

Just Right

Why We Like What We Like

(and why we don't what we don't)



Uriel Meshoulam

ibidem

Uriel Meshoulam

Just Right

Why We Like What We Like

(and why we don't what we don't)

Uriel Meshoulam

JUST RIGHT

Why We Like What We Like

(and why we don't what we don't)

ibidem
Verlag 

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2118-2

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8118-6

© **ibidem**-Verlag, Hannover • Stuttgart 2026

Leuschnerstraße 40
30457 Hannover
Germany / Deutschland
info@ibidem.eu

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlanges unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who commits any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Printed in the EU

For my beloved wife, Rahel,

my companion in life and in the search for what is just right.

In loving memory of my brother,

Ilan Meshoulam

(1941-2026)

Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	11
Preface.....	13
Acknowledgments.....	15
Introduction.....	17
Chapter 1: When We Misjudge What We Desire.....	21
The Illusion of Knowing What We Want	22
The Cost of Misreading Preferences	25
Chapter 2: The Goldilocks Principle.....	29
The Yerkes–Dodson Discovery	30
Stress May Be Either Detrimental or Beneficial	32
In the Zone: Flow States and Profound Enjoyment	35
The Physiology of the Goldilocks Zone.....	36
Novelty and Complexity: Contributors to Optimal Stimulation	38
Chapter 3: Is Novelty the Spice of Life or Its Strain?.....	39
The Nuanced Status of “New”	39
Novelty as the Violation of Expectations	42
The Physiological Response to Novelty	44
Learning in the Goldilocks Zone	46
Surprise Means the Future Is on Our Mind	48
We Mostly Think About the Future	48
When Reading, the Mind Is Focused on the Future	50
The Optimal Level of Novelty	52
The Library of Babel	52
The Library of Assyria	54
The Cambridge Public Library	55
The Turmoil of Excessive Novelty	56
The Tedium of Minimal Novelty.....	57

An Illustration: The Appeal of Moderate Novelty	61
Anticipating Music	69
The Changing Nature of Novelty	73
Chapter 4: Complexity: From the Obvious to the Baffling	75
Defining Complexity	75
The Range of Complexity: From Overload to Effortless Routine	76
Complexity Is Interesting: A Blessing or a Curse?	77
Music Revisited: The Role of Complexity	78
The Case of the Arts	80
The Case of Playing Games	84
The Case of Professional Duties	86
Looking Ahead: Perception	88
Chapter 5: Perception in a Complex World	89
Perception as a Selective Process	89
The Case of Depth Perception	90
Perception as a Gap-Filling Process	91
Perceptual Closure	93
Perception and the Conception of Objects	94
The Culminating Principle: Perception Prefers Simplicity	97
Perceptual Choice	102
Chapter 6: Forming Narratives	105
We Do Not Simply Tell It as It Is	106
Stories Are Never About Everything	106
Stories Fill the Gaps	108
In Stories, Events Are Given Reasons	109
In Stories, One Thing Follows Another	111
A Love Triangle Story	113

Chapter 7: Finding Our Way Back to the Sweet Spot	117
Can We Override Our Automatic Processes?	117
Blood-Sugar Regulation as a Model of Adjustment	120
Acute Understimulation: Momentary Boredom	121
The Worst Idea of All Time	122
Anything But Nothing	124
Imagination and Creativity to the Rescue	126
Acute Overstimulation: Calming the System	129
Intensity: Managing Acute Sensory Overload.....	130
Confronting Sudden Novelty and Unexpected Complexity: The Limits of Immediate Understanding	131
Chronic Understimulation: Too Little for Too Long.....	132
Reinventing Life: From Monotony to Meaning	134
Enrichment Without Reinvention.....	136
Chronic Overstimulation: Too Much for Too Long	137
Persistent Intensity	139
Persistent Novelty.....	140
Persistent Complexity	143
Vacations: A Goldilocks Solution	144
Chapter 8: Psychotherapy: Restoring Balance	147
Therapies That Target Activation Head-On	147
Talking Therapies	151
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	152
Psychoanalysis	155
Humanistic and Existential Therapies	158
Goldilocks's Therapeutic Approach.....	163
Chapter 9: Between Apathy and Upheaval in Public Life	167
Excess Activation in Public Life: Political Turbulence	167
Low Activation in Public Life: Political Apathy	169
The Sweet Spot of Democracy: Collective Flow	173

Economic Life as Public Activation: Between Stagnation and Frenzy	175
Media and Political Perception: Shaping the Emotional Climate	178
Conclusion	181
References	189
Index	199

