

**The Value of a Free and Wandering Mind**  
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**Abstract**

Many theorists, including myself, have argued that some states of mind are appropriate targets of certain reactive attitudes even if they cannot be directly controlled. I now worry that the scope of agency can be widened too far so that no area of mind is beyond the reach of appropriate assessment and judgement. I begin with the intuition, that there is, or ought to be, a domain of the mind that is completely free of normative assessment, where you are safe to let your thoughts and images go wherever they take you without concern that you are doing anything wrong, where praise and shame do not apply. I begin (in section 1) by offering an example of the kind of state I think should be beyond normative judgment; I argue that certain kinds of wakeful fantasies are on par with sleeping dreams. If one shares my view that there is a “free” domain of the wakeful mind, then what I am doing can be seen as clarifying why such states exempt them from judgment. If one does not share this intuition, then what I am doing can be seen as specifying what criteria *would* be needed for a kind of state (or domain) to be free in this sense. And then some may argue that no wakeful fantasies satisfy these criteria. I address those arguments (in section 2) and argue that *if* the fantasies as characterized are appropriate targets of normative assessment then it will be very difficult to exempt dreams of sleep, as well as other exercises of imagination. Of course, some people (like Augustine and surprisingly many others) will not mind this result. I don’t think then that is the end of the discussion, stalemate and parting of intuitions. For I think a case can be made for the *value* of having a realm of imagination that is beyond the reach of any kind of judgment. I present this case in the paper’s final section.

**0. Introduction**

The targets of our normative judgments go beyond voluntary action and include mental states and attitudes. Many common reactions to each other's beliefs, for example, exhibit attitudes that display negative judgments and emotions; someone's belief can elicit what Peter Strawson referred to as "reactive attitudes" such as anger and contempt. We ask in an incredulous tone, "How can you believe that?" or exclaim, "What a ridiculous thing to believe!" We criticize each other for being angry, or fearful when we shouldn't be, or failing to be angry or fearful when we should. Depending on the state being targeted the kind of attitude or judgment that is appropriate to have towards it varies. In previous work I have been concerned with widening the scope of agency beyond that which is under our direct voluntary control and have argued that some states of mind are appropriate targets of certain reactive attitudes even if they cannot be directly controlled. I have argued, for example, that we can be responsible for our beliefs and, that some hopes are rational or appropriate and some not; I can fault you for not hoping well, or judge that, in this context, this is a hope you should not have (thus invoking a certain kind of reproach). In characterizing the conditions by which to evaluate hope's rationality I have argued that different dimensions of assessment track different dimensions of agency and that, in hoping, one's agency can be augmented or diminished in a number of ways. Many others have been engaged in a similar kind of project, and disputes center on how best to characterize the conditions needed such that one is the appropriate target of such attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

But in thinking about these matters I have become worried that the scope of agency can be widened too far so that no area of mind is beyond the reach of appropriate assessment and judgement. I begin with something like an intuition, though perhaps more of a conviction, that there is, or ought to be, a domain of the mind that is completely free of normative assessment, where you are safe to let your thoughts and images go wherever they take you without concern that you are doing anything wrong, where praise and shame do not apply.<sup>2</sup> I am not sure how widely shared this intuition is, but it seems that there is wide agreement that this is the case concerning dreams while we sleep. While it is undoubtedly the case that one can wake from a dream and *feel* some shame for what occurred, I think it is not called for. But on certain conceptions

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Hieronymi (2008) McHugh(2014) Meylan (2018), Owens (2000), and Smith (2005) among many others. I present arguments about belief in (2015) and about hope in (2017).

<sup>2</sup> George Sher (2019) has recently argued (against some of those referenced in the first footnote) that only actions are the proper targets of *moral* assessment, "that the realm of the purely mental is best regarded as a morality-free zone" (484). My argument is more modest than his in some ways and more ambitious in others. I think certain kinds of mental states *are* open to normative assessment, even of a narrowly moral kind; some kinds of beliefs may well be morally blameworthy. But Sher says as the outset that "a person's preoccupations and fantasies can reflect badly on his character" and that that they are open to rational evaluation. I will argue that for a certain domain of the mind even these assessments are also not appropriate. One of his arguments against those who think morality can apply to the mental is that he thinks there is no principled way to delineate some mental states from others in a way that explains why some are up for moral evaluation and not others. Part of what I am attempting to do here is offer such criteria of delineation.

of what matters for being an appropriate target of reactive attitudes (and so responsible in some sense), even dreams fall within the scope. This was ultimately Augustine's view. For dreams may well be expressive of something deep about you, your character, your desires; it is you who authors them.

