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### Boring Myself to Death

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## Boring Myself to Death<sup>1</sup>

### Drinion is *Happy*

I'm sitting at my desk, which has been conveniently placed in the cluttered and windowless storage room of a law firm, staring into the dull glow of the same computer monitor I've been looking at for the last three weeks from 10am till 6pm. This might sound like standard office work, but the task I've been assigned is far from anything normal. Over the course of this summer, a defendant has turned in a large stockpile of documents (around 400,000) which are unlabeled and unorganized. I've been asked to precisely label each document and organize them based on their types. Read, date, describe, file, and repeat. As an unfortunate aside, if I had looked at my email that day I would have noticed my supervisor's request to delete all their emails from their personal email; another menial task to complete with brief intermissions in which I would scan documents. If this sounds boring to you, you're right – it was. You've entered the milieu of my summer, which would continue this way for another three weeks.

That being said, I can't quite say I disliked the experience. Underlying the boredom of my day-to-day work was a deeply meditative experience where I was forced to learn how to focus my attention in such a way that I would not be sidetracked from my work. I can't help but feel a subtle connection to the character Drinion, an IRS worker who spends countless hours focused at his desk, in David Foster Wallace's unfinished and posthumously published book, *The Pale King*. The book's central theme, boredom, makes Drinion a puzzling character. Like all the other tax workers, we would expect Drinion finds his work unbelievably boring. The novel gives long illustrations of the other tax workers dealing with fatigue and hallucinations. One tax worker, Frederick Blumquist, presumably dies from boredom. But a note catalogued by Wallace about the character tells us that "Drinion is *happy*."<sup>2</sup>

I too, while sitting at my small desk in a windowless room full of residual heat from printers and damp summer humidity, came to feel completely content, even happy, with my boredom. A part of this paper is to sketch out why exactly this might be the case. To do this, I'll catalog my personal experiences with boredom in a hope of teasing out a broader picture of

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<sup>1</sup> I'd like to acknowledge Marianne Janack for her unbelievably helpful comments and support through this writing process. I'd also like to acknowledge Dayeon Cheong. Her wonderful photography appears throughout this paper unless noted otherwise. Finally, I'd like to thank Scott MacDonald, Jennifer Anderson, and Vernon Lott. Early into my writing process, Scott MacDonald helped me find films that seemed suitably boring. Because of his help, I was able to get in contact with the directors of *#monalisa*, Vernon Lott and Jennifer Anderson, whose interview I am very grateful for.

<sup>2</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*, (New York: Bay Back Books, 2011), 548.

boredom. Along the way, we'll digress into other topics, but my hope is to leave with a stronger understanding of the experience of boredom.

### **A Leisurely Start**

Boredom is something we all have a general understanding of. Visually, we associate it with heavy eyes and even heavier bodies. Our eyes droop and perform a kind of thousand-yard-stare in association with boredom's particular kind of disengagement. Our necks lower as the weight of our head can, eventually, only be supported by our hands which posture themselves against our cheeks. Eventually, we yawn – possibly the most common visual cue for boredom. But not everyone understands boredom this way, so I will explain how I am framing 'boredom' in this paper, so that we have a common starting point.



The need for this was not apparent to me until recently. During a conversation about boredom, two friends pressed me on the possible connection between boredom and leisure. Their point, as I remember it, was that if we take boredom to be a good in one's life, then it begins to sound like a kind of leisure. This is a reasonable criticism, and sometimes we even see ourselves slip between boredom and leisure. As we lounge around our homes on a particularly slow day, we might begin to describe our situations as boring.

That being said, we should not make the mistake of thinking that these two states are the same. The most obvious difference between the states of boredom and leisure is how we evaluate them. Boredom, in contrast to leisure, is something we experience as unpleasant. As Aristotle notes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, “happiness seems to be found in leisure” and that leisure is a byproduct of all our most immediate and basic needs being satisfied.<sup>3</sup> To that end, there is a great comfort we find ourselves in when leisurely sprawled across our bed with a blanket that does not seem to map onto our understanding of boredom.

A part of this problem stems from conflating what is *good* in one's life versus what is *pleasurable*. If boredom were pleasurable, then it seems reasonable enough to understand it as a state of leisure. But boredom is unpleasant. When we are bored, we feel restless, weary, and experience a perceived loss of meaning in the things around us. Unlike boredom, our leisure time feels meaningful and rewarding. Still, can boredom be unpleasant while being good for one's life? I believe it can

We think of some particular sensations as strongly negative. Pain is one good example. We hate pain and avoid it at all costs. But our avoidance of pain misinterprets our relationship to the sensation. We don't seek to avoid pain, we seek to avoid the objects of pain. The objects of pain are dangerous to us and pain merely signals their danger to us. In that sense, pain keeps us safe. In reality we ought to be thankful for pain.

Last week, for example, I was cooking with a pan whose plastic handle cover, through years of use and multiple moves, seemed to have disappeared. Its metal handle, inviting my grip, had spent the previous fifteen-minutes warming-up for just this moment. As I held the pan, a wave of pain came over me, and swears came out of me. Once the initial fuss was over and I had managed to clean up my mess, I continued to curse over the pain without giving pain any credit for saving my hand. What might result if I didn't feel pain? Would I let go when I begin to smell my burned and blistering skin, in which case I could infer that I should let go of it? In the worst case maybe I'd keep hold till the hot pan melted through my hand. Pain is really quite useful. It belongs to a class of sensations that trigger a response for our need to adapt to a new situation, bypassing the process of drawing inferences that would be required if all my information came from smelling the burned and blistering skin. For pain, the situation is often a physically dangerous one and our response is typically avoidance. So, we shouldn't spend too much time

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Terrence Irwin, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), (1177b5).

being upset with the sensation of pain. That's not to say we should be going out in search of it, but it doesn't exist as something purely negative.

Boredom is quite the same. While pain is a signal of potential danger, boredom seems to be a signal of potential meaninglessness or our lack of interest in something. Like pain, the feeling of boredom is deeply unpleasant. But, as the saying goes, shooting the messenger doesn't help. We project boredom as a problem when in reality it is merely a message that something else is boring us. That is, the object of our boredom is the problem, not boredom. So far as this is the case, we shouldn't spend too much time being upset with boredom either. Again, that's not to say we should go out in search of it, but it isn't purely negative.

## Motivating Movement

Chapter four of Bertrand Russell's *The Conquest of Happiness* is titled 'Boredom and Excitement.' Based on the title of the book, one is likely to assume that this chapter's contents must relate to the benefits of excitement in a happy life and the complications boredom can bring to our lives. This couldn't be further from the case. Indeed, Russell, like Nietzsche and Heidegger argues for the benefits of boredom in a good and happy life, adding his name to a star-studded list of intellectuals and writers.

Russell claims that boredom is the opposite of excitement so far as a bored mind is only partially occupied with its current surroundings, while an excited mind is..... This might seem reasonable but is a little misleading. For example, reading a book might not be boring, but it's certainly not exciting (understood in its common sense conception). Maybe Russell would have benefited from using the word *interest* instead of *excitement*, as we have already noted in our analysis. Still, this does little to harm the remainder of his analysis of boredom.

What is most interesting about Russell's analysis is his focus on motivations. He opens by saying that boredom "has been... one of the greatest motivating powers throughout the historical epoch."<sup>4</sup> That is, boredom is a kind of regulatory state that pushes us to re-engage with our world. This re-engagement could be bad. Russell claims that "at least half the sins of mankind are caused by the fear of" boredom, pointing to wars as an example.<sup>5</sup> But this does not make boredom intrinsically bad on his account. We'd benefit by understanding boredom as a

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<sup>4</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*, (New York: Liveright Press, 1970), 56.

<sup>5</sup> Russell, 60.

neutral motivator that can push us to damaging situations (like war) or pleasurable situations (a leisurely walk that leads us out of boredom).

A part of his diagnosis for why boredom causes problems is our evaluations of boredom (recall the example of our evaluations of pain and boredom). He points out that most humans think a happy life is one free from boredom. Because of this we are “afraid of boredom.”<sup>6</sup> While our fear of boredom motivates us to escape boredom, our belief that we ought to never be bored generates an unhealthy relationship to boredom. Instead of accepting an occasionally boring situation, we drive ourselves out of boredom by any means necessary.

This may be why Russell opposes boredom with excitement. Although excitement is not the opposite of boredom, finding something that is momentarily exciting is certainly easier than something we are genuinely interested in. But our focus on excitement as a means to cope with boredom is impractical. So far as Russell is concerned, and I agree, we will only continue to search for more and more exciting situations, eventually leading to an inability to be excited by anything. Our quest for brief excitement will lead right back to boredom.