List of Figures

Figure 1. Inverted-U relationship between stimulation and performance	32
Figure 2. Caricature of the Skandalkonzert	73
Figure 3. (a) 5-sided polygon, (b) 7-sided polygon, (c) 40-sided polygon.....	81
Figure 4A. Kandinsky: Klänge, Plate 25, 1913.....	83
Figure 4B. Kandinsky: Tache Noire, 1938	83
Figure 5. Incomplete shapes perceived as C and D.	93
Figure 6. Broken contours perceived as two circles.....	93
Figure 7. Black-and-white bands perceived as a hat	94
Figure 8. Fragmented blots perceived as a cow	94
Figure 9. Segmented shapes perceived as a football	95
Figure 10. The Old Man of the Mountain, NH	96
Figure 11. Four cloud formations seen as recognizable shapes	96
Figure 12. Necker cube	98
Figure 13. Two ways to perceive the Necker cube	98
Figure 14. Two-dimensional view of the Necker cube.....	99
Figure 15. Schematic boxes in order of increasing length.....	99
Figure 16. The Ames Room	100
Figure 17. The Ames Room through a peephole	101
Figure 18. The Duck-Rabbit Illusion	102
Figure 19. The classic young-woman-old-woman ambiguous figure	102
Figure 20. The narrative sequence of dishwashing	112
Figure 21. Images depicting dishwashing arranged in random order	112
Figure 22. Stages of silkworm development in the correct sequence.....	112
Figure 23. The stages of silkworm development shown in random order	113
Figure 24. Frame 332 from Heider and Simmel's movie	114

Figure 25. Twelve frames extracted from Heider and Simmel's movie.....	115
Figure 26. Compass needles in the absence of a magnetic field	163
Figure 27. Compass needles align with a magnetic field.....	163

Preface

Although my formal training was in clinical psychology, an early turn in my academic life led me in an unexpected direction. My first teaching assignment required me to delve into child development, a field somewhat outside my primary specialization. Preparing for that course, I returned to the writings of Jean Piaget. Reading Piaget anew, I came to appreciate more fully his vision of the mind as active and evolving, always constructing, revising, and adapting its understanding of the world.

Gradually, I came to see that Piaget's insights extended well beyond childhood. They helped me understand psychotherapy not simply as the relief of distress but as a developmental process in which people revise their assumptions, make fuller sense of experience, and discover more effective ways of engaging with life. Around the same time, I was increasingly influenced by George Kelly's view that human beings are active interpreters of reality, continually construing and reconstruing the world in an effort to anticipate events and make life more manageable.

As an undergraduate, I had the privilege of studying with Daniel Kahneman, who later received the Nobel Prize. His work added a further, humbling lesson: much of what shapes our judgments and preferences lies outside awareness, hidden from the very introspection we so readily trust. That insight led me to the broader question that animates this book: if we do not always know what will satisfy us, what kinds of experiences do we actually seek?

The idea at the center of this book is that, in many areas of life, we flourish not under conditions of maximum stimulation or minimum strain but within an optimal middle range. My thinking about this idea has been shaped by psychologists such as Daniel Berlyne, James Mancuso, Daniel Kahneman, Jean Piaget, Theodore Sarbin, and Viktor Frankl. Some advanced this idea directly; others offered concepts that deepened and supported it. I am especially indebted to their writings, which are referenced throughout this volume and have deeply informed my thinking.

Together, these thinkers helped me arrive at the question that lies at the heart of this book: why do we like what we like? Our preferences are not arbitrary, but neither are they fully transparent to us. They arise from the mind's ongoing effort to interpret experience and organize it into forms that are neither too chaotic nor too bland, neither too demanding nor too dull. What we like is shaped, in part, by what feels manageable rather than baffling, engaging rather than empty. This book grew from my effort to understand those hidden processes and the "just right" conditions under which the mind seems most fully alive.

Acknowledgments

This book grew out of many conversations, friendships, and intellectual debts accumulated over the course of my life. Two of the people who shaped it most are no longer with us, yet their presence is felt on nearly every page.

I want to begin with James Mancuso, my dissertation advisor, close friend, and, most important, intellectual mentor. Although I wrote my dissertation under his supervision decades ago, Jim's influence was never confined to that period of my life. He helped me appreciate the importance of narrative in psychology, introduced me to constructivist thought, and shared his enthusiasm for Daniel Berlyne's idea of the optimal level of arousal (or what I call activation), which became the seed from which this book eventually grew. Our many conversations about novelty, meaning, and psychological life remain among the most formative of my career. Jim was more than a teacher; in many ways, he was a father figure, and I continue to feel his guidance in my thinking.

I also owe a profound debt to Viktor Frankl, who was both a mentor and a valued friend. He introduced me to ideas that shaped not only parts of this book but also my thinking about psychology, human nature, responsibility, and meaning. His influence helped me understand that human beings are not merely driven by forces from within or pressures from without, but are also drawn forward by purposes, commitments, and meanings that give life direction.

I am deeply grateful to author Noah Charney, whose generosity extended beyond helping me prepare the book proposal. Noah believed in this manuscript at times when I was uncertain it would ever find its way into print. His confidence, encouragement, and practical counsel helped me keep going. Although he did not edit the book, he freely gave his time, experience, and literary judgment, and his unwavering faith in the project mattered more than he may have known.

My sons, David and Benny, were the book's first editors. They helped me polish several sections, catch mistakes, and improve the flow of the writing. They also, I suspect, saved me from a few

embarrassing missteps. I am grateful not only for their careful reading but also for the generosity and intelligence they brought to the task.

