What Is It Like To Be Asleep?

By Alexis Burgess

Reconsider the Cartesian skeptical hypothesis that you are currently dreaming. Traditional efforts to rule it out can be divided, very roughly, between those targeting content and those targeting form. A generic content-centric approach might maintain that dream narratives are typically much more disjointed and fantastical than the fluid, flat-footed series of events characteristic of waking life. By contrast, a form-based approach might argue that the phenomenology of waking life is somehow richer or more vivid than the qualitative character of dream experience.[1] So, for example, Hobbes found the real world less *absurd* than his dream life, while Locke thought waking pain was more *excruciating* than anything he could dream up.

Nowadays, of course, the skeptic tends to concede such points—neutralizing their dialectical force through more exotic, brain-in-a-vat, or Matrix-style scenarios (or a demonic throwback). But this familiar pivot toward science-fiction glosses over interesting and under-theorized wrinkles specific to the dreaming hypothesis, some of which I'd like to explore here. The purpose of this brief note is to point out, in particular, that phenomenological responses to the dreaming argument are significantly more problematic than one might have thought, for reasons stemming from the inherent limitations of experiential memory and the simple structural fact that we can't be simultaneously awake and asleep. What I ultimately want to suggest is that we lack introspective evidence of any marked phenomenal difference between dreaming and waking experience—and indeed, that there may actually be evidence to the contrary (i.e., of phenomenal homogeneity) available through so-called lucid dreaming. In a nutshell: for all we can tell from the first-person point of view, *dreaming feels just like being awake*.

To be clear: I don't deny that we can know we're awake rather than dreaming, or even that we can establish this by appealing to a phenomenal difference between the two sorts of state. For all I argue, there may in fact be such a difference, and we may come to know of it through partly non-introspective channels (e.g., neuroscientific research). Of course, if my main claim is correct, this would be a phenomenal fact that we have no purely introspective reason to believe—an odd sort of fact indeed. But there are other putative counterexamples to the "transparency" of consciousness on offer in the literature.[2] So, for present

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purposes, suffice it to say that we can either accept this particular counterexample, give up the idea that dreaming feels different from being awake, or find some fault in the reasoning below.

Let me begin by pinning down the alleged phenomenal difference between dreaming and waking a bit more precisely. So far we've said that dreams can seem less "rich" or "vivid" than waking life. One could also say they're more ethereal or diffuse. This family of adjectives arguably tracks a commonsensical view of the contrast at issue.[3] No single word seems to do the trick; but in the interest of fixing our diction, I'll usually say that one mental episode is more or less "robust" than another. More importantly—as these various comparative constructions suggest—we can grant that the relevant "dreamlike quality" might merely be a matter of degree, rather than some all-or-nothing difference in kind. Perhaps an unusually vivid dream could even exemplify this quality to a *lesser* degree than some severely degraded waking experience. Charitably understood, our opponent simply thinks we can marshal introspective evidence that most or many (or perhaps just typical) waking experiences are significantly more robust than most/many/typical dreams. I'll call this opponent the dogmatist, to flag her affiliation with the traditional anti-skeptical project of establishing that we're presently awake. But strictly speaking, her view is just that there's evidence against phenomenal homogeneity available from the first-person point of view.

What sort of evidence can the dogmatist offer?[4] We can't be awake and dreaming at once, so we can't directly compare the qualitative characters of waking and dreaming experiences. It would seem that the best we can do is to contrast occurrent waking life with memories of our dreams. Thus the dogmatist will tell us that her experiential memories of dreams are phenomenally less robust than whatever waking state she's enjoying at the moment.

The skeptic can acknowledge such data, yet plausibly deny that they support the dogmatist's phenomenal difference thesis. After all, memories *quite generally* are less robust than occurrent experiences. My memories of yesterday's waking experiences pale by comparison with my experiences right now, but it hardly follows that my conscious life is richer or more vivid today than it was yesterday. The dogmatist thinks memory reveals intrinsically degraded dream experiences, but for all she's shown so far, memory might simply be degrading dreams that were originally quite robust. If the skeptic were right that waking and dreaming are phenomenally on par, it would only be natural to expect that memories of dreams should seem washed out when juxtaposed with occurrent experiences. So the dogmatist's data don't constitute evidence for her view.[5]

It might be prudent to point out that this skeptical challenge doesn't massively over-generalize. Take the case of intoxication. We can't be simultaneously sober and drunk, so any (sober) argument for a phenomenal difference between the two sorts of state will have to make do with memories of intoxication. Must we therefore admit—in keeping with the skeptical reasoning above—that our introspective evidence is compatible with the claim that being drunk feels the same as being sober? No, because the phenomenal difference in this case can't be explained away by appealing to the nature of experiential memory. The crucial point in the previous paragraph was that the putative difference between dreaming and waking is more or less identical to the manifest difference

between memory and occurrent experience. By contrast, no one would suggest that memories and benders generally have the same qualitative character.

