

Attunement: On the Cognitive Virtues of Attention

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Abstract

I motivate three claims: Firstly, attentional traits can be cognitive virtues and vices. Secondly, groups and collectives can possess attentional virtues and vices. Thirdly, attention has epistemic, moral, social, and political importance. An epistemology of attention is needed to better understand our social-epistemic landscape, including media, social media, search engines, political polarisation, and the aims of protest. I apply attentional normativity to undermine recent arguments for moral encroachment and to illuminate a distinctive epistemic value of occupying particular social positions. A recurring theme is that disproportionate attention can distort, mislead, and misrepresent even when all the relevant claims are true and well supported by evidence. In the informational cacophony of the internet age, epistemology must foreground the cognitive virtues of attunement.

1. Introduction

Attention matters. It influences our evidence, beliefs, knowledge, and understanding. It alters our conception of the world and our self-assessments, including whether we notice the limits of our understanding. Attunement is deeply tied to skills, values, and epistemic character. And, as I argue, it can be epistemically evaluated.

This essay motivates three claims: Firstly, the normativity of attention is illuminated by virtue epistemology. Given deep connections between character and attention, it is fruitful to study the cognitive virtues of proper attunement (section two). Secondly, groups and collectives can possess virtues and vices of attunement (section three). Thirdly, attention is important for epistemology (see especially section four).¹ I highlight the social and ethical significance of attention for understanding disparate phenomena like media, social media, big tech, search engines, crime reporting, political polarisation, aims of political protest, sexual fantasising, and Lucifer's Fall. I use attentional normativity to undermine recent arguments for moral encroachment, the thesis that moral features of a belief can affect its epistemic justification. And I argue that putative cases of doxastic wrongdoing—

¹ The epistemology of attention is strikingly underexplored within analytic epistemology. In September 2020 a Google Scholar search for “epistemology of attention” generated just 21 results. Most of these were poetry, education, or media studies, rather than philosophy. The rest were the philosophy and psychology of perception (Mole et al, 2011; Watzl 2011). Watzl (2017: 5) describes a similar dearth of research. Research in media studies, communications, informatics, and psychology reveals the importance of attention (Lanham, 2006). And Buddhist, Islamic, and Confucian traditions foreground attention (Ganeri, 2017). Analytic philosophy appeals to the importance of attention in, for example, proper moral conduct and aesthetic appreciation (Herman, 1993: esp. 73-93; Murdoch, 2003: 16-36; Brewer, 2009; Korsmeyer, 2011), Todd, 2014). The lacuna is epistemological theories of attention. Much of the analytic epistemology of attention is relatively new, such as Hookway (2003), Fairweather and Montemeyer (2017), Siegel (2017; ms), and Munton (forthcoming). See also references in later footnotes.

that is, wronging someone by forming beliefs about them—might instead exemplify attentional wronging or attentional vice. Highlighting the various interactions of epistemic and moral normativity can thus help defend purism, the view that whether a belief is epistemically justified depends solely on truth-relevant factors, such as evidence. Proper attunement is a deeply social phenomenon. We should be attuned to what matters; I suggest that the neologistic virtue of “wokeness” can be well-theorised as a virtue of proper attunement.

A recurrent theme is that beliefs, assertions, and various epistemic activities can be epistemically flawed even though all relevant propositions are true and well-supported by evidence. This is because attentional patterns can distort, mislead, and misrepresent even when no claims are false. Relatedly, epistemic and communicative activities can be successful even though they neither uncover nor convey content. The conduct instead precipitates attentional shifts. Section five concludes by emphasising the growing urgency of the epistemology of attention to understand the epistemic landscape of the internet age. Information is plentiful; we must assess information curation. Evaluative frameworks that are limited to whether propositions are true and evidentially supported are inadequate; a virtue epistemology of attention, I argue, provides valuable resources for this endeavour.

2. Proper Attunement is a Virtue

This section posits cognitive virtues of attunement. I highlight central features of character virtues and vices and I show that attentional traits share these features. Note that my use of “attunement” differs from the psychologists’ sense of receptivity to and resonance with another person (Erksine, 1998). Nor do I simply mean having more or less focus, calibrated to the demands of one’s context and capacities, such as paying more attention when confronting difficult tasks and high stakes. And being attuned differs from having a “good attention span”. Proper attunement is paying attention to the right things in the right way, at the right time; being sensitive to significant features and ignoring what should be ignored. It relates to questions of attention span, concentration, and quality of focus but, as will become clear, it is not exhausted by these.

Note too this essay sidesteps contentious disputes about when attention is undue by using paradigm examples.² Fixating on Louvre bathroom signs rather than artworks, for example, typically exhibits improper attention. I do not develop principles for proper attention, but guidelines include that typically one should attend to central and illuminating features rather than peripheral details. Dwelling on risks is typically appropriate to the extent they can be managed, the outcome is severe or probable, or moral emotions are apt. It is typically inappropriate to dwell on farfetched or insignificant possibilities. Attentional patterns should reflect moral considerations and support aims like inquiry and happiness. Staring at Louvre bathrooms signs can be appropriate if you are redesigning them, for example, or are overwhelmed by crowds. Attentional normativity thus reflects manifold contextual features. This multiplicity and intricacy partially explains why virtue theory is well-equipped to theorise proper attentional conduct.

i.) The Significance of Habits

“I wonder whether my daughter gets enough iron”, thinks Ariana. “Vegan diets can be low in iron and Teagen is vegan.” Does Ariana pay too much attention to this question? We cannot tell. Our

² For tractability I focus on appropriate attentional distributions, rather than attentional manner. Both are important. One should be sensitive to a person’s disability, for example, but not transfixed. These can involve similar attentional magnitudes, but a different manner. I also sidestep whether proper attunement is one unified virtue or a cluster. This depends on the individuation conditions of virtues.

information is inadequate. To assess this we need to know, among other things, whether Ariana has reason to worry, what the evidence indicates, and whether iron consumption matters. We also need to know Ariana's broader thought patterns. It might be the first time Ariana has wondered this or she might think about it daily. Ariana illustrates that when assessing a person's attention, the locus of evaluation is often attentional patterns and habits, not instances.

