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## Boredom, as a Concept in Phenomenology



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### Synonyms

*Ennui*, *Langeweile*, *Listlessness*, *Tedium*,  
*Weariness*

### Definition

A summary of phenomenological approaches to boredom.

### Introduction

Boredom – that inescapable accoutrement of human existence – is more than a common affective encounter. It is an experience of key phenomenological significance. Boredom gives rise to perceptions of meaninglessness, difficulties in effective agency, lapses of attention, an altered perception of the passage of time, and to an impressively diverse array of behavioral outcomes. Above all, it shapes our world and lives. Boredom's presence demarcates what is engaging, interesting, or meaningful from what is not;

it alerts us when we find ourselves in situations that either are lacking in personal significance or cannot properly engage us; and it spurs us into action and thought. Within the phenomenological tradition, the importance of boredom has been highlighted by Martin Heidegger, who in his 1929–30 lecture course, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude (FCM)* (Heidegger 1995), makes a case for its ontological significance. Notwithstanding Heidegger's detailed engagement with it, boredom has not received sustained attention within the phenomenological tradition, even though phenomenology is particularly well suited to explicate the phenomenon of boredom. The aim of this entry is to present three different phenomenological perspectives on boredom. In doing so, it hopes to showcase not just what boredom is, according to phenomenology, but also what a phenomenology of boredom can reveal about human existence.

### Boredom and Husserl

The experience of boredom relates to a distorted perception of the passage of time. Three types of considerations corroborate this judgment. First, manipulations of one's perception of the passage of time have been shown to lead to negative appraisals of one's experiences and to feelings of boredom (London and Monello 1974). Second, individuals who have a high propensity to

boredom (and arguably experience boredom often) tend to perform errors when estimating the duration of perceptual events (Danckert and Allman 2005). Third, and most important, first-person reports of subjects' experiences of boredom reveal that boredom is associated with a perceived stalling of the passage of time (Martin et al. 2006).

Known findings on the character of boredom and reflection on one's own experience of boredom are thus in line with the observation that, when we are bored, "[t]ime seems endless, there is no distinction between past, and present, and future. There seems to be only an endless present" (Wangh 1975, 541). Although Edmund Husserl does not take up the issue of boredom explicitly, the realization that boredom is intimately connected to a change in the manner in which we perceive the passage of time is key: it makes it possible for us to examine the character of boredom from a transcendental perspective. In particular, by focusing on Husserl's discussion of inner time-consciousness (Husserl 1991), we can make progress in advancing a phenomenological analysis of boredom.

Putting aside interpretative and philosophical complexities, in his analysis of inner time-consciousness, Husserl concludes that the experience of any temporally extended object or event would be impossible, if time (as given to the experiencing subject) were composed of a series of narrow, independent now-points. A chain of independent, unrelated perceptions, Husserl insists, cannot give rise to a temporal experience. Instead, Husserl argues that the original experience of past and future must be included in the experience of the now. "The now-point," he writes, "has for consciousness a temporal fringe" (Husserl 1991, 37; see also 24, 218, 239). That is to say, we are conscious not only of that which is present in the now, but also of that which has just passed and is about to occur. What is presently perceived is always located between *just-past* and *soon-to-be* object phases. The former (*retention*) furnishes us with a consciousness of the phase of the object that has just been, whereas the latter (*protention*) provides us with a less definite consciousness of the phase of the object that is about

to occur. Consequently, the full immediate experience of temporality that we possess at any moment (*living present*) is not the consciousness of the sharp now-phase of an object. The consciousness of this sharp now-instance (*primal impression*) is only a moment of the living present; it is always accompanied by a retention and a protention – that is, a horizon that enables the perception of temporal extension.

How does the Husserlian analysis of time-consciousness become relevant for boredom? As already announced, one of the key characteristics of the experience of boredom is an altered perception of the passage of time – specifically, while bored, one perceives time to pass slowly, to drag, or even to stand still. What this realization suggests is that the experience of boredom is related to, and ought to be understood through the lens of, inner time-consciousness.

