Essay

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Recollections of a Former Boredom Scholar

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I never intended to become a boredom scholar, and I was one for a very short time. When I wrote my small book in the spring of 1999, there was no such thing as a field called boredom studies. There were a couple of monographs, especially Martin Doehlemann's (1991) *Langeweile?: Deutung eines verbreiteten Phänomens*. This was a pioneering work that had deserved a much wider reception, but perhaps his timing was a bit off, as happens with good books all the time. And there was Patricia Meyer Spacks' (1995) *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*, but that also failed to have much of a wider impact. I should also mention Orrin Klapp's (1986) *Overload and Boredom*. And certainly Reinhard Kuhn's (1976) *The Demon of Noontide*. There were some psychological studies on boredom proneness. And there was Heidegger's (1995) ambitious analysis of boredom in his 1929–1930-lectures, of course. But it is striking that there are only a small handful of works dedicated specifically to boredom among the 200 titles in the bibliography at the end of my book. As Aristotle pointed out in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I, 1098a18): "One swallow does not make a summer; neither does one day." And a few scattered works on boredom does not make a scholarly field.

I didn't know anybody else who was working on boredom. The internet back in the late 1990's wasn't what it is today, and there was no digital community to draw on. Digital accessibility to journals was also very underdeveloped. This partly explains the somewhat eclectic selection of sources in the book. I was an avid reader, and since I had so little regular boredom research to draw on, I pieced together a picture drawing on stuff that I had already read. If somebody wonders why German romanticism has such a prominent place in the book, the answer is simply that I had read a lot of German romanticism. In addition to that, I wanted to break free of the strict format I had followed in my PhD dissertation. That is why I placed pop music alongside Kant and Heidegger in my sources. And a couple of novels. And why not throw in a movie for good measure? Whereas my PhD dissertation had been all-too-pure, I wanted this little essay to be rather impure.

But why did I write it in the first place? Because I was bored, of course! I was especially bored by philosophy, but I was really bored by everything. And here I should perhaps add some biographical background, even though I refuse to do so in the book itself.

I grew up in a small industrial town not far from Oslo, Norway. My father was a plumber in a shipyard, which was the largest company in the city. He had worked there since he started as an apprentice at the age of 14 after seven years in elementary school. My mother worked at the welfare office—also with seven years of elementary school. Books were not a part of my upbringing, and I was probably the first person in my family to voluntarily open a book. It happened a bit by chance, when a friend said that I just had to read a certain novel. I was 16 or 17 at the time. So, I was a late starter. I then moved on from fiction to philosophy. Entering the world of philosophy was a revelation for me, and I found it incredibly satisfying to think thoughts that I hadn't thought before. I had no plans for an academic career—the fact that it happened was basically just a side effect of my interest in philosophy. I might also add that in addition to philosophy, one of my main interests was partying, and I guess that I devoted approximately the equal amount of time to these interests. And music, of course, which always was and still is my main interest.

Anyway, finding philosophy was a momentous change in my life. I loved it! I didn't care much for the university, because there were too many sharp elbows, too many people who suffered from the illusion that life is a zero-sum game—and that wasn't to my liking. I didn't want to play that game. So, it is somewhat paradoxical that I've made my living as an academic philosopher at a university for over 30 years now, more than half of my life. What can I say? I was young and needed the money.

However, I had more or less decided to leave academic life just as I began writing this little thing on boredom. I had had a very generous scholarship for four years, and I thought that it was time to move on. I had submitted my PhD dissertation on Kant's theoretical philosophy, more precisely on the schematism, and thus fulfilled my obligations. It would be an exaggeration to say that the work on the dissertation had been characterised by enthusiasm. On the contrary, it hardly filled me with anything but boredom. Still, I worked hard on my dissertation, and I've never put so much effort into anything else I've written. There is no contradiction between working hard at something and being deeply bored about it. As Fernando Pessoa pointed out, the boredom of great effort is perhaps the heaviest to bear.

Perhaps the most important reason why I carried out the work was that I feared appearing as a failure, as someone who was not up to par with the task he had applied for and been given. The problem was that I no longer saw any *point* in writing this dissertation. It appeared to be a monstrous effort to do something that simply did not matter. I no longer cared about what I was writing about, but I obviously cared enough not to appear a failure.

Philosophy struck me as especially meaningless, perhaps because it had been a particularly meaningful part of my life, so there was an acute sense of loss. The philosophy I had done for quite some time did not resonate with my mood. I was deeply bored, and the detailed analysis of Kant's theory of schematism that I was writing was of no apparent relevance for coming to terms with this boredom. I could go through the motions, lay out arguments, refer to the vast amount of commentaries on the schematism, dig up new material from the *Nachlass* and so on. But it simply did not *matter* to me.

