

THROUGH THE KALEIDOSCOPE OF MEANING: CONSTRUCTIVIST AND EXISTENTIAL APPROACH

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Abstract: Boredom and later emptiness are frequent topic, although it seems that people continue to find ever-new and diverse ways to escape it. Despite being products of modernity, this concept also captured the attention of earlier thinkers. The goal of the lecture is to explore, through interaction, alternative ways of coping with this distressing emotional state, as well as to deconstruct the concept. Does creating meaning dispel this seemingly hollow yet intense emotional experience? We will seek understanding and potential answers through constructivist and existentialist theoretical frameworks - from Frankl's concept of the existential vacuum to Kelly's ideas on roles and interpersonal closeness.

Keywords: Boredom, Emptiness, Meaning, Relationship, Entertainment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Modern humans are never bored - or at least, they are not allowed to be. Boredom is one of the most unpopular experiences today. In contrast, the solution to this experience is often sought in enjoyment, comfort, and power. How is it that we are losing connection today - and why? Existentialism and constructivism both give their contribution to understanding alienation. These theories recognize the essence of human existence and began analyzing the context that significantly influences this issue. More and more people today report feelings of emptiness, meaninglessness, loneliness, a lack of purpose, and a loss of direction or identity - they do not know who they are, where they are going, or where they want to be. Why is this so, and have people always felt this way? Have we become like this all of a sudden, and what should we do about it? According to Frankl, this phenomenon is, to some extent, understandable. It is based on a double loss that humanity has faced (Frankl, 2014).

Frankl explained it as follows:

At the beginning of our development, we lost basic instincts - security of instinctual behavior was lost. Man had to make a choice. After that came the loss of tradition. With the loss of instinct, we lost the sense of what we must do; with the loss of tradition, what we should do. (Frankl, 2014, p. 94, my translation).

And so, today, we don't know what we want to do. How does this make a person feel? Frankl says that people often feel boredom and apathy, and he calls this state the existential vacuum (2014). Boredom is nothing else but the inability to feel interest, and apathy the inability to take initiative. Ironically, one of the least unpopular things to say today is: "I'm bored". We cope with this by staying busy - or at least, by staying entertained. This shows the very nature of our society - its narratives and values. In a materialistic, competitive, and hedonistic world, time is filled accordingly. It's interesting that people today

actually have more leisure/free time than 100 years ago. The key question is: how do we use it?

2. HISTORY OF A CONSTRUCT

Interpretations and analyses of boredom vary. The kind of boredom we speak of today is relatively recent and is linked to the emergence of modernity. This section would be best considered in the context of changes in the construct of boredom. The first interpretations of this condition came from a theological perspective, and later many philosophers contributed to the exploration of boredom. The premodern form of boredom was called *acedia* (a negation of the Greek word *akedia*, which means care or attention), dating back to late antiquity and the Middle Ages (Svendsen, 1999). This term referred to indifference and unfulfilled time. *Acedia* was viewed primarily as a moral concept, whereas today's understanding of boredom is psychological. It affected only a small number of people, which marks a key difference compared to the modern perception of boredom—something that affects the masses and is largely a product of the current context. This form of boredom was different from the one we encounter today. It contained a contemplative value. Essentially, this construct, within its range of convenience, involved a greater awareness that human beings must confront and struggle with the challenges of earthly existence. The opposite of such boredom would be spirituality.

One of the earliest theorists of boredom was Blaise Pascal. He spoke of boredom from a religious standpoint, framing it as a departure from faith or spirituality. Pascal claimed that, in our absence from God, we turn to pleasures in order to forget our condition (as cited in Svendsen, 1999).

Pascal wrote:

Boredom. – Nothing is more unbearable for a person than to be in complete rest: without passion, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then you will feel your nothingness,

your loneliness, your incapacity, your dependence, your helplessness, your emptiness. (as cited in Svendsen, 1999, p. 56, my translation).

