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Boredom, Motivation, and the Value of Life: Schopenhauer, Mill, and Nietzsche

Joshua Isaac Fox

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5188-9132

Abstract
What, if anything, does our propensity to boredom tell us about the value of our lives? In this paper, I reconstruct the views of two nineteenth-century thinkers – Arthur Schopenhauer and John Stuart Mill – who converged on an answer to this question: namely, that life is only worth living if we can remain unbored by our fully realized ends. For Schopenhauer, this answer follows from a worry about the value of our ends. An end which bores us after it is realized must be of merely *negative* value: it only interested us as a means of removing something harmful, and thus ceases to interest us once that harmful thing is removed. If this is true of *all* of our ends, then the best we can hope to achieve in life is the reduction of harm rather than the accrual of benefit. For Mill, this answer follows from a worry about the impoverishment of our motivational set. If our ends bore us once they are realized, then our interest in them is *self-cancelling*. Each time one of our ends is realized, our motivational set gets smaller, and we get closer to a state in which we have nothing left to live for. After explaining Schopenhauer and Mill's worries, I then consider the potential challenge to them offered by a third nineteenth-century thinker: Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche suggests that our tendency to lose interest in our fully realized ends reflects neither that our ends lack value nor that our engagement with them reduces our motivational set. Rather, it simply reflects the inexhaustibility of our avarice. We always desire to make *more* of life's goods our own. This rules out a lasting interest in those we already possess.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, there was increasing interest in the problem of pessimism: the worry that life might not be worth living.[1] A key role in this debate was played by discussion of boredom. What, if anything, does our propensity to boredom tell us about the value of our lives? In what follows, I will reconstruct the views of two nineteenth-century thinkers—Arthur Schopenhauer and John Stuart Mill—who converged on a particular answer to this question: namely, that life is only worth living if we can remain unbored by our fully realized

[1] For helpful discussion of this historical development, see the introduction to Beiser 2016.

ends. I will conclude by considering a potential challenge to this view offered by a third nineteenth-century thinker: Friedrich Nietzsche.

1. Schopenhauer

1.1. Schopenhauer's View of Boredom

Schopenhauer identifies boredom as distress at the inactivity of our faculties. This view finds a metaphysical basis in Schopenhauer's claim that the body is the phenomenal expression of the will. Our bodies are the way that our wills appear to cognition. Schopenhauer applies this view not just to the body as a whole, but to each of the body's individual parts. Each part of the body corresponds to a particular will: namely, a will to engage in the activities characteristic of that part of the body. As Schopenhauer puts it:

> The will to cognize, intuited objectively, is the brain; just as the will to walk, intuited objectively, is the foot; the will to grasp is the hand, the will to digest is the stomach, to procreate is the genitals, and so on. (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 272)

For present purposes, what matters is not this metaphysical view itself but its psychological consequences. Each part of the body corresponds to a will to use that part of the body. As such, insufficient use of any part of the body generates frustration. It is this frustration that Schopenhauer identifies with boredom. Boredom is the state in which our own idle powers become a burden to us:

> the original purpose of the faculties with which nature has endowed human beings is the fight against want, which presses them hard from all sides. But when this fight stops for once, the idle powers become a burden for them. Therefore, they must now play with them, i.e. employ them without a purpose; otherwise they immediately fall prey to the other source of human suffering, boredom (Schopenhauer, 2014, p.292)

We typically keep our faculties in motion through "the fight against want." We use them instrumentally, deploying our faculties as a means to fulfill desires focused on objects other than their own use. Once the fight against want is over, however, we discover that we also had a direct desire to use the faculties themselves. Our faculties demand to be used, and boredom is the distress we feel when that demand is not met.

Insofar as each faculty corresponds to a will, failing to use any one of our faculties will subject us to some amount of boredom. However, Schopenhauer takes the disuse of our most prominent faculties to generate the greatest amount of distress. To some extent, this results in significant individual differences in the sources of boredom: different faculties have different degrees of prominence in different individuals. In all people, however, one faculty is especially prominent: cognition or sensibility, the faculty "whose predominance distinguishes human beings from the other animal species" (Schopenhauer, 2014, p.294). Due to its unique prominence, cognition plays an especially large role in human boredom. We are distressed by the disuse of any faculty, but we are especially distressed by the disuse of cognition. It is when our minds are insufficiently active that our boredom is at its greatest pitch.

Our mental faculties can be deployed in a broad array of different activities. Thus, Schopenhauer characterizes sensibility as active in "contemplating, thinking, feeling, writing literature, creating, playing music, learning, reading, meditating, inventing, philosophizing, and so on" (Schopenhauer, 2014, pp. 293-4). Significant engagement in any one of these activities will be enough to hold the cognitive component of boredom at bay. As Schopenhauer puts it:

> cognition has multiple functions and never takes place wholly without effort, which is needed for fixing attention and making the object clear, and then further for thought and reflection; (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 218)

Cognition is responsible for complicated conceptual thought and reflection. However, it is also responsible for the simple presentation of experience to consciousness. As Schopenhauer indicates, active mental effort is just as required for the second of these activities as for the first. An absorbing feeling that fully commands our attention will thus be no less effective at relieving boredom than reflecting on an intricate philosophical argument. The specific mental activity that we engage in is not what matters. All that matters is that we engage in a significant *degree* of mental activity of any kind.[2]

1.2. Positive Good Cannot Bore

Schopenhauer, then, understands boredom as distress at the inactivity of our faculties. Moreover, he views the biggest source of this distress as mental inactivity. As such, Schopenhauer presents mental activity as our best defense against boredom: whether in the form of complicated conceptual reflection, absorbing feeling, or anything in between, mental occupation is the surest means of holding boredom at bay.

