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5.2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BOREDOM: A SARTREAN READING

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Abstract

By examining boredom through the lens of Sartre's account of the emotions, I argue for the significance of boredom. Boredom matters, I show, for it is both informative and regulatory of one's behavior: it informs one of the presence of an unsatisfactory situation; and, at the same time, owing to its affective, cognitive, and volitional character, boredom motivates the pursuit of a new goal when the current goal ceases to be satisfactory, attractive, or meaningful. In the absence of boredom, one would remain trapped in unfulfilling situations, thereby missing out on many rewarding experiences. In helping us to articulate the function and significance of boredom, Sartre's account provides a much-needed counterbalance to accounts of boredom that portray it as a distinctively negative state.

“Sometimes good things come from boredom. Like Gene... and Tina.”
 Bob Belcher from *Bob's Burgers* (Season 3 Episode 22)

“Boredom is the root of all evil. It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion. The effect that boredom brings about is absolutely magical, but this effect is one not of attraction but of repulsion.”
 Kierkegaard 1843/1987, 285

1. Introduction

Boredom matters. It matters not only because boredom has been associated with a plethora of psychological, physical, or even social harms (Fahlman et al. 2013, Eastwood et al. 2012, Sommers & Vodanovich 2000, Ahmed 1990, Abramson and Stinson 1997, Mercer & Eastwood 2010, Blaszczynski et al. 1990); or because it affects a large percentage of the human population (Eastwood et al. 2012, Toohey 2011); or because our world is thought (by some at least) to have become increasingly more boring (Healy 1984; cf. Spacks 1995). It also matters because the very experience of boredom reveals a manner in which we find ourselves as embodied agents with worldly projects and interpersonal and social affairs. As a sign of how we are faring, boredom is polysemic. Being bored with a situation is a sign of a dissatisfaction with, or disinterest in, a situation. It is also, typically, a sign of our inability to attend to features of a given situation, to keep our focus on it, or to become engrossed by it. Relatedly, boredom also indicates a lack of satisfactory mental engagement or a failure to discern and discover meaning. Boredom can even

signify a moral transgression or the lack of virtue. To be bored with the beautiful, with your civic duties, or with your children, would be considered a moral or character failure.

Despite its importance, boredom still remains a topic that has gathered, at least in the philosophical literature, limited attention. And even when boredom is discussed, only a partial picture of it emerges. Most philosophical discussions of boredom tend to focus on what might be called ‘existential’ boredom, namely, a type of pervasive state of being that affects a person’s relationships to all possible objects (Healy 1984, Svendsen 2004). The existentially bored finds meaning (almost) nowhere; her world appears pallid or neutral. Existential boredom has a rich and complicated history and is closely related (conceptually, at least) to melancholy, ennui, *tristesse*, *acedia*, and *tedium vitae* (Svendsen 2004, Toohey 2011, cf. Raposa 1999). Perhaps what partly explains philosophers’ attraction to existential boredom is its alleged grand, i.e., metaphysical, import (Heidegger 1983). Regardless of what the allure of existential boredom might be, focusing on existential boredom often leads to the neglect of a simpler and much more mundane type of boredom. Most of us do experience this type of boredom; some, of course, do so more than others. We experience it, for instance, while waiting in line, when our flight is delayed, or when we have to endure the same conversation for the *n*th time.

Yet, even when simple boredom is discussed, it is often portrayed as a distinctively problematic or negative state.¹ To be bored is a problem, and the less one is bored, the better. Simple boredom deserves our attention, according to such a view, only because of its disruptive, negative, or harmful character. If one ought to study simple boredom, one ought to do it for the same reason that one needs to study other harms: to keep them at bay.

Both of these attitudes toward boredom miss, I believe, something quite important. Although mundane or commonplace, simple boredom is not trivial; although unpleasant, it is not an entirely negative state. In fact, an approach that takes simple boredom (hereafter just ‘boredom’) to be essentially a state that needs to be avoided runs the risk of failing to come to terms with the positive aspects of boredom.² In what follows, I offer a limited defense of boredom. Boredom, I argue, serves a rather important function in our lives and my objective in this chapter is to articulate its function and significance.

