

Freud, Van Eeden and Lucid Dreaming

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There has not been a complete discussion of the biography of Fredrik van Eeden, who is credited with coining the phrase "lucid dream" and publishing the first serious research into these dreams. Writers on lucid dreaming have not addressed some very basic questions about the development of the concept of lucid dreaming in the context of the development of psychoanalysis. Most descriptions of that historical period in the history of lucid dreaming have been limited to what was presented in a 1913 paper by Fredrik van Eeden. The existing literature does not provide many details about who van Eeden was or why he appears to have written so little on this topic.

This paper presents two new historical perspectives. It offers 1.) a biographical sketch of van Eeden and his relationship to Freud and the psychoanalytic movement, and 2.) a previously unpublished letter from Freud to van Eeden, outlining what would appear to be Freud's opinion about and attitude toward lucid dreaming.

Historical Oversights

Although there has been a steady growth of interest in lucid dreaming since van Eeden's paper was reprinted in books by Celia Green (1968) and Charles Tart (1969), the historical dimension of the topic has been neglected. The possibility that Freud may have known about this concept and therefore, being one of the most influential thinkers on dreaming in the early part of this century, may have influenced its course of development (at least within the psychoanalytic arena) has not been explored. Indeed, the first explicit suggestion of a link between the two men regarding lucid dreaming came with Rooksby (1989). This is late, especially when it is considered that Ernest Jones writes in his biography of Freud that Dr. van Eeden was "...an acquaintance of his from the old hypnosis days" and continues on to say, "Van Eeden, a Dutch psychopathologist, is now remembered more as a poet, essayist and social reformer; both Freud and I had been unsuccessful in getting him to accept psycho-analytical theories." (1955, p.412) Such remarks might suggest that the relationship between Freud and van Eeden was negative. As we will discuss in a moment, there is some foundation for such a conclusion. However, Jones makes these comments as an introduction to a letter dated December 28, 1914, written by Freud to van Eeden concerning the Great War. This comment raises the possibility that the two men might have been exchanging letters, despite any differences between them, around the time of van Eeden's paper and therefore may have actually discussed lucid dreaming itself.

Support for the suggestion that Freud may have known about lucid dreaming came initially from two other sources. First, van Eeden's essay, "A Study Of Dreams," did

appear in the bibliography of the fourth German edition of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1914). However, it appears that Otto Rank was responsible for bibliographical additions from the second to the eighth editions, so there can be no guarantee that Freud had read this paper, or that he even knew of it. In the modern Standard Edition, the bibliography of *The Interpretation Of Dreams* is restricted to the works originally cited by Freud. This editorial decision was made by Angela Richards, who, according to correspondence between Rooksby and Albert Dickson (the present General Editor of the Pelican Freud Library), wanted to retain only those post-1900 references that reflected textual additions actually made by Freud himself.

The second source of support for the suggestion that Freud may have known about lucid dreaming came from references made by Freud himself to lucid-type dream experiences. Jones, in *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* (Volume 1) reports that in a dream diary, Freud describes what he calls a "sharp dream," which we suggest has shades of lucidity to it (i.e., Freud began to question whether or not he was dreaming). Jones says this is an improvement on other reports of the "dream within a dream." (p. 386) This questioning of the dream reality is mentioned in *The Interpretation of Dreams* as the "dream within a dream" and in Freud's 1901 book, *On Dreams*. Whether or not these really are lucid reports, and whether or not lucid dreaming was known as the "dream within a dream" before 1913 by Freud is a matter for further research. Up to now the investigation into Freud's knowledge of van Eeden and lucid dreaming remains elusive and speculative. However, with recourse to van Eeden's diaries and several of his biographies, with the knowledge that he is something of a major literary figure in the Netherlands, and with the discovery of a letter written by Freud to van Eeden, the following historical sketch can be drawn.

van Eeden, an Historical Sketch

Fredrik Willem van Eeden (1860-1932) entered the psychoanalytic scene late in his life. After completing his medical training and Ph.D. work, he pursued both a literary career, becoming one of the founders of the literary-political journal, *De Nieuwe Gids*, and a medical career, practising as a physician in Bussum. In 1887, he opened the first psychotherapeutic institute in The Netherlands, in collaboration with the seemingly practically-minded A.W. van Renterghem (van Eeden was the theoretician of the two). By 1893, van Eeden had lost interest in this "experiment in hypnosis" (methods Liebault) along with psychotherapy. Until 1892, he did publish frequently in Dutch, English and French journals on psychotherapy, hypnosis and related subjects (cf. Wentges, 1976; Bulhof, 1983; Fontijn, 1990). One can wonder if he influenced Freud's thinking on these topics. The reverse is unlikely. Although it is true that Freud began to get involved in psychotherapy as early as 1887, he did not really publish much on these topics prior to 1893, concentrating instead on neurology.