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[2] The view of boredom I attribute to Schopenhauer is defended in detail in Fox (2022). In addition to my reading, there are at least three other notable interpretations: the will to will account defended in Young (2005, p. 211), the desire to desire account defended in Reginster (2006, pp. 120–6), and the sensation of emptiness account defended in Bather Woods (2019).

The will to will and desire to desire accounts are fairly similar. According to the first, Schopenhauer identifies boredom with distress at the dissatisfaction of a second-order desire to *pursue* objects of first-order desire. According to the second, Schopenhauer identifies boredom with distress at the dissatisfaction of a second-order desire to merely *have* first-order desires. I argue that both of these accounts misconstrue one of boredom's effects with its essence. Our faculties are typically kept in use by the struggle against want. The desire to use our faculties is thus frequently *expressed* in a desire for first-order desires: if we can get want back on the scene, then we can resume using our faculties in the struggle against it.

On the sensation of emptiness view, Schopenhauer identifies boredom with distressing awareness of life's worthlessness. Normally, the fight against want keeps us busy, distracting us from our miserable condition. Once the struggle is over, however, we have no choice but to confront our state. This account does not fit well with Schopenhauer's suggestion that unused faculties are *themselves* what burdens the bored. Schopenhauer claims that our disused faculties *become* a burden for us, not that their disuse exposes to some separate burden.

On the basis of this view, Schopenhauer reaches a conclusion that plays an important role in his evaluation of human life: namely, that genuinely *positive* good could never bore. This is made particularly explicit in Schopenhauer's argument against the positive value of life itself:

> If life, in the craving for which our essence and existence consist, had a positive value and real substance in itself, then there could be no boredom; instead, mere existence in itself would have to fulfil and satisfy us. (Schopenhauer, 2015, p. 259)

If simply being alive was positively valuable, then boredom would be impossible. A positive good would always be available to us: as long as we were alive, we would always have the positive good of life itself even if we lacked any others. This would render boredom impossible, for it is impossible to be bored while in the possession of a positive good. Any positive good would "fulfill and satisfy us," and this fulfillment and satisfaction would be enough to bring boredom to an end.

To see why Schopenhauer takes this to be the case, it will help to first say something about how Schopenhauer distinguishes between positive and negative goods. A negative good is something valued for *negating* some harm: it is considered good simply because it frees us from something bad. A positive good, in contrast, positively contributes some benefit: we value it because it is itself good to have, rather than because it removes something that is bad to have. To acquire a negative good is to transition from a harmful condition to a harmless one. To acquire a positive good, in contrast, is to transition to a genuinely beneficial state.

Given this difference in the nature of positive and negative goods, Schopenhauer expects them to have quite different effects on their possessors. In particular, Schopenhauer suggests that negative goods are incapable of holding our attention in any lasting way:

> we do not really notice or value the possessions and the advantages we actually have, but think that they represent the necessary course of things: this is because

> they only make us happy negatively, by warding off suffering. (Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 346)

Taken on their own, we are entirely indifferent to negative goods. They appeal to us only by way of contrast with the suffering we would experience in their absence. As such, we find them notable only when that contrast is brought to mind. Otherwise, we take them to "represent the necessary course of things:" instead of standing out themselves, they constitute the backdrop against which other things stand out. We notice that which veers away from the neutral state, benefitting or harming us. The neutral state itself, however, eludes our gaze.

That negative goods fail to hold our attention is at least in part a product of their inability to generate absorbing feeling:

> We feel pain, but not painlessness; we feel worry, but not freedom from worry; we feel fear but not security . . . this is why we do not become aware of the three greatest goods in life as such – that is, health, youth and freedom – so long as we possess them, but only after we have lost them: for they too are negations. (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 590)

Negative goods remove us from harmful states. In so doing, they remove certain pains. Simply removing a pain, however, is not the same as replacing that pain with a pleasure. The contrast between a state in which you feel pain and a state in which you feel nothing can sometimes lead to the belief that you are feeling pleasure: feeling nothing feels much *better* than feeling pain, and so feeling nothing is sometimes conflated with feeling good. This appearance, however, is misleading. Negative goods, in freeing us from pain do not actually replace that pain with some more desirable feeling. Instead, they simply leave us cold. This is why even the greatest of negative goods fail to hold our attention: health, youth, and freedom may remove the pains of sickness, age, and restraint but they do not replace those pains with any new feeling capable of pulling us in.

A positive good, in contrast, would not simply remove a source of distress. Rather, it would provide a source of delight. As such, it would offer real, absorbing feeling: a positive good could be enjoyed directly, rather than simply appreciated in contrast with even worse states. Thus, Schopenhauer often identifies the positive with what can be directly felt: "suffering . . . is *what is positive, what is immediately felt*" (Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 202). Suffering is positive because it involves the immediate experience of a distressing feeling instead the mere absence of delightful feeling. A genuinely positive good would similarly offer the immediate experience of a delightful feeling instead of the mere absence of a distressing feeling. Positive goods, consequently, are not liable to fade into the background in the way that negative goods are. In the same way that positive ills stand out as regrettable departures from the neutral default, positive goods would stand out as welcome departures. In offering us a good that we can feel, they would shine out against an indifferent background, holding our attention in way that negative goods never can.[3]

[3] To be clear, the claim is not that anyone to whom a positive good is present would be *constantly* conscious of that good. Rather, it is that the manner in which a positive good might fail to enter consciousness is different from the manner in which a negative good would fail to do so. Negative goods fade into the background, failing to occupy us even when nothing else is competing with them for mental real estate. Positive goods, in contrast, only fall out of consciousness when consciousness is fully occupied by something else. This is, in any case, how Schopenhauer thinks about positive ills. Someone suffering a serious ailment no longer notices the spot where their shoe pinches, but that petty distress will return to consciousness once the major distress is relieved: "when a fortunate outcome lifts a central, oppressive worry from our chests, its place is immediately filled by another worry, whose entire content had already been present, but could not enter consciousness as a worry because there was no room for it there"(Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 343). It is possible to be *distracted* from a positive feeling, but a positive feeling will not fade into the background absent such a distraction.

