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by

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary studies of the phenomenon of attention uncritically suppose that the only way to go about observing attention is as a modification of consciousness. Consciousness is taken to be always intentional, i.e., distinguished by reference to an object—whether physical or not—toward which it is directed. Observers of attention therefore assume that attention is an intentional modification of consciousness. Such practices of observation, in virtue of the kinds of practices that they are, take for granted that the fundamental constituents of reality are subjects and objects. Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (and Maurice Merleau-Ponty after them) discovered that belief in the world as divided into subjects and objects is merely a convenience designed for the purpose of making a certain kind of sense of experience intelligible—a belief that operates as a controlling assumption which forces the world, if it is to be intelligible, to show up under the oppressively confined ontology that was originally introduced merely as an observational convenience. My work contributes to the prevalent literature an examination of these presuppositions by reconsidering what the landscape of attention studies would look like without the importation of the confinement of a world reduced to

subjects in interaction with objects. I do this first by returning to the fundamental and yet strangely forgotten insights into the question that Husserl and Heidegger provided. Then I explore through some of the autobiographical work of Virginia Woolf, Simone Weil, and Pascal a pathway by which we might think differently about what it is to pay attention. I conclude that attention might also be understood as a kind of waiting that does not specify an object, but rather a posture, a way of being that necessarily manifests itself prior to any sort of prejudged or anticipated object. The contribution of my work will serve the community of observers of attention by forcing them to explain what it is to pay attention without reliance on the subject-object distinction.

Chapter One: Introduction

The Pathway to the Question of What it is to Pay Attention

Attention to Virginia Woolf's Attention

On my way to the first class I ever taught independently, the thought occurred to me that I would need a guiding question in order to lend the semester of Freshman English an organizing principle. I walked very slowly across the beautiful University of New Mexico campus toward the classroom, struggling to come up with a question that would tie together the readings and assignments I had already planned for the students to undertake, I finally decided to throw caution to the wind and allow the guiding question to come to me in its own time thereby making it possible for my attention to drift to irrelevant places that remain inaccessible to my memory today. As I approached the door of the classroom, the question still had not arrived. I entered the classroom to the sound of chatter and rustling papers, walked to the desk at the head of the room, put down my briefcase, pulled out a piece of chalk, turned to the chalkboard and wrote, "May I have your attention, please?" I then turned around to a classroom full of students who had stopped rustling papers, fidgeting with their electronic devices, chatting with their neighbors. The students had folded their hands in front of them and cast their eyes very politely on me. My interior monologue, having not quite grown accustomed to being the center of attention, wondered why they were all staring at me. And then it occurred to me that I had inadvertently provided the guiding question that would occupy my class for

the semester. Little did I know at the time: the question would continue to occupy me well beyond the semester end.

Puzzling: is this what it means to give attention when someone asks for it? Are we meant to look straight ahead, fold our hands, and simmer down? I asked the students to explain what they understood when seeing and hearing the phrase, "May I have your attention, please?" They acted as if I had committed some infraction of impertinence in posing a question whose answer seemed so obvious. The students took it to be obvious that one ought, in response to a request for attention, to dedicate oneself bodily, visually, and aurally to the bearer of the question. Pressing them further, I asked whether or not they believed there to be a distinction between their bodily (visual, aural) response and the directionality of their thoughts. This certainly sounded like the setting up of a contrast between their inner life and its attendant outer physical manifestations. The reply to this question did not reflect the same huffy response as the one they had given before. Visibly struck by the depth of the question, the classroom began to divide into those students who were intrigued by the query and those who had so quickly become aggravated by it as to retract the purported attention that they had, just moments before, lent to the occasion. As the hour moved ahead, the students and I discussed the various possibilities and concluded the class period expressing my desire to hear them by the end of the semester reply, "No! You *may not* have my attention. At most, you can have part of it; but I will no longer respond to your question in the uncritical way I did on the first day of class."

Among the required readings for that term was a selection from Virginia Woolf's

posthumously published autobiographical writings, now titled *Moments of Being*. The fragment, entitled "Sketch of the Past," explicitly attempts to recapture, to give a unified account of, Woolf's conscious activity throughout the day—a suggestion she followed in an effort to get to the bottom of that which Woolf took to be her mental illness…as if her conscious activity would reveal the source of and locus for treating her illness. During one of the characteristically lucid descriptions, Woolf recounts a remarkable scene from her childhood that came to the forefront of her consciousness as she drifted from a moment during her day. Woolf would come to refer to such moments as *moments of non-being*. The scene she described arose during an attempt to locate her earliest accessible memory—a memory that turned out to be of the floral print fabric of one of the dresses Woolf's mother wore. Woolf recalled her mother wearing the dress while she rested her head in the comfort of mother's lap. The floral print had significance within this description because it gave rise to a memory when, as a young girl, Woolf had been sexually molested by her half-brother who was twelve years her senior and, in order mentally to cope with the experience, she had to shift focus away from her own reflection in the looking glass—one imagines floral print wallpaper behind the mirror that may have reminded her of her mother's dress.[1] The scene is quite vividly presented in Woolf's characteristically beautiful prose.

While reading the astonishing passage in preparation for my presentation of it to the class, a suspicion arose that the students might overlook the brutality of Woolf's childhood molestation scene even though it was so thoroughly, albeit nonchalantly,

[1] Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), pp. 64-70. I will treat the interesting topic of Woolf's relationship to the question of attention as it pertains to her descriptors of "moments of being" and "moments of non-being" in a later chapter of this work.

described. I operated under the assumption that the sort of flowery prose employed by Woolf would be difficult for the students to penetrate without performing the certain kind of scrutiny of and profound thinking about the text that it was incumbent on me to teach them to develop. I decided to set up a thought experiment in which the students would be asked to react to the fragment by Virginia Woolf. Their reactions hinted at confirmation of my suspicion. When asked, the students replied that the piece was pretty, but boring. They could tell me nothing more about it than that Woolf seemed to be talking about her mental life. "How astute," I thought, given that Woolf admitted this to be her intent in the opening paragraph. Having permitted ample discussion time for the students to demonstrate their oversight of the molestation scene, I wanted unequivocal confirmation that they had missed it. I decided then to read the passage aloud to them, starting paragraphs in advance so as to establish the flowery prosaic context that might testify to their initial responses to the text. As I read the molestation scene, I heard gasps from many of the students. They had missed the scene, yes; but they had also let the gravity of the entire reading pass by as the result of their having missed this one component.

The idea occurred to me to require the students to maintain journals throughout the remainder of the semester in which they would keep track of their attention while reading the subsequent assigned texts. Wherever they might capture their focus having drifted from the page, they were to record 1) that and whence it happened, 2) where their attention went, and (if possible) 3) why their focus traveled off the page toward its ultimate destination. I posed the question to them on the spot, with reference to their reading and missing of the scene from Virginia Woolf. As expected, the students

explained that they *must have* been bored by the prose Woolf used—a familiar conjecture laying blame on the author for the students' own failure to grasp the described situation. Undoubtedly, it was true that their boredom in connection with the reading had something to do with their failure, but I wanted to understand and, more importantly, wanted the students to understand what it means to cite boredom as the reason for such an oversight. Was boredom to be derived from the flowery prose employed by the author? Was it accurate to say that "the text bored me" or that "I was bored by the text"? Or was it more fitting and accurate to locate the source of boredom from within their own experience, having little if anything to do with the text? I suggested to them that there might exist a connection between the horrific situation described in the text and their own psychological impediments to thinking about such discomforting moments as scenes of sexual molestation. In brief, I expected the students to become aware of and remain in a heightened state of alertness to their attention to literary and philosophical works. I did this with the hope that, by extension, the class would begin to give attention to the more mundane and yet nevertheless pervasive drifting of attention that I anticipated would be mirrored in their everyday lives.

Hypothetically, the students would learn to differentiate what they called a lack of interest from the phenomenon of a psychological distancing that stemmed from an unconscious or subconscious discomfort with the subject matter. In this way, they would develop a more profound type of literacy than that with which they had entered the course. The students would, in brief, develop the skill of paying attention to their own activity of paying attention. My hypothesis met with a limited degree of success.

In the first place, a number of journal entries owned up to the redirection of attention associated with suppressed psychological reactions that the students had unconsciously hoped not to feel obligated to face. "The scene described was too intense to think about," said one of the students. This is what I expected to be the situation in many cases of diverted attention. The students who reached the revelation of suppressed psychological reactions learned through the balance of the semester something of great moment about their own capacity to attend and its dependence on the expectation of a comfortable (or at least not unsettling) set of circumstances for consideration. Though they had not known it at the outset, commitment of their full attention had been contingent upon their not having to exert too much thought to life's harsh realities while reading. Many of these same students reported that their attention had drifted to places that ranged from certain pleasant memories to occupations with the lists of things to do that occupy many of us throughout our everyday lives. My assessment in these cases was that their attention, just as Virginia Woolf's had done in the memoir, had been redirected toward places that were more comforting because of their inability to cope with that which the written page presented.

I grew progressively more interested in the question concerning the source of the "lack of interest" side of the disjunctive hypothesis. It struck me that "lack of interest" was not really a satisfying explanation of attentive drift, at least not if the goal was to uncover what lies underneath superficial appearances. For one thing, "lack" implies an absence of interest and I suspected that "absence" could only properly describe the situation relative to some pre-ordained *appropriate* object of interest. In other words, I

suspected that interest actually inundated the conscious activity of the students, just not an interest in the matters under investigation—in this case, the written texts. When students described their boredom, it was usually by reference to an indifference they recounted as if it inhered in the object itself, as if it were the fault of the assigned reading.

Some of the students, however, claimed to locate the ambivalence within themselves. These students often explained their indifference in terms of a lack of fit between their own life projects—their anticipated undergraduate majors and minors, for instance—and the discussion topic. But this, in my opinion, was yet another, perhaps less overtly judgmental way of suggesting that the trouble was in the object to which they were expected to direct their attention. These students were pitched to comprehend experience as distributed (without remainder) between things that do and things that do not (or do not currently appear to) have relevance to their projects. Hence, the trouble was in the object, mostly because of its lack of cohesion with that to which they assigned value. Assigning blame to themselves simply meant they felt responsible for having set up a framework of relevance that determined in advance what would count as interesting to them; I had doubts as to the depth of their comprehension of the full scope of such an admission.

More than a few others concluded that their inability to remain focused on the required texts should be attributed to their own medical conditions, among them was an unpredicted high number of confessions of Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. Most of these students claimed to be undergoing treatment for their alleged maladjustments and yet they still had difficulty paying attention. These

students reported nothing further, no further reflection that might locate the failure within their relationship with the written word. Simply, their inability to focus was grounded in a physiological condition. They acted as if nothing more needed to be said about it. This was more alarming to me than any of the other accounts of attention. I worried that such explanations as these reflected an acknowledgment both that the problem resided within their own conscious experience (that the problem was not with the text or with anything that the text presented) and that, apart from taking their prescribed medication, no responsibility for the direction of their attention needed to be assumed. Certainly, I did not want to place an unbearable burden on the shoulders of people who suffer from a diminished capacity to attend—to do so would be cruel—but I did expect at least a limited degree of reflection on and awareness of the trajectory of the students' attention.

All of these recorded reactions led me to a sort of sustained curiosity over the problems that face us with respect to attention. I imagined that alleged deficiencies of attention might be analogous to certain reading disorders or learning disabilities like dyslexia—disorders whose treatment first involved recognition of the way in which the hopeful reader received the words on the written page and then, exertion of energy toward reversal of the effects. There was a sense in which I naively wanted to instruct the ADD- and ADHD-afflicted students that the way past their problem would ultimately involve paying attention, just as the way past a reading disorder involves reading. Thankfully, prior to acting on my desire, I remembered that I am not a medical professional and speculated that there might be more going on with people who suffer from such afflictions than my naivety could fathom. I decided (for so long as would be

possible) to dedicate my efforts to learning and thinking about the topic of attention.

Attention to Heidegger's Attention

One of my initial forays into the topic had begun to occur more than a year prior to that first day of class, though I had been unaware of it at the time. I participated in a seminar covering the later work of Martin Heidegger. During the seminar, there arrived a point where we spent time thinking about Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi party—a notoriously polarizing fact about Heidegger's life and thought. I was deeply troubled by the prospect that the philosopher whose work I loved so much, whose thought I found so life-affirming, could have participated in that which I take to be one of the most heinous political movements in recent history. How could Heidegger not have seen where things with the Nazis would eventually lead? Even factoring in the clichés about hindsight lending an air of clarity to historical questions, Heidegger's involvement with and subsequent failure to denounce affiliation with the Nazi party perplexed me. I exerted considerable effort trying to work through his texts and his intellectual biography with the goal of articulating a defense of Heidegger's infraction.

Heidegger's critics often cite the speech, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," as irrefutable evidence that implicit in his thought lurks the fertile ground out of which Nazism grows.[2] The critics saw in Heidegger's thought a necessary connection to the atrocities committed by the Nazis. As ridiculous as I knew this to be, I had to admit that the speech sounded like a call-to-arms of Nazi youth in its use of

[2] Among them, Richard Wolin is one of the most articulate and ostensibly thoroughgoing, i.e., if one accepts the premises that lead to Wolin's and others' conclusions. See his *The Politics of Being* alongside the commentary preceding Heidegger's *Rectoral Address* in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*.

phrases like "the blood and soil of the German folk" and the heightened urgency of its tone.[3] I suspected that there was perhaps another way to read the speech; but also that, in order to uncover it, I would have to put aside the assumption that its apparent emotional charge might be atypical of German rhetorical style, that such phrases and tones were unique to Nazi propaganda. This meant that I would have to think through the content of Heidegger's address, that I would have to attend to something else in the speech, I would have to hear through the alleged inflammatory language to the essence of the talk if there was to be a defense of Heidegger.

As I look back on that period, I recall that the first whisper of my occupation with the topic of attention had already made it to my ears through the vehicle of a simple question about how to interpret Heidegger's speech. Although it did not reach explicit articulation at the time, I had nonetheless become suspicious of the manners in which a person comes to focus on certain aspects of a spoken or written work, bringing them into the foreground while permitting other aspects to be pushed into the background. Why had I (and the critics) heard something inflammatory in Heidegger's address? Had there been some socially manufactured tendency to perceive the speech in the way I initially did—a tendency whose origin lay deeply buried under layers of common-sense obviousness? Where had I received the idea that the language of the speech sounded like Nazi propaganda? These were thoughts that begged for my attention, but that had to wait for explicit treatment. Even so, I had already begun to notice that spoken and written

[3] Martin Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," ["*Die Selbsthauptung der deutschen Üniversität*" (1933)] translated by William S. Lewis in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, edited by Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), pp. 29-39.

words present themselves along multiple pathways of potential interpretation and that, surely, one needs to be watchful of authoritative, dogmatic explications.

It struck me that Heidegger employed citations at the beginning and the end of the address which came from Plato's *Republic*. I discovered that, during the period surrounding Heidegger's delivery of the speech, he had been lecturing on and therefore thinking about the work of Plato. It might be useful, I suspected, to think about how the talk might be understood within the context of Heidegger's intellectual preoccupations of the period. There was an obvious connection between the spirit of the speech and those parts of the *Republic* that treated the generation, degeneration and regeneration of political regimes. All of these reflections compelled me to conclude that the *Rectoral Address* could intriguingly be interpreted in a novel way, not in terms of its emotional persuasiveness but rather, in terms of the way Heidegger assessed Germany's station along the cyclical movement of political regimes that Plato had laid out. Did Heidegger see Germany's political situation as in the prelude to a state of degeneration or as having arrived at the end of the degeneration phase of the cycle and therefore moving into the upswing of regeneration, as moving into or away from tyranny?[4] Answering these questions would surely provide a revealing context in which to situate Heidegger's speech.

Whatever Heidegger's predilections, there was reason to suspect that, in order to square this dark period of his life story with the profound insightfulness of his work,

[4] I have written on this topic in my unpublished "Parallel Between Heidegger's *Rectoral Address* and Books VII and VIII of Plato's *Republic*." The development of my own thought is indebted to Iain Thomson's "Heidegger and the Politics of the University," from the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, v. 41, no. 4 (2003), pp. 515-542 and to the entirety of Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

tracking the focus of his attention at the time would prove worthwhile. Gathering evidence as to the objects of Heidegger's attention might provide us with another way of interpreting his speech and his political involvements. Nothing factually definitive came of these efforts, except the insight that Heidegger's critics had no more authoritative interpretation of his thoughts and actions during that period than had his defenders.

Nevertheless, I continued to speculate from time to time about what must have been going on in Heidegger's attentive activity during the period of his involvement with the Nazis. The nature of my questioning about the matter began to undergo revision as my thoughts wandered to the relationship between the profundity of his work in *Being and Time*—its effect on the philosophical community—and the way Heidegger must have felt about it. The intellectual community would indubitably have seen in Heidegger's work something new and inherently valuable to the future of the history of ideas. I started drawing comparisons between Heidegger's situation and the way people in the USA speak about their political commitments. Given the two-party system that dominates the political landscape in the USA, citizens are forced to prioritize the values they hold according to their importance within the environment in which they arise and conflict. Quite frequently, the options force voters to decide between candidates who only represent some of their interests. Indeed sometimes voters elect candidates on the basis of a desire to defeat the opponent, regardless of the potential lack of correspondence between the candidates' views and their own. Often, voters are required to prioritize which from among several interests can be suspended as temporarily dispensable in favor of others that seem more pressing. Heidegger and the German citizenry may have been

faced with a similar situation. The question: which of the party choices in Germany at the time must Heidegger have deemed most likely to endorse and perhaps recognize the importance of his work? Under which form of government would Heidegger's work realize the recognition he felt it deserved? These questions assuredly pose a challenge to those interpreters who assert a necessary connection between Heidegger's political affiliations and his thinking.

There is no sense in which I intend to suggest that a person's choices may be forgiven simply because they are in possession of thoughts that need to be allowed to make a splash on the world—intellectual community or otherwise. In the extreme, Heidegger's choices, understood from this kind of perspective, would reflect a sort of messianism that I do not want to allege. Still, given the profound impact his thinking did have on the history of ideas, it seems reasonable to imagine a person so thoroughly moved by the rightness of their thought that they would feel an irresistible need to share it with the rest of the world—a need that might override or render invisible the potential hazards that encircle them.

The thought then occurred to me that *whenever we give our attention to one thing, whenever we are guided by a singleness of purpose, we do so to the exclusion of some other matters that might in the long run end up having been more crucial to us*. We do this all the time. The possibility of giving our undivided attention seems to be contained in the nature of what it is to pay attention. But sometimes we even do so to our own detriment. If any portrait of the relationship between Heidegger's work and political associations can obtain, then his actions might well be understood from within the horns

of some such dilemma. With what authority, if it is indeed the case that paying attention naturally involves the exclusion of certain possible objects of attention, do we permit ourselves to condemn, or see as erroneously made, people's choices that conclude in having produced baleful consequences? How do we determine from outside the context of a person's life what they should be paying attention to and what they may without fear of retribution disregard?

Blameworthiness of Attention

Common sense tells us that minimally, when our attention drifts so far away from the physical circumstances in which we find ourselves as to produce dangers for ourselves or for others, we have a tangible measure for judging our adroitness at prioritizing the objects of our attention. There does appear to be a region wherein baleful consequences may clearly be anticipated. Walking out in front of and getting hit by a moving vehicle while engaged in a cell phone conversation; having sexual relations with someone other than one's partner and confronting the possibility of a break-up while in a committed monogamous relationship; drinking to the point of inebriation and causing harm to oneself or to other vehicles and their passengers while driving an automobile—the list could continue for pages—all of these seem like circumstances the observation of which gives one license to relegate responsibility, to assess the blameworthiness of the person who foolishly disregarded that which anyone could anticipate would happen. Assessments of the disapprobation and credit associated with an action seem always to imply that some measure of attention was withheld or given and that the withholding or

donation of attention fell under the conscious control of the attendee. And there are certainly situations in which it seems reasonable to make such appraisals and to dispense culpability accordingly.

But there are other factors which, when given consideration, might make those same appraisals seem superficial, if not altogether dubious. Reflecting upon the example of the drunk driver who causes harm to others: the ready-to-hand assessment that he is to be blamed for not having attended properly to the situation, or for callously disregarding the very idea that his attention should be focused on not harming other people, does not seem to exhaust the question of why his attention was directed (or misdirected, or lacking direction) as it was. Most institutionalized legal practices determine that nothing else in the situation matters: the driver was not paying attention and should have been; the reason the driver failed to attend was because his attention had been impaired by alcohol consumption; his failure to attend to the right object at the right moment caused the accident; the driver is therefore accountable. The reasoning relies on a suppressed premise that the drunk driver's attention was at some stage under his direct control—whether it be that he made a conscious choice to aim toward the impairment of his awareness through intoxication or that his earlier conscious choice produced the result which ultimately led to the accident—which means that attention (at least in legal determinations of such situations) has been assumed to emanate from within the conscious choices (or even the consciousness) of the attendee and not from the broader arena of life itself.

A different way to pose the question of the driver's attention might be to try to

understand the social context out of which the driver's behavior and attendant wandering of attention originated. Among certain, perhaps most, drinking cultures in the USA, a sort of unspoken game or contest affiliated with drinking and driving exists. The objective of the game is to drink without regard for the legal limit set for driving a motor vehicle, to make it home untarnished (without having caused an accident or landed in jail), and to live to relate it to one's drinking friends the following night. To those friends, this makes for an amusing anecdote. Being unable to remember having driven home just adds to its appeal, lending the story a promising moment of commiseration—as if the operative thought were: "we all got through that situation unscathed; weren't we lucky? Tally up another point for our team." There is, additionally, a measure of weakness associated with not being able to drive oneself home—a perceived weakness whose gravity grows stronger in proportion to how much the would-be driver has already had to drink. Such people are called amateurs by their drinking cronies, adding to the equation a peer-pressure component.

Legal determinations do not concern themselves with conditions that make driving-while-intoxicated possible. The conditions for the possibility of the drinking and driving game need seriously to be examined if prevention of drunk driving accidents is to be realized. Articulating such conditions would first involve identification of the kinds of presuppositions that underscore our common sense about such accidents. One way of uncovering such presuppositions might be to speculate as to the chain of causal events presumed to determine the situation. Suppose that our drunken driver was involved in an automobile accident that ended in the death of the driver of the vehicle he hit. A fairly

simple assessment of the scenario would be that the intoxicated driver was to blame (for the sake of argument I will assume that this account is an accurate assessment) for the death of the other driver. Stipulating that the drunken driver did not intend to end the life of the other driver, the usual way to understand what happened is to say that the drunk driver was not giving, or was incapable of giving sufficient attention to the environment that surrounded the pattern of traffic in which he found himself. The driver's intoxication is blamed for the diversion of his attention away from the salient elements of the accident. But how does intoxication show up as the cause of the diversion of attention? Naming the driver's intoxication as the cause supposes that his attention would not have been diverted even if he had not been drunk. Statistical evidence incontrovertibly provides us with the idea that drinking impairs one's ability to react to an urgent situation, slows a person's motor skills down, making it improbable that such an accident could have been avoided. For anyone who has ever drunk a bit too much alcohol, experience confirms the statistical evidence. But I suspect that we can all also imagine similar scenarios of deflected attention being the culprit in an explanation of events where we ended up with damaging results that we did not intend. What has led us to isolate drunkenness as the preferred causal explanation of the event?

Some years ago, vehicular accidents were thought to be unfortunate mishaps. Victims of fatal accidents were taken to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Their number was up; it was their time to go. Negligence was cited as the cause of the accident; everyone knew that the negligent person did not mean to offend and, while the loved ones of the victim might remain imaginably upset with the offender for some time,

I suppose they rarely shifted focus from grief over their loss toward the evil monstrosity of alcohol's effects on those who drink it and then drive—though there must surely have been exceptions.

Today, institutions have developed whose stated purpose is to prevent what are perceived to be senseless deaths brought about by drunken driving. During the period of my revelation that *whenever we give our attention to one thing, it is always to the exclusion of something else that might in the long run end up being more important*, I waited tables in a restaurant where one of the regular customers happened to be one of the executive officers of the state chapter of *Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD)*. Her affiliation with this group came about as the result of unfathomably sad circumstances. Her daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren were killed in an automobile accident on Christmas Eve while on their way to spend Christmas with her at home. The driver of the other automobile survived the accident and was charged with *Driving While Intoxicated*. It was believed by most people statewide that alcohol had been the cause of the surviving driver's impairment and that he should be held accountable for the fatalities. But the state failed to make its case against him and the alleged drunken driver many years later was released and cleared of all charges except for the mundane traffic violations that usually characterize minor accidents. The woman who lost members of her family was understandably inconsolably upset at the perceived absence of justice in this verdict. The most tragic aspect of this entire story, however, resided in her emotional and physical deterioration over the seven-year period when I knew her. I observed her week after week meeting with people about the plight of

victims of accidents involving drunk drivers and scheming about ways to make the drunk drivers pay—as if the fear of legal consequences would somehow prevent the drivers from drinking. She gave her life over to setting right that which she felt to be an injustice. She became so dogmatically self-righteous that she lost many of her friends. The woman was guilty of a bit of negligence herself with respect to paying attention. The focus of her attention became so narrow that she apparently could not find room for thinking about anything but retribution against drunk drivers in general. I wondered why she could not see that her own actions, driven by such a seemingly virtuous singleness of purpose, could be perceived under the same set of descriptive analyses of negligence as had the actions of the alleged murderer of her family—even though her actions had not been caused by alcohol consumption (though I am inclined to argue that they indirectly were, just not her own consumption) and even though her actions did not produce comparably devastating effects. I understood that she was driven by sadness over the ostensibly random and unnecessary loss of her family. Given the stated purpose of such institutions as MADD—the prevention of death at the hands of drunk drivers—I wondered whether the implied purpose of this institution, taking into account the observed behavior of its members, ought better to be understood as the prevention of death more generally. Since death is the necessary conclusion to life, it is difficult for me to see how such institutions expect realistically to bring about the fulfillment of their purposes.

