

July 24, 2010  
words: 8.700

## **The other side of existence: Heidegger on boredom**

Jan Slaby

Contribution to “Habitus in Habitat II – Other Sides of Cognition”, edited by Sabine  
Flach, Daniel Margulies & Jan Söffner

Freie Universität Berlin  
Cluster “Languages of Emotion”  
Habelschwerdter Allee 145  
D-14195 Berlin, Germany  
Email: [slaby@zedat.fu-berlin.de](mailto:slaby@zedat.fu-berlin.de)

*Tedium is not the disease of being bored because there's nothing to do, but the more serious disease of feeling that there's nothing worth doing. This means that the more there is to do, the more tedium one will feel.*

Fernando Pessoa<sup>1</sup>

Emotions and moods are the other side of cognition: all-important elements in our relatedness to the world and indispensable ingredients of thought, judgement and evaluation; still, they have long been both neglected and, what is in some ways worse, misclassified as antagonists of reason (while what they in fact are is invaluable ingredients of our rational perspectives on the world). In a time where the overall perspective that the sciences and the humanities adopt towards affective phenomena has changed dramatically to the better, we are still far away from an adequate understanding of the emotional spectrum. In fact, it is not even clear that an adequate descriptive approach to affective phenomena in humans has been found and established. The purpose of the present chapter is to make some progress in this direction. Since it is always more effective to work from a single case to a more general conclusion, I will focus exclusively on one particular kind of feeling: On boredom.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Boredom, if looked at in the right way, can reveal elements of the predicament of human existence, although the restlessness and consequent urge to engage in dispersing activities that usually come along with the advent of boredom easily prevent insight into this structure. In boredom, significance of world and self drain away, motivation ceases, and even the temporality of our existence is altered in a strange way: Nothing seems to happen and thus time seems to stand still, and can thereby become strangely obtrusive. In his 1929/1930 lectures on the *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger offers a remarkable existential interpretation of three varieties of boredom: ‘becoming bored by something’, ‘being bored with something’, and ‘profound boredom’ as expressed in the phrase *it is boring for one*. According to Heidegger, these three varieties of boredom reveal a skein of relations between the temporality of human existence and what one could call ‘existential significance’ (*mattering*, ‘meaning of life’). The temporality of human existence, the temporal constitution of our very being, and existential meaning – the significance that intrinsically orients a human life – hang together inextricably: The draining away of existential significance *is identical to*

<sup>1</sup> Pessoa: *The Book of Disquiet*, fragment 445, p. 365.

<sup>2</sup> We will soon see that it is not quite correct to call boredom a ‘feeling’.

the strange slowing or even halting of time in boredom. Heidegger then goes on to claim that the experience of profound boredom, understood in its full existential depth, makes manifest that a human being is the free and responsible creator of whatever meaning there is in one's life. Not only that, profound boredom moreover amounts to a *call* to actively take charge of one's existence so as *to endow* it with meaning, and thereby effect a fundamental change in existential temporality.

Heidegger's discussion of boredom is an exercise in the existential interpretation of human affectivity and as such it can serve as a source of inspiration to attempts to understand human emotion and feeling. To begin illustrating this by means of a reconstruction of Heidegger's analysis is the aim of the present contribution. I will show that Heidegger operates with an understanding of human affectivity as a passive sense of possibility, so that feelings are understood on the one hand as passive, involuntary reactions, but on the other hand also as proto-conceptually shaped ways of 'being open towards the world' – they manifest what Heidegger calls 'disclosedness' or 'understanding of being', at any time mediated by language understood in an inclusive way as 'articulated intelligibility'. In our feelings, we are oriented in a certain way towards possibilities of conduct, of existence, of being, and equally away from other possibilities of this kind. The possibilities in question are existential possibilities – *ways of being*, encompassing modes of conduct, of leading one's life. Manifested in our affectivity, the world presents itself as a space of possibilities. Our sense of possibilities is at the same time a way of being open to (or its privation: being closed off from) the world. Talking about this openness to the world is to talk about a general dimension of human feelings, their directedness-towards something, what I have elsewhere called *affective intentionality*.<sup>3</sup> The study of affective intentionality has to be at the centre of the philosophy of affective phenomena in humans – philosophy of emotion, in short.

My main aim in the following is to characterize this key strand of reflection upon human feeling through a discussion of Heidegger's interpretation of boredom. In the concluding section I will cast some doubt upon the final stage of Heidegger's interpretation, suggesting that it too aggressively forces a quite specific understanding of existence upon the most profound variety of boredom. A brief glance at Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* will support this critical line of thought. This final move, however, will not change my overall assessment that Heidegger can serve as a valuable guide in our efforts to shed light upon the so far too little explored 'other sides of cognition'.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Slaby: *Gefühl und Weltbezug*; Slaby/Stephan: "Affective Intentionality".

I prepare the grounds for my subsequent analysis by outlining some general contours of the broader theoretical orientation that one might adopt in order to come to grips with Heidegger's interpretation of boredom. What will become particularly clear from this initial clarification is the widening of the analytical perspective from single states of experience to the whole of a person's perspective on the world – what I chose to call 'human existence'. This broadened perspective can help improve our thinking about human feelings and other human capacities as it avoids a narrowing of one's focus on artificially isolated elements. Working back and forth from the broad existential perspective to its various constituent elements is the best way to proceed. In this way, the other sides of cognition become the 'other sides of existence'.

## 2. From states of consciousness to existential orientations

According to Heidegger, moods are not subjective states of feeling, but rather something we might call *existential orientations*. As such they concern the entirety of a person's situated existence and thereby also the textures of the situations in which the person finds herself. Boredom is a good example of this re-orientation. From the distance, we might think of boredom as an affective state, a kind of feeling, a certain type of mood. But boredom seems quite unlike many paradigm cases of feeling. We are not gripped by boredom in the same way than we are gripped by other kinds of feeling. That is why we are better off taking boredom as an *existential orientation*.<sup>4</sup> Existential orientations are background structures of experience, ways of being situated in the world as well as more active adoptions of stances towards oneself and the world. Existential orientations encompass experience, thought, volition, action and other forms of demeanour. In an existential orientation, all of these components are modified and shaped in specific ways depending on the kind of existential orientation in question.

