

Boredom and Its Values

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Comments on Andreas Elpidorou's *Propelled: How Boredom, Frustration, and Anticipation Lead Us to the Good Life* (2020) for Author Meets Critics, the Society for Philosophy of Emotion, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting January 2021

Introduction

The book is a lot of fun to read. It is engagingly written, and it tells us about many results of psychological research that shed light on some of our affective attitudes, and opens up, towards the end, into an attractive invitation to approach life in the spirit of existentialist adventure.

Elpidorou's aim is to show that boredom, frustration, and anticipation – states that he takes to have negative hedonic character – have the capacity to enhance our lives, and to contribute to human flourishing. To show this Elpidorou aims to develop detailed functional accounts of these states.

I present three general questions about the project in Section 1. Next, I provide a critical examination of Elpidorou's account of boredom. In section 2, I zoom in on the formal object and aptness conditions of boredom given Elpidorou's account. I consider four possible ways to characterize the formal object of boredom, and argue that they all fail, leaving the question of the formal object of boredom unanswered. In section 3, I consider the practical, moral, and aesthetic value of boredom. While I think that practical and moral value of boredom is questionable, it seems that an apology for boredom is best constructed by appealing to its contributions to art appreciation. Its potential to facilitate an aesthetic experience affords it final value.

1. General remarks

First, it is somewhat puzzling as to why these three states were chosen by the author as it isn't clear what they have in common or how they relate to one another. Elpidorou writes that (1) they all involve feelings of dissatisfaction and entrapment in our current situation, and (2) they can motivate us to remedy the situation. Elpidorou emphasizes that this last feature is important because these states not only identify the situation as dissatisfying but also at the same time "already contain the potential to liberate us" (p. 34). Yet these features are not unique to these states. The action tendencies entailed by many other negative emotions also aim to 'remedy' the situation in some way. For

instance, fear aims to correctly identify danger, while at the same time providing us with an action tendency to either freeze or flee. Anger identifies some wrong committed against us, and provides us with the action tendency of aggression to correct the wrong. Negative emotions generally can be construed as indications of one's goals being frustrated (Lazarus, 1991). Thus, it is no surprise that their action tendencies aim at changing one's behavior to realign with one's goals, and it remains unclear what distinguishes the triad Elpidorou has decided to focus on from other negative emotions.

My second general comment concerns the specific ways in which Elpidorou sees these three psychological states as contributing to the good life. These include (1) informing the organism of how they are faring with respect to their goals, (2) providing a point of contrast in order to 'reset the system' so that positive experiences do not become mundane and lose their pleasurable qualities, and (3) potentially enhancing 'emodiversity' – "the variety and breadth of our emotional experiences" (p. 7). The first point is obviously right since it is what emotions generally do. The second point is also right; but Elpidorou is cautious not to overstate the case, since negative emotional experiences can turn harmful. One can imagine boredom turning into depression, frustration into rage, and anticipation into anxiety. Elpidorou is also clear that we must react to these emotions in appropriate ways in order for them to be beneficial (p. 69). By themselves they seem to be of neutral value at best. Third, while the research on emodiversity is in its infancy, the results so far do not speak in favor of Elpidorou's thesis. As he points out, the research he cites shows that a rich diversity of positive emotions correlates more highly with well-being than a diversity of negative ones (p. 8). These considerations do not directly link boredom, frustration, and anticipation to well-being and the good life. They only suggest some of the ways in which our lives can be made richer by exposure to a diversity of experiences and emotions.

Third, anticipation, despite the features it shares with the other two states, still seems to fit oddly into the group. While anticipation is admittedly "all too often an emotionally laden experience", it is unclear that it fits the emotion model as well as the other two states. In itself, anticipation is a cognitive rather than an emotional state. As illustrated by recent work by Andy Clark and others on the "predictive brain", anticipation appears to be the general rule that governs all our perceptual processes and makes it possible for us to respond appropriately to our environment's affordances (Clark, 2016). Elpidorou himself quite rightly notes that waiting has no inherent valence. Sometimes, anticipation is fraught with anxiety and is highly aversive; at other times, however, anticipation of a certain pleasant experience can itself be savored and enjoyed, even to the point of wanting to delay the anticipated satisfaction. Hence anticipation is unpleasant in the first case and pleasant in the second. Since there is nothing intrinsically negative about it as an emotional experience, and since it is merely a universal brain mechanism in its non-emotional cognitive form, it is difficult to see what it has to do with the other two states discussed by Elpidorou.

