

"Pay attention!"

Simone Weil and Bernard Lonergan in dialogue on the role of *attention* in education: implications for the next National School Reform Agreement.¹

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SW: Good afternoon, Fr Lonergan. Why are you today?

BL: Good afternoon to you too, Miss Weil. Why am I? Well now, let me see, or should I say, let me do more than just “take a look” but rather attend to the data of my experience, asking intelligent questions, and then evaluating the possible answers so as to judge reasonably which of them I should affirm as being most likely!

SW: Sounds exhausting! How long will that take?

BL: All done, or rather should I say, “already done”, as I can draw on the communal tradition into which I have been born to affirm the answer the question, rather than having to conduct the analysis myself from scratch. However, I have appropriated that tradition for myself, and can affirm that I am today for the same reason I was yesterday, and will be tomorrow, namely because I am loved.

SW: I have another question for you.

BL: I relish questions, especially the ones I can't yet answer. I get to experience the tension of inquiry.

SW: Quite. Well, my question is rather mundane and concrete.

BL: The good is always concrete.

¹ Those who are familiar with Lonergan's writings and with Simone Weil's "Reflections on the right use of school studies with a view to the love of God" will recognise that this imaginary dialogue incorporates sections from their writings taken word-for-word but arranged here in such a way as to (hopefully) give the feel of a conversation. And this also means that I have put words into the mouths of the protagonists that reflect my own contemporary concerns in a way that some might object are not entirely faithful to the spirit of the thinking of these two great minds. Such is the risk that is run in any interpretive enterprise.

SW: My question is, have you heard about the new National School Reform Agreement?

BL: No I haven't - what is it?

SW: Well, you will need to pay attention.

BL: I always do.

SW: The National School Reform Agreement is an agreement between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories about how funding for our schools should be used and for what ends. The current agreement expires at the end of 2024, and the parties are about to enter negotiations with respect to the level of funding, how it should be used, and what the accountability mechanisms will be. An important question will be "How will we know whether the outcomes of the agreement have been achieved?"

BL: It's important to begin with the ends, and work backwards to the means.

SW: Absolutely agree. So what do you think the outcomes should be? What is the purpose of school education, and why?

BL: You are asking me what is my philosophy of education, and why it is important to have a philosophy of education. You are asking me why we educate people at all? Well, it must be because we think it will achieve some human good.

SW: But what is your notion of "the human good"? And how does it relate to school education?

BL: As I said before, the good is always concrete. An education system is an instance of the good of order. But what is the higher value to which this system is directed? The way we organise our schools is the result of choice between competing ends, given limited resources, a choice of goods if you like. Currently our culture is unbalanced insofar as we have chosen to emphasise one instance of the good above all others, namely the economy.

This reflects another aspect of our culture – its focus on the quantitative rather than the qualitative aspects of life. So our education system is increasingly focussed on preparing students to be productive contributors to the economic life of the nation so as to maximise economic growth. And increasingly we assess the quality of our education system in terms of things that can be measured quantitatively.

SW: This has been referred to as "the industrial or factory model" of schooling, where schools are little more than a production line churning out worker bees. This

became increasingly necessary when the Industrial Revolution transferred the locus of work from the household, the village and the tradesman's workshop to the factory. Having spent time in factories, I can attest to the fact that this approach does not necessarily foster the ability to pay attention that is the essence of prayer and the kind of personal reflection that is necessary to live a morally, qualitatively good life. Such an educational philosophy – if you can call it that – is value-free.

BL: Not entirely, rather it operates at the most basic level of the scale of values, focussing on vital and social values only, what is necessary for the production of the goods and services that people need and want, and organising society in such a way as to support the economic life of the community. But otherwise, you are right, the purely economic approach has nothing to say about cultural, personal and religious values that inform ethical action in the world. However Marx would argue that the economic means of production serves as a base that to a large extent determines the shape of the cultural superstructure of a society.

