

Chapter Seven

Living with Boredom

Boredom is worth exploring partly because it is so hard to look at, so much taken for granted as an aspect of life.

—Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom*

It is like dust. You go about and never notice....But stand still for an instant and there it is, coating your face and hands.

—George Bernanos, *Ennui to Go*

The dominant leitmotiv of philosophical and psychological literature on boredom is that boredom is a problem. The *prevalence* of boredom—either in the lives of particular boredom-prone individuals, or in post-modern culture generally—is a problem. And what bored people *do* is a problem: they pursue meaningless diversions and indulge in normative delinquencies ranging from goofing off instead of working to overeating to crime. The implicit message of this boredom-as-problem literature is that the human capacity for boredom is not itself interesting. Boredom becomes interesting only when it causes or signals trouble.

By contrast, I think that boredom itself is interesting—in part because it's puzzling. Why, for example, would the bored be especially disposed to remedy their boredom via meaningless diversions like playing solitaire or internet surfing and by “normative

delinquencies” like goofing off at work even when they have options for making more productive or meaningful use of their time? And why does repetition bore? This fact is typically taken as an obvious truism requiring no further explanation. But when what repeats is something that initially interested us, why would repetition over time produce boredom, as opposed to, say, contentment or a longer period of interest?

More importantly, the human capacity for boredom—not just some problematic cause or consequence of boredom—is interesting because it illuminates the difficulties inherent in leading the life of an evaluator. Attending to boredom shifts our philosophical gaze from the *ranking* and *end setting* activities of evaluators to the *temporal lives* of evaluators who seek out, meet up with, spend time with, and act with respect to value-qualities. Boredom, I will argue, is virtually inevitable, and not because the world itself is boring, but because the kinds of lives that evaluators typically live create the conditions for boredom. Hence the title of this chapter, “Living with Boredom.” It is boredom’s connection with the difficulties involved in leading the life of an evaluator and the special vulnerability of some evaluators to boredom that, I think, makes boredom especially interesting.

Not taking a boredom-as-problem approach is considerably at odds with the literature on boredom (in psychology, sociology, philosophy, and literary criticism). I begin, then, by describing three main boredom-as-problem approaches and by offering reasons for not approaching boredom this way. Those approaches, however, inadvertently expose puzzling features of boredom, like the two mentioned above, which an adequate analysis of boredom needs to explain. I then examine principal life circumstances that invite boredom: stalled lives, normative constraints, value disappointment, value satiety, and leisure. The aim here is to bring into view the different shapes that boredom takes and their connections to

different sorts of difficulties that evaluators face in living with value-qualities.

I. The Boredom-as-Problem Approach

Boredom may seem an unlikely place to look for any significant insight about evaluators even if we take ‘evaluator’ quite broadly to refer to beings who appreciate a wide spectrum of value-qualities; who rate objects, actions, and character traits; who set and pursue ends and assess instrumental means; who grasp, comply with, and assess their own and others’ responsibility for violating norms; and who are appropriate subjects of moral critique. First, rather than involving the activation of capacities that are linked with evaluation, boredom appears to be the inactivation of those capacities. Typically, boredom is marked by the absence of either desire or aversion. It is a state of indifference, disengagement, inability to pay attention, and lack of motivation. Evaluation appears to go off-line insofar as the bored find nothing worthy of positive or negative evaluation and often are at a loss to say what would not be boring. Boredom is, in Goodstein’s words, an “experience without qualities,” or more precisely an experience of a world whose qualities do not invite evaluative differentiation. Second, while virtually anything can be the object of boredom, much of what bores us is trivial—TV, the dinner conversation, one’s hairstyle, waiting in line. Boredom in this respect is like embarrassment; to the extent that it is an evaluative attitude, boredom’s orientation, like that of embarrassment, is not typically toward important value-qualities (such as injustice, harm, benevolence, suffering, loss of status, threat).

Almost any emotion one could name *other than* boredom bears some interesting connection to the capacities, concerns, and actions of evaluators. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that those who theorize about boredom generally do not take as their subject matter

boredom as such but something that is only contingently connected with boredom, and in particular, something that makes some types or some quantities of boredom look like an important problem worth reflecting on.

Boredom Causes Problematic Behavior

One strategy is to focus on the personally and socially harmful things that people do out of boredom. Boredom is, for example, causally connected with gambling, drinking, drug abuse, overeating, crime, dropping out of school, juvenile delinquency, risk-taking (e.g., adolescent train surfing, which is often lethal), poor task performance including shoddy workmanship, and social conflict.

In its focus on social and personal ills caused by boredom, this boredom-as-problem approach ignores the fact that people put their boredom to many uses other than socially or personally harmful ones. Some of these are relatively innocent—gossiping, shopping, net surfing and channel surfing, cleaning the house, doodling, and napping, to mention a few. Others are salutary. Boredom is sometimes credited with being a stimulus to creativity, invention, and positive life changes.¹ Elijah Milgram, for example, argues that all final ends are bound to become boring after a time, and that this is not regrettable. Rather, we should see the capacities for interest and boredom as “among the top-level components of rationality....Their function is not to stabilize the self, but to push you past the structures of final ends that you might have taken for your personal that-without-which-not.”²

If boredom can be put to bad, innocent, and good uses, then boredom is not a distinctively problematic emotion, since the same might be said of the uses to which people put any emotion. In order to make the case that boredom is an especially problematic

emotion, the first strategy would need to be supplemented with some account of what it is about boredom itself, as opposed to the limited opportunities or misguided imagination of some bored people, that produces a tendency to relieve boredom with bad behavior rather than through innocent or creative outlets. If it turned out, for example, that many seemingly innocent escapes from boredom in fact involve normative delinquencies (for example, the bored grad student balances her checkbook instead of working on her dissertation, or the bored faculty member doodles instead of preparing a question for the guest lecturer), and if we had some account of *why* escaping boredom through normative delinquencies made sense given what boredom itself is like, then an analysis of boredom might both give us some insight into both the distinctive nature of boredom and into the lives of evaluators. I think there *is* a reason why bored evaluators often indulge in normative delinquencies, but the first strategy takes this for granted rather than explaining it. An adequate account of boredom should shed some light on the puzzling attraction of the bored to normative delinquencies.

