

A Conversation with Allan Hobson

Jay Vogelsong

Summary. My wife Janice Brooks and I self-published our book *The Conscious Exploration of Dreaming* in 2000. As experienced lucid dreamers, we wanted to add our voices and detailed observations to the discussion about the implications of lucid experiences for dream theory, especially since so many others had failed to take naturalistic perspectives into account. Allan Hobson encouraged our efforts and wrote a foreword for our work, and even introduced some of our ideas to his contemporaries. That relationship with Allan grew into a friendship over time. While visiting Allan at his farm in East Burke, Vermont last summer, I took the opportunity to record his answers to some questions I had worked up beforehand, after reading his paper “EGO ERGO SUM” that will be published in the journal *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* (In Press) and is a précis of Allan’s book on Dream Consciousness (Springer Verlag, In Preparation). The book will carry Allan’s three William James lectures given at Roehampton University in London and will be published along with 25 commentaries by Springer Verlag in a volume sponsored by the Vienna Kreis, Friedrich Stadler, Director. This conversation was recorded on Monday morning July 16, 2012 as we sat at the breakfast table on his sun porch.

Jay Vogelsong: What are the implications of your protoconsciousness hypothesis for the humanities?

Allan Hobson: I think that man is an image creator and a fiction producer. All of that comes from the autocreating nature of the brain. I’ve said this before, so it isn’t strictly related to protoconsciousness, it is related to the concept that the brain is autocreating. The autocreating connection with the protoconsciousness notion is more in the development of the system that can do these things. So what protoconsciousness says is that prior to the emergence of language and consciousness as we know it, the brain is getting ready to be conscious by being autocreating. The brain is not just following the directions of the external world, the brain is following the directions of its own internal programs. In other words, this is a way of translating the genetic paradigm into a functional program. The way you do it is to activate the brain in utero, then provide it with its own information so it learns to organize its own information. So by the time you are born you’ve got a brain that is already protoconscious in the sense that it is ready to be conscious.

JV: How does that improve on Freudian perspectives?

AH: What Freud did that I think was a mistake was that he had to load everything onto his environmentalist model, like why you have the personality that you have, why you have the style that you have. I mean all of these things are in part environmentally determined, but they are in very, very large part probably determined by something like the system that produces protoconsciousness. It’s working from the age of 30 weeks after conception. So this also changes the view of creativity in a very important way. What Freud was always trying to do was to show that creativity was some sort of neurotic process. Well, I don’t think it is. I think it’s an intrinsic, normal, healthy process. It’s something that comes with the suit as I say.

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Submitted for publication: November 2012
Accepted for publication: November 2012

JV: You are normalizing creative behavior.

AH: To the degree possible, I’m trying to normalize creativity, I’m trying to normalize literature, I’m trying to normalize science, I’m trying to normalize religion. I think all of these things are not neurotic. They can become neurotic. One can develop neurotic dependence on any one of those.

JV: You said that something like 80% of dreaming material does not have memory as a source, and have said that it is very possibly generated by chance. Couldn’t it also possibly be created by the disabling of ordinary memory as well?

AH: The exact percentage varies according to the observer, but it’s high. There’s a lot of dream material that can’t be ascribed to previous experience. That could mean the subject simply doesn’t remember the previous experience that the mental content of the dream represents. What I would suggest is that we consider an alternative, and that is that a lot of mental content is synthesized. It’s not a replay of something experienced, it is in fact gotten up for the occasion. The example that I like is my farm dreams. I have a farm in Vermont and I’m an absentee landowner, and I worry about it all the time. Has the heat gone off? Have burglars gotten in there? Has the place burned down? I’ve got all sorts of good, healthy reasons to be worried about the place. So I have these anxiety dreams about my farm, but the farm in my dream is never my farm. Why should that be? I have fifty of these dreams, not one of which is architecturally similar to my farm.

JV: You’ve lived here for forty-five years.

