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Ari Segal March 31st, 2025

The Theoretical Overlap of “Flow” and Eudaimonia

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Abstract

The Theoretical Overlap of “Flow” and Eudaimonia

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When Aristotle's notion of *Eudaimonia* is translated simply as happiness, there may be a false equivalency between *Eudaimonia* and Csikszentmihalyi's conception of "flow" as described in his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990). However, these terms are not identical, as *Eudaimonia* has a normative connotation that Csikszentmihalyi's concept of “flow” lacks. This does not mean, however, that “flow” may not be a component of a *Eudaimonic* life. In certain scenarios, “flow” may very well be an experience enjoyed by someone who is living a *Eudaimonic* life, especially given an Inclusivist (Pluralist) conception of the Good for humanity. Aristotle understood *Eudaimonia* as an account of a person’s life, while “Flow” encompasses a person’s transitory experience during certain types of activities. Csikszentmihalyi’s book builds upon decades of scholarship and research on what constitutes “flow” states or “optimal experiences.” Csikszentmihalyi’s account of "flow" can aid in reconceptualizing *Eudaimonia* for our modern purposes as we no longer occupy an Aristotelian world, nor do we accept his rigid teleology.

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Integrating "Flow" into Contemporary Conceptions of Human Flourishing

When Aristotle's notion of *Eudaimonia* is translated simply as happiness, there may be a false equivalency between *Eudaimonia* and Csikszentmihalyi's conception of "flow" as described in his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990). However, these terms are not identical, as *Eudaimonia* has a normative connotation that Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow" lacks. This does not mean, however, that "flow" may not be a component of a *Eudaimonic* life. In certain scenarios, "flow" may very well be an experience enjoyed by someone who is living a *Eudaimonic* life, especially given an Inclusivist, or Pluralist, conception of the Good for humanity.

Aristotle understood *Eudaimonia* as an account of a person's life, while "Flow" encompasses a person's transitory experience during certain types of activities. Csikszentmihalyi's book builds upon decades of scholarship and research on what constitutes "flow" states or "optimal experiences." Csikszentmihalyi's account of "flow" can aid in reconceptualizing *Eudaimonia* for our modern purposes as we no longer occupy an Aristotelian world, nor do we accept his rigid teleology.

This thesis will make the case for how Csikszentmihalyi's conception of "flow" can be integrated into a contemporary conception of *Eudaimonia*, even though it was not explicitly mentioned or addressed by many of the philosophers engaged within these discussions. Through mapping out the existing frameworks and debates surrounding *Eudaimonia*, it will exemplify where and how the concept of "flow" can effectively fit within them. What will follow is a comprehensive case for why "flow" is, in fact, a viable and meaningful addition to these discussions surrounding human flourishing.

Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's scholarship on "flow," especially through his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, brought the idea of "optimal experiences" to the public. Csikszentmihalyi initiated this branch of positive psychology while still firmly rooting its conventions within Aristotle's account of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. A vast array of activities are flow-inducing — reading, surgery, running, mountain climbing, dancing, professional chess tournaments, sewing, sailing, philosophy — yet those who experience "flow" describe these conscious-expanding experiences in the same manner, irrespective of their medium. People who have experienced these heightened "flow" states report a complete merging of consciousness with their activity, with this unification occurring at the ideal intersection between one's skill set and the difficulty of said task. Csikszentmihalyi writes in the Introduction of his book that this blending of the self with an activity occurs when we do not seek fulfillment outright: "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."[1] In other words, individuals experience "flow" through their "total involvement" in pursuit rather than by pursuing some effect associated with the activity.[2]

All of the activities that lead to "optimal experiences" take progressive complexity into account or the significance of increasing the complexity and rigor of a task over time to increase difficulty and, ultimately, mastery. Csikszentmihalyi emphasized the importance of layered and progressive complexity in evaluating the propensity for achieving states of "flow." He writes that after a "flow" experience, "the organization of the self is more *complex* [sic] than it had been before. It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow."[3]

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[1] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. HarperCollins e-books, 1990, p. 2.
[2] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play*. Jossey-Bass, 1975, p. 36.
[3] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. HarperCollins e-books, 1990, p. 41.

Csikszentmihalyi also claimed that life's most rewarding moments are a result of directed effort (he called this "psychic energy" throughout the book) rather than through passive leisure. Consequently, Csikszentmihalyi readily rejected the modern idea of passive entertainment and leisure as constituting authentic "enjoyment":

> "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" (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* 3).

Similarly, Julia Annas wrote, "Happiness is *active* [sic]: it is a matter of how you do whatever it is you do, how you live your life in whatever circumstances you find yourself as you start to reflect about your life" (*Intelligent Virtue* 130). The reason for her conception of happiness as active is because of her broader view of happiness as a lifelong project of self-improvement and self-actualization, rather than a fleeting emotional state, a sentiment which was repeatedly expressed in Aristotle's original writings in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This additionally aligns with her view that happiness should be evaluated as objective and activity-based rather than via subjective well-being evaluative metrics, a sentiment explored in *The Morality of Happiness*. Csikszentmihalyi's description of cultivating "psychic energy" reflects the Aristotelian idea of actively cultivating the virtues over one's lifetime.

Additionally, one's upbringing profoundly influences one's future likelihood to cultivate and achieve regular "optimal experiences." Family upbringing and the pedagogical tradition of fostering virtues, for example, have historically been regarded as crucial for instilling these virtues in childhood. Csikszentmihalyi broadens his discussion of "Flow" to encompass a variety

of case studies — including a violinist "mastering an intricate musical passage" and a child pushing their physical limits to place the last block on a teetering tower — all aimed at illustrating the diverse flow activities and their respective psychic energy inputs. Throughout the book, Csikszentmihalyi presents a compelling argument for why these "optimal experiences" can enrich life despite their challenging nature. By investing in this currency to offset what he called "psychic entropy" (the opposite of "optimal experiences," characterized by chaos and uncertainty), individuals become more fully realized versions of themselves. Although some of these activities are undeniably difficult, they ultimately provide participants with a greater internal locus of control, deeply embedded within their consciousness. Csikszentmihalyi noted, "In the long run, optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery — or perhaps better, a sense of *participation* [sic] in determining the content of life — that comes as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine" (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* 4).

The Difference Between Activity and the Experience of the Activity

In Aristotle's discussions of *telos* and *eudaimonia*, he eventually concludes that the contemplative life embodies the pinnacle of human purpose. The modern Western formulation of "happiness" is encased within implicit and explicit notions of passive pleasure and comfortability, two trends that stray away from the ancient understanding of "happiness." Though the mental image of philosophers and metaphysicians debating the nature of reality may not conjure up the modern notion of "happiness," it undoubtedly embodies Aristotle's approach toward a life well lived.

Aristotle views hedonism and a life characterized exclusively by pleasure-seeking unfavorably.[4] Though he does not fault the "crudest" of society, who not unreasonably suppose the life of pleasure as the apex of life, he takes issue with their conceptualization of the discipline of their political and hedonistic aims. Pleasure perfects an activity, as opposed to being the independent good of an activity. It is also worth noting that Aristotle would be critical of certain types of enjoyment like those mentioned earlier but does not necessarily look down upon enjoyment as a whole.[5]

Aristotle's conceptualization of "pleasure" is broadly concerned with doing and acting well. Again, his understanding of "pleasure" is markedly different from the modern understanding of the term, although he does not disregard the term entirely. Aristotle's proper form of "pleasure well-received" is a component of *Eudaimonia*, a byproduct of living a virtuous life. Aristotle writes throughout many books to elucidate this very thought: intellectual engagement and intentional merging with tasks are intrinsically rewarding and life-affirming.

Aristotle contends that those who view the "Good" as pleasure itself, like the Greek astronomer Eudoxus, are surely missing the point. While pleasure is certainly a good, it is not the chief good of humanity, as he writes in Book X.[6] Though to some, it would seem reasonable that pleasure is the chief human good, Aristotle argues against this position in ways that are still relevant to modern virtue ethics. Aristotle does not try to claim that pleasures are not inherently

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[4] Aristotle critiques the philosophical theory of hedonism — the view that pleasure is the supreme good — in the following two sections of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: Book I, Chapter 5 (1095b15–1096a10) and Book X, Chapters 1–5 (1172b–1176a). Note, all quotations from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* will be drawn from W. D. Ross' second edition translation.

[5] Aristotle might be critical of the type of enjoyment, not enjoyment itself. Additionally, Aristotle argues that pleasure is not the highest good, though it is closely connected to and associated with virtuous activity. True pleasure for Aristotle emerges when individuals engage in specific activities that align with their highest rational faculties; pleasure is the natural byproduct of engagement with virtuous activity.

[6] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X, Chapter 4 (1174b31-33): "For this reason, all people suppose the happy life to be pleasant, and they weave pleasure into happiness — reasonably so."

satisfying or even enriching, though, and contends that an account of *Eudaimonia* invariably considers some form of pleasure.[7]

There has additionally been great confusion as to what Aristotle himself thought of pleasure and the extent of its role in *Eudaimonia*. In Aristide Tessitore's "A Political Reading of Aristotle's Treatment of Pleasure in the Nicomachean Ethics" (1989), for example, Tessitore diverged from two recent philosophers, G. E. L. Owen, and André-Jean Festugière, to make a wholly distinct account of Aristotle's seemingly irreconcilable accounts of pleasure in Book VII and Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Tessitore argued that the different accounts of pleasure, from Book VII to Book X, reflected Aristotle's distinct goals of addressing prospective or actual philosophers in the former text, while speaking to "integrate this subject (as far as possible) into the moral-political horizon of gentlemen that dominates the Ethics as a whole" in the latter section (Tessitore 249).

Accordingly, Aristotle formulates a more nuanced approach toward pleasure, specifically in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Sarah Broadie wrote regarding Aristotle's view of pleasure in an introduction to a translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "We ought not to trust our pleasure-instincts outright, but we certainly ought not to be suspicious of them through and through and in principle" (66-7). Broadie introduced a parallel analogy to the role of "pleasure" in the normal course of life as one of a "signal." Broadie wrote that pleasure is elicited during the action as if to tell the participant that their course of action is in alignment with their best virtues and disposition. She noted, "The signal works by making the activity appear to us as an end in itself, to absorb us so that we do not look beyond it, as we tend to do when an activity is not going well, or when we are engaged in something as a means or as part of a wide project" (69).

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[7] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, Chapter 8 (1099a7-17) and Book X, Chapters 4-5 (1174a-1175a). Pleasure is not the good, but something that completes an activity. Aristotle emphasizes the importance of pleasure to human life and therefore to his study of how individuals ought to live.

In continuing with the theme of signals, pleasure more accurately can be described as something that "arises because the activity is good of its kind," rather than being a component of an activity that speaks to its utility or apparent goodness (70).

Broadie has written extensively on the nature of "pleasure" in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and has helped contextualize the Aristotelian notion of highest goods, pleasure, and happiness for a modern audience. Broadie explained that most goods are not pursued for their own sake. Those pursuits, ranging from money-making, external validation, health, and more, are frequently used as a means for later receiving happiness (10). These pursuits may often be pointless without the participant even being aware of their futility. Broadie also noted the conceptual divergence between the ancient and modern conception of "pleasure" and "happiness." As Broadie asserts, there is a specificity to the *Eudaimonistic* application: "Regarding someone as *eudaimōn* [sic] is more like ascribing a status, or applauding. It is to imply that the person is admirable, even enviable, an exemplar of life at its best" (12).

Furthermore, Susan Wolf has contributed to the contemporary discourse on pleasure. Wolf added to this modern discussion by describing how many of life's great pleasures are not growth-inducing, nor do they add to the soul's increased complexity. Many of the pleasures to which Wolf refers, like eating "a hot fudge sundae" or "meeting a movie star," may provide an individual with extreme momentary pleasure while still failing to contribute to a palpable sense of fulfillment (10). Conversely, someone's life of fulfillment may not bear much in common with the conventional term "happiness" due to the term's ambiguity across time and space (10). This trend further underscores the conceptual expansion of the idea of "happiness," especially in the modern understanding of the term.

