

A Philosophy of Boredom

Lars Svendsen

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Translated by John Irons



REAKTION BOOKS

Published by Reaktion Books Ltd
33 Great Sutton Street
London EC1V 0DX, UK

www.reaktionbooks.co.uk

First published in English 2005, reprinted 2005, 2006, 2008

This book was first published in 1999 by Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, under the title
Kjedsomhetens filosofi by Lars Fr. H. Svendsen © Universitets Forlaget

English-language translation © Reaktion Books 2005 This translation has been published
with the financial support of NORLA Non-fiction.

English translation by John Irons

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Page references in the Photo Acknowledgements and Index match the printed edition of
this book.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Svendsen, Lars Fr. H., 1970–

A philosophy of boredom

1. Boredom 2. Boredom in literature

I. Title 152.4

ISBN-13: 978 1 86189 217 1

ISBN-10: 1 86189 217 9

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Preface

My reason for writing this book was this: I was deeply bored for a while. What made me realise the importance of the topic, however, was the boredom-related death of a close friend. I came to the point where I had to agree with Rimbaud: 'boredom is no longer my love'.¹ Being bored was no longer merely an innocent pose or a minor infliction. Rimbaud's complaint of 'dying of boredom'² – later to be repeated in numerous pop and rock songs from G. G. Allin's *Bored to death* to Depeche Mode's *Something to do* – suddenly became real. These songs stood out as the soundtracks of our lives. I believed that this experience was not restricted to a close circle of friends but rather indicated a serious problem regarding *meaning* in our contemporary culture as a whole. To investigate the problem of boredom is to attempt to understand who we are and how we fit into the world at this particular point in time. The more I thought about it, the more boredom seemed to be seminal for understanding contemporary culture. We live in a culture of boredom, and *A Philosophy of Boredom* is my modest attempt to come to terms with that culture.

At a more academic level, I was motivated by a certain dissatisfaction with contemporary philosophy. Emmanuel Levinas describes contemporary thought as one that passes through a world without human traces.³ Boredom, on the other hand, is human – all too human.

This book was originally written as an essay at a time when I had planned to devote myself to leisure. After having completed a lengthy research project, I was going to relax and do ... *nothing*. But that turned out to be absolutely impossible

to carry out. Obviously, I was unable to do nothing. So I thought I had better do something, hence this book.

Most often, we do not have any well-developed concepts for that which torments us. Very few people indeed have any well-thought-out concept of boredom. It is usually a blank label applied to everything that fails to grasp one's interest. Boredom is first and foremost something we live with, not so much something we think about systematically. Even so, we can attempt to develop certain concepts about boredom so as to understand better what it is that afflicts us when it strikes. This book is an attempt to develop such thoughts about what boredom is, when it arose, why it did so, why it afflicts us, how it does so and why it cannot be overcome by any act of will.

But let me say that although everything in this book is thematized in terms of the *relation* it has to boredom, it is clear that boredom is only one aspect of human existence. My intention is in no way to reduce all of life to being an expression of boredom.

It is important to find the right form for the subject to be dealt with. I once began to read a philosophical article on love. After a few lines the following statement came up: 'Bob loves Kate if, and only if ...'. At that point, I stopped reading. Such a formalized approach was unsuitable for treating a subject like love, because the actual phenomenon would in all probability be lost in the process. So the reader ought not to expect such statements as: 'Peter is bored if, and only if ...'. As Aristotle points out, we cannot seek to attain the same level of precision in all subjects; we must make do with the level that the subject-matter itself permits. Boredom is a vague, diverse phenomenon, and I believe that a long essay is the most suitable form for an investigation of it, not a strictly analytical dissertation. So I intend to present less of a cohesive argument, more a series of sketches that will hopefully bring us closer to an understanding of boredom. Since the phenomenon is so diverse, it calls for an interdisciplinary approach. So I have

based myself on texts from many different disciplines, such as philosophy, literature, psychology, theology and sociology.

The book consists of four main sections: Problem, Stories, Phenomenology, Ethics. In the first I give a broad account of various aspects of boredom and its relationship to modernity. The second is devoted to a presentation of certain stories concerning boredom. A central thesis here is that Romanticism constitutes the most central basis, in terms of the history of ideas, for an understanding of modern boredom. The third focuses on Martin Heidegger's phenomenological investigations of boredom, and in the fourth I discuss what stance one can adopt to boredom as well as how one ought *not* to do so. There is a loose thread that runs throughout these four sections, although each can be read independently.

