

The Internet Kestrel: Iris Murdoch and Attending Online

Potentially addictive technology (i.e. the general group of things designed to capture and keep attention, e.g. personal devices, websites, social media, etc.) should be evaluated by its effects on attention.

§1 Murdochian Attention

Iris Murdoch thinks attention is key for moral growth. Two well-known examples:

- a. *Unselfing*, by looking at a majestic kestrel
- b. A mother (M) ‘looking again’ at her daughter-in-law (D), to test her prejudiced view

From these we can draw (at least) two aspects of attention

- a. Being disrupted by something outside of oneself strengthens an ability to attend to others (and to reality)
- b. By intentionally attending to something (or someone), a person moves away from consoling fantasy or a distorted view, and moves closer to reality

§2 Evaluations of Technology

Timothy Aylsworth (2020) argues manipulation by advertisements could be beneficial if the manipulation is in line with personal goals.

- a. As an example, Ricardo informs a media site that he wants to see more diverse points of view online, and the site then pairs his goal with other tracked preferences.
- b. While Ricardo’s agency may not be compromised in this story, his attention abilities are not protected nor supported

Addictive technology is shown to have many harms to people, beyond attention (Castro & Pham, 2020; Aylsworth & Castro, 2021; Alfano, Carter & Cheong, 2018).

Many of these evaluations focus on protecting agency, not attention, yet the examples show how attention is at risk.

Shannon Vallor (2018) argues that regular technology use is often detrimental to skills of attention, and attention is important for cultivating virtue.

- a. If people are not learning attentive skills in everyday situations, when *do* they get the “chance to practice these moral habits and cultivate these virtues?” (Vallor 2018, 162).

§3 Conclusion

The design of potentially addictive technologies does not support attention growth or attention practices as conceived by Iris Murdoch.

Technology could be designed to support attention rather than taking advantage of psychological weaknesses.

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