

Is thinking an action?

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Abstract. I argue that entertaining a proposition is not an action. Such events do not have intentional explanations and cannot be evaluated as rational or not. In these respects they contrast with assertions and compare well with perceptual events. One can control what one thinks by doing something, most familiarly by reciting a sentence. But even then the event of entertaining the proposition is not an action, though it is an event one has caused to happen, much as one might cause oneself to see a book by looking at it. I also discuss how this may support the view that thinking about the world is a source of information about it.

Key words: action inner speech, perception, proposition, thinking

Some linguistic events are actions. Asserting that something is the case, asking whether it is, and supposing that it is are things that we do with language. It is typically up to us what we assert, what questions we ask, and what we suppose. A natural strategy for explaining these events is to cite some of the agent's beliefs, desires and intentions, that is to explain them in the way we explain rational action in general. It might seem that thinking – entertaining a proposition – is also an action. For it may seem natural to take thinking to be a form of inner assertion, like talking to oneself. The main aim of this paper is to argue that this is mistaken, or at least misleading in an important respect. Entertaining a proposition, I will argue, belongs in the same metaphysical category as perception and not as assertion.

Why the issue matters to philosophers

The question whether entertaining a proposition is an action is of philosophical interest for several reasons. First, to adequately understand the nature of our mental life we must first determine its variety. Without a relatively com-

plete catalogue of the kinds of events and states involved in this life no satisfactory account of it is possible. So determining whether thinking is an action is an important preliminary to developing this kind of account. Moreover, given the central place thinking has in our mental and cognitive life it would be surprising if the issue whether thinking is an action had no implications for an account of this life. More specifically, clarifying thought's metaphysical character might help clarify its epistemic one. At the end of the paper I will indicate one respect in which if what I claim is right then thought might belong in the same epistemic category as perception: like perception entertaining thoughts about the world is a form of cognitive access to it.

Focusing on thought may also serve as a novel case study to help clarify just what it is for an event to be an action. According to some, whether an event is an action depends on the kind of explanation it allows, and in particular on whether it can be explained in terms of the agent's beliefs, desires and intentions.¹ Others believe it has more to do with the agent's identification with the event, conceiving of it as her doing, and that it has little to do with its causal history (see Frankfurt 1988b). Still others hold that whether an event is an action depends more on the kind of control the agent has over or during the event, more specifically whether the course of the event is sensitive to the subject's reasons (see Fischer 1994). The place of explanation, identification and control in the concept of an action finds clear focus in the case of entertaining propositions. The case of thinking also raises in a clear form the question of how doing and acting are related. It provides, I will suggest, another case of something we do that is not an action.

I don't intend to decide among these competing analyses, or even provide much insight into them here. There may be some truth in each of them. Perhaps our concept of an action lacks the kind of integrity needed to yield a single analysis. What I will argue is that events of entertaining a proposition cannot always be explained by an agent's beliefs and intentions, can never be evaluated as rational or not, need not be identified by the thinker as her doing, and are not in general within the thinker's control. In these respects thinking belongs in the same metaphysical category as perceptions and not in the same metaphysical category as assertions. What morals we should draw from this about the nature of action I leave to another day.

Why the issue might matter to cognitive scientists

I have discussed what I think makes the issue I want to address interesting to a philosopher. But I think it might also be of interest to cognitive scientists. I

am not a cognitive scientist and what I have to say about what might be of interest to one is mostly speculation. Still, at the not inconsiderable risk of embarrassment, I will mention two points of possible interest.

The first concerns the brain. I will be emphasizing a difference between cases where an agent guides his own thoughts and cases where the thoughts merely occur to him. It would be interesting to know whether this difference corresponds to a difference in what occurs in the agent's brain. The difference is, I will suggest, like the difference between merely seeing a thing and actively looking at it and it would also be interesting to know whether this perceptual difference corresponds to a difference at the level of neural processing and if so whether there are any interesting similarities in the two cases. It would, of course, be very interesting to know whether a single region of the brain is involved in both cases of agent-guided thinking and agent-guided perception. Discovering such a region might help us to understand the neural correlates of agency.