My approach to the topic of boredom will be informed by Sartre’s account of the emotions as advanced in his 1939 *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Sartre’s account is uniquely suited to bring to the fore the function and role of boredom because for Sartre,

¹ There are, of course, exceptions. For example, Nietzsche and Russell both comment on the value of boredom. Nietzsche (1974, 108) stresses the creative force of boredom, whereas Russell notes the motivational potential of boredom (1996, 48) and claims that the ability to endure boredom is essential to a happy life (ibid., 52). More sustained defenses of boredom can be found in Heidegger 1983/2001 and Brodsky 1995. Heidegger’s discussion, however, focuses on “profound boredom,” a type of boredom that is perhaps a philosophical construct that does not clearly map on to a concrete experience (1983/2001, 162). Even if one accepts Heidegger’s contention that profound boredom exists and carries great ontological significance insofar as it reveals our unexploited possibilities and brings us face-to-face with our temporal character, Heidegger still finds no value in the more mundane experience of boredom, namely, the psychological state that is the topic of this essay. Finally, Brodsky (1995) holds that boredom has value but only insofar as the experience of boredom can teach us our “utter insignificance” and “puts [our] existence in perspective” (109). Even if Brodsky is right to hold that boredom has existential significance, this is not the only positive role that boredom plays in our lives. Or so I argue in this chapter.

² My focus in this essay is the actual experience of boredom and *not* boredom proneness, i.e., the propensity to experience boredom in a wide range of situations (Farmer & Sundberg 1986, Neu 1998, Fahlman et al. 2013; cf. Fenichel 1953, O’Hanlon 1981). One can experience boredom without one necessarily being prone to boredom: the experience of boredom does not have to be the manifestation of boredom proneness. For more on the distinction between boredom and boredom proneness, see Fahlman et al. 2013 and Elpidorou 2014a.

emotions, and indeed most affective states, are not only significant but also purposeful. They are significant insofar as they are indicative of the manner in which we exist in the world (Sartre 1939/2004, 11-12, 63), and they are purposeful insofar as they are invested with a finality or functional role (*ibid.*, 48). By examining boredom through the lens of Sartre's account, I argue that boredom – owing to its affective, cognitive, and volitional character – motivates the pursuit of new goals when the current goal ceases to be satisfactory to the subject. The desire for change that is inherent in boredom increases the possibility of attuning oneself to emotional, cognitive, and even social opportunities that could have been missed. It also helps to restore the perception that one's activities are meaningful. My aim is not to defend the veracity of Sartre's account of emotion. Nonetheless, by showing that Sartre's account is capable of casting boredom in a positive light and in doing so, explicating its function, a partial case for its value will be made. A Sartrean reading of boredom provides a much-needed counterbalance to accounts of boredom that portray it as a distinctively negative state.

2. Sartre's Account of the Emotions

2.1 Overview

For Sartre, emotional episodes are first and foremost ways of apprehending the world (Sartre 1939/2004, 35). To experience an emotion is to live *through* that emotion. To be angry (or to experience anger), for instance, is not (primarily) to have an experience *about* anger; when one is angry, anger is only rarely the object of one's consciousness. Rather, to be angry is to experience the world, or part of the world, in a certain affective way (cf. *ibid.*, 34-36).

Emotional consciousness is thus primarily unreflecting consciousness. In emotional experiences the self is not the positional object of one's emotional consciousness. One is only *non-thetically* conscious of oneself. That is, one is conscious of oneself by "transcend[ing] and apprehend[ing] [oneself] out in the world as a quality of things" (*ibid.*, 38; cf. Sartre 1937/1960, 45). Of course, one can reflect both on one's emotional experiences and on oneself as the subject of those experiences. But one does not have to. To be in an emotional state one need not be conscious of oneself as being in such a state. Nor does one need to be conscious (in a second-order way) of one's emotional consciousness. One only needs to apprehend and experience the world in a certain affective manner. "Emotional consciousness," Sartre emphasizes, "is primarily consciousness *of* the world" (1939/2004, 34).

