Out of My
Skull

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The Psychology of Boredom

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To my brother Paul.
Often bored, never boring
—JD

For Ben and Bronwyn:
may your days be full of
meaningful engagement
—JDE

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INTRODUCTION

• • •

You arrive early to renew your driver's license, hoping to avoid the crowds. No such luck. It seems others must have had the same idea, since the building is teeming with people. Stepping up to the counter you hear: "Please take a number and have a seat."

You shuffle to the nearest chair in dread. Your body twists and fidgets restlessly. You cast your eyes about, looking here and there for relief. After reading all the posters in the room, which outline the regulations for everyone from first-time drivers to crane operators, you slump forward and prop your head in your hands. Ticket numbers are slowly announced. The lethargy comes in waves, punctuated by moments of irritability. You're drained of energy and yet edgy, restless. You read the posters again. The urgency to act builds as time crawls.

Suddenly, you remember your phone. You tremble as you reach for it, anticipating the relief you've been craving. After you insert your earbuds and unlock your phone, your body relaxes, your mind clears, and a soothing calm envelops you. Crisis averted? Perhaps. You've drowned out a very unpleasant feeling. That's a good thing . . . but what if boredom was trying to tell you something?

• • •

Boredom comes for each of us in those moments when we can't see a way forward, when we want to be doing something but don't want to do anything currently on offer. We could call it sluggishness or listlessness. Or, perhaps it's the opposite, a sense of being "antsy," restless for something but unsure of what will satisfy. While boredom can be described in any number of ways, we've all felt it. We contend that we should pay attention to it and understand it. In our view, being bored is quite fascinating, and maybe, just maybe, it might even be helpful.

For years the topic of boredom has been explored by philosophers, historians, and theologians. Yet, despite the fact that boredom is ubiquitous, until now it has received relatively little attention from the scientific community. With *Out of My Skull* we seek to change that trend. Psychology—the scientific study of mind and behavior—is well positioned to shed light on the human experience of boredom. As psychologists who have been publishing research on boredom for the last fifteen years, with expertise spanning neuroscience and clinical psychology, we've developed an understanding of boredom that emphasizes the key concepts of engagement and agency. Our approach has the virtue of being able to account for a wide range of scientific research findings and draws together diverse approaches to boredom.

But despite our conviction that boredom has a message for you, we would not be so bold as to tell you how to live your life. Boredom itself can't tell you what to do, either. In that sense, you are on your own. This is precisely one of boredom's key messages and, by extension, a core theme of this book. As humans, we need self-determined, effective connection with the world. We need to be engaged, mentally occupied, giving expression to our desires and exercising our skills and talents. In short, we have a need for agency. When this need is fulfilled, we flourish. When this need is thwarted, we feel bored, disengaged.

In this regard, boredom reveals an important aspect of being human: we have a strong need to be engaged with the world around us. As we'll see, a number of substitutes for true engagement might be very tempting and might even beat back boredom in the short term. But such temporary salves never last, and boredom will return with a vengeance. After that, it is up to us to embrace our agency.

Boredom is an elusive subject, with tentacles that stretch into diverse areas of human inquiry. In part, this is what makes it so fascinating, but it is also what makes it so maddening. Consider an exchange between Humpty Dumpty and Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*: Humpty Dumpty "scornfully" asserts to Alice that "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." Alice correctly responds: "The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things."

The communication breakdown between Alice and Humpty is emblematic of much of boredom inquiry to date. Although committed to the idea that there is no correct or incorrect way to define boredom, we believe more precision is in order.

In *Out of My Skull* we endeavor to define the elusive subject of boredom with a decidedly psychological approach, as we consider boredom to be an experience occurring inside our minds. We further offer an organizing framework for what has been a fragmented field of study. We hope this will function as a common ground for a wide range of readers and scholars to meet and exchange ideas.

We start our journey by asking "What is boredom?" Just as with most everyday experiences, most of us feel we know boredom well—until we try to define it. The closer we look, the more mysterious and intriguing boredom becomes. Next, we ask "What is boredom good for?" Why would evolutionary forces have shaped us to be affected by such a negative experience? As we'll see, it is actually beneficial to have the capacity to be bored. When it does strike, we need not fear. The trick is in responding well to the signal.

