The knowledge of attention

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Abstract

At stake in the present article is a discussion on the phenomenon of attention and three basic phenomenological descriptions of this phenomenon, represented by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Ortega y Gasset. It argues for the necessity of developing a phenomenological approach on the phenomenon. From the phenomenological position, attention is not primarily a focus on something, but a perspective from turning points, where the in-between of relationships can be experienced. In this sense, attention shows itself as alertness for the coming to be and the realm of transitions.

Key words: Phenomenology, attention, perception, transformation of mental field, time and space of attention, Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Ortega y Gasset

The knowledge of attention

I was walking from the train station to my office at Södertörn University College and wandering about how I should start this paper. Around me there were a lot of people. Suddenly, I observed the image of a pigeon and some words printed on the back of a girl's black jacket. My attention fastened more on the words than on the image of the pigeon. The words said: “She has a hundred different smiles, yet only one of them was to the ones that could see it”. The inscription, walking in front of me, was a literal description of what was happening to me at this very moment. Among a lot of people walking the same way as I was doing, among hundred several other things and events taking place at this moment, this one “thing” caught my attention. It was there in front of me and I could see it. I could see it, however, not only because I had eyes and the spatial-temporal conditions to see this inscription on the back of a black jacket, but also because this inscription caught my attention when I was looking for some words to begin my paper about the “knowledge of attention”. This episode seemed to me a very proper start to this paper because it introduces the topic of attention through a rich description of several elements that are at stake in this enigmatic phenomenon.

This episode gives us immediately an image of our contemporary life style, pointing to the social-cultural conditions of discussing the phenomenon of attention and the place of attention in our lives. We all live in hurry, not having much time and space for paying attention. Our attention shifts continuously from one thing to another in order to follow the laws of productive life, which are the laws of accelerating exchange and circulation of things and meanings. Beaudelaire’s descriptions of modern life as a culture of fragmentation, dispersion, and dissemination are even truer today than at his time. Hundreds of different things are smiling and screaming for us, but it is more and more rare that we can see one of them. Noticing everything at the same time, we do not know any longer, what attention means. New techniques of attention such as television and computer screens, Ipods and walkmans, MSNs and so-called interactive disposers are rather techniques of inattention and separation than of the contrary. Our attention is controlled and directed by techniques of medialization, which shows the mediating role of controlling techniques in all levels of our lives.1

Having to accept as natural the continuous shift of attention from one thing to another, from one product to another, from one event to another, from a meaning to another, contemporary life style...
confuses dispersion with dynamic attention and further attention with the capacity of noticing the noticeable. Focusing our perception on visual, acoustic and tactile screens, we loose the ability of paying attention to the “other” and thereby to the unnoticeable, silent and simple event of life itself. Political, ethical, ecological catastrophes are screaming to us, but we are more focused on distracting our boredom with a thousand occupations and on solving our quotidian narrow and egoic concerns. The generosity of life smiles to us in hundred different simple and silent events, but we prefer to pay attention to what is dictated by the global institutionalized virtues of economy, efficiency and efficacy. Politically engaged minds can focus on humanity and big causes and at the same time be extremely inattentive to the suffering near them. Humanist scholars might be concerned with political and ethical issues and even writing papers on “attention” and at the same time act in unethical, inattentive and indifferent ways toward their colleagues and their own private lives for the sake of the institution and of the career. Physicians, nurses, health and care specialists have to pay so much attention to every single chemical and physical element of the body that they become fully inattentive and insensible to the person they are taking care of and dealing with.

With these statements I want to point out that, what becomes very challenging in the contemporary experience of attention is its ambiguity. Too much attention, absorption, as well as too little attention, dispersion, are alienating. However, the only way of breaking down alienation seems to be a way of attention. My general claim in this paper is that we live nowadays in the urgency of attention. Political, ethical, social, religious, aesthetical, medical, philosophical challenges of today are screaming to us the urgency of attention. The urgency of attention is further the urgency of understanding, of knowing from out attention. A knowing from out attention means not only knowledge about attention but also a transformation of the sense of knowledge, insofar as this knowledge cannot be dissociated from experience. In this sense, the question about what is attention is grounded on the question about how attention is attended to. The how of experience grounds the what of definition and not the other way around. This is a very simplified way of describing the phenomenological attitude in order to assume the urgency of a phenomenology on attention.

