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The uses and abuses of boredom in the classroom

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Abstract

Although the educational and psychological hazards of boredom are well documented, an increasing number of researchers have argued that boredom may be a helpful, rather than harmful, emotion for the growing individual. In this paper, we engage with this re-conception of boredom and explore its implications for contemporary education: Can boredom enhance student learning, or support certain forms of it? Can it be put to use in the classroom? What are the risks involved? In addressing these questions, we show that boredom can fulfil several important psychological functions under certain special conditions. At the same time, we argue that careful attention to the moral psychology of boredom reveals that it has significant disadvantages for helping students to develop a meaningful and fulfilling relationship to subject matter in the classroom. Against the backdrop of this analysis, we discuss the concept and experience of aspiration as a potential way of tempering and eventually obviating the psychological pitfalls of boredom. In the final section, we draw out several principles of an aspirational approach to grappling with boredom in education.

KEYWORDS
aspiration, boredom, motivation, self-regulation

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This article addresses the recent trend in the research on boredom suggesting that boredom may possess psychological and pedagogical advantages in the classroom environment. The article explores whether boredom can help students have experiences with academic subject matter that they find valuable, fulfilling and meaningful.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

This article shows that bored individuals tend to construe their academic experiences in a hedonic, objectifying and moralising manner, thus undermining the aspirational process required to apprehend value in difficult subject matter. The article demonstrates that the special features of aspiration suggest several constructive methods for grappling with academic boredom.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the steady stream of pedagogical and technological innovations in schools, students overwhelmingly report being bored in class, especially in the later years. In a 2016 Gallup Poll, just 32% of American 11th graders (Year 12 pupils) reported being engaged in school (Calderon, 2017), while a study by Goetz et al. (2007) showed that a randomly selected group of Year 10 pupils in Germany regularly attended classes in which they were bored almost half of the time. Academic boredom has been linked with student misconduct (Wasson, 1981), poor academic performance (Daniels et al., 2015; Pekrun et al., 2010), and even dropping out of school (Bridgeland, 2010; Wegner et al., 2008), while boredom outside of education has been associated with numerous psychological problems and compulsive behaviours, including stress and anxiety (Lee & Zelman, 2019), addictive internet use (Biolcati et al., 2018), gambling (Mercer & Eastwood, 2010) and depression (LePera, 2011).

Although the connections between boredom and psychological harm have been well documented, an increasing number of researchers have argued that boredom may serve important psychological and educational functions as well. Recent work in psychology, for example, has suggested that boredom may encourage creative thinking (Gasper & Middlewood, 2014; Mann & Cadman, 2014; cf. Elpidorou, 2018b) as well as certain 'prosocial' actions, such as giving to charity (van Tilburg & Igou, 2017). In the philosophy of emotions, scholars have argued that boredom has the unique ability to alert individuals 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, 2018b). Researchers of education influenced by Heidegger have likewise maintained that boredom may encourage students to seek out more authentic forms of life than the contemporary world typically encourages (Gibbs, 2011; Mansikka, 2009; Scribner, 2019; cf. Heidegger, 1995). From the standpoint of this more recent research, boredom thus begins to look like something we should embrace and even encourage in education, rather than attempt to drive away.

In this article, we attempt to make sense of the complex relationship between boredom and education, particularly in traditional academic settings like the classroom and especially at later stages of schooling (Years 7 through 13). In essence, we pose the question: can boredom potentially enhance student learning, or support certain forms of it? Can it be put

