

To Sleep; Perchance to Dream: Three Questions About Dreaming

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"Sleeping Gypsy," by Henri Rousseau, 1897 (Artsy.net, 2019)

To sleep; perchance to dream. (Shakespeare, 1641/1963: p. 107)

1. Introduction

Everyone sleeps; and during sleep, everyone dreams, although not constantly; but in any case, we often fail to remember the contents of our dreams upon waking. And even when one does remember the contents of one's dreams, unless one immediately records them upon waking, they typically fade and are forgotten very quickly, like words written on sand erased by incoming waves.

In view of the universality of the human experience of dreaming, I want to raise three questions about dreaming: (i) what is dreaming?, (ii) is dreaming a disembodied experience?, and (iii) is it possible to dream that you're dreaming?

2. What is Dreaming?

Dreaming is a conscious intentional act and process occurring during human sleep, and only during human sleep, that's principally actively generated by the imagination, but also by the faculties of memory and thinking, initiated spontaneously and freely but not controlled self-consciously, with more or less vivid representational content. The *Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary* defines "dream" as "a series of pictures or events in the mind of a sleeping person" (Hawkins and Allen, 1991: p. 434), but this makes it seem like the dreaming subject is mainly a passive viewer of visual images, static or moving, like someone looking at a series of paintings or photographs, or watching a movie, instead of the active imaginative agent of dreaming. Indeed, that dreaming is a product of the active human imagination is also captured by a secondary sense of "dreaming," as in Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a dream," which means "having an ideal, aspiration, or ambition" (Hawkins and Allen, 1991: p. 435). And even people who have been blind from birth also dream. Moreover, dreams in the primary sense are replete with emotional content of all kinds, especially desires and fears, and can be either deeply satisfying and pleasant or deeply dissatisfying and unpleasant, and amusing or terrifying (as in nightmares), and everything in between those extremes. Generally speaking, dreams are a paradigm case of the fact that human conscious experience and intentionality are inherently *creative*. Necessarily, all dreams occur during sleep, and only during sleep, and are a sub-phenomenon within sleeping experience, unlike hallucinations or other illusions, which occur during waking experience. But even though all dreams occur during sleep, and only during sleep, and although everyone dreams whenever they sleep, during sleep one is not *always* dreaming: as Shakespeare rightly puts it: "to sleep; perchance to dream" (Shakespeare, 1641/1963: p. 107, italics added). Similarly, during waking experience, one is not always being spontaneously imaginatively creative. Dreaming is therefore the spontaneous imaginative creativity of the sleeping human mind. Sleeping and hence also dreaming remain *conscious* experiences, however, since one can always intelligibly ask oneself or others how they slept, even to some extent independently of dreaming, and thus it's entirely possible for sleep per se, or sleep + dreaming, to be restful, untroubled, and refreshing, or restless, troubled, and enervating. The common goodnight wish, "sleep well," is basically interchangeable with "pleasant dreams."

Machines generally, and digital computers in particular, cannot dream because they are not conscious and they are not creative, and therefore they can never be intelligent in the sense in which we're intelligent (Hanna, 2024a, forthcoming: esp. ch. 1). Correspondingly, we can definitively answer Philip K. Dick's literary or rhetorical question, "do androids dream of electric sheep?" (Dick, 1968) in the negative: no, androids cannot dream of electric sheep, precisely because androids cannot dream, and therefore they cannot dream *of anything*.

Just as, according to Endel Tulving's famous distinction (Tulving, 1972), memories are either *episodic*, i.e., egocentrically centered and first-personal, expressing an apparent specific subjective point of view, or *semantic*, i.e., allocentric or impersonal, expressing apparent objective facts, so too dreams are either episodic or semantic.

Usually, dreaming carries with it a belief in the manifestly real existence of what's being dreamed, although in "lucid" dreams one is also aware that one is dreaming and that what is dreamt is not actually manifestly real. In any case, unlike sense perception and episodic memory, which both have veridical grounding in the actual manifestly real world, as a general rule, what one dreams is *not* the case. Nevertheless, it's also common in dreams to mix elements of actual manifest reality with elements of fantasy, so that the whole dream is not the case, although parts of it are actually the case. The fact that dreams are generally non-veridical, or at least not wholly veridical, while also usually carrying belief in what's being dreamed, has been exploited by philosophers in general and skeptical epistemologists in particular, to raise doubts about whether at any given time, we're awake or dreaming, and more specifically to raise doubts about the possibility of an infallible criterion for telling the difference between waking and dreaming, and correspondingly raise doubts about the possibility of an infallible criterion for the existence of the actual manifestly real world—for example, and most influentially, (Descartes, 1641/1984: meditation 1; see also Hanna, 1992). But if I'm correct that necessarily, all dreams occur during sleep, then there's an obvious infallible criterion for telling the difference between waking and dreaming: when you're awake, then necessarily you're not sleeping, but when you're dreaming, then you must be sleeping. So not sleeping *versus* sleeping is the infallible criterion. Notice that this is *not* the difference between believing or knowing that you're not sleeping and believing or knowing that you're sleeping, which are subjective facts; on the contrary, it's the difference between you're not being asleep or you're being asleep *per se*, which is an objective fact, determinable in actual manifest reality outside subjective facts.

