

# The Moral Dimensions of Boredom: A call for research

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## 1. Introduction

Boredom research is alive and kicking. Over the last few decades, several measures of trait boredom (i.e., the propensity to experience boredom in a wide range of situations) have been established (Acee et al., 2010; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Grubb, 1975; Iso-Ahola & Weissinger, 1990; Lee, 1986; Passik et al., 2003; Ragheb & Merydith, 2001; Zuckerman, 1979) and are used to study its numerous and often harmful correlates (for reviews see Vodanovich, 2003; Vodanovich & Watt, 2015). Although the initial emphasis on trait boredom prompted some researchers to lament the lack of a robust and rigorous understanding of the *state* of boredom (e.g., Vodanovich, 2003), recent work on boredom has begun to rectify this omission. Unlike trait boredom, which is a personality trait, the state of boredom is a concrete, short-lived experience (e.g., Danckert & Allman, 2005; Fahlman et al., 2013; Fisher, 1993; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993). It is characterized by feelings of dissatisfaction (e.g., Fisher, 1993; Harris, 2000; Hartocollis, 1972; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Pekrun et al., 2010; Todman, 2003), a perception of lack of meaning (e.g., Barbalet, 1999; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2016c), and attentional difficulties (Ahmed, 1990; Hamilton, 1981; Hamilton et al., 1984; Damrad-Frye & Laird, 1989; Eastwood et al., 2012; Fisher, 1993; Gordon et al., 1997; Harris, 2000; Wallace et al., 2003). It involves both a disengagement with one's current situation (e.g., Anderson, 2007; Fahlman et al., 2009; Fenichel, 1951; Goldberg et al., 2011; Passik et al., 2003) and a desire to escape from it (e.g., Bench & Lench, 2013; Berlyne, 1960; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; De Chenne, 1988; Fahlman et al., 2013;

Fenichel, 1951; Fiske & Maddi, 1961; Greenson, 1953; Hebb, 1966; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Todman, 2003; van Tilburg and Igou, 2012). The physiological and neurological correlates of state boredom are actively being investigated (e.g., Barmack, 1937; Braby et al., 1992; Danckert & Merrifield, 2016; Geiwitz, 1966; Jiang et al., 2009; London et al., 1972; Lundberg et al., 1993; Merrifield & Danckert, 2014; Oswald, 1962; Pattyn et al., 2008; Tabatabaie et al., 2014) and measures of the state of boredom are being developed and evaluated (e.g., Fahlman et al., 2013; Oxtoby et al., 2016; Todman, 2013; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2012).

Despite the impressive progress that has been made on both the empirical and conceptual fronts of boredom research within the last two decades, there is one facet of boredom that, up to this date, has received remarkably little attention. This is boredom's relationship to morality. Such a neglect is striking for at least three reasons. First, the history of boredom is the history of a *moral* emotion. Indeed, one of the first articulations of boredom—boredom as *acedia*—characterized boredom as a sinful lack of concern for God or one's religious duties (Cassian, 2000; Raposa, 1990; Sinkewicz, 2003). Second, the moral issue that boredom raises, and which ultimately transcends the context of religion, is one with which we are all familiar. Consider, for example, a father who is bored with his children, a citizen bored with her civic duties, a judge bored with justice, or a doctor bored with caring for others. We typically think that it is wrong to be bored with matters of such crucial importance. Thus, depending on its object, we readily take boredom to signal a moral shortcoming or character failure. Third, psychologists are no strangers to the study of how emotions affect moral judgments and behavior. Somehow, however, the expansive and ever-growing literature on moral psychology and moral emotions has missed boredom (see, e.g., Haidt, 2003 and 2007; Harenski & Hamann, 2006; Horberg et al., 2009; Rozin et al., 1999; Schnall et al., 2010; Tangney et al., 2007).

My aim in this essay is to show that there are strong reasons to think that boredom (primarily as a personality trait) is morally significant. To be clear, even though I will suggest a potential mechanism by which boredom affects moral conduct, I do not intend to uncover the precise moral character of boredom; this is not something that can be accomplished by the type of conceptual considerations offered here. Rather, the present essay is a call for research or, if you prefer, a type of manifesto. It does not aim to settle any debates, but to start some. Even though boredom's relationship to morality is not actively explored in the literature<sup>1</sup>, it deserves our attention and should be experimentally studied.

## **2. Moral emotions: A brief overview**

Emotions form a proper subset of the superordinate class of affective phenomena; such a class includes, in addition to emotions, feelings, moods, and sentiments. Emotions are relatively short-lived, flexible, multicomponent patterns and tendencies that occur as a response to specific physical and social situations. They are initiated by an agent's appraisal of an event that bears some significance to the agent (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991b; Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1987; Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1993; Smith & Lazarus, 1994). Such an appraisal can be either conscious (and deliberate) (Smith & Ellsworth, 1987) or unconscious (Lazarus, 1995; Öhman, 1987), but in either case, it gives rise to a cascade of interrelated responses in the agent, such as changes in the phenomenological character of the agent's experience, cognition, physiology, facial expressions, and behavior.

According to component-processes accounts of emotions (e.g., Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1991; Scherer, 2000), emotions can be understood in terms of the set of interrelated components

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<sup>1</sup> Two notable exceptions to this rule are Van Tilburg & Igou, (2011) and (2016a). I discuss both of these studies in section 5.

that they possess. Typically, emotions involve the following components: an affective component that involves what it feels like to undergo an emotion; a cognitive component that amounts to the effects of the emotional state on perceptual and cognitive processes; a physiological component that includes the physiological and neurological correlates of the emotional state; an expressive component that consists of the associated facial and bodily expressions; and lastly, a motivational or behavioral component that is composed of the actions, thoughts, and desires prompted by the presence of the emotion.

The task of characterizing an emotion amounts then to that of specifying its different components. Consequently, the specification of the different components involved within emotions can be used in order to individuate emotions. But such a specification can serve an additional function: it can help us to delineate which emotions should be understood as moral emotions.

Haidt (2003, p. 853) defines moral emotions as “*those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare whether of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent*” and he employs two main criteria in order to separate non-moral from moral emotions. According to the first criterion, moral emotions are those that motivate certain prosocial or antisocial actions or behavior (e.g., the building of trusting relationships, cooperation, revenge). According to the second criterion, moral emotions have disinterested elicitors—viz., they are triggered by events or situations that do not bear a direct and obvious relationship to the self. For example, anger can have a disinterested elicitor when it arises in response to an injustice done to a stranger. In such a case, we are angry because of how they are treated and not because of how we are treated (Haidt, 2003, p.854).

Although I agree with Haidt (2003) that most moral emotions are ones that have associated prosocial or antisocial action- (and thought-) tendencies, his second criterion is less

helpful in drawing a distinction between moral and non-moral emotions. I offer two reasons in support of this contention.

First, the label “disinterested elicitor” can be potentially confusing. Notice that even in the case of anger in the face of an injustice done to others—a prime example of an emotion with a disinterested elicitor—the triggering event still bears *some* kind of significance for the agent. That is to say, even if the injustice is not performed on the agent, it still matters to the agent that someone else had to suffer. Therefore, the very idea of a *disinterested* elicitor seems to be conceptually tenuous: If an event is completely alien or irrelevant to an agent, then that event will not give rise to an emotional reaction (Arnold 1960; Lazarus 1991a; cf. Scherer et al. 2001, Frijda 1986). Thus, the importance of categorizing an elicitor as “disinterested” or “interested” cannot lie in the fact that what triggers moral emotions is not meaningful or relevant to us. Rather, disinterested elicitors are important because they show that we are emotionally attuned to situations that do not have a direct effect on us.