There are two occasions when the similar interests of these two men theoretically

made it possible for their paths to cross. The first opportunity was at a lecture by Charcot in Paris on November 17, 1885. Freud had gotten a stipend to study with Charcot and consequently was in Paris between October 13, 1885 and February 28, 1886. Van Eeden spent several weeks in Paris during November, researching artificial nutrition for tuberculosis patients, the subject of his Ph.D. thesis. Despite apparent difficulties, he managed to get into Charcot's Tuesday lecture (a demonstration of hysterics) in the Salpetriere on November 17th. However, there is no documentary evidence to suggest that they actually did meet on this occasion. The second possible time they could have met was when they both attended the International Congress on Hypnotism in the Hotel-Dieu in Paris between August 8-12, 1889. According to Ellenberger's account there is, again, no evidence to suggest that they did meet at that time.

It was probably not until Freud's star rose at the beginning of this century that he seriously attracted van Eeden's attention, which at first was very negative. Van Eeden wrote in his diary on July 31, 1910, that Freud was "...a cynical, coarse soul" (p. 1111), and later on he began to refer to "Freudism," as the "psychosis of psychiatrists." (p.1120) By January 1911 his dislike of anything psychoanalytic seemed complete. He wrote of:

... a special aversion I feel against Freud's school. That is the zenith of unsympathetic medical science. All medical science has grown unsympathetic to me--there is something extra ugly, sinister, death-like and stuffy to it--but Freud's doctrine is the worst. It works on me as a suffocating vapor. I surmise there are demonical influences here. Sexual life in its entirety is the right point of application for lower beings."(p.1212)

Dutch biographers have attempted to explain van Eeden's rejection of psychoanalysis along standard psychoanalytic lines; criticism of Freud's work is nothing more than the operation of a defense mechanism, usually of a sexual nature. In the case of van Eeden, there are also suggestions that his rejection may also be based on his aversion to materialism and traditional medical science. Further research is needed into this area, especially in view of the next sequence of events.

We are not sure what led van Eeden to visit the psychoanalytic meeting held in Munich in September 1913. His impression of this experience is vividly reflected in his diary entry dated September 9th, when he writes, "...the whole seems a nightmare to me now." (p.1333)

Yet something occurred which apparently made him begin to rethink his attitude towards psychoanalysis. We do not know the nature or cause of this change, but in his diary entry for September 23rd, he seemed to be reflecting on personal love as the essence of life, and went on to write, "...all wisdom and greatness of the soul can only be reached by a deeper understanding of our own essence, the so-called unconscious. This

is real culture. And it is also the goal and power of psychoanalysis." (p.1337) The cause of this change in attitude can only be a subject of speculation at present. It is also one of the most interesting of the questions yet to be answered about van Eeden.

If September 1913 represented the beginning of van Eeden's intellectual turn-around, then it seems likely that his "conversion" to psychoanalysis was completed in February, 1914. At this time, van Eeden was on a lecture tour. On January 29th he was in Vienna and amongst his audience on that night were several psychoanalysts--including Freud. A meeting took place after the lecture, with Hugo Heller acting as "host", which appears to have led to van Eeden being invited to Freud's house for lunch on February 1st. This meeting seems to be the real point of full conversion. After this date van Eeden would never say anything against Freud himself, although he never lost his skeptical attitude towards some aspects of psychoanalysis. With this new attitude, van Eeden wrote an article on Freud in the German Daily, *Frankfurter Zeitung* (May 29, 1914). From this there is evidence that shortly after the lunch meeting an exchange of letters had occurred (the one regarding the Great War has already been mentioned).

Freud's Letter To van Eeden

The following letter, previously unpublished, would appear to be Freud's response to a request by van Eeden for several points of clarification regarding dreams, and in particular, lucid dreaming. The full text of the letter reads:

1 March '14

Dr. Freud

Vienna 1X Berggasse 19

Dear Dr. van Eeden,

It is of great and valuable interest to me that you will be writing an essay on my work and I am happy to give you the information you request, although I cannot add any more to what has already been written in my "Interpretation of Dreams". I secretly hope, however, that you have not read it properly and that I can induce you to re-examine a few points.