to use in the classroom? What are the risks involved? While boredom has remained a stable concern of educational research over the last several decades, the discussion has focused almost exclusively on the impact of boredom on academic performance, self-regulation and concentration, sometimes with reference to its 'arousal' and 'valence' profile when experienced by students (Goetz et al., 2019). While these are undoubtedly important aspects of the phenomenon, they do not adequately address the complex ways in which students *ascribe value* to their educational experiences. In other words, the educational research on boredom has tended to bracket how its various psychological features relate to, undermine or enhance the quality of students' engagements with academic subject matter, especially with respect to the subjective *value* (and not merely 'enjoyment') that students attribute to these engagements. Understanding the relationship between boredom and subjective value is of central importance for determining boredom's potential educational uses and risks, since recognising value in one's academic engagements is both an essential feature of meaningful learning experiences (Pugh, 2020) and a generally difficult task for students in disciplinary contexts (Strike, 2005). If boredom can really augment students' ability to seek out activities or aspects of their educational experiences that they find valuable, as the recent proponents of boredom claim, then it may be a promising element of the classroom environment. If it complicates or subverts this ability, however, then teachers will need to be equipped with effective and nuanced methods of counteracting its influence. Unfortunately, the research discussion to date has failed to provide ample guidance on how boredom impacts this essential psychological process and has thus missed the full educational import of boredom.

In order to address this general neglect, this article aims to provide a fine-grained analysis of the moral psychology of boredom and its implications for teaching and learning in contemporary schools. By the 'moral psychology of boredom', we mean the empirically observable tendencies within boredom to frame the objects in our field of view such that we are either helped or hindered in cultivating dispositions (or virtues) that enable us to live a happy, meaningful and flourishing life. Understanding the moral psychology of boredom is crucial for assessing boredom's impact on students' sense of subjective value. As we show below, boredom alters the horizon of activities and objects in which students recognise such value, and does so in ways that are relevant to their flourishing.

In thus connecting subjective value, moral psychology and the aim of flourishing together with one another, our analysis follows a broadly neo-Aristotelian tradition of ethical thought which takes the 'moral' to be intricately bound up with human flourishing or *eudaimonia*, rather than being concerned only with conventional or cultural mores. In other words, the purpose of engaging with boredom's 'moral psychology' is to describe the various ways the emotion either supports or undermines students' capacity to flourish, particularly by means of their experiences with school subjects like Mathematics, Physics, Social Studies and other standard disciplines. In determining whether boredom advances this purpose in academic environments, we are following a branch of educational theory inspired by both Aristotle and Wittgenstein, which considers one of the central justifications of learning in academic disciplines to be their capacity to support students' flourishing (Dunne, 1993, 2003, 2005; Higgins, 2011; Peters, 1971; Strike, 2005).

Our focus on the connections between boredom and learning in standard school subjects means that our analysis does not extend to the role of boredom in moral education proper, in which traditional academic subject matter is complemented by specifically moral and ethical content (such as programs of character education). Although our analysis of boredom's moral psychology has important implications for such contexts, it is not our central concern in this article. Nor does our analysis include considerations of how boredom may operate differently within non-traditional academic settings. By placing much more emphasis on self-directed learning and non-compulsory educational opportunities (e.g. Cunningham, 2020; Neill, 1960), these forms of education may potentially obviate some of the environmental factors that

exacerbate the experience of boredom. Finally, our understanding of how boredom impacts the learning environment is unavoidably coloured by our own school experiences as students and as teachers, most of which have taken place in classrooms in the United States and Germany. Our findings will perhaps be most relevant to these contexts, although we suspect that the issues that we raise will be familiar to teachers in UK and European schools, if not in those of many more countries.

Our argument unfolds in four steps. In the first section, we engage with the recent defence and 'revaluation' of boredom in psychology and the philosophy of education. Next, we assess some of the defining features of boredom's moral psychology, arguing that these tend to impede rather than be conducive to students' efforts to find value in their educational experience. We then show that the concept and experience of 'aspiration' (Callard, 2018) provides an alternative way of understanding and framing 'under-stimulated' psychological states so that they do not lead into the pitfalls of boredom. In the final section, we argue that the special characteristics of aspiration illuminate four concrete ways to engage student boredom comprehensively and systematically in the classroom.

