

Introduction

What is more pleasant than the benevolent notice other people take of us, what is more agreeable than their compassionate empathy? What is more inspiring than enthusiastic listeners? What captivates us as much as totally captivating another? What is more exciting than a room full of expectant eyes? What is more overwhelming than applause? What, lastly, enchants us more than receiving the delighted attention of those by whom we are enchanted ourselves? Other people's attention is the most irresistible of drugs. Receiving it surpasses any other kind of income. Because of this, glory ranks higher than power and wealth loses its luster when placed beside prominence.

Prominent people are millionaires measured in the income of attention. Fame is the most desirable earthly reward because it ensures one will stay a big earner of attention even after death. What overwhelms us when we face a cheering audience is the wave of its attention sweeping over us; what is so enjoyable when we fascinate others is that it allows us to bathe, as it were, in the audience's concentrated attentiveness. Attention lavished on us casts a stronger spell than if we were inundated with money. However, as our desire for money is endless, so our thirst for attention is boundless. It is true that applause may come from the wrong people, or that which receives attention may be the wrong aspect; but we can never receive too much attention from people we respect, nor can too much notice be taken of qualities in which we ourselves take pride.

It is lack of attention that gives us pain. We simply cannot bear not playing a prominent role in other people's lives. We immediately begin to suffer if we do not play the leading role in at least one other life. Our psyche will be permanently injured if it does not receive a certain minimum of attention. Total withdrawal of attention can be lethal. Children can die from a lack of warmth; adults experience isolation as torture. Our psyche needs attention by other psyches in the same way as our bodies need their endorphines.

Thus, no other cult besides that of personality is so commonly found throughout the ages and among all peoples. People pay homage to nothing and nobody with such dedication as to their own power of attracting other people's attention. All exhortations against coquetry, all warnings against conceit have remained ineffective. Vanity has gloriously survived all the higher values in whose name it used to be condemned. Secularization and the enlightenment have only nourished it. Modernization has liberated instead of undermining it. The greater the disintegration of old customs and religion, the more openly social ambition becomes the central value in life. To the extent that society grows wealthier and more liberal, the battle for attention becomes more overt and more expensive. Not unconcerned enjoyment, but rather concern whether the people around us are noticing us is becoming the prevailing sentiment in today's affluent society.

Within the Blind Spot of Theory

It would be strange if a society that cherishes attractiveness were not also prone to curiosity. Curiosity and the desire for attention are siblings: they are both freely floating types of desire. They are experienced like physical needs but have become dissociated from their physical roots. They captivate us in the absence of a concrete stimulus. Desire for novelty and longing for attention drive us inexhaustibly toward inventiveness and ingenuity. Both are clearly tinged with the erotic; if they are not satisfied, serious symptoms of deprivation will appear. However, their satisfaction occurs on an entirely psychological plane.

Curiosity and the longing to play a role in another consciousness are desires intrinsic to consciousness. Such desires move to the foreground when physical needs have been satisfied. It follows that they will be at the forefront in post-industrial society. When knowledge production takes over the leading role from heavy industry, conspicuous consumption replaces social status and material wealth. The economy of post-industrial

society is not only knowledge driven, but also characterized by a boom of conspicuous display and a flourishing production of prominence. Science dominates the world view of our high technology-based civilization, but it is the fight for attention which dominates its everyday culture. We witness something like an explosion of knowledge and we are swept up by a proverbial avalanche of stimuli competing for our attention.

Science is the professional satisfaction of curiosity. It is an industry characterized by specialized production, division of labor and business-to-business markets. But this is not all. Scientific research may also be conceived as an attention economy. In science, existing knowledge and attention are the most important means of production. Since new knowledge is the product of available knowledge and attention, it is ultimately attention that produces knowledge. Attention that produces knowledge is not readily available but scarce. It is not just the currency of social exchange but a productive input that may be turned into income only under specific circumstances.

The attention whose pursuit dominates everyday culture differs in so far as it is desired as income. It is desired not as a means of paying for other people's labor, but as a means of gaining access to other people's spheres of experience. The role we play in another's consciousness is what is celebrated in the high culture of attractiveness. It is because our social life takes place on the stage of others' consciousness that the rules for proper attire, for style of self-presentation are so important. As in the theatre, crucial appearances on this stage are carefully planned and no effort is spared to create the right impression. What is new in the contemporary style of such productions is the professionalism and high technology employed in the supporting industries. Fashion and cosmetics mass-produce goods that promise to make their consumers irresistible. Behind the design of consumer goods lie technologies producing attractiveness, driven to new heights by advertising. The high technologies of our highly technological age are not only those of information and communication, but also those of sowing and harvesting attention.