AH: I can draw you pictures of the buildings when I’m awake. I know what they look like. So to imagine that my farm dream is trying to disguise my fear of losing my farm – that’s ridiculous. What it suggests rather is that I have a virtually infinite album of possible dream scenes which are a farm. A lot of these farms I never saw anywhere. So what I am suggesting, back to your first question about creativity: where did these images come from? I make them up. The brain makes them up. “Farm” is a word that triggers imagery. That’s very important, I think, a very important part of my idea.

JV: You have also mentioned how emotions are very consonant with the dream plot details. You’ve said the emotion can cause certain dream images, which is certainly the case, but what about the images causing the emotions as well?

AH: It could be. In one of my farm dreams, which is recent, it cuts both ways. I imagine these two strangers are digging up in the field behind my barn when I arrive, and that doesn't happen so I'm anxious about it. I go and see them, and they are very dark skinned and they are Mexicans, and they have no reason for being there. I'm made more anxious by the fact that their identity is unknown to me and the reason for doing what they're doing is threatening. But, you know, it could be my farm dreams are triggered by the anxiety and specific content of the farm dreams makes it worse. And finally it's so unbearable that I wake up.

JV: Which is the way nightmares usually progress. It's a vicious circle.

JV: Okay, so how do you think people could improve their first person data when it comes to dream reports?

AH: Well, first of all I think they should record. They have to write something down. They need a pen and a piece of paper or a tape recorder.

JV: Record it as soon as possible.

AH: Most people think that if they're fun to talk about and they're amusing, they talk about them at breakfast. And by the next day they could not possibly remember the damn things. So the first thing to do is to say, "I am really interested in my own consciousness. If Hobson is correct, a way for me to help me understand my own consciousness would be to understand my dreams a little bit better. In order to understand my dreams I have to know what they are. I can't just take the headlines. That's like reading the paper and just reading the first page." You know, there's all sorts of interesting detail there for us to study. What I am suggesting is that this is both a job and a privilege for everyone, not only for scientists, because I think in addition to naturalizing psychology I want to universalize psychology. I want people to be more psychologically interested in themselves and aware of themselves. Now, you know, good luck on that one when you are competing with the National Football League and National Basketball Association and all sorts of other easy habits – which I indulge in too, I'm not saying I don't. But I've learned so much about the system by studying my own dreams that I think I've just scratched the surface.

JV: You think other people would find it just as fascinating?

AH: Especially if they have unusual experiences, and most people do have one unusual experience or another, which they aren't willing to talk about because they think it's a sign of mental illness. And it might be. But what I also want to do is naturalize our notion of mental illness. Why should we feel so guilty about being mentally ill? We don't feel guilty if we have a cold! If we have a brain, the brain is going to do funny things.

JV: You said that you thought the concept of mental illness was itself obsolete at this point, that we should be talking about diseases of the brain and so on.

AH: I would go further than that even. The functional state of the brain is such as to necessitate and include so-called mental illness. I don't like the term "mental illness" because it suggests that it is something that happens without the brain. I just don't think that's possible. I don't think there are witches, I don't think there are spirits, I don't think there is anything in there but a brain. I think that conscious awareness is a brain function. So disorders of conscious awareness – hearing voices, seeing things that aren't there, believing things that couldn't possibly be true – are not surprising

given the true nature of the situation. So what I am trying to do is sort of modernize, to make more acceptable the notion – let's not call it "mental illness," let's call it disturbances of the state of consciousness.

JV: The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is deactivated during dreaming, and that is a major part of the brain in terms of who you are when you are in waking.

AH: Yes, who you are and a lot of other executive ego functions.

JV: So you are acting without that part of your brain working properly while you are dreaming. To what extent is that subset of self [which is still active in dreaming] really representative of you in waking, when it comes to interpreting your dreams?

