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Paying Attention: Philosophy as Dissenting Therapy for the Information Age

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Thank you for paying attention. In a world saturated with information, this is a lot to ask and to offer. This essay's aim, however, is to dissent from these rules. Put simply, I am not asking you to 'pay attention'. Instead, my aim is to point out the contingency of a grammar that, just as it prepares you to pay attention, also prepares you to conceive of attention in crudely economic ways: as a resource, capital, commodity, investment, or deficit.¹

Consider these words from David Foster Wallace:

There are, as it happens, intergenre differences that I know and care about as a writer, though these differences are hard to talk about in a way that someone who doesn't try to write both fiction and nonfiction will understand. I'm worried that they'll sound cheesy and melodramatic. Although maybe they won't. Maybe, given the ambient volume of your own life's noise, the main difference will make sense to you. Writing-wise, fiction is scarier, but nonfiction is harder – because nonfiction [is] based in reality, and today's felt reality is overwhelmingly, circuit-blowingly huge and complex. Whereas fiction comes out of nothing. Actually, so wait: the truth is that both genres are scary; both feel like they're executed on tightropes, over abysses – it's the abysses that are different. Fiction's abyss is silence, *nada*. Whereas nonfiction's abyss is Total Noise, the seething static of every particular thing and experience, and one's total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, etc. (2012, 302–303)

A key question driving this essay is this: Where does philosophy sit in relation to Foster Wallace's 'intergenre differences'? Is philosophy 'fiction' or 'nonfiction', or something irreducible to either? If philosophy is irreducible, is it 'scarier' or 'harder' than both? Why, if its 'irreducibility' can be posed at all, is philosophy something Foster Wallace, himself a philosophy graduate (Max 2012), sees no difficulty in omitting? Is philosophy something so downright difficult or negligible that it has no obvious role to play in making sense of the abysses that threaten our contemporary 'felt reality'?

Part one takes up Foster Wallace's term 'Total Noise' to refer to the predicament of attention in our contemporary Information Age of networks, feedback, social media, search engines and ubiquitous

computing (Castells 2010). I argue that if the capacity to ‘pay attention’ is in crisis today, this may have to do with issues concerning how the topic is framed. A core problem, I suggest, is that we are inheritors of an engrained crudely economic grammar that frames attention as a resource or form of capital to be paid.

Part two takes up ‘silence’. If paying attention is in crisis today, the capacity to be silent emerges as both a threat and opportunity. It is a threat because it stands to let the loudest and most distracting statements and narratives shape the world’s accepted character; it is an opportunity because it allows us to recognise and step outside the terms of the crudely economic grammar. Put simply, what happens when we dissent to the terms of a narrative that frames attention as something to be ‘paid’? Can we then also dissent to a view of it as a resource to be mined, leveraged, exploited or exhausted, or as a form of capital to be invested, and that can, correlatively, be subject to deficits, monetised, leveraged and exploited by marketing? What happens when we start telling other stories about attention, according to different grammars, in terms of a capacity to be ‘nourished’, ‘drawn’, ‘dedicated’, ‘demanded’, ‘defended’, ‘devoted’, ‘attracted’, or to act in ‘harmony’, ‘dissonance’ or ‘concert’?

Part three returns to Foster Wallace’s ‘intergenre differences’:

[T]here are, as it happens, intergenre differences that I know and care about as a writer, though these differences are hard to talk about in a way that someone who doesn’t try to write both fiction and nonfiction will understand (302-303)

These remarks can come across as condescending and exclusive, to the point where they risk obscuring Foster Wallace’s remarks on the abysses of ‘Total Noise’ and ‘silence’. What is significant about these abysses, I will argue, is that they do not merely threaten the lives of writers; rather, they threaten the ‘ambient volume’ of everyone connected to the Information Age.

