**Reply to Baehr and Hill**

1. Introduction

In my work *Virtue epistemology* (2008) I argued that one’s epistemic motivates are a necessary condition for acquiring knowledge. This conclusion applies also to knowledge acquired through rather quick processing, perceptual processing. There is one major fact of perceptual processing (P-processing)[[1]](#footnote-1) that suggests the presence of motivation i.e., the role of focused attention in attending to stimuli within ones environmental field. Attention is a slippery concept but a rough characterization of it is the directed allocation of cognitive resources to *fully* process a stimulus. If P-processing is a function of attention then intuitively, we have a reason for thinking that motivation is involved in P-processing. When one attends to a stimulus in her environment, this act of directing one’s attention is a function of one’s motivations. In fact, most psychologists agree upon the interrelationship between attention and motivation. Ralph Ellis states, “The idea that attention is motivated, of course, is not new in psychology, nor is the view that limbic and subcortical emotional processes play a role in directing attention.”[[2]](#footnote-2) My work argued that attention is required in order to have perceptual *knowledge* and that the kinds of motivations involved in directing one’s attention could be *virtuous*.

To pump some intuitions consider some ordinary cases of perception that are motivated. Consider the thesis of cognitive penetrability. Depending only on whether a viewer is depressed or not, how a scene looks to that viewer can differ even if all other conditions stay the same. Or consider the following from Peter Markie,

Suppose that we are prospecting for gold. You have learned to identify a gold nugget on sight but I have no such knowledge. As the water washes out of my pan, we both look at a pebble, which is in fact a gold nugget. My desire to discover gold makes it seem to me as if the pebble is gold; your learned identification skills make it seem that way to you. (Markie 2006, 356-7)

Suppose it is a goal of mine to walk down the stairs – without falling. We may suppose that this goal is nested in with a few other supra-goals, such as getting to the kitchen (downstairs) in order to get some food. Given such a goal, my attention is going to be focused on determining depth relations of the surfaces by my feet as I start to go down the stairs. To say that this is done ‘automatically’ does not take away the necessity of there being a goal or endpoint at which the cognitive subject aims. Consider another example. When I am studying, my attention is drawn to the book; in particular, my perceptual faculties are aimed at discerning and comprehending the characters (letters) on the page. Here, perceptual attention is clearly goal driven. Change the case slightly. I am looking, or scanning at my bookshelf, thinking about the nature of perception. I am not really perceiving my books, or rather, I am not making perceptual *judgments* about which books are on my bookshelf. But then I remember that Brand Blanshard defended the notion that perception is an inferential process. I then draw my attention to perceptually searching for Blanshard’s *Nature of Thought* on my bookshelf. I am now attentive to which books are on my bookshelf. Here, perceptual processing was driven by the goal: ‘find out what Blanshard said on the topic of perceptual inference’. And finally, an intuitively plausible example of motivated perception is stereotyping. The point is, attention is an act in the sense that there is an allocation of cognitive resources, and such an allocation is goal directed. Intuitively, attention is motivated and perception depends on attentional resources. My argument in outline is as follows:

1. Attentionp is necessary for perceptual knowledge.
2. Attentionp is a function of an agent’s motivation(s) M1.
3. Motivations in class M1 are epistemic motivations.
4. ∴Perceptual knowledge is a function of one’s epistemic motivation(s).

The empirical evidence in defense of (1).

* Mack and Rock (1998)
* Pashlar (1999)

Ralph Ellis (1999), defends (2) as follows:

All phenomenal consciousness, even empirical consciousness, must be *motivated*; thus the “what it’s like” of phenomenal experience is inseparable from the *emotions* permeating it. Although we often do not pay attention to the motivational components of our perceptual and rational functions, the felt quality of these functions stems from the fact that they are continuously in a process of being motivated by the emotional purposes of the organism. For example, visual cortex activation is *unconscious* of red unless the emotional midbrain and anterior cingulate “look for red” in a motivated manner. That is, all the *afferent* aspects of brain function (those which *receive* stimulation from external sources) – such as the “sensory area” of the occipital lobe and the V4 visual area – can be completely activated, in just the way they are in a perception, but with no perceptual *consciousness* of the object occurring. Consciousness occurs only when the *efferent* system, beginning with the emotional midbrain, prompts corticothalamic loops, including frontal areas such as the anterior cingulate as well as the extended amygdala and reticular formation, to start looking for environmental items which might be of *interest* to the organism, in light of its emotional-motivational purposes.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Objections

