Philosophy of Attention Session 4: Epistemic norms of attention

(Siegel 2017 & Irving 2018)

Siegel's overall project

- *The Rationality of Perception* "Perceptual experiences can be rational or irrational" (Siegel 2017, p.15)

- *Hijacked experiences* You believe that your friend is mad at you. Because you believe this, she looks mad to you (Siegel 2017, pp. 4-5).

Siegel's overall project (cont.)

- Your experience of your friend looking mad reinforces your previous belief that she is mad at you.
- If you have an experience with content P, that experience gives you evidence for believing that P.
- Experiences can be the result of a process of inference (which is not necessarily *conscious*)
- Outputs of inference are not limited to beliefs.

The Hiring Case

- In forming the belief that candidate X should be rejected, evaluator S is responding to the evidence she has.
- Yet, this belief seems ill-founded/formed in an irrational way.
- What went wrong?
- Short answer: It was the pattern of attention with which evidence was collected.

Selection effects

- If we select the contents of our experiences, we select our evidence.
- In *attending* to a content X, we are selecting X and de-selecting other contents Y, Z.
- Selection is not always voluntary.
- Moreover, selection can be epistemically good or epistemically bad.

Selection effects in the Hiring Case

- Evaluator S has implicit belief B: “All members of group G are likely unqualified”
- Belief B has selection effects excluding uncongenial information: evidence that X is unqualified is selected, and evidence that X is qualified is anti-selected.
- While collecting her evidence, S focuses her attention in a flawed way.
- This flawed allocation of attention makes S’s belief ill-founded/formed in an irrational way.

Normativity of attention: Three questions

Q1: When is attention appraisable or non-appraisable?

Q2: When is a pattern of attention better or worse?

Q3: How can agents be responsible for inattention?

Answering Q1: The Inferential Model

1. A pattern of attention is **appraisable** when it is the output of an inference.

2. A pattern of attention is **not appraisable** when it does not result from an inference, but from stochastic associative thought.

Answering Q1: The Inferential Model

1. A pattern of attention is **appraisable** when it is the output of an inference.

- Evaluator S's attention is controlled by the Stopping Conclusion (see Irving's Table 1).
- The Stopping Conclusion inherits the outlook from the Prejudicial Premise.

TABLE 1 Inference in Out-group Hiring

Inferential Move	Out-group Hiring
Local Bits of Evidence	This part of X's application (e.g. research experience) has mediocre features F_1–F_n
…	…
Prejudicial Premise	X's application likely contains mainly mediocre features (because X belongs to the out-group)
Stopping Conclusion	Further evidence is unlikely to reveal conflicting (positive) features
Distribution[a] Conclusion	X's application contains mainly mediocre features
Ultimate Conclusion	X's application should be rejected

[a]Siegel calls this a 'distribution conclusion' because it concerns how features are distributed in the application.

Answering Q1: The Inferential Model

2. A pattern of attention is **not appraisable** when it does not result from an inference, but from stochastic associative thought.

- Example: Attention captured by a turtle in a forest trail.

Answering Q2: Inferential norms govern attention

1. A pattern of attention is a **“epistemically good”** when it results from, e.g., a valid rule of inference.

2. A pattern of attention is **“epistemically bad”** when it results from a bad rule of inference.

Answering Q2: Inferential norms govern attention

1. A pattern of attention is a **"epistemically good"** when it results from, e.g., a valid rule of inference.

- Examples of valid rules of inference:

Modus Ponens:

(1) P

(2) If P then Q

Therefore,

(3) Q

Disjunctive Syllogism:

(1) Either P or Q

(2) It is not the case that P

Therefore,

(3) Q

Answering Q2: Inferential norms govern attention

2. A pattern of attention is **"epistemically bad"** when it results from a bad rule of inference.

- Examples of bad rules of inference:

Affirming the Consequent

(1) If P then Q

(2) Q

Therefore,

(3) P

Circularity

(1) P

Therefore,

(2) P

Circularity in the Hiring Case

First Sub-Inference	
Belief 1	All members of group G are likely unqualified
Belief 2	X is a member of group G
Conclusion: **Prejudicial Premise**	X's application likely contains mainly mediocre features

Second Sub-Inference	
Prejudicial Premise	X's application likely contains mainly mediocre features
Local Bits of Evidence	This part of X's application contains mainly mediocre features
Stopping Conclusion	Further evidence is unlikely to reveal conflicting (positive) features
Distribution Conclusion	X's application contains mainly mediocre features.
Ultimate Conclusion	X's application should be rejected

Third Sub-Inference	
Ultimate Conclusion	X's application should be rejected
Belief 2	X is a member of group G
Conclusion: **Belief 1**	All members of group G are likely unqualified

Answering Q3: Inattention results from mental action

- Inattention, too, can be controlled by inferences.
- Evaluator S's failure to pay attention to X's positive features is the output of the Stopping Conclusion.
- Since inferences are mental actions, and we can be responsible for our actions, we can be responsible for our inferences.

A potential problem: The Explore-Exploit norm

- “Over time, one should balance between exploration and exploitation when allocating’s one attention” (Irving 2018, p.89)

- Siegel’s inferential model cannot explain this norm, because exploratory attention is not inferential.
  - Mind wandering
  - Child-like thinking
  - Creative thinking

- But Siegel should explain exploratory attention, because exploratory attention can be/is sometimes rational.

Bonus: The Reckoning Model

- Siegel's foil is the Reckoning Model, a standard model of inference (Siegel 2017, Ch.5).

- On this model, inference has three parts, all of which require awareness:

1. **Premises and conclusions**
2. **Reckoning state** (recognizing that the premises support the conclusion)
3. **Becausal condition** (conclusion is reached because it is recognized that premises support the conclusion)

- On Siegel's Minimal Inferential Model, inference does not require awareness.