The Role of Dreams in Moral Development

Mahroo Shahbaz
Simon Fraser University, Vancouver

Abstract

Dreams can be perceived as a range of possible experiences—from imaginative scenarios revealing nothing but the abstract nature of the human mind to almost life-like experiences that mimic considerations we undertake daily. Dreams have long been a topic of interest in various fields - much of the discourse in philosophy historically centers on questioning if agency exists within dreaming states and how this may impact the application of notions of morality to dream scenarios. The status of dreams as experiences may even aid in developing a person's moral character, cultivating possible benefits for personal growth and revealing specific characteristics inaccessible through the restricted reality of the waking world. Furthermore, the different states of dreaming raise an increasingly complex state of being; lucid dreaming can significantly impact considerations for the agency in moral decision-making in simulated worlds. This article aims to examine two aspects of morality within dreams: firstly, assessing the state of agency within dreams, and secondly, exploring the capacity of dreams to act as an avenue to advance the exploration of personal moral character for moral development.

Keywords: Ethics, Dreams, Moral Agency, Lucid Dreaming

DREAMS CAN BE perceived as a range of possible experiences—from imaginative scenarios revealing nothing but the abstract nature of the human mind to almost life-like experiences that mimic our daily lives. Dreams have long been a topic of interest in various fields and much of the discourse in philosophy historically centers on questioning if agency exists within dreaming states and how this may impact the application of notions of morality to dream scenarios. The status of dreams as experiences may even aid in developing a person's moral character, cultivating possible benefits of personal growth and revealing certain characteristics that are inaccessible through the restricted reality of the waking world. Furthermore, the different states of dreaming raise an increasingly complex state of being; lucid dreaming can greatly impact considerations for the agency in moral decision-making in simulated worlds.

In this paper, I posit that dreams feature a certain state of agency that allows for assessing their status as a critical avenue for moral development. Due to their ability to link the subconscious mind to the moral self in the waking world, I suggest dreams provide access to a key ability of reflection and unconstrained experience that can play a relevant role in moral development. I argue that the unverifiability and limited recollection of dreams pose minimal concern to their ability to promote moral development because it is the aftereffects of the dream-experience that truly matters. I further consider the role of lucid dreams to explore personal moral character, and how giving dreams the capacity to expand how we experience and influence our moral selves can be harnessed beyond the limitations of regular dreamscapes.

An Overview of Dream Morality Perspectives

Historically, dreams have been a concern for many who wished to live a morally perfect life. The nature of dreams is complex and often uncontrollable scenarios create a subconscious arena where the imagination can rarely be constrained. Therein lies worries if actions carried out in dreams

can reflect immorality within our waking lives. The conception of these concerns is believed to originate from devoted religious contexts, often attributed to Saint Augustine who was troubled by the impermissible nature of his dreams and his inability to control them to meet his waking ideals (Driver, 2007; Springett, n.d.). Rhetorically, he asks "[a]m I not myself during [sleep]?" This question has guided much discourse regarding agency within dreams and the ability to truly be moral within such simulations where there is no material existence.

Subsequently, consequentialists began to assess the actions within dreams in terms of their consequences in the waking world. The central question is if dreams have external or behavioural consequences for others. If they do not affect any aspect of waking life where we interact and impact real people, then it would not be wrong to commit immoral acts in dreams, even on other people, as no true harm created (Springett, n.d.). However, dreams often have a waking impact—they often feature individuals we encounter in daily life rather than faceless figures. When we wake from a particular dream that induces anger towards someone we know, it can impact our behaviour towards them as emotions enacted from the dream linger in our minds.

Alternatively, many deontologist perspectives on dream morality center around the real people that we recreate within our dreams. Through this regeneration of individuals in the dreamscape, we are treating individuals not as a mere ends-in-themselves but rather as a means for our entertainment, or other pursuits that fit our needs (Springett, n.d.). Furthermore, carrying out immoral acts within dreams "depersonalizes" our individual identity and generates a dream persona that is merely a means to reconsider our morality (Springett, n.d.). The basis for these perspectives relies upon if there is true agency in dreams and if that ability to make choices constitutes any moral motivation and behaviour in the waking world.

Dream Consciousness and Agency

Psychologically, dreams are often considered another form of hallucination that occurs while asleep:

> The offline world simulation engages the same brain mechanisms as perceptual consciousness and seems real to us because we are unaware that it is nothing but a hallucination. (Valli & Revonsuo, 2009, p.19)
> This description of dreaming denotes dream experiences as mental experiences that simply occur while asleep; we can perform any actions that we could in the waking world and experience some sameness in mental states (Springett, n.d.).