This might sound paradoxical, but recent studies have shown this much to be true. Though Russell died long before modern cell phones were invented, he seems to have diagnosed this modern conundrum. Our cell phones are unbelievably exciting. When we are bored, why would we not pick up our phone and look at something on Instagram or Twitter – something that is more exciting than our present situation? As Leslie Thiele (1997) and Kevin Aho (2007) convincingly make clear, our reliance on technology has a tendency to only bring us right back into boredom.<sup>7</sup> That’s not to say you will be bored because you check your Instagram or Twitter, but simply that it is a distraction or Band-Aid – it distracts you from your boredom, rather than actually solving your boredom.

Obviously Russell is not excluding excitement from a happy life, but he believes we ought to seek out a “quiet” life that synchronizes with “the rhythm of the earth.” Readers of Russell might find this remark uncharacteristically metaphorical for this philosopher who spent much of his academic career pursuing a systematized and precise formulation of philosophical language through logic and other means. His use of the phrase “rhythm of earth” might even call to mind Heidegger’s analysis of boredom.

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<sup>6</sup> Russell, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Thiele, “Postmodernity and the routinization of novelty: Heidegger on boredom and technology,” *Polity* 29 (1997), pp. 489-517; Kevin Aho, “Simmel on acceleration, boredom, and extreme aesthesia,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 37 (2007), pp. 447-462.

## Watching Clouds Go By

In 1986, the psychologists Richard Farmer and Norman Sudber published an article titled *Boredom Proneness – The Development and Correlates of a New Scale*.<sup>8</sup> In it, they devised a scale, the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS), to measure how bored one is likely to be in comparison to the general population. Their survey contains twenty-eight questions which the survey-taker ranks on a scale of 1 (highly disagree) to 7 (highly agree). The average for this scale is a score of 99 although anything within the range of 81-117 is considered ordinary. If you score above 117, you become bored very easily. If you score below 81, your threshold for boredom is quite high – it takes a lot to bore you.. I’ve taken the test blindly a handful of times and, unfortunately, scored an average of 120.

That is to say, I’m no stranger to boredom. And, although a score of 120 is hardly on the high end of this spectrum, it makes sense that boredom has colored large portions of my life – for example when I worked at the law firm described above or endeavored to get my issuers license (I did receive the license... if you are interested in any insurance). With this in mind, it’s also hardly surprising some of the experiences cataloged in this paper felt cripplingly boring to me. But I chose the experiences because I thought they would be boring to a lot of people, and not just to me.

To ease myself into the project, I strategically selected two films I declared to be reasonably boring without being punishing. In 2004, director James Benning released two films: *13 Lakes* and *10 Skies*. Both films are an hour-and-a-half long; the former, composed of thirteen static landscapes depicting a different lake and the later, which I’ll primarily discuss, depicting a distinct instance of the California sky . There is no plot, no characters, and no dialogue. Their sparse composition forces the viewer to observe each landscape with deep care, at least if one has any hope of maintaining interest.

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Farmer and Norman Sudber, “Boredom proneness: The development and correlates of a new scale,” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 50 (1986), pp. 4-17.



But this hope is quickly thwarted. As the slightest shift of a cloud becomes the focal point of my attention, an abrupt transition to a black frame throws me out of alignment and a new sky appears. This sky is much less exciting than the last. Its tone is grey and the clouds seemingly refuse to move. I can tell that the sun is setting, wherever the sun happens to be, but the sky's shift in color palate from grey to a deep navy occurs so subtly that even all my attention can't clearly pace these changes. The landscape is hopelessly boring to me – nothing can capture my attention.

The shrinking of our attention characterizes the experience of boredom. We become bored when our thoughts or the world around us lose their vitality. As our experiences seemingly lose meaning, or can no longer maintain our interest, the vibrancy through which we previously interpreted the world diminishes and our attention goes along with it. The disappearance of our attention might serve to explain why we seem to be unaware of our boredom *while* we are bored sometimes. Although this isn't always the case, it occasionally seems true. As we return home after a long day of what felt like important and engaging work, once we look back to our memories they're clouded by a distinct fog of boredom. We can't seem to point to any one specific thing as the cause for our bored, but we were bored nonetheless.

As my attention slides, it gives way to mind-wandering. One of the skies depicts billowing smoke from what I assume must be a nearby fire. The quick moving gradient from

black to white is my only indication that it is indeed smoke. Whether it be intentional or not, the framing leaves the story of this sky entirely to my imagination. Similarly, another sky has the ambient audio of dogs barking. I imagine that the camera must be situated in a park. This fantasy continues until three gunshots are heard from the distance and the barking becomes louder. Was that *really* a gunshot? Is one of the dogs dead? Surely not, they've kept on barking so that must mean they're all alive. I suppose this isn't a park. Is it a hunting ground?

Despite our shrinking attention, it seems we sometimes slide right back into being engaged with the world. A particular sound or image might enliven our thoughts and our wandering mind starts to focus once again. Are these thoughts directed toward one of these ten skies? not always. Regardless, when we are bored our mind directs us toward reengagement. It strives to reestablish interest or meaning in our surroundings by any means necessary. These thoughts need not be the truth of the matter. Were those noises even gun shots? That's something we, as viewers, cannot answer. But these sorts of questions are what allow us to refocus our attention once we have lost it.

### **Boredom Fosters Wallace**

Unlike Russell's claim (that boredom is simply a component of a good and happy life), Wallace seems to think that it is a *key* to happiness. In the same note referenced above, Wallace writes "that bliss... lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom."<sup>9</sup> Wallace's reason for believing this is sketched throughout *The Pale King*, but it is most clearly illustrated in his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, later published under the title *This Is Water*.

The key, for Wallace, directly relates to our attention and evaluations. I've already mentioned the relationship boredom and attention share. It's true that our attention wanes when we are bored giving way to mind-wandering and eventually a refocus of our attention. Wallace hopes to bridge this momentary lapse in attention in order to exercise our ability to hone our attention and focus on what we would like to think about. Like many people waiting in traffic, Wallace tells us that if he "doesn't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, [he's] gonna be pissed and miserable every time."<sup>10</sup> The reality of the situation is that we have hardly any good reason to be pissed. In this case, being pissed is just our default

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<sup>9</sup> Wallace, *The Pale King*, 548.

<sup>10</sup> David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*, (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009), 77.

orientation to the situation and it's a default we can escape from by choosing how we focus our attention.

The same goes for boredom, a recurring theme throughout the commencement speech. When we are standing in a long grocery check-out line, we might feel bored and lose our attention. Wallace would tell us this is our default setting – to simply disengage from the discomfort of boredom. Remaining attentive and focused allows us to continue as a participating agent in how we choose to experience our boredom. At this crossroads, we can choose to evaluate our boredom positively or negatively. “It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars.”<sup>11</sup>

This much begins to parallel Russell and his focus on our evaluations of boredom. It seems Wallace is directing us toward an evaluative choice throughout his speech. On his account, our default evaluation of boredom is a state that is to be avoided, ignored, repressed, and combated. But we can choose otherwise. If we choose to view boredom through a more positive lens, it will no longer be an unpleasant experience. Wallace tells us that this “is unimaginably hard to do.”<sup>12</sup> Maybe this is why when Drinion focuses all of his attention throughout the mundanity of his IRS work, he literally levitates above his desk.<sup>13</sup>



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<sup>11</sup> Wallace, *This Is Water*, 93.

<sup>12</sup> Wallace, *This Is Water*, 135.

<sup>13</sup> Wallace, *The Pale King*, 487.

Drinion is able to accomplish the impossible. But if Wallace truly thought this was impossible, he likely wouldn't be at Kenyon College telling graduates to attempt the impossible.

There are problems with Wallace's sketch of how to cope with boredom here, but I will focus on one – the ability to remain attentive while bored. Specifically, there is overwhelming scientific evidence that shows a correlation between boredom and attention failure. In a review of the psychological literature surrounding boredom and attention, Eastwood and colleagues (2012) go so far as to define boredom in terms of its relationship to attention difficulties.<sup>14</sup> Earlier, we too defined boredom as relating to a lack of interest in our surroundings implying a kind of failure to remain attentive while bored. This much should be worrying for Wallace's position. If we are unable to remain attentive while bored, it is a tall order to swim against the current of our biological makeup.

For example, Damrad-Frye and Laird (1989) suggest that distractions to our attention are related to boredom.<sup>15</sup> In their study, subjects were asked to listen to audio dictating the text of an article of middling interest and recall the content of the article. At the same time, a television in a nearby room would play unrelated content at a noticeably loud volume, a noticeable but quiet volume, or silent. Subjects then reported levels of interest and boredom once the task had concluded. Their study found that those who experienced noticeable noise were unaware of the source but still reported higher levels of boredom and lower levels of interest in the task at hand. Their study would seem to imply that slight distractions are correlated with boredom.

