

A teacher might once have told you that *nouns* refer to *objects*, *adjectives* refer to the *properties* of those objects, and *verbs* refer to the things those objects *do*. This isn't so.

The teachers' idea would be true enough if applied to a sentence like "John throws the red ball": Here "John" and "the red ball" are both noun phrases, and John and the ball (considered, sans quotation marks, as things in themselves) are the sorts of entities that you might meet with as objects in the world. The adjective "red" tells us about one of the properties of one of those objects. And the verb "throws" tells us which variety of doing is taking place. All of this conforms with the teacher's precept.

But nobody speaks only in sentences like that, and many perfectly good sentences break these supposed rules. Consider a sentence like "Health should be your priority". It contains two nouns — "health" and "priority" — neither of which seems to be referring to an *object* of quite the same sort as John's ball. More generally, nouns seem to pick out all sorts of entities. They have no special preference for objects over properties or doings: John has a red ball, a high temperature, a noticeable limp, a slight lisp, and an unrequited love for Smith. The entities denoted by these several nouns are very different from one another — and their different ways of existing are no impediment at all to our referring to each of them with a noun.

Similar points can be made about the other parts of speech. We can divide the world up into metaphysical categories: with objects in one category, properties in another, and events in a third (etc.). And we can divide the set of words up into grammatical categories, with nouns in one category, adjectives in another, and verbs in a third (etc.). But there is no mapping from the first of these taxonomies onto the second. Because of this, an entity's mode of being cannot be read off from the grammar of our talk about it. (The relationship of signs to the things that they signify is arbitrary.)

Attention is a case in point. We shouldn't suppose that we have any easy way of knowing what sort of existence it enjoys. Psychologists have often supposed that talk about attention must be talk about a *process*, and so they have asked where in the brain this process takes place, how fast it happens, and what its inputs and outputs are. When these questions turn out not to have straightforward answers, this has been taken to indicate that our talk about attention is somehow defective. But the defect might instead lie in the idea that such talk is in the business of referring to a process. Attention talk could be telling about something that belongs in one of the other metaphysical categories.

*Adverbialism* about attention is the idea that such talk is not telling us about any particular process, nor even about a generic type of process, but is instead used to speak about a way in which quite various processes might take place. It's not *what* you do. It's the way that you do it.

On this view, asking where attention happens in the brain is a mistake, similar to the mistake that would be made if we asked where *haste* happens in the brain: hasty remarks involve one sort of brain process; hasty calculations involve quite different brain processes; hasty marriages involve processes of an altogether different type. And any one of these process could also occur without being hasty. This isn't because there is no such thing as haste. Nor is it because haste is some very general type of process. It isn't a process at all. Instead it's a manner of occurrence that various processes can sometimes instantiate.

The particular version of adverbialism that I favour says that attention's relationship to the processes taking place in the brain is analogous to unison's relationship to the processes taking place in an orchestra. Just as unison happens when none of the musicians who is playing is playing anything other than the melody, so attention happens when none of the cognitive resources that you could be using to do something is doing anything else. Attention doesn't have a seat in the brain, any more than unison has a seat in the orchestra. Psychologists who have attempted to find a seat for it have been making a mistake about its metaphysical category. Nor does attention need to have any other sort of neurological signature: an instance of unison can involve all sorts of players, and all sorts of melodies. An instance of attention can involve all sorts of neural resources, doing all sorts of things, provided that they are operating together in an appropriately concerted way.