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Introduction

DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF FUNCTIONAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL BOREDOM

The gods were bored; therefore they created human beings. Adam was bored because he was alone; therefore Eve was created. Since that moment, boredom entered the world and grew in quantity in exact proportion to the growth of the population. Adam was bored alone; then Adam and Eve were bored together; then Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel were bored en famille. After that, the population of the world increased and the nations were bored en masse. To amuse themselves, they hit upon the notion of building a tower so high that it would reach the sky. This notion is just as boring as the tower was high and is a terrible demonstration of how boredom had gained the upper hand.

— SØREN KIERKEGAARD, *EITHER/OR*,
A FRAGMENT OF LIFE (1843)

DO YOU WANT to learn to tolerate boredom? If the answer is yes, you have come to the right place, but if your hope is to stop suffering from boredom, you will find no solace in these pages or anywhere else. This book explores how boredom has been

understood throughout Western history, attending to scenarios in which it has been essentially seen as a cursed, morbid, or pathological phenomenon. But the book also looks at the expression of boredom's functionality as an alternative to the prevailing notion that boredom is the root of all evil. The goal is not to convince you that boredom is good or bad, or that you should endure or reject it at all costs. Rather, it is to offer ways to recognize the different types of boredom that you may experience in your daily life as an individual and a member of society, to explore the causes and consequences, and to know how best to respond to your discomfort, taking into account the underlying conditions that give rise to your experience and the resources you have at your disposal to deal with it.

The hope is that by the end of this book you will recognize the importance of boredom in our personal and social development; that you no longer fear it but do not trivialize it; that you will not think that you are sick if you do not know how to manage your boredom but will not bring it upon yourself with the false expectation that being bored will make you a genius. The hope is also that you will appreciate or despise boredom for what it is: a painful symptom of an upset that may be inside us or outside us, which determines our way of being and our way of being-in-the-world, without which we would not be aware of our unhappiness and would never have the opportunity to overcome it.

How will this ship be steered into port? The aim is to trace and reconstruct the history of boredom as a pathology or disease through the philosophical, theological, literary, and medical narratives that have left a record of its plight in the West from antiquity to the present. This will help to understand how its *functional* and *dysfunctional* dimensions have been constructed over time. If you stay onboard, be aware that you are about to embark on an adventure through centuries and epochs preceding our own, up to the most heated present, in search of written evidence of boredom, which will be culled from a selection of texts resulting from a systematic literary review of primary and

secondary sources, gray literature, and the twists and turns of an entire decade of work.

Following Kierkegaard's famous parable in *Either/Or*,¹ the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg stated in his *Description of Man* that boredom may be the metaphysical principle of the world. What we call reality is only a step away from being a creation of entities that are bored with their own eternity, with their omnipotence, and this has created the problem of boredom throughout history. As Nietzsche wrote in *The Antichrist*, a bored God can only create a bored man, since the latter is made in the image and likeness of the former: "The old God, all 'spirit,' all high priest, all perfection, takes a stroll in his garden; but he is bored. Against boredom even gods struggle in vain. What does he do? He invents man—man is entertaining. But lo and behold! Man too is bored" (AC 48, eKGWB).²

Since then, everything has gone from bad to worse as a result of boredom. Aware of the tedium to which they had condemned their offspring, the gods brought misery into the world to relieve themselves, as Leopardi relates in his "History of the Human Race":

He commanded Mercury to found the first cities and to divide the human race into peoples, nations, and languages, thus introducing rivalry and discord among them, and to instruct men in singing and in those other arts which, both because of their nature and of their origin, were and still are called divine. He himself established laws, conditions, and civil ordinances for the new peoples; and finally, to bless them with an incomparable gift, he sent among them certain idols, most exalted and superhuman in appearance, to whom he granted government and power over those peoples. They were called Justice, Virtue, Glory, Patriotism, and other such names.³

