

Chapter 9

Animal Boredom



Lars Svendsen

Goethe (1950) jokingly claimed that the capacity for being bored was the essential property that separates humans from nonhuman animals and that if monkeys could be bored, we would have to recognize them as fully human. Others have arrived at the same conclusion. For instance, Erich Fromm claims: “Man is the only animal that can be bored” (2002, p. 23). I also used to believe that this is the case. Contrary to what I claimed in *A philosophy of boredom* (2005), there is good reason to assume that boredom exists also outside of the human species. However, relatively little research has been done on animal boredom, and animals are virtually absent in boredom studies.¹

A central problem in discussing animal boredom is related to the question as to how we can justify the ascription of various mental and emotional states to non-linguistic creatures. I here draw on my book *Understanding animals* (2019), arguing that such states are not hidden from view in some ‘inner’ realm, but are for the most part in plain view. This is especially clear in the case of such phenomena as fear, where the criteria for establishing that an animal experiences fear are quite straightforward. More complex emotions like grief, loneliness and boredom will have more complex criteria, and you need information about the context in which the emotional expression occurs. The criteria will further differ somewhat from species to species. Nevertheless, I will argue that we can plausibly argue that boredom occurs in many other species than humans and that this is especially clear in the case of mammals, birds, and at least some species of octopus. Using the term ‘boredom’ to describe the emotional state of these animals will invite charges of anthropomorphism, but I will argue that this is legitimate use of anthropomorphisms.

¹One notable exception is Toohey (2011, Chap. 3). More work on animal boredom has been done within animal behavior studies, and especially the pioneering works of Françoise Wemelsfelder.

L. Svendsen (✉)
University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway
e-mail: Lars.svendsen@uib.no

The acknowledgment of boredom as an emotion to be found also in nonhuman animals creates problems for theories of boredom that place the concept of meaning at the center of their account, and argue that boredom consists of a lack of meaning. My book, *A philosophy of boredom* (2005), is an example of such an approach. The main problem is that such meaning seems to presuppose language. I will claim that we have little reason to believe that any nonhuman animals have a capacity for proper language—and that includes even the most meticulously trained primates—and one is therefore forced to either provide an account of animal boredom that does not employ the concept of meaning or give an account of meaning that does not presuppose language. I choose the latter approach argument. When we analyze the concept of meaning, we find that the notion of caring is central. And it is no stretch to say that many nonhuman animals have a capacity for caring for various objects and activities, but what they care about will to a great extent vary from species to species. We can then define animal boredom in terms of being deprived of objects and activities for which they care.

Boredom as a Lack of Meaning

Defining boredom in terms of a lack of some sort of meaning is fairly commonplace in boredom studies. There are those who object to this, such as Toohey (2011). His main reason for doing so is that he believes that there is no such thing as ‘existential boredom,’ only ‘simple’ boredom. Contrary to Toohey, I believe that there is in fact good reason to explain boredom in terms of a lack meaning, one of them being that it can help us to differentiate between boredom and related phenomena, such as depression. Even though human boredom and depression are phenomena that can resemble each other, they can be distinguished empirically, and what sets them apart is *life meaning* (see Fahlman et al. 2009; Goldberg et al. 2011). Such a claim is based on the observation that changes in the experience of boredom can be predicted from changes in perceived life meaning, but one cannot make such predictions from perceived life meaning to the experience of depression. There is a fairly clear correlation between levels of perceived life meaning and boredom, then, but such a correlation tells us nothing about *how* they are related, if, for instance, low levels of perceived life meaning cause boredom or vice versa. I will not discuss this any further here and simply claim that the phenomenon of perceived life meaning is central to understanding human boredom.

There is no uncontroversial account of what we mean by ‘meaning.’ The sort of meaning we discuss in our present context differs from meaning as discussed by philosophical semantics. We are talking about an existential meaning, something related to the observation of some sort of *point* to our lives. It is tempting to reserve such meaning for the lives of creatures that possess a language because this meaning is tied to our conceptions of our past and future. I doubt that any other animals than humans have an understanding of their own past and future and of the fact that they are born and that their lives will end one day.

