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# Human Attention as a Philosophical Problem: The Question, and the Nature of Questions

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## Abstract

Human attention has become a touchstone of widespread concern across the humanities, sciences, and broader culture in much of the world. The emergence of a new, heavily capitalized, and technologically sophisticated industry “commodifying” human attention (what has been called “human fracking”) has given rise to a transdisciplinary conversation about attentional problems. Philosophical analyses of attention take on special importance in the context of these new developments. Drawing on historical epistemology and the critical perspective of the history and philosophy of science, this paper examines the major positions in contemporary philosophy that have staked accounts of human attention. Ultimately, this metaphilosophical analysis juxtaposes analytic and Continental approaches, and contends that much current philosophical work on human attention fails to take adequate account of the sublated genealogy of instrumentalizing/cybernetic scientific practices that have constituted attention as an object of inquiry across the twentieth century. The implications for forward-looking investigations are considered.

## KEYWORDS

attention, consciousness, erotetics, hermeneutics, human fracking, philosophy of mind

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# 1 | INTRODUCTION

Human attention has come sharply to the fore in recent years as an issue of broad cultural, economic, and existential importance. A wide variety of journalists, critics, scientists, and historians have, with increasing concern, voiced consilient warnings about the societal and psychological impacts of an intensified commercial battle for “eyeballs” in the digital environment (Wu 2016; Mark 2023; Haidt 2024; Hayes 2025). Because a primary business model of several of the largest corporations in the world now hinges on the aggregation and continuous auctioning of human attention (what is often called “the attention economy”), and because data-intensive, algorithmically driven, and artificially intelligent systems are proving incredibly good at corralling this valuable commodity, our daily experience of our attentional abilities has been changing rapidly—in ways that are precipitating considerable anxiety. Comparisons with a variety of “gold rush” extractive industries have been made. For instance, aspects of the attention economy look much like petroleum “fracking,” where high-pressure, high-volume detergents are pumped into the deep structure of Earth, forcing a monetizable slurry of hydrocarbons to the surface. “Human fracking,” it has been suggested, involves an equivalent process, whereby high-pressure, high-volume “detergents” are pumped into whole populations, to force bankable “attention” to the surface for continuous resale to the highest bidder (Burnett et al. 2023). In both the natural and the social arena these forms of aggressive resource extraction can be understood to produce measurable harms.

This rapid set of technical and socioeconomic changes has brought the problem of “attention” to the fore in new ways—across a number of disciplines. The stakes for understanding the nature of human attention, and for understanding the role of attention in human flourishing, have increased enormously, and a suite of interdisciplinary research initiatives are currently working to investigate exactly these problems.<sup>1</sup>

Philosophy has proven to be particularly important to this timely conversation. The recognition that human attention has come under new kinds of “industrial” pressure has precipitated a probing preoccupation with an essential problem: What *is* “attention”? How should this complex and multifarious feature of our sensory and cognitive lives be *defined*? And what is the relationship between laboratory efforts to identify the neurological and psychological aspects of human attention (on the one hand) and the humanistic, theoretical, and philosophical-conceptual framings of attention (on the other)? These have become questions of the utmost importance, not merely for their scholarly or “academic” interest but also because the answers touch directly on urgent issues of social action.<sup>2</sup>

Because contemporary philosophical perspectives on human attention have become a central zone of contention in an area of such pressing significance, I undertake here a review of major lines of recent work in the philosophy of attention. My aims are expository, critical, and formally metaphilosophical. While I strive to be faithful and clarificatory in sketching the contours of several knotty disciplinary disputes, my ultimate concerns lie in a different direction. Drawing on the history of science, and historical epistemology, I wish to highlight a number of important (and generally overlooked) contingencies that, I argue, inform, and perhaps even distort, trends in the analytic philosophy of mind concerning human attention. In closing, therefore, I attempt to recover and contrast a largely sublated line of related work

<sup>1</sup>Examples would include the Princeton Workshop “Attention: History, Philosophy, Science” of 2021, which issued in a recent edited volume (Burnett and Smith 2023). See also the “Good Attention” project of Sebastial Watzl, at the University of Oslo, and the Center for Attention Studies at King’s College, London. I would also add the nonuniversity “radical school” efforts of the nonprofit “international coalition” known as the “Friends of Attention,” with which I have been involved.

<sup>2</sup>I am thinking, here, of the work of “Attention Activism.” See *Attentivity! A Manifesto of the Attention Liberation Movement* (Friends of Attention forthcoming), scheduled to be published by Crown in 2026.

on “the question of attention”—work that comes out of the twentieth-century tradition of hermeneutics. As we confront increasingly ubiquitous AI systems permeating societal-scale digital platforms (Burnett 2025b), we would do well, I contend, to reflect on this *other* tradition of philosophical work on human attention.

## 2 | PHILOSOPHIES OF ATTENTION: PROCESS AND MANNER

In the preface to his important book on attention published in 2011, *Attention Is Cognitive Unison*, Christopher Mole offered an elegant summary of the way the study of attention has been awkwardly divided by experimental psychologists and working philosophers across multiple generations of studious (if mostly inconclusive) research: “Psychologists, for their part, have been investigating attention without regard to philosophy, and so have spent the last century blunting ever sharper empirical tools against what is fundamentally a metaphysical problem.”

It is a nice turn of phrase. The tools of laboratory mind science have certainly grown sharper and sharper across those decades. But they have arguably also again and again lost their edge on the problem of attention, since all those remarkable instruments (fMRI—functional magnetic resonance imaging—above all) haven't really brought much clarity to “attention”—indeed, one could contend that they have mostly provided newly intricate ways to be confused as to what we might mean by the very idea. It is Mole's (2011, vi–vii) contention that the psychologists “mostly know that they have been doing this” (that is, banging their fancy equipment against a conceptual brick wall), “but they [also] know also that the underlying problem is not theirs to address.” And so, in Mole's view, they have gone about their business, doing a “great deal of ingenious research” that “succeeds in describing the ways in which various forms of attention behave, and succeeds in accounting for that behavior by reference to its basis in the brain.” But the basic problem never goes away, since “nobody quite knows how all of this adds up to an *explanation of attention*.” The result is a tendency to back away from the subject of “attention” as such, even as it remains, from Mole's perspective, *the* subject of the mind sciences (that is, “the best name we have for the subject matter of cognitive psychology's central, defining research project”). The apologetics and deflections take the form of a “literature loaded with protestations, caveats, and complaints” and a tendency to pair exacting empirical analyses with rather arch disavowal: “We are told that ‘attention’ is a family resemblance term, or that it is ambiguous, or hopelessly folksy, or ill-defined, or nonreferring.”

