



ENGAGEMENT, EXPERIENCE, AND VALUE: REPLY TO CRITICS

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ABSTRACT: In this reply to comments by Neera Badhwar and Barbara Montero, I examine more deeply the nature of cognitive engagement and how it is distinct from other forms of cognitive activity; revisit the distinction between interesting and boring experiences; and present an analysis of all-things-considered value that illustrates the contributions that the interesting makes. I conclude by considering what all-things-considered value becomes for patients with severe cognitive impairments.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to think of a more important question than “what makes life worth living?” I’ve argued that interesting experiences can make life worth living and that their value ought to be considered in third-party assessments of quality of life. Neera Badhwar and Barbara Montero pose pressing and constructive concerns, which I’ll address in three parts. What exactly is the nature of the cognitive engagement distinctive to interesting experiences, and do we need awareness of it to experience it? What is the relationship between interesting experiences and boredom, and how do we understand their respective values? Finally, how do we understand the prudential value of the interesting as it relates to judgements about all-things-considered value?

II. COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT: A DEEPER DIVE

I define the interesting as the qualitative feature of our experience of robust cognitive engagement. We experience the interesting in virtue of being cognitively engaged, and our experience of the interesting resonates with us such that we experience it as valuable. In this context, resonance is best understood in terms of responsiveness. When we have an interesting experience, our responsiveness to what we are doing leads us to become engaged with it. Conversely, if it doesn’t resonate, this means

we're not responsive to the stimuli presented. We won't find ourselves engaging in it, so we won't have an interesting experience.

The more interesting an experience is, the greater degree to which we experience it as valuable. This suggests a spectrum that attributes prudential value to cognitive engagement of any kind. Montero worries: are all forms of cognitive engagement really valuable? Surely, there are many states of mind that look like cognitive engagement but that subjects don't experience as valuable.

To bring the concern into focus, let's take a deeper look into the counter-example that Montero raises, which is of a subject experiencing the obsessive thoughts associated with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Someone experiencing obsessive thoughts seems to be cognitively engaged but does not experience her engagement as valuable. If so, then not all forms of cognitive engagement are prudentially valuable.

The argument succeeds only if the thought patterns distinctive to OCD instantiate cognitive engagement, which I don't think is true. OCD thought patterns occupy our minds and demand attention, but they don't engage us. Understanding why not helps clarify the distinction between cognitive activity and cognitive engagement.

The DSM-V defines OCD as evidenced by "recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges or images that are experienced, at some time during the disturbance, as intrusive, unwanted, and that in most individuals cause marked anxiety or distress."¹ We see that, by definition, the thought patterns distinctive to OCD do not resonate with the subject and are instead experienced as "intrusive" and "unwanted." These markers indicate that the subject experiences her thoughts as occurring beyond her volition. That these unwanted thoughts additionally present themselves as "recurrent and persistent" indicates the disorder involved: the subject cannot harness these thought patterns in any way. They instead hold her mind hostage, which gives rise to anxiety and distress. The thought patterns involved in OCD hijack the subject's mind, leaving her unable to engage. Her mind is active, new thoughts are happening, but she's not engaged.

We find a more ordinary example of thought hijacking by considering the ways in which implicit biases are known to impact thought patterns. Like obsessive thoughts, implicit biases harness our thought patterns in ways that are intrusive and unwanted.² We don't mistake these operations for cognitive engagement, partly because they happen on a sub-conscious level, but also because they don't engage. Like the operations of OCD, implicit biases direct and control our thought patterns, but they don't engage. Rather, it seems more natural to say, as with OCD, that the operations of implicit bias prevent us from engaging.

Rather than calling into question the value of cognitive engagement, we see that these examples illuminate the broad range of cognitive activity. Whether sub-conscious or not, not all cognitive activity takes the shape of cognitive engagement. This takes us back to the task of distinguishing between cognitive activity and cognitive engagement. Not all cognitive activity is engaging, although it is true that cognitive activity may stimulate new thoughts. But my claim is not that the marker of cognitive engagement is the production of new thoughts, but that the marker of cognitive engagement is that it stimulates further engagement.

