AN INTERVIEW WITH SEBASTIAN WATZL
ATTENTION, PLEASE!

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A rainy Tuesday morning we arrived at Sebastian Watzl's office. The appointment was to talk with him about a mouthful of philosophical issues related to attention, his area of expertise. Not long ago, he joined the Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature (CSMN) at the University of Oslo as a postdoctoral fellow, and then, shortly after, as an associate professor contributing to the study of the structure of consciousness. As a travelling man, he has been at all kinds of universities before coming here to Norway. Watzl appeared to us as a down-to-earth, happy-go-lucky fellow. And if you look at his website, you will find the topic of attention all over the place. He researches it non-stop. The man appeared to us as a sage-like fellow, full of meditative insights. But what lies at the back of all this — who is the person behind that friendly face? This, anyhow, is what we set out to uncover, launching the session with some general questions before then focusing our attention towards a deeper level. As it turned out, the real nectar of our conversation only started flowing after the tape recorder was shut off. We carried on talking for an hour. True, missing out on this part could be unfortunate for the readers, but sit tight. A sequel might come before long. For our part, this Tuesday morning was a true philosophical voyage into the dark corners of phenomenal awareness.

What is attention?

Let me begin my answer by mentioning some historical strands in the study of attention. There is a long tradition that goes back at least to the mid-19th century that relegates attention to neuroscience and psychology. By contrast, things like perception, belief, and desire are thought to be things that the whole person does, and which consequently require a broader interdisciplinary approach. So even though psychology and neuroscience also investigate these issues, philosophy, too, is thought to have something to say about these aspects of our mental life. In the tradition where attention was thought to be a topic for neuroscience and psychology, however, many people thought that attention just is some specific mechanism in the brain, and that philosophy therefore doesn't have much to say about it. I think that's a mistake. There is some debate about this in the literature, but I think science doesn't really allow us to identify attention with a particular mechanism. If you look at the scientific work on attention, of which there is a lot, you find that there are a number of different mechanisms that are associated with attention, but no particular one can be identified as the "attention mechanism". In a sense, this is to be expected: Why should there be an attention mechanism if there is no particular mechanism with which you can identify desire or belief or thought or perception or volition, or any of these categories? So, on my view, if we want to look at attention, we should also look at what the whole person is doing when she attends to something.

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Attention comes in a variety of versions. There's perceptual attention: attending to a particular object in front of you or a particular feature of the object — color, shape, and so on — or to events that happen in the environment, a sound or a process like the humming of a machine outside, or something like that. There's also intellectual attention, where you focus your attention on a particular idea or on some particular object that you're thinking about. There's also attention in the sense of doing something attentively: e.g. playing basketball attentively, or doing philosophy attentively. It is difficult to imagine what all these things have in common. My approach has been to take attention primarily to be a kind of structure of our mental life that prioritizes some aspects of our mental life above others. These aspects which are prioritized can be aspects of various different things: They can be aspects of perceptual experience, aspects of
thought, or aspects of what we are doing, for instance, when we play basketball. Attention creates a sort of priority ordering, and that is what attention fundamentally is: It is the activity by which subjects order or structure their mental life to prioritize some things over others. This activity cannot be identified with any particular mechanism on the brain level. And the priority structure that attention creates can be used flexibly. You can put the attention structure to use for a number of different purposes: you can exploit it in action or thought, for example. These things you can do, but the attention structure is not made for any particular purpose. It's a general sort of priority.

And what is the difference between attention and awareness?

Again, it is helpful to put this in a historical context. There is a long tradition of thinking about attention in connection with consciousness. We find this already in the 19th century philosopher William Hamilton, who says that consciousness is like a telescope and that attention is like pulling the tubes in and out, so attention is making consciousness focus on something. Similarly, William James said that conscious attention is consciousness concentrated, a sort of focalized, concentrated form of consciousness. So according to this tradition, attention is a particular form of consciousness. And I do think that attention does, in a sense, focalize consciousness. This priority that attention creates has an upshot in our experiences. It creates a kind of structure in our experience, a kind of phenomenal foreground and background.

