

**Attending to the online other**

**A phenomenology of attention on social media platforms**

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# 9. Attending to the Online Other: A Phenomenology of Attention on Social Media Platforms<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction: Attention Scattering on Social Media Platforms

In scholarly discussions on the ethics of social media,<sup>2</sup> a recurring point of concern around the heavy usage of such platforms is their detrimental effects on the well-being of their users (Dennis, 2021; Hoffner & Bond, 2022), with one of the most visible effects being the scattering of users' attention (Roholt, 2023). With the constant usage of smartphones, users are always connected to their social media platforms (SMPs) of choice, constantly updated but with a scattered focus as users find themselves compulsively checking their social media updates whenever they have a free moment and even when they are doing something else, multi-tasking (Koralus, 2014). In these discussions, attention is usually seen as a resource depleted by SMP usage,<sup>3</sup> with long-term effects on

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  - 2 The platforms discussed here are mainstream social media platforms (SMPs) such as Facebook, Twitter ('X'), Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Threads.
  - 3 There are exceptions to this mainstream view—most remarkably, Galit Wellner's work (2014), which has pointed out that our notion of attention as an undistractable capacity to focus on one thing is problematic and culturally constructed (Wellner, 2014, p. 49) and that multi-tasking is not only possible and

diminishing users' attention and capacity to focus on one thing at a time (Fisher, 2022). The framing of scattered attention as detrimental is seen as one of the main ways in which online social media platforms are disruptive of the day-to-day lives of their users as a standard example of how a socially disruptive technology acts (van de Poel et al., 2023). In this chapter, I turn to a less-discussed dimension of the attention disruption of SMPs—namely, how the capacity for attention enables us to relate to others as moral agents. By focusing on this relational aspect of human attention, I will argue that SMPs are disruptive for our moral and social lives in specific ways previously ignored in most scholarship on social media ethics.

In this chapter, I use a phenomenological approach to disentangle the features of the relational mode of attention and use this analysis to argue that SMPs' constant bid for users' attention has detrimental consequences for how users attend to other users, and for recognizing their moral agency. I claim that SMPs do not merely distract us from our surroundings but also hinder us from perceiving distant others as moral agents and worthy of our attention. I first analyse how the other-oriented attention is distinctive from other modes of attention that objects demand. I will draw from conceptualizations of attention in the phenomenological tradition to flesh out a phenomenology of attending to the other or other-oriented attention. Then, I will use these phenomenological insights to investigate the ways in which SMPs affect the other-oriented attention detrimentally, in ways that short-circuit our moral perception of others.

## 1. Attention and Moral Agency

The shaping of human attention through technological artefacts is an ethical issue that has been widely discussed, with online social spaces such as SMPs playing a significant role in this shaping. Thus far, the ethically focused discussions on attention in online social spaces have followed two broad directions: the first one concerns the deceitful

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assumed by specific jobs (piloting an aircraft, parenting), but also that specific technological designed experiences make multi-tasking feasible and rewarding, becoming an experience which is 'greater than the sum of its parts' (Wellner, 2014, p. 69).

practices enacted by design, where attention is seen as a scarce resource that is consumed by online platforms without the users' awareness, leading to problematic issues such as accountability in design choices and user consent (Brady et al., 2020; Fogg et al., 2007; Timms & Spurrett, 2023, p. 24), or user manipulation (Klenk, 2022) when users do not notice how certain choices are already made for them by the platform. When design choices affect a user's capacity for focused attention without the users' noticing or consent, we are in the realm of the ethics of (interaction) design. The second direction of ethical analysis concerns what attention as a mental capacity enables for our moral lives: it has been discussed that we are autonomous and self-directed agents precisely because we can choose what we pay attention to (Williams, 2018), hence attention is a resource that we need for enacting moral agency (Watzl, 2023; Bombaerts et al., 2023). My concern in this chapter aligns with the second direction of ethical analysis, namely how attention is fundamental for moral agency, to which I add the distinctive concern of recognizing the moral agency of others. Thus, while it has been argued that we need to be able to freely focus our attention on the matters of concern to us—as a precondition of our own moral agency, acting in the realm of moral ends—I will argue here that we need to pay attention to others in particular ways such that we recognize their moral agency. Attention has a particular relational aspect, which I will explore in this chapter while also highlighting the distinct ways in which online attention can hinder this mode of attention.

Before we dive into the phenomenology of attention to others, we need to establish what makes attention a distinct experience. An example will help us discern the fundamental dimensions of attention. Imagine you are walking in a park with the purpose of finding a spot to have a picnic. You scrutinize the grass and the trees, looking for the perfect spot, not too shady, sunny, or wet. Then, a toddler runs at you and throws a ball at you, so you notice the toddler and wonder where the ball will go next. As you scrutinize the grass, you also wonder if this spot would also be good for playing a football game, so you move your gaze to the trees surrounding it and wonder if their branches are too low for this purpose. Then you hear a bus passing by on the street next to the park and think you could take the bus back home instead of walking. In a few minutes, you switched what you noticed seamlessly—

the grass, the toddler, the ball, the grass again—but looked at different aspects of the field, the trees, the sound of the bus. At the same time, you were thinking and imagining things while also paying attention to these thoughts and the surroundings. Attention is this capacity for dynamic rearrangement of what you focus on while also holding all the other things in the periphery of perception. As you moved your focus to the football game, the toddler did not disappear, but it only became less central and slowly faded away from your perception.

