

Attention as an Instrument of Love by Maria Popova

Whatever fundamental reality might exist, we live out our lives in a subjective reality defined by what we agree to attend to. “An act of pure attention, if you are capable of it, will bring its own answer,” D.H. Lawrence wrote. But we live largely in the territory of the unanswerable because there is no pure attention — the aperture of our attention is constricted by myriad conditionings and focused by a brain honed on millions of years of evolutionary necessities, many of which we have long outgrown.

How the brain metes out attention and what that means for our intimacy with reality is what the philosophy-lensed British psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist takes up in his immense, in both senses of the word, book *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World* (public library) — an investigation of how “the very brain mechanisms which succeed in simplifying the world so as to subject it to our control militate against a true understanding of it,” and what a richer understanding of those mechanisms can do for living in closer and more felicitous communion with reality. At its heart is the recognition that “the whole is never the same as the sum of its ‘parts’” and that “there are in fact no ‘parts’ as such, but that they are an artefact of a certain way of looking at the world.”

Art by the Brothers Hilts from *A Velocity of Being: Letters to a Young Reader*.

Punctuating his ambitious 3,000-page effort to braid neuropsychology (the way our brains shape our impression of reality), epistemology (the way we come to know anything at all), and metaphysics (our yearning to wrest meaning from fundamental truth as we try to discern the nature of the universe) is an ongoing inquiry into our way of looking at the world — the lens of consciousness we call attention. He writes:

The world we know cannot be wholly mind-independent, and it cannot be wholly mind-dependent... What is required is an attentive response to something real and other than ourselves, of which we have only inklings at first, but which comes more and more into being through our response to it — if we are truly responsive to it. We nurture it into being; or not. In this it has something of the structure of love.

This property of reality is what Iris Murdoch had in view when she observed that “love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real,” and what the poet J.D. McClatchy captured in his insistence that “love is the quality of attention we pay to things.”

One of artist Margaret C. Cook's rare 1913 illustrations for *Leaves of Grass* — Walt Whitman's supreme serenade to the art of paying attention. (Available as a print.)

McGilchrist considers the way our attention constructs our reality and becomes the beating heart with which we love the world:

The whole illuminates the parts as much as the parts can illuminate the whole... The world we experience — which is the only one we can know — is affected by the kind of attention we pay to it.

Defining attention as “the manner in which our consciousness is disposed towards whatever else exists,” he writes:

The choice we make of how we dispose our consciousness is the ultimate creative act: it renders the world what it is. It is, therefore, a moral act: it has consequences.

A century-some after William James insisted that our experience is what we agree to attend to, and two generations after Simone Weil asserted that “attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity,” McGilchrist adds:

Attention changes the world. How you attend to it changes what it is you find there. What you find then governs the kind of attention you will think it appropriate to pay in the future. And so it is that the world you recognise (which will not be exactly the same as my world) is “firmed up” — and brought into being.

[...]

Attention is not just another “cognitive function”: it is... the disposition adopted by one's consciousness towards the world. Absent, present, detached, engaged, alienated, empathic, broad or narrow, sustained or piecemeal, it therefore has the power to alter whatever it meets. Since our consciousness plays some part in what comes into being, the play of attention can both create and destroy, but it never leaves its object unchanged. So how you attend to something — or don't attend to it — matters a very great deal.

In the vast remainder of *The Matter With Things*, McGilchrist goes on to explore how “the type, and extent, of attention we pay changes the nature of the world that we experience,” shaped largely by the difference between the way the brain's two hemispheres pay attention — “narrow-beam, highly focussed attention” in the left, “broad, sustained vigilance” in the right. Complement this tiny fragment of it with Mary Oliver on attention and love, then revisit cognitive scientist Alexandra Horowitz's wonderful field guide to eleven ways of paying attention to the everyday wonderland of life.