

Occurrent states

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ABSTRACT

The distinction between occurrent and non-occurrent mental states is frequently appealed to by contemporary philosophers, but it has never been explicated in any significant detail. In the literature, two accounts of the distinction are commonly presupposed (and occasionally stated explicitly). One is that occurrent states are conscious states. The other is that non-occurrent states are dispositional states, and thus that occurrent states are manifestations of dispositions. I argue that neither of these accounts is adequate, and therefore that another account is needed. I propose that occurrent states are active states.

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1. Introduction

Occurrent mental states are common coin in philosophy. With non-occurrent states – often called ‘standing’ or ‘dispositional’ states – they form a binary division among mental states. The distinction is standardly glossed with an exemplar. Consider, for example, the proposition that cats have whiskers. Now that I have mentioned that proposition, your belief in it is occurrent. But you have believed it continuously for decades in the non-occurrent sense.

Yet this standard gloss of the distinction is wholly unsatisfactory as an *explication*. Firstly, its focus on beliefs makes it too narrow. Some philosophers hold that beliefs cannot be occurrent at all (e.g. Price 1969), but even those who allow that there are occurrent beliefs do not think that *only* beliefs, or even only propositional attitudes, can be occurrent. Philosophers regard a variety of mental phenomena – judgments, thoughts, experiences, sensations – as occurrent states (see §3). Secondly, and more importantly, the standard gloss has the same fault as did Euthyphro’s initial account of piety in the eponymous

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Platonic dialog: it does not tell us what *makes* something an occurrent mental state. What *unifies* this category of mental phenomena?

It is a striking fact that the question of *what occurrent mental states are* has been almost entirely ignored. Philosophers seem to have tacitly agreed that the notion is unproblematic, and that we can therefore deploy it at will. Yet I shall endeavor to show that the two most common ideas about the nature of occurrent states are demonstrably inadequate.

Moreover, this lacuna in our understanding is no small matter. The concept of occurrent states is no mere footnote to the metaphysics of mind. It is tightly connected to our concepts of other mental phenomena, and especially to that of consciousness. That conscious states are necessarily occurrent would seem to be one of the few features of conscious states on which there is total agreement. So if it turns out that we do not actually know what it *is* for a mental state to be occurrent, then we know even less about conscious states than we thought.

It would thus appear at least useful, if not outright essential, to get a firmer grip on the distinction between occurrent and non-occurrent mental states. I propose to make a beginning – though only a beginning – on this task. After some background and preliminaries (§§2–3), I present and reject the two accounts of occurrent states that are often implicit in the literature: that occurrent states just are conscious states (§4), or that they are in some way to be contrasted with dispositional states (§5). I then offer a sketch of what I think is a superior account (§6).

2. Remarks on occurrent mental states and the ontological category of occurrents

I said just above that philosophers have largely ignored the question of what occurrent mental states are. Some might find this claim surprising. For is there not an extant debate on the notion of *occurrents*?

Indeed there is (e.g. Simons 2000 and Melia 2000). However, it is a very general metaphysical debate which hardly touches on the mind at all, and which is thus not especially relevant to my project. While it is true that the category of occurrent mental states is historically linked to the general category of occurrents, there is now little relationship between them.

The term ‘occurrent’ first appeared in philosophy as a noun, paired with ‘continuant’ in W. E. Johnson’s magisterial three-volume *Logic* (1921–1924). Johnson intended ‘continuant’ as a more neutral replacement for ‘substance.’ Exactly what he meant by ‘occurrent’ is less clear (cf. Broad 1924a), but it seems to have denoted a temporary state of a continuant: ‘while we cannot say that a *continuant* occurs, we *can* say that a *state* occurs; and anything that may be said to occur will be called an ‘occurrent.’ And I lay it down that any occurrent must be referred to a continuant or to two or more connected continuants’ (Johnson 1921–1924, vol. 3, xx–xxi).

Today it is often assumed that *objects* are continuants and *events* are occurrents. Continuants do not have temporal parts; occurrents do. However, almost everything in this area is controversial. Stout (2016) denies that occurrents must have temporal parts. Melia (2000) denies that they even exist. Perhaps because there is so little agreement on the fundamentals of the continuant vs. occurrent distinction, it is no longer in common use.¹

As for the now-common adjectival use of 'occurrent' to refer to a type of mental state: its precise origins are unclear, but Johnson's occurrents were presumably the inspiration. The originator may have been Broad, who made a three-part critical study of Johnson's *Logic* (Broad 1922, 1924a, 1924b). The earliest use I have found of the phrase 'occurrent state' is in Broad (1945), where he briefly refers to anger and jealousy as 'occurrent states' (p. 135). The contrast was not with continuants but with *dispositions*. For by then the rise of behaviorism had prompted a vigorous debate over the existence of mental acts (e.g. Gallie, Spratt, and Mace 1947), which began sometimes to be called 'occurrent states' (e.g. Gallie 1948).²

The key point here is that the concept of an occurrent mental state, although inspired by Johnson's concept of an occurrent, had from its inception a distinct purpose. Occurrent mental states were contrasted with dispositional states, yet Johnson would have seen *both* of these as occurrents.³ The general ontological category of occurrents, then, has always been quite distinct from the mental category of occurrent states. So the (small) literature on the nature of the former is not particularly pertinent to my question about the nature of the latter.

