

Maximize to Minimize

This article came into existence in response to an experience many of us are undergoing right now, perhaps more than at any other time in our lives. In brief, it has to do with exposure to the media. The word “media” has expanded greatly to include a number of meanings: the more traditional venues of newspaper, magazines, radio, television and the more popular Internet in its various incarnations. So-called smart phones play a big role here, for when you stop and think of it, such a small device literally can access any and all information that ever has existed. You’d think such access would produce generation after generation of Einsteins. Just the opposite. The access seems to be making us dumber. While this is a common lament, here is not the place to elaborate on what we know already, for a more thoughtful analysis needs to be done. The phenomenon still is relatively new. I venture to say that the problem lays in part to the devices themselves. They demand constant attention compared to the material they make accessible to us. By the time we access the desired information, we’re too tired out from all the recently expended effort managing the device.

Also this article is being composed not long after the twentieth anniversary of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. As expected, the media is pulling out all the stops to make us remember and not to forget. While everyone agrees that we must keep alive the memory of those who have died, the media is going way overboard. It seems they’re trying to make everyone feel depressed with one goal in mind, that is, for everyone to tune into their particular coverage. As for those who had been killed, unfortunately they are secondary to ratings. So 9-11 passes like everything else. The next day its memory vanishes into thin air. Yet some congratulations is in order. Before the build up I heard quite a lot of folks say how they’ve tuned out. Even some have opted for the non-Internet flip phones which supposedly are making a come-back.

On the other hand, borrowing a worn-out expression, I’ve found the Internet to be the best invention since sliced bread. By that I don’t mean the usual stuff pertinent to entertainment but as a tool to access material essential to my interests. Such interest occupies a minuscule place in the larger order of things but it has a presence and surprisingly quite active. It seems that every time I access something (Syriac, for example, which is a somewhat exotic topic), new information and access to manuscripts pop up continuously. Then you have lexicons that normally cost an arm and a leg, all in PDF format, free for the taking. A true delight if ever there was one.

In fact, I haven't stepped into a physical library for several years because all that I want is literally at my fingertips.

While jotting down thoughts for this article, I admit succumbing to the temptation of breaking away from my work and taking a peek at news headlines and other material such as videos. I'm not quite sure from where this tendency arises, but it is somewhat annoying and clearly lacks any forethought or the like. In other words, I don't chose deliberately to stop my work and access the news. It just happens...a kind of habit or compulsive impulse. When accessing such material you may start off with a good intent but quickly it devolves into a pure waste of time. You stay with it for a while following one random lead after another until it tires you out. Then you stop and return to your work. By no means are you refreshed but have experienced a dissipation of energy both mental and physical. It may be minor but tends to become harmful when it starts to become accumulative which is almost all the time.

So what lies behind this modern day phenomenon? First of all our minds naturally tend toward distraction. That's something practitioners of meditation know well, so nothing new there. So when we access the Internet, it turns out to be the perfect tool to foster growth of this pesky tendency. It's a marriage made in heaven (or is it hell?). In theory it's better for us to stand up now and then, look out the window or walk around a bit before returning to our work. However, sticking with what we're doing in uninterrupted fashion essentially is a pipe dream. We're not so good at keeping at bay our desire to access anything that will cater to that flood of fantasies coming our way. Surely there must be studies we can Google to find out how much our our creativity is actually at work. I suspect the results are a bit scary.

On the other hand, there just might be a real benefit to these distractions. Overall, they keep our mind fluid...obviously too much so, but we can moderate it. If we remained focused all the time on a given project, quickly we'd run out of steam. This experience is borne out by intense periods of creativity as when writing. We keep at it relentlessly, being driven to complete what has been on our minds. While that's one of the most exhilarating experiences we can have in life, we know we cannot replicate it as often as we'd like nor should we be disappointed when we can't.

There might be other ways to foster alternatives, if you will, to the just mentioned distractions. Since the experience of varying degrees of mental wandering is part and parcel of our lives, it's high time to get creative and break out of the usual patterns of constraint. That is to say, we wish to quarantine these thoughts, and one

of the best ways is to think of them as infections. That image is very appropriate in these days of Covid 19. However, forget-about-it. There may be some short term benefits but emphasis is on the adjective “short.” We require a stronger fix, one that isn’t a cure-all but allows us to function better.

