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ABSTRACT

The widespread compromising of attention currently taking place in our digital age is, at least in part, a theological issue necessitating a theological response, which invites an examination of the human person in relation to God. Familiar within the biblical narrative and throughout Christian tradition, I suggest that when the role of *steward* functions as the operative paradigm for humans, the claims made upon their lives have profound implications for attending within the digital age. More specifically, the steward's attention becomes a tangible expression of authority and accountability in representation of God's image to the rest of creation. In pursuit of a faithful representation of God within our digital context, the paradigm of steward orients the human person towards a virtuous moral growth of attention, while placing their attention in a relation of proper fit within reality's design. Though the concept of attention is often neglected in discussions of Christian stewardship, adopting the steward as an operative paradigm has the potential to guide us in attending to what matters most, even in the face of the challenges and predatory manipulations brought about by our digital technologies.

Becoming Stewards of Attention:

A Theological Appeal

A Thesis

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

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For Caleb and Emily

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Our attention is being compromised. On one hand it is nothing new. Throughout history, attention has been subject to human physiological hardwiring and its concomitant limitations. Yet whereas our physiology has changed very little over time, the context in which we must attend has shifted dramatically. Never has human attention faced challenges such that our present digital age provides. Driving those challenges are ubiquitous and pervasive technologies intentionally designed to capture our attention toward predetermined ends, ends rarely in alignment with our own stated values. To the degree we utilize these digital technologies, they will inevitably shape us into their image, crafting a culture recognizable for its attentional deficiency. More nefariously, the widespread usage of these technologies is effectively severing our connections to one another, the very connections that provide structure, coherence, and meaning to our lives. As we lose those connections, we lose authoritative claims on how we ought to attend, lose training for how to attend well, and lose our grasp on what is worth our attention, paving the way for total capitulation to technology's entrancing attentional capture. With little reason to believe substantive changes to our digital context will come anytime soon and only sporadic motivation to overcome the enticements of our technological offerings, we are left to reckon with our current situation. Somehow, amidst our digital world with all its challenges and changes and manipulative grabs at our attention, we must insist on attention's reclamation, lest its degradation co-opt our individual and communal

values. Amidst such a bleak prognosis, what hopeful avenue exists for attention's reclamation?

Avenues of Attentional Reclamation

One way to answer this question is to focus on our digital context and the technologies driving its definition. In fact, doing so is crucial if we are going to pursue more healthy systems of interaction between our technologies and ourselves.¹ However, we can also answer the question by turning the spotlight upon ourselves, rather than on our technologies, which is the approach taken by the authors bearing the most influence on my own proposal. These authors understand our attentional limitations, obligations, capacities, and aims. In particular, the works of Simone Weil and Matthew Crawford serve as the basis of my own engagement with this topic.

Simone Weil, the twentieth-century French philosopher, concerns herself with the moral aspect of attention, suggesting that attention is a product of desire more than of will. Rather than trying to force ourselves to attend to that which we think matters and in ways that we think are helpful, we must undergo a transformation of our desires, a process which requires moral development. According to Weil, our external circumstances need not be ideal in order to ideally attend. The locus for attending

1. Many recent works address the design and ethics of our digital technologies, along with their impact and influence upon individuals and the culture at large. See James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Dirk Nicolas Wagner, "The Tragedy of the Attentional Commons – In Search of Social Rules for an Increasingly Fragmented Space," *Journal of New Frontiers in Spatial Concepts* 7 (2015): 31–41; Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

Additionally, the Center for Humane Technology has gathered a variety of resources along these lines. They strive to "reframe the insidious effects of persuasive technology, expose the runaway systems beneath, and deepen the capacity of global decision-makers and everyday leaders to take wise action" through avenues of education, advocacy, and practical initiatives. They can be found at Center for Humane Technology, accessed February 14, 2022, www.humanetech.com.

properly is the attender. As we allow desire to propel attention, we will be rewarded with the truth, with reality, and with the good we seek. By waiting and watching, regardless of the situation, desire will guide our attention toward its proper ends. Unless we develop the moral character requisite to such waiting, our attempts to force such changes will fail to produce genuine attention and keep us from the fruit of our efforts.

Another twentieth-century philosopher and the author of *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew Crawford, recognizes that despite the many obstacles presented by modern day technologies, it is our conceptions of the self that betray our ability to attend well and to what matters. He argues that we have inherited a paradigm—those root metaphors structuring our self-understanding, animating our values, and sanctioning our behaviors—that treats the world beyond our heads as suspect. For him, our attentional capacities are crippled from the start, so that if we want to truly reclaim our attention, we must take a serious look at the paradigms operating across modern culture. His suggestion for attention's reclamation is that rather than compromising attention, our external environments facilitate it. If we engage reality on its own terms (instead of through the lens of incessant skepticism inherent to our inherited paradigm) and with discipline, we can become more attentive to what matters. In short, by submitting ourselves to reality's design, and devoting ourselves to certain disciplines, our attention can be honed toward fulfilling ends.

These two philosophers have profoundly impacted how I conceive of the problem of attention in our digital age, along with what a promising reclamation of that attention might entail. Both authors present astute assessments of our attentional problem and compelling attempts at reclamation. By putting their respective works alongside one

another, in which a moral attender is properly situated within the design of reality, new spaces are created for ways these two conceptions might be held together. For instance, what if the attentional degradation we experience at the hands of our digital technologies is, at least in part, also a theological issue? And if so, how might the works of Weil and Crawford fit in with a theological response?

Theological Issue and Theological Response

For humans, attention is a zero-sum exchange; once it is given to something, there is no getting it back. If our digital technologies excel in capturing our attention, they position themselves as competitors to anything or anyone else of value that makes claims on our attention. Filtered through the lens of theology, this is deeply problematic.² For instance, Christians adhere to the Greatest Commands: to love God with all their hearts, souls, and strength, and to love their neighbors as themselves.³ Requisite to love is attention. Yet the attention needed for loving God and others is being commandeered by our digital technologies. How can we expect to love God or others well when our attention is being compromised? Jesus says, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other; or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”⁴ Might the same logic carry over to our relationships with digital technologies, so effective at gaining our devotion? Since the nature of these incredible digital technologies is such that they can captivate our attention to the point

2. I concern myself here with Christian theology. No doubt other religious theologies can be developed with a view toward the reclamation of attention; however, I deal exclusively with Christianity in this project.

3. See Jesus’s words in Matt 22:36–40; all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

4. Matt 6:24.

that they start to shape us in their image, it is no stretch of the imagination to conceive of such obsessive devotion as a form of worship. The compromising of attention by means of our digital technologies is deeply theological because those technologies compete for our attentional devotion, a devotion that Christians confess belongs primarily to God.

A theological issue necessitates a theological response. Given that our attentional context is unavoidably the digital age, comprised by technologies so omnipresent and integrated into society that to imagine a world without them is fantasy, rather than suggesting a change in our digital technologies or a dismissal of them altogether, I want to address the human person engaging with those digital technologies. Along those lines, I propose a re-imagining of the operative paradigm that informs our attention. As it stands, the most prevalent paradigms apprising our modern Western culture are conceived around the autonomous individual who is free to do as they wish, subject to no authority save for themselves. Unfortunately, such paradigms too often undermine substantive acts of attention, both because no checks exist upon the person's attention aside from the movements of their own determined will, and because the nature of those paradigms cast a net of skepticism over authoritative structures of reality; thus, attending to the world fails to guarantee a reception of that which is true and real. Therefore, over the course of this project, I will suggest a theologically grounded alternative paradigm, that of the steward, which is capable of situating humans in proper relationship with God the Creator, in proper relationship with the way creation is designed, and in proper relationship with our own role and function within this creation. The steward is a concept familiar enough to be recognizable, yet foreign enough to be disregarded. However, when theologically conceived, with God the Creator serving as the commissioning agent and

human beings serving as his stewards, then profound possibilities emerge for how we, both individually and collectively, may attend in ways commensurate with such pursuits as loving God and others. This project aims to make such a case.

The Basis of the Steward Paradigm

If the steward paradigm is to hold any sway upon our attention, the basis for the paradigm must first be developed. What is a steward? A steward is one who holds in trust that which rightfully belongs to another. Intrinsic to the role is a relationship whereby one in a position of power and authority willingly endows a chosen representative with a portion of their own authority. This is done in order that the commissioning agent's will may be faithfully represented in particular places and situations, even when that agent may not be physically present. In this way, the steward is invited to cooperate in the commissioning agent's agenda, to participate in their envisioned intentions while enjoying the benefits of increased authority to bring those intentions into reality. This empowered authority is balanced by a steward's accountability for how they use the authority given to them; that is, do they act in the manner and for the purposes prescribed? If the steward's representation is accurate and aligned with the will of the one who commissions them, they will be considered good and faithful stewards, fit to receive greater measures of trust and authority. If instead the steward believes themselves to be the source of their authority or chooses to use that authority to bring about their own will and agenda, they will be regarded as wicked and foolish stewards, who may then be stripped of that authority by the one who gave it to them. Therefore, stewards are those who balance an empowered authority with a responsible accountability in representation of another.

Methodology

In order to make a case for the steward as an operative paradigm for addressing attentional degradation, I primarily utilize philosophy and theology. Philosophy provides many worthwhile questions and insights into the problem of attentional degradation. In this project, Simone Weil elucidates the moral aspects of attention for individuals, while Matthew Crawford takes a wider tact and examines the issue through a social lens. These philosophical vantages help inform a way of being in the world that I gather together in theological categories. Drawing on existent works of scholarship on the steward, from such theologians as Douglas John Hall and T. A. Kantonen, as well as the Christian Scriptures, I develop a theological rationale for the steward and then apply the paradigm to attention in the digital age.

Structure of the Project

The problem animating this project is that our digital technologies are actively compromising the attention necessary for fulfilling our theological commitments. I propose that by theologically re-imagining who we are as humans through the paradigm of steward, we might better align our attention with those commitments. To achieve that goal, Chapter 2, “The Impacts of Digital Technology on Attention,” focuses specifically on how our digital technologies facilitate the compromising of our attention, as well as the negative effects degraded attention has upon our interpersonal relationships. In Chapter 3, “Approaches to Attentional Reclamation,” I draw on the work of three writers from three different disciplines in order to interact with the ways that other thinkers approach the problem of attentional degradation. Drawing on the work of Simone Weil,

Matthew Crawford, and Donella Meadows, I engage with their relevant thoughts in order to build my own case for a theological approach and to question its viability. My suggestion of a theological remedy for compromised attention first requires a theological rationale. Therefore, in Chapter 4, “Constructing a Theological Framework for the Steward,” I provide the theological framework for what it means to be a steward in relation to God, the divine Creator and describe how we might know the ways that our representation of him holds bearing for our lives. Chapter 5, “Stewarding Attention,” applies the theological framework specifically to our attention within our digital context and explores the claims made upon our attention by this theologically developed paradigm of the steward. In the conclusion, I reflect upon the arc of this project, elucidate my contribution to scholarship, and propose areas of future research as regards the stewarding of attention.

CHAPTER II

THE IMPACTS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY ON ATTENTION

Introduction

We live in a time in which we experience unique and pressing challenges on our attention. Devices providing instant connection with nearly everyone and everything happening across the globe rest unassumingly in our pockets. The internet amplifies our ability to share an opinion, regardless of our qualifications to share it or the truth and merit of the content. Even the ways we communicate and relate to one another on a personal level are re-organizing around the mediated medium of screens, where millions of digital veils obscure the levels of accountability and engagement required for genuine connection. With each new evolution, our modern technologies press upon the limitations of our physiological hardwiring, exacerbating the degree to which our attention is compromised. So quickly is the technological landscape shifting that by the time scholars can research its effects on us, the conclusions become nearly obsolete.

Escape from our digital technologies is difficult and in many ways disadvantageous. Yet an unregulated embrace of them is overwhelming, distracting, and somehow averse to what it means to be human. Caught in the middle, we must learn to attend in this digital context under conditions that will continue to prove challenging and complex. While not every personal and societal woe can be (or ought to be) attributed to the digital landscape, the current widespread experience of attentional struggle should

prompt us to explore the prominent role played by our modern digital technologies and the culture they propagate. An understanding of how our digital technologies affect the attention that is central to our lives and our relationships provides a starting point for engaging with those technologies from a human perspective.

Digital Technology and Attention

As it will play a prominent role throughout this project, the term “digital technology” requires some clarification before its relationship with attention can be explored. All references to technology that are digital in nature centers around storing and transmitting information through the conversion of that information into a numerical format, most basically ones and zeroes.¹ Digital technologies, then, are those devices and applications—mobile phones, the internet, laptops, tablets, televisions, and others—which function by using this binary computational code. Ever since their development in the mid-twentieth century, binary computing systems have had an indelible impact upon “how people communicate, learn, and work.”² The historical and ongoing transformation of individuals and societies through use of those technologies, along with the shared characteristics of those people, comprises what I refer to as “digital culture.”

With the advent of these digital technologies, volumes of information can be compressed, shared, and stored on devices that have become increasingly faster, lighter, and more versatile. These advances have provided undeniable boon for society in numerous ways: learning opportunities, social connectivity, entertainment, and cost

1. “What is Digital Technology?” IGI Global, accessed August 9, 2021, <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/back-basics-electronic-collaboration-education/7723>.

2. For a brief overview of these developments, see Elizabeth D. Schafer, “Digital Technology,” *Dictionary of American History*, Encyclopedia.com, accessed August 9, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/digital-technology>.

reduction, to name a few. Crucial to our purposes here, though, is the recognition of how these digital technologies, dealing in the currency of information, have profoundly affected our attention. This was famously articulated in 1971 by the economist and cognitive psychologist, Herbert Simon, when he said, “in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”³ While information may be abundant and access to that information easier than ever, our ability to attend to that information remains limited, placing us consistently in positions where we must choose how and to what we will attend. For all the benefit they offer, the cost of engaging with these incredible digital technologies is our finite resource of attention: the exact same currency paid out for being entertained as for pursuing what matters most to our lives.

Assaults on Attention

Attention-for-information may sound like the inevitable price to pay for living with the many advantages intrinsic to the digital age. However, what often gets obscured in the trade-off is the fact that digital technologies do not just *happen* to capture our attention in order to disseminate information, they are purposefully designed to tap into our hard-wired human physiology in order to *monopolize* our attention.⁴ Each design

3. Herbert A. Simon, “Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World,” *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 40–41.

