Bernard Williams has famously argued that an immortal life would necessarily be boring. Despite the obvious importance that boredom occupies in Williams’s argument, he says very little about the nature of boredom. In this paper, I argue that attention to the empirical literature on boredom reveals a serious flaw in Williams’s argument. Specifically, I show that there is no available explication of boredom that is supported by the empirical research and which at the same time establishes Williams’s conclusions.

Is immortality boring? In a now classic essay, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” Bernard Williams has argued, on the basis of two assumptions regarding the nature of human character and personal continuity, that an immortal life would necessarily be boring. Despite the obvious importance that boredom occupies in Williams’s argument, he says, surprisingly, very little about the nature of boredom. In this paper, I argue that attention to the empirical literature on boredom reveals a serious flaw in Williams’s argument. Specifically, I show that there is no available explication of boredom that is supported by the empirical research and which at the same time establishes Williams’s conclusions.
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1. Kinds of boredom

Williams argues that “from facts about human desire and happiness and what a human life is, it follows … that immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable” (1973, p. 82). And it would be intolerable because it would necessarily give rise to an inevitable boredom that either renders our lives meaningless or is tantamount to a subjectively meaningless existence. To better understand Williams’s position, two issues must be addressed. First, one needs to know what boredom is for Williams and how it relates to meaninglessness (or to a life without meaning). Second, one needs to know why Williams thinks that an immortal life leads inevitably to this type of boring and meaningless existence. Here, I focus only on the first of these two issues; not only is the second issue largely (if not entirely) a matter of (Williamsian) exegesis, but the issue has been discussed many times already in the literature (see, e.g., Fischer 1994; Fisher and Mitchell-Yellin 2014; Moore 2006; Rosati 2013; Tanyi and Karlander 2013).

Boredom, Williams assures us, is not “a tiresome consequence of the supposed states or activities” (1973, p. 95)—it is not, in other words, a temporary dissatisfaction with features of our activities. Rather, the boredom that Williams has in mind is “a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one’s relation to the environment” (ibid.). What exactly that means, Williams never clearly articulates. Still, we can surmise through his discussion of categorical desires that this type of boredom relates to the death of life-motivating desires.
Williams distinguishes between conditional and categorical (or unconditional) desires. Conditional desires are desires that have a hold on us (i.e., they motivate us to fulfill them) only under the assumption that we will continue to be alive. Categorical desires also motivate us to fulfill them. Yet they also furnish us with a reason to keep on living. Categorical desires occupy a special role in our lives: not only do they propel us forward in life, but they also make possible a life with personal meaning and significance (pp. 82-3, 99). Without categorical desires, we would have no reason to engage in the numerous projects that shape our lives. A life without categorical desires would be, in Williams’s words, “unlivable” (p. 100). And boredom, for Williams, is related precisely to such an existential state: one is bored when one ceases to have any categorical desires and finds no reason to keep on living (pp. 89, 91). Williams’s boredom is thus both severe and totalizing. One is not bored by this or that activity; one is bored with life itself.

Williams’s position is clearly committed to certain claims both about the character of boredom and about its effects on one’s life. But how do we know whether Williams’s claims are true? In our evaluation of Williams’s argument, we shouldn’t take Williams’s claims for granted. Yet much of the relevant literature has done, surprisingly, precisely that. That is, authors have readily accepted that what Williams describes as the characteristics and effects of boredom are indeed the characteristics and effects of boredom and have focused their efforts in trying to determine whether boredom (as described by Williams) would be the inevitable consequence of an immortal life and if so, what would that mean for the quality of one’s (immortal) life.¹ Such a dialectical response, however, concedes too much to Williams. It already assumes that Williams has gotten boredom right. But that is exactly what needs to be questioned. Consequently, our evaluation of Williams’s position ought to begin with an attempt to articulate the nature of boredom, given our best available evidence concerning
boredom. For only once we have determined what boredom is (or can be), we can ask whether Williams’s boredom is indeed boredom.

