

THE DREAM THEORIES OF SARTRE AND HOBSON: THE CASE OF THE IMPRISONED CONSCIOUSNESS

Sartre devotes only a small portion of his extensive corpus to a discussion of dreams, yet his comments on the subject are nonetheless essential to his philosophy of existentialism. He states in *The Psychology of Imagination* that a dreaming consciousness is paradoxically imprisoned. At first glance, such a declaration might seem to contradict the doctrine of freedom propounded in his later philosophical essays and treatises. In several seminal passages of *The Psychology of Imagination*, however, he attempts to resolve this apparent contradiction and in the process lays the cornerstone for his fundamental ontology.

Whereas Sartrean analysis focuses largely on the passivity of the dreaming consciousness, current dream theorists tend to highlight its active role in the constitution of the dream world. In so doing they implicitly corroborate the existence of the human freedom on which Sartrean ontology is founded. In the present essay I shall examine the relationship between the dream theories of Sartre and contemporary scientific theorist, J. Allan Hobson. This will not only make possible a fuller appreciation of the significance of dreams within the Sartrean context but will help to mediate Sartrean existentialism and modern science. It will also add a philosophical dimension to the already considerable discussion, both in academia and the media, of the work of Hobson.

At the outset of his major treatise, *The Dreaming Brain*, Hobson argues for a synthesis of the traditional disciplines of philosophy and science. He states:

We may, now, begin to entertain a unified theory of mind and brain. To that end, I use the hybrid term *brain-mind* to signal my conviction that a complete description of either (brain or mind) will be a complete description of the other (mind or brain). At some future

time, the two words may well be replaced by one. (16)¹

Although some critics have claimed that Sartre rejects science, he too recognizes the interrelatedness of the two disciplines, and in *The Psychology of Imagination* avails himself of a variety of scientific and psychological dream theories prevalent during the period preceding World War II. To be sure, his interests are pre--eminently philosophical, and he ultimately integrates these theories into what he considers to be the more all-encompassing framework of existentialism. Scientific theory, however, should not be seen as irrelevant or somehow opposed to existentialist philosophy but complementary insofar as it enriches our knowledge of the objective world through which consciousness articulates its existence.

The Psychology of Imagination is a foundational text of Sartrean philosophy insofar as it provides the groundwork for the elucidation of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. It is Sartre's basic premise that an image is an unreal object arising through a fundamental act of negation. The ability of consciousness to negate the real means that it is not only "in-the-midst-of-the-world," as are things, but a free agent capable of positioning itself with regard to the world. Sartre recognizes, however, that the existence of dreams might easily undermine this definition of the image. If the dreamer encountered rather than constituted the dream, would there not be at least one instance when an image was given as a real object in the world? The arguments of *The Psychology of Imagination* in fact prepare Sartre to deal with the problem of dreams.

Sartre begins his discussion of imagination with a rejection of what he calls the "illusion of immanence," that is, the dual belief that an image resides *in* consciousness and that the object of an image resides *in* the image itself. In other words, neither is an image of Peter in consciousness nor is an image of Peter the object of consciousness. What occurs, instead, is an imagining consciousness of Peter. In fact the object of an imagining consciousness and the object of a perceiving consciousness are the same: Peter. Yet in imagination this object is not vaguely perceived, as the idealistic philosophy of Berkeley would suggest; it is not perceived at all. It is Sartre's tenet that the object of a

¹All quoted material of Hobson comes from *The Dreaming Brain*.

perceiving consciousness is posited as an existent whereas the object of an imagining consciousness is posited as a species of nothingness. (He identifies four types of imaginative acts through which the object is posited as non-existent, as absent, as existing elsewhere, or through which it is not posited as existing.) Perception is thus an act of affirmation through which existence is revealed; imagination, on the other hand, is a negative gesture through which it is denied. The upshot is that there exists only one world. This, indeed, is Sartre's great law of imagination: there is no imaginary world but only an imaginary apprehension of the real world.