Then we turn our attention to the question "What makes us bored?" The answer is not simple. Boredom, like beauty, could be said to be in the eye of the beholder. One person's joy is another's boredom. However, there are key factors within us, as well as within the situations we find ourselves in, that increase our risk of succumbing to boredom. We further examine how boredom involves being cut off from others and from our critical need to create meaning and find purpose. We then scrutinize boredom's opposites to deepen our understanding of the experience and set the stage for considering what optimal responses to boredom might look like.

Boredom is a call to action, a signal to become more engaged. It is a push toward more meaningful and satisfying actions. It forces you to ask a consequential question: What should I do? *Out of My Skull* is not an answer to this question. It's a guide to help you understand boredom's message more clearly.

CHAPTER 1

BOREDOM BY ANY OTHER NAME

• • •

You lift your head from the dishes in the kitchen sink to look out the window into your backyard. An overwhelming sense of restlessness pervades your thoughts. Born of the desire to be doing something, anything . . . but what? Distracted, you hadn't noticed the dog until now.

She's an Australian Shepherd, a speckled grey-blue coat with tan patches framing an alert face. She's used to rounding up sheep or cattle with an uncanny, seemingly innate skill. Two walks a day—and let's be honest, that's a generous estimate—just aren't quite enough for such an active animal. She needs open spaces, activity, a purpose, a job to do. Not so different from you.

Without sheep to corral she contents herself with charting wide arcs at full speed around your lawn. Normally, this brings a smile to your face. Chasing her tail, occasionally catching it, all seems mildly amusing. And pointless, you realize. Just as this dawns on you, she stops her current circuit, catches her breath briefly, and spies you smiling at her. The plaintive look on her face slowly erases your own smile. Your eyes are locked just long enough for her to figure out you're not coming to the rescue. You will do nothing to save her from the tedium. The endless, meaningless running begins again.

> She's bored. You know it, she knows it. And if your dog can be bored, then what hope do you have to fix your own malaise?

• • •

Sir Dedlock: "Is it still raining, my love?"
Lady Dedlock: "Yes, my love. And I am bored to death with it. Bored to death with this place. Bored to death with my life. Bored to death with myself."[1]

That cheery description of Victorian life comes from a TV adaptation of Charles Dickens's appropriately titled novel *Bleak House* in which Dickens introduces the word *boredom* for the first time. Although to be considered a *bore* predates the Dedlocks,[2] and the French had long made use of *ennui*[3] to capture a feeling of listlessness, "boredom" was not in common English usage until late in the nineteenth century.[4] But the lack of an English word to capture the experience doesn't mean boredom didn't already exist.

Boredom, in some form or other, has always been with us; it is a part of our biology shaped by a long evolutionary heritage. Boredom has a complex and fascinating social, philosophical, literary, artistic, and theological history—far too complex to cover in its entirety here.[5] But to truly understand what boredom is, to define it, we must start somewhere.

A Brief History of Boredom

Peter Toohey, in his excellent book *Boredom: A Lively History,* traces the origins of boredom as far back as antiquity.[6] Seneca, a Roman philosopher, may have been the first to write about boredom, linking it to nausea and disgust, driven by the monotony of daily life:

> 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 [nauseous]. There are many who judge living not painful but empty.[7]

Seneca's lament sounds decidedly modern in its complaint of repetition, that there is nothing new under the sun. One could argue that Ecclesiastes gives an earlier description born of a similar lament of monotony. After outlining the attainment of great wealth and prestige, the narrator of Ecclesiastes writes, "Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun."[8] Both complaints highlight two components of boredom: first, it is a negative experience and second, it feels purposeless, making living seem empty. Toohey even tells us of one Roman village in the second century that memorialized an official who somehow delivered them from intolerable levels of boredom![9]

Boredom, arising from a lack of zest for daily routine, also loomed large in the Middle Ages. Scholars argue that what has come to be called and understood as boredom has roots in the Latin word *acedia,* which referred to a lack of enthusiasm for the spiritual practices that sustained the monastic life—a listless spiritual languor in which rituals such as the burial of the dead lose their significance.[10]

Referred to as the noonday demon,[11] the ceaseless repetition of daily routines led to an odd combination of lethargy and agitation—bedfellows that recur throughout this book—in monks living a cloistered life. Beyond highlighting the oppressive nature of monotony and purposelessness, what both Seneca and the monks show us is that boredom has long been with us—well before Dickens's treatment of it.

