

Review of Gregory and Michaelian (eds.) *Dreaming and Memory: Philosophical Issues*

Robert Cowan

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Summary. Daniel Gregory and Kourken Michaelian's edited volume *Dreaming and Memory: Philosophical Issues* is a very welcome development in what has been an area of intersection hitherto neglected in analytic philosophy. The book, the first of its kind, brings together philosophers of memory, dreaming, and of mind more generally, and is organised into three parts. The first explores the topic of remembering dreams, the second on the issue of whether dreaming ever involves memory, and the final part contains various comparisons between dreaming and memory. I here provide an overview of the book then some brief concluding thoughts of my own.

Keywords: Dreaming, memory, philosophy

There appear to be multiple, rich, and overlapping connections between dreaming and memory. For instance, our waking access to dreams is mediated by memory. But our recollections are often fleeting and vague. And we apparently forget most dreams. Yet it seems that we are sometimes able to successfully remember our dreams. Theories of dreaming ought to be able to explain these features. Moreover, the occurrence of remembering dreams may provide an adequacy constraint for theories of memory.

But some or all of this may be misguided. Perhaps what appear to be reports of genuine memories of dreams are a kind of confabulation (Rosen 2013) or are only superficially like waking experiential reports (Malcolm 1959). Maybe dreams reports are only relevant to memory research as an interesting contrast case. Going in the other direction, there may be deeper connections between dreaming and memory than initially appears. For instance, perhaps dreaming sometimes is a form of memory, or maybe dreaming and memory (of at least some kinds) are instances of a broader psychological type (imagining?). Resolution of these issues (and others) is not only of significance for understanding dreaming and memory but potentially has general implications for the philosophy of mind and the study of consciousness more generally.

In this context, Daniel Gregory and Kourken Michaelian's edited volume *Dreaming and Memory: Philosophical Issues* is a very welcome development in what has been an area of intersection hitherto neglected in analytic philosophy. The book, the first of its kind, brings together philosophers of memory, dreaming, and of mind more generally, and is organised into three parts. The first explores the topic of

remembering dreams, the second on the issue of whether dreaming ever involves memory, and the final part contains various comparisons between dreaming and memory. I here provide an overview of the book then some brief concluding thoughts of my own.

Part I

The *received view* in dream research is that dreams are conscious thoughts and experiences, which are sometimes encoded in memory, and which can sometimes be remembered after waking (Rosen 2013). Our dream memories play a role in multiple waking activities, such as dream diary-keeping, dream-telling, and self-reflection, and seemingly play a crucial role in theorising about the nature of dreaming itself. Part I of *Dreaming and Memory* explores challenges to, support for, and implications of the received view.

The first two papers can be thought of as presenting sceptical challenges. In the opening chapter, Rebecca Copenhaver outlines an *intentionalist acquaintance view* of memory according to which episodic memory renews acquaintance with (roughly: direct awareness of) events in a subject's personal past. This view entails that, strictly-speaking, we don't remember dreams. When I recall a dream of being chased by a tiger, I am ostensibly remembering *the tiger* and not my *dreaming* of it. But (thankfully!) I wasn't acquainted with any tiger while I dreamt, so there is no prior acquaintance which my memory could renew. Copenhaver argues that this applies even in cases of remembering dreams of events which occurred in one's personal past, such as a dream which re-created a significant childhood birthday. Further, dreams of past events are not themselves even apparent memories of past events (this is relevant to papers in Part II of the book) because the system that produces dreams lacks the proprietary function of the memory system.

Melanie Rosen's chapter challenges multiple aspects of the received view. She argues that because memory and cognition are severely degraded while subjects undergo normal dreaming, this may prevent the mental processes that occur while we sleep from becoming conscious (at least, given her application of two contemporary views of consciousness). A corollary is that most waking dream reports are not genuine recollections of conscious experienc-

Corresponding address:

Robert Cowan, School of Humanities, University of Glasgow,
Room 309, 69 Oakfield Avenue, Glasgow G12 8QQ, United
Kingdom

Email: Robert.Cowan@glasgow.ac.uk

Submitted for publication: March 2025

Accepted for publication: March 2025

DOI: 10.11588/ijodr.2025.1.109646

es which occurred while we slept. Rather, waking may be the occasion that most 'dreams' become conscious; hence dream reports will typically be of false memories. Rosen is keen to stress that this doesn't apply to all dreams. Lucid dreaming and other cognitively enhanced dreams may constitute exceptions. Thus, her *weak skepticism* about dreams (conceived as conscious thoughts and experiences had during sleep) has affinities with, but avoids some liabilities of, the more extreme form associated with Dennett (1976).

