

The Problematic Coherency of Lucid Dreaming

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This paper advances reasons why lucid dreaming is considered problematic to the psychoanalytic venture. It is shown that the conscious thought mechanism of lucid dreaming is obstructive and in opposition to the repressed and therefore conflictual within the unconscious parameters. A negative value is attached to the mechanism of lucid dreaming which is presented as an ill-advised endeavor that undermines meaning through its promotion of conscious interference and ego inhibition of dream symbolism. Viewed as a deterrent to self-knowledge and the interpretative process of working through, lucid dreaming does not advance an authentic inner presentation and is therefore of no interest to the betterment of the psyche. At the core of the argument is the significance of the willful autonomy of an ego-conscious presence on the continuance of the dream schematic.

There is something conceptually wrong with the process of lucid dreaming wherein the dreamer is fully aware of the dream and can consciously influence its outcome through active participation. For one thing, the term “lucid dreaming” is an oxymoron in that dreams are not lucid productions — nor should they be. Whereas the unconscious dream in its elusive, reticent, and idiomatically repressive form inhabits a symbol-dependent, unassailable and unyielding environment, the lucid dream is on bold and pliant ground. While the unconscious dream has reached satisfactory agreement with repressed material to codify or distort perception of anxiety-provoking thoughts, the conscious mind perceives things as it wishes. As such, writes Freud (1900–1901/1953, p. 615), there is simply no equivalence with what is psychical and what is conscious. When lucid or directive dreaming proceeds with its assertive freedom, wherein the dreamer has the liberty of altering that which is fixed in the psychical realm to that which is mutable, it corrupts an unconscious-driven ideation. The aim of recreating the original unconscious assembly trends away from any meaningful synthesis. In other words, when a dream wish is directed or rewritten, the dreamer is tampering with the immutability and indestructibility of the mnemonic per-

ception stored in the unconscious. As Freud (pp. 573–621) makes clear, unconscious wishes have an indestructibility in that they remain in an active state of readiness to force their way to perception. It is an unfortunate sign of the times to wish for a lucid or directive dream and be wakeful even during sleep. Such conscious awareness, having willed its way into the dream construction, exposes the absorbent dream to the interfering yet protective presence of the conscious ego. In that the efficiency of the psychological dream apparatus is dependent on the instinctual forces of the id, it is no small surprise that ego-awareness inhibits these unconscious wishful impulses; in directing the dream, the lucid dreamer and her induced, contrived, and readily understood symbolic content transmits subjective responses which are non-emotive-relevant. To this extent, the unconscious is unconscious for a reason: only in this realm will the ego leave behind its regulating element of control.

In that “the unconscious is the true psychological reality” (p. 613) and the core of psychic experience, the further one strays from unconsciousness the more diluted the wealth of its information. Similarly, because consciousness incompletely presents or interprets its data, the closer one gets to consciousness or what is misleadingly termed “the subconscious” (Freud, 1914–1916/1957, p. 170), the more osmotic the distraction of the ego-conscious mind. Freud notes the inhibition of the preconscious mind and rejects the term “subconscious,” writing that “the only trustworthy antithesis is between consciousness and unconsciousness (Freud, 1925–1926/1959, p. 198). The lucid dreamer, then, is a disruptive intruder. In shaping the dream construction he is at odds with the unconscious mind which must remain uninhibited for its energy to find an outlet in the dream formation.

When the sleeping dreamer becomes momentarily aware of the process of dreaming, something else occurs — within that wakeful moment of ego-conscious involvement the lucid dreamer begins to tamper with the psychic content; he engages in the exchange of the original dream for another dream of his willful making. And while the unconscious dream environment demands that the dreamer has neither control nor advance knowledge of what will be experienced, the lucid dreamer is shaping wishful fantasies in a cognitively mediated non-revelatory ego-conscious realm. This explains why Freud early on in the twentieth century referred to these control driven dreams as dreams of convenience (Freud, 1900–1901/1953, p. 571). When Freud acknowledges directive dreaming it is as a way to preserve sleep more than anything else; it is a way to reroute the dream to a more pleasant venue or to incorporate an exterior arousal that forestalls awakening or the awareness of consciousness (pp. 571–572). It is clear that this directive process is viewed as fulfilling the most basic of wishes and not as something especially beneficial to the therapeutic process of gaining a deeper understanding of the psyche in its unconscious state. Hobson (1988, p. 297), like Freud, regards the function of lucid dreaming as

being primarily for enjoyment purposes, although he is markedly accepting of the irreverent treatment of dream narratives that have had their plots changed.