I will begin (in section 1) by offering an example of the kind of state I think should be beyond normative judgment; I argue that certain kinds of wakeful fantasies, namely ones which are motivationally inert, are on par with sleeping dreams. If one shares my view that there is a "free" domain of the wakeful mind, then what I am doing can be seen as clarifying why such states exempt them from judgment. If one does not share this intuition, then what I am doing can be seen as specifying what criteria *would* be needed for a kind of state (or domain) to be free in this sense. And then some may argue that no wakeful fantasies satisfy these criteria. I will address those arguments (in section 2) and argue that *if* the fantasies as characterized are appropriate targets of normative assessment then it will be very difficult to exempt dreams of sleep, as well as other exercises of imagination. Of course, some people (like Augustine and surprisingly many others) will not mind this result.<sup>3</sup> I don't think then that is the end of the discussion, stalemate and parting of intuitions. For I think a case can be made for the *value* of having a realm of imagination that is beyond the reach of any kind of judgment. I present this case in the paper's final section.

### **1. Locating the space: Pure Fantasy**

I am going to offer an example of a kind of mental state with the hallmarks of one where normative assessment (at least of the kind where what you are doing is reproachable in *any* sense) is inapt, where it would be akin to reproaching you for the size of your nose. It may be that other nearby states share the features required for exemption, but I will focus on what I am calling "pure fantasies," partly because I think this is a state that many would *not* want to exempt from the realm of judgment.

If we begin with dreams of sleep as our model, we can begin by thinking about what kind of wakeful state most resemble dreams. An obvious place to begin is with "day dreams." What is a day dream? You let your mind wander, without a clear purpose or intention. But one can do this and end up anxiously obsessing about one's "to do" list or the potential consequences of the latest of Donald Trump's tweets. This is not day dreaming. One requirement is that it involves some mental imaging, and the second is that it has a kind of narrative structure. It needn't be a very coherent narrative, no more

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<sup>3</sup> See, Couenhoven (2010) for a discussion of Augustine's view, especially p. 116. He is quite sympathetic to his view, as are Matthews (1981) and Cherry (1988)

so than dreams. But when you wake from a dream you can write it down or tell someone what happened. I will call these kinds of wandering narratives (with mental images) “fantasies.” A third feature that seems needed to distinguish fantasies (or daydreams) from other exercise of the imagination is that they have an overall positive valence. It certainly seems constitutive of daydreams that they are pleasant. We think of the student smiling wistfully in class and then being brought back to the present task by the teacher repeating the question that she has not heard numerous times. The dictionary defines a daydream as “a series of pleasant thoughts that distract one’s attention from the present.” This may seem to distinguish them from dreams of sleep which are not always pleasant, but perhaps that is why we have the term “nightmares.” And, in general, fantasy also has this positive connotation; it is the pleasurable imagining that distinguishes them from other kinds of imagining. Aaron Smuts, one of the few to discuss the ethics of fantasy says “the notion of a sad fantasy is incoherent.” (2015, 385) This may be a bit strong but, in any case, I will include this third feature in what counts as a “fantasy,” partly because it is the finding the images pleasurable that some may think is what makes it worthy of reproach. I will clarify the kind of fantasizing I have in mind by first distinguishing it from fantasies that accompany hope, and fantasies that accompany desires.

(i) *Fantasizing without hope*

When trying to become clear about what distinguishes hopes from desires more generally, many point out that when you hope for something as opposed to *merely* desiring it, there is a focus on the possibility of the hoped-for outcome obtaining that affects you in various ways. It can often affect what you actually *do*, but even more so it leads you to devote mental and emotional energy toward the hoped-for outcome. This kind of focus and energy that hope elicits can help to explain its potential motivational power. For a mental state to count as a hope it needs to take up space, as it were, in our mental landscape. Its dominating presence is what allows it be such a powerful force.

One way that this energy is manifest is in fantasizing about the hoped-for outcome. Luc Bovens argues that this kind of mental imaging is constitutive of hope, that it is this imaging which distinguishes hope from other desires. While I think it is possible to hope without fantasy, it is a very common and central way that hopeful energies are manifest, or, as Adrienne Martin puts it, it is a significant way of expressing hope, and further when we encourage others to hope, we often encourage this kind of expression. If a fantasy is expressive of hope, then it *is* open to normative assessment. In such a context when I ask “Should I have this fantasy?” I am asking “Should I have this hope?” While exactly what it takes for a mental state to be open to normative assessment (and that may well depend on the *kind* of normative assessment at stake) is part of what I am

here trying to get clear on, at least this much seems needed: that is the type of state that is, at least in principle, responsive to reasons in a certain way; where it makes sense for me to ask why you have such an attitude, that there could be reasons for you not to have the attitude, which may function in your revising it. As Kate Nolfi helpfully puts it “being in a rationally evaluable mental state (e.g. believing that  $p$ ) paradigmatically involves being answerable- being responsible, in some normatively significant sense of the term- for being in the state.” (Nolfi 2015, 45)

Hope is such a mental state. It makes sense for me to ask you why you have hope, or for me to ask you to give me reasons for hope. But, while some degree of fantasy may frequently accompany hope, the converse is not true: one can fantasize without hoping. It may be easiest to get a grip on how fantasy can come without hope to think about a child playing make-believe. She does not hope to be an elephant or to be the villain who gets shot by the super-hero. But trying to articulate the difference between these two kinds of fantasizing is surprisingly difficult.

