

# The Ethics of Attention: a framework

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Forthcoming in: S. Archer (ed.), *Salience*, Routledge

## 1. Introduction

The study of the normative evaluation of attention – and salience, this paper argues, has the potential for being rich field that intersects with debates in moral philosophy, the theory of rationality, and in epistemology. This paper lays the groundwork and provides a framework for such a study.

Suppose that you had no other information about a person than what she focuses her attention on, how much she tends to pay attention to this or to that, what is salient to her and what isn't, what has a tendency to grab her attention, and what she tends to ignore, and about how much she has the capacity to control her attention. Even with just only information about a person's attention, you would know a lot about the life of that person. You can paint a picture of her character, her values, what she cares about, and her likely beliefs and preferences. Information about someone's attention, in other words, allows us to give a rich account of the structure of a person's mind, her experience and life using only a single psychological term. A psychological theory of a person that uses attention as its only primitive psychological term would plausibly be rich in its expressive capacities.

This exercise, minimally, shows that attention is a mental phenomenon that dramatically shapes human agency and experience, including scientific and moral inquiry – at least as much as perception, belief, and desire (cf. Watzl 2017). What we attend to and how we attend is a crucial factor that influences and provides form to our individual and collective lives (Watzl 2011, 2017; Ganeri 2018; Dicey-Jennings 2020).

Given that attention is such a central factor in shaping our lives we would like to know: what normative pressures are there on how we should attend: what are good and what are bad ways of attending? What, in a specific situation, should be salient to an agent? Should she control her attention in that situation, or let her mind wander? And what, generally, should be more and what should be less salient to us? Are there general truths about how much control we should exercise over attention? To what degree are we responsible for how we attend?

We can begin our investigation with a label. Since the time of the famous debate between Clifford (1877) and James (1896), the study of norms of belief, and if there are any, has evolved to be rich, multi-faceted and tightly structured field between epistemology, philosophy of mind, action theory, decision theory, and ethics about those normative issues and how they relate to the nature of belief. Discussions regarding which norms, if any, govern our practices of forming, maintaining and relinquishing *beliefs* have come to be collected under the label “The ethics of belief” (cf Chignell 2018). Included in the ethics of belief are debates about how those normative issues relate to the nature of belief.

This paper concerns an analogous set of questions regarding our practices of attention. “The ethics of attention” in the title of this paper thus concerns the discussion of which norms, if any, govern our practices of attention: what norms govern what we should attend to, how we should engage our capacity for attention, when we should begin and when we should stop to pay attention to something? Like the ethics of belief, the ethics of attention connects those normative questions to issues regarding the nature of attention, what may or may not be subject to such normative pressures: how, for example, are salience and attention related? To what degree can we control our attention? How are different forms of attention related to each other?

In the public debate, topics in the ethics of attention tend to figure prominently.

Think about discussions of spin doctors and troll factories (or certain political actors): they misdirect and distract; they direct attention to what is irrelevant and to information that is false or radically incomplete. Those who criticize either those actors or those who fall for them make claims in the ethics of attention: they argue that it is criticizable to misdirect someone’s attention, or that it is wrong to pay attention to what is false.

Or think of the debates about statues, paintings, or history books: the presence of the great men of history in these places gives them a lot of everyone’s attention. Our social and physical environments are, literally, engineered and created for certain patterns of attention. Attention in thought, in sympathy, but also in perceptual, in visual or auditory attention: the statues at the central squares are literally designed to be looked at. Many, in the contemporary debate, argue that this focus is inappropriate. The painter Titus Kaphar, for example, tries to show with his art that the dreams and hopes of the slave boy, who is depicted the background of a painting or

as leading the horse of a general, they too deserve our attention.<sup>1</sup> Kaphar argues for a claim in the ethics of attention: justice demands changes in our attentional patterns.

Yet, when we look to professional philosophy the study of the ethics of attention is more or less undeveloped compared with rich, complex, and systematic investigation of the ethics of belief. While the normative evaluation of our own and other's attention is a rich aspect of ordinary normative thought and hence the normative questions I've discussed sound familiar, the majority of contemporary normative philosophy, from moral theory, to epistemology and decision theory, contains no systematic discussion of attention norms.

