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## Understanding Boredom in Ortega y Gasset's Moral Philosophy

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to contribute to the field of boredom studies from a perspective that has not yet been systematically explored: the gaze of Ortega y Gasset. On the one hand, it seeks to acknowledge the influence of Ortega y Gasset's thought within the context of Spanish philosophy; on the other, it aims to engage with the growing field of Boredom Studies, which has become increasingly established with greater clarity regarding its direction and purpose. This study focuses on Ortega y Gasset moral philosophy, based on the thesis that the core concepts that structure it—life, vocation, project, and absorption—offer valuable insights into understanding the phenomenon of boredom. Ortega y Gasset's work has been, and continues to be, extensively studied, in line with one of his fundamental ideas: that reality cannot be reduced to a single perspective, and any attempt to comprehend it requires a multiplicity of viewpoints. To this end, the present work also seeks to contribute to the study and understanding of Ortega's philosophy, with particular emphasis on his ethics of vocation.

**Keywords:** boredom, existential boredom, definition of boredom, Spanish philosophy, vocation.

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## 1. Introduction: The Philosophy of Vital Reason in José Ortega y Gasset

This article seeks to contribute to the growing field of boredom studies by engaging with the work of José Ortega y Gasset, one of the most influential figures in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish philosophy. By first contextualizing Ortega's work within the intellectual traditions of the Spanish-speaking world, this paper aims to offer a systematic interpretation of how his moral philosophy—especially his *ethics of vocation*—and core conceptual frameworks provide fertile ground for a deeper understanding of boredom as a philosophical and existential phenomenon. Ortega's thought remains subject to ongoing critical engagement. In Spain, the *Fundación Ortega-Marañón* continues to preserve and promote his legacy. The present analysis adopts an explicitly *orteguian* lens, grounded in his perspectivist metaphysics—namely, the conviction that no single viewpoint can exhaust the complexity of reality. Instead, multiple perspectives must be integrated to approximate a fuller understanding of human experience. Ortega called this approach *perspectivismo*, or perspectivism. This theoretical stance positions Ortega's philosophy as particularly relevant to contemporary debates within boredom studies, which likewise resist reductive or monodimensional accounts of subjective experience.

This study thus operates on two interrelated levels: first, as a contribution to the interpretation and reception of Ortega's philosophical project; second, as an intervention in boredom studies, a field that has recently gained prominence across philosophical, psychological, and cultural domains. By bringing these discourses into dialogue, the article aims to reveal how Ortega's philosophy can enhance current understandings of affective disengagement, existential discomfort, and the search for meaning—dimensions central to the contemporary analysis of boredom. Accordingly, the structure of this article begins with an examination of the key concepts in Ortega's moral philosophy in the first two sections. From the third section onward, the focus shifts to the question of boredom in Ortega's thought and its relationship to other notions such as entertainment, temporal perception, and agency.

Ortega y Gasset was arguably the first Spanish philosopher to achieve significant intellectual influence beyond the Iberian Peninsula. Although deeply concerned with Spain's sociopolitical conditions—its crises, transformations, and future—his works attained transnational resonance. His texts were translated into multiple languages, including French and English, and read widely in countries such as Argentina, Mexico, Germany, France, and the United States. In Ortega's vision, Spain could participate in global philosophical discourse, and he was committed to giving Spanish thought its true importance. An intellectually restless figure, Ortega aimed to lead a new generation of thinkers during the first half of the twentieth century. His engagements were not confined to the academy; he also entered the political arena. Yet, like Plato before him, he would eventually conclude that philosophy and politics are not always compatible pursuits. Nevertheless, this ambivalent relationship with public life further informs his reflections on individual vocation, historical responsibility, and the conditions of modern existence—all of which intersect, directly or indirectly, with the contemporary experience of boredom.

One of the principal teachings of Ortega's thought is that each era must confront its own challenges, something the philosopher expressed as the need of being “up to the task or challenge

of our time” (Ortega y Gasset, 2023, p. 213). The concept of *circunstancia* (circumstance), and the idea that if we do not save ourselves through it, there is no salvation possible, align with this perspective. The purpose of this study is connected to these teachings. Boredom, like the circumstance and so many other things that fall within it, must be understood by integrating multiple perspectives. We begin with the premise that it is impossible to comprehend boredom, as an existential phenomenon, without understanding that what we call life, or existence, is something fundamentally affected by boredom itself.

