

ATTENTION AND GUNK

*Let us assume that an object of experience could be found
for the transcendental idea of the absolutely simple;
then the empirical intuition of some object
would have to be cognized as one containing
absolutely no manifold of elements
outside one another and combined into unity.
—Kant, second antinomy, antithesis*

I. Some things we believe, or believe in

- The *adverbial theory of attention*. Three doctrines:
 1. There is a property of actions, *attentiveness*;
 2. This property is not a *kind*;
 3. Attentional phenomena are not manifest in any other way.So in particular, attentional phenomena are manifest only in cases of *King attentively*, where K is the kind of an action which is merely accidentally attentive. (And in general, which *might have been inattentive*.)
- *Interrupted action*. I am studying with Mark Johnston for five years but sleeping for a certain interval of time S during those five years. I am watching a movie when a text message comes in, which I read and respond to before turning back to the movie. I continued the studying and the watching throughout the interruptions. I am writing a paper and teaching a seminar, and have been doing both for some months. Today I am interrupting the writing for the teaching; yesterday I interrupted the teaching for the writing. (Interrupted interruptions seem to be possible: having a brief thought about my paper, I turn away for a minute to fix it.) We have proposed to analyze interruption in terms of attentiveness: during the interruption, my action is performed inattentively; when the interruption ends, it goes back to being performed attentively.
- *Attentiveness is a high grade of consciousness*. An F can occur attentively just if an F must occur consciously. Phenomenologically, this is captured in the *foregrounding* of attentive acts: during the period of texting, the movie is backgrounded and the texting is foregrounded. During the period of working on this handout the teaching is foregrounded and the writing is backgrounded. During the period of sleep, everything is backgrounded. *Attentively is a fine way to perform an action*. It has a causal impact which is hard to characterize in general terms but is something along the lines of *making it more likely to succeed* or *pushing it further along* or *making it be performed more sensitively to shifts of circumstance*. Psychologists run these points together under the rubric of the idea that attention is *selective*.

What is attentiveness, such that this is all so? Nutshell: to A attentively for a while is for one's act to go *gunky* during that period—to have an infinite descending chain of actions contributing to it.

II. Mereology of action and time

Let's distinguish between *parts* and *tranches* of actions:

- a is *part* of b just if b straightforwardly rationalizes a (the Michael Thompsonish sense).
Assume: that if a is part of b, a doesn't stretch temporally outside of b.
- a is a *tranche* of b just if a is a temporal subsegment of b.
Let a *total action* be an action that is not a tranche of any action.
- Terminology: J is a *subinterval* of I just if J starts no earlier and ends no later than I.

Comments:

- These relations are antisymmetric, antireflexive, and transitive.
- *Contrast*: if a is part of b, a and b are of different kinds—"I am Aing because I am Aing" works only if Aing = *living*. if a is a tranche of b, a and b are of the same kind: we think of a temporal subsegment of an act as something which just ignores the beginning and/or end of the act.
 - Example: my *pushing this rock from M to N* is a **part** of my *pushing this rock from A to Z*. Why? The latter rationalizes the former.
 - Example: my *studying with Mark Johnston during S* is a **tranche** of my *studying with Mark Johnston*. Why? The latter does not rationalize the former but merely expands it.

Assume, with Thompson:

- Gunkiness: every **total** action has a part.
 - I do not mean that every *tranche* of an action has a part. Of course, every tranche of an action has a tranche.

Total actions are therefore "gunky". (Ignoring achievements.)

III. Attentiveness as gunkiness

My analysandum is this:

- An action's being *attentive relative to an interval*.
 - Stipulation: if a is attentive relative to I, every bit of I has some of a in it.

Don't confuse this with the notion of an action's being attentive *throughout* an interval. I want my analysandum to be compatible with the action's being interrupted during the interval. The thought is rather that if we look just at the tranche of the action exactly at the interval, there is a degree to which we can blur up our eyes such that we then see attention shining throughout the tranche.

- Examples: my studying with Mark Johnston was attentive relative to 1995–2000. But it was not attentive relative to S, the interval then at which I was asleep (indeed, none of my actions is). My watching the movie is attentive relative to a certain two-hour interval, but it is not attentive relative to the ten second interval of texting.

Now, it seems plausible that:

- If a is attentive relative to I, a has a part b and I has a subinterval b and J such that b is attentive relative to J.
a might also have a *tranche* which is not attentive relative to *any* interval.