3. The background in action theory, and some preliminaries

After its introduction in the 1940s, the adjectival use of 'occurrent' was ultimately crystallized into its contemporary form in 1970, by Alvin Goldman in *A Theory of Human Action*. Goldman was building on William Alston's distinction between 'aroused wants' and 'latent wants' (1967, 402). Aroused wants are those that are currently guiding the subject's actions, while latent wants are currently inert. Goldman dubs them 'occurrent wants' and 'standing wants,' respectively. He expounds the theoretical need for the distinction with the example of his omitting to buy cheese at the supermarket even though he *wanted* to buy some. The way to explain the omission, Goldman argues, is to say that while he had a *standing* want to buy cheese, the want did not (alas) become *occurrent* while he was in the supermarket. Goldman also notes that the same distinction is needed for beliefs, and for the same explanatory purpose. For example (my own, not Goldman's), even though Clem believes he should bow if he meets the queen, when the queen is before him he may fail to bow if his belief does not become occurrent. Hence, Goldman concludes, 'Standing wants and beliefs can affect action only by becoming activated, that is, by being manifested in occurrent wants and beliefs' (p. 88).

I shall henceforth adopt Goldman's terminology, and refer to *occurrent (mental) states* and *standing (mental) states* – usually dropping the qualifier 'mental', as is common. (§5 will make clear why I choose the term 'standing' over the more common 'dispositional'.) For convenience, I shall also call the distinction between occurrent and standing states the *o/s distinction*.

Goldman (1970) distinguished the occurrent forms only of beliefs and wants. My interest is broader. I am asking what it is for a mental state, in general, to be occurrent. As I said in §1, philosophers assume that many kinds of mental phenomena, not just propositional attitudes, are occurrent. For example, in a well-known paper Block and Fodor (1972) noted that we 'draw a distinction between dispositional states (beliefs, desires, inclinations, and so on) and occurrent states (sensations, thoughts, feelings, and so on)' (p. 168). And it is commonly acknowledged that emotions come in both occurrent and non-occurrent forms (e.g. de Sousa 2014). In fact, the o/s distinction appears to be treated as *exhaustive*, in that *all* mental phenomena are assumed to be either occurrent or standing. Here is H. H. Price in his 1960 Gifford Lectures:

The distinction between 'dispositional' and 'active' (or 'occurrent') ... cuts across the distinction between belief and knowledge itself. It cuts across many other distinctions too, for example that between hope and fear, or between love and hate.

We might say that its domain is hardly narrower than the whole of the philosophy of mind. (Price 1969, Series I, Lecture 3)

Again, Goldman (1970) adopts a much narrower focus. But it seems clear that his deployment of the term 'occurrent' is conceptually tied to the earlier usages I have mentioned. We can trace a path from the adjectival term's introduction in the 1940s through to Goldman, via its appearances in the intervening decades – in Price's lectures and elsewhere (e.g. Taylor 1960, 82–85).

I therefore believe that Goldman's usage is not just a terminological coincidence, but that he applied the existing conceptual distinction in order to mark out two modes of existence of propositional attitudes. So I shall use his treatment as a starting point for my question: what, exactly, is that distinction? In this paper I shall consider three answers to this question, two of which I will reject. All three answers are visible in Goldman's introduction of the o/s distinction:

An occurrent want is a mental event or mental process; it is a 'going on' or 'happening' in consciousness. A standing want, on the other hand, is a disposition or propensity to have an occurrent want, a disposition that lasts with the agent for a reasonable length of time. (1970, 86)

Goldman writes as if this passage provides a single, unified account of the o/s distinction. Yet it actually suggests (at least) three different accounts. Firstly, calling an occurrent want 'a mental event or mental process,' or 'a 'going on' or 'happening,' suggests that occurrent states are in some way *active* (cf. the passage from Price above). But Goldman then adds the phrase 'in consciousness' to the latter description, which suggests that occurrent states are *conscious* states. Finally, his description of a standing want as 'a disposition or propensity

to have an occurrent want' suggests that occurrent states are *manifestations* of mental dispositions.⁴ The passage cannot provide a unified account, then, unless active mental episodes, conscious states, and manifestations of mental dispositions are simply identical. I think they are not. I also think that the second and third accounts, though they are now very popularly assumed, are misguided. In the next two sections, I show why. I will then defend the first account.

