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Absorbed in Play and Gambling: Gadamer and Csíkszentmihályi

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Abstract: One of the most apparent features of playing and gambling is how easily people become engaged and absorbed into playing and gambling. In some cases, people lose themselves in playing and gambling to the extent that addiction might occur. This paper seeks to contribute to the phenomenology of play and gambling by attempting to describe how and why playing and gambling are attractive for us, and how we get absorbed in playing or gambling. In doing so, I disregard the difference between play in a broader sense and gambling with whatever stakes where in the latter case the risk inherently belongs to the activity. To get a nuanced description, I focus on two prominent theories that clarify different aspects of the phenomenon of playing. First, Hans-Georg Gadamer's analysis of play gives an account of how playing is like submerging into an independent reality. Second, I follow Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's conception of meaningful activity which he called "flow". The main interest of the paper will be the problem of what it means to enter and to indulge in the context of play, and how we come to immerse ourselves in the process of playing and gambling.

Keywords: phenomenology of play, absorption, flow, happiness

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Introduction

One of the most apparent features of playing and gambling is how easily people become engaged and absorbed into playing and gambling. In some cases, people lose themselves in playing and gambling to the extent that addiction might occur. This paper seeks to contribute to the phenomenology of play and gambling by attempting to describe how and why playing and gambling are attractive for us, and how we get absorbed in playing or gambling. In doing so, I disregard the difference between play in a broader sense and gambling with whatever stakes where in the latter case the risk inherently belongs to the activity. To get a nuanced description, I focus on two prominent theories that clarify different aspects of the phenomenon of playing. First, Hans-Georg Gadamer's analysis of play gives an account of how playing is like submerging into an independent reality. Second, I follow Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's conception of meaningful activity which he called "flow". The main interest of the paper will be the problem of what it means to enter and to indulge in the context of play, and how we come to immerse ourselves in the process of playing and gambling.

Gadamer (1989) seeks in his masterpiece *Truth and Method* to describe what play is. His basic claim is that play is an autonomous context that prescribes certain goals that the players try to reach. In his argument, which is motivated by the elaboration of the ontology of artwork, he characterizes play as something essentially delimited against the rest of reality, with the liberating effect of previously given ends. From this angle, playing a game is being free from the permanent task of existence, which consists of projecting purposes and seeking to reach them. This demarcation against reality and real life is the reason, Gadamer thinks, why gaming can be so attractive and amusing.

Concentrating rather on the process of getting involved in an activity, Csíkszentmihályi (1991; 1994) elaborated a concept that tries to explain why we can submerge into certain activities, even if for the impartial observer they seem to be tiring, superfluous, and meaningless. His concept of "flow" is designed to explain the experience of streaming in the activity we are engaged in in a specific manner. His deeply Aristotelean conception of "flow" develops the basic point that each activity, even monotone, and mechanical ones, might be the source of a pleasant contentedness. By this claim, he tries to answer the

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question of how one can be deeply immersed in activities. His analysis throws light on how gambling can be conceived of as a flow experience.

In addition to the description of playing, it will be claimed that absorption and involvement have a positive and negative form depending on whether they remain under some control or not. The autotelic activities Csíkszentmihályi describes with the popular term "flow" share with passions and addictions that they draw us into themselves. His conception, I will assert, can be fruitfully used to describe our engagement in playing. It will also be shown that gambling is only attractive for those who can be absorbed into it, viz. for those who find a flow experience in gambling. However, while flow-activities offer us the possibility of spending enjoyable time, passions might and addictions do have destructive consequences. Therefore, the difference between flow-activities and addictions will also be briefly discussed. The paper will refuse that "dark flow", as introduced in recent literature, is a productive application of Csíkszentmihályi's conception. In connection with it, in the last part of my paper, I give some reasons why flow-activities are promising candidates for constitutive elements of a conception of happiness.

Gadamer's Theory of Play

Hans-Georg Gadamer' philosophical hermeneutics uses the analysis of play as a model for the ontology of artworks, viz. for developing how works of art exist. His interest in the process of playing and games should be seen in this framework, and he is much less involved, say, in an anthropology of *homo ludens*. It should also be added that the model clarifies not only the work of art but also the texts or works of humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*). The ontology of the work of art develops a structure of understanding a meaningful whole which is also informative for the humanities since texts as typical objects of humanities need a similar understanding as works of art. And this establishes the connection between the two first parts of Gadamer's masterpiece *Truth and Method*.

