

6. Salience and what matters

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6.1 Introduction

Imagine you are at a political rally, listening to an impassioned speech by a politician whose political outlook you are in general sympathy with. In fact, you are in vehement agreement with their stance on the particular issue at hand. Their central argument in the speech contains a glaring non sequitur but you fail to notice. So concerned are you with the truth, as you see it, of their conclusion that the obviously fallacious nature of their argument does not occur to you. It is not that you notice their logical misstep and dismiss it as insignificant. You do not even notice it at all, despite your attention to the speech. Assuming you are usually pretty competent at reasoning, this failure to notice seems like motivated theoretical irrationality that we would naturally hold you rationally responsible for: “But it’s obvious that Y doesn’t follow from X! Come on – you can see that!”

Alternatively, imagine you are waiting in a restaurant for a blind date to arrive. They walk in and they are utterly gorgeous. Throughout the date, you continue to be so blindsided by their physical attractiveness that their many and significant character flaws are occluded from your view. They talk about themselves and their accomplishments all the time, never ask you about your- self, and are horrendously rude to the waiter on several occasions. But all you can think about is how good-looking they are. Again, it is not that you do notice their character flaws and do not care. Their physical attractiveness simply dominates the scene, as far as you are concerned. You seem morally criticisable for this: “Don’t be so shallow! What about how rude they were to the waiter?”

Finally, imagine you have ambitions to lead a particular project at work. Your boss will decide between you and several other viable candidates for the role. You decide that today is the day you will approach your boss to discuss the matter. You persist, entirely oblivious to their terrible mood. You seem prudentially at fault for this obliviousness: “But didn’t it occur to you that they were in a bad mood and it would have been better to wait for a more opportune moment to ask?”

What these examples have in common is that they all involve holding you to account in some way for what you do and do not notice. You are not being held responsible for what you attend to exactly, but for what is and is not salient to you in the first place. Let us assume that it is legitimate to hold you to account as we do. Rationally, you should have found the non sequitur in the politician’s argument salient. Morally, you should *not* have found the person’s physical attractiveness so salient that it eclipsed their other important features. Prudentially, you should have found your boss’ mood salient if you were to stand a good chance of getting what you wanted.¹ But how are we to understand what it is for something to be salient to you so as to make sense of this responsibility?

I should be clear from the beginning that I intend ‘salience’ to be understood in what might be called a ‘subjective’ sense. Sometimes we talk about what is ‘salient’ in a particular situation, intending this in an objective, or maybe better, intersubjective way. Perhaps the boss’ bad mood *was* salient in this sense, even though it was not to you, subjectively speaking.² I should also make clear that by ‘salience’ I do not mean to include some sort of subpersonal sense of the phenomenon. I mean to refer to personal-level salience. And, typically, I have in mind salience that involves conscious awareness, in either perceptual experience or thought. The question I

will be addressing in this essay then is: What is *this kind of salience* if we are to be responsible for it in the sorts of cases I described at the beginning?

As a first stab at defining salience of this kind, one would likely suggest something such as the following: for something to be salient to you is for it to ‘stand out’ to you, to be ‘prominent’ or in the ‘foreground’ of your experience or thought. I will begin, in 6.2 with this idea as developed by Watzl (2017, 2022). Watzl describes salience as a “passive force” (2022, p.97) and, although I will concur that what is salient to you is not subject to your direct voluntary control, I will argue that you must nonetheless be the agent of what is salient to you in some sense, if we are to properly understand your responsibility in the cases with which we began. In 6.3, I will argue that the indirect voluntary control you have over what is salient to you – as when you practise attending to certain phenomena, for example – cannot underpin the kind of direct responsibility you have for something’s being salient to you in these cases. In 6.4, I will maintain that the relevant kind of agency is what I will call ‘evaluative control’. I will argue that you have evaluative control over what is salient to you insofar as it is intimately connected with your evaluation of what matters. From 6.5, I will turn to the nature of this “intimate connection” and, relatedly, how exactly to understand the relevant evaluation. I will argue for what I will call the ‘Sophisticated Constitutive View’ of this connection. On this view, something’s salience to you in the kinds of cases we are interested in is *constituted* by your occurrent evaluation that it matters in the context of the situation you are in. This enables us to capture your direct responsibility for this salience in itself. The Sophisticated Constitutive View also understands this particular occurrent evaluation as emerging from your standing evaluative worldview about what matters in general. This enables us to explain why it is that we understand your responsibility for what is salient to you in these particular cases in terms of the extent to which it is representative of your broader character.

