

Boredom, Contemplation, and Liberation

Kevin Hood Gary
Goshen College

Boredom is an unavoidable part of the human condition. We often do not suffer it well, and find countless ways to avoid it. Arthur Schopenhauer contends that boredom “is direct proof that existence has no real value in itself; for what is boredom but the feeling of the emptiness of life?”¹ Perhaps this accounts for our desire to evade it, revealing as it does the metaphysical insignificance or pointlessness of existence. With eyes wide to open to this abyss, Søren Kierkegaard’s Poet A in *Either/Or* develops a sophisticated “boredom avoidance scheme” that essentially involves busyness, distraction, and triviality.² This aesthetic modality, as Kierkegaard describes it, is all too common; fundamentally it is a flight from the self and its emptiness.

Students know what it is to be bored.³ Schools are particularly good at ensuring this. The sterile architecture, bureaucratic management, perfunctory teaching to the test, crowded spaces that silence unique expression, all contribute to this phenomenon. After his second day of kindergarten, my son Lucas shared with some exasperation, “I am tired of hearing about hallway procedures.” The explicit and latent curricular message, conveyed to students and teachers alike, is that boredom should be avoided. Moreover, if it arises, it is primarily considered to be an external problem; if a classroom or other situation is experienced as boring, the environment must therefore be wanting in meaningful stimuli. School is boring, so students are conditioned to believe, because of boring teachers, boring textbooks, and so on.

While not turning a blind eye to the problematic nature of boredom, especially within a classroom context, or to the fact that certain environments are more prone to cause boredom, this essay considers what is overlooked and lost in the commonsensical wisdom that teachers and students should avoid boredom at all costs.⁴ It also calls into question the assumption that boredom is primarily an external problem, contending rather that boredom is fundamentally a problem with the self.

Boredom, F. Scott Fitzgerald says, is a necessary stage in life and art, a filter that one must pass through before the real product can emerge.⁵ Bertrand Russell says that “a generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little people . . . unduly divorced from the slow processes of nature, in whom every vital impulse withers, as though they were cut flowers in a vase.”⁶ Instead of appreciating the educative possibilities of boredom, we are conditioned by culture and nature to avoid rather than endure or suffer it well. Moreover, our wireless and perpetually amused culture naively suggests that boredom might be negated once and for all.

Drawing from diverse yet resonant voices, John Dewey, Josef Pieper, T.S. Elliot, and Simone Weil, this essay makes a case for how and why we should suffer boredom well rather than avoid it. However we conceive the ideal of the educated person, the ability to cope with and constructively manage the experience of

boredom is certainly an essential part. The conditioned flight from boredom, a salient feature of the modern classroom and the consuming self of modern capitalism, exerts a special yoke.⁷ A person incapable of enduring boredom lives at the mercy of interests and external stimuli, blind to the fickle nature of interests that motivate learning, and thereby far from being a liberated self. This problem is worthy of careful examination in light of the enduring ideal of a liberal arts education. A liberal education, if it is anything, is thought to be an education for freedom through the development of autonomy and critical thinking. Yet to the extent that schools graduate students who seek to avoid boredom and are unable to endure it and do not see why they should not avoid it, they are far from cultivating liberal learners.

INTEREST OR EFFORT

The overriding consensus in educational literature is that boredom is a negative experience for teachers and students alike.⁸ If a teacher or their instruction is boring all manner of problems are sure to follow: misbehavior, disengagement, lower achievement, and so on. Teachers are judged and often judge themselves according to an idealized classroom space where the experience of boredom hardly emerges, if at all. While the descriptor *boredom* is not usually found on formal evaluation rubrics, it is signaled and certainly implied by such indicators as “lack of student engagement,” “low student motivation,” or “developmentally inappropriate instruction.”

Merriam-Webster defines boredom as “the state of being weary and restless through lack of interest.”⁹ For pedagogical progressives the key insight in understanding and addressing the phenomenon or problem of boredom is a “lack of interest.” Instruction should appeal to the interests of the learner. Interests are the springs that propel learning, questioning, thinking, and wondering. Teachers must begin or connect here, with these emerging interests, so as to draw learners into the systematic questions of a particular discipline. For this to occur, Dewey explains, “the subject-matter of the studies must be restored to the experience from which it has been abstracted. It needs to be psychologized; turned over, translated into the immediate and individual experiencing within which it has its origin and significance.”¹⁰ It must be activated through the facilitation of educative experiences that correlate to the nascent queries of the learner.

