

Wondering as Appetitive Desire

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To wonder a question, I argue, is to have a kind of appetitive desire. This helps answer a range of objections to the view that wondering is a kind of desire for knowledge. It may also imply that wondering is not subject to rational norms.

1. Introduction

To wonder Q , I say, is to have some kind of desire. What kind of desire? We'll come back to that. Desire for what? Desire to *know*⁺: that is, desire to know Q or desire to ϕ for some event type ϕ that culminates in knowing Q (like finding out Q or learning Q). Call this schematic view *WONDER AS DESIRE TO KNOW*⁺ (*WADTK*⁺).

WADTK⁺ strikes me as intuitively attractive.¹ It also promises a parsimonious story about wondering's nature and normative significance—it is just the same as that of the relevant kind of desire—and a good fit with knowledge-centric perspectives on the mental lives of animals. But it faces serious objections. One is the metacognition objection pressed by Friedman (2013) and Carruthers (2018): non-human animals wonder but lack the requisite metacognitive capacities to want to know⁺.² I am unpersuaded, but leave addressing this objection for elsewhere. Another is the activity objection pressed by Friedman (2013) and Drucker (2022): wondering seems to be a process or activity, but desire is a paradigm state.

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¹Others too, judging by how often semanticists assume it: Karttunen (1977, p. 8), Boër (1978, p. 323), Ginzburg (1995b, p. 575), Guerzoni and Sharvit (2007, p. 367), Uegaki (2015, p. 66), Theiler, Roelofsen, and Aloni (2019, p. 112).

²See also Kvanvig (2003) and Whitcomb (2010) for the parallel argument about curiosity and Haziza (2022) and J. Nagel (2024) for defenses of curiosity as a kind of desire to know. I am sympathetic to Haziza and Nagel here. However, being curious is different from wondering; perhaps they are different kinds of desires.

I will answer the activity objection by adopting a more specific view about the kind of desire wondering involves:

WONDER AS APPETITIVE DESIRE (WAAD): To wonder *Q* is to have a kind of appetitive desire.

We'll see this also explains some new data that alternative accounts do not and helps answer a host of other objections to WADTK⁺. It may also imply that wondering's relation to reasons and rational norms is widely misunderstood.

2. The Activity Objection

We should reject anything like WADTK⁺, some say, because desiring is a state and wondering is not.³ This metaphysical difference, whatever exactly it amounts to, seems to be reflected in the aspectual classes of verbs: *to wonder* passes the progressive test for non-stativity, whereas *to desire to know* does not.⁴

- (1) a. My friend is wondering whether expressivism is true.
- b. #My friend is desiring to know whether expressivism is true.

And it can be leveraged to produce concrete counterexamples of agents being in the relevant state but not engaging in the relevant activity. Here's Friedman: "[r]ight now I wish to know the answers to a whole range of questions having to do with the origins of the universe, but I'm not currently wondering about each of these questions" (Friedman 2013, p. 154).⁵ And Drucker: "I do want to know how they got that gash, but I don't have time to wonder about that now [since I have to focus on submitting grades]" (Drucker 2022, p. 69). So while wondering perhaps typically travels together with a desire to know⁺, it cannot be such a desire.

But not all verbs for expressing desires fail the progressive test. Consider *to crave*, *to feel like*, and Levin's (1993, p. 194) class of *long* verbs: *to long for*, *to hunger for*, *to thirst after*, *to lust for/after*, *to pine for*, *to yearn for*, among others. These express desires of a certain kind,

³Friedman (2013, p. 154), Drucker (2022, pp. 69–70).

⁴On tests for non-stativity, see Kenny (1963, Ch. 8), Lakoff (1966), Vendler (1967, Ch. 4), Dowty (1979, p. 55), and Parsons (1990, §3.6).

⁵Teague (2024, p. 4) follows Friedman in rejecting WADTK⁺ on this basis.

which I will call appetitive desires.⁶ And they work just fine with the progressive.⁷

- (2) a. I'm craving chocolate.
- b. I'm longing for a sunny day.
- c. I was thirsting after more fantasy/sci-fi rooted in Platonic philosophy and esoteric pedagogy.

So either appetitive desires are not states or the verbs expressing them are a systematic exception to the progressive test for non-stativity. Either way, the badness of (1-b) is no objection to WAAD.

And appetitive desires are regularly absent even when there is some corresponding generic desire or wish.

- (3) Right now I wish to read a whole range of sci-fi books, but I am not currently yearning to read each of them.

