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Meditative Attention to Bodily Sensations: Conscious Attention without Selection?*

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Abstract

Prominent figures in the philosophical literature on attention hold that the connection between attention and selection is essential (Mole (2011)), necessary (Wu (2011; 2014)), or conceptual (Smithies (2011)). I argue that selection is neither essentially, necessarily, nor conceptually tied to attention. I first isolate the target conception of selection that I deny is so tightly coupled with attention: graded intramodal selection within consciousness. I analyse two visual cases: analysis of the first case shows that there can be attention without a connection to tasks or action; analysis of the second case shows that there can be attention without a phenomenal foreground/background structure. Finally, I extend the argument into the domain of the body by considering a form of meditative absorption in body sensations to recapitulate the conclusions drawn from the two visual cases.

KEYWORDS: attention, selection, bodily sensation, meditative attention

§1 Introduction

Does everyone know what attention is? Is it taking possession of the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seems several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought? Is focalisation its essence? Does it imply a withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others? Is its real opposite the state of being confused, dazed, and

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scatterbrained? For James (1890: 403-404) these questions were posed as assertions. What is sometimes overlooked is that James' assertions were not about the nature of all attentional phenomena, but assertions about selective attention.¹

Selective attention was not the only type of attention James recognised. James devoted an entire section, "The Varieties of Attention"², to other forms of attention. For example, one of the varieties of attention James distinguished from selective attention – he called it 'passive intellectual attention' – is a form of attentional absorption in or concentration on intellectual objects. This form of attention involves a withdrawal from sensory objects so marked that it can result in bodily neglect:

And it is reported of Newton that, while engaged in his mathematical researches, he sometimes forgot to dine. Cardan, one of the most illustrious of philosophers and mathematicians, was once, upon a journey, so lost in thought that he forgot both his way and the object of his journey. To the questions of his driver whether he should proceed, he made no answer; and when he came to himself at nightfall, he was surprised to find the carriage at a standstill, and directly under a gallows. The mathematician Vieta was sometimes so buried in meditation that for hours he bore more resemblance to a dead person than to a living, and was then wholly unconscious of everything going on around him.

James (1890: 419)

James remarked that "The absorption may be so deep as not only to banish ordinary sensations, but even the severest pain." These kinds of states of attentive absorption receive little to no sustained treatment in contemporary philosophical discussions of attention.³

I mention James' passive intellectual attention to contrast it with a form of attentional absorption that James did not consider and that also receives little philosophical discussion:

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¹The first line of James' chapter XI on attention reads, "Strange to say, so patent a fact as the perpetual presence of selective attention has received hardly any notice from psychologists of the English empiricist school," (James (1890: 403)). When James makes his much quoted assertions about attention in the third paragraph, he is still speaking about selective attention.

²James (1890: 416–425).

³Watzl (2017: 17) mentions them in passing.

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

a form of sensory attention to the body, in particular, meditative attention to bodily sensations.⁴ In this paper, I give reasons to think that there are *boda fide* forms of attention, such as meditative attention to bodily sensations, that are neither essentially, necessarily, nor conceptually tied to selection.

Against whom am I arguing? Not psychologists who have followed James in admitting that attention is not one thing, even if their typologies of attention differ.⁵ I am reasonably confident that the episodes of meditative attention I discuss can find a home under the psychologist's capacious understanding of attention, perhaps as a form of vigilance.⁶ I am less confident that these episodes will be recognised as instances of attention by philosophers. Philosophers have tended to be more restrictive and revisionary in their understanding of attention. For example, some philosophers have deflated or recategorised phenomena that psychologists have thought of as constituting or involving attention: Mole (2011: 57) argues that daydreaming does not implicate attention at all; Wu (2014: 94–95) argues that sustained attention or vigilance is really nothing but a measure of effectiveness of selection for action; Koralus (2014: 38) argues that by his lights what vision scientists understand by 'selective attention' is not an attentional phenomenon.

In §2 I set out the views of some contemporary philosophers on attention and selection that I will argue against. In §3 I pin down the sense of selection in which I think there is attention without selection. In §4 I use two visual cases to argue against Mole (2011) who thinks that selectivity is essential to attention because of attention's connection to task and

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⁴James (1890: 416-417) did consider what he called 'sensorial attention' but focussed on episodes of the 'extreme mobility of attention' in which attention gets wrapped up in quick succession with every passing object such that, "some people, whose work, to the end of life, [only] gets done in the interstices of their mind-wandering."

⁵For example, see Neumann (1996), Parasuraman (1998), Luck & Vecera (2002), Petersen & Posner (2012).

⁶A caveat: I *am* arguing against those psychologists who think that attention is essentially connected with action; I argue against Wu (2011; 2014) who is the philosophical heir of that tradition.

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

to argue against Wu (2014) who thinks that attention is just selection for action. I also use the second visual case to argue against Smithies (2011) who thinks that every episode of attention involves a phenomenal contrast between the background and the foreground of attention. Finally, in §5 I introduce the case of meditative attention to bodily sensations as a further and more interesting case of attention without selection.