Compare the rich epistemological discussion on what we should believe and how we should update our beliefs in response to evidence: in these debates the logical landscape of various options, questions and positions has been well mapped out. A lot of progress has been made in the ethics of belief since Clifford's original paper. By contrast, the study of norms of attention has remained fairly unstructured: what exactly is being evaluated? What types of normative pressures on attention are there? How does the normative assessment of attention relate to discussions in, for example, moral philosophy, epistemology or decision theory?

Why is there currently no ethics of attention? Arguably, there are at least two reasons. First, one might argue that attention is not the kind of "thing" that is amenable to the relevant type of normative assessment. I will call this the wrong kind of object objection. In the next section I will answer this objection and show that attention is an appropriate target for serious normative investigation. Second, one might argue that even if attention in principle can be assessed normatively, no *systematic* normative investigation can be given. The second part of this paper shows that such a systematic investigation can be provided by developing a framework for such an investigation. This framework classifies potential norms of attention along three dimensions: whether they are manner or object based, instrumental or non-instrumental, and whether its source is moral, prudential or epistemic. I will use this framework to locate proposals for norms of attention in the literature, and in order to situate the normative discussion of attention within the wider field of normative philosophy.

## 2. The Wrong Kind of Object Objection

Theoretical engagement with attention in academia since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century has been dominated by a complex, and multi-faceted discussion in cognitive psychology and the

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<sup>1</sup> See: [https://www.ted.com/talks/titus\\_kaphar\\_can\\_art\\_amend\\_history?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/titus_kaphar_can_art_amend_history?language=en)

neurosciences. While there can be no doubt that this investigation has enabled progress in our understanding of attention, the view of attention as a special topic of those sciences can get in the way of bringing normative questions about attention into clear view. Once we think of attention in terms of a set of neuronal or psychological mechanisms, questions about good or bad forms of attention, questions of how attention figures in moral considerations, in the assessment of the character of a person, or its proper role in epistemic inquiry, can appear to be misguided: neuronal or psychological mechanisms may seem not to be the right kind of thing about for which such normative questions can be properly posed.

One reason for why the mechanistic picture of attention tends to push its normative assessment out of view is that the normative questions concern the whole person (what should she do, does she have good character), while attention – on this picture – is viewed as a sub-personal phenomenon, whose nature is not constitutively bound to the person as such.

Yet, the fact that there exists a rich sub-personal science of attention does not imply that attention just is a sub-personal phenomenon. Just consider that much is also known about sub-personal perceptual processes; and yet it is the subject who perceives her surroundings; the sub-personal processes underpin and enable the subject's perceptual state. Similarly, a person's conscious experience is arguably the paradigm of a personal level phenomenon – the subject's own subjective point of view, as it is sometimes described. And yet, sub-personal processes underpin and enable that conscious experience. A first step toward a serious normative investigation of attention thus is to take seriously the idea that attention, like perception and conscious experience, is a personal level phenomenon: attending is something the person does; attention processes are what underpins that attending. For the normative investigation of attention, we want a framework that seriously treats attention as a personal level phenomenon and shows how, as such, it is integrated with other personal level phenomena such as perception, belief, desire, or conscious experience.

Another reason for why attention can easily slip away from normative investigation is that it can seem so variegated as to lack the kind of unity that a proper target of such investigation would seem to need. In one form attention is perceptual: a subject focuses her attention on one (or some) perceptually presented item over others. Perceptual attention can be highly focused (directed only at one or a few objects or features) or it can be dispersed through a whole scene. But attention also comes in other, non-perceptual, forms: your attention might be occupied by a pain or feeling (as opposed to a pain that doesn't distract you; one that you only feel in the periphery of your mind). It may also be occupied by a train of thought like planning for your

friend's birthday, as opposed to thoughts that pass through your mind on their own accord while your attention is occupied with something else. Finally, your attention might be occupied by an embodied action: consider playing soccer with all your attention, as opposed to kicking some balls while your mind is occupied with the birthday planning. How could there be a normative theory that treats perceptual focus, getting distracted by a feeling of nausea, and the attentive engagement in sports in anything like a unified manner? To make matters worse, while some instances of attention are paradigmatic voluntary actions, like when I, just like that, shift my attention, with mental effort from the melody of the guitar solo in a concert to the rhythm played by the drums, some other cases, seem passive and involuntary, like when my attention is drawn, against my will, to a beeping phone that disturbs the concert. The type of normative assessment appropriate for a phenomenon, according to many views, crucially depends on whether that phenomenon is under voluntary control: just consider moral responsibility or the ethics of belief. For a normative theory of attention, we thus want a framework that unifies the variety of forms of attention and that lets us see how they are connected.

