

Part Two (chapters 4-6): The Skills of Wisdom

You have now concluded the first part of this book. Congratulations! In the first part of this book (chapters 1-3) you have been introduced to the whole idea of philosophy as a love of wisdom. After the introduction in chapter one, you explored the whole idea of the examined life in chapter two. You considered how we live our lives, looking at how one aspect of our lives affects another, at various levels of depth. You also thought about what it means to examine that life, looking for the connections between beliefs, values, and life itself.

In chapter three you looked at the sources from which wisdom is gained. It is one thing to ask questions about life, to look for wisdom. It is another to know where to find help for the process. Here you explored your own personal experience, the wisdom of others, Nature, and the possibility of some Ultimate Source of wisdom. On the way, you have gained some facility in reading philosophical material.

Now you are ready to take the next step.

Often, when we think of people who are wise, we think of them as having developed certain “skills”: a kind of careful and non-judgmental attention to the way things are, an ability to ask questions when (and *how*) they are needed, a practice of not just “believing,” but actually “doing” the truth. If we are to become lovers of wisdom (and “livers” of wisdom), it behooves us to gain some introduction to the key skills of wisdom. Some skills of wisdom are quite general (“paying attention”). Others are very specific (the ability to sit still and notice a thought arising in one’s mind). This book arranges the skills of wisdom into three groups (in the next three chapters):

4. The Skills of Paying Attention

5. The Skills of Asking Questions

6. The Skills of Practicing

As usual, you will be doing some reading in philosophical material. This is to introduce you to the different ways that philosophy in East and West has come to look at these skills. But don't be overly consumed with the esoteric debates. The main point is that you begin *yourself* to learn to pay attention, to ask questions, and to practice life. Start to experiment with the Journal Assignments right away. Play with it, and see if you don't start to love wisdom a little more.

CHAPTER 4 PAYING ATTENTION

Chapter Outline:

1. Awareness
2. Attention
 - a. Ordinary Attention
 - b. Buddhist Attention
 - c. Scientific Attention

An Example from Francis Bacon
3. The Objects of Our Attention
 - a. Out-there Oriented Philosophies
 - b. In-here Oriented Philosophies

An Example from René Descartes
4. The Skill of Paying Attention

Chapter Objectives:

In this chapter you begin to work on your skills of wisdom, the tools you will use to examine your life and facilitate your love for wisdom. The first of these skills is the skill of paying attention. Consequently, you will get the most out of this chapter if you concentrate very hard on paying attention this week: to the text, to the exercises, and to yourself in everything you do. Do the journal exercises early this week. Make paying attention a game this week! Do something, and then when you are done, look back and reflect on the character of your attention. How does the character of your attention affect your daily life in this or that area?

In this chapter you will learn about “awareness” and “attention” and how they are

related. You will consider the process of attention in East and West, in particular looking at the “scientific” approach to paying attention offered by Francis Bacon. Then you will explore the various “objects of our attention,” those “out there” and those “in here,” in particular examining the way that René Descartes pays attention to his own thoughts. You will also get a chance to play with “paying attention” yourself through various journal assignments. After studying this chapter you should be able to:

- describe the basic structure of awareness and attention.
- name Francis Bacon’s four “Idols” and three steps of bringing attention to bear upon the nature of nature.
- summarize the common elements in wise attention.
- give examples of both “in-here” and “out there” attention.
- reconstruct Descartes’ basic procedure for systematic doubt through attention to what goes on within his mind.

My mother used to give me instructions about something I needed to remember while she was away. My eyes would be looking here and there--at the neat bird on the tree, down the block at my friends playing on their bicycles. I would be wiggling this way and that. My mind would be bouncing about here and there--planning war games, wondering about some far away thought. My mother could see my distraction. “Can you just be still and pay attention?” she would ask. I would try: stopping, looking at her, being with her, trying to hear what she said and take in the meaning so I would remember later. But it wasn’t easy. Paying attention came hard for me.

Wisdom comes from paying attention--from paying careful attention to the way things are. If philosophy is the love of wisdom--the art and science of learning to respond, with all of our resources to fruit of an evaluation of life--then perhaps one of the first skills of a philosopher is that of paying attention. It is in paying attention that we notice the way things are, that we see the details of life, that we catch glimpses of

thought, of life, and of the features that will inform our more general evaluation of life. In some basic, although perhaps incomplete, way, we simply see the way things are. I treat the skill of paying attention first also because it is so intimately connected with the sources of philosophy introduced in the previous chapter. At the onset of the philosophical life there is a season of getting acquainted with the sources of philosophy: for example, learning to read the writings of the Masters, which we covered in the previous chapter. But there is also the “getting acquainted” with our own thoughts, with our communities, and with the world itself. And basic to our getting acquainted with these is the skill of paying attention. Without paying attention, we would not notice our own thoughts and they would not become sources of wisdom for us. Without attention we would become simply clones of our culture, mimicking a life without seeing wisdom. Without attention we would act in the world without really ever being present to it. And so, in order for our sources to become sources of *wisdom*, we must learn the skill of paying attention.

[Now try Journal Assignment 4.1 -- A Beginning Experiment in Paying Attention]

Philosophers have long encouraged the development of the skill of paying attention. Again, as Socrates mentioned, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” The examined life begins by paying attention. Aristotle (4th century bce) began his foundational *Organon* (a treatment of the basic principles of logic and science) by simply observing the ways that words and thoughts are used. Shantideva, a Mahayana Buddhist poet (vii ce) writes, “if thought is distracted, we lie in the fangs of the passions.” Examination, simple observation, undistracted thought, paying attention--how can you reflect on life and respond to it if you do not *see* it?

