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**Josefa Ros Velasco: *The Disease of Boredom:
From Ancient Philosophy to Modern Psychology.***

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MARIUSZ FINKIELSZTEIN

University of Gdańsk, Poland

mariusz.finkielsztein@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1620-9402>

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The book *The Disease of Boredom* is an invaluable contribution to boredom studies and the humanities in general. Its main goal is “to trace and reconstruct the history of boredom as a pathology or disease through the philosophical, theological, literary, and medical narratives that have left a record of its plight in the West from antiquity to the present” (p. 2). To that end, it draws on every relevant piece of data, regardless of disciplinary classification, taking the reader on a truly multidisciplinary journey into the depths of the malaise in question. From my perspective, it comes as close as possible to being the third major sketch of the general history of boredom (following the attempts by Kuhn [1976] and Toohey [2011]). Drawing on the best of psychology, philosophy, and literary studies (along with occasional insights from other disciplines), the author navigates the reader through the labyrinths and numerous nuances of boredom. Given my own expertise in the field, she demonstrates one of the deepest general understandings of boredom one can possess: she knows that she knows nothing. She convincingly demonstrates that boredom is far from obvious, remaining just as elusive to researchers as it is to those who suffer from it. Nevertheless, this should not deter us from following her in our quest for knowledge, and she invites the reader to embark on this journey alongside her.

Chapter 1 demonstrates the scarcity of information on boredom in ancient texts, explaining this absence by the cultural inhibition of the emotion—it was viewed as a vice counter to ancient morality and best left unmentioned. Nevertheless, subtle clues regarding the existence and nature of boredom in antiquity remain, reminiscent of the cryptic hints surrounding ancient mystery cults. The phenomenon begins to surface during the Roman Empire in the works of Lucretius and Horace as a byproduct of the excessive leisure enjoyed by the elite. Most notably, a proposed reinterpretation of Seneca’s writings frames deep boredom as a pathology directly linked to suicidal behaviour.

Chapter 2 transitions to the Middle Ages, an era in which the religious establishment strictly regulated time and elevated boredom to a capital sin representing a deviation from divine devotion. The text illustrates how boredom—termed then *acedia*—was metaphorically conceptualized as a ‘disease of the soul’ associated with melancholy, anguish, and depression. The chapter competently presents key writings from figures such as Evagrius Ponticus, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas that establish the earliest outlines of an epidemiology of boredom and its attributed physical ailments (after all, *acedia* was historically referred to as the monk’s illness). Ros Velasco elegantly and comprehensively analyzes the significant transitions and reconceptualizations of boredom throughout this long period, offering the reader a thorough perspective on the nuances of theological thought concerning the ailment.

Chapter 3 traces the Renaissance transformation of *acedia* into melancholy, marking a pivotal shift from a moral flaw of the soul to a biological ailment of the body. Thinkers and religious figures such as Dante, Petrarch, and St. Ignatius of Loyola document this evolution, offering both spiritual care and physical remedies for the condition. The chapter also explores the revaluation of melancholic boredom as a trait of silent genius—a metaphysical mark on the soul of a select few. In my view, the chapter does not do full justice to the ‘opposite’ discursive element in treating *melancholia generosa*: the individual toll of the ailment. While this theme is present, it warrants further exposition to counterbalance the connection between exceptional gifts

and the torments of melancholics (a similar omission occurs in Chapter 2, which never engages with the ‘dark night’ of the mystics, who are the closest counterparts to Renaissance geniuses).

Chapter 4 focuses on literary representations of the *mal du siècle* in Romantic, Realist, and Symbolist authors (mostly French and German)—including Goethe, Chateaubriand, Tieck, Senancour, Sand, Flaubert, and Baudelaire—who frequently employed the metaphor of boredom as a disease. Simultaneously, it demonstrates how 19th-century physiologists began treating this literary figure literally, using fictional characters as clinical case studies to map out the pathology of boredom. The presentation of this osmosis and transgression is one of the most compelling aspects of the chapter, illustrating the gradual medicalization of boredom.

Chapter 5 details how the expansion of leisure time in the 20th-century welfare state democratized boredom, subjecting both the rich and the working class to the same transient and chronic states. The rise of mass entertainment culture attempted to quickly suppress this widespread issue, but ultimately failed, sparking an even deeper and more insatiable form of boredom. In response, individuals increasingly turned to pathological and deviant behaviours—such as substance abuse or suicide—to assert their identity and express a taste for the morbid.