The phenomenon of attention

What is attention and how does attention take place? Let us go back to the inscription I read on the back of the girl's black jacket. “She has a hundred different smiles, yet only one of them was to the ones that could see it”. This sentence seems to correspond quite well to our everyday experiences of what attention is and how it is. Attention, as we use to say, has to do with some qualities of what catches our attention; further it has somehow to do with the focusing and concentration on one among several different stimuli; last but not least, it has to do with some kind of transition from a state of dispersion to a state of focus. This everyday awareness on the phenomenon of attention even corresponds to cognitive-scientific approaches to the phenomenon. According to these approaches, attention is a reflex process by which the organism is able to organize its ability of responding to the environment, adapting itself to it, protecting itself from it, interacting with it. In this sense, Darwin placed attention as the most basic factor for survival of species. Attention is therefore assumed as a capacity that not only we need to have but that we even have to develop, stimulate and exercise in order to survive, to avoid problems, failures, and to reach goals. When a baby begins to walk and spring, beginning thereby to live by its own, the protecting gesture of the adult immediately says to the child “attention”, förstichtig, vorsichtig. Saying attention, we say: look toward and ahead, anticipate what may occur, and protect yourself.

This everyday use of the word “attention” defines attention as the capacity of focusing on something. This focusing is generally understood as a transition from an indeterminate dispersion to a determinate concentration. This elementary sense of attention connects attention to what we call abstraction, that is, the ability of drawing something out from an undifferentiated multitude or context in order to focus on this thing as such, as itself. Attention is assumed in both the so-called naïve awareness and the scientific view as the interplay of a coming to us of something and our capacity of turning us to something. Attention is, therefore, the most basic interactive factor between living beings and the environing world, being active not only in perceptual acts but even in different levels of cognitive and intellectual acts.

The history of attention

There is a long history of philosophical views on attention, which try to explain this interplay of a coming to us of things and our turning ourselves to things. Ancient philosophy, both Greek and Latin thinkers, underlined the phenomenon of attention as this turning to things in the attempt to correspond to their “smiles” and screams to us. This privilege is already present in the Greek and Latin words for
attention. In Greek, attention is announced with the expression prosechein, (prosechein for noun)\(^2\) which means literally holding awareness in direction to. In Latin, attentio, means tending to something, holding a tension with something. In the vocabulary of Augustinus, to whom we owe deep analysis of this phenomenon, attention is essentially connected with intention and distension, a vocabulary centred on the experience of tending to and tension. Attention is understood as an act, a disposition, an ability and capacity of living beings that not only becomes the most developed in human living beings but also defines human consciousness. Human consciousness is attentive consciousness, is awareness, insofar as it is a consciousness or awareness of something, a relational structure.

Modern philosophers will share two main positions regarding the phenomenon of attention: the empirical and the intellectualistic position.\(^3\) In the first position, attention is determined by operations of various automatic or unconscious processes. In the second position, attention is envisaged as decisive, voluntary activity of the subject. The most important distinction between ancient philosophical concerns about attention and moderns is that for modern thinkers attention is either due to the passive capacity of being caught by remarkable events or to the voluntary activity of paying and directing attention to something. This either or supposes a split between the subjective and the objective domain insofar as attention is now turned toward the inside of consciousness, to the “I”. Modern attention is introspective, attention, drawing things to the eye. For ancient philosophers, attention was always attention towards the being in the world, it was prospective or cosmic attention, a drawing the eye to the world. The world was still the splendour of a donation, whereas for our modern souls, the world is nothing but our own construction. For modern minds, the world is rather the image of our own attention.