But there is also some recent empirical work that suggests that attention can also occur without awareness, which means mean that the two are separate phenomena. For example, there are people who have a medical condition known as blindsight. These are patients who have a lesion in their primary visual cortex, and they will say, for example, that they can't see anything in the left half of their visual field (what is called the left hemifield). They claim to be completely blind in this area,
but, surprisingly, they are still able to make fairly fine-grained perceptual judgments about objects located within their blind hemifield. It was found that there must be something which at least very closely resembles attention in that blind hemifield. Interestingly, this was discovered more or less by accident: There was an experiment where the test subject was supposed to complete some tasks located within his blind hemifield, and he claimed not to be able to see anything. But the patient then also said: “Look, sometimes I think I can do better if I focus my attention on the upper half of my blind hemifield.” And the researchers thought, “Wait a minute, what are you doing? You’re focusing your attention on something that you can’t see?” And then they tested whether they claimed to focus their attention had an effect on performance. It was shown that that the blind patient, like sighted subjects, get better at discriminating stimuli if they attend to them. This, as well as some studies with normally sighted subjects, has suggested that there can be attention without awareness. So, while for some time I found myself in agreement with the tradition that claims that attention is focalized consciousness—that it is a sort of priority structure in our experience—I have now come to think that there is also an unconscious form of attention, as is suggested by the case of blindsight.

I would think that attention is a part of the self and being an agent. If you can attend to something without being aware of it, then it seems as if there is something else that is directing your attention. But isn’t the self the thing controlling the attention?

I actually also think that attention is plausibly connected to something that could be called the self or the subject of experience. The reason for this has to do with the connection between attention and subjective perspective. After all, it is very natural when thinking about subjects to also think that they are things that have a perspective or point of view on the world. Think about the difference between a stone and a person, or even a stone and an animal. The animal or person is different from the stone in that they have a perspective. I think that this is connected to attention in that there are things that they focus on and things that are in the background of their point of view. This is not true of a stone. Attention is connected to the idea that you focus on something rather than something else. And that gives you a perspective on the world. But I don’t think that means that attention is always something a subject is aware of. You have a point of view, but it is not a point of view that you are always consciously controlling. And I think we have learned that the unconscious parts of our mental life are in a sense also part of our perspective or point of view. This is most evident, I take it, for the Freudian subconscious. Such subconscious elements also shape our perspective. They are behind the scenes, as it were, but they are still part of who we are. So attention could still be part of who we are even if it is engaged unconsciously.

When I think about the connection between attention and the self I find it helpful to think about Eastern philosophical traditions. In Western philosophy, as I said, attention has been a fairly neglected topic, but that is not at all true for Eastern traditions in philosophy. This is in part because they have been interested in meditation and its upshots. They focus a lot on how attention affects our mental life because it plays a role in meditation. In that tradition, there has been a long debate about whether there is a self that controls the attention or tries to control it. Some Eastern philosophers thought that there is such a self, but then there is also the Buddhist tradition which has always tried to argue against this. They say that there isn’t an agent behind the scene that controls attention or controls experience. We should rather identify the subject with the way she is experiencing. So there is no subject behind the experiencing. I haven’t really made up my mind about this. But my tendency is to go more with the idea that there isn’t anything that is separate from the experience or from the mental life. There is just the point of view on the world, and the self isn’t something that stands behind it or controls it.

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Do you often sit and explore the phenomenology of attention and try to get a picture of how it is structured phenomenologically into foreground-background?

I do often do that. I mean, I think that whatever one’s reflective judgment on the value of introspection is, it can give you an initial grasp on certain phenomena. So in the case of attention, one thing that I’d like to reflect on, for example, is just liste-
ning to music. You can focus on one instrument or one melody or another one. And one thing that I think is fairly obvious in this case, is that you are still hearing the other things, so it is not true that you need to focus your attention in order to get conscious awareness. You are clearly aware of the other instruments that you are not focusing on. In the case of visual attention, people sometimes think that it is connected to moving your eyes in some fairly direct way. In the case of auditory attention, on the other hand, it is obvious that it has nothing to do with a movement of the sensory organs. You do not need to move your ears in order to focus attention on one instrument; it is just something you do mentally. So I reflect on these things, and I get a grip on what the phenomenon in question is and what its effects on experience are.