This process of attaining *Eudaimonia* is recursive rather than a direct practice in and of itself. Happiness, in the Aristotelian sense, is an activity, an *Energeia*. The attainment of happiness is also a lengthy, life-long process, as "one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day, and in the same way, one day or a brief period does not make someone blessed or happy."[8] If one aims at happiness as their goal, then they effectively aim at the Good Life. When one obtains happiness, then pleasure naturally accompanies it. In this view, "flow" allows for this recursive process to be self-reinforcing. When one obtains happiness, Aristotle asserted in Book X, Chapter 4, pleasure would naturally follow. He wrote accordingly:

> "For the activities of the virtues are their ends; and in each case the master of any art labours at bringing his work to a good finish; and the work is not perfect without pleasure any more than the young are without the bloom of youth. Therefore, if each of the virtues is both a good and productive of good, and if their exercise is pleasant, virtuous life must be inherently pleasant as well."

This quote underscores the role of pleasure as a natural byproduct of living virtuously rather than the final goal of life. When one aims at maximizing pleasure, one should aim instead at happiness via Aristotle's framework. Happiness is the fullest expression of a well-lived life. Even though people do not look for happiness directly, they aim at activities that speak to a life well-lived. Thus, the pleasure, or "flow," that accompanies those good activities speaks to the habituation of virtue acquisition.

Aristotle wrote that *Eudaimonia* essentially means "doing and living well."[9] He has also written that the perfection of the virtues and the attainment of *Eudaimonia* is a lifelong pursuit,

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[8] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, Chapter 7 (1098a18-20)
[9] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, Chapter 4 (1095a19-20)

rather than a fleeting transitory state.[10] As many translators point out, happiness is at its best an incomplete capture of the import of *Eudaimonia*.[11] Despite this, I will define these terms based on the existing scholarship in this domain: *Eudaimonia* is translated as "human flourishing" by many virtue ethicists, including Julia Annas[12], Martha Nussbaum[13], Sarah Broadie[14], John Cooper[15]; "happiness" by Julia Annas[16], Richard Kraut[17]; and "The Good Life" by Richard Kraut[18] and Terence Irwin.[19] This is not an exhaustive list, but merely a linguistic foundation for future discussion on the nature of *Eudaimonia*.

The Role of Flow in Eudaimonic Fulfillment

As understood today, "happiness" has strayed considerably from the ancient understanding of the term and is conceptually removed from the pursuit of genuine fulfillment. Our contemporary departure from the word may also reflect the modern understanding of self-actualization as a unique endeavor, as opposed to Aristotle's normative claims about humanity's potential to strive toward his singular, objective archetype. While Aristotle claims that one must direct one's intellect toward the philosophical life, the basis of his argument about the "Good Life" can be found in a myriad of other pursuits besides philosophy. For instance, the

[10] "For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a18–20).
[11] There has historically been great difficulty in accurately translating *Eudaimonia*. The various translations and definitions have led to an imprecision regarding the relationship between Aristotle endorsing a notion of happiness versus a contemporary view of happiness, as well as the uncertain relationship between happiness and pleasure, flourishing, and how this all speaks to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow."
[12] Annas, Julia. *The Morality of Happiness.* Oxford University Press, 1993.
[13] Nussbaum, Martha C. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.* Cambridge University Press, 1986.
[14] Broadie, Sarah. *Ethics with Aristotle.* Oxford University Press, 1991.
[15] Cooper, John M. *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*. Harvard University Press, 1975.
[16] Annas, Julia. *The Morality of Happiness.* Oxford University Press, 1993; Annas, Julia. "Virtue and Eudaimonism." *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 267–292.
[17] Kraut, Richard. *Aristotle on the Human Good.* Princeton University Press, 1989; Kraut, Richard. "Two Conceptions of Happiness." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1979, pp. 327–357.
[18] Kraut, Richard. *Aristotle on the Human Good.* Princeton University Press, 1989.
[19] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics.* Translated by Terence Irwin, 3rd ed., Hackett Publishing, 2019.

"Good Life" may be aided by exemplifying a gregarious spirit in the company of others — Aristotle discusses the importance of friendship and companionship in his *Ethics*.[20] What these activities have in common, however, is a directed purpose, namely, this subset of activities that are pursued for their own sake, are morally upstanding, and are intrinsically rewarding fulfillment of one's *telos*. This is especially true today, where flourishing is not conceived of as a teleological actualization, but rather a fulfillment of one's worthwhile aspiration.[21]

Csikszentmihalyi adds to the perennial discussion through his concerted effort to discriminate between "pleasure" and "enjoyment," two phrases most nonspecialists use interchangeably. First, he describes his understanding of "pleasure" and makes a point to note that people do not grow from these pleasurable experiences despite their evolutionary importance. Csikszentmihalyi wrote in a section called "Pleasure and Enjoyment" in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*:

> "Pleasure is an important component of the quality of life, but by itself it does not bring happiness. Sleep, rest, food, and sex provide restorative *homeostatic* [sic] experiences that return consciousness to order after the needs of the body intrude and cause psychic entropy to occur. But they do not produce psychological growth. They do not add complexity to the self" (46).

Csikszentmihalyi's usage of "happiness" echoes Aristotle's usage of *Eudaimonia*, as opposed to the fleeting modern perception of "happiness." Quality daily food intake, healthy sleep hygiene, and sexual desires are undoubtedly crucial for prolonged human development and health, though

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[20] Aristotle discusses the importance and virtue of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, specifically in Book VIII, Chapter 1 (1155a1-5), Book VIII, Chapter 3 (1156a15-20), Book VIII, Chapter 6 (1157b6-10), Book IX, Chapter 4 (1166a1-10), and Book IX, Chapter 9 (1169b6-10). MacIntyre, in discussing Aristotle's treatment of friendship in his virtue ethics, mentions in *After Virtue* that Aristotle treated friendship "in terms of shared goods," an analysis which is important for MacIntyre's conception of community-bound practices, tradition, and narrative formation (229).

[21] Bedzow, Ira. "Teleology: One of Aspiration and Not Actualization." *Maimonides for Moderns: A New Understanding of the Jewish Philosopher's Teachings*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 13-45.

they alone do not push the individual forward in any meaningful way. Csikszentmihalyi builds upon the philosophical tradition of Aristotle, writing, "One must particularly achieve control over instinctual drives to achieve a healthy independence of society, for as long as we respond predictably to what feels good and what feels bad, it is easy for others to exploit our preferences for their own ends" (18). Csikszentmihalyi argued that these lower instincts are more primitive needs and do not contribute to an increased complexity of the self.

Conversely, "enjoyment" occurs more deliberately and purposefully. These enjoyable moments surface at the "boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act" (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* 52). At this golden mean of challenges, anxiety, discomfort, and thrill, the participant may feel a newfound connectedness with the activity and their place in their surroundings. Across religions, cultural enclaves, and geographical areas, people report these "flow" states when they are fully engrossed in the challenges and rigor of their preferred activity. Participants in this blissful enjoyment report a loss of self-consciousness, although Csikszentmihalyi elucidated that this is not synonymous with a loss of self. Instead, by temporarily discarding self-perception through complete engrossment, one can then return to a state of awareness from a restorative mindset. Theorists have even convincingly contended that current business and workflow practices, especially in the technology center, may be undercut by systemic practices that undercut the employee's frequency of achieving these undisturbed "flow" states.[22]

In illustrating this distinction, Csikszentmihalyi conjured up a realistic example of mismatched tennis players to underscore the importance of properly matching skill level to difficulty level for maximal enjoyment. He exemplified in this thought experiment that the

[22] Õepa, Mona-Brit. *Enabling deep work and flow: Leadership practices in Estonian technology companies*. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.20750.78403, July 2024.

seasoned tennis player will be bored, and the novice may feel overwhelmed. In the case of the mountain climber, their reasoning for engaging in their sport conveys a patently Aristotelian description: "There is no possible reason for climbing except the climbing itself; it is a self-communication."[23] Much like the mammalian desire to play and rough-house for the sake of the activity itself, people pursue these "optimal experiences" because they are intrinsically rewarding and life-affirming. They may not invoke Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or "flow" states to describe their experiences, but their narratives and justifications for spending thousands of hours on their desired activities certainly echo these concepts.

Positive psychologist Martin Seligman similarly distinguished between "gratifications" and "pleasures." In *Authentic Happiness* (2002), Seligman discriminated pleasures (fleeting sensory-based experiences) from gratifications (effortful skill-based endeavors) to support his broader PERMA model of well-being, which stands for positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments. Seligman's definition of gratification, specifically, aligns with a view of *Eudaimonic* happiness, a life-long embodiment of personal development, rather than a life characterized solely by pleasure-seeking.[24]

Seligman provided an elaboration on the distinctness between "gratifications" and "pleasures" in the chapter titled "Happiness in the Present." Notably, he underscored the importance of effortful skill-based activities that are affixed to an overarching cultivation of positive virtues:

> "Enjoying a great conversation, rock climbing, reading a good book, dancing, and making a slam dunk are all examples of activities in which time stops for us, our skills match the challenge, and we are in touch with our strengths. The gratifications last longer

[23] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* HarperCollins e-books, 1990, p. 54.
[24] Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (Free Press, 2002), Ch. 7.

> than the pleasures, they involve quite a lot of thinking and interpretation, they do not habituate easily, and they are undergirded by our strengths and virtues" (*Authentic Happiness* 120).

"Gratification" closely resembles Csikszentmihalyi's conception of "enjoyment," as Jonathan Haidt recounted in his book *Happiness Hypothesis* (2006), clarifying that "Gratifications ask more of us; they challenge us and make us extend ourselves. Gratifications often come from accomplishing something, learning something, or improving something. When we enter a state of flow, hard work becomes effortless " (97). Conversely, pleasure concerns bodily delights that constitute shallower levels of complexity.

These activities of "gratifications," Haidt points out regarding Seligman's research, can often lead to "flow" states and enrich the participant's quality of life. Haidt invoked Seligman's "Happiness Hypothesis" and placed these "flow" states into the "V" category. The "Happiness Hypothesis," developed by Seligman, Sheldon, and Schkade, is as follows: H = S + C + V, illustrating that the sum aggregate of happiness is equal to the sum of one's genetic or biological set point, the conditions of one's life, and the voluntary actions one pursues (91). The "V" variable constitutes all voluntary but potentially beneficial actions for human flourishing, which includes engaging in "flow" states as well as both "pleasures" and "gratification."

Csikszentmihalyi also called attention to people's paradoxical desire to long for passive leisure experiences at home while still reporting their highest levels of satisfaction and "flow" states at work. The paradox of modern "leisure" has been discussed at great length — notably, since Josef Pieper's *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (1948), in which he principally held, as the title suggests, that "leisure" is the definitive base for all cultures, that in its absence cultures

cease to exist, and crucially, that "leisure" does not constitute "idleness."[25] Csikszentmihalyi explains this paradox of leisure in his scholarship on "optimal experiences":

> "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" (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* 11-2).

These "problems of progress" encompass the unintended consequences of modernization, like automation, wealth inequality, and a blending of technology and humanity. The modern age seems to be marked by apparent dissatisfaction, listlessness, and "ontological anxiety," or existential dread. Csikszentmihalyi used this term in the first chapter of his book, in the section titled "The Shields of Culture," writing that the term itself "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" (12). These newfound technological developments would also fall into the "C" category of the aforementioned "Happiness Hypothesis."

Play as a component of a Eudaimonic life

Aristotle views undirected and aimless "playing" as not constituting true happiness. He writes that undirected play appears to be both "foolish" and "childish," although he soon qualifies this statement, writing that play directed toward "seriousness" seems to be more "correct." He writes, "For play resembles relaxation, and because people are incapable of laboring continuously, they need relaxation. Relaxation, then, is not an end: it arises for the sake

[25] Pieper, Josef. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Translated by Gerald Malsbary, Introduction by James V. Schall, Ignatius Press, 2009.

of activity."[26] A happy life, one in harmony with the highest virtues, must then consist of play in some iteration, although the intention of the pursuit will determine its merit. Using the teleological model, playing for the sake of playing would be better than playing for the sake of relaxing.

With Dr. Stuart Brown's pioneering research in the field of play, the idea of what constitutes *Eudaimonia* may be broadened to include the act of "human play." In his book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (2009), Dr. Brown builds the case that play has historically been misunderstood and undervalued as an integral pillar of mammalian social development. He claimed that "play" is an integral boon to childhood and adolescent development, arguing throughout the book that human flourishing can occur in adulthood if people relearn how to get in touch with their playful tendencies. Dr. Brown makes a concerted effort throughout the book to underscore the neurological benefits of lifelong play, including several research studies that show a positive relationship between the duration of play and cortical brain size (33-42).

