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The Power of Attention

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Upcoming Events

Moderated by [David Gleason](#)

Roundtables:

- **"The Power of Attention"**
April 8 & 22
- **"Conscious Life vs Technology"**
May 13, 27

All are Open to the Public

Happy April, happy spring!

Diving into AI raised questions about our own intelligence and awareness.

While some like to speculate, it's clear to me that computers aren't conscious, have no self-awareness, embodiment, or emotional capacity. It's all still just algorithms.

So what makes us different? What is attention? How do we decide where to put it? How can it be clarified, intensified, focused?

AIs, as we discussed in March, process information, but they do not possess human consciousness or the capacity for the transcendence that shapes human judgment and wisdom.

So what makes it possible for us? How do we access those parts of ourselves?

Please lmk your thoughts!

-David

Summary

Attention is our most valuable resource, and one of the few over which we have any real control: we can *direct* our attention. It may be fair to say that we are alive to the extent that we are consciously attentive. And therein lies our personal power.

Attention is presence of mind in the real-time experience of perception, participation, and decision-making. What we attend to shapes what we learn, how

we feel, and ultimately who we become.

And in a world saturated with information, attention is no longer just a cognitive function—it is a form of control. When we allow others to focus our attention, we give them some of our power.

Ethics of Attention

Because attention is fundamental to experience, it is also integral to our ethics:

- **Attention is a moral resource:** Perception, judgment, and action all unfold in real time, observed and governed by attention.
- **Shaping attention** raises ethical concerns because it directly influences autonomy and agency—what people notice, think about, and ultimately choose to do.
- **The attention economy**, led by companies such as Meta and Google, compete to capture and retain user focus. Algorithms incorporate techniques from behavioral psychology to maximize engagement via personalization and variable rewards.
- **Asymmetry between manipulation vs. consent**—designers understand how systems influence attention, while users often do not. This undermines informed consent and raises concerns about manipulation, especially when cognitive biases are exploited.
- **Well-being:** Prolonged attention capture can contribute to distraction, addictive behaviors, and polarization
- **Justice and vulnerability:** Attention is not targeted equally. Paying subscribers to YouTube don't see ads, while vulnerable groups—especially children—are exposed to a firehose of products.
- **Individual responsibility:** Despite systemic pressures, individuals retain some agency. Practices like mindful media use and boundary-setting are ethical acts that help reclaim control over attention.
- **Toward attentional rights:** Emerging frameworks propose protecting attention similarly to privacy, advocating for regulation, design standards, and norms that respect human autonomy and cognitive well-being.

Experience and Mindfulness

Beyond its practical function, attention is central to the lived experience of consciousness. What we notice becomes our reality, moment by moment.

Attention shapes the texture of experience—whether life feels rushed or spacious, meaningful or empty. When attention is scattered, experience becomes fragmented; when it is steady, perception deepens and understanding expands. This is why meditation reinforces mindfulness generally.

Attention also binds memory and identity, linking moments into a coherent sense of self. In this way, directing attention is not just about productivity, but shaping the quality and continuity of experience.

Intention

Directing attention effectively requires *intention*. Over time, our desires, needs, and values collectively become subsumed, habitual, and behavioral. Changing ourselves requires intentional effort – we can set explicit intentions and then use them to focus attention.

Alternatively, values-driven decisions engender reliability and integrity, trust and deep relationships. When we define what matters to us, we create intentions -- frameworks for directing our attention. Morals, norms and ethics flow from there.

Self

Our patterns of attention—our concerns, interests, and preoccupations—gradually define our identity. Over time, by giving them our attention, we reinforce certain thoughts and narratives, making them feel intrinsic rather than chosen. By shifting attention, we can reshape these narratives, opening avenues for growth.

Habits

Mindful attention is key to forming good habits. By directing awareness to specific behaviors and their outcomes, we reinforce neural networks. This deliberate, repetitive training reduces effort over time.

Rhythm

The brain did not evolve for endless concentration; it performs best in cycles of effort and rest. Techniques such as deliberate breaks, variation in tasks, and adequate sleep help maintain cognitive performance. In this sense, effective attention is not just about intensity, but about sustainability. More broadly, the rhythms in music, dance, and daily routines all contribute to brain health.

Psychological Manipulation

Nor can we process everything simultaneously, so we filter input based on emotional impact, context, and intensity. It is limited. Thus, personal choice, agency, and autonomy all require judicious use of attention, a deliberate mindfulness. Absent such diligence, attention is easily manipulated.

The Attention Economy

Today's economies are built on ***capturing and holding user attention***.

Consumer platforms are engineered to exploit psychological vulnerabilities such as novelty bias, social validation, and intermittent rewards to keep users engaged. Infinite scrolling, algorithmic recommendations, and personalized notifications are designed to maximize time spent and emotional engagement.

Social media grabs attention by triggering the limbic system and following with short, intermittent bursts of dopamine: “again, again!” Without realizing it we become glassy-eyed users barraged by mostly useless, very short form entertainment, competing aggressively using outrage, spectacle, and seduction. The attention economy's is also called “surveillance capitalism.” It is extractive.

On a positive note, last week's verdict against Meta and Google is a big step towards recognizing the addictive and harmful qualities of social media.

Manipulation

The case highlights how manipulation bypasses deliberate choice. Instead of deciding what deserves attention, habit-forming algorithms direct the user. Emotionally charged or sensational content captures attention, even if it is misleading or harmful. Over time, this skews understanding and reinforces cognitive biases, compulsive behaviors, distorted perceptions of reality, and reduced self-determination.

How to Reduce Screen Addiction

To avoid some of these impacts, try turning off notifications and structure scrolling into focused time intervals. Practice mindfulness to strengthen attentional control. By repeatedly returning to a chosen focus, build the capacity to resist distraction and sustain effort.

Practical Strategies

Recognizing that attention is being competed for—and often exploited—is the first step. From there, impose constraints and boundaries: curate information sources, set time limits, and deliberately choose when, where, and how to engage

When you get the feeling that “this is not what I meant to be doing right now,” return to intention. Sometimes a couple of deep, slow breaths are all that's needed.

And of course there are thousands of resources to help with mindfulness, from guided meditation apps to yoga and Tai Chi to simply listening attentively to someone you love.

In Sum

Ultimately, attention shapes experience. The power to direct attention offers self-knowledge, clear-mindedness, and significant practical advantages. In such states, we can make wiser choices, act more deliberately, and resist external pressures.

In an age of constant distraction, mastering attention is not merely a skill, it is a form of personal sovereignty.

Read More

- [Attention](#), Wikipedia
- [The Ethics of Attention in Simone Weil](#) from Philosopheasy. 8/27/25
- [Cultivating Ethical Attention in Psychology](#), by Finn Janning, PhD in Psychology Today, 9/2/25
- [The power of attention: understanding its role in our lives](#) by Pernilla Kaitah, University of Antwerp, 2024
- [Is social media addictive? The science reveals what's at stake](#), Jackie Flynn Mogensen in Scientific American, 3/24/26
- [A minute to calm your strong emotions](#), (YouTube, 1 min) guided meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh, 1/9/24
- [Practicing Mindfulness](#), (YouTube, 1 min) Rush University System for Health, 2022
- [The power of setting intentions & how to set mindful ones](#), blog post from Calm.com, 2/13/26

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