

Concerns with the Field of Lucid Dreaming Essays/Letters

Lucid Dreaming: Ethical Issues

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My first reaction on beginning to read about ethical issues in connection with lucid dreaming in *Lucidity Letter* (6 (2), 1987) was, "surely there is not much of a problem." When I read on and began to think about it a number of points did occur to me.

From a personal point of view, during lucid dreams I had already had cause to consider certain ethical issues (as Morty Schatzman mentions in that issue p. 83). In the examples given, it is evident that my thinking processes were a little confused, as they often are in lucid dreams. Trying to resolve ethical issues while dreaming seems likely to suffer from this lack of clarity. However, some of the difficulty may stem from our habitually viewing dreams with the values of the waking state as if this was the only valid way to do it, a sort of wakingism, external-world chauvinism. It may be worth approaching the subject of ethical issues in connection with dreams by initially trying to accept dreams on their own terms. This seems to be a reasonable first approximation to what is appropriate, at least while actually dreaming. Otherwise, it seems likely that the conventions we apply in the waking social world may be applied inappropriately to dreaming, just as naive lucid dreamers attempt to apply their waking experience of light switches to dreams where there is no electricity, only an imperfect behavioral simulation.

Let me offer an example.

Partly in order to avoid this risk of waking through movement I have been experimenting with not moving at all in lucid dreams. The particular type of lucid dream I use for these experiments is one that is entered from the waking state without pre-sleep. I lie on my back, determined to not move whatever happens, and concentrate on relaxing and counting breaths. Sometimes I have to wait 2 hours for anything to happen. This may seem extreme but I have found the results fascinating. The relevance of this to ethical issues is that some of these experiences are quite alarming.

The realism is often significantly greater than that which I normally experience in lucid dreams in which the lucidity begins in the middle of a non-lucid visual dream. Part of the reason for this is that these dreams, which I refer to as on-back-not-moving-imagery (OBNMI) dreams, usually begin with strong body and auditory imagery without any visual imagery. This makes them very difficult to dismiss as "merely dreaming" should one wish to reassure oneself (in the event of the lucidity faltering) that it is not really happening.

I am not given to superstition or believing in 'unnecessary entities' but perhaps the term "dream" is a little too bland to do justice to the ultra-realism of these experiences. For instance, if one "dreams," as I have, in rich tactile and auditory imagery of being examined in the dark by robots or operated upon by small beings whose good will and competence may be in doubt, or abused in various ways by life-forms not known

to terrestrial biology, it can be very difficult to keep still. I have found that if I do not keep still this peculiar state of consciousness usually evaporates in a moment. That can be very useful as an escape route, but it can be annoying to lose it when the success rate is not high and each attempt takes 2 hours or more.

I like to regard myself as at least a moderately intrepid investigator, but I have to admit that in spite of being intellectually of the opinion that what was happening was only internally generated imagery, I have flinched during these episodes on more than one occasion. From an ethical point of view, knowing that these potentially terrifying experiences are possible, I would not recommend this particular technique and its results to the faint hearted and certainly not to the weak-hearted. The lack of visual imagery does not prevent imagining the cause of the touch and sound sensations. What is imagined then often actually appears as autonomous self-sustaining visual imagery, which merely confirms one's fears. I suspect that many "UFO abduction" experiences, as well as out-of-body-experiences (OOBEs), are examples of the same kind of thing.

The fact that these experiences and lucid dreams in general can be demanding does offer, at an elementary level, the opportunity to develop one's spiritual mettle. One can understand why those aspiring to spiritual advancement are advised to ignore as irrelevant distractions the fascinating results of attempts to control and still the mind with its incessant concern with trivia and material issues. It may be that the more one tries to divest oneself of worldly thoughts, the more compelling and fascinating they tend to become. The more one tries to keep still, the greater becomes the provocation to movement. At least this method provides material for the progressive exercise of restraint. (The same principle applies in the early stages of OBNMI where minor itches seem to act as the grit round which the pearl of resolve to remain motionless can grow.)

Another ethical point arises in connection with the reporting of lucid dreams and dreams in general. From the point of view of scientific research, it is important that dreams should be reported accurately without censorship. It is important for the dreamer to be confident that dream reports will be treated with respect, and that those with access to the reports shall not publish the content without the dreamer's permission where this could damage (by identifying the dreamer) his or her reputation. If dreamers see their dreams reported and attributed with inadequate regard for propriety, even by professionals, this will not encourage accurate reporting of dreams. This is true even though it may be said that, as far as morals and manners are concerned, it is possible to do what you like in dreams without guilt or fear of punishment since, being internal to the skull, they can harm no one and they are secret.

As to whether dreams can harm the dreamer, in general it seems unlikely that the degree of proficiency commonly achieved in altering states of consciousness at will will lead to any of the three major perils recognized by mystics as possible consequences of interfering with the natural order of the mind: disease, madness and death.

However if one kind of madness is defined as some arbitrary degree of deviance from social norms (for instance the dreamer might begin to prefer his dreams to waking life) then I would guess that that kind of "madness" is quite possible. Whether this is in essence any different from watching endless TV, for instance, might depend on the

content. What may be seen as threatening by those with an interest in such things is dreaming as an "escape from authority" which is unobservable, inaccessible, and frustratingly private. The technology currently available (brain scans and brain mapping) allows little more than an informed guess as to whether a lucid dream is even occurring. It seems likely that it will be some time before anyone is charged with illegal dreams. Promoting, procuring, conspiring to induce, being an (awake) accessory to the control of "immoral" dreams may be another matter.

In order to reduce the likelihood of "dreams for pleasure" dragging the whole subject the way of witchcraft, magic, exotic sex and recreational drugs, it might be a good idea for dream associations to establish a professional code of behaviour.

This would apply perhaps in particular to those with a commercial interest in lucid dream induction devices who may promote them as a key to a free-sex playground. In view of the AIDS situation, for instance, this does have a positive side, but emphasis of the sexual dimension is not likely to improve the image of an organization aiming to gain the respect of the academic/political establishment. This applies particularly when the subject is dreams, since there is already a strong association with occult, fay, mystical, psychic, and other 'dubious' areas. It might therefore be appropriate for the professional dream organizations to set up an ethical committee to which those wishing to promote their "dream machines" with the blessing of the Associations should submit promotional material for approval.