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Précis

Propelled: How Boredom, Frustration, and Anticipation Lead Us to the Good Life

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Abstract: By synthesizing research from psychology, economics, and philosophy, *Propelled* criticizes notions of well-being that overly focus on positive emotions and experiences. Against a tradition that has condemned boredom and frustration to be emotional obstacles that hinder human flourishing, *Propelled* shows that to live a good life we must experience and react appropriately to both. In addition, it argues that we need to anticipate, wait for, and even long for future events. Boredom, frustration, and anticipation are not unpleasant accidents of our lives. Rather, they are vital psychological states that illuminate our desires and expectations, inform us of when we find ourselves stuck in unpleasant and unfulfilling situations, and motivate us to furnish our lives with meaning, interest, and value.

Keywords: good life, emotion, boredom, frustration, anticipation, self-regulation, well-being, mental health

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUESTIONS

Books often ask questions. They also offer—right or wrong, partial or complete—answers. Asking the right questions is key. If answers are the celebratory conclusions of an inquiry, questions are the humble but exciting beginnings.

The topic of asking the right questions is masterfully broached in Ursula Le Guin's (2010[1969]) *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The book tells the story of Genly Ai, a male envoy who is sent to the frigid planet Gethen to invite its leaders to join an interstellar coalition. During one of his adventures, Genly meets the Foretellers of the Handdara and is granted the opportunity to ask whether his mission would prove to be successful. Before he can pose his question, however, he is told by his guide that "[t]he more qualified and limited the question [is], the

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more exact the answer” will be. He is also informed, through the telling of a story, of the potential dangers and unintended consequences of assuming that all questions are answerable:

Do you know the story of the Lord of Shorth, who forced the Foretellers of Asen Fastness to answer the question What is the meaning of life? Well, it was a couple of thousand years ago. The Foretellers stayed in the darkness for six days and nights. At the end, all the Celibates were catatonic, the Zanies were dead, the Pervert clubbed the Lord of Shorth to death with a stone . . . (63-64)

The story is obviously a warning: to Genly who is about to ask his question, but also to those of us who, like the Lord of Shorth, might be tempted to ask the “big” questions. So much is clear. What is less clear is the exact content of the warning.

I take it that what we are warned about by Genly’s guide is not the dangers of merely asking questions. Regardless of how difficult or profound our questions may be, it is inconceivable to suppose that they must somehow come to an end. How could we be denied that opportunity? How else would we ever learn, discover, and grow? So, what we are being cautioned against isn’t the practice of asking questions. It is something else. It is the pitfalls of asking questions *while holding on to inappropriate expectations*. What ought to concern us, in other words, aren’t the questions themselves but our interrogative attitudes and presuppositions. To approach the Foretellers with a question in mind, one must already be convinced that the question can be clearly answered (or answered once and for all). Hence, to pose the question of the meaning of life to the Foretellers is to oblige them to try to do what might not be possible. This is the warning that Genly’s guide delivers.

The moral of the story then isn’t that the question of the meaning of life is unanswerable. It is instead the realization that whether the question is unanswerable or not depends largely on what type of answer we are seeking. If we are convinced that the question admits of a singular answer, then the question might indeed be unanswerable. Yet if we ask the question as a way of exploring what it means to live a human life and are willing to allow ambiguity, historical contingencies, human biases, and subjective preferences to shape its answer, then the question is transformed. It is now not just an answerable question but perhaps one that we must, for our own benefit, try to answer.

If a meaningful life is part of the good life, then the question of the meaning of life is an integral part of our investigation into the character of the good life. And so, *Propelled* asks about the meaning of life obliquely, by asking about the character of the good life directly. It does so, however, while heeding the guide’s warning. It recognizes that there might not be just one answer to the question “What is the good life?” Further, it acknowledges that the question itself might be vague, or even ill-defined. *Good in what sense? Whose life are we considering? And is there such a thing as the good life?* All the same, *Propelled* attempts to make progress in our examination and understanding of the good life not by necessarily settling the question (even though the book does offer an answer) but by approaching the question from the perspective of negative experiences. *Propelled* might be about the good life but it is primarily about how certain affectively-laden psychological states contribute to or hinder the pursuit of such a life. It asks: can boredom, frustration, and anticipation contribute to the good life? If so, how much? In what ways? Under what conditions? And what can they teach us about the character of the good life? Such questions, the book argues, are important. They pave the way for an understanding of the nature of the good life that is realistic and doesn’t shy away from life’s inevitable obstacles

and failures. The questions also allow us to see more clearly the role that emotions play in our personal and social lives. *Propelled* finds much richness and value in our complex but often painful psychological experiences. It attempts to articulate how they may be our guides and motivations for a life that is, to the extent that is possible, one's own.[1]

