



Boredom and Aspiration in Moral Education

Kevin Gary and Douglas Yacek

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



Abstract

So much of modern culture, as Walker Percy notes, is a “boredom avoidance scheme,” in which we prop up our attention and interest by compulsively checking our social media, emails, news updates, online sales campaigns, and so forth. In this paper, we attempt to make sense of the complex relationship between boredom and moral growth. We argue that while boredom can sometimes helpfully signal a loss of purpose or meaning, it tends to distort the moral possibilities within our environment. In response, we suggest that a characteristically aspirational approach to education can reframe and potentially even resolve the hazards of boredom.

Introduction

In spite of the steady stream of pedagogical and technological innovations in K-12 classrooms, students overwhelmingly report being bored in school, especially in the later grades. In a 2016 Gallup Poll, just 32% of 11th graders reported being engaged in school (Calderon, 2017), while a study by Goetz et al. (2007) showed that ninth-grade students were bored almost half of their time in class. Academic boredom has been linked with student misconduct (Lazarides & Buchholz, 2019), poor academic performance (Daniels, Tze & Goetz, 2015), and even dropping out of school (Bridgeland, 2010), while boredom outside of education has been associated with numerous psychological problems and compulsive behaviors, including stress (Lee & Zelman, 2019), addiction (Biolcati, Mancini & Trombini, 2018), overeating (Crockett, Myhre & Rokke, 2018), gambling (Mercer & Eastwood, 2010), and depression (LePera, 2011). The problem of boredom is particularly troubling for moral education. When students are bored, it may not only be an indication of impending academic failure or psychological harm; it can lead students to lose faith in the importance of moral struggle and achievement, as well as the people and practices that inspire moral growth.

Although boredom therefore seems to pose an important challenge to moral education, an increasing number of scholars have argued that boredom may serve important moral and psychological functions. According to recent work in the philosophy of emotions, boredom can alert students to a mismatch between their desire for meaningful activity and the potentialities of their environment, motivating them to change their environment or their perception of it (Elpidorou, 2018a, b). Some initial findings in psychology suggest that boredom may encourage creative thinking (Gasper & Middlewood, 2014; Mann & Cadman, 2014; cf. Elpidorou, 2018b) and “prosocial” actions, such as giving to charity (van Tilburg & Igou 2017). And scholars of education influenced

by Heidegger have argued that confronting boredom may encourage students to seek out more authentic forms of life than the modern world typically encourages (Scribner, 2019; Gibbs, 2011; Mansikka, 2009; cf. Heidegger, 1995). As Walker Percy (1985) contends, so much of modern culture in the digital age is a “boredom avoidance scheme” (p. 11) in which we prop up our attention and interest by compulsively checking our social media, emails, news updates, online sales campaigns, and so forth. From this perspective, it looks like boredom is something we should embrace, rather than attempt to drive away.

In this paper, we attempt to make sense of the complex relationship between boredom and moral growth. Given how widespread boredom has become in contemporary society, it seems to us that an appropriate response to boredom is an essential feature of any program of moral education fit for the twenty-first century. Yet there has been very little attention paid to boredom in moral philosophy (cf. Elpidorou, 2017) and moral education.¹ This paper addresses this general neglect by, first, engaging with the recent “revaluation” of boredom as serving potentially positive moral and psychological purposes. Next, we argue that attending to the moral “character” of boredom reveals several disadvantageous aspects of how boredom shapes our normative judgments about the world and our moral identity. We then show that the concept and experience of aspiration (Callard, 2018) can reframe the experience of boredom to avoid these moral pitfalls and can illuminate several ways to engage student boredom in the classroom. In the final section, we discuss four core aspects of responding to student boredom in a comprehensive and aspirational way.

¹ For example, there has not been a single paper published in the *Journal of Moral Education* within the last fifty years whose title or abstract mentions “boredom,” “boring” or “bored,” and only one paper does so in the journal *Ethics and Education* (see: Lewin, 2020).

I. The Revaluation of Boredom

In order to understand the ways in which boredom is relevant to moral life and education, we should first consider the characteristic psychological features of boredom. In the last decade or so, the research on this issue has increased significantly, though it still occupies a somewhat marginal place in the current scholarly discussion in psychology and the philosophy of emotions (Elpidorou, 2018b). Within contemporary boredom research, there are several competing constructs for capturing the special psychological characteristics of boredom (e.g. Zuckerman, 1979; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986), but there is broad agreement that it is best understood as an emotion in the sense described in the so-called “component processes” model of emotion (e.g. Goetz, Hall & Krannich, 2019; Elpidorou, 2018b; Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupinsky & Perry, 2010). On this view, emotions like boredom are psychological phenomena with distinctive affective, cognitive, physiological and volitional features (Scherer, 2000; Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981). Bored individuals are affectively averse to this emotion they feel; they are cognitively disengaged and understimulated; they are—in some situations—physiologically aroused and irritable, other times apathetic and listless; and they are volitionally motivated to extricate themselves from the environment (Elpidorou, 2018b).