We may have real emotions, feel real pain, or even replicate realistic scenarios within our dreams (Zadra et al., 1998; Springett, n.d.). The intensity of these experiences, and the ability to feel certain aspects of these dreams, set them apart from mere fantasy experiences and into the realm of waking consciousness (Springett, n.d.). Though no actions are taken due to the paralysis of sleep, the reactions are reflected in the minuscule changes within the body language of the sleeping individual, such as bodily twitches or eye movements that phantom mimic the real-life actions and intentions (Arnulf, 2019). The experience is similar to a perceptual-like state of consciousness, with the primary difference being that the actors and environments exist as conjures of the mind (Windt, 2010).

State of Agency Within Dreams

The state of agency within dreaming is irregular, with "dream [state of agency]...equivalent or even increased compared to waking" (Rosen, 2021, p. 713). Rosen (2021) describes a state of agency as the feeling of,

"achieving our intended movements and actions," and "feeling in control rather than [out of it]" (p. 695). A sense of agency is further described by Bayne (2011) as, "the experience of a particular movement or mental event as realizing one's own agency." A combined understanding of a state of agency built upon these descriptions lends itself to a baseline to further examine agency within dreams. This consideration of agency is critical to personal identity, guiding what makes up an individual's sense of self (Morsella et al., 2011).

It is important to consider how the impact of lack of clarity in dreams can misrepresent crucial details that aid in analyzing agency. Furthermore, we may have a limited understanding or awareness of when we are experiencing a state of agency. We tend to only notice when our intended actions are not completed, often dismissing agency in mundane actions that follow pre-established expectations (Rosen, 2021; Frith, 2005). Given the lack of control within dreams, we simply may not be acknowledging that we have a level of agency within the experience. This may be particularly applicable for mundane dreams where intentions are inconsequential to the outcome.

Ordinary dreams are often considered insignificant, rarely involving choices but rather act as experiences that happen to us. However, the mundane nature of a dream does not diminish the possibility for agency. They merely disguise it as an expected mental route. Consider the following example from a dream report:

> I am heading home alone. I have two choices: I can go through the woods or I can take a winding road. Because I have a wheel barrel, I decided going through the woods would be difficult to manage. So, I end up taking the winding road. This is a good choice [...].
> (Rosen, 2021, p. 697)

This case appears like a mundane dream. Without further expansion of the dream world, it cannot be known if there was any true consequence or purpose of this scenario. However, the features presented within this report are akin to the agency witnessed in the waking world—they "contemplate their options, assess which is preferable, decide based on reasons, [and] carr[y] out intentions" (Rosen, 2021, p. 697).

Altered states of dreaming complicate this experience, changing the core nature of the dream with the addition of another factor. Lucid dreaming reintroduces agency to our dream experiences, creating an almost virtual reality where actions are a critical part of the result. Increased control over dream agency can occur in lucid dreaming through "lucid control" or "non-lucid control" (Rosen, 2021, p. 703). This increased control is most often witnessed within lucid control where dreamers can morph or direct dreams to meet their intended goals. The following example is from a dream report of someone enacting lucid control:

> I recall a waking intent for the next lucid dream—to call a particular type of cat to me […] I call 'Here kitty,' hoping to call the particular cat I was imagining to me. Soon I am surrounded by 7 or 8 cats[…]. I see a tortie cat that is close but not exactly like my ideal. (Kahan & LaBerge, 1994)

The "waking intent" in this recount is crucial for guiding the reality of this new simulated world – the individual has some level of agency over their actions within their dream and even the ability to direct the creation of the elements that make up their world.

However, judgements of agency within dreams are not always accurate. Our considerations are reflective as they are applied after the dream experience occurs (Rosen, 2021, p. 696). This leaves room for our assessment of our agency to be manipulated by waking perceptions; we may be more likely to feel in control if the action taken aligned with our intentions—we

believe we would have undertaken them if the event was to occur at the moment (Aarts et al., 2005; Rosen, 2021; Martin & Pacherie, 2013). Due to the unstable nature of recalling dreams, this influence is an important factor to consider.

However, as Driver (2007) states it:

> ... [T]ypically, our dream experiences do not allow for us to exercise choice, or make intentions, or exhibit various motivational structures. All that is needed is the observation that such is quite possible, and does happen [at least once]. (p. 9-10)

Therefore, only the possibility that such agency occurs within dreams is necessary to constitute a deeper consideration of what role dreams can play in moral development of our character.

