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Wondering on and with Purpose

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1. Introduction: Having a Question, Being Curious, and Wondering

Though Socrates and Aristotle tell us philosophy begins in wonder,¹ philosophers, at least recent ones, have neglected to consider what wonder itself is. In this chapter I'll present a theory on which wondering is an activity by which one considers various alternative propositions that might, as far as the wonderer is concerned, answer the question they wonder about, structured by the end—not necessarily a *desired* end—of coming to an epistemically better doxastic attitude to some of the alternatives.

Besides, I hope, being interesting in its own right, and perhaps eventually allowing us to evaluate these ancient philosophical claims about the relation between philosophy and wonder, the account on offer here has significant implications elsewhere, both in the philosophy of mind and in other areas of philosophy. Most importantly for present purposes, when one wonders, one has a token of a species of attitude, the genus of which we might call *having a question*. Here's some evidence that there is such an attitude, and that wondering is related to it as I suggest.

First, at least to a first approximation, when someone sincerely asserts that *p*, they believe that *p*. In ordinary cases, their belief that *p* makes their assertion sincere.² More generally, the question of a speech act's sincerity only arises when some accompanying attitude may be had or not had that makes the speech act sincere. Compare:

¹ For Socrates, see *Theaetetus* 155d, and for Aristotle, see *Metaphysics* 1, 982b.

² Things can be a bit more complicated, since we sometimes believe we believe *p* without believing *p*. Probably in such cases, when we assert *p*, we do so sincerely. See, e.g., Ridge (2006), Chan and Kahane (2011), and Stokke (2014, 2018) for discussion. These complications don't affect my point here, though.

- (1) ???Was she sneezing sincerely?
- (2) Was she saying sincerely that she wanted to go to the Ethiopian place?

Now consider a different speech act, asking a question:

- (3) Was she asking sincerely whether Biden won?

The fact that this question can often be a good one—answered in some cases by “no”, others by “yes”—means that asking a question can be sincere or insincere. When it is sincere, there must be an attitude that makes it that way, just as there must be an attitude that makes an assertion sincere when it is.

I will call any attitude that can make the asking of a question sincere a way of having a question. This may look stipulative, but it isn't. When someone asks a question *Q* and we know they did it sincerely, we can say the following of them:

- (4) a. They have the question: *Q*.
- b. She has the question: did Biden win?

We *wouldn't* say (4) when we take the speaker to have asked their question insincerely, as with, for example, rhetorical questions. Consider a rally for the country's president, one of whose sycophants says:

- (5) Is this not the greatest president in the history of the country?

It would be wrong to say that the person really has the question whether the president is the greatest president in the history of the country. That seems to be because they don't have the relevant underlying attitude.

Assertions that *p*, once accepted, not only license third-person singular belief-that-*p* ascriptions, but also first-person *plural* belief-that-*p* ascriptions. This works for askings of questions, too:

- (6) *S* (to *S'*): What food are they going to serve at the party?
S' (to *S*): Oh, hm, I'm not sure. Good question.
S (to *S''*): Hey, we have a question: what food are you serving at the party?

So our interpretative and communicative practices strongly suggest there is a genus, having a question, which underwrites the sincerity of asking a

question and is licensed by such sincere askings. Why do I say *genus*, though? Why isn't it a specific kind of attitude? Type-individuation of attitudes is really tricky, of course; is my belief that *p* and my credence .95 that *p* the same type of attitude or a different type? What about *de dicto vs. de se* beliefs? Perhaps there is nothing to do here but to stipulate. Still, we do talk as though there are recognizably different attitudes that all seem to be ways of having a given question. For example, wondering about *Q* and being curious about *Q* are different; one can be curious without wondering, and one can wonder without being curious.³ I'll return to both cases in detail later, but here I'll present them and make some basic observations about them.

One can be curious and yet not wonder. Consider someone who sees their friend with a gash on their hand, but who is really busy finalizing students' grades before the system shuts off. They can think:

- (7) I'm curious how they got that gash, but I don't have time to wonder about that now.

The second conjunct presupposes the possibility of being curious about *Q* even when one isn't wondering about *Q*. The apparent explanation, one I'll explore much more later on, is that wondering is somehow an activity or like one, in that it takes time; curiosity doesn't seem to be like this. Anyway, cases like these suggest curiosity doesn't entail wondering.

To see that wondering doesn't entail curiosity, consider a case in which someone is trying to pass the time but has misplaced their phone and so must amuse themselves somehow. Searching around for something to think about, they think about what the etymology of the word 'power' is, for example, is it Romance or Germanic? Initially it seems Germanic because of the '-er' ending, but then they remember the French 'pouvoir'. During all of this, they may be described in the following way:

- (8) They're wondering what the etymology of 'power' is, but they're not actually curious about it; it could have been anything—they're just trying to pass the time.

Later on I'll defend the cogency of this utterance in detail, in part by embedding it in a picture of how wondering relates to desire. For now, though, it's

³ Important caveat here: ultimately I'll argue wonder isn't an attitude at all. The broader point is still right, though; consider being curious and being puzzled about.

enough to notice that it sounds reasonable, and definitely not clearly false or unintelligible in the way that analytically false utterances typically sound.

Assuming these cases work as I think they do, then neither curiosity nor wonder entail one another. Yet whenever one wonders or is curious about some question, *Q*, asking *Q* will be sincere. Consider how bizarre these sound:

- (9) a. ??I know she's wondering what the etymology of 'power' is, but when she asked what it is, did she ask sincerely?
 b. ??I know she's curious about the etymology of 'power', but when she asked what it is, did she ask sincerely?

So, it is sufficient to ask sincerely either that one wonders or that one is curious. So, outside of very abnormal cases—analogueous to repressed beliefs—we should say that those people then *have the question, Q*. That is why I say that having a question is a genus, because whatever makes a person's question sincere is common across cases in which one wonders and in which one is curious about *Q*. Getting clear about wonder and wondering will help to make sense of this genus, and along the way help to bring curiosity better into view by contrast.⁴

Here's the structure of the paper. I'll first develop a view of wondering that captures how I think *curiosity* actually works. Then I'll return to the cases I introduced here, elaborating on and defending my interpretation and showing how they make trouble for the first view of wondering. After that, I'll present my own account in light of those cases, and then draw out some interesting consequences of that analysis.