Attention is the individual capacity to rank things subjectively in a dynamic manner: some things become the centre of our focus, and some are pushed to the background (Watzl, 2017). We cannot pay equal attention to everything in our surroundings; thus, we need to dynamically shift what we notice and involuntarily ignore. The capacity to rearrange spontaneously what we focus on, shifting between what becomes central and what fades at the periphery, ranking and selecting subjectively the things we attend to (Panizza, 2022, p. 157), is what attention is all about phenomenologically. Sebastian Watzl has described this implicit hierarchy-setting in the experience of paying attention as the arranging of saliences: ‘attending to something creates a structured field, in which the object of our attention plays a special role’ (Watzl, 2017, p. 209). Attention is a mode of consciousness that arranges everything into ordered sets based on the perceived importance of the elements of the set (saliency), whereby this arrangement is subjective and idiosyncratic to the one paying attention, heavily dependent on their particular ways of experiencing the world. For example, a field covered with grass will be perceived differently based on who is paying attention to it and given their interests. A sports player will perceive the features of a field, looking for what game actions it affords (D’Angelo, 2020, p. 964), while others may look at the same field, noticing good places for having a picnic. What we perceive as salient is already shaped by what we want to do but also, at the same time, by the unfamiliar. Some things capture our attention, with attention hijacked from us when we cannot help but pay attention to the unfamiliar (Fredriksson, 2022, p. 31).

Attention is experienced by humans on a continuum from voluntary to involuntary. There is an effortful way of paying attention (presupposing voluntary intention from our side) and a general

attentiveness or perception,<sup>4</sup> both are part and parcel of the faculty of attention (Panizza & Hopwood, 2022, p. 162). Both modes of attention have ethical implications but in different ways. While voluntary attention is something we direct at others, we cannot say the same thing about our perception (attention as awareness), which can be hijacked and is seemingly out of our voluntary control. It seems that one cannot be held responsible for what one perceives. Still, there is room for responsibility, even in passive attention. Previous experiences of voluntary attention shape our passive attention or perceptual awareness; that is, we train ourselves to know what to pay attention to through habitual interactions. What strikes us as attention-worthy is shaped by our past experiences of attention, our relations with others, and our embodied history of being alive in the world. If we want to pay attention to other things, we need to train ourselves by paying voluntary attention to some aspects of the world until, given enough interactions, we become experts at passively noticing these aspects after a while. In the ethics of attention, we are autonomous about what we pay voluntary attention to—based on our interests and preferences—and agentic about our involuntary attention, as we are responsible for our habits that shape what we notice and what strikes us as interesting. To sum up, attention is a capacity to arrange saliences which is both voluntary and involuntary, shaped by our particular history of interactions with the world, by our interests, and by our way of being-in-the-world as embodied agents.

## 2. Relational or Other-Oriented Attention

Attention is the currency of social media exchanges, while posts, notifications and images are the attention attractors. Mainstream social media platforms are primarily seen as places for socialising but, at the same time, places where we bid for other users' attention and offer it to others through the informational snippets that we publish, share, or consume. It has been argued that every share on social media is a gesture of pointing at the interestingness of the original post. The speech act entailed in sharing would be pointing at something interesting to draw

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4 See the work of Sebastian Watzl (2017) for more fine-grained distinctions between the kinds and modes of attention.

other's attention (Arielli, 2018). But if every post, image, or comment is an attention bid, then the overall environment becomes overwhelming for users who are constantly asked to pay attention to this or that. This is already recognized as an issue for psychological well-being but also an ethical concern. This constant bid for attention from everyone makes SMPs feel like exhausting places. When you decide to share someone's post, you cannot only look at what is said in the post (informational and epistemic content) but also who said it, and you also need to think carefully about what kind of attention you want to disclose about that person. You may agree with a post by Trump, factually, but you may withhold from sharing it if you disagree with him politically. Every gesture of sharing, linking, or commenting is primarily a gesture of signalling attention. In deciding whom to share and whom to like, I also decide whom to ignore. This renders a quality of premeditation to any act of attention online, which also becomes a morally loaded choice.

The angle of my approach to moral agency is relational. Relational approaches in ethics highlight the role that other moral agents play in our own shaping as moral agents, seeing as we all inhabit the same social environment and our moral actions are connected. Moral agency is 'the property of humans and other animals in their capacity as actors who more or less intentionally bring about results in the world' (Alfano, 2016, p. 219). Moral agency presupposes agents with responsibility and autonomy (Watson, 2013, p. 1): we are responsible for the things we bring about in the world through our actions. If these actions rely on autonomous decisions, how we act in the world is the result of our choices and preferences. Moral agency concerns what someone can do, and it relies on their being autonomous and deciding for themselves what they want to do. Moral agency is already relational to some extent, given that, to act in the moral realm, it is assumed that we are responsible for our actions in front of others: our actions are not morally relevant unless we accept accountability for them. Furthermore, we never act in a social vacuum: our actions encounter the resistance and reaction of others. Sometimes, our moral actions presuppose that others receive these actions, and then they are the patients of our agency. As Mark Alfano (2016) has put it, our moral agency is intertwined with the moral patiency of others, and vice-versa: 'people can be simple patients, to whom things just happen; they can be simple agents, who just do

things; but they can also be complex agents and patients: they can do things to each other. In such cases, agency and patiency are inextricably intertwined' (Alfano, 2016, p. 20). One's actions can diminish another's moral agency and enhance it, for example, by promoting another's autonomy in decision-making (Raskoff, 2022). To sum up, the relational dimensions of moral agency are visible in the following ways: agency is not possible without responsibility and autonomy, and sometimes it entails the patiency of others (when we do things to others, e.g., we decide for them). Responsibility is already a relational concept, while autonomy has already been discussed as a relational concept (MacKenzie, 2019)—albeit some Kantian philosophers will not agree that autonomy is fundamentally relational.

