

# Deontological Feelings as Normative Affective Backgrounds: The Case of Profound Boredom

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**ABSTRACT** · In this paper, I suggest that our normative background orientations, against the backdrop of which something emerges as a compelling reason, an obligation, etc., also have an irreducible bodily-affective dimension. This dimension is conceptualized in terms of deontological feelings as fundamental bodily attunements which sensitize us to various forms of deontic power. These ideas are elucidated by referring to a peculiar deontological shift that accompanies the fundamental attunement of profound boredom. I argue that this deontological shift implies that usual values lose their bindingness, making a difference is highly valued and rigidity is regarded as the main ground of authority.

**KEYWORDS** · phenomenology; embodied cognition; existential feelings; deontic power; boredom

A vast range of phenomena, such as cultural conflict, echo chambers, or increasing political divides in Western societies, point to the fact that practical reasoning can only function where there is a shared normative background. Only against such a background, can something emerge as a compelling reason, as fair, as demanding my or our respect, as my or our obligation or right. In part, the background in question can be elucidated by pointing out particular norms that, at least in principle, can be stated in propositional form, e.g. ideals, values, projects, formal conditions regarding non-contradiction, etc. While valuable work has been done in that respect (e.g. Habermas 1984, Bourdieu 1990, Lakoff 1996, Searle 2010), I wish to highlight yet another dimension of our normative background. This dimension cannot be exhausted in terms of propositional content, but consists in a pre-intentional, bodily-affective orientation toward the world. For reasons explained below, I shall term such normative affective backgrounds as ‘deontological feelings’.

The notion of deontological feeling draws upon the following idea found in many current accounts of embodied cognition: There is a constitutive link between the bodily condition of the cognizer and the practical significance with which the cognizer’s world is imbued. While this idea is often spelled out in terms of a kinaesthetic sense of instrumental possibilities (“I/you/them can/cannot  $\varphi$ ”), I wish to investigate bodily background orientations as disposing the subject to recognize (or fail to recognize) specific instances of non-instrumental possibilities, i.e. deontic powers or demands (“I/you/them ought/ought not to  $\varphi$ ”). In other words, is there a bodily orientation towards the world predisposing you, for instance, to refrain from taking the initiative in particular situations, not only because you have the sense that you *cannot* do it, but rather because you *ought not* to do it? Or is there a significant correlation between one’s bodily background orientation and the kind of norms one accepts as obligatory or the kind of persons one accepts as authority?

I suggest addressing these and many more questions under the label ‘deontological feeling’. This notion intends bodily orientations having a phenomenology similar to that of attunements, existential feelings, moods, or atmospheric sense. The general idea is that such bodily orientations are an irreducible dimension of our normative background in that they are involved in conditioning *what* one recognizes as deontic power, *how* one adjudicates between conflicting deontic powers, the *temporal* horizon of what one feels responsible for, etc.

How can these claims be accounted for? Giving a phenomenological account of deontological feelings is quite a difficult task. Since they, by definition, are part of one or more persons’

affective background, deontological feelings are less easy to pin down than, say, momentary surges of anger or joy. Therefore, experiences of difference are the most common way in which we can become explicitly aware of deontological feelings, occurring, for instance, when we find something problematic about them or when our sense of justice is critically challenged or they are challenged by another normative background, etc.

One such problematic form of deontological feeling is implied in a fundamental attunement to the world that Heidegger (1995) and many others have addressed as a profound kind of boredom. In this paper, I will conceive of profound boredom as a bodily background orientation in the context of which usual values lose their deontic power, where making a difference is highly valued and rigidity is the main source of authority. Thereby, I hope to give a first indication of how deontological feelings are supposed to function in our normative background orientations.

In order to prepare my interpretation of “profound boredom” as a form of deontological feeling, I will introduce two key notions: (i) recognizing deontic power and (ii) bodily background orientations.

