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Immersion

Anthony Cunningham

St. John's University, tcunningham@csbsju.edu

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Immersion

Were you to ask most parents what they wish for their children, I should think that aside from predictable necessities like good health and adequate resources, they would say something along the lines of “I just want them to be happy.” Pinning down the notion of happiness is notoriously difficult, whether you are talking about philosophers working out complicated necessary and sufficient conditions or everyday people consulting their gut feelings. Despite these difficulties with defining happiness, consider a family of ideas that people tend to associate with the notion: general feelings of well-being; a sense of contentment; the generous satisfaction of desires; the absence of serious suffering; the abundant enjoyment of particular things and life in general. Of course, there is much more to say about these particular things, and there are other candidates to add as possible elements of happiness, but suffice it to say that none of these ideas is exotic and we have an intuitive grasp of them as sensible candidates for what most people are trying to get at when they wish their children and loved ones well.

I want to briefly explore an element of human life and character that doesn't automatically fit into this intuitive picture so neatly and simply. Depending upon how you look at happiness — or if you prefer, a good life — what I'll call *immersion* can either work against happiness in some important ways, or else complicate the notion in key respects. My purpose is to clarify some aspects of life and character that can easily go unnoticed and unappreciated (or at least underappreciated).

Final Ends

Think about the many things we can pursue in life. We have all sorts of ends. Some we pursue primarily for the sake of something else. Thus, perhaps I chase after money, but I do so only for the material goods it can

get me. If you gave me millions of dollars and put me somewhere I could never spend it, maybe I would paper my walls with the money or burn it to stay warm or to roast marshmallows. If I couldn't use it to get other things I desire, money wouldn't have much use for me. Not all our ends are instrumental. As Aristotle aptly noted, any good life requires final ends, ends we pursue for their own sake and not just for the sake of something else. In this vein, maybe one reason I chase after money so desperately is to have the resources to make my way to beautiful places where I can look out on the natural world and savor the wonderful view. If you ask why I'm so interested in the vista from atop Maine's Mt. Katahdin, I'll insist that what I see before me is its own sweet reward, something I desire intrinsically, and not just as a means.

Of course, not all final ends are equal to us. If you ask people about the things they desire for their own sake, you'll find some things matter more than others. As much as I might enjoy my time on top of Katahdin (and getting there too), if it comes at the price of my life's work or my family, then the mountain simply has to go. This particular choice would be an easy one, even if somewhat disappointing. Obviously, the choices between our final ends can often be much harder. But even when the choices are really hard, we usually find some way to figure out, as best we can, what roughly matters more than what. These deliberations, the kind that take place in the trenches of everyday life and the more global kind about a life in general, are the stuff of our most significant practical reasoning, the part that deals not just with how best to get what we want, but with what to want in the first place and how much to want it.

Immersed Lives

When we deliberate about what matters to us in this sense, we want to get things right because our life can really hang in the balance. At first glance, maybe this sounds like a bit of melodrama, but it really isn't. Our deliberations over final ends are something like a roadmap of the self. In fact, let me suggest that good lives are invariably marked by final ends where people are thoroughly *immersed* in people, activities, and projects in ways that provide a particular kind of shape and meaning to a life and self.

Examples of immersion might include loving someone, being dedicated to an art, or being determined to save lives. For people to be immersed in the sense I mean, they must care deeply about these people, activities, and projects for their own sake, and there must be a distinct sense in which their lives flow through them. In other words, immersed people are constituted to a significant degree by the people, activities, and projects they hold so dear.

The Details

This idea sounds simple enough: We are what we love and what we do for our loves and with them. But consider some important details. First, note that the kind of immersion I have in mind has active elements to it. The ends in question are not simply passively experienced. The experience isn't just a matter of being carried along, the way we might float down a river. For one thing, living true to them always requires distinct capacities on our part. For instance, take love. The temptation can be to imagine love entirely as a feeling, perhaps distinct from hunger pangs by how it feels and by its greater complications, but like hunger, something that essentially happens to you. Love wells up from inside, and when you have it, you have it — end of story. Of course, some feelings of love feel just this way. You can *fall* in love, and the feeling really can be something along the lines of falling. It happens to you, sweeping you along in ways you certainly don't command. But imagine that you fall in love and thereafter you want to be true to your beloved. All the feeling in the world on its own can't do the trick of living up to love. One needs to be a particular kind of person to do love much justice. For instance, one needs courage to face frightful things that can get in the way of love. One needs fortitude to bear love's burdens. And one needs fidelity to defy all sorts of temptations. Maybe, just maybe, a person could be none of these things and get lucky with some easy and completely undemanding love. But I doubt it; luck so good doesn't usually last forever.