4. The methods for tapping into human psychology and designing for behavior influence and change are being taught at places like the Stanford Behavior Design Lab, see “Behavior Design Lab,” Stanford University, accessed August 9, 2021, <https://behaviordesign.stanford.edu>. Tristan Harris, a technology ethicist, details his experience taking these courses in his TED talk, “How a Handful of Tech Companies Control Billions of Minds Every Day,” TED, talk given April 2017, https://www.ted.com/talks/tristan_harris_how_a_handful_of_tech_companies_control_billions_of_minds_e

decision has a profound impact on our attention, whether in the way it challenges our attention, the way it hijacks our attention, or the way it deliberately preys upon our attention.⁵ Regardless of the strategy, the objective of each assault is the same: achieve the most comprehensive capture of attention possible for as long as possible in order to advance a particular agenda.⁶ While it is tempting to think ourselves beyond manipulation, invulnerable to the machinations devised to dupe everyone else's attention, the philosopher Damon Young advises caution against such perceived invulnerability. He suggests instead that we "interrogate and illuminate the ways in which our attention is exploited and coerced, [in order to] to assess how it might be differently engaged."⁷ Imperative, then, to any transformation of our attention is the awareness of the threats along with an acknowledgment of our own susceptibility to them, beginning with the challenges to attention.

Our Attention is Being Challenged

Granting that challenges to attention existed in some form or other long before the digital age, aspects of this problem signal to us that this is not business as usual. The prominence of and increasing reliance upon digital technology in our personal lives and in society, the exponential nature of technological progress, and the lack of control we

very day.

5. Several technology industry insiders have banded together to bring this very issue into the light by creating *The Center for Humane Technology*. Through CHT, they have produced an award-winning Netflix documentary entitled *The Social Dilemma*, have advocated for reforms in the tech industry before Congress, and regularly speak with other experts in the field about this and other relevant topics on their podcast *Your Undivided Attention*. See CHT at www.humanetech.com.

6. Technological design and the ethics driving its makers are the central concerns of James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

7. Damon Young, *Distraction* (London: Routledge, 2014), 13.

have over technologies most of us barely understand present unique challenges to our attention. While more can be named, I want to highlight three of those challenges as aspects of the problem: the innocuous theft of our attention, the lack of regulation concerning our digital “public squares,” and the discrepancy of interests between those designing our technologies and those using them.

Technology industry insiders insist that technology is never neutral.⁸ However, not all technological design is maliciously programmed for direct attack upon our attention. Sometimes our attention is stolen from us innocently, without ill-intent on the part of the designer nor much notice from the user that an unwanted transaction is taking place. Consider, for instance, the familiar ping and buzz of a notification coming through to our devices. The notification cues us to sneak a glance at our smartwatch to see who is contacting us and what they have to say. Maybe we give a quick response or initiate a longer exchange? In any case, such an innocuous interruption to whatever task or person we were previously engaged with might cost 30 seconds of our time in that moment. Yet on average in America, each person spends an hour a day encountering distraction, bringing the time cost of distraction to around five weeks a year.⁹

It’s not just the interrupting event that steals away attention, either. Dr. Dirk Wagner, professor in Business Economics & Management at Karlshochschule International University notes that “each interruption requires some recovery time to

8. The Center for Humane Technology gives three reasons for this: 1) our values and assumptions are baked into what we build; 2) the values and assumptions of the world shape the effects of new technology, regardless of the inventor’s intentions; and 3) every single interaction a person has, whether with people or products, changes them. See “For Technologists,” Center for Humane Technology, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.humanetech.com/technologists>.

9. Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, *The Distraction Addiction* (New York: Little, Brown, 2013).

return the work previously undertaken.”¹⁰ Additionally, Gloria Mark, a professor in the Department of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine, illuminates why this is the case: “people have to cognitively reorient where they were, and this is an extra cognitive load because you have to recall, for example, where you were if you’re working on a document. What was your train of thought before you got interrupted.”¹¹ Innocuous as the notification may have been, the fact remains that attention has been effectively stolen from whatever pursuit toward which it had formerly been oriented.

External interruptions have become such a common part of daily life that we hardly need them anymore. We have internalized the process and will self-interrupt regardless of whether a device is present or not.¹² An interesting finding in Professor Mark’s research confirms that when there is a lack of external interruption, say from a phone or from email, the “internal interruptions kick in . . . as though people are just habituated to being interrupted.”¹³ In defense of human physiology, Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen note in their book, *The Distracted Mind*, that our “sensitivity to interference” (their term for distractions or interruptions taking place as a result of external or internal cues) was not born with modern technology, but is a “fundamental

10. Dirk Nicolas Wagner, “The Tragedy of the Attentional Commons—In Search of Social Rules for an Increasingly Fragmented Space,” *Journal of New Frontiers in Spatial Concepts* 7 (2015): 33.

11. Tristan Harris, Aza Raskin, and Gloria Mark, “Pardon the Interruptions,” podcast, *Your Undivided Attention*, August 14, 2019, audio, 44 minutes, <https://www.humanetech.com/podcast/7-pardon-the-interruptions>.

12. Laura Dabbish, Gloria Mark, and Victor Gonzalez, “Why Do I Keep Interrupting Myself? Environment, Habit and Self-Interruption,” *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems: Proceedings* (2011): 3127–30, <https://doi.org/10.1145/1978942.1979405>.

13. Harris, Raskin, and Mark, “Pardon the Interruptions.”

vulnerability of our brain.”¹⁴ Digital technologies exploit that vulnerability, whether they intend to or not, stealing away attention, one ping at a time.

Another profound challenge to attention in our age runs in the background of our digital “public squares,” those largely unregulated spaces we refer to as social media platforms.¹⁵ Facebook is a well-documented case. Their business model focuses on engaging as many people (deemed “users,” tellingly enough) as they can for as long as they can in order to sell advertisement space to any companies willing to pay a premium for it.¹⁶ Under this marketing conception, it is the user (specifically the user’s *attention*) functioning as the product being sold. It is a lucrative business model, given that Facebook is known to track and collect data on each user as they move around the internet (even throughout other mobile apps) in order to provide targeted ads most likely to appeal to that person.¹⁷

The ads are one thing and may even be desirable to those who, if they are going to be fed a diet of ads, may as well enjoy relevant ones. But under the guise of providing

14. Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 3.

15. See Yaël Eisenstat and Aza Raskin, “With Great Power Comes...No Responsibility?” podcast, *Your Undivided Attention*, June 25, 2019, audio, 56 minutes, <https://www.humanetech.com/podcast/3-with-great-power-comes-no-responsibility>, for an enlightening discussion on this topic between two tech industry insiders.

16. According to John Gramlich, “10 Facts About Americans and Facebook,” article, *Pew Research Center*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/01/facts-about-americans-and-facebook/>, Facebook currently has in excess of 2.8 billion monthly users, which places them in an excellent position to influence.

17. In light of the 2018 Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal centering around data collection and privacy, and detailed in *The Great Hack*, directed by Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim, January 26, 2019, documentary, 113 minutes, available on Netflix, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg promised to provide a way for users to see how Facebook was handling their data. The result is the “Off-Facebook Activity” tool, which can be found at “Off-Facebook Activity,” Facebook, accessed July 27, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/off-facebook-activity>.

relevant content, the data that Facebook gathers on a person is then curated, in ways unbeknownst to that person, to promote further engagement on their platform (naturally, with the hope of selling more through their ads).¹⁸ What this amounts to is that the content being recommended for our viewing—such as what comes across our “news feed”—is not random, not in the order it was posted, not balanced in opinion, not equally seen by everyone else on the platform, but selected and disseminated by artificially intelligent algorithms with a specific agenda.¹⁹ Facebook prioritizes and amplifies certain content in order to promote further user engagement. Substantial research reveals the type of content that engages our “bottom-up” attention, the kind of attention that happens automatically, and it is a race to the bottom of the barrel. As Tim Wu puts it, “attention will almost invariably gravitate to the more garish, lurid, outrageous alternative . . . the audience’s baser instincts.”²⁰ Wu’s comment corroborates with Facebook’s own internal research, which has shown that they have studied and verified the toxic impact their platforms (in this case, Instagram) have on segments of the population, especially teenage

18. This problem grows in importance as increasing evidence suggests that what happens online has a profound effect offline. As such, it has become an issue that has been pursued in the United States Senate for years. The video and testimonies from one of the more recent sessions can be found at *Algorithms and Amplification: How Social Media Platforms’ Design Choices Shape Our Discourse and Our Minds*, Committee on the Judiciary, hearing conducted April 27, 2021, video, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/meetings/algorithms-and-amplification-how-social-media-platforms-design-choices-shape-our-discourse-and-our-minds>.

19. One instance of this was recently detailed in *The Wall Street Journal’s* investigative podcast by Ryan Knutson and Kate Linebaugh, “The Facebook Files, Part 4: The Outrage Algorithm,” *The Journal*, September 18, 2021, audio, 28 minutes, <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/the-journal/the-facebook-files-part-4-the-outrage-algorithm/e619fbb7-43b0-485b-877f-18a98ffa773f>. Their inspection of Facebook’s internal documents reveal how Facebook’s engagement algorithms incentivized harmful, untrue, sensational, and divisive content. Furthermore, they show how attempts by Facebook’s own employees to combat the damage being done by these algorithms were repeatedly dismissed.

20. Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017), 16–17.

girls. Quoting from *The Wall Street Journal's* investigation into Facebook's internal documents, reporter Georgia Wells, Jeff Horowitz, and Deepa Seetharaman write:

For example, among teens who reported suicidal thoughts, 13% of British users and 6% of American users trace the desire to kill themselves to Instagram. And for teens who said they felt alone or lonely, 21% of U.S. teens and 18% of British teens said that that feeling started on Instagram. Another slide says that Instagram shapes the daily lives and moods of teens And the researchers are clear about this in the documents. Over and over again they report that the teens say that constant comparison on Instagram is contributing to higher levels of anxiety and depression. And the researchers don't dispute this.²¹

Surprisingly (or not), this research, which was initially shared internally throughout Facebook, did not result in any substantive change in practice or regulation. Their formula for attention-capture *works*, and interfering with the equation is, for them, out of the question. So much so that when American lawmakers called on Facebook "to do more to protect teens and for the company to share its own research into teen mental health," Facebook declined to distribute it. In a more recent push, senators Marsha Blackburn and Richard Blumenthal publicly asked Facebook to share its internal research on the impact of their platform on children's mental health, a request Facebook again declined, citing that their internal research is "proprietary" and "kept confidential to promote frank and open dialogue and brainstorming internally."²² Left unregulated, though, the track record shows how little incentive there is for Facebook, or others within the tech industry, to change their design in order to promote attentional values in line with our own.

21. See Georgia Wells, Jeff Horowitz and Deepa Seetharaman, "Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show," *The Wall Street Journal*, article, September 14, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739?mod=article_inline.

22. The exchange between lawmakers and Facebook is corroborated in Kate Linebaugh, Anastasia Vlasova, and Georgia Wells, "The Facebook Files, Part 2: 'We Make Body Image Issues Worse,'" podcast, *The Journal*, September 14, 2021, audio, 37 minutes, https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/the-journal/the-facebook-files-part-2-we-make-body-image-issues-worse/c2c4d7ba-f261-4343-8d18-d4de177cf973?mod=article_inline.

Recent testimony from Facebook whistleblower, Frances Haugen, illuminates the discrepancy of interests that perpetuate a lack of cooperation in the regulation of digital spaces.²³ Spurred by her own conscious and a recognition of the damage being done, Haugen, an ex-employee of Facebook, released a wealth of Facebook's internal documents that included how their algorithms prioritize polarizing content because it garners the most engagement from users, how their own internal research details this system's influence on political and societal instability at home and abroad, and how they are averse to investing in or incorporating the kind of safety measures that could protect people from disinformation because it would cause a decrease in revenue (even a decrease as little as 1%). Haugen's bold move in bringing Facebook's own documents into public view reveals the intent behind major tech companies to optimize user engagement for their own purposes.²⁴ Clearly, unless given incentives to change or being forced by law to do so, these major corporations will hold to practices that serve their own interests, but not necessarily the interests of those using their platforms.

Attention will continue to face challenge as long as constant interruptions become normalized, our digital public spaces are left largely unregulated with scant incentive or consequence to change, and we become apathetic to the kinds of business models that capitalize on our human physiology. And these are just a few instances highlighting how attention-for-information is not a fair nor equitable exchange. Neither should this data be dismissed as a known consequence of a person's free choice to engage with technology,

23. Haugen's full congressional testimony is located at "Facebook Whistleblower Frances Haugen testifies before Senate Commerce Committee," *C-SPAN*, YouTube video, October 5, 2021, 3 hours and 27 minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOnpVQnv5Cw>.

24. For insight and interpretation on the thousands of documents released by Frances Haugen, visit *The Wall Street Journal's* investigation page "The Facebook Files," *The Wall Street Journal*, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039>.

for any time the narrative is framed with such language, we can be sure that 1) we do not adequately understand the terms of the deal, 2) our attention is always the product being sold, and 3) the challenges to our attention are predominantly systemic in nature.

Our Attention is Being Hijacked

The physiology of our attention is comprised of top-down and bottom-up processes. Top-down processes of attention describe the chosen acts of intentional focus, such as the attention required when listening to a friend, reading a book, or learning to play guitar. Bottom-up processes of attention describe the unintentional orienting responses of attention, such as the attentional reactions we give when a waiter drops a tray of food, or we catch movement on the periphery of our vision. Both top-down and bottom-up processes are necessary, beneficial, and unlikely to change; humans are hardwired in this way. Included in our bottom-up processes of attending are automatic orientations toward anything able to engage our baser instincts.²⁵ By presenting people with certain attention-grabbing stimuli (such as cute animals, death, or scantily clad women), in certain ways (with flashing lights, movement, or loud noises), at certain times (in between purposeful mental engagements), our attention can be hijacked in a way that is difficult, if not impossible, to ignore. When that happens, we become subject to the content being presented, whether we intend to be or not, effectively forcing us to look away from other things in order to pay attention to the agenda of someone else's determining. When a person is aware that their attention has been hijacked, their experience may feel like a breach of trust. However, we are not always aware of the

25. Michael I. Posner and Charles R. R. Snyder, "Attention and Cognitive Control," in *Information Processing and Cognition: The Loyola Symposium*, ed. R. L. Solso (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1975), 55–85.

powers at play in terms of attentional hijacking, two of which stand out: the ability to influence opinions and the advantage of celebrity to exert that influence.

Sometime companies hijack attention in order to sell a product. A more nefarious requisition occurs when companies hijack attention in order to sway public opinion. In April 2017, Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts published an article that described how the Chinese government fabricated an estimated 448 million social media posts containing pro-government support from millions of fake accounts. The government's objective was to present the illusion of higher levels of support while simultaneously overwhelming the conversation in order to strategically distract its citizens from controversial issues.²⁶ With the resources available to world governments, their ability to effectively capture and control attention and then direct the conversation where they want is seemingly limitless. If restricted access and lack of transparency already provide enough distrustful fodder against governments, reports of willful manipulation of its citizens understandably places us on vigilant watch for places where our attention might be under attack.

Consider once more our interactions on social media platforms. Mark Zuckerberg, the owner of Facebook and its acquisitions WhatsApp, Messenger, and Instagram, occupies a unique position in which to influence billions of people's thoughts and actions through the design and management of these prominent digital gathering spaces.²⁷ We have already seen that Facebook is driven by a set of values that serve their own interests

26. Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margret E. Roberts, "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," last modified April 9, 2017, <https://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/50c.pdf>.