I have attempted to write this book in a non-technical style, as boredom is an experience that affects many people, plus I want this book to be accessible. Even so, certain passages are quite demanding – this is simply due to the fact that the subject at times *is* demanding. In the course of writing, comments from friends and colleagues have been invaluable. I thank them for their contribution, and, not least, for having put up with me at a time when I was virtually unable to talk about anything else other than the subject of this book. A special thanks must go to Ståle Finke, Ellen-Marie Forsberg, Anne Granberg, Helge Jordheim, Thomas Nilsen, Hilde Norrgrén, Erik Thorstensen and Knut Olav Åmås for their detailed comments on the typescript.

ONE

The Problem of Boredom

BOREDOM AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM

As a philosopher, from time to time one must attempt to address big questions. If one fails to do so, one loses sight of what led one to study philosophy in the first place. In my opinion, boredom is one such big question, and an analysis of boredom ought to say something important about the conditions under which we live. We ought not – and are actually unable to – avoid considering our attitude towards the question of *being* from time to time. There may be many initial reasons for reflecting on one's life, but the special thing about fundamental existential experiences is that they inevitably lead one to question one's own existence. Profound boredom is one fundamental existential experience. As Jon Hellesnes has asked: 'What can possibly be more existentially disturbing than boredom?'¹

The big questions are not necessarily the eternal questions, for boredom has only been a central cultural phenomenon for a couple of centuries. It is of course impossible to determine precisely *when* boredom arose, and naturally it has its precursors. But it stands out as being a typical phenomenon of modernity. On the whole, the precursors were restricted to small groups, such as the nobility and the clergy, whereas the boredom of modernity is wide-ranging in its effect and can be said to be a relevant phenomenon today for practically everyone in the Western world.

Boredom is usually considered as something random in relation to the nature of man, but this is based on highly dubious assumptions regarding human nature. One could just as well claim that boredom is embodied in human nature, but that would also presuppose that there is anything at all that can be called 'human nature' – a presupposition that seems problematic to me. Postulating a given nature has a tendency to put an end to all further discussion. For, as Aristotle points out, we direct our attention first and foremost to that which is capable of change.² By postulating a *nature* we are claiming that it cannot be changed. It can also be tempting to postulate a completely neutral human nature, where man has just as great a potential to experience sadness as happiness, enthusiasm as boredom. In that case, the explanation of boredom is exclusively to be found in the individual's social environment. I do not believe, however, that a clear distinction can be made between psychological and social aspects when dealing with a phenomenon such as boredom, and a reductive sociologism is just as untenable as a psychologism. So I choose to approach the matter from a different angle, adopting a perspective based partly on the history of ideas and partly on phenomenology. Nietzsche pointed out that the 'hereditary fault of all philosophers' is to base themselves on man at a particular period of time and then turn this into an eternal truth.³ So I will make do with stating that boredom is a very serious phenomenon that affects many people. Aristotle insisted that virtue is not natural, but that it is not unnatural either.⁴ The same applies to boredom. Moreover, an investigation of boredom can be carried out without presupposing any anthropological constants, i.e., anything given independently of a specifically social and historical space. We are dealing here with an investigation of man in a particular historical situation. It is *us* I am writing about, living in the shadow of Romanticism, as inveterate Romantics without the hyperbolic faith of Romanticism in the ability of the imagination to transform the world.

Even though all good philosophy ought to contain an important element of self-knowledge, it does not necessarily have to take the form of a confession modelled on Augustine's *Confessions*. Many people have asked me if I undertook this project because I suffered from boredom, but what I personally feel ought not to be of any interest to readers.⁵ I do not conceive philosophy as being a confessional activity, rather one that labours to gain clarity – a clarity that is admittedly never more than temporary – in the hope that the small area one feels one has shed light on will also be of relevance to others. From a philosophical point of view, my private conditions are irrelevant, even though they are naturally important to me.

I carried out a small, unscientific survey among colleagues, students, friends and acquaintances that revealed that they were on the whole unable to say whether they were bored or not, although some answered in the affirmative or the negative – and one person even claimed that he had *never* been bored. To those readers who have possibly never been bored I can say by way of comparison that deep boredom is related, phenomenologically speaking, to insomnia, where the I loses its identity in the dark, caught in an apparently infinite void. One tries to fall asleep, takes perhaps a few faltering steps, but does not gain sleep, ending up in a no man's land between a waking state and sleep. In *Book of Disquiet* Fernando Pessoa wrote:

Certain sensations are slumbers that fill up our mind like a fog and prevent us from thinking, from acting, from clearly and simply being. As if we hadn't slept, something of our undreamed dreams lingers in us, and the torpor of the new day's sun warms the stagnant surface of our senses. We're drunk on not being anything, and our will is a bucket poured out onto the yard by the listless movement of a passing foot.⁶

