The Limits of Virtue?: Replies to Carter and Goldberg

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Context
- My essay 'Attunement: On the Cognitive Virtues of Attention' is the lead essay in a symposium.
- J. Adam Carter and Sandy Goldberg each respond to the 'Attunement' essay. This is my rejoinder.

Adam Carter and Sandy Goldberg both challenge my claim that the normativity of attention is well-illuminated by virtue epistemology. Carter suggests virtue epistemology may not address which attentional patterns and habits we should have. Goldberg points to demands on attention stemming from social roles, such as professions. Both criticisms are, I think, rooted in relatively narrow conceptions of virtue theory.

Virtue Reliabilism and Virtue Responsibilism

Carter contends that "To *illuminate* [the normativity of attention] would presumably involve identifying the *source* of the relevant normativity, or suggesting how we might go about identifying it" (emphasis mine). And, Carter continues, my proposal hasn't met this criterion. In response, firstly, this methodological requirement on illumination or explanation is too demanding.[1] One can illuminate or explain a phenomenon without providing a reductive explanation or tracing the phenomenon back to its ultimate source. One can illuminate via partial explanation or by occupying explanatory levels that aren't reductions to fundamental grounds. Just as claims from applied and normative ethics can be combined with metaethical and metaphysical claims about what fundamentally explains those claims, a virtue theory of attention is compatible with various accounts of why, fundamentally speaking, attention patterns matter at all. Virtue theory might explain the source of attentional normativity, but this isn't required for virtue theory to illuminate attentional norms.

Carter claims that resources from virtue reliabilism explains the source of attention normativity. On Ernest Sosa's view, knowledge is apt belief.[2] Beliefs are *Apt* when their *Accuracy* manifests *Adroitness*. Carter modifies this virtue reliabilist AAA-framework to apply to attentional normativity. He suggests that one aims at attentional distributions towards tasks, and the resulting attentional distribution is proper when apt; that is, when attainment of the attempted attentional distribution manifests adroitness. This substitutes Sosa's *Accuracy* with *Attainment*, because attentional distributions are not truth apt. Sosa's orthodox AAA-framework applies to belief; Carter's adaptation of virtue reliabilism

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[1] Thanks to Jordan Baker and Jon Garthoff for helpful discussion.
[2] Sosa (2017) *Epistemology* Princeton University Press.

thereby exemplifies how theorising attentional normativity expands the concerns of epistemology beyond truth and belief.

But, Carter notes, this framework leaves unexplained which attentional patterns one should aim for. He concludes, "As I see it, the question of which tasks to turn your attention to falls in the area of intellectual ethics. Whether virtue epistemology (of any stripe) can illuminate those norms of attention that fall within intellectual ethics […] remains to be seen."

I aver that virtue responsibilism, rather than virtue reliabilism, illuminates intellectual ethics. Virtue responsibilism is versatile, theorises multifaceted explananda, and features multiple dimensions of assessment. It considers social, moral, and contextual features, including motivations and personal development. Resources from virtue responsibilism and reliabilism might be fruitfully combined to yield a comprehensive framework for evaluating attentional traits and patterns. I lack space to explore this idea; I instead sketch three concerns about Carter's adaptation of virtue reliabilism's SSS-framework.

Firstly, Carter's proposed framework is best suited to when a person (intentionally) aims at distinct, dissociable attentional distributions, such as during specific tasks. But these might be relatively marginal or abnormal cases. They are, anyway, a fraction of the target phenomenon. We need a framework for assessing automatic, default attentional habits and abilities as one navigates life. This includes general omissions, like not staring at physiological abnormalities, and sensitivity to complex situations' important features, such as a friend's capacity to notice sadness or a harried nurse's attunement to subtle symptoms. Similarly, we seek a framework for assessing overall life patterns and trajectories such as, for example, Greta Thunberg's attentional dedication to the climate catastrophe. But the AAA-framework does not straightforwardly apply to these examples, not least because patterns and habits evolve over time, whether attention matches a given pattern is not binary, and attention is contrastive. The good friend doesn't aim to notice sadness, he is simply well-attuned to emotions and conduct—or to other features, like the road he is driving on—as appropriate. This brings me to the second worry.

Attentional patterns may be insufficiently similar to true beliefs for Sosa's AAA-framework to smoothly apply. Whether a belief is true is often binary and straightforward; the epistemic value of true belief is not wholly dependent on broader features of the person and context, and there is a relatively clear sense in which beliefs aim at truth. These features undergird Sosa's AAA treatment of the normativity of true belief. Attentional traits and habits do not share these features. Whether an attentional pattern, habit, or trait matches an ideal can be complex and nuanced. It may match in some ways but not others, for example. And whether attentional patterns are valuable can depend wholly on social, moral, and contextual features, including the person's attitudes and motivations. And it is doubtful that we typically aim at attentional distributions, at least in an ordinary sense. These differences problematise adapting the AAA-framework for attentional normativity.

Finally, Carter says "[the AAA-framework offers] just the kind of resources we'd need in order to better understand why (in short) *proper attention is proper* and improper attention is not." But it is unclear whether, absent an independent account of which attentional patterns are good, the virtue reliabilist AAA-framework makes much headway on questions of *propriety*. For this, we need intellectual ethics.

Depths of Sociality
Goldberg emphasises demands on attention that stem from community roles. He notes these demands are "assimilable" within a virtue framework, so it is unclear how much we disagree. The crux of the disagreement—such as it is—is that Goldberg views these as "additional sources" of attentional demands, outside of virtue theory, because they are "not grounded in the value of a flourishing cognitive life".

Goldberg appears to employ a relatively narrow conception of virtue theory, according to which the relevant attentional value or demand must directly contribute to the cognitive flourishing of that same individual. (See, for example, his testimonial illustration.) We might broaden this conception in several ways. Perhaps any flourishing qualifies, for example, not merely cognitive flourishing. This helps unify the ethics and epistemology of attention. Insofar as this is a correction, it is one I welcome; the attentional normativity interlaces ethical and epistemic considerations, and so is the domain of virtue theory, rather than virtue epistemology specifically. Secondly, the contribution need not be direct. Proper attunement in one's employment can contribute to flourishing via salary, or pride in one's work, for example, or via the mental health benefits of entering the "flow state".

Thirdly, the relevant flourishing might reside outside the individual. It may be grounded in another person's flourishing, or that of a group, institution, or society. Individuals are embedded within overlapping and interconnected layers of agency, such as groups and institutions. Questions of flourishing, languishing, and attentional normativity can arise for different levels, even if the relevant entity is not an agent. Individuals' attentional demands might thus be grounded in traits or flourishing of some institution or group to which they belong.

Virtue theory can illuminate these interconnected levels of attentional demands. Conflicts can arise, for example, if attentional patterns serve the institution but stifle the individual. A virtue theory of attention can provide guidance on avoiding this, so that attentional interests better align. I preferred dishwashing in restaurants, rather than waiting tables, for example, because the cognitive monotony of dishwashing allowed me to become lost in thought. Others might prefer the higher attentional and cognitive demands and challenges of waiting tables. Understanding attentional virtues and flourishing might help evaluate working conditions by illuminating, for example, why employment in call centres is widely despised. Its attentional demands prevent the flow state without interpersonal or intellectual recompense, and attention is typically forced towards lousy topics. Fourthly, as intimated above, explaining the fundamental sources and grounds of normativity is perhaps not virtue theory's core aim.

A broader conception of the remit of virtue theory—encompassing virtue responsibilism, virtue ethics, and interwoven social layers of agency—can thus help illuminate various facets of the normativity of attention.