

THE POLITICS OF ATTENTION AND THE PROMISE OF MINDFULNESS

LAWRENCE BERGER

NEW HEIDEGGER
RESEARCH

The Politics of Attention and the Promise of Mindfulness

Lawrence Berger

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Endorsements

Lawrence Berger's ground-breaking study of attention provides a remarkably wide-ranging investigation of a phenomenon central to human presence. His is the first work to treat attention in a way that critically engages with both the contemporary scientific and philosophical literature. Grounded in phenomenological and hermeneutic thinking, it provides a comprehensive exploration of the ontology of attention as well as the centrality of attention to political life. —Jeff Malpas, Emeritus Distinguished Professor, University of Tasmania

Lawrence Berger offers us a deeply learned and imaginative account of attention and human flourishing. Synthesizing a dazzling array of thinkers and theories that span centuries and subject areas, he articulates an idealistic and attractive vision of mindfulness that, widely practiced, might elevate our communal and political lives. —Ben Berger (no relation), associate professor of political science at Swarthmore College and author, *Attention Deficit Democracy: The Paradox of Civic Engagement*

Lawrence Berger makes a significant contribution to the phenomenology of attention. His claim that attention is an extended form of human presence in the world is comprehensive in scope, rigorously argued, and creative. —James Risser, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Seattle University, and editor, *Research in Phenomenology*

In a time when the media are mercilessly clamoring for our constant attention, nothing perhaps could be more urgent than a book helping us to understand and work with our ability to exercise attention with due awareness. Lawrence Berger's comprehensive, well-researched and insightful study, critically examining the contributions of the empirical sciences while also drawing on the resources of experiential phenomenology and practices of mindfulness, argues in a reader-friendly style for the importance of disciplines of attention in facilitating the kind of mutually satisfying communication necessary for a flourishing democracy. —David Kleinberg-Levin, Professor Emeritus, Department of Philosophy, Northwestern University

Berger's new book provides an important account of the phenomenology of attention and its social implications. This is the kind of scholarship that advances the relevance of Heidegger's thought for urgent questions we face today, especially in understanding the complexities of a political community. —Lawrence J. Hatab, Louis I. Jaffe Professor of Philosophy Emeritus, Old Dominion University

Berger calls for the recognition of attention as indispensable for reshaping our traditional views of the body, self, and politics. Rigorous yet accessible, this book offers readers interested in hermeneutics, phenomenology, and political philosophy valuable new insights into the gathering power of attention for individual and community formation. —Katherine Davies, assistant professor of philosophy, University of Texas at Dallas

Attention is a central phenomenon in everyday existence, but it is front and center in very few philosophies. In conceiving it as human presence, Berger shows that disciplines of attention such as mindfulness are essential, in that they enable us to establish the communal bonds that are required for effective political engagement. Berger's careful study—and his message—are important for our times. —Richard Capobianco, professor of philosophy, Stonehill College, and author, *Engaging Heidegger, Heidegger's Way of Being*, and *Heidegger's Being: The Shimmering Unfolding*

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Preface

Although attention is a subject of interest in both philosophy and political science, there is need of a full-length study of its nature and role in the constitution of political realities. I intend to provide a rigorous analysis of the question, but fundamentally I argue that attention is something quite simple. It is human presence, or how we are presently engaged in the course of everyday activity. It brings with it whatever resources we have to bear on the current situation, which is how we are made manifest in relation to other individuals and the world at large. Despite its simplicity, however, traditional philosophical approaches cannot accommodate it because it is impervious to objectification. It is rather a holistic phenomenon that operates within a hermeneutical circle of attention, language, and bodily understanding, as I demonstrate in this book.

Attention is important in politics because it orients and shapes us in the course of worldly engagement. It is evident that its deployment is crucial in political outcomes, as was seen, for instance, in Donald Trump's domination of the media during the 2016 US presidential campaign. In fact, it has been argued that the Trump presidency came about due to realities that were produced by the media themselves, which depended in turn on the engagement of public attention. In particular, the instability and capriciousness associated with the movement of attention has important implications for the stability of the realities that are so produced. It is crucial that we understand its nature and how it can be gathered to promote the public good, as in, for instance, dealing with our present planetary emergency.

Attention is how we are made manifest, and under mutual attention it is how we do so in relation to one another. It also has the potential to unify us if we take responsibility for its movement. This means that the extent to which we are ontologically bonded is not determinate, but rather depends on the state of attention, or the extent of mindfulness that accompanies such engagement. In particular, the quality of discourse and action that issues from public spaces depends upon its state. Since worlds are literally built by way of action

in these spheres, the implication is that the stability of the worlds in which we dwell, the extent to which activity is oriented to the common good, and the extent of human flourishing that is thereby enabled, all depend at least in part on the state of attention.

I draw on the thinking of Martin Heidegger in putting forward many of the claims in this book, but I limit most discussion of the specifics of his work to the final chapter to be more accessible to the general reader. However, any work on politics that involves Heidegger must at least mention his disastrous foray into Nazi politics. There is a vast literature on this subject, but my position is that Heidegger is not a political philosopher. He says as much in correspondence with Hannah Arendt, where he says that she is interested in political thought and he is not. He certainly has political opinions, and his illiberal orientation is consistent with many themes in his work, but Arendt also draws heavily on his thought and is much more inclined to liberal thinking. I have turned to Heidegger because I believe his philosophy provides a framework that enables us to better situate the phenomenon of attention and to comprehend its importance for politics. It offers an extraordinary vision of the place of the human being in the cosmos, which calls for the practice of acute and steadfast attentiveness, thus providing a standpoint that transcends traditional political oppositions.