Second, it would also be interesting to know how independent the capacity to entertain a thought is from the capacity to guide one's own thinking. Perhaps there are aphasias that affect an agent's ability to guide her own thinking while leaving intact her ability to entertain thoughts. Developmental studies might also help to answer this question. Since children seem to learn to understand language long before they learn to talk, I would guess that the capacity to entertain thoughts is acquired before the capacity to guide thinking. If this guess is right, it would be interesting to know what the developmental stages are between acquiring the first and acquiring the second capacity. I would also guess that an infant's capacity to see her surroundings is acquired prior to the capacity to guide her perceptions of it. Perhaps the two cases share interesting developmental stages.

Senses of "thought"

Let me start by saying more precisely what kinds of events I want to study. The term "thought", like other attitude terms, is ambiguous in several dimensions. It can mean what one thinks, in the sense of the propositional *content* that one entertains. Or it can mean the event of thinking that proposition, the *entertaining* of it. I want to focus on the events themselves and not so much on their propositional content. There is also a difference between two kinds of events of thinking. One can, for instance, think about George Bush or one can think to oneself that George Bush is a bully. My interest is in the latter kind of event, which we might call "propositional thinkings", since they are

events of entertaining a certain proposition. I take it that one cannot think about, say, George Bush without thinking something in particular about him, but I will not pursue this here.

It is controversial how we should theorize about the contents of thought, some preferring very coarse grained objects such as sets of possibilities and others preferring objects with an internal structure mirroring the syntactic structure of sentences we use to express our thoughts. I want to remain more or less neutral in what follows on just what the best way is to theorize about propositions, in hopes that this will allow us to focus on the events of entertaining them. But it might even be that getting clearer on what it is to entertain a proposition will help decide among competing accounts of what a proposition is. In any event, it is (relatively) uncontroversial that propositions determine a set of possibilities: those with respect to which it is true. So to entertain a proposition is at least to entertain something that determines a set of ways the world might be. Given this, it is natural to say that to entertain a proposition – to think it – is to reflect on or to be presented in thought with some set of possibilities.

Thinking something, in the sense of entertaining a proposition, is to be distinguished from the state of believing it and from the event of judging it to be true. Sometimes when we say what someone thinks we are trying to say what they believe or have judged to be so. In this sense, to say that Lucy thinks that salmon is delicious is to describe her state of belief. But there is also a usage of “thinking” on which it concerns an event of a certain kind, as in “Lucy is thinking to herself that salmon is delicious”. In this sense we are describing, not Lucy’s belief on some topic, but rather what she is then entertaining, what possibilities she is considering. To entertain a proposition one need not have any specific attitude to its truth. I can entertain the proposition that Al Gore is a Republican, though I do not believe it, just as I can entertain the proposition that snow is white, which I do believe. Still, while thinking is in this way independent of belief, much of its importance lies in relation to judgement and belief. Abstractly put, one purpose of thought is to present ways things might be to judgement whose aim is to identify the ways they are. In deciding what to believe or do we need to consider different possibilities and entertaining propositions is a primary means we have to do just that.

Why assertion is an action

As a paradigm example of a linguistic action, consider assertion.² Suppose that Henry asserts that Lucy likes salmon. At least two things about this event

might need to be explained. First, why did Henry make an assertion, as opposed to raising a question or making a supposition? Second, why did he assert that Lucy likes salmon, as opposed to that Lucy likes salmonella? A natural strategy is to answer both questions in terms of Henry's beliefs, intentions and desires. Here is a first approximation. Henry made an assertion because he wanted his audience to come to believe that he has a certain belief (and/or that he is proposing that they have a certain belief), and believed he could effect this by uttering the words he did. The assertion's content is the proposition that Lucy likes salmon because that is the proposition Henry wanted his audience to come to believe he believes (or to believe that he is proposing that they should believe).

This explanation is only approximately correct for two main reasons. First, more detail would have to be given about Henry's attitudes. An adequate explanation would have to mention Henry's beliefs about his audience's expectations and about the linguistic meanings of the words he is using. Second, the explanation could not be wholly restricted to Henry's attitudes. For what one asserts also depends on the meanings of one's words and these are not fixed solely by one's attitudes about them. These points indicate how an adequate explanation would be more complex than the one I gave. But only, I think, in ways that are already familiar from ordinary explanations of non-linguistic acts, where the agent's motives include sophisticated beliefs about other people's expectations, and where she is relying, if only implicitly, on facts, sometimes even conventions, in her environment. To explain why Henry rang Lucy's doorbell we might have to cite beliefs Henry has about Lucy's dispositions to respond to hearing a doorbell, and also facts about (and Henry's beliefs about) the conventional significance of a ringing doorbell. So while a satisfactory explanation would surely be complex, no obvious special difficulty faces the idea that we could explain these aspects of Henry's assertion, and of other linguistic acts, in the way we explain intentional action generally.

