

Aage Jensen:

An unfinished article about:

Time and boredom – a necessary unity?

He leaned towards me and stirred at the badge I had around me neck showing that I was participating at the World Wilderness Conference “We are at the same conference” he said to me with a smile. From his traits I concluded that he was a representative of the indigenous people. Later on he told me that he came from a small place far north in Alaska – I don’t remember the name anymore – he was 71 and loved walking.

We walked together towards the conference building and were discussing a lot of interesting things on our way.

- How is the situation for young people in your town? I asked.
- It is a lot of unemployment, but they are surfing on the internet all the time.
- Any alcohol abuse?
- No, but their worst problem is boredom.

Later on that same fall I was practising as a teacher for 9 year old pupils in a nearby school where I live in Norway. One day in the math lesson I tried to teach them how to multiply with more than two numbers. One little girl was very clever and she solved every problem I presented for her – even to multiply with three and four numbers. “Oh, it so boring” she said.

I thought back to my conversation with that wise man from Alaska. What’s going on? Is boredom a scourge of our civilisation? Why? What is boredom?

Boredom

“The gods were bored and therefore they created man. Adam was bored and that’s why they created the woman” (Kierkegaard)

Boredom is a typical problem in the modernity and is affecting everybody in the western world and has become one of our most widely spread notion. It is seems characteristic for the modern society that our relation to the world has been lost. We don’t know where we are or what we want to do and we have difficulties to find a purpose and meaning in our lives. We try to meet that lack of meaning by using drugs, alcohol, violence, suicide, risk taking etc.

It is a dimension of meaning connected to boredom or lack of meaning. To make up for that deficiency we are searching for something that can replace our lack of meaning. We are looking for amusement that can replace - television, amusement parks, surfing on the internet etc. The list is long. This is what Sigmund Kvaloy Setreng has called the ‘Tivoli-effect’ in our society.

- Boredom is an expression for a strong desire for adventure.

Human beings normally construct actively their own world and their understanding of the world. When we have finished our coding of the world the active constitution of the world is no longer necessary. The problem is that we nowadays get heaps of information that is already interpreted and coded for us. The information technology gives us in that respect a debt of meaning because we very rarely are given the opportunity to adapt and reflect upon our own experiences since the world is more or less already interpreted. The active role we normally should have played has turned over to be a passive – and boring one.

Categories of boredom

According to Svendsen Martin Doehleman has characterized four types of boredom which are more or less mixed into each other.

1. The situated boredom – connected with a certain situation i.e. waiting for someone, waiting for the train, attending a lecture.
2. The satiety boredom – when you have got too much of something. (This was perhaps what my nine year old pupil was ‘suffering’ of.)
3. The creative boredom – you are forced to do something else and new.
4. The existential boredom – the world is on idle speed and your soul is void.

The existential boredom worries and it seems that more and more people suffer from that kind of boredom. But on the other hand all these four typologies are more or less intertwined. The situated boredom is expressed by gasping, twisting, stretching bones and arms etc. but the existential boredom is more or less expressionless. It cannot be seized by any act of will; it is characterized by its poverty of adventure and a more or less total lack of personal meaning. It is caused by a poverty of experiences

Boredom is possible because of every thing has its time. If every thing has not had its time boredom would not have existed. Boredom originates therefore when there is a disparity between the time of the thing in itself and the time we meet that thing.

- Heidegger and boredom

Heidegger is interesting because he discusses the connection between boredom and time with basis in his expression “Dasein”. According to him the deeper or existential boredom is characterized by its emptiness – emptiness in our real self. In spite of the fact that time was filled up, we still have that emptiness because what we were occupied with did not fill us up. The situations had no meaning for us.

Boredom is one of many characteristics of modern people. We do not have a strong feeling of doing something essential, life is in some respect been too easy. It is in this easiness that we according to Heidegger find the source of boredom. This easiness becomes a ‘sleeping pad’ for us. For Heidegger it is then important to wake up. The boredom shows its radicalism and does the existence more complicated or difficult. ‘Dasein’ is bored because life is lacking meaning and the necessary task for boredom is to make us aware of just that fact. Boredom represents a need and longing for another time and conception of time and that can be identified as “kairos” by Heidegger.

Time:

- Bergson and time

Bergson's conception of time: He describes two kinds of time: The linear time / "room time"¹ and the duration (La duree) The linear time / 'room-time' is materialized through the movement of the hands of the clock. This illustrates that time is 'a movement in a room' or 'res extensa' according to the philosophy of Rene Descartes. This kind of time expresses a world that is measurable and foreseeable. This is just a unit of measurement for movement and as a result of movement in a room – 'room-time' and it is the conception of time used by the natural sciences and as a consequence looks upon nature as something static and unchangeable.

In his inquiries Bergson discovers that time is identical with consciousness and that time is continuously changes and processes. Life is a 'duration' where the passed is prolonged in the present. Every moment is not just something new, but it is also something that cannot be foreseen. Since he connects time with consciousness, time must be a portrait of our inner life. Our different experiences soak into each other and make up an inner wholeness. Bergson gives this process the name of 'La duree' or 'Duration'. La duree will then be a continuously ongoing process where new experiences are melted together with previous ones and where the past lives in the present.

This process of life is all the time creative because it continuously appears new forms and expressions and they are 'twisted' and 'intertwined' into each other with no obvious boundaries between them. That is why Bergson names them to be qualitative processes. Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng asserts that our faculty of understanding and because of that; our possibility to do something – is blocked by our one-sided room-thinking. In that way we are imprisoned in a room – 'a time-room'. (The best word to use here in English will probably be 'period', but by using this a loose the point by comparing it with being in a prison (a room).

