Optimizing Optimal Experience: Flow, integration, harmony

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Abstract

Various theories in inside and outside positive psychology make claims as to what constitutes optimal experience or human flourishing. The present paper provides a brief review and critical discussion of flow theory, self-determination theory, and the dualistic model of passion; both as interesting in itself and as a basis for comparison with concepts of optimal experience from outside positive psychology.

It is argued that in all three areas there is a discrepancy between the theoretical emphasis on autotelic behaviour and autonomy, and its practical neglect. Nevertheless, there is a common theoretical core among these approaches to optimal experience that includes mindfulness, effortless and flexible attention, and action without inner conflict; common not only to these areas of modern psychology but apparently also to a number of ancient wisdom traditions ranging from Daoism through Buddhism to Hellenistic philosophies. This is not only interesting in itself but also holds promise to fill in the above mentioned lacuna on the practical side of the psychological theories of optimal experience.

The paper closes with applying the results of the discussion to the controversy about the relationship between Aristotle’s virtue ethics and flow.

Keywords: optimal experience; autotelic experience; self-determination theory; dualistic model of passion; mindfulness; virtue ethics
When it comes to learning to control the body and its experiences, we are as children compared to the great Eastern civilizations. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.103)

**Introduction**

**Motivation**

Various theories exist both inside and outside of psychology as to what constitutes optimal experience. Within positive psychology, explicit reference to optimal experience has been made above all in the context of flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Occasionally, parallels between the ‘flow’ experience and so called ‘Eastern’ practices and philosophies have been noted, but not worked out in any detail as far as I am aware. This is quite surprising, since the Buddhist idea of nirvana, the Daoists’ spontaneous and harmonious living, or the ataraxia of the Hellenistic philosophies are obviously concepts of optimal human experience; and even more surprising given the huge success of the Buddhist-inspired notion of mindfulness and its relations to self-determination theory, the obvious parallels between the theory of harmonic passions and Daoism, and the importance of Hellenistic philosophies (e.g., Stoa: Robertson (2010)) in the development of cognitive psychotherapy (which in turn recently incorporated mindfulness techniques (Segal et al., 2013) connected to Buddhism (Hayes, 2002)).

**Overview and relevance**

Purpose of the present paper is a review, comparison, and critical discussion of three related theories that are central to positive psychology: flow theory, self-determination theory (SDT), and the dualistic model of passions (DMP). Besides being interesting in itself, this provides a basis for comparisons with ancient wisdom traditions including the above-mentioned Buddhism, Daoism, and Hellenistic philosophies. Such comparisons seem important for a number of reasons: They may not only corroborate extant research but will help making positive psychology more culturally
inclusive”; they also open a window on a considerable repertoire of time-tested long-term strategies to improve life (in contrast to the usually short-term and often small-effect-size interventions studied that – presumably for the obvious practical reasons – make up most of positive psychology research); conversely, the study of ancient traditions may well profit from a psychologically informed reading of the underlying texts (Fabbro et al., 2018) which rarely happens (one exception being the philologist Johannes Bronkhorst (2012) trying to understand Buddhist liberation in a psychoanalytic framework). Better communication between ancient traditions on the one hand, and modern psychology and philosophy on the other, might also help forestall the potential detrimental effects of certain (in my view erroneous) criticisms of mindfulness based therapies (Ratnayake & Merry, 2018) that seem based on basic misunderstandings (Mattes, 2018). Furthermore, the results in the present paper are also relevant to current controversies about what are or should be ultimate human concerns, and specifically concerning the relationship between well-being and eudaimonia (Kristjánsson, 2018), as will be discussed later.

Flow Theory

Overview

The autotelic experience

Csikszentmihalyi (1999, p. 824) described the autotelic experience, or flow, as ‘a particular kind of experience that is so engrossing and enjoyable that it becomes [...] worth doing for its own sake even though it may have no consequence outside itself’ and asserted that his studies ‘have suggested that happiness depends on whether a person is able to derive flow from whatever he or she does.’ (p.825) In fact, he claimed that ‘People are happy not because of what they do, but because of how they do it.’ (p.826, original italics)

Often, the flow state is described in terms of a number of characteristics. For example,
Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p. 90) referred to flow as a subjective state with the following characteristics:

1. Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment.
3. Loss of reflective self-consciousness [...].
4. A sense that one can control one’s actions [...].
5. Distortion of temporal experience [...].
6. Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding [...].

Furthermore, they stated that the proximal conditions for the flow experience include (a) a sense of match of challenges (opportunities for action) with existing skills, and (b) clear proximal goals with immediate feedback about progress. Activities like ‘making music, rock climbing, dancing sailing, chess, and so forth’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 72) were claimed to fit this description and therefore to make optimal experience easier to achieve.

**Skills-demands balance and flow models**

To make flow more amenable to psychological research, measurement methods and models have been developed. Importantly for the present work, I will argue below that they led to a distorted view of the autotelic experience.

