

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Phenomenal Self and Dream Self

Hayrettin Kara, MD<sup>1</sup>, Yavuz Selvi, MD<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Istanbul Medipol University, İstanbul, Turkey

<sup>2</sup>Selcuk University, Medicine Faculty, Department of Psychiatry, Konya, Turkey

### ABSTRACT

The concept of self is a complicated issue; however, a conceptualization of dream self even reflects a more complicated process. Various historical and contemporary approaches, which need reconciliation and refinement, exist toward the topic of the self; these approaches spread through a wide spectrum. On the one hand is the thought that self is fictional; on the other hand, self is considered a solid concept. Of these approaches, the phenomenological approach has its own unique place capturing the issue from a broader view. While this phenomenological view argues that self is the subject of the self's experiences, it also emphasizes the accessibility of self through consciousness. A descriptive introspection might access the basic phenomenal characteristics of the self. The present article basically argues that there is a phenomenal self in dreams that can be accessed through consciousness and thus, dreams are basically personal experiences of the self. Research into the phenomenological similarities and differences between the awake and dreaming self might help to better understand subjectivity and consciousness. On the other hand, if there exists a phenomenal self in dreams, which can be accessed through consciousness, psychological dream theories need a radical revision.

**Keywords:** self theory of dreams, dreaming, consciousness

## INTRODUCTION

Every individual is aware that their "self" is in the center of their lives and experiences. Therefore, when we talk about our lives, our sentences start with the pronoun "I" either as the subject or a null subject (however, rarely, in severe psychopathological cases, the person talks about himself as "s/he"). We face difficulties in understanding what we mean by "self" although clearly understand ourselves. For us, it is a paradox that although self is one of our aspects, which we are highly familiar with, we face a lot of difficulty in explaining it. We can trace back the queries about the concept of self to early wirings as to the issue in history. For example, the

Upanishads explains the first emergence of self and the moment when a being calls himself "I" as follows: "In the beginning, this world was an essence (*ātman*) in the form of a human (*pruṣa*). He looked around and did not see anyone but himself. For the first time, he said, "this is me". "The pronoun "I" was thus created" (Korhan, 2008). Self has been differently conceptualized in various cultures. Moreover, cultures have diverse and different contentions and ideas as to the structure of self. One of the most spectacular characteristics of the views on self in Western cultures is that these views are polarized. At the one side of these views is the rational understanding of self, meaning the "substance" that is the basis for information and existence, which was effectively discussed by Descartes (Cottingham, Stoothoff, & D.Murdoch, 1988). On the other hand, empirical view on self argues that self does not have a real existence and it is a "fictional" or simple linguistic structure. D. Hume, the most prominent representative of the empirical view, argues that when he introspects, he does not come across to a being called "I" and only finds a bunch of perceptions (Hume, 1978).

\*Correspondence: dryavuzselvi@yahoo.com

Yavuz Selvi, MD, Selcuk University, Medicine Faculty, Department of Psychiatry, Konya, Turkey

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Between these two extreme views, there are many other different approaches on self. Kant's evaluation of ego in two levels as phenomenal ego and noumenal ego can be perceived as an effort to bridge these two extremes. We can see traces of this polarization in the present-day philosophy and sciences of the human mind. For example, Dennet's "multiple drafts model," which argues that the self is the "center of narrative gravity," is like a modern extension of the empirical view of D. Hume (Dennet, 1991). In contrast, Chalmers' theory of "naturalistic dualism," which argues that consciousness (ego) is not a part of the physical self, is very similar to the rational-self theory by Descartes (Chalmers, 1996). The perspectives of the first and the third person, which are often mentioned while discussing consciousness and self, are reflections of the aforementioned polarization.

The phenomenological approach of the self has its own unique and privileged place within this polarized views on the self. Phenomenology is a tradition of thinking that was started by Husserl, who was a student of the descriptive psychologist F. Brentano. The term phenomenology means the examination of the "phenomena", namely the things that are seen by the consciousness, and the things that are given (Lyotard, 1991). Phenomenology is also the name of a method, and it attempts to describe the phenomena by suspending all theories and beliefs (*epoche*) without making any presuppositions. In the tradition of phenomenological thinking, there are two significant concepts exist: givenness and orientationality. Phenomenology is closer to the pole represented by Descartes because it considers self as a givenness. In addition, phenomenology does not approach self as an abstract substance, and it tries to identify self with an experience within its own orientationality. Currently, there are various phenomenological approaches; however, they all share a common view that the self is accessible through consciousness. Zahavi, one of the contemporary phenomenologists, states the following on that matter:

*To be conscious of oneself is not to capture a pure self that exists in separation from the stream of consciousness, rather it just entails being conscious of an experience in its first-personal mode of givenness, that is, from 'within'. The*

*self referred to is consequently not something standing beyond or opposed to the experiences, but is rather a feature or function of their givenness.'* (Zahavi, 2003). It is very important for practical sciences like psychology to emphasize the empirical nature of self through orientationality.