I think that behind the rather messy usage of the idea of occurrent states lies a coherent and valuable concept. The core of the concept is that occurrent states, in contrast with standing states, are *active*. The account of the o/s distinction that I shall ultimately propose has, I think, been implicit in its use more or less from its origin in the 1940s. So I am not so much suggesting a new account as articulating an existing one. But a necessary first step is to dispose of two other accounts which are, I shall argue, unsatisfactory.

Before I proceed to that task, six preliminaries.

Firstly, I emphasize again that my topic is not beliefs, wants, or propositional attitudes. While I shall speak of 'occurrent beliefs,' this is for convenience only. If you hold that there are no such things as occurrent beliefs, please take me to be referring to *thoughts* or *judgments*. Nothing in the paper turns on whether beliefs themselves can be occurrent.

Secondly (and relatedly), nor is my topic the theory of action explanation. While that is Goldman's (1970) topic, I take him only as a jumping-off point. As it turns out, the o/s distinction has become a foundational concept much less in action theory than in epistemology and philosophy of mind. Rarely does an introductory or survey text in either of these two fields fail to invoke it at some point (for two examples, see §4). By contrast, in the philosophy of action, the distinction has faded along with Goldman's theory. His version of the causal theory of action is no longer influential (by comparison, especially, with that of Donald Davidson); and so, since the o/s distinction itself was not generally adopted by other theorists, it seldom appears in the literature (with the notable exception of the work of Alfred Mele – see §4). So while my arguments concerning occurrent states may have some implications for action theory, in my view the more significant impact will be on epistemology and (especially) the metaphysics of mind.⁵

Thirdly: for simplicity I shall speak as if occurrent and standing states are categorically distinct, but nothing I say excludes the possibility of intermediate or even indeterminate cases. It is even possible that the o/s distinction is graded or quantitative rather than categorical. This would naturally entail some further complexities in the accounts I shall consider, but I do not think that the basic points I shall be making would be affected. (Indeed, I think that my own account, in §6, would be very readily adapted to a graded version of the o/s distinction. Whereas I suspect that gradability would create even further difficulties for the account I reject in §5.)

Fourthly: while it is routinely assumed that minds feature both occurrent and standing states, I do not require this assumption. Gertler (2007) suggests that only occurrent states are genuinely mental. This view does not in itself abandon the o/s distinction, however. Indeed, the distinction thereby becomes even more important, for Gertler uses it to distinguish the mental from the non-mental. By contrast, to *abandon* the o/s distinction is to take the eliminativist view that there is simply *no distinction to be drawn*.

Fifthly: what about the eliminativist view I've just mentioned? Might the states that we call 'occurrent' turn out to have nothing interesting in common? One might suspect, in particular, that the o/s distinction is just a misguided piece of folk psychology.

Here I take a conditional stance: *if* the o/s distinction is genuine, then the account I present in §6 is the correct one. So if you deem that account unsatisfactory, you should indeed favor elimination. But more positively, I doubt that the o/s distinction is folk-psychological at all. While non-philosophers readily grasp the contrast between occurrent and standing *beliefs* if given a standard exemplar, they do not deploy it themselves. The term 'occurrent belief' has next to no non-philosophical use. A web search for it yields almost exclusively philosophical sources. And again, my concern is not with occurrent *beliefs*, but with occurrent mental states more broadly; and the folk do not appear to put experiences, sensations, judgments, and thoughts into a single category in the way philosophers do. As with 'occurrent belief', a web search for 'occurrent state' yields almost exclusively philosophical sources. Philosophers are the creators and consumers of the concept of occurrent states, so I submit that we may analyze it as we see fit. Indeed, it seems incumbent on us to do so, so as to keep our conceptual house in order.

My sixth and final preliminary is to set some ground rules. I take it to be clear from existing usage – where standing states are sometimes simply called 'non-occurrent' states – that the o/s distinction is exclusive and exhaustive. So I shall assume the following basic principles:

Exclusiveness: Necessarily, no mental state is both occurrent and standing.⁶

Exhaustiveness: Necessarily, every mental state is either occurrent or standing.

Therefore, an account of the o/s distinction must posit some differentiating property *F* as being possessed by all occurrent states but no standing states, like this:

[Schema 1] Occurrent states just are mental states which are *F*, and standing states just are mental states which are not-*F*,

or vice versa, like this:

[Schema 2] Standing states just are mental states which are *F*, and occurrent states just are mental states which are not-*F*.

The proposals we consider will therefore be formulated in one of these two ways. Note, however, that [Schema 1] is a great deal more intuitive than [Schema 2]

– as suggested by the fact (again) that standing states are sometimes just called ‘non-occurrent.’ There is a strong sense that it is occurrent states which possess something that standing states lack, rather than the reverse. This observation will be significant in §5.

