

*Mashuq Ally*

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## What is wrong with current theorisations of ‘boredom’?

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This article examines theoretical attempts to focus attention on the much-neglected phenomenon of “boredom” and evaluate the extent to which the theorists succeed in illuminating it. It is argued that cognitively important aspects of boredom are ignored by these theorists and suggest ways in which such shortcomings in the treatment of boredom may be addressed in future studies.

## Wat is fout met die huidige teoretisering van ‘verveling’?

Hierdie artikel ondersoek teoretiese pogings om aandag op die hoogs verwaarloosde fenomeen van “verveling” te vestig en te evalueer tot watter mate teoretici daarin slaag om dit te verhelder. Dit word geargumenteer dat bewussynsbelangrike aspekte van “verveling” deur hierdie teoretici geïgnoreer word en wyses word voorgestel waardeur sulke tekortkominge aangespreek kan word in toekomstige studies van “verveling”.

**B**oredom is a highly familiar yet relatively unexamined phenomenon. Perhaps because of its reputation as an inconsequential emotion, the significance of boredom in human social life has often been minimised if not ignored. Boredom has been theoretically linked to modernity, affluence, and the growing problem of filling “leisure time”. It has also been attributed to the expansion of individualism with its heightened expectations of personal gratification. Whether it is viewed as a reaction to the sensation of understimulation or as “overload” (Klapp 1986), boredom appears to be, ultimately, a problem of meaning. Its marginal research status notwithstanding, there is now, though often unnoticed, a sizeable and multidisciplinary body of scholarship on this elusive entity. While the Enlightenment’s mainstream therapeutic discourse on boredom as a univocal psychic disorder of lack continues to be influential, several studies of the last three decades have begun to question its anthropological assumption and developed alternative conceptualisations, such as boredom as a complex and ambivalent state of mind, a historical phenomenon, a cultural construct of modernity, a mode of social interaction and communication, an integral part of the bourgeois ideology of the (male) subject, and boredom as a polysemous aesthetic signifier. As a result, boredom has emerged as a theoretical problem, while the practical hope to cure it has waned. There is hardly a better time to commence the philosophical task of unpacking its growing discourse.

I begin by providing an overview of various theoretical perspectives on boredom in works that have been published during the preceding two decades. This survey enables me to focus attention upon a number of themes in recent boredom literature, such as the experience of psychic alienation during and after the Enlightenment period.

I examine current theoretical efforts to treat the phenomenon of boredom. Not all of these have a philosophical focus, but all attempt clarification of boredom through the examination of both actual and fictional representations of the phenomenon. I offer a critical appreciation of these efforts. More particularly, I examine the shortcomings of the analyses on boredom in recently published works, and I consider the form of a better-grounded philosophical

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conceptualisation. This enables me to suggest ways in which the treatment of boredom may be addressed in future studies.

## 1. The seminal surveys

Russian writers seem especially adroit at tapping the artistic marrow in the topic's unpromising bones. Anton Chekhov (*Uncle Vanya, et al*) and Ivan Goncharov (*Obломov*) might be regarded as boredom's patron saints. Samuel Beckett transmuted boredom into an existential vaudeville in his 1952 theatrical landmark, *Waiting for Godot*, while the work of the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire (*Les fleurs du mal*) was another vexed by "spleen" and in the grip of "eternal boredom" (Baudelaire 1952: 102).

To fix ideas, let us consider a work on the subject of some twenty years ago. In his book entitled *Boredom, self, and culture*, Sean Desmond Healy (1984) claims that boredom is the "silent scourge" of modern culture. Known as *acedia* to centuries of Christians, it was nothing less than a sin. Detailed accounts of psychic inertia can be dated back to the fourth century, according to Healy. The hermits of Lower Egypt spoke of a "noonday devil" that drained their vitality and will. Healy follows the trail from the Greeks to St Thomas Aquinas to Petrarch ("a voluptuousness in suffering that makes the mind sad") and on to Shakespeare's Hamlet, who soliloquised on a world grown "weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable" (Healy 1984: 9, 16, 18, 20).

But, as Patricia Meyer Spacks (1995: 13) points out in *Boredom: the literary history of a state of mind*, the contemporary use of the word "bore" dates back only to the eighteenth century and "boredom" to the nineteenth century. A variety of social factors gave rise to this new outlook, Spacks argues. The fresh notion of leisure time, Christianity's diminishing power and the Enlightenment focus on individual rights and experience all fostered boredom's appearance on the psychic landscape. Once we took the time to look inward and consciously cultivate our own emotions, the flatness of things came into clearer view.

Spacks's work brilliantly opens up a space in which to assess the critical phenomenon of descriptive narrative, even as it treads ever

so uneasily on its ground. Boredom offers a compelling reading not just of psychic alienation through the ages, but also of its explanatory force. And any motif that explains, that carries predictive power, must be approached with the greatest caution. Fortunately, Spacks's pleasure in her subject's ubiquity sacrifices very little to the facile even as it reveals the trademark sign of its subject's menace. That is, in organising a reading of Western culture since the eighteenth century around a negative reflex (the need to counter dullness), it constructs a master narrative, a supremely fascinating insistence that its subject is so reclusive it must be deeply implicated in all cultural movements. The force of her narrative sequence must hold our attention: what could be more urgent than the ghost that haunts our every utterance, our every reading endeavour, and our every effort to pay attention. Of course nothing could be more urgent, because such a rubric subsumes everything, which is as much as to say that the causal history of boredom is here posited as history: "All 'cultural advance' derives from the need to withstand boredom; literature is a single instance among many" (Spacks 1995: 3). That is a tall claim. But then again, there is none among us who can claim to be exempt from its force, and herein lies Spacks's marvellous resonance. Boredom raises a frightening spectre because

... readers' capacity to declare themselves uninvolved threatens the writer's project as it menaces their own pleasure. All literary endeavour occurs in a context of conceivable rejection (Spacks 1995: 2).

One can live with disagreement, even with fiery opposition; but to recognise oneself as boring is to have one's existence effectively nullified, cancelled, not worth even the energy of conscious rejection. The quest not to bore, then, becomes a quest for survival, but only of a sort. If I have ceased to exist for you because my narratives put you to sleep, then I will find a place in which I can exist. I will leave, and seek to resurface in another space, or maybe only in another form. Here, the reader nullifies the writer by declaring her too dull; but then the writer threatens the intellectual and imaginative integrity of the reader.

