

# Entertaining as a Propositional Attitude

Contemporary philosophy of mind tends to theorize about the propositional attitudes primarily in terms of belief and desire. But there is a propositional attitude, sometimes called 'entertaining,' that seems to resist analysis in terms of belief and desire, and has been thought at other times and places (notably, in late nineteenth-century Austrian philosophy) to be more *fundamental* than belief and desire. Whether or not we accept the fundamentality of entertaining, it certainly seems to be an attitude ill understood in contemporary philosophy of mind. The purpose of this paper is to make first steps – very first steps – toward a more mature understanding of entertaining.

In inquiring into the nature of entertaining, we would do well to start by considering the variety of attitudes of entertaining. These include:

- Entertaining that  $p$
- Entertaining the proposition that  $p$
- Entertaining the thought that  $p$
- Entertaining the possibility that  $p$
- Entertaining an idea
- Entertaining an image

I will focus on entertaining a proposition, which is arguably the most basic of these attitudes (though I will not argue for this here).<sup>1</sup>

Even within this limited target, there is a distinction to be drawn between two varieties. There is a kind of entertaining of  $p$  that is done with a view to a certain cognitive achievement, namely, the establishment of some credence in  $p$ . We often entertain that  $p$  in the context of trying to figure out the plausibility of  $p$ , that is, whether and to what extent we should believe that  $p$ . On the other hand, there is

another kind of entertaining that is purely contemplative, done with no doxastic business or concern (let alone cognitive achievement) in mind. My claim is that there is a noticeable, if ever so subtle, phenomenological difference between these two kinds of entertaining. The former variety involves a phenomenological element of doxastic or epistemic engagement with the proposition that  $p$ , which element is entirely lacking from the latter variety. With that in mind, let us call the former variety *engaged* entertaining and the latter *disengaged* entertaining.

With some savagery to ordinary language, we may say that entertaining  $p$  in the engaged mode is a matter of *considering*  $p$ , while entertaining  $p$  in the disengaged mode is a matter of *contemplating*  $p$ . Thus the engaged/disengaged distinction corresponds to a consideration/contemplation distinction. I say 'with some savagery' because in truth we can very well use 'contemplating' to describe an engaged episode of entertaining. Nonetheless, my sense is that it would be fair to remark that the engaged usage belongs relatively more on the fringe of the range of ordinary use of 'contemplating' but is relatively more central to, closer to the core of, the ordinary use of 'entertaining.'

There is no question that there is a difference in the functional role of consideration and contemplation, in light of the cognitive achievement targeted by, and epistemic concern involved in, the one but not the other. I claim, however, that there is also a phenomenological difference between the two: it simply *feels* different to entertain  $p$  with a view to settling on what one's doxastic attitude toward  $p$  should be and to entertain  $p$  without any doxastic goal in mind.

In doing so, I am assuming, of course, that we can speak intelligibly of a phenomenology proper to purely intellectual or cognitive mental states, such as entertaining a proposition. I am assuming, that is, the existence of (what has come to be called) *cognitive phenomenology* (Pitt 2004). As I have argued for this elsewhere (Author 2003, Forthcoming), I am not going to do so here.<sup>2</sup> Instead, here I assume cognitive phenomenology and use it as a tool for understanding the cognitive

attitude of entertaining. In particular, there are two phenomenological observations I wish to make.

The first concerns *phenomenal intensity*. It seems phenomenologically manifest that conscious experiences vary in their phenomenal intensity – in how vividly they are present to consciousness, so to speak – and can even differ with each other along no other dimension but that of phenomenal intensity. When we discuss *sensory* conscious experiences, it is important to distinguish this kind of phenomenal intensity from a more straightforward type of sensory intensity. Thus, the phenomenal intensity of a visual experience of red is *not* a matter of the degree of brightness or saturation of the red experienced. Visual experiences of red can vary independently along the dimensions of experienced brightness and saturation and the dimension of phenomenal intensity/vivacity, which has to do rather with the clarity and alertness with which they are present to consciousness.<sup>3</sup> My claim is that this is true of episodes of entertaining as well: one can entertain that *p* more vividly or less vividly, in a phenomenal sense of ‘vividly,’ such that the episodes differ in nothing but their phenomenal intensity. Thus, I can at one moment consciously entertain the proposition that *p* with a certain degree of phenomenal intensity, and the next moment, perhaps after a sip of espresso or a bite of raw chocolate, suddenly entertain the proposition with noticeably greater phenomenal intensity or vivacity.