Researchers generally maintain that boredom is an emotion in its own right—having its own, if somewhat variegated, phenomenological “feel”—rather than indicating a mere lack of interest, stimulation or self-efficacy (Pekrun et al., 2010). Given the aversive and at least mildly painful character of boredom, it is considered a “negative” emotion, and its psychological consequences a cause for concern. As mentioned above, boredom has been shown to be associated with various addictive behaviors (LePera, 2011), anxiety (Fahlman, Mercer-Lynn, Flora & Eastwood, 2013), anger (Rupp & Vodanovich, 1997), depression (Malkovsky, Merrifield, Goldberg & Danckert, 2012) and low satisfaction with life (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986), and these are regularly cited as alarming concomitants of its psychological profile. For these reasons, boredom has been traditionally

considered a dangerous emotional state for individual flourishing (Bunge, 2011; Kierkegaard, 1988), and it is generally seen as a major obstacle to academic success in educational contexts (Goetz, Hall & Krannich, 2019; Pekrun et al., 2010).²

Recent work in the philosophy of emotions has urged caution when drawing conclusions about how to respond to the negative character of boredom and its consequences, however. Elpidorou (2018b) suggests distinguishing between “boredom proneness” (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986) as a trait and “boredom” as a transitory state, where boredom proneness refers to a disposition in which we frequently experience boredom in a variety of situations and compulsively pursue stimulation in response. According to Elpidorou, it is people with high boredom proneness that most often experience the troubling psychological associations of boredom just described, and thus boredom itself should be analytically separated from these phenomena. State boredom, when it occurs in psychologically healthy and low boredom-prone individuals, is not necessarily pathological or psychologically destructive. For Elpidorou, state boredom signals a breakdown in the alignment between our desire for purpose and the ability of our immediate environment to fulfill that desire, and thus it is a helpful way of coordinating our behavior to the potentialities of the world around us. Elpidorou (2018b) goes a step further, arguing that state boredom can perform an important psychological function that is tied to human well-being. It can “can motivate one to pursue a new goal when the current goal ceases to be satisfactory, attractive, or meaningful,” and thereby “help to promote the restoration of the perception that one’s activities are meaningful and congruent with one’s overall projects” (pp. 325-326; cf. van Tilburg & Igou 2017). Elpidorou does not deny the

² The etymology of the word boredom is relatively recent. The words “bored,” “to bore,” and “boredom” first appeared in the late 18th and early 19th century, gaining significant traction in the 20th century. The reference to tradition points to prior terms for diagnosing and understanding this phenomenon, most notably *acedia* as described by the monk Evagrius Ponticus in the 4th century (Bunge, 2011).

“negative” character of boredom—that is, its relationship to pain, nor our justified aversion to the state—but he does question whether it should be regarded as primarily or solely a negative part of our psychology.

Elpidorou’s qualified defense of state boredom is in line with recent work in the philosophy of education on the topic of student boredom. Generally taking a Heideggerian point of view, scholars have pointed to the potential within boredom to break the continuity of the student’s experiential field, opening up space for authentic forms of life (Gibbs, 2011), the pursuit of meaningfulness (Mansikka, 2009), as well as “independence, moral responsibility, and self-knowledge” (Scribner, 2019). In each case, a “transformative” (McDonald, 2019) quality is attributed to the experience of boredom, which allows “the repetitiveness of our everyday life [to] be seen for what it is, and . . . an alternative state of existence [to] be considered” (Gibbs, 2011, p. 604). On this view, boredom is more than just a transitory experience; it is thought to describe a central aspect of the human condition in mass societies. Boredom offers us a glimpse into this condition. When we resist nervously driving our boredom away, it can provide us with the impetus to extricate ourselves from the conformity, inauthenticity and one-dimensionality of postmodern life. In essence, this understanding of boredom underscores the signaling function that Elpidorou ascribes to it, though the content signaled by boredom is cast in more dramatic terms. It is not merely an indication of having lost touch with “satisfactory, attractive or meaningful” goals, but a fundamental mode of being that has reared its head.³

³ This is not the place to assess the claim that boredom describes our fundamental existential predicament in the modern world. Seeing ourselves as—deep down—captives of existential boredom undoubtedly illuminates certain aspects of our behavior. Our desperate attempts at distraction and pursuits of ever more intense stimulation make much more sense in this light. On the other hand, there is the empirical fact of “low boredom prone” individuals who have found ways to structure their lives and guide their perception such that even monotonous environments fail to trigger bored behavior. Keeping this fact in mind is essential for determining the moral significance of

