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## Is Profound Boredom Boredom?

Andreas Elpidorou and Lauren Freeman

Martin Heidegger is credited as having offered one of the most thorough phenomenological investigations of the nature of boredom in the history of philosophy. Indeed, in his 1929–1930 lecture course, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude (FCM)*, Heidegger goes to great lengths to distinguish between different types of boredom and to explicate their respective characters. Moreover, Heidegger, at least within the context of his discussion of profound boredom [*tiefe Langeweile*], opposes much of the philosophical and literary tradition on boredom insofar as he articulates how the experience of boredom, though disorienting, can be existentially beneficial to us. Yet despite the many insights that Heidegger’s discussion of boredom offers, it is difficult to make sense of profound boredom within the context of contemporary psychological and philosophical research on

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17 boredom. That is because profound boredom does not map neatly onto  
18 either our pre-theoretical understanding of boredom or extant psycho-  
19 logical accounts of boredom.

20 In this chapter, we undertake a study of the nature of profound  
21 boredom with the aim of investigating its place within contemporary  
22 psychological and philosophical research on boredom. Although bore-  
23 dom used to be a neglected emotional state, that is no longer the case.  
24 In recent years, boredom's causal antecedents, effects and concomitants,  
25 experiential profile, and neurophysiological correlates have become top-  
26 ics of active, rigorous study. The same goes for boredom's influence on  
27 behavior, its relationship to self-regulation, and its connection to other  
28 related affective states. Such a situation provides a ripe opportunity to  
29 scrutinize Heidegger's claims and to try to understand them both on  
30 their own terms and in light of our contemporary understanding of  
31 boredom.

32 The structure of this chapter is as follows. In Sect. 1, we offer a  
33 concise overview of the psychology of boredom. There, we distinguish  
34 between the constructs of *state* boredom and *trait* boredom; describe  
35 their respective natures; and briefly discuss their effects on behavior,  
36 cognition, and other affective states. In Sect. 2, we turn to Heidegger's  
37 account of boredom. Although we discuss the nature of all three kinds  
38 of boredom, we focus primarily on profound boredom and consider  
39 the existential and philosophical value that Heidegger ascribes to it. In  
40 Sect. 3, we address the question of whether profound boredom is indeed  
41 boredom by comparing it to the ways in which boredom has been  
42 understood in contemporary psychology and in philosophy. We argue  
43 that although profound boredom shares some features with such under-  
44 standings, it cannot be seamlessly assimilated to any known category  
45 of boredom. Such a finding is important. It cannot be assumed that  
46 Heidegger's (profound) boredom is identical to either our colloquial  
47 or scientific understanding of boredom. Nor can one use Heidegger's  
48 account of this type of boredom to make general claims about the  
49 phenomenon of boredom. All the same, we offer an interpretation of  
50 profound boredom that retains the characteristics that Heidegger assigns  
51 to it and allows for a meaningful comparison both to our common  
52 experience of boredom and to our scientific understanding of it.

53 **1 Boredom: A Primer**

54 One obstacle that the study of boredom faces, but certainly not the  
55 only one, is the unfortunate fact that the term “boredom” is polysemic:  
56 depending on the context, the term both denotes and connotes different  
57 things (Fenichel 1951, 349; Vodanovich 2003, 589). As such, one can  
58 draw different, and sometimes even conflicting, conclusions about the  
59 nature of boredom. For the present purposes, we utilize the distinction  
60 between *state* boredom (a transitory affective experience) and *trait* bore-  
61 dom (a lasting personality trait). Empirically, the distinction has been  
62 both confirmed and proven to be exceptionally useful. Conceptually,  
63 the distinction is capable of capturing much of our pre-theoretical grasp  
64 of boredom—it accounts, *inter alia*, for the various principles governing  
65 the application of the concept *boredom*.<sup>1</sup>

66 Consider, first, how the term “boredom” is usually used in everyday  
67 situations, such as when a child becomes bored with a toy, when you  
68 find a movie boring, or when patients are bored by having to wait at  
69 the dentist’s office. In such situations, boredom is understood to be a  
70 *state*: namely, a short-lived (i.e., transitory), aversive experience. State  
71 boredom is characterized by feelings of dissatisfaction, a perception of  
72 lack of meaning, attentional difficulties, and even an altered perception  
73 of the passage of time. While bored, one is disengaged with one’s cur-  
74 rent situation and experiences a strong desire to escape from it. In terms  
75 of its physiological character, boredom is characterized by a decrease  
76 in arousal, although an increase may also occur. As a low arousal state,  
77 boredom is disengaging; whereas as a high arousal state, it prepares one  
78 for action or change.<sup>2</sup> All in all, boredom is an unpleasant state from  
79 which one seeks escape and solace.

80 Whereas “state boredom” refers to a transitory experience, “trait  
81 boredom” is meant to capture a characteristic of agents that persists  
82 through situational change and which is predictive of one’s behavior.  
83 Trait boredom is variously described as the “tendency,” “propensity,”  
84 “disposition,” or “susceptibility” to experience boredom often and  
85 in a wide range of situations. It is thought to be a lasting personality  
86 trait and is assessed by multi-item, self-report scales. Several meas-  
87 ures of trait boredom exist in the literature. However, the only two



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88 existing measures of trait boredom that are neither limited in scope nor  
89 lacking in reliability and validity (Vodanovich 2003), are the Boredom  
90 Proneness Scale (BPS) (Farmer and Sundberg 1986) and the Boredom  
91 Susceptibility Scale (ZBS) (Zuckerman 1979). Of these two scales, only  
92 BPS is a full-scale measure of boredom. As such, we restrict our atten-  
93 tion primarily to findings that involve the use of BPS.

94 Research on the correlates of trait boredom has demonstrated that  
95 the propensity to experience boredom is associated with numerous  
96 harms (for reviews see Elpidorou 2017; Vodanovich 2003; Vodanovich  
97 and Watt 2016). Boredom proneness (i.e., the construct that BPS  
98 operationalizes and measures and which is thought to correspond  
99 to trait boredom) has been positively correlated to poor social rela-  
100 tionships, lower life and job satisfaction, difficulty in finding mean-  
101 ing in one's life, depression, anger and aggression, anxiety, loneliness,  
102 and apathy. Individuals prone to boredom experience impulse control  
103 deficits, and are more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior, and are  
104 prone to drug and alcohol abuse. It has also been suggested that bore-  
105 dom proneness is morally significant insofar as it hinders one's abil-  
106 ity to live a flourishing life (Elpidorou 2017). And if all of the above  
107 were not enough, there is even evidence suggesting that too much  
108 boredom can be an indication of early death (Britton and Shipley  
109 2010). Understood as a lasting personality trait, boredom is a per-  
110 vasive existential condition. It changes our world, our selves, and our  
111 relationships to others. It is no surprise then that (trait) boredom  
112 has the (poor) reputation that it does.