In our highly technological civilization, attention is also experiencing an unprecedented rise in importance as a factor in production. In this role, it is a scarce resource, also known as

mental labor. Today, the share of mental labor in the GNPs of developed economies exceeds by far that of physical labor. In the developed economies, attention has generally become the major source of added value. It is strange, therefore, that it plays next to no role in economics. So far, attention is not a category of economic theory. Much is written in economics about information, de-materialization, and virtualization: yet, the central resource of information processing is ignored.

Income of attention is not a category employed in theoretical economics, either. What is acknowledged is that income means more than money received: psychological forms of income are considered as well. But there is no systematic treatment of the exchange of attention and of attention income. Economic theory ignores attention both as a scarce resource and as a form of income. However, anyone thinking that this deficiency might be corrected in the less technical disciplines of the social sciences will suffer another disappointment. By and large, nothing will be found under the term attention in the scientific literature of post-industrial society.

Only in less highbrow domains is the organized struggle for attention a major theme. The press and television are spell-bound by attention. Nothing interests the mass media more than the commotion around well-known faces and the stock values of prominence. The more dubious the medium, the more unequivocally will it give space to the cult of attractiveness. The gutter press celebrates the high mass of this cult, a mass that serious intellectuals may only attend in secret. Of course, they too are driven by the power of vanity and the greed for publicity, but only gossip columns, not scientific publications, may mention this.

Attention, therefore, is not a term used in philosophy of science. It is true that everybody is aware of the role that vanity plays in science; nevertheless the desire to cause a stir is regarded as a despicable vice. The possibility is overlooked that vanity may be decisive for efficiently organizing collaborative research; attention as a productive resource is not taken into account. The avoidance of this concept goes even further: epistemology is not interested in economy of thought. Although intellectual power rests on the efficiency with

which the available attention is used, this kind of economy has so far been neglected by philosophers of science.

The first and only attempt to develop a systematic economy of thought was Ernst Mach's philosophy of science.¹ This philosophy is more than a hundred years old now. Mach discovered that the economical use of attention was decisive for augmenting the scope and analytical precision of scientific thought. For Mach, scientific research meant moving from craft to industrial methods of knowledge production. For him, scientific research differed from pre-scientific thought in its conscious employment of naturally limited resources, its avoidance of anything superfluous, its division of large operations into small ones, some of which at least could be mechanized. Although this process of rationalization received the most dramatic boost after Mach, his philosophy of science has remained an isolated attempt. While he is an acknowledged pioneer of post-classical physics, his pioneering study of thought economy was not followed up.

Body and Soul

What is the reason for this biased world view of science? Why is professional attentive curiosity so uninterested in itself? The reason is that attention is subjective in nature and therefore resists scientific objectivization. Attention does not exist independently of the experiencing subject. Its existence resists being confirmed empirically or by logical proof.

Attention is as hard to grasp as it is indispensable to conscious experience. We do not know the etiology of phenomenal consciousness. Although we do know a thing or two about its necessary conditions, we do not know why our nervous system not only processes information but also produces subjective experience. Nothing is harder for science to deal

¹ Mach, Ernst (1883), *The Science of Mechanics: A Critical and Historical Account of its Development*, tr. by Thomas J. McCormack, Chicago: Open Court (2) 1902.

with than subjective experience. The resulting frustration was so severe that for a long time it was *de rigueur* in science to belittle the phenomenon as a subjective "illusion."

In fact, our nervous systems are the strangest of objects. They present themselves in completely different ways depending on whether they are investigated or experienced. From the third-person perspective, the nervous system is an anatomical structure with physiological functions, a conglomerate of chemical and physical processes, whose prime ability is the processing of information. From the perspective of the first person, that is, of the person who *is* that nervous system, a world of sensations, perceptions, feelings and ideas appears; a world the appearance of which cannot be reduced to information processing. From the third-person point of view, the nervous system is a biological computer. From the first-person point of view, it is the center of a world endowed with sense qualities, value and meaning.

The two aspects are separated from each other by an abyss. No sentient being has ever been able to inspect another's sphere of experience. But it is just such an inspection that would be required if the attention we crave were to find a place in the scientific view of the world. In science, the only relevant perspective is that of the third person. Whatever it is that makes the attention of our fellow human beings so crucial, it does not exist in the eyes of science. The wish to receive attention is a longing to capture another's *feeling* for oneself, if possible his *deepest* feeling. While the scientifically trained mind has learned to have serious doubts about the existence of qualities that go beyond information processing, these doubts seem absurd from the point of view of the desire to receive attention. If we focus on our role in another's consciousness, it is information processing that leaves us cold. It is not the processing of information that vanity misses if nobody is looking. Rather, what is missed is another soul's attentive concern.

