Philosopher Mark Kingwell Interviewed by novelist Eli K.P. William

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Eli K.P. William interviews philosopher Mark Kingwell about his book Wish I Were Here: Boredom and the Interface upon release of the Japanese edition.

Dr. Kingwell was originally supposed to visit Japan to promote the new translation of his book, but due to COVID-19 pandemic, this interview was held instead. It was recorded on May 25 2021.

Mark Kingwell is an essayist, a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto, and as of 2018, a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He is a contributing editor of Harper's magazine, and has written for numerous publications, both academic and popular, including the Journal of Philosophy, the Globe and Mail, and the New York Times. He often speaks on Canadian television and radio, including the CBC, and is regularly invited to give talks around the world. His work has been translated into more than ten languages, and he is the author of twenty-two books, on topics ranging from political theory and architecture to baseball and pianist Glenn Gould.

Eli K.P. William is the author of the Jubilee Cycle trilogy, set in a cyber-dystopian future Tokyo, where every action—from blinking to sexual intercourse—is intellectual property owned by corporations that charge licensing fees. The series includes Cash Crash Jubilee, The Naked World, and A Diamond Dream. Born in Toronto, Canada, he has spent most of his adult life in Japan, and has translated literature by some of Japan's most renowned authors. His translations include Keiichiro Hirano's bestselling novel A Man and various essays and short stories for Granta, Kyoto Journal, and The Southern Review.

Wish I Were Here (2019) presents a philosophical analysis of boredom and its contribution to the decline of democracy in the digital age. It was originally a response to the Trump era but its main arguments are still just as relevant now.

The Japanese edition of Wish I Were Here "▨▨▨▨▨▨▨▨▨▨▨SNS▨▨▨▨▨▨▨▨▨▨▨" was translated by Dr. Nobuo Kamioka, professor of American literature at Gakushuin University and prolific literary translator. It was released by Shueisha on January 15, 2021.

Learn more about Wish I Were Here:
`https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/Mark-Kingwell/dp/0773557121`

Learn more about Eli K.P. William:
`https://elikpwilliam.com`

`https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gEGY6rOhvA`

Eli: Hi everyone, I'm Eli KP William. I'm the author of two novels, Cash Crash Jubilee and the Naked World, and the translator of Keiichiro Hirano's novel, A Man. I'll be talking with philosopher Mark Kingwell about his book, Wish I Were Here, Boredom in the Interface. Hi Mark.

Mark: Hi Eli, it's great to see you. It's been a while since we met in person. It's nice to have this virtual conversation at least.

Eli: Yeah, no, definitely. I'm looking forward to the days when we can meet in person again. So, Japanese translation of Wish I Were Here titled... was released this January. Oh, I've got it upside down by Shueisha. It was translated by Dr. Nobuo Kamioka, Professor of American Literature at Gakushuin University and prolific literary translator, who I'm told will be overseeing the Japanese subtitles for this video. Mark Kingwell is an essayist, a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto, and as of 2018, a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine and has written for numerous publications, both academic and popular, including the Journal of Philosophy, the Globe and Mail, and the New York Times. He often speaks on Canadian television, including the CBC, and is regularly invited to give talks around the world. His work has been translated into 10 languages other than Japanese, and he is the author of 22 books on topics ranging from political theory and architecture to baseball and pianist Glenn Gould. Thank you for agreeing to do the interview, Mark.

Mark: My pleasure, Eli. This is a lot of fun, and I'm very excited about this translation. It's really great. The only regret, of course, I have is that I can't fly to Japan and be there. I've never been to Japan. So I hope at some point that may be possible.

Eli: Oh yeah, we would love to have you here and show you around and I'm sure set you up with talks and all kinds of interesting things when the opportunity arises. I should mention before we go on that I was a student of Mark's in my undergraduate years. I ended up running a tutorial for one of his lectures in my final year and we've stayed in touch on and off ever since. I was the one who recommended Wish I Were Here to Shueisha, and I also handled translation queries for which the translator has acknowledged me in the back of the book. Wish I Were Here is a book that presents a philosophical analysis of the idea of boredom. But I think it's just as much a book about the relationship between humanity and technology, especially the internet, and about how that relationship impacts and is impacted by political and economic conditions. I'm hoping we can spend the bulk of this conversation discussing these core ideas. But first, Mark, I'd like to ask you to talk a bit about yourself. What led you to become a philosopher and what got you interested in the topic of boredom?

Mark: Well, the first question is a little bit hard to answer because it seems so long ago, and I've been doing this for 35 years, I guess, both as a student and now a professor. I was interested in certain questions that I think are basic human ones. is there meaning in the universe? What does my life mean? And then specific things like, if I see a color, is that the same experience that someone else has when they say they see that color? the kind of things that kids ask. And so when I became interested in those questions, and I went to university, I just kept going down what sometimes it's called a rabbit hole of philosophical analysis. And there were just a whole bunch

of questions that I was not done with, I suppose. So then graduate school, academic appointments, and so on. The issue of boredom, Go ahead.

