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Philosophy and Anthropology of Boredom in Hans Blumenberg

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1. Introduction. Never Say Never

For some time now, I've been trying to disconnect from Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996), though I've never quite managed to do so. I devoted all my reading hours during the last two years of my degree to his philosophy, wrote a Master's thesis—focused on his metaphorology—and even a doctoral dissertation (2017a), which required me to spend an entire year of my life in Marbach am Neckar (Stuttgart, Germany), translating, studying, and systematizing hundreds of the Lübeck-born philosopher's unpublished manuscripts. From those years of tireless work came some of the writings I cherish most: a couple devoted to metaphorology, another two to philosophical anthropology (see, e.g., 2012), two more to issues related to feminism (see, e.g., 2016a), several to prehistory and paleoanthropology (see, e.g., 2016b), and even one in which I had the Hanseatic thinker engage in dialogue with Schopenhauer (2016c). I have also made an effort to understand how his work has been received by Blumenberian scholars (see, e.g., 2014, 2017b). I always think I've reached my limit with this thinker, yet I never completely let him go. Although I often promise myself to leave him behind, I end up returning to him at the slightest opportunity: a small request to discuss his relationship with Johann Sebastian Bach (2021), a brief translation of an unpublished text, or an invitation to a specialized conference. To be honest, I always carry Blumenberg on my back; I end up quoting passages from his writings in my own almost automatically; I turn to his teachings to reflect on subjects as diverse as illness, eternal life, fear of death, animal empathy, weakness, COVID-19, capitalism, old age, or suicide. I've lost count of how many times I've publicly declared that this or that would be the last time I wrote or spoke about Blumenberg. False, always false. Here I am again.

It's only fair: through Blumenberg I discovered my passion for philosophical and paleoanthropological study and, as is well known, for the study of the phenomenon of boredom —my field of specialization. It's curious, really, because although I always bring up Blumenberg when I talk about boredom—and even shoehorn him into the work of other colleagues researching the subject—I have published almost nothing on Blumenberg's philosophy and anthropology of boredom, apart from what appeared in my doctoral dissertation (2017a). I have never set down in writing a synthesis of the German philosopher's view on the experience to which I devote every hour of my life, even though I ultimately owe him everything I have achieved in boredom research. In this paper, I want to repay my debt to the philosopher who has brought me to this point. In the pages that follow, I not only aim to present the key ideas in Blumenberg's philosophy and philosophical anthropology of boredom, but also to put an end to that absurd flight from Blumenberg's thought that I tried to undertake at the end of my doctoral years, but which I never managed to carry out—for obvious reasons. I will never say never to Blumenberg again.

The ideas I will present below are drawn, in addition to my doctoral dissertation (2017a), from the chapter "Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Anthropology of Boredom," published in the collective volume I co-edited with Alberto Fragio and Martina Philippi in 2020 for Karl Alber Verlag, titled *Metaphorologie, Anthropologie, Phänomenologie*. These ideas were first presented in outline at the 2017 conference *Hans Blumenberg. Legacies and Research Programs* at the University of Leipzig, organized by the same editors of the volume, and later at the *II Congreso*

Internacional Blumenberg: Retórica y antropogénesis, held in 2023 at the Complutense University of Madrid, organized by Enver Torregroza and Oscar Quintero. This is not a mere adaptation of that earlier chapter, but rather a revised exposition that reconsiders those notes in light of a theoretical framework on the experience of boredom developed over the years since its publication and presented in my first book, *The Disease of Boredom* (2026). Before beginning, I would like to thank my colleagues for inviting me to take part in the 2023 event, which once again—and certainly not for the last time—compelled me to return to Blumenberg's philosophy. I am also grateful to Professor Antonio Lastra, who offered us his publishing house, Nexofia, for the publication of the conference proceedings in which this paper was published in its Spanish version (2025a), thus giving me yet another opportunity to recant my ill-fated intention to bury Blumenberg at the bottom of my heart.

2. History of the Philosophy and Anthropology of Boredom[1]

Boredom is a state of discomfort that we experience when the environment in which we find ourselves, or the activity with which we try to engage, fails to stimulate us adequately in accordance with our initial expectations, resulting in the painful experience of a lack of meaning. We all suffer from it to a greater or lesser extent, at all times and in all places, depending both on exogenous factors—stemming from the possibilities offered by the context—and endogenous ones, related to one's own personality. The person who is bored feels that their relationship with the present reality is damaged and that they must do whatever is within their reach to return to the optimal level of arousal that translates into a sense of well-being.

The study of boredom has awakened the curiosity of countless thinkers throughout the history of the West. We moderns are not the first to be doomed to suffer this painful state that is boredom, nor are we the only ones to have left a record of our suffering. Homer was probably the first to do so when, in Book 24 of the *Iliad*, he referred to the excessive idle time endured by the Achaeans as they waited to begin their battle against the city of Troy. The poet also created several characters—most notably Odysseus and Calypso—who embodied the boredom inherent in moments of waiting, and he wondered, at the end of Book 12 of the *Odyssey*, what could be more boring than a story told twice. Later, in the Classical period, figures such as Pindar and Isocrates complained about the boredom provoked by overly long and repetitive speeches lacking originality. The old Dicaeopolis, from Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, was bored while waiting for the Athenian assembly to begin. Euripides' soldiers in *Iphigenia in Aulis* shared the same fate as Homer's Achaeans, and the husbands in *Medea* grew bored with their families. Plato admitted in the *Laws* that he nearly died of boredom listening to wealthy men and merchants talk about their business affairs, while in the *Gorgias* he confessed his fear of boring others—something that, he noted, occasionally happened to his teacher Socrates as well. The early philosophers understood boredom as a shameful emotion, since it reflected a lack of interest in the cultivation of virtue—

[1] The historical overview presented in this section is developed in greater detail in *The Disease of Boredom* (2026, especially chapters 1–6), as well as in several other texts I have authored on the subject (see, e.g., 2022, 2023, 2024). In these sources, the reader can find a comprehensive bibliography of the works cited.

the supreme ideal of the Greek people. During the Hellenistic period, Metrodorus of Lampsacus lamented how boring the symposia, or *drinking parties*, could be.