SW: Yes, but it also works in reverse as well, with the culture influencing the way technology evolves and is used. But attributing culture to economics alone fails to recognise the need for roots, connections to historic and geographic communities that ground our very sense of self.

BL: Yes, and this is actually a side-effect of the liberalism which has otherwise driven so many positive developments in terms of human rights, democracy and economic progress. An excessive focus on autonomy for its own sake can lead to cultural degeneration via numerous mechanisms, including increasing material inequality, and retreat into group-identity ghettos as a means of trying to create a sense of belonging, meaning and purpose that membership of wider, common culture no longer provides.

The cultural failure of modernity is a consequence of the optimistic hyper-rationalism of the Enlightenment. Modernity has been unable to accept that virtually all the truths we hold to be self-evident common sense are in fact contingent, not absolute, and that the march of human progress is not inevitable. We could say that it is the failure to adapt to this reality that has given rise to the so-called "culture wars", with conservatives recoiling in horror from the loss of traditional social and moral norms, while post-modernists embrace and rejoice in the loss of normativity. Finally, the divided community, their conflicting actions, and the messy situation are headed for disaster. For the messy situation is diagnosed differently by the divided community; action is ever more at cross purposes; and the situation becomes still messier to provoke still sharper differences in diagnosis and policy, more radical criticism of one another's actions, and an ever deeper crisis in the situation.

The universalism of rational scientific principles thus contributed – in combination with Western imperial expansion which exported it to the world – to the demise of particularist cultures and religions of earlier epochs. Modern technocracy, by eroding cultural and religious allegiances, maintained only a superficial moral and emotional hold on us. Recognising the motivational shortcomings of the calculating ethos, modern rationalists of the revolutionary era embraced the liberalism of rights as an ally that could stir the passions where sober rationalism only piqued the intellect. But rather than asserting their own spiritual potency, liberal technocracies offered their members only an anodyne, agnostic, superficial faith. Yet empty liberty and instrumental proceduralism could not feed the moral imagination or fuel the quest for wider purpose.

SW: So what does this mean for an educational philosophy? The education system is a key social institution that can help turn things around. But to do that, it must, in my view revision the purpose of schooling as fostering the capacity for attention, which is the essence of prayer, the means by which we connect with the divine. This connection is our telos, so education should foster our capacity to achieve it. The role of the teacher is to help the student develop this capacity for attention, properly understood. The accumulation of particular knowledge and skills is therefore a by-product of education, rather than its primary purpose.

BL: You may struggle to convince the modern, secular parent that the purpose of schooling should be based on the importance of prayer and union with God. But what do you mean by paying attention? I suspect we have different views on this.

SW: Perhaps I should begin to answer that question by telling you what I do NOT mean by paying attention. Imagine a classroom in which the teacher is attempting to impart knowledge of some particular mathematical concept or process, but at least one, or perhaps, all the students seem distracted. The teacher calls out “Pay attention!” What do the students do? They furrow their brows and tense their muscles in an effort of the will, but if you ask them two minutes later what they have been paying attention to, they can’t tell you. This is not the kind of attention I am talking about. The kind of attention I am talking about requires effort, but what I call negative effort. Instead of the effort of searching and actively going looking for answers, it is the effort entailed in passively waiting for insight to emerge and being open to being penetrated completely by the object of one’s attention, to the gift of what it reveals.

BL: Interesting. However, surely you would acknowledge that some positive effort of focus on the part of the student is necessary. But this focus is not forced, rather it is the fruit of curiosity and the unquenchable desire to know. The effort made by the

teacher is fruitless without the proper orientation of consciousness on the part of the student. When one lies on the beach without a care, watching the clouds drift by, one is in a purely empirical pattern of experience. But when one begins to wonder about something - for example, why the clouds are drifting in this direction and not that - when one begins to ask why about something, then one has the illumination of phantasm. The flow of consciousness becomes directed by intelligence. It expresses an orientation of the subject; it exercises a selectivity over what is attended to; one's Sorge is engaged; one is asking why. One is wondering. One has injected into the flow of consciousness the wonder that is the start of all science and philosophy. Now one cannot do that for one's pupils. They have to do it for themselves. However, one can stimulate them by making things puzzling in one way or another.