At the same time, it is not as if the philosophers were, across this same period, unduly attentive to the experimental psychology being done on attention—or, for that matter, especially concerned to provide satisfying philosophical accounts of attention as such. Mole (2011, 11) reviews the late nineteenth-century dispute between William James and the English idealist Francis Herbert Bradley as to whether there was in fact “any special activity” properly designated as “attention” (James, yes; Bradley, no), and he then sketches the way mid-twentieth-century natural language and analytic philosophers (notably Gilbert Ryle and Alan R. White) opted for treatments of attention that de-emphasized “subpersonal” dynamics. That is a way of saying that a frankly anti-metaphysical tendency in twentieth-century English-language philosophy favored theories of attention that did not hinge on particular mental processes—any account of which was likely to be either speculative or better handled by an experimental psychologist (or both). As a result, one encounters philosophical accounts of attention that characterize attentional dynamics as involving, say, some particular relationship between “interest” and “engrossment” (Bradley) or that treat attention as a “mongrel categorical” (Mole 2011, 21)—meaning a *seemingly* discrete notion that, in matter of fact, secretes a quite contingent array of contextual and relational components (this is the view of both Ryle and

White, if in different ways). By these latter lights, to say that a person is “attending” to a task is actually to slip a whole (elided) “story” into the conversation, under cover of what appears, facially, like a conceptually delineated term. For Ryle, what has been invoked by the term “attention” is a set of sublated hypotheticals and counterfactuals (concerning what would have happened had “attention” not been happening). For White we have been given, in the use of the term “attention,” *no information at all* about what is happening inside the mind of a given “attender” but rather merely some information about the attender’s “disposition” with respect to a given object, i.e., “that his activities and energies, whatever they are, are directed to and focused on something which occupies him” (White 1964, 8).

Mole’s concern, in sketching the twentieth-century history of research on attention in this way, is to set up his own intervention—which has indeed proven a durable one. Let me review it.

It was Mole’s contention that neither the experimental psychologists nor the philosophers had yet proven willing to roll up their sleeves and address the core problem: Just what sort of a thing *is* attention? We had, in effect, two different, and mostly nonintersecting, *pragmatics* of attention (the psychologists with their accounts of Broadbentian bottlenecks and Triesmanian feature integration; the philosophers with their intricate, Wittgensteinian construals of the rules governing attention talk), but essentially no one who was willing to open the genuinely *metaphysical* can of worms and hazard a proper answer to the hard question: *What is the essential nature of attention as such?*

This was Mole’s quarry. And his answer, while it has things in common with older theories, is original—and also, in its way, compelling. His opening move is to clear the ground: he begins by insisting that there are certain kinds of things that *cannot be properly understood in terms of any description of acts or processes*. This part of his book is honest-to-God metaphysics, and anyone reading my summary here who is an actual philosopher and is interested in seeing how this argument goes should simply turn to Mole’s (2011) actual study (and his various articles in suite that have defended his position). For the purposes of nonspecialist review, I am going to skip all the cut and thrust that is involved in clearing and holding this little bit of philosophical ground. I’ll just lay it out there: Mole makes a case that there is an essential difference between things that can be accounted for in terms of *process* (like, say, “oxidation”) and those that can only be understood in terms of *manner* (for instance, “teaching”). He calls the latter “adverbial” phenomena.

Adverbial phenomena can be identified, in Mole’s account, by applying the following test: If you are presented with two questions—(1) what is X?; and (2) what is it for something to be done X-ingly, or in an X-ing manner?—*which do you need to answer first?* Some kinds of things (like “oxidation,” a process thing) require an answer to (1) before (2) can be reached; other kinds of things (like “teaching,” a manner/adverbial thing) require an answer to (2) before it is possible to make a stab at (1).

This is, when you puzzle over it for a while, a pretty slick little argument. Since it seems to work, in a somewhat unexpected way, to delineate two good categories (or it does to me, anyway—practicing philosophers can get very exercised here, so we again want to make clear that folks who think about this stuff professionally do not all agree). As Mole would have it, if I want to say what it is for something to happen in the manner of an oxidation, I absolutely *must* understand what an oxidation reaction “is.” I need to have a command of oxidation as a *process*. Whereas if I want to say what “teaching” is, that approach is at least much harder—and, in Mole’s view, actually impossible. “Teaching” can look like a million different things. It can involve hens and chicks. It can involve feeding data to a neural network. It can involve a decade of dissertation advising or a decade of ignoring another human entirely. It is no particular “thing” in any process sense. As Mole (2011, 31) puts it, no “piecemeal identification” of “component processes” is ever going to explain an *adverbial* phenomenon. You cannot give a satisfactory account of “haste” or “employment” or “wit” or “stealth” in terms of any

*properties of objects or specific processes.* You are going to need to dig in on the “manner” of things—the suite of relations and intentions within which any given process is unfolding. To make any progress on this kind of problem, you are going to need to do an investigation of a *situation* and understand an array of things about what is going on in some contextually rich *circumstance*.

To help give this process-type/adverbial-type distinction additional force, it may help to use a metaphorical anecdote (courtesy of another philosopher, Philipp Koralus, to whom I turn in a moment). Imagine Martians come to Earth to do a little reconnaissance. They bring along some instruments and some ethnographers. They set to the task of learning English, and generally try to sort things out in a very foreign environment. In no time at all, they determine what “rust” is, because they run a qualitative analysis assay and establish that “rust” is what Earthlings call the result of an oxidation reaction on any ferrous metal. But they have a lot more trouble with the idea of “employment.” They find that this term is used to refer to highly diverse activities: telling jokes, blowing up buildings, writing books about attention. They enumerate a lengthy slate of instances of this important activity but have the darndest time putting their long and glowing fingers on why Earthlings group this stuff, some of the time, in the “employment” category—and then sometimes don’t (since all those same activities/processes are also, often, *not* “employment”).

Until the Martians sort out that there is *no particular activity or process* that constitutes “employment,” they are literally NEVER going to get this right. Employment is about a “way of doing something.” It indexes the wider situation or conditions under which an activity or process occurs. It is, in Mole’s terms, “adverbial.”

If you have followed this argument so far, then you are ready for the punchline: Mole thinks “attention” is an adverbial phenomenon. He thinks, therefore, that so long as psychologists look around in the brain for a brain activity or a brain process that is “attention,” they are going to be disappointed—and their findings will remain essentially unsatisfactory.

Supposing this is right, what *is* the adverbial nature of attention? What does it mean to do something *attentively*? Mole’s answer is in the title of his book: he thinks attention is “cognitive unison.”

The resulting account is perhaps best captured by the metaphor of a symphony: you get “symphony” when all the parts of an orchestra are playing their parts *together*. That “is,” in a basic way, what a “symphony” *is*: all the instruments and all the players playing in “unison”—not in the sense of “all playing the same thing at the same time” but in the sense of “all playing their parts, synchronically, in such a way as to *play the symphony*.” Mole thinks that “attention” is the way we talk about the mind when it is operating like this: all the parts are “together” on the thing that is happening; all the elements of our cognitive being are “in sync” and “in unison” in the shared attentive task (whatever it is).

Mole’s account has some interesting implications. He has no room, really, for anything like “divided” attention. It would appear that (again, there is a technical argument here that Mole has been having with other philosophers for a decade or more, but I pass over this for our purposes), in his way of thinking about attention, if a bit of the brain orchestra starts playing something else, that just isn’t a “symphony” anymore, attentively speaking. Whether this holds for actual symphonies is hardly clear (it might still be a symphony but just a crappy one). Mole is nevertheless facially committed to the idea that attention is an all-or-nothing proposition—at least as he defines it. This can feel a bit quixotic when held against our experience of (our always slightly wonky) attention in the real world or against the way people use the concept of “attention” in ordinary conversation. But the exigent demands of logic force analytic philosophers to defend some counterintuitive positions—and even, sometimes, to insist that their conclusions are compelled by rationality itself. I think reasonable people can disagree about what happens in those situations that feel like “divided” attention. Is it *really* a rapid switching between two fully attentive scenarios? Is it actually just a euphemism

for *distraction*? Mole, anyway, will not admit of any truly “divided” attentional situation. Attention, in his theory, is a special condition in which all the components of our cognition are in exquisite, dynamic *conjunction*. There are no half measures.