Whether a chemical reaction is part of a living organism depends on its broader spatiotemporal context. This is not simply the epistemic claim that we cannot determine whether a process partially constitutes life without knowing what happened before, after, and around it. The claim is ontological: Whether the reaction is in fact part of life depends on those broader facts. Whether Ariana's thought constitutes improper attention is similarly dependent on diachronic features. Proper attunement depends on temporally extended cognitive conduct.

In some cases, a single instance of attention or inattention can be improper. Visually focusing on disfigurement, even fleetingly, can constitute improper attention, for example, regardless of broader attentional habits. And continuing a causal telephone conversation when a nearby stranger has just fallen from a pier constitutes inappropriate disregard. Even if you can't help them, their falling warrants attention. These examples illustrate that the loci of attentional normativity are not always attentional patterns. But typically attentional normativity depends on patterns and habits. Ariana's daughter is irked by a particular instance of her mum's wondering about her iron intake because her mum thinks of it too often. There is usually nothing wrong with isolated instances of wondering; an instance's badness stems from broader trajectories, habits, and traits. This accords with other virtue notions. Whether actions manifest virtues or vices typically depends on patterns of acting.³ In some cases, an action qualifies as virtuous or vicious regardless of the broader pattern, but typically an instance of, say, not donating is not by itself a mistake; the mistake is located in miserly habits.

ii.) Interrelated Facets of Agency

Questions about proper attunement arise for diverse aspects of agency, including perceptual attention, occurrent beliefs, and what a person wonders, daydreams, cogitates, questions, doubts, and dismisses. Attention determines which possibilities a person takes seriously and which environmental features they are sensitive to, monitor for, and neglect. Attunement affects—and is partly constituted by—patterns of inquiry, communication, and forgetting. The heterogeneity of agential capacities that facilitate and govern attention indicates deep links between attentional normativity and cognitive character. To see this, contrast attunement with aspects of cognitive normativity that are more plausibly severed from character. Whether a belief constitutes knowledge, for example, is plausibly theorised by the characterological resources of virtue epistemology or by rival non-characterological frameworks like evidentialism or coherentism. Proper attention, by contrast, seems inherently, ineliminably linked to character and thus the distinctive purview of virtue theory. In other words, virtue theory is well-positioned to limn attentional normativity because attention is essentially interlaced with heterogenous but integrated parts of character.

Some attentional features of a person are automatic, such as finding sudden noises salient. Some are habitual or associative, such as associating Ozzy Osbourne with bats. Others are deliberate and controlled, such as when one focuses on maths. We can use interactions amongst these levels to enhance virtues of attunement. That is, the fact that attentional traits arise at different levels partly

³ Herman (2007; 1993); Garthoff (2015).

explains their plasticity. We can consciously bring something to mind repeatedly, so it later becomes habitual or automatic. We can deliberately learn more about Osbourne to weaken the association with bats. Someone might be unattuned to signs of boredom in listeners and so consciously work to notice them. The signs consequently become more salient to her and no longer require deliberate attention. She hones her virtues of attunement. Advertisers exploit the relative ease of changing perceptual salience to shape deeper attentional habits. I return to this in section four. Interplay amongst cognitive levels, and their power in cultivating and corroding virtue, is characteristic of virtue.

Stemming from this heterogeneity, attentional patterns can be assessed in many ways. The patterns and underlying dispositions can be rational, reasonable, apt, judicious, useful, creative, misleading, distorting, unwise, harmful, or destructive. They can reflect well or poorly on the person's character. They can contribute to, and partially constitute, wisdom. Their effects can also be assessed, including morally, epistemically, and prudentially. This evaluative richness is indicative of characterological assessment, rather than rival evaluative frameworks, like those centred on consequences, reliability, or evidential probability. And virtue theory can help unify the various grounds, roles, and evaluations of attention.

iii.) Developmental Features: Education, Emotion, and Understanding

Attentional patterns can be improved or worsened over time, both deliberately and otherwise. Like other characterological dispositions, they are shaped by community and culture, including in ways that are difficult to notice. Denizens of a sports-loving culture will typically think of sport relatively often, for example, compared to people from other cultures. Sport-inspired metaphors and explanations will be cognitively accessible for them and, since attention is contrastive, they may think of other topics less. Sport's cognitive centrality can go unnoticed and unquestioned because it accords with the person's cognitive cultural background.

Education affects attunement. Aims of education include steering attention and developing concentration capacities, and people are more disposed to notice something after learning about it. And, conversely, attunement affects education. Developing skills and expertise requires attending and we typically discover more about salient phenomena. Virtuosity and expertise are sometimes partly constituted by the ability to perform well without devoting attention to the task. But reaching this stage typically requires investing considerable attention. Theorising attention illuminates educational injustices because, for example, one can fail to notice educational lacunas unless those topics are made salient. A person might never learn west African history, for example, yet never notice this.⁴

A central aim of education is enhancing understanding. Understanding involves the apprehension of coherence-making connections amongst facts; the person who understands sees how things hang together.⁵ A topic's salience across diverse cognitive contexts fosters the grasping of explanatory connections and thereby enhances understanding. Suppose Lissa cares about climate change. Since emotions direct attention, global warming is thereby salient to Lissa more frequently. When other topics, such as food, gifts, education, or generational wealth inequality arise, Lissa is more disposed to concurrently consider climate change. The topics cognitively coappear. These attentional patterns help Lissa forge explanatory links—whether accurate or erroneous—between climate change and these

⁴ I am grateful to Mark Alfano and Zoe Johnson King for helpful discussions on these topics.

⁵ See Kvanvig (2003), Elgin (2006), Gardiner (2012).

other topics. Since appreciating such connections is constitutive of understanding, Lissa's attentional patterns aid understanding.

