



Commentary

## Balance or Propel? Philosophy and the Value of Unpleasantness

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**Abstract:** In *Propelled*, Elpidorou persuasively argues that the three *prima facie* undesirable conditions of boredom, frustration and anticipation are, in fact, importantly valuable to human life. His method is an interesting combination of existentialist explorations and reporting of cognitive science research, all written in a style more friendly to the analytic-philosophical tradition. However, I argue, the book's precision and depth of philosophical analysis have some limitations. This is so in two main respects: first, in the relative lack of discussion of important philosophical antecedents, and secondly, in the relative lack of critical engagement with some of the empirical literature the book discusses.

**Keywords:** boredom, frustration, anticipation, cognitive science, existentialism, negative emotions, art

Contemporary Anglophone philosophy of mind has, in the last couple of decades, been characterized in large part by a growing trend of re-discovering pre-analytic philosophical approaches such as phenomenology. It has often done so in an attempt to make those older approaches more palatable to broadly "analytic" tastes. Some of those attempting this have used cognitive science in order to build bridges between analytic and pre-analytic approaches. Andreas Elpidorou (2020) appears to do something similar with existentialism. In other words, he seems to use cognitive science to bridge the divide between analytic philosophy and existentialism.

The result is a highly readable book that will persuade most readers of its main claim, i.e., that the three *prima facie* unpleasant or negative psychological states of boredom, frustration, and anticipation are importantly beneficial to living the good life. I will not contest that claim here. However, if one of the aims of his book is to also create a rapprochement between existentialism and analytic philosophy, then that aim is less than optimally achieved.

In this critical discussion, I would like to probe the breadth and depth of the philosophical engagement Elpidorou carries out in his book. In the first section, I raise concerns about the relative importance in the book of Elpidorou's reporting of empirical work as opposed to his philosophical engagement with that work and the issues discussed. I point to a few instances of previous philosophical work, arguing for similar claims, that Elpidorou does not acknowledge. Moreover, I discuss a couple of instances in which Elpidorou's book is, respectively, less accurate or critical in using empirical work for his philosophical claims. In §2 I point out some issues on which Elpidorou might have achieved greater clarity and precision of analysis. Finally, I point to a long-standing philosophical debate on the positive value negative emotional experiences can have: viz. the aesthetics debate on the so-called "paradox of negative emotions." Although Elpidorou does not engage with this debate, I draw on some contributions to it to show some potentially useful lines of further enrichment of the book's treatment of both artistic and real-life experiences of boredom, frustration, and anticipation.

### SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

One striking way in which the empirical approach has, in Elpidorou's book, greater prominence over the philosophical is in terms of the much greater number of empirical (than philosophical) studies it discusses. The book discusses Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre more than once and, on a few occasions, Elpidorou offers his own existentialist analyses of some thought experiments or artworks. Especially thought-provoking in the latter respect is, for instance, his discussion, towards the end of the book, of Herman Melville's titular character in *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (e.g. "Bartleby wills nothing; he merely prefers"; Elpidorou 2020, 152). However, such discussions are typically shorter and less articulated than Elpidorou's reporting of empirical studies.

Moreover, there certainly are other prominent discussions elsewhere in philosophy of some of the three psychological states at hand that the book might have discussed. I have in mind, for instance, Schopenhauer's views on boredom and our constant lack of satisfaction (e.g. "life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents"; Schopenhauer [1859] 1969, vol. I, 312). Schopenhauer's views might have for instance enriched Elpidorou's discussion of the empirical research on emotional adaptation (Elpidorou 2020, 5 ff.), at least by way of recognizing previous proponents of similar philosophical ideas. Likewise, Elpidorou's discussion of psychological studies on self-administration of electric shocks to escape states of boredom (Elpidorou 2020, 55–57) would have been nicely complemented, if only again for the sake of acknowledging past contributions, by a discussion of Edmund Burke's view that we sometimes seek moderately negative emotions to escape the dullness of boredom (Burke [1757] 1958).

Overall, however, the cognitive science results reported in the book quite convincingly support the book's main claim. Nonetheless, such results are, perhaps too often, not discussed with sufficient care or with enough of a critical eye. Chapter 5, for example, reports an experiment designed to test the psychological plausibility of the beginning of the fictional story told by Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In this experiment Elpidorou reports (van Aart et al. 2010), subjects were given boring stimuli or tasks while they were in a room that featured an entrance in the wall (or a "rabbit hole"). All subjects, by the end of the experiment, made their way to the entrance of the "rabbit hole." The researchers, emphasizes Elpidorou, take this result as showing that boredom acts as an effective motivator by pushing subjects to enter the "rabbit hole."