The feelings in which paid attention is steeped are less important in the case of mental labor. Of course, feelings are not irrelevant to the motivation for. But the concept of attention as factor in production could also have been elaborated by assuming that subjective experience is epiphenomenal. In other words, it would not have been necessary

to deal with the question of whether subjective experience exerts some influence on information processing, or whether it is just an attendant circumstance without efficacy. Neither would the psychic qualities so crucial in the exchange of attention have undermined Mach's program of thought economy. In this case, too, it would have been sufficient to dwell on the scarcity of psychic energy. It remains an open question why not even this solution was chosen for working out a theoretical approach to the economy of attention. It is quite possible that the psychic qualities, which one associates with the term attention, were enough to prevent any such attempt.

Subjectively we are motivated not only by our own feelings, but also by those we attribute to others. But how is it possible for the feelings of others to become our own motives when we do not have any access to others' spheres of experience? This question returns us to the 'cult' that surrounds the representation of one's own person in another's consciousness. This is a cult in the basic sense of the word, both with respect to the dedication involved and to the object of veneration. Paradoxically, the feelings with which our representation in the other consciousness are met are both the most sensual and the most spiritual there is. The feelings of others are the most sensual we have to do with, because our own most sensual feelings are those that relate to them. At the same time, the feelings of others constitute the concretely spiritual, because everything we feel, perceive, notice, imagine, mean, takes place solely in our own consciousness. There is no window opening upon another person's consciousness, no door leading out of our own. Yet we live as if we were in constant contact with consciousness other than our own.

Genuine contact between one consciousness and another is the extraordinary product of wishful thinking. We are so certain about psychic life other than our own because we simply cannot dispense with the idea of playing some role in the psychic life of others. We relate the supposed feelings of others to ourselves and take delight in them because we could not live without this comfort. We experience it as a great tragedy if we do not get this attention, which seems to be indispensable to us. Nothing preoccupies us so much as our self-image reflected in another's consciousness. But all we ever do is to satisfy our desire in

our own imagination. We dream that we are playing the leading role in the consciousness of those who themselves play the leading role in our own, although we are imprisoned in our own consciousness. Yet somehow the trick works. We all act as if we were living in the company of beings endowed with souls. The exchange of attention among human beings may be magic, but it is magic that works.

The Economic Principle of Reality

No wonder science finds it hard to cope with such magic. In science everything must be down-to-earth. To science, everything supposed to exist needs to be proven to exist by scientific methods. Despite this, is it not astonishing how well this magic works? Could it work so flawlessly if its presuppositions were illusions? There is no positive proof of the existence of another soul, but neither is there any sign indicating its non-existence. Whenever serious doubts are raised whether phenomenal states exist in biological organisms, those are purely theoretical doubts, artificially produced for the purpose. In human interaction the supposed endowment of others with phenomenal consciousness is the most self-evident thing in the world. In fact, this supposition works with such unquestioned naturalness that it would amount to a miracle if there were not something true about it.

Could this miracle not become a point of departure in our search for a theoretical explanation of the cult in which we are all worshippers? Is it not time to ask ourselves whether we are pretending to be duller than we are if we take this theoretical skepticism literally? Does the process of cultural and economic change not teach us that our presuppositions about the multiplicity of soul-endowed presence are valid?

Without the belief that another's feeling is real it would be impossible to explain the growing importance of attention income. The booming vanity fairs would appear to be

instances of collective insanity if this belief were really wishful thinking. How could we explain the general enthusiasm for this vanity fair if nobody else had ever discovered how another person's feeling feels? What else than common experience could explain why human beings devour psychic income as if by common agreement as soon the battle for physical survival has been won? Assuming that this income is just imaginary has always been strange. In the meantime this assumption comes close to being nonsensical. Why not make this nonsense productive by turning tables? Why should one not ask whether the cultural and economic development we observe renders such scientific disbelief absurd?

We must not give in too easily to the pressure of those questions. Disbelieving in consciousness as something not reducible to information processing is the reaction to a long and painful history of intellectual failure. It is not only science in the narrower sense that has difficulties in coping with conscious experience. From its very beginnings, philosophy has had problems with tackling psychic presence. Attempts to grasp this presence conceptually run like a thread through the history of occidental philosophy. Because satisfying solutions were never found, the "mind-body problem", as it is called, remained unresolved. The case should not be re-opened without very good reasons. Additional facts would not be enough; there ought to be new observations pointing to an approach beyond trodden paths. Only an approach that has never been tried can justify another such attempt. Is it, then, the case that the social change we are going through suggests a new approach to conscious experiencing?

