

BOREDOM AND VALUE

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ABSTRACT

L.H. Townsend: Boredom and Value
(Under the direction of Susan Wolf)

In this paper I argue that the susceptibility to boredom and the experience of boredom can be involved in a good life in important ways. First I address why this inquiry is worth pursuing and then define what it is to be bored and what it is for an object or experience to be boring. I then discuss three ways boredom is involved with positively valued projects or experiences, first outlining some features I take to be an essential part of living a good life that often include boredom. Then I argue that the ability to grow and change is facilitated by the susceptibility to boredom. Finally, I discuss how the experience of pain can be a constituent part of certain kinds of valuable experiences and suggest there are analogous ways that the experience of boredom is also constitutive element of some valuable experiences.

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Introduction

Being bored can be a miserable, almost painful experience. In one psychological study, many subjects preferred pain over boredom: rather than do nothing for fifteen minutes they elected to administer one or more electric shocks to themselves.¹ The experience of suffering through a boring lecture, sermon, or staff meeting is familiar to most. It seems at first glance as though we would be better off if we never had to experience boredom. But in this paper I will argue that the susceptibility to boredom as well as the experience of boredom can be involved in a good human life in important ways. The susceptibility to boredom can facilitate growth and progress for an agent and in the world. Boredom is often a part of valued experiences and achievements—sometimes incidental to that value but sometimes integral. Boredom can also inform an agent about herself and about the world. If this is right then we need not avoid boredom at all costs or see it as necessarily indicative of a defect in ourselves or the world around us.²

I will begin with a word about why this inquiry is worth pursuing and then define what it is to be bored and what it is for an object or experience to be boring. I will then discuss three

¹ They reported that the shocks were painful and would have hypothetically paid money not to be shocked again, so it is not the case that they enjoyed being shocked.

² The thought that boredom is to be avoided or that one can be blameworthy for boredom is widespread. See Calhoun, Cheshire. "Living With Boredom" in *Sophia*. 50:2 (2011), page 269; Moller, Dan. "The Boring" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 72:2 (2014), 181; Episode 5 of season 2 of the television show *Louie*; and *The Phantom Tollbooth* for example.

ways boredom is involved with positively valued projects or experiences. First I outline some features I take to be an essential part of living a good life that often include boredom. Then I argue that the ability to grow and change seems to be facilitated by the susceptibility to boredom. Finally, I will discuss how the experience of pain can be a constituent part of certain kinds of valuable experiences and suggest there are analogous ways that the experience of boredom is also constitutive element of some valuable experiences.

Why should we care about boredom?

First, a word on why this inquiry is worth exploring. Boredom is, by definition, an unpleasant experience and we might wonder why it is not obvious we ought to just minimize it as much as possible.³ One reason is that boredom is sometimes classified as an emotion. Most emotions, even unpleasant ones, have been defended at some point as having some usefulness in our lives. Many philosophers have discussed the importance of feeling moral emotions like anger, contempt, and indignation.⁴ There are nonmoral examples, too; never experiencing sadness would seem to indicate a psychological problem or perhaps impoverished conditions in the life of the agent. Never experiencing sadness seems to indicate a lack of the kind of attachments and commitments that, when lost, are cause for grief. Even jealousy has had some champions who argue that to eradicate jealousy from our lives would be to diminish an important

³ I will address what boredom is in a moment but it does seem that it must be an unpleasant experience: “I’m bored” is a complaint. It is hard to imagine a situation in which someone says “I’m bored” and is enjoying herself. It seems more likely she would say she is content or relaxed or not feeling much of anything.

⁴ For example: Lorde, Audre. “The Uses of Anger” in *Women’s Studies Quarterly*. 25:1 (1997) pages 278-285; Bell, Macalester “A Woman’s Scorn: Toward a Feminist Defense of Contempt as a Moral Emotion” in *Hypatia* 20:4 (2005) ages 80-93; Strawson, Peter. “Freedom and Resentment” in *Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pages 72-93

feature of ourselves.⁵ Might there be similar considerations when it comes to boredom? Perhaps there is some feature of human lives or psychologies that entails boredom and would be diminished if we did not experience boredom.

