

*Why Boredom Matters: Education, Leisure, and the Quest for a Meaningful Life* by Kevin Hood Gary, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022

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*Review of*

## *Why Boredom Matters: Education, Leisure, and the Quest for a Meaningful Life*

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Kevin Gary's important and insightful book challenges readers to consider the moral and practical dimensions of boredom so that we might educate for lives of meaning. He gathers a range of sources from across time, traditions, and disciplines, and he puts these in conversation with our everyday experiences of boredom in the modern world, while also exploring ways that boredom has been written about and experienced in the past. It is an excellent book, and I cannot recommend it highly enough.

At the heart of Gary's thinking on boredom is the counterintuitive suggestion that boredom can be an educator, as opposed to something to be avoided at all costs: If your students are bored, give them something interesting to do. If you are bored, it just means you haven't figured out how to live your best life. Technological and self-help fixes for boredom proliferate. While it is easy to mock the ways we try to outrun boredom, Gary sagely advises us to consider whether being bored may be written into the human condition. And if boredom is part of our condition, maybe it isn't a problem to fix, but rather something to which we must develop a disciplined and humble response. And here Gary offers leisure as a practice, a way of learning how to live wisely with boredom, instead of acting as if boredom is something we can engineer a solution to or run away from.

Gary, importantly, distinguishes between two types of boredom: situational and existential. Situational boredom has many forms, but an exemplary form of situational boredom is waiting in line. We are bored because we are waiting for something to happen. But once we arrive at the front of the line and reach our goal, this type of situational boredom disappears. Teachers should be mindful of the roles that situational boredom plays in the classroom, but this situational boredom is not Gary's main concern. Rather, Gary sets out to address more profound experiences of boredom, the type of boredom that may occur, for example, when even our most cherished accomplishments leave us feeling empty and bereft of meaning. I have heard from several colleagues that the experience of getting tenure was a relief but also a moment that left them asking: is that all there is? Someone gets the promotion they longed for, or the house in the desirable neighbourhood they have always wanted to live in, or the consumer good they thought would make them happy. Instead of feeling fulfilment or joy, it only leaves more boredom. Unlike situational boredom, this existential boredom can strike us to the core and is less easily resolved.

There is another important distinction to be made between clinical depression and boredom in the sense Gary is interested in. As Gary notes (p. 34), even someone who would not qualify as clinically depressed can nonetheless feel existential despair when they contemplate the ways that we humans find ourselves bored and unfulfilled, maybe especially in the face of the very things we thought would bring our lives meaning. Given the increasing concerns about mental health in schools and society, it may be

worth more fully disentangling depression from the type of existential boredom that Gary addresses in this book. That said, I think there is important truth to the assertion that getting the things we think we want can still leave us feeling terribly empty without necessarily being symptomatic of clinical depression. Such feelings of emptiness can suggest the need for something different than treatment for depression. And this something different, Gary suggests, might be found in the practice of leisure.

One of the best ways to understand Gary's conception of leisure is to consider a distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* (p. 77). Put simply, *ratio* can be thought of as all those things that make us doers and makers. By contrast, *intellectus* is connected with contemplation, wonder, awe. When we are situationally bored, we can rely on *intellectus* to resolve the boredom. For example, if we have assigned the same book three semesters in a row and are bored when preparing for class, we can use *intellectus* to find a way forward. But when we are existentially bored, *intellectus* can fail us. To return to an earlier example, if tenure or a promotion did not lead to meaning, it may not be the case that trying new things or achieving new things will bring meaning. Rather, we need to step back from an achievement mindset and ask deeper questions about what might bring the deeper meaning we are after. This is not the way of leisure. The way of leisure is to step back and ask: can achievement of any sort bring the type of meaning or purpose I am after when I sink into existential boredom?

This leads to yet another important distinction that Gary develops (p. 67 ff.), drawing on David Foster Wallace's essay on all-inclusive cruise vacations. If working and doing don't bring deliverance from boredom, maybe what we need is time off, empty time, rest. But there is rest and there is rest. Wallace is critical of the idea that a cruise vacation can bring the type of rest we are after when we experience despair and existential boredom. He believes that there is resting in deeper sources of value that only discipline of a different sort can give us. This is the type of leisure Gary commends. Gary's analysis of leisure, which draws on many Christian (often Catholic) sources to think about leisure, is in line with recent scholarship on the religious dimensions of Wallace's work (e.g., Griffith, 2012). And the type of rest that Gary points us toward is something like a peace that surpasses all understanding. When we begin to realize that all achievement might lead to existential boredom, then we can begin developing practices that put us in touch with more permanent sources of value.

