

Mental Acts and Moral Responsibility

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Can you be morally responsible for merely imagining something? The answer seems straightforward: unlikely. After all, the usual sorts of things that are candidates for wrong-making features require some kind of externality—a real-world consequence or negative effect. Physical actions are something we generally agree one is morally responsible for: kicking puppies, stealing from the poor, etc. There is no physical consequence to imagining something. What happens in the confines of one's mind can't cause physical harm to another being. One's imagination has very few, if any, real-world effects. It seems as if there is nothing to hold one morally responsible for because no harm is caused, no negative action is taken, and nothing in the physical world has been changed or affected.

This answer feels rather intuitive—it's an easy enough conclusion to make. So now that I've hopefully buttered you up to the view, I'm going to completely disagree with everything I just said. I think one can be responsible for a particular kind of imagining. This is because, I will argue, it counts as an intentional action—the kind of thing that we generally consider someone to be responsible for. This particular sort of imagining I will refer to as “fantasization.”

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First, I will clarify the important differences between fantasization and other sorts of mere imagining. Then, I will argue that fantasization counts as an action for all the same reasons physical actions do. I will then discuss the interesting upshot of this argument: if we can hold someone morally responsible for intentional physical actions, we should be able to hold someone morally responsible for certain intentional mental actions as well. In closing, I will suggest some ways we might think about the potential wrongness of certain mental actions and discuss a couple of possible objections.

I. The Distinction

Imagination vs. Fantasization

I believe it is important to preserve the line between the kinds of mere imagining one isn't responsible for and the kinds that one might be, so I will endeavor to provide a clear account of what I mean by fantasization. Imagination is a mental faculty consisting of something like our "capacity for representing possibilities other than the actual, times other than the present, and perspectives other than one's own" (Liao and Gendler). It's a tool one can use, but it can also function independently from one's intentions in some way. Fantasization is an intentional utilization of the imagination in pursuit of pleasure or gratification. It is distinct from mere imagining in both its intentionality and desired end. When one fantasizes, one intentionally employs the faculty of imagination to seek out a pleasurable or gratifying reaction. Because I am introducing this new term, here are some brief technical criteria:

- (1) The agent employs the mental faculty of imagination (in some way) to produce the fantasization.
- (2) The agent's fantasizing is guided by their intention to obtain a pleasurable or gratifying reaction.
- (3) The agent is aware of their fantasizing and conceives of it as being the purpose and method of obtaining a pleasurable or gratifying reaction.

(1) is necessary because one cannot fantasize without employing the imagination in some way (though one can involve external factors as well, which will be touched on later). (2) is necessary because the purpose and effect of the employment of imagination must be pleasure or gratification, or it cannot be a fantasy. (3) is an extra meta-cognitive piece that allows us

to exclude fringe cases that we wouldn't want to include as fantasization. One could employ one's imagination with some kind of intention to obtain a pleasurable or gratifying reaction without being aware of it. This sounds like an unusual case, but it seems like dreams could potentially meet these criteria, with the intention aspect being subconscious. It seems wrong to say that dreams are actions one could be morally blameworthy for, and thus (3) protects us from having to include cases like these. Now, this is a lot of jargon and technical verbiage, so to illustrate more directly what fantasization looks like, I will introduce a couple of cases.

Suppose person A imagines what it might be like to hit someone with their car. Imagining is simply a general faculty of the mind, so mere imagining could be caused by a variety of things. Person A could be experiencing an intrusive thought, conducting an internal moral experiment, or considering a negative consequence to potential action. Person B fantasizes about hitting someone with their car and intentionally employs their imaginative faculties. They fantasize about what it would be like, and they do so with the intention, and end result, of receiving a pleasurable or gratifying reaction from their fantasy.

It's unclear that person A is doing anything in particular with their imagining, and it doesn't seem as though their imagining indicates anything potentially morally concerning. However, we might think person B has a desire to hit someone with their car. They are, after all, intentionally pursuing the fantasy and deriving pleasure from the idea of hitting someone with their car.

