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THE PHENOMENON OF BOREDOM IN EDUCATION

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Аннотация:

Martin Heidegger's philosophy is a central concern of the article. Having the ideas expressed in M. Heidegger's fundamental ontology in 1920s as the starting point, the author seeks to examine an intricate connection between a phenomenological description of different forms of boredom and its manifestations in educational practices. As the outcome of the study it is proposed that the analytic of Dasein, especially its ideas about selfhood, boredom and care, applied to educational practices make the last ones authentic in nature.

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In everyday life, a person often meets a situation when certain activities seem boring and uninteresting, for example, cleaning up the room or washing dirty dishes, while reading a book or watching a movie, on the contrary, seem to be something exciting. Any activity that a person finds himself involved in can be appreciated through this opposition: interesting - boring. Education is no exception. At the same time, while referring to pedagogical literature, what attracts attention is the fact that the word «boredom» itself is extremely rare and is often replaced by expressions such as «low motivation of students», «lack of cognitive interest», «low level of activity», «content, that which not corresponding to the level of personal development». The research gap in studying the phenomenon of boredom in educational practice is emphasized by many scholars. For example, P. Doherty argues that the majority of researchers, who state that boredom is one of the basic feelings of schoolchildren and students, do not describe the structure and interaction patterns that arise in educational experience, which cause boredom and an aversion to school subjects [3]. Education specialist T. Belton also notes that the relationship between education and the mood of boredom remains largely unexplored [1]. G. Breitenstein, who studied the phenomenon of boredom in the everyday life of schoolchildren, states the almost complete absence of special studies on this phenomenon in education [2].

Basically, in studies on issues of training and education, boredom is considered as such an emotional state from which deliverance should be sought. We do think, however, that our thinking on phenomenon of boredom should be oriented towards a deeper, existential level. In this case, we are faced with the question: whether the only problem is that students have lost interest, and the teacher has been unable to find a way to interest the students? We believe that to see boredom not only as negative, but also as positive phenomenon is of great importance. This would require to review of contemporary Heidegger's analytics of human being.

In his work «The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics» Heidegger identifies several forms of boredom. The first form of boredom is characterized by Heidegger as «being bored by something» (*gelangweiltwerden von etwas*). This form of boredom is characterized by the desire of a person to drive away boredom by finding something that can hold one's attention in order not to let the latter take hold of oneself. Explaining what is at stake, Heidegger's example is that of being in an everyday situation, with well-known, banal forms of passing

the time. One such situation is waiting at a railway station. Waiting at a railway station a person studies the train timetables and routes, counts the trees along the road, walks up and down, looks at the clock, etc., but despite all these attempts to wile away the time, the railway station nevertheless, is bringing up dead boring. An attempt to pass the time is an attempt to cope with a deep sense of emptiness that comes over a man when he turns out in such a situation. Heidegger stresses: it's not the rail station itself or the waiting people or the arriving trains, but the situation itself, in which they are placed that can give rise to boredom. Being unable to give what a person wants most of all – to get on a train at the scheduled time to leave the station itself – this situation makes the person to fall into this *being left empty* that is emerging in boredom [7: 154-177].

The second, a more profound form of boredom, that Heidegger investigates is «boring oneself with something» (*das sichlangweilen bei etwas*). Heidegger's example is that of being invited to a dinner party where the food is good, as is the music, and the guests are enjoying one other's company etc. But once back home, I am struck by the thought that I was actually bored the entire evening. This is presumably an experience most of us have had at some time. The strange thing about this form of boredom is that I am unable to identify exactly what I was bored with. According to Heidegger, the strange thing about this form of boredom is that a man is unable to identify exactly what he was bored with at this party. And furthermore a man did not make a single attempt during the entire evening to while the time away; on the contrary, he gave time free rein. And yet it feels as if the whole evening was nothing more than just passing the time. At a closer scrutiny, the party as such was a mere pastime. The consciousness of boredom that sometimes strikes us afterwards should be understood, states Heidegger, as a consciousness of an emptiness. According to Heidegger, the emptiness that crops up in this more profound form of boredom is the emptiness left by 'our proper self' [7:192-195].