Chapter 6 surveys the contemporary history of boredom within the mental health sciences, tracing its shift from a byproduct of sociohistorical factors to a root cause of psychopathology. It reviews early 20th-century efforts to curb boredom-driven behaviours and worker inefficiency before examining post-war developments in psychological measurement scales and cognitive frameworks. Finally, the chapter analyzes the neurological bases of chronic boredom and concludes with a critical assessment of the medical institutionalization of the phenomenon. It is arguably the most disciplined and comprehensive overview of the evolution of the psychology of boredom published to date, making it an excellent starting point for researchers and foundational reading for students.

Chapter 7 explores the reactive nature and functional utility of boredom, drawing heavily on a thesis first articulated by Hans Blumenberg. It argues that while boredom is experienced as a painful pathology, it actually serves an essential adaptive function by preventing stagnation and driving human survival. Consequently, the text advocates replacing moral categories of good and evil with functional criteria, urging readers to hyper-monitor their boredom and harness it to their advantage (while simultaneously debunking the myth that boredom is universally creative).

Chapter 8 presents a fictional reconstruction of boredom’s prehistory based on unpublished texts from Hans Blumenberg’s *Nachlass*. This evolutionary narrative explores the hypothesis that collective, simple boredom among early human ancestors may have triggered our species’ first cultural revolution. By travelling back into the distant past, the final chapter reinforces the idea that boredom became biologically fixed due to its crucial role in preventing evolutionary stagnation.

The entire book presents a chronologically ordered investigation into the discourse of boredom as a disease. Yet, beyond this historical overview, Ros Velasco proposes her own typology of boredom, which arguably represents the book’s major theoretical contribution. Let us scrutinize this proposition in depth. The author distinguishes between situation-dependent and transient boredom, individual-dependent and chronic boredom, situation-dependent and chronic

boredom, and profound or existential boredom. The simplest form of boredom is “a state of discomfort that arises when the environment we inhabit, or the activity we try to engage in, fails to stimulate us adequately or align with our expectations, resulting in the painful experience of meaninglessness” (p. 6). In this understanding, it draws on arousal theory with a meaninglessness component and aligns well with much of the relevant literature that labels this type as task-focused boredom (Acee et al., 2010), reactive boredom (Neu, 1998), situation-dependent boredom (Todman, 2003), content or transient boredom (Fisher, 1987), responsive boredom (Bernstein, 1975), episodic boredom (Mael & Jex, 2015), temporary boredom (Irvine, 2001), state boredom (the majority of psychological literature, e.g., Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993), normal boredom (Fenichel, 1951), or, most commonly in the humanities, situational/situative boredom (Healy, 1984; Svendsen, 2005; Toohey, 2011; for further analysis of existing typologies of boredom, see Finkielstein, 2021, esp. pp. 46–49). Ros Velasco perceives this type of boredom as the most functional of all forms, following Andreas Elpidorou’s (2017) functional theory of boredom to claim that boredom serves as a valuable signal for change and adaptation (though I must observe that the author rarely highlights this connection explicitly). However, this is not the primary original contribution of her typology.

As Ros Velasco rightly observes, “Colleagues who are experts in the study of boredom have not yet paid enough attention to the idea that situational boredom can become chronic over time” (p. 6). Consequently, the author introduces the concept of chronic boredom in two modalities. The first is individual-dependent chronic boredom, defined as “a state where the bored individual is unable, whether consciously or unconsciously, to draw from their repertoire of options to initiate change” (p. 152). Here, a personal disposition, vice, or inhibition prevents the individual from remedying one’s boredom. I am uncertain which concept in the existing literature serves as its direct equivalent; my best guess would be trait boredom or endogenous boredom (Neu, 1998). The second modality is situation-dependent chronic boredom. In this scenario, “the individual is entirely capable of identifying options, expanding their catalogue of possibilities, and even devising a strategy to escape the boring situation. Yet, the very context in which the boredom originates repeatedly prevents these strategies from being implemented” (p. 153). Thus, situational boredom becomes chronic and persists because static external circumstances hinder any attempt to escape the ailment.

The final and most dysfunctional type is existential boredom, which can be readily identified with established concepts in boredom scholarship such as boredom of the soul (Tardieu, 1913), hyperboredom (Healy, 1984), or profound boredom (Heidegger, 1995). It is “a deeper, more pervasive form of dysfunction in which life is entirely stripped of meaning” (p. 153), closely resembling concepts of melancholy or depression.

