

Fantasy and Self-deception

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In addition to forms of self-deception in which people ignore information that contradicts preferred theories of theirs (Baumeister, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988), there is a form in which people choose to interpret a situation from a perspective other than their own – adopting a different set of assumptions and modes of thinking so as to compensate for gaps in their own experience, in order to deal with situations which they could not tolerate otherwise, or simply because they enjoy doing so.<sup>1</sup> In particular, such fantasizing could help individuals deal with serious threats to their personal safety, by allowing them to employ the point of view of a figure for which such threats are a matter of routine. This possibility contradicts the argument from the Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Health that mentally healthy people are those who are "able to take in matters one wishes were different, without distorting them to fit these wishes, that is, without inventing cues not actually existing" (Jahoda, 1959 cited in Colvin, 1994). Arguably, however, it is an example of a behaviour where "[r]eplacement of potentially dangerous exploratory action with increasingly flexible and abstracted thought means the possibility for growth of knowledge without direct exposure to danger" (Peterson, 1999, p.66).

While employing fantasy can arguably be adaptive when practiced in some ways in certain circumstances, there are also associated risks. Fantasy can be a self-indulgent exercise, in which a person can substitute a more glamorous or entertaining imagined context for one that is banal, personally destructive, or even morally dubious. Substituting a fantasy context for a realistic one could thus help a person gain a fuller perspective on a situation or identify novel possible courses of action, while it could also lead to a person seeing a situation through an inappropriate lens and behaving problematically as a result.

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<sup>1</sup> In some ways, the role of fantasies may be akin to that of games, in that they allow people to develop strategies to prepare for novel and potentially important future situations.

This essay will discuss three such fantasies, the purposes they can serve, and the consequences that may accompany their use: the 'what would Jesus do' fantasy, along with those of the soldier and the spy. In the mind of the person employing it, each fantasy is constructed on the basis of some combination of personal experience and exposure to fiction and each fantasy is applied in a way that reflects the needs of the current situation. The psychological needs that motivate these three fantasies may be connected. Each of the three helps to address the universal human unknown of death – both how to confront it and (potentially) when and how to inflict it on others. All three fantasies evoke figures that are powerful in different ways and capable of defeating opponents that are in many senses stronger. Each fantasy could potentially be used in ways that improve a person's mental life and ability to cope with external events, though each also carries a risk of being misapplied or taken to damaging excess. These fantasies are only examples – selected because the author has thought enough about them to be able to comment. Many other fantasies may be frequently employed by members of the general public, generated from some combination of personal experience, exposure to fiction, and exposure to things like theological dogma.

### **Jesus**

If fantasies are assumed to be a kind of wish fulfillment, the idea of a Jesus fantasy is arguably paradoxical, because the primary meaning of the Christ story is self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. As a result, the fantasy either fails to be self-serving or can only be self-serving at a higher level of analysis: for instance, on the basis that nobility is its own reward, even when it involves great pain. Christ's sacrifice is the basis for the reverence directed at him (Peterson 1999, p.452). It is also the reason why his example is impossible to emulate in practice (people die for their fellows with fair frequency, but such sacrifices are not taken to have the same

significance as Christ's). At the same time, while Christ's mortality is overlaid upon ultimate invulnerability, those who choose to emulate him may suffer an even harsher punishment for their determination: sacrifice without glory and immortality to follow.

As 'the man with nothing to gain', Christ can also help us access the inherent goodness that is possible in a choice, which exists aside from its social significance. It allows a person to separate the question of the most laudable possible behaviour in a given situation from the question of what sort of behaviour would be most prudent. The Christ fantasy can be a way to counterbalance the tendency to be self-serving, but it can also be messianic delusion. Those who emulate Jesus can gain influence over others because we find those who are committed to a cause to be impressive and worthy of admiration. There is therefore a risk that Christ fantasies will form the basis of damaging self-deception in which unethical behaviours are mentally repackaged as selfless ones, along with a risk that by adopting a Christ-like persona a fantasist might attract followers to unworthy aims.

Jesus has the worst possible operational security – knowingly permitting a lethal betrayal. This illustrates both key aspects of the fantasy when employed constructively: first, the way in which considering one's own situation from the perspective of Christ allows one to more effectively identify what the most morally commendable possible behaviour is and, secondly, the way it allows one to consider how one could behave if freed from the practical limitations to which normal people are bound.