2. A Preliminary (Incorrect) Analysis of Wonder as Desire

In this section, I'll present a preliminary and, I think, tempting account of wonder, and then I'll show that it can't work, in part using the two cases

⁴ Thinking about wondering will also have consequences for other areas of philosophy, too. In related work in epistemology, I apply the view of having a question I develop, in part using the materials from this chapter, to some long-standing issues concerning requirements to use *modus ponens* to form certain beliefs in certain circumstances; this problem is discussed by, among others, Harman (1986) and Friedman (2018). And then in the philosophy of language, I apply that view to help solve some problems for Yalcin (2018)'s view of belief, and to develop a view of the pragmatics of questions.

from the introduction. Though in the next section I'll argue that it is incorrect, this account will nevertheless provide a number of important desiderata for an account of wondering, an account that I'll develop in Section 4.

So, suppose someone apparently sincerely tells you:

(10) I wonder who killed Kennedy.

What would you take them to be like, psychologically? Well, someone like that isn't simply telling you that their overall doxastic state has some gap. They are not, that is, telling you that they have *no idea* who killed Kennedy or *maximally undecided* about it or something like that. I have no idea, and am maximally undecided, about lots of things I don't wonder about at all. Wonder doesn't supervene on doxastic states like (degree of) belief.

What makes them look to have said (10) sincerely to you is that they *do* certain things: they try to find out the answer.⁵ This at least suggests that (10) requires a certain desire, too.⁶ There are other hints that desire is involved here as well.⁷

Desiring something doesn't just motivate us; it also focuses our attention, either on the object itself or on possible means to satisfy the desire. Thus when I want a cold drink, I think about how nice it'd be to drink it, how I might get it, what the obstacles to getting it are, etc. Wondering seems in some sense to *be* an attentional phenomenon: it doesn't make a lot of sense to say that someone is wondering about Q, but whose attention is completely elsewhere. There is also a "generic" use of 'wonder', as in:

(11) Since I was a kid, I've wondered whether there's a God.

I take (11) to be false if the speaker has never had a token episode of wondering whether there was a God, indeed if such episodes weren't at least somewhat frequent.

Satisfying a desire pleases us, and we're also pleased when we *expect* a desire of ours soon to be satisfied; and having a desire frustrated, or coming

⁵ See, e.g., Carruthers (2018), for a discussion of the relation between having a question and being motivated to answer it.

⁶ For the *somewhat* contentious idea that where we have motivation, we have desire, see, e.g., Smith (1987). But a wider variety of philosophers should see the suggestion here; for example, Anscombe (2000) famously says "the primitive sign of wanting is trying to get".

⁷ I take much of this list from Sinhababu (2009). See also Railton (2012) for a good specification of desire's functional role.

to expect it will soon be frustrated, displeases us. Similarly, wondering can be pleasant, especially when we reach a satisfying answer; and we can be frustrated when we wonder fruitlessly, having no idea where even to begin, for example. Relatedly, desire also comes in negative, aversive “flavors”, whose satisfaction brings relief, and positive flavors, whose satisfaction makes us happy. Wondering can feel like this, too: we can wonder *because* uncertainty about something is bothering us, or because having the relevant information would be good.

Finally, notice how strange it can be to say that you wonder Q^8 but don’t want to know the answer to Q :

- (12) ??I wonder who will win the election this year, but I in no way want to know who will.

Someone who said (12) would be hard to understand, at the very least. This suggests wonder at least ordinarily goes with such desires.

All this strongly suggests desire is centrally involved in wonder. What, then, is the *content* of that desire?

Specifying the content in any detail is a more difficult task than it might seem. It’s extremely natural and tempting to say that it involves a desire “for the answer”. Probably we should think that amounts to a desire *to have* the answer, but because having subsumes so many relations, this does not get us much further.⁹ Presumably what’s wanted is a doxastic attitude or attitudes of a certain kind, which involves attitudes *toward* the answer. Which?

Again, there’s a natural and tempting answer, namely knowledge. The simplest proposal so far, then, would have it that the person who says (10) sincerely wants to know who killed Kennedy. More generally, S wonders Q just in case S wants to know the answer to Q . One immediate problem with this is that, it is likely, questions can have multiple answers. The most common such are “mention-some”:¹⁰

- (13) Where can I buy an Italian newspaper?

⁸ To ensure this phrase’s grammaticality, think of ‘ Q ’ not as shorthand for a noun phrase (e.g. not as for ‘the question of who will win’) but rather for the interrogative phrase (e.g. ‘who will win’).

⁹ See Humberstone’s (1990) good discussion of ‘have’ (i.e. in ‘wants to have’) as a ‘dummy verb’.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Groenendijk and Stokhof (1984) and Beck and Rullmann (1999).

Perhaps there are multiple answers to this question: that the speaker can buy an Italian newspaper at X , for any X that sells an Italian newspaper and is a suitable distance from the speaker, etc. Or perhaps there's just *one* answer, the conjunction of all those propositions and a final conjunct, that there are no other such places. Whatever the right way to think about the semantics of questions might be here, it seems clear that at least *many* times the person who asks (12) (or who says "I wonder where I can buy an Italian newspaper") might want no more than to know one suitable place where they can buy an Italian newspaper. So, either questions like (12) don't have unique answers; but even if there's a unique, exhaustive answer to (12), we shouldn't say the associated desire is, in general, the desire to know that (i.e. *the*) answer.¹¹

Maybe, then, it's the desire to know (at least) *an* answer to the question one wonders, or an answer of a suitable, for example sufficiently useful, kind. But this hides some further difficulties. Friedman (2013) has the following kind of case: imagine there's a box with something in it such that the only way to come to know what it is would require opening it, but where I also know that knowing whatever it is that's in there would then kill me. I may still wonder what's in the box, even though it also seems true to say I *don't* want to know what's in it. Or consider an example like this: I may wonder who will survive to the end of a particularly bloody show I love, but if you offer to just tell me before I've seen the last episode, I may insist I don't want to know who survives.¹²

Are desires really not involved in these cases? In the box case, if—somehow (contrary to what I believe is possible)—I could figure out what's in the box without being killed, I would typically be pretty pleased. Maybe this means I only *wish* I knew what was in the box. What's odd about this case is that I can describe myself as wanting to know *or* as wanting not to know. More particularly, I can say:

- (14) a. I want to know, but I never will, since I'd be killed if I looked.
 b. I don't want to know, since I'd be killed if I looked.