After all, during my five years of studying under Mark Johnston, I spent a certain period of time during those five years attentively peering through a window to see if I could spot him in his hideaway office; and a certain other period of time during those five years listening attentively to his profound thoughts and sage advice. Those actions were rationalized by my studying under Mark Johnston.

If this is right, then:

- If attentiveness, gunkiness: if a is attentive relative to I, somewhere during I, we find an infinitely descending chain of parts of a.

We could say a “goes gunky” at some subinterval of I. After all, if a is attentive relative to I, we can find an attentive b which is a part of a somewhere in I. But if so, we can find an attentive c which is part of b somewhere in I. And so forth.

Is the converse true?

- If gunkiness, attentiveness: if, somewhere during I, we find an infinitely descending chain of parts of a, a is attentive relative to I.

I see no way of establishing a counterexample to the converse. Accordingly I advance the following reduction of attentiveness relative to an interval:

- A = P: For a to be attentive relative to I is for a to have a part that does not extend outside of I. That is **part**, mind you, not **tranche**.

By Gunkiness, every total action has a part (and we have assumed that a part of an action occupies a subinterval of the interval occupied by the action). So RHS of A = P is true just if a is gunky at some subinterval of I. Accordingly, A = P entails:

- A = G: a is attentive relative to I just if a “goes gunky” somewhere in I.

We can distinguish two sorts of gunkiness:

- *Blade* gunkiness: there is no positive extent interval such that things are gunky throughout;
- *Plate* gunkiness: there is such an interval

I suspect that in the general case we will find plate gunkiness, if only for physiological reasons.

IV. Explanatory power of A = G

First, this explains the link of actions-experiences to attention exploited in my maestro argument that the kinds of experience are the kinds of action:

1. If the K is a kind of action then a K can occur attentively;
2. If a K can occur attentively, a K must occur consciously;
3. If a K must occur consciously, the K is a kind of experience.

Since total actions are gunky, every total action is attentive relative to the interval it fits exactly. Let that be what it is to “occur attentively”. Then if a is a total action of kind K, it does occur attentively, and thus a K at least can occur attentively. A tranche of a K is a K, and might not occur attentively, if it is not

attentive relative to the interval it fits exactly (if the total action goes gunky only at some other tranche). That explains P1. Experiences/actions are the things which occur consciously and definitionally the only things which can be tranches of things which occur attentively. That explains P2.

Second, note that plate-gunkiness of an act in an interval will amount to “indefinite specificity” of that act in the interval. It is plausible that in most cases this will crowd out plate-gunkiness of some distinct act through that interval, but even if such super-multitasking is possible there will be no hope of super-everytasking: indefinite specificity of everything we are doing at once is ruled out the physiological. (Perhaps God’s alleged omniscience and omnipotence consists in the lack of any such limitations.)

This explains both the phenomenological foregrounding and the respect in which doing something attentively is a fine way to do it. Concerning the former, actions that are in the background may exert some phenomenological oomph, but it will be boringly constant by comparison with the blooming buzz of an action unfolding gunkily. And concerning the latter, the indefinite specificity of an attentive action makes for both exquisite sensitivity to the momentary demands of the task and (given the crowd-out effect) a devotion of resources to it.

V. Attentiveness at an instant

Is there a well-defined basic notion of attentiveness at an instant? If not, is this a problem? No and no.

We can give a sufficient condition for attentiveness at an instant and a sufficient condition for inattentiveness at an instant:

- if *a* is “plate-gunky” throughout *I*, and *t* is during *I*, *a* is attentive at *t*;
- if *t* is during an interval throughout which *a* has no part, *a* is inattentive at *t*.

Maybe we could construct supertask-style intermediate cases. (Dunno.) What if we could? Answer, this would not be so bad. The case for the antithesis in the second antinomy seems right: every action occurs over an interval, even phenomenological reflection. If recognition of some fact is always lashed to some act of investigation as its telos; and if the temporal resolution of an act of investigation is on the order of its duration; then we could never know that this was happening. A primitive notion of attentiveness at an instant serves no purpose.

Why do we want to *avoid* such a notion? Answer, if we deny that it has application we get an argument for action/experience holism in the spirit of Schaffer’s case for ontological monism; conversely, if we accept it as a primitive notion that would put a lot of pressure on monism and the whole temporally extended action-y non-stative package.