

## Concerns with the Field of Lucid Dreaming Essays/Letters

### Reply to Buckley: "A thoroughly confused picture of what ethics is all about ... utterly antithetical to any sort of valid ethical position"

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Kelly Buckley (1988) claims that the *ethical significance of lucid dreaming* is foremost among the questions that face us in the field today. Outside the confines of Divinity School, I cannot see how this can be so. Although some have felt that there exist significant ethical problems regarding lucid dreaming (e.g., Gackenbach, 1987), I agree with others who have doubted that ethics are relevant to the private behavior of lucid dreaming (e.g., Schatzman, 1987). Ethical issues *could* become relevant, if for example, it were ever shown that lucid dreaming is potentially more harmful than non-lucid dreaming. Then it we might be ethically bound to inform people of these hypothetical dangers. Since no one has shown this, I do not, at present, consider ethical issues paramount. In my view, the most important questions for the field today are how lucid dreaming can be made more accessible and how it can be used most beneficially. However, I have a few comments in response to Buckley's piece. Ethics refers to "the specific moral choices to be made by the individual in his relationship with others" (American Heritage Dictionary). The word *moral* derives from the Latin word for custom, which should remind us that the concepts of ethics and morality essentially refer to notions of behavior currently in vogue in a given culture. Of course, these moral standards of good and evil vary wildly with time, people, and place. Moreover, since we rarely know the final outcome of our actions, it is difficult to judge them good or evil, even by conventional standards. As Sir Richard Burton (1880/1974) put it:

There is no Good, there is no Bad;  
these be the whims of mortal will:  
What works me weal that call I "good,"  
what harms and hurts I hold as "ill:"

They change with place, they shift with race;  
and, in the veriest span of Time,  
Each Vice has won a Virtues's crown;  
all Good was banned as Sin or Crime:

Like ravelled skeins they cross and twine,  
while this with that connects and blends;  
And only Khizr his eye shall see  
Where one begins, where other ends.

What mortal shall consort with Khizr,  
when Musa turned in fear to flee?  
What man foresees the flow'er or fruit  
whom Fate compels to plant the tree? ( p. 35)

The reference is to the story of Moses (Musa) and Khidr (Khizr) from the Koran. Khidr, representing the enlightened man endowed with perception of things not available to the ordinary man or woman, allows Moses, representing the conventional moralist, to accompany him on a journey provided that he ask no questions about Khidr's actions. However, Moses cannot keep silent when he sees Khidr perform various acts of apparent evil. Khidr explains all before leaving Moses, showing him how each of his seemingly reprehensible acts could be seen as good in the light of Khidr's superior knowledge. We ordinary people are therefore in an awkward position in regard to ethics. We can only follow the course of action we believe leads to good, as we conceive it. Or we can follow convention. When in doubt, do what others are doing. The guardians of conventional standards tell us we should follow what *they* believe is right. In any case, it should be clear that the proper sphere of ethics and morals is *public, not private* behavior. Nevertheless, righteous religionists have always sought to extend this sphere to include a person's private thoughts, and now it seems, dreams.

Mr. Buckley seems to have seen much in my book that isn't there at the same time as ignoring much of what *is* there. He frequently quotes out of context and takes extreme liberties with interpretation. For example, he claims that "...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.' " (Buckley, 1988, p. 2) In the first place, I did not specifically discuss *ethical* or *moral* issues anywhere in my book, which incidentally, as its title suggests, is about lucid dreaming, rather than ethics, politics, or anthropology. Secondly, ethical problems are exactly those which involve uncertainty, as Buckley himself observes. Incidentally, in the sentence before the passage quoted, I wrote, "It is often not so obvious which outlook or course of action is best. Life often presents us with difficult decisions, and as it happens, lucidity may help us to choose wisely." (p. 185)

Yet Buckley feels free to claim, "LaBerge, however, implies that ethics is merely a matter of collecting data, with no need to choose, to decide, or even think." (p. 3) I trust that I am not alone in finding this absurd.

One of the oddest pieces of reasoning in Buckley's piece is the passage in which he argues thus:

1) LaBerge suggests 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." (p. 3)

2) LaBerge suggests that we follow the advice: "It's your dream. Try it and see how you feel afterward. If you listen to your own conscience, you need no other rule." (LaBerge, 1985, p. 179).

3) Therefore, LaBerge supports doing whatever you feel like in waking life. The attentive reader will note the leap of faith in the last step of the argument.

Buckley concludes 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 ["ethical egoism"] could be his ethical theory." (p. 4) Does common sense count for nothing here? Could this *really* be my "ethical theory"? By the same reasoning as above, one might just as logically conclude that I recommend jumping out of windows while awake because I recommend flying in lucid dreams. How can this not be obvious? Lucid dreams are private, mental experiences, not public behavior.

#### References

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