Even a quick look at the literature on boredom reveals the existence of an important distinction between two types of boredom: state boredom (a transitory affective experience) and trait boredom (a lasting personality trait). In what follows, I utilize this distinction and examine whether either type of boredom corresponds to Williams’s boredom. There are at least three reasons that support my use of this distinction. First, the distinction is widely used in the empirical literature on boredom (e.g., Fahlman et al. 2013; Todman 2003). Under the assumption that boredom is a psychological state amenable to empirical investigation, then it is not unreasonable (perhaps, it is even mandatory) to take seriously what our best sciences reveal about boredom. And without a doubt, scientific approaches to boredom routinely distinguish between these two types of boredom and explore their respective characters, correlates, effects, and antecedents. In fact, the distinction has been instrumental in furthering our understanding of boredom (for discussions, see Elpidorou 2014, 2017; Fahlman et al. 2013; Neu 2000; Todman 2003). Second, and in addition to the empirical support that it enjoys, the distinction is also supported by our ordinary linguistic and conceptual practices. Specifically, it is on the basis of this distinction that we are able to capture much of our pre-theoretical grasp of boredom for the distinction accounts for the various principles governing the application of the concept boredom. For instance, we often use the term “boredom” both to refer to a long-lasting existential condition (something like an existential malaise) and to a temporary emotional experience. The distinction between state and trait boredom makes such double work possible. What is more, the distinction also allows us to make sense of various discussions of boredom in the history of philosophy. For instance, without the notion of trait boredom, it would be hard to explicate aedia or tedium
vitae, both of which are thought to be traits or dispositions and not affective states. Third, within the empirical literature of boredom, the distinction appears to be exhaustive. There is no third type of boredom that is currently empirically explored, and claims that seem to be about different types of boredom amount to claims about different subtypes of these two types of boredom (Elpidorou in press; Westgate and Wilson 2018).

2. Not your ordinary boredom

Is Williams’s boredom state boredom? State boredom is commonly understood as an affective experience that is both transitory and often situation dependent and which signifies a failure to engage with one’s environment in a desired manner despite one’s wish to do so. It is characterized by feelings of dissatisfaction, a perception of meaninglessness, non-optimal arousal, attentional difficulties, and a desire to change one’s activities (for discussion, see Elpidorou 2018b). State boredom has been the topic of an active research program in psychology and the cognitive sciences. At the same time, this type of boredom deserves the name “ordinary” or “everyday” boredom. Such research program not only assumes that the construct that it explores is precisely the experience that most of us feel when, for example, we wait for a delayed bus, watch a boring documentary, or engage in a mundane or repetitive task; it also experimentally induces this state in individuals by exposing them to the type of things and activities that regularly bore us—monotony, repetition, understimulation, or lack of interest (Fahlman et al. 2013; Van Tilburg and Igou 2012).

There are at least two reasons why state boredom is not the boredom that Williams has in mind, in addition to the fact that state boredom is both a transitory and largely situation-dependent experience. First, state boredom is consistent with the existence of categorical desires; Williams’s boredom is not. Indeed, there is no necessary connection
between state boredom and categorical desires or the perception that one’s life is meaningless. To be bored sometimes with something entails nothing about one’s relationship to one’s life. One can be bored while performing a repetitive task or listening to a lecture and still perceive one’s life as fulfilling, meaningful, and worth living. Consequently, an immortal life can have bouts of state boredom without becoming necessarily meaningless for the subject of this life.

Second, under certain articulations of the nature of state boredom, state boredom is not only consistent with the existence of categorical desires, but it suggests the presence of something like categorical desires. How could this be the case? This is a subtler point, one often missed in the immortality literature, and in order to draw it out we need to say something about the character of state boredom.

