

Parallel Thinking Part 33: The Enigma of Consciousness V

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The last four articles have focused on the concept of consciousness in science, philosophy and Judaism. This final article on consciousness turns our attention to dreaming, one of the most mysterious

of human experiences. Most neuroscientists, psychologists and psychotherapists accept that the content of our dreams is significant, whether it has been influenced by our psyche, our experiences during waking hours, from medication or from the food we eat.

The famous neurologist and forefather of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (d. 1939) viewed the content of his patients' dreams as a window into their primitive, unconscious desires. Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung (d. 1961), who collaborated with Freud, felt that Freud's analysis of dreams was too limited. Jung viewed dreams as a communication from the unconscious, as part of the self-regulation of the psyche. While contemporary opinions still differ, modern studies support the theory that dream content is primarily related to the experiences a person has while awake.

From a Jewish perspective, the Torah itself describes how God communicates with people through dreams. Having dreams and interpreting their meaning is, for example, one of the prominent threads that runs through the story of Yosef (see Bereishit chapters 37, 40 and 41). The Talmud indicates that while some dreams are insignificant and meaningless (Horayot 13b), others have the potential to contain messages about the future (Berachot 57b). While Yosef's dreams were clearly prophetic, could our own dreams contain elements of prophecy or portent?

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (known as the Ramchal, d. 1746) concurs with the scientific approach that dream content is affected by the thoughts and emotions one experiences, as well as through food that we have eaten. Yet he also

adopts the Talmud's assertion and writes that our modern day dreams can have prophetic significance or relate to spiritual experiences. This is because when we sleep our souls can sometimes interact with external spiritual forces which enter our subconscious awareness and affect the content of our dreams.

One might think this sounds a little far-fetched. Yet in a recent article, psychologist Dr. Patrick McNamara noted that a wide range of unexplained dream phenomena, such as shared dreams and precognitive dreams containing exquisite, incontrovertible detail are widely reported (*Psychology Today*, June 2016). He admits that science has "no good explanations" for such astonishing phenomena for "science has no place to put them within its current worldview – but this is all the more reason to investigate them".

In conclusion, consciousness is difficult to study scientifically. Scientists wedded to the idea that there is nothing other than the physical world will inevitably conclude that consciousness, defined as our sense of self and inner thoughts, is merely an elaborate illusion. While science cannot provide concrete evidence to the existence of the supernatural, for those with a conviction that reality is more than just atoms and molecules, the footprints of the spiritual world can be found in many areas of the human experience.



Front row: Sigmund Freud, G. Stanley Hall, C. G. Jung; Back row: Abraham A. Brill, Ernest Jones, Sándor Ferenczi. Photo taken for Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, September 1909