One might also hope that Henry's attitudes could explain what made his act an assertion. That is, in addition to explaining *why* he asserted what he did, his attitudes might explain what made his action an assertion as opposed to an asking or a supposing. On such a view, to be an assertion would just be to be an event that is explainable in the way Henry's attitudes explain what he did. Being explainable in this way would be distinctive of being an assertion, part of what makes an event an assertion. It is controversial how this picture should be filled out and, in particular, just which intentions and beliefs would make an event an assertion. Indeed, it is even controversial whether this is the best way to analyse assertion. While this is not the place to decide

this issue, it is worth noting that while the proposal to analyze assertion in this way is not obviously on the wrong track, it would be an obvious mistake to analyze an event of seeing in terms of the seer's attitudes, since (as we will see below) seeings lack intentional explanations.

The fact that this kind of explanation, one that explains in terms of reasons, seems adequate to explain Henry's assertion indicates that his asserting what he did is an action. Other features of it also indicate this. No doubt he would during the event identify with it in the sense of viewing it as his own doing. He would view it as an expression of his own self, and not as something that is merely happening to him. The presence of this kind of identification indicates that the event is an action of his. Moreover, his asserting what he did is under his control at least in the sense that Henry guided its course. This too indicates that his asserting what he did was an action.

Is thinking an action?

Are the features that make assertion an action also present in the case of thought? One might expect so if one viewed thinking as a kind of inner speech or monologue, like talking to oneself. It could not be inner assertion, or at least not straightforwardly so, since it is not clear whose beliefs one would be trying to affect and since one can entertain propositions one does not believe. But it might be thought to be inner speech with a different force. One might object to this account on the grounds that it would not apply to thoughtful but language-less creatures. A similar objection faces the attempt to model belief on dispositions to assert, since many are inclined to hold that dogs and cats have beliefs but lack dispositions to assert. But it is more controversial, I think, whether dogs and cats entertain propositions – whether they reflect on ways things might be – than whether they have beliefs. I am inclined to believe that only a linguistic being could entertain propositions. In any case, since it is clear that paradigm cases of thinkers – ourselves – both entertain propositions and make assertions, it might seem plausible that in that case thinking could be viewed as a kind of inner linguistic action. Nonetheless, I believe this is mistaken.

One reason is that there are cases in which entertaining a proposition is manifestly not an action. In some of these, the agent's beliefs, desires and intentions explain neither the fact that she is entertaining a proposition nor which proposition she is entertaining. In the most familiar cases, one simply allows thoughts to cross one's mind *on their own*, neither directing them nor stopping to reflect on them. Phenomenologically, this is like staring out the car

window at the passing show. One knows that one could direct or stop one's thinking, just as one could redirect one's gaze inside the car, but one does not. One simply allows the thoughts to pass through, unguided. Cases of schizophrenia, where the patient hears voices in her head, are even more striking. A schizophrenic might believe that she cannot stop or guide the thoughts she is having and she may fail to identify with the thinking in the sense of viewing it as not her own doing, as not manifesting her own self. She might view it as alien to her self. In such cases it is clear that entertaining a proposition is not an action. It would make little sense to try to explain Henry's thinking when he is daydreaming or hearing voices by citing his beliefs, desires and plans; his entertainings are not the right kind of event for that. In all of these ways, such cases of thinking contrast with Henry's assertion. In these cases the thinking is an event that simply happens to one, not an action.³

Admittedly, these are fringe cases and not paradigms of thinking. But they do reveal one important thing: the concept of entertaining a proposition cannot be analyzed in the way some have hoped to analyze the concept of assertion. It might be that to be an assertion just is to be an event with a certain kind of intentional explanation. But since some events of entertaining a proposition do not admit of intentional explanation, it cannot be that to be an entertaining of a proposition just is to be an event with a certain intentional explanation. For daydreaming Henry and schizophrenic George entertain propositions even though these events cannot be explained by their beliefs, desires and intentions. So there is no hope of analyzing the concept of entertaining a proposition in terms of the thinker's beliefs and desires. In this respect, events of entertaining a proposition are like perceptual events. To be a seeing is not to be an event with a certain kind of intentional explanation, since seeings lack intentional explanations. It makes no sense to say that George saw the books on the table because he wanted to and believed he could.

