

Journal of Boredom Studies

Issue 1, 2023, pp. 1–13

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7521879>

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



INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY



of BOREDOM STUDIES

Toward an Epicurean MAC Model of Boredom

ALEX R GILLHAM

St. Bonaventure University

argillham@icloud.com



<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2234-6945>

How to cite this paper: Gillham, A. R. (2023). Toward an Epicurean MAC Model of Boredom. *Journal of Boredom Studies*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7521879>

Abstract: I have previously argued that an Epicurean who has achieved the final *telos* will still find philosophy worthwhile on hedonic grounds because philosophy prevents painful boredom they might otherwise experience. In response, Justin Bell objected that the Epicureans do not need the kind of explanation I developed because lasting tranquility is rare if not impossible, and even if this were false, it would be better to take philosophy to be worthwhile to the tranquil because of the curiosity it satisfies rather than the boredom it prevents. I reply here that the Epicureans do need the kind of explanation I developed and that Bell's explanation is less attractive than mine. However, I also concede that my explanation requires an account of Epicurean boredom, which I proceed to sketch here. Borrowing from Westgate and Wilson's MAC model, I contend that if doing philosophy is worthwhile to the tranquil Epicurean because it prevents boredom, three things must be true: 1) boredom must be an aversive state; 2) the Epicurean must be able to attend to philosophy while tranquil, and 3) philosophizing must have value for the tranquil. I argue that all three conditions are satisfied by the view that philosophy is worthwhile to the tranquil because of the painful boredom it prevents.

Keywords: boredom, curiosity, Epicurus, MAC model, tranquility.

Copyright: © 2022 Journal of Boredom Studies (ISSN 2990-2525). 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 28 September 2022; Accepted 8 January 2023.

1. Introduction

I developed (2021) an interpretation of Epicurean ethics according to which boredom is a mental pain that doing philosophy prevents. Without this interpretation, I argued that philosophizing would not be worthwhile to those who have already achieved the final Epicurean *telos* defined as tranquility, which consists in freedom from bodily and mental pain, and this would be inconsistent with several primary Epicurean texts claiming that doing philosophy is always worthwhile. In a response to me, Justin Bell (2021) objected that positing boredom as a mental pain that doing philosophy prevents is unnecessary because Epicurean physics make achieving the sort of tranquility I considered rare if not impossible. Moreover, even if achieving such tranquility were not rare or impossible, Bell contended that doing philosophy would more plausibly be worthwhile to those who have achieved the final Epicurean *telos* because philosophizing satisfies their curiosity, not because it prevents them from experiencing painful boredom. In this article, I argue that although Bell is correct that achieving tranquility might be rare, my proposal that boredom is a mental pain that doing philosophy prevents, which makes philosophizing worthwhile to the tranquil Epicurean, is promising and deserves further consideration, consideration I provide in this article. Borrowing from Westgate and Wilson's (2018) MAC model of boredom, I identify some conditions that an Epicurean account of boredom would need to satisfy in order for philosophy to be worthwhile because of the boredom it prevents the tranquil from experiencing: 1) boredom must be a painful state; 2) the tranquil Epicurean must be capable of attending to the activity of philosophy when bored, and 3) philosophy must have meaning for the tranquil Epicurean. I argue that philosophy can play the role I previously argued it does within Epicureanism on such a MAC model of boredom. I conclude that when the Epicureans are equipped with such a model, my proposal that philosophy is worthwhile to the tranquil because of the painful boredom it prevents becomes more plausible.

2. Tranquility, Boredom, Curiosity, and Philosophy

Epicurean axiology is thoroughly hedonistic. Pleasure is the only intrinsic good,¹ but there are two kinds of pleasure: kinetic and katastematic. Understanding the difference between kinetic and katastematic pleasure requires understanding the role that desire plays in the good life.² Since the Epicureans are hedonists, they think that our ultimate goal in life is to experience pleasure. When we want an object and do not get it, we experience pain, and the experience of pain is to be avoided for the hedonist. For Epicureans, the solution is to control our desires so that we only want what is natural and necessary for happiness. If we can meet our basic needs and do not have to worry about being able to do so, we can be as happy as gods. Thus, one Epicurean doctrine reads: "The cry of the flesh: not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. For if someone has these things and is confident of having them in the future, he might contend even with Zeus for happiness" (VS 33 [1994]).³ To make sense of this claim, more needs to be said about the nature of happiness. According to the Epicureans, the final *telos* is tranquility; freedom from bodily and

¹ An intrinsic good is desirable in and of itself, not because of what it causes or leads to. For the remainder of the article, by 'good' I mean desirable and worth having. By 'bad' I mean undesirable and worth avoiding.