The optimism towards boredom that we find in the Heideggerian treatments and in Epictetus's conception of boredom suggests several important implications for determining the moral significance of boredom. According to the boredom optimists, boredom is a kind of waystage towards a more flourishing state of being. By alerting us to ruptures in our apprehension of meaning or value, it can motivate us to seek out more stable sources of personal satisfaction and recognize the shallowness or insufficiency of our prior habits or practices. In other words, boredom is a negative emotion with a positive utility. It is an instrumentally valuable emotion for recognizing changes—and particularly dips—in the subjective value we ascribe to our environment, or for realizing that this value is missing in the first place. Because the experience of subjective value is both an essential aspect of our personal well-being and our practical reasoning (Paul, 2014), boredom can act as a kind of “dashboard” emotion for maintaining a sense of subjective satisfaction and rational coherence in our lives.

There is certainly something right about this view of boredom. Not only are the boredom optimists correct to emphasize boredom's signaling function; their reevaluation of boredom captures something seriously awry in the way we often move through the modern world. We find it difficult to sit with monotonous tasks or situations and often feel as if we require immediate re-stimulation if we have taken part in one. The incapacity to maintain equanimity and purpose in the face of these experiences leaves us vulnerable to the attractions of sensational media and compulsive consumption and can prevent us from appreciating the more subtle aspects of conscious life. As Bertrand Russell (1996) notes, “a generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little people . . . unduly divorced from the slow processes of nature, in whom every vital impulse

boredom because it holds open the idea that there may be more ethically and psychologically salutary ways of engaging with the inevitable lulls in stimulation and interest in daily life.

withers, as though they were cut flowers in a vase” (p. 41).⁴ Our wireless and perpetually amused culture misses these subtle processes and naively suggests that the dullness or monotony that seem to accompany them might be negated once and for all.

Although we share these concerns about our capacity for “understimulation,” we are less optimistic about the role boredom ultimately has to play in a well-lived life. While it may be true that boredom’s signaling function can sometimes be a valuable psychological asset, the foregoing discussion simply does not tell the whole moral story about boredom. In the next section, we would like to explore the moral dimension of boredom in more depth, as it is central to understanding what is at stake when we fall into the psychology of boredom.

II. The Moral Character of Boredom

To note that something *can* have desirable moral results is not yet to show that it is praiseworthy for that reason or even that it is a defensible means for realizing those effects. If boredom signals something recognizably problematic, we can still ask whether it is a *good* signal of the problem. Is boredom a good signal of the ruptures of subjective value that sometimes occur in our practical activities? Is it something we should learn to endure or even embrace in light of our agitated pursuits of amusement in contemporary life? We have already seen one reason why boredom may be a less-than-optimal signal of subjective value: it is connected to psychological harm. As we saw above, Elpidorou attempts to exonerate boredom by conceptually distinguishing state boredom from boredom proneness, which he claims is the real culprit of the problems associated with boredom. While this is a helpful distinction both in theory and practice, it is important to keep in mind that

⁴ Something like this insight seems to be what motivates poet Joseph Brodsky’s (1995) advice about how to face boredom. Rather than attempting to avert it, he claims the “best way out [of boredom] is always through [it]. When hit by boredom, let yourself be crushed by it; submerge, hit bottom.”

boredom proneness is, for some individuals at least, an *outcome* of a certain attitude towards boredom, rather than simply a disposition with which they are born or which they develop early in life. In other words, boredom may be a *learned response* to particular aspects of or occurrences within our environment. The more we allow ourselves to be bored by (what we perceive to be) understimulating environments, the more we may cultivate boredom as a habit and, eventually, a trait. The boredom optimists assume that boredom is an unavoidable emotional response to understimulating environments and, as such, offer various conceptual resources for re-seeing it as a potentially positive experience. Although this is an admirable aim, it overlooks the troubling fact that positively revaluing state boredom can effectively transform it into a psychologically and educationally precarious disposition.

The boredom optimists might respond that the class of individuals whose bouts of boredom progressively usher them towards trait boredom is small, if not negligible. Even if this were true, the problem still remains that the value of boredom as a moral signal is still questionable. Boredom, like other emotions (Nussbaum, 2001), carries with it a particular set of evaluative judgments to the environment in which it emerges. Within this set there is likely some variety, and yet in one common variant of boredom there seems to be an underlying normative dimension that is charged with indignation. Particularly the high arousal or “irritated” species of boredom often seems to carry the normative judgment, “I am bored because this activity is boring, and yet I deserve better” (cf. Goetz et al., 2014).⁵ When we are irritated and agitated by our boredom, this normative judgment effectively justifies our frustration with its source. It tells us that we are right to be frustrated and should remove ourselves as soon as possible from the offending situation.

⁵ Goetz et al. (2014) calls this “reactant” boredom. Below, we use the term “boredom” to refer to this form of bored experience, though the present argument is likely less relevant for low arousal variants of boredom.