Introduction

Everyone knows what attention is (James [1890] 1983, 381)—and I would add that everyone knows it is important in politics, for it is central to who and what we are as human beings, both as individuals and in collectives. I take this to be the case literally, that as human presence, attention lies at the center of our relations to the people, things, and events of this world. This is not to say that we are harmoniously unified by way of that centering; that is hardly the case, as a cursory look at our political situation will show. But the extent to which we have any presence at all, the extent to which we are made manifest as encounterable by self and others, depends on attention. It may be the case that one is distracted and dispersed, which will be evident to others if they are present, but at any moment there is typically some central manner in which one is engaged, perhaps in what one is thinking or worrying about. That, I argue, is the presence of attention, and it is how we come across to people depending on how they relate to us in turn. It is a precious thing, especially in political affairs, because it is essential for the formation of any bonds that may hold between us.

James says that we know what attention is, but cognitive science finds it to be anything but a simple matter due in part to an implicit commitment to physicalism. An example is Chun, Golomb, and Turk-Browne (2011), who say that “attention has become a catch-all term for how the brain controls its own information processing” (74) and discuss the consensus finding that it is not a unitary phenomenon. The following is illustrative of the metaphysical assumptions that are operative in this literature:

Attention is not unitary. Rather, attention should be considered as a property of multiple, different perceptual and cognitive operations. Hence, to the extent that these mechanisms are specialized and decentralized, attention mirrors this organization. These mechanisms are in extensive communication with each other, and executive control processes help set priorities for the system overall.

However, such priority setting is still independent of the actual nuts and bolts of selection and modulation within the multiple mechanisms. (76)

Thus, on the scientific view, attention is a feature of multiple mechanisms that communicate with one another and where a central mechanism coordinates activities among the processes. But the reliance on a metaphysics of mechanisms (metaphorical or not) is problematic for this approach, because a machine, by definition, proceeds with minimal human intervention. If the executive decision maker is a mechanism itself, it would appear that the essence of the human being has been reduced to a mechanical process. These processes support the presence of the self in the course of worldly activity, but we are certainly not reducible to them, or so I argue.

It is difficult to reconcile the primacy of the mechanical with attention when the latter is conceived as human presence, as it is here. Thinking in terms of mechanisms may be useful for sub-personal processes that work in the background, but attention itself is the very foreground in which we find ourselves, how we are presently engaged in any manner whatsoever. There are many ways in which we can be so engaged, which can be described as speaking, touching, reading, walking, staring, moving, reflecting, etc., where in each case we are made manifest in a particular manner depending on who we are and how we understand the situation at hand. Moreover, in the course of any of these activities we can be more or less gathered or collected. If we are scattered, dispersed, or distracted, that is how we are as a whole, how we come into presence, and likewise if we are gathered and focused. I argue that this understanding of the nature of attention is incongruous with reduction to a mechanical system.

James's view is that we know what attention is in a pragmatic sense, in that, for instance, when someone asks for our attention we know what to do. We can sense whether or not others are paying attention to us, and we know our performance will suffer if we don't attend to the task at hand. We also know that we are capable of gathering our attention and therefore ourselves, for we can "gather ourselves together" (James [1890] 1983, 382) and focus on matters of essential import when the situation calls for it. That is, in stark contrast to the view from cognitive science, *attention is a unifying phenomenon*, as I argue over the course of this book.¹ This understanding of ourselves cannot be dismissed as illusory or epiphenomenal, for it is the essential ground for engaged activity of any type. But it is not a fixed ground; rather, it presents itself in the form of potential ways of being in the world.

There are two interrelated dimensions of attention:

- *The emergence of entities*: Attention is typically studied from the point of view of selection, which I argue is an aspect of the more general orienting and centering in relation to the presence of worldly entities, as we come into presence at the same time. It is the manifestation of the self, which is where we speak from or how we show ourselves in the course of worldly engagement. It is the center from which action arises, and the public space is where we are centered as a community, where we are made manifest as a people.
- *Effort of attention*: Efforts of concentration or vigilance are also associated with the phenomenon, but I focus on the possibility that such effort can go above and beyond the ordinary, which enables one to be more gathered and open in relation to the presence of worldly entities. This will be considered below as *active attention*, in contrast to the *passive attention* that typically holds. In the latter case we can be gathered by affect, for instance, but this is not active attention in the sense put forward here. Active attention (closely related to mindfulness) is characterized by an acute and sustained attentiveness that enables explicit self-awareness, integration, and more profound relations with others.²

Attention is how we collect ourselves, both as individuals and collectives. We can gather ourselves for the sake of openness, in particular for openness to others, which is essential to our humanity. Moreover, we know what attention is because it is where we are centered, how we come into presence as engaged in the everyday. This is why James says that everyone knows what it is, for it is the essence of the first-person perspective, which cannot be understood assuming a world that can be apprehended only by way of distanced observation and theoretics. Indeed, cognitive science finds attention to be mysterious because it is itself the basis for any such objectivating activity.³

KEY CLAIMS

Two central claims are put forward over the course of this book: (1) attention is human presence, or how we are made manifest in the course of engagement, and (2) it moves according to a hermeneutical circle of attention, language, and bodily understanding. These claims owe much to the thought of Martin Heidegger, as I show in chapter 9, which can be seen in brief as follows:

