

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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As we mentioned in our most recent issue of “Reconsiderations,” we have been grappling with the question of attention and we are now more concerned than ever to fight off the constant distractions and to attempt to live fully and faithfully. This fall, therefore, we held a panel on the subject and we also invited Michael Sacasas to give a talk on “Distracted from What? – Attention and the Moral Life.” Mike is an Associate Fellow of the Greystone Theological Institute and Director of their Center on Ethics. We trust that the following excerpt of that talk will inspire you to listen to the full podcast of Mike’s talk, which you can find on our website at christianstudycenter.org/resources/audio. As usual, we also offer you a recommended resource in this issue—a bit out of the ordinary this time perhaps, but we are serious about the recommendation and quite glad to have James Chapin, one of our recent alumni, commend it to us as only he can.

“ONE HUNDRED YEARS (OR SO) OF ‘DISTRACTION’”

by Michael Sacasas

Let’s you wonder if issues having to do with attention and distraction are real, let me introduce you to a device called Wear Space. This device, which is in its prototype phase, was designed by Panasonic’s Future Life Factory, and it was created in collaboration with Japanese fashion designer Kunihiko Morinaga. Here is how one design magazine described it: “Sharing a similar aesthetic and concept to horse blinkers, the device consists of a curved strip of flexible material that wraps around the back of the user’s head and extends out to shield the sides of their eyes, blocking out any distractions in their peripheral vision.” It is a sleek looking piece of equipment, we might call it dystopian chic. The article went on to explain that Wear Space was “designed to keep people distraction-free when working in busy spaces or open-plan offices by blocking them off from their immediate surroundings.”¹

Two things came immediately to mind when I first read about Wear Space. The first, is that it is a fine example of the unfortunate tendency to pursue technological fixes to social problems rather than to reconsider and address the underlying causes. The second, not unrelated to the first, is that this tool is not a solution, it is merely a symptom. Something somewhere along the line went wrong. When horse blinkers for people become thinkable and even desirable, we can safely assume that our situation is deeply disordered.

Of course, you and I already knew that. Odds are that you have come

across any number of articles, Youtube clips, or books claiming that ours is an “age of distraction” or that we are in the midst of a crisis of attention. A few of these titles include *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*, or *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction*, again *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life*, and finally *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*. And these are just a sampling of books published in recent years. To be clear, I’m not listing these titles only to suggest that they are somehow misguided. With varying

degrees of success, they are trying to make sense of something most of us experience. I do think there is a problem.

Indeed, even if you had not been aware of any of these titles or any of the magazine and journal articles or the news reports and social scientific studies, etc., and even if you had not once encountered any of these

sources of distraction discourse, you would probably still know that attention has become a problem. If you are a parent, for example, you may have noted disconcerting symptoms of it in your children, but it is not just an issue for our children. If you are at all like me, the crisis of distraction unfolds each day in your own head and heart.

It has been ten years since Nick Carr published a widely-read article in *The Atlantic* titled “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” I’ve always thought that title was rather unfortunate because it is not at all what Carr was arguing, and it is the sort of title that is bound to

*“If you are at all like me,
the crisis of distraction
unfolds each day in your
own head and heart.”*¹

Continued on page 2

“One Hundred Years (Or So) of Distraction”, continued from page 1

ill-dispose readers to what he actually had to say. Indeed, we might pause just a moment to take note of the title. It is a subtle indicator of the condition we’re trying to understand. It is, of course, a plea for your attention. The core of Carr’s point, which he later developed in a book called *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, is that the circuitry of our brains is now known to be more plastic, that is to say, more malleable, even in adulthood, than what had been previously assumed, and that our brains are being effectively re-wired by our internet use. A key aspect of this re-wiring (note, in passing again, the technological metaphor), is the erosion of our capacity for attention.

Here is how Carr opened his article:

“Over the past few years I’ve had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn’t going—so far as I can tell—but it’s changing. I’m not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I’m reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.”²

“Over the past few years I’ve had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain.”