Attention to the Unattended

The question of the direction of one's attention pressed on me more than ever as I placed the aforementioned examples into contact with the passages from Virginia Woolf's memoir. Specifically, I felt compelled to examine that to which our attention is drawn in its relation to that from which it is repelled. It seemed important to understand the coincidence of the object of attention and that from which it emanated. Questions like the following occupied me: Was the focal point of Heidegger's attention during that dark period of his life less the result of a conscious decision to direct himself toward a particular object than it was a reaction to the social context in which he found himself? Is the failed attention of a drunk driver comprehensible as a movement made in the face of broader social settings that are too grim to bear? Do members of institutions like MADD focus their attention as they do so that they can avoid confrontation with harsh realities such as that death is on the way for each of us? Could the reactions of the students in my Freshman English course be construed as mirror images of the way attention works in general? Is it the case that what looks like the gathering of our attention for the sake of an intended object is in actuality the retrieval of our attention from unpleasant or unbearable life circumstances? An affirmative response to all of these questions seems quite plausible; but such a reply depends on understanding what it is to pay attention from an entirely different point of view, viz., by emphasizing the dynamic movement of attention in its away-ness from life circumstances toward an object.

My own attention focused on the need for revision of the common-sense perspective which inadequately conceives attention exclusively in terms of its towardness

as an intentional, object-directed, activity. Within a few moments of my having made explicit the idea that, as intentional, attention moves in two directions (toward an object and away from another), I noticed that the entire project had presupposed without question that attention is intentional, i.e., characterized by and understood in terms of its aboutness, by its being always toward something. Even when directed away from some life circumstance, attention has the characteristic of having previously been directed at something. This discovery meant that I had myself been guilty of an unexamined presupposition whose time for analysis had arrived.

I began to think: if we were to conceive what it is to pay attention from an entirely different angle, we might then be able to open up a new pathway toward understanding our own contemporary situation. But I needed to decide how to go about challenging that which we have taken to be so obvious as to be beyond question. If I could show that not only is attention not essentially, but also not even mostly an instance of intentionality—*intentionality*, again, understood as a *directedness toward*—I could then broach the possibility of an exhaustive description of what it is to pay attention. As traditionally defined, intentionality depends on the conception of reality as ontologically divided into subjects and objects that interact with one another. Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and others at the beginning of the Twentieth Century demonstrated convincingly that thinking of the world like scientists do as divided according to the Cartesian picture of subjects and objects imports a framework that determines in advance what counts as primordial.[5] In fact, such a picture of the world is derivative of a more fundamental

[5] The clearest account of Heidegger's contribution challenging the Cartesian framework I have encountered may be found in Charles B. Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett

reality—subjects and objects might just be convenient oppositional groupings that we employ for efficiently understanding the world; they do not enjoy a privileged ontological status; we bring subjects and objects into a metaphorical existence—*metaphorical* here taken in the ancient Greek sense of *lighting up from beneath*—not out of some chosen convention, but rather as the inevitable result of the cultural transformations that occurred during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century.

In the pages that follow, I struggle to keep the metaphorical nature of the subject-object distinction in mind, allowing for its utility but remembering that usefulness does not of itself constitute reality. If a true phenomenology of what it is to pay attention is to be possible, then it will be necessary to bracket that which we take to be obvious in the common sense and scientific view of matters. But bracketing the obvious will require an identification of its obviousness as such—which means that a certain pretense of the obvious will be a useful first step. In other words, I will need simultaneously to speak as people ordinarily do of what it is to pay attention and yet also to think of attending in this way as concealing a broader more originary sense of the topic. I will want to think through the scientific orientation in order to highlight the problematic presuppositions at work in the exasperating confusion that encircles contemporary attention studies.

Plan of the Work

The appropriate place to begin will therefore be to provide a synopsis of some current trends in the empirical sciences for thinking about attention. The underlying assumptions, once made explicit, will lead to the conclusion that a new way of thinking

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Publishing Company, 1983), particularly pp. 182-194. My views are shaped by and indebted to Guignon's elucidation.

about attention will be necessary. I propose then to commence a more thoroughgoing phenomenology of attention. First, I will take stock of that which has remained in the darkness for contemporary attention studies, namely, an account of those periods in life where attention appears to be absent and of the privileging of presence that has accompanied such views. I would like to examine the appearance of attention's absence within a framework set up by the work of Virginia Woolf, Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Ricœur. Doing so will then provide me with the impetus for returning to Husserl and Heidegger and their explosion of the authority of the subject-object distinction. At that point, the shortcomings associated with the view that attention is an intentional modification of consciousness—that attention is a subspecies of consciousness, that attention can only be understood as a mental act emanating from a subject and directed toward objects—will compel the discussion toward a more all-encompassing sense of what it is to pay attention. Pascal, Simone Weil and Heidegger, from different points of view and for different reasons, all worked with this novel sense of how to understand attention as non-intentional. A new pathway will thereby have opened up for thinking about attention and many of the tangential prescriptions affiliated with it.

Chapter Two:

Uncovering the Presupposition at Work in Contemporary Attention Studies

Making the Gap Explicit

Much of the work done on the topic of attention within the fields of psychology, neurology, psychiatry, and neuro-physiology at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century has dedicated itself to correcting that which is seen to be a deficient mode of being in the world, manifested through individual human beings who seem unable to master the dispersal of their own consciousness. Almost everyone who lives in contemporary North America has some awareness of diagnoses such as Attention Deficit Disorder and its cognates. The anagrams ADD and ADHD have successfully traversed the terrain that typically separates the world of the expert in her field from the world of the uninitiated. People, in common parlance, offer the non-medical diagnosis of ADD as an excuse for the wandering of their attention away from its prescribed intended arena toward some distraction that emerges from out of the background of the scenery that encases them. Almost everyone, whether officially afflicted with these disorders or not, has some opinion about the strategies deployed in the treatment of so-called attention deficits and their attendant behavior problems. While it is by no means clear to anyone involved precisely what is meant by the word, "attention" (let alone "consciousness"—a word by which many mean to indicate that field out of which attention emerges as a

modification), academics and medical practitioners alike proceed as if we can rely on that which is a tacit and pre-theoretical, or an intuitive acquaintance with what it is to be conscious in order adequately to speak about it. This sort of reliance is, of course, neither an unusual set of circumstances nor necessarily an unwarranted point of departure for anyone who has engaged in going beyond the boundaries by which we have historically been limited. "We have to begin somewhere," the scientists might say.

There is a tendency, seemingly thorough in its sweep across ground-breaking endeavors of whatever stripe we might visualize—from the scientific to the ethical, from the ethical to the aesthetic—to forget that the point of origin for an investigation was decreed in the manner of "we have to begin somewhere." The all-encompassing nature of this tendency produces some baleful results. In the first place, once having established a point of departure, a trajectory of authorization begins whose grounding is tethered to nothing more substantial than the stipulation that it should be deemed "the beginning" only in the absence of a more solid foundation. In some ways that are even more baleful, this kind of stipulation also assures that the resultant discoveries will be cast in terms that support the (not-so-sufficiently grounded) foundational assumptions with which it began. Again, perhaps dispositions to treat as concluded the pathways by way of which reasoning arrives at its subsequent projects is only the natural progression of events. We often hear old saws like "there is no use reinventing the wheel!" Expressions like this draw attention to the redundancy of creating something that is already in existence; but they also ask us to make use of something that is already there without having to worry ourselves with the means by which it became available to us. This is precisely the space

within which I would like to locate a proper investigation into what it is to attend to the world.

Even in daily experience, we commonly encounter the annoyance of being called upon to justify the thinking that led us to take certain actions. We might become a bit irritated at having to retrace the steps of reasoning that informed our action because we have already moved beyond them. But our irritation, notwithstanding the possibility that it rests in need of no more far-reaching explanation, might simply be a flourish that decorates a deeper fear that we might discover other equally legitimate pathways that could have been selected instead of the pathways we chose. Such is the state in studies of attention over the past four or five decades.

Three spheres of inquiry have emerged in recent years that treat the topic of attention, sometimes explicitly and sometimes in a fashion that subsumes "attention" under the broader category of "consciousness." They may loosely be identified as follows: 1) The physical sciences—so called because of their unyielding commitment to the "naturalistic attitude's" privileging of (the far-from-supposition-free faith in) empirical evidence; 2) The phenomenological investigations—so construed because of their deep dependence on first- and third-person accounts; and 3) The amalgamated, or hybrid, position in whose sights is set the perceived positive features of both the above spheres of inquiry. I would like to provide a sketch of that which each position entails, drawing examples from contemporary studies of attention and consciousness. Then I will draw attention to that which I believe to be a glaring discrepancy common to each view to account for the fundamental ontology of their particular fields of endeavor. And, while it is the case that my own orientation tends toward the phenomenological approach—and,

while it is the case that the phenomenological approach will, I believe, ultimately provide us with the proper tools by which to understand what it is to pay attention—I notice that many contemporary phenomenologists pander so much to the scientists that they end up ignoring the principal insight that phenomenology was originally intended to provide, viz., that the naturalistic and theoretical attitudes stand in need of deep and critical examination of its grounding precepts. There are certainly exceptions to this problem. I would like to save some of the discussion of their positions until after identification of the problems so that we will have a measure by which to assess the status of their exceptional posture.

Next, a return to the implicit and explicit treatment of the topic of attention that Edmund Husserl prescribed will be indispensable toward situating the fork-in-the-road that attention studies took around the beginning of the Twentieth Century in Western Europe and North America. Some scholars claim that it was around this time that attention began to become manifest as a topic for discussion, noticing by way of the studies more broadly conceived as consciousness that attention was just one among various modes of consciousness itself. They trace the origin to the work of Théodule Ribot, a mid-19th century psychologist who set a sort of standard out of which others in the field conceived of their work.[6] Husserl's work and the work of many of the American Pragmatists at the time began to take issue with some of the unchecked grounding assumptions that pervaded psychological studies of the topic. Attention was characterized as a sort of spotlight shone across a background of utter darkness that illuminates certain features of the already constituted world that lays there in the

[6] Chris Mole, from his draft forthcoming in *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Psychology*, pp. 1-3. christopher.mole@ucd.ie.

darkness, waiting to be uncovered. For Husserl, at least, this way of conceiving of attention was only a small fraction of the total picture. As suggested in some of the work from Husserl's middle period, especially in his *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* lectures, attention begins to be conceived on three distinct fronts, each one a progression into deeper terrain than the one before. Husserl, ever concerned about the direction of phenomenology, sought in these lectures to describe the inner workings of consciousness. He identified two poles between which our attentive gaze moves, the extremes of which he characterized as the utter passivity of affectivity moving toward the utter activity of a phenomenological attentiveness to something Kant might have called the conditions for the possibility of any conscious experience at all.[7] On the face of it, Husserl's account certainly seems to involve a deepening move into the innermost recesses of consciousness.

Heidegger's celebrated attack on the kind of theorizing, which he conceived as a sort of removal from the flow of experience, that Husserl's accounts implied made clear that the breed of scientific theorizing that Husserl privileged was itself parasitic on a much deeper mode of experience within which we find ourselves throughout the largest part of our lives, viz., the experience of everyday life. Being so removed from the originary, Husserl's brand of theorizing itself needed to undergo the same kind of rigorous critique to which Husserl expected the naturalistic standpoint to be subjected. Though I will argue that it was already visible in Husserl's work, i.e., in the subtlety of his manner of presentation, Heidegger's critique of Husserl made explicit the derivative

[7] *Phenomenological attentiveness* was distinguished by Husserl and by Heidegger as a sort beyond-the-ordinary attending whose principal occupation concerned the same transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience that Kant articulated for the first time.

nature of the subject-object distinction that all modern and contemporary scientific inquiry uncritically presupposes. Experiencing the world as divided into subjects and objects is already to have performed a sophisticated theoretical maneuver that conceals itself while compelling us to suppose the ontological privilege of the subject-object distinction. In other words, thinking of the world as comprised of subjects in interaction with objects is to be at the mercy of a controlling assumption that is difficult to surmount.

The controlling assumption that attention studies cannot be conducted without having presupposed a world divided into subjects and objects pervades the work of those like Sean Kelly, Chris Mole and John Campbell despite the profundity of their engagement with the phenomenological tradition as laid out by Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. This group of contemporary philosophers, influenced as they are by the phenomenological tradition, appears to care deeply about the establishment of an interpolation that will span the gulf that separates the empirical sciences from philosophy. It only makes sense to think, in order to bring about a functional dialogue between the two modes of inquiry, that the long-standing association of phenomenology with esoteric and impenetrable unintelligibility might benefit greatly from the attempt to translate traditional phenomenology into a language that science can grasp and even, as is hoped, adopt. The price to be paid, however, for making phenomenology intelligible to the already self-contained methodologies of the scientific community is that we have to ignore or consider insignificant the fundamental insight introduced by the early phenomenologists: that the subject-object distinction amounts to nothing but a manifest strategy for enframing the field of inquiry for the sake of reinforcing a bifurcation of the world.

Another branch of contemporary phenomenologists have appeared on the scene who reflect a sensitivity to the possibility that attention studies might be better approached from the standpoint of an event- (rather than a substance-) ontology. Anthony Steinbock and Natalie DePraz have led the move toward reconceptualizing what it is to pay attention using Husserl's work as their guide. While their work seems to hit just the right sort of resonance with respect to the deeper ways to go about understanding attention, they, like Husserl, open themselves up to Heidegger's rejection of the theoretical standpoint—which, in this case amounts to a distaste for the view that attention takes place inside consciousness. In spite of their sensitivity to the dissolution of the subject-object distinction, Steinbock and Depraz *prima facie* end up re-invoking it. Through some rather subtle distinctions made by Steinbock and Depraz, I intend to show that their work can be understood without having to commit to the bifurcated world that a subject-object detachment brings along with it. We need only make a few adjustments announced by Anthony Steinbock himself in order to suggest another way by which we might come to think of what it is to attend to the world.

Layout and History of the Problem

Husserl made the following remark in 1913:

> Attention is one of the chief themes of modern psychology. Nowhere does the predominantly sensualistic character of modern psychology show itself more strikingly than in the treatment of this theme, for not even the essential connection between attention and intentionality—this fundamental fact: that attention of every sort is nothing else than a

fundamental species of *intentive* modifications—has ever, to my knowledge, been emphasized before.[8]

Accordingly, this would serve as the first approximation of a full-blown theory of attention to take shape quite gradually over almost a century under the guidance of phenomenology. Likewise, Husserl's assessment would serve as throwing down the gauntlet initiating a challenge to psychology to pay attention to the modification of consciousness that takes place almost without our permission any time we attend to our objects. Husserl worried that sensualism, understood as a subjectivistic account of perception that admitted of no cognitive component and that was feared to lead to an irreversible relativism, was taking over the field of psychology. The psychologists of his day, as Husserl indicates here, were engaged in a sensualistic enterprise that left us in desperate need of an adequate account of our mental processes and that, indeed, confined psychology to a highly subjectivistic description of our mental life. The extent to which psychology has rid itself of the subjectivistic shackles Husserl thought kept it prisoner remains an open question, but we would certainly be remiss were we not with equally guarded skepticism to notice that phenomenology's project of bringing us a theory of attention remains fundamentally incomplete, if not constitutionally incomplete-able.

By all means, we should also pay heed to the departure that such talk takes from the usual way we have of thinking about psychology and phenomenology. Do we not ordinarily think of psychology as being the more scientifically objective of the two enterprises? Does phenomenology not deal primarily with the subjective contents of

[8] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology* (*Ideas I,* 1913), translated by F. Kersten (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983), p. 226f (Husserl, 192).

experience and, in so doing, does not phenomenology à la Husserl conclude to posit some spooky sort of Transcendental Ego that can only be reached from within the *solus ipse*? The superficial answer to both questions is "yes!" We also notice, however, that there is a more primordial way of seeing in to the issue which confirms Husserl's assessment and calls into question the very mode by which we are usually attuned to thinking about these problems. Rather than working through the difference right here, we would like to use this opportunity to illustrate, by way of a look at current work in arenas that investigate attention, that which we hope will bring the whole matter more sharply into focus. The plan, though subject to revision as we move along, will be to isolate three apparently separate categories of work currently underway that pertain to the subject of attention, to explicate in a very cursory way the nature of those categories—what they are up to, what presuppositions they endorse—and then to reflect on the plausibility of melding the categories into a common understanding of what attention is: a question that, surprisingly, lurks in the background awaiting explicit treatment.

On the Way to Neuro-Cognitivity

Recent work in the fields of neurophysiology, cognitive psychology, and philosophy of mind reflect a theoretical, if at times merely implicit, respect for Husserl's concerns as they examine the methods by which they come to determine the scope of their investigation into attention. Most of the work done in these fields, however, lacks any sort of transparent consideration of method, almost as if no examination of presuppositions could preempt the evidence that their experiments reveal. This is not to say that cognitive science does not question the validity of its hypotheses in relation to its

conclusions—indeed, cognitive science seems quite painstaking in its continual re-examination of experimental procedures—but, rather, that it is puzzling that cognitive science does not usually take time to define its terms. A neophyte wandering into the realm of these kinds of inquiries is met with a tacit, "this is how we do things around here!" sort of attitude. In fact, in most cases, the very meaning of the word "attention" seems to be assumed—a fact that, we suppose, should not be surprising since even in our everyday lives, we tend to operate with some sort of pre-theoretical comprehension of what "attention" means when someone says, "Pay attention!" That does not relieve us of the responsibility for making sure that we are all dealing with the same understanding of the domain of our research.

Here is one attempt to identify the concept of attention:

> The term *attention* captures the cognitive functions which are responsible for filtering out unwanted information and bringing to consciousness what is relevant for the organism. Our brain continuously assigns priority to some aspects of sensory information over others, and this selection is likely to determine which of the signals will enter our consciousness and memory and influence our overt behavior and trains of thoughts.[9]

To be sure, this statement offers a functionally complete working definition suitable to most intuitions about attention. But notice how the identification of attention above supposes a directionality, a situatedness of organism-consciousness set as over-against the world. The filtering-out process is assumed to emanate from inside the conscious experience of the organism. It is as if we need not inquire into the possibility that

[9] Peter Thier, Thomas Haarmeier and Alla Ignashchendova, "The functional architecture of attention" in *Current Biology*, v. 12, no. 5 (5 March 2002), p. R158.

attention is drawn from out of the world and aimed toward the organism or, better still, into the possibility that organism and world mutually constitute the significance of each other. To this, we might reply that the idea expressed runs parallel to the way we ordinarily mean "attention" when we go about our business. And surely we would be well within our intuitive rights to assert such a thing. But, again, we need to justify our assumptions in order that we might all be on the same page.

The author goes on in the passage to address our concern in saying, "Attention is either grabbed by the sensory stimulus automatically, in a bottom-up fashion, without any voluntary choice, or it is alternatively deployed voluntarily in a top-down manner."[10] There is a disjunction of possibilities: either our attention, viewed as "the taking possession by the mind in clear and vivid form of one out of what seem several simultaneous objects or trains of thought,"[11] playing the role of master over all that we survey (in the "top-down manner"), or it gets dragged around and determined by the environment in which it resides (in the "bottom-up fashion"). In any event, our attention does not do both simultaneously. This either/or serves as the center around which an entire industry of empirical research into attention has developed.

Empirical research on attention began, in mid-Twentieth Century behaviorist style, with studies intent on showing how attention works through stimulus-response experiments. Many of these experiments still decorate the overall field of inquiry. Examples of such experiments include the famous "cocktail party effect" in which the attention of a participant was observed under conditions where aural over-stimulation

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[10] *Ibid*.
[11] William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, v. 1 (1890) (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950), pp. 403-4.

seemed likely to occur—conditions like those one might experience at a cocktail party where chatter dominates the background from which a person can single out a particular contributing stimulus—and yet the participant's attention was shown to respond invariably to mentions of his own name even from quite far across the room.[12] This special ability of ours to listen through a buzzing whirr of chatter seems to indicate that we have at least some degree of mastery over the background resource-field out of which the focusing of our attention is made possible. Other early experiments with, for instance, air traffic controllers tested the duration of a person's ability to focus on a single object through extremely stressful circumstances. Still others wanted to examine the effects of sustained periods of watching a radar screen, waiting for something to happen.[13] All these experiments provided evidence that we are actually capable of directing our own attention.

The nature of these types of empirical research remains unable to provide us with information about what happens in the brain of the observed, except as such goings-on can be measured in behavior. This is so because such experiments presuppose either that what it is to attend is manifest in physical tells exhibited by the patient or that the patient is able to indicate with a verbal cue that she attends. In either case, the measurement of brain activity begins after the cue is given—a dependency that will only permit the capturing of attention in terms of an already constituted act of attending. And perhaps this is the deficiency that brought the cognitive scientists into the discussion. If it is the case that attention originates in the consciousness of the participant (and surely it is no

[12] E.C. Cherry, "Some Experiments on the Recognition of Speech, with One and Two Ears" in Journal of the Acoustic Society of America, 25 (1953).
[13] Barry Arons, "A Review of the Cocktail Party Effect" accessed on-line December 5, 2005 at http://Xenia.media.mit.edu/~barons/cocktail.html#kantowitzhumanfactors.

small discovery to learn that this is the case), then there ought to be some corresponding neurological activity that will confirm such phenomena. Otherwise, we are still left without foundation, except as the combination of behavior and first person reporting is able to present us with a possible story among other possible stories, for claiming that the organism has control over its own mental capacity for attending to its concerns.

Lauding the advances Neurobiology made in the latter half of the 20th Century, Michael Posner reminds us that, "an understanding of consciousness must rest on an appreciation of the brain networks that subserve attention, in much the same way as a scientific analysis of life without consideration of the structure of DNA would seem vacuous."[14] By analogy to our ability to read the recorded mappings of life that DNA provides, Posner believes that our brains mirror what happens when we pay attention. He cites the "finding that the integrity of the brain stem reticular formation was a necessity to maintain the alert state"[15] as an important move in the direction of uncovering the internal mechanisms that subtend our ability to pay attention. And he goes on to enumerate three hypotheses of the (at that time) state of the art:

(i) There exists an attentional system of the brain that is anatomically separate from various data-processing systems that can be activated passively by visual and auditory input.

(ii) Attention is carried out by a network of anatomical areas. It is neither the property of a single brain area nor is it a collective function of the brain working as a whole.

[14] Michael I. Posner, "Attention: The Mechanisms of Consciousness" in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, v. 91, no. 16 (August 2, 1994), p. 7398.
[15] *Ibid*., from a study conducted and reported my Moruzzi and Magoun (1949).

(iii) The brain areas involved in attention do not carry out the same function, but specific computations are assigned to different areas.[16]

The idea here, without rehashing the highly complicated evidence that Posner provides to support these hypotheses, is that we now have a picture of the neuronal activity of the brain that runs parallel to certain experimental instances of attending to objects—a picture generated as the result of technology like functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) and Positron Emission Tomography (PET). We can now map the brain activity of organisms that occurs while they undergo experimental measurements of their attentional consciousness. And it looks as if there occurs some sort of flow of neuronal activity from one part of the brain to the other—a flow the pathway of which, once understood, could provide us with a great deal of information about correlations between brain activity and behavior. It would be a mistake, as Posner would undoubtedly agree, to assume that there is some sort of causal relationship between the neural circuitry that subtends our experience of paying attention and our subjective experience of paying attention—at best, such a conclusion would be premature. If any sort of conclusion such as this could be drawn it would have to go in the other direction. These areas of the brain do not light up except as the subject attends to something in the environment.

We should pause for a moment to consider that all of these experiments—those of the neurobiologists and those of the behaviorists—have been aimed toward measuring overt manifestations of attention. Posner himself admits that much more needs to be done toward the goal of capturing "the control structures involved in covert orienting of

[16] *Ibid*., p. 7399.

attention."[17] Presumably, Posner has in mind here situations where our outward behavior belies our inner activity—instances where, for some reason, we need to conceal the fact that we are paying attention to something, or maybe circumstances in which we sign promissory notes to objects that need, but cannot at the moment have, our undivided attention.

And perhaps we should take stock of our intuitions about this notion. Reflecting on situations from our past, we can think of circumstances where, for imaginable reasons, we have access to information that lies within the background of a scene to which we were not expressly attending. We want to say that, indeed, the situatedness of most all events in our memory preserve some residual information that can be recalled with the assistance of certain precise prompts—as if we had an archived snapshot of the scene in our memory to which we might, if called upon to do so, refer. It remains a puzzle how we find ourselves able to assign the status of "background information" to some items (to which we may return) while attending to others (that themselves may be cast into the background and to which we may also return).