This question generates the first thesis of this book: appropriate understanding of the social and economic change taking place presupposes the explicit recognition of the phenomenon of consciousness. Furthermore, and this is the second thesis, it requires a truly unusual approach to the phenomenon. It necessitates precisely a kind of approach that has never been tried throughout the long history of the mind-body problem. Never, throughout this history, has an economic approach been attempted. Such an approach, it was believed, would be inadequate to the sensitivity and dignity of the object under scrutiny. Economics is associated with aspects of life susceptible to measurement and weighing, whereas

attentive presence is that aspect of existence which eludes being measured or weighed. Yet in high-technology civilizations attention has assumed a new significance by way of becoming a productive resource and a form of income. The gist of the change that has taken place with respect to attention is its "economization." The more scarce a resource is, the more important will its economic aspects become; the greater the demand for a kind of income, the more systematic will be the efforts to obtain it.

It is true that the plain prose of economic thought and the metaphysical glamor surrounding the concept of soul do not seem to suit each other very well. But does this glamor not blind us rather than shedding light? Is it not time to bring the soul back from the firmament of ideas to the solid earth of everyday life? Would not the immediate result be an awareness of the quantitative aspects of conscious presence?

Economic methods characteristically assume that those whose interaction is under investigation are pursuing their advantage rationally. The higher the rank attributed to the rational pursuit of advantage in a social context, the greater the success of the economic method. Which kind of advantage is pursued is not pre-selected by the method. Applying this method means asking how the fulfillment of wishes and the satisfaction of needs can be optimized, given the available resources and the possibility of exchanging goods.

Economics interprets observable behavior as solution to this problem. By interpreting the exchange of goods as decentralized vote on their value, economics arrives at the concept of price as socially objective value. This way theoretical economics establishes a reality principle: at the individual level, everything is real that satisfies needs; at the social level, everything is real that is capable of assuming a price.

The idea of an economic approach to psychic life may seem odd at first. However, the longer one considers the idea, the more startling it becomes that theoretical economics did not take up this issue long ago. Not only is a theory of intellectual labor, especially knowledge production, missing; also, economics has great difficulty coping with the de-materialization of the economic process. There is no economic theory of information society and its mass media. There is no theory of the production and distribution of

recognition. There is no economic theory of prestige, reputation or prominence. Theoretical economics is silent on transformations of everyday culture and on change in the aspirations of economic subjects. It would be a great mistake to believe that economics is limited to material production and to exchange mediated by money. The assumption about rational goal attainment does not entail any pre-selection concerning the way accounts are kept, nor is it biased concerning the kind of goods exchanged. It only presupposes that the categories involved in the fulfillment of wishes and the satisfaction of needs actually work. It is of secondary importance whether the means employed for that purpose are of a material or immaterial nature. The preferences that economic methods presuppose are subjective and cannot be inspected from outside. In the last analysis, prices are not defined in terms of money but in terms of the relations in which goods are exchanged.

There are no *a priori* reasons militating against the inclusion of ways of dealing with one's own and other people's attention in the rational pursuit of advantage. This is not to say, however, that the applicability of economic methods implies an economic proof of existence. Concepts like scarcity or economic value cannot be put to work apart from the whole of the economic conceptual apparatus. That something can be described as scarce does not make it real. Nor is the fact that something is desired proof of its existence. The observation that something is scarce and desired will support the claim that it is real only when this scarcity and valuation have become variables in an economic theory that is generally successful in explaining observations. The economic approach to attentive presence will only become cogent if the idea of an economy of attention can be systematically elaborated.

The following discussion intends to do this. The hope is to win wider approval for the idea that not only the body but also the soul plays a significant role in our daily lives and interactions. It is not intended to be an economic attempt at solving the mind-body problem. The goal is gaining a deeper understanding of the social mechanisms that harness individual experience. The outline that follows falls short of presenting an economic theory able to meet the standards of existential proof. One of the reasons is that the exchange of

attention proves to resist the canonical formulation of such a theory. The traditional concept of economic rationality is too narrow for a rational treatment of attention.

And this is not all. Success in the rational reconstruction of the rational use of attention is a mixed blessing. The concept of economic rationality that the present analysis relies on is, in principle, narrower than one that would be adequate for dealing with things like phenomenal states. Conscious experience is much more than a means of production, received attention much more than just a means of wish fulfillment. The use we make of our attention is another way of expressing what we experience. The role we play in another consciousness is part of our self-image. An adequate treatment of our ability to experience and of our self-image cannot be restricted to the calculable. Rather, a theoretical economy of attention will remain too narrow so long as it is not conceived as self-critique of economic thought. This critique is double-ended: its first concern lies in asking about the effect that the economization of attention has on experience itself; its second concern lies in asking what it exactly is that renders the concept of economic rationality inadequate to deal with this delicate subject matter.