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«Πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ»: Attentiveness and Digital Culture

The Distracted Life

Having promised us a technological utopia, our ubiquitous and intrusive cyberculture has instead precipitated a spiritual crisis in which human experience has been systematically fragmented and the coherence of the self increasingly threatened. Living in a culture of organized distractions, our thoughts are isolated and disconnected, preventing us from seeing and experiencing the wholeness of life. Distraction and fragmentation have negative consequences for the organization of knowledge; they prevent us from engaging our spiritual depth, and render us incapable of engaging the spiritual depth of others, for having lost touch with our own personhood, we can receive neither the personhood of our neighbor nor of God.

Beginning in 2009, the New York Times ran a series of articles called “Driven to Distraction,” focusing on accidents and fatalities involving distracted drivers.¹ The series expanded to include “Distracted Doctoring,” reporting on the large number of surgeons who are placing personal calls during surgery; on medical technicians who are texting while running cardio-pulmonary bypass machines; and anesthesiologists who are shopping online for airline tickets.²

Distractions created by social media in the work place cost the American economy \$650 billion per year, with social media interruptions occurring every ten minutes, and with workers spending 41% of their time on Facebook. In the US alone, over 12 billion collective hours are spent browsing on social networks every day. The average college student spends 3 hours a day checking social sites, but only 2 hours a day studying. Alongside the official statistics, there is an abundance of anecdotal evidence, such as the September, 2013 report concerning train passengers in San Francisco who were too distracted by their smartphones and tablet computers to notice the presence of an armed gunman, who had been brandishing his weapon in plain view for several minutes before he shot and killed a 20-year old commuter (the entire episode was caught on the train’s surveillance camera).

In addition to the financial costs and loss of human life, there are spiritual costs that the New York Times and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are not competent to diagnose, namely, the loss of human agency, the fragmentation of human subjectivity, and the growing incoherence of the self. In his recent book, *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew Crawford has referred to this situation as a “crisis of self ownership,” arguing that we are now living in an “attentional economy” in which “our attention is not simply ours to direct where we will,” making “the effort to be fully present” an intractable struggle. Crawford claims that our insatiable need for endless distractions means that the *content* of our distractions has become largely irrelevant, revealing a deeper crisis of values. According to Crawford, we

¹ In 2012, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 570,000 accidents, and 3,328 fatalities, the latter marking a 9% increase from the previous year.

² 50% of all medical technicians surveyed acknowledged that they had texted while in surgery, and nearly 60% acknowledged talking on cell phones.

have become “agnostic” on the question of *what* to pay attention to, which means we no longer know what to value.³ As a result, our inner lives become “shapeless,” and we become susceptible to what is presented to us by powerful commercial forces that have taken the place of traditional cultural authorities.⁴ To be attentive, on the other hand, is the first step in claiming our humanity, our agency and self-determination as human beings. We choose what to pay attention to, and, in a very real sense, this determines what is real for us; what is actually present to our consciousness. By contrast, distraction and fragmentation reveal an ethical void at the center of our existence, prompting Crawford to call for an “ethics” and “ascetics” of attention for our time, grounded in a realistic account of the human mind.⁵

Crawford’s previous book was an essay on the importance of labor, lamenting the loss of manual competence in digital cultures, which, he believes, have distanced human beings from actual tools and the physical world those tools were designed to engage. Unsurprisingly, his proposal for an “ethics” and “ascetics” of attention is similarly focused on participation in a skilled craft or practice, an activity that requires the craftsman to grapple directly and attentively with, and thus to be fully present to, objective reality.

Being Attentive

Without wishing to minimize the importance of skilled craftsmanship (which the Holy Mountain has been practicing and supporting throughout its long history), I would like to focus on the logically prior moment of “attentiveness” itself, independent of any (logically sequent) activity for which it might be deemed necessary or useful. As we shall see, attentiveness offers us a profound and effective response to our modern culture of organized distractions. To be sure, the “ethics and ascetics of attention” that Crawford is seeking are central to Orthodox anthropology and moral psychology, namely: the practice of “attentiveness” (προσοχή) or “attending (*or* giving heed) to thyself” (προσέχειν σεαυτῷ).⁶

This phrase—which is only superficially related to the Socratic injunction to “know thyself” (γινῶθι σαυτόν)⁷—occurs in various forms in the New Testament, but is in fact derived from Deuteronomy 4:9: “Attend (*or* Give heed) to thyself, and keep thy heart diligently” (πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ καὶ φύλαξον τὴν ψυχὴν σου σφόδρα), or, alternately, from Deuteronomy 15:9: “Attend to thyself, that there be no hidden, iniquitous word in your heart” (πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ μὴ γένηται ῥῆμα κρυπτὸν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου ἀνόμημα).⁸ The phrase, which is an ethical imperative, has a long and rich history, from which only a few examples can be cited here.

³ Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (New York, 2015), 5. Here, Crawford acknowledges his debt to Simone Weil, “Attention and Will,” in ead., *Gravity and Grace* (London, 2008), 116-22.

⁴ Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, 6.

⁵ Ibid., 7, 15.

⁶ The various translations of προσέχειν reflect the multiplicity of English translations of Scripture, which offer valuable nuances of meaning: “Be careful,” “Beware,” “Take care,” “Take heed,” “Attentively observe yourself,” etc. The Greek word προσοχή is derived from προσέχειν (πρὸς + ἔχειν), which in its basic sense means to hold to, to turn to or towards something; and thus to take heed, attend, devote oneself to, etc. Note that the Suda, s.v., glosses «προσοχή» as «νηφαλισμός».

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, in his sermon “On Those Who have Fallen Asleep,” fleetingly identifies the two sayings (GNO 9:40); as does (pseudo-?) John of Damascus, *Sacra Parallela* (PG 95:1049), although the identification is obviated by the differences between Christian and Hellenic anthropology; cf. John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton, 2012), 326-41 (= “Plotinus’s Theory of the Human Person”).

⁸ Compare Luke 17:3 (προσέχετε ἑαυτοῖς); Luke 21:34 (προσέχετε δὲ ἑαυτοῖς); Acts 5:35 (ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλῖται, προσέχετε ἑαυτοῖς); and Acts 20:28 (προσέχετε ἑαυτοῖς καὶ παντὶ τῷ ποιμνίῳ, ἐν ᾧ ὑμᾶς τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον ἔθετο ἐπισκόπους ποιμαίνειν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ Θεοῦ).

In the fourth-century *Life of Antony* 3.1, we are told that Antony’s first ascetic practice, which he undertook before entering the desert, was to “attend to himself.”⁹ Antony’s younger contemporary, Basil of Caesarea, wrote what is likely the first homily devoted exclusively to Deuteronomy 15:9 (“On the Words, Give Heed to Thyself”).¹⁰ Though the *Life of Antony* does not describe the practice of attentiveness in any detail, Basil describes it at length. Far from mere external “self observation,” and having nothing to do with any kind of solipsistic self-absorption, “attentiveness” is comprehensive in scope, being at once: (1) the awakening of the rational principles that God has placed in the soul; (2) vigilant stewardship over the movements of the mind, which govern the movements of the body and society as a whole; (3) the awareness of the mind’s (or soul’s) priority over the body, and of the beauty of God over sensory pleasure; (4) an engagement with reality and a rejection of mental fantasies; (5) self-examination and the refusal to meddle in the affairs of others; and (6), not least, the very knowledge of God, insofar as the “self” is the image of God, a connection with which Basil concludes the entire sermon: “Give heed, therefore, to thyself, that you may give heed to God” (πρόσεχε οὖν σεαυτῷ, ἵνα προσέχης Θεῷ).¹¹

The practice of attending to the self, firmly established by the fourth century, remained central to Christian anthropology and ethics. Subsequent generations of writers and practitioners developed the concept, generally aligning attentiveness with cognate practices such as “stillness” (ἡσυχία) and “vigilance” (νήπις).¹² In this more comprehensive form—already

⁹ *Vita Antonii* 3.1: «αὐτὸς γὰρ πρὸ τῆς οἰκίας ἐσχόλαζε λοιπὸν τῇ ἀκκήσει, προσέχων ἑαυτῷ καὶ καρτερικῶς ἑαυτὸν ἄγων» (ed. G.J.M. Bartelink, SC 400:136); cf. *ibid.*, 91.3, where Antony on his deathbed tells his disciples: “Live as though you were going to die each day, attending to yourselves, and remembering the exhortations you have heard from me” (Καὶ ὡς καθ’ ἡμέραν θνήσκοντες ζήσατε, προσέχοντες ἑαυτοῖς καὶ μνημονεύοντες ὧν ἠκούσατε παρ’ ἐμοῦ παραίνεσεν) (400:368). Note that the phrase and corresponding practice are well attested in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

¹⁰ PG 31:185-98. A foundational essay on the inner life, Basil’s homily is found in later Byzantine and post-Byzantine “Philokalic” collections, such as Lavra M 54 (which Paul Géhin calls a “Filocalia bis”). See also Ephraim graecus, *Eἰς τὸ Πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ* (ed. K.G. Phrantzoles, vol. 2 [Thessaloniki, 1989], 142-98). According to Rufinus and Cassiodorus, Origen is said to have written four homilies on Deuteronomy, which have not survived.