Sartre distinguishes specifically between images with a material content and those with a mental content. A portrait of Peter, for example, is a material analogue of Peter. It is what Sartre calls an external transcendent, existing independently of the imagining consciousness. (We learn in *The Family Idiot* that the imagining consciousness in fact derealizes this material object and irrealizes the aesthetic object.) The mental image of Peter, on the other hand, is a psychic analogue of Peter. It is an internal transcendent, disappearing with imagining consciousness, and thus less accessible to phenomenological description. Like the mental image, the dream image is an internal transcendent, yet like the portrait it possesses a material content. Sartre describes this material content in the context of hypnagogic imagery.

The hypnagogic image appears in the penumbral period immediately prior to sleep. Its material content is an entoptic light or a phosphene, posited by a perceiving consciousness. The hypnagogic image itself, however, is not perceived, and with regard to images of stars and the teeth of a saw, Sartre writes: "In a word, I do not see the teeth of the saw (I only see phosphemes)... Nothing new has appeared, no image is projected on the entoptic lights, but, in apprehending them, they are apprehended as teeth of a saw or as stars" (65).² Sartre argues that the hypnagogic consciousness becomes "fascinated" or "charmed" by its images. It alone is responsible for its fascination and is capable at any moment of breaking it through self-reflection, that is, through a reflexive retotalization of its imaginary acts. Just as it chooses its enchantment, so

²All quoted material from Sartre's *The Psychology of Imagination* is indicated in parentheses after the citation.

too it determines not to fall asleep: "As a general rule... we *want* to fall asleep, that is, we are aware of drifting into sleep. This consciousness delays the process by creating a certain condition of conscious attraction which is exactly the hypnagogic condition" (64).

The dreaming consciousness, like the hypnagogic consciousness, takes a material reality, such as a phospheme or an entoptic light, (or what Sartre refers to as a "swarm of impressions" [243]) as something other than what it is. This material, however, is not an analogue comparable to a portrait. The dream world, Sartre states, is not "imagined, in the sense in which consciousness imagines when it presents something by means of an analogue" (242). A red light, for example, does not arouse in the dreamer the mental image of blood; instead, the dreamer takes the red light to be blood. The dreaming consciousness is in fact unable to do otherwise. It has lost its grasp on the real and is what Sartre calls a "shut imaginary consciousness" (240). "Just as King Midas transformed everything he touched into gold, so [the dreaming] consciousness is itself determined to transform into the imaginary everything it gets hold of" (255).

The dreaming consciousness does not *know* its images, in the way that a perceiving consciousness knows its object, because an image is not an object but an act through which an object is negated as such. Rather, the dreaming consciousness *believes* in its imaginary world. This belief, however, is not an explicit affirmation of the unreal as real precisely because the dreaming consciousness is no longer in contact with the real. Instead, it is the consequence of a consciousness doomed to take as real an unreal world of its own making. The deep alienation of the dreaming consciousness, therefore, is both from the world and from itself as a relationship to the world.

Sartre clarifies this through the assertion that the dreaming consciousness, unlike the hypnagogic consciousness, is incapable of reflection. Were the dreaming consciousness to engage in reflection, then the dream would be revealed for what it is and the dreamer would awaken. It is for this reason that Sartre rejects the claim of Descartes that it is impossible to differentiate between sleeping and waking states. According to Sartre, the waking consciousness can confirm its perceptive acts through reflection, whereas through the same act the dreaming consciousness destroys the dream. The question of reflection is in fact central to an understanding of Sartre's theory of dreams. Any real

reflection, he argues, involves a momentary awakening on the part of the dreamer. There is, to be sure, a non-positional knowledge of dreaming that reflection makes explicit. Yet:

The non-thetic consciousness of dreaming permits of none of the restrictive and negative characteristics that we find in the judgment: "I am dreaming." ("I am dreaming," therefore I am not perceiving.) A non-thetic consciousness can be negative of nothing because it is completely full of itself and only of itself. (235)

Because of the impossibility of the non-thetic consciousness of the dreamer to engage in reflection, Sartre accepts the theory of Halbwachs that the dreamer has no recollection of the real world.³ Were a memory possible, then according to Sartre all reality would suddenly crystallize before the dreaming consciousness and the dream would vanish. Yet this does not mean that there is no past or future within the context of the dream. In fact, it is precisely the temporal dimension of the dream that makes it appear to the dreamer as a story.