THE REVALUATION OF BOREDOM

In order to understand the various ways in which boredom is relevant to 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. Within contemporary boredom research, there are several competing constructs for capturing the special psychological characteristics of boredom (e.g. Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Zuckerman, 1979), 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. Elpidorou, 2018b; Goetz et al., 2019; Pekrun et al., 2010). On this view, emotions like boredom are psychological phenomena with distinctive affective, cognitive, physiological and volitional features (Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981; Scherer, 2000). The bored emotion in particular is closely coupled with the perception of lacking value or significance in one's experiences, whether constrained to a particular occurrence or environment (i.e. 'situational boredom'; Chan et al., 2018) or sprawling into a variety of experiential domains (i.e. 'existential boredom'; Svendsen, 2005). Bored individuals are usually affectively averse to the emotion they feel; they are cognitively disengaged and under-stimulated; they are—in some situations—physiologically aroused, other times apathetic and listless; and they are correspondingly at times volitionally motivated to extricate themselves from or to change the environment, and sometimes resigned to its lack of affordances (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' (Goetz et al., 2014) and at least mildly painful character of boredom, it is considered a 'negative' emotion, and its psychological consequences are often cited as a cause for concern. As mentioned above, boredom has been shown to be associated with various addictive behaviours (Biolcati et al., 2018), anxiety (Lee & Zelman, 2019; Fahlman et al., 2013), anger (Rupp & Vodanovich, 1997), depression (Malkovsky et al., 2012; LePera, 2011) 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 et al., 2019; Pekrun et al., 2010).

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 similar to existential boredom and 'boredom' as a transitory state, where boredom proneness refers to a disposition in which we frequently experience boredom in a variety of situations. 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 fulfil that desire, and thus it is a helpful way of coordinating our behaviour to the potentialities of the world around us. Elpidorou (2018b) argues that boredom 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 '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 primarily as a deleterious influence on our psychology.

Elpidorou's qualified defence of state boredom is in line with recent work in the philosophy of education. Generally taking a Heideggarian point of view, scholars have pointed to the potential within boredom to break the continuity of the student's experiential field, enabling the pursuit of more meaningful (Mansikka, 2009) or authentic forms of life (Gibbs, 2011), while cultivating 'independence, moral responsibility, and self-knowledge' (Scribner, 2019) in the process. 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. Experiencing boredom shows us that our lives are often marked by conformity, inauthenticity and one-dimensionality, and it can potentially provide us with the impetus to extricate ourselves from this state. In essence, this understanding of boredom underscores the signalling function that Elpidorou ascribes to it, although the content signalled is cast in more dramatic terms. Boredom 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.

Although they differ in some important respects, both the Heideggerian treatments and Epidorou's conception of boredom express a certain 'optimism' towards boredom that suggests several important implications for determining the educational 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 recognise 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 recognising changes—and particularly dips—in the subjective value we ascribe to our environment, or for realising that this value is missing in the first place. Because the experience of subjective value is an essential aspect of both our personal well-being and our practical reasoning (Paul, 2014), boredom can act as a '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 emphasise boredom's signalling function; their revaluation 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 imme-

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

Moreover, the analytical distinction introduced by Elpidorou accurately marks out two very different experiences of boredom with two very different implications for education. Trait boredom is a troubling phenomenon because it seems characteristically *unresponsive* to educational interventions. Boredom-prone individuals can become so thoroughly disinterested in nearly all aspects of life that their capacity to be motivated to change their circumstances or their orientation to them is seriously curtailed. This process can end in an almost complete resignation and capitulation to boredom: to the sense that one's life is irremediably boring, and perhaps even human life itself. In contrast, the more one's boredom resembles a *state* rather than a trait, the more susceptible one is to pedagogical influence that would help change that state. When individuals experience boredom as a state, they are incensed by the lacking affordances of the situation, and this 'arousal'—whether more 'calm' or 'fidgety' (Goetz et al., 2014)—can potentially lead to a meaningful shift of perspective or activity.