This account leaves us with the following problem with regard to animals: Meaning as described so far would seem to presuppose a capacity for language. If boredom presupposes a capacity for meaning, no nonlinguistic creature could experience boredom. Nevertheless, Françoise Wemelsfelder uses the term ‘meaningful’ when she is describing the lives of nonhuman animals: “To be able to create a meaningful life, the animal must be provided with materials that are biologically salient and enable it to fulfil its primary needs in an inventive, varying, and flexible way” (Wemelsfelder 2005, p. 87). Should animal existence be described in terms of ‘meaningfulness’? Of course, it depends on how you understand ‘meaningful.’ ‘Meaning’ can refer to elements of language, but that is clearly not what is meant here. The term is also used in a different way, as referring to something important or worthwhile. Being ‘meaningful’ here simply means that something *matters* to someone that somebody *cares* about something. Such mattering and caring is hardly exclusive to human existence, and therefore, the use of the ‘meaningful’ appears to be warranted also when describing the lives of nonhuman animals. And such caring also seems to be central to the problem of boredom. Interestingly enough, this point is also contained in the premodern concept of boredom, *acedia*. The Latin word stems from the Greek *akedia*, a combination of a privative prefix and *kedos*, which literally means ‘caring about something.’ *Acedia* is, according to its etymology, about not caring, or perhaps not having anything to care about.

I have therefore made a full retreat from the claim I made with regard to animal boredom in *A philosophy of boredom*. Not only do I accept that there is such a thing as animal boredom, but I will also describe this form of boredom as in terms of a lack of meaning, and further that this meaning should be explained in terms of caring. The boredom of human and nonhuman animals will be different simply because human and nonhuman animals are different and care about different things. But it is nevertheless boredom.

Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial

This approach will probably invite accusations of relying on *anthropomorphisms*. The term originates from the Greek words *anthropos* (human) and *morphe* (form), meaning to give something a human form or shape. In this context, it will refer to the projection of concepts from human psychology onto the mental lives of animals. Many philosophers and naturalists will systematically try to avoid using such expressions based on the idea that the animal, as part of the natural world, must be *explained* rather than *understood*.

In the nineteenth century, biology saw it otherwise, and Charles Darwin is an example of this, as he wrote a brilliant work entitled *The expression of the emotions in man and animals* (1872). However, George Romanes, who was Darwin’s research assistant and designated heir to his project, got carried away in his use of anthropomorphisms with overly imaginative stories of animal behavior and mental life. Romanes’s successor, C. Lloyd Morgan, warned against this practice and

formulated what became known as ‘Morgan’s Canon:’ We should never interpret behavior as a product of a higher mental ability if it can be interpreted as the product of a lower one (1894, p. 53). This means, for example, that if one and the same behavior can be interpreted as both a product of instinct and that the animal has reasoned, then one should give preference to the first, simpler explanation. The principle became widely accepted in twentieth-century biology, where it became increasingly less common to talk about an animal’s emotions and mental life. It should be noted, however, that Morgan himself believed that there was sufficient evidence for ascribing emotions and advanced mental capabilities to a range of animals and that it was perfectly legitimate to describe their behavior as a product of having these capabilities. He argued that animal scientists should use terms and emotions from their own mental life and that they should consider the animals to be analogous to this.

Unfortunately, it became common to interpret Morgan’s Canon in a far more restrictive way, and this led to what the zoologist and ethologist Frans de Waal has referred to as ‘anthropodenial,’ an untenable dismissal of all similarities between humans and nonhuman animals for no other reason than it is ‘unscientific’ (de Waal 1999). We should rather attribute higher characteristics to animals as long as it is the most *reasonable* explanation for the animal’s behavior. We should be as open for animals to show us their emotions and intentions, as we are for people to do it, knowing that humans are different from other animals in several important respects. If you try to describe the behavior of nonhuman animals without any use of anthropomorphisms, you will be left with a collection of descriptions of movements with little meaning or inner context. The use of such ‘human’ terms creates context and therefore also meaning. It is the only possible way we can have any understanding of animals at all—by drawing from our own psychology, our own perceptions, and feelings. However, it is also crucial that one takes into account biological explanations when attempting to understand the animal. Then, we can prevent anthropomorphisms from running wild, attributing the animal with every possible human trait for which there is no sustainable basis for us claiming they have.