In relation to positive ills, Schopenhauer uses this point to explain something like the phenomenon of hedonic adaptation. Even if some terrible new misfortune arrives on the scene, you will end up feeling about the same amount of pain as you did before. This is because that terrible misfortune will distract you from many smaller ones: "If it were not for this particular external cause of suffering, the suffering that is grounded in our essence for a certain period of time (and is therefore irremovable) would be scattered in a hundred different places and appear in in the form of a hundred little bouts of moodiness and depression over things we now overlook completely, because our capacity for pain has already been reached by this major source of evil"(Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 343). Were positive goods to exist, the amount of joy one could take in their presence would be similarly constrained by the limits of each individual's representational capacities. A single big joy would distract us from many small ones, and the loss of that big joy would allow those small ones to grab our attention once again. Thus, the level of each individual's joy would remain fairly stable once a fixed ceiling had been reached. Schopenhauer is not, then,

At this point, it may already be clear why Schopenhauer claimed that positive goods would provide sure protection against boredom. Schopenhauer takes the primary source of boredom to be mental inactivity. He likewise identifies feeling as a key mental activity, and describes the fixing of attention as a major form of mental exertion. Anything capable of generating absorbing feeling, then, will be well-positioned to hold boredom at bay. The mind will be active in the feeling itself, in our attention to that feeling, and in our attention to whatever is the source of that feeling. Anything that can generate absorbing feeling will thus also free us from mental inactivity, the primary source of human boredom.

As we have seen, it is precisely in generating feelings of this kind that positive goods distinguish themselves from negative ones. Positive goods reliably generate absorbing feelings: namely, those feelings involved in enjoying their presence within our lives. As such, they would reliably prevent boredom. Thus, Schopenhauer's original suggestion that positive goods could never bore because they "would have to fulfill and satisfy us." In order to count as positive, a good would have to be something that we find immediately delightful. In providing this kind of fulfillment and satisfaction, such a good would also act as a source of absorbing feeling. In acting as a source of absorbing feeling, it would keep our minds in motion. In keeping our minds in motion, it would keep boredom at bay.

1.3. The Value of Our Ends

committed to the implausible view that the existence of positive goods would allow human beings to *endlessly* increase their pleasure. Positive goods do not fade into the background like negative goods do. However, that does not mean that we are capable of attending to an infinite number of them at once.

Schopenhauer has argued that it is impossible to be bored while in possession of a positive good. With this claim in hand, Schopenhauer can use boredom to test whether a good is positive in character. Thus, we saw Schopenhauer argue that life itself cannot be a positive good simply by noting that it is possible to live and be bored simultaneously.

With this in mind, we can now see why Schopenhauer took life's value to turn on the possibility of remaining unbored by our fully realized ends. If the object of our desire bores us once we have obtained it, then this means that it was nothing more than a negative good. If this is true of *all* the objects of our desire, then this means that all of our efforts lead to nothing more than the acquisition of negative goods. Negative goods are, however, of merely neutral value: they free us from harms but do not replace those harms with any benefits. Thus, a life spent struggling to obtain negative goods would be a life spent struggling to avoid harm rather than to obtain benefit. The best we could aspire to is reaching a neutral condition, a mode of life to which we are entirely indifferent. As Schopenhauer puts it:

> That human life must be a kind of mistake emerges sufficiently from the simple observation that a human being is a concretion of needs whose satisfaction, difficult as it is to achieve, provides him with nothing more than a painless state in which he is still abandoned to boredom. (Schopenhauer, 2015, p. 259)

The worthlessness of human life can be seen from the fact that it is nothing more than a struggle to achieve painlessness. That life is nothing more than a struggle to achieve painlessness can in turn be seen from the fact that the ends we struggle to realize bore us once we have realized them. This proves that none of them were genuinely positive goods.

In realizing ends that bore us, then, we do not make the kind of gains that could render life worth living. We remove harms, but do not obtain benefits. Thus, the position we end up in is never any better for us than simply not existing would have been. As Schopenhauer puts it, all of our efforts aim at restoring us to the condition we started from:

> But it is so hard to succeed at anything or to get anything done: difficulties and endless troubles stand in the way of every plan, obstacles pile up with every step. But if we succeed in overcoming them in the end, we never gain anything more than liberation from some suffering or desire, and so we find ourselves just the way we were before we had the desire. (Schopenhauer, 2010, pp. 345-46)

