

Dreams and Time. A Phenomenological Analysis

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ABSTRACT. Dreams are a complex phenomenon which the philosophical field knows very little about. However, scientists like Freud or Jung, were able to prove that dream interpretation brings different advantages to our lives. For that reason, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that dreams, when understood, can offer us a new life perspective, especially in difficult times.

Therefore, with the help of an innovative phenomenological approach introduced by Maria Zambrano, which focuses on the form of the dream and its relation with time perception, rather than the dream content, we are going to observe that people have many types of consciousness, as well as different forms of access to time which relate to multiple perception modes and emotional states. Applying this theory, Maria J. Neves, is able to demonstrate that a phenomenological dream analysis can produce significant changes in peoples' lives.

Keywords: phenomenology, dream phenomenology, dream interpretation, dream consciousness, time perception

Introduction

Among the philosophers that offer us a phenomenological dream theory we can find Husserl, Fink, Sartre and Conrad; but they've only dedicated a few fragments of research to this phenomenon. Nicola Zippel (2016, 194), tells us that the reason we lack a philosophy of dreaming is due to the fact that no philosopher made dreaming the core of his/her reflection. Researching a totally unconscious

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mental state is extremely difficult, and it is also hard to avoid the preeminence approach of psychoanalysis and neuroscience to the dreaming state. However, Maria Zambrano introduces an innovative, and much more complex, phenomenological approach, that allows us to see how essential dreams are. We find this new perspective in Maria J. Neves' work: *Phenomenology of Dreams in Philosophical Practice*, through which she is able to prove that dreams can help us know ourselves better; and their interpretation offers us solutions we most likely would not be able to see when awake.

The RVP method: a philosophical dream interpretation

Even though, most people think that sleeping is time-wasting¹ and dreams are without sense and inexplicable, Maria Zambrano builds a theory based on dream phenomenology focused on the form of the dreams and their relation with time perception, rather than the content of the dream. Starting from this perspective and with elaborate research, Maria J. Neves (2014, 1475) develops the *RVP method (Poetical-Ratiovitalism)*, with which she can help people significantly change their lives. She tells us that: "When we think or talk about our life, we mainly have in mind our waking life. The eight hours most of us spend sleeping do not count. We only remember them after a bad sleep or a surprising dream of which we keep thinking during the day". For that reason, most people think sleeping is a waste of time and it should be reduced as much as possible; but we would be surprised to find out how much dreams can improve our way of living when they're accurately interpreted and understood.

Opposing these thoughts, we have Zambrano (1986, 14-15) stating that sleeping comes first and awakening only afterwards: "The dream state is the initial state of our life, from the dream we awake; wakefulness comes after, not sleep. We abandon dreaming for the vigil, not the reverse". A very interesting and innovative statement that could lead dream research in a whole new direction. Even if other phenomenologists had different approaches, Hobson (2012, 25) agrees with Zambrano and explains that: "Instead of being the follower of waking, dreaming is in fact the progenitor of waking. Sleep comes first and awakening comes second. This is a very radical shift in emphasis. (...) We have been almost exclusively interested in the way the night follows the day and we have ignored that night

¹ Even if this is the case, it has been proven, as Jha (2023, 119) explains, that even congenitally blind people are able to dream. And when compared to the dreams of people with normal vision, their dream experiences contain more auditory, haptic, olfactory, and gustatory sensations.

might anticipate the day. (...) Waking consciousness actually depends on dream consciousness rather than the other way around". Ponty (1999, 350) shares a similar attitude towards dreams and believes that without the waking moment, dreams would be nothing more than instantaneous modulations that wouldn't even exist for us. According to him, we do not leave the world while dreaming, even though the space frame in which the dream takes place is different from that in which we are lucid, although it uses all of its articulations.

Why hasn't anyone considered this before? Although it might be really difficult to prove, I believe it's essential we take these opinions into consideration, because it could lead the understanding of the dreaming process to a level we haven't known before. Especially if we also consider the fact that dreams are very helpful in solving problems. Even though, the majority of dreams do not offer a clear solution, Rahman et. al. (2023, 1067) explains that if the vivid fantasies that happen during night are properly deciphered, they are able to provide great breakthroughs.

