

BOREDOM AND THE DIVIDED MIND

Vida Yao

Abstract: On one predominant conception of virtue, the virtuous agent is, among other things, wholehearted in doing what she believes best. I challenge this condition by exploring the connections between the emotion of boredom and the states of continence and incontinence. An easily bored person is susceptible to these forms of inner disharmony because of two familiar characteristics of boredom: that we are often bored by what it is that we know would be best to do, and that occurrent states of boredom tend to give rise to positive interest in performing actions that we know would be bad to do. Moreover, while a susceptibility to boredom can indicate a lack of attentiveness, or be evidence of a vice such as ingratitude, it is in others inseparable from a number of positive qualities of character, such as perspicacity, liveliness, and certain forms of intelligence. Given this, we should reject wholeheartedness as a condition on the virtues, and recognize those possessed by more divided minds as well.

1

According to a predominant conception of virtue, rooted in Aristotle, the virtuous agent not only knows what action would be all things considered best to perform,¹ but in lacking “base appetites” and finding “nothing pleasant against reason,” he performs the best or right action *wholeheartedly* (NE 1152a).² This purity or unity of his motivations and emotions with his practical judgment is taken to be the feature that distinguishes him from, and renders him superior to, the *enkritic* or continent agent, who performs the best action but not without overcoming some reluctance in doing so. More generally, there has been a longstanding philosophical tradition of viewing inner harmony as a mark of the ideal human being;

¹ Though I will refer to this as the “best” or “right” action interchangeably, I do not mean to mask the fact that there are important reasons for not conflating the language of good and bad with the language of right and wrong. For a discussion of this point see, for example, Adams 2006.

² All references to Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* (1999) will be referred to as ‘NE.’

1 in contemporary philosophical literature, one way in which this tradition
 2 has taken shape is our tendency to regard inner harmony or coherence as
 3 essential to rationality, or by taking the standards of virtue and the norms
 4 of practical reason to coincide with, or reinforce one another.³ Against
 5 this background, genuine excellences of character cannot be constituted
 6 by or based upon an agent's motivational or emotional divergence from
 7 what she knows would be best to do: the gaps that can arise between one's
 8 knowledge of that action and one's motivations to do it is precisely where
 9 vice or weakness take hold of one's character.

10 In spite of its attractions, I shall argue that wholeheartedness does not
 11 deserve this lofty status. I suspect that our theoretical attraction to it
 12 has been encouraged by first of all, an overly narrow focus on what it
 13 takes to be a paradigmatically excellent *agent* when considering what it
 14 takes to be a paradigmatically excellent *person*,⁴ and second of all, by
 15 taking for granted that motivational or emotional disharmony with one's
 16 practical judgment is always an indication of one's irrationality. Given these
 17 standard assumptions of philosophical investigations in practical reason
 18 and moral psychology, we too hastily assume that there is nothing left
 19 worth either exploring or appreciating about the distinct ways in which a
 20 person's psychology can be divided.⁵

21 I propose we look again. When we examine more carefully why it is that
 22 some souls are divided, *in the particular way* in which they are divided, we
 23 will find that ambivalence toward the best action need not be evidence of an
 24 undesirable or unattractive quality in a person's character. On the contrary,
 25 this disharmony may be the very foundation of, or partly constitutive of,
 26 certain excellences of character that we enjoy and appreciate in one another,
 27 and which we might ourselves wish to possess.

28
 29 ³ See, for example, [Smith 1994](#). John Broome ([2007](#)) argues for a more restricted claim that
 30 he calls the "enkratic condition": rationality requires that an agent intend to do what she
 31 believes she ought to do. And R. Jay Wallace puts the point this way: "If agent A has reason r
 32 to perform action X, and A is properly aware that r obtains, then A must be motivated to do
 33 X, on pain of irrationality" ([1999](#), 217–218).

34 ⁴ In other words, our conception of a good person has been too heavily shaped both by taking
 35 into consideration how we evaluate *actions* rather than agents (a common virtue ethicist's
 36 complaint), but also by evaluating a person's *agential* capacities, rather than her character as
 37 a whole (something that a virtue ethicist may still be guilty of). This might be the result of
 38 moral philosophy's predominant interest in providing theories that are "action-guiding." For
 39 a discussion of how this is too narrow to capture all of what is important to a philosophical
 40 study of ethics, see [Stocker 1990](#).

41 ⁵ One important difficulty in stating the difference between virtue and continence is that
 42 given a plurality of values, we would expect the virtuous agent—in being sensitive to this
 43 plurality—to be divided among conflicting but good options. My arguments here do not focus
 44 on emphasizing how the virtuous agent might be internally conflicted given a plurality of
 45 value. So a more precise way to characterize the difference between the virtuous agent and
 46 the continent agent is to maintain that the continent agent is ambivalent toward performing
 the best action, in spite of there being no, or comparably little, competing *value* in the other
 option available to her.

1 Here, I shall focus on just one explanation for this disharmony, which
 2 involves the contrasting emotions of boredom and interest. Both emotions
 3 are notable for the ways in which they tend to influence our motivations,
 4 and—important for my discussion here—for the ways in which they incline
 5 us to act against our better judgment. In particular, we can be reluctant
 6 to perform actions we know would be best to perform, simply because
 7 of how boring we find them; and out of occurrent feelings of boredom,
 8 we become attracted to performing actions we do not believe would be
 9 good to perform, at all. In spite of these tendencies, I shall argue that
 10 given the relationship between one's patterns of boredom and interest, and
 11 certain positive character traits, the bored enkratic or akratic may be no less
 12 excellent given these divisions in her soul. While there are many negative
 13 character traits commonly attributed to those who are easily bored—such
 14 as shallowness, or a lack of gratitude or appreciation—there are also a
 15 number of positive traits exhibited by the easily bored, and perhaps best
 16 exhibited by easily bored enkratics and akratics, in particular.

17 This leads to a conclusion that has broader consequences for philosoph-
 18 ical studies of the virtues of character in general. One might be left with
 19 the impression that I am a champion of the motivationally divided as being
 20 in some sense superior to, or as having more attractive characters than,
 21 those who are wholehearted about doing the right or best thing. Perhaps
 22 a similar conclusion can be found in some interpretations of Kant, who
 23 seems to suggest that the less inclined one is to do what is right, the more
 24 praiseworthy he is for doing it.⁶ But in fact, as long as we understand the
 25 sort of psychic harmony necessary for virtue in a certain way, I do not
 26 believe we should accept that conclusion, either. Rather than determining
 27 which state is, overall, the better or best way to be, I hope my discussion
 28 encourages moving away from an understanding of the virtues that lends
 29 itself to this sort of ranking or hierarchical thinking, and toward adopting
 30 a more flexible, pluralistic approach: one that allows for the appreciation
 31 and celebration of a diversity of excellences of character—including those
 32 that may conflict with the requisites of others.

