

**Philosophy of Attention Session 11:  
Beyond individual attention**  
(Battich & Geurts 2020)

- Learning to coordinate our attention with others is an important milestone in our social and cognitive development.
- Coordinating our attention with that of another person involves some kind of shared ground: joint attention is “open”.
- But, what is this “openness” that characterizes joint attention?

**Two kinds of approach**

**Reductionist:**

- To attend jointly just is to share some other mental state with others (e.g. awareness, belief)

Example:

- **The knowledge-based approach**
  - Joint attention just is common knowledge

**Non-reductionist/Primitivist:**

- Attending jointly is a fundamental kind of mental state of its own. It cannot be reduced to others.

Example:

- **Campbell’s relational theory**
  - Joint attention is a specific and unique kind of sensory experience.

**The knowledge-based approach**

A and B are jointly attending to x iff:

It is *common knowledge* to A and B that each of them is attending to x.

This entails an iterative structure:

p is common knowledge between A and B iff

- A knows that p,
- B knows that p,
- A knows that B knows that p,
- B knows that A knows that p,

- Importantly, this iterative structure is not about inferences made by A and B, nor about representations in their minds.
- Joint attention is “open” because it has this structure.
- Joint attention achieves this structure (and with it, openness) thanks to a **normality condition**.

**Normality condition:** “If a ‘normal’ person has her eyes open and her head facing an object of a certain size, she will see that an object of a certain sort is before her”

**Problem (i.e., Campbell’s objection):** This approach is cognitively demanding and psychologically unrealistic

**The relational theory**

- This view characterizes joint attention as a primitive (i.e., irreducible) kind of *perceptual* consciousness.
- Perception is construed *relationally*: A perceptual experience is a three-place relation between a perceiving subject, a perceived object, and a way the object is perceived (S perceives x as being F).
- On this view, “that the other person is attending to the object with you” can be a constituent of your experience. She is “in the periphery of your experience as co-attender”.

A and B are jointly attending iff: - A perceives x as being *co-attended* by B, and  
 - B perceives x as being *co-attended* by A.

This view entails:

- Your perception of the same thing changes when someone else is attending to it with you.

It also entails:

- A and B monitor each other's attention
- A's (continued) attention is one of the factors controlling B's attention, and vice versa

**A dilemma for the relational theory**

⇒ Are joint attention and co-attention the same thing, or not?

<p>If yes:</p> <p>Then, you cannot analyse co-attention (since you cannot analyse joint attention).</p> <p><b>Problem:</b> How can we be sure that co-attention does not invite undesirable infinite iterations?</p> <p>⇒ Being primitive does not by itself prevent recursion! (compare with conjunction).</p>	<p>If no:</p> <p>Then, an explanation of co-attention is needed.</p> <p>⇒ Under what conditions does B enter A's experience as co-attender?</p> <p>A plausible answer:          A must be able to recognize that B co-attends to x with her (and vice versa)</p> <p>⇒ How can A recognize that B co-attends to x with her?</p> <p>Likely answer:          B's line of sight intersects with x....</p> <p><b>Problem:</b> This sounds a lot like the normality condition!</p>
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⇒ Upshot: Either way, the relational theory does not fare better than the knowledge-based approach.

**Two further issues**

**a) Causal monitoring:** The relational view entails that A's *continued* attention to x must be one of the factors causally sustaining B's continuing to attend to x. But how should we understand "continued attention"?

**b) Failures of joint attention:** We can know that we are attending to Z together with Y by introspection. But as it often is with introspection, we can be wrong: maybe Y is not really attending to Z despite appearances.

**Problem 1:** Given that Y's attention is a constituent of our own experience, when Y stops attending to Z, our own experience should change. But on the face of it, it does not (this is the reason we are mistaken about jointly attending).

⇒ Since nothing "external" has changed (i.e., appearances are the same), how can the relational theorist justify her claim that our experience has changed and our introspection is mistaken?

**Problem 2:** Since introspection can be wrong (we might believe that we are having a certain experience when we are in fact having a different one), then I might well be jointly attending to Z with you, while mistakenly believing that I am not.

⇒ But if I can be mistaken in this way, how can joint attention still be "open"?