Consider the example of the perception of a melody. The perception of a melody requires that an "individual tone does not utterly disappear with the cessation of the stimulus" (ibid., 11). Tones must leave behind them traces (or echoes) and must carry with them intimations of what is to come. Yet, the preservation and anticipation of phases although necessary for the perception of temporal extension are not sufficient for the perception of a melody. According to Husserl, what needs to be added to this description is the fact that the preserved and anticipated phases must be modified and, thus, differentiated from the now-phases. In the perception of a melody, the elapsed tones must be preserved not as they originally appear but *as past*; likewise, the anticipated tones must be presented *as future*. In the absence of this double modification, the elapsed and anticipated tones would remain identical to the tone perceived in the now, and "instead of a melody we would have a chord of simultaneous tones" (ibid.).

The example of the perception of a melody illustrates that in order to experience temporal duration something must be immediately given to consciousness (the content) and this content must be serially and constantly modified. This process of constant modification allows us to evaluate what transpires in situations that we call "boring." The hallmark of such encounters is the

presence of an object (or situation) that fails to engage us in a satisfactory manner. As a result, consciousness fails to pay attention to its object, or, to put the same point in a more passive language, consciousness is not greatly affected by its content. During boredom, we might still engage with something, there is still an object of engagement, but the object fails to absorb us; we are not engrossed by it. Given the structure of time-consciousness, such a lack of engagement will give rise to a double outcome. First, our primal impression will be less defined, pronounced, or vivid – we are, after all, neither paying attention to, nor strongly affected or captivated by, an object. Second, the reduced specificity or forcefulness of our primal impression will modify the other two moments of the living present. Given our inability to pay attention to (or to be affected or cognitively engrossed by) the object of consciousness, there is less to retent and less to protent. In fact, if we imagine a limiting case in which the content of primal impression is empty, then there will be no retention and no protention. But if retention, primal impression, and protention are the necessary conditions for the experience of time, then in such a limiting case, we will not experience the passage of time. Boredom is not *that* extreme. Yet, it can be helpfully understood in light of that limiting case. A situation in which the now is almost empty, unimportant, or unmemorable is a situation in which the just-passed and the soon-to-be are likewise almost empty, unimportant, or unmemorable. If the content of primal impression fails to engage or affect us, it will neither leave a discernible retentional trail nor allow for an impressionable protention. Hence, the lack of specificity or vivacity in the content of primal impression brings forth a blurring (or merging) of the tripartite structure of the living present, and this blurring gives rise to the impression that the present moment has become longer (*Lange-weile*) and, consequently, that time passes more slowly.

The foregoing considerations illustrate that transcendental phenomenology can offer an account of boredom by focusing on the nature of inner time-consciousness. In fact, the phenomenon of boredom is shown to be temporal: it is

grounded in the assumed and introspectively accessible blurring of the distinction of the different moments of the living present. Moreover, the Husserlian analysis is consistent with findings in the empirical science of boredom that report a close connection between attentional difficulties and boredom, on the one hand, and perceived meaninglessness and boredom, on the other hand. According to the provided account, boredom would tend to arise when the content of the living present is less defined or less important to us, something that could be attributed to an inability to pay attention to one's object of consciousness or to one's prior evaluation that one's situation is meaningless. Lastly, a situation in which time passes slowly will arguably be experienced as unpleasant and will be one from which we shall seek escape. It will be unpleasant because it prolongs a state in which the living present is given to us as empty of meaning or cognitive significance. And we will seek escape from it not only because it is experienced as unpleasant but also because we have now found ourselves stuck in a situation that fails to engage us and which is foreign to our desires and goals. The aversive phenomenology of boredom along with a desire to alleviate it and escape from one's current situation are known and important features of (ordinary or everyday) boredom (Elpidorou 2018). The fact that these features can be shown to follow from an analysis of the temporality of boredom is an argument in support of the value, if not necessarily of the veracity, of the provided phenomenological account.