Existential orientations overlap to some extent with conscious states, but they importantly include more than these. Existential orientations are, most fundamentally, the basic structures of our *ways of being*, the ways in which we *are*. They comprise all the meaningful ways in which a person relates to the world, herself and other people in action, experience, thought, feeling, posture and demeanour – existential orientations prepare and configure all our ways of relating to the world (where both 'world' and 'relating to' have to be understood in an inclusive way). Existential orientations form a background framework of

---

<sup>4</sup> The notion of an existential orientation was recently introduced into the philosophical debate about human emotions by Matthew Ratcliffe (see Ratcliffe: "Feeling of Being" and Ratcliffe: *Feelings of Being*).

intentionality, insofar as they pre-configure foreground intentional states. Examples of existential orientations include fearfulness, self-confidence, motivatedness, alertness and vigilance, hostility, cheerfulness, open-mindedness, resoluteness and determination, boredom, anxiety, depression, etc. Not all manifestations of the conditions that go under the names just listed are existential orientations, though. Some instances of fearfulness, open-mindedness, hostility etc. are more appropriately thought of as character traits, while other instances rather qualify as ‘foreground intentional states’, concretely directed at something specific.

Existential orientations are the middle ground between dispositional character traits and the common foreground intentional states. They are manifest in experience in a certain sense, but are not (usually) in the foreground of awareness. Rather, they figure in experience as background structures. Existential orientations thus are the ‘*from whence*’ attention, emotion, experience and action are directed to the world – that is why it is often so hard to ‘notice’ existential orientations. For the most part, attention is focused not on one’s existential orientations but rather *through them* onto something else. Their experiential aspects concern the ways of one’s attending (and not attending) to something. However, there are indirect ways of ‘getting hold’ of existential orientations. For once, existential orientations can change, sometimes even quite abruptly, thus changing our ways of relating to the world. Insofar as they are transparent experiential structures, these changes in our relatedness to the world change the way the world appears to us. Sometimes, the way we orient ourselves towards the world changes quite subtly, as when our background state changes from contentment to slight irritation, so that some of what happens around us suddenly appears slightly annoying, offensive, or threatening. Our overall condition has changed, and we might become aware of this by noticing the subtle change in how the world appears first.

Existential orientations are neither restricted to what happens to us, nor to what we bring about intentionally. Instead, they combine elements of both, to varying degrees. Thus, many existential orientations are clearly a matter of *feeling* a certain way – to borrow another useful term from Matthew Ratcliffe: in these cases they are *existential feelings* or ‘feelings of being’.<sup>5</sup> Your existential orientation could be a *feeling* of being unwelcome, of being at home, being in control, unloved, stared at, offended, comfortable, etc. As feelings, these are passive occurrences rather than activities. On the other hand, existential orientations could also be, to some extent at least, actively adopted. This is the case when you chose to adopt a certain stance or attitude towards things in general, towards aspects of your life, your projects, your friends, loved-ones or fellow humans in general. Thus, you could try (and succeed) to

---

<sup>5</sup> See Ratcliffe: *Feelings of Being*.

motivate yourself, to make yourself live in a more open-minded, more attentive way, to try to be less irritable, to have a warmer, more friendly attitude towards others etc.<sup>6</sup> If you succeed, you *actively orient* yourself (towards something), as opposed to merely *being* (passively) *oriented*. Usually, active and passive elements are mixed together inextricably, and it is not easy to determine to what extent one has a say in shaping one's existential orientations. Often, mood-like existential orientations simply assail us – however, most affective states allow for *some* voluntary control or regulation. This activity of '*holding oneself*' in an existential orientation comes quite close to what Aristotle called 'hexis', and something like this is crucially involved in character formation, in personal development, and in virtue.<sup>7</sup>

The exploration of possible ways to *orient oneself existentially* is one of the many fascinating themes in the writings of the early Heidegger, and it of course plays an important role in his analysis of boredom.

This preliminary discussion brings us in a good position to understand some of the things Heidegger says in his analysis of mood. An understanding of existential orientations, for instance, might help understand Heidegger's claims about moods not being psychological states, their not being something 'inner'. Instead, he famously claims that a mood is a way of being – “the fundamental way in which Dasein *is* as Dasein” (p. 101/67 – my emphasis)<sup>8</sup>, “the way of our being-there with one another” (p. 100/66), and moreover “the ‘presupposition for’ and ‘medium’ for our thinking and acting” (p. 102/68). Heidegger takes moods to be existential orientations. This is in accord with his concept of *Befindlichkeit*, which can be translated as *attunement*. Looked at superficially, *Befindlichkeit* is Heidegger's generic term for affective phenomena. However, given the way he introduces it as a technical term, it seems to correspond more to the concept of an existential orientation as described above than to a generic term for affective states. What one has to take into account is that Heidegger construes attunement to be inextricably joined together with *understanding*. And as he understands the latter, it amounts exactly to an active holding oneself in an existential possibility – for instance, in *Being and Time* he explains that understanding “is not a having-discovered a fact, but rather a holding-oneself in an existential possibility”, (p. 336 – my

---

<sup>6</sup> These attempts often involve affectivity, at least to some degree – often, you need to bring yourself in the right kind of emotional state in order to genuinely succeed in adopting a certain attitude. Attitudinal and affective modulation go hand in hand. See Slaby: *Gefühl und Weltbezug*, chapter 7.

<sup>7</sup> In German, the fitting translation of 'hexis' is *Haltung* – a term that nicely captures the idea that one often has to actively *hold oneself* in an existential orientation. The English terms that come the closest to the German *Haltung* are 'stance' and 'posture'.