## PHENOMENAL SELF

Currently, there are many different definitions of and approaches toward the self. For example, Neisser described 5; Strossen described 25 different definitions of self, respectively. These definitions sometimes can be completely contradictory to each other. Therefore, we cannot discuss a common understanding of self (Zahavi, 2003). In most cases, when a writer talks about self, what they mean and what the audience understands are different. When we talk about the scope of the concept, we mean the phenomenal self and the subject at the heart of our lives, which we call "the self." The self is the subject of the personal experience. However, this does not make consciousness an abstract existence independent from experience, or without experience. The concept of "phenomenal self" refers to that the self in itself is accessible through experiences of consciousness. Accessibility of consciousness necessitates the perspective of the person him- or herself; a person can only access his self by introspecting and nobody can reach the subjective experiences of someone else by observing them from a third-party perspective. For example, while drinking tea with a friend, you have your own subjective experience and can observe your friend's tea-drinking experience externally. However, you can never grasp your friend's true experience of tea drinking through observation. On the other hand, he can explain his subjective experience to you verbally or by behaving in a certain way and you can grasp to his experience indirectly using empathy. As a result, any study on the self requires the perspective of the first person as well as introspection. Here we can descriptive introspection, not analytical or interpretive but descriptive (Revonsue, 2009). In the history of psychology, W. James is one of scholars who examined his self by using descriptive introspection. As is widely

known, James argued that the self is composed of four components: the material self, the social self, the spiritual self, and the pure ego; he discussed each of these components separately. For us, his discussion of the spiritual self is crucial. James mentions that the spiritual self can be felt and this is a remarkable point. He states the following on the matter, in his classic work "The Principles of Psychology":

*"...Now, let us try to settle for ourselves as definitely as we can, just how this central nucleus of the self may feel, no matter whether it be a spiritual substance or only delusive word. For this central part of the self is felt... Now we can tell more precisely in what the feeling of this central active the self consists, – not necessarily as yet what the active self is, as a being or principle, but what we feel when we become aware of its existence?..." (James, 1983).*" He describes his feelings in detail when he notices the innermost self just like the existence of a vault in a castle. This description effort is phenomenologically valuable. At this point, we will ask an additional question quite different from James—when we notice this innermost self, what kind of basic irreducible qualities of it do we observe? When we introspect, if we differentiate each distinguishable characteristic, which we assume belongs to the self, what is left? We answer this question as follows. When we introspect using a descriptive phenomenological method, we observe some basic irreducible qualities of our selves. These qualities are "existing at a moment," "existing at a place," "feeling," "perceiving," and "being oriented." We observe ourselves within a natural and ordinary consciousness at a moment or at a place, feeling one thing or the other, perceiving one thing or that the other, and being oriented toward one thing or the other.

Using the phenomenological distinguishing method, we can observe that many qualities of ourselves, which look like they belong to ourselves, are not in fact indispensable. However, we cannot reduce the above-mentioned qualities because they are phenomenal parts of our expression "I am myself." On the other hand, we cannot associate phenomenal self with observational self; we cannot argue that we reach the observational self through introspection. Observing self is only possible

with objectifying it. The self can be transformed into an observable object only by duplicating itself. In this case, we would not be observing the observational self. When we talk about phenomenal self, we mean the process of duplicating of the observational self itself and becoming an objective self. This objective self has the phenomenal characteristics that we discuss above.

## DREAMS AND PHENOMENAL DREAM SELF

We never have any doubt about whether daily experiences we have are "our own experiences." Despite the clarity of our awake experiences being "our own experiences," we are somehow confused about dreams. However, dreams are also our own experiences just like the ones when we are awake. In our dreams we are either as an observer or the self in action. The self in the center of the dream experiences is at a moment, at a place, and is in the process of perceiving, feeling, and orienting just like the awake one. There is a cultural and psychological background in our lack of understanding that the dreams are also experiences of the self just like the awake experiences.