Even in 2008, most readers would have likely found Carr’s experience all too familiar, and today we identify with him all the more. We know that we are losing our ability to pay attention. Likewise, we know that something is not right in the way that we compulsively check our smartphones. We know that we ought to be able to attend to the person before us without furtively glancing away toward a device. We know that the slight panic we feel when we find ourselves without our favorite devices probably signals a disordered relationship to those devices. No one has to tell us that ours is an age of distraction. Each of us is Exhibit A.

There is a problem here, and in this short essay, I want briefly to

consider two questions and then just point to a third. First, What exactly is going on? Second, Is our situation novel? and, finally, What exactly is attention for?

The first question, then, is this: What exactly is going on right now? Why does our experience resonate with Carr’s? Why is it possible for someone to imagine that human horse blinkers are a good idea? It is tempting simply to cite the prevalence of digital tools and leave it at that, but I think it’s worth asking why exactly our devices distract us the way that they do? Is it simply a manifestation of a collective human weakness, or is there something about the devices themselves that is working on us?

One of the best studies of the power of digital devices and apps was actually a study of Las Vegas gambling machines. Natasha Dow Schüll’s *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* traces the history of Las Vegas and the gaming industry. Schull noted that until the mid-1980s “green-felt table games such as blackjack and craps dominated the casino floor.” Slot machines were relegated to the sidelines, in hallways or by elevators. By 2003, however, 85% of industry profits came from machines. Part of the reason for this is that the industry discovered both that the general population was becoming more comfortable with screen-based interfaces and that the architecture of the machines could be designed, as the title of Schull’s book suggests, to addict users.³ Over time a highly sophisticated set of techniques evolved, often borrowing insights from psychology and cognitive science, in order to induce compulsive engagement and with disturbing results.

These techniques have been used to great effect by digital technology designers and developers. Indeed, much of the recent so-called “tech-backlash” has been driven by a growing understanding of how our digital tools have been designed for compulsive engagement as well as by a series of very public *mea culpas* from designers, engineers, executives, and investors confessing their own participation in these techniques and ostensibly expressing their regret, after having already made lots of money, of course.

The rather predictable and straightforward motive that drives all this is, in a word, profits. And the central way of building profits has

been advertising. The internet has been built on one dominant economic model: advertisement revenue. Consequently, internet companies have been involved in an ever-escalating digital arms race to maximize their ad revenues. The companies that have risen to the top, Google and Facebook most notably, have done so because they have managed to mine enormous reams of user data in order to feed their algorithmically driven practice of micro-targeting. Almost everything you need to know about the dynamics of Silicon Valley can be reduced to this quest for ever more data to feed the predictive algorithms that fuel their advertising tools. Nearly every app you download, every social media platform you join, every device you use, every smart appliance you place in your home, every AI assistant you employ—each one of them is designed chiefly to gather ever more precise data about you. In order to gather this information, apps and websites need you to feed their data extraction tools as much as possible and we do this mainly by using the apps as much as possible.

I cannot stress enough how sophisticated the data extraction machine has become: Facebook stores not only your “likes” and “shares” and the information that you post about yourself, it also records the links that you hover over and never click and the status updates that you type but then delete before posting. And if you think you are free from all this because you have never created a Facebook account, think again. Even if you have never had a Facebook account, Facebook has a shadow profile of you built on whatever data about you they’ve been able to gather from your connections and your other traceable activities online. But their work is made all the easier by our ostensibly willing, although actually conditioned, use of the platforms and devices, and they are far better at attracting our attention and gathering this data than we can imagine.

This brief look at what exactly is going on leads to our second question, namely, whether our situation is a novel one. As you might suspect, the answer is complicated. It is both yes and no. On the one hand, it would be a very serious mistake to underestimate the extent to which digital media shape our lives in new and ever more intricate ways. Even if the difference is only one of degree, one could argue that the difference in degree almost amounts to a difference in kind.

