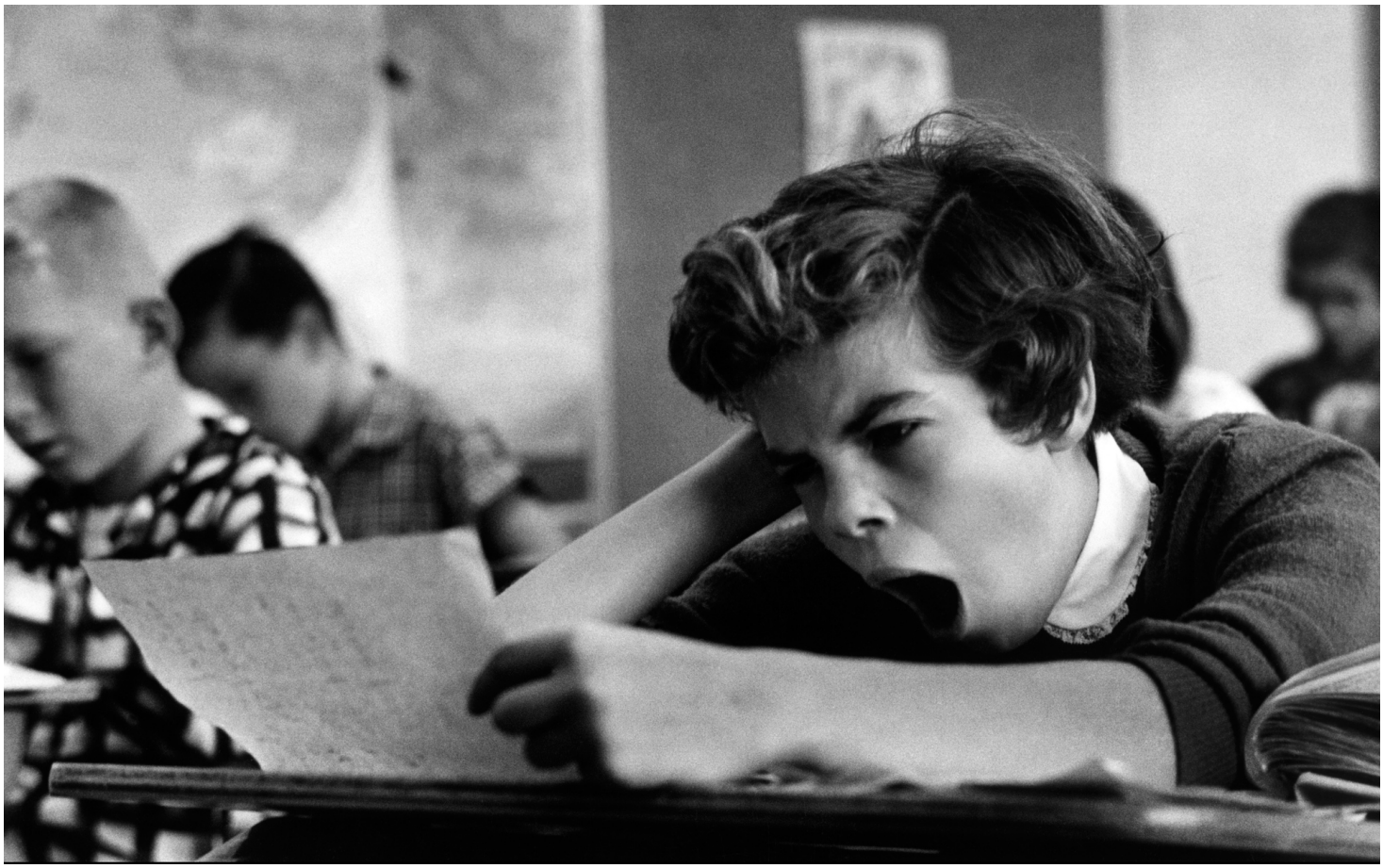

The quiet alarm

Just like pain, boredom is an aversive and unpleasant experience that we need to have in order to truly live well

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Twice a day, for a total of 19 months during the 1920s, the American vaudeville performer Edward H Gibson would get up on stage and perform a death-defying routine. The man billed as ‘The Human Pincushion’ would ask a member of the audience to pierce him with 50 or 60 pins that would be inserted up to their heads anywhere on his body, except his abdomen and groin.

