

Fantasy, Pleasure, Desire, and Morality

Although the nature of imagination has received much attention from philosophers, the nature of a closely related phenomenon, fantasy, remains relatively neglected. This may be because it is natural to suppose that fantasy is just a specific type of imagination—namely, the pleasant kind: to fantasize about something, it seems, is just to pleasantly imagine it.¹ The credibility of this analysis might make it appear that investigating the natures of imagination and pleasure is all we need to do to investigate that of fantasy: whatever the correct accounts of the former two phenomena are, it might seem, the correct account of the latter will fall out of them. In this paper, I argue that this picture is too simple. Even if we assume that to fantasize about something is to pleasantly imagine it—or, more weakly, that it requires pleasantly imagining it, though it may also require something else—it is not obvious what the nature and object of the relevant pleasure are. I distinguish two natural views about this, the Activity View and the Object View, and I argue that the latter makes it easier than the former to justify two claims: that one cannot fantasize about something without desiring it, and that it can be inherently morally objectionable to fantasize about certain things. Although I suggest that we should therefore accept the Object View, my larger aim is to encourage inquiry into the nature of fantasy by illustrating how interesting it can be.

1. Assumptions

I am primarily interested in fantasizing, a certain kind of mental process or activity, rather than in fantasies, construed as the objects of that process or activity (e.g., “winning the lottery is a common fantasy”). When I talk about what fantasy is or requires, I mean what it is or requires to fantasize about something.

As one might have inferred, I make these assumptions:

- (1) Fantasy requires an object: one cannot fantasize without fantasizing about something.
- (2) Fantasy requires imagination: one cannot fantasize about something without imagining it.

¹ Smuts (2016, p. 380) defines fantasizing as “conscious, pleasurable imagining” without elaborating upon this. Agreeing with him, McCormick (2020, p. 272) writes that “it is the pleasurable imagining that distinguishes [fantasies] from other kinds of imagining.” Cherry (1985) says only that fantasy is “one mode of the imagination” (p. 177).

(3) Fantasy requires pleasure: one cannot fantasize without experiencing pleasure.

Although some might doubt (2) because they suspect that fantasy can be partly constituted by some more general mental activity than imagination (e.g., thinking), I think this concern is largely allayed by the widely accepted view that imagination need not be sensory: one can imagine, for example, that physicalism is false or that moral realism is true. If fantasy requires only some mental activity more general than imagination, everything I will say below can be modified accordingly. Moreover, because I use ‘pleasure’ to refer to all pleasant experiences, sensory or not, (3) doesn’t imply that one cannot fantasize without feeling bodily sensations.

I also assume that

(4) The objects of fantasy are states of affairs.

If I fantasize about winning the lottery, for example, the object of my fantasy is the state of affairs *my winning the lottery*.² And to fantasize, for example sexually, about a particular person is to fantasize about a state of affairs involving that person. This seems as defensible as the standard assumption that the objects of desire are states of affairs even though ordinary language may suggest otherwise. Moreover, it will be convenient to proceed as though states of affairs correspond or are identical to propositions in such a way that, for example, the state *my winning the lottery* corresponds or is identical to the proposition *that I win the lottery*. This will allow us to equate fantasizing about something with fantasizing that *p*, for some proposition *p*.³

2. Two Views about Fantasy and Pleasure

It’s not plausible that to fantasize about something is just to imagine it while feeling pleasure. After all, if you imagine something while feeling a completely unrelated pleasure, this doesn’t entail that you are fantasizing about what you are imagining. Insofar as it is plausible that to fantasize about something is to pleasantly imagine it, pleasantly imagining something cannot just be imagining it while feeling pleasure: the pleasure must be related in the right way to, and not just simultaneous

² Of course, the objects of fantasies are usually far more determinate states of affairs that are difficult to fully describe.

³ Assumptions (1) – (4) may not entail all of the truths about the nature of fantasy. For example, perhaps fantasies must be sufficiently temporally extended.

with, the imagining. Very little has been written about this relation.⁴ To my mind, two views about it are most worthy of consideration. Since it’s plausible that to pleasantly do something is just to do it while enjoying doing it, the most natural view is arguably this:

Activity View To fantasize that p , one must imagine that p while enjoying imagining that p .

