than a threefold increase. It is true that the budget of the Department of Education also tripled in the same period, but in 1985 this amounted to "only" $17.4 billion. At least as far as the allocation of resources is concerned, the sword is about sixteen times mightier than the pen.

The future does not look much rosier. Today's teenagers show the symptoms of the malaise that ails their elders, sometimes in an even more virulent form. Fewer young people now grow up in families where both parents are present to share the responsibilities involved in bringing up children. In 1960 only 1 in 10 adolescents was living in a one-parent family. By 1980 the proportion had doubled, and by 1990 it is expected to triple. In 1982 there were over 80,000 juveniles—average age, 15 years—committed to

Copyrighted Material

various jails. The statistics on drug use, venereal disease, disappearance from home, and unwed pregnancy are all grim, yet probably quite short of the mark. Between 1950 and 1980 teenage suicides increased by about 300 percent, especially among white young men from the more affluent classes. Of the 29,253 suicides reported in 1985, 1,339 were white boys in the 15-19 age range; four times fewer white girls of the same age killed themselves, and ten times fewer black boys (young blacks, however, more than catch up in the number of deaths from homicide). Last but not least, the level of knowledge in the population seems to be declining everywhere. For instance, the average math score on the SAT tests was 466 in 1967; in 1984 it was 426. A similar decrease has been noted in the verbal scores. And the dirgelike statistics could go on and on.

Why is it that, despite having achieved previously undreamed-of miracles of progress, we seem more helpless in facing life than our less privileged ancestors were? The answer seems clear: while humankind collectively has increased its material powers a thousandfold, it has not advanced very far in terms of improving the content of experience.

Reclaiming Experience

There is no way out of this predicament except for an individual to take things in hand personally. If values and institutions no longer provide as supportive a framework as they once did, each person must use whatever tools are available to carve out a meaningful, enjoyable life. One of the most important tools in this quest is provided by psychology. Up to now the main contribution of this science has been to discover how past events shed light on present behavior. It has made us aware that adult irrationality is often the result of childhood frustrations. But there is another way that the discipline of psychology can be put to use. It is in helping answer the question: Given that we are who we are, with whatever hang-ups and repressions, what can we do to improve our future?

To overcome the anxieties and depressions of contemporary life, individuals must become independent of the social environment

Copyrighted Material

to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments. To achieve such autonomy, a person has to learn to provide rewards to herself. She has to develop the ability to find enjoyment and purpose regardless of external circumstances. This challenge is both easier and more difficult than it sounds: easier because the ability to do so is entirely within each person's hands; difficult because it requires a discipline and perseverance that are relatively rare in any era, and perhaps especially in the present. And before all else, achieving control over experience requires a drastic change in attitude about what is important and what is not.

We grow up believing that what counts most in our lives is that which will occur in the future. Parents teach children that if they learn good habits now, they will be better off as adults. Teachers assure pupils that the boring classes will benefit them later, when the students are going to be looking for jobs. The company vice president tells junior employees to have patience and work hard, because one of these days they will be promoted to the executive ranks. At the end of the long struggle for advancement, the golden years of retirement beckon. "We are always getting to live," as Ralph Waldo Emerson used to say, "but never living." Or as poor Frances learned in the children's story, it is always bread and jam tomorrow, never bread and jam today.

Of course this emphasis on the postponement of gratification is to a certain extent inevitable. As Freud and many others before and after him have noted, civilization is built on the repression of individual desires. It would be impossible to maintain any kind of social order, any complex division of labor, unless society's members were forced to take on the habits and skills that the culture required, whether the individuals liked it or not. Socialization, or the transformation of a human organism into a person who functions successfully within a particular social system, cannot be avoided. The essence of socialization is to make people dependent on social controls, to have them respond predictably to rewards and punishments. And the most effective form of socialization is achieved when people identify so thoroughly with the social order

Copyrighted Material

that they no longer can imagine themselves breaking any of its rules.

In making us work for its goals, society is assisted by some powerful allies: our biological needs and our genetic conditioning. All social controls, for instance, are ultimately based on a threat to the survival instinct. The people of an oppressed country obey their conquerors because they want to go on living. Until fairly recently, the laws of even the most civilized nations (such as Great Britain) were enforced by the threats of caning, whipping, or death.

When they do not rely on pain, social systems use pleasure as the inducement to accept norms. The "good life" promised as a reward for a lifetime of work and adherence to laws is built on the cravings contained in our genetic programs. Practically every desire that has become part of human nature, from sexuality to aggression, from a longing for security to a receptivity to change, has been exploited as a source of social control by politicians, churches, corporations, and advertisers. To lure recruits into the Turkish armed forces, the sultans of the sixteenth century promised conscripts the rewards of raping women in the conquered territories; nowadays posters promise young men that if they join the army, they will "see the world."

It is important to realize that seeking pleasure is a reflex response built into our genes for the preservation of the species, not for the purpose of our own personal advantage. The pleasure we take in eating is an efficient way to ensure that the body will get the nourishment it needs. The pleasure of sexual intercourse is an equally practical method for the genes to program the body to reproduce and thereby to ensure the continuity of the genes. When a man is physically attracted to a woman, or vice versa, he usually imagines—assuming that he thinks about it at all—that this desire is an expression of his own individual interests, a result of his own intentions. In reality, more often than not his interest is simply being manipulated by the invisible genetic code, following its own plans. As long as the attraction is a reflex based on purely physical reactions, the person's own conscious plans probably play

Copyrighted Material