Aside from needing a certain kind of character, we often need particular skills to sustain immersion, at least with more complex activities. Take an activity like making music. People can enjoy making music without

music without being especially serious or good at it. The same can be said for all sorts of activities we enjoy, activities that can command a fair amount of our time and energy. However, when I think about immersion, I'm not thinking of activities where we have nothing more than a passing interest in them. A sizable portion of many lives can be taken up with activities that are only mildly interesting, things we don't mind doing and may enjoy to some small degree, but something we could abandon without any real sense of loss. Sometimes this is simply a matter of molding ourselves to our circumstances and learning to like the things we must do anyhow. But with immersion, I'm thinking about activities that call our name in some deeper sense, where the activity is far more than an accommodation to sheer necessity or happenstance. In the case of music, I'm thinking about making good, beautiful music, or at least as good and beautiful as one can make. Music takes dedicated practice, and ordinarily, its greatest rewards are intimately connected with some degree of mastery via dedication. Though one can enjoy making mediocre or bad music, no honest musician would prefer to do so. Yet, with a complex activity like music, the demands can be quite ruthless. In *This Is Your Brain on Music*, Daniel Levitin suggests that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to master an instrument. At three hours every day, the time commitment comes to over nine years of solid practice. This is no small thing.

To put this kind of practical commitment into perspective in contemporary American life, the Nielsen Company recently reported that the average American watched 151 hours of television per month in 2008. This amounts to something very close to a full-time job watching television. And when it comes to actual employment, a recent Conference Board report (January, 2010) on job satisfaction in America showed that the long-term downward trend in satisfaction continued, with a record-low 45 percent of workers being satisfied with their jobs. America's top fifteen jobs in terms of sheer numbers for 2009 were as follows (in order): retail salespersons; cashiers; office clerks; fast-food workers; registered nurses; waiters/waitresses; customer service representatives; freight and stock movers; janitors; clerks and order fillers; secretaries; bookkeepers and accountants; general managers; truck drivers; and elementary school teachers. Many of these jobs are hard, repetitive, and involve tasks that are

unlikely to call upon and develop complex human powers that are prized and exercised for their own sake. In other words, for many American workers, a job is primarily a paycheck, and often a relatively dull one. When you add up the number of hours that Americans work, sleep, perform domestic chores, and engage in passive leisure activities like television watching, many people are left with precious little time to develop and sustain activities that engage and cultivate skills exercised for their own sake in activities that can define and fulfill them in the sense I am getting at.

Consider the last job on this top-15 list — elementary school teachers. If you were to ask arithmetic teachers whether addition and subtraction truly call their name, presumably they'd say no. They might go on to say that they are really in the business of inspiring and developing young minds, not adding apples and oranges. The skills they impart may be so elementary that they couldn't possibly find the subject matter very intriguing after years and years of teaching. They might insist that they are immersed in a project, more than an activity prized for its own sake.

Many such stories might be told, and some of the projects might make immense demands on a life. In some cases, a person might search out the project, and in others, the project might find the person, so to speak. Imagine working in an under-developed country to eradicate serious diseases or to improve the quality of life for desperate people. There are some who seek such opportunities, but sometimes the situation is thrust upon a person in unexpected ways. Perhaps I am a doctor and I visit a poor country afflicted with malaria. Confronted by massive death and suffering that were only abstract statistics before, maybe my life takes a significant turn as I dedicate myself to doing what I can to help. If you were to ask me, I would wish malaria completely eradicated to spare lives, but I would also see it eliminated so that I could do other things with my life. For instance, maybe I would love to play my cello or study medieval literature, and I might pine for the day when I might freely indulge in these loves to my heart's content. But I might insist that I cannot abandon the cause when I am needed so badly and so many lives are at stake.

In either case, whether I seek out such projects as my life's work or stumble upon them as something I simply cannot abandon, the cause must be something that matters deeply to me to say that I am immersed in the sense that I mean. In other words, my commitment must be driven by and manifest some deep and compelling value of my own, something I hold dear as a defining value of my life. It doesn't have to be this way right from the start or all at once. Maybe I take on a project and the longer I spend at it and the more I come to appreciate its significance, the deeper my intrinsic interest in the project becomes. Whether we are talking about educating minds or saving lives, we can imagine someone growing into the work that eventually comes to define that life to a large degree.