THE UNPLEASANT STATES THAT MOVE US

The book focuses on boredom, frustration, and anticipation. It argues that these psychological states play a valuable role in human life, so much so that they ought to be considered, if certain conditions are met, elements of the good life. To be clear, they are elements of the good life not because they are indications of the attainment of the good life. Instead, they are elements of the good life insofar as all three states are helpful tools in our pursuit of the good life.

To understand this central claim of the book it is instructive to begin from the contention that boredom, frustration, and anticipation[2] are different ways in which we find ourselves stuck in the present. The idea of entrapment that is operative in the book does not reduce to the literal or physical sense of the word. Being stuck in the present does not mean that the present moment is somehow inescapable, persistent, or endlessly lingering. Rather, we are stuck in the present insofar as in the present we are confronted with a situation that is not desirable to us. Even though the present may afford us with opportunities (often numerous and diverse in nature), those are not, in an important sense, our *own* opportunities: they are not ones that we have chosen for ourselves, or if we have once chosen them, we no longer desire them.[3] They don't appeal to us and are perceived neither as meaningful nor as engaging.

In all three states, the now fails to satisfy us. It traps us, we might say, without entrancing us. We are not lost in the moment. Rather, we are acutely aware of its unpleasant grip and we wish to escape it. As such, the three psychological states obtain their meaning and significance not just from the fact that we are entrapped in the moment, but also from our desire to escape and reach beyond it. Indeed, all three states are characterized by our desire to alter, bend, or somehow counteract time. We wish to replace the unsatisfying now with a promising future.

An appreciation of our relationship to time, as such a relationship is manifested in these three psychological states, allows us to bring to the fore the importance that such states carry for our own well-being. First, the three states reveal to us in an immediate and affective manner how we are faring in the world (for more on this, see Chapter 2 of *Propelled*). They are informative both of our own interests, desires, and goals; but also, and more importantly, of how our present situation measures up to those interests, desires, and goals. Boredom tells us that what we are doing is not what we want to be doing; frustration discloses to us simultaneously both our dissatisfaction with the present and our desire to overcome it; and anticipation informs us of the value that we have placed in a future event. Thus, in their own ways, these states make evident to us that there is something that we are not yet accomplishing. They are reminders that what matters to us is not found in the present but in what lies ahead.

Boredom, frustration, and anticipation can tell us what matters to us and what does not. But they do more than that. On account of their experiential, physiological, and cognitive characteristics, they can act as motivating mechanisms that push us to pursue what is important to us. While boredom and frustration are unpleasant, anticipation is not, at least not necessarily and not in all of its varieties. Yet all these three states set us on a trajectory to seek what is truly our own. The aversive nature of boredom gets us out of uninteresting, non-stimulating, and meaningless situations and into ones that we find to be more congenial to our aims and goals (Bench and Lench 2013; Elpidorou 2018). The unpleasantness of frustration allows us either to continue to pursue what we take to be important or ultimately to give up and reprioritize our desires. Finally, anticipation keeps us motivated and helps us to strive to achieve and to care for what we deem to be worth pursuing.

Given their functions, we can afford neither to live without these states nor to ignore them. Or so *Propelled* argues. A world in which nothing is boring is a world in which everything—even that which is most humdrum or mundane—is interesting. A world in which nothing is frustrating is a world in which nothing thwarts our desires. It is, in other words, a world in which we are *too easily* satisfied (cf. Kupperman 2006). And a world bereft of anticipation is a world in which there is nothing to look forward to. Such worlds are distant and foreign to us. If we were to live in them, we would constantly run the risk of becoming stuck in the present; we would be unable to go beyond the present moment, to develop our own projects, and to author the narrative of our own lives. If everything strikes us as interesting, if the world constantly and too easily satisfies us, and if there is nothing that we anticipate, then we ultimately occupy a world that carries none of our own personal values.

