

BOOK REVIEW

Living in Flow: The Science of Synchronicity and How Your Choices Shape Your World by Sky Nelson-Isaacs. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2019. 320 pp. \$19.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-62317-311-1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31275/2019/1563>
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While Sky Nelson-Isaacs is not the first physicist to be interested in the phenomenon of synchronicity—others who come to mind are Wolfgang Pauli, F. David Peat, and Walter von Lucadou—Nelson-Isaacs' new book *Living in Flow* is notable for its engaging and highly readable presentation of his particular theory about the relationship between quantum physics and synchronicity. Like the great idealist philosophers before him, Nelson-Isaacs takes mind to be the primary reality, and his theory explains how the contents of our minds—in particular the qualities of the experiences we anticipate having—shape the evolution of the physical world through the process of “meaningful history selection.” Nelson-Isaacs also links his theory to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, positing that we are best able to shape the evolution of the world in accordance with our desires when we are in the state of flow.

Nelson-Isaacs begins his book with the psychological component of his theory and works up to the quantum physics near the end, but I'm going to take the opposite approach here.

Those who have some familiarity with the basic ideas of quantum theory will be aware that the mathematics of quantum mechanics provides us with information about a physical system in the form of a collection of superposed states and their associated probability amplitudes. However, it has long been a matter of debate what causes one of these superposed states to become the state we ultimately observe. Many theories have been proposed, but none has been universally agreed upon. Nelson-Isaacs takes the position that it is the act of observation by a mind that causes a physical system to assume a determinate state (at least with regard to that observer). Furthermore, he hypothesizes that the qualitative experience anticipated by the observing mind influences which state becomes actual, with states more conducive to the anticipated qualitative experience being more likely to occur.

Nelson-Isaacs offers the concrete example of a woman rushing to catch a subway train so she can see a play at the theater. The woman is a bit late and is rushing specifically because she doesn't want to miss out on the delicious popcorn served at this theater—she is vividly anticipating the taste of this salty snack on her tongue. Nelson-Isaacs says that the woman's vivid anticipation is able to influence which possible states of her environment become actual, weighting the various possible states in favor of those that are more likely to produce the qualitative experience she's anticipating. For instance, if there's a cyclist boarding the train at the time that the woman is rushing to catch it, her mental anticipation of popcorn at the theater could increase the likelihood of the cyclist's getting their bike stuck in the train doors, so that the train is delayed in leaving the station and the woman has enough time to board. Or the woman's anticipation could increase the likelihood that the driver of the train will be momentarily distracted so that the train doors close a few seconds later than they normally would. There are many different ways that the woman's anticipated, qualitative experience of salty popcorn at the theater could be promoted by the way events unfold around her, and some of them might not even involve her making it to the play on time. As Nelson-Isaacs points out, it could be that she makes it to the play too late to be seated but then discovers that a nearby movie theater is playing a film she's been wanting to watch, and so she ends up in the movie theater munching on *their* salty popcorn and enjoying the very qualitative experience she'd been anticipating, albeit in a different context.

Nelson-Isaacs notes that his theory allows us to explain synchronistic experiences without appealing to supernatural powers of influence over other people or objects. This woman isn't *causing* the bicycle or the train driver to behave in any particular way. Rather, the quantum processes occurring in her environment are evolving in response to the qualitative experience on which she's focusing her mental energy.

Nelson-Isaacs also points out that his theory avoids the thorny paradoxes that are often associated with causation backward in time. Many synchronistic experiences seem to be built on past events being affected by what we are thinking or desiring *now*, but in Nelson-Isaacs' theory our anticipated qualitative experiences don't go back in time and change events that have already occurred, a situation that could lead to *Back to the Future*-type paradoxes, where one could be responsible for preventing one's own birth. Rather, says Nelson-Isaacs, the past only takes on a definite state or "history" when we observe it or its effects (and it only takes on that definite state for the mind that has made the observation). Since we have observed that we were in fact born, the past is (for us, at least) determinate with respect to that event, but it can remain indeterminate with respect to

many other details that we have not yet observed, including, perhaps, the specific details of our conception. Nelson-Isaacs calls this aspect of his theory “retroactive event determination,” and according to it the qualitative experiences we are anticipating now can, without paradox, influence the yet-indeterminate portions of the past toward possible histories that are conducive to the production of these experiences. As Nelson-Isaacs puts it, “*The end result makes the history fall into place*” (p. 208). And this is why he calls his overall theory one of “meaningful history selection.”

Now for the psychological component of Nelson-Isaacs’ hypothesis. Nelson-Isaacs admits that the universe doesn’t always seem to be giving us what we want. In fact, sometimes it can seem that events are continually falling into place so as to *thwart* our desires. What’s going on here? For one thing, many people besides ourselves are influencing the evolution of events in our world, and many of them may be influencing those events in a manner contrary to our own desires. But Nelson-Isaacs also emphasizes that his hypothesis is that the physical world responds to the experiences we *anticipate*, not necessarily to the experiences we *desire*. We may really want a certain thing to happen, but if we spend all of our mental energy focusing on how horrible we will feel if it *doesn’t* happen, then the physical world is going to evolve in a way that promotes that negative qualitative experience, rather than the positive one we would prefer. Furthermore, we may not always be consciously aware of the experiences we are subtly anticipating. Because the physical world so faithfully mirrors those underlying anticipated experiences back at us, paying attention to our environment can actually be an excellent way of noticing our inner thought processes and how they run counter to our expressed desires.