In a study conducted by Hunter and Eastwood (2018), the authors suggest that attention failure has the ability to cause boredom.<sup>16</sup> Their study, in comparison to the above, is important because it makes the distinction between trait boredom and state boredom. Trait boredom categorizes those who are prone to boredom using measures such as the BPS. I would be included in this category, for example. State boredom, on the other hand, categorizes those who experience boredom, as we all do, but are not afflicted by it in any kind of dispositional sense. While trait boredom and its relationship to attention difficulties has been written about quite extensively, state boredom and its relationship to attention difficulties has been minimal.

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<sup>14</sup> J. Eastwood, A. Frischen, M. Fenske, D. Smilek, "The Unengaged Mind: Defining Boredom in Terms of Attention," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7 (2012), pp. 482-495.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Damrad-Frye and James Laird, "The Experience of Boredom: The Role of the Self-Perception of Attention," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57 (1989), pp. 315-320.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Hunter and John Eastwood, "Does state boredom cause failures of attention? Examining the relations between trait boredom, state boredom, and sustained attention," *Experimental Brain Research* 236 (2018), pp. 2483-2492.

Their study is also important because it makes significant contributions to understanding the direction of fit between boredom and attention. That is, does boredom *cause* attention failure, or is boredom a *consequence* of attention failure. This is particularly relevant for Wallace's analysis of boredom because if boredom causes attention failure, his advice to focus our attention on evaluating boredom in a new light would seem to be doomed. The experiment conducted randomly placed participants into one of two experimental conditions. Participants in the boring condition were asked to watch a 25 minute video titled *Easy English*, used to teach English as a second language. Participants in the non-boring condition were asked to watch a 25 minute clip of the 1994 movie *Speed* starring Keanu Reeves. In addition to this, those in the non-boring condition were told that their clip would be 30 minutes long and those in the boring condition were told that their video would last 20 minutes. The hope of this misinformation was to exacerbate a sense of time dragging in order to make those in the bored condition feel more bored (more on the relationship between boredom and time will come later).

Before and after the viewing, participants would fill a handful of surveys used to estimate levels of attention and boredom. Their findings showed that trait boredom uniquely predicted levels of sustained attention performance. What's more, their experimental findings jived with the assertion that boredom is a *consequence* of attention failures. This much is a tentative result as more studies must take place before we can say with confidence the direction of fit between boredom and attention. Indeed, as Hunter and Eastwood later allude to, it still seems equally as likely that boredom and attention for "a Gordian knot."<sup>17</sup> That is, both attention failure and boredom might both be a *cause* and *consequence* of one another.

Possibly anticipating this difficulty in the relationship of boredom and attention, Wallace spends a great deal of time in *The Pale King* discussing the strength of our will. For example, in chapter thirty-three, the reader is met with Lane Dean Jr. who, through sheer will-power, completes the monotony of his IRS job. In chapter thirty-six, we are met with a nameless adolescent whose only goal is to kiss every part of his body including his back and every inch of his skull. This seems impossible, but through practice and will-power, it would seem that the boy is able to complete the task. The theme of will-power is made explicit later on when a nameless narrator tells us the key to success in the IRS. He states:

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<sup>17</sup> Hunter and Eastwood, 2490.

The underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. *To breathe, so to speak, without air...* if you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish.<sup>18</sup>

Even though boredom is characterized by an inability to remain attentive, it would seem Wallace thinks we can regain attention through sheer will-power.

## The Stoic Take

For those interested in ancient Western philosophy, this view might sound remarkably similar to that of the Stoics. In fact, I take Wallace to be promoting a brand of Stoicism in his position. To that end, I'll map the terrain of particular Stoic doctrines in order to shed light on what seems to be Wallace's own position.

A part of Wallace's argument is that we have a choice when it comes to our experience of boredom. That is, we have a choice about how we choose to experience boredom. If we choose to focus on all the negative aspects of boredom, we'll experience boredom negatively. But if we stop focusing on the negatives of boredom, it supposedly is blissful.

The Greek word for choice is *prohairesis*, but it can also be rendered as ability, volition, or will. For the Stoics, *prohairesis* is a rational capacity of human intellect. For example, I might want to eat an entire sleeve of Oreos. This is entirely within my rational will. I can construct a reason for eating the Oreos – I'd enjoy it – and I can construct a reason for not eating the Oreos – it would be unhealthy. In either case, I have total rational control over the outcome. On the other hand, I might want to not be hit by a car. Still, my efforts to not be hit by a car is irrational because I have no capacity to choose an outcome when a Kia Soul happens to come speeding toward me while I am biking safely in the bike lane up 8th Avenue. Fortunately, I was not injured. That is to say, some things are within our ability to choose the outcome and other are not. Oreos are within my control, but Kia Soul's are not.

For the Stoics, what is external to ourselves is not up to us. The Stoics believe that we cannot control anything external to ourselves because it is not within our rational capacity. The flip side of this is that we have total control of anything internal to ourselves, the Stoics claim.

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<sup>18</sup> Wallace, *The Pale King*, 440. Emphasis is my own.

That is, everything internal to ourselves is within our rational control. All this talk of rationality may have given it away, but the Stoics are deeply rationalistic. They believe, fundamentally, that humans are rational to their core. This means the Stoics even believe we have control over functions like the emotions. If I'm bored, it is within my *prohairesis* to simply uproot my boredom.

This claim is striking and connected with the Stoic concept of *phantasia* which translates to appearance or impression. Whenever we have an experience, it leaves an impression on us or has a certain appearance. The Stoics believe it is within our rational capacity to assent or dissent to these appearances. For example, when I am bored there is an appearance that boredom frustrates me and it is bad. This is an appearance I can assent to if I so choose. There is also an impression in which we often believe we cannot control our emotions. Although I *can* assent to this appearance, the Stoics believe it would be irrational to. Emotions, on their account, are within my rational control. So, the notion that I cannot control it is merely an appearance that I ought to reject.

To put this in the terms Wallace outlines, the appearance that emotions are not up to us and that we passively experience them is just our default orientation to them. Wallace thinks we can choose to shift our attention and change the experience of boredom. The same way the Stoics attempt to explain that what is in our control is internal and that we have no control over external experiences, Wallace seems to suggest that boredom is an internal experience we have control over; we can, using our *prohairesis* (will), shift the *phantasia* (appearance) of our experience with boredom.

What's more, drawing from the cliché that the mind is 'an excellent servant but a terrible master,' Wallace famously states that "it is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms nearly always shoot themselves in... the *head*."<sup>19</sup> So, like the Stoics, Wallace takes this will that allows us to shift our attention and change the appearance of our experience with boredom to be tied with our rationality.

In Stoicism, this capacity of choice is often called the dichotomy of control. Epictetus' *Enchiridion* famously opens with the statement: "some things are up to us and some are not up to us."<sup>20</sup> What is up to us, he claims, are internal – our opinions, impulses, desires, and aversions. What is not up to us is external to ourselves – our bodies, possessions, or reputation. What

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<sup>19</sup> Wallace, *This Is Water*, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, tr. Nicholas White, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), §1.

Epictetus is outlining a certain evaluative choice we can make. We have the choice to put effort into things that are within our control or put effort into things that are outside of our control. But the only rational decision is to put effort into the things that are within our control.

This certainly sounds like what Wallace is promoting. You either choose to remain in your default orientation toward boredom, or you can choose otherwise. On Wallace's account, and the Stoics, it is entirely within your will-power to make this choice because boredom, and any other emotion for the Stoics at least, is up to you. If you are scratching your head thinking this isn't a particularly realistic picture of our emotions, you're right. It seems unbelievable that our emotions are entirely within our control. This error happens because of a false dichotomy lurking within the dichotomy of control.

Indeed, some things are up to us and some things are not up to us. But this dichotomy ignores another very reasonable possibility: that some things are partially up to us but not entirely. Call this interpretation the trichotomy of control. For example, applying for a job is up to us. We can write a wonderful cover letter, organize a solid résumé, and contact recommendations writers we feel confident will speak well on our behalf. This much is up to us. But getting the job is not up to us. Although we can place effort into the package we eventually ship off to an employer, the decision to receive employment is not within our rational capacity. Actually getting the job is entirely external to us and therefore not within our control. So, getting a job is partially up to us and partially not up to us.

Although I don't take this to be Wallace's or the Stoic's position, if we understand emotions as landing in this third category, partially up to us and partially not up to us, we have a much more intuitive picture of emotions and the relationship we share to them. I cannot control that I am bored when I become bored, but I can anticipate situations in which I am likely to become bored and avoid them. For example, I might avoid that Mark Rothko exhibit in favor of bowling perhaps. I might still become bored while boring, but I would certainly be more bored while at the Mark Rothko exhibit.