Kant, on the other hand, believed that life becomes boring for those who do nothing, and that for such people life seems as though it was never truly lived. Similarly, Theodor Adorno concludes that death appears more terrifying to those who have lived shorter—or less fulfilled—lives (as cited in Svendsen, 1999). Søren Kierkegaard attributed the feeling of boredom to the elite, the aristocracy. He claimed that boredom presupposes a degree of self-awareness, thus implying that it was a condition experienced by those who had the time and luxury for such introspection (as cited in Svendsen, 1999).

In his book, Svendsen discusses German Romanticism as an important period for the emergence and spread of the modern understanding and experience of boredom. Svendsen argues that Romanticism is a form of aestheticism, and that aestheticism gradually turns into increasing subjectivism—making the aesthetic experience of the world ultimately crucial (as cited in Svendsen, 1999).

Hegel, criticizing this period and especially its subjectivism, writes:

If the self remains at that standpoint, then at first everything except its own subjectivity will appear empty and meaningless. But eventually, even that very subjectivity will become empty and meaningless. (as cited in Svendsen, 1999, p. 65, my translation).

And because of this, the self cannot, for long, find satisfaction merely in the enjoyment of itself. It will come to realize its own emptiness and thus begin to long for something lasting and substantial—for concrete and essential interests. In this way, subjectivity appears as both unhappy and contradictory: on the one hand, it demands to find truth, something objective, yet on the other, it fails to escape its own solitude - its self-caused self-sufficiency. We can see that many great

thinkers have devoted their attention to the topic of boredom. Today, this may even sound strange, given how unpopular the subject has become. In fact, boredom seems to stand at the opposite end of today's dominant discourse. A person who is bored is seen as wasting their time, thereby bypassing hedonism and pleasure. And yet, as we can also observe in the works of the aforementioned authors, boredom is less a condition to be avoided and more a genuinely human state - a response to the perceived meaninglessness of what is generally considered meaningful. Boredom tends to emerge most clearly when we are alone and confronted with ourselves. In such moments, it reveals something essential about our inner experience. It is not merely a matter of having free time, but a lived emotional state that reflects the organization of one's core psychological structure. Boredom is a concept closely related to emptiness, and the two mutually influence one another. In contemporary times, the term emptiness has begun to occupy an important place in descriptions of human experience, including diagnostic manuals. Boredom is more closely associated with resources and the dispersion of dependency, whereas emptiness refers to a structure that is unable to enter role relationships and identity disturbance (Masland, Shah, & Choi-Kain, 2020, pp. 247–248).

In many cases, it is also appropriate to speak of a traumatized self. Contemporary boredom and emptiness, therefore, are closely connected to patterns of relating marked by relationships with little experiential vitality (Leitner et al., 2019, p. 49). What stands in opposition to boredom may be precisely the role relationship. Constructivism consistently calls us to action - action understood as taking responsibility for one's own life. In light of what has been discussed, this also obliges us to see others and to respond to them responsibly. Experiential personal constructivism explicitly assumes that meanings are created in the "between" of the person–environment (frequently self–other) dynamic reality (Leitner, Faidley, & Celentana, 2019, p. 46).

3. FROM A CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

For Kelly (1955), suspension refers to situations in which an idea or element of experience is effectively set aside because the person is, at that moment, unable to tolerate any structure within which the idea could acquire meaning (p. 349). He further emphasized that ideas are not suspended because of their intrinsic nature, but because their implications are intolerable (p. 350). Within this framework, trauma designates events involving suspension, without implying that all traumatic experiences are necessarily suspended. Early trauma may result in a frozen state of functioning, a process referred to by Leitner as "freeze." Because childhood construing tends to be simpler and more concrete, individuals may have a reduced capacity to tolerate the implications of events that threaten the very nature of their relationships (paraphrased from Leitner, Faidley, & Celentana, 2019, p. 32). From a constructivist perspective, the ability to make sense of oneself, others, and relationships presupposes the prior development of a basic self–other distinction. Without this foundational construct, experience remains disorganized and unstable, as the individual lacks the capacity to differentiate personal experience from that of others. In the absence of such differentiation, the very recognition of others as separate subjects—and, consequently, the possibility of meaningful relational engagement—becomes severely compromised (Leitner, Faidley, & Celentana, 2019, p. 33). One's initial construction of self–other is grounded in a sensory–physical meaning system that begins to develop early in life (Barratt, 1977; Klion & Leitner, 1985, as cited in Leitner, Faidley, & Celentana, 2019, p. 33). Such constructs are very early in nature, formed during the first years of life, and they are often experienced through various states and bodily sensations. The person will attempt, at any cost, to avoid these difficult, embodied states. When constructions of self and other remain fixed at the level of a simple *inside–outside* distinction, role relationships become severely constrained. Others may then be experienced as isolated, self-contained entities rather than as relational beings,