Both the desire-like and the doxastic attitudes contained in fantasy that is not hope-induced are different from fantasy that is expressive of hope. I will begin by discussing the differences in doxastic attitudes which is more straightforward. One can believe that a hoped-for outcome is very unlikely but one cannot hope for what one believes is impossible. Depending on what kind of possibility we are concerned with, this may not be quite right. A religious person may hope for a miracle while recognizing that this would mean hoping for a violation of causal laws, and this would mean it is possible to hope for what one believes is causally impossible. But in such a case, the person believes a miracle is possible! Since most non-philosophers do not distinguish metaphysical from causal possibility, I think a better way of making the point is to put it in terms of credences; one cannot hope for something to which one has a credence of 0. But there is no such constraint on fantasy. Even if one does not believe in miracles; has zero credence that one can fly around the room unassisted, or that someone dead can return to life, one can fantasize about it. Now it may be the case that one cannot fantasize about what is logically or conceptually impossible, but this may be because there is no way to produce mental images of such things.

There is some debate about whether one can hope for what one believes is certain (has a credence of 1). When I express hope, it always seems to imply uncertainty but some argue that it would not be *incoherent* to hope in the context of certainty. Again, we do not have the same difficulty when thinking about hopeless fantasy. I can be minutes away from home after a long journey, certain I will be lying in bed very soon and still fantasize about the comfort of my pillow.

We can see then that just attending to the doxastic attitudes found in the two fantasy states reveals that they differ in how they are assessed. In hope, I can evaluate and criticize your probability estimate, and how low the chances are can detract from hope's overall rationality. None of that seems relevant when it comes to fantasy. I can ask you "How can you hope for something so unlikely? It will just lead to disappointment!" And you may have a response that explains your reasons, or you may alter your state in response to my reasons. But if I were to say (which I probably could not because hopeless fantasies are rarely expressed) "How can you fantasize about something so unlikely?" such a question seems out of a place; in a sense that's at least in part what such fantasies are for.

The difference between the conative attitudes in the two kinds of fantasies is more difficult to articulate, and it is ultimately more important for it is this attitude that one may think keeps such fantasies within the scope of judgment. When one engages in hopeful fantasy, one has a desire for the hoped-for outcome. But is this the case in a fantasy without hope? One way of getting at the difference is to think that in the former one is fantasizing about the content of the fantasy *really* coming to be while in the latter one is not. This idea can be made more vivid if we think about darker fantasies, say like murdering an ex, or about some sexual fantasies; one can fantasize about things while not fantasizing about them *really* coming to be. Think of a Genie appearing and telling you he will make your fantasy a reality. If the fantasy is of something hoped for one will welcome the Genie's gift, but there are some fantasies where one would politely decline the generous offer.

But perhaps this is the case with certain kinds of hopes as well. One can hope for something without fully endorsing the hope; Bovens talks about a category of "shameful hopes," that is ones that connect to partial but ultimately ill-considered desires. Sometimes these can get a grip on our mental imagery, even if it is not what we hope for all things considered.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps I do have a full-fledged desire to murder my ex (or cause him pain) but I have many other conflicting desires that override this one. If shameful hopes are possible then the Genie test doesn't quite work. Others think the kind of desire contained in hope must be an *endorsed* desire and perhaps this would be enough to distinguish hopeful fantasies from fantasies without hope. I worry about this for two reasons: First, it seems to make it harder to explain conflicting hopes, and second, in many cases, one will not disavow the desire-like attitude found in hopeless fantasy. Ultimately, for a fantasy to be a *pure* fantasy, it needs to be void of desire.

(ii) *Fantasy without desire*

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<sup>4</sup> See Bovens, PUP, forthcoming.

What is distinctive about the kinds of fantasies I am thinking about, and what I think insulates them from normative judgment, is that they are motivationally inert (or very close to being so).<sup>5</sup> But again, it may seem that we can hope for many things where what we do will make no difference, and that such hopes must also be motivationally inert just because it is completely out of our hands whether what is hoped for will come to be, and if we cannot *act* at all, how can we be motivated to do so? A prominent way of defining hope in the psychological literature includes that it must be goal directed. C.R. Snyder, whose work on hope has been extremely influential- who developed the “hope scale” which is a widely used measurement in social psychology defines hope like this: “the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways.” (2002, 249) While this way of thinking about hope is too narrow to capture the range of phenomena that we would want to count as hope (indeed it would seem to render it incoherent to hope to win the lottery once the ticket was bought) but it does point to something important. This at least seems to be true of hopes, that part of what it means to hope is that one is *disposed*, if possible, to seek out pathways to affect making what is hoped-for come to be. It may be that this disposition never has a chance to manifest but, this conditional seems to be the case; if the conditions were to obtain where one could affect the outcome then one would (again all things considered).