I can understand a dog by interpreting its behavior, and I have to view the dog as analogous with myself and consider how it would be for me to be in the situation the dog is now in. On the other hand, I have to take into account that the dog is, after all, a dog and not a person. We must then begin with the similarities between the animal’s behavior and our own. If the behavior is similar, it is not unreasonable to assume that the mental state that underlies the behavior is also similar. As David Hume put it:

Tis from the resemblance of the external actions of animals to those we ourselves perform, that we judge their internal likewise to resemble ours; and the same principle of reasoning, carry’d one step farther, will make us conclude that since our internal actions resemble each other, the causes from which they are deriv’d, must also be resembling. When any hypothesis, therefore, is advanc’d to explain a mental operation, which is common to men and beasts, we must apply the same hypothesis to both. (1984, p. 226)

The Mental States of Animals

On what grounds can we ascribe an emotion like boredom, or any other emotion, for that sake, to an animal? The following, famous remark by Wittgenstein, could lead us to believe that he argued that we can never understand any other animals than other humans: “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (1986, p. 223). One interpretation of this could be he wants to emphasize an abyss between the worlds of humans and animals, so deep that understanding would be impossible even if, for argument’s sake, we assumed that an animal, for instance, could speak English. If that had been Wittgenstein’s point, we would have to ask what the foundation for that distinction is, and when it emerged. Going backwards in our evolutionary history, we would have to ask when we would have been entitled to claim unequivocally: ‘If X could talk, we would not understand him?’

However, this is hardly the point that Wittgenstein was out to make with his famous remark. His point was that a lion and a human have such different forms of life that understanding would not follow immediately even if they—hypothetically—were to share a language. This problem also occurs in human communication, because also humans can have forms of life that differ significantly and they will suffer from communicative breakdowns. Just before his remark about the lion, Wittgenstein writes:

We also say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country’s language. We do not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves). We cannot find our feet with them. (1986, p. 223)

You will have some understanding of these people, of course, especially of the activities we have in common with them, but there will be aspects of their form of life that we are unable to grasp. When Wittgenstein explains how people from different cultures are able to understand each other, he refers to “the common behaviour of mankind” (1986, § 206). There are also behaviors common to humans and animals that enable a form of communication. There are a number of activities we share with lions, and it is not impossible to understand these activities.

As I do not have the space to argue the point here, I will simply presuppose that no other animals than humans possess what we usually call ‘language.’ Having said that: Is it really so important whether we can refer to animal communication as ‘language’ or not? It is undeniably true that they communicate. Other species are clearly able to communicate feelings and intentions to each other and to us. This expressiveness is imposed upon us in a completely different way than other natural objects do, and it demands a response from us. Wittgenstein quotes Goethe’s *Faust*: “In the beginning was the deed” (1993, p. 394). Language is, as Wittgenstein says, a refinement. In human actions, we find a regularity, and without such a regularity, understanding can never take place. He describes this regularity as “the common behaviour of mankind” (1986, § 206). However, there are not only common

behaviors of mankind, but also behaviors we have in common with other animals. With a foundation like this, we can understand animals, even though they do not have a language.

Wittgenstein writes: “The human body is the best picture of the human soul” (1986, p. 178). This claim about the relationship between body and soul in humans can also be extended to animals: “If one sees the behaviour of a living thing, one sees its soul” (1986, § 357). Seeing a soul means seeing *somebody*, someone with a subjectivity or consciousness, and not a mere thing. You are seeing a subject, not a mere object. To see this soul is not about looking through a kind of shell. Seeing this body and its behavior *is* to see a soul, as the soul is manifest in the body. A person who does not *see* an animal’s consciousness, that it has feelings and intentions, suffers from what Wittgenstein calls ‘aspect-blindness.’ According to Wittgenstein, aspect-blindness is akin to being tone-deaf (1986). A tone-deaf person receives the same auditory stimuli as a person with a perfect pitch, but will not *hear* the same, and an aspect-blind person receives the same visual stimuli, but does not *see* the same as someone capable of seeing aspects. However, such a grasp of the mental state of the animal presupposes that what we are seeing has a sufficient resemblance to ourselves. For example, we can only say that an animal has pain, when it exhibits a behavior that resembles human pain behavior.