In our everyday, ordinary existence, worldly entities are presented to us already as a part of a causal and instrumental nexus. Entities invite or afford certain actions: "they appear to us as potentialities that lay claim to existence" (*ibid.*, 39). The world, as given in this instrumental guise, is "deterministic," that is to say, prescribed means bring about (or are meant to achieve) prescribed ends (*ibid.*). "From this [instrumental or practical] point of view, the world around us [...] appears to be all furrowed with strait and narrow paths leading to such and such determinate end" (*ibid.*). To advance one's academic career one must publish papers; to get home at night one must walk through a dark alley; to alleviate one's cold symptoms, one must see a doctor; and to find a life-partner one must date.

Often enough, however, the world presents us with obstacles. Either we are unable to achieve the desired means or the means simply ceases to be available to us: I do want to advance my career but the paper is just too hard to write; I wish to get home, but I am too scared to walk through the alley alone; I do want to get better but it is impossible to make an appointment with the doctor; and I do want a life-partner, but I do not want to (or I cannot) open up to anyone. It is

when we encounter such difficulties and many others that emotional episodes occur. Sartre explains:

We can now conceive what an emotion is. It is a transformation of the world. When the paths before us become too difficult, or when we cannot see our way, we can no longer put up with such an exacting and difficult world. All ways are barred and nevertheless we must act. So then we try to change the world; that is, to live it as though the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes but by magic (1939/2004, 39-40).

What occurs during an emotional episode is that we alter our perception of the world. We confer on worldly entities or situations alternative qualities, i.e., qualities other than the ones that they are perceived to have in their instrumental guise. Emotions transform our world, but they do so in a unique fashion; the transformation that they bring about is, according to Sartre, *magical*. It is magical insofar as the world itself (i.e., its material constitution) does not change. “[E]motional conduct is not on the same plane as other kinds of behaviour; it is not *effectual*... Emotional behaviour seeks by itself, and without modifying the structure of the object, to confer another quality upon it...” (*ibid.*, 41). Emotions give rise to a change without causing one. Or better, emotions change our world by changing *our consciousness of the world*. In bringing about such a transformation, the difficulties that we encounter magically disappear: I do not have to write the paper, for my career is no longer seen as important; I walk through the alleyway with my eyes closed so that I see nothing; there is no need to make an appointment to see a doctor, for doctors are perceived as worthless; and I have no reason to date because celibate life is now seen as preferable to life in matrimony. Emotions are solutions to problems that we cannot solve via ordinary, practical means.

The transformation that emotions effectuate on the world might be magical, but it is not inconsequential. When we undergo emotional episodes we find ourselves in a world that is different from the instrumental world. “Consciousness does not limit itself to the projection of affective meanings upon the world around it; it *lives* the new world it has thereby constituted – lives it directly, commits itself to it, and suffers from the qualities that the concomitant behavior has outlined” (*ibid.*, 51). We are absorbed or engrossed by the world that we live in through our emotional consciousness. Emotional consciousness is, in fact, “caught in its own snare” (*ibid.*, 52). The new qualities, relationships, and demands that have been magically conferred upon the world matter to us, for we believe in them. Emotional consciousness is thus not “playacting” (*ibid.*, 50). Or, if it is a kind of playacting, “the play,” Sartre notes, “is one that we believe in,” i.e., it is one that we do not recognize *as* play (*ibid.*, 41).³

2.2 The Function of Emotions: The Paradigm of Fear

Emotions are ways of magically transforming the world through the use of one’s body in response to experiences of difficulties. As magical transformations of one’s situation, emotions serve a function: they are meant to be unreflective solutions to perceived difficulties.

³ There is empirical evidence to support Sartre’s claim that during an affective experience the world appears different to us. For instance, extreme fear is associated with certain perceptual distortions of feared stimuli (Teachman et al. 2008) and fearful subjects overestimate, to a great extent, high heights when they are imagining falling from a height (Clerkin et al. 2009, Stefanucci et al. 2008).