In contrast to the reader of fiction, however, the dreamer is unable to foresee the outcome of the dream: "Consciousness cannot get perspective on its own imaginations in order to imagine a possible sequence to the story which it is representing to itself: that would be to be awake" (246). It has no choice but to narrate in a certain fashion. This leads Sartre to assert that there is no possibility in the dream. A dreamer, for example, "does not say to himself: I could have had a revolver, but suddenly he does have a revolver in his hand" (246). Such a dreamer, moreover, does not ask if the revolver is locked; when he attempts to use it, it simply is locked. For Sartre, indeed, the dream is a world in which freedom is impossible: "The imaginary world occurs as world without freedom: nor is it determined, it is the opposite of freedom, it is fatal" (246). The only "escape" from this infernal realm is the production of another imaginary adventure. In the dream, then, consciousness is compelled "to live the fascination of the unreal to the dregs" (250).

³Hobson clarifies that dreams are usually forgotten because of an absence in the sleeping brain of the chemicals necessary for storing memories.

The dreaming consciousness further differs from the reading consciousness insofar as reading involves what Sartre calls "aesthetic distance." Despite identification with a fictional character, even the most naive reader is aware of their ontological difference: "I *am* the unreal hero, while remaining different from him; I am myself and another" (248). In the dream, on the other hand, I am, so to speak, both myself and the other, as if we existed through a relationship of emanation. In my dream of an escaping slave, for example, he is "transcendent and external since I still see him running and, in another sense, transcendent without distance since I am present in him unreally" (249-50). Yet we are both imaginary. This in fact is a fundamental tenet of the Sartrean theory of dreams: the world of my dream is unreal and so too am I as either an observer or a participant in that world.

When I say to myself in a dream, "I am only dreaming," it is hence an imaginary "I," incapable of reflection, that speaks: "This reflective act, has in reality not been carried out: it is an imaginary reflective act, operated by the me-object and not by my own consciousness" (252). Real reflection would break the enchantment and cause the dreamer to awaken. But given the nature of the dream itself, real reflection is virtually impossible. In this context Sartre states:

Nothing is more strange than the desperate efforts made by the sleeper in certain nightmares to *remind himself* that a reflective consciousness is possible. Such efforts are made in vain, most of the time, because he is forbidden by the very "enchantment" of his consciousness to produce these memories in the form of fiction. He struggles but everything glides into fiction, everything is transformed in spite of him into the imaginary. (253-54)

The spell of the dream can in fact be broken only if an emotion, such as fear, becomes so strong that it motivates a true reflection and thereby breaks the enchantment, or if an event, such as the death of the dream self, occurs so that any sequence to the dream is impossible. In the latter case "consciousness hesitates, and this hesitation motivates a reflection, which is waking up" (254).

Sartre concludes the discussion of dreams in *The Psychology of Imagination* by restating that the dream is not, as Descartes claimed, the apprehension of the real, but instead the constitution of the unreal. "It is the odyssey of a consciousness dedicated by itself, and in spite of itself, to build only an unreal world" (255).

The analysis of dreams in *The Psychology of Imagination* predates the major philosophical treatises of *Being and Nothingness* and the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Yet Sartre's views on the subject remain relatively unchanged throughout his career. In *The Family Idiot*, for example, he contrasts the world of fiction with that of dreams, and as in the earlier essay, he reiterates the fact that the two differ fundamentally with regard to the question of "possibility." He states that in the nocturnal dream, the possible is suppressed, while in literature numerous possibilities exist (3, 269). He proceeds to clarify that the possible is established in literature in an *a priori* fashion by the author and that the readers are compelled to envision a certain imaginary world. In contrast to dreamers, however, they are free at any moment to reflect upon themselves in the process of reading.

