Critical Notice

**Attention norms in Siegel’s *The Rationality of Perception***

Zachary C. Irving

University of Virginia, Corcoran Department of Philosophy, Cocke Hall, Charlottesville VA USA 22904

**Correspondence**

Zac Irving, University of Virginia, Corcoran Department of Philosophy Cocke Hall, Charlottesville VA USA 22904

Email: [zci7c@virginia.edu](mailto:zci7c@virginia.edu)

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My best students are those who “ask the right questions”, who attend to the relevant parts of the material. I worry that Americans live in epistemic “bubble chambers”, attending to evidence only when it confirms their beliefs. Here and elsewhere, people’s epistemic standing depends partly on how they direct their attention. Yet analytic epistemology has been largely silent on attention. Susanna Siegel breaks this silence in “Selection Effects”, a pathbreaking chapter of *The Rationality of Perception* (2017). In this chapter, Siegel develops one of the first philosophical accounts of *attention norms*. Siegel’s account is inferential: patterns of attention are often controlled by inferences and therefore subject to rational norms that govern any other form of inference.

Siegel’s account of attention norms rests on the minimal theory of inference she develops in *The* *Rationality of Perception*. According to this theory, inference can result in perceptual experiences (or control attention) in much the same way that it results in belief. We can therefore evaluate perceptual and doxastic inferences by the same rational norms. My piece does not critique the main themes of Siegel’s book: her theory of inference and its implications for the epistemology of perception. I focus more narrowly on Siegel’s account of attention norms, unpacking the theory, its explanatory virtues, and its relationship to accounts of rational attention in cognitive science.

This review has four parts: part one uses an example from Siegel to introduce three challenges that any theory of attention norms must overcome. Part two shows how Siegel’s inferential theory of attention norms overcomes these challenges. Part three clarifies why Siegel’s account of attention norms requires her minimal theory of inference. Part four contrasts inferential attention norms with those we find in cognitive science.

1. ATTENTION NORMS – THREE CHALLENGES

Siegel argues that someone can be epistemically irrational because of where she directs her attention. Here is Siegel’s core case of irrational attention:

Outgroup hiring: A group of evaluators harbor implicit, ill-founded views about a group of people who constitute an “outgroup” relative to them. Due to those views, evaluators disproportionately focus (without knowing it) on the weakest parts of an outgroup candidate X’s application. The negative features of X’s application are not fabricated, but a fuller picture of X’s candidacy would contain positive features that the evaluators did not consciously register, or did not take in at all. In response to the evidence they have about X, the evaluators conclude that X is unqualified (Siegel, 2017, p. 158).

Are the evaluators in bad epistemic standing? At first glance we might say ‘no’. Based solely on the evidence that the evaluators attend to, it is rational for them to conclude that X is unqualified. But there is vicious circularity beneath the surface. The evaluators ill-founded prejudice leads them to attend only to negative parts of X’s application, which reinforces their prejudice. How should we epistemically evaluate cases such as these, where agents are unaware of the circular etiology behind their beliefs? This is a central question of Siegel’s book. In general, she calls this the ‘Problem of Hijacked Experience’.

Outgroup Hiring poses specific problems about *attention*. If the evaluators are epistemically irrational, it is because of their attentional biases: they attend selectively to the weak parts of X’s application, and in so doing reinforce their prejudice. Their attentional biases function as “epistemic bubble chambers” that insulate them against disconfirming evidence. To understand Outgroup Hiring, we must therefore look for norms that specify when attention is epistemically irrational. But any account of these *attention norms* must answer three difficult questions.[[1]](#footnote-1)

First, how can agents be *responsible* for inattention? I assume that the evaluators in Outgroup Hiring did something epistemically blameworthy, that they are responsible for their biased attention. But Smith (2005) points out that cases where we are responsible for inattention are puzzling. It is commonly assumed that we are responsible for φ-ing only if we chose to φ. Yet people (typically) do not choose to ignore something, since we are (typically) not even aware of what we ignore. This is certainly the case in Outgroup Hiring: the evaluators did not choose to ignore the candidate X’s positive features, since they were not aware that X had these positive features.