That said, the continuity over time is, in my view, most interesting, so I want to focus on how our situation is not entirely novel. Attention discourse has a history, and it is worth considering that history in order to understand our situation more fully. In fact, we don’t have

to go very far back at all to encounter the most recent, pre-digital eruption of public concern about our capacity for attention. During the 1980s and 1990s, some of you may remember, attention deficit disorder was a widely discussed topic, especially among social critics, educators, and parents. It, too, was often linked to the dominant media of the time: the television.

Going a step further back, to the mid-20th century, we find prescient novelists who foresaw how distraction could become a problem in a society structured by entertainment media. In one of Kurt Vonnegut’s short stories, *Harrison Bergeron*, the main character rebels against a society designed around enforced equality. In the dystopian setting of the story, equality was enforced through a crude and coercive mechanism. Individuals were forced to wear a band around their head which would periodically blare a loud and disorienting noise. In this way, no one was able to focus or concentrate. Under this regime of perpetual and draconian distraction, individuals lost their ability to think and to reason. The moment I first read the story several years ago, it immediately struck me as a wonderfully apt image for what we are doing to ourselves today and of the dire consequences that follow.

Another American writer, however, came even nearer to the mark. Just as the television was being widely adopted by American households and before earphones were invented, Ray Bradbury imagined a world in *Fahrenheit 451* where the average family ensconced themselves in rooms dominated by three wall-sized screens (four if you were really affluent) and segregated themselves from the world by the use of what Bradbury called seashells, what we would recognize today as ear buds.

At a critical moment in the narrative, the protagonist, Montag, a fireman who has awakened to the truth, is traveling by subway to meet an older man named Faber, who, though cowardly, remained nonetheless attuned to the truth of things. As he rides the subway, Montag clings to a copy of the Bible that he had stowed away. He knows he will have to surrender it, so he attempts to memorize as much of it as he can. But he discovers that his mind is a sieve. He recalls that when he was a child an older relative would play a joke on him by offering a dime if he could fill a sieve with sand and now he remembers “the terrible logic of that sieve.” He thinks to himself, “if you read fast and read all, maybe some of the sand will stay in the sieve.” But he reads and as an ad for Denham’s Dentrifice blares over

Continued on page 6

LUKE 2:1-20

from the King James Bible

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judæa, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCE: THE KING JAMES BIBLE (OR THE AUTHORIZED VERSION OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS)

by James Chapin

The most important book in my life came into my possession haz- ardly. One afternoon, I pulled off to the side of a road in Alachua County where a man sold books and produce from under the same awning. I moved past the melons and mustard greens and there it was, bound in tatty black pleather, this book I'd wondered about from a distance for a long time. It was the Authorized Version of the Old and New Testaments, also known as the King James Bible. I bought it for \$10. I believe I bought some vegetables too.

The reasons I went looking for the book that day were mostly liter- ary, with a small tincture of religious curiosity. Today, after years of this book exerting its strange gravitational force over my life, that ratio has flipped. It's like one of those optical illusions, two faces in one. If I squint, I can see the pretty lady of the book's liter- ary merit. But for the most part I just see the old crone. This probably makes me a poor critic of the book — but it sure makes for interesting reading.

I had a good secularist upbringing and was a confirmed mythbusting anti-Christian before my first shave. Still, I was not completely scrip- tureless growing up. A stern Presbyterian great- aunt had made sure I had a children's Good News version on my shelf. I remember reading the first few chapters of Genesis as a kid and liking them. There was something thrilling about the mixture of sparseness and grandeur in the language. But comic books were thrilling too, and had better pictures. I left the book shortly after the Garden of Eden.

This meant that when I finally encountered the book again in my early twenties, I came to it as something almost entirely new. The text had that weird, arid expansiveness that I remembered from childhood, but the style was in every way heightened in the KJV. Old Testament stories like the Flight out of Egypt had page-turning

vividness, while the Psalms sang brazen poetry. And the Gospels— when I finally came to the Gospels—had both qualities, both the concreteness of a pain-etched narrative and the unreasonable joys of song. It hit me like a bolt. I was confused, and clarified, and altered.