With such dynamics in mind, Spacks traces an early nineteenth-century sensibility through William Wordsworth's efforts to educate

the public. Like many of his poetic peers, Wordsworth sought to make his readers pay attention to the wonderments precisely of the everyday and the marginal. In rejecting the sensation literature of his time and in writing his *Lyrical ballads* in a form of studied pedestrianism, “[w]hat is important is, or should be, interesting, Wordsworth implicitly argues, and conversely, what is interesting should be important” (Spacks 1995: 114). In this the poet was turning to an older meaning of the word “interest”, one that equated the interesting with the important. And where Spacks finds hints and glimmers of doubt in Wordsworth’s self-assurance, she is able to trace the emergence of a world in which communal values can no longer be confidently posited. All the same, in the Wordsworthian understanding here described, the responsibility to read well is the responsibility to be fully human: “Failure to respond to his text may imply human failure to respond to the needs and natures of others perceived as unlike the self” (Spacks 1995: 115). My disappearance, then, can only mean your death to me. You are not an interesting listener if you cannot stay awake. The fact that you find me boring attests to your inferior reading skills.

Indeed, the very history of boredom — which in his narrative is also the history of cultural advance since the eighteenth century — hinges upon the development of constructions of selfhood and the development of notions of subjectivity. Spacks deftly traces the ways in which the sexes “use” boredom for and within different ends. For eighteenth-century women novelists,

... to constitute fiercely imposed misery as boredom’s only alternative implies devious but intelligible social protest. The taken-for-granted probability of boredom in a woman’s life provides the starting point for narrative — and perhaps for female anger (Spacks 1995: 62).

In both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to be bored is to fail an essential test of human worth. By the nineteenth century, however, its meaning — especially for women — has somewhat changed. In a virtuosic reading of Maria Edgeworth’s *Helen*, Spacks (1995: 181) observes that the characters portrayed as bored “fail not in thought but in feeling. Feeling attests character. The good woman’s primary

interest in other people demonstrates appropriate emotional orientation". And then thinking of the implicit stance of muted protest in characters portrayed in Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth and Charlotte Brontë, she concludes

... what they resist is the social prohibition for women of many forms of meaningful action. The struggle against boredom is one consequence of such prohibition [...] Misguided or conventional in form, their resistance helps constitute their characters and the plots that contain them (Spacks 1995: 189).

Before the eighteenth century individuals certainly became bored or were repulsed by tedium; however, such responses were theorised in terms of apathy, and more importantly, in terms of a spiritual malaise that threatened the personal responsibility of the disengaged creature. Personal responsibility remains a vital motif into the eighteenth century, but it speaks to a differently inflected understanding of experience. It is a concentration on such inflections that focuses Spacks's historical narrativising. For the eighteenth-century organisation of the workforce, and its concomitant increase in "leisure time", exposed a separation of work and leisure that humankind simply had not known before. Furthermore, with the decline of orthodox Christianity as the central ethic of society, individual right, especially the right to pursue happiness as an individual, becomes paramount. The rise of individualism, according to Spacks's careful calibrations, coincides with the consciousness — and therefore with the cultural history — of the threat of boredom.

Spacks is a subtle reader, and her historical narrative does not merely reduce culture to a progressive terror of inattentiveness. We must be clear about this, as projects such as hers are vulnerable to misrepresentation. For the most part, she bears this vulnerability well. As both cultural construct and cultural by-product, boredom's history raises urgent questions about our own historicity: as the author is at pains to point out, the social history of boredom is a history of how taste is constituted, how importance and significance are designated, and how ultimate value (a shifting concept) is articulated in the very announcement of what interests. If the eighteenth-century individual saw boredom as an ethical and moral flaw, one that must be remedied

for the sake of the salvation of the individual soul as much as for its postulated community, then something crucially important is revealed about the status of shared values and communal norms. The post-modern condition of boredom, on the other hand, is in fact the aptest metaphor of our own age. In Spacks's (1995: 260) reading,

[b]oredom as universal explanation and complaint reveals the scope of twentieth-century entitlement: Calvin's sense of a right to adventures, the teenager's right to 'be with friends every single minute', the housewife's right to mental stimulation.

Spacks's tone in this book, though often witty and certainly engaged (engagement being the very opposite of boredom), is not uncontrolled; she is interested in a social history that reveals as much about our changing conceptions of "social" as it does about the recording of "history". She does not take us through an overview of the existential agonies of expression or the crises of reception: fear of dullness is no Bloomean *angst* or submerged and displaced political manoeuvre. Instead, it is an all-pervasive scaffolding which supports the structural materials of modernity.

"Attentive boredom" may seem like an oxymoron, but Michael L Raposa makes a persuasive case for its possibility in *Boredom and the religious imagination* (1999), a work that ranges in philosophy and theology from the teachings of the early Christian "desert fathers" to the musings of Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and especially Charles Sanders Peirce.

Drawing on Peircean theory, the author sees boredom as a failure of interpretation and imagination, a "semiotic breakdown [or an] incapacity" (Raposa 1999: 113). Boredom represents the refusal or inability to discover meaning in a thing or situation, but it can be transformed, without the need for frantic distraction, into attentive discernment. In Hindu, Buddhist and Judeo-Christian traditions, boredom can be seen as a door to meditation and heightened spirituality. It may be seen as a "midwife for the birth of religious knowledge" (Raposa 1999: 2). Trying or even excruciating as it may be, boredom offers an elevated awareness of time's conquering, expansive enormity. It is an intimation of death, according to Raposa,

a glimpse into “the nothingness that lurks behind and threatens each person, every project, each moment” (Raposa 1999: 34).

Liberating and terrifying, numbing and enlightening, boredom raises questions about meaning it cannot possibly answer. Is experience itself a void, as twentieth-century artists like Beckett, Cage, Duchamp, Warhol and others often suggest? Or is boredom a failure of our own spirits and imagination? A culture frantic to entertain, stimulate, divert and inform us is in no danger of drowning out boredom. If anything, it may take that placid sense of turning off and turning away, buoyantly detached and rising to the opportunity, more valuable than ever. Raposa’s work is a fine study, which takes a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, look at boredom’s place in religious thought and practice. His argument, that boredom is an important sign both interpreted by and interpreting religions should induce the reader to pay attention to boredom in order to understand many aspects of religious life. With Peirce always informing his thinking, Raposa describes boredom as a subjective state in which things lack meaning, although boredom need not be considered negatively, as many aspects of spiritual life require disinterest, detachment, and repetition, all of which we associate with boredom. Raposa begins by viewing boredom both religiously, giving much attention to Christian *acedia* (“spiritual dryness”), and philosophically, through the eyes of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger. Subsequent chapters contrast indifference with aesthetic disinterest and address redundancy’s role in religious practice.