One might think that events of entertaining a proposition could be analyzed, if not in terms of the thinker's intentions and beliefs, at least in terms of her knowledge. On one version of this view, to entertain a proposition just is to know its truth conditions, to know with respect to which conditions it would be true. I am skeptical of this view. If the proposed knowledge requires justified true belief, then this view seems to exaggerate the intellectual sophistication needed to entertain propositions, since children and unsophisticates can entertain propositions without having justified true beliefs about the semantic properties of those propositions, or of events of entertaining them. In my view, events of entertaining a proposition are cognitively more basic than such beliefs and knowledge (see Burge 1974; Hunter 2001; Soames 1989). If, on the other hand, the knowledge in question does not require justified true be-

lief, then this kind of analysis would seem to apply to perception as well: to have a perceptual experience would then be to know under what conditions one's experience is veridical. In this case, the proposal would not affect my main point, which is that events of entertaining a proposition belong in the same metaphysical category as perceptual events. So while an adequate discussion of this proposal is best postponed, I doubt that its outcome would affect my present point.

Intermediate cases of thinking

I have considered cases where one entertains a proposition without doing anything. But in paradigm cases one entertains a proposition by reciting (silently or out loud) a sentence. Are these actions? I believe that even in these cases they are not actions. It is worth noting, as a preliminary, that even if events of entertaining a proposition are sometimes things we do, it does not follow from this alone that they are then acts we perform. For some things we do are not acts. We do what we make happen, even when what we make happen is not an action we perform. Though discovering America is something Columbus did, it is not clear that it was an action he performed, as opposed to a result of actions he performed. So, from the fact that entertaining a proposition is sometimes something we do it does not follow that it is then an action we perform. It might instead be, in those cases, something we achieve. Still, this distinction is a subtle one, and developing it would take me too far afield.⁴ Instead, I will address the paradigm cases directly.

But before this, it is helpful to consider intermediate cases where although one does something in order to entertain a proposition one does not guide one's thinking. Reading a text and listening to someone speak are like this. For while there is something one is doing in these cases the event of entertaining the proposition is not itself an action. To see this it helps to consider the distinction, among perceptual events, between looking and seeing. Looking is a kind of action: one guides where one's gaze is directed. It is typically up to us whether to look at the desk or over to the window. But the seeing is not an action. Whether we see books when we look at the table is not under our guidance (except in the sense that we can determine how things look by controlling how they are; e.g., by placing books on the table). Whether we see books depends, in part anyway, on whether there are books on the table. Looking at the books is an action – seeing them is not. This difference is reflected in the kinds of explanations we would offer of the two events. Henry looked at the table because he wanted to find his copy of *Sense and Sensibilia* and he be-

lieved it was likely there. And we can evaluate his looking as irrational or not, as in line with his intentions and plans: given his goals and beliefs, looking at the table was reasonable. All of this suggests that his looking at the table is an action. But none of it explains why he saw the book. It makes little sense to say that he saw the book because he wanted to find it. Rather, he saw the book because it was there and his perceptual faculties were functioning normally. We cannot evaluate his seeing the book as rational or irrational, as in keeping with his plans and ambitions. His seeing the book is not an action, even if his looking at it is.

The same is true when one entertains propositions by listening to someone or by reading a text. One can guide one's listening and reading, since one might choose to glance out the window instead. But while listening or reading one does not determine what propositions one entertains – how one understands the utterance or text.⁵ One cannot choose to understand this very sentence as expressing the thesis of logicism, or at least so choosing does not make one understand it in that way. How one understand texts and utterances, and so which propositions one entertains by reading and listening to them, is fixed by factors that are largely out of one's control. It is fixed by what the utterance or text means and by one's cognitive capacities. As in the perceptual case, this difference between what one does in order to entertain a proposition and the entertaining itself is apparent in the ways we explain the two events. Henry listened to Lucy because he hoped to learn her opinions on salmon, and he believed she was about to expound on them. This explains why he listened to her, and we can evaluate this as irrational or not, given his desires and plans. And his listening to her was under his control. But none of this explains why in listening to her he entertained the proposition that salmon is delicious. Rather, this is explained by the facts that she said that salmon is delicious and that his faculty of understanding was working properly. And we cannot evaluate his entertaining of that proposition as irrational or as out of line with his other plans and goals. Even if his listening to Lucy say that salmon is delicious was an action – his thereby entertaining the proposition that salmon is delicious was not.