Since our concern in the rest of this article is to work out the educational implications of boredom, we will concentrate on the latter, non-pathological types of the emotion, which are at least potentially responsive to motivational appeals. In doing so, we will adopt the following (minimal) definition of boredom, which combines some of the central insights of the psychological and philosophical conceptions of boredom discussed above: boredom is a negative emotional response to a stimulus or complex of stimuli, in which the latter appears not only to lack value or significance for us, but to be incapable of providing that value as it is. This latter quality is important for grasping why (state) boredom is aversive, i.e. why we are irritated by and often motivated to extricate ourselves from boring situations or to change them. The object of boredom is, in part, a defect or fault that it takes to be within the environment itself. On this definition, the difference between state and trait boredom is that the latter does not typically involve the situationally specific negative value judgement just described. Instead, for boredom-prone individuals, that judgement forms the background and condition of their experience of the world, rather than being dependent upon qualities of their particular situation that are fundamentally changeable.

Although this definition is supposed to reflect many of the theoretical and practical insights of the recent revaluation of boredom, we do not completely endorse its psychological account of the bored emotion. In a word, we are less optimistic about the role boredom ultimately has to play in a well-lived life in general, and in education in particular. While it may be true that boredom's signalling function can sometimes be a valuable psychological asset, the foregoing discussion simply does not tell the whole story about boredom. In the next section, we would like to explore the psychological dimensions of boredom in more depth, as it is central to understanding what is at stake when students fall into a pattern of boredom.

THE MORAL PSYCHOLOGY OF BOREDOM: THE CASE OF 'SAM'

To note that something *can* have desirable results is not yet to show that it is praiseworthy for that reason or even that it is a defensible means for realising those effects. If boredom signals something recognisably problematic, we can still ask whether it is a *good* signal of

the problem. Is boredom a psychologically reliable 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 as a means of seeking out meaning and purpose? We have already seen one reason why boredom may be a less-than-optimal signal of the presence or absence of subjective value: it is connected to psychological harm. As we saw above, Elpidorou attempts to exonerate state boredom by conceptually distinguishing it 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 in practice, it is important to keep in mind that boredom proneness is, for some individuals at least, an *outcome* of a certain attitude towards state 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 that we come to evaluate as 'boring'. The more we allow ourselves to be bored by (what we perceive to be) under-stimulating environments, the more we may cultivate boredom as a habit and, eventually, as a trait. The boredom optimists seem to assume that boredom is an unavoidable emotional response to under-stimulating environments and, as such, offer various conceptual resources for re-seeing it as a potentially positive experience. Although this is an admirable aim, it not only overlooks alternative responses to under-stimulation; it seems to ignore the troubling fact that positively revaluing state boredom can progressively transform the state into a psychologically and educationally precarious disposition.

The boredom optimists might respond that the class of individuals whose bouts of boredom usher them towards trait boredom is small, if not negligible. Unfortunately, the frequency and causal determinants of the state–trait transformation have received very little attention in the empirical research on boredom to date (e.g. Hunter & Eastwood, 2018), and it seems to us that this transformation is common enough to warrant caution. Similar to emotions like anger, boredom often has an inflationary quality to it. The more we indulge boredom, the more space it takes up in our personal psychology. If we are not careful, boredom can become a dominant lens by which we evaluate the goodness or quality of our experiences, as we find them consistently lacking in their ability to stimulate and satisfy.

Even if this state–trait transformation is rare, however, the problem remains that state boredom's function as a psychological signal is still questionable. Boredom, like other emotions (Nussbaum, 2001), carries with it a particular set of evaluative judgements to the environment in which it emerges. Within this set there is probably some variety, and yet in one common variant of boredom there seems to be an underlying evaluative dimension that is charged with indignation: 'I am bored because this activity is boring, and I deserve better' (cf. Goetz et al., 2014). When we are irritated and agitated by our boredom, this evaluative judgement effectively justifies our frustration. It tells us that we are right to be frustrated and should either remove ourselves as soon as possible from the offending situation, mold it according our own desires or needs, or turn our minds away as best we can.

