

Pretending and Wrongdoing

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“Pretend: Definition and Meaning” (CED, 2024)

In another essay, “Dreams and Human Agency,” I asked the following question:

Is it immoral to think immoral thoughts in dreams, if these thoughts arise spontaneously and have no outer expression; and correspondingly, are we morally responsible for them? (Hanna, 2024: p. 1)

And my answer to that question was:

Self-evidently, no: it isn’t immoral; and we aren’t morally responsible for those thoughts. (Hanna, 2024: p. 1)

I called this *the no-fault dreaming thesis*, and I offered two arguments in favor of it:

First, *the argument from self-conscious control*: an act can be immoral, and we can be morally responsible for our thoughts or actions, *only if* they’re under our self-conscious control, but even though spontaneous thoughts are conscious, and we are their ultimate sources (Hanna, 2018: chs. 1-5), they aren’t under our self-conscious control, hence they’re not immoral and we’re not morally responsible for them.

And **second**, *the argument from reductio ad absurdum*: if it were immoral to think immoral thoughts in dreams, if these thoughts arise spontaneously and have no outer expression, and we were morally responsible for them, then many or most of us would be acting immorally many times a night, even though these actions have no outward consequences and never harm anyone else; but that's absurd, so it must be false. (Hanna, 2024: p. 2)

Nevertheless,

if one were constantly to experience spontaneous, non-outwardly-expressed immoral thoughts in waking life, this would surely have a morally deleterious effect on one's moral character; similarly, if one were constantly to experience immoral thoughts in dreams, surely one's moral character would also be adversely affected. Thus a relatively large number of spontaneous, non-outwardly-expressed immoral thoughts in either waking life or dreams can be a cause or an indicator of the viciousness of one's moral character, and the relative absence of such thoughts in either waking life or dreams can be a cause or an indicator of the virtuousness of one's moral character. (Hanna, 2024: p. 2)

In the present essay, I want to ask a related but different question: if it's morally wrong to do something, then is it morally wrong to pretend to do it? If the answer is an unqualified "no: it isn't immoral; and we aren't morally responsible for such pretending," that then that amounts to what I'll call *the no-fault pretending thesis*.

For clarity's sake, I'll define *pretending*. Someone X pretends to be something or someone Y, or do something Z, or be some kind of thing F if and only if (i) X is conscious, (ii) X is self-conscious, (iii) X is in fact *not* either Y or an F, (iv) X does *not* in fact do Z, (v) X consciously or self-consciously either (va) overtly acts like or imitates Y or an F, or acts as if they were doing Z, for the purpose of deceiving others or themselves (hence self-deception) into falsely believing that X is Y or an F, or that X is doing Z, (vb) overtly acts like or imitates Y or an F, or as if X were doing Z, for the purpose of entertaining others (e.g., film actors or stage actors) or themselves, or (vc) merely imagines themselves acting like or imitating Y or an F, or doing Z, for the purpose of either (vc1) simply amusing themselves, (vc2) as an interesting thought-experiment, or (vc3) rehearsing for actually impersonating Y or being an F, or doing Z. This definition fairly closely follows the definitions of "pretend" in the *Collins English Dictionary* (CED, 2024) and *Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Hawkins and Allen, 1991: p. 1146), with a few philosophical elaborations for the sake of clarity, distinctness, and completeness.

Interestingly, and even somewhat ironically, I posed the question "if it's morally wrong to do something, then is it morally wrong to pretend to do it?" during a recent dream in which I said this to an interlocutor named "Ian":

When someone pretends to play an electric guitar, it's called "playing an air guitar." So if someone pretends to shoot a gun, let's call that "shooting an air gun." Then if it's morally wrong to shoot a person with a real gun without any provocation, is it morally wrong to pretend to shoot an imaginary or real person with an air gun without any provocation?

And then Ian answered:

As a general rule, it's not morally wrong, because it's just like pretending to shoot someone as a joke, or pretending to shoot someone in a play or a movie: the context of your act makes it clear that even though you're engaging in intentional body-movements that are the same or similar to shooting a real gun at a real person, you're not actually intending to do that, but only representing doing that for some other non-immoral purpose.