§2 Mole, Wu, and Smithies on Attention and Selection

How do contemporary philosophers conceive of attention and its relation to selection? The philosophers canvassed below characterise the relation between attention and selection variously as essential, necessary and conceptual.

Mole (2011) defines attention not as any kind of cognitive process, but rather as the manner of their occurring. The guiding metaphor of Mole's view is that cognitive processes stand to attention as individual performances in an orchestra stand to the musical unison of the orchestra. The manner in which cognitive processes occur in attention is *cognitive unison*: as subserving a task of which the agent has some understanding.⁷ Mole's model of attention has significant revisionary implications for the how cognitive processes relate to attention. An orchestra can play one melody in unison on Monday and an altogether different melody in unison on Tuesday, showing that there is no single melody that is the signature of musical unison. Analogously, some cognitive processes can occur in unison on Monday and altogether different processes can occur in unison on Tuesday, showing that there is no single cognitive process or set of processes that is the signature of attention. Another consequence of Mole's model: just as there is no safe transition from the melody played by a flautist to whether the flautist is in unison with the rest of the orchestra, so there is not safe transition from the occurrence of a cognitive process to whether that process

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⁷Mole (2011: 51).

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

constitutes attention.⁸

Mole repeatedly says that selectivity is *essential* to attention.⁹ What does Mole mean by ‘selectivity’? Mole does not think that capacity limitations in the cognitive system are what make selectivity essential. Mole uses his orchestral metaphor to show that capacity limitation is orthogonal to selectivity:

The orchestra can only be playing one tune in unison at any time, but this is not because there are insufficient players, or because any one section of the orchestra is less competent than the others. If attention is cognitive unison, then the attentive performance of one task will place limitations on the extent to which other tasks can be attended...It will do so whatever the extent of an agent’s information-processing capacities.

Mole (2011: 132)

What drives selectivity for Mole is not limited capacity, but the demands of cognitive unison. Following Mole’s own framing of the point in negative terms, selectivity results from devoting cognitive resources to a task in a manner that the agent’s cognitive resources are not devoted to an activity that does not serve the performance of the task.¹⁰

Wu (2011; 2014) defines attention as selection for action, following Neumann (1987) and Allport (1987). Neumann (1987: 375) gives a crisp formulation of this approach to attention, “...attentional phenomena result from the solution of selection problems in action control,”. What are the selection problems in action control? Neumann (1987: 376) observes that producing coherent bodily action requires both selecting *what* body parts will act (effector recruitment) and selecting or specifying *how* they will act (parameter specification). Wu (2011: 99-100) takes a step beyond Neumann and Allport in extending the scope of action to include mental action. Adapting Neumann’s formulation, we can say: attentional phenomena result from the solution of selection problems in bodily and mental

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⁸Mole (2011: vii).

⁹For examples, see p. 7, p. 131, and p. 158 in Mole (2011).

¹⁰See Mole (2011: 51).

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

action control. Wu also specifies that the action is a subject level phenomenon performed by the agent. The problem of selecting one out of the many potential paths from the range of inputs to the range of action outputs is what Wu calls the Many-Many Problem. According to Wu, attention is the process of solving the Many-Many Problem:

On my account, the metaphysics of attention is a process metaphysics by which I mean that attention is in the first instance identified with the processes involved in solving the Many-Many Problem—namely, selection of a specific input to inform a specific response. These processes constitute the subject’s attending to that input: attending to X is selecting X to guide or inform a response.^[11]

Wu (2011: 103)

On Wu’s account of attention, selection is *necessary* for attention. Since attention is the process of selecting an input to guide the subject’s response, it is clear that on Wu’s account there could be no attention without selection: selection is necessary for attention.

Smithies (2011: 262) defines attention functionally: it makes information rationally accessible to the subject as a reason for forming a belief or performing an action, such that the subject can use that reason for rationally controlling action, reasoning, and verbal report. Smithies (2011: 248) argues that his functional characterisation builds in the phenomenology of attention because it is consciousness that makes information available as a reason (in contrast to information which impinges on the subject just as a non-rational cause). Attention is thus a distinctive mode of consciousness.

Smithies argues that selection is *conceptually* tied to attention. Smithies (2011: 250) thinks that attention is an “essentially contrastive notion” because every experience exhibits a phenomenal contrast between what is in the attentive foreground and what is in the background; since every experience has a foreground/background structure and everything in

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¹¹Wu (2011: 103) also recognises that there can be persisting *states* of attention, which he analyses as supervening on the dynamics of the process of solving the Many-Many Problem.

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

the foreground must be selected to be in the foreground, selection is *conceptually* tied to attention:

However, not every experience within the stream of consciousness can occupy that attended foreground at once, since attention is an essentially contrastive notion: there is always a phenomenal contrast to be drawn between the foreground and the background of consciousness. Therefore,...it is a conceptual truth that attention involves competition for selection in the sense that whenever we attend to some things, we do so at the expense of others.