Though Sartre frequently employs the word "dream" in *The Family Idiot* to describe the derealizing action of an imagining consciousness, he makes few references to nocturnal dreams. To be sure, the nature of dreams relates only indirectly to the existential psychoanalysis of Flaubert. Dreams, nevertheless, remain a problematical aspect of his philosophy.

If consciousness alone is the agent of being, how can it become imprisoned? As Sartre has demonstrated through his analyses of Flaubert and Genet, imprisonment results only from the selfsame action of consciousness, be it that of the Other, to whom consciousness passively acquiesces (either directly or through the mediating agency of the practico-inert), or its own action. Clearly, however, dreamers are not the slaves of some unseen Other. Nor can they in all fairness be accused of bad faith. They are, after all, asleep. Yet it is possible that their dreaming bears a closer resemblance to their waking actions than Sartre has led us to believe. Indeed, they are not necessarily caught in a web of fatality beyond their control but are perhaps responsible for their actions. It might even be said that they choose the manner of their imprisonment.

Despite the contention of Gordon G. Globus that Hobson creates a mechanistic theory of the brain,⁴ his research suggests that dreaming

⁴Globus' assessment of Hobson was made prior to the publication of *The Dreaming Brain*. In fact Hobson rejects a mechanistic theory of the brain insofar as he emphasizes the creativity of the dreaming consciousness. Moreover, he refuses to grant to dreams in themselves the significance accorded them by traditional psychoanalysts. In this way he

involves a greater degree of freedom than Sartre permits in *The Psychology of Imagination* or *The Family Idiot*. It is his basic contention that dreams are not passively received from the unconscious, as traditional Freudian psychoanalysts have maintained, (and which Sartre, of course, categorically denied), but freely constituted by an active consciousness. In an unceasing effort to create meaning, the dreaming consciousness, he theorizes, fabricates a story through a maze of chemical and electrical impulses.

Hobson not only attacks the Freudian theory of dreams but the entire concept that Freud and his contemporaries held of the brain. Rather than as a passive reflex, he views it as a self-activating organ in some ways similar to the consciousness of Sartrean ontology. He states:

The brain is neither a closed system with its own set of fixed determinancies nor a slave to information received from the outside world. It is a dynamic and self-sustaining organ capable of generating its own information. It is designed to deal with the external world by having ideas about the external world. The brain therefore constantly imposes its own truth upon the external world. (15)

Like Sartre, Hobson rejects the Freudian notion of a censor that operates independently of the dreaming consciousness. As a result, he argues that dreams do not conceal some hidden and oftentimes sexually charged fantasy but are in fact undisguised and as comprehensible to the ordinary dreamer as to the trained analyst. This insistence on the transparency of dreams is reminiscent of Jung, although Hobson is also critical of the Jungian theory of symbolic archetypes.⁵

Scientists now maintain that dreaming occurs during the REM (rapid eye movement) period of sleep, when one of the two sleep-producing neurons, composed of acetylcholine, is discharged throughout the brain. The acetylcholine neurons send rapid bursts of electrical signals to the cortex, the portion of the brain where reason and vision

approximates Sartre, as well as Malcolm and Dennett, all of whom Globus criticizes for their insistence on the fictive nature of dreams.

⁵Whereas for Freud dream images derive from the forces of a personal unconscious, for Jung they reflect the universal truths of the collective unconscious. Both positions are basically essentialistic to the extent that they allow consciousness to be passively affected from the outside and thereby endowed with a content.

occur. The cortex then takes this information and, according to Hobson, weaves it into a coherent story, interpreting the signals by referring to pre-existing memories. The neurons, he asserts, might be compared to a Rorschach, and thus function like the phosphemes and entoptic lights that Sartre analyzes in the context of hypnagogic imagery. Hobson states that the brain is so "inexorably bent upon the quest for meaning that it attributes and even creates meaning when there is little or none to be found in the data it is asked to process" (15).