It is misguided however, Dewey cautions, to think that continual stimulation of the learners’ interests is a worthwhile goal. This perspective, which Dewey calls the theory of interests, leads to over-stimulation and a dissipation of energy. “Will is never called into action ... [and attention] is never directed to the essential and important facts, but simply to the attractive wrappings with which the facts are surrounded.”¹¹ Such instruction may keep students from getting bored, but the subject at hand will not have been dealt with on its own terms, addressing both its savory and unsavory aspects. Consequently, a single focused interest will not develop, as learners slavishly crave immediate stimulation over sustaining and developing a distinct interest.

More problematically, according to Dewey, is the self's stagnation; to avoid boredom is to avoid becoming a substantive self. For Dewey interests and the self can be used interchangeably.¹² According to Dewey, development of the self and its impulses "involves seriousness, absorption, definiteness of purpose; it results in formation of steadiness and persistent habit in the service of worthy ends" (*IE*, 15). The self is a bundle of interests; in order to become a developed, autonomous self, certain particular, worthwhile interests (becoming a carpenter, a lawyer, or a friend) must be cultivated and sustained, acquiring the requisite virtues that make this possible. Interests are multiple; drawing us outward, their intensity ebbs and flows. To sustain and develop an interest fully, to become a viable self, boredom, or the waning of a worthy interest, is to be expected, and it must be endured. To the extent that it is evaded, the self remains superficial.

Yet what does this endurance mean, and what does it look like? Is mere will power and determination, what Dewey describes as the theory of effort, all that is needed to push through tasks or situations that become tedious? Again Dewey offers caution. Such overt exertions, characterized by compliance and time on task, can be misleading. True exercise of the will, Dewey explains, "is not found in the external assumption of any posture; the formation of moral habit cannot be identified with ability to show up results at the demand of another" (*IE*, 8). Rather, the "exercise of will is manifest in the direction of attention, and depends upon the spirit, the motive, the disposition in which work is carried on" (*IE*, 8). In other words, classroom spaces characterized by busy compliance may be dreadfully boring for students, with students checking out, escaping the moment just as soon as they can, either mentally or physically. The theory of effort naively hopes that the external motions will ensure that the inner motions of attending and concentrated focus will take hold and will dispel boredom. Yet boredom has not been dealt with but rather avoided.

Both the theory of interests and the theory of effort fall short. The interests view lacks appreciation for the value of boredom, positing strategies to outrun or sidestep it; while the effort view advocates a muscling through monotony that risks being yet another boredom-avoidance strategy, wherein the learner's "deeper nature has secured no discipline at all ..." (*IE*, 10). Both approaches, Dewey argues, misunderstand the nature of experience, and what it means to have an experience. This may sound strange, as experience or having an experience is seemingly a given. Yet Dewey contests this point. Experience has a "pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship."¹³ Insofar as it is doing, having an experience involves venturing out, tasting, seeing, reading, and so on, propelled by our interests. But lest we miss the meaning, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot by way of Dewey, there must be "an element of undergoing, of suffering in its large sense, in every experience. Otherwise there would be no taking in of what preceded. For 'taking in' in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known" (*PH*, 560). To miss the meaning, for Dewey, is really not to have an experience, understood and grasped as a distinct happening, demarcated by a beginning and an end.

Returning to boredom or experiences that are apparently without meaning or interest, what exactly is Dewey suggesting? First, he calls for careful attending to the self and its interests. The self that is overcome by boredom, especially profound boredom that verges on apathy or loss of vital interests, requires such attending.¹⁴ Second, to become a substantive self one must commit to developing and sustaining a worthwhile interest. Worthwhile interests, though, are often long-term and require persevering through several intermediate steps that can become tedious. In the face of this, what is required is suffering, a receptivity to meaning that is not easily ascertained or grasped. Rather than busyness and excessive doing, a capacity for undergoing is needed, lest we fret from one activity to the next.

CONTEMPLATION AND LIBERATION

At this point in Dewey's argument, resonance with Josef Pieper's *Leisure the Basis of Culture* and Eliot's *The Four Quartets* becomes clearer. "Humankind," Eliot observes, "cannot bear very much reality."¹⁵ Instead of undergoing we are too often restless to wait for or take in meaning, taken over by a "lust for action." Such a state, Dewey explains, leaves a person "with experience of an almost incredible paucity, all on the surface. No one experience has a chance to complete itself because something becomes so dispersed and miscellaneous as hardly to deserve the name ..." (PH, 561).