6.2 The minimal account and direct voluntary control

Let us start with the idea that for something to be salient to you is for it to ‘stand out’ to you. This could be couched explicitly in terms of attention: something is salient to you insofar as it attracts or ‘calls out’ for your attention (whether you do in fact attend to it or not). And this happens to a greater or lesser extent, of course: salience is a matter of degree. Watzl (2017) develops precisely this kind of account of salience, in congruence with his ‘Priority Structure View’ of attention. Roughly speaking, according to Watzl’s account of attention, it consists in the regulation of your ‘priority structures’. These priority structures order your occurrent mental life in terms of their relative priority to you. According to his ‘Imperative Account’ of salience, salient states have, “an imperative content of roughly the form <put *x* on top of a priority structure!>” (Watzl, 2017, p.126) What I will call the ‘Minimal Account’ of salience is something along these lines then: something is salient to you simply insofar as – and to the extent that – it elicits your attention.

Now, according to Watzl (2022, p.97) salience is a “passive force” on your attention:

Salience is a feature of subject-level states, but it is not under the subject’s control (just like the content of a perceptual state is subject level but not controlled by the subject).

It seems clear from what he says elsewhere (e.g. 2017, pp.135–137) that by “passive” and “not under the subject’s control”, Watzl means simply that what is salient to you is not under your direct voluntary control. This must be right: you cannot simply *decide* that something be salient to you or not as you can decide to raise your arm or not.

Nonetheless, the way in which you are held accountable for what is and is not salient to you in the kinds of cases we started out with would be puzzling, to say the least, if there were no sense in which *you* had ‘control’ over it at all. If the salience or otherwise of your boss’ mood were completely out of your hands, something that just occurred within you – like your heart’s beating – how could you be responsible for it in the kind of way you are being held to be in the example? It might be unfortunate, from a prudential standpoint, that their bad mood was not salient to you. But *you* couldn’t be held to account over it.³

6.3 Indirect voluntary control

Although you cannot simply decide that something be salient to you or not, you *can* decide, even arbitrarily, to focus your attention on a particular aspect of a situation. And doing so may well make it salient to you (and decrease the relative salience of other aspects) with immediate effect. But this is not exercising direct voluntary control over what is salient to you. It is exercising direct voluntary control over what you attend to and therein causing a redistribution in what is salient to you in the situation. It is exercising ‘indirect voluntary control’ over what is salient to you.

Many of those who discuss the place of salience in moral life think of one’s responsibility for it, at least in part, in terms of indirect voluntary control. Typically, this is not with regard to how one directs one’s attention at the relevant moment alone, but in terms of the uncountably many decisions over one’s lifetime up to that point – some apparently insignificant, others less so – that substantially influence what one finds salient in the moment. Your moral responsibility for what is salient to you is conceived as underpinned by the cultivation of your propensities in this kind of way, particularly in virtue of what you have decided to attend and not to attend to. In the *Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch (1970, p.37) asks us to:

...consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on... This does not imply that we are not free, certainly not. But it implies that the exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time... Attention is the effort to counteract... states of illusion.

Given that this is so, Murdoch (1970, p.54) wants to know more about the “techniques” we can employ to effectively shape our moral “vision”.

When it comes to rational responsibility, Pink (2009, pp.99–100) claims that if someone is to be rationally responsible for failing to notice a non sequitur, for example, this responsibility can *only* be in terms of their indirect voluntary control over this failure:

What settles whether someone is so responsible? How, for example, to establish that it was through the bad reasoner’s own fault that their reasoning was faulty? It is obvious enough how. We would raise questions about their action and omission and about how this might have affected their responsiveness to reason in this case—questions such as the following: what if they had taken greater pains at the time, such as by attending more carefully or taking longer to reflect; or had prepared themselves better beforehand, such as by working harder at practicing this form of reasoning? Did the error arise from their failure to do any of these things?... We are responsible for it only if it arises as our doing.

Now, you *do* have this kind of indirect voluntary control over what is salient to you to some extent.⁴ And we do sometimes hold you responsible for its exercise, or lack thereof. “Well, it’s no wonder that all you could think to do was to punch them. You watch far too many violent

films.” Here, you are being criticised for your part in shaping yourself into someone for whom punching a person is a maximally salient course of action. You are being criticised for voluntarily watching as many violent films as you have and, in so doing, exercising indirect voluntary control over the extent to which a certain, violent, option is salient to you.⁵

Although you might be held responsible in this kind of way in situations such as those I opened with, I think there is another, more direct, way of being held responsible for what is and is not salient to you that these situations illustrate. This involves being criticised *for noticing* or *for failing to notice*, as when you are criticised as rationally at fault for failing to notice the non sequitur. Here, you are being held directly to account for this omission in itself. The expectation you have failed to meet is *that you notice* the non sequitur and appreciate its significance in the context of the politician’s speech. For such direct responsibility, indirect voluntary control over what you notice is not to the point.⁶ Rather, it seems that noticing itself must be something you can *do*, in a certain sense. Given that you cannot simply decide to notice something, what we need is another form of direct agency over what is salient to you that is not direct voluntary control.