In sum, it isn't clear why these three states should be considered together. Since all three require the agent to take the right attitude towards them to overcome their potentially harmful effects, it is also unclear why we should think they make a specific contribution to the good life. And it seems doubtful that we should think of anticipation as an emotion as opposed to a non-affective cognitive mechanism.

2. Boredom

Leaving these general questions aside, I now turn to Elpidorou's discussion of boredom. Elpidorou's account of boredom illuminates many of its facets. After reconstructing Elpidorou's psychological profile of boredom, I concentrate on the question of the formal object of boredom – the value property of *the boring*, and boredom's aptness conditions. I briefly consider four possible ways of characterizing *the boring*: (1) causally, (2) as analogous to aesthetic value, (3) as the meaningless, and (4) as conflicting with our goals and interests. I give reasons to reject all four, thus leaving *the boring* currently undefined.

Elpidorou discusses boredom as a character disposition, and a short-lived emotional episode. Both are extremely interesting. But for lack of space I concentrate on boredom as an emotional episode. The psychological profile of boredom includes its eliciting conditions (conditions that can in fact cause or trigger the emotion), targets (the objects at which boredom can be directed), formal object (the value property boredom represents its target as having), aptness conditions (condition that make boredom fitting or unfitting), hedonic character and phenomenology, and action tendency.

The eliciting conditions of boredom are highly varied – almost anything can bore us. We might also not know why we are bored, or only realize later that we were bored (p. 39). The target of boredom could be virtually anything – the situation we are in, the task we are performing. One feature characteristic of boredom experiences is 'temporal entrapment' – the sense that time is passing very slowly (p. 33). In addition, we feel detached from the situation, and cannot find meaning in it. Boredom has a negative hedonic valence – it is unpleasant to feel, and is coupled with a desire to escape it. Elpidorou argues that the action tendency of boredom is to terminate the emotion. This can be achieved by either switching to an activity that does not elicit boredom, or by changing one's attitude towards the situation or activity that is currently boring (p. 59-60). The latter strategy is particularly pertinent in cases where the tedious task or situation cannot be avoided.

What about the formal object of boredom? Elpidorou points out that when bored, one is disengaged and dissatisfied with the situation. There is nothing that interests us about it. Our attention is not grabbed; there is nothing about the situation we want to pursue. We find it meaningless. Elpidorou says that boredom has a dual function of (1) identifying the uninteresting, and (2) motivating us to escape it. Thus, the formal object

of boredom – *the boring* – is a value property that “demarcates the uninteresting” (p. 68). But what makes something uninteresting?

Prima facie, if something fails to elicit interest in us it is uninteresting, i.e. boring. We might call this account of *the boring* a causal account since the value property is cashed out in terms of whatever produces the emotional reaction in question. Might this explain the rich variety of eliciting conditions and targets of boredom? If it happens to make us feel bored, it is boring. However, such an account of the formal object of boredom faces the issue of making sense of the aptness conditions of boredom. Typically emotions are taken to have representational content, which requires that they represent their targets as grounding their formal objects by way of some features of the target. This means that emotions can *misrepresent* their targets as grounding a particular kind of formal object. An emotion is apt when it correctly represents the target as having a particular value property. When it misrepresents it, it is inapt. For example, fear is apt when the dog (the target) is dangerous (the formal object). The dog is dangerous if it is large, aggressive, and indicates its intention to attack (features of the target that ground the formal object). On the other hand, fear is inapt if the dog poses no danger – it is a small cute friendly puppy. Similarly, we should expect that boredom has representational content, which in turn requires that it is subject to correctness conditions. If this is right, then the causal account will fail to demarcate *the boring*. In order for boredom to have representational content it must be possible in principle for it to misfire or misrepresent. Therefore, to specify the correctness conditions of boredom, we must provide a different account of *the boring*.