Furthermore, Zambrano considers dreams as being our more spontaneous reality: „They are subjective and immediate, an unfolding of images and events without thought intervention –but at the same time dreams are our faraway reality because the person becomes an object to herself, she can only watch the dream action without any means to intervene (exception made for lucid dreaming), her one-self is, in dreams, independent and impossible to modify.”² While most of us think we don't dream at all, even when we do, we tend to forget what happened during this unconscious mental state; but as Neves states (2014; 1475), once we're able to remember them, they can show us the important details they contain, which are a great source of help for Philosophical Counseling. With a lot of practice and patience, we can be able to dream and remember what we dreamt; which is a very beneficial process, especially when we're dealing with life difficulties. That's why, inspired by Zambrano's *Phenomenology of Dreams*, Neves dedicates her research to dreams and builds a new interpretation technique that helps many people solve the issues in their lives, whether they're neurotic problems, or simple thoughts they can't seem to move on from.

Through an innovative way, but in complete contradiction with Freud (2017a), Jung (2018), and Adler, to Zambrano (1986, 71): “What is real in dreams are not the stories and the configurations but the intimate subject's movement under atemporality.” A point of view that no phenomenologist or philosopher has considered before. Although, we have Hobson (2012, 26) again with a similar opinion, because he also thinks that we should: “Emphasize the formal properties of dreams rather than the content”. This also represents the main difference between the phenomenological

² Cited in Neves (2014, 1475).

and psychoanalytic approaches. What Zambrano takes into account is the time-frame in which the action takes place. As Kant would've said: "Time is an *a priori* form of the sensibility into which the sensible data will be inserted"³; but Neves (2014, 1476), tells us in this regard, that Kant only referred to "time" without clarifying the concept. On the other hand, there's Zambrano, which points out that we can experience different types of time: "Our experience of time is not always the same. Evidently, this *a priori* time-frame shapes the subject's perception accordingly. The kind of time-frame experienced is what phenomenology of dreams aims at bringing to light", Neves (2014, 1476).

The great discovery that Zambrano makes, is the fact that we have many types of consciousness and different ways in which we can access time; these are all in relation to our numerous perceptions and emotional states. Plus, it is also possible that during the vigil state we could enter certain stages that are similar to dreaming; from here the expression "dreaming awake". Therefore, Zambrano (1986, 27), is able to distinguish three main stages in her Phenomenology of Dreams:

- *Atemporality*: subdivided into Obstacle Dreams and Inverted Dreams (which can be Desire Dreams and Direct Dreams, that are also subdivided in Monoeidetic and Obsessions, in which they can transform).
- *Consecutive Time*: represents the awareness of time, or successive time, which we know as past, present and future.
- *Spiral Time*: is a spiral experience in which time has been transcendent and "the beginning is informed by the end".

1. *Atemporality*

Zambrano (1992, 6), explains that atemporality represents "the suspension of successive time". Therefore, the individual can't act on his free will. Questioning is also suspended in this time-frame, which leads to the impossibility of thinking. As a result, we could say that atemporality is more like a receptive state; the dreamer has no thoughts or questions. In fact, this stage could also be beneficial, because it helps us relax and free our minds; which is an essential condition, required for certain phases of the *RVP method* where we can connect with our inner truth.

a) Obstacle Dreams

These are the dreams in which we have to overcome an obstacle, but we always fail to do so, because of the impossibility to access a conscious time and the lack of free will. Taking into consideration that we can't get surprised, we don't ask

³ Neves (2014, 1476).

any questions and therefore, we don't complain or revolt against the situation we are in.⁴ It is a state in which we're passively watching what is happening to us.⁵ Let's see an example introduced by Neves (2014, 1478), to be able to understand it better:

Obstacle Dream (female, 20, 12 grade high school, waitress)

I was in the Fishermen's Beach in Quarteira, walking close to the sea, the weather was good and the sea was calm. Suddenly a huge wave came out of the sea and pulled me inside the water. The sea was strong, I tried to swim, but without success. The reason why I could not swim out of the water was because my hands were covered with pink plastic gloves, the same I use for washing dishes. The dream did not continue, I woke up before finding a way out of the water. In the dream I did not find it odd that I could not swim because of the gloves, I just knew they were the ones that were preventing me from leaving the water. I have this dream repetitively, with little changes, but in the end, I can never go out of the water and in the dream, I know it is because of the pink plastic gloves.