¹¹ Cf. Basil, Letter 2: “Prayer is to be commended, for it engenders in the soul a distinct conception of God. And the indwelling of God is this: to hold God ever in remembrance, firmly established within us” (Εὐχὴ δὲ καλὴ, ἢ ἐναργὴ ἐμποιοῦσα τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐννοιαν τῇ ψυχῇ. Καὶ τοῦτό ἐστι Θεοῦ ἐνοίκησις, τὸ διὰ τῆς μνήμης ἐνιδρυμένον ἔχειν ἐν ἑαυτῷ τὸν Θεόν) (LCL 1:16).

¹² See, for example, St. Nikephoros the Solitary (d. 1340), *On Watchfulness and Guarding the Heart*: “Some of the saints have called attentiveness the guarding of the intellect; others have called it the custody of the heart, or watchfulness, or noetic stillness, and others something else. All these expressions indicate one and the same thing” (Τὴν μὲν προσοχὴν τινὲς τῶν ἁγίων νοὸς τήρησιν ἔφησαν, ἄλλοι δὲ, καρδιακὴν φυλακὴν, ἕτεροι δὲ νῆψιν, ἄλλοι νοερὰν ἡσυχίαν, καὶ ἄλλοι ἄλλως. Τὰ δὲ πάντα ἐν καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ δηλοῦσιν) (*Φιλοκαλία* 4:26; English translation taken from *Philokalia* 4:204). Nikephoros goes on to define “attentiveness” as: (1) the sign of true repentance; (2) the soul’s restoration; (3) hatred of the world; (4) return to God; (5) rejection of sin; (6) recovery of virtue; (7) unreserved assurance that our sins are forgiven; (8) the beginning and presupposition of contemplation; (9) the revelation of God to the intellect; (10) serenity of intellect; (11) the subjugation of thoughts; (12) the palace of the mindfulness of God; (13) the stronghold that enables us patiently to accept all that befalls us; and (14) the ground of faith, hope, and love. See also Hesychios, *On Watchfulness* 115: “If you wish to be in the Lord ... with all your strength pursue the virtue of attentiveness—that guard and watch of the mind, that perfect stillness of heart and blessed state of the soul when free from images” (Εἴπερ ἐν Κυρίῳ θέλεις ... προσοχικὴν ἀρετὴν πάση δυνάμει μέτελθε, ἣ ἐστὶ νοὸς φυλακὴ, νοῦ τήρησις καὶ τελείωσις καρδιακὴ γλυκειὰς ἡσυχίας, ἀφάνταστος μακαρία τῆς ψυχῆς κατάστασις) (*Φιλοκαλία* 1:158; *Philokalia* 1:182); and the anonymous *Ἐκλογή ἀπὸ τῶν ἁγίων Πατέρων περὶ προσευχῆς καὶ προσοχῆς* (*Φιλοκαλία* 4:373-75), which is also found in PG 147:828-32, under the name of Kallistos Telikoudis.

suggested by Basil—it was given a foundational role in Christian life, and was ultimately considered a necessary presupposition or pre-condition for salvation.¹³

The extraordinary emphasis given to attentiveness is explained, not simply because the human mind is prone to distraction, but because the disintegration of our inner life began precisely with the fall, when humanity separated itself from God. “Distraction,” from this point of view, has rightly been called “the original sin of the mind.”

The notion of the primal transgression as a fall from attentiveness into distractions is a central element in the theology of the fifth-century writer, St. Diadochos of Photiki: “Divine knowledge teaches us that our natural perceptive faculty is single, but that it split into two different modes of operation as a result of Adam’s disobedience.”¹⁴ Created with a single, simple, and undivided consciousness, the fall shattered the integrity of the self into two conflicting activities, one drawn to divine realities, and the other dragged outward into the surface appearances of the visible world through sense perception, and subject to a process of ongoing fragmentation.