## 113 2 Heidegger's Boredom

114 Heidegger's account of boredom appears in the first part of FCM, a  
115 lecture course delivered in 1929–1930. Prior to the lecture course, the  
116 only fundamental attunement that Heidegger discussed was anxiety  
117 (*Angst*), which played a key role both in *Being and Time (BT)* (1927)  
118 and in “What Is Metaphysics?” (1929). One aim of FCM was to delin-  
119 eate his conception of philosophy and metaphysics, already evolving



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120 from the one presented in *BT*. Another aim was to develop his account  
121 of the fundamental attunement (*Grundstimmung*) of boredom in  
122 order to grasp the fundamental meaning of our being. Importantly,  
123 he set out to do this *not* by developing an anthropology or philosophy  
124 of culture (*Kulturphilosophie*) (*FCM* §18c) but rather by considering  
125 the ways in which profound boredom is a key step in opening up the  
126 proper questioning of philosophizing for us.<sup>3</sup>

127 On Heidegger's account, there are three types of boredom, each of  
128 which corresponds to a distinctive way in which we experience the pas-  
129 sage of time<sup>4</sup> and each of which we describe below. They are: (1) becom-  
130 ing bored *by* something (*Gelangweiltwerden von etwas*); (2) being bored  
131 *with* something (*Sichlangweilen bei etwas*); and (3) profound boredom  
132 (*tiefe Langweile*), which is expressed by the impersonal phrase "it is bor-  
133 ing for one" (*es ist einem langweilig*).<sup>5</sup> Within this third form of boredom,  
134 Heidegger makes a distinction between "profound boredom" and "con-  
135 temporary boredom" but he does not flesh it out systematically or with  
136 much clarity.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, each form of boredom manifests in relation to  
137 how time passes (*die Zeit vertreiben*) in that within each form, there are  
138 two related structural moments: being left empty (*Leergelassenheit*) and  
139 being held in limbo (*Hingehaltenheit*). Only by understanding how each  
140 form of boredom relates to the passage of time and what role each of the  
141 two structural moments play in the experience of boredom, can we fully  
142 grasp what boredom is for Heidegger.

### 143 2.1 Becoming Bored by Something

144 Though the first form of boredom is the most familiar to us, it is also,  
145 according to Heidegger, the most superficial. This form of boredom is  
146 the experience of being bored *by* something—person, object, or state of  
147 affairs—a phenomenon that we all know well. For example, waiting for our  
148 delayed flight to depart, with no departure time in sight; waiting to see a  
149 doctor who is running far behind schedule; trying to get off the phone with  
150 someone who will not stop talking to us; these are all instances of becom-  
151 ing bored by something. Here, boredom is unpleasant and we do whatever  
152 we can to try to get rid of it. In terms of the two structural moments of



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153 boredom, we are *held in limbo* insofar as our situation does not let us do  
154 what we intend to do, namely, board our flight, see our doctor, and get on  
155 with our day. At the same time, we are also *left empty* insofar as our situa-  
156 tion does not fulfill us; it is not what we want to be doing.

### 157 2.2 Being Bored with Something

158 With the second form of boredom, things become slightly more compli-  
159 cated and slightly more interesting. Whereas with the first form, the object  
160 of boredom is clear to the one experiencing it, with the second form, it is  
161 not immediately clear precisely *what* it is that is boring—it is also not clear  
162 that one is, in the moment, bored. In order to explain this form of bore-  
163 dom, Heidegger develops an example of going to a dinner party at which  
164 neither the company, conversation, food, nor the ambiance is perceived by  
165 us, while at the party, to be boring. However, upon returning home, we  
166 come to the realization that the evening itself was boring. Here “boring”  
167 does not denote a subjectively obvious aversive experience; rather, “boring”  
168 means something like casualness (*viz.*, one of the same, what others do),  
169 the inauthentic following of a social ideal (*FCM* 111–112).

170 In order to fully comprehend the depth of Heidegger’s account  
171 of the second form of boredom, it is crucial to understand the struc-  
172 tural moment of being *held in limbo*, which requires us to return to  
173 the example. That evening, we made the decision to attend the dinner  
174 party and in so doing, we transformed our relationship to time: both  
175 by leaving time for ourselves and by taking this time for ourselves. But,  
176 according to Heidegger, during the party, the time that we have given to  
177 ourselves comes to stand still and we become trapped in a standing pres-  
178 ent (*stehendes Jetzt*). That has happened because our choice of activity  
179 disconnected us from our past and future projects. Stuck in this stand-  
180 ing present, our comportment to originary temporality changes and the  
181 significance of the full temporal horizon is lost (*FCM* 124). By not pur-  
182 suing an activity that is meaningful to us, we are *held in limbo*.

183 Furthermore, by immersing ourselves in activities that are not our  
184 own, we are *left empty*. But the emptiness is not directly caused by  
185 something in the surrounding; rather, it arises as a result of having left



186 behind (*Sichzurücklassen*) our authentic, temporal, existential self. Our  
187 situation does not fulfill us; it does not contribute to the completion of  
188 our projects, nor does it relate to our having-been. We spend our time;  
189 give it up; and in doing so, we make it stand.

### 190 2.3 Profound Boredom

191 Whereas with the first form of boredom, a determinate object or sit-  
192 uation is the source of our boredom, with the second form, boredom  
193 arises both from the particular situation and from ourselves. There  
194 is an additional form of boredom which is the most profound of all.  
195 According to Heidegger, it is also the most perplexing.