[Smithies \(2011: 250\)](#)

What does Smithies mean by ‘whenever we attend to some things, we do so at the expense of others’? What needs special care is the expression ‘at the expense of others’ that has at least three different senses: first, an object or property not currently represented in the cognitive system; second, a representation within the cognitive system of an object or property outside phenomenally conscious attention that could be brought into it; third, an object or feature already present in phenomenally conscious attention that, though not focally present, could be. Smithies clearly means to exclude the first sense. If attention were only essentially contrastive in the first sense, attending to an apple would rule out attending to dust motes in Alpha Centuri (which we stipulate are nowhere represented in the cognitive system). Claiming that attention is essentially contrastive in the first sense would be true but trivial.¹² Smithies clearly means the third sense, the sense in which an object or property within the ambit of phenomenally conscious attention is not the focus, but could be, for [Smithies \(2011:](#)

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¹²The second sense of ‘at the expense of others’, the sense in which an object or property represented within the cognitive system but outside of phenomenal attention could be brought into it, is harder to evaluate. Smithies denies that there is attention without consciousness. However, if there is attention outside of phenomenal consciousness, then cashing out ‘whenever we attend to some things, we do so at the expense of others’ cannot take for granted that attending to something involves phenomenally conscious attention. For example, two non-phenomenal representations may compete for selection such that the winner does not proceed into phenomenally conscious attention but proceeds for further non-phenomenal processing. In such a case, it is a conceptual truth that attention involves competition for selection in the sense that whenever we attend to some things, we do so at the expense of others – but the connection to phenomenal consciousness is lost.

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

249) writes, "...the relevant contrast is to be understood in phenomenal terms: there is a phenomenal contrast between the foreground and background of conscious experience."

Does Smithies intend the conceptual connection between selection and attention to be read intermodally or intramodally?¹³ That is, does he think every experience exhibits a phenomenal contrast between what is in the attentive foreground and what is in the background within a single modality or across modalities? There is no reason to think that he adopts only the weaker intermodal claim and carves out an exemption to his conceptual connection between selection and attention for the intramodal cases. Were Smithies to want such an exemption, it is difficult to imagine the principled grounds for it. For simplicity and to keep discussion manageable, I henceforth restrict my discussion to attention and selection within a given modality; with this restriction I save discussion of the difficult and important issues raised by multisensory integration (see [Macpherson \(2011\)](#)) for another occasion.

§3 Distinctions in selection

What is selection? In this section I distinguish different concepts of selection to identify the form of selection that I think is neither essentially, necessarily nor conceptually connected to attention.

The philosophers I am discussing conceive of attention as a subject-level phenomenon. Given a division between sub-personal and subject-level models of attention and selection, and borrowing the intuitive terminology of an 'attentional space' offered by [Watzl \(2011\)](#), it seems natural to distinguish selection *into* the space of conscious attention, which is (plausibly) sub-personal, from selection *within* the space of conscious attention, which is a subject-level phenomenon. I am concerned exclusively with selection within the space

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¹³I appeal to an intuitive but coarse-grained intra/intermodal distinction; see [Macpherson \(2011\)](#) for a finer-grained taxonomy.

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

of conscious attention. I want to draw some further distinctions between different types of selection within conscious attentional space.

How should we conceive of the changes in degrees of attention, shifts of attention, and selection? We can distinguish two types of changes in conscious attentional space.¹⁴ The first is when an item already selected into conscious attentional space is accorded more or less attention. The second is when a item that was outside conscious attentional space is selected into it thereby changing its topology, and accorded some given degree of attention, as in attentional pop-out. The dynamics of these changes of degrees of attention determine relations of centrality and peripherality. Relations of centrality and peripherality in turn determine what is attentionally salient. Roughly, to be selected is to gain a degree of attentional centrality with respect to a periphery; a shift of attention is a change in relations of centrality and peripherality to a new attentional pole; hence a shift of attention indicates selection. More accurately: shifts of attention are *defeasible* indicators of selection, since not just any change in relations of centrality and peripherality counts as a shift of attention – it must be a change towards a new attentional pole; this rules out minor changes at the periphery of an attentional pole as constituting a shift of attention, though such minor changes do constitute a change in the peripherality relations at that point.

Contrast intermodal selection with intramodal selection. In the former, a stimulus in one modality is selected over one in another modality. For example, I may select the laptop I can see over the doorbell I can hear. In intramodal selection, one stimulus is selected over another within the same modality. For example, I may select the cursor on the screen, over the steaming cup of tea, both of which I can see. As I mentioned, I will only focus on intramodal selection.

A distinction that cuts across the previously drawn one concerns the degree of selection.

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¹⁴This paragraph bears the clear imprint of [Watzl \(2011\)](#).

