

Attention and Knowledge

(Some ideas from *Knowledge, Dexterity, and Attention*)

Attention provides skillful, selective, and inhibitory “habits of mind” that allows us (and animals) to gain knowledge of the environment. We are acquainted with objects and properties to specific attention routines. These capacities are reliable enough to allow for robust types of joint attention, which grounds collective action and cooperation. Attention thus defines what we know as individuals and through linguistic capacities, what we know as communities of knowledge production. The ultra-specialization of knowledge and the commodification of attention are a direct threat to these capacities for knowledge production through attention.

Since attention can be defined as a set of habits of our minds, a virtue approach to attention is justified. A virtue is a character trait that allows agents to respond in the right way (moral or epistemic) to various situations and difficulties. A virtuous person is good because of these capacities that depend on her training and for which she is responsible. An advantage of a virtue-based, rather than a norm or purely action-based approach to epistemic and moral justification is that proper habituation leads to fluent and automatic behavior that satisfies normative standards. Attention is ideally suitable to make possible such performances.

Attention also relates motivations with goals in a virtuous way. Motivations can be implicit as long as they are integrated with attention routines, which can be unconscious. Epistemic agents are motivated to satisfy representational and cognitive needs and for this, they have attentive skills. The main idea is that virtue theories are based on performances that satisfy normative

standards of excellence. If attention is the main target of evaluation, epistemic achievement can be understood in terms of the epistemic excellences of attention routines.

In epistemology “virtue reliabilism” provides a very balanced theory of knowledge. Externalism doesn’t rely on phenomenal consciousness or access, but it ignores agency. Internalism appeals directly to the conscious agent or to her mental states but it fails to explain how these states relate to success based on ability. Virtue reliabilism combines the advantages of externalism (process reliabilism) with the agential aspects of virtue theories. It also provides a more empirically grounded account of epistemic responsibility.