

What Do We Mean By “Lucidity”?

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John Wren-Lewis fascinating article (1985), reinforcing the discussions George Gillespie and I have been having (Gillespie, 1983; Tart, 1984), demonstrates much we need to clarify the term “lucid.” It raises many other vital issues, but space limitations preclude my commenting on them here.

I propose that we take “lucid” and make it a technical term, along the lines discussed below. Since lucid is rarely used in common speech, this is practical. This technical usage will have applications to all states of consciousness, not just dreaming. What I propose will be reasonably consistent with current usage of “lucid dream,” while simultaneously calling for greater care and clarity in talking about lucid dreams.

Consider the dictionary definitions of lucid: It is defined as meaning suffused with light; luminous; translucent; having full use of one’s faculties; sane; and as clear to the understanding, intelligible. “Lucidity” is defined as clearness of thought or style; a presumed capacity to perceive the truth directly and instantaneously; and as clairvoyance.

To define lucidity in a technical sense, we start with a simplified model of reality. I assume there is a real, lawful world, existing independently of what I believe about it. I further assume that I exist and I have some real, lawful nature, regardless of what I currently believe about it.

My perceptions and understandings of both my world and my self can vary in their degree of experienced lucidity. Consider my world. At one extreme, my vision can be out of focus, objects hard to recognize, my location unclear, the meaning of the world around me obscure. At the other extreme, I can experience clear and intense perception of the world around me and clearly and immediately recognize everything in my world around me, and understand its name, function, and place in my world.

Consider my self. At the non-lucid extreme, I may feel confused about who I am in a given situation, or who I really am in a larger sense than the immediate situation. I may suffer from rapidly changing or contradictory emotions and concepts, my body may feel strange. I may be unclear about who or what I am and what my current state is at the moment. Indeed I may have delusions about my self. At the lucid extreme I clearly know who I am in a wide sense as well as grasping the particular functioning of my self at this moment in space and time.

Experienced lucidity can vary somewhat independently on these two dimensions of world and self. I could be lucid about my self, for instance, while in a world situation that was very unclear in terms of its external nature, or perhaps unclear because of malfunctioning of my sensory organs. Those of us who wear glasses get a small example of this sometimes when our mind is clear but we can't see well without having our glasses on.

Note carefully that we have been discussing experienced lucidity, your immediate perception/cognition of your perception of your self and of your world. The degree to which experienced lucidity correlates with general and wide ranging validation of the lucidly experienced percepts and ideas is a different issue. We would like them to go together, but we have all experienced situations when things were quite lucid, but later we realized that we were mistaken. My proposals for the technical use of the term lucid here deal only with experiential qualities, not with their validation by long-term or external criteria.

Absolute and Relative Uses of Lucidity:

Given our model of a real self and a real world, with lawful properties of their own, we can now define absolute lucidity as the experience of immediate, clear access to all relevant information about yourself and your world that is possible for a human being to have. I believe this includes the "clairvoyance" aspects of the word lucidity, for these are part of human nature (Tart, 1977). Absolute lucidity is thus similar as a concept to the idea of absolute enlightenment, and to Gurdjieff's idea that genuine wakefulness was having immediate and complete access to all of your abilities and knowledge (Tart, in preparation).

For those who are not comfortable with including psi abilities like clairvoyance in the underlying model for lucidity, we can define absolute-but-conventionally-limited lucidity as the experience of immediate, clear access to all relevant information about your self and your world that is possible through conventional sensory perception and inference from memories of past experiences. You perceive as clearly as is possible, and you have access to all your stored experience to draw rational inferences from.

Our ordinary state of consciousness, which can best be technically described as consensus consciousness (Tart, 1975), does not possess this absolute lucidity or absolute-but-conventionally-limited lucidity. For one thing, perceptual defense and distortion frequently give us limited and/or distorted perceptions of our world, even without our knowing they are distorted.

Lucidity can be seen as changing quantitatively along a continuum. Imagine we have precise knowledge about your nature and the nature of reality. Suppose you find yourself in a certain situation calling for an adaptive response. If, to make up some numbers, you have the inherent capability to perceive 100 relevant elements in the situation and have 100 stored items of relevant information, but only perceive, e.g., 30 elements and

recall 40 stored items, we could say you were 35% lucid on some sort of absolute scale. If people generally were about 35% lucid on this scale, we would call your state “ordinary” or “normal” and not think about “lucidity” or lack of it.

Now suppose something happened that altered your mental functioning so you functioned at 45% on our scale. This quantitative shift would probably make you inclined to say you had become lucid with respect to your ordinary state. Small shifts would probably not be perceptible to the experiencer as lucidity or lack of it, while large shifts would. Such a shift upward could happen in your ordinary waking state, in a dream or in some other altered state, such as marijuana intoxication or a meditative state. We can call this kind of shift quantitative lucidity.

A lucid dream, however, is usually described as a qualitative shift. We don't get reports of the type “I found I could recall 15% more informational items about the dream person I was looking at, and so called this lucidity.” There is a shift in overall quality, a pattern shift to a discrete altered state of consciousness as compared with ordinary dreaming. Parts of this pattern shift may include the appearance of psychological functions (such as volition) that were absent in the previous non-lucid dream. We should call this kind of change qualitative lucidity. John Wren-Lewis' ongoing experience of “Isness” in his “ordinary” waking state is an entirely new quality superimposed on ordinary waking functioning, not a simple quantitative shift. I would consider his current waking state as a discrete altered state of consciousness compared to his previous ordinary waking state. The kind of self-remembering Gurdjieff taught leads to a similar qualitative shift in ordinary consciousness (Ouspensky, 1949; Tart, in preparation).

The nature of discrete altered states and the practical methodological considerations for investigating and working with them are a major topic in themselves, dealt with in my “States of Consciousness” (Tart, 1975).

Space limitations preclude further discussion here, but note that this is intended as a further stimulus to clarification of the concept of lucidity and of lucid dreaming. I look forward to your responses.

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