We find similar views in the writings of St. Gregory of Sinai (d. 1346), who argues that the human mind, created in a state of rest, became agitated and distracted when it fell from grace by choosing corporeal sensation over God, and subsequently found itself lost and wandering among the things of the world.¹⁵ St. Gregory Palamas, perhaps alluding to teaching of St. Gregory of Sinai, states that: “A great teacher has said that after the fall, our inner being naturally adapts itself to outward forms,” and urges the reader to “attend to himself,” citing Deuteronomy 15:9 directly.¹⁶

Forgetting God and grasping at the world, we become subject to unhealthy desires and addictive behaviors, driven by a continuous preoccupation with and pursuit of nothing. Being fixated on the superficial appearances of things, we have no awareness of their deeper meanings or mutual relatedness, but seek only that part of an object or person that can temporarily satisfy our desire for pleasure. Habitually surrendering to our irrational drives and impulses, the mind becomes enslaved to sensations (bodily or psychological); we splinter into isolated fragments, leading double and triple lives, being self-divided into numberless, unrelated acts, so that our pursuit of pleasure contributes, not to the unity of the self and the world, but to the disintegration and disorganization of both. Divided into unrelated acts of

¹³ See, for example, Peter of Damascus, *The Guarding of the Intellect*: «Χωρίς δὲ προσοχῆς καὶ ἐργηγόρσεως τοῦ νοῦς ἀδύνατον σωθῆναι ἡμᾶς» (*Φιλοκαλία* 3:30).

¹⁴ Diadochos of Photike, *On Spiritual Knowledge* 25: «Μίαν μὲν εἶναι αἴσθησιν φυσικὴν, αὐτὴ ἢ τῆς ἀγίας ἡμᾶς γνώσεως ἐκδιδάσκει ἐνέργεια, εἰς δύο δὲ λοιπὸν διὰ τὴν παρακοὴν τοῦ Ἀδάμ διαιρουμένην ἐνέργεια» (*Φιλοκαλία* 1:241; English translation, *Philokalia* 1:259, modified); cf. Maximos the Confessor, *Ambigua* 45.4 (ed. Constat, DOML 2:197).

¹⁵ Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines* 60: “The source and ground of our distractive thoughts (λογισμοί) is the fragmented (διαρθεῖσα) state of our memory. The memory was originally simple and uniform (ἀπλῆ καὶ ἐνοειδής), but as a result of the fall its natural powers have been perverted: it has lost its recollectedness in God and has become compound (σύνθετος) instead of simple, diversified (ποικίλη) instead of uniform” (*Φιλοκαλία* 4:39; *Philokalia* 4:222, modified).

¹⁶ Gregory Palamas, *In Defense of Those who Practice a Life of Stillness* (= *Triads* 1.2): «Ἐπεὶ δὲ καθάπερ τις τῶν μεγάλων περὶ ταῦτα λέγει, τοῖς ἔξω σχήμασι πέφυκεν ὁ ἄνθρωπος συνεξομοιοῦσθαι μετὰ τὴν παράβασιν» (*Φιλοκαλία* 4:128; English translation, *Philokalia* 4:338); cf. Hesychios, *On Watchfulness* 172: “Woe to what is within from what is without” (Οὐαὶ τῷ ἔσω ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξω) (*Φιλοκαλία* 1:168; English translation, *Philokalia* 1:193).

irrational sensation, the mind receives only the fleeting impression of something finite and isolated from everything else.¹⁷

This condition has been diagnosed and described by Orthodox spiritual and ascetic writers, who call it the “scattering” or “dispersal” of the mind. For example, Niketas Stethatos, the disciple of St. Symeon the New Theologian, contends that: “To the extent that our inner life is in a state of discord and dispersed among many contrary things, we are unable to participate in the life of God. We desire opposing and contrary things, and we are torn apart by the relentless warfare between them, and this is called the ‘discord’ of the mind, a condition that divides and destroys the soul. As long as we are afflicted by the turmoil of our thoughts, and as long as we are ruled and constrained by our passions, we are self-fragmented and cut off from the divine Unity.”¹⁸

Yet, if attentiveness is the answer to the dilemma of human fragmentation and disintegration, the aim is not a return to a presumed Edenic form of consciousness, but rather to the grace of the Holy Spirit, placed in our hearts at the time of our baptism. This sacramental focus is central to the spiritual theology of Diadochos, for whom healing begins with the gift of the Holy Spirit, while the duality of the fallen self is unified through the invocation of the Jesus Prayer.¹⁹ It follows that the primary motivation for the practice of inner attention, the purpose of turning inward and entering the heart, is to encounter the indwelling Holy Spirit, a principle that was consistently and indeed systematically reaffirmed by the later Byzantine Hesychasts.²⁰