Friedman's putative counterexample is thus just what we'd expect given WAAD. Similarly Drucker's:

- (4) I do want a better life, but I don't have time to yearn for that right now, since I have to focus on paying rent.

WAAD thus defuses the activity objection. In fact, we'll see, it does better.

⁶Davis (1984) uses the term for a similar grouping. Many others have made roughly the same distinction, though often under other labels: unmotivated/basic/bodily/affective/orectic/proper/etc. desires. See T. Nagel (1970, p. 29), Schiffer (1976), Stampe (1986, 1987), Schueler (1995), Scanlon (1998), Alvarez (2010), Swartzner (2013), Arpaly and Schroeder (2014), Schapiro (2014), Heathwood (2019), Marcus (2021), and Shaw (2021), among others.

Some, like Gregory (2021, §7.2), may take "appetitive desires" not to be desires at all. I am inclined to disagree, since they seem to play the central theoretical roles that are typically taken to characterize desires, but the terminology is ultimately not so important. One who denies that "appetitive desires" are desires can still accept the main claims of this paper: that WAAD is true (though they'll want to give it a different label), that it explains data that alternative accounts do not, and that it avoids the various objections made against WADTK⁺. Even on such a view, these objections to WADTK⁺ would not be irrelevant, as they might initially seem. First, given that many have taken appetitive desires to be desires, it wouldn't be surprising if they are similar in ways that would allow objections to WADTK⁺ to carry over to the corresponding view for "appetitive desires". Second, the objectors themselves may not want to reject the view that "appetitive desires" are desires, and so should intend their objections to WADTK⁺ to apply to a WAAD-based version of it. Finally, these objections involve interesting data that should ultimately be explained by any theory of wondering.

⁷(2-b) is based on an example of Levin's and (2-c) is naturally occurring: <https://nusantaranaga.wordpress.com/2019/03/24/a-review-of-jo-waltons-thessaly-trilogy/>.

3. Passive Activities

Appetitively desiring, if it is an activity at all, is an activity of a rather special kind. We might call it a passive activity or, more traditionally, a passion. There may be a sense in which craving chocolate is something I'm doing, but only a weak sense. Craving is something that happens to me in a way that my pacing, even my impulsive pacing, is not. And though appetitive desire verbs work with the progressive, in other ways they look like statives.

A stative in the simple present reports a particular state, but a non-stative usually gets a habitual reading. Outside a few special kinds of context, (5-c) does not report a particular event, but rather a habit, and (5-d) is bad.

- (5) a. I want chocolate.
- b. Right this moment, I want chocolate.
- c. I eat chocolate.
- d. #Right this moment, I eat chocolate.

And statives don't work with manner adverbs like *slowly*, but activity verbs typically do.

- (6) a. #I wanted chocolate slowly.
- b. I ate chocolate slowly.

Statives are also typically non-agentive. Unlike agentive non-statives, they don't work with act-related adverbs like *carefully* or *deliberately*, in imperatives, or with purpose clauses and *by*-gerunds (cf. Anscombe (1957)).

- (7) a. Eat chocolate!
- b. I carefully/deliberately ate chocolate.
- c. In order to please my boss, I ate chocolate.
- d. I ate chocolate by taking small bites off that chocolate bar, then eating a piece of chocolate cake.
- e. #Want chocolate!
- f. #I carefully/deliberately wanted chocolate.
- g. #In order to please my boss, I wanted chocolate.⁸
- h. #I wanted chocolate by imagining how it would taste.

⁸The intended reading is one on which the speaker was not trying to please their boss by getting or eating chocolate, but by merely wanting it.

We've seen that appetitive desire verbs pass the progressive test for non-stativity, but with these tests they pattern like statives.

- (8) a. Right this moment, I crave chocolate.
- b. #I craved chocolate slowly.
- c. #Crave chocolate!
- d. #I carefully/deliberately craved chocolate.
- e. #In order to please my boss, I craved chocolate.
- f. #I craved chocolate by imagining how it would taste.

This is interesting and merits a deeper investigation than can be undertaken here.⁹ What concerns us is that appetitive desire verbs are rather distinctive creatures and that *to wonder* behaves just like them.

- (9) a. Right this moment, I wonder where my keys are.
- b. #I wondered where my keys were slowly.
- c. #Wonder where my keys are!
- d. #I carefully/deliberately wondered where my keys were.
- e. #In order to please my boss, I wondered where my keys were.
- f. #I wondered where my keys were by first considering where at home they could have been, then where else they could have been.