It is not until the mid- to late nineteenth century that we start to see explorations of boredom from a psychological viewpoint. As is so often the case in the history of psychology, it was the Germans who got the ball rolling. Theodor Waitz, better known at the time as an anthropologist, and the philosopher Theodor Lipps explored what the Germans called *Langeweile* (literally, "long while").[12] For Waitz, boredom was about the flow of thoughts. As one thought begets another we generate expectations of where this thought train is headed. Boredom arises when those expectations are not met, thus there is a break in the flow of thoughts—the train is derailed.[13] Lipps suggested that boredom arises when we experience a conflict between our desire for "intense psychological activity" and an inability to be stimulated."[14]

Similar notions of boredom were explored by the forefathers of psychological research in the English-speaking world, the polymath Sir Francis Galton and the philosopher William James. Galton captures that notion of agitation that medieval monks called the noonday demon. Constantly finding ways to measure people and behavior, Galton wrote of audience members swaying to and fro and fidgeting during a dull scientific talk—clear signs of restlessness and boredom. In a speech given at the turn of the twentieth century, James bemoans "an irremediable flatness [that] is coming over the world."[15] For James, this flatness and its attendant boredom was driven by an increase in the *quantity* of information at the expense of *quality*.

What each of these early accounts of boredom hint at is the uncomfortable feeling of wanting to engage in satisfying activity but being unable to do so. Each of these accounts highlights a central tenet of boredom: the signal that we are mentally unoccupied.

An Existentialist Dilemma

James's "irremediable flatness" and Seneca's laments of the nausea born of monotony both point to a critical component of the experience of boredom—the sense that things lack meaning. In exploring the foreboding sense of angst brought on by acknowledging the absurdity of life, existentialist philosophers were among the first scholars to systematically address the role of meaning in boredom.[16]

For Arthur Schopenhauer, the pessimistic forebear of existentialism, the underlying reality of the world is most directly expressed through our bodily experience of desire. In other words, life *is* desiring, striving, and yearning. If life is a constant yearning, then the desires we harbor can never be satisfied in any lasting way; when one desire is sated, another rises, making desire itself all there is. Happiness—a momentary reprieve from desire—is always just about to happen. As soon as happiness does arrive, a new desire presents itself. According to Schopenhauer, then, we are predestined to suffer most of the time due to the ceaseless desire coursing within us. We are faced with two miserable choices: the pain of not yet fulfilling a desire or the boredom of not yet having a desire to pursue.[17]

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and progenitor of existentialism, also associated boredom with the struggle to find or make meaning. When we fail to adequately make meaning, we catch a glimpse of an impoverished and impotent self.[18] In *Either/Or,* Kierkegaard's hedonic raconteur states that "Boredom rests upon the nothingness that winds its way through existence; its giddiness, like that which comes from gazing down into an infinite abyss, is infinite."[19]

One understanding of Kierkegaard's message is that "boredom is a root of all evil" precisely because we seek to avoid it at all costs.[20] Diversions from boredom actually *increase* its stranglehold. Were we not so preoccupied by the need to escape from boredom it could point us toward another way of being, one where passionate commitment to a life purpose becomes our guide.[21] Indeed, the second half of *Either/Or* asserts that when we choose to move away from the hedonic and toward more ethical ways of being, boredom ceases to be so troubling.

