Boyle Lecture 2023

with Rowan Williams, "Attending to Attention"; John D. Teasdale, "Reshaping the Heart-Mind: A Response to Rowan Williams"; and Fraser Watts, "Rowan Williams on Attention and Intelligence in the Spiritual Life."

ROWAN WILLIAMS ON ATTENTION AND MEMORY IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

by Fraser Watts

Abstract. In a series of recent articles, including his Boyle Lecture, Rowan Williams has developed a theology of the role of intelligence and attention in spiritual life. There is a sense in which all intelligence is spiritual activity. Current approaches to intelligence are often mechanistic, but intelligence in spiritual life needs to be understood in a more embodied and organic way. Attention is often thought of as a matter of choosing which already-formed objects to focus on. That overlooks the fact that sensory information is often confusing and ambiguous, and neglects how habits of attention make the world appear more atomized than it really is. If we can learn restraint in how we impose order upon the world around us in attending to it, there is an opportunity to encounter the divine Spirit which is the source of all that we experience. That leads to a more participatory, less objectifying, way of engaging with the world.

Keywords: attention; embodiment; intelligence; participation; spirit; spiritual

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Much work on the interface of science and religion has brought substantive claims made by science into dialogue with what appear to be comparable substantive claims made by faith traditions.[1] Another approach would focus more on scientific and spiritual *ways of understanding* things. One of the highlights of Rowan Williams' recent work on science and religion is his focus on *how* we know things. His 2023 Boyle Lecture (2023a) makes an important contribution to that growing area of interest, focusing particularly on how people "attend" to things. Focusing on ways of knowing in science and religion gives a certain kind of primacy, scientifically to

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psychology and the cognitive sciences, which is where ways of understanding are studied scientifically. Theology has often made much use of philosophy, especially epistemology, but I suggest that it would be helpful to make more use of cognitive science alongside epistemology, as Rowan Williams does here.

It may help in seeing the significance of Williams' 2023 Boyle Lecture to set it in the context of some of his other recent works on related topics, starting with his beautifully clear little book, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (2018). There is much richness in this concise book and I can only summarize it here very selectively.

Williams starts by pointing out that two claims that are often made: that the mind is a machine and that consciousness is a mistake, are hugely problematic; and he reflects on some of the reasons why people might be attracted to such claims. He then makes four important claims about consciousness. First, consciousness always has a location; it is looking at things from a particular point of view. Second, becoming aware of things is not just registering things passively; it involves an active process of making sense of them. Third, human consciousness connects what has happened in the past with what is happening now; it builds a narrative about how things have developed. Finally, human consciousness is bound up with language; putting things into words changes them.

As Williams sees it, "persons" are more than just "individuals". Persons are embodied and located. They are both material and spiritual, as embodied intelligence is important in spiritual life. He makes use of the two different kinds of human thinking that Iain McGilchrist associates with left and right brain (2009; 2022), and Williams recently published a lengthy review of McGilchrist's latest book (2023c). Like McGilchrist, Williams cautions against overreliance on the kind of intelligence that is highly selective, like "beams from a lighthouse playing over a world of passive stuff", in a way that always prioritizes solving problems and taking control. Rather, Williams advocates the value of a "rich interweaving of stimulus and imagining, worked in and through our bodies" (2018, ix).

Over the last few years, Rowan Williams has been part of a research team working on "Understanding Spiritual Intelligence" (a research project of the International Society for Science and Religion, funded by the Templeton World Charity Foundation). His work in the project includes his response to an earlier Boyle Lecture (Williams 2021); a chapter on "spiritual intelligence" (Williams forthcoming); and a keynote on *Spirit and Ecology*, given at the 2023 conference of the International Society for Science and Religion (Williams 2023b), as well as his 2023 Boyle Lecture (Williams 2023a). In what follows I will discuss this material in a sequence that facilitates exposition, rather than the order in which things were written, starting with the lecture on *Spirit and Ecology* and culminating in the 2023 Boyle Lecture. In the following two sections I have largely summa-

rized Rowan Williams, though I have occasionally introduced connections that he had not made himself. However, in the final section of the paper I will briefly put what Rowan Williams has to say about intelligence and attention in a broader context.

