

Sleep consciousness and pure awareness

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Q: What can we learn from sleep to develop an account of consciousness?

- Wait, but why sleep?

“Everybody knows what consciousness is: it is what vanishes every night when we fall into a dreamless sleep and reappears when we wake up or when we dream. (Tononi 2008, p. 216)”

- Deep sleep = blackout. Absence of consciousness
- Sleep phenomena are more varied than we think it is. Not only dreams vs absence of dreams.

Claim: Investigating and understanding the varieties of dreamless sleep experiences will let us understand the different ways in which consciousness is instantiated.

§1 Wrong assumptions on sleep and consciousness

1. Sleep consciousness is limited to dreams

- Greater variety of sleep experiences that aren't dreams: Dreamless sleep experiences (DSE) (Windt et al. 2016).
 - Hypnagogic states: Hallucinatory-like experiences ha during sleep-onset transition (Mavromatis, 1987). Most common: Fleeting and isolated imagery. Also: auditory, vestibular, and kinaesthetic sensations.
 - Sleep thinking: Sporadic, uncontrolled conscious thoughts
 - Bodily sensations, feelings: E.g. the feeling of the own body in bed

Q1: DSEs: Why aren't dreams?

- **A:** They aren't immersive nor simulative enough
- Dreams: **Simulation theories of dreaming** (Revonsuo, 1995; Windt, 2015): Dreams as the immersive experience of a self in a simulated world (dream-world).
- Hypnagogic states aren't immersive: perception as if it was a cinema screen (Mavromatis, 1987:14-15). Experienced as 'in front of us'; we aren't integrated in the scenery. Usually static, brief and fragmented

Q2: DSEs: Are they 'sleep' experiences?

- **A:** They occur during NREM sleep or 'light sleep'.
- Canonical sleep taxonomy ≠ phenomenological taxonomy

1st Wrong assumption: “Sleep consciousness is limited to dreams”. **No:** wider range of conscious sleep phenomena. The study of DSEs can shed light on the variety of sleep phenomena we can have

2. Conscious states are limited to those states in which I’m aware of something (e.g. ‘I’m right now aware of my computer screen”).

a. Consciousness vs ‘unconsciousness’

Example 1: ‘I believe there’s a computer in front of me’

- Conscious state: A ‘me’ having the experience of [a computer in front of me]

Example 2: If I don’t know that there’s a computer in front of me, am I unconscious?

- Unconscious experience: I’m not directing my attention to particular objects (e.g. I’m still ‘perceiving the computer while giving my talk, but I’m not ‘aware that I’m seeing the computer’). But we want to say that I’m still conscious.

Example 3: A dog experiencing the computer in front of them. Do they know that ‘there’s a computer in front of them’? Are they then unconscious if they don’t?

- Conscious vs unconscious dichotomy doesn’t help.

b. Consciousness as a phenomenal state

What-is-it-likeness (Nagel, 1974): There is something it is like for me to be in a particular state.

- e.g. my subjective experience of being here giving this presentation.
- E.g. the dog who doesn’t know that there’s a computer in front of them.

Qualitative aspect of my experience.

- The redness of the red apple.
- The sweetness taste of the red apple

“But fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism-something it is like for the organism” (Nagel, 1974: 436)

c. Consciousness vs self-consciousness

- **Self-consciousness:** To be aware I need to know that I’m conscious (Carruthers, 2000).
 - **Consciousness:** only awareness, not awareness of my mental states (qualitative experience)
- Is it self-consciousness required for consciousness? (Highly disputed)

2nd Wrong assumption: “Conscious states are limited to those states in which I’m aware of something”.

Not so easy to refute: Do I need to be aware of something? Can I merely be ‘aware’?

§2 DSE and the study of consciousness

Q: Can we find a state during sleep in which I'm not aware of something (including, me having awareness that I'm in a particular state)?

- **Witnessing-sleep:** State of awareness during sleep in absence of any content.
- Described by Indian contemplative schools: Advaita Vedanta, Yoga and Tibetan Buddhism.
- 'sushupti' = one of the four states of consciousness.
- State of pure awareness: the essence of consciousness

➤ *"The essence of deep sleep is, in fact, great luminosity, the true nature of mind. It is utterly bright and utterly vivid. It is a dense clarity, and because its clarity is so dense, it has a blinding effect on the confused mind. When we purify the ignorance of deep sleep, when we transcend that delusion and further penetrate the intense clarity, then we experience the clear, luminous nature of mind" (Ponlop, 2006: 86)*

But was I aware while I was having this experience? I wasn't aware that 'I was having this experience' nevertheless I was conscious. When I wake up in the morning, I can recall that 'I was in a state of 'consciousness'

My research on witnessing-sleep

Pilot study to gather reports of witnessing-sleep

- *"it's emptiness. It's emptiness but awareness of emptiness. But well, when I say awareness you can say, 'Oh, there's awareness of emptiness', but sometimes, it's like emptiness and awareness it's the same, there's **no 'being' being aware of emptiness**, it's emptiness is awareness", P#02*
- *"There's an awareness of the observer, which I guess I identify with, but there's **not a typical sense of the self**", P#02*
- *"[...] and start to have an awareness...isn't you, **it's just an awareness**. [...] It's like if we were going to drop a mind in a computer and whatever we drop into the computer is what it's left. It can experience but isn't saying, isn't feeling, isn't tasting...it can't describe the experience", P#04*
- *"I was aware [...] It wasn't that I was thinking consciously I'm in sleep or I'm in a dream. It was more that **it was an awareness**", P#06*

Some notes on the results:

- All reports: perception of a state of absence following a lucid dream/straight from wakefulness.
- This state lacked imagery and further mentation (no images, no thoughts). But this state did have some sensations/perceptions associated to it: darkness/light; sense of familiarity; absence/emptiness; emotional state
- There was a first-person perspective attached to the experience: participants experienced themselves to some sort of degree while in this state (completely selfless for some?)
 - Were they having a 'dream'?
 - Were they having another sort of experience?
 - Was this a case of pure consciousness? (Just subjective experience)

- Further exploration is required!
 - Is there a complete dissolution of the sense of self during these episodes?
 - How is their conscious experience during them?
 - Is there any sort of perceptual experience in place at all?

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