Eli: No, I feel like when I ask you what made you want to become a philosopher, it's as if I'm asking someone else, you know, what made you become a human? Like it's so much a part of who you are now that it's almost redundant. All right, so you were going to say about boredom?

Mark: Yeah, but I think you're right about that. It is, first of all, I think philosophical reflection is a basic human impulse at every level. And academic philosophy, scholarship, that's one aspect only of this kind of philosophical impulse. So it's, you know, we use the label philosopher for the people who have academic appointments, who publish in journals and so on. But I think all humans are philosophers in that basic sense. Boredom is related in a strong fashion because boredom is a basic human experience. And it has been, over the centuries, under-theorized. Really, only the first philosophical discussions of boredom arise in the 18th century, 19th century in the Western tradition. So people like Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, who I mentioned in the book. And partly that's because when people have sufficient leisure time, to not be thinking at always about working, sleeping, eating, then they have time to reflect. And sometimes that leads them to philosophical insights, but other times it leaves them with this kind of, this feeling of restlessness or emptiness. And as you said, Eli, I think one of the points about my book is that our current engagement with technology has only made that issue much more urgent. So this book was written before the pandemic happened, but when the pandemic started keeping people more confined to screen time and indoors and so on, less human connection, I think that the question of boredom became even more acute at that stage.

Eli: Absolutely. Early on in Wish I Were Here, you identify five kinds of boredom. Boredom as philosophically originary, psychoanalytic boredom, political boredom, creative boredom, and neoliberal boredom. I'd like to leave neoliberal boredom aside for a moment so we can focus on it in more detail. For now, can you briefly explain how you understand boredom in general, which you've already started to do? and what you mean by the other four categories of boredom?

Mark: Each of these categories captures some aspect of the experience of boredom. So the philosophically originary kind is the kind that, like I said, philosophers, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, they see boredom as a route to insight about existential issues, more or less. Psychoanalytic boredom is the way that we understand or experience boredom as a kind of conflict within the mind. So the idea that I wish I had a desire. So the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips defines boredom as the paradoxical wish for a desire, which is a really interesting phrase to me because You're wishing at one level that you had desire at the other level, or there's some kind of conflict there between 2 levels of your own psychology. And this captures that aspect that doesn't lead to philosophical insight, but rather that sense of boredom when you can't settle on any one thing. You can't decide to do something. You're sort of bouncing around.

Eli: This is a very familiar kind of boredom.

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Mark: Yeah, I think so. And I was going to say, the mundane version of this is when you might open your refrigerator and it's full of food, but you say there's nothing to eat in this house, because you can't fixate on any particular thing as worth desiring. Creative boredom is the kind that it's almost like a mechanism by which you leverage boredom into other behavior. And it's related in many ways to procrastination. So people talk about, you know, procrastination as the idea that you're putting things off, you're deferring the tasks that you should be doing because you can't quite do them. Filling out your tax return, cleaning the house, you know, whatever the mundane task might be. But it can be creative if you do a kind of maneuver around, a kind of flanking maneuver and you do something else instead. And one of the curious things about creative boredom, just like procrastination, is that there's really no end to the productivity you can achieve if you're doing the things that you're not supposed to be doing, but something else. Because We have this kind of mental block often about the things that we're supposed to be doing, right? And then the other kinds of boredom, well, we're going to talk about neoliberal, which is my coinage. I don't think anybody else has used that phrase. But the other kinds of boredom are the sort of the suffering kind, right? Ennui, which can lead to a certain sort of despair even. There's a famous quotation, this is kind of dark, but it's relevant. The actor George Sanders, who died by suicide when he was in his 50s, left a suicide note that said, I am leaving because I am bored. And that's, yeah, that's the real dark side to boredom, that it is, and Schopenhauer actually says this in his discussion, boredom paints on the face the real visage of despair. And that's extreme, obviously, but I think we have to acknowledge that it's part of this whole kind of range of experiences that we call boredom.

Eli: Yeah, wow. I don't think that in regular conversation, we usually think of boredom as having so many facets. You know, it's just something that we're always trying to escape as soon as it arises. And I don't think usually that we think about it any more than that.

Mark: Yeah. Well, and in fact, that's a really important point because the idea that we try to escape it as soon as we experience it leads to what I call the neoliberal version of boredom and its relation to specific contemporary relation to technology, especially screen time. That is that when we feel the onset of boredom, our first instinct is to flee. And what we flee into is more stimulus. So I'm bored with a particular, I don't know, television program, so I flee to another one. I'm bored with this video game, so I start up another one, and so on and so on. And that is something that is it's very natural human impulse, but it's also something that can be taken advantage of by the purveyors of those technologies. And as you said, the political dimension of my discussion has to do in large part with that, the way that different kinds of platforms and corporations use our own desires against us because they're constantly manipulating or exploiting our sense of boredom.