Is boredom a disease inherited from our creators at the beginning of time? There is something morbid in everything

that has to do with it. How tedious boredom is, how unpleasant it makes the time in which it visits us, what hatred of the present moment it arouses, and how destructive some of our reactions to such afflictions can be. Boredom is an abnormality, a pathology. It interrupts the normal passage of time and acts as a symptom to be relieved. Its experience marks the transition from a state of psychological satisfaction to one of frustration. Our cortical arousal levels drop as a result of uninteresting, monotonous, repetitive, or meaningless situations. The clock stops, and life is emptied of sensation, losing all sense and plunging us into an unbearable discomfort in which we are all but one unhappy being. Boredom is so painful that no one in their right mind would desire the torment to which it subjects us, only tortured souls who naïvely believe they will find catharsis in suffering.

Throughout the history of the West, boredom has always been considered a disease. It has always been the cause of our misfortunes, the punishment of humanity. The ancients saw it as a shameful condition resulting from a lack of devotion to the community and the cultivation of virtue, and as a consequence of an ostentatious lifestyle. In the Middle Ages, it was included in the list of mortal sins as *acedia*. In modern times, it has come to represent the negation of the capitalist work ethic, becoming the *mal du siècle* (evil of the century) at the end of the nineteenth century, a genuine disease. Only now, in some cultures, is boredom considered a blessing when it is confused with rest.

But boredom is almost never a disease or a pathology in the strict sense. It is a *symptom*, a sign of dissatisfaction and contempt for what is before us, for the reality in which we are immersed, and which constitutes the real *disease* from which we must flee in order to put an end to suffering. It becomes a problem only when the condition itself becomes chronic over time because we cannot shake it. Then boredom becomes dysfunctional. The rest of the time, for better or worse, boredom is the prelude to the very change that prompted the gods to invent us.

Almost all of us experience boredom from time to time, with more or less intensity, more or less frequency, depending on both exogenous factors, which correspond to the possibilities offered by the environment, and endogenous factors, which are related to the inner life. But this does not mean that we are all ill. Most of us get bored in a very functional way when we feel unable or reluctant to engage in an activity or situation because of individual and environmental conditions that may occur simultaneously or independently. It saves us a lot of energy.

Consider this example. You may want to get hooked on this book right now, but for various reasons, even several at once, you are unable to achieve your goal. It may be that what the book is telling you is so uninspiring that it's impossible to get your attention. Or perhaps it's not the time for focusing and staying engaged. Or maybe you feel that it's not worth the effort to stay engaged because there's not much reward in reading it. In all these circumstances, the flow between one's cognitive demands and available resources has broken down, and boredom has entered the scene—the kind of boredom that tells you to close the book and move on to something else. Once you make a decision and commit to it, the pain vanishes.

This everyday form of boredom is known in psychology and psychiatry as *situation-dependent boredom*, or in philosophy and literature as simple or transient boredom. It is a functional boredom that helps us determine what we want to leave behind and makes us react to force it to become part of the past. It can lead us to introspective action and cognitive reassessment, make us curious about what lies ahead and what is missing, and predispose us to inquire about what is possible. And it can at times be an opportunity to learn about ourselves and our context, becoming a means of anticipation and preparation for action that avoids stagnation.

But being bored is not always that easy. As mentioned, boredom sometimes becomes chronic. This means that it is not easy to stop whatever is causing it. Some people are always bored,

regardless of circumstances, and are unable to design a strategy to figure out a scenario more desirable than the present one. They suffer from *individual-dependent and chronic boredom*, according to psychology and psychiatry, that prevents the escape from pain because the source from which it emanates is, in fact, oneself. Another atypical form of boredom occurs when we cannot free ourselves from its grip because the context or situation in which it appears is resistant to change. The cause is not an individual problem, but the environment itself. This type of boredom can be called *situation-dependent and chronic*, because it depends on the situation, not the individual. But it's not transient: We cannot do anything to change the circumstance that causes it and that persists over time. Sometimes these chronic experiences of boredom are so prolonged that they finally rob existence of its meaning. It is at this point that what philosophy and literature have described for centuries as profound or complex boredom, synonymous with weariness, tedium, or ennui, comes into being. It is the boredom of living (*l'ennui de vivre*) of existentialist origin, in which nothing seems worthwhile anymore.