Later, during the Roman Empire, Lucretius referred in *De Rerum Natura* to the boredom that afflicted wealthy Romans, disgusted by remaining always in the same place (*horror loci*). Horace, in his *Epistles*, described boredom as the result of a *strenua inertia*, the cure for which lay in the practice of philosophy and hard work. Seneca, for his part, frequently discussed *taedium* in his *Letters to Lucilius* and in dialogues such as *On the Tranquility of the Soul*, considering it an affliction capable of driving men to suicide. In the Middle Ages, numerous debates arose around the phenomenon of boredom, when theologians conceived of it as a vice that distracted the faithful from their contemplative duties. The term *acedia*, signifying tedium, appeared in the *Septuagint*—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—as well as later in St. Jerome's *Vulgate*. Even earlier, Origen had addressed boredom in his *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*. Throughout the first millennium, St. Augustine reflected extensively on boredom in the *Confessions* and in *The Catechesis of Beginners*. Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian did the same in the *Praktikos* and the *Institutes of the Coenobia*, respectively. The *Patrologia Latina* is filled with references to boredom—sometimes equated with sadness—from the writings of Columbanus of Luxeuil to those of St. Bernard, including those of St. Benedict, St. Pirminius, John of Orléans, Rabanus Maurus, Theodore the Studite, Theodulf of Orléans, Alcuin of York, John of Damascus, Peter Damian, Hugh of St. Victor, Adam Scotus, Richard of St. Victor, and Gilbert of Nogent, among others. Within scholastic philosophy, St. Thomas Aquinas also wrote about boredom in his *Summa Theologica*.

In the Renaissance, boredom—which had until then been regarded at times as a contextual problem and at others as a spiritual ailment—became linked to the old Hippocratic disease of melancholy and came to be seen as a failure of the organism. This transformation was discussed by theologians such as Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises* and autobiography, and John of the Cross, in *Dark Night of the Soul*; by writers of the stature of Dante, in *The Divine Comedy*, and Petrarch, especially in *My Secret*; and by figures more inclined toward medicine, such as Marsilio Ficino and Robert Burton, who explored boredom in works like *Three Books on Life* and *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Philosophical reflections on the topic can also be found in Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, already in the 17th century.

From the beginning of the Modern Age, boredom came to represent the negation of the capitalist work ethic, even attaining the status of a disease, plague, or epidemic. Lyricists such as Novalis, Hölderlin, and Heine; playwrights like Schiller, von Kleist, and Büchner; and novelists such as Hoffmann, Tieck, and Goethe made boredom the central theme of many of their works, in a kind of critique of the society of their time. Meanwhile, a philosopher like Kant defined it as the cancer of practical pure reason, devoting an entire section to it in his *Anthropology in a Pragmatic Sense*; Schopenhauer analyzed it through the lens of the concept of will in *The World as Will and Representation*; and Nietzsche associated it with the organized character of societies in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. A bit further north, Kierkegaard delved into the concept of existential tedium in works such as *Either/Or*. Further south, from the French intellectual sphere, boredom embodied the *mal du siècle*, its decay chronicled by writers such as Senancour,

Chateaubriand, Madame de Staël, Stendhal, George Sand, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, to name a few. Finally, physiology turned its attention to boredom through the work of physicians such as de Sauvages, Vitet, Hallé, Thillaye, Esquirol, de Tours, Jousset, Roubaud-Luce, Bricheteau, Michéa, and de Boismont.

In contemporary times, the experience of boredom is understood as a symptom of life rationalized in the service of the logic of productivity under the capitalist imperative. In the classical period of our era, thinkers such as Simmel, in his essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life*; Lefebvre, in *From Rural to Urban*; Kracauer, in *The Mass Ornament*; and Benjamin, in *The Arcades Project*, among many others, spoke of the profound sense of boredom caused by the ever-repetitive, entirely redundant, which affects not only the satiated and wealthy, as Tardieu would say, but also the proletariat, weary of the unbearable rhythms of factory life. These philosophers also observed the rise of the mass entertainment industry, which emerged to alleviate boredom, only to operate as a simple extension of work under the premises of the rational capitalist system—aiming to break the vicious cycle of production and diversion to counteract the alienation from which such boredom arises. Similarly, some Germanic schools of psychology follow this line of thought, incorporating boredom, as in Freudian psychoanalysis, into a moral problem of society, as a 'disease of culture' that drives the Self toward the pursuit and liberation of pleasures.

However, the rise of studies on consciousness, personality disorders, and the physiological substrate of mental processes and human behavior has, in recent times, gradually shifted efforts to understand boredom toward the individual—the person who experiences it—and their particular characteristics, leaving aside the social component. In other words, while philosophers once saw social structure as the disease and boredom as its symptom, the focus later shifted to psychic and physiological factors, which were understood to require treatment within the framework of psychopathology. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first, the analysis of boredom has been handled almost exclusively by psychologists and psychiatrists. Other disciplines, such as anthropology, philosophy, and sociology, were sidelined in the study of boredom and have only relatively recently regained their role as observers of the multifactorial reality inherent in its experience.

The humanities are reclaiming their indispensable role in the study of boredom after several decades in which it was addressed almost exclusively from the perspective of mental health sciences. This shift was largely driven by the publication of *The Philosophy of Boredom* by the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen. Other works from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have also moved away from the previously dominant psychological approach, adopting perspectives from cultural or literary studies, historiography, anthropology, or sociology. Examples include *The Demon of Noontide* by Reinhard Kuhn; *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* by Patricia Meyer Spacks; *Boredom and the Religious Imagination* by Michael Raposa; *Boredom: A Lively History* by Peter Toohey; and *Experience Without Qualities* by Elizabeth Goodstein, one of the strongest advocates for multidisciplinary work within Boredom Studies. More recently, works such as *The Art of Being Bored* by Sandi Mann; *Out of My Skull* by John Eastwood and James Danckert; *Propelled* by Andreas Elpidorou;

Boredom and Capitalism by Daniel Lesmes; *The Sociology of Boredom* by Mariusz Finkielsztein; essays by Byung-Chul Han; and even my own book, *The Disease of Boredom*, have continued this trend.