There are, on the reading to be developed in this essay, two good reasons why philosophy does not feature in Foster Wallace’s discussion of ‘intergenre differences’. First, philosophy is not a ‘genre’ at all: it is a practice or ‘way of life’ (Wittgenstein 2009, 86; Hadot 2001). Specifically, philosophy is a form of critical, creative, and therapeutic practice, dedicated to working through distortions and inconsistencies in the narratives we tell ourselves about the world. Second, this means that philosophy is the type of practice capable of refiguring our understanding of what counts as ‘nonfiction’ and ‘fiction’, and of refiguring why these categories matter. Before they are ‘genres’ for writers and critics, nonfiction and fiction are ways of turning the ambient volume of our lives up and

down, and this is why they matter today: because oscillations between ‘Total Noise’ and ‘silence’ have perhaps never been greater than in the contemporary ‘Information Age’.

1. Total Noise

If the capacity to ‘pay attention’ is in crisis today, this may have to do with an engrained tendency to conceptualise attention in crudely economic terms. I make the case for this by detecting signs of this tendency across different contexts in this part, including continental philosophy, marketing, cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind.

In *Suspensions of Perception*, Jonathan Crary writes:

I am interested in how Western modernity since the nineteenth century has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for ‘paying attention’, that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli. That our lives are so thoroughly a patchwork of such disconnected states is not a ‘natural’ condition but rather the product of a dense and powerful remaking of human subjectivity in the West over the last 150 years. Nor is it insignificant now at the end of the twentieth century that one of the ways an immense social crisis of subjective dis-integration is metaphorically diagnosed is as a deficiency of ‘attention’ (2001: 1)

These remarks indicate that Crary is performing a ‘genealogy’ of attention, as befits influences drawn from Nietzsche and Foucault (Crary 1990, 2014; Foucault 1991). In this ‘masters of suspicion’ vein of philosophy, ‘genealogy’ is the attempt to tell the hidden history of the apparently obvious.

Crary’s work has applied genealogy to topics including attention (2001), the changing status of the observer (1991), and sleep (2014). Nevertheless, we might still suspect his handling of attention of being insufficiently genealogical. The problem is this: Crary wants to tell us the hidden history of attention, but, in doing so, he underplays the fact that framing attention in economic terms also has a history.

Granted, Crary does appear to highlight certain ‘economic’ characteristics of the history of attention: by using scare quotes for ‘paying attention’, and by describing ‘deficiency’ as a ‘metaphor’. But such allusions do not amount to an investigation of the hidden history of the economic grammar. They are placeholders for it. Indeed, they might even be interpreted as a kind of ‘insurance policy’: absent a thoroughgoing investigation into the grammar of paying attention, they seem to indemnify Crary from any criticism that he was unaware of the need for such an investigation.

But at least Crary was conscious enough of the economics of attention to get caught up in this problem. In contrast, the 'economics of attention' often seem to be so engrained in everyday language as to go unnoticed. Consider a few examples from diverse contemporary contexts.

In 2004, Patrick Le Lay, chairman of the French television channel TF1, stated:

There are many ways to speak about TV, but [from] a business perspective, let's be realistic: ... TF1's job is helping Coca-Cola, for example, sell its product.... [I]n order for an advert to be seen, it is necessary for the brain of the viewer to be available. The vocation of our programmes is to render the [viewer's brain] available: ...to amuse and to relax it in order to prepare it..., between two adverts. What we sell to Coca-Cola is available human brain time. Nothing is more difficult than obtaining this availability. This is where permanent change is located. We must always look out for popular programs, follow trends, surf on tendencies, in a context in which information is speeding up (2004; see further Stiegler 2004; Stiegler and Ars Industrialis 2008)

When Le Lay states 'let's be realistic', is this a throwaway figure of speech or an ontological assertion about the primacy of a 'business perspective', or both? When he states 'between two adverts', what does this say about the status of TF1's programmes, and where do these sit in relation to the marketing narratives employed by companies like Coca-Cola? Why, when referring to what TF1 seeks to 'render available' to these companies, does Le Lay mention the 'brain', not attention? Is this because he considers attention to be too allusive or ethereal, or because he implicitly adopts a crudely 'neurological' grammar that refuses to consider attention as something more comprehensively somatic? To what extent does Le Lay's reference to 'always [looking] out for popular programmes' presuppose a hunter's vigilance, and to what extent does that grammar converge and diverge from neurological and economic grammars?

