

# Can we really speak of ‘pretend desires’?

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ABSTRACT. Up to now the debate concerning ‘pretend desires’ (imaginings whose functional role is similar to that of desires) has concerned only the question whether pretend desires are really *necessary* in order to explain our capacity of understanding and engaging with fictional scenarios.

Nobody, however, has put into question whether pretend desires are really *possible*. In this paper I will show that, if a certain conception of desire is adopted (Carruthers 2006), no reliable distinction between genuine and pretend desire can be traced. The sustainers of the existence of pretend desires, I will conclude, are thus called to specify a notion of desire that allows to draw this distinction.

## 1. Introduction

With the expression ‘pretend desires’ we typically mean states of the imagination that resemble our genuine desires, that is: imaginings whose functional role is very similar to the functional role characteristic of desires.

The existence of pretend desires has been postulated by some philosophers (cf. Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Goldman 2006a,b) in order to explain our capacity to understand fiction and engage in pretense<sup>1</sup>. When we are engaged in a game of make-believe, they claim, our imagination is recruited not only to depict certain fictional scenarios, but also to produce some desire-like imaginings that can motivate our behavior in the game.

For instance, if I make-believe that I have been invited to a tea-party, I need not only to imagine a tea-party scenario (that is, I need not only to form some pretend beliefs that there are tea and cakes, and friends around me), but I also need to imagine desiring something (e.g. to have a slice of cheesecake, or to talk to a friend): only these pretend desires can explain why I act in the way I do.

The debate concerning pretend desires, however, has focused only on the question whether pretend desire are really *necessary* in order to explain our behavior in pretense and our appreciation of fiction more generally<sup>2</sup>, but it has not considered a more fundamental question, meaning: whether pretend desires are really *possible*.

In the following pages my aim will be precisely to show that, given a certain conception of what a desire is (ascribable to Peter Carruthers 2006), it is impossible to trace any principled distinction between genuine and pretend desires. Consequently, philosophers such as Currie and Ravenscroft and Goldman should either drop the notion of ‘pretend desire’ or specify a conception of desire that allows to discriminate our real-world desires from the desires we entertain towards fictional scenarios<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of ‘pretend desire’ was already present in the ‘simulation theory of mindreading’ proposed by Goldman (1989), according to whom, when we put ourselves in the other’s shoes and try to predict what decision she could take, we must feed our decision-making system with some pretend inputs – a pretend belief and a pretend desire – and then let our system operate on these states as if they were some genuine beliefs and desires of ours. The debate concerning pretend desires has then developed within the literature on pretense and the appreciation of fiction.

<sup>2</sup> For example, contrary to Currie and Ravenscroft (2002), Nichols and Stich have tried to show that our behavior in pretense can be motivated by genuine desires, without recurring to pretend ones (cf. Nichols and Stich 2000; Nichols 2004a, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The reason why we have chosen to focus on Carruthers’s theory of desire is that both Currie and Ravenscroft and Goldman limit themselves to discuss the role of pretend desires in mindreading and pretense, but they do not specify the notion of desire that they employ. The notion adopted by Carruthers, however, could be plausibly attributed also to them, since they all adopt

## 2. Desires in pretense

Carruthers (2006) has recently proposed a convincing explanation of how pretense can be motivated, that he himself has labeled as a 'hybrid account', since it combines the architecture of pretense developed by Nichols and Stich (2000) with the theory of somatic markers advanced by Damasio (1994).

According to Nichols and Stich what motivates our behavior when we pretend, is the desire of acting in accordance to the fictional story or, more precisely, of acting in the same way in which some people or things represented in the pretend scenario would behave (2000: 134).

For example, if I imagine being a commander at the head of an army, I will desire to behave in the same way a commander would in that situation; if I imagine being a cat walking in the street, I will desire to behave as cats typically do.

This account of motivation, however, fails to explain why we are much more prone to play certain games of make-believe rather than others. As Carruthers remarks, "people pretend to be, or to do, things that they find in some way admirable or valuable", whereas they tend to avoid pretending according to unconformable scenarios (2006: 94). Children who admire soldiers are typically inclined to play war games, whereas children who admire homemakers usually make-believe to take care for some baby or to cook pies: what could then motivate their choices, beyond the general desire to play in accordance to a certain scenario?

This problem can be satisfactorily explained, Carruthers claims, if one corrects Nichols and Stich's account with Damasio's theory of somatic markers.

According to Damasio (1994: ch. 8), when we reason about what to do in a certain situation, we envisage different scenarios, each depicting a different action to perform; these scenarios, on their turn, raise different emotional reactions in us, depending on the subject's previous experiences, and it is these emotions that confer to those scenarios different motivating powers.

For example, if I go crazy for strawberry cakes and I am at a confectioner's, the depiction of the scenario 'eating a strawberry cake' will probably raise in me a strong positive emotion, much stronger than other scenarios (e.g. eating an apple pie or a cheese cake). The representation of a strawberry cake,

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the architecture of the mind designed by Nichols and Stich (2000), with a difference which concerns only pretend beliefs (cf. Nichols 2004b).

in other words, will be ‘marked’ by a high feeling of pleasure because my previous experiences with strawberry cakes have always been highly pleasant. As a consequence, the representation of a strawberry cake will be capable to motivate my behavior, that is: I will be more prone to realize my desire to eat a strawberry cake rather than other scenarios (e.g. eating an apple pie).