Josef Pieper describes this element of undergoing as contemplative. Drawing from Thomas Aquinas, Pieper observes in the human act of knowing two distinct capacities: *ratio* and *intellectus*.¹⁶ *Ratio*, which parallels Dewey's doing, refers to the discursive faculty of knowing; it is busy, active, probing, comparing, abstracting, and sizing things up. *Intellectus*, by contrast and in tension with *ratio*, "refers to the ability of 'simply looking,' to which the truth presents itself as a landscape presents itself to the eye."¹⁷ Rather than seeking to frame or understand reality within our categories, we seek to let our categories or frames be shaped by experience.¹⁸ More than simply passive, *intellectus* is better understood as receptive or contemplative.

Easily dismissed by *ratio*'s "lust for action" as soft or lazy, *intellectus* is actually harder to sustain. Whereas *ratio* faculty feeds the ego in its desire for autonomy and control, grasping on to its tools for understanding and making meaning, *intellectus* requires letting go of these tools and frames of reference. It also involves detaching from interests, which according to Dewey means letting go of the self or losing oneself, entering into an abyss of sorts in faith that the self will not be lost.

Eliot illuminates this movement further. Describing an experience of being on a delayed train with strangers, Eliot observes how

conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about ...¹⁹

Allowing oneself to go deeper, avoiding chitchat, Eliot says is to

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation

And destitution of all property,
 Desiccation of the world of sense,
 Evacuation of the world of fancy,
 Inoperancy of the world of spirit;
 This is the one way, and the other
 Is the same, not in movement
 But abstention from movement; while the world moves
 In appetency, on its metallated ways
 Of time past and time future.²⁰

Stark as Eliot's words are, he qualitatively explicates what suffering through rather than avoiding boredom entails. It involves solitude, letting go of our itch for stimulation and distraction, facing a seeming abyss that lurks beneath the trivial or an interest that has evaporated. As Eliot notes though, our hardened or "metalled" appetites often resist this contemplative posture.

Dewey would probably shudder at this point, suggesting Eliot has gone too far. Experience, Dewey argues, while compromised by excessive doing can also be undercut by too much receptivity, where mere undergoing is prized, "irrespective of perception of any meaning" (*PH*, 563). To remain in this receptive state, Dewey explains, is to entertain or be impressed by a multiplicity of meaning or fancies — a state of impotence. To counter this, some "decisive action is needed in order to establish contact with the realities of the world and in order that impressions may be so related to facts that their value is tested and organized" (*PH*, 563). Doing and undergoing, Dewey contends, must be balanced.

Yet this is where Dewey seems to come up short. Ever the pragmatist, Dewey's account of the nature of experience avoids the "terror" beneath experience that Eliot speaks about. Recalling Schopenhauer's argument that boredom reveals our metaphysical insignificance portending an existential crisis, Dewey's account seems too buoyant. While recognizing the necessity of suffering and undergoing, Dewey is quick to return to decisive action. A contemplative kind of knowing or practice hardly gets off the ground in Dewey's account before he cautions against a receptivity in which the "crowding together of as many impressions as possible is thought be 'life,' even though no one of them is more than a flitting and a sipping" (*PH*, 563). Though Dewey, like Pieper, maintains that intelligence is constituted by doing and undergoing, this last quote suggests a slightly dismissive tone of the receptive contemplation that Pieper and Eliot are speaking about. Moreover, Dewey's contemplative undergoing sounds qualitatively different than Eliot's contemplation. It is busy, crowded with fancies and impressions, flitting around.

Moving beyond a flood of images, categories, or chitchat, Eliot's and Pieper's contemplative postures descend into a deeper solitude, moving from cataphatic impressions (images and categories to frame meaning) to an apophatic (letting go of all images and categories) point of stillness. This solitude is needed to break away from the categories of social construction that flood and feed the restive mind and do the seeing for us.²¹

This is a crucial turning point in the *Quartets*. It illuminates what F. Scott Fitzgerald meant when he described himself as being a "slave to boredom."²² Eliot

further elaborates what this contemplative posture looks like and why it is liberating. To enter this space, Eliot describes in sparse poetic meter, is to be

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
The inner freedom from the practical desire
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving ...²³

Detaching from the propulsion of interests and the compulsion to stimulate new interests leads to an “inner freedom from practical desire.” Without this ability to cultivate *intellectus* learning there is “no dance,” no authentic freedom, but rather “slavery to boredom” and to the restlessness of our *ratio* way of learning.