Either seems sayable, and thus, perhaps, true. Actually, it's been tricky to give truth-conditions to 'want'-ascriptions that allow both (14a) and (14b)

¹¹ Though I think this point is correct, for convenience and/or euphony I'll still sometimes refer to the desire to know *the* answer.

¹² See Kelly (2003) for discussion of this kind of case.

to come out true.¹³ Probably we'll need some kind of context sensitivity. But it'd be helpful to have some intuition about what might be driving the context sensitivity. What seems to be going on is that *in some respect*, or *some things considered*, I want to know what's in the box. But *all things considered*, I don't. Similarly, I may want to take a trip to Tokyo now, but because of the expense or because of issues with COVID, I may also *not* want to: in one (or really, several) respect(s) I do, but all things considered, I don't.¹⁴

So the desire to know the answer associated with wondering, which in developing this proposal I'm assuming exists, need not be an all-things-considered desire, but might only be desire certain things considered.¹⁵ The question now, then, is whether we can identify *what* that respect would be. Here's a plausible attempt: one wants to know the answer insofar as it would improve their overall doxastic state epistemically with respect to issues the person cares about. This nicely handles the two cases I mentioned. First, I care to know what's in the box; I care about improving my doxastic state, epistemically, with respect to the question of what's in it. And second, when I wonder who will survive but don't want you to spoil it for me, presumably I do care about improving my doxastic state, epistemically, with respect to the question of who will survive to the end, but I don't want that improvement to come by just any means; rather, I want to come to it by watching the show.

So the tentative proposal I've developed (and in the next section will refute) is:

WONDER AS DESIRE. S wonders Q iff S has a some-things-considered desire to know at least some suitable answer to Q , the considerations being that knowing such an answer would improve S 's doxastic state with respect to an issue (namely, Q) that she cares about.¹⁶

The main element here that I have not motivated is why the doxastic state desired is *knowledge*. The truth is that's the part of my account that matters the least, at least for my purposes. There's a large literature that connects knowledge with all manner of important further states and statuses,¹⁷ and if

¹³ The classic Heim (1992) semantics for 'want' predicts that only (14b) is true, as does von Fintel's (1999). See Villalta (2008) for a good discussion of the problem.

¹⁴ For this diagnosis, and a formal implementation, see Phillips-Brown (2018).

¹⁵ See Deigan's "An Analysis of Wonder" for a similar thought.

¹⁶ For roughly this analysis, see Deigan, "An Analysis of Wonder".

¹⁷ I mean, of course, the "knowledge first" program made prominent by Williamson (2000); see especially chapter 1's treatment of "factive mental state operators", as well as Dietz (2018).

my account could fit with those, I'd be happy; but if those connections weren't real, or if for whatever reason the aimed-at doxastic state relevant to wonder isn't knowledge, not much would be affected. So, if you have doubts that the relevant state is knowledge, feel free to read *WONDER AS DESIRE* as really positing a disjunctive desire for either knowledge, or true belief, or Sosa's "reflective knowledge" (as opposed to animal knowledge),¹⁸ or whatever other doxastic states you think plausible. In my own preferred account, the references to knowledge will mostly drop out, anyway.

One small piece of evidence for favoring knowledge as the relevant doxastic state is that it does seem incoherent to say things like (12) and, to take another example, (15):

(15) ??I wonder how dogs evolved, but I don't want to know how they did.

The felt incoherence suggests that what's wanted in wondering here is knowledge of the answer, that is, of how they evolved.

So, that's the natural first proposal, *WONDER AS DESIRE*. As I said, I'll argue it's wrong, but instructively so, since it will form the skeleton of the account I think is right, and many of the considerations I've adduced will remain relevant to that account. In particular, we want whatever we say wonder is to have the features of a desire that I've isolated here.

3. Against Wonder as Desire

The two cases I described toward the end of Section 1 show why *WONDER AS DESIRE* cannot be right, and point the way toward fixing it. I'll first go through a more typical consideration that should perhaps make us more skeptical of *WONDER AS DESIRE*.

The trouble is that it seems to require a rich amount of metacognition. That is, it seems to require of creatures that they have desires *about* their own doxastic and epistemic attitudes. But it seems like young children and non-human animals, even quite simple animals, can wonder about things.¹⁹

¹⁸ See, e.g., Sosa (2011), among many other places.

¹⁹ Typically philosophers develop this objection for related theories of *curiosity* as the desire to know (of the particular kind I've been describing), but if it works against curiosity, it would work basically as well against wonder. Anyway, see Carruthers (2018) for lots of evidence that small children and non-human animals can be curious. Whitcomb (2010) also makes this argument against this view of curiosity.

It seems that when I step out to take out the trash, my dog wonders where I've gone. But especially in the case of non-human animals it seems wrong to say that they can have metacognitive desires. Perhaps this is because this requires them to have pretty sophisticated concepts, which they can't or don't have. Bees, for example, might be curious; do they have the concept of knowledge? Whatever the reason, worries about metacognition in children and non-human animals loom large for *WONDER AS DESIRE*. Perhaps in the final accounting we will want to say my ascription of wonder to my dog is loose speech or somehow to be understood in a less full-blooded sense than my wondering where my keys are. But first, I suspect not; second, we should not wish to rule out this situation by conceptual fiat; and third, we have some reason to prefer accounts that allow for this possibility to ones that don't.