The difference between individual-dependent and chronic boredom, in the sense of the term coined by mental health sciences, and profound or complex boredom, as found in philosophy and literature, is that the former can occur only individually, depending on the subject, while profound boredom can occur individually, depending on the person and the context, or collectively, when a whole group gets tired of what is offered by an invariably boring and shared circumstance, which becomes chronic to the point of losing its meaning.

Colleagues who are experts in the study of boredom have not yet paid enough attention to the idea that situational boredom can become chronic over time. This may be due to the impossibility of the bored subject or group to bring about changes in the environment, not through their own fault, but because the context does not allow it, leading to the desperation in which

profound or complex boredom is sometimes born. This peculiar form of boredom is essential for analyzing the history of boredom as a disease and for distinguishing its metaphorical expression from its literal one. This book links the contemporary teachings of psychology and psychiatry with the Western philosophical and literary tradition in order to identify situation-dependent and chronic boredom.

Accordingly, what we have is an intensifying scale of the experience of boredom, ranging from its functional form, that of transient or simple boredom, to the horror of profound boredom, the most dysfunctional form of all, which affects those with a high individual propensity to be bored and those who live in circumstances of situation-dependent and chronic boredom. If this progression were outlined schematically, it would boil down to the following four experiences of boredom, from most functional to least functional (see fig. 1.1):

1. Situation-dependent and transient boredom (functional): A subject or group of subjects is bored in a given context, and their boredom disappears when a change occurs or is induced.
2. Individual-dependent and chronic boredom (dysfunctional): A subject is pathologically bored in all circumstances or in a large number of contexts, due to psychological or neurological reasons that cause a high propensity to be bored and an inability to develop coping strategies or to imagine a more desirable scenario than the present one. It can lead in extreme reactions to pain.
3. Situation-dependent and chronic boredom (dysfunctional): A subject/group of subjects is bored by a context they cannot change. Sometimes they can only wait for the context to change by itself, but this can also lead to extreme reactions on the part of the bored person(s).
4. Profound boredom (dysfunctional): A sense of fatigue and life-weariness can be experienced both

discomfort to the action that changes it. When we speak of dysfunctional boredom, the passage from pain to the transformation of the present is, in principle, forbidden. Unless, of course, those who suffer from it finally explode in a violent reaction of unimaginable consequences, in a forceful repulsion, or in an extreme response that, as is usually the case with extremes, can take on pathological forms.

Wherever boredom falls on the scale of dysfunctions, when it occurs in chronic circumstances, it is typically associated with a whole range of mood disorders, such as anger, rage, dissatisfaction, apathy, depression, anxiety, stress, or alexithymia; with behavioral disorders such as suicide, delinquency and crime, rebelliousness and provocation, wildness, impulsivity, reckless driving, or addictions to drugs, sex, gambling, the internet, smartphones, or eating disorders; with personality disorders such as hysteria and narcissism; with pathological states of self-consciousness related to identity and introspection; and with mental illnesses such as psychosis, schizophrenia, paranoia, Alzheimer's, Asperger's, and bipolar disorder, among many others. All these experiential and behavioral correlates lead to the association of boredom with illness.

By contrast, we would not suggest that the most ordinary boredom experienced by people who have ample opportunities to respond to pain by engaging in alternatives has pathological implications. On the contrary, many believe that the simplest and most mundane boredom stimulates cognitive abilities related to memory, concentration, structured thinking, synthesis, reflection, and imagination. It has even been suggested that boredom can be an IQ booster, and that boredom has the capacity to increase the acuity of our five senses, and even a sixth: that of extrasensory perception of the environment and ourselves. The most ardent apologists for boredom recommend that parents deliberately let children be bored, in the belief that its effects will turn them into gifted children. Without realizing it, they are resurrecting the Renaissance ethos that argued that

boredom, even—or especially—in its deepest form, was a necessary condition for becoming a genius.