Second, and more important, it is unclear why emotions with elicitors or triggers that are exclusively about *us* should not be classified as moral. Consider, for instance, fear of punishment. It can motivate law-abiding or norm-respecting behavior (Haidt, 2003, p.864). As such, it can have prosocial action tendencies. Is this type of fear a moral or non-moral emotion? Under the assumption that having a disinterested elicitor is a *necessary* condition for being a moral emotion, fear of punishment does not count as a moral emotion. But why should this be the right verdict in this case? What else is needed in order for an emotion to count as moral than the promotion of moral (or immoral) conduct? It seems that if we accept that a disinterested elicitor is necessary for a moral emotion, then we have already accepted a certain conception of morality: specifically, one that requires that moral conduct stems from non-selfish or non-self-centered considerations. But clearly this is not the only way of understanding morality. Not only are there self-centered

(egotistic) conceptions of morality (see, e.g., Hospers, 1967; Kalin, 1970), but there seem to be aspects of morality that are self-centered: improving oneself and cultivating one's talents, for example, are both important aspects of a moral life (Aristotle, 2014; Kant, 1991a). What is more, for certain popular conceptions of morality the nature of the triggers of our emotions, thoughts, or behavior is besides the point. For example, according to a broadly consequentialist account of morality, what matters when thinking about morality is simply the consequences of our conduct (e.g., Bentham, 1789/1961; Hooker, 2000; Mill, 1861/1998; Sidgwick, 1907; Singer, 1993; Sinnott-Armstrong, 1992). A consequentialist conception of morality is thus indifferent to the nature of the elicitors of moral emotions; it simply requires that moral emotions are those emotions that lead to moral or immoral conduct.

In light of the above, I shall operate with a definition of moral emotions that is more inclusive than Haidt's. Accordingly, I shall take moral emotions to be emotions that either help or hinder our attempts to live a moral life (e.g., Kroll & Egan, 2004). Such a definition is broader than Haidt's in the following two respects. First, not all moral emotions have disinterested elicitors. Second, although most moral emotions are ones that motivate prosocial or antisocial behavior, some can be self-regarding and can promote or impede aspects of one's moral life such as personal growth or character development. Using this definition of moral emotions, I shall examine whether there are good reasons to think that boredom is a moral emotion or personality state. But before doing so, a clarification about my understanding of moral emotions is in order.

One might wonder whether my construal of moral emotions is too broad. If moral emotions are those that either promote or hinder our attempts to live a moral life, then are there *any* emotions that fail to be moral? The answer, I believe, is "yes" but before I explain my response, it is important to point out that (most) moral emotions can have non-moral instances and, conversely, (most) non-moral emotions can have moral instances. On the one hand, not

every instance of an emotion that has been deemed to be moral must be moral. Certain emotions, e.g., shame and guilt, seem to be prototypically moral and attributions of such emotions are standardly made within the context of moral discourse. To say that someone experiences shame is often to say that one experiences a negative feeling in response to the perception of a violation of a norm (Fessler, 2004; Tangney et al., 1996). And to say that someone is feeling guilty is often tantamount to saying that one has realized that they have harmed another. Still, given the right conditions, even shame and guilt could be considered to be non-moral. Take, for example, the guilt felt by someone who survived a calamity that others did not (survivor guilt) or the shame experienced by someone who has achieved a higher social status than others (Prinz, 2009). Neither seems to be necessarily moral. The same goes for anger and disgust: they both have moral and non-moral instances or analogues. Let me focus on anger; the case for disgust is more obvious (Rozin et al., 1999). Although anger is associated with aggression and is typically elicited by the perception of harm done to oneself or others, not every instance of anger will count as moral. We might respond aggressively and even feel anger in the absence of a judgment that we have been wronged: e.g., when competing in sports. Or we might exhibit strong irritation and anger towards non-moral situations and objects. Consider anger in response to driving-related situations (Deffenbacher et al., 1994). Consider how we might respond to our word processor when it freezes before we had a chance to save our changes.

On the other hand, it is true that certain emotions (or affective states) such as surprise, amusement, loneliness, joy, interest, or anticipation do not qualify as moral insofar as experiences of such emotions (or affective states) do not have associated prosocial or antisocial action-tendencies nor do they obviously promote or hinder one's moral life. Yet, instances of those emotions could turn out to be moral. Being amused by someone's pain or suffering is immoral, or, at the very least, a sign of lack of empathy; exhibiting interest when trying to understand the

character or situation of an outgroup member could be construed as a moral quality. There is thus an obvious difficulty in trying to neatly separate moral from non-moral emotions and this difficulty is one that affects most, if not all, accounts of moral emotions.

Yet such a theoretical difficulty need not fetter our ambitions to say something meaningful about the distinction between the two types of emotions. The point I want to make is this: under the right circumstances, most emotions could promote moral or immoral conduct. However, this is not enough to call those emotions “moral.” Instead, what moral emotions have in common (e.g., shame, guilt, anger) is the fact that they *systematically* (and as a result, frequently and in a wide range of situations) promote or hinder the moral life. They do so systematically insofar as there is a mechanism internal, or intimately related, to the nature of the emotion that is responsible for the promotion of moral or immoral conduct. The moral character of shame, guilt, and anger is due to the emotion *itself* (its associated action- and thought-tendencies and eliciting conditions) and not due to the situation in which one finds oneself. Conversely, instances in which amusement, interest, patience, etc. can count as moral are ones that their moral character depends on the specifics of our situation: in most cases those emotions are not moral; there is nothing about the action-tendencies of amusement, for example, that renders it moral or immoral.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge of this paper is to demonstrate that boredom is more like shame, guilt, and anger than amusement, surprise, or interest. In other words, the paper sets out to demonstrate that there is something about the nature of boredom itself that promotes or hinders the moral life. But the paper does not only need to show that boredom is similar to moral emotions insofar

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<sup>2</sup> I do not distinguish emotions from their associated action- and thought-tendencies, as if we can deduct from an emotion its associated tendencies and still have the emotion. Instead, I take those tendencies to be proper and necessary parts of emotions. So, although one could suggest that emotions themselves are not moral or immoral (what is moral is just their associated tendencies), my understanding of emotions does not permit the adoption of this suggestion.

as it affects moral conduct, it also needs to show that boredom becomes morally relevant when it is considered as a personality trait. It is the frequent experience of boredom (or the inability of one to deal with the frequent experience of boredom) that is of moral significance and not the transitive, infrequent, and often situationally-based experience of boredom. The seriousness of trait boredom has long been established. My aim is to show that the harms of trait boredom extend into the moral sphere.

### **3. Morality and the self**

It is natural to hold that morality is fundamentally an interpersonal issue (Baier, 1958). But if morality is really about our treatments of others, then what place can self-regarding and self-promoting behavior have in morality? A very important one, I contend.

In what follows, I offer two distinct sets of considerations in support of such a claim. First, I review briefly three popular normative theories and argue that neither of them renders morality exclusively other-concerning; indeed, according to such theories, self-promoting conduct can be moral and thus ought to be, at least sometimes, pursued and enacted. Second, I argue that there are general theoretical reasons that show that morality is not entirely other-concerning. Taken jointly these two sets of considerations support the contention that there can be moral emotions that are self-regarding. Hence, even if it is primarily a self-centered state, boredom can still be morally significant.

#### **3.1. Normative ethics and the self**

When discussing Western ethical theories, and specifically normative ethics—i.e., theories that aim to describe the standards that we ought to use in order to live a moral life—it is customary to distinguish between three competing approaches: (i) consequentialism; (ii) deontology or duty

based ethics; and (iii) virtue ethics. Consequentialism holds that the morality of our conduct is determined solely by the consequences of such a conduct. Specifically, an action is deemed to be moral if it brings about the best consequences—or, in a less demanding form, consequentialism holds that an action is moral if its consequences are more favorable than unfavorable (see, e.g., Bentham, 1789/1961; Hooker, 2000; Mill, 1861/1998; Sidgwick, 1907; Singer, 1993; Sinnott-Armstrong, 1992, 2005). Deontology judges the morality of an action solely on the basis of whether it conforms to certain morally obligatory duties. Consequently, whether an action is moral or not does not depend on its consequences, but rather on the intention behind the act and specifically, on whether the agent has acted with the intention of fulfilling a moral duty or not (e.g., Kant, 1991a; Ross, 1930). Finally, a virtue ethics approach to morality focuses on the development of good habits of character and on the cultivation of certain virtues (e.g., honesty, generosity, justice). According to virtue ethics, what it is to live a moral life is not to follow a list of set rules, nor is it the maximization of happiness or utility. Rather, the aim of a moral life is to become a virtuous person (e.g., Annas, 1993, 2011; Anscombe, 1958; Aristotle, 2014; Hursthouse, 1999).

