

# **All the World a Stage**

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## **Chapter 3**

### **How Attention Works:**

### **Paying It Means Reshaping Your Mind (and Actions)**

(March 13, 2007)

We have been moving through the history of economies that grow, eventually reach their implicit goals, and then ultimately give way to utterly new ones they have accidentally opened spaces for. The successors then proceed to grow in their own directions. Chapter 4 takes up the story as maturing Market-Money-Industrialism provides the seedbed for the growth of the new Attention Economy.

To make sense of that recent history, though, we need to know better what about it matters. Older economies depended on fighting, outward pledges of loyalty, or the production of a great many different kinds of things that have an objective and clear existence in the world. In contrast, the new economy is based on something seemingly inward and subjective — namely attention. How does this evanescent, hard-to-grasp aspect of mind work? How can inbuilt human propensities and potentialities in regard to it come to underpin an entire economy?

What we have to get right is: how attention connects people; how when one person pays attention to another it can change both of them; why getting other people's attention is so necessary for us and often so desirable; why there is not enough attention to go around; and why there can never really be much more. These are the kinds of issues that matter for an economy, but they are not the kinds of questions that have come first for most people who have

studied or thought seriously so far about what goes on inside us when we pay attention or when we get it. (It will help to have one standard word for someone paying attention to someone else, and another for the person receiving that attention. I call the first the *audient* and the other the *attent*.)

Not everything about attention matters for our purposes; some aspects have little tie to any economic role. Without considerable care, it is easy, too, to come to the wrong conclusions about just how attention does function in an economic sense. I have had to develop my own approach to all this. I now think of attention primarily as the *aligning of minds*. I have found a very good way to introduce this is to start with some recent advances in the study of how brains work, even though that science will only take us a bit of the way.

### AN ITALIAN ICE CREAM CONE

Not long ago I learned of a remarkable scientific accident that took place in the early 1990's in the research lab headed by Giacomo Rizzolatti at the University of Parma, Italy. The group had been studying the pattern of nerve-circuit firing in rhesus monkeys' brains. Each circuit of interest corresponded to a particular type of intentional muscular action. One circuit normally instigated a monkey's arm and hand motions in lifting a peanut to its mouth. To make their observations easier the researchers had linked a loudspeaker to the electrodes they had connected to that neuron chain. Whenever the monkey began to perform the peanut-to-mouth motion, everyone around would be alerted.

One day, a graduate student insouciantly walked into the lab licking an ice cream cone. Suddenly, the speaker blasted. But something was wrong. The monkey was staring at the student, but was not moving its own arm at all. Why was the loudspeaker sounding? Enough repetitions revealed that the problem was not

with the setup. Evidently, the chain of neurons in the monkey's brain had responded to the motions of the human doing the same sort of thing that the monkey would normally be doing when feeding itself peanuts! Somehow the monkey had recognized the act as like its own act. That recognition involved its activating same nerve chain as if it were moving its own paw, though without that occurring.

### THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

This was a momentous discovery. For the first time, the highly relational nature of monkeys — and by extension humans — was revealed at the neural level. Since then, using less invasive brain-imaging techniques, scientists have verified that humans have exactly the same kinds of reactions, though with considerably more precise distinctions between different actions. For us too, the same chain of brain neurons we would use to instigate any muscular action, we also apparently activate — without actually moving our own bodies — when we note someone else doing exactly the same thing. Neuroscientists now use the slightly misleading term “mirror neurons” to describe any connected brain circuit that has the dual functions of initiating an action and recognizing the same action when performed by someone else.

Intentions are part of what is mirrored. People move slightly differently, when, say, picking up a glass intending to drink from it than if their intent is to put the glass away or empty it out in the sink. The subtle differences in motion mean that different neurons are active in each case. Likewise, it appears that in a watcher different chains of mirror neurons get activated depending on the mover's purposes. It seems that we directly experience others' intents along with their movements, almost exactly as if they were our own.

Neural mirroring of a slightly different kind comes into play in feeling others' emotions. We all know people with “infectious”

smiles. When you see such a person smiling, even if a smile does not appear outwardly on your face you can feel a corresponding inner glow. An angry expression can bring out your own anger; someone laughing can make you mirthful; and so on. Likewise, a person who looks sad or depressed might pull your own mood down. Sometimes a down expression is hardly visible, consisting of very subtle arrangements of the facial muscles. It is only by feeling our internal response to these slight indications that we can gauge the other's mood.

### MIRRORING TAKES OVER

Let us see where such observations can lead. Numerous actions are so familiar to you, so automatic, that you hardly have to think about them when performing them. These include putting food in your own mouth, walking, sitting down, standing up, screwing in a light bulb, and hundreds of others. You can usually recognize others' doing the same things with equally little focus or thought. You do not interrupt your own stride when you notice that someone else is walking near you, as long as they are walking normally and not about to bump into you

However, you might pay closer attention to a child taking its first insecure steps or to a friend who is re-learning to walk after a serious injury. Then, the standard sort of neurons for walking will not be the only ones activated, for this novel locomotion involves unusual muscles, moved in unusual ways. It is much easier to pay attention to that unusual motion if you stand still, so that your normal neural circuits for walking do not interfere. Watching from your own stillness, you are very much experiencing — from the inside — some of what it would feel like to be this person. You can feel all the purposefulness, the focus on avoiding the ever present effects of gravity, the sense of precarious balance, and the triumph of each step successfully taken.

It is the same whenever you watch actions so complex they would require a fair bit of focus if you performed them yourself — say acrobatics, ballet dancing or football playing. To let your appropriate mirror chain of neurons be activated so as to experience the performer's or player's motions, you either can move a little in sympathy — lunging upwards from your seat as the player leaps to catch the football — or you must be more or less still. You cannot be paying attention if you are simultaneously performing some complex but unrelated action of your own — say lining up a pool shot or building a structure out of dominoes. You could not pay attention to both even if your eyes could somehow follow both your own tasks and the performance at the same time. Likewise, it is impossible to feel sharply different moods at once, so you cannot focus simultaneously on two people with different emotions. Mirroring appears to be a necessary component of paying attention — at least to physical movement, intentions and feelings.