This typology is a much-needed and bold attempt to bring order to the chaotic field of boredom taxonomies and to move beyond a simple dichotomous understanding of the phenomenon (situational vs. existential), providing a far more nuanced framework for defining different ‘species’ of boredom. That being said, I would like to offer a few polemical rather than strictly critical points that may aid in the further development of this typology—which remains, nonetheless, a magnificent starting point.

i) The typology lacks sufficient grounding in existing literature. This is not to say that relevant scholarship is unreferenced or unused, but rather that the proposed types are not explicitly linked to established labels. Situational and existential boredom are straightforward; the primary issue lies in chronic boredom—specifically, as noted earlier, regarding individual-dependent and chronic boredom and its uncertain relationship to trait boredom. Moreover, numerous scholars have already employed the term ‘chronic boredom’ (e.g., Bernstein, 1975; Finkielstein, 2021; Irvine, 2001; Mael & Jex, 2015), yet the author omits a discussion of these prior formulations and how her distinct types deviate (if at all) from existing scholarship. There is also the open question of how chronic boredom relates to habitual boredom (Bargdill, 2000, 2014).

ii) It remains unclear how to distinguish between different types of boredom in practice. The author proposes duration as a key distinguishing factor: transient boredom becomes chronified into chronic boredom, and “[i]f the pain endures for too long [...] there is a risk of succumbing to profound boredom” (p. 153). I am in full agreement that the prolongation of situational boredom within an unchanging, uncontrollable, and tedious environment may represent a mere continuation of situational boredom, as I have demonstrated in the case of student boredom. Indeed, “the accumulation of situational boredom due to its frequent repetition in similar circumstances associated with a particular sphere of one’s activity” (Finkielstein, 2021, p. 79) may eventuate in a chronic form of boredom—one much more severe than situational boredom, yet still significantly less profound than the existential type. The primary point of contention lies in the transition to existential boredom. This issue mirrors the debate surrounding boredom proneness: is such susceptibility biological, socio-cultural, or simply a consequence of frequently experiencing boredom? This raises the possibility that it is not duration, but rather an internal and/or cultural disposition that generates existential boredom—and that chronic boredom may merely be a consequence of this more ingrained, existential form (if Romantic authors are to be believed on this matter). I suggest that further reflection is needed on the temporal continuum of boredom, and that subsequent types might be distinguished not by duration, but simply by intensity.

iii) Another challenge lies in the distinction between individual and environmental aetiologies of chronic boredom. The author herself recognizes this difficulty, observing that

The symptoms of chronic experiences of boredom, regardless of their root cause, appear indistinguishable. How can we determine whether someone’s pervasive boredom stems from an endogenous issue or from a restrictive and limiting environment that prevents them from implementing effective coping strategies? How can we be certain? (p. 157).

Ros Velasco wrestles with this issue throughout the whole book, frequently finding herself unable to clearly differentiate between the two forms of chronic boredom in the analyzed cases. As such, this distinction appears less than fully functional. While I recognize that this distinction stems from a psychological repertoire, as a sociologist I cannot help but emphasize that the relationship between the individual and society (the external environment) is among the most complex of all. The two are deeply intertwined: the external environment shapes us—both physically (as seen in evolutionary adaptiveness) and socio-culturally (through socialization)—while we, in turn, moderate our surroundings. The individual is effectively society at the micro scale. Indeed, many, if not all, of our inhibitions, predicaments, and emotional mechanisms are

shaped, reshaped, or at least heavily influenced by our socio-cultural grounding (consider, for instance, social constructivism, which posits that mental disorders are social constructs; see Goffman, 1961). This accounts for class-based variations in how boredom is experienced and conceptualized. Without belabouring the point, I simply wish to highlight that the distinction between individual-dependent and situation-dependent chronic boredom seems problematic, if not entirely redundant.