Perhaps the dogmatist would therefore do better to symmetrically disadvantage waking experience—pitting memory of *it* against memory of dreaming. Is your memory of last night's dinner, for example, more phenomenally robust than your memory of last night's dream? If so, the dogmatist might try to argue that we can "cancel out" the interference from memory in both cases and conclude that waking experience *simpliciter* is more robust than dreaming. Now, some memories of dreams may well be brighter and bolder than certain memories of waking life. When we're roused "in the middle" of a particularly compelling dream, our immediate memory of it will often be quite vivid. But our rules of engagement allow for isolated exceptions to the dogmatist's generalization that memories of waking life tend to be more robust than memories of dreams. And this generalization admittedly sounds like an article of common sense.[6]

Be that as it may, the dogmatist still needs to establish the legitimacy of "canceling out" the influence of memory, and there are at least two reasons to doubt she'll be able to do so. In the first place, as we can all attest, dream recall drops off much more rapidly than memory of waking life. The most vivid memories of dreams tend to dramatically degrade in just a matter of hours, whereas vivid memories of waking experiences often haunt us for years. To assume that memory has degraded dreaming and waking experience equally in a given case would therefore be tantamount to assuming that two different functions of time happen to take exactly the same value at the moment of comparison. But a linear function and a logarithmic function, for example, will only intersect once or twice, if ever. I suppose it's possible that the sciences of dreaming and memory will eventually vindicate some version of the dogmatist's "cancellation" policy. But the point remains that we have no purely introspective reason to believe memory affects the phenomenology of dreaming and waking in equal measure.

The second problem is that our revised methodology retains a kind of asymmetry. Granted, we're now comparing pairs of memories instead of comparing waking experiences to memories of dreams. But we're still conducting the comparisons *while awake*. In the absence of empirical evidence, it seems entirely possible that a waking comparison of memory-of-dreaming and memory-of-waking might somehow privilege the latter. Consider the following analogy. When I'm in NYC, my memories of previous visits to the city can be more robust than memories of trips to LA. But when I'm in LA, it's the other way around. Present circumstances can affect the characters of our memories. Or at least, introspection doesn't tell us otherwise.

Can the dogmatist circumvent these two difficulties by devising a better test? She might mitigate the second concern by conducting her comparison while dreaming as well. This would presumably require a lucid dream—one in which the subject somehow realizes she's dreaming.[7] Lucid dreams are relatively rare, and I've never tried to philosophize in one. But I can't see any in-principle obstacle to executing the relevant experiment. What's more, duplicating her protocol during a dream allows the dogmatist to drop the dubious cancellation policy discussed above. For this new symmetry correction seems to obviate the need for our original

correction. In other words, there doesn't seem to be anything problematically asymmetrical about the following revised experiment:

(1) While awake, compare occurrent experiences and memories of dreams.
(2) While dreaming, compare occurrent experiences and memories of waking life.
(3) Finally, compare the robustness differentials revealed by 1 and 2.

Step 1 is just the first test we thought to try, at the beginning of our investigation. Step 2 is its mirror image during a lucid dream. And step 3 is a meta-comparison between (memories of) judgments reached in the first two steps. Admittedly, this meta-comparison entrains some residual asymmetry, insofar as we make it while awake.[8] But it's some consolation that we're now comparing memories of judgments rather than memories of experiences. Memory distorts phenomenology, but it's not clear how it would distort judgments of the form: states of type J are more vivid than those of type K.

In any case, it would be interesting to see the results of this experiment. When I said at the start of the paper that there might be introspective evidence of phenomenal homogeneity available through lucid dreaming, I had the following possible outcome in mind. While dreaming, memories of waking life seem ethereal and diffuse—washed out by comparison with occurrent dream experiences. Since we're lucid, we know we're asleep. But real life seems, well, like a dream. Indeed, it seems just as dreamlike as dreaming seems from the perspective of waking life. The two perspectives are perfectly symmetrical. Each feels equally unreal once we've assumed the other. (Our LA/NYC analogy is actually pretty apt.) Granted, this outcome wouldn't logically entail that dreaming and waking experiences are phenomenally equivalent. But presumably that would be the simplest explanation of these hypothetical data.