In elaborating play as a model of how art exists, Gadamer develops two fundamental points. First, the surplus of play against the subjectivity of the player should be recognized to refuse the idea that the most essential factors of art lie in the subjectivity of the subject. Play is a closed area, a separate region which we must enter into if we really want to play. This conception takes a mastery of the rules of the game as a precondition of playing. Thus, Gadamer writes: "The 'subject' of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 103). This feature appears both in the fact that playing requires leaving the seriousness of life and in the fact that play demands involving ourselves in it.

The second major point for Gadamer is that play is realized in each playing activity, and in this sense, playing is where the play shows itself. This somewhat mannered formulation means that it is football or tennis that we encounter in each match we see, even if each match is different. Here we must highlight the structure of being the same in different constellations, since it makes play for Gadamer an attractive model in describing the mode of being of works of art. It is easy to see that in the case of works of art we have a similar opposition that belongs together: the unity of the work and the plurality of its interpretations. In the same way as the players make the play real in every instance, each interpreter of the work of art makes it real in each interpretation.

The second point offers a decisive step in Gadamer's fundamental thesis concerning the ontology of art. It is essential for how works of art exist that the work of art becomes real only in its performance or presentation (*Darstellung*). Works of art are in need of being presented or interpreted, and so they are accessible for us only through their interpretation. "A drama really exists only when it is played, and ultimately music must resound" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 115). In the case of music, most of us could not make much use of the score, because we cannot read it. The unavoidability of performance or presentation constitutes the structure that makes play theoretically interesting for Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. "Play is structure [*Gebilde*] – this means that despite its dependence on being played it is a meaningful whole which can be repeatedly presented as such and the significance of which can be understood. But structure is also play, because – despite this theoretical unity – it achieves its full being only each time it is played" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 116).

The analysis of play, in addition, illustrates a further essential feature of Gadamer's theory of art, viz. its anti-subjectivist approach. Motivated by his academic teacher, Martin Heidegger, the anti-subjectivist strand in his thought consists in a critique of interpretation schemes and models in terms of constitutive accomplishments of a subject or subjectivity. Gadamer wants to criticize the typical modern way of grounding philosophy in subjectivity. He claims that the ideal of method is intimately bound to the primacy of the subject in philosophical thinking. It is this "subjectivism" against which he, following Heidegger's path, tries to develop his position. In his view, the "subjectivization of aesthetics" takes place in the Kantian critique, and it is an integral part of the project of *Truth and Method* to "desubjectivize" aesthetics.

The desubjectivization in aesthetics amounts to saying that a work of art might be regarded as filled with a content that the recipient of the work of art can experience.[2] With regard to aesthetics, this critique means to refuse an understanding of the aesthetic experience as a special state of the subject or subjectivity. The concept of play serves as a counter-model to a subject-based interpretation of aesthetic experience, since Gadamer conceives the whole of play, and not the subject or the subjectivity, as the fixpoint in the process of experiencing art. The analysis of play, thus, helps to overcome various versions of subject-philosophy which tend to describe the consumption of works of art as an "aesthetic consciousness […] that confronts an object" (*das Gegenüber eines ästhetischen Bewußtseins und seines Gegenstandes*).[3]

Turning now to Gadamer's description of play, the first characteristic feature of his approach is that he doesn't focus on regularity and the rules of play. In opposition to some philosophers of language, for example Gottlob Frege or Ludwig Wittgenstein, he is not interested in understanding what rules are and what it means to follow a rule. Instead, he highlights something in play that already involves the automatic, self-evident mastering of the rules. In Gadamer's sense, we are not yet in the game if we deal with the rules, if we have to reflect, for example, what moves can be made with the knight or bishop in chess. This would mean that we are not able to enter the play as a complex net of possible strategies, plans, and steps. We have to be familiar with the whole of the game, having interiorized not only the rules, but possible strategies, means, and techniques of winning. This level of knowing a game lies beyond the knowledge of the rules.

