

作为现代性产物的“无聊”

- ▶ 托尔斯泰如何定义“boredom”？
- ▶ 什么说“boredom”是一种荒谬的悖论式情感？
- ▶ 如何理解现代性造就了我们对于 boredom 的日常体验？
- ▶ 如何区分人和动物都会感受到的 simple boredom 以及哲学家、小说家笔下的现代生活的 existential boredom？
- ▶ 什么法兰克福学派认为闲暇是被资本主义制造出来的一种不自由？
- ▶ 大流行带来的生活受限会让我们感受到 boredom 吗？
- ▶ 你知道“on occasion”这个短语是什么意思？



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What Does Boredom Do to Us — and for Us?

讲解正文

Humans have been getting bored for centuries, if not millennia. Now there's a whole field to study the sensation, at a time when it may be more rampant than ever.

Fundamentally, boredom is, as Tolstoy defined it, "a desire for desires." The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips describes boredom as "that state of suspended **animation** in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of **diffuse** restlessness which contains that most absurd and **paradoxical** wish, the wish for a desire."

Boredom, it's become clear, has a history, a set of social **determinants**, and, in particular, a **pungent** association with modernity. Leisure was one precondition: enough people had to be free of the demands of **subsistence** to have time on their hands that required filling. Modern capitalism **multiplied** amusements and consumables, **while** undermining spiritual sources of meaning that had once been **conferred** more or less automatically. Expectations grew that life would be, at least some of the time, amusing, and people, including oneself, interesting—and so did the disappointment when they weren't.

Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard considered boredom a particular

scourge of modern life. The nineteenth-century novel arose in part as an antidote to the experience of tedium, and **tedium** often propelled its plots. What was Emma Bovary, who arrived in 1856, if not bored—by her **plodding** husband, by **provincial** existence, by life itself when it failed to show the glittering colors of fiction? Though it was possible in the English language to be "a bore" in the eighteenth century, one of the first documented instances of the noun boredom's being invoked to describe a subjective feeling did not appear until 1852, in Dickens's "Bleak House".

In recent years, something like boredom has been studied and documented in understimulated animals, which would seem to argue against its being an entirely social construction. The classicist Peter Toohey, in his book "Boredom: A Lively History," offers a helpful resolution for the debate between those who say that boredom is a basic feature (or bug) of humanness and those who say that it's a by-product of modernity. He argues that we need to distinguish between simple boredom—which people (and animals) have probably always experienced **on occasion**—and "existential boredom," a sense of emptiness and alienation that extends beyond momentary mental weariness, and that perhaps did not come into many people's emotional lexicon until the past couple of centuries, when philosophers, novelists, and social critics helped define it.

Historically, the diagnosis of boredom has contained an element of social critique—often of life under capitalism. The Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno argued that leisure is fundamentally shaped by "the social totality"—and is "**shackled**" to work, its supposed opposite: "Boredom is a function of life which is lived under the compulsion to work, and under the strict division of labor." So-called free time—**obligatory** hobbies and holidays that **reconcile us to** the capitalist economy's coldly **regimented** workday—is really a sign of our unfreedom.

But, while social critics can **endow** boredom **with** a certain **potent** charge, many people **downplay** or deny their own ordinary experience of it. Maybe it's the system's fault, but it feels like ours.

Boredom is a distinctly uncharismatic state of being. It lacks the charm of **melancholy**—a charm that is connected to melancholy's traditional link to wisdom, sensitivity and beauty. **Ennui** would be its **chic**, black-clad, Continental cousin, but you don't often hear even the most pretentious aesthetes complain of that.

If boredom arises in the absence of meaning, though, the constraints that the pandemic imposes on us may not feel boring, exactly. (Anxiety-inducing, emotionally **depleting**, **fraught with** uncertainty, yes.) If you're leading a more **circumscribed** existence these days, at least you are likely doing so with the goal of trying to bring the pandemic under control and save lives. And the little kindnesses that we show to the people we're **hunkered down** with, and that they show to us, have a certain **consequential** new **hum** to them.