² By 'good life' I mean the life that Epicureans find worth living and therefore try to lead.

³ Unless noted otherwise, translations of Epicurean texts are from Inwood and Gerson (1994). I use abbreviations for primary sources: Ep. Men. = *Letter to Menoecus*; Ep. Hdt. = *Letter to Herodotus*; VS = *Vatican Sayings*; KD = *Principal Doctrines*; DL = Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*; Sen. Ep. = Seneca's *Epistles*, etc.

mental pain is that for the sake of which everything else is worthwhile. Indeed, Epicurus himself writes that “we do everything for the sake of neither being in pain nor in terror”, clarifying that tranquility is our ultimate goal (Ep. Men. 128 [1994]). Since pleasure is the intrinsic good and pain impedes pleasure, we want to avoid as much pain as we possibly can in our lives. There are two kinds of pain: bodily and mental. The closer we get to eliminating all pain of both kinds, the nearer we get to achieving tranquility. We experience kinetic pleasure in the process of and katastematic pleasure as a result of eliminating these pains.⁴ Think of the bodily pain you experience from hunger. You experience kinetic (active) pleasure in the process of eating while hungry and then katastematic (static) pleasure after having eaten, once full. If you were to eliminate all bodily and mental pain from your life, then you would achieve complete tranquility. In turn, your life would be as pleasant as possible, and, as a result, you would be as happy as you can be. Freedom from all bodily and mental pain is the ultimate goal. All value is derived from this ideal. An experience, activity, etc. is valuable and worthwhile only if it brings us nearer to achieving tranquility, conceived of as the absence of bodily and mental pain.

I have argued (2021) that all these features of Epicurean axiology set up the following problem. Since an experience, activity, etc. is worthwhile only if it brings us nearer to achieving tranquility, and tranquility is just the absence of bodily and mental pain, then it follows that nothing would be worthwhile to someone who has eliminated all bodily and mental pain, thereby becoming tranquil. In order to be worthwhile to the tranquil, there would need to be some bodily and/or mental pain that doing philosophy eliminates, but the tranquil Epicurean has already rid themselves of all such pains. Nevertheless, doing philosophy continues to be worthwhile to the person who has already achieved tranquility according to several Epicurean texts. One Epicurean doctrine, for example, holds that “[i]n a joint philosophical investigation he who is defeated comes out ahead in so far as he has learned something new” (VS 74 [1994]). Those who lose an argument learn, thereby benefitting. If learning is beneficial then the advanced Epicurean who has already achieved tranquility might find learning worthwhile, but nothing could be worthwhile to such an Epicurean. On hedonistic grounds, an experience, activity, etc. could only be worthwhile to such an Epicurean if it were to bring them closer to tranquility, but the Epicurean in question has already achieved tranquility. Furthermore, one of Epicurus’ letters also provides evidence that philosophy is always worthwhile. It reads:

Let no one delay the study of philosophy while young nor weary of it when old. For no one is either too young or too old for the health of the soul. He who says either that the time for philosophy has not yet come or that it has passed is like someone who says that the time for happiness has not yet come or that it has passed. Therefore, both young and old must philosophize, the latter so that although old he may stay young in good things owing to gratitude for what has occurred, the former so that although young he too may be like an old man owing to his lack of fear of what is to come. Therefore one must practice the things which produce happiness, since if that is present we have everything and if it is absent we do everything in order to have it (Ep. Men. 122 [1994]).

A few specific claims from Ep. Men. 122 are important for my interpretation. First, Epicurus writes that it is always the time do philosophy, for it is one of the things that produces happiness, which is just tranquility, defined as freedom from bodily and mental pain; to be happy is to be

⁴ This is the standard interpretation of the distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasure, championed by Bailey (1928) and Bignone (1973). Alternative interpretations include Diano’s (1943) and Rist’s (1972).

tranquil according to the Epicureans. Nonetheless, the advanced Epicurean who has achieved tranquility has already made their life as happy as possible in virtue of eliminating all bodily and mental pains. The only possible obstacles to happiness are these pains, the tranquil Epicurean has freed themselves from all pain, and yet Ep. Men. 122 implies that doing philosophy is still worthwhile to them. After all, if it is always the time to do philosophy, then philosophy must always be worthwhile, and if doing philosophy is always worthwhile, then it must be worthwhile to the advanced Epicurean who has already achieved tranquility, even though it is difficult to see how anything could be worthwhile to them. Finally, the most accomplished Epicureans continued to do philosophy even after achieving tranquility, including Epicurus himself, and it would be strange if these individuals were to undertake activity that is not in fact worthwhile, for if doing so were not worthwhile then presumably they would not do it. On my reading, all of these considerations give reason to believe that doing philosophy would continue to be worthwhile even for the Epicurean who has already achieved tranquility, but the Epicureans appear to be lacking a viable explanation for why anything, let alone doing philosophy specifically, would be worthwhile to the tranquil.