When I finally completed my dissertation, well before my scholarship ended, I thought I would enjoy life. I had a full salary for months to come, and no tasks. However, it turned out that it was not only the work on the thesis that was a source of boredom. Everything seemed to bore me. Even music was not able to arouse much more than a yawn. Even partying bored me. The world bored me, and not least: I bored myself.

Had I gone to see a psychiatrist, I would probably have been diagnosed with a clinical depression, as I certainly satisfied several of the criteria in the diagnostic manuals. I would have objected to such a diagnosis, however, because I did not see myself as depressed, but as *bored*. I believed that my ailment was philosophical rather than psychiatric. I thought that I was suffering from a deficiency of meaning which could and should be remedied by an existential reorientation in life—a reorientation I believed that philosophy could shed light on. Perhaps my boredom was akin to a voice of conscience telling me that I needed to change my life. It wasn't that I thought the world no longer had any meaning to offer, but it wasn't available to me. I couldn't orient myself properly in whatever meaning might be there. And as Ludwig Wittgenstein points out: A

philosophical problem is ultimately about a lack of orientation. Philosophy, as I see it, is ultimately about self-reflection. So I chose to use the tools I had acquired studying philosophy in order to see if they might help me come to terms with my affliction, using philosophy as my therapy. And that became a book.

The pent-up frustration almost ran out of my fingers so that it had resulted in a finished manuscript, *The Philosophy of Boredom*, just three months later. The book was literally self-help. I tried to help myself to get out this affliction. I hadn't given much thought to any publication. But then an editor at Scandinavian University Press that I knew asked if I was writing anything at the moment, and when I said that I was writing this little thing on boredom, he asked me I would be willing to publish it. I said: "OK, but nobody is going to read it." Nobody was more surprised than me when it went into the bestselling charts in Norway. This was nice, of course, but the most important thing about writing the book was that it revived philosophy for me. Not only was writing about boredom not boring, it filled me, for the first time in years, with an enormous joy in philosophy. Writing this book made it possible for me to continue to do philosophy, but I had to do it more like I did it in the book on boredom and less than I did in my dissertation on Kant.

When my book was published in English translation five or six years later, I thought that the book had already for the most part run its course. Finding an English publisher for the book wasn't easy for my agent, with many rejections, and when we finally found one, I had to fight hard to keep the third part of the book, the one on the phenomenology of boredom, which I saw as an essential part of the philosophical backbone of the book—my publisher thought that this phenomenological stuff was too difficult and would prevent the book from getting much attention. I was pleasantly surprised when that turned out to be wrong. The English translation was also essential for the book reaching other markets. There had been 8 translations of the book prior to the English one, but after the English one, there were another 20 languages.

However, when all of this happened, I had already moved on to other topics. Actually, I had written and published five books on completely different topics in the meantime, on evil, art, philosophy of biology, fashion and so on. So when the English translation was published almost at the same time as Elizabeth Goodstein's (2005) excellent *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*, I had already left the field—or rather the-not-yet-existing-field—years ago.

At the beginning of this lecture,[1] when I said that I was a boredom scholar only for a very short time, I could have been more precise and said that I was a boredom scholar for approximately three months in the spring of 1999. When I finished my little manuscript, I had gotten the sort of grasp of the phenomenon that I needed. I had in fact managed to help myself. And that also meant that I didn't feel a need to continue to study boredom. I could move on to other frustrating topics.

I've never liked repeating myself too much, and those who have invited me to contribute anthologies or special editions of journals can attest to the fact that I have usually been more than a little bit reluctant to do so. This also goes for the very lecture I'm giving right now (see note

[1] Editor's note: this essay is a transcription of Svendsen's lecture given as part of the 6th Boredom Conference.

1). I believe that my initial response to the organizers was: "I don't want to be the boring old fart doing outdated stuff." Because the field has clearly progressed so much since I wrote my book 26 years ago. Lots of interesting work seems to be done, and I have no interest in being a gatekeeper, standing in the way for people who present fresh approaches. I might add that I've been asked a couple of times to write *A Philosophy of Boredom 2.0*, but why on earth should I do that?

I have only published two articles on boredom after my old book, and they were both devoted to correcting what I saw as serious flaws in that book. The two flaws were related. It rather astonishing that I never gave anything even resembling a proper account of meaning in a book that had as its central thesis that boredom consists in a lack of meaning. But there was an implicit account there, and it was mistaken. More specifically, my notion of meaning was far too intellectualistic, too tied to linguistic meaning, even though I made a feeble attempt to distinguish between them.

Now I basically think that meaning should be analysed in terms of caring. The sort of meaning we discuss in our present context differs from meaning as discussed by philosophical semantics. We are talking about an existential meaning, something related to the observation of some sort of *point* to our lives. There are etymological reasons for tying boredom to caring. We get a clue from the pre-modern variety of boredom, *acedia*. The Latin word stems from the Greek *akedia*, a combination of a privative prefix and *kedos*, which literally means 'caring about something.' Acedia is, according to its etymology, about not caring. As I see it, this brings us to the very core of what boredom is about: not caring. And then I've tried to flesh out this notion of caring in a few other works, especially in *A Philosophy of Freedom* (2014), but also in article entitled "Boredom and Meaning in Life" (2016).