To your First Question: My "Interpretation of Dreams" is not based on dreams by neurotics, but largely on my own dreams. The assertion that one does not judge nor appraise in a dream, nor speak, cannot contradict your experiences, for it is derived from the distinction between manifest and latent dreamthoughts - which

is a fundamental one - yet one which is so rarely being taken seriously. Analysis shows, that all thought, judgment and suchlike stem from the latent dreamthoughts in which, of course, our entire psychic activity is reflected. One must not, however, confuse the dream with the latent dreamthoughts, like the Swiss do now. The dream is, correctly perceived, the result of dream-work, a process that converts the latent thoughts into the manifest content. This dreamwork does not know judging, appraising, dialogue-forming and suchlike. Wherever something like this occurs in a dream it has been taken over from the dreamthought either dark or distorted, and reshaped.

Read again the relevant examples of my dreams in which manifest content as well as judgements and suchlike may appear just as in yours (Section Dreamwork). There is thus no contradiction between our experiences, but a misunderstanding, which is based on the fact that you neither accepted nor applied the premise, in every dream interpretation, of the distinction between manifest and latent dream content.

To your Second Question: I think you are being unjust by saying: for me there is nothing else psychic than what is conscious. This can only be said as long as one has not taken any notice of the facts of dream analysis, observation of parapraxes, study of neurosis.

Of course, every one of us knows only conscious processes in oneself and may conclude that those of some other person, unconscious to himself, are known to that person. But whoever analyzes must learn by necessity that he has erred in this quite natural premise, and that he can find psychic acts in himself that have remained unknown to his conscious awareness which he must, however because of certain consequences, deduce in the same way as reliable circumstantial evidence without a confession. Finally, analysis provides him with the means to raise to consciousness these, initially unconscious processes, similar to photography that makes visible otherwise invisible ultraviolet rays. I cannot understand, however, that the unconscious should mean a loosening of the relationship between our psychic life and our individual body.

My unconscious thought is my individual property in the same way as my conscious one. At this point we are not threatened by a radical change. I now have two copies of your work. Jelgersma's talk surprised and pleased me. Thus the Interpretation of Dreams has been recognized in an academic setting in your little Holland of all places. It was in fact particularly on this point, that Bleuler did not follow me. Your visit has left us with the most pleasant memories. The ladies still often speak of you and your so informal and charming companion, and the boys regret not to have seen you, because of the change of your initial plans. My kindest regards to you together with the request to continue sentiments of

friendship regardless of our theoretical disagreements.

Yours Faithfully

Freud

The translation of the German transcript of this letter has been made to conform to current translations of Freud. Strictly speaking, the word "Seelische" means "soul" or "soul-based." In the version above it has been left to read "psyche" and "psychic" because of the implications of the translation problems (as noted by Bettelheim in his book, *Freud and Man's Soul*) with respect to our current understanding of Freud.

It would seem that the exchange of letters between the two men was not abundant, though it may well be that there are few others in existence. It is obviously of great interest to find the van Eeden original which led to this reply, although reconstruction is possible up to a point, based on the above. Freud or van Eeden may have written to or talked with other members of the psychoanalytic group on this topic, so there are some other interesting avenues still to be explored. Contact between van Eeden and Jung would be interesting because of Jung's interest in the manifest dream, but considering the dates of van Eeden's meeting with Freud, the former would not have "naturally" met Jung because of Jung's rift with Freud at this time.

Overall, Freud's letter offers three main points: 1.) it supports the claim made in van Eeden's diary that the two men did meet, at least on one occasion; 2.) it alludes to the article that was subsequently written and which appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*; but most importantly of all, 3.) it offers Freud's basic attitude towards what we can call in retrospect the "lucid dreaming concept" (although it is not mentioned by that name in the letter itself).

The Limited Importance of Manifest Content

A central point in Freud's dream theory is his distinction between the manifest dream and latent dream content, both theoretically and in actual clinical practice. Note his comment about it "rarely being taken seriously." He saw the appearance of a dream in sleep as the end result of a process which had begun deep in the unconscious. This process involved the "release" and "movement" of repressed psychic energy towards the sleeping conscious mind. He argued that if this material was to break into the conscious mind in its "raw" state, the shock would be enough at least to wake the sleeping person in an unpleasant way.

Because this material needed to find expression, be recognized by the sleeper, and be dealt with (ideally by proper analysis), Freud described the mechanism by which this occurred under the title of "dreamwork." He saw this process as using various methods,

like condensation and displacement, to convert the raw energy into a form which could be experienced by the dreamer in a comfortable way which did not cause the sleeper to wake. Dreams took on a protective role allowing the individual to hallucinate the fulfillment of repressed wishes, release the repressed energy and remain asleep as well. For Freud the real 'psychic activity' in this process occurs at the level of the unconscious and anything that ends up in the conscious mind in the form of a dream is only the product of the dreamwork and a symbolic expression of something else. On a practical level, this meant that it was not so important how a person experienced the manifest dream, but rather what the symbolic content of a dream actually related to in the unconscious. It is only by breaking the person's symbolic code that the analyst can trace the source of the dream, hidden in the person's unconscious.