In any case, the approach to the experience of boredom in these works remains largely historical and cultural; proper philosophical reflection on boredom is often conspicuously absent. In none of these books—except my own—is Blumenberg mentioned, unlike other philosophers such as Heidegger or Schopenhauer, even though the Lübeck-born thinker developed an entirely original thesis on the experience of boredom, which, in many cases, my colleagues reproduce without realizing that what they are discussing is part of Blumenberg's intellectual legacy. My efforts to disseminate his philosophy of boredom in English, often at the expense of his interested Spanish-speaking readers, usually fall on deaf ears. No one cites Blumenberg when talking about boredom.

3. Blumenbergian Philosophy and Anthropology of Boredom

It will be impossible for me to unpack Hans Blumenberg's thoughts on the experience of boredom without constantly making references to my own work. His conception of boredom is entirely new. I have embraced it, but as a starting point to develop my own philosophy of boredom—one that ultimately becomes, in part, contradictory to some of the assumptions underlying Blumenbergian approaches. He did not study this experience in a specialized way. He was unaware of what was being said about boredom in his time from disciplines other than philosophy, nor could he know what would be said after his death. With the knowledge I possess, for these reasons, I often have no choice but to contend with Blumenberg on the subject of boredom. Nonetheless, I will do my utmost to clearly distinguish my philosophy from his. First, I wish to begin by noting certain procedural difficulties we will encounter in attempting to systematize his theory of boredom. After this warning, I would like to present my synthesis of his ideas. Finally, I will share his reflections on the role boredom has played in two historical periods as distant as prehistory and our contemporary era.

It is tremendously difficult to trace everything Blumenberg wrote about boredom. Almost all the notions we have at hand are found in *Description of Man* (2011). Scattered references also appear in works such as *Time of Life and Time of the World* (2007) or *Concepts in History* (2003). We can also find some remarks on melancholy in *Work on Myth* (1988). From these texts, one can infer the philosopher's thoughts on boredom. However, a complete reconstruction necessarily leads us to his *Nachlass*, housed at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach (DLA). There, we do not find a single unpublished text devoted entirely to boredom, but dozens of small writings dispersed across countless folders. Some are immediately apparent simply by typing the word *Langeweile* into the DLA's Katalog Kallías search engine. Others are discovered thanks to the brief index Blumenberg himself created listing several unpublished notes on boredom. Yet many remain hidden under the most baffling labels, giving no hint that they contain key passages for understanding his philosophy of boredom. I had only one year to work on the unpublished Blumenbergian material, so it is highly likely that much of it remained unexamined. It is not my

intention here to dissect all that I did manage to consult—that is fully included in my doctoral dissertation, which I encourage the reader to consult if they want a more thorough account. Almost none of these writings are dated. We know that the section of *Description of Man* dealing with boredom is based on manuscripts developed from lectures he gave during the winter semester of 1976–1977 at the University of Munich. Several of the unpublished notes are in folders dated between 1968–1988 and 1992–1993. When he wrote the rest remains a mystery.

Blumenberg describes boredom as a painful emotion that we experience whenever we are exposed to overly familiar situations or contexts that no longer pose a challenge to us—that is, situations in which we are over-adapted. This definition is quite similar to that proposed by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi in his *Flow Theory*. Here I encounter my first disagreement with Blumenberg. For me, boredom arises from the imbalance we feel between our need for stimulation and the possibilities we perceive the environment as offering. This imbalance does not occur every time we encounter a familiar situation, since many experiences to which we are accustomed—even if they no longer represent a challenge—can still stimulate us adequately. In any case, for Blumenberg, the essential point is not so much to analyze why boredom arises, but rather *for what purpose*. The philosopher argues that boredom functions to signal what is failing—those situations that provide no added value or hold no meaning for us—forcing us, through our desire to escape pain, to introduce change into the present. Blumenberg's approach is a true precursor to what some contemporary philosophers have called the Theory of the Functionality of Boredom, with Andreas Elpidorou as one of its main representatives (a friend, as far as I know, who has never read the Lübeck philosopher).

I appreciate that Blumenberg places such strong emphasis on how painful boredom is. In *Description of Man*, he writes that the experience of boredom brings with it an unpleasant sense of lack of meaning, making us feel irritated because, while bored, our self-awareness becomes uncomfortable; it is as if we are at a standstill, as if nothing speaks to us, and as if we cannot make any assertion about anything. In the unpublished text "Langeweile, Kurzweil" (1992–1993) he explains that boredom can even be experienced as a stillness akin to death, hence expressions like 'dying of boredom' or references to *tödliche Langeweile* (mortal boredom). Indeed, boredom is unpleasant. Yet many contemporary discourses seem to ignore this detail when they absurdly extol the desirability of having time to be bored; that is why I like that Blumenberg does not romanticize it. Boredom is always painful because it results from dissatisfaction. No sane person wishes to feel bad; what we desire is to have *time of power*—another Blumenbergian expression (2007)—for freely chosen activities or to do absolutely nothing at all. But we do not expect boredom, of all things, to occupy that time. Everyday expressions like 'I'll spend the whole weekend bored' or 'I wish I had time to be bored' stem from a misunderstanding of the meaning we attach to the word 'boredom,' associating it exclusively with leisure time. We only need to recall a moment when we were truly bored and relive that discomfort to realize we would not wish to repeat it—or for it to last longer—and that desiring boredom is an oxymoron. What we

truly desire is to be in 'goblin mode'[2] occasionally, but this is not equivalent to boredom, since it brings us pleasure and encourages us to continue in that state.

Boredom must hurt in order to fulfill its function, which is none other than to make us react and escape from situations that hold insufficient value for us. In *Description of Man*, Blumenberg states that the experience of boredom is so powerful that it cannot be ignored. He explains that boredom "belongs to the strongest motivating passions of man," initially acting as a paralyzing force and later triggering "a violent repulsion" toward the situation that causes it.[3] It cannot be otherwise if the aim is to make us react. Ultimately, boredom is nothing more than the result of "poverty of stimulus and [the] prohibition of [...] falling asleep" (2011, p. 530). In this sense, the philosopher identifies two moments of reaction. The first, outlined in *Description of Man*, is merely a state of awareness regarding a situation that has become obsolete. It is a moment of recognizing the present context and oneself situated within it. Later, the reaction involves the implementation or materialization of some strategy of escape, enacting a change that frees us from boredom. Blumenberg describes boredom as "a condition in which one does 'something' only to escape it" (1992–1993, *Langeweile, Kurzweil*). Regarding all this, I have several things to say.