Even in such seemingly innocuous situations of boredom, traces of pathology may be lurking. Many of the most *creative* responses to the simplest forms of boredom end up taking destructive forms. It can be agreed that boredom is responsible for organizing the search for the different. However, from the combination of the two factors that come into play at the moment of flight in the face of boredom—that is, from the amalgamation between the subject and the environment—anything can emerge, even the most maladaptive responses. Not everything is black or white, chronicity or contingency. The interplay of the psychological and social variables on which our experience of boredom depends, and how we deal with it in different circumstances, can bring us closer to or farther from pathology or normality.

Creative and healthy people in thriving contexts are likely to respond positively to boredom. In less stimulating situations, they may or may not, depending on how limiting the environment is. There will be those who respond well to constraint, but in general the impulse will prevail. For their part, unhealthy people, faced with an abundance of opportunities, will react constructively or destructively, depending on the subjective condition that ails them. But there is no doubt that when unhealthiness, a disturbed personality, and a restrictive environment are combined, the result is usually disastrous.

So where does this leave us? Is boredom good or bad? Is it pathological or not? What does it depend on, if it occurs in this or that context? The experience or the consequences? The individual or the context? Or all these at once? Was Kierkegaard right or wrong? Let's not lose perspective in the face of so many questions. Boredom itself is neither good nor bad, neither disease nor its opposite (or, again, almost never). It is a symptom and a sign, a driving force and a trigger. It is the individual who is sick, just as the context can be equally morbid.

The psychological and social conditioning factors that lead to chronicity and maladaptive responses in an effort to silence the symptom may be pathological. When we are bored, in whatever form, it is because something is wrong. If we are unable to cope with boredom, wherever it comes from, something is also wrong. What is important is the circumstance in which boredom of any kind occurs, so it should not automatically be considered *de facto* a disease if it appears to be chronic, or in cases where it produces aberrant responses.

In a sense, boredom is pathological in itself, in all its forms. It is so because it is annoying and causes us pain, but it is also our best ally. In the end, boredom is a *failure* that we must endure because it allows other arrangements to take place and prevents greater evils. Boredom conveys relevant information about our own reality and the reality in which we find ourselves. It facilitates action and prevents the unbearable excess of stillness. It motivates movement somewhere and keeps our adaptive mechanisms from rusting. The ability to be bored is not an accident. We have acquired it to enable the refusal of situations that have become too comfortable or meaningless and to initiate the search for different experiences in order to avoid dozing off and becoming redundant. Paradoxical as it may seem at the moment, boredom maintains a degree of maladaptation that is essential to train our state of alertness in the face of future dangers or unforeseen changes, and to deter the overadaptation that would lead to death.

Boredom could not do all this without being painful. It's that faithful friend who tells us the truth to our face; that doesn't let us remain happy *minors*, as Kant would say, and forces us to take the reins of our lives; that only sometimes fades away when we pay attention to it, although it always comes back to keep us from falling asleep. This companion is neither good nor bad, it just is, and in its way it is functional—as long as a change can be introduced in the present situation to banish the boring circumstance. Otherwise its functionality is reduced to flagging the

failure without resolving it. Naturally, its experience is unpleasant, sometimes unbearable, but to cloak it in moral overtones and speak of it in terms of “disease” is something that obeys sociohistorical contingencies. The ideal is to think of “letting it be,” with an active and critical attitude toward the examination of the circumstances from which it emerges, in order to understand how to move past it. But reaching this level of tolerance for boredom requires a long apprenticeship.