Following from these challenges are two papers which explore what and how dream memories and reports might teach us about the nature of dreaming. André Sant'Anna's chapter begins by highlighting an asymmetry between our reports of, and access to, waking and dream experience. Whereas reports about waking experience typically result from direct introspection, our access to dreams are mediated by memory and introspection upon those memories. This, he argues, potentially problematises attempts to theorise about the nature of dreaming, particularly those which analogise dreaming with waking experiences like imagination or perception. Sant'Anna proposes a solution which appeals to the operation of metacognitive monitoring processes that apparently enable subjects to distinguish memories of dream experiences from memories of waking experiences. Work on these processes suggests that dreams are neither like imagination nor perception but instead supports the view (defended by Fox et al 2013, Windt 2015) of dreaming as intensified mind-wandering.

Ema Demšar and Jennifer Windt attempt to address some challenges to the use of reports in dream research. They begin by highlighting the variability in approaches to dream research, both in terms of methods and measures, and how this influences results. For instance, divergent results on the occurrence of affect in dreams seem to depend upon whether self-assessments of dreams or external assessments of dream reports are used. Demšar and Windt go on to argue that, despite this, we can identify examples of best practice for using dream reports in empirical study. For instance, it is widely held that researchers should minimise the gap between the report and target dream experience. Finally, they make a positive suggestion for future dream research. While extant studies have tended to focus on reports about the content or formal features of dreams, there is potentially much to be gained from focusing on dream phenomenology, i.e., *what-it-is-like* to dream. For instance, studies focusing on the phenomenology of colour could enrich existing research on the influence of media consumption on dreaming. Demšar and Windt end by providing some concrete models of how to carry out phenomenologically focused dream research.

The final three papers of Part I can be thought of as vindicating the received view that we sometimes remember dreams. Indeed, the authors appear to regard the occurrence of dream memory as a constraint on an adequate theory of remembering. In their chapter, Markus Werning and Kristina Liefke begin by characterising the two main theories of episodic memory. On one side, *Intentionalists* hold that memories relate us to propositions, that memory reports should be understood *de dicto*, and tend to endorse the view that memory involves causal preservation of a representational trace. On the other side are *Relationalists* who take memory to relate us to existing things, claim that memory reports are *de re*, and may regard things remembered as constituents of, rather than merely causally related

to, memory. Werning and Liefke argue that these accounts face a series of problems, culminating in their inability to account for the phenomenon of misremembered dreams, where neither a *de dicto* nor a *de re* analysis is possible. To address this, they develop a *de hospite* account, according to which reference in memory is parasitic upon reference in the original experience. Further, they argue that this *referential parasitism* suggests that memory traces are not representational, in line with the minimal trace theory of memory.

In his chapter, Kourken Michaelian uses the case of episodic dream memory as a test case for theories of what makes episodic memories accurate. Extant theories focus on either of two conditions: truth (roughly, that it accurately represents a past event) or authenticity (roughly, that it accurately reflects the subject's original representation of the event). Michaelian rejects the view that accuracy of dream memory requires truth, and argues that dream memories are not even truth-apt. Further, although dream memories are authenticity-apt, they can be accurate without being authentic. Instead, dream memory is accurate just in case it is *faithful* in the sense that it is accurate with respect to the intentional object of the dream. Michaelian argues that since there is nothing special about dream memory, we should adopt a new theory, *pisticism*, which takes faithfulness – rather than truth or authenticity – to be what makes episodic memories (of any sort) accurate.