Second, what is the distinction between cases where attention is subject to rational epistemic appraisal from cases where it is not? Attention can sometimes be epistemically neutral (Siegel, 2017, 160). Consider a case where you are hiking on a forest trail, and your attention wanders to a turtle instead of a salamander or a gnarled log (Siegel & Watzl, manuscript give a similar case of normatively neutral attention). Was it epistemically rational to attend to the turtle? Was it epistemically irrational? Intuitively, the answer to both questions is ‘no’. Rather, your attention to the turtle was *arational* (De Sousa, 2007): it was not subject to any rational appraisal. In Siegel’s words, your attention was a ‘normative freebie’ (Siegel, 2017, 160). In contrast, attention does not seem epistemically neutral in Outgroup Hiring (here attention seems irrational) or when a student “asks the right question” (here attention seems rational). Any theory of attention norms should account for the difference between ‘normative freebies’ and rationally appraisable attention. (This is a difference between the epistemology of attention and belief: none of my beliefs are ‘normative freebies’; beliefs are either rational or irrational.[[2]](#footnote-2))

Third, what norms can we use to epistemically evaluate attention? Familiar epistemic norms of evidence and truth seem inapplicable to attention: it makes little sense to say that one should attend to what the evidence supports or to what is true. It is tempting to think that attention norms concern relevance. Here is a candidate norm: one should attend to *information that is epistemically relevant*. Yet Dennett’s frame problem (1984) suggests that it is challenging to specify what information is epistemically relevant, even in simple situations such as making a midnight snack. Furthermore, information is often relevant for moral or practical reasons, not epistemic ones.[[3]](#footnote-3) Suppose you are making a sandwich for a midnight snack, for example. Is peanut butter a relevant ingredient? Well, that depends on practical considerations about your preferences and allergies. In principle, one may be able to specify norms of epistemic relevance for attention; but it would be hard.

Any account of attention norms must therefore answer three challenging questions. Siegel’s inferential account does just that.

1. SIEGEL’S INFERENTIAL MODEL OF ATTENTION NORMS

Siegel argues that attention is subject to rational evaluation when it is controlled by the conclusion of an inference. Let us make this theory more concrete by returning to Outgroup Hiring. Siegel cashes out the case as follows. The prejudiced evaluators attend to part of candidate X’s application – say, X’s research experience ­– that really does reflect negatively on X. Based on their prejudice, the evaluators assume that further investigation is unlikely to yield conflicting (positive) information. So they ignore the rest of X’s application and evaluate X solely on the basis of what they have read so far. The evaluators make a number of inferences, which I break down in Table 1 (cf. Siegel, 2017, Table 9.1).[[4]](#footnote-4) (What makes these inferences? I will return to this question in section 3, where I review two technical accounts of inference.)

Table 1: Inference in Outgroup Hiring

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Inferential Move | Outgroup Hiring |
| **Local Bits of Evidence** | This part of X’s application (e.g. research experience) has mediocre features F1–Fn |
| **…** | … |
| **Prejudicial Premise** | X’s application likely contains mainly mediocre features (because X belongs to the outgroup) |
| **Stopping Conclusion** | Further evidence is unlikely to reveal conflicting (positive) features |
| **Distribution**[[5]](#footnote-5) **Conclusion** | X’s application contains mainly mediocre features |
| **Ultimate Conclusion** | X’s application should be rejected |

Outgroup Hiring is viciously circular, and thus irrational, because of how the evaluators prejudice leads to their stopping conclusion. Admittedly, it can be rational to stop searching for new evidence (Buchak, 2010). If the evaluators slog through seven pages of an inflated and unimpressive ten-page CV, for example, they could safely conclude that the remaining three pages of “personal accomplishments” are unlikely to reveal conflicting (positive) features. In contrast, the evaluators in Outgroup Hiring base their stopping conclusion on prejudice. This makes their inference viciously circular: because of their prejudice, the evaluators ignore the rest of X’s application and conclude that X’s application is mostly mediocre, which reinforces their preexisting prejudice against X.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Crucially, the stopping conclusion influences the evaluators’ decision by *controlling attention*. Had the evaluators attended to more of X’s application, they would have discovered that X has many positive features. Because of the stopping conclusion, however, the evaluators ignore the remainder of X’s application and draw their conclusions based on what they have read already. We have arrived at the crux of Siegel’s theory of attention norms. Steps in an inference can sometimes control attention. Attention that is under the control of an inferential step inherits the rational standing of that step. In this way, attention can be rational or irrational. In Outgroup Hiring, for example, the evaluators’ attention is under the control of their stopping conclusion. When the evaluators ignore the remainder of X’s application, their inattention inherits the vicious circularity of the stopping conclusion. In this way, their inattention is irrational. Let us call this the ‘Inferential Model’ of attention norms.