This book is about finding the conditions under which life feels neither too empty nor too overwhelming, but just right. I have been fortunate to learn about that balance not only from books and research but also from the people who have accompanied me along the way. I am grateful to all those whose conversations, questions, and encouragement helped me think more clearly about boredom and overwhelm, novelty and complexity, safety and growth. Special thanks to my friends Shua Tsal, who planted the seed that led me to begin this project, and Tomer Ullman, who introduced me to the podcast *The Worst Idea of All Time*, which, as it turned out, was a very good idea.

Above all, I am grateful to my family, young and old, who supported me throughout and shared my excitement.

Introduction

We all like to think we know ourselves. Who else could have better access to our wants, needs, and desires than we do?

That sense of familiarity feels comforting. It gives us confidence that we can steer our lives by following what we like and avoiding what we do not. If we trust our instincts, surely we will make the right choices and find what makes us happy.

Yet it does not always work out that neatly. Time and again, our intuitions betray us, and our confidence proves unjustified. We pursue what we are sure will fulfill us, only to find disappointment waiting on the other side. We get what we wanted, and somehow, we no longer want it. Gadgets that once thrilled me now sit in a corner of the basement collecting dust. Many readers, I suspect, could identify a similar relic somewhere at home.

Why does that happen? Why are we so often mistaken about what we will actually enjoy? How can we be so sure in the moment, only to discover later that we misunderstood ourselves entirely?

These are not new questions; they are as old as philosophy itself. Even Aristotle was puzzled by how people can follow their best judgment and still end up unhappy, or even harmed.¹ He concluded that when people fail to choose what is best for them, ignorance or weakness in reasoning must be to blame.

But ignorance of *what*, exactly? Why is it so easy to fool ourselves about our own desires? Our story begins with that mystery: how we lose our way even when we think we are being true to ourselves.

My interest in this enigma intensified during my undergraduate years at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, when I studied under Daniel Kahneman. He summed up this problem in the following concise statement: “You know far less about yourself than you feel you do.”² Kahneman’s work on cognitive biases and the limits of introspection reinforced a troubling conclusion: people

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII: *Symposium Aristotelicum*.

² Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), 52.

have far less access to the unconscious workings of their minds than they believe.

Consistent with Kahneman's view, both therapists and academic psychologists assume that much of human behavior is shaped by unconscious processes that are not readily accessible to straightforward introspection. People follow psychological "rules" without realizing it, much like they follow grammar rules in speech without necessarily being able to state them explicitly. Across fields ranging from perception and cognition to social and clinical psychology, researchers seek to illuminate the hidden processes that shape our choices and preferences. Psychotherapists pursue a parallel task: helping people recognize the forces that guide their priorities, decisions, and self-understandings.

My academic and clinical interests gravitated toward the "hidden rules" that shape our likes, dislikes, and intuitive choices. This curiosity led me to the central claim of this book: much of human experience is governed by a "Goldilocks Principle," according to which we are drawn to conditions that activate the mind neither too much nor too little, but just right.

For me, the psychologist who brought this question into the clearest focus was Daniel Berlyne. Drawing on research across several areas of psychology, he identified a fundamental principle underlying our choices and priorities: the drive to maintain an optimal level of activation. We tend to resist both understimulation, which leaves us dull and restless, and overstimulation, which produces strain and confusion.

The book explores the idea that human beings seek and function best within a "just right" range of activation, and that this tendency shapes our preferences and decisions across many domains of life. Drawing on experimental findings, clinical insight, and everyday examples, it examines how this process operates and why it matters.

In developing this idea, I found it useful to look beyond psychology. Across many fields, scientists have observed that systems tend to function best not at extremes but within optimal ranges. In physiology, body temperature and blood pressure must remain within narrow limits; in ecology, the balance of population size,

predation, and available resources is crucial; in medicine, drug dosages are effective only within a limited therapeutic window. Again and again, stability and effectiveness depend on a “just right” balance. This book asks whether something similar governs the mind.

The book focuses on two major contributors to activation: novelty and complexity. It argues that experiences that are too novel or too complex can overwhelm us, while those that are too familiar or too simple can leave us bored and disengaged. By examining how we respond to and regulate these forces, the book aims to illuminate the hidden processes that shape perception, narrative, well-being, psychotherapy, and public life.

The chapters that follow develop this argument step by step. The book begins with the problem of misjudging what we want, then introduces the Goldilocks Principle as a hidden regulator of both preference and performance. It next examines novelty and complexity as two central forces that raise or lower activation, before turning to perception and narrative as two of the mind’s principal ways of organizing experience. The final chapters consider how we regulate activation in everyday life, how psychotherapy can be understood through this lens, and how similar dynamics appear in public and economic life.

If you have ever wondered why your choices do not always bring satisfaction, or why some experiences leave you overstimulated while others leave you flat, this book may offer useful answers. It is not a conventional self-help manual, but an attempt to illuminate the hidden processes that guide our preferences and decisions. I hope that the book will help explain why we so often misjudge what will satisfy us, and what it means to live closer to that “just right” range in which experience becomes more satisfying, coherent, and sustaining.