The priority structure view of attention (Watzl 2017) provides an answer to these concerns. According to this view attention consists in the agent's activity of regulating priority structures, which order the parts of the subject's on-going (occurrent) mental life by their relative priority to the subject.

This priority structure view unifies the varieties of attention. Perceptual attention consists in prioritizing some parts of your overall perceptual state over other parts of that state. If your attention is visually focused on an object, then the state of seeing that object is prioritized over other part of that visual state. Attention *to* external objects thus gets explained by relative priority of aspects of the subject's mind. When attention is focused on a feature (like the timbre or colour of the object or event) then the state of seeing those features is prioritized. Prioritizing orders the parts of the subject's perceptual state by their relative priority to the subject, thus allowing for degrees of attention as we move up or down that ordering. When attention is non-perceptual what is prioritized is a non-perceptual aspect or part of the subjects on-going mental life. What is prioritized may be a bodily sensation or feeling, or the parts of perceptual experience, mental images, occurring ideas, and occurrent desires that are constitutive of an embodied action or train of thought. The priority structure view thus unifies all forms of attention by taking as the primary notion the notion of a mental state's relative priority for the subject. The forms differ only in which aspect of the subject's mind has the highest relative priority.

The priority structure view also unifies passive and active forms of attention. Attention is a mental activity, a personal level on-going process. A person, on my view, is always engaged in that activity. We are constantly regulating our priority structures. Yet, while this is something we are doing (and attention is thus agential, and within the realm of our responsibility), how we are doing what we are doing is subject to both an active and a passive force. The passive force shapes the activity to the degree to which the regulating of priority structures is influenced by what is salient to the subject during that period, where the salience of a mental state roughly consists in the degree to which that mental state commands prioritization (a type of imperatival content). Salience is a feature of subject level states, but it is not under the subject's control (just like the content of a perceptual state is subject level but not controlled by the subject). The active force interacts with that passive force and shapes the subject's prioritizing to the degree to which she herself guides her own activity. Such guidance can take all forms that it can also take for bodily action. Attention is subject to deliberation (you may weigh reasons for and against focusing more attention on one group of people rather than another), normative judgment (you might think it best to focus on one group), intention, desire and choice (you may choose to attend to A rather than B), and fine-grained online control (cf. research on visual search).

The central notion in this framework is the notion of a priority structure, where the relevant parts of the agent's mental life are compared by their relative priority or priority weight. The framework allows for different forms of development depending on how one thinks of the relevant notion of priority. In my own view, relative priority does not have a reductive definition. We have a grip on the relevant notion through its reflection in conscious experience: here relative priority shapes the field of consciousness into centre and periphery. One way to take this is to think of our conscious acquaintance with how peripheral or central a part of our mind is as fixing the reference to an underlying type of relation between those parts of our mind (this view allows that once reference is fixed the relevant relation may also hold between unconscious mental states).

### 3. Content-based and manner-based attention norms

The priority structure framework gives us a clear target for the normative assessment of attention. Norms of attention are norms for the regulation of priority structures. I will now begin to develop a framework for the study of norms of attention within the priority structure view. A first dimension is between what I will call *content-based* and *manner-based* attention norms.

We can think of the priority structures I have introduced in two tiers. On tier 1, the elements of the structure are mental states that occupy the subject's attention to various degrees, and the relation between them is their relative priority to the subject (we can allow for ties in relative priority). If I'm paying more attention to the drums than to the instrumental solo, then my hearing the drums has strict priority in my mind compared hearing the solo. Seeing the other audience members will be lower in priority rank even to the hearing of the solo. Or if I'm so excited about a possibility that I keep thinking about it and notice little of my surroundings, then my excitement and thoughts about the possibility are prioritized over my experience of the world around me. On tier 2, the elements of the structure are external items and the structure orders them by how much the person attends to them. The ordering in tier 1 determines an ordering in tier 2. Tier 2 characterizes the world as it is according to the attention occupiers. We can think of the structure elements at tier 2 as the intentional objects of the structure elements at tier 1. If there are non-intentional, non-directed aspects of the mind (a nausea or a headache that occupies your attention may be examples), then there is more to tier 1 than can be captured in tier 2. Also, if a part of the world is, as it were, attended "twice over" like when you both look at rustling leaves and listen to them, then we can capture details in the subject's attention on tier 1 that will be lost if we only consider tier 2.

