

# The Concept of Boredom: Russell and Kierkegaard

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic forced people to be at homes or even worse for those who got affected by the Covid 19 were even forced to be in a room in isolation for few weeks. Now that on one hand when it is something so tragic to deal with for a lot many and just to come in terms with one's company has been sheer difficult. Whereas on the other hand, this time made people undergo all kinds of feelings and emotions varying from anxiety, depression, loneliness and boredom to name a few.

William James, understand Boredom as an experience or sensation that "comes about whenever, from the relative emptiness of content of a tract of time, we grow attentive to the passage of the time itself" When bored, you attend closely to the mere feeling of time *per se* (1890:205). Whereas others like Schopenhauer believe that Boredom is a "tame longing without any particular object" (2005:22). Boredom, he says, is the sensation of the worthlessness of existence.

Boredom is now somewhere considered destructive to human mortal life, given our culture of hyper productivity. On one hand, we as a people are unable to accept even a minute of time spent with ourselves and constantly crave active distractions. On the other hand boredom is associated with developing faculties of reflection, introspection, solitude and tranquillity. This makes it necessary for the mind and the spirit and for sustenance of art and science.

In this paper, I would like to give a detailed exposition of the theory of Boredom as put forward by Bertrand Russell and Soren Kierkegaard in their works. In the first section I shall discuss Russell's concept of boredom. The second section will be discussed by and large with relevance to Kierkegaard's theory of Boredom. In the third section, I shall point out where both the thinkers, Russell as well as Kierkegaard differ or are in agreement with each other in context of their theories of boredom followed by the last section in which I shall briefly conclude my paper by throwing light on the fact that how both the thinkers have focused on extremely significant aspects of boredom.

## SECTION 1

According to Russell, Boredom in the behaviour of humans has not received as much attention as it should have had. Russell understands boredom to be an extremely important human emotion which is very distinct and unique in its own way. He believes that an individual throughout his life keeps pursuing excitement and it is in this constant pursuit that he does not endure boredom. To quote Russell, "We are less bored than our ancestors were, but we are more afraid of boredom. We have come to know, or rather to believe, that boredom is not part of the natural lot of man, but can be avoided by a sufficiently vigorous pursuit of excitement" (1930:45).

The desire to escape boredom comes naturally to an individual, and can be found in people of all kinds of ethnicities, class or race. It could also very well happen that an individual looks for an escape from boredom by indulging in intoxicants and to which Russell says that, "When savages have first tasted liquor at the hands of the white men, they have found at last an escape from age-old tedium, and, except when the Government has interfered, they have drunk themselves into a riotous death." (1930:58). Thus, Boredom is therefore a fundamental conundrum for a virtuous person, as most of the debaucheries are led in persuasion of escaping it by an individual.

He further states that those who work to earn a livelihood mostly get their share of boredom at the workplace but the ones who do not have the need to work to earn their livelihood idealise to live their lives completely rid of boredom. But Russell portrays that though the latter might seem to be an ideal life but it is extremely difficult to be achieved.

There has always been a component of boredom which cannot be separated from avoiding a lot of excitement. Russell commands that a little bit of boredom is essential for a happy and healthy life. He felt that too little of it could be melancholic for an individual whereas too much of it could completely exhaust an individual. Thus, some element of boredom in the right proportions is essential for a balanced life.

The seeds are sown right in the childhood so it is very important as to what kind of experiences one have had in the formative years as they pretty much shape most of the life of a human being. Bertrand Russell does not seem to be in favour of parents raising their children with a lot of amusements (movies, toys, variety of foods, travel etc) as too much excitement in a child's life would never allow him to enjoy the stillness of life.

A life of distractions and over indulgence would never allow a child to look for some fruitful purpose in life. An individual with a constructive aim in life would sustain boredom if he finds it to be necessitous whereas an individual who has a lot of distractions in life would never be able to work on a constructive purpose altogether.

Thus, an element of boredom is essential to living a wholesome life as it only helps an individual in reflecting for distant achievement rather than focusing on next momentary pleasure.

## **SECTION 2**

According to Kierkegaard, boredom is the foundation of all malevolence. Boredom is defined by him as an idea of emptiness which he analyses to be not deprived of stimulation but rather as something which lacks meaning. Thus, an individual could have stimulation of all sorts in the present world but still be existentially bored.

Kierkegaard found boredom to be extremely dreadful, To quote; "I know no stronger expression, no truer one, for like is recognized only by like... I lie prostrate, inert; the only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness (2004:239). The idea of boredom in Kierkegaard's theory reflects some kind of nothingness, which pervades all veracity. He understands it as pantheism which is demonic in nature, as he explains "...if we remain in it as such it becomes evil; on the other hand, as soon as it is annulled it is true" (2004:231).