Interesting experiences arise when a subject experiences a robust form of cognitive engagement, in which new thoughts arise that impact the subject, leading her to experience new thoughts and, often, new emotions. To get a better handle on the nature of this engagement, it is helpful to look at some scientific literature on cognitive engagement. Much of this literature comes in the context of educational psychology and in the context of exploring how to engage children in a classroom setting. This context alone helps to put our target into perspective. As teachers, we strive to engage our students. What does that look like? What are we aiming at when we strive to engage our students?

We want our students to think about the material we are offering. We want them to connect the material to something they might already be thinking about. We want them to explore the ideas, to think of possible objections and consequences, and to evaluate those ideas. Often, it doesn't really matter what students do with these ideas, just that they do something with them.

One prominent definition of engagement that guides research in education psychology distinguishes between "deep" engagement and "shallow engagement."

Deep engagement [involves] the active use of prior knowledge and the intentional creation of more complex knowledge structures by integrating the new information with prior knowledge. Shallow engagement involves rote processing and other intentional cognitive actions that are more mechanical than thoughtful (e.g., rote rehearsal and verbatim memorization strategies). (Greene 2015: 15)

In its best form, cognitive engagement is "active," "intentional," and "prolific." In any form, cognitive engagement is "intentional," which in this context does not invoke a planned intention to engage but indicates something more like willingness.³

This understanding of cognitive engagement seems true to the classroom experience. The most engaged students are willing, active, and prolific. The less engaged students are willing and active, but less prolific. They don't go beyond what you're lecturing, but they at least take it in. And the non-engaged student? They are not willing and not active.

At a minimum, cognitive engagement occurs when minds are active and willing. Cognitive engagement becomes more robust to the extent that it is prolific. I'd go one step further and say that the most robust forms of cognitive engagement are prolific of both thoughts and feelings, for these rapidly stimulate further engagement (Besser 2023).

We can now explain clearly why the thought patterns distinctive to OCD and those influenced by implicit bias are forms of cognitive activity and not cognitive engagement. It is because the subject does not experience them as either active or willed.

This analysis primes us to revisit our driving question, which concerns what capacities are necessary to experience the interesting. I've argued, at minimum, that subjects need to have conscious awareness of cognitive activity to experience the interesting. Badhwar worries that this is too much, and suggests:

What is interesting to us is typically out there in the world. When we find it interesting it engages us. We have the experience of being engaged. It's a conscious experience to be sure, but there's no reason such an experience should require "conscious awareness of one's cognitive activity." (249)

She goes on to suggest that conscious awareness seems necessary only when "the object of our interest is our own thoughts, feelings, or fantasies" (249).

In describing the capacity for the interesting in terms of conscious awareness, my intention is to point out that interesting experiences are qualitative experiences, i.e., that the interesting must be experienced. But Badhwar interprets me as requiring a second-order consciousness of one's experiences. It will be helpful to clarify the difference.

Partly driving Badhwar's concern is the notion of there being "an object of interest" that engages us. If there is an "object of interest" that engages us, then specifying conscious awareness in this context is redundant, for there's already awareness built in—awareness of the object.

Here, it helps to take note of the many different connotations of the word "interest," many of which do presuppose an object of interest.⁴ When used to describe the quality of our experiences, however, the "interesting" does not have an object. An interesting experience is one that we experience as interesting. There's no aboutness with respect to interesting experiences.⁵ There is content contained in an interesting experience, but the interesting experience is not about an object. Regardless of what is engaging you—be it thoughts about experiential value or thoughts about worms or thoughts about your next adventure—it's the experience of the cognitive engagement that is of prudential value.

In settling on "conscious awareness of cognitive activity" to present the minimum requirements of experiencing the interesting, my aim is to capture the importance of the experience of cognitive engagement, and in future work I'll be sure to avoid the ambiguity that Badhwar's critique points to. The idea is simply this: When we experience anything, it affects us. Interesting experiences affect us by stimulating cognitive engagement and, also, by giving rise to feelings of resonance.⁶ It is essential to be aware of this for the experience to become interesting.