33 34 2

35
36 I'll begin by determining what this particular kind of wholeheartedness
 37 or unity looks like when instantiated in a person, and elaborate on why
 38 the standard conception of virtue emphasizes its importance. Consider
 39 a suggestion from Julia Annas, who writes that the distinction between
 40 the disposition of virtue and the disposition of continence, self-control, or
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42
43 ⁶ I am thinking, in particular, of the passage in the *Groundwork* where Kant discusses the
 44 moral superiority of the sorrowing philanthropist. As I will discuss, I do not accept this
 45 conclusion, nor am I limiting my discussion to considerations of the *moral* quality of a
 46 person's character.

1 “enkrasia,” is one we should be well acquainted with. According to Annas,
2 it is:

3 the everyday contrast between someone who does the right
4 thing, but has to battle with his feelings to do so, and thus
5 acts reluctantly and with a sense of pain and loss, and the
6 person who does the right thing and whose feelings endorse
7 the action, and who thus acts gladly and with pleasure. We
8 all do recognize (mostly in our own case) the difference
9 between the merely self-controlled . . . and the person who
10 does not have to be self-controlled. And we take pleasure
11 or the absence of it in acting to be the chief mark of this
12 distinction. Aristotle draws the distinction in these terms,
13 but it is clearly present in later authors even if they do not
14 use the word, since it is regarded as a matter of common
15 sense. (1993, 53)

16 Granting this as a familiar and commonsense contrast, we can nonethe-
17 less imagine at least two different interpretations of what it would take
18 to maintain unity, or wholeheartedness, in doing the right thing. The first
19 would be to take Annas at her word here and conclude that the virtuous
20 agent always experiences pleasure, or positive interest, in doing the right or
21 best thing. The enkratic agent, in contrast, experiences no pleasure in doing
22 the right thing—and *this* is why she must exercise self-control in order to
23 do it.

24 But there are cases in which the virtuous agent *shouldn't* take *pleasure* or
25 *interest* in doing what is right. Taking Old Yeller out back to be shot might
26 be the right thing to do, but it would seem callous or insensitive, if not
27 insane, should one literally “act gladly,” or take pleasure in doing this. So
28 we should supplement this initial interpretation in order to accommodate
29 cases like this, while still preserving the thought that there is a way of
30 shooting Old Yeller that is *more* wholehearted, and a way that is less.⁷ I
31 propose the following: depending on the details of the particular action
32 in question, while the enkratic experiences *pain*, or *reluctance*, or some
33 other negative reaction that must be overcome, the wholehearted agent—
34 though not experiencing *positive* interest, pleasure or enthusiasm—does not
35 experience these negative reactions, or at least does not experience them to
36 the extent that she must rely on self-control in order to do what is right.

37 Now, why think that wholeheartedness is a defining mark of genuine
38 excellences of character? One rather straightforward reason is that the
39 wholehearted agent will more reliably perform (or at least attempt to
40 perform) the best actions, for the right reasons: she is just less susceptible
41 to acting against her better judgment, while the enkratic seems to always
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43 ⁷ One might think that the distinction between the virtuous agent and the enkratic agent
44 collapses in cases like this—but if this is so, we will already have good reason to think that
45 wholeheartedness is just not as essential to virtue as the standard conception maintains.
46

1 skirt the edge. But another consideration is that the wholehearted agent
 2 will not be subject to the inner turmoil and pain experienced by those
 3 whose emotions are less unified, and the avoidance of this tension makes
 4 the disposition of wholeheartedness preferable. For Annas, this tension
 5 renders the state of self-control, or *enkrasia*, a “lower stage” than the state
 6 of virtue, even though both the virtuous and the self-controlled agent may
 7 be just as reliable in their performance of the right actions. She writes, in
 8 approval:

9 What the ancients stress [in stressing wholeheartedness] is
 10 just the common thought that conflict and stress are signs
 11 of something’s failing or going wrong, and that a state
 12 where these are absent is preferable to a state where they
 13 are present. Virtue is not just different from self-control;
 14 the harmony in the virtuous between action and feeling
 15 makes it *preferable* to self-control. (1993, 53–54)

16 In contrast to the inner harmony of the virtuous agent, the *enkratic* is
 17 susceptible to at least three distinct forms of conflict or stress. First, she is
 18 motivationally divided between the better and the worse in the first place.
 19 Second, she must exercise self-control in order to do the thing that is better.
 20 And third, because she is motivated to do the worse thing to begin with,
 21 she is likely to feel some regret or dissatisfaction even when she successfully
 22 does the better thing—the discontent that one can feel in turning down, for
 23 example, a desired drink or helping of dessert, even while knowing that it
 24 was better that one did so.

25 The virtuous agent, having no motivation to do the worse thing in the
 26 first place, gracefully transcends this inner conflict and stress. As John
 27 McDowell describes her, she renounces other options “without struggle,”
 28 achieving a kind of alluring “sublimity” or “serenity” (1979, 27–28).
 29 Furthermore, we may even think of her as possessing substantive qualities
 30 of character, such as autonomy, self-confidence, sincerity, integrity and a
 31 distinct lack of self-alienation, in virtue of the harmony that resides within
 32 her soul.⁸

33 Moreover, as mentioned there is, as mentioned, a widely shared assump-
 34 tion that there is an important connection between rationality and inner
 35 harmony. Rosalind Hursthouse, for example, emphasizes the desirability
 36 of inner harmony by making explicit its connection to norms of practical
 37 rationality, and the connection between practical rationality and human
 38 nature. Denying that the virtuous agent’s excellence over the merely conti-
 39 nent agent consists in the reliability of her performance of the best action,
 40 Hursthouse writes:

43 ⁸ One need not maintain a particularly rationalist picture of human psychology to take this
 44 inner harmony to be essential to a good human life. See, for example, Harry Frankfurt’s
 45 discussions on the importance of *wholeheartedness* (2004).
 46

1 The Aristotelian view of human nature is that, *qua* rational,
 2 it can be perfected by getting our inclinations into harmony
 3 with our reason. If my inclinations are not in harmony with
 4 my reason, and if getting them into harmony is something
 5 that human rationality can achieve, then the people whose
 6 inclinations are in harmony are, *ceteris paribus*, better
 7 human beings, closer to excellence (virtue), than I am.
 8 (2006, 104)

9 Nonetheless, as I proposed earlier, we need to look more closely at the distinct
 10 ways in which a person can fail to be wholehearted before concluding
 11 with Annas, McDowell, Hursthouse and the ancients, that inner harmony
 12 is not only different from, but in itself preferable to, or more excellent than,
 13 inner division.⁹ Echoing Aristotle, while there is only one way for a person
 14 to be virtuous there are a variety of ways in which human beings can miss
 15 the mark, and our evaluations of a person will differ depending on the
 16 particular way in which he falls short of the standard of wholeheartedness
 17 in particular.¹⁰

18 In philosophical discussions of this variety, the opposing experiences of
 19 *boredom* and *interest* have been largely overlooked as explanations of why
 20 an agent may not be wholeheartedly motivated to perform what she knows
 21 to be the best action. Typically, our attention focuses on the misalignment
 22 or disproportionality of one's appetites, or on "hotter" emotions like anger
 23 and fear. No doubt this stems, in part, from Aristotle's observation that
 24 there are only two forms of *akrasia*: softness or weakness in regards to
 25 pleasure, and impetuosity. But this should strike us as a surprising
 26 omission once we reflect on how, in our everyday lives, boredom affects
 27 our motivations.¹¹ It seems that we are often disinclined to do what we
 28

29 ⁹The line of thought I will pursue here differs from the familiar suggestion (again, one found
 30 in Kantian thought) that we admire the person who must struggle to do the right thing more
 31 than the person who need not struggle because it shows an admirable strength of will. Annas
 32 considers and then rejects this proposal, suggesting that although we do admire the disabled
 33 for overcoming their disability, it would be "confused" to infer from this that the state of
 34 being disabled is preferable to, or as preferable as, the state of being able-bodied. I am inclined
 35 toward a more flexible stance when it comes to either sort of assessment, but I will not discuss
 36 this here.