Siegel’s Inferential Model answers all three challenging questions about attention norms. First, how can agents be responsible for inattention? As we saw in Outgroup Hiring, inferences can control attention and inattention. And inference is a kind of mental action: it is something we do, not something that happens to us. Attention *and inattention* can thus be under the control of a mental action. We can therefore be responsible for inattention.

Second, what distinguishes cases where attention is subject to rational epistemic appraisal from cases where it is not? According to the Inferential Theory, the distinction concerns whether attention is under the control of an inference. Attention in Outgroup Hiring is controlled by an inference. Contrast this with a case when your attention wanders to a turtle while hiking on a forest trail. Here, your attention is not controlled by an inference; rather, your attention moves stochastically through objects in the forest. Indeed, Siegel defines inference in contrast to the kind of stochastic, associatively-chained experiences that you have while hiking (see section 3).

Third, what norms can we use to epistemically evaluate attention? Siegel again has an easy answer: we can use the norms that govern inference. According to Inferential Model, attention can inherit the rational profile of inference. When this happens, we can therefore use the norms that govern inference to epistemically evaluate attention. For example, the evaluators’ attention in Outgroup Hiring is irrational because it is viciously circular. Attention could also be irrational because it is controlled by an inference that affirms the consequent, or draws a false dichotomy, and so on. Fortunately, all these norms are familiar and well-established. The Inferential Model of attention norms therefore gets off the ground without specifying novel, troublesome norms that concern epistemic relevance.

1. INFERENCE WITHOUT RECKONING

Siegel’s Inferential Model of attention norms has a great deal of explanatory power. But it rests on a contentious assumption: that the evaluators in Outgroup Hiring make an inference from their prejudice. Proponents of the standard model of inference, which Siegel calls the ‘Reckoning Model’, would likely question this assumption. According to the Reckoning Model, inference has three parts. First, mental states that function as *premises* and *conclusions* of an inference. Second, a *reckoning state*, wherein the agent “reckons” that the inference’s premises support its conclusions. Third, a *becausal condition*, which states that the agent reaches the conclusion state *because* she reckoned that the premises support the conclusions. Canonically, the Reckoning Model requires that the inferrer is aware of her premises, conclusions, and reckoning states. The becausal condition therefore specifies a ‘correct first-person rationalization of the conclusion that the inferrer could provide’ (Siegel, forthcoming).

Here is the problem: the evaluators in Outgroup Hiring are likely unaware of the prejudice that motivates their stopping conclusion. Perhaps the evaluators consciously think, ‘further evidence is unlikely to reveal anything positive about X’. Even so, the evaluators are probably unaware that this thought is based in prejudice. And it is this prejudice that generates the vicious circularity that makes Outgroup Hiring irrational. So according to the standard Reckoning Model, the actual *inference* in Outgroup Hiring does not contain any vicious circularity and thus is not irrational.

Siegel has a ready response, which relies on her minimal theory of inference (2017; forthcoming). According to Siegel, a subject can make an inference without reckoning that her premises support her conclusion – consciously or otherwise. Subjects can also make inferences without being aware of each premise in their argument. Rather, Siegel allows that certain parts of an inference can occur below the threshold of awareness. On her model, ‘inferring is a distinctive kind of response to an informational state, or to a combination of such states, that produces a conclusion’ (2017, 77). Siegel does not reductively analyze the ‘distinctive kind of response’ involved in inference. Rather, she aims to ‘illuminate’ the notion of inference ‘without analysis’ (2017, 78) by, among other things, contrasting inference with other phenomena. For example, Siegel (2017, 87) contrasts inference with associational thought (the contrast between associational and inferential thought will be important in §4). Inference is a response to the truth-evaluable contents of an information state. In contrast, associational thought is merely a response to concepts contained *within* an information state. Suppose you ‘observe that the sky is growing dark, [then] recall that you need to buy lightbulbs’ (Siegel, 2017, 87), then think that your tulip bulbs will soon sprout beautiful flowers. Here, your thoughts are chained by mere conceptual associations (dark 🡪 lightbulb 🡪 tulip bulb) and are therefore non-inferential.