Consider passive fear, one of the emotions that Sartre discusses in the *Sketch* (*ibid.*, 42). ‘Passive fear’ refers to a type of conduct that takes place during and shortly after the experience of a threatening situation⁴. In passive fear, the subject remains still or frozen. Freezing is, in fact, a typical initial reaction to the perception of a threatening situation. Upon encountering a threat or danger, e.g., an approaching wild animal or predator, humans and other animals will manifest a series of defensive reflexes that are commonly and collectively known as the “defensive cascade” (Ratner 1967; Marks 1987, ch. 3). When the predator is initially detected, the fearful agent freezes: he or she remains motionless and orients him- or herself towards the threat. It is hypothesized that the value of freezing is to increase the chances that the agent avoids detection and in turn to allow the agent to locate the predator, to assess the threat, and to prepare for action (Marks 1987, 58-60; Bovin et al. 2008). If the predator continues to approach, freezing is replaced by a series of defensive postures or movements. Most often the subject flees in an attempt to escape. If escape is not possible, the subject fights or resists the attack.

Freezing, flight, and fight do not exhaust the gamut of defensive responses. In some situations that involve extreme fear, and during which escape or resistance are not viable options, the subject will enter a state of tonic immobility (Maser and Gallup 1977). Tonic immobility is an automatic and uncontrollable reaction to life-threatening situations, such as a close encounter with a wild animal, a sexual assault, or a plane crash (Fizman et al. 2008, Johnson 1984, Marx et al. 2008). During an episode of tonic immobility the subject experiences, *inter alia*, a temporary inability to move (i.e., a gross motor inhibition), suppression of vocalization, unresponsiveness to external stimuli, and periods of eye closure (Bovin et al. 2008, Abrams et al. 2009). Although tonic immobility bears a resemblance to the freezing behavior that takes place immediately after the perception,⁵ the two types of behavior are importantly different. Freezing – sometimes called also “attentive immobility” (Marks 1987, 58) – is associated with increased “responsivity to stimuli and volitional action tendencies” and occurs, at least in cases where a predator is involved, early in the encounter stage, i.e., when the predator is still somewhat distant (Bovin et al. 2008, 402). On the contrary, tonic immobility involves unresponsiveness to external stimuli (sometimes even analgesia) and it is thought to be a last-resort reaction to imminent danger.

Unfortunately, Sartre’s discussion of passive fear does not distinguish between freezing (or attentive immobility) and tonic immobility. Even more problematically, Sartre asserts that during an episode of passive fear the fearful subject may even faint. “I see a ferocious beast coming towards me: my legs give way under me, my heart beats more feebly, I turn pale, fall down and faint away” (Sartre 1939/2004, 42). Consequently, it is unclear to which type of conduct ‘passive fear’ should refer. Are freezing, tonic immobility, and fainting all different expressions of the same emotion, i.e., passive fear? For present purposes, I will not adjudicate this issue. Instead, I shall assume, in line with Sartre’s comment, that regardless of what the expressions and behavioral manifestations of passive fear might be, passive fear is meant to be a solution to a perceived threat when normal deterministic means are incapable of dealing with the threat. When one cannot outrun, hide from, or fight a predator, one finds *solace* in passive fear by magically transforming the world (or at least attempting to do so). By freezing oneself, one tries to freeze magically the threat; by fainting and losing consciousness, one tries to annihilate magically the threat.

⁴ The ensuing description of passive fear is influenced by Hatzimoysis 2014.

⁵ For instance, both are defensive reactions that begin abruptly, they have comparable duration, and are both states of high arousal; see Marks 1987.

Two points must be made clear. First, although the function of passive fear is to provide the fearful subject with an escape, it is not one that necessarily (or even most often) helps the subject to escape. That is to say, passive fear is not for Sartre a strategy (evolutionarily adapted or not) that increases the chances of survival. “No conduct could seem worse adapted to the danger than this [i.e., fainting], which leaves me defenseless. And nevertheless it is a behavior of *escape*” (*ibid.*, 42). Passive fear gives rise to a magical transformation of the world, but insofar as the transformation is magical, the material constitution of the world remains unaffected. Passive fear as a solution to a perceived threat is thus severely limited, sometimes even impotent. By freezing, one does not freeze the threat. By fainting, the danger does not disappear; only my consciousness of it does.