In saying that entertaining a proposition is not in general explainable by the agent's attitudes I do not mean to deny that its explanation might make reference to underlying cognitive states, and perhaps even states of knowledge. According to one view, the cognitive capacities that *produce* events of understanding employ tacit states of linguistic knowledge. Whether this view is right is an empirical matter. But even if it is right, this would not affect my main point. For one thing, the process is different than the product. Even if the process is an act, it does not follow that what it produces – an event of

entertaining a proposition – is an act. Moreover, it is not very plausible to suppose that the process is an action. Since the states involved would be unconscious ones in the strong sense that the agent could well lack the concepts needed to understand their contents, they would count as knowledge or belief in only a special extended sense, and not in the ordinary sense involved in explaining action. What is more, this process would not involve any of the agent's desires or intentions, states that are involved in ordinary action explanation. So discovering such a cognitive process would not affect the point that entertaining a proposition by reading a text or hearing someone speak is not something that one does, but is something that merely happens to one.

The paradigm cases

But now what about the paradigm cases of thinking, where one actively guides one's thoughts? In the cases we have examined so far, which propositions one entertains is fixed by outside factors, by chance (as in the daydreaming case) or by the author or speaker. But when I guide my own thinking – when I deliberate about where to go for dinner, or whether to believe what the speaker is saying – it seems to be up to me what propositions I entertain, it seems that I am in control of my thinking. Since these are the paradigm cases of thinking, doesn't this show that thinking is at least in paradigm cases an action? I think that it does not.

Suppose that Henry is considering whom to invite to his dinner party. In considering this he entertains the proposition that Lucy likes salmon. There are two kinds of cases. Perhaps he believes that she does, and wants to take that into account in reaching a decision on whether to invite her, or he may be unsure whether she likes salmon and wants to consider the possibility that she does. In either case, his reciting the sentence "Lucy likes salmon" is an act that we can explain by citing his beliefs and desires and that we can evaluate as rational. He wanted to entertain the proposition that Lucy likes salmon and knew he could by reciting the sentence "Lucy likes salmon". And given that he was trying to decide whether to invite Lucy over for a salmon dinner, reflecting on this possibility as part of that deliberation was reasonable.

But in these cases is the event of his entertaining that proposition also an act? That it is does not follow merely from the fact that his reciting that sentence is an act. Consider again the perceptual case. Henry was wondering about the book's color and so decided to look at the book. He looked at it because he wanted to see it and believed he could see it by looking at the table. We can evaluate his looking as rational, but not his seeing. Seeing the books is

not an action; it is, in this case, something that merely happens to him as a result of, or perhaps in, his doing something. This is so even if he knew he would see the book by looking at the table. Henry is simply guiding a capacity he knows he has to passively see the world in trying to form judgements about it. The same is true, I contend, when Henry entertains the proposition that Lucy likes salmon by reciting that sentence. He is simply guiding a capacity he knows he has to passively entertain ways the world might be in trying to form judgements about it. This is so even though Henry knew that by reciting that sentence he would entertain the proposition that Lucy likes salmon.

A helpful abstract picture

It may help to consider an abstract picture of what is going on in these cases. Consider first, seeing the world. Seeing the world is a kind of receptivity to the ways things are (or to some of the ways some things are). How things are is independent of the seer's attitudes and so are the contents of her perceptions. What she sees is fixed by how things are and by the nature of her perceptual apparatus. The event of seeing cannot be explained by her intentions and beliefs and cannot be evaluated as rational or not. But she can guide where in that space of facts she directs her gaze – where she looks – and because of this guidance we can evaluate her looking as rational or not. This provides a weak sense in which it is up to her what she sees, in which she can control what she sees. I suggest the same kind of picture makes sense of thinking. Thinking about the world is a kind of receptivity to the ways things might be (or to some of the ways some things might be).⁶ The space of these ways is independent of the thinker's attitudes, and so are the contents of her entertainings. What possibility she entertains is fixed by what is possible, by the semantic facts of her language, and by her faculty of understanding. The event of entertaining these possibilities cannot be explained by her intentions and beliefs and cannot be evaluated as rational or not. But she can guide where in the space of possibilities she directs her thought – what possibilities in this space she entertains – by controlling what sentences she recites. This provides a weak sense in which it is up to her what she thinks, in which she can control what she thinks. On this picture, entertaining a proposition is akin to gazing out over the space of possible ways things might be.