Chronic, but Not Situational, Boredom Is a Problem

Some evaluative attitudes point primarily outward from the evaluating subject toward qualities of objects. Disgust, admiration, and resentment are like this. Here the language of feeling is part of the language of criticism and appraisal. Other evaluative attitudes point primarily inward toward the subjective inclinations of the individual. Loving, liking, being pleased by are like this. While individuals often have reasons for loving or being pleased—reasons having to do with the qualities of the things loved and the things that please—‘loving’ and ‘being pleased by’ are part of the language of subjective self-revelation. Boredom points both outward toward the qualities of the world that *are* boring *and* inward

toward some feature of the bored person that *prevents* engagement. We are bored both from without and from within.³

It is tempting to try to accommodate this feature of boredom by sorting boredoms into two different types. Indeed, psychoanalytically inspired or influenced literature on boredom does just that.⁴ On the one hand, there is “normal,” “situational,” “responsive” boredom. Such boredom points outward, responding to what is reasonably regarded as boring—the boring lecturer who has nothing interesting to say or the boring psychoanalysis patient who says nothing the analyst hasn’t heard before. On the other hand, there is “chronic,” “pathological” boredom, which points inward toward an internal source. On the conventional psychoanalytic account, chronic boredom stems from early repression of unacceptable impulses that leave the individual in a state of tension but unaware of how to discharge it, and wanting help from the external world but unable to find it. In Otto Fenichel’s words, “the person who is bored can be compared to someone who has forgotten a name and inquires about it from others.”⁵ Offering another psychoanalytic account, Richard Bernstein suggests that the training of children for success that has started at younger and younger ages since the 1950s, and the practice of taking children along on adult outings where they are required not to get excited results in children learning to cope with parental demands for obedience through massive repression of feeling.⁶ Once in adolescence or adulthood, the incapacity to feel spells chronic boredom.

A philosophical version of this chronic-boredom-as-problem approach, developed in greatest detail by Lars Svendsen, distinguishes ordinary episodes of being bored with the boring from a more chronic existential or profound boredom.⁷ Existential boredom originates, however, not in psychological pathology, but in the loss of any grounding for

valuation or attribution of meaning to human lives in the absence of a theological guarantee of value and meaning as well as in a loss of confidence in the authority of traditions to bestow meaning on life activities. Existential boredom might fairly be described as an encounter with the absurdity of human life, that is, with the absence of any ultimate basis for thinking that how we spend our lives is grounded in anything other than sheer choice. From this more philosophical viewpoint, a person might reasonably regard human life as essentially boring because there is no alleged value or meaning that, in fact, is worth taking an interest in.

Because the psychoanalytic and philosophic analyses of chronic boredom set aside situational boredom as uninteresting because unproblematic, these analyses implicitly deny that there is anything interesting about either the human capacity for boredom or the vast majority of boring moments experienced by the vast majority of people. To set aside situational boredom in favor of its more exotic cousin on the grounds that, after all, some things just *are* boring, period, is to miss the way that warranted boredom differs from other warranted emotions.

Things aren't boring in the way that they are pitiful or enraging or enviable. In these latter cases, the warrant, if there is one, is entirely within the objects themselves—the suffering of some being, the extremity of a wrong, the greater good fortune of another. By contrast, things can *become* boring without any change in the things themselves. The psychotherapy patient's narrative isn't boring on first hearing, but now, ten sessions in, the same narrative is boring. Our final ends, if Milgram is right, are not boring when we choose them; they become boring over time simply in virtue of continuing to be our same ends, not in virtue of any change in the worthiness of those ends. Or consider Bernard Williams'

assessment of why immortality would be boring. He takes up the fictional character, Elina Makropulos, whose biological age has been frozen at forty-two and whose character remains the same. In Williams' view, what makes immortality unlivable for her, and what explains her refusal, after 342 years of life, to keep taking the drug that keeps her alive is that "everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 [of a certain sort of character] had already happened to her."⁸ In these cases, it is the repetition of more of the same that warrants boredom. But why would more of the same be so unwelcome? It won't do to say that repetitiveness, monotony, lack of novelty just *are* boring, and extended eternally, are unbearably boring. One wants to know how sheer repetition could have this effect on evaluators. There is surely a place where explanation runs out, but to stop at "repetition is boring" is to stop too soon. One wants to know what this says about the way that evaluators engage with value-qualities. An adequate analysis of boredom should shed light on the puzzling transformation of the interesting into the boring via repetition.

The Amount of Post-Modern Boredom Is Problem

A third strategy for rendering boredom interesting enough to warrant theoretical reflection depends not on singling out an especially dramatic (because pathological or existential) form of boredom, but in locating the drama in the historical emergence and proliferation of boredom. Boredom is a problem because the world didn't use to be so boring. It is now, and is increasingly so. The principal basis for the claim that the pre-modern world was not so boring is etymological. 'Bore' enters the English vocabulary mid-18th century and 'boring' mid-19th century. Different authors cite different complexes of causal factors for the modern origin and post-modern escalation of boredom.⁹ Included on the roster are: the

loss of a theological or tradition-based ground for attributing meaning and value to activities; a shift in the conception of time from meaningful natural and cultural rhythms to a sequence of identical quantifiable moments; the industrial revolution's separation of work from leisure and the regimentation of the workday, which increases boredom at work and introduces the problem of what to do with leisure time; and the expansion of affluence and leisure time that places the problem of free time at the doorstep of more people.

Those more interested in contemporary contributions to the veritable plague of boredom cite the blandness and repetitiveness of urban design (including housing developments and strip malls); the American quest for certainty and predictability; a decline in the difficulty, discomfort, and inconvenience of life; mass produced and disposable goods; multi-tasking; and the accelerated tempo of modern life.¹⁰

This boredom-as-problem approach comes closer than the previous two to illuminating a connection between boredom and the lives of evaluators, or at least the lives of post-modern evaluators. If the world itself has become more boring, evaluators today will have a much tougher time escaping boredom than evaluators in earlier eras.

One might wonder, however, about the truth of the claim that the world *is* more boring. The principal bit of evidence—that the word ‘boring’ comes into use mid-19th century—*might* indicate that pre-modern people were less bored. But that etymological fact is compatible with two other hypotheses. First, pre-modern people might have felt bored but simply lacked the label ‘boredom’ for that feeling. While leisure may bore *us*, so we have more of *that* kind of boredom than pre-moderns, there may well have been other aspects of the pre-modern world that would have made *that* life equally, though differently, boring, say, hours-long masses in a language one didn't understand, or potatoes for every dinner. Perhaps

they lacked the label ‘boring’ for those long, incomprehensible masses or those all-too-familiar potatoes because they organized their psychological space differently, for example, in terms of boredom’s historical predecessors ennui and acedia; or perhaps because, as Patricia Spacks suggests, they had other terms of appraisal that, for them, adequately did the work of our “it’s boring.”¹¹ In short, pre-moderns could have been bored in the absence of a label in just the way that they might have had diabetes or suffered post-traumatic stress disorder in the absence of the labels ‘diabetes’ or ‘PTSD’.