In this and other ways, then, Mole's theory, presented in figurative (rather than analytic-philosophical) language, bears a striking resemblance to the notion of “flow” made popular by the Hungarian American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the 1990s. For Csikszentmihalyi, who was surely affected by the psychological tenor of the “human potential” movement in the 1970s, the optimal conditions of human concentration (and the “peak experiences” of our flourishing) are manifested in a falling away of all that is *not* the immersive engagement itself. Indeed, in his account, the very task (the activity, the attentional *object*) can itself be understood to lose its “task status” and become subsumed into the phenomenologically encompassing symphonic activation of the attentional being.

Csikszentmihalyi thought this experience—of immersive, cognitive, embodied, and real-time coordination of *being* in some form of full-attention *doing*—was basically what made people feel positive about themselves, others, and the whole business of existence. It was about as good as it gets in the sublunary universe for creatures like us. Mole is less concerned with an exhortation to his kind of “cognitive unison” as a form of well-being (though, for all I know, he might have ideas about that) than with showing that an adverbial theory of attention—in “cognitive unison” terms—defeats other theoretical contenders in the field of philosophical attention studies. How you get good at achieving cognitive unison, or why you might want to pursue this state, are not only not Mole's primary concern, they really don't even come up in his work. Csikszentmihalyi, by contrast, was not trying to win an argument with philosophers, and he did not even frame his core claim in explicitly “attentional” terms, so his writings (he died in 2021) have a very different mood.

But philosophers *will* argue. And they have continued to do so. There are enough post-Mole contenders for the crown in the philosophy of attention that a synoptic review is practically impossible. Diversity marks the approaches, and diversity marks the results. Pricking out a pair of works that bookend the decade since Mole's study, we have Jesse Prinz's thumping *The Conscious Brain: How Attention Engenders Experience*, which came out in 2012 (right on the heels of Mole's monograph), and then, quite recently, Carolyn Dicey Jennings's *The Attending Mind* (which landed in 2020). But there was much work in between, too. In 2017, Jonardon Ganeri published his challenging *Attention, Not Self*, shortly after Wayne Wu brought out a helpfully synthetic *Attention* volume in the “New Problems in Philosophy” series with Routledge. And there were many others. *Many* philosophy books on attention.

For someone like Prinz, whose study is, among other things, an exhaustive review of the relevant pre-2010 literature in cognitive neuroscience, attention is at the heart of consciousness itself, and it is best accounted for, functionally, as “the process by which perceptual information becomes available to working memory” (Prinz 2012, 95). A more process-oriented (and hence “anti-Molean”) account could hardly be imagined. Other philosophers disagree as to whether attention is both necessary and sufficient for “consciousness” but side with Prinz contra Mole. That describes Jennings, for instance, who adopts a robust account of the centrality of attention to the experience of selfhood and agency but argues (along with, say, Carlos Montemayor and Harry Haladjian in their *Consciousness, Attention, and Conscious Attention* of 2015) that consciousness *without* attention is very much possible—although, as Jennings would have it, such “attentionless” consciousness is precisely a form of mind life that must rely on *habit*, since the agential bearing of personhood is inextricable from attentional dynamics.<sup>3</sup> Despite their various differences, Prinz, Montemayor,

<sup>3</sup>Dacey argues, in parallel with James, that “attention is evidence of mental causation by an emergent mind or self” and that such an emergent mind or self is best thought of as “responsible for top-down attention” (Jennings 2020, 74).

Haladjian, and Jennings all offer very definitely “process-based” accounts of attention—and reject Mole’s “adverbial” approach. Unlike him, they all believe that it is quite possible to account for attention in terms of brain activities and brain processes. Prinz, with his robustly specific account of attention as a function of access to and processing in short-term memory, actually goes right down into the weeds of neural processing and aligns his argument with the best data concerning the regions of the brain that light up in attentional activities. Jennings is less preoccupied with laboratory neuroscience, but she too (like basically all working philosophers of mind in the twenty-first century) takes care to test her arguments against recent experimental results.<sup>4</sup>

It is possible that a reader attempting to navigate the paragraphs above (which endeavor to offer a non-false précis of some very complicated arguments) will have begun to wonder about the status of the “task” or “object” of attention—however defined. If we stay with Mole for a moment and grant him his account of “cognitive unison,” we might still be curious about exactly what any given instance of cognitive unison is “about.” “O.K.,” we might say, “we have a cognitive symphony here that you are calling attention—but what is it actually *playing*?” I suggested that in Csikszentmihalyi the treatment of “flow” the “task” can in some sense be understood to “fall away” in the pure *playing*: he seems to posit a higher state in which meanings analytics lose their traction, at least phenomenologically (meaning, within the experiential/perspectival universe of the person in question; we, outside, might still be able to say, for instance, “that basketball player is trying to dunk” even as the player in question is, in “flow” terminology, operating totally beyond or beneath any such teleological/operational experience of the moment). Mole does not offer us anything quite so “woo.” There is every reason to think he takes the attentional “task” to be a condition-of-possibility for the relevant kind of cognitive unison, and that he understands the task to be a robust and constitutive element of any attentional situation.

### 3 | THE “TASK” OF ATTENTION

So what about the attentional *task*? Might a close look at task orientation itself be adequate to account, philosophically, for attention as such? There is, in fact, a long-standing tradition of attempting to understand attention in terms of its task conditions, or, to put it differently, its “objects.” Wayne Wu is probably the most prominent philosopher of mind currently advocating such an approach in its purest terms. Making an effort to reconnoiter the scope of neuroscientific and experimental-psychological data concerning human attention (the eye-tracking work, the fMRI, the reams of evidence amassed by lab work on change blindness, visual search, split-cues, and so on), Wu comes to the conclusion that the best way to sum up what we know about attention is to say that it amounts to *selection for a task*.<sup>5</sup>

Though Wu works this claim out with a rigor that is his own, the sense that “tasks” are somehow what coordinates or orients attention goes all the way back to the very origins of experimental psychology itself.<sup>6</sup> The German term for “task” is *Aufgabe*, and the first generation of psychologists to concern themselves with *Aufmerksamkeit* (“attention”) in Leipzig

<sup>4</sup>As in, for instance, her discussion of the way the Feature Integration Theory fares in the context of subjects with parietal damage that causes unilateral neglect (Jennings 2020, 85–87).

<sup>5</sup>Given as a sufficient condition, Wu (2014, 39) formulates his claim this way: “Subject S perceptually attends to X if S perceptually selects X to guide performance of some experimental task T, i.e., selects X for that task.” He goes on, in chapter 3, to the more challenging work of defending this as a *necessary* condition for attention as well, as he moves from his “functional” to his “metaphysical” definition: “S’s attention to X is S’s selection of X for action” (Wu 2014, 96).