It is worth noting that you can mirror activities — such as somersaulting on a trapeze or sumo wrestling — that you have not and could not actually perform. The muscles used still are roughly the same as your own. So you can simulate commanding your muscles to do those things, even if in reality you would fail dismally. You can possibly even imagine (and so mirror — to a degree) moving muscles you don't have, soaring like an eagle, being an elephant curling up its trunk and then squirting water, or wagging your non-existent tail like a dog. Even mirroring the motions of a mythical creature such as a centaur (in an animated film, say) seems doable.

## ONE SIDE OF THE NET

To come back closer to earth, suppose you are watching a singles tennis game. As the ball passes over the net you can shift your focus from one player to the other, but while one is going after the ball and hitting it, it would be extremely difficult to see the details

of what she is doing and why, while also taking in what the player across the net is up to and why. They are both moving arms and legs, but not in sync with each other. Your own neuron chains would have to fire differently for paying attention to one than the other.

Even switching attention completely from one tennis player to her opponent every time the ball crosses the net is not easy. As you fully pay attention to the first player — let's call her "Sonya" for short — you are caught up not just in her actions but their intent, which includes wanting to win the point. If you are normal person you do not change your goals or intents as frequently as a tennis ball crosses the net. A strong desire usually stays with you for a time — and often a long time. Any time we have allowed ourselves to be in one person's shoes, it is a bit of a wrench to move into another's, especially when the other is presented as acting at least in part against the wishes or goals of the first.

It takes a huge effort to stay completely neutral when watching a contest of some kind. Easier by far is to want one player — say Sonya — to win the point. You start by letting her apparent feelings take over yours for considerably longer than the few seconds she is getting set to hit the ball, Soon the boundaries between you seem to dissolve. Her successes and failures, movements and goals seem to become yours. That is why sports events, plays, or other types of complex actions to which we pay attention call up our loyalties to players, teams or characters so completely.

## A UNIFIED VIEW

Already, the implications of our neurons' mirroring the neurons in others' brains when we watch them move has led us to some important conclusions about attention. First, it has to be in limited supply. We simply cannot pay detailed attention to more than one person acting in different ways or with different motives. Even to

follow that one person (or unified group), we usually have to still our own movements so as to let hers take over our neural activity. And when we do pay attention, we automatically come to identify at least a bit with the intents and feelings of the other person, if we can possibly decipher them.

This already takes us beyond where neuroscience has yet gone with any reliability. To find out how a volunteer reacts at the neural level to what she is experiencing, neuroscientists have to get her to accept being placed in a big, unwieldy scanner. This greatly limits what can be learned about typical experiences of daily life. However, though I am extrapolating considerably from what has been shown in lab settings, the kinds of reactions I am describing are ones we all experience countless times, almost every day. So these extrapolations seem quite safe. We all really know a great deal about paying attention, just from our own experience, outside any lab.

We also can draw on a huge body of additional systematic knowledge, collected over millennia by: students of attention as practiced in meditation or Zen; experimental psychologists; neuroscientists who work on different aspects than mirror neurons; cultural and evolutionary anthropologists; sociologists and social psychologists; philosophers of cognition or mind, specialists in animal behavior (ethologists); traffic engineers and auto designers trying to make sure that drivers focus on driving; literary, art, theater, film and music critics and theorists, rhetoricians, and other scholars (and practitioners) of media. There are educators, deeply interested in how to get and hold attention in the classroom, as well as how teachers can pay adequate attention to each pupil. There are those who study attention to help out advertisers or product designers. Everyone from fashion designers to book illustrators are concerned with how to draw attention, sometimes very explicitly. Various schools of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy are deeply interested in the flow of attention in the therapeutic session, and

also in the ways infants and small children get attention from parents and vice versa. And more....

Clearly, no one person can possibly approach mastering and integrating what all these fields have to offer. I have tried to fit some insights from many of them into a fairly unified framework. That framework, while it can draw in part on brain science, is easier to express at the level of mind. In the brain, chains of neurons are active or inactive; in the mind, we have thoughts, feelings, imagination, understanding, and a sense of what words, actions, and things mean. It is the mind that experiences consciousness. So, too, it is through our minds that we pay attention. To my best reckoning, an exact science of mind is still many, many years away. To proceed here we shall have no choice but to adopt a mixture of metaphor, analogy, introspection, examples, reflection along with occasional dips into brain science — plenty of ingredients, if used judiciously, for a satisfying dish.

## MINDING MINDS

Minds depend on active brains, and also on being in a moving, sensing body. No one is born with much of a mind; rather we each develop one as we develop a sense of self. This never happens in complete isolation but rather through hundreds of thousands of interactions with others — paying attention and being paid attention to. It happens in a specific cultural setting, or sometimes in a setting combining several cultures at once.

For human infants —even more than for other mammal or bird newborns— the attention from others through emotional connection is the only way they have to take care of themselves. They must enlist older children or adults to do almost everything for them, or they will certainly perish. At an extremely early age — perhaps under an hour after birth — a normal infant responds to a smile by smiling back, which instantly creates a bond. And, of course, babies cry.

In our culture, at least, we interpret a baby's cry as indicating that something is wrong, or that the baby wants something, but often, especially for a new baby, we can only guess what it might be. Does she want to be fed, burped, have her diaper changed, be held, be rocked, or what? At first, at least, most parents are unable to figure out what a particular instance of crying means — if indeed it means anything. It may be an exaggeration at that stage to think a baby knows what it wants or what is wrong. Yet the pain associated with the cry comes through.

Now begins a complex awakening of meaning in the baby and her caretakers as well. As they find out what seems to stop the crying in different circumstances, the parents or other caretakers see themselves as learning the meaning of this baby's different cries. Meanwhile, the baby is learning the different possible responses and how to elicit them. Baby and caretaker are both shaping or reshaping their minds to correspond to the workings of the other's. Just as parents of more than one child have to reshape their responses and imaginations to each child individually, so the infant soon learns to feel different depending on which particular parent or caregiver is present. This is what mutual attention is: a reshaping or realigning of one's mind to the mind of the other.

When you are watching Sonya the tennis player, your activated brain circuits resemble some of the activated circuits in Sonya's brain. In terms of mind, you are adopting her emotional intent and actions, and thus, indirectly, her viewpoint as well. One could say you are shaping or aligning your mind to hers at the moment.