My aim in posing this glut of questions is self-consciously rhetorical: to draw attention to the extent to which a crudely economic grammar acts as their discursive condition. The contention to be developed, in this sense, is this: critical questions like these are only possible because they issue from the same discursive register as Le Lay's comments. That is, they are possible because, syntactically, they 'speak the same language'.

Let's now switch contexts, to cognitive psychology. The aim in doing so is to observe the ways in which the ostensibly everyday grammar of paying attention is *trans-disciplinary*. That is, the aim is to observe the ways in which this grammar gets carried across from contemporary everyday discourse into discrete theoretical contexts and specialisms.²

Consider these remarks from Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, a thinker famous for conceptualising states of attentional 'flow':

Attention is the medium that makes information appear in consciousness. The human organism is limited to discriminating a maximum of about seven bits – or chunks – of information per unit of time [T]he duration of such an attentional unit [is estimated] to be on the order of $1/18^{\text{th}}$ per second; in other words, we can become aware of 18×7 bits of information, or 126 bits of information, in the space of a second. Thus a person can process at most in the neighbourhood of 7,560 bits of information each minute. In a lifetime of 70 years, and assuming a waking day of 16 hours, this amounts to about 185 billion bits of information. This number defines the limit of individual experience. Out of it must come every perception, thought, feeling, memory, or action that a person will ever have. It seems like a large number, but in actuality most people find it tragically insufficient (1988: 18)

My aim in citing these remarks is not empirical: it is not to either accept or dispute Csikszentmihalyi's figures. Instead, my aim is to highlight the ways in which a crudely economic grammar acts as a background condition for the possibility of his remarks as a whole.

Consider what defines a subject's attention for Csikszentmihalyi: a lifetime quantity of data, which is to say the data 'resources' or 'capital' the subject is capable of investing. From here, questions proliferate. For whom, for instance, could the lifetime figure of attention of '185 billion bits' really count, since no attentive subject would appear either willing or capable of quantifying the phenomenology of their attention in this way? For what type of 'quantified subject' would this putative figure 'define the limit', if not a fabricated and purely theoretical subject, in Kierkegaard's sense of the 'average man' (1978: 62) or Heidegger's sense of '*Das Man*' (2005: 163-168)? And why does Csikszentmihalyi state that 'every perception, thought, feeling, memory, or action that [such] a person will ever have' must come 'out of' this quantity of 185 billion bits? If we are talking in the (vexed) terms of 'inner' and 'outer', wouldn't it make more sense to say that such items come 'into attention'?

We have again reached a surfeit of rhetorical questions. Again, however, the suggestion is that these are extensions of the same grammar conditioning Csikszentmihalyi's remarks. As in the case of Le Lay, the contention is that, if these questions can be posed at all, it is because they issue from the same set of discursive conditions as Csikszentmihalyi's remarks.

Observe, further, that Csikszentmihalyi's remarks exhibit clear tendencies towards obfuscation and contradiction. This emerges most clearly in his comment that 'most people' find the putative lifetime

quantity of 185 billion bits ‘tragically insufficient’. This tends towards obfuscation because it is a matter of high statistical improbability that ‘most people’ have reflected on attention in such an artificial way, and it tends towards contradiction because it implies that, to find one’s quantity of attention ‘tragically insufficient’, one would have to be *dead*, a state which, according to criteria employed by all current natural science, does not appear to involve the capacity for conscious attention. The point here is that Csikszentmihalyi’s remarks take up an ostensibly ‘everyday’ grammar that frames attention in crudely economic terms, before proceeding to build elaborate and inconsistent metaphysical fictions upon it.