Introduction of an Intermediary

In the process of directing a dream, the lucid dreamer loses touch with her symbolic reference. For the moment she inserts effort she is an intermediary between the unconscious dream and the lucid dream formation — and the unconscious dream ceases to be. What follows is an inauthentic dalliance in a pseudo dream realm of the manageable and the mediated wherein the subsequent visual continuance is informed on the unearned or un-lived material of the moment and not on the earned or lived experiential material of the unconscious past. Jung (1961/1965, p. 336) in his later writings regarding the emanations of the unconscious writes that “we do not ourselves *make* a dream or an inspiration, but it somehow arises of its own accord.” Further on, Jung defines the unknown or the unconscious in the glossary of *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* as “consisting of everything we do not know, which therefore is not related to the ego as the centre of the field of consciousness” (p. 401). It is my contention, therefore, that lucid dreaming is an unwelcome cognitive process, an intrusion that prohibits the dreamer from any measure of veridical gain. For from here on in, the lucid dreamer is distanced from the unconscious. Considering the peculiar discursive predilection of the analysand during the psychoanalytic session to move progressively away from self truth (Lacan, 1970/1977, p. 7), one can only imagine what happens when the lucid dreamer is left to his own ego-conscious devices.

Lucid Dreaming and the Imposition of Will

One of the problems with lucid dreaming is that it imposes will, the necessary determinant for choice, resolve, and motivation. As part of the volitional conscious mechanism of thought, will is in direct opposition to the deficiency of the dreamer's volition in the unconscious. As a conscious production that leads away from the unconscious inner experience to the evaluative outer arena of preference and option, it is counterintuitive to advocate the insertion and assertion of will into the dreaming process. Nevertheless, there are those who support this incorporation. In *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming*, although LaBerge and Rheingold (1991, p. 117) readily acknowledge that the brain receives almost no sensory information while asleep and draws on certain stored psychic material — memories, fears, anxieties and wishes — to fashion its visual presentation, they ignore the effect this evaluative process has on the dream visual. When, in lucid dreaming, consciousness is no longer obligated to perceive a visual culled from the past, it is content to occupy itself with a per-

ception of the moment. Whereas LaBerge and Rheingold view this volitional intention as an asset that allows dreamers “to dream anything [they] choose” (p. 137), it must be noted that the willful ego may also be viewed as a disruptive presence that puts an end to the psychic intention.

It is the heuristic illogic of dreams — the multi-layered, convoluted “hidden meanings” — to engage the dreamer in speculative work, in a therapeutic interpretative task to decode or transform the dream into something emotionally meaningful. Even though lucid dreaming eliminates this important function by imposing a restriction on the psyche, for LaBerge and Rheingold the best feature of lucid dreaming is its freedom to exercise voluntary unrestricted power over the dream (p. 163).

To the extent that the dream enactment is an ancient production, the dream interpretation is a literary criticism of the historic self — which is why the discourse must not be rewritten. Whereas dream enactments are productions with interpretive meanings and reviewable scripts, lucid dreams are rewrites in progress. With new characters, props, and outcomes the lucid dream wills and reconfigures an entirely different script.

In the examination of nightmares and especially traumatic recurring dreams, we find that through each new unconscious recreation of the traumatic event the psychic processes are formulating a way to diffuse the traumatic energy and weaken its affect. It is the function of recurring dreams to unite and re-experience the fear and the pain during the sleep palliative of the present with the traumatic experience that belongs to the past at a time when the dreamer is better equipped to bear the traumatic burden. Toward this end, the dissolution of affect is dependent on the re-experiencing of painful memories in a permissive, ego-free environment. It may be said, therefore, that lucid dreaming undermines this process by altering the ancient memory in favor of a mythic, pleasant one of negligible import so that perception will regard the irrelevant construct as a substitute for the relevant one. In this way, lucid dreaming invalidates reality and separates the dreamer from the inner presentations of the self.

