



On boredom: A note on experience without qualities

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Most of us probably remember how long and dreary Sundays could be when we were kids. When I think of the boring Sundays in the little town that I grew up in, I for one picture a world, into which someone had plunged a teabag that had been used too many times, leaving everything blotched with a putrid and pale colour. Morrissey, the former singer of the band The Smiths, must have felt something like this when he wrote: 'Etch a postcard: "How I Dearly Wish I Was Not Here" / In the seaside town that they forgot to bomb / Come, Come, Come - nuclear bomb / Everyday is like Sunday / Everyday is silent and grey' (Morrissey, 1988: tr. 3). In boredom the world appears empty. But at the same time this emptiness registers as a nauseating tension, a feeling of being fed up with the situation that simply *will not pass*. It is as if time itself has come to a halt and now literally seems to be swelling like a washed up body on a beach.

Research in work organizations over the last decades have ever more often associated human attributes and the ability of the working subject to perform as a 'self' with positive organizational outcome. In this light, it is surprising that boredom, which Kierkegaard considered a despairing refusal to be oneself, and called 'the root of all evil' (Kierkegaard, 1987: 281) has not gotten more attention. In comparison to research into stress and ill mental health at work, the phenomenon has largely been ignored. What is more, the studies that do exist, mostly within the fields of work sociology and psychology, rarely touch upon the experience of boredom itself. Instead they engage with either its consequences, with the work situations that lead to it or with individual differences that may indicate who is more prone to it. In this contribution, I want to return to the *experience* of boredom and explore the curious and frustrating waiting position that it entails in a little more detail. What I will argue is that boredom, as a position where nothing is available for self-expression, where one *wants* to be active, but does not know *how* to act, may be viewed as '*experience without qualities*'¹.

1 I borrow the term from Elizabeth S. Goodstein's excellent work on the concept of boredom and its role on modernity: *Experience Without Qualities – Boredom and Modernity* (2005).

Boredom in work organizations

Mentioned among negative corollaries of boredom in work organizations are not surprisingly low job satisfaction and performance, alcohol and drug misuse, counterproductive behaviour, depression and work-related injuries (Loukidou et al., 2009). Early studies of work situations focused on external factors like repetitiveness and monotony as causes of boredom that may ultimately be harmful to worker health (e.g. Davies, 1926; Bartlett, 1943). Later research has dealt more with the effect that monotony has on internal factors like attention. Here there seems to be a general agreement, that attention will deteriorate and be expressed as lower performance, when a boring or uninteresting task must be performed (e.g. Damrad-Frye and Laird, 1989; Perkins and Hill, 1985). Similarly, processes of formalisation and routinisation of rules, procedures and norms in institutional settings have been found to provoke boredom, either by reduction of the variety of stimulation or by placing limitations on what is considered acceptable behaviour and activities from the organization's perspective (e.g. Fischer, 1993).

Other studies again revolve around individual differences, i.e. the relationship between boredom and the levels of stimulation that individuals require to function optimally. A differentiation between the transient *state boredom* and the more pervasive and enduring *trait boredom* (Watson et al., 1988) has been essential to the development of the notion of boredom proneness as a measurable personality trait. Farmer and Sundberg (1986) suggested the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS) as an instrument to operationalise boredom as a personality trait, which has been used (along with a few other tools like it) in personnel selection and to develop the rewards processes used in organizations (Loukidou et al., 2009). It has been suggested for example that employees who score high on the BPS are better suited to jobs providing immediate rewards and should not be placed in monitoring and high vigilance jobs (Wallace et al., 2003).

Boredom as experience without qualities

Common to the research perspectives on boredom in work organizations, which no doubt have important practical value, is not only that they barely discuss the *experience* of boredom, but also that they approach the phenomenon from an angle that will ultimately be counterintuitive to the bored. This in a way is quite understandable, for we feel that we know what boredom is like anyway. Take an everyday situation like a late afternoon lecture on the subtleties of film noir minimalism in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob le flambeur* (1955). This lecture may be very boring to me. But it may be a hit with my more Francophile colleague, who as we make our way home afterwards cannot stop talking about it. Boredom, in other words, appears to be a subjective interpretation of a given situation or of a discrete object, which is waiting for us to reflect on it. Whether we focus on the causes of boredom or on boredom proneness, this is the adopted perspective.