6.4 Evaluative control

Talk of any kind of direct ‘control’ or ‘agency’ over what is salient to you might sound inappropriate. But I think that this is only insofar as we understand both in terms of voluntariness. The kind of control I have in mind is emphatically nonvoluntary. It does not involve a decision to do anything. Nonetheless, it is a form of control, which renders that which you control ‘yours’ in the relevant sense (and hence ‘down to you’, or your responsibility). It is what I will call ‘evaluative control’.⁷

Belief provides us with a good example. Our criticisms of one another’s beliefs as ‘false’, ‘off the mark’, ‘unfounded’, ‘irrational’, ‘absurd’ etc. are a familiar aspect of everyday life. According to the evaluative control model, these criticisms are to be understood in terms of the control you have over your belief that *p* insofar as it represents your own evaluation concerning *whether p*. You evaluate whether or not *p* is the case, typically in response to your evidence, and therein are in control of what you believe.⁸ It is in virtue of this evaluative control that you “make up your mind” when it comes to what to believe, as Moran (2001) famously puts it.

So, on this model, you exercise control over your belief in making an evaluation regarding the truth of the matter. What I would like to suggest here is that, when it comes to what is salient to you in the kinds of cases at the beginning, you exercise control in making an evaluation regarding what *matters* or is of significance in some sense, again typically in response to your reasons that bear on this question. In all of the illustrations I began with, there is an important connection between what is salient to you and what you evaluate as mattering. This mattering could be rational, moral, prudential, or of some other kind. Regardless, the thought is roughly that something’s salience to you in such cases aligns with your evaluation that it matters (hence, by implication, its lack of salience to you aligns with the lack of such an evaluation on your part). It is this connection that grounds your direct responsibility for what is and is not salient to you. In being criticised for finding something salient you are being criticised for your evaluation that it matters (at least to the extent that it does, or at the expense of other features of the situation). In being criticised for failing to find something salient you are being criticised for your failure to evaluate it as mattering sufficiently. And, in being expected to adjust accordingly, it is expected that you adjust your evaluation as to what matters. This is something you can *do*, in the relevant sense. The question I will now turn to is how exactly to understand this “important connection” and, relatedly, the precise nature of the evaluation involved.

6.5 The naïve constitutive view

When it comes to belief, it is plausible that your evaluation that p is the case simply *is* your belief that p . You do not *first* make an evaluation regarding p 's truth and then subsequently form the corresponding belief.⁹ Your affirmative evaluation as to whether p *constitutes* your belief that p . On what I will call the 'Naïve Constitutive View', in the sorts of cases we are interested in, the relationship between your evaluation about what matters and what is salient to you is also a constitutive one. What is salient to you is not merely what commands your attention, as on the Minimal Account we began with. There is more to salience than this. Something's salience to you is constituted by its commanding your attention *in virtue of* your evaluation that it matters (and the degree to which something is evaluated as mattering is constitutive of the degree to which it is salient to you). This evaluation need not be explicit, of course, but it is present, often implicitly, in something's being salient to you in cases like those I opened with.

Unlike belief, which is a standing state, salience is an occurrent phenomenon, in the sense that it occurs in a time-limited manner. So, the evaluation that constitutes the salience, on the Naïve Constitutive View, is also occurrent in this sense. In occurrently finding a certain aspect of your situation most salient, you are occurrently evaluating it as mattering most in that context. You need not be evaluating it as mattering most across all situations or contexts. Your acquaintance, who is currently speaking, might be most salient to you, even whilst your partner sits silently beside you. You also need not be evaluating it as mattering most *sub specie aeternitatis*. You might have a particular penchant for cheese that makes it most salient to you on the menu, without this involving the idea that cheese matters most to one and all.¹⁰

The Naïve Constitutive View of your evaluative control over what is salient to you (and the degree to which it is) seems to help us make sense of the sort of responsibility for salience we are interested in. When you meet your blind date, for example, your moral responsibility for finding their physical attractiveness so salient that it occludes their other important characteristics makes sense insofar as this salience is constituted by your evaluation that this is what matters in the situation (as opposed to, or more so than, other features of the situation, such as their flawed character). Given that this is a morally objectionable evaluation, you are to be morally criticised *for finding their attractiveness so salient*. And the expectation that you do something directly about what is salient to you in this situation can also be met. You can re-evaluate and *therein* modify the relative salience of your date's physical attractiveness.