We begin our lives in a kind of neutral condition, having been neither harmed nor benefitted by our existence. We then fall into various harmful conditions. Through great effort, we escape these conditions. In so doing, however, "we find ourselves just the way we were before:" all our efforts do nothing more than remove the source of our distress, returning us to the neutral state from which we started. Looking at our life as a whole, however, we have actually ended up worse off than when we began. Starting from a neutral state, we enter a harmful state, and then escape back to the neutral state again. Our life thus contains some time spent in a neutral condition and some time spent in a harmful condition. Taken as a whole, then, our life is harmful: it contains some states that are bad for us, some states that are neither good nor bad for us, and none that are good for us. As Schopenhauer puts it, "life is a business that does not cover its costs" (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 589). Experiencing harmful states deducts from life's value, while experiencing neutral states leaves life's value unchanged. No matter how many times you add zero to a negative number, the sum will remain negative. No matter how many negative goods we acquire, the neutral states that they offer will never outweigh the harmful states that they relieve.[4]

To escape this deficit, we would need life to offer more than just bad states and states which are neither good nor bad. Positive good alone could provide this third state, one which could compensate us for life's harms instead of simply removing them. It is for this reason, then, that Schopenhauer takes life's value to turn on whether we can remain unbored by our fully

[4] Beiser (2016, p. 50) similarly emphasizes that, when calculating life's value, Schopenhauer treats negative goods as zeroes.

realized ends. If we are unable to do this, then negative good alone can be the fruit of our efforts. And as we have seen, negative good alone will never be enough to make life worth living.

2. Mill

2.1. Mill's View of Boredom

In the last section, we saw Schopenhauer's reasons for holding that life is only worth living if we can remain unbored by our fully realized ends. In the current section, we will consider John Stuart Mill's reasons for reaching the same conclusion. As we will see, Mill starts from a conception of boredom similar to Schopenhauer's own. In proceeding from that conception to worries about life's value, however, Mill's path will differ.

At the end of *The Subjection of Women*, Mill considers the direct harms that gender inequality deals to women themselves. Among these harms is, Mill suggests, condemning women to lives of crushing boredom. Gender inequality has this result by depriving women of reliable opportunities to put their faculties to use:

> There is nothing, after disease, indigence, and guilt, so fatal to the pleasurable enjoyment of life as the want of a worthy outlet for the active faculties. […] There are abundant examples of men who, after a life engrossed by business, retire with a competency to the enjoyment, as they hope, of rest, but to whom, as they are unable to acquire new interests and excitements that can replace the old, the change to a life of inactivity brings ennui, melancholy, and premature death. Yet no one thinks of the parallel case of so many worthy and devoted women, who, having paid what they are told is their debt to society – having brought up a family blamelessly to manhood and womanhood – having kept a house as long as they had a house needing to be kept – are deserted by the sole occupation for which they have fitted themselves; and remain with undiminished activity but with no employment for it (*CW* 21.338)

"Ennui," or boredom, is the inevitable result of possessing faculties which can find no use in the life you are actually living. Thus, men who only know how to deploy their faculties in service of

business are reduced to boredom by retirement. Likewise, women who are forbidden from developing any faculties but those necessary for maintaining a household are reduced to boredom as soon as that household is dissolved. As Mill puts it, our faculties function like a standing reserve of energy that needs to be released: those unable to perform the kind of activity for which their faculties are suitable "remain with undiminished activity but with no employment of it." Their faculties call for a use which their lives can no longer provide.

A life that offers insufficient opportunity for the deployment of one's faculties excites a particular kind of dissatisfaction. It is this dissatisfaction that Mill identifies with boredom. Thus, as Mill continues his discussion, he speaks of "the dull and hopeless life to which [society] so often condemns [women], by forbidding them to exercise the practical abilities which many of them are conscious of" (*CW* 21.339). He likewise refers to "the feeling of a wasted life" produced by the "disproportion between the ideas and faculties of women, and the scope which society allows to their activities" (*CW* 21.340). A dull life, one that feels like nothing more than a waste of time, is the product of a gap between the faculties that an individual possesses and the opportunities for exercising those faculties that are available to her.

Mill, then, identifies boredom with a state in which we are fundamentally dissatisfied with our lives because those lives fail to offer sufficient opportunity for the use of our faculties. This state can be produced in a number of different ways. One that Mill gives particular attention to, however, is a kind of motivational problem. In order to use any object, it is necessary to have an end: you cannot use your faculties without using them *for* something. Moreover, this end has to be something that can be credibly advanced by your efforts: however much I might wish to have been born a year earlier than I was, there is simply no way of putting my faculties to use in the service of this goal. Thus, if we are to avoid boredom, there are at least two things that we

will need to do. First, we will need to take genuine interest in some end: there will have to be something that we truly wish to enjoy or achieve. Second, we will need to connect that end with the life we are actually living, identifying some way of deploying our faculties in its service.[5]

Thus, Mill often presents boredom as the result of a mismatch between the ends that someone is interested in and the life that she is able to lead. This was Mill's analysis of the retirees above. Transitioning away from "a life engrossed in business," they find themselves "unable to acquire new interests and excitements that can replace the old." The retirees have never cultivated an interest in anything other than business. Upon retirement, however, the ends of business are no longer open to them. As such, there are only two options available: they can take an interest in new ends compatible with their new life, or they can fall into boredom. Mill makes the same point elsewhere, suggesting that avoiding boredom in old age requires taking an interest in ends compatible with the later parts of life:

> To those who have neither public nor private affections, the excitements of life are much curtailed, and in any case dwindle in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be terminated by death: while those who leave after them objects of personal affection, and especially those who have also cultivated a fellow-feeling with the collective interests of mankind, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigour of youth and health. (*CW* 10.215)

The person with exclusively selfish ends is faced with boredom by death's approach: there is less and less that can be done to improve their own situation, and thus less and less that can motivate them to put their faculties in use. The person interested in the condition of others, in contrast, has an end that can be actively worked on even in the last moments of their life. As such, they "retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigour of youth": their unselfish ends are just as capable of putting their faculties in motion in either life stage. In each case, Mill takes

[5] I discuss this motivational problem in detail in Fox (2021), though with less emphasis on its implications for the use of our faculties. Both there and here, my thought is informed by Reginster (2006)'s "problem of inspiration" (pp. 24-25): taking an interest in our lives requires us to have ends that we see as both *valuable* and *realizable*.

interest in our lives to rest on interest in the ends we hope to realize or enjoy within those lives. To avoid boredom requires finding opportunities to make use of our faculties. These opportunities, in turn, require the convergence of our interests and our options. In order to keep our faculties in use, there must be ends that we want to engage with, and we must see a way of carrying that engagement out within our lives.

