

Journal of Boredom Studies

Issue 4, 2026, pp. 1-7

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23414894>

<https://www.boredomsociety.com/jbs>



**Andreas Elpidorou: *[The Anatomy of Boredom](#)*.
Oxford University Press, 2026, pp. 263. ISBN:
9780197564332**

MARIUSZ FINKIELSZTEIN

University of Gdańsk, Poland

mariusz.finkielstein@gmail.com

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

How to cite this paper: Finkielstein, M. (2026). Andreas Elpidorou: *The Anatomy of Boredom*. Oxford University Press, 2026, pp. 263. ISBN: 9780197564332. *Journal of Boredom Studies*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23414894>

Copyright: © 2026 Mariusz Finkielstein. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license for use and distribution (CC BY 4.0).

Received 15 October 2026; Accepted 16 October 2026.

Andreas Elpidorou's book is—or at least should be—a major event in Boredom Studies. It provides vast material for reflection and presents a highly advanced, well-thought-out theory of boredom that anyone familiar with the author's previous work will anticipate: the functional theory of boredom. This is a theory that many boredom researchers have referenced for its elegant heuristic contours and its sound, almost 'natural' premises. The book is a major philosophical achievement, representing the culmination of many years of Elpidorou's reflection on the topic. The title echoes Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, reproducing the multidisciplinary of the original by drawing on whatever is useful across various fields (it even includes a counterpart to werewolf melancholy in its discussion of animal boredom). The objective of the work is "to dissect and lay bare the intricate components of boredom, to reveal how they coalesce to form the experience of boredom, and to position this experience within a larger societal, economic, and political framework" (p. 17), and I believe Elpidorou fully delivers on this promise.

Let us start with a brief overview of the functional theory of boredom, which is presented primarily in the Introduction and Chapter 1, but whose premises are repeated with almost nauseating frequency throughout the book (after all, *repetitio est mater studiorum*). The central idea is that boredom constitutes "the painful realization of the absence of satisfactory cognitive engagement" (p. 1) or "the product of a frustrated, and thus aversively felt, need for cognitive engagement" (p. 12). Boredom is framed as a form of pain informing us that we have deviated from our 'optimal cognitive engagement'—a formulation that ultimately represents, at least in my understanding, a rebranded, somewhat more sophisticated version of the arousal theory of boredom. In this view, boredom is simultaneously informative and motivational: "[T]he experience of boredom indicates the presence of cognitive discontent and aims to alleviate it by guiding us toward activities that can reinstate satisfying cognitive involvement" (p. 35). Its sole function is the regulation of cognitive engagement. Indeed, boredom does not merely have a function; it *is* a function. Function is so essential to boredom that, ultimately, according to Elpidorou, "boredom is what it does" (p. 31).

My main reservation with this position lies in its ambition to operate as an *über-theory* of boredom. Implicitly, the framework suggests that prior debates are largely rendered redundant, as if an all-encompassing architecture has finally arrived to clean the Augean stables of Boredom Studies. At times, this totalizing stance feels bracingly integrative; at others, overly reductive. While I do not doubt the author's nuanced intentions, the text occasionally implies that adopting the functional approach causes foundational theoretical impasses to simply evaporate. Although Elpidorou explicitly acknowledges boredom's complexity, his drive toward functional unity effectively sidesteps that complexity once the master framework is installed. I remain conflicted: while the model is unquestionably valuable as a unifying heuristic—providing a common denominator across diverse forms—elevating it to a grand, definitive theory feels prematurely conclusive. It risks signaling that the conceptual riddle of boredom has been permanently solved, leaving future scholarship to manage only minor empirical details rather than foundational questions.

Yet, the theory is philosophically convincing; for instance, it neatly solves the problem of boredom's historicity. For Elpidorou, anything that serves the function of regulating cognitive engagement counts as boredom. Consequently, historical concepts such as *acedia*, *ennui*, and

taedium vitae are all understood as forms of boredom because they fulfilled that same function. Boredom is thus framed as a kind—a category grouping entities that share essential common characteristics. I must admit that this proposition is heuristically convenient and effective for conceptualizing the history of boredom, wherein modern or late-modern boredom represents merely one concept or experience within a broader family of concepts and experiences sharing the same function. While modern and premodern forms of boredom are not identical, they remain members of the same functional kind. The author illustrates this with a memorable example involving the corkscrew: although wine-bottle openers vary widely across different historical eras and cultures, they all share the same fundamental function and therefore belong to the same kind.