Eli: So neoliberal is a term that often gets hurled about and can take on a whole plethora of different meanings. So would you mind just explaining how you understand

or how you're using the term neoliberal in this context and how it contributes to your phrase neoliberal boredom?

Mark: Yeah. And you're right, of course, that it's used in many different ways. And I think for some people, I got reaction to this when the English version of the book was first published, you know, what do you mean by neoliberal? Is this relevant? And I think it's relatively simple, at least in my sense of the term, and that is this sense of a society that's dominated not just by capitalism, but by corporate capitalism. and the exploitation of human desire. And so what makes that neoliberal is that it takes the idea of human freedom, which is the core insight of liberalism in the political theory sense, and makes that idea of freedom into a monetizable aspect of human life. So that's the neo. If you want to be a little bit technical about it, traditional liberalism says, Any one of us is free to choose the path of our own lives, and we should allow others that same choice and freedom. And then there's a kind of collective thriving that might result from that. But the neoliberal vision is 1 where markets are made free, but people think they're free and yet are not. And so that's what I'm talking about when I say neoliberal. And how that relates to boredom goes back to what I said a moment ago. If you are in this condition where you think that your desires are free-ranging, but you're actually being exploited with all kinds of small mechanisms, including the way that platforms are set up and the way that they're programmed, then you are not, in fact, free. So neoliberal turns out to be not liberal, not free. And that's the irony that's at the core of this.

Eli: I think that's actually in many ways a more dangerous predicament than traditional totalitarianism in the sense that, if you are in a society that's not free and you realize that on some level, well, that sucks, but it's worse if you are not free, but you think that your society is realizing, you know, the epitome of freedom.

Mark: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. And I've had many thoughts about this over the years. And they're excellent theorists, especially from the middle part of the 20th century, who talk about precisely this, kind of soft noose of non-authoritarian government or statism. And in fact, what's most interesting about the 21st century version of this, you might call it the post-modern version, is that the state is actually less important than it was for a long time. We focus a lot on government, media covers government all the time, but actually the big levers in our everyday lives are being pushed by corporations. And not just any corporations, but what we now call big tech, which is, I think, a useful phrase because it captures something about the dominance over everyday life of companies like Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Amazon, and that is so ingrained in our everyday experience. It's much more influential on a moment-to-moment level than the state as such, you know, the traditional political state.

Eli: So you introduce a concept in the book that connects technology and neoliberal boredom that you call the interface. This is an interface with a capital I to indicate that it's a philosophical term of art. So what do you mean by the interface?

Mark: Yeah, and thank you for putting it that way, because I've had, again, a lot of interesting pushback from people about my use of interface. And it is a philosophical term of art. Programmers and users talk about interface all the time. So, you know, we're on Zoom, that's an interface. When I open up Microsoft Word, that's an interface. But I'm using it in what I think is a more wide-ranging and maybe more important sense. And that is to say any kind of mediation between self and world. And in the old days, when we weren't so dominated by digital technology, an old-fashioned phenomenologist like Husserl, say, wouldn't have used that word. He would just talk about, you know, worldliness or, you know, structure of consciousness or something like that. But I think in this kind of post-modern moment, post-McLuhan, you know, after the advent of these big tech innovations, our experience of world is in some ways almost entirely mediated by technology, unless we make deliberate moves to come away from it. So that's another thing we could talk about, media fasts and people who are giving up their social media accounts and so on. So that's what I mean by interface. It doesn't have to be digital technology. Any kind of technology is a form of interface. the threshold of your apartment or your house, the sidewalk. These are all interfaces in the largest possible sense of human experience. And that's worth remembering too, because we often, when we talk about technology, seem to assume that it's just digital technology. But in fact, technology is all around us in material forms as well. It's just that in our current moment, we are having our experience pretty much dominated for much of the time each day by digital technology. So that's why I used interface to resonate with the digital version, but then also expand the concept.

Eli: Great. There's a quote in chapter one that I think for me at least seemed to capture the idea of interface well. I am troubled, restless, overstimulated. I am consuming myself as a function of the attention I bestow. I am a zombie self, a specter, suspended in a vast framework of technology and capital, allegedly meant for my comfort and entertainment. And yet, and yet, I cannot find myself here. So this passage is underlined in the Akindle edition that I read, because it's reportedly one of the passages that readers most frequently highlight. So by capitulating to this suggestion from an algorithm and reading it to you now, I feel like I may have become the very sort of zombie that the passage describes. So later in the book, you talk about how people consume their selfhood and subjectivity while engaged with the interface. You also describe people as person casings rather than genuine people. and borrowing an idea from Deleuze as dividuals rather than individuals. Can you explain what you see as the effects of the interface on personal identity?

