

Concerns with the Field of Lucid Dreaming Essays/Letters Lucid Dreaming and Ethical Reflection

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With the veritable explosion of interest in lucid dreaming in the past few years, important new questions have arisen to challenge those of us who are exploring the values of lucid dreaming. Foremost among these questions is that of the *ethical* significance of lucid dreaming. Some writers have expressed concern that lucid dreaming may actually inhibit true healing (1), while others have asked whether the pleasures of lucid dreaming may not become a harmfully addictive "drug" (2). Still others have denied any cause for alarm (3)

I would like to contribute some reflections to this much-needed discussion about lucid dreaming and ethics. While the above-mentioned writers have called our attention to some crucial issues, no one has yet considered the relations of lucid dreaming to the process of ethical reflection - to the process of evaluating our needs, our choices, and our relations with others and trying to decide how we should act in given concrete situations.

Even though all of us continuously engage in this process of ethical reflection, it appears that some researchers of lucid dreaming have not thought carefully enough about the significance of ethics in our lives. As a result their portrayal of the values of lucid dreaming has ethical implications which are deeply troubling. This is extremely unfortunate, because I believe lucid dreaming has a great potential here: *lucid dreaming may in fact become a powerful new resource for the process of ethical reflection*

To illustrate some of the ethical difficulties writers about lucid dreaming encounter, I will look at Stephen LaBerge's pioneering work *Lucid Dreaming* (4). Despite its many other virtues, I believe LaBerge's book presents a thoroughly confused picture of what ethics is all about.

For example, in one passage LaBerge suggests that ethical decisions are so self-evident that there is really no need to worry about choosing and applying moral principles. He says in one place "of course, decision-making is only a problem when there is uncertainty about the information involved. Otherwise, the optimal choice is clear-cut" (5). In other words, decisions require nothing more than amassing all the relevant data bearing on a given conflict; once this is achieved the best choice becomes obvious. But while we may know all there is to know about, say, what constitutes sexual health, this information is of no help in trying to decide whether it is better to pursue this through a monogamous relationship or through the seduction of other people's spouses.

In this passage LaBerge entirely misses the crucial point that ethical reflection only begins once we have gathered all the relevant information. After we have this information, we then refer to ethical principles to help guide us in deciding which of the many possible options is best. LaBerge, however, implies that ethics is merely a matter of collecting data, with no need to choose, to decide, or even really to think.

Elsewhere LaBerge does seem to say that there are certain ethical principles we

ought to follow - but what he says gets him into still worse trouble. Throughout the book LaBerge argues that the greatest value of lucid dreaming is how the positive experiences we have in lucid dreams may be carried over into our waking lives (6). Now if we take LaBerge at his word here, what are we to make of the ethical implications of passages like this:

I have found from experience that the feelings I am left with after a lucid dream reliably indicate my intuitive evaluation of my behavior in that dream. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that 'if it feels good, it is good'. What I am saying is that 'if it felt good afterward, it was good' ... Rather than recommending to my students any more particular course of action in their lucid dreams, I advise them to follow the same general path: "It's your dream. Try it and see how you feel afterward. If you listen to your own conscience, you need no other rule." (7)

Taking at face value LaBerge's premise about the applicability of lucid dream experiences to waking life, the resulting moral philosophy is what is known as ethical egoism. The immediate problem with ethical egoism is of course what to do when there are conflicts in what "feels good" to different people: what do we do in the inevitable cases where one person's intuitive evaluation of what feels good or bad leads to actions which clash with the actions another person takes based upon what he or she intuitively feels is good or bad? The fatal weakness of such an ethical outlook is clear, I think.

Is it fair to assume that LaBerge intends to promote ethical egoism based on what he says about the guidelines for behavior in lucid dreams? Probably not. He does ask us not to "misunderstand" him. But my point is that in the absence of any more clearly presented discussions about moral principles and decision making, LaBerge certainly leaves us free to conclude that this could be his ethical theory. He thus makes it difficult not to misunderstand him. Time and again he points out that lucid dreaming can have direct and positive effects on our waking life, that if we could bring the attitudes cultivated in lucid dreams into our waking consciousness we could enjoy more health, happiness, and spiritual fulfillment; yet these exhortations include no qualifications about whether some of these attitudes, such as the belief that if it felt good it was good, are more or less appropriate for export to waking life.

These problem pale in significance, however, when we consider the nature of LaBerge's most fundamental spiritual and psychological assumptions: We find that they are utterly antithetical to any sort of valid ethical position.

First, his spiritual assumptions. LaBerge portrays lucid dreaming as the Western equivalent of Eastern mystical religious practices. He claims that lucid dreaming can teach us in the West the same spiritual truths about the errors of our subjective perceptions and about the nature of ultimate reality which Eastern mystics have known for centuries. But what LaBerge does not seem to learn from the mystics is that almost all Eastern religions recognize that the doctrine of external reality being to some extent illusory can have *devastating* effects on ethics: If the world isn't real, why worry if we lie, or steal, or kill? Why try to stop others from doing these things?