This *intellectus* learning, Pieper claims, exposes the weakness of *ratio* learning, unchecked by *intellectus* learning. What might be perceived as curiosity, diligence, and a zeal for learning is revealed in light of *intellectus* freedom to be a compulsive busyness and a desire to escape from oneself. This tendency, Pieper contends, springs from an idleness or despair of the self. More than just a problem to be overcome with a proper balance of undergoing and doing, Pieper sees in this a metaphysical dis-ease. Behind all this energetic activity, a person is not at ease with herself; a certain sadness, says Pieper, has taken hold such that a person does not see herself “in the face of the divine Goodness that lives within them.”²⁴ The opposite of this is a cheerful affirmation of one’s own existence, “which arises from that special freshness of action, which would never be confused by anyone with any experience with the narrow activity of the ‘workaholic.’”²⁵ More than a transient or situational problem, Pieper suggests boredom is a chronic existential predicament.

WEIL ON ATTENTION AND SCHOOL STUDIES

I turn now to Simone Weil who explores this problem within an educational context. Like Pieper, Weil raises the stakes with respect to boredom, suggesting that it is spiritually significant. She urges that students be made aware of the underlying metaphysical struggle for meaning and liberation that boredom occasions. Rather than tests scores, job preparation, or even mastering new knowledge, Weil argues that the principal benefit of school studies, laden with boredom, is “the development of the faculty of attention.”²⁶ This, she underscores, is the real object. While studies may be intrinsically interesting, this is of secondary interest; rather students should come to like school subjects because each of them occasions the development of the faculty of attention.

Echoing Pieper’s contemplative posture, Weil says that this manner of attending to school tasks constitutes the very kind of listening that is characterized by prayer. Even if a student is unsuccessful in attempting to solve a geometry problem a genuine effort of attention is never wasted, as it always has effect on a spiritual plane. Even if after an hour of working to solve a problem we are no closer to finding

a solution “we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another more mysterious dimension” (RR, 106).

Here Weil’s mysticism appears to drift far from Dewey’s pragmatism. And yet just at this point her analysis takes a pragmatic turn, although more in the spirit of William James than Dewey. These spiritual certainties, she says, are experimental. We need to “believe in them before experiencing them” (RR, 106). Only then do such certainties emerge. “If we do not regulate our conduct by it before having proved it, if we do not hold on to it for a long time by faith alone, a faith at first stormy and without light, we shall never transform it into certainty.” “Faith,” Weil underscores, “is the indispensable condition” (RR, 106).

Weil contrasts this faithful waiting with effort. This kind of attending, though difficult, is altogether different than strained effort. “This kind of muscular effort in work,” contends Weil, “is entirely barren, even if it is made with the best of intentions” (RR, 110). Such exertions, Weil contends, echoing Dewey and Pieper, have no place in genuine learning. While such efforts might yield academic success they are ultimately ineffectual for inspiring love of learning, for the intelligence “can only be led by desire ... and [for] there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work” (RR, 110). Attention is effort, but it is a negative effort that “consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object ...” (RR, 111).

Aimed at school studies what Weil is proposing is more than a simple method of study. It is a method of living well, of enduring and suffering boredom well that involves a pragmatic faith and patience in the mundane tasks of life that leads to an experience of meaning. This method, Weil insists, should be made known to children, “not only in a general way but in the particular form that bears on each exercise” (RR, 113). More importantly, teachers should model this method for their students, living within and revealing “the slow processes of nature” that Russell speaks about.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The thesis argued is this: the self must be both active and contemplative if it is to be a liberated self. Rather than liberation from boredom, activity or doing may very well be a slavish avoidance of boredom. Detachment from the captivity of interests requires what Simone Weil describes as a posture of waiting, of being patient in the true sense of that word, deriving from the Latin *pati*, meaning to suffer, doing so calmly, without complaint. Such suffering involves undergoing an *ascesis* or purgation from external and internal stimuli and engagement, resisting what John Keats describes as the itch for certainty, and what T.S. Eliot diagnoses as the temptation to flee the present moment, seeking refuge in time future or time past.²⁷ Suffering boredom well is not only an essential part of the creative process, as F. Scott Fitzgerald discovered, it is an essential part of our struggle for liberation.

1. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism, On Human Nature, and Religion: A Dialogue, Etc.* (Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com, 2008), 15.