With these two tiers in place, we can now define content-based attention norms as those norms that are exclusively formulated at tier 2. Manner-based attention norms, by contrast, are those that pertain directly to how the person's mind is organized at tier 1.

Content-based norms, then, are what is described when we say that a person should pay more attention to X than to Y, that she should not completely ignore the Fs, that it would be appropriate if people paid more attention to X, or that a virtuous person is one who pays enough attention to certain features of the world.

Content-based norms will ignore in what *way* a person pays attention to something, and instead are concerned with a coarser level of detail: a person should – in some way or other – pay attention to certain features.

As an example, where such coarse graining appears appropriate consider a hiring process (see Greenwald and Banaji 2013; see also Siegel 2016, *this volume* for discussion). Suppose that person evaluating various résumés harbours an unconscious prejudice against members of a certain group (the out-group). As a result and as a reflection of that prejudice, the evaluator pays little attention to the strong parts of the résumé of outgroup members, while she pays much more attention to weaker parts of their CVs. By contrast, when she considers the résumé of an

in-group member, she pays a lot of attention to the strong parts and comparatively little attention to the weak parts. We may want to say that this distribution of attention is normatively criticisable (below I will discuss ways of thinking of the normative source of that critique). Arguably, though, it is normatively irrelevant *how* she re-distributes her attention. She may make sure to perceptually focus her attention equally on all relevant parts of the CVs, she may make sure to give enough thought to all parts after she has looked at them, or she may counteract her bias by directing her attention in her imagination to the qualities that a person with that CV is likely to have.

Note that tier 2 structures in the first place provide an ordering of attended items, but probably do not define an interval scale (we can't define:  $x$  receives twice as much attention as  $y$ ). But, if the structures are "big enough" we can define rough degrees by the number of actual and potential intermediate elements (cf Watzl 2017, p. 82). Sometimes, as plausibly in this case, a normative evaluation may want to say that a person ought to attend much more to one thing rather than another, and not merely pay a little more attention to that thing.

Note also that each priority structure already contains the information about what is and what is not included in the subject's current mental life. For the moment neglect the structuring relation, and just think of a tier 1 structure as a set of mental states. We can think of that set as a partitioning of the space of *potential* mental states, into those that the subject actually has and those that she does not have (just like the set of all of a subject's beliefs, i.e. every proposition she believes, partitions the space of possible beliefs into those the subject has and those she doesn't have, i.e. propositions believed and those not believed). Two priority structures can differ simply in that one contains an element that the other does not contain. So, by being given a certain priority structure, we already know what is excluded from it. If you 'overthink' a situation, tier 2 attention norms can express the idea that that thought should not have entered your mind. You should not have attended to that situation at all.

As a second example, and arguably in the present context more controversial, consider gratitude (see Bommarito (2013), and Chappell and Yetter-Chappell (2016)). Someone who possesses the virtue of gratitude (who is a grateful person) must pay a sufficient amount of attention to the value of what others have done for her. Someone who merely knows that others have done something valuable, or is peripherally aware of that value, but pays no attention to that value is not grateful. "[A]ttention is essential to the virtue. We cannot be grateful by simply being aware that someone has helped us", as Bommarito (2013, p. 100) puts it. It is thus plausible that good character is characterized by paying enough attention to the value of what others do for us. But



arguably it, again, doesn't matter how we pay attention to it: whether we perceptually take it in, when it is happening, by thinking attentively about it, or by often imagining how valuable those deeds were.

Yet, the example of gratitude also illustrates the limits of content-based approaches to attention norms. Suppose that, as Bommarito observes, that a “teenager under the influence of Nietzsche might attend to the support of his or her parents but take it to be evidence of how disgustingly weak Mom and Dad are.” (ibid.). This observation is certainly correct: not all ways of attending to the help of others are a sign of gratitude. There are two ways of taking this observation. On the one hand, we may leave the relevant norm of attention at the content level and provide a fuller characterization of gratitude by supplementing having the right attention structure with, for example, having the right emotions directed at the supporting person. On the other hand, we may take Bommarito's observation as showing that the content-based assessment of attention in this case is insufficient. If the subject attends to the value of another's help by prioritizing negative emotions directed at those values, then that distribution of attention makes no contribution to her gratitude. Whether we go one way or the other here plausibly depends on whether we think that a positive contribution of attention can be separated out even if the subject's emotions are misguided: is the person at least partially grateful if she attends to the value of others, even if that attention is accompanied by spite? If yes, then we have a content-based attention norm as a partial component of gratitude. If no, then we are here really dealing with a manner-based attention norm.