In modern discussions, attention is viewed either as the passive or as the active aspect of consciousness. Consciousness can be drawn to and caught by things outside and it can direct itself towards things outside. Assuming the dichotomy between the interiority or immanence of consciousness and the exteriority or transcendence of the world, modern philosophical positions struggle with the primacy of the active or the passive side of consciousness. The focus and intriguing aspect of attention turns to be the selective event that attention seems to confirm. Why among hundreds of different inscriptions on hundreds of other black jackets this one caught my attention? Why an image on the cloth of someone and not the trees, the sky, the trash, the sorrow and the joy of someone else caught my attention even if I am somehow aware of all those things when I focused on the inscription? Several theories of attention have underlined the decisive factor of the structure of interest, desire, emotional aspects, striving and so on. In my own example, I have to recognize that my attention responded to my own focus—I was looking for the words to start my paper on attention. This would prove that we can only pay attention on what falls into our own interest, motivations, wills, desires fields.

**A phenomenology of attention**

Phenomenology is understood historically as the philosophical movement grounded by Edmund Husserl. Husserl’s phenomenology is not only a phenomenology of attention but is in its own foundations an account on the phenomenon of attention. For Husserl, attention is not a form of introspection, is not attention to the acts of the mind when meeting an external reality. Accordingly to Husserl, the former modern philosophical and psychological-scientific accounts on attention are grounded upon the “myth of given data”, assuming “things” as external realities upon which consciousness can throw meanings from out its will, interest and desires. Husserl argues that the important contributions made by empirical and experimental psychology are not enough to give a real account on this phenomenon because they are based on this myth.\(^4\)

Furthermore, the attentive mind does not notice and register what exists “outside”, it discovers itself in the middle of a world of experience. In the middle of a world of experience, attention discovers consciousness as intentionality, that is, in Husserl’s terminology, as a turning to meanings and not to “things”. This implies a destruction of the certitude concerning the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective. Both the supposed independent spheres of consciousness (interiority) and things (exteriority) shall be reinserted in the world, here understood as a nexus of meanings. Meanings are though, for Husserl, worlds of experiences. Husserl “puts in brackets”, “interrupts”, the naive belief in the reality of “things in themselves”, that is, as existing as pure meaningless data and the belief on the existence of consciousness independently of the world. Indeed, where consciousness is to be placed in order to observe objectively the world.

Consciousness is a paradoxical structure. Only from a world, consciousness can claim for a neutral and wordless place to observe the world. The claim for an objective consciousness of things around us, for a view that is able to see things as they are in themselves, independent from the world of experience, is naïf because it does not see that “things in
themselves” is already a meaning and as such expression of a way of experiencing the world. In other words, the claim for objectivity expresses a worldview, which has in advance interpreted what things are from a certain interest. The phenomenological dictum “zu den Sachen selbst”, to things themselves, means turning “to things in their way of given themselves to a consciousness”. It means that things “are” not, but things give themselves to, things are what appear and not what exist. This means further that consciousness is not a thing but a turning to things, a reception and openness for the appearing of things.

Donation, appearing of things and consciousness openness is to be understood as meaning constitution, and meaning as textures or worlds of experience. Things present themselves in different meanings. Things can be perceived, can be remembered, and can be imagined. The perceived tree, the remembered tree, the imagined tree are and are not the same tree. Their difference however does not lie in the fact that only the perceived tree exists in reality whereas the remembered and the imagined tree lack reality. They present different realities. They are different modi of presenting the world of experience of what we call a tree. The remembered tree, the imagined tree is real and exists qua memory, qua imagination. The fact that it is being remembered and is being imagined is as real as the fact that I perceive a tree here and now. They have different realities insofar as they expose different textures of experience. The myth of the objective given data—the thing tree—lies in a very narrow understanding of reality. Reality is though more real than its objectivity. This narrow understanding is grounded in a very narrow understanding of experience and of perception.

That things exist as an external reality is something granted by perception. However, when we perceive something we perceive more and less than we actually perceive. We see the tree but we cannot see the whole tree. Several sides and qualities that cannot be seen in the present act of perception are seen together with what we actually see. We see sides, parts, shadowed and incomplete structures. We do not see everything, we see more than we can see, and further, we never see “the tree”. We see a plum tree in a garden beginning to green anew in the first warmth of the spring, and so on. We perceive the horizon from which a tree can be a tree. All those not perceptible sides are being perceived in the here and now perceived thing. We perceive both the seen and the unseen.