196 The reason why the third form of boredom is both the most pro-  
197 found and the most perplexing is because in it, there is nothing in  
198 particular that is boring, nor is there a determinate cause of or reason  
199 why one is bored. And yet still, everything bores us, even ourselves. The  
200 impersonal construction “it is boring for one”—where “it” [*es*] is the  
201 same subject found in expressions such as “it is raining” or “it is hot”—  
202 is Heidegger’s way of expressing the ubiquity of profound boredom. It  
203 is limitless and depersonalized. It is neither me, nor you who experi-  
204 ences this form of boredom; rather, Dasein becomes an “undifferenti-  
205 ated no one” (*FCM* 135). We stand without any concerns and interests.  
206 All identifying characteristics, history, and projects are stripped away.  
207 Profound boredom is unconditioned, overpowering, and extreme. In it,  
208 the passing of time is altogether missing. That is to say, all three tempo-  
209 ral dimensions (past, present, future) merge into a unified temporality  
210 and beings as a whole withdraw. In their withdrawal, they lose all sig-  
211 nificance which means not only that everything around and alongside  
212 us is drained of meaning; it also means that nothing carries any future  
213 prospects for us and that nothing relates to or gives meaning to our past  
214 (having-been). One thus grows indifferent to who and what one was,  
215 is, and will be. And yet, contrary to the first form of boredom which  
216 one actively tries to escape, in this third form of boredom, one does not  
217 respond by trying to distract oneself or to escape from it. There is sim-  
218 ply no point in resisting profound boredom. No thing, no being, no



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219 situation matters to us. In the midst of profound boredom, we stand  
220 entirely indifferent to everything and everyone.

221 Because nothing matters to us and we are unable to become  
222 involved in anything, profound boredom *leaves us empty*. Because one's  
223 possibilities are foreclosed, profound boredom *holds us in limbo*. Yet  
224 counter-intuitively, these two structural moments do not lead to  
225 despair. Rather, in withdrawing and thereby losing their significance—a  
226 kind of concealing—entities in the world and Dasein's own unexploited  
227 possibilities suddenly and paradoxically reveal themselves to Dasein.  
228 "All telling refusal [*Versagen*]," Heidegger writes, "is in itself a telling  
229 [*Sagen*], i.e., a making manifest" (*FCM* 140). When the pressing world  
230 of everyday concern fades into indifference, the world is made present  
231 to us anew. In that moment of totalizing boredom, we can come  
232 to understand what projects carry proper significance to us—that is, we  
233 can discern the projects that are related to our past and that define us,  
234 both in the present and in the future. In doing so, we come to understand  
235 not only that we are the type of being for whom existence is an  
236 issue, but also that we can take up and appropriate (at least to a certain  
237 extent) our own existence. As such, profound boredom drives Dasein to  
238 enact its ownmost possibilities in what Heidegger calls the "*Augenblick*,"  
239 the instant or "moment of vision" in which Dasein faces itself as the  
240 kind of being it is—a power to take over its ground and to choose what  
241 it will be (*FCM* 149). The revelatory moment of profound boredom  
242 is Dasein's being called toward its authentic self-disclosure wherein it  
243 is brought face to face with itself and its temporal freedom. That is, in  
244 profound boredom, Dasein has the opportunity to become authentic.

## 245 3 Understanding Profound Boredom

246 How well does Heidegger's discussion of boredom align with what we  
247 know about boredom from psychology? We can make two quick obser-  
248 vations. First, the first form of boredom (*becoming bored by something*)  
249 appears to be akin to state boredom, although Heidegger would not call  
250 it a "state" (*BT* §29; *FCM* 63–68; Elpidorou and Freeman 2015). In  
251 other words, what Heidegger describes as the most superficial kind of





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252 boredom is our ordinary experience of boredom. For both Heidegger  
253 and psychological accounts, this form of boredom is an aversive expe-  
254 rience that signifies a failure to engage with or to be engaged by one's  
255 environment in a desired manner despite one's desire to do so. In this  
256 kind of boredom, we want to be doing something other than what we  
257 are currently doing. We feel trapped or are *held in limbo* in a situation  
258 that does not provide us with meaningful possibilities. And precisely  
259 because of this unavailability of meaningful possibilities, we are *left*  
260 *empty*.

261 Second, the second form of boredom (*being bored with something*)  
262 does not appear to be an affective experience proper. That is, it is not  
263 an experience that is primarily characterized by an affective or qualita-  
264 tive character. As Heidegger tells us, "There is nothing at all to be found  
265 that might have been boring about this evening, neither the conversa-  
266 tion, nor the people, nor the rooms" (*FCM* 109). Instead, the second  
267 form of boredom appears to be a type of cognitive attitude: the retro-  
268 active realization that we wasted our time. During the experience of  
269 this boredom, we are given hints that we are bored ("[j]ust as we are  
270 on the verge of playing with our watch chain or a button, cigars are  
271 passed around again" [*FCM* 11–12]), but those hints are not recog-  
272 nized by us at the time as symptoms of the presence of an unsatisfactory  
273 activity. Instead, we carry on with the activity that we had chosen to  
274 pursue and only after the activity concludes do we realize that what we  
275 had done was a waste of time. It was, for Heidegger, literally a waste  
276 of *our* time, the time that is *Dasein*. By agreeing to go to the party, to  
277 continue with Heidegger's example, we have immersed ourselves in an  
278 activity that is not our own—we decided to go along, to embrace "cas-  
279 ualness" as Heidegger puts it, and thus, to do as others do (*FCM* 114).  
280 We have allowed ourselves to be fully absorbed by a present that is dis-  
281 connected from our past and future. The party neither promotes our  
282 projects nor meaningfully stems from or relates to our past. As such, it  
283 is not an authentic activity. Thus, the party was boring but not because  
284 it felt boring. It was boring because we came to realize that it was not  
285 meaningful to us. The psychology of boredom does not study this retro-  
286 active experience of boredom that Heidegger highlights, at least not by  
287 this name. All the same, given the intimate relationship that boredom



bears to the perception of meaninglessness (Van Tilburg and Igou 2011, 2012), the second form of boredom can be recognized as boredom, even if it is not the typical (self-luminous)<sup>7</sup> form of boredom and even if it is predicated on our attitudes regarding what is valuable, meaningful, or fulfilling to us.

Matters become much more complicated, however, when we turn our attention to profound boredom. Is profound boredom state boredom, trait boredom, or something else, perhaps a distinctive kind of experience that is captured neither by our ordinary nor by the scientific understanding of boredom? In what follows, we consider these three possibilities in order.

