

What is Boredom, Why Do We Want It, How Can We Cure It, and Why Do We Quit Things?

“One Voluntarist’s Perspective” is an original column appearing sporadically, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins.

My son comes to me about once a month complaining of boredom. I remember feeling this way when I was his age, and of course I’ve felt this way as an adult.

After this last instance, I become a bit more thoughtful and began wondering where boredom comes from, why it exists. The world is full of amazing things, and as unschoolers my son has complete control over his time and what he does with it. Talking through this with my wife I made a few interesting realizations, which I’ll get to.

But first, why the boredom? Here’s my theory: *boredom is the absence of felt uneasiness.*

Felt Uneasiness

Let me back up and define my terms. In the field of praxeology, the study of human action, *felt uneasiness* is the cause of all purposeful behavior. Why? Because if we did not feel uneasy (this is the best term praxeologists have found to describe said feeling) about the state of affairs around us, we would not be motivated to change them.

With that in mind, here is the “action axiom” of praxeology: action is the purposeful utilization of means over a period of time in order to achieve a desired end, an end which always has as its goal the removal of felt uneasiness.

As an axiom, it is irrefutable. Any attempt to refute it is proof positive of its truthfulness. Why would one even attempt its refutation? Because they feel uneasy about not being certain of its truthfulness. In their attempt at refutation, they prove it. Hence its axiomatic.

But go on, think of any purposeful behavior that may or may not be motivated by felt uneasiness.

Going to the bathroom: feeling uneasy about the uncomfortable sensation in your bladder, and desiring to eliminate it.

Getting a cup of coffee in the morning: feeling uneasy about going through the day without the energy created by drinking coffee; feeling uneasy about not tasting what you consider delicious.

Writing a column about boredom: feeling uneasy about keeping this idea to myself, and not

letting it out into the world to be examined and critiqued; feeling uneasy about the prospect of forgetting the ideas surrounding this topic; feeling uneasy about not working out the idea on paper, so to speak, which has greatly helped my thinking through things in the past.

And on, and on. You get the picture. Which brings us to boredom.

Boredom

It is my estimation that boredom is the absence of the felt uneasiness required to motivate one to act. Think about it.

When you're bored, there is nothing you're feeling uneasy about. You've successfully removed all felt uneasiness. You think long and hard about "what you can do" with yourself, only to find that there is *nothing* that interests you. Why is that? Because you have, at that point in time, completely satisfied your curiosity about things unknown or eliminated any feelings of discomfort, *et cetera*. That's not to say that you know everything, but in that moment, for that temporary period of time, there is nothing of interest for you to explore.

Nor is there anything creating the necessary feeling of uneasiness that leads you to purposeful behavior, to act.

The Goal of Action

This brings us to the first interesting realization I made using my wife as a sounding board for these ideas.

And that is: *the goal of action is the attainment of boredom.*

It's very simple, really, and I've already explained as much in everything I've written thus far, but let me spell it out in a syllogism:

IF boredom is the absence of felt uneasiness, (which I think I've demonstrated that it is)

AND removing felt uneasiness is the goal of action, (purposeful behavior, this is axiomatic)

THEN the goal of action is to attain a state of boredom.

Therefore, when one has achieved boredom, they have, at that point in time, achieved all of their immediate goals.

Entering the state of boredom is not to say that all of their goals in life are completed. Many are long term and require time and processes out of their immediate control. But

once the state of boredom is entered, all of their immediate goals have been realized.

Except for one: the finding of new goals.

Wait, what? Alright, you got me. Boredom is not the total absence of felt uneasiness. There exists a feeling of uneasiness about not feeling uneasy enough about anything to motivate one to action. Which is why boredom always brings my son to me complaining about his state of boredom.

The Cure for Boredom

This event always prompts me to begin suggesting activities he could do, but these suggestions are mostly futile. Why? Because it's a complete shot in the dark on my guessing what he may or may not prospectively feel uneasy about. Remember, the only reason he would begin to act is if he felt uneasy about some bodily discomfort or unknown thing (curiosity), *et cetera*. So why would any of my suggestions create that for him? They mostly can't.

But what can I do? Perhaps he needs to just sit with his thoughts and ruminate. That can be very beneficial. He may discover something he feels uneasy about, enough to motivate action. I've removed boredom this way many a time. Or perhaps he needs a change in environment, in stimulus. I have successfully cured his boredom by suggesting we leave the house to go do some fun activity that he's always excited to do but the doing of which is out of his control. Sometimes I can't suggest this for practical reasons, but I often can, and should, if I want to truly help him (and get him off my back about being bored!). I have removed my own boredom this way many a time.

And perhaps there are more solutions to the "problem" of boredom.

Let Them Quit!

Having gone through this, here's another realization. As unschoolers we are very careful not to force our children into doing things they have no interest in doing. But what about when they start something, and then lose interest? Should they be pushed and prodded into sticking with it, seeing it through? Maybe, maybe not.

Let's dig deeper. What does it mean that they've lost interest? It means they've become bored with it. Why would they become bored with it? Because they have completely removed any felt uneasiness related to that activity. This may be, and usually is for these kinds of activity, that their curiosity has been met to their satisfaction.

So why in the world would we force them to continue it? They're no longer feeling curious about it, which means they're no longer motivated to do it because they no longer feel any

amount of uneasiness about not experiencing that activity.

And remember: *that is the goal of action, the attainment of boredom!*

Game over.

When we push and prod them to continue, we are doing it to remove our own felt uneasiness, not theirs. They have none. They become a tool for the achievement of *our* goals. It seems to me that this is an objectification, a dehumanization, of a person we claim to love and cherish. Maybe it's time to stop this. Maybe it's time to let our children get bored with things and to move on with their lives.

Yes I know a lot of non-refundable money can be spent on these things. Believe me, *I know*. But who's problem is that, theirs or ours? Maybe there are ways to indemnify ourselves ahead of time, such as having your kid earn the money to pay for the activity before committing. I've done it this way. But I've also required a strong promise that he wouldn't quit.

And during the period of time (two months) the activity proceeded (baseball), there were times that I pushed and prodded him to practice or to a game. Thankfully he found felt uneasiness enough to motivate him into finding happiness by the end of said practice or game. Should I have kept pushing him? Had he not found that happiness by the end of each instance, I would not have continued. That's been the key for me. He had trouble at first, but then found excitement, so I kept pushing week to week.

But otherwise I've "let him" quit. He quit an online massive multiplayer game I introduced him to. He quit reading a book I introduced him to. He's quit watching certain television series. He quit guitar lessons. He quite basketball last year about half way through, and has decided to start basketball again this year. If he gets bored, he'll quit.

Don't we all quit when we become bored with something? What's the purpose of continuing if it no longer removes any felt uneasiness? If it no longer meets our needs?

Final Thoughts

Well there it is. More came out with this than I intended at the start. I had to keep changing my introduction and the title as the writing poured out. I kept finding new ideas to feel uneasy about them not being written down. I'm usually bored by the end, but the boredom never came, so I kept writing. But alas, it's here. So I'm done.