

## **Compare and contrast Freud's explanation of dreams a wish-fulfilment and Davidson's theory of action**

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (henceforth *ID*) Freud claims that “the dream is a wish-fulfilment” (*der Traum ist eine Wunscherfüllung*) – an assertion which constitutes not only the title of one of the central chapters of the book, but also one of its main theses. But what exactly does defining the dream as the fulfilment of a wish imply? What relation do dreams bear to desires? And how can a wish be fulfilled in (or through) a dream? In this essay, I would like to examine Freud's claim in his own terms, as well as in the light of the philosophy of action, particularly that of Donald Davidson. On a related note, I will also make an excursion into Tamas Pataki's ideas regarding intentional character of mental phenomena.

To begin with, the *fulfilment* (*Erfüllung*) brought about by dreams must be sharply distinguished from the *satisfaction* (*Erfriedigung*) achieved through action in waking life. According to Freud, dreams arise as a response of the sleeping mind to a desire which it is unwilling or unable to satisfy, precisely because of its sleeping state. This response consists in the purely mental enactment of the situation desired, in such a way that the reality beyond the dream remains unaffected. It is in this aspect that the fulfilment and the satisfaction of desires differ for Freud: for although they are both triggered by the subject's wish or desire, satisfaction entails the actual modification of the state of things in reality, whereas the fulfilment brought about by dreams only takes place in the sleeper's mind. But this is a strange notion indeed – why would the mind seek the illusory achievement of its desire? Why should the mind, so to speak, deceive itself by means of an insubstantial dream, instead of trying to attain the object of its desire in reality? In order to answer these questions, we must examine the place of wish-fulfilment within Freudian theory more closely.

The most straightforward explanation of the function of wish-fulfilment would seem to be found in what Freud terms “dreams of convenience”, which at first sight arise mostly as responses to physical stimuli – such as thirst, hunger, or a need to urinate –, and serve to prevent the dreamer's sleep and rest from being broken. In Freud's famous example, whenever he ate anchovies or other salted foods, he would become thirsty during the night and dream that he was drinking water.

The cause of this dream is thirst, which I perceive when I wake. From this sensation arises the wish to drink, and the dream shows me this wish as fulfilled. [...] If I succeed in appeasing my thirst by means of the dream that I am drinking, I need not wake up in order to satisfy that thirst (*ID*, ch. 3).

However, Freud remarks that even the most obvious dreams of convenience, which correspond quite clearly to specific physical stimuli and needs, usually display elements which appear to be largely superfluous, or at least non-essential, to the “deception” with which the sleeping mind attempts to delay the eventual awakening. Thus Freud gives a more elaborate version of his “thirsty” dream in which it is his wife who gives him a drink from an Etruscan vase; and he mentions how dreams of convenience often do double duty, temporarily warding off an immediate physical need and attempting to provide a release for a further, symbolically encoded desire of a sexual nature – what Freud calls the *latent meaning* of the dream.

The meaningful character of dreams, and the way in which they symbolize, by condensation and displacement, unconscious desires usually unavailable to daytime consciousness, is the other main thesis of *ID*. However, we will not deal now with the differences between manifest and latent meanings, or with the particulars of the dynamics of primary and secondary processes. For the time being, let us rather assume in a very general way that *all* dreams fulfil some sort of desire – taking *desire* in its broadest possible sense, which would span a spectrum of what we can call – to use Davidson’s handy coinage – *pro-attitudes*, ranging from purely physical needs such as thirst, at one end, to unconscious sexual desires, at the other end. Having thus established the systematic relation between dreams and desires (of whatever form), and the nature of this relation (dreams fulfil desires, i.e. they constitute a virtual, non-actual enactment of the state of things desired), the question remains of the reason for such link.

It is important to note that in *ID* Freud drew heavily upon notions which he had already attempted to define and elaborate in his unpublished *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. Indeed, it was in this work where he began to sketch out the outlines of his conception of desire and satisfaction within a neurological and developmental framework. In this conception, desire – in his own terms, *libido* – is seen as a flow of energy coursing through the neural network by means of cathexis, which would roughly correspond to the firing of neurons. The energetical view of

mental processes reappears in *ID* under the form of Freud's description of the development of the mental apparatus. And it is in this context that Freud presents what he regards as the Ur-instance of wish-fulfilment, the first experience of satisfaction by the newborn infant when it first feeds:

The hungry child cries or struggles helplessly. But its situation remains unchanged; for the excitation proceeding from the inner need has not the character of a momentary impact, but of a continuing pressure. A change can occur only if, in some way (in the case of the child by external assistance), there is an experience of satisfaction, which puts an end to the internal excitation. An essential constituent of this experience is the appearance of a certain percept (of food in our example), the memory-image of which is henceforth associated with the memory-trace of the excitation arising from the need. Thanks to the established connection, there results, at the next occurrence of this need, a psychic impulse which seeks to revive the memory- image of the former percept, and to re-evoke the former percept itself; that is, it actually seeks to re-establish the situation of the first satisfaction. Such an impulse is what we call a wish; the reappearance of the perception constitutes the wish- fulfilment, and the full cathexis of the perception, by the excitation springing from the need, constitutes the shortest path to the wish-fulfilment. We may assume a primitive state of the psychic apparatus in which this path is actually followed, i.e., in which the wish ends in hallucination. This first psychic activity therefore aims at an identity of perception: that is, at a repetition of that perception which is connected with the satisfaction of the need. (*ID*, ch. 7)