Brown asserted that the mammalian act of "play" is crucial for evolution, cooperative socialization, emotional regulation, and heightened brain development. His description of "authentic play" exemplifies an individual who engages in an uncompromisingly genuine manner that is consistent with their hopes, pursuits, and values. Crucially, this type of "play" is pursued for its own sake despite no obvious evolutionary benefit. In his research on "flow," Csikszentmihalyi studied this same phenomenon and came to a similar conclusion in his own research:

"Playing is not for the sake of getting something, but it is for the process and enjoyment. I started looking at and studying adults who spent a lot of time doing things that didn't

[26] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, Chapter 6 (1176a15-20)

> bring them any kind of external rewards: chess players, mountain climbers, long distance swimmers, etc. [sic] and what was so remarkable after a while was how similarly people who were doing these different things described why they were doing it … They all produced the same kind of rewarding experience" (Beard and Csikszentmihalyi 355).

Csikszentmihalyi's description of "flow" parallels Brown's description of play, as both are intrinsically desired activities with little to no external benefits. They are both descriptively "autotelic."

Csikszentmihalyi wrote in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, in a section titled "The Autotelic Experience," "The term 'autotelic' derives from two Greek words, *auto* [sic] meaning self, and *telos* [sic] meaning goal. It refers to a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward."[27] Though the medium may vary, all "autotelic" pursuits share a feeling of novel discovery and authentic exploration; participants feel that they are being pushed to the extremities of their capabilities in a conscious-expanding manner.[28] In this account, play for the sake of itself would contain an "autotelic" quality.

In addition to play's "autotelic" nature, Dr. Brown also points to six other properties of play: it is completely voluntary, possesses an inherent appeal, has improvisational potential, engenders a desire to prolong the activity, has a novel temporal element to it, and minimizes the consciousness of the self. These last two elements of "play" — its temporal element and its minimization of self-perception — specifically evoke the ideas of the "optimal experience" one encounters when one's skill set is evenly matched with the difficulty of a task. Specifically, the fact that the subjective experience of "play" extends or shortens time in a way that is different

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[27] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. HarperCollins e-books, 1990, p. 67.
[28] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play*. Jossey-Bass, 1975, p. 30.

from usual is even further proof of this conceptual and physiological overlap. As Brown writes, when we are engrossed in play, "We stop thinking about the fact that we are thinking. In imaginative play, we can even be a different *self* [sic]. We are fully in the moment, in the zone. We are experiencing what the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls 'flow'" (17). In another section he writes that during play, individuals are fully engrossed in playtime, so much so that "attention is focused exclusively on the pleasurable play activity, and memory fixation is closely related to heightened attention and emotional rewards" (102). Dr. Stuart Brown's invocation of Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" further underscores the theoretical link between the Aristotelian idea of *telos* and the *telos* of non-goal-oriented play.

Csikszentmihalyi studied the propensity of various play forms that led to certain "flow" states, specifically attributing the enjoyability of these activities to the presence of heightened concentration on a "limited stimulus field," transparent demands, the discarding of personal issues and one own's identity, an objective external control of their environment, and a corresponding "psychic integration with metapersonal systems."[29] Csikszentmihalyi also illustrated the process by which adults effectively minimize the importance of play as well as the importance of discovering intrinsic motivation for pursuing certain activities:

> "Action deprivation, and therefore flow deprivation, must be the consequence of growth settings which exclude room for free imagination, room for free movement, room to explore and manipulate real objects. At the same time, societal values begin to affect the child's interpretation of his actions. Efforts that bring no concrete results are branded a waste of time, and the child is encouraged to work only at tasks which will bring extrinsic rewards" (*Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* 200).

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[29] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. "Play and Intrinsic Rewards." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1975, pp. 41–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/002216787501500306.

In the realm of socialization, when "play" is cultivated meaningfully, it can instead allow children to discriminate complex social cues, regulate fierce emotions, and learn how to "blow off steam" in the face of adversity. Aristotle saw humans as fundamentally social beings, so social play is an integral part of a *Eudaimonic* life, even with contemporary conceptions of these concepts as Dr. Brown alludes to through his various case studies.

Specifically, Brown underscored the importance of "play" through thousands of "play histories," or in-depth investigations of animals and humans and their relationship with "play." One anecdote in particular underscored the author's role in the comprehensive analysis of what led to the infamous Texas Tower Massacre in August 1996. At the time, it was the worst mass shooting in United States history; emotions and fear were high, and legislators wanted to know the root cause of this heinous crime. Brown oversaw the psychiatric postmortem of the incident. Although he was part of a very interdisciplinary group of researchers, they all stepped away from their research with the same conclusion: the perpetrator's systemic lack of play throughout his childhood and adolescence, coupled with his inability to regulate his emotions, ultimately led to his final violent outburst. Despite what conventional wisdom held, it was his singular lack of play, rather than another confounding variable, that led to his ultimate violent assault. The repeated abuse from his father, who crucially never allowed him to have unstructured playtime, had profound deleterious effects that undoubtedly lasted into adulthood (94-100). Thus, Brown argues, individuals ought to prolong their predisposition for "neoteny," the prolonging of more child-like qualities into adulthood, as it makes them more psychologically resilient and innovative (Brown 55-8). Without it, humans, like other mammals, become unimaginative, sad, and ultimately powerless against the unstable forces of life.

This horrifying story points to a broader point about play's role in a given society: without it, communities suffer tremendously. As one sociologist put it, "When members are discouraged from spontaneous expressivity in play, they may overlook other possibilities. Elemental play and scientific curiosity stem from a common source, a generous hospitality toward newness, puzzlement, the untried difficulty, the emerging unknown" (Mitchell 51). The sociological implications of "flow," and by extension play, will be explored in greater depth later in this paper.

So long as one is immersed in the aimless fun of "play," one may be able to channel an "optimal experience" as Csikszentmihalyi envisions it. Csikszentmihalyi's scholarship on "optimal experiences" was inspired in large part by the "playful quality" found within experiences that adequately match the skill and challenge level of the participant.[30] That is not to say that "play" must always be completely pleasurable and risk-averse — often, the most growth comes from more demanding experiences.

Monism and Pluralism

Aristotle's conceptualization of the "Good Life" may obfuscate a deeper undercurrent in philosophy between Monism and Pluralism and their respective views on the "Chief Good" for humans. Monists contend that all items can be reduced to a shared single good, while Pluralists contend that there are multiple goods to balance in this understanding. The modern understanding of virtue and actualization would fall into the Pluralist tradition, as one could

[30] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play.* Jossey-Bass, 1975, p. xiii.

achieve an actualization of their potential through different means and directed toward different pursuits beyond mere contemplation.[31]

Theorists have routinely understood the limitations of Monism in an understanding of the final good. Martin Seligman, for example, wrote in *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being* (2011) that the many grand philosophical theories regarding humanity's purpose — ranging from Freud and Aristotle to Nietzsche — excel in their "parsimony" but ultimately minimize reality to little explanatory value. Though he aligns himself closest with Aristotle, he still dryly claims that these philosophical giants suffered from "the great mistake of monism" (9). Alasdair MacIntyre also fell into the Pluralist tradition, as he would go on to write that humanity's "Chief Good" is a personal, contextual combination of the goods irrespective of religion where one must find "a final end that is our own."[32] Aristotle's naturalistic ethical framework, as has been previously discussed, is relevant to a modern discussion of where "flow" falls on the *Eudaimonistic* continuum or whether this type of activity is virtue-laden enough to accurately be described as having "normativity."

Ultimately, this thesis endorses an "Inclusivist" (Pluralist) account of the *Eudaimonic* life rather than an "Exclusivist" (Monist) view, as the former can accommodate our modern understanding of well-being and flourishing, as well as better account for the cultivation of "flow" states throughout one's life. The latter interpretation of the good contends that contemplation is the only ultimate cause worth pursuing, thereby casting all other possible activities as merely intermediary steps toward achieving this ultimate goal. The "Inclusivist"

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[31] Thomas Nagel in "Aristotle on Eudaimonia" (1972) makes a similar bimodal distinction in reference to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* between an "intellectualist" and "comprehensive" account of *Eudaimonia*, with only the latter encompassing the need to cultivate practical wisom, or *Phronesis*, as a broader means of attaining *Eudaimonia*.
[32] MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative.* Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 53.

view contends that the *Eudaimonic* life cannot possibly consist solely of one activity, namely contemplation.

This dichotomy between Inclusivism and Exclusivism's view of the Good is based mainly on W.F.R. Hardie's book *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* (1968). Hardie described at length how Aristotle's moral philosophy leaves ample room for interpretation regarding whether he supported an Inclusivist or Exclusivist view of the Good, especially via Aristotle's treatment of humanity's *Ergon*, or function. Hardie related that Aristotle's account of *Eudaimonia* is often contradictory, especially as it relates to which ends are more important to the others. Hardie wrote in "The Final Good For Man":

> "Now in I. 7 he admits, and indeed insists, that the 'human good' must be an inclusive whole: it would not be final and self-sufficient if any addition would make it better (1097 b16-18). In agreement with this he says that we must be ready to allow a plurality of ends (1097 a22-4). But a few lines later he puzzles us by saying that, if there is more than one final end, the object of our search is the most final (a28-30). Similarly his definition of *eudaimonia* [sic] as activity in accordance with virtue contains the clause: 'if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete' (1098 a17-I8; cf. 1099 a30). Thus in speaking of the good for man Aristotle hesitates between an inclusive and an exclusive formulation" (22-3).

Hardie continued, writing about the confusion that arose between how an active citizen should plan his or her life within their respective *polis*. Hardie expanded on this dichotomy between Aristotle's indecisiveness on the *telos* for humanity, writing on the general desire to understand happiness as a harmonious unification of one's desires, "Aristotle sometimes, when he speaks of

the final end, seems to be fumbling for the idea of an inclusive end, or comprehensive plan, in this sense" ("The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics" 279).

Hardie's discussion on this dichotomy exemplifies that although Aristotle believed in an ostensibly Exclusivist view of the good, where contemplation is the final end of rational beings, there still exists valuable insight in evaluating the Inclusivist "comprehensive plan for life," even if Aristotle never made this dichotomy explicit (*Aristotle's Ethical Theory* 23-7).

Optimal Experiences and their relation to Aristotelian virtue ethics

Aristotle asserts throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* that there are different kinds of people and that certain lifestyles best accompany specific kinds of people. This alludes to Aristotle's Pluralist tendencies, as while he contends that the life of maximum activity is the active philosophical life, he maintains that this life is only for those who are capable of it, further underscoring the breadth of options beyond the pure Monist interpretation of the "Chief Good."

This discussion of the philosophical life also relates to Aristotle's treatment of practical wisdom, or *Phronesis*. *Phronesis* guides virtuous action, but contemplation ultimately supersedes action as it is closer to the divine and self-sufficient and perfects the actualization of human excellence. *Phronesis* is necessary for ethical virtue, though, as it perfects individuals in their engagement with determining the appropriate methods for achieving certain ends. For those who are unable to lead a philosophical life, though, Aristotle would concede that engagement with their intellectual virtue would still be a worthwhile endeavor. Oftentimes, one can find people who are flourishing, but when questioned about the reasoning for their pursuits, they may reply without any theoretical reflection for why they pursue their chosen "Good." As Aristotle detailed in Book X, the philosophical, or contemplative life, is the highest and most self-sufficient type of

human life available. He writes in Book X, Chapter 7, “Thus, the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness. And this is an activity of contemplation.”[33]

This discussion of Csikszentmihalyi and his broad scholarship on “optimal experiences” can ultimately inform our modern conception of *Eudaimonia*. “Flow” can be an integral component of *Eudaimonia*, specifically through describing the motivation for the perfection of intrinsically desirable actions, as well as speaking to the experience of full engagement within the activity. “Flow” states may be experienced by those who are morally good, bad, or neutral, thereby exemplifying a rift between the normativity of *Eudaimonia* and the value-neutrality of Csikszentmihalyi’s conception of “flow,” although Csikszentmihalyi most likely would not endorse a morally perverse action achieved via a “flow” state.[34] The medium itself does not specify the moral quality of the activity that induces the “flow” experience. Some objectively immoral activities, like individuals involved in organized crime and juvenile delinquency, have historically reported flow-like experiences.[35]

“Flow” lacking normativity does not at all take away from the necessity of its cultivation, though, as one’s life is still enhanced considerably by the pursuit of these psychically enriching states: participants of “flow” report a feeling of intense intrinsic reward, a sense of genuine fulfillment, increased performance and productivity in their respective domain, improved emotional well-being and emotional regulation, an overall greater sense of self and purpose

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[33] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, Chapter 7 (1178b7-10)

[34] Despite his concession about flow’s potential lack of morality, Csikszentmihalyi still claims that the cultivation of “flow” states is a human good that can elevate one’s happiness significantly and potentially lead to a more virtuous, purposeful, and fulfilling life.