For Ortega, life is more than a philosophical category; it is the starting point of his philosophy and of everything—it is ‘radical reality’. In his course *What is philosophy?* (2023) we find the first and one of the clearest displays of the theory of life as radical reality. This course, given at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Central University of Madrid (now the Complutense University), presents a mature Ortega’s idea, firmly grounded in his philosophical ideas. Life, Ortega (2023, p. 221) asserts, is “that which we do and which happens to us” and of which we are conscious. To live is to be aware of oneself, to be conscious of the relationships we establish with the world and with others. This world, composed of others and the objects we encounter, is what Ortega calls *circunstancia* (circumstance). Circumstance is everything we coexist with, all that we are not and yet accompanies us.

Ortega’s notion of life not only includes this relational dimension but also a temporal one. To live is always to plan what we will do next—tomorrow or in the coming years. For this reason, Ortega tells us that life is also ‘futurition’; by this, Ortega meant that the subject’s perception of time, their present and their past, only acquires true meaning in relation to the future. For Ortega, life is oriented toward the future. However, all these plans are always possibilities, never absolute certainties. Thus, to live is also to choose among a range of possibilities that present themselves at every moment. Each choice requires constant validation, for we can always decide to flee, abandon everything, change the station, and tune into another plane of existence. A few years earlier, in *The Revolt of the Masses* Ortega had already stated that “our life, at every instant and before anything else, is consciousness of what is possible for us. If at every moment we had before us only a single possibility, it would make no sense to call it such” (Ortega y Gasset, 2022, p. 36). Therefore, “to live is to constantly decide what we are going to be” (Ortega y Gasset, 2023, p. 229). Among these characterizations of life, Ortega introduces an element that will later allow us to understand his contribution to the study of existential boredom: choice.

From these characterizations, we see that life is not an isolated and autonomous entity but is conditioned by an engagement with something beyond ourselves: *circunstancia*, which shapes and limits us—something we do not choose, like our name or the very fact of having been born. The notion of circumstance encompasses a multiplicity of concepts, realities, and effects, which explains why it has transcended the realm of philosophy. Ortega’s famous statement, “I am myself and my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I do not save myself” (2004a, p. 760), has ensured that circumstance remains a valuable analytical tool in philosophy, applied today to the field of boredom studies (Elpidorou, 2023).

Our next stop is *In Search of Goethe from Within* (published 1932), where Ortega offers a profound reflection on human life, its existential tensions, and culture. This essay connects key

concepts such as choice, vocation, and the authenticity of existence. Let us proceed step by step. Ortega begins his reflection with a powerful and somber image of human life: “Every life is, more or less, a ruin among whose debris we must discover what the person ought to have been” (2006, p. 128). This statement expresses the sense that, in many cases, the life we live is a distorted version of the life we could have lived. Indeed, we all “feel our real life as an essential deformation, greater or lesser, of our possible life” (Ortega y Gasset, 2006, p. 129). At some point, we have all experienced that abyss between the life we lead and the one we would have liked to lead—or would still like to lead. But for Ortega, whether we like it or not, human life is praxis; otherwise, it would not be life at all—it is “‘an action’ that begins with *doing*” (Ortega y Gasset, 2006, p. 131). In this sense, it is not enough to think about life; it must be lived and enacted in the continuous ‘now’ that defines existence. Our thoughts, ideals, and life projects must, sooner or later, confront reality. It is in this process, where decision-making and the search for options take place, that the meaning of our lives is shaped. At this point, Ortega reminds us of life’s relationship with time, clarifying that not only “the human being has a futuristic constitution” but also involves a connection with the past (2022, p. 132). The past serves as an aid in the task of giving meaning to our lives: “without the past, the future is an abyss, a horizon of problems that induces vertigo” (Ortega y Gasset, 2006, p. 131). This becomes particularly evident when we consider the shelter provided by any tradition or way of doing things inherited from our ancestors. From our grandmothers’ cooking recipes to sayings or proverbs that preserve both linguistic customs and certain ways of perceiving and understanding the world. Ortega correctly observes that for life to be healthy and vigorous, it must strike a balance between what has been done and what remains to be done—between past and future. For our philosopher, both dimensions are necessary, and neither should dominate the other.

In this work, Ortega adopts a tragic tone when he continues by stating that everyone’s life is a ‘drama’, confronted with the things that make up reality and condition the decisions we make. This drama—this struggle to live an authentic life—is closely linked to the notion of vocation, which we will explore later. In relation to this dramatic and tragic dimension of life Ortega identifies an element that allows us to understand boredom. For the Madrid-born thinker, satisfaction alone is not a sufficient criterion to identify an authentic life. It is possible to live an authentic life and yet experience unpleasant, dissatisfying, or demotivating moments without necessarily being bored. If we accept that that boredom is a phenomenon that appears when we are not fulfilling what we understand as an authentic life (a full life that satisfies our need for meaning), we can see how Ortega’s view reinforces what Finkielstein (2024) has already stated when it comes to one of the essential elements of boredom: a lack of interest simply does not provoke reactions, but it is not necessarily linked to boredom. Following Ortega, we can conclude that we must be prepared for such moments, accepting that the path is not always easy. While Ortega does not provide a concrete solution at this point, his perspective is clear: a meaningful life may include unsatisfying or repetitive moments but is not necessarily boring.