However, this is not *exactly* what Wallace has in mind when talking about boredom. His primary interest is the choices we have *once* we are bored. So, focusing my attention while bored might not be up to me. For the reasons outlined above, our inability to focus attention is an unavoidable side effect of boredom with which we have little control over. But maybe I don't need to feel frustrated about my boredom while at a Mark Rothko exhibit. Instead, I can try to

manage my frustration and attempt to feel calm about my boredom. We've already made the point that boredom isn't a strictly negative emotive state, so shifting our evaluation of boredom from frustration to something like calmness seems reasonable enough. Or, I can find the source of my boredom (that damn painting with two big red rectangles on it) and seek out something else that will regain my interest (like a painting with two red rectangles on it along with a white rectangle... obviously).

This is all to say that we cannot control boredom quite as easily as Wallace would like us to think. But we can still influence it similar to the way we learn to influence our emotions in practices like cognitive behavioral therapy.

## A Vexing Tune

I've been sitting listening to a single song for what must be nine hours at this point. On May 30th, 2020, Igor Levitt performed the piece *Vexations* composed by Erik Satie. It is a brief score, not exceeding half a page in length. It is a strange piece so far as it feels slanted and unnerving while remaining enchanting and beautiful. It wanders from note-to-note with a kind of intensity and assurance giving each note a distinct opportunity to take stage and linger just long enough before the next note enters. So, why do we care that Levitt performed this piece? Inscribed on the head of the sheet music, Satie left a vexing little comment: "in order to perform the theme 840 times in succession, it would be advisable to prepare oneself before hand, and in deepest silence, by serious immobilities."

Levitt's performance lasted for sixteen hours. In one interview, along with frustration, anger, and exhaustion, Levitt explains that more than anything else he "got bored. There was no point of just playing it."<sup>21</sup> In another interview, he explained this feeling further: "at some point, you lose the perspective of time – like now. You lose the perspective of an end – like now. I think at some point I will lose the hope that this will ever end – like now."<sup>22</sup>

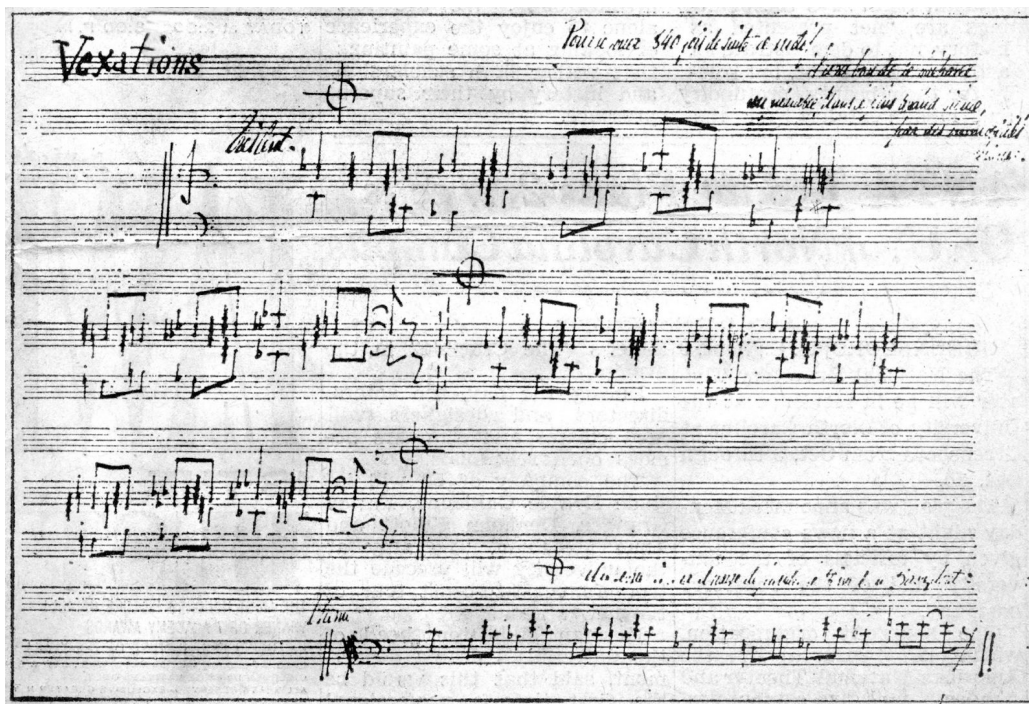
Sadly, I am not a pianist. So, I endeavored to do the next best thing to generate the intended vexing boredom of this piece by listening to the song continuously. The recording I had would take thirteen hours to listen to on loop. Removing all possible distractions, I began listening at 12pm and would finish listening at 1am. Listening to *Vexations* is at first relaxing. The song, truth be told, is unbelievably interesting. Once I picked up the melody, it lulled me in.

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<sup>21</sup> Joshua Barone, "'I Just Let Myself Go': Igor Levit on Surviving a Satie Marathon," *The New York Times*, May 30th, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Alex Ross, "A Pianist's Marathon of *Vexations*," *The New Yorker*, May 31st, 2020.

Pacing alongside each note was reassuring and a kind of comfort came over me when I knew they would not change. Each note felt as though it was in its right place.



As time went on, the experience shifted. *Vexations* became a great big nothing. It remained as a white noise hanging over me. It was neither relaxing nor annoying. It was simply existing alongside me and my thoughts as though it was a part of my thoughts. This didn't last long though. A great wave of frustration colored my experience of the song for probably two hours. I'm uncertain to what degree I was bored at this point. It could be that I was simply frustrated. However, it could also be the case that I was frustrated by my own boredom bubbling to the surface. In the back of my head, I had hoped this experience would be fun and easy even though I understood that boredom would eventually come. This much was obviously naive of me. After all, I still had ten hours remaining at this point.

Next, I felt extremely anxious. Dealing with anxiety quite often, this felt even more terrifying. Why was a song making me this anxious? Specifically a song I had been listening to already. At this point, I knew I was not simply anxious. My anxiety was not directed at the song, but at my boredom. Unlike my frustration, it was clear to me that I was anxious about my growing boredom. This anxiety will be a recurring theme throughout this paper. It seems anxiety is a part of my habitual response to boredom. A coping mechanism to remove myself from the boredom. Like Wallace explained earlier, it is my default orientation to boredom. Similarly, a

nameless narrator recalling a dream in *The Pale King* tells us “this dream was my psyche teaching me about boredom... I was fretful, nervous, anxious.”<sup>23</sup>

It’s odd to approach an anxiety attack all the while knowing you will not do anything about it. Although I have some tricks to avoid anxiety, I didn’t want to jeopardize the experience I was being thrown into. And, fortunately, as time went on, my anxiety subsided. It was not gone. My anxiety would ebb and flow for around seven more hours. But as I pushed through, my impulse to respond to boredom, to cope with boredom, let up. I was just bored, hopelessly bored. I sat, staring at my computer, with a glazed look just sitting in it. Steeping myself in every moment boredom slowly inching by. It was awful. I would occasionally think about turning the piece off only stopping once I remembered I had already made it seven hours in.

This boredom, unlike the boredom I experienced while watching *10 Skies*, carried a very repetitive quality. Like the office work I mentioned earlier and my inability to escape from the unvaried tedium of my tasks at hand, there was a sense that I couldn’t escape from the constant recurrence of the music. Consider it a boredom of excess or surfeit. The same way we become bored when we eat too much of the same food far too often, we also become bored by certain experiences due to their viciously repetitive nature. With each iteration, the experience seemingly becomes more and more boring. To be clear, this doesn’t point to multiple kinds of boredom – a standard boredom and a boredom of excess, for example. I take boredom to remain a singular emotion, but there are many ways in which we can experience it. This much was true for the eventual shifting of my boredom at the ten hour mark while listening to *Vexations*.

I tried to focus my attention back onto the music which had unfortunately taken a back seat to my internal monologuing, anxiety, and boredom. It was odd when the thought came across my mind that I was really enjoying this piece. Nothing had changed about it. It’s the same looping cycle I had spent the last ten hours listening to. Why did it feel more palatable now? It’s as though I had transgressed boredom. In all fairness, I don’t quite take this to be the case. I’m skeptical of the notion that boredom can be transgressed. What would be past boredom? I still believe I was quite bored. But the boredom I felt now was different somehow. Relaxed, accommodating. It was as though I had jumped into a pool and my body acclimated to the cold of the water. Having thrown myself into boredom, I was now acclimated to my environment. I no longer felt frustrated or anxious about it, I was simply sitting in my boredom. It was not

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<sup>23</sup> Wallace, *The Pale King*, 255.

unpleasant either. Instead, like my experience in the law office, it felt meditative. As the thirteenth hour finished and my listening ended, a deafening quietness hung over my room. Each creek of my floor as I stood up sounded as though I was hearing that noise for the first time.

## An Idle Remark

I'd like to address an experience we might be tempted to mingle with boredom, idleness. Like leisure, idleness seems to bear a similar resemblance to boredom when first observed. There is a certain kind of glazed stare we adopt when idle quite similar to the thousand-yard-stare of boredom. Also, the slouched posture of someone who is idly sitting could easily be confused for boredom. But idleness does not seem to capture every aspect of boredom.