Awareness

But just what does it mean to “pay attention”? To clarify this let us distinguish between two words: “awareness” and “attention.” Think of these two terms. Ask yourself, “What am I aware of right now?” “Where is my attention right now?” You may have given two different answers to each of these questions, for you can be (vaguely) aware of much more than you are paying attention to at any given moment. Yet the possibilities for your attention come from the horizons of your awareness.

I like to think of awareness as having a few variables.¹ First our awareness has a *range*. Our awareness can be “open,” as when we sit on a mountain-top and just take in everything around us. It can also be “restricted,” as when we are consumed in a good book, clueless to all that is going on around us. Awareness also has *intensity*: it is “alert” when we are concentrating in a racquetball game, or “dull” when we are just vaguely present with a television program after a hard day at work. Awareness also carries a kind of *energy*: “relaxed” when we are doing something familiar, “tense” when we are doing something complicated and unfamiliar. Finally, awareness arises with a *level*, a degree of consciousness or unconsciousness. The configuration of all of these variables shapes the world of my attention (for example, when I am playing racquetball for the first time with a challenging competitor my awareness is restricted, alert, tense and very conscious). It is very hard for a beginning golfer to pay attention to wrist position and elbow position when your awareness is restricted to letting the swing “flow” and keeping your head down. When, to use another example, I am socially open, relaxed, and alert, I am likely to pick up lots of information from the people around me.

Awareness can define a kind of “state” of consciousness within which attention functions. Or you might think of it as the starting point of attention. Either way, we learn

1. I have adapted the categories of awareness from Gerald G. May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 37–51, 218–20. My approach to attention, however, differs somewhat from May.

to pay attention best when we learn to be aware of our awareness. Think of your own life. What kinds of awareness are common to you? When and where do you find them? What does an observation of your awareness tell you about yourself?

Attention

“Attention” is sometimes seen simply as a form of restricted awareness. We restrict our awareness to that upon which we are paying attention. But there is another way of looking at attention. Attention can also be understood as the activity of noticing what is present within *any* state of awareness. Whether alert or dull, relaxed or tense, open or restricted, attention “attends” to what is there, seeing the way things are, insofar as that is personally apprehended. While awareness is often described as a “state” of consciousness, attention might be described as a “process” or “activity” of consciousness.

Ordinary Attention

Let’s take, for example, my encounter with my mother. Here I am: distracted, wiggling around, anxious to leave and get on with my play. Mom is trying to give me instructions. She asks me to “pay attention,” and so I try. What do I do? First I stop. I stop moving and looking around. I would look at her, focusing my awareness away from other things and on to her, but also broadening my awareness to include the details of her words and tone. I become present *with* her, giving her time, taking her into my experience, and allowing my experience to join with hers for that moment. Then I try to “hear” what she has to say. This is both a hearing of words, but also a discernment of the way things are: the state of my relationship with her, the degree of freedom I have in the situation, the importance of that which I need to remember. This is what “attention”

meant to me as a child: stopping, focusing, giving time, presence, setting aside distractions, noticing.

Buddhist Attention

Now let us take another example of attention, this time from Buddhist meditation practice. I include Buddhist meditation practice here as a form of philosophical “paying attention” for two reasons. First, the practice of meditation itself might be included in a list of the skills of philosophy; both Western and Eastern philosophers have recognized this.² Second, Buddhist meditation practice is itself designed to enable the one who meditates to achieve the goal of philosophy, namely, to respond with one’s mind and life to the fruit of realization about the way things are (in Buddhist language, to “penetrate to the elements,” to “lead to the unconstructed,” to “discern the real”). So what does “attention” look like in Buddhist meditation practice?

It is common in many schools of Buddhist philosophy to speak of the practice of meditation in terms of two primary terms: calming (*shamatha*) and discerning (*vipassana*).³ In the first moment we calm our minds, freeing it from distractions, and resting it upon the object of meditation. Specifically this stage involves confirming the right attitude toward things, choosing an object of meditation, dealing with distractions (often discussed in terms of the mind’s “fading” and “scattering”), and settling one’s mind, present with the meditative object without attachment. The second stage of practice (discerning) involves identifying the characteristics of what arises in this state (described as “establishing the view of voidness,” or “seeing the clear nature of Mind” or other

2. Indeed, it was often seen to be so in early Greek philosophy. See Pierre Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 85. Here Hadot explicitly ties the practice of meditation with the virtue of “attention.”

3. See, for example, Tson-kha-pa, *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real: Buddhist Meditation and the Middle View*, Alex Wayman (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978).

phrases). In identifying these characteristics, one sees the nature of what is. Calming, focusing, eliminating distractions, becoming present to the object, settling the mind, identifying what arises therein: this is what “attention” is to many Buddhists. Pay attention. Do you notice what is involved in Buddhist attention?

Scientific Attention

We have seen something of the process of paying attention both for the ordinary boy and for the practicing Buddhist. But what about the world of traditional Western philosophy? For this purpose, let’s look at a forerunner of Western scientific philosophy, the *Novum Organon* of Francis Bacon.⁴ You should read the whole excerpt first (skim) and then later return and interact with the document as I walk you through it. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was an Englishman during the difficult years of the British reformation of the Church. Bacon was convinced that the ways of learning about nature common to his day were seriously flawed and were in need of an overhaul. Bacon felt that we needed to reconsider just how to pay attention to nature. Bacon begins, in our excerpt, by identifying his the starting point: the particulars. He shows where he agrees (and disagrees) with the skeptics.

NOVUM ORGANUM, Part I

XXXVI

One method of delivery alone remains to us which is simply this: we must lead men to the particulars themselves, and their series and order; while men on their side must force themselves for a while to lay their notions by and begin to familiarize themselves with facts.

