

Meaning and Time - from Riche du Plessis

On travelling in India one soon becomes aware that the people of this country cope with the concept of time far better than we do in the west. On every pavement one observes individuals waiting, or just sitting, perhaps observing themselves without showing any evidence of being bored.

By comparison we, in the West, suffer this problem of time for, no matter what we do; boredom manages to seek us out. We then need to create elaborate schemes, attempting to prevent the onset of boredom. As we know, such schemes are never foolproof. Waiting is evidence of this.

Waiting for a bus, or a train at Central, we impatiently check our watches more frequently than we would normally. We stand up, walk around for a while, fidget with whatever is within reach, or read anything, scrutinize the advertisements, listen to music on an MP3, in order to occupy our thoughts.

We behave this way because we are bored.

Seldom do we go further in attempting to understand boredom. But it is a simple statement. It is like a politician saying inflation is the result of a previous government's policies. Yet we know that inflation has multiple causes; the cost of crude oil, the world food crises, the high revenue resulting from mineral exploitation, etc. I believe that the same is true of boredom; it is the consequence of a more fundamental phenomenon-, our experience of time. And hidden somewhere within this phenomenon is the key to finding meaning in our lives. To fully unravel the mystery we need to examine three things, and establish, if we can, a relationship between boredom, time and meaning. This will allow us to discover how we can deal with time and meaning, and how this relates to the society in which we live.

To begin, let's first try to understand what happens when we are bored.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger uses the example of waiting for a train at a suburban station when describing boredom. First we begin to feel uneasy, and then search for any distraction. We constantly think of things that we could be occupying our time with. It seems that we are wasting time, waiting on a train station, doing nothing. Heidegger believes that such boredom is evidence to us of our existence through our direct experience of time. It is a very physical experience. Without the distractions of books, newspapers, the MP3, other people, we are unarmed in such an experience. Time pushes down on us, applying pressure, and we are uncomfortable with it as we are not capable of dealing with 'raw' time. We then become aware of many distractions, and more frighteningly, we become aware of ourselves.

With nothing to distract us from time we see our own existence stretched before us and, suddenly, we begin to feel very insignificant. We feel ignored by the world as it passes us by, seemingly uninterested in providing us with any meaning.

Why does our experience with time and the awareness of our existence scare us so much? JP Sartre, I think, believed that this was because of the vacuum, or gap, created by awareness. This is obvious to the opposite situation to boredom; when busy at work. Then we talk of 'time flying', or claim that we were unaware that it was so late. Sartre argues that this is because, in these circumstances, we are not aware of our existence, that we are merely playing the role of a waiter, engineer, doctor, much as an actor plays a role, but are never truly these objects. On the

other hand, an object can never be aware of itself. A box is always a box. It is not playing at being a box, it is not aware of its 'boxiness'. The gap between the object we are playing and ourselves is increased when we experience time. At the train station, when we experience time directly, we feel this gap painfully as our boredom increases.

Imagine yourself in a boat in the middle of a lake. The boat has a leak, but it not too serious as long as we make certain we empty the excess water out of the boat. As long as we are doing this, our existence has meaning and purpose and we are aware of nothing else. However, if we fix the leak, we are suddenly aware that we are merely floating on the lake, with time on our hands, but our next concern would be about reaching land, whereas, previously, we were not aware of that concern. Our meaning was previously simple since our time was occupied by ensuring that we removed the excess water. This shows that, without purpose or meaning we become bored due to our experience with time, which leads to a renewed search for meaning.

Meaning, therefore, can be either of two things; in the simple sense it is a temporary distraction (as at the train station) or it is a more fundamental meaning for life. Both are based on the same principle - the avoidance of boredom. The boat example raises an interesting side question: Should we fix the leak at all? Plato might argue that we should fix the leak only if we are capable of dealing with the consequences of doing so- here, dealing with time

In Plato's 'ideal society', based on a simple rural community, he believed that life would be simple providing only the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter to its members. Though members would not be self-sufficient, some would excel at producing food, others at building houses, and others in supplying clothing. All would spend their time perfecting their skill or talent. A fair barter system would exist. There would be no free time as all members would industriously work at their occupation and this would be the key to the society's success. Our skill is our meaning and gives us the ability to deal with (or hide from) time, and thereby avoid boredom. If such a society ever existed in the past, why would anyone wish to leave it? The answer is simple. It is because such a society is, in fact, unsustainable. In such a society the gap between our awareness would be almost insignificant. This tiny awareness of time would lead to a desire for what Plato calls 'luxuries', and the need for luxuries formed the basis of the complex, civilized society of today. Plato's idea of 'luxury' was somewhat different to our understanding of the word. To Plato a luxury meant a desire for more than the essential elements of shelter, food, clothing. This could include the development of a better tool for tilling the land, a storage facility for food during the winter, thus creating the situation where one does not live from moment to moment. While such advances would seem innocent and harmless, the process would result in the creation of free time. With free time people would begin to create more luxuries; perhaps perfumes, confectionery, brighter coloured clothing. This could lead to the creation of fine arts and then to the accumulation of highly valued materials such as gold or silver. In short, Plato's 'ideal society' would not be sustainable. Plato himself argued that humans moved from the 'ideal society' to a more 'civilized' one, due entirely to our desires for luxuries. The highest of all luxuries, it could be argued, is our desire for more free time itself. But each advance that leads to more free time results in the need for further luxuries to

prevent the onset of boredom and ensure that the gap of, and in, our awareness of self does not increase.