When it comes to your responsibility for *failing* to find something salient, such as your rational responsibility for failing to notice the non sequitur in the politician's argument, this can be understood on the Naïve Constitutive View as a failure to evaluate it as mattering in the situation. This, in turn, could of course amount either to your positively having evaluated it as not mattering or, more likely, your failure to make an evaluation. Either way, it seems that the Naïve Constitutive View has an explanation of your direct responsibility here.¹¹

However, there is something myopic about trying to understand your responsibility for what is salient to you in a particular situation solely in terms of a snapshot of that situation. As I argued above, when we criticise you for finding your date's physical attractiveness salient above all else, we are criticising you directly for this, in itself, and the indirect voluntary control model cannot capture this. Nonetheless, our criticism can only be properly understood in the context of our understanding of you as a person. This point is revealed, I think, by the fact that it is easy to feel some discomfort about the tone of this blind date example – to hear it as somewhat moralising. Part of the reservation about moral criticism in this case is to do with evolving and ambivalent attitudes to 'purely sexual' encounters between consenting people. But bound up here too is the

sense that the description of you in this particular situation is not sufficient to enable us to pass judgement. We want to know whether the salience of your date's physical attractiveness in this situation is reflective of you as a person, or 'out of character'. If it were merely a fleeting episode, unrepresentative of what you evaluate as mattering more broadly speaking, we might not be moved to think particularly poorly of you. On the other hand, insofar as we *are* prepared to offer significant criticism of you for it, we do so, taking it to be representative of some fact about you that is deeper than your having made a one-off, occurrent evaluation in a specific situation. We are not criticising you for having moulded yourself into someone who notices or not, but we *are* criticising you for *being* such a person in this deeper sense. Indeed, relatedly, in holding you to account in the opening cases, we implicitly grant the psychological point that what is salient to you does not spring from nowhere and is representative of your broader character. The problem for the Naïve Constitutive View is that, in focusing solely on particular states of salience themselves (and your occurrent evaluations that it claims constitute these), it omits this richer psychological picture and hence cannot fully and adequately account for your responsibility in these kinds of cases.

6.6 The separate states view

In order to do so, rather than look to your occurrent evaluations, we need to consider what you evaluate as mattering more broadly speaking. This brings me to what I will call the 'Separate States View' of your evaluative control over what is salient to you. On this view, the relationship between your evaluation concerning what matters and what is salient to you is not a constitutive one. Something's salience to you is not constituted by an occurrent evaluation. In itself, salience is simply an eliciting of your attention, as on the Minimal Account we began with. But, in the opening cases, what elicits your attention is caused and rationalised by a separate, more long-standing evaluation of yours as to what matters. 'Rationalised', that is, in the sense that the standing evaluation provides a reason (not necessarily a *good* one) on the basis of which something is salient to you. And it is this causal-rational relationship between your standing evaluation and what is salient to you that explains your responsibility for it.

In an influential article, Smith (2005, p.270) appears to present a version of this view of the nature of your evaluative control over what you "notice and neglect",¹² claiming this to:

...indirectly reflect certain judgments or evaluative commitments. There is, if not a conceptual connection, at least a rational connection between these unreflective patterns of awareness and what we care about or regard as important or significant.

The Separate States View seems to allow us to explain why the extent of your responsibility for what is or is not salient to you in a particular situation depends on the extent to which this is representative of your character. Your evaluative control that grounds this responsibility is exercised via your standing evaluations that partially constitute your character, not by mere one-off occurrent evaluations, that may be out of character for you. So, the Separate States View appears to be an improvement on the Naïve Constitutive View in this respect.

The view also seems to offer another advantage over the Naïve Constitutive View: a univocal account of 'salience'. The Naïve Constitutive View claims that in the kinds of cases I opened with, something's salience to you is constituted by your occurrent evaluation that it matters in the situation (and the degree to which something is evaluated as mattering is constitutive of the degree to which it is salient to you). But one might think it implausible that such an understanding of salience can be generalised. What about cases in which what is most salient to you

seems to come apart from your evaluation as to what matters most in the situation you are in? To take an example from Watzl (2017, p.135), imagine that:

A fire alarm captures your attention even if you know that the building is merely testing the system.

You know that the fire alarm does *not* matter to you in the situation – it is only a test. This knowledge does not interfere with its persisting intrusion though. Indeed, it is precisely your knowledge that it does not matter to you now – that you should ignore it – combined with its oppressive presence that makes it so annoying.

The fire alarm case is one in which anyone with a functioning auditory system could find themselves, but other cases that involve irrationality or pathology also suggest themselves. Take someone suffering from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. An interesting aspect of OCD is that it often includes what psychiatrists call ‘good insight’. It seems that someone suffering from OCD might find anything they encounter pertaining to infection, for example, maximally salient. And, strikingly, this is so even though they, in some sense, understand entirely that it does not ‘really matter’. It seems it might be maximally salient to them that they have not washed their hands in the last half an hour even though they understand that this does not matter. Indeed, they apparently evaluate it as mattering far less than listening to their child tell them about their day at school, which it seems they evaluate as mattering most at the moment. Nonetheless, they cannot keep their child’s stories in view, so distracted are they by their unwashed hands. Somewhat analogously to the fire alarm case above, this kind of insight into their condition can often be part of what makes OCD so frustrating and distressing for someone suffering from the condition.