But since the object of one’s imagining can also be an object of pleasure, another natural view is this:

Object View To fantasize that p , one must imagine that p while taking attitudinal pleasure in p .

Note that these views state only necessary conditions, so they leave open the possibility that fantasy requires more than pleasant imagination. I have named them after the answers that they give to the question: what is the object of the pleasure that fantasy requires? The Activity View is so-called because it says that it is the *activity* that one is engaging in: imagining. The Object View is so-called because it says that it is the *object* of one’s imagining. But these views also disagree about the nature of the relevant pleasure: while the Activity View says that it is enjoyment, the Object View says that it is attitudinal pleasure. To fully grasp how the views differ, one must therefore understand how these forms of pleasure differ.

Attitudinal pleasure is pleasure about some state of affairs: it is what you feel when you are pleased, happy, glad, or delighted that something is the case, or when you take pleasure in the thought that something is the case.⁵ Claims of the form ‘S is pleased that p ’ might appear to be factive, since it would ordinarily be misleading to make such claims when p is false. It seems to me, though, that ‘S is pleased that p ’ doesn’t entail that p is true but only pragmatically implicates that it is. To my ear, for example, “Harris was pleased that she was about to win the election—even though, unbeknownst to her, she wasn’t” sounds fine, and this suggests that “Harris was pleased that she was about to win the election” can be true even though she wasn’t about to win. In any case, attitudinal pleasures can have false objects: a person can take pleasure in some state of affairs even if it doesn’t obtain, at least

⁴ Some theorists assume something about this relation without noting the importance of what they assume: see, e.g., Kershnar (2005), pp. 301, 307, and Smuts (2016), pp. 381, 384, 388.

⁵ Feldman (2004), ch. 4; Heathwood (2006), pp. 551-52. Feldman (1988) also calls it propositional pleasure.

if she believes it to obtain. If ‘S is pleased that p ’ is indeed factive, then it communicates not only that S takes attitudinal pleasure in p but also that p is true.⁶

The concept of *enjoyment* is familiar from ordinary thought. I follow Wayne Davis⁷ in holding that:

- (i) One can enjoy something at t only if one is conscious of it (i.e., is experiencing it) at t , for example via sense perception or introspection. (To be aware of something in the epistemic sense of knowing or truly believing it is not sufficient.)
- (ii) Enjoyment is factive: one can enjoy something only if it exists, occurs, obtains, or is true.
- (iii) Enjoyment is extensional: if $x = y$ and one is enjoying x , then one is enjoying y .

Enjoyment and attitudinal pleasure are distinct. You can be pleased that you won the race even if you came in second, but you cannot enjoy winning the race unless you win. If Lois Lane is enjoying kissing Superman, then she is enjoying kissing Clark Kent even if she doesn’t realize that that’s who she is kissing; but since attitudinal pleasure is not extensional, she can be pleased that she is kissing Superman without being pleased that she is kissing Clark Kent.

The Activity and Object views occupy spaces in a two-by-two matrix that has spaces for two other views: the view that, to fantasize that p , one must imagine that p while enjoying that p , and the view that, to fantasize that p , one must imagine that p while taking attitudinal pleasure in the fact that one is imagining that p . These views are less plausible than the Activity and Object views are, however. Fantasy can, and usually does, have a false object. Furthermore, fantasy isn’t extensional: Lois can fantasize about kissing Superman without fantasizing about kissing Clark. Thus, if the pleasure that one must experience while fantasizing about p has p as its object, then it cannot be enjoyment, which is factive and extensional. This rules out the view that, to fantasize about p , one must imagine that p while enjoying that p . We can’t likewise rule out the view that, to fantasize about p , one must imagine that p while taking attitudinal pleasure in the fact that one is imagining that p , because one can take attitudinal pleasure in the fact that one is imagining something. However, taking pleasure in the fact that one is imagining something is different from enjoying imagining it and is less promising as an account of the nature of the pleasure required for fantasy. If, having long lost the ability to imagine,

⁶ Feldman (2004), p. 60; Heathwood (2006), pp. 556-57.