The empirical literature on boredom includes different accounts of state boredom. Often such accounts single out one particular aspect of the experience of state boredom and treat it as the essence of boredom. For instance, existential theories of boredom render one’s perception of meaninglessness as the core of boredom (Barbalet 1999; Maddi 1970); arousal theories hold that boredom is a state of non-optimal arousal (Berlyne 1960); and attentional theories understand boredom to be the result of certain attentional or cognitive difficulties (Eastwood et al. 2012). At other times, boredom is conceptualized as an affective state that is intimately related either to our environmental conditions or to our perception of those conditions (e.g., monotony, lack of stimulation, non-optimal challenge, constraint, or lack of value) (Pekrun 2006; Troutwine and O’Neal 1981; Csikszentmihalyi 1975).

In addition to the aforementioned accounts of state boredom that attempt to locate the essence of boredom in one of its cognitive, volitional, physiological, perceptual, or experiential aspects, a growing number of researchers have argued that boredom should be
understood as a functional state. According to such a perspective, boredom is the affective state that it is because of its role in our mental and behavioral economy. A functional account treats boredom as a regulatory state that aims to promote the pursuit of meaningful, interesting, or engaging activities when our current activities cease to be so (Bench and Lench 2013; Danckert et al. 2018; Elpidorou 2014, 2018a, 2018b). Boredom arises thus when we find ourselves in a state of dissatisfaction and acts as a motivating force that can help us to move out of such a state and into one that is either in line with our interests and values or engaging. The functional account is supported by the empirical literature and offers a productive framework to unify various findings about boredom (Elpidorou 2018b).

Although I take the functional account of state boredom to be currently the most promising elaboration of boredom, one need not agree with the functional account. The argument I am about to offer can be presented even if a different theoretical articulation of boredom were to be accepted (O’Brien 2014; Van Tilburg and Igou 2012). The functional account, however, gives pride of place to the main premise of the argument which is the expression of the fact that when we experience state boredom, we do so precisely because we are not doing something that we wish to be doing. In other words, the very presence of boredom is indicative of the existence of certain wishes that remain unfulfilled. State boredom arises only against the background of preexisting interests and commitments. As such, the existence of state boredom is a sign that we are still involved with life.

Is this involvement one that necessarily indicates the existence of categorical desires? I am inclined to say ‘Yes’, but I will not argue for this claim. I am content to settle for the following weaker and disjunctive conclusion: Either some of the desires involved in the experience of state boredom are categorical or all of them are conditional. If some such desires are categorical, then clearly Williams’s boredom cannot be state boredom—state
boredom is not the death of categorical desires. But even if all of them are conditional, this conclusion should still pose a concern for Williams. Here is why.

It is a well-established fact that state boredom is a powerful drive (Bench and Lench 2013, 2019). It motivates us to act in various ways, all of which share a common aim: to escape boredom’s unpleasant grasp. Boredom can help us to find uses for polystyrene cups (Mann and Cadman 2014). It can push us to shock ourselves when we are left alone with nothing to do (Nederkoorn et al. 2016; Wilson et al. 2014). It may even force nurses to kill (Elpidorou 2020), arsonists to commit crimes (“Arson suspect said” 2016), individuals to eat more M&Ms (Havermans et al., 2015), and, in an elaborate experiment aimed to recreate a narrative arc from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, participants to enter a rabbit hole (van Aart et al., 2010). Under the assumption that all of state boredom’s desires are conditional then we are moved into action on account of our conditional desires. But if so, the relevance of the distinction between categorical and conditional desires for living a meaningful life becomes much harder to draw clearly. In particular, it is hard to see why a life with only conditional desires would be necessarily a meaningless life if such desires are capable of prompting us to act and of shaping our conduct. After all, the desires which are part of the experience of state boredom are desires to do something that we find to be interesting or meaningful (Fahlman et al. 2013; Van Tilburg and Igou 2012). So, at the very least, the presence of state boredom implies the presence of interest.