Chapter 2, “The Birth of Boredom,” applies the functional theory further to the debate surrounding the historicity of boredom, particularly challenging the notion of its strictly modern character. Here, the author brilliantly dismantles the arguments advanced by proponents of this view (making this my favorite section of the book). Elpidorou neatly organizes the debate on boredom as a strictly modern phenomenon, distinguishing between three versions of the Modernity Thesis: (1) Emergence, which advocates that boredom has emerged as “a new feeling or emotion, one that has not been experienced before, has appeared in modernity”; (2) Transformation, claiming that “a pre-existing feeling or emotion was transformed during modernity”; and (3) Reconceptualization, which posits that “the concept of boredom, and not the phenomenon itself, originated with modernity” (p. 49). The author deftly refutes the three main arguments advanced by proponents of the Modernity Thesis (the new word argument, the prevalence argument, and the argument from the uniqueness of causes). What I find missing in this otherwise fantastic discussion is an engagement with the strongest argument for the novelty of boredom: the secularization of consciousness. This involves not merely shifts in lifestyle driven by urbanization and industrialization, but a fundamental transformation in one’s orientation toward the world that is cited as a unique catalyst for modern boredom. In antiquity, one could be an atheist within a religiously immersed social world; today, one can be religious yet still operate with a thoroughly secularized consciousness.

Chapter 3, “Varieties of Boredom,” addresses the multifaceted nature of boredom—spanning transient states, trait proneness, and profound existential moods—arguing that all forms stem from state boredom and fulfill the same regulatory purpose, while demonstrating that physiological variations across boredom experiences align seamlessly with this unified functional model. I can agree with the claim that there is ultimately one core type of boredom, namely state/situational/situative boredom (indeed, I argued for such a similarity, if not unity, in my own definition of situational boredom, which is why I titled it “The essence of boredom” [see Finkielstein, 2021, 2024]). The author distinguishes six dimensions of profound boredom based on its object, scope, frequency, duration (chronic boredom), intensity, and causes (boredom proneness) to show that they all share the same core, rendering the broader typology an ultimately redundant exercise (if I understand his argument correctly).

My main contention, however, lies in subsuming profound boredom under the functional category of a regulatory mechanism. The author claims that “[e]ven existential theories of boredom—that is, theories which conceive of boredom as a state of perceived meaninglessness

or a response to the perception of meaninglessness—cannot avoid drawing a connection between boredom and a lack of proper cognitive engagement” (p. 7). This claim is insufficiently supported by evidence: where and by whom has profound boredom ever been described in terms of suboptimal cognitive engagement? An existentially bored individual struggles not with cognitive engagement per se, but with the sense of meaninglessness or futility of any engagement. In my view, what unifies all varieties of boredom is a perceived lack of meaning, rather than unsatisfactory cognitive engagement. Such a description seems entirely inadequate for existential (profound) boredom, or else leads to bizarre conclusions—for instance, that boredom acts as a signal for the existentially bored individual to end their life due to the unbearable nature of life’s utter meaninglessness. What a form of regulation that would be! In general, the author is so fixated on his unifying principle that he never seriously considers alternative unifying frameworks for boredom, such as the sense of meaninglessness. I could easily imagine a history of boredom as a kind described through such a lens—the history of how people recognize, deal with, and conceptualize their sense of meaninglessness.

Deconstructing boredom into its experiential, cognitive, volitional, expressive, and neurophysiological dimensions, Chapter 4 demonstrates how these components collectively work to restore satisfactory engagement. The functional theory is shown to resolve the problem of boredom’s negative valence as well as the ongoing debate regarding low versus high arousal (for which I believe I proposed an equally useful, if slightly different, explanation in my own definitional analysis [see Finkielstein, 2021, 2024]). Yet, I cannot agree with the thesis concerning the intentionality of boredom—namely, the argument that boredom always has an object (“is about some object, task, situation, or person” [p. 150]). The object of boredom is at times so vague that it fails to materialize as a concrete entity, particularly in the mood of boredom or in profound boredom, where the experience is not directed at anything in particular.