27. To illustrate this point, in *Stand Out of Our Light*, 36, James Williams draws on research stating that "Google and Facebook now comprise 85 percent (and rising) of internet advertising's year-over-year growth. And the Facebook News Feed is now the primary source of traffic for news websites."

rather than those of its users. What is further obscured from view are the billions of dollars, sophisticated Artificial Intelligence, and some of the world's brightest minds, all geared toward fulfilment of Facebook's interest. With such incredibly sophisticated and dedicated resources geared toward capturing as much attention as possible from its users, it is hardly fair to think our physiological hardwiring can or should be able to resist. And once attention is captured, regardless of the means, we are in a position to be influenced.

When a person has some recognizable degree of celebrity, their ability to combine their name with powerful tools of information dissemination, such as the internet or television, equate to an incredible ability for influencing attention. It is a fruitful concoction for the amplification of a person's reach. Within the attention economy, fame becomes veritable currency for it provides greater ability to direct attention whether to advance a personal position or cast aspersion on one's enemies.²⁸

Consider Oprah as an example. Rising from the depths of the unknown, Oprah Winfrey paved her own way through the attention industry by selling advertisers on "the lure of her own irresistible persona," and by placing her show's focus upon the "emotional, confessional" pulse that audiences craved at the time.²⁹ People were drawn in by her talent for connecting with guests and communicating in clear and uncompromising

28. This was put to particularly foul use in the rise and success of Hitler's Nazi Party. Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 108–22, describes two contributing factors along these lines: the dictator's profound understanding of how to capture people's attention *and* the radio and loudspeaker technology of the day. With the creation of the National Radio Division of the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda of the Third Reich, the implementation of a "Radio Guard" to ensure people tuned into the Führer's propaganda, and the technology to extend his reach, German citizens could hardly escape Hitler's attention-capture infrastructure. And once enough people adopted his ideology, there was nothing left but war to come against it.

29. Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 228.

ways, and they trusted her voice as a “form of public ‘moral accountability.’”³⁰ As her fame grew so did her reach, and “her enthusiasm would morph into quasi-endorsements of particular products, her magical touch performing little miracles for small companies.”³¹ So when Oprah chose Jacquelyn Mitchard’s, *The Deep End of the Ocean*, as the first book in her “book club,” her endorsement skyrocketed the number of copies sold from 68,000 to 4 million. However, she did not stop with endorsing certain products; eventually she launched her own magazine as well as a fully fledged cable network shaped in her image—OWN, the Oprah Winfrey Network. Perhaps the most consequential of all her endorsements was her backing of Senator Barak Obama for the Democratic primaries in 2007. Some suggest that her decision to do so won him, by some estimates, between 420,000 and 1.6 million votes and subsequently the nomination.³² Reflecting on the power and influence of celebrity within the context of our digital age, Wu notices how “Oprah’s great innovation was to amalgamate the ancient attention-capturing potential of a great faith with the programming function of a broadcaster, and the mass drawing power of her own celebrity. . . . by the standards of any attention merchant a potent proffer for advertisers.”³³

Clearly, Oprah exposes our own susceptibility to follow the direction of those who know how to captivate and direct our attention. However, unlike outright challenges to our attention, the hijacking of attention happens more subtly. When put to effective use

30. Eva Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

31. Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 231.

32. This statistic is quoted by Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 235 and based upon an analysis by two economists at the University of Maryland, College Park.

33. Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 231.

by those who understand human physiology, we might even happily give our attention over to those with an agenda which we might otherwise disdain. Yet when our bottom-up attentional processes are coerced, we unwittingly endow our attentional hijackers with greater and greater influence.

Our Attention is Being Preyed Upon

In the introduction to his book, *The Attention Merchants*, the Columbia University professor Tim Wu states, “there was once a time when, whether by convention or technological limitation, many parts of life . . . were sanctuaries, sheltered from advertising and commerce. Over the last century, however, we have come to accept a very different way of being, whereby nearly every bit of our lives is commercially exploited to the extent it can be.”³⁴ Wu’s thesis traces the attention industry’s identifiable arc in Western culture, beginning in the nineteenth century and advanced by those he calls “Attention Merchants.” Even his choice of moniker hints at how attention is actively treated as a commodity, able to be bought and sold, and then resold to the highest bidder. We may balk at such a notion because this process took place bit by bit, so that “what was once shocking became normal, until the shape of our lives yielded further and further to the logic of commerce—but gradually enough that we should now find nothing strange about it.”³⁵ A casual glance at commercial society may not trigger any immediate alarms for us, as we have become accustomed to the omnipresence of adverts; we have made our peace with the bargain struck between the entertainment we love and the occasional co-opting of our attention for commercial purposes.

34. Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 5. His entire book centers on the development of the attention capture industry and the strategies employed to prey upon the public’s attention.

35. Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 6.

Wu’s driving question asks, *how normal is this?* It turns out that we may neither fully understand the deal, nor would we readily consent to it if we grasped the costs of this bargain. As Wu’s historical journey through the attention industry unfolds to illuminate how we came to be where we are, attentionally speaking, one unavoidable reality surfaces: our attention is being preyed upon with ever greater efficiency in our digital age. This agenda to capture our attention is not happening by accident or chance, but is acknowledged, exploited, commodified, and pursued with vigor by “those whose very business is the influence of consciousness” and, because of this, subsequently shapes “how our lives are lived.”³⁶ As technology develops and changes, so do the strategies and abilities of the Attention Merchants who relentlessly strive toward their goals, which are more often than not at odds with our own.

One pernicious example of predatory action upon our attention makes use of an attention-gathering concept known as *clickbait*, that is, internet content intentionally crafted to attract attention and drive engagement (through mouse clicks), which often takes the form of shocking or intriguingly headlined articles paired with provocative pictures.³⁷ With the rise of “journalism” websites such as *The Huffington Post* or gossip blogs a la Perez Hilton, those who master the art of clickbait prove that they can capture attention by driving engagement toward their own purposes—predominantly financial in nature although also motivated by a desire to detract attention from competitors—while simultaneously changing the rules of the game. For legitimate news sites based in reputable journalism, such as *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, to keep

36. Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 6.

37. Tim Wu’s chapter, “The Rise of Clickbait” in *The Attention Merchants*, 276–88, traces the development of this particular strategy used by the Attention Merchants to prey upon attention.

afloat in the era of digital media, their hands were forced to take a page out of the clickbait book. Once society becomes hooked on the lurid drug of clickbait, where the superficial, sensational, and gossipy hold sway, attention can be harvested with little resistance for those who know how to reap it.

Given the onslaught of challenges, the susceptibility to hijacking, and the relentless predatory pursuit of our attention, there seems a certain unavoidability that it will be compromised. Unless one isolates from society and unplugs from all forms of digital connection, the influence of our modern technologies will be present, along with those who will use the capability of those technologies for less than noble purposes. As strategies for attention capture are exposed and the effects of digital technology on attention are explored in general terms, more pressing inquiries begin to take shape. For instance, how does digital technology's impact on attention affect how we relate to one another? If the assaults on attention are as problematic as they seem, with minimal change forecasted concerning our digital context, we must consider the implications for our connection with others.

The Impact of Attentional Compromise on Our Relationships

Let's be honest: it is discomfoting to examine the ways our attention is compromised especially since much of the time it seems to happen without our consent. Even when we do give consent, we may not see the obstacles standing in the way of our attention nor recognize them as obstacles in the first place. The zero-sum nature of attention can be a harsh reality; once attention is given to something or someone there is no getting it back. Whether we want them to or not, our digital technologies capture our attention in such a profound way as to change how we interact with one another. At

present, research shows that children spend twice as much time on smartphones than they do in conversation with their families,³⁸ that half of all romantic relationships report their partner being distracted by their smartphone during conversation,³⁹ and that 89% of people were on their phones during their last social gathering.⁴⁰ When our attention is consistently focused on other priorities rather than connecting with the people present with us, the quality of love suffers, and our ability to give it atrophies. How exactly are our digital technologies influencing and crafting a culture in which we fail to attend well to those around us? They distract us from one another, divide us from one another, and create distrust between one another.

We Are Distracted From One Another

With its promise to connect us with each other as never before, some research suggests that the technology inextricably integrated with our lives may not be delivering on this promise when it comes to our most valuable connections, namely our face-to-face relationships. Instead, we are profoundly distracted by our technology, and our social relationships are suffering. Two examples of this distraction help paint a more complete picture. In the first example, Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein explain in their 2012 research article, “Can You Connect with Me Now?” that they wanted to test whether the mere presence of mobile communication devices, such as smartphones

38. Laura Donnelly, “Children Spend Twice as Long on Smartphones as Talking to Parents,” *The Telegraph* online, February 7, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/07/children-spend-twice-long-smartphones-talking-parents/>.

39. Emily A. Vogels and Monica Anderson, “Dating and Relationships in the Digital Age,” *Pew Research Center*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/05/08/dating-and-relationships-in-the-digital-age/>.

40. Lee Rainie and Kathryn Zickuhr, “Americans’ Views on Mobile Etiquette,” *Pew Research Center*, August 26, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/08/26/americans-views-on-mobile-etiquette/>.

impacted the quality of human interaction. They conducted two separate experiments and concluded that “the presence of mobile phones inhibited development of interpersonal closeness and trust, and reduced the extent to which individuals felt empathy and understanding from their partner . . . [and] these effects were most pronounced if individuals were discussing a personally meaningful topic.”⁴¹ Even though we may not be aware of it, our devices split our attention, pulling us away from potentially meaningful interactions.

In the second example, a study of the interactions between mothers and their infants, a group of researchers noted the negative consequences for children’s social-emotional development along with the quality of parent-infant interactions when mothers used their digital devices for as little as two minutes during interactions with their infants. Even though the parent may be physically present, their distracted and unresponsive state “decrease[s] the quality of the social exchange by limiting opportunities for the in-the-moment emotional feedback essential for emotion regulation development.”⁴²

Alternatively, Brandon T. McDaniel and Jenny S. Radesky analyzed parents’ digital technology usage in association with parent-child interactions, specifically in regard to child behavior.⁴³ Their findings show that on a typical day, 48 percent of the parents

41. Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, “Can You Connect with Me Now? How the Presence of Mobile Communication Technology Influences Face-to-Face Conversation Quality,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 30:3 (July 2012): 237–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407512453827>.

42. Sarah Myruski, et al., “Digital Disruption? Maternal Mobile Device Use is Related to Infant Social-Emotional Functioning,” *Developmental Science* (July 2018), 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12610>.

43. Brandon T. McDaniel and Jenny S. Radesky, “Technoference: Parent Distraction with Technology and Associations with Child Behavior Problems,” *Child Development* 89:1 (January/February 2018): 100–109, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12822>. All subsequent references to this study can be found here.

involved in the study reported three or more “interruptions in interpersonal interactions or time spent together that occur[ed] due to digital and mobile technology devices;” or what they call “technoference.” They also found that, on average, 40 percent of mothers and 32 percent of fathers used digital technology in a problematic way, assessed by high self-ratings of three metrics: (a) inability to resist checking devices, (b) constant thoughts about calls or message that might be received, and (c) feeling as if one uses their device too much. Within the bounds of their study, technoference and problematic usage of technology correlates to a higher report of child behavioral difficulties. The findings in both studies cited here contribute to a growing body of work linking the distractibility predictable in technology usage to greater dysfunction in relationships.

The rate at which we have adopted and incorporated modern digital devices into our lives has far outpaced the research into their short- and long-term effects. These studies help elucidate that the usage—and sometimes even the presence—of digital technologies in our lives are having some negative impacts on the attention we give others. Consequently, we are distracted from being able to connect, empathize, and bond with one another in loving ways.

We Are Divided From One Another

In her recent work, *The Monarchy of Fear*, Martha C. Nussbaum observes the division she sees within modern American society and asks, *where is this coming from?* Her research leads her to conclude that fear sits at the emotional center of our interactions with one another, giving birth to toxic expressions of anger, envy, and disgust. By naming and exploring each of these pervasive emotions, she advocates for more hopeful avenues of interaction with one another. In pursuit of those positive exchanges, she must

first reckon with the role digital technology plays in crafting a culture that is hostile to attentive listening, as well as our desire to understand and to engage respectfully with those whose opinions differ from our own:

Social media encourage brief blurts of opinion, rather than the working out of complex argument. The tone is often shrill, as if people are shouting to be heard. People don't listen: everything is me me me. Attention spans, already shortened by many aspects of our technology (constant phone checking, distracted walking and driving) become even shorter, since social media encourage the thought that everything worth saying can be said right away, in a trumpet of self-proclamation.⁴⁴

It would be far-reaching to pin the blame on digital technology as the sole contributing factor to the division we experience in our society, and yet the diagnosis is still appropriate. It does not take much imagination to see how our social media platforms foster fabrications of narcissistic expression, cloak anonymous bullying in the garb of protected speech, or encourage isolated and mediated interactions over physical human encounters, all of which erect barriers between ourselves and others. In fact, the internet is set up in a way that obscures the ability to identify and verify sources, thus providing unprecedented potential for disinformation and misinformation to spread through a society. Coupled with the staying power of content on the internet, successfully combating any toxic or false information is nigh impossible. Additionally, since digital technologies provide the ability to share information at an exponentially greater speed than any other point in history, any attempt to try and dispel falsity is futile. Instead, it is easier and more comfortable to engineer our digital interactions toward our own biases, accepting the information we want to be true and rejecting the information we want to be false.

44. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 228.

A proliferation of diverse offerings has been embedded into our digital age, each calibrated for a targeted demographic, expertly crafted to have their message received without resistance. Plurality of options are illustrative of, and undoubtedly contributors toward, fragmentation in society. Once the advertising and media industries realized that Americans were not singular in their sensibilities or demands and therefore would not be singularly served by one set of products, a rise in focused marketing emerged.⁴⁵ Our technologies have responded to this deep-seated individualism by endlessly diversifying to fit personal preferences and taste. We can now opt in or out of listening to someone’s worldview by the simple click of a button: “follow/unfollow,” “channel up/down,” “power on/off.” Tom Nichols, a university professor and author of *The Death of Expertise*, asserts that our divisions are more than preferential self-sorting: “we’re not just associating with people more like ourselves, we’re actively breaking ties with everyone else, especially on social media.”⁴⁶ The ability to engineer our interactions in this way serves only to divide us further, making it difficult to find the common ground essential to democracy and to human decency.⁴⁷

This results in the formation of clusters of people who associate with those whom they already agree. Touting freedom of choice, our interactions with information and with each other become profoundly filtered into what has become commonly referred to as “echo chambers.” These echoes are fueled by a common human tendency to seek out the

45. The history of this emerging fragmentation is documented in Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 170–80.

46. Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 128.

