

Statement of Research Interest

My main area of research is the philosophy of mind and philosophy of psychology. My work focuses on the kinds of control agents deploy in acting, their respective psychological bases, and their respective contributions to the subjective experience of acting. The example which I have focused on to date is the role of attention in guiding the execution of an action and in structuring the accompanying experience of acting. In parallel with this, I've defended a distinctive account of attention itself as essentially related to motivation and as possessing a constitutive aim. My current work thus probes the theoretical interconnections between agency, consciousness, and attention.

Below, I outline three current projects. The first is about the nature and basis of motor control. The second is about the explanatory relations between experiences of acting and the processes of cognitive control exercised in acting. The third concerns the motivational and normative side of attention.

Project 1: The intelligence and agential status of motor control

This project develops work begun in my dissertation about the varieties of control exemplified in skilled bodily action. Specifically, I've argued that agents exercise flexible control not only in acting as they intend, but also in how they motorically execute their intentions. I've been concerned with identifying the psychological basis of the latter type of flexible control and in arguing that it qualifies as a form of practical intelligence. In two papers that build on this work, I argue we should accord a central role to perceptual attention in understanding the basis of this control (and in its selective loss).

Paper 1: "The motor control challenge" (In preparation for submission to *Philosophical Psychology*)

This paper concerns the practical intelligence exemplified in the fine-grained execution of skilled behaviours, such as reaching for a glass to take a sip of water. I argue that fine-grained properties of action are the nonconceptually represented outputs of goal-directed perceptual attention, where 'goal-directed perceptual attention' is the process whereby nonconceptual information is harnessed to settle how one's body will move. I exhibit the virtues of this proposal over accounts that explain practical intelligence of skilled action exclusively in terms of propositional and conceptual states (e.g., Stanley 2011), and over other accounts which emphasize perception's role in skilled action (e.g., Dreyfus 2002). I further motivate my proposal in terms of its ability to make sense of *mistakes of execution*, as when a skilled agent 'chokes under pressure' or acts clumsily. Whereas intellectually-based mistakes of execution issue from a false belief about one's circumstances (e.g., Davidson 1980), I propose that non-intellectually-based mistakes (like choking or acting clumsily) issue from distracted states of attention.

Paper 2: "Attention, action, and selection for action" (In preparation)

This paper examines the proposal that attention is 'selection for action' (Allport 1987; Neumann 1987; Wu 2014). I suggest that we must distinguish two possible interpretations of this view: one according to which attention consists in selection between alternate behavioural possibilities, and one according to which attention consists in compensating for interference from distracting information. I argue that the former implementation is unsustainable because it has no adequate explanation of the agential status of the agent's 'selection'. By contrast, the latter implementation avoids these difficulties. Consequently, those attracted to the selection-for-action theory of attention should embrace the latter implementation of the view.

Project 2: Conscious agency

My second line of research concerns the nature of conscious agency. More specifically, I am investigating the prospects of accounting for aspects of the phenomenology of acting in terms of mental states and processes deployed in controlling an action. I have also applied these ideas to understanding the phenomenology of attention as a mental action, and to understanding the significance of consciousness for agency, more generally.

Paper 1: “Understanding the sense of ownership of action” (under review)

There is something that it’s like to act—e.g., to raise your arm when waving or reaching for a thing. Experiences with this phenomenology are experiences of acting. A central component of any experience of acting is the sense of ownership or ‘mineness’ the subject feels toward experienced actions. When you raise your arm to wave goodbye, for example, you experience the arm-raising as your own doing—i.e., as a process or event that is attributable to *you yourself*. In this paper, I develop and defend an original account of the psychological basis of this central aspect of agentive experience. In §1, I present a puzzle about how the agent figures subjectively in specifically ‘immersive’ experiences of acting, and I sketch a preliminary solution to it. According to this solution, the agent manifests in immersive experiences of acting in virtue of its ‘perspectival character’. In §2, I argue that we can ground the perspectival character of an agentive experience in the motivational structure of the conscious attention as this is deployed in guiding action. I thereby propose to explain a phenomenal property of agentive experience in terms of exercises of conscious attentional control. In §3, I show how to extend this account to cover subjective ownership in nonimmersive experiences of acting. Finally, in §4, I further defend the attentional account by showing that, compared with rival accounts, it better accommodates cases in which the sense of ownership for action is lost.