[35] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi wrote in Chapter 7 of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* that many people achieve "flow" states in objectively harmful or immoral acts, such as crime, cheating, or gambling. People have also used Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow” and extended it to explain crime behavior, most notably in Per-Olof H. Wikström’s Situational Action Theory.

within their broader surroundings, among its other melange of benefits. Thus, there is clearly something "good" about "flow" states. A life deprived of "flow" experiences may not constitute a flourishing life as the individual would not be cultivating the necessary virtues to achieve a life well-lived.

Obstacles to "flow"

People find "flow" states to be inherently enjoyable, and yet, most people in modern liberal societies seem to underutilize their hard-earned leisure time, thereby undercutting the realization of their potential. Though these experiences make them "happier, more cheerful, stronger, more active," time and time again, they choose to opt out of challenging work and instead for passive entertainment (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* 159). The perverse irony lies in the assumption underpinning almost all institutions: that work is fundamentally boring and inherently unsatisfying. Csikszentmihalyi specifically focused on these types of "boring" professions and employment conditions in his scholarship for this very reason, centering on "work and "school," two places that he thought ostensibly should be conducive for frequent "flow" experiences despite most people's unhappiness with them (Beard and Csikszentmihalyi 355). This increased complexity of the self may explain why some people achieve states of "flow" in ostensibly uncomfortable or unenjoyable activities despite their continuous desire to be at leisure rather than at their job.[36]

Despite the many instances of "flow" activities found around the world, particularly in people's employment, there still exist some unrecognized assumptions in Western traditions about the purpose of institutions writ large. Csikszentmihalyi wrote about this very paradox at length in *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975), the intellectual precursor to *Flow: The*

[36] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. HarperCollins e-books, 1990, p. 159

Psychology of Optimal Experience. This self-fulfilling prophecy of unfulfilling work and employment will continue to bolster the idea that one's time spent at school or in their cubicle must necessarily be unpleasant. Couched between these precious moments, Csikszentmihalyi showed, are psychic opportunities for "flow." Csikszentmihalyi has even researched what he coined as "microflow" activities, or those trivial, mindless activities people pursue to pass the time as potentially conscious-expanding experiences, further underscoring the ramifications of his scholarship.[37] Even the smallest moments change the constitution of one's consciousness.

Thus, Csikszentmihalyi declared that one should cultivate a more "autotelic" view toward one's lifestyle, work, and spiritual outlook. I have used the term "autotelic" here, as it is used repeatedly in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's writings, but the term is generally in line with Aristotle's teleological framework for assessing actions and their root end. Aristotle wrote extensively on the importance of understanding actions and their respective *telos*, like in Book 1, Chapter 1, of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "Every art and every enquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."[38]

Csikszentmihalyi's idea of the "Autotelic Personality" is characterized by an openness and willingness to continually experiment with challenges and skill sets that align with one's internal aspirations, as opposed to conforming to an externally imposed value or goal system. While Csikszentmihalyi contends that genetic predispositions and family-rearing practices may heighten or diminish these qualities (i.e., the biological setpoint and conditions factors, respectively, from the "Happiness Hypothesis"), broadly, this "autotelic" sensibility may be cultivated at any stage in one's development and ought to be to achieve a flourishing life.

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[37] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play.* Jossey-Bass, 1975, p. 140–60

[38] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, Chapter 1 (1094a1-5)

Crucially, the "autotelic" self may achieve this "optimal experience" in various activities, although they all share similar properties as described earlier. Even the act of writing, an act that many people find cumbersome, can host an abundance of "flow" opportunities, so long as emotion and passion are held at an optimal level for achieving a desirable written output.[39]

It is not enough to fill up one's free time with distractions: true "human flourishing" occurs in structuring entropy (chaos) and embracing a negentropic (limiting entropy) view toward time, space, and personal autonomy. Psychic entropy, or disorders in an individual's consciousness, transpire whenever "Information … conflicts with existing intentions, or distracts us from carrying them out."[40] This correction of the self is a lifelong pursuit with no definitive start or finish. This account of goal-oriented activity en route to "flow" states is consistent with many contemporary neo-Aristotelian accounts of flourishing as well.

The link between Csikszentmihalyi's conception of "flow" and the components of a *Eudaimonic* life still remains incomplete, which will be discussed in the following chapter. I will utilize the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre, specifically in *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Dependent Rational Animals* to form a philosophical foundation for preserving aspects of Aristotle's objectivity teleology to apply it to the modern world. Through this exploration, this thesis will explore how "flow" can potentially be an integral part of a *Eudaimonic* life, especially given the presupposition that this thesis endorses an Inclusivist account of the Good.

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[39] Larson, R. "Flow and Writing." *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness*, edited by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Isabela Csikszentmihalyi, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 150-171.
[40] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. HarperCollins e-books, 1990, p. 36.

MacIntyre's Reconceptualization of *Eudaimonia*

MacIntyre's reconceptualization of *Eudaimonia* provides a way for "flow" to be seen as part of a flourishing life, in terms of it being the experience one has when engaged in virtuous actions. In this chapter, I will discuss MacIntyre's reconceptualization of *Eudaimonia* and how his view of "practices" relates to virtue acquisition and "flow."

Alasdair MacIntyre, principally in *After Virtue* (1981), asserted that we must resuscitate an Aristotelian teleology to fix the current state of modern philosophy and its moral failings. He proposes the conception of practices, traditions, and narrative to save a version of Aristotelian ethics, which I seek to show can endorse a view of *Eudaimonia* that can accommodate Csikszentmihalyi's conception of "flow."

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argues that there has been a breakdown in a contemporary shared moral framework, which has led to widespread alienation and confusion about how to lead a virtuous, purposeful life. What MacIntyre is describing is similar to what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called "ontological anxiety" (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* 12) because both express a similar sentiment about the fragmented state of modernity. The difference is that MacIntyre takes this as a starting point for his reconceptualization of Aristotelian virtue ethics; Csikszentmihalyi instead focused on achieving and evaluating the propensity of individuals to experience "flow" states. However, these interpretations are not at odds with each other, as both theorists focus on different phenomena: MacIntyre centers on virtue development, while Csikszentmihalyi focuses on the experience one has when fully engaged with an activity. If that activity is virtuous, then it could be the experience one has in living a *Eudaimonic* life.

MacIntyre asserts from the outset that people today have only scant "fragments of a conceptual scheme" rather than a wholly realized notion of morality and ethics (*After Virtue* 2).

MacIntyre accordingly claims that "the interminable and unsettable character of so much contemporary moral debate" emerges due to the conflicting premises from which the main individuals in today's discourse draw their arguments (226). MacIntyre has asserted that modern Western liberal societies, as a consequence of having a purely Emotivist culture, have divorced philosophy from politics and institutionally assembled a society epitomized by a high degree of compartmentalization, which encourages role variability and incompatible social norms ("Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good" 236-7).

Furthermore, this compartmentalization has made it inconceivable to ask Aristotelian-rooted questions that could undermine the stability of the institutionalized political order in liberal democracies ("How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance, and Utopia" 16). This compartmentalized social order also leads to a hyper-specification of norms within specific social spheres, often resulting in detrimental social harmony. This hyper-compartmentalization of modernity also systematically discourages critical reflection, as MacIntyre has noted:

> "Within each sphere such individuals conform to the requirements imposed on their role within that sphere and there is no milieu available to them in which they are able, together with others, to step back from those roles and those requirements and to scrutinize themselves and the structure of their society from some external standpoint with any practical effect" ("Social Structures and Their Threats to Moral Agency" 322).

This compartmentalization may diminish the likelihood of "flow" states, especially as institutions tend to emphasize the attainment of external goods over internal goods.

In illustrating this chasm of disagreement in modern ethics, MacIntyre briefly chronicles the philosophical history of virtues in the chapter "The Nature of the Virtues" in *After Virtue*. In

this chapter, he discusses the progression of the virtues from thinkers and texts as broad as Homer, Aristotle, the New Testament, Benjamin Franklin, and Jane Austen. MacIntyre utilizes this eclectic mix to discuss the broad disagreement about what constitutes the virtues and to indicate the sheer incompatibility of certain conceptualizations of the virtues. In one example, MacIntyre details how Franklin added wholly new types of virtues, such as "cleanliness, silence, and industry"; he also elevated the importance of the "drive to acquire itself" as being one of the lauded virtues, whereas a majority of ancient Greek thinkers would constitute this same virtue as the deplorable vice of greed, or *Pleonexia* (183).

MacIntyre contends that the loss of a shared social teleology and vocabulary around virtue has led to a deterioration in moral judgments. He maintains that there has been a breakdown in a shared understanding of human goods and of a coherent version of what constitutes the "Chief Good." This collective detachment from a shared understanding of morality, justice, and ethics, coupled with a noncommittal acceptance of this apparent deterioration since the Age of Enlightenment and an insistence on making universal claims about human behavior, has led to a loss of moral clarity.[41]

MacIntyre takes issues with three central philosophical thinkers of the Enlightenment rationalism movement, Hume, Kant, and Kierkegaard, for what he saw as their collective abandonment of an Aristotelian teleology and their proposed ideals' tendency to dissolve into relativism with closer inspection.[42] In the absence of Aristotelian teleology, as MacIntyre rejects Aristotle's metaphysical biology[43], MacIntyre asserts that we can still successfully keep

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[41] Some philosophers view MacIntyre's depiction of liberalism as stereotypical or incomplete. One of those reviews, specifically regarding *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, can be found in Brenda Almond's article "Alasdair MacIntyre: The Virtue of Tradition" (1990).

[42] MacIntyre has compellingly defended his tradition-based view of morality and ethics against criticism that it is just another guise for Relativism, notably in the last three chapters of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

[43] MacIntyre explores a biological teleology in greater detail in *Dependent Rational Animals*, where he contends that humans have a considerable amount in common with other animals, specifically in intellect, cooperation, and

Aristotle's central teachings on virtues and still observe how moral growth can occur throughout one's society, tradition, and narrative, which all influence what constitutes a life well-lived (*After Virtue* 183). MacIntyre has described himself as having both a Thomistic Aristotelian teleological ethics[44] as well as a neo-Aristotelian framework, reflecting how his philosophy is deeply rooted in Aristotle's philosophy.[45] He has also contended that all "plain persons" are inherently proto-Aristotelian due to their raw attraction to Aristotle's philosophical emphasis on evaluating different ends and pursuing the most choiceworthy one. On this note, MacIntyre shields himself from criticism of Aristotle's elitism by his dynamic embodiment of Thomistic Aristotelianism. The laymen, MacIntyre asserts, will at some point in their adulthood be concerned with the overall narrative of their life, less through an appeal to explicit moral arguments but more regarding if there is a narrative throughline through their lived experience ("Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues and Goods" 136-8). These "plain persons" also play a vital role in the more revolutionary ramifications of MacIntyre's proposed Aristotelianism, a topic explored in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism*.

In *Alasdair MacIntyre (Contemporary Philosophy in Focus)* (2003), an interdisciplinary collection of scholars discussed the broad import of his philosophical works and his revitalization of virtue ethics. This collection of scholars comprehensively traced MacIntyre's evolving treatment of the virtues from *After Virtue*, where he rooted his account of the virtues within traditions, practices, and narrative, to *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), where he expanded his social teleology to reflect the methodologies in which virtues are intertwined

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rationality, and that the integral element of understanding human beings propensity to flourish is in their ablity to be independent practical thinkers.

[44] MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Ethics in the conflicts of modernity: An essay on desire, practical reasoning, and narrative.* Cambridge University Press, 2016. p. 166.

[45] MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Ethics in the conflicts of modernity: An essay on desire, practical reasoning, and narrative.* Cambridge University Press, 2016. p. 31.

with specific histories of moral inquiry. Additionally, this roster of academics analyzed the influence of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990), which expands even further to include a discussion of epistemology, as well as a lengthy analysis of what MacIntyre concluded to be the three primary modes of analytical thought in the West — Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition. In his essay, Murphy noted that MacIntyre's evolving treatment of the virtues was inspired by his intellectual shift to Aquinas's thought.[46] MacIntyre's conceptions of the virtues and his account of rationality and morality progress significantly from their original formulations in *After Virtue*. Jean Porter has also noted that, especially in his later philosophical works, MacIntyre's discussion of what constitutes "traditions" evolved dramatically, noting that it "moves between a wider concept of tradition as an overall social and moral orientation, and a more limited concept of a tradition as a focused scientific or moral inquiry" (39).