Drawing a clear delineation between imagination and fantasization allows us to distinguish mere imaginings and other mental acts from fantasization. Many people, often with OCD or other conditions that have an impact on their thought processes, may experience frequent intrusive thoughts about things we may deem morally reprehensible. But if a thought is not under the control of the thinker (they are not actively seeking the thought) and does not provide the thinker with pleasure, it cannot fall under our established definition of fantasization. I will exclude things like intrusive thoughts, dreams, and other mere imaginings from the kind of moral consideration I will be arguing fantasization can possess.

Additional Considerations

Fantasization need not happen solely within the imagination. There is a necessary component of imagination in fantasization, but one may pursue one's fantasies with external assistance. Someone who fantasizes about being a superhero might read comics or watch movies about

superheroes, imaginatively putting themselves in that world to better pursue their fantasy. Perhaps someone else fantasizes about buying a house and scrolls through options on Zillow, imagining what it would be like to own one. Looking at homes on Zillow or reading comics are external actions, but they might aid the imaginer in the pursuit of effective fantasization.

On the darker side of things, someone might fantasize about illegal, sexually deviant acts, and so they seek out pornography depicting those acts in order to better pursue their fantasy. Someone who fantasizes about cheating on their partner might scroll through dating apps, fantasizing about potential escapades with the people they see. The point is that while all the aforementioned criteria must be met for an act to count as fantasization, there are means of supplementing fantasization with external material.

Fantasization, at least intuitively, seems to have the potential to be much more morally concerning than other mental acts. Consider an example. Suppose someone derives pleasure from fantasizing about sexually assaulting someone. They do not act on this fantasy when it comes to real people, but they routinely fantasize and are gratified by this fantasy. Suppose that the same person is particularly interested in pedophilic acts, and this plays a role in their fantasies. We might think it is extremely concerning that someone would fantasize about such a thing. But to provide grounds to criticize fantasization, it must count as an intentional action. So, we will establish just that.

II. Fantasization as an Intentional Action

To carefully establish fantasization as an intentional action, let's take a look at one of the most prominent theories of action: Davidson's ARC theory, from his paper "Actions, Reasons, and Causes." Davidson's "widely accepted" ARC theory of action has two central theses (Wilson and Shiphall). First, the explanation of an action involves a "primary reason," which is a pairing of belief and desire. This pairing rationalizes the action by expressing the end pursued in the action (desire) and how the agent conceived of the action accomplishing this end (instrumental belief). The second thesis is that the primary reason is also the cause of the action (Davidson 685-700). To illustrate this theory, we can take an example: Clara goes to the dentist because she wishes to get her teeth cleaned. We can explain her action with her desire (to get her teeth cleaned) and a belief (the dentist can clean her teeth).

We can run this same sort of example for fantasization, matching the ARC theory of action. John fantasizes in order to obtain a pleasurable or gratifying reaction. His action (fantasization) is explained by his desire

(to obtain a pleasurable or gratifying result) and a belief (fantasization will allow him to obtain a pleasurable or gratifying result). Already, this theory of action helps eliminate other mental acts from the possibility of action status (dreams, intrusive thoughts, etc.). The key factor to this is the aspect of intentionality, which is lacking in many of the mental acts that fall short of the action criteria. So why does intentionality matter? Kelley puts it this way:

Indeed, notice that we don't tend to blame or praise people for their sneezes, seizures, ticks [*sic*], and what they do while asleep, the reason presumably being that such doings are not usually intentional. On the other hand, outside of extenuating circumstances involving, for example, coercion, we do tend to blame and praise people for what they do intentionally. Approximately then, we can be blameworthy and praiseworthy for the behaviors that we perform intentionally. ("Guilty" 2)