But what about mere desires that are not hopes, either because one does not believe it possible to obtain what one desires (and so despairs), or it is a desire one does not want to have, perhaps is even actively trying to get rid of? Even such desires seem open to normative assessment. Why? Some think that desires include some kind of representation of the object desired as good, or even more that to desire something entails that one believes one has reason to so desire.<sup>6</sup> On such accounts, one can be mistaken in one’s representations. But even on less cognitive views of desires, if you desire something, it has some pull on you. It is quite common to have desires one

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<sup>5</sup> I am not here claiming that any particular state which is motivationally inert is thereby exempt from any kind of normative judgment. Many beliefs of trivial matters many have no effect on me, and yet they can be negatively evaluated if false, or perhaps if based on insufficient evidence. Elsewhere (forthcoming) I argue that a belief violating a particular norm and so being negatively evaluated does not mean that the believer is subject to blame, or any blame-like attitude. Fantasies, unlike beliefs are not subject to standards of correctness, so there is no evaluation independent of whether reproach of the agent is justified. What is of concern here is what distinguishes the kind of fantasizing I am arguing is exempt from judgment from that which is not.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of ways to understand desires as representations that are correct if good see Hazlett (2018) and Gregory (2017).

would prefer not to have but it takes work to overcome them. And the desires you have (or don't have) tell me something about who you are.

Now if desires are intrinsically motivating states, and I am claiming that pure fantasies are motivationally inert then it follows that such states are void of desires. And I think this is correct; pure fantasies are pleasurable imaginings but without desire. These fantasies then seem much closer to aesthetic experiences. When you take pleasure in looking at a beautiful artwork, you don't need to desire it; there are times when you would not want it anywhere other than where it is, or depending on its nature – if it is something temporary like a mural – it may not even make sense to say you desire it. And also there can be aspects of it that are dark and disturbing, but the overall experience is one that is positive. Another way of understanding the conative element of pure fantasy and why it differs from those connecting with hope, or desire, is to think that the desires represented in fantasy are not *ours*; they are not about the actual world and our actual selves but, instead we represent some alternative, or hypothetical self as having certain desires. If we also hope for what we are fantasizing about then we may share these desires, or see that we should adopt them. But desires of a possible, but not actual, self in a possible, but not actual, world unless connected or adopted do not motivate me anymore than the desires of a fictional character in a book I am reading or a movie I am watching.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Concerns and Clarifications

Now that I have isolated the kind of state I think should be normatively on par with dreams of sleeps, I will consider some worries about my proposal. The first are skeptical concerns about whether pure fantasies as I have described them actually exist. The second concerns the strength of my conclusion; even if I have characterized an actual state of mind correctly, is it really true that *no* normative assessment of such a state is appropriate?

(i) *Is the idea of a pure fantasy even coherent?*

Given the potential power of fantasy, one may be dubious that it can really be void of desire. Jerome Neu says this for example “To make a thought a fantasy there must be a motivation of a particular sort” and further “The problem with certain fantasies is the desires and the attitudes that they reveal.” But Neu's own discussion allows a way to

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<sup>7</sup> Cherry (1986) distinguishes between what he calls “surrogate” and “autonomous” fantasies, and Smuts adopts this language in some of his discussion: “Surrogate fantasies are those that the fantasist would like to take place. They are surrogates for reality. But not all fantasies are like this. Some fantasies are ‘autonomous’... autonomous fantasies are unlike surrogate fantasies in that the fantasist does not desire the fantasy to be actualized.” (2015, 387)



think of some fantasies as revealing attitudes that are not clearly motivational. Drawing from Freud, he suggests that both night dreams and day dreams manifest wishes, but often in an indirect and distorted form. One cannot even determine that one wishes for the same things that one dreams or fantasizes about. Moreover “desires have a tendency to inform inclinations toward action. Wishes may be simply idle.” (146)

In trying to think about which kinds of mental states may be rationally evaluable, we saw one important element is whether the state is responsive to reasons or whether asking for a reason, or a kind of justification is appropriate. And, as an example of one that is not, typically a state of this kind, having a headache is often invoked. It does not seem appropriate for you to ask me to justify my headache in the way it is appropriate for you to ask me to justify my belief, or even my anger. But one may say: well, there is some sense in which I can ask you to justify it or to criticize you for being in this state. What if you have a tendency of drinking too much and then having hang-over induced headaches? Can I not say something akin to “you should not have that headache” the way I would “you should not have that belief?” But here it is clear that what I am criticizing you for is the behavior that led to the state, not the state itself. There is no sense in which the state is an inappropriate response to the circumstances you are in, or that it can be altered in response to recognizing you have reasons to not have a headache. The inclination to judge pure fantasies, I think points to something similar; there is the idea that certain fantasies are linked to problematic behavior; either behavior that led to you having the fantasy or perhaps, more importantly, that it will lead to problematic behavior. These worries often center on fantasies that are repeated or frequent; if you keep fantasizing about that then it begins to seem you must actually desire it. I think it is telling when one is arguing for fantasies being open to judgment, that frequency and repetition get invoked. For example when arguing that even fantasies over which one has little control can be the proper target of certain reactive attitudes, Aaron Smuts asks us to “Consider the case of someone who routinely spontaneously fantasizes about violently raping anyone they meet, man, woman, child, or beast. They aren’t a rapist; they just pleurably imagine raping, and they do it a lot.” (2015, 385) If one is constantly fantasizing about something, it is hard to see how this won’t seep into one’s actual motivational structure, and if and when it does then it has left the “no judgment” zone.