There are, I conclude, serious difficulties with claiming that Williams’s boredom is state boredom. The latter is transitory and situation specific, compatible with the existence of categorical desires, and a sign that we are still involved with life; the former is none of those three things. Hence, a defender of Williams’s position is well advised to look for an alternative understanding of boredom.
3. Not a personality trait either

If Williams’s boredom is not state boredom, could it be trait boredom? Trait boredom is a personality trait, i.e., the propensity to experience boredom frequently and in a wide range of situations. Researchers assess the presence of trait boredom using self-report measures (i.e., questionnaires). The most common measure of trait boredom is the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS) (Farmer and Sundberg, 1986), a questionnaire that involves 28 items and which is thought to operationalize and measure trait boredom (or as it is called, “boredom proneness”).

There are reasons to think that Williams’s discussion is trading on an understanding of boredom as trait boredom. Results from numerous correlational studies involving BPS or some shorter form of it make evident that the presence of trait boredom is correlated with a number of psychological harms. Specifically, trait boredom (as measured by BPS or some shorter form of the original questionnaire) has been found to be positively correlated with depression, apathy, anhedonia, alexithymia, and hopelessness (for a review of the literature, see Vodanovich 2003; Vodanovich and Watt 2015). Furthermore, individuals who score high on BPS report lower life satisfaction and have a harder time finding meaning in life than those who are not prone to boredom (Fahlman et al. 2009). Boredom prone individuals have also been characterized as lacking in autonomy (Farmer and Sundberg 1986), and they report both disordered agency—they do not know what they want to do in life (Fahlman et al., 2013)—and diminished self-determination (Kanevsky and Keighley 2003; Tolor and Siegel 1989). A recent literature review of correlational data has shown that the presence of trait boredom is related to lower levels of subjective well-being, lower reported life-satisfaction, lack of meaning in life, potentially harmful conduct, and reduction in autonomy (Elpidorou
As such, trait boredom is significant (perhaps even morally so) insofar as it is a serious impediment to living a good (flourishing) life. Thus, it appears that boredom proneness (or trait boredom) serves Williams’s purpose not only insofar as the presence of such a trait hinders one’s flourishing but also insofar as it may even render one’s life meaningless, trite, and ultimately not worth living (Bargdill 2000; Maltsberger et al. 2000).

Still, proponents of Williams’s position should not rush to the conclusion that trait boredom (or boredom proneness) is Williams’s boredom. The nature of a personality trait such as that of boredom is largely an empirical matter. One learns about its nature, prevalence, correlates, and effects from the available evidence. However, empirical work on the psychometric properties of BPS (and of other measures of trait boredom) reveals important limitations with our current instruments for assessing the presence of trait boredom. Because of that, our theoretical grasp on trait boredom might not be firm after all. Concerns about the psychometric properties of BPS have been discussed before in the literature so I will limit myself to what I take to be the three most important issues. First, there is disagreement regarding the factorial structure of BPS and of other measures of trait boredom. Such a disagreement is important for it shows that we do not yet know whether the construct that BPS purports to measure is a unitary one or not (Elpidorou in press; Gana et al. 2019; Struk et al. 2017). Even worse, it appears to be the case that the original BPS does not have a replicable factorial structure (Melton and Schulenberg 2009), a result which could be taken to mean that BPS is not a valid instrument or that it is an instrument that measures a different construct depending on contextual factors. Second, and partly because of this lack of replicable (factorial) structure of BPS, researchers have expressed skepticism regarding the external validity of BPS. Indeed, there is a worry that we do not really know what BPS measures (Danckert et al. 2018). Given the wealth of correlational studies that we
are in possession, it does measure something. What it measures exactly is unclear: Does it measure the frequency of the occurrence of boredom or one’s inability to cope with the experience of boredom when that arises? Current instruments are incapable of separating between the two. Lastly, a recent study that applied a trait-state-occasion model to the scores of (a short form of) BPS found that such scores could not be wholly attributed to trait component (Gana et al. 2019). In fact, the researchers reported that almost two thirds of the variance in the questionnaire’s scores were attributed to measurement errors—a result that underlines the inadequacy of our instruments for measuring trait boredom. All in all, we appear to have neither a psychometrically sound instrument for assessing trait boredom nor a satisfactory understanding of the construct that such an instrument is supposed to be measuring.