Consider a quintessential case of boredom in an academic setting: a student is assigned a text that she comes to find overly complex, arcane, divorced from reality, and boring. This otherwise conscientious student has to read Section One of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* for her next class period in Ethics. Her struggles begin already on the first page, when she realizes—to her dismay—that the second sentence of the text is nine lines long and the fourth sentence fifteen lines long. She is getting discouraged trying to navigate through the circling folds of Kant's prose and can't see why someone would spend so much energy talking about something everyone already knows: that having good intentions is important for moral action. Thinking she knows roughly what Kant is saying, the student starts to read a little less thoroughly, until by the final five or six pages she is just skimming. She therefore misses Kant's distinction between intentions and maxims towards the end of the section, and unfortunately overlooks his explicit contradiction of what she thought his main point was. All the while, the student feels herself getting increasingly agitated and bored by the text. Although she knows it is hardly a sign of a good student that she has resorted to skimming, and although she really *wants* to be a good student, her boredom begins to whisper in her ear that it's not her fault. She starts to think: Kant should have written more clearly, less abstractly, with more lively and realistic examples. Why did her teacher assign such an old text anyway? He should have given them something more current, more relevant for students' real concerns, and more engaging. Why are her courses so text-focused in the first place? They should include the kinds of media students are already using: films, videos, blog posts and the like. These are created by people that have a real sense of what their audience *wants*; they are exciting and interesting, and they address what people care about *now*. Why does school have to be so dull?

The student in this example is having an experience that many of us have had ourselves, and that is therefore quite understandable. There are countless things that could be culpable for our student's predicament: we might wonder whether the instructor prepared his students appropriately for

reading such difficult texts, whether the student is contending with personal or extracurricular pressures that are drawing her attention from her studies, or whether she is lacking academic skills to meet the challenges of the Kant text that she did not receive in her prior schooling. However, we want to focus specifically on how our student's boredom frames, or rather *reframes* her engagement with the text. As it seems to us, the student's boredom construes her experience as something whose central purpose is to provide her with satisfying stimulation. When this stimulation does not occur, her boredom urges her to place the blame on the people and things that seem to have caused her frustration rather than on the student's particular way of apprehending the situation. We might call these normative tendencies the (1) hedonic, (2) objectifying and (3) moralizing character of boredom. The student's boredom is *hedonic* because the basis of her frustration—or more technically, her negative evaluative judgment—is her learning environment's failure to provide an appropriate amount of pleasurable stimulation. Her boredom is *objectifying* because her negative judgment locates the problem outside the self and within the environment. And it is *moralizing* because it encourages a feeling of having been wronged or slighted by this environment.

Our point here is not that the student's assessment of her situation is factually incorrect. She might be entirely right that her teachers too often assign old texts without showing how they are relevant, that her teachers' choice of media is too constrained or one-sided, and even that Kant could have done a better job making his ideas clear. What we are worried about is how these kinds of judgments essentially excuse the student from discovering whether there is value in something that is not immediately stimulating to her.⁶ Indeed, many of the richest, most complex and therefore most

⁶ Although the case we have just described is one in which we can clearly recognize the value of what the student considers boring, even situations that seem to lack such value are misconstrued by boredom. Consider the example of a student stuck in a particularly dull lecture, agitated by what she sees as utter vapidness of the experience, as in the classic scene with the economics teacher from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. In the scene, the high-school economics teacher addresses a class of students who are visibly hostile in their boredom. And not without reason: The teacher speaks in a droning monotone about arcane US economic policy developments in the 1970s

satisfying activities we experience in life are not those which we initially find stimulating or even pleasurable. The first several times that we went to a classical music concert, visited an art gallery, or read poetry—and perhaps many more times afterwards—were likely psychologically taxing and even boring experiences. Each of them required us to sit for extended periods of time in silence, staring at stationary or barely moving objects, and clashed with our existing preferences, pastimes, and predilections. We likely felt the urge to escape from the experience as best we could. Yet, if we were ever to appreciate the pleasures of these things, we had to stick with it: to seek out what was of value in the experience and to get a bit closer to appreciating its value, often with the help of others.