1. Attention can be understood as human being, or human presencing. Heidegger's notion of the ecstatic nature of human existence is put here in terms of attention as an extended presence (see chapter 1).
2. Since presencing is also a speaking for the later Heidegger, the relation between attention/being and language is crucial for the hermeneutical

circle I put forward in terms of attention, language, and understanding. This triad appears in the discussion around the circle in *Being and Time* (SZ), with understanding and the hermeneutical circle put forward in §32, and discourse and hearing in §34.⁴

Attention as Human Presence

Attention is how the self is made manifest in the course of worldly activity, how embodied resources and sensibilities (e.g., thought, feeling, emotion, skills, energies) are brought to bear in various modes of engagement. Rather than being ensconced in a private mental realm, attention is our extended presence in relation to people and things as they are made manifest in relation to us, and it is thus the basis for the intersubjective bonds that lie at the heart of political realities. It is centrally important in human existence because it is literally how and where we are centered, where embodied resources and sensibilities are brought to bear in the course of everyday engagement.⁵ I refer to embodied resources instead of the more commonly employed cognitive or processing resources because attention, as a holistic phenomenon, commands all the resources that make up the human being. Thinking in terms of cognition is consistent with the detached view of mind in which humans are cast as “knowers” rather than incorporating other dimensions such as the affective and somatic (e.g., Lerman, Rudich, and Shahar 2010; Kupper, Widdershoven, and Pedersen 2012). Attention brings the potential of integrating the human being as a whole, which can lead to transformed ways of being in the world. This is the claim to be pursued here.

Attention as my presence means that I cannot be there without it; if it is elsewhere, so am I. This theme appears in Heidegger’s *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (GA 29/30: 95/63): “How often it happens, in a conversation among a group of people, that we are ‘not there,’ how often we find that we were *absent*, albeit without having fallen asleep. . . . In such being absent we are precisely concerned with ourselves, or with something else. Yet this not-being-there is a *being-away*” (29/30: 95/63). Thus although we are not “there,” our attention is still engaged in some manner, in that we are oriented to entities that are not associated with the present goings-on. In such a case, I myself appear to others as absent in the conversation, as being otherwise engaged. Therefore, attention as presence is how I am made manifest in the world, engaged with the things themselves. It is how I am occupied, how the self engages with worldly entities.

It is important to note that a peripheral awareness is associated with attention. Gurwitsch (1964), for example, distinguishes between theme (focal center), context (periphery of objects relevant to the theme), and margin (ultimate horizon).⁶ The claim here is that attention is how the self is made

manifest. The engagement of the self with worldly entities can be characterized as peripheral or central depending on the deployment of attention, while there is little or no engagement with entities on the margin. That is, an entity that is peripheral to the central focus is made manifest as such and is recalled as such.⁷ It is intimately related to Husserlian intentionality in that it is how the ego directs itself toward its thematic objects, as discussed in chapter 1.

Attention must be approached as a first-person phenomenon, and as such is resistant to the detached approaches of the natural sciences. Given its role in experiential contexts, this means in particular that any associated vocabulary must also be taken into consideration. The understanding of attention that appears in the language is of particular import given the intimate relation between the two that is constitutive of the hermeneutical circle. For it is by way of attention that we come to understandings that are preserved in language (chapter 2), and when we are aware of the movement of attention itself that reflexive understanding is preserved in its associated terms. Therefore, it is essential to take these terms seriously in the study of attention.

For instance, we talk about ourselves as distracted, scattered, or dispersed, which describes our state in the course of engagement. Otherwise we say that attention is captured or taken by something other than the task at hand. These expressions are in the language, reflecting a common understanding that does not represent a “folk psychology” (in a pejorative sense) but rather a first-person phenomenon that lies at the heart of our worldly existence. We talk about being immersed or absorbed in various activities; we can be “carried away” by emotion. This should be taken literally, that attention is very much affected by powerful emotions, as can be seen in expressions such as “she’s the apple of my eye” or “my heart goes out to you.” We may realize that attention has been absorbed in worrying about how things are going and not paying attention to loved ones. Such things matter when we reflect upon what our lives amount to. All this and more must be considered in coming to an understanding of the nature of attention.

My claim is that the understanding of attention as human presence is implicit in the language, in the very meaning of the term. It would be nonsensical, for instance, to say that although I am fully engaged in a particular activity, my attention is engaged not in this but in some other activity. Only when attention shifts to an activity can one say, “I am” to engagement in that modality, that one is explicitly aware of being engaged in such a fashion. In fact, saying “I am . . .” attentively results in the deployment of attention in a corresponding manner. For instance, if I say, “I am speaking” or “I am walking,” attention attests to the truth of the matter by being directed accordingly. That is, when I say, “I am speaking,” attention is directed to the very act of speaking itself. If, on the other hand, I say, “I am walking” while seated on the couch, I know it to be false because attention is directed in accordance

with what I understand walking to be, and I see that I am not walking. There is a relation in the language between me in the first person and my attention, which must be taken seriously in any account of attention.

We also understand as a matter of course that attention is required for full engagement, for full presence in the course of an activity.⁸ It is common, for instance, for students' minds to be elsewhere, which means that they do not hear all that the professor has to say, or, at a minimum, they do not take in all of the nuances of the presentation. We understand that we can be more or less present, more or less collected or dispersed. If attention is scattered and dispersed, so are we; likewise if it is focused and collected. This means that a more gathered attention brings more of oneself to bear in the course of engagement, as one sees and hears in a more profound manner.

Of course, it is typically the case that such a full or active presence is not exercised. For instance, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (2017) point out that the mind tends to wander incessantly and that we are unaware of it until we are called on to attend to a specific task. This means that attention is typically passive in that we are immersed in various matters, so that it is still operative but proceeds unawares. This is the distinction that I make between active and passive attention.