Raposa’s last chapter counterpoises boredom and Peirce’s semiotic category of “musement”, which is characterised by attentiveness, imaginative play, and abductive reasoning, all of which the bored individual of the *fin de siècle* lacks. Indeed, the book is an example of “musement” in action during which “one can try out emotions as well as explanations [which] can themselves have interpretive value” (Raposa 1999: 99). Raposa concludes with an interesting postlude on waiting, which the author argues is an important spiritual exercise in its own right. Scholars in any fields, and general readers alike, will find much that is valuable in his book.



## 2. The latest offerings

The year 2005 saw the publication of two books on our topic. In *A philosophy of boredom* (a soft cover version of a book published the previous year by University of Chicago Press, which itself is a translation of the Norwegian original of 1999) author Lars Svendsen gives a nuanced, if somewhat unsystematic, account of boredom. Following an interdisciplinary approach — texts from disciplines as diverse as literature, psychology, theology and sociology are employed — Svendsen's work consists of four main sections: problems, stories, phenomenology, and ethics.

### 2.1 Problems

Here Svendsen (2005: 11-48) gives a broad account of various aspects of boredom and its relationship to modernity.

### 2.2 Stories

Taking the position that Romanticism constitutes “the most central basis’ in terms of the History of Ideas for an understanding of boredom”, Svendsen (2005: 49-106) explores various historically significant conceptions of boredom-like phenomena beginning with ancient *acedia*, through Pascalian *divertissement* (diversion), and Schopenhauer’s “insufferable” boredom on to the Kierkegaardian aesthetic variety, and latter-day accounts informed by a variety of Romantic and post-Romantic perspectives of the phenomenon.

### 2.3 Phenomenology

Svendsen (2005: 107-32) devotes an entire section of his book to Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of boredom in order “to use it to gain a better understanding of how boredom expresses itself and influences experience as a whole”(Svendson 2005: 107). His exploration of what is involved in being profoundly bored enables him to extract various premises for his fourth main section.

## 2.4 Ethics

In this final section Svendsen (2005: 133-52) develops his thesis that, by pulling things out of their usual context, boredom “can open up ways for a new configuration of things, and therefore also for a new meaning, by virtue of the fact that it has already deprived things of meaning” (Svendsen 2005: 142).

It is not so much that boredom has been roundly ignored. Philosophers such as Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger are widely known for their analyses of boredom. Pascal and Kierkegaard vest boredom in religious terms: if we pay attention to boredom, we will realise our need for God, the ultimate source of all meaning. Heidegger expressed a similar idea, though not in religious language. He thought boredom fosters a kind of healthy detachment. If we stick with our boredom and listen to it, we may feel empty, but it can lead to a peaceful equanimity, a freedom from the pull of particular things. This led him to postulate

... a monumental boredom that is supposed to disclose the full meaning and significance of human existence and thereby encourage a turnaround to authenticity (Svendsen 2005: 132).

Svendsen finds this somewhat problematic insofar as it falls within a “logic of transgression”, something he identifies as a flight from recognition of the limits of selfhood towards a way of living informed by new insight based on hierarchical thinking. It is the latter that he finds objectionable because, unlike Heidegger — for whom boredom is a privileged fundamental mood — he regards boredom as merely one phenomenon within human existence whose function is to inform us about how we actually lead our lives, and which requires acceptance rather than transcendence.

In fact it is one of the great merits of Svendsen’s book that unlike other studies — Wolf Lepenies’ *Melancholy and society* (translated 1992; original 1969), and Healy’s and Spacks’s books come to mind — it grapples with issues raised by Heidegger’s complex analysis of boredom in *Fundamental concepts of metaphysics: world, finitude, solitude* (1995). The English translation of Heidegger’s lengthy analysis of boredom has also sparked renewed interest in the phenomenon and

led to increasingly greater interest in boredom. But Heidegger himself would have found such renewed interest in boredom regrettable because he thought it would prevent boredom's revelation of the truth of time (boredom, *Langeweile*, is time in its extension, as a "long while", and thus in its difference from the atomistic "nows" of the derivative concept of time). I shall consider Heidegger's position in some detail presently (cf section 4 below), but Svendsen is wrong in thinking Heidegger valorises boredom. Heidegger is too critical of voluntarism to advocate giving oneself up to boredom. If there are problems with this theorisation of boredom, these still have to be identified.

## 2.5 Elizabeth Goodstein

Although Svendsen has not attempted a historical survey of boredom beyond the outlines mentioned, this is part of Elizabeth Goodstein's rather more comprehensive treatment of the topic in her book *Experience without qualities* (2005). She argues that, although boredom appears to be a perennial feature of the human condition, it is linked to ways of experiencing time and thinking about human existence that are recognisably modern (nineteenth century onwards). Before then, individuals definitely became bored or were repulsed by tedium. However, such responses were theorised in terms of apathy, and more importantly, in terms of a spiritual malaise that threatened the personal responsibility of a disengaged creature. Personal responsibility remains a vital motif into the nineteenth century, but it speaks to a differently inflected understanding of experience. It is the concentration on such inflections that focuses Goodstein's historical narrativising. By tracing the emergence and evolution of the modern discourse on boredom in French and German literary, philosophical, and sociological texts, *Experience without qualities* makes a contribution to the intellectual and cultural history of European modernity. In interpreting that discourse as the reflection of a specifically modern crisis of meaning, it contributes to the theorisation of modernity and modern experience. And in bringing these historical and theoretical dimensions into conversation, it develops analytic strategies that are of broader application in interdisciplinary inquiry, because

the methodological problems that arise in thinking about boredom as a phenomenon of both philosophical and, more broadly, cultural significance illuminate the constraints that confront any attempt to reflect historically on subjective experience in modernity.