Consider, further, some instances of how such a grammar inflects contemporary philosophy of mind. In his *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* article on attention, Christopher Mole writes:

Bottleneck metaphors have traditionally guided the theories that attempt to locate the cognitive resources that operate only on attended stimuli, but it has been *spotlight* metaphors that have guided the theories that attempt to say which features of a stimulus determine whether attention is being paid to that stimulus at any given moment. The central idea suggested by the spotlight metaphor is that the determinant of whether or not a stimulus is attended is that stimulus’s location (2013. Original emphasis)

While reflecting on dominant metaphors that have traditionally framed philosophy of mind’s theories of attention (‘bottleneck’ and ‘spotlight’), Mole uses an even more dominant metaphor drawn from a more pervasive ‘everyday’ way of referring to attention: the economic metaphor that frames attention as something to be paid. In the process of being attentive to the metaphors that shape his theoretical field, then, Mole comes across as more or less oblivious to the metaphors conditioning this field on a less specialised level.

My aim in highlighting this is not to claim that Mole is being insufficiently rigorous. Unlike Crary, he is not engaged a ‘genealogical’ investigation that would benefit from digging deeper into the rhetorical/grammatical background of the metaphor of attention as ‘payment’. Instead, the point is that Mole’s discussion is not syntactically arbitrary: while he could have referred to attention in different ways (in terms of ‘being attentive’, or of ‘drawing’ or ‘giving’ attention), the fact remains that he did not, and instead had recourse to the metaphor of attention as ‘payment’. This, I suggest, is because although this metaphor is ultimately contingent, recourse to it is a matter of deep cultural and syntactic probability and habit.

Let me close this part by relating these reflections to Foster Wallace’s remark that ‘[t]oday’s felt reality is overwhelmingly, circuit-blowingly huge and complex’, generating a kind of ‘Total Noise’.

The suggestion this essay will go on to develop is that the conditions for this perception may fundamentally have to do with an engrained tendency to frame attention in terms of the crudely economic grammar highlighted in this part. This is because framing attention as an 'asset' or as 'capital' to be invested is, contrary to the indemnity we saw Crary's genealogical account take out at the beginning of this part, not a matter of 'mere metaphor' to be alluded to. Rather, this engrained way of relating to attention has real pragmatic consequences because it carries the corollary that attention is framed as something that can become 'toxic', that can be 'exploited' or 'leveraged', and that can 'crash' and become 'bankrupt'.

2. Silence

The aim for this part is to consider what 'being silent' might mean today, in the midst of ostensible 'Total Noise'. Reflecting on the history of philosophy, it might be quipped that philosophers going back to Plato have often found the world too 'distracting' or 'noisy'. To torture metaphors, silence has often appeared as a kind of philosophical 'austerity measure': a way of stepping back from the world's 'idle chatter', to a metaphysical Ivory Tower or philosopher's armchair (Nietzsche 1998; Rorty 1991). To further explore this, consider two famously austere approaches to 'silence': from the early Wittgenstein, and Blanchot.

In his 1929 'Lecture on Ethics', Wittgenstein states:

This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolutely valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. (2014: 51)

Although positioned at a turning point in Wittgenstein's development, these remarks are governed by the famously austere grammar underpinning the *Tractatus*, a grammar which gave rise to that text's notorious closing words:

7. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. (2001: 89)

In both these extracts, Wittgenstein is thinking through the apparent meaninglessness of language that can be deemed "meaningful" in any logical sense – that is, the incapacity of meaningful statements to say anything on profound issues such as the 'absolutely good' or 'absolutely valuable'. This, according to *Tractatus*' 'picture theory', is because the only truly meaningful statements are contingent ones that could be contradicted or falsified, and which therefore do not relieve the desire to say something meaningful in the sense of 'necessary' or 'profound' (2001: 89). According to the

grammar orchestrating both extracts, then, the only possible recourse is silence. At most, Wittgenstein conjectures, we can hope that the absolutely good or valuable might 'show' itself, in quasi-mystical experiences that could, per definition, not be discussed in any meaningful sense (2001: 89).