One final existentialist necessary to consider in our quest to define boredom is Martin Heidegger.[22] Heidegger asks us to first imagine sitting in a train station, waiting for a train that is two hours late. Scanning the station provides only the shallowest of entertainment. We have a book or a phone, but they devour only brief periods of time before we are left wanting some new distraction from waiting. Heidegger refers to this as *superficial boredom,* directed at an external object or event that is not happening. In other words, time is dragging on.[23]

Next, Heidegger asks us to imagine being at a social gathering—some pleasant, innocuous affair—perhaps a work gathering celebrating a recent retirement. We discuss current affairs, trade stories of our children's latest achievements and foibles, and if in Canada, spend considerable time talking about the weather. It is not until later that we realize that all of that time, although pleasant enough, was utterly pointless! Perhaps we were engaged, but not in anything we would rate as meaningful. We sense our time was wasted. This is *boredom alongside* an activity not directly tied to one specific object or event, like waiting for a train. Yet, it is a third stage of boredom that is most important for Heidegger—*profound boredom.* This kind of boredom has no object or source. It is timeless and represents a kind of emptiness in which we get a terrifying view of reality.

So throughout the ages boredom has been linked to mundane routines (Seneca's "night overcoming day, day night"). And since no one thing can ever be counted on to fully satisfy us now or into the future, our daily struggles can feel as though they are empty of meaning. This is boredom's irony. On the one hand it highlights the inherent meaninglessness of existence while on the other it propels us forward in a never-ending search for something fresh and meaningful—something we *hope* will satisfy.[24]

Boredom on the Couch

Whereas the existentialists see boredom as a problem caused by a lack of meaning, psychoanalysts cast boredom as a solution to the problem of anxiety.[25]

According to classical psychoanalytic thought, our primal desires, buried deep under layers of socialization, are disturbing to us. Becoming aware of such desires threatens our sense of self, as well as the social order—we are afraid of our own desires. One coping strategy is to simply push unwanted desires out of our mind. In their wake, however, what remains is the strong feeling that we want to do something, combined with an inability to say precisely what that something is. We have banished the details of the desire to the dungeons of our subconscious. Confronted by a sense of wanting but without a specific target for our desire, we experience a restless tension and turn to the world in a futile attempt to find something compelling that will quell the wanting. Boredom, then, is the price we pay to stay emotionally safe.

In one of the early psychoanalytic accounts of boredom by Ralph Greenson, boredom is characterized as a restless, agitated state.[26] Greenson describes a patient for whom boredom arose from a need to keep depressing impulses at bay. In fact, for his patient the absence of boredom "led to either severe depressive reactions or to impulse ridden behaviour." He goes on to claim that for the bored person, "Tension and emptiness is felt as a kind of hunger—stimulus hunger. Since the individual does not know for what he is hungry, he now turns to the external world, with the hope that it will provide the missing aim and / or object."[27]

For the psychoanalysts, boredom represents avoidance of deeper psychological problems. But this leaves us stuck in other ways. Anything we can think to do won't satisfy because it is too far removed from the original desire.[28] Unaware of our emotions, we are adrift without direction.[29]

If existentialism highlights a paralysis due to meaninglessness, psychoanalysis emphasizes boredom's association with anxiety. Our attempts to cope give rise to absurd binds. The British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes of boredom as "that state of suspended anticipation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire."[30]

This is a paraphrasing of a line from Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*—"boredom—a desire for desires."[31] So, according to the psychoanalysts, boredom arises whenever we are threatened by what we really want.

Lack of life meaning and deep internal conflict; these seem to be uniquely human problems. Eric Fromm, a sociologist, psychoanalyst, psychologist, and philosopher of the twentieth century, famously declared, "Man is the only animal that can be bored."[32] Was Fromm wrong? Is boredom a uniquely human experience? Watching your cat chase after a laser pointer, it's hard to imagine she experiences existential angst or anxiety about unacceptable desires.