<sup>8</sup> All quotations in the text that are marked by page numbers only refer to Heidegger: *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, in such a way that the first number always refers to the page number in the German edition while the second number refers to the corresponding page number of the English translation by McNeill and Walker (Bloomington, Ind. 1995) from which I have taken all quotations.

*translation*). Since, according to Heidegger, each attunement “is understanding” and each understanding has its attunement (*Being and Time* p. 335, see also p. 142), I take it that we should not exclusively reserve the notion existential orientation to the passive aspects of human existence (i.e., to affectivity), but rather allow it to include active elements that belong to understanding.<sup>9</sup>

The most important point for present purposes anyway is that, according to Heidegger, our attunements reach deeper into our very being than anything else – it is “in them that we first meet ourselves” (p. 101/68). It is here, in studying existential orientations, where we enter the dimension that we can call our being – our existence. So let us follow Heidegger’s lead and try to meet ourselves – *in boredom*.

### 3. Heidegger on Boredom

With his detailed interpretation of different varieties of boredom, Heidegger wants to prepare the grounds for his metaphysical questioning concerning world, finitude and solitude – these three being his ‘fundamental concepts of metaphysics’. Remarkably, he wants to do this by *awakening the fundamental attunement*, the *Grundstimmung*, for ‘our’ philosophizing. As this fundamental attunement he identifies ‘profound boredom’. The reason why a state of boredom, of all things, is the ultimate precondition for metaphysical philosophizing is briefly hinted at, in the form of a vague foreshadowing only, in § 20. Boredom, as the experience of *Lange-weile* – of a time that is becoming long – points towards *time* as that which the fundamental questions of metaphysics are intimately tied up with.

From this it is already clear that Heidegger does not want to merely provide *descriptions* of varieties of boredom. He wants to *awake* boredom in his listeners. His goal is to create a specific readiness *for* certain experiences, and a kind of attentiveness or wakefulness *in* experience. This approach is based in part on the observation that although we are always in some existential orientation or other, we are for the most part not *attentively* in it. *Dasein* – being-*there* – as the kind of being proper to us as humans – is constitutively correlated to being-*away*, which means existing in any of a variety of non-attentive, absent-minded, unfocused modes of being (cf. p. 95/63). According to Heidegger, these various modes of being-away are in fact our default ways of being, only rarely (if ever) interrupted by spells of lucid attentiveness, of wake- and mindfulness, which then truly deserve to be called

---

<sup>9</sup> In the German original, the relevant passages read as follows: “Die Befindlichkeit ist *eine* der existenzialen Strukturen, in denen sich das Sein des „Da“ hält. Gleichursprünglich mit ihr konstituiert dieses Sein das *Verstehen*. Befindlichkeit hat je ihr Verständnis, wenn auch nur so, daß sie es niederhält. Verstehen ist immer gestimmtes” (p. 142). And: “Jedes Verstehen has seine Stimmung. Jede Befindlichkeit ist verstehend” (p. 335).

being-*there*. This is why, according to Heidegger, we do not initially have a clear idea of what boredom and other existential orientations really are, what they do to us or make manifest to us, even despite the fact that they structure experience in pervasive ways and are thus continuously ‘there’ in a certain way. This is also why, in order to gain an understanding of boredom, we need to *wake up to it*, attend to it, *live it* in some lucid sort of way. No amount of amassing factual knowledge can replace this *event* of waking up in and to the attunement of boredom. Thus, methodologically, Heidegger’s work on boredom is an exercise in what could be called *performative* and *transformative* phenomenology in that it has an active purpose instead of merely providing theoretical insight. This approach significantly diverges from many descriptive approaches.

In boredom, the default tendency of Dasein towards being-away seems to be particularly powerful. There is an active tendency to turn away from it. In boredom, just as in anxiety, the default tendency is not to be inattentively bored, but to actively seek distractions in order *not* to be bored. For this reason, a person on the verge of becoming bored constantly engages in activities that serve the sole purpose of ‘passing time’. This makes it particularly difficult to get a hold of boredom. Most of the time, it seems to most people that they are in fact *not* bored.

So in order to perform the phenomenological act of waking us up to boredom, there is no need to create a state of boredom in the first place. Instead, one has to inhibit the activities and distractions that routinely fill most of one’s regular life. Once these shallow surface activities are halted, boredom is revealed to be already there, lurking beneath the surface of dispersing activities. Expect this procedure to be quite painful though, once all routine distractions are disallowed. Only then, in the resulting state of withholding all distractions and lofty engagements, we have a chance of getting hold of our boredom, probably in a state of ever-increasing unrest, in a conspicuous and oppressive *felt emptiness* that threatens to drive us crazy.

### 3.1. Becoming bored by something

The first variety, *becoming bored by something*, is the most common one and has a fairly simple structure – there is something (an object, a person etc.) that is boring. Thus, one is bored because of the “boringness” of this item. The second variety is more difficult, Heidegger calls it *sich langweilen bei etwas* ‘being bored with something’, where it is not

easy to determine what it is that is boring. The third variety is the strangest, as there is nothing in particular that is boring here – it is a profound, unconditioned boredom expressible in the puzzling phrase ‘it is boring for one’ (*Es ist einem langweilig*).

The basic phenomenological characterization that Heidegger provides of the first variety of boredom is that one is *held in limbo* and *left empty* by it. In the most clear-cut cases, this is because the item in question does not grant us a fulfilment that we expect from it. For example, a railway station is boring if it occasions an overly long wait for a train to arrive. It leaves us empty by not offering us occasion for fulfilling activities, and it holds us in limbo by stubbornly postponing the activity proper to our being at the station, namely boarding a train. A book we read is boring insofar as it is uninspiring and uninteresting, thus it leaves us empty; and in reading it, we are “held in limbo” by the book since, though occupying our attention, it keeps providing uninspiring material and thus constantly postpones the fulfilment we are seeking in reading it. It makes us wait for what would be proper as a result of reading: e.g., being moved or enthralled by a good story. Thus, what is boring is such that we are *held in limbo* and *left empty*. Boring is what *postpones* (probably indefinitely) an expected fulfilment.