Mark: Yeah, well, there's a lot there to unpack. I think the first thing to say is, yes, this idea of self-consumption is, I think, really important to highlight because, and I'm aware of the irony that you just pointed out that Not only are we on a digital platform, but you're quoting an algorithm. But what I think has changed in, say, the last 100 years or so, maybe 150 years, with respect to how people interact through capitalism and technology is that there were earlier periods where The focus of the forces of capitalism were on accumulating wealth and status and exhibiting that status.

So this is the kind of thing that's analyzed so brilliantly by Thorstein Veblen and the theory of the leisure class. And then there's a democratization of that. So the leisure class was an elite status upper percentile phenomenon. And then in the early part of the 20th century, this gets democratized. So now everybody can seek status through that kind of engagement with capital. But there's still a restlessness there in the form of self-improvement or seeking happiness. You know, when you look at the advertising from the 1930s and 40s, for example, it's all about how you can improve your sexual attractiveness or your wardrobe or your car and so on. I think now we're into a point which is kind of the post-branding moment where the products are less important than the self-engagement. And what I'm arguing is that when the self-engagement becomes the dominant force of capital, then you are consuming your own self. because it's not, in some cases, you don't even need to have a product. You just need to have a brand or an experience. And once that occurs, that's a really interesting shift in how we experience ourselves in the world. So that's the brief version of the self-consumption point. And then the person casings and individuals, this is kind of jargony, I suppose, but The person casing the idea, I kind of, is a riff on a passage from Jennifer Egan's novel, wonderful novel called Visit from the Goon Squad, which won the Pulitzer Prize a few years back. And she talked about word casings and in a near future dystopia, which of course you're the expert on.

Eli: I should read this book.

Mark: Yeah, I think you'd like it. And anyway, the notion of word casings is that they're formerly resonant words. And she talks about things like democracy and honor and how these words are still floating around, but they don't have any meaning anymore. So they're like, you know, the shells of insects that have molted and they're just sort of blowing through the wind. And so I wanted to float the idea that word casings also imply person casings, that we seem to have, we believe ourselves to have solid personal identity from day-to-day. But when we start examining this more critically, and in here I mean very specific things like how our preferences are being generated to us through big platforms like Amazon, it tells you what you're going to like, or on the streaming services, they say, this is a 92% match to what you like already, that kind of thing. And that's all driven by data gathering. And it starts to make you feel like your personal identity is a bit wispy or ephemeral. And that does then link up to Deleuze's notion of individuals, because what he argued, and this is pre-internet really, was that personal identity was a kind of illusion or delusion, you know, because we think that we're solid selves from moment to moment, from day-to-day. But maybe this is all just a kind of magic show. And, I don't want to believe that that's true. I mean, I think, you're Eli, I'm Mark. I think those are real facts about us in the world. But I understand the critique, and I think it's important to see it in its context with respect, especially to technology and capital.

Eli: Great. I want to shift gears for a second and switch to a slightly different but related topic because the title of the Japanese edition contains the word post-truth.

And this is a topic that you discuss at length in Wish I Were Here. So how does post-truth fit in with this discussion of neoliberal boredom in the interface?

Mark: And I should say that in works that are not yet translated into Japanese, English and French, and in some cases German, I do talk more about post-truth, which is, of course, a central concern of many political theorists at the moment. And in brief, it's this idea that, which was only exacerbated by the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States, that There is no truth, no reliable basis of fact. And what was fascinating to me about that, among many other things, was that was an idea that people, theorists on the left, had been floating for some time. So when you think about the earliest French post-modernists, for example, Foucault and Lyotard and others, would say, well, look, truth isn't this monolith that is controlled by some central authority. There is no such thing. The foundations have crumbled and we have to seek much more local or personal notions of what makes something meaningful. And that at the time that those things were being written in the 1940s to say 1960s seemed very liberating because there was a post-Second World War consensus that dominated the world, the global geopolitical structure. And it had at its foundation a central notion of truth and authority. But then that liberation flips in the now genuinely post-truth era where people say, well, I heard it on Fox News, and that's all I need to know. Or, the press secretary for the White House says, we have alternate facts. And this, of course, is very alarming to philosophers, because even though I liked the liberating aspects of challenging central authority, I think it's really important to hang on to the norm of truth. Because otherwise, I don't know how language means anything or how we communicate with each other. And this actually goes back to the earlier point about individuals. One of Deleuze's insights about individuals was that we would become isolated. And in a sense, we'd become pod people, or as I say, zombies. We would just be, you know, moving around the world, consuming. but without any connection to anything other than ourselves. And we might try to forge connections with family, say, or a workplace. But one of the things we've seen, again, during the pandemic is that those ties are very fragile. You know, I don't know what it was like in Japan, but here, many families could not visit their ailing relatives, even unto the point of their dying. and workplaces have been drastically, radically altered. Will we even go back to the old-fashioned office setup? So all of that fragility, I think, is really important to acknowledge. And yeah, I mean, this is, it seems to me, this is what philosophers are around for, is to not always to outline solutions, but at least to acknowledge the problems and analyze them in potentially useful ways.