Once, Gibson accidentally burned himself on a hot gas stove and felt nothing. It was only the malodorous scent of his burning skin that notified him of the situation. Besides headaches, he claimed never to have experienced pain. Not when he chopped his own knee with a hatchet, nor when he shot himself with a .22 hammerless pistol and the bullet passed through his left index finger, nor even when, during an episode of anger, he broke his own nose by banging it on a piano.

Gibson was no ordinary man, but he was no superman either. By most accounts, his insensitivity was congenital. Such disorders are rare but hardly unknown. Sufferers of congenital insensitivity live hard, hazardous, and often tragically short lives. The medical literature describes many individuals who have sustained serious injuries – lacerations, bruises, fractures, burns – without feeling anything. The absence of pain makes us careless. Few of us *like* it, but pain keeps us out of trouble.

Pain is not the only unpleasant experience that humans are subject to. What about boredom? Might it serve some useful purpose, too? It certainly has no shortage of philosophical defenders. Bertrand Russell and the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips both spoke of the importance of being able to endure it. Russell asserted that the capacity to weather boredom is 'essential to a happy life', whereas Phillips speculated on its developmental significance for children. Friedrich Nietzsche commented on the creative power of boredom and found value in its relationship to art. So did Susan Sontag, who in a brief diary entry suggested that the most interesting art of her time was boring: 'Jasper Johns is boring. Beckett is boring, Robbe-Grillet is boring. Etc. Etc. […] Maybe art has to be boring, now.'

Martin Heidegger discussed, at length, the ontological lessons that profound boredom can teach us. And the poet Joseph Brodsky, in what might be the most famous and sustained defence of boredom, exalted its existential import. In his commencement address to the class of 1989 at Dartmouth College, he called boredom a 'window on time's infinity' and spoke of its ability to put our existence into perspective, to demonstrate to us our finitude and indeed the futility of our actions.

All of these authors are correct to value boredom. However, they miss what is most important about it. Boredom is precious, but there's nothing particularly good about *being bored*. Its unpleasantness is no illusion, its subjective character no taste worth acquiring. We should give thanks for it – and avoid it like the plague.

Though distressing and unpleasant, the sensation of pain is of great value. It is not just a reliable signalling mechanism, informing us of harm to our bodies. It also *motivates* us to change our behaviour and to take defensive measures in order to protect ourselves. Without it, we would be ignorant of our injuries, and perhaps rather indifferent to them even once we had noticed them.

Now, imagine a life that is devoid of boredom. On first glance, many of us might find such a prospect desirable, even ideal. But consider it more carefully. We are not talking about a life bereft of boring situations. Someone like Gibson is free of pain only insofar as he cannot experience it. Such a life, however, still contains dangerous and harmful things. Similarly, the life of someone who cannot experience boredom will be free of boredom – but only because the subject of this life cannot experience boredom. If we did not have the capacity for boredom, then any situation – regardless of how trivial, banal, or humdrum it might be – would fail to strike us as boring. Nothing would be boring. Not the experience of listening to the same lecture over and over again. Not the seemingly endless time spent waiting in offices. Yet some situations *should* bore us.

Often, boredom arises as the result of the perception of a mismatch: a gap between the need for stimulation and its availability. We want something that simply is not there. Boredom is our awareness of that absence. In monotonous activities, we are bored because we want more variety than we can find. In familiar situations, we are bored because we crave novelty, yet none is offered. And when engaged in compulsory tasks, we are bored because we want to do something other than what is demanded from us. If boredom stems from unfulfilled desire, then in order to allay boredom we would need to satisfy that desire. To escape boredom, in other words, we need to seek activities that seem congruent with our wishes.