That boredom is effective in pushing people out of it is hardly a claim I want to contest. However, there are features of the experimental setting of the study Elpidorou relies on that make me doubt how strongly its results support Elpidorou's claims. First, it is worth noting that the experimenters themselves emphasize the role of boredom a little less than Elpidorou does. By and large, in fact, they talk of the motivational power of the *combination* of boredom and curiosity. Indeed, the individual role of boredom in the experiment appears quite limited. For instance, the obvious presence of an entrance in the wall of a room in which a modern psychology experiment is conducted would on its own (i.e., without any special contribution from boredom) seem to be sufficiently curiosity-inducing to push many subjects to attempt its exploration. Of course, I can imagine some scenarios that would grab our attention more than the experimenters' "rabbit hole" but, given the context, I expect them to be few in number. Similarly, in such (relatively) ordinary contexts as the one presented in the experiment, the presence of a pink-eyed, rabbit-like robot dressed as a human should appear sufficiently extraordinary to stimulate one's curiosity—whether or not one is bored. Moreover, in a later stage of the experiment, the rabbit (on behalf of the experimenters) explicitly asks the subjects who have not yet followed it through the rabbit hole to do so. At this stage, subject compliance might well become such a strong factor that any role boredom (or even curiosity) might have had up to that stage is overshadowed.

Another instance in which Elpidorou's argument might have benefitted from a more careful handling of experimental results concerns the IKEA study referenced in Chapter 7 of the book (Norton et al. 2012). Elpidorou discusses this experimental study as showing that invested effort in something typically makes us value that thing more. This, in turn, argues Elpidorou, shows us that we do indeed give value to the frustration that often accompanies our efforts. Again, it is far from an implausible claim that we often give some value to effort. However, it is not clear to what extent the study reported by Elpidorou supports his point. In the experiment he reports, subjects are asked to attribute monetary value to IKEA furniture that they had either assembled themselves, or that was pre-built by others. The result was that subjects attributed a 63% higher value to the former class of furniture when compared to the latter. Combined with previous studies and with the other experiments described in the same study, this leads Norton et al. to conclude that the effort one expends in building something adds value to it. However, a closer look at the Norton et al. study gives a less straightforward picture. As we saw, previous experiments, dating back at least from the 1950s, had already supported the conclusion that we value effort. By contrast, the specific contribution of the Norton et al. study is, by their own design, to control for the role of the successful (vs. unsuccessful) completion of the subjects' effortful aim. Indeed, taking into account their follow-up experiments, reported in the same article, Norton et al. suggest that the crucial factor for the emergence of "the IKEA effect" is not mere effort but successful (and lasting) completion of labour. This is backed by their discovering that no increase in perceived monetary value follows from either unsuccessful completion of subjects' building efforts, or the destruction of their artifact (by their own hands). The emphasis on successful completion as opposed to mere effort would change the relevance of the experiment for Elpidorou. As we saw, in fact, Elpidorou's point in this context concerned the value that accrues from the frustration we feel in our efforts. Frustration may follow from unsuccessful completion at least as often as from successful completion of one's efforts. As a consequence, Norton et al.'s study is, in the relevant context, not the most relevant source of evidence for Elpidorou's point.

## LABELS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

As Elpidorou puts it, his main claim in the book is that the three psychological states of boredom, frustration, and anticipation are essential to our living the good (human) life. As I have already said, I think the book does a good job of convincing its reader of that claim. However, what the claim really amounts to is a little less clear than one might hope. In particular, there are a couple of alternative ways in which the three states at hand might qualify as “essential” for Elpidorou, and it is not obvious which of the two ways he wants to argue for. Given the book’s philosophical matrix, one way in which one might be tempted to understand “essential” is as more or less synonymous with “necessary.” So disambiguated, Elpidorou’s claim would then be that without experiencing boredom, frustration, and anticipation humans cannot live the good human life. This understanding is, however, difficult to square with the kind of evidence that mostly supports the book’s main claim. Such evidence, in fact, is mostly derived from scientific studies that largely focus on typical human behaviour. To establish necessity, Elpidorou might instead need to appeal to empirical data about atypical or exceptional subjects.