We find essentially the same teaching in Scripture. The Prodigal Son left his home and went into a faraway place, where the Gospel says he “dispersed” (or “scattered”) his “substance” (διεσκόρπισεν τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ) (Lk 15:13). On one level this means that he squandered all his money, but the deeper meaning is the wealth of the soul, our spiritual inheritance, since our “substance” is the spirit that God has placed within us, and in which, through Holy Baptism, He has planted His own grace, clothing us in “our original garment of glory” (cf. Lk 15:22), and “sending forth His own Spirit into our hearts” (Gal 4:6). But when we separate ourselves from this grace, we lose our spiritual unity and become fragmented.

Conclusion

The fallen human mind is fragmented, prone unceasingly to distractions, and scattered across a troubled infinity of disconnected thoughts and sensations. Our minds are always elsewhere than our bodies. Rather than working to alleviate this constitutive weakness, we have built a culture of organized distractions, aiding and abetting the mind in its fallen condition. It can be argued that the computer itself is a fallen mind, a powerful extension of our own dubious desires, created after our own image. Lingering unregenerately in a realm of illusions;

¹⁷ For these remarks, I am indebted to the work of Fr. Dumitru Stanilaoe, *Orthodox Spirituality* (South Cannan, 2002), 93.

¹⁸ Niketas Stethatos, *On Spiritual Knowledge* 16-17 (*Φιλοκαλία* 3:330; *Philokalia* 4:144). For the sake of brevity, I have combined the central ideas of the two chapters.

¹⁹ Diadochos of Photike, *On Spiritual Knowledge* 77-80 (*Philokalia* 1:279-82).

²⁰ Cf. Gregory of Sinai, *On the Signs of Grace and Delusion* 1 (*Philokalia* 4:257); and Kallistos and Ignatios, *Μέθοδος καὶ κανὼν σὺν Θεῷ ἀκριβῆς* 1, 4-6 (*Φιλοκαλία* 4:196, 199-201). The doctrine has much older roots in writers such as Mark the Monk, *On Those who Imagine they are Justified by Works* 56, 92, 118 (*Philokalia* 1:130, 133, 134-35); and Maximos the Confessor, *Questions to Thalassios* 6 (CCSG 7:69-71); and is conveniently summarized by St. Nikodemos, *Hand book of Spiritual Counsel* (Mahwah, 1989), chap. 10.

mesmerized by the images flitting about on our computer screens, we become “dull, predatory flies buzzing on the chamber window,”²¹ desperate to consume all the futility of the world.

Yet we are not the predators, but the prey. We are not the users of information technologies and social media, but rather are being used, manipulated, and exploited by them. In our culture of distractions, public and private spaces are saturated with technologies designed to arrest and appropriate our attention; our interior mental lives, like our bodies, are merely resources to be harvested by powerful economic interests. (Crawford suggests that distractibility is to the mind what obesity is to the body.) Our focus, then, should not be on technology and digital culture alone, but on the interests and motivations that guide their design and promote their dissemination into every aspect of our life.

Throughout its long history, Christianity has often been subservient to the prevailing political and economic structures, forgetting that the Gospel is not derivative of human culture, but generative of a new way of life. We need to recover the power of the Gospel as a counter-cultural force, not with the aim of destabilizing society, but in order to create life-affirming communities. We need to rediscover, not simply that our faith and vocation to holiness set us apart from the world, but that they also engender a new, alternative world; not a virtual reality, but the reality of virtue.²²

In order to realize our calling, attentiveness must be our fundamental attitude and ethos. Without attentiveness there is no prayer, and without prayer, there is no communion with God, no participation in divine life. The practice of inner attention, of descending with the mind into the heart, is both an activity and a way of life that locates us in authentic existence, that is, in our relationship to God. This is why attentiveness is so often said to be equivalent to the recollection of God, the conscious awareness of the grace of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. Taking heed of, and attending to, ourselves is the most effective method for reclaiming ownership of our self-determination from those who wish to take it from us. Transfigured by grace, attention will discover new objects of attention, because it will have its source in a new subject, no longer conformed to the form of the world, but transformed in the renewal of its mind (Rom 12:2), possessing and possessed by the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16).

²¹ A line adapted from Emily Dickinson (d. 1886), “How Many Times These Low Feet Staggered” (= poem no. 238, published posthumously in 1890).

²² On which, see the insightful study by C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford, 2010); and John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, 2006).