

Being bored

Lars Svendsen

Boredom normally arises when we cannot do what we want to do, or have to do something we do not want to do. But occasionally we have no idea of what we want to do, as we have lost our orientation in a world that we expect to provide us with meaning. We may then be in a state of existential boredom that is reminiscent of a lack of willpower, because the will cannot get a foothold anywhere. In existential boredom one loses the capacity to find any object whatsoever for one's desire. Time stands still – it is as if eternity has entered this world. The temporality of boredom is negative. In boredom time must be passed. The pastime has no genuine object because what concerns us is not the activity or object we are occupied with, but rather the occupation itself. We seek to be occupied because it liberates us from the emptiness of time. Meaninglessness is boring. Boredom can be described as a meaning withdrawal, in analogy with drug withdrawal, as a discomfort that tells us that our need for meaning is not being met.

A common feature in analyses of boredom is that boredom consists of or is caused by a lack of interest in something. This is clearly not a sufficient condition, since there are numerous things that we have absolutely no interest in, but that does not necessarily make those things boring for us. Another necessary condition is therefore that one must be subjected to that which one finds boring. An objection to this might be: This works fine for ordinary, everyday boredom, but it might not work so well for existential boredom. What is one subjected to in existential boredom? Possible answers might be: Life. The universe. Everything. These answers may be correct, for all I know, but it is hard to see what they entail.

What do I mean by saying that I am bored because I am subjected to something I find no interest in? The word "interest", which stems from the Latin *interesse*, literally means "to be between", but it had the meaning of being of importance or making a difference. By saying that I have no interest in something, I am saying that it does not matter to me whether or not that something exists. But if something simply does not matter to me, it would seem to pose no problem. Is it because such an absence of mattering in itself is painful or disturbing?

That which bores me, is something I do not care about.

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. This notion of caring probably gives us some clue to what is meant by a lack of meaning in boredom.

The act of caring makes the world a meaningful place and gives our lives a direction. Boredom is not overcome simply by doing something other than what one is currently doing, but rather by doing something that comes across as meaningful, as something one cares about. Boredom motivates a search for meaning, and such meaning can, of course, be found in something new, but one can also rediscover a meaning that has been lost, in one's work or relationships. You have the ability to reflect on what you care about, to question whether you should actually care about it and to consider how you might devote yourself to it. That is how you define who you are.

There are a multitude of potentially and actually meaningful lives, and which is relevant to you will depend on the person you are and the circumstances in which you live. However, it is generally true that, in order to have a meaningful life, a person must care about what he fills his life with. You must be committed to something, because commitment gives life substantial meaning. Aside from that, there is no universal – and informative – answer as to what makes life meaningful.

When you complain about boredom, you usually complain about not being given something meaningful – as if existence has failed to provide you with something you are entitled to. Your need for meaning might be dysfunctional. Perhaps your expectation for meaning is so great that nothing will ever be capable of satisfying that need. You may not be responsible for a disposition for feeling bored, but you are responsible for how you deal with this disposition. This is why you are also responsible for your own boredom. Your emotions are your emotions. They belong to you. You cannot simply choose what to feel. You cannot simply choose not to be bored, such that the problem of boredom would vanish like a puff of air as a result of a volitional act. Phenomenologically speaking, emotions happen to us, often contrary to our wishes. However, you can modify your own thoughts and expectations. Nobody else can do that for you. Boredom is experienced as having its source outside of you as a shortcoming in your surroundings, which fail to satisfy your needs. Perhaps that shortcoming is your shortcoming.

The problem is, of course, that you cannot simply decide to care about something. If you do not care about something, you will cannot simply establish a caring relationship to that thing. It is rather a question of being open to possibilities of caring. However, such caring can seem to be threat to our late modern sensibilities, as real caring involves commitment. Life meaning and the remedy against boredom is ultimately about embracing the apparently dull stuff in life, such as commitment and taking on responsibilities. And if a person simply cannot find it in him- or herself to care about anything at all, having reached some sort of rock bottom, I guess that there is nothing we can do for that person. There will be nothing to grasp onto, not anything to give anything any direction what so ever. However, I would believe that this person is self-delusional, that he does in fact care about something, but has lost his orientation in his cares.

by Lars Svendsen, Bergen, Norway, 2018

for Chris Hanlon