In the final chapter of Part I, Christopher Jude McCarroll, I-Jan Wang, and Ying-Tung Lin (hereafter McCarroll et al) defend the view that, in case of episodic memory of dreams, memorial accuracy requires authenticity (it is worth noting is that they engage directly with Michaelian's chapter and his pisticist account). They do so by arguing for a view they call *attitudinal pluralism* according to which the dream self (the character one identifies with in the dream) adopts a range of attitudes – such as beliefs and emotions – that form part of the ontological structure of the dream. Given this, McCarroll et al argue that to accurately remember a dream a subject must accurately recall the attitudes that were taken by the dream self towards the dreamscape, which is to say that dream memory must be *authentic* to be accurate.

PART II

Most researchers agree that dreams are causally influenced by the subject's memories, in the sense that dream content is sometimes partly shaped by information about events in the subject's past. Further, there is wide consensus that sleep plays some role in memory consolidation. It is, however, a distinct and more controversial issue whether dreaming can ever be said to constitute, or be constituted by, remembering. Part II of the book turns to the fascinating and underexplored question of whether remembering ever takes place within dreams.

In his chapter, Steven James argues for an affirmative answer, at least with respect to remembering persons (this is distinct from episodic memory of a past event). James argues that dreaming of a person, such as a celebrity or a family member, partly involves remembering them. And he argues that this kind of remembering is partly constituted by what he calls *distinguishing objectual knowledge*, which involves being able to discriminate the individual from relevant alternatives. Further, James suggests that if dreaming of individuals involves remembering them in the way described, then this may provide support for, and enhance

understanding of, the claim that a function of dreaming is to simulate and strengthen the social bonds, interactions, and networks that we engage in during our waking lives. By contrast, Daniel Gregory's chapter focuses on episodic memory, arguing that it probably is not possible for this kind of remembering to take place within nonlucid dreams. He does so by deploying a condition (from Debus 2010) for paradigmatic experiential memory, "that the subject be disposed to take the relevant experience into account when judging about the past", arguing that alleged cases of episodic memories within dreams fail to meet this. First, dreams will fail this condition, if, as many believe, dreaming doesn't involve the formation of judgments (see Sosa 2005). Second, even if dreams do involve the formation of judgments, given dreamers' compromised rationality, we have little reason to believe that they are disposed to take dream experiences into account when making judgments about the past while dreaming. And finally, it is unclear whether dreamers can really be said to make judgments about a personal past event, given the discontinuity between dream and waking experience.

PART III

While dreaming and memory may be connected in some of the ways explored in Parts I and II, there is a further question as to whether there are any interesting similarities or differences between these mental phenomena. This sort of comparative philosophy of mind has arguably borne theoretical fruit in other areas (see, for instance, the comparison of emotion with perception), so there is potential for making progress in our understanding of dreaming, memory, and waking consciousness more generally. The papers in Part III, in multifarious ways, engage in this project.

In his chapter, Sven Bernecker endorses the views that dreams are imaginings and that memories can involve imagistic representations of previously perceived scenes. Given this, the question arises how we are to distinguish dream imaginings from memorial imaginings. Bernecker considers and rejects a series of proposals – truth, authenticity, metacognitive feelings of familiarity – for doing this, eventually arguing in favour of an externalist view that imagining is memorial if it is underwritten by a cognitive mechanism that has the proper function of tracking the truth. By contrast, dream imaginings aim at something other than truth, such as interestingness.

Matthew Soteriou's chapter is focused on capacities for conscious perspective-taking. While awake, we occupy a conscious spatiotemporal perspective that apparently makes possible minimal orienting knowledge that *I am here now*. We are also apparently able, while waking, to simultaneously represent ourselves occupying a spatiotemporal perspective different from the one we in fact occupy, as is the case in imagining and episodic memory. Soteriou uses reflection on these waking cases to develop a framework that makes sense of the idea that we can merely represent a perspective without occupying it. This gives rise to a hypothesis that, in at least some of our dreams, we fail to occupy a conscious spatiotemporal perspective despite representing a spatiotemporal perspective that we do not occupy. While having such dreams, we lack orienting knowledge that we occupy a particular place and time.