XXXVII

The doctrine of those who have denied that certainty could be attained at all has some agreement with my way of proceeding at the first setting out; but they end in being infinitely

4. Excerpts taken from http://www.constitution.org/bacon/nov_org.htm. See also Francis Bacon, “Novum Organum,” in *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*, ed. Edwin A. Burt, The Modern Library (New York: Random House, Inc., 1939), 24–123.

separated and opposed. For the holders of that doctrine assert simply that nothing can be known. I also assert that not much can be known in nature by the way which is now in use. But then they go on to destroy the authority of the senses and understanding; whereas I proceed to devise and supply helps for the same.

Whereas the skeptics doubt that knowledge about what can be known in nature can be found, Bacon aims to guide us directly to that knowledge. But he agrees with the skeptic insofar as he says that not much can be known *by the way which is in use*. The way people have commonly tried to pay attention to things is seriously flawed. Bacon thinks of the flaws in our ways of knowledge by speaking of four “idols,” or ways of thinking that get in the way of our clear attention upon the particulars. Look carefully to see how Bacon names and describes each idol. See if you can think of examples of each of these in our day and age.

By the way, one skill you will need in reading philosophy is the skill of looking things up in a dictionary. Sometimes philosophers use unfamiliar words. Sometimes they use familiar words in unfamiliar ways (especially when the author is English). Here are a few words and their definitions that might help you read the following section:

beset - to harass constantly, to attack on all sides

instauration - an act of instituting or establishing something

axiom - a universally accepted principle or rule

induction - the process of reasoning from the specific to the general

sophism - a clever, but false argument

perturbation - a great disturbance or shaking

consort - to keep company

XXXVIII

The idols and false notions which are now in possession of the human understanding,

and have taken deep root therein, not only so beset men's minds that truth can hardly find entrance, but even after entrance is obtained, they will again in the very instauration of the sciences meet and trouble us, unless men being forewarned of the danger fortify themselves as far as may be against their assaults.

XXXIX

There are four classes of Idols which beset men's minds. To these for distinction's sake I have assigned names, calling the first class Idols of the Tribe; the second, Idols of the Cave; the third, Idols of the Market Place; the fourth, Idols of the Theater.

XL

The formation of ideas and axioms by true induction is no doubt the proper remedy to be applied for the keeping off and clearing away of idols. To point them out, however, is of great use; for the doctrine of Idols is to the interpretation of nature what the doctrine of the refutation of sophisms is to common logic.

XLI

The Idols of the Tribe have their foundation in human nature itself, and in the tribe or race of men. For it is a false assertion that the sense of man is the measure of things. On the contrary, all perceptions as well of the sense as of the mind are according to the measure of the individual and not according to the measure of the universe. And the human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it.

XLII

The Idols of the Cave are the idols of the individual man. For everyone (besides the errors common to human nature in general) has a cave or den of his own, which refracts and discolors the light of nature, owing either to his own proper and peculiar nature; or to his education and conversation with others; or to the reading of books, and the authority of those whom he esteems and admires; or to the differences of impressions, accordingly as they take place in a mind preoccupied and predisposed or in a mind indifferent and settled; or the like. So that the spirit of man (according as it is meted out to different individuals) is in fact a thing variable and full of perturbation, and governed as it were by chance. Whence it was well observed by Heraclitus that men look for sciences in their own lesser worlds, and not in the greater or common world.

XLIII

There are also Idols formed by the intercourse and association of men with each other, which I call Idols of the Market Place, on account of the commerce and consort of men there. For it is by discourse that men associate, and words are imposed according to the apprehension of the vulgar. And therefore the ill and unfit choice of words wonderfully obstructs the understanding. Nor do the definitions or explanations wherewith in some things learned men are wont to guard and defend themselves, by any means set the matter right. But words plainly force and overrule the understanding, and throw all into confusion, and lead men away into numberless empty controversies and idle fancies.

XLIV

Lastly, there are Idols which have immigrated into men's minds from the various dogmas

of philosophies, and also from wrong laws of demonstration. These I call Idols of the Theater, because in my judgment all the received systems are but so many stage plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion. Nor is it only of the systems now in vogue, or only of the ancient sects and philosophies, that I speak; for many more plays of the same kind may yet be composed and in like artificial manner set forth; seeing that errors the most widely different have nevertheless causes for the most part alike. Neither again do I mean this only of entire systems, but also of many principles and axioms in science, which by tradition, credulity, and negligence have come to be received.

The Tribe, the Cave, the Market-place, the Theatre. Because of these idols we tend to attend only to what our interests draw us, only to what our personal constitution equips us, only to what our words and concepts permit us, only to what the current theories and trends tempt us. These are the “distractions” that prevent our minds from seeing what is really there. Bacon’s first step is to make us aware of these distractions in hopes that we will recognize them and eliminate them from our attention to nature. Bacon’s task, in the first part of the *Novum Organum* is to expose and thereby defeat all those ways in which our clarity of attention is inhibited. Bacon’s conviction is that the human mind is naturally confused and distracted, prone to notice what is less important and to generalize what seems interesting to us, rather than what is actually the case. What is needed, then is a way of helping the mind to “pay attention” to what is actually there.

Then Bacon moves, in the second part, to identify a process for bringing attention to bear on the nature of nature. He suggests (1) the preparation of what he calls “a natural and experimental history” of the object or event under consideration. This is a record of events related to the particular subject about which we might be wondering. Then, (2) he suggests that we create a set of “tables” describing the instances of certain events related to our event/object. Finally, (3) we use inductive logic to clarify the meaning of what has been noticed in the above steps. Read this section slowly and carefully. I will give you an example of the process here and there.

