

EVERYTHING FLOWS

THE ART OF GETTING 'IN THE ZONE'

FLOW: THE OPTIMUM PERFORMANCE OF AN ABILITY

STEPHEN MUMFORD

Sportsmen and women would call it being in the zone. Writers and artists call it flow. And they aspire to those occasions where they are in full flow. The flow: so coveted because it produces the peak of performance. But what is it? Why does it seem so enigmatic, elusive and at times ephemeral? As soon as one notices one is in the zone, that is often the point at which one has left it. And if a writer stops to congratulate her smooth and productive flow, it is in the same moment lost.

Can the mystery be untangled? In what follows, an account will be offered in which to at least some extent the notion of flow will be explained. I take it that being in the zone is more or less the same phenomenon, being the words in which flow is often described in sports.

The account is very simple but still benefits from elaboration. The idea is that flow occurs when someone exercises an ability to the full extent in which they possess it. In flow, one executes an optimum performance of an ability. But for reasons that will be explained, this performance must be unselfconscious, for reflecting upon the fact that one is in flow distracts one from performing the ability as well as one can.

Because flow is all about doing – the active exercise of a power, capacity or ability – it is rightly associated with performance. Hence we find some of the best examples in sports, from musicians, actors, lecturers, and so on, which require the skilful use of ability. One also finds flow in creativity – from writers, composers and painters – but this is because creating is also a performance of an ability. Flow is thought of as relatively rare and some people struggle to find the zone: to achieve the optimum performance of their ability. But it need not be a rarity with some individuals. An elite athlete may train herself to perform at her very best more often than not and a professional musician may be able to deliver near-enough their best performance routinely. Being able to attain such flow is part of what makes these people special.

The flow is not the preserve of the elite, however. We are all empowered agents – active doers – with a host of abilities. An amateur has an ability to play piano though they are not as able as the concert pianist. Even our amateur can attain flow where they deliver the very best performance of which they are capable. And the best performance of an amateur could in theory be better than a sloppy performance from a professional. One assumes, however, that if both perform to the best of their ability, the concert pianist outplays the amateur. Indeed, it is even possible that although the amateur is in the zone, their performance is nowhere near as good as the concert pianist who gets distracted by thoughts of their laundry while delivering a polished performance. Because the professional has a greater ability, they still might be better even without ever quite reaching the zone.

What seems so enigmatic about flow is the way it vanishes as soon as someone realises they have it. It exists merrily until the point at which it is perceived. See it, and it is gone. It evades our introspective stare. To understand how this occurs is to give us a deeper insight into its nature.

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What we need to grasp is how flow can be interrupted by the subject's own reflection upon it. The writer, for instance, suddenly realises that she just has written a thousand words relatively effortlessly. The writing is good and she is satisfied. She realises the words are flowing and that she is in the zone. But the realisation is a distraction. Instead of writing to the best of her ability, she is now self-congratulating. And by doing so, she has removed herself from the zone. We can get the same in sport. Consider a high-level snooker player who begins building a break. In the past he has struggled to do so but now the balls drop down the pockets with relative ease: red, black, red, black, it continues. At some point while building toward a high score, he suddenly realises that he is in full flow. He hopes it can continue. But it is too late. Now he is distracted and he misses the sort of red that a few seconds earlier he sank with ease.

Here is a theory. To exercise an ability fully, whether it be mental or physical, one needs to put all one's concentration into its execution. If for one moment one thinks of other things, then that distracts from the performance and makes it suboptimal. And the thought that one is in the zone is apparently one of the most distracting thoughts of all, after which it might take a long time to return to that same place.

This is not to say that thought is always a distraction in the exercise of an ability. On the contrary, the optimal performance of a skill often requires a great deal of thought. Our snooker player, while building his break, is thinking hard throughout. He is planning three shots ahead, calculating the angles of the shot and his positional play. His thinking is an integral part of the performance required for this sport. It is not a physical skill alone, though it undoubtedly requires a good eye and a steady hand. So thought is not generally the enemy of flow; it usually assists it. But there is one kind of thought in particular that seems to defeat it.

The human mind is a beautifully empowered entity and it has one very special power that holds the key to our problem. This power is so important because it might be the key to understanding our free will. As well as human agents having a plenitude of abilities, we also have a higher-order power to reflect upon those abilities. Someone can play the violin, speak French, perform mathematical calculations, deliver an unscripted lecture, and so on. But they can also reflect upon those abilities and decide which of them should be exercised, when and how. A typical adult has an ability to inflict pain on a rabbit, for instance, but they are also able to reflect upon that ability and realise that it would be wrong to exercise it. This higher-order ability to reflect upon which of our basic or first-order abilities should be exercised is thus a clue to our free will and responsibility for our actions. When one does wrong, one will often be told that one should have known better.

We might call this higher-order ability self-consciousness. But the problem is that this ability also requires mental effort in order to be exercised. And thus if one is reflecting self-consciously on another, first-order ability that one is currently exercising, then that detracts from the execution of that ability. For example, our violinist may be performing excellently, maximising the execution of their violin skills. They are entirely focused on the first-order ability of violin playing. But as soon as they start to think that they are in the zone, a large part of their mind is occupied by that task and consequently there is less focus on the violin playing itself. Experience tells us that nothing is so disruptive of flow as thinking that one has it. Even if one thinks to oneself that one should not think about one's flow, that is also a thought about it, which then produces its destruction.

With this understanding, we now know that if one is in the zone, one wants to ride it as long as possible to get the most out of it. A tightrope walker, for instance, needs to concentrate entirely on walking the rope. She mustn't doubt herself, start thinking of how high she is, and she must not start congratulating herself on her flawless performance until she is safely down and finished. The same would be true even of a sexual performance. The best sex would be unselfconscious. One shouldn't start thinking about how well one is or is not doing. One should just get on and do it.

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It was said that thought sometimes aided the performance of an ability, and this remains the case. Some skills do require monitoring by the agent so that adjustments can be made and the exercise be fully controlled. While this is a necessary accompaniment to the skill, the sort of self-congratulation, doubts or realisation of which we spoke plays no essential role in the execution of the skill. It hinders more than aids it. It is superfluous.

The account can now be summarised. To be in flow is for a person to be exercising an ability, or group of abilities together, to the optimum level for that individual. The flow thus consists in performing an ability as well as the agent finds possible. To do this is to focus on the execution of the basic, first-order ability in question. Higher-order reflection upon that performance, where it is not at the service of the performance, distracts from its effectiveness. It follows that the agent ought really to be pleased with having experienced flow only once they have ceased the activity that had flowed. They may like to do it, for instance, at the moment they are enjoying the applause.

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