So instead of anxiously groping around—a very natural response—we have to yank ourselves out of our customary way of doing things. “Yank” is a strong word and indeed a necessary one as in the case at hand. Real force bordering on self-imposed violence may be required. However, it’s temporary. This withdrawal from media by necessity requires some hard-core yanking because its attraction is so overpowering. The worse part is that it’s constant, day and night, and so readily available. If it were a bit more difficult to access, we’d have a built-in buffer but unfortunately that’s not the case. It’s up to us to create such a buffer. And so we’re left with a situation which can stymie anyone. At this point it’s good to pause and take a deep breath before considering any alternative.

Such a break is vital because it puts some space between us and the activation of one of those complexes discussed in the article before this one. In brief, a complex is defined as a state of mind that hijacks us from behind, if you will. It sneaks up on us and takes control before we know it. Inferred is that although we’re wide awake, in reality we’re fast asleep, snoring away. Our guard is down completely so we’re primed to be taken over without putting up a struggle. As for the media, it’s a perfect instrument to keep active all the complexes out there so they can assail and control us at any time and in any place. Our problem without us fully realizing it is that we consent to remaining asleep which means that even if we’re disgruntled at our situation, we comply readily with what we’re told to do. This goes against our natural desire to be an autonomous being which means that all along we’ve been asleep and now comply without violence to whatever is proposed to us.

To see this is equivalent to waking up and can be quite embarrassing. Perhaps for the first time ever we discover that we’ve been asleep and have been so the day we emerged from our mother’s womb. If we weren’t somehow jolted, we’d continue being asleep right to death. No small wonder that zombie movies are so popular. They’re perfect mirrors of where most of us are right now. However, the zombies in our midst aren’t violent as in the movies. Rather, provided we’ve been jolted from our slumber we can walk among them with impunity. Superficially there’s no distinction between us and them except for the major one of us being awake. To put it perhaps more accurately, we realize our hijacked situation and instead of engaging in the

Copenhagen Syndrome, of sympathizing with our hijackers, we see through their ruse and walk away from it. Interestingly the hijackers comply or better, they melt away.

In a discussion with that friend I mentioned who's quite an expert in Carl Jung, I asked if a person can exist without having a complex or if there ever was a person without them, not even one. Right away you can't help but think of people like Buddha, Jesus Christ or some other notable religious founder. Without missing a beat he said no. The expression on his face was revealing, for right away I could tell he knew what he was talking about. Actually this question brought up more than I had expected. Even asking it wasn't one I intended, but I'm sure glad I did so. Then after a few minutes he back-tracked somewhat on his initial remark.

Complexes are ever present, most of the time latent, waiting to spring into action, that action having been described as hijacking. They can be kept at a minimum...not eliminated...only when we're occupied with something we love. This isn't quite the same as a hobby, but that's more a temporary fix or distraction. What's required is something that could, if we had the rare ability to do so, blossom into a full-time occupation. Then again, to do this is akin to be set free from many societal obligations. Perhaps the closest to it is cultivation of that ancient practice of *skole* or *otium* which will be discussed later. In other words, we've hit upon a state of existence of real freedom but a freedom oriented toward service of a far higher end.

Being so occupied takes us out of ourselves and posits us into a world where our constructive impulses are let loose. Again, the relaxed atmosphere of *skole* is essential for this. In fact, it turns out that more time and energy are involved than our usual ideas about being engaged in a hobby. Such activity doesn't seem to have a properly defined name, for example, an occupation. However, the main point is to watch ourselves while so engaged, take mental snapshots of ourselves and store them in in our memory as a reserve¹. In this way we have ammunition on hand for later and in reserve against those sudden occasions when we've been hijacked. A great idea but try putting it into practice. The hijacking by a complex is so complete it owns us hook, line and sinker. This is especially true at night when our defenses are down yet

1 Here our recollective faculty called *anamnesis* may be involved. By far Socrates is the best source for this. *Anamnesis* is far more than the ability to recall this or that but it seems to lay at the very foundation of our being. Here isn't the place to go into it. That might be left to another time.

to bear with it is a period of grace which can lead us to something better. Clearly some trial and error is needed to build up resistance to being taken in.

