

Green Paper 04 — Attention as Ethics

Green Papers: Notes Toward Planetary Guardianship
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Abstract

This paper proposes attention as a form of ethical infrastructure. What we attend to shapes what becomes real, what becomes actionable, and what becomes morally relevant. Ethics is often framed as principles or duties, but in practice it begins earlier: with perception, selection, and presence.

Under stress and overload, attention collapses. Time horizons shorten, complexity becomes unbearable, and the world shrinks into threat and immediacy. In such conditions moral language may intensify, but moral perception weakens.

Attention is therefore not a private matter. It is a civic and ecological condition. Planetary guardianship depends on forms of attention capable of holding long horizons, ambiguity, and repair.

1. Attention comes before judgment

Before we decide what is right, we decide what is real. Before we act responsibly, we notice what calls for responsibility.

Moral life begins with a field of perception: what is visible, what is ignored, what is held with care, and what disappears into noise.

In this sense, attention is not only a cognitive function. It is a condition for ethical life.

2. The attention economy is an ethical environment

Contemporary life reorganizes attention through speed, novelty, interruption, and competition. Not only through media, but through institutional rhythms: meetings, dashboards, alerts, performance metrics, urgent requests.

This produces a predictable outcome: attention becomes fragmented, shallow, and reactive.

And when attention becomes reactive, ethics becomes reactive too. We lose the capacity to stay with complexity.

3. Collapse patterns: what happens under overload

Under overload, attention becomes narrow. This narrowing is not a personal weakness. It is a biological and systemic response to stress.

Common collapse patterns include:

- **shortened horizon** — the future disappears
- **threat fixation** — the world becomes hostile and urgent
- **simplification** — nuance is experienced as danger
- **moral intensity** — louder values, weaker capacity
- **responsibility diffusion** — “someone else should handle it”

A culture of chronic overload produces ethical degradation without intending to.

4. Attention as care

Care can be understood as the practice of sustained attention. Not attention as surveillance, but attention as presence: remaining in contact with what matters.

This kind of attention is slow. It requires protection from constant interruption.

Where attention is protected, care becomes possible. Where attention is destroyed, care becomes heroic, sporadic, or performative.

5. Civic and institutional attention

Attention is not only individual. Institutions train attention through what they measure, reward, and ignore.

Civic attention is shaped by:

- what is made discussable
- what remains invisible
- which voices are heard as legitimate
- how time is allocated for deliberation
- whether repair is structurally possible

A viable democracy depends on forms of attention capable of holding long horizons and plural realities without collapse.

6. Planetary attention

Planetary crises are attention crises. Not because people are indifferent, but because the scale and complexity exceed the default capacity of human and institutional attention.

Planetary responsibility requires attention that can hold:

- slow violence and delayed consequences
- irreversible thresholds
- uneven burdens and injustice
- grief without paralysis
- care without moral exhaustion

This is not a call to intensify urgency. It is a call to design for sustained perception.

Closing questions

- What do our institutions train us to notice—and to ignore?
- Where does moral attention collapse first: body, relation, or institution?
- What protects attention from chronic interruption and reactivity?
- How do we build long-horizon attention without ideology or burnout?
- What would it mean to design governance as “attention infrastructure”?

References (working constellation)

Attention & cognition: Posner · James · Kahneman

Stress & regulation: McEwen · Sapolsky

Phenomenology & embodiment: Merleau-Ponty · Varela/Thompson/Rosch

Institutional attention: Weick · Simon (bounded rationality)

Status: Working paper (v0.1). Revised over time.

Spiralweb: spiralweb.earth