

***Pay attention! Exploring Contemplative Pedagogies between Eckhart and Heidegger*¹**

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Attention is a mysterious faculty. It seems to knit together experiences, attitudes, histories, skills, dispositions, intuitions and manifold other aspects of lived experience such that discussions of it cut across a range of domains, from, for example, cognitive neuroscience and educational theory to ancient philosophies of Vedanta and Buddhism. Taking its cue from the title of the volume, this chapter examines attention by drawing together strands from mystical theology, particularly Meister Eckhart, and continental philosophy, that of Martin Heidegger. The argument will explore some difficulties of conceiving attention as a faculty of human agency. While these considerations will be, I hope, of general philosophical interest, I will apply them to concrete contexts of educational theory and practice. Educational contexts illustrate well the ways in which attention is both conceived and misconceived, as well as providing a strong practical motivation for needing to consider the extent to which attention can be managed and controlled, and the anthropological suppositions present in such considerations. The argument relies upon mystical theology insofar as it draws on negative strategies for undoing some of the conventional ways of framing attention. This is the kind of theological framing that the post-metaphysical Heidegger might wish to develop. I begin with

¹ This chapter is based on my article 'Behold: Silence and Attention in Education' *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 48:3, 2014, and I am grateful to John Wiley and Sons for permission to reproduce parts of that article. The argument is similar in places, though in this chapter the emphasis on Heidegger and Eckhart is drawn out and developed in greater detail, and the context in educational philosophy is less developed.

the primary moment in which education is enacted: the moment in which student, teacher, and world are gathered.

Behold: this may be the educator'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. To say *behold* recognises the autonomy of the student in the apprehension of being, and the agency of the world in the presence of things. It is to show more than to speak, to address being more than knowing. The teacher is not the source of the light, nor does she enforce its apprehension, even if she can support its comprehension.

Although an archaic sounding word, *behold* is still used in a way that denotes giving regard or attention to something, holding it 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. But this impression is mistaken. Behold is related to the German *halten* to hold, originally meaning to keep, watch over, hold firmly or restrain. It calls us to attend, but also holds or restrains that attention. Maggie Ross calls it the “most important word in the Bible,”² where the chronicles of Scripture begin and end. As the translation of the Hebrew *hinneh*, it is the first word God says to Adam and Eve after creating and blessing them: ‘Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.’³ The Greek word *Idou*, also often translated as behold, is the last word that the risen Christ speaks

² Maggie Ross, ‘Behold Not the Cloud of Experience’ in: E. A. Jones (ed.) *The Medieval Mystical Tradition VIII*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2013), p. 30.

³ Genesis 1: 29. All Biblical quotations are taken from the King James Bible.

to his disciples: ‘... behold, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.’⁴ Other Biblical terms also have similar resonance and perform similar roles: ‘lo’, ‘yea’, ‘see’, and ‘suddenly’. It is the performative capacity of language that places mystical language at some distance from propositional or doctrinal discourse. In other words, language has the capacity here to disclose or reveal, not simply to point out.

To behold places one firmly in the present. It is often understood as a moment both temporally and ontologically prior to interpretation, explication, or analysis. It speaks at the point of world-disclosure: it can be said to speak the world. It is, as 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.”⁵ Can beholding resist the temptation towards representational thinking and its relation to the ‘vulgar’ conception of time?⁶ Is beholding the point at which all images (of the divine, for example) are abandoned? Can beholding release us from the prison of our subject/object relation by opening up the ground zero of pure awareness, removing us from any and every projection of the mediating subject?⁷ I suggest such ambitions rely upon a rather unhelpful

⁴ Matthew 28: 20.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 29-30.

⁶ In *What is Called Thinking?* Heidegger reflects on Nietzsche’s highest hope that man will be delivered from ‘revenge’. In Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* this revenge is seen as “the will’s revulsion against time and its ‘It was.’” Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* (New York NY: Harper and Row 1976), p. 93.