Contrast this with the kind of agential activity one might take wondering to be.¹⁰

- (10) a. #Right this moment, I consider potential answers to the question of where my keys are.
- b. I considered potential answers to the question slowly.

⁹Hypothesis: they are non-statives in expressing events rather than states (Parsons 1990), but assign the thematic role of Experiencer rather than Agent to the subject (Belletti and Rizzi (1988), Pesetsky (1995)). Perhaps such events lack an Agent role, or perhaps we can think of it as being played by the subject's "inner animal" (Schapiro 2021).

¹⁰Drucker (2022) claims that wondering, like running, is something we "choose to do" (p. 78). He proposes it is a kind of considering (*ibid.*):

S wonders Q = S considers sufficiently many of Q 's potential answers p_1, \dots, p_n as answers to Q , which considering is guided by mechanisms whose function is to make S epistemically better off with respect to at least some of the p_i s and which ceases when (among other possible terminating conditions) S is consciously certain that some p_i is the complete and exhaustive answer to Q .

Teague (2024) seems to follow Drucker, with the addition that the considering must manifest a desire to better understand Q . Friedman doesn't analyze wondering; she may take it to be unanalyzable. But she does claim each interrogative attitude, wondering included, is a kind of mental asking (Friedman 2017, p. 315).

- c. Consider potential answers to the question of where my keys are!
- d. I carefully/deliberately considered potential answers to the question of where my keys were.
- e. In order to please my boss, I considered potential answers to the question of where my keys were.
- f. I considered potential answers to the question of where my keys were by first considering where at home they could have been, then where else they could have been.

It looks, as we might expect, like an ordinary agentive activity, unlike appetitive desires and, crucially, unlike wondering. Once we have the possibility of WAAD in mind, attending to the aspectual features of *to wonder* supports rather than undermines the view that wondering is a kind of desire.

4. Preferring Not to Know

You might wonder who wrote a manuscript you are reviewing but, out of a sense of fairness, prefer not—and so not want—to know.¹¹

This putative counterexample to WADTK⁺ is expected given WAAD. We often have appetitive desires for things we on balance prefer not to have: more chocolate, an impromptu vacation, revenge. As Davis (1984) observes, one can report this in apparently contradictory ways. Yearning to play tennis, you might say either (11-a) or (11-b).

- (11) a. I want to play tennis today, but I have to teach.
- b. I don't want to play tennis today since I have to teach.

In just the same way, when you have strong reason not to know⁺, you might appetitively desire to know⁺ and yet say you don't want to.

WAAD predicts another aspect of this phenomenon: one may resist doing what appetitive desires tempt one to do. You might often wonder who wrote the manuscripts you review, but always steadfastly avoid doing anything at all that might improve your epistemic position on the question. Or you might wonder what that smooth, creamy paint tastes like (Quinn 1993, p. 249) without trying to get a better idea than you already have.

¹¹Cf. Friedman (2019, p. 311, n. 7), Uegaki (2022, p. 80).

5. Idle Wondering

You might idly wonder questions about some topic you don't really care about. Drucker (2022, p. 71) imagines someone looking to occupy their thoughts hitting upon a question of etymology. He takes this to be a case of wondering without wanting to know:

- (12) They're wondering what the etymology of 'power' is, but they couldn't care less about whether they find out what it was; they could have wondered about anything—they're just trying to pass the time.

But this looks, as WAAD predicts, just like other cases of people putting themselves in a position to trigger an appetitive desire as a means to some other end.

- (13) Don Giovanni is lusting after Zerlina, but he couldn't care less about whether he sleeps with her; he could have lusted after anyone—he's just trying to pass the time.

Triggering short-lived appetitive desires for more or less arbitrary ends is common and often useful. I just care about having fun and getting exercise, but when I start to play, I trigger an urge to win, which makes it more fun and better exercise.¹² I just care about eating food that is nutritious, tasty, and cheap enough, but when I survey the fridge's contents, I trigger a craving specifically for yogurt, which makes snacking more enjoyable.

It doesn't always work. Sometimes nothing in the fridge looks appetizing. Sometimes we can't get into the game. Similarly, sometimes thinking of some question and its potential answers doesn't trigger genuine wondering. "How many toes do I have? Hmm, yes, it looks like 10. Could it be 11? Or 10,000? No, don't see any other toes around. . . ." or "Have I eaten an even number of grapes in my life, or odd?". But we by nature desire to know, so it's usually easy to get ourselves to at least mildly wonder.