Structure of the Book

After this brief introduction, chapter 1 will show how little is known about boredom from the ancient texts. At first, the virtual absence of testimony on boredom from the Dark Ages to the Hellenistic period is explained by the implicit (or explicit) prohibition of having time to be bored. Then, during the Roman Empire, boredom begins to appear bit by bit in the pages of the philosophical treatises of authors such as Lucretius and Horace, as a consequence of the excess of leisure time enjoyed by those who took advantage of a comfortable life. The most striking mention of boredom as a pathology comes from a proposed interpretation of Seneca’s texts in which this experience, in its deeper form, is related to suicidal behavior.

From here we move on to the Middle Ages, a long period in which the religious establishment implanted an absolute system of values on the basis of which the management of time was regulated. In this context, boredom is again condemned, and this time it is elevated to a capital sin, a manifestation of deviation from the obligatory devotion to the contemplation of the divine. Chapter 2 gives many examples of how boredom—not always associated with monastic life—is metaphorically defined as *a disease of the soul*, and how it is associated with melancholic states, attention disorders, anguish, mental disturbance, and depression in all its forms. The works of Evagrius Ponticus, St. Augustine, Cassian, St. Gregory, and St. Thomas are key. In

this period we will discover the first outlines of an epidemiology of boredom and the physical ailments attributed to it more than five centuries ago.

Chapter 3 considers the transformation of chronic and profound boredom into melancholy as a leap from the moral to the biological that took place in the Renaissance. If medieval *acedia* affected the soul, melancholy is a disease that attacks the body. Boredom, recast as melancholy, is attributed to a certain organic complexion and requires a medical remedy. This development, it must be said, is very appropriate for people of faith, who are no longer bored as a result of laziness in the contemplative functions but as a result of a disease whose underlying cause is physiological, for which they cannot be held morally responsible. Writers such as Dante or Petrarch and religious figures such as St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. John of the Cross give a solid account of this evolution from the spiritual to the physical, placing themselves on one side of the spectrum—and sometimes on both. They offer *treatments* for melancholic boredom, through either spiritual care or physical healing. This chapter also considers the alternative position that revalues melancholic boredom for its closeness to the ancient personality of the silent genius, as described by Aristotle. It looks at the context in which the seeds of the capitalist work ethic were sown during the Reformation, which dominated modernity and gave rise to a new condemnation of boredom as functions of variables such as performance and production. The discussion shows how some rebel against the profound boredom provoked by enlightened rationalism, and how this maneuver reopens the door to the experience of the simplest boredom on the part of the disengaged.

The question of boredom as a disease takes on unprecedented importance in the context of German Romanticism, where the word *Langeweile* is born. But it is above all in French Romanticism that the concept of *ennui* will be used to describe profound boredom and situation-dependent and chronic boredom, which is explicitly distinguished from simple boredom for

the first time in literature. In chapter 4 the metaphor of *boredom as a disease* is present in the works of romantics such as Étienne Pivert de Senancour, François-René de Chateaubriand, and Madame de Staël; of realists such as Stendhal, George Sand, and Gustav Flaubert; and of symbolists such as Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud. Physiologists such as François Boissier de Sauvages, Louis Vitet, Jean-Noël Hallé, Jean-Baptiste-Jacques Thillaye, Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol, Paul Moreau de Tours, Pierre Jousset, Maurice Roubaud-Luce, and Jean-Pierre Falret, among others, take the figure literally, using fictional characters as case studies to decipher the pathology of boredom.

Chapter 5 illustrates how the extension of the possibility of simple boredom to the working class at the beginning of the last century, through the gain of leisure time established by the successful welfare state, managed to lump the rich and the poor into the same bag. That condemned them all to the suffering of common transient boredom and profound boredom resulting from the situation-dependent and chronic boredom caused by the capitalist system. A corrective of commensurate magnitude then entered the scene to put an end to the generalized malaise: the culture of mass entertainment. This ruse of quickly suppressing democratized boredom would prove to be a failure that would soon awaken a deeper and, if possible, more insatiable boredom than that of the previous century. This, in turn, is countered by the assertion of the uniqueness of the subject, of one's own identity, by the demonstration of a taste for the morbid and the macabre through all kinds of pathological and deviant behavior, such as drug use or suicide.