Some might object that boredom is not really an emotion at all. Still, there are other unpleasant feelings that are not emotions but serve important functions like hunger and pain. Even beyond the instrumental value of these things to signal facts about our biological needs and physical well-being, some argue that they can be an integral part of valuable experiences.⁶ We might look and see whether there are any parallels with the case of boredom. If so, we will have found support for the claim that boredom is not necessarily indicative of a defect in agents or the world or something to always avoid.

What is it for something to be boring? What is it to be bored?

The boring is something that lacks features with which we are capable of engaging. William James Earle says the boring is “cognitively useless:” when something is boring there is nothing there with which we can cognitively engage in a meaningful way.⁷ Dan Moller defines the boring as what disappoints a well-positioned audience’s reasonable expectation to be given sufficient reason to focus their attention.⁸ Cheshire Calhoun says an activity is boring when it demonstrates an insufficiency to engage a person’s evaluative-related capacities, where evaluative capacities are things like desire and aversion, value ranking, and deciding how to deal

⁵ Neu, Jerome. “Jealous Thoughts” in [Explaining Emotions](#). A. O. Rorty (ed.), University of California Press. (1980) pages 425-463

⁶ MacLean, Douglas. “Pain and Suffering” (Draft)

⁷ Earle, William James. “Interesting, Boring, Beautiful” in *The Philosophical Forum*. 43:4 (2012), page 381

⁸ Moller, Dan, op. cit., 183

with. Notably, we can sometimes “use up” our capacity to engage these capacities.⁹ We get done with whatever we are doing, we come to the end of our capacity to appreciate, we can no longer think of something new to do with a given object or activity.

Consider an example. Marwa, a philosophy professor, and her two daughters go to a philosophy talk. The lecturer gives an overview of a familiar philosophical problem. Marwa feels bored. The lecturer merely outlines the problem and the various solutions that have been offered but does not go into detail defending any of them and does not present a new solution. Marwa has been aware of this debate for some time and is interested in it but everything that was presented is familiar to her. She has read about, discussed, and taught all of the material presented. This lecture might count as boring for on Calhoun’s view since there is nothing to engage Marwa’s cognitive or evaluative capacities—Marwa has already engaged with this material in many ways on many occasions. There is nothing to come to understand, nothing surprising, nothing else to do besides sit through information with which she is already familiar. But this might not count as boring on Earle’s view—it is not as if the material covered is completely cognitively useless. Marwa’s older daughter might find it fascinating because she has never been exposed to the material before, though she finds the problem interesting and important and has the capacity to understand what is being lectured on. But perhaps Marwa’s younger daughter also finds the talk boring, not because she is so familiar with the material like her mother, but because she is too young to understand any of the content. This brings out a feature of Moller’s view: it must be a *well-positioned* audience who is taken into account when determining whether an object or activity is boring. There are major differences in each philosophers’ view: Calhoun’s view is agent-relative. Moller’s view is relative to a well-

⁹ Calhoun, Cheshire, op. cit., page 273

positioned audience. And Eares's view talks only about the object or activity that is boring (though he references agents in so far as being cognitively useless makes reference to a cognizer). But they have some important commonalities: it is not the case that the boring is simply identified with whatever anyone under any circumstances finds boring. What is boring is characterized in each case as a deficiency of qualities with which to engage or pay attention [whether or not the deficiency is strictly a feature of the activity or whether it makes reference to a particular agent (idealized or not)].

To be bored is to respond to an object or activity with weariness, restlessness, and dissatisfaction.¹⁰ Marwa and her younger daughter are *tired* of sitting through the lecture. They are restless for it to become more interesting or to be over. Neither one is content with the lecture—when they report being bored it is a complaint and an indication they wish things had been otherwise.

Being bored is related to what is boring but they do not track each other perfectly. It is possible to be bored by something that is not boring. That is, one can be bored by something that has features capable of engaging one's attention and cognitive capacities. This might be because the agent is exceptionally impatient or particularly tired and does not have the energy to engage as she usually would. But when an agent's reactions appropriately track that state of things, we can expect her to be bored by what is boring.

