

Technology and the Education of Attention.

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Simone Weil wrote in an essay in her book *Attente de Dieu* that ‘the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of education’ [*études*] (Weil 1959, 66). Weil seems to suggest that education involves such an attentiveness to attentiveness itself. Interestingly, she suggests that the best way to do this is, if not quite inattentively, then certainly indirectly.

Most school tasks have a certain intrinsic interest as well but such an interest is secondary. All tasks which really call upon the power of attention are interesting for the same reason and to an almost equal degree. School children and students who love God should never say: “For my part I like mathematics”; “I like French”; “I like Greek.” They should learn to like all these subjects, because all of them develop that faculty of attention which, directed towards God, is the very substance of prayer. (Weil 1959, 66-7)

The substance of prayer is embodied in the French title of Weil’s book, *L’Attente de Dieu* (1950) which is lost in translations like *Waiting on God*, though it is quite close to the title of a certain play written in French by an Irish writer some years after Weil’s death: *En Attendant Godot*. To focus on mathematics is really to focus on your powers of focussing. Anyone convinced by Peter Sloterdijk’s argument that all religions are in fact nothing other than disguised anthropotechnic operations, or instances of a ‘general ascetology’ of training projects (Sloterdijk 2013, 6), might be inclined to see the action of concentrating on God as a training in concentration itself.

But what is the faculty of attention? The most ready-to-hand way of thinking about attention nowadays is as the lost art of one-thing-at-a-time concentration in a world of feverish distractions. We used to worry a lot about the terrible, petrifying threat of objectification, of being turned to stone by the gaze of some malignantly beady-eyed Other. But the maximally-mediated life is not one of ubiquitously deployed death rays, but of sirenic solicitations, to look, to ‘listen up’. It is strangely like the condition which all parents of toddlers will recognise, of endlessly being required by their darlings to look! look at this! look at me, Daddy!

In the days when Louis Althusser held sway, or for those over whom he did, this might have been called 'interpellation', or, as it was sometimes rendered, 'hailing'. The world of social signs seems to consist much less of vulnerable entities saying 'keep your filthy eyes off me' than of exhibitionist entities saying 'hey you, take a look at this!' In one sense, this is the opposite of objectification, since, according to Althusser one was supposed to be hailed as a subject, and therefore called into one's subjectivity. Only nowadays, this kind of subjectification is an anxiously vigilant affair, as one is evacuated of everything but the vigilant lookout for the next thing wanting to grab your attention. Strangely enough, this will as often as not take the form of some warning or other, in the generalisation of the function I have called 'Monition' (Connor 2023, 178-214). Think what a large proportion of news stories begin with the phrase 'scientists are warning that ...'

We rarely think about the opposite of attention-deficit-disorder, in what we might call, but do not, attention-surfeit-disorder. At an individual level, this takes the form, not of flibbertigibbet distraction (to be distracted used to mean to be out of your senses) but of obsession, a condition which has the right to be thought of as coeval with, and itself strongly formative of, modern psychoanalysis and psychiatry. Freud formulated the idea of 'obsessional neurosis' (*Zwangsneurose*) in 1896, following it up in 1909 with the case history familiarly known as 'The Rat-Man', but bearing the title of 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis', following on the identification during the nineteenth century of various kinds of conditions known as monomania, anticipating today's obsessive-compulsive disorders. Obsession, or the malady of over-attention, has a right to be considered the signature psychiatric disorder of the early twenty-first century.

Obsession plays a curious and paradoxical role in the contemporary experience of health, or its anxiogenic accomplice, wellness. On 10th November Alexander Chan, the membership secretary of *The Guardian* wrote to subscribers an email alluringly headed 'How We Became Obsessed with Wellness'. The body of the email turned out to contain nothing at all bearing on the question it had used to prod readers to open it. Instead, it announced the arrival of a regular feature entitled *Well, Actually*, which is to be a consumer guide to wellness products and services. The puff quoted Estelle Tang, the *Guardian's* Lifestyle and Wellness Editor

"We'll interrogate and challenge those health and self-care trends and identify the findings that matter. We'll cut through the noise with thoughtful, actionable journalism, thorough reporting and moving personal perspectives about how to lead meaningful lives."

The idea of obsession, and the promise of avoiding it, indeed the warning that one should be on one's guard against it, here turns into an obsessional amplifier, in the form of what Marcuse called 'the ceremonial part of practical behaviourism' (Marcuse 2002, 16).

The homiletic concern with wellness is an area of absolute unanimity among readers, or one might prefer to say, addressees, at both ends of the mass-media political spectrum, for both the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph* provide an endless supply of guides to well-being, encompassing tips on eating, exercising and, most recently, sleeping, which is getting to be extremely hard work nowadays. Well-being embodies in the most acute form the vicious paradox of attention: that the closer the attention you pay, the more blinkered you become.