Problems with trait boredom persist even if we put aside issues with our measures of such kind of boredom. Trait boredom is a personality trait and by definition something that some people possess and others do not. But Williams’s boredom does not seem to mark an interpersonal difference. What is more, the suggestion that it is a personality trait militates against Williams’s claim that boredom is inevitable. It is a key part of Williams’s argument that anyone with a stable character would come to be bored with one’s life if one were to live long enough. Williams’s claim does not hold for some types of characters but for all. Yet an understanding of boredom as a personality trait threatens to undermine Williams’s claim about the inevitability of boredom: if boredom is a personality trait then whether one is bored in this manner depends on one’s psychological constitution.⁶

But even under the assumption that immortality would inevitably give rise to trait boredom, extant evidence does not support the conclusion that all boredom prone individuals lack all categorical desires. Some might (see Bargdill 2000; Maltsberger et al.
2000), but not everyone experiences life as completely meaningless on account of their frequent experience of boredom. The reported correlation between the two constructs (boredom proneness and perceived lack of meaning) is moderately strong but not so strong to suggest that the presence of one would necessitate the presence of the other (Fahlman et al. 2009). Furthermore, there is evidence in support of the claim that these two constructs are distinct—something that once again runs counter to Williams’s insistence that boredom just is the death of categorical desires and a life of meaninglessness (Fahlman et al. 2009).

In sum, if we accept that Williams’s boredom is trait boredom, then boredom is not the inevitable consequence of a long enough life. But even if it were, the mere presence of this type of boredom would not necessarily make our life meaningless.

4. **A different type of boredom?**

I have argued that given the current state of affairs in the empirical literature on boredom, when one makes a claim regarding boredom, one could use “boredom” to refer either to state boredom or to trait boredom. I also argued that Williams’s use of “boredom” cannot mean either one of these types of boredom: either option fails to meet Williams’s requirements about what boredom ought to do. The lesson here is that Williams’s pessimistic outlook about boredom is unjustified but that is not because we have somehow shown that an immortal life is not meaningless. Williams’s position ought to be rejected because he seems to have gotten boredom wrong. His boredom is unlike the boredom of our best empirical sciences.

Is Williams out of options? Not necessarily. There is another possibility that is open to Williams: One could deny that boredom as it figures in Williams’s essay is the subject matter of the empirical sciences of the mind and thus a state that has to be articulated by
appeal to scientific findings. Williams’s boredom, one could hold, is neither state boredom nor trait boredom; it is rather a unique state of existence that should not be understood in light of what we know about boredom. It is defined instead by what Williams says about it in his essay.

Could then Williams be right about immortality even if he is not talking about boredom as it is empirically conceived? One could certainly think so. What matters for Williams, one could suggest, isn’t boredom as such but the realization that an immortal life would be meaningless for the person living it. “Boredom” could be Williams’s name for an existential state without any categorical desires. Or more plausibly given how Williams describes boredom, it could be a psychological reaction to the lack of categorical desires (p. 95). But if that is so, then boredom appears to play little role in the argument against the desirability of immortality. An immortal existence is boring but that is not why we ought to reject it. We should reject it because it is meaningless, not on account of boredom, but on account of the fact that the subject of such a life lacks categorical desires. Such a reading of Williams’s view has been raised before. In their careful evaluation of Williams’s argument, Tanyi and Karlander (2013) write the following:

Boredom is a reaction to this [immortal] existence, but it is not what makes it impoverished, hence meaningless. In other words, boredom is consequential upon and is therefore evidence of the meaninglessness of the immortal’s existence, but it is not what makes this existence meaningless. To decide whether the immortal’s life is indeed meaningless, we must focus on its ‘meaning-making’ features, and these are not given by the phenomenology of boredom (p. 265).
If we follow Tanyi and Karlander’s suggestion, then boredom is not particularly important for Williams. What matters instead is the presence or absence of the type of perceived meaninglessness of one’s life that is associated with the death of categorical desires. As a result, Williams’s contention regarding the unbearableness of an immortal life could be true even if my critique of his understanding of boredom is granted. Does that show then that Williams’s position is immune to issues arising from a discussion of the nature of boredom?

I have two responses to offer to such a defense of Williams’s position.

First, the above reading of Williams’s position does not speak against the main conclusion of the paper, namely, that his argument is not supported by what we currently know about boredom. Either boredom (as it is understood by the empirical sciences or by folk psychology) plays an integral role in Williams’s argument or not. If it does, then I have given reasons to suggest that Williams’s argument does not work: it just cannot deliver the conclusion that he wants. But if boredom does not play an important role in the argument (if boredom, in other words, is simply a reaction to perceived meaninglessness), then the argument might work, but whether it does or not has very little to do with boredom. The suggestion to reconceive boredom as a mere reaction to perceived meaninglessness does not in any way vindicate Williams’s understanding of boredom. If it helps Williams in any way, it does so by taking boredom out of the argument. What this means is that even if Williams were correct to hold that an immortal life is necessarily meaningless, his conclusion would not follow from any facts regarding boredom as we understand and study it. In other words, the meaninglessness that Williams finds in an immortal life (assuming that such meaninglessness is an inevitable part of immortality) is not a consequence of human boredom. Such a conclusion is important. It shows that Williams’s essay should no longer be considered to be the standard account of the place of boredom in an immortal life.
Second, the response that was offered on Williams's behalf is premised on the idea that boredom is, at best, a symptom and neither a cause of nor a part of perceived meaninglessness. For if boredom were the cause of (or constitutive of) meaninglessness, then it and its features would become central to Williams's position and appeal to empirical evidence would once again be relevant. But is it correct to hold that boredom is simply a reaction to perceived meaninglessness? I admit that I do not know of any way of beginning to answer this difficult question other than by appealing to empirical explications of boredom. Once we do that, however, we discover that there is a wealth of evidence that suggests that boredom is intimately related to the perception of meaninglessness.

First, there is correlational evidence that demonstrates a relationship between the presence of boredom (either as a state or trait) and perceived meaninglessness. For instance, participants in high boredom condition report a greater sense of meaninglessness than those in a low boredom condition (Van Tilburg and Igou 2011, 2017b), whereas participants in a meaningless condition report greater boredom than participants in a meaningful condition (Fahlman et al. 2009). Second, experimental studies suggest that a perception of meaninglessness is an important characteristic of boredom (Chan et al., 2018; for a more conceptual articulation of the same position, see Barbalet 1999). For instance, the state of boredom has been shown to be distinguished from the negative emotions of sadness, anger, and frustration insofar as it involves thoughts about lack of meaning in one's current situation and activity (Van Tilburg and Igou 2012). This finding has been shown to apply not just to state boredom but also to lay conceptualizations of boredom (ones that presumably guide philosophical discussions of boredom) and to trait boredom (for details, see Van Tilburg and Igou 2017a). Last, and more important, Fahlman and colleagues (2009) reported a bidirectional relationship between boredom and perceived lack of meaning (in life).
Specifically, they found both that life meaning significantly predicted changes in boredom across time and that boredom was a significant predictor of changes in life meaning across time. Although Fahlman et al. (2009)’s findings go against identifying lack of meaning with boredom (and thus are in agreement with the claims of the previous section), they provide support for the claim that the two are nonetheless closely related, perhaps even in a causal and bidirectional manner. I do not wish to make too much about the possibility of a causal relationship between the two, especially given how notoriously difficult it is to ascertain causal relationships. All the same, the realization that there is a close relationship between lack of (perceived) meaning and the presence of boredom suggests that one cannot so easily ignore considerations of boredom when one discusses whether a type of life is meaningful or not. This is especially so given Fahlman et al. (2009)’s findings that suggest that boredom might not just be a reaction to meaninglessness but also one of its sources. Such a result is consistent with accounts of boredom that emphasize the role of attentional difficulties in the experience of boredom (Eastwood et al. 2012; Westgate and Wilson 2018). If boredom is often a state in which one’s situation does not hold one’s attention, then it is likely that the bored individual will experience negative feelings and negatively appraise their situation. As Eastwood and colleagues (2012) conclude after summarizing relevant evidence: “Things that are not within the focus of attention are disliked, and thus unattended activity is subject to negative attributions (‘this task is horrible and boring’).” (p. 488) The experiential profile of boredom is thus relevant to the manner in which the world strikes us: the presence of boredom might be constitutive of the fact that we experience our situation as meaningless.