If moral agency is a relational concept, then what we can do in the moral domain is constrained or enhanced by others' actions and responses to our own actions. Hence, our moral agency is constrained by the attention we pay to others and the attention they pay to us.

In exploring the part played by attention in exercising our moral agency, the phenomenology of attention can help us to understand what exactly is relational in our attention. While we use the same term of 'attention' for the capacity to notice other humans as we do for objects or environments, there is a qualitative difference between the attention we give to other humans versus everything else. When we perceive others, usually, we cannot see them merely as objects—we also see them as subjects at the same time. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. When we are running through a crowd—to catch a train, for example—we do not see the others as subjects, just obstacles we must avoid as we navigate the public spaces. But in most cases, when people surround us, we pay attention to them as subjects as well, meaning that they can also pay attention to us. There is always a possibility for reciprocity in the attention we give to others, even if this possibility does not always become actualized. We are able—partially due to technological artefacts—to create our social bubbles into which nobody can enter without our consent; for example, we may walk on a street and completely ignore the people around us as we scroll social media feeds on our phone and listen to music with noise-cancelling phones. In this walk, we notice those around us only as bodies and potential obstacles, things not to bump into, but still, we do not perceive them in the same way as we would

the stop signs or buildings around us. Any of these persons around us can emerge at any time as a moral agent, demanding a different kind of attention from us, for example, by asking us for directions, for our help with something, or to start a conversation. Even when we create a social bubble around us, we are not immune from others soliciting our attention, and then we feel obliged to respond. In granting attention to others, reciprocity is always possible: they can also notice us in their subjective field of attention. This reciprocity embedded in the other-oriented attention affects how we relate to others as moral agents.

Is there something distinctive in the attention we pay to others, from the attention to inanimate objects? Yes, and this distinctiveness has to do with moral agency, both our moral agency and that of the others we pay attention to. We notice that others are moral agents when we feel responsible for our actions in front of them and demand accountability for their actions—at least in principle. To dive deeper into this object-person difference within the phenomenology of attention, I will draw on the concepts of the classical concepts of the gaze and empathy. Others can return our gaze and we can feel empathy towards others, even without wanting to.

## 2.1 The Gaze

The moral phenomenology of the gaze has been analysed on a continuum stretching between the opposing views of Sartre and Levinas (Gallagher, 2020, p. 101). For Sartre, the encounter with another's gaze discloses the experience of being objects of that gaze. We are objectified when we are looked at:

The shock of the encounter with the Other is for me a revelation in emptiness of the existence of my body outside as an in-itself for the Other. Thus my body is not given merely as that which is purely and simply lived [...] [it becomes] extended outside in a dimension of flight which escapes me. (Sartre 1956, p. 352, cited in Gallagher, 2020, p. 102)

For Levinas, on the other hand, the other's gaze and the encounter of gazes is 'imperative' (Gallagher, 2020, p. 102) as it addresses us as subjects and makes a moral demand from us. The gaze can subjectify and objectify someone at the same time. When another person watches me, I can feel that I am the object of their scrutiny but also, if our eyes

meet, a moral subject who is asked something. Both ways of reading the gaze are plausible and can happen at the same time or alternate.

Shaun Gallagher proposes an affective and interactive reading of the gaze: the gaze 'is neither a passive observation nor a disorganised glance; it appears, at the very least, as an active, interested questioning—and we experience it as something to which we need to respond' (Gallagher, 2020, p. 103). The gaze of the other carries an affective dimension and a demand for relating, which Gallagher calls an 'elementary responsiveness' (Gallagher, 2020, p. 103). When another looks at me, their gaze carries this implicit demand for affective relating. This is why, for example, staring for too long at someone else is experienced as uncomfortable because there is an implicit demand for relating in that gaze. However, without additional information, what is asked of us is unclear. When a moral request comes through words, asking for help is easily understood. However, a gaze signals the entering into a relation of attention awarding while also demanding attention from the other. The purpose of this bid for attention is unclear in the beginning. The gaze signals an initiating reciprocal attention exchange, which may or may not have moral significance.

There is a continuum between two modes of attention to others: the 'scientific' gaze and the affective one (Harney, 2020, p. 101), with various modes in between. We can see the other as an object of our scrutiny, and we see the other as a subject capable of returning our attention by returning our gaze or answering us. Many ethical issues arise when we are stuck only in the scientific gaze, looking at others as if they are merely objects of scrutiny (for example, a doctor looking at patients only as clusters of symptoms). Even in professional contexts, staying in the scientific mode of attention to others should be avoided since it is a dehumanizing gaze. Meanwhile, the affective mode of attention is about relating to others as subjects capable of affective responses, yet this mode of attention is difficult to maintain all the time.