Goodstein's approach is to consider the perceived increase in boredom discourse as part of the altered temporal rhythms of everyday life dependent upon revolutionary technological and economic developments. She argues that such discourse registers this epochal transformation in an historically and culturally specific way of understanding and interpreting human experience — what she terms a “rhetoric of reflection” on human existence —

[i]n it, the impact of modernization of subjective experience was articulated, existential questions linked to a peculiarly modern experience of empty, meaningless time (Goodstein 2005: 3)

She endeavours to explicate the nihilistic dynamic of the experience not ontologically (as for instance Heidegger) but historically, while simultaneously seeking “to grasp its pervasiveness not sociologically but philosophically”. There is an underlying incoherence about her attempted synthesis of “the philosophical [also referred to as idealist] and social scientific [also referred to as materialist] rhetorics of experience”. She fails to appreciate that the supposed weakness of the former, which is identified by its overemphasis on the epistemological and ethical implications of the experience for the sufferer, which results in a universalisation of “the existential dilemmas of the isolated individual subject and [abstraction of] them from their socio-cultural and historical context” (Goodstein 2005: 14), supplies precisely the features which the social-scientific rhetoric of experience overlooks by its overemphasis on the effects of the socio-cultural and historical context at the expense of the subjective significance of the experience. One cannot locate boredom within the interplay of social and cultural conditions and still retain the distinctiveness of the varied experiences of “philosophical” boredom without yielding to the objectivist tendencies inherent in social scientific research. By focusing upon the “universalisation” of boredom in existentialist philosophy, Goodstein fails to appreciate that the explication of subjective experience in literary and existential philosophical elucidations

captures precisely what is individually unique in the milieu in which boredom emerges as a theme. At the same time, she indirectly confirms this particular reading of her position by conceding “all forms of boredom involve problems of meaning grounded in the concrete circumstances of modern life” (Goodstein 2005: 23). By describing existential elucidation as “effects”, Goodstein (2005: 140-55) reveals her privileging of the “materialist” (“external forces”) over the “idealist” (“matters of heart and mind”) interpretations of boredom.

The great virtue of her distinctive contrast between the “materialist” and “idealist” interpretations of boredom lies in her view of the experience of boredom as mediating both objective and subjective and her demonstrations of the lived ambiguity of the historically grounded experience of boredom. This is a perspective that is quite absent from Svendsen’s narrower philosophical narrative. Svendsen (2005: 47) would reject Goodstein’s caricature of an idea as “a logical structure of experience playing itself in history”, by arguing that only the situative variety of boredom (for instance waiting for someone, taking a train, and so on) need be described in this way, with the other forms (Svendsen 2005: 41-2) being sufficiently varied to avoid the strictures of the “logical structure” characterisation. The enigmatic character of the situative variety of boredom would lend much-needed credibility to the descriptors employed by Goodstein in her demonstration of the lived ambiguity of the historically grounded experience of boredom.

However, in response to Svendsen, Goodstein could argue that the classification of boredom adopted by Svendsen appears phenomenologically verifiable from a culturally specific perspective only insofar as it “illuminates the blind spots of that perspective and thereby clarifies what is at stake in defining boredom in terms of a philosophical rhetoric of experience” (Goodstein 2005: 56). But it is the cultural specificity of the perspective that remains unacknowledged in social scientific rhetorics of experience. This cultural specificity seeks to conceal the rhetorics of experience through appeals to objectivity to the exclusion of the mediation which Goodstein herself valorises. She recognises this in her discussion of the work of Lepenies (Goodstein 2005: 67-8), but not in her account of how that

experience of boredom fits into the “rhetoric of reflection” (Goodstein 2005: 249).

Goodstein (2005: 52) concedes

... since genuine philosophical reflection occurs in a realm of thought separate from ordinary life, metaphysically significant [boredom] can be abstracted from the historical context in which it transpires.

Goodstein (2005: 411) acknowledges that, as an experience of time, boredom is linked to dilemmas of subjectivity that transcend the historical specificity of the language in which they are phrased. But this recognition does not prevent her from arguing that the

timeless experience of the futility of human existence [...] is in fact the dialectical expression of an historic situation (Goodstein 2005: 412).

She arrives at this conclusion after reflecting upon the aporiae surrounding attempts to theorise the convergence of language and experience in the historically constituted “metaphorics of boredom”. But such attempts to reconcile the philosophical conceptualisation of boredom (as a marker of a subjective way of relating to the world), with the sociological conceptualisation of boredom (as a culturally and historically constituted mode of response to the conditions of modern existence) presuppose that her own “rhetorical perspective” can encompass the “limitations” of those particular conceptualisations.

Goodstein (2005: 407) argues for a

... philosophically reflexive mode of rhetorical analysis that steps outside the modern rhetoric of experience [...] while attending to the historical specificity of the discursive and conceptual transformations associated with modernization.

In her account, Robert Musil’s literary-philosophical exploration of early twentieth-century European malaise in his great five-volume, incomplete novel, *The man without qualities* comes closest to offering such a

... critical, reflective perspective on the dilemmas of modern subjectivity than neither abstracts experience from history nor neglects its philosophical dimension (Goodstein 2005: 417).

Methodologically, Goodstein's account amounts to little more than a hermeneutics of ideas, which, save for a gloss on the pre-modern *acedia* tradition, covers European thought on boredom from the late seventeenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Equally traditional is the inquiry's theoretical framework, as outlined in the first chapter. Along the theory-practice division, it sets out to explore two principal questions. First, how can boredom be theorised and, second, what are the remedies for boredom, and is there a cure for it? In this dual approach, as well as the study's organising trope of illness, Goodstein unwittingly follows the Enlightenment heritage for which understanding boredom has primarily been a therapeutic issue.

Moreover, what ostensibly appears to be recognition of the postmodern critique of universalist thought turns out to be a mere typographical concession. The universalist presumption is linked to the other fundamental premise that boredom is a transhistorical, universal affliction. Even though this position has been a bone of contention, the author is satisfied with anecdotal evidence, abstaining from any serious debate. Taking her cues from the introspective descriptions the Enlightenment engendered, Goodstein isolates the phenomenological nature of boredom in familiar terms: a negative feeling of psychic emptiness, a sense of nothing, and a paralysis of vitality. But that is not the ultimate essence of boredom. An existential interpretation, Heideggerian *avant la lettre* and in circulation since the Romantic trope of world *ennui*, brings it to the fore: boredom reveals the "pure facticity" of *Dasein* and nothingness as a condition of being human.

Let alone that this definition is too broad, a similar claim could be made about anxiety or depression, so what exactly is said here? Maybe nothing, disguised as profundity. Perhaps that human life as such has no all-encompassing, *a priori* meaning. Possibly, that boredom marks a boundary between intelligibility and non-intelligibility or, in traditional terminology, between culture and nature. Goodstein leaves the reader guessing; she takes her defining, highly abstract terms to be self-evident as if they did not have diverse interpretations, for instance, nothing as absence, as negative infinity, or as potentiality. What is not even entertained is that this existential-nihilistic view of

boredom, historically linked to the discovery of the infinity and contingency of meaning, is itself an interpretation that contains both a doubt about and a longing for the traditional holistic conception of identity. Instead, Goodstein tends to biologise the borrowed existentialist view, as becomes evident in her synthesis of philosophical and sociological hypotheses.