Yet even if boredom were simply the outcome of or a reaction to perceived meaninglessness, the fact that boredom (as empirically studied and understood) tends to arise during conditions of such meaninglessness is important. As many studies have
demonstrated, boredom is not simply a reaction to perceived meaningless. Often, it also constitutes an attempt to re-establish meaning. In doing so, boredom can facilitate escape from situations that we take to be meaningless (Bench and Lench 2013; Elpidorou 2014, 2018a, 2018b; Van Tilburg and Igou 2011, 2012; Van Tilburg et al. 2013; see also McDonald 2019 for a discussion of how boredom may lead to authentic existence).

In sum, the relationship between boredom and perceived meaninglessness is complex. The response that was considered on Williams’s behalf, however, underestimates this complexity and does not fully appreciate the active role that boredom plays in our lives. Boredom isn’t merely a passive reaction to the perception of meaninglessness. It can also contribute to such a perception. And it may, if the conditions are right, even offer us a way to restore the perception that our situation is meaningful by motivating us to pursue alternative tasks and goals (Bench and Lench 2013; Elpidorou 2014; Van Tilburg and Igou 2012). Hence, the study of the character, effects, and correlates of boredom is relevant to investigations of the presence or absence of personal and life meaning.

5. Conclusion

Williams’s argument is either about human boredom as it is currently understood by our empirical sciences or not. If it is, then his argument is not sound—as I have shown in sections 2 and 3, Williams is mistaken about the consequences and ultimately the character of boredom. But if Williams’s argument is not about the boredom of our empirical sciences, then it must trade on an idiosyncratic understanding of boredom. As I argued in section 4, such an understanding does little to support Williams’s position. Although Williams could re-appropriate “boredom” to mean simply a reaction to the lack of categorical desires, this move proves costly. For one, if Williams were to do so, then his position is not about
boredom as it is currently empirically studied. Thus, whatever we make of his position, it isn’t a position about boredom as that is revealed either by our empirical sciences and or even by our lay understanding of boredom. (Recall that what psychologists call “state boredom” is meant to be our ordinary, everyday boredom). But even if we were to accept the suggestion to rethink and redefine boredom, that still does not settle the issue of the character of immortality. We now need to discuss and determine whether meaninglessness is a necessary condition of an immortal life. We also need to determine the exact relationship between boredom and meaninglessness. Such a topic remains difficult to breach without an antecedent understanding of boredom. And if we turn to empirical investigations of boredom, we find that boredom and perceived meaninglessness, although distinct, are closely related in ways that speak against the suggestion to treat boredom as merely the perception or symptom of meaninglessness.

For the subject of an immortal life, boredom is a serious matter. Because of that, we ought to try to understand boredom’s character and outcomes, its relationship to meaninglessness, and its role in the immortal life. Williams’s essay does not contribute to such aims. Whatever lessons we might draw from it, these shouldn’t be lessons concerning boredom.