But in reality this description does not come close to how the bored experience boredom. If we ignore for a moment the argument that it might be reasonable to make a distinction between the everyday kind of boredom in the example above and a deeper,

more pervasive experience like the *tedium vitae*, then Seneca's description may help us understand why this is so:

How long the same things? Surely I will yawn, I will sleep, I will eat, I will be thirsty, I will be cold, I will be hot. Is there no end? But do all things go in a circle? Night overcomes day, day night, summer gives way to autumn, winter presses on autumn, which is checked by spring. All things pass that they may return. I do nothing new, I see nothing new. Sometimes this makes me seasick [fit aliquando et huiusreinausia]. There are many who judge living not painful but empty. (Seneca, 2004: 120)

What Seneca presents us with here, is not a two-stage act of receiving a neutral object and then glossing it over with an interpretation. No organization is made by a reflection subsequent to the experience of the phenomenon that appears. No raw material is given external to the self-sameness of the world that makes the bored think of life as empty (as this would make his initial question easy to answer). Rather, it is the other way around. The unbearable presence and clarity of a world that makes the bored nauseous in all its obviousness is conditioned by the experience itself. It is the experience of the world as a tautology that gives him access to the 'materiality' of reality. In Heidegger's terms, Seneca's *tedium vitae* is 'world-disclosive'. The primary is not a situation in which he 'chooses' how to deal with the objects that he is facing and then finds them boring, it is *his experience itself that is without qualities*.

What is uncovered here is an experience of boredom that is not as simple as it was made out to be above. We find ourselves suddenly confronted with a new field of inquiry that is concerned with discerning and evaluating the interpretive situation, which makes the world appear as it does and which confronts the forms and limits of our powers of interpretation. It is a situation that reveals something about us, about who we are, where we come from, what we hope for and – not least – what interests us. Another way to put this is to say that in the experience of boredom, identity is turned into a problem, a question, into something fundamentally precarious.

Time and the failure of imagination

In boredom identity becomes a problem as the teleology of the self is fundamentally questioned. But what does it mean to speak of this experience as *experience without qualities*? Consider the example of listening to music. When we listen to a melody, we naturally take it to be a unity although it passes through different notes, pitches and rhythms². To hear a melody, then, and not just the variety of single notes, presupposes the ability to retain the already sounded notes as a context against which the sound of the present note is experienced. Similarly, hearing this present note as one that anticipates further musical development is necessary in order for us to experience the whole of a melody. To listen to a melody, in other words, means being able to 'hear' what is not present at the moment. Husserl called this the synthesis of *protention* (the anticipation of what is yet to come), *presentation* (the momentary impression) and

2 The example of listening music is often used to describe what Husserl calls 'the inner time consciousness' that established the experience of continuity. I here draw on John Russon's use of it in *Human Experience – Philosophy, Neurosis, and the Elements of Everyday Life* (2003).

retention (retaining what has just been experienced as it slips away) (Husserl, 1991)³. Whoever listens to a melody must come to ‘inhabit’ the music, both in order to integrate what has already sounded and to anticipate where it moves from here. Another way to put this is to say that experiencing music in a very acute sense entails the ability to ‘tell time’. This synthesising capacity of maintaining as a definitive aspect of the present that which is not itself present – the past and the future of the melody – is what we traditionally refer to as *imagination*, not of course in the sense of fantasy, but as the synthetising ability to entertain diversity within a single conscious act.

Imagination in this respect is not only proper to listening to music, but constitutes a fundamental condition for meaningful experience as such. As John Russon puts it, ‘all our experiences carry on something like this melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic flow whereby one moment seems to grow out of the last and melt into the next in a way that “keeps the tune going”’ (2003: 13). If we return for a moment to Seneca’s description, this aspect of rhythmic differentiation is what seems to be affected in boredom. It is not that the ‘tune’ does not ‘keep going’ – on the contrary – but the melody of the world has been reduced to a single monotonous tone, a drone that does not change at all. In this sense, boredom can be thought of as a failure of imagination. The result of this failure is the frustrating feeling that *time will not pass*.

The experience of boredom as a rupture of the self-differentiating flow of time is very well illustrated by the German word for boredom, ‘*Langeweile*’, which literally means a *long while*. The title of Louis Althusser’s autobiography *L’Avenir dure longtemps* (The Future Lasts a Long Time), which was published in The United States as *The Future Lasts Forever* (1994), in a subtle way plays on the same experience. To the bored the present seems to be dragging itself along unbearably, it is as if nothing leads up to it and nothing will come of it. Along with the feeling that the present will not pass, comes the feeling that all eternity is going to be like this, that forever is reduced to the self-sameness and obviousness of a single moment. Althusser’s anticipation is of a future painfully reduced to univocity. Similarly, when Seneca writes of life as empty, rather than painful, this can be taken as an indication that boredom entails the feeling of having seen it all. This is what it means to speak of boredom as *experience without qualities*. It is an indication of the inability to employ the synthesis of imagination, which will differentiate the present by associating it with that which is not present at the moment. Boredom is experience without qualities, not because the bored ‘chooses’ to interpret a given situation as boring, but because the synthetic process of imaginative interpretation is somehow failing to ‘open’ it to her.