There are three ways to understand what kinds of objects and activities get categorized as boring without simply identifying the boring with whatever it is that people find boring. First, we might think what is boring is restricted to objects or activities that are completely cognitively useless—those that have nothing to engage anyone's attention or capacities. Another possibility

¹⁰ Elpidorou, Andreas. "The Bright Side of Boredom" in *Frontiers in Psychology*. 5 (2014), page 2

is that something should only be counted as boring if it fails to engage a well-positioned audience—those things that bore those who are not well-positioned will not count as boring. Lastly we might allow that the concept of what is boring is relative to the agent. Not every agent has the same capacities, skills, and knowledge. However, we can talk about what sorts of things we would expect an agent with my particular skills, capacities, and knowledge to have reason and ability to engage with cognitively or emotionally, and this need not map on perfectly to what I find interesting and boring. I will be using this last, broadest definition of what it is for something to be boring.

With this understanding of boredom in place I will now turn to some ways it is involved in important parts of our lives.

What is involved in having a good life?

There seem to be features of a good life that often involve boredom. Though the boredom itself is may not be of any obvious value or necessity, it is not clear that we would be better off without it. I will explain the features of the good life I have in mind and then return to how they involve boredom.

I am assuming that a good human life will involve long-term goals and commitments, and the sorts of things sometimes called final ends, or ground projects. These sorts of things might include the pursuit and maintenance of relationships, the acquisition of desired skills, careers and the goals that go along with them, keeping up with hobbies, living to see or bring about changes in the world, or one-off experiences like visiting some destination or running a marathon. It does not seem that any one of these projects or goals must be included in a good life. But it seems plausible that a good life would have to have some of these sorts of things both

for it to be enjoyable and for it to be the kind of life people would agree is a good one (by which is meant one worth living, emulating, or one in which we do not see anything missing or terribly wrong).

I want to call attention to some features of these sorts of things. Many of them require a long-term commitment. These relationships, hobbies, and projects often require planning or some extended amount of attention or preparation. They also often involve many different kinds of tasks. Consider the many things involved in developing and nurturing relationships. One might have conversations with friends, cook and consume meals with family, go to the movies, and express physical affection. These are often very interesting or even exciting parts of our relationships. But consider these other aspects of relationships: waiting in the hospital for hours through the duration of a loved one's surgery, attending a three-hour graduation ceremony, reading the same book to a child every single night, or having inane conversations with a toddler as she learns to talk. There are varied tasks in other kinds of projects, too. Acquiring the skills to play piano will require playing the same scales and exercises over and over again, as well as learning and mastering new and beautiful pieces of music. Traveling might include seeing new places and visiting friends as well as long stretches of driving or time on a plane. Trying to bring about social change might include attending a huge protest, discussing ideas among peers, posting a hundred flyers, or addressing hundreds of envelopes to raise money or awareness for the cause. Nearly all of these projects and commitments that make our lives worthwhile have some aspects that are exciting as well as some that have little to engage our cognitive or emotional capacities.

It seems clear that simply avoiding the boring activity is not always an option in these cases: the previous activities and tasks are all importantly involved in the given relationship or

project. For example reading and talking to one's child is an important part of nurturing a relationship with her. Still, not everyone will find these things boring, and certainly not in every instance. I might be so enamored in the miracle of my developing child that I am absorbed by everything she says, even when it is babble. As a pianist I may never tire of practicing my scales. But it does not seem that those who *are* bored by these activities are somehow wrong to experience them this way. They are activities that really can be boring on my characterization of boredom: there is not much to engage the cognitive or evaluative-related capacities of an adult mind in addressing envelopes or watching a two-hour long children's ballet recital. The person who is bored may be responding appropriately to the situation in which she finds herself.

Another thing to notice is that repetition can bore. So, even if there is still plenty about a particular song or exercise that could engage the piano player's cognitive capacities, she may run out of ways to engage with it *right now*. Many of our valued projects and goals involve some extended temporal commitment and thus fatigue and repetition can lead to boredom. Giving up these projects altogether would make one much worse-off. Pretending they are interesting when they are not or distracting ourselves from the boredom do not seem like the best courses of action all the time. While it may be just as well to distract oneself from the boring waiting room with a magazine or from the dullness of addressing envelopes by turning on some music this does not seem like the right approach in relationships (as in the child example) or projects that require relatively undivided attention (like playing scales). Thus, there emerge two sorts of cases: one in which boredom is not something to be worried about or avoided, but something that simply must be endured (waiting rooms or graduations, perhaps) and another where the boredom is something to be accepted as a necessary part of valued projects and activities.