First of all, I agree that when we are bored, we are all *aware* of the pain; we feel it. For me, functional boredom is one in which we move through the following dimensions without major difficulty: 1) a sense of discomfort caused by an environment that fails to stimulate us adequately because it does not meet our expectations; 2) the formulation of a strategy to escape the situation causing the discomfort; and 3) the implementation of that strategy. However, I am not so sure about the role of *consciousness* in this process. Many philosophers of boredom argue that in that first reactive moment, beyond a mere expression of profound dissatisfaction, there is a critical element—a principle of introspection, a drive toward cognitive reevaluation, or epistemic inquiry. It has been suggested that boredom represents an opportunity to learn about oneself and one's environment. But the process of developing a strategy to end boredom does not necessarily require consciousness; it does not have to involve a reflective or, if you will, meta-representational moment. Throughout our lives, we build a mental catalog of responses to boredom that have proven successful—these are not fixed, but adjustable and flexible. The brain frequently relies on these responses without engaging in any reflective process, aiming to avoid the energetic cost of accessing this catalog consciously to analyze each option or create new ones every time we need to escape boredom. Of course, if the options included in this catalog were derived from prior reflection and awareness, they are more likely to endure over time. However, today our 'mental hard drive' is supplemented with pre-set options provided by the mass entertainment industry, which we use when bored without any prior conscious awareness. Furthermore, algorithms now do the work for us, so the brain does not even need to access the catalog unconsciously, as they suggest how to fill our time based on what we have previously shown provides satisfaction. Aside from all this, I am not even sure that Blumenberg always

[2] 'Goblin mode' refers to The Oxford English Dictionary's word of the 2022, meaning a type of behavior that is *unapologetically self-indulgent, lazy, slovenly, or greedy, typically in a way that rejects social norms or expectations* in an increasingly goal-oriented world.

[3] These quotations come from an untitled and unnumbered card located in box *Zettelkasten 26 U-Welt* at the DLA.

presupposes this conscious moment prior to implementing a strategy of escape, since in *Description of Man* he also notes that, faced with the poverty of stimulus that boredom represents, an "internal compensation is generated as an invisible movement" (2011, p. 530). Yes, some internal compensation must occur; the question is whether it happens as a visible (conscious) or invisible (unconscious) movement, or whether both are possible. It seems to me that the key lies in the latter. Both are possible, though we tend to respond to boredom through an invisible movement, without any conscious or reflective process, in order to conserve energy.

This seriously calls into question the widespread belief that boredom makes us more creative—a notion that, fortunately, Blumenberg never embraced. Escaping boredom does involve a moment of creativity in the sense that we must bring something into play where previously there was nothing, or where what existed no longer stimulates us. However, the *myth* tells us that boredom will make us more creative, understood as imaginative or inventive, which is a big assumption. On one hand, the change that materializes in response to boredom does not necessarily involve introducing something novel or original into the context. In fact, most of the time the design of a strategy to escape boredom not only occurs unconsciously, but even on the rare occasions when we become aware that something must be done to avoid boredom and attempt to think through how to do it, we repeatedly fall back on the same familiar options from our mental catalog. Blumenberg never claims that the change prompted by boredom must be unprecedented; it is sufficient that the movement occurs. On the other hand, the belief that boredom makes us more creative is overly optimistic. Not only are we encouraged to think that something original will emerge from boredom, but also that this resulting *creation* will be positive. We forget that a large proportion of our responses—whether conscious or unconscious—to boredom are maladaptive and far from admirable, something Blumenberg was well aware of.

Secondly, Blumenberg seems not to take into account that not all experiences of boredom, no matter how painful, are reactive or allow one to move through all the dimensions of the reaction process that make the experience functionally meaningful. For Heidegger, the reactivity of boredom increased as the experience became deeper. In the lectures he delivered during the 1929–1930 academic year at the University of Freiburg, later compiled in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, he explained that profound boredom (*es ist einem langweilig*) was a fundamental mood or disposition, an existential orientation, or a background structure of experience: a way of being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*) and of adopting stances toward oneself and reality. However, Heidegger acknowledged that not all boredom is deep or endowed with this capacity for reaction. Other forms of boredom only allow one to recognize the situation from which they arise, without prompting any action for change—for example, when we are bored by something (*das Gelangweiltwerden von etwas*) or when we are bored with something (*das Sichlangweilen bei etwas*). In these cases, boredom is not fully reactive, and thus not entirely functional, because it does not facilitate escape from its source. In my book (2026), I argue against Heidegger because I believe the opposite occurs: we react more readily to boredom when it is not deep, whereas existential boredom is less functional because it makes designing an escape strategy extremely difficult. But that is another matter—though I will later provide reasons for why I think this is the case.

My thesis follows a different line. Like any negative emotion—fear, for example—boredom can occur in a functional or dysfunctional way. Throughout the reactive process I described earlier, many failures can arise related to perceptual or attentional processes, as well as executive, volitional, and emotional functions, which may prevent the individual from designing an escape strategy to alleviate the discomfort, even while experiencing it. This is the case of what is known as *chronic boredom*. People who suffer from chronic boredom are aware of their pain and even know what causes it, yet they are unable to deploy—consciously or unconsciously—their catalog of options to effect change; that is, to imagine a scenario more desirable than the one they are immersed in or to design a completely new option to fill their time meaningfully. This constitutes a dysfunctional experience of boredom, whose root lies exclusively within the individual experiencing it and is purely endogenous, although the endogenous causes that produce it remain largely unknown. In such cases, one does not move beyond the paralysis moment Blumenberg describes; the process is never completed, so the functionality of this type of boredom is, in my view, questionable.