MacIntyre, like Aristotle, contended that *Eudaimonia* is the universal "good" of humanity and acknowledged the murkiness of what constituted this good. MacIntyre does, however, claim that the possession of virtues is a necessary condition for achieving flourishing, stating, "The virtues are precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* [sic] and the lack of which will frustrate his movements toward that *telos* [sic]" (*After Virtue* 148).

Sociological implications of "flow"

[46] MacIntyre believed Aquinas effectively resolved two contradictory rival traditions, Augustinianism and Aristotelianism, by synthesizing Aristotle's emphasis on natural virtues and Augustine's emphasis on theological virtues (Porter 59). Remarking on MacIntyre's lecture series the *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, Gordon Graham in his essay discussed the implication of the activity of intellectual inquiry being intrinsically a practice in and of itself, where he noted: "The central point to grasp, however, is that intellectual inquiry is a *practice* [sic], and the same possibilities of conception, and the same points for and against them, can be made with respect to all human practices" (29).

Richard G. Mitchell, Jr., in “Sociological implications of the flow experience” (1988), maintained that “flow” typifies the midpoint between the continuum of certainty and uncertainty in social contexts. “Flow” is the psychically enriching balance of one's ability to their task — too little responsibility relative to one’s ability leads to the Marxian “alienation” characterized by “self-estrangement,” while an overabundance of responsibility, relative to one’s ability, engenders a dominating feeling of confusion and isolation exemplified by Durkheim's “anomie.”[47] The opposites of certainty and uncertainty are expressed by Marxian “alienation” and Durkheim’s “anomie,” respectively. These two terms are utilized in a specific context, as Mitchell asserted that “alienation” and “anomie” exist on the same spectrum but are located on opposite ends; he also wrote that the experience of these two opposite states are “conscious states,” thereby diverging from some of his sociological contemporaries who believed this to be an externally imposed label (41). Csikszentmihalyi also appreciated a similar theme regarding certainty to uncertainty in his research, notably when he documented that “anxiety or boredom” may emerge in periods where there are “either too few or too many opportunities for action” (*Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* 185). Csikszentmihalyi wrote that human behavior may better be understood as the dichotomy between “flow” experiences and “anxiety and boredom” rather than between “work” and “play” (185).

Both agents experiencing “alienation” and “anomie,” Mitchell asserted, seek a state of “competence” as a medium for salvation from their present plight. Mitchell expands upon this idea as he contends that this desire for “competence” is a precondition for the experience of “flow”:

[47] In her article "Alasdair MacIntyre: the virtue of tradition," Brenda Almond makes the compelling assertion that Durkheim's conception of "anomie" may now be interpreted as that of "self-emancipation," a remarkable interpretative and linguistic departure from Durkheim's original intention of analyzing "restless normlessness" (102).

> "Flow is found in using a full measure of commitment, innovation, and individual investment to perform real and meaningful tasks that are self-chosen, limited in scope, and rewarding in their own right. Flow is the 'opposite' of both alienation and anomie" (Mitchell 44).

Mitchell's discussion of "flow" from a sociological context is illuminating, for it provides further contextualization on modern obstacles to "flow," most notably the Western concept that "flow" must be found in leisure rather than in one's work or employment, or that "flow" states experienced in employment are exceptions to the rule. Additionally, Mitchell's utilization of "flow" within a sociological context is helpful for it supplies a visible approach for evaluating an individual's proclivity to achieve "flow" states based on an axis of certainty versus uncertainty in social contexts.

The individualistic, normless state of modernity characterized by Durkheim's theory of "anomie" aligns with MacIntyre's disenchantment with the current modern liberalist order. MacIntyre asserts that the uniquely fragmented state of modernity, much like Csikszentmihalyi's description of "ontological anxiety," can illustrate why there is such a proliferation of conflicting accounts of what comprises ethics. MacIntyre wrote how "external goods" necessarily possess a physical, divisible property, a fact that inherently leads to competitive division, writing, "It is characteristic of what I have called external goods that when achieved they are always some individual's property and possession. Moreover, characteristically they are such that the more someone has of them, the less there is for other people" (*After Virtue* 191). In this light, MacIntyre's elevation of "internal goods" over "external goods" makes sense, as the former can be obtained only through specific "practices" that intellectually "refine" the individual and are indivisible in their composition.

MacIntyre's Notion of a "Practice"

In *After Virtue* and his later works, MacIntyre attempted to rectify the central issue associated with modern philosophy, which in his eyes is the discipline's inability to present a coherent conception of the human good and what constitutes virtue. He holds that modern liberalism's one issue is that it "can provide no compelling arguments in favor of its conception of the human good except by appeal to premises which collectively already presuppose that theory" (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* 345). For MacIntyre, the loss of a teleological view of humanity in philosophy has made it challenging to have productive moral discussions that do not flatten into relativism. MacIntyre finds this trend in modern philosophy problematic as it has led to an irreconcilable, fragmented, and individualistic view of morality due to the taking of moral vocabulary out of the context of its original tradition. Discarding an Aristotelian teleology, MacIntyre asserts, effectively abandons an organized view of values and the parameters for human excellence relative to specific social conventions. In rebuilding a virtue-based conception of ethics, MacIntyre coined the term "practice" to tie activity, norms, and a narrative tradition of those activities to a conception of a good life. He defined "practice" specifically as follows in *After Virtue*:

> "By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (187).

He goes on to explain that architecture, farming, and even a game of football would all constitute a “practice,” while simply “throwing a football with skill” and bricklaying would not constitute such a “practice” (187). The experience one has when engaged within a “practice” when focused on “internal” rather than “external” goods resembles a “flow” experience: ample time for feedback, layered complexity over repeated exposure and participation, the desire to seek out mentorship opportunities, and a standard of excellence in that specific activity, which is emulated by individuals seeking to improve at an activity.

MacIntyre defined virtue as an achievable human means of gaining specific goods internal to their appropriate “practice” (191). Later, he added an addendum to his definition of virtue, writing that they should be:

> “understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good” (219).

MacIntyre’s account of the virtues emphasizes the prolongation and durability of the relevant “practices” in which a person is actively involved. The possession of the proper virtues, as laid out in *After Virtue*, is essential for achieving human flourishing, primarily through a participant's involvement within a “practice.”

Virtue acquisition occurs in three distinct stages in MacIntyre’s social teleology. First, in the initial stage of a “practice,” individuals engage in shared social practices that have internal goods, the intrinsic rewards and virtues derived through participation in a “practice,” and benchmarks of performance. Then, in the second stage, individuals reflect on their life as a

coherent narrative, linking their thoughts and actions into a streamlined story. As Ira Bedzow wrote regarding MacIntyre's social teleology, "By setting practices within a narrative, the virtues that one acquires become more than just dispositions that sustain the practices; they become part of a broader scope and serve to allow a person to develop his or her life story as he or she searches for the good."[48] Lastly, one must incorporate and situate their narrative within a broader social tradition. In a similar vein, these individuals must expand their "practice" beyond the limits of performing the activity well within the general rules of the "practice" and integrate their narrative into a broader context that recognizes the interconnectedness of their community and its traditions.[49] One's view of virtue becomes more nuanced as virtue itself depends on the "conception of the *telos* [sic] of a whole human life, conceived as a unity" (*After Virtue* 202).

MacIntyre's emphasis on personal agency and the importance of community-dependent virtue formation, coupled with his discussion of internal and external goods, is relevant to the discussion of a contemporary, inclusive notion of *Eudaimonia* — these goal-oriented "practices" are ends within themselves and possess "internal goods" associated with individual's engagement within a specific "practice." MacIntyre's notion of "internal goods" exemplifies the intrinsic value received directly from one's active involvement in a tradition-bound "practice" and can only be derived from that specific "practice." For example, concerning the game of chess, the "internal goods" to this "practice" by definition "cannot be had in any way but by playing chess or some other game of that specific kind" (*After Virtue* 88). The "practice" ultimately fits within a more significant historical narrative, a step beyond the creation of an individual, personalized narrative.

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[48] Bedzow, Ira. *Maimonides for Moderns: A New Understanding of the Jewish Philosopher's Teachings.* Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 11.

[49] MacIntyre rejects the label of "communitarian," though other philosophers continue to apply the label to his works.

"External goods," as opposed to "internal goods," are the type of nonspecific benefits derived outside of the "practice" yet from its participation, such as honor, wealth, or praise.[50] MacIntyre acknowledged that the perfection of "practices" and the attainment of the "internal goods" specific to it may sometimes ironically be "a potential stumbling block" to one's comfort levels and societal standing, though, as the current world order, specifically in a society characterized by modern liberalism, frequently praises the pursuit of "external goods" over "internal" ones; he noted that developing the virtues of courage, justice, and truthfulness, for example, may hurt an individual's chances of attaining fame or monetary success later on in this type of culture. Nevertheless, he reasoned, "We should therefore expect that, if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might suffer first attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement, although simulacra might abound" ("The Nature of the Virtues" 34). Csikszentmihalyi made a parallel claim that social systems that depend on external rewards invariably produce alienation among its participants, as well as cause an unsustainable depletion of finite materials (*Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* 4).

MacIntyre asserted that even if Aristotle never explicitly made this differentiation between "internal" versus "external" goods, it is nonetheless intended as Aquinas does make this distinction based on his defense of St. Augustine's definition of virtue rooted in an Aristotelian viewpoint. In his qualification of Aristotle's philosophical position, MacIntyre refers to Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle discusses what constitutes *Eudaimonia* and how happiness should be viewed as the activity rather than the consequence of the action. The outcomes of the activity, the "external good," are contingent by nature. Aristotle acknowledged

[50] MacIntyre claims that in certain scenarios, "external goods" may corrupt the "practice," especially if they become the dominant reason an individual engages with a "practice." A focus solely on "external goods" may distort the true reason for engaging with the "practice" in the first place, thereby deteriorating the purity of the "practice" and the "internal goods" specific to it.

that “external goods” may contribute to happiness, though they are inessential and contingent to happiness itself, writing in Book 1, Chapter 8 that, “It would be correct too to say that certain actions and activites are the end, for in this way the end belongs among the goods related to soul, not among the external ones.”[51]

MacIntyre's concept of “practices” is central to his theory of virtue acquisition. Virtue, then, is chiefly concerned with engaging in these “practices” in coherent ways that contribute to the “common good” as well as benefit the development of an individual’s character. Thus, MacIntyre’s virtue ethics calls for upstanding action and the cultivation of the paramount virtues as preconditions for *Eudaimonia*:

> “Thus he [the educated moral agent] does what is virtuous because it is virtuous. It is this fact that distinguishes the exercise of the virtues from the exercise of certain qualities which are not virtues, but rather simulacra of virtues … The genuinely virtuous agent however acts on the basis of a true and rational judgment” (*After Virtue* 149-50).

MacIntyre’s description aligns with Csikszentmihalyi’s aforementioned usage of the term “autotelic.” Aristotle wrote that happiness, or *Eudaimonia*, is the only thing chosen for itself and not for the sake of something else. Similarly, MacIntyre’s “educated moral agent” acts virtuously because they are inculcated with the proper intellectual and moral virtues. They act in the way that they do precisely because it is how they ought to act in that specific situation, regardless of any external benefits or punishments for their action or inaction. For Csikszentmihalyi, like Aristotle, the most preferred activities are those pursued for themselves rather than for their contingent benefits. Likewise, MacIntyre’s account of the “educated moral agent” aligns with

[51] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, Chapter 7 (1098a14-16)

Aristotle's view of the virtuous individual who chooses specific activities for their own sake as well as prefers these subsets of activities to every other option.[52]

Additionally, these "internal goods" can only be obtained through one's active involvement in a particular "practice," which necessarily requires the cultivation of those relevant virtues adopted by the "practice." Communities must take into account the "narrative" dimension of "human flourishing" and engender some semblance of mutual interdependence and shared cooperation toward finding their version of the "good." The narrative, which MacIntyre views as the paramount task for individuals across their lives, demonstrates why the good is a given good within a specific society.