Consider a quintessential case of boredom in an academic setting: a student—let us call him Sam—is assigned a text that he comes to find overly complex, arcane, divorced from reality, and utterly boring. This otherwise conscientious student has to read Section One of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* for his next class period in Ethics. Sam's struggles begin already on the first page, when he realises—to his dismay—that the second sentence of the text is nine lines long and the fourth sentence 15 lines long. He is getting lost trying to navigate through the circling folds of Kant's prose and is feeling increasingly disengaged. He cannot see why someone would spend so much energy talking about something everyone already knows: that having good intentions is important for moral action. Sam catches this idea in the first few pages and subsequently starts to read a little less thoroughly, until by the final five or six pages he is just skimming. He therefore misses Kant's distinction between intentions and maxims towards the end of the section, and unfortunately overlooks

Kant's explicit contradiction of what Sam thought his main point was. All the while, Sam feels himself getting progressively more agitated and bored by the text. He almost springs out of the chair with relief when he sees his phone light up with a call from a classmate, and he takes the opportunity to vent about his experience 'You have just saved me from reading the horrid Kant text that our teacher assigned. Could you believe how boring it was? And how poorly written?' Sam's complaints continue after some encouragement from his classmate: 'Kant should have written more clearly, less abstractly, with more lively and realistic examples. Why did our teacher assign such an old text anyway? He should have given us something more current, more relevant for our real concerns, and more engaging. And why are his 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?'

Sam is having an experience that many of us have probably had ourselves, and there are countless things that could explain its emergence. We might wonder whether the instructor prepared his students appropriately for reading such difficult texts, whether Sam is contending with personal or extracurricular pressures that are drawing his attention from his studies, or whether he is lacking academic skills to meet the challenges of the text that he did not receive in his prior schooling. However, we want to focus specifically on how our student's boredom frames, or rather *reframes* his engagement with the text. As it seems to us, Sam's boredom construes his experience as something whose central purpose is to provide him with satisfying stimulation. When this stimulation does not occur, his emerging boredom urges him to place the blame on the people and things that seem to have caused his frustration rather than on his particular way of apprehending the situation. We might call these evaluative tendencies the (i) hedonic, (ii) objectifying and (iii) moralising qualities of boredom. Sam's boredom is *hedonic* because the basis of his frustration—or more technically, his negative evaluative judgement—is his learning environment's failure to provide an appropriate amount of pleasurable stimulation. His boredom is *objectifying* because his negative judgement locates the problem outside the self and within the environment. And it is *moralising* because it encourages a feeling of having been wronged or slighted by this environment.

Our point here is not that Sam's assessment of his situation is factually incorrect. He might be entirely right that his teacher too often assigns old texts without showing how they are relevant, that his teacher's choice of media is too constrained or one-sided, and even that Kant could have done a better job making his ideas clear (he certainly could have). What we are worried about is how these kinds of judgements essentially excuse Sam from discovering whether there is value in something that is not immediately stimulating to him. Indeed, many of the richest, most complex and therefore most satisfying activities we experience in life are not those that 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 probably psychologically taxing and even boring experiences. Each of them required us to sit for extended periods in silence, staring at stationary or barely moving objects, and they probably clashed with our existing preferences, pastimes and predilections. We may have even 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 significance, 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 probably undermined and perhaps halted altogether. We might have rationalised our displeasure and disen-

gagement by pointing out flaws in the composers, painters or poets that we experienced. We probably 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 tragically, we found ourselves bored even by our favourite pop songs, cartoonists or sci-fi novelists, discovering to our chagrin that even their lustre 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 value is its tendency to become parasitic on the attitude towards pleasure and pain that is necessary to culivate the virtue of moderation. The bored individual sees the pain of under-stimulation as something to be escaped, and pleasure as the medication that delivers this escape. Whatever promises to give us this pleasure begins to appear as the vehicle by which we avert the pains of being under-stimulated. This is why our various stratagems of boredom avoidance are often even worse for individual flourishing than the experience of boredom itself. In desperate flight from under-stimulation, we amuse ourselves into an unsteady, shallow and fleeting satisfaction.