A second possibility is that the meaning of “essential” at work in the book is more akin to that of “central.” So disambiguated, Elpidorou’s claim would be that the three psychological states at hand are often very important, albeit not necessary, to living the good life. Such an understanding, however, would have the consequence of leaving the possibility open that some (actual or possible) people would be better off without boredom, frustration, or anticipation. But this is difficult to square with some passages in the book that appear instead to endorse an understanding of “essential” as “necessary.” This is, for example, the case where Elpidorou writes: “Without anticipation there would be no goals to pursue, no aspirations to aspire to, and no ideals to model one’s life after” (Elpidorou 2020, 159). At least on the face of things, in fact, this is not a counterfactual claim that is warranted by the kind of evidence offered in the book. It remains therefore unclear what “essential” should mean in the formulation of the book’s main claim.

Another ambiguity concerns the ways in which the book’s three titular psychological states achieve their essentiality. One way in which they would seem to do so is that they offer a balance between pleasurable and unpleasant states (or between achievement and failure), since it would otherwise be difficult to endure a life of pure pleasantness and achievement. Call this “the balancing thesis.” A second way in which boredom, frustration and anticipation can be essentially valuable is in providing us with the motivational impetus to achieve, or to get out of unpleasant states. Call this “the propelling thesis.” Overall, the book seems to suggest that both claims are true and that they both, presumably jointly, provide support for the essential value of boredom, frustration, and anticipation for the good life. Nonetheless, the two are distinct theses, the nature and roles of each of which the book could have more clearly distinguished between.

One way in which Elpidorou characterizes the propelling thesis is by arguing that the three states of boredom, frustration, and anticipation all promote motion, or are antidotes to stagnation. Accordingly, the emphasis in his book is more on favouring motion than on combatting stagnation. However, the emphasis on motion, or movement, has the consequence of neglecting activity that is less physical and more, say, psychological. The latter, however, would seem to fall under the benefits of boredom and of its fellow psychological states (as Elpidorou’s own discussions of daydreaming and mind-wandering show; Elpidorou 2020, 60 ff.). Indeed, “activity” might generally have been a better label for what Elpidorou has in mind than “motion.”

Yet another area where more clarity would have enriched the book is with respect to the third and final psychological state on which Elpidorou focuses, viz. anticipation. At least to start with, the book draws a parallel between the claims that it puts forward and the potential benefits of emo-diversity (Elpidorou 2020, 7 ff.). Moreover, the publisher's overview of the book tells us that the book "[e]xplores how negative emotional states can be beneficial for our well-being" (Oxford University Press 2020). However, Elpidorou is careful not to formulate his main claim in terms of emotion (or even affect), but in terms of the broader concept of a *psychological state*.

The reason for this, however, is never spelled out explicitly. I presume that at least part of the reason lies in the status of anticipation. There is at least a *prima facie*, folk-psychological sense in which all three states Elpidorou focuses on are indeed emotions. However, the book for the most part does not talk about the emotion of anticipation.[1] Anticipation as an emotion would seem to be the affective state one is in when one consciously looks forward to some future event. With the possible exception of its discussion of savouring, however, the book only talks about that state (or circumstance) in which one finds oneself before a possible future event. At least on the face of things, however, these are two different phenomena. We might call the former "emotion-anticipation," to distinguish it from the latter. The dialectic in the book would have been more coherent as well as perspicuous if the book had at least included a discussion of the differences and similarities between these two apparently distinct phenomena we sometimes call "anticipation."

Another peculiarity of anticipation (or emotion-anticipation) about which I would have liked the book to be more explicit is its valence. The book labels all three states of boredom, frustration, and anticipation as states of disappointment or discontent. While this may be true,[2] the case of anticipation appears more complicated than those of boredom and frustration. Valence-wise, there would seem to be two kinds of anticipation: i.e. anticipation of positively and of negatively valuable future events. In the former case, one's dissatisfaction can be said to lie in the future events not having occurred yet, whilst in the latter any dissatisfaction might be in the valence of those events yet to occur. However, this is only a first-pass characterization and Elpidorou's book would have benefitted from a greater discussion of both the nature and valence of anticipation.

