

**WEEK 3** ANSWER TO QUESTION 2  
STEP 4.2 ASK MARK

OK, question two: “What part does consciousness play in dreaming? If I'm having a particularly vivid dream, it can appear as real as my experiences when awake. Indeed, there can be a short period of time when I wake up from a dream when I'm uncertain as to whether I'm awake or still dreaming. If it's the unconscious that's responsible for dreams, how come it can feel identical to being conscious?”

So, I'm glad to have this question, because I think that there's a common misconception in regard to this idea that dreams are unconscious. Of course – as the question says – dreams are, by definition, conscious. They are hallucinatory states. If you are not conscious, you're not dreaming. The reason is twofold why people get a bit muddled about it.

The one is because dreams occur while you're asleep, and sleep is sort of defined as being not conscious, being not awake. But of course, that only applies to dreamless sleep. The dreaming part of sleep is conscious. That's what differentiates dreaming from sleep in general.

The other source of confusion, though – which I think is the one that the questioner, specifically, is asking about – is the Freudian notion that dreams come from the unconscious. They come *from* the unconscious I think is the important thing to emphasise in that Freudian notion. To say that the dream is ‘instigated’ or ‘triggered’ by an unconscious thought process is not to say that the dream itself is unconscious.

The dream itself, as I've said already, is by definition conscious. It's an hallucination. It's an experience no different – in regard to the extent to which it's conscious – from waking consciousness. So let me explain a little further, the way that it works is something like this. I said in response to question one that the information processing that cognition intrinsically consists in is going on all the time, whether you're *conscious* or not. Now, I want to add it's going on all the time, whether you're *awake* or not.

While you're asleep there's a lot of cognition going on. There's oodles of evidence that there's very important cognitive work done while we're sleeping, most specifically – or rather the most well researched and thoroughly demonstrated cognitive work that goes on during sleep is – in regard to memory consolidation. But it's not only memory consolidation, there's also a lot of problem solving that goes on during sleep and which is probably closely related to memory consolidation.

And then there are other things too – which I won't enumerate, because it begins to blur between dreaming and non-dreaming sleep – like, for example, emotion

regulation, which does happen during sleep but seems more to do with dreaming. The main point is that cognition is not intrinsically conscious. It's happening all the time. Unconscious cognition is happening all the time whether you're asleep or awake.

During sleep there is definitely complex cognition going on all the time, but it's unconscious. So the question becomes: what makes it become conscious? What is it that turns that unconscious cognition going on during sleep into a dream?

And my view – and this incidentally, coincides with Freud's view. Freud's view was that there's an unconscious thought process that occurs during sleep which attracts emotional attention which means something, which matters. Freud says that these are dreams that are triggered from above or from below, and there might be a superficial thought process, nothing particularly emotionally charged, or it might be a deeply unconscious thought process.

The thing is that once it attracts feeling, once you feel something about what you're thinking – and usually it's heart-felt feeling that's at issue – that's when that thought process turns into a dream. Now, translated into neuroscientific terms, what that means is that there's cortical processing going on all the time while you're asleep. And, indeed, this is demonstrably so – you can show it on functional neuroimaging.

But it's only when this cortical processing – this forebrain, higher cognitive processing – only when it triggers or activates upper brain stem structures, it's only when those are activated that the forebrain cognitive process gets turned into a conscious experience, into a dream. So first of all, the cognition needs to attract affect, needs to have a charge, and this is what turns the otherwise ongoing cognitive information processing of sleep into a dream. Hope that's clear.



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