

Why all the drama? How do we attain peace?

(Online at: <http://anandavala.info/article/why-all-the-drama.pdf>)

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Boredom and interest are little understood and greatly underestimated as motivating factors in our lives and societies.

A year ago I had a fascinating discussion with [Augustin de la Pena](#), whose primary research is into the psychophysiological foundations of boredom and interest and how these relate to our overall behaviour, individually and collectively. This a summary of what I learnt from him. But first a quote that hints at what will be analysed further in some detail below.

“As it is, we are merely bolting our lives—gulping down undigested experiences as fast as we can stuff them in—because awareness of our own existence is so superficial and so narrow that nothing seems to us more boring than simple being.

If I ask you what you did, saw, heard, smelled, touched and tasted yesterday, I am likely to get nothing more than the thin, sketchy outline of the few things that you noticed, and of those only what you thought worth remembering. Is it surprising that an existence so experienced seems so empty and bare that its hunger for an infinite future is insatiable? But suppose you could answer, “It would take me forever to tell you, and I am much too interested in what’s happening now.”

How is it possible that a being with such sensitive jewels as the eyes, such enchanted musical instruments as the ears, and such a fabulous arabesque of nerves as the brain can experience itself as anything less than a god? And, when you consider that this incalculably subtle organism is inseparable from the still more marvelous patterns of its environment—from the minutest electrical designs to the whole company of the galaxies—how is it conceivable that this incarnation of all eternity can be bored with being?”

(Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*)

Consciousness (heart/mind) apprehends a stream of experiences, which it needs to either assimilate or ignore thus interpretive and responsive structures evolve to process the stream of experiences.

The ego is a cognitive structure that grows by commandeering other structures. It also protects its growing structure from incompatible structures, which results in such things as unnoticed experiences, threatening ideas, trigger points, phobias, etc.

The ego is a centralised point of control for the organism - thus it cannot manage all of the complexity within its growing structure and seeks to automate as much as possible the functioning and interactions between the various cognitive structures within itself.

This combines with the ego's tendency for self-importance and aggrandisement, causing the ego to feel that it is above bothering about the details of how the cognitive structures function, it just wants to be in command of them.

This leads to the emergence of an ego that is in command of a large, complex and highly automated cognitive structure that interprets the stream of experiences and responds to it in habitual and routine ways.

This habituation of cognitive processes is called "attentional automatization". The more that attention is automated the more the ego is free to focus elsewhere and thereby expand its field of awareness.

This is analogous to a government privatising its services so that it doesn't have to be concerned with the operational details and is free to pursue its other agendas.

In this way the ego acquires further cognitive structures (ideas, attitudes, paradigms, etc) that it can assimilate, which then influence the areas of interest. Thus by following its 'interests' the ego builds a larger, more elaborate cognitive structure. This process is also related to the need for 'entertainment' and the experience of being 'entertained'.

As the new structures become assimilated and automated, there is a reduction of 'novelty' that is related to the increasing complexity of the cognitive structures and the resulting decreasing information content of stimuli. Thus something that was once interesting becomes boring due to attentional automatization. For a very simple example, someone with no memory can be surprised and entertained by the same experience over and over, however someone with memory will eventually get bored with the same thing again and again.

If the range of available new cognitive structures is limited then this is experienced as an oppressive sense of boredom - akin to starvation, which leads to intense cravings for the pursuit of interests, entertainment, excitement, drama, etc.

Sometimes existing cognitive structures may be incompatible with the available ones, hence the ego's defensive tendencies exclude the available ones. This can lead to a paucity of available stimuli and thereby result in boredom even if there are many things available that other's find interesting.

The ego's response to intense boredom is to attempt to shake up its underlying cognitive structures, which de-automatizes them. This is done by selectively or randomly seeking new interests, entertainment, unusual experiences, taking risks, inciting conflict, consuming drugs and generating crises, with intended and unintended consequences.



This exploration and upheaval can break cognitive habits and lead to the emergence of new perspectives, new understandings, new attitudes, awe, being in the flow, inspiration, creativity, etc. It can unlock reserves of energy, insight and hidden potential.

Those with relatively simple cognitive structures can become satisfactorily interested in and entertained by relatively simple things. They have relatively simple attentional automatization, due to having relatively simple cognitive structures with sparse integration. Thus a relatively light shake up is all that is needed to de-automatize things, perhaps a glass of wine, a walk in the park, a little small-talk and gossip, watching a movie, etc.

However those with highly complex and elaborate cognitive structures have a greater need to pursue interests due to their greater capacity for experiencing boredom. They have strong attentional automatization, due to having complex cognitive structures with dense integration. Thus they require a more vigorous shake up to loosen things and are thus more prone to extreme and risky behaviour, such as extreme sports, extreme conflict, extreme drug use, extreme recklessness, extreme entertainment, etc.