The Epicureans have the resources to explain coherently why doing philosophy is worthwhile even to the advanced Epicurean who has achieved tranquility, although no such explanation exists explicitly in the primary texts. What makes doing philosophy worthwhile even to the tranquil, I have argued (2021), is that it prevents the Epicurean who has freed themselves from all bodily and mental pain from lapsing into boredom, which would be painful. Suppose someone were to achieve tranquility and then do nothing at all day after day. Life would become painfully boring for such a person. However, pain is the hedonist's enemy, an experience to be avoided, all other things being equal. Therefore, even the advanced Epicurean who has already achieved tranquility has reasons to avoid this sort of boredom on hedonic grounds. In turn, if the advanced Epicurean who has already achieved tranquility has hedonic reasons to prevent boredom, then avoiding boredom is worthwhile on hedonic grounds for such a person. Consequently, if doing philosophy prevents boredom for the advanced Epicurean who has already achieved tranquility, then doing philosophy would be worthwhile on hedonic grounds for them. In other words, I think that the advanced Epicurean who has already achieved tranquility might find doing philosophy worthwhile because it helps them to maintain the tranquility they already enjoy. Without philosophizing, the advanced Epicurean who has already achieved tranquility might counterfactually get bored, which would be painful, and thereby lose their tranquility. Doing philosophy is worthwhile because it preserves tranquility.

Bell (2021) raises two objections against my argument for the claim that doing philosophy is worthwhile to the tranquil because it helps them avoid painful boredom they might counterfactually experience. First, Bell argues that tranquility is not a static state in which the Epicurean can persist. Epicurean physics are thoroughly atomistic and chaotic. Everything that exists is composed of atoms and void; the formers are always in motion. Constant motion means constant change. As a result, everything that exists is always undergoing change, the tranquil person included. In turn, the Epicurean who eliminates all their bodily and mental pain cannot simply count on tranquility to last. They must maintain their tranquil state against a constantly changing world. As things change, they are exposed to new sources of bodily and mental pain,

and the advanced Epicurean must safeguard their tranquility against such pain. In other words, Bell takes me to overstate how lasting and/or resilient tranquility actually is.

Bell's first objection against my proposal is on the right track. According to the Epicureans, all physical objects are in constant motion, to move is to undergo change, and so all physical objects undergo constant change. However, this does not mean that one cannot persist in a tranquil state over time and/or that tranquility cannot have some permanence. On the one hand, it is certainly possible to achieve tranquility and then lose it. On the other hand, that this is possible does not mean that achieving a resilient tranquility that persists in the face of constant change is impossible. An Epicurean doctrine holds that "[h]e who has learned the limits of life knows that it is easy to provide that which removes the feeling of pain owing to want and make one's whole life perfect" (KD XXI [1994]). If to make one's whole life perfect is to achieve tranquility, then the point of KD XXI is that once we revise our desires so that we only want what is natural and/or necessary for happiness, our lives will be perfect and we can remain tranquil no matter what fortune throws our way. Luck is a feature of life to the extent that we simply cannot control everything that happens to us, but we can train ourselves to respond to all events in a way that enables us to remain happy. Another Epicurean doctrine claims that "[c]hance has a small impact on the wise man" (KD XVI [1994]). The student of Epicureanism who has really taken its teachings to heart and trained himself in accordance with them can remain tranquil regardless of what happens to them. Tranquility need not but can be permanent. The Epicureans even believed that "if the wise man is tortured on the rack, he is happy" (DL 10.118 [1994]). Supposing that to be happy is to be tranquil here, DL 10.118 means that one can remain tranquil even despite being tortured, and if this is possible, then tranquility can be considerably permanent.⁵ Moreover, Epicurus himself writes that the person who practices Epicurean precepts day and night will never be disturbed, achieving a godlike happiness. He instructs the Epicurean to

[p]ractise these and the related precepts day and night, by yourself and with a like-minded friend, and you will never be disturbed either when awake or in sleep, and you will live as a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal goods is in no respect like a mere mortal animal (Ep. Men. 135 [1994]).