Note that while Aristotle looks at the philosophical life as the ideal life, that is only for those capable of it. For those who are not capable of the intellectual life, *Eudaimonia* might consist of the engagement of practical wisdom, *Phronesis*, through acting virtuously in society.[53] This Pluralistic view fits within MacIntyre's framework as well. Regarding "practical reasoning," MacIntyre put it simply in *Dependent Rational Animals*:

> "And, since for a human being to flourish unqualifiedly qua human being, it is her or his life as a whole that must flourish, the individual has to learn through experience about the places both of independence and of dependence on others in the different stages of a flourishing life. It is insofar as an individual is able to articulate what she or he has thus learned that that individual is on occasion also to make explicit the first premise of her or his practical reasoning" (113).

One's attainment of practical wisdom, or *Phronēsis*, gives an individual the ability to reason through their actions and thoughts in a way that demonstrates virtuous activity.

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[52] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, Chapter 7 (1098a16-20)
[53] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI, Chapter 5 (1140a25-1140b30) and Book VI, Chapter 7 (1141b9-1142a30)

MacIntyre employs the example of a "highly intelligent seven-year-old" to illustrate both "internal" and "external" goods, as well as the power of a community-bound "practice." In a hypothetical example, MacIntyre describes a situation where a gifted but unmotivated seven-year-old is encouraged to play chess with an older teacher using the gift of candy as motivation. It is clear in the example that the child is principally motivated by the candy, or the "external" goods of the practice of chess, and has no desire whatsoever to learn the game for the sake of itself, the "internal" goods of the "practice." So long as candy is the sole motivator for their behavior, the child has every reason to cheat and bend the rules of the game for their benefit. MacIntyre writes in *After Virtue* about this example:

> "But, so we may hope, there will come a time when the child will find in those goods specific to chess, in the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity, a new set of reasons, reasons now not just for winning on a particular occasion, but for trying to excel in whatever way the game of chess demands" (188).

MacIntyre utilized the "practice" of chess to exemplify the motivational shift from "external" to "internal" goods, ultimately leaving it up to the reader to analogize this example to virtue acquisition. Although socially dependent, "practices" can effectively illuminate and account for modern ethical and moral problems, most notably what constitutes perfected excellence in specific skill-based domains. The presence of both standards and goods effectively rule out "all subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgment," as within the "tradition," the norms are objective, and there is a shared expectation of what comprises an excellent exercise of the "practice" (190). This acquisition of virtues epitomizes how traditions themselves dictate what is

deemed excellent in any given society. Similarly, the narrative view of the self is inextricably linked to one's upbringing and culture, an identity linked to its moral-social tradition.

In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihalyi provides an example similar to MacIntyre's chess protégé example. He discussed two individuals engaged in the stock market, with only one of them embodying an "autotelic" approach, namely, they pursue buying and selling stocks for the sake of the activity rather than for the benefit of money. Although monetarily the two agents are identical, their approaches to the stock market are not, as one agent is focused on the money associated with the stock market, the "external goods" of the "practice," while the other is primarily concerned with their ability to forecast future financial patterns, the "internal goods" of the "practice." He concludes succinctly, writing that although the two agents appear the same on their surface, "What transpires in the two situations is ostensibly identical; what differs is that when the experience is autotelic, the person is paying attention to the activity for its own sake; when it is not, the attention is focused on its consequences" (67).

Csikszentmihalyi, in detailing the nature of learning skills, has written that usually one begins learning an activity for external reasons, and only with time and considerable practice does a shift ensue to focusing on the intrinsic rewards of the activity itself. He followed with the typical process of learning to read and write before adding an addendum on the proper goal of educators and inculcating a lifelong passion for learning:

> "A person usually learns the rudiments of reading and writing under compulsion. The goal is to avoid punishment and to get the praise of adults who are significant in our lives. But eventually, if the learning process has been successful, we begin to enjoy our ability to read. At that point, the goal becomes intrinsic to the task itself — the anticipation of

> reading a book or solving a problem is enough to motivate the activity" ("Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation" 130).

Csikszentmihalyi's description of the typical learning process inadvertently supports MacIntyre's account of gaining the necessary virtues to attain the specific "internal goods" of a practice. Whether it is learning to write an essay or learning the chromatic scale on the piano, a view toward attaining the internal goods of a practice, rather than its external ones, ultimately benefits the agent in their route toward virtue acquisition and *Eudaimonia*.

MacIntyre's account of "internal" versus "external" goods aligns with Csikszentmihalyi's research on "flow," as both relate to the foundational elements of an Aristotelian teleology; namely, they both elevate the importance of activities that are pursued for their own sake. In *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, for example, Csikszentmihalyi detailed that if external rewards are given to individuals pursuing activities they previously pursued due to their intrinsic motivation, then their overall enjoyment can decrease, most likely due to the actor relinquishing a sense of autonomy.[54] While not subscribing to an Aristotelian teleology, as Csikszentmihalyi's research is descriptive rather than normative, there certainly exists considerable thematic overlap between Csikszentmihalyi's conception of "flow" and MacIntyre's treatment of "internal" and "external" goods. Likewise, MacIntyre contended that "internal goods" are those types of rewards intrinsic to specific activities, such as excellence in artistry or the pursuit of mastery in athletics. These goods can only be achieved by deep engagement and oftentimes, "flow" within specific "practices." This shift from "internal" to "external goods" supports MacIntyre's methodical elevation of "internal goods" as they are pursued for their own sake and gained exclusively by active involvement within distinct "practices." A participant with an "autotelic"

[54] Csikszentmihalyi discusses the nature of autotelic (self-rewarding) activities and intrinsic motivation in "Rewards of Autotelic Activities" in *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975).

disposition will pursue activities purely for their own sake, precisely for the theoretical, philosophical, and empirical foundation set forth by Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" model. One's preoccupation with extrinsic rewards — such as prestige, praise, acclaim, and wealth — disrupts the quality and propensity of "flow" experiences by diverting the participants' attention away from the activity and onto its extrinsic benefits.[55]

The *telos* of an individual may be realized through their active involvement in a "practice," where one cultivates the necessary virtues to achieve excellence within a specific domain while acknowledging the relevant "traditions," and ultimately, crafting their individual "narrative." The active cultivation of the relevant positive virtues may engender the sensations of pleasure as the agent embarks on the path toward human flourishing, an occurrence consistent with Aristotle's treatment of pleasure in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. MacIntyre's account of "internal" and "external" goods thus plays a foundational role in preserving Aristotelian ethics in the face of modern liberalism and its deterioration of a shared moral framework. This preservation of an Aristotelian teleology, specifically regarding the *telos* of humanity, will subsequently anchor an Aristotelian notion of *Eudaimonia* that can accommodate Csikszentmihalyi's account of "flow."

MacIntyre's notion of active involvement in a "practice," primarily when motivated by "internal goods," can incorporate Csikszentmihalyi's conception of "flow" as one of those "internal goods." MacIntyre's chess example, coupled with Csikszentmihalyi's money-making and teaching vignettes, points to a broader point about virtue acquisition and the traditions and

[55] In the realm of behavioral and social psychology, Edward L. Deci's seminal study "Effects of externally mediated rewards on intrinsic motivation" (1971) empirically showed that external reward decreased intrinsic motivation in a laboratory-controlled puzzle-solving experiment. One experimental group was given money for their engagement with this task, while the other group was given only positive feedback. The group getting paid for their involvement tended to disengage with the activity after they stopped getting paid, a trend not found in the non-paid group, indicating to behavioral theorists that external rewards could undermine intrinsic motivation and enjoyment of certain skill-based activities.

"practices" that determine social life: a community's various "practices" may be pursued either for their "internal" or "external goods." However, only the pursuit of the former will give rise to the cultivation of the proper, necessary virtues that may serve as a precondition for attaining a state of *Eudaimonia* across one's lifespan. This inherently inclusivist notion of Aristotle's "Chief Good" readily accommodates both MacIntyre's notion of "practices" as well as both the "internal" and "external" goods associated with an individual's engagement with a "practice."

Chess is not a moral game, even if the rules of chess will determine if a chess player is good at the game or not. Moreover, the desire to play chess well is not good in the sense of being moral; however, the good, positive experience while playing chess is desirable and can thus be seen as an "internal good" as MacIntyre conceives it. So, if one considers social norms as the "rules of the game of life," it becomes apparent that the desire to live life well for its own sake according to the game and the "flow" experience of living well is itself an internal good.

Additionally, a life deprived of "flow" experiences may not constitute a flourishing life as the individual may not be formulating the necessary virtues to achieve a life well-lived. It may be conceivable to acquire the necessary virtues without "flow" states, but cultivating "flow" states may greatly facilitate this process of virtue acquisition and thus ought to be pursued by those interested in embodying a *Eudaimonic* life. A *Eudaimonic* life consequently includes Csikszentmihalyi's conception of "flow," not because "flow" itself is *the* good, but rather because "flow" is *a* good, otherwise known as an "internal good." Despite its lack of normativity, "flow" still adequately elucidates the experience one has while acting in alignment with the proper intellectual and practical virtues via an engrossing activity characterized by a loss of self-consciousness. MacIntyre's useful stand-in via his conceptualization of a "practice" and the

relevant, specific "internal goods" one receives through their active involvement within them further details this process of virtue acquisition.

What will follow are common barriers to achieving "flow" states, clarifications about the nature of "flow," clarifications on the interpretations of *Eudaimonia*, as well as a final theoretical thread that will anchor Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow" within an Aristotelian notion of *Eudaimonia*.

MacIntyre, Hardie, and Ackrill on Aristotle's Chief Good

As many Aristotelian scholars note, Aristotle himself presented two seemingly incompatible notions of the "Chief Good" in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. He identified *Eudaimonia* as the highest good that humans ultimately seek to achieve,[56] while in other sections, he claimed that *Eudaimonia* consisted of multiple goods that could not be flattened to a single metric.[57] Specifically, he discussed the goods of the soul and goods of the body, as well as the importance of external goods in a flourishing life. Additionally, the Monism and Pluralism debate is the same as in Inclusivism and Intellectualism: Inclusivists contend that *Eudaimonia* can incorporate multiple goods, such as external goods, intellectual virtues, and moral virtues. Intellectualists, like Monists, contend that the activity of theoretical contemplation constitutes the exclusive form of *Eudaimonia*.

Aristotle's ethical theory emphasizes personal agency, choice, and a commitment to a lifelong embodiment of the virtues en route to *Eudaimonia*. Thus, Aristotle's unified framework of *Eudaimonia* encompasses the complexity of virtue acquisition, and with it, certain ramifications that will inform what "Chief Good" or goods are attained by *Eudaimonia*.

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[56] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, Chapter 7 (1098a16-20)
[57] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, Chapter 8 (1099a15-25)

Proponents of this Inclusive approach can rightfully argue that a host of lifestyle choices and virtue formation can constitute *Eudaimonia*, so long as these activities are in accordance with the highest virtue of wisdom, or *Sophia*.

The Inclusivist and Intellectualist debate speaks to a broader tension in Aristotle's conflicting treatment of *Eudaimonia* in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, specifically, the divergence between Book I-IX and Book X. Whereas Book I-IX stresses the importance of both moral and intellectual virtues, Book X focuses on the specific claim that only contemplative activity and theoretical wisdom are at the pinnacle of human happiness.

W. F. R. Hardie, in his "The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics" (1965), for example, examined the multi-faceted nature of *Eudaimonia*, as well as its two dominant modes of interpretation: an Inclusive and Dominant understanding of *Eudaimonia*, which correlate with Inclusivism and Intellectualism, respectively. In this essay, Hardie expressed textual support for an Inclusivist interpretation of the "Chief Good" in the "self-sufficiency passage" in Book I, Chapter 7, though he qualified his position significantly to reflect the complexity of this debate (277-95). Hardie wrote about these two differing interpretations of this "final end," as well as their respective limitations, in his essay, writing that he believed Aristotle's description of humanity's *telos* was weakened by its description as dominant rather than being viewed via an Inclusive framework, specifically writing that this former interpretation may falter in its "too narrow account of practical thinking as the search for means" (284). Hardie does however, contend that an Inclusive view of the "Chief Good" does not rule out specific dominant ends within it that correlate with "major interests of developed human nature" (284). Hardie ultimately claimed that Aristotle's conception of human flourishing is best understood via a

“dominant end” framework, which raises the importance of theoretical contemplation as the highest activity under virtue for humans.