If boredom encourages pain-escape and pleasure-seeking, then its apparent "uses" are not only dubious from a neo-Aristotelian perspective that considers moderation a virtue; its "uses" are also questionable from a more general educational perspective. Boredom potentially robs students of the power of reinterpreting the initially painful or unpleasant aspects of their academic experiences as challenges to become, in effect, better versions of themselves. In other words, there is something indulgent in boredom, in allowing the pain of under-stimulation to make us bored. This indulgence can get in the way of learning to embrace more profound and less immediate sources of value in subject matter. Given the right kind of upbringing or education, our reaction to under-stimulation need not be boredom.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ASPIRATION: THE CASE OF 'SARAH'

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 students like Sam to see value where there seems to be so little? To answer these questions, it will be best to consider another student—let us call her Sarah—who is facing the same assignment as Sam and initially finds herself in a similar predicament. Like Sam, Sarah is initially nonplussed by Kant's esoteric argumentation and finds her attention seriously flagging. She has to read the first page of the assignment three times until she can figure out what Kant is saying and begins to feel less engaged, focused and motivated. She, like Sam, is becoming bored by the text. However, just as Sarah's incipient boredom arrives in her consciousness, she feels a countervailing impulse. Sarah remembers that she had made a kind of promise to herself several weeks ago, when she read Book I of the *Republic* as a part of the same class. That text was just as challenging as Kant's *Groundwork*, but she saw something in it that she found to be of profound significance. She was inspired by the image Plato depicts of several friends engaged in conversation about the most important questions: about the nature of justice, its effects on our personal well-being, and what it means to be a good person. Confronted with this image, which jarred with her previous view of philosophy as

stodgy and aloof academic speculation, Sarah recognised for the first time that philosophical discussion was an immensely valuable activity. Sarah could not quite follow every premise and conclusion of Socrates' refutation of Thrasymachus' sceptical arguments about justice, but she told herself back then that she would set her mind to getting better at this kind of thinking. Now facing the Kant text, she is again having some trouble tracking, but she is determined to decrypt this text, if it is the last thing she does. She thinks: 'There *must* be a reason why my instructor assigned this text. What is this text trying to tell us?' She decides to take it clause by clause, sentence by sentence. To her surprise, she finds by the end that she is getting used to Kant's style. In class afterwards, she even finds herself using terms like 'misology' and 'principle of volition', although not without a bit of an awkward feeling when she does so. In the end, she is not sure if she thinks Kant's insistence on the moral value of action from duty is ultimately compelling, but she sees her experience as offering her a further glimpse into the attractions of philosophical thinking.

Sarah's encounter is quite similar to Sam's at its outset, but it takes a turn that leads her to have a very different, and much more educationally valuable experience. Sarah does not take her initial feeling of pain as a justification for disengaging from the activity and judging it as pointless or tedious. She is even sceptical of this feeling—at least when it becomes conscious—wondering whether it may be an indication that there is value, satisfaction and pleasure there for the taking. Put in the terms introduced above, Sarah resists the hedonic pressure of boredom, which suggests that one's struggle is a sign of lacking value in the thing before us. At the same time, Sarah's experience is not *ahedonic* or ascetic. She does not embrace the pain of hard work just because it is pain. Rather, Sarah exhibits a more sophisticated understanding of how pleasure and pain can lead to value. Sarah realises that there is a deeper pleasure to be had, if she would apply herself to the task at hand.

Moreover, Sarah's experience moves her beyond an objectifying perspective on her struggle with the text. In the objectifying mode, she would have blamed the text or her instructor for her struggles, just as Sam came to do. In contrast, Sarah demonstrates a kind of trust: she trusts that her teacher assigned the text for a good reason or that Kant has something important to say in spite of his confusing prose. At the same time, Sarah's response is not 'subjectifying'. Neither the onset of boredom nor her cognitive struggles with the text cause her to feel shame or insecurity, at least not in a debilitating way. Indeed, once she moves past her initial repulsion, she becomes very attuned to the objective world around her. She is reminded of a value *outside* of herself, in the 'object' lying on her table and its connection to her previous experiences in the class. Together these constitute a powerful source of motivation that rises up within her.