In Epicurean theology, the gods are incapable of experiencing pain of any kind, and, as a result, they can never be disturbed and thus enjoy perfect, permanent tranquility. If humans are also capable of reaching a point where they are never disturbed, as Ep. Men. 135 implies, then achieving tranquility that persists in the face of an ever-changing cosmos is not only possible but quite feasible. Consequently, insofar as tranquility can persist over time, it seems that the Epicureans do need the sort of explanation I have offered. The advanced Epicurean who achieves tranquility will continue to do philosophy, which must be hedonically worthwhile, lest the tranquil Epicurean undertakes an activity without sufficient reasons. On my solution, doing philosophy would be worthwhile even to someone who has already achieved tranquility because philosophizing counteracts a painful boredom they might experience without doing philosophy.

⁵ That one can be happy while being tortured might surprise the modern reader. Then again, if virtue is sufficient for happiness and one can be virtuous while being tortured, then it follows that happiness and being tortured are compatible. On the other hand, even Aristotle writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1153b19 [1982]) that those who defend such a claim are talking nonsense. Nevertheless, the fact that Aristotle takes time to explain why he thinks that this claim is nonsense provides evidence that other philosophers must have defended it, Epicurus being one of them.

Bell's (2021, p. 38) second objection is that "curiosity and not boredom is the better candidate for the pain" that the sage relieves by doing tranquility, which in turns makes philosophizing worthwhile to them. Presumably, for Bell, curiosity would be a mental pain because being curious about something entails wanting to know something and not knowing it, which constitutes an unsatisfied desire, a source of pain for Epicureans. In other words, Bell argues that even if the Epicureans need an explanation for why doing philosophy is worthwhile to the advanced Epicurean who achieves lasting tranquility—which Bell denies is likely or even possible in the first place—doing philosophy is more plausibly worthwhile to an advanced Epicurean who achieves tranquility because it satisfies their curiosity, not because it saves them from experiencing painful boredom. Bell offers two arguments for this objection. First, Bell claims that curiosity demands an answer, the lack of which we often find bothersome. Doing philosophy helps us find the answer to the things about which we are curious, thereby sating our underlying curiosity. Being bothered by a lack of answer constitutes a mental pain for us, and doing philosophy helps us to eliminate this pain by seeking the truth, which is ripe for Epicurean analysis: finding an answer to a question about which we are curious would bring the experience of a katastematic pleasure because our desire for the answer in question is satisfied by doing of philosophy. Second, Bell argues that curiosity rather than boredom is more plausibly the mental pain that doing philosophy prevents because there is a feedback loop between curiosity and philosophy and because the connection between curiosity and philosophy is tighter than the connection between boredom and philosophy. As to the feedback loop, Bell's point is that the more we do philosophy, the more curious we become, and the more curious we become, the more we need to do philosophy. As to the tighter connection, Bell's point seems to be that the pain of curiosity is more specifically relieved by doing philosophy, whereas the pain of boredom could be relieved in a bunch of ways that do not even involve doing philosophy, e.g., by taking a nap, having a walk, or even seeking vice.

I have two objections against Bell's claim that it would be better to posit curiosity rather than boredom as the mental pain that doing philosophy saves the tranquil from experiencing. First, I think Bell is correct that curiosity arises from wanting to know an answer, that not knowing this is bothersome, and that doing philosophy could help us acquire new knowledge, satisfying the desire for answers to unanswered questions.⁶ I also think Bell is correct that the more curious we are, the more we need philosophy, and the more we do philosophy, the more curious we become. However, that Bell is correct to make these two points explains precisely why we should posit boredom rather than curiosity as the pain that doing philosophy prevents. As I previously explained, the Epicureans develop a version of desire satisfaction theory that complements their hedonism, according to which we should eliminate all desires that are not natural and/or necessary for happiness conceived as tranquility. The reason for this is simple: wanting some object and then not getting it is painful and what is painful is to be avoided for the hedonist. Setting aside the question of whether the desire for knowledge that curiosity-driven philosophy satisfies is natural and/or necessary for happiness—although I suspect that the answer to this question is 'no' because the knowledge generated by philosophizing about theoretical

⁶ This is not to say that we can answer all questions by doing philosophy. Nevertheless, the process of philosophizing might be worthwhile even if the question about which the Epicurean philosophizes goes ultimately unanswered. However, on Bell's solution, we can avoid this complication by recommending that the Epicurean philosophize primarily about questions that they might reasonably expect to be answered by doing philosophy.

physics, for example, is probably not necessary for tranquility—the fact that there is a feedback loop between curiosity and doing philosophy means that the desire for curiosity-driven philosophical knowledge is problematic and ought to be eliminated. The Epicurean poet Lucretius condemns love insofar as desire for one’s beloved is problematic because the more we satisfy it, the stronger the desire becomes, and the harder it becomes to satisfy (4.1089 [2009]). According to Lucretius, being with a lover is like drinking sea water while thirsty: it makes you thirstier. Lucretius’ underlying point is that we should eliminate desires of this kind because desires that are difficult to satisfy generate obstacles for one’s tranquility insofar as not getting what we want is painful. As such, if Bell is correct that doing philosophy is worthwhile because it satisfies our curiosity but also makes us even more curious, creating demand for more philosophy, then curiosity is like desire for the beloved and thus ought to be eliminated; it would not be a desire the tranquil Epicurean should cultivate to make doing philosophy worthwhile.