We need an account of *the boring* that could in principle identify or “demarcate” that which is truly boring. Given the variety of conditions and targets of boredom, this seems like an insurmountable task. In light of this, one might reject the idea that boredom has representational content, and instead, model it on aesthetic emotions through which one appreciates the aesthetic properties of an artwork. As the cliché goes, “beauty is in the eye of the holder”, so might it be with *the boring*. Yet many resist the total subjectivity of the aesthetic; it seems plausible to maintain that one might sometimes be mistaken about assessing a work of art for its aesthetic qualities.

So what might be a way out? The boring is contrasted with the interesting. One way to try to specify the value property of boredom, then, is to first explicate the ‘interesting’. Elpidorou’s characterization of the experience of boredom might help. He points out that we experience boredom as meaningless. The meaningfulness in the boring experience might explain why one’s attention can find nothing to latch onto, no particular thought or activity to pursue with engagement. Indeed, this is why our minds begin to wander in search for something that might hold our attention. Which things hold our attention? Which things do we find interesting?

Psychological research indicates a number of properties that tend to elicit interest, such as novelty, complexity, uncertainty, conflict with our expectations, as well as instant

enjoyment (Silvia, 2006). These relate current experience to our previously existing interests, desires, and values. For example, in encountering novelty we attempt to draw connections with previous experiences and knowledge in order to make sense of the new experience. In encountering something that conflicts with our expectations we attempt to reconcile it with our existing beliefs. We experience something as meaningful when we are able to draw connections between it and other things that we hold meaningful.

If this is right then one might say that boredom is apt when the experience is meaningless – has no connection with things we care about—and inapt when the target of boredom is meaningful but we fail to experience it as such. Of course an immediate problem with such an account is that we seem to be able to find meaning in virtually anything—even the unintelligible—if we try hard enough. A speck of dust, the tedium of an office routine, the noise your refrigerator makes can all be imbued with meaning and even interpreted as a comment on the human condition. Elpidorou points out that humans are natural “meaning-makers” (p. 6). So the ‘meaningfulness’ criterion is insufficient to specify the aptness conditions of boredom.

Elpidorou’s characterization of the function of boredom suggests another possibility:

Boredom protects us from certain situations. It does so by informing us of the presence of situations that aren’t in line with our interests and desires and by motivating us to do something else. If we were to lack the capacity to be bored, we wouldn’t notice when we’re faced with an unsatisfying, nonstimulating, or monotonous situation. Nor would we do something to get out of it. (p. 71)

This passage clearly indicates that boredom can get things wrong, which implies that Elpidorou does think boredom has aptness conditions. Perhaps *the boring* is whatever is not in line with our desires and goals, whatever is not relevant to our lives. However, this cannot be right. For some things that are important to us and are congruent with our goals are nonetheless boring. Consider, for example, sitting through a very important lecture. The lecture is important because it contains information that is key to doing well on the exam and later in the profession. Mastering the material presented in it has a direct impact on one’s course grade, one’s GPA, as well as one’s expertise. Still, the lecture is boring: the material is unexciting – a matter of following procedures, mindless memorizing of the order of the steps. Furthermore, the professor is reading directly from lecture notes in a monotonous voice, not making eye contact, making no effort to engage the students. In short, important things that are directly relevant to our goals and interests can be boring: “[B]oredom signifies a lack of interest but not a lack of importance” (p. 70). Therefore, defining *the boring* as what is irrelevant to our interests and desires misses the mark again.

The inability to specify aptness conditions for boredom puts pressure on the idea that boredom is an emotion. If emotions typically adhere to a standard of correctness and have representational content then an account of boredom must be able to specify the conditions under which boredom can be apt and inapt. If it lacks aptness conditions then it can be said to *present* rather than represent its target as boring. Boredom comes to seem akin to a perception or a mood rather than a standard emotion.

3. Boredom and its norms: practical, moral, and aesthetic

The rational assessment of boredom requires that its formal object and aptness conditions be adequately defined. I have not been able to determine what they might be from Elpidorou's *Propelled*. But boredom can also be assessed from practical, moral, and aesthetic points of view. Let me briefly speculate about each of these in turn.