iv) The next issue concerns the conceptualization of boredom from a strictly functional perspective. The author adopts Elpidorou's (2017) view that boredom is functional and attempts to extend it to all types of boredom—with situational boredom framed as the most functional and existential boredom as the least functional, or even dysfunctional. While this perspective is convincing at first glance, it lacks a sufficiently rigorous theoretical reflection on the category of 'functionality'. Who decides, or what determines, what is functional and what is not? Are criteria defined in terms of evolutionary adaptation (in which case the boredom of Darwin Award winners would be highly dysfunctional)? Or is general well-being and measured psychological health the determining factor? Ultimately, the division between the functional and the dysfunctional appears to be presented in a 'taken-for-granted' manner, as though there were universal consensus on what is beneficial. As a sociologist, I view functionalist theory with greater scepticism, bearing in mind the history of this theoretical tradition in anthropology and sociology. First, a single phenomenon can be functional and dysfunctional simultaneously: it may be functional for one individual yet dysfunctional for another, functional for an individual but dysfunctional from a societal standpoint, or functional in one situation while dysfunctional in another. Second, before diagnosing something as purely dysfunctional, we ought to search for latent functions (see Merton, 1968) hidden beneath popular, political, or ideological discourses and social categorizations (where boredom may be viewed either as a beneficial spiritual condition or as ultimate suicidal anguish, depending on the epoch or culture). Moreover, even through a functional lens, why shouldn't chronic or existential boredom be functional, at least for a 'selected few'? Who is to judge? Perhaps a fixation on boredom (a scenario in which boredom fails to serve its function of recalibrating behaviour or attitude) is deeply beneficial—not only because its offspring is great literature, but also because it allows one to feel elevated, more sophisticated, and better adapted to certain social settings. Consider aristocratic boredom as a status symbol (see Finkielsztein, 2025; Tochilnikova, 2021): existential malaise fulfils a distinct social function here, whereas a pragmatic, bourgeois-style organized aristocrat would cease to be a true noble.

v) The final, minor point concerns the concept of collective boredom. Though mentioned only briefly in the book, this is a much-needed yet still underdeveloped concept that gives rise to several fundamental questions. Can boredom truly be collective, or is its phenomenology purely individualistic? Does each of us have an individual path into boredom, even when sharing the same underlying causes? And if collective boredom is possible, which types of boredom can assume this collective dimension? In my paper on Gracq's *The Other Shore* (Finkielsztein, 2024), I propose the concept of collective existential boredom, defined as a shared deep mood of marasmus, boredom, and lack of agency. Ros Velasco, by contrast, situates collective boredom primarily within situation-dependent and transient boredom and situation-dependent and chronic

boredom. This concept certainly warrants further development in future research, and the book serves as a vital initial step in that direction.

Taking all of these reservations into account, I view a minor simplification of the typology as beneficial—reducing it to three core types: situational, chronic, and existential boredom, without predetermining their functionality or underlying cause (endogenous vs. extraneous). This refined model still emphasizes the intermediate tier of boredom (chronic boredom) while avoiding overly simplified, dichotomous conceptualizations.

Finally, I have a minor comment regarding the target audience. The writing style of the book is somewhat mixed: the majority is written in an occasionally dense theoretical register that may prove challenging for readers outside the humanities and psychology, while other passages adopt a popular tone full of rhetorical questions, direct addresses to the reader, and cheerful irony (or even mockery). On the one hand, the book makes a major contribution to boredom studies in general and to the theory of boredom specifically; on the other hand, it at times resembles—or perhaps parodies—a self-help guide. It engages deeply with a wide range of material (psychological, philosophical, and theological) and analyzes boredom in a rigorously scholarly manner, yet also seems to harbour an ambition to transform the reader. Consider a sample of this style:

The journey through the mysteries of boredom has not ended with the close of this book; it has only just begun. The hope is that what has been uncovered so far has helped you better understand this phenomenon and, in some way, provided tools to create more personalized options for filling your time meaningfully (if possible) when boredom arises. The next time you are bored, you can examine your experience with a new perspective, approaching it with renewed curiosity and searching for clues to decipher its message. You may find yourself exploring its depths to uncover the wisdom that can guide you toward change and relieve the pain it brings. Perhaps, over time, you will not only explore your boredom but learn to exploit it (p. 180).

I genuinely believe it to be possible (at least for a select, highly self-reflexive few, if I may joke). The book is a major contribution to boredom scholarship and reading it may prove to be not only informative, but transformative. We will see. Expect functional boredom in the form of politically constructive engagement against authoritarian regimes. But as a pessimist, I am more inclined to foresee dysfunctional boredom leading to a fascist renaissance. Or maybe leftist boredom is functional, while rightist boredom is dysfunctional? Who can judge? Joking aside, this is a truly magnificent piece of boredom scholarship that should find the publicity it richly deserves.¹

¹ I do not wish to seem petty, so I will relegate this to a footnote that nobody reads, but I found two minor errors in the book. First, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi is called “the Croatian psychologist” (p. 131), which is inaccurate; although he was born in Rijeka (today in Croatia), he came from a family of Hungarian diplomats and emigrated to the US at the age of 22. Thus, the label ‘Hungarian-American psychologist’ would be much more appropriate. The second issue is that the author calls Max Weber a philosopher (see p. 70). Max Weber belongs to us sociologists—stay away from him! Joking aside, Weber was educated as a lawyer, taught political economy for many years, and was appointed a professor of sociology toward the end of his life.

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