## I. Deontic power and bodily background orientations

Why should there be a pre-intentional, bodily-affective orientation toward the world involved in any interesting sense when something emerges as a compelling reason or as my obligation or right? Many will find a claim amounting to this strange, for recognizing reasons or obligations seems to be a matter of higher levels of cognition, involving linguistic representations and abstract concepts.

Searle, for instance, has argued that obligations and rights – “deontic powers”, as he calls them – have the logical structure of declarative speech acts and motivate the agent in a way that is different to immediate inclinations or impulses, in so far as they provide the agent with a desire-independent reason for action (see Searle 2010, 81, 127 f.). More precisely, deontic powers come with particular “status functions” ascribed to a person or an object:

So what we think of as private property, for example, involves a standing speech act. It is a kind of permanent speech act affixed to an object. It says that the owner of this object has certain rights and duties, and other people, not owners of this object, do not have those rights and duties. Think of money as a kind of standing permanent speech act. (Searle 2010, 86)

That is, by way of such declarations ‘affixed’ to the relevant objects, there is something implicated in the proposition “I promise to  $\varphi$ ” that obliges me to  $\varphi$ , something implicated in the value of five dollars that entitles me to exchange that piece of paper for, say, a latte macchiato, or something implicated in this five-dollar bill’s counting as my property that prohibits you from simply taking it from me. In other words, a sophisticated nexus of linguistic representations needs to be in place for an agent to recognize a particular obligation such as respecting another person’s property.

However, many accounts, including Searle’s, acknowledge that deontic powers are recognized relative to a background which is, in part, structured by elements pertaining to an individual’s bodily orientation, such as motor capacities, modes of sensibility, or sensorimotor experience (see Bourdieu 1990; Lakoff 1996; Schatzki 2003; Searle 2010). Yet, as these accounts predominantly focus on elements like tacit assumptions, collective practices, preferences, symbols, narratives, etc., they do not fully explore the bodily-affective dimension involved in the agent’s recognition of deontic power.

The idea that affective background orientations are involved in a person’s disposition to relate or fail to relate to a particular conceptual nexus has also been put forward in some pragmatist and phenomenological accounts. Think of James’ argument about temper and its influence on philosophical thought: Given a rather “tender-minded” background orientation

towards the world, you are more likely to agree with idealistic and optimistic theories, whereas the “hard-minded” may find a materialistic and pessimistic view more persuasive (James 1907, 3 ff.). A similar influence is acknowledged by Heidegger when he presents a peculiar “home-sickness” as the fundamental attunement of philosophizing in which we who philosophize are “driven” to “being as a whole” (Heidegger 1995, 5 ff.). According to Heidegger, the proper meaning of metaphysical concepts such as “world”, “finitude” and “individuation” can only be grasped and adequately used by those who philosophize in and out of that peculiar attunement. Furthermore, Dewey argues that any existential proposition such as, for instance, “the native American was stoical” or “the stone is shaly” ultimately refers to what he calls a particular pervasive quality against the backdrop of which alone single objects and their attributes such as “native American”, “stone”, “stoical” or “shaly” can make sense (Dewey 1931, 94 f., 97 f.). Such pervasive qualities are supposed to be “felt rather than thought” (ibid., 99). A pervasive quality constitutes the scope and context – the “situation” – by the implicit cues of which any thought, insofar as it is methodic and distinct from the loose association of ideas, is oriented or even guided (“controlled” (ibid., 96 f.)).

Another, more recent framework is Ratcliffe’s notion of existential feelings as specific ways of finding oneself in the world (Ratcliffe 2008, 2, 38 ff.). On the basis of phenomenological and pragmatist insights, Ratcliffe argues that an existential feeling provides the subject with, what he calls, a pre-intentional background orientation towards the world. Against the backdrop of specific existential feelings, particular intentional acts are supposed to receive – or lose – their intelligibility. Alongside many other examples, Ratcliffe describes a radical form of hope that, unlike less radical instances of hope, cannot be interpreted as an intentional state of the form “I/we hope that *p*”, even if one assumes a very general propositional content, such as “good will ultimately come of this” (2013, 603). Ratcliffe argues that the feeling of radical hope can be explicated in terms of various propositions (“life will go on”, “the world is ultimately good”, etc.). He claims that the content that those propositions aim to capture is different in form compared to the content of typical intentional states such as “I/we hope that *p*”. With regard to the latter, it seems much easier to assume a single, core propositional content. Ratcliffe argues that if the pre-intentional orientation provided by radical hope was somehow lost, a person could not adopt the more specific attitude of hoping for anything in particular.