The expressive qualities of the social environment

Another way to think of this failure of imagination is as a call that is not answered. The social environment seems to be *demanding* something, which the bored fails to reply to. We encounter such expressive qualities – that phenomena are somehow interpretatively charged to lead us in a certain direction – in most everyday objects. A light bulb, for

3 See also Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008:75ff.

example, directs us towards the socket in the lamp at the table we are working at. Similarly, when we want to change lines in the Paris underground, the signs guiding us through the metro stations lead us in the direction we want to go. After a while in the city, we become so used to it that we hardly think about moving through the tunnels anymore – that is until a redirection interrupts the routine and we find that we are lost and perplexed by the rift in the steady flow of the morning traffic. Abstract situations that are more or less standardised by culture, value and history, like important biographical transitions (entering school or marriage, graduating, retiring or becoming parents), carry the same kind of latent expectation that let us pass through them together as the individuals of a community.

That the qualities of experience are not merely presented to us, but are conditioned by the way they compel us to take a certain direction in our expectations of how things are going to turn out, leads us toward another important aspect of the experience of boredom. To the bored, who has lost the imaginative ability to ‘tell time’, the feeling of intense displeasure or even disquietude that follows, may be thought of as an inhibition registering as a need for activity, when one does not know *how* to be active. One wants to do something, but does not how to act in an appropriate way to that urge. Another central problem in boredom then is the diffuse urge to act on the demand that the experience of the situation is pregnant with, but which the bored is unable to satisfy.

If we think again of the example of listening to music, we sometimes find ourselves in situations in which we have to ‘develop an ear’ for what we hear. The first time most people encounter Balinese Gamelan music, or a symphony by Schönberg for example, they will find it difficult to make sense of what they hear. In most day-to-day dealings, we are dependent on the routines and habits that help us cope with the situations or objects that we encounter. We can think of such routines and habits perhaps as a kind of ‘life-support systems’ that enable us to find our way through the world without having to make explicit reflective decisions. To be ‘familiar with’ a situation ultimately means to inhabit it in a way that lends it form, content and relative duration. But as Peter Sloterdijk remarks, such interpretively charged environments, or ‘atmospheric-symbolic places’ as he calls them (Sloterdijk, 1998: 46), need to be continuously ventilated. The symbolic air-conditioning of our life-support systems – that is our habits, routines and traditions – that he refers to as the primordial production of every society, is a necessity for our being-in-the-world. If we continue this metaphor, what the bored experiences is the stale air of a life-support system that she fails to open to ventilation. The bored, whose synthetic imaginative faculty is failing, is literally choking on too much reality, as the experience of any kind of negativity, deferral, ambiguity or concealment is absent.

What is worth holding onto here is that the bored does not necessarily lack the urge to act (if we accept, at least, that the experience of boredom entails the urge to do something, even if one does not know exactly what). What the bored lacks is the *skill* or *know-how* to interact with the demand or anticipated fulfilment that the situation or phenomenon requires of her.

Melancholy, acedia and the instinct for self-preservation

The interpretation of boredom as a reaction to the feeling that one does not know how to make sense of the immediate social environment brings us closer to its role and place in cultural history. We are used to think of boredom as a universal phenomenon; and we have done so here too, by drawing on Seneca's work. But 'boredom' also has a more specific meaning that ties it to the social changes that took place in modernity. The concept of boredom that arose out of the age of Enlightenment was specifically associated with the structural transformations of modern societies and its problems in dealing with the decline of traditional – especially religious – ways of making sense of the world⁴.

