

## **Behold: Silence and Attention in Education**

Abstract:

Educators continually ask about the best means to engage students and how best to capture attention. These concerns often make the problematic assumption that students can directly govern their own attention. In order to address the role and limits of attention in education, some theorists have sought to recover the significance of silence or mindfulness in schools, but I argue that these approaches are too simplistic. A more fundamental examination of our conceptions of identity and agency reveals a Cartesian and Kantian foundationalism. This assumed subjectivity establishes too simplistic a conception of the agency of students in directing attention. I critically engage with these conceptions by drawing on a range of diverse sources, primarily modern Continental philosophy and Christian mystical theology.

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What is the role of attention in education? In what follows I argue that attention should be distinguished from concentration, mindfulness, or mental focus. In an everyday sense we are able to direct our awareness to specific objects and situations, and in this sense our attention is amenable to subjective intention. However, I am concerned to distinguish the awareness that we can control from an aspect of attention that eludes the simple direction of the will. Whereas concentration, mindfulness, and mental focus can to some extent be controlled, managed and developed, I want to draw attention to a foundational moment of awareness that eludes efforts to manage or develop attention. This aspiration could strike the reader as confused or paradoxical since I am seeking to direct the attention of the reader while making the claim that attention cannot be directed. However, I would certainly hesitate to make the strong claim that attention cannot be directed at all, but rather to show that there must be a moment of awareness that in some respects is *prior* to the engagement of intended concentration. This moment of awareness is fundamental to knowledge, experience, and education. In developing the argument, I relate this moment of awareness to the theological tradition, but in ways that are to some extent evocative rather than fully elaborated. This is a deliberate strategy since the concern (or reference) of this paper is best understood not simply cognitively or propositionally, but also aesthetically or experientially.

I begin by exploring some theological connotations of the word 'behold' to consider the sense in which our attention is held by something 'other'. To behold something is, in a certain sense, to submit ourselves to it, to give ourselves to be held, to become silent. It is to become entirely open and receptive to what is present. This mode of attentive receptivity has been understood as the ground of learning for a range of thinkers such as William James, Simone Weil, and Jiddu Krishnamurti. This conception of attention is contrasted with more willful forms of attention that are common currency in

educational discourse. But the fault line between what we can and cannot control speaks of a foundational moment in which the spirit of learning is born.

This article is only a first step along a longer path that aims to retrieve insights from the theological tradition for pedagogy. Our so-called post-secular context (Habermas 2008), in which the quest for a utopia without religion is no longer a cultural preoccupation, offers an opportunity to reassess the contributions of the theological tradition. Having said that, the main contours of the argument do not, I believe, depend on the perspective offered by any particular religious tradition, and so I would wish to locate this paper in a yet to be defined space that is neither secular nor confessional.

## **Behold**

*Behold* may be the teacher's essential word. Whatever else teachers do, they draw the attention of students to things. As in the Platonic allegory, the teacher drags the student from the cave of ignorance and, standing in the light of truth, gestures or speaks the essential word: behold. To say *behold* does not affirm the authority of the teacher. Rather it recognizes the autonomy of the student in the apprehension of being, and the agency of the world in the givenness of things.

Although *Behold* is an archaic sounding word it is still used in a way that denotes giving regard to something, or holding a thing in view. It can also connote being caught by something as though beheld by it. More often where we come across the word these days it can sound ornamental, rhetorical, or comical without much significance or 'cash-value'. But this impression is mistaken. Behold is related to the German *halten* to hold, originally meaning to keep, tend, watch over, or restrain. It calls us to attend, but also holds or even restrains that attention. It has particular resonance in theological context<sup>1</sup> though such resonance does, I think, suggest a broader epistemological and pedagogical structure.

