In its many manifestations, for example, as “alertness,” “mindfulness,” “attentiveness,” “attending to” another in solicitude, “being watchful,” even “being suspicious,” attention unarguably plays a central role in our lives: It is essential for carrying out our projects (from business affairs to educational pursuits and sport related activities); it is vital for our dealing with others and the establishment of community; and it is fundamental for spiritual and religious awareness and practice (e.g., prayer and meditation). Today, we have even gained an experiential clue to the importance of attention in our lives via negativa, that is, by our experience of its very negation— not merely through inattention, divided attention, and distraction— but by what is known today as “attention deficit disorder.”

Attention belongs to our common, everyday field of experiences; arguably, everyone at least has been or is attentive to some degree or other. Nevertheless, the very phenomenon of attention has seemed to elude our attention. How are we to get a foothold on paying attention to attention?

There have been two major philosophical approaches to the study of attention: (A) empirical–psychological and (B) philosophical– phenomenological.1

(A) At the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, many thinkers sought to understand the nature of consciousness and both directly and indirectly addressed the issue of attention (e.g., Fechner, Wundt, Stumpf, Lipps, Ribot, Bradley, and within the pragmatic tradition, James).2 In these instances, attention was primarily, though with some exceptions, examined as a mental response to a stimulus on the part of an object. There is a distinctive line of thought that is heir to this tradition, namely, the area of cognitive and empirical psychology as well as neurobiology. Theorists in these disciplines, to their credit, make attention a theme of investigation and strive to understand the internal dynamic of attention as such in order to give its proper theoretical underpinnings. Often a set of assumptions were in play in these approaches3; attention functions like a search-beam or a spotlight illuminating a thematic field4; attention is like an “attentional window;”5 there is a quantitative gradient in attention that could define good or poor attention in the visual field, and by implication, normal and pathological consciousness.6 We would characterize this approach as an objective third-person perspective.
(B) There is another approach to attention particular to the phenomenological tradition (e.g., Husserl, Scheler, Merleau-Ponty, Gurwitsch). The phenomenological approach takes experience as its starting point, and does so by describing how attention is lived-through. First-person (subjective) and second-person (intersubjective) perspectives tend to characterize this approach.

The essays that make up this special edition on attention work primarily within the latter perspective. They were occasioned by a series of phenomenological “work groups,” organized and directed by Natalie Depraz and Anthony Steinbock, and held over a period of two years in Carbondale, Illinois in the US (2001) and in Paris, France (2002).

Here is a sampling of questions that often guided our investigations into the structure of this experience: What does it mean to be attentive? What constitutes “attention” – it is a long held focus, a glance? Does being attentive to others mean the same thing as being attentive to things? What is (are) the motivation(s) in becoming aware of things or others? Is there a limit to how long one can hold one’s attention on something? Are we able only to be attentive to one thing at a time, or are we able to focus on two or more things at once? How is one present to oneself in attentiveness? What happens when we reflect on attention and become attentive to attention itself? Is the philosophical practice itself an attentive one, and if so, what kind of attentiveness is phenomenological reflection? At what point does inattention or distraction arise? How is the origin of distraction given? How can one become attentive without fixating on something?

To explore these and similar questions, we engaged in new readings of Husserl, we presented essays on the phenomenology of attention, we offered and participated in workshops on attention, undertook descriptive practices that brought to the fore the matter of attention, and we attempted this from first-person (subjective), second-person (intersubjective), and to some extent integrate third-person (objective) perspectives.

The handful of articles assembled here are representative of this project. We gratefully acknowledge Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and the Collège International de Philosophie for their generous support of these cooperative endeavors.

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Notes

1. There are, of course, other approaches to the phenomenon of attention that we do not treat here, for example, those cultivated within various religious and spiritual traditions.