⁷ Davis (1982).

I suddenly regain it, I might be pleased that I am imagining something without thereby fantasizing about what I am imagining. Likewise, if I am pleased that I am imagining missing my flight because I would otherwise have neglected to set my alarm, I needn't be fantasizing about missing my flight. By contrast, it is more credible that I would be fantasizing if, instead of (or in addition to) being pleased about the fact that I am imagining, I were enjoying imagining. Although taking attitudinal pleasure in the fact that one is imagining something could nonetheless be necessary for fantasizing about it, it's hard to see what would motivate thinking that this is true. So, it seems best either to pair attitudinal pleasure with the object of one's imagination, as the Object View does, or to pair enjoyment with one's act of imagining, as the Activity View does.

One commonly endorsed claim about attitudinal pleasure saddles the Object View with the plainly false implication that one can fantasize only about what one believes to be true:

Belief To take attitudinal pleasure in *p*, one must believe that *p*.⁸

But Belief is hard to square with the apparent fact that “a person... could take pleasure at the things he observes in a movie, or in a novel, or in a play.”⁹ It forces us to say that, if you are watching the scene in *Forrest Gump* in which Gump meets Kennedy, you can be taking attitudinal pleasure only in something like “the way in which they make it seem that [they met].”¹⁰ These considerations don't count decisively against it, since perhaps the pleasure in such cases is just enjoyment directed at the activity of watching or reading, but they do cast some doubt on it. Moreover, Belief is not strongly supported by the fact that it is misleading to make claims of the form ‘S is pleased that *p*’ when S doesn't believe that *p*. To my ear, it sounds wrong to say, “Harris was pleased that she was about to win, even though she didn't believe this,” and this suggests that ‘S is pleased that *p*’ does entail, as opposed merely pragmatically implicating, that S believes that *p*. But even if this is correct, it doesn't follow that Belief is true, because it could be that ‘S is pleased that *p*’ communicates not only that S is taking attitudinal pleasure in *p*, but also that S believes that *p*. Those committed to Belief will deem the Object View unacceptable and will therefore be drawn to the Activity View. But since Belief isn't obviously true, we shouldn't dismiss the Object View out of hand.

⁸ Feldman (2004), p. 59; Heathwood (2006), pp. 557-58.

⁹ Feldman (2004), p. 59.

¹⁰ Feldman (2004), p. 59.

Nor should we dismiss the Activity View because of cases that suggest that even enjoying imagining something (and not just taking attitudinal pleasure in the fact that one is imagining it) isn't sufficient for fantasizing about it. It might seem that, if a teacher instructs some schoolchildren to imagine a lion, they could enjoy doing this (because they enjoy exercising their imaginations) without thereby fantasizing about a lion. Although the Activity View states only a necessary condition, it might seem unmotivated if its condition is not plausibly sufficient. But perhaps the children are fantasizing, and we are tempted to think otherwise because their act of fantasy is unusual (e.g., by being other- rather than self-directed). What's true about cases like this isn't clear enough to warrant dismissing the Activity View out of hand—especially since its most plausible competitor, the Object View, is unavailable to theorists who accept Belief.

So, there are at least two *prima facie* plausible views about the nature and object of the pleasure that is required by fantasy: the Activity View and the Object View. This shows that the correct analysis of fantasy won't simply fall out of the correct analyses of imagination and pleasure. Perhaps fantasizing about something just is (or requires) pleasantly imagining it, but it's unclear what it is to pleasantly imagine something in the relevant sense: is it to imagine it while enjoying imagining it or to imagine it while taking attitudinal pleasure in it? As I will argue in the next two sections, these views may disagree about fantasy's morality and its connection with desire.

3. Fantasy and Desire

Must you desire what you are fantasizing about? Neither view immediately entails a positive answer, but the Object View is friendlier to such an answer than the Activity View is.