Second, Bell is also probably correct that the connection between curiosity and doing philosophy is tighter than the connection between boredom and doing philosophy in the sense that philosophizing is only one of many ways to counteract boredom whereas philosophy is one of only a few ways to sate curiosity. However, for reasons similar to those that I provided in support for my first objection above, the fact that Bell is probably correct to observe that the pain of curiosity is more specifically relieved by doing philosophy is precisely why the Epicurean would be misguided to posit it as what makes philosophizing worthwhile to the tranquil. According to Epicurean desire satisfaction theory, we should aim to have desires that can be satisfied in many ways rather than desires that can only be satisfied in one or even a few ways. Again: wanting an object and not getting it is painful, and what is painful is to be avoided, so all things being equal we should prefer to desire objects that can be readily obtained, and the more ways there are to satisfy a desire, the more ways there are to obtain what it is that we want. One Epicurean doctrine is that “[o]ne should bring this question to bear on all of one’s desires: what will happen to me if what is sought by desire is achieved, and what will happen if it is not?” (VS 71 [1994]). The answer to the latter question is that one will be dissatisfied, which will be painful, and this is why it is better to have desires that can be satisfied in many ways. In fact, Lucretius uses this very point to provide another argument against love in *De rerum natura* (2009). Love creates a singular desire for the beloved, with whom we cannot always be, and so we feel painful dissatisfaction in the absence of the beloved. In response, Lucretius somewhat crudely recommends eliminating this singular desire by satisfying the underlying want with many objects; he proposes that lovers get over their unique desire for one another by having sex with other people (4.1057-1072 [2009]).⁷ All of these texts provide evidence that the Epicureans encourage the cultivation of desires that can be satisfied in many ways. As such, to the extent that the pain of boredom can be satisfied in many ways and doing philosophy is only one of them, whereas the pain of curiosity can be satisfied in far fewer ways but still via philosophy, doing philosophy is more plausibly rendered worthwhile to the tranquil Epicurean because of the boredom it counteracts.

⁷ I should clarify that many of the Epicurean views I describe in this paper are not my own. Lucretius might sound somewhat judgmental here and I do not share this position. However, I am trying to determine in this paper whether the Epicureans have the resources to explain how philosophy is worthwhile to the tranquil because it prevents boredom, and such an explanation would need to be consistent with other Epicurean claims, e.g., Lucretius’.

3. An Epicurean MAC Model of Boredom

One problem with my proposal is that I have not even attempted to describe what an Epicurean account of boredom would look like. In the absence of any such description, it remains unclear whether the Epicureans could even have an account of boredom. If they cannot, then my claim that philosophy is worthwhile to the tranquil Epicurean because it prevents painful boredom they would otherwise experience would be mistaken. In this section, I determine whether the Epicureans are in a position to have an account of boredom, and if they are, what such an account would need to look like. In the following pages, I explain which features an Epicurean account of boredom would need to possess, determine whether an account of boredom that possesses all those features exists, and if so, whether it coheres with key Epicurean tenets.

First, an Epicurean account of boredom would need the experience of boredom to be painful. If the experience of boredom were not painful, then avoiding or eliminating the painful sensation associated with it could not be worthwhile on hedonic grounds. If this were the case, then an experience, activity, etc. could not be worthwhile for the sake of preventing or eliminating the experience of boredom qua painful, which is what would need to be the case for my view to work. After all, my very proposal is that philosophy is worthwhile even to the tranquil Epicurean because it helps her avoid or eliminate boredom. Fortunately, there is considerable psychological evidence that the experience of boredom is painful, which the modern Epicurean could use to support their claim that the prevention and/or elimination of boredom is worthwhile on hedonic grounds, which makes philosophy worthwhile, provided that doing philosophy is the sort of activity that can prevent and/or eliminate boredom. Wilson et al. (2014) found that individuals do not enjoy being by themselves with nothing to do, prefer to administer electrical shocks to themselves instead of being alone with their thoughts, and, generally, would rather do something over nothing even if the something is negative. Havermans et al. (2015) found that participants in a study ate more M&Ms and even self-administered brief electrical shocks when driven by the desire to escape monotony. A later study by Nederkoorn et al. (2016) even showed that the function of the self-administered shocks in the original study was to disrupt monotony. Apparently, boredom is perceived to be so painful that individuals are willing to experience a negative but less painful sensation, e.g., a brief electrical shock, in order to distract themselves from the greater pain of monotony associated with experience of boredom. As Westgate and Wilson (2018, p. 17) put it, boredom “is a highly aversive state”. All of this is water for my mill. If boredom is this aversive, then the tranquil Epicurean will find boredom painful and desire not to experience it. Consequently, they will need an experience, activity, etc. to prevent or eliminate boredom, which would then be worthwhile on hedonic grounds. The question thus becomes whether philosophy can play the role that I have suggested it does, i.e., whether philosophizing is an activity that prevents and/or eliminates boredom for a tranquil Epicurean.