The Tibetan Buddhism with which LaBerge claims such an affinity is deeply concerned with these questions and takes great pains to secure a prominent place in its teachings for the ethical principle of *Compassion* toward all beings (8). LaBerge himself, however, never discusses any of this; in his view, it appears, the achievement of spiritual lucidity carries with it no obligation to help those still suffering in a non-lucid existence, and no moral obligation whatsoever except to promote one's own lucidity. Things are no better with his psychological assumptions. We can see the difficulties emerge when LaBerge offers the following definition of health:

In the most general terms, health can be conceived as a condition of adaptive responsiveness to the challenges of life. For responses to be "adaptive" requires at minimum that they resolve a situation in a way that is favorable and that does not disrupt the integrity, or wholeness, or the individual. Adaptive responses in some way also improve the individual's relationship to his or her environment. There are degrees of adaptiveness; the optimum is what we have defined as health. (9)

This highly individualistic psychological model is just as destructive to ethics as is LaBerge's appeal to Eastern mysticism. He presents society as something which imposes norms, rules, and roles on us from the outside which are false to our true selves. Our social relations appear to him to contribute nothing of essential importance to our psychological growth and, in the end, to impede our becoming truly healthy.

According to this view, the only thing that really matters is our own "adaptive responsiveness"; our highest ethical obligation is therefore to promote our own health, and by implication to treat others as means to this end. The problem here is that unless we assume a model which recognizes that our social relations are fundamentally and irreducibly involved in our psychological development (10), it is extremely difficult for us to assert that we have any primary moral responsibility to respect and seek the welfare of others.

According to LaBerge's position, the best we can say is that we should help others and treat them with respect because that will improve the conditions for our own health; but this gives us no grounds for refuting the person who says that hurting others, e.g. stealing their money or enslaving them, best promotes his or her own health. Once again, LaBerge leaves us with an ethical egoism that renders us helpless in the face of the tough moral conflicts that come up continually in all of our lives.

All of these problems in the ethical implications of LaBerge's work should not, however, obscure the highly suggestive ideas about ethics and lucid dreaming which we can draw out of his writings. Many psychologists have noted that dreams often present important perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and intuitions which our consciousness has ignored; and further, that dreams may serve as the means by which future actions are "rehearsed," i.e., the consequences of different behaviors imagined in a prospective fashion.

In both of these ways dreams can contribute to our knowledge about those needs, choices, and alternatives we consider in the process of making ethical

decisions. With an expanded awareness of both external and internal realities and with an enlarged imagination of what the future may bring, we are in a better position to make specifically moral decisions about how we ought to act in relation to those realities and future possibilities. Insofar as LaBerge is correct in his claim that the achievement of lucidity can further enhance these qualities of ordinary dreams, lucid dreaming appears as a significant new resource for ethical reflection.

Lucid dreaming has something even more important to offer ethics, I believe. Many moral philosophers (11) believe that the core of ethical reflection is the capacity to think *reciprocally* and *reversibly* - that is, the capacity to transcend the limits of our own views and to consider impartially what action would be best in a given situation.

Thus when LaBerge asserts that one of lucid dreaming's greatest benefits is its promoting "reflective consciousness," which "allows dreamers to detach themselves from the situation they are in, and reflect on possible alternative modes of action" (12), a potential relevance of lucid dreaming for the process of ethical reflection as those philosophers envision it emerges: Lucid dreaming can help to cultivate just that sort of reciprocal reasoning and mutual perspective-taking that is the essence of ethics. LaBerge himself never explores this possibility. "Reflective consciousness" is useful to him only as a means for the individual to penetrate through the illusions of self and world to True Reality. But we can see that the reflective consciousness developed in lucid dreaming can also serve to strengthen our capacity to recognize the various competing interests in a given conflict, to evaluate them impartially, and to seek a fair resolution between them.

I want to end with two comments. First, I would like to dispel the notion that moral philosophy is something so abstruse and esoteric that it has no relevance to our lives. On the contrary, ethical reflection is a fundamental dimension of human existence. Moral decisions are often the most transformative experiences in our lives - they force us to reflect honestly on what we value most deeply, to rouse in ourselves the courage to defend what we believe is right, and frequently to discover that other people's values and beliefs are as legitimate as our own. By ignoring the role of ethics in our lives we impoverish our capacities to learn and to grow.

Second, I should emphasize that the ideas I have put forth here are by no means the definitive way of looking at ethics - mine is only one of a wide variety of ethical perspectives. My hope is simply that these reflections will stimulate the important and growing discussion about ethics and lucid dreaming.

References

1. Williams, S.K., Lucid Dreams or Resolution Dreams for Healing? *Lucidity Letter* 6(1), 10-20.
2. Gackenbach, J., *Lucidity Letter* 6(2).
3. LaBerge, S., *Lucidity Letter* 6(2).
4. LaBerge, S. (1985). *Lucid Dreaming*. New York: Ballantine Books.
5. *Ibid*, p. 185.

6. Ibid, p. 279, 184.
7. Ibid, p. 179.
8. Zaehner, R. C. (Ed., 1959) *The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*. Boston: Beacon Press. p. 298-300.
9. LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming*, p. 171.
10. A model, incidentally, for which much of contemporary social science is providing strong evidence--cf. the works of D. W. Winnicott, Erik H. Erikson, Carol Gilligan, and Clifford Geertz.
11. For example, the whole deontological tradition beginning with Kant and continuing into the recent work of John Rawls and Lawrence Kohlberg.
- [if !supportLists]12. [endif]LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming*, p. 221.

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