Afterwards we found that it was progressively easier to hold our attention throughout the experience until we were finally able not only to spend hours listening, observing and reading the things which had seemed so boring at first, but to cherish our time spent doing so. If boredom got the upper hand in our initial encounters with these activities, however, our progressive approach towards value was likely undermined and perhaps halted altogether. We might have rationalized our displeasure and disengagement by pointing out flaws in the composers, painters or poets that we experienced. We likely removed ourselves from the situation as quickly as possible and sought out much more secure sources of stimulation, perhaps in the various offerings of pop culture. Finally, and most

and 1980s, interspersing his discussion with short fill-in-the-blank opportunities for his students that he signals with the plea, “Anyone?” Because of the extreme dullness of the teacher’s pedagogy, the students’ boredom seems completely justified. And yet even though the students’ boredom may be correctly pointing to a fact of the environment, it does not necessarily mean it is morally justified. The economics teacher has taken too little care in making his lesson accessible and interesting; there is no doubt about this. The students are, in fact, understimulated and deserve better, in the sense that the teacher should have put forth much more effort to engage his students. However, when this understimulation is expressed as boredom, it simultaneously eclipses other ways of responding to the situation which could mitigate the problem for students, if not solve it. When experiencing their predicament through the lens of boredom, the students focus on the offending aspects of the situation rather than exploring options for changing how they respond to it. They might, for example, focus on the most interesting aspects of the material that come up in the lesson, use their imagination to enliven the details, reflect on connections to other areas of knowledge, consider reasons why the lesson is going so poorly, or find some parallel preoccupation of academic value. Admittedly, the teacher gives very little room for this kind of response, but there is always a degree of freedom that the bored response nips in the bud.

tragically, we found ourselves bored even by our favorite pop songs, cartoonists or sci-fi novelists, discovering to our chagrin that even their luster eventually wore off.

The boredom optimists might reply that these kinds of reactions to classical music, art, poetry and Kant simply indicate that they do not speak to our authentic selves. If we find ourselves bored by these things, we ought to find something closer to our personal interests and predilections—things that we do not find boring. Yet it should be obvious now why this is a deeply troubling position. Allowing boredom to inform us about what is worth doing constrains our horizons of value to those things we already find stimulating and interesting, forever closing us off from a whole range of activities, ideas and values that can ultimately make our lives more meaningful.

If this is right, then another reason to think boredom a poor, or at least precarious signal of subjective value is its tendency to become parasitic on the attitude towards pleasure and pain that is necessary for the practice and cultivation of virtue. The bored individual sees the pain of understimulation as something to be escaped, and pleasure as the medication that delivers this escape. Whatever promises to give us this pleasure—even if it conflicts with our values or sense of who we are—begins to appear as the vehicle by which we avert the pains of being understimulated. This is why our various stratagems of boredom avoidance are often even worse from a moral standpoint than the experience of boredom itself. In desperate flight from understimulation, we amuse ourselves into an unsteady, shallow and fleeting satisfaction.

Of course, we are not saying that pleasure and stimulation are things that are bad in themselves. From an Aristotelian standpoint, we know that feeling both pleasure and pain in the appropriate manner is essential to living a virtuous life. The issue is the kind of response boredom encourages when we experience pain. Although in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle (1995) claims that the virtuous person feels pleasure where the non-virtuous person feels pain—particularly when

confronting situations in which virtuous action is required (p. 1744, NE II.3 1104b4-14)—this does not mean that the virtuous person never feels pain when acting virtuously. Rather, it means that the virtuous person feels pain in the right way and in the right degree—namely, with the virtue of moderation. The virtuous person will, like any other person, feel discomfort and pain when he goes to console his one-year-old child who has woken up crying in the middle of a cold winter night. He, like any other person, will shiver from the cold, his knees will hurt from kneeling beside the bed, and his eyes will be swollen with tiredness. The difference is that his experience of these various pains will not provide a reason for him to disengage from the situation. He will not try to coax his wife to go in his stead or become angry or impatient at his child. Rather, his discomfort will be something that he registers as just what it is: a physiological reaction to a physical environment that he has the power either to discount or to integrate into a narrative about who he is as a father. If he takes the former route, the pain he feels is ultimately relegated to the background of his concerns for his child, especially if it is not his first, but his fifth or fiftieth time. If he takes the latter, less stoic route, he sees the experience as an opportunity to be a certain kind of father: a father that not only fulfills his duty of going to his crying child, but who sees in the physical discomfort of doing so the essence of what paternal love is. To love one's child means just as much the joy of eating ice cream with her on a hot summer day as it does the pain of consoling her on frigid nights. He wants to be the kind of father that gladly—if sleepily—makes his way to his child's room.

If boredom encourages pain-escape and pleasure-seeking, then it undermines the cultivation of moderation. It robs us of the power of reinterpreting the initially painful or unpleasant aspects of our experience as challenges to become the people we want to be. There is something indulgent in boredom, in allowing the pain of under-stimulation to make us bored. This indulgence gets in the way of learning to embrace more profound and less immediate sources of value. Given the right kind of moral upbringing or education, our reaction to understimulation need not be boredom.