To behold is not to interpret, analyse, or take into account. Rather it speaks at the point of world-disclosure: it can be said to speak the world. It is, as Maggie Ross puts it "a liminal word; it signals the threshold of contemplation, where the self-conscious mind stops analysing and becomes attentively receptive, open in an ungrasping and self-emptying way to irruption from the deep mind" (Ross 2013, p. 29-30). Is it possible that in beholding the world we can see things before, as it were, they are represented as objects? Does the moment of beholding take place before educators get involved and start putting things in boxes? And is education not concerned more with the comprehension and explanation that follows apprehension or immersion? These questions reflect the epistemological tensions emerging in the nineteenth century Continental hermeneutical tradition between primary phenomenological experience (*Erlebnis*) and secondary hermeneutical understanding (*Verstehen*). For now such wider perspectives will have to remain on the horizon. But the extent to which education should be concerned with the *boundless present* prior to analytical and critical scrutiny remains a complex question. Perhaps schools, colleges, and universities should do more to encourage quiet times, pauses,

reflections, and silences, to create spaces for attention and contemplation. Of course many schools structure silence and contemplation, some, like Quaker, Maharishi, and Krishnamurti schools, in quite distinctive ways. Helen Lees has provided a survey of the significance of silence in schools where she begins the important task of distinguishing forms of silence beyond simply the absence of noise (Lees 2012). Lees argues for 'strong silence' as a positive force in education, as distinct from the forced negative silences that too often structure school experience. This is important work but could draw more upon the philosophical and theological traditions in which the phenomenology of silence is so richly developed.

It has often been noted that silence is not just the absence of noise (Picard 1972; Caranfa 2004; Lees 2010). But the notion that silence is constituted by attention – that it cannot exist without attention - is less often discussed (Krishnamurti 1996). The call for silence in schools might be helpfully recast in terms of a call to attention. But this is surely nothing like the teacher's vain repetition: pay attention.

### **Pay Attention**

These words quickly become hollow prescriptions for improved performance and so we should be attentive to such formulas. In 1890 the philosopher and psychologist William James bemoaned the fact that philosophers had largely ignored the faculty of attention. James encouraged the consideration of attention in education:

the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. No one is *compos sui* if he have it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence* (James 1890, Chapter 11).

We will see that Simone Weil similarly argued that the central concern of pedagogy ought to be training in attention. Today much research continues to assume that attention is something to be trained (Lotz et. al. 2009) particularly where attention is identified with concentration or mindfulness. But even for James there are ambiguities with the idea of training the faculty of attention:

But it is easier to define this ideal [of improving attention] than to give practical directions for bringing it about. The only general pedagogic maxim bearing on attention is that the more interest the child has in advance in the subject, the better he will attend. Induct him therefore in such a way as to knit each new thing on to some acquisition already there; and if possible awaken curiosity, so that the new thing shall seem to come as an answer, or part of an answer, to a question pre-existing in his mind (James 1890, Chapter 11).

But of course the awakening of curiosity itself raises as many difficulties as does the directing attention. There are no guaranteed methods to achieve either. These practical problems are often hidden by the assumption that

attention is a given condition of education. If educational theory considers the wider role of attention in education, it tends to be concerned with deficits of attention and the attendant problems of diagnosis and treatment. This 'deficit model' of attention assumes an unverifiable norm: that for the most part students are able to direct, control, and manage attention. As such, attention is the tacit ground of education, something we all assume to be present. From this perspective it seems self-evident that teachers are able to command students to pay attention.

And, of course, in the everyday sense of the word, this is true. Teachers do expect students to pay attention or concentrate and educators have a range of strategies to manage the attention of their students. But I want to complicate this view by indicating that, rather like beholding, there is something about attention that cannot be demanded, still less coerced. Attention is capable of involuntary wandering as much as voluntary control. Our attention is drawn out of itself by the cry of the infant, by the beauty of the work of art, or by the pain of toothache. Advertisers expend vast resources within the 'attention economy' (Davenport and Beck, 2001) seeking effective means for capturing attention. Of course we can resist efforts to manipulate attention, but very often we follow our attention, not the other way around.