Moneta (2012) provided an overview of the methods which have been used to operationalize and measure the autotelic experience. The first instrument used was the Flow Questionnaire, which asks participants whether they recognized definitions of flow proposed in the questionnaire, asks them to describe activities and situations (if any) during flow was experienced, and their subjective experiences in them. Later, the Experience Sampling Method was developed. At random times during participants are prompted to fill in a questionnaire asking about their current activities,
context, subjective feelings about the main activity, and mood. The third approach to measuring flow is via validated multidimensional questionnaires, the most widely used of which are the Dispositional Flow Scale-2 and the Flow State Scale-2, based on research with athletes described in Jackson (1996).

Parallel to the development of measurement techniques, models have been developed. The simplest flow model simply describes flow as the state in which one is neither anxious nor bored because ‘skills’ and ‘challenges’ are perceived as being roughly equal (Moneta, 2012, p. 26), later models added more states like apathy (when skills and challenges match, but both are at a low level), or divide ‘anxiety’ into anxiety proper, worry, and arousal as well as ‘boredom’ into boredom, relaxation, and control (Moneta, 2012, pp.33,35).

**Critical discussion**

**Flow = skills-demands-balance?**

Kawabata and Mallett (2016) pointed out a number of conceptual problems in the literature on flow: First, researchers in this area use different (and sometimes contradictory) definitions. Next, the concept of the flow state is used to cover a whole continuum of states from ‘microflow’ (see below) to deep flow. In addition, they considered it highly problematic that key terms like ‘autotelic experience,’ ‘flow experience,’ and enjoyment have been used interchangeably in this theory. Furthermore, they noted that flow theory may be incompatible with self-determination theory since autonomy, which is central to intrinsic motivation according to SDT, is not an element in flow theory. Two additional issues that Kawabata and Mallett raised are problems with the notion of challenge as used in flow theory, and they questioned whether flow always constituted optimal experience.

Concerning skills-demands balance, Landhäußer and Keller (2012) noted that in most cases, researchers purportedly investigating flow actually investigated correlates and consequences of
skills-demands compatibility – which they rightly refer to as being a precondition of flow rather than the flow experience itself. They then pointed out that

researchers seem to equalize the precondition of flow [...] with the experience itself [...] Because the association between the preconditions of flow and the experience itself is definitely not deterministic [...] this is problematic. [...] As there are situational as well as personal moderators regarding the relation between skills-demands compatibility and flow experience, a measure of skills-demands balance should not be used (or interpreted) as a measure of the flow experience per se. (p.66)

Consistent with this, a meta-analysis (Fong, Zaleski & Leach, 2015) found the relationship between skills-demands balance and flow experiences to be only moderate (effect size around $r=0.48$). This is even more problematic since sometimes the skills-demands balance is referred to as a characteristic of (rather than a precondition for) the flow experience, for example in Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 71). In fact, even calling it a ‘precondition’ seems inappropriate since it misleadingly suggests necessity for, rather than just raising the probability of, experiencing flow.

‘Flow light’ as optimal experience?
Kawabata and Mallett (2016) quoted Csikszentmihalyi as saying ‘Flow theory implies that a flow state is perceived differently based on the intensity and complexity of an activity along a continuum from almost imperceptible microflow events like doodling to the truly memorable occasions of deep flow.’ A similar distinction between ‘shallow’ and ‘deep’ flow was made by Moneta (2012, p. 28). To the extent that flow is supposed to capture the idea of optimal experience, such ‘flow light’ would not really constitute flow; after all, an ‘imperceptible optimal experience’ sounds like a contradiction in terms, and in terms of ‘autotelic’ behaviour, imperceptibly self-determined seems difficult to make sense of as well. In the present context, the only situations where such flow light could be possibly regarded as an optimal experience is where a person is in such a disastrous situation that no positive aspect whatsoever is possible – presumably an extremely rare situation.
given examples showing that some positive experiences are possible even in the most desperate looking circumstances (e.g., Albom, 1998; Frankl, 2011).

One consequence is that ESM studies may not contribute much to the understanding of optimal experience since ESM interrupts deep flow, thereby destroying the phenomenon one wants to study, as Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p. 101) recognized. In fact, even just the expectation that one might get prompted by an ESM generated signal may interfere with the ability to enter deep flow as ‘repeated assessments may lead people to pay unusual attention to their internal states and own behavior.’ (Scollon, Kim-Prieto & Diener, 2003, p. 19)

**Action and effort?**

From the point of view of optimal experience, another serious deficiency of many presentations of flow theory is the frequent emphasis on action, as when Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p. 101) claimed that ‘inherent in the flow concept is the notion of skill stretching. Activities providing minimal opportunities for action do not lead to flow’. To be sure, terms like ‘activity,’ ‘skill,’ or ‘challenge’ are sometimes used in an extremely wide sense, for example when Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 50) wrote that ‘[a]ny activity contains a bundle of opportunities for action, or “challenges’, that require the appropriate skills to realize’, including activities like reading, looking at paintings or socializing. This over-stretching of concepts is infelicitous, as can be seen from the fact that the same authors who noted that one can not equate flow with a skills-demand balance claimed in another paper in the same volume (Keller & Landhäußer, 2012, p. 53) that ‘activities that are passive in character (such as watching a sunset […] and do not involve a skill component cannot be associated with a flow experience.’ In fact, one of the best and most memorable experiences of my life was watching a sunset from Dante’s Point overlooking Death Valley; another one was watching a silent movie with the film music played life by a renowned symphony orchestra. In either case there was no skill in any sense of the word recognizable to me used in allowing me to have the experience (for example, I know virtually nothing about classical music),
let alone any feedback on how I was performing this ‘activity.’ Nor can I think of any skill-involving action that could have resulted in a better experience at those times, therefore it seems that the concept of flow has to be able to accommodate such experiences of intense awe, if it is to truly represent the psychology of optimal experience. Arguably, and importantly for comparisons with mindfulness and Buddhism, the same applies to the ‘activity’ of meditating.