This young woman requested philosophical counseling at the age of twenty. At eighteen, after finishing high school, she wanted to continue her studies at the university. When she came to see me, two years had passed and she continued living with her parents, helping in the family business: a restaurant. Frequently she had to wash dishes using that kind of pink plastic gloves. It was clear that staying in the family business was the obstacle impeding her to pursue her goals.

b) Inverted Dreams

As Neves (2014, 1479), explains: "Inverted dreams present an object that is a mask or a symbol of something else". They can be of two types:

⁴ "According to Zambrano, we can recognize this state of endless suffering in Kafka's *The Castle* or the Greek tragedies where the hero lives in a tragic inevitability", Neves (2014, 1478).

⁵ "No matter the form in which this threshold is set: the object that we want to grab is millimeters beyond reach, we need to pass a door but cannot make it, we want to talk but have no voice etc. These are dreams in which, strictly speaking, we do not think, because thinking would first demand being surprised with a situation, secondly ask a question, and finally reflect on what is going on. However, this first crucial moment of astonishment never happens. For this reason, in this class of dreams, there is no thought in the true sense of the word. It may happen that we find the answer to a problem that arose during the daytime, however, this is not to be considered thinking because what happens is a finding: the solution presents itself in the dream, without the process that allowed to get there. The subject had been passive. However, at certain stages of the RVP Method this state of active passivity (Zambrano, 1989, 55) is precisely what is needed", Neves (2014, 1478).

- *Desire Dreams*: which manifest in the present, but have a previous origin. These types of dreams refer to past events that haven't been mentally resolved ("like some muffled anxiety or unfulfilled but repressed needs")⁶. Because while dreaming we can travel far back in time, *Desire Dreams* allow the individual to address conflicts that remained behind because of the inability to solve them at that specific time.
- *Monoeidetic Dream*: here we can find a symbol helpful for the individual's development. This type of dream requires an action towards a purpose that is not completely revealed, because it is in fact an inexhaustible process. Their purpose is of an ethical nature; they can set us free and direct us to a personal development which was already achieved or about to be achieved. Neves (2014, 1480), tells us that: "They are a picture of a total unity that show the dreamer's destiny in an instant. This causes a strain towards the finality-destination, so that raises a transcendent action. Every action, whatever form it takes – thought, contemplation or action itself – in which the subject ripens his mask is a transcendent action. The impulse towards the transcendent action undoes the dream and with it the atemporality. The person awakes, which provokes the appropriation of the consecutive time, being ready to take action".

2. Consecutive Time

This represents the second stage and it is defined as our conventional understanding of past, present and future. We are aware of this time-frame, because we can experience free will and make decisions. It allows us to see the logical sequence of events or the lack of it. Neves (2014, 1482), tells us that: "This is the vigil time, the wakefulness time by definition which, according to Zambrano, is only possible due to the existence of a void, a pore in the time line". It is the contrary of the Atemporality stage, where we encounter appearing and disappearing images. It is the void we find here what helps us see that something is happening or has happened to us. There are two types of experiences here: *External Sensorial Event* and *Lucid Dreaming*.

a) *External Sensorial Event*

These are the dreams that transform an exterior sensation into a dream, as we can see in the example below, introduced by Neves (2014, 1482):

⁶ Although we mentioned at the beginning that Zambrano's theory opposes that of Freud, the definition of *Desire Dreams* is similar to that of Freud; what differs here is that Freud strongly believed that all dreams are *desire dreams*.

It was summer, it was very hot and I was on the beach having a bath in the sea. But only my feet got cold while the rest of the body was still hot. I woke up. I was confused for a moment without realizing what had happened to me. I had fallen asleep in the sun, though the tide had risen and a wave soaked my feet.

These types of experiences have been often reported by researchers. We can find a complete list of examples in Freud's work: *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

b) Lucid Dreams

When we experience lucid dreams (also known as LD), we know that we are dreaming and we also have the possibility to change the course of action; although they are difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, these types of dreams are mentioned by several contemporary scientists that explain their healing powers. Johnson (2020, 66), for example, states that lucid dreaming can help us practice our reaction towards scary events in a very realistic space-frame. The outcomes can be beneficial and able to help us overcome frequent nightmares. Plus, they also represent an efficient therapy method that could aid us in optimizing our present while creating a better future. Ball (2018, 47), shares a similar opinion because she thinks that lucid dreaming is already considered to be a great way to bring changes into our daily existence. She supports the fact that when we find ourselves in a lucid dreaming state, we are fully aware that we are dreaming and that we can change the dream's outcome. By learning to control our dream world, we could also increase our life quality.