A second compatible hypothesis is that while pre-modern people did not feel bored, the world in fact had just as many boring features then as it does now. Here the case would be similar to that of other recently constructed notions such as *human right* and *childhood*; while pre-moderns lacked such concepts and found neither human rights violations nor childhoods in their world, we might nevertheless think that such terms had application, e.g., that women’s human rights were violated when they were burned as witches or that children in pre-modern eras were typically deprived of their childhoods. If so the proliferation of boredom is to be credited to a modern discovery about the way the world is, not to a special problem with the modern and post-modern worlds.

Even granting the hypothesis that the world has become more boring, the specific features of modern and post-modern life cited to explain the emergence of boredom as a problem worthy of a name are puzzling. How could *both* regimented workdays *and* leisure be principal causes of boredom? If what is boring about regimented workdays is that one is told what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and when to stop doing it, one would think that unregimented leisure would be a principal source of *relief* from boredom. What are evaluators thinking when they complain that being told what to do with their time *and* that

being free to decide for themselves what to do with their time produce boredom? An adequate account of boredom should shed some light on why both regimented and leisure time bore.

Boredom and the Loss of Evaluative Meaning

The claim that boredom has proliferated since the modern period is predicated not only on an etymological fact and facts about changes in the organization of human life activities. It is also predicated on observations about how our *thinking* about the world has changed. The most often cited difference is the loss of a theological grounding of value and meaning. The world bores because everything is, ultimately, meaningless and without value. But surely this is neither a correct description of how value and meaning are now understood nor a correct description of what the bored usually mean when they complain that what they do with their lives lacks meaning.

Rather than evacuating the world of meaning and value, skepticism about an external grounding of meaning and value, occasioned a shift towards connecting value and meaning to human valuing activities, valuing activities reflected in individuals' feelings and in a human sense of what matters. A tighter connection between value, valuing activities, and a human sense of what matters opened up a space for thinking about what might be valuable or meaningful not only from an impersonal or divine standpoint, but also for thinking about what might be personally meaningful to individual evaluators, a meaning for which individual feelings might seem an especially reliable indicator. The subjects in Richard Bargdill's study of life boredom, for example, do not complain of there being no ultimate reason to value one thing over another; theirs is not an existential boredom. Rather, they

complain of being stuck in lives that are not the ones they want for themselves that they ended up with after having “compromised their personal goals for less desirable projects.”¹² In short, while granting that boredom is an evaluative attitude that sometimes registers the lack of value in, or meaninglessness of, what one spends time with, one might doubt that (most) boredom can be traced to a modern crisis of value and meaning.

Analyses of boredom that connect boredom tightly to absence of meaning face two further difficulties. First, what individuals find meaningful sometimes bores. Lars Svendsen confesses at the beginning of his book on boredom, “I have never been so bored as when I was in the process of completing a large dissertation after several years of work. The work bored me so much that I had to mobilize all my will in order to continue, and all that I felt in doing so was a tremendous tiredness.”¹³ Perhaps he had come to find the project worthless or no longer personally meaningful; he doesn’t say. But it’s also common for people involved in a long-term project to forge ahead through boredom precisely because they regard their project as worthwhile and personally meaningful; they’re simply bored with it at the moment. And this suggests that an adequate account of boredom may need to specify a plurality of sources of boredom rather than reducing it to a single source—loss of the specific sort of meaning that comes from doing what one takes to be worthwhile.

Second, boredom often *motivates* indulgence in meaningless activities. This is puzzling if what the bored suffer from and wish to escape is loss of meaning. Consider this confession: “When I get real bored, I like to drive downtown and get a great parking spot, then sit in my car and count how many people ask me if I’m leaving.”¹⁴ Or this confession from a grad student bored with working on her dissertation:

Whenever I forced myself to go to school, instead of working, I would sit there and get on the internet and read *inane* chat groups that were going on. I read so many newsgroups: I knew what was going on in the Simpson's group and would talk to these people for an hour, sometimes six hours a day. How ridiculous is that?...

I thought it was ridiculous that I did that. I still think I sort of wasted time; four to eight hours a day reading these stupid little comments on the computer screen. There's no meaning in that. I thought it was stupid. My time would have been much better spent reading a book.¹⁵

If the problem is absence of meaning, it's hard to see why these particular choices of escape—along with gambling, delinquency, crime, social conflict, overeating, alcohol and drug abuse, risk-taking, horseplay, gossiping, doodling, and daydreaming—would be such common responses to boredom. One might respond that those who turn to meaningless diversions are those who have no other options or who mistakenly opt for “*ersatz* meaning.”¹⁶ But this is not universally true and I suspect not even commonly true. The grad student is well aware that what she does is meaningless and that she has the option of doing something more meaningful, like reading a book. Even for those who have no other options, there remains the question of why things like doodling and eating answer boredom *at all*. Why not instead do nothing rather than something else that's just as meaningless? Or just go to sleep? An adequate account of boredom needs to explain the attraction of meaningless diversions as well as boredom with what one takes to be a worthwhile project.

We now have a set of puzzles to address, in addition to our original question, “How might attention to boredom illuminate the difficulties inherent in leading the life of an evaluator?” Those puzzles include: Why might normative delinquencies be an especially

attractive method of escaping boredom? Why is more of the same boring? If meaningless activities are boring, then why do the bored try to escape boredom through meaningless activities? Why do both regimented and leisure time often bore?

Without claiming to offer an exhaustive typology of boredom, I think that answers to these particular questions will emerge from a focus on some of the prime boring circumstances: a stalled life, normative constraints on action, satiety and disappointment with value experiences, and leisure.

II. Circumstances of Boredom

Stalled Lives

One kind of meaning whose absence bores is *temporal* meaning. And one kind of “more of the same” that bores is more of the same going nowhere in a life, or part of a life, one expected, or hoped, would go somewhere. That is, stalled lives bore. What stalled lives share in common is the fact that the stalled person regards what actually happens in her life as incompatible with continuing to seeing her life as having the *trajectory* that she assumed it did, or hoped it would, have. Sometimes the best option for escape from the boredom of “more of the same going nowhere” is wasting time in meaningless activities that aren’t supposed to go anywhere.

Temporal meaning is not equivalent to evaluative meaning. *Kinds* of activities or projects have evaluative meaning, and they do so by being regarded as worthwhile, because valuable, kinds of things to do. So we might say that getting an education or reading a morally rich book like Coetzee’s *Disgrace* have evaluative meaning. *Specific activities in the present* have temporal meaning, and they do so by being constituent parts of a temporal

trajectory. To see one's life as having a trajectory is to see present doings and experiences as *pointing toward* a desired future, and deriving their meaningfulness from, as Karen Jones puts it, what happens "elsewhen."¹⁷ Located on a trajectory, present doings and happenings take on such temporal meanings as being *a present actualization of...*, *causally instrumental to...*, *a necessary waiting period before...*, *a temporary setback from...*, *the next in the sequence of...* Some trajectories are goal-directed (earning a degree); others are progressive (improving one's Spanish), others are continuations (enjoying retirement). Some trajectories are life trajectories; others are not, either because their temporal span is too limited to characterize what a life (or even a phase of one's life is about), or because the trajectory is not sufficiently dominant (for example, it is just one among a plurality of long-range trajectories of similar importance).