I mention these three distinct and well-known approaches to normative ethics not to adjudicate between them, but rather to argue that not all of morality is other-concerning. That is to say, there can be moral conduct that is in certain respects self-regarding or self-centered.

To begin with, under one very influential and indeed popular variety of deontology—viz., the one advanced and defended by Immanuel Kant—one has *moral* duties towards *oneself* (Kant, 1991a, 1963; see also Denis, 2001; Reath, 2002). Kant says so in no uncertain terms. “Our duties towards ourselves,” he writes, “are of primary importance and should have pride of place,” and adds that “the prior condition of our duty to others is our duty to ourselves” (Kant, 1963, pp. 117-8; see also Kant, 1991b, p. 214).

Although I have no interest in defending the foundational claim that Kant seems to be making in the quoted passage—i.e., that duties to oneself ground or are somehow prior to duties to others—it is important to underscore that for Kant we have the duty to promote the perfection of our natures (Wood, 2009). That is, we should strive both to cultivate our distinctively human (i.e., rational) capacities (Kant, 1991b) and to maintain our capacity to reason practically and morally. Such an obligation to develop our distinctively human nature is rooted in Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative that demands that all humanity (ourselves included) deserves to have its dignity recognized and respected (Kant, 1991a). In other words, it is a central premise of Kant’s ethical theory that each rational being respects rational nature wherever such nature is found. Insofar as we have duties or obligations towards humanity, we also have duties or obligations towards oneself (Denis, 1997, 2001). A deontological account of morality thus includes self-regarding aspects.

A virtue ethics approach reaches the same conclusion, albeit through a different route. According to virtue ethics, not only should we take measures to improve ourselves intellectually, socially, and emotionally, but such a task of self-improvement is the only way that we can live a moral life. That is because for the virtue ethicist, the good life is one that is founded on moral education and requires the practice of a set of self-transformative habits (Annas, 1993, 2011; Aristotle, 2014; Hursthouse, 1999). To put the same point in another way, virtue ethics aims to answer the question “What kind of person should I be?” Invariably, the answer to that question will require us to take certain measures that either transform ourselves or allow us to maintain certain aspects of our personality and character. Taking care of ourselves and improving our rational and emotional nature is a necessary requirement of a moral life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the literature one finds complaints that virtue ethics, by focusing on the self, is egoistic (e.g., Hurka, 2001). Whether this is the case or not (Annas, 2008), it is irrelevant for present purposes. Egoistic or not, virtue ethics requires individuals to engage in the cultivation of certain lasting dispositions.

Lastly, no tenet of consequentialism renders self-centered behavior inherently or in principle immoral. Depending on the context, it is possible for self-regarding and even self-promoting behavior (e.g., cultivating one's talents, taking the time to learn how to empathize with others, or even fulfilling one's desires) to be the right thing to do. As a theory, consequentialism is impartial. It asks us to take into consideration how our actions will affect *everyone* involved (see, e.g., Bentham, 1789/1961; Mill, 1861/1998; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2005). But that obviously includes us in addition to our fellow human and non-human beings. A consequentialist who holds, for example, that the aim of morality is to maximize happiness is thus committed to maximizing everyone's—including one's own—happiness. As such, consequentialism cannot always be other-concerning.<sup>4</sup>

Synthesizing the above considerations, we can conclude that regardless of one's preferred normative ethical theory, morality is not *entirely* other-concerning. Indeed, morality requires us, at least sometimes, to cultivate our own talents and even to promote our well-being.

### **3.2. The personal and social aspects of the moral life**

In addition to the above considerations that are internal to the three normative theories reviewed, I wish to offer two additional and general reasons to support the contention that self-regarding conduct has a place in morality. Importantly, such a contention holds even if one accepts, as many do, that morality is first and foremost an interpersonal matter.

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<sup>4</sup> A proponent of consequentialism may protest that consequentialism is so demanding that it leaves no room for the cultivation of one's talents or the promotion of one's well-being. As a matter of fact and not of logical necessity, the objection continues, there are no circumstances under which one should promote one's interests instead of helping the millions of fellow humans that are starving, sick, or dying (cf. Singer, 1972, 1993; Unger, 1996). Such a complaint, however, misses a fact that is central to consequentialism: namely, that often the best way to promote happiness or well-being is circuitous (e.g., Hare 1988, pp. 289 – 90; Parfit, 1984, pp. 43-5; Railton 1984; Stocker, 1976) and as such it could pass through the subject.

First, it seems uncontentious to hold that as moral agents we have the obligation to care for and help others. Not only that, but such an obligation is genuine. That is to say, it is not the case that we can always escape the force of such an obligation; sometimes morality requires us to care for others despite our wishes to the contrary. But if we accept that there are good reasons to care for others, then those reasons should apply to everyone including ourselves. In other words, if we have the moral obligation to care for others, we also have the moral obligation to care for ourselves, assuming that we find ourselves in a situation that is morally similar to that in which we find others. For example, if it is the right thing to do to take someone to the hospital, then it is also the right thing to do to take ourselves to the hospital. Granted, depending on the situation, morality might require us to put others above ourselves and it might ask us to give priority to the interests of some (e.g., family) over those of others (e.g., strangers). Such prioritization of our moral obligations does not, however, vitiate entirely the need to help ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

Second, figuring out the right thing to do is often challenging and requires, among many other things, that we are intellectually and emotionally attuned to the needs of others. We thus owe it to others to cultivate our own rational and emotional natures. It should be obvious, however, that such attunement and intellectual and emotional maturity requires attending to oneself; it requires taking care of oneself and promoting certain morally relevant aspects of one's character. Such a responsibility towards others includes the responsibility to protect and take care of oneself. But to be a moral agent it is not enough to exist. One also needs to exemplify certain morally relevant qualities. As a parent, for example, one does not only have a responsibility to keep oneself alive, but also a responsibility to support one's children in substantial ways.

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<sup>5</sup> A version of this argument is found in Hills (2003). Hills notes that if there are reasons to promote the well-being of others, then since those reasons are universal and agent-neutral they apply to our well-being. Even if one does not agree with Hills that the reasons to promote the well-being of others are universal and agent-neutral, one can still hold that there will be at least some circumstances in which such reasons will apply to us and as a result, we will be obliged to help ourselves.

Arguably, such a support cannot be provided to the extent that is required unless one succeeds in developing certain capacities, dispositions, or habits.

The above considerations suggest rather strongly, I believe, that morality's focus on others does not negate the need to focus, at least sometimes, on oneself. In other words, even if morality is fundamentally about others, it is not to the exclusion of ourselves. There is room, nay a need, for both other-regarding and self-regarding aspects in a moral theory.

#### **4. Boredom, Well-being, and Flourishing**

Having found a space for self-regarding behavior in our moral realm, we can now turn to boredom and consider whether boredom has the capacity to either promote or hinder self-growth, the realization of one's talents, and ultimately whether it can lead to or preclude flourishing. Looking at the psychological literature on the trait of boredom and its correlates, one finds a clear and unequivocal answer. Trait boredom is detrimental to self-growth and flourishing.

Flourishing contrasts both with pathology and languishing (Keyes, 2002), insofar as it requires both the absence of mental illnesses and the presence of mental health. More precisely, flourishing is a type of positive functioning that consists of subjective well-being (i.e., the presence of positive affect, lack of negative affect, and perceived life satisfaction) (Diener et al., 1999; Diener, 2000), psychological well-being (self-acceptance, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, personal growth, life purpose, and autonomy) (Ryff, 1989 and 2013; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 1998), and social well-being (i.e., social coherence, social actualization, social integration, social acceptance, and social contribution) (Keyes, 1998, 2002). Thus, individuals are flourishing when they fulfill most, if not all, of the following criteria: they are satisfied with their lives and themselves; they often experience positive affects; they have

healthy relationships with others and are a part of a social community; they are able to engage in autonomous decisions and to develop their environment in ways that are conducive to their needs; they live meaningful lives; and finally, they are growing and developing as persons.