Here the wish – or need, or desire – is pictured by Freud as an amount of energy which the psychic apparatus is literally unable to bear, an excitation to which it puts an end by cathecting the memory of a previous satisfaction of that need. On this account, the infant mind, given the child's inability to satisfy its own bodily needs due to the extreme physical immaturity of human beings at birth, seeks to temporarily allay an intolerable inner stimulus – in this case, hunger – by evoking the mnemic trace of a former experience in which such need was actually satisfied. And this is no representational evocation, it is important to note, but a full-blown virtual perceptual experience, indistinguishable from the actual experience of satisfaction in all but its temporary effects (the hunger will obviously reassert itself after a while). Hence Freud's description of this kind of primal fulfilment as hallucinatory – a quality

which, he claims, is shared by dreams and psychotic delusions. In all these cases, the mind, unable to relieve pressing needs by taking action in the actual world, generates a virtual phantasmagoria, a perceptual simulacrum, in order to provide a (temporary) respite.

But this account of wish-fulfilment has deeper implications. For Freud suggests that the original experience of hallucinatory fulfilment lies at the root of *all* later experiences of actual satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> It would be the ultimate inadequacy of wish-fulfilment that leads to the development of what we usually understand as normal psychological functioning, whereby we strive to actually obtain the objects of our desires in extramental reality:

In order to attain to more appropriate use of the psychic energy, it becomes necessary to suspend the full regression, so that it does not proceed beyond the memory-image, and thence can seek other paths, leading ultimately to the production of the desired identity from the side of the outer world. [Freud's note: In other words: the introduction of a *test of reality* is recognized as necessary.] This inhibition, as well as the subsequent deflection of the excitation, becomes the task of a second system, which controls voluntary motility, i.e., a system whose activity first leads on to the use of motility for purposes remembered in advance. But all this complicated mental activity, which works its way from the memory-image to the production of identity of perception via the outer world, merely represents a roundabout way to wish-fulfilment made necessary by experience. *Thinking is indeed nothing but a substitute for the hallucinatory wish.* (*ID*, ch. 7; my italics)

In speaking of a “second system”, Freud alludes to the distinction between primary, unconscious processes, and secondary, conscious processes which was glossed over before (cf. page 2). It is a distinction which now becomes relevant, though, as most of the points in which the Freudian account of wish-fulfilment (and, one might say, Freudian theory as a whole) are philosophically problematic arise from this opposition between conscious and unconscious. Donald Davidson, however, is one of the few philosophers who has claimed that an account of reason and action can be compatible (if not necessarily so) with Freudian theory. In what follows I will attempt to give the

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<sup>1</sup> And indeed at the root of representational judgement itself, as Freud claims in his short text on denial (*Die Verneinung*).

a brief outline of his thought regarding action theory, and its connection to Freudian wish-fulfilment.

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Donald Davidson's main thesis concerning the philosophy of action can be summed up in the statement that reasons are causes – that is, that the reasons for action are causally efficacious. Reasons for action are here to be understood as the coupling of

- (a) a pro-attitude (or *desire*) towards the end or objective of the action, and
- (b) a *belief* that such action will promote this end. (Davidson 1963, 3-4)

Davidson asserts that, in order to satisfactorily explain an action, a reason (that is, a desire-belief pair) must stand in two different relations to that action:

- (a) a *logical* relation whereby the content of the belief and desire implies that there is something valuable or desirable about the action;
- (b) a *causal* relation, whereby the reason plays a causal role in the occurrence of the action. (Davidson 1982, 293)

In this way, Davidson's picture of reason explanations involves two separate claims, a claim about the *causal* character of reasons, and a claim about their *rational* nature (given that the logical relation between the content of reasons and the actions serves to define its rationality). It is this last claim that I will focus on here.

As we have seen, Freud regards wish-fulfilment as the original template for later satisfaction – in his own words, *thinking is indeed nothing but a substitute for the hallucinatory wish*. I think here we may safely regard rational action – that is, that action which is in harmony with the content of the reason-belief pair which causes and explains it – as at least a subspecies of “thinking”. For rational action involves an element of calculation, inasmuch as the action and the content of its reason must match to a certain extent, and I think it is this sort of calculation that Freud had in mind when he described a secondary, reality-oriented elaboration beyond the primary (and primal) hallucinatory wish-fulfilment.

Freud explains the transition from primary wish-fulfilment (dominated by the pleasure principle) to secondary satisfaction (ruled by the reality principle) by the introduction of what he terms the *test of reality*, whereby the desires are brought to comply with the constraints of the extramental environment. Rationality – the

accordance of actions and the reasons for those actions – might then be described as the outcome of the application of the test of reality to primal wishes.