⁷ The idea that the projections of the subject provide grounds for atheism has been compelling ever since Feuerbach made the argument. However, mystical theology has since shown that the projecting subject does not preclude an encounter. As Henri Duméry put it: “Consciousness is projective, because it is expressive, because its objective intentionality cannot fail to express itself, to project itself on various levels of representation. This does not mean that these representations themselves become projected upon the objective essence, or upon the

decontextualized and dehistoricised conception of identity that I will explore a little more later on. Certainly for Heidegger, the conception of time as the three-dimensional gathering of the facticity of the past and the projections of the future into the ‘fallenness’ of the present, seems at odds with any notion that we could be released into the pure presence of an immanent now. For the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology that came in the wake of Heidegger’s revolution of twentieth century thought, there can be no ‘short route’ to an ahistorical now.⁸ So we do not escape our ecstasis (our standing outside of ourselves) by some kind of entry into silence and attention.

Even if some ‘pure consciousness’ conception of beholding was at all plausible (and I do not find that it is), is education not concerned more with the comprehension and explanation that follows apprehension or immersion? This question reflects the epistemological tensions emerging in the Continental hermeneutical tradition between phenomenological experience (*Erlebnis*) and hermeneutical understanding (*Verstehen*), while also reaching further back to the foundations of philosophy where Parmenides announced the unity of thinking and being. 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 is a complex practical question for those involved in educational practice. Schools,

reality which this essence constitutes. When contemporary phenomenologists write that the thing itself becomes invested with anthropological predicates and becomes known through those predicates, they merely allude to the need to represent the object in order to grasp its intrinsic meaning with all the faculties of the incarnated consciousness. But they do not deny that the object, the objective meaning, the “thing itself,” orders, directs, rules the course of these representations” Louis Dupré *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection* 1998, pp. 10-11.

⁸ The emphasis on history has been an important part particularly of the work of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

colleges, and universities could do more to encourage quiet times, pauses, reflections, and silences, to create spaces for attention and contemplation. Reading could draw less on basic literacy or conceptual familiarity and more on *lectio divina*. Speaking and writing could be as much about bearing witness as clear expression. Many schools structure silence and contemplation, some, like Quaker, Maharishi, and Krishnamurti schools, in quite distinctive ways. These schools often break up the frenetic activity of the school day with deliberate pauses, or longer sessions of quiet sitting or meditation. Helen Lees has provided a survey of the significance of silence in schools where she undertakes the task of distinguishing forms of silence beyond simply the absence of noise, arguing for ‘strong silence’ as a positive force in education, as distinct from the forced negative silences that too often structure school experience.⁹ This work could draw more upon the philosophical and theological traditions in which the phenomenology of silence is so richly developed.¹⁰ While it has often been noted that silence is not just the absence of noise,¹¹ the notion that silence is constituted as a positive

⁹ Helen Lees, *Silence in Schools* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2012)

¹⁰ Silence has all sorts of significations within education. A phenomenology of silence within education would be a fascinating project: the silences of exam halls, detentions, or classes engaged in focused activities; the many awkward silences as tutors invite comments from seminar students upon a reading that few students may have read; there are those silenced by the political or social conventions and customs in societies; there are moments of mindfulness so popularly evoked in many schools around the country; occasional prayers and reflections where groups of students perform remembrance of, for example, the war dead. At a completely different level exist forms of silent teaching, or direct instruction, of the sort traditions in the far East are more familiar with. I am thinking of particularly of Zen Buddhist traditions, though Indian religious culture has some similar processes with such figures as Sri Ramana Maharshi or Mother Mira, for whom the enlightened state could only be taught through silent transmission.

¹¹ Max Picard *The World of Silence* (Washington DC, Regnery Pub, 1972); Ann Caranfa, ‘Silence as the Foundation of Learning’ *Educational Theory*, Vol. 54, No. 2, 2004, 210-230.

achievement by attention—that it cannot exist without attention—is less often discussed.¹² From this point of view, the call for silence in schools could be helpfully recast in terms of a call to attention. But it is hardly surprising that it is not, since a call to attention is generally conflated with the teacher's vain repetition: pay attention!