Finally, Sarah's experience lacks that judgemental attitude towards her environment that so often accompanies academic boredom. Sarah does not feel wronged by the fact that she has to work to understand and appreciate the text. She is not thrust into the moralising posture that Sam ultimately adopted and that so quickly passes judgement on things that fail to stimulate. However, she also does not blindly accept the value of the text before she has even engaged with it. She is trying to figure out what value there is in Kant's text, with the hunch that—because it is a celebrated philosophical text—there is probably *something* there that she can appreciate, if only as a kind of rite of passage in becoming more versed in philosophy. Her statement, 'There *must* be a reason why my instructor assigned this text', is not an indication of intellectual servility, but a sign that she is on a search for value. Sarah's psychological state is not moralising, but it is also not obsequious or uncritical.

How exactly should we describe this psychological state, which seems to find a mean between uncritical acceptance and the hasty rejection of value? In our view, the concept of *aspiration* illuminates several important features of the psychological state that Sarah embodies, features that ultimately help to neutralise her onset of boredom. Recent work in moral psychology has shown that aspiration is a form of value learning with four central

features (see especially Callard, 2018; Yacek, 2021). First, aspiration involves an *intimation of value*. Aspirants see value in an activity or way of life that they previously overlooked or misunderstood. Not only do they 'see' value; they desire to come closer to it. Sarah's is a unique psychological state because it involves appreciating something she does not fully understand—the practice of philosophy—and therefore cannot fully value. Yet she has caught enough of a glimpse of philosophy's significance that it has put her on a path to get to know it much better.

Second, aspiration entails recognising *ethical distance*. Sarah knows that her glimpse of value is only just this: she will have to work hard to make her intimation a fuller understanding of philosophy's value. This ethical distance can be daunting, but because it is undergirded by a prior intimation of value, Sarah finds that it is actually a source of motivation.

Closely related to the ethical distance embodied in aspiration is the aspect of *ethical difference*. Aspirants recognise that they need to *become different* in order to arrive at the distant value they sense. That is, aspiration involves personal transformation. Sarah evinces this quality in the fact that her engagement with philosophy is tied up with the existential task of pursuing a different kind of self, of becoming a more philosophically reflective and thoughtful person. But she also exhibits the transformative quality of aspiration by her brief initial slip into boredom. That occurrence indicates that Sarah is simply closer to her 'old' self than the self to which she aspires, a quite natural phenomenon for those on a path of aspirational value learning. This is the reason that many novice aspirants require external rewards, self-coaxing and support from teachers and trusted peers in order to carry out the tasks demanded by activities like philosophy.

Finally, aspiration involves a *resolution to change*. For Sarah, this resolution co-occurred with the intimation of philosophy's value to her, and it is an essential part of the psychological resources she needs to re-engage herself in the Kant text. In essence, the resolution to change functions to provide a perspective for self-critique when individuals like Sarah act in a way that stagnates or undermines their aspirational path.

The educational import of aspiration for grappling with academic boredom should now be obvious. In Sarah's case, aspiration provided a motivational reservoir that helped her escape the pitfalls of the bored state of mind. Because Sarah is an aspirant, she was able to make her initial disengagement from the text a brief hiccup on the path to further value discovery. As she gets closer to her goal and more versed in meeting the challenges of philosophical thinking, she will probably find that these close calls with boredom occur less and less often. Thus, aspiration has a double effect with respect to boredom. It provides the individual with resources to emerge from the bored state with little psychological harm, and it tends to obviate the emotion as the individual becomes a more stable aspirant. In the next section, we discuss several further educational implications for meeting boredom in the contemporary classroom.

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 necessarily 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 lack of aspirational projects is not only a detriment to students' academic motivation or performance. To lack aspirational projects in education is to be left without a central means by which students can approach a more meaningful and flourishing life through their educational experiences. Academic disciplines are complex human endeavours that offer students not only various epistemic resources or instrumental goods; they are also home

to potentially inspiring examples of human achievement, dedication, self-discipline and community. These additional features of disciplines, along with the characteristic forms of perception and reasoning that they harbour, are part of what make them special contributors to the richness and depth of our experience. When students appreciate Mathematics not just for its logical content, but for its fascinating history, its rarefied beauty or its profound insights into the structure of the universe, they have gained an invaluable and enduring perspective that can imbue their conscious life with a deeper sense of significance. Aspiration seems to be the psychological process by which students access these additional and less immediately appreciable sources of value within academic disciplines. The more students experience boredom, the less they will be able to be moved by the values that can jumpstart this aspirational process. By encouraging a hedonic, objectifying and moralising reaction to the perceived lack of stimulation in the environment, boredom progressively closes students' perception of value progressively further in upon itself and cuts them off from the ideas, perspectives and people in their studies that can inspire them to aspire. It renders them less responsive to value in the world around them and thus robs them of the feeling of purpose and significance that is essential to leading a flourishing life.