and psychological closeness can be felt as an overwhelming intrusion, giving rise to intense fear around connection.

This can influence the construction of the world through ambiguously linked constructs. An important part of the constructivist view is the possibility that, within a person's core construct system, certain constructs may be linked in ambiguous ways. Rather than assuming that such ambiguity is necessary or universal, it may be more accurate to suggest that it can be identified and diagnosed in some clients' core structures. In practice, this becomes evident when central constructs—for example, secure–helpless and dependent–independent—are organized in a manner that constrains the person's perceived alternatives. When such constructs are ambiguously linked, relational closeness may come to be construed as inherently associated with helplessness or loss of autonomy, whereas safety and security are associated with emotional distance or isolation. From the perspective of Kelly's theory of role relationships and the sociality corollary, this organization is particularly problematic, as human meaning-making is fundamentally relational and oriented toward engagement with others. Yet, under these conditions, the individual may experience relational life as offering two polarized options: being alone and safe, or being in relationship and vulnerable. Although isolation offers an illusion of safety, it simultaneously weakens the person's capacity and motivation to engage in relationships, thereby reinforcing patterns of emptiness and stagnation. In this way, ambiguity within core construct linkages can contribute to a preference for solitude framed as independence or comfort, effectively limiting opportunities for change and relational development. I consider ambiguities to be diagnostically important because the prevailing individualistic framework in contemporary Western culture often further reinforces this type of construing. Especially within cultural contexts that valorize autonomy, individualism, and self-sufficiency, such a construal makes withdrawal and isolation appear as the more viable choice. This does not mean that such an

outcome is inevitable. Some individuals feel secure only when they are in a relationship; in such cases, for example, security becomes linked to belonging. However, this does not mean that the person simply fears relationships and withdraws from them. This, too, does not mean that the person is engaged in role relationships. We may say that they are employing a different strategy to avoid a genuine, vital relationship. In this sense, the person may also experience symptoms of emptiness and boredom.

Alternatively, a person can be unaware of the impact of his or her being on others who attempt to connect with the person. One can be emotionally neglectful of another and not grasp the reasons why that other feels empty and isolated in the relationship. The other's injuries around such neglect are experienced as the other's responsibility rather than the other's, the person's, and theirs in different ways. The net result is experiencing extreme internal emptiness as the relational world is experienced more as using the other to meet one's needs or, at best, giving the other what he or she needs so that he or she will give back to one what one needs. (Leitner, Faidley, & Celentana, 2019, p. 34).

Kelly's concept of role relationships is crucial for understanding the sense of emptiness that accompanies boredom.

Role relationships are essential to the experience of richness and meaning in the world. Without them, a person is left with an existence that is empty and impoverished. However, to the extent that one attempts to connect with others to reduce emptiness, one fails to develop a role relationship. Such connections use the other as a means to the end of being less isolated and empty. To this extent, the other is not a unique, evolving, subjective creature in his or her own right; the other is there to meet one's needs. This relative objectification of the other contradicts an essential component of role relationships. A person must engage in a role relationship because of a genuine caring for another, not because of emptiness and aloneness. Emptiness

disappears as a by-product of the role relationship because the emptiness was present as a communication to one's self that one had failed to develop mutually affirming role relationships. (Leitner, Faidley, & Celentana, 2019, p. 38)

This issue can be understood in terms of dispersed dependency within personal construct theory. Individuals may struggle with dependency through under-dispersed or over-dispersed dependency, as well as through the avoidance of dependency. Such configurations do not necessarily imply engagement in role relationships; rather, they function as construction strategies aimed at avoiding genuine, vital relationships, often accompanied by experiences of emptiness and boredom (Leitner, Faidley, & Celentana, 2019, p. 40). Finally, the willingness to change and reconstruct one's system of constructs when it is invalidated speaks to openness. In this sense, individuals may move along a continuum ranging from hostility to excessive openness (Leitner, Faidley, & Celentana, 2019, p. 48).