Related to alleged necessity of action is the often made claim that the flow experience requires effort, as when it is asserted that ‘[t]he 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.’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3) Again, moments of intense awe seem to provide counterexamples. In this context it is remarkable that Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2010, p. 182) ‘hypothesize that it is specifically the experience of complete but also effortless attention that is associated with being in the enjoyable state of flow’ and Dormashev (2010, p. 306) stated that ‘[p]rolonged effortless concentration of attention is the principal characteristic of the flow experience’ (emphasis added in both quotes).

Another point in respect to the claimed relationship between flow and activities has to be made: It has been repeatedly pointed out that flow-producing activities – like all enjoyable activities – have the potential to lead to addictions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 62), like exercise addiction or compulsive computer gaming. What tends to be missed in these discussions is that a crucial factor for the possibility to lead to addiction seems to be the identification of the enjoyable flow experience with one particular activity (or type of activities): If this identification of flow with action is not assumed, then there is no reason why a person should need to increase the dosage or to ‘persist in activities although they know the possible harmful consequences’ (Engeser, 2012); compare also below the distinction between harmonious and obsessive passions.

**Ego and control?**

Related to the idea that optimal experience might invariably require action and effort, and to the
claimed need for a balance between skills and demands, is the widely held idea that the flow experience requires being in control. Csikszentmihalyi implied that feeling in control is a necessary part of optimal experience when he wrote

… we all have experienced times when, instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we do feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fate […] we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment […] This is what we mean by optimal experience.

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3)

and praises yoga and the martial arts as ‘the ultimate control.’ (p.103) That this again is seriously misleading can be seen from p.59, where Csikszentmihalyi acknowledged that

… the flow experience is typically described as involving a sense of control - or, more precisely, as lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life. (emphasis added)

This distinction is a crucial one, as will be argued later in this work. For the moment, three remarks will suffice: (a) According to the popular flow models referred to above, a flow state is more likely to happen when there is neither anxiety/worry nor boredom, which suggests that worry rather than lack of control is one of the crucial ingredients in obstructing flow; (b) some descriptions of flow experiences don’t seem to involve a sense of control: can you view yourself as ‘close to death’ and at the same time feel to be in control, to be master of your own fate (compare the quote above)? can you control the ‘enemy bullets whining’ past you? (Harari, 2008, p. 254f) (c) the brute fact that many of the most important aspects of our lives are outside of our control (we and our loved ones do grow old, get sick and have accidents, and in the end we all die) implies that, if flow is to be more than a form of escapism, the theory behind it must accommodate this lack or control.

**Absorption and the flow experience**

‘Viewed through the experiential lens of flow, a good life is one that is characterized by complete
absorption in what one does’, according to (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 89), who later in the same chapter state that intense concentration is ‘perhaps the defining quality of flow’.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 39) theorized that the underlying reason that the flow state constitutes an extremely enjoyable experience may be that it corresponds to a state of order in consciousness, in which ‘the information that keeps coming into awareness is congruent with goals, psychic energy flows effortlessly. There is no need to worry, no reason to question one's adequacy. But whenever one does stop to think about oneself, the evidence is encouraging […]’. The central role of attention is assumed to come about because ‘[i]nformation enters consciousness either because we intend to focus attention on it or as a result of attentional habits’ (p.30) and one ‘allocates attention either by focusing intentionally like a beam of energy […] or by diffusing it in desultory, random movements’ (p.33). Therefore

[t]he mark of a person who is in control of consciousness is the ability to focus attention at will, to be oblivious to distractions, to concentrate for as long as it takes to achieve a goal, and not longer. And the person who can do this usually enjoys the normal course of life.

(p.31)

Three remarks are in order:

(1) Dormashev (2010) pointed out that there are various forms of absorption, like being ‘completely absorbed in a horror movie, experiencing fear and pleasure at the same time’, or being in a hypnotic trance; the crucial difference between forms of intense concentration being ‘the difference between passive and active (although not necessarily effortful) attention.’ This matches Csikszentmihalyi’s statement that in flow, attention is directed intentionally, and could presumably be expressed equivalently by saying that one pays attention on purpose.

(2) In flow one is absorbed in what one does (at that moment). Given (as I argued above) that flow need not be associated with an activity, one can presumably more generally say that one pays
attention in the present moment (as opposed to scenarios for the future, for example during prospection (Seligman, Railton, Baumeister & Sripada, 2013), or to past happenings, as some schools of psychotherapy stress).