Imagine you are travelling by public transport. While all other passengers are capable of being subjects of your attention and hence of being recipients of your affective gaze,<sup>5</sup> not all of them should be

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5 Visually impaired people are also capable of full attention to another and being attended to. In these cases, the voice replaces the gaze as a marker of the lived body. Being spoken to and answering back, in real time, is what replaces the

because then your attention would be indiscriminate: when everyone is important, nobody is. As a fictional example, in Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* (1869), Prince Myshkin, the main character, is a very peculiar man who awards everyone affective attention in a way that makes them feel really seen. Initially, this feature of Myshkin is endearing, and he gains a lot of fans among the other characters of the novel. However, as the action progresses, Myshkin disappoints everyone as he cannot sustain this genuine interest in everyone else equally. While attending to others as moral agents entails having this capacity to see them as subjects and extending this affective attention to them, this is only a requirement in principle. In a Levinasian reading, we owe others our affective attention insofar as they ask, but we cannot always relate to others as subjects. In practice, both modes of attending to others are alternating—the scientific and the affective—since attention is a dynamic rearrangement of saliences, so this affective dimension also gets rearranged. Sometimes we see others clinically and sometimes we perceive them affectively, alternating modes for the same person depending on the context.

## 2.2 Empathy

As mentioned previously, a distinctive dimension of other-oriented attention consists in its affective modality, usually cashed out in terms of empathy. What makes the attention we pay to others as opposed to objects distinctive is the ever-present possibility of empathy. This does not mean we always need to experience empathy when we look at others—this would be too high a requirement for ethically relating to others as subjects—even when we see others as moral agents. A judge in a courtroom sees the accused as a moral agent, but empathy is not needed for this kind of attention to be awarded.

The link between attention to the other and ethical life passes through empathy. Attention to others is fixed by empathy, making it hard to dismiss the other as a moral agent or treat them as a non-person.

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reciprocity of the gaze. If we are in the dark and someone speaks to us directly then this counts as establishing reciprocity between subjects, and is a grounds for recognition. We do not speak to inanimate objects in the same way as we do not look at the objects expecting a response. The response needs to be embodied to establish the common ground between the two subjects: the lived body.

Empathy is a mode of perceiving the other as embodied, similar beings to ourselves. We experience others as ‘embodied minds’ (Zahavi, 2014, p. 151) capable of feeling the same sensations as us (that is, the same type of experiences, not the same tokens). This ground of common sensations and ways of being-in-the-world is very hard to dismiss: ‘the most fundamental form of empathy is the one that allows us to apprehend the perceptually given body as a lived body, that is, most fundamentally as a sensing body’ (Zahavi, 2014, p. 138).

Other-oriented attention emerges in the tension of distance and interconnectedness: the other is similar to me (embodied being), and another that I cannot assimilate. ‘Both polarities are required for ethical attention: a propensity to distinguish the other as that which is not governed by my self-interest, and the propensity to acknowledge our’ (Fredriksson, 2022, pp. 168–169). I recognize their embodied reactions (Maurice Merleau-Ponty brings the example of the person who twitches when the sun hits their face) and a common ground of perceiving the world and, simultaneously, we are different, irreducible to another. To whom we choose to (not) give our attention divides the world into people like us and the other: strangers, aliens, and invisible: ‘wilful non-perception, making a person socially invisible, is to deny recognition to that person’ (Zahavi, 2014, p. 224).

Empathy is important for the ethical domain since it grounds recognizing others as moral agents in a way that short-circuits the deliberation or conscious decisions. I may not want to see another human as a moral agent, but empathy bypasses this tendency and forces me to see their moral personhood. Some historical instances of seeing other humans as sub-human are a counterexample to this claim (Smith, 2020, p. 63). However, I see this more as a boundary condition for recognition: awarding others our full attention does not mean that we will see them as moral agents, even when they return our gaze and even when we cannot help but feel empathy, due to recognizing our embodiment. Still, we cannot recognize others as moral agents without focusing some of our attention on them, thus making them important in our subjective ranking of attention.

Attention to others always has a moral dimension: ignoring others or paying the wrong kind of attention to them has consequences for the kind of relations we enter into and their moral weight. Choosing

to pay attention to this person rather than that one is a moral choice, especially if the situation as such has moral implications (requesting help or care, for example). By contrast, what we pay attention to in the realm of inanimate artefacts or environments is not necessarily charged with ethical significance. We are drawn to the unfamiliar, the strange situations, as our attention is magnetically focused on such situations (Fredriksson, 2022).

The attention we pay to others is the basis for recognition and for effectively being-in-the-world as a moral agent. Moral agency, as previously highlighted, is not only about the actions I can perform and the relations I enter into but also about how others become moral patients for my actions and how others react and respond to my actions with a moral significance, for example, by demanding accountability. I may think I am an autonomous moral agent, making decisions for myself. However, if others do not recognize my agency and dismiss all my decisions, I am not effectively a moral agent. A similar case could be when I am a moral agent; I say and do things unimpeded, but nobody pays attention to me. Am I still a moral agent when I am ignored, given that my actions are not visible in the moral realm? Some would argue that being invisible does not remove one's agency, and at some point, I could be held accountable for my actions. But, outside the legal realm of being held accountable, we need constant recognition from others of our actions and their consequences, and this recognition routinely entails being paid attention to.

### 3. The Ethics of Paying Attention to Others

The moral features of attention to others can be briefly conceptualized within the following dimensions.