PART II

X

. . . For first of all we must prepare a natural and experimental history, sufficient and good; and this is the foundation of all, for we are not to imagine or suppose, but to discover, what nature does or may be made to do.

But natural and experimental history is so various and diffuse that it confounds and distracts the understanding, unless it be ranged and presented to view in a suitable order. We must therefore form tables and arrangements of instances, in such a method and order that the understanding may be able to deal with them.

And even when this is done, still the understanding, if left to itself and its own spontaneous movements, is incompetent and unfit to form axioms, unless it be directed and guarded. Therefore in the third place we must use induction, true and legitimate induction, which is the very key of interpretation. But of this, which is the last, I must speak first, and then go back to the other ministrations.

[Now that he has summarized the whole process, he immediately proceeds to describe the “tables” involved]

XI

The investigation of forms proceeds thus: a nature being given, we must first of all have a muster or presentation before the understanding of all known instances which agree in the same nature, though in substances the most unlike. And such collection must be made in the manner of a history, without premature speculation, or any great amount of subtlety. . . . This table I call the Table of Essence and Presence.

XII

Secondly, we must make a presentation to the understanding of instances in which the given nature is wanting; because the form, as stated above, ought no less to be absent when the given nature is absent, than present when it is present. But to note all these would be endless.

The negatives should therefore be subjoined to the affirmatives, and the absence of the given nature inquired of in those subjects only that are most akin to the others in which it is present and forthcoming. This I call the Table of Deviation, or of Absence in Proximity. . . .

[So we examine something, such as the behavior of light and we note when we find similarities (the light shines through both glass and water and air) and differences (through colored glass the light changes)]

XIII

Thirdly, we must make a presentation to the understanding of instances in which the nature under inquiry is found in different degrees, more or less; which must be done by making a comparison either of its increase and decrease in the same subject, or of its amount in different subjects, as compared one with another. For since the form of a thing is the very thing itself, and the thing differs from the form no otherwise than as the apparent differs from the real, or the external from the internal, or the thing in reference to man from the thing in reference to the universe, it necessarily follows that no nature can be taken as the true form, unless it always

decrease when the nature in question decreases, and in like manner always increase when the nature in question increases. This Table therefore I call the Table of Degrees or the Table of Comparison. . . .

[we explore, for example, the degree of brightness of light when passing through various thicknesses of glass, or different clearnesses of glass]

Do you notice how these tables are designed to clarify our attention? No subjective opinions here! We document all instances of an event, experimentally testing the phenomena in question point by point, measuring and documenting similarity and difference so as to have all the variables at hand.

Now, having taken us through the history and experimental tables, we are ready to put inductive logic to work.

XV

The work and office of these three tables I call the Presentation of Instances to the Understanding. Which presentation having been made, induction itself must be set at work; for the problem is, upon a review of the instances, all and each, to find such a nature as is always present or absent with the given nature, and always increases and decreases with it; and which is, as I have said, a particular case of a more general nature. Now if the mind attempt this affirmatively from the first, as when left to itself it is always wont to do, the result will be fancies and guesses and notions ill defined, and axioms that must be mended every day, unless like the schoolmen [Scholastic philosophers, who focused on reason and theories apart from systematic experimentation] we have a mind to fight for what is false; though doubtless these will be better or worse according to the faculties and strength of the understanding which is at work. To God, truly, the Giver and Architect of Forms, and it may be to the angels and higher intelligences, it belongs to have an affirmative knowledge of forms immediately, and from the first contemplation. But this assuredly is more than man can do, to whom it is granted only to proceed at first by negatives, and at last to end in affirmatives after exclusion has been exhausted.

XVI

We must make, therefore, a complete solution and separation of nature, not indeed by fire, but by the mind, which is a kind of divine fire. The first work, therefore, of true induction (as far as regards the discovery of forms) is the rejection or exclusion of the several natures which

are not found in some instance where the given nature is present, or are found in some instance where the given nature is absent, or are found to increase in some instance when the given nature decreases, or to decrease when the given nature increases. Then indeed after the rejection and exclusion has been duly made, there will remain at the bottom, all light opinions vanishing into smoke, a form affirmative, solid, and true and well defined. This is quickly said; but the way to come at it is winding and intricate. I will endeavor, however, not to overlook any of the points which may help us toward it. . . .

The point here is this, that only an infinite being can gain entire intuitive knowledge about the way things *are*. We mere humans must gain knowledge about the way things “are” by first clarifying what it “is not.” This is the way of exclusion. By exclusion, we identify, for example, that light is *not* like water in that it does not push against that which it flows into. And so on. By clarifying those features exhibited in experimentation that identify what our phenomena in question is *not*, we move step by step closer to identifying what it is.

So after observing all these instances and making up all these tables, and using induction to clarify what is not the case--Bacon permits the interpreter of nature to venture an initial hypothesis about what might actually be the case, how things *are*. It is a tentative hypothesis, subject to change. But it will be useful to guide our attention for the rest of our investigation. He calls this hypothesis an “indulgence of the understanding,” or a “first vintage” [taken from wine production] of our attention.

XX

And yet since truth will sooner come out from error than from confusion, I think it expedient that the understanding should have permission, after the three Tables of First Presentation (such as I have exhibited) have been made and weighed, to make an essay of the Interpretation of Nature in the affirmative way, on the strength both of the instances given in the tables, and of any others it may meet with elsewhere. Which kind of essay I call the Indulgence of the Understanding, or the Commencement of Interpretation, or the First Vintage. . . .

Then, finally, he points us to the way of supporting or rejecting our initial

hypothesis. This is the way of paying attention to the way things are, the “instances” of events related to our question. Our aim is to observe, and to document, a wide range of types of instances and to consider their significance for our hypothesis. Don’t worry here about understanding each of the names for the various instances. Bacon spends pages and pages dealing with each one. Just read them all through to get a sense of what they are and how they function to inform our reason about the nature of what is.