The Japanese author and Buddhist monk Yoshida Kenkō work, *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essays In Idleness*), remains among the most studied works of medieval Japanese literature and a representative work of the *zuihitsu* genre. Similar to other works in the genre, it contains 243 loosely connected essays ranging in length from a single sentence to a handful of paragraphs. From topics as disparate as historical anecdotes, etiquette, stories of drunken monks, and Buddhist practice, a theme of idleness emerges. As Kenkō remarks in his preface, “what strange folly, to beguile the tedious hours like this all day before my ink stone, jotting down at random the idle thoughts that cross my mind.”

One can't help but assume this “strange folly” is a bit of irony on the author's part so far as he would later go on to question “what kind of man will feel depressed at being idle? There is nothing finer than to be alone with nothing to distract you.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it would seem as though Kenkō's understanding of idleness is unusually positive. Specifically, if we understand idleness as the rejection of a guiding purpose, *Tsurezuregusa*'s meandering and divergent passages become a kind of artistic depiction of idleness.

It also appears there is also a sense in which Kenkō wants to distance his enjoyment of idleness from boredom. In a remark on storytelling, he tells us that most stories are “lies, no doubt because the truth is so boring.”<sup>25</sup> A part of his analysis stems from understanding boredom as a state of disinterest. The truth is not boring in this instance because it makes us weary or restless, but because it is not interesting. In contrast to this, Kenkō tells us that in the idle moments when we are “going on a journey, whatever the destination, makes you feel suddenly

<sup>24</sup> Yoshida Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness*, tr. Meredith McKinney, (New York: Penguin, 2013), §75.

<sup>25</sup> Kenkō, §73.

awake and alive to everything.”<sup>26</sup> That is, our experiences of idleness do not seem to be meaningless or uninteresting. It’s likely that Kenkō takes his own work as an example of this. Although the experience of reading the *Tsurezuregusa* might feel like idle meandering at first, the reader cannot help but find meaning in its brief passages.

One need not agree with Kenkō entirely. In all fairness, his depiction of idleness seems to overstate how much we enjoy being idle. Still, the point he highlights – that idleness is not a response to disinterest or perceived meaninglessness – is reasonable enough. To that end, idleness would seem to be distinct from boredom. What’s more, a characteristic effect of boredom is the experience of time slowing down. This much is absent from idleness and is something I’d like to address next.

### **Time for Something More Boring**

In Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, we meet an airman stationed at the same base as Yossarian on the island of Pianosa. Named Dunbar, he explains to Yossarian that he hopes to live as long as he possibly can and by any means necessary. One of his primary life lengthening techniques is becoming as bored as he possibly can. On his account, time slows down when we are bored (or at least appears to slow down). As the world surrounding us begins to dull into a fog of boredom, it’s as though time goes along with it and begins to slow. By living life as boringly as possible, Dunbar will extend the perceived length of his life and heroically accomplish his goal of living as long as possible. All jokes aside, Dunbar has his finger on the pulse of a very interesting feature of the experience of boredom and its relationship to our experience of time.

Our perception of time dragging while we are bored is something we are all at least vaguely familiar with. As the expression goes, ‘time flies by when you’re having fun.’ The insidious and unspoken contrapositive of this expression might go something like, ‘time dies when you’re bored as hell.’ While I’m sitting, patiently reading through and sorting thousands of boring legal documents, I find myself looking down at my computer’s digital clock, 12:45pm, and I tell myself I’ll get through these next fifteen-minutes and then take my lunch break. After working for what feels like thirty-minutes, I look down to check how much time has passed. *Only five minutes? This clock must be broken!* I think to myself as the clock now reads 12:50pm.

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<sup>26</sup> Kenkō, §15.



In a chapter titled ‘The Perception of Time’ in his *Principles of Psychology*, William James explains that a boring “day full of waiting, of unsatisfied desire for change, will seem a small eternity.”<sup>27</sup> He argues that boredom emerges when our activities fail to meet our desired expectations. Because of this, we have been left empty and, presumably, bored. We are left bored, searching through the fog of our current situation looking for something to fill our thwarted desires; or, as Tolstoy describes in *Anna Karenina*, to fulfil our “desire for desires.”<sup>28</sup> The realization of this boredom, James argues, comes from our noticing the slower passage of time. If we do not notice the dragging of time, it is not as though we are not bored, but we don’t realize we are bored.

Martin Heidegger devotes a considerable amount of ink to the relationship between boredom and time in his lecture *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. Those who are acquainted with Heidegger will know this means boredom is no joke to him. Time takes a central role in all of Heidegger’s philosophy. So, if he believes boredom is distinctly related with time, it is of key importance to him. His analysis offers three distinct types of boredom (*Langweile* – also rendered as ‘long while’): being bored *by* something, being bored *with* something, and profound boredom. The last form, profound boredom, is most fundamental on Heidegger’s

<sup>27</sup> William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1950), chapter 15.

<sup>28</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, tr. Nathan Haskell Dole, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1899), part 5, chapter 8.

account, but it is conceptualized by Heidegger in dense and philosophically loaded jargon. What's more, it rarely appears in philosophical or scientific literature. For those reasons, we will only gloss over it briefly.

Heidegger's first form of boredom is remarkably similar to James' formulation of boredom. The first form occurs when we are bored *by* something, be it an individual, an object, or a situation more generally. When we are bored, waiting in a train station for example, we try to pass the time by distracting ourselves from our boredom. It should also be noted that we are unable to distract ourselves from our boredom. As time continues to crawl by, we continue to become more bored because of our thwarted desire to just hop on our train and get to our destination. As Heidegger notes, it leaves us in limbo, empty.<sup>29</sup> Being bored *by* leaves us in limbo because the dragging of time – whatever would have allowed us to regain interest, getting on the train, is delayed indefinitely.<sup>30</sup> This boredom leaves us empty for the same reason James explains. It leaves our desires unfulfilled and dejected. Because nothing about our situation allows us to regain interest, we are left empty with nothing at hand.<sup>31</sup>

The second form of boredom, being bored *with*, is supposedly more fundamental than the first on Heidegger's account. The boredom is considerably more insidious than the first so far as it is characterised by a lack of apparent boredom. What we are bored with is unknown. It has the character of "I know not what," as Heidegger puts it.<sup>32</sup> His example of this boredom revolves around a dinner party – one we have attended with the hopes of killing time. Everything about the party has been remarkably pleasant. The conversations were fun, the food was delicious, and even the music was well curated. That being said, we come home and after briefly reflecting on the evening we realize we were bored the entire time. The fact that the pastime, a dinner party, was so bland and formulaic makes it vacuous and leaves us empty. What's more, because the event lacks *any* amount of importance, Heidegger believes we have abandoned our own authentic selves. To that end, we have left ourselves entirely and are thus in limbo.<sup>33</sup> Being bored *with* isolates us in an artificial temporal sliver – alienated from our past and future and making time seemingly stand still. In this sense, the phrase 'killing time' takes on a very literal meaning for the second form of boredom. Time has, in a sense, died. For that reason, Heidegger takes this

<sup>29</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World Finitude, Solitude*, tr. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1983), 106-107.

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger, 103.

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, 114.

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger, 119-121.

to be a more fundamental sense of boredom. For those more well acquainted with Heidegger, he claims being bored *with* “*arises from out of Dasein itself*.”<sup>34</sup>

The third form of boredom, profound boredom, is the most fundamental form of boredom. It is a puzzling entity and Heidegger gives no example as to what the experience might be like. That being said, Heidegger seems to believe it is deeply important. To that end, Heidegger, like Russell, takes a positive outlook on the existence of boredom in our lives and that is, largely, the only similarity between the two thinkers beliefs on boredom. To reiterate a point I’ve made earlier, I’m skeptical of the idea of the existence of multiple types of boredom as Heidegger suggests. Having multiple boredoms seems to complicate the matter of understanding boredom. What really seems to be at play is the numerous ways in which we experience boredom – an interesting characteristic of the emotion. But let’s return to the discussion of time and its relationship to boredom.

All of this, despite James’ and Heidegger’s best efforts, is entirely speculative. The perception of time as it relates to boredom has only recently been discussed among wider scientific circles. A centerpiece of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s ground breaking theory of ‘flow states’ included extended discussions of time perception. In *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, he explains that during experiences of flow – what can be most easily explained as moments of effortless action that *flows* through someone naturally, for example a well trained ballerina is dancing at their best – the participants perceived perception of time would slow.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Csikszentmihalyi would later suggest that the experience of boredom was also related to a perceived slowing of time. This much is puzzling so far as boredom would seem to be the antithesis of flow. When bored, our actions seem to take great effort that does not come naturally.