In his chapter, Michael Barkasi contributes to the debate about the nature of the *feeling of pastness* that is apparently

found in cases of waking episodic memory (it is worth noting that the paper involves direct engagement with Soteriou's chapter). Barkasi argues that it has been previously overlooked that this feeling also shows up in dreams which shift their temporal frame, for instance, dreaming of suddenly being transported to a time experienced as yours but past. Given this, he develops a *two-sided temporal approach* which he thinks can capture feelings of pastness across both memory and dreams. According to this account, the feeling of pastness is a certain experience of time, the experience of a time as having previously flowed through your subjective present moment. Despite the commonality, feelings of pastness in dreams and memories differ in terms of their immersiveness. Barkasi ends the chapter by comparing his account to extant rivals.

In his chapter, John Sutton provides an historical perspective by exploring hitherto unpublished work (unpublished in English) on dreams and memory by the C20th French psychologist and sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs. Sutton explains how the newly translated work shows Halbwachs's thinking on dreaming and memory to be more sophisticated and nuanced than previously thought. In particular, he is shown to offer distinctive accounts of the role of social frameworks in both memory and dreaming. Sutton also helpfully connects Halbwachs's insights to contemporary debates on the nature of dreaming.

Vilius Dranseika's chapter is a work in experimental philosophy, presenting a series of studies that are designed to explore folk beliefs about the similarity or dissimilarities between mental state types, including dreaming, imagining, seeing, hallucinating, and remembering. Some of these studies involve direct comparison, while others involved indirect comparison based upon ratings of features associated with these states, such as vividness, control, metacognitive transparency, reality, etc. Study participants were especially likely to think that dreaming and imagining feel like one another (closely followed by hallucinating and dreaming), and associate remembering with a greater sense of reality than dreaming.

In the final paper of the volume, Fiona Macpherson deploys her novel theory of illusion and hallucination to generate the prediction of a variety of hitherto unrecognised kinds of dream experiences. For instance, she argues that dreaming subjects can perceive real-world properties (such as the sound of an alarm clock) whilst attributing this to a hallucinated dream object (such as a what Glaswegians call a "bin lorry", AKA "garbage truck"). Because dreams can include perception of real-world objects or properties, this has the implication that subjects can dream of things that they have not previously experienced. Macpherson argues that this also applies to sensory imagination, thus presenting counterexamples to the *Humean* account which claims that sensory imagination is built from faint copies of prior experiences stored in memory.

Concluding Thoughts

Dreaming and Memory is full of high-quality, cutting-edge, and empirically informed philosophy by leading experts. One of the most pleasing aspects of reading the book is the interconnectedness of the chapters (which is likely due in part to the volume being based upon a conference on the topic). I often found myself critically evaluating one chapter with reference to points I had found plausible from papers

elsewhere in the volume. The book thus provides the reader with the sense of engagement with a rich dialogue between a diverse range of thinkers and perspectives.

In reading through the volume, it struck me that there is lots of philosophical work to be done on topics that weren't addressed, such as the tendency of subjects to forget dreams (and what this means for theories of dream function), whether dreaming ever involves semantic or procedural memory (as opposed to episodic), a comparison of lucid dreaming and memory, or an exploration of the ways in which dreaming and memory connect to personal identity. Identifying these possibilities is, of course, not a criticism of what is already a full volume. Instead, it reflects the philosophical richness of the topic. Indeed, I hope and expect to see a lot more philosophical work in this area of research in the future. As the field grows, this volume will undoubtedly come to be regarded as having made a seminal and lasting contribution.

References

Debus, D. (2010) "Accounting for epistemic relevance: A new problem for the causal theory of memory", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 47(1): 17–29

Dennett, D. (1976) "Are dreams experiences?" *The Philosophical Review*, 85(2): 151–171

Gregory, D. & Michaelian, K. (eds.) (2024) *Dreaming and Memory: Philosophical Issues*, Springer: *Synthese Library* 491: *Studies in Epistemology, Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*

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

Rosen, M. G. (2013) "What I make up when I wake up: anti-experience views and narrative fabrication of dreams" *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4(514): 1–15

Sosa, E. (2005) "Dreams and Philosophy", *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79 (2): 7–18