### 3.1 State Boredom Is Not Profound Enough

The differences between state boredom and profound boredom are both important and numerous. To begin with, state boredom is thought to be an emotion: a relatively short-lived, flexible, multi-dimensional response to specific physical and social situations. Emotions are typically initiated by an individual's appraisal of an event that bears some personal significance to the individual. Such an appraisal can be either conscious or unconscious and it gives rise to a set of interrelated responses in the individual—such as changes in felt experiences, physiology, facial expressions, perception, cognition, and action. But Heidegger is quite clear that profound boredom is not an emotion but a fundamental mood (*Grundstimmung*). As a mood (*Stimmung*), boredom is the ontic manifestation of *Befindlichkeit*—a basic structure of Dasein's existence that makes engagement with the world possible (BT §29; Elpidorou and Freeman 2015; Ratcliffe 2013; Slaby 2015). Moods are the various, specific, and pre-reflective ways in which the world is disclosed to us and the background horizon or context through which we understand and make sense of the world and of ourselves. Importantly, they reveal the world as mattering to us and in doing so, they are the necessary conditions for our emotional existence (Freeman 2014). As understood in psychology, boredom would then be that which arises on account of the fact that as human beings we are already mooded.



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321 The psychology of boredom studies, one might say, the symptoms  
322 of our affective existence. Heidegger's discussion of boredom as a  
323 *Stimmung* attempts to explicate what makes such an affective existence  
324 possible (Freeman 2014).

325 But boredom is not just one *Stimmung* among others; it is a  
326 *Grundstimmung*, a fundamental or grounding mood. Indeed, it is fun-  
327 damental in at least two senses. First, it is fundamentally revealing of  
328 the nature of our human existence. In profound boredom, we stand dis-  
329 connected from our world of concerns and we 'see' ourselves for what  
330 we really are—as a power or potentiality to seize our own existence in a  
331 way that is meaningful to us. Second, profound boredom is distinctive  
332 insofar as it is a preparatory mood for philosophical inquiry. Only  
333 once this mood has been awakened in us, will we be in a position to  
334 study and understand the fundamental concepts of metaphysics (world,  
335 finitude, and solitude).

336 State boredom lacks the features that make profound boredom a  
337 *Grundstimmung*. This is not say that state boredom is not revealing of  
338 anything; it is (Elpidorou 2018a). Nevertheless, state boredom does  
339 not appear to be 'deep' in any sense. State boredom arises often and  
340 in various contexts without revealing anything about the ground (or  
341 lack thereof) of our existence, our being, or our temporality. If one is  
342 made to wait long enough, one's dentist appointment can be a lesson  
343 in patience or frustration, but not in ontology. Relatedly, state boredom  
344 does not have the philosophical significance that profound boredom is  
345 thought to have. We find nothing in our common everyday experience  
346 of boredom that is necessary, preparatory, or even congenial to meta-  
347 physical thinking. The existential and philosophical functions of pro-  
348 found boredom are related. Metaphysics is not a theoretical enterprise  
349 but "a fundamental way of Da-sein" (*FCM* 23). The questioning that  
350 metaphysics involves and requires is comprehensive. We too fall under  
351 its scope and as such we are affected by it (*FCM* 24). Insofar as state  
352 boredom fails to disclose to us the nature of our being, it fails to affect  
353 us in this profound way. Insofar as it fails to affect us in any profound  
354 way, it fails to prepare us for metaphysical inquiry, which is after all the  
355 explicit aim of Heidegger's lecture course.<sup>8</sup>



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356 The realization that state boredom does not seem capable of doing  
357 the philosophical work that Heidegger wants profound boredom to do  
358 is underscored by yet another difference between the two. Profound  
359 boredom is totalizing. It affects every aspect of our existence. It makes  
360 every characteristic of our existence (present, past, or future) irrelevant  
361 to us and in so doing, renders us an “undifferentiated no one” (*FCM*  
362 135). State boredom does none of those things. On the contrary, state  
363 boredom typically depends on our situation and as a consequence,  
364 can be easily alleviated by a change in situation, action, or even way  
365 of thinking. Precisely because state boredom lacks the comprehen-  
366 sive scope of profound boredom, it fails to have profound boredom’s  
367 existential and philosophical import. Simply put, state boredom is not  
368 profound enough. It does not shake us up. It does not reveal ourselves  
369 as potentiality or as a power to choose. It does not motivate us to take  
370 up our lives anew.

### 371 3.2 Trait Boredom Is Too Negative, Too Personal

372 A comparison between state boredom and profound boredom quickly  
373 revealed that state boredom is not profound enough to be profound  
374 boredom. Such a realization suggests that if profound boredom is to be  
375 identified with a different type of boredom, then that type of boredom  
376 must be more extreme. Trait boredom meets this requirement. First,  
377 individuals who are thought to possess the trait of boredom often and  
378 easily find themselves to be bored, even in situations that others typi-  
379 cally find interesting and stimulating. Second, trait boredom can affect  
380 one’s existence in profound ways. For instance, it can affect one’s hab-  
381 its and actions. And it can render one’s personal, professional, and  
382 inter-personal life uninteresting. As such, trait boredom carries the  
383 potential to be existentially or ontologically informative, insofar as it  
384 can reveal to us both the various ways in which we relate to the world  
385 and how such relations may languish. Third, and most importantly, trait  
386 boredom, just like profound boredom, is totalizing. Individuals possess-  
387 ing the trait of boredom can experience the totality of their world as  
388 boring. Such a feature of trait boredom is not only corroborated by the



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389 way in which trait boredom is assessed, but also by testimonies from  
390 individuals who experience their lives and worlds as boring. Consider,  
391 for example, the following first-personal testimonies reported by  
392 Bargdill in his phenomenological study of life boredom.

393 Presently, I am bored with my whole life. None of the old things I used  
394 to do bring enjoyment to me anymore. Nothing. [Boredom] covers my  
395 social life. It covers school. It covers work. It covers going to the grocery  
396 store . . . It covers a lot of things. My hair. (Bargdill 2000, 198)

397 I might think that I would become bored with whatever activity I'm look-  
398 ing at. I project boredom. I'm looking ahead and saying 'Oh boy, it looks  
399 like it's going to be boring after all.' So I don't even start it. (ibid.)