Love, guilt, and trauma are powerful influences on attention. They thus can aid understanding and can distort. The conception of understanding sketched here helps explain why. The person seized by love, guilt, or trauma has their attention directed towards a topic across varied cognitive contexts, which causes them to forge novel connections, whether insightful or illusive, between that topic and others. Phobias and hatred distort a person's understanding, as the attentional forces of emotion help forge the links characteristic of understanding, but inaptly.⁶

Standpoint epistemology emphasises that occupying marginalised social positions affords distinctive epistemic benefits.⁷ The potency of attention for enhancing understanding helps illuminate how. The marginalised person's attention is drawn to the same topic, such as police brutality or wealth inequality, in diverse social and cognitive contexts. This process helps forge coherence-making connections amongst apparently disparate topics. Indeed the epistemology of attention suggests an epistemic value that arises from occupying particular social circumstances and cannot be acquired by testimony. Attentional patterns and dispositions are diachronic. If having appropriate attentional patterns or traits has epistemic value, this value may ineliminably require the unfolding of time. It is not something that can be gained second-hand by, for example, deferring to the marginalised person.⁸

iv.) Feedback Loops: Values, Character, and Attention

Attention is integrated with other features of a person's character and values. Attentional patterns manifest, shape, and reveal epistemic and moral character.⁹ Suppose Carrie tends to notice the expensiveness of people's outfits. Recall attention is contrastive. Character can be revealed by attending to a person's clothing instead of, say, their wit or sadness. And, as with education, the connection is bidirectional. Character and attentional patterns form a feedback loop. Habitually noticing clothing leads to further sartorial beliefs, inferences, and predictions. Carrie's sensitivity to clothing can thus reveal and strengthen her social acuity. She will perceive patterns—perceptively or spuriously—between clothing and personality or social status. She regards clothing as significant *because* she notices it. Sartorial choices increasingly feature in Carrie's evidentiary and explanatory inferences. Ignoring a person's clothing could accordingly seem like, and indeed *become*, the epistemic error of neglecting evidence.

Attention is potent. Clothing choice does not merely *seem* more evidentially and socially important if people attend to it. Mere attention can render something important, which fuels further attention. Attentional feedback loops can be seen, for example, in attention to celebrities' political opinions. Those opinions matter when, and because, people attend to them.¹⁰ This illustrates how attentional patterns shape what people *should* pay attention to. Attention snowballs.

⁶ On the epistemology of emotion directing attention, see Elgin (1999: 146-169), Goldie (2004), Brady (2010; 2013). On affect directing aesthetic attention, see Korsmeyer (2011), Todd (2014).

⁷ Note that standpoint epistemology is characterised by stronger claims and standpoint epistemologists offer various explanations for the epistemic benefits of social marginalisation (Toole, 2019; forthcoming; Saint-Croix, forthcoming). Thanks to Renee Bolinger, Catherine Elgin, Amy Flowerree, and Cat Saint-Croix for conversations on these topics.

⁸ On some views, character traits are merely dispositional and do not require time unfolding.

⁹ Scanlon (1998: 39ff.); Bommarito (2013).

¹⁰ See also Archer et al (2020) on celebrity political opinions.

Sometimes attentional feedback loops are simply distorting. A person frequently exposed to news stories about violent crime committed by immigrants will likely overestimate the prevalence of such crime. They may foster increasing resentment of immigration and erroneously centre such crime in their explanations of other social maladies. The constant attention restructures their values, character, evidence, and thought patterns.¹¹

Attentional patterns can either accord with or conflict with a person's broader character, values, and commitments. This too is characteristic of virtue-relevant conduct. Suppose Arthur disproportionately notices whether women are slender, for example. Theorising disproportionate attention lies beyond the scope of this essay, but suppose the pattern far outweighs Arthur's attention to men's figures and the actual importance of physique. Arthur's attentional disposition can clash with his broader feminist commitments. But attentional patterns can qualify as "out of character" only to a point. Absent special explanation, a person cannot uncharacteristically be late on most occasions. It is instead characteristic; they lack punctuality. Similarly, a person cannot uncharacteristically daydream about fame if those thoughts are constant and continual. Our habits become us.

v.) Excellences of Character: Attunement and Other Virtues

Possessing good attentional traits—the virtues of attunement—is not simply a matter of following clear, determinate rules. Attunement requires responsiveness to subtle, hidden, abstruse, competing, or multi-faceted features whilst navigating disparate, complex, changing contexts. And so evaluating attunement requires virtue notions like excellence, competence, discernment, judiciousness, and intellectual dexterousness, which indicates attentional traits are characterological.

Attention plays cardinal roles in possessing and employing other virtues.¹² This may include, for example, modesty as not dwelling on one's good qualities and gratitude as focusing on one's good fortune. Virtuous forgiveness involves not dwelling on being wronged. Perhaps virtuous friendship includes focusing on friends' admirable qualities rather than their vices. (Note I do not endorse this claim because good friends attend to vices to help friends improve and disproportionate attention can be distorting, even when all the beliefs are true.)

Indeed proper attunement facilitates and guides other virtues. Attending is a prerequisite for properly assessing and responding to almost every context. Virtuous friendship requires understanding and helping friends, for example, which requires perceiving and appreciating their foibles, strengths, values, challenges, and so on. It requires noticing patterns, including ones they may themselves overlook. Suppose someone often complains about their job and starts pining for their hometown. A good friend might appreciate the significance of these apparently unrelated facts and be attuned to the connection: Their friend is considering—perhaps subconsciously—moving home. But this requires noticing subtleties. Similarly, being a virtuous teacher, researcher, or nurse requires attunement to features of the professional environment. Perhaps, then, attentional virtues are meta-virtues, prerequisites for, and constituents of, other virtues.

¹¹ Munton (forthcoming); Watzl (2017).

¹² For insightful discussion, see Chappell and Yetter-Chappell (2016) and Bommarito (2013).

3. Collective Virtues of Attention

Section two argued that proper attunement is fruitfully cast as a cognitive virtue. This section posits that groups can possess attentional virtues and vices. Since this essay already covers many topics, I sidestep contentious discussions about the nature of collective agency and virtue.¹³ I do this by focusing on less controversial examples. Readers who doubt collectives can have cognitive virtues are unlikely to be convinced by what follows, but I hope they find something of value in the essay, nonetheless, in its attention to the epistemology of attention. This sidestepping is itself an exercise in directing attention. I hope to avoid the mires of theorising group agency because I have different aims, namely foregrounding normative contours of attention and suggesting the reasons for conceiving of attunement as a virtue indicate that attentional virtues and vices are attributable to groups, institutions, and perhaps societies.

i.) Socially Distributed Attention

Section two argued that whether attention is appropriate can depend on broader attentional patterns. In the case of Teagen's mother, the loci of normativity are patterns and traits, not any particular attentional instance. Attentional patterns also emerge across people. Suppose Teagen mentions her veganism on Facebook. If almost everyone who sees Teagen's post wonders whether Teagen receives enough iron, this constitutes disproportionate attention. As with her mother, plausibly this excess is not located in individual instances. It emerges from the aggregate.