Although from a different tradition, Blanchot is another philosopher who appears to indulge this austere recourse. Reflecting on Herman Melville's famous story 'Bartleby the Scrivener', he writes:

"I would prefer not to..." the negative preference, the negation which effaces preference and which effaces itself in doing so.... Language silencing itself by perpetuating itself. (1986: 145)³

The question arising here concerns whether the reflections of philosophers like Wittgenstein and Blanchot can emerge as 'silent' in any other sense than that of politically quietistic, elitist, or conservative. Can the limits of language be affected immanently, from within the walls of language's 'echo chamber', in such a way that we can stop perceiving silence as a philosophical 'austerity measure'?

At the risk of further torturing metaphors, perhaps the part we really need play in order to dissent to ostensible 'Total Noise' today is not that of the austere philosopher, but that of the accountant with sensitive ears; that is, someone capable of observing another, more literal, but paradoxically more forgotten, sense of the term "auditing": as *listening*.

The suggestion here is that we need to develop the capacity to 'audit' ways of framing attention that, in the face of the 'Total Noise' generated by the crudely economic grammar of attention, show up as silences within this grammar. If such talk of 'auditing silences' seems too allusive, let me put it differently: what we are after is a way of recognising overlooked conditions for the possibility of the 'attention economy'.

Let me try to demonstrate what such a practice might involve. Recall Csikszentmihalyi's remark that 'we can become aware of ... 126 bits of information in the space of one second' (1988: 18). Here, in belated response, is a speculative question: are there types of attention of which we, as conscious psychological subjects of the type quantified by Csikszentmihalyi, are unaware?

Consider the following summary of a 2013 experiment to simulate the biological processing time of the human brain, by the Fujitsu 'K' supercomputer⁴:

It took 40 minutes with the combined muscle of 82,944 processors in K computer to [simulate] 1 second of biological brain processing time. While running, the system ate up about 1 PB of memory (Whitham 2013).

It could be objected that this summary exhibits journalistic hyperbole. This objection, however, is precisely to the point: what it draws out is the fact that this summary and Csikszentmihalyi's account exhibit isomorphisms in terms of their grammatical conditions. For example: both seek to quantify living processes (consciously directed attention in Csikszentmihalyi's case, 'biological brain processing time' in that of the summary), and both frame these in terms of more or less elaborate metaphysical fictions (a 'lifetime quantity of data' in Csikszentmihalyi's case, zoomorphisms that frame K computer in terms of 'muscle' and 'eating' in that of the summary). By virtue of these isomorphisms, both sources can, I think, be said to participate in the general grammar of the 'economy of attention', as discussed in part one.

Despite these isomorphisms, however, the sources point towards very different conclusions on what constitutes 'attention'. Csikszentmihalyi holds that we can become aware of 126 bits of information in 1 second. In contrast, the summary holds that 1 second's worth of "biological brain processing" requires 1PB of computing processing power to simulate. 1PB of processing power is 10^{15} bytes, a figure that would, assuming consistency between Csikszentmihalyi's conception of a 'bit' and that current in computer science, have to be multiplied by 8 to arrive at the number of bits involved in 1 second's worth of biological processing time. This gives an astronomically stark difference in the orders of magnitude between the types of living process these two sources seek to quantify: 126 bits in the case of Csikszentmihalyi, and $(10^{15} \times 8)$ bits in that of the summary.⁵

The point about these figures, despite the huge differences between them, is that there is a case for qualifying both as attempts to quantify 'attention'. First and foremost, this is because the sources share the grammatical isomorphisms discussed above. Ontologically speaking, and more profoundly, however, it is also because the type of consciously aware attention discussed by Csikszentmihalyi must, absent a highly anachronistic Cartesian conception of mind, require 'biological brain processing' as a condition of possibility. In other words, 'biological brain processing' time must function as a necessary condition upon which attentive awareness of the type discussed by Csikszentmihalyi supervenes. From here, a case emerges for treating 'biological brain processing' time as a form of attention of which we are not consciously aware.

