

# A Psychological Commentary on the Article: Untangling Spiritual Contradictions Through the Psychology of Lived Paradox: Integrating Theological Diversity in the Old Testament with Durand's Framework on the Imaginary

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## Article Info

### Article Notes

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The tension of integrating proactivity and passivity in response to ever changing situations in the world can be addressed from multiple disciplines. The article *Untangling Spiritual Contradictions Through the Psychology of Lived Paradox: Integrating Theological Diversity in the Old Testament with Durand's Framework on the Imaginary* addresses the healthy integration of proactivity and passivity both from a twofold (theological and anthropological) perspective. It can be further enriched with contemporary empirical findings in the domain of psychology.

To summarize the theological perspective of this integration, the article explored how the theological stream of Wisdom Theology in the Old Testament emphasizes choice, training and discipline, diligent pursuit, discerning the righteous and the wicked, and divine justice and theodicy while the theological stream of Promise Theology emphasizes building trust in God, expectant passivity, God's protection, ceasing from anxiety, and safety in God. In terms of the anthropological perspective of this integration, the article outlined how the construct of the imaginary is relevant to one's relationship with God as well as others, as it is a dynamic force that creates images and symbols and is represented by particular verbs and actions. The Heroic Imaginary Structure of the human imaginary, – characterized with the verbs 'to distinguish', 'to separate', 'to ascend', and 'to purify',– emphasizes actualizing an outcome, striving, initiative and action, separating good and evil, and conquering one's obstacles. The Mystical ('intimist') Imaginary Structure,– characterized with the verbs to confound, to descend, to possess, and to penetrate– emphasizes intimacy, passivity, refuge as a fortress, peaceful rest, and relaxation<sup>1,2</sup>.

The following tables (A and B) outline the parallels between these theological and anthropological analyses on the integration of proactivity and passivity<sup>3</sup>.

**Table A:** Parallels Between Wisdom Theology and the Heroic Structure of the Imaginary

Wisdom Theology	Heroic Imaginary Structure
Choice	Actualizing an Outcome
Training and Discipline	Striving
Diligent Pursuit	Initiative and Action (and Production)
Discerning the Righteous and the Wicked	Separating Good from Evil
Divine Justice and Theodicy	Conquering One's Obstacles

**Table B:** Parallels Between Promise Theology and the Mystical Structure of the Imaginary

Promise Theology	Mystical Imaginary Structure
Building Trust in God	Intimacy (and Solidarity)
Expectant Passivity	Passivity
God's Protection	Refuge as A Fortress
Ceasing from Anxiety	Peaceful Rest
Safety in God	Relaxation

In addition to a theological perspective and anthropological perspective on this tension, it is beneficial to reflect on a psychological perspective. This way, insights from theology and anthropology will have very concrete implications at the individual level for everyday psychology. As many spiritual seekers have daily challenges in their capacity to be regularly aware and live a spirituality of paradox<sup>4</sup> according to their ideals, we propose that the contemporary psychology construct of "flow" is particularly relevant to this issue.

Flow involves a type of immersive focus on an activity that involves seemingly effortless attention and skill in mastering challenges<sup>5</sup>. It is intrinsically rewarding and enjoyable. Some defining characteristics of it include intense focus and concentration, a merging of action and awareness, an increased sense of control, a loss of self-consciousness, an altered sense of time, and an autotelic enjoyment of the activity<sup>6,7</sup>. Some autotelic attributes that facilitate the experience of flow include enjoyment of challenges, intrinsic motivation, persistence, curiosity, low self-centeredness, attentional control, and the transformation of boredom and tedium<sup>7,8</sup>. Some characteristics of the experiences of the flow state itself are similar for people regardless of socioeconomic status, age, culture, or ethnicity<sup>9-11</sup>.

Flow has some parallels with the aforementioned theological and anthropological perspectives on integrating proactivity and passivity. In flow, challenges must match the person's abilities to deal with them<sup>12</sup>. If the challenges are too high, anxiety results with no flow experience. If the skills are too high in comparison with the challenge, boredom occurs. In situations where both the challenges and skills are low, apathy emerges. Only when a person is in a condition where a high level of challenge meets with a high level of cultivated skill can a person enter flow. This can be comparable to when a person overly emphasizes Wisdom Theology without matching it with Promise Theology in their spiritual relationship with God. When this happens, the person may feel the benefits of one theological stream but lack the flow of integrating both together. These conditions of flow are also comparable to the requirement of the heroic imaginary structure needing to be matched (to better balance) with the mystical imaginary structure in order to experience the flow of a synthetic (later called systemic) imaginary structure. In the synthetic imaginary

structure, there is a harmonious coexistence of both imaginary systems without the exclusion of the other<sup>1-3</sup>. Furthermore, Durand's framework on the imaginary refers to the expression "coincidental oppositorium" (coincidence of opposite elements) in order to describe the essence of the synthetic category. This structure is well described with the verbs ('to come back', 'to grow', 'to progress'), under the verbal schema 'to link' which echoes the Latin term 'religare' meaning 'religion'.

Practically, these connections can be illustrated in flow with regard to the self in relationship with God and others. In terms of the self, one can see that

*"Following a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex than it had been before. It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow. Complexity is the result of two broad psychological processes: differentiation and integration. Differentiation implies a movement toward uniqueness, toward separating oneself from the other. Integration refers to its opposite: a union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies"*<sup>5</sup>.