We could say that when engaged in this desirable state of *skole* or *otium* which involves our entire self memory of everything else takes a back seat and in fact, is left behind. Does it resemble being hijacked? I'd say only in that we've been taken over completely, nothing else. The major difference is that we have a distinct feeling of being set free, not imprisoned. Like the hijacking experience, there's a kind of outward pressure bearing down upon us, but it's benign; protective rather than wanting to control or let's say, horde us. Wishing this state would last forever is natural, but being ready to let it go is a better strategy. The anticipation focused around whether we can hang on to it or not turns out to be a sign of immaturity in that it reveals we haven't been accustomed to act in such a way before. *Skole/otium* is brand new to us, so we're bound to do some fumbling around. While we may have had earlier experiences of this time to engage in task especially meaningful to us, we hadn't reflected on it sufficiently to contrast with how we comport ourselves.

We have to adopt a new tactic not just to sustain this state of mind but to allow it to become more operative in our lives. Such phraseology seems the same but is not. Sustaining refers to our willful effort whereas allowing is just the opposite. Being grim and determined, albeit subtly, is one way but is bound to failure. Again, the element of hijacking can't help but rear its head when we grow in knowledge of how often it lies in wait along with its various guises. All can be reduced to a kind of pseudo-manipulation where we wish to be in charge. As my friend with his Jungian background would say, we don't allow ourselves to be governed by our unconscious. It requires a mediating element else because in the unconscious (he says) abides everything, and this everything can't be allowed to swamp us. This includes not just what's out there right now but what had been out there I guess going all the way back to the Big Bang and going forward to God-only-knows-what. So we could call it universal in the literal sense as one big turn, *unus + vertere*.

So to dispose ourselves in a mediating way to our unconscious appears to be the correct approach. At least that's how I understand it and am willing to be corrected as well informed should this be necessary. Such openness doesn't come naturally but is attained by repeated exposure to what we love doing. It may sound corny, but this love might be tied in with a larger reality of love—let's use *agape*—which resides in the unconscious. Now the way we talk about things assume a different tone, not as strained as in the past. The sense of being fulfilled in what we may call tentatively

our super-hobby can't remain confined within its own bounds but necessarily spills over into other areas of our life. If we've been enabled to expand there, surely the same can apply elsewhere.

Note that at this stage how those old yet familiar confining thoughts creep in. They've kept us comfortable through various ups and downs, but when you look at them now, you see how terribly confining they had made our lives. Talk about being hijacked. There's nothing bad about them, just that they are seen now for what they truly are, mental straight-jackets of varying degrees of tightness. We've grown accustomed to this tightness in its various forms because they delineate borders in which we can "freely" move. Note that "freely" is put in parentheses. In actuality this is not freedom but is more like an unlimited number of guiding principles to keep us on the straight and narrow.

Within these straight and narrow confines we pass our lives. To go outside them would be considered trespassing and with good reason. Everyone around us subscribes to the constrictions which they've had since birth. To go even further, we can hearken back to what was said above concerning the unconscious, way before we came into physical existence. At this juncture just about the best thing we can do is simply stop and take this in without passing judgment. Another way to look at this pause is to consider it a loosening from our being hijacked. Now we simply observe everything which turns out to be the greatest loosening agent that ever had existed. Yet as soon as we reach this state we feel the confining bonds wanting to embrace us. The contrast between the two are so extreme that we're inclined to consider the relaxed freedom of *skole/otium* that has come upon us as not real. Better yet, it's real, all right, but we're not inclined to be there...unworthy of it, perhaps?

At this juncture we have to be wary of ideas coming from religion. Right away lots of red flags starting popping up because such talk automatically brings us back to childhood. At that formative time quite a few constraining ideas were implanted within our heads, tight as any straight jacket and far from giving the impression of being essential to setting us free. They do this in two general ways: first, by appealing to the various defects of our human character which usually fall under the label of sin. Second, they appeal to our being made in the divine image and likeness. While that's preached a lot, always it takes second place to sin. Reference, of course, is made to the so-called "fall." Being caught in between them is standard Christian fare and when you come right down to it, rather depressing. Furthermore, they offer various disciplines which over time have become encrusted and handed down as *bona*

fide methods of dealing with such a situation. This is incredibly hard from which to loosen ourselves. Sometimes it's beyond our capacity meaning we're forced to accept it for what it is.

Recapping in a way, each of us carries around a bunch of complexes, saintly people being no exception. We tend to revere such persons which means we overlook what we'd rather not see and when we see it, are scandalized. This brings up the issue of adoration so intimately connected with a complex and escapes an uninitiated eye, mine included. It also touches upon whether or not it's desirable to be saintly. For some, to question this might sound outrageous. However, closer examination shows it is not. Essentially being saintly or holy means to be set apart from the run-of-the-mill of society. You have to be virtuous to the nth degree and then some. It's a terribly boring, sterile form of existence.