In connection with his emphatic understanding of participation in a game, Gadamer claims concerning the activity of playing that a play is something like an autonomous context that prescribes certain goals that the players try to reach. For this reason, he characterizes play as something essentially delimited against the rest of reality. Therefore, Daphné Dragona seems to misunderstand Gadamer's point here when she presents his theory as a description of the domination of play over the players (Dragona, 2010, p. 161). Gadamer's point is, rather, that entering play means to leave behind the ordinary pursuit of our ends, since the game defines for us what we should seek to do while playing. This demarcation against reality and real life is the reason, Gadamer argues, why playing the game can be so amusing and can have a relieving effect. Playing a game is getting disburdened from the permanent existential task, which consists of projecting purposes and seeking to reach and to realize them. Taking play seriously is, in turn, a precondition for the liberating effect of the game. Indulged in the process of playing, we do not need to deal with the urgencies of our life, with the sorrows and projects we ordinarily seek to solve or to realize (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 102-103). From this angle, living a human life is connected to the existential burden of setting goals and pursuing them. This structure might be called the seriousness of life, and playing a game liberates us in an inspiring way from this seriousness.

Putting aside the question of how the seriousness of life should be conceived, it has to be emphasized that there is a corresponding specific seriousness of play, too. Play needs to be taken seriously, and someone who doesn't follow the prescribed goals of the play with sufficient urgency destructs thereby the play. She is *Spielverderber* (a spoilsport), as Gadamer puts it.[4] An essential point implied in this observation is that playing has an unavoidable moment of activity. Play differs from narcotic states in that it should be more than simply stepping out of conscious everyday life through forgetting everything in passivity.

To sum up, Gadamer's phenomenology of playing shows that play is a space, a net of possible steps and strategies demarcated from ordinary life.[5] Playing the game is characterized by certain goals the following of which gives us the special joy of absorption in the game. This immersion is motivated by the state of being liberated from the "pursuit of happiness," from setting goals and seeking to reach them. Last but not least, Gadamer suggests that the playing activity is inadequately conceived if understood on the basis of mastering the rules of the game. In the full sense of the word, playing needs to be, at least to some extent, a routinized activity where knowledge of the rules no longer arises as a problem. Let us turn now to Csíkszentmihályi's approach to how we get involved in activities of playing and gambling.

Csíkszentmihályi's Conception of Flow

Mihály Csíkszentimhályi's work has its place, as is well-known, in the tradition of humanistic psychology, which has often been regarded as a kind of middle course between behaviorism and psychoanalysis or, more broadly, psychodynamic psychology. One of the fundamental convictions of this approach is the attempt to overcome psychological reductionism. The leading hypothesis of humanistic psychology might be

[2] It should be remarked that Gadamer's judgement is somewhat ambiguous as to whether the subjectivization in question may be traced back to Immanuel Kant or to Friedrich Schiller.

[3] Gadamer, 1989, p. 102. See on this Olay 2007, chapter 3.

[4] Mathias Fuchs offers a different account of the *Spielverderber* claiming that they could be considered from a pragmatic angle not as opposites or destructions of play, but rather belonging to the play (Fuchs, 2010). It is unclear, however, how the spoilsport who doesn't really want to reach the goals implied in the game could meaningfully belong to it.

[5] For this reason, Reith (2005, p.132) mistakenly emphasizes Gadamer's idea that repetition is the essence of play. Gadamer grounds not a phenomenology of playing, but the ontology of the artwork on this conception – meaning that every interpretation of the work of art is a kind of repetition.

captured in the idea that lower forms of human behavior should be studied in the light of higher ones instead of founding psychology either on animal experiments or on pathological persons. Leading figures of the movement such as Rogers, Maslow, and Csíkszentmihályi pursued research on higher accomplishments and reaches of human nature that could serve a basis for psychology (Polkinghorne, 2015). They formulated the challenge to interpret human persons primarily with regard to their highest potential and most complex activities (Moss, 2015, pp. 3-4; see also Berlyne, 1981, and on the historical predecessors Pléh, 2006).

This approach was specified by some as an attempt to establish self-actualization broadly understood as a central concept, which was not without ambiguities, as Weckowicz (1981) pointed out. Weckowicz succinctly describes how there were three different ways to understand the "self" in self-actualization for the American humanistic psychologists. The first way was to understand the self in the formula in the Aristotelian interpretation, according to which human beings already at birth have entelechy, or potency, to realize the common human essence. In this case, the unfolding process toward this end is determined, since the essence of humanness is already potentially present from the outset, and it follows that individual differences are unexpected outcomes and play a marginal role. In a second understanding, individual differences are ascribed more weight in realizing potentials. Under adequate conditions individuals develop their proper characteristics, realizing through this process their particular, individual essence. The third interpretation claims that existence precedes essence, in so far as the person is not determined by an essence (common or individual), instead she transcends and creates herself by her deeds.