Both the fire alarm and the OCD with insight cases appear to illustrate the following two possibilities. 1. What is maximally salient to you is not what you evaluate as mattering most in the situation. 2. What you evaluate as mattering most in the situation is not what is maximally salient to you. If it is true that your evaluation and what is salient to you can come apart in both directions like this, then the Naïve Constitutive View cannot provide us with a general account of salience.

The Separate States View, on the other hand, promises to provide an account of salience that is entirely general. According to the Separate States View, what is salient to you *itself* is simply a matter of what ‘stands out’ to you, or commands your attention, as on the Minimal Account. The fire alarm’s salience is its commanding your attention, just as your date’s physical attractiveness is its commanding your attention. Neither the salience of the fire alarm, nor of your date’s physical attractiveness, is constituted by an occurrent evaluation on your part that it matters in the situation. You are not responsible for the fire alarm’s salience to you because you do not have evaluative control over it: *it is not* revelatory of a separate standing evaluation of yours. You *are* morally responsible for the salience of your date’s physical attractiveness to you though, insofar as this *is* to be explained by a separate standing evaluation of yours.

In sum, the Separate States View seems to offer two key advantages over the Naïve Constitutive View. First, it appears to enable us to capture the way in which your responsibility for what is salient to you depends on its being re- presentative of your character. Second, in construing salience itself as per the Minimal Account, it promises generality: something’s salience to you is simply its eliciting your attention – this is true of both the opening cases and the fire alarm and OCD with insight cases.

However, my concern is that the Separate States View attempts to secure these advantages at the expense of properly doing justice to your direct responsibility for what is or is not salient to you in the kinds of cases I began with. As I argued in 6.3, the indirect voluntary control you exercise over what is salient to you in a given situation cannot explain this. This only allows you to get at what is salient to you via your voluntary actions elsewhere. You voluntarily attend to certain things, for example, and this has a causal influence over what you find salient. But, structurally, at least, it looks as if a similar difficulty arises for the Separate States View. According to the Separate States View, your control over what is salient to you is also exercised via something else – in this case, a separate standing evaluation.

A key difference between your indirect voluntary control over what is salient to you and the kind of evaluative control the Separate States View postulates is that the relationship it alleges between your standing evaluation and what is salient to you is a *rational* one. The indirect voluntary control you exercise over what is salient to you does not involve a rational connection between the voluntary actions you perform in ‘training’ yourself and what is salient to you. ‘Techniques’ of the kind Murdoch seeks would seem to involve – at least in abstraction – something like an initial evaluation as to what *should* (she is concerned with the moral sense) be salient to you in a situation of a certain kind and a reliance on the knowledge that humans are such that one can *cause* (without rationalising) the increased salience of something, or some kind of thing, by the practice of repeatedly attending to it, for example. This leaves you in a position of exercising what Hieronymi (2009) calls ‘managerial control’ over what is salient to you. You *manage* what you find salient in much the same way that you might manipulate a physical object like a book, by picking it up and moving it across the table, relying on the laws of nature to do their bit. *You* are inevitably alienated from that which you control to some extent – there is a merely causal process between you and it. Contrast this with the Separate States View on which what is salient to you does not need to go via such techniques and instead is itself in a direct reasons-relation with your evaluation as to what matters.

Smith illustrates the significance of the rational nature of the relationship between your standing evaluation and what is salient to you with the following example. Imagine you feel nauseous before giving a talk and this nausea is caused by your evaluation of such occasions as, “both important and also fraught with opportunities for failure” (Smith, 2005, pp.257–258). You are not responsible for this nausea in the way you are for what is salient to you, which we are trying to capture. The nausea is merely caused by an evaluation of yours, and not rationalised by it: it is not “(internally) judgement sensitive” (Smith, 2005, p.258). What is salient to you, however, *is*. It is your standing evaluation about the significance of good looks in general that rationalises your date’s good looks standing out to you on this particular occasion.