Eli: So I don't know if you would self-describe as a post-modern thinker, but I think you definitely have some affinity with the post-modern tradition at least. And some people, for example, Jordan Peterson, another professor at your university, has attacked what he calls post-modernism or postmoderns for, as critics like him see it, encouraging relativism about truth. And these critics claim that such relativism underlies the post-truth phenomenon exemplified by Trump. Personally, I doubt that postmodernism is cohesive or unified enough to make generalizations about. But setting that aside, I

think that Wish I Were Here makes a case for a position that is both postmodern and asserts the importance of science and facts in adjudicating disagreements. So, yeah.

Mark: Well, I was going to say I hope that's true because I do think that, well, there are a number of threads there. One is I don't think that Professor Peter really understands what philosophers mean by post-modernism. I think for him it's a bit of a straw man. And so his assertions are geared towards a different sort of argument and of course have garnered a wide audience, but I don't know, I just don't find it that there's any traction there for what I would call serious philosophical thinking. He's, whatever. He's got, he's not a dumb person, but I think he's got a different kind of agenda. And, but yes, I think there's something to be said for acknowledging that we have moved out of a modern era of, you know, what Lyotard called meta-narrative, where there's like one big picture that explains everything. without giving up the norm of truth and the role of facts and science. And I think furthermore, if possible, without surrendering our sense of self, because despite these many challenges that I talk about and others have too, I feel like there is a core that we can assert. And that's really the root of the title of my book, Wish I Were Here. It's a wish. that I could be present to myself in this moment. But it's a really strong wish. It's also a riff, by the way, on this kind of conventional way of writing a postcard to someone where you say, wish you were here with me having this experience. And so when I started thinking about that, I thought, wish I were here. Can I be present to myself in the moment? And I really do think we can. I wouldn't have written a book if I didn't. But it takes work and thought. And we have to be vigilant, actually, about all these different challenges. So one, I guess, last thing about this is, I mean, this is a little bit crude or schematic, but Therapists often say depression is about the past and anxiety is about the future. And the only place where you can defeat both of those is in the present. And I know that sounds maybe a little bit trite, but living in the moment, as they say, is not only hard, but it is the only way to live. That's how I feel.

Eli: It's interesting to hear you say that the title for you had a sort of hopeful intention in it because that wasn't the way that I took the title. I mean, it's, I caught the play on words and I sort of thought it was maybe a joke in the sense that, well, I mean, it's both a play on words and And the very idea of wishing that I were here is just a very strange idea to contemplate, but also very fitting for the present moment. But there is definitely a lot of hope in the book. You know, it portrays a very tangled and difficult situation, the predicament that we all find ourselves in, but also begins to point towards some potential solutions, one of which surrounds the idea of civility. And you've written in support of civility as a value in political discourse. This was the topic of your first published book, Civil Tongue. And in Wish I Were Here, you argue that the interface has dangerously eroded civility especially through social media. And you describe incivility as a collective action problem. What do you mean here?

Mark: Yeah, again, several things I want to sort of separate out there. The title was meant to be both a joke and a hopeful statement. So I guess that's probably my tendency as a writer. I like to, when I can, layer meanings together. With respect,

and by the way, that's one reason that, and this is another thing I suppose that I'm prone to as a writer, I had these mood reports for each different chapter. So just to acknowledge the fact that when someone writes a book, they're not in the same mood the whole way through, even though that's the illusion that can be created. And in a way, that's a bit like selfhood, because a book can fall into a reader's hands and it reads as if the writer, sort of did it all in one go. But that's not how books get written, as you know. So I thought it was kind of fun and important to acknowledge that the shifting moods that writer might have, the subjectivity of writing. And with respect to civility, you're right. I mean, my very first book, way back in 1995 was about civility as a political virtue. And there's been an upsurge in that kind of argument in the last, I'd say, 5 or 10 years, partly because we see the erosion of this. And by civility, to be clear, I don't mean etiquette or politeness in the standard sense, but rather the regard for the fellow citizen or the fellow person. that sustains social relations. And the specific social media aspect of this, of course, has been much remarked that flame wars and trolling and the kinds of routine insults that people swap on social media are obvious deficits of civility. And I can say, even though I'm not on social media much myself, I've been astonished, actually, in the last five years or so, the kind of insults and death threats and other things that I get by e-mail, which just, I mean, I wouldn't have anticipated. But again, we can't blame Donald Trump for all of this, but I do think that his extremely bad behavior on Twitter became a sort of enabling function. of others to be as bad as that or even worse. So civility is, sorry, what?