Is it possible to focus your attention so hard that you lose awareness of everything around you?

I think it is clear that there are cases when you are extremely focused on something and you are not aware of much else. There is a famous series of experiments, the inattentional blindness experiments, which focus on this very issue. The most famous case is the invisible gorilla, where you are engaged in a task, in this case counting the number of passes in a game of basketball, and there is a person in a gorilla costume who walks around in the middle of the scene. If people focus very hard on counting the passes, then they tend not to see the person in the gorilla costume. So in this case you are not aware of something that is right in front of you because you are focusing on something else. That is what usually gets reported in the news. But it should be stressed that it is not true that no one ever sees the gorilla. Fifty percent see the gorilla. So these famous experiments don't really suggest that we are never aware of anything outside the focus of attention. However, there can arguably be more extreme cases: situations where you are hardly aware of anything outside the focus of attention. Even so, I think that in most cases it is fairly obvious that we are aware of something outside of what we are focusing our attention on. Suppose you are playing a computer game. Your attention is focused on the game, and you may not hear when the doorbell rings or not see if someone enters the room; but still, plausibly, you are focusing your attention on a particular aspect of the game. Maybe you are moving some figure around, but you are still aware of the other parts of the computer screen although you are not focusing directly on those. So there is still a structuring within your experience of those things that are phenomenally foregrounded and those things that are in the background of your experience.

I am not sure if there are cases of focused attention where the only thing you are aware of is the thing that is specifically in the focus of your attention. Some people have claimed that this occurs in certain kinds of meditation. The way I think about attention, in terms of prioritizing and structuring experience and foreground and background, isn't really compatible with there being just attention and nothing else. There always has to be a background. The priority is always a priority of one thing over another thing. So I like to think that there is no case where the only thing you are aware of is what is the focus of your attention. But I admit that I have heard of some very plausible cases in meditation where it seems to be quite like that.

And what about the opposite? Are we always focusing our attention on something?

Attention is not always narrowly focused. Indeed, the cases where you focus on a particular object, or color, are very rare. In experiments that is how it happens: People's attention is drawn to a very specific part of the scene. But in most normal circumstances our attention is engaged to some degree with some things and to some degree with other things. And when you are moving around, attention is distributed to various things. Psychologists often talk about distributed attention, where attention is distributed over the whole field to some degree. I think that attention often isn't narrowly focused on anything in particular, but is widely distributed in this way.

Now, here's an interesting question that I haven't worked out the answer to. Suppose you are distributing attention completely evenly across the field of consciousness, not just in vision, but auditory attention, bodily sensations, your thoughts. Everything gets equal attention. Could there still be differences in degree of attention when everything in your field of consciousness is "wrapped up" equally in attention like this? Very little attention to
everything versus very high attention to everything – are those different possible experiences? I actually find it very difficult to get a grip on whether there is a difference here. The natural way to think about this is that we are more engaged when we attend. But if that's how you think about it, then I think that there is also this feeling of being engaged that is in the background, and so it's not really the case that we are more engaged when everything is equally attended to (the feeling of engagement is not in the foreground). So it is not just a difference in attention, then, it is also a difference in the conscious experience of feeling engaged and not very disengaged from the environment. So, overall I think that attention can definitely be distributed, but I'm not absolutely sure that we can have differences in attention that do not affect what is foregrounded and what is backgrounded.

It sometimes occurs to me that I am trying to distribute attention and I realize that all I am doing is distributing it temporally, so that I rapidly focus on many things in succession. In this case there is no single time slice of my attention where it is distributed. So the only way to speak of the distribution of attention is to take it to apply over a period of time.

Say you want to have a complete experience of all the things in your field of vision and sound and everything. Then it seems hard to just zoom out. What I am really doing is just switching the attention rapidly to get many of the aspects of the phenomenal field close to each other temporally, but I'm not really managing to zoom out, as it were, in one slice of time.