Westgate and Wilson (2018) develop what they call the Meaning and Attention Components (MAC) Model of Boredom. According to the MAC model of boredom, “boredom is an affective indicator of unsuccessful attentional engagement in valued goal-congruent activity” (2018, p. 20). On the MAC model, we experience boredom when we cannot attend successfully to whatever it is to which we are supposed to be attending and/or the activity in which we are supposed to be attending lacks adequate value. Westgate and Wilson (2018, p. 20)

arrive at this account of boredom after finding that “attention and meaning are independent causes of boredom”. Many previous accounts of boredom held that boredom is caused by either a lack of attention or a lack of meaning but not both. For example, attentional theories claim that boredom results from a lack of attention, i.e., we tend to experience boredom when we cannot attend successfully to some activity (Eastwood et al., 2012; Fisher, 1993; Hamilton, 1981; Leary et al., 1986; Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). Functional theories claim that we experience boredom when an activity lacks meaning and the function of boredom is to signal that the activity is insufficiently meaningful (Barbalet, 1999; Chater and Loewenstein, 2016; Locke and Latham, 1990; Van Tilburg and Igou, 2017). The MAC model of boredom holds that attentional and functional theories are correct and compatible. In other words, “there are two crucial pieces of information boredom provides – first, whether there is successful cognitive engagement in the current task (attentional component) and second, whether the current task, regardless of engagement, is valuable and thus worth pursuing” (Westgate and Wilson 2018, p. 5).

Presupposing the MAC model of boredom, my claim that doing philosophy is worthwhile to the tranquil because it prevents painful boredom they might otherwise experience works only if 1) the tranquil Epicurean is capable of attending to doing philosophy while tranquil and 2) doing philosophy while tranquil has adequate value to make it worthwhile. At first glance, it might seem obvious that doing philosophy will keep the tranquil Epicurean’s attention so that a tranquil Epicurean who does philosophy will not experience boredom due to some attentional deficit. Sure, my proposal would fail if the tranquil Epicurean were incapable of attending to philosophy after achieving tranquility, but the tranquil Epicurean seems more than capable of keeping their attention focused squarely on philosophical activity even after freeing themselves from bodily and mental pain. After all, it would be somewhat strange if the most accomplished Epicureans, who devoted their lives to philosophical activity, all of a sudden became incapable of attending to philosophy upon achieving tranquility. However, attending successfully to an activity is more complicated than it might seem. As Westgate and Wilson (2018) point out, although an attentional deficit can cause boredom, this deficit can result from a mismatch between one’s resources and difficulty of the activity attended to. Put otherwise, attentional deficit and thereby boredom result from both under and overstimulation. My interpretation must therefore navigate a thin line. Doing philosophy must be worthwhile to the tranquil because it prevents painful boredom they might otherwise experience, but, in turn, the activity of philosophy cannot be too demanding or too underwhelming to them. If philosophy were too under or overstimulating to them, then it might actually cause boredom for the tranquil Epicurean, whereas on my view the very function of philosophy is to prevent such boredom in the first place. Doing philosophy could backfire for the tranquil Epicurean.