Attention and the Lived Body

Attention is our presence in the world, which, importantly, includes our own bodies. It is an extended presence in that it can move from the sensation of the lived body (interoception) to external objects (exteroception), and thus across what is referred to as the *lived body-environment*. In referring to the lived body I am following Husserl's distinction between the lived body (*Leib*) and the physical body (*Körper*), where the former refers to how the body is experienced as we live within it while the latter is how it is viewed as a physical object. I am also employing the notion of the body-environment, which recognizes the intricate relation between the body and its environment that shows itself in the freedom of attention to extend from one to the other.

Any modality in which we are engaged (including thought, reflection, imagination, etc.) occurs by way of such a placement in the lived body-environment, but we are typically unaware of it and its movement. It is possible, however, to place it intentionally in any manner whatsoever, and from there to stay with its movement in the body-environment—either as the situation demands or simply because we are free to move it at will, collecting ourselves as we do so. This is the essence of what I am referring to as active attention.⁹ When we stay with that embodied movement there is a stabilization and opening which is required for the long-term efficacy of the public space, or the space of appearances in Hannah Arendt. I show that the effort

to stay with that opening, to hold and sustain it so we can be made manifest together as ontologically bonded, is essential for what Arendt refers to as power, as contrasted with violence (see chapter 8).

What is key for human relations is that we can sense bodily how the attention of others is deployed and who they are in that presence, especially when we are face-to-face in mutual attention. We know when people are attending to us and when they are not; children, for instance, certainly know when attention is not being paid to them. This is an important aspect of our relations with others that must be understood, which argues against the notion of “the mental” that stands in the way of a more profound understanding of the nature of attention. Rather than being restricted to an inner realm, attention extends into the world as the gateway to relations with all things, including our fellow human beings. In this sense it is fundamentally an intersubjective phenomenon.

In proceeding I draw on enactivist thought, which has developed in response to conceptions of the mental that show themselves in theories such as computational theory of mind and representationalism. The idea is that rather than being passive processors of information in a world that is stripped of meaning, we participate in the production of meaning: we *enact* it. Enactivism focuses on phenomena such as self-organizational systems and sensorimotor cycles, assuming the lived body-environment to be the field of action, and it draws on phenomenological thought, especially Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Rather than assuming the mediation of mental representations in engagement with others, it argues for a direct understanding of the minds and acts of others, in contrast to the currently predominant theory-theory and simulation-theory.

This literature has developed in response to the Cartesian notion of the mind as a private, isolated entity, emphasizing instead the embodied and situated nature of cognition. Rather than abstract intellection, the emphasis is on practical reason, or attention to the specifics of each situation. Ideas are not mental entities in the head, but are rather socially situated and include gestures, speech acts, and motor action. The implication is that context is crucial in inquiring into the nature of physical reality, especially in quantum physics, in that the embodied physicist cannot be separated from the reality that is under investigation (see chapter 3).

The Hermeneutical Circle

Attention moves within a hermeneutical circle of attention, language, and understanding, which is a holistic phenomenon that is operative soon after birth. This means that attention is not a form of “mere awareness,” for it always operates within a context. Its deliverances serve as the basis for the

formation of the self in its possibilities for further manifestation, and as the basis for the formation and dissolution of political realities. I show that the circle is operative as soon as we enter this world, for it is well recognized that children develop the capacity to jointly attend to objects in conjunction with others at around nine months of age, where they not only attend to the same objects but are aware that the others are also doing so. There is a large literature on joint attention (e.g., Eilan et al. 2005, Seemann 2011b), which generally considers attention in infancy and its role in the acquisition of language. But what is also crucial is that prior to joint attention there is mutual attention beginning at birth, where infants recognize faces, in particular the face of the mother, and shortly thereafter engage in protoconversations with caregivers. Indeed, Trevarthen (2002) argues that the ability to recognize the mother's face lies in experience gained in relation to the mother in the womb.

The implication is that attention is first operative in face-to-face interactions, which are essential to who we are as human beings over the course of our lives. I am arguing that it is essentially the same from birth until death, where the movement of attention within the circle is a holistic matter that depends on the whole of who we are at any moment. Rather than subsuming that movement to posited mechanisms or structures, this approach fully respects the human by arguing that it is determined not by independent structures but rather by who we are as whole human beings within the various contexts we inhabit. As intelligent, meaning-seeking beings, the way we understand ourselves and the world in which we dwell shows itself in this, the very movement of ourselves, in how we are made manifest in the course of worldly engagement. This is my essential thesis.

Attention is how we are made manifest in relation to entities that show themselves, where aspects of ourselves are made manifest according to our embodied understanding, which is itself formed in interaction with others by way of attention and language. It is directed by the confluence of language and understanding, and language is forged in the interaction of attention and understanding. This intricate relation between attention, language, and understanding determines how things are made manifest to us, and it is the basic framework within which any ontological determinations can be made. This puts significant limits on the sorts of claims that can be made regarding the status of categories such as the mental and the physical, as discussed in chapter 3.

Relational Holism

Attention is a holistic phenomenon that cannot be accommodated within traditional metaphysical schemes. Limited conceptions of its nature arise due to the assumptions that are typically employed, such as physicalism and

representationalism. The assumption of the primacy of the physical, which is implicit in most scientific inquiries into attention, is insufficient for insight into its nature, as in the work of Chun, Golomb, and Turk-Browne (2011), discussed above. I also consider the work of philosophers such as Jennings (2020) and Mole (2011), who provide relatively narrow views of the phenomenon. In general, theorists rely on conceptions of the mental as separated from physical reality, assuming a derivative status relative to a physical underpinning, as in theories that argue for supervenience on the physical. I argue in chapter 3, however, that attention is neither mental nor physical, for it enables us to relate to both kinds of entities, such as the theories of physics and their referents.

