

What We See in Dreams

Abstract

We seem to be aware of things in our dreams. Yet it has proven difficult to say precisely what those things could be. It is commonly thought that although we may *seem* to be aware of things in dreams, we are not in fact aware of anything. I offer a new account, however, of the sorts of things we seem to be aware of while dreaming. I make use of the notion of ‘arrangement’ and explain how dream objects could be analyzed as arrangements of shapes and colors. These arrangements *contain* shapes and colors but are not themselves colored or shaped. This proposal enables us to give a new solution to the classic problem of perception—*i.e.*, the problem of accounting for how we can ever have direct and immediate access to reality if our conscious experiences in veridical and non-veridical perception could be indistinguishable.

What We See in Dreams

1. Introduction

I saw what looked like an apple, but I realized I was only dreaming. As I focused on the reddish, apple-ly image before me, I wondered, “What am I looking at?” Then I woke up.

What *was* I looking at? Here is a popular answer: I wasn’t looking at anything; rather, I was in a state of “being appeared to” in a certain way. This answer is known as the Adverbial Theory of Perception, which says that non-veridical experiences consist of my sensing *in a certain way* (e.g., redly) without my thereby being aware of any corresponding objects. Still, when I am dreaming, it *seems* as though I am aware of things in dreams. Moreover, even now, I can close my eyes and “see” faint images floating and twisting; these images are just the sort of things that seem to show in dreams. But what could these images *be*?

One motivation to doubt that one is aware of—or in some sense acquainted with—things in dreams is that it has proven difficult to identify the sort of things one might plausibly be aware of in dreams.¹ I obviously wasn’t aware of a real apple, for there weren’t any apples nearby: what, then, might I have been aware of? My goal is to develop and motivate a new answer to this question. I will offer a theory of the objects of immediate awareness in dreams and in “non-veridical” perception more generally.

2. Theories of Dream Objects

I will use the term ‘dream object’ to stand for anything we are *immediately* aware of in dreams. This conception of dream objects leaves open whether or not things in dreams are mind-dependent (e.g., see Jackson 1977; Robinson 1994) or mind-independent (e.g., see Moore 1905;

¹ See Noë 2005.

Johnston 2004). In this section, I will briefly explain why one might doubt that dream objects fall under traditional ontological categories, including concrete particular, property, relation, set, proposition, and state of affairs.

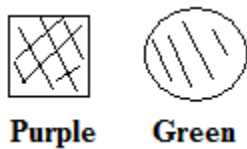
Consider first *concrete particulars*. When I have a dream about an apple, I am evidently not aware of a particular apple, or a particular bit of my brain or any other concrete particular. Moreover, a person can be aware of the *same* “apple-ly” dream object on many different occasions, yet there does not seem to be any concrete *particular* that exists before one’s field of awareness every time one dreams about an apple. It is not as though we can find an apple-ly dream object inside a person’s head (say). If there are dream objects at all, they don’t seem to be anything like familiar concrete particulars. It seems reasonable to host doubts, therefore, that dreams objects are concrete particulars.

Let us consider next *properties*. Suppose I dream about a purple box being to the left of a green ball. In my dream, I seem to see a purple-box-to-the-left-of-a-green-ball *image*. What property or properties might this image consist of? The image seems to consist of these properties: being purple, being a box, being green, and being a ball. But that can’t be the whole story. For the existence of those properties doesn’t suffice for the existence of an image of a purple box to the left of a green ball. The image builds in *order*: the purple goes with the box, and the green goes with the ball. The properties don’t by themselves convey this extra information about how the properties are organized.

Mark Johnston (2004) has proposed that mental images are *complex*, structured properties. For example, a purple-box-to-the-left-of-a-green-ball image might be the complex property of *being a purple box to the left of a green ball*. I find his proposal both fascinating and

helpful. Unfortunately, however, there is problem. The problem is that there doesn't seem to be a principled way to say *what* property a given dream image is supposed to be.

To draw out the problem, consider a purple-box-to-the-left-of-a-green-ball image, which I have represented with the picture below:



Johnston proposes that such an image is a complex property. Which property? You might think it is this one: *being a purple box to the left of a green ball*. But there is another, equally good candidate: *being a green ball to the right of a purple box*. These properties both describe one and the same situation equally well. Yet, they are *distinct* properties: the first one can only be exemplified by a purple box, whereas the second can only be exemplified by a green ball. Which complex property, then, is the image identical to? I don't see a principled way to answer that question.

The problem is that there seems to be no way to analyze dream images in terms of any *unique* property. Someone might respond by treating images as *sui generis*, unanalyzable "distributional" properties.² But this response stops our inquiry too short. What are these special, unanalyzable properties? And how exactly are they related to their constituent properties? Johnston's theory doesn't answer these further questions.

What about *relations*? Might the purple-box-to-the-left-of-a-green-ball image be a relation? I don't see how. The image seems to *contain* (in some sense of 'contain') *greenness*.

² See, for example, Parsons 2004.

But no relation contains (in *any* sense of ‘contains’), greenness. Although Dream objects may *contain* relations, they don’t seem to *be* relations.

Consider, next, *sets*. One might think that a dream image is a “container”—a *set*—of both properties and relations. Unfortunately, sets won’t work, either. The problem is that distinct images can contain the same set of properties and relations. For example, a purple-box-to-the-left-of-a-green-ball image is distinct from a green-box-to-the-left-of-a-purple-ball image. Yet, they seem to contain the same properties and relations: they both contain *greenness*, *purpleness*, *being a box*, *being a ball*, and *to-the-left-of*. The constituents don’t by themselves differentiate the images.