(3) Obviously, being interested in an activity or situation makes paying attention easier, and being bored while being interested seems like a contradiction terms (for example, while discussing ‘the boring’ in art, Moller (2014) identifies boredom and lack of interest when saying that ‘announcing that certain works are boring is to assume something like that there is not anything sufficiently interesting in them’). On the other hand, anxiety or worry tend to distract attention. Thus, it is hardly a surprise when flow appears to arise more easily in situations where neither the evaluations ‘uninteresting’ (felt as boredom) nor ‘threatening’ (felt as anxiety or worry) are – usually unconsciously – made. This suggests that evaluations, i.e., judgements, are a crucial hindrance to flow experiences; both negative judgements (compare above: in flow there is ‘no need to worry, no reason to question one's adequacy’), but also positive judgements (as can be seen from remarks like ‘during the experience [of flow] people are not necessarily happy because they are too involved in the task to have the luxury to reflect on their subjective states’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p.825)).

This suggests that it is important to pay attention in a non-judging way.

In sum, it seems plausible that the flow experience would be closely tied to ‘the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment’ – which happens to be the widely-quoted operational working definition of mindfulness by Kabat-Zinn (2003, p.145).

**Autotelic personality and the paradox of flow research**

Autotelic persons are those who have such flow experiences relatively often, regardless of what they are doing (see quote above). If flow is indeed crucial for happiness and maybe even for a meaningful life (compare the quotes in Landhäußer and Keller (2012, p.73)), one would expect people to endavour to develop an autotelic personality. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 16) noted that
humans collectively have not advanced very far in this direction, in contrast to all the material progress made, and declared:

There is no way out of this predicament except for the individual to take things in hand personally. […] To overcome the anxieties and depressions of contemporary life, individuals must become independent of the social environment to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments. To achieve such autonomy, a person has to learn to provide rewards to herself. She has to develop the ability to find enjoyment and purpose regardless of external circumstances. [emphasis added]

Therefore it is highly paradoxical that flow research focuses almost exclusively on external enabling conditions (like structuring of present activities, or appropriate early childhood experiences) of flow experiences, rather than on what oneself can contribute to developing an autotelic personality. As we will see below, self-determination theory and the dualistic model of passion are plagued by a similar problem.

Self-determination Theory (SDT)

Autotelic behaviour as studied in flow theory is closely linked to intrinsic motivation. Another psychological theory in which intrinsic motivation takes a central place is self-determination theory. (Ryan & Deci, 2017)

**Overview**

**Growth orientation**

SDT is rooted in an organismic view of human nature in assuming that humans have an innate tendency of growth towards both greater complexity and integration:

The starting point for SDT is the postulate that humans are active, growth-oriented
organisms who are naturally inclined toward integration of their psychic elements into a unified sense of self and integration of themselves into larger social structures. In other words, SDT suggests that it is part of the adaptive design of the human organism to engage interesting activities, to exercise capacities, to pursue connectedness in social groups, and to integrate intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences into a relative unity. (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p.229)

This underlying assumption places it plainly within the mainstream of North American humanistic psychology along works like that of Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1962) or Carl Rogers (Patterson & Joseph, 2007; Worth, 2017). (Its position relative to other strands of humanistic psychology – for example the work of Viktor Frankl (Frankl, 2011), Alfried Längle (Längle, 2011), Milton Erickson (Erickson, 1999), and even Eugene Gendlin’s work (Gendlin, 1997) which developed out of Roger’s person-centered approach – seems less straightforward.)

Hodgins and Knee (2002) noticed that individuals who are oriented towards growth and integration will meet ongoing experience without distorting or avoiding it, and be ready to assimilate novel content into self-structures. They called this attitude ‘openness’ and noticed its closeness to various concepts of mindfulness. The SDT conceptualization of mindfulness was discussed and contrasted with the construct of ‘interest’ in Deci, Ryan, Schultz and Niemiec (2015), this idea of mindfulness was in turn operationalized by Brown and Ryan (2003) as a questionnaire, the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS).

**Intrinsic motivation and autonomy**
SDT is a macro-theory which claims to explain human motivation. A distinctive feature of SDT among motivation theories is that motivation in SDT is not only described in terms of strength, but also of quality of motivation:

The primary motivational distinction [in SDT] is between autonomous motivation and
controlled motivation, and together these two types of motivation stand in contrast to 
amotivation, which means to have no motivation - that is, to have no intention to pursue a goal or engage in a behaviour. (Deci et al., 2015, p. 113f)

(Perceived) autonomy connotes actions when they are experienced as freely done and holistically self-endorsed (hence it comes in different degrees): ‘The issue of autonomy lies in one's assent to demands and the sense of their legitimacy. Self-determination describes willfully consenting to external obligations based on a sense of value, or following demands that are deemed legitimate. Similarly, our inner workings can also make demands on us. From emotional urges and strong drives to compulsive pressures [...]’ (Ryan & Rigby, 2015, p. 257)

The most important form of autonomous motivation is intrinsic motivation, where ‘[i]ntrinsically motivated behaviors are those that are freely engaged out of interest without the necessity of separable consequences ...’ (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p.233) In the context of SDT, intrinsic motivation is seen as a basic psychological growth function.