XXI

The Tables of First Presentation and the Rejection or process of Exclusion being completed, and also the First Vintage being made thereupon, we are to proceed to the other helps of the understanding in the Interpretation of Nature and true and perfect Induction. In propounding which, I mean, when Tables are necessary, to proceed upon the Instances of Heat and Cold; but when a smaller number of examples will suffice, I shall proceed at large; so that the inquiry may be kept clear, and yet more room be left for the exposition of the system.

I propose to treat, then, in the first place, of Prerogative Instances; secondly, of the Supports of Induction; thirdly, of the Rectification of Induction; fourthly, of Varying the Investigation according to the nature of the Subject; fifthly, of Prerogative Natures with respect to Investigation, or of what should be inquired first and what last; sixthly, of the Limits of Investigation, or a synopsis of all natures in the universe; seventhly, of the Application to Practice, or of things in their relation to man; eighthly, of Preparations for Investigation; and lastly, of the Ascending and Descending Scale of Axioms. . . .

What do we notice about attention as understood by Francis Bacon? What do we see about the process? We must eliminate the distractions of the idols which keep us from

observing clearly and correctly. We must stop our premature interpretations. We must focus on the particular instances, the changing conditions and the documented behaviors in order to see what might be involved. We posit our own hypothesis (after eliminating others), but must continue exploring instance after instance, type of instance after type of instance, forcing ourselves to be present to the phenomena, until nature itself clarifies the way things are.

[for a taste of this yourself why not try Journal Assignment 4.2 An Exercise in Philosophical Observation?]

Once again we find that even here, at the earliest expressions of modern Western science, the skill of paying attention is encouraged, though not necessarily using those words exactly. Furthermore, this skill bears significant similarity to the same skill as seen in ordinary life and in Buddhist meditation. Go back and look at our three examples of paying attention. What do you notice? Even though they describe very different practices, there is still a fundamental similarity about the pattern or process of paying attention. We can summarize the common elements in wise attention as follows:

- stop
- identify object of attention/awareness
- eliminate distractions
- become present with what is, let it be, give it time
- notice what appears without attachment
- consider the meaning of what is

Now, ask yourself, as a budding philosopher, “How have I paid attention to my *life*?” “Which of the above steps have been strongest for me?” “Which have been weakest?” We live today in a culture suffering from an attention-deficit disorder, fueled by an overdose of media, keeping us from really paying attention to anything. We are surrounded by

attractive distractions constantly. And wisdom is wanting. What would the love of wisdom look like in your life? In the life of a community?

The Objects of Our Attention

While the *process* of attention is common to different situations, the *objects* of our attention vary greatly. This is only natural. One moment we are trying to figure out how to work the latest upgrade to our internet software. The next moment we are paying attention to our children (who are *not* paying attention). Furthermore, being finite human beings, our ability to notice things is limited. As Francis Bacon suggested, only Infinite Mind can intuit the whole of everything at once. We humans have to piece things together one at a time. And so while the process of attention is common to all, the objects of our attention vary from time to time and from person/group to person/group.

Furthermore (again being finite human beings), in giving our attention to this or that, we tend to pay attention only to certain aspects of a given phenomena. Hence there are *objects within* our objects of attention to which we pay attention. Let me explain. The question comes up, “Does she love me, or does she love me not?” The object of my attention is our relationship, in particular to her side of that relationship. But what *really* do I pay attention to? Do I listen to what she says about our relationship? Do I look for cues in her behavior? Do I pay attention to my feelings? What will guide me to a response with the way things really are in this case? The fact of the matter is we each have our own tendencies on these things. While we might want to integrate information from all the “objects within” our object of attention, some of us tend to pay greater attention to the feelings “in here,” and others will tend to pay greater attention to the behavioral cues “out there.”

And that is the way it is with philosophy. Throughout the history of our grasp of the way things are, some philosophers and philosophic schools have paid greater

attention to the objects “out there” and others have paid greater attention to the objects “in here.” Some of the great shifts in the history of philosophy reflect changes in this kind of paying attention. As we shall see in our chapter on the question(s) of knowledge, different approaches to the objects of our attention can seriously influence one’s understanding of truth and knowledge (and vice versa). But here we are simply looking at the skill of paying attention, and the point is to acknowledge that as people, and as philosophers, we tend to pay attention only to a limited segment of things.

“Out-There Oriented Philosophies

Some philosophies are oriented “out there,” tending to pay greater attention to features in the outside world. These philosophies tend to distrust clever theories or deep feelings. They want to see our ideas correspond with identifiable reality right there in front of everybody.

This is the way of the “communitarian” philosopher. Communitarian thought is a common philosophy, though it is seldom formally expressed. One’s attention, in communitarian thinking, is to the “out there” of the community: the elders, or the culture. Communitarian philosophy can be embodied in a very passive manner (less conscious, dull awareness), as when we simply absorb our sense of reality from advertisements. There also is the slightly more conscious integration of community when one generation of farmers passes on the farm (and all the wisdom of the land and culture) to the next generation. Communitarian philosophy becomes explicitly formal, however, in the case of someone like Confucius or in medieval Western thought. Here regard for the elders/the past, for common value, for the view of the world which is shared by the whole membership guides the attention of those learning to appreciate wisdom.