It should be obvious from the provided characterization of flourishing that I take flourishing to contain both personal and social aspects. That is, flourishing requires not only the presence of positive affect, personal growth, and development, for example, but also the existence of certain healthy social relationships. This point is important to remember. If flourishing has a positive social component insofar as it requires prosocial behavior, then even if one disagrees with me that morality contains self-regarding aspects, one can still accept the distinct claim that flourishing is morally important and as such should be an aim that is worth pursuing.

If the trait of boredom hinders elements of subjective, psychological, or social well-being, then trait boredom should be thought of as an obstacle to flourishing. It is precisely for this reason that trait boredom should be considered to be a morally relevant personality trait. As I argued above, morality does not just require us to help others; it also demands from us that we become better persons. Insofar as the trait of boredom opposes flourishing, self-growth, and well-being, it hampers a moral life.

#### **4.1. Measures of trait boredom**

What is trait boredom? Trait boredom is a tendency or propensity to experience boredom in a wide range of situations and is typically assessed by multi-item, self-report scales. Although several measures of trait boredom exist in the literature (Acee et al., 2010; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Grubb, 1975; Hamilton et al., 1984; Iso-Ahola & Weissinger, 1990; Lee, 1986; Passik et al., 2003; Ragheb & Merydith, 2001; Watt & Ewing, 1996; Zuckerman, 1979) most of them are

restricted in scope insofar as they measure boredom only in specific and circumscribed contexts (Vodanovich, 2003). The only two existing measures that do not suffer from such a shortcoming are the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS) (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986) and the Boredom Susceptibility Scale (ZBS) (Zuckerman, 1979).

BPS is better poised as a measure of trait boredom than ZBS. First, although numerous studies have provided support for the validity of both measures (Vodanovich, 2003; Vodanovich & Watt, 2015), ZBS exhibits low internal consistency reliability (see, e.g., Deditius-Island & Caruso, 2002; Glicksohn & Abulafia, 1997; Mercer-Lynn et al., 2011; Watt & Ewing, 1996; Zuckerman et al., 1978). Second, BPS is a full-scale measure of boredom, whereas ZBS is a 10-item subscale of the Sensation Seeking Scale (Form V) (Zuckerman, 1979; Zuckerman et al., 1978). By design, ZBS is designed to measure “aversion to repetition, routine, and dull people, and restlessness when things are unchanging” (Zuckerman et al., 1978, p.140). Consequently, the trait measured by ZBS—boredom susceptibility—is intimately related to inadequate external stimulation and sensation seeking. This theoretical conceptualization of ZBS both distinguishes it from BPS (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986, p. 10) and renders it a more appropriate measure of sensation seeking than boredom. Given differences in the theoretical underpinnings of the two measures, it is not surprising that the two measures are only weakly correlated. Such a weak correlation is a further indication that the two measures might be assessing different constructs (Mercer-Lynn et al., 2011; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986). Care is thus needed when comparing between studies that have used these two different measures of trait boredom. For the purposes of this essay, I focus only on studies that used BPS as a measure of boredom.

## **4.2. Boredom proneness and flourishing**

What is the relationship between the trait of boredom (as this is measured by BPS) and flourishing? In what follows, I offer six distinct considerations that highlight the ways in which boredom proneness is detrimental to one's flourishing. Jointly, such considerations demonstrate the morally problematic nature of boredom proneness.

(a) Negative affect and subjective well-being: Subjective well-being (SWB) is a self-evaluation of the quality of the life of an individual (Argyle, 2001; Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999; Kahneman et al., 1999) and as such, an important indication of the presence or absence of flourishing. SWB is conceptualized as a multifaceted construct that includes both an affective component (a measure of an individual's positive and negative emotional experiences) and a cognitive component (a global evaluation of one's life or a report of satisfaction with various specific aspects of one's life such as family life, friendships, school, and job) (Diener et al., 1999; Andrews & Withey, 1976; Lucas, Diener & Suh, 1996; Huebner et al., 1998; Diener, 2000; Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). An individual will score high on measures of SWB if that individual frequently experiences positive affects, does not experience negative affects often, and is satisfied with the various aspects of their life.

Boredom proneness is related to the frequent presence of negative affective experiences (Vodanovich et al., 1991). Specifically, it is positively correlated with depression (Ahmed, 1990; Blaszczynski et al., 1990; Carriere et al., 2008; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Goldberg et al., 2011; Malkovsky et al., 2012; Mercer-Lynn et al., 2011), anxiety (Eakman 2011; Fahlman et al., 2009; Fahlman et al., 2013; Newell et al., 2011), loneliness (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986), and hopelessness (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986). Furthermore, boredom proneness is positively correlated with the personality trait of neuroticism (Gordon et al., 1997; Mercer-Lynn et al., 2011; Mercer-Lynn et al., 2013), which is, in turn, characterized by the tendency to respond with

negative emotions to the perception of loss, threat, and frustration (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1993; Lahey, 2009). Given that SWB depends upon both the frequent experience of positive emotions and the lack of negative emotions, individuals who score high on BPS will score low on measures of SWB.

But boredom proneness' relevance extends beyond the sphere of our emotional lives. That is, boredom proneness is not only important when it comes to our *emotional* well-being; it is also important when considering and evaluating our *overall* quality of life. Numerous studies have documented the benefits of positive affects (for a comprehensive review, see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). For example, positive feelings broaden people's interests and action repertoires (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). They affect people's mindsets by fostering creativity (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987) and trust in others (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005). Moreover, happy individuals have stronger immune systems, make more money, have better social relationships, and are more successful in achieving life goals than their less happy peers (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). The presence of positive affect was also shown to be a predictor of psychological health (e.g., growth in ego-resilience and psychological growth) (Fredrickson et al., 2003; Ong et al., 2006; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Finally, the frequent experience of positive affect has even been linked to longevity (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001; Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002; Moskowitz, 2003; Ostir, Markides, Black, & Goodwin, 2000). The aforesaid findings make evident the importance of positive affect in our lives and support the contention that SWB is a necessary component of the good life (Diener et al., 2003). More to the point, they also demonstrate the many difficulties that boredom prone individuals will face on account of the fact that their lives are ones that lack the frequent experience of positive affect.

(b) Life satisfaction: In addition to an affective component, SWB also includes a cognitive component, commonly referred to as “life satisfaction” (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Diener et al., 1999). Life satisfaction is a conscious cognitive judgment about the quality of one’s life on the basis of a set of criteria that are up to the person (e.g., Diener et al., 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). Hence, SWB depends not only on the frequent experience of positive emotional and affective states, but also on the perception that one is living a satisfactory life.

Such a relationship between SWB and life satisfaction is important in the case of boredom. Life satisfaction, either on its own or as a part of SWB, is associated with a number of health and psychological benefits (e.g., Diener & Diener, 2009; Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2001; Matthews et al., 2006; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Simply put, individuals who are satisfied with their lives live better lives than those who are not. Boredom proneness, however, is associated both with a lower life satisfaction (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986) and with lower job satisfaction (Abdolahi et al., 2011; Kass et al., 2001). Consequently, boredom prone individuals will be at a disadvantage compared to those who experience life satisfaction.

In sum, there are good reasons to think that the presence of boredom proneness is incompatible with the presence of SWB: where boredom proneness is, SWB and the good life are not. Such a relationship between SWB and boredom proneness is not at all surprising. Although early research on SWB was guided by the assumption that objective life conditions determine one’s level of well-being, there is now substantial evidence that supports the claim that well-being is based to a great extent on personality and individual dispositions (for a review see DeNeve and Cooper, 1998; see also Andrews & Withey, 1976; Brickman et al., 1978; Diener, Oishi, and Lucas, 2003; Fredrick & Lowenstein, 1999; Hellmich, 1995). As a personality trait, boredom proneness is thus well suited to have such a profound effect on our well-being.