It is also important to mention that dreams represent an interest for researchers from different domains, because of their benefits and direct connection with mental well-being, creativity, restoration and skill improvement. As Stumbrys et. al. (2015, 27-34) explains:

With anecdotal evidence and practices, a possible role from problem solving ability to healing has been propounded by incorporating LD practices. Since it has been very well established how LD holds powers to influence mental health and overall temperament by mood upliftment of the person, myriad number of researchers studied and devised possible techniques to induce LD⁷ and constructed mechanisms to voluntarily control our lucid and vivid dreams.

Krishnan (2021, 211), also states that:

Some studies showed that the LD could be controlled partially or fully which in turn has ascendancy over meditative and inner healing capabilities. We learned that

⁷ Baird et. al. (2019, 305-23); Tholey (1983, 79-90).

REM dreams could be more helpful in this regard, as LD being its distinctive feature, is instrumental in the improvement of wake life and can be induced via various means and practices. Dream contents have been shown to influence judgments and its interpretation tends to affect day to day lives of individuals. Thus it is suggested here to draw its impact in “our favor” and building a more productive and skilled temperaments.

Which once again, proves the amount of help dreams can bring into our lives.

3. *Spiral Time*

The Spiral Time is defined by Zambrano (1986, 27) as “indefinitely open but centered and integrated”. This spiral movement “allows the person to realize herself as being in constant transcendence and simultaneous integration. Time, without disappearing, has been transcendent by this unity in which the beginning is informed by the end”. Only in privileged moments where we’re in sink with our life we can experience this time-frame: “The person acts unisonous with herself and produces a true action. The person shows her true face and all the masks from different characters fall”. Here, we can find three forms of experience.

a) Vocation

In the case of experiencing vocation, Neves (2014, 1483) explains that: “It is as if the person has been informed of her fulfillment, if she were to take a certain course of action. It is a call that comes with an assurance. The person breathes calmly, resting in the confidence of working towards her realization. It is an experience of unity, wholeness, as if she already closed the circle of life; the person feels complete in her being”. Zambrano (1986, 72), uses the “Present Perfect” expression to define this stage: “The person communicates fully with herself and the world and intuitively receives confirmation that her course of action is correct”. Jacobi (2018, 219), shares some similar thoughts, because she believes that some dreams are capable of giving us the certainty of a concrete experience, as if the dreamer has already experienced that same event while being awake.

Although we need to keep in mind that this time frame is usually experienced while awake; that’s why we must keep in mind that Zambrano is interested in the time-frame of the experience, and not if we’re awake or asleep.

b) Creativity

When this state of knowledge is transferred to the artistic sphere of creation, the creator already knows how the work that is yet to be created, is going to turn out; it inspires the artist. It might be for this reason why Freud (2017b, 111),

calls writers people that dream with their eyes wide open. Furthermore, Neves (2014, 1483) tells us that: “This insight of the work of art dictates from the future its own unfolding as an art object. This paradox is exactly how we can understand the phenomenon of inspiration in Zambrano’s aesthetics. The access to a future time is the mediator between the author and his creation”. The channel that he just opened represents the inspiration that allows the “birth” of the work of art. The artist and his creation are in perfect harmony. Although it is difficult to prove this theory, Zambrano sustains that: “Time perception suffers a modification during the creative art”. Even though, many artists believe that their time perception is changed when inspired; but none of this has been tested yet.

c) Predictive Dreams

Between their many characteristics, dreams can also be predictive, “in the sense that a dream may correctly anticipate future events or actions”, Neves (2014, 1483). According to Zambrano, all of this is possible because of the spiral time in which the individual “travels”; believed to be a future time from where he returns with information. Let’s see an example that will help us understand this phenomenon.