6. Wanting to Know for the Money

One might desire knowledge for some payoff, but this doesn't guarantee wondering:¹³

¹²Drucker himself assimilates his case with striving play in Nguyen's sense (Drucker 2022, pp. 73-74, n. 33). The comparison is apt, but Nguyen (2020, p. 45) seems right to me in holding that one "does genuinely desire to win during the course of the game" in striving play, although this desire is acquired instrumentally and is "disposable".

¹³I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the case. Teague (2024, p. 5) has a similar case, wherein a student wants to know the answer to a difficult question in order to ace an exam; she is not wondering that question as she works on the others, though she still wants to know it and that desire is motivating her to hurry.

Ann has no interest in the race, but an eccentric billionaire has promised to give her \$1 million if she comes to know who won. Ann also knows that tomorrow at noon, her friend will inform her who won. As she travels to meet her friend, Ann occurrently desires to know who won but is not wondering who won.

Again predicted by WAAD. Cravings, lusts, inclinations, and the like are not directly induced through incentives. As one can occurrently desire a food for its health benefits without craving it, Ann can want to know for the money without wondering.

7. Wanting Knowledge You Already Have

Friedman (2019, p. 305) points out that assertions of sentences like (14) are unacceptable.¹⁴

(14) #Morse killed the doctor, but I wonder who killed the doctor.

A WADTK⁺ theorist might seem to have an explanation. In asserting, one represents oneself as knowing *Q*, yet in saying that one is wondering, one represents oneself as wanting to know⁺ *Q*. If, as some assume, it is incoherent or logically impossible to want what one takes oneself to have, then (14) is expressing something incoherent.¹⁵

There are, however, apparent counterexamples to such principles about wanting. Recent work tends to cite (15-b) from Iatridou (2000, p. 243), but sentences like (15-a) were already discussed in Plato's *Symposium* (200a–d):

- (15) a. I am healthy, which is just what I want to be.
 b. I live in Bolivia because I want to live in Bolivia.

Some will resist taking sentences like (15-a) and (15-b) at face value. Plato, for example, has Socrates suggest that what is really meant is “I want the things I have now to be mine in the future as well” (200e). But if we do take them at face value, we have an objection to WADTK⁺: wondering *Q* while knowing *Q* is incoherent,

“[b]ut wanting to know *Q* while knowing *Q* need involve no rational failing. Right now I want to know what my home address is, and luckily I do; there's a lot of knowledge that I have right now that I want to have and wouldn't want to lose. There's no irrationality or incoherence here.” (Friedman 2019, p. 313, n. 25)

¹⁴How to explain this has been much disputed: Archer (2018), Lee (2020), Millson (2020), Woodard (2020, 2021), Van Elswyk and Sapir (2021), Falbo (2021, 2022), and Goodman and Holguin (2022).

¹⁵Van Elswyk and Sapir (2021, pp. 5854–5855) suggest an explanation along these lines.

With WAAD, though, we have no such problem, since appetitive desires look more clearly future-oriented.¹⁶

- (16) a. #I am healthy, which is just what I yearn to be.
- b. #I live in Bolivia because I pine to live in Bolivia.
- c. #Right now I long to know what my home address is, and luckily I do.

So the incoherence of (14) is another phenomenon we should expect given WAAD.

8. (Can't Get No) Satisfaction?

Drucker claims that wonder, unlike desire, “is not the sort of state or attitude that can be satisfied”; it is rather “extinguished, or somehow or another terminates” (Drucker 2022, p. 68). Why think this? He observes that while one can naturally speak of desires or curiosity being satisfied, one cannot do so for wonder.

- (17) a. Winning the lottery would allow me to satisfy every desire I have.
- b. Satisfy my curiosity: what did she tell you?
- c. #Satisfy my wonder/wondering/wonderment: what did she tell you?

At first WAAD seems of no help, since it is also natural to talk about satisfaction of cravings, longings, inclinations, and so on. But some other appetitive desires show that something must be going wrong with this objection.

- (18) a. #Winning the lottery would allow me to satisfy every pining I have.
- b. #Satisfy my pining to know: what did she tell you?
- (19) a. *Winning the lottery would allow me to satisfy every feeling like I have.
- b. *Satisfy my feeling like knowing: what did she tell you?

We have not discovered that while *to crave*, *to long*, and *to be inclined* do express desires, *to pine* and *to feel like* don't. Similarly, I say, for *to wonder*.

After all, though these sentences sound somewhat off or ungrammatical, they are intelligible enough.¹⁷ Indeed, the satisfaction/dissipation contrast seems to apply just as

¹⁶This too is noted by Davis (1984, pp. 182–3).