Pessoa's boredom is obvious – it is distinct in all its formlessness. It is, however, in the nature of things that very few people indeed can come up

with an unequivocal answer as to whether they are bored or not. First, moods, generally speaking, are seldom intentional subjects as far as we are concerned – they are precisely something one finds oneself *in*, not something one consciously looks *at*. And second, boredom is a mood that is typified by a lack of quality that makes it more elusive than most other moods. Georges Bernanos's village priest provides us with a fine description of the imperceptibly destructive nature of boredom in *The Diary of a Country Priest*:

So I said to myself that people are consumed by boredom. Naturally, one has to ponder for a while to realise this – one does not see it immediately. It is a like some sort of dust. One comes and goes without seeing it, one breathes it in, one eats it, one drinks it, and it is so fine that it doesn't even scrunch between one's teeth. But if one stops up for a moment, it settles like a blanket over the face and hands. One has to constantly shake this ash-rain off one. That is why people are so restless.⁷

It is perfectly possible to be bored without being aware of the fact. And it is possible to be bored without being able to offer any reason or cause for this boredom. Those who claimed in my small survey that they were deeply bored were as a rule unable to state accurately *why* they were bored; it wasn't this or that that plagued them, rather a nameless, shapeless, object-less boredom. This is reminiscent of what Freud said about melancholy, where he began by stressing a similarity between melancholy and grief, since both contain an awareness of loss. But whereas the person who grieves always has a distinct object of loss, the melancholic does not precisely know what he has lost.⁸

Introspection is a method that has obvious limitations when investigating boredom, so I decided to look critically at a number of texts of a philosophical and literary nature. I regard literature as excellent source-material for philosophical studies, and for the philosophy of culture it is just

as indispensable as scientific works are for the philosophy of science. As a rule, literature is a great deal more illuminative than quantitative sociological or psychological studies. This applies not least to our subject, where much research has focused on how the deficiency or surplus of sensory stimuli cause boredom without this always being particularly illuminative when considering such a complex phenomenon as boredom.⁹ As Adam Phillips, a psychoanalyst, has expressed it: ‘Clearly, we should speak not of boredom, but of boredoms, because the notion itself includes a multiplicity of moods and feelings that resist analysis.’¹⁰

It is often claimed that about ten per cent of us suffer from depression in the course of life. What is the difference between profound boredom and depression? My guess is that there is a considerable overlap. I would also guess that almost one hundred per cent of the population suffers from boredom in the course of their life. Boredom cannot simply be understood as a personal idiosyncrasy. It is a much too comprehensive phenomenon to be explained away in such a way. Boredom is not just an inner state of mind; it is also a characteristic of the world, for we participate in social practices that are saturated with boredom. At times, it almost seems as if the entire Western world has become like Berghof, the sanatorium Hans Castorp stayed at for seven years in Thomas Mann’s novel *The Magic Mountain*. We kill time and bore ourselves to death. So it can be tempting to agree with Lord Byron: ‘There’s little left but to be bored or bore.’¹¹

My small survey revealed that there were more men than women who claimed to have been bored. Psychological investigations also indicate that men suffer more from boredom than women.¹² (These investigations also support Schopenhauer’s claim that the feeling of boredom diminishes with age.¹³) I have no good explanation as to why this should be the case. It may be that women to a lesser extent than men verbally *express* boredom, but that they are affected by it to an equal extent. Possibly, women have other needs and sources of meaning than men and are therefore less affected by

various cultural changes that give rise to boredom. As mentioned, I have been unable to find any satisfactory explanation of this gender difference. Nietzsche too claims that women suffer less from boredom than men, motivating this by saying that women have never learnt to work properly¹⁴ – a more than dubious form of justification.

I think Kierkegaard exaggerated when he claimed that ‘Boredom is the root of all evil.’¹⁵ But it contributes to a great deal of evil. I do not believe all that many murders start because of boredom, for they are known most often to be acts of passion, but it is a fact that boredom is often used cited as the reason for a number of crimes committed – including murder. Nor can we say that wars start because of boredom, although it is a fact that the outbreak of some wars has been accompanied by manifest joy, with euphoric crowds filling the streets, as if celebrating the fact that something has finally broken the monotony of everyday life. Jon Hellesnes has written perceptively about this.¹⁶ The problem about war, however, is that it is not only deadly but that it also quickly becomes deadly boring; ‘Wars without interest boredom of a hundred years’ wars’,¹⁷ wrote Pound. In *The Magic Mountain* it is the outbreak of war that finally awakens Hans Castorp from his seven-year slumber, but there is every reason to believe that Castorp is soon to be afflicted by boredom once more. In an attempt to say at least *something* positive about boredom, the sociologist Robert Nisbet has claimed that boredom is not only the root of a number of evils but that it has also put an end to a number of evils, for the simple reason that they gradually became too boring. He takes the practise of burning of witches as an example, claiming that it did not die out for legal, moral or religious reasons but simply because it had become too boring, and that people thought: ‘If you’ve seen one burn, you’ve seen them all.’¹⁸ Nisbet possibly has a point here, although boredom can scarcely be said to be a redeeming force. For implicit in his argument is the idea that boredom was also the cause of witch-burning beginning in the first place.