Boredom as regulatory mechanism

I have just argued that boredom is a sometimes essential component to important projects and relationships and thus boredom is not always to be avoided. Now I will turn to another way boredom has a positive function in our lives.

Andreas Elpidorou claims boredom is valuable because it helps us to spend our time and attention on what is worthwhile and meaningful by motivating us to abandon projects and activities that have little to engage us cognitively or that are not in line with our goals. Here he explains how boredom functions:

“...boredom motivates the pursuit of a new goal when the current goal ceases to be satisfactory, attractive, or meaningful to the agent. Boredom helps to restore the perception that one’s activities are meaningful or significant. It acts as a regulatory state that keeps one in line with one’s projects. In the absence of boredom, one would remain trapped in unfulfilling situations, and miss out on many emotionally, cognitively, and socially rewarding experiences. Boredom is both a warning that we are not doing what we want to be doing and a “push” that motivates us to switch goals and projects.”¹¹

According to Elpidorou, we need to actually experience being in the unpleasant state of boredom to be motivated to take up a different, more fulfilling project or goal. On his view boredom is a mechanism which informs us that something about our current activities or conditions is unsatisfactory and because experiencing boredom is uncomfortable and unpleasant it motivates us to *do* something about it. But we should not wish away the fact that we are creatures who are susceptible to boredom. It functions to make sure we spend our time on activities and projects that are meaningful to us. Without it he supposes we may risk getting stuck in activities that no longer have meaning for us or are not in line with our projects and goals.

¹¹ Elpidorou, *op. cit.*, 2

I think boredom can have this useful function, though it is not as straightforward as Elpidorou suggests. First, it is possible that an agent is never involved in activities that are out of sync with her interests and values and thus never has a need for the regulative function of boredom. But this need not diminish the importance that boredom could have for someone who does find herself in such a situation. And, given that our intellectual and emotional capacities change from childhood into adulthood (and often our goals and values as well) it seems most of us will have occasion to realign our commitments and goals with our changing capacities and values. It seems to be a good thing that we are the kinds of creatures who can respond to changes in the world and ourselves such that our values change or what it means for our activities to be congruent with those values can change.

We can illustrate Elpidorou's claim with an example. Suppose a person's goal is becoming proficient at playing piano. The kinds of activities that are in line with that goal might at first include learning to read music, practicing scales, and playing very basic songs. However at some point to continue on in this way will be to stagnate and she should move on to more difficult exercises and more challenging songs if her goal remains the same. Being susceptible to getting bored with the same old scales and songs might be the motivation she needs to move on to more challenging pieces and continue with her goal of developing as a pianist. Of course it may be that other things can motivate a person as well: the desire for excellence might be enough. But it seems plausible that boredom can work well to facilitate progress that is in line with the agent's actual skill level.

Consider two things that might happen if the pianist is motivated only by the pursuit of excellence. First, she might spend much longer at each stage than is necessary. She would practice her scales and basic songs endlessly, aiming at perfection. At a certain point this is no

longer conducive to her goal of improving her piano-playing skills: there is only so much one can learn from playing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. The other possibility is that she spends less time on the basics than might be ideal. Since she wants to get along to the more difficult songs and skills that would indicate excellence she hurries up past the basics since mastering these basic things will not mean the fulfillment of her goal. Of course it is possible that some people are just good at knowing when it is a good time to move on to learning a new song or skill, or that they have teachers instructing them about these matters. But another thing that can inform us it is time to move on is boredom. Since boredom is a response to there being little to engage a person's cognitive and evaluative skills, it should come up precisely when it would be good for a person to begin working on something new or more difficult. It can also come up when we try to engage with things that are beyond our skill level. There may be just as few features I am able to engage with in a song that is much too difficult for me as in a song that is much too basic, so boredom may help to keep the pianist from starting off on pieces that are too difficult, as well.¹²

Another possibility is that learning piano is no longer really consistent with what I find meaningful in which case the boredom might be the motivation needed to abandon this project for a new one. Perhaps I only wanted to be able to play at some basic level or it was just a hobby to enjoy and pass the time with and to make the jump to the next level would take much more dedication than I want to commit to this project. Perhaps other projects have come up that are more rewarding than the prospect of continuing to practice piano. In both cases some sort of change is necessary and boredom can serve both to make the agent aware of that need and motivate her address it.