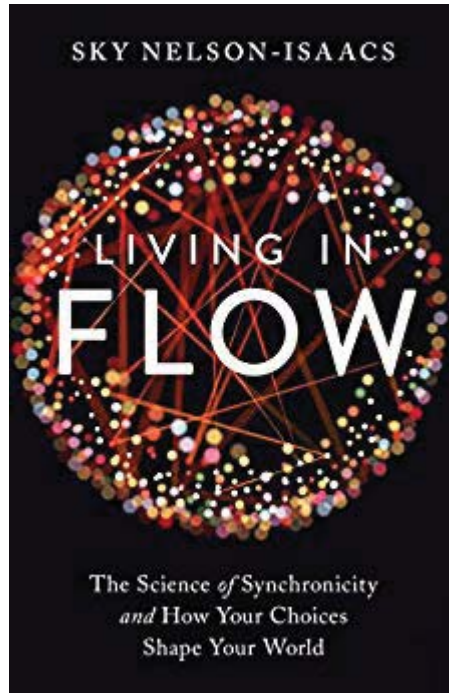
Nelson-Isaacs encourages readers to cultivate mental and emotional clarity so that “the cosmos can respond to [their] highest ideals, not [their] worries and fears” (p. 47), and he offers some practical advice regarding how to do this. He says that positive synchronicities—events that are in accordance with what we most deeply desire—are promoted by entering the state of flow described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In flow, says Nelson-Isaacs, there is a balance between inner drive and responsiveness to the environment. We are in touch with our highest inner purposes as well as in tune with the messages that our circumstances are sending us about the most fruitful paths to achieving those purposes, given what all the other minds around us are anticipating. In flow, we are not focused on the possible negative outcomes of events around us but instead are calmly aware of what we deeply desire as well as receptive to the creative ways in which the universe may respond to us. Nelson-Isaacs offers six practical steps for promoting flow, summarized by the acronym LORRAX: Listen,

Open, Reflect, Release, Act, and Repeat(X). When we are able to desire in this detached way, he says, the universe turns out to be highly responsive to our desires.

In the end, I find both the quantum mechanical and psychological components of Nelson-Isaacs' theory plausible. I've been carefully studying the phenomenon of synchronicity for almost a decade, and Nelson-Isaacs' theory aligns with many of the basic features of this phenomenon I have observed. (For instance, many people who have experienced strong synchronicities have reported their being accompanied by a relaxed but focused state of mind that it seems reasonable to connect to Csikszentmihalyi's

concept of flow.) It is certainly refreshing to hear someone who is well-versed in quantum mechanics—Nelson-Isaacs has an MS in physics and specializes in the foundations of quantum mechanics—put forward a theory that many less-qualified authors have only been able to gesture at. Physicists will probably wish that he went into more technical detail, and it's likely that philosophers and psychologists will also wish for more detail regarding the aspects of the theory that touch on their own specialties. However, one of the strengths of Nelson-Isaacs' book is the way in which he brings these disciplines together to create a unified theory that can spur the imaginations of lay readers and specialists alike, and create a framework for much future detailed technical work in all of these areas. And those who are interested in the quantum mechanical details of Nelson-Isaacs' theory can consult his scholarly articles on the subject, including one in this journal.

But, if I can understand why Nelson-Isaacs didn't give more technical details in this popular work, I do think his book would have been strengthened, even for popular audiences, by considering a wider range of synchronistic experiences. The particular real-life examples that he offers are rather mild and could be easily explained as mere chance events. It's hard to see why these particular experiences would motivate one to adopt



a revolutionary physical theory. More striking examples of synchronicities are certainly out there, as I show in my own recent book *The Source and Significance of Coincidences* (2019), and I believe Nelson-Isaacs' book could have benefited from including a few cases of this more compelling variety, some of which border on blatant psychokinesis.

I also discuss in my book evidence that many of the synchronistic events in our lives have their origins in sources external to us, only some of which are other living human beings. Indeed, it appears that synchronicities can at times deliver very pointed messages from other minds. I believe that Nelson-Isaacs' theory can accommodate and even help to explain this aspect of the phenomenon, and his book would be even stronger if it contained a discussion of this possibility.

Nelson-Isaacs' book could also have benefited from a comparison between his ideas and other theories that connect synchronistic phenomena to quantum physics: for instance, the entanglement theory proposed by Walter von Lucadou, Hartmann Römer, and Harald Walch (2007).

In spite of these minor deficiencies, however, *Living in Flow* is a highly valuable addition to the popular literature on synchronicity. There are not enough works out there that emphasize the role we play in creating our own synchronistic experiences, and this book is an important step toward a better understanding of the process by which our own minds determine the evolution of the world we observe.

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