AND AFTERWARDS...

At the same time as watching Sonya in the here and now, like the parent or infant, you are laying down memories of what you are paying attention to. Most likely, our capacity to activate neuron chains that capture the motions of others has an added use. It

allows us to decompose those motions into units in our own mind so as to try to imitate them or learn them ourselves. Were we to practice those ways of moving over and over again, such motions would be easier and easier to perform, or to imagine performing. In the same way, if we simply pay attention to Sonya repeatedly, we have an easier and easier time focusing in on her motions. The more we watch her, the easier it becomes to activate the neural circuits that mirror how she plays. We also continue to retain the desire that she win that we originally picked up by watching her. We have no sharp separation in our minds of her own desire to win from our own desire that she do so.

It is not only her characteristic motions that can ready us to mirror Sonya another time. All manner of cues can work — her name, face, voice, idiosyncratic tennis togs, stories about her we happen to be reminded of, and much else. How all these elements form a unified gestalt of a person remains something of a mystery now at the neural level and probably will for years to come. We can consider all these extra elements as of a piece with the various bodily motions of Sonya — or whomever — which we tend to mirror in a combined package.

### **BEYOND MERE MUSCULAR MIRRORING: PAYING ATTENTION TO WORDS, ART AND THINGS OF ALL SORTS**

So far, following on the insights gleaned from the mirror neurons that control muscular activity, I have focused on what it is like to pay attention to people in motion or showing emotion. But much of what makes humans special as a species is our unique verbal ability, which allows us to share what is in our minds in ways probably not open to any other animal. A very high proportion of attention goes to speech or writing, and through it to the speakers or writers.

Our attention also goes to works of art of many sorts, to all kinds of everyday artifacts, to buildings, and cityscapes, to nature and at times towards ourselves — our own bodies, feelings and personal memories. More recently a growing proportion goes to moving images — in movies, on TV or over the Internet — some of which are basically non-verbal — in the form of sports, music videos, and short videos of all kinds on the Net. To understand fully how attention works, we eventually need to take all these into account. Nevertheless, we can learn a lot seeing just how we pay attention to language.

## WORDS AND LANGUAGE

It is natural to assume that all words we hear or see have been spoken or written by some person or other. I wrote these words, for instance, and you have no difficulty knowing to whom “I” in this sentence refers. When you try to pay attention to words you hear spoken, normally you would first seek to determine just who is speaking. It would be unsettling not to be able to figure that out. Conceivably, if you find no source, you could be hallucinating. Even then, according to the accounts I have heard or read of hallucination or schizophrenia, each strange voice seems personified; it is always taken to be that of someone, often unknown, but still specific. Even a mechanical, computerized voice must have some person’s intent behind it (unless the computer has become a person in its own right, like HAL in the movie 2001).

Since people always speak or write with some motive or other, it’s natural to assume that we try to pick up that intent, as a very basis of paying attention. Quite often, in fact, words are used for the sole purpose of getting and holding the attention of another person or persons — maintaining contact and communion between two or more people. An entire conversation might consist of nothing but “Hi!” “Hello!” “How are you?” “Fine. Yourself?” “Great” “Beautiful day, isn’t it?” “Lovely.” To keep at it, the speakers

might settle on some subject to banter about, but then repeatedly veer off to other topics. This can continue as long as they both want, without either one ever feeling she wants to pass on any particular information. Like a parent cooing or babbling with a pre-verbal infant, each partner in such an exchange is both tightening a bond with and mirroring the other. It is rather as if they were playing some simple and non-competitive game such as “catch.”

Were these communers with each other indeed playing catch, their mirror neurons would be firing. They would be aligning their motions as well as their mental acts to one another. The one pitching would note by neural mirroring how the other was positioning herself to catch the ball, so as to throw accordingly. Meanwhile the catcher would be mirroring the motions of the pitcher so as to anticipate the right motions to make the catch. In bantering, gossiping or many similar kinds of common conversation, they are doing much the same, except that they are aligning their minds, not their physical actions.

## MOVING THOUGHTS

Is it too much of a stretch to say that every time anyone speaks or writes a prime motive is to gain and hold attention? One may want little more than the general kind of communing that is so common, or one might aim for some more particular kind of aligning of minds. When a friend says, “How are you?” in a solicitous tone of voice, we pick up the emotion, feeling, possibly held and cared for, and free to disclose in some detail how we are really doing.

To present that same emotion in writing is at least a little more complicated. In print it is harder still. In an e-mail or old-fashioned personal letter, I might say to a friend, “I am concerned about how you are, since you haven’t been in touch for awhile.” However, to put that same thought, without quotes, directly in this text, to be read right now by you — most probably someone I do not know personally — would be weird.

Still, poets, songwriters, novelists, politicians (or their speechwriters), columnists and bloggers — among others — constantly find ways to present emotions that readers can then mirror at least somewhat. Think about occasions you have been moved by something you have read, where the author’s own feelings seemed to come through. Right this moment, for instance, can you tell that I really care that you get what I am writing about and align with it? So, are you with me?

If you like, you can view that last line as a simple experiment in trying to align through the print medium. Even if it did not work very well, you might at least have gotten some sense that with sufficient skill such connection is possible.

Of course, often someone seeking attention wants a different kind of alignment than just sharing an emotion. We may want the alignment that comes from sharing an attitude, a story, a report (which is nothing but a slightly more formal story), a position about the world (say a political one), or many another sort of thought.

## THOUGHTS AS ACTIONS

Can we tie all these possibilities to mirroring? The short answer is, most definitely, “yes.” In fact, we can go even farther. You cannot pay attention to speech, writing or print without understanding each sentence, whether it be as simple as “gimme!” uttered by a child wanting something or a sentence far more complex than this one. To understand a sentence, you have to be able to follow the thinking, feeling and experiences that make it up. Language itself pulls you into this.

Contemporary linguists, philosophers of language, and cognitive scientists combine to offer the view not only that on several levels all language encodes actions but also that every utterance itself is a

kind of action. In effect, to listen to or read what is said we must mirror these implicit actions. At the same time we must also take account of their context, which usually involves trying to see the world from the perspective of the utterer — the attent.