4. Occurrent states as conscious states?

As I mentioned in §1, it is a platitude that all conscious states are occurrent. If we add to this platitude the converse claim that all occurrent states are conscious, we get the view that the occurrent states *just are* the conscious states. A narrower version of this view, concerning beliefs (or propositional attitudes in general), is commonly assumed. Consider these glossary entries from two relatively recent books – an introduction to philosophy of mind, and a survey of the epistemology and metaphysics of self-knowledge:

occurrent beliefs Beliefs of which one is actively aware. Your belief that Newton was a genius was non-occurrent until you read this sentence. (Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson 2006, 303)

occurrent attitude An attitude whose contents one is currently entertaining. For instance, at the moment you judge that it’s raining, your belief that it’s raining is occurrent. When you stop thinking about the rain, you no longer occurrently believe that it’s raining, though you may retain the dispositional belief that it’s raining. (Gertler 2011, 280)

Both entries convey that to have an occurrent belief is to occupy some sort of conscious state: that is, to be ‘actively aware’ of or ‘currently entertaining’ the attitude in question. It is harder to find avowals of the more general view that occurrent *states* just are conscious states, but this is simply due to the rarity with which the general concept of occurrent states (as opposed to the more specific concept of occurrent beliefs) receives explicit attention.⁷ The proposal, per [Schema 1], is this:

- (C) Occurrent states just are conscious mental states, and standing states just are non-conscious mental states.

How does (C) fare as an account of the o/s distinction?

To begin with, notice that (C) renders talk of occurrent states *redundant*, by simply *identifying* them with conscious states. If we accept (C), then to talk of ‘occurrent’ and ‘standing’ states is to multiply words unnecessarily; we should replace those terms with ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious,’ respectively. However, such a wholesale replacement would be warranted only if there were no interestingly *distinct* notion of occurrent states. I shall suggest that there is indeed a notion of occurrent states that is distinct from the notion of conscious states.

There is a use of the term ‘occurrent’ that distinguishes it from the term ‘conscious.’ While it is (again) a platitude that all conscious states are occurrent, it is far from agreed that all occurrent states are conscious. Alston (1967) – whose discussion of wants was a major influence on Goldman (1970) – says that an

aroused want is not 'a kind of conscious state or content of consciousness' (p. 402). And more recently, here is Alfred Mele criticizing Goldman's (1970) claim that occurrent wants are conscious wants:

Goldman's way of drawing the distinction [between occurrent and standing desires or wants] is problematic. Part of what the distinction is supposed to mark is the difference between desires that influence behavior only if they are first 'activated' in some way and desires that are already active (Alston 1967, 402; Goldman 1970, 88). But not all active desires are present to consciousness – at least if common sense and clinicians may be trusted ... Goldman implausibly makes being 'a "going on" or "happening" in consciousness' an essential feature of occurrent wants. (Mele 2003, 30)

Mele gives the example of a boy who speaks spitefully to his girlfriend out of an unconscious desire to hurt her feelings. The desire causes his utterance, so it is active, and thus, by Goldman's own criterion, occurrent. So not all occurrent desires are conscious (see also Davis 2005, 72). Mele does not discuss beliefs, but the same goes for them. Extending his example, suppose that what the boy says is, 'I never liked that silly hat you always wear,' and suppose he says this because he knows that his girlfriend is especially fond of the hat in question. He may not have consciously thought at the time that she is especially fond of the hat, yet clearly that belief was active in producing his remark – so the belief was occurrent. Hence not all occurrent beliefs are conscious, so (C) is false.

In fact – though Mele (2003) appears not to notice this – even Goldman (1970) himself evinces doubt about (C) for the very same reason. Later in his book he notes that since unconscious wants can cause behavior, they 'cannot be dismissed as mere standing desires' (p. 121). Are they, then, occurrent? Here Goldman wavers. He says that 'an unconscious want is a nonstandard form of want, since it violates one of the normal criteria for wanting' (p. 122) – the criterion of consciousness. Yet he still seems to allow that such wants are occurrent. His reason is that 'unconscious wants, like normal wants, [tend] to cause other wants by practical inference' (ibid.), where the latter wants, at least if they are conscious, in turn can cause actions. Goldman is less sure that unconscious occurrent wants can cause actions directly (i.e. unmediated by conscious wants), but he sees it as an open possibility.⁸

There undoubtedly exists, then, a sense of 'occurrent' on which some occurrent states are unconscious. And while I cannot say how widespread this sense of the term is as compared to the sense expressed by (C), here is an argument that (C) does not capture what we have in mind when we speak of 'occurrent states.' The nature of *conscious* states is considered a deep puzzle. So if we think that occurrent states are identical with conscious states then we should be deeply puzzled about the nature of occurrent states. Yet no one ever expresses such puzzlement. Admittedly, this could be because (as I emphasized in §1) we hardly ever *examine* the notion of occurrent states. Perhaps if we did, we would converge on (C), and the puzzlement would duly ensue. But the conclusion of the argument is just that we are not presently *committed* to (C), so there is no

special reason to think that we *would* converge on it; hence we should investigate other possible accounts of the o/s distinction.