### **Boredom and Heidegger**

Heidegger's analysis of boredom is by far the most sustained and detailed phenomenological explication of the phenomenon of boredom; it is also highly original for it distinguishes between different types of boredom and underscores boredom's ontological and historical import. Heidegger's account of boredom is found primarily in the first part of *FCM*, a work whose chief aim is to present the relationship between philosophy and metaphysics and to alert us to the need

of awakening in us the fundamental mood (or attunement) (*Grundstimmung*) of boredom (Heidegger 1995). Although *FCM* signals a transition away from his project of fundamental ontology, Heidegger's account of boredom still remains grounded in the existential-ontological analysis of Dasein's existence that he provides in *Being and Time* (*BT*) (Heidegger 1962).

In *BT*, moods are articulated to be the ontic counterparts of *Befindlichkeit* – one of the equiprimordial ontological structures (*existentials*) of Dasein's existence. As a basic structure of human existence and openness to the world, *Befindlichkeit* makes possible that human beings find themselves in a world that matters to them and thus forms the condition for the possibility of affectivity. For Heidegger, each ontological structure announces itself ontically through the various ways in which Dasein finds itself in the world and thus the ontic and ontological registers of Dasein's existence are two related yet distinct ways of explicating its existence. In *Befindlichkeit's* case, it is always manifested through some mood. So, Dasein exists always “in” or “through” a mood, where moods are the pre-reflective ways in which we relate to the world. They “open up” the world for us, and disclose our thrownness, being-in-the-world as a whole, and what matters to us (Heidegger 1962, 173–7, 263–4, 321, 389–90).

Not all moods, however, carry equal existential significance. Some, Heidegger notes, are more profound than others insofar as they are able to disclose fundamental features of human existence. Those who do have such revelatory potential are called “fundamental moods” (*Grundstimmungen* or *Grundbefindlichkeiten*). It is through them that Dasein can be revealed to itself in an exceptional and metaphysically insightful manner (ibid., 226). Profound boredom (*tiefe Langeweile*) is one of those fundamental moods.

Profound boredom is not the only form of boredom that Heidegger discusses. In fact, before we are offered an analysis of profound boredom (Heidegger 1995, §§29–41), Heidegger introduces and articulates two other forms of boredom: (i) becoming bored *by* something (*Gelangweiltwerden von etwas*) (§§19–23) and

(ii) being bored *with* something (*Sichlangweilen bei etwas*) (§§24–28). Each of the three forms of boredom corresponds to a distinctive way of how time passes and can be characterized in terms of two related structural moments inherent in each form of boredom (being left empty [*Leergelassenheit*] and being held in limbo [*Hingehaltenheit*]).

Being bored *by* something is the most familiar form of boredom. In light of Heidegger's description of this type of boredom, we can readily identify it with the ordinary or everyday experience of boredom that arises when we find ourselves in a situation that fails to be interesting, meaningful, or engaging to us (e.g., waiting for a doctor's appointment, being in a room with nothing to do, or having to perform a repetitive or monotonous task). This type of boredom is experienced as unpleasant and reveals to us our inability to find fulfillment in the activities that surround us. In doing so, it leaves us empty and holds us in limbo. It does the former because it involves the lack of meaningful and satisfactory activity. It does the latter because the absence of meaningful or satisfactory engagement characteristic of this type of boredom is related to a slower passage of time (time is now experienced as lingering) and to the realization that we are not able to do what we wish to do. The fulfillment of our goals and desires is thus deferred and we are forced to endure this type of boredom by passing or wasting time.