The distinction between aptness and practical use is familiar for other emotions: while the fear of crossing a rickety bridge is apt – the bridge is really dangerous – it is impractical in this situation because it prevents me from achieving my goal of getting to the other side. Similarly, we have seen that boredom is often impractical. While it might have been practical to feel excited about the lecture since one would have gotten more out of it, getting excited was inapt because the lecture was boring. If boredom has a function, as Elpidorou insists, it should be of some practical use. What might the practical value of boredom be?

Elpidorou's answer lies in the twofold function of boredom: its practical value is to correctly identify *the boring*, and to facilitate appropriate action. As we have seen, more work is needed to explain how boredom fulfills its first function. What about its action tendency? Elpidorou says, "Boredom offers us direction but only minimally. It tells us "Do something more interesting!" (p. 69). Ultimately boredom motivates us to stop being bored. Yet, the actions we engage in in order to terminate boredom do not necessarily have practical value. We might choose to do housework, to play *Candy Crush*, or to go smash windows at an abandoned factory. Elpidorou is clear that there is no direct link between boredom and useful practical action. While it has interesting and complex connections with mind wandering and creativity, it is not the only antecedent of these more productive activities. Its practical value seems to be contingent on the kind of action we choose to terminate it.

Elpidorou's discussion of the connection between boredom and morality demonstrates how boredom can be morally problematic. Historically it was associated with acedia, or sloth. The connection between morality and boredom is again cashed out in terms of its dual function. Acedia is the sin most common among the medieval monks who failed to appreciate, delight in, and commit themselves to serving and loving God (p. 43-4). The sin of sloth is the lack of appreciation and interest in life. Boredom becomes

morally problematic when a politician does not care about the public good, a judge about justice, a doctor about the health of their patients, a parent about the well-being of their child. Elpidorou also discusses the case of German nurse, Niels Hoegel, who confessed to murdering his patients during World War II in order to escape the wearisome routine of the hospital (p. 55). All these examples demonstrate how boredom can be morally problematic. Can it be shown to be morally praiseworthy? Elpidorou argues that it has positive contributions to make to a good life. But I have already raised concerns regarding those arguments. It seems contributions of boredom to good life are limited.

Yet, one still finds a compelling defense of boredom in Elpidorou's *Propelled*. It comes from situating boredom in art appreciation. While the practical and moral value of boredom is questionable, perhaps it is to our aesthetic experience that boredom has an important contribution to make. That may be the core of its value. Boredom can be thought to be an aesthetic emotion in so far as it affords us special access to art. As Susan Sontag famously wrote in her journal, "Most of the interesting art of our time is boring" (Sontag, 2013:144). On the face of it a paradox. How can boring art be interesting? Elpidorou enumerates examples of boring art: Erik Satie's *Vexations* (1893) – a theme of nineteen notes to be played 840 times, Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964), Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget* (2000). One can think of many of other examples: John Baldessari, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971), Charlie Lyne's *Paint Drying* (2016), and numerous works by John Cage and Philip Glass.

What makes them interesting if they are boring? For one, some of them can be taken to be a commentary on boredom itself by way of inducing it by trapping one into a movie theater or a museum. One is forced to face boredom, experience it firsthand, contemplate it, making it the object of one's thoughts, affording a different perspective, thus making it interesting. Second, as Sontag writes, art does not owe us entertainment. Boring art is not an easily accessible art. It requires that we sit with our boredom and endure a state of dissatisfaction that moves us to reflect on it, either finding meaning or meaninglessness. Similarly, Alva Noë points out that boring art pulls the rug from underneath our feet: it affords no easy explanation (Noë, 2015). Experiencing boredom in an aesthetic context can afford channeling it in just the right way – giving oneself mental space from which one can emerge wandering, exploring, and making meaning. Thus, the role of boredom in affording an aesthetic experience is not only indicative of its practical value, and its contributions to good life, but of its aesthetic, and, therefore, final value.

Conclusion

Elpidorou's book is provocative and exciting. It raises lots of interesting questions, and draws numerous connections between philosophical questions and empirical research on boredom, frustration, and anticipation. For my part, I'd like to ask him to say more about

boredom's formal object, aptness conditions, and about the ways in which it might have practical or moral value independently of its aesthetic value.

References

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