Paying Attention

Professor Stephen Muecke, April 2018

I think the topic of paying attention has some currency today because we have a strong sense that we are losing the capacity to pay attention. On the one hand there are all sorts of incentives and pressures to pay attention to the task at hand, for the purposes of productivity, and on the other our attention is divided and distracted by all sorts of environmental noise.

Parents, some of them, are caught up in a moral panic about their kids and 'screen time' and try to joke about the difficulty in getting the child to 'break suction' and come to the dinner table. Others, more sanguine, bring the iPad to restaurants to distract their toddlers while they attend to their own enjoyment.

And of course, you know about the ADHD epidemic taking off in the 1990s. What was that all about? It might have been a perfect little storm generated by a number of factors: a narrowing of the bandwidth of acceptable classroom behaviour; distractions of new on-line media; feedback among school psychologists and medical institutions; the aggressive marketing of Ritalin by pharmaceutical companies; the belief, that for humans, the brain carries out 'executive functions'; another belief that medicalizing individual brains is a good way of keeping that classroom behaviour within manageable limits.

In 2014 11% of children in the US were diagnosed with this condition that didn't really exist two decades before, and now the marketing of the drug globally ensures that millions of other children will be caught up in this weird machinery that is a configuration of heterogenous factors: industries, institutions, concepts, beliefs and cultures.

Did anyone ask if the deficit of attention in classrooms might have had something to do with a lack of interest? Or that a classroom is an ecosystem that is much more than just 30-odd brains in 30 active bodies? I'll come to ecology later, but first the question of interest, which is not just a glib, 'why can't the teacher be more interesting and less controlling'?

The generation of interest is itself an interesting thing. Any good teacher knows that you cannot get the attention of students with force, and it can't simply be turned on: the capacity for pupils to pay attention is amplified enormously if they already have some interest in the matter at hand. The first great psychologist on the subject of attention, William James, wrote in 1890: 'the more interest the child has in advance of the subject, the better he will attend.' Attention is mediated; interest (from the L. inter-essere, 'being in between') is about relations, but what kinds of relations?

I want to try to reconfigure the landscape—the conceptual landscape—that gives us our understanding of attention. This involves taking it away from brains and psychology and towards environments and ecology. My argument will be that being able to attend to our own survival, or just getting by with some kind of enjoyment, is all about caring for our own nurturing environments, and these are complex, delicate and multispecies things.

Consider 2 examples

Example 1: When an Indigenous tracker sees things in the environment that the rest of us fail to notice, this is not, I think, a matter of a specialised psychology, but a matter of intergenerational attunement in a particular world. Noticing one thing may also depend on being attuned to many others: the sun, the wind and the way finches flock in that part of the country. What interests us (me and my colleagues at UoA) is the challenge to describe this skill and what makes it surprisingly useful in the current world.

Example 2: A visitor to an unfamiliar city, bent over her smartphone to use an app to find a well-reviewed café, nearly steps in front of a moving car. Attention in this case might be impractically distributed, between worlds that are near and far. It is a complex network of attention, crafted by both human and non-human actors, including computer programs and algorithms. We are interested in understanding the new skills that are needed to navigate the different kinds of attention distributed through these new modalities.

Now I want to tell you a story that illustrates attention in multispecies environments:

Imagine you are reading by the fire in an isolated farmhouse, with only your dog for company. He is

lying on the rug at your feet, perhaps sleeping, then he growls softly and you say to yourself, “Ah, must be a car coming up the drive.” Then he gets up, goes to the window and starts barking urgently, and you speak to him: “Nero, who is it? A car you don’t recognise?” Then you start to hear the sound of the motor, something he had heard a good minute earlier. You part the curtains, and see headlights flashing against the dark trees. You start to wonder, who could be visiting this late at night? We’re not expecting anyone.

Even though the beginnings of a horror story are being set up here, what interests me is a particular multi-species configuration that is enacted. The human capacity to hear is extended by the dog’s sharper hearing, and in this case by his acute capacity to distinguish familiar sounds from strange ones. By enlisting the help of animals and plants, humans extend their capacities to hear, see, smell, even think. A walk in the bush with a dog is more enjoyable because of what he might notice, and it is safer because he could easily find his way home should you lose your way.

There are large numbers of examples of animals’ specific capacities being used to extend the envelope of the human sensorium: canaries’ greater sensitivity to poisonous gas; sniffer dogs in discos or minefields; flocks of finches telling Walmajarri people in the Western Desert where water lies; falconry for hunting; the famous clever Hans; Paul the octopus who could predict the results of the football world cup …The field of animal studies has lately been busy reviving such stories of multispecies and intersubjective co-existence, including the whole history of domestication, where words like ‘harnessing’ and ‘husbandry’ add metaphorical depth to their basic functionality. Humans, therefore, were never on their own.