Trajectories stall in a variety of ways. Some stall when the agent exhausts her resources for effecting the trajectory. Margaret, the math graduate student, for example, takes herself to be on a goal-directed trajectory in which she proceeds from research, to solving the theoretical problem posed by her dissertation, to receiving a PhD. At a point early on, she exhausts her resources for effecting that trajectory and instead spends day after day reading and re-reading the same source material, hoping for miraculous inspiration. Or consider another of Bargdill's subjects, a woman who spent her adult life raising children, which she found unsatisfying, and remaining married to a man she describes as an emotionally abusive "beast" who undermines all her efforts to be happy. One might imagine she hoped to be on a progressivist *things will get better* trajectory—the children will grow up, her marital problems will be resolved, she will find ways of being happy. Located on a progressivist trajectory, present unhappiness acquires temporal meaning as merely a stage in a trajectory

toward a better future. Over the course of time, however, this woman exhausts her resources for effecting that trajectory as well as her hopes that something will change. She says of her life, “It’s like you take a train, and you have a long ride, and you come to the end, and where do you go? There’s nothing for you, nobody for you. It’s like a big empty room. What do you do? Lay down an die.”¹⁸

Some trajectories stall because the person sets a trajectory that exceeds any resources he has or might develop; or because his life circumstances preclude envisioning his life on a trajectory in the first place. One of Aaron Esman’s adolescent patients, Jonathan, sets a trajectory for himself that so far outstrips his abilities that it stalls out immediately. Jonathan “imagined himself the modern successor and rival of Joyce, Yeats, and Pound,” but he was utterly unwilling to expend the time and effort to learn the craft of writing.¹⁹ Unwilling to give up his idea of his life’s trajectory, he stalls out in a present that is in fact going nowhere.

Stalled lives promise to go on as more of the same that isn’t going anywhere. Decisions and actions—such as Margaret’s deciding sometimes to struggle with her dissertation and sometimes to avoid it—come to have less the character of moving oneself into the future than of prolonging the present. Present actions and happenings lose their temporal meaning. Describing his subjects, Bargdill says, “they could no longer see themselves making progress toward their futures”;²⁰ “they were no longer throwing forward possibilities.”²¹ Feeling trapped in a persistent present that is divorced from a trajectory into the future, Bargdill’s subjects responded to their life boredom by avoiding doing anything to change their circumstances, absorbing themselves in the immediate present, and passively hoping that something would just happen to change things. Brissett and Snow nicely sum up the hopelessness of this sort of boredom: “Boredom is the preoccupation, non-appreciation,

and or disinterest in what one already has and the loss of a sense of future possibilities for intention and choice and a leaning into the future.”²²

At one level, escaping the boredom of a stalled life via meaningless diversions makes sense. Reading chatroom comments and counting how many people ask if one intends to leave one’s parking space aren’t *supposed* to go anywhere. So, too, cruising, wandering, and “indulging in vast amounts of amorphous unstructured time” such as playing cards, as the Walpiri Aborigines do in apparent efforts to escape life boredom, restructures time in terms of activities that aren’t supposed to go anywhere and whose significance is wholly complete within the present moment.²³ Lacking a temporal meaning that could be lost, these seem perfect escapes for the bored who are burdened by the experience of their lives as a “more of the same” failure move forward. “When I lose my vision,” says a Bargdill subject, “I lose any idea or projection of what I want to do in the future. I don’t have any distinct plans, or even an idea of what I want to do and so I want to immerse myself more in the present rather than projecting myself in the future....”

For those unwilling or unable to reorient their lives on a trajectory that could go somewhere, shifting to present-bound activities may be the best route out of boredom. Unfortunately, present-bound activities remain open to temporal redescription as occurring within a life trajectory that has stalled: one surfs the internet *as part of* a stalled trajectory. So, as Bargdill discovered, boredom with a stalled life trajectory tends to infect trajectory-independent activities. “Presently, I am bored with my whole life. None of the old things I used to do bring enjoyment to me anymore. Nothing. [Boredom] covers my social life. It covers school. It covers work. It covers going to the grocery store...It covers a lot of things. My hair.”²⁴

It is tempting to lay the fault for life boredom at the doorstep of the bored: Sticking with a stalled trajectory appears to be a form of practical irrationality. Margaret could change her dissertation topic rather than hide from her advisors and waste time in chat rooms. The married woman could disentangle herself from the “beast.” Jonathan could set his sights more realistically or work harder at the craft of writing.

Possibly. But “fault” may reside instead with the fact that there is no guarantee that all the demands of practical rationality can be met simultaneously. One of the difficulties evaluators face is that they must select ends that are both *evaluatively worth having* and are *prudentially advisable* (for example, the ends match their competencies, makes good use of their resources, and are ones for which the person is willing to take the necessary instrumental means). Prudential considerations may narrow the range of “reasonable” ends to ones not sufficiently worth having to count as one’s life going somewhere. Worthwhileness considerations may narrow the range of ends that would make one’s life go somewhere acceptable to ones beyond one’s abilities to achieve. Attending either choice is the risk one’s life will stall out. Margaret prioritizes prudence at the expense of worthwhileness. She adjusts her sights downward from a preferred topic that she finds personally worthwhile to one both she and her advisors believe she is well suited for.²⁵ Disengaged from the subject, her life stalls. Jonathan prioritizes worthwhileness at the expense of prudence. Jonathan sets an end he finds worth having, but it is well beyond his present competences and motivational resources; his life stalls. Moreover, whether such stalled lives are best handled by cutting one’s losses or by hopefully sticking it out is often underdetermined by the available evidence. In short, boredom with a stalled life need not originate in some failure of practical rationality.

Among those most vulnerable to losing the temporal meaning of their present activities, and thus to suffering stalled-life boredom, will be persons who structure and understand their lives in terms of dominant, long-term aims. (They are even more vulnerable if having those aims involves risky dependencies on favorable turns of events, others' cooperation, and uncertain competencies and motivational resources). Less vulnerable to loss of temporal meaning will be those who structure and understand their lives in terms of a plurality of minor aims that individually and collectively are not construed as one's *life's* trajectory. Also less vulnerable will be those whose aims are easily met and for whom "more of the same" signifies "having arrived" rather than "going no where," and is thus a source of contentment rather than boredom.

Normative Constraint

Attending to the specific kind of boredom produced by stalled lives gives us one set of answers to the questions, "Why does more of the same bore?" "Why might those engaged in evaluatively meaningful projects nevertheless be bored?" "How can meaningless diversions answer the needs of the bored?" Attending to the specific kind of boredom that arises in contexts of normative constraint suggests an explanation for a different, puzzling feature of boredom: "Why would normative delinquencies serve as an especially attractive escape from boredom?"