This view rehashes the modern *topos* of boredom as “spur”, which literary scholars (and Svendsen, following them) have discussed under the rubric of “creative boredom”. It tacitly turns boredom as void into boredom as impetus to fill the void, that is, into an imperative directed at the individual to become innovative and productive again and thus to reassert his agency, his subjectivity. But from where does this imperative or impulse issue? What invests it with authority? These questions could have been an interesting starting point for critically examining the vexing nexus between the psychology of boredom and the philosophy and ethics of the autonomous subject.

Finally, the two principal boredom tropes Goodstein’s inquiry employs — illness and human condition — are at odds, unless human nature is considered as fundamentally corrupt, a view she does not seem to hold. Read from a historical perspective, both tropes express two major interpretative paradigms of boredom in modernity, which superseded the theological doctrine of boredom as sin. Responding to the postmodern routinisation of both novelty and boredom, everyday discourse has transformed these horrific idioms into the normalcy of *ennui*: not deadly or dreadful but simply dreary. Ironically, Goodstein’s revival of the existentialist rhetoric, meant to lend philosophical significance to boredom’s apparent triviality, ends up converging with the idiom of normalcy also known as pure fasticity of existence. It is a view of boredom not as void or nothingness but as white noise, which might prove to be an appropriate simile to rethink the demon of noontide.

In summary, this book is a milestone in the philosophy and textual scholarship on boredom but Goodstein’s persistent bifurcation of accounts of boredom, which is central to her review of her selected authors unsettles and, finally, confuses. Her very commitment to a social-historical account which at the same time tries to take seriously



philosophical insights from various traditions leads — if one were to be so unkind as to parody her own words — her “language [...] which originally thematised the relation between historical and cultural transformations and subjective malaise [... to lose] its critical edge” (Goodstein 2005: 336). Her probing analyses and critical reflections collapse under the weight of the load occasioned by the bifurcations.

### 3. What kind of studies are needed?

Before considering the contours of future studies let me summarise the major shortcomings that I have identified with the current theories (I omit Goodstein’s since it has just been discussed).

Spacks offers a compelling reading of boredom not just around a negative reflex (the need to counter dullness) prevalent since the eighteenth century, but as a reading of Western culture constructed around the master narrative of psychic alienation. However, her conception of boredom as a catch-all in which all “cultural advance” derives from the need to withstand boredom is both unwarranted and misleading.

Raposa and Svendsen raise different issues. Is experience itself a void as twentieth century-artists often suggest? Or is boredom a failure of our own spirits and imagination? A culture focused upon entertainment and diversion is in no way capable of dispelling boredom. If anything, it may make that placid sense of turning off and turning away, buoyantly detached and rising to the opportunity, more valuable than ever. For Raposa, boredom represents the refusal or inability to discover meaning in a thing or situation, but he believes it can be transformed, without the need for distraction, into attentive discernment. But this view is insufficiently linked to our fundamental predicament. What is missing from his fine study is revealed in our own capacity to unhinge ourselves from our environment through the experience of boredom. To quote Giorgio Agamben (2004: 70): “*Dasein* [the human being] is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened from its captivation to its own captivation.”

For Svendsen, too, the primary difficulty in any project on boredom is its definition. A negative phenomenon, boredom “is a mood which is reminiscent of an absence of mood” (Svendsen 2005: 46). Svendsen maintains that it is possible to be bored without being aware of it and without being able to offer any reason or cause. Boredom is merely one phenomenon within human existence whose function is to inform us about how we actually lead our lives, and which requires acceptance rather than transcendence. These observations are sound, but could have been built upon by utilising some of Agamben’s insights. For the latter, boredom is the estrangement of our relationship to our normal preoccupations, our captivated relations with our environment. As such, then, it is either pure absence of mood or, perhaps better, a kind of degree zero of mood.

But Agamben (2004: 87) is able to relate this boredom as a functional part of “the anthropological machine” with the post-anthropological figure of “otium” or “workless [...] inactivity” that for him defines our post-anthropological predicament or possibility.<sup>1</sup> This “human nature rendered perfectly inoperative” (Agamben 2004: 87) would also seem to be far distant from either captivity or any determinate fundamental mood (*Grundstimmung, stato d’animo*).

Despite the erudition of the scholars to whose many fine ideas I am conscious of having failed to do justice, boredom remains elusive. It poses fundamental questions about our own identities and the connections we make, or do not make, with the world around us. It may be that boredom derives from a failure to understand and assimilate what is going on, for whatever reason, whether it is a conversation, a jargon-filled lecture or conceptual art. Lacking prior information or being unwilling to receive something new, we shut down and identify a feeling of frustration, which is boredom.

We have a right to stimulation: this, at least, we know. For in an age of discontinuities and generalised uncertainty, one marked by “the end of history”, the history we know ourselves to be sharing seems to be one in which we are bored but do not want to be. This explains the proliferation of critical and historical narratives

1 Cf section 5 for further detailed discussion.

of strange excitement, of academic books announcing an ultimate substratum of powerful force repressed beneath the fabric of everyday complacency. We may be staid, repetitive, and monotonous. We may produce too many books that tell us our new secrets. But is our monotony perhaps only the obverse of our sublimated Dionysian frenzy? Psychoanalysis, Romanticism's great gift to modernity, tells a story in which boredom masks aggression, in which it tells of a state of "instinctual tension" seeking an endlessly deferred release. Our very boredom (so the story goes) is thereby a subject that explains our deep selves.

Boredom as a symptom of deeper problems, such as depression, or ineffective management in a workplace is briefly treated in a provocative book on the paradoxes of motivation, *On kissing, tickling, and being bored*, by British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1993: 68-78), who describes boredom as both a form of depression — a kind of anger turned inward, and a longing for that which will transform the self, making life and learning meaningful. He acknowledges that this dual aspect of boredom — its negative brooding and its positive yearning — makes it difficult to deal with. Its dark, depressive side tends to provoke our anger and defensiveness ("I am *not* boring!"), even as its searching quality stirs up fears of our own insufficiency ("Are my thoughts and actions interesting and meaningful to others?"). There is an inherent hopelessness in boredom; we expend considerable effort to prevent or remedy it, yet in many circumstances ought it not to be accepted as an inevitable suffering to be endured? I want to suggest a reading of these issues that may point to their dissolution in future boredom research.