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

The distinction is between graded selection and all-or-nothing selection (see Allport (2011: 28–29) for a corresponding distinction between types of attentional limitation). In all-or-nothing selection, a single stimulus is selected at the cost of attending to any other. For example, I could be so absorbed in listening to the radio play that I do not attend to the doorbell. In contrast, in graded selection one stimulus is focally selected over another but non-focal stimuli are still attended to some degree. For example, even though I cannot stop paying attention to my social media feed, I am dimly aware of the light indicating that my laptop is nearly out of charge.

These distinctions can be fruitfully put together. Intermodal graded selection is selecting one stimulus over another in a differing modality while still attending to the contents of the latter modality; intermodal all-or-nothing selection is similar except the subject ceases to attend to the contents of the latter modality. (What exactly it means to ‘cease to attend to a modality’ is a delicate question. It is not that the modality ceases to exist for the subject, as if one were suddenly to lose a sense; rather, it is that there is no more sensing or consciousness in that modality. It is an open question whether the sense of having that modality (rather than not having it) itself requires attention to that modality (rather than to any of its contents) and if it does require attention, whether that attention is constantly deployed without the need for any selection of that faculty. I set these issues aside here.) Intramodal all-or-nothing selection is selection of one stimulus over another in a single modality and thereby ceasing to attend to any other stimulus in that modality; intramodal graded selection is similar but one still attends to some degree to the non-focal stimuli.

We can add further structure to these distinctions by specifying conceptions of ‘selection for X’, where the values of the variable may be action, reasoning, demonstrative judgment, etc. Each such specification of selection generates its corresponding matrix of cross-cutting distinctions, for example, ‘intramodal graded selection for action’ as when a sniper visually

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

selects a target without thereby ceasing to pay attention to non-target innocents.

I deny that graded intramodal selection within consciousness is either essentially, necessarily or conceptually connected to conscious attention.

§4 Attention's connection to selection: skies cloudy and clear

The structured and instrumental acts of selection that form the staple diet of examples for theorists of attention do not exhaust the space of possibilities. In this section, I will consider two cases aimed at weakening the hold of the thought that attention shares a deep tie with selection. The first case serves to cleave off a very weak sense of selection from more demanding conceptions, while the second case illustrates an absence of even that weak sense of selection. The first case targets Mole and Wu: I argue against Mole's conception of a task, and hence of his conception of attention; I also argue that the case does not involve selection for action in Wu's sense, but plausibly involves attention. The second case targets Smithies' claim that every experience has a phenomenal contrast between what is in the foreground and what is in the background of attention.

§4.1 The Case of the Monsoon Sky

Consider the case of being in your most relaxed state: there is nothing to do and nowhere to be. You let your eyes wander dreamily over low hanging monsoon clouds as they gently roll by on a lazy Sunday afternoon. You are just watching the clouds, watching without purpose. Call this the Cloud case. In this case, as [Watzl \(2011: 159ff.\)](#) would put it, the structure of attentional space is characterised by relations of phenomenal centrality and peripherality, and as your attention shifts, a new cloud is selected, and the centrality and peripherality relations of attentional space change.

The Cloud case seems far removed from the energetically purposeful cases of selection

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

for task or action, reasoning, or demonstrative judgment. There does not seem to be any plausible task or action in the vicinity, nor anything particularly rational, nor is a judgment in the offing. Attention seems to be possible without these kinds of selection.

Mole could argue that the Cloud case does involve performance of a task: purposelessly watching the clouds. According to Mole (2011: 51), what it is that displays unison – *i.e.*, attention – is the subject’s performance of a task, defined here:

A task is defined as an activity of the agent’s the execution of which is under the guidance of the agent’s understanding of that activity. An activity fails to be a task if it is not agent involving, if the agent has no understanding of that activity, or if the agent has an understanding but his understanding does not guide the way in which the activity is performed.

Mole (2011: 52)

Mole’s conception of a task encompasses much more than bodily action and voluntary acts, for example: a mental act of remembering counts as a task even though it involves no bodily action.

For Mole, even involuntary occurrences like tripping over a chair can count as a task. Mole (2011: 53) explains, “A subject’s understanding of tripping can guide her tripping even when the subject has not voluntarily undertaken to trip.” This is puzzling. I do not understand what Mole means by a subject’s *understanding* of tripping *guiding* her tripping; what do ‘understanding’ and ‘guiding’ amount to here? What could they amount to here? The case cannot be one of extending my arm to break my fall since that task would be breaking my fall rather than tripping (breaking my fall is a voluntary bodily action, so it anyway cannot be what Mole has in mind).¹⁵ I fear that Mole stretches the concept of a task well beyond its breaking point. If Mole’s concept of a task is unviable, the concept of cognitive unison breaks down too, and with it his model of attention.

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¹⁵The example would be clearer if the tripping in question were chemical rather than mechanical but Mole intends the latter.

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

Even if Mole's conception of a task could be rendered plausible, making it your task to purposelessly watch clouds has more than a whiff of a pragmatic contradiction, much like the paradox of hedonism. In the paradox of hedonism making happiness your end may prevent you from realising it; analogously, making it your task to purposelessly watch the unfolding scene before you may prevent you from watching it purposelessly. Watching the clouds purposelessly is something you can at best indirectly set the stage for, so that you slip into it. Making it your task to observe purposelessly is as unlikely to succeed as making it your task to fall asleep or be spontaneous.