Otto Fenichel, the psychoanalyst whose observations on boredom heavily influenced subsequent psychoanalytic and psychological accounts of pathological boredom, observed that normal boredom "arises when we must not do what we want to do, or must do what we do not want to do."²⁶ While I disagree that all boredom "arises when we must not do

what we want to do, or must do what we do not want to do,” Fenichel is surely right that a great deal of ordinary boredom originates in contexts of normative constraint. Norms of etiquette require that we patiently and attentively listen to boring conversation partners. Work requirements include attending boring meetings and doing boring tasks. School children often complain of being bored by what they are required to study in school. While what comes most readily to mind when we think about boredom suffered under normative constraint are times where we feel forced by externally imposed normative constraints to do what we don’t want to do, we also bring about our own boredom through our willing compliance with self-imposed norms. Because we accept norms of instrumental rationality, we willingly choose to do what, while useful in getting us what we want, is in itself boring. We wait in lines for cappuccinos, floss our teeth, and memorize the driver’s handbook for the licensing exam. Accepting norms of self-discipline and self-improvement, we practice scales, do daily workout routines, and spend time repeating simple-minded sentences on foreign language tapes. Because we accept norms of beneficence, we choose to do good deeds that involve boring things, like inventorying donated clothes or baking 500 samosas for a cultural event. And our own commitments to participating in valued projects, relationships, and ways of life may entail extended or frequent periods of “compulsory” boredom. Recall, for example, Lars Svendsen’s confession that he had never been so bored as he was while completing a large dissertation project.

Psychoanalytic and psychoanalytically influenced work on boredom sometimes defines boredom as a stressor, in the same league with anxiety,²⁷ which is connected to both frustration and rage. If one focuses on, say, leisure time boredom where boredom is often connected to not knowing what one wants to do and not being particularly attracted to

anything, it's hard to see how boredom could be a stressor or connected with anxiety or rage. Boredom in contexts of normative constraint—especially when the constraints are externally imposed (through, say, threats of penalties for noncompliance) rather than self-imposed—however, *does* fit this description. When one is compelled to do what one doesn't want to do, especially when what one is compelled to do serves no apparent, good purpose or when those imposing the constraint lack legitimate authority to do so, frustration and anger—and hence stress—would seem natural responses. Towards the end of her narrative of her own life boredom, Margaret shifts from narrating her own reasons for imposing her particular thesis topic on herself, to a narrative of external imposition: “I sort of felt like I had been forced into the situation [by her dissertation advisors]—like it wasn't of my own choosing to work on this problem. In fact, I think I felt resentment toward them because I felt that they sort of pushed me into this problem and it was easier for them and they wanted someone to work on it. So they picked me and why did they have to pick me?”²⁸

One source of frustration when boredom arises under conditions of normative constraint is that one knows what one would rather be doing. The many bumper stickers that proclaim “I'd rather be ___ing” are perhaps testimony to how much boredom is suffered by people who experience what they have to do as depriving them of time to do what they want to do.²⁹ Even when the boredom is self-imposed, one may feel that one's life is being used up rather than lived (for example, in long waiting lines at Starbucks or by too many boring texts to read in one's self-chosen profession). This, I think, explains the attraction of normative delinquencies.

For those whose boredom is engendered by the “have to dos” and the “ought to dos” in their life, rebellion against boredom might naturally find its outlet in normative delinquencies

that violate the specific normative constraints engendering boredom. Recall Margaret who sounded a bit puzzled about why she chose to escape boredom by reading inane chat room comments rather than reading a book. Her boredom stems, in part, from her feeling that she *has to* read dissertation-related material: “If I finished this [thesis] I could enjoy the things I used to enjoy. I would be free to study other things that interested me. I certainly felt like I wasn’t free, freed from this obligation, free from thinking that I had to work on this all the time or else I’d have to feel guilty about it.”³⁰ Reading a good but *wrong* book would violate the normative constraint that chains her to her dissertation; reading something totally noneducational and utterly inane violates it better.

Escaping boredom by refusing the terms of boredom, namely the externally and self-imposed “have to dos” and “ought to dos,” may also explain the attraction of criminality, alcohol and drug abuse, gambling, overeating, and social conflict. One needn’t search normative delinquencies for something that makes them evaluatively or temporally *meaningful* activities in order to explain their being satisfying escapes.³¹ More plausibly, the satisfaction of the escape resides in one’s refusing to do (at least temporarily) the has-to-be-done that bores.

As in the case of stalled-life boredom, one might be tempted to lay the fault for boredom under conditions of constraint at the doorstep of the bored. First, one might imagine that many conflicts between complying with normative constraints and doing what interests one are avoidable. Students can often choose to fulfill educational requirements in ways that are likely to interest them. Workers can choose career paths and jobs in which the regimentation of the workday is more, rather than less, likely to involve tasks that the worker finds interesting. The beneficent can elect to discharge their duty of beneficence in more,

rather than less, interesting ways. And those who find that their commitments are producing considerable boredom can reset their commitments in more interesting directions (this was Milgram's assumption about what boredom would motivate those bored with their final ends to do).

Although people sometimes do bear responsibility for making their lives more boring than they need be, boredom is also a normal hazard of leading a life that is normatively constrained in all sorts of ways. One of the common difficulties that evaluators face is that in choosing to comply with moral and nonmoral normative requirements, as well as choosing to commit themselves to valuable projects, relationships, and ways of life, they create the very conditions that engender boredom, namely the paucity of anything here-now that engages an evaluator's attention and concern. Hence the feeling that one isn't *living* one's life at the present moment, but postponing "real" life to some future, more engaging moment.

The "difficulty" here is not a problem to be solved through better practical reasoning. To be an evaluator is to have the capacity to set aside the pursuit of what engages an evaluator's attention in favor of complying with prudential, moral, and social norms. To be an evaluator is also to have the capacity to steer one's life in accord with values attaching to temporally extended activities and temporally remote aims, values that by their nature are not given in *present* experience and activity. Both compliance with norms and pursuit of temporally extended activities or temporally remote aims, then, are compatible with the paucity of anything here-now that engages an evaluator's attention, interest, and concern. Boredom, as I will suggest in the next section, registers the absence of value-qualities *in the present* that are worthy of an evaluator's attention.