For individual Facebook friends—or some, many, or most of them—the attentional instance is plausibly not inappropriate. There is typically nothing wrong with an individual's sometimes wondering about veganism and iron deficiency. Unlike with belief, there is considerable latitude in what we may wonder.¹⁴ And there are reasons to wonder. It is not outlandish that a vegan has low iron. Non-heme, plant-based iron is relatively hard to absorb. Yet the resulting pattern of socially-distributed attention is disproportionate. Society unduly fixates on putative inadequacies of vegan nutrition, especially given that vegans are typically nutritionally healthier and better informed than non-vegans and given the relative neglect of health risks of non-veganism.¹⁵

Detractors might insist that emergent socially-distributed attentional patterns cannot be improper unless the individuals' attention is improper. They might argue individual Facebook friends are being nosy, for example. Perhaps Teagen's nutrition is not their business because they won't affect it or because their attention stems from ignorance. In response: Firstly, it is unduly judgemental to condemn these Facebook friends. Many exhibit concern for Teagen. We are free to wonder about all kinds of things, including about topics we cannot control and lack expertise about. Undisciplined wonderings and considering diverse objects of passing thought are essential for creativity, curiosity, and enhancing understanding. And some Facebook friends might worry precisely because they understand nutrition. Secondly, readers can themselves devise an example they find compelling. The

¹³ Lahroodi (2018) discusses how requirements on collective agency and virtue affect collective virtue attributions.

¹⁴ There are epistemological normative conditions on non-doxastic attention. That is, wondering, daydreaming, imagining, considering, hoping, and similar can be epistemically inappropriate. But doxastic attitudes—belief, doubt, certainty, suspension—are more epistemically constrained.

¹⁵ Non-vegans face higher risks of cancer and cardio-vascular disease and, according to the National Institutes of Health, about 65% of the global population develops lactose intolerance (Orenstein, 2017). Presumably the undue attention to putative risks of veganism is partly fuelled by animal farming industries and individuals' moral unease about their own omnivorism. Note I do not claim veganism is morally or nutritionally superior.

structure is that some, most, or all individuals do not exhibit a flaw in their attentional pattern by noticing or considering something, but the aggregate pattern is disproportionate.

ii.) Group Attentional Traits

Teagen's Facebook friends are not a group agent or promising candidate for attributions of group-level virtue or vice. The example simply illustrates how attentional patterns arise amongst people synchronically, in addition to intrapersonally diachronically. To investigate group-level virtues of attunement, it will be helpful to consider a paradigm group agent, such as a small deliberative decision-making group.

InvestyGate. A six-person investment group, InvestyGate, discusses whether to invest in AmaRanch, a small amaranth farm in Kentucky. It looks like a safe, lucrative investment that will outperform rival investment opportunities. One group member, Wayne, raises a worry. If it rains torrentially throughout June, Wayne notes, the crop would be ruined. He is correct that a heavy June rainfall would render AmaRanch unprofitable. The investors discuss the possibility briefly. Kentucky rainfall is typically low and there is no special reason to worry this year. They move onto other considerations, such as whether there will be sufficient labour to harvest the autumn crop and whether recent increases in farro sales helps or hinders amaranth sales.

In this case, the group exhibited the cognitive virtue of attunement. They were sensitive to relevant considerations, paid them appropriate attention, and properly situated them in deliberations. They did not dwell on Wayne's worry.

There is latitude in proper attention. Given the unlikeliness of crop-destroying rainfall, it would probably have been perfectly reasonable for InvestyGate to have never considered it, just as they did not discuss other distant but possible risks, such as the farmer's negligently allowing her insurance to lapse before a crop-destroying fire. But, given this latitude, it was also perfectly reasonable to discuss it and move on.

Wayne's raising the concern can alter the normative landscape of attention. Once Wayne raises the possibility of excessive rainfall, perhaps the group should briefly discuss it and merely waving it aside would be negligent. His mentioning the possibility may constitute evidence that it is not farfetched and is attention-worthy. But had Wayne not raised the topic, the group can permissibly never consider it. If so, this illustrates a way that paying attention to a topic affects epistemic normativity.¹⁶

iii.) Non-Summativism

The group might exhibit virtues of well-calibrated attention even if one member fails to. Suppose Wayne doesn't let it drop. He researches weather trends and—even though the data show crop-destroying rainfall is rare—he reraises the possibility. In some such cases, Wayne thereby allots the possibility an unreasonable amount of attention and exhibits the epistemic vice of improper attunement. But the group itself can be nonetheless virtuous. Indeed, they can be better attuned in virtue of Wayne's individually disproportionate attention. Suppose rain is a non-negligible risk that they would have disregarded but, because of Wayne's fixation, they instead allot appropriate attention.

¹⁶ Elsewhere I suggest that mere attention can render error possibilities relevant and so undermine knowledge. Gardiner (forthcoming-b) argues this is an epistemic mechanism of gaslighting, conspiracy theories, and other epistemic injustice. Gardiner (forthcoming-a) questions whether society-wide attention to the possibilities that rape accusers are lying can render those error possibilities relevant. See also David Lewis's (1996) "rule of attention".

The group could instead exhibit group-level *improper* attunement. They could, with Wayne, dwell on the possibility over multiple meetings. They might disregard other factors, such as consumer trends and alternative investments. Wayne's rainfall fixation impairs group attunement.

Institutions other than deliberative groups also exhibit attentional patterns that emerge at the collective level. Suppose many scientists research male-patterned heart disease, but very few research female-patterned heart disease, for example. This is disproportionate attention. An individual researcher might dedicate years to a particular kind of male-patterned heart disease. Plausibly her attention is not improper; it is not attentionally inappropriate or vicious for a scientist to be engrossed in specialised research. Research requires specialisation. But the scientific community's pattern is improper.