When people are intrinsically motivated, they tend to be open to experience and to be aware of themselves and the activity as they engage in it [...] in the sense of being open, vital, fully engaged, and interested in the activity. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) referred to this state as "flow". Such intrinsically motivated actions are volitional and experienced as congruent and self-endorsed.’ (Deci et al., 2015, p. 115)

In contrast, other forms of motivation constitute extrinsic motivation, which in turn may be more or less well internalized. This internalization is considered essential for ‘psychological integrity and social cohesion’ (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p.232) Internalization can happen to various degrees, determining the degree to which one’s behaviour is felt to be autonomous; ‘goal-directed activities can differ in the extent to which they are autonomous or self-determined—that is, in the extent to which they are enacted with a full sense of volition and choice. Intrinsic motivation and well-internalized extrinsic motivation are the bases for autonomous or self-determined behavior.’ (Deci
Psychological needs
The attempt to integrate research results concerning intrinsic motivation and internalization led to
the concept of psychological needs, and specifically to the ‘needs to feel competent and self-
determined’, the above quote from Deci & Ryan (2000, p.233) continues by noting that intrinsically
motivated behaviours, ‘to be maintained, they require satisfaction of the needs for autonomy and
competence.’ Of note here is that the feeling (i.e., the perception) of competence and self-
determination are crucial, not any objective state of affairs. In addition to (perceived) autonomy
and competence, ‘relatedness also plays a role, albeit a more distal one’ (Deci & Ryan, 2000,
p.235), in relation to intrinsic motivation, as ‘people often engage in intrinsically motivated
behaviors (e.g., playing solitaire, hiking) in isolation, suggesting that relational supports may not be
necessary as proximal factors in maintaining intrinsic motivation.’ (ibid) This concept of needs
explains the energy for action and it ‘was assessed in numerous populations across multiple
cultures, and it consistently predicted wellness and optimal functioning.’ (Deci et al., 2015, p. 114)

Needs are seen as fundamental supports that individuals must have to thrive. (Ryan & Deci,
2017, p.81) It is claimed that depriving an individual of (the perception of) autonomy, competence,
and relatedness ‘results in degraded forms of growth and impaired integrity, that is, it leads to
serious harms’ (p.81) and that the presence of these perceptions ‘reliably facilitates thriving and the
fuller expression of the organism’s nature and full potential.’ (ibid)

Critical discussion
The basic needs are not created equal
It would seem that few people in their 90s perceive their need for competence satisfied, even when
only thinking about the conduct of everyday life. In fact, the fulfilment of both competence and
relatedness seems to inevitably diminish from some point in life on as the body starts to get
increasingly fragile, memory starts deteriorating, and the people in one’s age cohort begin to die in increasing numbers. The same does not necessarily apply to (the perception of) autonomy: Even when recognizing the impact of physiological limitations, one can still potentially agree with life’s course.

In fact, in a few places the architects of SDT acknowledge that autonomy is the fundamental need in that it ‘is essential to the initiation and regulation of behavior through which other needs are better realized. [...] Moreover, fulfillments outside of autonomy do not have the same resonant impact on the self.’ (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p.250) Consistent with this, Deci and Ryan (2000, p.242) said

autonomy occupies a unique position in the set of three needs: being able to satisfy the needs for competence and relatedness may be enough for controlled behavior, but being able to satisfy the need for autonomy is essential for the goal-directed behavior to be self-determined and for many of the optimal outcomes associated with self-determination to accrue.

Concerning specifically the alleged universal need for relatedness, one can point to Chua and Koestner (2008, p.646) who found that ‘when individuals spend time alone in a volitional and autonomous manner, they counterintuitively report lower levels of loneliness and higher levels of well-being.’

**No conflicts between basic needs?**

Intuitively, one would expect that the three basic needs postulated in SDT can conflict. For example, competence might conceivably generate envy in others, and the need for relatedness presumably is a necessary ingredient in susceptibility to group pressure, which is in tension with autonomy. In fact, Deci and Ryan (2000, p.253) recognized ‘that the need for relatedness can at times compete or conflict with self-organizational tendencies, that is, with the need for autonomy.’
Despite this, Ryan and Deci (2017, p.248) asserted that ‘SDT sees these three basic needs as interdependent. Each need facilitates the satisfaction of the others under most conditions.’ It seems the only empirical evidence for this claim is the fact that correlations between the three needs tend to be medium-to-large (they refer to Chen et al. (2015) who reported correlations of 0.47-0.61). Ryan and Deci (2017, p.249) also claimed ‘in relationships that are controlling […] a person is not likely to feel a lot of closeness’; this would seem to be contradicted by the closeness that the followers of religious or ideological cults apparently feel.

**Integration, flexibility, harmony**

If needs indeed can conflict, this would only reinforce the paramount importance of integration, which was already mentioned above as part of the fundamental humans tendency to create and integrate intra-psychic and interpersonal experiences. As Ryan and Deci (2017, p.648) put it, ‘Self-determination, as it turns out, is *ultimately a problem of integration.*’ We can achieve such integration as we are ‘guided by [our] natural propensities to detect inner conflict and to produce integrative solutions to decisional and regulatory challenges’ (p.647).

