Philosophy of Attention Session 7:
How attention might pick up on moral difference-makers
(Vance & Werner 2022)

Sensibility Theory: Virtuous agents can perceptually detect moral features of the environment (McDowell 1998)
- This is a kind of perceptual expertise, like identifying birds.

Q: What does it mean to detect moral features of the environment?

    a) **Contentful Moral Perception** (CMP) – Ambitious and controversial

       CMP: Moral properties are part of the content of perceptual experience

    b) **Attentional Moral Perception** (AMP) – More modest and plausible

The Virtuous Perceiver Thesis (VPT)

       VPT: To be a virtuous agent, you must be *perceptually attuned* to *moral difference-tmakers*

VPT must explain Saliency, Framing and Accuracy:

- **Saliency:** Joan perceives a morally relevant value that John does not (Subway scenario, p.4).
- **Framing:** Joan (or any virtuous agent) can identify a situation with moral import.
- **Accuracy:** Virtuous agents have an increased sensitivity for evidence about the presence of morally relevant features

Two kinds of perceptual attunement

- **Patterns being salient *as patterns*:** A pattern is represented as a salient pattern. Moral properties are the *content* of a perceptual experience.

- **Patterns just being salient:** A pattern is salient but need not be represented as such. The perceptual system selects features in the environment as relevant, and these features become subject to attentional focus (p.7).

Two main problems with taking the first option:

1) High-level properties are controversial (see Siegel & Byrne 2016)
2) Moral properties do not seem to have a distinctive look (or sound, or smell)

Attentional Moral Perception (AMP)

       AMP1: Attentional mechanisms tend to be sensitive to *moral difference-makers*. This is reflected in attentional patterns in perceptual experience.

AMP2: Changing patterns of perceptual attention *can* change moral judgments and decisions.

Moral difference-makers: Features of our perceptual environment that make a moral difference in a situation. Need not be the moral properties per se. They could just be indicators to the moral properties.

Empirical evidence

1. **Moral pop-out & binocular rivalry**: Morally charged stimuli (words and faces) are more likely to reach awareness and dominate experience, and this is because they are prioritized by attention (AMP1). And this is likely to affect moral judgment and decision making (AMP2).

2. **Eye-tracking in moral dilemmas**: The way how our eyes scan a scene (e.g., looking more at future victims and at faces) is a good predictor of moral judgment (AMP2). Thus, attention is sensitive to morally relevant features like victimhood and facial expressions (AMP1).

3. **Gaze and cheating**: When we are doing something immoral (cheating), we pay less attention to evidence that we are doing something immoral. Because we are sensitive to these morally relevant features (AMP1), we divert our attention away from them.

4. **Gaze and generosity**: Different patterns of visual attention (e.g., looking at self-relevant or in-group information first or longer) correlate with levels of generosity (AMP2). Ignoring morally irrelevant features (e.g., in-group vs. out-group status) improves moral decision-making (AMP2). This could be because attention is sensitive to which features are morally relevant (AMP1).

AMP explains Sensibility Theory's moral psychology

- **Saliency:** Moral pop-out and binocular rivalry studies show that attention can be naturally and immediately drawn towards moral features, making them available for conscious awareness.

- **Framing:** Having moral features available in conscious awareness helps framing a situation as one of moral import, automatically and without applying any moral theory.

- **Accuracy:**
  (i) Different agents direct attention to different features of their situations, and this does seem to impact their moral decision-making. So, plausibly, some agents identify moral features more accurately than others.
  (ii) Besides, agents that ignore morally relevant information have a less accurate picture of their situation