Paying attention

‘Pay attention’; these words that have become hollow prescriptions. The words in fact mean ‘pay attention to this.’ Since attention is, one might say, the gift that keeps on giving, the problems for teachers arise when students do not direct attention sufficiently to the task at hand, often a technical, decontextualized, ‘problem’ to be solved within a prescribed and assessable scheme. These are not actual problems, but representations of what real problems look like. Hence, as John Dewey famously noted, students have the feeling that education is not living, but only a preparation for it. The difficulties in directing the attention of students are familiar to most teachers, but they suggest a failure to understand the phenomenon of attention. In 1890 William James bemoaned the fact that philosophers had largely ignored the faculty of attention arguing that “an education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.”¹³ Simone Weil similarly argued that the central concern of pedagogy ought to be the development of attention. Much contemporary research continues to assume that attention is something to be trained¹⁴ particularly where attention is identified with concentration or

¹² Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Total Freedom* (New York NY: HarperCollins, 1996).

¹³ William James, *The Principles of Psychology: Volume One* (Dover Publications, 1890), chapter 11.

¹⁴ See, for example, Antoine Lotz, Heleen Slagter, Nancy Rawlings, Andrew Francis, Lawrence Greischar, Richard Davidson, ‘Mental Training Enhances Attentional Stability: Neural and Behavioral Evidence’ *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 21 October 2009, Vol 29, No. 42 pp. 13418-13427.

mindfulness. But this, as Masschelein and Simons have recently noted, seems to confuse attention with therapy.¹⁵ James recognised that although improving attention might be desirable, it is not necessarily practical:

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.¹⁶

With a similar structure in mind, Dewey accounts for the distinctive aspects of agency in relation to attention by distinguishing involuntary attention (characteristic of children up to the age of 7) with voluntary attention (which is directed at some particular, often abstracted, end) and reflective attention (where the goal is not just an abstracted end, but is an answer to a particular question within the learner).¹⁷ This reflective moment characterises progressive education's interest in letting the student answer their own question, a concept which strongly resonates with Heidegger's educational ideal of 'letting learn.'¹⁸ These are helpful distinctions to make, but they do not ultimately answer the question of origins, the fundamental etiology of curiosity or attention. More specifically, James indicates the problem that there are no methods to bring about curiosity or attention, and that this practical problem is not easily solved. The

¹⁵ Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, In Defence of School: A Public Issue. Available online:

<http://ppw.kuleuven.be/ecs/les/in-defence-of-the-school/masschelein-maarten-simons-in-defence-of-the.html>

¹⁶ Ibid. 9.

¹⁷ John Dewey "The Development of Attention". Chapter 7 in *The School and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1915), pp. 141-152.

¹⁸ Ibid. 4.

practical issue is surely related to the theoretical problem of radical origins. These practical and theoretical considerations are often obscured by the assumption that attention is the *sine qua non* of education. If contemporary educational thinking 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 students are able to direct, control, and manage attention. As such, attention is the tacit ground of education, something we assume to be available if not always 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 there are at least two philosophical problems with this idea.

Firstly, as has already been noted, attention is always already present. From a phenomenological perspective, human identity can be interpreted as effectively constituted by attention. Heidegger’s notion of care (*Sorge*) entails the gathering of attention, a gathering that *Dasein* cannot avoid since it constitutes the thereness of *Dasein*. From this perspective it is not the case that the student fails to pay attention, but rather that the attention is gathered (or scattered) elsewhere. It is important to observe that attention is never absent, although it might be otherwise engaged.¹⁹ This is an important point but I will discuss a second related problem in more detail.