It would appear from the discussion above that an open awareness (mindfulness) of one’s present experience that allows one to recognize inner conflict is essential to developing an integrated self, as is the ability to flexibly and non-dogmatically integrate your needs, values, and interests with each other within given circumstances:

> The psychological hallmark of self-determination is flexibility in managing the interaction of oneself and the environment. When self-determined, one acts out of choice rather than obligation or coercion, and those choices are based on awareness of one's organismic needs and a flexible interpretation of external events. Self-determination often involves controlling one's environment or one's outcomes, but often it may also involve choosing to give up control. (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p.38)
The paradox of self-determination research

*Self-determination*, whatever precise definition one may use to operationalize it, is obviously incompatible with being fully or mostly a victim of external circumstances. So it is hardly surprising to read that ‘we cannot conclude a treatise on self-determination by looking wholly at environments’ (Ryan & Deci, 2017); what is surprising is that it took the authors 647 of their 650 pages to realize that!

Indeed, as Brown and Ryan (2015, p.146) admitted, ‘SDT has been preoccupied with the social psychology of motivation’ for over 30 years now, even though ‘autonomous regulation requires both an existential commitment to act congruently, as well as the cultivation of the potential’ (Brown & Ryan, 2015, p.147), and at one point in their book Ryan and Deci (2017, p.266) also noted that ‘acting with autonomy and finding opportunities for need satisfaction are not simply a function of one's external context; they are equally dependent on one's active use of the organizational tendencies that each person possesses.’ In my view it is an embarrassment for a theory that calls itself self-determination theory to have to confess after several decades of research that ‘[p]erhaps most incomplete is research on [...] personal change and responsibility’ (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p.650)

Dualistic Model of Passion (DMP)

*Overview*

*Background*

Closely related to self-determination theory is the dualistic model of passion (DMP) proposed by Vallerand and co-workers. (Vallerand et al., 2003; Vallerand, 2015) Again, the DMP falls squarely among the theories based on the assumption of an inherent tendency towards organismic growth:

The DMP rests on the firm assumption that people have a natural tendency toward self-
growth that is experienced throughout life. That is, people seek to master both their outside and inside worlds [...]

However, such a growing process is not automatic and rarely happens haphazardly. Rather, self-growth takes place along a very specific path. [...] I posit that self-growth takes place through a person-environment dialectic wherein both sides of the hyphen matter. (Vallerand, 2015, p.44)

Its development was partly motivated by the assumption that ‘research on passion can tell us what people who thrive actually do’ (Vallerand, 2015, p.10), because being passionate has the potential to provide joy and meaning to one's life, while clearly not all passionate people are happy – ‘there seems to be a duality of passion that can bring out the best and worst in people.’ (Vallerand, 2015, p.11) In contrast to earlier psychological research on passions, these authors focused on passion for activities (instead of passion in relationships) and approached this topic from a motivational perspective. (Vallerand, 2015, p.27) The definition of passion used, and the essence of the DMP, were explained in Vallerand (2015, p.33) as follows:

Passion can be seen as a strong inclination toward a specific object, activity, concept or person that one loves (or at least strongly likes), highly values, invests time and energy in on a regular basis, and that is part of one's identity. Furthermore, two forms of passion seem to exist. The first can be seen as being in harmony with other aspects of the self and the person’s life and should mainly lead to adaptive outcomes.

DMP refers to this first form of passion as harmonic passion, as distinct to obsessive passion. DMP further postulates that both types of passion can be present to different degrees, since the development of these two kinds of passion is theorized to result from autonomous and controlled internalization as understood in SDT, respectively, which in turn are a matter of degree rather than all-or-none (see above and Vallerand (2015, p.67)). The obsessive character of passion is assumed to result from the combination of need satisfaction during the activity – leading to the development
of passion Vallerand (2015, p.113) – with lack of need satisfaction outside it, which attaches to the activity the character of compensation (Vallerand, 2015, p.336) in turn leading to compulsive behaviour.

**Harmony and flexibility versus obsession and conflict**

With harmonic passion, ‘the activity occupies a significant but not overpowering space in the person's identity and is in harmony (rather than conflict) with other self-elements and aspects of the person's life.’ (Vallerand, 2015, p.63) The person can therefore perform the activity with flexibility and an open, mindful awareness of the experience without fearing failure. Therefore ‘people should be able to fully focus on the task at hand, show high levels of concentration, and experience flow.’ (ibid, compare also Vallerand (2015, pp. 129-131)).

In contrast, with obsessive passion, ‘individuals experience an uncontrollable urge to engage in the activity that they find meaningful and enjoyable. [...] The passion must run its course as it controls the person.’ (Vallerand, 2015, p.64) Therefore, it can easily come into conflict with other aspects of the person’s identity or with situational necessities while not being able to use their full range of adaptive self-processes. This will likely lead to conflicted affect independently of how the activity unfolds:

If they do well during activity engagement, they should experience some positive affect but negative affect as well, because they often engage in the passionate activity when they should not. They should then experience guilt and shame. However, if they do not do well, then low levels of positive affect and high levels of negative affect should be experienced. (Vallerand, 2015, p.65)

When not engaged in their obsessively passionate activity, these individuals will often experience negative emotions, rumination, and interference with other aspects of their lives since they might regret having engaged in their passion when it is ill-advised, or live the rest of their life ‘in
brackets’, waiting to resume engagement with the beloved activity. (ibid) The possibility of failure may be seen as a threat (rather than an opportunity for learning and growth), leading to defensive reactions which despite their possible short term advantages (focusing attention, mobilizing energy – see also Vallerand (2015, p.339)) will lead to long term damage to the individual in both physical (e.g., reduced immune system functioning) and mental (e.g., burnout) forms.