In other words, Ian was saying that the unqualified, universalized no-fault pretending thesis is true. And inside the dream, that seemed right to me, so I complimented Ian on his philosophical perspicacity, and then I woke up.

But after waking and upon reflection, however, it occurred to me that there would obviously be some contexts in which pretending to do something morally wrong would *also* be morally wrong.

For example, suppose you pretended to shoot people without provocation in order to encourage or motivate other people actually to shoot real people without provocation. That would be in itself morally wrong, as an incitement to random, unjustified violence. Or suppose that you pretended to shoot people in order to make an unfunny joke, or mock the innocent victims of such a shooting. That would be callous and heartless, and therefore morally wrong.

Moving away now from examples involving pretended violence, what about examples involving pretending to use ethnic or racial slurs? In late night comedy clubs or TV, or plays or movies, that wouldn't always be immoral. For example, if a Black comedian pretends to use racial slurs directed at Black people, or if a Black dancer wears blackface and pretends to display discriminatory stereotypes, that's simply funny, edgily ironic, or at least morally acceptable. And if a White person were to use racial slurs or wear blackface as a comedian, dancer, or actor in a stage play or movie, which by virtue of its contextual framework made it clear to any reasonable audience that the intention of the play or movie was morally to criticize the very idea of racist attitudes or wearing blackface, then that would be morally acceptable too. But if an ordinary White person went out into the streets wearing blackface and started tap-dancing in public, then it

would be morally objectionable, even if the White person's intention was to be funny, edgily ironic, or to criticize the very idea of wearing blackface. In all such cases, the lack of an appropriate contextual framework makes it morally unacceptable.

Moreover, these counterexamples to the no-fault pretending thesis show us that it's not the case that the agent's self-conscious intention in pretending itself determines the moral properties of pretending: in many, or perhaps even all cases, precisely how that intention is interpreted or received by an audience is also required in order to determine its moral properties. Indeed, the pretender must be highly sensitive to the contextual framework of their pretending and also to the audience of their pretending, in order to avoid doing something immoral, whether unintentionally or as a foreseeable side-effect of their pretending.

Taking into account now the full range cases of pretended wrongdoing, it seems clear-&-distinct that the unqualified, universalized no-fault pretending thesis is false. Although sometimes it's not morally wrong to pretend to do what it's morally wrong to do, very often it's morally wrong so to pretend. Indeed, the more morally heinous the wrongdoing, the more likely it is to be morally problematic or even outright morally wrong to pretend to do it. For example, censorship and restrictive ratings of movies for their violent content—even allowing full rein for artistic and aesthetic freedom of expression—makes sense in light of this fact.

In addition, as in the case of constantly experiencing immoral thoughts in dreams, so too if one were constantly to pretend wrongdoings, then surely one's moral character would also be adversely affected.

So now I can re-ask my initial question: if it's morally wrong to do something, then is it morally wrong to pretend to do it? And the answer I'm proposing is that, no, it's not *always* morally wrong to pretend to do something that's morally wrong, and indeed it's *often* perfectly morally permissible. But because, unlike immoral thoughts in dreams, pretending always involves self-conscious control, and actual intentional body movements, and because it almost always involves an actual audience, and because the more morally heinous the wrongdoing, the more likely it is to be morally problematic or even outright morally wrong to pretend to do it, then the risk of doing something immoral by pretending to do something immoral is always present to a greater or lesser extent, in direct proportion to the degree of immorality of the wrongdoing, whereas in dreams, immoral thoughts occur spontaneously and non-self-consciously, hence uncontrollably, and only in the private chambers of one's own interior life.

If that's right, then since the line of questioning and analysis I've pursued in this essay began in a dream, then we can also conclude as a side-bar consequence that although dreams can supply rich material for waking philosophical investigation, doing philosophy in waking life is typically better reasoned and more cogent than doing philosophy in dreams.¹

¹ I'm grateful to Scott Hefler for thought-provoking correspondence about this essay.

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