So we might already be in a position to blame or praise fantasization because it's a behavior we perform intentionally.¹ However, even though fantasization qualifies for ARC action status and meets the intention requirement, I'd like to take it a step further. Just being an action isn't enough for a mental act to be up for moral evaluation, and we want to leave a lot of mere imagination off the morally charged table, so to speak. So fantasization needs to be a nonbasic intentional action, one we take a means for, if we want to say that fantasization counts as a morally evaluable action for the same reasons our other actions do. Raising one's hand or moving one's leg don't seem like candidates for moral evaluation in themselves; just because you perform an act doesn't mean that the act is either morally good or bad. The choice to fantasize at all might be a sort of action without means. Nonbasic actions are performed by taking a means—raising one's hand to ask a question in class, or moving one's leg to kick a ball. Moving one's fist is an action, but it doesn't seem to be up for any kind of moral inquiry; it's too simple. But moving one's fist to punch someone in the face seems obviously bad. In this case, moving one's fist is a productive means to punch someone in the face, and the productive means causes the nonbasic intentional action of punching someone in the face.²

¹ There are other mental acts, like intentional judgment, deciding, and remembering, that likely qualify as potentially blameworthy or praiseworthy actions in the same way. See Peacocke, "How to Judge Intentionally," and Kelley, "How to Perform a Nonbasic Action."

² It should be noted that there is debate in the literature about whether or not productive means cause a nonbasic action or constitute it. Following Kelley, I will be taking the causal stance.

To establish further what a productive means looks like, we can consider an example from Alfred Mele. He provides an example of someone trying to think of seven animals with names that begin with ‘g.’ There must be a productive means for that action to actually occur. For instance, “keeping one’s attention focused on the task, silently keeping a running account of the ‘g’ names that occurred to one, and bringing it about that one thinks of seven suitable names” (Mele 17). To explain why fantasization is a nonbasic action, I will establish its productive means.

Though there may be other productive means in which to cause fantasization, the means I believe to be the most fitting is engaging with the fantasy one is aiming to fantasize about. For this to be true, we need to establish the engagement with the fantasy (called “EwF” from here on) as a productive means in which to cause fantasization. EwF is sort of like the raising of the arm, and fantasization is like the raising of the arm in order to ask a question in class. EwF only involves the intention to fantasize, and the mental movement involved with the engagement. The fantasization includes forming the intention to receive pleasure and gratification and successfully attaining the pleasure or gratification. To establish EwF as a productive means, we can use these criteria from Kelley:

ψ as a Productive Means to ϕ

- I. ϕ is a (bodily or mental) movement of the agent’s under the description $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$;
- II. the agent’s ψ -ing is guided by their intention to ϕ ;
- III. the agent, while ψ -ing, conceives of their ψ -ing as being for the purpose of and as being their method of executing their intention to ϕ . (“How to” 109)

There is already an overlap between these criteria and our definition of fantasization, but we need to plug in EwF. Using Kelley’s above criteria, we can tweak it to use EwF:

EwF as a Productive Means to Fantasize

- I. Fantasization is a movement of the agent’s under the description $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$;
- II. the agent’s EwF is guided by their intention to fantasize;
- III. the agent, while EwF, conceives of their EwF as being for the purpose of and as being their method of executing their intention to fantasize.

Now we have our productive means for fantasization, so we can move on to establishing fantasization as an intentional nonbasic action. To take Kelley's theory to its completion, an action must meet the "causal closure" criteria to be an intentional nonbasic action. Causal closure explains how one uses a productive means (for us, EwF) to intentionally act.

Kelley's Causal Closure

- (1) An event M is a [mental or physical] movement of an agent's under the description $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$;
- (2) the agent intends to ϕ and this intention persists until the completion of M ;
- (3) an event N is an intentional action of the agent's under the description $\ulcorner \psi \urcorner$;
- (4) the agent uses ψ as a productive means to ϕ ;
- (5) and N non-deviantly causes M . ("How to" 110–11)

Then the event M is an intentional action of the agent's under the description $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$.

To illustrate the importance of causal closure in more detail:

When an agent satisfies Conditions (1)–(5) relative to her action ψ and her movement ϕ , the claim is that she does not merely intentionally *cause herself to ϕ* or *bring it about that she ϕ s* or *make herself ϕ* . She successfully executes her intention and intentionally ϕ s as a nonbasic action. (Kelley, "How to" 111)

To illustrate how fantasization can fit the causal closure criteria, we can plug it into the conditions provided.

