

Leisure Reflections: 58

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Forced Non-Religious Contemplation: Is It Worse than Boredom?

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I wrote in Stebbins (2006) that contemplation and reflection can be conceived of as synonyms, both terms referring to the act of intensely thinking about something. When contemplating (reflecting) we make thought on a particular subject the center of our attention, the dominant activity of the moment. As an act that endures over time, running in length from a few seconds to possibly an hour or more, it is however largely mental, though the contemplator may manipulate related objects during this period. Contemplation can be intense and relatively impermeable, as expressed in the phrase 'lost in thought', or it can be relatively permeable, where the process is easily interrupted by environmental stimuli.

My informal observations suggested that contemplation comes in at least four types. The one of concern here I dubbed *obligatory contemplation*. It is, from time to time, forced on us, as we must try in a certain area of life to solve a problem from which we cannot escape. That problem may be momentary boredom, as experienced, for example, in waiting rooms, air travel, and periods of holding on a telephone.

Wilson and colleagues (2014) studied the effects of boredom on activity done in reaction to it. At one point in their research program, they asked a sample of university students to sit in an empty room without books, mobile phones, or any other distractions. They were told to stay in their seats, stay awake, and entertain oneself with one's own thoughts for six to fifteen minutes. The result was that most students said that their minds wandered and that they were bored. Further, the research team tested out these findings with older participants from a church and a farmer's market. The same result was obtained. They found no evidence that any group based on age, education, income, or patterns of social media use was more inclined to value the time that could be spent on contemplation.

In a separate experiment the team endeavored to determine if negative stimulation might encourage their participants to embrace the opportunity to engage in some contemplation. The team decided to use a negative activity; namely, self-administered electric shock.

Meanwhile, the participants had experience a priori in giving themselves a mild shock using a nearby 9-volt battery. If the enforced boredom became intolerable, they could liven up their existence by recourse to the battery. Sixty-seven percent of the male group gave themselves between one and four shocks, whereas twenty-per cent of the female group did this. A negative experience, the research team concluded, was better than being bored.

In 2021 for many people in the modern world being bored means not having a computer, mobile phone, smartphone, television, tablet, or radio in front of them and no other entertainment is available. Fottrell (2018) points out that “American adults spend more than 11 hours per day watching, reading, listening to or simply interacting with media, according to a new study by market-research group Nielsen. That’s up from nine hours, 32 minutes just four years ago.” Leisure contemplation for these people is largely out of the question. And it is dramatically different from the entertainment and diversion gained by staring at screens.

I identified two other types of contemplation, both of which bear on the present discussion (Stebbins, 2006). One is *casual leisure contemplation* and, by contrast, it is not coerced. Instead, it is taken up as a form of casual leisure of the play variety. This is reflection for the fun of it, as exemplified in the song “If I were a Rich Man” from the Broadway show *Fiddler on the Roof*. Playing with ideas, as sometimes happens even in intellectual circles, is another instance of casual contemplation.

The other type is *serious leisure as contemplation*, or reflection devoted to solving a problem arising with regard to a serious leisure activity. Though this is not play, it is still uncoerced, in the sense that the activity itself is uncoerced. This kind of reflection occurs when, for example, a participant ponders the best training approach for an upcoming marathon, ponders which of two musical instruments to buy, or considers the pros and cons of a prospective volunteer role.

Pondering Everyday Activities

Upon finding ourselves in a boring situation (*sans* electronic gadgetry), we might engage in either of these two types of contemplation. The second type is the more profound of the two and falls under the heading of *pondering everyday activities* (PEA). It is at once a process of thought and talk as well as an activity. More precisely, it appears to be an activity within an activity being undertaken during work, leisure, or non-work obligation. That is, when thought and talk constitute the only activity a person is engaged in, it is just another activity in the domain of work, leisure, or non-work obligation (Stebbins, 2020).

Why is PEA important? Numerous separate sessions of PEA combined give a person an overview of everyday life – their big picture of that life. This picture is not in the typical case scientifically or analytically sophisticated, as it would be when mainly anchored in such abstractions as social class, gender, ethnicity, and historical background. Nevertheless, our PEA does give a sense of life’s personal organization and sometimes of its personal

disorganization and contradictions (eg, Joudrey & Wallace, 2009). It also gives a sense – a social organizational sense – of how one fits in the local community and for some people how they fit beyond it.

Barbalet (1999) observed that boredom springs from a person's perception of the meaninglessness of a situation or activity. Boredom, he says, "is a restless, irritable feeling that the subject's current activity or situation holds no appeal, and that there is a need to get on with something interesting" (p. 631). It is an emotional state of mind rooted in an acute lack of

significance for the bored individual of objects, activities, or the situation itself, as understood within that person's system of values and the larger culture.

Clearly, boredom does not spring exclusively from inactivity ("nothing to do"); it can also arise from activity which, alas, is uninteresting, unstimulating, as can happen with loafing. Furthermore, since boredom is a decidedly negative state of mind, it must be concluded that, logically, it is not leisure at all (Stebbins, 2009, p. 9).¹ For leisure is typically conceived of as a positive mind set. Nonetheless, a session of loafing might not last long enough to degenerate into boredom, or the supply of resources is sufficient to prevent such change.

To complete the story of contemplation, it should be noted that it has two other types. We just considered the type of *obligatory contemplation*. It is commonly effected while at work or carrying out non-work obligations, and in these two spheres, the problems reflected on are legion: how to approach the boss for a raise, smooth over embittered relations with one's spouse, most effectively fill in the annual tax return, and on and on.

The fourth type is *contemplation as serious leisure*, or the classificatory home of complex reflective activity engaged in for its own sake. The activity is complex, and if the participant is to develop the capacity to execute it, there are special skills and a body of knowledge to learn. This type is sometimes called "meditation," it being evident in such systems as Yoga, Tai Chi, and Transcendental Meditation. Proper religious meditation requires a working knowledge of the religious system on which it is based.

Conclusion

Boredom is an emotional state of mind rooted, for the bored individual, in an acute absence of meaning of objects, activities, and life's everyday situations, as understood within that person's system of values and the larger culture (Stebbins, 2003). Looking at it from a somewhat different angle, Brissett and Snow (1993) argue that boredom is born of either lack of momentum or lack of psychological engagement with the events at hand. In any case, meaninglessness and absence of momentum experienced as boredom are, for many so afflicted, strong motivators to find meaning, even if, in some instances, the meaning found brings risk, deviance, conflict, and the like – in a word, more negativity.

Obviously, boredom does not spring exclusively from inactivity (“nothing to do”); it may also arise from activity, which alas, is uninteresting, unstimulating. Moreover, as might be expected, such activity is necessarily obligatory, whether carried out at work or in the domain of nonwork obligation; it is a feature most unskilled jobs as well as certain domestic tasks (common examples include washing dishes and preparing routine meals). Boredom, then, is hardly a feature of life unique to the domain of free time.

Endnote

¹This fits in the domain of free time, which until now I have been calling leisure. But boredom, unwanted as it is, is not leisure, even though it is experienced in free time (and elsewhere).

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