An animal’s intentions are often immediately understandable. As Wittgenstein writes: “What is the natural expression of an intention? – Look at a cat when it stalks a bird; or a beast when it wants to escape” (1986, § 647). We learn to understand the intentions of animals by dealing with them. For anyone who has grown up with animals, the accusation that there is something suspicious about attributing the intentions to animals, that one is falling prey to a fallacy due to the use of anthropomorphisms, is a rather odd. The critic seems to assume that one first learns to understand another’s intentions when dealing with humans, but then does something questionable by extending this to include animals. However, anyone who has grown up with both animals and humans has usually learned to understand the intentions of others—both animals and humans—by interacting with both animals and humans.

I know that a person who smiles and laughs warmly is happy because I learned what ‘happy’ means by referring to this sort of criteria. Pain, joy, and sadness usually have fairly simple criteria. More complex conditions, such as grief or loneliness, which go beyond mere sadness, will have more complex criteria. In all cases, the understanding of mental states will always require external criteria (1986, § 580). We can explain expressions that refer to mental states only by referring to observable signs. We *see* emotions. As a rule, I can *see* you are happy or sad. The ‘inner’ can also be hidden, such as when someone does their utmost to keep a straight face instead of expressing how funny they find something. However, it is not hidden because it is something ‘inner’—but rather because these people are deliberately showing a different face to the one that would be the normal expression of their inner condition.

The same considerations we make with regard to the ascription of mental states to humans can also be made about animals. However, the criteria become

increasingly more uncertain the further we get from the situation in which we learned to detect them. For animals that have a very different form of life from ours, it would be much more difficult to decide what the criteria for joy or sadness are. The more we know about the animal—from species-defined traits of mannerisms and senses, to the individual traits of the specific animal—the more reliable these ascriptions of mental states are.

We cannot simply ask nonhuman animals about what they are thinking or feeling, and it is not always easy to interpret their body language. However, by interacting with animals, one can develop interpretative skills. For example, people used to interacting with dogs cannot have failed to notice that tail-wagging often, but not always, means that the dog is happy. Tail-wagging can have a number of different meanings, depending on whether it is slow or fast, pointed more to the right or left, and relative to the situation. Dog owners will most often learn to interpret their dog without thinking so carefully about it. However, those same people may regret using these interpretations when encountering a cat. Anyone viewing calm tail-wagging as an expression of friendliness or pleasure, rather than irritation, runs the imminent risk of getting their hands scratched. When a dog places its head in your lap, you can be certain that it is a sign of affection. Were an elephant to attempt the same, you would be advised to get away as quickly as possible, because it is trying to kill you, by crushing you with its forehead. We frequently misunderstand animals, just like animals misunderstand each other, as the joyful, play bark of one dog can be interpreted as an aggressive bark by another dog. Humans also frequently misunderstand each other. However, all misunderstanding is possible only on the basis of a far larger area of understanding.

In one sense, the expression of emotions and intentions is often more reliable in animals than in humans. As a human, I often have the capacity to choose to express an emotion or intention. Not always, of course, because I can, for instance, be so overwhelmed by pain or grief that the thought of attempting to suppress it has not even occurred to me. And when one is in extraordinarily great pain, it obliterates everything, both language and the sense of self, such that nothing but the pain itself remains in consciousness. But on many occasions, we have a capacity for choosing what to express. Animals do not seem to have such a capacity to the same extent, even though they can, for instance, hide that they are wounded in order to protect themselves from predators. A well-documented example of an animal hiding its intentions and emotions is the chimpanzee Santino at Furuvik Park in Sweden (Osvalth 2009). Like so many other chimpanzees in captivity, Santino had a strong dislike for zoo visitors. Captive chimpanzees often throw objects, such as excrement, at them. Early in the day, before visitors arrived, Santino would gather stones in piles. When the visitors arrived later, he bombarded them. When Santino displayed aggression, and the guides began ushering the visitors away from him, and out of his throwing range, his response was to pretend to be a peaceful chimpanzee and approach the visitors in a friendly manner, only to explode with rage and bombard them with stones as soon as they were within range. In this sense, a capacity for hiding one's true intentions and emotions is not unique to humans, but humans seem to have a far more developed capacity for this. This is also why I

