

Reinterpretation of Dreams:

Why Incoherence Does Not Collapse Cognition

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[Drafted by Steven Srebranig, with analytical and editorial assistance from AI tools used under the author's direction. All theoretical frameworks, definitions, and claims originate with the author.]

Dreams are routinely described as incoherent: places shift without transition, identities merge or dissolve, time folds back on itself, and causal sequence is frequently violated. Yet despite these disruptions, dreams rarely feel unintelligible while they are occurring. Experience continues. Scenes progress. Emotional continuity is preserved even when narrative logic fails. This presents a basic but largely unexamined puzzle. If coherence is required for cognition to function, dreams should collapse almost immediately. That they do not suggests that cognitive stability does not depend on global consistency, but on something more local and permissive—a form of navigability that tolerates extreme abstraction volatility without demanding reconciliation or explanation.

1. Introduction: The Puzzle of Functional Incoherence

Dreams are commonly characterized as incoherent. They violate basic expectations of narrative continuity, causal sequence, spatial stability, and personal identity. Scenes shift without transition, people merge or substitute for one another, and events unfold without discernible motivation or consequence. In ordinary waking contexts, such features would be taken as evidence of confusion, breakdown, or loss of intelligibility.

Yet this characterization sits uneasily beside a simple empirical observation: dreams typically remain experientially navigable while they occur. Experience does not halt when continuity fails. Scenes proceed, attention remains engaged, and emotional tone is often sustained even as representational structure fragments. The dreamer rarely experiences the dream as unintelligible in real time. Whatever its later strangeness, the dream unfolds as a coherent experience while it is happening.

This presents a basic puzzle. If cognition requires global coherence—stable identity, consistent chronology, and causal order—to function, then dreams should collapse almost immediately under their own instability. That they do not suggests that the conditions required for cognitive viability are more permissive than is often assumed. The persistence of experience under pervasive inconsistency indicates that collapse is not an automatic consequence of incoherence.

This paper proposes a shift in how the problem is framed. Rather than asking what dreams mean, or what they symbolically encode, it asks how they continue to function at all. The focus is not on interpretation, decoding, or explanation of content, but on the

structural conditions that allow cognition to remain operational in the absence of global consistency. Dreams are treated here not as messages to be deciphered, but as evidence that cognitive navigability can be preserved under extreme abstraction volatility.

2. Why Traditional Explanations Miss the Core Question

Accounts of dreaming have traditionally focused on interpretation. Symbolic, narrative, and thematic analyses seek to explain what dream elements represent, how they encode latent concerns, or why particular images recur. These approaches can be informative with respect to content, association, and personal meaning. However, they do not address a more basic issue: how experience remains stable enough to proceed when the representational structures being interpreted are themselves unstable.

Psychological and neurobiological accounts approach the problem from a different direction. They explain dreaming in terms of cognitive processes, memory consolidation, neural activation patterns, or sleep-stage dynamics. These explanations clarify the conditions under which dreaming occurs and the mechanisms that accompany it. Yet they largely describe correlates of dreaming rather than its functional properties. They explain when and with what substrate dreams occur, but not why cognition does not fail under the conditions dreams routinely exhibit.

What remains largely unexamined is the structural question shared by both approaches: what allows cognition to continue in the presence of contradiction, discontinuity, and violated expectation? Dreams are unusual not because they are strange, but because they demonstrate that global coherence is not required for experiential continuity. Existing explanations tend to bypass this issue, moving either toward interpretation of meaning or toward description of mechanism, while leaving the problem of functional stability under incoherence unaddressed.

3. Dreams as Low-Obligation Cognitive States

One distinguishing feature of dreaming is the absence of interpretive enforcement. While dreaming, there is no requirement to explain events, resolve contradictions, or justify transitions. Inconsistencies do not trigger demands for reconciliation, and violations of expectation do not require repair. Experience proceeds without the need to account for itself.

This absence of enforcement carries several consequences. Dreams do not require consistency across scenes, continuity across time, or stability of identity. A person may be both familiar and unfamiliar, a place may change without explanation, and events may contradict earlier moments without consequence. None of these disruptions impose a burden on the dream to restore coherence. There is no internal or external pressure to make the experience “add up.”

Dreams also lack persistence and accountability across states. On waking, the dream is not required to maintain continuity with waking memory, nor is it evaluated against external criteria of correctness or plausibility. The dream does not need to defend itself, endure scrutiny, or support action beyond its own duration. This absence of persistence removes the penalties normally associated with incoherence.

The result is a cognitive state that tolerates high levels of abstraction volatility. Representational structures can shift, dissolve, or recombine without causing collapse because nothing demands their stabilization. Cognition remains viable not because coherence is preserved, but because coherence is not required. Dreams thus provide a clear example of experience continuing under conditions where interpretive obligation is effectively absent.