Announcing a Robust Account of the Physiology of Attention

Anne Treisman and company have conducted work in the area of feature binding, by which she means "the way in which we select and integrate the separate features of objects in the correct combinations."[18] As she admits, even though the problems that

[17] *Ibid*., p. 7402.
[18] Anne Treisman, "Feature binding, attention and object perception" in *Attention, Space and Action: Studies in Cognitive Neuroscience*, edited by Glyn W. Humphreys, John Duncan and Anne Treisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 91.

arise as the result of improper feature binding procedures are obvious to our intuitions, it is by no means clear how we "achieve the experience of a coherent world of integrated objects, and avoid seeing a world of disembodied or wrongly combined shapes, colours, motions, sizes and distances."[19] Her hunch is that attention plays a major role in feature binding, meaning that experiments designed to support her hunch must take elements of the background into consideration when observing a person's attentional practices. "There is considerable evidence," says Treisman, "that the visual system analyses the scene along a number of different dimensions in various specialized modules. Both anatomical and physiological evidence suggests the existence of several maps of the visual scene laid out in different visual areas of the brain."[20] The representation she has in mind is an intricate, multi-dimensional schema of isolatable features that show up to us as inhering in the contextual relationship of objects of perception; for instance the color, shape, sheen, depth, heat, position-in-relation-to-something-else (among other applicable features) of an object of perception activate a mechanism in our brain for recognizing such specific arrangements of features and thereby makes it possible for us to constitute a proper object of perception within consciousness. But this constitution of objects of perception for consciousness occurs as the by-product, according to Treisman, of our having selected an object from out of the background to which we attend.

[19] *Ibid*.
[20] *Ibid*.

Among the important things to notice about her research is the role of selection on which her account of attention depends. In fact, Treisman's research is presented in contrast to the research of John Duncan, whose description of what happens when we attend rests on the integrated competition of potential objects of perception for our attention. By "attention", Duncan means, "a widely distributed state, in which several brain systems converge to work on the different properties and action implications of the same, selected object."[21] Treisman characterizes the distinction between their projects as follows: "In Duncan's language, attention is a state into which the system settles through global competition between objects for dominance over experience and action," as opposed to her own view that it is, "a selective process that helps create those objects."[22] What appears to be at stake here is the correct response to the question of whether attention *just is* the neuronal activity that occurs while we are having the subjective experience of attending to something—this would be Treisman's view—or whether, instead, attention is the resultant state toward which the components of the neuronal activity are aimed—which would be Duncan's view. In other words: is attention synonymous with feature binding or is it the result of the process of feature binding; is attention a process or the result of a process that is invisible to the naked eye?

Even allowing that both responses to the question seem to be very well supported by empirical evidence—fMRI's, PET's, behavioral correlations, etc.—whether or not

[21] John Duncan, "Converging levels of analysis in the cognitive neuroscience of visual attention" in *Attention, Space and Action: Studies in Cognitive Neuroscience*, edited by Glyn W. Humphreys, John Duncan and Anne Treisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 126.
[22] Treisman, p. 108.

attention is a process really seems parasitic on what it is to attend to something. Both views rest on a presupposition that occurrences within the representable activity of the brain while we pay attention are not simply incidental to the act, but rather that they constitute the act. And while there may be good defensible external reasons—such as making it possible for someone who lacks the ability to attend to certain features in the environment to become able to do so—for holding on to such presuppositions, they still really amount to an attempt to remove from the picture first-person accounts of the experience of paying attention. Perhaps we will want to say in response to such an event, "Well, so much the worse for first-person accounts!" But surely we need to hold on to them. We need to know what explanandum the explanans is supposed to explain—if for no other reason than that we still lack an exhaustive account of the physiology (Treisman herself notes the provisional nature of her findings); and perhaps we will ultimately acquiesce when such an exhaustive account becomes operative.

A New Wave of Possibility

Thus far we have merely nodded to some of the rich and important work done in behavioral psychology and cognitive neuroscience in the last two decades without taking the time to explicate their experimental procedures; and surely this work will remain incomplete until we do. But we have been able to speculate, based on our summary of those experiments, as to some of the presuppositions operative at the foundation of the authority that a reader of their work might commit herself to. We have uncovered a presupposition with which we ourselves have operated, viz., that attempts to provide a

pristine third party perspective of what it is to pay attention are wanting and suspicious. They demand our tacit assent to the view that the structures of stimulus-response and neuronal activity more primordially represent that which goes on than does our own first hand experience. We note the notorious history that first hand accounts have provided, given that our senses can deceive us and given that our beliefs at times incorrectly (and even dangerously) determine the way things show up to us in the world. But we also suggest that it is possible to bridge the disparate gulf that exists between the two ways of viewing things.

Quite recent work has taken inventory of our concerns and has put forth some innovative ways to frame the questions that have traditionally plagued research into attention. For purposes of simplicity, we will discuss two camps whose views do not provide us with anything like the kind of mutual exclusion that would ordinarily permit us to separate them, but we do so nonetheless. Both camps appear to come from different academic backgrounds—the one from the loosely demarcated Austro-Anglo-American Analytic/Scientific tradition and the other from the Continental European Synthetic/Literary tradition—that are by no means prevented from having overlapping interests. It is significant that both groups have the study of the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in common and that both groups do not hesitate to express their desire to get at what attention is by way of first person experiences in the special use of the term "experience" that Husserl and company deployed, i.e., as intentional (as consciousness *of* something), transcendental and universally valid and not as subjective and relative. In fact, we might identify as a manifesto the following from Natalie Depraz and associates: "Briefly put, we wish to understand how we come to examine what we

live through. That is, we wish to understand that most peculiar of human acts: becoming aware of our own mental life."[23]

During the introductory paragraphs of this chapter I pointed to the seemingly unusual way in which we talk about first person experience as somehow different from the relativity of subjective experience, as universalizable in a sense. Now is perhaps the time to try to make that distinction more explicit, since it seems that a tension relative to this distinction has remained very much alive throughout the discussion. There is something different at work between these two utterances: 1) "I feel depressed", and 2) "Feeling depressed is like not wanting to eat, sleep, get off the sofa, watch TV, not watch TV, etc.". In the first case, I am providing a report about my overall state of mind, mood, disposition toward life; but my report leaves open the possibility that the listener might only have access to the meaning of my report were she to know first hand what it is like to be depressed. Given that the listener might not know what it is like to be depressed, then she might investigate what depression is by reading clinical studies collected by psychologists, neurologists, psychiatrists and others, so that she might be able to understand my depression from the outside. In the second case, I am making an attempt to describe my depression to the listener so that she might come to understand my depression from inside the experience of being depressed. The assumption correlative to the second case is that there is something more fundamentally informative contained in the act of describing than in the act of naming. Describing with such first hand reports permits the listener to consult her own experience and to imagine what depression must be like. Clinical descriptions amount to naming feelings such as depression, usually with

[23] Natalie Depraz, Francisco Varela and Pierre Vermersch, eds., *On Becoming Aware* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company/Advances in Consciousness Research, v. 43, 2003), p. 2.

a view to some palliative end; but they are meant to remain distant from the experience. The first kind of report becomes universalizable only under the following conditions: (i) that a third party (a psychologist, say) who has collected a number of similarly named reports and who has witnessed (or heard about) certain tendencies of those people to behave in certain ways can thereby confirm that the reporter is indeed depressed; or (ii) that such a psychologist, in consultation with a neurologist, can retrieve the same collection of reports and compare them to imaging of certain brain patterns that will lead to the conclusion that the patient is depressed. In other words, the case where I say, "I feel depressed," remains subjective and relative to my own private understanding of what it means to be depressed until the statement has been validated by a third party. But even in the event of independent confirmation of my condition, I am left on my own in coming to an understanding of what it is to be depressed.

A skeptic might argue that what it is to be depressed just *is* the tendency of behavior that concurs with the report, or that depression just *is* the brain patterning that coincides with reports of depression. And this is where the new wave of attention theorists have begun to deconstruct the discrepancy between the authority extended to third-party accounts and that extended to first person accounts of what conscious experience is like. They connect the accounts in a way that makes a great deal of sense: they keep in mind that the very idea of a third party account should remain grounded in first person accounts. We must pass through first person experience in order to get at the significance of third party accounts—this just intuitively seems the right way to think about the issue.

As early as 1993, Bruce Mangan remarked that cognitive science needed to heed the phenomenological "fringe" of consciousness, that without attending to such experience we would be limiting ourselves to the old behaviorist (dark) age in which "'Objective' psychology was purely scientific and experimental, while 'subjective' psychology concerned itself with consciousness. And consciousness was 'neither a definite nor a useable concept'. Behaviorism did much to embed this forced-choice presumption into subsequent thinking about consciousness."[24] Mangan goes on to remind us that there is nothing new about an interdisciplinary cognitive science, that phenomenology, "i.e., the directly felt qualities and structural features of experience," played a very important role in pre-behaviorist science. "Probably the best single example of the power of phenomenology in the mixed cognitive method comes from Hering's research on color vision. Drawing, in part, on absolutely subjective facts (e.g., that we experience yellow as a primary color and not as a mixture of red and green), Hering was able to deduce the structure of the neural mechanisms implied by the phenomenology."[25] This is the kind of thinking that our new wave of attention theories presupposes. We are obliged to shift our thinking about how to get at what attention is. We must go from the idea that attention is determined by its formal structure in brain patterns to the view that the formal structure of brain patterns that concur with acts of attention are determined, conversely, by the acts of attention themselves.

Harking back to Husserl, Natalie Depraz reminds us that "attentionality is a dimension of the acts of consciousness whose originality is to show the character of

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[24] Bruce Mangan, "Taking Phenomenology Seriously: The 'Fringe' and its Implications for Cognitive Research" in *Consciousness and Cognition*, 2 (1993), here citing Watson (1924), p. 90.
[25] *Ibid*., p. 91.

changing present in all the intentional acts of consciousness," that attention is therefore experienced as a highlighting of objects from out of the background of intelligibility available to consciousness, that "Whereas intentionality is a formal model of the structure of consciousness, whose openness lies in a linear directedness towards the object, attentionality as modulation furnishes every act of our consciousness with a material fluctuating density due to its inner variations and its concrete changeability."[26] Insofar as every act of consciousness, every conscious act, can be deemed "consciousness of" something, attention must be that modifier or modulator of consciouness that moves and determines the relevance of objects to a consciousness. But these attentional modifications occur in concrete situations. They are not experienced as some empty beam of light that seeks an object to pull out of the background. Rather, what an act of attention is can only be experienced at the moment of convergence of consciousness with its object, or that about which it is conscious.

Moreover, it is here that we confront a problem: what about those experiential instances where I am engaged in some project, say researching and writing a paper, and am presented with a number of different possible objects to attend to? Is it just the case that I select the objects according to some prioritized schedule that my consciousness originated by itself? It certainly seems like this must be a case where attention acts as if it were a searchlight emanating exclusively from my consciousness toward the selection of an object within the field that will suit its purposes.

[26] Natalie Depraz, "Where is the Phenomenology of Attention that Husserl Intended to Perform? A Transcendental Pragmatic-oriented Description of Attention" in *Continental Philosophy Review*, 37 (2004), p. 14.

Nevertheless, a great deal more than just my selection of an object from out of the field of possible objects has occurred in such a situation. An entire temporal trajectory has made the very field possible. Borrowing one of Husserl's examples[27], Anthony Steinbock reminds us that

> We hear a melody without it exercising any considerable affective force, since we are busy doing something else; it does not even register as a disturbance. Now there is a phrase that arouses either a particular pleasure or displeasure. The entire melody in the immediate present is accentuated, and in one stroke, the affection and the pleasure or displeasure radiates back into the past retentional phase, affectively highlighting it as a unity. Again, it is not only the present that gives the past an affective force that it never had before, but the whole melody gives even the instigating present a new affective prominence as a part of the whole melody.[28]

The connection of this example to the problem of how it can appear to be the case that my attention plays a primary role in the selection of its objects—the connection—is an easy one to see. At all times in which the activity of my consciousness is under observation, I must remind myself that the observation has occurred as the result of the removal of an isolated sequence from the broader stream of events that were in play and headed somewhere before they were observed. We want to say that a particular event of

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[27] Phenomenology has famously been accused of providing few and impotent examples. I think that such a claim is patently false. One can read Husserl's entire project (from start to finish) as one huge example of what he was talking about. People tend to discount the performative validity of attestation in the phenomenological project…or perhaps they are just wary of it…or perhaps they just do not want to dedicate the kind of work it takes to think through the examples they provide. In any event, here is a clear one.

[28] Anthony Steinbock, "Affection and Attention: On the Phenomenology of Becoming Aware" in *Continental Philosophy Review*, 37 (2004), pp. 29-30.

attentional activity can only be understood as removed from an attentional flow in which it was already underway—a difficult notion to follow, to be sure, but intuitively graspable nonetheless. Applied to my own example of writing a research paper, I draw attention to the circumstance in which I focus on a particular piece of relevant (relative to the priority list) information, a moment when I find the right piece, let us say. It looks as if the focal orientation of my attentional activity had everything to do with my locating the piece of information, but my own activity was in some sense defined by the information's having been there, by the fact that I was engaged in the activity in the first place, by my situation in regard to the trajectory of my whole life story, and so forth. The confluence of past and future possibilities had as much to do with the circumstance as did the isolated instance of my noticing regard.

Another group of folks from the Anglo-American academic tradition have recently emerged who are occupied with the same phenomena as their Continental counterparts. Sean D. Kelly concerns himself with the relevance of Phenomenology to cognitive science. He says,

> Phenomenology and brain science, then, are not at odds with one another. This is a point that Merleau-Ponty is not always so clear about, but that Dreyfus has emphasized repeatedly in his work with the neurophysiologist Walter Freeman. But if this is so, then what exactly is the right relation between phenomenology and brain science? I propose that the right relation between phenomenology and brain science is that of data to model: brain science is ultimately concerned with explaining the way the physical processes of the brain conspire to produce the phenomena of

> human experience; insofar as phenomenology devotes itself to the accurate description of these phenomena, it provides the most complete and accurate presentation of the data that ultimately must be accounted for by models of brain function. Thus, the phenomenological account of a given aspect of human behavior is meant to provide a description of those characteristics of the behavior which any physical explanation of it must be able to reproduce.[29]

Through a series of firsthand examples, Kelly demonstrates the need for the transmission of mutually beneficial information across the two fields. In many ways, he reconstructs the argument against empiricism and cognitive science that Merleau-Ponty makes in his "Introduction" to *Phenomenology of Perception*; and yet, according to the passage, Kelly hints at a conclusion different from the one drawn by Merleau-Ponty. Whereas Merleau-Ponty goes to great lengths to show how both the empiricist and the cognitivist work with derivative conceptions of the experience of perception, with conceptions that are parasitic on a more primordial sense of experience to which they have deprived themselves access, Sean Kelly seems committed to the view that phenomenology is engaged with the so-called raw data that brain science interprets according to the prearranged model indigenous to its current practices. On the face of it, given that Merleau-Ponty sought to privilege phenomenological accounts over the more theoretically dependent models for understanding perception, Kelly seems to be in agreement with the conclusions of *The Phenomenology of Perception* that phenomenological accounts of experience are foundational and should be revered as such.

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[29] Sean D. Kelly, *The Relevance of Phenomenology to the Philosophy of Language and Mind* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2001), p. 152.

But when Kelly says, "physical processes of the brain conspire to produce the phenomena of human experience," he departs from the discoveries reported in Merleau-Ponty's work. Merleau-Ponty, it seems fair to say, would not have admitted that the phenomena of human experience enjoy some underlying cause originating in brain activity. To think so would commit him to the view that there exists some distance between phenomena and experience; and surely Merleau-Ponty would at most admit that brain activity mirrors or subtends human experience, not that brains produce experience. Brain activity is certainly part of the experience that phenomenology seeks to describe. Brain activity is not separate from the experience for which phenomenology provides an account. Implicit in Kelly's work here is the rather messy unspoken premise that brain activity stands in some causal relation to experience and it would not be outrageous to realize that Kelly remains committed to the separation of mind from world in which mind affects world or in which world affects mind. This means that Kelly, though he probably would balk at the suggestion, rests committed to the subject-object distinction that characterizes the Cartesian world picture that Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty went well beyond.

The Need for a Newer Wave

The empirical scientific point of view that structures current work on attention performed by psychologists, neuro- and cognitive-scientists betrays an expected reliance on a conception of reality as consisting of subjects and objects in interaction with one another. Surprisingly, though in many ways more subtly, the new wave of professional philosophers who seem committed, in their endeavor to understand what it is to attend, to

including the overlooked discoveries made by Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty have themselves fallen back into the Cartesian world picture that the phenomenologists of the early Twentieth Century defeated. I suspect that the reason for their drifting has to do principally with their attempts to bridge the gap left open between the scientific and commonsense perspective of the world on the one hand, and the phenomenological philosophers on the other: they both, to different degrees, end up privileging the scientific point of view in their attempts to explain phenomenological accounts of experience in terms of it. The topic of attention, investigated within the paradigm of such a dichotomous conception of reality, will not escape the problems that face it until we broaden the discussion to include that which it has routinely overlooked. Phenomenology distorts the explanatory value of description so long as the dualism of subjects and objects as the theoretical model remains uncritically presupposed. In the next chapter, I will offer a clue as to the way out of this impasse by reflecting on the erroneous tendency to think of human history as presenting a perpetual progression of full moments of being and to thereby conceal the moments of non-being that encase them.

Chapter Three:

Attending to Attention

The Present

The French verb *attendre*, ordinarily translated into English as *to wait*, serves as the root (as does the Latin *attendere* from which the French word stems) for a number of different words that, while indicating seemingly dissimilar activities when translated into English, maintain very close ties in French to their roots. The word *attention* is such a word. When a Frenchman in the street says, "*Faites attention*!" he usually means something like "Step out of the flow of consciousness in which you currently find yourself and notice that which you were not (in that particular flow) previously able to see!" We hear, "Stop! Notice what's immediately in front of you! Pay attention!" and we would immediately commence to look for the new object to which his urgent cry intended to draw us. Parsed in this way, the phrase "*Faites attention*!" directs us in both languages to arrest the activity of consciousness in which we are engaged in order to bring a new object to our attention. In English, however, if we were to produce a traditional account of the event of paying attention, we would cast the description in terms of that new object toward which our focus of attention was to be directed. In common descriptive practice, we would skip right past the part of the experience where the directive meant for us to detain the further progression of our thought life. The description would move directly to an accounting of our consciousness as it is in the

presence of its new object. More precisely, the account of our consciousness would not begin until it had an intentional (in the Husserlian or Brentanoan sense, as "consciousness of" an) object. We are inclined to describe what it is to pay attention in terms of the object toward which our consciousness is directed without paying heed to that which happens between the events of our focalized consciousness.

These in-between times might be thought of as strange mental blank spots. They are times when our attentive focus is suspended while we locate a new object of attention. These moments of suspension, when we take the time to notice them, are described in terms of the other, the focalized, moments in which the objects of attention have come into view. We think of these strange mental blank spots as the indeterminate something through which attentive consciousness must pass on its way from one object to the next. But, this seems to suggest that consciousness as such is suspended during the blank periods, that consciousness as such is somehow distinguishable from the "indeterminate something" and that attentive consciousness, by consequence, does not participate in existence during these periods. These are the periods of waiting, seen by us as parasitic on the objects from which they leapt and toward which they aim, that the French word *attention* includes in preserving its ties to the root verb *attendre*; waiting is therefore, in French, part of the activity of attending to something. The object of attention awaits the arrival of our consciousness, while our consciousness looks for the anticipated object of its attention; at no point does consciousness exit the scene. The French sense of attending preserves, as part of what it means to pay attention, the *process* by which we come to attend to an object.

Upon reflection, we speakers of English will almost certainly assent to the proposition that we, too, mean to include the *process* by which we arrive at attending to the object of our attention in the account of what it is to pay attention. But I would like to draw attention to the subtle inclination we feel toward understanding what it is to pay attention in terms of *an object* on which our attention is focused. It does not seem to me that we need to think that attention must be construed in such a narrow object-generated fashion. Even if we think that no harm will come from using our everyday understanding of how one goes about paying attention as the starting point for our investigation, even if we think that the everyday understanding of attending to something necessarily presupposes the object of our attention as the point of origin of attending in general, it seems entirely likely that the assumptions with which we approach such an investigation might conceal something. It only makes sense to be wary here since, as we ordinarily characterize it, *any time we attend to something we do so to the exclusion of something else*. Our finitude demands of us that we give our attention to one thing (or constellation of things) at a time. Of course, we might argue it is not the case that we can focus on only one thing (or constellation of things) at a time, but our purposes here will not be affected by the likelihood that we experience degrees of consciousness that are neither narrowly focused nor totally absent of the background that our attentive gaze intends to illuminate. I stipulate that, while we experience attention by degrees, we are conceiving our object to be the undivided kind of attention; then, perhaps, we might be able to say something about the adumbrations of our attentive gaze.

Remaining within the orientation of an object-generated account of what it is to pay attention and reflecting a bit further, we might think of an exemplary situation in

which we paid attention. Certainly, our attentional gaze seems to be comparable to the conical ray of a searchlight, illuminating regions that were heretofore waiting in the dark background. Our gaze moves them into the foreground of our consciousness from out of the background. As our attentional gaze moves across the background of our consciousness, different objects or regions move into the foreground, forcing the previously foregrounded objects back into the background from which they originated. What we fail to notice under such an object-generated description, however, is that our attentional gaze has performed the additional activity of prioritizing the potential objects (in their potentiality) of our attention. Our attention has selected an item on which to focus, but in so doing, our attention has also selected items on which *not* to focus.

When we make something present to consciousness, we also make something absent. In order to notice that the activity of paying attention to something is composite in this way, we are forced to bring the activity or process of paying attention into the spotlight of our attentional gaze, thereby making the activity itself the object of our attention. We might then shift our attentional gaze onto the previously unnoticed feature of paying attention: the activity of making something absent. But as soon as we do, we will of necessity banish to the background our very activity of making an object present to consciousness. We really cannot make present that feature of paying attention that consists in making something absent from the foreground. And yet this is most definitely part of the activity of attending to something. I suspect the reason we encounter such difficulty has everything to do with our inclination to think that the genesis of the act of paying attention is in commerce with the object, to think that we are only conscious when

we are conscious of something, to think that we only pay attention when we pay attention to something.

Among the other words with which the etymological understanding of attention has affinity are the following: showing up, expecting, being moved, being present, concentrating the direction of one's mental powers, considering, caring, being ready, acting from a sense of courtesy or gallantry, and being in the service of someone (or something).[30] Can we assent to the possibility that an understanding of what it is to pay attention simultaneously conveys all of these meanings as well? Can we keep all of these meanings simultaneously in play while we attend to something? The picture I have in mind is one in which we would be able to isolate from the stream of our existence a succession of moments to which we would ascribe the temporal ekstasis of "presence" in order to see whether or not we can capture the full spectrum of subtlety that the French meaning of the word *attention* carries along with it. But, here again, I am recommending an engagement with the topic of attention that will have objectified and detached (from its home in the flow of consciousness) the process by which we attend to something. I seem to have embarked on a circular journey. The possibility of a description of what it is to give attention to something seems limited either to an occupation with the object of attention *simpliciter* or to the proposed initial step of converting the process of paying attention into an object so that my attention will have an object on which to focus. A proper description of attention seems to necessitate the isolation of an object for investigation; and that means that any description whatsoever of what it is to pay

[30] *The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Pleasantville, NY: The Reader's Digest Association, 1968), "attention", p. 93.

attention will depend on the *presence* of an object to my attention or on the *presence* of my attention to an object.

From Accountability to Attention

We hold people accountable for their actions. We think that there is some relationship between the decisions people make, the consequences that the realization of those decisions produces, who those people are, what they deserve, and the circumstances in which they dwell (once having recognized that they have such circumstances, we hold them accountable for their acquiescence to or their rebellion against those circumstances). We like to think that the decisions we make will render us deserving of an anticipated set of desired circumstances—we do so because we are convinced that we have some influence on our own future. We invite other people to hold us accountable for our own actions. We maintain this invitation until some rupture in the fluidity into which flow our decisions and our actions causes us to except ourselves from the accountability to which we have held ourselves and others; sometimes, we accept limited degrees of accountability—at such times we, on reflection, see that we failed to anticipate, and yet should have anticipated, the eventuality of the consequences of our deliberations to act; sometimes, we accept full responsibility even though we do not think, owing to some unforeseeable occurrence that prevented us from fulfilling our anticipated projects, that we should be held accountable; and sometimes we wish that others would not hold us accountable for actions even though we know they should and despite the fact that, given the reverse scenario, we would probably hold them responsible.

Implicit in all of my descriptive speculations is the idea that thinking, action, life-story, and consequences are (or should be), in some tangible way, integrally related. Without thinking, there could be no significant connection to action, life-story, and consequences. Without consequences, the relationship between thinking, action and life-story would be empty. Without action, the substantive meaning of thinking, life-story and consequences disappears. And without life-story, what would be the point of talking about thinking, action and consequences? There are certainly examples that might reveal the existence of any number or combination of these while not including them all. We might think for instance of occasions where thinking is clearly missing from the action a person takes—most of the pranks in which the contributors to the television show *Jackass* participate would serve as such instances. Or we might think of circumstances where consequences for a person's actions seem conspicuously to be absent from their life-story—the current President of the United States comes to mind. We might even think of people whose experiences do not seem to add up to a life-story—wanderers, people who let the spirit move them, who go the direction of the wind. But such examples usually involve deliberation about the appropriate ascription of accountability to the particular situation from which they emerged. Following Harry Frankfurt, we would like to think that accountability—thought of loosely as moral responsibility—goes along with personhood and that personhood consists in the integral relationship of these four components.[31]

While a study of these four components—thinking, action, consequences, life-story—in their relationship to each other must surely be important, I would like to make

[31] See Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the will and the concept of a person," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 17.

use of this occasion to draw attention to a feature that seems to underlie them all and that in so doing asks to be considered prior to any further examination of the connection between human agency and personal identity: that feature is *attention*. Any relevant sense in which we seek to connect our thought with action, life-story and consequences must surely involve our having had those things in mind when we acted. It is not very difficult to see that attention is a necessary presupposition that underlies discussions of accountability when thinking about events, say, where we have unwittingly hurt someone's feelings. We ask for forgiveness on grounds that we did not mean to hurt them, that we did not attend with enough vivacity to the possibility that our words and actions might result in their feelings being hurt. In fact, attention seems without fail to be a necessary element in bringing any sort of thought to realization in an action. Despite the fact that unpleasant consequences happen sometimes when our attention to detail failed, our ability to avoid those same consequences in the future depends on our attention to them. And in order to tell a life story, we must have been able to attend to the requisite opportunities that would make such a story possible. Attention pervades all aspects of the kinds of relations between thinking, action, life-story and consequences that culminate in that which we think of as personhood.