AH: Well I would say that it is probably, in waking, a component of the sense of self, but it's not the conscience component. It's not the moral component. It's not the analytic component. But a lot of what is the self is probably emotional, and that is, if anything, amplified in dreams. But we don't even know that. We don't know if anxious people have more anxiety in their dreams. I have a lot of anxiety in my dreams and I'm not an anxious person. So the person, the me, the I, the self of my dreams is quite different from the self of my waking. Is it qualitatively different? No, it's quantitatively different. That is on the list of difficult projects to do: to compare the dream-self and the wake-self in various individuals.

JV: So how different, really, is that than the Freudian construction of the unconscious mind – or in this case the protoconscious mind – being made explicit in dreaming interactions?

AH: The difference is that, for the most part, this is not symptom producing. For the most part it's providing the opportunity to have waking consciousness. It is certainly not exclusively the enemy of waking consciousness. In the Freudian disguise-censorship model, dreaming was interpreted as the necessity of disguising from the conscious mind unconscious impulses. I just don't think that's at all true. You can see why protoconsciousness frees you from that kind of notion. Protoconsciousness says that anxiety could be amplified in dreams, but what is that telling you? It tells you, I think, not that anxiety is a symptom to be interpreted in waking as a psychopathological process, but that anxiety is a normal process. Anxiety is a normal part of cognition.

JV: How is dual aspect monism different than strict dualism?

AH: I think that the mind is a function of the body yet to be understood clearly, and so in that sense dual aspect – two manifestations of the same thing – one is subject the other is object, but they can't operate without each other. Certainly the subjective part can't operate without the objective part. The objective part can continue to exist long after the subjective part is either absent or severely altered. But probably the alteration is understandable in terms of the brain disorders that underlie it. I don't know if that really answers your question adequately. Put it another way: why is dualism so attractive? The answer is that it feels like a dualistic system. When I think, I don't have any awareness of that as a brain function, even though I am a brain scientist. I just don't have it. I have to think, I have to have a second loop going on saying, "Hey, you say you're thinking, but what that really means is that your brain is acting in a certain way." I don't do that. I try to do that but it's very

difficult to do. So monism is a very difficult state to achieve because subjective experience is so isolated from the objective part of the thing.

JV: But it may not remain that way.

AH: No, of course not. We're already making great progress in that respect. What I'm saying is, when you dream you're being confronted with the fact that your brain has changed states. So the way to understand the change of states of the brain is by comparing the dream experience with the waking experience. It's not just to be thorough, it's to be analytic at the same time. The fact that you can't remember your dreams is already a great invitation. Freud says it's all repressed. I say, no, it's just amnesia. That dream content is not placed in memory. You don't remember the dreams – ever – unless you wake up.

JV: And reprocess them into your waking memory.

AH: Absolutely.

JV: First person accounts have largely been left outside the realm of [hard] science as we know it, but that has been more based on a rejection of the strict dualistic model. Now that we have dual aspect monism we can reinstate first person accounts into a more complete science.

AH: You can. The problem is that most people are dualists and they take this charge of mine – to study their subjectivity – as a license for understanding the fact that they can predict the future, or the fact that they are for sure going to meet their sister in heaven – I don't know what. People have got the belief system, which is normal to the brain, interfering with their scientific inquiry because what they are looking for is evidence for their other-worldly theories. That's probably very common. That's certainly one of the reasons why academic psychology rejected introspection, because people bring to the table of introspection all of their kooky expectations.

JV: You've called the brain a "subjective object," which is understandable since it has these subjective states. But you have also said that the states of mind are "objective subjects," and that's less clear to me. What do you mean?

AH: I can tell, if I have physiological recordings of your brain waves, eye movements and muscle tone – I can make a prediction on the basis of the objective data, third person data, that you're dreaming. Okay? I can't say you are dreaming about your mother, I can't say what you are dreaming about – I don't know that yet – but if I had a better analysis of the cortical regions that were activated, then I would be able to do that better. So what I am saying is that they're already objective, that states of the brain are objective subjects.