When I talk about attention as organizing the field of consciousness by prioritizing some parts over others, the initial way to think about it is maybe that a field of consciousness in front of you is like a big screen where some parts get highlighted and other parts do not. Then you have different time slices that are different screens with different parts highlighted. I don't think that is quite the right way to think about it. There are temporal dynamics of attention, and if you want to understand attention, you have to understand these. On the one hand, there is attention structuring things through time. This is most evident in auditory attention because auditory stimuli like music are very dynamic. A melody isn’t happening at a time, it happens over time, and you have to prioritize that melody in a way that takes into account the temporal aspects of the stimulus. But, on the other hand, there is also the structure of the stream of consciousness that evolves in time. When you attend to something, as you said, you are often switching from one thing to another. But even if you’re not switching, when you attend to something, you are doing something that takes time. So there is a dynamic aspect to attention. Sometimes your attention is drawn to something, and sometimes your intention to attend to something and the salience of the stimulus work together to draw your attention to various parts. So we also have to understand that aspect of experience in order to understand attention – the way attention is guided through the field of consciousness by various dimensions of the stimulus as well as our own decisions and what we are trying to do. So if we want to understand attention, we shouldn't just try to understand the organization of the field of consciousness at a time. We also have to understand how it evolves over time and how aspects of the stimulus guide attention as well as how the subject guides her own attention by the tasks she is performing.

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I thought about this because I was reading about empiricism and Carnap. He wants to make a priori analytic connections between phenomenal experiences and all the way down to sentences. And I started wondering what aspects of the phenomenal field are to be included in this view? Are we to take the whole thing, a sort of time slice of the whole phenomenal field, or should we leave it out, so that there is just the field itself? That way nothing is either in attention or outside of attention. Do you think it is possible to abstract the bare experience at a time, leaving out attention, or is it an essential part of it?

One thing that is interesting is that – with respect to attention – there is a big divide in philosophy of consciousness between those who are more in the analytic tradition and those who fall within the phenomenological tradition that goes back to Husserl and Brentano. Those in the analytic tradition, Carnap for example, tend not to talk about attention very much, while those in the phenomenological tradition have always talked about attention as part of consciousness. As I remember, Carnap has a very holistic view of the phenomenal field. He doesn’t want to divide it up into parts, so when he thinks about experience, he thinks about
the full field at a time. Now, here's an interesting question: Does that field include attention? If you want to capture all of phenomenology I think you do have to include attention, because on my view attention is an aspect of the phenomenal character of the experience that you cannot get by putting other aspects together. It is an irreducible part of the experience. But then there is this other question of how to think about that irreducible part. You mentioned this other conception one might have of it. The philosopher John Campbell once described it as the "arithmetical conception". So there is consciousness without attention, and then attention is added to it, in a way. That is one way to think about it – there is the way the world around you appears to you and then you add attention as a "spotlight" or "highlight" or an organization. So unorganized consciousness plus organization gives you organized experience. I tend to think that this is not actually right. This is controversial, but I want to say that you can't get any consciousness without attentional organization. So I think of this organization, this structure of consciousness, as a part of what it is to be conscious.

I mentioned that having a mind is connected with having a perspective or a point of view. I think that you can't really have a perspective that isn't structured in some way that resembles a foreground-background structure. Here is how I think about it. For consciousness you need, on the one hand, "phenomenal matter". There needs to be something that shows up to you, some aspect of appearances. But then, on the other hand, you also need "phenomenal form," i.e. organization. Attention gives you that organization. So if you do not put in phenomenal matter, you do not get experience. But then, nor do you get experience if you just have the matter; you also need the form that organizes these appearances so that you have a point of view. So if you want to describe the full experience of the subject, you can't do that by just describing experience and then adding attention to it, because attention is an integral part of having an experience.

So it is impossible to only have the "phenomenal matter"?