47. This theme is explicitly explored in Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

information and people who already confirm our biases. This is a dangerous prospect when coupled with the undiscerning medium we call the internet, which operates not as a referee for that which is accurate or true, but as a confluence for any uploaded opinion. As Frank Bruni puts it, “this is erudition in the age of cyberspace: You surf until you reach the conclusion you’re after. You click your way to validation, confusing the presence of a website with the plausibility of an argument.”⁴⁸ If a piece of information is presented as true, aligns with one’s ideology, and is reinforced by repetition and the perception of a widely held belief, it *becomes* true, at least for that particular person.⁴⁹ To counter this with any other information, however legitimate or logical, is threatening and elicits a defensive response, nudging us ever farther from each other.

Unintended as they may be, the consequences of our digital technology’s design and usage have birthed a divided and divisive culture where it is easy to isolate ourselves from whichever ideas confront our own thinking. Instead of equalizing access to information in a way that might empower people to connect with one another and hold structures of authority accountable, our technologies too often fragment us from one another, even within a shared geographical space. These cracks originate at the point where our attention erodes, revealing faults in our discernment of information, and all too quickly compromising the integrity of our common humanity.

48. Frank Bruni, “California, Camelot and Vaccines,” *New York Times* online, July 4, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/opinion/sunday/frank-bruni-california-camelot-and-vaccines.html>.

49. As mentioned above, confirmation bias has a lot to do with how we as people are physiologically wired. This issue is taken up by Tristan Harris and Aza Raskin, with Renée DiResta, a disinformation experts, in “From Russia With Likes (Part 1),” podcast, *Your Undivided Attention*, July 24, 2019, audio, 46 minutes, <https://www.humanetech.com/podcast/5-from-russia-with-likes-part-1>.

We Distrust One Another

“Fake news” has become a common phrase in recent days. Underlying its usage is the clear message that *we cannot trust this source as knowledgeable, authoritative, or true*. Though its original purpose may have been a discrediting tool or dismissal tactic, it stands as a poignant metaphor of the distrust that pervades in our digital age, a distrust that involves more than arguments against certain pieces of information; it is now employed as a definitive descriptor of actual people or groups of people for whom it is advantageous to label as untrustworthy. Our attention is compromised in several ways that foster this distrust, three of which I shall focus on here: through our distrust of expertise, through our ability to interact instantaneously, and through the presence of artificial intelligence in our digital spaces.

One way to frame distrust and trace its movement throughout society is to use categories of expertise and non-expertise.⁵⁰ In his work devoted to this subject, Tom Nichols bemoans the active resistance in society toward learning, toward deference to expert knowledge, and toward any acknowledgment of intellectual deficiency in ourselves. While not the sole culprit, Nichols gives a fair amount of space to examining how our digital technologies—the internet in particular—promote this miserable state of affairs. Thus, he points out that “the Internet is the largest anonymous medium in human history. The ability to argue from a distance, and the cheapened sense of equality it provides, is corroding trust and respect among all of us, experts and laypeople alike.”⁵¹

50. This is the theme of Tom Nichols’s *The Death of Expertise* referenced above. I am indebted to his work throughout this section.

51. Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*, 132.

Digitally mediated interactions do this by unsettling the conversational norms widely held in physical interactions, giving people the courage to speak anonymously and without accountability, and disrupting the decency, rapport, and trust built when people must have these same conversations face-to-face.

A prominent facilitator of this distrust between people is wrapped up in the instantaneous nature of digital interaction. Instant engagement with anyone on earth who has an internet connection is a novel situation within the scope of human history and nothing short of a wonder. Yet this ability to immediately engage with and react to information robs us of is the impulse to stop and think before speaking, an important process that is being replaced by people who have “become invested in defending their gut reactions rather than accepting new information or admitting a mistake.”⁵² In fact, when presented with contradictory evidence against a claim, research shows that people are more inclined to double-down on their original assertions than they are to admit they are wrong.⁵³ When such postures become dominant in our own lives, meaningful conversations become difficult, stymied by pride and narrow mindedness. When they become dominant in our culture, attending to others in respectful and charitable ways is fractured by an internal narrative that others cannot be trusted.

Another facilitator of distrust is associated with the presence of artificial intelligence (A.I.) and the accompanying illusion that all our interactions online, especially in the social sphere, are with actual people. While it may sound like science

52. Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*, 111–12.

53. See, for instance, Joe Keohane, “How Facts Backfire: Researchers Discover a Surprising Threat to Our Democracy: Our Brains,” *Boston Globe* online, July 11, 2010, https://archive.boston.com/news/science/articles/2010/07/11/how_facts_backfire/.

fiction, A.I. already plays a significant role in our digital society through the use of internet bots (robots programmed to perform certain tasks automatically and instantaneously), image manipulation software (such as “deepfake” videos, in which a person’s face or body has been altered in order to present information that was not actually said or to appear as if they are someone else), automatized trolling and spamming, and all manner of computational propaganda campaigns. Renée DiResta, research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory and a disinformation expert, has published and spoken extensively (even consulting for congressional staff members before a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing) on the topic of disinformation, largely attributable to A.I.–generated content.⁵⁴ The presence and influence of these automated accounts on social media platforms which disseminate false, misleading, malicious, and emotionally charged content is not widely recognized by the average internet user, thus creating major problems.⁵⁵ Even though it may be difficult to say with any certainty the overall influence of such content, the presence of these fake personas naturally invite distrust, paranoia, and skepticism with no easy way for users to consistently discern whether certain content is real or fabricated. When the amplification of fake content makes a given reality seem true, particularly if there is a widely held belief about

54. The best place to access the collection of DiResta’s published works is her own website <http://www.reneediresta.com>. One particular place to start in her articulation of the issue at hand is Renée DiResta, “The Supply of Disinformation Will Soon Be Infinite,” *The Atlantic* online, September 20, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/future-propaganda-will-be-computer-generated/616400/>.

55. See Mike Isaac and Daisuke Wakabayashi, “Russian Influence Reached 126 Million Through Facebook Alone,” *The New York Times* online, October 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/technology/facebook-google-russia.html>, for one supporting data set for this claim, in which they report that “Russian agents intending to sow discord among American citizens disseminated inflammatory posts that reached 126 million users on Facebook, published more than 131,000 messages on Twitter, and uploaded over 1,000 videos to Google’s YouTube service, according to copies of prepared remarks *from the companies* that were obtained by *The New York Times*” (emphasis added).

something, the kind of epistemic vigilance required to engage with that content and those people becomes extremely difficult. Just an awareness that bots are out there can devolve digital conversations into virtual shouting matches in which anyone with a different opinion can be conceived of as unreal; perhaps they are simply a computer bot plotting to manipulate others?

Conclusion

Every engagement with digital technology is a transaction taking place at the level of our attention. Once we give attention to one thing, it cannot be given to another. Our digital technologies are adept at capitalizing on our attention, holding onto it, and directing it towards the ends for which they have been designed. In recognition of this reality, the emerging humane tech industry begins with the premise that *technology is not neutral*. So as attention over time becomes sufficiently captured and co-opted, in part due to the design and usage of our digital technologies, it cannot but have a profound impact on all our lives, especially in our relationships with others. It is not difficult to see that these impacts are already in our world: conversations are interrupted by someone checking their device; citizens spread false information that lead to chaotic ends; sitting still for any length of time is difficult; reserves of decency and respect for one another are replaced by fear, entitlement, and violence. The list goes on. Crucially, attention is at the heart of these issues which is why an astute recognition of how our digital technologies affect our attention is a first step toward its reclamation. Although we desperately need people advocating for attentional reclamation through a re-imagining of our digital technologies, what follows is a look at how we, as the people using those technologies, may reclaim attention by placing ourselves under the spotlight of attention.

CHAPTER III

APPROACHES TO ATTENTIONAL RECLAMATION

Introduction

Visit any self-help section of the local bookstore, and it quickly becomes obvious that many current approaches in reclaiming attention from the clutches of digital technology—recognizable by the alluring promise of “how-to” spearheading their subtitles—prefer to limit their focus on greater productivity, rather than address the more fundamental questions of who we, as humans, were made to be and towards what ultimate ends. On the other hand, Simone Weil, Matthew Crawford, and Donella Meadows each explore the human aspect of attentional reclamation while not getting caught up in these more surface-level pursuits. As such, their thoughts provide necessary pieces for putting together the puzzle of compromised attention within our digital context. Throughout this chapter, I will gather their relevant offerings as compelling components for attention’s reclamation, seeking to bring them together in a cohesive proposal of my own, that of the paradigm of steward. While their thoughts indeed inform my own offering, I diverge from them at the point of theological grounding and remedy. By advocating for the steward as a theological paradigm with authoritative bearing on our attention, I incorporate Simone Weil’s insistence on the moral growth of the attender, Matthew Crawford’s situating of the moral attender within a reality not of their own making, and Donella Meadows’ recognition of paradigms as influential leverage points within systems. Their work on attention provides a foundation upon which my own

theological proposal can stand, for it is in the gathering of their thoughts that I am emboldened to suggest they are best held together by the symbol of steward. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate continuity in attending to the problem while simultaneously approaching a solution from a new perspective.

Simone Weil: Attentional Reclamation Through Moral Growth

Simone Weil, the French philosopher-theologian of the early twentieth century, approaches attention by emphasizing the moral stance of the attender, suggesting that attempts at attentional reclamation can be located within ourselves, regardless of external circumstances. As someone who thought extensively about attention, Weil focuses on the character of the attender. In fact, content of attention is rather negotiable; any range of subjects—from geometry to French—can properly lend themselves to developing our attention. However, deepening our moral character so that we attend well toward worthy aims is a task which can be neglected altogether; therefore, this proves to be the most important aspect of attending. As Weil posits, the development of that moral character is an act of desire, not will. She explains the difference in this way: “We have to desire that it should be done in us—to desire it truly—simply to desire it, not to try to accomplish it. For every attempt in that direction is vain and has to be dearly paid for. In such a work all that I call ‘I’ has to be passive.”¹ Weil binds attention with desire, just as she ascribes effort to will.

Does attention not require effort, though? Weil argues that it does, but describes attention as a “negative effort” where thought is suspended, “leaving it detached, empty,

1. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge Classics, 1999), 118.

and ready to be penetrated by the object.”² In this way, moral growth becomes an actively passive activity; active in that we must decide to be changed and turn our focus in that direction, but passive in that what we hope to elicit through attending is a gift that can only be received, not seized. In fact, any purposeful attempts at bringing about our own moral development are in vain, for instead of attaining what is good and true, we “will find in their place counterfeits of which [we] will be unable to discern the falsity.”³ Rather, according to Weil, the attender must assume a posture of indifference and detachment, of waiting and watching, in order to experience transformation; they must attend truly in order to grow in their ability to attend well. When this happens, and our minds are turned “towards the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself,”⁴ so that in “directing [our] thoughts towards something better than [ourselves] . . . [we are] drawn upwards by this something.”⁵ Such desire fosters the kind of growth needed for a person to become a better attender, even though it might not always seem like anything is happening. *Rest assured*, she comforts, no genuine effort of attention is wasted; “every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit.”⁶

2. Weil’s most concentrated thinking about the subject of attention comes in her essay, “Reflection on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009). Quotes are from pages 61–62.

3. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62.

4. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 117.

5. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 99.

6. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 59.

As we saw in the previous chapter, we do not always have a say in what grabs our attention, especially when it is co-opted through challenges, hijacking, or predatory attacks. Like it or not, we are hardwired with certain boundaries for attending. However, our awareness of those strategies offers a first step in reclaiming attention. Once we *are* aware, we have a choice either to remain captivated by what has captured our attention, or to turn our attention toward a different focus. Either way, Weil’s position offers an important balm for our attentional anxiety; for while she believes there are more worthy aims of attention, her concern with the transformation of the attender allows for the whole expanse of life’s experiences to function as our teacher. The “what” of attending is not nearly as important as the “how.” Weil does caution, though, that this change is not necessarily easy. We can spend large amounts of time on something, only to find it practically wasted because we were not attending well. In her words, “twenty minutes of concentrated, untired attention is infinitely better than three hours of the kind of frowning application that leads us to say with a sense of duty done: ‘I have worked well!’”⁷ Yet if the quality of attention is kept in mind, regardless of the object of that attention, the rewards can be great, for “every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves. If we concentrate with this intention, a quarter of an hour of attention is better than a great many good works.”⁸

Without getting deeper into Weil’s philosophical insights or the nuances of her thoughts, it is worth pausing here to consider this *how* of attending in any given moment.

7. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 61.

8. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62. This is not to say that Weil values all foci of attention equally. While anything has the potential to sharpen our attention, certain areas do so more effectively because they require more from the attender. Thus, she asserts that school studies have greater potential to develop our attention than, say, working out in the fields.

What quality of attention am I giving to the person sitting next to me? Do I instinctively react when I receive a notification on my phone, or am I able to let it pass by so that I can stay present with the task at hand? Every day our attention can be pulled in a thousand ways; teachable moments are everywhere. Weil’s offering invites us to recognize the possibility of attending well to what matters—even within a chaotic context where attention is constantly compromised—when we recognize the moral aspect of attention. As I will demonstrate, the virtuous moral growth of the attender is crucial for understanding what it means to be a steward of God’s attention.

Matthew Crawford: Attentional Reclamation as Proper Fit with the World

Not only are certain qualities of character necessary on the part of the attender, but there exists a certain way in which the world works that is both unavoidable and undeniable. In his book, *The World Beyond Your Head*, philosopher Matthew Crawford, attempts to orient the attender into a relationship of proper fit to that reality by advocating for disciplined engagement with the world on its own terms as a remedy for attentional degradation. Before one can do so, Crawford points out how unnatural this stance has become due to a paradigm inherited from Enlightenment thought. Inherent to this paradigm is a distrust of “the world beyond our heads,” wherein our external environment necessarily compromises the self and its attention. Essentially, his position posits that the founding of modern liberalism required a re-description of politics with a view toward freedom. Located within a particular point in history, the agenda was freedom from “the arbitrary exercise of coercive power by the political sovereign, who lived in England.”⁹ However, in order to make the case for the ideal of autonomy it “required a re-description

9. Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 116.

of the human being, and of our basic situation in the world. Ultimately it required a new account of how we *apprehend* the world.”¹⁰ Taken to its logical ends, cherished concepts such as “freedom” and “autonomy” lead us to cast the authority of others, our own experience, and even reality itself into the light of suspicion. The inevitable conclusion becomes: “*Reality is not self-revealing.*”¹¹

This thinking still permeates modern ideals, making it difficult to address attention, because woven into the fabric of how we encounter the world is the rejection of what we may find there. Therefore, we must recognize our inheritance of this paradigm before we can hope to reclaim the attention that has been widely degraded. The problem with this inherited paradigm is that our constant questioning of the processes by which we can trust our own experiences of reality focuses attention inward (not in the morally constructive way suggested by Weil, but in a skeptical scrutinization of our mental process in order to arrive at the truth) rather than focusing outward at the world. This amounts to what Crawford details as a demotion or redirection of attention (“the faculty that joins us to the world”).¹² Instead of the world functioning as an anchor for what is real, we end up creating mental representations of the world that we can then subject to critical analysis, in order to determine their truth or falsity.