Unlike its 'sisters' melancholy and *acedia* that resonated primarily with traditions extending into antiquity, the notion of boredom is part of the cultural vocabulary, which draws on the secular vision of the body as a reservoir of an abstract force that can be depleted. If melancholy implied a deviance from the optimal homeostatic balance of humours, and *acedia* despair at losing connection with the divine, the notion of boredom deals with the disenchantment of the world and with strategies for stabilising identity in a constantly transforming reality. Thus, whereas both melancholy and *acedia* (in different ways) were associated with the nature of the self, boredom is specifically linked to the pressure exerted on the subject by external reality. The experience of empty, meaningless time in this way is tied closely to the material effects of modernisation. As a concept, boredom is configured as a vocabulary for a kind of subjective *malaise*, where the romantic longing for an authentic reunification of the meaningfulness of the world is no longer an option. While such a longing is still palpable in much of the 20th century writings on alienation and social critique in the tradition of Benjamin, Adorno, Kracauer and others, boredom, as the experience discussed above, implies a resignation to which traditional frameworks of meaning are no longer viable. If an essential part of the cultural vocabularies of melancholy and *acedia* was a longing, either for a lost time of more authentic being-in-the-world, or for a better world to come, then in boredom the loss of meaning registers only as a resignation to the hollow emptiness of the self and to the dull matter of worldly experience that no longer makes sense.

This last point can perhaps be illustrated by thinking, as Elizabeth S. Goodstein (2005: 398) does, of boredom as a concept that comes close to Peter Sloterdijk's 'cynicism' in *The Critique of Cynical Reason* (1987). To Sloterdijk, the discontent in our culture has assumed the quality of a universal, diffuse cynicism, the decisive change of which lies in a new, disenchanted mode of experiencing self and world. Cynicism, according to Sloterdijk, is the emblem of *enlightened false consciousness*, that is, a modernized unhappy consciousness, where the cynics 'know what they are doing, but they do it because the force of circumstance and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language' (Sloterdijk, 1987: 5). Cynicism is a reaction to disenchantment, to the dulling of the matter of the world, which transforms the problem or question of meaning into a 'survival mechanism'.

4 For an excellent discussion of boredom as a specifically modern rhetoric strategy, see Elizabeth S. Goodstein's *Experience Without Qualities – Boredom and Modernity* (2005).

If we return for a moment to the failure of imagination, that is, to the inability to differentiate a given life-situation in a way that makes it a meaningful experience, then we can think of boredom in terms of a mode of self-preservation like this. As an instinct for self-preservation, what boredom does for the bored is to transform a threatening *loss of meaning* into a *lack of something*. What is exchanged here is the anxiety provoking failure to produce the know-how to interact with the anticipated fulfilment, which the social environment requires, for the paradoxical experience of being ‘fed up with nothing’ in which the world appears empty. In other words, what the bored experiences as the dullness of matter and is consequently disgusted with, ensues from a stalemate between the inability to engage with a life-situation and the latent significance of the situation that calls her to complete it.

Boredom, anxiety and the fear of losing control

Such an interpretation of boredom resonates very well with the understanding of the phenomenon in psychoanalysis. Here it is sometimes found in analysis when the analysand has ‘nothing on her mind’. The bored seems to have no fantasies at her disposal whatsoever. In reality, though, analysis reveals that there was ‘cognitive content and corresponding feelings, but that the emergence into consciousness was immediately opposed by ideas evoking some feeling of anxiety or loss’ (Wangh, 1979: 517). The bored analysand is caught up in a stalemate between *wish* and *fear* that registers as the sensation of time standing still and as a feeling that nothing is happening. Traditionally, psychoanalysis interprets this as an unconscious fear that the wish or fantasy might lead to an action of libidinal or aggressive character – for example the impulse to masturbate or strike out. The concurrent opposition is strong enough to prevent any recognition of content, but it does not erase the unpleasurable sense of pressure. Hence the analysand registers a restless and uncomfortable feeling of boredom.

While this is not the place to go any further into the subtleties of psychoanalysis, the intuition that boredom registers as a defence directed against the experience of a loss of control when we are confronted with situations where our responses seem to us all of a sudden insufficient or even threatening, is very important. As a failure of imagination occurring when we experience the restraint of a lack of means to engage meaningfully with the world around us, experience without qualities may very well be thought of as a defence mechanism. The experience of boredom in this light acquires a self-annihilating character, as it is directed not towards pleasure, but away from anxiety.

Boredom in a globalised world, where information processing becomes ever more important, and the ability to ‘just be yourself’ is more predominant than ever, for this reason is an issue that should be dealt with beyond the mere questions of cause and effect. The experience without qualities, as the deficit of a self that struggles to come to terms with the diffuse normative demands of the contemporary world, needs to be scrutinised on an experiential level with the same severity of attention as that of more conventional pathologies like stress and depression, also in organization and management studies. After all, the one who just kills time out of boredom forgets who holds the knife.

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