Beyond Human Boredom

We have little trouble believing that animals engage in play. Whether it is tiger or lion cubs wrestling, an elephant calf sledding down a muddy slope to crash into unsuspecting adults,[33] or killer whales tossing seals high in the air to bat them away with their tail flukes,[34] it seems plausible, even obvious, that animals play. Early theories on the function of play cast it as training for skills needed for adulthood or serving an important role in social bonding. Neither is the whole story. Young animals that play do not simply grow to become better hunters or have more friends. A more recent explanation of play behavior in animals describes it as a short-term advantage that would also work for humans—that is, play reduces stress.[35]

If we accept that animals play, and perhaps for some of the same reasons humans do, then shouldn't we also accept that animals have other experiences that we once thought were uniquely human? In other words, can animals be bored? If play helps animals cope with stress, then boredom might arise when the animal is prevented from engaging in behaviors it would normally choose—play or otherwise. It has long been recognized that there are detrimental consequences for animals reared in impoverished environments, from increased stress and poor coping strategies[36] to negative effects on brain development.[37] The converse is also true—environments rich in variety work to promote neural development. Importantly for our story, increased stress in animals has led some to suggest that those animals reared or housed in bland environs exhibit behaviors akin to boredom. Françoise Wemelsfelder, a scientist at Scotland's Rural College, has long been a champion of the idea that animals can indeed become bored.[38] For Wemelsfelder, it is the confined environs that captive animals are kept in that is the main culprit. Such confinement clearly restricts the available options for action for the animal. They are reduced to a restricted range of stereotypical behaviors that in some sense are pointless—they do not reflect the behaviors the animal would normally be capable of deploying in the wild. As we will argue throughout the book, when humans are bored, we too are confronted by a challenge to our agency—a feeling that our capacity to be the author of our own lives is being challenged or constrained in some way.

But how can we be sure that an animal is truly experiencing boredom and not something else? Rebecca Meagher and Georgia Mason from the University of Guelph conducted a study intended to discriminate between anhedonia, apathy, and boredom in captive bred Black mink.[39] Anhedonia—the inability to experience pleasure—is associated with depression in humans.[40] Apathy is considered distinct from boredom in that it reflects a lack of interest coupled with low motivation to redress the circumstance. In contrast, boredom is characterized by a strong drive to be doing something. In other words, the anhedonic person can't feel pleasure, the apathetic person doesn't care, and the bored person wants to be engaged. The problem, of course, is that we can't simply ask an animal to tell us when they're bored (or apathetic or anhedonic). But we can measure behaviors in response to the introduction of novel stimuli, which is precisely what Meagher and Mason did.

Two groups of animals were tested—mink housed in unenriched cages and a group housed in enriched cages that allowed for more varied, exploratory behaviors. Both groups were eventually shown objects classed as either aversive (the odor of a predator), rewarding (a moving toothbrush—the equivalent for minks of a laser pointer for cats), or ambiguous (a plastic bottle). The researchers then measured time to contact, duration, and amount of contact with the novel objects. The logic was that an apathetic animal should show decreased interest in all objects. In contrast, an animal exhibiting anhedonia should be less interested in only those objects considered rewarding. That is, the animal can't experience pleasure and so will not approach things normally seen to be enjoyable or positively rewarding. Things would be different for the bored animal. The researchers argued that a bored animal would engage indiscriminately with any and all objects. In other words, if the mink in unenriched cages were indeed bored, then any new object should satisfy their need to engage with the world. The researchers measured which type of objects the animals interacted with, as well as how quickly they went to the objects when they became available.

Mink in the unenriched cages were quicker to make contact with *all* object types—including the aversive odor of a predator! It seems the mink were not depressed or disinterested, they were desperate for stimulation, a clear sign of boredom. Consumptive behaviors—how many treats the animals ate—were also measured, and the mink housed in unenriched cages ate more treats than those housed in the enriched environments. Eating out of boredom is something humans do too. Even if we avoid the use of the word boredom altogether, what this study shows is that animals raised in bland environments become sensitized to new avenues for action.

Of course, all of this relates to animals in captivity. Do animals in the wild get bored? They likely do, but only for short periods of time. In unconstrained, natural environments animals are free to choose their next action. In captivity, their circumstances impose constraints that mean the animal is doomed to experience a monotonous life; they are caged and prevented from engaging in the full suite of behaviors they would normally exercise were they in the wild.

So for humans and animals alike, the key is that we must be self-determined and engage the world on our terms; we must

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