

Letters to the Editor

Some Further Thoughts on Lucid Dreaming and Ethical Reflection

Immediately following the article I wrote in the June 1988 *Lucidity Letter*, "Lucid Dreaming and Ethical Reflection"¹, Stephen LaBerge commented on my ideas in "Reply to Bulkley: A thoroughly confused picture of what ethics is all about...utterly antithetical to any sort of valid ethical position"². From the comments he made in his essay, it seems that LaBerge and I disagree on a few points. But before I begin a detailed consideration of LaBerge's arguments, I want to stress that debates such as these are an important way of improving our knowledge and understanding about lucid dreaming. Similar disputes emerged at the Lucidity Symposium at this past summer's annual conference of the Association for the Study of Dreams, and while things got a little cantankerous I believe that everyone benefited from an open airing and discussion of the difficult issues involved in our studies and research. So while I may continue to challenge certain of Dr. LaBerge's positions, and while he may continue to challenge me, I feel confident that such a debate will make positive and constructive contributions to the enterprise in which we are all engaged, namely the exploration of the experience of lucid dreaming.

Now, I would like to address Dr. LaBerge and his "Reply to Bulkley", pointing out what I believe to be points of confusion or debate.

1) I am troubled by the fact that Dr. LaBerge's essay suggests that I have thoroughly denounced the whole of lucid dreaming as ethically worthless. This is most definitely not my position. The essential thrust of my essay was to emphasize the tremendous value lucid (dreaming has in relation to ethical reflection, even though I may have criticized Dr. LaBerge's ideas in particular rather pointedly. I would really like to know what he thinks about these more positive ideas in my essay.

2) Dr. LaBerge's claim that ethics simply is not relevant to lucid dreaming marks an important difference in our outlooks, as I do believe that lucid dreaming has great ethical significance. I suspect that the problem here is that he and I are not using the term "ethics" in quite the same way. Dr. LaBerge seems to consider ethics as fixed, socially or religiously sanctioned codes of public behavior: his concern is that such codes might be applied to the private experience of lucid dreaming. This possibility has sinister implications in his view, and I would entirely agree with him on that point.

But this notion of ethics is emphatically not what I am talking about: I very deliberately titled my essay "Lucid Dreaming and Ethical Reflection" not "Ethics and Lucid Dreaming" to stress the fact that I am not concerned with whether lucid dreaming is ethically right or wrong. Again, I agree with Dr. LaBerge that this is a minor, if not a nonsensical issue. My interest is entirely different from this: I am trying to bring out the ways in which a particular form of consciousness or experience--in this case lucid

dreaming--can contribute to the process of reflecting on ethical dilemmas. In the same way I might have written on "The Experience of Love and Ethical Reflection" or "Psychedelic Drugs and Ethical Reflection", looking at how such experiences might influence the ways we look at our ethical relations with society.

¹ Bulkley, K., "Lucid Dreaming and Ethical Reflection", Lucidity Letter (June 1988), vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 13-16.

² LaBerge, S., "Reply to Bulkley: A thoroughly confused picture of what ethics is all about...utterly antithetical to any sort of valid ethical position", Lucidity Letter (June 1988). vol. 7. no. 1. pp. 17-18.

In short, Dr. LaBerge seems worried that ethics might be applied to lucid dreaming; in contrast, my purpose is to consider the significant of lucid dreaming for ethical reflection. Having made this distinction as clearly as I can, I hope to have allayed some of his concerns.

3) Dr. LaBerge charges that I "frequently quote out of context and take extreme liberties with interpretation" with regards to his book *Lucid Dreaming*¹, citing three specific instance in which I do this.

First, he says that since he "did not specifically discuss ethical or moral issues anywhere in my book"², the attempts I make to talk about the ethical implications of his work are unjustified. I disagree. It is precisely my point that Dr. LaBerge does not deal explicitly with the ethical implications that follow from his ideas about lucid dreaming. If lucid dreaming is as revolutionary a development of human consciousness as he claims it is, it is going to have implications for the ways in which we interact with other people in society, implications that demand our attention.

Second, he says that I neglect to set a quote from *Lucid Dreaming* in its appropriate context. The quote referred to the process of decision-making, and while I claim that Dr. LaBerge is ignoring the tremendously complex nature of ethical reflection he points out that in the preceding sentence he does in fact fore the difficulties that we often face in life. I admit that my usage of the quotation from his book is misleading and, while I do not believe it diminishes the force of my argument, I apologize to him for this unintentional error.

Third, Dr. LaBerge disagrees with my suggestion that it could appear that he is promoting a form of ethical egoism. I argue that, since he claims that the values of lucid dreaming can be carried over into waking life and that the best advice for lucid dreaming is to follow one's intuitions without any other guide, one could conclude that this means we should only obey our subjective intuitions in waking life also. In his reply Dr. LaBerge asks rhetorically. "Does common sense count for nothing here? Could this really be my

‘ethical theory’?...How can this not be obvious?’³ My answer is no, in this sort of a discussion “common sense”, whatever that might mean, counts for exactly nothing: clarity and precision do.

4) Dr. LaBerge says in his reply that morality is nothing more than the accumulated social conventions of a given culture; that moral standards of good and evil vary from culture to culture; and that it is extremely difficult for us to judge what is right and wrong. I believe that this extremely relativistic view of ethics is misguided, and can have some very problematic consequences,

The greatest moral philosophers in history, from Plato through Kant to John Rawls, have all begun their theories with the emphatic assertion that judgments of right and wrong are not to be based on social conventions, but on clear-headed reflection, deliberation, and discussion. Furthermore, anthropological studies in comparative ethics suggest that most human cultures share many fundamental ethical principles⁴. Morality is not an arbitrary code imposed on people from some external source; morality emerges out of the experience of human interactions, out of our need to live together in social communities. In this sense it is meaningless to speak of ethics as something separate from our lives--ethics is simply the name for our attempts to get along with other people in our community.

¹ LaBerge, S., Lucid Dreaming (New York: Ballantine, 1985).

² LaBerge, S. “Reply to Bulkley”, p. 18.

³ LaBerge, S. “Reply to Buikley”. p. 18.

⁴For example, see the works of Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Sudhir Kakar.

I fully agree with Dr. LaBerge on his third point, that ethical judgments are hard to make. Indeed, they are so hard that often we are tempted just to throw up our hands and say that it does not matter what we or anyone else does. But there is a vast abyss separating the admission that ethical judgments are difficult from the surrender of all attempts to make such judgments. To give in to that temptation, to conclude that it is useless to try and figure out what is good and what is evil, is to take the first step down the path of moral relativism. If we follow the Burton poem which Dr. LaBerge quotes, no one can really know if the slavery of blacks was a bad thing, if the torture of political prisoners in Latin America is wrong, if apartheid in South Africa is a profound evil.

My point is that even though it may be extremely hard to figure out what is the world, we still have to try--the great suffering of the modern world demands it of us. We will not always be absolutely sure that we are right, and we know that we will often be wrong, but we cannot let these limitations deter us from our ethical members of society.

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