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ATTENTION NOT SELF

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OXFORD

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Epigraphs

We say: 'I didn't see; my attention was elsewhere. I didn't hear; my attention was elsewhere.' For it is through the attention that one sees and hears. Therefore, even when someone touches us on the back, we perceive it through the attention.

—Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (c. 7th century BCE. BU I.5.3)

And what is the proximate cause for knowledge, for seeing things as they really are? It should be said: attention.

—Saṃyutta Nikāya (c. 3rd century BCE. S.ii.30)

Attention is the centring of consciousness evenly and correctly on a single object; placing is what is meant. Its function is to eliminate distractors.

—Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* (c. 450 CE; Path 84 [iii.3])

The function of consciousness must be to link us attentively to the physical world that contains us . . . Attention ultimately functions as a sort of life-blood for a whole range of mental phenomena; or perhaps better expressed, as a kind of psychic space . . . A system of experience constitutes a continuous ongoing phenomenon which is a sort of circle or centre of awareness. This awareness is the Attention.

—Brian O'Shaughnessy, *Consciousness and the World*
(2002: 84, 277, 290)

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Attention provides a window for consciousness through which we become aware of a small subset of real bindings among a throng of illusory phantom objects.

—Anne Treisman, 'Consciousness and Perceptual Binding' in
A. Cleeremans and C. Frith eds., *The Unity of Consciousness,
Binding, Integration, and Disassociation* (2003: 103)

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X EPIGRAPHS

We should not pretend to find a detached self in all our experiencing and acting . . . we should discard the idea that mindedness implies the presence of a detached self.

—John McDowell, ‘The Myth of the Mind as Detached’ in Joseph Schear ed., *Mind, Reason and Being-in-the World* (2013: 41)
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There is no inner self which does the looking towards or looking away.

—Buddhaghosa, *The Dispeller of Delusion* (c. 450 CE; *Dispeller* 356)

When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no I . . . I am then plunged into the world of attractive and repellant qualities—but me, I have disappeared.

—Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1957: 48, 49)

Attention with effort is all that any case of volition implies.

—William James, *Principles of Psychology* (1891, v. 2: 561)

Shame is my empathetic awareness of the other’s attention . . . leading to decreased self-esteem.

—Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other* (2014: 239)
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Introduction

This book is an exploration of the reorientations that take place when attention is given priority in the analysis of mind. Attention, I will argue, has an explanatory role in understanding the nature of mental action in general and of specific mental actions such as intending, remembering, introspecting, and empathizing. It has a central role in explaining the structure of the phenomenal and of cognitive access, the concept of the intentionality or directedness of the mental, the unity of consciousness, and the epistemology of perception. And attention is also key to an account of the nature of persons and their identity, to the distinction between oneself and others, and to the moral psychology that rests upon it.

I claim that what explains the nature of our consciously active involvement with the world, our freedom from passivity, is attention. This leads me first to reject two ideas in the philosophy of action, agent causalism and the causal theory of action, one very much out of vogue and the other very much in. What I will call the ‘Authorship View’ of self detaches the self from experience and action; it is the main target of Buddhist ‘no-self’ (*anatta*) polemic, more so even than notions of self as permanent substance or substratum. The argument is perhaps straightforward: being the centre of an organized arena of experience and action is a property not of a real but at best of a virtual entity, which as such cannot have any causal powers; so the self cannot be an agent. It cannot be an inactive witness either, because witnessing is meta-cognitive attention and attention is a mental action. The causal theory of action, that an event is an action just in case it is caused by a rationalizing intention which is itself the result of an agent’s motivating beliefs and desires, may provide a sufficient condition for action but cannot constitute a necessary one—not, at least, if one wants to leave room for the idea that much of what happens in the mind is mental action and not mere happening. That is particularly true of attention, considered as a fundamental

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kind of mental action, and it is unfortunate that the influence of the causal theory of action continues in cognitive psychology's enduring attachment to an endogenous/exogenous distinction in theories of attention.

Conscious attention, I will argue, performs two distinct roles in experience, a role of placing and a role of focusing, roles which match a distinction between selection and access endorsed in influential recent theories of attention (Treisman 2003; Huang and Pashler 2007). The intentionality of conscious experience rests on two sorts of attentional action, a *focusing-at* and a *placing-on*, the first lending to experience a perspectival categorical content and the second structuring its phenomenal character. Placing should be thought of more like opening a window for consciousness than as shining a spotlight, and focusing has to do with accessing the properties of whatever the window opens onto. A window is an aperture whose boundaries are defined by what is excluded—in this case, distractors. The claim that attention performs two constitutive roles in perceptual experience is motivated by a need to respect two apparently competing insights about experience, one having to do with its epistemic role in supplying reasons for our beliefs about the world around us, the other to do with the phenomenology of openness to the world. Attention is the glue that binds our sensate, active, and rational natures, that in virtue of which we both find ourselves absorbed by a world of solicitations and also what enables us to access objective features of the entities whose presence solicits us.

The recognition that attention performs these two roles enables me to argue that the epistemology of attention is such that attention provides an immediate improvement to justification, as long as there are no defeaters, and also that when suitably expert attention is sufficient for knowledge. I will argue that attentional justification is an underived epistemic principle, and relate it with a view known as 'Dogmatism' in the epistemology of perception. There is, I will agree, cognitive penetration of attention by beliefs and interests, as well as by past actions, but it is restricted in scope. So attention improves justification, and sometimes, when attention is trained or cultivated, the improvement is such as to deliver knowledge.