Second, passive fear is escapist behavior but it is not one that is perceived as such by the agent. As Sartre is quick to emphasize: “...let no one suppose that it is a refuge *for me*, that I am trying to save *myself* ... I have not come out of the non-reflective plane...” (*ibid.*). In passive fear, my consciousness is and remains *of* the world (*ibid.*, 36).

A similar story can be told for other emotions. Active fear, for example, is also an escapist solution to a perceived threat. Often, in active fear one flees from the threat. Fleeing, however, is not a means towards an end. That is, it is not a calculated attempt to protect or hide oneself. Sartre, in fact, insists that to suppose that fleeing involves calculation is to misdescribe active fear. The inclusion of calculation would fail to see active fear as an emotional response. Instead, it would render it a prudential action, one during which the subject relates to the world in an instrumental manner. Like freezing or fainting during passive fear, fleeing is a way of magically transforming one’s world in order to negate the threat or difficulty. “Flight is fainting away in play; it is magical behavior which negates the dangerous object with one’s whole body, by reversing the vectorial structure of the space we live in and suddenly creating a potential direction on the *other side*” (*ibid.*, 43).

Passive sadness or melancholy is again thought to be a response to perceived difficulties. It often arises, Sartre notes, when conditions necessary in order to achieve certain desirable ends are missing or have been taken from me. I lost my job, yet my need for income persists; I lost a friend but I need his companionship. In order to achieve these ends, I now need to look for, and secure, new means. Passive sadness solves this difficulty by “suppressing the obligation to look for these new ways, by transforming the present structure of the world, replacing it with a totally undifferentiated structure” (*ibid.*, 44). Passive sadness changes the way that we experience the world. If the ends that we previously desired are no longer attractive to us, then there is no need for securing new means for achieving those ends.

What holds for fear (passive or active) and passive sadness, holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for anger, joy, and countless other emotions. Or so Sartre maintains. In experiencing an emotion, the subject is effectuating a magical transformation of the world in order to resolve a difficulty that he or she encounters.⁶ In emotional consciousness, the world is no longer given in its instrumental guise. It is instead experienced emotionally, i.e., magically.

⁶ The emotions of horror, awe, and wonder appear to be exceptions to the hitherto provided account of the emotions (Sartre 1939/2004, 55-56). In the case of horror, Sartre tells us, it is the world *itself* that is apprehended as magical. And it is apprehended as such without requiring a transformation. Ultimately, Sartre’s account of the emotions makes use of a double understanding of magic. On the one hand, during emotional experiences such as fear (*ibid.*, 42-43), sadness (*ibid.*, 43-45), and joy (*ibid.*, 46-47), we transform both our consciousness and our experience of the world - the instrumental, determinist world disappears and in its place a magical world is ushered in. Emotions, Sartre writes, “are ... reducible to the constitution of a magic world, by making use of our bodies as instruments of incantation” (*ibid.*, 47; cf. *ibid.*, 57). On the other hand, during certain other emotional episodes such as horror,

3. Boredom: A Sartrean Approach

Given the affective or emotional nature of boredom, a Sartrean account of boredom ought to conform to the general paradigm of emotions delineated above. Hence, to be bored is to apprehend the world (or a worldly situation) magically; as a magical consciousness, boredom arises or is motivated by the perception of certain difficulties; and the experience of boredom is meant to be an attempted solution of those difficulties. In our effort to specify further the nature of boredom according to Sartre's account, we must explicate (a) the problem to which boredom is supposed to provide a solution and (b) the manner in which boredom attempts to solve the problem.

3.1. The Problem of Boredom

According to Sartre, the perception of a threat can give rise to fear, whereas the realization that certain desired means are no longer available to us can give rise to sadness. But what is the difficulty that gives rise to boredom? That is to say, what is the problem to which boredom is supposed to be the answer?