And this is where Gary's text gets especially interesting. As we live in a secular age (see Taylor, 2007), can leisure still do the work that Gary believes it can? I believe it can, and I believe Gary's book invites us into a conversation we often avoid but is well worth having. Whether one is religious, spiritual but not religious, or contemplative and naturalist, boredom is a problem for all of us. What resources do members of a religious community, or poets, or therapists, or mindfulness practitioners, or scientists have that will put people in touch with more permanent sources of value that can address the problems that stem from mindless boredom avoidance and the threats of existential despair? How can we have conversations that will work with and across these differences so that we can empower ourselves and the next generation to experience leisure?

I want to be careful not to overstate the significance of Gary's argument, but I believe that our inability to experience leisure leads to violence. In our boredom, we consume more. In our boredom, we are unkind to ourselves and others. In our boredom, we lash out and thrash about, destroying our environment and bonds of kindness and sociality. Unable to experience peace through leisure, we unleash strife and violence into the world.

Finally, it is important to note that as Gary makes his positive case for leisure, he also criticizes Martin Heidegger's thinking on authenticity as a response to boredom as existential despair (p. 39 ff.). What Gary's criticism of Heidegger points to, as I understand it, is the ways that a quest for authenticity can become its own trap. Instead of finding meaning through a quest for authenticity, we are only left with our bored self and its longing for something that the self alone cannot offer. Though Gary seems to suggest that only a vertical, or transcendent source can offer what the self longs for, I think very useful conversations can and should be had about what secular sources of permanent value look like, and how leisure can put us in touch with these values. Gary invites these conversations through this book, and as I mentioned above, I think it is time that philosophers and educators have serious conversations about

vertical values in a secular world. One of the most interesting things I learned from Gary's book (p. 7 ff.) is that leisure was once a learning goal for American schools. Specifically, the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* report, published in 1918, listed leisure as an essential outcome for students. For years, there has been bipartisan agreement in the United States that schools need to focus on college and career-readiness, and that a main – if not *the* main – purpose of schooling is global competitiveness. With growing awareness that increasing numbers of young people are not alright (US Surgeon General, 2021), attention is turning toward a more expansive vision of what schools should be. Notably, there is a new awareness that schools should teach life skills that go beyond earning a living (Turner, 2021).

This doesn't mean that schools are ready to embrace Gary's particular vision of leisure as an important institutional goal. But I think we are in a climate that is more receptive to Gary's vision than we were at the height of the standards-based reform movement. The COVID-19 pandemic has offered an opportunity to reflect on meaning in life, and many people have found that what they took to be important was – ultimately, and on reflection – empty, or at least incapable of generating lasting value. Though economic pressures remain the paramount concern for many, more and more parents are demanding that schools also offer students opportunities for meaning-making and reflection on purpose (see Damon, 2020).

Gary ends his book with recommendations for schooling. I don't disagree with any of them. He suggests that schools should help students cultivate a spirit of study, and remember and reflect on epiphanies, and that schools should become spaces that embrace what he calls a trusting apprentice model (pp. 112–125). It is easy to imagine schools in which all these things happen. For example, imagine a science classroom in which students stop seeing the learning of chemistry as busywork and are apprenticed into thinking like a chemist who not only achieves in a lab, but who experiences the full value of doing good work that transcends achievement, developing an appreciation for the mystery and depths of science. Imagine a humanities classroom in which students learn to see the world with new eyes and become more receptive to the wonder of their world. Because of this experience of wonder in the classroom, students who may have dreaded the long walk home from school, may now have moments of epiphany watching a leaf fall from a tree or appreciating the love that exists in their small community, a profound love that is easy to look past in these rancorous times. Finally, it isn't impossible for me to imagine a classroom in which students think twice about the value of chasing the highest grade for the least amount of work because they have a teacher who models what it means to find the joys of patient and deep learning.

What is harder to imagine is how to bring any of these initiatives to the scale needed to make sure that every student has an opportunity to learn leisure. For this to happen, we would need to rethink standards, assessment, curriculum, the training of teachers, and much else. Maybe most important, we would need to desire and truly long for schools in which students can experience what it feels like to rest in deep value. The great gift of Gary's book is that it sparks and kindles *that* type of desire and longing. Schools are burdened with so many aims, some of them conflicting and hotly contested (here we might think of debates over how race and human sexuality should be taught in schools). By shifting the angle of inquiry away from the most hotly contested issues of our day, Gary opens a space for a quiet, even reverent, discussion of what would help all our students – regardless of their background – escape from the overwhelming urge to distract themselves from existential boredom. What he invites us to imagine is the idea of schooling for deep value. With our gazes focused on deep value, we might have the courage to fundamentally rethink the purposes of education in our time. I am tremendously grateful to Gary for writing a book that provokes this line of thinking and I trust that readers will find much of value in this book.

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