¹² We are not always just bored by what is boring. People can get bored because they are too tired or distracted or because they are exceptionally impatient. What I am saying here applies to instances where people are bored by what is actually boring (as described near the beginning of the paper). Being bored by what is not boring may inform us of other interesting or important things about ourselves or the world but it will not function to keep us in line with our skill-level the way I am describing here.

One more qualification to Elpidorou's claims is that sometimes boredom is just something to be endured and is not, in fact, an indication that change is needed. I have already mentioned some examples like this. Presumably the boredom I feel at a three hour graduation ceremony indicates neither that my relationship with the graduate is no longer something I value nor that my presence at the ceremony is the wrong way to be participating in that relationship. There may just be a lack of features which engage my cognitive and emotional capacities. Similarly if I find myself bored while reading through some very important but very dry piece of philosophy, this need not indicate that I would be better off abandoning my project of becoming a philosopher or that there is some other activity that would better support that goal. It might just be something to be gotten through. Still, though episodes of boredom might not be reason to abandon a project it seems that a pattern of boredom can often work much in the way Elpidorou claims. If everything involved in becoming a philosopher bores me I might want to reconsider my profession or investigate whether there is something I can change about the way I am engaging with it. If I am always bored when I spend time with my friend (and not just at the graduation ceremony) I might wonder whether this relationship is still one I want to be spending time and energy on (or, whether there is something problematic going on with me causing excessive boredom).

Though in this example I have mainly been talking about a change the agent needs to make in her life or activities (such as moving on to a new song or an entirely new project) notice that sometimes boredom can track deficiencies in the world as well. For example, we might expect students whose backgrounds and experiences are largely unrepresented in educational curriculum to find that curriculum boring. We might hope it will motivate change as some of these students go on to become teachers, policy-makers, and academics. Yet it is unlikely that

they have the resources to make the kind of immediate change Elpidorou thinks boredom can motivate—it is unlikely they have the option to seek a different form of education or the ability to implement curriculum change. But the function of boredom is still the same: it identifies activities and situations as not having features that directly align with an individual's interests, values, or capacities to engage. It motivates change—it is just the unfortunate case that widespread or immediate change is not always practical.

Boredom as integral to value

I have now discussed two ways boredom can have value: First, boring tasks are sometimes an incidental or even essential part of valued projects and experiences. Second, boredom can facilitate growth and progress by steering one toward activities that fit her skill level well and motivating an agent to abandon activities she no longer values. Now I turn to a few more ways boredom or susceptibility to boredom can be essential to the value of experiences.

Boredom has similarities to hunger and pain and so considering how hunger and pain can be valuable reveals similar ways in which boredom or the susceptibility to boredom has value. Boredom, pain, and hunger can be characterized as regulative functions. They inform the agent who is experiencing them of a need and motivate her to address it. Boredom informs me there is little available for cognitive engagement or that my current activity is no longer in line with my projects and goals. Because it is an unpleasant experience, it motivates me to abandon my current activity for something more interesting. Hunger (when my body and mind are functioning properly) informs me of the need for nourishment and because it is an uncomfortable feeling, motivates me to eat. Pain is similarly informative and motivational: the burning pain in my hand informs me the pan I picked up is hot and motivates me to drop the pan.

But the value I have just described is entirely instrumental. We might think it would be better to just avoid the hunger, pain, and boredom altogether if we could remain safe, well-nourished, and engaged in interesting and meaningful activity some other way.¹³ If there were some non-instrumental value involved in these experiences, however, it would not be the case we should prefer to avoid them altogether. Douglas MacLean draws attention to cases where pain or hunger is still instrumental to some other end, but it is involved in such a way that one could not achieve the end without the pain.¹⁴ One example he discusses is endurance sports. For example, running more than twenty miles is painful for many of us. A number of people who engage in such an activity do so for challenge of working through such pain and the sense of accomplishment that comes with successfully doing so. Is there something similar going on with boredom?