Now, the Separate States View certainly gets you closer (so to speak) to the salience itself than your indirect voluntary control does. Nonetheless, the fact remains that it does not get you all the way in. It does not secure the kind of direct, or *intrinsic*, control over what is salient to you that we are looking for. On the evaluative control model, it is an *evaluation* that something matters that is the seat of your control. If this evaluation is built into the salience itself, you have intrinsic control over that salience. If it is not, you do not. Even if you have a reason to find your date’s good looks salient (your own standing evaluation about the importance of looks in general), just as you have reason for that standing evaluation, the difference between the standing evaluation and the salience is that the former *is* itself an evaluation, whilst the latter is not. You can alter your standing evaluation simply in virtue of changing your mind about the significance of physical appearance. However, *ex hypothesi* on the Separate States View, altering the salience of your date’s good looks, in this particular situation, is not something you can simply *do* in this way. Rather, it is the rational *upshot* of your changing your standing evaluation. It

is an *indication* or *expression* of what you have direct evaluative control over rather than itself an exercise of your evaluative control.

Given that this is so, rather than explaining the criticism we seek to explain of the form, “You should/should not have noticed that *p*!”, what the Separate States View gives us is an explanation of a criticism of the form, “You should/ should not evaluate states of affairs like *p* as mattering such that you noticed/did not notice that *p*!” Consider the date example once more. The criticism of you we are trying to understand is not *for being shallow, as evidenced in this case*. Rather, the criticism is of you *for being shallow in this case*. Now, as I have argued, in order to be shallow – properly speaking – in this situation, a one-off occurrent evaluation is not sufficient (a point I will return to in the next section). But what I hope our consideration of the Separate States View in this section has shown is that though not sufficient, it *is* necessary.

6.7 The sophisticated constitutive view

So, in order to properly make sense of your responsibility in the sorts of cases I began with, we *do* need to construe something’s salience to you as itself constituted by your occurrent evaluation that it matters in the context of the situation. The Naïve Constitutive View has this much right. But, as I have also insisted, this occurrent evaluation will not do justice to the nature of your responsibility if it is a one-off. It needs to be understood as representative of your character, to some extent at least.

The idea that naturally suggests itself at this point is to try to borrow the thought that there is a relationship between your standing evaluations and what is salient to you from the Separate States View. What I will call the ‘Sophisticated Constitutive View’ does this by understanding the occurrent evaluation that constitutes something’s salience to you in a particular situation as emerging from your standing evaluations about what matters in general.

Now, it is clear by everyone’s lights that you do not walk around with a fully articulated, ranked set of standing evaluations about what matters. As Wiggins (1987, p.231) says:

No theory... can treat the concerns an agent brings to any situation as forming a closed, complete, consistent system. For it is of the essence of these concerns to make competing, inconsistent claims... The weight of the claims represented by these concerns is not necessarily fixed in advance. Nor need the concerns be hierarchically ordered.

Indeed, even if we *were* to conceive of your standing evaluations about what matters on such an implausible model, it is not obvious what explanatory good it would do. It is not as if your ranked set of standing evaluations about what matters would help explain the relative degrees of salience of any corresponding aspects of a given situation. As I touched upon in 6.5, even if we were to imagine a codification on which you evaluate your partner as mattering most, followed by your work etc. it is clear enough that this will not always correspond with the degree of salience each has for you at any given time. Your partner is not *always* the most salient aspect of your experience and/or thought. In fact, precisely in virtue of their ‘hinge-like’ status in your life, your pressing concerns, such as the work you need to be getting on with that day, will often usurp them in this role, as will someone much less significant to you, generally speaking, who happens to be speaking at that moment.

A far more realistic conception of your standing evaluations about what matters conceives of these as fairly underspecified. What you have is something more like a partially amorphous standing evaluative worldview about what matters (which, of course, is ever-evolving). One

could sketch certain aspects of this evaluative worldview more or less accurately, but it is nonetheless far from a fully articulated ranking of concerns. So, one could say truly of you that you have a standing evaluation that your partner matters, but not what this amounts to exactly. Indeed, with this in mind, it is unclear that the Separate States View can even help itself to the idea that you have a *standing* evaluation that is determinate enough to feature in its account of your responsibility for what is salient to you.

By way of contrast, the Sophisticated Constitutive View allows us to recognise that the content of such standing evaluations can only be fully specified in terms of their application in particular circumstances. On the Sophisticated Constitutive View, it is in relation to a particular situation, with all of its idiosyncrasies, that your evaluative worldview about what matters crystallises into an articulated occurrent evaluation on your part about what matters in that context. Or rather, more accurately, it crystallises into an articulated occurrent evaluative take on the situation as a whole in terms of the degree to which the various aspects of it matter. This constitutes the degree to which you find the different aspects of that situation salient and also helps define your standing evaluations themselves.

Wiggins (1987, p.229) illustrates this relationship between your evaluative worldview about what matters and what is salient to you in a particular situation via appeal to Aristotle's 'Lesbian Rule':

In fact this is the reason why not everything is determined by law and special and specific decrees are often needed. For when the thing is indefinite, the measure of it must be indefinite too, like the leaden rules used in making the Lesbian moulding. The rule adapts itself to the shape of the stone and is not rigid, and so too a special decree is adapted to the facts.