<sup>6</sup>Wu himself notes as much, pointing out that the link between attention and some version of selection for a task has been a feature of research “[f]rom the beginning of experimental work on attention” (Wu 2014, 103). There is a sense in his treatment that this is, on balance, support for the correctness of this view.

and elsewhere very definitely noticed the way that shifting laboratory “tasks,” given to subjects, altered the dynamics of human attention. You could even say that what “attention” was, in the laboratory, was exactly the way that any given experimental task (“look at the dot on the wall”) registered in a human subject. The question was so central for one line of experimentalists that it came into English under the banner of the German word itself: the “Aufgabe” question, for, say, Edward Titchener, was the question of how determinate tasks affected attention. While he would have rejected the idea that attention itself was nothing more than a kind of “task orientation,” he would have recognized such an argument, as he had come across versions of it before, in the writings of Oswald Külpe and G. E. Müller.<sup>7</sup>

Which is to say, Wu is on well-trodden ground in focusing on “selection for a task” or “selection for action.” And he realizes this—indeed, he sees the durability and longevity of this way of conceptualizing attention as *prima facie* evidence for its value. If this is what lots of people working on attention have, for all practical purposes, treated attention as being, we would want to approach the problem with a respectful sense that they were not all (probably) totally wrong.

Wu rehearses Mole's adverbial account and displays some sympathy for Mole's rejection of divided or “partial” attention. But in the end, it is a little hard to say whether Wu's treatment of attention can be fitted together with Mole's or not. For Wu, the fact that one can effectively unify all the different kinds of empirical psychological and neuroscientific study of “attention” by understanding attention functionally as “selection for a task” provides preliminary grounds for the hypothesis that “a plausible answer to the metaphysical question” is right in front of us: “[M]ight attention in some way just *be* selection for a task, or, more generally, for action?” (Wu 2014, 72). This looks like a way of thinking about attention that privileges process over manner: What is attention? It is the *PROCESS* of *selecting for action*—whatever that process might be (at the level of, say, psychological abstraction or neurophysiological dynamics). Although somewhere in there a little technical metaphysics will kick in, since it seems to me that, depending how one construes the underlying categories, it might be possible to argue for an “adverbial” construal of Wu's central claim. After all, is “selection for action” more like “oxidation” (where we are obliged to understand the actual process as such before we will be able to identify situations that unfold in an oxidation-like way)? Or is it more like “employment” (where we have to understand the adverbial manner of the activity or process before we can know what is going on)? I am frankly not sure. It may be obvious to Wu (or Mole?) but it is not to me.

What *is* obvious to me, however, is the important role that the history of science plays in Wu's position. The way in which Wu argues for his “sufficient condition” on attention is by showing how that condition (“selection for a task”) “is built into experimental practice and neuroscience” (Wu 2014, 72). Wu first shows that the scientists who have participated in this experimental practice have used the word “attention” to talk about their participants' *selection of behavior in relation to the tasks that are assigned in their labs*. He then suggests that, in order for us to avoid speaking at cross-purposes when we attempt to engage philosophically with the work of those scientists, we should conform to this same pattern of usage. And he goes on to suggest that, in addition to being a sufficient condition for attention, such task-relevant selection is *necessary*, so that attention “is” (or is, at least, *coextensive with*) selection for a task.

This line of analysis, in my view, wants a critical rethinking in light of expanded reflection on the historical contingency of modern laboratory investigations into human attention. We

<sup>7</sup>It was Külpe's Scottish student, Henry J. Watt, whose name would be most closely associated with the elaboration of the *Aufgabe* in experimental psychology in English, and while Watt himself was not centrally concerned with attention as such, his closely related theorization of *Einstellung* (or “set” or “disposition” of a subject) was important to attention theorizing in the period. For a discussion of both *Aufgabe* and *Einstellung* in relation to attention in the early twentieth century, see Geissler 1909, 473–529. On Watt and the *Aufgabe*, see Boring 1929, 403–404.

would want to consider the extent to which those scientists (to whom Wu stays relatively close) may well have worked on attention as a form of “selection for a task” simply *because that is the kind of attention that can be tested using the available equipment in their laboratory*. Indeed, we can push this point and express it with a larger measure of hermeneutic suspicion (the history of funding structures for twentieth-century laboratory science with human subjects leaves room for active cynicism): these scientists may well have explored attention as “selection for a task” *because that is the kind of thing that the Department of Defense will pay you to test*.

We do well to remember that a huge percentage of the laboratory research on human attention conducted in laboratories in the United States across the watershed decades of the last century was hot-war- and Cold War–directed inquiry into human abilities to *track and trigger on a stimulus*—work centrally concerned with military operations. Another large component of such research centered on durational vigilance of human subjects under various exigent conditions—investigations that lay at the heart of radar monitoring and other forms of “human factor” performance in relation to complex industrial systems. The “task-orientation” of laboratory scientists studying attention over the past century and a half must be understood to be intimately entangled with these concrete problems, and thus to have unfolded, to a significant degree, as a function of specific (if, also, changing) historical circumstances.

Let me be clear: I am not arguing that this history prevents us from conceptualizing attention as selection for a task. One surely can, and a coherent construal of attentional situations from this point of departure is entirely possible, as Wu demonstrates. However, my historicist observation should also, I believe, raise critical questions concerning the adequacy and ultimate reach of such an account. To put it polemically (and counterfactually), if in the 1950s the entire budget of the U.S. Department of Defense had been rerouted to fund the attentional research of a set of *Tibetan monks*, we would surely have inherited by 2020 quite a different scientific literature on human attention. Probably less essentially “cybernetic,” and, it stands to reason, less focused on a variety of operationally oriented “tasks.”

This observation cannot be construed as direct “philosophical” attack on Wu's work, and/or that of the philosophers who follow his line of analysis. But as a metaphilosophical observation, it merits, I think, ongoing critical consideration. And it can be extended. After all, the problem of attention as a testable laboratory subject had its earliest origins in one of the very most difficult “tasks” of the late eighteenth century: observing the meridional transits of stars in the course of celestial mapping (work at the heart of expensive mercantile problems of navigation and cartography); the early experimental scenarios created to amass empirical data on human attention reproduced the multimodal task of sensory coordination and response reflex (Schaffer 1988). For more than a century, variants of those “complication experiments” not only framed scientific understanding of “attention” but also proved central to the development of experimental psychology itself as a viable scientific enterprise in Europe and the Americas. Such programs informed a wide range of research into the human subject as a particular kind of “gate” or “node” in increasingly complex industrial systems: the “task” of the human person, under these analyses, was to hit switches at the right moment, to keep watch, to aim weapons, to monitor the gauges and screens of control rooms, to read advertisements. Was this what attention *was*? Is this what attention *is*?

In some sense, as Wu can show, yes—this argument can be made. But in another sense, I would contend, *not at all*. When in 1962 the pioneering Harvard-trained psychiatrist Arthur Deikman sat his subjects down in front of his famous “blue vase” and asked them to give it the full attention of their sustained concentration, it is possible to understand those instructions as a “task.”<sup>8</sup> And yet, it was precisely the *indeterminacy* of his instructions that consti-

<sup>8</sup>I am referring, here, to the “Blue Vase Experiments” of the medical psychologist Arthur J. Deikman (1963), which were watershed investigations of “open attention” in a laboratory setting.

tuted the situation. Here was a kind of “deconstruction” of the teleological orientation of the entire tradition of experimental psychology. Here was an attentional object presented without any “objective”—a veritable apophatics of the “task” as such. What Deikman drew from this negative space was nothing less than the *emancipation* of the human person from the Cold War interpolations in which the sciences of mind and behavior had so thoroughly conspired—sometimes with malice aforethought and at other times blithely, on account of inherited structures of analysis and ingrained habits of practice. It is for these reasons that Deikman's work should be understood as a watershed in the history of the scientific study of human attention.<sup>9</sup>

Nor was this merely some idiosyncratic conjuration, this *other* form of attention—the one that declined to wear the harness of some assigned task yoke, declined to bite tight on the mouthing-bit. The shifting cultural norms of the 1960s brought a steady percolation of attentional forms that would not be straightened into the synaptic mechanics of time on task. But these programs had deeper roots. For instance, Deikman, despite his own experience with military psychology (he had served in the Air Force and done psychological evaluations of pilots), was anchored in the institutional traditions of psychoanalysis, a domain that grounded its special form of access to the workings of the mind in a very particular (and richly theorized) kind of attention: “free-floating” attention, an attentional mode assiduously tuned to waylay and suspend each and every task temptation; the project was precisely *not to know* what one was looking for, and *not to pursue* any possible “end” within the analytic encounter (Chehirian 2023).