So, how can the cross-section of Heidegger's analytics of boredom be applied in the educational realm? Apparently, the situative boredom or «being bored by something», as defined by Heidegger, is the most common form of boredom in educational situations or learning environments. This is just one of many observations that are rather commonplace in the educational practice. «Anja scratches a little with her legs. It looks as if she wants to stretch them. Otherwise, she remains absolutely still in her seat. Anja continues to play with her hair. Then she begins to play around with an index card. Meanwhile, Heiko places a paperclip chain around his neck, and acts as if he (or someone else) were strangling him. He makes a face like someone dying. Anja yawns. Heiko continues to play with the paperclips; he turns them into an arm bracelet, and then puts it around his wrist. At 1:20 pm Anja asks me the time. Heiko holds the chain in front of his face, and starts making faces. By 1:21 pm it starts getting loud, the lesson is over. The students pack up. They wait for their next course to start...» [2: 93]. The signs are easy to interpret: Anja and Heiko are bored, and attempting to past the time away. They play with objects directly at their disposal such as cards, paperclips, pencils in order to take their minds off the lesson. Heiko and play with paperclips and cards, not because they like them that much, but rather because they must do something to occupy themselves, so as to divert their attention from the time that passes so slowly. Anja asks the time, in anticipation of the moment she has been waiting for, i.e., the end of the lesson. In the situation described, students are waiting for the lesson to end in a similar way a person is waiting at a railway station for his/her next train to depart. Why the learning environment is not meaningful, indifferent to the students, attempting to occupy themselves at the situation of the classroom lesson so as to kill time left until the end of the lesson can have different reasons. It is important to keep in mind the fundamental position of Heidegger's philosophy about the specifics of human existence. To define this specificity, Heidegger uses concept of *Dasein* and emphasizes that *Dasein* is an entity, «which in each case we ourselves are». That's why the entity is revealed itself to *Dasein* in a certain way, i.e. not as a result of some kind of automatic, natural process, as for example the act of affecting the external things on the human senses, but only if an entity affects *Dasein*, i.e. turns out to be meaningful for it in its being. In this regard, education and learning activities should not be identified with a particular kind of learning, a transmission of information or knowledge from the educator to students, but should be interpreted and organized also as the process that would open the wide opportunities for any future meaningful educational experience of the participants in that process. If the educational practice ignores this fact in its most varied manifestations, then the student finds himself in a situation where he simply passes the time away (or «kill time»). Doesn't student, as thrown being-in-the world and not even realizing why and what for he is here, see no reasons to stay-being held in the classroom other than external ones. The boredom that arises from dull and meaningless educational situation is as painful as being caught in a railway station waiting for the next train. In both cases “passing the time” is the only way out from the situation.

As already mentioned, «being bored by something» (*gelangweiltwerden von etwas*) is the most common form of boredom in educational realm. But can we attest that this form of boredom is the only one? Whether there is a more profound form of boredom? As we recall, Heidegger finds a more subtle form of boredom –

«boring oneself with something» (*sichlangweilen bei etwas*). This form of boredom is characterized by the fact that everything appears to be «tedious» which is not to say «indifference». For, as Heidegger states, if something is wearisome and tedious, then this entails that it has not left completely indifferent, on the contrary: we are present while doing something (gossiping with friends, reading, learning) given over to it, but not taken by it. Such kinds of activities, as Heidegger explains, «doesn't stimulate and excite, it doesn't give anything, has nothing to say to us, doesn't concern us in any way» and it doesn't engross us, leaving us empty [7: 142].

