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From Wishful Thinking to Self-Deception

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Abstract

What are wishful thinking and self-deception, and what is the difference between them? This article looks for answers to these questions with reference to a real-life case.

Two Kinds of Irrationality

It is frequently observed that people often believe what they like, and it is the divergences between people in what they want to be true that often makes it so difficult for them to agree on what is true. Two forms that this 'believing what you like' phenomenon takes are wishful thinking and self-deception. Philosophical writers on self-deception have often attempted to sharpen our understanding of it by distinguishing it from closely related phenomena, and in this connection perhaps none has been contrasted with it more than wishful thinking. But false assumptions remain in how we understand the difference between these two things, or so I will argue.

An enduring idea about wishful thinking is that it is a simple phenomenon where a belief is caused directly by a wish and is not founded on any evidence or reasons. For instance, in his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, E. J. Lowe writes, 'wishful thinking is believing something because one wants it to be true, rather than because one has any evidence for its truth'. Donald Davidson, a widely read and influential early writer on this phenomenon, is perhaps most responsible for this idea. In the article 'Paradoxes of Irrationality' he said that 'the entire explanation of his holding the belief is that he wanted to believe it. This is a case of wishful thinking, which is a model for the simplest kind of irrationality.' Self-deception is then distinguished from this as a more complex and less passive phenomenon where the want does not directly cause the belief but rather motivates actions that construct a justification for it; the subject in this case will have reasons for his belief, though typically shoddy ones.

This idea of a belief that we hold but not because we have any evidence or reasons for it is puzzling. If you interrogated such a person and asked her why she believes what she believes, what would she say? Would she shrug her shoulders and say, 'I just do'? I think that this makes wishful thinking out to be more irrational than it really is. In what follows I will describe a case that illustrates the difference between these two phenomena and suggests that we should draw the line between them differently from how the Davidsonian view draws it.

Romantic matters – and I use this expression in a wide sense – are a fertile ground where wishful thinking and self-deception can sprout. Let me share with you a true story that involves the cleanest case of wishful thinking that I have

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come across. This story involves some bar-stool talk, so please excuse the vulgar language.

A Cautionary Tale

Years ago, I had a colleague in a previous job who was psychologically an interesting and amusing character. He was a vain man and also an obsessive type, in the sense that he would dive into some project with great intensity for a period of time, would subsequently fail at it or burnout, and then abandon or repudiate the interest and take up some new interest with a similar intensity. And his interest at the period in question was in finding a girlfriend or 'lover' as he would sometimes put it. He spared no effort in achieving this end, including reading books by 'pickup artists' for tips and strategies. He would fearlessly approach women at any time of day (usually in cafes), engage them in conversation and ask for their phone number, which he would duly be given at least for politeness' sake. But despite his boldness and persistence (though some might call it pestering) he met with remarkably little success. I estimate that he got the phone numbers of over 200 women in the two years that I knew him, but these numbers almost invariably led to nothing. Hope springs eternal, however, and with each new number he got his optimism would return.

This wannabe ladies' man, I'll call him Jack, was a chronic wishful thinker and self-deceiver, but one incident in particular stood out. On one occasion we came across each other at work and stopped for a short chat. He seemed cheerful and mentioned that he had met a woman a few days earlier. In fact, he said that things were going so well that she had already expressed interest in being his 'f*#k buddy'. 'Really!' I said with surprise. What a forthright thing to suggest after just a few days' acquaintance! He seemed earnest in reporting this, and, though he was a vain man, I didn't know him to be one who makes things up. Had Jack's luck finally turned? But I had to go and told him that he could tell me more the next time we met.

A few days later we met for dinner and drinks, and I asked him how things were going with his new female friend. 'Did she really say she wants to be your f*#k buddy?' I asked. 'Yeah,' he answered, 'take a look,' and he handed me his phone showing a text-message conversation they had. I scrolled through the conversation, and it all seemed fairly innocent, just chit-chat,

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a bit flirtatious perhaps. But then I came to the salacious sentence: 'Let's be FB friends.'