36 ¹⁰"there is only one way to be correct. That is why error is easy and correctness is difficult,
 37 since it is easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it. And so for this reason also excess and
 38 deficiency are proper to vice, the mean to virtue; 'for we are noble in only one way, but bad in
 39 all sorts of ways.'" (NE 1106b32–35). Aristotle was sensitive to the fact that our evaluations
 40 of one another will differ depending on the *way* in which we fail to be virtuous: he observes,
 41 for example, that being overcome by one's appetites is more shameful than being overcome by
 42 one's spirit (NE 1149b).

42 ¹¹What exactly *is* boredom? I won't attempt to provide an analysis of it here. Instead, I will
 43 borrow from Wendell O'Brien's recent analysis of boredom that captures the features that are
 44 relevant for my arguments. He writes that boredom is:

- 44 (1) a mental state of
- 45 (2) weariness,

1 know would be best simply because it is also something boring to do:
 2 we halfheartedly wait at the DMV to renew our licenses, politely endure
 3 conversations with the self-absorbed, and plod through the routine steps it
 4 takes to maintain an orderly home or office. And similarly, it seems that
 5 we are often positively *interested* in doing things that we simultaneously
 6 recognize are of very little value, or no value at all, to do. Think of a
 7 person who knows that it would be best to get a good night's rest before
 8 an important meeting she has in the morning, but finds herself engrossed
 9 by the inane television show she just put on. She may not believe that
 10 the show itself is any good, or that it would be good for her to continue
 11 watching it, but nonetheless be absorbed enough to stay up an hour or two
 12 longer than she knows would be best. Furthermore, one notable feature
 13 of the experience of boredom is its tendency to give rise to motivations
 14 to do things that we simultaneously recognize are not good to do, at all.
 15 Boredom renders us restless; out of restlessness, we eat though we are not
 16 hungry, fiddle with things until they break, vandalize just for the sake of it,
 17 and pick fights with one another.

18 But perhaps this omission is justifiable. Perhaps these cases are not
 19 really best understood in the way that I've described them—as instances in
 20 which considerations of interest and boredom conflict with considerations
 21 of value and disvalue, respectively. This thought would be consistent with
 22 the widespread philosophical thesis that positive and negative emotions are
 23 best understood as perceptions or construals of goodness and badness.¹²
 24 And it would also be consistent with the particular kind of boredom that
 25 tends to draw both philosophical and literary attention: one that is typically
 26 associated with the experience of *disillusionment* or the *disenchantment*
 27 that accompanies a sort of widespread evaluative nihilism.

28 For example, this is how we might interpret Henry, the narrator of John
 29 Berryman's poem, "Dream Song 14," who reports to us that:

30 Life, friends, is boring . . .
 31 Peoples bore me,
 32 literature bores me, especially great literature,
 33 Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
 34 as bad as Achilles,
 35

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- 36 (3) restlessness, and
 37 (4) lack of interest in something to which one is subjected,
 38 (5) which is unpleasant or undesirable,
 39 (6) in which the weariness and restlessness are causally related to
 40 the lack of interest. (2014)

41 My discussion will emphasize the consequences of conditions 3–6.

42 ¹²There are different ways to understand *akrasia* and *enkrasia*, and some philosophers deny
 43 that one could be motivated to do something that one does not see to be good *at all*, while
 44 nonetheless maintaining that weaker forms of *akrasia* are possible. The arguments I will offer
 45 here illustrate how even strong forms of *akrasia* in which the agent sees *nothing* good about
 46 what she wants may be possible.

1 who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
 2 And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
 3 and somehow a dog
 4 has taken itself & its tail considerably away
 5 into the mountains or sea or sky, leaving
 6 behind: me, wag. (Berryman 1964)

7 Henry's boredom, we might think, is a result of his seeing the world as
 8 empty of anything of genuine value. Even supposedly "great" literature
 9 turns out to be not so great, after all. And his inability to see the world as
 10 containing value, we might think, just *is*, or is essentially characterized by,
 11 the experience of boredom.

12 If this were the only sense of boredom familiar to us, it would be natural
 13 to conclude that an agent couldn't be properly understood as being bored
 14 by what she genuinely takes to be good. And we could extend this thought
 15 to her actions: she couldn't be bored by what she genuinely believes is best
 16 for her to do. That it cannot sustain her interest is perhaps itself a sign that
 17 it *lacks* value for her.

18 Harry Frankfurt suggests something like this in his discussion of why
 19 it is particularly *bad* for human beings to be bored. When we are bored,
 20 Frankfurt claims, this is an indication that we do not find the objects of our
 21 boredom *valuable* or *important*.¹³ This suggestion nicely pairs with and is
 22 explained by a more general position, also maintained by Frankfurt, that
 23 what *gives* something value is a person's finding positive interest in it.¹⁴

24 Consider an implication of this understanding of the relationship be-
 25 tween boredom, interest, and goodness. It suggests that a person's life
 26 would be unquestionably improved if she were, no matter her actual cir-
 27 cumstances, *unborable*.¹⁵ If her positive interests and cares can themselves
 28 give rise to and create value for her, then a sustained interest in *anything*
 29 would create and maintain one's contact with some form of goodness.

31 ¹³ "We do not care about any of it; none of it is *important* to us. As a natural consequence of
 32 this, our motivation to stay focused weakens; and we undergo a corresponding attenuation of
 33 psychic vitality" (Frankfurt 2004, 54).

34 ¹⁴ "It is true that the beloved invariably is, indeed, valuable to the lover. However, perceiving
 35 that value is not at all an indispensable formative or grounding condition of the love. It need
 36 not be a perception of value in what he loves that moves the lover to love it. The truly essential
 37 relationship between love and the value of the beloved goes in the opposite direction. It is not
 38 necessarily as a result of recognizing their value and of being captivated by it that we love
 39 things. Rather, what we love necessarily *acquires* value for us *because* we love it," (Frankfurt
 40 2004, 38–39).

41 ¹⁵ I borrow this neologism from David Foster Wallace's novel, *The Pale King* (2011), in which
 42 a character remarks: "To be, in a word, unborable. . . . It is the key to modern life. If you are
 43 immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish." Wallace presents the
 44 view that this immunity is not only the "key" to modern life, but constitutes a kind of virtue:
 45 "Enduring tedium over time in a confined space is what real courage is." I'll elaborate below
 46 on the particular sort of admirable "unborability" that Wallace seems to have in mind and
 why it differs from the form of unborability that I will discuss first, and which is not obviously
 admirable, or desirable.