Boredom has become associated with drug abuse, alcohol abuse, smoking, eating disorders, promiscuity, vandalism, depression, aggression, animosity, violence, suicide, risk behaviour, etc. There are statistical grounds for making the connection.¹⁹ This ought not to surprise anyone, for the Early Fathers of the Church were already well aware of such a connection, considering the pre-modern forerunner of boredom, *acedia*, to be the worst sin, since all other sins derived from it. That boredom has serious consequences for a society, not only for individuals, ought to be beyond all doubt. That it is also serious for individuals is because boredom involves a loss of meaning, and a loss of meaning is serious for the afflicted person. I do not believe that we can say that the world appears to be meaningless because one is bored, or that one is bored because the world appears to be meaningless. There is hardly a simple relationship here between a cause and an effect. But boredom and a loss of meaning are connected in some way. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton claimed that ‘we can talk about 88 degrees of melancholy, since diverse people are diversely attacked and descend deeper or are dipped less deeply in the hellish pit.’ Personally, I am unable to distinguish all that precisely between various degrees of boredom, but it covers everything from a slight discomfort to a serious loss of all meaning. For most of us, boredom is bearable – but not for all. It is of course always tempting to ask the person complaining of boredom or melancholy to ‘pull himself together’, but, as Ludvig Holberg points out, this is ‘just as impossible to do as ordering a dwarf to make himself one cubit taller than he is’.²⁰

Almost all those who talk about boredom consider boredom to be an evil, although there are certain exceptions. Johann Georg Hamann described himself as a ‘Liebhaber der Langen Weile’, and when his friends criticized him for being a good-for-nothing, he replied that it is easy to work, whereas genuine idleness is really demanding on a human being.²¹ E. M. Cioran has a similar view: ‘To the friend who tells me he is bored because he is unable

to work, I reply that boredom is a *superior* state, and that it is debasing it to connect it with the notion of work.’²²

There are no courses offered at the universities, apart from the fact that one is often bored during one’s studies. Nor is it obvious that boredom can any more be considered a relevant philosophical subject, although it has formerly been so. In a contemporary philosophy where almost everything has become variations on the theme of epistemology, boredom would seem to be a phenomenon that falls outside the framework of philosophy as a discipline. To busy oneself with such a subject will for some people be seen as a clear indication of intellectual immaturity. That may well be. If boredom cannot be considered a relevant philosophical subject nowadays, there is perhaps good reason to be concerned about the state of philosophy. A philosophy that cuts itself off from the question of the meaning of life is hardly worth getting involved in. That meaning is something we can lose falls outside the framework of philosophical semantics, but it ought not to fall outside the framework of philosophy as a whole.

Why should boredom be a *philosophical* problem and not just a psychological or sociological problem? I have to admit here that I am unable to advance any general criterion as to what distinguishes a philosophical problem from a non-philosophical one. According to Wittgenstein, a philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about.’²³ Similarly, Martin Heidegger describes the ‘need’ that drives one to philosophical reflection as a ‘not-inside-out-knowledge’.²⁴ What characterizes a philosophical question, then, is some sort of loss of bearings. Is this not also typical of profound boredom, where one is no longer able to find one’s bearings in relation to the world because one’s very relationship to the world has virtually been lost? Samuel Beckett describes this existentialist state to his first novel hero, Belacqua, in this way:

He was bogged in indolence, without identity ... The cities and forests and beings were also without identity, they were shadows, they exerted neither pull nor goad ... His being was without axis or contour, its centre everywhere and periphery nowhere, an unsurveyed marsh of sloth.²⁵

Boredom normally arises when we cannot do what we want to do, or have to do something we do not want to do. But what about when we have no idea of what we want to do, when we have lost the capacity to get our bearings in life? Then we can find ourselves in a profound boredom that is reminiscent of a lack of willpower, because the will cannot get a firm grip anywhere. Fernando Pessoa has described this as ‘To suffer without suffering, to want without desire, to think without reason.’²⁶ And, as we shall see in the analysis of Heidegger’s phenomenology of boredom, this experience can be a way into philosophy.

