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Philosophy 828

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The Dreams of Alpha-Lupi: A Trip In Virtual Reality

Dreams have been important to human cultures since they were able to understand and reflect on the content. From nightmares to daydreams, these distinct breaks of wakeful consciousness are different from our regular life. Dream states are part of our conscious experience, every night when we fall asleep, we might have a dream of some past event of the same day or ten years ago. To reflect on the contents of the dream is when we need the full use of wakefulness along with the access to consciousness to make judgments on the phenomenal experiences of the dream. This raises questions about the type of quality, experience and events do ordinary dreams states have when compared to a waking state, more so what makes dreams states stronger and more distinct than hallucinations and illusions? In this paper, I will focus on these questions to at least see if I can tease out some possible solution.

We have to look at the question of what possible solutions could be found in such a limited space, but first I will bring up two different cases of the formulation of the problem at hand. Then, I will seek a development of criteria of an adequate solution like an ordinary explanation of our experience and engagement with dream states. To further understand this, we have to ask ourselves what exactly are we looking for when we talk about dream states? A deep understanding is not needed when looking for a dream state since we have interactions with dreams almost every day. That everydayness will help us in the deciphering of the content of the dreams since first we have to pierce that veil in one swoop. This is where we must look very closely at the question at hand. Let us make two cases for this question. Case one is that the waking mental states provides an account that we can use as a background into which we can compare the dreaming state. Do dreams follow the continuity thesis, one that is created by Carlos Montemayor and Harry Haladjian, and they are epistemically available to us via the same conscious mental state such as waking? In this case, we have the continuity thesis which is that dream experiences are just like waking ones. The dreams state themselves are devoid of epistemic content but they are phenomenally identical to their wakeful counterparts (Montemayor and Haladjian 170). From this, we move one to case two which is different from the first. The dream state is completely devoid of any epistemic experience and is purely phenomenal. With no access to any part of our cognitive functions, our conscious and mental state. Most who deny case one will say that we just have a narrative viewpoint\*. Now that we have a clear case of what the main question is, we can start to look at the dream states themselves and the closer we look the better answer we will find.

Dreams states are weird[[1]](#footnote-1). No doubt about that, as humans we have tried the very least to come to some sort of terms with their meaning or content. For centuries many cultures have deep roots in the dream interpretations and meaning but lately, this has fallen out of fashion. This background plays an important role in explaining how the science of dream states and the philosophy of dreams combine to give us a clearer picture. But calling a dream an "experience" has been pretty contentious in philosophy but there have been some developments in what dreams experiences mean. Within the philosophy of mind, there has been some debate about dreams, but this has been fleshed out by years of working out the problem. Norman Malcolm (1956) made a famous claim that dreams are not experienced." […] the concept of dreaming is derived, not from dreaming, but from descriptions of dreams, i.e., from the familiar phenomenon that we call “telling a dream” (Malcolm 55). This has been rejected by many of today's philosophers as improbable. Many would say that Malcolm's claim is an example of extreme verificationism since Malcolm never clears up or follows up on what does he mean by "conscious experience" in the context of dreaming. But this is an interesting jumping-off point for the question we are asking and the answer we are seeking.

Waking up from a deep sleep almost always features the person asking for an anchoring point (i.e. their home, school, park). If you also happen to sleep next to someone by chance the topic of your dream might come up. “Dreams are now considered odd things we experience while we sleep, and people are rarely encouraged to keep track of their dreams or interpret them, unlike people in earlier cultures.” (Montemayor and Haladjian 170). At this point when we want to recall our dreams, we have to remember and use memory. This function is the one that might help us find out about dream states. Maurice Halbwachs (1952) says that memory in dreams does not work as it does in our waking state. But how can our dream state be clear as a wakeful state? This might have to do with the way that memory works while we are dreaming. As said by Montemayor and Haladjian,” Memory storage in dreams is bizarre and paradoxical. The way dream traces are stored defies any linear or causal order.” (169). Unlike our wakeful memory, memory storage during dreaming follows different narrative pathways which make it unique to our experience. "[…] both mind wandering and dreaming content largely presents audiovisual and emotional features, draws on long-term memory, follows loose narratives mixed with fantasy, is strongly associated to current concerns, simulates interpersonal interactions, and is characterized by a relative lack of meta-awareness.” (Patani 184). From these positions we can start to draw on the idea of memory and dreams being important but, what about the dream state themselves? We need to find an account that can lead us down the path of understanding the dream state. By understanding how memory plays a role in dream states, we can connect the dots to view the wider picture.

 So far, we have talked about the instances for our question to be answered, and the cases themselves lend a hand in the paths we should take when considering a solution. This also brings into our train of thought about the nature of dreams. Maybe a possible solution to our inquiry could be based on the evidence in the previous passages. Such as dream states are just phenomenal-like consciousness since dreaming state staunchly different from the waking state as described by Churchland (1988). The ability to interact with smells, sounds and objects are as real as our waking state. This is why many like Churchland think that dream states are a benchmark for consciousness. But there are many detractors to this like Revonsuo (2006) who says that dream states are the same as wakeful states since the purest form of consciousness is this phenomenal experience as said by Revonsuo: “[…] the dreaming brain brings out the phenomenal level of organization in a clear and distinct form. Dreaming is phenomenality pure and simple, untouched by external physical stimulation or behavioral activity” (Revonsuo 75). This is an interesting idea since our phenomenal state in our dreams is directly interactions within the reality of our respective minds. The brain also acts in this manner as mentioned by Montemayor and Haladjian, “The so called ‘stimulus-independent thought’ recruits the same area of the brain in dreaming and daydreaming: an area associated with the ‘default network.’” (171). But there are major problems with this solution, this encompasses ideas of internal and external environmental stimuli with involvement in the phenomenology of dreams. Many philosophers and neuroscientists like Rosen (2018), Windt and Noreika (2011) believe that the current models of the neural pathways of the brain are deeply complex and just to say that either the internal or external stimuli cause the feeling of such a phenomenal dream state. They also advise against such an oversimplification of such a dense subject. This has partly answered the proposed question first mentioned in the introduction, but it has failed to bring about an adequate solution.