There is something about attention that cannot be demanded, still less coerced. Meditative practice amply demonstrates that attention is capable of involuntary wandering as much as

¹⁹ This is reminiscent to the Augustinian idea that our love for God is never absent rather it is misdirected. The connection with education is developed in James Smith *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

voluntary control. Our attention is caught by the cry of the infant, by the beauty of the melody, the glance of the beloved, or by the pain when we stub a toe. Advertisers expend vast resources within the ‘attention economy’²⁰ seeking effective means for capturing and trading on attention. Of course we can resist corporate efforts to manipulate attention, but very often we follow our attention, not the other way around.²¹ Dewey offers an interesting account of the transition from involuntary to voluntary control of attention. Although Dewey’s developmental account of education moving from the involuntary to the voluntary (at around age 7) is somewhat helpful, it does not engage the question of agency in philosophical terms and seems too straightforwardly developmental to do so.²²

In the classroom, the autonomy of attention is similarly porous: 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 can choose whether to offer the teacher their attention. Yet the skill of teaching is significantly defined as the art of engaging attention, a skill which cannot be reduced to a managed competency or teaching standard.

The gathering of attention is perhaps the essence of education and what Heidegger’s pedagogy is really all about (whether as *Sorge* or *Denken*). Some of Heidegger’s writings on poetry, for

²⁰ Thomas Davenport, and John Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001).

²¹ The recent critical theory of Bernard Stiegler understands the marketization of attention as a kind of proletarianisation of the consumer. This is basically because the kinds of passive attention encouraged by the proliferation of digital cultures, short circuit the active and critical aspects of attention. For Stiegler this is an existential threat partly because it corrodes the capacity of judgement that allows for a fuller sense of agency to resist this proletarianisation. See Bernard Stiegler *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Daniel Ross, (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010).

²² Dewey “The Development of Attention.”

example, are studies in pedagogy in that they demonstrate the process of thinking the difference between being and representation. In the opening page of his book on Hölderlin's hymn *Der Ister* Heidegger says,

We must first become attentive to this poetry. Once we have become attentive, we can then "pay attention to," that is, retain, some things that, at favourable moments, will perhaps let us "attend to," that is, have some intimation of what might be said in the word of this poet.²³

To discover what is said in the word of the poet seems to require a double-movement of attention, hence the circuitous, or paradoxical, manner in which attention is possible only after we have become attentive. An orientation of attentiveness (which is not directly controlled by the will) is the precondition of paying attention as an action of will. But even this second moment of paying attention involves a 'letting' which undermines the notion of a clear agent engaged in straightforward action. Heidegger goes on to reflect on the nature of interpreting poetry. Why is poetry in need of interpretation? Does interpretation help us behold the poetic word, or does it merely mediate and represent? Are we transported into the dwelling place of the poetic, or is the poetic word translated and domesticated into the digestible curricula and schemes of work appropriate to educational outcomes? Heidegger is ambivalent: "At the risk of missing the truth of Hölderlin's poetry, the remarks merely provide a few markers, signs that call our attention, pauses for reflection."²⁴ This is Heidegger's pedagogy: to be an accompaniment that draws attention through markers and signs, to open spaces for reflection. Any other more directive or explicative move would not teach through a kind of bearing witness, but would represent and thereby deface or replace.

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'* (Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 2.

Heidegger's pedagogy is characterised as a kind of gathering of attention that acts in a participative way. This is quite different to the concentration or trained mindfulness that is sometimes associated with attention (mindfulness in schools, for example, being a very fashionable topic right now).²⁵ 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 polarised conception of agency as either simply active or passive. 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.²⁶ Modern English no longer uses the form of the middle voice (apart, perhaps, from the equivocations of peculiarly political linguistic constructions whereby responsibility can be acknowledged to a point: e. g. "mistakes were made") reflecting the fact that our modern conception of subjectivity assumes and reinforces an unequivocal sense of agency and responsibility. This connection between linguistic identity and subjectivity preoccupies much of Heidegger's later work and so we find ways to explore the relation between attention and the will.

The anthropology developed by Heidegger, whether as early *Dasein* or later conceptions such as the clearing of Being, reflects the grammatical cleavage of the middle voice by locating

²⁵ See for example, Terry Hyland, "On the Contemporary Applications of Mindfulness: Some Implications for Education" *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 2015, 49, 2, pp. 170-186; Aislinn O'Donnell "Contemplative Pedagogy and Mindfulness: Developing Creative Attention in an Age of Distraction" *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 2015, 49, 2, pp. 187-202; David Lewin "Heidegger East and West: Philosophy as Educative Contemplation" *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 2015, 49, 2, pp. 221-239.