This suggests the need for another ontology, for attention is how we relate to all that is. We cannot gain any distance from it because it is where we dwell, and it is only by way of active attention that it is possible to become aware of its action from the first-person perspective. I therefore advocate for a relational holism in which attention plays a major role, as it is how we come into presence and thereby relate to anything at all. In this approach, relations enjoy a primacy over any particular entities, and the whole enjoys a primacy over any particular relations. This means that independent entities cannot serve as the ontological ground, but rather that any such entities are made manifest only in relation to one another and the whole, which implies that the movement of attention itself, as the basis for human relations, cannot be directed by any such ontic entities.

In considering this approach I rely on enactivist thought and phenomenology (largely Husserl, Dan Zahavi, and Heidegger), emphasizing the importance of first- and second-person perspectives rather than the third-person perspectives that are derivative of the former.¹⁰ I also note that relational ontologies have been put forward in physics (Teller 1986, Esfeld 1999, Rovelli 1996, discussed in chapter 3), feminist thought (Stoljar 2018, Mackenzie 2019), enactivism (Gallagher 2017), Eastern thought (Bitbol 2019), analytic metaphysics (Benovsky 2010, Paolini Paoletti 2018, Santos 2015), social science (Gergen 2009), joint attention (Seemann 2011a, Campbell 2011), political thought (Steiner and Helminski 1998, Sturm 1998), theology (Polkinghorne 2010), and the work of scholars such as Benjamin (2015) and Topolski (2015), who apply the notion to the work of Arendt (discussed in chapter 8), among others. In conjunction with these metaphysical assumptions, I favor ordinary language philosophy and natural life contexts for the study of attention. In general, I take a holistic approach and examine the implicit presuppositions that are employed in competing visions.

THE POLITICS OF ATTENTION

Attention is typically conceived in economics and political science as a limited capacity resource, and the politics of attention refers to the effort to attract attention to promote various candidates and positions. On the view put forward here, however, attention is our presence in the world and how we are formed as individuals and collectives. It is often assumed to be passive and subject to manipulation, but I argue that while it is indeed ordinarily passive, it is possible at least in principle to take charge of its movement by simply staying with it as it occurs. This is our ultimate responsibility for ourselves and others, to take charge of this, our very ontological movement, which is the path to freedom, autonomy, and resistance against oppression. This would appear to be an impossible task given the paradox of control of attention, of control of one's own movement, but the support of a community intent on enabling such efforts can render it more feasible.

Attention is how we are made manifest, and under mutual attention it is how we are made manifest together in public spaces. This means that the very spaces that are essential for the exploration of who we are and how we should live together are constituted by way of attention to matters of shared concern. For what would make a space public if not our mutual presence, a presence that is achieved by way of attention? Any forum that lacks the attention of its members is hardly a meeting of the minds. But any sort of presence is not sufficient; what is required is active attention, effort above the ordinary solely for the purpose of being open and responsive to what may present itself. Passive attention, on the other hand, which is far more prevalent, means absorption in everyday affairs with no cognizance of its movement. There are considerable political implications to such passivity, in that we see the fragmentation of public spaces and subjection to techniques of diversion and distraction away from the substantive matters that concern us all, given the flitting about that enables, for instance, rapid news cycles and reduced ability to focus on matters of importance. We need to be able to stand our ground in the face of tyranny, for example. While passive attention is subject to capture and hence the possibility of the nefarious use of the power that is so acquired, active attention enables power to stay with the people.

We know that a unified public attention is capable of achieving many things, while a divided and dispersed attention can lead to widespread misery.¹¹ Passivity means that instead of coming together we turn away from one another into private realities that are *de facto*, not *de jure*.¹² For attention, language, and understanding work together in constituting the worlds in which we dwell, so when attention is dispersed we end up with the divergent understandings that characterize public life today. Fragmentation of the

media in particular entails political conflict as different views of reality are promulgated. In this case we are subject to manipulation that can only be avoided by efforts of active attention and the associated ontological bonding that enables us to take hold of our movement together.

I turn now to a review of works that are related to the general approach that is taken in this book, followed by a review of more traditional approaches to attention that support the claim that attention is how the self is made manifest in the course of engagement in the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The work that corresponds most closely to the approach put forward here is Ganeri's (2017) *Attention, Not Self*. In this text Ganeri draws on the Indian Buddhist tradition, largely focusing on the work of Buddhaghosa, a monk who lived in Sri Lanka in the fifth century CE. At the same time, he is in conversation with a wide range of other literatures, such as phenomenology, cognitive science, enactivism, and philosophy of mind. He thus aspires to a cross-cultural philosophy that draws on theories from a variety of milieus to incorporate more of the perspectives that make up the human condition.

Ganeri puts attention at the center of human activity and argues that when it is given priority in this manner there is a resulting reorientation in the philosophical analysis of mind: "[Attention] has a central role in explaining the structure of the phenomenal and of cognitive access, the concept of the intentionality or directedness of the mental, the unity of consciousness and the epistemology of perception" (2017, 1). When applied specifically to the treatment of attention in the present book, I argue for a reorientation of the notions of activity and passivity and the associated notion of control that is so important in political thought. In particular, the notion of top-down attention as being under the control of the subject will be brought into question. In addition, as discussed above, the primacy of the physical comes into question when attention is recognized as the center of worldly engagement rather than being restricted to an inner realm.

