

Philosophy and Dream

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Abstract: Dreams are inseparable parts of our life. In the past some philosophical books had been studying philosophical aspects of this phenomenon and extracting its important points. But nowadays some philosophers do not take it seriously. In our age, discussion of dream is granted to other scholars such as Freud. He has reduced all dreams to unfulfilled desires. After him, this view of point has been accepted more or less by other scientists. Although dreams have been remained multidirectional among many people, but deep philosophical investigation has not done on it and has been granted to those that had not have necessary ability to discuss it multidirectional. Some branches of philosophy, including philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind, epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics, should study dreams. Surely it does not contrast other aspects of dream that psychologists and psychoanalysts consider it. The important heritage of philosophy, mysticism and religion about oneirology should be deepened on new achievements. This paper is an attempt to show the importance of philosophical aspects of dream and show analytically that three branches of philosophy should study it: philosophy of religion, epistemology, and philosophy of mind. Other branches were not mentioned here.

Keywords: dreams; oneirology; epistemology; philosophy of religion; philosophy of mind

1. Introduction

The main subject matter of this paper is that: why philosophy should examine the dream and it was a mistake that philosophy has ignored this matter in recent centuries. As a preface it should be mentioned that dream is a strange and mysterious phenomenon in human's life. All people every night and day dream while sleeping, although they may not remember it. In every long sleep we see four or five dreams. All mammals have the same kind of brain activation during sleep as humans (Hobson, 2005, p. 61). Although many empirical scientists, philosophers, theologians and psychologists have been interested this subject and many theories

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have been developed in history on dream, but still we cannot confidently say what content and meaning of dreams are and what do these images and sounds refer to. And what are ontological, epistemological, ethical...implications of such dreams? Dreams can be examined on different levels, it is in some aspects a philosophical subject, so some branches of philosophy should study this phenomenon. These branches are: philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind, epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics. In the past centuries, some philosophers have addressed some aspects of this phenomenon and extracted its important points. Those discussions were not enough. In recent centuries we need more philosophical investigations on dreams but it became less and less. In our age, discussions of dreams are given to other scholars such as Freud and his followers. He believed that dreams are belonged to folklore and mysticism, but modern science brought it back. Freud has made dreams empty from those important religious, philosophical and mystical meanings and implications, and reduced all dreams to unfulfilled desires. After him, this point of view was accepted more or less by other scientists. The Western philosophy has not properly reacted towards it. Although dreams have remained important among laypeople and religious men and women, deep philosophical investigations were not done to turn it back to its previous position and this subject matter is granted to those scientists that did not have necessary ability to discuss it multidirectional. In this paper we will discuss: 1- Current discussions on dreams. 2- The philosophical studies of dreams in history 3- The branches of philosophy that should examine dreams.

2. Contemporary Studies on Dreams

Today, it is possible to recognize three major scientific approaches to the study of dreams, including psychoanalytic, neurophysiological, and psychological (Schredl, 2010, p. 135). From the psychoanalytic perspective, that have been described initially by Sigmund Freud, in his fundamental book "Die Traumdeutung" (The Interpretation of Dreams) published in 1899, dream is a conceptualized phenomenon as an expression of a person's inner life, i.e., "the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind". The discovery of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep was the starting point of the neurophysiological approach for studying the dream state. In 1953, Eugene Aserinsky and Nathaniel Kleitman published their finding that indicates in the course of the night the sleeper goes through different sleep stages, among others periods with REMs ...The third approach is based on methods of academic

psychology. The basic methodology was provided by Calvin S. Hall and his coworker Robert Van de Castle who published the book “The Content Analysis of Dreams” in 1966. Their extensive research have carried out since the 1940s has led to the development of comprehensive coding system for analyzing of dream's content and to “norms” which were derived from 1000 dreams of college's students. The major advantage of this approach is that characteristics of specific dream can be quantified in a reliable fashion so that hypotheses can be tested by using common statistical methods. (Schredl, 2010, p. 136)

But where are philosophies and philosophers? They are absent in this filed, and some scientists try to philosophize concerning it, while they have ignored philosophical claims on dream, since struggling for solving them scientifically is not a correct method. Many claims of psychoanalytic and Psychologists are naturally philosophical. For example, Lacan said: Freud is a first level philosopher and is as important as Heidegger and Hegel in philosophy. If it is said that Freud is not a philosopher I do not care, but for the richness of his thoughts, none is like him. (Lacan, 1988, pp. 93-94) If we say that Lacan's claim is exaggeration, but philosophical consequences of Freud's thoughts on unconsciousness and meaning of dreams should be important in some branches of philosophy that will be mentioned.