It is noteworthy here that everyone I told this story to knew instantly what is meant by 'FB friends', but this remarkable specimen went about a whole week without this thought entering his head. And this was despite him being a frequent user of the social networking website! He simply interpreted what she wrote in accordance with his wishes and never considered any other possible meaning. Anyhow, after having a good laugh I gathered myself together and broke the news to him: 'Jack, you wally, she just wants to be your Facebook friend! FB means Facebook!' He grinned uneasily.

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This was an exemplary case of wishful thinking, but it goes against the Davidsonian view. It is not true that Jack's wishful belief was not based on any evidence. I asked him whether his belief was really true and then he produced evidence to support it, or what he took to be evidence. The irrationality of his belief did not consist in its being not based on evidence. Rather, it consisted in his jumping to a welcome conclusion based on meagre evidence, and in his not stopping to consider other interpretations of the datum. It seems that sometimes people just stop asking more questions as soon as things appear agreeable, like the patients who do not ask for a second opinion when their doctor gives them a good diagnosis but do when the diagnosis is bad.

But the story doesn't end there. When I put forward my humdrum interpretation of the lascivious line, he was for the first time confronted with unwelcome counterevidence to his belief. How did he react? He would not yet relent. With great deftness, he acknowledged my suggestion but posited that she was being 'deliberately ambiguous'. He knew 'her game' now: she was asking to be his Facebook friend, yes, but she was proposing something else at the same time (thus giving herself plausible deniability in case of rejection perhaps). He also seemed unimpressed when I questioned why she would write 'FB friend' given that, on his interpretation of this, 'friend' would be redundant. People do sometimes express themselves with redundancies after all.

It was at this point that he began to transition from wishful thinking to self-deception, and the case shows how smooth that transition can be. For this kind of behaviour – rationalization – is widely associated with self-deception. It is characteristic of it because unlike in wishful thinking, in self-deception the subject is confronted with unwelcome evidence, and he maintains his belief in the face of it. This requires defensive measures to protect the belief, which is exactly what was seen from Jack. Thus, there is often an intellectual deftness involved in self-deception that is not required in wishful thinking, and in that sense wishful thinking is, as Davidson said, the simpler form of irrationality.

It is this need for intellectual deftness that would suggest, ironically, that clever people are perhaps better at and more inclined towards self-deception than less clever people. A person with less intellectual ingenuity than Jack might not have come up with that rationalization and thus might have lost the belief earlier. This chimes with a related claim that Michael Shermer has argued for in *Why People Believe Weird Things*, that smart people are more inclined to believe weird and absurd ideas. As he says, 'Smart people believe weird things because they are skilled at defending beliefs they arrived at for non-smart reasons.'

However, Jack's drift into self-deception did not last long. From his later silence about the issue, I gathered that his belief had soon collapsed under the weight of its own preposterousness.

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There is another aspect to Davidson's remark that, in light of this story, we might take issue with. Davidson said that in wishful thinking, the entire explanation for his holding the belief is that he wanted to believe it. (Lowe put it differently, saying that he wanted it to be true.) But did Jack want to *believe* that he had gained a more-than-just-a-friend, or did he want it to be *true* that he gained a more-than-just-a-friend? My impression was the latter. Jack was not looking to have a pleasant state of mind or comforting illusion, rather he was looking to find a lover. What would he have gained from the mere belief that he had found one, irrespective of its truth? Nothing at all I would think. Any such belief would not have survived for long and any pleasure he got from it would have been cancelled out by the disappointment it would inevitably have led to. To have wanted the mere belief in these circumstances would not just have been irrational but perverse.

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Conclusion

In summary, this story teaches us a number of points about the difference between and nature of wishful thinking and self-deception. First, the difference is not that wishful thinking is not based on evidence while self-deception is. Both are based on (what the subject regards as) evidence or reasons, but the irrational belief in self-deception is retained in an evidentially hostile environment that requires defensive behaviours, while in wishful thinking the irrational belief has not yet been seriously challenged. Secondly, self-deception is more intellectually demanding than wishful thinking, often requiring an ingenuity that the latter does not require. Thirdly, it seems that at least in some cases, these irrational beliefs are caused by the desire for the proposition to be true, rather than by the desire just to believe that it is true, since the latter desire would not have made much sense in the above situation. Whether having such abstract insights into the nature of wishful thinking and self-deception can help us avoid making asses of ourselves as Jack did, however, is another question and one whose answer is far from clear.

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