²⁶ David Lewin, "The Middle Voice in Eckhart and Modern Continental Philosophy" *Medieval Mystical Theology*, 20:1, 2011, pp. 28-46.

Being and human being in the space between activity and passivity.²⁷ Heidegger's contribution to the hermeneutic project is in part his conception of 'revealing' or 'disclosive looking'²⁸ in which agency is not to be found at the polar regions of identity, but rather in the mediate gathering of the middle voice. Earlier I said that this mediation is a double-movement of attention, entailing a primary orientation of attentiveness that precedes and structures the possibility of the (secondary) act of letting attention into itself. This porous even ambiguous notion of agency 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.²⁹ We are left without a clear method of approach to the problems of our age. I suggest the same equivocation would be detected were we to seek a stable Heideggerian conception of attention. I have tried to suggest that 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 the care structure of Dasein's being-in-the-world from *Being and Time*, of thinking as thanking from *What is Called Thinking?* and the meditative thinking of his *Discourse on Thinking*, or man as the 'shepherd of Being' in the *Letter on Humanism*,³⁰ the

²⁷ Bret Davis *Heidegger on the Will: On the Way to Gelassenheit* (Evanston IL, Northwestern University Press, 2007).

²⁸ Richard Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology: A Reading of Heidegger* (New York NY, State University of New York, 2006).

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York NY, Harper and Row, 1977).

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (New York NY, Harper and Row, 1970);
Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* (New York NY, Harper and Row, 1976);

complex double-movement of attention mirrors the complex double-nature of identity itself because attention is significantly constitutive of Dasein. The thereness of Dasein's being appears as the opening of being onto itself: i.e. as attention. We could take this further if we consider how language constitutes Being and human being. In a certain sense, all speech grants the world in terms of structuring our orientation to it, and so speech intimates the tripartite gathering of the beholding which involves Being, Dasein, and mediation (teacher).³¹ This is because speech requires a speaker, a hearer, and a world, and is therefore "the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself."³² Speech too entails a transcendental condition, namely being. This path into Heidegger's thinking locates the question of attention within mainstream philosophical discourse. Nevertheless, it is the religious traditions that offer an equally rich account of the dynamics of attention to which I now turn.

The Paradox of Intention

What has been called the 'paradox of intention'³³ describes the dynamics of the call for attention rather more simply: that we may reach a goal only by giving up the attempt to reach

Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York NY, Harper and Row, 1977); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time A Translation of Sein and Zeit* (Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 1996).

³¹ This discussion of language is meant to include all forms and levels of language, not only speech. The point is perhaps clearer with the concrete example of the pedagogical role of speech, but the essential point need not assume a priority for the spoken word.

³² Martin Heidegger "The Letter on Humanism" in *Basic Writings: Second Edition, Revised and Expanded* (New York NY, HarperCollins, 1993), p. 230.

³³ Marvin Shaw *The Paradox of Intention: Reaching the Goal by Giving Up the Attempt to Reach It* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010).

it or, conversely, that we may be prevented from reaching a goal by our intentional efforts to achieve it. Religious traditions often 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 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.³⁴

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. This subversion of will can, on some readings, engage attention, since all aspects of self must be abandoned to what presents itself in total darkness. That this might entail the pure attention of a timeless moment, an escape from the temporal into the eternal is an attractive yet problematic idea. A typical reading of Eckhart as fundamentally neo-Platonic would see the negation of time and history in Eckhart’s *via negativa*. This could be seen as a clear contrast with Heidegger’s rehabilitation of temporality and history. Despite the important resonances between Eckhart and Heidegger, Caputo draws a clear distinction here in the following summary:

Eckhart’s attitude toward time is in keeping with traditional mysticism: he wishes to see God in all things so that one “day”—in eternity—he may see all things in God. But

³⁴ Quoted in Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, (New York NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2001), p. 114.

for Heidegger such “mysticism” is “metaphysical” because it moves within the distinction between time and eternity.³⁵