Prolonged submission to normative constraints—for example, to the constraints imposed by commitment to career success—may increase one’s vulnerability to boredom. Worse, prolonged deferment of questions about what would be engaging if free of such constraints, may unfit one for later answering them. Aaron Esman, for example, observes of one of his patients, a former business man who now finds his retirement boring, that “[h]is monolithic life of work did not permit him—or the legions of those like him—to develop interests and skills needed to cope with endless leisure,” or as I would say, to cope with freedom from normative constraints.³² A similar fate may be in store for those for whom the practical questions “What do I need to do?” “What do I have to do?” and “What ought I to do?” dominate their planning, crowding out questions like “What would be interesting to do?” In light of this, Brissett and Snow’s advice for the bored sounds like good advice:

Surely people can change their consciousness and thus their experience and appreciation of the dance of life. But it seems to us that the best bet is behavior: doing things differently; on some occasions not doing anything at all; doing things that do not appear to count for much; doing things where the outcome is uncertain if not unpredictable. Perhaps the best antidote for boredom is what Georg Simmel (1991) called “the adventure.”³³

Value Disappointment

Examining the boredom created by stalled lives and suffered under normative constraints suggests a general account of boredom: To be bored is to find present activities and experiences not worth an evaluator’s attention. This is not simply the platitude that the uninteresting bores. Boredom responds to the insufficiency of temporally indexed value-

qualities—qualities attaching to present activities and experiences. That insufficiency is not simple demerit on some scale of value. What is outrageously bad, disgusting, or appallingly unfair is typically not boring. Nor is it simply failure to generate a specific psychological attitude called “being interested.” Rather the insufficiency is specifically *insufficiency for engaging a person’s evaluation-related capacities*. Evaluation-related capacities include desire and aversion, attentiveness, close inspection, positive or negative value-ranking, storing in memory, acting upon, deciding how to deal with, assessing the degree of relevance to one’s ends or instrumental resources, and so on.³⁴ Finding their present insufficient to engage them as evaluators, the bored find themselves both unable to pay attention and to be fully in the here and now.

Because boredom is only one of a plurality of temporal attitudes that evaluators can, and do, adopt toward their activities and experiences, the insufficiency of present value-qualities to engage one’s attention isn’t inevitably boring. Past- or future-oriented temporal attitudes enable disattention to the present in favor of those of the past’s or future’s value-qualities. The despairing, the fretful, the regretful, the guilt-ridden, the eagerly or hopefully anticipatory, goal-directed planners, and the task-oriented project themselves into futures or relive pasts, disattending the present.

That evaluators have past- and future-directed temporal attitudes available by which to avoid present boredom does not mean that they ought to make use of those attitudes to escape boredom. Evaluators who properly care about the quality of their lives and how they are leading their lives will care not just about where to head their lives and where their lives have been, but also how to fill the present. A goodly share of everyday decision-making concerns what sorts of value-qualities to spend time with and how best to insure one does

so. Consider accepting a party invitation, planning a trip to the natural history museum, or selecting library books to check out. Unlike decisions and plans that aim to *achieve* something of value, say, the completion of home repairs, the decisions and plans above aim at *spending time with* particular value-qualities. The goal of planning a trip to a museum is to put oneself in a position to participate in a variety of activities that share the same value-quality. At the museum, one will see the dinosaur skeletons, look at the bird exhibit, examine trays of insects, and peruse the North American mammal exhibit. The entire museum outing is aimed at spending time with what is cognitively enriching and perhaps also wondrous.

However, in choosing which value-qualities to spend time with in the present, evaluators run the risk of creating the very boredom they hope to avoid. Indeed, much of what bores does so precisely because we bring to our present experience expectations about what we will find. That is, in choosing to spend time with anticipated value-qualities, we set ourselves up for disappointment.

Part of what we are doing in choosing to spend time with a value isn't just *predicting* what will engage our attention, but *stipulating in advance* the value-qualities (for example, the quality "spiritually uplifting" in a sermon) and their degrees (for example, what could be expected of this pastor) that the experience or activity must have in order to engage our attention. That we find things interesting or boring is thus in part a function of what we decide in advance to invest our interest in. Such decisions set the conditions under which we will allow ourselves to be interested. The sermon, for example, turns out to be disappointingly boring in comparison with what we anticipated. It is no surprise, then, that on any plausible list of what people complain that they've been bored by, one will find the

very things they chose to spend time with in the expectation that these things will engage their attention: parties, movies, novels, TV shows, sports matches, dates, sex, vacations, classes, sermons, and historical tours, to mention only a few.

Snobs make themselves especially vulnerable to boredom, in part by setting the bar very high for what they are willing to take an interest in, and in part by narrowly circumscribing the range of value-qualities with which they are willing to engage. Those who set the bar lower or with less specificity do less to set themselves up for boredom. But even here, the expectation of finding *something* engaging may invite disappointment, engendering boredom. Least vulnerable to boredom are those with extremely low or nonexistent value expectations who leave themselves open to engagement with whatever presents itself.

Again, as in the other contexts of boredom, the difficulty here is not necessarily a practical problem to be solved. Part of leading the life of an evaluator is making decisions about what to invest interest in. The snob whose standards are high rather than misguided isn't obviously making a worse choice than the person with low or unspecific standards even if high standards make boredom more difficult to avoid. Moreover any evaluator who makes plans to spend time with and anticipates engaging with value-qualities runs the risk of disappointed boredom.

Value Satiety

But what about monotony and repetition? Surely, the largest share of boredom is generated not by disappointed expectations, but by one's having done, seen, heard, read, felt, or otherwise experienced something so many times that it now bores. This was

Williams' worry about immortality. If one has a character at all, this will limit one's range of choices and responses; and given endless time, one's life will eventually repeat itself, and repeat itself too many times not to be boring. The course of one's relationships, for example, will lose the character of adventure and surprise and "take on a character of being inescapable"—a sure recipe for boredom.³⁵ The boredom of repetition was also Milgram's prognosis for everyone's final ends, and his reason for rejecting Frankfurt's identification of the agent with her present constellation of final ends: "One is bound to get bored with whatever ends, ideas, or concerns one now has."³⁶ Voluntary self-refashioning via a re-selection of final ends is a good way of forestalling boredom. And on a more mundane level, one might think that a sure sign of cognitive development is that countless repetitions of the same story or same movie cease to entertain the way they do for children and come to bore.

Why does repetition bore? It seems to me that the best explanation is that value-qualities are *consumable* items in the life of evaluators. The fact that evaluators consume value-qualities tends to stay out of philosophical sight so long as concern focuses on the value-ranking and end-setting activities of evaluators rather than on evaluators' temporal experience of value-qualities. The former philosophical concerns largely skirt the question of what it is like to be an evaluator who conducts her life *in time*.³⁷ In spending time with a value-quality, one may use it up.