1 But rather than being clearly attractive, there is something unsettling
 2 about the idea of being unqualifiedly unborable that this picture leaves
 3 unaccounted for. Consider John Rawls's example of a mathematician who
 4 takes pleasure in counting blades of grass in "various geometrically shaped
 5 areas such as park squares and well-trimmed lawns" (1999, 42). Rawls
 6 points out, quite rightly, that we would find such a person, as he puts it,
 7 "surprising." And he is surprising in a particular sort of way: it is difficult
 8 to imagine what it is like to *be* him, persistently engaged in this activity.

9 There are a number of features about grass counting that we might cite
 10 in an attempt to explain why this is. Undoubtedly, part of the explanation
 11 may be that this activity is pointless, or valueless. But the strangeness
 12 of the grass-counter cannot be wholly explained by these considerations
 13 alone. Stamp collecting and jigsaw puzzle solving may be pointless, but
 14 we understand a person's interest in doing either, even in light of his and
 15 our awareness of the pointlessness of these activities. And there may be
 16 nothing valuable about smashing the icicles that have been growing on
 17 the windowsill, or pulling a mean-spirited prank on one's colleague, but
 18 again, it is no stretch of imagination to understand a person being positively
 19 engrossed by these activities, in spite of their lack of value. Counting blades
 20 of grass in well-trimmed lawns stands out as distinct and surprising because
 21 not only is it in itself pointless and valueless to do, it is also—if any activity
 22 is—boring to do.

23 Given the dullness of grass counting, we might wonder whether Rawls's
 24 mathematician could really be fully attending to what he is doing, or
 25 whether his concentration is actually directed toward something else. Maybe
 26 his mind is elsewhere: contemplating proofs, or recollecting childhood mem-
 27 ories. And so, although some small part of his mental energy is focused on
 28 the actual task of grass counting, the bulk of his attention is really directed
 29 elsewhere. Or perhaps he is—as Rawls suggests—a neurotic who uses grass
 30 counting to avoid the frustrations of engaging with other people.

31 But if we cannot explain his ability to sustain an interest in counting
 32 blades of grass in these ways (which each suggest that it isn't the task *itself*
 33 that he finds engaging), we may begin to suspect that it is his *experience* of
 34 that activity that is impoverished. This is because, as Bernard Williams puts
 35 the point, the experience of boredom can be "not just a tiresome effect, but
 36 a reaction almost perceptual in character" (1973, 95). And given this, it
 37 can—like other emotions such as anger and fear—have what amounts to
 38 veridicality, or fittingness conditions. A person's experience of boredom
 39 can indicate that she is accurately perceiving the features of her situation or
 40 her activity, and her *failing* to find certain things boring can suggest that
 41 she is not seeing those things as they really are.¹⁶

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 43 ¹⁶ By claiming that boredom is perceptual, or "quasi-perceptual," I mean to suggest that it is
 44 sensitive to the features of one's circumstances and because of this, that there are *limits* to what
 45 it is that we can find interesting, without suffering from a quasi-perceptual defect. This differs
 46 from a standard dispositional analysis of an emotion, because it involves a particular kind of

1 Williams’s discussion incorporates this quasi-perceptual aspect by empha-
 2 sizing how the experience of boredom can mitigate a person’s motivations
 3 by being an experience that is *responsive* to the features of her circum-
 4 stances. According to Williams, Elina Makropulos, who has been given
 5 the capacity for an immortal life, doesn’t become less and less invested in
 6 her life for no reason, as if her interests and cares have simply petered out
 7 over time. Nor is her boredom necessarily a matter of her no longer finding
 8 things to be of *value*. Rather, she becomes more and more emotionally
 9 withdrawn because after living too long as herself she senses that, “in the
 10 end, *it is the same*” (1973, 82, my emphasis). And this feature of her
 11 unending life, Williams thinks, not only explains but also justifies EM’s
 12 boredom with it.

13 I will not evaluate Williams’s argument that it would be intolerable
 14 because too tedious for *any* human being to be able to maintain her identity
 15 while living an unending life. Instead, I want to highlight just two features
 16 of his discussion that are germane to mine. First, that boredom isn’t *blind*:
 17 it is an experience that one has in response to the features of one’s situation.
 18 This explains why there is, at least for some for us, something unnerving
 19 about the idea of being *unborable*—being constantly engaged and fascinated
 20 with an activity or one’s circumstances, regardless of the *features* of that
 21 activity or one’s circumstances. Those of us who are unnerved want some
 22 assurance that if one is unborable, it is because one is engaged with things
 23 that are actually interesting. Second, that boredom need not always be
 24 a response that one has in recognition of a lack of *value*. Rather, it can
 25 simply be a response that one has when what one is doing or attending to is
 26 no longer interesting. Perhaps it has become lifeless and insipid in the way
 27 that an excellent song can fail to resonate simply because one has heard it
 28 too many times.

29 Importantly, this allows for the possibility of a person’s finding boring
 30 the very thing that she simultaneously recognizes would be good, or even
 31 best for her to do. Her present sense that a certain activity is boring need

32 normative standard—a person’s experience of boredom can be *merited* or not, given features
 33 of her circumstances or her activity. While I am not committed to any particular theory of the
 34 emotions, there are some that seem consistent with the picture I have in mind. For example,
 35 in their recent work on the emotions, Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2003) offer the
 36 view that “base emotions” such as amusement, anger, contempt, and disgust are the products
 37 of “relatively discrete special-purpose mechanisms that are sensitive to some important aspect
 38 of human life” (138). Jealousy, for example, “monitors the social environment for potential
 39 losses of affection or allegiance” (140). On this picture, we can understand interest and
 40 boredom as monitoring one’s environment for things such as novelty and repetitiveness. For
 41 D’Arms and Jacobson, this picture of the emotions supports the thought that such responses
 42 are governed by what they call “norms of fittingness”: “considerations of fittingness are all
 43 and only those considerations about whether to feel shame, amusement, fear, and so forth
 44 that bear on whether the emotion’s evaluation of the circumstances gets it right: whether
 45 the situation really is shameful, funny, fearsome, and so forth” (132). Something like this
 46 norm is what I will rely on when I discuss the idea that a person’s boredom, or interest can be
 “veridical,” “justified,” or “fitting.”

1 be no indication that it isn't something worth doing, or that she doesn't
 2 sincerely believe it to be so. Along the same lines, we can see why an
 3 occurrent experience of boredom can lead to a person's being interested
 4 in doing something she sees as not good to do, or even bad to do: it may
 5 simply be *interesting* to do—and perhaps interesting, in part, because of its
 6 particular kind of badness. The descriptions that I offered above, in which
 7 akrasia and continence are due to one's patterns of interest and boredom,
 8 can thus be vindicated.

