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Boredom as Wonder by Other Means in Heidegger

In his seminar of 1929-30, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (FC), Martin Heidegger proposes a strange path to philosophy: boredom (*Langeweile*). More incredibly, his proposal is that we must begin in philosophy, not by analyzing boredom, but rather by being bored—being struck by the emotion itself. When we're bored in the right way, that is, the proper subject matter of philosophy is, he thinks, disclosed to us in a way that makes possible the most fundamental sorts of insights.

This proposal can seem strange in several ways. First, there's the notion that emotions have disclosive power: that they're not merely ways we feel, but also avenues through which real aspects of ourselves and the world are revealed to us. Further, there's the notion that what certain emotions disclose—those he calls fundamental attunements (*Grundstimmungen*)—deserves to be called the proper subject matter of philosophy. Both are theses for which Heidegger argued in *Being and Time*'s famous analysis of the emotions—arguments he rehearses and amplifies in FC.

However, beyond this, there's the notion that what has this disclosive power is boredom in particular—an emotion whose sheer hatefulness and banality makes the suggestion that it offers deep insights incredible in the extreme. To be sure, Heidegger argues that only a certain kind of boredom—what he calls profound boredom (*tiefe Langeweile*)—is a fundamental attunement: the 'homelessness' that inspires the 'homesickness' that, following Novalis, he identifies as the animating spark for philosophy. By contrast, in more ordinary forms of boredom, the disclosive power of profound boredom is stunted. However, even if he's succeeded in identifying a rare, remarkable sort of boredom that offers insight rather than mere tedium, Heidegger himself argues that this same boredom is also the source of many of modern culture's malaises—that modernity has made people profoundly boring to themselves. Why, then, should the very boredom that drags down not just

certain individuals but an entire civilizational epoch be something to which we should aspire?

In this paper, I attempt to clarify Heidegger's conception of profound boredom with the help of his later analyses of wonder—e.g. in his seminar of 1937-38, *Basic Questions of Philosophy*. The wonder that sparked the emergence of philosophy in ancient Greece was, he thinks, characterized by a certain unease at their place in the world—an unease that, upon reflection, illuminates his cryptic remarks about boredom as 'homesickness' in *FC*. However, modernity has, on Heidegger's account, made wonder increasingly unavailable to us. Thus, his analysis of profound boredom in *FC* can be interpreted as the proposal that profound boredom can, if we let it, serve for us the philosophy-inspiring role that wonder did for the ancient Greeks. I argue that profound boredom is, in other words, wonder under the specific historical conditions of modernity. More specifically, it can be accessed through a meditative relinquishment of the distracting frenzy of 'busyness' that Heidegger thinks stunts the disclosive power of the very profound boredom with which life in modernity saddles us.