In a similar way, when the young sociologist Charles H. Hubbell conjured his “vigils for peace” on campus at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1966, he resurrected an attentional mode with an ancient lineage—one that defined itself as a form of open “waiting” (Burnett 2025a). Was there a task? Yes and no. Or, perhaps more truly, no and yes. “No,” in the sense that Hubbell and his fellow vigil holders raised no signs, sang no songs, made no demands. They were *present*, but they eschewed determinate ends, and they were equally indifferent to means. But was there, in some sense, a “task”? Sure. The task of the vigil. Which is to say, a certain kind of collective attention. This, though, is not attention as a means to the end (“selection for action”) but rather attention as *an end in itself*—inextricable from the expressive and inhabited condition of human being.

It is important to weigh this durable and significant conception of attention against the more narrowly operational models of human attention that emerge from the main line of the human sciences—and that have, I contend, disproportionately preoccupied contemporary philosophers. A focus on the specifically *scientific* framings of attention, for all their rigor, can actively obscure the existential/phenomenological modes of attentional being. And while this is unfortunate as a general matter for the work of understanding, it is an especially problematic distortion at our present moment, in that it is precisely the “instrumental,” operational, quantifiable, track-and-trigger kinds of attention that have proven highly susceptible to intensive exploitation in the “attention economy.” To put it another way, the laboratory analyses of attention that have sliced and diced this aspect of human personhood as a tractable reflex in the task orientation of the subject (generally sitting in front of a screen) are the very analyses that have permitted something called “attention” to be *priced* in the marketplace and mechanically extracted in an industry of unsettling scope. An instrumentalized attention was the only kind of attention that laboratory instruments could discern. And an instrumentalized attention has been the form of attention that could be most readily *operationalized*—within the trigger-response framework of consumer capitalism, within the trigger-response framework of military-industrial priorities, within the

<sup>9</sup>This is the contention of chapter 6 of my forthcoming book-length study of laboratory research on attention in the twentieth century, *Attention: Science, Power, and Perception*, which also treats the work of Charles H. Hubbell (discussed below).

trigger-response framework of biomedical reductionism. Attention as “selection for a task” proved to be one of the very most powerful organizing analytics of modernity. It provided a valuable new “commodity,” which became sufficiently ubiquitous and fungible that it came to function as an actual currency—reproducing a ubiquitous pattern in the evolution of human systems of exchange whereby certain commodities (stripped of their histories, contexts, and functions) become themselves *means of exchange*.

## 4 | DIALECTICS OF ATTENTION

There is always a certain danger in a stridently dialectic sensibility, the dyadic fever of which can easily distort the understanding. And the basic moves of such thought (emergent contradictions sequentially left behind as they are transformed into new synthetic wholes) so nakedly reprise the generational dynamics of sexual reproduction as to leave a miasma of childlike wish fulfillment hovering around every instance of Hegelian (or para-Hegelian, or pseudo-Hegelian, or frankly Fichtean) analysis. But I anyway cannot resist.

I believe that a fundamental antinomy in the understanding of human attention can be discerned in the juxtaposition of a pair of definitions that came to light in the same decade, if in very different contexts. On the one hand, let us take the core proposition from the veritable bible of the so-called attention economy, Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck's eponymous volume of 2001, *The Attention Economy*, a Harvard Business Press best seller that did more to give currency to the concept of commodified attention than any other single work of the past fifty years. Charged to specify their topic at the outset of the volume, Davenport and Beck (2001, 20) offer a concise definition: “*Attention is focused mental engagement on a particular item of information. Items come into our awareness, we attend to a particular item, and then we decide whether to act.*” The italics are original. This is an account of attention that lines up squarely with that of Wayne Wu: attention is *selection for action*. Its essential operation is *catalytic*: attention trips a switch between the steady state of general awareness and the goal-directed behavior of an organism.

By contrast, the French theorist Bernard Stiegler, writing in his book *Prendre soin* of 2008, offered what can be thought of as a diametrically opposed theory of human attention: “*To pay attention,*” he writes, “*is essentially to wait*” (Stiegler 2010, 96).

He is helped, in this account, by some French etymology: *attendre* is indeed the ordinary verb in French that means, precisely, “to wait.” So, in French, the quoted sentence above reads: “*Faire attention, c'est essentiellement attendre*” (Stiegler 2008, 174), which has a music to it—the letters on the page seemingly disclose a hidden conceptual intimacy.

The contrast with Davenport and Beck (and, for that matter, Wu) could hardly be more pronounced: attention as the *TRIGGER to action*; attention as the *SUSPENSION of action*. There you go: a proper antinomy.

What does Stiegler think one “waits on” in the attentional situation? This gets a little more complicated. At issue is not merely a *durational* waiting: true “attention,” in his account, is not the same as mere eyeball hours or sustained fixity of regard. One can look (and listen) for a long time without, in fact, “paying attention” at all in his sense. What the true attender “waits on,” for Stiegler, is something like the *disclosure of the infinitude of the object of attention* (an infinitude which, he contends, is a “mirroring” of the infinitude of the attentive subject). For Stiegler, then, “deep” attention is the portal through which the infinite (the eternal, the transcendent) enters time, and is made accessible to finite being.

It is my contention that Stieglerian attention is real, and that any account of “attention” that wishes to evade, elide, or deny this account of what attention is (of what we *mean* by attention) will be unfaithful to something true and important about the human condition. I believe that Stiegler's account of attention can be held together with a line of arguments

about the ethical, existential, and metaphysical/theological dimensions of attention that remain relevant to any effort to understand ourselves and our relationship to the world.<sup>10</sup> But it is also the case that it has been exceedingly difficult to hold space for this “thick” conception of attention in the context of more than a century of well-funded, technoscientific rigorous, and directly actionable research into the “thin” versions of attention so adroitly theorized by Wu. A careful survey of the history of science reveals that attention *became* “selection for action” across more than a century of laboratory-based research into eye blinks, trigger fingers, and reflex arcs. Attention *as selection for action*, in the context of assigned *tasks*, was what early twentieth-century experimental psychologists, behaviorist eye trackers, Cold War experts in vigilance, and cybernetic information engineers studied when they studied attention. And what they studied *as attention* has become, to a considerable degree, what “attention” has come to be. Along the way, we inherited an understanding of our most intimate human way of relating to the world that had been sliced and diced in such a way as to be *priced*—in the globe-spanning socio-technical system called “the attention economy.”