9 Moreover, this also makes available an alternative interpretation of
 10 people like the narrator of Berryman's poem—one that I think is just as
 11 plausible as the first, and which allows for the sort of ambivalence that the
 12 poem seems to invoke. Rather than simply reading Henry as an evaluative
 13 nihilist who is bored in response to his belief that the world contains nothing
 14 of genuine value, we can also interpret him as somebody who sincerely
 15 believes there to be good things in the world—*genuinely* great literature,
 16 as he suggests—but who finds, to his dismay, that he is uninterested in
 17 engaging with such things any longer, in spite of their goodness.¹⁷

19 3

21 So far I have argued that a person's experience of boredom can be fitting or
 22 unfitting, given its quasi-perceptual nature. This explains, at least in part,
 23 why Rawls's grass-counter strikes us as so strange: he seems to be able to
 24 maintain positive interest in something that just isn't interesting. Again, per-
 25 haps his attention is directed inward, or perhaps he sees something that we
 26 don't: but importantly, these thoughts simply reinforce the idea that bore-
 27 dom and interest are reactions *to* something, and that to be able to maintain
 28 one's interest regardless of one's circumstances suggests either a lack of
 29 engagement with, or a distorted perception of, those circumstances.¹⁸

32 ¹⁷ Consider a section of the poem that I omitted above, in which Henry lays the fault with
 33 himself and not the world:

34 Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
 35 After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
 36 we ourselves flash and yearn
 37 and moreover my mother told me as a boy
 38 (repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored
 39 means you have no Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
 40 inner resources, because I am heavy bored. (Berryman 1964)

41 ¹⁸ I do not mean to suggest that having one's perception of one's circumstances be distorted—
 42 either through the use of chemical substances or certain mental disabilities—is something to
 43 be avoided at all costs. Indeed, there is no doubt some good in temporarily and occasionally
 44 suspending such accuracy. I am suggesting, instead, that given that we value having accurate
 45 perceptions of the world it is one relatively important reason why we might find being
 46 unborable an unattractive way to be, in general.

1 One might nonetheless wonder whether a person would live a better or
 2 more attractive life, or be a better or more appealing person, if she were
 3 never bored by, in particular, those things that she recognizes as best for her
 4 to do. Wouldn't it be preferable to be fully engaged by those actions and
 5 activities? To answer these questions we must first take into consideration
 6 what a person's patterns of boredom of interest can say about the sort of
 7 character or mind that she has, in general.

8 A common thought is that a notable proclivity toward boredom is
 9 revelatory only of unattractive or regrettable qualities of character or mind.
 10 For example, a person who is easily bored may be deficient in imagination,
 11 creativity, curiosity, or perhaps other forms of intelligence; or we might
 12 think that though she possesses these capacities, her bouts of boredom are
 13 brought on by a failure to exercise them. This latter thought in particular
 14 is one that we are likely to have of children who complain of boredom, but
 15 it can be extended to adults just as well, accompanying either advice or
 16 even criticism. This criticism can sometimes tend toward a *moral* criticism
 17 about one's inability to be fully grateful for what one has been provided.
 18 We might think that a person is simply overlooking something that deserves
 19 her attention, and her oversight is an indication of a shallow, or ungrateful
 20 character.¹⁹

21 In many cases, this sort of evaluation seems exactly right. For example,
 22 a person may at first find the Nevada desert maddeningly boring. But
 23 imagine that in response to a friend's claim that she has been too dismissive
 24 and too parochial in her tastes, she attempts to scrutinize it more carefully
 25 the next time she drives through. As she pays closer attention to its details,
 26 she begins to notice certain streaks of color, patterns that have been carved
 27 into rock by the wind, and formations of clouds she hadn't noticed before,
 28 which a less attentive or perceptive person might never appreciate at all,
 29 and which she may not have noticed without taking her friend's suggestion
 30 seriously. She might conclude that really, she was mistaken in thinking
 31 the landscape so dull; it is in fact, quite interesting. We can also think of
 32 activities that may at first appear boring but are revealed to be interesting
 33 upon closer inspection and more serious engagement: weeding a garden,
 34 bird-watching, or reading through baseball statistics come to mind.

35 But although we are right to think that boredom can sometimes indicate
 36 a regrettable lack of attentiveness or perception on the part of the person
 37 who is bored, a person's particular patterns of boredom and interest can

38 ¹⁹ For example, consider Henry's mother's advice to never confess to being bored, as it
 39 indicates a lack of "inner resources." In a memorable passage from Marilynne Robinson's
 40 *Gilead*, John Ames writes to his son, "I wish I had paid more attention to [water]. My list
 41 of regrets may seem unusual, but who can know that they are, really. This is an interesting
 42 planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it" (2004, 28). And in an episode of the
 43 television show *Louie*, Louis CK responds to his four-year-old's complaints of boredom during
 44 a car ride with the following remark: "you live in a great, big, vast world that you've seen
 45 none percent of. Even the inside of your own mind is endless; it goes on forever, inwardly, do
 46 you understand? The fact that you're alive is amazing. So you don't get to be bored."

1 also be explained by basic differences in taste, rather than a failure to
2 possess or exercise certain mental capacities, or because of ingratitude or
3 shallowness. A different person, preferring the bustle and grit of urban
4 landscapes, might have noticed the very same details of the Nevada desert
5 that her friend now finds interesting, and nonetheless still find it a bland
6 backdrop only to be endured or ignored rather than enjoyed. Some people
7 simply cannot find the natural world to be of any interest, and it seems
8 possible that in at least some of these cases, it is not because of a lack of
9 attention or shallowness in their values. Some become engrossed by the
10 minutiae of historical baseball games; others just cannot bear the thought.
11 In such cases, paying *more* attention to what one is bored by may only
12 deaden the experience further.

13 And importantly, if a person *isn't* bored by what it is that she is doing
14 or the situation that she finds herself in, it is sometimes because she hasn't
15 scrutinized or attended to her activity or her environment *enough*. For
16 example, a person may be able to watch and enjoy an episode of a boring
17 sitcom that she has seen before only because she is presently exhausted, or
18 mentally depleted. And we should not forget that, as a matter of empirical
19 circumstance, there are also plenty of occasions in which the activity or the
20 environment that a person is faced with is ill-equipped, or not equipped
21 at all, to provide an engaged and lively human mind with anything of
22 interest. If the world that a person experiences is an interesting place, it
23 is only contingently so; if it is not interesting, heightened attentiveness or
24 perspicacity is likely to only exacerbate one's boredom. And as we found
25 in the case of Rawls's grass-counter, if a person were to exhibit sustained
26 positive interest in something that is itself boring, we may be tempted to
27 conclude that he is not completely or fully perceiving his activity or his
28 environment.

29 So, while we tend to associate the experience of boredom with negative
30 qualities of mind and character, this is only one half of the story. Although
31 a person's boredom may indicate that he isn't fully aware of his situation or
32 activity, or is lacking in creativity, curiosity, or gratitude, our assessment of
33 him should be sensitive to what his situation or activity is actually like. And
34 in cases where there is very little, or nothing, of interest in his environment
35 or activity, his boredom may indicate that his mind is both discerning and
36 attentive. His mental capacities may be of good quality, and he may be
37 primed to exercise them; it is the world that yields nothing in return. And if
38 such a person is unable to turn his attention toward something else, being
39 bored by his activity or environment seems to be a perfectly *warranted*
40 response. The advice or injunction to pay more attention in order to
41 alleviate one's boredom, if good or plausible, must take for granted that
42 there is something there, after all, for an attentive and perceptive person to
43 be engaged by.