I also think that a sort of cognitive illusion may exist here. When we think about occurrent beliefs or wants, *conscious* beliefs or wants are what immediately come to mind. But this may be because conscious occurrent attitudes are more *salient* than unconscious occurrent attitudes – precisely *because* the former are conscious. (There may also be an association of the word ‘occurrent’ with the meaning of its cognate verb in common phrases such as ‘A thought occurred to me’, which are used to report on one’s conscious states.) This does not show that unconscious occurrent attitudes do not exist. It does not even show that they are ‘nonstandard’ (Goldman 1970; see above). Indeed, since our behavior often seems to be driven by attitudes of which we are not aware (e.g. Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Wilson 2002), the unconscious occurrent attitudes could even be considered the *standard* form.

Thus there does exist a notion of an occurrent state that is distinct from the notion of a conscious state. Now it could still turn out that this distinct notion is not coherent. But until we establish that, we should not endorse (C). It seems to me that the distinct notion *is* coherent. I will attempt to describe it more carefully in §6. Before I turn to that task, however, there is one more alternative account to be examined and put aside.

5. Occurrent states as manifestations of dispositions?

In §2 I noted that as well as suggesting that occurrent states are conscious states, Goldman (1970) hints at another reading of the o/s distinction: that standing states are dispositions, while occurrent states are manifestations of dispositions. Standing beliefs and wants are indeed very commonly called *dispositional* beliefs and wants; and as I noted in §2, the need for some distinction roughly along these lines seems to have been the original stimulus for the introduction of the concept of occurrent states in the behaviorist heyday of the 1940s.

However, the proposal cannot just be that standing states are merely dispositions whereas occurrent states are merely manifestations of dispositions. This would violate the principle of Exclusiveness. Dispositions and manifestations are not mutually exclusive, for a disposition can be the manifestation of another (second-order) disposition. Broad (1933) gave the example of magnetism, which is the manifestation of magnetizability. And on the assumption that standing beliefs are dispositions, examples involving mental states are very common. For instance, a gullible person has many standing – i.e. ‘dispositional’ – beliefs that are the manifestation of her gullibility. Such a belief, then, would be both a disposition and a manifestation of a disposition.

Another way to put the problem is that, on the imagined proposal, being a manifestation of a disposition is sufficient for being occurrent. Yet the gullible person’s *standing* belief that (say) Nostradamus predicted the rise of Hitler is a

clear counterexample, for it is a manifestation of her gullibility, which is itself a disposition.

To respect Exclusiveness, we must use one of the two schemas formulated in §3. Either one is possible in this case. Let us first try [Schema 1]:

- (M) Occurrent states just are mental states which are manifestations of dispositions, and standing states just are mental states which are not manifestations of any disposition.

One immediate problem to note with (M) is that it still makes being a manifestation of a disposition *sufficient* for being occurrent. Again, a gullible person has many *standing* beliefs that are manifestations of her disposition of gullibility. (M) counts these standing beliefs as occurrent.

But not only is (M) too liberal in what states it counts as occurrent; it is also too conservative. It makes being a manifestation of a disposition *necessary* for being occurrent. Yet on any non-trivial notion of a disposition, many paradigmatically occurrent states are not the manifestation of *any* disposition. A person can have entirely new thoughts that are not the manifestation of a pre-existing attitude. Most sensory experiences are not the manifestation of a pre-existing disposition. In short, it seems patently false that all occurrent states are manifestations of dispositions.

So we might try [Schema 2] instead. Now as I noted in §3, the way we think about the o/s distinction makes [Schema 2] a good deal less intuitive than [Schema 1]. We think of the distinction as being built around the possession by occurrent states of some positive feature which standing states lack. [Schema 2] reverses that picture. Thus, in this case we get:

- (D) Standing states just are dispositional mental states, and occurrent states just are non-dispositional mental states.

This does indeed seem odd. One wants to ask: but what *are* occurrent states, beyond just being states which are non-dispositional?

The oddness is borne out when we see that, contra (D), occurrent states are often dispositional. Indeed they are arguably *always* dispositional, for dispositions are ten a penny. All (or practically all) mental states are dispositions of some sort. (Functionalists erect an entire theory of mental states on this fact.) The problem with (D), then, is that a mental state's being dispositional is not sufficient for its being a standing state. Dispositionality is not a differentiating property of standing states. For example, consider my fear of snakes. This fear comes in standing and occurrent forms. My standing fear of snakes is a disposition which, if I am exposed to a snake, tends to cause me to feel occurrent fear. Now we would normally not consider the occurrent fear to also be a disposition. But it is. It is a multitrack disposition which tends, in me at least, to cause (among other things) sweating, thoughts of fangs and biting, and a strong urge to flee.⁹

You may object that surely the idea of (D) is that standing states are *mere* dispositions, while occurrent states are dispositions *plus something else*; and so my observation that occurrent states are dispositions is beside the point.

