

DANIEL C. DENNETT

THE ONUS RE EXPERIENCES

*A Reply to Emmett **

(Received 6 February, 1978)

More than a few people apparently suppose that I espouse and defend the bizarre 'cassette theory' of dreaming in 'Are Dreams Experiences?'¹ Emmett speaks, for instance, of "Dennett's defense of the cassette theory". Since more than a few suppose this, it must be because of obscurity or misdirection in my paper, for I do not end up espousing the theory, and am quite explicit about it. I concoct the cassette theory as a foil, as an alternative to what I call the received view, precisely in order to raise and investigate the question of what in fact would settle the issue between two such drastic rivals. Emmett's attempt to refute the cassette theory and confirm the received view is thus grist for my mill, not a *direct* challenge to anything I claim. I myself offer reasons — both my own and those of others — for being skeptical about the cassette theory (pp. 169–70), and I think they are at least as persuasive as Emmett's. I do not claim that the persuasions I offer against the cassette theory are conclusive. Since the main point of the paper was to show that "it is an *open* and *theoretical* question whether dreams fall inside or outside the boundary of experience" (p. 170–71), it is not a question I am prepared to answer. To answer it, I claim, one must have a well-confirmed, empirical (psychological, physiological) *theory* of dreams — something no one yet has.

Since my aim was to wrest the issue out of the hands of philosophers, by showing the systematic inconclusiveness or irrelevance of the sorts of considerations philosophers have traditionally raised, Emmett, by claiming to *settle* the issue in favor of the received view, does present a disagreement I want to rebut. She begins *Section 1* by claiming without argument "The criterion for having had an experience must be subjective; whether or not someone has experienced something can only be determined on the basis of testimony". I offer several arguments and illustrative examples against that unargued claim:

(1) the discussion of the ills besetting what I call the 'criteriological move', pp. 163–65;

(2) the discussion of the possibility in principal of abnormal (e.g., surgical) insertion of bogus experience-memories (pp. 157–7);

(3) the example of Jones' odd (hallucinatory?) memory of (hallucinating?) a ghost (p. 169).

A conclusion of the paper is, after all, that the 'criterion' for having had an experience *cannot* be subjective.

But let us see in any case what Emmett claims. The subjective testimony she believes to refute the cassette theory concerns 'lucid dreams', and she offers some *bona fide*, non-fictional transcriptions of such testimony. What, though, do they show? They show what the subjects, on waking, *believe* they experienced, but unless we let such beliefs be authoritative or incorrigible or constitutive, they are only very inconclusive data against the cassette theory. Why so inconclusive? Because, as I said, the cassette theory can handle all 'lucid dreams' reports "via the literary conceit of a dream within a dream" (p. 161.) This remark turns out to have been an overly compressed expression of my point, for Emmett is not alone in aiming at an unintended interpretation of it. What I had meant was just this. Since Descartes at least, it has been a commonplace that a dream can tell any story at all, can have any content at all, in particular can in principle mimic a bit of conscious life — *any* bit of conscious life — indistinguishably well. I see no reason to challenge that. It is proposed, then, that there are at least two sorts of dreams: *lucid* dreams (well described by Emmett) and — shall we say — *ordinary* dreams. The distinction drawn does not put any restriction on what may transpire *within the story frame* of an *ordinary* dream. Then if someone gives a waking report of the lucid dream variety, there will be two hypothesis consistent with the report; the subject had, as she believes she had, a lucid dream; *or* the subject had an ordinary dream *in which* she was aware she was dreaming, decided to fly in her dream, etc. She wasn't *really* aware she was dreaming, of course; she just dreamt she was aware she was dreaming. So subjective testimony, Emmett's criterion, cannot establish that lucid dreams are anything other than a variety of ordinary dreams, viz., dreams of having lucid dreams. But what if we can train people — ourselves even — to have lucid dreams? It is just as easy to suppose we could train people — ourselves even — to have ordinary dreams with certain contents, e.g., dreams about green things, or about selfless devotion to the State, or *about having lucid dreams*. If it was a standoff between the received view and the cassette theory before the topic of lucid dreams was raised, it appears to be still a standoff.

If one wants to push ahead with reasons why the cassette theory is nevertheless rendered somewhat less plausible by the existence of lucid dreams – and this strikes me as eminently reasonable – one can do this only by advancing and espousing the sorts of empirical theory-sketches in the light of which the cassette theory looks *ad hoc* and gratuitous. That is, in order to make anything of the manifestly *ad hoc* flavor of the cassette theory's handling of lucid dreams, one must counter this *bad* theory with a *good* theory, and accede to the principle that the issue of whether or not dreams are experiences is not settled by subjective testimony at all, but rather, if at all, by the triumph of a good empirical theory over rival empirical theories.

The nature of Emmett's argument is disguised by her claim to have found a *tertium quid*, "a framework for the claim that dreams are experiences that does not rely solely on either neurophysiological data or memory". So far as I can see, she supposes this new ground to be occupied by such remarks as "the distinction between an ordinary dream and a lucid dream rests in the degree of self-consciousness that the dreamer possesses". But this is not a third way; it is just equivocation. If we treat the degree of self-consciousness as something to be *settled* by subsequent subjective testimony, we are still playing the criteriological game. If on the other hand we suppose that *something else* – our theory of self-consciousness will tell us what – settles the degree of self-consciousness (even, possibly, in the face of contrary testimony) the claim is no different in kind from the sorts of objective considerations I have already raised for *and against* the cassette theory; it is also no more compelling.

Finally, let me just deny Emmett's claim that I contend "that since we are never justified in claiming that our apparent memories of dreams are genuine, we cannot base the claim that dreams are experiences on the fact of apparent dream recall" (p. 445). I certainly don't contend that. Perhaps we *are* (often, almost always) justified in claiming that our apparent memories of dreams are genuine. If the received view turns out to be true, as I allow it may, no doubt we are often so justified. So the line of skeptical argument Emmett correctly brands as captious I would further denigrate as a red herring.

Perhaps it was the title of my paper that misled more than anything else. What could be more reasonable than so suppose that a paper called 'Are Dreams Experiences?' would set out to answer that question? My aim, however, was to treat the question itself as the specimen to be examined.

NOTES

* See Emmett, K.: 1978, 'Oneiric experiences', *Phil. Stud.* 34, pp. 445–450.

¹ *Philosophical Review* LXXXV (1976), pp. 151–171.