But does this interpretation not see Eckhart as a rather dualistic figure, reading in Eckhart a valorisation of the eternal over/against the temporal? Caputo goes on “it is profoundly *uncharacteristic* of the mystic to be concerned with the historical; it is profoundly characteristic of him to identify his experience as an experience of a timeless now.”³⁶ While Caputo does go on to complicate this rather simplistic binary between the mystic and the philosopher, this broad characterization speaks to the very core of the question of attention that I am trying to address. Our constructions of attention often do draw upon assumptions around being fully present as a denial of historicity and temporality. There are subtler readings of Eckhart in which the non-dual relation between the temporal and eternal does not appear to imply such a straightforward neo-Platonic negation of temporality.³⁷ The question of Eckhart’s non-duality cannot be fully elaborated here but the significance for my argument should be stressed: a view of the eternal over/against the temporal (in denial of the temporal) is a product of the failure to see the non-dual nature of Eckhart’s theology and anthropology.³⁸ Consequently Heidegger’s thinking (which I have identified with attention), and Eckhart’s prayer do not need to be as opposed as Caputo suggests: at least the point of divergence need not be the hackneyed emphasis on the temporal in contrast to a mystical disavowal of the temporal in favour of the eternal. Neither Eckhart nor Heidegger allow us to deny the world, time or existence.

³⁵ John Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (Fordham University Press, 1986), p. 226.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 227.

³⁷ See, for example, Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), chapter 6; Joseph Milne, *The Ground of Being: Foundations of Christian Mysticism* (Temenos Academy, 2004).

³⁸ See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press), chapter 6.

It is important to understand that a significant part of our thinking about pedagogy is structured by this tension between seeing attention as a negation of, or an engagement with, the temporal. The divergence of progressive educational traditions from traditional formal pedagogy, for example, could be identified with the recognition of the complexity of will and attention. This is because progressive educators, as we have already noted Dewey in this regard, highlight the spontaneous, organic, or ‘non-directive’ forms of learning, where the goals, as well as the agency, of the educational processes 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.

I wish to now draw in the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti who, although explicitly and publically disavowing any association or affiliation with a school of thought or tradition within either philosophy or education, speaks from a broadly progressive educational perspective. Krishnamurti calls truth a ‘pathless land’³⁹ 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

³⁹ Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Total Freedom* (New York NY, HarperCollins, 1996), p. 257.

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.⁴⁰

In my experience⁴¹ Krishnamurti schools generally do endeavor to create this atmosphere of wellbeing in which students can feel at ease. 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— rather oddly given his antipathy towards doctrinal religiosity – here calls

⁴⁰ Jiddu Krishnamurti *Life Ahead: On Learning and the Search for Meaning* (Novata, CA, New World Library, 1963), pp. 13-14.

⁴¹ 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.

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 along the lines of another more modern Eckhart, Eckhart Tolle, who speaks of the ‘power of now’. There is a range of other problems introduced when we consider the field of attentional research within the psychological sciences which begin with the metaphor of attention as a spotlight which casts the light of awareness and thereby illuminates the world.⁴² The spotlight model is prone to assume a subject/object binary. How are we to avoid this idolatry of attention in a moment of pure awareness, or the nowness of the now?⁴³ Krishnamurti’s focus on the ‘choiceless awareness’ of pure attention which is associated with what he has called the ‘ending of time’ and ‘total freedom’⁴⁴ do not seem to help. They 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 naiveté 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,

⁴² Charles Eriksen & James St James ‘Visual attention within and around the field of focal attention: A zoom lens model.’ *Perception & Psychophysics* 40 (4), 1986, pp. 225–240

⁴³ Heidegger ecstasies of temporality offer one option here.

⁴⁴ Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Total Freedom* (New York NY, HarperCollins, 1996); *The Ending of Time* (New York NY, HarperCollins, 1985).

rather than seeking to escape entirely conditioning itself, but this is a delicate issue which is beyond the scope of the present article.

