

Attention and Salience

The world is a pretty cluttered space full of objects and agents, events and information, noise and feelings. Thankfully, not all of them sweep our minds at once; we are highly selective in what we perceive, what we think about, and what we tend to ignore. Attention and salience are the two main guides of this selection process: Attention is something that can sometimes be consciously controlled, sometimes is unconsciously drawn to something. Salience, on the other hand, determines what it is natural to pay attention to, what appears to us as striking, what separates the relevant aspects of a phenomenon from those we tend to pay less heed to.

While the influence attention has on our day-to-day activities is undisputed, its origins are still unclear. While some philosophers have argued that our limited attention is a result of cognitive limitations, others have held that it is an essential feature of our mental lives, sometimes going so far as to calling it one of the central marks of consciousness. Recently, from interaction with cognitive scientists and psychologists, more complex theories of the role of attention have started to take hold. Furthermore, the connection between attention and our cognitive phenomenology is subject to lively debate, as it is not yet clear whether our attention determines which features of our perception and thinking we consciously experience, or whether the phenomenology of our mental states directs our attention to them.

The topic of salience has only recently become the centre of philosophical discussions of its own. Therefore, it is currently up to debate whether “salience” is a unified concept, or whether it actually denotes different properties, depending on whether we are discussing perception or action. In addition to these conceptual matters, there are more specific questions discussed in various areas of philosophy: Salience seems to be action-guiding in that it determines which affordances to act are cognitively available to us – but might we have control over salience itself? And it has been established that certain types of linguistic expressions depend on salience to fix their reference – is this kind of salience a private mental state of the speakers, or a public feature of the conversational context?

Finally, attention and salience are subject to ethical discussions themselves: Is there something such as a duty to pay attention to certain facts? Should politics intervene into which features of the social world are salient and which are not? Discussing such matters connects to issues in the epistemic injustice literature, as well as other parts of the resistance philosophy literature. For example, there are recent attempts to explain racism as a result of misdirection of attention to certain properties.

Why we should pick the topic:

1. The topic of attention and salience is discussed within pretty much all subdisciplines of philosophy; it is obviously connected to philosophy of mind and action theory, but there are papers discussing it within ontology, philosophy of language, epistemology, political philosophy and even aesthetics, ffs. So not only does the topic allow for a very broad range of readings some of which should appeal to everyone's interests, we could also adapt our focus over the course of the year according to the participants preferences. Additionally, a topic with broad applications makes for a more diverse conference.
2. Since the Vienna institute of philosophy also houses a CogSci division, this could make for some interesting cooperations; at the very least, we have an audience for our regular sessions and our conference outside the usual bubble.
3. The current philosophy of mind as well as cognitive science is rather complicated to get into – attention and salience provide neat entry points into theories such as predictive processing and affordance perception.
4. Ignore 1. to 3.; the topic is just really, really interesting! Just look at these amazing papers!

Possible papers:

Broome, M., Ratcliffe, M. (2022): "Beyond 'Salience' and 'Affordance': Understanding Anomalous Experiences of Significant Possibilities"

Buehler, D. (2019): "Flexible occurrent control"

Chappell, S. (2022): "Salience, Choice, and vulnerability"

McGowan, M. (2022): "On Salience and Sneakiness"

Munton, J. (2021): "Prejudice as the misattribution of salience"

Ransom, M., Fazelpour, S. & Mole, C., 2017: "Attention in the predictive mind"

Riccardi, M., 2019: "Perceptual presence: an attentional account"

Siegel, S., & Silins, N., 2014, "Consciousness, attention, and justification"

Siegel, S. (2022): "Salience Principles for Democracy"

Watzl, S. (2011): "The Nature of Attention"

Watzl, S. (2022): "The Ethics of Attention: An Argument and a Framework"

Whiteley, E. (2022): "Harmful Salience Perspectives"

Possible speakers:

Cathy Mason (Central European University) (focus on love and attention – certainly also interesting, not part of this proposal yet)

Jessie Munton (University of Cambridge)

Matthew Ratcliffe (University of York)

Susanna Siegel (Harvard University)

Sebastian Watzl (University of Oslo)

Ella Whiteley (London School of Economics)