2. This phrasing “boredom avoidance scheme” is borrowed from *Conversations with Walker Percy*, eds. Lewis Lawson and Victor Kramer (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 11. On this scheme, “the rotation of crops,” see Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 281.
3. For recent statistics on the prevalence of boredom in U.S. schools, see “The Case for Boredom,” *American School Board Journal* 198, no. 4 (2011): 33.
4. There is limited scholarship on the educative possibilities of boredom. Most studies on boredom come from the field of psychology, where the focus tends to be on the causes and effects of boredom. Two recent studies that explore the educational value of boredom include J. Mansikka’s, “Can Boredom Educate Us? Tracing a Mood in Heidegger’s Fundamental Ontology from an Educational Point of View,” *Studies In Philosophy & Education* 28, no. 3 (2009): 255–268, and T. Belton and E. Priyadharshini’s, “Boredom and Schooling: A Cross-Disciplinary Exploration,” *Cambridge Journal of Education* 37, no. 4, (2007): 579–595. Belton and Priyadharshini provide a thorough overview of how boredom is analyzed across multiple disciplines, most notably philosophy, psychology, sociology, and education. Their analysis though only briefly explores the phenomenology of boredom explored from literary sources (literature, poetry, and so forth), which is at the center of my analysis. Martin Heidegger in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1995) offers a phenomenological analysis of boredom, distinguishing three distinct types: being bored by something (waiting for a train), being bored with something (a rapid dinner conversation), and being profoundly bored (existential listlessness). This essay works with a composite understanding of all three, with an underlying emphasis on the third: profound boredom. The first two, rather than unrelated to the third, are surface indicators of this deeper boredom. For Heidegger profound boredom reveals the responsibility we have to make our lives meaningful, occasioning the awareness that the self must assert a will to meaning. In agreement with Heidegger I underscore the metaphysical significance of boredom, yet in disagreement, I argue that meaning is not willed but given.
5. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up* (New York: New Directions Books, 1945), 157.
6. Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (Oxford: Routledge, 1996), 41.
7. A critical theory perspective rightly calls attention to boredom as a social construct. Rather than being inevitable, a critical theorist might argue that the tedium and monotony that characterizes schooling and industrial environments is no accident, but rather part of a latent and oppressive curriculum of modern schooling and its bureaucratic, anaesthetizing apparatus. The self who dreads boredom is a social construct that is of special interest to a capitalistic consumer society because such a self can be easily manipulated into becoming a consuming self in its desire to escape boredom.
8. See G. Yair, “Educational Battlefields in America: The Tug-of-War over Students’ Engagement with Instruction,” *Sociology of Education* 73, no. 4, (2011): 247–269; “Double Take,” *Educational Leadership* 68, no. 1, (2010): 8–9; and J.A. Plucker and S.N. Omdal, “Beyond Boredom,” *Education Week* (June 18, 1997), 32.
9. Merriam-Webster, “boredom,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/boredom>.
10. John Dewey, *The School and Society/The Child and Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 200.
11. John Dewey, *Interest and Effort in Education* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 15. This work will be cited in the text as *IE* for all subsequent references.
12. For a fine analysis of John Dewey on interests and the self, see Mark Jonas, “Dewey’s Conception of Interest and its Significance for Teacher Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43, no. 2 (2011): 112–129.
13. John Dewey, *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 562. This work will be cited in the text as *PH* for all subsequent references.
14. The distinction and relationship between apathy, boredom, and depression are murky. A state of profound boredom/apathy may very well require the kind of attending Dewey recommends in tandem with therapeutic and biochemical resources. For an excellent account that explores these dynamics, I recommend Kathleen Norris, *A Marriage, Monks, and A Writer’s Life: Acedia & Me* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008).
15. T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 14.

16. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (South Bend, IN: Saint Augustine's Press, 1998), 12–15.
17. *Ibid.*, 11.
18. On this distinction, see Abraham Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 11.
19. Eliot, *Quartets*, 28.
20. *Ibid.*, 18.
21. On this distinction between apophatic and cataphatic, see Belden Lane's fine discussion in *The Solitude of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford Press, 1998), 62–79.
22. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (New York: Bartleby.com), chap. 4, ln. 234.
23. Eliot, *Quartets*, 15–16.
24. Pieper, *Leisure*, 28.
25. *Ibid.*, 28–29.
26. See Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God," *Waiting for God* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), 105. This work will be cited in the text as *RR* for all subsequent references.
27. John Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1899), 277.

This essay owes a debt of gratitude to the following friends for their careful edits and suggestions: Suzanne Ehst, Heather Grennan Gary, Mark Jonas, and Sam Rocha.