Dream objects are plausibly not *propositions*. Propositions can be true or false, but no dream object can be sensibly said to be true or false. Moreover, I can fully grasp any proposition about a green ball without thereby being aware of any *image* of a green ball: propositions seem to be colorless, whereas images seem to be vibrant with color. This leads me to doubt that propositions are dream images.

The final traditional category I will consider is state of affairs. Perhaps my image of a red apple is a state of affairs of *there being a red apple*. Or, perhaps it is the state of affairs of me being appeared to red-apple-ly.³ These are promising possibilities.

Unfortunately, I cannot accept them. On my view, states of affairs are too abstract and too fine-grained to be images. Consider, again, the purple-box-to-the-left-of-a-green-ball image, pictured below:

³ Cf. Chisholm 1976, p. 46–53.



Purple



Green

Now compare this image with the following two states of affairs: (i) *there being a purple box to the left of a green circle*; (ii) *there being a green circle to the right of a purple box*.⁴ These states of affairs seem to be *distinct*, co-obtaining state of affairs. But then the image in question is surely not identical to either one: for neither one is more qualified to be the image than the other. I don't believe there are any other states of affairs that are better candidates. Therefore, I don't think the image in question is a state of affairs.

These arguments are admittedly controversial. I present them merely to explain why certain philosophers will find the accounts of mental images that have been proposed so far less than satisfactory. My central goal is to put on the table a new account of the nature of dream objects, and even those who do not feel compelled to abandon previous accounts may benefit from considering the account I offer.

3. Seeing Color Arrangements

I propose that what we see in our dreams are *arrangements* of shapes and colors. Rasmussen (2013) introduces the term 'arrangement' to designate a category of things that may serve as truthmakers for true propositions. At the most general level, an arrangement is any complex entity that *consists* of things (concrete or abstract) bearing relations to one another.⁵ Put differently: an arrangement is anything that depends upon its *parts* (or constituents) bearing

⁴ Alternatively, consider: (i) my being appeared to as if *there is a purple box to the left of a green circle*; (ii) my being appeared to as if *there is a green circle to the right of a purple box*.

⁵ Rasmussen 2013, p. 169–170.

certain relations to one another.⁶ It is *like* what Armstrong called a ‘state of affairs’. But there is at least one important difference, however: arrangements may be made up entirely of abstract things, whereas Armstrong’s states of affairs must contain at least one concrete thing (such as a substance).⁷ Thus, Rasmussen’s arrangements may be built wholly out of properties.

With arrangements in hand, I propose that dream images are *arrangements of shapes and colors*. Recall, for example, the image of a purple box to the left of a green square. I propose that this image is an arrangement that has three primary proper parts: the property of *being purple and square*, the property of *being green and circular*, and a certain spatial relation. (We can say that these parts in turn have parts—e.g., *being purple and square* has *being purple* and *being square* as its parts. But that’s not crucial to the theory.) The image exists by virtue of its parts being related in a certain way. I do not say that the properties are spatially related, of course. What I propose is that there is a relation that holds between the proper parts of the image, such that the image exists if and only if those parts stand in that relation.

We may suppose, then, that a dream (in color) consists of one’s awareness—direct and immediate awareness—of arrangements of shapes and colors. In dreams, there are many arrangements within one’s field of awareness, and some arrangements are parts of others. In addition to arrangements of shapes and colors, there can also be arrangements of phenomenal sounds, feelings, tastes, and smells that occur in dreams. These are all arrangements built up out of properties and relations.

⁶ I am using the term ‘part’ in its most general sense to include constituents, pieces, ingredients, members, and any other part-like relation. Some philosophers may prefer to view propositions as having *constituents* rather than as having *parts*. They are welcome to do so. If there is a *part-like* relation that propositions can participate in, then that is good enough for the purposes of this paper.

⁷ See Armstrong 1997.

This proposal seems to fit the phenomenal data. Dream images seem to contain colors and shapes, and arrangements have colors and shapes as proper parts (or “constituents”, if you prefer). Also, dream images seem to resemble the external world, and this resemblance can be explained in terms of properties contained within a dream image being exemplified by concrete particulars in the external world. I suggest, therefore, that Rasmussen’s theory of arrangements empowers a new and adequate account of dream objects in terms of arrangements of shapes and colors.

4. Results

My proposal concerning what we see in dreams opens up an interesting account of what we see when we are awake. While awake, we see *the same things*: arrangements of shapes and colors. One could think of these arrangements as (abstract) *surfaces*. In cases of veridical perception, the surface, along with its constituent properties and relations, are exemplified by genuinely existing objects. By contrast, in cases of dreams and hallucinations, the surfaces are *there* (they exist) but not exemplified. The proposal admittedly requires heavy ontology. But there are payoffs: we now have a way to explain how we could enjoy *direct* and *immediate* access to reality despite the fact that our conscious experiences in veridical and non-veridical perception could, in principle, be indistinguishable. The explanation is simply this: non-veridical and veridical experiences can be indistinguishable by virtue of consisting in one’s immediate awareness of the *very same* arrangements of properties. In other words, some of what we see while we are awake is the same as what we see in dreams.

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