would not describe my dog as ‘honest’ for the simple reason that she cannot be dishonest—she cannot lie to me. The concepts of honesty and dishonesty do not apply to her life. My dog cannot choose whether or not to reveal her intention to try to capture a hare or a pigeon. If she has such intentions, it is immediately manifest in her behavior. Likewise, I can choose to express my boredom or suppress that expression, for instance, if it occurs in a context in which it would be inappropriate to express boredom. My dog cannot choose this. In this sense, we cannot say that the expressions humans make of their inner state are in principle more reliable than the expressions of animals. In both human and nonhuman animals, the conscious states of others can be interpreted only by means of outer signs, and that includes linguistic acts, and there is no essential difference between the access we have to mental states of other humans and the access we have to nonhuman animals.

If we discard the idea of consciousness as something hidden, something that can only be revealed by a language that breaks through the barrier separating the internal from the external, and instead recognize that the internal is *visible* in what is external, there is no principle difficulty in ascribing different states of consciousness to animals. This does not mean there will not be interpretation problems in practice, because we do not always know how to understand a behavior, but the problem is not that the internal is ‘hidden.’ If we take a Wittgensteinian approach, the subjective experience of animals—and other humans, for that sake—is not hidden, but can to some extent be observed.

All emotions will have a private character in the sense that I cannot experience your emotions as you do. It is conceivable that what you describe as an experience of joy differs from my experience. However, emotions are not just private. They are also expressed, and in that sense, they are public, available for external observation. Of course, you cannot know exactly what it is like for a mink to live in a small cage, but you can get some idea because there is sufficient overlap between you and the mink. Similarly, you can never know exactly what it is like for your dog to feel boredom, but again, there is sufficient overlap between your life and your dog’s to give you an idea. My dog’s boredom will differ from mine, simply because she is a dog and I am human. Nevertheless, I believe that the sort of experience she and I have when being deprived of the activities we care about—even though we care about different activities—is sufficiently similar to warrant the use of the term ‘boredom’ to describe both of our emotional states. I also cannot know exactly what boredom feels like for another human being, for that matter, and people will describe boredom in slightly different ways.

Criteria for Animal Boredom

What sort of behavior can give us reason to believe that an animal is bored? To some extent, these will resemble human behavior when afflicted by boredom. Humans deal with boredom by resorting certain acts, such as repeatedly shifting one’s position in a chair, yawning, various pastimes, and so on. In animals, we will

typically find repetitive acts, such as going back and forth in a cage in an agitated, almost compulsive style. I once saw a polar bear in a zoo, and it did nothing except repeating the same pattern of movement, going in a small circle diving under water, going back on land, diving under over and over, in a way that seemed to express no joy at all, but rather came across as a pure pastime, as way of coping with not being able to act ‘normally.’ With insufficient relevant options for agency, animals turn to actions that seem to have very little purpose and that also seem to give them little real satisfaction.

Other criteria for animal boredom is redirected behavior, such as gnawing on a cage, on its own leg or on other animals. It is well documented that boredom in humans is correlated with a stronger tendency to self-harm, and aggression toward others, and we find the same correlation in animals (Wemelsfelder 2005). As for the chimpanzee, Santino, that we discussed earlier, Toohey (2011) suggests that his aggressive behavior toward visitors at the zoo was in fact caused by boredom, and this might be the case.