Suffering and Disappointment

When we are engaged in work we see as meaningful in this way, we naturally take satisfaction in our own fidelity and we understandably enjoy whatever degree of success we can achieve. But notice that many such stories — whether we are talking about an elementary school teacher or a physician combating malaria — are unlikely to be complete success stories. Say I am a teacher in a poor, inner-city elementary school and I do my utmost to rescue children from poverty, drugs, and ignorance by helping them develop the educational tools they need to escape their inimical circumstances. All the while, I know I can only rescue some children, and even some of those may later be lost. Or say I am a physician in sub-Saharan Africa, and for every person I save, many more perish. After all, malaria claims a child's life every 30 seconds. Unfortunately, just as Jesus said, it seems that the poor will always be with us, and even if I might somehow look forward to a time beyond poverty, I know that day is a long way off and malaria cannot be wiped out in a day. In either of these cases, despite the satisfaction of rescuing lives, the results are bound to be bittersweet. In other words, one is very likely to suffer for one's love. If these things matter enough to define a life, they matter enough to wound that same life in their own way.

When one pictures an embattled teacher in an at-risk school or a physician struggling against insurmountable odds in a poverty-stricken country, perhaps the lesson with respect to projects for a happy life may seem simple: Pick your projects very carefully if you want to be happy. After all, if heartache is your business or if you are surrounded by it, it won't be so easy to have a life marked by the sorts of things I mentioned as intuitive elements of happiness. A sense of contentment and well-being, the satisfaction of desires, the absence of serious suffering, abundant enjoyment — these would all be predictable casualties to one degree or another for the schoolteacher or the physician. If so, maybe doing their good deeds might not be so good for them.

Vulnerable Loves

I think three important observations are in order at this point. First, the kind of price I'm describing here isn't neatly confined to such cases of service and sacrifice against the odds. Any deep loves are inevitably subject to suffering. Some may be more prone, either by nature or happenstance, but the possibility for suffering simply comes with the territory. For instance, think about what it means to love someone deeply. People can leave you. They can betray you. They can suffer and they can die. The way in which you suffer as a lover in each case will be different, but suffer you will. If you don't, then you didn't care about them in the first place.

Carefully chosen activities might seem like a safer bet in this respect, but they are hardly immune from suffering. Think of athletes gradually losing their skills until they are a shell of their former selves. Some athletes handle such erosion gracefully, but this shouldn't be confused with indifference. Cynics may contend that what drives over-the-hill athletes to make comebacks must be fame, glory, and money. In some cases, this may be right. But my guess is that far many more athletes simply miss being able to play at a high level. If once upon a time you could run like the wind, catch everything in sight, and hit the ball from the park, and if these things were key components of your identity, you are likely to mourn their loss when they are no longer yours. A.E. Housman's words in his "To an Athlete Dying Young" — "Smart lad, to slip betimes away / From fields where glory does not stay" — capture something true and poignant about athletes. And there are good reasons to think much the same about all sorts of activities that involve elusive and inherently vulnerable skills. Andres Segovia at 80 was still the great master of the classical guitar, but no doubt he wasn't everything he once was.

Of course, maybe there are good lessons to learn from such examples. Maybe we are wise not to put all our eggs in one basket and wiser still to cultivate new loves before old ones run their course. Then again, so doing can be easier said than done. Recreating oneself isn't so easy and it may not even be so welcome. Our beloved activities aren't so much like dish sponges, used up and discarded when they run out of steam. In fact, even loves that haven't run their course in this way are given to their own disappointments and longings. We can fall short of our loves in all sorts of complicated ways. Life is usually an admixture of success and failure in this respect, and even when the successes outweigh the failures, the failures aren't usually lost on us. Indeed, when we factor in the likelihood that lives with disparate loves — people, activities, projects — are very likely to have to trade off some for others, loss seems almost inescapable. We have no guarantee that our loves can be harmonious. There is seldom any blessed harmony of love.

A second observation concerns the idea of picking our loves so as to rule out suffering, failure, and conflict. Clearly we can make all sorts of choices that can deeply affect what sorts of loves we cultivate with respect to people, activities, and projects. Life doesn't chain us to a chum, a cello, or a cause. Our decisions add flesh to the bones of our lives. Yet if we think we can manufacture deep interests at will, we are sadly mistaken for the most part. Not only does life simply present us with some things and not others (for instance, we don't choose our parents or our children in any meaningful sense), but all sorts of loves just find us to a large degree. With the latter, we can often do a great deal to help budding interests along and to sustain them once developed. We aren't silly at all for thinking we can do a lot to cultivate our loves. In fact, many loves are likely to flourish only with a good deal of careful, attentive cultivation. But some things can grab us, and other things can leave us cold, and all the will in the world can't manufacture these attachments. Indeed, love is never forged on the straightforward anvil of will. In other words, we can often be "stuck" with our loves to a large degree. In this sense, despite what I said earlier about the active elements of our loves, our final ends can carry us along to some degree as if we are swept along in a great river. We have choices and some degree of control, but everything isn't a matter of pure decision.