Well, it is not necessarily impossible to only have the matter. It is just that then it won't be a conscious experience. I think that something like this might be what happens in another disorder of consciousness, namely neglect. Neglect is usually caused by having a lesion in the brain, at quite a different spot in the brain than in blindsight. At first glance, it has a similar effect: The subjects do not react to anything in, for example, the left hemifield. But what actually happens in neglect is that they just ignore that hemifield. So, for example, if they eat from a plate, they eat only from the right half of the plate. If they shave, they shave only the right side of their face, and so on. So it is as if the left half of their visual field has ceased to exist for them in some way. Interestingly, the neglect does not happen only with respect to the whole visual field, but also with respect to single objects, such as in the example of the plate or the face. So they ignore the left or right part of every object. The general explanation of why this happens is that they do not focus their attention on the ignored side; the attention is completely absorbed by the other side. But if you present a very salient stimulus on the normally ignored side of the object or the field, then the attention gets drawn over there, and they see it and do not neglect it. That is why it is called neglect; they neglect it, but they can focus on it, and then it becomes part of their experience. But in many ways, what happens on the neglected side makes an impact on them. There is this very famous study where neglect patients are presented with a drawing of a house that looks normal on the non-ignored side, but on the neglected side there is a fire burning. The experimenters then ask the patients what they see, and they will say, "Oh, it's a house", "Is there anything special about the house?" "No", "Do you want to live in the house?" "Eh, I feel a little uncomfortable". So the neglected side still makes an impact. And it actually makes an impact in a much more fine-grained way than in blindsight. So here is the way I think about it: You have phenomenal matter there, on the neglected side; you have everything there that you need for experience, except that it hasn't folded into this attention structure, this organization. As soon as it gets integrated, it becomes part of the person's subjective perspective. You could have phenomenal matter by itself, but that is not truly phenomenal – it is not yet conscious.

So, it is not like the blindsighted person, who can tell you, if pushed, whether there is something in front of them or not?

So, it is not like the blindsighted person, who can tell you, if pushed, whether there is something in front of them or not?
Well, the blindsighted can’t tell you either; they are just making a guess. I am also pretty sure that the neglect patients also make quite reliable guesses— not about anything as high-level as fire, maybe, but blindsight patients won’t be able to do that either. Here’s an interesting result that shows just how much information they get and how much they understand. You probably know the Müller-Lyer illusion: If you take a line with two fins at each end, the line looks longer if the fins splay outward rather than if they splay inward. You can make a line with three pairs of fins: one pair at one end, splaying outwards, one pair in the center, splaying the same way as the first pair, and one pair at the other end, splaying inwards. If you ask someone to make a little indication of where the middle of such a line is, they will not draw it exactly in the middle, but a little more on the side where the fins go to the outside, because that side seems longer. If you ask a neglect patient to draw a line exactly in the middle of such lines, interestingly, the direction the fins point has an influence on them as well, even though the fins are in the neglected hemisphere. So it seems very much like an illusion, in that it is connected to how things appear to the subject even though they are not really like that, but it is an illusion that happens in the neglected hemisphere. So there is something there that looks a lot like the stuff of consciousness—it is even subject to perceptual illusions. And that is much more complex than anything you find in, for example, blindsight subjects. That is why I think the “phenomenal matter” is there in the case of neglect.

So I take it that blindsight is an example of a situation where you have the phenomenal structure but the phenomenal matter is missing, and that, surprisingly, the structure can still do its job without the phenomenal matter to work on.

Yes, that is what I think. In the case of the blindsight patient, what they have in the blind hemisphere isn’t the right matter, as it were. It is not the right mental representation that is needed to become conscious, but the organization of the subjects’ mental life still reaches into this part—just the organization, just the form. By itself that does not suffice for experience. You also need the right input, the right matter. So in the case of the blindsighted you don’t have the right matter; you just have the form. So attention isn’t by itself sufficient for consciousness; you need something more. In the neglect patients we have just the opposite. There is the right matter, but they lack the form, the phenomenal structure, in the neglected hemisphere. What these neglect patients illustrate, I believe, is that you can’t get consciousness without that form either.

Does this suggest that the form and the matter can work independently of each other, or that the form can work independently of all matter? That there is no dependence between the two?