Within living memory, or mine, it used to be the case that health was a medical condition, whereas wellness was a more general and indeterminate condition of being well, of things going well or, what often amounts to the same thing, especially in England, 'as well as can be expected'. You would say to somebody you met on the street, 'How are you? Are you well?' You would only be likely to say 'How are you? Are you healthy?' in the case of an acquaintance whom you knew to be recovering from an illness. This is why you could get a certificate, or what is called a 'clean bill' of health, but there was no need, or means, for certifying how well you were.

We can compare the health/wellness coupling to the nonbelief/atheism coupling in respect of religious belief. Non-belief in God can easily be entertained, and in most cases actually is so entertained, as a kind of implicit assumption, such that you might articulate your non-belief only in a now-you-come-to-ask kind of way. Most nonbelievers in God live their lives in ways in which the question of the existence of God rarely if ever arises. Atheism is a much more positive and even militant form of nonbelief: it is the belief that there is no God rather than the all-things-considered absence of such a belief. In a similar way, wellness used to be the condition of not having anything wrong with you that you could tell, whereas it was health that used to be thought of as the

positive absence of infirmity. Nonassertive nonbelief is like wellness used to be and assertive atheism is like health used to be. Being 'well' used to amount to feeling 'fine', namely, being as well as could be expected. But a great deal more is expected of wellness nowadays, as a result of our increased, and increasingly compulsory attentiveness to it.

The prominence of the terms wellness and well-being in contexts where they can be assumed to be subject to watchful and calculative assay means that wellness is beginning to move into the space previous occupied by health. Being well is not just something we realise about ourselves when somebody asks us, it is something of which we need assurance, and therefore something which demands our attention, and more even than that, exhorts a continuous and generalised attentiveness, sometimes in the form of delegated automatic functions (real-time glucose monitors, step counters and the like), even if the point of such functions is to keep us in a standby condition of readiness. Hence, Human Resources departments encourage us to think not about our lives outside work, but about our work-life balance, which suggests something demanding the work of continuous attention.

In *The Master and his Emissary* (2009) and *The Matter with Things* (2023), Ian McGilchrist has recently argued that the bicameral brain division that characterises almost all creatures that are possessed of a brain at all has the function of coordinating two kinds of attention. McGilchrist writes in a tradition of lateralisation that is at once a source of popular fascination and enthusiasm and academic deprecation. Careers have been made and lost on characterisations of left brain and right brain thinking, but the fact that all vertebrates, including all mammals, have brains that exhibit bilateral division of function suggests that there must be some advantage to the division that would itself repay attention. According to McGilchrist, the left brain is partitive and predatory. Its actions are orientations are typified by the sighting of prey, its pursuit, seizing, and assimilation. More abstractly, it specializes in separating things from their backgrounds, and therefore may be said to be specialised for specialisation itself. By contrast, the right hemisphere of the brain specialises in large-scale or broad-spectrum attentiveness. This is because absorption in the task of predation, and enjoying its fruits, is very risky in a world of entities intent on preying on you. One of the reasons that so much of human social life is built around the ritual deflection of aggression in eating – nearly all religions have some equivalent of Holy Communion – is because the act of eating is nearly as dangerous as getting something to

eat in the first place. It is necessary while eating to stay attuned to the possibility of a copredator sneaking up to steal your meal (waiters know that only weirdos choose a seat facing the wall rather than a defensible position facing outwards into the restaurant), or to an eagle swooping down on you from an empty sky.

The difference between the attentional modes of the left and right hemispheres is essentially the difference between knowing *that* and being aware *of*. To be, or become 'aware of' something in your visual field would always be to suspect that there might be more in it than meets the eye (Polonius behind the curtain). The left hemisphere is also the seat of language and has been thought to be identical with rationality itself. For this reason, McGilchrist argues, we are seeing a kind of large-scale cultural hemiplegia, ensuring left-hemisphere dominance through the amplification of left-brain functions (not least in their automation), and promotion of LHD (left-hemisphere-dominant) persons to positions of esteem and authority. The shift from sympathy to admiration in relation to autism, which is strongly associated with right hemisphere lesion, may be a sign that it is increasingly neurotypical rather than neurodivergent. McGilchrist quotes with approval the observation of G.K. Chesterton that 'The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason' (Chesterton 1909, 32).