Furthermore, according to Ratcliffe, existential feelings should be conceived of as bodily felt orientations towards the world. That is, these feelings provide a background sense of the surrounding world in terms of the experience of there being certain kinaesthetic possibilities, non-conceptual, habitual bodily expectations, felt tensions, possibilities of bodily interaction, etc. that make up a complex structure of soliciting affordances: While particular things “appear to us as inviting, valuable, fascinating, threatening, dull, repulsive, proper, improper, comforting, terrifying, and so on” (Ratcliffe 2009, 350; see also Dreyfus and Kelly 2007; Withagen et al. 2012), even the world itself as a whole may, in terms of structures of kinaesthetic possibilities, tensions, etc., appear as “familiar”, “homely”, “cosy”, “suffocating”, “overwhelming”, “distant”, “strange” or as something from which one feels detached (see Ratcliffe 2008, 135 f.). And, according to James, Heidegger, Dewey, Ratcliffe and many others, it is also in terms of such affective background orientations that philosophizing, hoping, or accepting a reason other than one’s immediate inclination can function.

Following this line of thought, I suggest that bodily background orientations may also have a deontological dimension. That is, they are not only involved in the agent’s sense of what they *can* or cannot do or what can or cannot happen to them, but also in their understanding of what they *ought* or ought not to do. In order to flesh out this idea, let me begin by briefly showing that the recognition of deontic power is not only a matter of assigning status functions, but also one of feeling a demand (see Mandelbaum 1955; Levinas 1979; Løgstrup 1997; Horgan and Timmons 2010; Kriegel 2008).

A person may understand in the abstract that they should keep their promise when the time has come or refrain from climbing over their neighbours’ fence, but yet fail to recognize this as their obligation in any stricter sense. Essential to recognizing deontic power is the af-

fective and therefore bodily dimension of *feeling* a certain demand to keep the promise, etc. According to Horgan and Timmons, the experience of a felt demand includes the following elements:

- (i) a feeling of pressure, (ii) a sense of a vector-like force which is directed toward oneself and has an ‘external’ origin, and (iii) a motivational pull toward either performing or not performing the action being contemplated. (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 120; cf. Mandelbaum 1955, 54 ff.)

This description suggests that the demand in question is felt in a manner similar to rather instrumental solicitations such as a chair that invites sitting on or a painting prompting the beholder to step back in order to get a better view on it (see Dreyfus and Kelly 2007, 52). The specific character of felt demands, however, by which they are distinct from solicitations of the kind just mentioned, involves a felt evaluation of the situation as coming with ethically relevant reactive attitudes, for instance, actual shame-like feelings or their affective anticipation. Arguably, it is this felt evaluation that constitutes the particular sense of “oughtness” in terms of which the action demanded is apprehended. Given a sufficiently broad sense of “soliciting affordances” (see Dreyfus and Kelly 2007), while at the same time strictly avoiding blurring the difference between felt demands and instrumental possibilities, one can say that felt demands are an integral part of the affordance structure in most of the situations we find ourselves in (see Nörenberg 2020).