Moreover, sometimes what one dreams is more or less accidentally also true in actual manifest reality. Just because of this fact, it has often been held that some dreams carry special predictive or prognostic force, as per the claims of seers. But although it's

sometimes true that dreams are correct about the future, this isn't always the case. It has also been held that our dreams contain special insights about people's "real" characters or "unconscious" selves. But even despite the fact that certainly specific facts about one's own character that are normally repressed during waking experience, are sometimes revealed in dreams, this is also not always the case. So the famous Freudian and Jungian claims about dreaming are overstated, or even outright false.

Moreover, as I've argued elsewhere, it is generally not immoral to think immoral thoughts in dreams, which is what I call *the no-fault dreaming thesis* (Hanna, 2024b: pp. 1-2). But

[a]t 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. (Hanna, 2024b: p. 2)

In the same way that being asleep and being awake are not strictly on-off or binary, but instead allow for many intermediate degrees of shading between the two extremes—for example, dozing, day-dreaming, spacing out, meditating, and so-on—so too dreaming and not dreaming allow for many intermediate degrees of shading between the two extremes.

3. Is Dreaming a Disembodied Experience?

Dreams seem to float in and out of one's life, especially when considered or remembered from the standpoint of waking experience. And it's not unusual to dream that one is flying, soaring above the Earth, or somehow looking down on one's own body from a higher vantage point. So is dreaming a disembodied experience?

Now, like all human intentional acts, states, or processes, dreaming is conscious, and in turn, consciousness like ours is inherently embodied, which is what Michelle Maiese and I have called *the essential embodiment theory* (EET) of the mind-body relation and mental causation (Hanna and Maiese, 2009; Hanna, 2011). In a nutshell, EET says that the conscious minds of minded animals are *necessarily* and *completely* embodied in those animals, and, more specifically, that the conscious mind of a minded animal is the global

dynamic immanent structure of the living organismic body of that very animal, a structure that inherently activates and guides the animal's causally efficacious biological powers—or as Aristotle puts it in his own metaphysical terminology: “the soul (*anima*) is the first actuality of a natural body that has life potentially” (Aristotle, 1968: II.i.412a22). Hence EET is committed to what we call *neo-Aristotelian hylomorphism* about the mind-body relation (Hanna and Maiese, 2009: chs. 1-2 and 6.8).

Therefore, *no*, dreaming is not a disembodied experience, and indeed dreaming is necessarily and completely embodied, simply because sleep is necessarily and completely embodied, and all dreams occur during sleep. More specifically, all dreaming, as a sub-phenomenon within sleeping, inherently includes bodily movements and processes, including breathing or snoring, stretching, twitching, or larger movements of the limbs, changes in body chemistry, brain activity, arousal of various kinds, including sexual arousal—hence the classical notion of the *incubus* or *succubus*, ghostly sexual visitors during dreams—and so-on, although normally the bodily movements and processes are not explicitly apparent in the dream content itself. The experience of dreaming that one is floating or flying requires only dreaming an aetherial body, not no body at all; and the experience of dreaming that one is looking down on one's own body is a special case of semantic or allocentric dreaming.

4. Is It Possible to Dream That You're Dreaming?

The content of dreaming seems to be unconstrained by the laws of logic, laws of nature and social convention, although of course the content of many dreams is perfectly ordinary, logical law-abiding, natural law-abiding, and in line with social conventions, even if often bizarre or strange. Moreover, it's generally true that if one dreams X or Y, then X or Y is *not* the case. If that were a strictly necessary feature of dreaming, then it would be impossible to dream that one is dreaming, since to dream that one were dreaming would automatically make it the case that one were not dreaming.

But as I noted above, sometimes, more or less accidentally, what is dreamt is actually the case in manifest reality. So too, one might dream that one is consulting a psychologist who is doing experiments about sleep, or specializes in sleep therapy, and then puts one to sleep so that one apparently dreams: then, lo and behold, one is dreaming that one is dreaming, although of course the dream apparently dreamt is *a different one* from the dream that is actually consciously experiencing in manifest reality. So although it's impossible to dream that one is dreaming the very same dream that one is actually dreaming, it is possible to dream that one is dreaming a different dream.

5. Conclusion

I conclude that I've answered the three questions I raised at the outset. Dreaming is the spontaneous imaginative creativity of the sleeping human mind. Dreaming is essentially embodied, even when it seems disembodied. And although in one sense it's impossible to dream that one is dreaming the dream one is actually dreaming, since as a general rule to dream that one is doing X or Y is not actually to be doing X or Y, in another sense it's possible to dream that one is dreaming a different dream. Above all, human imaginative creativity is paradigmatically present in dreaming, and in that sense, dreaming is an essential mode of human experience.

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