Accordingly, the person may now seek the satisfaction of certain core needs through alternative resources. The constriction–dilation dimension provides a valuable lens through which this issue can be more fully understood. Kelly defines dilation as the expansion of a person's perceptual field to resolve inner incompatibilities (Kelly, 1955). The elements now brought into our expanded perceptual field become resources for immediate gratification - an attempt to satisfy some important needs placed higher in our psychological structure. Dilation is a strategy to get more resources for meeting certain unarticulated needs, but it does not create a functional core structure. This instant gratification keeps us “occupied.” We entertain ourselves with resources that should be integrated into mature constructs of meaning, but we are not building the deeper system - the core structure - that would make our lives meaningful.

An important part of this is also the story of impulsivity - the shortening of the CPC (circumspection–preemption–control) cycle - as a way to quickly re-establish control (Kelly, 1955).

The less aware a person is of their goal, the more urgently they try to rush towards it. What, then, gives meaning? We will see later how Kelly and Frankl define meaning.

4. MEANING-MAKING

Seemingly, the only cure for the existential vacuum, according to Frankl, is not the absence of boredom and apathy but constant transgression (Frankl, 2014). Transgression is meant to bring the self into contact with something new and different, because sameness threatens to suffocate the self in boredom. So, how do we deal with states that Frankl calls the existential vacuum, or simply the meaninglessness of life? Today, people often fill this void by turning toward power and pleasure. According to Frankl, the will to meaning is often substituted with the will to power and the will to pleasure (Frankl, 2014). This results in a constant need for money, entertainment, and comfort. As a result, we witness careerism, achievement, profit, and the increasing use of psychoactive substances, gambling, pornography, and the entertainment industry. Some might even add tourism. I would say that anything excessive is, in fact, a form of addiction. The search for meaning gives way to the pursuit of means. What was once a means becomes an end in itself, losing its original purpose.

What is particularly characteristic of our modern world is the lack of tension and frustration. In the age of abundance and freedom, many suffer not from excessive demands but from the lack of them. Our society is shielded from tension. Pathology arises not only from stress but also from the absence of stress (Frankl, 2014). Humans need a reasonable level of tension. Contrary to homeostasis theory, tension should not be unconditionally avoided. Inner peace should not be accepted uncritically.

Frankl says:

I do not consider that the state of equilibrium or inner peace is the ideal state of the human

psyche. What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal freely chosen. (Frankl, 2014, p. 97, my translation).

In this sense, examples of addiction, entertainment, and power are also ways to create meaning in life. Humans need a tension that creates orientation. On the other hand, Kelly's theory is based on the idea of role relationships, as well as on the concepts of closeness and connectedness (Kelly, 1955). As a relational being, a person must exist in real relationships and genuine contact. Kelly speaks of an integral universe and interconnectedness (Kelly, 1955).

Larry Leitner writes an interesting text on the topic of the integral universe and introduces the concept of existential guilt. He states, "When we do not respond to the suffering of the world, and the sickness that results from the denial of such guilt is not merely a psychological phenomenon but an event between persons" (Leitner, 2019, p. 267). Thus, Leitner presents us with an existential given. According to the definition of guilt in constructivism, when we deviate from this principle, a person should experience existential guilt. We can see that personal construct psychology, Leitner's experiential psychotherapy, as well as logotherapy, all speak of contact as meaning.

Frankl explicitly states that only good deeds, love, and suffering can provide meaning (Frankl, 2014, p. 98), while Leitner, for example, speaks of the act of humility and the act of faith (Leitner, 2019, pp. 268–270). Leitner explains this through the concept of transpersonal responsibility and care, stating that pathology arises from the inability to be part of something greater than ourselves (Leitner, 2019). We skip over meaning and build a simulation and representation. Baudrillard says that in postmodern society we increasingly live among simulacra - signs that no longer point to reality (Baudrillard, 1994).