A puzzle about attention with a long history will need to be addressed, the puzzle that attention can be captured by events or features and in such cases does not appear to be required for conscious experience. One might argue that there is still conscious attention in these cases, though of a global sort; but the view I defend is rather that attention has a subliminal as well as a

conscious form. Subliminally, attention is the mode of activity of cognitive modules which are responsible for the orienting towards and processing of stimuli, and their deliverance into awareness, as well as for crossmodal integration. A close relationship between attention and working memory is revealed, attention having a large part to play in the gate-keeping, maintaining, and modulating of information in working memory. Attentional orienting is an action with two aspects, a cognitive aspect in the instruction to select a sense modality, and a contribution to consciousness through the embodied intentionality that is a matter of being ‘in touch with’, alive or present to, engaged by, the environment. So orienting has a constitutive role in a first sort of reaching out which consists in being present to the world. It will be important to separate the role of attention within a philosophy of conscious thought from its role within a philosophy of cognitive science, between attention considered as a contributor to conscious experience and attention considered as an activation of cognitive modules.

It is a fundamental feature of the account to be developed here that there are many varieties of conscious attention. A basic (that is to say, irreducible) kind of attention is intending, when one sets oneself to act, a straining or exertion that fills the ‘psychic space’ with resolution. Other basic kinds of attention are introspection, a distinctive manner of attending to the world and not quasi-perceptual awareness of one’s inner life, and mindful attention, a kind of rehearsing or retentive attention. Attention, moreover, is that in virtue of which one does not merely live in the present but also travels mentally into the past and is situated in a social world with others. So another basic variety of attention is past-directed and auto-noetic: it is placed on past events whose properties are retrieved in an act of simulated reliving. In episodic memory, the reliving of experience from one’s personal past, one attends to the past in a particular way, but there is no reduction of the phenomenology of temporal experience to a representation of self as in the past.

Attention can also be placed on others, and this, too, is a basic variety of attention. Now it is you on whom my attention is placed, and what I access in focusing on you are your mental states. I do not experience them directly; rather, your movements provide focal attention with a causal channel: they ‘intimate’ your thoughts to me. It is analogous to listening to another, itself a kind of attention. So empathy, one’s awareness of another in their otherness, is an attentional state, a fact that is phenomenologically evident if one reflects

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on what it is like oneself to be that other on whom another's attention falls. To conceive of a being as other is to conceive of it as the centre of an arena of presence and action in which one may oneself be located, but not at the centre. While phenomenologists have claimed that empathy is a perceptual skill, I will argue instead that empathy is a distinct kind of attention, attention through embodied comportment to the feelings, commitments, and wishes of others as others.

I will draw on the distinction between self and other that is made available by empathetic attention in order to construct an account of persons. Persons are not merely causally connected chains of psycho-physical events, nor are they physical objects that happen to instantiate mental properties: they are loci of value and significance. The boundaries of a person are defined by what is excluded as alien, and so the notion of a person is apophatic rather than forensic. Emotions like shame evidently presuppose that there is such a distinction, for shame is an empathetic access to another's attention on one, and a resultant diminishing of self-esteem.

There is no need to introduce any more robust distinction between self and other than the one implied by a conception of persons as beings with a characteristic capacity for attention. In particular, there is no need to conceive of the distinction as having its basis in a phenomenology of interiority or in an authorial conception of self. There is nothing that could be described as the invariant core of a human being, such as a set of fixed character traits, but one effect of attending is to make some elements more central, at least for a short period. Neither should we think of the narrative identity of a person as requiring one to stand in a relation of sympathy for one's past and future condition: it is enough that one does not feel alienated from them. So the conception of human beings as endowed with the capacity for attention provides an alternative both to strident individualism and to impersonal holism. Attention precedes self in the explanation of what it is to be human, and if there is anything defensible in the concept of self, for example as the expression of a subjectivity that is at once experiential and normative, then it itself must be understood in terms of its relationship to attention. So attention, not self, is what has explanatory priority, and the misapplication of the concept *self* is as the concept of a detached author, the simple origin of willed directives, a concept that forces us to understand the mind in terms of a dichotomy between free voluntary actions and purely passive happenings.

Such, in outline, is the position I describe and defend here. In doing so I will draw extensively on the ideas and arguments of a Theravāda Buddhist philosopher, Buddhaghosa, living in Sri Lanka and writing in Pāli around the fifth century CE. A hugely important figure in the history of philosophy, his ideas would influence conceptions of the human throughout South and Southeast Asia for a millennium and a half, and they continue to do so today. Their philosophical significance, moreover, is global in reach. For Attentionalism, as we call the stance which lends attention centrality in explanatory projects in philosophy, encourages us to rethink many central concepts in the philosophy of mind from an attention-theoretic perspective. Two large bodies of data about attention are available to an aspiring Attentionalist: first, the rich experimental studies of contemporary cognitive psychology; and, second, the information which emerged as a result of meticulous Buddhist introspective observation of the human mind's structure and functioning in the first 1,000 years after the Buddha lived. I will seek to draw these two bodies of evidence together, to study the philosophical implications of their interaction, and thus to form a better appreciation of the reach and limits of the project. An attention-theoretic approach brings important new options to the table in contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science, providing new directions to recent work on the pervasiveness of the mental, embodied cognition, cognitive phenomenology, intersubjectivity, personal identity, and the experience of time.

Michael Dummett recently predicted that 'the best point of contact between philosophers of divergent traditions surely lies in the philosophy of mind' (2010: 150). Philosophy of mind is indeed a transcultural undertaking: the search for a fundamental theory of mind must never limit itself to the intuitions and linguistic practices of any one community of thinkers but should be ready to learn from diverse cultures of investigation into the nature of mind and mind's involvement in world. The Buddhist thinkers whose ideas are examined here had an enormous interest in getting the story right about the mind, and for that reason if no other we should take very seriously what they had to say. One ought not ask ancient texts to bear the weight of greater expectations than they can sustain, but with discretion and sensitivity they can be a source of profound philosophical insight.