People have shown special efforts to explain and understand dreams in every known culture throughout history. This effort has generally been clustered around the following questions: What is the source of dreams? Do dreams have any meaning? If dreams have a meaning, if so how can we reach this meaning? Cultures from Ancient Egypt to the Far East and from Ancient Greece to Islam proposed answers to these questions (Bulkeley, 2001). People interpreted their dreams using these answers and behave on the basis of these answers. For example, we can see how the cultural answers produced to understand dreams affected individuals' perceptions and behaviors, even in the Epic of Gilgamesh, which is one of the first written texts of humanity (*Épopée de Gilgamesh*). Approaches on dreams in Mesopotamia in 4000 BC had an impact on all cultures throughout history and still has some influence. The basic tenets of this approach, which we can call the "traditional interpretive approach," are as follows: Dreams originate from the

outside of individuals' self and carry information that the individual does not consciously know. This information is cryptic with symbolism. The symbolic structure, i.e., the dream, needs to be interpreted for this information to be exposed. These basic tenets easily explain our failure to see that dreams are an experience of the self just like awake experiences. On the other hand, dream theories developed on the concept of the unconscious in modern psychology are very similar to the traditional interpretive approach regarding their basic tenets. Psychoanalytical dream theory is like a modern version of the traditional dream approach. In psychoanalytical theory, the metaphysical para-conscious area of the traditional dream approach is replaced by a physical unconscious area. Accordingly, unconsciousness-centered psychological dream theories differentiate the awake cognitive activities from cognitive activities in dreams. In this context, we know that Freud differentiated the thinking processes in dreams as an "initial process" and the awake cognitive activities as a "secondary process" (Freud, 1913). Jung, another prominent dream theorist, considers dreams as expressions of the collective unconscious archetypes, and differentiates dreams and the awake mind. Hobson, one of the currently well-known dream researchers, discovered most of the neurochemistry of the rapid eye movement sleep (REM) period using the activation-synthesis model, and shook the main foundations of the psychoanalytical dream theory (Hobson, McCarley, 1977). He argued that dreams are a delirium, which makes him one of the scholars who believed that there is a basic difference between the dream mind and the awake mind (Hobson, 1999).

Despite these views, the recent contextual, developmental, and neurobiological studies conducted on dreams rapidly produce evidences showed that there are no qualitative differences regarding the cognitive processes between the dream and the awake states, as assumed by some scholars (Antrobus, Kondo and Reinsel, 1995; Nir and Tononi, 2010). These studies suggest that dreams are similar to the mind-wandering state where the awake mind is wandering. The similarity between the active areas of the default mode network (DMN) in the brain and those of the brain during the REM period led researchers to develop

theories suggesting that the act of dreaming is realized by a sub-system of DMN (Domhoff, 2011).

These neurobiological data approximating the dream and awake minds put forward two new developments: First, a new neurobiological model explaining the dreams is needed. Second, a new self- and consciousness-centered dream model particularly to explain psychotherapies. PDSM (Phenomenological Dream Self Model), which we have developed on the basis of our psychotherapy experiences, is a result of these needs. We believe that although there are no neurobiological proofs, it is possible to show that dreams have a phenomenological nature similar to that of being awake when considered from a phenomenological point of view. One of the basic principles of the phenomenological approach is "not to presuppose anything". If we adopt this approach and suspend cultural and psychological assumptions, we can easily see that dreams are subjective experiences of the self, just like the awake state. Phenomenologically, there is the self that can be accessed through consciousness while being awake, and similarly, there is the self that is accessible through consciousness during the dream state. The self is a phenomenal reality in the awake state and in the dream state. In addition, the fact that dreams are subjective experiences of the self does not mean that the language and the form of these experiences are the same as those experienced in the awake state. Moreover, the awake state is phenomenally not a single form. For example, daydreaming is also a subjective experience of the self during the awake state. At first, we tend to associate daydreaming with an ordinary wakeful experience. However, if we carefully look at it and analyze its contents, we can reach some facts that would require us to examine daydreaming as a separate category.

In the previous section, we have mentioned our belief that anybody who introspects with a descriptive phenomenological attitude during their awake state can reach the non-distinguishable basic phenomenological characteristics of their selves. Now, we argue that anybody who approaches their dreams with a descriptive phenomenological attitude can see that they themselves exist in their dreams and these selves are phenomenologically very similar to their selves in their

awake state. At this point, the following question might come to the mind: Does every dream have to be an experience of the self by default? Some articles argue that a small part of the dreams does not have this characteristic of the dream self (Revonsuo, 2009). For us, such approaches are problematic because every reported perceptual experience has to be an experience of the self. Dreams are perceptual experiences and if they are being communicated, these perceptual experiences need an experiencing individual. If a study on dreams argues that in some dreams, there does not exist any self, we believe that phenomenologically, those dreams have not yet been thoroughly studied because the self in dreams might have surprising and extraordinary forms.

We will write another detailed article discussing the similarities and differences between the phenomenological qualities of the self in the awake and dream states.

As a result, there is a phenomenal self in dreams that exists at a moment, at a place, and is in the process of "perceiving," "feeling," and "orienting." Approaching dreams through this phenomenal self might make important contributions to a better understanding of the consciousness and the self. It is more important to comprehend dreams through the phenomenal self because this would make it possible to study dreams in psychotherapy in a more effective, easier, and more understandable manner.

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