We believed that freedom would lead to happiness - but instead, it has led to even greater uncertainty. That is why freedom is an important thing - but only when it comes with responsibility.

Both constructivist and existentialist perspectives agree on this point: responsibility is the ultimate goal - it is the alternative path by which life can be taken into one's own hands. Otherwise, symptoms take control of our lives. Therefore, it is important that we have life tasks, not merely as activities, but as ideals. Meaning does not push - it pulls. It is up to the individual to decide whether or not to fulfil it. Frankl says: "Therefore, try to be patient and brave: patient enough to leave your problems unresolved for a while, and brave enough not to give up fighting for their final resolution" (Frankl, 2014, p. 99, my translation). Here, we see a call to responsibility, and before that, a call to building tolerance for facing life. In this light, we need new types of leisure - perhaps even new kinds of entertainment - which allow for contemplation and meditation (Frankl, 2014).

5. BOREDOM TODAY

As previously mentioned, today's understanding of boredom is heavily influenced by culture. The modern conception of boredom is indeed a product of modernity. Nietzsche claimed that the feeling of boredom would increase with the spread of industrialization, and that the current usage of the term first appeared in the English language during the industrial era (Spacks, 1996, p. 242). Boredom is associated with a lack of stimulation and is primarily seen as a mismatch between cognitive demands and available resources, or as a lack of meaning (Masland, Shah, & Choi-Kain, 2020, p. 244). Milan Kundera distinguishes between two types of boredom: passive boredom, which reflects a person's lack of interest in something, and active boredom, when one gives oneself over to a hobby (as cited in Svendsen, 1999, p. 43, my translation).

Boredom is also a diagnostic criterion in some mental disorders. Interestingly, official psychiatric nomenclature no longer recognizes boredom as a diagnostic criterion in the case of borderline personality disorder. Although the term boredom is often associated with emptiness, these are, in fact, distinct concepts. However,

they are frequently interconnected. The cascade model of boredom describes the relationship and mutual influence between emptiness and boredom (Masland, Shah, & Choi-Kain, 2020, pp. 247–248).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout history, the very understanding and definition of boredom have changed. However, we can see that the feeling of boredom has always captured the attention of many thinkers. There appears to be a kind of common thread connecting various interpretations of boredom. Many, in fact, describe this state as a result of escaping from true meaning. Kierkegaard (1843/1987, as cited in Svendsen, 1999) even said, “Boredom is the root of all evil” (p. 18, my translation). While it was once a problem affecting only a small minority, today it has become a widespread epidemic. Drawing on Romantic ideas, subjectivism and individualism have grown in neoliberal culture. The personal has become paramount - but this turning inward comes at a cost, as it often leads to nothingness. The individual is left alone, turning toward some interest, something accessible and substantial. This is why today we see a rise in the use of psychoactive substances and the ever-growing entertainment industry. The modern human is a being of pleasure and amusement. This is similar to what Baudrillard calls consumed vertigo (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 33). Relationships are being replaced by individualism, and instead of meaningful connection, we are left with entertainment and fleeting moments.

Both theories, Kelly’s Psychology of Personal Constructs and Frankl’s Logotherapy, primarily emphasize relationship as the foundation of meaning. From both a constructivist and an existentialist perspective, meaning is built, not searched for. Modern understandings of boredom, although often insufficiently explored, are largely shaped by today’s culture. Though seemingly similar terms, boredom has become the most undesirable state, while leisure has lost its original significance. In individualistic culture,

entertainment becomes a central activity, and what was once leisure is now reduced to boredom - leading to a growing inability among people to remain unstimulated. Leisure becomes a luxury, and boredom a hidden everyday condition. “In the end, the cry for meaning represents a characteristic mark of humanity” (Frankl, 2019, p. 23, my translation). It is, therefore, in human nature to create meaning. Without meaning, a person is left to escape from their own withering.

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