Boredom, I propose, is a reaction to a perceived mismatch between our occurrent desires and what the world is offering to us. More specifically, boredom arises when (a) the subject's desire for stimulation (or engagement) is not met by the stimulation (or engagement) afforded to the subject by the world and (b) the subject is aware of his or her unfulfilled desire for stimulation (or engagement). The perceived mismatch between the agent's desired stimulation and the availability of environmental stimulation can vary along two dimensions. First, there can be a mismatch between the *kind* of stimulation that the agent wishes for and the one that is given or made available to the agent. One experiences such mismatch, for example, when one wishes for novelty (say, a new episode of one's favorite TV series) but instead is presented with a situation that is all too familiar (say, a rerun of an older and previously seen episode). Second, one can experience a mismatch between the *amount* of stimulation that one wishes and the amount of stimulation which one is given. For instance, one experiences this mismatch when one attends a lecture that one finds not to be challenging enough; in this case, one desires not a different type of stimulation (i.e., something which is not a lecture) but rather a lecture that is more stimulating. Other things being equal, the greater the mismatch in quantity between stimulation (or engagement) desired and stimulation (or engagement) given the more intense the resulting feeling of boredom will be. Other things being equal, a lecture that is too elementary for a subject will be more boring than a lecture that is only slightly below the intellectual level of the subject.

The above characterization of boredom has a number of advantages. First, it fits well with our folk psychological understanding of boredom insofar as it captures something essential that happens in the situations that most often elicit boredom. Boredom is typically experienced when

terror, or wonder, we apprehend the world magically from the very beginning. Magic, according to this latter analysis of the emotions, is not a quality that we assign to the world (*ibid.*, 56). Rather, it is part of the very existential structure of the world. For purposes of this essay, I shall not examine whether the *Sketch* advances a single, unified account of emotions that accommodates this double role of magic; I do so elsewhere (Elpidorou 2014b). Suffice it to say, however, the following: the type of boredom that is the subject of this essay, i.e., simple boredom, behaves less like horror and more like anger, sadness, or fear. The immediacy or urgency that one experiences when one is in a state of horror is not present in simple boredom. Nor is it true that in simple boredom the entire world is boring. Moreover, simple boredom can most often be easily and quickly alleviated, whereas horror cannot.

dealing with something that is monotonous or repetitive; something that is overly familiar or predictable; something that is compulsory; or something that is either too hard to comprehend or simply not challenging enough. All of these cases are cases in which we desire something different from what the world makes available to us. In monotonous and repetitive activities, we are bored because we want more diversity than we can find; in familiar or predictable situations, we are bored for we wish for novelty, unfamiliarity, or even surprise yet we find none; during compulsory tasks, we are bored because we desire to do that which is not required of us or we desire not to do that which is required of us; and in situations in which we are presented with an input (a lecture, a book, a film, etc.) that is not given to us at the right level, we are bored for we wish for something that is at the appropriate level. In all of the aforesaid examples, the desire to be stimulated in a way different from what the situation affords is necessary for the experience of boredom. For instance, a monotonous or repetitive situation does not suffice to elicit boredom. One also needs the desire to engage in an activity that is not monotonous or repetitive. This consequence of the provided account of boredom is in line with empirical evidence showing that monotony is not a sufficient condition for the occurrence of boredom (Perkins and Hill 1985).

Second, an account of boredom that maintains that boredom results from the perception of a mismatch between the need for stimulation (or engagement) and the availability of stimulation (or engagement) enjoys the support of a number of contemporary psychological theories of boredom. Despite the fact that there is no consensus as to how to precisely define boredom (Vodanovich 2003, Eastwood et al. 2012), a review of the psychological literature on boredom does yield a fairly uniform description of boredom across the different theories. According to this description of boredom, which echoes the Sartrean account, boredom is a state in which one is unable to engage with the world in a satisfying manner (Fahlman et al. 2013, 69; Berlyne 1960, Csikszentmihalyi 1975, Fiske and Maddi 1961, Hebb 1966, Greenson 1953, Mikulas and Vodanovich 1993, Todman 2003, Eastwood et al. 2012, 482; Bench and Lench 2013, 461).

Finally, a Sartrean reading of boredom supports the phenomenologically accurate observation that boredom admits of many specific objects. A lecture, a work of art, a movie, a conversation, or an intimate relationship can all be found to be boring, depending on what the subject is looking for in those situations and on what the situations have to offer to the subject. In fact, the proposed Sartrean account of boredom allows that, in principle, i.e., under the right circumstances, anything can be experienced as boring.