Moreover, I argue that while boredom is not and cannot be desirable, dissatisfaction is a moment we must accept and be prepared to live with. Here it is worth recalling the distinction proposed by Viktor Frankl between dissatisfaction and boredom. For Frankl (2000), boredom is a state linked to existential emptiness and, therefore, to a lack of meaning. By contrast, suffering

or dissatisfaction may arise in other areas of life and can be meaningful in themselves; although suffering must be avoidable whenever possible (Frankl, 2000). As Frankl asserts, if life has a purpose, then there must also be purpose in suffering and in dying. This kind of suffering is an inescapable part of human existence, whereas boredom, by contrast, can—and should—be avoided.

### 1.1. Choice and Absorption

For Ortega, there are only two moments in existence that prevent us from choosing: birth, as we are thrown into life without being asked, and death, the closing moment that ends our existence in the world. Aside from these two moments, Ortega sees life as *choice*. While animals exist in a state of *restlessness* (Ortega calls this state *alteración*), driven by their instincts and unable to refrain from actions such as satisfying hunger or reproduction, human beings are free; they can, and must, choose their next step and distinguished by *absorption* (*ensimismamiento*), which we should understand as the capacity to reflect in solitude on the projects that we want to guide our lives.

To be self-absorbed (*ensimismarse*) is therefore both an ability and a condition that allows us to develop a personal and unique reflection, which can then be translated into action. Without this capacity, we become subject to mechanisms that do not belong to us—family, society, and their dictates—because what truly matters is listening to one’s own judgment. To achieve this, one must spend time alone with oneself. One might think, quite rightly, that this is nothing new. Indeed, the retreat of the self has always been a requirement of philosophy. The prototype of the wise man, the thinker embodied by Thales—who, according to the well-known anecdote, fell into a well while contemplating the stars—has become a leitmotif in the history of philosophy. This is not new. However, Ortega adds two requirements to this philosophical necessity of solitude. First, solitude is not an exclusive attribute of the thinker. In reality, everyone must have moments alone with themselves. Otherwise, we will never be able to reflect on the life we would like to live. The danger of not reserving time for solitude is that we betray ourselves, allowing others to dictate our destiny. In this sense, Ortega democratizes the philosophical imperative of solitude and personal reflection, presenting it as a non-transferable task that each individual must undertake. Second, and more importantly, we find the concept of *vocation*. Vocation represents the guiding force that determines what we must choose. If solitude is the moment in which we retreat to reflect, vocation is the inner voice that enables us to identify our destiny. Thanks to vocation, we can live an authentic life. It serves as a criterion with a dual function. Positively, it acts as a compass, pointing us toward where we should go. Negatively, it allows us to recognize whether we are living an authentic life or, conversely, a false one (i.e. one dictated by the projects imposed on us by others).

That life is a work that constantly demands our attention (*quehacer*) means that, in some way, we must plan it, filling it with projects. Ortega distinguishes between two types of life projects. Some are given to us, imposed from the outside. This is the case during childhood when our parents or guardians decide which tasks and obligations concern us. Then comes adulthood, when the second type appears: the projects we choose for ourselves. Choice is an activity that we can engage in either with or without knowledge (e.g., I can be aware of the consequences of my

actions, know what I want to do, and then choose accordingly; or I can simply choose to do something with my life because it appeals to me). When we choose with full awareness (i.e. when we understand our choices and can explain them not to others but primarily to ourselves) then, according to Ortega, we move closer to an authentic life. In this journey, vocation is the essential element, the compass that allows us to recognize when we are happily choosing and when we are not. The danger arises when we consciously decide that we do not want to choose our own course of action, delegating that responsibility to others. When we live according to the projects of others, we live an inauthentic life.

Ortega is not alone in these ideas. More recently, Viktor Frankl has argued that the will to meaning is the basic and primary motivation of human life. In line with the notion of authentic life, Frankl maintains that the meaning of life is unique and specific to each person; it is not something that can be defined in abstract terms. In his words:

‘Life’ does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life’s tasks are also very real and concrete. They form man’s destiny, which is different and unique for each individual. No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any other destiny (Frankl, 2000, p. 85).