2.2. Self-Cancelling Interests

Mill, then, has suggested that avoiding boredom requires two things: 1) taking a genuine interest in certain ends and 2) seeing a way of engaging with those ends. Mill's worry turns on the possibility that these criteria might be in tension with each other. To engage with my end is to make progress toward either realizing or enjoying it. If the interest I take in an end is *undermined* by realizing or enjoying it, however, then this means that having opportunities to engage with my end will also diminish my interest in it. For a quick example, consider the kind of case Schopenhauer discusses above. If I am only interested in obtaining health in order to escape the pains of sickness, then obtaining health with also eliminate the source of my interest in health: the sickness is removed, and with it everything that made health seem appealing. Successfully deploying my faculties for the sake of health, then, would also deprive me of any motivation to continue using my faculties in this way. If this self-cancelling structure was a general feature of human interests, then the method we use to hold boredom at bay would be unsustainable: avoiding boredom requires having both interests and opportunities to express them, but the more opportunities we have to express our interests, the fewer interests we would have. Thus, if we are unable to maintain an interest in our fully realized ends, boredom will become inevitable for us:

we will be forced to choose between maintaining our interests by avoiding engaging with our ends or engaging with our ends at the cost of undermining our interests. Either way, one of the criteria required to avoid boredom will go unmet.

Mill's major discussion of this problem is found in his *Autobiography*. There, Mill recounts a crisis in his early life, a period of time when he was unable to see any path to his own happiness. As Mill emphasizes, however, he did not take this crisis to concern him alone:

> though my dejection, honestly looked at, could not be called other than egotistical, produced by the ruin, as I thought, of my fabric of happiness, yet the destiny of mankind in general was ever in my thoughts, and could not be separated from my own. I felt that the flaw in my life, must be a flaw in life itself (*CW* 1.149)

Despite appearing his *Autobiography*, then, Mill's account of his crisis is of more than autobiographical significance. It is, rather, an explanation of a general problem: a potential "flaw in life itself," something that threatens to undermine the happiness of not only Mill but human beings quite generally.

As I have suggested, this potential flaw is the impossibility of remaining unbored in the presence of our fully realized ends. Thus, explaining why the work of Byron was no help to him during the crisis, Mill describes their shared mindset as follows:

> The poet's state of mind was too like my own. His was the lament of a man who had worn out all pleasures, and who seemed to think that life, to all who possess the good things of it, must necessarily be the vapid uninteresting thing which I found it. (*CW* 1.151)

Byron's state of mind was similar to Mill's own for both feared that boredom was inevitable for "all who possess the good things of [life]": that is to say, for all who have had an opportunity to actually realize and enjoy their ends. Their common worry is that the pleasures in life *wear out*:

in the same way that a shoe's sole becomes thinner the more it is worn, our interests diminish the more that we engage with their objects.[6]

Throughout his account of the crisis, Mill comes back to this worry again and again, considering a series of different interests that all share this same self-cancelling structure. Some things interest only because of misconceptions we have about them. Engaging with them thus undermines our interest by confronting us with their reality. Mill's own initial interest in social reform was undermined by carrying this confrontation out in thought:

> it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself, "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized: that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for. (*CW* 1.139)

Mill's interest in reform turned on expecting its realization to provide a kind of happiness which it would not actually produce. A clear-eyed projection of himself into a world in which his goals had been realized revealed the illusory nature of this expectation. As such, it destroyed the interest which that false expectation had sustained.[7]

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[6] Although fears about the *durability* of our interests are widely seen as essential to Mill's crisis, these fears are not typically taken to rest on the potentially self-cancelling structure of our interests. Heydt (2006 ,p. 63) and Setiya (2017) are the exceptions, but both leave the account undeveloped. Setiya sees Mill's worry as similar to the one I attributed to Schopenhauer above: our interests are all remedial in character, aimed at removing the bad rather than obtaining the good. He notes that such interests are self-cancelling, but sees this as a side issue. Heydt explicitly identifies the self-cancelling character of our interests as the heart of Mill's crisis, but does so in passing.

[7] Anderson (1991) and Vogler (2001) take Mill's worry here to concern the *normatively* arbitrary character of associational desires. Mill's interest in social reform rests on taking pleasure in social reform. There is, however, no reason why he *should* take pleasure in social reform: it makes him happy only because arbitrary features of his past experience have led him to associate it with pleasure. Thus, his interest collapses under the pressure of normative reflection: once he realizes that there is no reason why he *should* find pleasure in social reform he ceases to do so.