The second phenomenological observation I would like to make in connection with entertaining concerns *presentational phenomenology*. Chudnoff (forthcoming) argues that certain purely intellectual states, such as *intuitions*, have this commonality with perceptual states, that they boast (what he calls) a presentational phenomenology. The presentational phenomenology of perceptual states consists in the fact that whenever one perceives that something is the case, one is also perceptually aware, or is presented with, a certain *item*. For example, I can see that it is getting late by being aware of (presented with) sunset. So although my perceptual state of seeing that it is getting late has a propositional content, it is mediated by, or at least involves, a sort of non-propositional item-awareness. This is

the presentational phenomenology of perception. Chudnoff argues that intuitions have a similar feature: when one intuits that  $p$ , there is always some abstract object  $O$ , such that intuiting that  $p$  involves being aware of (presented with)  $O$ .<sup>4</sup>

I do not necessarily wish to subscribe to every aspect of Chudnoff's account. It is not clear to me, for example, that the item one is aware of must be construed as an abstract object.<sup>5</sup> But the core of the phenomenological claim before us is that propositional intuition is mediated by, or at least typically involves, a form of intellectual item-awareness. It seems to me that this is often the case with entertaining as well – perhaps more clearly so with the disengaged, contemplative variety. Thus, when I consider the phenomenology of an arbitrary episode of entertaining that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, I find that it is quite complex. It involves, for example, a visual image of the US Capitol building in Washington and an auditory image of the word 'establishment' in silent speech. In addition, however, it seems to involve a purely intellectual awareness of certain *items*, namely, the natures or essences of religion, of law, and of the US Congress. This purely intellectual item-awareness is the presentational phenomenology of entertaining.

If all this is right, then while entertaining that  $p$  is itself a propositional awareness, it typically involves in its phenomenology an element of item-awareness. I think it is natural to construe the item-awareness involved in entertaining as *apprehending*. The traditional philosophical notion of apprehending seems to me to comport well with the kind of theoretical role that the notion of item-awareness plays in the present phenomenological analysis of entertaining (inspired by Chudnoff's phenomenological analysis of intuition). Thus the following strikes me as a plausible thesis about entertaining: for any subject  $S$  and proposition  $p$ , if  $S$  entertains that  $p$ , then there are items  $O_1, \dots, O_n$ , such that  $S$  apprehends  $O_1, \dots, O_n$ . Perhaps this is too strong, and we should replace 'for any' with 'for most.' But the conceptual connection between entertaining and apprehending should be clear.

Where are we? I have suggested that considering is the engaged mode of entertaining a proposition and contemplating its disengaged mode, and that apprehending is the presentational component of entertaining. Next, let me turn to conceptual connections between entertaining and a more remote circle of notions, including thinking, judging, believing, and supposing.

What is the relation between episodes of entertaining and episodes of thinking (i.e., thoughts)? To answer this question, it is important to distinguish between thinking-that and thinking-of. Thinking that *p* is distinct from entertaining, in that it involves full-blooded doxastic commitment. This is not the minor doxastic engagement involved in *considering p*; it is the much more involved state of considering *and affirming* that *p*. Thinking-of, however, is much more intimately connected with entertaining. Thinking of *a* being F plausibly involves some kind of doxastic commitment – perhaps thinking of *a* being F is the same as thinking that *a* is F. But one can also just think of *a*, or of F, and such episodes of thinking-of need not be doxastically committed. Thus one can think of *a* or think of F *without* thereby thinking that *a* exists or that F is instantiated. Thinking of *a* and thinking of F therefore look closely tied to apprehending *a* and apprehending F. Nonetheless, arguably there is also an important difference here, insofar as apprehending involves essentially, whereas thinking of *a* or F does *not* involve essentially (though it may involve incidentally), cognitive contact with the *nature* or *essence* of *a* or F. One can think of friendship without being aware of (anything one takes to be) the nature of friendship, but in apprehending friendship one is necessarily aware of (something one takes to be) the nature of friendship.

In the case of thinking-that, there is a familiar and important distinction to draw between an occurrent variety and a standing variety. Standing thinking-that is essentially belief: to be in a standing state that can be described as thinking that *p*, it is necessary and sufficient that one believe that *p*. In saying that belief is sufficient for *standing* thinking-that, I am assuming, with others (e.g., Crane 2001 Ch.4), that belief is always a standing state, and that the occurrent version of the same state

(that is, the way the standing state manifests itself as occurrent) is more accurately described as a thought, not as a belief.

Unlike standing thinking-that, *occurrent* thinking-that is a mental *act* of sorts. It is, more precisely an act of (or an act centrally involving) *predication*. To occurrently think that *a* is F is to perform a mental act of predicating F of *a*. This is what is sometimes referred to as *judging*. On the picture I am proposing, then, there are two kinds of thinking-that: a standing thinking-that, which is one and the same as belief, and an occurrent thinking-that, which is one and the same as judgment.

