

On Attention

[Pseudo-Pseudo-Aristotle]

Attention is said in many ways, for a man attends equally when he makes another person the object of his solicitous concern (φροντίς¹), as when he concentrates his intellect upon an external object (προσοχή). An attentive lover is one who brings gifts to his beloved [*seinem Geliebten*] and sings his praises [*ihn lobt*].² Yet a spectacle may be said to hold our attention whether we love it or not, and whether it pleases us or not. There is a species of attention indeed that seems to rely upon a feeling of revulsion: the one commonly called “gawking” [*Gaffen*] or “gaping” [*Glotzen*], as when a man, setting out from the city and going beyond its walls, finds himself unable to resist the temptation to feast his eyes upon the rotting corpses of executed criminals.³ But the species of attention that is deserving of our attention --for it is in respect of this species that we may speak of an art of attention and of its excellence-- is the one that involves no particular fondness or revulsion toward its object, but only a mental focus that some call alertness [*Wachsamkeit*]. It is this sort of attention that may by turns grow heightened and flag, and that may be honed and rendered less susceptible to flagging as a result of a program of training not entirely unlike the one athletes undergo. So thorough was the training of the so-called “Attention Master of Abdera”⁴ that he was able to keep his eyes trained upon a stalk of fennel placed on a table for sixteen hours, without ever flinching, and, on other occasions, was able to set his eyes upon a tree for no more than an instant, and then to tell you how many branches it has, how many leaves on each of these, and other things of this nature. Yet such training by itself cannot be said to produce the true excellence of attention, as it is merely akin to the talent of the man who taught himself to toss a chick-pea through the eye of a needle at a great distance: thus a sort of ματαιοτεχνία⁵ that imitates art pointlessly, with no intrinsic quality of good or bad.⁶ The art of attention that has its own characteristic excellence is, we may further say, the one that is natural and present to all, even if it may be developed by some more than by others, according to circumstances and inclination. As parrots only begin to speak when

¹ The parenthetical Greek term is given by Jaeger. In what follows, our own supplementary translations are indicated in square brackets, while curved brackets always reflect what is in the original German text.

² The repetition of the masculine pronoun here, both for the lover and the beloved, can only be interpreted as implying a homosexual relationship. If Aristotle is the author of the text, this would be the only such example in the corpus. Pugliese (1989) suggests that this is the first of several hints throughout the text of a strongly Platonizing bent on the part of the author.

³ This is a reference to Book 4 of Plato's *Republic* (439e-440a), in which “Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioners' feet. He had an appetite to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned away. For a time he struggled with himself and covered his face, but, finally overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed toward the corpses, saying, 'Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight!'.”

⁴ No other known testimony of this character exists in ancient literature. None of the members of the so-called School of Abdera from the 5th century BCE, notably the atomists Democritus and Leucippus, make any mention of an art of attention, either as something they themselves practice or as something mastered by one of their contemporaries.

⁵ *Mataiotekhnia*: a useless art or skill. In Greek in Jaeger's manuscript.

⁶ This example is found in a nearly identical form in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (2.20, 3-7) of the 1st century CE, suggesting a composition date for the present text far later than the era in which Aristotle lived. It is also possible that the tale was told and retold over a period of several centuries, and that both Aristotle, if he is the author, and Quintilian, were sharing in the same bit of popular lore.

they are in the presence of speech --though whether theirs is itself true speech or only an imitation thereof is a question we shall not resolve here--, so do other <birds>⁷ only begin to attend properly speaking when surrounded by practitioners of the art of attention. In this art, that it be properly distinguished from the pointless toss of the chick-pea and other such distractions, the chick-pea must as it were come to share in the same nature as the needle it passes through. That is to say that in true attending, by which we mean attending as an art with its own proper excellence, there arises an identity, if only temporary, between the mind of the attender and the object attended upon. Now elsewhere we have argued that the activity of the sensible object and of the sensation is one and the same, though their essence is not the same.⁸ Thus the actual sight and the actual seeing are the same, though their essences are not the same, for it is possible that one who possesses sight does not see, and it is possible that what is visible is not always being seen. So much for sensation, which again has been treated elsewhere; our topic here is attention. Sensation may occur without alertness, as when in the background of our vision of a chariot moving along a highway, leaves rustle on trees, but we are alert only to the motion of the chariot. This is a form of blindness, in respect of the leaves, as they are before our eyes though we do not see them, but it is a blindness that may be instantly cured the moment we redirect our attention to them. There is however no blindness in attention, for to attend to an object is ever to know that one is attending to it. In attention, moreover, it may be said not only that the mind of the attender and the object attended upon share in the same activity, but that they are identical in respect of essence, again, even if only temporarily. Now there are two ways they may be identical in respect of essence: either in kind or in number. It is the former sort of identity that obtains between two horses, say, or two men, in respect of their horsehood or their humanity. Some, however, most notably those who are sometimes called "birds", argue in a Pythagoreanising vein that the identity is an identity in number, as, in attention, the mind of the attender migrates temporarily into the object attended upon. This, they say, is experienced in attention paid to works of figurative art, as when a viewer is so taken with the sight of a javelin thrower or a stampeding horse represented on a vase or a wall, that he takes himself to be that thrower or that horse. But such fleeting identification is only a figment and involves no sharing of essence, as when in dreams we imagine ourselves to fly or to take on the natures of other beings, generally as a result of the vapors rising to our heads in the early rumblings of a fever felt first only in sleep; and in any case it is not clear what the exercise of such attention has to do with birds, as these animals are known not for their alert concentration upon a single object, but for their darting glances and quick scans, setting their sights now on this bright object, now on that colorful one, never dallying long enough, or focusing sustainedly enough, to confuse their own essence with the bauble or morsel they notice pell-mell. Thus they are wrong who say that excellence in the art of attention consists in the identity in number between the attender and the thing attended upon, and who moreover see this excellence as avian in character. We assert rather that the excellence in question consists in this, that it is, as Diogenes of Z*** said of the fisherman who was surprised to pull up in his net an abyss-dwelling anglerfish <... >⁹

⁷ Jaeger appears to have begun to cross out the word *Vögel*, but the stroke is infirm, and passes through only the first two letters.

⁸ See *De Anima* 3.2, 425b27-426a2.

⁹ The manuscript breaks off here, in mid-sentence. There is no other mention in antiquity of a Diogenes from a town or region beginning with a 'Z', nor is it clear why Jaeger obscures the place-name with asterisks.