¹⁷And googling turns up some not too unnatural examples.

- (20) a. Back in grad school I studied comets and always wondered what it would be like to land on a nucleus [of a comet]. With [the space mission] Rosetta, that wonder was satisfied. (<https://thespacewriter.com/wp/2016/10/04/rosetta-last-hurrah-comet-67p/>)

well to these cases as it does to other desires. This is very unlike sentences with nouns denoting things that satisfaction doesn't apply to.

- (21) a. #Winning the lottery would allow me to satisfy every belief I have.
b. #Satisfy my hair color!

These don't sound awkward or ungrammatical; they are just nonsense.

But if *to wonder*, *pinning*, and *to feel like* express desires that can be satisfied, why can't we easily and directly say so? Here is my suggestion. The verb *to satisfy* selects for a certain kind of non-gerundive nominal complement.

- (22) a. #That satisfied his desiring/craving fame.
b. That satisfied his desire/craving for fame.

But whereas *to desire*, *to crave*, & co. have such corresponding nominals readily available,¹⁸ *to pine*, *to feel like*, and *to wonder* happen not to. This shows up in other environments having nothing to do with satisfaction, like this one with an indefinite article, which also requires a non-gerundive nominal.

- (23) a. A craving/desire is what led to his demise.
b. #A pining is what led to his demise.
c. *A feeling like is what led to his demise.
d. #A wonder/wondering/wonderment is what led to his demise.

Why is there no readily available nominal of the right kind for *to wonder*? As with *to pine*, I take this primarily to be an accident of linguistic history, rather than a reflection of anything about the underlying semantics or metaphysics.

Working out a proper theory of this would require a detour not only into historical linguistics but also into the morphosyntax of nominalization,¹⁹ a worthwhile task for elsewhere, perhaps, but not one especially incumbent upon the WAAD-theorist to undertake. The badness of (23-d) and (24-b) is just as much an issue for those who take wondering to be a kind of considering or who hold that it is extinguished or terminated.

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- b. This time, I actually got an answer that satisfied my wondering. (<https://www.theodysseyonline.com/watching-smoked-signals-for-the-fifth-time>)
c. Nonetheless, neither queriers' wonderment about the question is at all satisfied by the exhaustive answer. (Ginzburg 1995a, p. 468)

¹⁸Unlike the *craving* of (22-a), the *craving* of (22-b) is not a gerundive, but rather a lexicalized form.

¹⁹Deeply complicated and disputed territory. See Lees (1960), Chomsky (1970), Grimshaw (1990), Lieber (2016), and Alexiadou and Borer (2020) among countless others.

- (24) a. A consideration of potential answers to that question is what led to his demise.
b. #Getting that grant would allow me to terminate/extinguish every wonder/
wondering/wonderment I have/am engaged in.

9. Wondering and Rationality

WAAD predicts a lot of facts about wondering and *to wonder* and makes WADTK⁺ more tenable. It may also have important implications for how we view wondering's relation to rationality.

On a classical—and, I think, plausible—view, while there may be a kind of desire we can form rationally, appetitive desires “simply assail us” (T. Nagel 1970, p. 29). They cannot be based on reasons and are not governed by norms of theoretical or practical rationality in the way our beliefs, preferences, intentions, and actions are.²⁰ If this is right, then WAAD implies that wondering is not governed by such norms, contrary to what many have recently assumed.²¹ Wondering may constitute a malfunction or failure of fittingness, indicate bad dispositions or irrational beliefs, or motivate irrational acts. But neither wondering nor failing to wonder would itself be a rational norm violation.

This would not make wondering irrelevant to rationality, however. Appetitive desires might, in the right conditions, give one *pro tanto* reasons to act. So wondering *Q* could contribute to making inquiry into *Q* rationally permissible or required.²² Wondering, then, would be like perceiving as traditionally conceived: reason-giving, but not itself rationally evaluable.²³

²⁰On rational evaluability, see Nolfi (2015) and Neta (2018). Neta lists “Craving Doritos” as a paradigmatic non-rationally determinable condition (p. 289).

²¹See, for instance, Friedman (forthcoming), Archer (2018), Falbo (2021), Whitcomb and Millson (2023), Willard-Kyle (2023), Teague (2024, p. 20).

²²Though so too will other considerations; cf. Thorstad (2022).

²³See Stampe (1987), Schafer (2013), and Shaw (2021) for discussions of this kind of view of desires.

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