What Attention is at First Glance

It might be useful at this point to think about what attention is. The very grammatical structure of the phrase "pay attention!" seems to presuppose a freedom on our part to direct the currency of our consciousness toward the metaphorical purchase of objects in the world. We must be free to direct the focus of our attention. Such a view

implies that attention emanates from inside our consciousness and acts as a searchlight shining on various features of the environment in which we live. But this autonomy already itself presupposes precisely the kind of subject/object detachment that Heidegger and his followers strived so judiciously to eradicate. If we are supposed to look at our own experience of the world in order to arrive at the richest possible description of experience in general, then we quickly thereafter notice that there are certain postures that the very act of describing requires us to adopt. These postures in turn make it incumbent on us to assume the existence of a world divided into that to which we attend and that toward which we remain in the dark. Some people characterize this distinction as the mark of human finitude, as the reality of the way the world shows up for us, as the never-ending movement of objects of our attention from the background into the foreground and back again—as if there were some world that sits in wait for the blessing of our recognition of it.

Virginia Woolf strikes me as able to be of some help in speaking about this distinction in her unique way of converting the ordinary into the extraordinary. She speaks of "moments of being" in contrast to "moments of non-being". Woolf admits a certain perplexity at how to describe the moments of non-being. Yet she notices that, "Every day includes much more non-being than being."[32] By "moments of being", she means to draw our attention to those moments that come easily to mind as we take inventory of the day, hour, or minute that just passed. We may remember having lunch with a friend and being completely unencumbered by the weighty financial obligations that bothered us just prior to lunchtime. In other words, we remember giving our

[32] Virginia Woolf, "Sketch of the Past" from *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, p. 70.

undivided attention to our lunch companion. We remember being, so to speak, completely absorbed in the moment, without distraction. "These separate moments of being," says Woolf, "were however embedded in many more moments of non-being. I have already forgotten what Leonard and I talked about at lunch; and at tea; although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool. This is always so. A great part of every day is not lived consciously."[33] Moments of being, on her account, are actually the rarities that emerge from out of the cottony wool of the moments of non-being that surround them. Moments of being are in this sense derivative of the moments of non-being in which our consciousness resides proximally and for the most part.

The significance of Woolf's prosaic account of the way our consciousness spends most of its day is that, if she was right, then our fully conscious interaction with the world in which we dwell is quite limited, even rare. Yet, when giving an account of our life in some narrative form, we specify a continuous thread of the moments of being that constitute the story we relate. We configure our story with the moments of our existence that are the rarest. What about those moments of non-being that initially surrounded the moments of being? What can we say about those? Perhaps they provide the background of our story—Virginia Woolf might have said, "I was at lunch with Leonard when the funniest thing happened," …then, filled that in with a story and followed it up with… "and we all lived [in Woolf's case perhaps not so] happily ever after." The key feature of this example is its exclusion of the moments of non-being from the telling. If it is the case that these moments of non-being take up most of our time and that moments of

[33] *Ibid*.

being occur only rarely and from out of the cottony wool of the non-being moments, and if we can conceive of the moments of non-being as moments where we do not pay attention while moments of being represent moments where we do, then there might be a problem with the way we license our judgments of accountability. It occurs to me that a robust account of the means by which a human being comes properly to be called "agent" in a specified course of events, the means by which a human being may be held accountable for his actions, needs to consider that of which we remain only vaguely aware, those moments of non-being to which Virginia Woolf refers.

A Deeper Sense of Attention

So far, we have moved from speculations about what we hold people accountable for when we hold them accountable; we noticed that our speculations were missing something, viz., a story about how attention figures into the picture; we then took a first go at what attention is—here we noticed that our attention is like a searchlight emanating from us that shines on features of the world that seem to wait for us; we remarked that a great part of our days are not spent consciously; and then we moved to the suggestion that we should understand a bit more about the inattentive remainder of our conscious life before we can speak justly about human agency. But we have left many loose ends in the telling of our story about the relationship between attention and agency. Our suspicion is that the searchlight simile we used to describe attention still lacks something crucial. We should take the time now to enhance our view.

In one of the opening chapters of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty spends considerable time paying heed to our concern. The chapter, entitled

"Attention and Judgment", is contained within the rather large introductory movement that Merleau-Ponty makes toward the view that the Empiricist/Cognitivist (in Merleau-Ponty's terms, "Empiricist/Intellectualist") debate is founded on a mistake about perception. With regard to attention *per se*, both the empiricists and the cognitivists have helped themselves to the assumption that there is something constant—whether in the world as the empiricist would have it, or in the observer's mental apparatus as the cognitivist would have it—around which a theory of attention may center itself.[34] Of more pressing concern, however, is the status of the role that attention plays in the empiricist/cognitivist picture. For the empiricist, "Attention is […] a general and unconditioned power in the sense that at any moment it can be applied indifferently to any content of consciousness. Being everywhere barren, nowhere can it have its own purposes to fulfil."[35] Merleau-Ponty suspects that attention, for the empiricist account of perception, is merely an empty concept of activity (the perceiver's screen is turned on), a functional capacity that only gets activated when the world makes some sort of impression on our senses. Attention, viewed in this way, is a searchlight that sits in wait for some item to show up as surprising so that objects of sense experience may be seen from out of their pre-existing darkness.[36] Merleau-Ponty is concerned that such a conception of attention begs for an explanation of how it is that the world, seen as over-against the observer of it, possesses such a magnetic draw on our mental machinery. Attention merely acts as the conduit through which the world gets lit up for us.

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[34] While the "constancy hypothesis", the notion that there is an immovable fact of the matter when it comes to the interaction of mind and world, serves as the *bête noir* throughout the "Introduction" to the *Phenomenology of Perception* (see, in particular, pp. 8-9 and 30-37), I take the fiction of such constancy to be sufficiently established without having to rehash Merleau-Ponty's argument.

[35] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 31. He has Locke in mind here.

[36] *Ibid*., p. 30.

Attention, for the cognitivist, seems at first blush to have a much more active role to play. Because the intellect implicitly contains within its memory-banks the framework of intelligibility that corresponds to the essential structure of the object to which it attends, the activity of attending to an object appears to play a sort of constitutive role for the intellect. But, in virtue of the assumption that there is in the world some objective essential structure that the intellect seeks to replicate for itself, attention plays no active role. That is what Merleau-Ponty indicates when he says, "But in a consciousness which constitutes everything, or rather which eternally possesses the intelligible structure of all its objects, just as in empiricist consciousness which constitutes nothing at all, attention remains an abstract and ineffective power, because it has no work to perform."[37] Attention, just as it does in the empiricist account, impotently awaits direction from the intellect; and a proper theory of attention relies completely on an atomistic subject-object distinction.

For Merleau-Ponty, such views do not account for that about attention which we, in our everyday lives, know to be there: that our attention actually has the capability to alter that with which it comes into contact. "Attention first of all," says Merleau-Ponty, "presupposes a transformation of the mental field, a new way for consciousness to be present to its objects."[38] Even in making the move from attending to some object, say this piece of paper on which I am typing these words, to attending to my own act of attending to some object, I am able to see that attention itself is capable of shifting focus from one field of inquiry to another that seems qualitatively to differ from it. But furthermore, my attention to particular details within the field of consciousness, within

[37] *Ibid*., p. 32.
[38] *Ibid*., p. 33.

the scope of my attention, suggests that I can take some action toward those details that will result in a qualitative change of their spatio-temporal position, of their meaning, of the priority of their relation to other details within the field. Attention plays an active role. Merleau-Ponty adds that,

> To pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as *figures*. They are preformed only as *horizons*, they constitute in reality new regions in the total world. It is precisely the original structure which they introduce that brings out the identity of the object before and after the act of attention.[39]

Attention then constitutes that which sits in the distant and formless horizon, the background, thereby bringing it to the foreground of a life project that is heading toward completion.

> Thus attention is neither an association of images, nor the return to itself of thought already in control of its objects, but the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon. At the same time as it sets attention in motion, the object is at every moment recaptured and placed once more in a state of dependence on it.[40]

Our capacity to attend to objects of our perception actually plays a role in activating the way the world shows up to us.

The metaphorical searchlight shines from behind the objects of perception towards us, not as the representationalist picture would have it, from in front, creating a

[39] *Ibid*., p. 35.
[40] *Ibid*.

snapshot of the object that will stay in our brain. The cognitivist, as Sean Kelly reminds, "misses the phenomenological fact that such distances [between objects of perception and the perceiver] are experienced not as determinate values, but rather as pre-determinate deviations from an optimum not yet achieved."[41] The entire status of attention shifts here from our initial conception of it as masterful in its quest to illuminate items waiting in blackout on some sort of stage in a Cartesian theater. Instead, attention is beginning to look like a blend of active receptivity and receptive activity. Staying with Sean Kelly's explication of Merleau-Ponty, we highlight the following: "the thing is not an entity whose constant size and shape are constituted by me in the process of perception. Rather the reverse. The very possibility of determinate features characterizable in terms of law-like relations is enabled by the self-evidence, in perception of the thing with its definite size and shape," and further on he says, "The thing is precisely that optimum towards which each of my perceptual attitudes tends, and so is given implicitly in all of them."[42] There is a sort of mutual constitution between object and perceiver that attention facilitates. We are left with this much more richly textured and intuitively familiar account of the dynamic relationship that exists between our attention and its objects: they mutually constitute *each other*.

The Concealed Being of Attention

Our attention to objects of perception now exhibits a deeper liaison between our thinking and the world about which we think, a liaison suggesting that the relationship between thought and world is not uni-directional—neither going in the one direction

[41] See Sean Kelly, *The Relevance of Phenomenology to the Philosophy of Language and Mind*, p. 57.
[42] *Ibid*.

(from thought to world), nor going in the other (from objectively conceived world to thought)—but is, rather, constituted by our attentively being in the world. Even so, why have we not noticed this before? We need only try to capture ourselves in the act of attending to some object of perception to see that there exists a problem. When we attend to our attention, i.e., when we pay attention to our own act of paying attention, we cannot help but notice that that to which we (just prior to our shift of focus) were attending has suddenly slipped into suspense, into some sort of holding tank. Perhaps this is a mark of our finitude, of a limit horizon beyond which there is only background (out of the background you came and into the background you shall return!). On the other hand, perhaps the characterization of attention as confined to a limit horizon might just be the mark of our own shrinking back from having traveled this distance toward uncovering what attention is. Or perhaps the very nature of attention itself wants to remain undisclosed.

In his early work, Paul Ricœur believed that attention terminates in choice, where, by *choice,* in contrast to the way we usually employ the word, he means, "the event which resolves into a univocal project the antecedent indetermination which, in most favorable instances, is raised to the dignity of an alternative in the process of clarification of motives."[43] Attention plays a quite significant role in the events that bridge the gap between our deliberating about a decision, our making a decision to do something and our choice. For Ricœur, again, choice is the actual completed decision realized through the *attendant* actions that make it possible. Choice is not some empty sort of statement we might make to ourselves like "today, I choose to be happy." Instead, it is the actual

[43] See Paul Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, p. 164.

being happy that follows from having made such a decision. Decisions become choices when they are fulfilled. This way of thinking about choice leads us to consider the possibility that our commonsense way of thinking about it was wrongly directed. It appears to be the case, and Ricœur spends considerable time on this, that the nature of our deliberations oriented toward making decisions that culminate in choices—the nature of them—consists in being forgotten. He says that, "the event of choice stands in a peculiar relation to the process which precedes it: it *completes* it and at the same time *breaks it off*. A living dialectic constantly brings us back from one aspect of choice to the other: choice as the *peak* of previous growth and as the *surge* of novelty."[44] In coming to completion as the height, or peak as he would say, the dramatic nature of the surge calls attention to itself as the moment toward which all incidental and previous moments were aimed. Our memory of the constitution of the choice gets covered over by the completion, the realization, of our decision. We want to say that it is simply the essence of choice itself that seduces us to forget the moments that made it possible.

Attention pervades such forgotten moments through and through. Our use of the word *attendant* as affixed to the actions above was deliberate since Ricœur explicates attention in a way that gives it special meaning. *Attention* for him brings that which is to be deliberated to the table, carries the deliberation process toward its conclusion in a decision, and finally urges the decision toward its realization in a choice. But attention's job seems to end there. And this notion needs careful consideration because it, too, is not what it seems to be. Speaking first of the way attention relates to its objects he says, "Herein lies the secret of attention: when an object becomes detached from the

[44] *Ibid*., p. 164.

background of which it is a part, it remains the same as to its meaning. I do not know another object, but rather the same one more clearly."[45] And then later, "Thus the essence of attention is that temporal shift of vision which turns towards or turns away from and thus makes an object appear such as it is in itself, that is, such as it already covertly was in the background."[46] We see here a double aspect of attention—that it relates to an object and that it relates (in general). Attention both affects and is affected by the object of its perception. And yet attention, seen as double-affection, gets clouded over by the moment at which it fulfills its aim.

But this is only the first bite of attention as we experience it in perception, which for Ricœur presents us with the structure of perception itself: in searching attentively to comprehend the object of our perception, we become possessed by that object. In becoming something for us the object of our attention announces that we have become something for it as well. So there is in attention both an active and a receptive element of constitutive import to the act of perception in general. But this intertwining of activity and receptivity plays a role, too, in the deliberation that leads to a decision and that subsequently culminates in a choice. Attention attends to possibilities in deliberation, highlighting variations, looking at trajectories. And in each case, attention imagines a scenario in which certain possibilities become realized. In this way, attention is both receptive—giving us over to certain projects that appear as mere figures—and voluntary. "The voluntary complex is what gives the debate as such a forward thrust and bestows on choice through which it will be expressed a future mark, the sign 'to be done by me'

[45] *Ibid*., p. 154.
[46] *Ibid*., pp. 155-156. Ricœur relies here on Husserl's special understanding of the "things themselves," better thought of as the "matters themselves."

which the pure act of attention to ultimate reasons does not include."[47] Hence, attention is equiprimordially active: "Thus the moment of resolved attention is the gesture indicating the alternative which will be chosen, of constituting the direction of an action held in suspension by hesitation."[48] In choosing, we cut off the process of deliberation that relied wholly on the focus of our attention. Cutting off attention in this way, liberates our attention to set its sights on a new project. Attention slips into the background again, making it appear as if it were never there. This is what makes attention so difficult to grasp. Still, we can see that our attention is always somewhere, even though we may not be able to locate its object (in inattention).

Thought of as serving some purpose efficacious at bringing about decisions, or the actualization of choice, attention shares similarities with temporary employees whose job is focalized to such a degree that, once accomplished, there no longer exists the need for their services to the task. The account of attention ascribed here to Ricœur pushes toward the conclusion that attention moves stealthily from one object to another; but even accepting this more profound understanding of attention and the phenomenology of the intractability of it, we are missing the kind of developed sense of what it is to pay attention that we sought in the first place. What seems to be standing in the way of a full account of attention, at least for the early Ricœur, is the familiar reliance on presence that pervades the tradition. Perhaps there is another way to think about it.

[47] *Ibid*., p. 165.
[48] *Ibid*.

Unwrapping the Present: a Deconstruction

In the early part of his career, Jacques Derrida nurtured the germinating seed planted by Heidegger that was to grow into a critique of the metaphysics of presence. In light of the directionality of our investigation into what it means to give attention to something, in light of the apparent inevitability of constructing our project in terms either of the presence of an object to consciousness or of the presence of consciousness to its object, a look at Derrida's critique seems appropriate at this stage of the investigation. Since presence does seem to be the common denominator pervading our attempts to describe paying attention so far, we need to consider the status of its alleged indispensability to such an examination. We will consider Heidegger's contribution first. Then we will move to some of Derrida's clarification and subsequent recontextualization of the problem. After doing so, we will think about how a phenomenology of attention might be possible without tethering itself to the metaphysics of presence that Heidegger and Derrida thought mesmerized the history of thought.

According to Heidegger, the historical development of Western thought from Plato onward has fallen under the spell of the forgetfulness of Being. Heidegger meant to draw attention to the particular orientation to the question of Being initiated at the time of the Greeks—an orientation that aimed at understanding Being (what it is, what it means, to be) through an understanding of beings or entities (those things) that are. Heidegger understood that such an orientation announced (and perhaps constituted) a difference between Being and beings—a difference which he referred to as the "ontological difference". And he demonstrated that the ontological difference gave birth to an ontological tradition that concealed Being by taking it as a foregone conclusion that

Being would reveal itself through the beings it inhabited. It only makes sense to strive to understand Being through the lens of those things that are most likely to reveal it; but the fact that it makes sense to conceive of the project of understanding Being in this way (i.e., through an understanding of that which *is*) and that we have adopted this as the exclusive way—the *fact* that we might find this conception appealing—already reveals the development of a disposition to exalt the method by which we come to understand what a thing is by looking at it. Our attention shifts from the *isness* of that which is to the *whatness* of entities—what makes them the kinds of things that they are, how do they come to function as they do, why are they here? These are all legitimate kinds of questions to ask, but they do not tell us about Being. Responses to them will not tell us about the meaning of Being. Instead, they will prejudice us toward thinking that the answers to such questions will comprise the meaning of Being. Rather than recognizing the diversion of our attention from its original focus, we reorient the region of our concern to match the kinds of questions that we have been led to ask. And this oversight has amounted to the concealment of the question of the meaning of Being.

Heidegger believed that the ontological tradition needed to be deconstructed (though his word for *deconstruction* was the German *Destruktion*, which may be translated as *destruction*, but actually means to examine and peel away the structural preconditions for the possibility of existence of the object of inquiry) in writing, "The question of Being does not achieve its true concreteness until we have carried through the process of destroying the ontological tradition. In this way we can fully prove that the question of the meaning of Being is one that we cannot avoid, and we can demonstrate

what it means to talk about 'restating' this question."[49] Being careful here to notice that Heidegger speaks of the true concreteness that we are to achieve with respect to *the question* of the meaning of Being, I realize that the destruction of the history of ontology will serve merely as a prelude to the requisite attunement to the question of the meaning of Being that will then (hopefully) yield fruitful results.

Heidegger felt it necessary to get out from underneath the tradition that he held responsible for the forgetfulness of Being. In an earlier passage, Heidegger reveals a clue that might assist in coming to see how history has concealed that which would authentically orient us to the question of the meaning of Being:

> In other words, in our process of destruction we find ourselves faced with the task of Interpreting the basis of the ancient ontology in the light of the problematic of Temporality. When this is done, it will be manifest that the ancient way of interpreting the Being of entities is oriented towards the 'world' or 'Nature' in the widest sense, and that it is indeed in terms of 'time' that its understanding of Being is obtained. The outward evidence for this (though of course it is merely outward evidence) is the treatment of the meaning of Being as παρουσία or οὐσία, which signifies, in ontologico-Temporal terms, 'presence' ["Anwesenheit"]. Entities are grasped in their Being as 'presence'; this means that they are understood with regard to a definite mode of time—the '*Present*'.[50]

[49] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1962), H. 26, p. 49.
[50] *Ibid*., H. 25, p. 47.

According to the translator of the text of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Heidegger here engages himself with a bit of careful word play that seeks to preserve the polysemy unified under the Greek understanding of the words *ousia* and *parousia* that, given the right kind of consideration can be seen in the German *Anwesenheit*. *Ousia*, translated differently as demanded of its use within the context of a particular tradition, is usually translated as *substance* (in the Aristotelian tradition) or as *essence*, *existence*, or *being* (on behalf of the Platonic tradition, where *eidos* was on the way to becoming understood in terms commensurate with *ousia*). Heidegger was interested in understanding what these various translations through their development over time came to preserve; but in discovering what they preserve, he believed he would be granted access to that which concealed itself underneath the preservation. The translator writes, " 'die *Gegenwart*'. While this noun may, like παρουσία or 'Anwesenheit', mean the presence of someone at some place or on some occasion, it more often means the *present*, as distinguished from the past and the future. In its etymological root-structure, however, it means a *waiting-towards*."[51] The significance of the etymological approach to the tracing of the history of the question of the meaning of Being announces itself here: etymology reveals how the characterization of Being has traveled toward the belief that the question will be adequately formulated if we simply pose it in such a way as to permit a response that comes in terms of substance. That is to say, if it is the case that we determine in advance, as an appropriate answer to the question of the meaning of Being, that what will count as a reply must be formulated in terms of substance, then we have precluded the possibility that any other kind of response might be operative in settling the question.

[51] *Ibid*., p. 47.

As Heidegger pushes us to see, *ousia* was construed within the Platonic tradition to mean essence, existence, being—all translations that themselves presume to reveal a permanence of focal point or a persistence through time of that which shows itself through that which *is* (a notion that was previously captured by the word *eidos*). This means that the Platonic tradition established a framework into which any answer to the question of the meaning of Being must conform. From there, the Aristotelian tradition began to configure appropriate replies to the question of the meaning of Being in terms of a description of the substance of the thing under investigation. What a thing *is* is now conceived in terms of what it possesses, viz. its substance; a thing simply *is* its substance. And, already it has become obvious that the nature of the meaning of Being has begun to take the shape of a partial and derivative account of what it is to be. The history of thought has thereby foreclosed the possibility of arriving at the kind of fullness that the original question of the meaning of Being demanded in the way of a response.

Derrida attunes his critique of the metaphysics of presence to the abovementioned sort of Heideggerian analysis. The inception of the ontological tradition that is under our deconstructive gaze has preserved something in the way of a trace, a metaphorical trail of breadcrumbs that we can follow to see where metaphysics first began to determine the authority of the description of that which *is* on the basis of presence. This is difficult to conceive without first fixing the meaning of some of the key terms. In the first place, *metaphysics* I take to refer to the field of philosophical investigative practices that seek to understand the being of what *is* from the standpoint of the that-for-the-sake-of-which and the that-in-virtue-of-which an entity is what it is, from the standpoint of its hidden causes and conditions. Metaphysics, then, would seek a fixed foundation from which things

become what they are and to which anyone in possession of the right kind of insight may refer. As it was explained to me once, if physics selects a particular tree as the proper object of its investigation, then metaphysics will be interested in the roots from whose nourishment the tree gains its strength and on account of whose being the tree depends (the roots are the that-for-the-sake-of-which the tree not only *is* but also *is what* it is).

Secondly, following Derrida and Heidegger before him, I take *presence* to refer to one of the three temporal *ekstases* that the ontological tradition has historically viewed as separable from its counterparts. Though presented with sensitivity to a different existential import by Heidegger, I will think of the *ekstases* as the past, the present, and the future. As our investigation has hinted up to this point, the history of Western thought has come to construe presence as manifest in a number of different ways: as *eidos*—presence of a thing to sight; as *ousia*—presence conceived as substance (as shown above); *stigmē* and *nun*—as a point on the spatio-temporal time line, as the now; as *cogito*—as presence of a thinking subject; but also as the presence of the sensible object itself in distinction from its intelligible essence or *eidos*. We need do nothing more than discern the differences between these conceptions in order to see that their differences share something in common—they each respectively represent modifications or adaptations to their ancestors of the understanding of presence as it has evolved over the history of Western thought—a movement that has led to the detachment of subject and object from each other, the subject-object distinction, that has come to dominate our way of experiencing the world. Transported along with the earliest presentation of presence as *eidos*, as that which shines through that which appears or as that which co-presents itself along with the sensible object, is the point of origin from which our contemporary

conception of the world as consisting of objects for a subject (and therefore consisting of subjects and objects that are distinct from one another) has developed.

Hence, *metaphysics of presence* would mean to indicate an investigative philosophical practice whose objective is to provide an account of the being of what is from the privileged standpoint of the presence of a subject and an object at an event of presencing—whether it be sensible or intelligible—as it is for modernity. Any understanding of Being within a metaphysics of presence will necessarily depend on the thought that Being can be removed from the stream of its existence in order that it may be present to an inquirer as to its being. In still other words, a metaphysics of presence supposes that, from the flow of the constantly temporalizing stream of what is, we can isolate and objectify and put in stasis that which is. A metaphysics of presence supposes that what is should be seen as standing out, away from what it is in order to be correctly seen.

Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence, as it was initiated in his *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, calls into question the privileging of presence from among the other temporal *ekstases*. He points out that the traditional ontology has comported itself toward a situation in which, in order to investigate the fundamental presuppositions that underlie it, ontology must conceive of the presence of its object as somehow re-presentable. Contemporary empirical science depends upon the reproducibility of its experiments to demonstrate that they will yield the same results over various periods of time and under various conditions—this is the privileged sort of presence that we have in mind. Derrida challenges Husserl's reliance on reproducibility in this work. He writes,

> Let us note only, in order to here specify our intention, that phenomenology seems to us tormented, if not contested from within, by its own descriptions of the movement of temporalization and of the constitution of intersubjectivity. At the heart of what ties together these two decisive moments of description we recognize an irreducible nonpresence as having constituting value, and with it a nonlife, a nonpresence or nonself-belonging of the living present, an ineradicable nonprimordiality. The names which it assumes only render more palpable the resistance to the form of presence. Briefly, it is a question of (1) the necessary transition from retention to *re-presentation* (*Vergegenwärtigung*) in the constitution of the presence of a temporal object (*Gegenstand*) whose identity may be repeated; and (2) the necessary transition by way of *appresentation* in relation to the *alter ego*, that is, in relation to what also makes possible an ideal objectivity, which is absolute only in the case of ideal objects. What in the two cases is called a modification of presentation (*re*-presentation, *ap*-presentation) (*Vergegenwärtigung* or *Appräsentation*) is not something that happens to presentation but rather conditions it by bifurcating it *a priori*.[52]

Husserl's project, as dependent as it is on getting "to the matters themselves" as they would be in separation from the impurities of traditional assumptions, falls prey to the unexamined presupposition that underscores the entire history of Western philosophy: the metaphysics of presence. What is this constitutive "nonpresence" of which Derrida

[52] Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, translated by David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 6-7.

speaks? He mentions the movement from retention (in memory, according to Husserl's scheme) to re-presentation. By this, Derrida seems to mean that there is a not-so-patently obvious bit of non-consciousness that accompanies the frequently occurring human act of calling up an item from the memory banks into presence. When we call up a memory, we undergo a process by which we make present to ourselves something that was present at an earlier time. But, we have undergone alterations in the period of time (even if only minutes have transpired) since we supposedly had the experience as it was present to us. Remembering, if that is all it takes, depends on our ability to call up memories and make them present to our consciousness as they were when they were originally presented. Even if we factor in the impossibility of a memory that could withstand the modification traversing the course of our life experience (since its initial presence to our consciousness), the fact that we are aware of such factoring presumes that, at least in principle, we could get at the pure presence of the experience. But this could not take place, i.e., if we accept the idea that we undergo changes at every moment—even if we do not accept the idea outright, we will be forced to admit that the addition of a memory to our memory banks alters that which was the case before we made a memory of it.

Moreover, the very possibility of *re*-presentation, that is, of that which was previously presented as present being made present again, relies on the other temporal *ekstases* of the past and the future. In the first place, the retaining of a situation in my memory banks that occurs in the present is a retention that depends on my continued ability to call it up. In converting a present event into a memory, I must contain it in such a way as to preserve it for the future. But in order to do that, I must be instantaneously able to determine that about the situation that will be significant in the future. But, I

cannot with certainty predict what the future will demand of my memory. It is in this way that a retained memory will undergo unnoticeable changes as my life experiences continue to build. Retention would have to differ from presence, both in its ability to represent the present and in the content of that which it presents—both in terms of the type of process that it is and in terms of the object that it retains. Later, Derrida says,

> Without reducing the abyss which may indeed separate retention from re-presentation, without hiding the fact that the problem of their relationship is none other than that of the history of "life" and of life's becoming conscious, we should be able to say *a priori* that their common root—the possibility of re-petition in its most general form, that is, the constitution of a trace in the most universal sense—is a possibility which not only must inhabit the pure actuality of the now but must constitute it through the very movement of différance it introduces. Such a trace is—if we can employ this language without immediately contradicting it or crossing it out as we proceed—more "primordial" than what is phenomenologically primordial.[53]

The idea is that it is by no means clear how this gulf that exists between the original presentation or presencing of an object to consciousness and its re-presentation from having been retained in memory could call to mind anything other than what appears to be an inherent difficulty. The establishment of a trace—which occurs according to the passage within the same pure actuality of the now within which the presentation of the event happens—is from the outset, and even before its instantiation, meant to be left as a

[53] *Ibid*., p. 67.

point of reference for some future time. This is disconcerting for Husserl's programme because it is an instance in which the leaving of a trace in the now can only happen by reference to the future—the trace is always a trace for the future. But the trace must also be laid by reference to a past in which traces have been accessible from a future that was not yet present at the time it was laid. Presence, the temporal *ekstasis* of the present, seems under this description to be impossible except by reference to its counterparts: the past and the future. A metaphysics of presence will be haunted by the discovery that there is no pure presence, that the temporal ekstases work in tandem with one another, only separable by an investigation that separates them for the sake of some purpose other than to see how they work together.

On a less theoretical (but by no means less complicated) account Derrida speaks of the key notion of *différance*. He says,

> Différance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be "present," appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present. In order for it to be, an interval must separate it from what it is not; but the interval that constitutes it in the present must also, and by the same token, divide the present in itself, thus dividing, along with the present,

> everything that can be conceived on its basis, that is, every being—in particular, for our metaphysical language, the substance or subject.[54]

Emphatically, Derrida's work here implies that there is no such thing as a pure present, a present that stands uncontaminated by its relation to a past and to a future. Thinking about how meaning comes to be discernible from out of the (at times) ceaseless parade of blooming, buzzing, confusion of chatter that surrounds us, it strikes me that, saying or being something presupposes the kind of scenario described here—not just sometimes, but anytime we utter something that is intended to be meaningful. The meaning of whatever we say must be distinguishable from the words we utter so that we can allow for clarification of our points, or our meaning when we speak. What we say must differ at least in some slight sense from what we mean because we are incapable of grasping fully how our words are going to be taken by those who listen to them. Equiprimordially, the meaning of whatever we utter must also be deferred, not only in the sense just mentioned of the lag between my spoken word and its receipt by a hearer, but also in terms of a future that is impossible to predict. My statements may express meanings of which I am not aware at the time of their utterance. But my statements are also uttered within contexts which participate in the constitution of their meanings. It is not difficult to see that the most pointed of critiques of the metaphysics of presence must lie in the possibility of the impossibility of the present as such. We can speak of a present time or a present tense, but we thereby call into presence something that does not exist in itself. The present can only be spoken of in terms of its relation to the past and to the future.

[54] Derrida, "Différance", from *Speech and Phenomena*, pp. 142-3.

Can we realistically conceive of an application of this truth to the way we comport ourselves in endeavors other than discussions of a philosophical nature?

Rewrapping the Present: Recontextualizing What it is to Pay Attention

I opened this chapter with a cursory attempt to get at what it is to pay attention and discovered that my resources for articulating a phenomenology of attention were all victimized by their dependence on the old subject-object detachment that philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida struggled to get beyond. I noticed that my descriptions kept relying on a conceptualization of attention that made of it something akin to a beacon of light that emanates from my consciousness onto the world, as if my consciousness were detachable from that world and as if that world were just sitting there waiting to be illuminated by my beacon. More importantly, however, my descriptions presupposed precisely the kind of metaphysics of presence that seems now to be in some sense mythological. I suspect that the same movement that needs to be applied to the subject-object distinction (and its trappings of mind-body detachability, substance ontology and the like) should also be applied to the illusion of presence in accounting for the being of what is. The question now is how to go about conceptualizing such a turn. How can we reorient the description of what it is to give our attention to something so that we would no longer depend on the problems of the history of philosophy, but rather on the solutions offered by the critics of the metaphysics of presence?

The limitation that confronted us at the conclusion of the first part of this chapter committed us to the inevitability of determining what it is to pay attention in terms of an object—either in terms of a genitive object, or by converting the dynamic process of

attending to something into an object so that it may be seen. I said: "A proper description of attention seems to necessitate the isolation of an object for investigation; and that means that any description whatsoever of what it is to pay attention will depend on the *presence* of an object to my attention or on the *presence* of my attention to an object." In either case, *presence* is operative. Apparently, we have two choices within which to operate. We can either recognize the limitations that confronted our investigation as permanently restrictive, in which case we can say that we have discovered a limit-situation beyond which we will be unable to travel; or, we can follow the lead of Derrida and Heidegger in thinking that the limitation we reached was the result of a fork in the road that presented itself at some point in the past that foreclosed the possibility of conceiving of attention differently than we presently do. It seems pretty clear that accepting the first option—giving in to the restriction—will only present itself as a plausible option once we have exhausted the other possibility. But opting for the second—following Derrida and Heidegger—seems to take us in a direction wherein we will depend on the presence at some point in time of a choice that was made about how to construe the activity of paying attention. And here we need to proceed with caution. Comparing Heidegger's account of the error made in the history of the question of the meaning of Being by philosophers of fixing frameworks and foreclosing possibilities of interpretation, we unveil that the fork in the road presented at the time may not have required a settled choice. In other words, we need not be constrained to think that paying attention is an objectifiable event; nor must we think that a description of attention need be centered on an object.

Being demanded of us, through the person of Heidegger, that we raise anew the question of the meaning of Being. Perhaps attention is asking us to do the same thing. I have already raised the issue that, even thinking that a proper description of attention requires an object of orientation, we perform a double movement in the activity. The double movement consists in foregrounding one object (or constellation of objects) while backgrounding another (constellation). It occurs to me now that we would do well to include in our description the feature of letting go of objects into the background. Then we might begin to see something new about the way we attend to things. We might be forced to see an interrelation between subject and object that cannot be construed separately, but we will also see that the very determination of that which is foregrounded in contradistinction to that which is backgrounded is only possible on the basis of a past that aims toward a future. We would then see that the activity we have been trying to isolate of paying attention is just another illustration of temporality temporalizing itself while we get to enjoy the ride. Such a holistic conception of what it is to pay attention to something will surely have important things to say to us as we confront contemporary society in fear that we do not pay attention correctly or to the right things.

A Concluding as Slipping Back into the Background and a Promissory Note

We voiced in this project a concern for how it is that we are supposed to hold people accountable for their actions when we cannot even provide an adequate description of the attentive means by which we are able to bring our thoughts to action. We suspected that such a description might need to begin with an examination of our ability to attend, to pay attention, to our world. We then began to investigate what

attention is and discovered therein that the nature of attention brings along with its activity certain appearances that themselves serve to conceal its true significance: attention appeared to be akin to a searchlight emanating from us whose purpose is to shine on objects that sit in the dark waiting for us to illuminate them. We suspected that such an account of attention, while pretending to enlarge our field of consciousness, might actually be thought of as a limitation to our field of consciousness—a spotlight does not increase the number of visible objects, but rather decreases the field. We imagined instead that attention is something more like a solution in which our thoughts swim, a solution that is so familiar to us that we often forget its existence. And perhaps that is just as well; perhaps it truly is as Virginia Woolf suggested: moments of non-being are the moments out of which moments of being must necessarily appear. Still, we seem always to be attending to something. Given Derrida's insights as to the status of the temporal ekstasis of the present, we rarely if ever know what that is. If we cannot count on the presence of the object of our attention, then we had better consider a different way to conceive of what it is to pay attention, without subject-object talk.

Chapter Four:

Taking a Clue from Husserl and Heidegger

Grasping the Tension between the Mental and the Lived

An almost paralyzing objection confronting the early phenomenologists arose which called into question the credentials of phenomenology for describing consciousness without first having to conceive it as an object removed from the stream of experience that constitutes it.[55] How, the worry goes, can consciousness provide transparent access to itself? How do I avoid an infinite regress when trying to track and make stable what consciousness is when what counts as the only legitimate condition for doing so occurs when I am conscious of my own conscious activity? The view that attention is to be understood as a modification of consciousness appears to make the phenomenology of attention I have been attempting to perform vulnerable to the same sort of objection that was raised for the phenomenology of consciousness.

Constricting ourselves to the architectural scaffolding of intentionality as the basic structure of consciousness and then assuming that attention is but a modification of consciousness restricted us further to the view that attention is itself intentional. Attention was viewed early on by Husserl as a modification of the intentional structure of consciousness. Husserl's view about the constitution of the intentional structure of attention, however, underwent important and illuminating transformations throughout the

[55] I refer here to the famous objection levied by Natorp against phenomenology as it was examined and disrupted in many ways by Heidegger in *Towards the Defintion of Philosophy* (1919), translated by Ted Sadler (London: Continuum Books, 2000).

development of his thought over the years—particularly with respect to the idea that attention admits of degrees ranging from utterly unfocused dispersal, or lack of attention, to sharp precision in its directed focalization, or undivided attention. Husserl struggled with the apparent confusion implicit in talk of attention that made reference to it in terms of non-targeted dispersal. *Attention*, he says, is a "mode of consciousness," a "focusing gaze," a "mindedness." Husserl adds that, "A content is differently present to me, according as I note it implicitly, not relieved in some whole, or see it in relief, and according as I see it marginally or have specially turned my focusing gaze upon it."[56] Within this epigraph, we see the emergence of three different modes of attending prescribed by three different ways the attentive object might present itself: First, I may attend to the object of attention as if it were part of a larger unified context, say, within a parts-to-whole relationship; secondly, I may attend to the object as standing in relief from the larger context out of which it emerged; or thirdly, I may attend to the object of my attention peripherally or indirectly or in not attending explicitly to it by leaving it in the background of which I only have bare awareness, but presuming it to be there and then, on reflection, confirming its presence to consciousness at the time of my activity. Common to all explicit descriptions of attention in his work, however, is the conception that attention emanates from a mental apparatus, that attention takes place inside and as a modification from inside consciousness.

This pervasive conception that attention is an exclusively mental activity is that which proved to crater under the weight of Heidegger's challenge to Husserl's work, even though Heidegger did not directly speak to the topic of attention. In what follows, I

[56] Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, "Investigation V", §14, translated by J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge Press, 1970), v. 2, p. 103.

would like to provide a sense of the extent to which Heidegger's critique imposes upon us the need to reject the Husserlian mentalistic conception of attention that still dominates the way many think about attention today. And while Heidegger's critique seems to present Husserl's work with insurmountable difficulties, I would like to suggest that Husserl's treatment of attention needs to be viewed as the necessary precondition for the possibility of Heidegger's critique. Husserl was unable to move thoroughly beyond the subject-object distinction (nor, arguably, beyond even the idea that attention is an intentional modification of consciousness) despite the fact that he was largely responsible for recognizing its ubiquity as the unexamined presupposition assumed by the sciences of his day. His inability to pierce the subject-object barrier stemmed, I suspect, from the commitment to consciousness being the solution, as it were, in which all experience abides. Husserl never seemed to question the assumption that consciousness is our access to the world. Heidegger found himself on the trail of a resolution to the difficulties presented by such assumptions during the period in which he delivered his lectures on Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* and Plato's *Sophist*. My discussion of these early lectures will serve as a springboard to the presentation of an alternative way of thinking about attention.

Before dealing with Heidegger's progression beyond the mentalistic trappings associated with Husserl's account of attention, I would like first to proceed by laying out that which is at stake in rejecting the old understanding of attention. Then I will provide an overview of the evolution of the explicit treatment of the topic in Husserl's work. While Heidegger did not deal expressly with the topic presumably because of the theoretical standpoint that came along with it for Husserl, Heidegger's early work does

attempt to elucidate some notions that are related in interesting ways to the topic. I would like to give an account of that which Heidegger would undoubtedly have considered a more adept manner of thinking about attention, viz., that talk of consciousness has not only not been helpful in coming to understand the experience, it has also covered over the being of attention.

On the Way to Attunement

There are three things at stake in discussing the topic of attention. I restate and summarize them here in progression from the most personal challenges that attention provides to the most far-reaching and general concerns that should (and in many respects already do) occupy our healthcare, judicial, and educational institutions. The order of progression is not accidental. Nor is it arbitrary. The work of Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century laid down a path that moved in a similar direction—through subjective experience toward an occupation with the significance that such experiences universally hold. Despite Heidegger's highly critical stance toward the undisclosed motives that compelled Husserl's striving for that in the description of experience which universally obtains, Heidegger's own efforts followed a pathway that led similarly from existence to Being, from that which is closest to that which appears to be farthest away.

First, attention is at one and the same time the simplest to grasp and the most elusive of topics for discussion. We ask, "What is it to pay attention?" A fully exhaustive response cannot include an indicative maneuver of, say, attending to something and then planning to use our attentive gaze as a model for our interlocutor. Doing so would only yield the rather ambiguous visible signs of paying attention. We

cannot adopt an attentive posture toward something, say that *this* is what it is to pay attention, and then expect that an observer of our behavior should grasp, by emulating our bodily movements, what we are doing. There seems to exist an internal feature belonging to attentive acts that defies capture in behavioral mannerisms. And yet we do recognize when someone is caught up in her own immovable efforts to concentrate attention on something. It appears that attention, under such descriptive auspices, is something like currency we possess that can be given to features selectively isolated from out of the surrounding background. We have access to a wellspring of attention, as the story goes, that we may direct according to our own meanings, values and purposes. In a very real sense, however, we must already know how to pay attention before we can adhere to the commonplace warning, "Pay attention!" An adequate description of what it is to pay attention, so we would like to claim, would at minimum reveal to us the plausibility of continuing to think of attention as a metaphorical searchlight that sheds light on particular components from the background of our environment. At optimum, a fully worked out phenomenology of attention would illuminate a novel way of thinking about our relationship to the world.

Secondly, social circumstances require that we be held accountable for that on which we both focus and fail to focus our attention. We are held accountable for our errors of omission and our errors of commission. People who drive automobiles in alcohol- or drug-induced blackouts might awaken to the very real possibility that they caused an accident that through negligence culminated in the senseless death of their victim. The particularity of such circumstances when they occur is only possible within social settings where, despite legal prohibitions and social stigma attached to doing so,

drinking to the point of oblivion is encouraged, promoted, suggested as a way out of the burden of full consciousness. We need not rely on such extreme examples as driving while in a blackout in order to see in our own lives the prevalence of this search for a "way out" from under the weight of paying attention. We elect officials to take care of the business of making decisions about how we are to be governed; we hire experts to look after our legal, financial and estate planning needs so that we can remove some of the worry that these issues add to our lives; we allow television and pop culture to educate our children so that we can have time to work…so that we can save for retirement…so that we can finally live the kinds of lives that we always wanted to live. The very structure of our primary education system seems to set up for us a timetable whose undercurrent demands that we focus on the right subjects at the right time and that we not focus our attention on the wrong things at the wrong time. We think about play and recreation when it is appropriate to do so; and we subject ourselves to humiliation and punishment when we do not. We are encouraged not to pay attention to the conditions that make paying attention possible. A phenomenology of attention would surely reveal something fundamental about tendencies toward thoughtlessness, and then we could begin to ask important questions about why we would ever want to surrender our thought life in such ways.

Thirdly, medical, educational, and judicial institutions make assessments and render opinions that unquestioningly presuppose the standards to which our paying attention is to conform. *Attention Deficit Disorder* is a fairly commonplace diagnosis among children and adolescents in our world. In fact, we are even beginning to see a rise in the number of *Adult Attention Deficit Disorder* diagnoses—a rise that extends the set

of possible sufferers beyond the realm of badly behaved children into the realm of unfocussed adults. Doctors prescribe for this affliction medication whose job is to channel the focus of attention in the right direction or to make focusing possible as opposed to the flitting of attention experienced by the patient. They treat the symptom without having to spend time doing much about the causes and conditions that produced the symptoms in the first place. Statistical analysts of many different stripes find themselves in overwhelmingly burdensome positions when they try to identify symptoms and then try to retrieve the causes from which they originated. Everyone operates as if they understand how attention is supposed to be distributed. And yet, attention has not been adequately understood. Phenomenology would certainly be invaluable toward coming to an overdue understanding of what it is to pay attention—if for no reason other than that phenomenology would provide a more thoroughgoing description of the experience from inside the experience of attending.

Having thus staked out the territory for which a properly conceived understanding of what it is to pay attention should be gained, having hinted that the phenomenologists are best suited to such an endeavor, we turn now to the beginnings of the phenomenological movement and its incomplete treatment of the topic of attention as presented in the work of Edmund Husserl. The task before us is a daunting one, first because Husserl does not perform an official phenomenology of attention *per se*, and secondly because in his allusion to a proper phenomenology of attention, he leaves two pathways open by which we might comprehend his project—*both* in the sense of leaving it an "open question" which pathway to choose *and* in the sense of two pathways that do not close or remain aporetic as regards their conclusiveness. On the one hand, there are a

number of explicit references to the topic of attention that appear sporadically over the course of his intellectual engagement with human consciousness and intentionality. On the other hand, implicit throughout the development of Husserl's work is a performative demonstration of the process by which anyone capable of bearing the excruciating intricacy of doing so should come to attend to her own act of paying attention. There is a definite sense in which the reader of Husserl must be vigilant in attending *both* to the details and content of that about which Husserl writes *and* to the overarching and ever-present thematic core contained in the performance of his work. I shall make an attempt to deal generally with these explicit treatments of attention by providing a chronicle of their appearance, explicating their context wherever it seems fitting, but then I will want to indicate how all of this provides us with a phenomenology of attention that is immanent in the movement of Husserl's own work despite its lack of direct treatment.

As early as the *Logical Investigations* (1901), we find a chapter entitled "Abstraction and attention" in which Husserl challenges the description of attention borne out by Lockean and Humean theories that abstraction is exclusively "an achievement of attention."[57] Here Husserl proclaims,

> However attention may be characterized, it is a function which, in a descriptively peculiar fashion, *prefers* certain objects of consciousness, and which (apart from certain differences of degree) only differs from one case to another in virtue of the objects to which it gives this preference.[58]

[57] Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations I*, "Investigation II: The ideal unity of the species and modern theories of abstraction", translated by J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001), §13, p. 258.
[58] *Ibid*., § 19, p. 268.

Attention attends to objects selected from an already existent field of possible objects from which it may choose. Specific instances of attention differ from one another only with respect to the objects to which attention is paid. Our capacity to pay attention occurs, according to the early empiricists, rather late in our process of coming to experience the world, following upon the establishment of sense impressions and their associations in the form of an idea. Husserl argues that these early empiricists, in their efforts to propose an attentional theory of abstraction, failed "to clear up the nature of attention to an extent absolutely required by its aims." He adds that,

> It should have ascertained what gives the word 'attention' its unitary sense, in order to see how far its range of application extends, or what the objects in each case are that we can (in a normal sense) claim to attend to. Above all, it should have inquired into the relation of attention to the meaning or reference which gives names and other expressions their significance.[59]

A proper attentional theory, according to Husserl, will provide an account of attention that considers two features of the way we pay attention: the objects (of consciousness) toward which our attentional gaze extends and the meaning-giving activity of attending that aims toward those objects as they interact with one another. The empiricists dealt only with a fraction of the object-side of the matter, leaving unexamined the meaning-side and the fuller scope of objects that such an elucidation of meaning would delimit. Husserl proceeds to lay the groundwork for fulfilling that which the empiricists omitted.

[59] *Ibid*., § 22, p. 272.

As a point of departure, Husserl expands the notion of that which amounts to a proper object for the attentional gaze. Here he presents considerations that stand in stark contrast to the empiricists' *object of attention*. Whereas the Lockean account obfuscates the contents of consciousness and the sensible objects to which they are meant to refer, Husserl reminds us for example that when

> we have a presentation or judgement about a horse, it is a horse, not our sensations of the moment, that is presented and judged about. Our sensations are only presented and judged about in psychological reflection, whose modes of conception should not be read into the immediate situation.[60]

The empiricists seemed all to share the view that attention is directed to the abstract mental idea of the object to which it refers. Husserl felt differently about attention. Our attention may be directed either to the object of consciousness or it may direct itself toward the object's status as an object of consciousness—in the former instance, the horse itself is the object of consciousness; in the latter, the horse as a constituent element of consciousness becomes the object. The empiricists were led astray in taking

> experienced contents to be the normal objects to which one pays attention. The concrete phenomenal thing is treated as a complex of contents, i.e., of attributes grown together in a single intuitive image. And it is then said of these attributes, taken as experienced mental contents, that their non-

[60] *Ibid*., p. 273.

> independence precludes their separation from the concretely complete image: they can only be noticed in the latter.[61]

Given the example of the horse, the empiricist would necessarily (by his own account) have difficulty speaking of the brownness of the horse or of its spiritedness as such in isolation or abstraction from the concept of the horse itself. On Husserl's account, such an omission fails to recognize an entire area of potential objects for consciousness, and, by consequence, fails also to register the shifts in attention that may occur within consciousness. He says, "What we attend to are the *objects of our thinking*, the objects and states of affairs seen by thought in this or that manner, which are revealed to our insight when we perform such acts on such a foundation."[62] A list of the proper objects of our attention will include not only those already unified sensible objects, but also those predications made of the sensible object that may be brought into our objectivizing gaze. The set of things that may become objects of our attention now includes those things that we see in the sensible objects and those relations that our consciousness brings to bear upon them.