This discussion may raise the suspicion that we might be able to analyze entertaining in terms of judging. The analysis I have in mind would construe entertaining as a judgment from which the element of affirmation has been removed. The predication of F of *a* is bracketed, as it were, so that one 'withholds judgment,' with the result that one is merely entertaining that *a* is F. In a slogan, entertaining equals judging minus affirming.

This would be an elegant analysis, insofar as the notions of judging and predicating are relatively well understood, but there are several problems with it. First of all, the account seems unfaithful to the phenomenology of intellectual life. Entertaining does not *feel* like an episode of judging in which an element (i.e., predication) has been bracketed. When I examine an episode of entertaining, it does not seem *structured* in this way. In fact, it is the attitude of judging that seems structured, indeed plausibly structured as a neutral state of entertaining with an overlay of affirmation. Thus for my part, I have the impression that entertaining is phenomenologically prior to judging, rather than the other way round, where phenomenological priority of A over B is a matter of B displaying a certain structure involving A but not conversely. Put simply, my point is that the slogan 'entertaining equals judging minus affirming' is if anything logically on a par with a corresponding slogan, 'judging equals entertaining plus affirming,' but the latter also has the advantage of reflecting the phenomenological appearances more accurately. I recognize, however, that proclamations about appearances of phenomenological

priority are hard to assess and may not resonate with the reader as much as they do with me.

Secondly, however, even if we set aside the issue of phenomenological priority, and consider 'judging minus affirming' as a mere *description* of entertaining (a description, moreover, that is silent on the issue of primacy), there are further problems. Arguably, at most we could hope it would be an accurate description of *considering*, the engaged variety of entertaining. For it suggests a mental activity in which the plausibility of the proposition entertained is in the subject's sights: the subject's potential doxastic commitment to the proposition is an issue. After all, on the proposal discussed entertaining is a matter of withholding judgment, but withholding judgment is not doxastically neutral – it involves withdrawing or retracting affirmation, which is an epistemically significant act. It puts the issue of affirmation of the table, so to speak. One does not withhold judgment where the issue of what judgment to make is not even an issue. By contrast, in contemplating (i.e., entertaining in the disengaged mode) affirmation does not enter the picture – it is neither asserted nor withdrawn, but simply absent. This again recommends treating entertaining as (in the relevant respect) simple rather than structured. Although I will not consider that here, the descriptor 'judging minus affirming' might be quite fit for *doubting* instead of entertaining.

Thirdly, even if 'judging minus affirming' were a correct *description* of what is involved in entertaining, this would not distinguish entertaining from other types of attitude, of which it would be a correct description as well. Consider *supposing* that *a* is F. Supposing that *a* is F is also a cognitive state that involves no commitment to the truth of *a* being F. To suppose that *a* is F, a subject need not predicate F of *a* and can perfectly well withhold judgment on whether *a* is F. Thus supposing would also be judging minus affirming. Yet supposing and entertaining are very different. The former involves a phenomenology of pretend-affirmation, or mock predication, that is entirely lacking from entertaining (whether contemplating or considering).

In conclusion, far from entertaining being analyzable in terms of judging, it would seem that judging – occurrent thinking-that – should be analyzed in terms of entertaining. Specifically, judging is engaged entertaining with an overlay of affirmation or predication. To judge that *a* is F is to consider the proposition that *a* is F and predicate F of *a*. (Note well, however: this is not intended as a chronological description of judgment – there need not be a temporally extended process in which one first considers and later affirms.) Meanwhile, supposing can be analyzed as engaged entertaining with an overlay of mock predication (which is not the same as, but is more than, a mock act of predication!).

If this is right, then both judging and supposing can be analyzed in terms of entertaining. This leaves the question of whether believing could also be analyzed in terms of entertaining. As we saw, believing is standing/tacit thinking-that, which is distinct from occurrent thinking-that. However, there are important connections between occurrent and standing thinking-that, so if the latter could be analyzed in terms of the former, then given that the former can be analyzed in terms of entertaining, an analysis of belief in terms of entertaining would become available.