We might also find the opposite behavior, hardly any movement at all and general apathy. As for this last category: Could we not just as well claim that the animal suffers from depression? I believe that we could, as I see no possibility of making a general distinction between these two mental states based on observable behavior in the animal. However, with the context of the behavior, you would have a better basis for claiming that we are dealing with one emotion rather another.

In order to ascribe a specific emotional state, such as boredom, to an animal, you will need information about the context in which the emotion occurs. This also holds for human emotions. If you see a child crying, you cannot determine whether it is crying from fear or pain unless you know something about the context in which the child cries. Or take the behavior of Flint, a chimpanzee described by Goodall (1990). He one day climbed up a tree, hardly moved, was apathetic and did not eat. Was Flint ill? Was he bored? Or depressed? His behavior was certainly abnormal. When you learn about the context of the behavior, the most plausible explanation is that he was paralyzed by grief. The behavior occurred after the death of his mother. Flint was born when his mother, Flo, was in her forties, which is late, and she was more nurturing toward Flint than she had been with his older siblings. They were inseparable—until she died. Flint then climbed up a tree, into the nest he and his mother had shared, and refused to eat. He stayed there until he died a month later. You would not be able to determine his emotional state if you had just been given a quick glimpse of him. You need context.

This also holds for the ascription of boredom to animals. As we have seen both apathy, stereotypical behavior and redirected behavior are criteria for boredom, but they could also indicate other emotional states. In order to argue plausibly that an animal is bored, you will have to take a look at its living conditions, if it is possible for the animal to what it usually cares about doing. A monotonous environment that causes boredom in the animal can explain monotonous behavior. This hypothesis can find support in observations of reduced monotony in behavior when the animal is provided with an environment that allows for greater variety in its agency.

The Good Life

Why should we concern ourselves with the question as to whether nonhuman animals are capable of experiencing boredom? The most essential concern is probably ethical that we take animal welfare seriously and believe that animals should be able to have good lives.

Following Aristotle, we can say that the good life for a creature is a life in accordance with the *nature* of that creature. I will refrain from discussing how 'nature' should be understood, if an essentialist or nonessentialist account is most plausible and so on. The central point is simply that what *living well* means will differ depending on what sort of creature we are talking about. It will differ from species to species, as the good life from me differs from the good life of my dog. It will also to some extent also differ from individual to individual, at least among more complex or developed creatures, such that the good life for me is not identical to the good life for my neighbor, just like the good life for my dog is not necessarily identical to the good life for my neighbor's dog, as a Whippet has a greater need for running than a Bulldog. However, there will be a fairly large overlap in the natures and needs among the members of a given species that it will suffice for our purposes. My Whippet and my neighbor's Bulldog are sufficiently similar to warrant talking about their needs for living a good life as *canine* needs. Similarly, my neighbor and I are, in spite of having fairly different personalities, sufficiently similar to have our needs described as *human* needs.

A good life for an animal is a life in which it is capable of doing what it cares for doing. A bird will have need for flying and a dog for socializing. They may not perish if these needs are not met, but an animal will have an impoverished existence without them. Boredom is one possible effect of having to live under impoverished conditions. Different animals will be bored under different conditions, depending on their nature. Can all animals be bored? That seems highly unlikely. There is little, if any, reason to think that a tick is bored while it is waiting to pick up the smell of lactic acid, detect a temperature of approximately 37 degrees Celsius, and feel that a portion of skin is not covered by too much hair. I also doubt that oysters can be bored, and the same goes for lobsters and insects. I assume that all mammals have the capacity for boredom, based on their behavior and the neurological conditions they have for consciousness. I am also inclined to include birds and at least some species of octopus. However, I will not enter into any further discussion here of where we should draw the line within the animal kingdom.