Eli: Oh, no, go ahead.

Mark: Well, and the last, just the last aspect of this, civility is the sustaining virtue of social engagement. And therefore, it's not necessarily the most important political virtue, but it has to be in the set of political virtues in order for the other ones to function. So My original argument was you can't have justice without civility, which seems maybe counterintuitive at first, but as I unpack the argument in that book way back when, it seems to me that these kind of background conditions where you acknowledge and respect the other person, which is really what civility comes down to, are essential to any kind of idea of justice.

Eli: Right. So what I was going to say was that you actually describe some of these angry attacks, online attacks in the book. And I'm sorry to hear that they've continued since, but not, I have to say it's not surprising given the age that we live in. So the online attacks in the book, they, arise in the context of a discussion of incivility. And they were directed, I believe, at an idea that you proposed called scaffolding. So what is scaffolding and how might it help us resolve the crisis of incivility?

Mark: Well, that's an interesting, very interesting question. Scaffolding, as I use it in this book and as it's used in some of the existing discourse is a way of creating social structures that encourage good behaviour and discourage bad behaviour. So you can think of very primitive versions of scaffolding as, say, speed limits on highways or rules at restaurants that you have to be wearing shoes and a shirt, which seems, you know, Why would you have to tell somebody that? But it creates a kind, that's the

idea of the scaffold. It creates a structure around the behavior that encourages people to behave well. And you can get more and more detailed about this. And I'm a little bit conflicted, to be honest. And I think I talk about this in the book. Some people are very, very keen advocates of scaffolding, think that there should be quite specific and detailed recommendations, even policy measures. I'm a little bit more libertarian, I guess, than that. But I do think when you think about things like limitations on the size of drinks or opening and closing hours, then there are all kinds of interesting little examples like When people go to fast food restaurants, if there are no trays there, they order less food because they have to carry it in a bag rather than piling up the tray, which seems really silly in a way, but it actually it helps reduce obesity and therefore diabetes. And, you know, so that's that's what scaffolding means in the in the social science notion of the term. And generally speaking, I'm in favor of it, even though I do think we have to be careful about how far it goes, because once again, we might be starting to move into that kind of soft authoritarianism. But when it's well researched and the results have been demonstrated, that people are healthier and happier when they have scaffolds around them and there's less harm that's being distributed. then that just seems like a good idea to me as a political theorist. The other big example, I guess, would be, they don't want, people don't want to say gun control anymore, gun safety. So in Japan and Canada, I don't think this is a big issue, but of course in the United States, it's a very big issue, how you regulate the distribution and use of weapons, especially sidearms. So That's a kind of obvious sort of scaffold.

Eli: Right. Yeah, in my opinion, the issue around scaffolding in the context of social media and the internet is that there already is scaffolding in a sense. there's a certain network that has a particular structure that shapes the interactions. And at the moment, it's largely decided on the private side by companies. And so it's not a question of whether to have scaffolding, it's the question of who decides the structure of the scaffolding and how. So Yeah, I think that's really the central issue from my perspective.

Mark: I think that's I think that's well said, Eli, because a number of things. People often forget that Facebook and Twitter are private companies. They can decide who is allowed on their platforms and what they can say. And that's, I mean, obviously in one basic structural sense, that is scaffolding too. But yeah, who is the the decider, who is making the regulations. And it's still a bit of the Wild West when it comes to social media. I think we all know this, that when you look at the history of media in the 20th century, radio and television, which were the dominant media for a long time, broadcast media, were regulated pretty stringently. When things flipped, and this goes back to the earlier basic point about screen time, social media are not broadcast media. They have this complex relationship between the user and what is displayed. And so the regulation efforts have been confused. People may remember when Mark Zuckerberg was testifying before the United States Congress, and the congressmen, who were often older white guys, just didn't understand what they were doing. because they just didn't quite get what the media were about. So we have to figure this out, yes. And I'm not

against regulation. I think one of the big evils of large tech is, big tech is what's called regulatory capture. That is their ability to assimilate the agents of regulation to their own interests. And of course, they're not the only ones who do this. Banks do it all the time. But regulatory capture is a huge problem for democratic politics because it usually happens behind the scenes. And so then there's something like a, in effect, a show trial, which was what that congressional hearing was like, in my opinion. And it doesn't really change anything. So this is something that needs to be debated even more thoroughly. In the book, I talk about how Europe has made much bigger advances on this than North America, and I think Asia, although you would know better than me. But general agreements across the European Union about the way that data are gathered and deployed and exploited, this is kind of the wave of the near future, I think. Actually, you know what? It makes me think of your trilogy because that idea that everything could be corporately monetized, right? I mean, that's kind of a stroke of genius on your part.