JV: Okay, you've called lucid dreaming a mixed state. The question then becomes to what extent are the things that people can do in lucid dreaming, all the dream control and so on, still relevant to the picture of dreaming as a whole?

AH: Most dreaming is not lucid, so if I was normalizing about the physiology and psychology of dreaming sleep, I would only use the evidence about lucid dreaming in an ad hoc way. I think lucid dreaming is very important evidence that something like the protoconscious hypothesis has got to be correct, because in lucid dreaming you have primary consciousness – awareness of self, space, movement, emotion – all of that's working as it does in normal, non-lucid dreaming, but you've added something else to it, which is a self that observes the dream, a self that changes the dream. You've added back a lot of wake state functions. So, in essence, I think of it as almost proof that something

like what I am saying has to be true. In that sense lucid dreaming is, in and of itself, of interest.

JV: To consciousness studies?

AH: Definitely. It's mainstream. It puts lucid dreaming right in the middle of things instead of off at the side in a sort of murky, somewhat suspect area. We've got to be more healthy-minded about lucid dreaming and utilize it better. The problem with lucid dreaming, as you know, is that it's rare, evanescent, and when you study it you have Heisenberg on your back all the time – it's uncertain.

JV: Right. It's not actually a natural state, therefore it doesn't last very long when it's there at all.

AH: That will be overcome, I predict.

JV: Oh yeah? With enough people and enough studies and enough interest?

AH: Yep. And that's another reason why I like a guy like Glen Just, because it looks like he is a sort of habitual or almost compulsive lucid dreamer.

JV: He's a natural, like Janice.

AH: He developed lucid dreaming in order to control the tendency to have troubling experiences. This guy is 70 years old and he's still lucid. [Allan and Glen are presently working on a dialog piece about lucidity and related phenomena.] I mean, I haven't been lucid in forty years. I don't know about you. I think that if you led a relatively normal life, you probably are lucky to have been lucid at all, ever.

JV: I do have occasional lucid dreams when I am able to nap again, but for the most part my schedule prevents it.

AH: I guess I have a little bit, but it's not like what I had.

JV: But then again I'm not also doing all the dedicated induction and all the dedicated recording and paying attention to my dreams.

AH: I'm not doing the sleep deprivation, which I think also very much enhances lucidity. I think the fact that these dream-like symptoms come out when people are sleep deprived is obviously important.

JV: You're mixing your brain chemistry enough to get some interesting results, is what I think it comes down to.

AH: You're weakening the waking system in such a way that the dream system is facilitated, and it comes right out.

JV: You end up with a mixed state that way.

AH: And I think that's why this approach is so salutary for psychiatry.

JV: It holds out hope that you can become lucid about your mental difficulties to the point that you can control them.

AH: That's another reason why I like what Glen is saying, because that's what I ended up doing with my patients, teaching them to control their symptoms.

JV: Because you can't really change the way their brain is?

AH: I gave them this drug, that drug, the other drug. They got obese, they got tremor, there were all sorts of side-effect aberrant. And I realized that, for instance, one of my patients who had visual hallucinations. Those hallucinations stopped as soon as she started counting something that she could see.

JV: So she was getting her brain working externally a little bit more, instead of internally.

AH: She learned how to control her brain. That's very exciting, I think.

JV: Especially since it was so simple in that case.

AH: That's another answer to your earlier question about why I think it's important to study dreaming, for other people

to understand the study of dreams: because we all have conscious states, we all have peculiar conscious states that we wish we didn't have. So everything we can learn about how to control them better, by naturalistic means, is to the good.

JV: The brain obviously influences the mind. How do you see the mind in turn influencing the brain, like through practicing scenarios and so on?

AH: That's a good question. The implied answer that I'm going to give you will encourage you to think I believe in free will. I do believe in free will, I just don't have any scientific evidence for free will. I use my experience, no question about it, to alter my behavior, there's no question about it.