But to the contrary, this objection actually reinforces the point, which is that (*D*) comes at the issue from entirely the wrong direction. For if both standing states and occurrent states are dispositions, but the latter also have some *other*, differentiating property, then what we need is a proposal modeled on [Schema 1], not [Schema 2]. This is why (*D*) seemed odd in the first place. What we want to say about the o/s distinction in regard to dispositions is that standing states are *nothing but* dispositions, while occurrent states are something *more*.¹⁰ Thus we are brought back to [Schema 1] again, where we ask: what is it, exactly, that occurrent states possess which standing states do not? Yet with the failure of (*M*), it seems that the entire manifestation-disposition approach can give no answer to that question.

All in all, then, this approach to the o/s distinction appears to lead nowhere. I suspect that its initial attraction rests on an ambiguity in the word 'disposition.' In its original use in English, the word referred to an aspect of a person's demeanor. Outside philosophy, this remains its dominant use. This use is reflected in philosophy by the common practice of referring to standing mental states as 'dispositional states.' However, in philosophy, 'disposition' has also acquired a technical use which, while inspired by the original meaning, has developed in an independent direction. In that usage, a disposition is characterized simply as a tendency to manifest certain results under certain conditions. As a result, there is no longer much relationship between the dispositions discussed by philosophers and the dispositions ascribed to a person's demeanor.¹¹ The fact that standing mental states are often called 'dispositional states' reflects the latter sense of the word 'disposition,' and should not be taken to suggest that the o/s distinction has anything much to do with dispositions in the former, technical sense.

6. My proposal: occurrent states as active states

The last three sections have comprised an argument by elimination. In §3 I noted three ideas about occurrent states: that they are conscious states, that they are manifestations of dispositions, and that they are active states. I do not claim that no other accounts are possible, but I know of none that have been suggested. I argued in §§4–5 that neither of the first two ideas is adequate. I shall now pursue the third.

There remains, I remind the reader, the option of pursuing the argument by elimination all the way to the bitter end. Perhaps the so-called occurrent states have *nothing* in common, and we should simply *eliminate* the o/s distinction. This possibility cannot be entirely dismissed. I do not pretend to prove that the account I shall offer is correct. I do think, however, that it is the best account available, and that it may also offer sufficient explanatory power to earn its keep.

In what sense, then, is an occurrent state *active*?¹² In my view, the word indicates an implicit appeal to a fairly ordinary contrastive notion. A thing is active

(or is in an active state) when it is changing in certain salient properties over time; whereas if it is unchanging in those salient properties, it is inactive.

Many diverse kinds of things can be described in this contrastive way. Consider a volcano, a police investigation, an ant colony, a tumor. Certain changes in certain properties constitute the thing's being in an active state, but the pertinent *kinds* of changes (and *kinds* of properties) will be very different from one case to the next. In a tumor, certain metabolic changes may count as making the tumor active, whereas no purely metabolic changes will count as making a police investigation active. By the same token, the sorts of changes that *do* make a police investigation active – which might include psychological, administrative, and legal events – will be wholly unrelated to what makes it the case that a volcano is active.

Crucially, when I say that occurrent states are active, I do *not* mean that they are causally active in producing action. There is a difference between a mental state's *being active* and its *affecting action*. This difference is clear in Goldman's (1970) original presentation of the *o/s* distinction. He says that standing wants 'can affect action only by becoming activated' (1970, 88) – that is, by becoming occurrent. Activity, then, is a necessary condition for a want to affect action. But it is not sufficient.¹³ A want may be activated yet not issue in action. We do not act on all of our occurrent wants. You may occurrently want a third slice of peach pie, but dietary concerns or a sense of decorum may stay your hand. So the activity of an occurrent state, as I am speaking of it – that is, as involving change in certain salient properties – is a feature of the occurrent state itself, not of its effect on the subject's actions. It is internal, not external. A parallel distinction can be made in the other sorts of cases I have mentioned. A volcano may be active (e.g. undergoing internal changes in pressure, temperature, or magnetization) even if it is not presently erupting.¹⁴ An ant colony may be active even if none of the ants are out gathering food or otherwise engaged in the colony's environment. A police investigation may be active even at a time when the case is merely being discussed inside the detective unit. Something's being active in the relevant sense, then, does not entail its showing any external effects of that activity. The salient property changes will usually be an internal matter.