A group might exhibit a well-balanced attentional distribution precisely because each group member is differently fixated. In some cases the individuals' attentional dispositions are irrational, yet the group functions well in virtue of this skewed attentional distribution. This suggests the virtues of attunement are non-summativ: A group can lack the collective virtue even though each member's attention is virtuous. Suppose every doctor hired into a cardiology department virtuously specialises in an interesting and important kind of heart disease, for example, but the overall group wholly neglects female-patterned heart disease. Conversely, a group can possess attunement even when no member does. Suppose each InvestyGate member is unduly gripped by a different investment opportunity and neglect alternatives, but in discussions the group thereby focuses adroitly. Indeed the undue attention of individuals yields deep insights and ensures each prospect is discussed.

Note that proper attentional distributions do not suffice for virtue; the group may lack appropriate attentional dispositions and motivations, for example.¹⁷ Note too that skewed attentional distributions can be vicious even if the aggregate amount is appropriate. Suppose one member of InvestyGate focuses wholly on gender justice, to the exclusion of other topics, and no other member ever considers it. The group lacks virtuous attentional distribution, even if the amount of attention is unimpeachable. A social virtue epistemology of attention can limn these normative contours further.

iv.) Levels of Attentional Infrastructure

Section two argued that attentional traits exhibit features characteristic of virtue and vice. These features included bidirectional links between attunement and education, skills, values, other virtues, and other character traits, for example, and that being properly attuned requires navigating complex, nuanced, and changing features of one's cognitive environment. Collective attentional traits likewise exhibit these features, which suggests there are collective attentional virtues and vices. I will not sketch group examples of each property described in section two. I instead focus on just one, namely that attentional traits arise from heterogeneous, interlocking agential components. This property illuminates the attention-shaping power of big tech and social nudging (sections 4.4 and 4.5).

Individuals' attentional dispositions arise from myriad aspects of agency, including perception, intellection, and imagination. Attentional patterns arise for features that are automatic, habitual, subconscious, associative, reflective, deliberate, and so on, and can be grounded in extended environmental conditions. We use connections amongst these facets to alter attentional habits. Collective attentional dispositions are similarly heterogeneous. InvestyGate's attention arises from, and

¹⁷ Thanks to Ning Fan for raising this issue.

is constituted by, group discussions, correspondence, conversations with outsiders, individuals' thought patterns, and so on. Rainfall estimates could appear in minutes, memos, agendas, action items, whiteboards, shared electronic folders, silly jokes, or offhand comments. Funding and person-hours can be assigned to researching rainfall. A consultant could be hired. These media direct and constitute attention.

Funding, space, and time are key attentional resources for most collective agents. But, of course, different collective agents have varied kinds of resources. Attentional resources can include a newspaper's column inches, an art gallery's wall space, and a university's campus layout. Is the library the focal point, for example, or the football stadium? And which departments are relegated to campus peripheries? Accessibility of information and similar abstract features of social infrastructure determine—and can constitute—attention. Search engine rankings are a potent attentional force.

Substrata of attention can remain relatively segregated. InvestyGate might discuss rainfall at length, for example, but not keep written records or perceive connections between weather and other topics. Perhaps rainfall is neglected when discussing a similar farm. Alternatively they might integrate the topic. Their newfound sensitivity to the significance of rainfall on farming means those same concerns become salient in novel contexts. The group's attention helps them forge new connections. Such features constitute the group's cognitive character. They affect the group's epistemic position, including its understanding, judgement, knowledge, evidence, sensitivity, reliability, expertise, and confidence. As with individual agents, if the group can be confident it hasn't overlooked important considerations, it is owing to integration amongst the manifold parts of attention infrastructure. These attentional features underwrite the group's attentional virtues and vices.

v.) Group Action and Character

As with individual attention, group attention is deeply linked to education, values, and character. These links are multi-directional and have feedback loops. A group's values shape its attentional patterns, for example, which in turn shape its values. And, as with individuals' attentional traits, an instance or pattern of attention can conflict with the group's broader values and character. InvestyGate might become uncharacteristically fixated on rainfall, for example, whereas typically they adeptly proportion attention.

Detractors might doubt the possibility of divergence between a group's values and its actions, including its attentional patterns. According to this objection, whilst an individual's values can diverge from her actions, a corporation's values are wholly determined by its actions. There is no space for disparity to arise. If correct, this closes the gap between group attentional patterns and putative character traits. This threatens a virtue-theoretic treatment of group attentional dispositions because, if correct, groups cannot have attentional virtues and vices, but merely attentional patterns.¹⁸

In response I concede that—compared to individuals—groups might be relatively constrained in their capacity to act out of character. Whereas an individual's valuing might be constituted by their history, emotions, motivations, hopes, thoughts, and other psychological and somatic states, an institution's valuing is more fully determined by its actions. But although slimmer, there is nonetheless a gap between a group's actions and its values and character. This gap is revealed by counterfactuals. Suppose researching female-patterned heart disease attracted accolades and career advancement. An

¹⁸ See also Siegel (ms). I am grateful to Dennis Whitcomb for discussion on these topics.

ambitious research group, HeartLab, might devote considerable attention to the topic. But this behaviour does not determine HeartLab's values. If incentives were removed or better elsewhere, HeartLab's focus would shift. This illustrates a group's attentional patterns can diverge from its values and character.

Detractors might respond that HeartLab's attention and values do not diverge because its attentional patterns accord with a stable disposition to value careerism. In response, I grant HeartLab acts in accord with careerist values and traits, but they also—because of incentives—invest considerable attention towards women's health despite not caring about it.

Group's attentional patterns can also diverge from values and character simply because the group functions poorly. I thus hope to have motivated that collectives can possess attentional virtues and vices and these traits merit further investigation.

4. The Ethics and Politics of Attention

This section applies the virtue theoretic resources outlined above to highlight the importance of the epistemology of attention for understanding moral and social phenomena. A theme throughout the section is that attentional normativity requires epistemological frameworks beyond assessing whether claims are true and supported by evidence.

i.) True Yet Distorting

Attention can render information misleading or inapt even when every claim is true. For audio, visual, print, and internet-based media, attentional patterns are determined and constituted by features like colour, shape, size, font, links, layout, volume, time, and motion. Suppose a news site reports crime. The reports are accurate and carefully reflect overall ratios of crimes committed by immigrants and non-immigrants. But the site foregrounds the former; those reports are higher and have larger fonts. Since the website's claims are true and the ratios proportionate, criticising this news site requires evaluative frameworks from the epistemology of attention.