And while we are thus held in limbo and left empty, what we eagerly and nervously strive to do is to ‘fill up’ the dead time by engaging in dispersing activities that offer themselves to us in the given situation. We nervously strive to make time pass. Heidegger nicely describes our wait at the village train station: What we might do is draw circles in the sand, count the trees in the alley, and glance repeatedly at our watch in increasingly shorter intervals, eager to check how much time we have made pass already. Thus dispersing ourselves, we inadvertently make sure that the boredom doesn’t reach a deeper level – that the boredom doesn’t grip us more fully, and so we prevent ourselves from gaining a deeper insight into what goes on.

### **3.2 Being bored with something**

The first variety of boredom is an existential orientation that is dominated by some clearly identifiable intentional object – an external item, a structure or situation, such as the deserted train station in the first example, a book or an uninspiring interlocutor. The thing or person bores us because, although we are somehow bound to that item in expecting a specific fulfilment, the item withholds that fulfilment and thus leaves us empty – what is boring in this sense enchains us, keeps us fixated upon it without granting us what we want. The second

variety – being bored with something – is not focused on some item or other in such a straightforward way. Heidegger's example is an evening invitation to which he decides to go after a good day's work:

We have been invited out somewhere for the evening. We do not need to go along. Still, we have been tense all day, and we have time in the evening. So we go along. There we find the usual food and the usual table conversation, everything is not only very tasty, but tasteful as well. Afterward, people sit together having a lively discussion, as they say, perhaps listening to music, having a chat, and things are witty and amusing. And already it is time to leave. The ladies assure us, not merely when leaving, but downstairs and outside too as we gather to leave, that it was really nice, or that it was terribly charming. Indeed. There is nothing at all to be found that might have been boring about this evening, neither the conversation, nor the people, nor the rooms. Thus we come home quite satisfied. We cast a quick glance at the work we interrupted that evening, make a rough assessment of things and look ahead to the next day – and then it comes: I was bored after all this evening, on the occasion of this invitation. (p. 165/109)

Poor Martin. What happened? As opposed to the train delay at the uninspiring village station, the evening invitation is an event that he had freely chosen to attend, and of which he knew exactly what to expect – all of the usual things proper to a dinner party did in fact take place. We were bored nonetheless.

Heidegger analyses the situation by again trying to identify the characteristic 'passing of time' and the two structural features that were so striking in the first variety: being left empty (*Leergelassenheit*) and being held in limbo (*Hingehaltenheit*). At first sight, neither the 'passing of time' nor the two features seem present. But, as Heidegger goes on to demonstrate, on closer inspection they in fact do present themselves.

The first observation is that the routine passing of time is actually much more pervasive, and it is for this reason that we can easily overlook the fact that it takes place. This time, the entirety of the situation – *everything* that one does while engaging in the dinner party activities – qualifies as a kind of *Zeitvertreib* ('passing of time'). That with which we are bored is not in fact distinct from our killing time:

The evening is that with which we are bored, and *simultaneously, what* we are bored *with* here is *passing the time*. In this boring situation, *boredom and passing the time become intertwined* in a peculiar way. Passing the time creeps into our becoming bored and, diffused throughout the whole situation, achieves peculiar proportions that it is never able to assume in the first form in

our discontinued and restless attempts. We find nothing boring, and yet passing the time takes on such proportions that it lays claim to the whole situation for itself. Strange! (p. 113/170)<sup>10</sup>

This strange entangling of the boring with our passing time is taken by Heidegger to indicate that boredom of the second variety is ‘more profound’ than the first variety, because in it the entirety of one’s situation is infected by it, as opposed to merely one specific aspect. The boredom is increasingly focusing on ourselves while details of the situation don’t matter so much.

What about the two phenomenal features characteristic of the first variety of boredom – being held in limbo and being left empty? At first sight, both seem to be missing in the second variety. Heidegger undertakes to show that these features do in fact appear in the second form, but that they also have taken on a different appearance. The feature of ‘being left empty’ has changed in line with the overall structure of the second variety into something that is not caused by something in our environment (as was the case in the first variety). Instead, the emptiness in question is of our own making. By letting ourselves be casually swept away and taken along by the usual dinner party activities, by freely submitting to whatever it is that happens at the dinner, we create a peculiar emptiness in ourselves. It is this *casualness* (‘Lässigkeit’ in German) in which we submit, unthinkingly, to whatever goes on at the party, that gives the decisive hint as to what goes on here:

In this chatting along with whatever is happening we have, not wrongly or to our detriment, but legitimately, left our proper self behind in a certain way. In this seeking nothing further here, which is self-evident for us, we *slip away* from ourselves in a certain manner. [...] In this casualness of leaving ourselves behind in abandoning ourselves to whatever there is going on, *an emptiness can form*. Becoming bored or being bored is determined by this emptiness forming itself in our apparently satisfied going along with whatever there is going on. [...] This emptiness is a being left behind of our proper self. (p. 180/119-20)

This is what is what is at the root of the emptiness: A casual dinner party is not something that would fulfil us, not something crucial to our lives. Thus, although we seem heartily engaged in it, this engagement remains shallow. Since it originates in ourselves as our free choice – as opposed to being forced upon from something external that we do not control (like a train delay) – it makes sense to say that this emptiness is of our own making. This is why indeed

---

<sup>10</sup> The argument here is not so easy to discern. What I take to be the grounds for the claim that indeed *all* our dinner party activities qualify as ‘Zeitvertreib’ is the fact that we were bored while engaging in them. This is a typical Heideggerian argument in that it has a circular structure: The fact that we were bored manifests itself in that all activities we engaged in are revealed as mere attempts to kill time – i.e., they were not genuinely based in authentic care. This simply is the phenomenological profile of the second variety of boredom. I hope this will become clearer in the remainder of the present section.

we are bored in the sense of the German *Sichlangweilen bei* (“being bored with...” or “...at...”) as opposed to *Gelangweiltwerden von...* (“becoming bored by...”). The emptiness in questions results from us *leaving behind our authentic self* (“die Zurückgelassenheit unseres eigentlichen Selbst”, p. 180/120) – which in the case of the dinner party example means that this dinner is not among the things that we are looking for in our lives. The party is *existentially irrelevant* to us. That is why our involvement in it leaves us empty.