Every sentence in every language must contain a verb, expressed or implied, which most often represents a particular action. Often this verb is wrapped in metaphor, as in the word “wrapped,” which came earlier in this very sentence. Even when a verb such as “is” does not directly stand for any sort of action, it still stands in for a kind of mental movement. Thus if I say, “the cup I am thinking of is yellow,” you can hardly understand the thought without visualizing a cup, and, then, mentally, somehow applying the color yellow to it. The thought that flitted through my mind then flits at least roughly through yours. The cup you visualize may differ in shape from the one I visualized. I could partially change that by telling you I meant an ordinary ceramic coffee mug, not some delicate china cup nor a tin or any other sort of metal one. I could then specify that the yellow I have in mind is lemon yellow, not egg-yolk yellow, nor a pale, greenish yellow. That still will not make your image and mine exactly the same, but it would bring them somehow closer. If you have followed this, I have enlisted you at least a bit in the project of trying to see how visualization as a form of paying attention works. That, and not any kind of cup or mug of any color, was what I was really trying to get you to align with.

### WHO WENT HOME?

Likewise, if your friend, in telling a story about herself, says, “I went home,” you will only be paying attention if you apply details you know or guess according to the demands of your friend’s way of narrating. When you say “I,” you mean someone different from who she means by it, and, most of the time, the same with “home.” When she says these words, you automatically rearrange your frame of reference so that while you are paying attention to her

story, she becomes “I” The verb, “went,” itself enters your imagining in a particular way that depends on the context, from what you know about her, from the method she might have used to travel, from what you know about her home, and from her state of mind in all this. Plus more. You are only paying attention if you put yourself pretty much “in her shoes” as the story unfolds. (Probably, the more empathic you are, as psychologists use the term, the more completely you can pay attention, at least if emotions are important for this story. However, in many cases shared knowledge of the appropriate context matters more than emotional empathy. It would not be easy, for instance, to listen attentively to a detailed story about the latest Oscars ceremony if you know nothing about Hollywood. )

Every narrative has a story line, a path through which the events and actions and feelings flow, which entails a kind of deliberate pushing forward with the story. To follow the story, the listener or reader has to do something very like mirroring the force and flow of the narrator as the story is pushed onward. Paying attention to a story can be pretty much like watching a tennis game. One follows the intentions and imagines being in the position of one character for quite a time, and then at times one takes up the stance and actions of another.

Another easy position to take is that of the teller or narrator. For a small child, the tale teller is usually a beloved caretaker, who offers protective strength and certainty, and with whom the child generally can strongly identify. With greater sophistication, at least in the modern and post-modern world, we often identify with neither a character nor the ostensible narrator, but with the author, who invents and manipulates all elements of the story including language, plot, characters and one or many narrators — sometimes intervening with ironic intent at any of these levels, endlessly referring to the writing process itself and so breaking a spell, only to create a new spell as the one who invents all the rest.

To read such a work, we can hardly pay full attention without coming to understand and share the author's continually subversive intentions. We must end up able to congratulate ourselves as not only seeing but in effect participating in these various twists and turns. We follow these purely literary acrobatics much as we might identify with the elaborate twists and turns of a trapeze artist, figure skater, high diver or ballerina. Just as we can usually only crudely mirror the physical actions, being unable to perform them ourselves, we do the same in reading.

### BESIDES STORIES

Not all speech and certainly not all writing is in story form. There can be arguments (attempts to convince), meditations — mystical or otherwise — explanations, instructions, commands or exhortations, labels, and so forth. Whatever they are, though—even if mathematical equations — they still are presented in the form of sentences of some kind. That is so even if parts of these sentences have to be assumed by the audient. For instance, an ID tag you might wear at some event might or might not say, “Hi, my name is....” Still, anyone reading it would assume something like that.

Even complex arguments will be made up of sentences that try to “force” your mind in some direction or another. Anyone trying to convince us of anything — no matter how rationally or logically — wants us to think as she does, and in effect is trying to cajole or wrestle us into doing so. Regardless of whether you end up convinced, you can't be paying attention if you do not “feel” or mirror that push or pull, and for that you must feel the arguer's emotions at least a bit.

Someone arguing in person for a point of view will often pause and ask her audience something like, “Do you follow me?” That suggests the argument is indeed an example of motion down a

path, a merely metaphorical motion perhaps, but one that nonetheless can easily be translated into mirrored muscular movements.

## BEYOND WORDS

Very commonly, too, we pay attention to human-created things that do not involve language. Think of music, pictures, sculptures, buildings, actions, standard manufactured objects, scenes in movies or theatre, and so on. In each case we have particular ways of paying attention to them that also involve complex aligning. Looking at a photo, we are seeing a view carefully chosen by the photographer, who saw the same view, and found something worth noting in it, as well as capturing a certain experience of looking. By looking at the view from the same angle and with same focus the photographer chose we are again aligning minds. By trying to see what the photographer thought was of value in this view, we are aligning still more.

In the case of music, there are a whole series of motions each piece of music encodes, from dances to the bobbing up and down of the instrumentalist, and along with that a pretty intense emotional content, as well as melodic and more complex structures. In the case of architecture, behind aesthetic and stylistic aspects, there is the purely functional. A door in a building is some kind of invitation to enter, a window is an occasion at least to try to look in as well as to look out, to mention only some very simple aspects. Looking at a building we automatically find ourselves trying to understand why the architect or whoever designed it decided to place the door just where she did, as well as detecting how it fits with other elements. The more we know — from earlier aligning — about architecture — the more we can align with the mind of this particular architect and so pay attention to her.

## **WHAT IS “ALIGNING ONE’S MIND”?**

Bit by bit, I have been introducing the concept of aligning or reshaping of one’s mind as the essence of paying attention to another person. It is worth a bit more explanation.