Husserl moves subsequently to the unitary extension of the term *attending* itself. He describes:

> The range of the unitary notion of attention is therefore so wide that it doubtless embraces the whole field of intuitive and cogitative *reference* (*Meinens*), the field of presentation (*Vorstellens*) in a well-defined but

[61] *Ibid*.
[62] *Ibid*., § 23, p. 275.

sufficiently wide sense, which comprehends both intuition and thought. Ultimately it extends as far as the concept: Consciousness of something.[63]

The empiricists' limited view of the function and capacity of attention failed to account for the consciousness we have even for that of which we are not explicitly attentive at a given moment, e.g., the particularity of reference associated with the aboutness of consciousness itself, but that presents itself nevertheless to consciousness. In response to this oversight, Husserl adds,

> Dazed by the confusion between object and mental content, one forgets that the objects of which we are 'conscious', are not simply *in* consciousness as in a box, so that they can merely be found in it and snatched at in it; but that they are first *constituted* as being what they are for us, and as what they count as for us, in varying forms of objective intention. One forgets that, from the mere finding of a mental content, i.e. the pure immanent intuition of such a content, up to the external perception and imagination of objects neither found immanently in consciousness, nor capable of being so found, and from these on to the loftiest thought formations with their manifold categorical forms and appropriately correlated semantic forms, an *essentially* single concept runs continuously: in all cases, whether we *intuit* in perceptual, fancying or remembering fashion, or whether we think in empirical and logico-mathematical forms, an intending, or reference (*Vermeinen*) is present,

[63] *Ibid*.

that *aims* at an object, a consciousness is present that is the consciousness *of* this object.[64]

Husserl draws attention here to a certain constitutive chronology and priority that in some sense antedates all instantiations of consciousness, viz., that consciousness is always experienced as a *consciousness of* something, that the structure of consciousness is always intentional. At this stage of his treatment of attention, Husserl has revealed the shortsightedness of the empiricist account of attention: they have failed to provide a description of what it is to pay attention. They have failed to account for that in an act of attending that unifies it with other so-named acts. Attention must be the hallmark by which we come to notice that there is a distinction between *what* a thing is for consciousness and *the way* that consciousness takes possession of and makes it a theme.

Husserl has merely laid the foundation on which he will attempt to construct an account of attention that will be heard as synchronous, as we have already seen above, with consciousness. But lurking in the background of that which has come before, Husserl must have in mind that attention is distinguishable from consciousness. But how can he have it both ways? He has delimited the empirical constraints on that which may show up as an object for our attentive gaze; he has opened up the possibility of reflection on that in which the activity of attending consists. Now it is time to look at Husserl's explicit account of what it is to pay attention in order that we may find a clue.

There are differing modes of attention: "A content is differently present to me, according as I note it implicitly, not relieved in some whole, or see it in relief, according

[64] *Ibid*.

as I see it marginally, or have specially turned my focusing gaze upon it."[65] Attention, understood here as the active role adopted by consciousness in response to the presentation of a content, admits of degrees of engagement with that which is presented. Tentatively, attention is a modification of consciousness that takes consciousness from a state of passivity—a state in which the metaphorical screen is turned on—to an active state in which the contents of consciousness receive varying degrees of illumination. Puzzlingly, Husserl continues to enumerate some modes of attention:

> More important still are differences between the existence of a content in consciousness in the sense in which a sensation so exists, without being itself made a perceptual object, and of a content which *is* made such an object.[66]

This is puzzling because, according to the way Husserl has accounted for attention up to this point, the activity of attention seems to involve necessarily the coaxing of a content of consciousness into the status of an object perceived. If it is the case that attention should be distinguished from consciousness as consciousness' active subset, then how can Husserl speak of a content of consciousness that has not been made a perceptual object as if it were an object of attention? Husserl seems sensitive to the problem and yet he stops short in the *Logical Investigations* when he asks, "Should we not rather regard the phenomena of attention as mere ways—requiring much more detailed description of

[65] Husserl, *Logical Investigations II*, "Investigation V: On intentional experiences and their 'contents'", translated by J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001), § 14, p. 103.
[66] *Ibid*.

their several varieties—in which acts may be carried out?"[67] He answers in the affirmative and admits that a theory of attention has yet to be realized.

Husserl, in his lectures from 1905 titled *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, revisits the topic of attention. The collection of lectures makes thematic the famous Augustinian distinction between objective temporality and the subjective experience of time that subtends it. He speaks of attention as the active subset of consciousness over which I have control and as that subset of consciousness from within which I isolate and make objective particular moments of an array of experiences. I can shift focus, when thinking about time, from the movement of the hands on a clock that represent the linear progression of time to the subjective experience of the duration that seemingly occurs alongside and yet does not proceed in the same linear direction as objective time. The feature of interest revolves around how we are able to shift our focus in this way. Attention serves an objectifying role for consciousness at this stage. Husserl writes,

> We understand right away what it means to be turned towards an object—say, towards this paper, and specifically towards a corner of the paper that is particularly emphasized. The distinction between what is specifically noticed and what is not noticed about the object is something totally different from the distinction on the "subjective side," that is, from the paying-attention itself in its steps. The object is given in an attentional mode, and if occasion should arise, we can even direct our attention to the change of these modes: precisely to what we have just described—that

[67] Ibid., § 19, p. 118.

> now this or now that in the object becomes objective in a singular way; that what now predominates was already there before it came to predominate; that everything that predominates has a background, an environment in that sphere of the totality of objects, and so on.[68]

Keeping in mind that Husserl engages here in a phenomenological description of consciousness, the object to which he refers is to be understood as multiply realized in terms of its orientation to me and in terms of my orientation towards it. He speaks of the attentional mode in which the object is given. As my attentional gaze directs itself away from the whole piece of paper that Husserl initially posits as an object, I begin to become aware of a movement that occurs. As I focus on one segment of the paper, the previously regarded entirety of the paper drifts into obscurity. When I notice the drift that my attention has experienced, the piece of paper that had just been present to consciousness fades and I become cognizant of the slippage that occurs. If I repeat this process, I notice that such movement takes place any time my attention highlights a new focal point. The description moves from the most miniscule feature of an attended environment to a macroscopic picture of the contextuality of the contexts in which the objects of consciousness are located. Husserl asks,

> What then is attention other than the running-off of differences of such modes of "consciousness as such" and the circumstance that such perceived moments come together to make a unity in the form of "the same," which now has this mode of attention and now that one? What does it mean, then, to reflect on the moment "turning towards…"? At one

[68] Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893-1917), translated by John Barnett Brough (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), pp. 132-3.

> time the modes of attention run off "naively": in their running-off, I am turned towards the object appearing in them; at another time an objectifying glance is directed towards the series of modes themselves. I can run through them repeatedly in memory, and this series, as a series, has its unity.[69]

Attention brings various objects into the foreground from out of an inchoate background for consciousness, but as it does so, attention also lets return to the background that with which it was previously occupied. Attention also transcends, i.e., takes a step back from, the simple interaction with a precise intentional object in order to make the activity of attending itself thematic. Husserl captures the movement of attention that appears when attention is taken to be a mode of the intentional structure of consciousness. Attention, on this understanding, provides the intentional object for consciousness as such.

Husserl also, however, hints in the above passages at the pull of potential objects of attention from the background. They beckon to my attentional gaze. They ask to be noticed by me. Here is one of the earliest places where Husserl hints at the possibility of there being two sides to the activity of attending: a passive side and an active side. So far, Husserl has only spoken of the active, the objectifying side of attention for consciousness.

In §92 of the *Ideas* (1913) twelve years after its first explicit indication, Husserl takes up the topic of attention with a bit more profundity and clarity. Whereas previously Husserl was concerned with attention as it bore on theories of abstraction and on the formation of complex ideas in the *Logical Investigations*, and whereas he focused on the

[69] *Ibid*.

foregrounding and backgrounding that characterize the inevitable movement of intentional objects in the lectures on *Internal Time Consciousness*, now the concern apparently deepens and shifts to attention and its alterations as it moves through the adumbrations of its degrees—from the background into the foreground of consciousness for a consciousness. Husserl attempts to provide a phenomenological reduction of attention. He supposes that attention emanates from the pure Ego. Provisionally, he makes this comparison:

> We spoke metaphorically of the pure Ego's "mental regard" or the "ray of its regard," of its advertings toward and turning away from. The relevant phenomena stood out unitarily for us with perfect clarity and distinctness. Wherever "attention" is spoken of originarily, they play a major role without being separated phenomenologically from certain other phenomena; and, mixed with these others, they are usually designated as modes of attention.[70]

Pure Ego, as Husserl uses it here, refers to a transcendental realm of consciousness accessible only through reflection wherein the alleged universally valid claims about consciousness, its vicissitudes and its objects, are uncovered. The shift in Husserl's thinking about attention that has taken place is the shift from an ordinary experience of attending to an object to an originary experience in consciousness of attending in general that serves as the universally valid basis upon which anything like an ordinary experience may come into being. We are to think of attention according to the metaphors of "mental

[70] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenology of Philosophy, First Book*, translated by F. Kersten (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983), § 92, p. 222.

regard" and "ray of its regard" here because, on Husserl's view, attention takes place in the mental functioning of she who attends to the essences of the objects of consciousness. Attention emanates from the pure Ego as a ray of light emanates from the sun illuminating that on which it shines. While technically, this does not mark anything more than a stylistic departure from his former accounts, there remains a sense in which Husserl alters the object of concern; the new concern centers on how it is that an account of the capacity of consciousness for effecting changes on its contents becomes possible, how we are to account for this unique ability of ours to bring the contents of consciousness out of the background into the foreground and then to return them to the background. This stage of the development of a phenomenology of attention makes manifest the transformation that the ray of our regard brings to the objects of our attention. Hinted herewith is the possibility that consciousness, through its active feature of attention, actually changes its objects when it attends to them.

Husserl concludes this section of the *Ideas* with a lengthy footnote that I include here because of its relevance to the notion that an exhaustive description of attention belongs to phenomenology and not to the cognitive sciences:

> Attention is one of the chief themes of modern psychology. Nowhere does the predominantly sensualistic character of modern psychology show itself more strikingly than in the treatment of this theme, for not even the essential connection between attention and intentionality—this fundamental fact: that attention of every sort is nothing else than a fundamental species of *intentive* modifications—has ever, to my knowledge, been emphasized before…what is in question here concerns

> the radically first *beginning* of the theory of attention and that the further investigation must be conducted within the limits of intentionality and, moreover, not forthwith as an empirical, but *first of all* as an eidetic investigation.[71]

On Husserl's advice we are to think of attention now as an intentive modification of essences, as a modification of the *consciousness of* that characterizes our mental processes. Husserl's concern that we must first approach the description of attention under an eidetic investigation, that is, an investigation of essential structures, means that we should seek, through experience, the essential structural core of our intentive modifications, what it is to pay attention. The empiricist could not adequately handle the job of describing attention because of reliance on observations of behaviors that show up tangentially and perhaps coincidentally to that which paying attention is in its essence. Only a description from inside the experience of essences, so Husserl thought, will reveal such structures.

During the period of his lectures on transcendental logic of the 1920's entitled *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, Husserl spent considerable time developing an account of the interconnectedness of the active and passive sides of consciousness and it is here that we might expect to find a more fully worked out phenomenology of attention. Husserl makes a distinction in nomenclature between *attention*, which refers to the active accomplishment of the ego and *affectivity*, which denotes the passive reception of the ego. Husserl says,

[71] *Ibid*., footnote 32, p. 226.

> In general, we can say: The investigation into the active accomplishments of the ego, through which the formations of the genuine *logos* come about, operate in the medium of an attentive turning toward and its derivatives. Turning our attention toward is, as it were, the bridge to activity, or the bridge is the beginning or *mise en scène* of activity, and it is the constant way in which consciousness is carried out for activity to progress: All genuine activity is carried out in the scope of attentiveness.[72]

The turning of our attentive gaze toward an object of attention is an active enterprise that establishes, lays the foundation for, activity in general. But where was our attentive gaze prior to the fulfillment of its directedness in an object? Husserl continues,

> We are familiar with the fact that there are differences in the mode of attentiveness and that what we call negative attentiveness, or the counter mode of all attentiveness within passivity is called affection. Something can be noticed in a primary fashion; if this is the case, then the ego is attentive <in> a distinctive sense, the ego has turned toward it in a primary sense; but something can also be noticed in a secondary fashion; a single thing or several things in the unity of a single grasping can be called to our attention in a primary fashion or can be noticed in a secondary fashion and, for instance, can still be held onto in a secondary manner after it was primary. The affections proceed to the ego from out of the passivity of the background; they are what are presupposed [for the ego] to turn toward.

[72] Edmund Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, translated by Anthony Steinbock (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), p. 276.

> Carrying out this turning toward, the ego complies with the affection; it directs itself toward what is exercising the affection.[73]

Husserl has proceeded above to describe in more exacting detail the movement that his earlier investigations into consciousness introduced: movement from the background into the foreground and then back again. He attempts here to give an account of the intentional object of consciousness as it comes under and fades away from the ray of the ego's mental regard. But this time, rather than describing the proceedings from the standpoint of the object of consciousness, Husserl seems interested in the attentive/affective side of the operation.

The second pathway by which we earlier suggested we might come to grasp Husserl's account of attention is the implicit pathway that leads through the performative demonstration contained within the development of his work. This is a very difficult task indeed and, I fear, is also a task that will necessarily remain incomplete because Husserl never to my knowledge spoke directly of the stylistic trajectory of his own work. It occurs to me each time I read Husserl that he engages in the activity of trying to catch himself in the act of thinking so that he may document for all to read that he has done so. In some sense, he, as it were, leaves us a trail of mental breadcrumbs to follow in order that we might arrive at the same conclusions that he did. When reading Husserl, it is necessary to follow without interruption his entire line of reasoning from start to finish. If I return from a break from reading a passage in Husserl, I must often begin the passage again in order to remain abreast of the intricate description involved. Husserl is tracing the deepening of his attention toward its object. Simply in virtue of the schematizing we

[73] *Ibid*.

have done of his work toward a phenomenology of attention, we notice a willingness on his part to sharpen and expand his own views to meet the new discoveries that he made as he went along.

Taken to the level of the demonstrative possibilities of Husserl's own work, we see a constant building, reshaping, remodeling, and tearing down (where necessary) of that which came before. Visible throughout the entire evolution of his work is a movement, a kind of absorption, deeper and deeper into consciousness. It is in this sense that we feel compelled to suggest that Husserl strove to capture what it was for Husserl to attend to the world. The absorption into deeper states of consciousness reflected in his thinking, or so Husserl seemed to believe, meant also a sort of departure from the natural world. In the opening section of Part Two, Chapter 1, of the *Ideas* entitled "The Considerations Fundamental to Phenomenology", Husserl acknowledges that we must always begin from the natural standpoint. By *natural standpoint*, Husserl refers to that standpoint experienced as concerned with our everyday dealings from which we all begin to evaluate the world and that standpoint to which we all return when the process of thinking has concluded. He seemed to understand that there is a condition in which we for the most part find ourselves; he seemed also to understand that any other standpoint that we might adopt must necessarily originate in concerns that arise from out of the natural world where we dwell: "the natural world remains 'on hand:' afterwards as well as before, I am in the natural attitude, undisturbed in it by the new attitudes."[74] The natural standpoint is our "default setting." But for Husserl, the structural reality of the natural world remains traceable only through a standing back away from it, the same kind

[74] *Ibid*., p. 55.

of standing back or departure from the natural world that is evident in Husserl's own recorded thought processes: deeply engulfed in the mental structures of consciousness that uncover the structural possibility of meaning in the natural world. If we are to understand Husserl's work as revelatory of an accomplishment of the phenomenology of attention that his work only occasionally talks about, then we will be called upon to say that Husserl's work achieves a phenomenological analysis of attention *in deed* rather than *in word*. Husserl seemed singularly committed to the idea that the inner workings of the world will reveal themselves through the mental apparatus of he who thinks unencumbered by the distractions of the quotidian world. Heidegger approached the project differently.

Heidegger's Critique

Husserl notices that we are capable of directing our own attention to the distance that separates our own adoption of the natural standpoint (which is our "default setting," as Husserl indicated) and whatever other standpoint we might assume. I offer the following citation as a transition to Heidegger's critique.

> If my cogito is moving only in the worlds pertaining to these new attitudes, the natural world remains outside consideration; it is a background for my act-consciousness, but it is *not a horizon within which an arithmetical world finds a place*. The two worlds simultaneously present are *not connected*, disregarding their Ego-relation by virtue of which I can freely direct my regard and my acts into the one or the other.[75]

[75] *Ibid*.

Heidegger's critique of Husserl's incomplete account of attention would likely find a nice starting place in the citation above. Husserl implies here that there are at least two simultaneously existing worlds toward which we may choose to direct our gaze; but it is a mystery why he would say that these worlds are not connected. Though Husserl does supply the qualification that the "Ego-relation" acts as unifying common denominator, or connection, between the two worlds, Heidegger would no doubt take issue with the mysterious positing of two or more worlds that are not connected to the being who dwells in them; more importantly still, Heidegger would object to their dependence on the relation to an Ego. The assumption with which Heidegger would undoubtedly take issue is the idea that these so-called worlds owe their constitution, if not their existence, to an ego-consciousness—as if the ego-consciousness itself were not mutually constituted by them.

There are three significant fronts on which Heidegger would surely think that Husserl missed the mark in his phenomenological description of attention. Even though Heidegger does not address the passages on attention explicitly, many of the attempts to reconceive the phenomenological project contained within the lectures that precede the publication of *Being and Time* provide us clues as to the kind of response that Heidegger would make. Superficially, we might characterize Heidegger's critique of Husserl's work as the struggle to return philosophy to its ancient concerns for the being of what *is*, as what it is, and to reconceptualize philosophy under the guidance of phenomenology so that it may avoid being hijacked by the tangential and derivative regions of specialization which demand that interpretations of *what is* be cast in terms that conform to their own agendas. Husserl's laborious efforts to elevate philosophy to a status of legitimacy that

pure mathematical sciences could endorse and respect would necessarily be suspect. A presumption of legitimacy would have to involve putting constraints on the way the world shows up that excludes variations. Even more to the point however would be Heidegger's concern that Husserl's project aims toward seeing the exceptional as somehow of more value than and definitive of the ordinary. Husserl's project, insofar as it remained within the region of our mental being, could do nothing but overlook the other kinds of being that we express. In fact, Husserl privileged the mental feature of our existence. This would never work for Heidegger.

A more detailed account of Husserl's privileging of the mental, understood in the vernacular as *consciousness*, was initiated in Heidegger's lectures entitled *Introduction to Phenomenological Research*. Husserl thought that consciousness was the proper theme of phenomenology. Consciousness, seen as the kind of mental solution in which our encounter with the world is supposed by Husserl to sit, depicts the world in particular way, viz., as a content for consciousness. Heidegger found this problematic on many fronts. He worried that using consciousness as that through which the world comes to be intelligible to us might just conceal more than it reveals. Heidegger asks, "How does what is designated as consciousness come to enjoy the peculiar prerogative of providing the theme of a fundamental science such as phenomenology claims to be?" and "And to do so in such a way that we show that the field of 'consciousness' does not come to enjoy this position of priority accidentally or arbitrarily but instead that this prerogative of it is grounded in distinctive possibilities that existence bears within itself…?"[76] The tenor of these questions provides a hint as to the problem Heidegger would have with Husserl's

[76] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Phenomenological Research*, translated by Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 35.

account of attention. If attention, as we have shown Husserl to think that it was, is an intentive modification of consciousness and if consciousness, seen as the mental solution that surrounds our experience of the world, derives from something more fundamental (like existence, for example), then a description of attention will only give us an amputated and parasitic grasp of the being of the world.

For Heidegger, a more crucial difficulty inherent in Husserl's account of attention would have to revolve around Husserl's reliance on the categorial determinations that emanate from concrete existence and that then take on the function of informing how we see what *is* and how we determine what counts as definitive and legitimate. According to Heidegger's understanding of Husserl's project, Husserl was preoccupied with knowledge that is already known. By way of elucidation, we must think about what could be meant by this phrase, *already known knowledge*. Coming to understand the intricacies equated with what it is to pay attention, do we thereby add something to the everyday activity of attending to our world? Thought of another way: it seems possible that when we set the sights of our care about what it is to pay attention on arriving at certainty with regard to paying attention, we actually set up a situation in which we might ask ourselves questions like, "am I paying attention in the right way, i.e., in the way that will be most effective at producing justifiable acquaintance with that to which I attend?" To ask such questions takes us out of the realm of the flow of existence that is always already underway. Heidegger expresses concerns about the *leveling of being* that occurs when we privilege the naturalistic/scientific preponderance with certainty:

> From the outset, all being is set upon as an assortment of regions of being, reachable by valid propositions. In the process existence as such is

> transported into the same uniform field of being that the entities belong to. By this means, in an explicit sense and, indeed, in the context of scientific care, the care about certainty obstructs the possibility that the being of existence could be encountered in its own possibility, in keeping with the way it is, prior to this primary classification. Care about certainty diverts every question about being into a question about being-an-object for science. Within this direction of the basic question, every question of being is decided. In relation to existence, this means that the very care about certainty pounds every being down to one and the same level.[77]

Coming to the right understanding, to a fully worked out phenomenology of attention relieves us of the heavy burden of having to approach each case of attending to our world according to the unique circumstance in which it is presented. In other words, if what lies underneath our striving for a full scientific account of what it is to pay attention is a desire for getting the right answer, then the account of paying attention will be cast in terms that conform to our quest. If the right answer is the one that will provide us with the once-and-for-all-time definitive account of paying attention, then we will thereby presume that the categorial determination of attention that was originally drawn from everyday life will henceforth be the model for paying attention correctly. We will have leveled every proposed instance of attending to our world to a quest for conformity with a norm.

The most general critique that Heidegger would levy against Husserl's strife for a final understanding of attention actually underscores all the other criticisms. Husserl's

[77] *Ibid*., p. 217.

preoccupation with an ideal sort of scientific rigor that only phenomenology can model depends on the same subject-object detachment that Descartes' philosophy introduced. To think that the world is divided into discrete objects, notwithstanding the fact that some of them have the supplemental capability of conceiving of themselves as subjects, puts us in the position of seeing ourselves as subjects (who, incidentally, can be seen as objects by others and at times to ourselves) standing in stark contrast to the world and not as inseparable from that world. This is an illusion that is the result of our having adopted a scientific attitude toward the world as engendering the only fundamentally correct account of experience. Heidegger observes that such a division of the world itself relies upon a primordial unity of experience in the world:

> Natural perception as I live in it in moving about my world is for the most part not a detached observation and scrutiny of things, but is rather absorbed in dealing with the matters at hand concretely and practically. It is not self-contained; I do not perceive in order to perceive but in order to orient myself, to pave the way in dealing with something. This is a wholly natural way of looking in which I continually live.[78]

Heidegger's critique in this passage from the *History of the Concept of Time* offers some insight into the way that Heidegger would respond to a naturalistic/rigorously scientific understanding of what it is to pay attention. Even though the world may appear to be a world of objects that I must negotiate in order to get through life, such an appearance itself is in need of explanation. Why, for instance, does the world show up as something to be dealt with? When we dismantle the presuppositions that underlie such a view, we

[78] Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, translated by Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 30.

begin to see that we have formulated an understanding of the world in which we live that keeps us in an illusion of separation from it.

Were Heidegger to develop an account of attention, he would of necessity reorient the way we talk about what it is to pay attention. Whereas Husserl thought of attention as the intentive modification of consciousness, i.e., as a specialized form of mental activity that could only find itself in a world in which consciousness thematizes that which it encounters, Heidegger might think of *attention* as integrally intertwined with *attunement* or *mood*, existential states of which he renders an account in *Being and Time*. He would construe attention to be an *existentiell* mode, one of the features that accompany what it is to be human. Our attunement with the world, our mood, determines the way that world can show up for us. What stands out as we encounter the world and its people has always already been colored by the way our attunement to that world is going. "The mood has already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something," observes Heidegger.[79] But according to this citation, Heidegger conceives of attunement as a necessary precondition to anything like paying attention at all.

Perhaps a more thoroughgoing understanding of the matter would involve an occupation with the important notion of *disclosedness* for Heidegger that we will only here allude to. Heidegger thinks of disclosedness as "the character of having been laid open."[80] Applied to human existence, it seems plausible to think that we are always in some relationship to the world that may be adumbrated according to our own openness to

[79] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1962), H. 137, p. 176.
[80] *Ibid*., H. 75, p. 105.

that world and to our position in it. Heidegger speaks of authentic and inauthentic disclosedness. If we think of disclosedness as openness, as Heidegger seems to do, then we might be able to think that the range of possibilities that disclosure occupies might go from authenticity to inauthenticity. By substituting an understanding of attention for the notion of openness and by thinking about openness admitting of degrees, then perhaps the way to conceive of a Heideggerian account of attention would involve us in coming to see that when we attend to something, we are showing up for that to which we attend. In other words, rather than thinking of attention as a mental spotlight that we shine on the world, bringing things from the dark background into the foreground of our Cartesian theatre stage, we should think in terms of the possibility that attending to something means us showing up, with the various degrees of our whole being, for the world.

Under such an interpretation of the way that Heidegger would account for attention, I am led to believe that we need not think of attention as connected to the kinds of mental construction that rely upon consciousness. Attention is not a modification of consciousness, but rather consciousness is a specialized modification of our disclosedness to the world, one that conceals more than it reveals about how and what we are. If we are able to view attention as a fundamental disclosedness or openness of ourselves to Being, then we will have hit the mark that Husserl was trying so hard to hit, but could not because of his reliance on the subject-object distinction that the history of philosophy imposed on him.

Heidegger's Return to Antiquity

The early lectures of Heidegger entitled *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, "Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle: Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation," and *Plato's "Sophist,"* as well as certain sections of *Being and Time*, examine directly or allude to a different way of attending that is not dependent on the kind of orientation that seeks an object. In his later work, Heidegger reconceptualizes the term *Gelassenheit*, openness or letting-be-ness, in a way that captures more elegantly what it is to pay attention; but the early lectures, I want to argue, prepare a road for the unique way in which he comes to think about our fundamental modes of being in the world—among which must be included the capacity to attend or be present or be awake. The early lectures engage quite deeply with the ancient Greek modes of truth as Plato and Aristotle elaborated them. And it is here that I would like to target my efforts since it is also here that allusion to a non-intentional sense of what it is to pay attention may be said to emerge.