At least on some senses of 'desire', the following claim is plausible, and more so than Belief:

Desire To take attitudinal pleasure in *p*, one must desire that *p*.¹¹

The first such sense is the philosophical one on which 'desire' refers to any conative (as opposed to cognitive) pro-attitude. Plausibly, one cannot take attitudinal pleasure in something without having

¹¹ Heathwood (2006), pp. 557-59.

such a pro-attitude toward it (i.e., without being “into” it, “for” it, or “pro” it).¹² The second such sense is the one on which to desire something is to view it with enthusiasm, excitement, or gusto. (Since one can intentionally do something that one doesn’t so view—for example, from a sense of obligation—one can intentionally do something that one has no desire, in this sense, to do.)¹³ Plausibly, taking attitudinal pleasure in something requires so viewing it.

If Desire is true, then since the Object View says that you cannot fantasize about something without taking attitudinal pleasure in it, it implies that you cannot fantasize about something without desiring it. By contrast, even if something analogous to Desire is true of enjoyment (e.g., even if one cannot enjoy an activity without wanting to be engaging in it), the Activity View would imply only that you cannot fantasize about something without desiring *to imagine it*; it would not imply that you cannot fantasize about something without desiring *it*. The Object View therefore makes it easier than the Activity View does to justify the claim that one must desire what one is fantasizing about.

4. The Morality of Fantasy

The two views diverge similarly with respect to whether it can be inherently morally objectionable to fantasize about certain things—i.e., morally objectionable to fantasize about them simply because of what they are (and not merely because fantasizing about them has bad consequences, for example). Although neither view immediately implies that it can be, the Object View provides an obvious route to this conclusion, but the Activity View doesn’t.

Thomas Hurka has argued that, while it is good to love what is good or to hate what is bad, it is bad to love what is bad or to hate what is good. Stated more precisely, the component of this view that is relevant here is the following:

Recursion If p is bad, then having a pro-attitude toward p is bad.¹⁴

We can imagine a similar recursive principle about moral objectionableness:

¹² Heathwood (2006), p. 559; Lin (2020), pp. 518-22.

¹³ Heathwood (2019) calls this the ‘genuine attraction’ sense of ‘desire’.

¹⁴ Hurka (2001), p. 16. I have simplified his formulation.

Recursion* If p is morally objectionable, then having a pro-attitude toward p is morally objectionable.

And we can also imagine a similar principle—though not, strictly speaking, a recursive one—that connects badness with moral objectionableness:

Recursion** If p is bad, then having a pro-attitude toward p is morally objectionable.

These principles are plausible. Intuitively, morally objectionable or bad things merit opposition or some other kind of negative response. If one responds positively to such a thing, it seems that one’s response is itself morally objectionable or bad.

The Object View implies that if you are fantasizing about something bad or morally objectionable, you are taking attitudinal pleasure in something bad or morally objectionable. As I said earlier, it is plausible that to take attitudinal pleasure toward something requires having a pro-attitude toward it.¹⁵ Thus, if Recursion* and Recursion** are true, then plausibly, the Object View implies that it is morally objectionable to fantasize about bad or morally objectionable things.

By contrast, even if enjoying something requires having a pro-attitude toward it (which it plausibly does), the Activity View won’t imply via those principles that it is morally objectionable to fantasize about bad or morally objectionable things. After all, according to the Activity View, the object of the relevant enjoyment is not the object of one’s fantasy: it is one’s activity of imagining the object of one’s fantasy. And there doesn’t seem to be anything bad or morally objectionable about imagining something bad or morally objectionable.¹⁶ If you imagine some Nazi atrocities to remind yourself why antisemitism must never be tolerated, you haven’t done anything bad or morally objectionable.

Of course, someone might propose the independent principle that it’s morally objectionable to *enjoy* imagining something bad or morally objectionable. When conjoined with this principle, the Activity View would imply that it is morally objectionable to fantasize about bad or morally objectionable things. But this principle is less plausible than the aforementioned recursive ones, and it’s not clear

¹⁵ We can endorse this claim without endorsing Desire, on which the Object View implies that if you fantasize about something, you have the specific pro-attitude of *desire* toward it.