### ART AND REAL LIFE

A long tradition in philosophy, which can be traced back at least to Aristotle and continues in contemporary analytic aesthetics, attempts to explain a *prima facie* contrast between the cases of real life and art.[3] In the latter case, we seem especially prone to attributing value, seeking out or even enjoying the witnessing of events, or of representations of events, that would be unpleasant in real life (especially if we were involved in them). Although Elpidorou does not cite the aesthetic literature on the topic, his thrust in the book may be understood in part as denying this apparent contrast between art and real life. In both, the book seems to suggest, there is value to be gained from unpleasant experiences. Moreover, the three particular states that Elpidorou discusses are themselves under-analysed in the literature on the paradox of negative emotions. Discussing the relevant aesthetics literature would have provided Elpidorou's discussion with an established framing of related issues, as well as enriched the aesthetics literature in return. Those that follow are some suggestions for such a reciprocal enrichment.

Take Elpidorou's evocative discussion of a *prima facie* boring artwork such as Erik Satie's composition *Vexations* (1893). Elpidorou reports Fluxus co-founder Dick Higgins as saying that, contrary to what one might assume, the repetition of the theme of Satie's score for 840 times is boring "only at first." After a while, Higgins adds, the piece instead gives way to ever-increasing euphoria. And, eventually, the music becomes an expected part of the listener's very environment. Overall, Higgins concludes, boredom "is a necessary station on the way to other experiences." In the case of Satie's composition, in other words, someone finds something interesting or pleasurable in what initially was boring. In this case, boredom, Elpidorou quips, "forces us to see things anew" (Elpidorou 2020, 35–36).

In the Satie case, the benefits of boredom seem to fall under the remit of the aforementioned propelling thesis. The emotion of boredom is, in other words, valued for pushing us to find something more valuable elsewhere. Compare this to David Hume's description of a paradigmatic case of negative emotions in art:

It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle; and as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end. (Hume [1757] 1777, Mil 216)

At least on an initial analysis, the Hume and Satie cases are different from one another. In the former, the audience's pleasure appears immediately and intimately connected with the unpleasantness inherent in the represented events. By contrast, unpleasantness and pleasure appear further apart in the Satie case, insofar as the initial experience of boredom pushes the listener to find pleasure in "other experiences."

Although traditionally important, however, Hume's account is not the only one offered in the literature.<sup>[4]</sup> Moreover, there may well be other cases in which boredom (or another one of the three states discussed by Elpidorou) fit better with Hume's characterization. In yet other cases, the value of a distressful psychological state such as boredom might lie in its balancing more pleasurable states, in a sense affording us relief from unalloyed pleasure. This is an interesting source of value that, nonetheless, the aesthetics literature on negative emotions has not much explored. One notable exception is Aaron Smuts (2007), who argues that one of the values of art is that it offers us experiences that are varied and often include both pleasure and unpleasantness.

Another issue on which Elpidorou might seem to depart from much aesthetics literature is that of whether we appreciate unpleasant experiences in real life as well as in art. Here again, however, the contrast is not obvious, since this is something with which, for instance, Smuts (2007) would agree—although with the caveat that similar kinds of unpleasant experiences are appreciated less often and less intensely in real life than in art. Indeed, Burke ([1757] 1958, Part I, Section XV) even suggests that real life might sometimes be more sought out than art, by speculating that the best theatrical spectacle would be less enticing for a crowd of people than a public execution.

More generally, there are several aspects of many of the cases Elpidorou discusses that might make the cases of art and real life come apart. Elpidorou often talks about the value of boredom, frustration, and anticipation for our life, whether or not we appreciate such a value ourselves. Nor does he necessarily talk about enjoying, or even seeking out experiences of boredom, frustration, or anticipation. Moreover, the cases often discussed in the

aesthetics literature are cases in which our appreciation of the value of an aesthetic experience occurs both consciously, and more or less simultaneously with, the experience itself. By contrast, Elpidorou's cases tend to be cases that one can only value retrospectively (or by means of an unusually keen consciousness). More often than real life, art provides us with (for lack of a better word) greater distance from unpleasant experiences. Moreover, it typically presents us with circumstances in which we are not directly involved.

In this note, I have focused on some limitations of Elpidorou's discussion of the three conditions of boredom, frustration, and anticipation. However, I also hope to have shown how thought-provoking his book has been for this reader, and how much of a spur I hope it can be for future research, in more than one philosophical sub-discipline.

### Notes

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[1] Read also Pismenny's commentary for complementary concerns on the psychological nature of anticipation, as well as analogous worries about the psychological nature of boredom.

[2] However, it is not *prima facie* implausible to argue that anticipation is pleasant (or a mixed state), when the anticipated event is positive. Read Pismenny's comments.

[3] Aristotle (350 BCE) 1996, 1448b. Read Contesi 2018, for a first overview of the literature.

[4] Read Contesi 2018.



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