Ortega’s call to live an authentic life and to pursue one’s most genuine vocation aligns closely with Frankl’s call for the search for meaning. Moreover, there is a nuance in Ortega’s thought that we previously noted, which also appears in Frankl: the distinction between suffering—or a certain dissatisfaction—which can be tolerable or even meaningful in the pursuit of purpose, and boredom, which Frankl sees as a symptom of a lack of meaning and thus something not to be tolerated.

## 2. Two Principles of Ortega y Gasset’s Moral Philosophy: Illusion and Authentic Life

Ortega y Gasset’s moral philosophy began to take shape at a time when, according to the author, Spain and Europe were immersed in a deep crisis, which he called ‘the crisis of the West’. From his critique of this moment and his attempt to understand the situation, a solution emerges: the ethics of vocation. This proposal starts to take form in the 1920s, when we see Ortega adopting a more academic and introspective approach, viewing personal vocation as an individual and private task, detached from direct political involvement and its disappointments. It was during these years that he founded *Revista de Occidente* (first published 1923) and later, in 1948, the *Instituto de Humanidades* alongside Julián Marías.

After analyzing the problem, Ortega proposed a solution grounded in a practical approach: moral philosophy. Having been highly critical of the idealist philosophical tradition, particularly Kant’s excessive moral rigorism, Ortega sought to offer a philosophy that could inspire and move people to pursue their life projects. Far from embracing relativism, Ortega firmly maintained that it is necessary to have a guiding criterion, a compass to navigate the uncertainty of existence. This is where the notion of vocation comes into play as the first key element of his proposal.

Living and discovering one’s vocation are closely related phenomena, though not identical. We do not need to put our lives on hold to think about what vocation should guide

them, in the way that Descartes made a pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of the Virgin of Loreto after experiencing his three famous dreams that led to his *Discourse on Method*. It is not about this. As discussed in the previous section, living consists of dealing with the things of the world and responding to the tasks that characterize all existence. Clearly, the first relationship between living and discovering one's vocation lies in the fact that if we do not live, there is no possibility of discovering anything. Secondly, Ortega introduces the idea that because we live (i.e. because we interact with the world and with others) we can come to recognize our vocation. Simply put, one cannot find one's vocation from the couch.

To live is to encounter things, to realize what we like and dislike, what harms or benefits us, what satisfies us, and what repels us. It is through these interactions with things that vocation begins to take shape. Vocation is understood through action, on one hand, and through its relationship with theory, on the other; just as we discussed in relation to absorption (*ensimismamiento*). However, Ortega does not limit himself to presenting an abstract moral framework in which vocation merely hovers over our lives as a vague guiding principle. Instead, his ethics of vocation is anchored in two very specific principles: illusion and authentic life.

The purpose of ethics, according to Ortega, must be to inspire enthusiasm in the ethical subject. We must understand this ethical subject, according to Kant's view, as a rational agent who acts autonomously according to moral laws derived from reason, treating humanity—both in oneself and others—as an end in itself. After strongly criticizing Kantian rigorism and its ethical universalism, Ortega argues that what truly matters in ethics is that it should once again generate illusion, in order to encourage people to make the ethical subject act rather than merely think. A certain degree of illusion, of the desire to intervene in the world, is necessary. In this sense, boredom already appears as a lurking shadow, leading to a loss of meaning and to blind faith in outdated ideals that no longer serve an individual's life project. If, for Kant, *duty* is the central element of morality, for Ortega, it is illusion—that which moves us to act “while keeping the uncertain and problematic nature of the endeavor under control, by giving the self the impression that the possible can become real” (Lasaga Medina, 2006, p. 182).

The second principle, authentic life, is realized when we follow the vocation that guides us. At the core of Ortega's proposal lies a demand for happiness and fulfillment (Lasaga Medina, 2006). The principle of authentic life relates to what so many other thinkers have summarized as the human need to find meaning in life, broadly speaking.

All this can be better understood with an example. In his analysis of the figure of Don Quixote, Ortega finds in the old hidalgo the representation of pure effort, devoid of ideals, of direction. According to this interpretation, Don Quixote would be a ‘critique of pure effort’, a hero who had everything but ideas in the strict sense of the term. Ideas serve to orient significant life projects. In this analysis we find the link that Ortega makes between the capacity to give meaning to life linked to ideas, which shape projects, and the critique of effort for effort's sake, to will without direction. That is why, at bottom, “Don Quixote was a striving [...] a man of heart” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004b, p. 664). Of all the elements of Ortega's ethics, he only fulfills that of illusion, that of enthusiasm, but he has no ideas, no projects that lead him anywhere. As Ortega reminds us, in the second half of the Cervantes' novel, the famous nobleman ends in a

state of melancholy, feeling uneasiness. Although Ortega is not yet talking about boredom these reflections let us understand the true meaning of ideals and authentic life for Ortega. In this sense, Don Quixote experiences a crisis of meaning about his own exploits, about the goal of all his efforts.