Predictive Dream (female, 54 years, basic education)

My son got married four years ago ... I felt no animosity towards my daughter in law. On the contrary, I loved that girl! Two weeks before the wedding I had a conversation with my son: ‘Son, you thought it well? Can you not wait a little bit longer before getting married?’ My son answered ‘Oh mother, for God’s sake! I want to marry! I love her, she loves me, what is there to wait?!’ I insisted that he should not get married yet, because I had a dream in which he first got married and separated shortly after. And so it did happen two weeks after the wedding!

At first sight, the separation might seem like it happened because the mom told the son it could and that might have influenced an argument or something with the bride. We can’t know for sure, but these types of predictions have been reported for a long time. What’s more, science is not able to offer an explanation yet.⁸ Freud (2010, 168) calls these type of dreams “warning dreams” and Colucci (2020, 19) calls them “premonition dreams”.

⁸ “Although science does not provide a final explanation of this kind of phenomena, they have been reported since Homeric times. Several psychotherapists refer to patients with predictive capacities and/or telepathic skills (Carpenter 2002). Also striking allusions in the dreams of patients to events in the life of the therapist, which they had no way of knowing, have been registered (Eherenwald 1942 & 1955). Frequently people with this kind of capacity have a hard time dealing with it. In my

Conclusions

From her philosophical therapeutic experience, Neves (2014, 1484), concludes that: “Dreams – being beyond our conscious mind control – may function as a shortcut to elucidating where the problem really lies. This can save a lot of time, both for the consultant and the client”.⁹ Moreover, dreams are able to show us our mental state in regard with a problem we might be dealing with. Neves agrees with the fact that “dreams are a fascinating area of study that we still know too little about” and proudly admits that Phenomenological Dream Analysis has been a very useful tool for her philosophical practice.

Another therapist that speaks volumes about the benefits of dreams is Johnson (2020, 21). For her, dream therapy means sleeping consciously and dreaming consciously, in order to have a healthy and happy life. If we are able to consciously connect with our dreams during night time, we could open the gates towards the unconscious mind. Johnson states that everything is attracted into our lives through the thoughts and images that appear in our minds; while dreaming we are somehow forced to face our deepest and most unconscious images or experiences. That’s why, if we take the time to work with dreams, we can change the inner story that unfolds while sleeping; even if “studying and understanding dreams presents numerous challenges due to its subjective nature and the inherent difficulty in directly observing conscious experiences”, as Gallo et. al. (2023, 1) explains. What’s more, Gallo et. al. (2023, 8) adds that: “Dream reports can be influenced by interpretation and biases in memory recall, as well as the introduction of new elements upon recollection.¹⁰ However, we sought to mitigate these limitations by collecting reports immediately upon awakening”, in order to avoid too much time passing between the dreaming experience and wakefulness. Krishnan (2021, 207), also agrees with the benefits dreams can bring into our lives and states that: “Realising dreams as an effective tool for its contribution in daily activities might help organising our mood and overall *mental well-being*”, which is more than necessary to properly function and thrive in our contemporary world.

All of this being said, we can observe that philosophical traditions can continue to advance, as long as we agree on the fact that what we call profound

practice I make them see that they are not that strange by showing them reports of other people with the same capacities. This seems to give them some comfort”, Neves (2014, 1484).

⁹ It’s important to mention that dreams are beneficial for non-clinical people too, as we can see in the research made by Samson et. al. (2023, 1): “Dreams in non-clinical populations can effectively regulate emotions by linking potential threats with non-fearful contexts, reducing anxiety and negative emotions through emotional release or catharsis”.

¹⁰ Rosen (2013, 514).

must be researched and tested continuously, in order to enhance our future. From my point of view, dreams are a complex and complicated phenomenon that deserves meticulous examination. We still know little about them, but the benefits they bring into our lives cannot be denied. Even if most people do not consider dreams important, or sleeping in general; there still are many people fascinated by them. Therefore, I strongly consider that dreams are a great path to discover the mysterious and complex parts of our being; as proved above, not only they send us “messages” when something does not go well, they are also able to signal certain diseases that we could go through without us knowing; as Freud and Jung were able to prove in their works. The more we learn and work with dreams, the easier things can get in our lives. Plus, the fast-evolving technologies represent an even greater support that we can benefit from when researching dreams; as long as we keep an open mind to new ideas that continue to develop.

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