It is hardly surprising then that in the classroom the student remains similarly directed: the student is not simply commanding their attention, but often following it. The will of the student can, no doubt, intervene to direct matters and here we might say that the student offers the teacher their attention. But good teachers know how often certain simple techniques can draw the attention of students without such directedness.

I want to suggest that there is a fundamental aspect of attention that is given, not just from the teacher to the student, but at a more subtle level, to the student herself. The gift of attention is a gift both to the student (as giver) and the teacher (as receiver), in which both are blessed. I will briefly turn to a moment from Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* to illustrate this idea. The narrative comes to a point of crisis when Shylock asks under what compulsion he should show mercy to his debtor Antonio. The play's heroine Portia famously replies:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. (*The Merchant of Venice*)

Mercy, it seems, cannot be demanded, but rather *gently falls*. The possibility that mercy shall be shown depends, in no small measure upon the agency of Shylock, but his own perspective is itself subject to what gently falls from heaven. I want to suggest that attention, like mercy, is under no compulsion. The student who pays attention is offering a gift to the teacher while also paradoxically being given that moment of attention itself. In a sense, attention droppeth as the gentle rain, blessing both him that gives and him that receives the attention.

This is somewhat different to the concentration or trained mindfulness that is sometimes associated with attention. More specifically, this raises questions of identity: who is in control and who is responsible? Very often the question of identity is problematically structured by a polarized conception of agency: too often passivity and activity are regarded as polar opposites. Elsewhere I have argued that the obsolete linguistic mode of the middle voice reflects a mode of being which is some way between activity and passivity, and that this mode of being has been unable to resist the sedimentation of the modern subject (REMOVED). In other words, there exists a point of action in which the intention and agency of the person and the world intermingle, a moment captured in the grammatical cleavage between active and passive voice.<sup>2</sup> Modern English no longer uses this grammatical form, reflecting the fact that our modern conception of subjectivity assumes an unequivocal agency. This connection between linguistic identity and subjectivity preoccupies much of Martin Heidegger's later work and so it is here that we find interesting ways to explore the relation between attention and the will.

The anthropology developed by Heidegger (whether as early *Dasein* or later conceptions as the clearing of Being) reflects the grammatical cleavage of the middle voice by locating Being and human being in the space between activity and passivity (see Davis 2007). Heidegger's contribution to the hermeneutic project is in part his conception of 'revealing' (Heidegger 1977) or 'disclosive looking' (Rojcewicz 2005) in which agency is not to be found at the polar regions of identity, but rather in the mediate gathering of the middle voice. This has left Heidegger open to the criticism that he equivocates on his philosophical (and political) commitments; that, for example, the destiny of technological thinking is paradoxically both determining us, and determined by us leaving no clear statement of what is to be (or indeed can be) done (Heidegger 1977). We are left without a clear method of approach to the problems of our age. Heidegger's understanding of agency here is not incidentally related to the question of attention but centrally so. His philosophical movement can be interpreted as an elaboration of the nature of attention, whether in terms of care as the structure of *Dasein* (Heidegger 1996), thinking as thanking (Heidegger 1976) and the meditative thinking of his *Discourse on Thinking* (Heidegger 1970), or man as the 'shepherd of Being' (Heidegger 1993); the complexity of attention mirrors the complexity of identity itself because attention is significantly constitutive of *Dasein*. We could take this further if we consider how language is also constitutive of the world of Being and human being. In a certain sense, all speech grants the world and intimates the tripartite gathering of the beholding. This is because all speech requires a speaker, a hearer, and a world, and is therefore the "clearing-concealing advent of Being itself" (Heidegger 1993, p. 230). This detour into Heidegger's philosophy locates the question of attention within mainstream philosophical discourse. Nevertheless, it is the religious traditions that offer the richest account of the paradox of attention.