Perception is the co-incidence of the unseen and the seen. Our perception is not a switch from a muddle of undetermined and mixed things to a focused individualized thing. It is the tensioned coincidence of the seen and the unseen, of the background and its focus. This tensioned coincidence is the holding on to the texture of an experience. That is why for Husserl the task of phenomenology is to describe those different modi of donation, which are modi of holding on to the tension between things and their own limits. A thing is not a firm point outside conscience, but that which holds on through a spectrum of meanings oscillating between its extreme opposite and its uttermost intensity. This is what Husserl called a phenomenon. To describe things as they appear to a consciousness, to describe phenomena in this phenomenological sense, is to describe the holding on a subtle variation of meanings that reflect the whole world of experience. Phenomenology is a method of description; it aims to show how things are and not merely to define what they are. Therefore, it is already in its own attitude a phenomenology of attention to the how of things, to the lifeworld of experience.

In Husserl's phenomenology, attention is not only a constant implicit topic but also even an explicit one (Husserl, 1969, 1975, 1977, 1980, 2001, 2005). Not only phenomenology as such is already an attention to attention but also Husserl already in his early works developed a phenomenology of attention. In his phenomenological analysis of attention, Husserl aims to describe how attention attends. To summarize Husserl's phenomenological standpoint we could say that attention is the perspective from turning points. How to win this perspective? It can be won through a tensional analysis that stretches attention to is uttermost limits and intensity. A description of attention shall attend the phenomenon, shall hold on to the different textures of this experience.

Husserl's phenomenological descriptions of the phenomenon of attention are centred in different connotations of the German word for attention, Aufmerksamkeit, built from the root, merk, merken, in English mark, which means etymologically limit, frontier, territory. Attention is a demarcation act, an act of de-limitation. The first important remark Husserl makes is that attention is not limited to what we call perception. Attention is both perceptual and conceptual. One implicit consequence of this distinction that Husserl does not develop himself is to place attention in the very turning point between perceptual and conceptual acts. Another principal distinction is the one between noticing, remarking, and being attentive, bemerken and aufmerken. We cannot be attentive to something if we have not noticed it. However, it is not enough to notice or remark a thing in order to become attentive to it and further to attend it. We notice the presence of things but we do not necessarily pay attention to them. In order to describe this tension it is further important
to distinguish among what is noticed, noticeable, notable, unnoticed, unnoticeable, over- and under-looked in a vision.

The traditional views on attention struggle with the primacy of the coming to us of something and the turning of ourselves to things. The first one corresponds to the empirical view. The empirical view defines attention from out the surprising character of things. Attention is due to a having being surprised by something. Surprise is empirically understood as what shocks us, what exceeds and does not correspond to our expectations, habits, and routines. The surprising thing has the character of the sudden, being what comes too fast or to which we were not yet prepared. It also has the character of exaggeration, being too strong, too hard. The lightning in the dark night in Husserl’s example, the explosion of a bomb, they are noticed because they are too noticeable. But even being what impossibly can not be noticed, unless under pathological and sick conditions, it is possible that one does not pay attention to it, that bomb explosions become a terrible but nonetheless unsurprising routine. Infrasounds are neither noticeable nor noticed although they can influence and damage us at very strong levels. They torture without being perceived as sounds. Almost unnoticeable movements of a sleeping child can wake up the mother who even while sleeping is herself fully attentive. We can cross a city which we are visiting for the first time and do not pay attention to notable things and monuments. In such examples, we can easily see the spectrum of distinctions between ‘to notice’ or ‘to remark’ and ‘to be attentive’. It says further that the contrary to attention is inattention rather than dispersion.