Another way to experience boredom dysfunctionally is when an external, exogenous agent prevents movement through the different dimensions I outlined. In this case, the bored individual is fully capable of accessing their catalog of options and even adding new ones to change the present situation—that is, they can design an escape strategy or know exactly how they would like to occupy their time meaningfully—but the very context in which the boredom arises prevents the chosen course of action from being implemented. In my book, I call this *situation-dependent and chronic boredom* (2026). The outcome is similar to the previous case, as it entails being trapped indefinitely in discomfort until either the context itself changes, expectations are readjusted to match the environment, or an explosive reaction occurs to eliminate the discomfort. It is worth emphasizing that the pathological element here is the context, which makes a reaction to the source of boredom impossible. Again, the reactive chain through which boredom could be considered functional is not completed; therefore, it is also dysfunctional. If the pain persists for too long, in either of these two dysfunctional experiences of boredom, there is a risk of falling into what has been called deep or *profound boredom*—but not in the sense Heidegger describes, where greater pain supposedly correlates with a greater potential for reaction. Rather, it is in the sense understood by many other thinkers, defining it as the sensation in which life seems stripped of all meaning, and we can no longer even trace the origin of the boredom itself, becoming incapable of escaping the discomfort.

Flaubert described it perfectly, for the first time in history, in a letter addressed to the jurist Louis Marie de la Haye, Viscount of Cormenin, on June 7, 1844, in which he wrote: “Do you know what tedium is? I do not mean the banal tedium that comes from idleness […], but that tedium […] which consumes the entrails of men and turns an intelligent being into a walking shadow, a thinking ghost” (1997, p. 101). Later, the poet Paul Valéry further clarified this experience of deep boredom that immobilizes people in *Dance and the Soul*:

> Do you not know among so many active and efficient substances, among all these magisterial preparations […], in the arsenal of the pharmacopeia […], some specific remedy, some exact antidote for that evil among evils, that poison of poisons, that venom which is opposed to all nature […] [which] is called: the tedium of living? I mean, understand me, not the passing ennui, the tedium that comes of fatigue, or the tedium of

> which we can see the germ or of which we know the limits; but that perfect tedium, that pure tedium that is not caused by misfortune or infirmity […] that tedium, in short, the stuff of which is nothing else than life itself […]. This absolute tedium is essentially nothing but life in its nakedness (1950, p. 193).

Profound boredom is the ultimate consequence of any dysfunctional experience of boredom that persists indefinitely over time. Hardly, being this deep boredom the result of an inability to react to individual-dependent and chronic boredom or situation-dependent and chronic boredom, will it serve as a starting point for change for most people—although I acknowledge that, at times, it may lead to an extreme movement, as extreme as the pain from which one seeks to escape.

The experience of boredom is always the same: that discomfort resulting from a relationship with the present that fails to stimulate us adequately and that we try to address. What determines its ultimate expression, in one way or another, is the interaction between variables that set the possibilities for response, such as the characteristics of the environment and the individual, or the duration of the experience (transient or chronic). Following this reasoning, in my theoretical framework I distinguish four forms of the boredom experience, taking into account its functionality or dysfunctionality, insofar as we are—or are not—able (due to endogenous or exogenous reasons) to react to it by designing (consciously or unconsciously) a strategy to cope: situation-dependent and transient boredom, situation-dependent and chronic boredom, individual-dependent and chronic boredom, and profound boredom. In my view, if, despite feeling the pain and even reflecting on it, it is not possible to complete the reactive cycle Blumenberg describes, that boredom cannot be called functional, for the simple reason that it fails to fulfill its presumed function: to compel us to introduce change into the context. Strictly speaking, only situation-dependent and transient boredom would be functional—but this is by no means the only way in which we experience boredom. This will become clearer in what follows.

Blumenberg goes so far as to argue that boredom is functional in an adaptive sense. Kant, in his *Anthropology*, noted that creatures naturally tend to seek comfort and an optimal state of adaptation. However, as Blumenberg explains in *Description of Man*, an excess of adaptation is also undesirable, as it results in a stagnation that diminishes our capacity to react and prevents us from adjusting to unforeseen changes. The task of boredom is precisely to prevent stagnation, to counter excessive stillness. For Blumenberg, it is necessary that we cannot remain in a situation we already know too well—that is, that we become bored—because only then are we compelled to introduce change, maintaining the constant movement that hones our capacity to adapt to the unknown that may lie ahead. Pain pushes us to escape and change position (1968–1988, 019434); it allows us to reject situations that have become too comfortable and motivates the search for different experiences, thereby avoiding stagnation and the erosion of our adaptive capacities in the face of unexpected circumstances. Boredom is what remains when we encounter experiences that fall short of our expectations because they are too familiar, preventing us from enjoying them indefinitely. It is what makes it difficult for us to remain forever in the comfort zone—which would entail dangerous stagnation, a rusting of our adaptive mechanisms—urging us instead to occupy different spaces.

Agreed, boredom is functional and adaptive. But if we cannot free ourselves from it—either because something fails within us when imagining an alternative situation (individual-dependent and chronic boredom) or because the environmental conditions prevent the imagined alternative from being enacted (situation-dependent and chronic boredom)—then it is purely dysfunctional, since the necessary change to escape *supposed* over-adaptation does not occur. For the Hanseatic philosopher, it is inconceivable that boredom could be dysfunctional, since, in the long run, all boredom ultimately triggers some reaction. However, in my view, the mere fact that one cannot move smoothly through the dimensions previously described in some cases already represents a problem, as it hinders boredom from fulfilling its intended function. Moreover, from my perspective, if the response to boredom ends up being explosive—an outburst—in any of these cases of dysfunctional boredom, as a consequence of having endured discomfort for too long (something Blumenberg himself acknowledges), resulting in a harmful episode for the individual or those around them, the original functionality of the mechanism seems questionable. I would even call into question the functionality of boredom in some cases considered functional, when individuals move through the dimensions without difficulty but end up creating—consciously or unconsciously—and enacting escape strategies or responses that may be maladaptive—for example, habitual drug use. Nevertheless, I understand that for Blumenberg, the key is maintaining movement, whatever the direction, even if it leads to suicide. In cases of dysfunctional boredom, the reactions—if they occur at all, which is not guaranteed, contrary to what Blumenberg would argue—do not necessarily translate into negative, maladaptive, or harmful responses. Yet, the simple fact that one cannot easily pass through the various dimensions outlined seems to me more than sufficient reason to consider these experiences of boredom as distinct from those in which the reactive cycle is successfully completed without difficulty.