We believe this type of boredom correlates with educational practice. And it is perfectly possible to think of a situation, when a man has been very ingrained in what is happening, but all the same he can't help feeling dissatisfaction, that which may be described as «not on my own». The situation described above can be specified in various ways in educational practice. So, noticing an increased number of bored students with aimlessly wandering eyes, the teacher may be tempted to start telling jokes or recalling other funny accidents of life in order to draw the attention of the audience, to «wake up» the class participants. Such teacher's strategy may lead to the lesson or lecture becoming more entertaining than learning and developing. American philosopher and educator J. Dewey states that such procedure is properly stigmatized as «soft» pedagogy; as a «soup-kitchen» theory of education methods [3: 122]. The main problem of such a limited, one-sided approach to increasing the pupils' interest in learning activities, understood as an effective remedy in dealing with boredom in class, is that the teacher, selecting appropriate techniques to revive the classroom activities often with little willingness tries to understand what's happening to the student himself because of these techniques. If the teacher thinks of these methods as an automatic «magic crystal ball», then the process of learning is often operating in the blind, randomly. The episodic introduction of elements of animation into the content, teaching methods and forms of work of students in order to arouse cognitive interest will only give a short flash of immediate interest. Occasional introduction of stimulating elements in the education content, teaching methods and students' forms of working with a view to enhancing students' cognitive interests will only give the short outbursts of immediate interest. Clearly, external stimuli may generate students' interest and assist them in constantly trying to escape from boredom in the class when time becomes drawn out, becomes long. Nevertheless, the elimination of a seemingly appealing educational situation and learning environments may lead to the decrease of the interest giving way to boredom again. It is obvious, therefore, that the opportunities to gain new educationally viable experience has been significantly declining. A person who is dependent on both external stimuli and entertainment who needs outside assistance and support to encourage his cognitive interest, who does not understand the changing nature of interests that motivate cognition, is not free. What is being concealed by this desire for interesting is the desire to drive away boredom, to find anything, that can hold one's attention.

Another situation, that deserves our attention, is perhaps a situation where a pupil or a student is doing what he or she is required for him or her to be done. The student fulfills the outer educational expectations (parents', teachers' etc. demand) by being engaged, but what and how he learns is not of importance. It is often even if the students pass the test with the highest score and present excellent progress in their studies there is always a possibility that they, despite their success, do not really feel comfortable and satisfied. The students' attempts to study harder, with more passion to avoid the strong feeling of emptiness seem to have no effect. It feels like everything is well, but there is something missing. This effect correlates with the second form of boredom that Heidegger points as «boring oneself with something». The most striking example of this form of boredom may be one of the observations of everyday school life, which G. Breidenstein mentions in his research. He gives the observation for three girls in Latin class: «The three do not raise their hands, but are attentive; for they have apparently made an error that all three immediately correct. Now each of them is sitting by herself with her head facing the respective notebooks. Only Astrid is giving a somehow bored juvenile impression. However, they have noticed (at least Astrid) me observing her, and continually looks over to see if I am watching. Is her performance just for me?» [2: 99]. As the illustration makes clear, Astrid signals that she does exactly what she is supposed to do, she does the same what the other students do, but without interest and engagement. She's keen to show that her actions are done out of a sense of obligation, but are not connected with her «person», i.e., with her own interests, motives, or thoughts; there was still, in terms of Heidegger, an emptiness, which means that Astrid's activities failed to fulfill her needs.

Until now, we have been talking about two types of boredom, ignoring the third, so-called «profound boredom» («*est ist einem langweilig*»). The profound form of boredom does not stem from anything specific. In the profound form of boredom I am not bored by the situation or by myself. This is impersonal boredom, when it is boring for one «not for me as me, not for you as you, not for us as us, but *for one*. Name, standing, vocation, role, age and fate as mine and yours disappear» [7: 217]. The peculiarity of this form of boredom is that it indicates specificity of the human being, that which Heidegger describes with the term *Dasein*. *Dasein*,

however, has numerous meanings. I shall point the most essential one. The concept *Dasein* describes the being of the particular kind of entity that is the human being, which, in its being, is concerned with this being itself, and treats this being as a task. *Dasein* is confronted with a choice of one of its existing possibilities: to be ourselves (authentic mode of being) and not to be ourselves, not to choose, namely, to lose ourselves (inauthentic mode of being).