I would now wish to examine how this conception of rationality and its (possible) integration within Freudian theory relates to the commonsense notion of *intention*. Intention is a concept which belongs in the realm of folk psychology. Making distinctions between intentional and unintentional (or voluntary and involuntary) action is a matter of course in everyday life: thus assaulting a bank is seen as an intentional (and punishable) action, whereas reflex reactions such as laughing out loud when tickled are classed as unintentional.

Commonsense intentions display a remarkable resemblance to Davidson's reason explanations. Indeed, beyond their use for the description and classification of actions, intentions also work as explanations: I phone my sister because I want to tell her about my new house, I jump onto the pavement because I want to avoid a turning car, I open the book at the index because I want to look up a certain author mentioned. Notice the *because I want X* construction of the second clause in these sentences: not only are intentions explanatory (*because*), but they also provide the element of desire (*I want*) present in Davidsonian reasons. To put it more clearly:

*I perform action A*

**Clause 1**

*because I want to obtain result R*

**Clause 2**

Undoubtedly, the explanatory character of clause 2 holds because the utterer thinks (or considers, estimates, believes wholeheartedly or halfheartedly) that action A in clause 1 will lead to result R. Hence the second part of the reason explanation, belief. Folk psychology intentions thus appear to at least overlap to a considerable extent with Davidsonian reasons. And, as we have seen, the desire-belief couple which makes up reason explanations constitutes the basis for rationality. Thus rationality and intentionality (taken here in its common, non-Brentanian sense) would serve as almost-synonyms.

It is this almost-synonymy of intentionality and rationality, I believe, that has led many philosophers to mark those mental phenomena which fall under the aegis of Freudian primary processes and wish-fulfilment (dreams, infantile hallucinatory

experiences, psychotic delusions, symptoms, “Freudian slips”, etc.) as *sub-intentional*, that is, as falling beneath the threshold of intention (and therefore of rationality).

Tamas Pataki (Pataki 2000) has defined subintentional acts as those acts caused by a desire but lacking the belief component of the Davidsonian reason pair. According to the subintentionalist view, then, subintentional acts would be caused by a desire with no need of a mediating belief. To use the example of Freud’s “thirsty” dream:

*I dream that I drink water*

**Clause 1**

*because I want to quench my thirst*

**Clause 2**

In this example we have the causal relation and the desire. But unlike our first example, there is no belief here. Or rather, it is not the sleeper’s belief that establishes the causal connection between desire and action, but the researcher’s (in this case, Freud’s) belief: the sleeping subject does not believe that dreaming that he drinks water will quench his thirst – nor is there need for him to believe it. For dreaming is certainly not an intentional action in the usual sense of the word, as neither are any of the phenomena mentioned: we cannot choose to dream, or hallucinate, or display a symptom. Hence dreams (and the rest of phenomena) are not intentional, as they do not fall under the standard belief-desire explanation. Hence they are sub-intentional.

Pataki, however, opposes the subintentionalist view on the grounds (as I read him) that the definition of intention employed in this view is inadequate. As he puts it,

The Will, as sub-intentional operation of desire, expression, spontaneity, does indeed go deep; but the Will as practical reason, as *unconscious deliberation and intention*, or as something very like them, also goes deep, in ways that sub-intentionalists have been disposed to deny. In particular, by failing to recognize the *unconscious intentionality* or strategy involved in certain kinds of wish-fulfilling processes, sub-intentionalists have neglected important aspects of the self’s activity [...] (Pataki 2000, 51; my italics)

Through his mention of an *unconscious* intentionality, Pataki draws attention to the fact that intentions – or reasons to act – tend to be regarded as conscious in

commonsense psychology (indeed, the notion of unconscious mental processes is a rather un-commonsensical one). The kernel of the difference between intentional and subintentional actions, as we have seen, is *belief*. My picking up a magazine from the floor because I want to read it is intentional because I believe that my reading the magazine is made possible by my picking it up first. However, my dreaming that I eat a pie because I get hungry in my sleep is sub-intentional, as I hold no belief in my sleep that my dreaming that I eat a pie will appease my hunger. Or do I not?

Sub-intentionalists, as we have seen, have no problem in admitting that desires can be unconscious. However, they seem to preclude the possibility of unconscious belief. Yet, if there is an instance of the mind capable of harbouring desires - as subintentionalists assume - , there should be no reason why it could not hold beliefs as well. And indeed, as Pataki points out, in Freud's definition belief is as primitive and prior to the test of reality as is desire:

When nothing in the mind "contradicts" or contrasts with a particular idea or perception, because all incompatible ideas or perceptions have been excluded or decathected, "reality testing" is inoperative, and the idea or perception is "believed".  
(Pataki 2000, 52-3)

If we admit the possibility of unconscious belief, then unconscious intention ensues immediately. And indeed this seems to follow more closely the grain of Freudian thought than do sub-intentionalist positions: for inasmuch as intentions are intuitively seen as the "meaning" of actions, and Freud's claim in *ID* is that dreams are no senseless organic phenomena but are on the contrary essentially meaningful, an intentionalist approach to unconscious phenomena would be closer to the spirit of Freudian thought.



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