44 This brings us to considerations about the *excellences* of mind and char-
45 acter that are connected to a person's susceptibility to boredom. Sometimes
46

1 a person is easily bored precisely because her mental capacities are of a
 2 particularly high quality, or because rather than being incurious, apathetic,
 3 or lacking in imagination, she is *especially* curious, inquisitive, or imagi-
 4 native. What can keep others fascinated for longer just cannot sustain her
 5 interest, because it takes *more* for her mind to be placated. Her capacities
 6 of discernment are so acute, and her mind so quick, that she can speedily
 7 observe and absorb the details of something, recall similar instances of that
 8 thing, more quickly arrive at the desire for something novel, and so be
 9 more susceptible to (and perhaps more averse to) the feeling of boredom
 10 when nothing interesting avails itself. It is a familiar observation that while
 11 some students are bored in class because unable to grasp the material or
 12 unwilling to engage with it, others are bored precisely because of a quick
 13 grasp, and a subsequent desire to move on to something new. And we recog-
 14 nize **these** characteristics in some people that we greatly admire because
 15 of their qualities of mind: for example, Sherlock Holmes’s susceptibility
 16 to boredom—a feature of his character that Watson describes as a major,
 17 defining difference between them—is inseparable from the sharpness and
 18 intensity of his mind, and his high level of intellectual energy.²⁰

19 These different relationships between one’s tendencies toward boredom
 20 and the quality of one’s character and mind can explain why some of us
 21 may be *ambivalent*, rather than simply critical, in our assessments of people
 22 who are easily bored. We wonder whether there is something more that they
 23 could do to more fully appreciate their present circumstances, and whether
 24 they are being too hasty in finding them uninteresting; we may disapprove
 25 and chastise them when their boredom leads them to do silly or reckless
 26 things. But nonetheless, we should also be sensitive to the possibility that
 27 a person’s predisposition toward boredom may be evidence of either her
 28 (perfectly acceptable) tastes, or even of qualities of mind and character that
 29 we appreciate, enjoy, and even admire.²¹

30
 31 ²⁰ “you know how bored I have been since we locked up Colonel Carruthers. My mind is like
 32 a racing engine, tearing itself to pieces because it is not connected up with the work for which
 33 it was built. Life is commonplace, the papers are sterile” (Conan Doyle 1908, 224). One
 34 might, given my focus on the value of these mental qualities, wonder whether I am unfairly
 35 devaluing other forms of intelligence, or less intelligent minds, in general. But I do not mean
 36 to suggest either than the sort of intelligence that, for example, Sherlock Holmes has, is the
 37 *only* form of intelligence. Nor am I committed to thinking that those who are less intelligent
 38 in general wouldn’t possess other important virtues. However, these qualities are valuable,
 39 and given this, there is something to be said in favor of those who are easily bored.

40 So, in recognizing that boredom can be responsive to features of one’s environment or
 41 activity, we arrive at a result that is the inverse of the one we began with—both of which
 42 seem to me to capture different truths about the relationship between a person’s character and
 43 mind, and her susceptibility to boredom.

44 ²¹ The disposition to desire novelty for its own sake that can accompany one’s experience of
 45 boredom seems also to underlie (and perhaps may even be partly explained by) other valuable
 46 qualities, such as creativity and spontaneity. This can be gleaned from everyday experience,
 and there has been some recent work done in empirical psychology exploring this potential
 connection. See, for example, Gasper and Middlewood 2014.

1 As an example of this ambivalence, take the reactions that one might
 2 have toward the protagonist of Jane Austen's *Emma*. We recognize that
 3 Emma's meddling in others' affairs is largely the result of the fact that she
 4 is (though she herself doesn't seem to realize this) frequently bored by her
 5 life as a caretaker for her aging father. And we are primed by Austen to
 6 see her tendency toward boredom as a consequence of certain flaws in
 7 her character: her impatience with tasks that take time and persistence to
 8 complete, as well as her lack of interest in developing any of her talents seem
 9 to confirm that, being "handsome, clever and rich," she has gotten away
 10 in life without having to develop the qualities of fortitude or persistence
 11 (1816, 1). Impatient with the tasks deemed acceptable for her to perform,
 12 she becomes idle; her idleness feeds her imagination, and her imagination
 13 gets the better of her, making it difficult for her to see people as they
 14 really are, rather than as pieces in her matchmaking schemes and invented
 15 narratives. Given all of this, we are ready to find her heedless, immature,
 16 and irresponsible.

17 But at the same time, we might suspect that her scheming and impatience
 18 may in fact be the consequences of rather *good* qualities of mind and
 19 character such as cleverness, playfulness, sharpness, and liveliness. In her
 20 interactions and thoughts with others, we can't help but notice that Emma
 21 has a certain spark or vivacity about her; she's a firecracker. And we are
 22 told, for example, how she has from a very young age grasped things much
 23 more quickly than her older sister; and how with her governess and friend,
 24 Miss Taylor, married and moved away, she finds herself "in great danger of
 25 suffering from intellectual solitude." Austen continues, "She dearly loved
 26 her father, but he was no companion for her. He could not meet her in
 27 conversation, rational or playful" (Austen 1816, 6–7). Given this, one
 28 might begin to sense that she has been placed in circumstances that though
 29 perhaps another person (reserved and placid Jane Fairfax, for example)
 30 would find sufficiently absorbing, a person with Emma's positive qualities
 31 of mind would not. Given these qualities, she is in danger of finding her
 32 circumstances boring, and her boredom intolerable—no wonder, then, her
 33 tendencies toward mischief.

34
 35 **4**
 36
 37 In [Section 2](#), I argued that while there may be forms of boredom that one
 38 feels in response to a lack of value in the object of one's boredom, that
 39 sometimes it is simply a response to the *boringness* of an activity, and not
 40 to its lack of value. This allows for a vindication of initial appearances: we
 41 are sometimes enkratic or akratic because of our experiences of boredom,
 42 and interest. And in [Section 3](#), I argued that though we often think of
 43 the susceptibility to boredom as being revelatory of a vice or some other
 44 character flaw or mental deficiency, that this is too limited an assessment to
 45 capture the variety of ways in which we assess easily bored people. Under
 46

1 certain circumstances a person's boredom may be the result of a simple
 2 difference in taste, or her accurate assessment of her circumstances; more-
 3 over, her tendencies toward boredom may be inseparable from attractive
 4 qualities of character and mind.

5 I shall now make explicit the results we reach from bringing these
 6 two conclusions together. A person's ambivalence toward performing the
 7 best action, when explicable by her finding that action boring, as well
 8 as the motivations that she has to perform bad actions because of her
 9 occurrent experiences of boredom, need not be indications of a defective or
 10 unattractive mind or character. On the contrary, the positive qualities of
 11 character that a person's susceptibility to boredom can indicate may also
 12 be present—and may even be properly conditioned in a way I'll elaborate
 13 on—in those who are bored by what they know would be best to do.