Whatever else the good life is, it is arguably also a life that bears a certain relationship to us, the subjects of this life. That is, it is a life with which we identify or at least for which we care. To create a sense of identification or care, we have to find and invest in personal and social projects (de Beauvoir 2004). Such an involvement with one's life requires that we create, seek out, and sustain systems of values; that we develop as agents by having to distinguish between what we find interesting, meaningful, and valuable and that which is not; that we persevere in the face of obstacles and losses; and that we figure out what projects to pursue and what images of self-identity to try to realize. Boredom, frustration, and anticipation serve those aims. They might not make our lives easier, but they make them distinctively ours.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

What *Propelled* sets out to show is that difficulties, hardships, and states of psychological discontent don't mark the unattainability of the good life. Indeed, our conception of the good life should be expanded so that its attainment is possible not despite their presence but in virtue of them (cf. Elpidorou 2018; Frankl 2006; Gopnik 2020; Oishi et al. 2020). And so, the book begins by motivating and defending this expanded view of the good life. Chapter 1 explores the character of the good life and its relationship to happiness, pleasure, and positive emotions, and examines the effects of emotional adaptation and emotional diversity on psychological well-being. Moreover, the chapter argues that a good life is consistent with the presence of negative psychological states. In doing so, it puts forth a broad conception of the good life that doesn't simply amount to the presence of positive experiences and absence of negative ones.

Chapter 2 offers a characterization, but not a theory, of emotions. It focuses primarily on the role that such affective states play in our lives. The chapter pays special attention to real-life examples of agents who have lost the ability to experience certain emotions or who have an attenuated capacity to experience or recognize emotions. On the basis of such examples and case studies, the chapter articulates and defends three basic claims about the nature and outcomes of emotions. First, emotions are often transformative—they bring about changes (often remarkable and radical) in how we experience our world. Second, emotions are embodied and felt appraisals of our situations and as such they reveal to us what matters to us and what does not. Third, emotions are crucial in helping us to navigate the world. They are capable of prompting us to action and of affecting our dealings with ourselves and others, and they do so often in ways that are advantageous to us.

Chapter 3 focuses on the perception of the passage of time. It draws upon both relevant psychological research and descriptions of first-personal experiences of individuals whose experiences of the passage of time have been altered in order to show that the manner in which we experience the passage of time has important consequences for our well-being. The chapter considers the experience of feeling stuck in the present and relates it to the three psychological states that are the focus of the book (boredom, frustration, and anticipation). Moreover, it argues that being stuck in the present is a sign of being faced with situations that are incongruent to our goals and wishes.

The next two chapters are devoted to an investigation of the character of boredom. Chapter 4 offers an accessible introduction to boredom. In addition to describing boredom and its effects, it is primarily interested in articulating the reasons why boredom has often been understood to be either a trivial or an inconsequential experience. The chapter argues that such an understanding of boredom is problematic. By drawing a distinction between state boredom and trait boredom, it illustrates the various ways in which these two kinds of boredom can be harmful for our well-being. The chapter concludes by suggesting that a more positive and beneficial side to boredom exists, even though it has gone largely unnoticed.

Chapter 5 extends the discussion of boredom. It surveys recent empirical findings on the character of boredom and its relationship to self-regulation in an attempt to provide a theoretical account of state boredom that elucidates its role in our everyday lives. The chapter defends a functional characterization of boredom that maintains that boredom is a regulatory state that prompts the pursuit of interesting, meaningful, and engaging activities when our current goals and activities cease to be perceived as such. On the basis of this functional account, the chapter argues that boredom can contribute to our quest for the good life insofar as it can help us discover and engage with activities that are congruent to our projects.[4]

Chapters 6 and 7 are concerned with the emotional experience of frustration. Both chapters aim to explicate the character of frustration and to illustrate that it is a powerful and useful psychological mechanism. Chapter 6 presents findings from the last eighty or so years of research on the psychology and neuroscience of frustration and argues that although frustration is an aversive experience that signifies (very often) the presence of an unfulfilled or obstructed goal, it is extremely energizing. Frustration, the chapter shows, is an affective state that can invigorate us in the face of perceived difficulties and in doing so, can provide us with the resources needed to keep pursuing our goals.