This picture needs to be refined to address the fact that even in perception what one sees might depend on what one knows. Some hold that the more one learns about the world the more one is able to detect in it, one becomes able to see tomatoes, where previously one saw only round red objects. The same

might be true in the case of thinking. Perhaps the more one learns about the world the more possibilities one is able to consider. So the relations between entertaining a thought and one's cognitive states are more complex than this picture suggests. But since this modification is needed for both thought and perception, making it should not affect the pictured similarity between them.

But is there not a significant difference between the ranges of perception and thought? The range of one's perceptions is limited by one's location in space and time. One cannot see things that are too distant or too small. Is there an analogous limit in the case of thought? Can't one in fact entertain any set of possibilities, ranging freely in thought among them all? This is a complex issue. But even if there is such a difference, it is only a difference (albeit an important one) in the *ranges* of thought and perception, and would do nothing to show that entertaining a proposition is an action. It would show at most, to recall the abstract picture, that one can passively gaze out over all possibilities. It does not show that that gazing is an action.

Still, I doubt that thought is in this way unlimited. Semantic Externalism, the thesis that the semantic properties of one's words are fixed in part by the nature of one's environment, implies that there are some possibilities that one cannot entertain precisely because one is not suitably located. What we can think, and not just what we can think truthfully, depends on how things are. Had one's environment been relevantly different, say in containing some other liquid where our world contains water, one would be able to entertain propositions that one cannot currently entertain, propositions about that other liquid.⁷ In its own way, the range of thought is as limited as the range of perception.

To make this more concrete consider Putnam's character Oscar (Putnam 1975; see also Burge 1979, 1982). Oscar lives on Earth and has had lots of experience with water but knows little about its chemical composition. One day he thinks to himself that water is wet using the words "Water is wet". Now consider a possible world just like ours except that a liquid that is superficially just like water flows in its rivers and streams. This liquid does not exist in our world and nothing in our chemical theorizing predicts it. Experts in this world have developed a sophisticated and largely true theory about this liquid's chemical composition and properties. But their theorizing does not predict the existence of water. Suppose that a duplicate of Oscar, Toscar, lives on this world, has had lots of experience with this liquid but does not know its chemical composition. And suppose Toscar thinks to himself a thought he would express using the words "Water is wet". The externalist claim, which is now widely accepted, is that Toscar is not thinking to himself that water is wet.

One metaphysical moral of this story is that the contents of one's thoughts depend on more than one's internal physical constitution. For while Oscar and

Toscar are largely physical duplicates their thoughts differ. This mental difference derives from differences in their environments. Oscar's thought is that water is wet because it is water he has been in contact with, while Toscar's thought is not since he has had no contact with water. What each thinks when he uses the word "water" depends on how the world he is thinking about is. Picturesquely, it depends on where he is located in the space of possibilities. In this way, the contents of their thoughts depend on the facts. Had Oscar's environment been different, his thoughts would have been different too, even if his internal constitution had been the same. This is the metaphysical moral.

But an epistemological moral emerges if we ask what Toscar is thinking, if not that water is wet. If Externalism is true, then given our story *we* cannot say what he is thinking. We cannot entertain the thought that we are supposing he entertains. We can describe it. We know it is one made true by the liquid that we are supposing flows in the rivers and streams on his planet. We even know that what he is thinking is true. But since, by hypothesis, we have had no contact with that liquid, and nothing in our chemical theorizing predicts it, we are in the very position with respect to it that Toscar is in with respect to water. If Toscar's lack of exposure to water precludes his having water thoughts, then our lack of exposure to the liquid in his world precludes our having the thoughts he has about it. We are in the position of being able to describe thoughts which, given our situation, we cannot entertain. More accurately, we are in the position of being able to characterize a class of thoughts no member of which we are able to entertain. For there are countless possible worlds like Toscar's where a different liquid takes water's place and our characterization of Toscar's thought does not distinguish it from those that would be entertained by his twins on these other worlds. It is not that we can uniquely identify Toscar's thought but not think it, as if it were an object we could see but not grasp. Rather, the most we can do is characterise its type: a thought about a liquid to the effect that it is wet.