Csikszentmihalyi’s remarks on boredom, although important, were not at the fore of his research. In his study, there was no clear examination of the experience of boredom as it relates to time. Instead, he had accounts of the experience of boredom. This is also similar for much literature on boredom. For example, sociologist Conrad (1997) continued to record experiential accounts of boredom.<sup>36</sup> Later, psychologists Martin and colleagues (2006) performed a

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<sup>34</sup> Heidegger, 128.

<sup>35</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> Peter Conrad, “It’s Boring: Notes on the Meanings of Boredom in Everyday Life,” *Qualitative Sociology* 20 (1997), pp. 465-475.

qualitative study that suggested perception of time would slow for individuals who were bored, but their study only included a small sample size of ten participants.<sup>37</sup>

More substantial studies on boredom and time also face trouble. London and Monell (1974) performed an experiment in which subjects would perform a task while the clock in their room would be manipulated to run faster or slower in order to shift perception of time.<sup>38</sup> Those in the group whose clocks were manipulated to move faster reported their task as boring. London and Monell remark that this may be due to a mismatch between perceived effort and perceived time. Because their clocks were moving faster than our standard time, the participants evaluated the task as boring so far as their cognitive efforts seemed to have taken up significantly more time than they expected. One problem with this is that perceived time of subjects was not measured but rather manipulated. So, London and Monell's study only tracks the *ad hoc* evaluations or rationalizations of its participants rather than their experiences of time perception while bored.

Watt (1991) performed a study in which subjects would respond to a supposedly boring task, circling numbers, as taking more or less time.<sup>39</sup> His results found that high-boredom-prone individuals were more likely to rate the task as taking more time. He later studied the subjective sense of time using a Likert scale and then asked participants to approximate the amount of time that had passed. This later measure showed that low- and high-boredom-prone individuals did not differ in perception of time. That being said, a single measure of subjective time perception is not reliable enough to certify the results Watt's experiment points toward. The strength of the relationship between time perception and boredom would need to be further studied.

This is what Dankert and Allman (2005) would go on to do.<sup>40</sup> Their experiment involved two tests. First, subjects performed an attentional blink task. Each subject would sit in front of a computer screen and detect the presence of target letters within a stream of fourteen alphanumeric stimuli. At the end, subjects would identify the target letters. Second, subjects performed a temporal estimation task. Subjects were asked to estimate the length of a illusory motion stimulus ranging between two to sixty seconds. Once the stimulus was completed,

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<sup>37</sup> M. Martin, G. Sadlo, and G. Stew, "The phenomenon of boredom," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2006), pp. 193-211.

<sup>38</sup> H. London and L. Monell, "Cognitive manipulations of boredom," in *Thought and Feeling*, ed. H. London and R. Nisbett, (Chicago: Aldine, 1974), pp. 44-59.

<sup>39</sup> John Watt, "Effect of boredom proneness on time perception," *Psychological Reports* 69 (1991), pp. 323-327.

<sup>40</sup> J. Dankert and A. Allman, "Time flies when you're having fun: Temporal estimation and the experience of boredom," *Brain and Cognition* 59 (2005), pp. 236-245.

subjects estimated how long it was present on the screen. The hope of performing these two experiments was to determine which contributed to the experience of boredom most.

Their study found no difference in high-boredom-prone or low-boredom-prone individuals in the attentional blink test. In fact, those who experience low-levels of boredom frequently *underestimated* the duration of time far more frequently than those with high-levels of boredom. More interestingly, high-boredom-prone individuals had a substantially higher error-value when estimating the subjective perception of time passing. So far as this is the case, their study is a strong indication that the slowing down of time is a component of the experience of boredom.

### **Some Rambling Concerns**

I have a handful of worries that, unfortunately, I have no solutions to. It concerns me that the study conducted by Dankert and Allman found that high-boredom-prone individuals experience a slowing down of time. Why? Isn't this the proof we're looking for? The answer to that question is both yes and no. This *is* beneficial because it tells us that the experience of boredom is related to a slowed perception of time. It is concerning because it *only* cements this for those who are high-boredom-prone like myself. The slowing down of perceived time would seem to be an experience most share when bored. So why would this correlation only appear with those who are high-boredom-prone? My best guess would be that the experiments were not boring enough to induce boredom on those who were low-boredom-prone.

This much leads to a new worry. Was boredom actually induced on any of the subjects? Indeed, the BPS would seem to be a reliable measure to find individuals prone to boredom. And the tasks mentioned would also seem to be boring. But this does not imply that those individuals in the studies actually reached a state of boredom over the course of these experiments. Another adjacent question relates to the very experience of boredom in these studies. Did these studies truly induce boredom onto the candidates surveyed in the study? Or, did they actually induce a host of seemingly similar states such as idleness or apathy?

More pressing for my project, am I doing something wrong by actively seeking boredom? An important part of the state seems to be that we stumble into it (or it into us). This question implies that it might not be possible to manufacture boredom. When we tell someone not to think of a pelican wearing a small tophat, they cannot help but conjure the image (and I'm sure you

didn't by the way). Maybe boredom carries an inverted relationship to this. When we tell someone to become bored, or attempt to bring them into a state of boredom, they will not do so – it may seem that boredom is a state into which we fall, rather than a state that we actively seek.

This might seem to be a ridiculous worry. We could tell the participants of a study involving boredom and time perception that the study has to do with emotional responses to counting and mention nothing about time and boredom. All the while, we are twisting the knobs and pulling the levers behind the scenes making sure to pick up on what we are most likely assuming to be boredom. Because they are unaware of our true goals, their boredom won't be an artificial boredom at least. Still, there is a worry that we are not *actually* studying boredom but instead idleness. Moreover, the concern cannot be mended for me especially as it relates to the paper you are reading currently because I am still *actively* attempting to engage boredom. Regretfully, I have no answers to these questions currently.

## Watching Paint Dry

I'm staring at the freshly painted wall of my basement. It's close to midnight now. I began staring at the wall at 11pm because I didn't want the footsteps of my family above distracting me or frustrating me for the three hours I've decided to bore myself by watching paint dry. Watching paint dry might be one of the most commonly used English idioms expressing a state of boredom and there is good reason for it.

It's filled with a sense of anticipation as we patiently wait. Like Heidegger's train example, the destination of painting something is the completed and dried product. But our desire for the wall to be dry is thwarted. To solve this problem, most people go do another task to fill the dead time while paint is drying. To busy yourself with something else is often a fairly foolproof solution for a momentary lapse into boredom. What makes watching paint dry so boring is the fact that we are not heading off to do something else. We sit staring without anything else left to do. We are left empty and in limbo as Heidegger would put it.

My situation is obviously a little different. I could be doing any other number of things, but I've brought this upon myself. This troubling thought is prominent throughout my experience watching paint dry and in some senses I believe it made the experience all the more boring. Time would drag on and all I could think about were the numerous other activities I might be able to spend my time doing. Then, in an almost sadistic sense, I was forced to thwart those desires for

the sake of this project. Similar to my experience listening to *Vexations*, a great sense of anxiety loomed over me. I was anxious about being bored. I was anxious about what I might write about once this was over. I was anxious because I could be doing so many other worthwhile things. And I was anxious because this would not be the last time I was doing this.



Truth be told, I was technically not watching paint dry this first time. I was watching primer dry. This first experience was a kind of trial run, or primer if you will, for the later experience of watching paint dry in which I would spend another three hours staring at the same wall. Most of what I told myself this time around was to focus on this anxiety and boredom and sit with it. If this experience would be anything like *Vexations*, later on these feelings would subside as I grew comfortable with them. What's more, the experience might even become meditative. The meditative quality found in my experiences is something I have alluded to throughout this paper and is something that occurred during my first experience while watching paint dry.

I'm now staring at the same wall for a second time. Similarly, it is late and I've quickly put my paint roller in a bucket of lukewarm water while turning my head to the new wet low luster acrylic sheen of my basement wall. Soon, boredom ensues. Like the boredoms I've described before, it is a crushing boredom. I'm startled by how fast this boredom set in considering my three hours of gazing have only just started. Noticing this, I sink deeper into my

boredom. I begin to ease myself into it as if it were a cool body of water whose surface reflection might display something about my own experience at hand.

I've been practicing focused attention meditation on and off for the last six years and have attempted to take it more seriously within the last two months. Further, my more serious practice of focused attention meditation has been punctuated by attempts to progress in open monitoring meditation. Leaning into my boredom, I am not just sensing a refocusing of my attention like I experienced while watching *10 Skies*. I'm beginning to sense the feeling I had much later into my experience listening to *Vexations* or watching paint dry the first time. That is, a relaxed and calm acceptance of my boredom.

The practice I'm using here is what we would most commonly refer to as mindfulness. As Wallace noted, we experience specific emotions through certain habituated or default responses. For example, I experience boredom through a habituated response of anxiety. These habits might be best understood as a cushion we use to distance ourselves from an unpleasant experience like boredom. The goal of being mindful is to be aware of and present to the experience our mind is going through – to be alive to both the habituated response we have to an experience and the experience itself.

