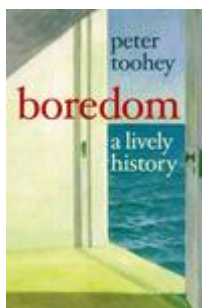


The Importance of Being Bored

A review of



Boredom: A Lively History

by Peter Toohey

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Reviewed by

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Of all human moods, feelings, and emotions, boredom might seem like the most trivial and unimportant, the antithesis of arousal and excitement. But in *Boredom: A Lively History* Peter Toohey sets out to refute this belief. He combines ideas from psychology, neurology, and philosophy with a little history and an analysis of novels and paintings. The result is indeed a lively presentation.

Toohy adopts a Darwinian perspective, assuming that boredom serves an adaptive purpose; it is designed, he says, “to help one flourish” (p. 7). This is a plausible assumption when a psychological state is experienced by almost everyone. It may prove more difficult than Toohy believes to determine what that adaptive purpose might be, but he argues that because boredom is inevitable and common, it must have some value.

To answer the question of purpose, Toohy explores the conditions that give rise to feelings of boredom and its psychological and physiological correlates. He summarizes

studies suggesting that boredom is associated with low levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine.

This leads to the idea, derived from the proposals of a number of psychologists, that boredom is a mild form of disgust, in the way that annoyance is a mild form of anger. Disgust certainly has a protective value, enabling humans to avoid potentially harmful substances. Does boredom serve a similar function? Toohey suggests that it protects us from “infectious social situations” (p. 17). The suggestion needs to be made more precise before it can be taken seriously, but it stimulates a number of interesting avenues of exploration.

The task of understanding *boredom* is complicated by the multiple uses of the word. It is possible that there is no such thing—that it is an ill-defined concept with too many different meanings. There is some psychometric evidence for this. Acee et al. (2010) suggested that boredom is not a single psychological construct. However, Toohey concludes that there is a common theme underlying most uses of the word.

Toohey makes an important distinction between *simple boredom*, a reaction to surfeit and tedium, and *existential boredom*, the loss of a sense of meaning to life. His assertion that these are different experiences is consistent with a report by Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, and Eastwood (2009), who showed that lack of life meaning is conceptually different from proneness to boredom, depression, and anxiety. Toohey’s conclusion is that existential boredom and simple boredom have little in common beyond a shared label.

Toohey devotes one chapter to a review of existential boredom. He traces the origin of the concept to *acedia* experienced by early Christian hermits, which must have been similar to the effects of severe sensory deprivation, and to a concern during the Renaissance with *melancholia*, which probably contained elements of serious depression.

Toohey is dismissive, though, of those who now write about existential boredom; he is not convinced that it is important to the human experience. Nor is he sympathetic to the notion that it might, like depression, predispose a person to suicide (implied by a number of novels). “The victims of existential boredom should have been dropping like flies,” he suggests, “but . . . the link between boredom and suicide seems stronger in literary texts than in real life” (p. 137).

Psychometric studies, most using the Boredom Proneness Scale developed by Farmer and Sundberg (1986), show that high levels of boredom are related to a number of behavioral problems. It has an especially strong connection to aggression. Toohey makes the sensible point that such research tells us little about the causal role of boredom. His own conclusion is that boredom is simply a reaction to situational factors and causes nothing. However, this, too, is a causal conclusion and hard to justify.

Toohey uses his analysis of paintings to discuss postural signs of boredom. His conclusions are interesting, but they need further testing. There has been extensive research on physiognomic and other indicators of emotions, and an extension of this work to boredom would be worthwhile. One problem with the analysis of paintings, though, is that the stimuli

are necessarily static, and it is known that static stimuli can be misleading indicators of emotion (Barrett, Mesquita, & Gendron, 2011).

The word *boredom* did not appear in the English language until the late 18th century. Some authors have drawn the conclusion that people did not feel boredom prior to that time. Toohey dismisses the argument, an extreme version of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis concerning thought and language; there is no reason to assume that because a word for a concept does not exist, people do not experience the concept. The English language contains no common word for the German *schadenfreude*, yet surely most people understand the feeling (joy at the misfortunes of others) before they learn that it has a name.