If the view just sketched is correct, it can help elucidate the deontological dimension of fundamental bodily attunements to the world. As we have seen, there are good reasons to maintain that such attunements shape our sense of practical significance. Now, given the close kinship between felt demands and soliciting affordances, our recognition of deontic power may at least in part be shaped in terms of our fundamental bodily attunements in a similar way. For instance, what Young (1980) and others describe as a particular habituated feminine bodily background orientation could be correlated more thoroughly with the way in which some women not only feel less *able*, but also less *entitled* to take up space in their overall engagement with the world. In a similar vein, the attunement of profound boredom may prevent persons from taking any sincere interest in most of the things they encounter (see Heidegger 1995, 138 f.; Ratcliffe 2009, 358 f.; Slaby 2010). It may arguably even affect their sensitivity to deontic power so that, for instance, sheer rigorousness is the only thing that would strike them as legitimate authority. Both cases seem to suggest that the sensitivity to certain forms of deontic power can be conceptualized alongside existential feelings as ways of being sensitive to certain forms of instrumental possibilities; hence the term “deontological feeling”.<sup>1</sup> Due to space, it is only the latter case, the case of profound boredom, that I will examine more thoroughly here.

## II. A brief account of profound boredom

The term “profound boredom” was coined by Heidegger (1995). The intended phenomenon, however, has been described by many researchers in philosophy, psychology, sociology, or political science before and after him under various names (see Simmel 1997; Cushman 1990; Aho 2007; Dalle Pezze and Salzani 2009; Ratcliffe 2009; Slaby 2010; 2017; Kustermans and Ringmar 2011; Gardiner 2012). Given the rich literature on this topic, profound boredom can be regarded as a quite well studied phenomenon.

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<sup>1</sup> This account of deontological feelings differs from the one referred to and criticized by Kleingeld (2014, 152 ff.). In her critique of Greene’s (2007) position, Kleingeld characterizes deontological feelings as strong emotional reactions to a given moral problem that needed to be augmented by way of confabulation or could be contrasted with cool consequentialist reasoning.

Profound boredom is often presented as a prevalent emotional alienation from the world and is regarded as inherent to the conditions of modern life, especially with regard to a pervasive sense of meaninglessness in connection with the temporality of accelerated life: In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century, massive social and economic changes took place within the lifespan of the individuals affected by those changes. Among them are, for instance, dislocation because of urbanization, a spread of Enlightenment's scepticism towards traditional values (the "death of God" according to Nietzsche 1974, § 125) and a constant acceleration of the lived environment in terms of living by the clock, reduction of distances (railways, motorcars, telegraphs, and, later, digitalization), increased mobility, etc. (see Aho 2007; Kustermans and Ringmar 2011, 1781 f.; Rosa 2013, 122–143). Such socio-economic changes are supposed to condition a particularly modern sense of meaningless and restlessness which is, as we shall see, one of the most relevant traits of profound boredom.

Boredom, in the sense intended here, is related to other fundamental attunements such as *acedia*, *ennui*, or despair (see Ratcliffe 2009; Schmitz 2014, 107 f.). Some authors have described relevant aspects of the phenomenon in question, namely a specific lack of concern for the world as well as for oneself, under topics such as "selflessness" (Arendt 1962, 315) or "alienated subjectivity" (Großheim 2002, 28 ff., 154 ff.). Profound boredom is not that kind of conspicuous feeling towards a specific object we have time and again when, for instance, hearing a tedious lecture or participating in a pointless meeting. It is rather a background orientation toward the world as a whole, which has – as I will now commence to show – an irreducible bodily dimension.

In the following, I will describe the orientation of profound boredom mainly in terms of its bodily dimension, thereby leaving to the side other dimensions including historical, social, economic, or political factors in the stricter sense. I begin by sketching boredom as a bodily background orientation in terms of three aspects, which are integral parts of a synthetic whole, rather than aggregated isolated units:

1. *Radical unrest*: Being a background orientation, profound boredom is often concealed from the so-oriented person's view precisely by virtue of that person's restless activity which characterizes their life-style as a whole. The restless activity in question is grounded in what one might call a tendency of "not-being-able-to-bear the stillness" (Heidegger 1999, 84; see Aho 2007, 28), a radical form of unrest, and it has the function of passing the time: glancing at one's watch, checking emails, moving fast from one point to the other, becoming impatient if someone else takes too long to make a point or if oneself has to wait without having something to occupy oneself with (Aho 2007, 29 f.; see Levine 1997). In this sense, profound boredom has been called a "time pathology" (Aho 2007, 30; Ulmer and Schwartzburd 1996, 331). The relevant person's temporal horizon – not so much in the sense of a condition for perceiving a temporally extended object (see Husserl 1966, 108, 114; Zahavi 2010, 322 f., 327), but rather as the "stretch of time attended with heed and care beyond the immediate present" (Großheim 2012, 22) – is comparatively narrow: "the symptom of acceleration", and profound boredom as its corresponding affective background orientation, "reveals a self that is fragmented and disjointed to the extent that it is pulled apart by competing commitments and investments that are always, for some reason, urgent" (Aho 2007, 29). In this regard, the accelerated and simultaneously bored self resembles Oakeshott's rationalist whose "conduct of affairs [...] is a matter of solving problems" and whose world presents itself as a never-ending "succession of crises" (Oakeshott 1947, 2).
2. *Sense of decreased self-efficacy*: Being oriented toward the world in terms of profound boredom entails that the things and persons we encounter in the world "offer us no further possibility of acting and no further possibility of doing anything" (Heidegger 1995, 139). One's own agency in the context of such things and persons is, at least unthematically, perceived as meaningless (Kustermans

and Ringmar 2011); the extent to which one experiences oneself as self-efficacious is rather limited (Rosa 2016, 273). This may appear somewhat paradoxical as the most conspicuous aspect of profound boredom seems to consist in that restless activity just described. However, both restless activity and the sense that things offer no further possibility of acting are part of a more complex phenomenon. Immersing oneself in activity and occupying oneself with all sorts of things can be interpreted as a rather superficial attempt of compensating the decreased self-efficacy of which one is unthematically aware in one's restless activity. Moreover, unrest and lack of self-efficacy might even mutually affect one another. In this perspective, restless activity would not merely be a response to the sense of decreased self-efficacy. It would also intensify that sense by increasing the felt effort without resulting in the sense of 'getting somewhere'.

3. *Muteness of the world*: According to many accounts, the sense of self-efficacy goes with the sense of belonging to a meaningful world; that is, if the former corrodes, the latter will be diminished as well (see Ratcliffe 2008, 134 f.; 2009, 369; Rosa 2016, 275 f.). One's habitual, pre-reflective bodily expectations of possibilities for meaningful resonance with the things encountered are constantly disappointed, one's bodily sedimented ways of relating to, engaging with, or "living into" the world come to nothing. As already suggested in the context of the previous point, neither one's vitality nor the tendency to concern oneself with parts of the world is entirely absent, yet there is no toehold for them (see Schmitz 2014, 107). Such constant coming to nothing of one's bodily expectations of resonance is involved in the way in which the world appears in terms of a pervasive evaluative quality or atmosphere. Everything is, as it were, "behind glass" (Schmitz 2014, 107), the world is "mute" (Rosa 2016, 306), devoid of meaning. In a certain sense, nothing really matters to one, not even oneself (Heidegger 1995, 134 ff.). Below the surface of passing time, the things and persons in the surrounding world appear in oppressive indifference (see Heidegger 1995, 137 ff.).

These three aspects are interrelated with one another: On the one hand, where one's vital care is given no toehold, it turns into directionless disquiet (Schmitz 2014, 107 f.) and meaningless agency. On the other hand, the acceleration of modern life seems to accentuate oppressive indifference in as much as it "makes it increasingly difficult for us to distinguish which choices and commitments actually matter to us in our lives" so that everything seems "equally important because nothing stands out" (Aho 2007, 32 f.).

### III. The deontological shift in profound boredom

Now, in what way is profound boredom supposed to implicate a specific normative background? How sensitive to deontic power is a profoundly bored person likely to be, if the preceding descriptions of the phenomenon are on the right track?