Most important is the intimate relation that Ganeri puts forward between attention and the self. He argues that many of the functions that are typically associated with selfhood come about by way of attention. For instance, Ganeri sees attention as "the ongoing structuring of human experience and action" (2017, 12). The self is understood as a complex of interacting parts whose operation is centered at the center of attention (19); otherwise he sees no underlying entity that serves as its basis. He rather posits an empirical, functioning self that consists of those aspects that have been made more central in the course of attending (331). It is not "a mere collection," but is rather

“those specific elements which attention centralized.”¹³ I argue in chapter 6 that such a role for attention is essential for any conception of a “minimal self,” as in the formulation that Zahavi (e.g., 2019a) has put forward.

The implications are crucial for how selfhood is understood, for while it is ordinarily conceived in terms of structures of consciousness, when attention is understood to be the basis for its manifestation the implication is that any such structures depend on the deployment of attention itself. On this view, the consideration of questions of such as freedom, autonomy, and intersubjective bonds must take account of attention. Thus the deployment of attention bears on questions regarding both the nature of the individual and the intersubjective relations which are crucial for political thought.

Jennings puts forward a theory of attention where the self (specifically, top-down attention) is responsible for controlling or directing it. She argues that this corresponds to the everyday notion of attention (2020, 34) and that it should be understood as such. Although Jennings sees attention as central for perception, she argues that is not the case for consciousness and action, so there is an unusual conception of the self at work here. Jennings also seeks to incorporate our contribution to the production of meaning in her theoretical edifice, but there is little flesh that is put on a self that is posited to unify experience and produce significance, other than being a higher order phenomenon of the brain. In what follows I review Jennings’s work as an example that embodies the sort of metaphysics and hence conception of attention that I contest. Jennings’s approach has been inspired in part by Husserl’s conception of attention as being directed by a transcendental ego, which I also consider in part II.

Ben Berger’s (2011) *Attention Deficit Democracy* argues that attention (and the energy and action that follow) is essential for the effective functioning of democratic systems, and he critiques Arendt’s argument for the intrinsic value of political engagement as idealistic and inconsistent, preferring Alexis de Tocqueville’s instrumental approach. I respond to this critique in chapter 8, noting in particular that it is important to recognize that the public space is itself grounded in mutual attention to one another.

Other Literature

I now turn to works in the cognitive science literature that touch on various features that correspond with my conception of attention as how the self shows itself, where the latter is understood to be the basis for human agency and thus the control, direction, and organization of the human being. Although to my knowledge this conception of attention has not appeared in cognitive science or philosophy of mind, there are many approaches that are consistent with aspects of it. I consider those that focus on the relation

between attention and (1) aspects of the self, (2) human presence, and (3) the integration of the human being. While I develop metaphysical assumptions that vary from those that are typically deployed in such studies, this congruence shows that aspects of the underlying matter come to the fore regardless of the background assumptions that are employed.¹⁴

Attention and the Self

Many themes associated with the notion of selfhood are related to attention in the literature. For instance, it is difficult to conceive of a self without emotion, for emotion speaks to what matters to us as human beings. The relation between emotion and attention has been of considerable interest (e.g., Eysenck 1982, Barrett et al., 2007), and emotion is particularly important in enactivist thought. The relation between the self and memory is also essential for any reasonable notion of self, and the relation between attention and memory is studied extensively (e.g., Pashler 1998, Cowan 2008). The mark of attention is the enhanced processing and memory that occurs with its presence, which we see in spotlight theories where entities at the center of attention appear more clearly and vividly.¹⁵ Enhanced processing (e.g., Wright and Ward 2008) means that more resources are brought to bear in relation to any entities that present themselves. This is how the self is made manifest in a given situation.

Attention is associated with action in Wu's (2014) work, which argues that it enables a solution to the "many-many" problem of matching perceptual inputs with behavioral outputs. Related to this is the problem of control, which is typically handled in the literature by way of the distinction between top-down (endogenous) and bottom-up (exogenous) attention, where the former is voluntary control of attention while the latter is control by forces external to the agent. I argue, however, that both of these modes of attention are typically passive, rather than being under the control of the subject, and that only active attention represents true "control" where (paradoxically) the self is made manifest in the very act itself.

Posner and Petersen's (1990) attention system theory posits alerting, orienting, and executive control as three essential networks in the brain that form the attention system. Under my metaphysical assumptions and conception of attention, alerting corresponds to ontological effort, orienting to one's presence as oriented to the entities with which one relates, and executive control to the integration that can come about by way of ontological effort. I argue that executive control as presented in the literature is not first-person control but rather proceeds at the sub-personal level, for the movement of attention usually proceeds unawares and is therefore not under the control of the

subject. Self-control and freedom are possible only when one stays with the movement of attention itself.

Effort and will are also essential dimensions of any notion of selfhood, and they have also been associated with attention. Kahneman's (1973) *Attention and Effort* finds no difference between human effort and attention, and James ([1890] 1983) sees attention as the essence of volition. Thus we see that many of the essential concepts associated with the self are also present in the literature on attention. My proposal, however, is to relate attention and the self in a new manner, as I argue that attention is how the self is made manifest in the course of worldly activity, how it comes into presence.¹⁶

Attention as Human Presence

Many theorists today seek to avoid a notion of self that is a mere part of the human being, invoking the notion of homunculus to point to the incongruity of a self within a self that remains as mysterious as ever. Jennings seeks to avoid this difficulty, although I argue that she is not successful in this regard. Ganeri argues that attention fulfills many of the functions ordinarily imputed to a self, as noted above. The approach here is to conceive of attention as human presence, as *my* presence, how and where the self is made manifest, with some aspects more prominent than others, depending on the circumstances.