This distinction between the two parts of an individual's psyche is applied by Freud to the difference and function of the person's conscious awareness of the dream (as suggested in the lucidity concept). The relative importance of the conscious and unconscious parallels his view of the latent dream contents and manifest dream. The conscious mind is the "smaller" and less important of the two, yet we mistakenly believe that it is more important because it is the bit we have direct access too.

Now as far as the general idea of lucidity in dreams goes, Freud indicates in the letter that he is basically happy with it. "The assertion that one does not judge nor appraise in a dream, nor speak, cannot contradict your experiences..." Where he takes issue is in the interpretation of this activity and the importance that may be attached to it. Since, according to Freud, the conscious mind is the less important part of a person's total psychological activity (the bulk of which lies in constant flux in the unconscious) it is of little real importance how dreams are experienced - especially so in the context of the therapeutic process.

In the final analysis, we can say that it is Freud's devaluing of the manifest dream (a point which contributed to the split with Jung) that naturally led him to "devalue" the idea of lucid dreaming. Lucid dreaming posed no threat to his major thesis. He probably felt that he had already given it enough attention - note how he directs van Eeden back to the *Interpretation of Dreams* in the opening of the letter. One can't help but speculate about what might have occurred had Freud accepted van Eeden's "lucid" term and the idea he was suggesting, but he didn't, so "lucid dreaming" did not attract the attention of other psychoanalysts and did not become a topic of discussion earlier this century.

van Eeden's Review

It would appear that shortly after van Eeden's article on Freud and the related exchange of letters, van Eeden dropped out of the psychoanalytic scene. Exactly why is not known at present. His disappearance was as sudden and as mysterious as his "conversion." The *Frankfurter Zeitung* article casts little light on this question; it contained an enthusiastic

introduction to psychoanalysis and to Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* in particular. An English translation has only recently appeared in a collection of reviews of Freud's work edited by Norman Kiell, called *Freud Without Hindsight*. (1988) Though Kiell is a faithful Freudian, and quick to analyze every criticism of Freud as caused by misunderstandings or resistances, he calls the main thrust of the review by van Eeden "a trumpeting of Freud, a veritable paen of praise." (p.209) There are, however, some interesting criticisms of Freud in the article. With regard to the notion of wish-fulfillment, van Eeden asks about whose wishes are fulfilled - a person's? He also wonders, "Can wishes be unconscious? Why are they expressed in this strange dream language? Does the unconscious only consist of mechanisms?" He adds from his own vantage point as a lucid dreamer, "From my own practice I have had occasion to report dreams whose symbolic character was clear to the dreamer even in sleep..." (p.216) Freud, however, admits the existence of unconscious thoughts: van Eeden refers to Freud's letter, quoting him as saying, "...my unconscious thoughts are mine." (Kiell, p.216) In the letter itself, we have read, "My unconscious thought is my individual property in the same way as my conscious one."

Van Eeden's point is not that in lucid dreams one may experience (be conscious about) the "unconscious," in Freud's sense. Freud, because of his manifest/latent distinction, as already mentioned, is forced to deny that the manifest dream is an experience at all. Thus experiences connected to the manifest dream (such as those reported by van Eeden and other lucid dreamers) have no relevance for the meaning of dreams. Such issues will be discussed further in a different context (Terwee & Rooksby, 1990).

Conclusion

This article has provided missing elements of the historical context surrounding the emergence of lucid dreaming as a concept in the early part of this century. It has answered in part the question regarding possible contact between Freud and van Eeden. Yet there are still questions which need to be dealt with, related both to van Eeden's sudden conversion to psychoanalysis and to his apparent withdrawal from it. Also, it may be asked what possible conversations or written exchanges about lucid dreaming that Freud or van Eeden might have had with any of the other members of the movement (Jones or Jung, for example). It seems likely that since van Eeden's involvement with psychoanalysis was short-lived there may be little to add to the correspondence questions. However, since there was contact, and Freud did know about the concept of lucid dreaming, a new area of research has presented itself. New areas of discussion may prove to be very interesting to follow up, perhaps along lines relative to the tension between lucidity and psychoanalytic notions (e.g., the manifest dream, wish-fulfillment, and Freud's denial of judgment in dreams), or van Eeden's ideas as expressed in the Diaries or any of his other written work in relation to psychoanalytic ideas in general. Based on the answers to some of these questions it will be possible to see how

the equivalent of the lucidity concept was treated in subsequent psychoanalytic writings and in what form it now takes (if any). We hope that it will not be long before a proper history of both lucid dreaming and perhaps dream research in the last century itself will be constructed, with all the insight and understanding that such a history could bring.

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