If we want to reclaim attention, according to Crawford, it is imperative to acknowledge that “we find ourselves *situated* in a world that is not of our making, and

10. Crawford, *World Beyond*, 116.

11. Crawford, *World Beyond*, 122.

12. Crawford, *World Beyond*, 24.

this ‘situatedness’ is fundamental to what a human being is.”¹³ Rather than a threat to encountering truth and reality in our pursuit of obtaining a coherent self, the world beyond our heads (our lived environment), is crucial in the formation of the self. Crawford’s proposal centers around coming “to be in a relation of *fit* to a world [we have] *grasped*,” rather than attempting to master a world we project.¹⁴ We can achieve this “relation of fit” through disciplined attention to skilled practices because obtaining excellence in a skill constrains attention to the nature of reality appropriate to that skill. Consider the process of learning a language, an example the moral philosopher Iris Murdoch describes with great effectiveness:

If I am learning, for instance, Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal.¹⁵

Therefore, suggests Crawford, if we are going to reclaim our attention, we must focus on the rigorous training that obtaining excellence in a skill is uniquely capable to provide. The constraining circumstances requisite to mastering a skill serve as a guide to the otherwise boundless possibilities available to our attention. When done well, truly becoming “competent in some particular field of practice, our perception is disciplined by that practice; we become attuned to pertinent features of a situation that would be

13. Crawford, *World Beyond*, 26.

14. Crawford, *World Beyond*, 25.

15. Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 373.

invisible to a bystander.”¹⁶ In this way, Crawford focuses on skilled practices as the means for aligning ourselves with reality.

Though I diverge from his focus at this point, his insistence that attention must be shaped and honed by reality so that we might be in tune with how creation was designed and understand our place within it, serves as a cornerstone for the steward paradigm.

Stewards are attenders who, in light of their relationship with their Creator, will grow in moral virtue and function within a relationship of proper fit to their external environment, a reality ultimately designed to facilitate attention rather than compromise it.

Additionally, Crawford’s assessment of our inherited paradigms, and the ways our attention thrives or withers as a result of those paradigms serve as a pillar of this project.

It’s not just that we are overwhelmed by stimuli (though that is often the case) or that we do not know which values to affirm and pursue with the attentional resources available to us (though we often do not), but that there is a fundamental starting point from which we as people operate that situates how we think and approach the concept of attention in the first place. Until the power and importance of those guiding paradigms come under scrutiny, our attempts at attentional reclamation are a more like “re-arranging deck chairs on the Titanic” than anything else; they matter very little because they are out of sync with paradigms that can support them. Thus, Crawford’s insights direct his readers to think in more systemic ways, to consider the possibility that the attentional problems experienced within our digital age connect to an inherited sense of self that involves a complex and multi-faceted understanding of what it means to be human at this point in history.

16. Crawford, *World Beyond*, 25.

Donella Meadows: Attentional Reclamation Requires a Paradigm Shift

Enlarging perspectives in this way is exactly why renowned educator Donella Meadows, author of *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, spent much of her life discussing the recognizable harms occurring in the world—such as attentional degradation—in terms of system dynamics, a method for understanding society as a complex, interconnected, dynamic whole.¹⁷ As a systems theorist, she sought to elevate people’s views beyond a single issue by showing how each one of those issues is connected to other parts of the system at large.¹⁸ She does this by describing systems, their parts, their functions, why they work well, and why they surprise us, before offering a series of “leverage points,” or ways to intervene in a system. She describes twelve of these leverage points which increase in both difficulty and effectiveness the further down the list one goes. Through her research she shows that the low-level leverage points of intervention within a system, those easiest to apply—in the case of attention this could be something like turning off our phone’s notifications or using the “pomodoro” technique when studying—are useful and even necessary, but their influence is unable to transform the dynamics of the system. In order for transformation to occur, we must address the source of a system’s goals, structures, rules, delays, and parameters. On Meadows’s list of leverage points within a system, changing one’s mindset or paradigm represents the most difficult way to affect transformation on a broad scale, meaning that it is also highly effective when the transformation does take hold. Transformation at this level is unusually difficult because as Meadows explains, “paradigms are the *sources* of systems. From them, from shared

17. “System Dynamics,” M.I.T., created January 22, 1997, <https://web.mit.edu/sysdyn/sd-intro/>.

18. Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, ed. Diana Wright (London: Earthscan, 2009). Chapters one and two describe system structure and behavior.

social agreements about the nature of reality, come system goals and information flows, feedbacks, stocks, flows, and everything else about systems.”¹⁹

It is no wonder paradigms have incredible power to shape perceptions of reality, structuring “what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people.”²⁰ Paradigms help determine which behaviors are sanctioned and which banned, going so far as to “influence [our] ability to make ethical decisions,” an argument attested to by researchers Caldwell, Bischoff, and Karri.²¹ Furthermore, theologian and professor Clifford C. Cain explains that “these paradigms or metaphors organize thought and experience and in so doing provide a basis for action [They] are the generators of meaning, for they guide our making sense of the world in which we live.”²² Often paradigms are transmitted through culture, handed down through family units, and bolstered by ritual actions undertaken by groups with claims on our allegiance. In any case, paradigms are inescapable. One way or another, human beings need a way to order life so that they may account for and pursue a meaningful existence. Seen through this lens, our digital technologies are only one part of the equation in reckoning with attentional degradation. How we engage with those technologies will largely be determined by the paradigms informing our lives, making them a subtle, important, and powerful factor in attentional reclamation efforts.

19. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 163. Emphasis added.

20. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3, for greater engagement with the importance and power of our paradigms.

21. Cam Caldwell, Sheri J. Bischoff, and Ranjan Karri, “The Four Umpires: A Paradigm for Ethical Leadership,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 36:1/2 (March 2002): 154.

22. Clifford C. Cain, “Stewardship as a Work of Art,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 17:1 (March 1998): 65.

If Donella Meadows is correct, lasting and pervasive transformation across culture necessitates a recognition and reimagining of the fundamental paradigms from which that culture operates. The driving proposition of this project is that in light of the attentional degradation experienced within our digital context, a remedial reclamation can be realized when we as humans live from the paradigm of steward in relation to God. When the steward, conceived theologically, becomes a foundational paradigm from which we live, interact, and make decisions, it will have a powerful effect on our lives and our world, including our attention. Before I outline the rationale for the steward paradigm in the following chapter, several questions which are important for establishing the viability of a paradigm shift for attentional reclamation must be considered.

Viability of a Paradigm Shift for Attentional Reclamation

Is paradigmatic transformation even possible? If it is, what does it look like and how effective is it? Is the suggested paradigm available to everyone or just certain people? Do we decide to take it on, or does it somehow take hold of us? These and similar questions deserve some consideration before proceeding further.

History shows us that our paradigms do shift over time and with the evolution of culture. At a societal level, we share values, language, and rituals that are deeply engrained by our economic, political, and social systems which are continuously reinforced by its constituents, so that any widespread shift in the foundation of our collective identity is not only difficult, but vehemently resisted. Change is possible, but rarely easy. However, Meadows suggests that for individuals a paradigm shift “can happen in a millisecond. All it takes is a click in the mind, a falling of scales from the

eyes, a new way of seeing.”²³ Even so, we are talking about living in a new way based on our self-understanding, a change ultimately realized over the process of a lifetime. While some of that reshaping will take effect immediately, some will take time. From there as more individuals recognize that which isn’t working in the old paradigms and instead live vibrantly from new paradigms, occupy positions of influence, and catch the attention of open-minded people, collective shifts can take place.²⁴ In terms of attention, the good news is that we need not continue to operate from paradigms that sustain an overtaxed, shallow, inferior sort of attending, even though our digital technologies often encourage such activities. By shifting the root metaphor that informs who we are and what we are about, we can counter the pervasive compromising of attention with a different set of guiding values anchored in a representation of God, who makes his own claims on our attention.

What actions substantiate a paradigm’s actualization? In their book, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson speak to the ways these paradigmatic metaphors take root within both society and the individual:

The metaphors we live by, whether cultural or personal, are partially preserved in ritual. Cultural metaphors, and the values entailed by them, are propagated by ritual. Ritual forms an indispensable part of the experiential basis for our cultural metaphorical systems. There can be no culture without ritual . . . Similarly, there can be no coherent view of the self without personal ritual . . . Our implicit and typically unconscious conceptions of ourselves and the values that we live by are perhaps most strongly reflected in the little things we do over and over, that is, in the casual rituals that have emerged spontaneously in our daily lives.²⁵

23. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 163–64.

24. In Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 164. She draws on the work of Thomas Kuhn, whose work centered on the great paradigm shifts in science, which can be found at Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

25. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 234–35.

On their account, our paradigms are reinforced by and reflective of the rituals we undergo. Therefore, success in a paradigm's actualization within our lives is at least partially dependent upon how that paradigm is supported by the appropriate rituals it warrants. Lakoff and Johnson insist that there must be tangible, lived components to our paradigms, lest they remain fanciful ideals. They claim that "we feel that no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis."²⁶ In order for the steward to be a viable suggestion, then, the paradigm requires lived instantiations for those individuals and communities who embrace it as normative. One benefit of developing a Christian theological account of the steward is that there are already substantive rituals, practices, and traditions supporting its reception into our lives that are attested to throughout centuries of Christian life together. However, while the skeleton for its reception is there, what seems to be needed is for Christian life to be conceived more intentionally through the lens of stewardship, thus allowing that particular paradigm to inform those collective and individual rituals.

Is the suggestion, then, that this proposal is available only to Christians? No and yes. There are aspects of the steward paradigm accessible to everyone, regardless of belief or faith commitment. For instance, just as a steward carries an authority into their actions, we can all recognize that there is a certain weight or influence tied to the attention we give something. And just as a steward is accountable for how they act, we can also choose to be more accountable to one another and to ourselves regarding the quality and aims of our attention. Crucially though, as will be shortly explained, at its core the steward is a position of representation, of faithfully imaging another's presence

26. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 19.

to the rest of the world. As a fundamental paradigm guiding human self-understanding and purpose in life (as opposed to, say, a role within a corporation), I suggest this makes the most sense within the narrative set out by the Christian Scriptures, in which God the Creator designs and commissions humanity to function as his stewards in caring for creation.

If God created humans as his stewards, is the steward paradigm somehow inevitable, taking hold of us whether we want it to or not, or do we choose it for ourselves? To say that creation has an intentional design, that it works in a certain way, and that humans were made for a certain role within that design is a claim about reality that Christians assert as true. Whether that claim is accepted or rejected does not ultimately change the truth of its reality, if it is indeed true. According to the Christian Scriptures, humans were fashioned by God to be his stewards so that to function otherwise would serve both as a denial of reality and a frustration to any other paradigmatic pursuit. In this way, we cannot escape the steward as our created role. Yet even as this reality takes hold of us, we must also take hold of it, to recognize, accept, and embrace the steward as essential to our design. Acceptance of the role comes with responsibilities, just as rejection of that role comes with consequences. God presents humans with a choice, which is appropriate, as free will is a staple in God's design of humanity.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly other questions surround the nature of paradigms and the challenges associated with their shifts in our lives.²⁷ As it stands based on the work of Weil,

27. Several authors will be helpful in going deeper on this subject, for those interested. As previously mentioned, one excellent resource is Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*. Two others

Crawford, and Meadows, it seems to me that we as moral attenders, properly situated in the design of reality, need paradigms that will encourage and develop the attention central to every pursuit of a good and meaningful life. Though often functioning in the background of our lives, these paradigms have an indelible role in who we understand ourselves to be, therefore how we function in the world and for what purposes. As such, I find compelling evidence for bringing the thoughts of these three authors together with my own theological convictions, allowing each to inform the other towards a common goal: the reclamation of attention within the digital age. My suggestion is that the theologically developed paradigm of steward provides an avenue for that reclamation which positively impacts everything from the means of attending to its ultimate ends. Yet in order to understand *how* the steward paradigm applies to attention in the digital age, a theological rationale for its application is needed.

are Robert Nisbet, *Social Change and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) and Philip Ellis Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962).

CHAPTER IV

A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STEWARD

Introduction

If a theological perspective is going to be held for reclaiming attention, a rationale needs to be developed. What is the source of the notion that we are God's stewards, empowered and entrusted to represent him in and through our attention? Such a proposal carries an anthropological weight, in that it makes a claim about who we are, inextricably tethered to a theological understanding of the God whom we are to represent. In order to embrace the steward as a feasible paradigm for human beings and their attention, we must therefore come to some understanding of the nature and character of the commissioning agent: God.

What can be said about who God is and what he is like that will have bearing on the way his stewards are meant to represent him in their attention? While that question can be answered any number of ways, I choose to focus on accounts of creation in the Christian Scriptures because they introduce the steward paradigm and spotlight two crucial aspects of God's nature that anchor that paradigm: God's affirmation of the world as good, and God's ordering of chaos. Additionally, Scripture claims that the most perfect image of God to which humanity has access is Jesus, the Incarnation of God into our humanity. As such, my theological framework for the steward intertwines with a Christological one, whereby Jesus serves as the proper means and model for the steward

paradigm. As God's nature and character come more clearly into view, through accounts of creation and in the person of Jesus, so will his claims on the steward's attention.

God as Creator

Who is God and how does he interact with the world? The opening words of Scripture proclaim, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth," affirming that he was before anything else, that he initiated existence, and that he did so with purpose and intent.¹ Throughout Christian history and confession, God as Creator and sustainer of life has been a central tenet of faith.² God as Creator is a crucial starting point for theological examination of the steward, for it is God's initial revelation of himself to humanity, as well as the origin of his commission for humanity to be his stewards.³ In the scriptural accounts of creation, God affirms creation as good and worthy of investment, exemplified in his nurturing of life through ordering chaos. Rather than choosing to do so alone, God commissions the humans he has created to be his partners in ordering chaos, stewards who bear his image and represent his loving dominion for the rest of creation. These affirming actions of God inform us about what it means to be his stewards, thus, what it means for us to steward our attention.

1. Gen 1:1.

2. Such is confessed, for example, in the first words of the Apostles' Creed, regularly affirmed aloud in the collective gatherings of Christians: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

3. While the steward's commissioning agent, especially in human-human relations, is often conceived of as "master" or "owner," I choose to spotlight the unique divine-human relationship throughout the rest of this project by using the language of "Creator" and "steward."