Phillips (1993: 75) points out that the malaise of boredom reflects "the poverty of our curiosity, and the simple question What does one want to do with one's time". Boredom sits on a conceptual map somewhere between interest and despair. It clearly indicates a lack of interest and meaning, and when that lack is serious enough, a person risks falling victim to feelings of meaninglessness and even of despair. The more bored one becomes, the further away one moves from a state of being interested, the closer one gets to despair. Quite typically, the bored person experiences a vacuum of meaning not in the sense of

lacking any clear explanation or understanding of what is going on, but rather in the absence of any interest, enjoyment or consolation associated with it. Meaning — according to Raposa — is a semiotic event. But, of course, what is boring to one person can be of great interest to another. Different persons interpret things and situations differently. And so it stands to reason that one person's object of attention will be another person's distraction. It also makes sense to propose that, over time, any given individual's attention will shift, so that what once preoccupied them as important might now be regarded as a disturbing nuisance. The act of paying attention is by its very nature a highly selective phenomenon. Choosing what to pay attention to, especially for persons living in a high information society, is an extraordinarily complex interpretive judgment.

Boredom challenges the choices we make, introducing the threat of distraction. In an environment where the array of choices is staggeringly wide, the potential for cognitive and emotional “numbness” is frighteningly real. This is also a species of boredom, the deeper form of meaninglessness that — again, according to Raposa (1999: 108) — is existentially significant: “The person who struggles to circumvent every experience of boredom achieves little, and quickly drowns in a sea of meaningless diversions”. Moreover, what is interesting to one person at a given point in time may later be regarded as boring. The judgment that something is unworthy of my interest does not result automatically in an appropriate feeling of boredom. If we stick with out boredom and listen to it, we may feel empty, but it can lead to a peaceful equanimity, a freedom from the pull of particular things. So boredom in itself need not be a bad thing. Perhaps we ought to appreciate that periodic feelings of emptiness are inescapable, no matter what we do to counteract them. Emptiness is at the centre of our lives. It underlies all our projects and activities. Everything that we value eventually vanishes. Moments of boredom remind us of this predicament, and it is unpleasant. Boredom itself represents the death of meaning, of interest. It is an experience — perhaps dimly understood as such — of the emptiness that lurks at the heart of human existence, an emptiness into which each moment fades, in which all finite things pass away. From a variety of perspectives boredom

is about death, yet it is a curious fact that death itself is not boring, that the mere awareness of death frequently serves to restore meaning and flavour to life. The recognition of approaching death might drain any particular human project or goal of its meaning, making it appear trivial, suddenly insignificant. But the threat of death suffices to render life itself precious — that is, life as a whole.

#### 4. The salience of Martin Heidegger's work

These ruminations necessitate a discussion of Heidegger's writings in some detail. My purpose is to suggest ways in which his phenomenological descriptions of boredom may be utilised fruitfully by empirical scientists seeking more rigorous explanations of connections between boredom and cognate conditions.

Heidegger (1995: 65) claims that moods or attunement (*Stimmungen*) such as joy, bliss, grief, or boredom are “not a mere emotional event or a state, in the way that a metal is liquid or solid, given that they indeed belong to the being of man”. Rather they are fundamental manners and ways of our being, of the distinctively human existence, which Heidegger defines as being-there (*Dasein*) with one another. It is how “we find ourselves disposed in such and such a way” (Heidegger 1995: 67). Thus, Heidegger is asking how boredom unfolds as boredom, or what is it like for us to be bored? Moreover, he wants to be able to “see and say what is happening here” by applying principles of his existential phenomenology to the mood of boredom.

According to Heidegger, there are three major forms of boredom. In the first form of boredom, we become bored within a particular situation, and what bores us is something quite determinate, specific, and familiar. We find a book boring and say that it is boring: “what we address as boring we draw from the thing itself, and also mean it as belonging to the thing” (Heidegger 1995: 86). However, we do not understand the boringness of the book as “some exclusively objective property”. What is essential about the boringness of the book “lies precisely in its relation to us, in the way in which we are affected or not affected” (Heidegger 1995: 86). From this Heidegger

(1995: 84) concludes “the characteristic of ‘boring’ thus belongs to the object and is at the same time related to the subject”. This means that “boredom — and thus ultimately every attunement — is a hybrid, partly objective, partly subjective” (Heidegger 1995: 88).

Letting boredom be as it is involves dispelling attitudes and breaking away from traditional theories. Heidegger (1995: 91) insists that “what is required is the release [*Gelassenheit*] of our free and everyday perspective — free from psychological and other theories of consciousness, of the stream of lived experience and such like”. He claims that our concepts of consciousness, subject, I, person, or rational being, as well as our use of these concepts to define human being, must be put into question if we wish to see boredom as it shows itself. The reason is that all those concepts are already infused with theory, and divert our attention away from “the thing itself” (Heidegger 1995: 133). To pose the problem of consciousness as a problem about the subjective character of conscious experience is to presuppose the theoretical constructs of subjectivity, objectivity, and consciousness. However, if we attend to boredom as it bores us, we do not see objects, consciousness, or a subject. If we are to look directly at boredom as it unfolds, in its immediacy, we must dispense with the mediation that theory provides. While Heidegger (1995: 91) acknowledges that “we are permeated by such theories”, he insists that the awakening of boredom does “not want to explain the facts of the matter by rash theories — no matter how current or acknowledged they may be” or “how self-evident” they seem. Rather, the point is to explain boredom as it unfolds “straightaway”. Theories “distort [...] from the outset” (Heidegger 1995: 86), “preventing our access to” the essence of boredom (Heidegger 1995: 133). Release will thus free us to uncover and open up this essence.

Heidegger (1995: 133) is well aware that he is also calling into question “our access to consciousness in the Cartesian sense of the method of grasping consciousness”. He classifies such a mode of access or method as an “ascertaining”. To ascertain is to grasp something as an object, to interpret it as an entity at hand or an extant thing with certain characteristics. Yet an attunement cannot be ascertained at all, for it is not a what but a how, in other words, a fundamental

way and manner of our being (Heidegger 1995: 65, 78). If we seek to ascertain boredom, we make it “into an object swimming in the stream of consciousness which we observers gaze after” (Heidegger 195: 90). Yet, if we attend to boredom as it bores us, we do not see an object, a subject, or a stream of consciousness. Ascertaining does not let us see what it is to be bored. All ascertaining means bringing to consciousness. With respect to attunement, all making conscious means destroying or altering in each case (Heidegger 1995: 65).

