

The Battle for Attention

This cultural revolution could not have come so far so fast without tapping into a very personal resource, located in the inner realm of conscious experience: human attention. There is growing recognition that attention has become an exceedingly valuable and hotly contested commodity.¹ It is also sometimes noticed that the market in this resource has a strange and seemingly objectionable structure, in that the owner of the resource would usually prefer that it not be sold and is almost never the one who pockets the proceeds from the sale.

It is hard to think of any other “commodity”—supposing we are willing to bring it under that ominous and omnivorous term—that is as crucial as attention to the tenor of our daily lives. When attention is depleted, there can be no heightened passion, no true friendship, no love. Without attention, we are not genuinely available to anyone at all—not to our children, not to our work associates, not to the strangers walking past us on the sidewalk. Even our most private deeds unfold at arm’s length without the perfecting consummation of enthusiasm. Attention has these enormous powers because it serves as the portal to thinking and acting. No course of activity can so much as suggest itself to us unless our attention is structured by some awareness of its possibility. And no activity fully worthy of a human being can blossom unless it is carried forward and completed by avid attention to the valuable possibilities latent in it.

It is, then, a matter of no small consequence that this resource is now so heavily exploited. Indeed,