词汇

animation /ˌæniˈmeɪʃn/ n. 生气; 活力; 富有生命力

- energy and enthusiasm in the way you look, behave or speak
- e.g. His face was drained of all colour and animation. 他面如死灰。

diffuse /diˈfjuːs/ adj. 不清楚的; 难解的; 冗长的; 啰唆的

- not clear or easy to understand; using a lot of words
- e.g. a diffuse style of writing 冗赘的文体

paradoxical /ˌpærəˈdɒksɪkl/ adj. 自相矛盾的; 似矛盾而(可能) 正确的

- If something is paradoxical, it involves two facts or qualities which seem to contradict each other.
- e.g. It is paradoxical that some of the poorest people live in some of the richest areas of the country. 某些最贫穷的人却住在这个国家一些最富有的地区, 这似乎很矛盾。
- **paradox** /ˈpærədɒks/ n. 矛盾的人(或事物、情况)
- a person, thing or situation that has two opposite features and therefore seems strange
- e.g. It is a curious paradox that professional comedians often have unhappy personal lives. 这真是个奇怪的矛盾现象——职业喜剧演员的私人生活往往并不快乐。

determinant /diˈtɜːmɪnənt/ n. 决定因素; 决定条件

- (formal) a thing that decides whether or how sth. happens
- e.g. The windows and the views beyond them are major determinants of a room's character. 窗户和窗外的景色是决定一个房间特色的主要因素。

pungent /ˈpʌndʒənt/ adj. 说穿的; 一语道破的; 一针见血的

- direct and having a strong effect
- e.g. pungent criticism 一针见血的批评

subsistence /səbˈsɪstəns/ n. 勉强维持生活

- the state of having just enough money or food to stay alive
- e.g. Many families are living below the level of subsistence. 许多家庭难以度日。

multiply /ˈmʌltɪplaɪ/ v. 成倍增加; 迅速增加

- to increase or make sth. increase very much in number or amount
- e.g. Cigarette smoking multiplies the risk of cancer. 抽烟会大大增加得癌症的风险。

while /waɪl/ conj. (对比两件事物) ... 而, ... 然而

- used to contrast two things
- e.g. While Tom's very good at science, his brother is absolutely hopeless. 汤姆很擅长理科, 而他的兄弟绝对是不可救药。

confer /kənˈfɜː(r)/ v. 授予, 颁发(奖项、学位、荣誉或权利)

- to give sb. an award, a university degree or a particular honour or right
- e.g. An honorary degree was conferred on him by Oxford University in 2001. 牛津大学于 2001 年授予他荣誉学位。

scourge /skɜːdʒ/ n. 祸害; 祸根; 灾害

◦ [usually singular] (formal) a person or thing that causes trouble or suffering

- e.g. Inflation was the scourge of the 1970s. 通货膨胀曾是 20 世纪 70 年代的祸患。

tedium /ˈtiːdiəm/ n. 单调乏味; 冗长; 啰唆

- the quality of being boring
- e.g. She longed for something to relieve the tedium of everyday life. 她渴望有什么事情能排解她日常生活中的烦闷。

plod /plɒd/ v. 艰难地行走; 吃力地行进

- to walk slowly with heavy steps, especially because you are tired
- e.g. Our horses plodded down the muddy track. 我们的马沿着泥泞小路蹒跚而行。

◦ **plodding** /ˈplɒdɪŋ/ adj. 老牛拖破车似的; 做事慎重而呆板的

- working or doing sth. slowly and steadily, especially in a way that other people think is boring
- e.g. plodding research 单调乏味的研究

provincial /prəˈvɪnʃl/ adj. 首都以外的; 外省的; 外地的; 地方上的

- [only before noun] (sometimes disapproving) connected with the parts of a country that do not include the capital city
- e.g. a provincial town 首都以外的城镇

on occasion(s) 偶尔; 偶然; 有时

- sometimes but not often
- e.g. He has been known on occasion to lose his temper. 大家都知道他有时会发脾气。

shackle /ˈʃækl/ v. 束缚; 阻挠; 成为 ... 的羁绊

- [usually passive] to prevent sb. from behaving or speaking as they want
- e.g. The trade unions are shackled by the law. 工会受法律的制约。

obligatory /əˈblɪɡətəri/ adj. (按法律、规定等) 必须的, 强制的

- (formal) that you must do because of the law, rules, etc.
- e.g. It is obligatory for all employees to wear protective clothing. 所有员工必须穿防护服装。

reconcile sb./yourself (to sth.) 将就; 妥协

- to make sb./yourself accept an unpleasant situation because it is not possible to change it
- e.g. He could not reconcile himself to the prospect of losing her. 他一想到有可能失去她, 就觉得难以忍受。

regiment /ˈredʒɪmənt/ v. 严格控制

- to organize and control people firmly and usually too strictly
- e.g. the regimented routine of boarding school 寄宿学校严格的生活规律

endow sb./sth. with sth. 给予; 赋予

- (formal) to give sth. to sb./sth.