Intelligence and Spirit

As Williams sees it, there is a natural affinity between spirit and intelligence. There is a sense in which all intelligence is, in some sense, "spiritual." If that sounds surprising in the English language, it would be less surprising in German to say that *geist* concerns both intelligence and the spiritual. This can be approached through the close connection, in many languages, between "spirit" and "breath." Breath involves a motion from inside to outside and back again. It connects our embodied selves with what is beyond us and connects inner with outer. We might say that spirit moves, connects, and transfers. All this is also true of intelligence. In that sense there is a close connection between intelligence and the spiritual, making intelligence a spiritual matter.

Embodied processes, such as breathing and eating, can be seen as a form of intelligence. This is seen in how we speak, for example, about "ruminating" on the scriptures. Organic processes such as eating and breathing are like intelligence in that they connect inner with outer. This may sound surprising but, paradoxically, the physical is also spiritual; spiritual intelligence is energy that connects with bodies and shapes bodies. In this sense, it is clear that embodied intelligence can be found across the living world and not just in humans.

Human intelligence involves an active capacity to connect with information received and to narrate our response to what we become aware of. It has become commonplace to talk about information as though it was simply a transfer of identifiable "bits" of information (according to a tradition dating back to Claude Shannon's information theory), but the fact is that the transfer of information requires an active and receptive subject. Units of information do not really exist independently of transmission. It is in the nature of information that there is an active subject who is becoming informed and who is shaping the information received.

The kind of information with which AI is concerned tends to privilege abstract and non-embodied information and to dis-privilege more organic forms of transfer of information. In as far as the assumptions about information and intelligence that characterise AI are transferred back onto humans, they mislead us about ourselves. We can be led to think that the information we receive as humans is abstract and disembodied and to neglect more organic and embodied forms of intelligence.

This leads on to a consideration of the relationship between intelligence and ecology. A body necessarily has a position in a particular place; it is

located. In that sense, intelligence is inherently ecological and involves interconnectedness between a body and a habitat. In any particular habitat, we need to devise coherent strategies for moving, using, avoiding, absorbing, and much more. Given the close connection between intelligence and spirit, the human spirit also has a locatedness. To understand oneself ecologically is to ask not just "who am I?", but "where am I?"

Similarly, our intelligence locates us in the context of our recollections. The things that each of us have done and made happen around us, continue to impact. Memory is an important aspect of human life, as has been widely recognized in spiritual traditions. That is what the idea of "karma" really refers to, rather than some kind of predetermination. In the West, Augustine's *Confessions* was pathbreaking in recognizing the importance of memory in human life and the complexity of access to our memories. In an important sense, memory is spirit. As Williams says elsewhere, "the self *is*—one might say—what the past is doing now" (2002, 23).

In his chapter on spiritual intelligence, rather than starting from "spirit" as an aspect of the human person, Williams follows the Hebrew and Christian scriptures in taking "spirit" to be the divine breath or energy that animates creation (forthcoming). The life of the spirit in humans is what happens when humanity comes into contact with this divine spirit. It can never be harnessed by humans for their own purposes, nor can it be studied by them in an objectified fashion. When humans are affected by it, there is a notable shift away from self-preoccupation which is gradually replaced by a heightened awareness of and attention to what is other than oneself. This is often experienced in community, not in a kind of group mind, but when each individual is shaped by their awareness of others in the community in a mutual empathic sensitivity.

Contact with this spirit has implications for how people live and conduct themselves. It involves a growing orientation towards the good of others and a recognition of the futility of trying to satisfy personal preferences. Williams looks toward a kind of spiritual intelligence in which people become attuned to, and grow into, a "sustainable and coherent relation with the truth of what is around and within us" (forthcoming).

Though Williams' account of life in the spirit is rooted in the Christian tradition, he is open to attempts to find new ways of thinking about "spiritual" mental processes beyond confessional boundaries. "Spiritual intelligence" is what happens to human intelligence when it is liberated from egocentricity and becomes attuned to the transcendent spirit. This requires that a person develops habits that silence the normal egocentric consciousness and adopts a non-instrumental mindset that does not try to actively do anything with its developing attunement to the transcendent spirit; instead of *doing*, the focus is on *being*.

Attention in Spiritual Life

In the twentieth century, psychologists, philosophers, and religious writers have all become fascinated by the topic of attention. There is much work to be done bringing their different approaches into conversation with each other, and this year's Boyle Lecture makes an important contribution to that ongoing work, which is fundamental to the exchange between science and religion. I will next review Williams' response to the 2021 Boyle, before coming to his 2023 lecture.