Eli: Oh, thank you. Well, the one thing that I leave out in my trilogy is large-scale marketing of private information because people have anonymity protections. It's actually the one semi-utopian aspect of my world amidst a whole lot of other darkness.

Mark: Right, yeah.

Eli: So, you know, Europe has definitely made some good moves towards privacy protection and, you know, limitations on the sale of personal information and things like that. But the general movement in the world, I'm not so sure, when you factor in America and China.

Mark: Yeah, well, of course that's true. And part of it is the, they're very different cases, but the American case is dominated by this mythology of individualism, which is, this goes back to an earlier point also, that people make these demands to be free, and yet they don't see that the structures are keeping them unfree. So I remember, this is a personal anecdote, and it's not American, but my two stepdaughters are American and Canadian both. And one of them, when early days of social media for her, she said, she complained that somebody had used a message or retweeted or something. And she said, how can they do that? It's private. And I said, you really have to think about the fact that it's not private. It's a private company, but what you put on there is not private. And so we've seen all kinds of versions of this, people trying to take down tweets and they can't because they've already been retweeted. And like I said before, other people just walking away from their accounts because various reasons. They're tired of it, it's exhausting, it makes them unhappy, or they feel like their privacy is being invaded. So these are interesting knock-on developments that I think are really going to become more and more interesting in the next few years.

Eli: So in the book, I think you describe a very, let's say, sticky situation. people are engaging with technology and, they're not really engaging so much with the content, but with the medium itself or the various media, and that it becomes all about, just scrolling as opposed to what it is that you're seeking when you scroll. And this is a way

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for us to escape from the underlying boredom, but it's not even really the revelatory boredom of previous ages, but it's a kind of insatiable neoliberal boredom. And it sounds very depressing. And a lot of the, at least for me, a lot of the passages that describe some of the addictive behavior related to the internet and digital technologies in general feel very true to personal experience. So is there a way out? I know that scaffolding is supposed to help with the incivility issue in particular, but is there a way for us to break free from this neoliberal boredom circle and from the interface? Well.

Mark: There is, but it's difficult. And I should preface this briefly by saying, once again, I got a lot of pushback from readers for using that language of addiction with respect to this, because medical doctors in particular don't like non-professionals. I mean, I have, I am a doctor in one sense, but I'm not a medical doctor. They don't like other people talking about addiction. So let's call it quasi-addictive behavior, because I think it is. And it's like breaking any other addictive behavior or bad pattern that one develops habitual. And yeah, the first part is what you highlighted, that when there's an endless scroll, you really aren't looking for anything in particular. You're looking for stimulus. And so you move from stimulus to stimulus. And whenever there's a threat that you might become even slightly bored, you move to the next one. And this is enervating. It's not insightful. It doesn't help you understand your being in the world at all. The interesting thing here is that there are at least a couple of different aspects. One is We tend to blame the victim in this case. And I talk a fair bit about that, we'd say to people, oh, well, it's your fault if you're spending all that time on Facebook. But what's neglected often is what's sometimes called the ethics of design or the ethics of programming. And that is that programmers often create interfaces precisely to be quasi-addictive. And most of us have some sense of this. So I used to play video games a lot, for example, a lot. And video games are all designed, or not all, but many of them anyway, are designed with this level up structure and the small battles and then the boss battle and so on. And it's all designed to keep you playing. And it works. I mean, the hours that I spent playing video games, I can't tell you how many I wish.

Eli: I had back. I don't touch video games because days of my life just vanish.

Mark: Yeah, exactly. So when I was moving out of my old apartment, I put all of my, I put my Xbox console and I had, I think, about 50 Xbox games. I just put them on the sidewalk and somebody took them away. But the endless scroll of Facebook, the endless feed of Twitter, these are similar kinds of designs in that one sense, that they are designed really to keep you there. And so there's a movement actually that's grown up among programmers to be more ethical with respect to design and make it less addictive or quasi-addictive. So that the onus is not just on the user. There's a structure here, which is a social fact. And I think we make a mistake if we simply say to somebody, oh, you shouldn't be spending so much time on Facebook, or whatever it is. It's more complicated than that. And that's, once again, that's the political theorist in me coming out, because I think that we have to acknowledge that these things are

not simply about individual decision-making. They're structured in various ways, that the structures themselves have to be critically analyzed.

Eli: Several years have passed since the publication of Wish I Were Here in English. In the meantime, we've been dealing with the pandemic, which is part of the reason we're talking about your book online, rather than having you visit Japan in person to promote the Japanese edition. Earlier this year, the American Congress was stormed by a ragtag assortment of cults brought together mostly through social media. The deranged narcissist they worshiped has been dragged kicking and screaming from office. And the new digital authoritarianism in China is under increasing scrutiny. In light of these and the many other dizzying developments over the past two years, Is there anything about your analysis of neoliberal boredom and the interface that you think needs to be modified? Or does your argument still apply just as well, in your opinion, in spring of 2021 as it did in the spring of 2019?