At a more concrete level, we can say that human beings tend to avoid participating in activities they perceive as meaningless when an alternative is available. The moment we recognize that something lacks significance, we choose to abandon or avoid it, as long as circumstances allow it (Finkielstein, 2024). To put it in Ortega's words, if our actions do not contribute to the fulfillment of an authentic life, we tend to avoid or omit them. It is based on these two principles—and the reflections they inspire—that some have characterized Ortega's proposal as an "ethics of happiness through vocation", distinguishing it from moral universalism (Díaz Álvarez and de Salas, 2013, p. 264).

This adds an essential nuance to Finkielstein's (2024) proposal, which links boredom to a lack of meaning. Meaning, in turn, is directly related to the feeling of control and agency over what one is doing. In other words, boredom emerges when we no longer perceive ourselves as active agents in our own projects, but rather as passive participants in imposed or meaningless activities. Nevertheless, other scholars have pointed out that boredom is linked to both a lack of challenge and a lack of meaning. What truly characterizes boredom, then, is the perception that the situation lacks a significant purpose—what, following Ortega, we might refer to as the absence of an *authentic life*. When these two elements converge—perceived lack of challenge and lack of purpose—boredom emerges. It can thus be understood as an affective state with a strong self-regulatory component that, far from being passive, actively pushes us to seek meaning and challenge in what we do—unlike emotions such as anger, frustration, or sadness (Van Tilburg and Igou, 2012). Pekrun (2006) has also proposed a control-value theory of achievement emotions from which to understand how boredom works in relation to the value, rather than the meaning, we give to our activities.

### 3. Boredom in Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy

As mentioned in the introduction, Ortega y Gasset did not develop a theory of boredom, nor did he engage, as others have (Finkielstein, 2024; Ros Velasco, 2022, 2026; Svendsen, 2005), in outlining a systematic classification of the phenomenon and its characteristics. Alongside this, we encounter the additional difficulty posed by the vast production of Ortega's work. Nevertheless, the edition of his *Complete Works* and, more specifically, the *Index* compiled by Domingo Hernández Sánchez, make this task easier as this index compiles every reference to boredom (Ortega y Gasset, 2004a). The objective here is to systematically gather those that are relevant and contribute some distinctive features to the reflection over the phenomenon. In all citations, we refer to the printed editions published by Taurus. To make the reading and comprehension of this phenomenon more engaging, we shall begin by establishing a starting point.

Let us briefly recall Ros Velasco's thesis (2022, 2026), according to which, in the history of Western thought, the type of boredom addressed by philosophy and, in general, the humanities, is deep or existential boredom. My thesis is that Ortega is no exception, as he predominantly refers to profound boredom, with only scarce mentions of situational boredom. As for the other types—individual-dependent and chronic boredom and situation-dependent and chronic boredom (as distinguished by Ros Velasco, 2022, 2026)—they do not appear at all.

From his literary critiques to his more profound analyses of modern sensibility, boredom appears as a symptom of cultural, social, and aesthetic transformations. In his early writings, Ortega speaks of boredom and weariness as synonyms. In *The "Summer Sonata" by Ramón del Valle-Inclán* (published 1904), Ortega (2004a) criticizes the inhumanity of the author's characters due to their lack of feelings such as passion, fatigue, or weariness, pointing out that the work avoids portraying any deep emotion. In *New Poetry, Old Poetry* (published 1906) weariness is described as an existential experience, a void that "drips drop by drop into the entrails", confronting us with the nothingness of existence (Ortega y Gasset, 2004a, p. 162). While both weariness, or apathy, and boredom are related through the absence of interest, the former entails a general disinterest in everything, whereas boredom refers to a lack of interest in the specific experience being lived (Finkielsztejn, 2024).

From literature to politics, passing through art and everyday life, boredom in Ortega is not merely a fleeting emotion but a symptom of profound change. In its various forms—weariness, disdain, *spleen*—it reveals both the fatigue of an era and the search for new horizons. In the second half of the 1920s, this vision remains intact:

The man who is inherently weary of himself is a categorical type of humanity. That weariness is the very core of his being, and everything else he does, he does out of the necessity to escape from himself, compelled by that exhaustion (Ortega y Gasset, 2005, p. 307).

One can distinguish between two types of demands: bodily demands, such as the need for food, rest, and hygiene, and spiritual demands, which relate to the realization of each individual's existence. Here, Ortega situates the need to avoid dying of boredom. To respond to these demands, humanity has created culture, which "is nothing more than the repertoire of devices through which man responds to the demands of his existence. And within culture, ideas occupy a central place" (Ortega y Gasset, 2006, p. 359).