Mole could change tack entirely and argue that the Cloud case does not involve attention at all. Mole could reason against the Cloud case as he does against daydreaming:

...the cases in which there really are no constraints on which processes do and which do not serve the daydreaming are cases in which the daydreaming is not under the control of the subject's understanding. In such a case the subject does not have daydreaming as a task at all. If so, then daydreaming is not something that this subject can do with cognitive unison...

Mole (2011: 57)

The extension of this line of reasoning to the Cloud case would go as follows: if there are no constraints on which processes do or do not serve watching the clouds purposelessly, then that watching is not controlled by the subject's understanding; if the watching is not controlled by the subject's understanding, then the subject does not have the task of watching purposelessly; if the subject does not have the task of watching purposelessly, then such watching cannot be done with cognitive unison. Hence the Cloud case is not a case involving attention.

By way of a dialectical reminder, for consistency I cannot respond that the Cloud case involves attention because it involves a task. And yet I want to say that the Cloud case involves attention. Here is my position cast in Mole's vocabulary. First, I disagree that there

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

are no constraints on which processes do or not serve daydreaming/watching purposelessly. If I am overcome by crushing doubt, anxiety, fear or despair, that will destroy my daydreaming or watching purposelessly. Hence there are real constraints on what processes serve these states. Notice that having real constraints on what serves watching purposelessly is a necessary condition for being controlled by the subject's understanding, but not a sufficient condition. This leaves open that processes could, speaking metaphorically, pull in the same direction without explicit guidance by a subject's understanding or having a task. Putting the point in terms of Mole's orchestral metaphor, the orchestra can play in unison without having made it its task to do so. I do not see why that does not suffice for attention. This brings an end to my discussion of Mole.

I now respond to two potential objections from Wu to the Cloud case. The objections are analogous to those posed by Mole: first, that the Cloud case does in fact involve selection for action. Wu (2011: 108) argues that it suffices to be selected for action that the selected item is *available* for action (even if it is never acted on). Availability for action is glossed in terms of being merely in principle locateable within a mapping of inputs and outputs of behavioural possibilities for the subject. The cloud is certainly available for action: whether a mental action like reasoning, or a physical action like pointing. Hence, Wu could say, the case does involve selection for action.

In response, setting aside worries that Wu's conception of selection for action is implausibly expansive, it seems to collapse the distinction between selection for action and *potential* selection for action. But action differs from potential action and the distinction ought to be preserved: fixing one's attention on the laundry and doing it differs from fixing one's attention on the laundry and only potentially doing it. Further, it is hard to see how such an expansive conception of selection for action solves what Wu (2011: 99) calls the Many-Many Problem: that the subject must select one of the myriad possibilities within the

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

space of possible actions at a time. Situating an object within the space of behaviourally possible actions helps to *set* the Many-Many problem, but merely so situating it does not help to *solve* the Many-Many Problem.

Wu's second objection changes tack entirely and argues that the Cloud case does not in fact implicate attention at all:

If I could press my eyeball to selectively render one specific object blurry or more clear, that *on its own* would not constitute attention to that object. We would have only ways in which the representation in the sensory manifold changes. I suggest that only when the relevant selectivity is *for something* can we make sense of an attunement that is plausibly a subject's way of attending to the world. The proposal is that it is just selection for action.

Wu (2011: 108)

The objection to the Cloud case is that shifting patterns of foveation – first on this cloud, then on that – with a correspond shifting pattern of clearness and blurriness, does not constitute attention to the cloud. For all I have said, goes Wu's objection, there is some capacity to register changes on the visual scene, but why think that what is involved is attention?

In response, one idea behind Wu's objection is entirely correct: not all changes of salience in the sensory manifold imply changes of attention. I would use a slightly different case than Wu's finger-in-the-eye: consider how attending to a fixation cross on a uniformly grey background differs from attending to a fixation cross on a grey background with a bright red ball in the rightmost corner of the background. Let us stipulate that attention is deployed in the same way over both scenes. Yet, it seems plausible that the portion of the background with the red ball is more salient than the corresponding portion in the other case (perhaps due to a colour contrast effect). Per hypothesis, this difference in salience is not an attentional difference. However, Wu's case and my illustration of his point are strikingly different from the Cloud case. It seems implausible to suggest that the phenomenology of

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

the Cloud case is independent of attention. Unlike the case I used to illustrate Wu's point, it would be question begging to assume that attention is held fixed. If we accept Wu's description of the Cloud case we are left with no explanation of why the registration mechanism alters the sensory manifold in the way that it does – an explanation that *is* available in Wu's example, in terms of the finger-in-the-eye. For these reasons, I do not find Wu's objection compelling.