The project will be a difficult one because it will involve sifting through what, in the early lectures, was presented as Aristotle's account of the situation in order to uncover Heidegger's own views. Such sifting presupposes, of course, that Heidegger's views will pull neatly apart from the views he ascribes to Aristotle and, at this juncture, I am not altogether certain of the plausibility of doing so: it seems fitting to suppose that a thinker's point of view must of necessity show up in his interpretation of another thinker's work—perhaps this was even Heidegger's point. I am certain that Heidegger saw us as the recipients of a tradition which developed in ways that seldom receive the kind of scrutiny Heidegger would surely have felt they deserve. One can identify many

places in Heidegger's work where the covering over of the question of being seems to be traceable to Parmenides' alleged dismissal of the changeable, condemning it to the *nothing* (or the *not*), as enjoying no ontological status independent of *what is*. Parmenides accordingly receives the blame for the forsakenness of the question of being (*Seinsvergessenheit*). In the early lectures, Heidegger appears to be preoccupied with the idea that studying Aristotle's work will provide us with an interesting, if not utterly indispensable to understanding our current situation, engagement with the question of being. According to the Heideggerian interpretation, Aristotle's work *both* reflected the Parmenidean tradition of thinking about being along a singular, exclusive pathway *and* determined the trajectory of thinking about *what is* that would continue to develop along that same pathway up to today. Aristotle's work already took for granted that *being* (understood as static, persistent presence) should enjoy the privileged status of independence from the *nothing*. And this presupposition then remained unexamined all the way up to recent times.

There remains a question much larger than whether or not Heidegger's thinking can be isolated from his account of Aristotle's thinking: can we ever divorce our thinking from the tradition of philosophizing that has been identified as the source of the way we treat of the question of being today? This is no small question. And Heidegger was surely sensitive to it. Nevertheless, I shall push forth with the suspicion that my sifting will prove useful to showing what it is to pay attention as divorced from the current presupposed conception of it as intentional activity, permitting Heidegger to be my guide.

In *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, Heidegger makes use of the terms *wakefulness*, *radical wakefulness*, and *philosophical wakefulness* (*Wachsein*). Heidegger writes,

> This understanding which arises in interpretation cannot at all be compared to what is elsewhere called understanding in the sense of a knowing comportment toward the life of another. It is not comportment toward…(intentionality) in any sense, but rather a *how of Dasein* itself. Terminologically, it may be defined in advance as the *wakefulness* of Dasein for itself.[81]

He speaks of the role and value of hermeneutics here. Explication of this and the surrounding passages reveals that, despite Heidegger's use at the end of the passage of the preposition *for* that announces an object for the Dasein who plays the role of subject, since Dasein (which, even within these early lectures, Heidegger thinks of as in each case our own) is always on the way (incomplete, unfinished), it cannot be made into an *intentional object* with the degree of potential specificity and explicitation that Brentano and others had in mind when employing the term. This is a complicated point to make. From a linguistic standpoint, it seems of minor import whether or not the object of an intentional act receives the specification of an actualized, existent entity that enjoys the ontological status of *object* in the ordinary sense of the word. So, for instance, the intentional object indicated by the linguistic structure of this passage is *Dasein itself*. This means that Dasein itself is to be thought of as an object. But Dasein, as Heidegger dedicated himself to showing, is not conceivable as an object without separating it from

[81] Martin Heidegger, *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, translated by John van Buren (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 12.

the ongoingness of its being, which means that Dasein once objectified, ceases to be Dasein. Heidegger seems to be drawing attention here to the difference that reigns in the act of intending between the object of the intentional act and the posture of the intender, or the subject. He refers to a "*how of Dasein* itself" by contrast with the kind of *comportment toward* that characterizes an intentional act. One might easily make the mistake of thinking that Heidegger has simply shifted poles within the traditional way of characterizing an act of intentionality; but he appears to be emphasizing much more than that. Heidegger may be understood to suggest that the very conception of "poles" supposedly present within such an act arises out of one of the ways of being that characterizes Dasein itself, viz., as a *how* of its being.

Moreover, any *how* of our being emanates from within existence itself first and then arranges itself into the handy components of which we make use in order to describe our experience of being. It is not the case that subjects and objects populate reality and that, through some effort on our part, we come later; rather, it is that we *are* and then subjects and objects as such appear on the scene. Subjects and objects as such are conceptions that arise out of our experience in the world.[82] They are theoretical constructs that act as tools for the expeditious description of our experience of reality. Heidegger seeks to describe our experience of reality as it is prior to the conception of

[82] For more on the discussion of the derivative nature of subjects and objects in Heidegger's work, see the manuscript drafted in Marburg 1923/4 entitled "Being-There and Being-True According to Aristotle" *["Wahrsein und Dasein (Aristoteles, Ethica Nicomachea Z)"]* as translated by Brian Hansford Bowles in *Becoming Heidegger: On the Trail of His Early Occasional Writings, 1910-1927*, edited by Theodore Kisiel and Thomas Sheehan (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

subjects and objects. He seeks description of experience as it is prior to our having laid a descriptive framework on top of it.[83]

Heidegger speaks of a "radical wakefulness [of Dasein] for itself."[84] In the following passage, Heidegger continues to drive home the idea that there is a necessary distinction between descriptions of experience that begin with, or presuppose, a subject-object distinction—as, for instance, we would find in the kind of conscious experience that would be deemed intentional—and descriptions of experience that are of existence. He adds,

> The theme of this hermeneutical investigation is the Dasein which is in each case our own and indeed as hermeneutically interrogated with respect to and on the basis of the character of its being and with a view to developing in it a radical wakefulness for itself. The being of factical life is distinctive in that it *is* in the how of the being of its *being-possible*. The *ownmost* possibility of the be-ing itself which Dasein (facticity) is, and indeed without this possibility being "there" for it, may be designated as *existence*.[85]

A contrast is here at work between the kind of being, existence, that the human being has, and the kind of being that belongs properly to an object. Just prior to this passage, Heidegger made the point that there is a difference at the level of being between "objects" appropriate to scientific inquiry and that toward which hermeneutics is aimed. The sciences seem to be occupied with that which may be said not to change, that about

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[83] Heidegger thinks about "concepts" in a paragraph very near the discussion of wakefulness in *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*.
[30] Heidegger, *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, p. 12.
[85] *Ibid*.

which something persistently true may be said and returned to, whereas hermeneutics, since the chance that it "will go wrong belongs in principle to its ownmost being," must be conceived as fundamentally concerned with something other than that which the sciences investigate.[86] The point of all this is to awaken in Dasein the need for a methodology for coming to self-understanding that differs from the understanding we have of things. One might say, "Well fine then; we will just adapt the methodology of science to the study of human existence"—meaning that the study of human existence will be adequately undertaken by setting the same standard for what counts as a complete description. Such an attitude prevails in the hard sciences. Since human existence is characterized by its dynamic movement in acceptance of some possibilities while in rejection of certain others, it would be impossible to arrive at an adequate description of what it is to be human on the basis of an analogy with the static and stable object that scientific method depends upon. This seems to be that toward which Heidegger believes hermeneutics is supposed to be driving Dasein to awaken.

But is the directionality of the wakefulness not simply a different kind of intentionality? Heidegger's lecture does not suggest as much. In fact, to think so would be to insist upon the conception of reality that forces us to re-invoke subject-object talk. Heidegger would like those of us who follow his lecture to guard ourselves against assuming that intentionality, replete with its characteristic insistence upon the particularity of aboutness and the specificity of the for-whom, plays anything but a derivative role in describing the being of what is. So, while it may appear that

[86] *Ibid.,* p. 12.

wakefulness is intentional all-the-way-down, it cannot be: wakefulness emerges from our existence and not from anything derivative like our subjectivity.

Elsewhere in the same work, Heidegger speaks of "philosophical wakefulness"—which refers to a heightened ability, a developed awareness or sensitivity to the everyday encounter we experience with respect to the world in which we find ourselves. This kind of wakefulness or sensitivity refers furthermore to a primordial way we have of being in the world that pretends to make it possible for us to take the world on its own terms while refraining from the excessive demands that our ordinary daily modes of interaction press upon that world. But, for the same reasons as mentioned above, the world cannot be made an object for us because we are always in it, part of it—a point which seems to render impossible the possibility of taking the world on its own terms, presumably divorced from our excessive demands. Here again, in order for the apparent contradiction to be made real, we would have to rely on the assumption that wakefulness must be an intentional act as traditionally conceived—more precisely, an intentional act that awaits or anticipates a complete(d) object. At most, we make conjecture as to an imagined completeness of the world in which we dwell; doing so inclines us toward the thought that the world may be made an object for us. The world, nevertheless, has not been forthcoming in its conformity to our conjecture.

Shifting gears, Heidegger begins to think about the *when* of interpretation of existence. While we might interpret existence with regard to an historical orientation, we do so from within the *today* of Dasein. Heidegger develops this thought in saying,

> Furthermore: interpretation begins in the "today," i.e., in the definite and average state of understanding from out of which and on the basis of

> which philosophy lives and *back* into which it *speaks*. The "*every-one*" has to do with something definite and positive—it is not only a phenomenon of fallenness, but as such also a how of factical Dasein.[87]

Every attempt to understand begins in the today. *Today* here means to draw attention to the surrounding discursive environs in which Dasein finds itself, no matter at which temporal juncture it finds itself there. The particular today from which my orientation to existence determines itself differs according to the particular set of temporal background conditions that determine my situation. While the facts that comprise my situation in its particularity are contingent and vary according to my own historical development, the fact that every interpretation begins in the today is not contingent. Heidegger continues,

> The *initial hermeneutical engagement and bringing into play*—that with respect to, on the basis of, and with a view to which everything is like a card in a game staked—thus *the "as what"* in terms of which facticity is grasped in advance and stirred, the decisive character of its being initially put forth and brought into play, is not the something which can be fabricated—nor is it, however, a readymade possession but rather arises and develops out of a fundamental experience, and here this means a philosophical wakefulness, in which Dasein is encountering itself. The wakefulness is philosophical—this means: it lives and is at work in a primordial *self-interpretation* which philosophy has given of itself and

[87] Heidegger, *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, p. 14.

which is such that philosophy constitutes a decisive possibility and mode of Dasein's self-encounter.[88]

This passage is difficult to comprehend because Heidegger is struggling with two notions that we typically hold apart. He struggles with them in this way potentially because they were originally and ought today to be re-integrated. There are two registers on which we may record human experience: one which draws upon that which always changes and the other which concerns itself with that which does not change. In the discussion so far, we have noticed the distinction between the contingency of facts about particular Dasein's existence as it is today, here and now, and the necessity of there being a today, here and now for Dasein. Hence, there is a kind of wakefulness within which Dasein is attentive to the historical contingency of its particular facticity and there is a kind of wakefulness within which Dasein is attentive to the formal indication of its facticity as such. The first of these is the radical wakefulness developed earlier and the second is the philosophical wakefulness. And yet each of these senses of wakefulness may be understood to inform the other.

Placed within the context of the exploration of attention I have embarked upon, there is indeed a kind of attention that exhibits directedness (intentionality) as its defining characteristic. But underlying that kind of attention is the more primordial sense of the word that indicates a general openness or questionableness that must be in place before directedness toward an intentional object may be enacted. Holding ourselves in a mode of questionableness prevents us from determining in advance what will count as the proper object of our attention thereby keeping open the possibility of letting the world be

[88] *Ibid*.

without interference from our attempts to think of the world as a pool of resources to be exhausted for our benefit. In this way, we can maintain ourselves in the recognition that we are part of and not master over the world within which we live.

Chapter Five:

The Excruciating Activity of Attending

Recapitulation of the Problem

In case it is not already apparent through my presentation of the problems that surround the topic of attention, I have been influenced in profound ways by Heidegger's reposing of the question of Being. Specifically, I would like to acknowledge the effect of his preoccupation with the interplay of the terms, *concealing* and *unconcealing* as they pertain to the ancient Greek word that we translate as *truth*, *aletheia*. Since the understanding of truth as *aletheia*, i.e., as unconcealing (in opposition to some correspondence of word to states of affairs), has enjoyed a degree of acceptance amongst those who have even a passing acquaintance with Heidegger's work, I will not bother here to reconstruct his insightful (and I think correct) elucidation of the term. Instead, I would like to make use of the notions of concealment and unconcealment for the purpose of thinking about that which has been left out of contemporary discussions involving attention. A broader sense of attention comes out of concealment once we begin to deconstruct the view that attention is an intentive, i.e., characterized by its intentionality or *being toward*, modification of consciousness. We have permitted talk of reality as exclusively consisting of subjects and objects to sink to a level of self-evidence that, as is hoped by now, I have sufficiently challenged. The question worth asking at this point is,

"What has our holding to be self-evident of subjects and objects as the fundamental constituents of reality kept concealed from us?"

The title of my work, *Minding the Gap*, arose because I have an interest in exploring or making available that which is left over when we think about reality in terms of subjects and objects. There are many different provocative and illuminating avenues that lead from such an interest. I might have followed the path of trying to achieve a clear sense of whose interests are being served in thinking about what it is to pay attention in terms of intentionality. Along this path, I would undoubtedly have been forced to think about the socio-political implications associated with insisting that there is a "correct" way to attend, a "correct" object of attention, an "incorrect" method and object. And to this end, I would surely have come up with some interesting speculata as to the injustice associated with such a totalizing controlling assumption. Questions like the following would inevitably arise: How do we come to attend to the environmental features we attend to? Why do we privilege the narrowing of a person's attentive gaze over a broadening of it? What sorts of Foucaultian insights might we glean from such an investigation? What about those people who do not enjoy the privileged status of a so-called soundness of mind, who truly suffer from their inability to focus? I will certainly return to these questions at some point in my development.

Instead, I have aimed here at trying to open up the restrictively definitive boundaries of our common sense conception of attention in order to give voice to such pressing questions. It seemed important to me to lay the groundwork upon which socio-political realities might reach expression, rather than exposing them to the possibility of being heard as the ravings of a conspiracy theorist. The far-reachingness of my aims

notwithstanding, I have only succeeded in further problematizing the implications of our assumption of the subject-object distinction without having examined how or even whether an alternative conception of reality might be possible. My plan, in what follows, is to imagine a reintegration of subjects and objects with that which has been left behind in the discussion. The suspicion all along has been that Heidegger's key notion of *Gelassenheit* will be indispensable in such descriptive efforts; but in order to explicate his idea concretely, I will look first at some of the central concerns of Simone Weil and Blaise Pascal.

Disclaimer #1

I have spent a number of years exasperated by the work of Simone Weil. Each time I find myself on the verge of comprehending and positively apprehending her project, I discover that she then presents a position that is utterly unpalatable to me. My distaste usually revolves around her rather austere religious convictions and the life they compelled her to lead. I am just Nietzschean enough to mistrust asceticism when I spot it, to suspect that underlying the promotion or adoption of an ascetic attitude is the attempt to disavow this life in favor of some fantastic future life for whose existence one can have nothing but glazed-eyed optimism. Simone Weil, however (and I will spend some time elucidating this aspect of her thought), seems to think it wrong to dedicate oneself to rewards—whether received now or later—for having done that which it was incumbent on one to perform in the first place. This is a very complicated story to understand and an even more complicated story to tell. I have looked for an opportunity to get clear on this aspect of Simone Weil's thought.

A deep interest in the connection between Weil and Pascal arose during my participation in a reading group that studied Pascal's *Pensées*. At that time, having already engaged with Weil's work for a few years, I began to see some connections between not only Pascal's and Weil's work, but also the extremity of their behavior as it was brought into conformity with their religious beliefs. The parallels between them, on investigation, are at once frighteningly close and yet there is very little evidence that directly attests to Pascal's legacy of influence on Weil. This means that, in order to discuss Pascal's influence on the life and work of Simone Weil, I must either propose an indirect link that could only be very loosely woven and impossible to defend authoritatively or I will need to show some similarity in the chain of influence on them both. In fact, this last move is the one I have chosen to pursue in the assumptions that lie underneath this chapter. Hence, I attempt to manufacture a story that will make sense of that which I see as a connection that must surely be more than coincidental, albeit a connection for which I will not here offer an argument.

Disclaimer #2

The circumstances surrounding Simone Weil's death in 1943 have been scrutinized by a number of people over the ensuing decades. Her death was ruled "suicide" by the pathologists who examined her. She had tuberculosis and had been told that she required more nourishment than her religio-socio-political commitments would allow her to take. In 1943, Weil's fellow unemployed countrymen received food rations that were barely enough to sustain a moderately healthy person's life. Simone Weil refused to eat more than the rations afforded to the most impoverished of her fellows.

She did this because, as she reported, she felt obligated not to feel entitled to privileges that would have been denied to others, regardless of the state of their health. Several commentators in the past couple of decades have reinterpreted Weil's death as the manifestation of anorexia. In doing so, they have imported the idea that, if her death can be viewed as the result of an eating disorder, then there are reasons for dismissing her work. Some have even assigned to her work the title "anorectic ethics," a title that I think of as a display of the very worst kind of reductionism (already, as a general practice, a despicable mindset to me) that there could be. These commentators believe that Weil's religio-/socio-political commitments were nothing but a subterfuge meant to disguise a deeper psychological or neuro-physiological illness. As they would have it, Weil manufactured, perhaps even unbeknownst to herself, an intellectual justification for starving herself to death. It is very difficult to argue with those who think this way since Simone Weil's life story includes, even from early childhood, several periods in which she deprived herself of food for stated religious, social, and political reasons. At the age of six, during the war, Weil refused herself the pleasure of chocolate because the soldiers at the front were not permitted to have it and she felt that her status, privileged in not being at the front, in no way entitled her to it. I feel compelled to add, however, that if we are to mistrust Weil's posture toward eating as merely ornamentation for a deep psychological problem, then we should surely also be suspicious of many of our own deeply rooted ethical commitments.

Much of the imagery that Weil employed in her writing had to do with deprivation of nourishment from the world in favor of the spiritual nourishment that comes from the beauty that reigns in everything that is—a beauty that Weil would have

identified as emanating from God. It is our job on earth, as she would likely have said, to look at the beauty that reigns in what is instead of consuming it. Leslie Fiedler, in his introduction to Simone Weil's collection of letters translated under the title, *Waiting for God*, writes,

> There are two kinds of eating for Simone Weil, the "eating" of beauty and beloved here below, which is a grievous error, "what one eats is destroyed, it is no longer real," and the miraculous "eating" in Heaven, where one consumes and is consumed by his God. "The great trouble in human life is that looking and eating are two different operations. Only beyond the sky, in the country inhabited by God, are they one and the same operation…It may be that vice, depravity, and crime are nearly always, or even perhaps always, in their essence, attempts to eat beauty, to eat what we should only look at."
>
> Here below we must be content to be eternally hungry; indeed, we must welcome hunger, for it is the sole proof we have of the reality of God, who is the only sustenance that can satisfy us, but one which is "absent" in the created world. "The danger is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread [God], but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry. It can only persuade itself of this by lying, for the reality of its hunger is not a belief, it is a certainty."[89]

It is difficult not to hear in this account the suggestion that there is an afterlife, a heaven, that we are to expect to encounter after the life we are living, but such an account really

[89] Leslie Fiedler, "Introduction," in *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001), p. xxxi.

was not the kind of thing that concerned Weil. Weil's own words on the subject occur in a piece of correspondence to Father Perrin where she admits, "As to eventual meetings in another world, you know that I do not picture things to myself in that way."[90] Though there is a sense in which she does presuppose a life beyond the one we live, we must exercise caution not to assume that such an afterlife is to be sought by us through our acts in this life and not available to us here and now. And yet Weil also describes embodied human existence as crippled by the force of gravity—her metaphor for the spiritually dead weight of our wretchedness. It would be erroneous to suppose that Weil thinks it possible to experience heaven on earth, but we catch glimpses of heaven when we love, i.e., when the love that comes from God and the love that we have for God come to be seen as synonymous. That kind of love comes to us through the weightlessness of God's grace, allowing us to float skyward.

Weil's use of the metaphors of gravity and the weightlessness of grace make it easy to see how the reductionists might defend the claim that, perhaps subconsciously, Weil thought constantly about weight as people afflicted with anorexia are disposed to do. It just seems to me that to think of her in this way implies that we are licensed to disregard many of Weil's profound insights that would otherwise be quite enlightening to us. Even if Weil was obsessed with weight to the point of subconsciously including it in everything she thought about, there is no reason to think that she should be ignored or that her work should be understood in terms of her alleged subconscious motives. Moreover, attending to Weil's preoccupation with weight as an avenue for understanding her work says something about he who lends attention to it as the essential feature of her

[90] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 18.

work. Focusing attention on this obsession gives one license to disregard other aspects of her work that might be equally worthy of consideration. And this suspicion corresponds to the pervasive worries about attention that have occupied me in the overall account of what it is to pay attention.

Simone Weil and God

> The thoughtlessness of those who wield force with no regard for men or things they have or believe they have at their mercy, the hopelessness that impels the soldier to devastate, the crushing of the enslaved and the defeated, the massacres, all these things make up a picture of unrelieved horror. Force is its sole hero. A tedious gloom would ensue were there not scattered here and there some moments of illumination—fleeting and sublime moments when men possess a soul. The soul thus roused for an instant, soon to be lost in the empire of force, wakes innocent and unmarred; no ambiguous, complex, or anxious feeling appears in it; courage and love alone have a place there. Sometimes a man discovers his soul during self-deliberation, when he tries, like Hector before Troy, to confront his fate all alone, unaided by gods or men. Other moments when men discover their souls are moments of love; hardly any pure form of love among men is missing from the *Iliad*.
>
> Simone Weil, *The* Iliad *or the Poem of Force*, #63

While Simone Weil addresses herself here to human struggles that occur in Homer's *Iliad*, there is a sense in which she believes that the thematic common denominator which unifies the instances of human struggle in the poem remains an issue for the human being today. Extending her discussion, we might notice the supposition that the human being, for the most part, lives swept up in the power of force. The soul of the human being emerges from out of this miasma of force along two apparently distinct registers: contemplation, as made evident through the person of Hector confronting his fate, and "moments of love," moments that seem to arise without the need for reflection—though I suspect that such moments could easily be said to arise as the result of reflection, they *need* not. For contemporary audiences like the ones to whom I usually address myself, the word "soul" requires some explaining. We hear in the passage that

the soul is both discovered and possessed. This means that our soul is with us, but that, for so long as we are swept up in the power of force, we do not make contact with it. The soul seems to be our ticket out of force. We catch sight of our soul during moments when we are removed from the violent waves of force that usually engulf us—whether the moments be constituted by way of an act of reflection or constituted by love. This means that our soul is caught sight of at precisely those moments when we step out of the flow of force, at those moments when we cease passively to undergo our situation and emerge as a conscious participant in the scene, a participant who, having once made contact with herself, now becomes capable of deliberating as to whether or not to continue with the scene that is already underway. But these moments, when they occur, announce the arrival of a new situation for us, i.e., we cease to *undergo* our situation and begin to *recognize our participation* in it. We step into a new, or newly conceived, situation; but now we are not subjected to it in the same way as before, perhaps we are not subjected at all. Heideggerians might identify such a moment as an instance of breakdown, where time is "out of joint" and where something like Dasein becomes aware of itself, distancing itself from the movement of everydayness in which each of us primordially and for the most part (on reflection) whiles away his time—a moment followed by an acknowledgement of the ownership of our situation, a moment that presents us with the opportunity to step into our ownmost-potentiality-for-being.

Simone Weil would most surely object to any characterization of the moment as one in which a *self* becomes exalted and, absent any talk of God, she might be inclined to think that the Heideggerians, provided that by *Dasein* they mean *self*, have fallen short of the point. The soul, for Weil, is the point of contact between the human being and God.

But the point of contact requires effort to achieve. I am, however, not so sure that the Heideggerians in fact have fallen short of her point, depending on what Simone Weil means when she refers to God. And this is the puzzle that opens up a meeting place for religious and non-religious thinkers.

God, for Simone Weil, is absent from this world. Our world is necessarily God-forsaken. Weil thought that God's creation of this world removed him from the equation. Given God's absence from our world, our only chance of understanding what Weil means by God is in thinking that God is that which is not us, that which we are not. Our relationship with God is marked by the fact that we must relate to the nothing. It is in this way that some have suggested that Simone Weil just means *nothingness* when she refers to God. There is abundant textual evidence in Weil's body of work to support such a view, though I suspect that many of her confidants would not approve of thinking of God in this way. It seems to me that one might understand Pascal's equation of God with infinity and his equation of infinity with nothing as the logical association of God with the nothing, too.

Pascal on Diversions

Pascal thinks about *divertissements*, diversions or distractions (hear a resonance with the word "diversity"), that serve at least two possible though not mutually exclusive ends: (1) they deliver us from boredom, but (2) they divert us from the possibility of reckoning with that which he calls our "wretchedness."

> Anyone who does not see the vanity of the world is himself very vain.

> Indeed, who does not see it, other than young people absorbed in noise, diversion, and thoughts of the future?
>
> But take away their diversion, and you will see them shrivel out of boredom.
>
> Then they feel their nothingness without recognizing it, for it is indeed wretched to be insufferably depressed, as soon as you are reduced to introspection without any means of diversion.[91]

Pascal here suggests that "boredom" is our default setting—that out of which our diversions arise and to which we return when stripped of our diversions. It is while in our default state of boredom that some of us come to recognize ourselves as nothing, a recognition that induces insufferable depression that is the mark of our wretchedness. Most of us, however, fail to recognize our nothingness—probably owing to the insatiability of our desire to be distracted. It seems plausible to think that we run from any such awareness of the wretchedness of our situation. And the world seems ready to provide us with such distractions.