God Affirms the World as Good

*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*⁴

As God brings forth life in the Genesis account of Scripture, he sees what he does and affirms the work of his hands as *good* and *very good*. Even when humanity turns aside from God's ways by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, an act that signifies their distrust in God's designation of what is good and what is evil in order that they might determine those designations for themselves, God does not abandon his creation. Throughout the biblical narrative, God is continually present with his creation, seeking to bless the world through his people Israel (and later his Church), intertwining himself so intimately with humanity as to eventually become human himself. Though broken by sin and marred by evil, the proper hope of Christianity according to the biblical witness is our world's renewal, its re-creation. In the biblical book of Revelation, the narrator, John, receives a vision of a "new heaven and a new earth," before he sees "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband," so that God might make his home "among mortals" and "dwell with them."⁵

Crucial to the steward paradigm is God's affirmation of the world as good. Any other stance, any condemnation of creation's intrinsic goodness or inherent worthiness, renders the steward paradigm incomprehensible. Unfortunately, the Christian message has not always oriented around affirming God's world as good. Too often it has been transformed into a hyper-spiritualized concept of escape. Instead of the earth being a

4. Gen 1:31.

5. Rev 21:1-3.

place where one encounters God, as is often found to be the case in the Hebraic tradition, in the years of expansion into the Hellenistic world, Christianity took on a forceful rejection of the physical. The gospel message of salvation came to mean salvation *from* the world, not *for* it. To speak of “the flesh,” “the world,” or “the body” was to accurately locate the source of evil, temptation, and sin. God’s domain was “heaven” and the devil’s, “earth.” Unsurprisingly, hope in such a schema comes from an eventual and ultimate escape of the world into this ethereal “heaven,” to be with a distant God. The pristine conception invoked by talk of “heaven” communicates clearly the message that humans properly belong somewhere other than here. Experiences of suffering in this life deepened the longing for escape from present tribulations, quickening the desire for another—different—world, and skewing the theological story toward the profession, “this world is *not* my home.”⁶ The hyper-spiritualized “good news” of Jesus claims that after suffering through this life, those who believe shall be whisked away from this world, saved from its current trajectory toward oblivion.

When the world becomes an obstacle to encountering God, attention is subverted by a narrative of retreat and disengagement from physical reality, fueling instead an internal preoccupation with getting through life as untainted as possible by the world. “It is curious,” says theologian Janet Martin Soskice, “that Christianity, whose central doctrine is the Incarnation, could be used to underwrite an epistemological programme in

6. “This World Is Not My Home” is a well-known Christian hymn written by Albert E. Brumley and found in *Songs of Faith and Praise*, second edition, ed. Alton H. Howard (Brentwood, TN: Simon and Schuster, 1994). The first verse is illustrative of the idea: “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through / My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue; / The angels beckon me from heaven’s open door, / And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.” Emphasis is my own.

which man attempts to distance himself from the human condition.”⁷ This withdrawal from the world, this resistance to giving attention to its messiness and pain, as well as its flourishing, is a blatant rejection of the steward’s charge, and renders it an absurd choice for an operating paradigm.

Moreover, the thirteenth-century German theologian, Meister Eckhart, provides an alternative to withdrawal from the world, writing that

if things are to go well with a man, one of two things must always happen to him. Either he must find and learn to possess God in works, or he must abandon all works. But since a man cannot in this life be without works, which are proper to humans and are of so many kinds, therefore he must learn to possess his God in all things and to remain unimpeded, whatever he may be doing, wherever he may be.⁸

God has provided a way to connect with us in and through the created world. However, if we do not embrace the world as a safe place for humanity to commune with God and continue to speak as if the world is unsuitable for us, acting as if God is hard at work trying to rescue his creatures from his creation, the steward paradigm will not prevail. Instead, the warrior paradigm will continue to serve as the foundation for Christian identity in the world. The warrior, who “liberates” others over to their “correct” and “true” perspective, and take it upon themselves to destroy every guise of falsehood along the way. Tempting as the latter narrative may be given the difficulty of human existence, and bolstered further still by the gratification such a domineering stance affords, theologian Douglas John Hall yet questions its cost, for

in the process of turning away from the world Christianity lost something that is surely of its essence: namely, the rootedness of the divine love in history. A faith that not only

7. Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.

8. Meister Eckhart, “Councils on Discernment” in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, trans. Edmund College, OSA and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 255.

follows in the path of the prophets of Israel, but has at its center the announcement of God's Word made flesh, and in the flesh suffering and dying for the world's salvation: such a faith can hardly turn itself towards the skies without turning away from something vital to its own rudimentary message.⁹

To reject the world or any investment in it is deeply problematic for the steward because it would not be a faithful representation of God their Creator and would go against their commission to care for creation. Fortunately, the Creator is not anti-creation, not quick to abandon that which he has made and named as good. By all accounts of Scripture, God the Creator desires to connect with his creatures,¹⁰ provide for and nurture his creation,¹¹ and enjoy life together in the order and harmony he always intended.¹² Any representation of this God must be rooted in an affirmation that all aspects of creation are worthy of intentional human investment—not least of all our attention, “the faculty that joins us to the world”—substantiated by participation in its renewal, not hope for its destruction.¹³ Saying so amounts to a direct challenge of the way the Christian narrative is often articulated in modern Western contexts, but also hints at the reason the steward has failed to gain widespread traction as an operating paradigm within Christianity.

In the hours before his death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasized Christianity's true hope in redemption, contrasting it with “the mythological hope” which is so often proclaimed. Resolute in his belief that God's giving up his own life for the sake of the

9. Douglas John Hall, *The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death* (New York: Friendship Press, 1985), 91.

10. Gen 3:8–9.

11. Gen 2:16–22.

12. Gen 2:7–9.

13. Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 24.

world held greater bearing than Bonhoeffer's own experience of injustice and evil, he affirmed the world's goodness and insist upon its worthiness even at the point of his death:

The decisive factor is said to be that in Christianity the hope for resurrection is proclaimed, and that that means the emergence of a genuine religion of redemption, the main emphasis now being on the far side of the boundary drawn by death. But it seems to me that this is just where the mistake and the danger lie. Redemption now means redemption from cares, distress, fears, and longings, from sin and death, in a better world beyond the grave. But is this really the essential character of the proclamation of Christ in the gospels and by Paul? I should say it is not. The difference between the Christian hope of resurrection and the mythological hope is that the former sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal This world must not be prematurely written off.¹⁴

God's affirmation of this world is a reality the Scriptures attest to time and again, no more so than in the willingness of God to die on a cross for the sake of the world. Such solidarity with humanity, such commitment to creation's enduring and flourishing must be received as an unambiguous stance that grounds and guides every account of the steward. Exposure to the world does not therefore threaten our connection with God but rather facilitates it. God has designed the world in such a way that it functions as the space in which we both encounter him and realize our God-given purpose as his stewards.

God Orders Chaos

...the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.¹⁵

When there was nothing but "formless void" and "darkness" blanketing the waters, God brought light and life into being. The opening poem of Genesis puts God's

14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 336–37.

15. Gen 1:2–3.

essential nature on display, where in the first three days God separates light from dark, sky from sea, land from water, then populates those arenas on days four through six with their corresponding inhabitants: sun and stars, birds and fish, animals and humans. God’s delight in creating is sealed with a day of rest, a blessed day in which he enjoyed the work of his hands. God brings forth life with order, purpose, but also with wisdom. In a behind-the-scenes account of creation, the book of Proverbs portrays a personified Lady Wisdom speaking about her role in God’s creative act: “When he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.”¹⁶

The connection between “order” and “wisdom” is more clearly seen in Hebrew, the original language of these Scriptures. *Chokmah* is the word which in English translates to “wisdom,” and entails the idea of order.¹⁷ This means that in God’s wisdom, he brought about a certain way of things, a particular order. Like Matthew Crawford’s attempt to situate the self “in a relation of *fit* to a world it has *grasped*,” we must first come to recognize that the world works a certain way and is bound by a particular design before it makes sense to talk of our role as stewards within that world.¹⁸ The Scriptures have a way of articulating our choice to either align ourselves with creation’s design or to reject that reality and go our own way. When we live in accordance with God’s design

16. Prov 8:29–31.

17. As it pertains to the study of *chokmah*, I am indebted to the teaching of Tim Mackie in his conversation with Jon Collins in the Bible Project podcast, episode 16, *Wisdom part 2: Proverbs*, June 8, 2016, 48:48.

18. Crawford, *World Beyond*, 25.

we are in tune with creation and are said to be wise. When we live contrary to creation's order, we are called foolish because we are at odds with its design and with our role as stewards.¹⁹ To acknowledge the order and design of reality is to recognize that God exhibits a will over that which he created; he intends a specific trajectory as well as an ultimate end. This has consistently been articulated by Christians throughout the centuries as "life to the full."²⁰ The God whom stewards are commissioned to represent concerns himself with the nurture and enhancement of life most fully realized in connection to him.

Normative for the steward is God's ordering of chaos revealed through his concern for life, peace, and justice within the sphere of existence. In this way, ordering chaos is not only an acknowledgment and commitment to live within creation's design, but referential to justice, an active participation in life that furthers God's intended *shalom* for the world. Stewards commit to cooperating with God in acting justly everywhere they have been given authority to steward. As I will argue in the next chapter, this is nowhere truer than in a steward's attention. The claim of Christianity is that the clearest view of ordered chaos will always be revealed in the person and life of Jesus, the one in whom "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."²¹ When Scripture declares that "all [things] belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God,"²² it situates Jesus as the preeminent steward, the one who "reveals the will of God

19. This language is especially prominent in the Jewish Wisdom Literature of Proverbs.

20. See Jesus's words in John 10:10.

21. Col 1:19.

22. 1 Cor 3:22–23.

in all its holiness and love, and models the sovereignty of God for human life. His own life of perfect obedience to the Father constitutes a living definition and concrete standard of stewardship.”²³ For Jesus, the steward becomes the means and model for affirming the world as good and for ordering chaos in representation of the Creator.

Jesus as Preeminent Steward

Jesus, the “image of the invisible God,”²⁴ perfectly represents God the Creator in his affirmation of the world as good as well as in ordering chaos.²⁵ His representation is twofold: Jesus uniquely functions as the means for our own stewarding as well as the exemplar in how he images God. If one bases the commission of the steward in commandment or loyalty or desire to do good or fear of reprimand or expectation of reward, they ultimately misrepresent God’s intent for calling humans into that position. Rather, the basis for our stewarding depends on “God’s loving nature in its movement toward man” that is realized fully in the person of Jesus.²⁶ In Jesus, God reaches out for humanity to re-create them as fitting dwelling places for his Spirit. This roots the steward in christological assumptions: “as those who are ‘in Christ’ we are taken up into his stewardship We are graciously brought into a stewarding of God’s grace that has already been enacted by God’s chief steward.”²⁷ Order here is important. Before one can

23. T. A. Kantonen, “Stewardship and Christian Doctrine,” in *Stewardship in Contemporary Theology*, ed. T. K. Thompson (New York: Association Press, 1960), 178.

24. Col 1:15.

25. Importantly, the Gospel writers attesting to the life of Jesus do not outline a proper ecology for Jesus as steward. I simply draw here on how his life enables and exemplifies the steward’s imaging of God.

26. Albert McClellan, *Christian Stewardship* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1966), 3.

27. Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, 2nd ed. (New York: Friendship Press, 1990), 44.

look at Christ as the model of the faithful steward, he must be understood as the means by which human beings are initiated into the steward life. Christians call this the *good news*, or *gospel*, for it reveals and transmits God's loving action in and through Christ to the world. This is crucial, for, as Douglas John Hall explains, "the gospel of stewardship begins by overcoming that within us which prevents our being stewards—the pride of imagining ourselves owners; the sloth of irresponsibility, neglect, and apathy."²⁸ The Chief Steward of God, Jesus the Son, initiates people into his own stewardship through the Spirit and through faith, enabling them to be vessels of his Spirit and transforming them in the process. Once Jesus is received as the means by which a person becomes God's steward, they can then look at him also as the model by which faithfulness, or accuracy, in representing God is measured.

In Jesus, we are also given a concrete example of the faithful steward. When the Jews in John's gospel are scrutinizing Jesus's actions, he replies about himself: "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise."²⁹ Here Jesus models the very attitude and position of the steward, one who holds in trust the authority of another and is accountable for how faithfully he represents the one who bestows that authority. What Jesus sees God the Creator doing is what he himself does, which is why he proclaims in the synagogue at the beginning of his ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to

28. Hall, *The Steward*, 44.

29. John 5:19.

proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."³⁰ God orders chaos, and Jesus follows suit by cooperating in that mission to put right what has been broken by sin. Throughout the Gospel accounts, we see Jesus making good on this mission. He heals the lame, the blind, the sick. He raises the dead to life. He miraculously provides food for the hungry. He teaches God's law with authority. He attends to the despised. With each interaction, Jesus exemplifies the steward's representation of God in how he brings order to the chaos around him.

Jesus orders chaos in the world because the world is good, worthy of substantive investment, and the place where people encounter God. This is not to God's chagrin, but his delight. The opening of the Gospel of John explicitly connects Jesus to the creation account in which God first spoke his affirmation of creation, as if to reiterate his delight in this reality:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.³¹

God's delight in the world mirrors his delight in Jesus, wherein he was pleased to live among us, to make himself known to humanity, and to bring light and life to our world. Scripture has another way of talking about God's nature, his heart for the world: *God is love.*³² Arguably, Jesus's most infamous words proclaim love as the driving force behind

30. This account is found in Luke 4:18–19. Jesus is reading from the scroll of Isaiah.

31. John 1:1–5, 14, 18.

32. See 1 John 4 for more on this theme.

God's movement toward humanity: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."³³ Jesus's imitation of God as preeminent steward is a perfect representation of God's love, attested to not only by his words, but in his deeds. Jesus's acts of love were not to be given only by himself, however, for he commissions us to imitate and enact the same love for one another in our lives, as witnessed in John 13:

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them."³⁴

What it means to be a steward, in both identity and vocation, is determined by who God is and what he does. It is told that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus. In Jesus we see God's affirmation of the world and his ordering of chaos through concrete acts of love. In his exposition on stewardship, Kantonen gathers these together in succinct summation by saying, "what we are and do is therefore determined by [who Jesus] is and [what he] does. We are to be holy as he is holy. We are to love as he loves. We are to give as he gives."³⁵ And we are to attend as he attends.

Human Beings as Stewards of God

Given the relational nature of the steward, the commissioning agent's identity, character, and purposes serve as the source for all stewarding. In our case, God the Creator spoke the world into being, affirmed it as good, and formed humans as his stewards to care for his creation by ordering chaos in all its forms. Not only did God

33. John 3:16.

34. John 13:12–16.

35. Kantonen, "Stewardship and Christian Doctrine," 177.

create humans for the stewarding role, he gave himself through Jesus as the means by which we can fulfill our assigned role while simultaneously exemplifying what that fulfillment entails. This theological framework suggests that a certain wisdom permeates creation, governing its design, while making ultimate claims upon human identity. We have been made to image or represent God, our Creator, and the paradigm of steward gives us the proper categories in order to understand and perform our role in creation.

How exactly *is* a steward's representation actualized in the world? Those representative actions are dictated by two mutually informative poles, a healthy tension of "empowered authority" and "responsible accountability." Therefore, stewards image God's character and intent for his creation when the two poles of empowered authority and responsible accountability are held in healthy tension. To lean too far in either direction creates dis-balance. Authority without accountability becomes a confusion of roles, in which the steward acts ultimately as owner. Accountability without authority diminishes the steward to the position of voiceless slave, stripping them of God's gracious empowerment to partner with him in ordering chaos. Giving attention to both the empowered authority and the responsible accountability which function as the exchange between Creator and steward informs what it means for humans to be God's stewards, and by implication what it means for human stewards to represent God the Creator in their attention.