A few years later, he returns to the figure of Goethe in the article "Goethe, el libertador", published in the German newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in March 1932. What is striking here is the novelty of finding that boredom can also be understood as a punishment directed at those who refuse to assume the responsibility of endowing their lives with meaning: "Boredom is a punishment upon those who attempt to evade this fundamental condition of life" (Ortega y Gasset, 2006, p. 143). Whoever desires nothing, whoever chooses nothing, becomes trapped in emptiness and inaction, condemned to the monotony of merely passing the time. One may distinguish between two types of demands: physical ones, such as the need for food, rest, and hygiene; and spiritual ones, which concern the realization of each individual's existence. Here Ortega places the necessity of not dying of boredom. To respond to such demands, humanity has created culture, which "is nothing other than the repertoire of devices through which man

responds to the demands of his existence. And within culture, ideas occupy a central place” (Ortega y Gasset, 2006, p. 359). At times, Ortega even went so far as to claim that boredom was not merely an individual affliction but one of the great evils of humankind, together with wickedness and stupidity (Ortega y Gasset, 2006).

### 3.1. Boredom and Entertainment

To spare ourselves a bit from boredom, let us take a brief pause along the way. The definition of a concept can be approached from a positive perspective (*definitio per genus et differentiam*), which we have been following, and which seeks to establish the essential traits and distinctive characteristics; but also from a negative perspective (*definitio negativa*), which attempts to delineate its meaning by contrast, specifying what it is not. If we follow the second approach, we can further understand boredom in Ortega by looking at what it is not. The main opposite of boredom is entertainment.

For Ortega, this concept has two sides: one negative and one positive. The negative aspect relates to what we leave behind, what we separate ourselves from when we manage to entertain ourselves or focus our attention on something; the positive aspect is what truly engages us, what genuinely demands our attention. The problem, and the truly difficult part, is achieving the positive. Ceasing one activity and moving on to another is easy; the challenge lies in ensuring that the second activity or project genuinely engages us—that it is more than just a mere pastime. When our vital efforts fall into a void and we surrender to pastimes such as doomscrolling (i.e. excessive consumption of short-form videos or social media content for an excessive period of time without stopping), that is when boredom arises. The alternative is far more demanding, which is why boredom is such a recurrent phenomenon.

What is interesting here is noticing that Ortega intuited that boredom concealed a hidden side that could become dangerous. When those pastimes that occupy us and help us cope with boredom cease to satisfy us, they can lead to a “terrible existential void” and, with it, to dysfunctional behaviors (Ortega y Gasset, 2008, p. 563). Furthermore, this feeling of “existential void” does not remain confined to the individual but can also affect a collective. It is, therefore, a serious issue, as it leads to hopelessness and alienation from one’s own life.

On the other hand, the positive aspect of entertainment leads us to another important notion in Ortega: absorption (*ensimismamiento*). This refers to the human ability to philosophize, to abstract oneself, and to designate the world—to be able to take a moment and look into ourselves. Similar to what Plato, Saint Augustine, and many other philosophers argue when it comes to the inner nature of human beings—as objects of reflection. Boredom is not absorption, but when we are unable to engage in it, that is when we realize we are bored. When that reflection over myself is somehow interrupted or impossible to establish that is when boredom can lead to a void of lack of meaning. As Cano Le Tiec (2023) points out, “boredom flourishes insofar as there is no absorption that contributes to the realization of action” (p. 113). It arises when one lacks the capacity for reflection to decide what to do and, ultimately, to do it.

### 3.2. Boredom, Perception of Time and Agency

As previously noted, Ortega develops two key concepts that illustrate how boredom is directly linked to agency and the perception of time. Life, understood as a project one must shape for oneself, is condensed in the concept of *vocation* or *authentic life*. Conversely, when we fail in this task of projecting ourselves—of orienting toward the future—Ortega argues that something within the subject breaks down. Those who are unable to live life as *futurition* are consequently unable to inhabit their present or past in meaningful terms. When this capacity for projection fails, boredom emerges.