In the age of mental disorders, of hysteria and narcissism, of anxiety and depression, boredom plays such a relevant role in all its forms that it has come to be considered an epidemic or a plague. Psychologists such as Émile Tardieu, Theodor Lipps, and Edmund Bergler begin to see boredom not as a consequence of sociohistorical events, but as a root cause of

the problem. Chapter 6 investigates approaches from mental health sciences that described boredom as a psychopathology in the first half of the twentieth century. We see that most of these were aimed at putting an end to the wave of pathological behavior attributed to boredom, and also how the growing concern about the way boredom affects the performance of workers gained importance. From here, the chapter delves into the literature that has made the study of boredom a consolidated part of the psychological discipline since the second half of the twentieth century. In recent decades, attention has been paid to the bored person to determine whether their boredom is due to a problem related to various cognitive components or to their personality traits. In addition, a variety of boredom measurement scales have been developed to determine who might have a chronic boredom problem and who does not, and the neurological basis of boredom has also been studied to determine whether those who experience chronic boredom show substantial differences at the physiological level from those of us who are bored in the *normal sense*. In short, chapter 6 is a brief history of the contemporary psychology of boredom, including, toward the end, a critique of the medical institutionalization of this phenomenon.

Chapter 7, the penultimate stop on this journey, emphasizes the reactive character of boredom and a functionality thesis first articulated by Blumenberg. This involves retrieving, analyzing, and synthesizing the sources on which the idea that some (if not all) forms of boredom are reactive is based, and elaborating on the proposal that boredom, although experienced as a pathology, serves an adaptive function because it prevents stagnation and forces us to keep moving, thus ensuring our survival as a species. The chapter also stresses why it makes no sense to apply the moral categories of *good* and *evil* when talking about boredom, but those of *functionality* and *dysfunctionality*, and tries to teach readers how to use their (hopefully) acquired new ability to hyper-monitor boredom to their advantage.

Finally, chapter 8 presents a *fictional* scenario of the prehistory of boredom, reconstructed from reading the unpublished texts of Blumenberg's *Nachlass*. This reenactment serves to reinforce the Blumenbergian thesis that boredom is a functional and adaptive experience that became fixed at some point in our evolutionary career by virtue of its ability to prevent stagnation of the species. The chapter travels into the distant past of our species to approach what will only be a probable example of the origin of boredom. With this new approach, we will explore whether the simple and collective boredom of our ancestors could have been responsible for the *first cultural revolution*, and under what plausible circumstances such a thing could have happened.

At the end of this journey, it will be clear that boredom, understood as a pathology and even as a functional condition, has a much older history than it appears at first glance; that it has been and continues to be associated with a variety of mental illnesses and pathological behaviors; that in some historical periods, the pathological experience of profound boredom has extended to entire generations as a symptom of their context; that the metaphor of boredom as a disease has been used over the centuries to speak of chronic and profound boredom, to the point of being taken literally by physicians and, later, by mental health professionals; that taking the symptom as a disease runs the risk of rendering the real problem asymptomatic and unattended; and finally, that it is necessary to approach a variety of perspectives on the nature of boredom that place it beyond good and evil if the mysteries of this elusive phenomenon are truly to be unraveled.

The following is an invitation to reflect on what boredom is in its various forms, so that we may learn to tolerate it in an informed and thoughtful way. Have the courage to listen to the voice of your own boredom, both when you are reading and when you are not. Have the patience to develop the ability to recognize it, to understand it, and to make use of it. Eventually, you

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will be able to taste the bittersweet liquor that, in Unamuno's words, is the experience of boredom. This is the intention. There is always the possibility that none of this will actually happen, but at least we will have had some success in entertaining the gods with your suffering.

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