(c) Lack of meaning in life: Feeling good is an integral part of living a good life, but it is not sufficient (Jahoda, 1958; Keyes, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998). A good life is not just a life that is suffused with positive experiences, but also one that is perceived to possess meaning (e.g., King et al., 2006; Ryff & Singer, 1998; From steiger & Oishi, & Kashdan). Although there is some variability in existing definitions (see, e.g., Battista & Almond, 1973; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Frankl, 1963; King et al., 2006; Klinger, 1977; Steger, 2012) and measures of meaning in life (Battista & Almond, 1973; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Steger et al., 2006), theorists agree that meaning in life is important (see, e.g., Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970; Steger, 2012; Wong & Fry, 1998). For example, having more meaning in life was shown to be positively related to life satisfaction (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Steger & Kashdan, 2007), happiness (Debats et al., 1993), work enjoyment (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000; Harlow et al., 1986), and quality of life (Krause, 2007). There is evidence that individuals with high meaning in life may be able to cope better with life's hardships (Debats et al., 1995; Jim et al., 2006) and to better regulate their emotions (Shin et al., 2005). Furthermore, having less meaning in life has been associated with depression and anxiety (Debats et al., 1993), substance abuse (Harlow et al., 1986), suicidal ideation (Heisel & Flett, 2004), and greater need for therapy (Battista & Almond, 1973).

If meaning in life plays such a crucial role in our lives, then those lacking the perception that their lives are meaningful will experience many existential and emotional adversities. This appears to be precisely the case for boredom prone individuals. Such individuals have a harder time finding meaning in life than those who are not prone to boredom (Fahlman et al., 2009; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2011, 2012; Vodanovich & Watt, 1999; Watt & Vodanovich, 1999; Weinstein et al., 1995). Hence, boredom proneness, through its relationship to meaning in life, is associated in yet another way to an inability to flourish.

(d) Potentially harmful conduct: One basic requirement of flourishing and well-being is that individuals neither engage in unnecessarily high-risk activities nor are subject to addictive behavior (Keyes, 2002). Boredom prone individuals, however, experience impulse control deficits (Dahlen et al., 2004; Leong & Schneller, 1993) and are more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior (Dahlen et al., 2005; Kass et al., 2010; Mann 2012) than individuals low on boredom proneness. What is more, individuals who score high on the boredom proneness scale (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986) are prone to addictive behavior such as drug and alcohol abuse (Lee et al., 2007; LePera, 2011; Paulson et al., 1990; see also Flory et al., 2011; Wiesbeck et al., 1996), hypersexuality (Reid et al., 2011), and problem gambling (Blaszczynski et al., 1990; Mercer & Eastwood, 2010). If boredom proneness is an indication that one is more likely to engage in some form of potentially harmful behavior, then boredom proneness is also an indication that one's prospects of flourishing in life are worse than they would be if that individual were not prone to boredom.

(e) Problematic social relationships: The importance of healthy, meaningful, and productive interpersonal relationships has been long acknowledged. In its definition of mental health, the World Health Organization states that mental health requires an individual's ability to productively contribute to their community.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services holds that mental health involves the existence of fulfilling relationships with other people.<sup>7</sup> A similar attitude about the significance of quality relationships and their role in

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<sup>6</sup> "Mental health: a state of well-being." Retrieved September 01, 2016, from [http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental\\_health/en/](http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/)

<sup>7</sup> "What is Mental Health?" Retrieved September 01, 2016, from <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health/>

well-being can be found both in the philosophical (e.g., Becker, 1992; Nozick, 1989; Russell 1996) and psychological literature on the good life (Allport, 1961; Jahoda, 1958; Erikson, 1959; Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Singer, 1998; Keyes, 2002; Ryff, 2013). Individuals satisfied with their interpersonal relationships live happier and healthier lives than those who are dissatisfied (Myers, 1992; Reis et al., 2000). In fact, after an extensive review of the relevant empirical findings, Baumeister and Leary (1995) have argued that the need to belong (i.e., the drive to form and maintain lasting and positive interpersonal relationships) is a fundamental human motive, the frustration of which can lead to a variety of ill effects.

Through its relationship to a diminished quality of interpersonal relationships, boredom proneness is, once again, related to diminished well-being. Boredom proneness has been shown to be associated with alienation (Tolor, 1989) and low sociability (Leong & Schneller, 1993). By testing the relationship of BPS to the *Hopkins Symptom Checklist*, Sommers and Vodanovich (2000) found that there is a significant relationship between boredom proneness and negative social orientation. Finally, McGiboney and Carter (1998) reported that for adolescents, boredom proneness is related to inactivity, social dependency, and a disregard for rules. All in all, boredom proneness is an indication of poor interpersonal relationships. As such, its presence strongly suggests the absence of flourishing.

(f) Reduced autonomy: A fully functioning individual is not only one who is capable of motivating oneself, but also one who is able to do so in an autonomous fashion. Autonomy in this sense is present when one perceives one's activities as being both in line with one's desires and goals and also as stemming from oneself (Deci & Ryan, 1991). In other words, autonomy requires the ability to be self-motivated, to evaluate oneself by personal standards, and to be in a position to resist social pressures (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Ryff, 1989). Thus understood,

autonomy is taken to be both a basic human need and a central component of well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996). For example, Sheldon and colleagues (1996) found that persons higher in the trait of autonomy were more prone to report greater well-being on average. Furthermore, when they conducted independent within-persons analyses that controlled for trait differences, they found that daily fluctuations in autonomy were linked to corresponding changes above and below one's personal baseline of well-being. In turn, achieving intrinsic goals (i.e., goals that are close to one's basic needs) is associated with enhanced well-being, whereas the achievement of extrinsic goals (i.e., goals that are not related to one's basic needs) not only fails to enhance well-being, but sometimes it even detracts from it (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Similar findings were reported by Sheldon and Kasser (1995) who observed that it is likely for well-being to be enhanced when one's daily activities are in line with one's needs and goals. The importance of autonomy has also been demonstrated in additional studies (for a review, see Ryan et al., 1996) all of which point to the conclusion that well-being is promoted by one's ability to find personal meaning and to pursue activities that are judged by the individual to be meaningful.

Boredom proneness has been shown to be related to reduced autonomy (Farmer & Sandberg, 1986) and individuals who are prone to boredom value external rather than internal rewards (Vodanovich et al. 1997). Such individuals also report disordered agency—they do not know what they want to do in life (Fahlman et al., 2013; Fenichel, 1951)—and diminished self-determination (Kanevsky & Keigley, 2003; Tolor & Siegel, 1989; see also Bernstein, 1975 and Greenson, 1953). Individuals with high boredom proneness scores have significantly lower intention to vote (Tolor and Siegel, 1989), are inactive (McGiboney & Carter 1998), and are lacking in motivation (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986). In virtue of reduced autonomy, boredom

prone individuals will be less likely to secure well-being than individuals who are not prone to boredom. Boredom proneness is yet again a sign of a non-optimal way of living.

### **4.3. The moral significance of boredom**

Moral situations are often challenging and ambiguous (Doris and Murphy, 2007). To do the right, one needs not only to know what that is but also to be able to do it. Morality thus demands the cultivation and possession of certain capacities—ones that are both morally relevant and parts of a flourishing life (Aristotle, 2014; Kant, 1991b). As agents living moral lives we should act autonomously, cultivate and maintain positive social relationships, and abstain from engaging in potentially harmful and abusive behaviors. As it is abundantly clear from the numerous studies cited above, the presence of boredom proneness makes it harder for individuals to be able to fulfill such requirements. Boredom prone individuals manifest reduced autonomy, have worse social relationships, and are more likely to engage in potentially harmful and destructive behavior than individuals who do not possess the trait of boredom proneness.