Blumenberg himself was well aware that the cases in which boredom ends up being the starting point of disaster are numerous. He simply considers preferable—functional—the chaos that may arise as a consequence of the attempt to escape boredom, rather than the chaos we would face if we never experienced boredom at all. He is clear that lacking the mechanism underlying boredom would lead to a true catastrophe, of much greater magnitude than those historically triggered by boredom itself. He knows that boredom will not always guide us toward constructive change, and that in many cases the outcome will be destructive, yet immobility seems even more destructive to him. Without boredom in the face of the familiar, we would become so comfortable and over-adapted that we would perish at the slightest unexpected variation. For this very reason, Blumenberg celebrates that boredom awakens "the spirit of adventure" (1992–1993, 019297–019298), that it represents "a kind of willingness to be prepared to do anything" (n.d., 820–821), and that it is "the gateway to what does not conform to order, to what is contrary to the system" (2011, p. 536).

Blumenberg witnessed many derailments in his time caused by attempts to escape boredom—a "tedious boredom" (2007, p. 534)—which I am inclined to interpret as the extreme consequences of dysfunctional forms of situation-dependent and chronic boredom as a result of the rationalist-capitalist logic of early 20th-century society. The boredom of the classical contemporary period is a deep boredom that evolves from a chronic situational boredom shared

by many, resulting from certain sociocultural structures or constructs that were both tedious and constrictive, limiting human movement in responding to the tedium they exuded, making the collective enactment of escape strategies practically impossible (Ros Velasco, 2025b). The society from which Blumenberg emerged constituted a mass bored by an apparently immutable situation that, over time, cast doubt on the meaning of everything, threatening the optimism inspired by the idea of progress and science—concepts on which people had placed their hope and trust a century ago. Boredom in Blumenberg's time, in his own words, was the offspring of the "new asceticism" and its ideal of progress, of a *moralia* that leads to "living without living" (2003, p. 32), constantly seeking novelty as a way to cope with tedium (n.d., 0219685).

This was a society in which natural time had gradually been replaced by the division of the day into equal units. Weeks and days were structured into hours for work and hours for leisure, marked by the repetitive cycles of clocks; a society in which the polarization between the individual and the external world was intensified, and punctuality, precision, and calculation became the norm, as Simmel noted in his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life." A standardized lifestyle was imposed to ensure the development of means of production and consumption, the accumulation of capital, and the prosperity of markets. Again, following Simmel, this was a moment in which the struggle with nature for survival had transformed into a struggle among humans for profit, leading to an individualistic mode of life in a rationalized world, a way of experiencing the world disconnected from the natural environment, dominated by habit and the sequence of daily practices. What remained in this time was, as Benjamin announced in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, a disenchanted reality, a bland life, an empty world, a field of ruins which, following Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, prevented the enjoyment of feeling, of unexpected adventure, and of beauty. The experience of boredom was the symptom of rationalized life, one from which escape was imperative at any cost.

Blumenberg observed that the struggle against boredom in this period reinforced tastes for the repulsive, for sickness, animalism, primitivism, infantilism, brutality, extreme violence, morbidity, and lust (n.d., 019424). Mass boredom fostered compulsive and excessive action typical of "actionism" (n.d., 019297–019298), as a form of compensation through amplification (1992–1993, *Unbehagen*), which often exposed "the most intimate desires for death" (2011, p. 539). In many cases, Blumenberg noted, "the aesthetic nature of revolts against boredom" revealed, for example, a macabre taste for the warlike (2011, p. 537). He was not surprised that Valéry and Gide exchanged letters expressing a longing for battle. Both even felt a certain envy for soldiers who, on May 1, 1891, killed ten demonstrators against the last European war of the 19th century, as a way to escape boredom. Valéry wrote to Gide on the night of May 8, 1891: "I almost wish for a monstrous war to flee [...]. The days are a yawn of boredom [...]. Does this barbaric surprise you?" Gide replied on the morning of May 12, 1891: "Is this you, this warrior? Ah! [...] You too dream of the tremors of weapons and blood" (1955, pp. 82–83). Blumenberg was also unsurprised that the dramatist Friedrich Hebbel wondered, "Why can't a person commit a murder merely to escape boredom?" (n.d., 373–375) nor by the confession of the decorated World War I soldier Berthold Feuchtwanger, who admitted that many of his exploits were motivated solely by bets with his superior officer to kill boredom (n.d., 2348). At that time, the

"apocalyptic desire for the great war" was fully normalized (2011, p. 538). Blumenberg stated that the widespread repulsion against boredom "was beginning to claim more victims than hatred" (n.d., 2348), although, in some cases, both factors went hand in hand, as in the figure of Adolf Hitler, whom his doctor Theo Morell classified as a type-A patient suffering from profound and severe boredom (n.d., 1835–1839). For Blumenberg (2011), boredom was probably behind not only the Nazi genocide but also any act of terrorism. He understood that, in his time, boredom had reached the status of a plague—like "cholera, leprosy and smallpox" (n.d., 166–167)—for which the only cure was extravagance, deviation, and illness. Yet all this frenzy was preferable to boredom: "A 'little hysteria' makes the world more colorful than pedantic boredom" (n.d., *Hysterie*) he exclaimed in another unpublished note.

Does boredom fail to fulfill its primordial function in these extreme cases? Blumenberg states in *Description on Man* that "boredom can be the metaphysical principle of the world" (2011, p. 529), of creation, while he also acknowledges, in the unpublished text "Umkehrung eines Mythos," that "the end of the world may have the same motivation: boredom" (n.d., 2461). If it is boredom itself that ultimately leads us to self-destruction—when it was supposed to prevent it through over-adaptation—has it not become dysfunctional? Perhaps we have begun to inhabit a time in which it is more likely that boredom is experienced dysfunctionally rather than functionally. But this was not always the case. Blumenberg is convinced that boredom played an essential role in the past, in our evolution as a species, and that the capacity to become bored represented a genuine opportunity for growth, even an evolutionary advantage, in our most remote ancestors, at times when they found themselves over-adapted. The very desire to escape the pain of what was overly familiar encouraged them to introduce changes into their environment—without which we would not be where we are today. Boredom was the prelude to culture. Let us pause on this point for a moment.