Hobson echoes Sartre on several fundamental philosophical points. For example, he holds that perception and imagination are radically different activities. Dreaming is specifically an imaginative act in which consciousness is unable to reflect on itself in the process of dreaming. The dream world is thus not known, as is the waking world, but is rather an object of belief. Hobson states:

Dreaming is properly considered delusional because most subjects have virtually no insight regarding the true nature of the state in which they have these unusual sensory experiences. During a dream, one tends to consider dream events as if they were completely real, even though, upon waking, one promptly recognizes them as fabrications. This loss of critical perspective is doubly significant since one believes in the reality of dream events in spite of their extreme improbability and even physical impossibility. Contributing to this state of credulity in dreaming is the fact that one lacks the reflective self-awareness that helps us test reality during the waking state. Instead, the dreamer is of but one mind, and that mind is wholly absorbed by the dream process. (5)

Despite these apparent similarities, a discrepancy between Sartrean and Hobsonian dream theories might, seen in the fact that, according to the latter, something happens to consciousness when neurons bombard the part of the brain where dreaming occurs. If we probe more deeply, however, we discover that the activity of these neurons is not an assault on consciousness but is instead suggestive not only of the phosphemes and entoptic lights of hypnagogic imagery but of certain bodily phenomena, such as pain, which Sartre analyzes in *Being and Nothingness*.

It is Sartre's position that consciousness is neither struck nor afflicted by pain but that through pain it lives its facticity. With regards to an illness, which is a certain meaning that consciousness ascribes to its pain, Sartre states: "I apprehend it as sustained and nourished by a

certain passive environment in which the passivity is precisely the projection into the in-itself of the contingent facticity of the pains. It is *my* passivity" (*Being and Nothingness* 443). Were we to substitute "dream" and "dream neurons" for the words "illness" and "pain," we might have a working, existentialist definition of the physical phenomenon of dreaming: I apprehend the dream as sustained and nourished by a certain passive environment in which the passivity is precisely the projection into the in-itself of the contingent facticity of the dream neurons.

Sartre writes that an illness is apprehended as an "affective object" (*Being and Nothingness* 443), but also that it is "*mine* in [the] sense that I give to it its matter" (*Being and Nothingness* 443). Both the illness and the dream are suffered by a consciousness that adopts a position of passivity with regards to its creation. In either case, its object is unreal to the extent that the only "matter" consciousness is capable of "giving" is the non-being of the imaginary.

While an illness is the product of a reflective consciousness, the specific images of the dream are like pains in that both are lived by a pre-reflective consciousness. The theory of Hobson would nevertheless suggest that a veritable reflection occurs in the dream inasmuch as dreamers interpret and order their images according to certain memories. What this means is that the subject of one's dreams is not limitless but is conditioned by one's lived-experience--not in the Freudian sense, but in the more general sense that one's lived-experience provides the raw material for the dream. In the language of Sartre, then, the past is the being of consciousness (the Hegelian "Wesen ist was gewesen ist") that consciousness derealizes and simultaneously irrealizes as the dream.

Sartre in fact allows for such an interpretation in a footnote to the statement that the dreaming consciousness has lost its being-in-the-world: "The question is, in fact, much more complicated, and even in the dream consciousness does retain its "being-in-the-world," at least in some way. But we may hold on to this idea of a lost "being-in-the-world," at least in a metaphoric sense" (247). This being-in-the-world must clearly involve the body and the body as the past. The dreaming consciousness is hence capable to a certain extent of reflecting on its waking-life past. It is unable, however, to reflect on itself while in the process of dreaming, and though temporality is a distinct feature of the dreaming consciousness, Sartre's second and third *ekstases* of self-reflection and