Even aspects of flourishing that *prima facie* seem to be irrelevant to morality (e.g., positive affect, life satisfaction, and meaning in life) turn out to be important components of a moral life. That is because even if positive affect, life satisfaction, or meaning in life are not themselves moral qualities, the type of behaviors and attitudes that they promote or inhibit are. For example, individuals who score high on happiness scales (a construct that is often operationalized to include life satisfaction) or on positive affect questionnaires are more willing to engage in prosocial and even altruistic behavior (Feingold, 1983; Krueger et al., 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1993; Thoits and Hewitt 2001). The transient experience of positive affect was found to promote both trust in others (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005) and charitable and generous behavior such as donating

blood (O'Malley & Andrews, 1983) or giving money to charity (Cunningham, Steinberg, & Grev, 1980; see also, Isen 1970; Isen & Levin, 1972). Importantly, a feedback loop between prosocial behavior (i.e., spending money on others) and happiness has been observed (Aknin et al., 2011): individuals who engage in prosocial spending are likely to experience happiness (Aknin et al., 2013) and the experience of happiness is likely to promote future prosocial spending. Previous research has shown that contrary to what one might expect, committing a kind deed can decrease the likelihood of committing a subsequent kind deed. When one individual commits a kind act, the individual has knowledge of her kind act. Such knowledge can inflate the individual's sense of morality and in doing so permit the performance of self-interested acts in the future (Merritt et al., 2010). The findings by Aknin and colleagues highlight the importance of happiness in the continuation of prosocial behavior. Happiness gained by the performance of a kind act can be a determining factor as to whether an individual will commit subsequent kind acts.

Life satisfaction has been suggested to be an inhibitor of violence and hostility towards others. Adolescents who were satisfied with their lives were less likely to carry a weapon and to engage in violence (MacDonald et al., 2005). Furthermore, a high level of life satisfaction in adolescent students was related to higher social interest (Gilman, 2001). Social interest involves a commitment to others and a sense of belongingness (Ansbacher, 1991; Magen & Ahoroni, 1991) and as such, has clear moral implications. Finally, meaning in life correlates with conscientiousness (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Schmutte & Ryff, 1997; Steger et al., 2008)—a personality trait that predicts prosocial involvement (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007)—and is negatively related to antisocial behavior and aggression in Chinese secondary school students (Shek, Ma, & Cheung, 1994) and to hostility, aggression, and antisociality in American (Mascaro et al., 2004; Scheier & Newcomb, 1993; Steger et al., 2008) and Dutch individuals (Debats et al., 1993).

Understood as a lasting personality trait (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986), boredom is a serious issue. Previous research has demonstrated the numerous and significant physical, psychological, and social harms with which it is related (see, e.g., Vodanovich, 2003). In this section, I have presented the ways in which the harmful effects or correlates of trait boredom thwart one's flourishing. Insofar as boredom hurts our prospects for flourishing, it also hurts our prospects for a moral life. Thus, through its role in hindering one's flourishing, boredom constitutes an important yet unfortunately neglected moral issue. Our moral theories and accounts of moral education ought to take boredom seriously. Not only do we need to think hard about ways in which we can become morally better individuals, but we also need to consider ways to cope with and alleviate the presence of boredom.

### **5. A Proposed Model: From boredom to lack of flourish**

So far, my argument has been premised primarily on the basis of numerous correlational studies that connect a measure of trait boredom (i.e. boredom proneness) to a number of factors that, as I have gone to some length to argue, ought to be considered to be morally relevant. But because of the correlational nature of my presentation many questions regarding the exact mechanism of boredom remain unanswered. Consequently, even if one grants that the presence of boredom correlates with an inability to flourish and thus with a type of moral failure, one might still be reluctant to accept the conclusion that boredom itself is morally relevant. After all, one can argue, I have not offered any explanation as to how the presence of trait boredom can trigger morally relevant processes. What is it about the personality trait of boredom that grants it significance and predictive value within a moral context?

Even though it does not detract away from the correlational argument that I have made, such a concern is well founded and it is incumbent upon myself to address it. In this section, I

propose a theoretical model to explain how trait boredom can stand as an obstacle to flourishing. My presentation of this model proceeds in two main steps. First, I distinguish clearly between trait boredom and state boredom and discuss what is known about the relationship between state boredom and morality. Second, I turn to an examination of trait boredom and propose how the prolonged or frequent experience of boredom (as this is experienced by high boredom prone individuals) can be morally significant. I argue that even though the transient experience of boredom is not morally worrisome, the possession of the personality trait of boredom is. The latter amounts to a state of prolonged lack of care and inability to take responsibility for one's own existence. High boredom prone individuals are more likely to become alienated from their projects and values, disconnected from their future possibilities, and ultimately alienated from their "true" selves.

### **5.1. State vs. Trait Boredom**

State boredom can be distinguished from trait boredom in the following ways. First, the state of boredom is short-lived (Danckert & Allman, 2005; Fisher, 1993; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993). A personality trait such as state boredom, however, is highly enduring and can last for many years (Allport, 1961; Fleeson et al., 2002; Fridhandler, 1986; Norman, 1967; Spielberger, 1972). Second, the state of boredom is concrete, whereas the trait is abstract. The state is concrete insofar as it occurs (fully) during a specific timeframe and is directly observable (either introspectively or through some kind of behavioral or physiological measurement). Traits are not, however, directly observed; instead, they are deduced on the basis of certain measures (Fridhandler, 1986, p. 170). Third, states are characterized by their continuity whereas traits are not. States, in other words, cannot be temporally discontinuous (Spielberger, 1966a, 1966b, and 1972). Finally, the state of boredom can be both easily induced and alleviated by proximal situational factors (see, e.g.,

Daniels et al., 2015; Fahlman et al., 2013, study 4; Fisher, 1993; van Tilburg et al., 2013 cf. Neu, 1998; Fenichel, 1951; O'Hanlon, 1981; Todman, 2003). Traits do not bear the same susceptibility to situational factors. For instance, no single exposure to a boring situation will give rise or cause the personality trait of boredom proneness.

The above four characteristics of state boredom (duration, concreteness, continuity, and susceptibility to situation) are features that the state of boredom possesses and render it a *state* (as opposed to a trait). In addition to such features, however, the state of boredom also has characteristics that render it a state of *boredom* (as opposed to frustration, sadness, or anger). The state of boredom is a multidimensional construct. In regards to its affective character, boredom is an aversive state (e.g., Conrad, 1997; De Chenne, 1988; Fahlman et al., 2009; Fisher, 1993; Freeman, 1993; Lin et al., 2009; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; J. A. Russell, 1980; Todman, 2003). While bored, one experiences feelings of dissatisfaction with one's current situation (e.g., Fisher, 1993; Harris, 2000; Hartocollis, 1972; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Pekrun et al., 2010; Todman, 2003). One feels weary and often even frustrated (e.g., Goetz & Frenzel, 2006; Harris, 2000; Martin et al., 2006). In terms of its cognitive character, boredom is characterized by an inability to sustain attention (Ahmed, 1990; Hamilton, 1981; Hamilton et al., 1984; Damrad-Frye & Laird, 1989; Eastwood et al., 2012; Fisher, 1993; Gordon et al., 1997; Harris, 2000; Wallace et al., 2003), the perception of a slower passage of time (e.g., Gabriel, 1998; Greenson, 1953; Hartocollis, 1972; Martin et al., 2006; Tze et al., 2013; Wangh, 1975), the perception of a lack of meaning (e.g., Barbalet, 1999; Fahlman et al., 2009; Fiske & Maddi, 1961; Perkins & Hall, 1985; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2012), mental fatigue, and mind-wandering (Game, 2007; Harris, 2000; Martin et al., 2006). In terms of its volitional character, boredom is marked by a strong desire to do something else (something more exciting, interesting, meaningful, or more generally something that is in line with the subject's wishes and desires) (e.g., Berlyne, 1960;

Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; De Chenne, 1988; Fahlman et al., 2013; Fiske & Maddi, 1961; Greenson, 1953; Hebb, 1966; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Todman, 2003; van Tilburg and Igou, 2012). Finally, in terms of its physiological character, boredom is characterized by a decrease in arousal (e.g., Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Russell, 1980), although an increase may also occur (e.g., Barmack, 1937; Braby et al., 1992; Fahlman et al., 2013; Geiwitz, 1966; London et al., 1972; Lundberg et al., 1993; Pattyn et al., 2008).