The author also claims that

while bored, one does not want change for the sake of change. Rather, one seeks change in order to escape from what is perceived to bring about one’s boredom. [...] they do not simply wish to replace their situation with any alternative situation. Instead, they express a desire to do something that is more cognitively engaging, even when they do not know exactly what that is (p. 125).

I find this perspective overly idealistic, as we frequently observe that: (1) people are not always aware of what would be more cognitively satisfying in a given moment or situation; (2) more cognitively optimal engagements may not be available in that moment (or individuals fail to perceive them as such); and/or (3) boredom drives people to escape their current situation so forcefully that they simply grasp at anything to obtain immediate relief.

In this sense, I disagree that the actual experience of boredom is grounded in a transition toward more satisfying cognitive engagement; rather, boredom frequently triggers change for change’s sake. Any change is preferred regardless of uncertain cognitive benefits, as the pressure to escape is so immense that one leaps toward an unspecified, prospectively more satisfying alternative. While people might theoretically desire a superior cognitive option, in practice this is often unrealistic in everyday social situations or demands substantial cognitive effort (and, as extensive research corroborates, cognitive laziness is a well-documented human trait).

In this connection, I am not fully convinced by the functional account when applied to the negative effects or consequences of boredom. The author is fully aware that the restoration of satisfactory cognitive engagement, though intended, is not always realized in practice (p. 130) and that “boredom can sometimes malfunction” (p. 133), meaning it is not necessarily adaptive or beneficial simply because it is functional (p. 132). The author’s core argument is that while boredom aims to reestablish satisfactory cognitive engagement, it can fail to perform this function: “A chair is a chair because it affords sitting; it is what it is because of what it does. Yet many of them break, rot, or wobble” (p. 133). Yet, I would argue that boredom may become dysfunctional not *despite* failing to perform its function, but precisely *because* it served its function successfully. Suppose an individual is deeply bored and decides to commit a violent act. They are thrilled, and their cognitive engagement is now optimal—yet the consequences are profoundly destructive and ultimately maladaptive. Here, boredom has not failed to perform its regulatory function; it has done exactly what it was meant to do. Boredom functions properly, yet its real-world effect is far from adaptive. This relationship remains somewhat ambiguous, especially because the author devotes an entire excursus to the biological adaptability of boredom and connects it to the functional approach. Indeed, in the following chapter, Elpidorou himself acknowledges that “[b]eing cognitively engaging and being beneficial are two conceptually distinct notions” (p. 147). This opens the door to stating that boredom can be functional on one level yet dysfunctional on another: even if boredom successfully provides satisfactory cognitive engagement, the resulting behaviour can be destructive for the subject. Consequently, the chair analogy ultimately fails to convince.

Chapter 5, “Boredom as Cognitive Allostasis,” summarizes the functional theory of boredom in terms of allostasis, defined as “a state of chronic deviation of the regulatory system from its normal (homeostatic) operating level” (p. 143). Within this context, boredom is once again characterized as an adaptive mechanism responsible for regulating cognitive engagement so as to attain its optimal level. Chapter 6, “Boredom and the Good Life,” contrasts chronic boredom proneness—a major impediment to human flourishing—with acute state boredom. When state boredom serves a constructive purpose by driving goal realignment, self-reflection, and the pursuit of meaning.

As a sociologist, I was particularly interested in Chapter 7, “The Sociology of Boredom,” which explores how political, structural, and cultural dynamics shape, and are shaped by, the experience of boredom. The author credits the functional approach with bridging psychological mechanisms and social reality, accounting for how norms and social identities interact with boredom. Regarding this chapter, however, I have several reservations.

First, there is very little actual sociology in a chapter titled “The Sociology of Boredom.” Elpidorou discusses the ideas of Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, John Stuart Mill, Theodor Adorno and Erich Fromm—none of whom is a sociologist. Indeed, he opens the chapter with Georg Simmel (1950), who was indeed a sociologist, but in his classic essay on the metropolis he operates more as a psychologist. Only one sociologist is genuinely discussed at any length: Wolf Lepenies (1992) and his *Melancholy and Society*. Orrin Klapp’s (1986) theory of boredom in the information society is merely cited without elaboration; the work of Michael Gardiner is almost entirely neglected (with only a single paper referenced in passing [Gardiner, 2012]); and

the same holds true for my own work, which would seem highly relevant to the topic (especially Finkielstein, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). All of this results in a chapter on the sociology of boredom that largely omits sociology itself. It would perhaps be more appropriate to title it “The Sociality of Boredom” or something similar.