3.2. The Significance of Boredom

For Sartre emotional or affective states arise on account of the perception of a difficulty. As stated above, in the case of boredom, the difficulty is the perceived inability to engage with a situation in the manner in which one desires. If that is the problem to which boredom is a solution, then what is the attempted solution that boredom offers? In order to articulate the solution that boredom offers and thereby its function, we need to say more about the type of transformation that boredom effectuates on the world. That is to say, we need to speak of the very experience of boredom.

Boredom is a transient, aversive state marked by feelings of dissatisfaction, restlessness, and weariness. All three feelings are essential to the state of boredom and subjects who experience boredom report having those feelings (Fahlman et al. 2013, Van Tilburg & Igou 2012, Hill & Perkins 1985, Perkins & Hill 1985, O'Brien 2014, Thackray et al. 1975). First, at the core of boredom, there is a feeling of dissatisfaction with one's situation. To be bored by or with something (or someone) is to be dissatisfied by or with it (or them). That is to say, if

something is the object of boredom, then it is something in which one has lost interest. In fact, to proclaim that you are bored with an object but at the same time interested in it is almost to utter a contradiction.

Boredom also includes restlessness, for when one is bored one is not content being in that state. Rather, while bored one wishes to be doing something else – often, anything but what one is currently doing (Van Tilburg & Igou 2012). Boredom is hence a state from which we seek to escape. Finally, boredom involves a feeling of weariness. To be bored by something is to experience a certain type of weariness or mental fatigue. The boring is, in a sense, tiresome.

A state of boredom thus includes two affective components that appear, *prima facie* at least, to be incongruent with each other: restlessness and weariness. Both of them, however, are necessary components of boredom (Berlyne 1960, Bernstein 1975, Fenichel 1951, Fiske & Maddi 1961). A state that includes a sense of dissatisfaction and restlessness but lacks weariness is a state that is closer to frustration than to boredom. A state that includes a sense of dissatisfaction and weariness but lacks restlessness is a state that is closer to apathy or even sadness than to boredom. As O'Brien puts it, when I am bored, "I am weary with one thing and restless for another. I lack energy, interest, and patience to attend to what is at hand; but I do have energy to burn, and I long for something else to burn it on" (2014, 4). The combination of weariness and restlessness along with a sense of dissatisfaction or loss of interest in what one is doing characterizes the affective component of boredom.

When one is bored one not only feels a certain way, one also thinks that the situation in which one finds oneself lacks significance or meaning; one wishes to engage in a different and more satisfying activity; and often, one has a desire to be challenged (Van Tilburg & Igou 2012). Furthermore, the bored subject experiences a slow passage of time (Martin et al. 2006, O'Connor 1967, Conrad 1997, Fenichel 1953, Hartocollis 1972) and has difficulty focusing his or her attention (Eastwood et al. 2012, Bernstein 1975, Fisher 1993, Martin et al. 2006). The entire experiential content of boredom – the affective, cognitive, and volitional aspects of boredom – has been shown to distinguish it from other negative affective states such as sadness, anger, and frustration (Van Tilburg and Igou 2012). That is to say, boredom is a distinct affective or emotional state insofar as it has a unique experiential signature.

To experience boredom is to experience oneself and one's surroundings in a certain way. Or in Sartre's terminology, an episode of boredom effectuates a magical transformation of the world and the very experience of boredom is revealing of the character of this transformation. When bored, the situation in which we find ourselves appears to be no longer interesting. There is a perceived loss of value, meaning, or significance. The situation appears foreign and no longer attracts us. At the same time, we feel restless. We wish to escape the state of boredom. We cannot focus our attention on features of the present situation. Instead, our mind wanders, thinking of alternative goals that we can pursue and wishing that we could be pursuing them. Finally, the perception of a slower passage of time that one experiences in an episode of boredom contributes to the aversive character of boredom (Sackett et al. 2010). The unsatisfying situation with which we are engaging seems to last longer and we feel trapped in it.