In paying attention, you must at least momentarily see the world from the other person’s perspective. In a way it is as if you are in her mind. Closer to what takes place, however, is that she — or, rather, your version of her— is in you. We have seen that when you watch anyone engaged in complex physical action, the activated mirror neurons are in effect taking over your own possibilities of movement. In the same way, while you are paying attention to someone, whether through her words, actions, thoughts, experiences or expressions in any form, your internal model of her is the functioning center of your mind. She has “taken over” — or, if you like, “inhabited” — you to some degree

Two caveats are in order. The rhesus monkey who mirrors the actions of the student with the ice cream cone does not mistake those actions for its own. If it did, it would not remain immobile in the process. Likewise, while sitting in the stands or in front of our TV watching Sonya, the tennis player, we always remain at least somewhat aware that we are not she. We may be metaphorically very much in her shoes, but we are also aware to some degree that we are still in our own. We are sitting there, not running around on the court. We don’t feel the ball banging on a tennis racquet in our hands, the way she does. We don’t feel the pounding of our non-moving feet on the surface of the court. We are not getting a physical workout. And our name is most probably not Sonya. When we leave the arena or change the channel, we normally go

on with pretty much the life we led before, which likely bears little relation with hers.

If we are taking in, say, a political harangue or a religious sermon some or much of it may conflict with a view or stand of our own. We will surely note those conflicts, even if we are also keeping an open mind. Keeping an open mind translates to actually trying to align with the speaker enough to understand the argument fully. To some degree, in such a case, much as if we are having a good conversation, we will move back and forth between aligning with the speaker and standing our own ground.

Just as we are all somewhat capable of evaluating our own actions or thoughts right after doing or having them, so we are capable of evaluating the feelings, thoughts, and so on that we have taken up in aligning our minds to the other. We will do that according mostly to our own personal standards, attitudes, and experiences, not those of the one we have been paying attention to.

Think of the mind as somewhat elastic — something like a foam-rubber pillow that temporarily takes on the contours of whatever is pressed into it. When the pressure is removed the pillow snaps back to pretty much its prior form. If the same object is repeatedly placed against the pillow, however, the snapping back can become less complete.

### A BUMPY PILLOW

I mentioned two caveats. The second is this. Not only are we not actually the person we are paying attention to, but our internal model of that person will be neither accurate nor complete in all respects. We can do no better than align with our best guess of what it is like to be that person. We make that guess largely unconsciously, based on our own past experiences and what we already know of the other, in part from previous attention-paying.

No matter how hard we try, though, it is still a guess. The wider the gap, in terms of personal experience, culture, context, internal feelings and moods, the less it is likely that an attempt on our part to convey a sense of who we think the other is would seem right to her. But we model anyway, we align anyway, and we go with our best guess, since it is the best. The pillow we may offer may be bumpy, but we have no other.

The more we try to pay attention to someone, for whatever reason, the more we form an inner representation of the person attended to. This allows us to feel at least something of what it is like to be her. The philosopher Thomas Nagle, in a famous paper entitled “What is it Like to Be a Bat?” used the alien-seeming example of bats (the flying mammals, that is, not the baseball tool) to suggest how hard it is to sense what it is like to be someone quite different. Bats are much smaller than humans; they fly instead of walk; many species sense their surroundings by auditory “sonar” rather than by sight; they spend their days asleep, hanging upside down; and they eat insects caught in flight. So is Nagle right that it is impossible for us to know what it really feels like to be such a different creature? Maybe not entirely. It so happens that when I was a college freshman I spent many hours diligently watching some bats, one at a time. (This was in an ethically challenged experiment, I’ve come to feel, but that’s not at issue here.) The point was to see how well each bat individually could navigate a space filled with noise designed to drown out its sonar. (This was akin to trying to blinding a normally sighted person with bright lights and then watching her stumble.) In my intense watching, my mind certainly became somewhat aligned with the bat. I do have some crude sense of what it is like to be one. These long-dead bats still live a bit in me. Longer watching might have offered a less crude alignment. If we strive hard enough to pay attention, differences partially dissolve. We can gain some inner connection even with a being quite alien.

A much-used method in family or couples therapy is relevant here. In it, each person is asked to demonstrate that he or she has “heard” the other by restating in her own words what the other has said. The other then judges whether the meaning is the same. Succeeding at this requires temporarily adopting the point of view and perspective of the other. There is no real “hearing,” or so the counselors who use this method would say, if this cannot be done. Before such therapy, it turns out, many couples pay little real attention to each other, and, so, get along badly. Unless they make the effort to align their quite different minds, and unless they know how to go about this, they will be stuck in this unsatisfactory state. (With a bat — or with a baby — this exact method is not available, and more indirect methods of ascertaining how well one has aligned must be used.)

#### ALIGNMENT AND WILL

So far, I have argued that to pay attention you have to temporarily adopt the other’s viewpoint, including experiences, thoughts, emotions and intentions. All those together include accepting as your own the other’s desires and will. The more she wants something, the harder it is for you not to want it too. The more completely you pay attention, the more you want her desires to be satisfied. Very often those desires will go against the desires you might feel were you not paying her so much attention. To some degree paying attention thus always involves a battle of wills, and in many instances it can feel good to succumb to hers. We will take up in Chapter 6 how this gets magnified the more the other person is a star, that is has the attention of a large audience.

This integration of having attention and getting one’s desires met is perfectly familiar to every small child. Without getting attention from a parent or caretaker almost no desire at all can be met. With such attention, the sky seems to be the limit, at least until the caretaker begins to resist. For an infant also, as well as sometimes for those older, being attentive to her wants means at times not

paying too direct attention; infants get over-excited and need to turn away. Being attentive then means not pressing unwanted attention.

If each toddler experiences this power of having attention as well as repeatedly coming up against its limits, might it not very well be that each of us — even in adulthood — still retains some hope of getting attention so perfectly that everything becomes open to us?

One thing is certain, we do tend to take for granted that with attention comes at least a bit of appropriate attentiveness. Think how often, in talking to someone, you yourself would make a request like one of the following: “Listen to this;” “Look over there;” “Consider this;” “Let me introduce you to Mr. Smith over there;” “Have a taste;” “Hold this for a moment;” “Hand me that thing over there, please;” “Wait a minute until I’m through;” “Wait here for me for a few minutes;” or maybe, “Please stand.”

If you know the person well, that is if she has paid you attention in the past, and *vice versa*, you could even ask her to share something that she is eating, get you a drink, give you a ride, or fill other very personal wants. In addition, you sometimes make negative requests, such as “please don’t do that; it’s annoying me.” If, without explaining why, she does not comply to requests such as these, you can conclude she is not paying attention.