By "wretchedness" Pascal wants to say our condition while here below, the impossibility of achieving happiness disharmoniously coupled with the obsessive desire for it. Pascal thinks that wretchedness marks the human condition, that boredom is our reaction to that condition. And yet we are powerless on our own to do anything to reverse the effects of our wretchedness. This long Pascal quote explains what he means:

> All men seek to be happy. This is without exception, whatever different means they use. They all strive toward this end. What makes some go to

[91] Pascal, *Pensées*, edited and translated by Roger Ariew (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company), 2005, p. 12 [S70, L36].

war, and others avoid it, is the same desire in both, accompanied by different perspectives. The will never takes the slightest step except toward this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who go hang themselves.

And yet, after such a great number of years, no one without faith has ever reached the point at which everyone constantly aims. All complain: princes, subjects, nobles, commoners, old, young, strong, weak, learned, ignorant, healthy, sick, from all countries, all times, all ages, and all conditions.

A test so long, so continuous, and so uniform, should certainly convince us of our inability to reach the good through our own efforts. But examples teach us little. No likeness is ever so perfect that there is not some slight difference; as a result, we expect that our hopes will not be disappointed on this occasion as they were on the other. And so, since the present never satisfies us, experience tricks us and leads us from misfortune to misfortune until death, which is its eternal climax.

What then does this craving and inability cry to us, if not that there once was a true happiness in man, of which there now remains only the mark and empty trace? He tries vainly to fill it with everything around him, seeking from things absent the help he does not receive from things present. But they are all inadequate, because only an infinite and immutable object—that is, God himself—can fill this infinite abyss.[92]

[92] *Ibid.*, p. 45 (S181/L148).

We wander through this life with a hole that only God can fill, a rupture in us that is so painful that, while given over to ourselves, we can only strive to anodize it with the assistance of worldly distractions. Pascal mentions here the futility of the will to bring about the satisfaction of its demands; but he also draws attention to our inability to recognize the identical orientation of our will to seemingly disparate situations. We are doomed to continue to approach the worldly object of our desire with the will even though experience reveals to us time and again the improbability of our success.

Pascal suggests that only for the faithful does happiness stand as a possibility. If the will is incapable of bringing about happiness and if only those people who have faith stand the chance for happiness, then there must exist a profound distinction between the will and faith. The will seems to be the source of effort that emanates from our wretchedness while faith is the source of effort that emanates from our higher selves.

Pascal writes,

> Man's greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us both that there is a great principle of greatness and a great principle of wretchedness in man.
>
> It must then account for these astonishing oppositions.
>
> To make men happy, it must show him that God exists; that we are required to love him; that our true bliss is to be in him and our sole ill to be separated from him. It must recognize that we are full of darkness preventing us from knowing and loving him, and that thus, as our duty requires us to love God and as our concupiscence turns us away from him, we are full of inequities. It must account for this opposition we have to

> God and to our own good. It must teach us the remedies of these infirmities and the means to obtain the remedies…[93]

But the contrast between the will and faith is only two-thirds of the story. Understanding the will as emanating from our passions, it might be tempting to suggest that Pascal must appeal to reason or rationality for illuminating the pathway to the certainty that God exists so that we may fulfill our obligation to love God. Many superficial readers of the "Discourse on the Machine" and the "Wager" have historically held Pascal to something like the belief that human rationality can provide us with certainty that God exists. They use passages like the following to make their case:

> Man is only a reed, the weakest thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The whole universe does not need to take up arms to crush him, man would still be nobler than what killed him, because he knows he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows nothing of this.[94]

Were the interpreters to read a bit further, they would hear Pascal say, "All our dignity consists, then, in thought. It is from this that we must raise ourselves, and not from space and duration, which we could not fill," and then, "Let us labor, then, to think well. This is the principle of morality." And further on, Pascal encourages us to take comfort in saying, "It is not from yourself that you should expect it, rather you should expect it by expecting nothing from yourself."[95] It is within these lines that we begin to see that Pascal has a kind of thinking in mind that is not dependent on rationality, strange as it

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[93] *Ibid.*, p. 46 [S182/L149].
[94] *Ibid.*, p. 64 [S231/L200].
[95] *Ibid*.

may seem. Under this interpretation, we must not think that we are ourselves the source of "thinking well." Rather, we should conceive of ourselves as conduits through which thinking well is achieved. Reason shows up as yet a more sophisticated diversion than the kind with which Passion has commerce.

But surely we must play an active role in producing anything that might plausibly be called *our* thinking about God, the superficial interpreters would say. A careful reading of Pascal's work on the machine and the wager, itself, will reveal that nothing could be further from the truth. The long, continuous passage from Pascal parceled under the heading "Discourse on the Machine," opens with the mysterious fragment: "Infini – Rien," which translates as "Infinity, nothingness [nothing]." The affiliation of infinity with nothingness receives clarification when Pascal explains, "The finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite and becomes pure nothingness."[96] There is an obvious connection between Weil's conception of God as pure absence and the view expressed here that the finite becomes void when confronted with infinity. The case might even be made that infinity and nothingness are identical: if something becomes nothing when added to infinity, then infinity is composed of nothing rather than something. And so, the significance of human rationality stands in the same analogous relation to God as does finitude to infinity; hence human rationality cannot establish God's existence.

The famous "Wager" of Pascal underscores the error in thinking that rationality will persuade a non-believer to believe; likewise, reason is utterly impotent in trying to bring a believer to skepticism. Having established that the non-believer, through the force of rational argumentation should and yet does not believe, Pascal suggests,

[96] *Ibid.*, p. 211 (S680/L418].

> But at least realize that your inability to believe comes from your passions, since reason brings you to this and yet you cannot believe. Work, then on convincing yourself, not by adding more proofs of God's existence, but by diminishing your passions…Learn from those who were bound like you, and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the way you wish to follow and who are cured of the illness of which you wish to be cured. Follow the way by which they began; they acted as if they believed, took holy water, had masses said, etc. This will make you believe naturally and mechanically.[97]

We non-believers are asked in this passage to put aside the kind of reasoning that we have heretofore employed in favor of a different kind of thinking, viz., faith, which is derived neither from ordinary passion nor from reason as commonly construed. Faith is granted us by God through grace. We cannot deserve it; but once we have it, we experience knowing on a deeper, more primordial level than any effort of logical reasoning can possibly afford.

Simone Weil on Attention

Our word *attention*, as I mentioned in Chapter Three but feel the need to repeat here, remains in close proximity to the French verb *attendre* whose Latin origin reveals the source of an ambiguity that, luckily for those of us who believe that we should strive in all things to preserve as much ambiguity as possible, still resides in the use of the word in our part of the world, though we usually do not pay heed to it. The Latin word

[97] *Ibid*., p. 214.

attendere is composed of two parts: the prefix, *at*, which we translate as *toward* and the stem, *tendere*, which we translate as *holding* or *stretching* or *offering* (as one would tender one's resignation or tender payment to satisfy a debt). So, given the Latin root word, we should imagine, when hearing the word, a stretching or holding or offering toward. The French verb, *attendre*, can be conjugated with a number of different prepositions and in a number of reflexive and nominative modes whose employment might variously allow us to hear: to wait, to serve, to expect, to show up or be present, to concentrate the direction of one's mental powers, to consider, to care, to be ready, to act from a sense of courtesy or gallantry—all uses transmit, sometimes implicitly, the notion of an activity that places us in a posture of receptivity. We are understood, when attending, to be offering ourselves up to some thing, person or event that has not yet arrived.

Simone Weil makes much use of the word attention in her work. She thought of attention as the highest mark of human freedom, as a human capability that makes it possible to rise above our tendency to lose ourselves in the clamor of the world as objects in interaction with other worldly objects. Weil reports on her early adolescence:

> At fourteen I fell into one of those fits of bottomless despair that come with adolescence, and I seriously thought of dying because of the mediocrity of my natural faculties. The exceptional gifts of my brother, who had a childhood and youth comparable to those of Pascal, brought my own inferiority home to me…What did grieve me was the idea of being excluded from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides. I preferred to die rather than live

> without that truth. After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom and truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention on its attainment.[98]

One of her earliest intellectual commitments to attention came as the result of a personal experience in which Simone Weil came to realize that, were she to seek truth, she would need to be prepared to work toward it. She remained committed to the idea that persistent concentration of one's mental efforts would yield the truth. The kind of attention that Weil meant to highlight, however, was not the kind of attention that we think of today when we set our sights on the achievement of some goal, though the movement of the soul bears some resemblance within the two examples. She says elsewhere that

> In every school exercise there is a special way of waiting upon the truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it. There is a way of giving our attention to the data of a problem in geometry without trying to find the solution or to the words of a Latin or Greek text without trying to arrive at the meaning, a way of waiting, when we are writing, for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen, while we merely reject all inadequate words.[99]

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[98] Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, as excerpted in Mario von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 20-21.
[99] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 63.

It is the dedication that we give to a particularly difficult mathematical proof that serves as the model for Simone Weil's understanding of what it is to pay attention properly. Paying attention is not the same thing as giving ourselves to one of life's distractables, but rather a sort of waiting:

> Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.[100]

Attention is a sort of waiting for the arrival of and a sort of waiting on, or service to, an unspecified object. The unspecified object for Weil is the love of God, taken in the double genitive sense of the phrase. According to Weil, the love for God is nothing other than the love of God for himself. But given that, as we suggested earlier, God is synonymous with the nothing, or nothingness, we are unable to have the intentional object of our attention defined in advance of our receiving it. One might be tempted here to think that Weil assumes a belief in the receipt of some object, but belief is of no use to

[100] *Ibid*., p. 62.

humankind according to Weil. And this is indeed difficult to follow. The best expression of what she means comes in the following:

> Pascal's words 'Thou wouldst not seek me if thou hadst not found me' are not the true expression of the relations between man and God. Plato is much more profound when he says 'Turn away with your whole soul from the things which pass.' It is not for man to seek, or even to believe in, God. He has only to refuse his love to everything which is not God. This refusal does not presuppose any belief. It is enough to recognize, what is obvious to any mind, that all the goods of this world, past, present, or future, real or imaginary, are finite and limited and radically incapable of satisfying the desire which burns perpetually within us for an infinite and perfect good. All men know this, and more than once in their lives they recognize it for a moment, but then they immediately begin deceiving themselves again so as not to know it any longer, because they feel that if they knew it they could not go on living. And their feeling is true, for that knowledge kills, but it inflicts a death which leads to a resurrection.[101]

It is within the framework of this understanding of the human relation to God that I see the strongest connection between Pascal and Simone Weil. Properly directing our attention in the way that Weil describes it is in close proximity to the new way of thinking that Pascal said was necessary in order to know that God exists. Simone Weil thought that the proper direction of our attention is that which it is requisite on us to do. We need not believe, we need merely to be obedient. Paying attention is nothing more

[101] Simone Weil, "Some Reflections on the Love of God," in *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, translated by Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 158.

than being obedient to that which we know to be the right commander. But, if the right commander is the nothing, or nothingness, then it is quite difficult to reason our way to the certainty of our identification of the proper object of our attention. Again, we do not concern ourselves with the object of attention, instead we are meant to obey. I suppose it is just that simple.

Heidegger and Letting-Be-ness

Given the interpretation of the word *God* in Simone Weil and Pascal (and admitting that they would likely not speak of God in this way) as the *nothing* or *nothingness* as such, I am now prepared to bring Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit* into the discussion. Intentionality revealed itself to be deficient as a descriptive model for attention since it relies so heavily on the conception of reality as fundamentally comprised of subjects and objects. Subject-object talk turned out to be a derivative characterization of *what is*, lending us the idea that subjects and objects may be isolated from the flow of experience in order to enjoy an independent ontological status. Though a convenient way to think about the activity of attending, intentionality has confined attention studies to an incomplete and perhaps wrongheaded belief that empirical evidence and experimentation will help us understand what it is to pay attention. Empirical studies of attention have all begun with the seemingly self-evident principle that attention is thoroughly object-directed. This assumes that whatever directedness may be identifiable within an act of paying attention may be tracked to a specifiable object, that any purported act of paying attention which does not exhibit such directedness toward specificity must be an example of a kind of dispersal of attention that falls outside

the parameters of properly so called attending. In brief, contemporary attention studies seem to presuppose that attention may be understood in terms of a limiting binary construction that life experience reveals to be inadequate.[102]

Throughout much of his career, Heidegger expressed concern over the ways of thought with which the human being may approach experience. He believed there to be a difficulty facing us when we give ourselves over to the tendency to forge shortcuts to experience. Applied to thought, such shortcuts oftentimes become manifest in our adoption of certain styles of thinking as, while effective within some life circumstances, appropriate to life circumstances for which they are not suited. Our tendency to abbreviate thinking shows up all around. Examples are easy to locate. For instance, we aim for automaticity on many different fronts in our lives. We strive, when learning to ride a bicycle or drive an automobile, finally not to have to think about the incidental steps involved in accomplishing our task. We are conditioned to think that learning frees us from the need to be aware of the process by which we come to apprehend our skill. In the beginning, we awkwardly put one foot in front of the other; we try to maintain our balance; we try to manage the steering mechanism, to adeptly apply the brakes, to distinguish when we should from when we should not do so, etc. We strive, when learning mathematics, to reach a point where it will no longer be necessary to think about what we are doing. We attempt to learn our addition and multiplication tables so that we

[102] I operate here with an unstated distinction between the kind of evidence that alleged empirical sciences offer and the kind of evidence that life experience offers: "empirical" would be the kind of evidence that can be reconstructed in an experiment, whereas "life" experience abides within the realm of that which oftentimes admits of no duplicability.

will automatically know that 2+2 and that 2x2=4.[103] We learn the pathway to and from our home so that we do not have to wander around in a state of confusion when out and about. We move to a new city and try quickly to learn the accepted ways of behavior so that we might avoid looking out of place. The possibilities for examples seem endless. All of these present us with situations where it seems legitimate and even desirable to relinquish our thinking of the precision of each step to a kind of automatic pilot.

We go wrong, however, when we decide that all purposes will be served by adapting our thinking capacity to that which comes automatically. We, in some important sense, become thoughtless when we overlook the nuances in a situation that announce to us the propriety or impropriety of our current way of thinking. We take much for granted in our world because of this tendency. Literature and pieces of theater that follow a sort of formulaic pattern for unfolding a story lull their audience into a state of complacency that relieves them of responsibility for attending to the particularity of the events that unfold. It would not be wise to apply the same desire for rote apprehension of mathematical tables, for instance, to the study of a piece of poetry. Poetry concerns itself frequently with the grey areas of life, areas that are not so clear-cut to understand as simple problems of addition and multiplication are meant to be. Difficult life situations in which we are presented with choices between two or more seemingly equivalent possibilities whose selection promises to have some unforeseen impact on our future do not seem like the kinds of situations in which our tendency toward automaticity would be seen as a good thing. These are all fairly obvious

[103] For Weil, the automatization of such elementary formulations is a necessary propaedeutic to more advanced problems whose working out involves the kind of thinking that she (and Heidegger) would have preferred, but this requires a continual openness to variation.

examples of circumstances in which our disposition toward routinization would surely lead us down a restrictive path.

Heidegger's critique of technology confronts us with our tendency toward automization as apt to produce a disastrous situation for ourselves. He shows that our current reliance on and high estimation of the conveniences that technology affords is traceable back to historical misappropriations of the thinkers from antiquity and their belief that enduring presence is the predominant characteristic of reality—casting that which is impermanent to the deficient and derivative realm of appearances. Whenever we encounter that which seems contingent and impermanent, we are to understand it as an illusion. This understanding of the contingent as illusory pitches us toward a sort of unrelenting refusal to accept that things might just be as they seem to be. The human being, who possesses a unique penchant for seeing the permanent that resides in the contingent, has learned to see itself as separate from the world that it observes and therefore qualified to refuse the impermanent appearances of things in favor of their foundational abiding stasis. Such a refusal creates an attitude of mastery which we adopt as the appropriate attitude to take with regard to anything whatsoever that we encounter. We come to think of the world in which we live as a resource to be exhausted for our benefit. Heidegger dedicated much of his later work to revealing this tendency of ours.

In his critique of technology, Heidegger speaks of a kind of truncation of thinking that characterized his (and arguably continues to characterize our) age. He notices that the human being is in possession of two different capacities for thought: the calculative (*rechnendes Denken*) and the meditative (*besinnliches Denken*). Heidegger worries in "Memorial Address" that we are "in flight from thinking," that, not only are we not aware

that we are, we also are deluded in believing that we exhaust ourselves thinking each day.[104] This is because our calculative thinking capacity, which functions within a framework that forces us to "always reckon with conditions that are given," and which "never stops, never collects itself," makes it seem urgent that we attend to the conditions whose satisfactory mastery will permit us to reach our goals.[105] We live in a time, he fears, when our calculative thinking capacity takes priority over our meditative capacity.

In contrast to the calculative, our meditative capacity is the kind of thinking which gathers, collects and "contemplates the meaning that reigns in everything that is."[106] When we think meditatively we are able to question the givenness of our conditions, we hold ourselves in a posture of openness toward the possibility that our conditions are not set in stone. In a meditative mode, we are capable of thinking about how what we do says something about who we are; we are capable of evaluating whether we want to be the kind of person who does the things that we do. Meditative thinking is not productive by any definition that would make it comparable to the productivity that is associated with calculative thinking. The meditative appears to be lofty and contemplative, a bit ethereal and impractical. But meditative thinking can only appear this way in an arena in which calculative thinking is valued more highly.

Heidegger's critique of the atomic age draws attention to the very real possibility that our meditative thinking capacity will atrophy under the privileged use of our calculative capacity. We run the risk of losing our meditative capability emphasizing the calculative the way we do. Heidegger ominously warns,

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[104] Heidegger, "Memorial Address" (1955) in *Discourse on Thinking* [*Gelassenheit*, 1959], translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), pp. 45-6.
[105] *Ibid*., p. 46.
[106] *Ibid*.

> the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking.[107]

Calculative thinking and perhaps the illusion of success that it affords us is capable of mesmerizing us into believing that meditative thinking is a waste of time. And it seems at least from my perspective that Heidegger was onto something, given the current reconsideration of the practicality of the Humanities underway within many educational institutions. Education in the USA appears to be directed toward workforce productivity and not toward the broadening of perspectives that education used to enjoy.

Heidegger does, however, propose a solution that would be effective provided that not too much time has lapsed: meditative thinking. "Meditative thinking demands of us not to cling one-sidedly to a single idea, nor to run down a one-track course of ideas."[108] We must be vigilant in our efforts to think broadly and deeply about our relationship to the world, about how the things that we do have an impact on the world, about how what the world experiences in terms of effects produced by us will itself be experienced by us, viz., because we are part of that world. But how do we become vigilant given the current state of the world and our dependence on technology?

Heidegger recommends *Gelassenheit*, the ordinary German word for composure and calmness, which has been translated as *letting-be-ness of things* (*Die Gelassenheit zu den Dingen*).[109] Involved would be a revaluation of our relationship to technological

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[107] *Ibid*., p. 56.
[108] *Ibid*., p. 55.
[109] The translators of the "Memorial Address" make use of the phrase, *releasement toward things*—a translation that I reject because of its transmission of the idea that in a state of *Gelassenheit*, we give ourselves over to things. While Heidegger will ultimately recommend that we relinquish control of what is

devices. We can, as Heidegger points out, " use technical devices as they ought to be used, and also let them alone as something which does not affect our inner and real core. We can affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us."[110] Rather than declare a moratorium on technology and the calculative thinking that brought it to us, Heidegger recommends here that we step back and think about what we are doing. We can only do so from within a posture of openness to that which shows up.

In an illuminating paragraph, Heidegger adds,

> There is then in all technical processes a meaning, not invented or made by us, which lays claim to what man does and leaves undone. We do not know the significance of the uncanny increasing dominance of atomic technology. *The meaning pervading technology hides itself*. But if we explicitly and continuously heed the fact that such hidden meaning touches us everywhere in the world of technology, we stand at once within the realm of that which hides itself from us, and hides itself just in approaching us. That which shows itself and at the same time withdraws is the essential trait of what we call the mystery. I call the comportment which enables us to keep open to the meaning hidden in technology, *openness to the mystery*.[111]

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to what is itself, he reserves for this state the corresponding key notion of *Offenheit für das Geheimnis (openness to the mystery)*. Both notions play equally significant roles, but are distinct. The one asks us to let things be what they are; the other asks us to attend to what they are in their being.

[110] *Ibid*., p. 54.

[111] *Ibid*., p. 55.

We do not know what our dependence on technology has in store for us, but we should imagine that there will be something that such dependence carries with it; and we need to remain open to the unfolding of what that is precisely through time. Just as he had done in his early work, Heidegger here speaks of the hidden and the unhidden (concealing and unconcealing elsewhere). It does not strike me here that we need to think that Heidegger has anything spooky in mind. The thought, it seems, is meant to call to mind the all-too-frequent experience of deciding that something means such and such—has certain properties that indicate that it will behave in certain ways consistent with our previous assessments of it—only to discover later that we were wrong. This kind of error, given adequate reflection, pervades human experience. There is a certain still-to-be-revealed feature that inheres in all that is (particularly apparent in the trajectory of human development); and yet, we try to supply ourselves with an account of what is as if it could be divorced from the contingency of its future determinations. Having adopted the comportment of letting things be, we now need also to remain open to the meaning that they bring with them. We are meant, according to the discussion, to let things be what they are and yet, in order to do so, we must be open to what they are as it pertains to what they will be or may become.

Brought around to the topic of attention, it seems that we could glean much from Heidegger's discussion. For one thing, I notice that when I truly pay attention, I am not always (if even ever) involved in trying to force what shows up to correspond to my own framework of interest. In such situations I seem to be allowing things to be what they are and at the same time remaining open to that which has not yet been revealed about them. The illustration that comes most readily to mind involves my experience of whitewater

rafting. When advancing down the river, one encounters many rapids that need to be negotiated if one wants to remain in one piece. If one opts simply to float through them, then one will be tossed from the raft into the river where the currents are frequently too fierce for an adult human being to handle. If one sets one's jaw to mastering the river, one runs the risk of being too rigidly connected to an expectation of the river that the hourly shifts in the river's structure make it impossible to meet. In such instances, one has put oneself equally at risk of being thrown by the river into rocks and currents. Successful negotiation of the rapids and currents of a river depends on a posture of openness—which is neither passive as the first example above would be, nor aggressively active as in the second example—to the vicissitudes of the river in their relation to the rafting party's position. Examples such as these demonstrate what Heidegger means when he suggests that we let things be what they are and that we remain open to the unknown meaning about them that has yet to unfold. Rigidly deciding in advance is dangerous business when it comes to rafting, but also puts us in a state in which we cannot see things as they are (as they are determined by what they will become).

Notice that I made an important qualification in giving heed to those moments when I am *truly* paying attention. Our current dependence on technology and, by association, on the scientific point of view has set up the illusion that when we think calculatively about the most expeditious route for dealing with our conditions, we are paying attention. As has been demonstrated, we are in such situations only partially aware of what is, viz., as what it is *for us*. The claim that I have been striving to assert is that there is a deeper sense of attending from which is derived this partial sense of paying attention. The more exhaustive way to think about attending reveals itself when we think

back to Pascal and Weil, specifically with regard to the notion of waiting that comes smuggled along with the act of giving our attention. Before we attend with the directedness that intentionality identifies, we must first be able to give our attention in general; we must first attend to that which is not, to the nothing, to the unspecified. Understanding what it is to pay attention from the standpoint of intentionality is to misunderstand what it is to pay attention.

Heidegger's "Memorial Address" quite cleverly dares the audience to think about the conditions that would make such a thing as a memorial address possible in the first place. Students who read the piece very quickly become frustrated that the address does not fit into the category of that which they were in virtue of its title expecting the "Memorial Address" to be. Here is a situation in which the audience performs and catches themselves in the act of performing exactly that which Heidegger deigns to criticize. The title might have given them an expectation closer to what Heidegger delivered had they not already been so accustomed to the meaning that has become sedimented thanks to previous encounters with memorial addresses as presented. We permit experience to determine for us ahead of time what it is that will count under such circumstances as legitimate. Without saying so, Heidegger leads the audience to question that which they have taken to be obvious. To ask ourselves why we have narrowly interpreted *Memorial Address* to mean formulaic exhibition of the accomplishments and endearing characteristics of the deceased is to be on the path toward meditative thinking. To be on the path toward meditative thinking is to hold ourselves in awareness of the permanence of the impermanence of the meaning of life. To hold ourselves in such a state of awareness is to attend more carefully and more openly to our situation. It turns

out that Western Thought has taken a detour away from what it truly is to pay attention; the time has come to awaken to the possibility of understanding attention as openness rather than closedness.

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About the Author

S. West Gurley grew up in Dallas, Texas and received a B.A. in Philosophy and French from Austin College, Sherman, Texas in 1980. During the period of his undergraduate studies, West spent a year in Paris, following a course of study in Philosophy at the Sorbonne. He spent several years practicing Real Estate in Dallas, Texas until he came to his senses and returned to school for his M.A. in Philosophy at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2004. In August 2004, West began his work toward the Ph.D. in Philosophy at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida where he completed his years as a student in the Fall 2008—with Ph.D. in hand.