I'm not completely sure how convinced I am by this particular reason for rejecting *WONDER AS DESIRE*, though. It might be that less cognitively complex agents have *de re* desires for knowledge of answers to the relevant questions, desires they need not conceptualize *as* desires for knowledge.²⁰ And if this is what in fact satisfies the given agent, then I think we have good reason to believe that the creature does have that *de re* desire. Still, it would be good to have an account of wonder that definitely didn't require the given creature to have complex metacognitions.²¹

Here, I think, is a stronger argument against *WONDERING AS DESIRE*, which will lead me back to the first case. Note first one absolutely central characteristic of desires: they can be satisfied. In the formal mode, the following will make sense:

(16) Winning the lottery would allow me to satisfy every desire I have.

²⁰ Carruthers (2018, pages 3–4) considers this possibility, but doesn't really say much against it, except to say that it is underdeveloped.

²¹ In my official account of wondering, I will argue that the wonderer considers answers to a given question *as* answers to the question, i.e., under that mode of presentation. So you may wonder if the *de re* desire maneuver I offered here would really be available to the defender of the desire-based view. My own account will be fully non-metacognitive: though my account will require considering *answers* as answers, it doesn't say anything about considering knowledge *as* knowledge (or certainty, belief, etc.). It's also not a desire-based view, since in the next section I will reject all of those; so strictly speaking it doesn't much matter for me if this maneuver ultimately helps the proponent of the desire-based view. Since I do think wondering requires considering answers as answers, the challenge for the proponent of the desire-based view is to concoct a desire relating to answers as answers, but that doesn't involve *knowledge* (as knowledge) of one of those answers (the, or a, true one). Perhaps this can be done, but it'd be difficult, though I suspect not impossible.

It's somewhat controversial *what* satisfies a given desire,²² but not at all that they can be. Curiosity can be satisfied, too:

(17) Satisfy my curiosity: what did she tell you?

Fears can be realized, for example, and beliefs true, but neither can be satisfied like desire and curiosity can. Perhaps it is *only* desire states that can be satisfied, at least in the intended sense, in which case curiosity would be a kind of desire, that is, a desire with a specific content. That seems to me like good reason to think curiosity really is a desire!

But the next thing to notice is that wonder *isn't* satisfied. The following sound bad:

- (18) a. #Satisfy my wondering: what did she tell you?
 b. #Satisfy my wonder: what did she tell you?
 c. #Satisfy my wonderment: what did she tell you?

Wonder, it seems, is not the sort of state or attitude that can be satisfied. Now, insofar as there really is one underlying thing, having a question, that being curious, wondering, being puzzled, etc. all have in common, that's a problem for WUNDER AS DESIRE, since it seems that satisfaction is essential to desire. It's worth stressing that this isn't primarily a linguistic point. Wondering isn't satisfied by learning an answer to a question, even though one will, of course, stop wondering when one learns the answer. It is extinguished, or somehow or another terminates, rather than is satisfied.²³ Wondering isn't *the kind of state* that can be satisfied. Thus, if wondering is a way of having a question, having a question isn't having a desire.

That doesn't mean that wondering doesn't normally go with some kind of desire. We still have the strangeness of (12) and (15) to contend with, even once we deny WUNDER AS DESIRE. That ultimately needs to be explained even if the identity claim is wrong. I suspect the difference between curiosity and wondering on this score comes to this. Curiosity is a *source* of motivation, whereas wondering is something you do, at least in ordinary cases, when you already have some such motivation. I can wonder about a

²² For recent thoughtful discussions of the nature of desire satisfaction, see, e.g., Fara (2012), Shaw (2020), and Grant and Phillips-Brown (2020).

²³ See, e.g., McDaniel and Bradley (2008) for a good discussion of this distinction applied specifically to desire.

question because I am curious about something. But the wondering isn't a source of that motivation.

With that distinction in mind, let's return to the first of the two cases that I described in the introduction. Recall that in that case, someone who sees their friend with a gash on their hand, but who is really busy finalizing students' grades before the system shuts off. They can think:

- (7) I'm curious how they got that gash, but I don't have time to wonder about that now.

We can modify it a bit for present purposes, even:

- (19) I do want to know how they got that gash, but I don't have time to wonder about that now.

The important thing here is to (non-generically) wonder *takes time*. It's something we *do*, and though it involves attitudes, it isn't itself an attitude. In this way it is far more like thinking about something than it is like having a belief or, for that matter, a desire.

To see this, compare the following:

- (20) a. ???I don't have time to believe that bats evolved from mice.
 b. I don't have time to think about whether bats evolved from mice.
 c. ???I don't have time to want to know whether bats evolved from mice.

Examples (20a) and (c) sound awful, but (b) sounds perfectly good. Or consider the following replies to "what were you doing just now?".²⁴

- (21) a. ???Believing that bats evolved from mice.
 b. Thinking about whether bats evolved from mice.
 c. ???Wanting to know whether bats evolved from mice.
 d. Wondering whether bats evolved from mice.

Examples (21a) and (c) sound awful, but (b) and (d) sound perfectly good. To wonder is much more like thinking about something than it is like believing or wanting.

²⁴ This test traces back to the famous Vendler (1957).

These points are easy to miss, I think, because of the generic use of ‘wonder’ I’ve pointed to with example (11). Vendler (1957, pages 150–151) mentions the two ways one can smoke: one can *be smoking*, or one can (habitually) smoke. But states and the other things verbs can stand for—especially for my purposes activities—must be distinguished.

Finally, notice that there’s an intentional aspect to wondering, so that the following often sound strange:²⁵

- (22) a. I was wondering whether Trump would win reelection, but I didn’t realize I was doing that.
 b. I wondered whether Trump would win reelection, but I didn’t realize that.

It doesn’t sound at all strange not to realize we desire something until something sparks our recognition.

This would all make sense if wonder is an activity and not an attitude at all.²⁶ We’d also have a neat explanation of why desire and curiosity but not wonder can be satisfied: activities more generally cannot be satisfied, even ones that *involve* desire. My working hard at my job cannot be satisfied, for example even by my receiving my salary. Notice also that ‘wonder’ is atelic, as activities more generally are. First, a person can have wondered whether bats evolved from mice even though they never discovered whether or not they did. And second, if someone wonders whether bats evolved from mice for a whole duration of time, they also wondered whether they did during any subinterval. Only atelic verbs satisfy this “homogeneity” condition.²⁷ So I think the case for thinking of wonder as an activity is strong. It will be my assumption going forward that this is right.