We might call this account of the relationship between your evaluative worldview about what matters and what is salient to you in a specific situation 'epigenetic', in the sense that what is salient to you in a situation can only be understood in terms of *the meeting of* your previously underdetermined evaluative worldview with the particularities of that specific situation. On the Sophisticated Constitutive View, it is only in context that you get the fully-specified evaluation(s) of the kind you need for evaluative control. And it is such control that enables us to properly explain your responsibility *for noticing* or *for failing to notice*. This responsibility is both specific to the particular act of noticing or failing to notice *and* arises out of (and helps define) your standing evaluative worldview about what matters. So, the sophisticated version of the constitutive view is an improvement upon the naïve insofar as it enables us to capture the idea that the extent of your responsibility for what is salient to you in the kinds of cases we are interested in is determined by the extent to which it is representative of your character. Unlike the naïve version, the Sophisticated Constitutive View is not focused on your occurrent evaluation about what matters in the situation alone, but rather understands this occurrent evaluation as emerging from (and helping define) what you care about, more generally speaking.

6.8 Returning to the problem cases: A univocal account of 'salience'?

If, as I have argued, the Sophisticated Constitutive View provides us with the best understanding of your responsibility for what is or is not salient to you in the kinds of cases I opened with, the question as to what to say about the other sorts of cases involving salience I have mentioned re-emerges. The salience of your date's good looks is constituted by an occurrent evaluation that this matters in the situation. But what about the fire alarm and OCD with insight cases?

Two strategies suggest themselves. First, we could of course simply allow that 'salience' is not univocal. In cases such as those at the beginning, in which you are responsible for what is salient

to you, salience is to be understood as per the Sophisticated Constitutive View. In other cases, some of which are irrational or pathological (such as in the OCD with insight example), some of which are what we might call 'biomechanical' (such as in the fire alarm example), what it means for something to be salient to you is to be understood in accordance with the Minimal Account: something is salient to you insofar – and to the extent – that it elicits your attention. Now, these two senses of the word 'salience' would not be unrelated, of course. Both involve something's standing out to you – one in a 'thin' sense, and, the other, in a richer, 'thicker' sense in which this standing out is in virtue of an occurrent evaluation that whatever it is matters in the situation.

Alternatively, we could attempt to preserve the univocality of 'salience' on the Sophisticated Constitutive View, in the face of these problem cases. Indeed, when it comes to the OCD with insight case, the Sophisticated Constitutive View might be thought to help us make sense of the conflict involved in the case along one of the following lines. On the first, the person has insight so occurrently evaluates the fact that they have not washed as not mattering. But, in spite of this evaluation, the fact that they have not washed is also salient to them in the sense that they occurrently evaluate it as mattering. They have conflicting occurrent evaluations: one that it does not matter and one that it does (that is constitutive of its salience to them). On this picture of the case, there is a breakdown in reason-relations between what is salient to the person and their opposing evaluation that this does not matter and they are therein irrational. An alternative picture conceives of the person as failing to maintain a firm grasp on either evaluation. They are prone to evaluate their unwashed hands as mattering (in their being salient), but also to evaluate them as not (in having insight into their condition) and they constantly vacillate between the two, never affirming both at the same time. Their treatment of their reasons on this kind of picture could also leave them open to the charge of irrationality. Finally, one might maintain that the OCD with insight case goes beyond being irrational and is *pathological* precisely insofar as the 'salience' of the unwashed hands is deficient: it is, in fact, a *mere standing out*. This standing out is *not* salience proper (*contra* the Minimal Account) because it is not constituted by their evaluation that it matters and, given that this is the case, the person is not rationally responsible for it. Perhaps our uncertainty as to which option to take here explains our ambivalence over whether, and to what extent, the OCD sufferer is to be held to rational account.

What about the fire alarm case? Here the 'salience' of the fire alarm is not irrational or pathological, it is 'biomechanical'. Any human with a functioning auditory system is such as to have the sound of the alarm continue to dominate their experience in almost any circumstance, whether they like it or not. When it is put this way, it becomes clear, I think, that even on the Minimal Account of salience, this would not be a typical or paradigmatic case of salience. On the Minimal Account, something is salient to you insofar as it attracts or 'calls out' for your attention, *whether you do in fact attend to it or not*. Here we have a case where you have *no option* but to attend to the alarm, in almost all circumstances. It cannot exactly be said to *call out for* or *solicit* your attention, it is not even *commanding* it, it is *enforcing* it. With this in mind, it could be argued that the Sophisticated Constitutive View can comfortably tolerate the idea that this is not a case of salience proper. The fire alarm case involves a *mere standing out* or dominance that is not constituted by your evaluation that it is what matters to you in the situation. The fire alarm is not then, properly speaking, salient to you.¹³

I will not affirm either of these strategies on behalf of the Sophisticated Constitutive View here. We can either restrict its scope to the sorts of cases I have been concerned to explain or not. Either way, what I have argued is that it is the best account of those cases.