A further point suggests that attention is possible without selection for action or reasoning, but it requires some care or it will turn back on my own argument. Watzl (2011: 155) points out that the temporal profile of selection of something as a target for action or reasoning differs from that of attention: attending occurs over time, such selection occurs at a moment in time. Hence, contra Wu, attention cannot be selection for action. Before proceeding, let us sharpen Watzl's point a bit. We can distinguish the event of selection, which ends, from the fact that selection occurred which endures (see Dretske (1999: 121, fn. 6)). Attention can be neither the relation between the event of selection and action, nor the relation between the fact of selection and action – the former because the event is too short, the latter because the fact endures forever, while attention does not. This point, however, threatens to turn into a liability for my argument, because it introduces a relatively trivial sense in which there can be attention without selection of a target for action or reasoning: any episode of holding attention fixed on the target *after* such selection would count as attention without selection. This point might seem to trivialise the conclusion I am working towards.

The trivialisation worry can be resisted, in two ways: first, by specifying that the point of interest is not in establishing attention without selection merely *for a moment* but rather over the course of an attentive episode; second, by distinguishing the sense of selection involved in selecting something as a target for action or reasoning from the sense of selection

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

involved in less structured and instrumental cases. To do that, let us return to the Cloud case.

Even if we grant that the Cloud case does not involve selection for action or reasoning, there seems to be a kind of selection at play, less structured, less instrumental: my attention drifts in a contentedly purposeless manner from this cloud to that one. Selection in this case bears a certain similarity to the breath: just as the breath runs quasi-automatically, so does selection in the Cloud case; but just as the breath can be taken hold of in a more structured and instrumental way, say in breathing exercises, so can selection, which can be put to the service of action, reasoning, or demonstration. This is the kind of relatively low-level selection that I am interested in.

I deny that that even this kind of low-level selection is an essential feature of attention, as my second case illustrates.

§4.2 The Case of the Clear Sky

The second case is of looking at a cloudless blue sky, with one's eyes fixated at the zenith, taking in the whole.¹⁶ Significantly, there are no objects to latch on to – to provide a new attentional pole – as one takes in the sky. The sky is an undifferentiated expanse, lacking objects like clouds, and uniformly blue. Call this the Clear case. One arrays one's attention uniformly over the scene: there is nothing standing as foreground to a background. As I am conceiving it, this is not a case of attending vigilantly to a specific region of the sky (“Look at the South-East sky to glimpse the rocket!”) or attending in a structured method such as imposing a grid on the sky and attending to each grid serially. Fixating one's eyes removes any significant change in relations of centrality and peripherality that would occur were one's eyes moving over the sky. While there may occur minor changes in relative

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¹⁶I am grateful to an anonymous referee who suggested this case and pressed me to explain what the meditative attention case I consider in the next section shows that is not shown by the cloudless sky case.

<https://goo.gl/asU8kV>

centrality and peripherality as one takes in the sky, the pole of attention remains constant: the cloudless blue sky. Because the pole of attention remains constant, the changes of centrality and peripherality do not count as shifts in attention, and hence no selection is in play.

An objection to the case is that it actually does feature a foreground/background structure.¹⁷ At the level of ‘objects’, the sky as a whole is foregrounded compared to any of its parts; at the level of properties, the colour property is foregrounded compared to the visual depth property, etc.; but there can hardly be a foreground/background structure without selection; hence the case does in fact involve selection.

We need to sharpen the objection to reveal its point. Recall that selection *into* conscious attention differs from selection *within* conscious attention. I am concerned with the latter. It is of course generally true that for any given object or feature that I do in fact attend to, I could have attended to some other object or feature. But recall that the locution ‘object or feature I could have attended to’ has at least three different senses: first, an object or field not currently represented in the cognitive system; second, an object or feature, represented within the cognitive system but outside conscious attention that could have been brought into it; third, an object or feature already present in conscious attention that though not focally present could have been. The first sense is not relevant to the objection, while if the objection is read with the second sense it misses its mark since my claim was never about selection *into* conscious attention; I do not contest that there are any number of subpersonal mechanisms that gate the entry of features and objects into conscious attention. The objection then must take the third reading: there are features or objects present in conscious attention such that they are in the attentional background, but could have been in the foreground. The objection then becomes: if the case features a foreground/background structure of elements, it involves selection within conscious attention; the cases does feature such a

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¹⁷I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this objection.

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foreground/background structure; hence it involves selection within conscious attention.

The objection fails because it is not true that selection within conscious attention is necessary for a foreground/background structure of elements. The reason is that subpersonal mechanisms gating entry into conscious attention can modulate an element's attentional footprint in the space of conscious attention: some elements enter the space of conscious attention with a larger footprint than others. That is a feature of selection *into* conscious attention rather than selection *within* it. Putting it a little more carefully, we can say that the foreground/background structure of elements in conscious attentional space is a function of two factors: the attentional footprint with which subpersonal mechanisms effect the entry of an element into conscious attention and the gain or suppression of an element conferred by focalisation in the space of conscious attention. Hence without controlling for selection *into* conscious attention, there is no safe transition from facts about a foreground/background structure to claims of selection within conscious attention.