J.L. Ackrill's "Aristotle on Eudaimonia" (1974) contributed to the modern revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics as well through his thorough response to Hardie’s reading of Aristotle’s ethics and his alternative approach. In his essay, Ackrill directly endorsed an Inclusive understanding of the “Chief Good.” Ackrill's defense of an Inclusive reading rests upon the nature of *Eudaimonia* itself, which he views as a combination of intrinsically valuable goods rather than just contemplation, or *Theoria*. Whereas Hardie emphasized Book X, Ackrill pays close attention to Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* for Aristotle's more nuanced discussion on the *telos* of humanity (16-7). Like Csikszentmihalyi’s term “autotelic,” these complete goods are chosen for the sake of themselves and nothing further, or as Aristotle has written, “that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.”[58] Inclusivists invariably note that the exclusive importance of *Theoria*, then, would only be supported by some, but not all, of Aristotle's writings. Ackrill wrote in regards to Aristotle’s view of *Eudaimonia*:

> “He is saying, then, that *eudaimonia* [sic], being absolutely final and genuinely self-sufficient, is more desirable than anything else in that it *includes* [sic] everything desirable in itself. It is best, and better than everything else, not in the way that bacon is better than eggs and than tomatoes (and therefore the best *of the three* [sic] to choose), but in the way that bacon, eggs, and tomatoes is a better breakfast than either bacon or eggs or tomatoes — and is indeed the best breakfast without qualification” (Ackrill 21).

Ackrill’s description of *Eudaimonia* is patently Inclusive in its scope and thereby includes optimal experiences like “flow,” where “flow” is the experience one has when engaged in activities other than contemplation. The composite nature of *Eudaimonia* is thus improved with

[58] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 2 (1094a1-5)

this addition of "flow" to its character as *Eudaimonia* is necessarily inclusive of the totality of intrinsic goods, just like the aforementioned complete breakfast. *Eudaimonia* lacks when it is just and only concerned with theoretical wisdom, just like the combination of bacon, eggs, and tomatoes is more choiceworthy combined than its individual counterparts. *Eudaimonia* is similarly diminished in the absence of *Phronesis* as an individual has less capability to make good decisions.

Additionally, regarding the *Ergon* of humanity, Ackrill cited Aristotle's renowned passage that "the good for man turns out to be the activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete." Ackrill noted after this quote that many scholars, Hardie included, view this final end as "*sophia* [sic], the virtue of *theoria* [sic]." Aristotle does mention, in Book X, that rationality is man's prime and most unique function. To call into question the certainty of the Intellectualist view of Aristotle's "Chief Good," though, Ackrill asserted:

> "Aristotle has clearly stated that the principle of the *ergon* [sic] argument is that one must ask what powers and activities are peculiar to and distinctive of man … But no argument has been adduced to suggest that one type of thought is any more distinctive of man than another. In fact practical reason, so far from being in any way less distinctive of man than theoretical, is really more so; for man shares with Aristotle's god the activity of *theoria* [sic]" (27).

Ackrill's commentary points to a broader point about the pursuit of multiple worthwhile activities and what the relevant role of theoretical contemplation may be in them, especially since "flow" may accompany all of these pursuits. The complete life for Aristotle would include the totality of all necessary virtues for human flourishing, and nested in this Inclusive notion is the possibility

of "flow" as an element of *Eudaimonia*. Put another way, Ackrill's *ergon* argument endorses an Inclusivist notion of *Eudaimonia*, which may include the "flow" that accompanies activities other than theoretical contemplation.

Lastly, Ackrill views the Intellectualist stance of Book X to be an example of the highest component within the inclusive good of *Eudaimonia*, which is not at all incompatible with other, perhaps lower intrinsic goods nested within *Eudaimonia*, like "flow." Ackrill's nuanced Inclusive approach is precisely described in a manner that is consistent with Aristotle's writing, as he conveys, that *Eudaimonia* "has a force" more in line with "the best possible life" as opposed to simply being "happiness," "comfort," or "pleasure" (24). Ackrill notes that this understanding of *Eudaimonia* can account for why there is intense disagreement as to what form of life constitutes *Eudaimonia*, but "no disagreement that *eudaimonia* [sic] is what we all want" (24). Ackrill's qualified Inclusivist stance will be instrumental in analyzing what Aristotle means by a complete life well-lived.

John M. Cooper similarly endorsed an Inclusivist interpretation of the "chief good" in *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (1975) to support an "inclusive second-order end" interpretation of *Eudaimonia*, a view which spanned Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics*, and *Magna Moralia*, to support the view that *Eudaimonia* should be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile intellectual virtues with moral virtues (115-33). He also noted that Aristotle holds a twofold end in his ethics, which consists "jointly of morally virtuous activity and excellent theorizing" (112). Cooper notes that the twofold, or "bipartite end," encompasses other first-order goods in Aristotle's hierarchical structure, which in my reading would include "flow."

Other contemporary philosophers endorse an Inclusivist reading, as Matthew Walker explained in an exposition of this Inclusivism versus Exclusivism debate regarding how to

interpret the *Nicomachean Ethics*, commenting, "Yet the reading is still inclusive since rational virtue *includes* [sic] both intellectual and ethical virtue. Thus, the rational virtue reading allows *eudaimonia* [sic] to contain more than the exercise of just one of the rational virtues (one of the intellectual virtues)" (93). When interpreted this way, the Intellectualist account of the "Chief Good," that of the contemplative life, is far too restrictive to constitute genuine human flourishing — it also does not address other praiseworthy activity that is in accordance with the highest virtues.

Additionally, several other aspects of Aristotle's teleology and treatment of human nature broadly seem to undermine the certainty of his account of the supremacy of philosophical life. In his *Politics*, for example, he claimed that mankind is inherently "a political animal," which implicitly brings with it the necessity of social and political engagements outside of philosophizing. Similarly, Aristotle asserted in Book X, Chapter 8, that human beings cannot continuously or exclusively engage with their theoretical wisdom, despite it still being the pinnacle of human activity, as he noted that this type of life would "be too high for man; for it is not insofar as he is man that he will live so, but insofar as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of virtue."[59] In a similar vein, J. L. Ackrill notes in "Aristotle On Eudaimonia" that in Aristotle's description, man is a type of "compound (*syntheton*) [sic], an animal who lives and moves in time but has the ability occasionally to engage in an activity that somehow escapes time and touches the eternal" (32). This ephemeral activity is, of course, contemplation, and by Ackrill and Aristotle's account, it is not something that humans can possibly engage in continuously, even if it is lauded as the apex of the *Eudaimonic* life.

[59] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X, Chapter 7 (1178b23-31)

In Aristotle's admission, uninterrupted contemplation alone is beyond human capabilities; it is also too exclusive in its concerns, given its disregard for other types of enriching virtues. Other vital human needs would unfailingly be unmet if an agent is preoccupied with intellectualism alone: emotional needs, physical needs, and practical wisdom would all be neglected under this Exclusivist, Intellectualist, Dominant account of the "Chief Good."

Human beings are not divine, a point Aristotle remarked in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Our nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation, but our body also must be healthy and must have food and other attention."[60] Additionally, Aristotle's account of the *polis*, which is his preferred type of human organization geared toward human flourishing,[61] necessitates a level of reciprocal interdependence that is unattainable if all individuals in society were preoccupied with intellectual wisdom alone.[62]

This layered view of the "Chief Good" is also consistent with Aristotle's treatment of the soul in *De Anima*, where he detailed how humans are an integrated composite of both body and soul (psyche). Humans possess an emotive part of their soul called the "appetitive" portion, which pure contemplation alone does not address.[63] Contemplation alone does not satiate the relevant needs of this part of Aristotle's conception of the soul. Further, Aristotle's treatment of friendship in Books VIII and IX underscores the importance of friendship, or *Philia*, in his social teleology, another factor not addressed by the contemplative life. Embedded within this Pluralist account of Aristotle's "Chief Good" is indeed Csikszentmihalyi's "flow model," a sensation in

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[60] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X, Chapter 7 (1178b31-35).
[61] *Politics* Book III, Chapter 9 (1280a31-1280b5)
[62] In Alasdair MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), he also asserted that human beings are fundamentally interdependent creatures, thereby diverging from Enlightenment ideals that human beings are wholly self-sufficient. Included in this book is a lengthy discussion on the "virtues of acknowledged dependence."
[63] Aristotle's *De Anima* illustrated his broader teleological view of nature through his integrated approach to understanding the unique capacity for reason in humans. His tripartite model of the soul consists of three levels: the nutritive, appetitive, and rational parts, with each successive layer necessarily building upon the previous one.

accordance with the highest virtues and psychically enriching for the participant over their lifespan.

Contemplation may, in certain contexts, be a “flow” state in and of itself, as well as further evidence to bolster Aristotle’s position of contemplation being self-sufficient. “Flow” is a feeling that accompanies pursuit, while *Theoria* is the activity pursued. Despite their differences, both “flow” and *Theoria* are “autotelic” insofar as they are pursued for their own sake and not for external rewards. Additionally, these phenomena bear sensational similarities: whereas the “flow” participants lose their sense of self via complete engrossment in their activity, one engaging in deep contemplation may transcend beyond regular human concerns and be closer to the divine. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle writes in Book X, Chapters 7 and 8, that contemplation, or *Theoria*, is the human activity that is closest to the divine.[64] While Aristotle uses this description of contemplation to build support for his view that contemplative activity exemplifies the highest embodiment of *Eudaimonia*, it can also descriptively support the assertion that “flow” may occur during contemplation, the best activity in Aristotle’s ethical framework. Both "flow" and *Theoria* are immersive experiences — "flow" is exemplified by total absorption in a challenging activity, while theoretical contemplation for Aristotle is the highest available form of human activity. This survey of Intellectualism and Inclusivism provides a roadmap for differing notions of *Eudaimonia* and supports this thesis’ contention of an Inclusive conception of *Eudaimonia*. Through this discussion, it is evident that Inclusivism can readily account for a more modern, applicable notion of human flourishing, one that can address the integral role of “flow” in a *Eudaimonic* life despite it not being addressed explicitly throughout antiquity.

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[64] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X, Chapter 7 (1178b12-20).

Recontextualizing Virtuous Activity

In Aristotle's ethical theory, virtuous activity is foundational to his broader theory of human flourishing. As his *Nicomachean Ethics* described, virtuous activity is derived first from a virtuous agent who has already been inculcated with the proper virtues through habituation, a proper upbringing[65] and rigorous instruction.[66] The educated, virtuous agent also acts deliberately and for the right reason and may take pleasure in performing the moral activity. He or she also acknowledges that they purposely seek the "internal goods" of the activity, to use MacIntyre's language, and recognize that virtuous activity must be chosen for its own sake, rather than for external benefits.[67] Human flourishing constitutes the utilization of one's rational and cognitive faculties in alignment with the highest virtues.

The field of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics maintains the core foundational commitments of Aristotle's ethical theory while recontextualizing many issues posed by its original formulations. Firstly, these modern frameworks are more sensitive to context and promote a version of human flourishing that is more naturalistic in its evaluation of human capabilities as they emphasize observable systems and their role in human flourishing. This tendency within Neo-Aristotelianism will help convey the integral role of "flow" within a *Eudaimonic* system. These modern frameworks also tend to reduce the importance of Aristotle's treatment of metaphysics and cosmic teleology. Lastly, they acknowledge the relativity of certain virtues and how different historical and social contexts may praise or emphasize certain virtues over others.

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[65] MacIntyre also stressed the importance of the type of environment on the development of moral habit.
[66] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, Chapter 4 (1095b–1096a); Book II, Chapter 1 (1103a–1103b); Book II, Chapter 4 (1105a–1105b)
[67] MacIntyre also emphasized the importance of one's community in virtue formation and moral habit in his moral works. His view of morality is contextual and practice-based. This view is described in *After Virtue*, where he maintained that "practices" are conserved within specific communities that allow for the necessary moral and social contexts to prolong them.

In the past century alone, virtue ethicists and moral philosophers have dissected the implications of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and attempted to reconcile his teleology with modern conceptions of the good. Elizabeth Anscombe's publication of "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958) reinvigorated virtue ethics and renewed interest in analyzing Aristotle's writings. Anscombe's critique of modern moral debate as being fragmented and incoherent, as well as its decisive abandonment of its theological framework, is consistent with MacIntyre's later critiques of modernity that led to his writing of *After Virtue*. Similarly, Anscombe's desire to return to Aristotle's virtue ethics is also consistent with MacIntyre's later social teleology influenced by a return to the Aristotelian tradition. MacIntyre, in his tradition-based version of rationality outlined in *After Virtue* and his subsequent works, set forth a construction for evaluating human flourishing via traditions, practices, and the creation of a narrative. Though firmly rooted in an Aristotelian tradition, MacIntyre departed from Aristotle through his assertation that *Eudaimonia* must be understood within social "practices" and "traditions" that provide objective benchmarks of excellence.