Going back to those babies and their wide eyes, coos, and smiles, the reason these behaviors mark the development of conscious awareness is because they evidence the impact of their surroundings. Smiling at something indicates that it's impacted you. It indicates that you've experienced it. Conscious awareness is essential to experience.

Since we know that cognitive activity often happens without conscious awareness, evidence of cognitive activity alone does not establish that the subject can experience. If a subject cannot experience, she is not capable of experiencing value. Since the value at stake here—the interesting—is a qualitative feature of our experience of cognitive engagement, it follows that the minimum capacity necessary to experience it is conscious awareness of cognitive activity.

I take this line of reasoning to affirm that those babies can experience the interesting, along with many patients suffering from cognitive impairments. This is important because it shows that subjects don't need a developed sense of self to experience the interesting. But there is a big gray area here, which concerns the

brain patterns necessary to engage; that is, its capacity to think about thoughts in a way that engages. We know that agentic thinking,⁷ a sense of time, and, I'll add, possession of concepts are not necessary for the mind to engage, but it is difficult to know much more about what is necessary. Identifying more concretely the capacities necessary for the mind to engage is an important project. It is what we need to know to understand how the different stages of Alzheimer's, along with other memory disorders and so much more, might affect a subject's capacity to experience the interesting.

III. INTERESTING EXPERIENCES AND BORING EXPERIENCES

Having fine-tuned my analysis of cognitive engagement and of the capacities required to the experience of the interesting, I now turn to address the broader questions my critics raise regarding the project of defending experiential value. I'll start by revisiting the relationship between interesting experiences and boring ones.

Badhwar observes that there are many different emotional states that are neither interesting nor boring and that are salient to our quality-of-life assessments. I agree. The example of terror brings this clearly to light. A subject who experiences terror is not bored, yet she is also not having an interesting experience. I'd take this a step further: her terror prevents her from being able to have an interesting experience. Real terror activates our sympathetic nervous system, whose influence on our minds leaves it unable to engage with the experience.⁸

A subject's propensity to experience terror is important information to use in our quality-of-life assessments. Some people can find horror novels interesting, while others can't. It is important to know this information about ourselves and about our loved ones. If Grummy has always avoided horror novels, movies, and such, then it's important to ensure that they aren't the kinds of book she reads every day. Building and developing knowledge about a subject's propensities to experience these states is critical.⁹

Underlying Badhwar's concern about terror, though, is a deeper concern about my analysis of boredom, the kinds of states that resolve boredom, and whether anything that resolves boredom ought to be viewed as valuable. I claim that any form of cognitive engagement resolves boredom. I still think this is correct, but it will help to clarify how I'm approaching these issues.

My focus is on the everyday, psychological, sense of boredom. It's the sense of boredom we invoke when we use it as an adjective. It's what we refer to when we say, "This [experience] is boring." When we say, "This is boring," what we mean is that it does not engage us. Conversely, if it engages us, we say, "It's interesting."

This is a different sense of boredom from the one most familiar to philosophical discussions. Philosophical discussions of boredom, which invoke the sense of meaningless to which Badhwar refers, focus on an existential sense of boredom: the pervading sense that life is meaningless.¹⁰ Someone afflicted by the existential sense of boredom also experiences the everyday sense of boredom, for her sense of meaninglessness prevents her from engaging. We should recognize, however, that patients with cognitive impairments, who have lost the capacity for agentic thinking, are not liable to experience existential boredom. Existential boredom is the

stuff of deep thinkers, who feel a need for meaning, who question and analyze the point of life beyond the experiences it offers. Not everyone experiences existential boredom, and it seems that a tendency to experience existential boredom might be one of the first things to shift upon the deterioration of one's cognitive faculties.