Blumenberg explains that boredom is not an essential emotion of human beings, but rather one that was acquired at some point in our evolution because it favored self-preservation by preventing stagnation. It is "a unitary form of anticipatory behavior adapted to initial anthropological situations" (2011, p. 524). Contemporary thinkers such as Peter Toohey have understood boredom in these terms, as an adaptive emotion "in the Darwinian sense" (2011, p. 7) that has been performing an indispensable function since time immemorial—Toohey, by the way, has also not read Blumenberg. However, the majority consider that boredom can only exist in social structures that generate enormous amounts of free time and that, consequently, in the past our predecessors were too busy with their own survival to have time to be bored. This is sheer nonsense. It demonstrates little understanding of the phenomenon of boredom. First, because having free time is not necessary to experience boredom. We become bored much more during *duty time*—the time we dedicate to fulfilling our obligations, often repetitive, monotonous, or unstimulating, and to satisfying our most basic needs—than during *power time*. It cannot be assumed that merely being busy will prevent boredom, nor that having leisure time is the source of boredom. In any case, even if this were true, some anthropologists, such as Richard B. Lee or Alan Barnard (2016, p. 47), have argued that proto-societies of the past did indeed have free time because they spent much less time on work-related activities than we do

today, that their needs "were easily satisfied [and] they valued free time above the accumulation of property."

Blumenberg has no doubt that our prehistoric relatives experienced boredom, and although this is something that cannot be proven—since boredom does not fossilize—he would agree with Barnard that *the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence*. Blumenberg applies here the *principle of insufficient reason* and has no problem embracing "the rationality of the lack of foundation" to "allow certain degrees of indeterminacy" (2013, pp. 98, 13). He believes that boredom was born in the cave, when our ancestors sought shelter in terrestrial cavities to remain unnoticed by predators. According to one of his notes, "the cave became a crucial alternative to the jungle" (n.d., 020141). It was the place that ensured "the priceless advantage of reproduction without disturbances" (n.d., 019682) and the "dwelling for safe sleep" (1968–1988, 022198). "In the firm control of the homely cave" (1968–1988, 017829), he writes, our forebears found themselves protected from threats, constant vigilance ceased to be necessary, and they could enjoy states that would have been impossible to experience during life in the open air, such as deep sleep, relaxation, or boredom (not because an excess of leisure time but of adaptation). The cave, as well as other types of shelters, brought tranquility and greater adaptation to the environment for our ancestors, to the point that they could begin to experience some degree of boredom. Blumenberg takes this for granted when, in his narratives about the everyday scenes of our antecessors, he explains that, sheltered in the caves, they began to tell stories and sing songs to alleviate "the boredom of the nights" (n.d., 021606). But who were these people?

According to Blumenberg, those most prone to boredom were precisely those who spent the most time sheltered in refuges—that is, mothers, children, the elderly, and the wounded—those who, having been excluded from hunting duties for being considered the weakest, led a more monotonous and less stimulating life (n.d., 021606). Visits to these caves would have helped them survive, but at the same time, they would have fostered the emergence of the annoying experience of boredom so that they would not become too complacent. At a time when they did not have to face as many problems and conflicts as in the past, and when survival was not a constant necessity, boredom could make its presence felt. The use of fire in these camps would not have been a minor detail for Blumenberg. It would have allowed them to leave behind "the lack of light in which humanity had spent most of its history" (2002, p. 110) and to overcome the tragedy of the nights, whose "length exceeded the organic need for sleep" (n.d., 963). But then, the new hours of light also had to be spent on something. It has been widely postulated in the literature that this activity must have been socialization. Nights would have been longer, waking hours would increase, and there would be opportunity to engage in other activities, such as, for example, storytelling to ward off boredom (n.d., 2271).

Blumenberg maintains that the weak carried out activities like these to remedy boredom, sowing the seeds of a proto-culture. But, moreover, he explains, boredom would have led the weakest to do what "the others had neither the time nor the desire for, turning life into something more valuable than mere survival" (n.d., 021606). Tales and songs against boredom brought "a powerful joy" (n.d., 021606) to the camps, with which the weak also compensated for their weakness and reshaped the social structure known up to that point. The division of the group into

weak and strong had been "the basic problem of human history" (n.d., 021606). "Through hunting, the strong and clever exploited their position in the group in order to gain advantages over the other members" (1968–1988, 019592). However, in the situation of the weak, "the great deadly boredom spread, driving the new 'madness,' making the position of the elite random and suspect" (n.d., 320–322). Determined to break free from the boredom produced by "a stable form of life" (n.d., 320–322), they assumed the risk of stepping out on their own and of being called crazy by the others. "They began to sing and dance around [the strong]" (n.d., 021606). In the end, Blumenberg says, the weak turned out to be "the essence and substrate of every culture" (n.d., 021606), the ones who gave rise to the creation of abstract systems of thought and even to art. Thus, some were able to participate in the evolutionary trajectory because they possessed certain characteristics "that made them preferable for success" (n.d., 0219685) compared to those who tried to impose strength. From then on, the tables would turn: members of the elite would have to compete with those previously marginalized for the favor of the females, who would value rational qualities over muscle. Henceforth, those capable of maintaining better conversations, telling better stories, and, ultimately, providing better company to alleviate boredom, would be the most valued members of the clans.