Jason Baehr in his very good work *Inquiring Mind* (2012), says the following:

Napier marshals substantial empirical evidence for the claim that epistemic motives are present in cases of what might initially appear to be fairly brute or mechanical perceptual knowledge… While I think Napier makes his point with respect to some of the relevant knowledge, I do not think he pays sufficient attention to the most difficult sorts of cases (that is, to the most brute and mechanical instances of perceptual knowledge) (2012, 42).

The examples Baehr gives of these “brute and mechanical instances of perceptual knowledge” include judgments such as “there is a computer monitor before me,… I do not have a splitting headache, music is playing in the background, the room smells of freshly ground coffee, today is Tuesday, I’ve been working for at least an hour this morning, and much more” (2012, 39).

Along similar lines, Christopher Gowans (2009, 590ff) says the following:

Nonetheless, an obvious rejoinder to his [Napier (2008)] response is that there are many cases in which perceptual knowledge is, as it were, forced upon us irrespective of our epistemic motivations to be aware. For example, a group of people are sitting on the porch and right in front of them a bolt of lightning strikes a hundred feet away, basically destroying a tall tree. The light and noise are overwhelming. Surely the people on the porch have just acquired some perceptual knowledge to the effect that something very bright and loud just struck that tree, and this will be the case whether or not they have epistemic motivations to be aware of their environment.

My reply must be rather short in that my interlocutors are relying on their philosophical intuitions – intuitions I share, but my argument depended upon giving empirical evidence. The key idea in my argument is that there are motivations that inform perceptual processing. Whenever we see “there is” or “there exists” prefacing a proposition, we are making an empirical claim. Testing such a claim’s truth by philosophical intuition is as sensible as saying that it is intuitively obvious that the sun goes around the earth. Much of what perceptual processing involves takes place unconsciously. There is no reason to think that any cognitive process lasting several milliseconds long is going to be transparent to self reflection. More importantly, the very preconscious processes that lead to full phenomenal consciousness *cannot* be transparent to self reflection as they are by definition preconscious. For such processes to show up on one’s self reflection, or philosophical intuition, that would require them to be conscious processes not preconscious ones. Therefore, the method of utilizing philosophical intuition to rebut empirical claims is simply inapposite.

I should also observe that all of the putative counterexamples involve *categorization* of the stimuli as being of a certain sort. For example, Gowans mentions a lightning strike being 100 feet away. Although the processing of such stimuli might be very quick, there is no reason – given by Gowans – to think that such perceptual judgments are arrived at without attention. Categorization, or top-down processing has typically been understood to require attention. See Palmer (1999).

1. By perceptual processing I mean the full and complete processing of environmental information to the point that one is conscious of it. This processing includes both inference and categorization. The view that perceptual knowledge is achieved through inference and categorization, is called the New Look view, pioneered by Jerome Bruner.

   According to this view, the perceptual process is like science itself; it consists in finding partial clues (either from the world or from one’s knowledge and expectations), formulating a hypothesis about what the stimulus is, checking the data for verification, and then either accepting the hypothesis or reformulating it and trying again in a continual cycle of hypothesize-and-test.

   The output of this process is a categorization of the object or percept which is constitutive of knowledge. More intuitively, we may see a black line on a page. But the processing centers of color, shape, and position are different. This is known as the binding problem according to which phenomenal consciousness is unified, but processing is distributed. The combination of our perceptual experience into one thing/unit/percept is a feature of phenomenological consciousness. And *that* degree of processing requires motivation as argued. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ralph D. Ellis, “Implications of Inattentional Blindness for “Enactive” Theories of Consciousness.” *Brain and Mind* 2 (2001): 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ralph D. Ellis, “Dynamic Systems as an Approach to Consciousness: Emotion, Self-Organization, and the Mind-Body Problem.” *New Ideas in Psychology* 17 (1999): 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)