The context of Csíkszentmihályi's flow theory, thus, is the research on self-actualization broadly understood. It is exactly his interest in higher levels of human functioning that is relevant in the present argumentation. Notably, he elaborated a conception that tries to describe and explain how and why we can submerge into certain activities, even if for the impartial observer, these seem to be tiring, superfluous, meaningless, and so forth. The concept Csíkszentmihályi uses for his explanation is "flow", and the term itself already highlights the experience of streaming in the activity we are engaged in. In his path-breaking 1991 book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csíkszentmihályi develops the theory that people are happiest when they are in a state of *flow*—a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation. This state means that people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. Obviously, playing and gambling can be cases of such an analysis, since they are especially attractive and sometimes even seductive by giving us occasion for deep immersion into them.

A further relevant aspect of Csíkszentmihályi's approach for present argumentation consists of the clearly formulated connection of flow experiences with a theory of happiness. The telling title of the first chapter of the book *Flow* – "Happiness revisited" – clearly indicates this aspiration. He explicitly mentions that his work intends to find a sort of answer within the framework of modern psychology to the ancient question: "When do people feel most happy?" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 2). Even if this doesn't mean automatically an answer to how experiences of intensive happiness fit into a happy life or well-being, it is, in any case, an important element for having a comprehensive conception of sustainable happiness. Csíkszentmihályi's key idea lies in the insight that happiness is not something that simply happens. Happiness is neither an outcome of good fortune or chance nor something we could buy for money. Instead of being dependent on outside factors, happiness is a result of our interpretation of outside events. "Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person. People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy." (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 3) We will return to the details of the problem of happiness in section 3.

Csíkszentmihályi's point of departure is that even if we have no control of many aspects of our life, there are moments when we do feel controlling our actions and mastering our fate. On such rare occasions, we have "a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment" which indicates for us what life should be like (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 3). And such experiences deserve to be regarded as optimal ones, since they are pursued for their own sake, they are ends in themselves, in Csíkszentmihályi's terminology, they are "autotelic", as opposed to "heterotelic": "The term 'autotelic' derives from two Greek words, auto meaning self, and telos 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" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 67). As we shall see, this distinction profoundly resembles Aristotle's division between *poiesis* and *praxis*.

The structure of the optimal experience is described by Csíkszentmihályi as the opposite state to psychic disorder or chaotic mind. Psychic disorder can be characterized by disturbances and threats that the self is trying to decline and overcome. In the state of flow experience, on the contrary, "the information that keeps coming into awareness is congruent with goals" so that "psychic energy flows effortlessly" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 39). Flow experiences are, then, situations where our attention invested into achieving our goals operates without hindrance. The metaphor of streaming underlines the loss of self in the process of doing something, and it has been advocated by

interviewed persons in order to depict what it was like to be in top form.

In summarizing the detailed description of the flow experience, Csíkszentmihályi captures its structure with a condensed list of eight major elements: Enjoyment is connected to a chance to complete the confronted task (1), where we are able to concentrate on our activity (2). The concentration is made possible by clearly defined goals (3) and immediate feedback (4), and the activity is engaged, but effortless in a distance to worries of everyday life (5). The person gains a sense of control over one's actions (6), while having no concern for the self (7), changed perception of the duration of time, in so far as time might seem to pass very rapidly (8) (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 49).[6]

With regard to these structural features, it should be noted that other humanistic psychologists, for example, Abraham Maslow paid comparable attention to higher levels of human functioning. In a similar vein, Maslow describes persons he calls "self-actualizers" as follows: "One is in the moment, fully in the present, in the NOW. There is a loss of self, or ego, or sometimes a transcendence of self […] Actually the two, self and selfless, become a single unity. […] A formerly hidden truth, a revelation, is stripped of its veils and finally, almost always, there is the experience of bliss, ecstasy, rapture, [and] exhilaration" (Maslow, 1971, p. 62). The changed relation to duration is highlighted in the quotation as well as the intensive enjoyment analyzed by Csíkszentmihályi.

Furthermore, an important feature of optimal experience should be noticed here. It is that flow experience falls under the category of enjoyment, which overlaps without being identical with pleasure. Pleasure might be defined as satisfaction of an expectation or need, while enjoyable activities have "gone beyond what he or she has been programmed to do and achieved something unexpected, perhaps something even unimagined before" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 46). In Csíkszentmihályi's view, enjoyable events are such, in contrast to mere pleasure, that we change after experiencing them; we have become more complex, and so our self has grown, even if this connection might become looser. In addition, experience of pleasure does not presuppose investment of psychic energy, while enjoyment is linked to intensive attention and the sense of accomplishment built thereupon.