Dreams as an Avenue for Moral Development

For the existence of some level of agency in dreams, it follows we must explore the possibility of their role in development of a person's moral understanding and character in a variety of ways. In comparison to consequentialist and deontological perspectives that limit dreams to their means or ends in relation to moral action, applying aspects of virtue ethics can lend themselves to greater consideration of how dreams can be an avenue for moral development. In this paper, moral development broadly refers to developing an understanding of right and wrong through an exploration of one's own moral character. While moral development is complex and multifaceted, guided heavily by personal experiences and upbringings, dreams can also play a role in expanding how we perceive our actions or mental states. Moving beyond if right and wrong can apply to dreams, the broader question concerns what dreams further provide to

the components of one's virtue or moral standing (Springett, n.d.).

Dreams create a link to our subconscious mind—one that guides every aspect of our lives through its influence, yet often remains inaccessible for direct analysis. Dreaming can act as an avenue to indirectly inform us about our deep-rooted paradigms and guiding motives. Taking the time to examine our unconscious dreams can be advantageous—they "reveal our inner motivations and hopes, help us face our fears, encourage growing awareness, and even be a source of creativity and insight" (Blackmore, 2004, p. 338). This clarity can be beneficial for analyzing self-thought and encouraging a deeper reflection of one's actions in daily life.

Furthermore, dreaming can make the internal moral character increasingly accessible to those with little concern for philosophy and the morality of actions. Johnson (2009) states:

> [I]t is in the world of dreaming that the unconscious is working out its powerful dynamics. It is there that the great forces do battle or combine to produce the attitudes, ideals, beliefs, and compulsions that motivate most of our behavior. Once we become sensitive to dreams, we discover that every dynamic in a dream is manifesting itself in some way in our practical lives—in our actions, relationships, decisions, automatic routines, urges, and feelings. (p. 19)

An individual who has rarely considered the moral status of their ideals and beliefs may encounter a dream whereby their actions take on harsh consequences in their dream world. Upon waking, they may take a closer look at their paradigm and choose to pursue an improvement of character when faced with the reality of the wrongness of their action in their dream. For example, if a person has been dishonest in their waking life, their dreams may reflect this guilt and prompt a heightened sense of moral awareness or desire to make amends. This could, in essence, allow dreams

to create real-world impacts for virtue within a person's daily life, altering how they consider and answer moral scenarios.

Dreams can also play a functional role in developing emotional processes. They provide the ability to create simulations of reality, where encountering new scenarios, and experiences can build upon emotional processes (Scarpelli et al., 2019). This development can be critical, with certain emotions motivating moral behaviour and the development of character (Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffmann, 1998). Negative emotions, such as guilt and shame, are associated with influencing moral behaviour (Eisenberg, 2000). This may further apply to emotions felt within a dream experience and extend to moral behaviour in waking life. A broader understanding of emotionality can be significant when exploring one's own character, particularly within dreamscapes due to their unstable recollection. Evaluating emotional processes when a dream's specific contexts are vague can allow for a greater sense of guidance for the morality of the situation—even only the outline of a situation and an association with higher-order negative emotion can provide a greater understanding of the situation at hand.

However, as Malcolm (1959) notes, there are no criteria to evaluate dreams, leaving them unverifiable and lacking in the coherence to communicate as an experience of value. In relation, other problems arise because there is often little recollection of dream components (Johnson, 1979). If one is unable to recount the experience in the waking world, there will be no impact on their moral self. This raises issues for dream experiences acting as an avenue for moral development in a consistent and significant way. Taking dream reports at face value without accounting for these limitations would be insufficient in understanding what role they truly play in moral development.

I believe that limited recollection and verifiability of dreams poses minimal concern to their ability to act as an avenue for moral development. It's important to consider that a limited recollection does not mean no recollection. While it may not occur in every sleep cycle, the possibility to have impactful experiences remains. It's not unreasonable to say that

once awakened from a particularly harrowing or reflective dream, the individual will often contemplate and reflect on its contents. While many features of perceptual states can be reduced or are absent within dreaming, evidence suggests that lucid dreaming or even mundane dreams in certain contexts, can present complex relations that duplicate cognitive responses in the waking state (Rosen, 2021; Hartmann, 2000; Schrendel & Hofmann, 2003). Evidence suggests that the "neurophysiological mechanisms underlying the encoding and recall of episodic memories may remain the same across different states of consciousness" (Marzano et al., 2011), linking the recall of dreams on similar scales to recollections of other memories. One can also work to improve one's memory and ability to recall dreams over time (Reed, 1973), creating an opportunity for dreams to pose as similar situations to real experiences in the past.