This reading does not seem to fit with the text, however, for the reflection that undermined Mill's interest is not normative in character. Mill's interest in reform is dissolved by a question about what *would* follow its gratification, not what *should* follow its gratification: "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized . . . *would* this be a great joy and happiness to you?" (my emphasis). This question is not normative, it is *causal*: Mill asks if a

Other things interest only because of their novelty. Engaging with them thus undermines our interest by rendering them familiar:

> the pleasure of music (as is quite true of such pleasure as this was, that of mere tune) fades with familiarity, and requires either to be revived by intermittence, or fed by continual novelty. (*CW* 1.149)[8]

Still other things—the negative goods Schopenhauer discussed—interest only because of the pain of lacking them. Engaging with them thus undermines our interest by removing the privation we needed them to avoid:

> the question was, whether, if the reformers of society and government could succeed in their objects, and every person in the community were free and in a state of physical comfort, the pleasures of life, being no longer kept up by struggle and privation, would cease to be pleasures. (*CW* 1.149)

What ties Mill's discussion of these cases together is the common worry that they express: namely, the fear that engaging with our ends might unavoidably diminish our interest in them.[9] This will be true of interests based on false-expectations, novelty, or privation. If it was true of *all* our interests, then Mill suggests that happiness would be an impossibility.

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particular cause – the realization of utilitarian reforms – will have a particular effect – his happiness. The problem is simply that his interest rests on a false expectation.

[8] To avoid a misleading impression, it is worth emphasizing Mill's parenthetical remark. His claim here is not that our interest in *music* necessarily rests on novelty. It is that our interest in "*mere tune*" rests on novelty. As Mill sees it, someone interested in music for the tune is interested in surprising combinations of notes. They thus lose interest in a piece of music once the combinations of notes it contains can no longer surprise. Someone who takes a genuinely aesthetic interest in a piece of music, in contrast, is not primarily concerned with the novel arrangement of its notes. Rather, they are concerned with their emotional resonance. As such, their interest is not reduced by familiarity: appreciation of a work's emotional depth is not inevitably diminished by repeated engagement in the way that appreciation of its novelty inevitably is.

[9] That this account of Mill's crisis makes it clear what ties all three of these cases together is, it seems to me, a mark in its favor. Accounts that emphasize the first case exclusively – such as those offered by Anderson (1991), Paul (1998), Vogler (2001), and Parkhurst (2013) – tend to conclude that Mill's central worry concerns the structure of associational desires. This makes it quite mysterious why Mill includes interests based on novelty and privation in his discussion as well. Setiya (2017), meanwhile, focuses on Mill's discussion of privation-based interests. He thus concludes that Mill's central worry is about our interests' remedial structure, rendering Mill's discussion of associational and novelty-based interests mysterious instead.

What explains this position is, I have claimed, Mill's view of boredom. Mill holds that a boring life—one found to be a "vapid uninteresting thing"—can have no true value to us (*CW* 1.151). Avoiding boredom requires opportunities to deploy our faculties, and these opportunities are only available where we both have ends that significantly interest us and are in a position to actually engage with those ends. If all of our interests have the same self-cancelling structure as those that Mill analyzed during his crisis, then these opportunities are likely to run out long before life does. Whenever we are in a position to genuinely engage with one of our ends, this engagement will itself destroy our interest in that end. We will thus eventually find ourselves in the same position as the retirees, oppressed women, and selfish elders discussed above: namely, one where the only ends that interest us are those we have no way of actively engaging with. If the interest we take in our ends is always undermined by actually realizing or enjoying those ends, then the crushing boredom that undermined life's value for those particular groups of people would be the fate of human beings quite generally.

It is for this reason that Mill presents his reaction to Wordsworth's poetry as offering a potential solution to his crisis. For what Mill discovered in that reaction was the possibility of a kind of interest that would be in no way diminished by prolonged engagement with its object. As Mill put it, he "needed to be made to feel that there was real, *permanent* happiness in tranquil contemplation" (*CW* 1.153, my emphasis). Wordworth's poems established this by offering

> a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which had no connexion with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. From them I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed. (*CW* 1.151)

Wordsworth's poetry showed Mill the possibility of "perennial sources of happiness." The objects of aesthetic and emotional interest do not only attract us while we are struggling to access

them. Rather, they continue to do so even when related to *tranquilly*: even when they are fully available to us and the focus of our enjoyment rather than our pursuit, our interest in them can remain undiminished. Thus, in the notes for his debating speech about Wordsworth's value, Mill suggests that Wordsworth brough his crisis to an end precisely by changing his views about the possibility of stably enjoying our fully realized ends:

> My own change since I thought life a perpetual struggle – how much more there is to aim at when we see that happiness may coexist with being stationary and does not require us to keep moving. (*CW* 26.441)

If all our interests were self-cancelling, avoiding boredom would require a constant cycling between different struggles. A self-cancelling interest could hold boredom at bay only while we were struggling to gratify it. Once that gratification had occurred, our only option would be to keep ourselves occupied by struggling to gratify some other interest. We would thus keep going, working through our interests one by one until there were none left. Mill's reaction to Wordsworth convinced him that this constant movement was unnecessary: avoiding boredom does not depend on endlessly struggling toward unrealized ends, nor does it depend on endlessly cycling between different ends. Rather, there is genuine hope of remaining stationary without becoming stagnant, of finding permanent relief from boredom in the stable enjoyment of a limited set of fully realized ends.[10] What this hope depends on, however, is the possibility of developing interests that are truly sustainable, lacking the self-cancelling feature possessed by all the kinds of interest that Mill worried about during his crisis.[11]

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[10] Millgram (2011) argues that Mill's crisis centered on worries about the rigidification of character. This seems to be in significant tension with Mill's description of his solution as a way of remaining stationary. The main virtue of poetry that Mill emphasizes—its capacity to generate a "perennial" and "permanent" form of interest—seems particularly inapt for resolving a crisis centered on the dangers of motivational *stability*.