Even though the objection fails, the issue is delicately poised. How to proceed? The first option is to deny that there is any foreground/background structure in the Clear case with respect to any element, so there is no selection. That involves a commitment to the phenomenological claim that given how attention is arrayed in the case, every element in conscious attentional space is equally salient. The theoretical upshot is that for every element, whatever the particular proportion of the two factors responsible for that element's attentional footprint, all elements are equally salient. In the Clear case, since there is only a cloudless undifferentiated blue sky to see, it is plausible that the attentional footprint of everything that gets into conscious attention is the same.

The second option is to affirm that there is a foreground/background structure in the Cloud case with respect to some elements, but that this is positively not a case involving selection. That involves a commitment to the phenomenological claim that give how at-

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tention is arrayed in the case, some elements are more salient than others. The theoretical upshot is that any differences in salience are the product of only one factor: the subpersonal mechanisms that effect the entry of an element into conscious attention; the second factor, the gain or suppression conferred by focalisation in the space of conscious attention, is held constant.

While both options demand a strong capacity to detect differences in salience they differ in the demands they place on our powers of introspection. The first option does not demand that introspection can discern the fraction of the two factors determining attentional salience. On the first option, for every element, whatever the proportions of the two factors, the result is the same: equal attentional salience. (Again, this should not be a cause for alarm because it is plausible that attentional footprint of everything that gets into conscious attention in the Clear case is the same.) Now turn to the second option. If the Clear case is to have any import, then on the second option differences in salience are not the product of selection within conscious attention and they must be the product of subpersonal gating mechanisms into conscious attention. The second option demands that introspection can discern the fraction of the two factors determining attentional salience, because introspection can discern that one constituent of the two factors – the gain or suppression conferred by focalisation in the space of conscious attention – is held constant with respect to every element. The second option thus makes greater demands on introspection than the first.¹⁸

My view is that the first option accurately captures the phenomenology: there is no foreground or background distinction to be drawn within the visual modality in the case of fixating one's eyes on the zenith of a cloudless undifferentiated blue sky. I think that the second option makes implausible demands on introspection. Thus the Clear case is a case

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¹⁸Making greater demands on introspection is not *ipso facto* theoretically suspect; the issue is always whether the demand lies beyond the threshold of plausibility. Where the threshold of plausibility lies is controversial. (see [Schwitzgebel \(2011\)](#) and [Lyons \(1988\)](#)).

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of attention without selection.

Even if one grants the case, and grants that it falsifies claims made about attention in the literature, one might worry about its import: how much does this case really reveal about attention? After all, the Clear case features an artificial fixation of the eyes towards an atypically undifferentiated field with no objects when the visual modality typically features a differentiated field with numerous objects and properties in flux over which the eyes are constantly saccading. The worry is that if there is attention without selection here, it is a limiting case that does not go far in illuminating structural features of our attentive capacity.

The case for conscious attention without selection would be stronger if there were a case of modality featuring a differentiated field – in fact a field in flux – in which it is plausible that there is conscious attention without selection. There is such a case: meditative attention to bodily sensations.

§5 Meditative attention to bodily sensations: a case of attention without selection?

Whereas it is common now to speak of ‘mindfulness’ I choose to speak of meditative attention. The reason is that ‘mindfulness’ is widely understood in a rather minimalist way to be ‘bare attention’ that is ‘non-judgmental’. But as [Gethin \(2011: 270\)](#) argues the concept of mindfulness as understood in the Theravāda texts from which it is extracted, includes much more than mere non-judgmental bare attention, it includes a detailed recollection of the purpose of the meditator in meditating. I am less concerned with the dimension of recollection of purpose in meditation as I am with another additional feature typically left out of the definition of ‘mindfulness’: the ability of attention to probe and explore the space within the body. ‘Meditative attention’ marks a much richer conception of the powers and tasks of attention to bodily sensations in meditation than ‘mindfulness’ has come to mean.

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Without looking, touching, or recalling an image, and using only your attention, can you discern whether your earlobes are attached or detached? *Vipassana* or ‘Insight’ meditation practitioners cultivate meditative attention towards the body, sweeping attention over every part of the body, and eventually through the body too, pausing at each part to observe the sensations present at that part of the body.¹⁹ When this kind of attention is cultivated, it is quite easy to involute one’s attention to discern features like the shape of one’s earlobes. Other experiments that come to mind include: without looking, discerning if there is any dirt under one’s finger-nails; discerning ‘from within’ whether one’s ear could use the services of an earbud; more formally, one could use a two-point discrimination task to test sensitivity as Fox et al. (2012) did, in a study brought to my notice by Evan Thompson.