In 2021, Williams joined Tom McLeish in pointing out that science, for methodological reasons, often necessarily has to be highly selective in what it attends to. However, he emphasized the danger that the exclusion of information from scientific attention can become a covert metaphysics. Then we can no longer respond intelligently to the often-ambiguous information that reaches us from phenomena that we are choosing not to attend to. We can mistake the world, as we understand it from our particular vantage point, for the world as it actually exists. That can give rise to a whole series of misunderstandings, for example about the nature of genes, which are thought of as being distinct packages of information that just need somewhere to land, rather than as complex stimuli that have their effects in interaction with a wider context. Kriti Sharma has made a similar point about how we misunderstand and overatomize cells (2015).

Contemplation takes a different path. Rather than imposing a heavily conceptualized framework on whatever we experience, we take a step back from our own efforts to make sense of things and to solve problems. We set aside our own agenda in order to be open to whatever we encounter. We allow things to make their impact on us in ways that go beyond what we envisaged and cultivate an "intelligent and patient receptivity which allows fresh enquiry and insight to arise when the ego's hyperactive self-referential activity is silenced" (Williams 2021, 780). We allow the universe to be a complex system of interactions (or "implications", to adopt the terminology of David Bohm). Then the universe can speak to us of a fundamental intelligence that underpins the intelligibility of the world, an intelligence that is not one just one phenomenon among many, but which makes the universe possible.

That is what the contemplative path allows to happen. Most spiritual practices (and especially mindfulness) teach us new ways of managing our attention with far-reaching consequences. Many of the benefits of spiritual practices seem to be mediated through how they shape our attention. The point that McLeish (2021) makes is that, though science often takes a path that seems to be the opposite of contemplation, it actually needs the imaginative open-mindedness of the contemplative mindset.

Building on this, the first part Williams' 2023 Boyle Lecture is concerned with the basic nature of attention drawing particularly on Maurice

Merleau-Ponty and to some extent on McGilchrist. Williams emphasizes that attention is a constructive process rather than a merely selective one. He rejects the idea that attention is a matter of choosing which fully-formed objects in the world we are going to attend to. Rather, he suggests that the things we attend to, as we know them, are formed into something definite out of fragmentary and ambiguous sensory information by the very process of attending to them in a particular way.

We develop habits of attention which enable us to go quickly and automatically from fragmentary sensory information to perceiving well-defined objects. In the process of doing so we ignore much else that does not fit the framework that we choose to impose on sensory information. Some of our habits of attention are cultural but others are personal. Understanding ourselves involves noticing how we attend to things. How we personally attend to things shapes the world as *we* know it and shapes us. Understanding our habits of attention is crucial to understanding ourselves. Without such habits we would be in a world similar to the sensory confusion of the AI device "Klara" in Ishiguro's novel, *Klara and the Sun* (2021), in an unfamiliar environment.

Williams is also concerned to emphasize that attending is an interactive and relational process. Our attentional processes often give us the impression of attending to a set of isolated, atomized entities. However, for Williams, the world to which we attend is a fundamentally relational world. Things come into being through interacting with each other and we become aware of them through a constructive, interactional, and relational process of attention.

The second half of the lecture (Williams 2023) returns, via Simone Weil and Evagrius of Pontus, to the spiritual and contemplative life. Simone Weil developed the concept of *attente*. She shared the same basic assumptions about the constructive nature of perception as Merleau-Ponty and Williams, and advocated a kind of attention in which we step back from our habitual ways of perceiving the world, which are often ego-driven and learn instead a disciplined restraint, through which we allow the world to speak to us.

Williams connects this with the theological tradition of attentive looking (*theoria*) in Evagrius of Pontus and others. Evagrius envisages a path that begins with attentive looking and moves on to the self-discipline involved in restraining the compulsive desires and egocentric emotions that impede our ability to perceive the beauty of creation. People then find that the beauty of the created order opens onto a silent receptivity to the creator that defies conceptualization. They encounter the active intelligence that is the source of everything. It is an experience in which love and attention converge, which epitomizes the deep intertwining between the cognitive and moral dimensions in mystical theology. Intelligence and knowledge of their highest form can never exist in separation from love and virtue.

Dorobantu and Watts (2023) have suggested that, implicit in this theology of spiritual intelligence, there are three stages. First there is a recognition that we live in a world we did not make and in which there is no certainty and limited control, a world in which we naturally feel perplexed and which invites awe. Second, we come to recognize that we are interconnected with what is around us and that we need to participate receptively in this world, rather than trying to study it as an outsider might. Finally, as we grow more deeply into the life of god, we become able to engage in relationships in a way that is self-emptying and empathic.