Finally, it should be reiterated that with obsessive passion the person feels controlled by the activity […] behavioral engagement in the passionate activity can be seen as rigid […] with potentially negative effects. (Vallerand, 2015, p.66)

**Critical discussion**

**Emphasis on ‘passion’ or on ‘harmonious’?**

Vallerand and colleagues are interested in the study of passion. Nevertheless, the distinction between harmonious and obsessive behaviour and action should be applicable much wider. The presumed reasons for harmonious passion generally being preferable to obsessive passion would seem to apply to many other constructs like grit, striving, mental toughness, etc. In fact, viewed from the point of view of harmony rather than passion, there is no obvious reason why it has to be ‘toward a specific object and not toward everything’ (Vallerand, 2015, p.33).

**The paradox of DMP research**

As noted above, DMP claims that ‘self-growth takes place through a person-environment dialectic wherein *both sides of the hyphen matter*’ (emphasis added), and criticises positions like those of Freud, Skinner or Bandura, which assume ‘that individuals are passively affected by forces outside their control’ where ‘[p]eople are hypothesized to only react to either internal (drives or instincts) or external (reinforcements, models) stimuli.’

If harmonious passion is as beneficial as DMP suggests, and if behaviour is not entirely dictated by forces outside one’s control, one would expect it to be a central field of scientific study
to understand how people themselves can contribute to the development of harmonic passion or to turning an obsessive passion into a more harmonious one. Bafflingly, DMP too fails in this respect (as flow research and SDT do): There is extensive discussion on social circumstances, very limited discussion of personality factors and individual strengths and values (Vallerand, 2015, pp. 98-100, 107-113), but apparently nothing about how to contribute to changing any of this beyond finding an activity that one enjoys (Vallerand, 2015, p.45). Neither does the closing section entitled ‘Where to go from here?’ (Vallerand, 2015, p. 335ff) propose any research in this direction. The ‘left side of the hyphen’ above gets virtually ignored.

Conclusions

This paper presented a review and critical discussion of three interconnected areas of positive psychology: Flow theory, self-determination theory and harmonic passion. One problem stands out as being common to all three areas: A curious discrepancy between the theoretical emphasis on autonomy and the practical neglect of the question how one can autonomously contribute to developing one’s autonomy. This is one reason for working towards a detailed comparison of positive psychology concepts of optimal experience with those of ‘Eastern’ wisdom traditions, as the latter have developed a plethora of techniques for self-development. More generally, there is a number of problematic issues with each of these three areas, suggesting their theoretical foundations can not yet be considered in final form. I venture to suggest that a deeper study of (at the least the non-religions forms of) Daoism and Buddhism, as well as Hellenistic philosophies, might be helpful in this regard.

On the positive side, a number of central tenets from these areas are unaffected by the criticisms above. In particular, the observations in the present paper suggest that the following constitute common components of optimal experience in positive psychology: acting with mindful,
effortless attention without worrying about being in control or not (flow theory); awareness and flexibility while acting with an integrated self without inner conflict (self-determination theory); acting on what one values in a flexible and mindful way in harmony with other aspects of the self (harmonious passion). These components look very much like three sides of the same coin; at first glance, they also seem perfectly in line with a number of ‘Eastern’ conceptualizations of optimal experience. For example, not worrying about control seems to be clearly reflected in Daoism, as when ZhuangZi (莊子, also transcribed Chuang-tzu) describes the Daoist sage (zhenren) as someone who ‘constantly goes by the spontaneous and does not add anything to the process of life’ (Graham, 2001, p. 82); compatible with this is also that the Pyrrhonian philosopher Sextus Empiricus gives an act of giving up control (in a story told of Apelles the painter) as a paradigmatic example of how one arrives at the goal of ataraxia (Mates, 1996, p.93). Similarly, advanced Buddhist meditation (jhāna) is described as ‘a natural process of coming to rest, and it requires you to get out of the way completely.’ (Brahm, 2006, p. 23) In fact, the advice is to

Trust the Dhamma, the Buddha’s teachings, and let the jhāna warmly embrace you in an effortless, bodiless, ego-less, and blissful experience that will be the most profound of your life. Have the courage to fully relinquish control for a while and experience all this for yourself. (p.24)

**Future research**

All this looks very suggestive to me but of course needs to be worked out in much more detail. One obvious topic is a detailed comparison of classical concepts like the Hellenistic ataraxia and the Buddhist upakka with low-arousal positive psychology constructs like peace-of-mind (Lee et al., 2013), equanimity (Desbordes et al., 2015; Hadash et al., 2016), or tranquility (Berenbaum et al., 2019). There also seem to be interesting connections to sports psychology and movement science for example involving the importance of locus and quality of attention (Wulf, 2013; Mattes, 2016; Becker et al., 2018), or the well-known concept of ‘choking under pressure’ (Lothes et al., 2013;
Ilundain-Agurruza, 2015; Mattes, 2016). The latter is important in a wide variety of contexts: For example, Locke and Latham (2002), while arguing for the importance of goal setting in organizational contexts, also acknowledge the importance of perceived pressure and resulting performance anxiety when they write,