(ii) *Is no kind of normative assessment appropriate?*

I have been referring rather loosely and interchangeably to states being open to “normative” assessment, or rational assessment, open to “rational” norms, open to judgment, open to justification, or whether we can ask if a state is appropriate, fitting, as well as whether it an appropriate target of reactive attitudes. In certain contexts, all of

these could be, and perhaps should be, distinguished. And many might agree that pure fantasies should be exempted from certain kind of judgment but think others are appropriate.

Most would agree that we are not responsible for our fantasies the same way we are for our actions, that full-fledged blame may well not be appropriate, certainly not punishment. But, still one may think there is a sense in which I can say that it is bad for you to have certain kind of fantasies, or even more generally, that certain kind of pure fantasies are bad. Those who connect blame to action, and in particular acting in a way that violates a duty suggest that another kind of negative evaluation, appropriate for desires and many emotions is "disesteem" or "dispraise." Some might say that those who engage in certain kind of fantasizing are worthy of this kind of negative evaluation. If someone has a desire to torture the innocent, even if they never will act on it, such an attitude in itself is worthy of disesteem. This is partly because of desire's close connection to action, as is the case with belief. But, putting instrumental concerns aside, it may be bad in itself to desire the bad. The same may be true of other attitudes. In thinking about the ethics of fantasy, Smuts says it is important to distinguish blame from this other kind of moral evaluation.

He asks us to consider cases where we find someone's attitude, emotional response, or lack of concern off-putting, such as when someone is callously indifferent to the suffering of a small child, and suggests the kinds of reactions we engage in is a different kind of evaluation from that of blame: "When we have these kinds of reactions we are engaged in a different kind of evaluation from that of blame. Most plausibly we are holding the off-putting person in disesteem...Plausibly, if a person is a fitting object of disesteem, then it would be appropriate for her to feel shame." (Smuts, 382) While David Owens uses the term "blame" a little more widely, he also uses the language of esteem. When thinking about certain epistemic vices (such as gullibility) and why I am responsible for the ill-formed beliefs that result from them, he says "Even before anything bad happens, gullibility means that I cannot be an esteemed human being because I cannot be trusted to think and feel as I ought." (124)

Why then would fantasy without desire be exempt from this form of reproach? Could certain pure fantasies reveal that I am not thinking and feeling as I ought? The attitude being assessed in the case of pure fantasy is that of "finding pleasurable." We can ask then can such a state be bad in itself? When we think about the badness or even wrongness of finding pleasure and enjoyment in things, it seems they are activities and, often, more importantly activities involving others. If one takes pleasure in causing pain or subjugating others, this is morally problematic. And again, one might think if I take pleasure in thinking about something this is not too far away from taking pleasure

in actually doing this thing. But that is, of course, what I have been urging need not be the case with pure fantasies. And so the badness must be *only* in having certain thoughts. To elicit the intuition that simply having certain kinds of pleasurable thoughts is bad, and the person having them worthy of disesteem, examples of someone fantasizing about raping and torturing children is invoked. Smuts says, for example, “it is a striking example of morally dubious imaginative experience.” And then to show that our attitude does not arise simply because of the worry about what such a fantasizer might *do*, a hypothetical scenario is introduced where there is no possibility of action, such as Ross’s thought experiment about two worlds:

Imagine two worlds, each having just one inhabitant, a sole survivor of a nuclear holocaust (Ross 1930, 140). In world A, the survivor spends her free time thinking nice thoughts. She often imagines cats playing with rubber bands on sunny window sills. In world B, the survivor lives a similar life, but rather than imagine cats, he imagines raping and torturing children. Is either world preferable? (Smuts, 384)

That we would find world A preferable is supposed to show that it is “intrinsically bad to enjoy evil.” One immediate response to this kind of scenario is it is not at all clear that these survivors do not have the desires connected with their imaginings; they both may well want their fantasies to come true if that were indeed possible. And, again a person whose mind is filled with these images, and little else, is very different from the person who lets his mind wander, and his fantasies grow without inhibition, even if this leads one to have a pleasurable reaction to something one would not react to with pleasure in any way if it were real.

Smuts’s idea is that the reaction to some thoughts (one which includes pleasure) is itself misguided, inapt, unfitting. Most of the time when we feel disesteem towards emotional reactions it is reactions to actual events, something real. Smuts recognizes with fantasy “the question here is whether it is intrinsically bad to enjoy imagined evil,” (2015, 382) but in his argument supporting this claim the distinction between enjoying evil and enjoying imagined evil is often blurred. For example we are asked to consider Charlie who takes great pleasure in seeing animals in pain though he never actually causes them suffering. In this case Charlie does things; he tours slaughterhouses, he views photographs; he clearly desires and even hopes to see such images. There is much in his mental world that lies within the scope of evaluative judgment. This example is supposed to show that his enjoyment itself is morally bad even if it is not bad for the animals. Smuts introduces the two world example because he thinks that we might be inclined to think our judgment of Charlie comes from a worry that he might

someday torture an animal. But as I said, his emotional life and his choices are already appropriate targets for reactive attitudes; he is very far away from pure fantasy.