400 Although Bargdill does not describe these individuals as ones who  
401 possess the personality trait of boredom, it is very plausible, given how  
402 trait boredom is assessed, that these individuals would be categorized as  
403 boredom prone individuals by the Boredom Proneness Scale (Farmer  
404 and Sundberg 1986). In other words, although Bardgill's focus is on  
405 what he calls "life boredom," this notion can be understood to be a  
406 proxy for trait boredom.

407 Trait boredom appears to be totalizing. It is thus profound. But is it  
408 profound in Heidegger's sense of profound boredom? The answer to this  
409 question is no. First, trait boredom is related to the frequent experience  
410 of state boredom. In other words, one is said to be prone to boredom  
411 (i.e., one possesses the trait of boredom) only if one experiences state  
412 boredom frequently and in a wide range of situations. When we turn  
413 to Heidegger's account, we find no discernible relationship between  
414 profound boredom and how frequently one experiences boredom (state  
415 or otherwise). If anything, it seems that profound boredom, given its  
416 existential import and effects, is a rare occurrence. Although one might  
417 argue that in order to experience the whole world as boring, one needs  
418 to experience boredom often and in all situations, this is not how  
419 Heidegger describes profound boredom. Profound boredom "can occur  
420 out of the blue, and precisely whenever we do not expect it at all" (FCM  
421 135). Profound boredom comes with no warnings and it is not causally



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422 related to the first form of boredom. But assuming that the first type of  
423 boredom is, as we argued, state boredom, then even though profound  
424 boredom does not require state boredom, trait boredom does. After all,  
425 trait boredom is predicated on the frequent experience of state bore-  
426 dom. Thus, whereas trait boredom is both conceptually and causally  
427 dependent on state boredom, profound boredom is not.

428 Second, trait boredom is understood to be a lasting personality trait.  
429 As a personality trait, trait boredom is grounded in one's psychological  
430 or biological characteristics and is used to account for differences  
431 between individuals that cannot be accounted for in terms of situational  
432 factors. Precisely because trait boredom is a personality trait, the task of  
433 showing how it can have the ontological 'weight' of profound boredom  
434 becomes extremely difficult. Not every individual possesses this person-  
435 ality trait, yet profound boredom is something that can be experienced  
436 by everyone. After all, profound boredom "is rooted in time — in the  
437 time that we ourselves are" (*FCM* 133). Profound boredom arises out  
438 of the most fundamental features of human existence—namely, our  
439 care structure (our thrown and situated projection). Consequently, any  
440 attempt to assimilate profound boredom into trait boredom runs the  
441 risk of conflating two levels that Heidegger wants to keep separate: the  
442 psychological/biological and the ontological.<sup>9</sup>

443 Third, trait boredom is pathological: it is related to a host of issues  
444 that are incongruent with Heidegger's contention that profound  
445 boredom can lead one to an authentic existence. This feature of trait  
446 boredom becomes most clear when we turn again to first-person  
447 descriptions by individuals who experience chronic or life boredom.  
448 Consider the following testimonies:

449 I feel I lack a sense of purpose, and completeness. Most of all I feel  
450 extremely bored. Bored of everything—work, friends, hobbies, relation-  
451 ships, music, reading, movies, bored all the time. I do things [merely] to  
452 occupy my time, to distract myself from trying to discover the meaning  
453 of my existence, and I would gladly cease to do anything if the opportu-  
454 nity arose. *No matter what the activity is it leaves me feeling unfulfilled [...]*  
455 *What possible difference does it ultimately make whatever I do? What differ-*  
456 *ence does anything make?* (Maltsberger 2000, 84; emphasis added)



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457 When I lose my vision, I lose any idea or projection of what I want to do  
458 in the future. I don't have any distinct plans, or even an idea of what I  
459 want to do and so I wanted to immerse myself more in the present rather  
460 than projecting myself in the future... (Bargdill 2000, 199)

461 Being in the disillusioned state I didn't have the will power to be  
462 disciplined. I knew what I was getting into, but I just didn't care.  
463 (Bargdill 2000, 200)

464 Trait boredom may bring about a totalizing experience of boredom:  
465 everything and everyone is boring to one. Yet precisely because of its  
466 totalizing nature, this form of boredom has the opposite result of pro-  
467 found boredom. The experience of totalizing boredom that can come  
468 about as a result of constant and pervasive boredom is accompanied not  
469 by a will to reaffirm authentically one's existence, but by an inability  
470 both to project possibilities for oneself and to act. The Dasein who is  
471 characterized by trait boredom might experience the total withdrawal of  
472 beings described by Heidegger. It would, in that case, be *held in limbo*  
473 and *left empty* by the world. Nothing would interest Dasein; nothing  
474 would seem as significant or meaningful to it. Yet, unlike profound  
475 boredom, such boredom is not motivating but incapacitating. It does  
476 not lead to resoluteness or authentic existence. In fact, given the host  
477 of physical, psychological, and social harms that are correlated with its  
478 presence, the truth is very much the opposite. Thus, profound boredom  
479 cannot be trait boredom. It cannot serve its existential function.

### 480 3.3 Profound Boredom as Sui Generis

481 A third possibility is that profound boredom is something entirely  
482 different from both our ordinary experience of boredom and our  
483 psychological conceptions of it: namely, it is *sui generis*. *Prima facie*,  
484 there seem to be at least two reasons in support of this reading and  
485 such reasons are not affected by the fact that Heidegger calls profound  
486 boredom "boredom"—after all, in the mid-to-late 1920s, Heidegger is  
487 known for claiming that though he is using ordinary words and con-  
488 cepts in his thinking (e.g., "care," "guilt"), the meaning of these terms is



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489 importantly different from our ordinary understanding of them (given  
490 their place and role in fundamental ontology).

491 First, as Heidegger makes clear throughout the mid-to-late 1920s and  
492 then again at the end of his career in the *Zollikon Seminars (Zo)*, the  
493 empirical sciences in general and psychology in particular do not engage  
494 with the same questions that he is asking; they tell us nothing about  
495 fundamental attunement or ontological modes of being. Rather, the  
496 empirical sciences study the psychological states of a subject. But Dasein  
497 is neither a subject (in any traditional sense of the term “subject”) nor  
498 the subject *of* psychology. Moreover, fundamental attunement is not a  
499 psychological state but rather, the condition for the possibility of such  
500 states. On Heidegger’s account, to focus on the psychological states of  
501 a subject is to miss the disclosive capacities of attunement—both as an  
502 ontological structure (*Befindlichkeit*) and in its various concrete man-  
503 ifestations (moods [*Stimmungen*]). And it is precisely this character of  
504 attunement that interests Heidegger insofar as his thinking in the mid-  
505 to-late 1920s aims to interrogate the nature and structure of Dasein in  
506 the service of answering the question of the meaning of being. Studying  
507 psychological states get us nowhere on the path to answering this  
508 question.