In light of these psychological hazards, we think that teachers should be equipped with resources for responding to student boredom in a comprehensive way. In particular, we think there are four concrete implications that an aspirational perspective has for facing the presence of boredom in education. The first implication has to do with an orientation to boredom that sees it merely as a problem of self-regulation, rather than as a failure of aspiration. Teachers adopt this orientation when 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, or amping up the entertainment value of their lessons. While it is of course essential that academic assignments are connected to students' interests and abilities, we are sceptical that these kinds of tactics can resolve the issue in full. For example, boredom researcher Richard 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 recognises that 'some degree of mismatch inevitably occurs in the classroom'. In response, Pekrun et al. suggest just what we are worried about here: '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 and the balance of academic demands an important feature of the classroom, boredom often indicates that students cannot apprehend the inherent value of the tasks before them. They often do not even see them as *potential* sources of value. In this case, no amount of self-regulation or task modification will be able to help. Thus, any comprehensive treatment of academic boredom must attempt to jumpstart students' aspiration to value. In essence, this is precisely what Pekrun et al. (2010) call for when he states that teachers should 'focus on increasing [students'] perceived values of activities in achievement settings' (p. 546), 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.

This leads directly to the next practical implication of an aspirational response to boredom. 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 opportunity for students to recognise the inherent value of academic subject matter and to move closer to embracing this value. While this may 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: that is,

to the utility of the knowledge for getting a good job, attending a good college or developing critical thinking skills. From an aspirational standpoint, this kind of appeal misses the very heart of the matter. Engaging with the various academic disciplines is valuable because they harbour unique perspectives into the mystery, beauty and wonder of, perspectives that can profoundly alter and enrich how students see themselves and the world around them. We have found, and recent research in educational psychology confirms, that students respond much more consistently to appeals to this "transformative" quality of disciplines than they do to merely external appeals (cf. Pugh, 2020). Thus, 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.

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 valuational perspective 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—or that they have progressively lost this contact as a result of their prior academic experiences—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 often be 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.

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 (Gary, 2022). These kinds of practices habituate us into positive forms of disengagement and de-stimulation in order to make us more composed, 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. In our view, the cultivation of leisure can therefore be a potent additional feature of a comprehensive and aspirational approach to academic boredom.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the various aspirational strategies for combatting boredom in the classroom that we have just recommended, the reader may still be wondering whether traditional academic settings are not, in a sense, fundamentally boring: the compulsion of students into forms of learning that are almost inevitably divorced from their immediate concerns and interests unavoidably creates conditions for boredom and undermines any particular approach to eradicating it. The proper response, according to this objection, is to radically rethink how we construct our educational spaces, allowing much more room for self-directed learning and non-compulsory education. Although we think there is important merit in this objection, our

purpose in this article has been to suggest that even in traditional academic settings there are resources available to teachers to confront, if not completely to remove, academic boredom. It is possible, we have argued, to point students towards rich and enduring sources of value in subject matter that can activate their aspirational energies and silence the appeals of boredom. Indeed, even though the conditions of contemporary schools may be quite inimical to this kind of aim, the contrast between the aspirational classroom and the non-aspirational one might increase the former's motivational effect, since its special qualities and invitations to value may be recognised more clearly. Alternative learning environments can provide an excellent response to boredom, but teachers need not lament if they do not find themselves within one. If teachers can see their disciplines as sources of aspirational value, they can not only begin to combat boredom in a comprehensive and systematic way; they can simultaneously create a classroom environment that unlocks the transformative power of their disciplines.

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