### **The Paradox of Attention**

What Marvin Shaw (Shaw 2010) calls the *paradox of intention* describes this

complex situation rather more simply: that we may reach a goal by giving up the attempt to reach it or, conversely, that we may be prevented from reaching a goal by our intentional efforts to achieve it. Religious traditions the world over warn of the propensity on the part of the novice to become preoccupied with the observance of ritual which can be the very thing that prevents the attention that is central to ritual itself. This is why Christian theologians are often ambivalent about structured religious practices. Meister Eckhart, to take one example, extols the pilgrim:

Leave place, leave time  
Avoid even image!  
Go forth without a way  
On the narrow path,  
Then you will find the desert track (Quoted in McGinn, 2001, p. 114).

Here the track that the novice walks along becomes an aspect of projected will that must be subverted. But to 'do' this, to set upon this *via negativa* is always in tension with itself. To understand that a significant part of education is structured by this tension is crucial. The divergence of progressive education from traditional formal pedagogy, for example, could be identified with the recognition of the complexity of will and attention. This is because progressive educators highlight the spontaneous, organic, or 'non-directive' forms of learning, where the goals of the educational process are less than clear. Progressive educators tend to emphasise the facilitative role of the teacher in contrast to a more directive approach associated with traditional pedagogy. From a progressive point of view directing attention is not a straightforward intentional act that we can employ to the disciplined appropriation of the facts, or a cognitive tool at our disposal. Rather genuine attention involves a submission of the self to the other which cannot be simply structured or enforced (REMOVED).

Speaking from a broadly progressive perspective, the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti calls truth a "pathless land" (Krishnamurti 1996, p. 257) echoing the paradox of intention at the heart of pedagogy. There are no paths, ways, or hows, when it comes to the matter of attention, since attention is pure act. Indeed the desire to focus attention is peculiarly susceptible to the delusions of intention since what we think we are harnessing when we 'focus the mind' can itself be a representational or analytical construction that inhibits the freedom of total attention. Of course, this difficulty pertains to meditation more generally. We project our intention to achieve a goal which results not in the goal itself, but in the image or projection of the idealized goal. The danger here is that we inadvertently displace or extinguish the 'flame of attention'. Krishnamurti has much to say about the significance of attention in education:

Learning in the true sense of the word is possible only in that state of attention, in which there is no outer or inner compulsion. ... It is attention that allows silence to come upon the mind, which is the opening of the door to creation... How is the state of attention to be brought about? It cannot be cultivated through persuasion, comparison, reward or punishment, all of which are forms of coercion. ... You can

teach concentration, but attention cannot be taught ... attention arises spontaneously when around the student there is an atmosphere of well-being, when he has the feeling of being secure, of being at ease, and is aware of the disinterested action that comes with love. (Krishnamurti 1963, p. 102)

In my experience Krishnamurti schools endeavour to create this atmosphere of well-being in which students can feel at ease.<sup>3</sup> But here Krishnamurti seems to set up a structure in which attention leads to silence, a silence which then opens up to creation (we must be careful not to fall into the temptation to construct a system out of an approach that is very clearly antagonistic to the pervasive tendency to structure what can only be beheld). This is interesting to educators because the process of engaging the attention is ultimately concerned not with silence for its own sake, but contact with, and contemplation of, the *other*. If we can speak of the goal of attention then surely it must be related to the idea of being taken up by what Krishnamurti here calls *creation*. Perhaps Krishnamurti intends something like the hermeneutic structure of disclosive looking or world disclosure that is, as I suggested earlier, an expression of beholding.

There is a common sense view of this attention in which awareness is fully present to itself in an ahistorical and groundless way. In speaking of 'behold', it is tempting to think of attention as a kind of ground zero, a Cartesian or Archimedean point from which the world emanates. This disclosure is in danger of being framed as some sort of ahistorical singularity. Krishnamurti's focus on the 'choiceless awareness' of pure attention which is associated with what he has called the 'ending of time' (Krishnamurti 1985) and 'total freedom' (Krishnamurti 1996), might appear to arise out of just such a naïve ahistorical attitude in which all conditioning falls away and we see not shadows or reflections (Krishnamurti often speaks of how our conditioning leads us to see only images), but we behold what is. It would require another essay to explore how Krishnamurti's conception of attention avoids the naivete of assuming we should escape our historicity. In essence his concern is to perceive human conditioning itself thereby achieving something of a freedom in relation to it, rather than seeking to escape entirely conditioning itself, but this is a delicate issue which is beyond my present scope.