Well, attention does also affect how things appear—the various properties that we are experiencing. There is a series of studies that show that attention affects, for example, the contrast with which something is experienced, apparent size, and so on and so forth—the various ways aspects of the environment appear to the subject. So, attention affects what I have called phenomenal matter. But just because there is a causal influence of the form on the matter does not mean they cannot in principle be separated, so I think they are fairly independent. You cannot have the form if you do not have anything in the form. But what you have in the form does not have to be a conscious experience, as the case of unconscious attention shows.

**How does consciousness and attention relate to other areas of philosophy?**

I am very interested in this. Reflecting on attention falls within the philosophy of mind, and I think the way attention shapes our experience has an influence on many things. First, there is the unity of consciousness: Attentional organization spans the whole field of consciousness, and thereby integrates it and gives you a single, unified perspective.
Second, the way the dynamics of attention guides consciousness through time, I believe, forces us to rethink a temporally atomistic conception of consciousness, where we think of consciousness as one temporal slice after the other. In order to understand the stream of consciousness, you have to take more seriously how it evolves over time. Third, there is the idea that we are never aware of our own experience. This is sometimes called the "transparency" of experience. I think that by looking at attention we see that this is wrong, because we can become aware of our own attending (this is what many meditation practices ask you to do). And if attention is part of our experience, then this shows that we can become aware of our experience.

So far, this is all within the narrow confines of the philosophy of mind and consciousness. I am also interested in bigger questions in a variety of dimensions. One dimension is that we are not just having our own experience; when someone else focuses their attention on us, we become aware of that too. We are aware of the perspective of another because we are aware of how we are the focus of attention. It has been shown that babies are aware of the attention of others very early on, and it is very important for their development. Later on, they engage in joint attention with others. So I am also interested in how the social dimensions of our lives are shaped by attention, and from there I am interested in, in general, the importance of social development and the way in which we cooperate mentally.

Another thing is the role that attention plays in thought, for example in the capacity to refer to objects. It has been suggested that attention is necessary for this. If you think of attention in terms of priority and structuring, what is its role in enabling thought?

Then there is the role of attention in action. One can attend to an idea or to some property of an object in the environment, but one can also perform an action attentively. This raises some questions of what the role of attention is in action: Is attention somehow necessary for action? What exactly is its role in action? Do we need to appeal to attention in order to give an account of action?

The last thing I want to mention is that there also are connections to moral philosophy. The philosopher Iris Murdoch talked a lot about attention. According to her, a moral person is not just someone who acts according to some moral principles: that is a very deficient way of being moral. If you meet another person and he has some principle, and he says for example "Oh, I'll apply this principle to this interaction with this particular person," and then he does it. This does not seem like a situation of connecting to the other person. A fully moral agent would be someone who is in some way attentive to the concrete situation in front of her. Asking herself questions such as "Who is this person here? What are their concrete needs? What does this situation look like?" And while the principles may be somewhat in the background, they should not just be thrown onto the situation. She's very interested in the concrete situation and the concrete people that she engages with. Accordingly, there is, for her, such a thing as moral attention: attention to the other qua human being, qua concrete, situated agent. I am interested in how to connect this with the way I want to think about attention. What is it to focus one's attention on someone qua person? Clearly it is not just looking at them as if they were a stone or a puppet. You have to look at them in a particularly moral way — as Murdoch puts it, "seeing them for who they are". It is natural, I think, to connect this with the notion of attention, but how to do that is a further question. But I am very sympathetic to the idea that being a moral person has something to do with concrete attentiveness to the situation and to other people, and not just with principles.

So when we look at things, the form of our experience has certain configurations, and one of these configurations amounts to looking at things qua human being?

I think that is a natural way to think about it; that the form of experience is different when others show up in it as humans. It is not obvious that this is consistent with what I said earlier about the appearance of things and how that is the phenomenal matter, and that this matter is different from the phenomenal form. It is not clearly consistent that there is a form that involves the other as a person, because that seems more like what I called matter, i.e. the way the other one appears to you. So one has to enrich the way we think about that form, where it has more structure, and there is a way in which we can structure our experience that takes
the other one in as a person. Arguably it is connected to the idea I mentioned that we experience others, not just as objects in our environment, but as people who themselves focus their attention on us. So when someone shows up in our experience as a subject, their perspective and our perspective are sort of connected; we experience them in our perspective as themselves having a perspective.