In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt offers valuable descriptions of the shift in the normative background implicated in what she calls the "atmosphere" of a pre-totalitarian society (Arendt 1962, 268, 315) – the felt quality of the situation of that time, if you like. I suggest that some of these descriptions can also be used in order to elucidate the deontological shift that comes with profound boredom. For instance, Arendt correlates a pervasive impairment of one's sense of belonging to a meaningful communal world similar to the one described in the previous section with the loss of one's "measured insight into the interdependence of [...] the accidental and the necessary" and, in turn, with one's openness to totalitarian ideas and norms (Arendt 1962, 352). I think, profound boredom as a bodily background orientation involves a deontological shift that is problematic in a very similar manner.

In this perspective, the most conspicuous fact is this: The recognition of a variety of deontic powers, which in many other contexts seems to be unproblematic, is far from self-evident under the condition of profound boredom. This has to do with the fact that, in many everyday scenarios, the disquiet of boredom is concealed by immersing oneself in practical routines that have also lost any deeper significance, say, doing one's job, distracting oneself, etc. In the light of such routines, the things and persons in the surrounding world do not straightforwardly appear in terms of sheer indifference, but also more and more as something to be manipulated and consumed as well as something exchangeable: The profoundly bored self "seeks the experience of being continually filled up by consuming goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathic therapists in an attempt to combat the growing alienation and fragmentation of its era" (Cushman 1990, 601), where most or all of these experiences are "quickly obsolete" (*ibid.*). Increasingly, the world presents itself "solely as a vast storehouse of objects to be manipulated, consumed, and quantified" (Aho 2007, 27).

Insofar as profound boredom implies such a "storehouse" orientation towards the world, deontic powers in the usual sense are largely eroded and manners degenerate to merely external conventions indistinguishable from rules of purely instrumental prudence (see Searle 2010, 142). This is the case, for instance, when the only intelligible consideration regarding fulfilling one's promise amounts to calculating one's advantages in the "storehouse" (e.g. possibilities for consumption and distraction), whereas any "affective anticipation" of shame-like feelings such as a sense of shrinking back from breaking the promise (see Nörenberg 2020, 200 ff.) is absent. A person, then, may understand in an abstract way that one should keep one's promise or tell the truth (e.g. for not doing so might have disadvantageous consequences, it might even hurt other people, etc.), and yet fail to *feel* a proper demand to do it. In the perspective of that "storehouse" orientation, deontology is more or less reduced to prudence; any norm has a rather hypothetical character, depending on the desires of the profoundly bored individual. What is more, given the narrowed temporal horizon of profound boredom, the desires in question tend to be structured in terms of what appears to be urgent now and obsolete later on.

However, the "storehouse" orientation and its implications do not give us the entire picture. Boredom is not only a problematic case of deontological feeling because the affected individuals seem insensitive to rather usual forms of deontic power. Many accounts of profound boredom explicitly or implicitly state that actual or affectively anticipated shame-like feelings are not entirely cancelled, but provided with other 'targets', as it were. The bored individual longs to commit itself to a specific form of deontic power – a form that fits better with that individual's attunement to the world. Jaspers, for instance, by and large intending the same phenomenon that Heidegger calls "profound boredom", notices that the bored individual seeks to fill an underlying "emptiness" by an "almost passionate urge for authority" (Jaspers 1931, 189; my transl.).

However, whereas Jaspers maintains the therapist's professional distance to what he nevertheless empathically diagnoses, Heidegger does not restrict himself to only *describing* profound boredom as the spiritual situation of his time. He also *normatively affirms* and subsequently radicalizes the evaluative perspective inherent to profound boredom. Thus, in my view, Heidegger seeks to invoke particular forms of deontic power when he calls his audience to an "urgent quest" for "what is *singularly* binding for us" (1995, 77), an "essential oppressiveness" (163), the demand for "essential action" (153), the demand to "overreach ourselves" in the "danger-zone of Dasein" to which man must "resolutely open himself again" (165). What is this supposed to mean?