A. First, there is **an embodied ground** for attending to others. This means that when we attend to others, we cannot help but notice that we share an embodied common nature (the Husserlian 'animal nature'—see Gallagher, 2022) and that the other is capable of feeling and suffering. The experience of paying attention to another (be it voluntary or involuntary) is about the spontaneous recognition that we, like them,

are embodied beings.<sup>6</sup> The sources of this mode of attention are usually the gaze, as described previously, but also the voice. Hearing the voice of another reminds us of the embodied nature we share with them. We cannot ‘hear away’ as we can ‘look away’. recognizing this embodied commonality with others, of having a lived body, is also the ground for empathy.

The attention we pay to others is grounded in our embodied being-in-the-world, as bodies recognize other bodies as having similar experiences. While all other-oriented attention is embodied in a basic way, our attending to others also seems to rely on us having some awareness of their bodies. However, this becomes problematic when we relate to others through digital intermediaries, such as social media platforms (messaging apps, emails, etc.). The affective or subject-oriented perception (Harney, 2020, p. 101) gives rise to moral obligations and recognition. Without the return of the gaze of the other, we would be hard-pressed to recognize them spontaneously as moral agents. We could still see their moral agency, inferred from their words and signs, but this requires a lot more effort in inference and induction, similar to the effort we put into consciously overcoming our biases.

B. Another moral feature of attention to others concerns **recognizing them as individuals**, not as class representatives. We notice a person, and almost immediately, we classify them into some categories, some broad generalizations of who they could be (these can be anything from culture, personality types, race, socio-economic status, and character traits). Iris Murdoch (2014) has conceptualized this kind of attention to another as an individual as the backbone of moral choices. We do not see the others until we pay continuous attention to them to notice how they evade the categories we fit into, *prima facie*. In Murdoch’s famous example (2014), a mother-in-law is at first prejudiced against her daughter-in-law, actively disliking her, and then slowly changing her mind after paying attention to her more. Murdoch argues that this act of focusing attention and readjusting one’s judgments could be happening

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6 This embodied dimension works for any animate other, not only humans, but other animals. For example, many people eat meat but refuse to see video documentaries of how cattle are sacrificed in industrial settings. Most people prefer not to see where the meat for their consumption comes from. In deliberately ignoring this source of information, they are curating their attention to prevent this raw and embodied identification with the suffering of another living being.

entirely inside the mother-in-law's head (for example, by rearranging and reinterpreting past impressions of the other). Still, the contact with the daughter-in-law needs something to reinterpret, so the gaze or the voice needs to provide some input for this attention. It is possible that even after we decide to refocus our attention on a person and be open to who they could be, we still dislike them and judge them. But what matters here is that we judge them as individuals, going out of the broad categories we ascribed to them on the first impression. In this dimension of attention, we pay attention to the particulars of the other, and their manner of being, and we need to take the time to pay this attention.

The recognition of the other as a moral agent means we see the other who can do things to us (or others), which can be morally evaluated and thus held responsible for these actions (Watson, 2013). The moral significance of attention to others concerns the attention that makes this recognition of the other as a moral agent possible. When we pay enough attention to others and the right kind of attention, we recognize their agency: we see them as responsible agents capable of making decisions on their own. This point is somewhat different from the idea that we need to pay attention to our actions to be responsible for them—see Jennings (2020, p. 162), who argues that we are still responsible for our automatic actions even though we may not pay attention to them at the moment. To attribute moral agency to others, one needs to pay attention to them; particularly, we need to pay attention to their embodied being and individuality. It is difficult to spontaneously recognize others as moral agents, equal to oneself, without noticing their embodied nature and unique individuality. It does not follow from this that attention to their embodied nature and attention to their uniqueness necessarily lead to recognition of their moral agency. Many parents notice their toddlers, their uniqueness, and their individual manner of being but do not attribute to them full moral agency, at least not for a while. Both the embodied dimension and the recognition of individuality are necessary, albeit insufficient, attentional dimensions for recognizing another's moral agency.

Thus far, I have discussed other-oriented attention as a spontaneous capacity to notice others (or some of their features) and to arrange what we notice into degrees of importance or saliences (Watzl, 2022), focusing on some aspects while backgrounding the others (Fredriksson, 2022;

Jacobs, 2021). I tried to argue that attention to others has an ethical significance as the ground on which we establish moral recognition (Anderson, 2021). I did not discuss how attention is a socially learned capacity based on multiple previous interactions. Attention to others allows us to pick up on social affordances (behaviours, cultural markers) and act on these. Presumably, the more attention we pay to others, the more skilled we become at picking up on social affordances, the more occasions we have to interact with others in community-endorsed ways, and the better we get at being moral agents and recognizing other's moral agency. Thus, we do not always consciously choose to award others our attention (albeit sometimes we choose to withdraw it, as the example of homeless people being invisible demonstrates)—rather, attention is also something we practice (Bombaerts et al., 2023) to develop as social actors. Without attention to others—involuntary or voluntary—our social realms of rules and tacit knowledge would look completely different. Attention is the invisible glue holding together the social, the ethical, and the legal, making a life together bearable and, to some extent, predictable. It follows that how attention is expressed and experienced online will play an important role in how we perceive others as social and moral agents.

#### 4. Other-Oriented Attention in Online Environments

In the offline realm ('IRL', or 'in real life'), we pay attention to whomever we choose, but, at the same time, much of our attention is hijacked by the awareness that spontaneously orients us to those who seem important for us to notice (again, this is a trained capacity shaped by the history of interactions we underwent, but it is still spontaneous). The gift of attention to someone else is simple and unmediated; a mere gaze suffices to acknowledge or ignore the others, or a spoken word lets others know that they are being noticed or ignored. What happens with this other-oriented attention when we engage in online interactions that are, by definition, always mediated by interfaces? There are two distinctive features of other-oriented attention online that deserve elaboration, as these features make the experience of paying attention to another distinctive: attention as a deliberate signal and the rigid saliences of online social platforms.