SW: I worry about what you might mean by "selectivity over what is attended to." This can narrow the possibilities of what we might discover about reality. Attention is not just about gathering information; it is about cultivating a kind of receptive openness to the world that allows us to connect with its deeper truths. I worry that too much analysis can lead us away from the truth, by focusing too narrowly on particular aspects of an experience and missing the broader picture.

BL: I see what you mean, but I believe that attention alone is not sufficient for attaining truth. We also need to engage in critical analysis and evaluation to ensure that our beliefs are well-founded and supported by evidence.

SW: Perhaps I need to explain further my thinking about attention. It is both a focused effort and a passive waiting. Paying attention involves, on the one hand, an unwavering focus on the object of attention and, on the other hand, the subject emptying themselves of desire and subjectivity.

Anyone who has practiced meditation recognises the relationship between activity and passivity. At once, the meditator must passively let things arise in consciousness while actively focusing their attention on something like their breath or the voice of a guide. Further, most forms of meditation advocate a detachment from the self. Attention alone, that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears, is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn it onto that which cannot be conceived. The individual's subjectivity impedes the passivity required of attention. My ego that gets in the way of perfect attention.

BL: But subjectivity does not have to be egotistic. True objectivity is the fruit of genuine subjectivity, the self-transcendence which results from stripping away our egotistic biases, leaving us open, as you say, to myriad possibilities. And the

selectivity about which you worry is nothing more than the consequence of wanting to know the answer to a particular question.

The pure desire to know is the root of the intellectual pattern of experience and is to be contrasted with Heidegger's *Sorge*, concern, which is man as he ordinarily is. Man's flow of consciousness is not simply an expression of the pure desire to know, but is modified by concerns of all types.

SW: I agree somewhat that desire is what gives joy in learning, but I am also cautious about the extent that a particular focus or set of questions and concerns can narrow our vision and restrict one's openness to the fullness of truth. And the desire, modified by their concerns, is not always present in the student. What if a student has no "concern" or desire to learn about physics, or chemistry, or the particular period of history that the curriculum dictates should be taught? This is not an uncommon experience. Perhaps we would say that it is the teacher's job to inspire that desire, and I will come to the kinds of pedagogical practices that might do that shortly. But the gaining of particular types of knowledge, while important for one's ability to understand and engage with the world, is not guaranteed as the outcome of schooling. And failure to advance in this kind of knowledge is not necessarily failure considered in the broader context of education, if you accept my premise that the primary purpose of studies is to foster attention.

Although people seem to be unaware of it to-day, the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies. Most school tasks have a certain intrinsic interest as well, but such an interest is secondary. All tasks which really call upon the power of attention are interesting for the same reason and to an almost equal degree.

School children and students who love God should never say: "For my part I like mathematics"; "I like French"; "I like Greek." They should learn to like all these subjects, because all of them develop that faculty of attention which, directed towards God, is the very substance of prayer. If we have no aptitude or natural taste for geometry this does not mean that our faculty for attention will not be developed by wrestling with a problem or studying a theorem. On the contrary it is almost an advantage. It does not even matter much whether we succeed in finding the solution or understanding the proof, although it is important to try really hard to do so. Never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the attention wasted. It always has its effect on the spiritual plane and in consequence on the lower one of the intelligence, for all spiritual light lightens the mind.