An organisation can hide detrimental information by not releasing it. But sometimes releasing information is legally required because of, for example, litigation or transparency laws. The organisation can instead bury the information within a camouflaging informational cacophony. This practice—known as “document dumping”—is similar to politicians strategically releasing damaging information during busy news cycles and on Friday afternoons. The released information is within the recipient's view, but not their grasp. It is difficult to criticise this epistemic misconduct using epistemological frameworks that focus on whether claims and assertions are true and evidentially justified. Assessing such practices requires frameworks in the epistemology of attention.

Search engine results do not present themselves as accurate or inaccurate, but rather ordered by relevance or anticipated value to the searcher. Resulting rankings can distort even if every search result and linked website contains only accurate claims. Suppose, for example, that Googling “Guantánamo Bay” produces results about holiday accommodations above results about the infamous detention centre. The relative spatial location is epistemically inapt because it reflects reality poorly. Social virtue

epistemology of attention offers resources for evaluating the power and influence of big tech companies.¹⁹

ii.) Political Polarisation Despite Full Agreement

The epistemology of attention illuminates political polarisation. Two individuals or groups could have similar beliefs and credences, and yet polarise as a matter of emphasis and attentional patterns. One worldview foregrounds crime and the other poverty, for example, in thought patterns, including associative dispositions, inferential habits, and time spent on topics. Attention-based polarisation is not captured by existing attempts to taxonomise and understand the epistemology of political polarisation, such as Talisse (2021), because attention-based, epistemic polarisation can happen even when people have identical belief content and confidence levels. This polarisation is insidious, entrenched, and hard to theorise and remedy because it is difficult to notice, measure, test, and criticise divergent attentional patterns, as compared to divergent beliefs.

iii.) Attentional Vice, Attentional Wronging, and Moral Encroachment

Attention has moral import. Suppose InvestyGate’s Wayne continually raises the question of whether InvestyGate’s secretary is embezzling funds, for example, despite lacking evidence. This can morally wrong her. But, importantly, this wrong hinges on Wayne’s attentional patterns, not his beliefs. He might, after all, believe she is innocent. “Merely” asking questions can cause bad epistemic and practical downstream effects, such as when “mere” question-raising stoked early vaccine skepticism. But plausibly question-asking can *itself* constitute attentional wrongdoing or flawed attentional conduct, even aside from downstream causal effects.

Recently theorists have argued that beliefs can wrong.²⁰ Moral encroachment holds that moral features of a belief can affect its epistemic justification. Some adherents also endorse the principle of doxastic wrongdoing, which holds that beliefs about a person can morally wrong them, even when those beliefs are supported by good evidence, in virtue of the belief’s content. These views are motivated by examples of, for example, believing someone is staff based on their race. They challenge the “purist” orthodoxy that, roughly speaking, whether a belief is epistemically justified depends only on evidence and other truth-relevant factors. Focusing on attentional normativity helps rebut arguments for moral encroachment and doxastic wrongdoing.

Rima Basu motivates moral encroachment and doxastic wrongdoing by noting that “We care how we feature in the thoughts of other people and we want to be regarded in their thoughts in the right way.” But thinking isn’t limited to belief. It includes characterological features, such as patterns of attention and inquiry. Emphasising this helps reconcile Basu’s contention that thoughts can wrong with the purist claim that a belief’s epistemic justification doesn’t depend on practical or moral factors. That is, we can countenance many epistemic and moral cognitive missteps without denying purism. Pointing to these missteps can defend purism because many putative examples of moral encroachment and doxastic wrongdoing exemplify flawed *attentional* conduct and character, rather than flawed *beliefs*.

Moral encroachment is typically motivated via vignettes of, for instance, racial profiling. Vignette protagonists can commit multiple errors concurrently, and so locating purist-compatible errors is

¹⁹ I am grateful to Jessie Munton for conversations on these topics.

²⁰ On doxastic wrongdoing, see Basu and Schroeder (2019) and Basu (2021). On moral encroachment, see Bolinger (2020a; 2020b) and Gardiner (2018; forthcoming-b).

consistent with the vignettes also illustrating moral encroachment. But the point is dialectical: We can respond to arguments for moral encroachment by diagnosing flaws exhibited by the protagonist that are compatible with purism. This appeal to attentional normativity exemplifies how focusing on ethical and epistemic questions beyond whether a particular belief is justified by current evidence helps defend purism against challenges from moral encroachment. Purism is a narrow claim about the epistemic justification of individual beliefs at a time; it is thus consistent with myriad rich intersections of ethics and epistemology. These rich normative ecotones can explain the vignettes that motivate moral encroachment within a purist framework.²¹ And virtue theory allows identifying flaws and other places for improvement without decrying it a wrong, that is, wholly prohibited conduct.

Attentional wrongings manifest in manifold ways. Suppose two InvestyGate colleagues were formerly married and one frequently mentions this during meetings. Within InvestyGate, the fact is common knowledge, entailed by background evidence, and sometimes—for recusals, for example—relevant. Yet drawing gratuitous attention to this common knowledge might constitute an attentional wrong. Attentional normativity must distinguish, of course, amongst merely attending to a topic, deliberately drawing your own attention to it, and steering other people’s attention. Some cognitive conduct, such as indulging in inappropriate sexual or violent fantasies, might qualify as attentional wrongs or flawed attentional conduct even if never disclosed to others. Perhaps sexually fantasising about a person who clearly doesn’t want you to can manifest flawed character, for example. But one must be cautious about morally assessing thoughts. Sexual harassment is often glossed as “unwanted sexual attention”, but the term “attention” is ambiguous between behavioural and mental conduct. This raises the spectre of sexual harassment merely by thinking about somebody. Neither of these potential sources of cognitive wrongdoing are best understood as doxastic wrongdoing; the central phenomena are not belief.

Indeed plausibly attentional normativity offers a unified explanation of various (putative) wrongs or flaws of several doxastic and non-doxastic cognitive propositional attitudes and conduct, such as hoping, fearing, expecting, suspecting, doubting, imagining, daydreaming, ignoring, forgetting, overlooking, and believing that *p*. Suppose a parent fervently hopes their child becomes a talented pianist, for example.²² *If* the hope itself can wrong the child, or be flawed, it could be because the parent attends to the ambition too much. The connections between a person’s values and attentional dispositions, discussed in section two, helps explain why people care what others attend to.²³

iv.) Agenda Setting, Big Tech, and the Social Infrastructures of Attention

This section motivates two claims: If attentional patterns are invisible, the underlying attentional *infrastructure* is even more so. And big tech companies yield both attention-shaping powers. That is, we recognise that big tech determines what people pay attention to—the topics of attention—but big tech also sculpts the underlying attentional infrastructure that determines these attentional dispositions.