Maybe a lesson from these thought experiments is that it is morally bad to pleurably imagine things that it would be bad to actually do in real life. Smuts, who ultimately wants to argue that some fantasies (and dreams) are bad in themselves says this is too severe; it would render too many fantasies worthy of moral disapproval. For example fantasizing about having sex with someone other than one's spouse doesn't seem morally bad even though doing so in real life would likely be bad because it would involve betrayal or violations of certain obligations. He suggests instead that it is morally bad to fantasize about doing something that is bad *in itself*; there is nothing bad in itself about having sex with one's tennis instructor; what would make it morally bad depends on the context of the relationship; it is the betrayal that is bad.

Why is it bad to fantasize about doing something that is bad *in itself*? In trying to say more about this, what one finds is repeated images of torturing children to convince us that it must be morally problematic to have certain fantasies:. And, again it is significant that the repeated nature is so often invoked: "Although the person isn't blameworthy, the chronic rape fantasist is plausibly worthy of disesteem. If shame isn't appropriate in these cases, I'm not sure it ever is." (Smuts 2015, 385) The gist of it is that one may think that having certain fantasies in itself reflects poorly on me, that it displays something wrong with my character. But this is exactly what some people will say about dreams of sleep – that having some kind of violent dream displays something problematic about me, something about my deep self or character. Now doubtless dreams tell us something about ourselves as does our fantasy life, but what they reveal is rather opaque and complex, it cannot be taken that a person who has violent dreams is a more violent person; or that if I dream about having sex with my brother that I want to have sex with my brother. Again remember Neu's discussion about wishing. Even if one isn't convinced of all of Freud's dream theory, it is uncontentionous that one cannot directly read off from the content of a dream, what its meaning it, or what it represents or that one has a desire, or even a wish that what was dreamed be the case.

I have likened pure fantasies to the enjoyment of fiction, as well as to dreams of sleep but it may seem that a difference which would show why fantasies can be assessed and judged in a way the others cannot has to do with the kind of control we have over them, or that I have an authorship over them. Enjoying horror movies, or a novel that has graphic descriptions of violence may seem very different from a fantasy of one's own creation because one is passive and the other active, in some sense. But the active nature is exaggerated; when engaged in fantasy, a thought, or image can lead to another in a way that involves very little conscious thought. Again, watching kids engaged in play

can give us a clue how this is so. There is often no deliberation or planning or scripting; when immersed in the make-believe world, they just flow with what that world seems to demand.

Again this kind of fantasy is very dream-like. But, *surely*, one might insist, there is a difference when it comes to control. Our dreams happen to us in a way fantasies do not and we can see the difference if we think about the fact that if I choose to stop fantasizing I can in a way I cannot if I am dreaming, largely because I am not aware that I am dreaming in a way that I am aware I am fantasizing. Now here is a difference and one that has some normative significance, and reveals where judgment about fantasy may well be appropriate. If I am disturbed by a fantasy I can take efforts to stop having it. As I said before, the worry about fantasies is often a worry about their entrenched or repeated nature. And it may well be that I ought to take steps to avoid or halt such entrenchment. But again, something quite similar can be said about dreams. If I have the same violent or deeply disturbing dream over and over it seems appropriate for me to take steps to understand why this is happening and take steps to alter it. The lack of control we have over our dream life and the amount of control we have over our fantasy life are both exaggerated.

In contrasting enjoying disturbing or violent fiction and the engaging in pure fantasy, it may even be that the former is more problematic in the context of control. One actively chooses to watch that movie or read that book; there is an intentionality that fantasy lacks and so it may be that if control is an important factor, enjoying the fantasies created by others is more problematic than the fantasies of your own inner life.

Ultimately I have a hard time distinguishing the attitude of disesteem from outright blame, unless one takes blame as always warranting punishment. They both have what Andrea Westlund has called a “verdictive” element, a strong passing of judgment which expresses certain “punishing attitudes.” When one is the target of strong verdictive blame, one may “feel shamed, berated, attacked...as if an implicit sentence has been carried out through the expression of blame itself. One experiencing these reactions experiences herself as (metaphorically) having been convicted, sentenced, and punished all at once: the blamer acts as judge, jury, and executioner.” (258) <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> There is a lot of disagreement among theorists of blame about how to best characterize the attitude but all agree that blame carries with it some normative force that seems to require that it includes a negative evaluative judgment of the person being blamed. Yet, it seems wrong to think of blame as a purely cognitive attitude because when we blame others, negative emotions are often included in the blaming. While there is dispute among theorists of blame whether any particular emotions are necessary, the challenge for those who deny any are required, is to explain the special force that blame has. All agree that to blame someone goes beyond mere description; it is not simply to register that someone has failed

She argues, expanding on some insights developed by Hannah Pickard, that we can hold each other “answerable” without blame in this sense. The following long quotation represents what is essential to holding answerable, and how it differs from strongly verdictive blame:

Holding answerable involves exercising a moral power to demand a response from another, and puts them under a (defeasible) obligation to respond. It is not, however, punitive...holding answerable is akin not to a sentencing (at least as that term is commonly understood), but to a summons to moral dialogue...The prospect of dialogue highlights the pro tanto nature of the accompanying verdict, and makes it defeasible in practice and not merely in principle. The meaning or significance of an action is typically subject to competing interpretations, particularly in morally complex situations. Currents of answerability run in more than one direction, and may lead to mutual moral insight and growth as well as, in some cases, the sharing of associated moral burdens or costs. Holding another answerable, in other words, is not just a way of checking whether a person is indeed blameworthy by scanning her answers for considerations that might excuse or justify. In holding another answerable, one invites her into an alternative perspective on her action, and opens up the possibility of coming to a constructive shared response.