This kind of self-reflexive effect is discussed by Varela and colleagues (1999). For example, we combat the feelings of restlessness or boredom when we become mindful of the sensation of restlessness we are in the throes of experiencing. "One begins to be able to see the restlessness as such and to become patient with it, rather than becoming automatically lost in it." What this suggests, they go on to say, "is a change in the nature of reflection from an abstract, disembodied activity to an embodied (mindful), open reflection" where embodied refers to reflection that brings the experience of both mind and body together.<sup>41</sup>

Once the three hours had ended, I stood up from my seat and began to reflect on the fact that I remained unperturbed through the whole experience. I cleaned up the space, washed the paint roller, and began getting ready for bed. Each moment of this second time watching paint dry truly felt like a meditative experience. For those skeptical of this, I'd like to flesh out the possible connection between meditation and boredom.

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<sup>41</sup> Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 26-27.

## Meditation is Boring

The point of watching paint dry is interestingly connected with the Sōtō school of Zen meditation. Like Bodhidharma, the semi-legendary originator of Zen who is said to have stared at a cave wall for nine years, students of the Sōtō school will often face a blank wall, eyes partially open, and meditate. Seven years into this experience, Bodhidharma is said to have fallen asleep. Being dissatisfied with himself, Bodhidharma cut off his eyelids so as to never allow himself to rest his gaze. Those well acquainted with *The Pale King* might find echoes of this tale in the character Toni Ware, who is able to keep her eyes open indefinitely.<sup>42</sup> This is obviously a far cry from meditation. However, Wallace does indicate a theme of meditation being introduced later on in the book when he makes reference to the “Midwest meditation semifinals” in an incomplete note.<sup>43</sup> Aside from this, I am unaware of any discussions attempting to connect the experience of boredom and meditation.

The comparison between boredom and meditation might seem odd at first. Isn’t the meditator in a state of calm and the bored person in a state of restlessness and weariness? The answer is both yes and no. For those who meditate frequently, meditation might bring great calm. But for any person new to meditative practice, a great sense of boredom is likely associated with your first experience. For those who are inexperienced, the bottom line is that meditation is boring. Because they have not experienced its benefits, or been able to actually achieve a meditative state, meditation often comes off as dull and tedious.

For example, practice of Theravada Vipassanā meditation often starts with focused attention on breathing. In focussed attention meditation, the meditator directs attention toward an object or experience. The goal is to maintain this attention for an extended period of time. As your mind wanders (it often will), you are instructed to recognize the fact that you have lost focus and then return to the object your focus was initially on. In a similar vein, the Sōtō school asks the meditator to become aware of their stream of thought. This awareness allows one to notice *makyō* (spontaneously arising images) which can then be ignored so far as these *makyō* are taught to be illusions.<sup>44</sup>

This much is difficult for those who are new to meditation. We have a tendency to get stuck on extraneous thoughts because of the restlessness we might inevitably experience while

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<sup>42</sup> Wallace, *The Pale King*, 441-442.

<sup>43</sup> Wallace, *The Pale King*, 549.

<sup>44</sup> James Austin, *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 373-376.

meditating, for example the anxious thoughts I was caught in while observing paint drying above. Despite initial stages of restlessness, there are long term benefits we gain from acquiring this skill of focused attention meditation. A kind of observational ability might come to mind first. Someone who is skilled in focused attention meditation will be able to quickly notice distracting thoughts or emotions as they arise with ease. Along with that, they will also be able to remove themselves from those distractions. Finally, it will be easier for one to redirect their focus on the desired object of attention.

Once one has a firm grasp on focused attention meditation, people will often move onto what is called open monitoring meditation. In contrast to focused attention meditation, during open monitoring the meditator is asked to not focus on any particular object while remaining awake to each moment-to-moment experience. This much is also rather difficult. For those new to this method of meditation, they might find it difficult to not doze off as their attention disengages from any explicit object to recenter toward. In this sense, focused attention meditation might bring about sensations of weariness that will need to be combated.

Practice of open monitoring meditation also brings about a handful of benefits. As Thompson (2015) notes, “open [monitoring] trains awareness of awareness.” That is, it trains specific meta-cognitive abilities like “implicit aspects of experience, such as the degree of vividness in awareness from moment to moment or the way that transitory thoughts and feelings typically capture attention and provoke more thoughts and habitual emotional reactions.”<sup>45</sup> What these thoughts might look like, for example, is my realization that I have a habitual tendency to respond to boredom with anxiety. With this knowledge, one is better able to anticipate their reactions and modify their experience from a meta-cognitive level to avoid distraction while meditation.

A part of what I’ve been attempting so far is drawing out a connection between boredom and meditation. I hope what might have seemed like an odd association at first is clearer now specifically as it relates to feelings of restlessness and weariness, which are often associated with boredom. Again, as Thompson notes, “during meditation, self-related thoughts and emotions arise spontaneously, especially when your mind is restless or drowsy.”<sup>46</sup> In this sense, to remain in a meditative state, we must balance between restlessness and weariness. What this

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<sup>45</sup> Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 52.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, 349.

preemptively suggests is that boredom might best be combated through meditation on the experience of boredom itself.

In a broader Buddhist context, boredom is likely to be understood as a form of *taṇhā* which can be rendered as longing, thirst, or desire. All things considered, we desire to be interested in the things around us. Interest is a source of psychic vitality. But desire also implies a disinterest in our current environment. When we desire we are operating under the assumption that there is something unsatisfactory with the present situation, like Heidegger's man waiting for the train. What this reveals, on a Buddhist account, is a signal from our mind that we have been left empty by our environment.

To some extent, we have lost connection to the world around us and it no longer feels like our own. This might serve to explain why Heidegger portrays boredom as a kind of “homesickness” or longing to return to what we once experience.<sup>47</sup> This theme also emerges more recently in the work of Elpidorou (2015) who argues that when we are bored, we experience the world as alien to a certain degree.<sup>48</sup> When we are bored, the Buddhist perspective suggests we pause to observe what might be boring us. We should meditate on the experience of boredom. This is strange advice since we normally seek to avoid boredom instead of sit within it. Nonetheless, it would have seemed to make a difference during my second experience watching paint dry.

Is this a realistic goal? A huge emphasis in meditation is placed on our attention, something we know to be scrambled while bored. I believe it is realistic so far as we would only be placing our attention on the experience of boredom. When bored, it is our focus on boredom that distracts our attention from other matters, like taxes in Drinions case for example. So, our attention will naturally be drawn to our boredom. In fact, distractions such as *makyō* might be less pervasive since our attention is drawn so strongly toward our boredom.

## Slowing Down to Open New Perspectives

I'm rocking back and forth in my chair while making a tally noting the number of times I've yawned throughout my continuous viewing experience of the film *#monalisa* (2020). This tally marks my twenty-eighth yawn. The film is just over eleven hours long and contains

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<sup>47</sup> Heidegger, 80.

<sup>48</sup> Andreas Elpidorou, “The Significance of Boredom: A Sartrean Reading,” in *Philosophy of Mind and Phenomenology*, ed. D. Dahlstrom, A. Elpidorou, and W. Hopp, (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 268-283.

fifty-two shots of the *Mona Lisa* exhibit at the Louvre and all it's many patrons in slow-motion – all too painful slow-motion. Like past experiences, my goal is simple. I'll sit for eleven hours, watch this movie, and become bored.