Causal Closure—Fantasization

- (1) Fantasization³ is movement of an agent's under the description $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$;
- (2) the agent intends to ϕ and this intention persists until the completion of the fantasy;

³ Because the obtaining of pleasure or gratification is already part of our definition of fantasization, we don't need to specify beyond that within the conditions.

- (3) EwF is an intentional action of the agent's under the description $\ulcorner \psi \urcorner$;
- (4) the agent uses ψ as a productive means to ϕ ;
- (5) and EwF non-deviantly causes the fantasization.

Then the fantasization is an intentional action of the agent's under the description $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$.

If you're not convinced, or if that was too jargony, we can also use a more straightforward approach, by checking if fantasization can meet the list of attributes a nonbasic intentional action must possess. Kelley provides us with some criteria for intentional action: "attributable to the agent, intended, voluntary, controlled, purposeful, and includes the agent as a participant" ("How to" 123).

Let us take a non-mental act as an example first. Suppose Kyle throws a basketball through a hoop. The fact that the basketball went through the hoop is attributed to Kyle. He intended to throw the basketball through the hoop, did so voluntarily, and was in control of his body when he did so. He was participatory and purposeful in his throwing of the basketball. Now that we have an example of an intentional physical action, we can provide an account of an intentional mental action.

Jenna chooses to fantasize about ϕ . The fact that she is fantasizing about ϕ is attributable to her choice to do so, combined with EwF. What about intended? Many in the philosophy of action tradition hold that to do something intentionally is to do it for a reason.⁴ When one fantasizes, one does it to obtain pleasure or gratification. So, we have the intentionality requirement. Jenna intended to fantasize and did so voluntarily. She was in control of herself when she did so (intentionally acting, not dreaming or coerced, etc.), and is purposefully fantasizing. She is participatory in her fantasization; it could not be happening without her. Fantasization cannot occur without the agent (in this case, Jenna) as a participant. Even if the fantasy excluded her in some way,⁵ the fantasy still occurs with the intention of pleasure or gratification for her, so she is still necessarily participatory. It is her fantasy, after all.

Intentional (often nonbasic) actions are what make up the morally important kind of agency, more often than not. Even if they don't have consequences, we may still think they're morally relevant. If I break a promise to you, even if you never find out about it, we'd like to consider

⁴ See, for example, Anscombe (1957) and Davidson (2001).

⁵ Perhaps the fantasy itself is about other individuals and does not involve Jenna. But as Jenna is still the one doing the fantasizing, she is still a necessary participant in some way.

that the intentional action I took in breaking the promise was probably morally questionable in some way. Now, we have shown that fantasization is a nonbasic intentional action. If we hold that one is morally responsible for one's physical actions, we are now in a position to hold one morally responsible for one's mental actions, for the same sorts of reasons.

III. Fantasization as a Morally Meaningful Action

Just because one *can* be morally responsible for one's fantasization doesn't mean there are indeed circumstances in which one is. A more robust account of the theory ought to be given to provide a more thorough investigation of what it means for actions like fantasization to be morally wrong. However, we can investigate at least one way of going about this. To illustrate a scenario in which one is morally responsible for fantasization, let us take a look at a couple of cases.

Suppose you and your partner are watching a new TV show you both greatly enjoy. Your partner is going out of town for the weekend and asks you not to watch the show without them so that you can enjoy it together when they get back. You promise not to watch without them. If you turned on the TV and watched the episode without them, it seems apparent you would be acting wrongly. Breaking a promise, especially to a person of importance, generally seems bad. We can exercise a sort of normative power to exclude or prohibit things (within reason) in our relationships. Your partner exercised their ability to request something of you, and you exercised yours to make an explicit commitment in response to that request. You are, of course, morally responsible for choosing to watch the TV show without them. Your action broke the promise you had made. We have reasons to participate in this kind of promise-making. There isn't anything normatively special about this case—it's just an instance of promise-making in relationships, in which one is now morally responsible for one's upholding of some promise.