Furthermore, while dream reports are often volatile and vary in their coherence to the waking world, it is not required that the dreams be recalled in true accuracy for moral development to occur. In essence, true recall of the experience may not matter—a distorted, unverifiable version could still spark the examination of oneself if the individual believes to have experienced it. It is the aftereffects of believing in a dream experience and considering its broader role that truly matters. It allows individuals to discover and explore ideals and virtues through thoughtful reflection on what the individual has the potential to accomplish within dreams.

A limited recollection and emotional associations in the waking world may be enough to encourage an individual to use their perceived experiences, whether real or not, to influence moral development. Additional considerations for the role of lucid dreams, where subjects are aware and influence of their state of consciousness, can offer an alternative to regular dreaming states that do not face the same issues.

Lucid Dreams

Lucid dreams posit an experience that can surpass the limitations placed upon the role of regular dreams. They have a greater chance of being recalled and are better remembered than normal dreams (LaBerge & Rheingold, 1990). Lucid dreaming is a learnable skill, and while techniques to induce lucid dreams are inconsistent (Stumbrys et al., 2012), pursuing lucid dreams may be an opportunity to further explore and cultivate one's moral character with greater accuracy. With nearly 11% of our mental experiences occurring through dreams (Love, 2013), there lies a crucial time frame where such development may take place beyond the bounds of the waking world. There is freedom to explore personal traits, beliefs, and relationships with others that goes beyond social constructs, uncovering the subconscious context that often evades us while awake.

> Lucid dreams may then help to play a role in developing traits that people otherwise would not develop, and act as an outlet for encouraging the "thick moral concepts" of oneself – courage, bravery, wisdom, and so forth" through an "expansion of agency (Springett, n.d.)

This freedom to explore oneself through intentional dreams can be crucial to further exploring one's moral character through different scenarios that are inaccessible to the waking world. The nature of these scenarios as being moral or immoral is not the concern of this paper, rather the focus remains that such an ability to explore one's psyche could be impactful to an individual's moral development.

If an individual can lucidly dream, they may be able to explore moral dilemmas in ways that create no external harm. This presents an opportunity to treat dream experiences as case-like scenarios. An individual could recreate moral dilemmas to encourage philosophical thinking in a virtual

realm and play them out as though experiencing them. Therefore, it follows that if merely thinking about scenarios of personal action is an important exercise to reveal moral character, engaging with them in a dream world could be increasingly impactful due to its ability to interact with the scenario on a greater scale.

The role of lucid dreaming as unconstrained moral imagination may also play a role in transforming social constructs that one adheres to. Babbitt (2018) describes the role of moral imagination to be "the capacity to envision alternative social arrangements" (p. 7), the ability to imagine "what ought to be possible" (p. 8). In a world of institutionalized injustice, dreams may pose as a crucial avenue to explore, realize, and shift our place within these structures. The combination of freedom from real-world consequences and agency that lucid dreaming provides could be a crucial part of the moral imagination necessary to construct a more human and just social vision (Babbitt, S., 2018).

Dreams, mundane or lucid, allow for a holistic interpretation of one's own moral character, deepening the ability for development of moral attributes. They provide spaces to reflect on internal values and actions; providing a safe arena beyond external judgement where one's beliefs can be questioned, and provides a nuanced understanding of virtue and morality. This capability of reflection makes them an important feature of moral development—even if a regular dream remains unverifiable, its aftereffects do not. The development of moral character relies upon such exploration and free thinking that dreams inspire. Within dreams we have access to scenarios and decisions we may never encounter, generating new avenues to illuminate our personal beliefs.

In conclusion, dreams contain the ability to play an integral role in moral development—they provide individuals with the space to explore and reflect on their values, beliefs, and moral principles. The limited recollection or unverifiability of dream content can impact its effectiveness, but nonetheless allow for some level of development through its aftereffects of reflecting upon dream experiences in the scope of moral development.

They can enhance emotional processing and assist in forming moral considerations. Lucid dreams further open avenues for intention-based exploration of one's moral character without the restrictions of the waking world—beyond the limitations that regular dreaming imparts on us. While their influence is unlikely to be the only or most significant factor within an individual's moral development, dreams should be considered as an important component of this complex process.