Commenting on these and other passages, Franzen has pointed out a "longing for hardship and heaviness", in other words a longing for a motivational rigorousness, that predisposes Heidegger to his subsequent engagement in National Socialism (see Franzen 1988, 83 ff.). Arguably, that longing for rigorousness is not only characteristic of Heidegger alone and it also has a compensatory function (see Großheim 2002 and Kustermans and Ringmar 2011 for further analyses). One aspect of this is that the evocation of "overreaching oneself", "essential action" and "oppressiveness" seems to compensate for the felt indifference to the world: Rather

than further seeking distraction in quickly obsolete things, the individual is consciously or unwittingly interested in *making* – or at least *witnessing* – a *difference* great enough in order to restore (at least some) resonance with the world. In this context, making such a difference shows appreciated value.

It is striking that, at least according to the self-understanding of profoundly bored individuals, only experiences of a specific type are suitable to make a great enough difference. When Arendt attempts to reconstruct the evaluative perspective implicated in the very same spiritual situation of the time intended by Heidegger and Jaspers, for illustration she quotes the words of a student in the time of the First World War: “[W]hat counts is always the readiness to make a sacrifice, not the object for which the sacrifice is made” (see Arendt 1962, 328). Howard (2001, 112) notes that “[m]ilitant nationalist movements or conspiratorial radical ones provide excellent outlets for boredom”, and Kustermans and Ringmar’s essay “Modernity, boredom, and war” (2011), which has a broader socio-historical focus than Arendt’s and Jaspers’ analyses, presents a similar point: Apparently, only pain, the hard and heavy, the violent disaster, can do the job, whereas other stirrings such as indignation or pleasure seem to lack the power to make the sort of difference needed to re-establish resonance with the world (see also Großheim 2002, 355).

From the viewpoint of the phenomenology of the body, this finding can be accounted for as follows: Bodily felt pain is one of the few things that is “essentially oppressive”, and “essential oppressiveness” seems to be the sole source of a meaningful difference in an otherwise tedious everyday world for at least two reasons: First, it gives evidence of a reality that resists manipulation to a large extent (Großheim 2002, 355). Second, only wrestling with the hard and heavy is what the profoundly bored individual expects to increase their sense of self-efficacy (see Großheim 2002, 390 f.; Kustermans and Ringmar 2011, 1782 ff.).

Against this backdrop, we can explicate a shift in *what* one recognizes as having the authority to make a demand on oneself. This shift comes with the longing for the hard and heavy. Where the “usual” deontic powers, such as the felt obligation to respect another person’s property, that orient the everyday world erode, the authority to make a demand is increasingly marked by atmospheric qualities such as severity, rigidity, tremendousness, powerfulness.<sup>2</sup> In Heidegger’s terminology, only this form of authority actually proves to be “singularly binding for us”. In other words, this is the only way in which the bored, desensitized individual is able to feel a demand at all.

Moreover, inasmuch as one’s sense of being cut off from a meaningful world also concerns the relations to other people and thus includes a tangible loss of possibilities of social interaction, one’s sense of belonging to a communal world defined by commitment to others of one’s ilk, common interests and manageable political goals is likely to corrode (see Arendt 1962, 311, 312, 315). Such corrosion may also predispose one to cherish imaginations of a “perfect” community and corresponding ideologies (see Gaffney 2016, 10 f.). Thus, a loss of one’s sense of belonging as a bodily background orientation may also be part of the appreciation of the rigorous in a similar manner as described by Arendt:

What convinces masses [i.e. individuals having lost a background sense of belonging to the common world – H.N.] are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part. [...] Before the alternative of facing the anarchic growth

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2 To give an admittedly extreme example, the authority of totalitarian leaders that allows them to commit their followers to the most arbitrary forms of what they recognize as deontic power can – at least in part – be accounted for in terms of the effect of the atmospheric quality in question of rigidity and rigorousness on individuals longing for the hard and heavy. Given an audience that has the sort of background orientation I am attempting to explicate here, Arendt argues that “someone who not only holds opinions but also presents them in a tone of unshakable conviction will not so easily forfeit his prestige, no matter how many times he has been demonstrably wrong” (1962, 305).



and total arbitrariness of decay or bowing down before the most rigid, fantastically fictitious consistency of an ideology, the masses probably will always choose the latter and be ready to pay for it with individual sacrifices – and this not because they are stupid or wicked, but because in the general disaster this escape grants them a minimum of self-respect. (Arendt 1962, 352)

To summarize, the deontological shift that comes with profound boredom implies the following aspects: an impaired recognition of usual deontic powers, the shrunk temporal horizon of accelerated life, the longing for the hard and heavy, the commitment to rigid authority and the imagination of perfect community.