To date, there are only two studies that have investigated directly the relationship between the state of boredom and morality (van Tilburg & Igou 2011, 2016a)—an additional study exists in which the authors consider the effects of state boredom on political beliefs but since there is no straightforward relationship between morality and political views I shall not discuss this study (van Tilburg & Igou 2016b).

In the first study (Van Tilburg and Igou, 2011), it was found that the presence of state boredom increases the liking of an ingroup name (study 1). The authors also examined the effects of the state of boredom on individuals' evaluation of aggressive behavior of an outgroup or ingroup member in a hypothetical intergroup conflict. They found that the presence of boredom increases the length of the hypothetical jail sentences for the outgroup offender (study 2) and decreases the length for jail sentences for the ingroup offender (study 3). Van Tilburg and Igou explain these findings by arguing that (a) boredom signals a crisis of meaning and (b) the state of boredom motivates individuals to reestablish a sense of meaningfulness and one way of doing so is to embrace social identity. If the state boredom can influence attitudes regarding punishment for outgroup or ingroup members then it has moral implications. What is more, boredom's relationship to social identity can perhaps help us to understand not only findings that relate boredom proneness to aggression and hostility (e.g., Dahlen et al., 2004; Fahlman et al., 2013; Gana & Akremi, 1998; Gordon et al., 1997; Mercer-Lynn et al., 2011; Mercer-Lynn et al., 2013;

Rupp & Vodanovich, 1997; Vodanovich et al., 1991) but also other morally pertinent phenomena such as stereotyping and intergroup hostility.

In a more recent work, Van Tilburg and Igou (2016a) examined whether the state of boredom can increase prosocial intentions. In line with theoretical articulations of the state of boredom that attribute to boredom a self-regulatory function (Bench & Lench, 2013; Elpidorou, 2014, 2015; Sansone et al., 1992; Smith et al., 2009; Pekrun et al., 2010; Struk et al., 2015; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2011; Van Tilburg et al., 2013), Van Tilburg and Igou found that the state of boredom can give rise to prosocial intentions if such intentions are seen as being purposeful. Once again, Van Tilburg and Igou attribute this characteristic of boredom to its potential to motivate individuals to reestablish a sense of meaning. Hence, in situations that prosocial behavior is perceived as meaningful, individuals may be prompted by boredom to form the intention to engage in such a behavior.

What the studies by Van Tilburg and Igou show is that boredom's capacity to motivate subjects to pursue and establish a sense of meaningfulness could be of moral relevance insofar as it influences one's intentions. Yet, boredom's moral import seems to be dependent on the situation and on the choices available to the bored individual. In other words, it is not the presence of the state of boredom as such that carries moral significance and predictive power, but rather the presence of the state of boredom *plus* certain specific and to an extent circumscribed situations. Depending on the situation, a sense of meaningfulness can be established by prosocial (Van Tilburg and Igou, 2016a)<sup>8</sup>, antisocial (Van Tilburg, 2011; study 2), or even morally neutral behavior. Consequently, the findings by Van Tilburg and Igou are important, but not sufficient by themselves to demonstrate that the *state* of boredom is morally

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<sup>8</sup> Van Tilburg and Igou (2016a)'s findings are in agreement with Barbalet (1999, pp. 633-4, pp. 642-3)'s suggestion that antisocial and harmful activities (e.g., gambling, risk-taking actions, and intergroup conflict) can be understood as attempts to avert or overcome boredom by seeking to establish meaning.

relevant. They are important because they can help us to make sense of the effects of the state of boredom on moral intentions and judgments; in turn, they can also permit us to predict how the state of boredom and situational factors could influence moral conduct. They are not however sufficient to establish that the state of boredom is a moral emotion because even though the state of boredom involves a motivation for establishing a sense of meaningfulness, such a motivation is, in and of itself, morally neutral.

Such an admission about the character of state of boredom, however, does not rule out the possibility that trait boredom could be a morally relevant personality trait. This is primarily for two reasons. First, trait boredom and state boredom are distinct constructs and thus differences between their respective characters, antecedents, and effects and correlates are not only to be expected but also consistent with findings in the literature on boredom. For example, whereas numerous studies have documented the harmful correlates of boredom proneness (for reviews see Vodanovich, 2003; Vodanovich & Watt, 2015), a number of researches have argued that the state of boredom can bring about beneficial consequences (Barbalet, 1999; Bench & Lench, 2013; Elpidorou, 2014; Gasper & Middlewood, 2014; Mann & Cadman, 2014; Sansone et al., 1992).

Second, there is not just *one* way in which psychological states or traits can be said to be morally significant. Indeed, it is possible to distinguish between at least four ways in which a psychological state or trait can be morally significant: (i) a state or trait is morally significant because it can influence moral judgment; (ii) it is morally significant because it can motivate prosocial or antisocial behavior; (iii) it is morally significant because it can facilitate *moral perception*—i.e., its presence makes it more likely for one to perceive morally relevant situations (e.g, a moral transgression); or (iv) it is morally significant because it stands as an obstacle to flourishing. Throughout the essay, my objective was to demonstrate boredom’s moral relevance

in the last sense. Hence, even if boredom does not turn out to be morally relevant in senses (i) and (ii), it can still be morally relevant in another sense, namely, (iv). As I hope to have demonstrated in section 3, it would not only be artificial but also wrong to exclude from morality aspects of self-regarding conduct.

## **5.2. Trait Boredom and Lack of Care**

Although it is important to clearly distinguish between the trait of boredom and the state of boredom, it is equally important not to lose track of the fact that the two constructs are related. One is prone to boredom (i.e., one is said to have the trait of boredom) only if one *experiences* boredom frequently and in a wide range of situations. In fact, given how the trait of boredom is conceptualized and assessed it would be meaningless to postulate its existence in the absence of the state boredom (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986). Furthermore, as a trait, boredom is an abstract construct the existence of which is inferred and not directly measured. Thus, the effects and influences of trait boredom are most likely going to be mediated by the effects and influences of state boredom. It is through the frequent or prolonged presence of the latter that the former gains its moral import and efficacy. This claim is consistent with recent attempts to understand boredom by investigating the characteristics of the state of boredom (Fahlman et al., 2013; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2012, 2016c).

But how exactly does the trait boredom become morally significant? The model that I offer is based on phenomenological studies of the experience of boredom (i.e., studies that try to explicate what it is like to be a boredom prone individual) and on theoretical considerations from existential psychology (e.g., May et al., 1958; May, 1961). Phenomenological studies are valuable insofar as they allow us to isolate the relevant experiential features of boredom; existential psychology permits us to articulate the moral importance of those experiential features.

Individuals who are almost always bored report “a desperate need to do something” (Martin et al., 2006, p.203). Such a desire to do something else—often anything but what one is currently doing—is of course present in the state of boredom (e.g., Berlyne, 1960; De Chenne, 1988; Fahlman et al., 2013; Fiske & Maddi, 1961; Greenson, 1953; Hebb, 1966; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Todman, 2003; van Tilburg and Igou, 2012). However, what is important in the case of individuals who experience boredom frequently is not that they just wish to do something else, but that they do not know *what* to do (Martin et al., 2006). All options appear to them to be equally unattractive. Nothing, so to speak, “jumps out” to them. It is one thing to occasionally find oneself in a state in which all options are equally unappealing; it is another thing entirely for such a state to be the norm.

Such a state of existence has at least two consequences. First, everyday decision-making becomes much more effortful than normal. Unlike apathy, the experience of boredom includes both feelings of restless and tiredness (Harris, 2000; Martin et al., 2006). As Martin et al. (2006, p.203) report, high boredom prone individuals “could not settle on any particular activity, and they could not rest, so they cast around trying to find something to do.” Coping with boredom is a constant struggle. It is not hard to imagine how such a state of existence could lead to a type of fatalism and passivity (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Maltsberger, 2000; McGiboney & Carter, 1988; Tolor and Siegel, 1989; White, 1998). If nothing alleviates one’s feelings of boredom, then one may give up trying. In such a prolonged state of boredom, “you loose [*sic*] the will to act, to take control, and so you become very passive” (Martin et al., 2006, p.204).

