

Georg Franck

Vanity Fairs

Another View of the Economy
of Attention

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Preface

The emblem of vanity is the mirror. Allegorically, however, the emblem goes far beyond the image reflected in the mirrored glass. Vanity is the addiction of creatures who live their lives in the ‘mirror’ of the consciousness of their peers. What is reflected in this other consciousness is the attention being paid to us. The addiction concerns the obsession by knowing the precise amount of attention paid to us or to put it another way, the extent to which we feature in the consciousness of others.

The pursuit of attention is socially organized around what can be termed ‘Vanity Fairs’. An introduction to the economy of attention with the title *Vanity Fairs* thus means addressing the economy as a kind of drug market. The competition for and exchange of attention, though all-pervasive in the lifeworld and by no means secret, has only recently been discovered by social theory. How could it have been hidden? It had to have found a conceptual hiding place in theory. In fact, there was a pretty good hiding place: the all-purpose concept of communication.

It is tempting to define communication reductively, as a mere exchange of information, thus omitting the fact that interpersonal communication always includes the exchange of attention. With that in mind, it was only logical that conceptualization of the economy of attention started with disentangling information and attention exchange in face-to-face communication. The context of its first articulation was an essay on the precision timing of turn-taking in conversation. The idea of the essay was not mine, but that of my sister Dorothea Franck, who was then engaged in the field of linguistic pragmatics. Her approach to conversation analysis was to replace the then common model of a grammar-regulated turn-taking with a model of implicit negotiation. Since I was working at that time on applying ‘public choice’ concepts to urban economics, she consulted me. The result was a model of conversation in which the exchange of information is underpinned by the exchange of attention. Turn-taking is negotiated implicitly by the participants, who invest their own attention as a scarce resource and take pains to be paid attention as a coveted income. With this dualism of properties, the concept of attention was connected to the heteronomous world of economic thought. Unexpectedly, the model proved to be viable. The economy of attention saw the light of day in a

paper, co-authored by sister and brother, that appeared in *Papiere zur Linguistik* (Papers on Linguistics) in 1986.

When first tinkering with the idea of developing the concept further, I would never have imagined, nor did I even wish, that the economy of attention would have taken the trajectory it has. The idea, nevertheless, resonated too strongly with the change that was underway in the media world simply to be left on the shelf to gather dust. In developing its own dynamics in the back of the author's mind, it lured him away from his main responsibilities and compelled him to write two essays to be published in the German periodical *Merkur*. In 1989, an essay entitled 'The New Currency: Attention' and in 1993 another one headed 'The Economy of Attention' appeared. The die was cast when Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich, invited me to write a book on the topic.

In a sense, the book was premature. It was written in the main before the Internet appeared on the scene, though it was not published until 1998. In the meantime, the topic had independently made its way onto the World Wide Web. In 1997, Michel Goldhaber's 'The Economy of Attention and the Internet' appeared in the Internet journal *Next Monday*. It was from there that the concept started its career in the English-speaking world.

Meanwhile, a considerable body of the literature on the topic has sprung up, covering fields as diverse as economics and philology. What I cannot find, however, is an account of the addictive potential of attention—that is, of the all too human longing for playing a role in fellow humans' consciousness. I cannot believe that both this potential, and, respectively, desire, have been simply overlooked. What I see, rather, is a widespread reluctance to speak about consciousness in precisely the sense which must be considered in order to discuss the desire of playing a role in the consciousness of others. It is this kind of meaning, so goes the argument behind the common reservation, in which consciousness has no place in science. Indeed, any talk of a 'science of consciousness' rests on shaky grounds. Without dismissing these concerns, I nevertheless suggest turning the tables, asking whether the success story of the attention economy is not, in fact, waiting to be read as living proof of the very real power that is brought to bear by the desire to feature in others' consciousness.