Csíkszentmihályi's conception of flow became popular with a broad public without there being sufficiently emphasized in the literature how much the theory of flow is embedded into the context of classic Greek philosophy. Although he himself was well aware of this connection, he didn't take interest in a careful contextualization of his work and gave no specifications as to his references. Thus, he characterizes the claim that the control of consciousness determines the quality of life as a simple truth that has been known for a long time: "It was clearly recognized by Aristotle, whose notion of the 'virtuous activity of the soul' in many ways prefigures the argument of this book, and it was developed by the Stoic philosophers in classical antiquity" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 20). The Ancient Greek context and the implied Aristotelean heritage in the first place are very interesting in our argument, since they illuminate how this attractive contemporary position implicitly relies on the distinction of *poiesis* and *praxis* in Aristotle.

To show this, it suffices to remind that what Csíkszentmihályi calls heterotelic and autotelic activities are, in fact, very similar to the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* made by Aristotle. The characteristic difference of these two types as Aristotle describes lies in the relation of an activity to its end. Csíkszentmihályi's innovation compared to Aristotle might be seen in the emphasis laid on the joyful property of the autotelic activity. In order to clarify this innovation, let's have a look at Aristotle's distinction.

Aristotle's classical distinction between production (*poeisis*) and action (*praxis*) distinguishes activities that have no ending in the sense of a point where they are finished from activities the end of which is reached when the product is ready.[7] The latter type of activities are in-finite in the sense of having no end, being never completed so that they can only be stopped. The distinctive feature underlying the opposition is the relation of activities to their ends. Consequently, the distinction is grounded in the assumption that human activity always has a teleological structure, in so far as it always follows a final end. Some activities have an end, a final product or work that might be opposed to the activity itself, such that they might be distinguished. Other activities have an end that cannot be separated from them. Aristotle settles this opposition by the terms *poiesis* and *praxis*, which were later translated into scholastic terminology as *actio transcendens* and *actio immanens*.

A fundamental point of Aristotle's distinction is that the fact of having no final product does not make a certain type of activity senseless. Activities of this type carry their end themselves, in the doing of that activity itself. This end is fulfilled in every moment of doing the activity, and it is the reason why there is no terminal point as in the case of producing processes that come to such a point when the production becomes completed. Praxis type activities, Aristotle argues, are

[6] Reshotko observes that in forgetting time we transcend our human condition and become more godlike (Reshotko, 2009, p. 15).

[7] Aristotle writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that "making and acting are different" (VI 4, 1140a1-5), "for while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end" (VI 5, 1140b6f). There is some controversy in the literature on Aristotle whether this distinction might be made in a discrete form, and some criticize Aristotle for not being able to give sufficient criteria to separate productions and actions. It is also discussed whether the distinction concerns simply the descriptive level, i.e., two different descriptions of a certain type of action, or the distinction is more essential claiming that actually there are two different types of action that cannot be reduced to each other (Vigo, 1996, pp. 206-207).

pursued for their own sake, and this property can easily be recognized in Csíkszentmihályi's description of autotelic experience. Furthermore, Csíkszentmihályi's argument results in the claim that life as a whole should be transformed into a flow experience. This idea has a clear counterpart in Aristotle who explicitly says in the *Politics* that life as a whole is rather an action and not production (Politics, I 4, 1254a7).

As mentioned above, the innovative aspect of Csíkszentmihályi's argumentation lies in his attention to the affective quality of the praxis type activity. Aristotle rarely comments on this aspect of action, although he claims that acting has a positive emotional component which is a result of successful moral education. The virtuous human being feels pleasure when acting virtuously, and the specific pleasure is a result of the moral education characteristic of the community in question. Moral education, then, is expected not only to form and to train morally praiseworthy character traits or virtues, but to couple them with a pleasant emotional coloring. It is not really developed in Aristotle's considerations concerning this point how the emergence of such an affective coloring could come about.[8] At this point, Csíkszentmihályi's theory highlights descriptive moments of a state in which an activity proves to be significant for us in such a way that we retrospectively find it enjoyable. There is, however, an important constraint for this claim. Aristotle doesn't restrict his analysis to actions extended in time, whereas Csíkszentmihályi's concept of flow works well for activities that take time. To illustrate this, recall that it is indifferent for moral action, which is paradigmatic for Aristotle's praxis type activities, whether that action lasts long or not. Examples of flow activities, on the contrary, are in each case lasting.[9] Play and gambling are particularly such activities, viz. processes involving the passing of time.