The everyday sense of boredom, as I've defined it, involves a lack of cognitive engagement that is experienced as aversive by the subject, in light of her need or want to be engaged. It is possible that some cognitive impairments leave subjects without the need or want to cognitively engage. This suggests that they aren't liable to boredom, which would be a good thing. Yet they very well might still have the capacity to experience the interesting, which would also be a good thing.

There is a symmetry between the value of interesting experiences and the disvalue of boring experiences, but it isn't exhaustive. Boredom is experientially bad, while the interesting is experientially good. Yet they aren't good or bad for the same reasons: boring experiences are bad because they are experienced as aversive states by the subject; interesting experiences are good because they are experienced as valuable. The value of interesting experiences is independent of the disvalue of boring experiences. Interesting experiences aren't valuable solely or even primarily because they resolve boredom, but that they do resolve boredom gives them the potential for this additional benefit.

It's also important to differentiate between states that resolve boredom and states that distract one from boredom. Terror distracts one from boredom, but it doesn't resolve it. Physical pain distracts one from boredom but doesn't resolve it. As many of us know all too well, distraction doesn't resolve.¹¹ If nothing else shifts, once the pain or terror dissipates, the subject will return to boredom. There is only one thing that resolves boredom, which is cognitive engagement.

IV. EXPERIENTIAL VALUE, PRUDENTIAL VALUE, ALL-THINGS-CONSIDERED VALUE

Reflection on the nature of boredom affirms the value attached to any form of cognitive engagement, no matter how big or small, no matter its content. And as the interesting describes the qualitative phenomenology of a robust form of cognitive engagement, this begets a pressing question: just how valuable are interesting experiences, and how does their value contribute or stand in relation to other values? I've argued that the interesting is an experiential value, which presents an intrinsic, prudential value but not an all-things-considered value. Because it is an experiential value, the value of interesting experiences lies in its experience. Experience is always subjective, though, for it involves a synthesis between what a subject is doing and the mental states she brings to that activity. This means that what counts as interesting depends on the subject's mental states—the thoughts, beliefs, expectations, hopes, and feelings occurring to her at that moment (Besser 2023)—and that the value of the interesting lies in its phenomenology, rather than arising from objective facts about the particular content that stimulates it.

An anonymous referee asks: Does this mean that a person with Alzheimer's disease might very well experience the same degree of the interesting when reading the same book every day as does the philosopher when engaging in a new intellectual

project? The answer is that she might. The value of the interesting might not be fixed or set by the kind of activity we're doing, but it does come in degrees. Some experiences are more interesting than others. The degree to which an experience is interesting depends exclusively on how the subject experiences it.

All of this suggests, and presupposes, that there is a distinctive phenomenology shared by interesting experiences, a claim that Montero views with caution. Rather than trying to locate its value in a distinctive phenomenology shared by a range of experiences, she suggests that a better strategy might be to locate its value elsewhere, such as by appealing to the positive attitudes we have towards these experiences.¹²

It's an apt concern. As I've structured it, the value of an experiential value is inseparable from its phenomenological feel, for its value lies in its experience. But to be useful, especially in the context of quality-of-life assessments, it must be true that there is a set of experiences that share a distinctive phenomenological quality, which instantiates the interesting. Is this true? Does the patient with Alzheimer's really experience the same phenomenological quality reading a book over and over again as does the philosopher thinking about a new idea? Montero's objection tracks a well-known problem in discussions of hedonism regarding the diverse range of pleasure,¹³ and, in broadening the category of experiential value to include a plurality of experiential values (or at least two: pleasure and the interesting), my view seems even more problematic. Even those who agree that pleasure has its own distinctive feel might worry about the plausibility of claiming that the interesting also has its own distinctive feel. Is it really possible to carve out this phenomenology? And once we start, how far are we prepared to go?

Both of my critics question: what other experiences might be valuable? The worry seems to be that broadening the category of experiential value invites a proliferation of value, such that the interesting becomes just one of many experiences important to the quality-of-life. I do believe in experiential pluralism, yet I'm not worried that the category of experiential value will expand to the point where there are too many to be meaningful and useful, especially in the context of third-party quality-of-life assessments.