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Georg Franck

Acknowledgements

The project of this book was preceded by a trial balloon: a paper with the title ‘Vanity Fairs: Competition in the Service of Self-Esteem’. It appeared in the journal *Mind and Matter*, whose editor, Harald Atmanspacher, had invited me to submit it. Harald had already edited the first book on the economy of attention (long before *Mind and Matter* had seen the light of day) and has been of invaluable help in the author’s excursions into what might one day become a science of consciousness. The project was finally sparked by a comment Katherine Peil Kauffman made on the paper and her encouragement to go deeper into the spiritual dimension of the economy of attention. Katherine, Psychologist, focused on the biology of emotion, brought in the key phrase of *natural spirituality*, which basically denotes sentience, this perfectly natural form of consciousness, but emphasizes its specific human formation.

The book would not have been completed without more than just a little help from friends. It was again my sister Dorothea Franck who decisively contributed to putting the project on the right track. She first donated the concept of emotional climate change and then was the first to work through the initial version of the manuscript. She detected a serious flaw and lent a generous helping hand in ironing out any dissonance of tone. In a later rescue operation, Sarah Spiekermann and Johannes Hoff saved me from a dead end I had run into. Sarah, Information Economist, corrected an over-optimistic picture of the citation process in science as a measurement process of pragmatic information. Johannes, Philosopher with a theological depth, convinced me of a reorganization of the structure of the treatise aimed specifically at the transition from the spiritual dimension of the capacity of conscious experience to the ethical dimension of the economy of attention. Sarah and Johannes earn a good portion of the architect’s and therapist’s fee for the remodelling of the structure. Robert van Krieken, Leading Sociologist of celebrity society, proved to be a very good critic by mixing a cocktail of wholehearted encouragement and subtle reservations regarding terminology. By making me aware of the risk I incur by replacing the term ‘narcissism’ with the more colloquial ‘vanity’, he inspired a reworking of the introduction that would have been omitted without his intervention.

There are three friends of mine who invested considerable time and effort to free me from the embarrassment in which a non-native speaker is in when writing not only papers in scientific pidgin, but a whole book in English: Silvia Plaza, Dwight Holbrook and Ross Ludlam. Silvia, having been my instructor for years, regrettably retired while the edit was still pending. She nevertheless took it upon herself to go through and extensively critique the still somewhat rudimentary draft of the introductory parts of the manuscript. Dwight, a fellow campaigner at the philosophical frontlines of the exploration of the ontology of presence, was exceptionally kind to take the time out of his life for face-to-face discussions regarding the entirety of a still-unfinished version of the manuscript on a full nine-day stay in Vienna. Ross, not only a native speaker but also a promising young author, did a terrific job of painstakingly editing the manuscript, attending to linguistic and argumentative consistency alike. He deserves recognition if the embodiments of a continental theorist have been turned into a book in English.

Most of all, I owe the completion of this book to the attentive awareness of my wife, Ingrid Schünemann. She understood me through my moments of vacillation and self-doubt more often than I did myself.

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Introduction



What is more pleasant than the affectionate notice other people take of us, what is more agreeable than their compassionate empathy? What is more inspiring than addressing ears flushed with excitement, what is more captivating than exercising our own power of fascination? What is more thrilling than an entire auditorium of expectant eyes, what more overwhelming than applause surging up to meet us? What, ultimately, equals the enchantment sparked off by the delighted attention we receive from those by whom we are ourselves enchanted? The attention of others is the most irresistible of drugs. To receive it outshines receiving any other kind of income. This is why glory surpasses power, and why wealth is overshadowed by prominence.

This is also why it is becoming popular in our affluent society to rank income in attention above mere financial gain. When more and more people can afford the insignia of material wealth, then the desire for distinction will create a demand for attributes more selective than a high money income. In accordance with the law of the socialization of former luxury goods, such attributes will be found among the privileges of a still-recognizable elite. The undisputed common denominator of contemporary elites is celebrity. And celebrity is precisely the status of being a major earner of attention. When material wealth has become inflationary, then, according to the laws governing the expansion of human desires and aspiration, a re-orientation of social ambition is imminent (cf. Franck 1993/2018, p. 8).