○ e.g. to endow sb. with a responsibility 赋予某人以责任

○ e.g. The room filled with the hum of conversation. 房间里充满了嘈杂的谈话声。

potent /'pəʊnt/ adj. 很有效的; 强有力的

○ Something that is potent is very effective and powerful.

○ e.g. Their most potent weapon was the Exocet missile. 飞鱼导弹是他们最有攻击力的武器。

downplay /,daʊn'pleɪ/ v. 淡化; 对 ... 轻描淡写

○ to make people think that sth. is less important than it really is

○ e.g. The coach is downplaying the team's poor performance. 教练试图淡化这个队的拙劣表现。

melancholy /'melənkəli/ n. 忧郁; 伤悲

○ (*formal*) a deep feeling of sadness that lasts for a long time and often cannot be explained

○ e.g. A mood of melancholy descended on us. 一种悲伤的情绪袭上我们的心头。

ennui /ɒn'wi:/ 无聊; 厌倦; 倦怠

○ (*from French, literary*) feelings of being bored and not satisfied because nothing interesting is happening

○ e.g. The whole country seems to be affected by the ennui of winter. 冬天的倦怠感似乎影响着整个国家。

chic /ʃi:k/ adj. 时髦的; 优雅的; 雅致的

○ very fashionable and elegant

○ e.g. She is always so chic, so elegant. 她总是那么时髦, 那么优雅。

deplete /dɪ'pli:t/ v. 大量减少; 耗尽; 使枯竭

○ [usually passive] (*formal*) to reduce sth. by a large amount so that there is not enough left

○ e.g. Food supplies were severely depleted. 食物供应已严重不足。

fraught with sth. 充满 (不愉快事物) 的

○ filled with sth. unpleasant

○ e.g. a situation fraught with danger/difficulty/problems 充满危险/困难重重/问题成堆的局面

circumscribe /'sɜ:kəmskraɪb/ v. 限制, 约束 (自由、权利、权力等)

○ [often passive] (*formal*) to limit sb./sth.'s freedom, rights, power, etc.

○ e.g. The power of the monarchy was circumscribed by the new law. 君主统治的权力受到了新法律的制约。

hunker down 蹲; 蹲坐; 蹲下

○ (*especially North American English*) to sit on your heels with your knees bent up in front of you

○ e.g. He hunkered down beside her. 他挨着她蹲下。

consequential /,kɒnsɪ'kwɛnʃl/ adj. 重要的; 将产生重大结果的

○ (*formal*) important; that will have important results

○ e.g. The report discusses a number of consequential matters that are yet to be decided. 这份报告讨论了许多有待决定的重大问题。

hum /hʌm/ n. 嗡嗡声; 嘈杂声

○ [singular] a low continuous sound

今日习题

1. 根据英文释义写出文中出现的对应单词

_____ : energy and enthusiasm in the way you look, behave or speak

_____ : [usually singular] (*formal*) a person or thing that causes trouble or suffering

_____ : (*formal*) a deep feeling of sadness that lasts for a long time and often cannot be explained

2. 一词多义

Which of the following underlined words is closest in meaning to the one in the sentence "The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips describes boredom as 'that state of suspended animation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire.'"? _____

A. A cold, diffuse light filtered in through the skylight.

B. His writing is so diffuse and obscure that it is difficult to make out what it is he is trying to say.

C. It allows nicotine to diffuse slowly and steadily into the bloodstream.

D. Over time, the technology is diffused and adopted by other countries.

3. 翻译：根据给定中文回译英文

所谓的自由时间——不过是一种义务性的爱好和假日，让我们妥协于资本主义冷酷编排的工作日——其实是我们不自由的一种标志。

习题答案

2. B

1. animation; scourge; melancholy

3. So-called free time—obligatory hobbies and holidays that reconcile us to the capitalist economy's coldly regimented workday—is really a sign of our unfreedom.