There are other conceptions of attention that move us away from a 'natural attitude' that sees attention in foundational terms (I use foundational here to echo the tradition of Cartesian foundationalism that might seek the cogito in a moment of pure attention where the self, and nothing but the self, is evident to itself). The tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics, most directly associated with Heidegger and Gadamer, offers a range of different but related conceptions of attention as always already constituted and formed through social and psychological contexts. Such accounts of being-in-the-world are explicitly engaged with the temporality and historicity of existence. The hermeneutic tradition seeks to restore the significance of historical existence to phenomenology. More recently, Bernard Stiegler has wanted to include our technological apparatus into the constitution of attention suggesting that the short route to self-awareness (by way of some self-certifying Cartesian foundationalism) is misconceived (Stiegler, p. 18).<sup>4</sup> This

range of issues underscores the fundamental significance of attention as a topic that has received surprisingly scant consideration within philosophy of education.

Thus far the main difficulty that we have come across is that there is a problem with suggesting that the will can directly command attention. Elements of the continental philosophical tradition, of Christian theology, and of progressive education have been somewhat helpful in sketching out a conception of will that undercuts some of the difficulties here. I now want to turn to some other ways in which educators understand attention beyond the deficit model.

### **Intended Attention**

Over recent years, mindfulness techniques have become increasingly appealing to educators. Mindfulness in schools projects such as 'b', and the research undertaken by the *Oxford Mindfulness Centre* have responded to a recognition that too narrow a conception of education cannot be healthy. In part because the movement of mindfulness generally presents itself as religiously and ideologically neutral, it has been the natural partner for broadly secular, public institutions like schools. Perhaps mindfulness is believed to remedy the social ills that were once more widely treated (or suppressed) by institutional religions. But the range of differing techniques, philosophies, and attitudes that are placed under the banner of mindfulness should give us pause before we get involved. The sense that a specific mindfulness practice can be employed to address individual and social ills such as stress or social instability, or that it might enhance creativity or generally provide a sense of fulfillment, could be regarded as suspiciously reductive or utilitarian (Picard 1972, pp. 2-3). But equally problematic is the idea that mindfulness practice is within the direct compass of the will. For Ross it is this intentional aspect of mindfulness that places it apart from beholding (Ross 2013, p. 33). If the emergent discourse of secularized mindfulness is incomplete, what can our religious traditions offer instead? This is not an easy question to answer, and here I can only offer suggestive remarks.

In *De Magistro* St Augustine says that the student "is taught not by words, but by the realities themselves made manifest to him directly by God revealing them to his inner self" (De Magistro, 40). Augustine's Platonic disposition seems evident in his conception of education as a form of bearing witness. The idea that teaching is bearing witness and learning is beholding would sit well with an Augustinian pedagogy. The balance of emphasis shifts between these understandings: bearing witness emphasizes the role of the teacher, while beholding places the student (along with the world) centre stage. More broadly, the Christian mystical tradition associates silence and contemplation with a relinquishment of self more widely relevant to education. This tradition has formulated stages of prayer that follow a roughly threefold pattern of recollection, quietude, and union (Underhill 2012).<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, the religious subject undergoes a transition from their activity and concentrated efforts in recollection, to a mode of relinquishing that activity and submission

of the self to the darkness, or emptiness of God in quietude. Finally, union with God may be achieved, though the less said about that the better. The transition from the concentrated power of recollection to the submissive attention of quietude entails the relinquishment of the self as subjective agent.