A recent example in which all these aspects come together is the well documented case of Alex, a young American woman, who was step-by-step indoctrinated by an ISIS recruiter.<sup>3</sup> When she felt her life to be nothing but a “blurred series of babysitting shifts and lonely week-ends roaming the mall” and she had “already been drawn to the idea of living a faith more fully”, she got “riveted” by a CNN clip of ISIS combatants beheading a journalist (Callimachi 2015). Alex’s longing for the hard and heavy, her fascination for the violence she saw in that clip, seems to have motivated her to find a legitimation for such executions: “‘I was looking for people who agreed with what they were doing, so that I could understand why they were doing it,’ she said” (ibid.). Soon she had extended online conversations with an ISIS recruiter who would answer all her questions immediately: “If before she waited hours to hear back from friends, now her iPhone was vibrating all day” (ibid.). Alex’s accelerated online communication became a touchstone which also implied a deontological shift: Even though she felt distressed and isolated because she had to keep those conversations secret from her family and even though she had come to feel that she could not trust her new friends, lying to her family about her plans of travelling to Syria and her imagined role in the Islamic State seemed less problematic than disentangling herself from those friends. “She felt as if she finally had something to do” (ibid.).

#### IV. Concluding remarks

I have suggested that our normative background orientations against the backdrop of which something emerges as a compelling reason, an obligation, etc. also have an irreducible bodily-affective dimension. Adapting Ratcliffe’s notion of existential feelings and the way in which such feelings are correlated with our bodily sensitivity to *instrumental* possibilities, we may speak of *deontological feelings* as bodily background orientations toward the world in terms of which we are sensitive to various forms of deontic power.

In order to explore the category of deontological feelings, I have argued that the recognition of deontic power entails feeling a relevant demand to act in a particular way. Felt demands are closely related, though irreducible to soliciting affordances such as experientially salient instrumental possibilities such as sitting on that chair, of which we have a kinaesthetic sense. Thus, if there is a correlation between bodily background orientations and instrumental possibilities, the question, whether a similar correlation can be established between bodily background orientations and felt demands as the bodily-affective dimension of recognizing deontic power, is a legitimate one.

The deontological shift that comes with profound boredom results in the individual recognizing possibilities of action as obligatory, binding, etc. (that is as asserting themselves on the individual in terms of felt demands), only if these possibilities involve a sense of the rigid or the hard and heavy. If this account is by and large correct, it can help elucidate how deontological feelings are supposed to function in general. It indicates *ex negativo* what needs to be in place

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<sup>3</sup> See Callimachi (2015). Boredom as a significant motive for Islamic jihad is, among many others, also pointed out by Venhaus (2010, 10 ff.) and Kustermans and Ringmar (2011, 1789).

whenever we actually recognize deontic powers in terms of felt demands: a subtle “sense of appropriateness” (Landweer 2011), a sense not only of how things are in the world, but also of how they ought to be.

I am aware that a satisfactory account of deontological feelings requires more fine-tuning. For instance, much more would have to be said about the deontological shift coming with profound boredom: To what extent is the recognition of authority in terms of rigidity embedded in a structure of reactive attitudes and what would this structure look like? To what extent is the temporal horizon of what one feels responsible for altered by the deontological shift and what does that tell us about the function of horizons of responsibility in general? Or, given that deontological feelings constitute a specific type of bodily background orientations, can they be shared in any stricter sense or does “shared” in this context only mean “a dominant feature within a given population”? These and many other questions will hopefully be answered by future research.

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