



Attending to the world

Description

“Stand to attention!” The deputy head teacher would say this once a week to the ranks of sweaty kids assembled on the asphalted schoolyard or was it a parade ground in the arid Melbourne sun. Then we were called to “stand at ease.” To be at attention, to attend, is to be at the ready, to listen, receptive, alert. In the case of our fidgety military play acting it involved bearing, posture: chest out, shoulders back, arms at the side.

Paying attention always involves the body. That’s the radical conjecture in the philosopher William James’s (1842-1910) chapter on Attention in his *Principles of Psychology*. Psychologists, particularly contemporary brain researchers, like to think of attention as something happening in the brain. James concurs up to a point. Attention is “the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem like several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought” (381).

Survival in the world requires attention. Without the ability to attend we would be subject to an ocean of sensations which drown us out of effective action. What we attend to is also what *interests* us. Attending to the object, situation, problem, or task at hand engages us and allows us to cope, survive, and thrive.



Of course, attention wanders. That's not altogether a bad thing. By various accounts (e.g. Kaplan), if we attended exclusively to what mattered at that moment then we wouldn't be so alert to other objects potentially competing for our attention. While attending with fascination to the flowers in a meadow we may not notice the threatening approach of a curious bear.

For James there are different kinds of attention. There's attention that is aroused by some **sensation** (hearing an unusual bird sound, or observing a shooting star). Attention can be **intellectual**, as when struggling with a maths problem, or deciding whether or not to take an umbrella to the park.

Then there's attention that is **immediate**, as when the object of attention is interesting in itself somehow, as in the case of a bloody wound, treacherous waterfall, table of appetising food, or other direct hazards or benefits to the human organism. There's also **derived** attention that associates with rich cultural meanings. A tapping sound is mildly arresting as a call to attention, but when it is a signal, as that of a lover on the window-pane, it will hardly go unperceived (395).

Then there are attentions that are involuntary (**active**) as when we hear crockery crashing to the floor in a cafeteria and turn round instinctively. James's final category is **voluntary** attention, which is the harder to maintain, as when concentrating on an important but boring task repairing a photocopier paper jam, struggling to write an essay. That's when our attention is easily diverted.

Attention and embodiment

The embodied aspects of attention are palpable. James thinks this embodiment is obvious where the senses are involved: When we look or listen we accommodate our eyes and ears involuntarily, and we turn our head and body as well; when we taste or smell we adjust the tongue, lips and respiration to the object; in feeling a surface we move the palpatory organ in a suitable way (411).

Lest we think the body is always directing itself to whatever attracts our attention, the body is also involved on contrary actions that inhibit certain senses: â??besides making involuntary muscular contractions of a positive sort, we inhibit others which might interfere with the result â?? we close the eyes in tasting, suspend the respiration in listening, etcâ?• (411).

These positive and negative bodily actions result in â??a more or less massive organic feeling that attention is going onâ?• (411). Attention involves a sense that thereâ??s an I, the one giving the attention and engaging in the bodily action, and the object of attention forms something other than me, â??the not-me.â?• Here the discussion drifts into the question of consciousness. Thereâ??s first â??the objectâ??s increase in clearness; and second, the feeling of activity in questionâ?• (412).

But for my purposes, Jamesâ??s radical point is that if sensory stimulation leads to this kind of embodied attention, then the other kinds of attention are similarly embodied. The important point is that â??in *intellectual* attention, as we have already seen, similar feelings of activity occurâ?• (412).

Design for attention

As well as an empirically-based psychologist, William James was a card carrying philosophical [Pragmatist](#). The body and its actions are primary above abstractions and â??ideas.â?• So the bodily basis of attention fits. Bodily attention provides an instructive basis for design. If you want people to attend, engage, and interact then consider what the body does, and how your design can influence that. If you want to engage an audience, class, or user community, then attend to what people do with their bodies.

Notes

- The issue of attention is deal with somewhat differently by Martin Heidegger. Iâ??m not aware that he used the term â??attention,â?• but it looks a bit like the practical experience of the â??ready-to-handâ?• (*zuhanden*): â??If we look at Things just â??theoretically,â?? we can get along without understanding readiness-to-hand. But when we deal with them by using them and manipulating them, this activity is not a blind one; it has its own kind of sight, by which our manipulation is guided and from which it acquires its specific Thingly characterâ?• (98).
- Also see blog posts: [E-motion](#) and [Accidental people](#).

References

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- Kaplan, Stephen. 1995. The restorative benefits of nature: Toward an integrative framework. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, (15)169-182.
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Category

1. Body

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2. body
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