Empowered Authority

What sets the steward apart from a lowly slave is that more is required from the steward than taking orders and carrying out the bidding of their Creator. The Creator's will and wishes are present, but so is an empowering authority, an endowed ability to

speak and act as if it were the very words and actions of the Creator himself. License exists for the steward to creatively accomplish tasks, make important decisions, give immediate orders, and take charge on behalf of their Creator. In fact, these are all part of their expected duties, and the role presupposes the Creator's trust that they will do so well.

A good example of this dynamic can be seen in Genesis 43 and 44. Joseph, a Hebrew prisoner who has risen through the ranks to become Pharaoh's second-in-command, has a steward fielding the issues being addressed to him. Joseph's own brothers come to the steward in search of assistance, treating the steward with the same respect they would his lord, and receiving his word in the same manner should it have come from Joseph himself. Imbued with Joseph's authority, the steward is entrusted to manage and care for what belongs to him in the way the Joseph desires it to be managed and cared for. By doing so, it becomes clear that the steward serves as a deputy or manager of their lord's own charge.

Two other references from the Hebrew Scriptures help give shape to the significant power entrusted to the steward. First Chronicles 27–28 details the names and arenas over which the stewards were empowered to have authority of King David's various resources throughout his kingdom. Daniel 1 shows an interaction between Daniel, a Hebrew prisoner of King Nebuchadnezzar, and the king's steward in charge of the prisoners. When Daniel desires a change in his diet, he goes to the steward, who makes an immediate decision regarding the king's restrictions and Daniel's request, without consulting anyone else; once it is spoken, his word is honored and followed. These examples show that, according to Ronald Vallet's research on the topic, "the steward is

not simply a passive caretaker of what has been entrusted to him or her. The steward is a full representative of the owner.”³⁶ Steward is a role which requires ambition to know the will and desires of one’s Creator, to fulfill those wishes without needing to be asked, and to exhibit initiative, boldness, and discernment in doing so.

Given that the Creator willingly chooses to hand over a degree of his own authority to a steward, he intends that the bond between them would grow to a point where the latter “completely identifies with the aims of his [Creator] and knows how his [Creator] would wish his desired objectives to be brought about,” thus allowing the steward “a certain independence from the criticisms and designs of others.”³⁷ As the bond grows, so does the likelihood of fidelity between the two, for the steward knows that not only do they possess the Creator’s authority, they must also present an accounting for their use of that authority.

Responsible Accountability

The empowered authority given the steward by the Creator is balanced by the steward’s responsible accountability. Without doubt stewards are important, but they are not ultimately authoritative (that is, unaccountable) nor are they irreplaceable.³⁸ Those who fail to serve as good stewards may have their authority stripped from them and given to another. In fact, another biblical reference from Isa 22:15–21 shows how those stewards who see themselves as such are dealt with by their divine Creator:

Thus says the Lord God of hosts: Come, go to this steward, to Shebna, who is master of the household, and say to him: What right do you have here? Who are your relatives here,

36. Ronald E. Vallet, *Stepping Stones of the Steward: A Faith Journey Through Jesus’ Parables*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 3.

37. Jeremy M. Kimble, “The Steward of God: Exploring the Role and Function of Elders,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 6:1 (Summer 2015): 85.

38. A point made by Douglas John Hall in *The Steward*, 33–4.

that you have cut out a tomb here for yourself, cutting a tomb on the height, and carving a habitation for yourself in the rock? The Lord is about to hurl you away violently, my fellow. He will seize firm hold on you, whirl you round and round, and throw you like a ball into a wide land; there you shall die, and there your splendid chariots shall lie, O you disgrace to your master's house! I will thrust you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your post. On that day I will call my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, and will clothe him with your robe and bind your sash on him. I will commit your authority to his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.

Stewards overstep their commission when they act without accountability, which within the purview of the steward is an assessment of representation. Does the steward accurately and faithfully represent God? With what integrity does the steward reflect and display the concerns and commands of their divine Creator? Faithfulness in representation presupposes investments of time, energy, trust, listening, learning, sharing—all the necessary components of having and growing in relationship with another. To be accountable to God is first to know him, to recognize his desires and expectations, to measure ourselves by his standard of love. Faithful stewards must stay connected to their Creator if they are to represent him well, a concept Jesus symbolizes through a vine and branches when he says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”³⁹ Jesus's words here are a direct challenge to our modern paradigms of the self as free and autonomous, as our own source and arbiter of authority, accountable to nobody else. For if we choose to live in this way, it ultimately proves to be a confusion of roles, a misunderstanding of reality's design and our place in it, which sets us on a path whereby we will be removed from the vine, thrown away, and left to wither.⁴⁰

39. John 15:5.

40. Jesus continues with the vine and branch imagery throughout John 15, including what happens with those who do not abide in him.

As foreign as this may seem to us, ideas of a steward's accountability to a sovereign were common in the Ancient Near East—the world of the Scriptures. Kings would erect images of themselves across their territories, especially the far-off reaches of their empire. These images served as representations of their sovereignty in that place, reminders to the people that their king or emperor was watching and had power over their lives. God does something similar in Genesis 1 when he creates humans in his image to serve as his representatives in his kingdom (i.e., all of creation). Among other reasons for God's later command that his people should not make any graven images of his likeness, perhaps it was because he has already formed *human beings* in his image, with the expectation that they will show what he is like to the rest of creation.⁴¹

In addition to their erected images, ancient kings would place representatives in the different provinces, faithful governors and trustees to carry out the king's will in that place or report any problems. In the absence of the king's presence in a place, his steward would represent the king's wishes and decisions to the people. However, the king's commissioning of stewards did not provide them with an unchecked share of power to wield. In their exercise of dominion they were accountable to the one who empowered them with the authority in the first place. Thus it is for us who serve as stewards of God. Ours is an exercise of authority that "is accountable to God . . . not license for human indulgence."⁴² While such accountability may appear stifling compared to other contemporary paradigms, the steward is a symbol that most fittingly situates us within

41. See Exod 20:4–6.

42. Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 169.

our world and our purpose. This frees us to settle into our intended role where God's *shalom* and life can be actualized in our lives.

Conclusion

Empowered authority and responsible accountability as two dynamic poles of the steward reveal the ways modern stewardship language (especially in the church) fails to capture the full scope of the image. More than matters of good investment, general philanthropy, or giving a certain percentage of finances, faithfulness as a steward demands that a person knows their Creator well enough to represent his will within the places and contexts where they are stationed. Those who call themselves stewards of God need to understand that it is not simply money that God entrusts to our care. In the creation narrative in Genesis, human beings are created to serve as partners with God, trustees over the rest of the created order, his representatives—his image—to everyone and everything else. Time and again humans fail to recognize their steward role as the entrusted gift he provides; they choose instead to grasp at an authority that is not theirs to begin with, and in so doing, attempt to shape the world into their own images. When they do so, they confuse themselves with the Owner, dishonoring him and proving themselves ill-suited for their created purpose.

Ancient as it may be, this symbol has something to offer modern culture, for the steward paradigm among other things “raises a man above merely looking at himself It discloses the emptiness in every striving in which one demands something for himself. In contrast, it points to the meaningfulness in a life subordinated to values which themselves make demands.”⁴³ Admittedly, it is not easy to accept the idea that one's will

43. Helge Brattgård, *God's Stewards: A Theological Study of the Principles and Practices of Stewardship*, trans. Gene J. Lund (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 194–95.

is subservient to another's. Neither do I suggest that we bind ourselves to just anyone. In crafting a theological foundation with God as Creator, I hope to make a case for a stewarding of life that, while not free from pain or suffering, can be lived in the peace of trust, in the assurance of meaning, and in pursuit of the good. One does this by first acquainting themselves with, and then taking on the life of God, the divine Creator.

Even though the qualities that make for a good steward—humility, obedience, loyalty, shrewdness—would undoubtedly serve the steward's own ambitions well, such grasping at a position unfitting for human beings is not only out of sync with the order and wisdom of creation but prove limited in the potential to actualize “life to the full.” The paradigm of steward serves as one way to properly situate us within the order of creation while giving meaning and weight to our lives and our attention. In short, it provides an alternative approach for addressing attentional reclamation within our digital age. Rather than desperate attempts to change our technologies or relieve ourselves of them altogether, the reclamation proposed here addresses us as humans, properly situated in our good world, functioning in the ways that God designed and purposed us to function. When we do, God makes claims upon our attention that transforms the ways we interact with those technologies. Through the steward paradigm, theologically grounded, we can also challenge the idea that the self ought to be the source and arbiter of authority, accountable to no one else. Stewards are not owners, and stewarding our attention comes with a greater source of authority and a greater sense of accountability than is commonly held. What remains for determining whether this proposition serves us well is to explore *how* the steward paradigm affects our attention.

CHAPTER V
STEWARDING ATTENTION

Introduction

The concept of stewardship is not new in Christian thought. In fact, much has been written on how stewardship applies to the Christian life, especially as it regards the environment, the handling of finances, and the pastoring of churches.¹ Glaringly absent from the conversation is what bearing the steward paradigm has upon our attention, any conceptualization of which must consider the current digital landscape. What might the attention of a steward look like in the unique context of our digital age? I offer here three brief characterizations concerning a steward's faithful representation, faithful devotion, and faithful engagement of their attention.

Faithful Representation

The claims that God makes upon the life of the steward will radically challenge the steward's ordering and practices of attending, instigating a re-negotiation of their relationship to digital technologies. Consider, for instance, how faithfully representing God makes claims upon a steward's attention. Is it possible to spend hours each day

1. Literature abounds for each category. On ecological stewardship, see John N. Black, *The Dominion of Man: The Search for Ecological Responsibility* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1970) and Mary Evelyn Jegen and Bruno V. Manno, eds. *The Earth is the Lord's: Essays on Stewardship* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). On financial stewardship, see Charles R. Lane, *Ask, Thank, Tell: Improving Stewardship Ministry in Your Congregation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) and J. Clif Christopher, *This Is Not Your Parent's Offering Plate: A New Vision for Financial Stewardship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015). On pastoral stewardship, see S. Scott Rodin, *The Steward Leader: Transforming People, Organizations, and Communities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010) and Kenneth H. Carter, *Pastor as Steward: Faithful Manager and Leader* (Discipleship Resources, 1991).

mindlessly scrolling through Instagram and Facebook, binging Netflix, or obsessively checking email while attaining the level and quality of attentional care requisite to genuine acts of love? Maybe, but not without two strategic temptations persistently threatening to compromise our attention: 1) that our attentional habits do not make any substantive difference for love's expression (a misconception about our authority); or 2) that we are already attending well enough to satisfy love's requirements, thus dismissing the necessity of any growth or change to our attentional habits (a misconception about our accountability). Apathy, reluctance, and willful ignorance are detrimental attitudes to any faithful representations of attending and do not change the fact that capitulation to such attitudes simply imply an inferior quality of representation, rather than the avoidance of representation altogether: a "foolish" rather than "wise" stewarding.

Accustomed as we are to the paradigm of the autonomous individual in which the claims on our attention are steered by pleasure and organized around self-interest, taking up the steward paradigm requires a re-ordering of our attention based upon the steward's relational connection with God. However, for the autonomous individual, ideas of submitting to another, much less willingly committing to do so, provide cause for rebellion, even when the "other" is God. Representation demands a constraint to "freedom" as we often conceive it, and in many ways the steward is not "free" to direct their attention where and how and with what quality they will because stewards are not owners. Their representation of God requires obedience and responsiveness to the purposes of their Creator, obligating the steward to attend as God does, not as they themselves might desire.

For instance, an important aspect of faithful representation concerns the objects of a steward's attention. God's interest in those who are overlooked, cast out, impoverished, or oppressed transfers to the steward. Marginalized people consistently catch God's attention. So much so that Jesus directly identifies himself with such people when he says to his disciples: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me [for] just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."² While this does not suggest that any one individual must attend to everyone in such dire circumstances, ignoring such people is not an option for the steward. Faithful representation for the steward—the kind of attending that participates with God in ordering chaos—alters our vision in radical, possibly unnatural, and assuredly uncomfortable ways towards the people and problems of the world that in our more honest moments we would rather avoid or ignore. However, if we give in to such preferences, we effectively reject our charge as God's stewards and misrepresent the one who has created us to bear his image. Yet when we succeed in taking on God's concern for those who suffer, Simone Weil equates that kind of attending with nothing less than a miracle. She writes, "the capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough."³ As difficult as it may be to concern ourselves with the recipients of God's attention and to

2. Matt 25:35–36, 40.

3. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: HarperPerennial, 2009), 64.

give a deeper quality of attention to those with whom God concerns himself, doing so creates possibilities for actualizing the miraculous in our daily lives.

Mercifully, the kind of re-ordering of our attention described above is a process more than it is a flip of the switch and is built primarily upon spiritual disciplines and the acquisition of virtue. By dwelling on and actively engaging with the person of God in Jesus—his character, his words, his actions, his aims—the chaotic whims of our attention may become divinely ordered, resulting in instantiations of more accurate attentional representations of God. To put it metaphorically, stewards learn to “see” with God’s eyes, which is important, for our vision provides the structural context for our action. We need God to organize our attentional “sight” around *his* will for creation so that we will not miss where he is present nor those who have his concern. As he organizes our sight as his stewards, he establishes “structures of value”⁴ through which our actions and choices are filtered, so that we learn the relevant and irrelevant knowledge pertinent to our representation of God.⁵ The cumulative result of our submission to God’s ordering is that our attention takes on the quality and shape of God’s attention, a virtuous ideal named by Aristotle as attending “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way.”⁶

4. Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 329. She goes on to say that “at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over.”

5. Interestingly, in *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 54–57, Daniel Goleman emphasizes how suppression of irrelevant information based on one’s goal is just as important as focusing on relevant information to that goal. Thus, to filter out irrelevant information is an active process and does not simply happen naturally.

6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translation by W. D. Ross, book 2, chapter 6, available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>.