This tradition (or range of traditions) has often sought to educate the novice into the recognition of his ultimate impotence before God. Yet the subject must take that step along the path to relinquish the path. Christian theologians such as St Augustine, St Bernard of Clairvaux, Meister Eckhart, St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross and so on, all suggest something like a structure in which the religious subject comes to know God through a process of abandoning the images, impressions and representations of God (Turner 1996). At the end of this path of negation, this *via negativa*, are we left with nothing? Yes and no. What is left in the contemplative desert of the mind is nothing human made: nothing but God who is, strictly speaking, nothing. In other words, in attention we become nothing. As Simone Weil puts it, "Once we have understood we are nothing, the object of all our efforts is to become nothing" (Weil 1987, p. 30).. And for Weil those efforts must be attentive and prayerful, since, as she puts it, "absolutely unmixed attention is prayer" (Weil 1959, p. 106).

### **Weil and Murdoch on Attention**

It is a good point to introduce Weil into the discussion since her work encapsulates a tension present in the foregoing discussion. Weil seems to understand that attention eludes efforts to become too directly attached to the will, and yet she wants to make attention a central focus of education, even the primary locus of instruction. As we will see, this tension is extremely fruitful for developing a nuanced conception of attention in education. Weil's ideas are also relevant insofar as they illuminate the sense in which education involves a negation of the self. Peter Roberts has pointed out how Weil's conception of self-negation runs counter to the spirit of our times, especially in Higher Education where "there is every incentive to become self-centred; to focus more on ourselves, not less" (Roberts 2011, p. 324). Weil remains a controversial figure in the history of Christian mysticism, a politically active and provocative figure whose legacy has been debated and derided as well as admired (Roberts 2011; McClellan 1990).

For Weil attention is of primary significance for education, for life, and for faith. Running through much of her work is a view of attention as something that can be taught, but also that does not respond directly to the will. At points Weil sees attention as the "real object and almost the sole interest of studies" (Weil 1959, p. 66); that with the right kind of discipline and effort, attention can be cultivated in students. "Teaching", says Weil, "should have no other aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act" (Weil 1959, p. 108) namely to fully attend to something. On the other hand, Weil wants to maintain some separation of attention from will. She suggests that the personal will, with its concern to fix itself on a particular problem constitutes a dependency at odds with the purity of desire for which the infinite

(God) is the only pure object of desire. Grace is not far away in this account of our relation to attention. Weil's conception of grace is expressed in her Platonic notion that attention responds almost spontaneously as though a magnetic force of attraction commands it: "A divine inspiration operates infallibly, if we do not turn away our attention, if we do not refuse it. There is not a choice to be made in its favour, it is enough not to refuse to recognize that it exists" (Weil 1987, p. 107). The force of grace is felt as a negative capability, an original kenosis, in which the will can operate by its power to not refuse the movement it is drawn into.

While I have argued for an understanding that attention is not within the direct purview of the will, I acknowledge the sense in which something like the right kind of effort can be employed to create conditions in which attention can flower. I would suggest that Weil might well offer some insight for this understanding, though most clearly through an indirect route. Iris Murdoch provides a wider context into which the mystical strain of Weil's thinking can be understood. It seems that Weil incorporates a complex theological anthropology but in somewhat terse and apparently contradictory terms, and so it is helpful that Murdoch provides an elaboration (albeit only implicit) so that the apparent contradiction in Weil can be maintained as a fruitful tension.

In 'The Idea of Perfection' (Murdoch 1970) Murdoch proceeds by problematizing the conceptions of identity, freedom, will, and decision that moral philosophy has expounded or assumed. Philosophical debate about the status of decision has tended, in Murdoch's account, to follow what she calls an existentialist-behaviourist philosophy of action. There is in this account a Cartesian and Kantian legacy in which the inescapable responsibility of an autonomous *cogito* must be affirmed. While this anthropology is unequivocal in assuring the agent has moral responsibility, its natural corollary turns out to be forms of determinism or fatalism. If this responsibility is denied or threatened in some fundamental way, then the self as such seems to be in danger. Since Murdoch's time, analytical philosophy seems to be struggling to defend a locus of agency as neuroscientific research seems to encroach ever further upon the stages of human decision making, leaving scarcely any place for the still centre of decision (see, for example, Brassier 2010). The ipseity of Cartesian foundationalism has nowhere to hide. But Murdoch provides us here with some resources to escape this reductive bind, and to explore identity and agency without committing to the either/or of Kantian/Cartesian subjectivity: that we are either fully rational agents, or we are fully determined patients.