We can run an analogous case with fantasization to show fantasization's potential moral implications. Suppose John has pledged absolute fidelity to his spouse Sarah in thought and action (a common promise in wedding vows). John has made a similar sort of commitment to the TV show case, in that he is participating in a particular sort of promise making. But in this circumstance, the promise attaches to sexual and romantic loyalty. If John chose to pursue sexual fantasization about an individual other than Sarah (with all the intention and gratification that comes with it), this would be a situation in which he failed to uphold his end of the promise because he committed an intentional, nonbasic action—namely, fantasization. He is

morally responsible for his fantasization in the same way you'd be morally responsible for watching the TV show without your partner. This is just meant to illustrate a case in which we might think you can be held morally responsible for fantasization.

IV. Addressing Possible Objections

Before closing, I'd like to address a few potential objections to the arguments made in this paper.

Objection One

Actions that happen within the mind cannot be actual actions because they lack a physical component.

A line of argument one could take against my reasoning is that true action requires a physical component. So, while fantasization may count as a mental action, it cannot count as a true action because it does not occur in the physical world. I think this would be a fair claim to make: all one needs to do is find a way to tack on physicality to action, and declare that as what really constitutes a true action.

The problem with this sort of objection is that fantasization is uniquely situated as a mental action that has a physical effect. Perhaps things like judging or remembering would fall to this objection more easily, but fantasization has a way out. This is because fantasization necessarily requires a result of pleasure or gratification—which is a physical reaction. Pleasure “is driven by the release of a range of neurotransmitters (chemical messengers) in many parts of the brain” (Kesby). So there is a physical reaction happening, at least as a result of the action.

The next point one might try to drive against this response is that an action must have a larger physical impact (like moving an arm or leg) for it to be a true action. To this, I would respond that it's certainly possible to develop a theory like that, but how large must the physical impact be for it to be an action? It would require strict regimentation to make sure one doesn't exclude things like lying, which are certainly actions but may require very little physical component. In fact, saying the action has to be physical may end up begging the question. Many philosophers in action theory already hold that mental action can count as action, for all the same reasons physical action can (Kelley, “How to” 108).

Objection Two

EwF might not non-deviantly cause fantasization.

In the causal closure criteria, it is stipulated that EwF must non-deviantly cause fantasization. One could absolutely object to this. Engaging with a fantasy might not always result in fantasization. Kicking a soccer ball will always non-deviantly cause the soccer ball to move (insofar as it isn't restrained). But EwF doesn't necessarily result in fantasization in the same way. It's more like heating up a stove to make water boil—the stove could be turned off before the water boils, or someone could take the pot off the stove. It's not necessarily an instantaneous reaction.

I think this is a fair objection, though I don't think it's theory-defeating. EwF may still be a productive means, even if it doesn't cause fantasization non-deviantly. Even if EwF doesn't non-deviantly cause fantasization, it doesn't entail that EwF is not still a productive means, though perhaps it is now a less-productive means. This means we might get a weaker result, but not necessarily an insufficient one. Consider a talented basketball player throwing a basketball with the intention of scoring a hoop. They may not successfully make the shot non-deviantly, but it doesn't follow that throwing a basketball at the hoop is no longer a productive means of scoring a hoop.

V. Conclusion

That we can be responsible for certain imaginings is an interesting result and one that I think we should give serious consideration to. In this paper, I've drawn a line between mere imagining and fantasization, argued that fantasization is a nonbasic intentional action for all the same reasons as physical ones, and concluded that if one is responsible for one's physical actions, one is also responsible for one's fantasization. Further work is required to determine in what circumstances one should be held morally responsible for one's fantasizations, and what that would look like, but this argument carries with it some very interesting implications for what we believe to be morally important. For now, we should imagine, deliberate, judge, consider, and use our minds to our heart's content. But I do hope we take time to consider our responsibility for our fantasies and what sorts of moral meaning they may hold.

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