But the history of modernisation is also a story of machine versus animal: people in an early motor car laughing at the farmer in a cart when his horse bolts after the car backfires. And the counter-story as the farmer deigns to stop and help, a few miles down the road after the car had broken down. Modernisation was an enthusiastic effort to strengthen the culture-nature division (the great bifurcation of Nature, as A. N. Whitehead had it), so that humans could do everything on their own, or so they thought. So, when it is a case of seeing better, telescopes and microscopes are developed as extensions of the eye. And they work. The results have been those breath-taking achievements that are ‘the very pinnacle of Western civilisation’, as they say.

I want to stress that these achievements are not just the result of a process of extraction from Nature, from the raw materials that are refined, machined and recomposed to produce a beautiful telescope, so that the telescope can sit there on its pinnacle and tell us about our position in the universe for ever more. If you shift your attention from what the object is to the process of maintaining it as it is, then its apparent autonomy begins to falter. Its continued existence as an object is dependent on its immediate and extended environment. And the continued existence of the facts that it demonstrates is also dependent on its immediate and extended environment. Climate scientists have found this out the hard way over the last few years and have taken to the streets to defend their eroded institutions. In other words, the simplest and the most complex things are embedded in ecologies, which can enhance their life trajectories, or not. A telescope, in this sense, is not all that unlike a rabbit or a tree: its existential logic is reproductive. It wants to keep going. It is the precondition for giving birth to better telescopes, and it can’t do this by itself.

Let’s go back to the classroom for a moment so that I can tell you another story told to me by Coral Oomera Edwards, in a discussion of her ‘Aboriginal Solutions’ project, told a story outlining a particular Aboriginal philosophy she calls Guyanggu (‘way of being’). I paraphrase:

I have developed a program for Catholic education, for little children. It is based on the principle that we have a connection with places, with any kind of place. Our habitual and sustained presence, passing though, camping in the lee of a hill, always going to the same place for fishing. All this presence, modulated by absence, establishes a sense of connection. Eventually we might address these presences, in a place, with whom we have become familiar, as we approach:

‘Hello, only us mob coming up, OK if we camp here again?’

Relations can thus be established with any sort of place. Even classrooms. Children might be encouraged to perform a little ceremony, to change each time they enter a place, to modify their behaviour at the threshold. They might be induced to address the room:

‘Hello, my name is Tommy, is it OK if I spend a year with you here?’

This is long before the didactic element is introduced, long before the child is introduced to the word ‘respect’.

Imagine all sorts of children brought up in this way. Imagine (Coral concludes) if they have the same attitude when, as teenagers, they get into cars.

In Coral’s example of the approach to place, the children keep in mind that the place has a prior existence and history of its own long before they show up. Their arrival and its impact are considered as additions to the place; in establishing a relationship they acknowledge the prior existence of a context they now seek to become part of and perhaps this performed ethic opens into sensations such as ‘seeing’ the place for the first time, which is another way of seeing it differently.[1]

According to Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose, in a paper called ‘Taking Notice’, Aboriginal cosmologies incorporate a non-human-being-centred view of the world, which also tends to be an ecological one.[2] ‘Man’ is just one living being among plants, animals, even the inanimate environment – all are kin.[3] In the narrow skin of atmosphere that the Earth provides, humans and non-humans are all in it together and attending to each other, more or less.

We are on the alert for danger and opportunities; that is what our senses are for. But not just physical senses, there are also intelligent calculations and strange things we call intuitions. The Ngarrindjeri down south call it miwi, like a gut feeling. This may be more of a kind of social feeling, a collective attunement, and it may be an art that can be cultivated by paying attention to one’s elders: not pestering them with questions, but just being there and seeing lives unfold in their mutual entanglements.

Now I have to get a bit critical. I have argued that attention is not about a brain/world relationship but is all about immersion in living ecologies. But it is the former that is promoted by mainstream economies that seek to keep us on task to the point that attention itself has become the prize resource. In an economy that runs on scarcity, it isn’t commodities and information we are short of, it is attention spans, and billions are spent on the rhetoric to capture our attention. This is the narrow road of attention that mainstream researchers also occupy. For instance, the poet Matthew Bevis writes that last year MIT Press published The Distracted Mind, in which the co-authors (a psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist) offered strategies for changing our behavior so that we might function more successfully “in our personal lives, on the road, in classrooms, and”—last but not least—“in the workplace.” The book concluded with the hope that “a neuro cross-fit training” program might soon be developed to minimize distractions.

But for the poet, Bevis argues, distraction is productive. There will be no poetry without gazing out of the window. He quotes Roland Barthes:

To be with the one I love and to think of something else:
this is how I have my best ideas.