I will not go into too much detail here, but tying meaning to caring loosens the relation to language. Of course, explaining what it means to care about something is no straightforward task, but I analyse caring to a great extent along similar lines as Harry Frankfurt. To care about something means that we value it, that we regard it, broadly speaking, as something we desire, and that desire, furthermore, as a desire that we desire to have. This desire is no passing fancy, but rather something with which a person identifies and considers being an expression of who he is. The act of caring makes the world a meaningful place and gives our lives a direction.

Loosening meaning from language, made it possible to correct a really stupid claim I made in the book, namely that non-human animals are incapable of boredom. We have little reason to believe that any nonhuman animals have a capacity for proper language—and that includes even the most meticulously trained primates—and one is therefore forced to either provide an account of animal boredom that does not employ the concept of meaning or give an account of meaning that does not presuppose language. In my book, I chose the first alternative, which is somewhat puzzling, since I've had cats and dogs my entire life. That alternative was clearly the wrong one. In order to correct that, I wrote a book entitled *Understanding Animals* (2019b) and an article entitled "Animal Boredom" (2019a). Many nonhuman animals clearly have a capacity for caring for various objects and activities, but what they care about will to great extent vary from species to species. We can then define animal boredom in terms of being deprived of objects and activities for which they care. Just like a creature who has the capacity

to feel love for another creature, will have a capacity for feeling lonely, a creature who has the capacity to care for something, will also have a capacity for being bored. In both cases, the negative state is characterised by a privation, by a lack of attachment and a lack of meaning.

The article on animal boredom is probably the last thing I'll ever write on boredom. The one possible exception might be an article on boredom and hope, as I briefly touched on their relation in a book on hope, and I think that there is quite a bit more to be said about that. Maybe I'll get around to write something about that at some point. Hope is about a future where possibilities can be realized. What's characteristic of existential boredom is that these possibilities do not form part of one's experience. With existential boredom the world appears empty—not of objects and events, but of relevant possibilities. In such a state, one is trapped by a present that is devoid of meaning. Kierkegaard describes boredom as a 'demonic pantheism.' The demonic part is the emptiness, so boredom is then to be understood as a nothingness that permeates all of reality. You simply cannot find anything to care about. You will then have no hope. But you can still hope to find something to hope for.

I no longer find life in general boring. The all-comprehensive boredom has not returned since I wrote the book. In fact, life is for the most part anything but boring. Of course, I still find certain movies, novels, records and people boring, but it is more of an exception than the rule. However, I still find much philosophy boring. I could even go as far as saying that I find *most* contemporary philosophy boring. Boring philosophy, like a boring movie, fills your time with emptiness. Boring philosophy fills your time, but you simply do not seem to find anything of interest there. However, to say that you are bored by something because it does not interest you, amounts to very little. The obvious question is then: Why does it not interest you?

Nietzsche starts his essay *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* with a quotation from Goethe (KSA, 1): "In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity." The main point of Nietzsche's essay is that the writing of history should serve the interests of the living, not the dead. I would argue that the same should hold for philosophy. Unfortunately, most of the academic philosophy written today, in both the analytic and the continental tradition, serves neither the living nor the dead—it serves nobody. It simply does not have much relevance for anyone, and that is probably why it is so often excruciatingly boring.

All worthwhile philosophy builds on something pre-philosophical. Something precedes philosophical reflection, something found in experiences which form the basis for such reflection. In this respect, philosophy itself is understood as the act of reflecting on a meaning or experience that already exists. Philosophy takes its content and legitimacy from what is already experienced and vaguely understood. This is methodologically significant because it requires philosophy to maintain contact with the pre-philosophical if it is to retain its legitimacy. But we tend to lose ourselves in greater and greater abstractions that become steadily less tangible. Ultimately, we often remain lost in abstraction and therefore lose sight of the concrete experience that was the basis for our initial reflection. We are then left with a philosophy lacking in experience, and such a philosophy is missing something crucial: a relation to its own origin. Contemporary philosophers read too many books and articles and make too few experiences. Or they are incapable of making experience relevant for philosophy or philosophy relevant for

experience. Too much philosophical writing is so self-contained. It has lost its relation to the pre-philosophical which gives real life and substance to philosophy and also lost its relation to the post-philosophical, to the real impact philosophy should have on our lives.

If I were to write *A Philosophy of Boredom 2.0* now, it would probably be boring because I'm just not properly attuned to the topic. It's not my topic anymore. But it's wonderful to see that so much goes on in the field, that so much engaging work is being done.

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