In this regard I go beyond the notion of selection that is central for the treatment of attention in the cognitive science literature. It is conceived there as the filtering of stimuli that present themselves to the senses, but this requires my presence, for I must be there for the selected object to appear to me. We participate in how things show themselves in a way that is profoundly different from the mere selection of some features over others in what is assumed to be a physical environment that is mind independent. Rather than being information processors, as presumed in the notion of selection, the placement of attention in the lived body-environment has significant implications for how entities are made manifest, as I show in chapter 1.

Although attention is typically not thought in terms of presence in the technical psychology literature, we do see the relation between the subject and presence put forward in the phenomenology literature and between attention and presence in the mindfulness literature.¹⁷ We see the latter relation, for instance, in the work of Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch, where mindfulness is equated with attentive presence (2003, 16). In the practice of becoming aware, they discuss the cultivation of a quality of presence by way of mindfulness and say that the effort is to pay attention to the process of manifestation of the entities that arise and subside, not their contents (33). This is crucial for understanding the sense in which presence is meant in the conception of

attention that I put forward here. The idea is that all experience in which we participate, in which we are present in a first-person sense (not in the sense of being physically present), occurs in what Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch refer to as the “attentive space,” and what Ganeri refers to as the window of attention. This is the site where we are made manifest in relation to all that presents itself to us by way of a variety of possible modes of engagement, which includes our fellows in political discourse. The effort Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch aspire to is to stay with that process without being absorbed in the content that arises, which can occur only by way of acute and sustained attentiveness. This is how to become aware of the movement of attention in which we are always already engaged but so immersed in its contents that we miss the very process of manifestation itself. We can also see it in the work of Brown and Ryan (2003), who consider the benefits of “being present,” and in Parker and colleagues (2015), who discuss the science of presence.

The relation between the subject and presence is also prominent in the phenomenology literature, as in Merleau-Ponty, who refers to “the subject’s vital area: that opening upon the world which has the effect of making objects at present out of reach . . . exist for him as touchable things. . . .” ([1945] 2002, 135):

The question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them; *how the presence to myself which establishes my own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time derepresentation and throws me outside myself.* (423)

Merleau-Ponty is laying out what can be understood as a relation of identity and difference, in which we come into relation to other entities by way of extending ourselves to them. We still relate to them as other, but at the same time, that extended presence enables a common space for mutual manifestation. We shall see more from Merleau-Ponty in what follows, in particular with respect to the notion of attention as extended presence (chapter 1).¹⁸

Attention and Integration

Several themes of unification and integration appear in the attention literature. For instance, Treisman’s (1988) feature-integration theory finds that attention enables the accurate combination of features of objects. While this occurs on the sub-personal level, Mole’s (2011) theory of cognitive unison defines attention as a state where all relevant cognitive resources are deployed for the task at hand. I argue below, however, that this is better characterized as a state of full attention, for attention is still deployed when one is not fully engaged or when one is not fully present, when the mind tends to wander. For

in this case there is still an orientation toward a central focus of engagement at any moment, be it daydreaming or worrying, that may be later recalled as what one was doing at the time. Mole's characterization, which focuses on human beings as cognizers, also misses the full breadth of human engagement, including the affective and somatic dimensions, as discussed above and in what follows.

There are also references in the literature to the role of attention in organizing consciousness (e.g., Watzl 2017), where some objects and activities are more centrally located, whereas others are on the periphery.¹⁹ In this regard there are considerable commonalities with Husserl, whose work will be discussed in parts I and II.²⁰ Self-organization is also a key concept in enactivist thought, which features in Ellis's (2005) theory of attention.

Other literature points to attention as a holistic phenomenon. Allport (2011) sees attention as a state or relation that emerges from the action of the whole organism. While it is typically conceived in terms of control or processing constraints, Allport argues that any such observable processes are themselves the manifestation of attention as a whole-organism state. This is similar to my position that various dimensions of the human being are made more prominent than others in the course of engaged activity. I consider this further in chapter 2 when discussing Fuch's (2018) *Ecology of the Brain*, which offers a similar view on the relation between brain, body, and environment.²¹

A final holistic dimension lies in the possibility of gathering ourselves by way of sustained attentiveness, or mindfulness (e.g., Brown, Creswell, and Ryan 2016). This I claim is the highest form of self-organization to which we can aspire. We can be more or less gathered, organized, or harmonized in relation to others, which shows itself in our personal, professional, and political lives. See also Kuravsky (2022) on the role of attentiveness in Heidegger.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The book consists of three parts of three chapters each. Part I critiques the metaphysics that are typically assumed in the study of attention and puts forward an alternative that is based on enactivist and phenomenological thought. In chapter 1, I show that the center of attention is an extended presence that goes beyond the bounds of the neural as typically posited in physicalist ontologies. Rather than being ensconced in a private realm, that presence is the basis for our relation to all things, including our fellow humans.

Chapter 2 lays out the hermeneutical circle of attention, language, and understanding that forms the framework for the movement of attention, which, as my presence in the world, is the condition for experience and action. These three dimensions are each essential for life experience, and each

is holistic in themselves. In their conjunction they interact seamlessly in producing the circle as a whole, which can itself be more or less integrated and open depending on the state of attention. Of particular importance is the joint attention that can open a space in which we enter into communion with one another, enabling the formation of the shared understanding that is the basis for language. Charles Taylor's notion of hermeneutical truth is also discussed, which is important for the political (see chapter 8).