Nevertheless, the causal connection to action makes it obvious why Goldman (1970) found it natural to speak of occurrent states as 'active' or 'activated.' Since action is itself a kind of activity (the intentional activity of an agent, roughly speaking), it is intuitive that *mental* activity is required to bring it about. (Again, this is paralleled in the other sorts of cases. A volcano, for example, cannot erupt without undergoing internal activity of particular kinds.) I do not intend this intuition about the causation of actions as an a priori claim. It is an empirical conjecture. Again, a mental state's being active is not the same as its causing the subject to act, and the connection between the two is contingent. However, while I find it conceivable that some actions *could* be caused entirely by inactive states, I doubt that any *actual* actions are caused in this way. I would further hazard that if we knew of a case of an action which was caused entirely by inactive

mental states, we would not call those inactive mental states ‘occurrent.’ So I suggest that occurrent states are active mental states, and that they are nomologically necessary for the production of action. These claims certainly require more defense, but here my purpose is only to offer a general sketch of an account of the *o/s* distinction, suggesting it as a better alternative to the two I have already canvassed. A full exploration of the account must wait on another occasion.

The general notion of activity at hand, then, simply entails some sort of *fluctuation of properties* internal to the entity in question. These fluctuations constitute an occurrent state. So here, finally, is my proposal regarding the *o/s* distinction:

- (F) Occurrent states just are mental states which consist in the fluctuation of certain properties, and standing states just are mental states which consist in the stability of those properties.

Another way to put this, I think, is that occurrent states are *processes*, whereas standing states are not (cf. Bartlett [unpublished](#)). Recall Goldman: ‘An occurrent want is a mental event or mental process’ (1970, 86). I shall continue to speak of activity and fluctuation rather than processes, however.

It must be admitted that (F) is somewhat vague. But this is unavoidable. It is largely an empirical matter what *kinds* of fluctuation, in what *kinds* of properties, make an occurrent state – just as it is an empirical matter what kinds of fluctuation, in what kinds of properties, make a tumor or a volcano active. In our own case, the obvious candidate is certain kinds of fluctuation in neurophysiological properties.¹⁵ But I do not wish to foreclose the possibility that in other kinds of subjects (i.e. non-human, non-biological, and perhaps even non-physical), different kinds of properties and different kinds of fluctuation might be involved.

Moreover, (F)’s vagueness is not much of a strike against it, for the alternatives are no better in that respect. (C) says that occurrent states are conscious states, which only seems concise and informative until one remembers that we still don’t understand what consciousness *is*. (M) and (D) draw on the metaphysics of dispositions, which remains a subject of ongoing debate. And even putting that debate aside, both (M) and (D) are very vague. They do not tell us, for example, what *kinds* of dispositions are involved.

My point is not to criticize those accounts all over again, but to emphasize that (F), despite its evident vagueness, is no less informative than they are. All of these proposals would need significant amounts of elaboration. But in light of the problems with those earlier proposals, I suggest that (F) is the one to pursue.

While we are recalling the earlier proposals, we may note that (F) nicely explains their *prima facie* attractiveness. Consider first (M) and (D). While a disposition does not *have* to be inert, nor a manifestation active, the classic exemplars always have those features – as in a *fragile* glass *shattering*, or a *soluble* sugar cube *dissolving*. When we think of dispositions and manifestations, we think of inert states and active states, respectively. So if standing states just are a kind of stable state and occurrent states a kind of active state, one might easily come to think of standing states as dispositions and occurrent states as

manifestations. As for (C), in a way it is very close to (F), as they appear to have similar motivations. (C) is what you get if you set out to identify occurrent states with whatever states are the proximate mental causes of actions, but become distracted by the most *salient* instances of those causes (see the penultimate paragraph of §4): conscious states. One gets from (C) to (F) by noticing that some unconscious states can also serve in that causal role.

I am suggesting, then, that as an account of the o/s distinction, (F) is superior to the two competing accounts that I have considered. There still remains, as I have said, the option of eliminating the distinction. As I said in §3, those who are tempted by this option may read my thesis as a conditional: *if we retain the o/s distinction, then (F) is the account of it that we should accept*. Of course, this conditional claim may be challenged. Perhaps one of the accounts that I dismissed in §§4–5 can be salvaged, or perhaps there is another account that I have not thought of. But I contend that if you agree with my rejection of those accounts, then absent some promising new account, you should see (F) – or at least something like it – as the only alternative to the elimination of occurrent mental states from our mental ontology.