"Using up," of course, does not mean that the thing in question has any fewer value-qualities at the end of one's time with it than it did at the beginning. A museum exhibit has the same educational value, measured in terms of the quality of its displays and informational signs, when boredom sets in as it did pre-boredom. One's end of learning

Spanish is just as worthy an end after one has become bored with the endeavor as when one originally chose to learn Spanish. A thing's bearing value-qualities and an evaluator's "making use" of those value-qualities are two different things. Evaluators "make use of"—in the sense of "do something with" or "engaging with"—value-qualities when they rate, appreciate, investigate, contemplate, fantasize about, think what to do with, hope for, worry about, take seriously as calling for action, plan for how to realize, and aim at value-qualities (to mention only some of the things evaluators do with value-qualities). Making plans to see a sunset, contemplating the atmospheric conditions that produce its colors, appreciating its beauty, and telling others about its splendid colors are ways of doing something with the sunset's value-qualities.

Evaluators, however, rarely if ever have inexhaustible capacities for doing something with the value-qualities they encounter. One gets done with the doing. One comes to the end, for example, of one's capacity to appreciate, or one runs out of things one can think of to do with this thing. Elina Makropulos runs out of things she can think of to do with personal relationships. She still might judge relationships to have value, even to be personally valuable to her (she'd like to have personal relationships in her life, if she's going to have a life). But she's exhausted her capacities as an evaluator to do something with the value-qualities of relationships.

What gets used up, then, isn't the value-quality itself but one's capacity to engage with it as an evaluator—sometimes only temporarily, sometimes permanently. This is to say that one doesn't get bored *just* because one has lost interest. One loses interest because the object of boredom does not satisfy one's basic interest as an evaluator. To be an evaluator is to want to *do* something with value-qualities. A machine that is programmed to generate

what we would regard as reasonably accurate value assessments on the basis of descriptive information is not an evaluator. Evaluators have, in addition to ranking abilities, a basic “drive” to do something with value-qualities. Sometimes the world disappoints, failing to present value-qualities worth our doing something with. At other times, the difficulty is that one has used up one’s capacity to engage with a value-quality. Repetition then bores.

When final ends bore, what ought evaluators do? One might take the ability or inability to engage as brute, in the sense of an inalterable fact about an evaluator on which the adoption of final ends depends in the first place, and their continuing to be personally meaningful ends depends. One simply finds that one cares about some things; and one simply finds that one has ceased so to care. If this were true, then one might rely on one’s ability to engage (interest, care) or inability to engage (disinterest, boredom) as foundational for the constitution and reconstitution of agency around final ends. Boredom with final ends means, as Milgram implies, that it’s time to select new ones.

I think this is false. Engagement often depends on a scaffolding of prior learning and experience that prepares us to take an interest in what initially was not interesting. Whether the appropriate scaffolding is in place or not is, at least in part, open to voluntary choice. The uninitiated who find watching dressage comparable to watching paint dry are not without options for learning how to engage with the sport. “Be patient; stick with it; give it a chance” is standard advice for those trying out worthwhile activities that initially bore. The scaffolding that prepares us to engage at all may also prepare us to adopt as a final end what we’ve learned to engage with. And when final ends come to bore over time, updating the scaffolding is an option. The point here is that while there are evidently limits to our ability to engineer engagement, voluntary choice and fortuitous experience have an

appreciable influence on what we find ourselves capable of engaging with.

One difficulty faced by evaluators bored with their final ends is epistemic: one cannot say for sure whether boredom is permanent, temporary, or remediable with additional scaffolding. What, for example, does Elina Makropulos's boredom with relationships signify? That she has fully consumed the possible value-qualities of relationships? That, having fully consumed the possible value-qualities of the kinds of relationships she's had to date, she might nevertheless be fortuitously surprised by her experiences in the next one? That additional scaffolding—say, a new perspective provided by therapy—could remedy her boredom? That her boredom is only temporary and remediable by taking a vacation from romance, perhaps a long one (after all, she has time)?

A second difficulty faced by evaluators bored with their final ends is normative: The objects of final ends are also typically objects of commitment. That is they are fixed as final ends not simply in virtue of a contingent yet deep and persistent caring, but as a matter of chosen policy to resist re-deliberation and to treat various obstacles and setbacks to pursuit of those ends as problems to be dealt with rather than as evidence against retaining those ends. If one's final ends are indeed objects of commitment, then boredom, even persistent boredom, does not provide obvious grounds for revisiting one's commitment in the same way that persistent boredom *would* provide grounds for reassessing more provisionally adopted ends.

As I argued in the previous chapter, people might reasonably have different temporal styles of managing their own futures, some adopting final ends as only provisional plans, open to revision in light of setbacks and obstacles, and others by making commitments that resist revision. What evaluators ought to do when their final ends

persistently bore depends in large measure on what temporal style they adopt for managing their futures. For those attracted to commitment, persistent boredom is not a clearly good reason for abandoning final ends rather than living with boredom.

Leisure

I turn now to one last principal life circumstance that generates boredom: leisure.

One of the more commonly cited explanations of post-modern boredom is the emergence of a cultural distinction between work and leisure, as well as, for some individuals, increasing quantities of leisure time. The distinction between work and leisure in modern life is structural—life activities are organized, on the one hand, into on-the-job labor, typically for defined periods of time, as well as less well-defined periods of domestic labor and, on the other hand, “free time” or leisure. Structured leisure includes work breaks, evenings at home, weekends, and vacation time.

The distinction is also conceptual and normative. Conceptually, we define what leisure is in contrast to our conception of work. Unlike work activities, leisure activities, are noncompulsory activities—they are chosen by the leisured agent independently of externally or self-imposed mandates. They are thus not aimed at completing what needs or has to be done, but are instead activities that one finds intrinsically rewarding or enjoyable. Being opposed to work, leisure activities afford relaxation, rejuvenation, and freedom from effort, challenge, and problem solving. Unlike work, leisure activities are temporally unregimented.

The norms for “doing” leisure also, in part, rest on a distinction between leisure and work. Leisure time is supposed to be used for leisure activities, not work. Those who use their leisure time for work or work-like activities are criticizable by others as workaholics

who are unable to relax. And, to the extent that we value leisure and are mindful of its scarcity, we come to have normative expectations about our own leisure “performance.” Should we fritter our leisure time away in what wasn’t in fact rewarding or in work or work-like activities we open ourselves to self-criticism for wasting leisure time.

The conceptual opposition between work and leisure, and our acceptance of norms to use leisure well by avoiding work-like activities and pursuing intrinsically rewarding ones, however, makes leisure time boredom puzzling. If the regimentation of the work day under externally imposed requirements that leave the worker without the option of choosing activities that engage her attention is what makes work boring, freedom from those boredom-causing conditions would seem to spell relief from boredom. Given free time to do as one pleases, and the happy normative expectation that one will use that time for activities that are rewarding and enjoyable, how could leisure activities fail to engage the evaluator’s attention? In short, why would leisure so often bore?

