

Attentional Temperament and Norms on Attention

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In what ways can we evaluate how we interact with information?

(1) Norms on belief; (2) Norms on inquiry; (3) norms on attention? What does it mean to be a “norm on attention?”¹ In this talk, we consider the question: *When we say some norm is a “norm on attention”, what are the things the norms could be norms on?*²

We argue two things:

1. There are two different ways in which attenders can vary: in the shape of their attentional guidance and in the shape of their unguided attention.³ Call these shapes their attentional *style* and attentional *temperament*, respectively.
2. These two ways in which attenders can vary might require correspondingly different evaluations. Norms on guided and unguided attention might not admit a univocal analysis.

Style and Temperament

- Style: “a unified way of doing things: of dressing, gesturing, speaking, moving, and so on” (Flores 2022).⁴
- Temperament: a unified way of *reacting* to the world. More passive and less controlled, perhaps, but perhaps not less *personal* or *agential* (Smith 2005, Archer 2021).⁵

Conference Attenders

1. **Conference Attender 1:**⁶ Connor₁ is attending the APA. When he meets fellow attendees who are women, their romantic eligibility is the first thing that occurs to him. But, well-schooled in contemporary feminist philosophy and having read Whiteley (2023), when he notices himself attending to romantic eligibility he consciously redirects his attention to more philosophical matters.⁷
2. **Conference Attender 2:**⁸ Connor₂ is attending the APA. He wants a romantic relationship and takes conferences to be prime opportunities. But he doesn’t have Connor₁’s dispositions to “automatically” attend to women as potential partners in philosophical settings. Once and a while he remembers this aim of his and looks around the room for potential partners.

Observations: (1) Both versions of Connor are apt to make women attending the conference uncomfortable in ways having to do with the pattern of their attention. Their patterns of attention seem normatively evaluable. (2) But they have different patterns of attention!

Your presenter today: Adrian (they/them)
References at adrianliu.me/attention

¹ Defer the question of whether there are moral, epistemic, pragmatic, or “constitutive” norms on attention.

² Essentially: for philosophers who will tell us about “epistemic norms on attention” or “moral norms on attention”, tell us what you mean by “norm on attention”!

³ Do we also need to define “attention”? We’re not so sure. Even if we don’t know exactly what attention is, the cases below we pick out intuitively pick out *something* related to a pretheoretic notion of “attention”. We want to get clearer on what this thing is, but to do so we don’t need to go completely reductive right now.

⁴ So we can think about *epistemic* styles (Flores 2021), *zetetic* styles (Steglich-Petersen and Varga, 2023), and now *attentional* styles.

⁵ Is *control* necessary for normative responsibility? Some, like Smith and Archer, argue convincingly against this. In many cases, it seems we can be responsible for things like attitudes and passive reactions in virtue of their reflecting our values, even if we do not have control over them.

⁶ In the grid below this is “Good Self-Policing Feminist”.

⁷ The “Conference Attenders” cases are variations on a case from Jordan Bridges (MS)

⁸ In the grid below this is “Aspiring Wife Guy”.

Guided and Unguided Attention

Irving (2016) on Attentional Guidance: An agent A is guided⁹ to focus her attention on some information *i* iff she has two dispositions:

1. A is reliably disposed to focus her attention on *i* and
2. If A's attention isn't focused on *i*, she notices, feels discomfited by, and is thereby disposed to correct this fact.

A's attention is unguided iff there is no particular information toward which A's attention is guided (Irving 2021).

Connor₁ guides his attention *away from* considering women as romantic objects; Connor₂ guides his attention *toward*. To criticize Connor₂'s patterns of attention, we can criticize how he guides his attention. What seems amiss with Connor₁ seems something more like: *why does that occur to you in the first place!?*

Hypothesis: for *some* notion of attentional guidance,¹⁰ intuitions about attentional style can be realized by *patterns of attentional guidance*, and intuitions about attentional temperament can be realized by *patterns of unguided attention* or *patterns of attention before they are guided*. The following diagram pulls apart the difference further:

| | good feminist | on the prowl |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| eyes on the prize | good self-policing feminist | he's a nice guy tho |
| eyes on the ϕ 's | basically Iris Murdoch | aspiring wife guy |

Norms on Attention

- Archer (2022): in *responsibility for salience*, "You are not being held responsible for what you attend to exactly, but for what is and is not salient to you in the first place." This seems straightforwardly to be motivating a norm on unguided attention.
- Whiteley (2023): Philosophers who are women are harmed by *relative attentional surplus* on the property 'women' over the property 'philosopher' in philosophical settings. Is this a complaint about people like Connor₁ or people like Connor₂? Does it matter?¹¹

Norms on attentional guidance and unguided attention might diverge or be strangely disjunctive. In particular: a norm that evaluates unguided or pre-guidance attention cannot invoke relevant notions of guidance — it cannot say "When you notice your attention wandering to X, redirect it." Conversely, norms on attentional guidance come "too late" to apply to any instances of attention that have occurred before the guidance kicks in.¹²

⁹ On Irving's picture, guidedness comes apart from goal-directedness: guided attention need not be guided by a *goal* (e.g. rumination) and goal-directed attention need not be guided (e.g. mind-wandering). The upshot for us: guided attention need not occur in the context of active inquiry.

¹⁰ And we're not confident that Irving has it completely right.

Columns are styles; Rows are temperaments. Top left corner is Connor₁, Top Right is Connor₂.

Connor₃ (bottom left) is a good feminist and *would* redirect his attention if he found that the romantic eligibility of women regularly occurred to him (in fact it does not)

Connor₄ (top right) is both on the hunt for a partner and instinctively attends to conference-goers as women first and philosophers second.

¹¹ Here's a way it doesn't matter: either way, it harms woman philosophers. Here's a way it does matter: it seems like we can better hold people responsible when we identify what in particular went wrong and what can change.

¹² For instance, Connor₁ adheres to the following norm on attentional guidance: "When noticing oneself attending to the eligibility of women at conferences, guide attention away." This norm operationalizes in his mind as one that redirects his attention. It operates when his attention happens to rest on women-qua-eligibility and he notices this fact. It comes too late to apply to pre-guidance attention. Connor₂, in contrast, violates the above norm on guided attention, but tends to adhere to a norm on unguided attention like "don't notice women-qua-eligibility at conferences."