Ultimately this must lead, in a vicious cycle, to our situation in modern-day society. Let's investigate this cycle by, say, looking at the way we deal with vision. Our eyesight shows signs of weakening. We visit an optician and get prescription glasses. We are told not to wear them all the time and, for a while, do so. But after a while our desire for 20/20 leads us to wearing them constantly. The glasses are, in fact, intended as crutches for the eyes, not a replacement and, by constant use, we soon need the use of a stronger lens, and then trapped in the cycle, growing more and more dependant on the crutch and eventually not be able to see without it.

Our society is doing the same to us in relation to time, making us incapable of dealing with it.

In life the glasses are replaced by luxuries. The initial realization of free time allowed us to sample luxuries. Not satisfied, we desire even more extravagant luxuries in the belief that they will satisfy our cravings. But as we satisfy our increasing demand for luxuries, we discover that the cravings only increase. Trapped in the cycle, the only apparent solution to us is to increase the strength of the very essence of the problem.

We could use this analogy to our everyday experience to understand how modern society makes us incapable of dealing with time. Heidegger claimed that we experience time directly in situations such as waiting for a train. This results in boredom as we are unable to deal with such a direct experience of time passing. If we wait for a train each day, or for some reason experience 'raw time' each day, we can learn to be more comfortable with the situation, gradually increasing our fitness to deal with time. Our encounters with time result in boredom because we are not 'fit' enough to deal with it. Unfortunately our present-day society does not provide for such training. Everywhere we look technology provides us with more ways to avoid experiencing time. When we wait for the train we 'fill the gap' with newspapers, radios, the MP3, the mobile phone, or the technology that best allows us to avoid experiencing time. There is now virtually nowhere to go in order to experience time. We are always busy and therefore, according to Sartre, not aware of our existence.

Our society covets and values such technological developments.

We feel uncomfortable with the experience of time as it presses down on us, so we believe that anything which relieves this pressure is a virtue.

But by not training to handle time we are failing to reap the benefits of a clearer experience of meaning.

If we continue to approach time by avoiding it, are we not in danger of creating an entire society incapable of dealing with it? Like an addiction, we will need increasing luxuries to distract us in every facet of our lives to ensure that we do not experience boredom. By so doing we will attempt to cover up the increasing gap created by our awareness of self, but this in turn will become increasingly difficult as we realize more free time.

Eventually, like the crack in a windscreen, it will become too large to ignore. Plato argued that this outcome could be avoided if philosophers became kings of the world. A sweeping statement based on the belief that philosophers, have clearer understanding and therefore better solutions. This may sound similar to the TV politician saying that he has the solution to each of society's problems. But Plato argued that philosophers would make better rulers because they are the only

ones who embark on a search for the 'true' truth, concerned with discovering the unchanging reality which is the true object of knowledge. So, by seeking and finding what is eternal and unchanging, the philosopher can eliminate the problem of time. We can consider this unchanging element as our meaning. Our true meaning is that which persists through time, and not that which simply occupies time. 'Removing the water from the boat' is not our real meaning, but only something that occupies our time, an artificial means of dealing with time.

The man sitting at the edge of the road in India, without the MP3, newspaper, mobile phone, appears to understand this.

But how can we apply it to every-day life in our society? Perhaps we can do so by taking the philosophical search for truth as an alternative way of looking at the world. Normally, to contemplate beauty, we need to observe a beautiful object. We cannot think of beauty without as existing by itself, independent of the object, because we rely on our senses to perceive beauty. As a result, in the absence of the object, we encounter boredom. What I think Plato is saying is that the philosopher is freed from this dependence (of a beautiful object) because he/she is searching for the unchanging reality of beauty, that their senses are providing only an indication of beauty. Thus the philosopher need not be distracted by the senses to occupy time, but instead uses time to find the unchanging element of meaning. What this means is that we do not continually rely on our senses to provide us with a stimulant or means of distraction.

We don't need the MP3. We can train ourselves to use our minds to search for eternal truths to deal with the boredom we feel while waiting for the train, trying to find something that persists through time so that we might become comfortable with our awareness of our existence.

This need not entail becoming a Tibetan monk meditating for ten hours a day. But if we can become comfortable with time we can be released from the cycle that forces us to create more free time we cannot deal with. We'll understand that boredom is our inability to deal with time, and we'll accept that that we need to learn how to deal with it.

Waiting for the train is the training. The longer you endure the boredom, the more capable you become in dealing with time. So, next time you are on the platform, don't look for a distraction or try to occupy the time. Rather, recognize that the boredom is your inability to cope and accept the need to learn how to deal with it.

Acknowledge the gap created by your awareness of your existence, and become less dependent on external distractions and more capable of realizing a meaning in life that is not simply occupying time.

At the very least, a lesson that I have already learned in India, is that waiting for the train has become a less painstaking experience.