Wayne from InvestyGate illustrates that an individual can influence the topics of group attention. But Wayne can also shape his group’s foundational attentional infrastructure. Suppose InvestyGate’s

²¹ See Gardiner (2018; forthcoming-b) for further discussion of this dialectic.

²² Basu (ms) discusses these kinds of cases. To help isolate the normativity of the hope itself, one might assume the hope neither causes nor arises from poor parental behaviour.

²³ The final sentence is ambiguous; I endorse both readings. This discussion benefitted from a series of conversations on intersections of ethics and epistemology with Rima Basu, Renee Bolinger, Amy Flowerree, Liz Jackson, Steph Leary, and Cat Saint-Croix. I am grateful.

meetings lacked agendas and Wayne introduced that structural resource for guiding attention, for example. Agenda setting is a powerful role. The minute-writer steers resources corresponding to group memory. Agenda setting determines group attention. Attention may be more foundational than values and judgements, since it determines what topics one has judgements about. Like many powerful roles, agenda setting can be invisible. Contours of attention—like air we breathe—are hard to notice. Like other foundational aspects of cognition and social infrastructure, attentional patterns are typically noticed only when defective. Likewise, with breath.

Big tech shapes attentional patterns. Sometimes an attentional instance or pattern does not stem from a stable disposition, but instead reflects external forces. Suppose Teagen the vegan’s Facebook comment was adjacent to adverts for iron supplements or an *Iron Man* movie on people’s Facebook feeds. Her friends’ wondering whether Teagen is iron deficient might stem from features of their cognitive environment—the salience of iron—rather than internal dispositions to wonder about vegan nutrition. But environments shape attentional dispositions and the proximity of iron supplement adverts to vegan content could be deliberate. If iron supplement adverts appear frequently, this fuels dispositions to think about micronutrition and associate iron deficiency with veganism. Advertisers exploit the relative ease of steering perceptual salience to shape deeper attentional character.²⁴

But more than this, big tech also shapes underlying attentional architecture. The Facebook corporation determined whether to have a separate “friends feed” and “current affairs feed” or to amalgamate them, for example, and users barely notice or question this decision about the architecture of social attention. They are currently merged; one feed serves both functions. An epistemological assessment of this decision lies beyond the scope of this essay, but the one-feed structure may fuel fake news, political polarisation, and the increasing dominance of social groups, rather than journalists, in shaping news exposure. Theorising the epistemology of attention helps distinguish these two distinct powers of big tech.

v.) Progressive Nudges and the Aims of Political Protest

One can leverage different levels of attentional scaffolding to adjust attentional traits; we do this for individuals, groups, institutions, and societies. Female-patterned heart disease is under-researched. Individual scientists can begin to remedy this by asking questions about women’s physiology at conferences, featuring female-patterned heart disease on course syllabi, or tweeting about the relative dearth of research. A medical association can direct attention by funding research, administering prizes, or hosting conferences. Journalists could foreground research on female-patterned heart disease and departments can encourage junior scientists by highlighting career benefits of this underexplored area. Shifting these various attentional levels alters overall attentional patterns.

Institutional features like newsletters, special issues, op-eds, and social media posts aim to shape knowledge and incentives. But they cannot be fully understood without focusing on their attentional aims. This is because many tweets and op-eds are not best understood as attempts to inform or incentivise: The audience either already knows, doesn’t care, or won’t remember the content. And more effective educational and motivational tools are available. The authors usually know all this. Yet tweeting (and similar) can nonetheless be effective because the author aims to influence attentional patterns, rather than inform. By creating instances of attention to female-patterned heart disease,

²⁴ On the attention economy, see Lanham (2006), Wu (2017) and Williams (2018). Thanks to Mark Alfano and Dennis Whitcomb for discussion.

individuals can help restructure overall attentional dispositions. The field thereby becomes more inclined towards noticing female-patterned heart disease and its research lacuna. The term “noticeboard” is telling; noticeboards often steer attention more effectively than they inform.

The virtue theoretic contours of attention illuminate the aims of protest. Chappell and Yetter-Chappell (2016) argue that inaction in the face of salient need is more monstrous than inaction concerning non-salient need.²⁵ They consider Peter Singer’s influential comparison of a child drowning in a nearby pond and one starving abroad. Regardless of the overall choiceworthiness of the two omissions, Chappell and Yetter-Chappell argue, inaction about the former exhibits worse moral character.

This insight illuminates the forces of protests. Protests can be effective. But how? They are typically not effective ways to educate or inform. Protest banners and chants might be humorous or build camaraderie, but they are feeble at transferring knowledge. And protests seem ineffective at directly affecting observer’s conative attitudes. Observers do not typically revise their motivations or beliefs about animal cruelty by seeing a protest.²⁶ Learning about animal cognition or talking with a friend is more effective at these aims. But protest is nonetheless effective: It directs attention. It reminds us that Guantanamo Detention Camp is still open, Washington DC lacks congressional representation, and polar bears face extinction. We already knew these things, but we weren’t thinking about them. Roadblocks, celebrities, stunts, humorous signs, outlandish outfits, danger, and nudity can be effective protest techniques, not because they communicate relevant information but because they command attention. They attract media coverage, for example. Drawing attention to a need renders inaction more monstrous. People are motivated to not feel or appear monstrous. Thus the influence of attention on character virtues helps explain the efficacy of protest. “What-about-ism” in political discourse is similarly an exercise in directing attention. It directs attention away from an issue, which can make inaction seem—or be—less monstrous.

vi.) Wokeness, Liberation, and Attentional Injustice

Flaws in attentional distributions are often easily overlooked because default attentional patterns and infrastructure go unnoticed. Arthur may never notice that he disproportionately clocks whether women are slender, for example, partly because everyone around him does too. Attentional omissions—such as absences from an agenda or curricula and whose perspectives are missing from deliberations—are particularly hard to notice, diagnose, and remedy. And epistemic injustice can be caused by, and constituted by, attentional patterns of ‘tuning out’ when some people, such as women, talk.²⁷ Unfair attentional distributions can arise when women are disproportionately expected to think of household demands or colleagues’ emotional needs, for example, which allows men mental space to consider topics that advance their interests. The epistemology of attention illuminates epistemic contours of these disparities.²⁸ Proper attunement is vital to social justice, including as a liberatory

²⁵ Mullaart (ms) notes that salience is observer-dependent. Theorists should avoid the consequence that, for example, an individual who is more attuned to others’ distress because of her own traumatic history is thereby more monstrous for inaction than someone who simply fails to notice.