> When people are confronted with a task that is complex for them [...] a performance goal can make people so anxious to succeed that they scramble to discover strategies in an unsystematic way and fail to learn what is effective. (p.707)

In fact, it should be another highly interesting area of research to relate spontaneous and harmonious action in the above sense with the often-claimed importance of goal setting. This could be approached for example using ideas from psychotherapy (including using Focusing to detect inner conflicts, Viktor Frankl’s ‘paradoxical intention’ (Frankl, 2011), or the fact that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes et al., 2014) sees committed action in line with one’s values as an integral part of psychological flexibility) together with psychological research on the importance of setting goals in line with one’s deeper motives and needs (Grund et al., 2018).

**Flow and Aristotelian virtue ethics**

As noted in the introduction, the above discussion is also relevant with respect to current controversies about the relationship between well-being and eudaimonia. A full discussion is beyond the reach of this article, here is a sketch of the argument: Kristjánsson (2018) claimed to provide counterexamples to what he calls the concordance thesis, ‘according to which flourishing and happiness will, for psychological reasons, go hand in hand.’ In particular, he argued against the claim of Annas (2008) that eudaimonia in the sense of Aristotle is a sufficient condition of living happily as it is conducive to experiencing flow:

> [V]irtuous activity, as opposed to merely self-controlled activity, is pleasant, not in involving extra feelings but in being unimpeded by contrary impulses, and in harmony with
all of the person’s thoughts and feelings. In the virtuous, virtuous activity can be thought of as an example of ‘flow’ because it is an unforced expression of the person’s reasoning and feelings, in harmony with the rest of her character and structured system of goals. (p.30)

Kristjánsson, referring to Besser-Jones (2012), asserted that ‘most of the virtuous activities that Aristotle sees as flourishing-constituting are pretty dull and uninspiring in themselves [and] not likely to produce flow,’ which according to him provides counterexamples to the concordance thesis. Besser-Jones claimed that ‘Flow experiences occur when individuals engage in complex and challenging activities that test one’s capacities [...] cognitive engagement is crucial, as part of the enjoyment lies in the exercise of her intellect—in the problem-solving.’ and therefore ‘[most] virtuous activities simply are not the kinds of things that generate flow experiences’. In light of the above discussion this seems another case of the widespread confusion between enabling conditions of flow and the flow experience itself: There is no reason why a mature virtuous person should not be able to experience flow while ‘keeping one’s promises, helping someone pick up papers she has dropped on the sidewalk, being a whistleblower, loaning money to a friend, raising money to help victims of natural disasters, and so on’ (Besser-Jones, 2012, p. 100). After all, as seen above, an autotelic personality ‘has to develop the ability to find enjoyment and purpose regardless of external circumstances’ and ‘derive flow from whatever he or she does,’ hence also when picking up dropped papers. This is not to deny that finding flow in activities which most of us most of the time find boring or anxiety-provoking may be difficult; but difficult does not imply impossible. All one can conclude is that autotelic personalities and mature virtuous persons are rare (may be as rare as Buddhist arahants or Daoist zhenrens) – but that is neither news nor a good reason to resign oneself to lower standards.
References


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Finding psychological principles embedded in a variety of ancient traditions may both lend support to the validity and range of these principles and can aid in their development and extension; compare Mair (1983, p. 98):

I maintain that the striking resemblances between and obviously kindred spirit of these two works [in his case, ZhuangZi and Erasmus of Rotterdam] – works that are separated by such vast reaches of time and space – are explainable because they represent a mode of human existence that transcends local and temporal variations of culture.

Positive psychology has been criticized as being overly reliant on the ‘Western’ tradition. In fact, even there one particular Greek philosopher gets a disproportionate share of attention, as evidenced for example in the recent special issue of the Journal of Positive Psychology on Emerging Directions in the Positive Psychology of Strengths and Virtues. Furthermore, when work in positive psychology does try to take ancient wisdom traditions beyond Aristotle into account, results tend to look rather unconvincing; for example, Peterson and Seligman (2004) in their quest for universal virtues and character strengths rightly mention that one should not mistake the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path (ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo) as a collection of moral directives related to obeisance to a higher power (p. 44), but on p.34 they put the Buddhist Eightfold Path next to the Ten Commandments and translate ariyo as “Holy” rather than the usual “Noble” (despite keeping the word “noble” for the Four Noble Truths).

‘Demands’ would be a more appropriate term than ‘challenge’ as Landhäußer and Keller (2012, p. 66, footnote 1) convincingly argue.

There are different forms of meditation, some of which might be reasonably referred to as an ‘activity’. I have in mind forms where this seems implausible, like open monitoring meditation (Lutz et al., 2008).

See Mattes (2019) for a discussion of non-religious readings of the Buddha’s teaching.