The synthetic category echoes Csikszentmihalyi's work on the flow experience, which also embraces both types of theology (Wisdom and Promise). On the one hand, "the self becomes more differentiated as a result of flow because overcoming a challenge inevitably leaves a person feeling more capable, more skilled (...), more a unique individual, less predictable (...)"<sup>5</sup>. This aspect echoes the heroic structure of imaginary along with many elements of wisdom theology (such as choice, training and discipline, and diligent pursuit). On the other hand,

*"Flow helps to integrate the self because in that state of deep concentration consciousness is unusually well ordered. Thoughts, intentions, feelings, and all the senses are focused on the same goal. Experience is in harmony. And when the flow episode is over, one feels more 'together' than before, not only internally but also with respect to other people and to the world in general"*<sup>5</sup>.

This aspect echoes the mystical structure of the imaginary along with many elements of Promise theology (such as solidarity, peaceful rest, relaxation, and intimacy). In terms of relationships, if someone is too preoccupied with Wisdom Theology in their relationship with God and neglects Promise Theology, they will rely on their own skill, knowledge, and efforts to attain intimacy with the divine. If the opposite is true, and they proportionally overemphasize Promise Theology at the cost of Wisdom Theology, they will tend to confine themselves to passive spiritual practices (such as contemplation) and not proactively pursue certain spiritual disciplines such as intellectual study, memorization of Scripture, or concretely helping the poor (doing acts

of charity) in their spiritual journey to establish intimacy rhythms with the divine. Both are needed to enter a relational flow state with God. Anthropologically, if a person is too preoccupied with the Heroic Imaginary emphasis in their relationships and neglects the Mystical Imaginary structure, that person will strive too much and try to force things to happen with no organically emergent emotions in their relationships. Conversely, if a person is too preoccupied with the Mystical Imaginary structure, they will be too passive and not discipline themselves with needed relational structure. What is needed is a harmonious integration of both imaginary structures to experience relational flow in one's friendships. If the heroic elements of a relationship are overemphasized with low mystery from the mystical elements, boredom can result in the relational bond. If the mystical elements are overemphasized with low skills of mastery from the heroic elements, anxiety can result in the relational bond. What is required is a synthetic imaginary structure that has a good union of both<sup>3</sup>. In terms of empirical research, studies show that highly conscientious individuals are more likely to spend time mastering challenging tasks<sup>13</sup> which is a prerequisite to flow that is associated with the Heroic Imaginary Structure. Research also shows that another aspect to flow proneness is a tendency to adopt active problem solving strategies in everyday problems<sup>14</sup>, which is another Heroic element. Conversely, studies show that flow has an element of effortlessness and automaticity in the experience<sup>15</sup>, which is associated with the Mystical Imaginary Structure, where one does not force things to happen, but instead feels like one is absorbed in a particular activity.

Cognitive-neuroscientific findings also seem to provide some support for the theological and anthropological frameworks of integrating proactivity and passivity in flow. During flow, the brain activates two information systems, namely the explicit and implicit, which are available for integration<sup>16-20</sup>. On the one hand, the explicit information system involves higher order cognitive processing in the prefrontal and medial temporal lobe structures of the brain that utilize rules, verbal processing, and conscious awareness. These parts of the brain acquire, represent, and consciously processes knowledge. These traits are similar to themes in Wisdom Theology as well as the Heroic Imaginary Structure. On the other hand, the implicit information system involves the basal ganglia and other regions of the brain that involve skill-based knowledge not amenable to verbal processing. The implicit system's nonconscious nature is nonverbal, experienced based, and sometimes called the emotional brain. These traits are similar to themes in Promise Theology as well as the Mystical Imaginary Structure.

Both of these two information processing systems, explicit and implicit, have multiple connections, with a region of great integration happening in the dorsolateral

prefrontal cortex<sup>18</sup>. When the brain is doing creative activity, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex organizes cognitive and emotional information and deliberately applies both, resulting in modes of thinking that are spontaneous with novel and appropriate expression. These traits of integration are similar to themes of the Synthetic Imaginary Structure as well as an overall healthy integration of Wisdom Theology and Promise Theology, captured in the life of Jesus in the Gospels of the New Testament.

Studying the phenomenology of flow can have insightful implications that inform the theology and anthropology of proactive and passive integration. Since there are multiple parallels between these three frameworks, it is very plausible that the conditions for integration in cognitive neuroscience transfer over to the conditions for integration in theology and anthropology. In flow, in order for optimal performance to occur, there needs to be an appropriate matching level of skills and challenges. This can inform spirituality by asking the question: "when do you experience flow in your relationship with God?". This can also inform one's relational health by asking the question: "when do you experience flow in your relationships with others?". The person can then reflect on the times of flow and what ingredients created the conditions for the phenomenology of it. There can then be a corrective balance—just like the notion of constant feedback, which is key in fostering the state of flow<sup>5</sup>, to help create more conditions for it in the future. Note that feedback is linked to the process of regulation (which refers to the synthetic structure) which combines both production (heroic structure) and solidarity (mystical structure)<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, the spiritual journeyer can emphasize more Wisdom Theology or Promise Theology depending on what a person is neglecting in their relationship with God. The relational journeyer can emphasize more of the Heroic Imaginary Structure or the Mystical Imaginary Structure (depending on which is neglected) in order to experience more of the Synthetic Imaginary Structure in their relationships. This capacity to embrace the co-existence of opposites is considered optimal for both global health and a healthy spirituality<sup>22-24</sup>.

Finally, there are many psychological benefits to flow. Flow proneness is related to life satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, and psychological well-being<sup>9,14,25-27</sup>. Prolonged experiences with flow-inducing activities are linked to increased functioning, satisfaction with life, and a sense of competence<sup>28,29</sup>. If these are benefits of flow to mental health, some of them can possibly transfer over to one's spiritual journey in one's relationship with God as well as one's relationships with others as one pursues the integration of proactivity and passivity.

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