Inattention, however, is not lack of attention but for the most part over- and under-looking in a vision, using here ‘view’ as a metaphor for awareness in general. In every attentive view to one thing, we do not suppress the several surrounding things and streams of thoughts but the horizon and surrounding context are over- and under-looked. This tells us perhaps more about the impossibility of being completely absorbed in one thing. The nearest we can come to an entire state of attention is in states of ecstasy, trances, meditation.

The same can be said about lack of attention. Neuro-biological studies concerning the so-called ADD or ADHD syndrome, syndrome of attention deficit disorder, have to acknowledge the impossibility of a total state of attention deficit when observing that even the most disturbed patients are able to sit down in front of the television and play video games hours a day. The ADD syndrome describes much better our global capitalist societies and its economy, politics and aesthetics of attention.

The extreme opposite syndrome would be the so-called autistic behaviours, which exhibit the inability to switch from one thing or event to another. However, even extreme autistic persons are not able to exist in an entire absorption or attention to one single stimulation. Experimental psychology should bring together those two syndromes and study them as extreme symptoms of one phenomenon, namely, attention. Both pathologies of extreme dispersion or extreme attention, ADHD and autism, confirm that attention and dispersion reach inside themselves the threshold at which they break down and switch to the contrary.

The nuanced phenomenological descriptions of attention made by Husserl show that attention is not the shift from dispersion to focus, from indeterminacy to determination, from a muddle of impressions to an individualized definition, but the simultaneous incidence, the co-incidence of over-looking, under-looking, viewing together, in viewing something. We point out a bird in the sky. We say, look at the bird. This pointing-out-saying—“look at the bird there”—says at the same time the bird is this and not the sky, and not the other birds, and not the earth, and not the trees. However, saying the bird is and is not everything else, the horizon of everything else is co-present in the detaching the bird from everything else. It then appears that perception and knowledge, awareness and consciousness, is the co-incidental simultaneity of implicated and explained meanings, of over and underlying meanings, of over- and under-looked contours, horizons, unnoticed, notable, and unnoticeable things and structures. Rather than a shifting from the context to a thing, attention is, according to Husserl, a rhythm of simultaneous incidence, a rhythm of the co- incidence of “Spannung und Lösung”, of contention and distension.4 Attention is neither in one nor in the other, but it is the holding on the rhythmical tension between both. Attention is for Husserl a holding on the turning point from contention to distension.

This rhythmical sense of attention as holding on to turning points was developed by other later phenomenologists.7 An important development of this understanding was made by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In his masterwork Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty defines attention as a transformative act. Holding on to turning points, attention means to Merleau-Ponty a creative transformation of the mental field, “une transformation du champ mental” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 37). Differently to a mere noticing of something whether due to the interest of the subject or to the surprising character of the object, attention is understood by Merleau-Ponty as a new way for consciousness to become
present to objects, “une nouvelle manière pour la conscience d’être présente à des objects” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) and not as a mere intensity of awareness. Attention is a transformation in the way of being aware and conscious about something. In attention, consciousness can become attentive and attend to being-in-the-world, to the presence of the world and not merely to the world present at hand. In this sense, attention is a rediscovery of things. Things are not any longer what exist, but what appears as if it were the first time a subject becomes aware of things.

What attention discovers is this attitude of an “as if it were the first time”. It is a transformation of the meaning of surprising. Surprise is not any longer understood as the unexpected coming to us of something never seen before. It is rather the creative transformation in which the already perceived and known can be perceived and known in a new light, in the light of the first time, in the light of an opening. Attention means therefore the instant of transformation in which the already perceived and something never seen before. It is rather the creative meaning of surprising. Surprise is not any longer if it were the first time”. It is a transformation of the same world under a new light co-incide.

In a very inspiring book about the art of hunting,11 the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, who is also deeply indebted to phenomenology, develops a kind of phenomenology of the hunting attention. Contrary to the natural or common understanding of attention as a concentration and fixed remark or noticing of determined things, the hunting attention is the one of dis-learning, of the active and hard putting aside the tendency to fix observation on determined things, events and thoughts. In what we should call the “naïve attitude”, which is the sum of our surviving attitudes in our environment and their correlated scientific explanations, the fixing observation of and on something seems to be an extraction and abstraction out of one entity from its context and meaning horizon. In this abstractive extraction, a thing in the world becomes an object of attention.