Suppose we call this 'unpaid attention'. By this, I mean forms of attention to which we are not 'paying attention'. This may give this concept an unfortunate appearance of paradox or wordplay. It

is therefore necessary to unpack it: what I mean to highlight are necessary conditions, such as ‘biological brain processing time’, that must be in place in order for what we qualify as ‘conscious’ or ‘aware’ attention to supervene, but which too narrow a focus on attention as consciousness or awareness distracts us from recognising. In this sense, unpaid attention is like ‘unpaid labour’: it refers to conditions that contribute and work towards making the economy of attention possible, but that are exploited and not recognised as part of it by virtue of an historically engrained focus on attention as consciousness or awareness. Insofar as unpaid attention features as a necessary condition, it is inside the economy of attention; to the extent that we are distracted from recognising it, however, it appears as outside this economy, illicit.

Recognising unpaid attention in this way carries a threat and an opportunity. The threat is that it should simply show up as an untapped resource for further exploitation. In the face of an increasingly competitive contemporary economy of attention ostensibly tending towards ‘Total Noise’, the threat is that unpaid attention, so quantified, will merely show up as a new frontier for capturing and instrumentalising attention, framed as a ‘supply’ or ‘resource’. The opportunity, in contrast, comes when we dissent from this grammar to read unpaid attention as a form of attention that may be irreducible to it: not as a new frontier for exploitation, but as a liminal concept that forces us to reflect on the relationship between language and economics *tout court*, and to invent and experiment with new grammars that problematise this relationship. Instead of simply making do with the terms of a crudely economic grammar that may have become too distracted, noisy, inflated or bankrupt to make sense of the predicament of attention today, the very conceivability of something like ‘unpaid attention’ points towards opportunities for dissent that frame attention differently.

Consider Foster Wallace’s remark that ‘[f]iction’s abyss is silence, *nada*’. The suggestion of this part is that silence need not be viewed as a philosophical ‘austerity measure’. Rather, we can develop a dissenting practice of ‘auditing silences’. This practice is not as paradoxical as it sounds, and does not amount to wilful jargon, obfuscation or contradiction; it is not, in other words, a case of a ‘mere metaphor’. Here, ‘silence’ refers to necessary conditions that do not register according to the frame set by a dominant and crudely economic grammar of attention that may have become too ‘total’ and ‘noisy’, yet which we can dissent from.

3. Philosophy as Dissenting Therapy

The aim for this part is to argue for a conception of philosophy as ‘dissenting therapy’. By this, I mean that, before it is anything like a literary genre comparable to ‘fiction’ or ‘nonfiction’,

philosophy is a critical, creative, and therapeutic practice, capable of exposing the contingency of grammars that have become ossified, toxic or counter-productive for our forms of life. I will work through four questions: 1.) Does recognising the contingency of the grammar of 'paying attention' do violence to language *per se*? 2.) What is the difference between 'therapy' and 'dissenting therapy'? 3.) How does 'dissenting therapy' stand in relation to the later Wittgenstein's sense of 'therapy'? 4.) What alternative grammars can be used to engage a topic like attention?

Early in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein states:

25. ... Giving orders, asking questions, telling stories, having a chat, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing (2009: 16)

Accepting Wittgenstein's contention that language can be as much a part of our natural history as 'walking, eating, drinking, playing', a question arises: is the grammar of paying attention as much a part of our *language* as 'giving orders, asking questions, telling stories, having a chat'?

It makes manifest sense to talk about attention in economic terms today, and, as Crary drew attention to in part one, this way of making sense has a history.⁶ Does this recognition therefore mean that I am advocating the violent 'suppression' or 'removal' of a part of the natural history of our language? Consider another famous passage from *Philosophical Investigations*:

11. Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. – The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities) (2009: 9)

The point I have been trying to make in this essay is not that 'paying attention' should be violently discarded from the toolbox of language. Instead, it should be put back into the box, to be compared with the other tools. My contention, in this sense, is not that we should seek to suppress or excise the grammar of 'paying attention'. Rather, we should seek to situate and contextualise it in terms of its natural history, to see whether or not it is the best or only 'tool' for making sense of attention. Instead of perpetrating violence against the 'natural history' of language, I am advocating that we draw on this history to ameliorate distortions that approaching attention with one dominant tool may have done to our sense of the topic.