6.9 Conclusion

In sum, I set out to understand what it is for something to be salient to you, in light of the fact that you are sometimes responsible for this. The kind of responsibility I have been considering has two interesting features. First, it is ‘direct’, or ‘intrinsic’, as I have been putting it: it cannot be understood in terms of any indirect sort of effect you might be able to have on what is or is not salient to you. It is a responsibility *for finding something salient*, or *for failing to do so*. Second, it is grounded in your ongoing character in a certain sense. It is not a responsibility for a one-off noticing or failure to notice, but, rather, is reflective of you as a person.

I have proposed that both features of this responsibility can be understood in terms of what I call the ‘Sophisticated Constitutive View’. According to this view, the salience of something to you is *constituted* by an occurrent evaluation on your part that it matters in the situation. Your control over this evaluation *is* your direct, or intrinsic, control over what is salient to you. This occurrent evaluation does not spring from nowhere though. It emerges, by way of interaction with the particular situation you are in, from your more long-standing evaluative worldview about what matters (which only becomes fully specified thanks to these interactions). This explains why we criticise you for what is salient to you to the extent that we consider this to be representative of you and your character more broadly speaking.¹⁴

Notes

1. The types of responsibility included here are intended as illustrative, not as an exhaustive list.
2. And perhaps one way of expressing our prudential criticism of you is in terms of this mismatch: something was intersubjectively salient and *yet not* subjectively so for you. But it is important to note that a failure to find something subjectively salient that is intersubjectively so will not always be criticisable. Imagine that a certain individual's wealth is the elephant in the room as far as other people are concerned but it is not something that occurs to you: what you notice above all is their warmth. Here you seem morally *praiseworthy* for failing to find subjectively salient what is intersubjectively so. There is much more to be said about the relationship between subjective and objective or intersubjective salience, but I set this aside for the purposes of this essay.
3. Perhaps if you had a particular instantiation of autistic spectrum disorder, for example, it *would* be inappropriate to hold you to account, insofar as it would not have been reasonable to expect that your boss' mood be salient to you. All three cases I offered at the beginning are obviously under-described in all kinds of ways that would affect the appropriateness of holding you to account. I return to this issue later but, for now, I take it that all I need is that there are cases along the lines I outlined at the beginning, the precise details of which could be specified, such that you would be held to account in the sorts of ways I described.
4. See e.g., Mole (2022, pp.151-157) in this volume on the psychological evidence in support of this kind of indirect voluntary control over what is salient to you. Watzl (2017, pp.135–137) also discusses the “penetrability” of what is salient to you by various phenomena, some of which are themselves under your direct voluntary control.
5. Obviously, the foreseeability (both for you and in general) of this effect of watching these films is relevant to the extent of your responsibility here too.
6. Indeed, as Smith (2005, pp.267–270) points out, we sometimes hold someone directly responsible in the kind of way I have in mind, *without* also thinking that they are responsible for *coming to be* the person they are in the relevant sense. Imagine someone raised in a deeply racist community (to use one of Smith's example). They might notice something as a result of this upbringing, and be responsible for noticing it, yet not for having contributed to making themselves into one who notices it.
7. I borrow the label from Hieronymi (2009) but she is not the only person to be interested in this form of agency, of course. See, for example, Boyle (2009), Moran (2001), and particularly Smith (2005), when it comes to salience.
8. I say “typically” as I think that there are probably limiting cases of belief on the basis of no evidence. Thanks to Boyle for discussion of this issue.
9. See Boyle (2009) for more discussion.
10. See Smith (2005, p.245).
11. Your responsibility, in this case, will be complicated by the fact that your motivation to fail to find the non sequitur salient is unconscious. This is not, it seems to me, an automatic excuser but the issue does warrant more discussion than I have the space to allow it here.
12. The idiom is Hampshire's (1959, p.91).
13. One might think that you *do* evaluate the fire alarm as mattering, despite your awareness that it is only a test. After all, test or not, you cannot continue with whatever it was you were doing until it is over. (My thanks to both Sabina Lovibond and Joseph Schear for suggesting this idea to me, independently of one another.) The problem with this attempt to resolve the issue though, it seems to me, is that the reason you evaluate the fire alarm as mattering in this way is *because* it is dominating your experience as it is.

This, I think, precludes thinking of your evaluation that it matters as constituting its salience.

14. Thanks to an audience at the University of Stirling, to one at UWTSD, and to Sabina Lovibond, and Joseph Schear.

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