All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style and all faulty connection of ideas in compositions and essays, all such things are due

to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth. The cause is always that we have wanted to be too active; we have wanted to carry out a search. This can be proved every time, for every fault, if we trace it to its root. There is no better exercise than such a tracing down of our faults, for this truth is one those which we can only believe when we have experienced it hundreds and thousands of times. This is the way with all essential truths. We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. Man cannot discover them by his own powers and if he sets out to seek for them he will find in their place counterfeits of which he will be unable to discern the falsity.

The solution of a geometry problem does not in itself constitute a precious gift, but it is the image of something precious. Being a little fragment of particular truth, it is a pure image of the unique, eternal and living Truth, the very Truth which once in a human voice declared "I am the Truth."

BL: Well, despite my conviction that we cannot stop ourselves going after answers – such is the innate desire to know within us – perhaps you and I are not so far apart.

As my friend Hugo Meynell has written, the essence of education is nothing other than to foster attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility to the uttermost. The judgments current in our society or any other, whether matters of common sense, science, or value, are to be affirmed not as unquestionable dogmas, but simply as the best that attentiveness, intelligence, and reasonableness have come up with thus far; clearly, there is more evidence to be attended to and more hypotheses to be envisaged which will, in time, render many of these judgments liable to modification or even outright rejection. Education in the arts and humanities is apt to keep consciousness open and flexible by way of expanding it through the realization of how others have understood, judged, and decided.

SW: But the study of the sciences can do that as well.

BL: Absolutely, for the scientific method is all about how accepted ideas can be modified in light of new data. But education in the arts and humanities in particular can help cultivate right feeling. No less than of knowledge and skills there is a development of feelings. It is true, of course, that fundamentally feelings are spontaneous. They do not lie under the command of decision as to the motions of our hands. But, once they have arisen, they may be reinforced by advertence and approval, and they may be curtailed by disapproval and distraction. Such reinforcement and curtailment not only will encourage some feelings and discourage others but will also modify one's spontaneous scale of preferences. Again, feelings are enriched and refined by attentive study of the wealth and variety of the objects

that arouse them, and no small part of education lies in fostering and developing a climate of discernment and taste, of discriminating praise and carefully worded disapproval, that will conspire with the pupil's or student's own capacities and tendencies, enlarge and deepen his apprehension of values, and help him towards self-transcendence.

SW: Yes, and it all starts with being attentive. But what of pedagogy? I mentioned I would come back to this issue. It must have as its first goal fanning the flames of wonder, the desire to know, to take an interest in something that would not otherwise be of interest to them.

Will power, the kind that, if need be, makes us set our teeth and endure suffering, is the principal weapon of the apprentice engaged in manual work. But contrary to the usual belief, it has practically no place in study. The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students, but only poor caricatures of apprentices who, at the end of their apprenticeship, will not even have a trade.

And this is a key debate in education today – how can teachers more effectively inspire that desire in students to learn so that their ability to pay attention is not so dependent on an act of the will, going against inclination, but is habitual and joyful?

BL: Some would say that the best approach starts with questions and problems that students might want to answer, and then equips them with the knowledge and skills to do so only *after* they have experienced the tension of inquiry, a form of productive struggle to answer the questions. We could simplify this approach as “questions first, then answers”. But it assumes that the students are actually interested in answering the questions that are posed. The task of the teacher then is to ensure that the student's innate curiosity is fostered in such a way as they do want to answer these questions.

Others would say that this approach is not as effective or as efficient in terms of learning as one that starts with instruction about how to solve such problems and answer such questions, before exposing them to questions and problems of this kind. Such an approach, the proponents argue, is more consistent with the modern scientific theories of learning and how the brain works. We could simplify this as “answers first, then questions”. Or rather “method first, then questions”.

SW: This is the debate about the different pedagogical approaches of “inquiry-based learning” versus “explicit direct instruction”. Surely you would be on the side of “inquiry-based learning”?!