### 4.1 Rigid Saliency Hierarchies

In 2015, an American dentist shot a lion during a hunting trip in Zimbabwe. The lion, called Cecil, happened to be famous. A wave of outrage ensues after the killing as the hunter is identified and later admits to the deed. Hatred waves follow on social media, with people sharing Tweets about the hunter's identity; the dental practice receives bad reviews on Yelp, while the dentist gets death threats.<sup>7</sup> Even today, if one were to search for the dentist's name, the lion incident would surface again in all search engines, affording a repeated cancellation of the hunter. New generations can feel outrage repeatedly since they say the Internet never forgets. In 2023, a philosopher posts a picture of herself on Twitter, next to a picture of Hume, with the caption 'what we actually look like',<sup>8</sup> intended to show in a funny way how the classic image of philosophers has changed and, presumably, how their public image should also change. After this tweet, she experienced a wave of hate and threats from what has been called the Twitter 'manosphere', with people outraged mostly that such a young and beautiful woman would dare to consider herself as a philosopher. Needless to say, the hate reactions did not come from academics, who happen to have seen young female philosophers, but from outside the profession. The female philosopher had stepped on an old taboo of who gets to do philosophy and suffered backlash consequently. What do the lion hunter and the young woman philosopher have in common? Twitter awarded them with too much attention from people who felt offended and wanted to express it. The hunter-dentist was not on Twitter; his identity and deed were made famous by a celebrity's Tweet. Meanwhile, the woman philosopher was active on Twitter. The hunter-dentist was cancelled as a dentist due to a wave of moral outrage, as people felt rightful about the cause and encouraged each other to pile on the online hate on this person. The

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7 BBC Trending (2015, July 29). How the internet descended on the man who killed Cecil the lion. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-33694075>. See also (Pichford, 2020) for an academic discussion of the waves of outrage around this incident.

8 D. Dixon (2023, May 11). Women philosophers in the Twitter 'Manosphere' (or, that light-hearted Hume tweet that ended in r\*pe threats). *The Philosopher's Cocoon*. <https://philosopherscocoon.typepad.com/blog/2023/05/women-philosophers-in-the-twitter-manosphere-or-that-light-hearted-hume-tweet-that-ended-in-rpe-thre.html>

female philosopher met a different kind of hate, not moral outrage, but outrage nonetheless, as she dared to be visible and assume the identity of a philosopher. She experienced being the target of a digital swarm or ‘online shitstorm’, as Byung Chul Han has described the phenomenon (2017)—a coagulation of anonymous hatred that has no political force, intended to change nothing, but to ‘strike individual persons, whom they unmask or make an item of scandal’ (2017, p. 12). The two cases discussed became the recipients of too much online attention, with the collective waves of hatred and threats that followed. Something about their identity became salient and sticky such that nobody who found their names online could forget this or focus on something else. This is a particular feature of online social platforms: they make certain features of one’s identity salient with no possibility to appeal or change.

In a paper on saliences and the ethics of attention, Ella Whiteley (2023) argues that minorities usually are subjected to unwanted attentional patterns from others, which make some features of their identity salient while disregarding other aspects. For example, women philosophers usually want their work to be discussed as philosophers, not as a token of a ‘woman philosopher’ work. In introducing one’s work to others as a ‘woman philosopher’ or ‘woman coder’, one makes a person’s feature extremely salient to the audience. Sometimes this salience is wanted by the person if she wants to be an example for others that women can be philosophers or coders. However, Whiteley argues that when others present and acknowledge someone as a ‘woman philosopher’, the gender gets more attention than the context requires. Whiteley argues that this can be a form of ‘morally problematic attention’ (Whiteley, 2023, p. 527) because one dimension (the gender, in this case) distracts the audience from other more important or relevant dimensions of the message (the philosophical content in this case).

Online attention poses a problem of rigid saliences that has ultimately moral consequences for how we recognize others. Inspired by Whiteley’s approach, SMPs are attentional environments that favour such morally problematic attention patterns. The main mechanism here is that of placing certain features as highly salient to the detriment of other features. Attention is dynamic, and one of its main features is that it can rearrange saliences instantly: something important fades to the background, and something else gets to be in the centre of our focus.

But, since what we perceive about others online is signalled by them, either deliberately or involuntarily, we rely on the other's signals (posts, reactions, content) to form our impressions of them and to revise such impressions. But revising saliences becomes difficult when nothing is forgotten and people keep reminding each other of one person's traits. A man shoots a lion in Africa and posts a proud picture on Twitter with the trophy. A storm of outraged reactions follows. He takes down the picture and apologises, but it is too late. Those who reacted to the post will remember him as the lion killer. In Murdoch's example of the mother-in-law, saliences are subtly rearranged across time. As the mother-in-law notices more things about the daughter-in-law and as she reinterprets them, a new relationship emerges between the two. The daughter-in-law is rediscovered, and the mother-in-law overcomes her prejudices by forcing herself to pay attention. With the lion hunter, there is very little extra information online to pay attention to so that we can paint a more complex picture of the person. Even if he apologises publicly, this is not enough to change what we find salient about him: his murder of the lion. To change our mind about the hunter, we would need to continuously observe the lion hunter's actions until he discloses more about himself than what we knew, gathering clues and reinterpreting. The reinterpretation would require that we make the effort to overcome our prejudices and that the lion-hunter gives enough information about his character to paint a complex picture of the human behind the hunter-persona. Without this effort coming from both sides, the class-like features of a person (where class means here any broad category to which we can attribute them: gender, race, social class, political inclinations, etc.) will always be more salient online than their individuality. This rigid salience arrangement makes it very difficult to dynamically and spontaneously focus on other traits of an individual user that we know only through social media, thus bypassing the individuality feature of relational attention.