The Two Cultures of Boredom

In 1959 the British scientist and novelist C. P. Snow delivered a lecture in which he decried the growing division between two cultures, the scientific and the humanist (Snow, 1959). His concern was not merely that members of one were too often ignorant of the other but that the methods of discovery were so different. Whereas the scientist depends on exact definitions, the humanist relies on metaphor and suggestion. The difference can lead to markedly different conclusions about reality.

Toohey can be counted among the small number of individuals who have attempted to integrate the two cultures. One must applaud such an attempt, while recognizing both its immense difficulty as well as its potential value.

I assume that Toohey, a professor of classics, is primarily a humanist using scientific findings to inform his analysis of paintings, novels, and other writings. Unfortunately, the absence of a background in science sometimes leads to mistakes. For example, he reproduces in full the Boredom Proneness Scale (pp. 48–52), implying that the reader can thereby assess his or her own proneness to boredom. Unfortunately, he does not recognize that many of the items are reverse-scored: While agreeing that “Time always seems to pass slowly” indicates proneness to boredom, agreeing that “I find it easy to entertain myself” clearly suggests the opposite. The unsophisticated reader who takes the questionnaire seriously can only come away confused.

Elsewhere Toohey makes a comment that implies an odd misunderstanding of psychological science. He discusses *apotemnophilia*, the pathological desire to have a limb amputated, which may or may not be related to extreme boredom. He mentions the theory proposed by some cognitive neurologists that it may be due to activity in the parietal lobe. “To believe that,” he states, “is to believe anything” (p. 80). It’s an offhand comment, but what is he saying here? That apotemnophilia (and boredom) have nothing to do with brain activity? Probably not, since later he discusses at length the role of the insular cortex in experiencing boredom.

Someone who hopes to use both cultures to understand boredom must also deal with the subjectivity of a humanist approach. Toohey makes reference to numerous paintings that, he asserts, illustrate boredom. But do they? Some I find to be less than convincing (a painting by Millais, for example, on p. 37). In the same way, his analysis of the motivation of characters in novels may be open to dispute. How do we settle disagreements on these matters? To be fair, he often frames his inferences as questions rather than assertions, but this merely emphasizes the weakness of his case. Many of his conclusions demand careful empirical testing.

The advantage to combining humanist and scientific approaches is evident in a number of sections, where the discussion of novels or paintings, or an analysis of historical trends, adds valuable weight to scientific theories or addresses disputes that would be hard to settle with an experimental test. Toohey's extensive knowledge of language and its history is especially helpful in illuminating the meaning of boredom.

I should add that I found the scope and the style of Toohey's discussion to be highly entertaining. A purely scientific treatment of boredom might easily turn out to be a great bore unless brightened by the insightful comments of someone who draws from both cultures.

In Defense of Boredom

A generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little men, of men unduly divorced from the slow process of nature, of men in whom every vital impulse slowly withers as though they were cut flowers in a vase. (Russell, 1930, p. 54)

Toohey asserts throughout the book that boredom is useful. He does not include Bertrand Russell in his review of the work of others, although Russell was someone who vigorously asserted the significance of boredom as part of the human experience. It is worthwhile comparing the two presentations, for they complement each other.

Russell's analysis of the forms of boredom is different from Toohey's. Russell had a rather different view of its benefits. They would likely agree, though, that it cannot be avoided, that it may be a useful signal, and that it provides a good opportunity to engage in productive thinking. We should tolerate boredom and resist viewing it as childish or as the absence of meaning to life.

Toohey's book should be very helpful in that regard. He concludes that, in the same way that sadness is too often called clinical depression and treated as a medical disorder, so boredom has been transformed into existential emptiness and treated as a spiritual disorder. He hopes that through this book boredom will recover some of the respect that it deserves.

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