In the past, most attention was up close, with both people within yards of each other. Today, that is very often not so. Over the phone, it is no use asking for a glass of water, or for most other things that would require immediate bodily motions. Also, if you are part of large audience, and the person who has your attention asks for something, you might want the request filled, yet not believe you should fill it personally. That also holds when there is a time difference between the request and your paying attention to it. As I am writing this, I have an appetite for a turkey sandwich on

toast, but no matter how closely you read, by the time the text reaches you my wants will not likely be the same. (And, of course, the “I” in question here is the author of this book, not the book itself; it would do no good to cram the turkey sandwich in between the book’s pages.)

I am pretty sure you are not considering rushing to the mailbox to belatedly send me that turkey sandwich, but you might possibly go listen to me if I were speaking locally. That by itself might involve considerable effort on your part. So, once there, it would not be much of a stretch to do me some small service if it seemed I wanted it and you were rightly placed to offer it. Bigger stars, such as our imaginary Sonya, have many more people who would be at least moderately eager to be attentive to their wants. That can add up to great deal of attentiveness.

#### WILLING “SLAVERY”

We commonly speak of a state of paying rapt attention as being “enthralled.” Literally, a thrall is a slave. Being enthralled then means being enslaved, though not in the usual way, which is by force. Paying absolute attention to someone would imply totally aligning your mind with hers. Quite unthinkingly, you would take up — as if your own — her desires, feelings and wants of all kinds. With perfect and complete attention, the boundaries between you drop, and you are in symbiosis with that other. Your body and your actions are as much at their disposal as their own body is. You will do virtually anything for them. It is complete harmony, total love.

This is the feeling a parent has for a baby, at least in the most intimate moments. It is the feeling an enthralled lover has for the one she loves. It is also to be seen in very compatible, long-married couples, in the ways doting grandparents act towards their grandchildren, among extremely good friends, between outstanding teachers and their pupils, and in many other situations. With that absolute degree of attention, people have made every

kind of thing, fixed anything, cooked thousands of meals, waited constantly and attentively on the other, made themselves always available, and at times almost literally enslaved themselves. Sometimes people in the thrall of attention to another go to still further extremes, violating laws, devoting years to someone who in reality gives very little attention back, prostituting themselves, murdering others or gladly giving their own lives — all to satisfy the wants of the person who had their attention.

The recipients of this degree of attention can easily be stars as well as intimates. To take a period distant enough that both broad history and details of personal biographies are known, consider the 1960's. In America, hundreds of thousands rallied to John F. Kennedy's inaugural call to "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." They gave up career paths and risked life or health to join the Peace Corps or the military (and in this latter case were willing to kill as well). Others harked to the sermons of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and dedicated years, or their whole lives, to the civil rights movement. Still others listened to the psychologist-turned-LSD evangelist Timothy Leary's call to "tune in, turn on, and drop out," entirely changing their plans and purposes. In China, brandishing their "little Red Books, devotees of Mao turned the country and countless lives — often including their own— upside down to carry out his "Cultural Revolution."

Then there were Marilyn Monroe, Jane Fonda, each of the Beatles, Elvis, Janis Joplin; along with dozens of other singers, TV stars, hosts, show creators, movie stars, directors and others, sports heroes, novelists, poets, astronauts, scientists, even philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Herbert Marcuse.

Changing one's life in a general or even in a more narrow way is not all that paying attention to such a figure amounts to. A good many people who were attentive to these same stars were not only

eager to, but actually did supply their more personal wants. It is now notorious that some filled the large sexual desires of Kennedy or King, not to mention Leary, Mao and a good many of the others. Sexual conquests may stand out most, but the wants satisfied extended far further. Stars have been given meals — often sumptuous — and shelter and transport — often luxurious. Any other craving they might have expressed, including their smallest whims, were often of interest to their audience and filled by one or another of them. Usually, whole entourages grew up around stars, eager to help serve their immediate needs.

## **THE DESIRE FOR ATTENTION**

By now, we have come across a number of reasons that make clear why having attention can be very desirable. The first, and perhaps most fundamental is what we might call enlargement of self. When you have a conversation with someone and feel considerable alignment, so that she gets what you are thinking and feeling, that connection feels good. Her mind seems like an extension of yours, as if you inhabit both bodies.

When you seek wider attention—as I am doing right now in writing this— what you are hoping for is likewise that each audience member's mental processes will align with your own. If that happens, in a sense your mind —and even your body — will have taken over all those other bodies, at least for a time. You will be magnified, enlarged, spread through all those other beings. It is a feeling of strength, comfort, connection, a jolt of good feeling, enhanced life.

Being right in front of an attentive audience grants you immediate strength and power. Sonya, our tennis player, gains directly from the attention of her fans as she plays. Their movements, and breathing unconsciously align with hers, focusing on her winning

each point. Without looking around, she can feel they are with her, so that she mirrors their mirroring of her, adding to her confidence with every stroke.

The reasons to desire attention are not just immediate, however. Once someone has aligned to you, she can do it again more easily the next time she encounters you. Present attention can thus lead to more in future. You become known, in a lasting way. This will have value in your own future,—and even beyond. Through the persistence of memory, others can snap back into alignment with you after your own death. In fact, if your medium also survives, new audiences might keep aligning to you far into the future. Part of your mind and feelings can continue to live in your audience, granting you as close to immortality as any non-believer in heaven or hell can achieve.

Further, as we have seen, attention to you is inseparable from attentiveness to your needs and wants. This means that in effect your mind is enlarged as well your bodily powers. Those attentive to your wants will often find ways to satisfy them that you would not have thought of. Desire for attention is also the desire for a satisfying life.

#### EVEN A CHILD CAN DO IT

Apart perhaps from immortality, all these reasons to seek attention are completely evident to almost every small child. Of course, if one has attention one has more confidence and power. Of course, others should know who one is and be attentive in future. Of course, if one has attention that means one's wants should be satisfied, even if one has no conception of how. One of the main reasons these desires often fade in adulthood is that some cultures — perhaps most—have taught that desiring attention is somehow wrong. As the next chapter shows, the market-money-industrial economy was once among those "don't seek attention" cultures, but inadvertently of late it has undercut those teachings.