14 To illustrate this, let's consider two alternative cases of grass count-
 15 ing. Victoria and Edith, both graduate students in biology, are counting
 16 blades of grass for a research project. So, unlike a grass counter who
 17 simply—*somehow*—finds this task engrossing in itself, Victoria and Edith
 18 are engaging in this activity because it is instrumentally valuable for them
 19 to do so. Let's imagine also that in order to do this task successfully, neither
 20 can simultaneously distract themselves from what they are doing, in the
 21 way that a person might listen to the radio or daydream in order to alleviate
 22 the boredom they might otherwise experience. If Edith and Victoria are to
 23 count blades of grass successfully, they must exert their full attention to
 24 what it is that they are doing.

25 Edith, in finding this task exceedingly boring, experiences some moti-
 26 vational resistance toward performing it. Though she recognizes that she
 27 has decisive reason to continue counting blades of grass, her boredom with
 28 grass counting renders her less than wholehearted about doing it. While she
 29 loves her work in general, she cannot love this aspect of it. Half an hour
 30 into the day, she finds that she must muster self-control in order to resist
 31 the temptation to get up and stretch her legs, get another cup of coffee, or
 32 check her email, all the while recognizing that she has little or no reason to
 33 do these things. After all, it is not as though her legs really are cramped, or
 34 that she really wants a cup of coffee, or that she needs to check her email;
 35 and she is fully aware that these actions will just delay the work that will
 36 have to be done anyway.

37 Victoria, like Edith, knows that the best thing for her to do is to count
 38 blades of grass, but unlike Edith, Victoria is *not* motivationally divided.
 39 Rather than being strong-willed in resisting the temptation to do something
 40 else in order to avoid this boring task, she isn't tempted to begin with. She
 41 does the best thing, for the right reasons, *wholeheartedly*.²²

42
 43 ²² I want to address a worry that one might have at this point. Though in this example, what
 44 is best for both Edith and Victoria to do is *instrumentally* best for them to do, we shouldn't be
 45 misled into thinking that it is only actions with instrumental value that can be both boring and
 46 good to do, as though good actions and things are more susceptible to being boring when their

1 At least initially, we are likely to find Victoria’s psychology puzzling
 2 in a way that we don’t find Edith’s, who’s experience is likely to be more
 3 familiar to us. How exactly does Victoria experience this activity? In
 4 trying to imagine the virtuous psychology we must accommodate that she
 5 perceives her circumstances accurately, so she must be able to appreciate
 6 that grass counting is, after all, a boring activity. This is not only because it
 7 will not yield a clearly attractive psychology should she be blind to salient
 8 features of her activity, but also because it is an important commitment of
 9 an Aristotelian understanding of virtue that the virtuous agent be sensitive
 10 to facts about her situation. And as discussed earlier, given her appreciation
 11 of the boringness of what she is doing, it would be bizarre if she were
 12 utterly *engrossed* by the task; this would suggest at least some sort of
 13 insensitivity to what she is up to. So her wholeheartedness, in this sort
 14 of case, should not be understood as a matter of taking pleasure or being
 15 positively enthused by what it is that she is doing.

16 So consider the supplemented view discussed in [Section 2](#), which allows
 17 that unity or wholeheartedness doesn’t demand positive enthusiasm or
 18 pleasure. Rather, the virtuous agent appreciates that grass counting is
 19 boring, but the consideration provided by the boringness of grass counting
 20 plays no other role in her response to it. She does not positively enjoy this
 21 activity, but she does not find it painfully boring, or boring enough that it
 22 would at all disincline her from doing it.

23
 24 goodness is purely instrumental. There are intrinsically good activities, as well as intrinsically
 25 good things, that are *also* boring, which can be experienced *as boring* even by those who are
 26 interested in the kind of goodness that is in question. For example, it has been remarked by a
 27 number of philosophers that Sidgwick’s *Methods of Ethics* is both good *and* boring. It has
 28 also been suggested, plausibly, that these two features are inseparable from one another: that
 29 some of the properties that make the *Methods* good are the very same properties that make
 30 it boring. Here, for example, is C. D. Broad’s description of the experience of reading the
 31 *Methods* (which he also describes, at the top of the chapter in which this quote appears, as
 “on the whole the best treatise on moral theory that has ever been written”):

32 [Sidgwick’s] style is heavy and involved, and he seldom allowed that
 33 strong sense of humour, which is said to have made him a delightful
 34 conversationalist, to relieve the uniform dull dignity of his writing. He
 35 incessantly refines, qualifies, raises objections, answers them, and then
 36 finds further objections to the answer. Each of these objections, rebuttals,
 37 rejoinders, and surrejoinders is in itself admirable, and does infinite credit
 38 to the acuteness and candour of the author. But the reader is apt to
 39 become impatient; to lose the thread of the argument; and to rise from
 40 his desk finding that he has read a great deal with constant admiration
 41 and now remembers little or nothing. (2014, 143–144)

42 My point here isn’t to bring up the virtues and vices of pieces and styles of philosophical
 43 writing (one might point out, after all, that philosophy *often is* made worse by being boring).
 44 Instead, it is just to highlight the possibility of something’s being *both* intrinsically good and
 45 boring. Again, that something good makes no promise of also being interesting, and that
 46 something bad makes no promise of also being uninteresting is precisely why it can take a
 concerted effort to attentively read Sidgwick’s writing on the one hand, and to refrain from
 gawking at train wrecks, both literal and figurative, on the other.

1 While I think that this proposal is initially difficult to fully imagine, there
 2 are resources that we can rely on to make Victoria's psychology more vivid.
 3 For example, we might think that by focusing on the *nobility* or *fineness* of
 4 her ultimate goal—advancing scientific knowledge—she is able to recognize
 5 that what she is doing is boring, but have that boredom be completely
 6 “silenced” so that it does not at all impact her motivations.²³ Perhaps the
 7 most plausible rendering of her psychology is that she experiences a mental
 8 state akin to a meditative tranquility, which is capable of resisting the
 9 experience of grass counting as boring in a way that would leave her less
 10 than wholehearted about doing so, without compromising her perception
 11 of her circumstances.²⁴

12 No doubt being able to maintain this inner calm is an attractive capacity—
 13 and one that we are right to admire. And it is likely supported by a number
 14 of virtues, such as patience, calmness, or a kind of stoicism. Moreover,
 15 in comparison with enkratic Edith, Victoria would experience less pain,
 16 frustration, and stress. Nonetheless, I contend that it is still an open
 17 question whose character is more excellent, and that it would be a mistake
 18 to conclude, as the traditional conception does, that the question is settled
 19 once we see that Victoria is wholehearted, and Edith is not.

20 Though it is true that Edith must struggle in a way that Victoria does not
 21 in order to do what she knows would be best to do, though her experience
 22 of this activity will be subjectively unpleasant in a way that Victoria's may
 23 not be, and though there is the risk that she might opt to do something
 24 else in order to avoid her boring task, I propose that the fact that she is
 25 motivationally divided rather than virtuous in regards to this activity need
 26 not be any indication of a character or mind that is worse off. Moreover,
 27 she may possess certain positive qualities that Victoria does not.