The main point here is not that we cannot pay attention to someone online as an individual, but rather that the kind of attention that grounds our relating to others as moral agents—by seeing more than they aim to disclose and by potentially reevaluating them, considering new information—is difficult to achieve in online social spaces. As online users of SMPs, we are all reduced to a handful of salient features

attributed to us by others or that we perform ourselves in front of others (the lifestyle influencer, the health guru, the conspiracy theorist, etc.) because it is these features that get picked up by the algorithms that make our posts visible to others. Our online profiles turn us into simplified sketches of who we are, almost caricatures. As Lucy Osler argued (2021), online empathy is possible in principle if enough effort is granted, and this should be the case with online attention awarded to others. Hyper-visible users like Donald Trump or Elon Musk are almost identical to their public persona. We know almost nothing about the real people behind those users. We could try to piece the puzzle by paying attention to every digital trace they leave, puzzling all the information about them, and looking for things they disclose unwittingly. But how much effort and time would this need? Meanwhile, having the real Donald Trump or Elon Musk in front of us would allow us to pay attention to them spontaneously while seeing more than they intended to signal about who they are. The issue is not that the online world is world-poor, but rather that there is too much signal-rich information going on in the online space, and we cannot help but pay attention to this information. We are all ‘inforgs’ (Floridi, 2009), meaning we are highly skilled at harvesting and interpreting information surrounding us. In the online realm of SMPs, all information coming at us is curated to be interesting and relevant to us hence we cannot ignore it. Adapting a phrase from the title of a book by Jonathan Safran Foer, the online information we get about others is ‘extremely loud and incredibly close’. In such a strong stream of signals we get about others, the more subtle cues that would have picked up our attention—the embodied cues of tone of voice, gaze, and gestures—are lost and fade to invisibility.<sup>9</sup>

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9 One could object that only the platforms relying on written messages and static images have this problem with asymmetrical and rigid attention to the other. Video streaming platforms such as YouTube or TikTok promise a more genuine access to the other’s self, albeit this is always performed to some extent, as influencers curate their videos as much as they do their posts and images. A fundamental problem with video recordings of others remains the lack of reciprocity. The YouTubers seem to look at their audience, but there is no exchange of gazes. One large part of the ethics of attention to others is the potential for reciprocity: the other can gaze back, speak back, and suddenly we are the objects of their attention. With SMPs this is unlikely, albeit not impossible. The moral relations into which we need to enter with others are devoid of reciprocity, spontaneity, and recognition, which threatens to reduce us all to some rigidly salient features.

## 4.2 Online Attention as a Mediated Signal

All our online interactions are mediated by the platform's affordances (buttons, links, and fields to fill in), so that the attention to other users is expressed in a mediated way. To give an example: I may pay attention to all of my friend's updates on Facebook, keeping up with her life and worrying about her, but if I do not engage with these updates (by liking or commenting on them), my friend will have no idea about my attention awarded to her online. I need to deliberately signal my attention by interacting with the platform in a publicly visible way. Otherwise, my attention is not relational, and my friend will have no idea about my online gaze fixated on her. Without signalling my attention and thus affording reciprocity from the one gazing at me, my attention awarded to another looks more like stalking or watching from a panopticon tower. In stalking, I fixate my attention on someone who cannot answer my gaze because they have no idea they are being watched in the first place. I could, of course, let my friend know in real life that I am following her posts and I am concerned about her. This would be a form of reparatory attention after the actual attention has been awarded. This is possible when our relations with others happen both online and offline, but when relations happen only online, this cannot happen.

Attention awarded to another online user is voluntary and deliberate. Many interactions with content also count as awarding someone our attention: reacting to their posts (usually with an emoji reaction such as a like or heart, but any other emoji counts as attention), commenting on their posts (with words but also with a gif or a meme), mentioning them in one's public posts, linking to their posts, sharing their posts (citing them or retweeting, depending on the platform), making a video essay about someone else, or making a parody of their content. All these forms of paying attention range from a simple reaction to more sophisticated creations of content, but all involve deliberate launching of signals in the digital environment. Online attention to another is carried by various signals such as messages, reactions, and posts. Hence, we need to invest some deliberate effort in awarding this attention, and this removes some of the spontaneity involved in acts of effortless attention. To turn my gaze to someone in an offline environment, I do not need to think about it; I just do it, and then maybe I realise that it

was impolite to stare at them like this if they also react with a gesture or a gaze directed at me. But to react with a like to someone's post, I have to click on a button. Even if liking or commenting does not involve much deliberation, as I can do it very fast, it is still more under my control than the spontaneous turning of one's gaze. This means that my attention to another is a deliberate choice I make each time I engage with another user's content. Meanwhile, ignoring another is the default option when we are online. We cannot be expected to signal attention to everyone we come across online through their digital content. The default action is to not like, comment, or click on their posts. This does not mean that we are ignoring others, as we are still aware of their online presence, but that this non-reaction is the default mode we engage with others online. Imagine if non-engaging was the default mode in how we related to others offline.