We are now in a position to specify the significance and function of boredom. On account of its affective, cognitive, and volitional character, boredom facilitates the promotion of alternative goals when the goal with which we are currently engaged is no longer satisfying (Bench & Lench 2013). The negative and aversive experience of boredom motivates subjects to pursue a behavior that appears to them to be more meaningful or more interesting (Barbalet 1999, Van Tilburg & Igou 2012, Elpidorou 2014a). In Sartrean terms, by transforming the

situation as one that is both unpleasant to the subject and also bereft of meaning or significance, the experience of boredom offers the subject an escape. That is to say, it creates a world that *pushes* the subject out of an unsatisfactory situation and at the same time it makes alternative situations salient and attractive. Of course, boredom does not motivate one to engage in any particular behavior; boredom does not specify an alternative goal or project to be pursued. It simply motivates one to pursue goals that differ from those currently pursued. Typically, boredom will motivate one to seek a novel stimulation, if one's current situation is perceived as familiar or predictable; or it will motivate a search for a challenge, if one feels unchallenged (Dahlen et al. 2004).

The desire for change that is inherent in a state of boredom underlies the significance of boredom. First, it motivates subjects to pursue opportunities that they would otherwise miss. Second, and most importantly, it promotes the restoration of the perception that one's activities are meaningful and congruent with one's overall projects (see, e.g., Heine et al. 2006, Sansone et al. 1992, Locke & Latham 1990, Elpidorou 2014a). If boredom arises on account of the perception of an unfulfilled desire to engage with the environment in a satisfactory way, then in order to alleviate boredom one will seek activities that are judged to be satisfactory and in line with one's plans, wishes and desires.

Boredom thus turns out to be informative both of the character of the situation in which one finds oneself and of one's interests, goals, and even self-perceived well-being. That is because boredom signals the presence of an unfulfilling situation – one that does not meet the expectations and desires of the agent. In doing so, boredom acts as a regulatory state. Not only does it inform one when one is out of tune with one's interest, but also, on account of its negative and aversive character, it motivates one to engage in a situation that is perceived as meaningful. Boredom, in other words, is a state that tries to keep one in touch with one's projects.

Given its regulatory aspect it is a mistake to think of boredom as a passive state of disinterest. It is also a mistake to think of boredom, as it is often thought, as an inconsequential state. Boredom matters, for not only does it inform us of the presence of an unsatisfactory situation, it also motivates us to escape that situation. Following a Sartrean account, the state of boredom is not a *problem* but rather a solution: it is part of a solution to the problem of an unsatisfactory worldly existence.

4. Conclusion

The proposed account of boredom is not intended as a definition of boredom. It would be a mistake to expect to derive a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for boredom from a Sartrean account of affective states and emotions. This is especially so when even the psychological literature on boredom does not offer such a definition. The benefit of a Sartrean reading of boredom lies elsewhere: it allows us to cast a positive light on the phenomenon of boredom. In so doing, a Sartrean reading of boredom contributes to a specification of the function and role of boredom in our everyday lives.

In a passage that is used as an epigraph to this essay, Kierkegaard writes the following:

Boredom is the root of all evil. It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion. The effect that boredom brings about is absolutely magical, but this effect is one not of attraction but of repulsion. (Kierkegaard 1843/1987, 285)

Kierkegaard, I hope to have shown, is only partly correct in his assessment of the character of boredom. He is incorrect to declare that boredom is the root of all evil. Not only does boredom have redeeming qualities, it is a psychological state that is important for sustaining our wellbeing. But Kierkegaard's description of boredom is partly correct. It captures an aspect of boredom that Sartre's theory helped us to underscore, namely, its magical character. Boredom is magical insofar as when one is bored, the manner in which one experiences and relates to the world becomes transformed. While one is bored, one lives in a world that is, in a sense, alien to one: the world appears to be disconnected to one's projects; it is experienced as unyielding and difficult. Fortunately, the experience of such a magical world is one that is, at least for most of us, temporary. Due to its aversive character, boredom *itself* 'pushes' us out of the state boredom. Boredom is thus self-effacing: when our current goal ceases to be stimulating, interesting, or challenging, boredom motivates us to pursue a new goal, one that is in line with our interests and projects. In the absence of boredom, we would remain trapped in unfulfilling situations. We need boredom in order to escape boredom.

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