A deep and effective confrontation with the harms of “human fracking” requires, I believe, a serious act of philosophical recovery. We need to reach back and sift out and bring to the surface a set of ways of thinking about, and experiencing, attention—modes of “attensity” other than the track-and-trigger, instrumentalized, and fundamentally cybernetic attentional forms that emerged from the careful laboratory research of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

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Was there, really, another kind of attention all along? Yes. There was. Could it be “made real” in the laboratory? Almost. There are paths not taken in the history of science, as there are paths not taken in the history of politics, economics, and ideas. But just because those paths were not taken does not mean they cannot be seen—be *glimpsed* through the trees (and the fences) that line our familiar way. Archives provide such glimpses. And in referencing the work of Arthur J. Deikman and Charles H. Hubbell, above, I have offered several examples of important moments in which other ways of thinking about attention seized the imagination of this or that figure—figures more or less at the margin of any “mainstream” history of the scientific study of attention in the twentieth century. The marginality of those figures is, I would argue, a function not of their work (its quality, its importance) but simply of the relentless domination of the essentially dehumanizing dynamic of objectivism (and the reductionist misapplication of purpose-oriented rationality) within the “human sciences.”

I will put the point in maximally polemical terms, for the sake of forceful exposition: If you ask the right question (“what is attention?”) in the wrong way (“here, sit in this chair and hit this switch when you see a dot”), you will get the wrong answer (“attention is selection for action”). If enough of you do it, you will also have a lot of cross-referencing footnotes.

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<sup>10</sup>I am thinking, here, in a particular way, of the work of Simone Weil, and of the technical, philosophical elaborations of Weil's work to be found in Iris Murdoch and others. I would place the work of Dorothea Debus in this line, for instance. As I read him, Paul North (2012) theorizes exactly this form of “attention” in a cleverly obverse way in his superb *The Problem of Distraction*. It is worth referencing the work of two very different collectives: the Friends of Attention (authors of the *Twelve Theses on Attention* [2022] and other texts), and the group known as “ESTAR(SER),” responsible for the volume *In Search of the Third Bird* (2021) in addition to other projects.

<sup>11</sup>The term “attensity” is borrowed from the work of the pioneering Anglo-American psychologist Edward B. Titchener, one of the great “introspective” students of human attentional behaviors. He coined the term in the early twentieth century, as part of an effort to define a field of research into the character of attentional experience itself, rather than merely its attributes in relation to reaction times or other indices of sensory physiology. This is a complex story. But see *Attensity!* (Friends of Attention forthcoming).

In his 1902 novel *Wings of the Dove*, the novelist Henry James—brother, of course, of the attention theorist par excellence, William—sketched a scene of attention that merits reflection. I think I do not offer it, here, as some kind of synthetic *Aufgehoben* in relation to the taut contradiction I have heightened above (in contrasting Wu-Attention and Stiegler-Attention; or, if you prefer, in contrasting the neoliberal pre-formed-for-commodification “attention” of Davenport and Beck against the God-storming “attention” of Simone Weil). But then again, I am not perfectly sure that I am *not* doing that. Anyway, here it is: James’s key scene depicts a crucial, if fleeting, encounter between a fatally ill patient (female, sensitive, bourgeois, anguished) and an esteemed medical doctor (grand, humane, bourgeois, busy). It is a charged rendezvous, and a rushed one. For various reasons, they will have only a few moments together—the time must be stolen from the exigencies of ordinary life and ordinary obligation. Much hangs in the balance. What can be achieved in a few instants that are so overburdened—with affect, with pain, with hope, with unsaid things?

They sit. And here is how James evokes the redemptive power of that moment, making use of the language of attention, and figuring it as a gift of pure imminence: “So crystal clean, the great empty cup of attention that he set between them on the table.”<sup>12</sup> This isn’t quite the “mirror of the infinite.” And it isn’t “selection for action” either. But it isn’t entirely *not* those things. There is something of the infinite in the emptiness, which contains all possibilities. And there is something of the mirror in the sparkle of this central thing, which, while between the two parties, permits of clear vision. At the same time, there is, too, a solicitation, a preparation for something that is to happen. And in this it is not impossible to feel a kind of “selection,” and the sense that *there is a task ahead*. By defining that task in terms of pure openness, however, we have been sprung from the world of determinate purposes and the operational logics that attend them. We are in the space where the immanent and the imminent are *permitted*—they may assort themselves in and between us.

This may be the best account we have of what attention can be—if it is to be ours.

## 5 | THE QUESTION OF ATTENTION

I’d like to make one more turn through the philosophical matters that have concerned us in this paper. And this last pass feels particularly important, in that analytic philosophers of mind have, in the past decade, hailed as novel a surprisingly ambitious theory of attention that I have not yet discussed. My intention here is to review that theory, at least in schematic terms, and again hold it against the work of interpretive historicism that organizes my own thinking. It is my hope that this exercise will cast into relief the particular form of inquiry that is historical hermeneutics, and, at the same time, gesture again at a form of attention that seems reliably to escape the grasp of those who, in their enthusiasm, chase the workings of the mind with some of the vigor of rodeo cowboys riding down on an errant steer (that is, they definitely rope that steer, and put it on its side, almost every time; but there is something about a steer laid out in the arena, its legs bound in a half hitch, jerking, that is not quite what we might usually mean by “steer”). Let’s see.

In a 2014 paper that received a good deal of scrutiny, a young philosopher of mind named Philipp Koralus put forward what he called “the erotetic theory of attention.” It is an unusual term, “erotetic,” and despite its orthographic propinquity to “erotic,” it has absolutely nothing to do with sexuality or desire. Rather, it shares a root with “interrogatory,” in that the core meaning of “erotetic” is “of or pertaining to *questions*.” For Koralus, the proper way to understand “attention” is as a particular orientation to a question—as an “attunement” to the kinds of answers that a given question entails or implies. Here is Koralus (2014, 26): “On the erotetic

<sup>12</sup>I first came across the passage (for which I am very grateful) in Charon 2005, 263.

theory, the functional role of attention is a *matter of the relationship between questions and what counts as answers to those questions*" (emphasis added).

As in the other philosophical treatments of attention that I have surveyed above, the erotetic theory can be stated relatively simply, but it unpacks into a set of genuine intricacies. Let's start with the most straightforward account: according to Koralus (2014, 30), what attention "is" is, simply, the project of being "appropriately sensitive to the occurrence of answers in our cognitive economy." Answers to what? Good question. And Koralus has the answer: Answers to the "question" (or "questions") implicit in any given *task*.

The "task" part of this will now sound familiar. And we can back up slightly and see that, for Koralus (2014, 30), as for Mole and Wu, the "object of attention in its most general form is a *task*" (emphasis added). Where Koralus departs from Mole and Wu, however, is in his characterization of any "task" in "erotetic" terms—that is, in terms of a *question*. He does not think that this question needs to be stated explicitly, and he goes to some length to argue that the question need not even operate linguistically (he believes, not implausibly, that questions can be formulated gesturally and can operate in and among organisms that do not have language). His treatment of the "semantics" of interrogatories is basically set-theoretical. Which is to say, he thinks of "questions" as, in effect, logical operators that establish a set of satisfaction conditions ("answers"). Making sense of a question requires that we understand "what is being asked"—which amounts to our having a sense of the set of things that are *responsive* (the technical term for that set is "congruent"). Koralus can draw on a robust line of philosophers of language to buttress this analysis of the way questions work. He is a bit more out on his own as he sets to the task of defining any *task* in "question/answer" form. But again, the analysis makes sense, even to a nonspecialist. To use a few of Koralus's examples: the "task" of finding the banana can, it would seem, be translated into the question "where is the banana?" without remainder, and without undue conceptual violence. Similarly, the "task" of calculating the sum of  $2 + 2$  can be comfortably, if perhaps pleonastically, restated as "what number is  $2 + 2$ ?"