Notes

1. A search for ‘continuant’ on PhilPapers yields only 35 hits. For contrast, consider another distinction introduced by Johnson in his *Logic*: determinates vs. determinables. This distinction is not exactly a philosophical commonplace today either, but a search for ‘determinable’ on PhilPapers yields 118 hits; it also has an entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Wilson 2017), unlike the continuant vs. occurrent distinction.
2. The term ‘occurrent belief’ also appeared as early as 1949, in Ducasse’s *Carus Lectures* (1951).
3. Even though dispositional states are commonly thought of as lasting far longer than occurrent states, Johnson put no limit on the temporal extension of an occurrent (see Broad 1924a, 245–246).
4. Even a *fourth* account is hinted at: that occurrent states are *short-lived* while standing states last, as the passage has it, ‘for a reasonable length of time.’ I shall ignore this idea, however, for even if these contrasting durations are typical, they are still merely contingent. A standing state may be short-lived, and an occurrent state may be long-lived. For example, a standing belief may be created and then quickly abolished if a defeater for it becomes immediately evident; and a person locked in a room with a poisonous snake might be occurrently terrified for hours at a stretch. (Relatedly, while Johnson [1921–1924] seemed to think of his *occurrents* as relatively short-lived, Broad noted that ‘there is no reason why there should not be an occurrent which lasts for centuries’ [1924a, 246].)
5. For an application of the view to be recommended here to the metaphysics of mind, see my ‘Functionalism and the problem of occurrent states’ (Bartlett unpublished).
6. When we say that a standing belief *becomes* occurrent, we imply that *one and the same state* serially occupies two distinct modes of existence. This may suggest that Exclusiveness is false. However, in such a case the obvious point of

Exclusiveness is that the belief cannot be standing and occurrent *at the same time*. One could add this specification to the principle. But I shall instead individuate mental states in a fine-grained way, so that the occurrent and standing ‘modes of existence’ themselves count as distinct states.

7. One example: Farkas (2008) remarks that ‘occurrent states ... form part of the stream of consciousness’ (43).
8. In later work (in epistemology rather than action theory) Goldman seems to fully embrace (C), asserting that an occurrent belief ‘is a state of consciousness’ (1978, 526, orig. italics). Other authors have also wavered on whether occurrent attitudes can be unconscious. The glossary entry above from Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson (2006), identifying occurrent beliefs with conscious beliefs, is from the second edition of their philosophy of mind text. The *first* edition identified occurrent beliefs as ‘beliefs of which one is consciously aware, or which are currently guiding behaviour, or some such’ (1996, 276; my italics). A more recent example appears in a single paper: Buckwalter, Rose, and Turri (2015) state that ‘occurrent belief is conscious endorsement’ (p. 753), but later in a footnote (n. 22) they acknowledge the possibility of unconscious occurrent beliefs.
9. There is a well-known (though little-discussed, at least in print) argument to the effect that functionalism must be false because it construes all mental states as dispositional states, yet occurrent states are not dispositional. The argument fails, in my view, because there is no reason to think that a dispositional account of occurrent states is impossible. In Bartlett (unpublished) I show how this anti-functional argument actually requires not the concept of occurrent states as non-dispositional, but instead the concept that I present in §6.
10. Cf. Kriegel (2011), who argues, against functionalism, that since the subjective character of phenomenal states is ‘occurrent and manifest’ (p. 213), it is not captured by a *dispositional* analysis. He then notes the objection that there *is* a sense in which subjective character is dispositional: like a functional role, it can be individuated by causal powers. Kriegel concedes this, but replies that subjective character, unlike a functional role, ‘is not *just* – not *nothing but* – a fund of causal powers’ (p. 213n).
11. Armstrong (1973) remarks, concerning the idea that beliefs are dispositions, that ‘[t]he word ‘disposition’ is a philosopher’s term of art here. In ordinary language, dispositions such as cheerfulness and irritability are attributed to persons and animals ... It would be a matter for inquiry whether such traits ..., although they bear obvious analogy to philosopher’s dispositions and are the source of the term, are in fact dispositions in the technical sense’ (p. 8).
12. It may seem incoherent to say that an occurrent *state* is *active*. But the word ‘state’ is used so indiscriminately in philosophy of mind that it has almost no definite meaning (cf. Steward 1997). Certainly no one assumes that a ‘mental state’ must actually be *static*. To the contrary, the assumption seems to have been that since mental phenomena could turn out to fall into a variety of ontological categories, ‘state’ was merely a default placeholder. For example, Armstrong (1968) explicitly used it in a broad sense that was ‘not meant to rule out ‘process’ or ‘event’’ (p. 82).
13. I should add (in an echo of my first and second preliminary remarks in §3) that my adoption of this distinction from Goldman does not constitute endorsement of his views of wanting, or of how wants cause actions.
14. In volcanology, volcanoes are often called ‘active’ if they have erupted in the last 10,000 years or so. I am using the word in a more everyday sense, connoting current internal changes. A volcano may thus be active in the volcanologists’ sense but not in mine. (I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the need for this clarification.)

15. Connectionists would appear to endorse (*F*), and thus have effectively put forward a specific account of the properties involved. Churchland and Sejnowski (1992) distinguish ‘occurrent’ representations, such as thoughts or perceptions, from ‘abeyant’ or ‘stored’ representations that comprise one’s background beliefs, and posit that the former are ‘patterns of *activation* across set [*sic*] of units,’ while the latter are ‘configurations of *weights* between the units’ (p. 165, orig. italics). See also Botterill (1994) and Horgan and Tienson (1995).

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