Let us then get to manner-based attention norms. Here, as I said, we are concerned not with what the subject pays attention to, but with tier 1 that concerns the organization of the subject's mental life. We thus look in more detail at the *way* a subject pays attention to something.

We have already seen one example of how to distinguish such ways: which mental states are prioritized over others. Suppose, for example, we would like to say, as Iris Murdoch (1970) does, that morality requires that a person should pay attention to the concrete other subjects she is engaged with (a “just and loving gaze directed on an individual reality”, p.33). Staring, perceptually, at others plausibly is not a way of fulfilling that normative requirement: rather what should occupy our attention is reflective thought about others as loci of intrinsic value and worth (though, again, the manner based treatment could be debated: if we can see intrinsic value and worth, then maybe the prioritization of such seeing *is* a way of encountering the other appropriately; see e.g. Werner (2014) for discussion of whether moral properties are perceptible). As another example, consider the positive evaluation of attentive touch, especially

the “close form of caring touch that forms an essential element of social bonding and human development” (Fulkerson 2015). There clearly is a good that pertains to the tactile attentive engagement with close others (family, friends, children and loved ones). Mere inattentive touch does not seem to have the same value; and equally importantly it is attentive *touch* that is valuable, mere attentive thought or seeing does not have the same value (though it may have other values).

Another way of distinguishing ways of attention is by considering *how* a subject’s priority structures are regulated. Here we can distinguish, as I mentioned, a passive force on the evolution of those structures in terms of what is salient to the subject and an active force, when a subject guides her attention, for example, with direct and effortful control.

One can argue both that a special value attaches to forms of passively evolving attention structures and to the active control over attention. For the first, consider another example from Bommarito and Chappell and Yetter-Chappell (2016): the role of attention in modesty. Chappell and Yetter-Chappell (2016) argue, correctly I believe, that a modest agent is “one who is not disposed to find their own positive attributes especially salient” (p. 457). She hardly ever finds herself pulled to give attention to those positive attributes. She may have an accurate view of her positive traits but doesn’t find them particularly salient. Maybe, indeed, in line with Yetter Chappell and Yetter-Chappell’s observations, a modest person actually does spend much of her time attending to her positive attributes: maybe she is paid to look into them and intentionally and effortfully gives them her attention. But such attention requires effort for her. It’s painful. For the modest person, attending to her own positive attributes is not automatic (while the immodest person feels the pull to attend to those attributes). Other plausible examples of salience constituted virtues discussed by Chappell and Yetter-Chappell are: being a good friend might be constituted by finding the friend’s positive attitudes more salient than her negative attitudes, someone who is able to “forgive and forget” finds past wrongs not particularly salient (she need not actually have forgotten about them; she is just not drawn to attend to them). These examples illustrate the positive value that may attach to manners of attention that without control evolve in the right direction.

On the opposite side, consider that we may also positively evaluate being in control of our attention. Immanuel Kant (1775-76, p. 62) expresses an extreme version of such an evaluation when he says that “[t]he greatest perfection of the powers of the mind is based on our subordinating them to our power of choice ... For this sake, attention ... [is] only the useful for us, if [it is] under the free power of choice, so that involuntary attentiveness ... produce[s] much

harm.” While we might not want to follow Kant that attention is “only useful” if it is “under the free power of choice”, we may still believe that having enough control over our own attention and being able to guide it according to our own values is an important and valuable aspect of self-control and personal integrity.

It is not my goal here to evaluate such proposals, but only to use them as illustrations of norms of attention that pertain to the manner of attention, and not what it is that we attend to.