Of course, for all I've argued, the test could go quite differently. And other outcomes might speak in favor of dogmatism. Since I don't know a good dogmatic slumber joke, I'll just end by inviting all you lucid dreamers out there to conduct this experiment at home. Let me know what you find out.[9]

Notes

[1] The only assumption I mean to build into this use of "experience" is that we're phenomenally conscious when we dream, in the vague but intuitive Nagelian sense that there's something that it's like to be asleep and dreaming. This shouldn't preclude representationalist theories of consciousness, insofar as we can plausibly represent (or misrepresent) the world while dreaming. And it certainly doesn't constitute a question-begging stipulation that dreams are phenomenally more akin to veridical experiences than to hallucinations, illusions, or mental imagery.

[2] It's often suggested in connection with the phenomenal sorites paradox, for example, that sufficiently small phenomenal differences will be inaccessible to introspection. The idea isn't just that two nearby shades of red can look the same, but that two different looks (qualia) can actually be mistaken for one. Closer to home, Eric Schwitzgebel (2002) argues that ordinary judgments about whether or not we dream in color are surprisingly unreliable.

[3] Ichikawa (2009) could be read as suggesting that the traditional philosophical view is that dreams are just as phenomenally robust as waking experiences. I'm not sure that's true of the

tradition, or for that matter, whether Ichikawa really thinks so. But in any case, I'm fairly confident that common sense sides with the Lockean claim that dream phenomenology is somehow watered down. If philosophical orthodoxy says otherwise, so much the better for me.

[4] Why is any evidence required? Isn't it just obvious that dreams are less robust than waking life? Or a bit less dismissively: why aren't our dreaming and waking experiences themselves evidence enough? Compare: our experiences of two paint samples (or our grasp of their phenomenal contents) would seem to be evidence enough for a comparative color judgment. Of course, if there were not in fact any phenomenal difference between dreaming and waking experiences, then presumably these experiences would not count as evidence of such a difference. But we granted above that dreams might well be less robust than waking life. So, though the dogmatist may deign to offer further evidence or argument for this apparent difference, one might reasonably insist that the burden of proof rests with the skeptic to undermine the putative evidence of experience. These points are well taken. I try to discharge the burden below.

[5] Some of the arguments in Ichikawa (2009) could be adapted to aid the dogmatist (or, as he sees it, to combat philosophical orthodoxy). But most of them hinge on empirical findings beyond the ken of introspection. The main exception is his observation that "loud" noises in dreams don't wake us like real noises do (p.108). But it's unclear whether the explanation of this asymmetry has anything to do with phenomenology. Maybe the brain has a subconscious way of telling whether an auditory experience originated outside itself.

[6] Common sense or not, the claim might be false. I'm personally well past the point of being able to make the comparison with any confidence. My wife assures me that the generalization is true. But for what it's worth, an informal poll of around sixty undergraduates (of mixed major) failed to turn up any strong feelings either way. One thing to keep in mind here is that we tend to forget our dreams entirely in relatively short order. Maybe common sense conflates the lack of phenomenology with impoverished phenomenology—to wit, absent qualia and faded qualia.

[7] Let's grant for the sake of argument that we can distinguish dreaming from waking life by non-phenomenal means. Recall our initial discussion of content-based responses to Descartes.

[8] If we duplicate it while asleep, we'll still want to check the two meta-comparisons for consistency, which we'll have to do either while awake or while asleep. If we insist on doing both and comparing the results, regress threatens.

[9] Thanks to Anna-Sara Malmgren and Krista Lawlor for comments. To Josh Landy for conversation. To my students for humoring me. And to everybody at the HRP. It's a special pleasure to publish this piece in the journal we toiled over as undergrads. I tried to write these ideas down in grad school, and benefitted then from discussion with Jim Pryor, Karen Bennett, and Adam Elga. But I think my sister, Saffo Papantonopoulou, may have actually dreamt up the three-part experiment sketched above when we were kids.

References

Ichikawa, Jonathan (2009), Dreaming and Imagination, *Mind & Language* 24: 103–21.

Schwitzgebel, Eric (2002), Why did we think we dreamed in black and white?, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 33: 649–60.