Later philosophers in this field, like Nussbaum and Sen, created distinctly political approaches that focussed on capabilities and freedom, respectively, thereby departing from MacIntyre's detestment of Enlightenment thinkers.[68] Notably, Julia Annas's account of Aristotle in *The Morality of Happiness* (1993) and *Intelligent Virtue* (2011) reconstruct Aristotle's account of *Eudaimonia* and the attainment of the proper virtues. In *Intelligent Virtue*, for example, Annas extensively discussed Aristotle's ethical and moral theories while recontextualizing them for more modern conceptions of the "Chief Good." Annas wrote in "Virtues and the Unity of the Virtue" about the nature of virtue development within a unified, streamlined theory:

[68] MacIntyre wrote in *After Virtue* that, "The project of providing a rational vindication of morality had decisively failed; and from henceforward the morality of our predecessor culture — and subsequently of our own — lacked any public, shared rationale or justification" (50).

> "The claim that the virtues are unified doesn't, then, prevent us from recognizing virtue at the everyday level, and respecting people for it, but it does require us not to be complacent or easily satisfied about our own or others' virtue, to expect our role models to have flaws and to respond to this maturely and without prematurely giving up on the idea of progress in virtue" (90).

This modern view of virtues, rooted in a neo-Aristotelian understanding of *Nicomachean Ethics*, further develops into what she called the "Skill Analogy." Her "Skill Analogy" illustrates how mentorship, skill habituation, progressive evaluation of the virtues, and an aspirational approach toward mastery are all relevant prerequisites for virtue development in the dedicated moral agent (16-25). The nature of virtue development is also explored to reveal an intrinsically rewarding and reinforced view of virtue acquisition, an interpretive approach that bolsters what Csikszentmihalyi deemed an "autotelic personality":

> "With skills of any complexity, what is conveyed from the expert to the learner will require the giving of reasons. The learner electrician and plumber need to know not just *that* [sic] you do the wiring or pipe-laying such and such a way, but *why* [sic]. An electrician needs to know more than she can learn by rote, since she will be dealing with a variety of different situations and will need to adapt what she has learnt to these; lessons learned by rote could lead to disastrous mistakes" (19).

Through these instructive examples, Annas stressed the final ends of pursuing virtuous activity. This description also relates to Aristotle's term *Techne*, which equates to craftsmanship or skill. *Techne* emphasizes structured learning and mentorship, repeated practice, and mastery, and is frequently used as a parallel for virtue acquisition in Aristotle's works, similar to the thematic content of this quote. The aforementioned electrician and plumber perform their duties faithfully,

accurately, and consistently for the right reasons, all while exemplifying the proper virtues; they become skilled in their respective profession via repeated exposure and practice to their given skill. They develop the correct virtues by repeatedly engaging with them. Similarly, moral and intellectual virtues, like *Phronesis*, are actively curated via habit over one's life through experience. Her descriptions signal a shared understanding of the "Chief Good" and reasoning for engaging with certain actions in ways that invoke both the philosophical foundation of Aristotelianism and MacIntyre's social teleology.

Practical wisdom, or *Phronesis*, likewise plays a pivotal role in this discussion of Aristotle's "Chief Good." Like in Annas' "Skill Analogy," Aristotle maintained that *Phronesis* is cultivated through active practice, experience, and reflection. *Phronesis* allows the educated moral agent to make informed, reasoned choices in ambiguous ethical environments. This intellectual virtue enables the agent to make nuanced decisions en route to a *Eudaimonic* life and to discriminate between choices that may lead to human flourishing. In Aristotle's ethical framework, this intellectual virtue enables the agent to make decisions en route to a *Eudaimonic* life, even though for Aristotle, it is a less important virtue than *Sophia*.

Alasdair MacIntyre's distinctive neo-Aristotelian approach, principally in *After Virtue* and refined in his subsequent moral philosophical works, also explained virtuous activity as embedded within social conventions called "practices," which he delineated as a complex, integrated, rule-based human activity with specific internal criteria for evaluating performance. One's involvement in a practice may lead one to get the characteristic internal goods relevant to that practice, although external goods may be derived through the practice; MacIntyre cautioned against the elevation of external over internal goods for their corruptive elements. These practices are also traditionally constituted, namely, they provide the broader context for making

sense of the standards of excellence and goods specific to the practice. In his works, MacIntyre repeatedly emphasized the importance of understanding rationality and virtuosity within the context of their tradition, as he noted, “Every tradition is embodied in some particular set of utterances and actions and thereby in all the particularities of some specific language and culture” (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* 371). Later, he conveyed the importance of narrative formation in unifying one's life themes and personal goals with a view toward the good.

This specification of what constitutes virtue is essential for supporting an Inclusive understanding of the “Chief Good” that inherently encompasses other modes of engagement and virtue acquisition. This Inclusivist understanding of the “Chief Good” would include Czikszentmihalyi’s conception of “flow,” an all-encompassing transitory state of complete engagement when one’s skill is aligned with a given challenge. In these “optimal experiences,” players can extend themselves intellectually, physically, and spiritually, all aimed toward internal goods of the practice in a *Eudaimonic* life. This brief survey of Neo-Aristotelianism provides further support for an Inclusive notion of *Eudaimonia*.

Bridging the Gap: Flow and *Eudaimonia*

From a philosophical standpoint, Csikszentmihalyi’s conception of “flow” is related intimately to Aristotle’s account of *Eudaimonia*, which roughly equates with a lifelong embodiment of happiness, well-being, or human flourishing. Though these two concepts were developed roughly 2,400 years apart, both Aristotle’s *Eudaimonia* and Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” model focus on the sensation and philosophy of human fulfillment. Both of these complementary theories center on what comprises the apex of the human experience. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle’s notion of *Eudaimonia* describes the highest human good — the intellectual,

contemplative life, marked by the attainment of the pinnacle of the virtues. Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" model documents the optimal experiences where humans are fully engrossed in their activity of choice and performing at their best given their skill level. Additionally, both theories emphasize the importance of intrinsic value to describe proper virtue acquisition; both theories downgrade the merit of extrinsic rewards and, for different reasons, claim that they harm the intellectual and moral purity of the participant. Csikszentmihalyi invoked the term "autotelic" in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* — the Greek word *auto* meaning "self" and *telos* meaning "goal — to describe both the personality of those who will most likely experience "flow" states as well as the type of activities that frequently encourage "flow" (67).

"Flow" is the desirable, psychically enriching experience one has when completely engrossed in an activity that combines skill level, novelty, and predictability. Csikszentmihalyi's model of optimal experiences also emphasizes the role of progressive complexity in an agent's skill level and the objective challenge of their chosen activity. To exemplify this, he has written about the delicate balance between challenge, practice, and mastery, writing that a "beginning piano player will see learning the keys corresponding to the various notes as challenging, and might feel flow simply by running the scales on the keyboard," before then later needing more rigorous scales to meet their newfound skill level to evade boredom (*Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness* 261). During an experience of "flow," the participant loses their sense of self but reemerges from the experience feeling reenergized. The "flow" model itself is named after the universality of its application and uniform description of its effects:

> "The phenomenology of enjoyment seems to be a panhuman constant. When all the characteristics are present, we call this state of consciousness *a flow experience* [sic],

> because many of the respondents said that when what they were doing was especially enjoyable it felt like being carried away by a current, like being in a flow. Consequently, we have called the theoretical model that describes intrinsically rewarding experiences *the flow model* [sic]" ("Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation" 127).

The description of "flow" experiences, regardless of culture, is uniformly positive, enriching, and sensationally alike.

"Flow" experiences are all-encompassing psychic experiences and consequently stimulate complete engrossment of the participant in their chosen pursuit. The "flow" experience is adequately characterized as pleasurable, though, if asked during a "flow" experience, an agent would hardly ever report that they feel "happy," but more likely that they feel "fulfilled." For this reason, one is too engaged in their activity to step back and consciously acknowledge how happy they are. Csikszentmihalyi described this dichotomy in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, where he documented:

> "When all a person's relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges of a situation, that person's attention is completely absorbed by the activity. There is no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but what the activity offers. All the attention is concentrated on the relevant stimuli" (53).

It is for this reason that a participant experiences a deep fulfillment, and why happiness in this model is more accurately understood as an after-effect of "flow" moments. The experience that accompanies and follows "flow" is consistent with Aristotle's active account of happiness, or *Eudaimonia*, a lifelong state achieved through activity, or *Energeia*, rather than passive undirected pleasure. For Aristotle, contemplation is the highest form of *Energeia* that can contribute to *Eudaimonia*.

Despite its desirability and proven psychological benefit, "flow" cannot be synonymous with Aristotle's account of *Eudaimonia*. First, one concept is related to phenomena, and the other is about evaluating the totality of a person's life. Csikszentmihalyi's decades of scholarship in "flow" research are purely descriptive, namely, they describe the types of conditions, cultures, institutions, and individual and collective attitudes that encourage or diminish "flow" states. Aristotle's conception of *Eudaimonia*, however, is normative and compels people to cultivate the relevant intellectual and moral virtues that are necessary for human flourishing.

Both theories also stress the importance of cultivating the proper virtues and human capabilities, notably rationality and virtue. In his ethical writings, Aristotle repeatedly stressed the importance of character formation as well as virtue acquisition. He noted that human development depends on one receiving proper instruction, and then through frequent habituation, one's potential may be realized, writing, "The virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature, but we are naturally capable of receiving them, and are made perfect by habit."[69]

Aristotle's account of *Eudaimonia* has a specific moral dimension that requires an individual to cultivate *phronesis* and *arête*. For Aristotle, one is barred from achieving a lifelong state of *Eudaimonia* if one behaves immorally. "Flow," as has been discussed, may be experienced by those who are just or unjust — it is a psychological state. Despite this, "flow" is still coded with desirability and may properly be described as having implicit *Eudaimonistic* premises. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, for example, Csikszentmihalyi's account of the "Good Life" is frequently accompanied by an active engagement with "flow" activities and with cross-cultural vignettes of people cultivating "flow" states. Researchers have also empirically shown a direct correlation between the frequency of "flow" states and life

[69] *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II, Chapter 1 (1103a25-30).

satisfaction.[70] Additionally, though it lacks a moral dimension, "flow" experiences might still have intrinsic value in and of themselves: they are worth having for their own sake and frequently to gain the "internal goods" specific to "practices," to use MacIntyre's terminology. Lastly, along the path to a flourishing life, "flow" states may facilitate the attainment of other worthwhile goods, like heightened creativity, a deeper sense of meaning, skill and craft development, as well a more organized "narrative" of the self.[71]

Although "flow" has historically not been addressed explicitly by many of the philosophers participating in the discussion of *Eudaimonia*, "flow" nonetheless may be an integral component of a modern evaluation of *Eudaimonia*. By mapping out the existing debates, frameworks, and theories of human flourishing, it is evident that the concept of "flow" can effectively be integrated into contemporary notions of happiness, *Eudaimonia*, or a life well-lived. Thus, as this paper has demonstrated, "flow" is a viable and meaningful addition to this discourse and can elevate the import of *Eudaimonic* discussion to an even broader audience.

These two contending theories about human flourishing diverge, principally, in their method of inquiry, morality, and social context. *Eudaimonia* for Aristotle exemplified a complete life well-lived. Aristotle's account of *Eudaimonia*, adapted to the contemporary world by neo-Aristotelianism, speaks to the entirety of one's existence, rather than a transitory feeling. "Flow," on the other hand, is a measurable psychological state that is "fleeting" insofar as it can only last from a few minutes to a few hours. "Flow" is an experience; *Eudaimonia* is a life-long embodiment of the proper intellectual and moral virtues. Despite this, "flow" may still be part of a *Eudaimonic* life, given the presuppositions of the Inclusivist account of the "Chief Good," as

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[70] Isham, Amy, and Tim Jackson. "Finding Flow: Exploring the Potential for Sustainable Fulfilment." *The Lancet Planetary Health*, Elsevier Ltd., 5 Jan. 2022.

[71] Robert A. Gahl, Jr. wrote in "MacIntyre On Teleology, Narrative, and Human Flourishing: Towards A Thomistic Narrative Anthropology" (2019) that "MacIntyre draws the conclusion regarding rational agency according to human nature and the construction of a personal autobiographical narrative as the chief task of human life" (289).

well as an understanding of how past philosophers, like MacIntyre, have been able to utilize aspects of Aristotle's teleology to advance a more robust, modern account of human flourishing that can meet contemporary evaluative needs.

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