Think of boredom as an internal alarm. When it goes off, it is telling us something. It signals the presence of an unfulfilling situation. But it is an alarm equipped with a shock. The negative and aversive experience of boredom motivates us – one might even say, pushes us – to pursue a different situation, one that seems more meaningful or interesting, just as a sharp pain motivates us not to put pins into our bodies.

When bored, the situations in which we find ourselves often appear distant or foreign – that is, removed from our interests and projects. They lack meaning for us. We feel uneasy and restless. Our minds wander. We mentally catalogue alternative goals. Even our perception of the passage of time is altered. In a state of boredom, it appears to drag. We want to escape from boredom's unpleasant grip. When the tasks with which we are currently engaged have lost their luster, boredom promotes the pursuit of alternative goals by *by its very character*.

> If boredom could be implemented in an app, we would pay money for it

Call this the motivational picture of boredom. It is supported by recent psychological theories (for example, work by John Eastwood of York University in Toronto, Shane Bench of Washington State University and Heather Lench of Texas A & M University, as well as Wijnand van Tilburg at the University of Southampton and Eric Igou of the University of Limerick). But it is also in agreement with phenomenological accounts of emotion.

Such accounts treat our affective experiences as revelations of our values. Emotions open up the world to us and show it already suffused with meaning. They are ways in which we are attuned to our already social, practical existence. They furnish us with an immediate and pre-conceptual understanding of what matters to us, and orient us towards existential possibilities – that is, ways of acting and being in the world – calling us to take action.

The internal-alarm model of boredom fits nicely within this phenomenological scheme. Boredom attunes us to features of the situation in which we find ourselves. It alerts us to how our present engagement fails to properly satisfy us. It delineates alternative courses of action. What more could one ask from an emotional experience? If the function of boredom could be implemented in an app, I venture to say that we would pay money for it.

And yet, for the most part, the Western literary and philosophical canons have painted an unflattering portrait of boredom. Such a judgment, I believe, is partly due to the fact that we talk about it in a frustratingly loose way. When one speaks of boredom, one often speaks of the commonplace, fleeting, aversive psychological state. But one can also talk about the propensity to experience boredom in a wide range of situations – what psychologists call 'boredom proneness'.

The latter is nothing trivial; it means experiencing boredom often, in numerous and differing situations, even in ones that most of us would find to be meaningful and interesting. To be bored often and almost regardless of the situation is to experience the world in an disengaged, cold and detached manner – situations, goals, projects do not attract you, they keep their distance from you, they are not really yours. Unsurprisingly, boredom-proneness is correlated with a number of serious, even life-threatening, physical, psychological and social harms, too many to list here. It deserves, and has rightly received, considerable attention. Yet, it ought to be clearly distinguished from the actual experience of boredom. Not everyone who experiences boredom is prone to boredom, just like not everyone who experiences pain suffers from chronic pain.

Let's look at that comparison one last time. If the sensation of pain is (most often) an indication of harm, then the sensation of boredom is an indication that we are engaged in something that is incongruous with our projects. Furthermore, if the sensation of pain is meant (most often) to motivate us to change our behaviour in order to protect ourselves, then likewise the sensation of boredom is meant to motivate us to find something else to do, something that is not boring. Boredom motivates us to do something else, without necessarily telling us what to do. It can transport us from one psychological place to another. Boredom isn't quite the white-sailed vessel that Madame Bovary so eagerly awaited. Yet it might be the next best thing.

So, the next time boredom overcomes you, it might be best not to ignore it. It might be best not to cover it up with your smartphone. Boredom might be trying to tell you something.

After all, how often do you ignore pain? How often do you treat it with your phone?