

Phenomenology of Dreaming: Re-examining Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre

Ayush Srivastava

Abstract:

Dreams have intrigued thinkers across disciplines, bridging the gap between the conscious and the unconscious, the real and the imagined. As an approach to understanding dreams, the phenomenology of dreaming provides profound insights into how dreams are experienced and relate to waking life. In this paper, I will critically reflect on the phenomenology of dreaming in brief, drawing on the works of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre. It explores the temporal, spatial, and ethical dimensions of dreams and addresses the limitations of phenomenology in capturing the full complexity of dreaming.

Keywords:

Consciousness, Dreams, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, Sartre

Introduction

Dreams are complex, often mysterious mental experiences that unfold during sleep, involving a range of perceptions, emotions, and narratives that frequently deviate from waking reality (Thompson, 2015; Windt, 2015). Historically, dreams have intrigued thinkers across various disciplines, from ancient mystics to modern neuroscientists, each seeking to uncover the nature and significance of the dream state (Flanagan, 2000). Dreams defy conventional laws of time, space, and causality, presenting worlds where past and future can intermingle, familiar settings morph unpredictably, and individuals may encounter others—real or imaginary—within bizarre and surreal scenarios. In phenomenology, the branch of philosophy concerned with the structures

of experience, dreams are seen not just as by-products of sleep but as windows into the fundamental nature of consciousness itself (Nir & Tononi, 2010).

Phenomenological analysis offers a robust framework for understanding dreams as complex interactions between time, space, memory, and selfhood. Edmund Husserl, a founding figure in phenomenology, suggests that our experience of time in dreams reveals an ‘elastic’ temporality, where the past, present, and future do not follow the linear progression seen in waking life. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, another leading phenomenologist, emphasizes the role of the body in shaping our perception of space. Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential approach further enriches the phenomenological understanding of dreams.

In this paper, I raise several critical questions about the nature and implications of dreams. ‘How does the altered temporality in dreams reshape our understanding of memory and anticipation?’ ‘Can phenomenology alone adequately explain the dream experience, or does it require supplementation from approaches in cognitive neuroscience, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies?’ For example, while phenomenology describes the subjective dream experience, it may neglect how cultural narratives, social anxieties, and neurological mechanisms influence dream content. Moreover, if dreams reveal hidden desires and fears, as suggested by existentialists like Sartre, to what extent are we ethically accountable for our actions and experiences in dreams?

This paper addresses these questions to expand our understanding of dreams beyond mere subconscious reflections or symbolic images. It examines dreams as complex phenomena that challenge the boundaries between self and other, perception and reality, consciousness and the unconscious. Phenomenology’s focus on the lived experience of dreams reveals the subtle ways in which dreams blur distinctions between

waking and sleeping life, the body and the mind, and freedom and responsibility.

Revisiting Phenomenologists

Edmund Husserl's work on internal time consciousness provides a foundational framework for understanding the experience of time in dreams. In *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, Husserl (1964) examines how consciousness experiences time, emphasizing that "the flux of time is the fundamental structure of all lived experience" (p. 74). This framework is crucial for understanding how time is perceived in dreams, where conventional temporal structures can become fluid and fragmented. Husserl's concepts of "retention" (the immediate past) and "protention" (the anticipated future) play a significant role in the dream experience. In dreams, these elements often lose their usual coherence, resulting in a temporality that can seem both elastic and disjointed. For example, a dream might abruptly shift from one scenario to another, or a single event might stretch out in an eternal and ephemeral way. Husserl's analysis reveals how the dream state challenges our usual understanding of time, suggesting that dream temporality is a complex relationship of past, present, and future shaped by the dreamer's consciousness.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, particularly his focus on the body's role in perception, provides valuable insights into the spatial dimensions of dreaming. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2012) argues that space is not merely a backdrop for bodily actions but is actively constituted through the body's interactions with the world. He states, "space is not the setting [in which] bodily actions occur, but is rather the means by which the position of the body and its motion are determined" (p. 115). In the dream state, spatiality often becomes fluid and malleable. Dream environments can shift unpredictably, and familiar spaces may be transformed in ways that defy physical laws. Merleau-Ponty's concept of "lived space" emphasizes that the body's engagement with space is not static but dynamic and

transformative. In dreams, this dynamic engagement allows for the creation of spaces that are both real and imaginary. For example, a dreamer might find themselves floating or navigating through impossible geometries, revealing how the body's perception of space in dreams is influenced by both its physical and imaginative capacities (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).