The look out there is also present in “scientific” philosophy. Again, the scientific tendency is present in informal as well as formal ways. Aristotle was one of the first

philosophers to give the scientific tendency formal expression. He believed that the true nature of reality was to be found in the individual things in front of him. Francis Bacon is certainly a scientific philosopher, the forerunner of a chain of British “empiricist” philosophers including John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685-1753), and David Hume (1711-1776). Through the British empiricists, the ways of attention were further refined. In the past century, a movement called “Logical Positivism” especially championed the scientific tendency in philosophy, linking scientific evidence with logical analyses.

The outward look is also present among what can be called “pragmatist” philosophies. There are some strong similarities between scientific and pragmatist philosophies. They both look to the workings of things to confirm their ideas about things. But whereas the scientist is interested in discovery for the sake of discovery, the pragmatist sees discovery in the context of the functioning of life. The Native American hunter, for example, pays careful attention to the details of the world around him, but all this attention is for the sake of the catch. Perhaps Epicurus could be labeled a proto-pragmatist. Different forms of pragmatism have been especially popular among North American philosophers, such as Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), John Dewey (1859-1952), and more recently Richard Rorty.

In-Here Oriented Philosophies

Other philosophies are more oriented in-here, attending to inner consciousness rather than outer data. Some are suspect of the deceptive nature of externals. Others are convinced that we simply have no solid access to the “out there”; all we have is access to the in-here. Still others see the out-there as part of a much larger in-here. And once again there are a variety of in-here types. Plato and Shankara are in-here philosophers. There are the rationalists, such as Abhidharma Buddhism in the East and René Descartes (1591-

1650) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) in the modern West. Others, such as Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and some Bhakti philosophies in Hinduism focus on the life within yet are critical of human reason. And then there are those who document the nature of what appears in consciousness, critical philosophers like Nagarjuna (c. 150-250) in the East and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in the West, or phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976).

We have seen an example of out-there attention in the *Novum Organum* of Francis Bacon. Let us now take a look at an example of in-here oriented philosophy: the first of René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*.⁵ Descartes was a contemporary of Francis Bacon, although living in France rather than England. He was a brilliant mathematician and scientist and wished, in his meditations, to move beyond the narrow fields of math and science to consider the broader issues of truth, God, and the soul, and indeed to ponder the foundations of any philosophical approach to life. In this first meditation Descartes is concerned with all the false beliefs he has previously held and is eager to wipe away any possibility of error, any uncertainty in knowledge, and thus to build philosophy upon a solid and indubitable foundation. He decides that he is now going to settle things once and for all. He begins by wiping the slate clean of all that of which he is not certain. Descartes calls this a process of "setting aside" his previously accepted opinions in order to "start again" from the beginning. His process is to systematically review his opinions and beliefs, rejecting those which have any ground for doubt, which are not "entirely certain and indubitable." Then, based upon the solid foundation of those principles which have not been rejected through doubtful scrutiny, he hopes to build the foundations of a new philosophy step by confident step. He argues

5. Accessed from <http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~fdoull/des-med.htm>. See also René Descartes, "The Meditations Concerning First Philosophy," in *Philosophical Essays*, tr Laurence Lafleur, The Library of Liberal Arts (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1964), 61–143.

(and questions himself) as follows (go back to this outline after you “skim” and “slow read” the text):

Q1 - Why can't I simply believe what my senses tell me?

A. Senses deceive me when I perceive from far off or in other similar instances.

But what about ordinary, basic common sense experiences?

A. I cannot be sure if I am asleep or awake, and so even the most solid sense appearances can be doubted.

Q2 - Yet the basic forms or concepts of both waking and sleeping thought must be real Can't we be certain about these?

A. Yet God may have deceived me; or I myself may be fundamentally deceived

Conclusion - There is no certainty available. Furthermore, since I have a tendency to believe the doubtful, I will force myself to deny the doubtful, believing that an (invented) evil spirit has deceived me regarding all that I think I know to be true.

As you read take note of the step-by-step process of his attention (even the care for his physical environment!), each deception he eliminates (remember the process of paying attention, the clearing away of distractions or anything that would hinder our attention to the way things are?). Remember to use your dictionary. Take note of the objects of his attention. Where does he leave us at the end of the meditation? We will return to Descartes later in this text.

Meditation I: Of the things which may be brought within the sphere of the doubtful

It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences. But as this enterprise appeared to be a very great one, I waited until I had attained an age so mature that I could not hope that at any later date I should be better fitted to execute my design. This reason caused me to delay so long that I should feel that I was doing wrong were I to occupy in deliberation the time that yet remains to me for action. To-day, then, since very opportunely for the plan I have in view I have delivered my mind from every care [and am happily agitated by no

passions] and since I have procured for myself an assured leisure in a peaceable retirement, I shall at last seriously and freely address myself to the general upheaval of all my former opinions.

Now for this object it is not necessary that I should show that all of these are false -- I shall perhaps never arrive at this end. But inasmuch as reason already persuades me that I ought no less carefully to withhold my assent from matters which are not entirely certain and indubitable than from those which appear to me manifestly to be false, if I am able to find in each one some reason to doubt, this will suffice to justify my rejecting the whole. And for that end it will not be requisite that I should examine each in particular, which would be an endless undertaking; for owing to the fact that the destruction of the foundations of necessity brings with it the downfall of the rest of the edifice, I shall only in the first place attack those principles upon which all my former opinions rested.

All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived.

But it may be that although the senses sometimes deceive us concerning things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away, there are yet many others to be met with as to which we cannot reasonably have any doubt, although we recognise them by their means. For example, there is the fact that I am here, seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands and other similar matters. And how could I deny that these hands and this body are mine, were it not perhaps that I compare myself to certain persons, devoid of sense, whose cerebella are so troubled and clouded by the violent vapours of black bile, that they constantly assure us that they think they are kings when they are really quite poor, or that they are clothed in purple when they are really without covering, or who imagine that they have an earthenware head or are nothing but pumpkins or are made of glass. But they are mad, and I should not be any the less insane were I to follow examples so extravagant.