3. Dream in the History of Philosophy

We don't mean discussions that have been made on dream to demonstrate that we are awake not sleeping, like Descartes' discussions in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Because these discussions don't concentrate on dream itself. Their question is: How can we know that we are not now dreaming? This is the famous question that Descartes asked of himself. Descartes was not the first to ask himself this question. It was questioned in Plato's *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Qazzali's *al-Monghezo Mena al-Zalal*. Although this is an epistemological question but it is not a philosophical one on dream itself.

Ancient and pre-modern Philosophers have seriously taken into on account dream. For example Plato's dialogue *Phaidon* described the last days of Socrates, while he was in prison awaiting execution by the city of Athens. When his friends arrived to visit Socrates, they were surprised of finding the great thinker passing his time by translating some of Aesop's fables into verse. They asked him, why he was doing this, and he answered:

I did it in the attempt to discover the meaning of certain dreams, and to clear my conscience, in case this was the art which I had been told to practice. It is like this, you see. In the course of my life I have often had the same dream, appearing in different forms at different times, but always saying the same thing, ‘Socrates, practice and cultivate the arts.’ In the past I used to think that it was impelling me and exhorting me to do what I was actually doing; I mean that the dream, like a spectator encouraging a runner in a race, was urging me on to do what I was doing already, that is, practicing the arts, because philosophy is the greatest of the arts, and I was practicing it. But ever since my trial, while the festival of the god has been delaying my execution, I have felt that perhaps it might be this popular form of art that the dream intended me to practice, in which case I ought to practice it and not disobey. I thought it would be safer not to take my departure before I had cleared my conscience by writing poetry and so obeying the dream. (Plato, 1961a)

In Islamic philosophy, from beginning until now, dream has been examined in some details. For example *Avicenna* studied it in some books including *Al-Nafs* (the mind), that is a part of *Shefa* (the Healing) the biggest philosophical book of Avicenna. In the second chapter of forth essay of *Al-Nafs*, he distinguishes between true and false dreams, and compares true dreams with mystical discloser. He explains dream as a product of imaginative faculty of the soul, and sees some similarities between dream and prophecy (Avicenna, 1996, pp. 235-249). *Suhrewardi*, as another outstanding Muslim philosopher and the funder of Illuminative Islamic philosophy, studied dream in some of his books and dissertations. In *Hikmat al Ishraq* (Illuminative Wisdom) he explains how the true dreams are happened (Suhrewardi, 1993, p. 238). *Mulla Sadra*, the most important Muslim philosopher in recent centuries, wrote on dream. In the book *Al-Mabda’ va Al- Maad* (the Origin of the Being and the Resurrection), he explains the cause of true and false dreams. He also describes some similarities between dream and Prophethood (Mulla Sadra, 2000, p. 591). This enterprise has been continued until now. But western philosophy don’t discuss this subject and Islamic philosophy’s discussions is not sufficient, if is compared with scientific investigations. It is worth mentioning that Islamic mysticism, also examines the dream theoretically.

4. The Branches of Philosophy that Should Discuss Dreams

Many branches of philosophy should enter in this controversy: philosophy of religion, Epistemology, metaphysic/ or first philosophy, philosophy of mind, ethics and philosophy of science. In this paper it will be explained three of these branches briefly.

4.1. Philosophy of Religion

If we define philosophy of religion as a rational scrutiny of the claims of religion (Alston, 1967, p.499) or a discipline that examines religious teachings philosophically, the dream should be discussed in this branch of philosophy for some reasons that are mentioned in what follows:

- As we see, most, if not all of the world's religious traditions have regarded dreaming as a potential source of creative inspiration, especially great ones, i.e. Islam, Christianity and Judaism claim that some dreams are the sources of insight. There are many dreams that are mentioned in religious books, including Old and New Testaments, the Quran and other holy scriptures. The lives of the Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph were filled with God-sent dreams that motivated and guided their religious behavior. Several dreams occurred in relation to the birth of Jesus as has been described in the book of Matthew, with quite specific instructions about what the dreamers should do and where they should go. It is said that the Prophet Muhammad, (peace be upon him) as the Islam's Prophet, received his first divine revelation in the cave where he slept and prayed alone for long stretches of time. Whether or not his original call came in a dream or a waking vision, it seems clear that Muhammad valued his own dreams and those of others as legitimate sources of insight into God's will. It is mentioned eight dreams in the Quran including two of Muhammad's own dreams. The idea of regarding dream as a source of religious inspiration has very strong roots in Islam itself and continues to this day in Islamic studies.

In addition these religions have some ontological claims concerning this subject. For example they say when we are asleep; the soul can go to the other supreme worlds and receive some information from it. These are religious, epistemological and ontological issues.