This limit on what we can think cannot be overcome simply by choosing a name for the liquid. It is not a limit imposed by our linguistic conventions. For if Externalism is true, naming the liquid and thinking about it require having had some exposure to it. But by hypothesis we have had none. If our chemical theory predicted it (or its possibility) this might be enough for us to have thoughts about it. We can, for instance, conceive of combinations of elements that have never occurred but might. But by hypothesis this is not the case, since our theory does not predict this liquid. So the reason we cannot share Toscar's thought is not that we have failed to set up our language in the proper way. It is rather that the required non-linguistic facts do not obtain. So what we can think, and not just what we do think, depends on non-linguistic

facts. Picturesquely, what we can think is limited by our location in the space of possibilities, just as what we can see is limited to our location in space and time.

The epistemic status of thinking

I have already said that, considered abstractly, thought's function is to present to judgement possible ways things might be. I want to elaborate on this idea. I will suggest that thought may belong in the same epistemic category as perception, and not just in the same metaphysical one.

Let me start by considering deliberation. In deliberating about what to do or believe, one needs information about how things are. Perception and testimony are the primary sources of this information. But having information about how things are is not always sufficient for successful deliberation. For one's deliberations sometimes concern facts about which one has only incomplete information, such as the future or the distant present. In these cases, in addition to information about how things are, one needs information about how they might be. One needs to be able to evaluate different possibilities, comparing and contrasting them, in order to form a judgement about what to do or believe. This is what thought allows us to do. It serves to provide information about how things might be that supplements what we believe about how things are.⁸

That this role might have epistemological significance is not itself a new idea. After all, it is a traditional view that our knowledge of what is possible derives from thought. On one version of this view, if we can conceive of some way things might be then we are justified in believing that it is possible that they are that way. Thought, on this view, is a reliable source of information about how things might be. There is debate about how reliable it is and about the strength of the justification. No doubt the traditional view that thought is an infallible and indefeasible guide to what is possible is too strong. Still, the idea that thought may have some epistemological role is not novel.

But it would receive new support if, as I have argued here, thinking about the world belongs in the same metaphysical category as perception. As I have already said, I believe that to think about the world is to be sensitive to the ways it could be in much the way that to perceive the world is to be sensitive to the ways it is. Learning a language extends one's cognitive reach in that it enables one to gain information about different ways things might be. Indeed, if the range of our thoughts is limited in the way I argued then it is a source of information about different ways that *actual* things might be. If this is right,

then thought belongs not just in the same broad metaphysical category as perception but in the same epistemic category as well: both are sources of information about things in the world. None of this strictly follows from the view that entertaining a proposition is not an action. But I believe that it is suggested by the way I have defended that view here.

Summary

Let me summarize the discussion. I have argued that entertaining a proposition is not an action. Such events do not have intentional explanations and cannot be evaluated as rational or not. In these respects they contrast with assertions and compare well with perceptual events. One can control what one thinks by doing something, most notably reciting a sentence. But even then the event of entertaining the proposition is not an action, though it is an event one has caused to happen, much as one might cause oneself to see a book by looking at it. And I have indicated how this may support the view that thinking about the world is a source of information about it.⁹

Notes

1. For an important development and defense of this view, see the essays in Davidson (1980). For a critique of it, see Frankfurt (1988a).
2. Asserting a proposition is to be distinguished from merely uttering a sentence that (in the given context) expresses it. Asserting something, I will argue, is always an action, something done on purpose, whereas uttering a sentence can be an unintentional product of a psychological disorder.
3. An agent can, in a sense, be responsible for thinking even in cases where she does not guide her thinking if she is nonetheless able to take control of it and does not. For one is, in general, responsible for failing to do what one could have done. Daydreaming is no excuse, when one could have stopped. Still, in such cases, one is responsible, not for having had the thoughts but for not having stopped them.
4. For a detailed discussion of the difference between the things we do and our acts, see Thomson (1977).
5. I develop this point in more detail in my Hunter (1998). In that paper, I argued that states of understanding are not states of belief. But I did not there provide an analysis of states of understanding. I now think that they are complex events having events of thinking as constituents.
6. I am inclined to the view that in thinking propositions are presented as possible, and not as true, whereas in perception the contents are presented as true. But this is not the place to develop this point.
7. Tyler Burge notes this limitation in his 1982, p. 115.

8. Saying that thought provides us with information may be misleading. My view is not that thought *tells* us what is possible, anymore than perception *tells* us what is so. Rather, in thinking about the world we are presented with some ways some things might be, and in perception we are presented with some ways some things are. It is in this sense that both perception and thought are sources of information.
9. I would like to thank James Pryor, Rob Stainton and reviewers for this journal for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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