BL: Not necessarily, because it’s not a question of taking one of these two sides. Both approaches are valid. The question is, when confronted by a concrete situation, which is the more appropriate approach? What I would say, as I mentioned previously, is that sometimes presenting students with a puzzle or a problem to solve can be a way of stimulating them to orient their consciousness correctly, to wonder.

Some might call this “inquiry-based” approach, but it often needs to be complemented by the teacher giving very direct aid. The teacher helps the pupil understand in the way the doctor helps the sick person become well. Nature is the principal cause of a person’s recovering health, and the doctor simply helps. Similarly in learning, the pupil's own sense of wonder is the principal cause, the desire to understand. You cannot form an image in the pupil's imagination, but you can suggest to him the image to be formed. You cannot be sure that the image will be formed in the right perspective so that intelligence will click and see the point, but you can help the student get it in the right perspective. You can provide opportunities for questions and find out what they have got wrong, what they are not seeing. You can express it in a different way, you can walk around the subject from all angles, until they finally catch on. For teaching is the communication of insight. It throws clues, the pointed hints that lead to insight. It cajoles attention to drive away distracting images that stand in insight’s way.

SW: But even then, not every student will “get it”, but their efforts at attention are not wasted.

BL: In general, there are varying rates of comprehension in a classroom. The really bright students find the pedagogy of the teacher rather boring, since they see the point right at the start. Others are just able to grasp it with all the teacher’s labours. Some begin to catch on only when they go home and do some homework, others only when there is a review of the material. Finally there are those that are destined for the wayside, who do not catch on at all. But the teacher can help and stimulate and guide the formation of the phantasm - the transition, the illumination of the phantasm, the formation of a phantasm in the right perspective, the formulation of what is grasped by the act of understanding.

It is the pupil himself becoming habituated to an intellectual pattern of experience that is at once the fundamental condition of the whole process of teaching and at the same time it's great fruit. Insofar as you are teaching people geometry, for example, you are using an implement that is magnificently adapted to habituating people to the

intellectual pattern of experience. Even though they never bother their heads about geometry for the rest of their lives, at least they have lived at certain moments of their lives in the intellectual pattern of experience. They have some familiarity with the way things go on there, and they have a greater facility of doing that sort of thing on other occasions. Moreover from the fact that they have been through the experience, their results a shift in the centre of gravity in their experiencing. That shift in the centre of gravity, the habituation to a differentiated consciousness, is a fruit of education, but an indirect fruit it is only by doing particular subjects that the fruit results.

SW: Yes, and it reflects the importance of background knowledge. So many people these days say students don't need to know facts any more, but without them, it is impossible to think creatively or critically. Factual knowledge is the raw material of thinking, wonder. Students can't wonder about nothing.

BL: When it comes to developing our knowledge, there are two vectors we can travel. The upwards vector is the way of achievement through wonder and inquiry, from the data of experience, through insight and understanding and then critical evaluation of the possibilities to the point where once can affirm that a certain way of interpreting the data is correct, or at least the most likely of the all the possible interpretations.

The downwards vector is the way of heritage, of gift, of tradition, whereby in virtue of the fact that we are born and grow into - or perhaps join - families and communities that nurture our sense of self, we come to trust that what they tell us is true is actually so. We progress along this vector then from the starting value of trust to belief and affirmation of concepts and ideas. We inherit them from the communities of which we are a part.

Even scientists to do this, that is, take on faith the knowledge bequeathed to them by the giants on whose shoulders they stand. It would be a mistake to fancy that scientists spend their lives repeating one another's work. They do not suffer from a pointless mania to attain immanently generated knowledge of their fields. On the contrary, the aim of the scientist is the advancement of science from that which they have inherited from the scientific community of which they are a part. This reflects the social and historical character of human knowledge.

This way of heritage is perhaps more useful when children are young, greedy for knowledge, novices in the various subjects and disciplines they encounter at school. But as they grow older, they begin to assimilate and assess new experiences into the schemas that have organised the increasing store of background knowledge they have been acquiring. They begin to ask their own questions based on their own

emerging personalities and interests. They begin to critique their heritage in a process of self-transcendence and self-appropriation.