Let me now turn to the second question. Commonly, but not universally, the grammar that has evolved as part of the natural history of therapeutic practices across different human cultures involves the prescription of a 'regimen'. Examples of this range from the forms of *hypomnemata* used by Stoics and Epicureans (Foucault 1988), through to contemporary courses of drugs,

programmes of exercise, or diaries for recording moods in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). My contention here is that philosophy also involves a 'regimen', and that it is such as to qualify it as a form of potentially 'dissenting' therapy. This is because the regimen philosophy prescribes involves the critique, clarification and creation of grammars: that is, the practice of diagnosing where faults, inconsistencies and illusions arise by virtue of extant ways of making sense of the world, and of proposing new ways of making sense as a dissenting corrective.

As Nietzsche and Deleuze have remarked, this philosophical regimen does not necessarily aim at the palliation, consolation, or normalisation of the individual (Nietzsche 2001; Deleuze 2004). On the contrary, philosophy can, by questioning extant values and ways of making sense, sweep the individual away in the morally ambiguous current of what Nietzsche called 'great health' (2001). This, I suggest, is what renders philosophy a form of potentially strong 'dissenting' therapy. To be sure, philosophy can, as per Boethius, take on the aims of consolation (2008); more fundamentally, however, its effects appear much more ambivalent.

Let me now turn to the third question, concerning how this connects to the later Wittgenstein's sense of 'therapy'. This is important, because although I have had recourse to Wittgenstein throughout this essay, the sense of therapy discussed in this part may seem too strident in light of a more piecemeal sense of the term that his work wanted to preserve.

Remark 133 of *Philosophical Investigations* states:

We don't want to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of [*unerhörter*] ways The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophising when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. – Instead, a method is now demonstrated by examples, and the series of examples can be broken off. – Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a single problem. There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were (2009: 56–57. Original emphasis)

It is possible to read these remarks as subtly gesturing towards the beginnings of an alternative grammar for dissenting philosophical therapy. The key term in this sense is 'unheard-of', which is a translation of the German *unerhörter*. Crucially, this term also involves the sense of 'hearing'. Wittgenstein's choice of this term may seem slight, but his use of it is significant insofar as it gestures towards a switch in sensory modalities away from sight, the influence of which can noticeably be detected in the *Tractatus*' 'picture theory'. Considered in terms of hearing,

Wittgenstein's injunction not to seek logical completeness becomes part of a different grammar and takes on new aspects: it can, for example, be figured as an injunction not to turn what is 'unheard' in language into 'noise'; that is, an injunction not to turn what is implicit, silent or unspoken in language into an object of theoretical 'chatter'. Far from comprising a trivial way of restating a sense of propositions that would remain consistent across these changes, this switch is critically and conceptually revealing in that it provides a way of reshaping sense.

How, in response to the fourth question posed above, might such a grammar of 'hearing' be taken further, in ways that dissent from the crudely economic grammar discussed in part one? Let me start with a bad pun: what consequences follow for how we relate to attention today by framing it, not as something to be 'paid', but as something to be 'played', in the sense of music?⁷

Apparently slight or trivial, this shift in fact introduces a different grammar and conceptual toolbox for framing attention, and different metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and aesthetic considerations thereby. Instead of framing attention as a resource, supply, or form of capital to be mined, exploited or captured, it allows us to frame it as something potentially 'resonant', 'dissonant', 'tonic', 'in concert', 'harmonic', 'creative', 'processual', 'rhythmic' or 'polyrhythmic'; further, it provides an alternative standard against which to assess the successes and failures of the crudely economic model of attention.