Boredom lacks the charm of melancholy – a charm that is connected to melancholy’s traditional link to wisdom, sensitivity and beauty. For that reason, boredom is less attractive to aesthetes. It also lacks the obvious seriousness of depression, so it is less interesting to psychologists and psychiatrists. Compared to depression and melancholy, boredom simply seems to be too trivial or vulgar to merit a thorough investigation. It is surprising, for example, that Peter Wessel Zapffe’s 600-page study *On the Tragic* (1941) contains not a single discussion of boredom.²⁷ Zapffe admittedly touches on the phenomenon at various points, but it is not given its usual name. We do, however, find discussions of boredom by important philosophers, such as Pascal, Rousseau, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Benjamin and Adorno. And within literature there are Goethe, Flaubert, Stendhal, Mann, Beckett, Büchner, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Baudelaire, Leopardi, Proust, Byron, Eliot, Ibsen, Valéry, Bernanos, Pessoa ... This list is incomplete – the subject is so comprehensively described that any such list is arbitrary. We ought, however, to note that all these writers and philosophers belong to the modern period.

BOREDOM AND MODERNITY

According to Kierkegaard, ‘The gods were bored; therefore they created human beings. Adam was bored because he was alone; therefore Eve was created. Since that moment, boredom entered the world and grew in quantity in exact proportion to the growth of population.’²⁸ Nietzsche’s view was that God was bored on the seventh day,²⁹ and he claimed that even the gods fought in vain against boredom.³⁰ Henry David Thoreau supported Kierkegaard’s idea (‘Without a doubt, the form of boredom and lassitude that imagines it has exhausted all the happiness and variety of life just as old as Adam.’³¹), and Alberto Moravia claimed that Adam and Eve were bored,³² whereas Kant asserted that Adam and Eve *would have* been bored if they had stayed in Paradise.³³ Robert Nisbet decided that God banished Adam and Eve from Paradise to save them from the boredom that in time would have afflicted them.³⁴

It is reasonable to assume that certain forms of boredom have existed since the beginning of time, among them that which will be discussed later as ‘situative boredom’, i.e., a boredom that is due to something specific in a situation. But *existential* boredom stands out as being a phenomenon of modernity. There are exceptions here too. Take, for example, the opening chapter of Ecclesiastes that contains the statement ‘All is vanity ... ‘and also ‘The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.’³⁵ It is not unreasonable, however, to say that Solomon is here being prophetic rather than diagnostic on behalf of his age. And Pastor Løchen in Arne Garborg’s *Weary Men* seems to be right in claiming that this Old Testament book was written for the people of the present age.³⁶ There are also writings by Seneca where via the concept *tedium vitae* (tiredness of life) he describes something that is strongly reminiscent of modern boredom.³⁷ It is practically always possible to find earlier texts that seem to anticipate later

phenomena. I do not assert that there is any clear, sharp break at any point in history, but insist that boredom is not thematized to any *major* extent before the Romantic era. With the advent of Romanticism, boredom becomes, so to speak, democratized and finds a broad form of expression.

Boredom is the ‘privilege’ of modern man. While there are reasons for believing that joy and anger have remained fairly constant throughout history, the amount of boredom seems to have increased dramatically. The world has apparently become more boring. Before Romanticism it seems to have been a marginal phenomenon, reserved for monks and the nobility. For a long time boredom was a status symbol, i.e., as long as it was a prerogative of the upper echelons of society, since they were the only ones with the material basis required for boredom. As boredom spread to all social strata it lost its exclusiveness. There are further reasons for believing that boredom is fairly equally distributed throughout the Western world.

Boredom always contains a critical element,³⁸ because it expresses the idea that either a given situation or existence as a whole is deeply unsatisfying. As François de La Rochefoucauld already pointed out in his *Maxims* – which are mainly acute descriptions of life at the French court – ‘Almost always we are bored by people to whom we ourselves are boring’.³⁹ At the French court, boredom was the privilege of the monarch, for if another member of the court expressed boredom, it could scarcely be interpreted in any other way than that the monarch bored that particular person. Similarly, the earlier *acedia* had to be considered as an unprecedented insult to God when the monks sank into a fathomless void in their meeting with Holy Writ. How could God, in His perfection, ever be thought of as boring? To be bored in relation to God is implicitly claiming that God *lacks* something.

If boredom increases, it means that there is a serious fault in society or culture as a conveyor of meaning. Meaning has to be understood as a