Visions, Hallucinations, and Dreams in the Context of Body Wisdom and Chaos Theory

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Abstract

Our bodies before language are one with our mothers and the universe. With language, we build our conscious individuality while still retaining our embodied unity with the universe and unconscious access to its unspoken mysteries. With language, we build our individuality as we struggle to make explicit those mysteries as they pertain to us. Dreams, hallucinations, and visions are some of the ways that our bodies move unconscious knowledge into our conscious (languaged) reality. This effort takes place in what is called the imaginal realm. In this realm, we may be talking to ourselves as we try to figure out what is going on. We may have imaginal companions, write fiction, dream, pray, engage in fantasy, and play. They imaginal realm is the workshop where our egos tap our unconscious body wisdom and construct the narratives that become our lives.

Key Words: Body wisdom, endo knowing, Subject 3, strange attractor, F in 0, imaginal realm

Introduction

This paper is the result of a long-festering dissatisfaction with the Cartesian concept of a disembodied ego. I have concluded, in opposition to this concept, that the body is the mind and is our point of contact with the mysteries of the universe. I develop these ideas in my book, Body Wisdom (2010). This paper presents a drastic condensation of that book’s argument and shows its relevance to dreams, hallucinations, and visions.

One day, Freud (1920) was watching the antics of his grandson who was about to develop the ability to speak. Recently, the grandson had been very upset when his mother was absent. This day, he was quietly playing with a spool attached to a thread, which was hooked over the edge of his crib. The boy was raising and lowering the spool in such a way that at times the spool was hidden by the side of the crib. As it was hidden, he said “Fort” (gone); when it reappeared he said: “Da” (here). Freud (1956), Lacan (1977), and Ricouer (1970) spell out the amazing consequences of this achievement (Bausch, 2010).

For this article, we will just note that newborn infants are almost undifferentiated from their environments. As such, they approximate what are called “Original Subjects” symbolized as “Subjecto.” As infants differentiate themselves through mirroring, imagination, and eventually...
language, they create rifts between themselves and their nurturing environments so that the Original Subject is divided into Ego and Other, that is:

Original Subject → Ego + Other

Or

Subject 0 → Subject1 + Subject2

The contents of Subject2 are two-fold: the external nurturing environment and all unconscious bodily functions and awareness.

Because of this primal split there is a built-in ambivalence every time we use the word “I” as the subject off a sentence. “I” can theoretically express the standpoint of Subject0 (original subject), Subject1 (ego), or Subject2 (my unconscious, which we are calling Other). In addition, the word “I” can also stand for Subject3, which is a communion of ego and other.

This existential situation brokered by language enables us to traverse life making it uniquely our own, and then to reunite with our Source as an aware, consciously articulated being. In other words,

Ego + Other → Communion

Or

Subject1 + Subject2 → Subject3.

**Endo Knowing**

Visions, hallucinations, and dreams are variations of endo knowing common to everyone. They are communications from our bodily unconscious that have their own logics and languages. They have been described from different perspectives: primary process thought (Freud), pre-reflective experience (phenomenology), symbolic thought (Jung), the discourse of the Other (Lacan), right-brain activity, and imaginal dialogues (Watkins).

Freud considered primary process thought to be primitive and considered secondary process thought to be more mature. Primary process thought is incomplete, symbolic, and unrealistic. According to him, secondary process is rational and reality-tested; it is real thinking, not whimsy.

Pre-reflective thought is a term used by phenomenologists. It focuses on the content of perception before we take a second look. We adjust our perceptions later to fit into our conceptual reality. The content of this pre-reflective experience is described as gestalts and symbols. Gestalts, because we experience wholes and not discrete unconnected sensations; that is, before we ecto/meso think about what we perceive we have already endo organized the perceived reality. Symbols, because our first perceptions have a connection to us and a meaning for us; that is, we make sense of our individual realities before we grow into an ecto understanding of what they are. We are not isolated from our world in the manner of the Cartesian box (a disembodied soul with an impossible task: to contact and make sense of a totally other and material world).

Symbolic thought, according to Jung, arises from our innate [meso] quest for meaning. Symbols (personages, animals, physical organs, myths, etc.) well up from both the individual and the collective unconscious. They are valued keys to a person’s and a culture’s identity. They have a validity of their own as communications from the unconscious. They provide a standard against which conventional reality is to be understood and not just vice versa.

Lacan, following Freud, sees these activities as communications from the unconscious, speaking a language of signs in the manner of a rebus (e.g. eye-heart-U). The language is to be deciphered by interpreting the signs as figures of speech.

Right brain thinking is endo thinking. It is symbolic, creative, non-linear, and irrational. It is directed by our attention, intention, and emotional intensity. Our emotions generally draw our attention to survival and relationship needs. As a result messages from our unconscious generally involve love and survival. Our attention, intention, and emotionality can also be channeled through discipline to achieve ends that we might desire. Following the lead of E. J. Bion (1983), this discipline can be called Faith, so that we can state that disciplined faith can direct our unconscious to provide the enlightenment that we need.

The science of chaos theory and its strange attractors provides a pattern for how such discipline can randomly attract elements into our though that lead to answers for our life problems. The chaotic attractors draw random elements out of chaos that
seemingly have no coherent theme, but which after many iterations draw forth a meaningful pattern. In a similar way we can see Faith drawing forth meaning from our chaotic unconscious. In other words, in endo thinking Faith $(F)$ acts as a strange attractor in the chaos $(O)$ of the unconscious $(F \in O)$.