#### 4. Instrumental and Non-Instrumental Attention Norms

I now get to a second dimension of the framework: we can distinguish different types of attention norms. We can, on the one hand, evaluate an agent’s priority structures and how she regulates them *instrumentally*, i.e. with regard to an end that is achieved through that form of attention, or we can evaluate attention *non-instrumentally*, i.e. evaluate a form of attention on its own without regard to its upshots. One important debate in this area concerns whether there are any non-instrumental attention norms, and if not, why not.

With Immanuel Kant’s negative evaluation of “involuntary attentiveness” we have already seen a clear case of an instrumental attention norm: Kant seems to think that such involuntariness is problematic because it “produce[s] much harm.” What is normatively problematic thus concerns the consequences of such a manner of attending. For a similarly instrumental, though less one-sided, evaluation of the relative costs and benefits of controlled and un-controlled forms of attention, consider Chandra Sripada’s (2018) discussion of the costs and benefits of mind-wandering (i.e. when our cognitive, non-perceptual attention hops uncontrolled from one thought to the other). Such mind-wandering sometimes may have negative consequences: it prevents you from achieving routine daily goals and may make you feel bad about yourself (Killingsworth and Gilbert 2010). On the other hand, arguably there are also good consequences: it may distract from boredom, and might lead to escape routines, and lead to insight and deep learning (what Sripada calls the advantages of “exploration”).

Consider also one way of looking at the hiring case I have discussed. One thing that is problematic about the unequal distribution of attention to the good and not so good aspects of the CVs of in-group and out-group members is that as a consequence, a so prejudiced evaluator will tend to not hire the best person for the job. She will miss out on candidates she would have wanted to hire (Banaji and Greenwald 2013). Her distribution of attention thus is problematic because it is an ill-calibrated instrument for the purpose to which it is put.

Not all instrumental attention norms will have to do with prudence alone: with what best satisfies the desires of the agent. Consider mindfulness meditation. Such meditation is constitutively characterized by certain attention structures: the Oxford English Dictionary, for example, describes meditation generally as ways of "focus[ing] one's mind for a period of time"<sup>2</sup> in specifically prescribed ways. Mindfulness specifically has been characterized by the idea that the agent intentionally makes higher order thoughts about her first order experiences a center of her experience (cf. Latham 2016).

Mindfulness meditation, by its practitioners and advocates, is often described as a good thing. They advocate an ethics of attention. What, though, is supposed to be good about it? It might serve as an epistemic tool, maybe delivering better insight into the true nature of the soul (though see Ratnayake and Merre 2018 for a critique), and – of course – it is widely promoted as a practical tool, helping to reduce anything from stress, anxiety, to substance abuse and chronic pain, and promoting increased quality of life and increased prosocial attitudes (whether it succeeds in those regards is another matter, e.g. Goyal et al. 2014 for a recent meta-studies suggesting scepticism). Many practitioners and many traditions in which mindfulness meditation is important, though reject the instrumental approach (cf Purser 2019 for a critique of such uses of mindfulness). They might advocate mindfulness and meditation practices as a good way of life. Mindfulness training ought, they would say, not just help an agent realize goals she already antecedently possesses. The instrumental approach does not do justice to the transformative effect mindfulness and meditations practices have. It helps the agent to become a better more virtuous person: it helps the agent, for example, to be more compassionate. Through that training to focus her mind on her own feelings, experiences, and emotions generally she will be in a position to notice anger toward others before it “takes a hold of her”. It thus helps her realize moral concern and compassion. Such an evaluation of attention would still fall under the instrumental approach: priority structures get evaluated only instrumentally, by how well they serve to realize an independently given good or virtuous trait.

Are all norms of attention instrumental norms, i.e. norms that evaluate attention according to its consequences? Arguably this is not so.

An instrumental approach treats the relationship between the attention structures and the relevant good (e.g. compassion) as akin to a means-end relation. But arguably the relationship between the attention structures and certain virtues is closer than that: the virtue is *constituted*

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<sup>2</sup> OED

in part by certain attention structures. What it is for an agent to have that type of virtue is for her to have certain attention structures – both synchronically as well as diachronically. If an attention structure is constitutive of a virtuous character trait, then it can not only be evaluated instrumentally. It is part of what it is to be an agent with that virtue to have specific attention structures. We have already seen some plausible examples of this type: gratitude and modesty may both be constituted by certain forms of attention (on either tier 1 or tier 2).