Whereas Chapter 6 is concerned primarily with illustrating the motivating value of frustration, Chapter 7 discusses frustration's capacity to structure our lives by endowing them with layers of significance and personal meaning. By discussing both experimental findings and real-life situations, the chapter articulates and defends the contention that projects that we experience as frustrating, difficult, or effortful become valuable in virtue of the fact that they are frustrating, difficult, or effortful to us. In this way, feelings of frustration and effort often lead to the generation of personal value and significance.

Anticipation is examined in chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 8 begins by making a case for the indelible role that anticipation plays in our lives. Through its discussion of predictive coding, memory, anticipatory and anticipated emotions, and existential views of human existence, the chapter illustrates how important and prevalent anticipation is in our lives. By demonstrating both the ubiquity and significance of anticipation, the chapter ultimately makes the case that a philosophical investigation into the good life cannot ignore anticipation's workings and effects.

Chapter 9 carries the book's investigation of anticipation a step further. It shows the benefits (but also potential dangers) of anticipation, especially when it is considered in relation to the pursuit of the good life. The chapter focuses on articulating how anticipation can contribute to subjective well-being and shows that it is correlated with a number of positive health outcomes. It also considers its value and role in decision-making, savoring, optimism, and as a motivating mechanism that can offer us emotional energy to shape our lives and to pursue what we deem to be significant and important for us.

Finally, Chapter 10 brings together the conclusions of previous chapters and demonstrates how the three psychological states are related both to each other and to the good life. The chapter discusses the psychology of self-regulation and presents empirical findings that illustrate that the ability to move from one state to another contributes to our well-being and allows us to be more successful in achieving our goals. Insofar as boredom, frustration, and anticipation ensure that we keep moving and that we do not remain stuck in situations that fail to meet our expectations and desires, they become elements of the good life.

The good life is not something that happens to us. It is instead something that we actively strive for and bring about. By relaxing happiness' grip on the good life, *Propelled* explores how one can pursue the good life even when we are struck with what might be called "psychological misfortunes." Bouts of boredom, flashes of frustration, and feelings of anticipatory dissatisfaction (a longing not for what we have but for what is to come) indicate neither the absence of a good life nor necessarily a failure in our attempts to attain it. Such negative experiences are instead opportunities to redirect our pursuits and to energize our efforts. Boredom, frustration, and anticipation can thus contribute to the pursuit of the good life by pushing us out of an unsatisfactory present and into a better future.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

Propelled is written with an interdisciplinary audience in mind. It is a book for philosophers interested in the psychology of emotions and anticipation and for psychologists interested in the implications of their research for the nature of the good life. But it is also a book for non-specialists—for those who are curious about the role that

emotions, especially negative ones, can play in our lives. Boredom, frustration, and anticipation are common psychological states. For that reason, descriptions of their nature will ring familiar to readers. However, the fact that such states are familiar, common, or, even in a sense, mundane, does not mean that they are not important. Nor does it mean that they should be overlooked. *Propelled* is an attempt to illustrate the richness and value that lies in them.

Notes

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[1] The contention that certain negative experiences help us to live a life that is one's own does not entail that they make our lives morally or hedonically better. As it is discussed in *Propelled*, such states contribute to a broader eudaimonic conception of well-being by furnishing our lives with meaning, by motivating us to pursue projects of personal significance, and by contributing to a sense of personal growth.

[2] By “anticipation” I understand the psychological ability that allows an organism to either conceive of future events or to predict—consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or automatically—what has not yet occurred. Although anticipation comes in many different forms and each appears to carry its own distinctive benefits and harms, here I am primarily concerned with anticipation as *anticipatory dissatisfaction*. This type of anticipation is akin to unpleasant waiting. We wait for a desired future event to take place while persisting through a disagreeable present.

[3] A clear demonstration of the experience of being stuck in an unsatisfactory present and a discussion of its relationship to boredom can be found in O’Neill’s (2017) ethnographic study of homelessness in Romania. O’Neill’s study also makes evident how frustration and anticipation play a role in such an experience of entrapment. Read especially pp. 39-43.

[4] Of course, boredom doesn't always promote the pursuit of the good life. In fact, Chapter 4 of *Propelled* discusses the many ways in which the experience of boredom (and especially the propensity to experience boredom frequently) can be detrimental to the pursuit of the good life.

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