It seems so. Overcoming challenges can bring a great sense of joy, accomplishment, and fulfillment. One kind of challenge is persisting through boredom. Perhaps most of us do not *cite* dealing with boredom as a big accomplishment, but that is what is often involved in things we do consider big accomplishments or impressive activities: we can see this in the example of running a marathon. Training would typically include running for hours at a time. It is likely that some of that time gets boring and continuing on through hours of not only physical pain but also boredom contributes to the feeling of accomplishment one has at the end of the race. The value of this kind of activity (for many people) is that there are many unpleasant bits involved in seeing the

¹³ In fact we often do avoid harm by drawing on past experiences of some object causing pain. For example I often avoid being burned by my hot cast iron skillet because my past experiences of pain when I've burned myself on the handle remind me to use a pot holder. I also might help someone else avoid pain and remain burn-free simply by warning them that the handle is quite hot.

¹⁴ MacLean, *op. cit.*, 12

training and race through to the end. Such experiences would have a much different character if they were enjoyable in their entirety.

Another example where the unpleasant experience of boredom is important to achieving some end is that of building up anticipation. Award ceremonies and graduation programs, for example, are often full of fluff and filler material. There is little to engage with as the host of the Academy Awards blathers on and not much that is interesting about hearing the names of several hundred strangers read out. Yet it is not clear that everyone would prefer to just have the award winners read out and be done with the whole affair in five minutes. A graduation would be less grand and ceremonious if we simply showed up and saw the few people we know walk across the stage. The weariness and restlessness of boredom might be a part of the sense of excited anticipation.

MacLean also mentions how pain has functioned in religious practice and epiphany.¹⁵ Boredom, too, may have a place in some spiritual practices. Consider that what is boring is the lack of features that engage one's cognitive and emotional capacities and that meditation aims at not engaging one's cognitive capacities—or engaging them very minimally. Ines Freedman, a Buddhist meditation teacher, points out human so often focus on doing or having and suggests that becoming comfortable with boredom through meditation is to practice the enjoyment of being (as opposed to doing or having). She claims this is to understand something important about life.¹⁶ Osho, a philosopher and spiritual teacher, also takes boredom and meditation to be very intimately connected. In defining meditation he says:

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Freedman, Ines. "Boredom." Lecture, Insight Meditation Center, 2011

“What exactly is meditation? Facing boredom is meditation. What does a meditator go on doing? Sitting silently, looking at his own navel, or watching his breathing, do you think he is being entertained by these things? He is utterly bored... The whole effort in meditation is this: be bored but don't escape from it; and keep alert, because if you fall asleep you have escaped. Keep alert! Watch it, witness it. If it is there, then it is there. It has to be looked into, to the very core of it. If you go on looking into boredom without escaping the explosion comes. One day, suddenly, looking deep into boredom, you penetrate your own nothingness.”¹⁷

Osho says in the same text:

“Boredom simply shows that you are becoming aware of the futility of life, its constant repetitive wheel. You have done all those things before - nothing happens. You have been into all those trips before - nothing comes out of it. Boredom is the first indication that a great understanding is arising in you about the futility, meaninglessness, of life and its ways.”¹⁸

On this view experiencing boredom is beginning to understand something important about the world. These are not ideas that everyone will embrace. But they seem reasonable enough to grant that boredom could be of value in this way for those that do accept them.

Finally, there are some studies about boredom and creativity which suggest that the susceptibility to boredom is conducive to creative thinking. In one study, participants in the experimental group were instructed to copy phone numbers out of the phone book for fifteen minutes. Those that rated the activity as highly boring and reported daydreaming then completed a creative task. The task was to come up with as many uses for two cups as they could. The experimental group did indeed come up with more uses (one measure of creativity). In the second experiment two different boring tasks were tested: copying numbers out of the phone book and simply reading numbers in a phone book. Then those who rated the activities as highly boring and reported daydreaming moved on to creative tasks: the same task brainstorming uses for cups, and a task where subjects had to come up with a fourth word to connect a series of three provided words. In this study both those who had participated in the boring reading task and

¹⁷ Osho. “Only Man is Capable of Boredom” in *Take it Easy Volume 1*.
http://oshosearch.net/Convert/Articles_Osho/Take_it_Easy_Volume_1/Osho-Take-it-Easy-Volume-1-00000010.html

¹⁸ Ibid.

those who had participated in the boring writing task scored higher on the creative tasks in both quantity of answers as well as quality (measured by originality and usefulness of answers). The experimenters hypothesized that it was the daydreaming catalyzed by boredom that produced the increase in creativity and thus there is no data on whether experiencing boredom without daydreaming would affect creativity.¹⁹ Still, this seems to indicate that at least the susceptibility to boredom can contribute to increased creativity.