If it is an activity, though, it still *involves* a desire: after all, it is something we do, as (21d) suggests. But is it *one* essential kind of desire that motivates us to wonder, or are there different kinds? If we wish to preserve as much of WONDER AS DESIRE as we could, we should say that even if wondering Q isn’t the *same* as the some-things-considered desire to know at least some

²⁵ See most famously Anscombe (2000) for the idea of this connection. I say “often”, not always; Uriah Kriegel points out to me that it may take place at the Jamesian “fringe of consciousness”, so I properly describe myself as not having realized it. Such cases, I think, are at least atypical. Not realizing what we want, however, is highly typical. Still, I won’t put too much weight on this test, partly because it does seem possible for (22) to be felicitous.

²⁶ Friedman (2013, page 154) makes a similar point, as does Deigan.

²⁷ On tests for telicity and atelicity, see Vendler (1957), Mourelatos (1978), and Bach (1986).

suitable answer to *Q*, the considerations being that knowing such an answer would improve *S*'s doxastic state with respect to an issue (namely, *Q*) that she cares about, that sort of desire might necessarily always be involved. Of course, that would not yet give us as full a characterization of wonder as we should want, since even a central motivation of an activity doesn't fully characterize the activity it motivates. But at least any account that did make use of such a desire would have a head start on the desiderata from Section 2.

The second case shows that such a desire is *not* always involved in wondering. That case, remember, is this: someone is trying to pass the time but has misplaced their phone and so must amuse themselves somehow. Searching for something to think about, they think about what the etymology of the word 'power' is, for example is it Romance or Germanic? Initially it seems Germanic because of the '-er' ending, but then they remember the French 'pouvoir'. During all of this, they may be described in the following way:

- (8) They're wondering what the etymology of 'power' is, but they're not actually curious about it; it could have been anything—they're just trying to pass the time.

Once again, we should look at the modification of (8) where we replace talk of curiosity with talk of desire:

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

I said this case would require some more substantiation and defense than the previous one. I'll do that now.

So, I claim this is one way someone who says (23) is clearly intelligible: they could be wondering what the etymology of 'power' is not because they care in any way what the etymology really is, but rather just to spend some time doing something that engages them enough and doesn't require resources—screens of some sort, say—that they don't have right then. The person may never revisit the issue, and feel no frustration if they're interrupted and diverted onto some other task. So there's certainly no desire that *outlasts* the wondering. The simplest thing would be to deny there ever was a desire, not to say there was one but it simply vanishes as soon as the

person turns to any other thing that allows them to pass the time. So, why, in spite of this *prima facie* plausibility of this description of the case, should we say that there must nevertheless be a desire here? I can think of three potential reasons, which I'll describe and reject.

First, you may think that when a creature engaged in an activity is *guided* by a certain end, the creature must desire that end. Wondering, as an activity, *is* guided. We do not wonder haphazardly; when I wonder about etymology, I do not think about my dog. The wondering seems to have a *point*: in wondering, we look into plausible answers to our question, and when we rule them out, we don't keep thinking about them. So wondering really does seem to be guided by the end of coming to know the answer. So *if* an end that guides our activities must be desired, we will have the relevant desire.

However, the guidance–desire link is simply false. Many animal activities are guided by ends that the animals don't explicitly represent to themselves in desire. Playing, for example, might teach cubs how to be good hunters, but they don't play with the desire of being a good hunter later. When I say the play is *guided* by the end of being a good hunter, I mean that, for example, the specific forms the play takes will tend over time to make them better hunters, and that forms of play that don't serve that (or other ends guiding the play) will tend not to recur, at least not in further generations.²⁸ An agent's desire for the end of an activity is not the only way the activity can guide that end. Natural-selective processes might have ensured that animals pursue given activities with the end—the *function*—of making them better hunters, etc. On a very rough account of what a function is that I prefer, *S*'s feature *F*'s function is to ϕ just when *F* is there, structured as it is, etc.—*S* has *F*—because it ϕ -s.²⁹ Clearly function needn't involve desire.

Another way this might happen is when an activity is guided by an external agent's—a teacher's—end. The child might practice writing letters with the end of writing their thoughts, even if the child doesn't yet have a conception of what writing even is. Thus the child's activity might be guided by an end that isn't represented by them in desire. A dog's going on a walk in order to relieve himself might also be like this.

²⁸ For a systematic approach to the function of animal play, see Burghardt (2006).

²⁹ For broadly historical conceptions of function, see, e.g., Wright (1976), Millikan (1984), and, somewhat more recently, Godfrey-Smith (1994). Here we likely need a less specifically biological notion of function than Godfrey-Smith, and maybe Millikan, provide, which makes Wright's more general work still relevant. There are non-historical rivals to this way of capturing the notion of a function, by the way, (e.g. Cummins (1975)).

So it's not true that when we engage in an activity guided by an end, we must desire that end. But perhaps wondering is different from, for example, a cub's play that is for teaching them to be good hunters. After all, the cub's play might be *instinctive*, or guided by the adults. But the wonderer guides their own wondering: they gather premises, etc. Perhaps when *we* guide our own activities with respect to some end, we must desire that end.³⁰

Even that's not true, though. A useful case here is games. To play a given sort of game, you may think a person has to want to win. But one can perfectly well play a game without in any way actually wanting to win. They might, for example, merely want to *look* like they want to win. An actor who plays a chess game trying convincingly to *look* like they want to win is still playing a game of chess. The desire to win needn't be present at all. There simply isn't a logical or even nomological connection between self-guidance by an end and a desire for that end.³¹

Wondering is, of course, a mental activity, so being motivated to *look* like you wonder doesn't motivate actually wondering. It's different from playing chess in that way. But one can also be motivated to play chess for a little while—say, just five minutes—even though one is certain that the game cannot conclude with a winner. Here, one guides oneself by an end: in this case, the end is still winning. But the motivating desire is simply to pass the time by playing chess, rather than trying to win. Indeed, if you think for *S* to desire that *p*, it must be that there be some epistemically possible world (for *S*) in which *p* is true, then such a desire will be impossible.³² But even if that's wrong, clearly the desire need not be the person's main motivation in acting. We would find it very strange if, when we ask this person why they're playing chess, they say: "well, because I want to win!". Rather, they'll likely say "just to pass the time."³³ But then why posit the further desire to win at

³⁰ It will be crucial for my own account, presented in Section 4, that the personal way in which we guide our wondering is quite limited; other mechanisms do important guidance in wondering.