For his second major form of boredom, Heidegger has us consider an example: We have been invited somewhere for the evening. We do not need to go, but it has been a stressful day, and we have the time. The evening is filled with the usual tasty food and pleasant conversations, and everything is witty and amusing. There is nothing at all that might have been boring about this charming evening, so we come home quite satisfied. Yet, in retrospect, it becomes clear: “I was bored after all this evening”. No single activity during the evening, such as listening to music or smoking a cigar, is a deliberate way of being occupied. Rather, it is “our entire comportment and behavior that is our passing the time” (Heidegger 1995: 112). In this sense, “[the] evening is that with which we are bored, and simultaneously, what we are bored with is passing the time” (Heidegger 1995: 113).

The second form of boredom seems to be a “more profound boredom” in that it “grasps more at the roots of our Dasein” (Heidegger 1995: 107). Moreover, the interpretation of the second form of boredom has taken us deeper into the essence of boredom and its relation to time, for it now appears to be clearer that boredom is grounded in or “springs from the temporality of Dasein” (Heidegger 1995: 127). However, these are not conclusions, but directives that point toward a third form of boredom. They do not propose to be “a piece of knowledge that we now have at our disposal”, but instead offer “directives” (Heidegger 1995: 155, 137). I argue later that these directives ought to be taken up by future boredom research. Before doing so, we need to consider Heidegger’s third form of boredom — profound boredom.

We do not react or respond to profound boredom by seeking to be occupied or by distracting ourselves, as with the first and second

forms of boredom. This is a boredom that overcomes us in such a way that we can neither struggle against nor evade it by passing the time, for we sense that it tells us something important about ourselves. With respect to the structural moment of being left empty, the emptiness that we feel when we are profoundly bored lies in our being indifferent to everything at once — to whatever situation we may be in, or the specific beings surrounding us, and to ourselves as particular persons. Heidegger emphasises that profound boredom is not about finding everything boring “for me” as a particular person, but “for one” as a particular human existence. When it is boring for one, then everything faces one as being indifferent, including oneself as a “me”, with all of my personal features. Nothing appeals to one and one feels that there is nothing one can do to get oneself interested or involved. Everything appears in such a way that it denies one those possibilities and thus leaves one empty.

Heidegger (1995: 133) claims that “the more profound it becomes, the more completely boredom is rooted in time”. It is important to note that he does “not regard time as something we find within our consciousness or as a subjective form, for such is the view of ascertaining”. Rather every moment of our existence is oriented simultaneously to who we will be, who we have been, and who we are. Future, past, and present are the unified directions in which we exist.

Heidegger’s awakening of boredom strives to preserve the immediacy of this mood, releasing it from the theoretical constructs of subjectivity, objectivity, and consciousness, so that it could unfold “straightaway”. The insights into the state of being bored are gained from such release, and not from trying to ascertain boredom from the start by treating it as an object to be observed in a detached manner. I want to suggest that the understanding that is thereby awakened offers a starting point for new theorists to ascertain boredom as they formulate and test their hypotheses.

Heidegger’s existential phenomenology cuts through these theoretical assumptions about subjects and objects of consciousness or lived experience in the attempt to go more deeply into boredom itself. In the spirit of exemplifying the move from awakening to ascertaining, I suggest that Heidegger’s phenomenological description of the forms



of boredom be used as material for the generation of hypotheses about the sociology, psychology, and possibly even, the neurophysiology of boredom. Researchers seeking to understand the proneness of boredom and the cognitive and affective aspects of boredom might consider employing Heidegger's phenomenological interpretations as a focus of their investigations. For example, studies report the difficulty in distinguishing boredom from dislike (Perkings & Hill 1985: 222), from dissatisfaction and frustration (Mikulas & Vodanovich 1993: 5), and from depression, loneliness, and hopelessness (Kass *et al* 2001: 969-76). The structural moments of various types of boredom might be a means of distinguishing boredom from these and other states of consciousness.

Seib & Vodanovich (1998: 647) report on studies that relate boredom to attention (cf Hamilton *et al* 1984: 189-92). The phenomenon of passing the time in the three forms of boredom should be directly relevant to these studies. In the first form, we deliberately attend to specific things. In the second form of boredom, our attention is seized by the elements of hesitation rather than being directed by us. In the third form, attention is held in the undifferentiated unity of time, focused on the telling refusal of beings and the telling announcement of unexploited but countless possibilities. From the first to the third form, attention comes to be less under the control of the subject, as well as less deliberately focused on particular things at hand. Studies of the mechanisms of attention should detect this waning of attention and internal control.

Seib & Vodanovich (1998: 649) also report on studies that relate boredom to cognitive effort (cf Leary *et al* 1986: 970-3). Heidegger's phenomenology of passing the time should be directly relevant to these studies. The three forms of boredom each prompt a response to passing the time, but the response is significantly different in each case. From the first to the third form, the strength of the hold intensifies, and we are increasingly unable, or unwilling, to try to abandon the source of our boredom. In the first form, we work hard to drive time on and shake off boredom. In the second form, our entire comportment and behaviour is an effortless passing of the time, and it is this with which we are bored. In the third form of boredom,

passing the time is immediately thwarted, and we neither struggle against nor evade boredom. We actively struggle to drive time on in the first form of boredom; less effort is expended in the second form, while the third form exhibits no effort at all, as subjects succumb to the overpowering nature of profound boredom. In addition, this activity should be reflected in the neurophysiology underlying the phenomenon of effort (Freude & Ullsperger 2000: 262).

Heidegger's understandings concerning boredom should also be relevant to researchers exploring the neural and biochemical basis for moods in general and changes in mood. Moods have been linked to changes in neurotransmitters and neural electrolytes, as well as to changes in the endocrine system (Griffiths 1997: 248-53). Thus, we might expect that forms of boredom would be identifiable in terms of specific changes in these mechanisms and systems. The increasing intensity and profundity of the experience of boredom ought to be reflected in whatever mechanisms underlie variations in the intensity of mood. The decreasing expenditure of effort and involvement of self as boredom becomes more profound should also be reflected in neural and biochemical findings.