What about the temporality of the second form of boredom, the strange feature of ‘being held in limbo’? As opposed to the first variety of boredom, where something specific stalls us, in the second form of boredom we have freely chosen to spend some time at the party. It therefore seems that we genuinely *have* time and thus could be quite relaxed. Nothing remotely resembles the panic-like situation at the railway station, where the delay stole us a precious amount of our time, forcing upon us a painful period of futile waiting. Heidegger points to the peculiarity of the fact that we have “*taken time*” to attend the party. He asks:

We have *taken time* for the evening. What does it mean to take time? *What* time have we taken for ourselves here? Some span of time that is freely lying around and belongs to no one? Or does the time that we are taking *belong* to someone? *It belongs to us.* (p. 185/123)

We have taken a bit of the time that is *our time* – a bit of our lifetime. This period of our time we now generously spend; we use it up by attending the party. What happens in this “spending our time”? Heidegger puzzles his readers at this point by claiming that the flow of time, the constant succession of “Nows”, is interrupted – that somehow, *time has come to a halt*. What results is an extended moment, a *standing Now* (“stehendes Jetzt”, p. 186-9/123-26). The standing Now is such that during it we are fully engaged in the present moment, the activities offered to us at the dinner party. We are completely absorbed by the situation, immersed in the pure present of what goes on.

Why does this absorption in the present count as an instance of boredom? The crucial aspect is that this strange *standing Now* is created by our “lived present” being radically cut off both from what has been and from what will be. The temporality of our engaging in the party activities thus is an *isolated* present, with no meaningful connection to a past and no transition to a meaningful future. That is why it seems to stand still. The seamless and natural transition from a past via a mattering present to anticipated futures (possibilities) has come to a halt. Total isolation from the overall temporal framework of past and future turns the experience of present time at the dinner party into an awkward modification of existential temporality. Cut off from our past and not projected towards a relevant future, we are delivered over entirely to the present situation. Heidegger proceeds to perform a crucial

identification, that is in line with his analysis of primordial temporality in *Being and Time* (see § 65): The halted time at the core of our being bored with something is nothing other than our “self” – however, our self in a state of *existential abandonment*, because it is cut off from both what it had been and what it will be. The self left hanging in a temporary void of meaninglessness.

The oppressive standing Now is *us* – our very being cut off from the significance-yielding contexts of its full temporal horizons, past and future. Thus dangling in the isolated (meaningless) situation is being bored.

Let’s quickly recapitulate this complex interpretation of ‘being bored with something’: By taking time for the dinner party, we allow time to be transformed into a standing Now. This happens through our total immersion into the present of the ongoing party activities. The standing Now emerges as a specific emptiness that forms an odd contrast to the flurry of activities we engage in. The emerging emptiness is what captures us, fixes and thus delays us as our abandoned own self, cut off from its significance-yielding relations to past and future. In this way, we now see that and how both characterizing features of boredom – being left empty and being held in limbo – are present in the second variety of boredom. We are left empty because what goes on does not matter (enough) to us, and this fact amounts to us being held in limbo in that we have transformed a period of our lifetime into a disconnected “standing Now”. Both these features characteristic of boredom in the end come down to the same thing. Moreover, in the context of Heidegger’s conception of the being of Dasein (existence), they are revealed to be nothing other than our own ‘self’ in a state of existential abandonment:

We said the time we take for ourselves is *our* time. This time in its standing – this is our sealed off having been and our unbound future, i.e., our whole time of our Dasein in a peculiar transformation. In this transformed form our whole time is compressed into this standing ‘now’ of the duration of the evening. This standing time – this *is we ourselves*; it is *our self* as that which *has been left behind* with respect to its *provenance* and *future*. This standing ‘now’ can, in its standing, precisely tell us that we have left it standing, which means, however, that it precisely is not releasing us, but that our being bound to it is impressing itself upon us. The standing ‘now’, the “during” of the evening in which the invitation endures, can manifest to us as such precisely this being held in limbo, being bound to our time. [...] When, letting ourselves go along with being there and part of things, we are thus set in place by the standing ‘now’ that is our own, albeit relinquished and empty self, then we are bored. (p. 189-90/125-4)

By agreeing to take time for the evening invitation, we have thrown ourselves, for a certain time, out of our existential track.<sup>11</sup> We linger on, existentially derailed, as mere shadows of ourselves, and it is indeed true and quite correct to say that what ultimately bores us is – *us*. When in this state, it is in a certain sense quite right to say that we have become boring to ourselves.

### 3.3. Profound Boredom

*[W]e can see that the more profound it becomes, the more completely boredom is rooted in time – in the time that we ourselves are.*

(Heidegger: *Basic Concepts*, p. 201/133)

A characterization of the third and profoundest form of boredom develops almost naturally out of the second variety – by means of a radicalization. Whereas in the second form we are still embedded in some specific situation or other even when it is not the situation as such that seems boring, this is not the case in the third form of boredom. Here, all one can say is that ‘it is boring for one’. Boredom has become total, all-encompassing, decoupled from any relatedness to specific situations. In a remarkable descriptive sequence, Heidegger claims that, in profound boredom, utter anonymity of self, wholesale meaninglessness of world, and total unrelatedness are fused together to create an existential extreme.