Chapter 3 argues that the predominant view that assumes the primacy of the physical cannot accommodate the phenomenon of attention. I show that attention is neither mental nor physical, so it transcends any such dichotomy. I rather show that a relational ontology can accommodate it, for attention plays an essential role in our relations with all things. This will be the basis for the claim in chapter 9 that attention is how we participate in the manifestation and relation of all that is, which Heidegger refers to as being.

Part II considers the relation between attention and the self. Chapter 4 puts forward the central claim of attention as human presence, how the self is made manifest in relation to manifesting entities in the course of worldly engagement. The self is made manifest as bodily modes of engagement are brought to the foreground, at the center of attention, to meet worldly demands. They are oriented to the center as called for in the present circumstances, directed to the thematic object that is the organizing focus for the activity.

Chapter 5 considers the relation between phenomenological reflection, introspection, and mindfulness. It finds that attention is essential for all three, which has implications for how they are conceived. Chapter 6 considers Zahavi's notion of the minimal self and argues that attention is essential for any such conception. Moreover, its movement is spatiotemporal in that it is always placed in the lived body-environment, meaning that attention is our unfolding and potentially deepening presence and openness. This spatiotemporal movement, with its inherent possibilities, is how the self is made manifest as engaged in worldly activity.

Part III considers the relation between attention and the political. Chapter 7 looks at the relation between self and community as put forward by Zahavi, who sees joint attention as a supplement to the minimal self which enables communal relations. I argue, however, that the conjunction of attention and language is the basis for the constitution of self, community, and world. I also argue that relying solely on face-to-face interaction for communal bonding is insufficient. Active attention is necessary for ontological bonding that can produce stable and responsive institutions for the promotion of the common good in the long term.

Chapter 8 argues for the intrinsic value of mindfulness and mindful political engagement, where the latter enables the community to engage the whole human being in articulating and achieving hermeneutical visions of the

common good. It recommends the widespread engagement of mindful citizen councils for this purpose. Chapter 9 turns to Heidegger's corpus in support of many of the claims that are put forward in the book.²² It argues that we belong in this cosmos because we are related to all that is by way of attention, and when being is itself made manifest it appears in more appropriate ways in which we can go about living together in the world.

The ultimate question considered herein is the role and potential of attention in political affairs. Given the challenges we face on a planetary scale, how are we to act in unison to promote the common good? My claim is that attention is our center as we engage the world; it is our worldly presence. As the site of human action, it is how we ourselves are made manifest, as gathered or dispersed. We can be more integrated, more harmoniously gathered, both as individuals and as members of collectives, by engaging in the practice of active attention. This means that attention offers the possibility of acting in unison, which may enable more effective approaches to the dangers that we face as a human race.

About the Author

Lawrence Berger began writing on the philosophy of attention in 1982, and his first article was published in 1989 (“Economics and Hermeneutics,” in *Economics and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press). After receiving a PhD in applied economics from the Wharton School in 1985, he was a business school professor at the University of Iowa from 1985 to 1989, then went back to Wharton as a professor from 1989 to 1994. He then worked as a professional economist for a number of years while continuing his philosophical work on attention, eventually receiving a PhD in philosophy at the New School in 2016. His March 2015 article in the *New York Times*, “Being There: Heidegger on Why Our Presence Matters,” was the most emailed article of the day on nyt.com and attracted more than five hundred comments. The present book is a full-length version of the article with an application to politics. He currently teaches philosophy at Marist College.

THE POLITICS OF ATTENTION AND THE PROMISE OF MINDFULNESS

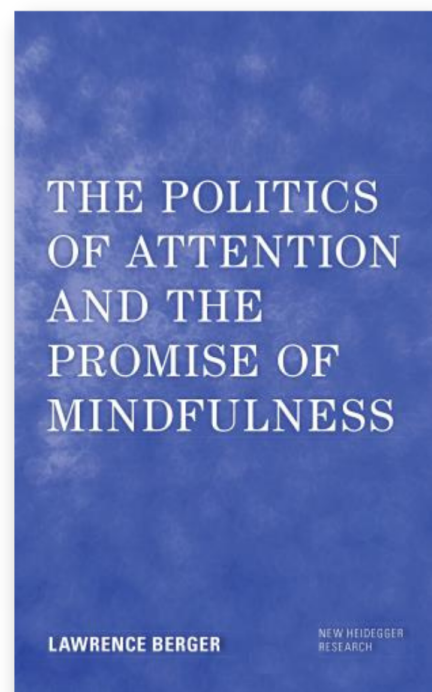
Lawrence Berger

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—**Jeff Malpas, Emeritus Distinguished Professor, University of Tasmania**

Drawing on the thought of Martin Heidegger, Lawrence Berger puts forward a new conception of attention as human presence, showing how its state determines the efficacy of public spaces in articulating and achieving visions of the common good. As politicians seek to amass power by capturing attention, citizens can engage in disciplines of attention such as mindfulness in producing a public power that is more appropriately oriented to the welfare of all. Berger argues that the practice of mindfulness can enable enhanced ontological bonds to form between individuals, which can be the basis for more stable and effective political realities. Such bonds are not given structures, but are rather contingent upon the state of attention, which comes about holistically by way of a hermeneutical circle of attention, language, and bodily understanding. This book is a valuable resource for scholars and students of philosophy of mind, political philosophy, phenomenology, and cognitive science.



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