This is very similar to how I characterized a possible conversation about hope. But even this weaker kind of normative assessment is out of place in the contexts of pure fantasy because, if I am right, there is nothing of normative significance to assess, nothing to answer for. Pure fantasies are “fitless” imaginings akin to supposition for the sake of argument.<sup>9</sup>

I do want to concede that one kind of evaluation that may be appropriate is a kind of aesthetic evaluation. When we criticize someone for liking bad reality tv shows or video games, our primary criticism is that they have bad taste. Now it could be that if one could inhabit another mind and witness the images that were being found pleasurable, that one would come to a similar view regarding taste. But for aesthetic evaluations to lead to appropriate reactive judgments more is needed. We begin to impugn someone’s character if certain kinds of pleasure and enjoyment begin to take up too much space and time. If you spend the bulk of your life watching tv or playing video games, the

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to meet a particular standard. I can describe you as flawed in a certain way without blaming you or judging you blameworthy. See Tognazzini and Coates, (2018) for a very helpful overview

<sup>9</sup> Langland-Hassan (forthcoming) discusses the view the “fitless view” of imaginings and argues that even if some types of imaginings are fitless not all are (673-674).

kind of criticism that may well be appropriate goes beyond the aesthetic. Even though you may not be blameworthy, some kind of disesteem seems apt. When Susan Wolf asks us to consider “The Blob,” someone who “spends day after day, or night after night, in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies” (2015, 92), most of us agree with her that there is something important missing from such a life, even if the person feels good and isn’t hurting anyone. But the problem is not with the activities themselves, or the taking pleasure in them, but with the absence of anything else beyond such activities.

### 3. The value of a judgment-free zone in mental life

I said at the outset that there may well be value to having a norm free domain in our mental life. When looking at summaries of empirical literature the results seem mixed on what the consequences of fantasizing are. Does letting one’s mind go to violent imaginings increase or decrease the tendencies to actual violence? One finds studies on supporting both sides, but these studies are almost all about consumption of violent or pornographic images, not simply images of one’s own creation. In discussing such findings Smuts concludes that “2,400 years of debate have failed to establish anything close to a reliable and systematic behavioral impact of fiction” and that “most plausibly, enjoying fictional suffering does not lead to anything bad, at least not with significant regularity.” (2017, 112) He, as well as others, are interested in whether there is intrinsic, not instrumental, disvalue in such fantasizing.

The intrinsic badness, as we have seen, is that of finding “the bad” pleasurable. I have argued against this view, but it might be instrumentally bad to be in such state. Perhaps allowing one’s mind to wander into such places is risky; it can risk a loss of virtue, damage to one’s character.<sup>10</sup> I will grant this, but on the other side there is the risk of not allowing such free wanderings, of one being overly controlled in even one’s private and internal thoughts. It is in the realm of imagination where one finds creativity and innovation. I will end by considering three ways that such judgment-free mind wandering can be of value.

#### *Art*

The first, and perhaps most obvious, way in which pure fantasies can be valuable is in their connection with artistic creation. Freud suggests that there is little difference between fantasists and creative artists. If we think one is of value, I suggest we should be careful about limiting the other. In his essay “Creative Writing and Day Dreaming”

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<sup>10</sup> Sher admits that thoughts can be morally hazardous (487-488).

he argues that creative writing is an extension of childhood play. One gets a sense in reading that essay that Freud might have been suggesting that such writers are emotionally stunted. But ultimately he seems to think of this as a healthy kind of sublimation – an alternative to other ways that fantasies can affect the psyche. I am not concerned with the details of Freud’s theory, and to what extent it can explain artistic expression. Freud himself seemed to find the psychoanalytic tools wanting, saying of the formula he suggests that creative writing is wish fulfillment stemming from childhood memories, that he suspects “it will prove to be too exiguous a pattern.” But what is important for my purpose is the recognition of the link between free play and creative production. “Might we not say that every child at play behaves like the creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things in his world in a new way which pleases him?...The creative writer does the same as a child. He creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality.” (174) Now the kind of emotional seriousness pointed to here may seem to contradict what I have been urging about pure fantasies being insulated in a sense from one’s motivational structure. When the artist is making deliberate choices of how to take the material from both their mind and from the world to create an object, such choices may well be open to different kinds of normative assessment or judgment; this will be even more likely if the object produced is shared with the public. But for there to be the possibility of making such choices, allowing one’s mind to wander to places quite disconnected from reality – like the child at play – is essential.