Metaphysically, the shift introduces a different set of categories, elements and attributes. Are acts of attention better conceived on the model of 'compositions' or 'motifs'? Are acts of attention better conceived as the work of 'soloists', or 'ensembles', played in conjunction with other actors, human and nonhuman? Are musical compositions infinitely iterable, and how does this compare with acts of attention? Are musical compositions ever properly 'finished', and how does this compare with acts of attention? Why have musical vocabularies and metaphors traditionally figured in the history of metaphysics (Schopenhauer, 1969)? Accepting that musical compositions can themselves also be framed in crudely economic terms, are there aspects of these compositions that are analogous to the 'unpaid labour' of 'unpaid attention'?

Epistemologically, we introduce a new framework for justifying beliefs about attention. Are 'acts' of attention properly speaking 'acts' at all, or do they involve a passive capacity for synthesis and receptivity on the model of attending to music, in line with what Mole has called the 'cognitive unison' theory of attention (2011)?⁸ How useful are the results of centuries of music theory for understanding attention? Under what conditions are we correct or incorrect to assume that playing or listening to music either aids or hinders attentiveness? What paradoxes follow from framing

attention in terms of music? Is a concept such as ‘cognitive dissonance’ simply a figure of speech, and, if so, why did ‘dissonance’ suggest itself in this case as appropriate for framing the phenomenon under consideration?

Ethically and aesthetically, we introduce a new framework for considering the value of attention. What, for instance, is the role of music in generating moods and ambiances that prime us for acts of attention and concentration? What are the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of music that suggest music therapy as a candidate for treating mental illnesses, neurodevelopmental disorders, and behavioural disorders such as attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)? As music becomes a cheap and ubiquitous commodity in the Information Age, is this confirmation of the pervasiveness of a crudely economic grammar, or an indication of its bankruptcy, insofar as it contributes to rendering certain industries unsustainable? To what extent are music and attention to be framed in terms of part of a conception of ‘everyday aesthetics’ (Saito 2007)? Why does music suggest itself as a pliable vehicle for promoting crudely economic values, as in marketing and advertising?

These questions may seem too speculative. To pursue a musical metaphor, they may simply come across as ‘distorting’. If so, that is fine, because the point is not to suggest the grammar of ‘attention as music’ as a straight up replacement for the grammar of ‘paying attention’. Instead, there are two points: to suggest this grammar as an articulate and nuanced alternative for certain circumstances, and to draw attention to the fact that it is not a distant future possibility for a highly specialised idiom yet to come. On the contrary, the grammar of attention as music is a way of framing attention that has developed alongside that of ‘paying attention’ as part of what Wittgenstein called the ‘natural history’ of our language, in a kind of ‘counterpoint’ to it. In the midst of ostensible Total Noise, this alternative grammar, perhaps alongside innumerable others, is relatively silent in comparison to that of ‘paying attention’. The point, however, is that auditing it (in whichever sense you please) may have strongly therapeutic consequences for making sense of the predicament of attention today, somewhere between silence and Total Noise.

Notes:

¹ This essay is an attempt to develop Wittgenstein’s sense of ‘grammatical investigation’ (2009: 47).

² The extent to which this amounts to *ideological* complicity is beyond the scope of this essay (See Dean 2005; Brown 2015).

³ Bartleby is the eponymous character of Melville's 1853 novella 'Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.' His dissenting phrase 'I would prefer not to' has been the focus of celebrated analyses of the intersection between politics and speech acts over the past twenty years or so (Deleuze 1998; Agamben 1999; Smith 2013; Berkman 2011).

⁴ The K computer is the fourth most powerful supercomputer in the world (Fujitsu 2015; Top 500 2015).

⁵ The point here is not empirical. I am not concerned with whether these figures are correct. I am concerned with the shared grammar that recommends them as impressive or significant.

⁶ An important related issue that I have not explored in this essay is the extent to which the grammar of 'paying attention' is linked to the syntax of English as the still dominant (but waning) language of the Internet (See Oustinoff 2012).

⁷ See also Citton 2014.

⁸ Mole uses the metaphor of an orchestra to explain his theory of 'cognitive unison' in his *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* article on attention (Mole 2013).

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