Second, by existing in a situation in which no option appears to be attractive, high boredom prone individuals may ultimately lose a sense of direction in their life (Bargdill, 2000). Most of us live in a world in which our choices are already delineated and predetermined by our projects (Elpidorou, 2013). We have our preferences and on account of them, we make our

decisions and develop ourselves. But that is not the case for high boredom prone individuals. Such individuals feel no “pull”: options do not call out to them and are not already imbued with meaning and personal significance. As Bargdill comments, boredom prone individuals “longer knew what they wanted or what to do with themselves” (2000, p. 199). And using the language of existential phenomenology, he adds: “[t]hey were no longer throwing forward possibilities” (ibid.).

Bargdill’s additional comment is important. It points to bored individuals’ inability to take over their situations and to imagine themselves in the future. For instance, one of Bargdill’s subjects reports:

When I lose my vision, I lose any idea or projection of what I want to do in the future. I don’t have any distinct plans, or even an idea of what I want to do and so I wanted to immerse myself more in the present rather than projecting myself in the future. (ibid.)

An inability to envision one’s future is symptomatic, I believe, of a fundamental lack of caring. Only an individual who has ceased to care about oneself ceases to care about one’s future. What one is, after all, is intimately related to what one can become (Heidegger, 1927). Our future constantly informs and grounds our present. Whether one is an instructor, a politician, a student, or a car mechanic, one’s present actions are almost always decided with the future in mind. Consequently, by neglecting their future, bored individuals become disconnected from their potential and leave behind what they took to be essential, important, or defining about themselves (Bargdill, 2000; White, 1998).

Once one becomes disconnected from one’s projects and future endeavors one may resist taking responsibilities for one’s actions and for missed opportunities (Bargdill, 2000, p. 196). Indeed, if the future does not matter and the present provides no solace, then what is the point

of trying and of assuming responsibility for one's action? This point is echoed not only by Bargdill's subjects but also by Zaskar's own description of his intensively bored existence. He writes:

I feel I lack a sense of purpose, and completeness. Most of all I feel extremely bored. Bored of everything—work, friends, hobbies, relationships, music, reading, movies, bored all the time. I do things [merely] to occupy my time, to distract myself from trying to discover the meaning of my existence, and I would gladly cease to do anything if the opportunity arose. No matter what the activity is it leaves me feeling unfulfilled [...] What possible difference does it ultimately make whatever I do? What difference does anything make? (Maltzberger, 2000, p.84)

Lastly, a lack of care for one's projects is a license to stop caring about *oneself* and thus bored individuals may start acting in ways that not only fail to promote their well-being but that they are detrimental to them (e.g., Bargdill, 2000; Dahlen et al., 2005; Kass et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2007; LePera, 2011; Mann 2012; Paulson et al., 1990).

In sum, the frequent or prolonged experience of boredom may bring about a form of existential stagnation. By inhabiting a world in which all of their options are equally unappealing, bored individuals become stuck in an unfulfilling present (Bargdill, 2000; Fahlman et al. 2013). Nothing can move or motivate them out of their situations. As a result, they become disconnected from their projects and values insofar as such projects and values simply cease to matter to them. In turn, they lose a sense of their own future and can no longer see—let alone develop—their potential. Cutoff both from their present and future, bored individuals are likely not going to be motivated to develop themselves. All in all, such an existential condition is marked by lack of care for oneself and for one's own development. Trait boredom through its ability to disconnect us from what matters to us and from our own future becomes morally relevant. It thwarts self-improvement. It blocks flourishing.

## 6. Connections and Further Directions

Investigations into the moral nature of boredom are still in their infancy. Only a handful of studies have empirically investigated boredom's potential relationship to morality and an examination of such studies delivers no definitive conclusions. Still, it is important to relate the claims of this essay to prior literature.

The two papers by Van Tilburg and Igou (2013 and 2016a) do provide initial support for the claim that the state of boredom can influence moral judgment and intentions. Still, as I discussed in section 5.1, such findings are consistent with a view of the state of boredom that holds it to be a morally neutral emotion. Furthermore, in a distinct study, Van Tilburg and Igou (2016c) found that compared to other emotions, people consider boredom to be relatively unrelated to morality.

Even though the conclusions of this paper do not echo Van Tilburg and Igou's findings, they are not in any way contradicted by such findings either. First, whereas Van Tilburg and Igou (2011 and 2016a) focus on the state of boredom, I have focused on the correlates and effects of *trait* boredom. Second, Van Tilburg and Igou's aim was to examine the moral relevance of boredom insofar as the latter may affect our intentions and moral judgments. My aim, instead, has been to explore a distinct way in which boredom can be morally relevant: namely, how it can affect self-regarding conduct and flourishing. Third, it might very well be the case that ordinary subjects consider boredom to be relatively unrelated to morality—at least if boredom is compared to other emotions. Such a finding however does not entail that there is no relationship between morality and boredom to be discovered. After all, boredom's relationship to morality might not be obvious to subjects—this would especially be the case if I am correct to insist that psychological states and traits can be morally relevant in at least four distinct ways.

Finally, it was reported that the onset of boredom may foster the retrieval of nostalgic memories (Van Tilburg et al., 2013). Coupled with previous findings that show that nostalgia increases perceived meaning in life (Routledge et al., 2011), one might point out that boredom's effects on meaning in life are not entirely negative. This conclusion does not constitute an objection to my claim that the presence of the trait of boredom is a strong indication of lack of flourishing. That is primarily for three reasons. First, boredom is itself a state of meaninglessness (Barbalet, 1999). Indeed, bored individuals engage in nostalgic reverie as a way to counteract the sense of meaninglessness that they experience while bored. Consequently, nostalgic reverie while being bored is not likely to give rise to a *net* increase of perceived meaning in life. Second, given what we know about the correlates of boredom proneness, I expect that even if high boredom prone individuals engage frequently in nostalgic reverie, such an engagement will be ineffective in furnishing their lives with meaning. That is because boredom prone individuals report a lack of meaning in life (e.g., Fahlman et al., 2009; Vodanovich & Watt, 1999; Watt & Vodanovich, 1999; Weinstein et al., 1995). Third, and most important, the main claim of this paper is that the trait of boredom hinders one's self-development and flourishing. Such a conclusion holds true even if not all effects or correlates of trait of boredom are negative. Trait boredom can still be an obstacle to flourishing even if nostalgic reverie is a process that is capable of alleviating some of trait boredom's harms.

Overall, the theoretical considerations offered in this paper, along with the findings by Van Tilburg and Igou, clearly highlight that boredom's relationship to morality is a topic that is ripe for further research. Experimental studies are needed in order to evaluate the model that is put forth in this paper and which attempts to explain how trait boredom thwarts flourishing. Studies should also confirm (or disconfirm) boredom's involvement in moral judgment and reasoning. If boredom does in fact affect moral judgment and reasoning, then it would be useful

to know the precise mechanism by which boredom has such an effect. Furthermore, the moral (or immoral) behavior of boredom prone subjects should be studied and compared to that of individuals who are not prone to boredom. Finally, researchers should not only pay more attention to boredom's relationship to moral conduct but also to its relationship to other moral emotions (e.g., shame, guilt, empathy, remorse) and morally relevant personality trait (e.g., shame proneness, guilt proneness).

## **7. Conclusion**

Three main claims have been presented and defended in this essay. First, I argued that self-regarding behavior should be considered to be moral. In fact, I argued that according to certain normative ethical theories we are morally obligated to care for our selves and to promote our well-being. I also suggested that even if morality is primarily other-concerning, our attempts to help and care for others require that we develop certain morally relevant capacities, the exercise of which can help us to act morally. Second, by reviewing the literature on the correlates on boredom proneness and that on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, I showed that there are excellent reasons to think that the presence of boredom is a sign of a failure to flourish. Third, I offered a sketch of the mechanism by which the trait of boredom can thwart self-development and ultimately flourishing. Putting these three claims together, I conclude that trait boredom is a morally relevant personality trait: it hinders our capacity to flourish and in doing so harms our prospects for a moral life.<sup>9</sup>

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