III. *Akrasia*, Aspiration and Boredom

What might an education look like that takes this account of boredom seriously? Or, returning to our example above, what kinds of educational experiences might help the student who struggled so unsuccessfully with her Kant text? In our view, we can gain important insight for answering these questions if we see the student's struggle as a case of *akrasia*. In Agnes Callard's (2018) recent treatment of the issue, *akrasia* is taken to indicate a situation of intrinsic conflict in which one's "dominant evaluative framework" (p. 157f.)—the one by which we determine which actions are correct for us—is at odds with a subordinate, but volitionally more effective framework. For the student, the dominant evaluative framework is her notion of what constitutes a "good student," someone who reads assigned texts deeply, and her subordinate framework is the one that brought her to finally begin skimming the text. The subordinate framework of values drives the student's real behavior, even though she recognizes her actions to be wrong from her dominant valuational frame. Because of the hold that the subordinate framework has on her willpower, the student can seem all but stuck in her psychological predicament. However, Callard argues that akratics that are simultaneously *aspirants*—that is, individuals who pursue the values of their dominant framework as a unique process of value learning—have additional psychological resources to move out of their akratic conflict. Aspiration involves a special kind of contact with the values that one hopes to embody. Aspirants possess a meaningful grasp of values that their dominant valuational framework encompasses, and yet they recognize that this grasp is still defective or insufficient. The insufficiency of their grasp of value is partly evinced by their akratic behavior: by bouts of distraction or boredom. However, aspirational projects have two psychological effects on aspirants that are relevant to boredom. First, the aspirational pursuit of value gives aspirants an enduring sense of purpose that helps to block the descent from under-stimulation to boredom. Second, the admixture of personal

initiative and humility in aspiration provides a kind of psychological support that reframes *akrasia* or akratic boredom as an understandable (mis)step in a process of value acquisition.

If this is right, the connection between *akrasia* and aspiration has important implications for grappling with boredom in a morally empowering way. In essence, the idea is that boredom will be least psychologically precarious, if not completely circumvented, when we buffer our lives with aspirational projects. As aspirants we can ensure that our experiences of boredom remain momentary lapses of focus or coordination, rather than potentially debilitating losses of purpose or meaning. Within an aspirational project, boredom shows up as a setback or misstep on our path to getting to know the value of a new activity or way of life. Aspiration provides a kind of psychological support for extricating ourselves from the inertia and *aporia* of boredom.

In order to motivate this point further, it will be helpful to consider the alternative for a moment: the attempt to grapple with *akrasia* or akratic boredom in the absence of aspiration. Something like this can be observed when we try out various nudges or “hacks” to make ourselves more efficient people, students or workers. We notice ourselves not getting enough done in our days, too-regularly getting off track, or lapsing into boredom, so we add an app to our browser to block websites that we lose time on, or we purchase a fit-bit to get us exercising more, or we make a to-do list with all the books we want to have read by next year. We can imagine our student attempting to use a strategy like this. Perhaps she sets a timer to go off in an hour in order to put pressure on herself to stay on-task and to get the assignment done in a reasonable amount of time. Although the intentions here are admirable, there is a kind of moral emptiness lurking behind them. We see our *akrasia* only as *akrasia*, rather than recognizing it to be a sign of some missing sense of value that can call out our aspiration.

Consider the dramatic example of Mary Karr (2010), whose fight with alcoholism is recounted in her witty and insightful autobiography *Lit*. Karr had battled with her addiction for several years until she finally decided to attend AA meetings. As a passionate atheist, Karr was decidedly averse to the AA principle of surrendering to a “higher power,” and especially to the concept of prayer. She found herself able to “white-knuckle it” for a while without accepting the spiritual side of AA. However, Karr eventually began to see (with the help of friends in the program) how effective gratefulness exercises were in resisting her compulsion to drink. One evening, Karr’s struggle came to head, bringing her to the brink of suicide. She fortunately averted the worst and had herself checked into a psychiatric ward. Karr recalls lying on the bed in an almost complete panic, overcome with the sense that she had abandoned her son, Dev, and wondering whether she would ever be able to see him again. Having reached a kind of tipping point, Karr decides that she ought at least to try out the prayer thing.

I tiptoe to the bathroom and bend onto the cold tiles. *Thanks, whoever the f*** you are,* I say, *for keeping me sober.* I feel small, kneeling there. Small and needy and inadequate. Pathetic, even. Like somebody who can’t handle things. Which is fairly accurate, after all, for the average inmate. If you’re God, I say, you know I feel small and needy and inadequate. And tonight I want a drink. The silence fails to say anything back. I glare at it. It feels like judgment, the silence. And at the silence I give off rage; I start ranting prayer in my head that goes something like this: F*** you for making me an alcoholic. For making my baby sick all the time when he was so tiny. You’re a f***ing amateur, torturing a baby like that, you f***. And my daddy withering into that form. What pleasure do you get from . . . from smiting people? (pp. 275-276)

Having released her rage, something occurs to Karr that she finds completely unexpected. Although she is mired in psychological upheaval, Karr experiences a complete shift of perspective, one that would become a crucial step towards aspiration.