Admittedly, attending in ways that faithfully represent God is not always easy or natural. That our digital technologies are proficient at challenging, hijacking, and preying upon our attention without any regard for our own ideals and aims of attending often seems unfair and unjust. That those who serve as God’s stewards under such hostile conditions are nonetheless held to high standards of attending can feel like an impossible task. However, God has not abandoned the plight of his stewards. He has given his stewards instruments of his grace, sacraments through which their life can be rooted in him and can guide their attention amid a digital world. These sacraments have been present at the center of Christian faith since the time of Christ, passed on through the Church, resolute in their ability to orient the attention of his stewards across generations and cultures. Two sacraments in particular are recognized as ones Christ gave the Church.⁷ The sacrament of baptism binds the steward with their Creator, marking the covenant made between the two and providing a new way of being in the world normed by the life and death of Jesus and empowered by the gift of his Spirit. The sacrament of the Eucharist regularly returns the steward to their source of life, placing them at the table where they are served and taught how to serve. Other instruments of grace have likewise been given the steward, such as the Scriptures, which lead the steward into paths of truth and life, bearing witness to God, his people, and his desire for the world, while providing nourishment for the steward’s soul through all of life’s challenges. Prayer, the lifeblood of the steward’s existence, actively places attention upon God and his concerns, transforming and perfecting the steward’s attention in the process. The towel,

7. In this instance I draw upon the confession of the Episcopal (Anglican) Church as a representative of the Church at large. See “What We Believe,” *The Episcopal Church*, accessed February 21, 2022, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/what-we-believe/sacraments/>.

exemplified in Jesus's own actions of stooping down to wash his disciples' feet, grounds the steward's attention in active service of God and others as the expression of love, humbling the steward to follow faithfully in the way of Jesus.⁸ These and other instruments of God's grace are the ancient yet relevant means by which a steward is meant to represent God faithfully in their attention, even in today's digital age.

Faithful Devotion

Consider how a steward devotes themselves to their Creator as the source of their authority and the one to whom they are ultimately accountable. The nature of the Creator/steward relationship is such that this devotion is warranted, for God entrusts the steward with his own reputation, and the steward commits to live according to God's interests rather than their own. When the steward, after making such a commitment, chooses to devote themselves elsewhere, the Scriptures say that person shall be punished and cast out of the position of authority. For, "from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."⁹ Herein lies the danger of our digital technologies, whose subtle allure, along with their overt theft, of our attention tempts away the steward's primary devotion to God. Ascribed with enough significance and apportioned with enough of our time, those technologies may act as conduits for redirecting our attention toward alternative objects of devotion, or even become objects of devotion in and of themselves.

If we remain at a level of ignorance regarding how these technologies capture attention, even though our words declare other allegiances, our actions will nonetheless

8. John 13:1–17.

9. See Luke 12:48. Jesus uses two separate parables about stewards to describe the qualities of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, ending his descriptions with these words.

express the loyalty of our hearts. If, as God’s stewards, we are aware of how technologies capture attention but are unwilling to change our unhealthy attachments to them, we deceive ourselves and fail to live in accordance with our stated loyalty. In such a case it would serve us better to be honest about the true object(s) of our devotion, then either make a change or give ourselves fully over to them, lest we live as divided selves. However, neither of these is the ideal. God is consistently explicit about the wholehearted connection he desires with human beings, and most Christians would affirm a reciprocal desire for God.¹⁰ For those who willingly assent to be God’s stewards and allow God to make definitive claims upon their attention, they must recognize the difficulty and count the cost.¹¹

Faithful Engagement

It is no secret that the Scriptures were not written in a modern, Western, digital context. Jesus did not have an iPhone or a verified Twitter account to keep him “connected” with his followers. How then are modern-day stewards meant to faithfully engage their attention in a digital context? What are the rules and guidelines, the prescriptions of wisdom, the boundaries? As a first suggestion, we must let go of one-size-fits-all answers to that question, as if there is a last word on attending well in the digital age. Instead, the faithful stewarding of attention, with or without digital technologies, thrives or withers on its connection with Jesus. Adam J. Copeland suggests that rather than make broad prescriptions for what is or is not sanctioned as far as our technologies are concerned, we should continually “ponder X in the presence of Jesus,”

10. See Deut 6:4–5: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

11. Jesus talks about this very subject using the language of discipleship in Luke 14:25–33.

always returning to the person of Jesus rather than looking at him as the ultimate fulfillment of a concept (such as how to engage with technology).¹² Under this schema, responses will vary for how attention can faithfully be given to God, be it in the utilization of digital technologies or through strategic disconnection from them. However, in every case, attention will be given to how the lordship of Jesus makes a claim upon the steward's relationship with technology. As an additional grace of God in discerning these kinds of questions, God has gathered a community of people together who are committed to pondering life in the presence of Jesus so that doing so need not be subject to the efforts of individuals alone.

Granted, my process for outlining a theological framework of the steward has primarily focused on the individual steward in relation to God. While individual action is certainly called for, it cannot stop there, for the accounts of Scripture and Christian tradition consistently involve a collective aspect to people's connection with the divine. The much-referenced Genesis account of creation where God creates humanity in his image is quickly followed by the story of Adam and Eve in which two individuals represent all humankind, as their Hebrew names reveal— *ādām* (Adam) meaning “humanity” and *ḥawwā* (Eve) related to the Hebrew verb “to live,” or “life.”¹³ As much

12. Adam J. Copeland, “Technology: Digital Gifts,” in *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship*, ed. Adam J. Copeland (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 58–59.

13. For more on Adam and Eve in Genesis, see R. S. Hess, “Adam,” in *The IVP Bible Dictionary Series: Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, edited by David W. Baker and T. Desmond Alexander (InterVarsity Press, 2002) and R. G. Branch, “Eve,” in *The IVP Bible Dictionary Series: Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, edited by David W. Baker and T. Desmond Alexander (InterVarsity Press, 2002). To make the above point, Hess says in his article that “it is clear that the *ādām* created is intended as a collective. In Gen 1:27, *ādām* in the first half of the verse is set in parallel with “male and female” in the second half. The intent is to include all members of the human race in the *ādām* that God created.”

as God’s commission holds true for individual lives, the steward is a collective identity that he speaks over humanity, a role all humanity is meant to play. As the story of the Scriptures progresses, God involves himself with a people, Israel, through whom he intends to bless the rest of the world.¹⁴ When Jesus comes, all who believe in him are grafted into the vine of Israel, joining in this family of God’s people and widely recognized as the Church.¹⁵ Consistently throughout the Scriptures, God’s concern, his commission, his invitation extends toward a collective people, rather than a mere collection of individuals.

Engaging with the steward paradigm on these terms means that while there must be commitment on the parts of individuals, the Church as a whole is called to be a stewarding community, that which theologian Joseph Fletcher calls a “returning from modern individualistic attitudes and mores to the essentially social or corporate character of stewardship at its biblical source in the Old Testament—when it was a ‘role’ assigned to and accepted by the whole covenant-community of Israel, and not a private or individual election.”¹⁶ Once again the steward paradigm challenges the autonomous individual paradigm in that a faithful engagement of attention with our digital

14. See Gen 12:1–3, in which God tells Abram, the father of the Israelites: “Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

15. See Rom 11:17–18, in which Israel is the olive tree and all non-Israelites (or Gentiles) are the wild olive shoot: “But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.”

16. Joseph Fletcher, “Wealth and Taxation: The Ethics of Stewardship,” in *Stewardship in Contemporary Theology*, ed. T. K. Thompson (New York: Association Press, 1960), 220.

technologies is not primarily an effort of the individual, but is an extension of the life and being of the Church, whose mission, in the words of Douglas John Hall is

not therefore the gaining of influence, power, property; not the winning of souls and tongues to the Christian confession; not even (as an end in itself) the extension of the manifest sovereignty of Christ in the world, but rather the care and nurture of life, the healing of the one who fell amongst thieves, the feeding of the hungry and freeing of the oppressed, the befriending of the friendless, the equitable distribution of earth's bounty, the passion for justice and peace, and dialogue with all who hunger and thirst for authenticity.¹⁷

In this way, the true Church functions as a society in which God's intent for creation and for humanity's place within it is presently realized. To be a steward of God's attention in this digital age, we must shed the illusion that our attention can remain a private affair, untethered to the world around us and not obligated by any authority other than the movements of our own wills. The gift of God's gathered people—their rituals, their confession, their service, their identity, their love—can offer a transformed way of attending in the world by structuring, reinforcing, and modeling an attention based on a stewardship of God. Though “we live in a culture that is fundamentally opposed to stewardship,”¹⁸ and thus can expect the values guiding our technologies and their hold upon our attention to be subservient to a more self-oriented paradigm, the commission of God for his Church is to live in ways that realize God's will done “on earth as it is in heaven.”¹⁹ For the community of God's stewards living in a digital age, it is the right time to start asking what the words of that prayer mean for our attention.

17. Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, 2nd ed. (New York: Friendship Press, 1990), 249.

18. Benjamin D. Williams, “An Orthodox Understanding of Stewardship,” *Orthodox Church in America*, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.oca.org/the-hub/the-church-on-current-issues/an-orthodox-understanding-of-stewardship>.

19. Matt 6:10.

Conclusion

Steward of God as operating paradigm for what it means to be human in our digital age claims nothing less than “the restoration of all areas of life to its rightful Lord,” not the least of which is our attention, so central to everything.²⁰ Applying concepts of authority and accountability to our attention prompts a certain representation of God, properly orients our devotion to God, and invites a communal engagement with others who have committed to being stewards. A different way of attending is possible for us, even when we are surrounded by digital technologies so accomplished at compromising our attention. We can begin to live from a new paradigm through a theological reclamation of the self in light of who God is, in order to see beyond the paradigm of autonomous individual and live a more generative and constructive existence as a steward. Doing so aligns us with who we were made to be and places us in a more fitting relation with God and the rest of creation.

Insisting upon this kind of transformed way of attending is not easy when the prevailing structures of society are held up by the pillars of individualism, selfish ambition, and skepticism of authority. Father Maximos Conostas reminds us that while “Christianity has often been subservient to the prevailing political and economic structures,” we must not forget “that the Gospel is not derivative of human culture, but generative of a new way of life.”²¹ Though the architecture of society constructs obstacles

20. T. A. Kantonen, *A Theology for Christian Stewardship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1956), 60–61.

21. Father Maximos Conostas, “Πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ: Attentiveness and Digital Culture,” presented at the International Conference on Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care, May 7–9, 2015, transcript available at https://www.academia.edu/12365160/Attend_to_Thyself_Deut_15_9_Attentiveness_and_Digital_Culture_International_Conference_on_Digital_Media_and_Orthodox_Pastoral_Care_Athens_7_9_May_2015

to living in the way of the steward, it need not be discouraging or threatening to our doing so. Challenging as it undoubtedly is, stewarding attention is also an invitation to attend to what matters, to affirm and participate in life's fullness, and to allow love to have its way with us so that together we might "engender a new, alternative world; not a virtual reality, but the reality of virtue."²² It is my conviction that the steward places us right in the center of this reality, orients us towards a transformed way of life, and sets down a better foundation for how we can attend in the digital age.

22. Conostas, "Πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ."

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In *The Art of the Novel*, the writer Henry James declares that “the effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in face of the constant force that makes for muddlement.”¹ Such is the challenge of stewarding attention in the digital age. Attending in accordance with our values and primary commitments, while not a new problem, is in the throes of a novel digital context, propelled by technologies masterful at capturing attention. In order to “really see” under these conditions, we must start by recognizing how those technologies challenge, hijack, and prey upon our attention to the detriment of our individual and collective lives. Gaining awareness of the part technology plays in distracting, dividing, and fostering distrust between people is an important step toward insisting upon the reclamation of our attention. My suggestion has been that this agenda begins with humans and not our technologies, with looking at attention through an ethical lens, as advanced by Simone Weil, that we may grow in attentional virtue. As we grow in virtue, we seek to situate ourselves properly within the design of reality, to submit to its structures, per Matthew Crawford, and to recognize that substantive change in attention involves more than a series of lifehacks that help us become more productive. What is needed for attention to be reclaimed is a paradigm shift in self-understanding. I suggested that it was the paradigm of steward, theologically rooted, that might bring together the

1. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Scribners, 1934), 62.

concepts of an attender who grows in virtue while living in tune with the wisdom of reality. Grounding the human steward in their relationship with God the Creator forms a basis for what it means to represent God. This effort to “really represent” God in terms of attention must then apply attention to our digital context. What results is a representation of God that can be faithful in character, in devotion, and in engagement with the world, even under difficult attentional circumstances.

Over the course of this project I have endeavored to draw attention to our digital context, to show how the technologies that surround us, the ones that fill our spaces and compete for our devotion at the level of our attention. In response to that problem, I have connected attention with stewardship as a means of challenging how we typically think about ourselves and what we owe to others. Throughout this thesis, I have endeavored to show in a preliminary way certain claims the paradigm of steward makes upon our lives. In the process, I offer up the steward as one approach for how the compromised and degraded attention plaguing our society might be addressed in a hopeful manner. In so doing, I hope to enlarge the influence and reach of the steward paradigm past its typical borders where its application to real life has largely been functional and perfunctory. In the process, I have attempted to elucidate relevant issues at the intersection of attention and stewardship, seeking to grasp what it means to attend with authority and accountability in representation of another’s will. With all that has been said, my hope is that the light cast upon our relationship with digital technologies allows us to engage with them more purposefully and with greater discernment, that we might live in accordance with our primary commitments, our highest ideals, and our stated devotions.

Even amidst such lofty hopes, I recognize there is more work to be done. The focus of this project has been restricted in scope, but there are other important questions that emerge at the crossroads of theology and attention. Several are immediately apparent. Firstly, much more could be developed in terms of what it means to attend with God's authority and to be accountable to him for the use of that authority. Examining attention through that lens invites many interesting intersections with other theological categories left untouched here: divine grace, salvation, eschatology, sanctification, and others. Secondly, though mentioned briefly in these pages, I wonder about the role sacraments play in helping us learn how to be better stewards of attention. Since sacraments function as a bridge between the physical and spiritual, their value for guiding and shaping attention cannot be overstated. Thirdly, to what extent can attention be cached out in terms of stewardship? And what role does mastery play in the stewarding of attention? Finally, what might it look like to apply a stewarding of attention to the varying contours of Christianity or even other faiths? The claim here has centered around faithful representation of the God of Christianity, but it is apparent that even amongst Christians, that representation can range in expression.

A final word about the value of this topic in my own life. This project began with a recognition of the discrepancy between God's command to love him with all my heart, and how difficult that was for me due to the digital technologies coercing my attention away from such love. I quickly learned two things: 1) that my attention is sacred; and 2) that digital technologies do not *happen* to steal attention from me, they are designed to do so. It became clear I needed to undertake an honest reckoning with the centrality and importance of attention if I was to realize this wholehearted love, especially in our digital

age. Then came the pursuit of realistically reclaiming attention while surrounded by digital noise, ideally without isolating myself from society, either through holier-than-thou abstinence from digital technologies, or through incessant rants about the detrimental loss of attention. I needed a framework for hope in the midst of increasing distraction, division, and distrust. It was the steward—this ancient yet astonishingly appropriate symbol—that surprised me with a new perspective on the topic. I saw that with the steward, my attention mattered (because it carried an authoritative weight), to the point that I was not the only one who had a say in how it got paid out (because I am accountable to more than just myself). But the steward will always be a “lived concept,”² ultimately proved worthy, not by theological explication or rhetorical argument, but in whether our day-to-day attention faithfully represents the Creator who entrusted us to image him to the rest of creation. Should that happen, these will certainly not be the last words on the subject.

2. Adam J. Copeland, “Introduction,” in *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship*, ed. Adam J. Copeland (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), xiv–xv.

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