Recently, several authors have indeed suggested an analysis of standing belief in terms occurrent, conscious judging. Searle (1992 Ch.7) has argued that every tacit, unconscious mental state must be potentially conscious, which may raise the suspicion that unconscious mental states might be analyzable as nothing but dispositions to enter conscious states. Applied to the belief, the analysis would be that believing that *p* is just being disposed to consciously judge that *p*. This analysis is explicitly asserted, and defended in a sustained manner, by Smithies (Ms). Smithies himself supports the analysis by consideration of the appropriateness of epistemic-normative evaluation of judgment and belief, in a discussion too nuanced to summarize here. For my part, I find the analysis plausible for a separate reason, which may be summarized as follows. Some philosophers (e.g., Audi 1994) have argued that there are no *dispositional* beliefs, only *dispositions to believe*, on the grounds that the explanatory work the former are posited to carry out can be perfectly well carried out, and more parsimoniously, by the latter. This claim can be



restated, once one denies that beliefs are ever occurrent, into the claim that there is no theoretical pressure whatsoever to posit dispositional beliefs, on top of dispositions to judge, and so standing beliefs should not be understood as dispositional beliefs but rather as dispositions to judge.

Combining this analysis of belief in terms of judgment with the above analysis of judgment in term of entertaining, we obtain an intriguing analysis of belief in terms of entertaining. The analysis is this: a subject *S* believes that *a* is *F* iff *S* is disposed to entertain that *a* is *F* and predicate *F* of *a*. This must be understood not as claiming that *S* has both a disposition to entertain and a disposition of predicate, but rather as claiming that *S* has a single disposition to entertain-and-predicate. To make this point explicit, we may put the analysis as follows: a subject *S* believes that *a* is *F* iff *S* is disposed to entertain and affirm that *a* is *F*. This analysis is intriguing in that it reveals quite a bit of structure in the notion of belief, which is often taken to be fundamental in philosophy of mind. More on this below. In addition to be intriguing, however, the analysis strikes me also as fundamentally plausible. This is just a result of the individual plausibility of the analysis of belief in terms of judgment, which as we saw is supported by considerations of explanatory parsimony, and of judgment in terms of entertaining, which as we saw is supported by a battery of considerations (including, but not only, having to do with phenomenological priority).

The result here is a picture in which thinking, judging, believing, and supposing are all analyzed in terms of the more fundamental attitude of entertaining. This picture runs counter to the functionalist-representationalist orthodoxy on the propositional attitudes, which has dominated philosophy of mind for over a generation. While I am not entirely confident that the alternative, entertaining-based picture is correct, it does seem to me at least as plausible as the orthodoxy. And the picture has great impact on our conception of the propositional attitudes.

## References

- Audi, R. 1994. 'Dispositional Beliefs and Dispositions to Believe.' *Noûs* 28: 419-434.
- Chudnoff, E. Forthcoming. 'What Intuitions are like.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- Crane, T. 2001. *Elements of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Masrour, F. Forthcoming. 'The Phenomenology of Objectivity.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- Pitt, D. 2004. 'The Phenomenology of Cognition; or *What Is It Like to Think that P?*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69: 1-36.
- Russell, B. 1910. 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11: 108-128.
- Searle, J.R. 1992. *The Rediscovery of Mind*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Smithies, D. Ms. 'The Mental Lives of Zombies.'

---

<sup>1</sup> This is argued for in a longer version of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Let me only make the following comment: what convinces me beyond doubt that there is such a thing as cognitive phenomenology is the simple observation that my inner life would be greatly impoverished, compared to what it is actually like, if there was no such thing as cognitive phenomenology. As Galen Strawson once put it to me, without cognitive phenomenology life would be *boring*.

<sup>3</sup> This can be seen most clearly by comparing visual perceptual experiences and visual after-images in which the brightness and saturation are the same but the phenomenal intensity is different. For a discussion relevant to this, see Masrour forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> More specifically, O is typically an essence of some property or particular, and one's awareness of it is akin to Russell's (1910) notion of acquaintance with a universal. This is the presentational phenomenology of intuition. Naturally, not any abstract object would do. There needs to be a certain intimate connection between O and *p*.

<sup>5</sup> Consider a simple proposition of the form  $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ , and the view that intuiting that *a* is F involves item-awareness of F-ness and *a*-hood, that is, of the essence or nature of the property of being F and of the particular *a*. There are well-known accounts of properties as abstract universals and essences as abstract objects. But there are also coherent nominalist accounts of properties and accounts of individual and property essences in terms of identity conditions or clusters of properties (again, potentially nominalistically construed). My point is not that these are *good* accounts of properties and essences; merely that the

---

phenomenology of intuition does not seem to take a stand on whether such accounts are good or not. It is thus silent on the metaphysics of properties and essences. The phenomenology would not have to be proclaimed non-veridical if it turned out that there were no abstract objects. Because of this, I am inclined to say that the presentational phenomenology of intellectual states, such as intuitions, involves awareness or presentation of individual and property essences, but not necessarily awareness or presentation of *abstract* objects.