²⁶ Protests might effectively shift participants’ attitudes, since people care more about subjects they have already invested in.

²⁷ I am grateful to Adam Carter for this suggestion.

²⁸ Recall from section two how attention enhances understanding, for example. On attention and epistemic injustice, Gardiner (forthcoming-b) examines the role of attention in gaslighting and conspiracy theories. I argue that focusing on remote error possibilities can render them relevant and so undermine rational belief. Similarly, Gardiner

virtue. It can be liberatory for women to pay less attention to their appearance, for example, and paying attention to marginalised groups serves and constitutes justice.

Wokeness is typically glossed as being aware of injustice.²⁹ Awareness has both informational and attentional components. It is not merely knowing; it requires “heeding” or bearing in mind. Wokeness is a virtue of attunement. By framing “wokeness” as largely an attentional trait, rather than centrally about one’s beliefs, one can countenance epistemic dimensions of wokeness without threatening evidentialist demands on belief. Gardiner (2018) emphasises that beliefs can serve justice whilst fully reflecting the evidence, but a conception of wokeness that centres on belief, rather than attention, risks requiring too much confidence in complex historical, economic, psychological, and social claims—such as about the roles of race in early human trafficking to the Americas—given the individual’s inexpert evidence. Attention-based conceptions of wokeness avoid this worry. Interpreting wokeness as largely about attention, rather than belief or knowledge, accords well with early and influential recorded uses of “stay woke”, such as Lead Belly’s 1938 exhortation to Black traveller’s to Alabama to “watch out” and “be a little careful when they go along through there—best stay woke, keep their eyes open” and Erykah Badu’s contrasting “stay woke” with sleep, not ignorance, in her 2008 “Master Teacher”. Finally, if wokeness centres on attention, rather than knowledge, it thereby avoids elitist values that cast ignorance and undereducation as moral flaws.

This essay argues that proper attunement is a social virtue because (i.) it can be possessed by groups, collectives, institutions, and perhaps societies. And (ii.) it is deeply affected by moral, interpersonal, and social factors. Social institutions, including especially big tech, should help cultivate attentional virtues. Social virtue epistemology can guide this endeavour.

5. The Devil was Lost in the Details

This essay investigates cognitive virtues of attention for individuals and collectives. I argue that virtue theory provides a powerful framework for illuminating the complex, nuanced, diachronic, developmental, socially-embedded contours of attentional normativity. Throughout the essay I highlighted the potency and importance of attention. Attention shifts the epistemic and moral landscape.

In closing, I highlight interconnections between two features of attentional normativity discussed in section four. Firstly, big tech companies play sizable roles in shaping attentional patterns and building the social infrastructures that underwrite those attentional patterns. They determine the Google rankings, for example, but also whether shopping, news, scholarship, and images have separate search results or not. Secondly, attentional patterns can be distorting even when all relevant claims are true and evidentially supported. Recall the website that disproportionately foregrounds crime committed by immigrants, for example. The articles can be wholly accurate—every claim is true—but the disproportionate attention misleads and misrepresents. This is insidious because difficult to epistemologically criticise. Epistemological frameworks that focus only on whether claims are true and evidentially supported are inadequate. An epistemology of attention, by contrast, enables us to

(forthcoming-a) examines how focusing on the chance that a rape accuser is lying might render the error possibility relevant.

²⁹ On the term’s history see Pulliam-Moore (2016) and Romano (2020). For philosophical accounts of wokeness, see Basu (2019), Atkins (forthcoming). On attentional character traits and social justice, see Tanesini (2020: 59), Medina (2016), Whiteley (forthcoming), Smith and Archer (forthcoming).

epistemologically assess the website because focusing on attention reveals a variety of epistemic errors that are consistent with the relevant claims being fully true and known.

These two features are importantly connected. In the internet age, vast swaths of information are available. Even when all the claims are true, information drowns in information. One can hide an object in plain sight by placing it in a messy room. In the information age, selecting, sorting, arranging, foregrounding, presenting, omitting, and contextualising information is paramount. These curatory epistemic virtues are indispensable.³⁰ Epistemological frameworks that are limited to whether individual propositions are true and evidentially supported cannot epistemically assess big tech products, advise on navigating modern cognitive environs, or map normative contours of the social epistemic environment.

Lucifer's fall from grace raises a puzzle. Heaven was perfectly good, so how could Lucifer have erred? There was nothing imperfect for him to do, see, or desire. One response holds that Lucifer only focused on good things—there were no other—but his error was focusing on the less good things instead of the best things. Rather than contemplating the Divine, Lucifer was distracted by his own goodness.³¹ Analogous dangers lurk in our epistemic lives: Even *if* all our beliefs were true and well-founded, we could epistemically misstep by focusing on less attention-worthy things and being distracted by the paltry and peripheral.

The epistemic forces of attention can be insidious. It is difficult to notice, measure, evaluate, criticise, and remedy the patterns and infrastructure of attention, compared to, say, whether a claim is false or unsupported. And whilst many epistemological frameworks attempt the latter, there is a relative dearth of epistemological theorising aimed at the former. The informational cacophony of the internet age renders the epistemology of attention even more urgent. Attention demands attention.

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³⁰ The motto of University of Notre Dame's College of Arts and Letters is "Study everything. Do anything." This is bad advice.

³¹ This account of Lucifer's fall is an interpretation of Augustine (Burns, 1988) and Anselm (Wood, 2016, esp. 236-237). I am grateful to Josh Watson for perceiving this connection to Lucifer. This attention-based explanation of Lucifer's fall accords well with Bommarito (2013)'s attention-based treatment of pride: Lucifer was good. His downfall was paying too much attention to his goodness.

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