Who is it that suffers from deep boredom? Not you, not me, not us – but rather ‘one’. The self has become an “undifferentiated no one” (p. 203/135), stripped off everything specific, stripped of its everyday personality; in fact, one is completely *de-personalized* in this state (cf. p. 207/138). Equally and correlatively, the entirety of entities – the world – not just a specific situation, has been stripped of its significance. Nothing matters anymore, everything is utterly and indifferently irrelevant. A non-person, a ‘no one’ is facing an all-encompassing void. This, in turn, leads to a third dimension of emptiness: Non-self and insignificant world are related in a mode of ‘unrelatedness’. In this respect, profound boredom is an extreme modification of intentionality: A Non-self is *negatively related* to an utterly meaningless totality of beings. This peculiar ‘negative relatedness’ results from the dual insignificance of both self and world. As the self in deep boredom is without concerns and interests and thus incapable of having things matter to it, its relation to the world is one of profound indifference

---

<sup>11</sup> This ‘track’ is nothing other than what Heidegger calls ‘care’: meaningful projections (of future possibilities) from a pre-given (factive) ground in the context of which entities stand out as presently mattering to us in specific ways: Being-ahead//having-been//being-amidst (see Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit*, § 41).

– not more than a dumb staring at the totality of beings in utter estrangement. This is an absolute borderline case of encountering entities, a breakdown of *being-in-the-world*.

Because of this extreme character of the third variety of boredom, Heidegger holds that it cannot be discussed by means of a concrete example. There simply is no example (cf. p. 203/135). Since it is all-encompassing, this kind of boredom has only one possible manifestation – affecting *the entirety* of self and *the entirety* of beings – everything there is.<sup>12</sup> There also is no ‘passing of time’ involved in deep boredom. Once in its grip, it is out of the question that any attempt to make time pass could ever succeed. We are stuck, there is no way out – and it is a part of profound boredom that we intuitively *know* this. (‘Know’ is meant here not in the sense of an explicit act of reflection, but in the sense of an unreflective ‘holding oneself’ in this predicament.)

In fact, profound boredom is so deep that Dasein itself is transformed by it – transformed into a state that facilitates ‘existential understanding’. Profound boredom offers us the possibility of getting to know how things stand with regard to our existence as such. As all Heideggerian moods have the character of making something manifest, they are *disclosing* something about ourselves (cf. p. 205/136), this applies also to profound boredom. However, profound boredom is special in that it offers the possibility of understanding our existential predicament in general (this applies to only a small number of moods, anxiety of course being another one).<sup>13</sup> This is the ontological dimension of boredom – the characteristic that makes it special.

A message is forced upon us in deep boredom. First, the extreme orientation described above – a depersonalized ‘self’ left hanging in a total void in a mode of utter unrelatedness – is described by Heidegger as *being delivered over to the entirety of beings withdrawing themselves in their entirety* (cf. p. 210/139). Beings in their entirety ‘withdrawing themselves’: worldly entities in general have ceased to offer any possibilities to Dasein. (This is the manifestation of the structural feature of *being left empty* in the third variety of boredom.)

What follows is the crucial move: Heidegger claims that this withdrawal or ‘telling refusal’ of possibilities is at the same time an *announcing* of these very possibilities. He plays an etymological trick here that doesn’t quite work in English, by claiming that “alles

---

<sup>12</sup> This is different from the fact that profound boredom might be *occasioned* by some specific situation or other. Heidegger suggests, in a remark that nicely exemplifies his self-assured provinciality, that ‘it is boring for one’ “to walk through the streets of a large city on a Sunday afternoon.” (p. 203/135).

<sup>13</sup> In the first variety of boredom, we “shout down” boredom’s potential “message” through hyperactive killing of time; in the second variety of boredom, we don’t want to listen to the message... (cf. p. 205/136) – whereas in profound boredom *we are compelled* to listen to it, there is “a peculiar compulsion in it” (p. 209/139).

*Versagen* ist in sich ein *Sagen*, d.h. Offenbarmachen” (p. 211/140) – which literally however un-etymologically translates to: “all withdrawing is a telling, i.e. a making manifest”.<sup>14</sup> But how can a refusal be at the same time a *telling* or a *revealing*? One answer could be that, while in profound boredom everything – both self and world – have lost all significance whatsoever, it is nevertheless still boredom, which is a *negative* existential quality (as opposed to the presumably neutral ‘utter indifference’). This negativity of the existential orientation in the absence of anything specific to focus on or turn away from, inevitably creates a state of ‘responsiveness’ in which the profoundly bored person is open, probably for the first time, to grasp basic truths about her existence.

However, a more important consideration is to place the ‘telling’ involved in profound boredom into the context of Heidegger’s overall understanding of language (‘Rede’ and, in his later works, ‘Sage’). Heidegger views language as a structural feature of Dasein, as the discursive articulation of intelligibility in general. In this context, it is not totally surprising to take worldly entities as constantly ‘telling us things’, i.e. calling for responses, ‘laying claims upon us’. In this sense, the situation in which beings withdraw themselves in their entirety has to be taken as a privation of the general ontological structure of telling, a modification in the structure of the world’s intelligibility. By not offering anything, beings become conspicuous through the very fact that they ‘fall silent’, and this will inevitably impinge upon our conceptually articulated responsiveness to our surroundings. In this way, beings ‘telling refusal’ can be said to force a message upon us.<sup>15</sup>

But what is it that is ‘told to’ Dasein by ‘beings telling refusal in their entirety’? According to Heidegger, what thereby gets announced are the *possibilities* that Dasein has (or might have). In the worldly entities’ receding, in their not offering us anything, they ‘point to’ the possibilities that they nevertheless *would* or *could* offer to Dasein – the beings withdrawal announces these possibilities exactly by refusing, by denying them (cf. p. 212/141). As soon as the emptiness and meaningless of the world becomes aggressively conspicuous, there is a *dawning* of the possibilities that Dasein could have, but that so far lay waste in its existence. (This is what Heidegger will then identify as the third variety of boredom’s manifestation of

---

<sup>14</sup> McNeill and Walker translate the passage in question as follows: “All telling refusal [*Versagen*] is in itself a telling [*Sagen*], i.e., a making manifest” (140). It is of course a stretching of language to coin the expression “telling refusal” to capture the connotation of “telling” in the German “*versagen*,” which would have to be translated literally as ‘deny’, ‘refuse’ or ‘withdraw’.