being-for-others remain imaginary.⁶

From the Hobsonian perspective, nonetheless, Sartre in a sense underestimates the degree to which freedom is exercised in the dream. While the "imprisonment" of consciousness is meant to indicate the paradox of an unfree freedom, in the context of dreams, the term is somewhat inappropriate because the dreaming consciousness is often using its creative freedom more completely than in many waking situations. Not only does it reflect on its own past, but perhaps, as Hobson would suggest, it makes a new interpretation of that past and concomitantly of the world in which that past has been engaged: "It is possible to suggest that the brain is actually creative during sleep. New ideas arise and new solutions to old problems may be... derived during sleep" (299). Based on scientific experimentation Hobson in fact argues that the brain is more active in sleep than in many waking situations.

For Sartre, however, as for Heideggerian dream theorist Medard Boss,⁷ dream life is impoverished. This results not so much from the fact that images are ontologically "inferior" to the things of the real world but precisely from the inability of consciousness to engage in full and complete reflection. To be sure, dreamers create a story, and for this reason they might be said to experience a dimension of the aesthetic. They cannot, however, grasp through reflection the existential significance of their dream lives. In waking life, on the other hand, consciousness is capable of capturing through thought the subjective experience of reality. As the surrealists and others have demonstrated, it can also imagine the fantastic and bizarre world of dreams. Therefore, not only is the dreaming consciousness limited in its range of activities, but it possesses no special abilities over and above the waking consciousness.

In contrast to Globus, for whom "dreaming and waking life-worlds are indiscernable as unreflectively lived" (89), Sartre would argue that in a waking state pre-reflective consciousness is a non-positional

⁶It should be noted that for a growing number of theorists, dreamers are capable of reflection. In the so-called lucid dream, dreamers are supposedly aware of the fact that they are dreaming. Aristotle and Augustine were among the first in the Western tradition to record lucid dreams.

⁷In contrast with Sartre, it is the contention of Boss that *Dasein* encounters rather than creates the dream world. The dream for Boss is something that "is given" by Being.

consciousness of the self ("conscience[de]soi"), or self-conscious.⁸ As such it possesses an existential awareness of its own non-being. In the dream, on the other hand, the dream self seems to block any explicit act of self-consciousness on the part of the dreamer. There is thus no corresponding awareness of nothingness. It is precisely for this reason that Sartre concludes that the dreamer lacks freedom and that the dreaming consciousness is accordingly imprisoned. Notwithstanding, this absence of freedom is what accounts for both the joy as well as the fear of many dreamers. In fact the experiences of the dream are emotions, that is, imaginary apprehensions of the real. They are not the revealing intuitions of being that are the hallmarks of the freedom of consciousness: existential anguish, boredom, and nausea.

Certain dreams are characterized by the same sense of pleasure as are certain aesthetic experiences. Indeed, for many of us the dream is the one occasion when we feel we approach the aesthetic from the perspective of creator rather than spectator. As we awake from such a pleasant dream, we often attempt desperately to prolong it. Our anguish in that moment is the knowledge of our own freedom and contingency. We realize that we are not ourselves in the form of an essence, as we take ourselves to be in the dream, but an absence of essence. Just as there are instances when we wish that the dream would continue, so there are times when we awake from a nightmare with a profound sense of relief that it was only a dream. It is then that we experience another kind of joy, which might be called the "joy of freedom."

The "good dream" and the "bad dream" differ not so much with regards to content but to the paradoxical and contradictory desire of consciousness to achieve the being that it lacks. In the good dream, unbeknown to the dream self, we endow our nothingness with an imaginary being. In the bad dream this being seems capable of annihilating us. It is, however, imaginary and hence no more than an expression of the non-being of consciousness itself. This, then, is the ultimate existential meaning of the Shakespearean dictum that we are "such stuff as dreams are made on."

⁸Sartre brackets the "de" in order to emphasize that consciousness can never make of itself a veritable object of reflection. The English construction "self-conscious" or "self-consciousness" seems to indicate this in a way that the French does not.

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