Murdoch elaborates her point by using an example of a mother (whom she calls M) and her daughter-in-law (called D). M feels that her son has married beneath him, a view that encourages certain perceptions/judgments M has/makes of D; D is regarded as unpolished, lacking in dignity and refinement, tiresomely juvenile and so on. This image M has of D may settle and harden with time, sedimenting M's intolerance. But there are other possibilities. Murdoch explores the possibility that M's view of D can soften and change even without any direct contact between the two women. For the sake of the argument Murdoch supposes that D is no longer around and never will be, thereby ensuring that M's perception is not altered by changed

actions by D, or by fresh information presented to M. Despite this lack of contact M's view is able to shift: "D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous...not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful." (Murdoch 1970, p. 18) It is important to realize that in Murdoch's example M's shift in attitude arises through an internal reflective process in which M perceives or attends to her attitudes and assumptions: "I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded" (Murdoch 1970, p. 17) and so on.

Does M make a decision to change her view? Did she in the first place decide on the view of D she would take? For Murdoch it seems that decision exists within a flow of attitudes and experiences that draw our past, present and future together into a coherent narrative, or as Murdoch calls it, "the continuous fabric of our being" (p. 22). It would be wrong to say that no decision is made to take a particular attitude. But it would be no less wrong to say that a decision is made to take a particular attitude, and so it seems better to speak of the mother's *orientation* to her daughter-in-law. A simplistic binary conception of agency or decision is inadequate to account for much that we might call human action. Of course Murdoch is not the first to point this out (Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur make similar arguments though in rather different terms – e.g. Heidegger's conception of being-in-the-world speaks to very similar anthropological issues), but the connection between Murdoch and Weil makes the example worth developing.

Interestingly, it is attention that is key to Murdoch's employment of Weil. If M can attend to herself and the world then she has opened a possibility for insight into her own conditioned existence. The way we see the world (our orientation to being) offers us a structure in which certain possibilities for action are conceivable (and similarly other possibilities fall outside of what is conceivable and become invisible to us). There is, then, a horizon within which attention operates. A view of attention as a singularity, a moment of radical purity where all conditioning is transcended could not, in Murdoch's account, fully appreciate the structural context of attention. A timeless and ahistorical view of attention means only a conception of attention that is unaware of itself and is rather inattentive to itself – it is, in some sense, a failure of attention. But the recognition of this historicity should not be interpreted as a negation of freedom since the conception of freedom is not to be identified with a pure unconditional voluntarism, of which Murdoch, among many others, is highly critical (Murdoch 1970, pp. 26-27).

There can, therefore, be some sense in saying that attention is both responsive to the world, but also available to us to develop, but only if we can avoid the tendency to regard human agency in absolutist terms. As Murdoch says "we have to accept a darker, less fully conscious, less steadily rational image of the dynamics of the human personality" (Murdoch 1970, pp. 43-44). And if we do, we can appreciate the sense in which our historicity and our projections constitute our being-in-the-world without wholly negating our agency. We are given an orientation to being in which our values and perceptions emerge. This orientation is not, of course, a fixed feature of the essentialist self but an apprehension that constitutes our being here now. It is part of the effort of education to attend to this orientation that, paradoxically, is

an important aspect of the power of attention. There are other more familiar examples of our orientation to reality offering us ways of being that similarly deconstruct the duality of freedom and determinism. For example, religious beliefs are neither simply chosen nor inherited; musical taste is rarely the pure expression of some universal aesthetic sensibility; and so on.