JV: So what kind of experiments could actually prove free will from your point of view?

AH: Well, I don't know that. I haven't thought enough about that to answer your question. But the experiments that have been done by very clever and thoughtful people have not supported the notion.

JV: Okay, well why isn't every restaurant in every town an experiment in free will? You go in, you pick up a menu, you've got all these different choices and you sit there and decide which choice you feel like having.

AH: And you have a good meal like we did yesterday. So you go back to Miss Lyndonville [Diner]. They gave us what I thought was a good lunch, they were prompt in service, they were polite. I didn't pay the bill, you did, but it was probably less than sixty dollars [for four of us]. So is that consciousness? I couldn't eat without being conscious. I couldn't be awake without being conscious, but is the consciousness causal of my return to Miss Lyndonville? It feels that way and that's the reason why I believe in it.

JV: But aren't you stuck on a strict dualist idea of what consciousness is when you say consciousness is causally ineffective?

AH: Yeah, probably. It probably is true that even my notion of consciousness is probably dualistic. So when I am sitting at Miss Lyndonville and I'm thinking, "It's a pretty good hamburger and these french fries are not bad and the onion rings are unbelievably good and everybody seems happy," my propensity to go back there again has already been determined.

JV: But you might not choose onion rings again. You might want to try other things from the menu, as just a shot in the dark.

AH: That's true. At any rate, what am I trying to tell you? Do I have free will? Yes I do, but I'm already committed to Miss Lyndonville because Miss Lyndonville is good. A behaviorist would say, "You just got good onion rings, you got good potatoes – you were reinforced for your choosing Miss Lyndonville, so you 'choose it again.'" It's really your body that's telling you to go to Miss Lyndonville, so you say "I want to go to Miss Lyndonville." I think this is important. The illusion is that you think that you made the decision.

JV: There's no question that we over-interpret where we are actually depending on habit. We think we are doing more than we actually are, and we are always caught out when we can't get ourselves to automatically change in certain ways. It's obvious we don't have the extent of free will we too often think that we do.

AH: That people would like to have....

JV: Why do we have to go to the extreme of saying there is no free will at all?

AH: I don't think we do. I think that's a mistake. I think we

should say, correctly, that there is no scientific evidence for it, and that the experiments that have been done to test the hypothesis are very counter-intuitive. To me they are a big surprise, to notice that there's backward projection of the subjective...

JV: Which could be just a part of the way people model the whole thing. I mean, they're not very sophisticated psychologically.

AH: No, it's true. This is just the beginning. I'm surprised at how little work has been done on free will. Wegner and Libet – probably some young Turk has taken this up.

JV: It seems to me that we have these various minds that don't always necessarily work together well.

AH: We have multiple minds?

JV: Yeah, we have instinctual, emotional, habitual and intellectual minds.

AH: We have modular minds, it's true.

JV: Do we read our own brains like a book? When we are recalling a memory, say?

AH: I don't think so. I think that the description is on page 65. It actually is not in the book at all. I don't think we read our brains like a book, no. I really don't.

JV: The complexity of how we encode our information is way beyond what a book does.

AH: Way beyond. Less reliable and more creative.

JV: Right, and it continually changes over time.

AH: Yep.

JV: But there's still the question of dissociation. There's a part of our brain that's looking at another part of our brain doing something else.

AH: Of course. So?

JV: So what we have are modules in the brain.

AH: Dissociation is normal.

JV: Dissociation is normal and part of normal functioning.

AH: Of course. That naturalizes dissociation. I mean, you can be dissociated to a pathological degree. You can be dissociated to a dysfunctional degree, that's true. That's what mental illness is. All of these cognitive processes are exaggerated or they're perverted in some way – but not by unconscious wishes.

JV: You've tried to promote a parallel idea rather than a layered system like the Freudian model. But you do go by the idea of having multiple and potentially conflicting agendas within the same brain?