509 Second, Heidegger’s main question in the context of which his  
510 account of boredom arises is not “what is boredom and why do we  
511 experience it?” Rather, it is “what is metaphysics (or philosophy) and  
512 what is the condition for the possibility of philosophizing?” His answer  
513 to this question is that boredom is the experience which catalyzes our  
514 capacity to do metaphysics and in the end, to become our authentic  
515 selves. Consequently, his account of boredom is instrumental to under-  
516 standing the real question that interests him—“what is metaphysics (or  
517 philosophy) and how and in what mood can we best pursue it?” This  
518 question can only be understood through the lens of his underlying  
519 philosophical undertaking. Psychological states as understood by psy-  
520 chologists are not studied in terms of their relationship with the project  
521 of philosophizing or of doing metaphysics.

522 These two reasons can be brought together by considering  
523 Heidegger’s notion of formal indication [*formale Anzeige*], characteristic  
524 of his phenomenological method from that period.<sup>10</sup> It was Heidegger’s





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525 contention that theoretical and objectifying discourse tends to misrep-  
526 resent or distort its own content primarily because it treats its subject  
527 matter as something present-at-hand (*PIA* 21). In order to avoid this  
528 misinterpretation or distortion, Heidegger deems it necessary to treat  
529 phenomenological concepts as formal indications. Unlike the objec-  
530 tifying concepts that are found in the positive sciences and in philos-  
531 ophy, phenomenological concepts as formal indications do not fully  
532 communicate or determine their content. Formal indications are indic-  
533 ative insofar as they furnish us with a sense of direction and allow us to  
534 undertake our phenomenological investigation (*GA* 63, 80; *PIA* 25). At  
535 the same time, they are also formal insofar as they do not specify or pre-  
536 determine the object of investigation. As Heidegger states, “the formal  
537 indication functions both...to guide as well as to deter in various ways”  
538 (*PIA* 105). With respect to its “detering” or “prohibiting” function, the  
539 method of formal indication

540 prevents every drifting off into autonomous, blind, dogmatic attempts to  
541 fix the categorial sense, attempts which would be detached from the pre-  
542 supposition of the interpretation, from its preconception, its nexus, and  
543 its time, and which would then purport to determine an objectivity in  
544 itself, apart from a thorough discussion of its ontological sense. (*ibid.*)

545 Indeed, the sense of a formally indicative concept is not something that  
546 can be theoretically given or retrieved, since the very point of formally  
547 indicating something is to get at a truth rooted in a more fundamental  
548 concealment that is central to our existence (see also Polt 1999). Rather  
549 than capture the essence of a thing and give an account of it with perfect  
550 accuracy, formally indicative concepts nudge us to pay more attention to  
551 things; they bring to the fore something more basic than what science  
552 can reveal, namely, they underscore the very fact that we find ourselves  
553 in a meaningful world. For Heidegger, what we cannot speak about  
554 theoretically, we must indicate formally. But doing so involves more  
555 than a saying or pointing: we can come to terms with the phenomena  
556 under investigation only by undertaking a type of enactment or per-  
557 formance (see Dahlstrom 1994; Granberg 2003). Properly understood,  
558 philosophy is a type of comportment (*PIA* 41–42, 46–47) and formal



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559 indication is a call to philosophize by taking anew the question of being.  
560 Thus, what “boredom” as a phenomenological concept formally indi-  
561 cates is something that is both distinct from scientific and ordinary con-  
562 ceptions of boredom and ultimately connected to philosophizing.

563 There are thus reasons to support the position that profound bore-  
564 dom is something entirely other than both our everyday experience of  
565 boredom and the psychological state or trait revealed by the methods of  
566 the empirical sciences. Still, we cannot unqualifiedly agree with such a  
567 reading of profound boredom. Even though such a reading highlights  
568 the distinctive ways in which Heidegger is conceiving of boredom, it  
569 runs into important philosophical and interpretative difficulties.

570 First, if profound boredom is *sui generis*, then the text is rendered  
571 methodologically problematic: why would Heidegger consider the  
572 first two forms of boredom that *do* in some way resemble our ordinary  
573 experience of the phenomenon before addressing profound boredom if  
574 profound boredom has no relation to them and to our experience of  
575 boredom? The “methodological” issue that we are raising here is not  
576 a concern with Heidegger’s use of formal indication.<sup>11</sup> Instead, it is a  
577 worry of how to understand the third form of boredom if not through  
578 some kind of understanding of or familiarity with the first two forms of  
579 boredom. In other words, even if Heidegger’s method of formal indica-  
580 tion allows him to treat profound boredom as something different than  
581 ordinary boredom, it still does not allow him to treat it as an entirely  
582 alien form of boredom, completely disconnected from the everyday  
583 experience of boredom (SZ 310). In its formally indicative guise, “bore-  
584 dom” would still share something in common with our everyday usage  
585 of the term and it is precisely because of this commonality and famil-  
586 iarity that it is capable of serving its indicative function. In fact, for-  
587 mal indications are not typically neologisms or terms of art (Dahlstrom  
588 1994, 785), but concepts that are closely related to and derived from  
589 ordinary experiences and linguistic practices. Moreover, if profound  
590 boredom were *sui generis*, then the intricate structure of the part of  
591 the lecture course that discusses the character of each type of boredom  
592 would fall apart. That is because Heidegger understands all three forms  
593 of boredom in terms of their relationship to time and in terms of their  
594 two-fold structure (being *held in limbo* and being *left empty*). Insofar



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595 as all three forms of boredom are related in this double manner, it is  
596 hard to insist that profound boredom is a *sui generis* experience, entirely  
597 unrelated from the first two types of boredom.