Siegel’s minimal theory of inference clarifies how prejudice enters into the inference in Outgroup Hiring. The evaluators harbor a prejudiced belief: X’s application is likely to be mediocre because X belongs to the outgroup. They then respond to this belief, in the distinctively inferential way, to produce a stopping conclusion: further evidence is unlikely to reveal anything positive about X. The evaluator’s prejudice does not reach the level of self-awareness. But this is not necessary for inference, on Siegel’s view. Whether we should adopt Siegel’s minimal model of inference is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, my claim is conditional: if we accept Siegel’s minimal model of inference, we get an explanatorily powerful account of attention norms to boot.

1. EXPLORATION/EXPLOITATION – A NON-INFERENTIAL ATTENTION NORM

Siegel’s Inferential Model accounts for certain cases of attention norms, such as those operative in Outgroup Hiring. But are there epistemic attention norms that the inferential model cannot capture? I think there might be. Specifically, I will sketch an attention norm regarding the trade-off between mental exploration and exploitation. Core processes that navigate this tradeoff are associational, rather than inferential (Christoff, Irving, Fox, Spreng, & Andrews-Hanna, 2016; Gopnik et al., 2017; Sripada, 2018). So if there is an attention norm that concerns the explore–exploit tradeoff, the inferential model is unlikely to explain why.

Let us start with a case to clarify how people tradeoff between exploration and exploitation. Mariah is an academic philosopher who must allocate her attention between potential projects. On the one hand, Mariah can extend a past project, *exploiting* her deep knowledge of the topics she has worked on before. On the other hand, Mariah can *explore* a new sub-field, which may prove a total bust or may take her in a fruitful new direction. Over the course of Mariah’s career, it is arguably rational for her to balance between exploration and exploitation. Too much exploration, and she may never fully develop a coherent research program. Too much exploitation, and she may toil away in an unproductive intellectual rut. The need to navigate the exploration–exploitation tradeoff is not unique to academic philosophy; it is arguably ubiquitous in cognitive life (see Cohen, McClure, & Angela, 2007; Hills et al., 2015 for reviews). I therefore propose the following attention norm:

Explore–Exploit Norm: over time, one should balance between exploration and exploitation when allocating one’s attention.

Can the Inferential Model explain why we should balance between exploration and exploitation? Likely not, because the modes of attention that agents use for exploration are decidedly non-inferential. Two of the most pervasive avenues for human exploration are arguably mind-wandering (Christoff et al., 2016; Sripada, 2018) and childhood (Gopnik et al., 2017). Exploratory theories of mind-wandering and childhood are motivated by analogous question: why do mind-wandering (Sripada, 2018) and childhood (Gopnik et al., 2017) take up so much of our lives? Mind-wandering occupies up to half our waking thoughts (Kane et al., 2007; Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Why waste this time with idle thought, when we could be diligently working towards our goals? Furthermore, humans have dramatically longer childhoods and adolescence than other animals. Why waste so much energy on ‘this flood of needy young’ (Gopnik et al., 2017, 2), when we could develop more quickly into competent adults?

Part of the answer may be that mind-wandering and childhood function as periods of mental exploration. Mind-wandering arguably facilitates exploration because of its dynamics: how attention meanders between ideas that are linked by only loose associations (Christoff et al., 2016; Irving, 2016; Sripada, 2018). Consider someone whose mind wanders from topic to topic: she remembers the lightbulbs she needs to buy, then pictures the beautiful flowers that will grow from her tulip bulbs, then considers whether to revive that long-neglected aesthetics paper. Because her attention is wandering to a broad range of topics, she is free to explore ideas such as a long-neglected aesthetics project, which she would otherwise ignore when working diligently towards her goals. Childhood arguably allows for a more extended and potent period of mental exploration (Gopnik et al., 2017). A child’s train of thought can be notoriously disconnected and bizarre, like an extreme form of adult mind-wandering. Gopnik and colleagues (Gopnik, 2009, Chapter 5; Gopnik et al., 2017) argue that the child’s meandering attention facilitates mental exploration, helping younger learners outperform older ones on a range of tasks that require one to generate novel or unusual ideas (German & Defeyter, 2000; Lucas, Bridgers, Griffiths, & Gopnik, 2014; Seiver, Gopnik, & Goodman, 2013). Meandering streams of thought in children and adult mind-wanderers are therefore likely to help satisfy the Explore–Exploit attention norm. In this sense, mind-wandering and childhood thought are epistemically rational.