28 According to the conclusions established so far, Edith's experience of
 29 grass counting as boring is a perfectly justified response given what that
 30 activity is actually like. Second, as I've suggested, that a person is partic-
 31 ularly susceptible to boredom may indicate that her mind is particularly
 32 lively or discerning, or that she may possess certain forms of intelligence
 33 that make it difficult for her to be patient and persistent with dull tasks.

34 And this second observation holds, I propose, even in cases where the
 35 action that the agent finds boring is also the action that would be best
 36 for her to perform. In fact, that Edith *knows* what would be best to
 37 do,²⁵ and nonetheless still desires to either stop, or do something else

38 ²³ This psychological capacity is mentioned, but not much elaborated on, in McDowell 1979.

39 ²⁴ In the psychological literature this sort of state is referred to as “flow,” or “zone.” See, for
 40 example, Csikszentmihalyi 1990. And Julia Annas (2008) also suggested that this is perhaps
 41 the best way to understand the phenomenology of virtue.

42 ²⁵ Perhaps this is something that a defender of the virtuous agent will reject: Edith couldn't
 43 possibly fully understand the value of what she is doing—and this is precisely why she feels
 44 resistance to grass-counting. If only she really *knew* how valuable scientific inquiry was, she'd
 45 be wholehearted about doing it. But how can we state, in a non-question begging way, exactly
 46 what Edith lacks, and Victoria possesses? More importantly, even if we grant that Edith has

1 entirely, is further evidence that her experience of boredom in this case
 2 is evidence of these positive qualities of mind. Her boredom is not best
 3 explained, for example, by a failure to appreciate the value of something—
 4 the way in which we might explain and criticize the boredom of a child,
 5 or a misguided or shallow adult. Again, recall our ambivalence toward
 6 Emma Woodhouse’s susceptibility to boredom: it isn’t immediately obvious
 7 whether her boredom is brought on by a failure to fully appreciate what the
 8 world has to offer, perhaps because she has mistaken beliefs about the value
 9 of the activities that she finds interesting and those she finds boring, or
 10 whether it is just a result of her positive qualities of mind placed in limiting
 11 circumstances. But if Emma really does know the value of such things—if
 12 we don’t think that she’s simply being shallow—we have more reason to
 13 see her in this second, more positive light.²⁶ This is the sense in which the
 14 enkratic’s susceptibility to boredom is properly conditioned in a way that
 15 renders it unlike the vices associated with boredom.

16 Given the connection that boredom has to certain other characteristics of
 17 mind that we admire and appreciate, it is not obvious that we would wish
 18 for others or ourselves to be less vulnerable to it—even when that vulnera-
 19 bility leaves us bored by things we also recognize are good, or good to do.
 20 While some may still be ambivalent about the agent’s disharmonious mind,
 21 even this ambivalence rather than outright disapproval can indicate that
 22 there are limits on the standard assumption that a harmonious psychology
 23 is clearly and obviously better. Holmes’s tendency to become easily bored
 24 is inseparable from other excellent qualities of mind and character that we
 25 positively admire. And so, we may find that we appreciate his susceptibility
 26 to boredom even if—to Watson’s concern—it is the very same tendency that
 27 nourishes his cocaine habit when he is left with nothing he finds interesting
 28 to do.²⁷ He wouldn’t be who he is, with the kind of attractive and appealing
 29

30 some “lower grade” of knowledge that results in her enkrasia, this does not settle the question
 31 of whose psychology is preferable.

32 ²⁶ This emphasis on the importance of evaluative knowledge as a condition on virtue renders
 33 the qualities I’ve focused on psychologically importantly similar to those that a standard
 34 Aristotelian account of the virtues would defend, and deeper than the qualities of character
 35 that count as “virtues” on certain more minimalistic theories of virtue, such as Hume’s. While
 36 I think Hume is right to turn our attention to the wide variety of qualities that we appreciate
 37 in ourselves and one another, I think that Aristotelian accounts are right to emphasize that
 38 there is an important difference between the qualities of character that would count as virtues
 39 on Hume’s account, and thicker qualities of character that reveal to us more about what the
 40 virtuous agent’s mental life, and capacities, are like.

41 ²⁷ As Watson reports: “My own complete happiness, and the home-centered interests which
 42 rise up around the man who first finds himself master of his own establishment, were sufficient
 43 to absorb all my attention, while Holmes . . . remained in our lodgings in Baker Street, buried
 44 among his old books, and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition, the
 45 drowsiness of the drug, and the fierce energy of his own keen nature” (Conan Doyle 1992, 5).
 46 In modern incarnations of Holmes, his susceptibility to boredom gives rise to other destructive
 and self-destructive actions, and partly explains other character traits such as social antipathy
 and arrogance.

1 character he has, without it. In appreciating this last point, we may come
 2 to see his tendency toward actually performing akratic actions in a more
 3 positive light, overall: one that presents this tendency as an essential and
 4 charming feature of a vibrant and brilliant soul.²⁸

5 Conclusion

8 I have argued that we should reject the traditional claim that the psychology
 9 of the wholehearted agent is clearly better than, or preferable to, the
 10 psychologies of those whose minds are more divided. This is not to deny the
 11 importance of wholeheartedness, but to deny its superiority. As Aristotelian
 12 virtue ethicists are quick to remind us, it is difficult for us—imperfect as
 13 we are—to imagine what it is like to be the virtuous agent. This is a fair
 14 point, and my arguments here have not relied on the particular difficulty
 15 we face in imagining what it would be like to be wholehearted about an
 16 activity that is also undeniably boring, while also in full awareness of its
 17 boringness. As I suggested, perhaps it is like being in a meditative state, and
 18 perhaps it is a state most familiar to those who are notably, and sometimes
 19 seemingly impossibly, patient, steadfast, and stoic. But I have argued that
 20 we should not stop at recognizing those virtues. Instead, we need a more
 21 pluralistic stance when it comes to the philosophical project of identifying
 22 and delineating the excellences of character, a pluralism that can recognize
 23 and celebrate the excellences of less harmonious minds.

Vida Yao

E-mail: vyao@live.unc.edu

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33 ²⁸ One might argue should the character traits I have highlighted conflict with or undermine a
 34 person’s moral virtues, we thereby have good reason to devalue or disregard them. Perhaps
 35 this is why the virtuous person’s character is more attractive. In response, I would emphasize
 36 that these qualities need not be incompatible with a person’s moral virtue, but that furthermore,
 37 even when they are, we might remind ourselves of just one point argued for by Susan Wolf in
 38 “Moral Saints”: that upon reflection on the sorts of people that we love, and the relationships
 39 we cherish, the qualities of character that we find of deep importance are not identical to, and
 40 may even conflict with, the moral virtues (1982, 419–439). It is important to note, however,
 41 that while Wolf focuses on a person who is maximally morally good, I have focused on the
 42 question of the importance of wholeheartedness to the virtues, whether or not those virtues
 43 are best understood as morally relevant.

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