

Dreams and Human Agency

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"The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" by Francisco Goya (Los Caprichos, #43, 1799)

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? Self-evidently, no: it isn't immoral; and we aren't morally responsible for those thoughts.

Let's call this *the no-fault dreaming thesis*. Here are two arguments in support of the no-fault dreaming thesis.

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.

I conclude that I've proved the no-fault dreaming thesis. At the same time, however, 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.

More generally, however, what is the relationship between dreams and human agency?

According to my theory of personhood and personal identity, which I call *minded animalism*, we're identical to our conscious lives:

According to Minded Animalism, you and I and the folks living next door are all real persons who are each literally identical—by which I mean numerically identical, or token-identical, and also personally identical—one-to-one, with the complete, finite, and unique *life* of some individual minded animal in the class of all minded animals. Then real personal identity is not an identity relation between a mind and a mind, or between a body and a body, or even between an animal and an animal. On the contrary, real personal identity is an identity relation between an animal's *life-process* and an animal's *life-process*.

What kinds of animal lives am I talking about? Some animals are minded, like us, and some animals are not minded, for example, human babies born with anencephaly, human beings in persistent vegetative states, and perhaps also insects and reptiles. In any case, by a *minded animal*, I mean any living organism with inherent capacities or powers for: (i) *consciousness*, that is, a capacity for embodied subjective experience, (ii) *intentionality*, that is, a capacity for conscious mental representation and mental directedness to objects, events, processes, facts, acts, other animals, or the subject herself (so in general, a capacity for mental directedness to *intentional targets*), and also for (iii) *caring*, a capacity for conscious affect, desiring, and emotion, whether directed to objects, events, processes, facts, acts, other animals, or the subject herself.

Over and above consciousness, intentionality, and caring, in *some but not all* minded animals, there is also a further inherent capacity for (iv) *rationality*, that is, a capacity for self-conscious thinking according to principles, responsiveness to reasons, and reasons-seeking, hence poised for justification, whether logical thinking (including inference and theory-construction) or practical thinking (including deliberation and decision-making)... [I]t is the fourth capacity (rationality), naturally built on top of the other three capacities (consciousness, intentionality, and caring), that sufficiently constitute the real personhood of a minded animal. (Hanna, 2018: p. 9)

According to minded animalism, when we're temporarily unconscious, or in a temporary coma, or suffer temporary amnesia, or in ordinary dreamless sleep, or when we dream, we remain one and the same real human person, due to the essential embodiment of our minds in the same living animal body (Hanna and Maiese, 2009). So, since dreams really belong to our individual conscious lives, they partially constitute the individual real human persons we are, or at the very least partially constitute the specific character of our real human personhood. Therefore, to a salient and significant extent, *we are what we dream*.

As conscious and spontaneous, dreams are expressions of the creativity of the rational human mind; indeed, it's well known that original or even brilliant ideas can come to artists, scientists, or philosophers in dreams. Moreover, even if, on the one hand, immoral thoughts in dreams can adversely affect one's moral character, make our moral characters more vicious, and—like nightmares, for example, the ones famously depicted in Goya's "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," as per the image at the top of this essay—contribute to the overall unhappiness of our individual lives, on the other hand, good dreams can also positively affect our moral character, make our moral character more virtuous, and contribute to the overall happiness of our individual lives.

For example, a few months ago I moved permanently to the Pacific Northwest of North America, from a dry, arid climate a few hundred yards from the Rocky Mountains,

to a moist, humid climate a few hundred yards from the Pacific Ocean. Because the house I'm currently living in is in a very quiet area, I've been sleeping with the windows open.

As a consequence of these new sleep conditions, I've been regularly experiencing intense, vivid, highly detailed, often lucid (that is, dreams in which one is aware that one is dreaming) dreams that imaginatively explore aspects of my own past and present life, or philosophical issues and problems that I've been working on during waking hours, in highly constructive, positive ways. Sometimes I'll even wake up, think about the dream, then fall asleep again and experience a continuation of the same dream, which has never happened to me before. When I wake up from one of these dreams, I think, "yes, now I understand this or that about myself in a new way"; or: "yes, I see this or that all-too-familiar philosophical issue or problem in a new and illuminating way." In short, these dreams contribute constructively and positively to my overall life and individual personhood. Therefore, not only is it the case that, to a salient and significant extent, *we are what we dream*, it's also the case that *dreaming is uniquely human creative activity and work*. Correspondingly, no machine or digital technology—for example, a chatbot or Large Language Model (LLM), or any other so-called "artificial intelligence" or AI—could ever dream and be creative in this way, not even in principle (Hanna, 2023a, 2023b).

This point is closely related to a fundamental fallacy in classical and contemporary theorizing, and also in our everyday thinking, about sleep and dreaming, that has, not merely unfortunately but even tragically, been widely implemented in our early modern and now late modern classical liberal and contemporary neoliberal individual and social-institutional *practices* of working and sleeping. This fallacy says that there is a sharp, dichotomous, and mutually exclusive boundary between work and nonwork, and between sleep and nonsleep. I'll call this *The Fallacy of Bordered Work and Sleep*.

Indeed, the empirical psychology of sleep provides some good evidence against The Fallacy. Empirical research shows that the emotional states occurring during dreaming, especially lucid dreaming, are continuous with waking states (Vallat and Ruby, 2019), even if the precise cognitive dynamics of this continuity are not yet fully understood, and even if they are also heavily dependent on local environment, individual personality, and other contextual factors. Relatedly, studies involving targeted sleep deprivation that's specifically keyed to an individual's character and personal disposition show that this deprivation can actually have positive effects on depression and how people respond to stress (Wu et al., 2015).

Corresponding to The Fallacy of Bordered Work and Sleep, it's also generally but fallaciously believed that the concept and practices of work or being-at-work must be black-vs.-white contradictory to the concept and practices of leisure, including play,

relaxation, and rest. Similarly, as part-and-parcel of the same package of fallacies, it is equally generally but also equally fallaciously believed that the concept and practices of sleep or being-asleep, and its passivity, insensibility, and unconsciousness, must be black-vs.-white contradictory to the concept and practices of being-awake, and its activity, alertness, and lucidity. Intense, vivid dreaming, especially lucid dreaming, as well as the Medieval idea of the *incubus* and the *succubus*—ghostly sexual visitors in the night—and the Freudian psychoanalytic idea of *dreamwork*, have of course long raised a serious problem for the fallacious being-asleep/passive *vs.* being-awake/active dichotomy. But very few philosophers, and perhaps even more surprisingly, very few philosophers of mind, have ever paid any attention to these fundamental counterexamples to it, even those with a strong interest in Freud and psychoanalysis. Indeed, just as unemployment is almost universally regarded as being in direct opposition to and outside hyperproductive advanced or late capitalism, so too sleep is almost universally regarded in contemporary neoliberal nation-States as unproductive and unprofitable time, whose only useful function is to recharge the temporarily depleted batteries of exhausted workers, as if they were nothing but so many humanoid iPhones or those iPhones-on-wheels, Tesla electric cars.

In direct opposition to and refutation of The Fallacy of Bordered Work and Sleep, what I'm saying is that as a matter of objective fact work and nonwork, and sleep and nonsleep, both as concepts and also as real-world activities or practices that are central in our rational but also "human, all-too-human" condition as human agents, especially including dreaming, not only can be but also should be continuously related to one another, rendered complementary, and then smoothly integrated with one another. So dream on.

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