Siegel’s Inferential Model of attention norms is ill-suited to capture why mind-wandering and childhood thinking can be rational. Recall that Siegel explicitly contrasts inference with associational thought, which moves between associated concepts. But mind-wandering and childhood thinking are likely driven by associations (Sripada, 2018) – for example, between lightbulbs and beautiful tulip bulbs and aesthetics. The Inferential Model should therefore classify these forms of associational thought as arational: as ‘normative freebies’ (Siegel, 2016, 160) that are not subject to rational appraisal. So there appears to be a conflict between how cognitive scientists think of the rationality of exploratory attention, and Siegel’s Inferential Model, which classifies these modes of attention as arational.

Siegel has at least two ways to proceed. First, she could clarify that the inferential model captures only a *sufficient* condition for attention norms[[7]](#footnote-7): if attention is controlled by an inference, then that attention is epistemically appraisable by the rational norms that govern inference. This is consistent with existence of other non-inferential attention norms. Specifically, Explore-Exploit might capture why associational, non-inferential, modes of attention can be rational. Second, Siegel could argue that Explore–Exploit is not a genuine attention norm. Consider that a model of attention norms should explain why we are responsible for attention and inattention in some cases but not others (§1). The inferential model has a ready explanation: we are responsible for attention and inattention when it is controlled by an inference. It is not as clear why children and adult mind-wanderers are *responsible* for their meandering attention.

What Siegel should say about non-inferential attention norms is an open question. But that is why Siegel’s ‘Selection Effects’ is so exciting: because of how many conversations it opens up. Much of *The Rationality of Perception* is fully realized, or near to it, working out deep problems and powerful models in the epistemology of inference and perception. Siegel’s discussion of attention norms is more exploratory, but no less important: she sets the terms for a whole new debate in epistemology. She presents challenges for any theory of attention norms, and an elegant answer to those challenges: the inferential model. Siegel deserves credit for starting the conversation about attention norms; we would be foolish not to continue it.

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1. I thank Derek Lam for pushing me to separate questions about one’s responsibility for attention and the standards by which we evaluate attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One could argue that delusional beliefs are not subject to rational evaluation. But this is an abnormal case where someone’s capacity for rationality is impugned by mental illness. In contrast, normatively neural attention – for example, attending to a turtle while hiking – is a normal occurrence in rational individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I thank Nikolina Cetic for arguing that putatively epistemic norms of relevance are in fact moral or practical. In conversation with Cetic and my graduate seminar, Siegel gave the following case of purely epistemic norm of relevance: people should attend to Gulla/Geechee, a creole language spoken by the African American Gulla people in the costal South. One could object that Gulla/Geechee is relevant for moral reasons, such as the moral importance of preserving cultures. However, I am sympathetic to the idea that relevance can be purely epistemic. My point is simply that it is challenging to specify when relevance is epistemic, as opposed to moral or practical. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Siegel does not make the Prejudicial Premise or Stopping Conclusion explicit in her formulation of the inference. I make them explicit to clarify a) where the vicious circularity is introduced and b) which conclusion controls attention (the Stopping Conclusion). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Siegel calls this a ‘distribution conclusion’ because it concerns how features are distributed in the application. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Since Siegel notes that not all forms of circularity are vicious (2017, 111), I should spell out why Outgroup Hiring is viciously circular. Let's assume that the evaluators’ prejudice and local evidence provide poor support (on their own) for their conclusion that X’s application is mediocre. But the evaluators conclude that they can stop inquiry solely on the basis of their prejudice and local evidence. The evaluators then infer that X’s application is mediocre solely on the basis of their stopping conclusion and local evidence. So by introducing the intermediate stopping conclusion, the evaluators have inferred that X’s application is mediocre solely on the basis of their prejudice and local evidence. By assumption, this is a poor inference. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Siegel and Watzl (Manuscript) discuss a variety of attention norms, not all of them inferential. So I suspect that Siegel would take the first route. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)