His final example feels messier, but Koralus (2014, 33) gives it as follows:

Task of kicking the ball into the goal → Is the ball in the goal yet?

I found myself feeling that this particular translation rather misses something essential about soccer, and indeed more generally about the very concept of "play" (to which I will return). After all, would it not be possible to offer, say, "how do I get the ball past the goalie?" as a better erotetic construal of the "task of kicking the ball into the goal"? Or, to reach a little wider, maybe even: "*How do I play soccer (well)?*"

Bracket that, for now. What does translating "tasks" into a certain kind of relationship between questions and possible answers *get* Koralus when trying to theorize attention? One might say that it buys him a little space for the iterative, meandering, and suboptimal dynamics of actual human attention as it works in the world. If your account of attention is simply "selection for a task," then it is hard to say whether attention as such is really happening when the subject is, say, *trying* to select for a task. Take the example, standard in perceptual psychology, of trying to find a given percept (in Koralus's account, "a red square") in a presented field of other red objects. The subject scans the screen, looking at other red things (a red triangle, red flowerpot, red star, red stop sign). This person is certainly *doing* the task. The "focus" of the eye is moving all around the field. But the subject hasn't yet "selected" anything—and the "attention" is on a bunch of things other than red squares. Koralus contends that this situation is better characterized as a person trying to answer the question "is this a red square?" again and again. The extent to which the subject can be said to be "attentive" to the assigned task is, for Koralus, best characterized as a measure of the sensitivity with which the subject is monitoring the sensory environment for answers to the question implied by the set task.

The erotetic theory of attention is, for what it is worth, “adverbial” in Mole’s sense, as discussed above. It is not a theory of a particular type of “process.” Koralus is neutral on the mechanisms that organize and effect “sensitivity” to responsive “congruency” within the milieu of a given attentive agent. How a task is conceptualized as a determinate question, the mechanisms by which a particular set of satisfaction conditions for that question are construed—Koralus has no stake in the exact workings of any of this. Structurally, then, his theory has the same “form” as that of Mole’s: each gives an account of what it is to do something in an attentive *manner*, and neither is committed to any particular activity or process by which a thing is done *attentively*. For Mole, attention is “cognitive unison” (all the relevant components of the sensory-cognitive being operating in symphony); for Koralus, attention is a heightened form of sensitivity to the occurrence of “answers” to “questions.” But in neither of these accounts will “attention” be discernible in terms of this or that operation. Attention won’t “look” any specific way. The only way to know if attention is happening, under these theories, is to have a “thick” sense of the larger situation: we will have to have a sense of the how and the why of the activities before us—we will have to understand the *manner* in which a person is listening or looking—if we hope to identify a “scene of attention.”<sup>13</sup>

Koralus believes that the erotetic theory of attention is preferable to Mole’s “cognitive unison” account. But the grounds for this claim get pretty technical. Koralus’s most straightforward comparison has to do with the way the two theories manage the idea of “divided” or “partial” attention. Mole, recall, insists that “cognitive unison” is an all-or-nothing proposition, and his theory is generally construed, therefore, as implying that attention is either “on” or “off.” It cannot be divided, and it cannot even really be understood to operate in degrees.<sup>14</sup> Koralus makes a pretty compelling case that the erotetic theory manages divided and partial attention “better” (that is, in a way that fits our experience more naturally, while remaining logically coherent). He also argues that the erotetic theory of attention may provide a new way to get at a very technical problem in the philosophy of mind that has to do with the challenge of reconciling “representationalism” (the idea, in its strong form, that there is nothing “to” consciousness other than its representational states; that is, there is no “thing it is like to be” a being in a given conscious state—or nothing, anyway, *beyond* those representational states) with the observed fact that attentional focus affects how things look and feel and sound and taste. So, for instance, you can show experimentally that directing the “attention” to a percept increases its “salience.” This means that people “see” the things they attend to *more*—those things get brighter/darker/sharper, and so forth; those things “stand out.” But that is a subjective experience. It does not happen in the world. It happens in the mind. Philosophers call this a “shift in phenomenal character,” and it feels potentially hard to hold this aspect of reality together with at least a flat-footed kind of representationalism (which biases toward physicalism and has trouble accounting for the way the mind seems to color or “construct” features of the world by means of operations that are hard to conceive in terms of representational states). If the way we look at the world creates effects, then (to paraphrase the anti-representationalist philosopher Ned Block) there must be a kind of “mental paint” by which the mind colors the world. Attention is evidently part of this dynamic.

<sup>13</sup>Though I trained in both the history and the philosophy of science, I consider myself more a historian than a technical philosopher, so it is possible that I am missing something here. But for other nonspecialists reading along, I will say that, from my perspective, Koralus’s account, described in the way I have just done at the end of this paragraph, looks an awful lot like an elaboration of the attention thinking of Ryle and White (discussed above)—which Koralus does not reference in his article. The allusion to “scenes” of attention is a reference to the volume of that title, which is concerned with precisely these casuistically rich accounts of attention (Burnett and Smith 2023).

<sup>14</sup>It should be noted that Mole himself has contested this apparent implication of his theory. For more on this, consider the excellent and relatively recent overview, Mole and Henry 2022.

Koralus sketches (a bit hastily) a way that the erotetic theory of attention can help manage the apparent conundrums that arise for representationalists when they have to deal with all the ways that attention can be shown to “color” phenomenal experience. He makes some other claims for the virtues of erotetics, too, having to do with insights it may afford into distraction and practical rationality. But let's leave all that to the side for now and ask the broad, hard, basic question: Is attention a matter of questions? Or, put that question aside for another moment and let us ask the question as Koralus would frame it: Is attention a kind of special sensitivity to the set of answers implied by the question implicit in a given task?

My answer to this is no. An emphatic no. In fact, I find myself, somehow, *especially* alienated from Koralus's account of attention—which strikes me as even more troubling, in a basic way, than Wu's frank privileging of the trigger-happy conceptualization of attention that, as I have tried to show, dominates the twentieth-century scientific study of human attentional capacities. To give the philosopher's blessing to a theory of attention that has more to do with winning video games than human flourishing strikes me as a disheartening *trahaison des clercs*: not “wrong” so much as “wrong-headed.” This is philosophy that arrives to offer its confirmation of the facts on the ground, and it isn't clear that those facts are in need of philosophical confirmation, however rigorous. What is needed is an *escape* from a theory of attention that has arisen in the context of a dehumanizing mechanomorphic reductionism, that has been refined in the cybernetic hothouse that hybridized people and the instruments of target acquisition, and that has found its lasting legacy in pervasive and insidious technologies by which to commodify the root structure of personhood.<sup>15</sup> Rarely has Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach seemed so relevant: “Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”

And while we are on the subject of theses, I will, I hope, be forgiven for citing one of the *Twelve Theses on Attention* (2022), the work of the activist coalition known as the “Friends of Attention” (with whom, full disclosure, I have worked for several years). The Friends' Thesis II reads as follows:

True attention does the work of bringing forth. It is the aperture through which the latency of things, beings, and persons becomes present.

“Mere” attention, ordinary attentiveness, is *useful*, standing in relation to the world like the opening, closing, entering, and exiting of the sensible doors in a well-maintained house.

But unmixed attention—pure attention to what cannot be used, to what no one already wants, to what promises no knowledge or gain—does not require doors, because it *walks through walls*.