Online attention to one another is effortful, as each signal for attention must be carried through various actions. The effort we put into signalling our attention to others may vary and depend on our willingness to engage. We can pay attention to their content as well as to some embodied ways in which they act online—for example, how fast someone types, their hesitant messaging as they type and delete, as discussed in Osler (2021)—but this comes with a cost in energy that offline spontaneous attention does not seem to demand. There are also effortful ways of paying attention in the offline realm. When someone is speaking in a crowded bar, I hear their words, and I strain for them, but the noise is also competing. In the end, my attention will be exhausted. In online social spaces, the main question for our attention is: for whom are we willing to make the effort to signal our attention? While we will try to pay attention to our friends, we are not inclined to do so for strangers we find online. It is possible to pay attention to all the users we are subscribed to on SMPs, but it needs to be voluntary and expressed so that the other sees it. In addition to the costs in the effort for awarding voluntary attention, SMPs are environments where others constantly bid for everyone's attention. For many people, posting on an SMP is to get as much attention as possible and eventually become an influencer.

Influencers and celebrities are constantly harvesting attention from everyone without even trying because their posts become visible due to the algorithms that promote certain posts to many users. Whatever

Donald Trump or Elon Musk may post gets shared regularly and liked even when it may be meaningless. Another category is temporary attention attractors: someone who becomes the target of collective outrage or of being cancelled. These people do not want the attention they get from others, but after the online swarms of outrage are formed, it becomes very hard to immerse back into anonymity (Han, 2017). Both these kinds of unwanted and wanted attention to the attractors have no clear moral relevance. Attention awarded to influencers is not a recognition of their moral agency, only their social status, with no moral weight tied to this. When Trump or Musk receive thousands of likes to their posts, it does not mean that they are exemplary figures in any way, nor that people endorse their utterances. A like granted to a post usually means that we find it interesting enough that others should see it (Arielli, 2018), so we raise its visibility in our network.

Online attention as a mediated signal gives rise to a paradox: we need to deliberately and effortfully signal our attention to those we follow online, such that they can reciprocate our attention, thus allowing for relational attention to form; however, there is a threshold of online visibility from which no reciprocity can be reasonably expected. If we like or comment on a tweet of Elon Musk's, we cannot realistically expect any recognition from Musk due to the sheer number of likes he gets for each tweet. Once an influencer strays from their public image and tries to say something dissonant, they will receive backlash from their followers. We recognize the influencer's visibility, but not necessarily their moral agency since none of our usual signals of online attention create any reciprocity. This is problematic because, in the long run, we may be tempted to treat them as performers, as non-human entities that are there for our entertainment alone.

Social media platforms mediate other-oriented attention and the experiences that trigger it. I have tried to argue that this mediation is problematic insofar as other-oriented attention is needed for ethically relating with others as moral agents. In the two cases of Cecil's shooter and the woman harassed on Twitter, there is no denial of their moral agency; on the contrary, their moral agency is over-emphasized as their whole identity is reduced to a single act that cannot be forgotten. For Cecil's shooter, there is no reparation possible in front of the online crowd, no matter how much he apologised later. His identity cannot be

reconfigured in a Murdochian way based on further moral perception and new signals that he gives; he will remain frozen in this identity of Cecil's shooter.

## Conclusions

The attention we pay to others online is a systematic misreading of who they are, in which we either over-identify with them (as is the case with influencers, giving rise to parasocial relations for their audience) or we reify them. The distance between us and others, which is required to enable tension for ethical relating, is undermined. What ensues between users is not dynamic tension. We polarize our gaze: either the other is an alien, or they are just like us but in an overly identifying way. Too much distance from another or too close. Granted, this kind of misreading does not occur when we know the other users from offline life since offline settings give us more information about the other and allow the other to interact with us. For the woman harassed on Twitter for being a philosopher, there was no moral outrage since what she did was not immoral in any way; it was just hatred expressed in violent ways. Something about her manner of appearing in the online space was moralized as if it was an infringement of something unspoken, and then she was judged and condemned by the online crowds. Things about their identities become all too salient to the crowds' attention, and no further signals are effective in changing the focus of attention. Once you become viral, you are condemned to be remembered in a certain way, which directs the online crowds' attention to most future interactions. Thus, the kind of dynamic and spontaneous attention that allows one to reevaluate another's moral character and deeds—as described by Murdoch in the interaction with the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law (2014)—is refused to those with the unfortunate fate of becoming viral. This threatens their moral agency differently than being ignored in real life—namely, their subsequent actions become invisible, as does their identity change. Attention online is remarkably sticky, rigid, and one-directional as it gets carried by deliberate signals to which we must constantly try to give rise. Every interaction with online others is like playing an attention lottery: how the others interpret our attention remains a mystery beyond our control since we are missing the embodied

cues that would allow us to spontaneously recognize the other as an equal we can empathize with. Establishing an embodied empathy and a gaze exchange are not sufficient on their own to ensure that we get the right kind of attention that grounds moral recognition, but rather these act as fail-safes to ensure that something or our moral agency gets across to the others. In the absence of our embodied presence, the online audiences get to choose which aspects of our identity get reified beyond our intention or control.

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