There is anecdotal evidence to support this, as well. Many writers and artists cite boredom as a part of their creative process. Idzie Desmarais, for example, claims of the education process in general and writing in particular that “Boredom is an essential element in both creativity and discovery, and should be recognized as the restless stage that [precedes] a new project, passion, or breakthrough.”²⁰ Graham Linehan has a similar view: “The creative process requires a period of boredom, of being stuck. That’s actually a very uncomfortable period that a lot of people mistake for writer’s block, but it’s actually just part one of a long process.”²¹ Countless others echo these thoughts.²²

We might think that the way boredom is functioning in the case of creativity is much like the way hunger is supposed to function, from an evolutionary perspective.²³ Hunger not only

¹⁹ Mann, Sandi and Cadman, Rebekah. “Does Being Bored Make Us More Creative?” in *Creativity Research Journal*. 26:2, London. (2014), 165-173

²⁰ Desmarais, Idzie. “The Role of Boredom and Dabbling in Pursuit of Passionate Learning.” *I’m Unschoolled. Yes, I Can Write*. <http://yes-i-can-write.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-role-of-boredom-and-dabbling-in.html>

²¹ “Graham Linehan: Twitter Has Made Me.” Interview by Charles Arthur. *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/may/27/graham-linehan-twitter-has-made-me>

²² For example: Goins, Jeff. “The Totally Boring Process of Writing a Book.” *Goins, Writer*. <http://goinswriter.com/boring-writing-book/>; McGuiness, Mark. “Why Boredom is Good For Your Creativity.” *99u: Insights on Making Ideas Happen*. <http://99u.com/articles/7188/why-boredom-is-good-for-your-creativity>; Ellis, Yael. “The Benefits of Boredom” *Women in Kiruv*. <http://womeninkiruv.org/2015/02/benefits-boredom/>.

²³ Much thanks to Tim Kwiatek for suggesting this point to me.

informs an agent of her need for nourishment and motivates her to find food, it also may sharpen her senses so as to increase her chances of acquiring food. Hormones are released when humans have empty stomachs which not only affect the part of the brain that registers hunger but also the part of the brain that deals with learning, memory, and spatial intelligence. In studies, mice injected with this hormone (i.e. that experienced biochemically-induced hunger) performed better on intelligence tests. It is hypothesized that this arose from the evolutionary advantage of having sharpened senses when food is needed.²⁴ Perhaps this is what is going on with boredom and creativity. When one is hungry, one needs food. Hunger not only informs an agent of her need for food but affects brain functioning so as to make her more likely to find it. When one is bored, one needs something with which to engage. Perhaps her brain function is altered so as to make her more likely to find engagement—say by daydreaming or whatever neurological processes cause daydreaming.

Conclusion

I have argued that boredom can be an essential part of valued projects and relationships in our lives and that the susceptibility to boredom can have positive value. It can act as a regulative function to facilitate growth and progress and may be an important feature of the creative process. Further, persisting through boredom can be a part of what gives some achievements their sense of accomplishment and might bring about spiritual insight in some traditions and understandings of the world.

But despite the fact that there are all of these various ways boredom might have positive value, boredom remains an extremely unpleasant experience that may sometimes be reflective of

²⁴ Shea, Christopher. "Empty-Stomach Intelligence." In *The New York Times Magazine*. 10 December 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/10/magazine/10section1C.t-1.html>.

deficiencies within in agent or lead to harmful behaviors.²⁵ It seems, then, that responding to boredom requires careful thought. Sometimes it informs us that changes are needed in our own lives or in the world around us. Sometimes we would be better off avoiding whatever it is that bores. And sometimes it is something that simply must be endured.

²⁵ Elpidorou, *op. cit.*, page 1

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