<sup>15</sup> This is backed by things Heidegger explains at various places in the *Zollikon Seminars*. John Haugeland in “Truth and Finitude” offers a good rationale for translating Heidegger’s Rede not as ‘discourse’ but rather as ‘telling.’ This is very much in line with the later Heidegger’s switching from talking about ‘Rede’ to talking about ‘Sagen’ and ‘Sage’, which is of course much closer to the English ‘telling.’

the feature of being held in limbo – the temporal character of this becomes clear in what follows).

The crucial final piece of the explication follows suit. What is still missing is the connection between deep boredom and time. So far, nothing in the characterization of deep boredom seemed to be specifically related to time. But this is just a superficial impression. Looked at rightly, already the first main feature of deep boredom – the all-encompassing void that was created by a total refusal of beings in their entirety – is a temporal phenomenon. In this all-encompassing void, Dasein is *entranced* ('gebannt' in German) by time – by its own time, by the very time that constitutes Dasein's existence (cf. p. 221/147). Thus entranced, Dasein fails to relate to any beings – beings tellingly withdraw in their entirety and all significance drains away. Being-left-empty in profound boredom is a being-entranced by the temporal horizon as such. A conspicuous feature of this is the complete disappearance of any concrete Now. As opposed to the second variety of boredom (which is centred upon a conspicuous *standing Now*), the Now is eliminated in profound boredom. What remains is an awkward merging of all three temporal dimensions – past, present, future – into an unarticulated temporal unity (cf. p. 222/148).

As this widening and fusion of the temporal dimension matches the telling refusal of beings in their entirety and their consequent meaninglessness, the second crucial temporal feature of profound boredom matches the strange announcing of possibilities in their telling refusal: The very entrancement by time amounts to a being forced into the centre of what enables Dasein as such – and this is, paradoxically, the present moment or 'moment of vision' (the 'Augenblick'). Thus, just as Dasein's possibilities are announced in their very refusal, Dasein's specific *being-in-the-present* (in the *Augenblick*) is opened up in the disappearance of the present into the dimensional indifference of a unified temporality. From this, finally, Heidegger draws his ultimate conclusion, reporting the fusion of the temporal and the existential dimension in profound boredom:

Yet whatever that which entrances as such, namely time, announces and tells of as something in fact refused [...] is nothing less than the *freedom of Dasein* as such. (p. 223/148-9)

This freedom, Heidegger explains, transpires only in the act of *freeing-itself* performed by Dasein. And this act of freeing-itself, in turn, happens only in the unlocking or disclosing of Dasein – in Dasein's disclosing itself as a Being-*there* (in the present), which is nothing other than *acting* in the here and now. Thus, Dasein is called upon in deep boredom to disclose-itself, i.e. to resolutely take over its particular existence in the here and now and amidst the entities of its world. This act of unlocking is the *Augenblick*, the 'moment of vision':

Only in the resolute self-disclosure of Dasein to itself, in the moment of vision, does it make use of that which properly makes it possible, namely time as the moment of vision itself. (p. 224/149)

Basic structural features of Dasein – the predicament of having to take over one’s existential situation (its concrete possibilities), and one’s having to perform free acts in the here and now – become conspicuous in deep boredom exactly through their vanishing, their ‘telling refusal’. *Through* their very disappearance, Dasein is called upon to actively retrieve these features. The conspicuous felt absence of all possibilities takes on the character of a call to actively grasp and engage one’s possibilities – and this corresponds to (or rather: is another description of) the disappearance of the present into an unarticulated temporal horizon which is at the same time a *forcing* of Dasein back into the very moment – into the present-moment of action in the here and now. That is why Heidegger can conclude that in profound boredom, bounded, finite human freedom ‘announces itself’ – i.e. makes a claim upon us, calls us back into resolute action. Each of us is thereby revealed to be the ultimate creator of any ‘meaning in life’ that there can possibly be.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

*I feel like a mere void, the illusion of a soul, the locus of a being, a conscious darkness  
where a strange insect vainly seeks at least the warm memory of a light.*

Fernando Pessoa<sup>16</sup>

Boredom grows from the temporality of human existence. In boredom, when it is allowed to become profound and is not evaded through dispersions or kept shallow in one of its more mundane varieties, our very being is modified to an extreme. In the deeper forms of the second variety of boredom (‘being bored with something’), the bored person’s existence literally turns into a span of ‘dead time’. The ‘self’ (understood essentially as ‘lived temporality’) is abandoned by being cut off from a meaningful temporal context – from a significance-yielding history and from a constructive projection towards a meaningful future. Consequently, experience in the present is turned into a ‘standing now’, which is nothing less than existential futility – nothing really happens, nothing really matters. In profound boredom (third variety), not just a short period of our life invested in a specific activity, but rather our entire existence is modified into our turning literally into a ‘no one’, and correspondingly, the

---

<sup>16</sup> Pessoa: *Book of Disquiet*, fragment 219, p.192.

world in its entirety ceases to offer anything of significance. In terms of temporality, profound boredom amounts to the loss of a lively present, as the three dimensions that make up existential temporality fuse into one another indifferently.

So far, so plausible. Next, Heidegger attempts to persuade us of the possibility of a ‘message’ being thrust upon us in profound boredom. From this point on, his interpretation can seem somewhat forced. Once at the deepest point of all-consuming boredom (rarely if ever experienced in the course of an ordinary human life), Heidegger reckons with the emergence of a quite specific possibility: The extreme transformation of existence creates a situation of heightened responsiveness in which the very features of existence that had been modified in profound boredom are made manifest to us. In this way, profound boredom would facilitate our *waking up* again – what Heidegger glosses as a ‘waking up to ourselves’. Profound boredom, according to Heidegger, calls us back into the present-moment in order to freely and responsibly take charge of our existence. Profound boredom would have the potential to awake our freedom by forcing us back into our existential present – into the *lived presence of the ‘moment of vision’*.