(Friends of Attention 2022, 4–5)

I understand this passage to invoke the distinction between a task-oriented account of attention and *something else*—a form of attention (here glossed variously as “true” and “pure” and “unmixed”) that defies operational logics and will not be put in harness to the technocratic logics of mondaine power and marketplace wealth.

Is this mumbo jumbo? I don't think so. But the colonization of our analytic discourse by the instrumentalizing reductionism of science obliges resisters to activate poetry as the language

<sup>15</sup>Consider, in this regard, Mole's very interesting recent efforts to theorize an “emancipatory” attention (Mole 2024).

of last resort. Better a mystery that gives pause, than yet another clarification—which only speeds down a calamitous path, a path that is *already* wrong.

From this perspective, then, I have a special antipathy for an “erotetic” treatment of attention—or anyway a special antipathy for the version of erotetics put forward by Koralus. And the reason for this lies in the central importance of the “logic of the question” to the kind of hermeneutic inquiry I take to be implied by “true” attention. To put it a different way, by reframing a theory of “thin” attention around (a correspondingly “thin” treatment of) *questions*, Koralus cheapens the deeper “erotetics” at stake in a more authentically humanistic treatment of human attention.

To understand how, let's take a moment to contrast Koralus's conceptualization of “questions” with that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, the philosopher whose *Truth and Method* set the course for hermeneutics in the second half of the twentieth century. For Koralus, as we have seen, questions are to be understood in set-theoretical terms. He puts it this way: “Questions are contents ... that consist in pairs of a function and a domain” (Koralus 2014, 32).<sup>16</sup> This is, above all, a *determinate* account of questions, an account that specifies their logic as a logic of discrete, set-theoretical *relation*. Questions, by these lights, are “about” their answers—which they specify, in much the same way that a function specifies a set of outputs in relation to a domain.

One can hardly denounce this account as “flawed.” It is “correct,” as far as it goes. But it does not go very far. Compare Gadamer, whose account of the question points to the heart of hermeneutics and lies at the center of human understanding:

The close relation between questioning and understanding is what gives the hermeneutic experience its true dimension. However much a person trying to understand may leave open the truth of what it said, however much he may dismiss the immediate meaning of the object and consider its deeper significance instead, and take the latter not as true but merely as meaningful, so that the possibility of its truth remains unsettled, this is the real and fundamental nature of a question: namely to make things indeterminate. Questions always bring out the undetermined possibilities of a thing.

(Gadamer 2013, 383)<sup>17</sup>

A more pronounced contrast with Koralus (and the theorists on whom he draws) would be hard to invent. On the one hand, a theory of the question as a “determining function”; on the other hand, a theory of the question as an *undetermining* function. The former can indeed be worked out as the mechanism by which the mind sets itself to *tasks*. The latter *asks questions about tasks themselves*. The former may well function as the logic of functional attention. The latter is aligned, I would argue, with the kind of attention toward which the second thesis of the Friends of Attention gropes: an attention that will not be bent to the operational logic of the task. When Bernard Stiegler (2010, 96) describes deep attention as a “waiting” on the infinitude of an object (which is, at the same time, a reflection of the infinitude of the human who attends—who is “immeasurable, incomparable, and incalculable” in his words), this is the logic of undetermined possibilities. What else could open onto the infinite? And what

<sup>16</sup>The ellipsis elides the following parenthetical: “(not linguistic items).”

<sup>17</sup>“Das enge Verhältnis, das sich zwischen Fragen und Verstehen zeigt, gibt der hermeneutischen Erfahrung erst ihre wahre Dimension. Wer verstehen will, mag noch so sehr die Wahrheit des Gemeinten dahingestellt sein lassen. Er mag noch so sehr von dem unmittelbaren Meinen der Sache auf die Sinnmeinung als solche zurückbeugt sein und dieselbe nicht als wahr, sondern lediglich als sinnvoll meinen, so daß die Wahrheitsmöglichkeit in der Schwebe bleibt—solches In-die-Schwebe-bringen ist das eigene und ursprüngliche Wesen des Fragens. Fragen läßt immer in der Schwebe befindliche Möglichkeiten sehen” (Gadamer 1960, 356).

does Gadamer say? “The essence of the question is to *open up possibilities and keep them open*” (Gadamer 2013, 310; emphasis added).

This is indeed an “erotetic” theory of attention. But it is not Koralus's. It is, though, the one we need, if we are to escape what the Friends of Attention lament in Thesis VII, where they decry the way that our understanding of attention “has been deliberately manipulated by market structures and technologies to the point that we are *increasingly incapable of true attention*. Our attention has never been more free, or more continuously entrapped. Our attentional environments are thus *catastrophic*” (Friends of Attention 2022, Thesis VII, 23).

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Human attention has become, across a few short decades, an issue of sharp concern across a wide range of scholars and researchers—in addition to a remarkably extensive and diverse array of citizens, entrepreneurs, journalists, lawmakers, and activists. New technologies (society-scale digital networks, powerful and intimate screen-based tools of communication and entertainment, AI-driven algorithms for maximizing human “Time on Device”) have enabled the emergence of a multitrillion-dollar industry, the “attention economy,” that runs on a new kind of immaterial “resource”: human attention. The most exploitative and extractive forms of this enterprise can be understood as a form of “human fracking,” an industry that many increasingly agree presents serious challenges to human flourishing (Office of the Surgeon General 2023).

In this context, careful consideration of the actual nature of human attention has risen to new levels of importance. Indeed, one may properly assert that a true and compelling account of attention is, at present, a matter of authentic urgency—with direct implications for policy-making, regulation, social welfare, and existential well-being. Philosophers, qualitative social scientists, and critical/rigorous humanistic thinkers must play an active role in this process of defining and understanding human attention.

In an effort to advance this important work, this paper has undertaken a review of several major lines of current philosophical research that deal directly with attentional dynamics. Simply sketching, in some detail, the contrasting and forceful power of these accounts has been a central concern of the foregoing pages. Philosophy of this kind is technical and demanding. Both deference and scrutiny are warranted, and a synoptic view is not easy to achieve, even for “insiders” in the subdisciplinary area. I have endeavored to provide such an overview that is faithful to the hard work of practitioners and also sufficiently “general” to assist interested nonspecialists who wish to gain some command over the current philosophical debates in this significant area.

At the same time, I have pursued a metaphilosophical critique of much of this work, a critique grounded in historical epistemology and the history of science and technology. It has been the contention of this paper that a close consideration of laboratory research on attention across the twentieth century (particularly in the era of Cold War psychology) reveals the extent to which an “operational” and “instrumental” form of attention received special focus—in the context of narrow, cybernetic preoccupations with tracking and triggering and machine vigilance. In practice, the volume and quantitative/analytic charisma of this research tradition has profoundly informed, as I have worked to demonstrate, the tenor of much of the prominent philosophical work on human attention in the past several decades. I have suggested that, for all the power of these approaches, they may serve imperfectly to guide us in our confrontation with the new challenges of “human fracking,” in that the accounts of attention on offer are largely *conformal with the logic of those systems*. Drawing on alternative philosophical resources, particularly those found in the hermeneutic tradition, I have proposed alternate (and in some cases complementary) paths by which those committed to various forms

of attentional “emancipation” or “attention activism” may pursue philosophical grounding of their endeavors.

The question of attention very definitely remains open. And its openness may be our best hope.

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