Historically, this was a pretty common reaction. From its first print- ings in the 1500s, the English vernacular Bible was a vehicle for countless new permutations of free-thought and social change. Ima- gine the heady groundswell of power when a common laborer could suddenly open a book that contained all of history between its covers, from Genesis to Revelation, from “In the beginning” to the very end.

The unleashing of cognitive and imaginative energies was immense. Movements arose with names like the Diggers, Ranters, and True Levellers which positioned themselves against all manners of social convention. With that Bible I bought from a roadside fruit stand, I was partaking in a subversive experience shared by everyday people dating back to the 16th century and beyond: the new feeling of something sacred and measurelessly vast suddenly held in one's hands.

It's important to note that the KJV was not the first version of the Bible in English. Rather, it was the culmination of a long and bloody process that had started centuries before.

When King James I finally authorized the 1611 version, the 47 schol- ars took the best parts of previous translations and melded them to create “one singular good one,” as the preface says. We often think of the KJV as the product of committee, but that committee extended across centuries, from John Wycliffe's 1380 translation in the time and language of Chaucer, through the work of William Tyndale, to the anonymous scholars' 1611 translation in the time and language of Shakespeare. People say the KJV sounds a bit archaic today, but it sounded a bit archaic to the original audience too. That was part of its power.

That power is lost in some of our more recent translations. Consider,

*“And the Gospels—
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and the unreasonable
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Continued on page 6

Recommended Resource: The King James Bible, continued from page 5

for instance, the angel's message to the shepherds in Luke 2. The KJV gives us this moment in words which seem indelibly right for the moment: "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." Compare it to the Good News translation (published 1976) which briefly held my attention as a kid:

... [T]he angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Savior was born—Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

This version is easily digestible and scrupulously accurate. Yet in striving for accuracy and digestibility it seems content to back away from considerations of rhythm, musicality, grandeur. It carefully avoids all doctrinal missteps and confusing words; but no one will be writing any Christmas carols based on it any time soon.

I draw this comparison not to disparage the Good News translation, but to shed more light on the KJV's attributes. Its "rhythmic excellence" was achieved while the translators strove for a word-for-word translation from the source languages (the italics mark the few places in the text where they dared to insert a new word). In short, it is not only as accurate as the translators could make it, but also as beautiful as they could make it. This dual challenge, which they set for themselves, is the reason for the text's pressurized splendor. And their success gave us a book which has been a lodestone for the whole Anglosphere in centuries since.

Lodestone is the right metaphor for the KJV—a mysteriously magnetic vein of rock. For me, the book is less like literature and more like geology. I still don't understand the process that drew me to it. But I am grateful for its influence on my life, solid and ever-present, a rock on which to stand.

We offer it here (on page 4) and invite you to give it your full attention. Read it aloud. Pause at commas. Stop at periods. Listen to yourself as you read. This is how people have heard this story since 1611, and thanks to the church calendar they not only read the very same words we are reading but read them on the very same week of the year.

"One Hundred Years (Or So) of Distraction", continued from page 3

the loud speakers on the subway, the words fall through. His attempt to catch "the lilies of the field" in the sieve of his mind is doomed to failure by "Denham's dental detergent." The brief memorable scene portrays a scenario that now feels all-too familiar to us.

Leading twentieth-century thinkers in philosophy and the social sciences also studied the question of attention and saw a significant emergence of attention to the topic of attention at the close of the nineteenth century. Here the work of Jonathan Crary has been especially useful. "From the 1890s well into the 1930s," Crary wrote,

One of the central problems in mainstream psychology had been the nature of attention: the relation between stimulus and attention, problems of concentration, focalization, and distraction. How many sources of stimulation could one attend to simultaneously? How could novelty, familiarity, and repetition in attention be assessed? It was a problem whose position in the forefront of psychological discourse was directly related to the emergence of a social field increasingly saturated with sensory input. Some of this was the work of James McKeen Cattell, whose experiments on students at Columbia University provided the classical data for the notion of range of attention [what we would call attention span]. Initially much of this research was bound up in the need for information on attention in the context of rationalizing production, but even as early as 1910 hundreds of experimental laboratory studies had been done specifically on the range of attention in advertising including titles such as "The Attention Value of Periodical Advertisements," "Attention and the Effects of Size in Street Car Advertisements," "Advertising and the Laws of Mental Attention," and "Measuring the Attention Value of Color in Advertising."⁴