³¹ This argument recalls Putnam (1965)'s "super-spartans" objection to logical behaviorism about pain. This argument also refutes a simple kind of dispositionalism about desire; consider, e.g., Stalnaker's (1984): "To desire that *P* is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to bring it about that *P* in a world in which one's beliefs, whatever they are, were true."

³² See, e.g., Heim (1992) for such a view.

³³ Nguyen (2019a,b) makes related points about games on the one hand and aesthetic judgment on the other. Regarding games, we might be what he calls "achievement" players: we may be focused on winning the game, either competitively or not. Or we might be "striving" players, who do try to win when we play but where winning isn't why we play in the first place, but rather simply to enjoy playing the game. And regarding aesthetic judgment, we might make them at all because we want to arrive at correct aesthetic judgments; or we might make them

all? The desire to *play chess to pass the time* explains everything that needs explaining in this case. But this is a motivation available for potential wonderers. And it is the motivation I claim we can easily attribute to the person saying (8).

Here's one last try to make something like WONDER AS DESIRE work. You may think that, when we wonder Q, a desire to know the answer to Q has to be present because otherwise wondering Q would be rationally unintelligible. Of course, since we are sometimes irrational, this doesn't get us anything like full-strength WONDER AS DESIRE, but it does get us to a pretty close fallback position: wonder involves a desire to know whenever the wonder is *rational*. The thought here would be that it would be *irrational* to wonder Q without wanting to know the answer to Q. The *prima facie* argument for this fallback position might be much of the apparent data amassed in Section 2: perhaps we can explain all of it without *reducing* wondering to desiring, but the most natural way to do so would be to tie them together rationally. That would explain why *normally*, wondering involves desire. As we know from explanations in pragmatics³⁴ and economics,³⁵ we often expect one another to be rational in various ways and use facts about what would be rational to explain behavior. So, even if we deny any kind of entailment or constitutive link between wondering and desiring to know, we may still need *some* link that explains why they at least tend to go together—so maybe the link is rational.

To show why we ought to reject even this much weaker position, we need to look much more at the specifics of what activity wondering is. That's what I'll do in Section 4. Then I'll return to the fallback position and show how it isn't necessary; we can see why desires to know the answer would tend to go with wondering regardless of any rational link.

because it is an enriching, valuable thing to engage with art objects, etc., in a way that is somehow disciplined and constrained by the goal of arriving at correct, good, informed, etc. aesthetic judgments. Here I suggest wondering is similar: sometimes we wonder about a question not because we care at all about what the answer to that specific question is, but simply to wonder about it. Still, it's not wondering, and not rewarding in the way wondering is, unless it's constrained by mechanisms that guide us to correct, rationalized, etc. beliefs about the things we wonder about. I should say, at certain points Nguyen (tentatively) equates having an end, even this kind of end in a striving game, with desiring that end. See, e.g., his discussion of Millgram (1997) at Nguyen (2019b, page 452). It's important for me that we can be constrained by ends without really wanting them, as in processes like wondering.

³⁴ See, of course, the tradition inaugurated in Grice (1975).

³⁵ See, e.g., Roth (1996).

4. What We Do When We Wonder Q

In Section 3, I argued that wondering is an activity; wonder, it seems to me, is not actually an attitude. But it does *involve* attitudes, both as aims and as part of the activity itself. In this section I'll elaborate on that. Specifically, I'll present an account of wondering that I think captures the phenomenon well. Ultimately, though, I am not claiming it is definitely correct. That is in part because empirical work needs to be done to have any confidence in it, and it also needs to be subjected to much more philosophical scrutiny as well. I present my account only as plausible and compatible with there being no desire whatsoever to know the answer to what one wonders. Along the way, I'll say how wondering differs from somewhat similar activities, namely mind-wandering and inquiring.

To fix ideas, suppose a person sees a dog in front of them and they wonder what breed she is (suppose they're told she belongs to some specific breed). While this person wonders, they will attend to many different propositions. That is part of what wondering is, on my view. Which propositions? Well, lots of them, but some will be special: these propositions that might answer the person's question, that is, answer it *for them*. A proposition *answers* a person's question if it would be irrational for a person to both have the question and be consciously certain that the proposition is the question's answer. For example, that that dog is a Siberian husky might answer my question because it would be irrational for me to both have the question of what breed the dog is *while* being consciously certain that that is the answer to my question.

Some quick comments on this explication of 'might answer the person's question' are in order. First, this is a sufficient, not a necessary condition. That's because I've made use of an apparently heavy-duty doxastic state, being certain. Perhaps we are certain of very few things, or ought to be certain of very few things. This depends on a lot of tricky issues in the philosophy of mind and in epistemology. Some people think belief is credence one (and mitigate the strangeness with a contextualist semantics for key terms³⁶) and some think certainty isn't all that demanding of a mental state.³⁷ The exact way these issues ought to be resolved doesn't concern me, however,

³⁶ I have in mind, e.g., Clarke (2013). But there are those who think that belief, far from being credence one, is *weak*, i.e., compatible with credences under 0.5. See, e.g., Hawthorne et al. (2016).

³⁷ See, e.g., Beddor (2020).

since a sufficient condition suffices for my purposes. If the necessary attitude isn't certainty but belief, nothing I say would be affected.³⁸

Second, the condition is sufficient only for *full* answers, not for partial ones. p is a partial answer to Q just in case it entails the negation of at least one complete answer to Q . So “what breed of dog is that?” has as a complete answer “it’s a Siberian husky” and as a partial answer “it’s a working dog”.