Those with cognitive structures that are compatible with the mass culture or various alternative cultures will be satisfactorily interested in and entertained by the products of those cultures. Thus, for example, many movies, television programs and documentaries will be quite entertaining to them.

However those with highly specialised cognitive structures have specialised areas of interest, thus they are less likely to be interested in the products of mass culture or the alternative cultures. Thus, for example, cutting edge conversations with potentially revolutionary implications would to entertain them.

Thus the interplay between interest and boredom underlies and motivates many behaviours that on the surface may seem peculiar, unnecessary and even dangerous. It is likely that much of the conflict, strife, drug use, entertainment, recklessness, crises etc in the world are driven by these psychophysiologic dynamics.

This raises some important questions (Note: these unfold in order so they each imply the previous questions.)

- Why are so many people so bored?
- Could it be that our mass culture and even alternative cultures are presently not nourishing to us?
- Could it be that the products of our cultures are too simplistic to really interest the growing number of people with complex cognitive structures?
- Could it be that many of us have cognitive structures that are largely incompatible with those that are able / allowed / encouraged to be conveyed via our cultures?
- If we were to communicate more openly, honestly, vulnerably and clearly would we find that the internal life of others is very unlike their culturally conditioned façade?
- If we were more able to express our real selves and to really see and understand each other, would the resulting culture become more nourishing?
- With a more nourishing culture would there be less boredom and craving for excitement, drama, conflict and crisis?
- Is this the manner in which mutual understanding can lead to peace - not just through things like arbitration between complainants, but in a very personal and deep psychophysiologic manner?
- Would a peaceful consciousness be as creative and innovative or would we be satisfied with relatively simple pursuits?
- Is there a balance between peace and conflict (between people) that results in a balance of creative innovation and simple pursuits, whilst avoiding the destructive extremes?

- Do these dynamics influence not just our personal consciousness but also the collective consciousness within a society?

- Could these dynamics explain the behaviour of and interactions between nation states, corporations and other such entities?
 - Could excessive 'institutional' automatization (e.g. privatisation of government services, outsourcing, etc) lead organisations (nations, corporations, etc) to metaphorically feel bored and thereby develop cravings for the pursuit of their interests, entertainment, conflict and crisis at a national and global scale?
 - Are organisations (nations, corporations, etc) with more complex and specialised institutional structures more prone to boredom and likely to develop intense cravings for the pursuit of their interests, entertainment, conflict and crisis at a national and global scale?
 - Could this 'institutional' automatization be the underlying cause of much of the drama and strife in the world - including the tendency to move in the direction of fascism and authoritarianism as the cravings become more intense?
 - If organisations (nations, corporations, etc) were to communicate more openly, honestly, vulnerably and clearly, and they became more able to really see and understand each other, would the resulting political and economic culture become more nourishing?
 - With a more nourishing political and economic culture would there be less institutional boredom and craving for excitement, drama, conflict and crisis?
 - Is this the manner in which mutual understanding between nations can lead to world peace - not just through things like peace-talks between nations, but in a very social and deep psychophysiological manner?
 - Would a peaceful society be as creative and innovative or would it be satisfied with relatively simple pursuits?
 - Is there a balance between peace and conflict (between organisations) that results in a balance of creative innovation and simple pursuits, whilst avoiding the destructive extremes?
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- If there is a balance point of peace and conflict at both the personal and organisational levels, what is the interplay between these two balance points?
 - How does the demographic distribution of personal balance points contribute to the organisational balance point?
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- Many complain that meditation is too boring, does this indicate that meditation has some impact on the ego's cognitive structure?
 - Advanced meditators have a very peaceful and clear consciousness, is this because meditation simplifies the ego's cognitive structure and also makes it more universally compatible with the stream of experiences, so that simple and ordinary experiences become quite stimulating and nourishing?
 - Is there something like meditation at an organisational level that can foster peaceful organisations (nations, corporations, etc)?
 - Aside from meditation, what other methods are there to bring peace to egos and organisations that are tormented by cravings that lead them into drama, strife and danger?

Related work by myself: [Gaian Ego Hypothesis](#) and [STriking At the Root \(STAR\)](#).

Note: the above article is off the top of my head; based on my recollections of my conversation with him and also informed by my own perspective and experiences. So some of the views expressed above are not necessarily a reflection of Augustin's. For a very detailed examination of his ideas see Augustin's paper:

Consequences of Increments in Cognitive Structure for Attentional Automatization, the Experience of Boredom, and Engagement in Egocentric, Hyperdynamic, Interest-Generating Behaviors: A Developmental Psychophysiological Approach
<http://journals.iss.org/index.php/proceedings50th/article/viewArticle/290/124>