In the face of such prohibitions, people often believe they are seeking attention not for themselves, but merely for something they know or feel. But is there any real difference? When Chicken Little in the children's story goes around screaming, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" she might well not consciously intend to be self-enlarging, but she is still seeking some of the essentially scarce supply of attention. She has to believe that her knowledge and fears matter to others, enough so that they should share them, —or, in other words, align with her on this. She must consider herself important enough to be worthy of that alignment. This may be a new feeling. Maybe up until the moment she decided the sky was falling she did not consider herself worthy of any attention, but still, once she has that thought, suddenly she does deserve it. For what is in your mind to matter, you must matter, regardless of how self-effacing you act or how modest you want to appear.

### HOW TO GET IT?

In a later chapter, I will explain in more detail just what kinds of moves can sometimes work in getting attention from an audience. No formula will continue to work, however, past the time when its patterns become clear. Audiences vary too, and different strategies are needed for different ones. The collective attention of the whole world, or even of a tenth of it, even very briefly, is a prize only very few can hope to attain, and that by only by considerable luck as well as skill.

### HOW MUCH ATTENTION IS ENOUGH?

Is there any limit to how much attention feels good? Almost all of us have had the experience of speaking to a table-full of people or a roomful. In many of these instances, if shyness or sense of propriety does not limit us, the whole group's attention seems most desirable. Anyone's not paying attention can seem either rude or disappointing. Many small children seek the applause or attention

of anyone who catches their eye. Some authors, such as the British novelist Martin Amis, have been quite explicit that they really want everyone to read their books and feel dissatisfied to consider that they do not have this many readers. Others might stick to "everyone who is anyone." We want to live, it would seem, in a world that aligns fully to us.

Attention is not like material things, even though our need for it is about as basic as for food, drink, air, shelter, and so forth. With those physical needs, our finite bodies set limits on the satisfaction of desire. You might want to eat all the food in a well-stocked refrigerator at one sitting, but you would probably burst. For the same basic reason— your having only one body, and that of limited size—you can only sleep in so many beds in a night or a lifetime, wear so many clothes, or visit so many spots. But having only one, finite body poses no limit to how much attention you could take in. In fact, from what we can gather, all the world's attention could feel terrific.

No one has ever gotten so much, though many have tried. These days the largest known audiences—say for the Oscars or the Superbowl—are over a billion people—a thousand million, or a thousand thousand thousand—which seems immense. But why stop there? If there were a trillion people—a thousand billion— we could somehow reach, why not get that amount of attention? Never mind the fact that for most of the existence of human beings, it would have been impossible to get more attention than from a tribe or village — probably no more than a couple of thousand folks at the very outside. Modern technologies permit going after lots more, and nothing seems to inhibit many of us from doing so. How many of the rest of us secretly—or perhaps unconsciously—would want to? Are most of us held back by anything other than fears of rejection or contempt?

## "BAD" ATTENTION?

A group of children are playing with a small toy. One child—call her Linda—is on the edge of the group. She feels starved for attention, rushes in, grabs the toy, and dashes off. The others follow in hot pursuit, perhaps angry at first, but, quite possibly, soon giggling. Linda is running so the rest run too, actively mirroring her, turning as she turns, and so on. It has become a game in which suddenly Linda is the main attention getter. She could climb up a hill or a tree and announce that they are now playing a new game, and the other children may well accept this. They might do so even if Linda's original grabbing act was done in anger or with a feeling of "naughtiness."

Given that attention is both scarce and desirable, what this vignette suggests is that even action perceived as bad can be adopted as ways to get others to align with you. That will not always work. A crowd running after you could be so hostile that you run in sheer terror, with no sense that the crowd is doing your bidding, following your lead, or mirroring you, however partially. You have become, in essence the quarry of some predator, little more than a piece of meat on the run. That kind of attention is presumably nothing a sane person would want. However, the distinction between these two kinds of chases can be subtle. Some of us would perceive more crowds as hostile than would others, and so might take more chances to inspire such a chase. As long as the crowd is following you, in a sense they are still mirroring you, or at least your actions, if not your emotions.

The same complexity goes for other kinds of attention seeking. Consider the oft-stated fear or phobia of many Americans—of public speaking. Behind this fear is very often a fear of getting a critical response, a negative judgment, which feels, in a common simile, like being eaten alive. I suspect a major source of such fear is the judgment children in school feel from their teacher or fellows if they mess up when called on in class. Sharp criticism by

groups is equivalent to getting the opposite of attention, or, rather, attention only as an object. Young mammals, left by themselves, make noises to get their mothers' attention, so that they will not be abandoned, but they usually would be silent and try to hide if they sense a possible predator nearby, who would regard them only as a meal. For humans it is much the same, except we generalize on this feeling of possible aggressors to include those who want to regard us as no different from objects or who would lace into us with possibly physical punishments for some sort of misbehavior. As if we were about to be eaten, we clam up.

Just as some kids respond to such a danger as an opportunity—seeking attention as the class clown, say—other activities that might seem shameful to a majority can also be perceived as avenues for attention getting—from yelling and screaming when one does not get one's way to insulting a public figure (or slamming a pie in her face) to committing a serious crime—even killing or committing suicide, in the perhaps vain hope that this is a way to get attention. No matter how destructive, unusual acts of any kind often do get the doer some attention. Like a sailboat tacking into the wind, we sometimes pick up a little of what feels like alignment even from those mostly not aligned with us as a person at all.

#### DEAR DIARY?

There does seem to be a minimal condition we would demand of a possible audient or audience; they must have minds capable of aligning with ours, at least in principle. Just as you are not likely to get much attention for something you have written from an audience of illiterates or those who do not understand your language, you would have quite a hard time getting much attention from a flock of birds, a group of trees or a pile of stones.

What about possibly inanimate "sources" of attention such as diaries we keep strictly for and to ourselves yet write in, as if we

were writing or speaking directly to them? When we confine our utterances to something like a diary, we are probably doing at least one of four things. First, through the act of writing—or speaking, say, to a tape recorder—we are each paying attention directly to our own selves, engaging in a kind of self-aligning, a sort of integration of different aspects of the same self. One could do this also by meditating, without any outward action. That can be helpful as a preliminary to getting attention from others, but does not directly replace it.