It seems clear that animals do not engage in activities only as a means to an end, but also because they find certain activities enjoyable in themselves. They enjoy playing. Everybody who has ever had a cat or a dog can confirm that. But it is also a case for other species. For instance, smaller octopuses have been observed carrying two coconut shells which they use for protection by curling up inside them, but they sometimes also use these shells for entertainment when they curl up inside two coconut shells at the top of a hill and roll down, and then carry the coconut shells back to the top, and roll down again. This is almost identical to what we humans do

when sledding. Why do octopuses do it? Probably because it is fun. One view on the concept of play is that it is just a preparation for the serious life that young individuals will have to deal with when they get older. Play then serves another purpose, outside of the playful activity itself. The problem with an explanation like this is that it does not capture a crucial aspect of play: It is fun. There is play that is a preparation for later tasks, but there is also play that is just play. We say that play is *autotelic*, meaning that it is its own purpose. It is this sort of play that octopuses seem to indulge in, just like countless other species. When an animal that enjoys playing is deprived of possibilities for playing, for instance, because it is placed in a cage that does not allow playing, it is deprived of something central to its existence, and such deprivation can cause boredom.

I would say that the polar bear I described earlier acted abnormally under abnormal conditions. It differs from normal behavior; i.e., the sort of environment polar bears have adapted to through their evolutionary history. I am not arguing that a species such as polar bears can live a good, fulfilling life only in such a 'normal' environment. On the contrary, I believe that an animal can thrive also in a highly artificial environment. However, the normal environment will show us the normal behavior of the species, which is the sort of behavior that should be facilitated also in an artificial environment or at least serve as a normative standard one can aim for. The important distinction is not between a natural and an artificial environment, as an animal can live in a highly engaging, artificial environment or in a natural environment that is so barren that the animal is bored. Animals can lead good lives in captivity as long as their living conditions are sufficiently and relevantly fashioned for the activities for which the animal cares. Unfortunately, this is not the case for most animals that live in captivity. They are deprived of the possibility of doing what they typically care for doing. And, as I have pointed out, what they care for will differ from species to species and to some extent also from individual to individual. One activity that most animals care for is searching for food, and it would probably be a good idea to let confined animals search for food or solve a task to get their food.

Using a term from von Uexküll (1980), we can argue that the animal needs an environment with a sufficient number of 'carriers of significance.' Different species will have different carriers of significance in their worlds, to a great extent, defined by what organs the animals use for perception and action, which in turn determine the function of the object for the animal. Primitive organisms will live in a world with just a few carriers of significance, whereas the surroundings of cats and dogs will have a fairly large number of them. An object without function does not really exist in the animal's world, and the very same object can have widely different meanings in the worlds of different animals. Much of what has an obvious function for us humans, like a fork or a clock, will be meaningless to a dog. If a clock is ticking loudly, a dog might notice it, but most likely the ticking will simply blend in with the background noise of the dog's surroundings. To a dog, a pen is not a writing tool, but perhaps a stick you can chew on. It is astonishing how much of a dog's world that actually falls into the 'something to chew on' category. This is also why different species will have a preference for different toys.

For social animals, such as dogs, others with whom to socialize are clearly crucial carriers of significance. A world in which they cannot socialize is an impoverished world for them. For other animals, such as many felines, but certainly not lions, this is not the case, except for mating and caring for offspring. Consequently, the typical dog will be more susceptible not only to loneliness, but also to boredom, in the absence of others with whom to socialize than the typical cat. That being said, my two Burmese cats were as social as any dog I have ever known, and some dogs are not very social. Smells are certainly more important to dogs than to cats, and staying in an environment with little variety in smells will promote boredom in dogs, whereas cats have a greater preference than dogs for being able to move vertically.

I have had animals, cats, and dogs, my entire life, and it is not as if I had never seen them have the sort of behavior that I now describe as expressing boredom. However, I refused to use the term 'boredom' when describing animal experience, unwilling to go any further than to say that animals may be understimulated, but not bored. I did so because I had other ideas of boredom and animals that were not compatible. Such an unwillingness to ascribe a certain experience to an organism, even if it clearly expresses having that experience, is hardly unique. This is not the case only in our relation to animals, but also sometimes to other humans. Until the 1980s, it was common to perform surgery on human infants without anesthesia. One reason for this was the increased risk when anesthetizing infants, but it was also argued that the infant's ability to experience pain was so small—or nonexistent—that it was unnecessary to take such a risk. Today, it is widely agreed that infants have a well-developed ability to feel pain, and therefore, anesthesia is also normally given during procedures presumed to be painful. How could the doctors make such a mistake? The infants, after all, showed behavior indicating they were in pain. The doctors were able to see it, but they interpreted the behavior as though it was not a genuine expression of pain awareness, because of other beliefs they had about infants. Similarly, I now recognize that I have on many occasions observed animals being bored, but I earlier refused to recognize it as boredom. One might say that I suffered from a theoretically induced aspect-blindness.