In boredom we are held in limbo, and our experience of time is characteristically changed. In one form, we are held in limbo by time as it drags; in another form, we are stuck in the standing now; while in the third form, we are entranced by time as an undifferentiated unity and held in its grip. This suggests that those neural mechanisms involved in temporality operate differently in these three modes. In the first form of boredom where time drags researchers should be able to detect neural mechanisms suggestive of excessive attention to the present, and the neglect of past and future states. In the second form of boredom, where subjects, who are bored with a situation are stuck in the standing now, researchers should be able to detect more dramatic changes in the neural mechanisms responsible for representing the past and projecting the future. Similarly, the brains of subjects experiencing profound boredom should not represent prior states and possible futures at all.

Each form of boredom also exhibits the structural moment of being left empty. In the first form, particular things leave us empty.

In the second form, the emptiness comes from within ourselves as we leave ourselves behind. In the third form, emptiness consists in the telling refusal of beings as a whole; we are indifferent to everything. From the first to the third form of boredom, the experience of being left empty becomes more profound and pervasive, and we are left increasingly unfulfilled. These characteristics may have implications for researchers investigating the nature of satisfaction and frustration (Hill & Perkins 1985).

The research directions I have noted are merely illustrative; I leave the task of explaining the psychology and neurophysiology of boredom to social and cognitive scientists. What is important here is that Heidegger's methodology can suggest structured approaches to these and other investigations of conscious experience, despite his own rejection of such a direction. But this feature of Heidegger's phenomenological approach is not recognised by the more traditional culturally oriented among the boredom theorists.

## 5. Giorgio Agamben's appropriation

In contrast, Agamben provides a different reading which is worth considering, because of his critique of Heidegger as well as his employment of Heidegger's thought in a "neurocultural" direction.<sup>2</sup> Agamben is convinced that the political consequences of Heidegger's own solution to the problem (which he suggests, by means of genealogy, is just a condensed form of the general Western solution) are disastrous. He attempts to open an alternative perspective on human being (*Dasein*) which enables us to retain the problem (and the solution) of the general condition of meaningfulness without the instrumentality that every division of human from animal inevitably points towards. Agamben's writings, most importantly, are interspersed with sensitivity toward suffering that contrasts visibly with Heidegger's imperious distance from all human particularity. It is also focused on ironing out the topological kinks of the anthropological construct. For him, there is no prospect of simply putting humanity and animality back together again. Rather than trying to

2 By this is meant the view that brain activity is influenced by cultural conditions.

unify these elements or substances again (as have many philosophical projects during the last centuries, and as does the literature under analysis here), Agamben (2004: 16) seeks to extract the dynamics of their constant division:

We must, on the contrary, learn to think man [*sic*] as what results from the disconnection of these two elements [body and soul] and examine not the metaphysical mystery of their conjunction, but the practical and political mystery of the separation.

Practical and political de-couplings or disconnections of animal bodies and human should produce the human. Human life, in whatever sense, reiterates more or less incessantly in many places and ways a dividing a breaking apart. Agamben's account helps situate the literature of animalised or neurocultural selfhood insofar as it highlights the strategies that literature adopts.

In his reading of Heidegger, Agamben maintains that being dazed or captivated is the basic state, the fundamental mood, of animals. This state flows from the functional coupling between perceptions; milieu is understood as a system of marks or triggers that drives behaviour. "Bare life" differs from human existence. Although we can be absorbed in things, we do not have to be. We act, we have and make worlds, the argument runs, because we do not have to, because we can not do. Not having to act or do, not having to make, in short, being essentially indeterminate, ground radical contingency, being-open and have a world. Instead, Agamben (2004: 92) suggests, it would be better "to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that — within man — separate man and animal, to risk ourselves in this emptiness: suspension of the suspension, Sabbath of both animal and man".

Agamben suggests that Heidegger's reading of the existentially profound state of boredom cannot ever be fully distinguished from the dazed state of animality. Conceptually and ontologically, boredom actually coalesces with the state of being dazed. As Agamben (2004: 70) concludes, "Dasein is simply an animal who has learnt to be bored, who has been woken from its own dazedness and to its own dazedness". The "practical mystery" of the separation between animal and human lives does not rest on any essential difference such as language, rationality, capacity for invention, and so on. It lies in a

zone of half-awake indeterminateness, between being dazed and being bored. The “banal, quotidian mysticism” (Agamben 2004: 65) he affirms, comes from being dazed. Agamben, via Heidegger, draws the line between animal and human within the human in a way that emphasises its mutability: “We share with, and veer away from, animals in this dazed relation or absorption in the world.”

Agamben’s substitute for the humanity-producing machine epitomised by Heidegger is introduced through a discussion of a late work of Titian known as *Nymph and shepherd*. In Agamben’s (2004: 87) interpretation, the painting depicts a kind of post-coital bliss in which the participants are liberated from an instrumental view of the world and others by the knowledge they have gained of its emptiness:

[I]n their fulfillment the lovers learn something of each other that they should not have known — they have lost their mystery [...] but in this mutual disenchantment from their secret, they enter [...] a new and more blessed life, one that is neither animal nor human.

We are meant, I think, to understand this condition as a potential alternative to Heidegger’s boredom — a mood that can ground the human capacity to take an interest in the world, but one that does not rest on a division of humanity against itself, a division which always threatens to become a site for violence. Instead we might look forward to “Shabbat of both animal and man”.

## 6. Conclusion

It seems appropriate now to review my findings. In agreement with the major theorists, I accept that taking boredom as an organising motif around which the development of modern culture can be studied is quite compelling. But as surely as boredom and its resistance can organise a cultural reading, so can desire. The same applies to belief, subjectivity, will to power, and more insistently these days, politics. This is not to suggest that none of the contemporary writers are unaware of the responsiveness of boredom as a heuristic — it is merely that their explanations sometimes work better as descriptions. This does not cancel the effectiveness of those descriptions in providing a glimpse of humanity’s development; it is only to

caution that when description is converted into explanation, it implies something more than just cultural history. Cultural history, that is, is being constituted in the effort to define self-expression as a profoundly public fact. The particular conceptual development given here speaks to our present preoccupation with the status of communal norms, and the way in which their complexities may be made coherent — and therefore interesting — by becoming part of a sequential narrative. Boredom is a significant contribution to the community (academic) that labours alone and longs to speak to something other than the void.

In this paper I investigated a highly familiar yet relatively unexamined phenomenon: boredom. More specifically, I explored some current theoretical efforts to theorise boredom in contemporary scholarship. I found that these efforts succeeded in their endeavours at rehabilitation of the phenomenon at the expense of some misrepresentation of cultural history as well as a result of neglect of salient factors such as the role of psychoanalytic considerations in the creation of meaning. I concluded by alluding to the relevance of both on neurophysiological and neurocultural perspectives on the topic.

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