What does the hunter do? The hunter is the one who has to learn to wait. Hunting attention is waiting attention. The hunter is further the one who has to learn to prepare herself or himself to receive and not firstly to perceive or to conceive the coming to herself/himself of the unexpected. The hunter has to learn to expect the unexpected, to recall a well-known fragment of Heraclites. Both waiting and preparation are learning acts because they are what always have to be learnt anew, at every stage of the hunt. Here, attention is not related to something already there but not yet perceived. Nor is attention a skill in reacting fast to surprising things or actions. For the hunter, attention is related to the open indeterminacy of a coming to be. If the hunter would fix her/his attention on a point or direction and concentrate on what s/he presumes in advance what will happen, s/he would prove how bad hunter s/he is.

The hunting attention is in fact the ability of getting rid of presumptions, the ability of not becoming fixated in points, directions, and rather of being attentive to the indeterminacy of the open horizon out from where something might or not appear. The hunter has to learn to dis-learn habits of attention. The hunter is the one who can only become attentive when dis-attending uses and internalizes techniques of attention. Ortega y Gasset called this hunting attention, “universal attention” and further “alertness”12. Alertness is attention to the openness from which things appear as presences of the world, as the lifeworld of experience in the experience of the world as life, and not merely as “objects” for attention. Attention to openness is not attention to a larger point or things called “openness”. It is a putting aside the perspective of points, a putting aside fixing perspectives on “things”. It is a strange operation, because openness can only catch our attention when we dis-regard the attention to pointed things. It is when and while attention to

A holding on turning points

One of the central aspects of Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological analysis of attention lies in the description of attention as a holding on to turning points, and thereby in focusing on the temporality aspect of attention. Attention is the temporality of a meanwhile. Actually, this is something that ancient Greek philosophers and Plato in particular have already grasped when the breaking through of the philosophical attitude was compared to the act of hunting.10
fixed points break down that attention to openness breaks through. Hunting attention, alertness is therefore understood as the co- incidental tension between a breaking down and a breaking through of perspectives.

Accordingly, to Ortega y Gasset, the most eloquent contrast to the philosophical transformative hunting attention is the looking at things that characterizes the tourist. The tourist seems quite close to the hunter because s/he is walking around in open places, “chasing” souvenirs, things, experiences and impressions to bring home. However, the tourist can only see, “paying” attention to things by means of fragmentation and multiplication of fixed points, hurrying in very short spans of time from one point to another, following a logic of non sequitur, in searching and willing to own everything. Contrary to the tourist who has never time to wait, the hunting attention is a waiting preparation toward a coming to be, to the possible in the necessary and to the necessity of the possible.

Conclusions

The three phenomenological approaches on attention here outlined in connection to Husserl’s, Merleau-Ponty’s and Ortega’s thoughts open up the possibility of understanding attention as the holding on to the rhythmical co-incidence of the unseen and the seen, of the one attended smile and the hundred other different un-attended smiles. Attention as holding on to the tension between contraries means fundamentally a stretched attending to, appearing as such in differential tension to what we usually call to remark, to notice, to select, to abstract and extract. As stretched attending to, attention is experienced as a creative transformation of attitude where consciousness rather than a more intensive awareness of things turns to the presence of the world’s event, dis-attending to the mere being present at hand of objects. The attentional perspective dislocates attention from the polarisation between a voluntary introspection of the mind and a passive being caught by the extroversion of things around us. It is on the contrary what enables the rare instant in which one becomes one with things and others, experiencing oneself as a being-with and no longer as a thing which exists together with other things.

Attention appears from the phenomenological standpoint as the breaking through of an awareness that comes from experience, if experience means a holding on to the being of the lifeworld of experience. It is the hunting alertness that enables one to hold on to the patient meanwhile also to the donation of the being-in-the-world. In the attentional attitude, a strange transformation takes place because attention becomes a dis-attention to techniques and habits of attention. In this strange transformation, it is no longer an “I” who see things but the eye appears as a prismatic gaze through which the life of the world and the world of life reflects upon things and others.

