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Counterfactual Imagination and Boredom

If we believed Susan Ertz, “boredom comes simply from ignorance and lack of imagination” (1943). That seems reasonable, as we can easily visualize someone with high imaginative skills who can permanently think up new and original things to create – never exposed to be bored. Nevertheless, is it really that simple that the relationship between imagination and boredom is constantly asymmetric? What if our precious human ability in imagining WHAT IF turned out to be an essential trigger of existential or situative boredom?

My presentation aims to specifically investigate the counterfactual imagination – this one peculiar cognitive ability whereby we imagine alternative (counterfactual) states of affairs (Byrne 2005), which is perceived as a particular evolutionary precedent and as a potential explanation of some unique human cognitive attributes (Suddendorf 2013). I will explore if this mental ability could be also responsible for our unique experience of acedia. Agreeing with Lars Svendsen (2005) who stated that “boredom always contains an awareness of being trapped, either in a particular situation or in the world as a whole”, we may suspect that the abuse of WHAT IF specific type of imaginings [WHAT IF something was different than it is] could mentally transform someone into a 'prisoner of the present' or 'prisoner of the real' – so into someone aware of being trapped in the actual situation or world. So – as Svendsen said – into someone situationally or existentially bored.