

Response to questions on Allan Hobson's paper in Dream Consciousness

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Book Contribution by Dr Susan Blackmore

1. Are you convinced that dreaming is a conscious state?

No. Indeed I am unhappy with the very notion of a “conscious state”. States have to be states of something, so what is dreaming a state of? Here are some possible candidates:

The whole organism. In this case if someone is in REM sleep they are not conscious – at least they are unresponsive and so not conscious in that simple sense.

Hobson suggests that a “mental process” may be conscious. Assuming that we adopt his brain/mind equivalence, we now have to argue that some brain/mind processes are conscious while others are not. This leads us into a veritable minefield. The idea of conscious and unconscious processes is commonly accepted and the popular hunt for the NCCs is based on this distinction. Yet it entails the curious notion that some brain processes have this special additional property of being, or becoming, conscious while others do not – some require solutions to the “hard problem” of consciousness, while others do not. Dennett’s classic *Consciousness Explained* (1991) can be seen as an attempt to demolish this idea, and I have argued elsewhere (Blackmore 2009) that brain processes cannot be divided into conscious and unconscious ones. Indeed I suggest it would entail a “magic difference” (Blackmore 2010). So I can make no sense of the idea that dreaming is a conscious state of a mind/brain processes.

We might instead say that it is “me”, the self or subject of experience, that is in a conscious state during dreams. Yet this is clearly untrue for ordinary dreams. After a typical dream we wake up with memories of all the bizarre, interesting, scary, or peculiar things that were apparently going on but which stopped when “I” awoke. This is quite different from a lucid dream in which, as Hobson explains, the person knows that they are dreaming. The feeling of becoming lucid in a dream is often described as becoming more conscious, or “waking up” within a dream. In this sense one might say that in lucid dreams the self is more conscious than in ordinary dreams. But even this faces difficulties because we do not yet understand what a self is or could be. Without a better understanding of self-processes, self-models, illusions of self, or other ways of understanding what a self is we cannot decide whether a self is in a conscious state or not.

I would like to add one further comment. Hobson claims that it is “profitable to regard dreaming not as unconscious but rather as an altered state of consciousness that is difficult to recall in waking” as though this were a new and bold idea. But it is not. Many elementary psychology textbooks define dreaming as “an altered state of consciousness occurring during sleep” and many consciousness researchers describe it as a conscious phenomenon: “Dreaming is a subjective phenomenon of consciousness” (Revonsuo and Tarkko 2002 p 4); “Dreams are conscious because they create the appearance of a world ... Dreams are subjective states in that there is a phenomenal self” (Metzinger 2009 p 135). “Dreams are a form of consciousness, though of course quite different from full waking states.” (Searle 1997 p 5).

According to Hobson “Our dreams are not mysterious phenomena, they are conscious events.” (Hobson 1999 p 209). But what does this mean? The notion of “conscious events” is itself a great mystery – perhaps the greatest mystery facing science - and Hobson’s theory, despite making valuable contributions in other respects, does nothing to solve it.

What impact does the apparent loss of volition in dreams have on the free will debate?

This loss of volition is fascinating, not least because volition reappears in lucid dreams. It seems that when a dreamer becomes aware that they are dreaming, not only does their sense of self become much more like their waking self, but they can often take control of the dream events and of their own actions in the dream. As Hobson has explained, this change appears to be associated with greater activity in some parts of the frontal lobes which is what we would expect given the role of these brain areas in waking volition.

I think this tells us something about the connection between self and volition. When a good enough self-model is constructed, actions are attributed to that self. So the illusion of free will arises along with the illusion of self.

To answer the question – this interesting fact ought to have an impact on the free will debate but I doubt that it will. The illusion of conscious will (Wegner 2002) is so powerful that for hundreds of years people have preferred to follow their intuition that “of course I have free will” than accept what appears to be obvious from science that our will is a function of brain activity and is not free at all. However, I hope that in combination with other such findings we may eventually find that the common intuition of free will may be left behind, as we long ago left behind such notions as caloric fluid, the luminiferous ether and the life force.

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