Paper 2: “Hallucinations of acting and the naïve view of agentive experience” (planned)

According to what I’ll call ‘the naïve view’ of the phenomenology of acting, aspects of what it’s like for one to act metaphysically consist in exercising the agent’s capacities for conscious control. What makes the view ‘naïve’ is that it claims to explain some aspect of how things subjectively *seem* to the subject by the fact that things *are* that way and are *manifest* as such. Thus, on the naïve view, it consciously seems to you as though you are directing control to a bodily movement because you are directing such control and, furthermore, you are doing so *consciously*—i.e., in virtue of allocating conscious states and processes. Opposed to the naïve view is representationalism about agentive experience. According to representationalists, it seems to the subject that she is controlling her movements because she *represents* herself as such. In support of their position, representationalists may cite the ease with which they accommodate *hallucinated actions*—i.e., experiences of acting occurring in the absence of any corresponding action. In such cases, they can claim, the agentive phenomenology is grounded in a misrepresentation of oneself as acting. By contrast, action hallucinations appear to be impossible on the naïve view given the constitutive connection on that view between properties of agentive phenomenology and actual deployments of agentive control. Drawing on empirical work on the ‘over-attribution of agency’, I assess the options open to the proponent of the naïve view for responding to this explanatory challenge.

Paper 3: “The Replication Argument and the Phenomenology of Attention” (ready for submission to *Journal of Consciousness Studies*)

According to an argument originally advanced by Edmund Husserl (1913) and more recently resurrected by Wayne Wu (2014) and Sebastian Watzl (2017), the phenomenology of conscious attention does not consist in any property of how the world *appears* to the subject of attention. For example, it does not consist in the attended entity appearing somehow clearer and more distinct than unattended entities do. The argument claims to establish this by showing that, for any candidate change in perceptual appearance that may accompany a shift of conscious attention, it is possible to replicate the relevant change in appearance without replicating the phenomenology of attention. It is then inferred that the distinctive ‘foreground-background’ subjective organization which subjects access when introspecting an attentional episode must therefore not be any organization within appearances. And in particular, the distinctive organization must consist in something irreducibly mental. In response, I defend three claims. First, the introspective evidence to which the argument appeals is fully consistent with the claim that it purports to undermine—namely, that the phenomenology of attention consists in a certain modification of perceptual appearances. Second, the relevant introspective evidence is not only consistent with but *better explained* by the latter hypothesis. Third, the relevant introspective evidence can be retooled to defend a different conclusion about the phenomenology of attention—namely, that the change of appearance which is constitutive of attentional phenomenology is essentially *subjectively owned*. Thus, by exposing the limitations of the replication argument, we discover something fundamental about conscious attention as a mental act.

Paper 4: “From the agent’s point of view: Why the ‘Disappearing Agent Problem’ is a problem for the phenomenology of agency” (in preparation)

According to ‘reductive’ or ‘event-causal’ theories of action, we can exhaustively characterize what it is for an agent to act in terms of the causation of behaviour by a specified class of mental states or events—typically, ones that motivate and rationalize the behaviour (e.g., an intention). An influential challenge to reductive accounts is the ‘Disappearing Agent Problem’. Despite variations in formulation, all versions of this challenge charge reductive accounts with leaving no role to the agent in the generation of bodily movement. In this paper, I defend an original solution to the Disappearing Agent Problem that grounds the agent’s presence in action in the motivational structure of conscious attention. I begin by isolating the most fundamental, non-question-begging version of the Disappearing Agent Problem facing extant reductive theories of action. This, I argue, is to accommodate what I call ‘basic subjective action ownership’. I then defend a reductive account of basic subjective action ownership as the relation that obtains between an agent and her behaviour when behaviour unfolds under the guidance of the agent’s motivational perspective. Lastly, I explain how we can be justified in moving from a claim about the *sense* of ownership to a claim about ownership *itself*, and so why the present proposal addresses the metaphysical structure of agency.