Attention thus can be evaluated non-instrumentally if it is a constitutive aspect of a feature or state that can itself be evaluated non-instrumentally. What, aside from virtues like gratitude, may be examples of such features or states? One interesting area of investigation concerns the question whether some attention structures are constitutive of *epistemically* evaluable states. Among these would be positively evaluated states such as knowledge, justified belief, or understanding, but also negatively evaluated states like prejudice.

For a potential example, consider that (at least) sometimes whether an agent knows something may constitutively depend on whether she has attended in the right way. Consider a doctor aiming to discover whether her patient has cancer. She looks through the patient's files and has only a quick glance at an X-ray (but doesn't pay much attention to it). From the evidence she has considered, it is reasonable to conclude that the patient is healthy. But had she paid more attention to the X-ray, she would have noticed a lump. While the patient is in fact healthy, let us suppose, had the doctor considered the lump this would have undermined her justification to think that the patient is healthy. One might argue (see Pollock 1986, Goldberg 2015) that the doctor here does not know that the patient is healthy *because she had the wrong tier 2 attention structures*. One might take such cases to show that knowledge of certain facts requires that the agent inquires into the matter properly and responsibly. But in order to inquire into the matter properly and responsibly she must pay attention to the right things (cf. Fairweather and Montemayor 2017). But now we seem to have a non-instrumentally evaluable attention structure: whether or not the agent cares about knowing anything in this domain, there is a type of epistemic evaluation of the attention structure available.

There is an interesting question whether some relation less demanding than constitution might also lead to non-instrumentally evaluable attention structures. Return also to the hiring example for illustration. One form of evaluation, as we have seen, is instrumental: the evaluator should be equal attention to the good parts of all CVs because only then will she be able to hire the most qualified person. But arguably there is also another form of evaluation: the prejudiced outlook is irrational (see Siegel 2016 for further discussion). With no evidence (or indeed

against available evidence) the evaluator takes outgroup members to be generally less qualified. Siegel (2016, forthcoming) argues that a tendency to have certain priority structures is itself irrational when it is in a specific sense she defines *based on* having such an irrational outlook: if we would like to say that the irrational outlook is non-instrumentally problematic, then the priority structure that is based on it will itself be non-instrumentally evaluable.

As I mentioned, whether there are any non-instrumental attention norms will be a matter of substantial debate. For now, I hope to have sketched the distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental attention norms enough for such a debate to get started.

##### 5. The normative source of attention norms

I now get to a final distinction among different attention norms. This distinction concerns the normative source of the relevant norms.

A first source are prudential considerations. Having certain priority structures, and certain ways of regulating those structures over time can be evaluated according to how good those structures are for the agent who has them. Many instrumental attention norms have such a prudential source. Consider, for example, as we have discussed the costs and benefits of mind-wandering. Mind-wandering may get in the way of an agent's pursuits of long term goals, and in that sense it is bad for the agent. But it may also be beneficial if it enables deep learning and serve as a source for welcome distraction. Prudential considerations generally pertain to the wellbeing of the agent: to what is good for her (see Crisp 2017). Well-being her may be thought of in terms of desire satisfaction: how well does a priority structure serve the agent in order to satisfy her desires. But well-being can also be thought of in terms of the overall balance of pleasure and pain, or in terms of what is objectively good for the agent (one might, for example, hold that friendship or knowledge and understanding is good for the agent independently how whether it is associated with pleasure or pain or whether the agent has the relevant desires). An interesting question in this area concerns whether some forms of attention may themselves be in this way objectively good for the agent: maybe it is, for example, good for the agent to have enough control over her attention. Or consider when Marcus Aurelius says that "those who do not observe the movements of their own minds must of necessity be unhappy" (Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2nd book). Arguably, Aurelius here thinks that reflective attention to one's own mind is objectively good for a person, and not just a means to satisfying her desires or because it will improve the overall balance of pleasure and pain.

A second source of attention norms are moral considerations. We have seen such a source at play when we considered the idea that the attention structures characteristic of meditation and mind-fullness may serve as an instrument toward instilling the moral virtue of compassion in an agent. And we have also seen examples of moral virtues, like gratitude or modesty, that may be partially constituted by certain forms of attention. In these cases, the fundamental object of moral evaluation is a certain character trait, and attention gets morally evaluated either instrumentally or because it partly constitutes a morally virtuous character trait.