[11] In discussing Mill's claim that Wordsworth's poetry resolved his crisis, my aim has simply been to use Mill's remarks about this solution to confirm my earlier account of how he understands the crisis itself. As such, a big question remains on the table: why exactly did Mill take aesthetic interest in particular to have this special, sustainable character? Although I cannot provide an at all adequate answer to that question here, I would like to

3. Nietzsche

We have now seen both Schopenhauer and Mill's reasons for holding that life's value turns on the possibility of remaining unbored by our fully realized ends. Before concluding, I would likely to briefly consider the position of another nineteenth-century philosopher who seems to challenge this view.

In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche offers a view of boredom quite similar to Schopenhauer and Mill's. Thus, Nietzsche too describes boredom as the frustrated desire for activity. There is, however, one significant difference. Schopenhauer and Mill present this desire as more or less innate: someone who has a faculty will inevitably feel a kind of pressure to use that faculty. Nietzsche, in contrast, suggests that this desire is *habitual*: those who are accustomed to using their faculties will be distressed by the inability to continue doing so, while those who have never made much use of their faculties will be unbothered by inactivity.

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quickly note one thing that might be helpful. In his scant writing on poetry, Mill suggests that a work engages us in a genuinely aesthetic way just in case it engages us in a genuinely *emotional* way:

> Every truth which a human being can enunciate, every thought, even every outward impression, which can enter into his consciousness, may become poetry when shown through any impassioned medium, when invested with the colouring of joy, or grief, or pity, or affection, or admiration, or reverence, or awe, or even hatred or terror: and, unless so coloured, nothing, be it as interesting as it may, is poetry. (*CW* 1.348)

At bottom, then, in claiming that aesthetic interest is uniquely sustainable, Mill is claiming that *emotional* interest is uniquely sustainable: *anything at all* ("Every truth . . . every thought . . . every outward impression") will count as poetry in Mill's sense of the term as long as it has been invested with some form of emotional significance. Where works of art are concerned, then, consider the distinction drawn in note 8 above: repeated engagement with a work will undermine our interest in its unexpected innovations and surprising twists, but it may only deepen our appreciation for its emotional depth and subtlety. More generally though, note that works of art are not the only things we can be emotionally interested in: if anything, the more typical objects of such interest are other human beings. Mill's claim, then, is not actually that there is something tremendously special about the interest we take in works of art. Rather, it is that our interest in works of art is of a uniquely sustainable *kind*: emotional interest writ large is sustainable in a way that interests based in false expectation, novelty, and privation are not.

> *Boredom and play*. – Need compels us to perform work with the proceeds of which the need is assuaged; need continually recurs and we are thus accustomed to working. In the intervals, however, during which our needs have been assuaged and are as it were sleeping, we are overtaken by boredom. What is this? It is our habituation to work as such, which now asserts itself as a new, additional need; and the more strongly habituated we are to working, perhaps even the more we have suffered need, the stronger this new need will be. To elude boredom man either works harder than is required to satisfy his other needs or he invents play, that is to say work designed to assuage no other need than the need for work as such. (Nietzsche, 1996, pp. 193-4, HH I: 611)

Nietzsche's description of boredom here sounds immediately familiar from the first *Parerga and Paralipomena* passage considered above. Schopenhauer claimed that our faculties initially serve us in the struggle against want, but become a burden as soon as that struggle is over, forcing us to invent play. Nietzsche makes the same claim about work with one key difference: we do not start out with an inborn need to work. Rather, we develop that need through repeated experience of the struggle against want. Having done so, we are then forced to invent play: a way of maintaining the level of activity typical of work even after work is no longer called for. Thus, in other passages, Nietzsche suggests that boredom is only possible for those who have extensive experience with working:

> *Boredom*. – Many people, especially women, never feel boredom because they have never learned to work properly. (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 151, HH I: 391)[12]

> *Spirit and Boredom*. – The saying 'The Magyar is much too lazy to feel bored' is thought provoking. Only the most acute and active animals are capable of boredom. (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 323, WS 56)

[12] In this passage, Nietzsche suggests that his view of boredom explains why women are uniquely *impervious* to it: in conditions of inequality, women rarely work, and thus never develop the habit on which boredom rests. This stands in sharp contrast with Mill's view, which aimed to explain why conditions of inequality render women uniquely *vulnerable* to boredom. Assuming that Mill's position is closer to the truth, this may seem like a reason to prefer his account of boredom over Nietzsche's. However, Nietzsche's view would only actually suggest that inequality protects women against boredom if inequality actually tended to reduce women's workloads. The implausibility of that second claim means that Nietzsche's view of boredom can also explain the phenomenon Mill describes: inequality renders women uniquely *vulnerable* to boredom, because the continuous demands of domestic labor leave women uniquely habituated to activity.

Boredom is, on Nietzsche's view, dissatisfaction of a need produced by a habit. Only those who first work enough to develop that habit are subject to that need. Thus, while Schopenhauer and Mill would say that an individual's vulnerability to boredom scales with the extent of their faculties, Nietzsche holds that an individual's vulnerability to boredom scales with the extent of their customary activity. Unused faculties are not inherently burdensome to us. They can, however, become burdensome to us if a habit has formed around their use.