Despite the significance of Murdoch to this analysis, there is a problem with her account. The mother's shifting orientation to her daughter-in-law locates the truth of the situation too readily. M's perception of D as common and juvenile is regarded as false, a state of illusion (Murdoch 1970, p. 37). M is able, Murdoch says, to directly break through to the "honest perception of what is really the case" (Murdoch 1970, p. 38) through a moral process of patient and just discernment in which the daughter-in-law is perceived justly. It is not the morality of the process that is of concern here so much as the readiness with which Murdoch speaks of what is really the case. Murdoch is suggesting that the moment of attention can break apart the failures of attention (which really amounts to inattention), as though we can take a short route to an unmediated apprehension of the truth of being.

Of course the relinquishment of self that attention entails does involve putting aside the images and projections of the other so that we can truly meet them in their singularity. This is why relinquishment, or as Weil calls it 'decreation' (Weil 1987), can seem to be a return to the things as they are. But I want to emphasize that such singular contact cannot be regarded as utterly ahistorical. Therefore, I want to maintain the significance of attention that Weil and Murdoch develop while making explicit the hermeneutic dimension to their phenomenology of attention.

I agree then, that our ability to move towards a "more honest perception" is something desirable, both personally but also educationally. But it would be better to understand these perceptions in their interpretive complexity: that they are ways of seeing (albeit more honest, and therefore better). This should indicate a move away from a false/true perception of a situation, to a worse/better interpretation of things. Finally, this is because the quality of interpretation directly correlates with the quality of attention.

## **Conclusion**

An important aspect of effective education is that we are challenged and unsettled, that the assumptions and images that we carry with us are seen in the light of fresh attention to the world around us. Practices of silence might be helpful in creating the right space for this attention, though there are problems with this. Positive silence might be better understood as the affirmation of attention in which the noise of the self is lost in submission of the self to the other.

The task of educators is surely to call attention to the world, and thereby to attention itself. In essence attention involves looking at – or better, being with – the other, whether that other is the object of educational inquiry, or the student herself. From the theological perspective, the other is God. But in the

context of pedagogy, the other is the world that calls to be known by the student. It has been tempting to speak of this attention as involving a self-emptying or self-negation. But too often such negations become the object of attention and lead, paradoxically, to inattention. There are no straightforward answers here. Attention seems to open a depth that cannot be fathomed, just as encountering the other cannot be completed. But then isn't that the point? If it was fathomable it would, no doubt, be enframed and enclosed in the targets of the modern age.

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Ross calls behold the "most important word in the Bible" (Ross 2013, p. 30), where the chronicles of Scripture begin and end. As the translation of the Hebrew *hinneh*, behold is the first word God says to Adam and Eve after creating and blessing them. The Greek word *Idou*, also often translated as behold, is the last word that the risen Christ speaks to his disciples ('...behold, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.' Matthew

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28: 20). Other Biblical terms also have similar resonance and perform similar functions: 'lo', 'yea', 'see', and 'suddenly'.

<sup>2</sup> Although the middle voice does not exist in modern English, we see traces of in phrases such as the bumper stickers reminding us that 's\*\*t happens'.

<sup>3</sup> I spent 2 years living and working at Brockwood Park School, the only Krishnamurti school in the UK. I have also visited a number of Krishnamurti schools in India, as well as Oak Grove the Krishnamurti school in California. For many years Brockwood Park has committed all staff and students to a morning meeting which usually, though not always, would involve sitting quietly for 15 minutes.

<sup>4</sup> One of the key ideas that Stiegler rests his discussion upon is that attention is not simply there, but in capturing it, it is formed. This conception of attention formation would resist the ahistorical notion of attention: "The constitution of attention results from accumulation of both primary and secondary retentions, and the projection of protensions as anticipations" (Stiegler 2010, p. 18).

<sup>5</sup> Underhill explicitly relates the concern of prayer to pedagogy: "It is the object of contemplative prayer, as it is the object of all education, to discipline and develop certain growing faculties" (Underhill 2012, p. 310).