Fortunately, this worry is defeasible. As long as there is no attentional mismatch between a tranquil Epicurean and the philosophical project they undertake in order to prevent boredom from setting in, philosophy could continue to be worthwhile to them to the extent that it staves off painful boredom. At the same time, for my interpretation to work, the Epicurean must be careful not to undertake philosophical projects that would be insufficiently or excessively stimulating for them. Interestingly enough, there is some evidence in the primary texts that the Epicureans were aware of the differences in aptitude that existed among them and took these

differences into account when they considered what would be appropriate for each of them. At the end of the *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus writes that even a summary of the most important points about the nature of the universe “would be able to make a man incomparably stronger than other men, even if he does not go on to all of the precise details of individual doctrines” (Ep. Hdt. 83 [1994]). Epicurus knows that not every Epicurean is interested in or even capable of studying the minutia of atomistic physics. The tranquil Epicurean who philosophizes to prevent boredom must keep this in mind and do philosophy that is appropriate to them given their philosophical aptitude. Epicurus himself might find philosophizing about anything other the minutia of atomistic physics insufficiently stimulating whereas less philosophically advanced Epicureans might find philosophizing about this too difficult a topic to manage. According to Seneca, Epicurus was aware that different Epicureans require different kinds of assistance in their quest for truth. Apparently, some required no help from teachers, while others required only a little, and some even needed encouragement and to be “forced along” into righteousness (Sen. Ep. 52.3-4 [1994]). We can say the same about what kind of philosophy the tranquil Epicurean should do to prevent painful boredom. The most advanced might need to philosophize about more difficult topics, whereas the less advanced would need to philosophize about less difficult topics. Provided there is no attentional mismatch, philosophy could be worthwhile to prevent boredom.

At this point, I have argued that the Epicureans have the resources to develop an account of boredom that satisfies one of the two conditions of Westgate and Wilson’s MAC model. As long as the tranquil Epicurean philosophizes about topics that are neither insufficiently nor excessively stimulating to them, aversive boredom would not result from attentional mismatch. What about the meaning component of the MAC model? According to Westgate and Wilson, attentional match is necessary but not sufficient for not being bored. An activity must also be meaningful, otherwise we might feel bored when we participate in it even if we are capable of attending to it successfully. For example, Van Tilburg and Igou (2012) found that participants in a study reported that copying references from a Wikipedia article about concrete was boring because the participants thought that doing so served no purpose and made them want to do a task with more meaning. This might explain why Chin et al. (2017) found that the wealthy are less likely to experience boredom that results from meaninglessness: since the wealthy have more autonomy in choosing their activities, they are free to choose activities that are more meaningful to them, and thus experience less boredom as a result than others might.

Whatever the case, for philosophy to play the role that my interpretation would have it play, the tranquil Epicurean would need to find doing philosophy meaningful. I have already made the case that the Epicurean who has achieved tranquility will still find philosophy worthwhile. In fact, my interpretation takes this to be an *explanandum* of Epicurean ethics, one I venture to explain. On my interpretation, there are primary Epicurean texts indicating that the Epicurean will find philosophizing worthwhile even after achieving tranquility, the texts I reviewed in section 2 of this article. However, the Epicureans do not explicitly offer any explanation for why doing philosophy would be worthwhile in such circumstances. In fact, it is somewhat difficult to see whether there could be any such explanation for this if there really are no pleasures to pursue once we achieve tranquility and hedonism is true so that an experience, activity, etc. is only worthwhile for the sake of pleasure. Nevertheless, I think that there is such

an explanation available: philosophy is worthwhile to the Epicurean who achieves tranquility because it counteracts painful boredom they might otherwise experience. In this respect, my interpretation already satisfies the meaning criterion of the MAC model of boredom. An experience, activity, etc. is worthwhile on hedonic grounds only if it produces pleasure and/or prevents and/or eliminates pain. Even for the tranquil, doing philosophy prevents pain, e.g., aversive boredom. Thus, philosophy is worthwhile even for the tranquil because of the boredom it counteracts. If an experience, activity, etc. is worthwhile, then it is certainly meaningful. Indeed, an activity's being meaningful is a necessary condition for its being worthwhile in the sense that if the activity did not have any meaning in the first place, then it could not even be worthwhile all-things-considered. As such, to the extent that my solution shows doing philosophy is worthwhile even to the tranquil, it follows that philosophizing must also have meaning for the tranquil.

