

Dreaming

Philosophical puzzlement

Dreaming is a metaphor often used in the branch of philosophy called ‘epistemology’ or ‘theory of knowledge’. It highlights the difficulty we have in knowing for certain that the way in which we (subjects) experience the world is indeed the same as the world is (objectively). Although dreams are usually about things and people we are familiar with, they have become a popular image to show the contrast between the subjective experience of an individual and what the world is really like. So a central question in philosophy is ‘How do I know for certain that I am not now or always dreaming?’ The dreaming-waking distinction is one we use to organise the real from the not real, but how clear is this distinction and on what evidence is it based? Can we dream that we are awake or waking up. How can we find out whether we are awake or asleep? By pinching? But can’t we dream that we are pinching ourselves in order to find out that we are asleep or awake? How much control, if any, do we have over our dreams? What makes the content of our dreams?

Various influential ideas about dreams that influence us

- Dreams come from outside and can be understood as messages or prophecies.
- Dreams are excursions of the soul during sleep.
- Dreams are natural phenomena, the results of mental activity during sleep.
- Dreams are valuable indicators of psychological truths.
- Dreams have no significance at all – there is no correlation between such subjective experiences and how things are in the real world.

Do dreams have any significance?

It was an ancient Chinese belief that there were two souls: a physical soul and a spiritual soul. The spiritual soul could leave the body at night. This led to the view that a dreamer should not be woken from sleep lest his soul be lost, depriving the sleeper of his reason. In the Indian Vedas, sacred books written between 1500 and 1000BC, interest was on the predictive power of dreams. These writings also suggested that dreams originated from the region between different levels of consciousness or different ‘worlds’.

Understanding consciousness, and awareness of ways of being and knowing through different levels of consciousness, are strong features of schools of philosophical thought such as Buddhism. Of the Ancient Greeks, Heraclitus (450-375BC) took the rational view that dreams are the ordinary accompaniments of the sleeping mind. Hippocrates (460-377BC) was interested in the prophetic nature of dreams and tried to put this to some medical use in the diagnosis of disease. Dreams have also been interpreted as carriers of divine messages.

Are dreams part of the 'real' me?

Aristotle (384-322 BC) observed that the delusions of the mentally disturbed, and the illusions, dreams and fantasies of ordinary people all have a great deal in common and he concluded that they might share a common origin. Plato (428-348 BC), teacher of Aristotle, said that we find ourselves doing things in dreams that we would be ashamed to do in reality.

How do I know I am not now or always dreaming?

One of the most important Chinese Taoist philosophers, Chuang-Tzu (369-286 BC) (pronunciation: jwang-dzu) – a contemporary of Plato and Aristotle – once dreamed he was a butterfly. When he awoke, he no longer knew if he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man, or a man who had dreamed he was a butterfly. He has been quoted to have said: “By and by comes the great awakening, and then we find out that this life is really a great dream. Fools think they are awake now, and flatter themselves they know”.

French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) was in the habit of recording his dreams. One of his dreams, recorded in extraordinary detail, is considered to have been the starting point for his philosophical method and in confirming his belief in the reliability of his rational mind. After all, even doubting whether we are dreaming or not, confirms the existence of an ‘I’ who is doing this doubting. “I doubt (think), therefore I am,” was Descartes’ famous conclusion.

Are dreams valuable indicators of psychological truths?

Nietzsche (1844-1900) regarded dreams as enactments and re-enactments of life events proceeding at both personal and collective levels. His idea of instinctive energy was to give rise to the psychoanalytic concept of psychic energy. Ideas about the nature of consciousness and the interpretation of dreams were transformed in the early 20th century by the work of psychoanalytic theorists such as Jung and Freud.

Is the mind like an Austrian house?

Freud’s metaphor of the mind is based on the room plan of a nineteenth century Austrian house. Our ‘I’ or ‘Self’ is split up in the following way. Our everyday consciousness – our ‘Ego’ – lives in the kitchen of this house. We have banned many of our instincts and desires – our unconscious self – to the cellar. The cellar door was locked at the age of five and the key thrown away (what Freud calls ‘repression’)! Our ‘Superego’ lives in the parlour – the room reserved for important visitors such as the priest and our parents and people we like (we want them to see us at our best). This is the ‘I’ we would like others to see – the ‘Self’ we would like to be or should be according to our culture, the standards of our country and our friends. What happens in the cellar causes the sometimes strange and disturbing content of our dreams. According to psychoanalytic theory, the careful observing and recording of our dreams can help to unlock the cellar to our ‘subconscious’. This metaphor of the mind has significantly influenced how we have perceived our ‘selves’ over the past hundred years.

Is the mind like a machine?

In more recent times, neuroscience has exerted a greater influence on claims to knowledge about the human mind. New technology has made it possible to study specific areas of the brain and types of brain activity. Some scientists claim they can unlock the keys to human consciousness by measuring what happens in the brain.

How conscious are you when dreaming?

On the other hand, cognitive scientists say most of our thoughts, including dreams, operate beneath the level of cognitive awareness and are, in this sense, unconscious, though not repressed, as Freud thought. They operate just too quickly to be focused on. For example, how consciously are you aware of the full extent of what you are doing when listening to someone? You have to, for example, access memory, comprehend a stream of sound, assign a structure, give words meaning and interpret body language.

Sources. Stevens, A. *Private myths: Dreams and Dreaming*, 1995, Penguin

Where are my dreams?

Name:

Class:

Make a drawing and show where your dreams are when you are dreaming.

Discuss:

1. Where are your dreams when you are dreaming?
2. Where are your dreams when you are not dreaming? Would the picture look different? If so, in what way and why?