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NOTES
Bruckner (2012), Chappell (2009), Fisher (1994), and Wisniewski (2005), among others, have provided insightful responses to Williams by criticizing his contention that boredom is the necessary consequence of an immortal life.

In one of the few purely conceptual articulations of boredom available in the philosophical literature, O’Brien (2014) holds that there is no need to distinguish between different types of boredom. I will not argue against O’Brien’s claim here. Suffice it to say that our respective projects are very different and subject to distinct methodological assumptions and norms. I think that claims about boredom ought to be supported by empirical evidence, whereas O’Brien does not (or if he does, he never explicitly articulates this commitment). All the same, even if O’Brien is right that there is only one type of boredom, my argument against Williams still goes through. O’Brien’s boredom is what I, and many others, call “state boredom,” and, Williams’s boredom cannot be state boredom. Or so I argue.

Not every arrangement of these bouts of state boredom would preserve the perception that our life is meaningful. In an infinite life, it is conceivable that such bouts of boredom could be stacked together and hence last for millions, billions, trillions, quintillions, etc. of years. This sort of arrangement, although possible, does not show that state boredom is Williams’s boredom. First, by definition, state boredom is an episodic (i.e., transitory) experience. Thus, a state of boredom that lasts for a million years is no longer state boredom; it is something else. Second, the fact that state boredom gives rise to a subjectively meaningless life under these conditions is not the necessary consequence of human psychology but the outcome of how our experiences are temporally structured.

The empirical literature strongly supports the view that a state of boredom without any motivating desires would not be boredom, but apathy (Goldberg et al. 2011; Meagher and Mason 2012).

Williams treats boredom as an apathetic state. EM’s boredom is characterized by “indifference and coldness” (p. 82). Her boredom is “frozen boredom” and someone like EM would be “cold, withdrawn, already frozen” (p. 91). Given our discussion, such a characterization of boredom is, at best, only partially correct. Boredom is not apathy. It is characterized not just by a felt dissatisfaction with one’s current situation but also by a strong desire to engage in an alternative situation (see also Elpidorou in press; Merrifield and Danckert 2014; Malkovsky et al. 2012). Williams focuses on the disengaging aspect of boredom to the exclusion of its motivating nature. Such an attitude has prevented him from acknowledging the possibility that
a life with state boredom is still a life with motion, interest, and meaning (Elpidorou 2020). If EM experiences state boredom, then she is not simply frozen. She has interests and desires. She is painfully aware of the fact that her desires remain unfulfilled. And she is itching for change.

6 Some authors (e.g., Bortolotti and Nagasawa 2009) have objected to Williams’s position precisely on the basis that the boredom of which he speaks is trait boredom and thus one cannot argue that it will be a necessary condition of immortality. I agree with such a contention: insofar as trait boredom is a personality trait and as such, a construct that is designed to track interpersonal differences, it cannot be assumed without argument that its presence will be inevitable for individuals with all sorts of psychological makeups. Still, in this section, I wish to go beyond Bortolotti and Nagasawa’s claims by also arguing that we should not read Williams (regardless of how tempting it may be) as being committed to the claim that boredom is trait boredom. In other words, I offer a two-fold argument. First, I argue that if Williams’s boredom is trait boredom, then his argument isn’t successful. Second, I argue that we do not have good reasons to accept that Williams’s boredom is trait boredom. The latter argument is necessary in order to establish my overall conclusion that there is no explication of boredom that is empirically motivated and that supports Williams’s argument.

7 Many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for pressing me to consider whether Williams could appropriate boredom so that his position is not subject to my objections.

8 Our folk understanding of boredom influences the results, measures, and experimental procedures of the scientific study of state boredom. Thus, by studying state boredom, the science of boredom studies (either implicitly or explicitly) lay boredom.
References