Thus, what is distinctive in a profound form of boredom, according to Heidegger, is that in profound boredom we exist in a field of proper possibilities to find ourselves, to be genuine. Following Heidegger's analysis of boredom, we can agree, that without experiencing profound boredom there is no self, no freedom, and *Dasein* (being-in-the-world) appears to be absent presence or presence-as-absent. Whereas in the first form of boredom we can turn away from it by passing the time so that we do not need to listen to it; and what is distinctive in the second form of boredom is that we don't want to listen to it; and in the case with profound boredom we are «being compelled to listen, being compelled in the sense of that kind of compelling force which everything properly authentic about *Dasein* possesses, and which accordingly is related to *Dasein's* innermost freedom» [7: 219]. It remains only to accept our boredom as attunement and «to let it be awake». So refusing our own mood in our efforts to meet the social norm, which is expressed in the warning «Do not give in to your mood!», creates the danger that we'll lose us as ourselves and become only and first of all like others. The authentic being of a man is then lost, remains unseen. The concept of education as a place for the realization of one's own existential projects correlates with Heidegger's idea of the understanding of education formulated by Plato (*paideia*). The essence of «*paideia*», writes M. Heidegger, «doesn't consist in merely pouring knowledge into the unprepared soul as if it were some container held out empty and waiting. On the contrary real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it» [6: 350]. The “result” of such an education will be, in the language of Heidegger, «that everything that has been heretofore manifest to human beings, as well as the way in which it has been manifest, gets transformed» [6: 351].

So, based on the above, we believe that it is the mood of profound boredom that is the very “space” in educational practice, being immersed to which the student gets a chance to meet him as himself. In this regard, such understanding of the potential power and use of boredom is evident in a notable and rare instance of its recognition by an English educational institution – a private school in the UK, founded by Alexander Sutherland Neill. Summerhill's current policy statement says it aims «... to allow children to experience the full range of feelings ... Apparently negative consequences such as boredom, stress, anger, disappointment and failure are a necessary part of individual development ...» [8]. It is noteworthy that students of the school, although having motivation; students acknowledged their experience of boredom but also appreciate it as an impulse for self-change. Engagement, on the contrary, is perceived as the factor curtailing the potential for change or development. The latter circumstance is not accidental. The thing is that, on the one hand, a tight timetable is considered nowadays to be the true measure of a man's success and his sustainability and thus it is always highly appreciated by the society. And on the other hand, modern psychological studies reveal that children today are too busy, they have little or no free time. Children are prevented, more precisely, taken away from being bored (and they feel it and even proud of it). Thus the child's boredom is often recognized as an incapacity and is usually denied as an opportunity. This is largely due to the currently widespread entertainment industry and social stereotype, according to which the predisposition to boredom is regarded as a negative phenomenon. Being under the influence of these factors, parents tend to fill children's time and supply much needed childcare when kids are out of school. It is one of the most oppressive demands of modern society that the child should be interested, rather than take time to find what interests him.

Meanwhile, over-scheduling children is unnecessary and could ultimately keep kids from discovering what truly interests them. Under total engagements the kid would have difficulty in finding something that is his or her own because it could be so beyond what the parents have already planned. In order to understand what he or she is interested in a child should have times when there is «nothing to do». In this regard, equally convincing is the L. Fry's observation that «children need to learn how to be bored in order to motivate themselves to get things done. Being bored is a way to make children self-reliant» [5].

In summary, let's draw our attention to one of the other core ideas. *Dasein* is an entity which does not just occur among other entities, but is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its very being, that being is an issue for it. *Dasein* cares for its most authentic ability to be. In this regard, it is not enough to create the culture or knowledge intensive environments for the child. The existential longing for the education of one's self is equally, if not more, important. Actually, this is the main goal of education: not to «give» a child an education, but to breathe into the child a desire for education, to wake up in him a longing for his absent «I». The latter is hardly possible without the student's experiencing the profound boredom. Thus one of the main imperatives of

the philosophy of education is to allow the feeling of profound boredom to stay awake, and not to put it to sleep by various forms of entertaining and playful activities.

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