Third, the condition is meant to be fairly internalist, since I’m trying to describe some psychology. It may be that knowledge is some kind of norm for having a question, such that one must have the question Q only if one doesn't know the (or a) full answer to Q .³⁹ But it can be irrational to have a given question even when one doesn't know the answer. In fact, to cover my bases I've not only required certainty in the sufficient condition, as per the first point of clarification, but also conscious awareness of that certainty.

So, on my account, when a person wonders Q , they attend to Q 's potential answers. Now it's important to say more about what this attending consists in, because there are many ways to attend to propositions. For example, when one's mind wanders, one may have many “thoughts” run through one's stream of consciousness, many of which might be unendorsed and not at all believed.⁴⁰ Wondering is different from mind-wandering at least in that wondering is *guided*: when a person wonders Q , they tend to do so in a way that leaves them better off with respect to some of Q 's potential answers. Mind-wandering might sometimes do this, but not in general. Part of the difference is that the attention involved in mind-wandering needn't be *evaluative*. When the wonderer attends to different answers, they *consider* those answers. The answers don't simply cross their minds, but rather the wonderer might deduce consequences—entailments or merely *likely* consequences—from them, and test those consequences against their other beliefs and thereby the answer they're considering. As I use the term, when one *considers* p , one entertains p in an evaluative way, that is, in a way that tests it for truth or at least plausibility.⁴¹

³⁸ For something like that view when it comes to *inquiring*, a very closely-related activity to wondering, see Friedman (2019).

³⁹ At least applied to the speech act of *asking*, which plausibly expresses having a question, see, e.g., Whitcomb (2017).

⁴⁰ For this use of ‘thought’, see, e.g., Davis (2003). For a related concept, see Kriegel's (2013) characterization of entertaining. And for the idea of mind-wandering as (sometimes purposive) unguided attentional thought (in the above sense), see Irving (2016).

⁴¹ This roughly tracks Kriegel's (2013) characterization of considering, but with one potential difference: his is tied to a specific sort of “engaged” phenomenology, whereas I point to a broadly functional differentiating feature.

So, to recap so far, when one wonders *Q*, one considers “sufficiently many” potential answers to *Q*. We shouldn’t, after all, require a person go through every potential answer, but just enough of them. It is vague how many is sufficiently many, but that is vagueness in the concept. But that condition is not sufficient for someone to be wondering. In wondering, the answers must be considered *as* answers to *Q*. That is, the given propositions must be considered under a mode of presentation of being an answer to the given question. This is easiest to conceive of linguistically, but presumably if animals are curious, as philosophers and cognitive psychologists suppose, the modes of presentation needn’t be linguistic. Regardless of exactly how it works, this qualification is necessary because someone who considers three propositions that in fact are the potential answers for them to some question *Q* needn’t be wondering *Q* at all, but just thinking about what seems to them to be relatively unrelated subject-matters. (Consider, e.g., the four propositions <Hakeem will/won’t be at Evelyn’s party on Saturday> and <Lev will/won’t be at Evelyn’s party on Saturday>; I might be wondering, of *each of them*, whether they’ll be at Evelyn’s party, even though I’m not at all wondering whether the two friends I’ve talked to most recently will be at Evelyn’s party on Saturday.)

So, when one wonders *Q*, one considers sufficiently many potential answers to *Q as* potential answers to *Q*. Even this isn’t sufficient. First, we need to add that the wondering will terminate when the person is consciously certain of a potential answer that it is the complete and exhaustive answer to the question. But second, notice that I may consider the propositions in a completely epistemically unhelpful way. For example, I may devote all my attention to the potential answers I think least plausible. Or I may flit from potential answer to potential answer, without stopping long enough to consider any one of them at all thoroughly. Much of the specific way my wondering unfolds isn’t under my specific control: different potential answers occur to me, and very often the likelier I find a potential answer, the likelier I will be to consider it while I wonder. The specific ways that the considering happens will be at least approximately optimized for arriving at an epistemically good answer, given the person’s beliefs.

A great number of our everyday activities are like this. We may decide to run, for example, and we may choose both where to run and how fast, but there are a million little decisions about the specifics we don’t choose, not at the person-level anyway. But still our gait optimizes for all sorts of things, such as energy efficiency. A person who’s running needn’t themselves *want* to run in an energy-efficient way; and of course, it’s very possible to choose

to run in energy-inefficient ways. There are mechanisms in the runner that, when not explicitly overridden, simply take over. Their function is to make the running energy efficient. Though running is an activity, and in these cases though it is energy efficient, the runner needn't ever want to run in an energy-efficient way or represent it to themselves as good.

I claim a similar thing happens with wondering. We can choose to wonder about a question, and spend five minutes or an hour or a couple days doing it. But the specifics of how the wondering will work will be decided by mechanisms whose function is to leave the wonderer epistemically better off with respect to their beliefs about the answers. By 'epistemically better off', I mean 'more reasonable, more supported by the evidence, more accurate, etc.' Thus, the answers that come to mind will tend to be the ones I find antecedently more plausible, and the time I spend on them will tend to be enough to make further progress in assessing their plausibility.

This, then, is my own proposal:

WONDERING AS STRUCTURED CONSIDERING. S wonders Q =⁴² 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 .

While I've already explained and motivated each piece of this account, the second part of my argument is just that this account satisfies all the desiderata on an account that I arrived at in earlier parts of the chapter. Most importantly, this account vindicates the thought that a desire to know the answer will *normally* be present, but *need not be*. Insofar as we think non-human animals and very young humans can wonder, that is a huge advantage.