¹⁶ Smuts (2016), pp. 380-81, 385.

what reason we have to accept it. Why would it be morally objectionable to enjoy an activity (viz., imagining something bad or morally objectionable) that is not itself morally objectionable? Thus, the Object View makes it easier than the Activity View does to justify the claim that it can be inherently morally objectionable to fantasize about certain things.

5. A Case for the Object View

Let me end by suggesting that those features of the Object View should incline us to accept it.

It is plausible that one cannot fantasize about something without desiring it, at least on some senses of ‘desire’. To fantasize about something seems to require having some kind of conative pro-attitude toward it, so it seems to require desiring it in the generic philosophical sense on which ‘desire’ refers to any such attitude. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain why a person fantasizes about some things and not others: why does she fantasize about those things in particular if not because she is positively oriented toward them? Fantasizing about something also seems to require desiring it in the sense of viewing it with enthusiasm, excitement, or gusto. Some philosophers deny that fantasizing about something requires desiring it in the motivational sense of being disposed to behave in ways that would, according to one’s beliefs, bring it about.¹⁷ But even if they are right, it remains plausible that fantasizing about something requires desiring it in some sense¹⁸—especially since one can desire something to some degree while being even more strongly averse to it or while even more strongly desiring things that are incompatible with it. As I noted earlier, since Desire is plausible, the Object View (unlike the Activity View) provides us a plausible explanation of why one must, in some sense, desire the objects of one’s fantasies. This is a reason to accept to Object View.

The claim that it can be inherently morally objectionable to fantasize about certain things is also, when properly understood, plausible. Moral objectionableness comes in many degrees, only some of which are sufficient for moral wrongness and for the appropriateness of blame in the absence of excusing or exempting conditions. Since the claim implies only that fantasizing about certain things

¹⁷ Neu (2002), p. 146; McCormick (2020), pp. 274-77.

¹⁸ Neu (2002) claims that the object of one’s fantasy *appeals* to one (pp. 133, 154) and that one must *wish* for something to fantasize about it (pp. 135-36 n1). Thus, he may well agree that fantasizing about something requires desiring it in some non-motivational sense. Smithies (forthcoming) argues that there is no necessary connection between desire and motivation and no motivational sense of ‘desire’.

can possess *some* degree of moral objectionableness on account of what those things are, it doesn't imply that it can be inherently morally wrong to fantasize about certain things or that one can be inherently blameworthy for fantasizing about certain things. Thus, the claim is compatible with the view that we should not police what people fantasize about, except insofar as their doing this may have morally significant consequences (e.g., by making them more likely to act morally wrongly). Consider the most evil act that you can imagine. Isn't it plausible that someone who fantasizes about it would thereby fall short of moral perfection? If so, then the fact that the Object View, unlike the Activity View, can plausibly explain this is a reason to accept the former.

Of course, because I can't rule out the possibility that a compelling case could be made for Belief, I can't be sure that we won't have to reject the Object View for having the false implication that one can fantasize only about what one believes to be true. In that case, the Activity View might merit our acceptance for lack of a plausible alternative. Absent such a case, however, it seems to me that we should be inclined to accept the Object View.

6. Conclusion

I distinguished two natural interpretations of the plausible claim that fantasizing about something requires pleasantly imagining it, the Activity View and the Object View, and I argued that the latter can more easily justify the claims that one must (in some sense) desire the objects of one's fantasies and that it can be inherently morally objectionable to fantasize about certain things. Although I then suggested, on the grounds that those claims are plausible, that we should be inclined to accept the Object View, my larger aim has been to show that there are interesting questions to be asked about the nature of fantasy and to encourage attention to these questions.¹⁹

¹⁹ I thank Mathilde Cappelli, Tristram McPherson, Declan Smithies, participants at the conference, “Fantasy: its Nature, Norms, and Values,” at the University of Geneva, and two anonymous reviewers.

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