Being bored *with* something is a more profound experience than the first form of boredom: it “arises,” Heidegger tells us, “from out of Dasein itself” (ibid., 128) and signifies a modification (albeit an inauthentic one) of our temporal existence. There are two important experiential differences between the first and second form of boredom. First, being bored *by* something is an experience with a specific and often easily identifiable object (its intentional target); being bored *with* something is not. Indeed, the object of this second form of boredom is not some concrete object or person (ibid., 114). Second, because of its aversive nature, the first form of boredom announces itself clearly to us when it arises: we know – in the moment – when we are bored by

something. In contrast, being bored with something is not immediately clear to us, and, often, we can only come to realize that we have been bored retrospectively. Heidegger's own example of this form of boredom is helpful to illuminate its nature. He describes an outing (attending a dinner party) during which nothing was particularly and obviously boring. The food, the company, the drinks, the music, and so on, all of them were pleasant. Yet, Heidegger notes, upon our return home, it dawns on us that the evening itself was boring. We were bored, but not in the obvious (and superficial, for Heidegger) way of being bored by something. Rather, we were bored because we have participated in an activity that it was not our own and in doing so, we have given in to an inauthentic following of a social ideal (ibid., §25).

We can make further progress in understanding this second type of boredom by examining it through the lens of the two structural moments that are characteristic of all forms of boredom. By accepting the invitation to attend the dinner party we have transformed our relationship to time: we *made* time to go to the dinner party but, in doing so, we *took* away time from ourselves. The dinner was, for Heidegger, predictable and banal; ultimately, it was an inauthentic engagement that was neither true to our past nor contributing to our future. Stuck in the present of the dinner party, we are both left empty and held in limbo. We are left empty because our present has lost its significance and value and is incapable of contributing to the authentic pursuit of our ownmost possibilities; we are held in limbo because we have placed ourselves in a situation in which our present has become disconnected from our true past and future. As a consequence, in this form of boredom, time stands still. It does so not in the sense that it is experienced as dragging but in an existential sense: it is no longer our time, the time that matters to us and which authentically contributes to our existence.

Profound boredom is the third and deepest, most significant form of boredom that Heidegger discusses. Insofar as it is a fundamental mood, it carries revelatory potential and for that reason, it is central not only to Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology but also to the aims of his

1929–30 lecture course. What is distinctive about profound boredom, at least from an experiential perspective, is its comprehensive scope. We are not bored by or with something. Rather, in profound boredom, Heidegger writes, "it is boring for one" (ibid., 134), where "it" [*es*] is meant to refer to the same subject as that found in expressions such as "it is snowing" or "it is cold." Everything bores us. No present, past, or future thing concerns us; nothing whatsoever matters to us. In the throes of profound boredom, we become an "undifferentiated no one" (ibid., 135). We are left depersonalized, unable to relate to any of our characteristics and projects that erstwhile defined us and had been the objects of our concern.

Profound boredom relates to a complete transformation of time – not felt time, but time as originary temporality, that is, time as the ontological structure that grounds and brings forth the being of Dasein. When profoundly bored, we are bored not just with our present, but also with our past and future (ibid., 143, 145). In other words, it isn't just the entities that surround us that have become devoid of meaning and significance. The same fate befalls all of our past and future projects – both our having been (facticity) and our possible projections (transcendence) become foreign to us and cease to matter to us. The total withdrawal of meaning and significance characteristic of profound boredom is thus (in an existential and ontological sense) temporal and what ultimately bores us, Heidegger announces, is originary time itself. In profound boredom, the three temporal dimensions of Dasein are merged and time becomes an "*unarticulated unity*" (ibid., 148). The merging of the three dimensions of time "entrances" Dasein and does not allow it to engage with its world and to project into its future (ibid., 147). As a result, we are left empty because entities as a whole (or in their totality) fail us, and we are held in limbo not only because they refuse any possible engagement but also because their refusal is clearly announced to us.

Yet in this total withdrawal of significance, profound boredom shows its true revelatory nature. It takes an absolute type of concealing – the withdrawal of entities as a whole – for Dasein to gain revelatory insight into the kind of being

that it is (ibid., 136). According to Heidegger, the “telling refusal” [*Versagen*] of entities turns out to be a perspicacious “telling” [*Sagen*] (ibid., 140). While profoundly bored, Dasein can realize that it is the type of being whose existence is an issue for it, and it can come to grasp that, most fundamentally, Dasein is a freedom or an ability to be (ibid., 148–52, §38). Profound boredom thus offers a moment of vision or clarity to Dasein. In doing so, it brings Dasein face to face with the possibilities proper to it and calls it to enact its ownmost possibilities and to resolutely disclose and appropriate itself.

