

Dreaming as play

Abstract: Dreaming can provide a marvelous opportunity for the "playful" exploration of dramatic events. But the chance to learn to deal with danger is only a small part of it. More important is the chance to discover what it is like to be the subject of strange but humanly significant mental states.

At a time when theories of dreaming are tending to lose touch with psychological and biological reality, Revonsuo's paper comes as a welcome call for a return to common-sense.

Dreaming, Revonsuo reminds us, is about having dreams. Dreams tell stories in which the dreamer is an active protagonist. These stories can and often do leave lasting traces on the dreamer's mind. Hence, surely, the way to understand the evolutionary function of dreaming must be to consider the relevance of such stories to the kinds of survival problems that ancient humans had to face.

I've no doubt that this is the right way to go. And, as it happens, in the early 1980's I proposed a theory that is quite similar in spirit to the one described here (Humphrey 1980; 1983; 1986). I began by noting, as Revonsuo does implicitly, that there is an obvious analogy between dreaming and childhood play. Dreaming, like play, allows the subject to simulate his or her own participation in dramatic or dangerous events, without suffering the consequences these events would have in the real world. One of the chief functions of play is to provide an opportunity for the player to gain practice in exercising the relevant physical, intellectual and social skills. So, there is every reason to suppose this is a major function of dreaming too.

Now, Revonsuo picks up on just one aspect of this: he suggests that the main purpose of dreaming is the simulation of environmental threats, so that the dreamer is able to practice making his or her escape. I've no quarrel with this suggestion so far as it goes (and Revonsuo does make a good

case for it). But, as a theory of dreams in general, it strikes me as being far too narrow - with regard to what it says both about the kinds of situation that are simulated and about the kinds of learning that take place.

To continue the analogy with play, even though childhood play does of course often centre around imaginary dangers, it's clearly not the case that learning to escape these dangers is play's main, let alone its only, function. Rather, play contributes in a major way to social and psychological development, especially through providing practice in role-playing and empathy. "Play is a way of experimenting with possible feelings, possible identities without risking the real biological or social consequences. . . Cut! time for tea, time to go home - and nothing in the real world has changed, except perhaps that the child is not quite the person that he was before, he has extended just a little further his inner knowledge of what it can feel like to be human" (Humphrey 1986, p. 106).

But if this broad-band "sentimental education", as I've called it, is the functional rationale for play, surely we should expect something like it to be the rationale for dreams as well. In my own writings I've stressed in particular the key role that dreams can have in the education of a "natural psychologist" - through introducing him or her to introspectively observable mental states that are as yet unfamiliar in real life (and possibly beyond the scope of waking play).

"Dreaming", I wrote, "represents the most audacious and ingenious of nature's tricks for educating her psychologists. In the freedom of sleep the dreamer can invent extraordinary stories about what is happening to his own person, and so, responding to these happenings as if to the real thing, he can discover new realms of inner experience. If I may speak from my own case, I have in my dreams placed myself in situations that have induced feelings of terror and grief, passion and pleasure, of a kind and intensity I have not known in real life. If I did now experience these feelings in real life, I should recognise them as familiar; more important, if I were to come across someone else undergoing what I went through in

the dream, I should have a conceptual basis for modeling his behaviour" (Humphrey 1983, p. 85).

Nor is this mere arm-chair theorising. My interviews with people in psychologically-taxing situations have shown again and again that dreaming is indeed a recognised and valued resource for gaining insight into what it is like to be in another person's place. A young midwife, for example, revealed: "I think most midwives dream about giving birth when they start working in maternity units, and it was a fairly common experience among the students that I trained with. . . I've never myself been pregnant. But my dreams have certainly made me more understanding, more relaxed and more confident in talking to mothers" (quoted in Humphrey 1986).

Revonsuo may object that this is all too rosy. It's all very well for me to point to the ways in which dreams can help with empathy-building and interpersonal understanding, in the relatively secure and sociable world that we now live in. But, for him, the true evolutionary context for dreaming was the harsh world of the Pleistocene, where human life was nasty brutish and short - and everyone lived in constant state of post-traumatic stress.

I'd answer that this Hobbesian vision of the EEA is simply much too bleak. Studies of contemporary hunter-gatherers such as the Kalahari Bushmen - those whom Sahlins (1977) has with good reason called "affluent savages" - have shown that, on the whole, their life is (and presumably has long been) remarkably easy, unstressful and free of danger. In fact the main - if not the only - serious challenges these people face are precisely in the area of their human relationships (family politics, love affairs, status battles, jealousies).

Then why, to end with one of the stronger bits of evidence for Revonsuo's narrow view of what dreams are about, are there so many animal characters in children's dreams? And why, for that matter, so many animals in story books, in the play-room, in Walt Disney cartoons, and so on? What can these animals be doing, if it is not that they represent archaic threats? I believe the truth is that these play-animals are usually just what they seem to the child to be: simple, and indeed highly simplified, proxies for human beings - which, as

it happens, are peculiarly well suited to the child's first tentative experiments in empathic projection and in applying a theory of mind. As Lévi-Strauss (1962) once put it, animals are "good to think with" . . . But this discussion is for another time.

References

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