AH: Absolutely. I'm saying that's the rule rather than the exception. Even though it may feel conflict-ridden, it's amazing that it's so conflict-free.

JV: It's more like a democracy than a tyranny.

AH: That's right. That has very strong political implications, but the system is much better off allowed to just run itself than to have some imposition of rules.

JV: I have one more prepared question. You've created all these journals, one-hundred-and-sixty-some? Did you tackle this as an art form, as science?

AH: I think they reflect my conviction that you can have pleasure in contemplating your own experience. I did it because I was unhappy with the notion that most of my creative effort was going into files, into manilla envelopes, which I thought would probably be thrown out or be uninterpretable. It gave me great pleasure, because it enabled me also to put a lot things together. It's like consciousness. Those volumes are symbolic, if you will, of consciousness. They are my scientific self, my personal self, my visual self, my artistic self – they're all in there.

JV: So it is an art form.

AH: It is an art form, yeah sure it is, if you want to glorify it with that word. It is a normal expression of a normal brain, it seems to me.

Comments

In the several months since my conversation with Allan, I have had a few more thoughts on the topics we discussed.

1) What Allan calls auto-creativity I would still rather call world-modeling. We create internalized maps of the world which we project onto our limited sensory information to navigate our way through the world and achieve our specific ends. The elaborations of dreaming are not anchored, as waking perceptions typically are, in concurrent sensory information, so dreaming becomes what Allan terms auto-creative. Similarly with other delusions of various sorts.

2) I think people could also improve their first person dream reports by separating the accounts of their actual experiences from their waking interpretations of them. Since our memories are associative, we too often forget that our experiences are one thing and our interpretations another. This is especially important when we are trying to access new information which we do not currently take into account.

3) If the human self is not the unified whole spiritualistic ideas would lead us to believe, but is instead a complex combination and interaction of various brain systems, then the deactivation of an important part like the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, which happens in dreaming, would entail that a person's thoughts and actions in his dreams cannot be taken as reliable reflections of what his waking self is really like.

4) The shift of opinions from strict dualism to dual aspect monism will likely take awhile. The former cultural perspective has been with us for so long that we will have to sort through a fair number of previously unquestioned assumptions, like whether we should really consider consciousness the self or whether it is really just a function of the total self.

5) I still consider the dream control exercised by lucid dreamers to have an important pertinence to ordinary dreaming. First, it is too easy to control dream content once you become lucid. This shouldn't be the case if dream content was in any way preprogrammed. Second, the line between lucid and non-lucid experiences can't be so cleanly drawn as we might like. A shift in brain chemistry to reactivate the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex may or may not be a necessary condition for lucidity, given the possibility of habituation of the lucid response, and it is certainly not a sufficient condition for lucidity, given the many non-lucid interpretations of similar states. This may mean that lucidity is not really an altered state in itself, though an altered state may often lead to lucidity. Third, the world-modeling that occurs in dreaming may indeed be global, something that occurs across all brain states. If it is not unique to dreaming, but only produces unique content because of the unusual conditions of dreaming, then our observations of such world-modeling in operation in lucid as well as ordinary dreams can help us see what is happening in both states more clearly.

6) If the brain is auto-creative as Allan maintains, or creates models of the world as I would rather say, then we are not responding directly to the world when we make choices, we are responding to our models. Since those models are

in our own heads and are subject to our creative modifications, we are not determined in our actions by information coming from outside of us.

7) The multi-mind idea is another way to conceptualize the self as a composite. In consciousness, we don't see the world directly. Instead, we see what other parts of our brains have already selected and processed for us to consider consciously. In that sense, we do indeed read our own brains like books and dissociation so-called is a normal part of brain functioning.

8) Dreams should not be considered in isolation from the rest of our experiences if we are to make the best sense of them, but they are nevertheless unique experiences in their own right.