I feel something stir in me, a small wisp of something in my chest, frail as smoke. It is—strangely—the sweetness of my love for my daddy and my son. It blesses me an instant like incense. My eyes sting, and I blurt out, Thanks for them. . . . The boundaries of my skin grow thin as I kneel there squinting my eyes shut. For a nanosecond, I am lucent. Inside it: an idea, the thread of a different perspective than any I've ever had. It's a thought so counterintuitive, so unlike how I think, it feels as if it originates from outside me. The voice—the idea—comes in solid quiet in the midst of psychic chaos, and it says, *If Dev hadn't been sick so much, you'd have kept drinking.* . . . Which is wholly true. If Dev had been one of those blank-eyed, anesthetized little blobs who slept infancy away, I could've sotted up his early years. Staying up with him—what with the trips to the hospital, which I'd thought were my punishment or ruin—I'd found a strange kind of rescue. (pp. 276)

The perspective shift Karr reports here is compelling in part because it seems to be a moment in which her project of “staying sober” begins to transform into a more substantive and aspirational task. After this experience, Karr would come to adopt the practices and values of AA and eventually the Catholic faith. Importantly, this transformation seems to have been of central importance for Karr's battle with her *akrasia*. Her membership in these moral communities would help her become more and more resilient not only before her powerful longings to drink, but also before her tendencies to anger and her insecurities about being a mother. It would be the thing which finally changed Karr's battle *against* her malaise into a process of growth *towards* a new sense of value.

Although Karr's example is somewhat removed from the concerns of educators, we think that it sheds light on how to respond to student boredom. Karr was not able to make progress towards her personal goals because she was focused on her *akrasia* as *akrasia*, on fighting her urges to drink rather than on pursuing substantive values that would have obviated her urges to drink. Students who struggle to stay on task, who strain to see the point of their studies, and who consistently fall into boredom and listlessness in spite of their better judgment are in a similar situation, and educators all-too often address these issues merely as akratic behaviors rather than as indications of lacking or lapsed aspiration. Returning again to our student above, if a teacher could help the student see her struggles with Kant in a slightly different light—as provocations to seek out a value that may still seem hidden or obscure—then she would be on a much more compelling and satisfying path of growth.

Of course, the difficulty and the pedagogical challenge lies in trying to convince students to mistrust the importunate whisperings of boredom, which tend to become louder and louder with increasing complexity and required personal effort, and which eventually drown out students' subtle longings for inspiration and meaning. To offer a true alternative, the teacher has to somehow bring students to see that the need for such effort is often precisely the sign that there is profound value in what they are doing. Kant's commitment to the value of selflessness—obscured by jargon and longwindedness though it may be—can inspire radical changes in the way we treat other people, if we could just temper our will to disengage. In the next section, we will explore how educators can respond to boredom in just such an aspirational way—that is, in a way that promises not so much to solve student boredom, but to dissolve it into inspiring and motivating aspirational projects.

IV. An Aspirational Response to Academic Boredom

The prevalence of student boredom poses a difficult challenge to educators. According to our argument so far, student boredom is not only an indication that students need to be re-stimulated with more entertaining forms of teaching or content. It is a sign that students lack or have lost contact with sources of value that call out their aspirational energies. The more they experience boredom, the less they will be able to be moved by the values that can jumpstart their aspiration. By encouraging a hedonic, objectifying and moralizing reaction to the perceived lack of stimulation in the environment, boredom closes students' moral perception progressively further in upon themselves and cuts them off from the qualities in their studies that can inspire them to aspire.

In light of these moral hazards, we think that teachers should be equipped with resources for responding to student boredom and that the concept of aspiration provides needed guidance for doing so in a comprehensive way. In particular, we think there are four concrete implications that the aspirational perspective has for conducting moral education that faces the presence of boredom squarely. The first implication has to do with the orientation to boredom that we criticized in the previous section—i.e. the perspective that fixates on boredom merely as *akrasia* rather than as a failure of aspiration. Let's call this perspective the self-help approach to student boredom. This approach understands students' struggle with boredom merely as a problem of self-regulation or self-motivation. That is, they see the presence of students' boredom as something that can be solved by simply tweaking or repackaging academic activities to align better with students' interests and abilities. While it is of course essential that this alignment is in place, we are skeptical that it can resolve the issue in full. For example, boredom researcher Reinhard Pekrun and colleagues (2010) point out that while "it would be important to provide a sufficient match between task demands and individual competencies, such that achievement related control can be experienced," he recognizes

that “some degree of mismatch inevitably occurs in the classroom.” In response, Pekrun suggests just what we are calling the self-help approach to boredom: “it may be helpful to promote students’ competencies to modify tasks and self-regulate approaches to learning, thus enabling them to restore the balance of demands and individual capabilities in self-directed ways” (p. 546). Again, while self-regulation is a valuable skill, boredom is often a form of akratic behavior that indicates much more than missing self-regulatory habits. Rather, it has to do with a lacking framework of value towards which students are aspiring, and so any comprehensive treatment of academic boredom must attempt to jumpstart students’ aspiration to value. In essence, this is precisely what Pekrun calls for when he states that teachers should “focus on increasing [students’] perceived values of activities in achievement settings” (ibid.), but he leaves his discussion of this important observation just there. The concept of aspiration further specifies both in theory and in practice what it means to raise this perceived value and yields what we might call a “self-edification” model of engaging akratic behavior.