The Christ fantasy is distinguished from those of the soldier and spy in that people have been explicitly encouraged to make use of it: to consider how Christ would respond to the circumstances in which they find themselves and identify which action he would take. The mental exercise of 'putting yourself in Christ's shoes' is church-sanctioned.

**Soldier**

Soldiers operate under rules of conduct that differ substantially from those of everyday life. Civilians make their own choices, rarely knowingly confront death, and are never called upon to kill. The life of a soldier is dangerous and defined by duty and camaraderie. In situations where an individual needs to deal with the acute possibility of death, the soldier fantasy can provide a useful template for acceptable (and perhaps even laudable) behaviour.

Soldiers also have an awkward relationship with their enemies, who they cannot help but see as occupying positions that are parallel to their own. Soldiers on both sides of a conventional conflict follow very similar routines, with the major difference being the overall objectives set by commanders at a much higher level. At least when they subscribe to your basic philosophy of warfare, your enemy is your comrade who you have to kill. This may help explain interesting anomalies in military behaviour, such as the much-discussed Christmas truces that arose during the first world war. Soldier fantasies can provide an escape from responsibility, both because the concept of duty can supersede individual responsibility and because war frequently involves choosing between undesirable outcomes. Unlike the spy, the soldier values valour above success. There is greater honour to be had in just conduct than in achieving victory at any cost. A person who favours victory through any means (such as pretending to be a civilian or an enemy soldier) ceases to obey the laws of war and becomes a spy.

Good military officers are self-sacrificing and willing to lead from the front. At the same time, they must be prudent in the use of men and willing to trade off the lives of some for the lives of others. Life sometimes requires us to play the odds with the highest possible stakes, and the soldier fantasy provides cognitive models to help. Similarly, soldiers must be prepared to use violence in some circumstances and – by imagining themselves in such a role – non-soldiers can

reconcile themselves to doing so as well. Soldiers must also know when to retreat and when to surrender, and have means of coping (at least temporarily) in the midst of severe disorder.

Misapplied, the soldier fantasy permits an inappropriate hardening of will and suspension of empathy. For instance, a person may justify a violent act on the basis that they are engaged in part of a 'war' and that the ordinary rules of ethics must be set aside in favour of a harsher form of consequentialism in which violence outside the context of direct self-defence can be justified.

### **Spy**

The spy is distinguished by superior theory of mind: awareness of the internal complexity in the minds of others, and the possibilities of deceit that accompany that. The key characteristic of a spy is savviness: realizing that there may be plots unfolding, and having some ability to anticipate them. In a social world where others will try to mislead us, the spy's counterintelligence capabilities have defensive value. At the same time, the spy is always in danger of getting trapped in irresolvable uncertainty and paranoia; every feint can contain another feint within it, and it is impossible to know for sure that you have identified the lowest level of a plot. Spies spend their lives looking for the weaknesses in one another's systems.

The spy's abilities also create opportunities for manipulation. Spies are romantic, powerful, and exciting. Partly, this is because they have privileged access to secret information that has social value. Those employing a spy fantasy can take advantage of these emotional responses to manipulate others. The spy can haggle and seduce, as well as employ disguise and misdirection. It is often possible to deceive others, and can be seriously advantageous to do so.

A spy must fend for themselves and cannot count on support from his allies or mercy from his enemies. They must be able to operate autonomously and accept the possibility of capture, torture, and death. Spies can make use of multiple strategies at the same time, making use of

multiple individuals who don't know about one another's roles, and cultivating redundancy in plans to deal with the unexpected.

### **Conclusions**

You can live in your fantasies, because the mind is its own place and as open to exploration as the physical world. More usefully, fantasies can mediate between the demands made by the external world and a person's own thinking. Fantasies can serve as a cover and justification for self-destructive behaviour, or serve as a template for rising above human limitation.

By considering the circumstances in which they find themselves using fantasies like those of Jesus, soldier, and spy, individuals can grant themselves a contrasting perspective that permits a more comprehensive consideration of what is happening and what might be done in response. In this way, fantasy as a specific form of self-deception may be useful or adaptive. There is a danger, however, that fantasies will be inappropriately applied, or that the behaviour of imagined individuals in very different circumstances may be used to justify inappropriate actions. It may be fruitful to undertake more comprehensive consideration of the mental roles played by fantasies, the frequency of their use, and their consequences in terms of mental health.

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