4. Local Continuity and Emotional Stabilization

Even as dreams violate expectations of narrative order, they typically preserve moment-to-moment experiential flow. Attention remains engaged, scenes unfold without interruption, and experience proceeds as a continuous present. Abrupt shifts in setting, identity, or causality rarely arrest the dream itself. Whatever coherence is lost at a global level does not interrupt the immediate progression of experience.

Emotional valence plays a central stabilizing role in this continuity. Feelings such as fear, anticipation, attraction, or unease often persist across representational disruptions, carrying forward even as narrative elements fragment or recombine. Affect provides a stable orientation that allows cognition to remain anchored despite instability in content. The dreamer may not know why events unfold as they do, but they remain situated within a consistent emotional posture toward what is happening.

This helps explain why narrative failures do not trigger collapse during dreaming. Violations of logic that would demand reconciliation in waking cognition do not interrupt experience because emotional alignment remains intact. Affect supplies continuity where explanation fails. The dream remains navigable because the question of justification never arises.

The distinction, then, is between local and global coherence. Global coherence requires consistency across time, identity, and causation. Local coherence requires only that experience remain viable from one moment to the next. Dreams abandon the former while preserving the latter. Cognitive stability is maintained not by enforcing overall consistency, but by sustaining immediate continuity and affective engagement.

5. Illustrative Dream Cases (Historical Descriptions)

The dream accounts discussed in this section are drawn from the case material collected in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900). These accounts are used here strictly as

descriptive records of dreaming, independent of the psychoanalytic interpretations originally proposed alongside them. Freud's value in this context lies not in his explanatory framework, but in the care with which narrative discontinuities, substitutions, and transitions were documented rather than smoothed or normalized. This makes the material especially suitable for examining how cognition remains navigable under conditions of extreme incoherence.

5.1 Identity Substitution Without Breakdown

Several reported dreams involve the partial or complete substitution of one person for another, often mid-scene, without eliciting confusion or arresting the progression of experience. In these cases, identity does not function as a fixed abstraction requiring preservation. Instead, role, affect, and situational relevance remain intact even as personal identity shifts. The dream continues because the cognitive system does not enforce identity consistency as a prerequisite for navigability. What would constitute a categorical error in waking cognition is tolerated here without disruption.

5.2 Temporal Compression and Causal Violation

Other examples describe events that collapse extended sequences of time into a single moment, or that reverse or scramble causal order. Actions may occur without discernible antecedents; outcomes may precede causes. Despite this, experiential flow is preserved. The dreamer does not experience these violations as paradoxes requiring resolution. Progression is maintained because temporal ordering is not globally enforced. Local continuity—what is happening now—is sufficient.

5.3 Spatial Discontinuity and Scene Transition

Dreams frequently shift locations abruptly, moving from one setting to another without transition or explanation. These shifts rarely interrupt experience. Emotional tone and situational engagement persist across spatial discontinuities, suggesting that place functions as a loosely bound abstraction rather than a stabilizing constraint. The dream does not collapse because spatial coherence is not required for moment-to-moment cognition under these conditions.

5.4 Emotional Continuity as Stabilizing Substrate

Across these examples, emotional valence often remains continuous even as identity, time, and place fragment. Fear, anticipation, or satisfaction carries forward, anchoring experience despite narrative volatility. This suggests that affective continuity plays a stabilizing role, allowing cognition to remain navigable when representational coherence fails.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that dreams tolerate extreme abstraction volatility without cognitive collapse. The absence of enforced reconciliation, justification, or persistence allows experience to proceed even when global coherence is repeatedly violated. These examples do not require interpretation to function as evidence. They show that cognition can remain stable under conditions that would otherwise be considered incoherent, provided the demands placed upon coherence are sufficiently relaxed.

Similar observations appear across phenomenological and cognitive accounts of dreaming, though they are typically treated as descriptive features rather than as constraints on cognitive viability.

6. Why Dreams Do Not Require Interpretation to Function

Dreams highlight a distinction that is often left implicit: the difference between understanding and operation. An experience can proceed, remain stable, and sustain engagement without being understood in explanatory terms. Dreams function while they occur regardless of whether their elements can be interpreted, decoded, or later made intelligible. The absence of understanding does not impede the continuation of experience.

Seen in this light, cognition during dreaming is better described as navigability rather than explanation. The dreamer moves through situations, responds affectively, and remains oriented within the unfolding experience without requiring an account of how its elements fit together. What matters is not whether events can be justified or reconciled, but whether experience remains viable from one moment to the next.