Group 3: The motivational and normative dimensions of attention

My third line of research concerns the nature of attention as a psychological kind and its deep connections with motivation, broadly conceived. In my dissertation, I argued that all attentional episodes manifest the agent’s total motivational state, where this includes not only explicit intentions to execute various tasks, but also ‘implicit’ motivational tendencies rooted in affect and formed partly

through reward history. I rested my case for these claims on a close reading of empirical work on automatic attentional biases and capture. I have two papers at different stages of development addressing the philosophical implications of this empirical work.

Paper 1: “Actionism and the objection from attention capture” (in preparation for *Synthese*)

Let ‘actionism’ be the view that to attend is to exercise an agential capacity. This may be because attention is *itself* essentially an action or activity (Watzl 2017; Jennings 2012; Carruthers 2015), because attention is essentially a *manner* of action performance (Mole 2011; Koralus 2014), or because attention is an essential *aspect* of acting (Wu 2011; 2014). Now, if attention ever occurs without action, the relation between attention and action is contingent rather than necessary, and actionism is false. Hence, to refute actionism, it’s sufficient to identify a single instance of attention occurring without any action being performed. Common sense suggests that there are such instances. For example, while working quietly at your desk, you hear a fly buzzing around your head. The buzzing *drams* or *grabs* your attention, distracting you from your work. Reorienting attention automatically to the fly does not seem to be an action nor to serve any action you’re attempting to perform. Instead, it seems more akin to a reflex—like the way your leg jerks when your knee is tapped. If so, then there are counterexamples to actionism. This is the *objection from attention capture*. At the heart of the objection, I argue, is an influential but mistaken view of automatic attention as *saliency-driven* (“the saliency view”). I begin by showing why if the saliency view is true, actionism is false. I then present empirical and conceptual arguments for rejecting the saliency view. Grasp of these arguments point us to a rival view of attentional control which I call the ‘priority view’. According to the priority view, all instances of attention (including cases we would intuitively describe as ‘captured’ or ‘involuntary’ attention) are governed by the subject’s *agential priorities*. After motivating the priority view and showing its consistency with actionism, I conclude with some broader morals about the broader category of automatic action.

Paper 2: “Distraction and the constitutive aim of attention” (planned)

Recent work on the nature of attention is characterized by two seemingly contradictory intuitions about the relation between attention and distraction. On the one hand, it’s natural to understand attention and distraction as, in some deep sense, *opposed* to each other. This intuition is codified in theories of attention which identify distraction as the absence of attention, and vice versa (Mole 2011; Koralus 2014). On the other hand, it’s natural to explain states of distraction in terms of how the agent’s attention is currently focused—namely, toward a distraction. This intuition is codified in accounts of attention which explain attention in terms of how a subject’s consciousness is focused or structured (e.g., Stazicker 2011; Watzl 2017). Ideally, an adequate account of attention will accommodate both intuitions, yet extant accounts require that we theoretically privilege one over the other. In this paper, I show how we can do better. I argue that states of distraction are *intrinsically defective* states of attention. Here, an analogy can help. For example, it’s widely agreed that a false belief is a defective insofar as it fails to attain the constitutive aim of belief—namely, truth or perhaps knowledge. Similarly, distracted attention is defective insofar as it fails to achieve attention’s constitutive aim: the avoidance of distraction or (equivalently) the achievement of prioritization. In this way, we can accept that the notion of distracted attention is perfectly coherent, while also acknowledging that distraction is opposed to attention—namely, to its proper functional role. I motivate this proposal by showing that it better accommodates both intuitive and empirical data about what it is involved in attention being captured by a distractor. On the view that results, attention is

Aaron Henry

essentially governed by the aim of prioritizing what is relevant to the agent (in light of her agential priorities) but does not always succeed at achieving this aim. States of distracted attention are thus revealed as failures to prioritize.