 Now, that we have some footing on our quest to find an even better solution to the question of dream states. We can start to look inward, as dreams are part of our unified consciousness and experience as humans. It has been difficult to show or tell others about the content of our dreams. To explain someone even in detail a dream about seeing loved ones who have died or impossible feats such as flying or diving in the deep sea. You might be able to use your memory to recall the hue colors and even the type of smells but it is still difficult to express these experiences the philosopher György Lukács (1916) wrote about, trying to describing a dream in a world that is difficult to interpret but why and how are the realms separate in such a neat manner:

“[…] dream and life, wish and reality, fear and truth, the lying denial of pain, and the courageous confrontation of sadness. What is left? What is sure in this life of ours? Where is the place, however bleak and bare, however remote from all beauty and richness, where a man may strike solid roots? Where is there anything that does not trickle away like sand between one’s fingers just when one would wish to lift that thing out of the formless mass of life and hold it fast, if only for a brief moment? Where is the dividing line between dream and reality, the “I” and the world, deep meaning and fleeting impression?” (Lukács 129,130)[[2]](#footnote-2)

From what we can understand it is difficult when the interpretation of dreams is never interpreted in the manner that self-narrator experienced even though the dream itself is phenomenally rich. Now we find ourselves in a position that was limited until recently due to the advent of technology, the precursors that got relatively close to our dreams such books, poems, theater, and plays are now replaced with cameras and film since these mediums are now dominate in our culture and society then the recapitulation began once again. But this time it showed us these fantastic productions, this was all but one step into the realm of almost copying our dream state and this is virtual reality[[3]](#footnote-3). At this moment, we have access to VR even though it is still in the early stages of production which makes them accessible to few people due to cost.

Soon enough people will be able to recreate their dreams. I propose something a bit radical, but I think it will stand well enough since there are many sides to it. I propose that dreams states can parallel VR because consciousness comes first as the world itself is immersively leaving the structure independent of anything else. This is an internalist position, it makes the most sense to me. Let me defend it since, naturally, that is the nature of such inquiries. But before I take this further, we have to take into account the continuity thesis (Montemayor and Haladjian 170), which says that dreams are just like waking ones, but dreams are devoid of any epistemic value, but dreams are identical to wakeful states even in phenomenal qualities. Also, our solution should have some understanding of VR and dream state synthesis. David Chalmers (2017) writes and supposes as much. He claims, “virtual reality is a sort of genuine reality, virtual objects are real objects, and what goes on in virtual reality is truly real.” (309) he defends this position and gives an account for VR and the objects and interaction within the realm. What is important to us, are the distinctions made in the similarities and objections between VR and Dreams.

If we take case one from the beginning of the essay and start to apply what I presented we can start to see a clearer picture of an adequate solution. Somethings that could also prop the concept up are VR and Dream comparisons that Chalmers makes, such as, ”Events in the dream world could be at least in principle identified with brain events.”(346) The events that are presented in the dream state will always be from the brain event so if there ever is a computer that can simulate VR it would be able to match a dream event. Chalmers follows this by saying that objects of perception in dreams are brain events. But the difference between VR and dream states are mind dependence of dreams and mind independence of VR. Chalmers claims that dream states are less real than VR due to this and the object of perception. I take issue with this claim since dreams reveal how the mind and dream are structure independent, with the help of Montemayor and Haladjian. First, the waking state, if we believe in the continuity thesis (170), we know that waking states and dream states are phenomenally the same but are devoid of the epistemic content. This solves the problem of case one and negates the other. Meanwhile, the phenomenal quality with the dream and wakeful states are identical, this also means the person within the dream will always remain the same:” Not only are dream traces similar in phenomenology, but they are also similar in cognitive and autobiographical content.” (Montemayor and Haladjian 170). Since Chalmers's quick dismissal of dream states seems to be weakened further by the empirical evidence of dream states as suggested by Ned Block (2007) since he has suggested that dreams are a baseline for whether phenomenal consciousness separated from access consciousness.

Then we ask ourselves about whether dreams are illusions or hallucinations, to this I say that dreams are more distinct that illusions since some would say that the imagery in the dream would provide enough context to declare the dream illusionary. I disagree with this since I place heavy emphasis on the phenomenally identical waking state that gives it much more grounding that perception of illusionary or hallucinatory.

In conclusion, when asked if dream states are experienced the same as waking states, I can say possibly, yes. Being phenomenally identical to waking states and having the narrative first-person perception helps us in the experience of our dreams. I have formulated what an adequate solution would be like and also found solid footing for many other situations where we can look at other methods. But for the time being an adequate answer has been given and maybe with the advent of more advanced technologies we can piece together more on dream states and the similarity to VR. Also, the recent devolvement of VR will help.

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1. Dreams can be affected by many environmental and biological factors; I do not take them into account at the time of this essay due to time constraints. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This quote from Lukács stems from his essay on Richard Beer-Hoffman’s realist approach to drama and poetry. Although, he still remains a small-time figure in the American drama scene, his fame in Europe is known for his deep fanatical plays about dreams. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Chalmers clarifies what is virtual reality several times in his article but is still refining his definition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)