598 Second, there is an ontological (or an *in virtue of*) relationship  
599 between the first type of boredom and profound boredom. Though the  
600 first form of boredom is not the causal antecedent of profound bore-  
601 dom, the latter is the condition for the possibility of the former:

602 The first form of boredom as such can indeed never pass over into the  
603 third, yet conversely, the first is itself presumably still rooted in the  
604 possibility of the third, and comes from the third form of boredom with  
605 respect to its possibility in general. (*FCM* 156)

606 But if profound boredom is the condition for the possibility of the first,  
607 and the first is our ordinary experience of boredom, then the two can-  
608 not be unrelated.

609 Third, although profound boredom might not be identical to state  
610 and trait boredom, there are still important and undeniable simili-  
611 larities between them. Heidegger is quite clear that he is not con-  
612 cerned with psychological states (qua psychological states) (*FCM*  
613 63–68); rather, his philosophical enterprise—phenomenology and  
614 fundamental ontology—aims to ask questions that are fundamen-  
615 tal to our experiences in the world and to understand and under-  
616 score the condition for their possibility. All the same, it is incorrect  
617 to hold that Heidegger completely rejects the sciences—this is espe-  
618 cially the case with regard to the second part of *FCM* where he uses  
619 biology to support ontological claims. Most importantly, elements  
620 of profound boredom seem to be present in experiences of boredom  
621 ordinarily understood and in scientific, empirical accounts of them.  
622 For example, profound boredom is constituted by a lack of mean-  
623 ing, disengagement from one's goals and projects, and an altered  
624 perception of time. But these elements are also present in varying  
625 degrees in both trait boredom and state boredom, as discussed above.  
626 If profound boredom were in fact *sui generis*, then we would not  
627 be able to recognize elements of it in the other types of boredom.



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628 Finally, to claim that profound boredom is *sui generis* raises a pressing  
629 metaphilosophical concern: namely, if it is *sui generis*, then Heidegger's  
630 account of profound boredom loses part of its significance, both as a  
631 phenomenological study of the (common) experience of boredom and  
632 as a philosophical contribution to the study of boredom. If profound  
633 boredom were not an experience that bore any relationship to our ordi-  
634 nary experience of boredom, then what would be the point of studying  
635 it? Would it even be something that we could ever experience or under-  
636 stand? And if it were something completely other, what could it ever  
637 teach us about ordinary boredom? On account of these four reasons, the  
638 claim that profound boredom is *sui generis* should not be accepted.

### 639 4 Locating Profound Boredom

640 Profound boredom is equivalent neither to our ordinary conception  
641 of boredom nor to any of the scientific constructs that carry the name  
642 “boredom.” For those who are familiar with Heidegger's thinking, such  
643 a conclusion will not be surprising. Ontology or fundamental ontology  
644 for Heidegger is not science. The latter could never unearth the truths  
645 of the former. And although Heidegger employs ordinary, everyday con-  
646 cepts in his thinking, he appropriates them (at least in the late 1920s  
647 and afterwards) and shows that there is much more to them than ini-  
648 tially meets the eye. Our conclusion then is not surprising. But that  
649 does not mean that it is not important. Indeed, as we have also shown,  
650 understanding profound boredom as something completely distinct  
651 from our everyday and scientific notions of boredom yields a position  
652 that is replete with difficulties. It threatens to make parts of Heidegger's  
653 lecture course methodologically otiose and runs the risk of rendering  
654 Heidegger's view a mere historical curiosity—one that is endemic to  
655 Heidegger and which stands disconnected from both ordinary human  
656 experience and other philosophical accounts of boredom. Heidegger's  
657 account of boredom thus occupies a precarious position: it can neither  
658 be assimilated to what we know about boredom nor can it be taken to  
659 be describing a *sui generis* kind of boredom. How, then, should one  
660 proceed?



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661 We offer a conciliatory reading. We acknowledge both that profound  
662 boredom is neither state boredom nor trait boredom, and yet that  
663 profound boredom is also not *sui generis*. Still, such a conclusion is not  
664 entirely negative. Our comparative analysis of profound boredom, state  
665 boredom, and trait boredom reveals important features of profound  
666 boredom that can be understood in light of our more familiar types of  
667 boredom.

668 We mentioned above that despite its severity, profound boredom is  
669 not an incapacitating experience. When one experiences profound bore-  
670 dom, though one becomes disconnected from one's own being or self  
671 (Dasein), one also comes to realize one's authentic being anew. In this  
672 way, profound boredom is motivational. It propels us to become the  
673 author of our own lives, to choose what is proper to us. State boredom  
674 does something similar, albeit less drastic. A variety of theoretical and  
675 empirical considerations on the nature of state boredom strongly sug-  
676 gest that it is a regulatory state that aims to keep one in line with one's  
677 projects (Elpidorou 2014, 2018a, b). The experience of boredom moti-  
678 vates one to cease to be engaged with one's current situation and instead  
679 to pursue an alternative situation that is more satisfactory, attractive, or  
680 meaningful. Just like profound boredom, state boredom is capable of  
681 bringing us closer to situations and activities that are in line with our  
682 own interests, goals, and desires.

683 Furthermore, the onset of boredom has been shown to be capable of  
684 triggering meaning reestablishment strategies that affect an individual's  
685 behavior and cognition (Van Tilburg and Igou 2011, 2012). Clearly, the  
686 desire to find meaning that arises out of the experience of boredom and  
687 in an attempt to alleviate its experience could be a useful attitude to  
688 have while philosophizing. State boredom is not necessarily anathema  
689 to philosophizing. Indeed, it seems that in some cases it could be  
690 precisely what gets us there.

691 Though these similarities between state boredom and profound are  
692 important, they are not perfect (e.g., the motivating effect of profound  
693 boredom does not compare to that of state boredom) nor are they suffi-  
694 cient to render the two one and the same. Furthermore, as we discussed  
695 above, state boredom is not profound enough. It is not totalizing nor is  
696 it necessarily existentially meaningful. Still, those features of profound



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697 boredom are found in trait boredom, even if trait boredom is not pro-  
698 found boredom. The situation thus appears to be as follows. Profound  
699 boredom is not state boredom nor is it trait boredom. Yet, profound  
700 boredom could be understood as involving features of both types or  
701 conceptions of boredom. Just like state boredom, profound boredom is  
702 motivating and capable of promoting authentic existence. Just like trait  
703 boredom, it is severe, totalizing, and existentially revealing (see Table 1).