Heidegger’s account of boredom offers a unique perspective on boredom. He assigns an unprecedented ontological significance to boredom and contends that profound boredom can yield a form of exceptional understanding of one’s existence. Profound boredom is thus praised and not condemned. Heidegger would be critical of attempts to ignore or bury the call of profound boredom. Evasion in the face of boredom stands in the way of coming to terms with our own existence and is antithetical to philosophizing proper. Indeed, regarding philosophy, Heidegger notes that “[e]ssential knowledge is possible only from out of and in an originary questioning” (ibid., 162). For the Heidegger of this period, profound boredom is both the ground out of which, and the mood through which, such questioning can arise.

## Boredom and Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre discusses all too briefly boredom in *Nausea* (Sartre 1938). There, we learn that Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist and diarist of *Nausea*, comes to experience a profound type of boredom that is revealing of the ungroundedness of human existence. Despite the importance that boredom is granted in *Nausea* (and its potential connections to action and meaning), it is surprising that Sartre does not discuss it in his *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions (STE)* (Sartre 2002), a work originally published a year after *Nausea* and that explicitly addresses the nature of emotions. The topic of affectivity is of chief importance to

Sartre’s philosophical project, and even though it is taken up in various places throughout his oeuvre, it is in *STE* that Sartre presents most fully his views on the emotions. Thus, any analysis of boredom ought to be based on the findings of that work. Sartre ultimately returns to the subject boredom in *The Family Idiot* (Sartre 1981–93). His engagement with boredom in that work does not amount to an account of boredom. What Sartre offers instead is a series of insightful reflections on the nature of desire and human existence.

In *STE*, Sartre argues that emotions are distinct ways of “apprehending the world” (Sartre 2002, 35) or, what amounts to the same thing, modifications of our “being-in-the-world” (ibid., 63; see also 54). Emotions are prompted by the perception or realization that we are now faced with some insurmountable difficulty, and, through the involvement of our bodies, they bring about a radical transformation of how our world is encountered and lived. They are also importantly *functional*. By transforming our world – specifically, by delivering us a world in which deterministic processes no longer hold – emotions aim to make the difficulties that prompted them to disappear (ibid., 39–40).

Emotions change how we apprehend and relate to the world in a curious manner. Even though they are incapable of materially changing the world (ibid., 41), they still manage to change the world by changing our consciousness of it. “Emotional behaviour seeks by itself, and without modifying the structure of the object, to confer another quality upon it” (ibid.). By altering our expectations, beliefs, desires, and our appraisals of meanings, we ultimately come to inhabit a different world. The world is thus transformed by our emotions. As Sartre writes, during emotional experiences, we “live it [our world] as though the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes but by magic” (ibid., 40). Because the deterministic requirements are now lifted (or believed to be lifted), we can solve difficulties that previously we could not. For instance, Sartre argues that in passive fear, we manage to negate (magically and ineffectually) a threat by fainting – we forget about it and thus it disappears (ibid.,



42). In this way, passive fear helps us to escape the threat without requiring us to do the difficult and perhaps impossible work of actually overcoming it. Emotions allow us to achieve some desired end without having to go through the process of acquiring the means that ordinarily (that is, in the deterministic world of our concerned existence) are the end's necessary antecedents. In other cases, emotions can relieve us even of the demand of having to achieve certain ends: they do so by renouncing or devaluing the ends themselves. In passive sadness, for example, we come to see the world as lacking in value and significance (ibid., 43–44). Because of that, we have absolved ourselves of the responsibility of acting in the world and of pursuing ends that otherwise we would be expected to pursue (socialize, go to work, get dressed, etc.).