Just like a creature who has the capacity to feel love for another creature will have a capacity for feeling lonely, a creature who has the capacity to care for something will also have a capacity for being bored. In both cases, the negative state is characterized by a privation, a lack of attachment, and a lack of meaning. Animals that have a capacity for meaningful lives should be able to live meaningful lives, to the extent that we are able to provide them with the conditions for such lives.

References

- Darwin, C. (1872). *The expression of emotions in man and animals*. London, UK: John Murray.
- de Waal, F. B. M. (1999). Anthropomorphism and anthropodenial: Consistency in our thinking about humans and other animals. *Philosophical Topics*, 27(1), 255–280. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics199927122>.

- Fahlman, S. A., Mercer, K. B., Gaskovski, P., Eastwood, A. E., & Eastwood, J. D. (2009). Does a lack of life meaning cause boredom? Results from psychometric, longitudinal, and experimental analyses. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 28*(3), 307–340. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2009.28.3.307>.
- Fromm, E. (2002). *The sane society*. London, UK/New York, NY: Routledge.
- Goethe, J.W.v. (1950). *West-östlicher Divan, Epen. Maximen und Reflexionen, Goethes poetische Werke*, Vol. 2. Stuttgart: Cotta'sche Buchhandlung.
- Goldberg, Y. K., Eastwood, J. D., LaGuardia, J., & Danckert, J. (2011). Boredom: An emotional experience distinct from apathy, anhedonia, or depression. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 30*(6), 647–666. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2011.30.6.647>.
- Goodall, J. (1990). *Through a window: My thirty years with the chimpanzees of Gombe*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hume, D. (1984). *A treatise of human nature*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Lloyd Morgan, C. (1894). *An introduction to comparative psychology*. London, UK: W. Scott.
- Osvath, M. (2009). Spontaneous planning for future stone throwing by a male chimpanzee. *Current Biology, 19*(5), R190–R191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2009.01.010>.
- Svendsen, L. (2005). *A philosophy of boredom*. London, UK: Reaktion Books.
- Svendsen, L. (2019). *Understanding animals*. London, UK: Reaktion Books.
- Toohy, P. (2011). *Boredom. A lively history*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- von Uexküll, J. (1980). *Kompositionslehre der Natur: Biologie als undogmatische Naturwissenschaft*. Frankfurt a.M./Berlin/Wien: Propyläen Verlag.
- Wemelsfelder, F. (2005). Animal boredom: Understanding the tedium of confined lives. In F. D. McMillan (Ed.), *Mental health and well-being in animals* (pp. 77–91). Oxford, UK: Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470384947.ch6>.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1986). *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford, UK.: Basil Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1993). *Philosophical occasions 1912–1951*. Indianapolis, IN/Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Co.

Lars Svendsen (born on September 16, 1970) is a Norwegian philosopher. He is Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Bergen, Norway. He is the author of 12 books and has been translated to 27 languages. Seven of his books are available in English: *A philosophy of boredom* (Reaktion Books, 2005), *Fashion: A philosophy* (Reaktion Books, 2006), *A philosophy of fear* (Reaktion Books, 2008), *A philosophy of evil* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2010), *A philosophy of freedom* (Reaktion Books, 2014), *A philosophy of loneliness* (Reaktion Books, 2017) and *Understanding animals* (Reaktion Books, 2019). He is currently working on a book on loneliness. In *A philosophy of boredom*, he investigates one of the central preoccupations of our age as it probes the nature of boredom, how it originated, how and why it afflicts us, and why we cannot seem to overcome it by any act of will.