Consider the specific example of novelty that Montero raises. L. A. Paul argues that the value of novelty may make worthwhile undergoing transformative experiences (Paul 2014). If we are both correct, this implies that novelty has its own phenomenological feel that is distinct from that of the interesting. The implausibility of this claim drives Montero's suggestion to locate value outside of phenomenology. I worry, however, that she moves too quickly here. Novelty is correlated with interesting experiences, which is why it seems implausible to claim a distinct phenomenology for each. Psychological research suggests that novelty provides conditions ripe for the interesting to arise (Besser and Oishi 2020). Novelty itself isn't experientially valuable. Rather, novelty tends to stimulate cognitive engagement that can become interesting and is valuable insofar as it begets the interesting.¹⁴

Not all experiences that we value are interesting or pleasant. And not all experiences have experiential value. The essential point is that interesting experiences have experiential value, and that their value is fundamental and comprehensive, much like pleasure. Interesting experiences are a neglected and unappreciated

source of experiential value. Might there be others? It is not immediately obvious to me that there are. That is, the categories of pleasure and of the interesting do track a distinctive phenomenology shared by a range of experiences, but I'm less confident that there are other categories that do.¹⁵

We can now turn to considering how the value of the interesting *qua* experiential value relates to other prudential values, as well as all-things-considered value. Experiential values are one species of prudential value, existing alongside other forms of prudential values. Because experiential value is experienced, its value is circumscribed to that of experience. The benefit they offer to our lives begins with the experience and ends with the experience. They are prudentially valuable, simpliciter, and they play a limited role in our lives. They are good-for-the subject to experience, and are a species of prudential value.

This invites thinking of prudential value as a package inclusive of experiential and non-experiential values. This package likely looks a little different for each of us. This is why I've suggested that the weight any one person attaches to the interesting (and to the pleasant) is individualistic. Like pleasure, the interesting is experientially valuable for all, but when choices have to be made between an interesting experience and a pleasant experience, there are no objective criteria applicable. While I tend to be more responsive to interesting experiences than pleasant ones, so likely would choose an interesting experience over a pleasant one, others very well might make the opposite choice. That a choice sometimes has to be made is part of our reality. We can't always have it all, and when it comes to prudential value, at least, we should let our responsiveness weigh in.

Let us now consider the relation between prudential value and all-things-considered value. The distinction between "good-for-me" and "good overall" is familiar. It is one of the first things we teach our children: the fact that something benefits you is important, but other things count too. It might feel good to hit your sister, but it's not good overall. At a very basic level, understanding the nature of prudential value involves understanding that it is not an all-things-considered value. Moral values factor into all-things-considered values, and, by most accounts, moral value is separable from prudential value. How to gauge the priority of moral value over prudential value depends on one's view of morality. Typically, though, we're used to seeing moral value as decisive when it comes to all-things-considered value. Taking moral considerations to be decisive, though, doesn't imply that there are no other values factoring into the package.

This begets what I think is an intuitive analysis of the ax-murderer type cases that worry Montero. If the ax-murderer finds experiential value in the chase and kill, well, that explains (partly) why the ax-murderer is an ax-murderer. But whatever value they find in the chase and kill is outweighed by moral values and, probably, by other prudential values. It is all-things-considered wrong to chase and kill, even if one finds experiential value in doing so.

Outside the philosophical context, it is not controversial to acknowledge that something can have value while nonetheless lacking all-things-considered value. Many of us have experience of finding pleasure in something that is all-things-considered wrong. The problem isn't unique to ax-murderers and sadists. For better or worse, it's just how things go. We shouldn't find watching TV shows about

serial killers interesting. We shouldn't find pleasure in an act of infidelity. But all of these things happen. We find pleasure in experiences that are morally bad, just as we find all kinds of morally questionable things interesting. The challenge of life is to find a way to live in a way that is all-things-considered valuable. If it's got to be all-good or all-bad, we'll never succeed. That's the importance of the all-things-considered value.