Last but not least it should be noticed that, although not intending to analyze games of chance in particular, we find some interesting, albeit somewhat contradicting considerations concerning gambling and flow experience. The first remarkable feature of gambling from the vantage point of Csíkszentmihályi is that here we have no control of the situation, which is constitutive of enjoyable activities: "Games of chance are enjoyable, yet by definition they are based on random outcomes presumably not affected by personal skills" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 61). The second property of such activities, on the other hand, is that "[a]leatory games are enjoyable because they give the illusion of controlling the inscrutable future" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 73).

The seeming contradiction disappears if we consider that Csíkszentmihályi evokes here Roger Caillois' classification of games into four groups based on the kind of experience they offer us (Caillois, 1958). First, "agon" is the category for games with competition as the distinctive feature (e.g., sports), while "alea", second, signifies games of chance in general. Caillois names, third, "ilinx" activities altering consciousness like skydiving. And fourth, "mimicry" is the term for activities that create alternative worlds and contexts, like theater and arts (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 72). Specifically with regard to games of chance, Csíkszentmihályi's reference to Caillois could be completed with the fine observation of Gerda Reith who claims that the hesitancy between excitement and boredom makes repetition to be a fundamental characteristic of such activities. "[B]ecause a game ends so quickly, it must be repeated, and this is one of the most essential features of play. The gambler plays in order to experience the tension and expectation of a game, but because it is over almost as soon as it begins, it must be continually repeated" (Reith, 2005, p. 132).

Since Csíkszentmihályi explicitly connects to his description of the optimal experience the problem of human happiness, let's try to assess how the preceding considerations can be relevant for a theory of happiness.

The Role of Flow Experiences in Happiness

As already underlined, Csíkszentmihályi considers his theory of flow to be a contribution to a conception of happiness. Roughly speaking, two major candidates might be held to be the basis of happiness: pleasure and meaningful activity. It is easy to show that pleasure is a state that cannot be continuously realized or brought about. Consequently, for a theory of happiness meaningful activity seems to be more fruitful – "praxis" in Aristotle or "autotelic" activity in Csíkszentmihályi. It is important here that Csíkszentmihályi makes a relatively sharp distinction between pleasure and enjoyment. Pleasure belongs essentially to life, in so far as it means the satisfaction of various homeostatic needs such as sleep, rest, food, or sex. But pleasure cannot provide happiness, because it doesn't contribute to the psychological growth and complexity of the person. Pleasure has the structural weakness that it can provide only episodic satisfaction so that happiness cannot be founded on it. Csíkszentmihályi completes this aspect with the additional argument that pleasure doesn't contribute to the psychological growth and complexity of the person. The advantage of flow experiences for a theory of happiness lies obviously in the fact that these activities give us a long-lasting contentedness.

Even if the concept of flow seems to be useful for a theory of happiness, an ambiguity should be highlighted. It is the question of specifying the activities that might bring flow experiences for an individual. The ambiguity lies in the tension between the paradigmatic examples Csíkszentmihályi gives and some passages,

[8] Annas (2008) tried to connect virtuous action with the flow experience, and to do this, she emphasized Aristotle's analogy between acquiring a virtue and learning a skill.

[9] This is an objection against identifying action in Aristotle's sense (praxis) and flow experience.

which clearly state that each activity can be adapted or transformed so that it produces an optimal experience. Given that people work or interact with others throughout most of their lives, it would be highly important, if possible, to transform these activities into flow experiences (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 7). Despite its significance, it might be, however, doubted that this is true for each activity. It seems far more probable that we individually connect optimal experiences to different spheres of action or diverse situations, and it is characteristic of us what activities we tend to immerse in. In other words, not everything can be a flow experience for me. Assembly line workers can "transform" their activities into optimal experience in the rarest of cases.