Although the above is Nietzsche's most explicit account of boredom, I do not take it to be the most relevant part of his view for our purposes. Rather, what is more important is Nietzsche's account of how we become tired of our possessions. Although Nietzsche does not typically use the term boredom in this context, the phenomenon he has in view seems to be the same one that Schopenhauer and Mill found so worrying: namely, the loss of interest in our fully realized ends. Schopenhauer took this loss of interest to indicate that our ends lack positive value. Mill took this loss of interest to indicate that engaging with our ends was diminishing our motivational set. Nietzsche, however, makes a different suggestion. When our ends cease to interest us, it is not always because we failed to find them positively valuable or because the overall scope of our interests has been diminished by engaging with them. Rather, we sometimes lose interest in one thing simply because we want *more* things. We do not seek after new things because we have grown tired of the old. Rather, we grow tired of the old because we seek after the new.

Nietzsche's initial account of how we become tired of our possessions is offered in *Gay Science* 14, as part of a discussion of the common instinct lying behind both love and avarice:

> Our love for our neighbor – is it not a lust for new *possessions*? And likewise our love of knowledge, of truth, and altogether any lust for what is new? Gradually we become tired of the old, of what we safely possess, and we stretch out our hands again. Even the most beautiful scenery is no longer assured of our love after we have lived in it for three months, and some more distant coast attracts our avarice: possessions are generally diminished by possession. Our pleasure in

> ourselves tries to maintain itself by again and again changing something new *into ourselves*; that is what possession means. To become tired of some possession means tiring of ourselves. (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 88, GS 14)

The common instinct lying behind both love and avarice is, Nietzsche suggests, the pursuit of self-enjoyment. We aim to take pleasure in ourselves. In order to do this, we strive to identify ourselves with new things. Our delight in those things is thus converted into self-delight. Soon, we become tired of these new things. This, however, is simply due to the voraciousness of our avarice. Our desire to take ever more delight in ourselves pushes us to continuously seek out new things to turn into ourselves. We lose interest in our current possessions because this is the only way we can make room for the pursuit of new ones. As Nietzsche puts it here, however beautiful our current environment may be, our interest in it will have to fade the moment a more distant coast attracts our avarice. It is our avarice for the more distant coast that undermines our interest in our present environment rather than the reverse. Schopenhauer's worry about positive good, then, does not apply: we lose interest in our current possessions not because they were never a source of positive value, but because we have already finished incorporating their value into ourselves and are now ready to go after a new source. Mill's worry is also inapplicable: what kills our interest in our current possessions is not engagement with them as such, but rather our interest in some new possession. Our motivational set is thus left fully intact: one interest dies only because another interest has supplanted it.

These features of Nietzsche's account become clearer in his later discussion of "brief habits": the fundamentally *short-term* attachment to some good. When in the grip of such an attachment, Nietzsche suggests, we expect it to go on forever. When this expectation is disappointed, however, this is not an occasion for the kind of worries that tormented

Schopenhauer and Mill. Rather, it as an opportunity: a chance to experience even more good things instead of getting stuck on the ones we already have.

> *Brief habits*. – I love brief habits and consider them an inestimable means for getting to know *many* things and states down to the bottom of their sweetness and bitterness. [. . .] I always believe that here is something that will give me lasting satisfaction – brief habits too, have this faith of passion, this faith in eternity – and that I am to be envied for having found and recognized it; and now it nourishes me at noon and in the evening and spreads a deep contentment all around itself and deep into me so that I desire nothing else, without having any need for comparisons, contempt or hatred. But one day its time is up; the good thing parts from me, not as something that has come to nauseate me but peacefully and sated with me as I am with it – as if we had reason to be grateful to each other as we shook hands to say farewell. Even then something new is waiting at the door, along with my faith – this indestructible fool and sage! – that this new discovery will be just right, and that this will be the last time. That is what happens to me with dishes, ideas, human beings, cities, poems, music, doctrines, ways of arranging the day, and life styles. (Nietzsche, 1974, pp. 236-7, GS 295)

To get tired of something is not evidence that it lacked value for you. The goods that Nietzsche parts with were genuinely beneficial during his time with them: he parts from them with *gratitude* for services rendered rather than disgust at his folly in thinking that they could render those services forever. Their temporary character does not correspond to their deficiency but to Nietzsche's avarice. Nietzsche aims to "know *many* things and states down to the bottom of their sweetness and bitterness": this desire to know *many* goods and make *many* things his own simply rules out permanent attachment to any one thing. It is no accident that the moment he loses interest in his present object, he finds a new one waiting at the door. For it is precisely the desire to find such a new good that brought his attachment to the old good an end. The case is similar to Nietzsche's suggestion that what explains our renunciation of one opinion is often nothing more than our growing need for a new one: "We negate and must negate because something in us wants to live and affirm – something that we perhaps do not know or see as yet" (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 246, GS 307). We think that we adopt the new opinion because we have discovered the

error in the old one, but in fact we only discover the old opinion's error because we long for a way to adopt the new one. In the same way, we may think that we desire new possessions because we are tired of the old ones, but in fact the reverse is true.

On Nietzsche's account, then, that we get tired of our possessions and become bored by our fully realized ends is no objection to life's value. Rather, it is evidence of just how attractive life is to us: in our avarice, we long to possess all the goods that life has to offer, and this means that we can never rest content with any one of them for long.

Conclusion

In presenting these different views, I have tried to bring out the stakes involved in two key questions: 1) do we necessarily lose interest in our fully realized ends?; and 2) if so, what is it that explains this loss of interest? Our answers to these questions will depend at least in part on our views about the nature and causes of boredom. I hope to have shown, then, that these questions about boredom themselves carry high stakes. Initially, boredom may seem to play a fairly small part in human life. In determining life's value, however, its role may be quite substantial.[13]

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