Themes and Influences

One of the themes that runs through these various writings of Williams is the danger of moving too quickly to a fixed view of what is around us, one that conceptualizes things in a particular way and ignores much else that does not fit. We often adopt a view that atomizes the world into separate and discrete things and underestimates their interconnectedness. In contrast, Williams emphasizes the value of a disciplined restraint that holds back from an overselective, overatomized, and overconceptualized interpretation of the world, in order to be open to what William James, in a different context, famously called a "blooming, buzzing confusion" ([1890] 2000).

Williams' recent work on intelligence and attention builds on his earlier works, especially his Gifford Lectures on language, *The Edge of Words* (Williams 2014). He there urged us to draw back from being overinfluenced by a kind of language for describing the world that assumes that it consists of a set of already formed, atomized, and distinguishable things. Drawing on Bohm's concept of an "implicate order", he pointed towards an alternative view of language, influenced by Margaret Masterman (e.g. Wiseman 2022a; Pickstock forthcoming). Masterman's work spanned philosophy, mystical Christianity, and computational linguistics, and Williams had a good deal of contact with it through the "epiphany philosophers" in his period as a lecturer in the Faculty of Divinity in Cambridge (Watts 2016).

In his recent work on attention, Williams emphasizes how our habits of attention similarly lead us to assume a world of discrete, already formed things, and to neglect the active role that we play in constructing our perception of the world. Fortunately, scientific assumptions about this are changing and there is now a move toward appreciating the extent to which human cognition is embodied, embedded, enacted, or extended (Newen, de Bruin, and Gallagher 2018). There is much scientific research that emphasizes the embodied processes with which we make sense of the world, which points toward embodied intelligence and spirituality (Watts 2021).

If the world around us is less fixed than we often assume, understanding that world requires different kinds of meanings. Williams is here not just making a point about human cognition, he is also saying that the world really is more interconnected and relational than we often take it to be. An "implicate" order requires "implicational" or holistic meanings. In McGilchrist's approach, that means making more use of the kind of cognition that he associates with the right brain.

Philip Barnard, who worked with Rowan Williams on the ISSR project on spiritual intelligence, has developed a cognitive architecture, *Interacting Cognitive Subsystems*, that similarly recognizes two alternative meaning systems in central cognition: one propositional/conceptual and another that is implicational/holistic (which engages more directly with sensory experience and with connotations and significance, rather than being referential). The latter plays an important role in spiritual life (e.g. Watts forthcoming; Wiseman 2022b).

This more implicational way of understanding the world is more organic and embodied than our usual conceptualizations. As a result, there is a close connection between embodied and spiritual intelligence. In the long-running tension between mechanistic and organismic approaches to science (Ruse 2010; Reiss and Ruse 2023), AI has taken a highly mechanistic approach to intelligence, whereas Williams is urging a return to a more organic and embodied approach.

Coming to know a relational world requires a relational kind of engagement with it. Williams has consistently emphasized that the contemplative path is participatory rather than objectifying. It is impossible for humans to stand back from divine spirit and study it in an objective way. Nicholas Lash, probably another significant influence on Williams, drew attention to the shift in the seventeenth century, the age of the so-called scientific revolution, toward studying nature in a detached, objectifying way with a new kind of "spectorial" consciousness (Lash 1995).

Lash lamented the misguided way in which this objectifying method was transferred into a new kind of natural theology which led to the absurd idea that human beings can study god objectively. Throughout his recent work reviewed in this article, Williams emphasizes the extent to which the path towards intelligent understanding involves a whole-hearted, personal engagement with what is around us rather than detached objectivity. That is a feature of all intelligent engagement with our habitat and is also a necessary feature of any encounter with divine spirit.

Learning disciplined restraint in how we attend to the world and talk about it can lead to an understanding of that world that is less distorted and oversimplified, and is more faithful to the actual complexity and interdependence of the world around us. Moreover, as Williams points out, holding back from imposing our own viewpoint on the world can also

create an opportunity to become acquainted with the divine intelligence or spirit from whom this complex and interrelated world arises.

Note

1. Though, on close examination, the apparent claims of faith traditions may not be quite what they appear; for example, the creation narratives in Genesis should not be taken as providing a descriptive account of the origin of the universe.

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