Attention is an immaterial kind of income. Receiving attention means to play a role in the consciousness of another person. By being concerned about the role we feel to be playing in other consciousness we testify inadvertently that we deal with one another as embodied psyches, or to go one step further, as embodied souls. As embodied souls, we are doomed to wither in isolation. In order to blossom individually, we have to succeed in occupying both space and affection in fellow consciousness. What we thus testify, knowingly or not, is that the pursuit of attention has a spiritual dimension.

In theories about affluent society, even in those focusing on the growing popularity of attention income, the implications of the conscious nature of attention are hardly addressed. Instead of the spiritual dimension of the pursuit, the pathological

dimension of the addiction is amply exposed. An early account of the growing dominance of the income in attention was significantly titled ‘The Culture of Narcissism’ (Lasch 1979). Narcissism denotes the self-centred ego’s dependency on outer recognition. This dependency, by seeming to contradict the ego’s preoccupation with itself, invites the suspicion of pathology. In psychology and in particular psychoanalysis, narcissism is described as a disorder, thus accounting for the indeed hard to tame antagonism of the ego’s autonomy and dependency. The connotation of this antagonism with a disorder, however, must be carefully avoided when the addiction is selected as vantage point for a novel approach to the economy of attention.

An economy accounting for the spiritual dimension of attention is novel indeed, but it is interesting only if adding to our understanding of social reality. Spirituality adding to realism may look like a contradiction in terms. Arguably, however, accounting for people’s concern about featuring in other consciousness is not. Colloquially, this concern is called vanity. Vanity, though deemed a vice, is a predisposition we all share. It is, though lacking a terminological definition, the common name for our congenital concern about our place in fellow consciousness. The reason why and the circumstances under which it deserves to be called a vice will be discussed in due course below. A reliable indication, however, that this concern is not without social relevance is the common place that the competition for attention occupies in everyday knowledge. Since it is close to a truism that there is little we care so much about as the role we feel to be playing in other consciousness, and since it is also plainly evident that the stage we long to play on is of limited space, we naturally assume that life in society involves an ongoing competition for attention. We thus intuitively understand what the trope of the vanity fair illustrates. The trope gives succinct expression to the market form that the competition for attention engenders. It is thus predisposed for visualizing how the individual’s concern to feature in fellow consciousness organizes itself into a fully-fledged social economy.

If it looks frivolous to invoke an image as vulgar as that of the vanity fair for delineating an approach to the spiritual dimension of human coexistence, then that is quite in the spirit of the matter. The spiritual nature of consciousness is nothing elevated, let alone transcendent. We all live in the state of conscious presence—as long as we have not fallen into dreamless sleep or coma. We are all, by virtue of our sentient nature, intimately acquainted with what the term spirituality denotes. This knowledge by acquaintance even epitomizes what is so particular about our sentient nature. States of conscious presence are accessible only from within: from the perspective of the first person, i.e. in the perspective of the person who is themselves mentally present. From the perspective of the third person, i.e. of the outside observer, they appear non-existent. No sentient being has ever inspected another’s sphere of conscious experience. States of consciousness are be-ables¹, in contrast to observables (such as firing patterns of neurons or blood oxygen level dependency) by virtue of which the brain processes supposed to bring them forth are accessible to empirical methods. As be-ables, the states actually do exist, i.e. exist in the mode

¹I take the wording from Pylkkänen (2014) who, in turn, refers to John Bell.

of presence, but they can be denied (physical) reality. This peculiar but nevertheless factual mode of existence is what the term spiritual basically refers to.

The air of mysteriousness surrounding the term is due to the fact that so far nobody knows how nervous systems manage to not only process information (i.e. to work as biological computers), but also to bring forth states of mental presence. Consequently, nobody has understood how and why our sensations, feelings and moods are made to present themselves as qualia, i.e. as phenomena that do not exist as observable objects, but only by being subjectively experienced. Science and thus neuroscience, by being committed to the perspective of the third person, are therefore rather stymied when faced by questions of conscious experience. Hence the inclination to explain the unexplainable away. Remarkably, however, this inclination is forcefully opposed from within science by a recent movement known as *Toward a Science of Consciousness (TSC)*. One of the founding fathers of TSC, anaesthetist Stuart Hameroff, counters the scepticism succinctly: 'I know that consciousness exists since it is my job to take it away' (personal communication).