The striking thing here is that we once again see the connection between attention and advertising, but Crary's work tells a complex and deeply researched story that unearths many fascinating and intersecting histories that reveal the emergence of attention regimes or disciplinary programs arising in science, industry, and education that were intended to correct what appeared at the time merely as faulty attention.

There are two points, I think to take from this history. First, although

Continued on page 7

we are not the first for whom attention has presented itself as a problem, there appears to be a rather definite point at which attention does become a problem in the way we seem to think of it today, and that is sometime around the late nineteenth century. Second, is a point of great importance that has to do with how we think of attention at the most basic level, and it brings us to our third question: What exactly is attention for?

Ordinarily, what we mean when we say that we are paying attention to something is that we are mentally focusing on it for an extended period of time. Attention in this sense, then, is the capacity or the faculty that allows us to attend to the world within and without. Implicit in this way of understanding attention is the fact that we choose what we will attend to. Alongside this understanding, however I would encourage us to consider the idea that attention can also be conceived of in terms of an openness to the world, as a posture of attentive and expectant receptivity, as a form of perception. We can think of attention as both an activity and a disposition. Finally, we can think of attention as a condition of our soul.

Correspondingly, we can think of distraction in a similar manner. Distraction too is a condition of the soul. Discreet instances of being distracted, of failing to direct our attention meaningfully, would then be symptoms of a deeper disorder. In this framing of distraction our digital devices are both a material cause of the state of our soul and

an effect of the state of our soul. On the one hand, we ought not underestimate the power of these technologies to shape us. Their presence preys upon, exacerbates, and amplifies our inner distractedness. On the other hand, we must beware. The absence of digital devices would not cure us of the underlying distractedness or aimlessness.

To deal with the challenges that come with living in a distracted age we will need some greater telos or moral aim that has the power to direct and sustain our attention and to buffer us from the forces of distraction. For this most of us would welcome help, so let me direct our attention to the wisdom of Hannah Arendt and Blaise Pascal, of Joseph Pieper, Walker Percy, and Simone Weil and invite you to listen in. "Attention," Simone Weil writes, "is the rarest and purest form of generosity." What could this mean, and what could it imply for us as we seek to discipline the distracted self and cultivate attention as a posture of attentive and expectant receptivity.

Notes

1. www.dezeen.com/2018/10/17/panasonics-wearable-blinkers-concentrate-open-plan-offices-technology/
2. Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making us Stupid?" in *The Atlantic*, July/August, 2008, or <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>
3. Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton UP, 2014).
4. Jonathan Crary, "Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory," in *October*, volume 50 (Autumn, 1989), p. 102.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

It was my privilege to meet Michael Sacasas when he was a student of mine in a January term class at Reformed Theological Seminary in 2001. James Chapin was one of our students here at the Study Center just a few years ago. I am blessed to the point of being spoiled by the students with whom I get to spend time and whom I now count as friends and co-conspirators.

Your contributions to the Study Center support not only our service to Mike and Jim but also their service to you. Thank you for that support.

Whether you slip your gift in before the close of the year or help get our new year started well, your financial partnership helps build a faithful, thoughtful presence of Christ in the University community. Thank you so much for your partnership.

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Inside this Edition

“ONE HUNDRED YEARS (OR SO) OF DISTRACTION”

an essay by Michael Sacasas

(See p. 1)

LUKE 2:1-20

The birth of Christ the Lord

(See p. 4)

RECOMMENDED RESOURCE: THE KING JAMES BIBLE

by James Chapin

(See p. 5)

This newsletter is a publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville which facilitates the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life and culture in the university community



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