In short, those ancestors "avoided boredom and increased the powers of the mind" (1968–1988, 021851); "they were elevated" (n.d., 472–476), thanks to boredom, toward a way of life that strove to transcend, that went beyond mere survival. Boredom—or, more precisely, the reaction to boredom—may have pushed them toward a rupture in the perfectly regulated relationship with their environment, without which, perhaps, "human beings would not exist" (2013, p. 67) as we are today. The philosopher's notes suggest that boredom was present in our prehistory, at a time of great stability, and that in our ancestors' effort to find relief from it, a response emerged that led to a paradigm shift. Nietzsche wrote in *The Antichrist* that all myths, chants, dances, and inventions created since the beginnings of human history are a response to boredom. This may be true, but it is also possible that these cultural manifestations arose to transmit group wisdom across generations, or that, initially, they existed merely as entertainment, and only later did their potential for cohesion, prosperity, and survival become evident. We cannot know for sure. The same applies to other proto-cultural manifestations that, unlike the previous ones, endured over time. For example, it is plausible that prehistoric artistic production was simply a way to occupy time for those ancestors who had reached greater cognitive development and higher levels of adaptation. Who knows.[4]

If Blumenberg is right—if the experience of boredom is a state of abnormality that becomes an advantage in certain contexts, allowing one to benefit from the experimentation of new niches; if it acts as a key equalizer in life in adaptive terms because, paradoxically, it maintains a necessary degree of maladaptation to keep us alert to future dangers; if it is a failure that permits the emergence of other arrangements through which the species improves; if it is functionally positive despite being emotionally negative; if it has fulfilled this function since ancestral times—then what has happened for its functionality to be so diminished in our era, even

[4] A detailed account of Blumenberg's imaginary conception of the origin of boredom in prehistory can be found in both my doctoral dissertation (2017a) and my book (2026).

to the point of endangering our survival through the desire for war or terrorism? Perhaps the dysfunctional forms of boredom, related to an individual's inability to imagine more desirable scenarios to overcome moments of tedium, are in communion with the belief that no new niches remain to explore, that everything that could be tried to combat boredom has already moved from potentiality to actuality. Perhaps our capacity to imagine alternatives has been destroyed because we have filled our catalogs of responses with predetermined options. Or perhaps these catalogs have been blocked because we have been discouraged from developing them on our own, or because the logic of our contemporary society has dissuaded us from materializing our personal choices.

I don't know. I don't know whether today we suffer from more dysfunctional boredom than in other eras; I'm unsure whether, despite the endless predetermined opportunities we have to fill our time, it is now harder for us to react to boredom than in the past. I would have to travel back to check whether the peasant had a large catalog of options to escape boredom or a narrow but effective one to fill the days with meaning. I have the sense that, in every historical period, we must have felt that there was nothing more to draw from, that the peak had been reached. Also, that in every period social pressures must have stifled human creativity when it came to responding to boredom or implementing specific strategies to escape it, causing profound frustration among people. My impression is that the experience of boredom today remains similar to what it was at the turn of the last century. We continue to live through transient, functional boredom, but we are also still immersed in a deep boredom derived from the inability to break free from the capitalist logic that condemns us to live a life without long-term projects, full of meaningless experiences repeating *ad infinitum*, in a dizzying time, charged with uncertainty, where the rhythms of production and consumption are even more aggressive than in Blumenberg's era. This is evident in rising stress levels, the unstoppable anxiety of our society, the countless diagnoses of depression, the shocking figures of suicide, and even in the imperative need to experience everything at once and, moreover, to show it instantly to the whole world. We increasingly need more stimuli to satisfy our appetite; we increasingly rely on algorithms to decide how to fill our time, in any way, without thinking, because we are truly exhausted. Our catalogs of options for occupying ourselves are increasingly saturated with predetermined choices, mediated by the mass entertainment industry, rather than personalized options consciously chosen after a process of reflection and self-knowledge. It seems that little remains of the Socratic *know thyself*, and even less of the Kantian *sapere aude*.

All of these are issues on which Blumenberg, obviously, has not commented, although he did place great emphasis on the importance of learning to *tolerate boredom* (n.d., 935–937). This means, quite simply, that we should not try to eliminate boredom by taking the quick route, but rather become interested observers of what it has to tell us. I translate this as: consciously build your catalog of options, paying attention to what boredom is signaling, instead of blindly consuming whatever comes your way. Only in this way will boredom be more likely to fulfill its function—and, in some cases, even then, it may fail. The casuistry of boredom is far more convoluted than we would like, and certainly more than Blumenberg ever considered. But this does not mean that we have to regard it as a *disease* every time we struggle to escape it.

Blumenberg was opposed to labeling boredom in this way. He wrote in *Description of Man* that the WHO had turned everything into pathology with its definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, promoting the idea that anything "becomes illness and [...] [that] the need for treatment potentially becomes a permanent state" (2011, p. 516). Blumenberg did not want boredom to turn into a nuisance from which health professionals could profit by imposing their "therapeutic pretensions" (2011, p. 516). Perhaps this is why he was so reluctant to view some experiences of boredom as dysfunctional, because he did not want them to be transformed into what he called "a diagnosis with great future" (2011, p. 527) to which "an extremely harsh therapy" (2011, p. 551) would have to be applied, forever overlooking the role that context plays in its experience. Today, boredom has already become a business. Advertisers and the media constantly exploit it as a lure, whereas in the 19th century no serious journalist spoke of it, he says (n.d., 166–167). Blumenberg feared that it was only a matter of time before the most licentious and authoritarian forms of medicine—the kind that would make Foucault's hair stand on end—took advantage of the more complex experiences of boredom. So far, this has not happened. Even chronic boredom dependent on the individual does not appear in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Without being as drastic as Blumenberg, I think that, as I have tried to show, dysfunctional boredom does exist, although I always tend to think that its dysfunctionality is caused, at least in most cases, by the context itself, not by an unknown endogenous cause. I would like to believe that if Blumenberg could have read my arguments, he would have agreed with much of what I present. He always said that boredom was by no means a trivial matter, but rather a weapon charged with as much life as lethality.

4. Farewell? Blumenberg; always Blumenberg

This concludes my brief exposition of Hans Blumenberg's philosophy and anthropology of boredom. Short, but dense. After so many years, the Lübeck-born philosopher still helps me think, to bring clarity to my ideas about boredom. What he says about this painful state I understand fairly well, but what I have to say about what he says is not always neatly organized in my mind. Sometimes I fear misinterpreting him, of twisting his words to make them fit—or clash—with my own. I suppose any researcher of this philosopher's work knows exactly what I mean. I hope I have at least managed to separate the wheat from the chaff so that you, the reader, can close this paper with an overview of what boredom can be: for Blumenberg, a functional, adaptive emotion, even when it involves death; for me, a question mark that I cannot stop turning over in my mind, for over a decade now—because of him! I have time to keep thinking about it, because "the world will always be boring" (1992–1993, *Die Langeweile der Zukunft*); always with Blumenberg.[5]

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