Even though boredom possesses the characteristic of nothingness, it does operate as an extremely important thrust to action. This is found to be extremely absurd by Kierkegaard that something as dismal and robust as boredom could inherit the trait of being a source to action. It is, "strange that boredom, so still and static, should have such power to set things in motion. The effect that boredom exercises is altogether magical, except that it is not one of attraction but repulsion" (Kierkegaard, 2004:227).

The fact that desire leads to action is not amusing but boredom which is contrary of desire leads to negative impetus to action. As a result, Kierkegaard puts forward boredom's action-prompting disposition as exquisite. He further contends that boredom has also become a kind of reputation icon. It goes with the luxuriant individuals as "those who bore others are the plebeians, the mass whereas those who bore themselves are the elect, the nobility" (Kierkegaard, 2004:230).

Kierkegaard mentions that to get rid of boredom, individuals look for change and he explains it through the metaphor of crop rotation which involves regular changing of soil. He however does not seem to agree with it and comments: "One is tired of living in the country, one moves to the city; one is tired of one's native land, one travels abroad; ...one indulges in a dream of endless travel from star to star. Or the movement is different but still is extension. One is tired of dining off porcelain, one dines off silver; one tires of that, one dines off gold, ...This method defeats itself; it is the bad infinite" (Kierkegaard, 2004:233).

Kierkegaard does not approve of this kind of regular change in one's life to get rid of boredom rather he advocates not to change the soil but to change the crops as done in the procedure of 'crop rotation' authentically. By this, he implies that one should follow the theory of limitation. The more an individual would regulate himself, the more ingenious he would become as a prisoner in the solitary confinement for life is most resourceful and a spider can cause him a great deal of amusement too (Kierkegaard, 2004:233). Thus, it is the intensity which brings relief to an individual and not the extensivity.

The solution offered by Kierkegaard to get rid of boredom is to pay attention to the feature of 'idleness' in one's life. He uses it very much like the notion of tranquillity implying that one can live a mindful life by being 'idle'. To quote, "Idleness as such is by no means a root of evil; quite the contrary, it is a truly divine of life as one is not bored. So, far from idleness being the root of evil, rather it is the true good" (Kierkegaard, 2004:230).

## **SECTION 3**

From the discussion done in the previous two sections, it is clear that there are some differences and similarities between both the thinkers. Those similarities and differences can be briefly summarised as follows:

- According to Russell, Boredom in human behaviour has not obtained as much attentiveness as it should have had. Russell explains boredom as an extremely significant emotion in humans which is quite unique in its own way whereas for Kierkegaard, boredom establishes malevolence. He finds it extremely dreadful and defines it as a meaningless notion which he evaluates to be not dispossessed of stimulus but rather as something which lacks meaning to some degree.
- As per Russell, the longing to avoid boredom comes innately to a person, and can be found in humans of all natures and varieties. It is also possible for a person to try to escape boredom by getting involved in intoxicants or drugs whereas the idea of boredom in Kierkegaard's theory reveals a sort of nothingness, which takes over all reality. He explains boredom as a kind of pantheism which is very demonic or infernal in nature.
- Russell advocates that the ones who have to work to earn a livelihood get their share of boredom at the workplace itself but those who do not have to do so can model to live a life fully exonerated of boredom. But Russell further says even though the latter way of living might come across as an ideal one but it is very difficult to be attained. Whereas Kierkegaard also says that the rich individuals get to experience boredom the most as they do not necessary have to earn a living. He promulgates that "those who bore others are the plebeians, the mass whereas those who bore themselves are the elect, the nobility" (Kierkegaard, 2004:230).
- Russell advocates avoiding over indulgence on one hand and being idle on the other hand as the former would lead to escaping from boredom whereas latter would lead a person to get too involved in it. Thus as per Russell, little bit of boredom is also required for one to live a nourishing life as helps a person to reflect other than indulging in momentary pleasure. Whereas Kierkegaard explicates that to get freed of boredom, one looks for change and this kind of regular change does not make an individual's life better. The solution advanced by Kierkegaard to exonerate boredom from one's life is to recognise and explore the 'idleness' present in one's life. He felt that when an individual spends time on his own, for example a prisoner in the jail where he is bound to be alone with limited distractions which also he starts enjoying after a while. Thus, he recommends one to live a mindful life, by not being over indulgent and enjoying the idleness too.

## II. CONCLUSION

Upon analysing Russell's theories on boredom with Kierkegaard, we observed similarities as well as dissimilarities in their views. While comparing the views of Russell with that of Kierkegaard one can see that though they differ on the method but both of them seem to agree that an element of boredom is essential to live a wholesome life

We can say that this paper has given us an in-depth examination of the complexities of Russell and Kierkegaard's positions on boredom, which has also enabled a discussion on the points of difference and a comparison between both the thinkers.

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