704 To suggest that it is fruitful to understand profound boredom as  
705 involving features of both state and trait boredom is not to reduce pro-  
706 found boredom to either state or trait boredom. Our proposed inter-  
707 pretation of profound boredom aims to help us understand both its  
708 nature and its relationship to our common experience and scientific  
709 conception of boredom. As such, our interpretation highlights the ways  
710 in which Heidegger’s account of profound boredom offers a distinctive,  
711 but not alien, kind of human experience. Given what we know from  
712 our empirical sciences of boredom, the co-existence of the features from  
713 trait boredom and state boredom that we have highlighted as impor-  
714 tant for profound boredom is probably rare. Profound boredom appears  
715 to be a peculiar mode of existence: one that combines the severity of  
716 trait boredom with the benefits of state boredom. In the grip of pro-  
717 found boredom, it is as if one experiences trait boredom but only for  
718 a moment. Because of the severity of this experience, its existential  
719 use would require us to know how to use it or deal with it. From the  
720 perspective of human psychology, the occurrence of profound bore-  
721 dom is extraordinary; and its successful implementation as a catalyst to  
722 propel us toward what is authentically ours is extremely difficult. But  
723 that does not make profound boredom less real. And in no way does it

**Table 1** A comparison of profound boredom, state boredom, and trait boredom. Shaded boxes indicate the features of trait and state boredom that we suggest can help us understand profound boredom

Features of profound boredom	Totalizing	Ontologically/Existentially revealing	Renders one an undifferentiated no one	Promotes authentic existence	Relates to philosophizing
Trait boredom	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
State boredom	No	No	No	Yes	Perhaps



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724 vitiates its philosophical and existential significance. “All things excellent  
725 are as difficult as they are rare,” Spinoza reminds us at the end of his  
726 *Ethics* (Spinoza, Vp42s). The same fact holds, it seems, for fundamental  
727 attunements.

### 728 Notes

- 729 1. The distinction between state boredom and trait boredom also allows  
730 us to make sense of various discussions of boredom in the history of  
731 philosophy. For instance, *acedia*, ennui, and *tedium vitae* can be use-  
732 fully and perspicuously explicated in terms of those two constructs.
- 733 2. Space in the present chapter does not permit us to offer a comprehen-  
734 sive review of the empirical literature on boredom. For recent reviews  
735 on the nature of state boredom, see Eastwood et al. (2012), Elpidorou  
736 (2018a), and Westgate and Wilson (2018).
- 737 3. For a comprehensive and extraordinarily helpful account of the way in  
738 which this lecture course is a radicalization of fundamental ontology,  
739 see de Beistegui (2003).
- 740 4. It is worth noting that already in his 1924 lecture course *The Concept of*  
741 *Time (CT)*, Heidegger raises the possibility of understanding boredom  
742 in terms of the lengthening of time. See CT 14–17.
- 743 5. Some of the following discussion is an expansion of Freeman’s (forth-  
744 coming) discussion of boredom. Heidegger’s account of boredom is  
745 also discussed in Freeman and Elpidorou (2015) and Slaby (2014).
- 746 6. With regards to contemporary boredom, Heidegger does not say  
747 a whole lot. His brief discussion occurs in FCM §18c, §§37–38.  
748 Nevertheless, what he does say is interesting on many levels (if not  
749 problematic, politically), insofar as it gestures toward an impor-  
750 tant shift in his thinking that occurs in the 1930s, namely, away  
751 from being focused on fundamental ontology through an interroga-  
752 tion of Dasein and toward a focus on history and on the co-respond-  
753 ence with the truth of being in its epochal unfolding (de Beistegui  
754 2003, 63). Given that Heidegger’s discussion of contemporary bore-  
755 dom is quite short, we can at most speculate as to what he might  
756 mean. A comprehensive and compelling reconstruction and inter-  
757 pretation of contemporary boredom can be found in de Beistegui  
758 (2003, 68–80). There, he problematizes Heidegger’s account of



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contemporary boredom vis-à-vis Heidegger's account of Dasein's attunement (in both BT and in FCM), fleshes it out within the context of Heidegger's critique of *Kulturphilosophie* (in FCM) and also in terms of how, collectively, profound boredom announces the great historical *Grundstimmung* that will both identify and define Heidegger's thought in the 1930s. De Beistegui shows how Heidegger's discussion of contemporary boredom bears a direct relation to the reprehensible and unforgivable political ideas and ideals that Heidegger held in the 1920s and 1930s. When de Beistegui was writing, the gravity of Heidegger's commitment to these ideas and ideals was less certain than it is now in the aftermath of the publication of the Black Notebooks.

7. An affective phenomenon (or affect) is self-luminous if the tokening of that phenomenon (or affect) is transparent to the agent. That is to say, an affect is self-luminous if the having of that affect guarantees that we are aware of having that affect. Not every affect is self-luminous—we might experience jealousy or guilt without knowing it. Furthermore, not every token of a type of affect that is typically self-luminous (e.g., anger) is necessarily self-luminous. Using this notion of self-luminosity, one could hold that boredom as a type is typically self-luminous even if not every concrete experience of boredom is.
8. One could add that there is an additional reason why state boredom cannot be profound boredom: the latter is historical whereas the former is ahistorical. Although this is one possible reading of state boredom, it is not the only one. Indeed, there are those who maintain that boredom is a state or experience that is historical insofar as it distinctive of modernity. See, e.g., Spacks (1995).
9. Perhaps one could argue that trait boredom is the symptom of something more fundamental—an ontological feature or aspect of human existence. Trait boredom is thus grounded in ontology even if it itself is not ontological; moreover, profound boredom should be identified not with trait boredom but with its ground. Whatever one makes of such a proposal, it is not one that corresponds to either a traditional understanding of boredom or to a scientific one. Neither commonsense nor the psychology of boredom talks of the ontological ground of boredom.
10. Heidegger's most extensive discussion of formal indication can be found in his WS 1921–1922 lectures (*PIA*). The topic of formal indication and its relationship to philosophy also arises in *PRL*, *GA* 63, and “Comments on Karl Jaspers's *Psychology of Worldviews*” in *PM*. Among





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798 others, Crowell (2001), Dahlstrom (1994), Kiesel (1993), MacAvoy  
799 (2010), and Streeter (1997) offer insightful and helpful presentations of  
800 Heidegger's understanding and use of formal indication.  
801 11. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for asking us to relate  
802 our discussion to the notion and use of formal indication.

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