Pleasure and Happiness

If we are to have the sort of deep interests in people, activities, and projects as final ends that I am describing, we must be prepared both to cultivate them and to discover them as they are for us. And this brings me to my third observation. We have a marked tendency to focus too simply on states of mind when thinking about putting a life and self together. We carefully look for signs that those we care deeply about feel happy, that they don't suffer, that they enjoy themselves. Of course, there is nothing odd about paying close attention to pleasure and pain. Everything else being equal, we wouldn't wish pain on those we love. Neither would we deny them pleasure. Life certainly feels a lot better with pleasant states of mind, and in the face of certain forms of physical or psychological pain, life can hardly be worth living.

But pleasures and pains can also be tricky and uncertain markers of a flourishing life for creatures like us. Pushpin isn't as good as poetry. Facebook friends aren't the same as the real thing. And a life dedicated to accumulating more and more stuff, even if the stuff brings great pleasure, may not be nearly as good and meaningful a human life as one that draws upon and exercises complex human powers for the sake of people and projects in ways that can be given to great suffering and even tragic endings.

Shackleton's Troubles

Consider a remarkable story in this vein. In October of 1914, Ernest Shackleton sailed from Buenos Aires aboard his *Endurance* bound for Antarctica. Roald Amundsen had already reached the South Pole. Shackleton had tried twice, and now had his sights set on a Trans-Antarctic crossing from the Weddell to the Ross Sea. In January 1915, the *Endurance* ground to a halt in thick ice. Shackleton's ship would never be free. He was forced to abandon ship more than nine months later when the ice crushed the vessel. Attempts to cross the floes proved futile, so they drifted for 170 days until they were forced to sail their small boats for seven days in some of the world's roughest waters to remote Elephant Island. Knowing their only hope was to make it to South Georgia's whaling station, Shackleton set sail again with a crew of five. Sailing more than 800 miles with just a sextant and chronometer in high seas, they reached the island after a harrowing 16 days. However, they landed on the far side and they had no choice but to trek through the rugged interior. With peaks over 10,000 feet high, the interior had never been charted. Taking Tom Crean and Frank Worsley with him, Shackleton went for 36 hours without rest or provisions. They knew the clock was ticking. They had to take chances. At one point, the three men locked arms to slide down a 1000-foot crevasse on the seat of their pants without knowing what might await them.

When they reached the station, the Norwegian whalers could hardly believe their wild story. Though Shackleton and his crew of five were safe, months passed before the men on Elephant Island could be

rescued. The first three attempts were turned back by ice, and then Shackleton had difficulties securing a boat. On August 16, 1916, the men were finally rescued. Frank Worsley noted how the many months of waiting had taken a great toll on Shackleton, and how changed he was when he counted twenty-two figures on the distant shore of Elephant Island.

Shackleton's story ended happily and he was hailed as a national hero. But one can easily imagine a different ending, an unhappy one where Shackleton and his men all perish. And yet, even if I imagine such an unhappy ending, I'd say that Shackleton's life and expedition were marked by the kind of immersion I'm getting at. Shackleton had a deep sense of responsibility to his men. He sought a life of challenge and adventure for its own sake. And when circumstance forced him to abandon his Trans-Antarctic trek in favor of saving his crew, his men became the mission. Shackleton's story is one of extraordinary danger, hardship, and privation, and yet it also called forth attributes, actions, and character that defined Shackleton. The story is extreme, but it also shines a bright light on the idea of living a life that testifies to loves that embody that same life.

Of course, a man like Shackleton enjoyed the privileged life of an adventurer, and for many people, their circumstances and inclinations are very different. For those who must struggle to put food on the table for their children and to have a place for their heads, what I am describing as immersion may seem like a luxury of privilege. However, many quiet, modest lives can be rich in the way I am describing. The obstacles to immersion are many. For instance, we can be swept up in the allure of all sorts of baubles — things like power, wealth, status, and glory. These things aren't necessarily bad, but they can easily blind people to a life immersed in significant relationships, one with cultivated activities that call upon significant human powers in the service of commitments that define that same life.

Depending upon how one defines happiness, this idea of immersion either qualifies happiness for creatures like us, or else it can suggest that in some cases, happiness isn't all it's cracked up to be. Were I giving my children, my students, or my friends advice, I would tell them to cultivate the kind of loves for people, activities, and projects that can render them inherently vulnerable, the kind that can easily make a life harder in many ways, but also more meaningful as a human life. Moreover, I would stress that such loves are part work and part discovery, and if they do things right, they are likely to suffer for their loves in various ways. And I would say that the sorts of things that people so often associate with happiness are likelier to be had if you immerse yourself properly and forget about happiness.

Tony Cunningham is Professor of Philosophy. A version of this essay was presented at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association Central Division in Minneapolis, March 30–April 2, 2011.