There is another virtue-theoretically inspired view that does not, though, take this indirect route toward the moral evaluation of attention structures. On this view, the morally virtuous person is constituted by certain attention structures not because those are constitutive of specific character traits. Rather, some patterns of attention and salience just are themselves morally virtuous. Good character requires having the right motivational susceptibilities. We find that aspect of virtue and of morality emphasized in thinkers from Aristotle, Iris Murdoch, John McDowell, Lawrence Blum, up to recent work by Seanna Shiffrin.

Which structures then ought the morally virtuous person to have? Arguably, there are several aspects. Arguably, it ought to be salient to her that a situation that has a moral or ethical dimension does have that dimension. For a virtuous person, for example, it will be salient that moral concerns about how we ought to live are a relevant aspect of her working environment.

Further, the morally virtuous person ought to notice moral wrongs as moral wrongs (they ought to be high enough on her salience ordering). She pays attention to the situation of each individual without needing to consult a moral rule book. Consider a case mentioned by Lawrence Blum (1991). He talks about a situation where two people, John and Joan, are on the subway together. There is another woman who is carrying a heavy shopping bag. John and Joan are both aware of that woman. But the fact that she is uncomfortable is salient to Joan while it isn't particularly salient to John. Blum thinks that difference between what is salient to John and what is salient to Joan is of moral significance. While Joan's attention is captured by the fact that a morally relevant value is at stake, John is not "attuned to" that morally significant fact. Blum thinks that the moral difference between John and Joan is not fully captured between how the difference in what is salient is going to make them act. If John is generally like that then this shows a "defect in his character ... [h]e misses something of the moral reality confronting him".

Finally, Seanna Shiffrin (2016) argues that there are moral requirements of non-negligence. Those requirements include patterns of attention: "to be non-negligent is to be both attentive

and responsive in thought and agency to how the pursuit of one's (permissible) aims and the state of one's agency affect one's ability to satisfy one's other duties and responsibilities." On Shiffrin's view, it is an agent's moral responsibility to pay enough attention to potential side effects of her doing.

A third source of attention norms are epistemic considerations. We have encountered this source when we have considered whether certain priority structures are epistemically evaluable because they are constitutive either of certain forms of irrationality or of positive epistemic states such as knowledge or understanding.

Just like for the case of morality, there is also an interesting question whether it may be a constitutive feature of an epistemically well-calibrated agent. Maybe, it is part of being epistemically well constituted that one pays attention to the right things?

Consider the idea that science not just concerned with knowledge, but knowledge on matters of interest (Anderson 1995, Kitcher 2003). An ideal epistemic agent doesn't just know random facts, but she knows and pays enough attention to *important* facts, facts that objectively merit our attention. This idea is deeply ingrained in our how we often think of cultural authority: it purports to identify things that are worth paying attention to – ideas worth considering, books worth reading, creations worth beholding, problems worth solving, histories worth trying to reconstruct – even independent of antecedent social purpose. These things produce pro tanto rational pressure to pay attention to them, regardless of whether or not you have antecedent interest in them, knowledge about them, or desire to pay attention to what someone else says you should pay attention to. The seriousness with which we often debate what exactly belongs in the canon, what it is that “we all” epistemically speaking ought to pay some attention to here shows that it would be mistaken to simply and quickly attempt to push the relevant epistemic pressures on attention into prudential or moral considerations: it is at least a matter of serious debate whether the epistemic value of paying attention to important facts about the world and our place in it can sometimes outweigh moral or prudential considerations regarding what may lead us to improve our lot.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to improve our grip on the normative landscape with regard to attention. I have introduced the priority structure framework that gives us a clear target for the normative evaluation of attention. I then distinguished attention norms along three dimensions: (1) those norms may attach to the objects of attention or to the manner of attention (which I



have identified with tier 2 and tier 1 attention structures), (2) the norms may be instrumental and evaluate attention structures with regard to an independently specified consequence or they may be non-instrumental and evaluate attention independently of any further consequences, either because attention structures are constitutive or normatively charged states or features or because those structure themselves constitute a non-instrumental good. (3) the norms may have their source in prudential, moral, or epistemic considerations. Interesting in this regard are specifically whether certain attention structure may be non-instrumentally good both prudentially (because they constitute an agent's wellbeing), morally (because they are constitutive of being morally well attuned to others) and epistemically (because they constitute inquiry into what objectively matters).

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