I made use of the conjunctive in the last few sentences in order to distance myself somewhat from this interpretation – not by denying it outrightly, but by questioning its inevitability. Without being explicit about it, Heidegger seems to think that not heeding the message of profound boredom is falling short, somehow missing out on a profound existential possibility. Consequently, the state resulting from *not answering* the call of profound boredom – not ‘re-starting’ resolute existence in the here and now of determined action – is implicitly construed as an inauthentic or otherwise defective mode of being. But what if someone lingered on indefinitely in profound boredom – existing, as it were, as an ‘undifferentiated no one’ in the waste land of a meaningless world, relating to this world in a mode of ‘utter unrelatedness’? How would this be like? Maybe there is even a calm resting place that gives us peace of mind in depersonalized detachment, and in the pure, disinterested beholding of one’s surroundings, unstirred by the vicissitudes of ordinary life. Viewed from this angle, it can seem like an impertinence to demand initiative and action. Why shouldn’t we submit wilfully into the bliss of indifference? From this (admittedly unusual) vantage point, it seems that Heidegger tends to impose an activist ideal upon human existence – inscribing a relentless demand to be oriented towards what matters, even at the point of grasping the existential truth that nothing really matters for its own sake. Even in the absence of all meaning, existence is tied slavishly to significance, by having profound boredom force a message upon us, by pulling us back into resolute being, into relentless caring, significance-

yielding projections and into a way of life that, like Sisyphus, creates and sustains those projections against one's better judgment. As my choice of motto for this section indicates, I have in mind an existential orientation like the one that Bernardo Soares – anti-hero (and author's alter ego) of Fernando Pessoa's wonderful *Book of Disquiet* – is burdened (or blessed?) with. In this fictional 'autobiography without facts' we find an abundance of confessions by an assistant bookkeeper from Lisbon – confessions that testify of quite a different stance towards existential emptiness than the one offered by Heidegger. The following fragments are presented in the hope that they can kindle an idea of a way to dwell in a boredom-like existential orientation:

Some say that without hope life is impossible, others say that with hope its empty. For me, since I've stopped hoping or not hoping, live is simply an external picture that includes me and that I look at, like a show without a plot, made only to please the eyes – an incoherent dance, a rustling of leaves in the wind, clouds in which the sunlight changes colour, ancient streets that wind every which way around the city.<sup>17</sup>

To goldenly stagnate in the sun, like a murky pond surrounded by flowers. To possess, in the shade, that nobility of spirit that makes no demands on life. To be in the whirl of the worlds like dust of flowers, sailing through the afternoon air on an unknown wind and falling, in the torpor of dusk, wherever it falls, lost among larger things. To be this with a sure understanding, neither happy nor sad, grateful to the sun for its brilliance and to the stars for their remoteness. To be no more, have no more, want no more...<sup>18</sup>

My happiest moments are those when I think nothing, want nothing and dream nothing, being lost in a torpor like some accidental plant, like mere moss growing on life's surface. I savour without bitterness this absurd awareness of being nothing, this foretaste of death and extinction.<sup>19</sup>

These remarks open up a dimension that makes the final steps of Heidegger's interpretation seem questionable. There might be many more and quite different questions to ask about profound boredom. Maybe there are other ways to deal with profound boredom than being forced back into resolute existence. What vast universes of possible being are laid out before us when we let go of the fixation upon 'meaning in life'? What unexplored spaces of possibility await us when we, like Pessoa's alter ego in the *Book of Disquiet*, commit our existence to unrelenting passivity, pure beholding and literary imagination? Heidegger's interpretation of boredom, remarkably though it is, may in the end offer no more than initial

---

<sup>17</sup> Pessoa: *Book of Disquiet*, fragment 193, p.169.

<sup>18</sup> Pessoa: *Book of Disquiet*, fragment 45, p.46.

<sup>19</sup> Pessoa: *Book of Disquiet*, fragment 461, p. 379.

glimpses of insight into the way in which temporality, selfhood, existential significance, and freedom hang together in human existence. It now seems as though the act of *freeing-oneself* in the ‘moment of vision,’ whereby Dasein is able to access the present situation so as to act meaningfully in it, is only one among various ways open to us in profound boredom. There might be other, quite different ways of transforming one’s existential orientation from tedium into absorption in the present. The book on boredom and related orientations is far from closed. Its existential analysis has only just begun.

### References

- Haugeland, John: “Truth and Finitude. Heidegger’s Transcendental Existentialism”, in: Mark Wrathall/Jeff Malpas (eds.), *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity. Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus, Vol. 1*, Cambridge, MA. (The MIT Press) 2000, pp. 43-77.
- Heidegger, Martin: *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen (Max Niemeyer) 1993 [1927].
- Heidegger, Martin: *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit*, Frankfurt (Klostermann) 2004 [1929/30]; translated by William McNeil and Nicholas Walker: *Basic Concepts of Metaphysics. World – Finitude – Solitude*, Bloomington, Ind. (Indiana University Press) 1995.
- Heidegger, Martin: *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols – Conversations – Letters*, Evanston, IL. (Northwestern University Press) 2001.
- Pessoa, Fernando: *The Book of Disquiet*, edited and translated by Richard Zenith, London etc. (Penguin Classics) 2002.
- Ratcliffe, Matthew: The Feeling of Being. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 12 (8-10), 2005, pp. 43-60.
- Ratcliffe, Matthew: *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality*, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2008.
- Slaby, Jan: *Gefühl und Weltbezug*, Paderborn (mentis) 2008.
- Slaby, Jan/Stephan, Achim: “Affective Intentionality and Self-Consciousness”, in: *Consciousness and Cognition* 17, 2008, pp. 506-513.