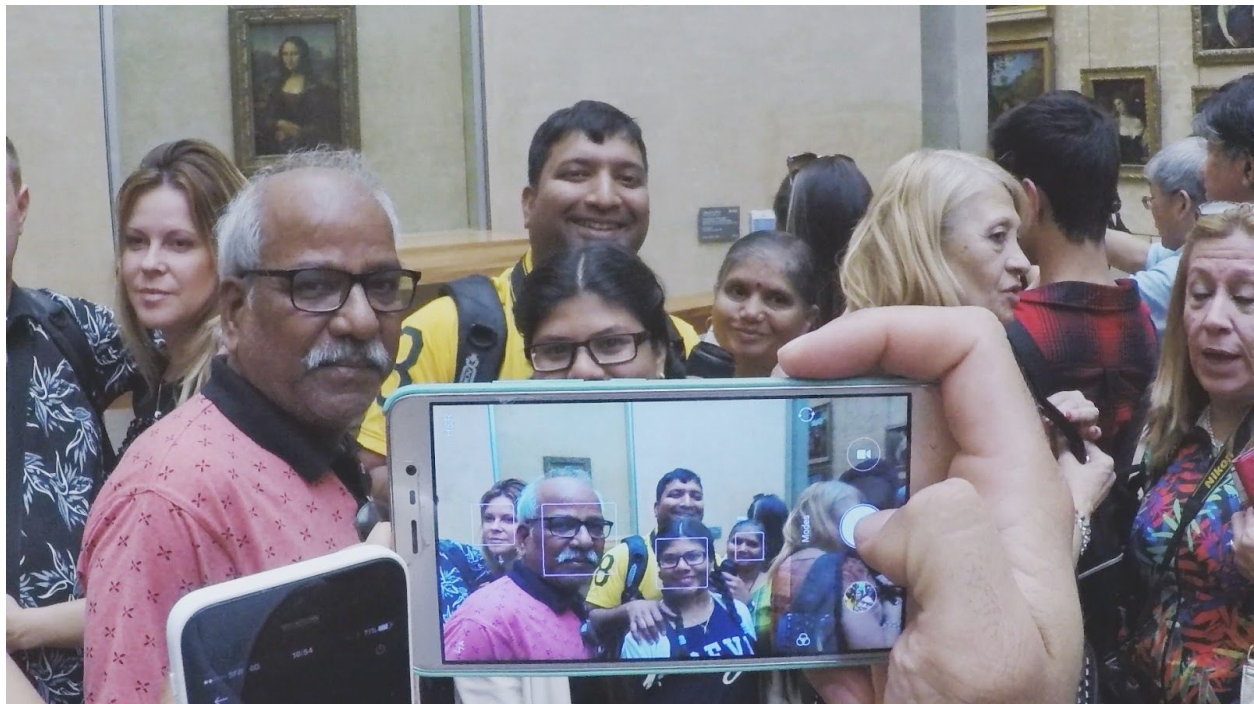
It is with good reason that we conclude on this work. It seemingly ties together many of the tangentially related and partially intersecting themes I've attempted to sketch throughout this paper. For example, there is nothing leisurely about viewing *#monalisa*. The film's epic size does not allow for a leisurely viewing so long as you actually intend to view the film as opposed to play in the background. And although the directors Jennifer Anderson and Vernon Lott expressed that one possible way of viewing the film could be “as a moving painting in the background,” this would more likely capture an experience closer to being idle.

As we've already noted, my aim is not to experience idleness, but boredom. That is not to say *#monalisa* is intrinsically boring – far from it, many moments shine with an amazing intensity that demand grabs interest – but much of it dulls the viewer (especially if they are as reckless as I am and trudge through a continuous viewing). Indeed, in an interview I was fortunate enough to conduct with Anderson and Lott, they explain that they “tried cutting out the boring parts, but the film seemed inauthentic and contrived.” Slipping into boredom is, in some ways, seems to be a vital part of this film. Again, Anderson and Lott suggest that one must endure through the boredom in order for the shining moments to have their distinctive “power.” This much was true on my viewing where many moments mirrored my experience watching *10 Skies* in which I would suddenly reengage and find the film deeply moving and interesting – eventually landing back in boredom.

What's more, the use of slow-motion is deeply suggestive of the experience of boredom. However, and very interestingly, their use of slow-motion was not to bore, but to allow us to focus our attention. In an email correspondence with Scott MacDonald, Anderson and Lott explain that a part of their use of slow-motion is an attempt to force viewers to “slow down and observe” the patrons of the exhibit with great attention. At its core, the film is certainly a commentary on attention. Once we focus our attention to the film, the viewer is immediately drawn to the fact that even the *Mona Lisa* is not capturing the attention of those at the exhibit. Instead, people's phones are actually the center of their attention. Instead of simply viewing the piece, one's viewing experience is mediated through their phone camera. While we are forced to “slow down and observe,” those at the exhibit focus little attention – trudge through the crowd,

take a photo, and leave.<sup>49</sup> Ironically, this is, in some ways, many people's experience of watching *#monalisa*. Anderson and Lott explained to me that their Vimeo analytics indicate that “most of the [viewers] make it about 20% in.” Truth be told, that’s not all too bad. Two hours of viewing ain’t too shabby when few will watch *all* eleven hours.

Still, like those paying little attention at the exhibit, it seems likely that those watching *#monalisa* are equally as vulnerable to more seemingly interesting experiences, for example one's phone. Anderson and Lott explained to me that “we live in a culture where people are afraid to be bored; we constantly ‘busy’ ourselves with our devices, even in quiet moments.” In a similar observation to Russell’s, Anderson and Lott rationalize our fear of boredom as a primary cause for our dependence on exciting attention grabbing solutions to boredom like our phones. It should be reminded that while our phones are a quick and easy way to focus our attention, they typically place us right back into boredom. Similar to the distinction I made when discussing Russell’s views on excitement, we would be better served to find something we are genuinely *interested* in as opposed to *excited* by.



It should be noted that the cinematographer, Nandan Rao, was not given permission to film at the Louvre. What this also means is not a single person was truly aware of their filming.

<sup>49</sup> Scott MacDonald, “*#monalisa*: An Interview with Vernon Lott, Jennifer Anderson, Nandan Rao, Peter Broderick and David Allered,” *Cineaste* (forthcoming).

By utilizing a GoPro, Rao was able to bypass security due to the camera's inconspicuous nature. Taking the role of a particularly tech interested tourist, Rao glides through crowds taking shots so close the viewer becomes uncomfortable. We pass through people's hair, view their phones with great detail, and even share moments like a kiss that seemingly lasts minutes. Although we find people glancing toward the camera – at one moment a teenage boy sticks his tongue at the camera in a wonderful and endearing way – they remain naive to the fact that Rao is no ordinary tourist.

The primary effect this had on me was a kind of distortion between perspectives. At times it feels as though we are entirely within the first-person; viewing from a kind of observational perspective like that of Rao or our own if we happened to be at the exhibit. *I'm watching a group emerge from the crowd.* Then, as someone's shoulder passes our immediate view, the camera will shift and follow. Pacing behind this individual, we no longer take the perspective of a first-person onlooker, but instead shift to the third-person. *She lifts her phone to take the photo.* Turning around to leave the crowded viewing gallery, we return to the first-person. Being too crowded, we wait for a moment and someone makes eye contact with us and perspective shifts to the second-person. *You stick your tongue out.* What is special is the sensation that we are taking on each of these roles as the viewer. We are not simply the viewer *qua* viewer. We spend such a long duration within each of these moments that it is as though we try on the perspectives of different people within the exhibit.

During my viewing, I'm reminded of a passage from the Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi*. The passage illustrates a dream Zhuang Zhou had in which he was a butterfly

fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Surely, Zhou and the butterfly count as two distinct identities!<sup>50</sup>

The imagery, shifting between human and butterfly, certainly illustrates something similar to the experience of shifting between first-, second-, and third-person while viewing *#monalisa*. It is

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<sup>50</sup> *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings* (With Selections from Traditional Commentaries), tr. Brook Ziporyn, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 2:49.

interesting to see how these perspectives might map onto the experience of boredom while viewing the film. From the first-person, I feel boredom and all its emotional correlates, like anxiety. From the second-person, you are able to recognize this experience from a cognitive level and observe it. And, from the third-person, they are able to regulate this experience, approving or disapproving it, from a meta-cognitive level.

I assume that we cannot avoid the first-person experience of boredom. In Stoic terms, that is not within our rational control. But it is my suspicion that most of us have a habitual tendency to lean upon the third-person experience of boredom so as to regulate it. Like pain, we have the meta-cognitive tendency to respond to the sensation of boredom with disapproving anger or fear. We dislike the experience, and attempt to regulate the emotion through these habits. Responses like these hardly seem to help. Russell dramatically claims that our fear of boredom causes us to wage wars. This is obviously dramatic, but our fear of boredom is certainly what contributes to our strong avoidance of it by using exciting distractions such as our phones. By disapproving of our boredom on a meta-cognitive level, we are shooting the messenger. We only provide fuel for our fear or anger of boredom. Certainly we don't want to approve of boredom. Then we'll simply remain within it. So, what other option do we have?

Open monitoring meditation might give us a solution. So far as open monitoring meditation can expose the habitual emotional reactions we have to boredom, it can also help us mediate them. It allows us the opportunity to observe our boredom from a new perspective, the second-person. By observing our boredom from the second-person perspective, we are able to cast a more critical gaze onto the experience. Instead of simply approving or disapproving of boredom, as if the experience will be swayed by rational choice, the second-person perspective provides us with the exploratory means to understand why we are bored. You are bored... Why might that be? The second-person perspective seemingly paves a middle way for us to experience boredom.

Largely, what I'm referring to as the second-person perspective is the meditative perspective outlined above. We must not fear boredom, but understand it as a form of desire – a desire to be interested in the world around us. There is nothing to be feared about this, nothing to be angry about, nothing to feel anxious about. We lose interest in our surroundings all the time. What we must do is cast a critical gaze so as to understand what is boring us as opposed to

shooting down the experience of boredom. By meditating on the state of boredom, we might just be able to do that.