- It is claimed that revelation has similarity with dream. In Islam, true dreams are regarded as a part of prophesy, and some revelations to the Prophets were in sleep. There is a religious narration (Hadith) that says: the

first revelation to the Prophet of Islam was through true dream. So the examination of dream can help philosophers to understand revelation more and more.

- In some religions, including Islam, it is claimed that this world that we are living within, is a dream and when we die we will find out the reality. Some mystics including Ibn Arabi says the meaning of this the Prophet's saying is that this world as we experience it, is the result of imagination, and it should be interpreted to find out its meaning. It is like a dream that should be interpreted. It is a very important ontological claim. So the examination of dream can help philosophers to find out this religious ontological claim.
- Dream is a kind of mystical disclosure. The discussion of dream can help us to understand other mystical disclosures that are claimed in religions.

4.2. Epistemology

Dream can be discussed in epistemology from two aspects. One of them is that how can we distinguish between awaking and sleeping manner and determine that now we are awake not sleeping. This is the very question that Descartes illustrates as a problem in the *Meditations*. But the second aspect is more important. People, from both Eastern and Western cultures, believe that dreams contain hidden truths and considering dreams provides more meaningful information about the world than similar awaking thoughts. (Morewedge, 2009, p. 249)

As it was pointed out, from the beginning of twentieth century, psychoanalytic, neurophysiologic, and psychological studies have claimed that dreams are meaningless or restricted their meaning to psychological and psychoanalytical ones. But it should be noted here that despite of some disagreements among scientists- laypeople endorse the first perspective, holding a general belief that dreams provide meaningful insights into both themselves and their world (Morewedge, 2009, p. 249). We can add to this that although scientists, in academic discussions, deny laypeople's belief on dreams but some of them in their ordinary life regard it as a source of meaningful insight. One of the main subjects of epistemology is the sources of justification and knowledge. As it was seen, it is claimed that dream can be one of these sources. Is this claim valid or not? If we seriously take into account this matter, some epistemological questions will be raised: whether dreams are meaningful, if they are meaningful, what would be their meaning? Is a dream a reflection of our psychological life, or denotes affairs

beyond our body and mind as have claimed by some philosophers and religions and many people around the world. Who can interpret dreams and how? In another word; can dreams give us some information or even knowledge? If it is so, which kind of information is expected from it?

4.3. Philosophy of Mind

What is the nature of dream, if there is a mind independent of body, is the dream a physical activity or a mental property that belongs to a soul/sprit/mind? Freud and Jung said dream is the unconscious activities of the mind. Some philosophers, including Muslim philosophers have claimed that some dreams, that they call it as true dreams, are connections between soul and the supernatural world that we have mentioned some of these claims above. Both of these theories have some philosophical claims concerning soul and its activities. Accordingly these philosophers have studied this matter in the philosophy of mind/soul.

Do we have a personal unconscious, as Freud believes or collective unconscious- as Jung said? Is another world- that is a metaphysical claim- that soul can connect with? Which power/faculty of soul can make change the images of dream that we need to interpret it to find its meaning? Is the agent of this change soul itself or there is an external director? Or is it possible to say that all of these questions are meaningless according to this view of point that dream is a neurophysiologic event? All of these questions are belonged to philosophy of mind. Yes, psychologists, cognitive scientists and neuroscientists may investigate some of these problems scientifically, so the area of these sciences and philosophy of mind overlap, but surely these questions have philosophical aspects and philosophers should study it.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that from the beginning of twentieth century until now, we find out many aspects of dream. Psychoanalytic and neuroscience have discovered many things of dream. Their efforts to show that dream is an important subject that should be studied, is very important. Freud and Jung and some other scientists, in a board sense of science and scientist, have spent nearly all of their academic life on studying dreams. But a big ignorance has been happened. We need to discuss dreams from different aspects and from various approaches, one of them is philosophical. Philosophy has many branches. Dreams can be discussed in

epistemology, philosophy of mind and philosophy of religion and some other branches. Surely it does not contrast the other aspects that scientists consider it. The important heritage of philosophy, mysticism and religion about oneirology should be deepened by new achievements. Dream is an inseparable part of human being life and some other animals share it with him/her. If anyone says that it has not philosophical aspects and scientists can discuss it sufficiently, it is a philosophical claim and should be studied philosophically. If some area that was belonged to philosophy in past centuries and was lifted by philosophy and science conquer it and those captures were permissible, but study of dream is not of this kind and should remain in territory of philosophy, and philosophy should pay attention to the findings of science. It is an interdisciplinary subject.

6. References

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