Mark: Well, I hope the basics of it do. I think that when I look back, you know, 2019 was already in the midst of the Trump presidency. So I think I had a sense of what was coming. I mean, I don't think anybody could have predicted the January 6th insurrection or even some of the worst depredations of the last part of the Trump presidency, and certainly not the pandemic. But I think the basic arguments are still pretty fundamental. And I should say, if I can plug, see if I can put this up. Here we go. This is the German translation of the book. Oh, great. Which just came out. And I, yeah. So for that version, I wrote a new preface to write about boredom during the pandemic. And it goes back to some stuff we already talked about that people were much feeling much more isolated. If they hadn't thought about boredom before, they were kind of forced to think about it. And that was perhaps a philosophical opportunity, but only perhaps, because it takes discipline to think philosophically, as you know. So I don't think my basic ideas have changed. I think it's probably more like they've become, some of them anyway, more relevant. And the updating that the pandemic kind of forced upon this analysis of technology and capital, was really useful. So yeah, I guess that's what I would say.

Eli: Right. Okay, I think that's a good place to stop. Let me ask you a few concluding questions.

Mark: Okay.

Eli: Since Wish I Were Here was released, you've published several books. Would you mind telling us briefly about those?

Mark: Yeah, thanks. I published a pamphlet, really, a short book called On Risk, which again was started before the pandemic. So I was really interested in the way that risk was conceived, both on the individual and on the social level. So when people take risks, whether it's gambling or venturing capital, starting a business, whatever it is, going on an adventure, but also the social aspects of it. So how risk is distributed unevenly across populations. Neighborhoods are riskier than other neighborhoods. Populations, subpopulations experience more risk. Anyway, so that came out in 2020. And then just about a month ago, I published a book called The Ethics of Architecture,

which also includes, by the way, a preface about how architecture might be affected by the pandemic. And I've long been interested in architecture. I've written several books already about buildings and cities.

Eli: Like concrete reveries?

Mark: Concrete reveries, yeah. And also a book about the Empire State Building called Nearest Thing to Heaven. So those are from a little ways back, 2008, something like that. But yeah, I'm fascinated about the way that we think about architecture because we all experience it every day. Again, this picks up that larger point about technology. Technology isn't just your screen, it's everything. It's the buildings, it's the streets, the sidewalks, the windows. So this book, The Ethics of Architecture, which is from Oxford University Press, just came out and I'm very glad that I had the opportunity to add a little bit about the pandemic because I think it's really changed the way that we experience cities.

Eli: All right. So what are you working on now and what sort of writing can we expect from you in the future?

Mark: Well, right now I'm working on a book that in a sense might be, if I execute it properly, a companion to Wish I Were Here. It's for the same press, McGill Queen's, here in Canada. And it's about artificial intelligence, but it's especially about post-humanism. So I'm very interested in pursuing this idea that you picked up on, Eli, about the person casings and individuals and relating that to current developments in artificial intelligence. What does, you know, people have probably heard about this idea of the singularity where non-human intelligence will outpace human intelligence. And there are all kinds of interesting political issues there too. But I think the most profound issue goes back to that question of personal identity. What does the rise of non-human intelligences, non-organic intelligences, make us think about our own sense of self? So that's what I'm working on now. And it's coming a little bit slowly, to be honest, but I'll probably get there.

Eli: Great. I'm looking forward to reading it when it comes out. So this is going to be my last question, and it's kind of a vague question. But for our Japanese listeners, what are your thoughts on Japan?

Mark: Well, I can only say that, again, that I really wish I could be there. I wish I were there. And I hope someday to see it. And I guess I have a lot of interesting, maybe this is typical for people who don't know the country, but I have I have visions of Tokyo in a kind of very futuristic mode, and then I have visions in my mind from films and so on of other areas that are much more non-urban and And then I guess my other thoughts probably run to food. I remember reading a food critic saying that if he only had to eat one cuisine for the rest of his life, it would be Japanese. And I thought, yeah, that sounds about right to me.

Eli: Yeah, I don't think you'll be disappointed when you do eventually make it. So thank you very much for having this conversation. It was a lot of fun. So that was philosopher Mark Kingwell talking about his book, Wish I Were Here, after release

of the Japanese translation. Hope all you listeners and viewers out there found it as stimulating as I did. Thank you very much.

Mark: Thank you for all the great questions, Eli. It's really been great to see you.

Eli: Yeah, definitely. Hope we can talk again sometime soon. Okay, bye for now.

The Ted K Archive

Philosopher Mark Kingwell Interviewed by novelist Eli K.P. William
Apr 2, 2023

<www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gEGY6rOhvA>

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