When it comes to patients with severe cognitive impairments, though, all-things-considered value starts to look a lot different than it does for well-functioning adults.

Because such patients have lost agency, the moral value of their actions largely drops out of the equation. I suspect many other prudential values drop out as well. Many of the prudential values discussed in the context of well-being point to experiences or ways of acting that patients with severe cognitive impairments might not be able to derive benefit from. Agency, as we've seen, along with autonomy, fails to be relevant for those who have lost their capacity for agentic thinking. For similar reasons, so too does desire-satisfaction and many objective welfare goods, such as friendship, achievement, and aesthetic appreciation. There will be a spectrum, but at some point, a patient's cognitive impairments might be such that the value of a patient's experiences reduces to only prudential value. In such instances, her experiences are all that matters.¹⁶ That's why we focus on the quality of life and take it to be definitive in the assessment of whether their lives are worth living.

V. CONCLUSION

While we might disagree on the details, I think that Badhwar, Montero, and I agree on this: there's more than pleasure at stake in these assessments. Many patients, even those suffering from severe cognitive impairments, can have interesting experiences. To limit our quality-of-life assessments to pleasure and pain alone would be a mistake. We should take into account the value they derive from interesting experiences.

ENDNOTES

1. "Impact of the DSM-IV to DSM-5 Changes on the National Survey on Drug Use and Health [Internet]." Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); June 2016. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519704/table/ch3.t13/>.
2. In contrast to the thought patterns distinctive to OCD, the thought patterns induced by implicit bias are not experienced in the moment as "intrusive" and "unwanted" because implicit bias operates sub-consciously. We aren't aware of the ways it has hijacked us until something brings it to light. Once aware of its operations, such as after taking an implicit bias test, most of us do view it as intrusive and unwanted.
3. I'm trying not to go too far into the notion of "willing," but hopefully it will suffice to note that I'm using it in the ordinary, generic sense, which is more like "embracing" than "bringing into existence through our conscious intentions."
4. For example, "I am interested in X" and "She is so interesting."

5. A parallel case can be made about pleasure. While we can be pleased about many things, the experience of pleasure is just the experience of pleasure. There is no “aboutness” in the experience of pleasure, for pleasure describes a phenomenal quality of our experience.
6. That the experience resonates helps explain the “willing” part of cognitive engagement. Resonance drives willingness.
7. I am, however, grateful for Badhwar’s insight into the role agentic thinking can play within interesting experiences.
8. I explore this topic at length in Besser (forthcoming).
9. Likewise, some individuals have conditions, including PTSD, which make them more liable to experience terror internally, in the absence of external stimuli. When assessing their quality of life, we should take this predisposition into account, and look for signs that a patient might be experiencing terror. Evidence that they do would suggest that their capacity to experience the interesting might not be operational and might lead straight to terror. While doing this kind of work is challenging, the plurality of experientially valuable (and dis-valuable) states makes it necessary.
10. For example, see Williams (1973).
11. Nonetheless, to the extent that they distract, disengagement strategies can be of prudential value to the subject. Because interesting experiences resolve boredom, they are more prudentially valuable than disengagement strategies, in addition, of course, to having their own intrinsic prudential value.
12. This concern parallels discussions in hedonism on the diversity of pleasures. Many frame the move towards attitudinal hedonism as a response to the problem of identifying a distinctive phenomenology shared by different experiences of pleasure. I discuss this in (Besser 2021; 2023).
13. This is the “heterogeneity objection.” For discussion, see Besser (2021: chapter 3).
14. In some individuals, though, novelty stimulates fear and terror.
15. An anonymous referee suggests that, on some definitions, “happiness” is an experiential value. While I believe happiness is valuable because it is pleasurable, I grant the point that some definitions of happiness attribute to it a distinct experiential value. Dan Haybron’s emotional state theory of happiness is a promising candidate (Haybron 2008), although I have reservations about whether the emotional state is valuable in itself. See Besser (2021: chap. 4).
16. I set aside the complications that arise when such patients have advance directives.

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