Second, we may intend our own future self as an audience; in that case, we expect that what we read in that future will in effect realign our then selves to our present sensibilities. Third, however private and secret we may take the diary to be, we may be wishing that in fact it will eventually be read by someone else or many others, who will thus align to us. Finally, though this is closely related to the first possibility, we can ascribe a mind to the diary, much as many people ascribe minds to all manner of natural objects. Of course, modern objectivity denies that the diary really has a mind, but not everyone automatically takes this modern view at all times.

Incidentally, if you do ascribe a mind to an inanimate object, to a spirit or god, or to a seemingly new form of life such as a computer, can you not get around the scarcity of attention? There is no shortage of stones. If we all believe stones can listen to us well, wouldn't that alleviate the shortage of attention as well? I think not, for it is difficult to ascribe mind to something — meaning it can align with a human—without believing it also wants or requires attention paid to it. I am not religious, but as near as I can tell, genuinely religious people spend much time paying attention to their god or gods. Little children who converse with their dolls or other toys usually act as if the dolls demand attention as well. I think Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick probably got it right in their movie 2001 that the computer HAL would demand

attention if truly capable of paying it, but even contemporary computers and other devices, such as cars, are sometimes treated by their owners as demanding their attention. If instead, you take the view that ascribing attentiveness to what science considers not capable of thought is a kind of projection of your own attention-paying abilities onto that object, then clearly no net attention can so be gained.

### ATTENTION THAT LEAKS OUT OF AN ECONOMY

If it takes a mind to pay attention, what does it take to get attention or to want it? In the examples so far, I have mostly assumed that what we pay attention to is one definite, single, unitary person with a particular mind and outlook — or her expression. This assumption is actually quite a leap, for several different reasons.

There often is no mind at all behind something—say a purely natural phenomenon such as an earthquake, volcano, hailstorm, drought, flu epidemic or solar eclipse. When a lightning storm goes on outside your window, you may well note each lightning strike. But unless you happen to believe that some god such as Zeus or Thor is behind each strike, or it is because of some politician's neglect of global warming, there will be no obvious mind to align to. There is no reason why the lightning decided to strike when or where it did, except purely physical reasons. If you are interested in such reasons, in contemplating the lightning you are probably also aligning your mind to that of whoever it was who first clued you in to why lightning strikes.

But you most probably just note the lightning, and possibly worry about your own safety (and perhaps that of others). If you conclude everyone you care about is safe, you continue with whatever train of thought the lightning interrupted. Except for possible concern for others' safety you do not really pay attention in this to anyone other than yourself. This means that no attention is passing from you to anyone else. What goes to the lightning just leaves the

economic system, much as if, in the money economy, you took some of your own paper money and just burned it up.

### DID THE CATERER MAKE THE MOVIE?

What if many minds are involved in creating something that is the immediate object of your attention? If you ever stay to the end of a movie to watch the credits roll, you know that many, many people have had a hand in making it, from the caterer to the transport crew to the actors, editors, writer, set designer, camera crew, assistant directors, director or directors, and various producers. Even more people have been involved in getting the movie in front of you so you could watch. In the same way, if you are reading this book, lots more people besides me have had a hand in it, and the same goes for stage shows, musical performances and recordings, sports events, and much else that we might pay attention to. In paying attention to any of these, what happens? Do we align equally to many minds at once, or what?

Imagine a ridiculous extreme: Everyone involved in making a movie does their own thing completely independently, without paying any attention to one another. But then, what would the editor edit if not what the camera crew had shot? Why have actors if the camera crew ignores them? Why have a writer, if the actors pay no attention to the script? Likewise why have a director, and so on? In fact, as most people even slightly familiar with movies know, the huge number of people mentioned in the credits have proceeded in a coordinated and even hierarchical fashion. Usually, the director is key. She often has had the script writer's attention in the late stages of the script. Then she has paid some attention to the script but interpreted it in her own fashion. In turn, the actors, camera crew, assistants, and editors pay attention to the director, who may also have heeded one or another of the producers. In short, at any one moment we can align to the performance or expression of many minds only to the degree that they are aligned

to each other, with just one mind having primacy for any given aspect.

In a symphony orchestra, the conductor pays attention to the composer, and the oboe player pays attention to the conductor's version of the composer's work; as part of the audience, we align to the musicians' alignment with the conductor's alignment with the composer's intent. If you already know the work, you can then align with how the conductor interprets it, and if you also know the conductor's interpretation, you may be able to align with exactly how the oboist handles it. Usually, though, they all seem to be working as one. The conductor and musicians have practiced and rehearsed to achieve that, and the composer (and possibly the orchestrator) had to be careful to write a score they could all align with.

Likewise, you can pay attention to the motions and emotions of a crowd—say running away from a fire— only to the extent they are already aligned with one another —all somewhat afraid, all headed in more or less the same direction.

Incidentally, all this explains why, for instance, it is extremely rare to find a good novel—or even a good nonfiction book with two or more actual authors. One composer, one conductor, one vocal lead in a band, one painter per painting—that seems to be what works best. It is not that people have not tried more collective endeavors, but without one dominant mind, or just a few minds that are so used to each other they are closely aligned themselves, at least for a time, paying attention does not really work. The more there is one mind behind something, the more definitively we can pay attention to it.

## **CONCLUSION**

An economy is a system that ties people together around what is scarce and desirable. An attention economy can work because, from this economic standpoint, attention is the same as the aligning of minds (and the bodies that go with them). You cannot align your mind to two different people at once unless they in turn are closely aligned. Thus attention is scarce. When you pay attention to something with no mind behind it or connected in some way, in essence your attention is wasted economically. Because having other minds aligned to yours in effect enlarges you, gives you power, allows others to align to you again in future, and causes them to at least consider doing your bidding, having attention can feel good and be the key to a satisfying life.

To some degree this has been so as long as there have been humans. But for it to dominate, the culture, society and technology all have to work together to permit paying attention on a large scale while also seeking it with little inhibition. That has come about only recently, within the influence of the MMI economy, though not really as part of it. The next chapter explains.