The general account of emotions that is offered in *STE* should also apply to (ordinary or everyday) boredom. After all, in this work Sartre seeks to provide a general account of the emotions: even though his focus lies primarily on negative emotions that are strongly felt by the experiencing agent (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, horror), he does discuss the positive emotion of joy (ibid., 46–47) and acknowledges the existence of both “subtle” and “weak” emotions (ibid., 55). Indeed, it is not hard to infer what (ordinary or everyday) boredom would have to be if Sartre's account were to be extended to boredom. Given his functional view of emotions, boredom becomes an embodied and unreflective attempt to resolve some pressing difficulty. Thus, a Sartrean articulation of boredom requires a specification of both the difficulty that prompts boredom and the solution (or at least, attempted solution) that boredom offers to the experiencing subject.

An example can help to illustrate how Sartre's analysis of emotions can shed light on the phenomenon of boredom. Consider a student, who when faced with some difficult material during a lecture, becomes bored. In this example, the problem that the student is facing is an inability to follow and understand the material. Perhaps the student could exert more effort, pay more attention to the lecture, or come to cognitively reappraise the material. But if these solutions are

not available to the student (because they are too hard or because the student is unwilling to pursue them), boredom will come to the rescue and offer a different solution. It will do so by transforming the student's situation – the material and lecture will be appraised by the student as insignificant, banal, or meaningless. Thus, boredom would relieve the student from the obligation to pay attention to, or to try to understand, the material. What is more, due to its aversive character, boredom would also motivate the student to find something *else* to do: to mind wander, to doodle, to talk to classmates, to look outside the window, or to try to solve a challenging but entertaining puzzle. In doing so, boredom would offer an escape from the now meaningless or uninteresting situation that the student is facing. The onset of boredom hence transforms the subject's world and instigates behavioral change.

Given Sartre's distinction between passive and active fear (and between passive and active sadness), we should be open to the possibility that some of our emotion categories are more finely grained than how they initially appear to be. In the case of boredom, it has been suggested that there can be a difference between apathetic and agitated boredom (Greenson 1953) – the former is boredom that feels like apathy and involves a withdrawal from one's situation; the latter involves aggravation and restlessness and is characterized by an unsuccessful attempt to engage with one's situation (Martin et al. 2006; O'Brien 2014). In either case, the problem to which boredom offers a response remains the same. In both cases, one has to engage with a situation that is not cognitively desirable to oneself. The situation is, for example, too easy, too challenging, overly constrained, or excessively repetitive. In light of this difficulty, which amounts to an unfulfilled or frustrated desire for proper or satisfactory cognitive engagement, boredom arises. The onset of apathetic boredom would push the agent away from the situation, whereas the onset of agitated boredom would, at least initially, motivate the agent to try to engage with the situation anew. Either way, boredom involves the revelation that one's situation fails to meet one's demands for cognitive engagement. Importantly, boredom is also characterized

by changes in one's beliefs, actions, physiology, and desires. These changes are conducive to the pursuit of an alternative (mental or physical) situation that, from the perspective of the agent, is thought to satisfy the agent's need for cognitive engagement.

In sum, despite the fact that Sartre does not discuss boredom in *STE*, his phenomenological investigation of emotions renders boredom a purposeful response to situations that fail to cognitively (or meaningfully) engage us (see also Elpidorou 2015). In doing so, Sartre's view on boredom permits us to come to terms with the potential value that lies in boredom. Boredom is not a passive recognition of an unfulfilled need for cognitive engagement but an active attempt to re-establish a proper cognitive relationship to the world. In a sense, what *STE* can teach us about ordinary boredom is what the protagonist of *Nausea* comes to discover. Boredom pertains to the very contingency of our existence. In boredom, we realize that the world does not have to be as it is. Indeed, we are bored *because* we want something other than what is given to us. But boredom is neither resignation nor the wholesale rejection of existence. It is instead our embodied struggle to replace one possibility of existence with another.

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