To be sure, a general outline of the field is provided, as Elpidorou notes that the significance of the social context for boredom encompasses: (1) the social consequences of boredom; (2) communicating norms, i.e., that through boredom “individuals, groups, and institutions can articulate and impose societal constraints, expectations, and norms” (p. 202); (3) group experience, i.e., the fact that boredom “can be experienced en masse and because of one’s social membership” (p. 203); and (4) systemic causes of the experience. While all of this is accurate, it fails to forge a robust link between individual regulation of cognitive engagement and its social coordinates. In other words, the author does not convincingly demonstrate a strong connection between functional theory and the sociology of boredom, beyond the observation that social circumstances can constrain or shape how social actors seek optimal cognitive engagement. Considerably more convincing is more concrete analysis linking poverty and boredom in Chapter 8.

Ultimately, I find the sociological aspect of the book disappointing. Rather than genuinely engaging with sociological approaches to boredom, Elpidorou misses an opportunity to meaningfully integrate sociology into his philosophical project. I strongly believe that even within the functional paradigm, there is a clear place for sociology. Throughout the book, the author repeatedly uses the concept of ‘engagement,’ yet he never connects it to sociological frameworks that conceptualize boredom as a state lacking engagement (which could readily be tied to cognitive engagement as well [see Finkielstein, 2021, 2024]). Furthermore, the author frequently asserts that boredom stems from unfulfilled cognitive expectations—a premise that aligns nicely with the sociological concept of failure expectations (Conrad, 1997; Finkielstein, 2021, 2024). What is missing, however, is the recognition that expectations themselves are socially constructed and that boredom can operate as a function of social interaction (see Finkielstein, 2021, 2024, 2025).

The final chapter, on animal boredom, offers an excellent demonstration of the functional principle’s utility. Thanks to the functional theory, we can not only consolidate all varieties of boredom into a single core type and unify historical concepts under one functional kind but also bridge the boundary between human and non-human affectivity.

Overall, I readily admit that Elpidorou’s work is near-exemplary; it synthesizes an immense body of material into a coherent and largely compelling theoretical framework. It offers numerous refined insights that warrant discussion not only within Boredom Studies, but also across the psychology and philosophy of emotions. While I find the sociological section flawed, it nevertheless fulfills its purpose for the functional approach (even if at the expense of the sociology of boredom itself). Ultimately, I view this book as a major event in Boredom Studies—it is well worth reading and undoubtedly deserves widespread scholarly debate. Otherwise, we risk missing another vital opportunity to reshape our understanding of boredom.

References

- Conrad, P. (1997). It's Boring: Notes on the Meanings of Boredom in Everyday Life. *Qualitative Sociology as Everyday Life*, 20(4), 123–133. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1024747820595>
- Finkielsztein, M. (2021). *Boredom and Academic Work*. Routledge.
- Finkielsztein, M. (2022). Consumer Boredom: Boredom as a Subliminal Mood of Consumer Capitalism. *European Journal of American Studies*, 17(4). <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.18977>
- Finkielsztein, M. (2023). Boredom and Power. How Power Relations Influence Feeling Boredom. *Zoon Politikon*, 14, 123–147. <https://doi.org/10.4467/2543408XZOP.23.004.18504>
- Finkielsztein, M. (2024). The Essence of Boredom: The Definition of Situational Boredom. *Journal of Boredom Studies*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10727142>
- Finkielsztein, M. (2025). *The Sociology of Boredom*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Gardiner, M. E. (2012). Henri Lefebvre and the “Sociology of Boredom.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(2), 37–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411417460>
- Klapp, O. (1986). *Overload and Boredom: Essays on the Quality of Life in the Information Society*. Greenwood Press.
- Lepenes, W. (1992). *Melancholy and Society*. Harvard University Press.
- Simmel, G. (1950). The Metropolis and Mental Life. In K. H. Wolff (Ed), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (pp. 409–424). Free Press.