At the same time I must remember that I am a man, and that consequently I am in the habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself the same things or sometimes even less probable things, than do those who are insane in their waking moments. How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed! At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is with eyes awake that I am looking at this paper; that this head which I move is not asleep, that it is deliberately and of set purpose that I extend my hand and perceive it; what happens in sleep does not appear so clear nor so distinct as does all this. But in thinking over this I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions, and in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream.

Now let us assume that we are asleep and that all these particulars, e.g. that we open our eyes, shake our head, extend our hands, and so on, are but false delusions; and let us reflect that possibly neither our hands nor our whole body are such as they appear to us to be. At the same time we must at least confess that the things which are represented to us in sleep are like painted representations which can only have been formed as the counterparts of something real and true, and that in this way those general things at least, i.e. eyes, a head, hands, and a whole body, are not imaginary things, but things really existent. For, as a matter of fact, painters, even when they study with the greatest skill to represent sirens and satyrs by forms the most strange and extraordinary, cannot give them natures which are entirely new, but merely make a certain

medley of the members of different animals; or if their imagination is extravagant enough to invent something so novel that nothing similar has ever before been seen, and that then their work represents a thing purely fictitious and absolutely false, it is certain all the same that the colours of which this is composed are necessarily real. And for the same reason, although these general things, to wit, [a body], eyes, a head, hands, and such like, may be imaginary, we are bound at the same time to confess that there are at least some other objects yet more simple and more universal, which are real and true; and of these just in the same way as with certain real colours, all these images of things which dwell in our thoughts, whether true and real or false and fantastic, are formed.

To such a class of things pertains corporeal nature in general, and its extension, the figure of extended things, their quantity or magnitude and number, as also the place in which they are, the time which measures their duration, and so on.

That is possibly why our reasoning is not unjust when we conclude from this that Physics, Astronomy, Medicine and all other sciences which have as their end the consideration of composite things, are very dubious and uncertain; but that Arithmetic, Geometry and other sciences of that kind which only treat of things that are very simple and very general, without taking great trouble to ascertain whether they are actually existent or not, contain some measure of certainty and an element of the indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three together always form five, and the square can never have more than four sides, and it does not seem possible that truths so clear and apparent can be suspected of any falsity [or uncertainty].

Nevertheless I have long had fixed in my mind the belief that an all-powerful God existed by whom I have been created such as I am. But how do I know that He has not brought it to pass that there is no earth, no heaven, no extended body, no magnitude, no place, and that nevertheless [I possess the perceptions of all these things and that] they seem to me to exist just exactly as I now see them? And, besides, as I sometimes imagine that others deceive themselves in the things which they think they know best, how do I know that I am not deceived every time that I add two and three, or count the sides of a square, or judge of things yet simpler, if anything simpler can be imagined? But possibly God has not desired that I should be thus deceived, for He is said to be supremely good. If, however, it is contrary to His goodness to have made me such that I constantly deceive myself, it would also appear to be contrary to His goodness to permit me to be sometimes deceived, and nevertheless I cannot doubt that He does permit this.

There may indeed be those who would prefer to deny the existence of a God so powerful, rather than believe that all other things are uncertain. But let us not oppose them for the present, and grant that all that is here said of a God is a fable; nevertheless in whatever way they suppose that I have arrived at the state of being that I have reached -- whether they attribute it to fate or to accident, or make out that it is by a continual succession of antecedents, or by some other method -- since to err and deceive oneself is a defect, it is clear that the greater will be the probability of my being so imperfect as to deceive myself ever, as is the Author to whom they assign my origin the less powerful. To these reasons I have certainly nothing to reply, but at the end I feel constrained to confess that there is nothing in all that I formerly believed to be true, of which I cannot in some measure doubt, and that not merely through want of thought or through levity, but for reasons which are very powerful and maturely considered; so that henceforth I ought not the less carefully to refrain from giving credence to these opinions than to that which is manifestly false, if I desire to arrive at any certainty [in the sciences].

But it is not sufficient to have made these remarks, we must also be careful to keep them in mind. For these ancient and commonly held opinions still revert frequently to my mind, long and familiar custom having given them the right to occupy my mind against my inclination and rendered them almost masters of my belief; nor will I ever lose the habit of deferring to them or of placing my confidence in them, so long as I consider them as they really are, i.e. opinions in

some measure doubtful, as I have just shown, and at the same time highly probable, so that there is much more reason to believe in than to deny them. That is why I consider that I shall not be acting amiss, if, taking of set purpose a contrary belief, I allow myself to be deceived, and for a certain time pretend that all these opinions are entirely false and imaginary, until at last, having thus balanced my former prejudices with my latter [so that they cannot divert my opinions more to one side than to the other], my judgment will no longer be dominated by bad usage or turned away from the right knowledge of the truth. For I am assured that there can be neither peril nor error in this course, and that I cannot at present yield too much to distrust, since I am not considering the question of action, but only of knowledge.

I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things; I shall remain obstinately attached to this idea, and if by this means it is not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of any truth, I may at least do what is in my power [i.e. suspend my judgment], and with firm purpose avoid giving credence to any false thing, or being imposed upon by this arch deceiver, however powerful and deceptive he may be. But this task is a laborious one, and insensibly a certain lassitude leads me into the course of my ordinary life. And just as a captive who in sleep enjoys an imaginary liberty, when he begins to suspect that his liberty is but a dream, fears to awaken, and conspires with these agreeable illusions that the deception may be prolonged, so insensibly of my own accord I fall back into my former opinions, and I dread awakening from this slumber, lest the laborious wakefulness which would follow the tranquillity of this repose should have to be spent not in daylight, but in the excessive darkness of the difficulties which have just been discussed.