4. Conclusion

From the inside of Epicurean ethics, there is a puzzle about how anything could be worthwhile to someone who has achieved the final *telos*: tranquility, i.e., freedom from bodily and mental pain. To the extent that an experience, activity, etc. can only be worthwhile for the sake of eliminating bodily and mental pain, once all these pains are eliminated, there is nothing to make doing anything worthwhile. I think that there must be an explanation for why some things are worthwhile to the tranquil Epicurean because the primary texts indicate that some things are always worthwhile, even to the tranquil, e.g., doing philosophy. I have argued (2021) that one explanation for why doing philosophy is worthwhile even to the tranquil is that philosophizing prevents boredom that the tranquil might experience without it. In response, Bell argues that the Epicureans do not need the sort of explanation I offer because lasting tranquility is rare if not impossible, and even if this were false, a better solution would take philosophy to be worthwhile to the tranquil because of the curiosity it satisfies rather than the boredom it prevents. I argued here that the Epicureans do need the sort of explanation I offered and that Bell's explanation is less attractive than mine. However, I also concede that my explanation requires an account of Epicurean boredom, which I then sketched. Borrowing from Westgate and Wilson's (2018) MAC model of boredom, I argued that in order for doing philosophy to be worthwhile to the tranquil because it prevents boredom, the relation between boredom and philosophy must meet three conditions: 1) boredom must be an aversive state, 2) the Epicurean must be able to attend to philosophy while tranquil, and 3) philosophizing must have value for the tranquil. I argued that all three conditions are satisfied by the view that philosophy is worthwhile to tranquil Epicureans because it helps them to avoid painful boredom.

References

- Aristotle (1982). *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Princeton University Press.
- Bailey, C. (1928). *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus*. Russell and Russell.

- Barbalet, J. (1999). Boredom and Social Meaning. *British Journal of Sociology*, 50, 631–646. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.1999.00631.x>
- Bell, J. (2021). Epicurean Philosophy, Change, and Curiosity. *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 37(2), 37–40. <https://doi.org/10.5840/swphilreview202137233>
- Bignone, E. (1973). *L'Aristotle perduto e la formazione filosofica di Epicuro* (vol. 1). La Nuova Italia.
- Chater, N., and Loewenstein, G. (2016). The Under-Appreciated Drive for Sense-Making. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 126, 137–154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2015.10.016>
- Chin, A., Markey, A., Bhargava, S., Kassam, K. S., and Loewenstein, G. (2017). Bored in the USA: Experience Sampling and Boredom in Everyday Life. *Emotion*, 17(2), 359–368. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000232>
- Diano, C. (1943). Note Epicuree. *Annali Della R. Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Lettere, Storia e Filosofia*, 12(3), 111–123.
- Eastwood, J., Frischen, A., Fenske, M., and Smilek, D. (2012). The Unengaged Mind: Defining Boredom in Terms of Attention. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7, 482–495. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916124560>
- Fisher, C. (1993). Boredom at Work: A Neglected Concept. *Human Relations*, 46, 395–417. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872679304600305>
- Gillham, A. R. (2021). Epicurean Tranquility and the Pleasure of Philosophy. *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 37(1), 149–158. <https://doi.org/10.5840/swphilreview202137116>
- Hamilton, J. (1981). Attention, Personality, and the Self-Regulation of Mood: Absorbing Interest and Boredom. *Progress in Experimental Personality Research*, 10, 281–315.
- Havermans, R. C., Vancleef, L., Kalamatianos, A., and Nederkoorn, C. (2015). Eating and Inflicting Pain out of Boredom. *Appetite*, 52–57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2014.11.007>
- Inwood, B., and Gerson, L. (1994). *The Epicurus Reader*. Hackett.
- Leary, M., Rogers, P., Canfield, R., and Coe, C. (1986). Boredom in Interpersonal Encounters: Antecedents and Social Implications. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 968–975. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.51.5.968>
- Lucretius. (2009). *De rerum natura*. Cambridge University Press.
- Locke, E., and Latham, G. (1990). *A Theory of Goal Setting and Task Performance*. Prentice.
- Nederkoorn, C., Vancleef, L., Wilkenhöner, A., Claes, L., and Havermans, R. C. (2016). Self-Inflicted Pain out of Boredom. *Psychiatry Research*, 237, 127–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2016.01.063>
- Rist, J. (1972). *Epicurus: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, C., and Ellsworth, P. (1985). Patterns of Cognitive Appraisal in Emotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48, 813–828. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.48.4.813>

Van Tilburg, W. A. P., and Igou, E. R. (2012). On Boredom: Lack of Challenge and Meaning as Distinct Boredom Experiences. *Motivation and Emotion*, 36, 181–194. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-011-9234-9>

Van Tilburg, W. A. P., and Igou, E. R. (2017). Boredom Begg to Differ: Differentiation from Other Negative Emotions. *Emotion*, 17, 309–322. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000233>

Westgate, E. C., and Wilson, T. D. (2018). Boring Thoughts and Bored Minds: The MAC Model of Boredom and Cognitive Engagement. *Psychological Review*, 125(5), 689–713. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000097>

Wilson, T. D., Reinhard, D. A., Westgate, E. C., Gilbert, D. T., Ellerbeck, N., Hahn, C., Brown, C. L., and Shaked, A. (2014). Just Think: The Challenges of the Disengaged Mind. *Science*, 345, 75–77. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1250830>