McGilchrist also identifies one of the leading characteristics of right-hemisphere deficit in the psychological characteristic known as 'perseverance', sometimes pronounced with the stress on the second rather than the third syllable to distinguish it from ordinary usage. Patients with right-hemisphere damage, or experimental subjects with suppression of right-hemisphere function, exhibit extreme inflexibility, for example in refusing to acknowledge ownership of a body-part belonging to the left of the body. The word *fixation* seems to have moved from chemistry to psychology following Freud's introduction of the term *Fixierung* to indicate a form of arrest in psychological development. In fact, ideas of bewitchment or sorcery had often incorporated ideas of painful or unnatural fixing, for example in the curse-bowls known as *defixiones*, or fixators, which were thought of as having a paralysing effect, just as being subject to obsession or fascination was thought of as a condition of being besieged (an *obsess* could in fact refer to a siege or blockade until the end of the seventeenth century). It was only from the mid-nineteenth century onwards that fixation came to be thought of as something reflexively exercised by a

subject on itself: to be obsessed *by* things gave way only in the late 1970s to the expression to obsess *on, about, or over* things. The left hemisphere is attuned not only to capture (the etymological root, through Latin *capere*, of the words *concept* and *perception*), but also to permanence. Its office is not only to have, but to hold. Like the hawk in Ted Hughes's 'Hawk Roosting', we must imagine it resolving 'I am going to keep things like this' (Hughes 2003, 89). The right hemisphere, specialising in alertness to and awareness of possibility rather than knowledge, is designed to keep us on the *qui vive* for new or unexpected things. This may be why, as McGilchrist notes, gorillas, who tend like humans to be right-handed, will usually reach for inanimate objects with their right hands, and reach out to animate beings with their left. Damage to the right hemisphere or left-hemisphere dominance tends to erode the capacity for humour, a word that derives from the absurdity of people reduced to the condition of machines by the action of one predominating 'humour', or governed by what Jean-Paul Sartre mocked as 'the spirit of seriousness' (Sartre 1984, 580).

Our devices and media of communication enforce exorbitantly exaggerated attention to a smaller and smaller range of subjects. The rise in the authority of what is expansively called interdisciplinarity has in fact been associated with a striking narrowing of the range of perspectives and preoccupations, both in the sciences and humanities. In place of the much-lamented fragmentation of disciplines, there is the exercise, largely through centralization of funding, of theme-control and confirmation-bias. The fortunes of the word *diversity*, converging greily on only one kind of divergence, exemplify this. There are more sources of news and means of news dissemination than ever before in human history and less actual novelty under the media sun than in a medieval hamlet.

One might connect this cognitive hemiplegia with the principle that Peter Sloterdijk has called explicitation, or the abolition of the implicit (Sloterdijk 2004, 87). Modernity is defined as the refusal of the principle articulated by the Stoic Epictetus, in Julian Barnes's rendering: 'some things are up to us, and some things are not up to us' (Epictetus 1928, 483; Barnes 2022, 21). For modern persons, glorying in their non-anthropocentrism, there can be nothing any more that is not up to us, nothing for which we can dare not to take on responsibility, not even the weather (especially not the weather). This is a condition simultaneously of omnipotence and persecutory anxiety, as things that are 'up to us' to decide for ourselves can so easily also be 'down to us'

when we are made to carry the can for them. Obsessive-compulsive rituals of attention are both the means of asserting the phantasmal supremacy of knowledge and the means of defending against its compulsive force.

You will have noticed the absence of anything other than passing reference to ‘technology’ in all of this. This is for the simple reason that what we call ‘digital technology’ is, for the most part, nothing of the sort. The entities we consent to call ‘tech companies’ for the most part do not sully themselves with engineering or machinery in anything other than a trivial sense. What digital technologies mostly do is provide means of controlling and modulating the function of other, already existing technologies. They are operating systems, which may be thought of as essentially offering capacities of *tuning* (a word that is an etymological cousin of *attention*). As a metaphor carrying the idea of subtle adjustment and sensitive responsiveness to one's environment, tuning has an honourable reputation. But it is never true that the more of a good thing you have the better, and, scaled up to exorbitant levels, tuning can lead to obsessional kinds of convergent and introversive attention. In a sense, the migration of the word *technology* away from hardware and towards software is a return to the old meaning of the word, which was still in use until late in the eighteenth century, to mean grammar, or the logical rules of language. There is a close relation between the conditions of modern attention, which is simultaneously hypertrophic, and maniacally selective, and the addictively self-confirming circuitry of digital systems of attention. The inanition of attentional capacity is not the opposite of the obese expansion of attentional objects, but rather its torpid reciprocal. It has been known to advertisers for many years that if you offer viewers a choice of 50 channels, they will regularly tune in to 3: presented with 9, they will try out 7.

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