Descartes refutes three inadequate foundations for philosophy in his First Meditation. First, sense experience is rejected. It has been known to mislead or deceive the perceiver. Second, common sense conclusions can be mistaken, as when we are dreaming. Finally, even our beliefs in the fundamental concepts of logic and mathematics are rejected as solid foundations upon which to build a philosophy. These may be mere impressions created by a deceptive god/evil spirit or fate or chance. Descartes is as meticulous in his attention to the nuances and deceptions of what arises *within* as Bacon is of the instances of what lies *without*.⁶ But again, note the process of attention. Descartes stops (taking leisure for the meditation), he gives his thought devoted time. He puts away false ideas and distractions. He notices the way things are. Where will

6. Later, for example in the writings of Martin Heidegger, the boundaries of *within* and *without* become intentionally blurred in philosophical reflection.

Descartes go with this meditation? Wait and see.

Why not try writing your own “meditation”?

The Skill of Paying Attention

Whether we are looking within or without (or both), the love of wisdom is facilitated by paying attention. When we stop, rest, focus, and let reality “be” before us, when we are present to “what is” without attachment, just noticing what it is, we take an important step toward the love of wisdom. Again ask yourself, “How do I pay attention?” “Do I tend to look within or without?” “What are the strengths and weaknesses of my habits of attention?” How might I become more wise in the future?

JA 4.1 A Beginning Exercise in Paying Attention⁷

“Attention (*prosoche*),” writes philosopher Pierre Hadot, “is the fundamental Stoic attitude. . . . Attention to the present moment is, in a sense, the key to the spiritual exercises. It frees us from the passions, which are always caused by the past or the future--two areas which do *not* depend on us. By encouraging attention on the miniscule present moment, . . . attention increases our vigilance. Finally, attention to the present moment allows us to accede to cosmic consciousness, by making us attentive to the infinite value of each instant . . . [Pierre Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 84-85].

Though we often talk about “paying attention” to this or that, rarely do we know what we mean by attention. Rarer still do we *practice* attention. This exercise gives you a chance to explore attention, perhaps for the first time.

Step One - Simply sit still for five minutes. Yes, that’s all. Your eyes can be open or closed. Just sit there and pay attention to whatever happens. You might notice the feel of your chair, the sounds around you, the room. You might notice your breathing, your moods as they change, your shifting awareness and attention itself. Don’t *try* to notice anything in particular. Just let the present “be” the present as it passes by. When your five minutes is up (you might use a timer for this or else you will find yourself watching the clock all the time), spend some time writing about your experience: what happened, how you felt, what you noticed, what you learned.

7. Step One is adapted from Gerald May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 49.

Step Two - Now let's make the process a little more specific. Let's try the steps outlined at the close of the section from chapter four on the process of Attention. First, take some time to *stop*. Clear your schedule for a while. Turn off the cell phone. Close the door of your room. Stop other things and create an environment to facilitate simple attention. Next, *identify an object of attention*. It might be a favorite object of art. It might be a piece of music. It might be a brief phrase. It might be a thought or feeling you have identified. Choose your object and be prepared to be with it for a while. Now begin to *focus* on that object. Allow your mind, your self, to *settle into* that object, to *become present* with it. *Give it some time*. If your mind wanders away and you realize this, just gently be aware of the *distraction* and return to the focus. As you settle into your presence with the object, begin to *notice* what arises, what appears. Don't judge what comes. Don't evaluate. Don't figure anything out. Just receive what what comes up *without any attachment*. Let your mind and feelings flow. When you think you are done, once again spend some time recording the experience as you did above, perhaps *considering the meaning* of what was there.

JA 4.2 An Exercise in Philosophical Observation

“First then we observe that some things always come to pass in the same way and others for the most part.” (Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, chapter 5; 196b)

After clarifying a number of basic principles and definitions, Aristotle addresses, in his *Physics*, the nature of chance and spontaneity. He begins by citing observation. Aristotle is famous for his observations. His insightful categorizations of all kinds of things reveals a man of careful observation, paying close attention to the details of things. This is the skill of attention brought to bear on things “out there,” specifically on the world of nature and the human soul (on the soul, see his treatise by that name). Careful observation has been encouraged by philosophers of many schools. Taoists, empiricists, pragmatists, naturalists, materialists and more have all urged lovers of wisdom to see the world through the eyes of careful observation. In this exercise you will have a chance to try observation for yourself. Once begun, this exercise will take around twenty minutes (or more if you wish--the longer you persevere, the more you will get out of this exercise).

First, you must choose for yourself an object or event to observe. It could be anything: a river, a leaf, a football game, a building, anything. Anything, that is, that you can spend some time with in observation.

Next, prepare yourself to record what you observe. Get writing materials in place, for you are about to spend a lot of time writing.

Then, you simply observe and write what you observe. Feel free to use all your

senses: touch, sight, taste, emotional impressions, everything. As best you can, try not to stop writing except when you are touching. Simply record every observation you notice, moment by moment. When you think you have described everything, go back and find more things to notice (I have heard a story about a young scientist who was required to spend days describing a fish).

After a while, stop and collate your observations. What patterns did you notice? What things were “essential” to your observed object? What things were “different” from one moment to the next, from one space to the next? What things changed by degrees based on variations in the surrounding conditions? What conditions may have brought these changes?

Now compare your observed object or event to others like it. What makes this object/event unique from the others? One by one distinguish your observations from observations of other things. Finally, summarize your observations with a new description of the way things are regarding that which you have observed. What wisdom have you gained through this exercise in observation?