Vanity fairs still wait to be described as living proof of the existence of natural spirituality. Isn't it perfectly possible to interpret the sociologically manifest competition for attention as an informal, out-of-lab and large-scale experiment concerning the existential proof of that which eludes instrumental observation? Even in hardcore science, there are phenomena finding acknowledgement despite evading instrumental observation. The paradigm case is dark matter. Dark matter eludes observation as does sentience; it nevertheless is standardly acknowledged in cosmology for the reason of rendering the observation intelligible that the outsides of galaxies rotate too rapidly for either Newtonian gravity or general relativity to explain. Sentience, though certainly not acting as a substance, plays an analogous role in the endeavour of making sense of the well-observed economy of attention. It is hopeless to theorize this economy without referring to the motivational power of the anxiety about featuring in other consciousness. It is hopeless, in turn, to theorize this anxiety without accounting for the spiritual nature of both our own and other consciousnesses. Phenomenal consciousness, to make the somewhat daring comparison, is to attention economy what dark matter is to cosmology. Nobody has ever observed sentience as experienced subjectively, but it is good practice to deal with the capability, known by acquaintance, as a working hypothesis.

In a sense, of course, the comparison of consciousness with dark matter is just a continuation of that daring coupling of spirituality and vanity fairs. Take it as a tongue-in-cheek answer to the queer [scientifically bigoted] endeavour of explaining the spiritual away. It will not be made use of in the implementation of the argument: instead we will be satisfied with inserting the spiritual into the economic.

Retrospect: How Economic Theory Made Contact with the Heteronomous Subject of Attention

Economy, in its original and still basic meaning, concerns the selection of scarce means for given ends. Scarceness is to be distinguished from lack: it is a function of the multitude of possible uses of a means restricted in availability. Money is scarce because it can buy anything, but is controlled in total supply. Attention is scarce because it is needed for whatever one wishes to experience consciously while its capacity is constricted organically. Each dollar and each minute of mental presence, accordingly, can be spent only once. Each use for one thing costs the renunciation of all the other uses that would have been otherwise possible. Dealing not only with money, but also with one's capacity of conscious experience thus involves a problem of selectivity, highlighted in William James's classical definition of attention: 'Attention is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which in French is called *distraktion*, and *Zerstreuung* in German' (James (1890), vol. 1, pp. 403f).

James's definition immediately connects the capacity of conscious experience with economy. It was only logical, thus, that economic theory first took notice of attention in its property as a scarce resource. Herbert Simon opened his early account of what would later be called information society with the thesis that a society that is information rich is attention poor.² Simon, an economist and pioneer of artificial intelligence, is best known for introducing the concept of 'bounded rationality'. Bounded rationality accounts for the fact that decision making, contrary to the standard assumption of unbounded, i.e. 'homo oeconomicus'-type rationality, is not free of cost, but a resource-consuming activity. This relates most clearly to the process of dealing with information, since information is not fixed and ready-made, but the surprise value extracted from patterns by bestowing attention on them. That is why a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention. Attention, to put it differently, promises to play a key role in an economy focused on information. Even if defining information society in terms of the technology it idiosyncratically makes use of, it is precisely the technology that widens the bottleneck of attention's capacity of processing information.

Simon's account, nevertheless, was not responsible for bringing the term 'economy of attention' into the popular consciousness. His emphasis on the poverty of attention is biased insofar as the scarce resource is not the only property through which attention comes into contact with the economic. There is that other property, the quality we started from: generally coveted income. Attention is scarce when conceived as the capacity—or energy—that one disposes of; it turns into a source

² '[T]he wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention' (Simon 1971, p. 40).