A vivid example of the connection between free mind wandering and artistic creation can be found in the work of David Lynch. The contrast between the darkness of Lynch’s films and his own positive (even cheerful) outlook on life is frequently noted. In his recent memoir/biography we find the following description during the making of *Blue Velvet*:

Amid all this mayhem, Lynch maintained a sunny disposition, tooling around the set on a pink bicycle with streamers fluttering from the handlebars, his pockets full of peanut M&M’s. “David is a genuinely happy person, and this is one of the remarkable things about him—I’ve never met anyone as serene as he is,” said Rossellini...“David would say meditation is the source of his happiness,” said Laura Dern, “and I’m sure that’s true. He knows who he was and who he became almost immediately after he started meditating, so he’s the best judge of that. I would add, though, that I think part of his happiness has to do with the fact that he places no limits on himself as a creative person. There’s a lot of self-judgment and shame in our culture, and David doesn’t have any of that. When he makes something he never wonders what people will think of it,



or what he should be making, or what the zeitgeist needs. He makes what bubbles up out of his brain, and that is part of his joy. (Lynch, 213)

These “brain bubbles” often come in the form both night and day dreams. Here is Lynch describing how the final scene of *Blue Velvet* came to be:

An important piece of the Blue Velvet script came to me in a dream, but I didn't remember the dream until quite a while after I woke up from it. So, imagine me for some reason going over to Universal Studios the day after I had a dream that I didn't remember. I went there to meet a man and went into the secretary's room and the man was in the room behind her. In this secretary's room there was either a couch or a chair near her desk, and because the man wasn't ready to see me I went and sat down on this chair and waited. Sitting on that chair I remembered my dream, and I asked the secretary for a piece of paper and a pencil, and I wrote down these two things from the dream: a police radio and a gun. That did it for me. I always say I don't go by nighttime dreams because it's daydreaming that I like. I love the logic of dreams, though. Anything can happen and it makes sense.” (Lynch, 228)

Lynch allows himself the freedom to experience darkness and violence in the realm of the imagination, but none of that penetrates his motivational structure or his character and temperament.

### *Innovation*

In a study of the phenomenon of “mind wandering” described like this: “our minds drifting away from a task toward unrelated inner thoughts, fantasies, feelings, and other musings” Jonathan Smallwood and Jonathan Schooler (2006) survey the many ways that such wanderings can inhibit completion of tasks that require a sustained focus, but they also cite findings that support the idea that such wanderings are importantly linked to problem-solving and creativity. They end their article by summarizing some of these findings:

Klinger (1999) suggested that one advantage to mind wandering is that it could foster creative problem solving. Similarly, Singer (1966) argued that processes associated with fantasy, particularly in early life, facilitate the development of problem-solving skills. In this article, we have argued that mind wandering may be a mode of problem solving. In particular, we have suggested that mind wandering is a situation when controlled processing becomes hijacked in the service of a goal reflecting our current concerns. If this is correct, then this

process is linked to the pursuit of ideas or problems that have, so far, eluded solution. Considered in this light, mind wandering may share important similarities with incubation processes related to creativity. Accordingly, the experience of sudden “eureka” or “ah-ha” moments (Schooler, Fallshore, & Fiore, 1995), which apparently occur out of the blue, may sometimes occur because mind wandering addresses more remote goals (e.g., discerning the solution to a heretofore unsolved problem). (2006, 956)

### *Meditation*

Meditative practices may seem to be antithetical to mind wandering, in that they increase focus and attention. Smallwood and Schooler, for example, reference a technique, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) aimed at reducing mind wandering: “In MBCT, participants are trained in meditative techniques that are focused on reducing mind wandering. MBCT shows promise in reducing the likelihood of depressive relapse and, posttherapy, in helping participants form more detailed autobiographical memories.” 2006, 955

While it is the case that as one becomes more experienced in mediation, the frequency of mind wandering episodes decreases it is essential that when one’s mind does wander that the mediator does not either (i) judge themselves for allowing their mind to wander or (ii) pass judgment on the content of the wanderings. The idea is to simply observe and be aware of the thoughts as they occur, and then bring one’s attention back to the focus of mediation such as one’s breath or sensation in the body. The meditative process is thus enhanced if one can feel free to let one’s mind wander without judgment. Here is a representative example of this idea: “If you want to obtain perfect calmness..., you should not be bothered by the various images you find in your mind. Let them come, and let them go...The true purpose to see things as they are, to observe things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes.” (Suzuki, 20)

## **4. Conclusion**

I have argued that a certain kind of imaginative state, what I have called “pure fantasy” has no fittingness conditions, is not rationally evaluable, and has no intrinsic value or disvalue. If we discover the contents of this state it will tell us no more about you than would the contents of your dreams. And so the normative judgments made about such fantasizing should not go beyond what is appropriate for dreams. While mind wandering may be risky, allowing freedom of the thought in the imaginative realm is importantly linked to creativity and need not have any negative consequences.

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