

“Public Vices: The Individual and Collective  
Dimensions of Civic and Epistemic Vices”  
Genova, 1-2 October 2021

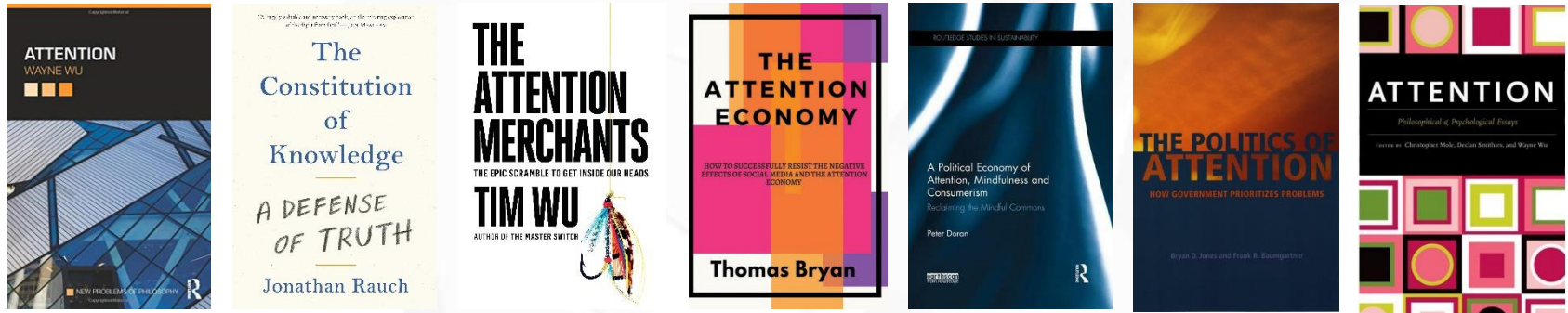
**On the measure of attention.**

**Epistemic vices from the totalitarian era to the  
digital public sphere**

Paolo Monti

October 2nd, 2021

# Attention, new media and democracy



Renewed consideration for the ethical, social and political relevance of attention.

Disintermediation, remediation and social media as grand technologies of attention.

A promise of transparency and participatory democracy...

...or an environment favorable to authoritarians, populists, conspiracy theorists?

Systemic problems, bound to how the public sphere is structured and regulated.

But, also, a matter of ethics of citizenship, of virtues and vices in public conduct.

# Question

What philosophical frame to connect  
attention, individual conduct and  
collective political unfreedom



# Simone Weil on Attention

from *On the abolition of all political parties*



The **goal of a political party** is something vague and unreal. If it were real, it would **demand a great effort of attention**, for the mind does not easily encompass the concept of the public interest. Conversely, the **existence of the party** is something concrete and obvious; it is **perceived without any effort**.

It is impossible to examine the frightfully complex problems of public life while **attending to, on the one hand, truth, justice and the public interest**, and, on the other, **maintaining the attitude that is expected of members of a political movement**. **The human attention span is limited** – it does not allow for simultaneous consideration of these two concerns. In fact, whoever would care for the one is bound to neglect the other.

**True attention is a state so difficult for any human creature** that any emotional disturbance can derail it. Therefore, one must always endeavour strenuously to **protect one's inner faculty of judgment** against **the turmoil of personal hopes and fears**.



# Hannah Arendt on Attention

from *Responsibility and Judgement*

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Cliches, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of **protecting us against reality**, that is, **against the claim on our thinking attention** which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. **If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted**; the difference in **Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.**



This total absence of thinking attracted my interest. Is evil-doing, not just the sins of omission but the sins of commission, possible in the **absence of not merely “base motives” (as the law calls it) but of any motives at all**, any particular prompting of interest or volition? [...] Is our **ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly**, dependent upon our faculty of thought?

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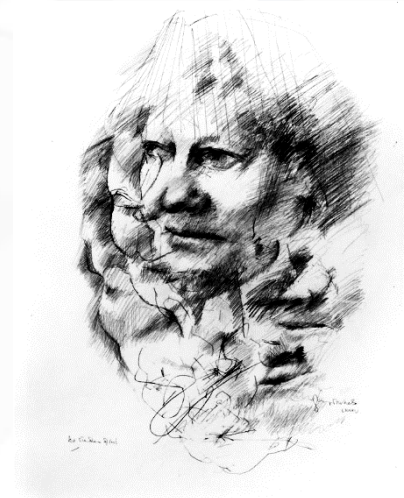
# Iris Murdoch on Attention

from *The Idea of Perfection*



I have used the word 'attention', which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a **just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality**. I believe this to be **the characteristic and proper mark of the moral agent**. [...]

I would like on the whole to **use the word 'attention' as a good word** and use some more general term like 'looking' as the neutral word. Of course psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary [...]  
**Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion.**



# Weil, Arendt and derealization

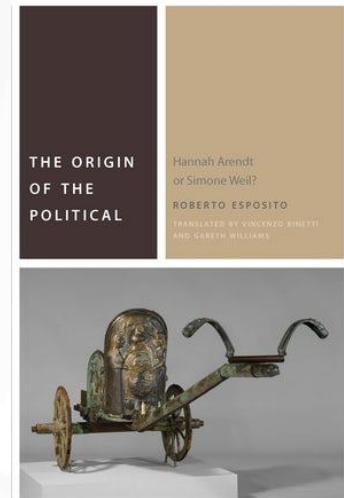
from Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political*

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For both [Weil and Arendt], this machine tends toward the annihilation of human presence via the double yet combined procedure of the **derealization of that which exists**, in conjunction with the **ideological construction of a world that is so false that the real appears to be unbelievable**. [...]

**Both authors explain that this is made possible through the arrest of thought**— Weil expresses it more specifically in terms of the **faculty of attention**— which brings about a collapse in the boundary between good and evil that is specifically designed to render each category the mirror image of the other.

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# Two vices and a virtue



There are three kinds of disposition, then, two of them vices, involving excess and deficiency respectively, and one a virtue, namely, the mean [...]

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1108b11



“Arendtian” vice of lack of attention

“Attentiveness” as a public epistemic virtue

“Weilian” vice of excess of attention

## Inattention and fake news

Pennycook and Rand (2020; 2021) argue that inattention is the main factor behind the diffusion of fake news.

Activating people’s attention on the accuracy of their beliefs is shown to reduce their contribution to the online circulation of misleading info.

## Belief corroboration and polarization

Robert Talisse’s (2019; 2020) on civic polarization and corroboration: enhanced belief intensity and extremization with no change in justificatory resources.

Echo chambers as mechanisms that prioritize affiliation over information and deliberation (Cinelli et al. 2021).



# Public vices and risk of domination

In a **non-domination perspective** (Pettit 1997; 2012) both tendencies render the citizen subject to the arbitrary influence of individuals, groups and institutions that exert their mastery through strategies of distraction and corroboration. **Both vices erode the conditions for free and autonomous social agency** as the citizens lose discursive control.

To be in **discursive control** (Pettit 1997: 70) one must have:

~~“the ratiocinative capacity to take part in discourse”~~

Inattention -> weakened ability to be reason-responsive, able to reflect on reasons.

~~“the relational capacity that goes with enjoying relationships that are discourse-friendly”~~

Corroboration -> weakened ability to participate in discourse and be recognized as a discursive authority.

**Exceeding or falling short of what is right in the exercise of attention** can be construed, in Aristotelian terms, as a pair of **opposite epistemic vices** that expose the citizen to an **increased risk of being dominated**.

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