These ideas are closely related to recent discussions by various scholars regarding boredom and the loss of agency and control. Boredom is commonly defined as an unfulfilled desire to engage in a meaningful or satisfying activity, which is frustrated by the absence of any specific, actionable desire. The bored individual wants to do something, yet cannot generate a concrete inclination toward any feasible action. To experience boredom, in this sense, is fundamentally to lack agency—the capacity to author one’s own life and to act upon one’s intentions. According to some scholars, boredom can be understood like a dead-end alley: “being bored is like being forced to solve an impossible problem. Boredom demands that we do something, yet it simultaneously prevents us from desiring anything doable. We’re torn, pulled in opposite directions by irreconcilable forces” (Eastwood and Gorelik, 2021, p. 112). A similar perspective can be found in Pekrun’s model and his *control-value theory of achievement emotions* that we mentioned before. According to this framework, boredom is an emotion directly linked to activity. As such, it is closely tied to agency, which is understood through two key dimensions: control and value (Pekrun, 2006).

The sense of control is determined by the subject’s perception of their ability to influence both actions and outcomes (which can be high or low). Value, also subjective, relates to the perceived incentives or importance of the activity (which can be positive or negative). Pekrun (2006) applies this model primarily to contexts such as education and the workplace. If we follow this line of reasoning, we can then observe a meaningful distinction that Ortega introduces when he reflects on work, knowledge, and professional life. In the course *What is Life?* (1930–1931), we find a new connection between boredom and work. To provide some context, Ortega is criticizing the traditional definition of knowledge, which, in his view, makes no distinction between the everyday activity of searching for something—such as a lost button or a pair of glasses—and the search for being as a cognitive activity.

For Ortega, the existence of being is not self-evident, and he, in fact, critiques this notion. In this case, he is not speaking of being as a metaphysical category but rather referring to knowledge itself. While it is clear that one may need a button to sew it onto one’s pants or glasses to see properly, the case of knowledge is different. In every epistemological endeavor, we act driven by an internal necessity, not by an external, instrumental need. Knowledge is one of humanity’s primary activities—something that was born out of necessity and not chosen.

Ortega dwells on the choice of professions to show us what he means. Nowadays, professions are chosen by social inertia. People tend to think that they must do something because

the alternative is the great evil of boredom: “which is the terrible task of making time, of holding up an empty life by sheer force, the heaviest burden of all, the one that collapses upon every minute of its own passing” (Ortega y Gasset, 2008, p. 444). As a result, knowledge—the intrinsic need for learning as humanity’s motivation—becomes prostituted; it is pursued purely due to social inertia rather than for its own sake. Alongside social inertia, but different from it, there is the fear of boredom, of living an empty life, because that would be unbearable—‘no one can live by doing nothing’; that’s the social mandate that leads to the confusion. As we have seen before, boredom is about lack of meaning, and agency, not about inactivity. We may be doing nothing, and yet that moment—or state—can hold meaning, allowing us to feel a sense of agency over it.

For these reasons, we can classify this type of boredom, which consists of merely making time, as situational boredom. It has a functional and temporary nature, acting as a driving force that mobilizes individuals. This functional aspect is also recognized today by Ros Velasco and Rocco Lozano (2023). In line with the earlier discussion of Pekrun’s model (2006), Ortega also understands boredom as being related to agency and control. However, he does not incorporate Pekrun’s important nuance—that boredom is an activity-related emotion, concerned more with the process of action than with its outcomes. In this view, boredom arises when an activity lacks sufficient incentives. For Ortega, by contrast, boredom is more fundamentally a question of meaning of actions.

#### **4. Conclusions: Ortega and Boredom**

Considering the above, we can draw several conclusions about the phenomenon of boredom based on Ortega’s reflections. The first and most evident is that it confirms the thesis initially proposed: Ortega primarily refers to existential or profound boredom. This aligns with the analyses of Ros Velasco (2022, 2026) in the history of Western thought, as this is the meaning most frequently examined in the humanities, and Ortega is no exception. Existential or profound boredom arises when life lacks meaning, and the individual fails to engage authentically. This also confirms, in my view, that the absence of meaning is the essential attribute of boredom, allowing us to distinguish it from mere lack of attention in specific moments. It goes beyond mere inactivity or temporary distraction and manifests when the individual experiences a deep disconnection from the meaning of their life, affecting their identity. This type of boredom is linked to the absence of a life project and can lead to weariness, despair, or even the annihilation of the self. In this clarification, I concur with the perspective highlighted by Finkielstein (2024) when he emphasizes that “there is no possibility for one to be bored and simultaneously to perceive the situation as personally meaningful” (p. 12).

Secondly, it is important to remember that the recognition of boredom as a phenomenon that leaves us empty is not exclusive to Ortega, as other authors such as Heidegger have understood it in similar terms (Ros Velasco, 2022, 2026). However, Ortega introduced new ideas by mentioning that it is a double-edged phenomenon. If sustained over time, boredom can lead either to an authentic life or to inaction and, in extreme cases, to self-destruction. This can be related once again to one of the essential elements of boredom, following Finkielstein (2024), namely: its transitional nature, linked to the need for meaning.