Out of a phenomenological attention to how attention attends, we should say that attention is not really attention to others than I or to how consciousness ‘reaches’ otherness. Attention is rather a becoming other of consciousness and things, when the conscious subject breaks down and an attentive heart breaks through.

We probably know and even can ‘see’ that the words inscribed on the girl’s jacket saying that “She has a hundred different smiles, yet only one of them was to the ones that could see it” express, as a matter of fact, a very common place in our hurried world. What we probably do not know at all is what we should do with knowledge from out attention. Probably not very much, but it is possible that this almost withdrawn knowledge from out attention can do something with us. It can compel us to discover that a knowledge about transformation coincides with a transformation of knowledge attitudes. This is however only possible through a transformation of attention. A knowledge about transformation co- coincides with a knowledge coming from self- transformation. In this self-transformative event, attention (Aufmerksamkeit) co-coincides with care (Achtsamkeit). To transform knowledge in order to attend to a knowledge on transformation, to allow the coincidence of attention and care are central aspects of the urgency attention. In order to understand this coincidence, it is important to distinguish care from merely taking account of or feeling formally responsible for. Taking account of, feeling responsible for, are formal aspects of care but not its own foundation. They are merely formal aspects because they are related to an underlying understanding of human being as a living thing encapsulate in itself which only by means of a will throws itself outwards in direction to others.

Coincidence of attention and care is only possible when this self-understanding breaks down from within experience, and thereby the self discovers itself as what is in itself outside itself, being in itself an in-between. Care for others can only coincide with attention when care means the experience of detaching oneself from solipsistic positions in order to discover oneself in a pre-positional openness to the event of the lifeworld in every finite relation. Heidegger defined human Dasein as Sorge (care) and this as an in-between. To discover oneself as an in-between and not simply as a self means the
possibility of making oneself present to its own acts. It is not enough to handle right. The urgency is more attentive and more careful: it is the urgency of making oneself presence to its own present.

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Notes
1. For the cultural, social, political and aesthetical implications of the question of attention in our technical culture, see Crary (1999).
2. Plato, Politeia 376 a9, Politikos 268 c 4–5.
3. See Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) discussion on these positions in regard to the problem of attention in the 3rd chapter.
4. The empirical and experimental psychology from 19th century such as developed by Herbart and Wundt made important contributions to the philosophical investigations on attention. William James investigations on attention showed the dynamic constitution of attention as something that not simply is caused by external stimuli, but what develops itself when awakened. His investigations pointed out the complex structure of attention where turning back, turning to, holding on, are movements of attention insofar as they are movements of desires, interests and motivations. James’ lessons on attention underlined the switching structure of attention, its movement of transition from what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought to one possessed object by the mind. “the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought”, James (1980).
5. Attention is a “percept”, we should say, recalling a term by William James.
6. Husserl, Hua 38, p. 107.
7. See the recent book by Bernhard Waldenfels Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit.
8. Merleau-Ponty, M. op. cit., “Le miracle de la conscience est de faire apparaître par l’attention des phénomènes qui rétablissent l’unité de l’objet dans une dimension nouvelle au moment où ils la brisent. Ainsi l’attention n’est ni une association d’images, ni le retour à soi d’une pensée déjà maîtresse de ses objets, mais la constitution active d’un object nouveau qui explicite et thématisé ce qui n’était offert jusque là qu’à titre d’horizon indéterminé”, p. 39.
9. Merleau-Ponty, M. “Il faut mettre la conscience en présence de la sa vie irréfléchie dans les choses et l’éveiller à sa propre histoire qu’elle oubliait, c’est là le vrai rôle de la réflexion philosophique et c’est ainsi qu’on arrive à une vraie théorie de l’attention”, p. 40.
10. Plato, Politeia 432b.
11. Ortega y Gasset, Sobre la Caza, los toros y el Toreo.
12. Op cit.

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