First, why is the desire to know the answer *normally* present when one wonders? Well, considering in this structured way is something that we can get ourselves to do. It's like running in an energy-efficient way: we can choose to run, and unless we override some default mechanisms we have, we just *will* run in a (relatively) energy-efficient way. But when we do take

⁴² In using '=' here, I mean that to wonder *just is* to consider in this way. I am not making a claim of pure conceptual analysis or of grounding. (Though I think those variants of my proposal here are well worth exploring.)

up considering a question in this way, we typically won't be unaware that we'll often end up with better beliefs about the question than if we don't. That means that a completely normal motivation for doing so will be that we want to know the answer to the question. Even if considering the different answers in this way by itself won't at all likely get us to learn the answer, likely it'll put us in a much better position eventually to come to know the answer, since we will have a much more definite sense of the different potential answers' relative plausibilities, the evidence we already have for each of them, etc. This, incidentally, is why wondering is different from inquiring, though they are both in some sense activities that aim at answering a question we have. Wondering is constituted by *considering*; it is no part of wondering that you gather new evidence, for example. Wondering is often the first chunk of inquiring (though it will likely recur throughout the process of inquiring into a question, if the question is at all difficult to answer and interest in doing so persists). Wondering is not *a priori* but "*armchair*": in wondering, we use what we already know and think.⁴³ We can want to run somewhere in the normal way without at all caring about energy efficiency—in fact, given that we now use it to burn off excess calories, perhaps that's the most common situation now, at least in wealthy places—but at least for most of history the choice to run *would* be accompanied by the desire to move quickly in an efficient way. (Perhaps the exact way the desire would be articulated would be different.) Often, an activity's having some function *does* figure into our motives for engaging in the activity. Our expectations can be shaped by knowing that.

Thus, we can explain the strangeness of (12):

- (12) ??I wonder who will win the election this year, but I in no way want to know who will.

We expect the motivation to wonder to be that the person wants to know who will win; they disclaim this motivation but don't provide any alternative motivation. Thus it sounds strange. Compare the strangeness of:

- (24) ??I want a piece of chocolate cake. But I don't want to eat it.

⁴³ For this conception of "armchair" cognition, see Nolan (2015).

This, too, sounds strange. But it will sound perfectly good if the person explains that they want to take pictures of it for an art project. That's why (23) sounds fine. The cases are entirely analogous.

There are other reasons beyond (8) why it looked like a desire to know had to be somehow involved in wondering. To capture some of these, we need only the specific account in *WONDERING AS STRUCTURED CONSIDERING*. I had said that the wonderer is trying to *do* something, namely figure out the answer to the given question. My account delivers that, given the mechanisms that guide the wondering. And because considering propositions involves attending to them, we also secure the attentional aspect I associated with desire before, in fact (as I said) that “wondering seems to *be* an attentional phenomenon”.

Finally, wondering is, like desire, hedonically laden: it can be pleasant, especially when we hit on the answer, and it can be aversive, for example when our reasons for wondering worry us. I myself have appealed to that in crucial places in my discussion, in order to display motivations for wondering that don't somehow reduce to wanting to know the answer to the given question. But this doesn't mean any *specific* desire is involved; lots of activities are pleasant that can be motivated by many distinct ends. Walking, for example, is pleasant, and I can be motivated to walk in many different ways, including by the very pleasantness of walking. Similarly, wondering can, itself, be pleasant (or unpleasant, depending on the circumstances), just as thinking things through can often be pleasant.⁴⁴

In all these ways, then, the account captures what seemed to support *WONDER AS DESIRE*. It also has distinct advantages over it. First, on that account, wondering is an *activity*, something that we do and that can take time; this is in stark contrast to desiring, which has the marks of a state. Second, the account is compatible with wondering being possible for creatures without the rich metacognitive capacities that might be required for a creature to desire to know the answer to a given question, for example non-human animals and small children. Just as a creature whose gait is somehow optimized for energy efficiency needn't represent energy efficiency to themselves as an end, so, too, the wonderer needn't represent coming to know an

⁴⁴ You may wonder, by the way, why wondering is different from thinking things through. Actually I think my account makes wondering a *kind* of thinking things through. But as I understand this other activity, it does not centrally involve a question or the consideration of multiple potential answers to it. When I think things through, I may just reason through consequences. So wondering isn't the *same* as thinking things through, but it does seem to be a kind of it.

answer as an end, either. The mechanisms involved in wondering can deliver epistemically better doxastic states (including sometimes knowledge) of the answer(s) to the wonderer's questions without the wonderer ever explicitly representing their own mental states desideratively.

All this means there is simply no need for the view that, for some reason, for someone's wondering *Q* to be rational, they must want to know the answer to *Q*. Wondering is perfectly intelligible, on this proposal, without such a desire, so long as there are other things one might get from the wondering, for example fun. Given that fact, even the fallback position about the presence of a desire to know the answer in the wonderer is unmotivated. I suggest we reject it.

Of course, none of this conclusively establishes *WONDERING AS STRUCTURED CONSIDERING*. As I said, to do that would require far more empirical investigation. I claim only that an account *like* this recovers a lot of the intuitive features of wondering, without requiring implausible empirical commitments (like rich metacognitive capacities in animals). It shows, in other words, that we can get a long way toward understanding the phenomenon without ever thinking it necessarily involves a desire to know the answer.

5. Conclusion

In concluding, there are two further issues I would like to point to as worth following up on. The first is the role of phenomenology in wonder. The statement of *WONDERING AS STRUCTURED CONSIDERING* does not mention any particular phenomenology; according to it, depending exactly on what considering requires, perhaps phenomenal zombies could wonder. This may seem wrong. That is, you may think that wondering comes with a special phenomenology. After all, I think it's pretty undeniable there's something wonder feels like; "a sense of wonder came over me" communicates something to you about how I'm feeling. I didn't include this phenomenology anywhere in my proposal, though, because I doubt it is always or even especially commonly a part of our wondering. When you think of all the many and varied circumstances in which you attribute wonder to yourself, I suspect you'll notice that only rarely do you feel that special feeling. Ultimately, though, there's still the question of what, exactly, that feeling is, where it comes from, and why it does seem to have something special to do with wonder. I have some speculative thoughts on that front, but I won't air them here. It really is best left for other work on the subject.

Second, I, personally, would like better to understand the relation between wonder and philosophy, if such there really is. Perhaps *part of* that potential connection is that on the proposal here wondering is something you do from the armchair. But I suspect that is really only the beginning of the connection. It might turn out that philosophy is just one area in which answers are particularly hard to come by to questions by which we (perhaps just we philosophers) are particularly captivated. This question itself, of the connection between philosophy and wonder remains difficult to evaluate, but hopefully a clearer conception of wonder of the kind I hope to have provided will help.⁴⁵

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