Ros Velasco (2022, 2026) follows this line of thought when she argues that all types of boredom, if sustained long enough, become functional. At some point, if prolonged, the individual will eventually reach a breaking point. However, there are situations from which there is no escape, and in these cases, we speak of situation-dependent and chronic boredom, which depends on the context, and those who suffer from it have no alternatives (such as students, elderly people in nursing homes, or prisoners).

Thirdly, Ortega's philosophy and the categories of his moral philosophy invite us to question the direction our lives are taking if we experience boredom in the existential or profound sense. 'What is not working in my life?' would be a very Ortega-like question that could save us from boredom—an invitation to escape that state. The capacity for absorption, the ability to pause, reflect, and become aware of the life we lead, constitutes one of the great imperatives in Ortega's ethics of vocation. This imperative can save us from boredom. Life ideals, the projects each individual must shape for themselves, must be tested and contrasted with the life we actually live (Lasaga Medina, 2006). Therefore, in the existential sense, it is important to clarify that from Ortega's perspective, boredom can be positive. Because we experience boredom, we once again exercise that capacity for absorption that Ortega celebrated as a distinguishing feature of humans compared to animals. The key is in exercising it; otherwise, we remain in the abyss, in incapacity, or worse, in dysfunctional behaviors that do not truly mitigate boredom. In any case, it should be clarified that Ortega does not propose boredom as a solution but rather absorption—boredom, considered in itself, is not a desirable phenomenon. So following Ortega's proposal, boredom is primarily an existential phenomenon that arises when life lacks a sense of meaning or an authentic project. It is not just a fleeting emotion but a symptom of a deeper crisis, manifesting as an existential void when distractions are no longer fulfilling. Boredom is a double-edged phenomenon that can push a person toward an authentic life by forcing them to question what is wrong with their current existence. Also, it prompts absorption; as we established while boredom itself is not the solution, it creates the need for this reflection. Finally, even in its superficial forms, the fear of boredom can motivate people to act, such as choosing a profession simply to avoid an empty life.

Fourth, as Ros Velasco has shown (2022, 2026, in chapter 4 of *The Disease of Boredom*), many psychosocial studies recognize that boredom can arise when meaningful goals fail. Nevertheless, it must be noted that Ortega provides a unique perspective on boredom, distinct from biomedical and psychosocial approaches. These can be summarized in three key points:

a) First, Ortega does not merely describe boredom as a passing emotion or a psychological problem; he considers it a profound symptom of the human condition. He connects it to the 'vital void' and the lack of an existential project—something absent in biomedical models and psychosocial approaches. For Ortega, boredom is not merely a problem of insufficient stimulation or context but a sign that life has lost direction and meaning.

b) Second, while health sciences seek to measure, prevent, or mitigate boredom through external strategies, Ortega proposes a philosophical response: the need to reflect on one's life and choose an authentic life project. This is an innovative idea because it suggests that boredom, far from being solely a problem, can become a catalyst for personal transformation.

c) Third, Ortega introduces the concept of absorption as a specifically human capacity that allows one to pause, analyze one's existence, and find new paths. Unlike some medical approaches, which sometimes consider boredom a pathology to be eliminated, Ortega suggests that it can be positive if used as a trigger for self-knowledge and change. As such, we should not lose sight of the fact that boredom, as an emotion or state, is neither positive nor negative but rather a space—a moment in which we reassess things. Here, we follow the perspectives of others such as Svendsen (2005) and Finkielstein (2024), who have pointed out that what is negative is not boredom itself but our negative perception of the phenomenon; and this, indeed, can be considered a distinctive, essential trait.

Finally, I conclude that Ortega's moral philosophy does not offer significant insights into situational boredom. However, Ortega does provide a criterion that may be novel in understanding existential or profound boredom. This criterion relates to the individual's agency, based on the imperative or idea of choice on the one hand, and on the necessity of satisfying the demand for authenticity and meaning, which other authors have already pointed out (Heidegger, Svendsen, Ros Velasco, Finkielstein). Ortega suggests that it is not enough to satisfy the need for meaning; to escape boredom, the individual must also perceive themselves as the primary agent of this task. A certain degree of agency, or at least the feeling of it, is necessary for boredom not to appear in each situation or stage of life. Thus, a small child, though not fully in control of their destiny or actions, can still feel entertained or escape boredom if they perceive that they control the situation; even if an adult is supervising from a distance. In conclusion, I draw on previously cited scholars who offer related insights—particularly Elpidorou (2023), who links boredom to a lack of control over time and life, explaining its connection to poverty, along with Finkielstein (2024) and Cano Le Tiec (2023).

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