This leads directly to the next practical implication of an aspirational response to boredom, one that might seem somewhat obvious. Namely, teachers should see their efforts in the classroom in aspirational terms. Teaching for aspiration means attempting to establish meaningful connections between students’ current frameworks of value and the values embedded in one’s subject area. It involves seeing the learning process as an experience in which students recognize the inherent value of the people, things, ideas and disciplines that they are studying and are drawn to embrace this value. While this may, again, seem obvious on some level, it is not the norm in educational settings. When teachers express the value of their subjects to their students, they often rely on appeals to extrinsic goods, to the utility of the knowledge for various desirable ends, like getting a good job or into a good college. From an aspirational standpoint, this kind of appeal misses the very heart of the matter. Engaging with the various academic disciplines should change how we see the world and

how we see ourselves, since they each characteristically harbor unique perspectives into the mystery and value of experience. These perspectives are essential to grasping the special epistemic, aesthetic and ethical resources the discipline can provide, but they are only accessible by means of adopting the various “biographical genres” (Higgins, 2011) at home in the disciplines. For example, meaningful learning in a discipline like physics requires students to become, in a sense, physicists—to begin to see the world as physicists do and to recognize an expansion of value when they do so (cf. Pugh, 2020). The aspirational teacher’s job is to encourage precisely these kinds of transformative experiences, not only because they are part and parcel of a meaningful engagement with disciplinary knowledge, but also because they provide unique support for grappling with boredom.⁷

This brings us to the third implication of an aspirational response to boredom. With an aspirational stance, teachers can reframe students’ boredom in an important way. Teachers can help students see their bouts of boredom as a brief psychological hiccup on the path towards value, a natural part of the movement from one framework of value to another. Framed by aspiration, boredom becomes an indication that students are still missing full contact with the values of the things they are studying, and this can signal to teachers that they must find new ways to re-establish or initiate this contact. Sometimes this can be done without explicitly talking about boredom in the classroom, but we think it will be often helpful to discuss boredom openly, to remove the feelings of guilt or resignation that can accompany it, and to remind students that it is often an unavoidable experience when engaged in aspirational projects towards intrinsic sources of value. These sources may appear unstimulating, unpleasant or boring at the outset of one’s engagement with them, and thus reminders like this will serve a crucial role in the aspirational classroom.

⁷ For a much fuller, and hopefully more satisfying defense of this position, see Yacek (2021).

The final implication involves how teachers can help students proactively prevent boredom from showing up in the first place. In addition to framing their studies in aspirational terms, teachers will have to help students practice grappling with under-stimulation in a way that does not lead to boredom—that is, to help them cultivate the virtue of moderation with respect to stimulation. For this, we think that the concept of leisure provides some guidance. Although sometimes used to refer to forms of activity that we enjoy pursuing in our free time, a deeper sense of leisure refers to a set of practices that are contemplative and restorative. These kinds of practices habituate us into positive forms of disengagement and de-stimulation so as to render us more equanimous, moderate and reflective individuals. Not only this, the leisurely state of mind can grant us a special means of accessing the world around us; we can notice better those “slow processes of nature” to which Bertrand Russell referred as well as the more recalcitrant phenomena of spiritual life. Leisure need not necessarily be a “practice apart” from students’ academic studies, however. Mathematicians, physicists, biologists, poets and so forth each have characteristic ways of cultivating leisure. We think it would be a great enrichment of students’ learning experiences to introduce these practices into the classroom environment.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that boredom constitutes a central challenge to the success of moral education in the twenty-first century. Although boredom does possess several “virtues” when seen as a psychological state, its personal costs seem to outweigh the benefits when we recognize the moral character of boredom. As such, we have argued that teachers should be prepared to address student boredom in the classroom. Aspiration, as a form of value learning that characteristically supports the individual through bouts of akratic behavior and boredom, offers a promising perspective for constructing a productive and proactive response to academic boredom. We have

outlined several aspects of such an “aspirational” approach to boredom, but there is much more to be said. In particular, we think the connections between boredom and leisure, understood as a personally edifying form of disengagement and de-stimulation, deserve much more attention than boredom researchers have traditionally given it.

VI. References

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