Interpretation enters only after the fact. On waking, the dream may be reconstructed, narrated, or assigned meaning, but these activities are external to the dream's operation. They do not contribute to its stability while it occurs. Interpretation is optional, retrospective, and imposed from outside the dreaming state rather than required by it.

This distinction clarifies why interpretive accounts, however elaborate, are not necessary to explain why dreams do not collapse. Dreams succeed structurally without interpretation. Their viability rests on the absence of interpretive obligation, not on the presence of hidden meaning.

7. Boundary Conditions: Waking Cognition by Contrast

The absence of interpretive enforcement is not proposed as a causal mechanism internal to the dream state, but as a structural condition governing what demands are placed on cognition. Whether this absence arises from physiological, psychological, or contextual factors is orthogonal to the present argument. The claim here is conditional rather than causal: when interpretive obligation is relaxed, cognition can tolerate levels of incoherence that would otherwise provoke collapse.

The same forms of incoherence that are tolerated in dreams often produce failure in waking contexts. Abrupt identity shifts, violated causality, or unstable narratives typically disrupt communication, decision-making, and coordinated action. In waking life, such disruptions are experienced not as benign oddities but as breakdowns requiring correction, explanation, or repair.

The difference is not psychological capacity but obligation. Waking cognition operates under conditions of enforcement. Experiences are expected to be justifiable, consistent across time, and accountable to shared reality. Statements must support action, memory must persist, and interpretations must withstand scrutiny. These requirements impose constraints that are absent during dreaming. When incoherence appears in waking contexts, it generates pressure to reconcile contradictions and restore coherence, and failure to do so carries real consequences.

Social reality intensifies these demands. Communication, coordination, and trust depend on shared abstractions that must remain stable across individuals and situations. In such environments, inconsistency is not merely tolerated but actively resisted, because it threatens collective function. What remains navigable in a low-obligation state becomes destabilizing when interpretation, justification, and persistence are required.

The contrast between dreaming and waking cognition thus reflects structural differences rather than psychological ones. Dreams do not succeed because the mind operates differently in some intrinsic sense, but because the conditions under which cognition unfolds are radically relaxed. When obligation and enforcement are reintroduced, incoherence becomes costly. Cognitive collapse in waking contexts is therefore not a failure of thought itself, but a consequence of mismatched demands placed upon coherence.

8. Scope, Limits, and Non-Claims

This paper does not propose a symbolic decoding model of dreams. It does not offer an interpretive framework for extracting meaning, uncovering latent content, or assigning psychological significance to dream imagery. Questions of symbolism, personal relevance, and narrative interpretation are intentionally set aside in order to focus on the structural conditions under which dreaming remains cognitively viable.

No therapeutic or diagnostic claims are made. The account offered here is not intended to support clinical inference, treatment, or assessment, nor does it distinguish between normal and pathological dreaming. Dreams are considered solely as instances of cognitive activity occurring under relaxed structural constraints, without implication for mental health or psychological function beyond that scope.

No biological mechanism is proposed. The discussion does not attempt to explain dreaming in terms of neural processes, sleep physiology, or cognitive architecture. Such

accounts may be compatible with the observations described here, but they are neither required nor addressed. The focus remains on functional stability rather than on causal substrate.

Finally, dreams are treated as evidence rather than as an instrument. They are not presented as states to be induced, optimized, or exploited, nor as models to be emulated. Their value in this context lies in what they reveal about the conditions under which cognition can proceed despite incoherence. Dreams serve as naturally occurring examples that constrain what any adequate account of cognitive stability must be able to explain.

9. Conclusion: Cognition Without Global Coherence

Dreams demonstrate that cognition can remain stable and navigable in the absence of global coherence. Despite persistent violations of narrative continuity, causal order, and identity stability, experience proceeds without collapse. The account developed here attributes this not to hidden meaning or specialized psychological mechanisms, but to the structural conditions under which dreaming occurs: the absence of interpretive enforcement, the lack of persistence and accountability, and the preservation of local continuity supported by affective stabilization.

This analysis suggests that coherence failure is not intrinsic to incoherence itself. Cognitive collapse occurs when demands for consistency, justification, and persistence exceed what a given cognitive state can sustain. In *dreaming*, those demands are largely absent, allowing experience to tolerate extreme abstraction volatility without disruption. The success of dreams thus reflects a conditional alignment between structural demands and cognitive capacity, rather than an exceptional mode of cognition.

While this paper has focused on dreaming, the implications are not confined to that domain. Situations in which experience or interaction becomes unstable under inconsistency may be better understood by examining the obligations placed upon coherence rather than by attributing failure to confusion or deficit. Dreams provide a clear, naturally occurring case in which cognition functions without global consistency, demonstrating that coherence is not an absolute requirement for cognitive viability, but a condition whose necessity depends on context.