We may kid ourselves by failing to admit that we engage in adoration of any sort, that it belongs to so-called primitives, but to adore is central to our being. In fact, adoration can be a form of being hijacked. One way to disentangle ourselves from this condition is to minimize contact with the outside world. We don't shut ourselves off and blot out everything else. Instead, we moderate the way we absorb things as by the media. This sounds great, almost Thoreau-ian, but rarely do we have the discipline to see it through. However, there is one way that might help us overcome the obstacle at hand.

If we're honest with ourselves, we enjoy being stimulated by input from the media. Those in that business are more aware of this than we imagine and make it a point to cater to us. All this is well known but embarrassing to admit, let alone to follow through. To counter this means it's time to—and this is in accord with this article's title—go from a tendency to maximize things to minimizing them. We know what to do which isn't the point at issue here. To put it better, it's helpful to reduce our propensity to adapt what I termed in another article our preference for the cutting edge. Now that's maximizing with a vengeance. By that I mean we tend to identify anything meaningful in life as associated with a struggle which gives the impression of being unavoidable. This is so ingrained that we can't think of any endeavor without it. All sorts of heroic deeds and the like are woven into this attitude, so much that we don't question it. The same applies to being a saint as noted above. To do so is seen as trying to avoid an uncomfortable but necessary situation, and we don't want to act in such an unmanly fashion. But does this have to be? And if there's an alternative, what does it consist of?

Actually the title of this essay (Maximize to Minimize) reflects such an alternative. By maximize I infer that we're disposed to go at anything full strength, no holds barred. It's the accepted way of doing things and wins high praise when we succeed. The inverse is true should we fail. Thus a certain dread hangs over our heads, an added feature to this cutting edge. Now lay it aside even momentarily. At first we're left stymied, holding the bag with nothing to do nor any place to go, a rather frightful prospect. Laying it aside is far from acting cowardly. Instead, it's a sign of real courage, of willing to take a gamble on something society (which includes religion) doesn't have the capacity to do. It's never been proposed or if so, has been shot down before it even had a chance to show itself.

As for making the shift from our habitual desire to maximize to its opposite or to minimize, we have to take a gamble by not following through on our habitual desire to take the cutting edge route. A simple example would be starting with the media as noted in the very first paragraph. Not long before this article the United States withdrew from Afghanistan. Most of us have followed it as well as other pressing issues both foreign and domestic. Indeed, they're presented to grab our attention and hold it as long as possible. So what if we stood back for a moment? When you consider the simple facts, we can't influence these events in any which way. Why, then, bother? We do so out of a certain commitment, that if we don't, we're unconcerned citizens. Get involved and stay on the cutting edge is what our instincts tell us. The only end result is ulcers, and when we get them we feel we've earned some kind of badge for merit. At least we won't be accused of shirking our duty (whatever that means).

In conclusion, I offer some remarks about how the Christian tradition has taken over from the ancient Greeks the practice of *schole* (for the Romans it's *otium*). Essentially it can be defined as spare time, leisure or ease. In those days such time was a rarity enjoyed by the upper class. However, it meant more than our modern notion of time off but something more akin to a *kairos* event, very different from the passage of chronological time. *Schole* is endowed with a touch of the eternal and put at the larger service of one's fellows. It's pretty much lost nowadays but certainly has just as much if not more value now than before. As for those who at the time engaged in *skole*, I don't think anyone had scorn for it as they would today. In fact, all society revolved around it.

This brings up once more that notion of needing to be at the cutting edge when it comes to the practice of religion, Christianity certainly included. Easily it can be applied to the various ascetic practices. When you're caught up in them, you know you're doing what's demanded of you. The harsher the better. Should it come to martyrdom, now you're really talking. In addition to this we have those who are standing by, taking this all in and loving every minute of it. Should you throw out any thought as to fostering a *skole* relative to religious practice, be prepared for being dismissed outrightly as lazy or worse, as not one of us. That's the ultimate condemnation and doesn't have to be stated explicitly. If you want *skole*, do it at night after a hard day of ascetic practice. That will earn you merit and respect in the eyes of your admirers without having to bother putting on a show.

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