For a theory of happiness founded at least partly on flow experiences, there remains an additional internal problem: the possible ambivalence of the flow experience. Csíkszentmihályi himself emphasizes the possibility that an enjoyable activity becomes predominant, and in this sense addictive in one's life: "Thus enjoyable activities that produce flow have a potentially negative aspect: while they are capable of improving the quality of existence by creating order in the mind, they can become addictive, at which point the self becomes captive of a certain order, and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 62). The structural change lies in losing conscious control over this activity, which becomes a necessity that confines other important aspects in the background (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 62; Csíkszentmihályi, 1994, p. 207; Dixon et al., 2018, p. 76). Losing control over the activity means, in fact, losing self-control (Steizinger, 2010, 35ff; Ludovico, 2010, p. 155; Fuchs, 2010, p. 174). Dixon and his colleagues – building on the work of Partington et al. (2009) – proposed to introduce the term "dark flow" for the negative version of flow experiences (Dixon, 2018, p. 77).

A motivation to propose the term "dark flow" has been Dow Schüll's description (2012) of the "zone" of machine gambling with reference to the conception of flow. Dow Schüll designates as the "zone" the environment of slot machines where players become completely absorbed in the game. She argues that the "zone" is characterized by the decisive psychic shifts and desubjectifying effects of flow. Gamblers "forget themselves" and feel carried forward by the setting they are acting in like the figures Csíkszentmihályi depicts. Dow Schüll states the difference in that for the latter "flow is life affirming, restorative, and enriching – a state of 'optimal experience' that enhances autonomy in day-to-day life. Repeat machine gamblers, by contrast, experience a flow that is depleting, entrapping, and associated with a loss of autonomy" (Dow Schüll, 2012, p. 167). Furthermore, Dow Schüll highlights the escape dimension in the conception of flow, although she emphasizes much less Csíkszentmihályi's additional point on the escape from everyday life that is implied by the flow experience. Csíkszentmihályi underlined that "this escape does not represent a descent into entropy, as when one dulls one's senses with drugs or simple pleasure; it is an escape *forward* into higher complexity, where one hones one's potential by confronting new challenges" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1994, p. 184). Therefore, it is misleading when Dow Schüll criticizes Csíkszentmihályi's conception of flow for not taking into account "the profit motives behind the design of user flow" (Dow Schüll, 2012, p. 167), since in Csíkszentmihályi's view flow experience presupposes becoming more complex, and so manipulation by design is not a convincing idea. Further critique is formulated by Nicoll in her discussion of the theory of flow where she blames Csíkszentmihályi for some underlying assumptions she thinks to be reminiscent of a modernist Enlightenment attitude. In doing so, Nicoll takes him to be a representative of positive psychology. Nicoll thinks that "[a]n implicit distinction between better or worse ways of being human is clear in the language used by Csikszentmihályi to describe the experience of groups who have either experienced colonization or chosen to reject the affordances of modernity – notably, Indigenous people and Amish communities" (Nicoll, 2019, p. 59). It might well be that Csíkszentmihály used formulations suggesting such views. However, the core of his conception of flow is not grounded on such assumptions. An attitude approving progress and modernity is not implied in his theory of flow experiences. Put otherwise, the presupposition is not needed in the description of flow as optimal experience.

Furthermore, there is the example of rural life in small villages in the book *Flow* that clearly shows that flow is not bound to modernizing tendencies. It might well be that Csíkszentmihályi has false expectations about the healing potential of his flow theory in modern society, but he is not an ardent proponent of modernity. Even in *The Evolving Self* he mentions "places like Bali or some isolated villages in Europe, where a variety of traditional crafts are still practiced at a high level of skill by every member of the community" (1994, p. 184).

Returning to the theory of happiness, Csíkszentmihályi intended with the concept of flow to address a problem that is often connected to happiness: the question of the meaning of life. Beyond doubt, the connection between happiness and the meaning of life is disputed. Their connection is, however, an attractive idea, for activities being ends in themselves offer us good candidates to give meaning to or at least partly generate meaning in one's life. Certainly, the meaning of one's life cannot be exhausted by pleasures and satisfactions, not even by flow activities. But in all likelihood, the latter play an important role in ensuring that one's life has meaning.

Csíkszentmihályi formulates the problem with regard to the discontinuity of enjoyable activities, so long as they are not integrated in a meaningful framework. His theory of flow had given a description of

a certain type of activities. The question of the meaning of life implies the additional problem of how individual actions can be connected in the context of a single life. And this is the difficulty Csíkszentmihályi addresses under the heading of the meaning of life. Career, human relationships, as well as other flow activities might lose their enjoyable quality in the long run so that episodic enjoyment cannot guarantee the meaning of one's entire life. His proposal to address this difficulty is to transform life into a unified flow experience:

> If a person sets out to achieve a difficult enough goal, from which all other goals logically follow, and if he or she invests all energy in developing skills to reach that goal, then actions and feelings will be in harmony, and the separate parts of life will fit together – and each activity will "make sense" in the present. (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, pp. 214-215)

This meaning is not a goal which would be the same for each individual, since there is no universal meaning for human life in general. Despite this, Csíkszentmihályi insists that we can give meaning to our life, if we find an overall goal that sufficiently orders our life, while presenting clear objectives and rules of action as well as a way to become involved. This consideration helps to distinguish depressing activities of "dark" flow from those that make us more complex. It is not only the focus on the present, but also the harmonious fitting in a series of activities that proves an activity to be "bright" flow, rather than "dark".