The same happens, according to Carruthers, also in the case of pretense. Let us consider, for example, the typical game in which a child pretends that a banana is a telephone (cf. Leslie 1987).

From this supposition, Carruthers says (2006: 104), the child could easily conclude that ‘That banana can be used to call grandma’. Now, if we suppose that he or she loves talking to his or her grandma, then he or she will surely experience a high degree of pleasure in imagining such a scenario, and thus she will be motivated to realize it: “The child mentally rehearses the action schema, experiences a positive emotion, and thereby comes to desire the execution of that action schema” (2006: 106).

This explains, Carruthers concludes, why we are not prone to pretend every scenario whatsoever and why there can be great individual differences: a tea-party scenario can raise a highly positive emotional reaction – and, consequently, a strong desire to pretend in accordance to it – in one person, but a negative reaction in another, depending on their specific preferences and their previous experiences.

### **3. The impossibility of discriminating genuine from pretend desires**

By relying on this account of pretense, we can now try to make some more general considerations on the notion of desire employed by Carruthers.

As seen, Carruthers explains our behavior in pretense by appealing to genuine – rather than pretend – desires, but what we want to stress is that he could not have done otherwise, since his notion of desire does not allow him to discriminate genuine from pretend desires.

Carruthers conceives of desires as occurrent mental states that represent certain non-actual scenarios and that raise in us a certain degree of pleasure, which, on its turn, possesses a motivating power, thus making us prone to realize the scenario represented.

Given this conception of desire as a composite state – a state which has not only a representational content, but also an emotional and motivational aspect – one could then claim that pretend desires differ from genuine desires at least for one of these two aspects.

The first, however, does not seem to be a good candidate. The desires we entertain during an episode of pretense, in fact, have the same representational content of the desires we entertain in real life: desiring to have an ice-cream for real, in other words, is not different from desiring to have an ice-cream in a game of make-believe, since in both cases what we represent is a state-of-affairs that is *not actual*, but only hypothetical.

Of course, one could object that, when I depict a future scenario such as eating an ice-cream, this possibility is not the same as the possibility of becoming a princess. From the cognitive point of view, however, this can only mean that, when I imagine being a princess, I know that this content cannot be so easily realized as it can be the content ‘eating an ice-cream’. So, what seems to distinguish a genuine desire from a pretend desire is not their content, but some awareness about the possibility that this content becomes actual<sup>4</sup>.

The latter component – meaning, the emotional-motivational aspect – could seem more promising, at least at first sight. One could argue, in fact, that pretend desires differ from genuine ones because the emotions that we feel towards fictional scenarios are not genuine, but only *quasi-emotions*.

This view, famously maintained by Walton (1990), typically makes appeal to the fact that our behavior towards fictional scenarios is different from the behavior that we have towards analogous real-world scenarios. For example, if I see a green slime on the screen, I can feel some fear, but I do not leave my armchair nor I call the police, because I do not really believe to be in danger. This means, Walton concludes (1990: 197ff), that what I feel is only a quasi-fear, because it lacks the necessary causal antecedent (a belief to be in danger) and, consequently, the appropriate behavior.

As it has been shown by several empirical studies (for a review cf. Moran 1994), however, discriminating between genuine and pretend emotions – at

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<sup>4</sup> Another problem is represented by the imagination of metaphysical impossibilities (such as imagining being a dead cat, or imagining being Napoleon). I do not have the space to treat this problem in detail. The solution I favor, however, is that proposed by Recanati (2007: 2003ff), according to which imagining being Napoleon can only mean imagining certain first-personal mental states, that I attribute to Napoleon. On this account, then, desiring a metaphysical impossibility is not an especially complicated case, since it amounts to desiring to have certain first-personal experiences, that, I suppose, another person or thing could have or could have had. So, again, what changes, with respect to a real-world desire, is not the content of my desire, but only the content of another state, which concerns my desire and the person or thing to which this desire must be attributed.

least in the case of basic emotional reactions such as disgust, fear, and pleasure as well – is nearly impossible, since these emotions are much like ‘gut feelings’, raised in an immediate and automatic way, and do not require any specific cognitive state as their causal antecedent.

In other words, in standard cases, I am disgusted far before having understood what disgusts me, I feel fear before having figured out what endangers me and, much the same way, I feel pleasure before realizing what pleases me. That fact that our pleasure is raised by a future or a mere fictional scenario is thus completely irrelevant with respect to the nature of this feeling and its identifying conditions.

Also tracing a distinction between genuine and pretend desires by relying on the alleged distinction between genuine and pretend pleasure thus seems to be very hard.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this paper we have shown that the notion of desire endorsed by Carruthers excludes *a priori* the existence of pretend desires, that is: given his conception of desire, we cannot discriminate between genuine and pretend desires neither by appealing to their representational content nor to the feeling of pleasure by which they are marked. Both genuine and pretend desires, in fact, are representations of non-actual states of affairs marked by a genuine feeling of pleasure.

Our claim, however, does not intend to be a general one: we are ready to admit that, if one adopted a different conception of desire, one could be able to discriminate genuine from pretend desires.

This is the challenge that the sustainers of pretend desires are called to accept: if they want to maintain a simulative conception of the imagination, according to which we would be able to recreate both belief-like states and desire-like states, then, they first have to give a plausible notion of desire, that clearly indicates in what, exactly, genuine desires would differ from only-imagined ones, and how a subject could discriminate between them.

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