How is consciousness related to epistemology? Is it completely irrelevant to epistemology, or can we, when doing epistemology, simply assume that there are some ways the brain or the phenomenal experience has to be, in order for one to be justified or for one to believe something? Can we simply avoid talking about conscious experiences when we talk about knowledge?

That is a big question that I have not really worked very much on, but I think it is interesting. There is an important line of thought that maybe deserves to be called the intuitive conception, where consciousness is very important for epistemology. While it is intuitive, I think it has only recently been developed more thoroughly. So compare blindsighted perception of, say, a vertical line with conscious experience of a vertical line. Many people feel a strong intuition that while the blindsighted person can, for example, discriminate vertical from horizontal lines, they do not know that there is a vertical line in front of them. And the reason they do not know this is that they lack the conscious experience of what is in front of them. So consciousness seems to be important for knowledge of our environment. We need conscious experience of things in order to know that there are certain things in front of us.

People also think that consciousness is important for knowledge of our own minds. We know what we are thinking by bringing what we are thinking into consciousness. Some people have also thought that the way we know, for example, that certain transitions and certain inferences are good inferences is because we have a conscious experience of validity, a conscious experience that this is a valid and epistemically good transition to make. I think it is a powerful idea that consciousness plays a crucial epistemical role, and it is powerful because it connects to the internalist conception of justification, where justification is something that needs to be available in some way to the subject. Consciousness is the paradigmatic example of something that is available to the subject. I think this a powerful line of thought. But then there is the question: What is it about consciousness that gives it a special epistemic role? Is it just a basic fact that it is important for epistemology, or can we somehow explain why that would be? There are some difficult questions on whether consciousness can really carry that epistemic weight. I don't quite know what to think about this.

Does working on awareness and attention give you an advantage when it comes to working and focusing and maybe in other aspects of your life as well, for instance when it comes to happiness?

One answer to this is: maybe just the opposite. Why are you interested in working on attention and awareness? Maybe it is because you have difficulties concentrating and you really need to reflect on what is happening in this field. Or maybe you are very unhappy because you are so distracted all the time, so you need to understand this. I think it can go both ways. I do think that you learn something about yourself when you reflect on experience, and that it is valuable and can enrich your life. I do sometimes read about the connection bet-
ween focus and happiness or about various cognitive upshots of concentration and things like that, and sometimes I do reflect on these things also. I reflect, for example, on something that I like to call "attentional engineering". We engineer our physical environments, for example, by placing things in various places so that they guide our attention. And I do think that the way our lives, mental and otherwise, go depends a lot on the way things guide our attention. Interior designers design environments that make it pleasant to be in them, that guide the attention through them. I think it is good to know that this attentional engineering is happening, to be aware of it. And to think about how it structures your experience. This way you can take back control. But I don't really apply some principles I have read in a textbook in my personal life. I think about how this attentional engineering happens, and then I think about how I want my attention to be guided. I like to go outside, to spend some time in the mountains, or something like that, because I think it is good for me to open my mind in this way. But I don't think this makes me happier than most people, though I'm not sure I'm less happy than most people either...

Do you think that, since you have explored many of these areas, you are able to manipulate the structure of your attention more easily than others?

There is theory and there is practice, and they are not exactly the same. When you try to theorize about these things you may focus on things that are fairly easy to understand — for example a color or a shape. But the things that are most interesting for enriching your attentional practices and the connection between the way you engage attention and happiness, are probably much richer. It is therefore much harder to get a theoretical grip on them. I think there are people who are very good at restructuring their experience in a good way. It is not clear that they get better at this by reading about psychology or thinking about philosophy. I think it may rather involve being engaged in practices such as meditation, although I hope that philosophy also helps us to a degree. But my observation is that philosophers tend not to be happier than other people — maybe less.