Csíkszentmihályi's approach to the meaning of life is, in the last analysis, functional: the meaning of life should give a coherent framework for one's particular efforts and actions, and it should bring at the same time sufficient tension and motivation for the individual's life independently of the question whether there is an 'objective' meaning of it. This idea raises, however, the danger of moral relativism; in certain passages, Csíkszentmihályi seems to be aware of this problem, e.g., when equalizing Mother Theresa and Napoleon from a purely psychological point of view. The suggestion that the biggest beer-bottle collection in the neighborhood would suffice as the meaning of one's life is in no way convincing (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 216).

Conclusion

Drawing on Gadamer's theory of play, this paper has described why gaming is amusing and liberating at the same time. As a second step, the paper has examined what Csíkszentmihályi's conception of flow can contribute to understanding playing. The last section considered the contribution of flow experiences to the problem of happiness and meaning of life. By way of conclusion, we see that the two positions complement each other.

In the first part of the paper Gadamer's description made clear that playing is like submerging into an independent reality. Play turned out to be an autonomous context prescribing certain goals that the players seek to realize. The liberating effect of this structural demarcation from the rest of reality is characterized by Gadamer as being free from the permanent task of existence which consists in projecting purposes and seeking to reach them. This is an existential explanation of why gambling relieves the burden of the seriousness of life.

It has been elaborated in the second part how Csíkszentmihályi developed a conception that tries to explain why we can submerge into certain activities, even if they seem to be demanding or meaningless. The concept of flow explained the experience of streaming in the activity we are engaged in in a specific manner. Csíkszentmihályi's conception thus offered an account of how we can be deeply immersed in various activities. The paper has clarified the complex structure of flow experiences, and special attention has been paid to the affinities between Aristotle and flow theory. Whereas Csíkszentmihályi explains well the possible engagement in flow activities, the addictive tendency of gambling, it seems, cannot be covered by his theory. The seriousness of life, as Gadamer elaborates, has to be guarded in the background in order to avoid an exaggerated submersion in gambling. It might be that Csíkszentmihályi doesn't have a clear answer to the question what constitutes the growing complexity of the person, but he doesn't have the problem of not being able to distinguish addictive gambling from flow activities.

The last part of this essay considered some reasons why flow-activities are promising candidates of constitutive elements of a conception of happiness. We saw that the flow theory is promising for the question of the meaning of life, since activities which are ends in themselves are good candidates to give meaning to one's life. It has been explained, in addition, why there is a need to integrate separate episodes of flow experiences. A purpose of this paper was to show that absorption and involvement have positive and negative forms depending on whether they remain under some control or not.

Finally, two limitations should be noted. First, there is another set of problems in connection with the meaning of life which is not even addressed by the flow-conception: the problem of authenticity. Practices that give me a lasting sense of satisfaction might be connected to me, in so far as they do not give similar satisfaction to others. Nevertheless, it might be objected that I possibly fail to become who I really am when I involve myself in such autotelic activities. Second, we should remark that the paper's investigation was limited with regard to an account of risk or chance in playing and gambling. A partial reason for this can be found in the Western philosophical tradition which, primarily, had an ambivalent attitude

towards luck and fate. The ambivalence is based on the fact that, to oversimplify, philosophers since Plato and Aristotle were compelled to acknowledge the role of luck in a happy life, having hardly any conceptual means to theoretically neutralize fate. Put otherwise, since the beginnings, philosophy as a way of life often tried to marginalize the role of luck, to delimitate the power of goddess Fortuna. This can easily be illustrated by the first considerations of Epictetus' *Enchiridion* which make a distinction between those things in our power (*prohairetic* things) and those things not in our power (*aprohairetic* things). The conclusion drawn by Epictetus is paradigmatic, in so far as he declares what lies outside of our control to be irrelevant for human happiness.

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