There are other conceptions of attention that would move us away from a ‘natural attitude’ that sees attention in these foundationalist terms - and I use the term ‘foundationalism’ 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, offers a range of different but related conceptions of attention as always already constituted and formed through historical, social and psychological contexts. As I tried to show earlier, accounts of being-in-the-world are explicitly engaged with the temporality and historicity of existence. Heidegger’s ecstasies of temporality are clearly significant in avoiding a vulgar concept of time. 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.⁴⁵ For Stiegler attention itself is historically contingent, dependent upon the evolutionary story of human emergence.

We have seen that there is a problem with suggesting that the will can directly command attention. Elements of the continental philosophical tradition, of Christian mysticism, 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

⁴⁵ Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 18.

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. 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 fulfilment, should be questioned not least for appearing reductive or utilitarian.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ If the emergent discourse of secularized mindfulness is incomplete, what can our religious traditions offer instead? This is not an easy question to answer, but I offer some suggestive remarks.

In *De Magistro* 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.’⁴⁸ 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 emphasis shifts between these understandings:

⁴⁶ Max Picard *The World of Silence*, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁷ Maggie Ross, ‘Behold Not the Cloud of Experience’, p. 33.

⁴⁸ St Augustine, “On the Teacher,” *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox, 1979), 40.

bearing witness emphasises the role of the teacher, while beholding places the student (along with creation) centre stage. More broadly, the Christian mystical tradition associates silence and contemplation with a relinquishment of self more widely relevant to education. Evelyn Underhill who articulates the threefold pattern of prayer as recollection, quietude, and union,⁴⁹ makes the connection between pedagogy and education quite explicit: ‘It is the object of contemplative prayer, as it is the object of all education, to discipline and develop certain growing faculties.’⁵⁰ 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. 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. The Christian mystical tradition, from Augustine to Eckhart and beyond, has suggested something like a structure in which the religious subject comes to know God through a process of apophaticism.⁵¹ Turner shows that the dynamics of apophatics should be applied both to God and the religious subject: that there is a correlation between negation of God and the negation of self. At the end of the *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 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.’⁵²

⁴⁹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: Third Edition* (Mineola NY, Dover Publications, 2012).

⁵⁰ Ibid. p, 310.

⁵¹ Turner, *The Darkness of God*.

⁵² Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London, Ark, 1987), p. 30.

And for Weil those efforts must be attentive and prayerful, since, as she puts it, ‘absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.’⁵³ But are we not, then, back to the problem of conceiving attention as an ahistorical singularity. Can becoming nothing take account of who we are in our historicity?

As discussed earlier, for Eckhart the eternity of time does not negate its temporality but divinises it because the eternal is the ground of time itself. Despite his Augustinian and Neoplatonic inheritance, for Eckhart, time rests in eternity rather than being a realm to escape from. We do not escape history in eternity but rather find the eternal as the ground of history itself. It would, perhaps, be stretching things too far to relate this idea too directly with Heidegger’s concern to awaken Dasein to temporality, but it need not be read as wholly inconsistent with it as Caputo tends to do.⁵⁴ So rather than understand the eternal in terms of the temporal (the eternal *now* being understood as a supreme and enduring form of a moment in time), we should seek to understand the temporal in terms of the eternal.

Conclusion

The task of pedagogy is to call attention to the world, and thereby to attention itself. Attention may well be a contemplative activity at its core. In essence attention involves looking at—or better, being with—the other, whether that other is some aspect of the world calling to be *borne in mind*, the student, or God. It has been tempting to speak of this attention as involving a self-emptying or self-negation. In this moment of pure consciousness we might imagine that the

⁵³ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London, Fontana, 1959), p. 106.

⁵⁴ John Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (Fordham University Press, 1986) pp. 216-217; pp. 225-226.

historical and temporal self must be denied so that our eternal identity can be realised. The dualistic framing of this elevation is redolent of neo-Platonism. Practically speaking, such negations of self often become the object of attention and lead, paradoxically, to inattention, and religious traditions have their own strategies to deconstruct the idolatries and misconstruals implicit in spiritual ascent. In the end it has been easier to negate popular constructions of attention than offer a clear alternative view. This may be because this chapter is concerned more with drawing attention that encourages encounter, than with offering explanation.