SW: Here perhaps is a point of disagreement. I actually think young children are instinctively more curious and more open to possibilities, more full of wonder, than teenagers, who become increasingly obsessed with themselves and their own identity.

BL: Yes, teenagers can appear self-obsessed, but this can be seen as part of the process of self-appropriation, as they come to understand themselves as having a range of choices before them, and begin to ask themselves: Who am I? What is important to me? What do I stand for?

SW: And what they are going to do and be once they leave school. Our schooling system's obsessions with credentials and formal qualifications doesn't help. I once incurred the wrath of the parents of my students when, instead of standing in front of blackboard expounding the principles of geometry, I took my students outside into the garden and asked them to be attentive to things that they had just passed over and taken for granted previously, such as the shape of leaves and the patterns in which the bricks had been laid, and prompting them to wonder about the significance and meaning of these things, asking them to be open to what they might reveal, what aspects of abstract geometry could be better understood by being attentive to the concrete aspects.

BL: Yes, I can understand how that may have been questioned by parents concerned for how their children would pass their exams.

SW: Students must work without any wish to gain good marks, to pass examinations, to win school successes; without any reference to their natural abilities and tastes; applying themselves equally to all their tasks, with the idea that each one will help to form in them the habit of that attention which is the substance of prayer.

BL: Well, I would say that, consistent with the principle of attention, teachers themselves need to be attentive to the data of their experience insofar as it relates to the students who are actually in front of them. By asking intelligent questions about their students – such as, what do they already know about this topic and what skills have they acquired – and then assessing which pedagogical approach is most likely to be successful with them, the teacher comes to the point where they can decide how to act, what to do, how to teach this topic. It may be that the more inquiry-based is better sometimes, and the more explicit-instruction approach is better at others. Or some combination of the two.

One of the interesting features of the current education environment is the extent to which this question has become so heated. It is an example of the culture wars I referred to earlier, flowing from divergent diagnoses of the issue, and correspondingly different prescriptions for the cure.

Ironically, those claiming to have science on their side appear to be the most dogmatic. They are modernists in the sense that they assert that all questions of value – including those of morals - must be settled by the techniques of empirical science. This is a form of scientism. It is a lack of openness to alternative sources of evidence.

We see an increasing tribalism, a phoney war in the form of false dichotomies being generated everywhere. Modernists on the one hand and traditionalists on the other emphasise only one aspect of series of dualities.

SW: Yes, much like failing to see that without both sides of a coin, there is no coin. The needs of the soul include both order and liberty, obedience and responsibility, equality and hierarchy, honour and punishment, freedom of opinion and truth, security and risk, private property and collective property. These pairs are like the two wings of a bird that cannot fly without both. Yet in so many contemporary debates about education, it is not “both/and” but “either/or”.

And so the new National School Reform Agreement must be wary of too dogmatic an approach to pedagogy, too zealous in the spirit of reform. In fact, reform may not be the right mindset to bring to these discussions. Perhaps renewal is a better term. Rejuvenation rather than replacement. Openness to possibility and flexibility to explore new approaches rather than fixing on one way as the only way of doing things.

BL: Simone, if I may call you that, I must away. Fred Crowe, Bob Doran and I are having tea with Pedro Arrupe discussing how the transcendental imperatives apply to the preferential option for the poor and afflicted.

SW: Well, Bernard (if I may call you that), attention is highest form of generosity. The afflicted have no need of anything else in this world except someone capable of paying attention to them. The capacity to pay attention to an afflicted person is something very rare, very difficult; it is nearly a miracle. It is a miracle. Happy then are those who pass their adolescence and youth in developing this power of attention. This is the highest service our education system can offer.

BL: Start with the ends in mind, and work back from there. God bless you, Simone.

SW: And you too, Bernard.