Being in prison year after year – the worse situation – with it's daily routines and all it's foreseen - ability – is probably for most prisoners utmost tiresome. The real penalty by being in jail is probably the boredom one experience there. (I have no experience myself, but I can imagine) But the paradox in this connection is that many in our society experience the so called freedom in the same way – killingly tiresome.

The Polynesian navigators

When the Europeans for the first time met Polynesian ships and sailors they were a bit surprised because the Polynesians were able to sail and navigate even better than the Europeans. Their wonderful catamarans were as large as the European ships but much better to manoeuvre and they were sailing faster. To navigate they followed the stars – just as the Vikings – but in cloudy weather they were able to find out where to sail by 'feeling' the waves. The skipper laid down on the deck to feel the swells and from the way they behaved the skipper could find out where they were and how far away they were from open land

¹ "Room-time" or "time-room" – these two words are literally translated from Norwegian. Sometimes it would have been better to use "a period". Other times we use "room-time" when we think about the outstretched world. (Descartes: Res extensa. See later)

Their confidence was found by renounce the need for control – which would have been the natural way of thinking for a representative from the European modernity. The necessity of control is a natural consequence of the static view we have on time and nature promoted by the natural sciences. Foreseen - ability is the word we like to use in this connection. The Polynesians had to be able to cope with challenges that to some certain degree were new and inexperienced. It was in that way necessary for them to be continuously creative to find solution to problems they met. Their confidence was found in their ability to master the situations. But this has another important aspect the situations forced them to put their experiences into more comprehensive coherence.

This is about freedom. To be on your way towards freedom means to be able to go more roads at the same time. The roads are of the type that on and on lead us out of situations where we have control. One of many characteristic of the traditional European way of thinking is the linear conception of time. This is a sharp contrast to the constant improvising human being.

Meaning

Meaning means to be able to put small pieces into a bigger and integrated coherence. In practise that means to able to see entireties. On the other hand is information the opposite and while information has to be processed must meaning be treated and interpreted in a more symbolic way than information. The enormous amount of information – made possible by the information technology makes us more or less passive and consumers and less active participants. The consequence of this is that we are suffering of a lack of meaning and as time goes on will be more and more boring because we are no longer active in the interpretation process.

We are demanding meaning in an existence and situation which have no meaning. We are living in a static and unchangeable existence because we have not taken the conception of time serious because we look upon time as ‘room’ and not process. But this is not only a question about the character of the existence it is also a question of who you are. I am always searching to find out who I am by relating myself to the existence. The problem for me is that I have to relate myself and evaluate myself to a static existence. In the long run get this a character of meaninglessness because everything is looked upon as the same with definitely no diversity.

To give life a sort of meaning I have to search for new excesses. After some time this will be impossible because there is nothing new to excess – for most of us. Someone does this by looking for the extreme activities. We know this as high-sensation seekers, piste-off skiers, base jumpers etc. For these people it handles about exceeding the boarder between life and death.

Boredom and meaninglessness are connected to an existence which do not give us possibilities – or better – are uninteresting because we look upon the world as uninteresting in that respect that “on the other side” there is nothing new. The world is the same. Our main challenge must now then be to try to understand the world as a dynamic process and a new

understanding of time. If we are able to do that we will probably be in a continuous condition of excesses because we are all the time towards something new.

Meaning must be found in an ability to master these changes which happen all the time. That is just what the old Polynesian sailors were able to do and they did so by playing along with nature. Today we see an opposite tendency – not playing along but fighting against nature. A fight against nature's ever changing processes – a fight we probably have to lose. (The fight against bacteria and viruses is a good example of this. When penicillin was discovered we thought that the fight against bacterial diseases was won. But in the latest years we have got many new bacteria variants which are more or less resistant against the known antibiotics.)

Alienation and history.

Has alienation become total? Are we living in a society we cannot be alienated from because the alienation has become total? Many in the western world are living in the present time without any historical background and because of that they have nothing they can contrast the reality against. In modernity the present is no longer connected to the past. We are liberated from the "deadweight" of the traditions by the fact that the past has been replaced by the present and a connection between the past and the future gives no meaning. We end up in a boring existence because we lack these historical excesses.

It is necessary to be bored

We must not forget that it is also of importance to be bored. Heidegger opens up for that when he connects time and boredom because the effect of boredom is that it leads us right into problems in being and time. But as he says we must be raised to handle boredom. By omitting this would be to neglect an important part of the upbringing of young people. Life would without that be experienced as a miserable flight from boredom.

Looking at boredom that way, boredom can be a strong force because of its negativity turned to be something positive. Boredom will then give you a new perspective on your own existence. Brodsky quoted in Svendsen: "Boredom is the invasion of time in your own system of values. It puts your own existence in perspective and the net result is insight and humility. Nietzsche says: "Boredom gives you a possibility to self-insight. Those who entrench against boredom, entrench against you self.

The end:

- Is it correct to say that boredom is one of our society's greatest challenges?
- Is boredom a single signal from a society out of mental equilibrium?
- Is it correct to say that there is an obvious connection between our conception of time and boredom?
- What other consequences do these conceptions of time have?
 - Is it worth taking notice of?
- How and what can we do to in the future to cope with time and boredom challenges?

Literature:

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