Jean-Paul Sartre's existential phenomenology provides a unique perspective on dreaming, focusing on freedom, responsibility, and the creation of meaning. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1956) explores how consciousness is free to create its own world and meaning, even in the dream state (for more, we can look at his work *Imaginary*). He asserts, "In dreams, consciousness is free from the constraints of the external world, yet this freedom is accompanied by a sense of responsibility for the world that is created" (Sartre, 1940/2010, p. 123). Sartre's concept of 'bad faith' can be applied to the dream state, where the dreamer might confront aspects of themselves that they avoid in waking life. Dreams often reveal hidden desires, fears, and conflicts, providing a space where the dreamer's values and anxieties are expressed in symbolic forms. Sartre argues that the dreamer is often complicit in the dream's unfolding, even when the dream's content is disturbing or frightening. This complicity highlights the existential tension between freedom and responsibility that characterizes the dream experience.

Additionally, Sartre's notion of 'the Look,' where one becomes aware of oneself through the gaze of the Other, can be reinterpreted in the context of dreams. In some dreams, the dreamer may feel observed or judged by other figures within the dream, leading to heightened self-awareness and a confrontation with aspects of their identity. This dynamic underscores the idea that even in dreams, one's sense of self is shaped by interactions with others and by internalized values and judgments (Sartre, 1940/2010).

The Temporal Dimensions of Dreaming

The experience of time in dreams is one of the most intriguing aspects of the phenomenology of dreaming. In dreams, time does not adhere to the linear progression experienced in waking life (Windt, 2015). Instead, it can stretch, compress, or loop, creating a unique temporality. Husserl's analysis of 'internal time-consciousness' provides a foundation for understanding this phenomenon. He describes how "the retention of the immediate past and the protention of the imminent future give structure to the now" (Husserl, 1964, p. 82). In dreams, this flow can be disrupted, resulting in experiences where the past, present, and future coexist in ways that challenge conventional understandings of time.

Merleau-Ponty's focus on the embodied nature of time perception adds depth to this analysis. He argues that "the body's engagement with the world gives time its directionality, its sense of past, present, and future" (2012, p. 74). In dreams, the body's interaction with the dream world creates a temporality that is both subjective and fluid. This dynamic experience of time is evident when a dreamer experiences events out of sequence or revisits past moments with an immediate sense of presence.

Sartre's existential approach to time further complicates the phenomenology of dreaming. For Sartre (1956), time is actively shaped by consciousness. His idea suggests that in dreams, the freedom of consciousness allows for a more fluid and dynamic experience of time. While this dream temporality is liberating, it also underscores the tension between the dreamer's desire for freedom and the constraints of waking life.

The Role of Memory in Dreaming

Memory plays a crucial role in the phenomenology of dreaming. Dreams often incorporate fragments of past experiences, blending them into new narratives that may seem disjointed or surreal (Flanagan, 2000; Thompson, 2015). The relationship between memory and dreaming

raises essential questions about the continuity of consciousness and the role of past experiences in shaping the dream world.

Husserl's phenomenology of memory, particularly his distinction between retention, recollection, and phantasy, offers insights into this relationship. Retention refers to the immediate past that is still present in consciousness, while recollection involves the deliberate retrieval of past experiences. Phantasy, on the other hand, is the imaginative reconfiguration of past experiences. In dreams, these modes of memory often intermingle, creating a hybrid space where the past is both retained and reimagined. Husserl (1964) notes that "the boundaries between these modes of memory become fluid in dreams, where the past can be experienced as both distant and immediate" (p. 94).

Merleau-Ponty's focus on embodied memory also provides insights into the role of memory in dreams. He argues that "memory is not just a cognitive act but is deeply rooted in the body's interactions with the world" (2012, p. 122). The body's past actions, movements, and sensations often resurface in dreams, suggesting that dreams are not just cognitive reconstructions but also reenactments of the body's lived history.

Sartre's existential approach to memory adds another layer to this analysis. Sartre (1956) contends that memory is an active process of meaning-making rather than a passive repository of past experiences. He argues that "the past is not fixed but is constantly being reinterpreted and reconfigured by consciousness" (p. 432). In dreams, this process of reinterpretation is intensified, revealing deeper desires, fears, and anxieties.