Having looked at a variety of sources of boredom, we are now in a position to answer that question. Leisure often exaggerates some of the factors that produce boredom in other contexts. Consider, first, absence of temporal meaning. One typical feature of jobs is that they involve at least short-term trajectories in the form of tasks to be completed and goals to be reached. Some involve long-term trajectories in the form of long-term work projects or career ladders. That means

that, however unengaging the particular tasks might be in themselves, they are likely to be seen as *temporally* meaningful. Leisure, however, is typically conceived not just as time away from paid labor, but also as time during which one *ought not* to engage in work-like activities. Running household errands, preparing for a certification exam, repairing the lawn mower, and the like during “leisure” constitutes more work rather than leisure. The normative ideal for leisure is not working—as it were, stopping and smelling the roses and just relaxing. To use one’s leisure well comes to be equated with *not* engaging in activities that have a temporal trajectory. However restorative that may be, it also means avoiding activities that have temporal meaning—a prime set up for boredom.

The risk of value-satiety may also be exacerbated by leisure time. Among the kinds of activities that the conceptual and normative opposition of leisure to work may encourage us to exclude from leisure time are what Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi called “autotelic” activities that enable individuals to enter the “flow” state.³⁸ Autotelic activities are intrinsically rewarding, and rewarding because they involve use of skills that are well matched to the ongoing physical or intellectual challenges posed by the activity and that thus give the person a sense of control over what comes next. They also present the most opportunity for entering the flow state.

In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future.³⁹

Flow activities are, as Csikszentmihalyi observed, activities in which there is no time to get bored. That is in part because, they are activities that, in my terms, are ones where the capacities of an evaluator are fully engaged. They are also “deep” enough to present ever more difficult opportunities for action, so that the level of skills one can attain is in principle inexhaustible....⁴⁰ Thus value-satiety has little opportunity to set in.

Csikszentmihalyi argued that the essential difference between boredom producing and nonboredom-producing activities is not between work and play, as we culturally understand those, but between activities that afford the flow experience and those that do not.⁴¹ While Csikszentmihalyi himself thought flow experiences typically occur in play, although possible in work, subsequent studies suggest that most flow experiences happen at work.⁴² One reason is that the activities that most engage our attention by demanding skilled action take effort; and external compulsion, a feeling of obligation, or long term commitment may be needed to motivate individuals to embark on them—all forms of motivation that jobs

and domestic duties may supply.⁴³

To make matters worse, the expectation—one that can easily rise to the level of a normative requirement—that leisure activities will not resemble work means that we often approach leisure time with a resistance to doing anything—let alone autotelic activities—that looks like work. And that includes not working at having fun. Unfortunately, many of the engaging things we could do with leisure time in fact take some work to set up—planning and hosting a party, taking a vacation, getting supplies and setting up a new project. As Al Gini observes, “most of us get very little time off from the job. And when we do, we want to do something different, something special. We want an interesting interlude. We want to escape the tyranny and tedium of the everyday. We want to have fun, and we don’t want to work at planning or preparing for it either. We already do enough work.”⁴⁴ Thus, when left free to choose in leisure time, the activities that individuals are internally motivated to do may not offer enough challenge to ward off value-satiety for very long.

For those for whom leisure means time alone or time with inadequate social partners, there are additional risks of boredom. No matter how resourceful or motivated to find engaging activities, evaluators do not have inexhaustible capacities for doing something with the value-qualities they encounter. As I suggested earlier, evaluators may simply run out of things they can think of to do with the value-qualities on hand. One reason boredom is correlated with loneliness is, I suspect, that other people are a resource for engaging with value-qualities we would not otherwise have noticed or for engaging with them in ways we wouldn’t have thought of. Reading

a novel on one's own may offer plenty of opportunities to engage with its value qualities; but reading it with a book group whose members can point out alternative interpretations and draw attention to what one overlooked increases the avenues for engagement. In addition, evaluators do not have inexhaustible capacities for thinking up things to do with their leisure. Other people help us answer the question "What shall I do with my time?" and often with things we wouldn't have thought of or been motivated to attempt absent social reinforcement.

Leisure may enhance the opportunity not just for value-satiety, but value-disappointment as well. One reason why we find ourselves bored is that we bring to experience standards for what our experience must be like in order for us to be willing to invest interest in it. The higher the standards, the more likely the experience will be disappointing. Both the scarcity of leisure and the uninteresting or unsatisfying nature of many jobs may easily lead one to have higher expectations about one's leisure time experience. So people who work long work hours in jobs that offer little that engages the attention may have much higher expectations of their leisure time than of other time.

Moreover, when leisure time is scarce in comparison to externally regimented work time, the importance of spending one's leisure time well—that is in activities that are themselves valuable, meaningful, or enjoyable intensifies: Am I enjoying my weekend? Vacation? Evening off? Patricia Spacks credits the modern era's focus on the individual and the individual's happiness as partially explanatory of the emergence of a discourse of boredom. "To consider human existence as an arena for seeking happiness virtually guarantees heightened consciousness of how little happiness daily routine necessarily

provides...Given constant assessment of degrees of pleasure, boredom becomes an essential category of experience.”⁴⁵

Perhaps the most obvious source of leisure time boredom, however, is simply that one can't think of anything interesting to do. This is the boredom that children complain of—“There's nothing to do!”—that parents resist in their children—“Go find something to do!” “What's wrong with your toys (friends, books, etc.)?”—and that adults learn to conceal because to be bored in this way is shameful. Being bored because one can't think of anything to do looks suspiciously culpable. It seems to indicate laziness, a lack of inner resources, lack of imagination, and a dependence on being passively entertained rather than on actively entertaining oneself.

So here, finally, do we have a place where the fault for boredom can be laid entirely at the doorstep of the bored? I am dubious. We as philosophers attach a great deal of value to the making of choices, to setting ends, to framing intentions and making plans. What we virtually never attend to is the fact that there are a *lot* of hours in a day, a week, a month that agents have to figure out what to do with. Happily, for most of us, what to do with all that time isn't a matter of much choice. Our jobs present us with tasks to be done, our home lives present us with chores to be gotten through and pets to walk, our friends with outings to go on, our educational goals with classes to take, and so on. By contrast, in true leisure, everything is optional, since nothing *has* to be done. And our cultural norms for doing leisure well enjoin us *not* to fill leisure time with work or work-like activities, on pain of being criticizable for being workaholics who are unable to relax. Norms for using leisure well thus tend to rule out the very complex, goal directed activities that would fill up lots of time.

The boredom of having entire weekends, weeks of vacation, months of unemployment, or years of retirement to fill up is the burden of agency when filling time is entirely and continuously up to us. The more the expenditure of time is not preset (by work, family duties, complex time-extended projects and the like), the more the agent is tasked with continuously deciding what to do with herself. Evaluators do not have inexhaustible capacities for thinking up things to do to fill their time. Living with boredom is sometimes the unavoidable cost of being an evaluator with time on her hands.