And an even earlier Frenchman, Denis Diderot:

Distraction arises from an excellent quality of the understanding, which allows the ideas to strike against, or reawaken one another. It is the opposite of that stupor of attention, which merely rests on, or recycles, the same idea.

So, it seems we might need both, alternating attention and distraction like we alternate wakefulness and sleep. But attention does not just take one form.
It isn’t just a brain mechanism. I think it is a set of arts that can be cultivated. When a student trains to be a biologist, they learn to attend to the world in a particular way, sorting the relevant from the irrelevant. This is a basic condition for knowledge production. If the student specialises in botany she will pay less attention to animals; the zoologist does the opposite. But they can’t afford to be too focussed because new knowledge will enter through the door of distraction. As Whitehead said about Nature: ‘We are instinctively willing to believe that by due attention, more can be found in nature than that which is observed at first sight. But we will not be content with less.’

What this means is that good scientists can’t remain with the status quo: a zoologist, by virtue of the due attention that she applies, will discover a new species of animal. She will not be content with less. It also means that nature is full of surprises; perceiving so-called natural things means being surprised by their attributes. Nature is not just ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered as it is, it surprises by virtue of attention directed towards it. The due attention we apply is in the form of arts, methods, and know-how. Some of

these are normative, others in the process of being forgotten, and some are yet to be created across many fields.

There is a normal kind of attentiveness that we could call a modern sensibility, and it is one that Bruno Latour associates with Western European cultures. It is a sensibility that was nurtured with wealth gained by imperial economic domination. This wealth, fed back into Europe, built up its institutions and gave them intellectual as well as economic power. The moderns have a peculiar attitude towards nature, the Earth and its materials that treats them as fungible matter with no agency of their own. If not already treated as dead, they are about to be, and are there just for the taking, to enrich human life. This culture has a single god who can appear anywhere, in London, Paris or the Belgian Congo with strong advice about how people should run their lives. It's an extraordinary scenario: Nature is one thing, the same everywhere, made of atoms or matter; God is mobile, and both accompany industrial expansion: modernisation will eventually encompass the whole globe for everyone's benefit.

Now, we are all feeling the effects of this global industrialization hitting the wall called climate change. This globe turns out to be a fiction, because it would need to be at least three times as big if everyone were to be modernised on the pattern of northern development. This can't happen, especially since the Earth is protesting and making arguments for sustainability that the moderns have difficulty hearing—this is another reason why attention is back on the agenda. And also why Indigenous philosophies are gaining more traction. It is they who have urged the Moderns to listen to the Earth and care for its needs. I mentioned God earlier for comparison: their gods are multiple and territorial, they are there to help Indigenous people stay in place and care for country.

Needless to say, such territorial belonging is seen as hopelessly backward by the still dominant economy of extraction colonialism. But what the latter thought it was exploiting for free, the oil, gas, etc., is now calling in its debts. Earth bonds whose cost was neglected.

Neglect turns out to be the opposite of attention, not distraction.

Bruno Latour was interviewed recently by the Libération newspaper in Paris. The interviewer was a novelist, and he asked: "As a novelist, I'd like to know how this deep ecological and political crisis is going to affect art and literature. What form do you think it will take?"

BL: Once again, the parallel with the 17th century, the era of the great discoveries, is of great interest, because theatre, music and literature will be completely transformed. The change is in any case quite visible today, especially in the visual arts, dance, theatre. The invention of new sensibilities, new bases for thought, is very noticeable. And that's why we need to invent new sensitivities adjusted to this new situation. Some literary fields like ecocriticism are revisiting ancient literature, and this shows we are still quite passionate about these questions of world, territory and cosmos. The joint project of the sciences, politics and art is one of creating sensitivities to.

Those of you in creative professions will not be too surprised. You make it your business to invent new sensibilities. That this has now become a joint project with the sciences, economics, the law, etc. is even more exciting, except that it has been forced on the world by the dark cloud of climate change. It is asking for a huge adjustment to the project of modernisation, on all fronts (industry is being asked to pay for its poisons, with the help of the law giving rights to rivers, as this very issue is being dramatised by poets and playwrights). It is like the discovery of a new world, except that it is the Earth, not the Globe, and we return to this Earth with new ways of paying attention to it in its endless plurality.

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[1] Mary Graham, in 'Some thoughts about the philosophical underpinnings of Aboriginal worldviews', Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion, vol. 3, no. 2, 1999, pp. 108–09, in which she says that, in Aboriginal philosophy, 'the custodial ethic is achieved through repetitive action' and speaks also of a 'modern Rites of passage program'.

[2] Deborah Bird Rose 'Taking Notice', Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion, vol. 3, no. 2, 1999.

[3] ——, DMUH, pp. 218–19. Rose writes: 'In saying that life is good, Yarralin people are asserting that every kind of living thing has its own place, its own origins, its own right to exist. They place no species at the centre of creation.'