The Ethical Dimension of Dreaming

The ethical implications of dreaming are significant, as the content of dreams, the actions taken within them, and the emotions experienced can raise questions about responsibility, guilt, and morality. The

phenomenology of dreaming provides a framework for exploring these ethical dimensions (for more, see Cowan, 2023).

Husserl's concept of ethical intentionality suggests that consciousness is directed towards values, whether explicit or implicit. He states, "even in dreams, consciousness is directed towards certain values, whether explicit or implicit" (Husserl, 1964, p. 131). The choices made in dreams, the emotions felt, and the judgments passed all reflect this ethical intentionality.

Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body's role in perception also has ethical implications for dreaming. He argues that "the body is not just a passive recipient of the world but is an active participant in it" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 136). In dreams, the body's engagement with the dream world involves ethical considerations as the dreamer navigates interactions with others and experiences emotions that reflect their values and desires.

Sartre's existential ethics add depth to the ethical analysis of dreaming. Sartre (1940/2010) reflects, "in dreams, the dreamer is free to create a world, to act within it, and to interact with others" (p. 141). This freedom entails responsibility, as the actions taken in dreams are expressions of one's values and desires. Sartre argues that "even in dreams, one is accountable for one's actions, as they reflect one's authentic self" (p. 147). This perspective highlights the ethical dimension of dreaming as an extension of one's responsibility for the world one creates.

The Limits of Phenomenology in Understanding Dreams

While phenomenology provides valuable insights into the experience of dreaming, it also has limitations. The subjective focus of phenomenology can obscure the broader context in which dreams occur, including psychological, neurological, and cultural factors (Nir & Tononi, 2010).

One limitation of phenomenology is its emphasis on the individual subject. While phenomenology provides a rich account of the dreamer's

experience, it can sometimes neglect the intersubjective and cultural dimensions of dreaming. Dreams are shaped by cultural narratives, social norms, and collective anxieties. A more comprehensive understanding of dreaming would need to consider these factors, exploring how individual experiences are embedded in a broader social and cultural context. Another limitation is phenomenology's focus on consciousness. While phenomenology describes how time and space are experienced in dreams, it does not address the unconscious desires, fears, and conflicts that shape these experiences. A more complete understanding of dreaming would need to integrate phenomenology with psychoanalytic and psychological approaches, exploring how conscious and unconscious processes interact in creating the dream world.

Finally, phenomenology's emphasis on subjective experience can obscure the neurological and cognitive processes underlying dreaming. While phenomenology describes the experience of time and space in dreams, it does not address the brain processes that shape these experiences. Integrating phenomenological insights with findings from cognitive neuroscience would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how brain activity influences the subjective experience of dreaming.

Conclusion/Final Remarks

The phenomenology of dreaming offers a nuanced and profound understanding of the dream experience, exploring the structures of consciousness, the nature of reality, and the ethical dimensions of dreams. Through a focus on the lived experience of dreaming, phenomenology reveals the complexities of the dream world and its intersections with waking life. However, as this paper has argued, phenomenology also has limitations. To fully understand the phenomenon of dreaming, it is necessary to integrate phenomenology with other approaches, including psychoanalysis, cognitive neuroscience, and cultural studies. Only by doing so can we hope to

unravel the mysteries of the dream world and its significance for human existence.

Notes & References

- Cowan, R. (2023). Dreams, morality and the waking world. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 104, 2-29.
- Flanagan, O. (2000). *Dreaming Souls: Sleep, Dreams, and the Evolution of the Conscious Mind*. Oxford University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1964). *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (J. S. Churchill, Trans.). Indiana University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of Perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1962)
- Nir, Y., & Tononi, G. (2010). Dreaming and the brain: from phenomenology to neurophysiology. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 14(2), 88–100.
- Sartre, J. P. (1956). *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Philosophical Library.
- Sartre, J. P. (2010). *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*. Routledge. (Original work published 1940)
- Thompson, E. (2015). *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*. Columbia University Press.
- Windt, J. M. (2015). *Dreaming: A Conceptual Framework for Philosophy of Mind and Empirical Research*. MIT Press.

IIT, Bombay