What kind of sensations are observed in *vipassana*? To get a fix on what the sensations can be like, imagine the following: when you sneeze, you experience a number of sensations around your nose at a (relatively) high resolution – they could be tingling, prickling, zinging sensations etc.; now as you scan your body imagine that you felt sensations like that, not just around your nose, but over and in parts of the body, as you go about your scan of the body. Typically, when one scans the body methodically in this way at the beginning of a session of meditation, some parts of the body are ‘dark’, there are no sensations felt to be there. But it can happen, that one feels sensations all over the body.

So far, I have been discussing scanning the body part by part. When scanning part by part, the part that is the focus of attention naturally sits in the attentional foreground, while the rest of the body is in the attentional background. But there is another kind of meditative experience that has a very different structure, and that brings me, finally, to a description of the phenomenology that is crucial to my argument.

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¹⁹For a description of *vipassana* meditation practice that accords with the one given here, see Glickman (2014: Chap. 8).

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As I mentioned, it can happen that there are no ‘dark’ areas, and one can feel high-resolution sensations ‘flowing’ over and in all parts of the body. It can also happen that instead of scanning one’s body part by part, one can take in the full three-dimensional array of free-flowing bodily sensations in one take. Glickman (2014: 97-100) describes the experience as follows:

After you’ve been meditating with the body scan a while, you may spontaneously find times when thoughts disappear, sensations turn into pure energy, and your awareness becomes very subtle. Awareness flows easily either through a particular body part or through your whole body. This feels quite pleasant. You may even get the sense that you’re totally disappearing.

This experience of complete dissolution is traditionally called *bhanga*. Bhanga is significant, as it reveals our lack of solidity. Once strong, gripping feelings and thoughts disappear or wane, and our minds become quiet, we experience what feels like pure awareness or that our body is comprised of very subtle and arising and passing sensations.

Glickman (2014: 97)

An analogy may help illustrate how scanning the body part by part differs from taking the whole body in one go. Contrast normal reading with speed reading. In normal reading, you begin by reading the first word of a sentence and you proceed sequentially word by word till you get to the end of the page; analogously, when you scan part by part, you start with the top of the head and work your way down to your toes. In contrast to normal reading, in speed reading you take in the whole page in one go; analogously, instead of proceeding sequentially with each body part, in one take, you take in the entire high-resolution three-dimensional array of bodily sensations. The whole body feels to dissolve into a mass of subtle sensations.

The crucial point about this type of experience is that within the modality of bodily awareness, there is no structure of an attentional foreground that stands in contrast to an attentional background. There is no attentional centre that stands in contrast to an attentional

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periphery. Here is a description what I take to be the same phenomenon from a case study of a *vipassana* meditator S in Ataria et al. (2015: 141):

In the third stage of meditation, S describes an experience of *disappearing*: a “sense of dropping, it’s like falling into empty space...I dissolve into the world and where you have the boundaries and the self as foreground and the world as background or as ground, here there isn’t a ground, there isn’t a foreground, in a way the background is everything, although not identical to the world, I’m not separate from background”....In addition, S describes an experience without either *a sense of center* or *a sense of location*: “there is no center...there’s really no address. I have no idea where I am in stage three, it’s all background, I’m not there basically, just world, so there’s no real location at all in stage three...the body is so spread that it’s very difficult to know where it is and what it is”.

Since to be selected just is to gain a degree of attentional centrality with respect to a periphery, and there is no such structure in this case, we have an instance, *prima facie*, of attention without selection.

There are, of course, any number of objections that can be raised to this case: that it does, in fact, involve a task, or selection for action, or that it does not and is hence not a case of attention at all, or that the case actually does involve a foreground that stands in phenomenal contrast to a background. My response to all these objections would follow the pattern of responses offered in the Cloud and Clear cases. Instead of restating those objections and responses, let me pose a fresh challenge.

The challenge speaks to a feature of the meditative attention case that stands in marked contrast to the Clear case: whereas the Clear case featured an undifferentiated visual field with no objects, the meditative attention case features a differentiated field in flux. The challenge is this: what is the structural feature in virtue of which it is even possible that relations of attentional centrality and peripherality are not features of the meditative attention case? In response, whereas vision occurs from a point, there is no analogous point

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from which we experience bodily sensations. When one experiences the full flow of subtle sensations in the body, there is no point or centre from which one experiences the field of sensations; there is only the field of sensations. The experience of bodily sensations in the meditative attention case is radically decentred compared to ordinary cases of visual experience. It is in virtue of this structural feature of our experience of bodily sensations that the meditative attention case can lack the foreground/background structure that emerges much more readily in vision.

§6 Conclusion

Suppose that we grant my analysis of the visual cases: that the Cloud case shows that the accounts of attention offered by both Mole and Wu are wanting and that the Clear case shows that Smithies' claim that attention is essentially contrastive is false. This much would already show that there is attention without graded intramodal selection within conscious attention. Thus, even without the meditative attention case there are grounds to think we have made philosophical progress. If we grant the meditative attention case, that deepens and extends the argument developed in the visual case and invites us to rethink not only the nature of attention but to look more carefully at how structural features of different modalities shape the nature of attention in those modalities.

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