Bibliography

Aarts, H., Custers, R., & Wegner, D. M. (2005). "On the inference of personal authorship: Enhancing experienced agency by priming effect information," *Consciousness and Cognition*, 14(3), 439–458. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2004.11.001

Arnulf, I. (2019). "RBD: A window into the dreaming process." In *Rapid-Eye-Movement Sleep Behavior Disorder* (pp. 223–242). Springer International Publishing. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/10.1007/978-3-319-90152-7_17

Babbitt, S. (2018). *Impossible dreams: Rationally, integrity, and moral imagination.* Taylor and Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429499913

Bayne, T. (2011). *The sense of agency: Classic and con-temporary philosophical perspectives.* Oxford University Press.

Blackmore, S. (2004). *Consciousness: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Driver, J. (2007). *Dream immorality*. "Philosophy," 82(319), 5-22. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4619706

Eisenberg, N. (2000). "Emotion, regulation, and moral development," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 51, 665-697. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/10.1146/annurev.psych.51.1.665

Frith, C. (2005). "The self in action: Lessons from delusions of control." *Consciousness and Cognition*, 14(4), 752–770. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2005.04.002

Flanagan, O. (2000). *Dreaming souls: Sleep, dreams and the evolution of the conscious mind*. Oxford University Press.

Hartmann, E. (2000). "The waking-to-dreaming continuum and the effects of emotion." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 23(06), 947–950. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00474029

Hoffman, M. L. (1998). "Varieties of empathy-based guilt." *In Guilt and Children* (pp. 91–112). Academic Press https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-012148610-5/50005-9

Johnson, D. M. (1979). "Forgetting Dreams." *Philosophy* (London), 54(209),

407–414. https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181910004883X

Johnson, R. (2009). *Inner work: Using dreams and active imagination for personal growth*. Harper & Row.

Kahan, T. L., & LaBerge, S. (1994). "Lucid dreaming as metacognition: Implications for cognitive science." *Consciousness and Cognition*, 3(2), 246–264. https://doi.org/10.1006/ccog.1994.1014

LaBerge, S. P., & Rheingold, H. (1990). *Exploring the world of lucid dreaming*. New York: Ballentine Books.

Love, D. (2013.) "Are you dreaming?" In *Exploring lucid dreams: A comprehensive guide Enchanted Loom*.

Malcolm, N. (1959). *Dreaming*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Martin, J-R., & Pacherie, E. (2013). "Out of nowhere: Thought insertion, ownership and context-integration." *Consciousness and Cognition*, 22(1), 111–122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2012.11.012

Marzano, C., Ferrara, M., Mauro, F., Moroni, F., Gorgoni, M., Tempesta, D., Cipolli, C., & De Gennaro, L. (2011). "Recalling and forgetting dreams: theta and alpha oscillations during sleep predict subsequent dream recall." *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 31(18), 6674–6683. https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0412-11.2011

Morsella, E., Berger, C. C., & Krieger, S. C. (2011). "Cognitive and neural components of the phenom-enology of agency." *Neurocase*, 17, 209–230. https://doi.org/10.1080/13554794.2010.504727

Reed, H. (1973). "Learning to remember dreams." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 13(3), 33-48. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/002216787301300305?casa_token=L8rsNkx-j6qoAAAAA:Zma6gVOphwQD5x6wz6rqGHGrXERyLLM_UY4nOp3Z-Vhiwck442IePjLT0eO_z7qYKmnos0pCKNpJh

Rosen, M. G. (2021). "Sleeper agents: The sense of agency over the dream body." *Human Studies*, 44(4), 693–719. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-021-09598-z

Scarpelli, S., Bartolacci, C., D'Atri, A., Gorgoni, M., & Gennaro, L. (2019). "The functional role of dreaming in emotional processes." *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10(459). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00459

Schredl, M., & Hofmann, F. (2003). "Continuity between waking activities and dream activities." *Consciousness and Cognition*, 12(2), 298–308. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1053-8100(02)00072-7

Springett, B. (n.d.). "Philosophy of Dreaming." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://iep.utm.edu/dreaming-philosophy/

Stumbrys, T., Erlacher, D., Schädlich, M., & Schredl, M. (2012). "Induction of lucid dreams: A systematic review of evidence." *Conciousness and Cognition*, 21(3), 1456-1475. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2012.07.003

Valli, K., & Revonsuo, A. (2009). "The threat simulation theory in the light of recent empirical evidence—A review." *The American Journal of Psychology*, 122(1), 17–38. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27784372

Windt, J. M. (2010). "The immersive spatiotemporal hallucination model of dreaming." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 9(2), 295 – 316. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-010-9163-1

Zadra, A., Nielsen, T. A., Germain, A., & Lavigne, G. J. (1998). "The nature and prevalence of pain in dreams." *Pain Research and Management*, 3(3), 155-161. 10.1155/1998/946171