The lucid dreamer in her trenchant love of revision may change the symbolic content of a terrifying dream about death. She may awaken the deceased and cab over to a rock concert via the courtesy of her willful directive; she may remand or bypass the meaning of the death and forgo its symbolic signification of a wishful termination or fear of abandonment. She may engage in a form of avoidance. Upon awakening, however, the lucid dreamer will not own what she wishes or fears and will not be prepared for the emergence of the repressed.

Defensiveness and/or Resistance in Analytic Treatment and Dreaming

There is an active opposition on the part of the analysand against the therapeutic effort to transform what is unconscious into consciousness with all its

erroneous data. Freud (1916–1917/1963, p. 288) writes that “one hardly comes across a single patient in analytic treatment who does not make an attempt at reserving some region or other for himself so as to prevent the treatment from having access to it.” This resistance is the pathogenic process of repression. If the analysand exhibits a defensive block during an analytic session imagine what he will inhibit in his directive dream.

Directive or defensive dreaming is subjected to repression even though the direction it takes is toward the praiseworthy and favorable and not the condemnable. It may be that the lucid dreamer is none other than the proverbial Freudian (p. 295) “watchman” performing the censorial function on the various mental impulses: like a bouncer at a nightclub, the watchman will not permit entry of those that displease him. To this extent, repression cannot be lifted or demystified by means of lucid dreaming; the lucid process cannot transform a non-mental act into a mental one. Similarly, repressed impulses are not allowed by the watchman to pass from the unconscious into the preconscious. Thus, the ego with its trend toward synthesis and unification will forgo its dealing with the dissociation of the id. In discussing a dream during an analytic session Freud (1915–1916/1961, pp. 115–116) found that the associations that gave rise to doubts and objections were precisely those that contained the material which led to the revelatory imparting of the unconscious. What is problematic is the lucid dreamer’s assumption of access to what was once repressed because there is no conscious provision that enables this overriding of the original intent.

The Waste of the Metaphoric Process

In my view, the ego-conscious energy employed by the lucid dreamer in directing or constructing the dream causes an alienation or loss of instinct; it disaffects connections between the unconscious material and the material governed by the near-conscious thinking. For example, at the behest of becoming lucid, the unconscious dream of the empty bedroom’s fully made bed which may reveal the anxiety ideation of marital discord is swept aside by the wakeful willful dreamer who deems it more important to look at a face in a picture frame on his bedside table or to look inside the bottom drawer of a bedroom bureau for revelatory clues. It is this demand-obsessive preoccupation with minutia that reveals the lucid dreamer’s attempt to validate the efficiency of his lucid dreaming skills. In other words, lucid dreaming encourages the dreamer to search for objects of no particular relevance which, once found, may be viewed in time as a trite impulse ideation that will soon be forgotten.

Indulging in driven behavior leads to the rejection of the real dream and the conservation of the diversion-driven pastime — where, in effect, all that lucid dreaming achieves is its manipulated and prolonged continuances in the ego-

conscious realm. Awareness of the dreaming process eliminates the objective distance of the dreamer and replaces it with the subjective distance gained by ego-conscious autonomy; it advances an insignificant perception in its aim to divert attention away from the significant repressed.

In lucid dreaming, there is no referring back to an earlier time; the subsequent dream symbols or objects it finds are choice-driven and riddled with temporal immediacy. These objects are not founded on primal experience but rather on the imposed will of the lucid dreamer in the desire to proceed with volition and cognizance. This present progression is viewed as trivializing the object found as opposed to mourning the object lost. It is as if the lucid dreamer remonstrates, "Symbols of the unconscious, be damned."

Concluding Comments

The intent of this paper is to question the tenets of what is known as the process of lucid dreaming. There is much to reconcile if one is to legitimate this ego-wakeful process of directing a dream. For one thing, at the first perception that one is dreaming, the dreamer gains influence and is no longer a passive bystander or an objective presence on the scene but rather an active and reactive subjective entity. This subjective perception that one is dreaming must not be equated with unconscious dream perception which, in theory, is unknowable to consciousness: the former perception due to its nearness of the ego-conscious self belongs to the realm of the subjective and the latter perception to the objective unconscious (Lawrence, 1990).

Lucid dreaming depends on the mythic supposition that the "subconscious" mind is a place wherein consciousness exerts an overriding influence on the unconscious mind. This is magical thinking to the extent that lucid dreaming produces of its own accord wishful fantasies that remain unchallenged by repression.

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