The Imaginal Realm
Mary Watkins (1976, 1986) has written great deal about imaginal realities. She has demonstrated that human thought is universally dramatic; in other words, we are always talking to ourselves. Anyone who recognizes the human truth in the works of Shakespeare is compelled to agree with her. In our imaginal dialogues we make sense out of our worlds. These dialogues are, of course, not solely verbal. They are often in the symbolic language that Jung, Freud, and Lacan have described.

Watkins points out that the term “hallucination” became current only after the arrival of psychoanalytic thought in the nineteenth century. Before then people talked of visions. Visions and hallucinations are basically the same thing. In the middle Ages, theology had many classifications for visions; today psychology has similar classifications for hallucinations. In theology’s main distinction, good and bad, visions are better defined than are hallucinations. Because of our rationalistic bias, that regards all hallucinations as bad, we denigrate an important part of our psychic makeup. Some sort of distinction between toxic and non-toxic hallucinations needs to be established. With her term “imaginal dialogues,” Watkins makes it clear that hallucinations are normal and often salutary experiences. The test for pathology cannot be the presence of hallucinations because they are universally present. The test is the quality of the hallucination. She provides these signs of pathology in imaginal dialogues:

1) Lack of autonomy for self or imaginal other; either self or other feels like a puppet, is told what to do and say.
2) Passivity of one with respect to the other; one enacts or suffers the other’s wishes without successfully asserting his/her own agency or wishes. This impotence may be reflected in such things as not being able to terminate an imaginal dialogue when desired.
3) The mode of relation is egocentric, where one figure is known only insofar as he/she affects the other; depth of characterization, where a figure known from more than one perspective, is lacking.
4) Absence of a reflecting ego (a self-reflective representation or narrative voice) who notices the difference between figures of the perceptual world and those of the imaginal, who appreciates the latter metaphorically, and who can communicate these distinctions when necessary to others (Watkins, 1986; pp.146-147).

The core of the pathology of hallucinations is well expressed in the following quotation:

[The] patient is denied any spontaneous and free survey of the world; his thoughts being heard, his mind being read, denote that the barriers of his intimate life have been leveled off, that the innermost sphere of his existence has been invaded (Erwin Strauss, quoted by Watkins, 1986; p. 142).

Unhealthy dialogues cannot be assimilated; they lead to delusional beliefs that dominate a person’s life.

Ordinary hallucinations/visions, on the other hand, are the means we use to explain our world to ourselves and to pose problems to ourselves. “To be or not to be” is the address given by Hamlet to his unconscious other. Within this drama he placed a strange attractor in his personal chaos, the necessary step toward creative problem solving. The apparition of his father’s ghost had previously been a communication from his unconscious that brought into focus his distress at that time. These imaginal dialogues of Hamlet mirror dialogues that go on in us constantly.

Watkins (1986) proposes formal criteria for differentiating imaginal dialogues as they occur in “private speech, hallucinations, imaginary companions, praying, the writing of fiction, dreams,
fantasy, and play (pp.149-150).” She demonstrates the richness of the dialogue between what we are calling ego and other in the communion that is Subject3. In particular, she related the Persian, Sufi mysticism of Ibn Arabi for whom to return to one’s Lord is to “return to his self.” Watkins wrote:

In Ibn Arabi’s words, “We have given Him to manifest Himself through us, whereas He has given us (to exist through Him). Thus the role is shared between Him and us….If he has given us life and existence by His being, I also give Him life by knowing Him in my heart” (1986; p.73).

If we remove the theological trappings of these thoughts and replace them with psychological clothes, we have the drama of Subjects 0, 1, 2, and 3.

In her book, Watkins (1976) draws distinctions between waking dreams, daydreams, and hallucinations. The waking dream is one manifestation of what we have termed Subject 3 activity. It is the somewhat meditative activity of withdrawing from ecto and meso immersion in experience. According to Watkins, it is:

...an attempt to get our awareness [out of immersion so that]...we can then discriminate what is moving. This does not mean one steps out of the experience, becomes unrelated, and begins to analyze. It means that our sensitivities and awareness are freed to participate independently as themselves and to bring their unique qualities into the situation (p. 16).

This kind of attention can be employed while awake, in reverie, or, with practice, in lucid nighttime dreaming. It is serene F in 0.

Merleau-Ponty (1964b) contributes this observation about waking dreams: “What one too deliberately seeks, he does not find; and he who on the contrary has in his meditative life known how to tap its spontaneous source never lacks for ideas and values” (p.83).

Daydreams are like waking dreams in that they deal with imaginal material. They are unlike waking dreams in the laxity of their attention; in their attention they are simply involved in what is going on in the imaginal realm with the same kind of attention that they fasten on external concerns. Watkins (1976) says, “In daydreaming, the ego’s attention becomes attached to the imaginal contents in the same way it does to our daily concerns. There is no awareness during it or memory afterward of what was going on” (p. 18). The quality of F in o distinguishes Subject3 attention from both daydreaming with imaginal realities, and immersion in physical and social reality. The Sufis held that the imaginal world (the mundus imaginalis) was the sacred realm of the soul, and that it required rapt attention to dwell there. As Watkins put it:

In the Sufi idea of creative imagination it was believed that whenever the imagination is allowed to “stray” and to be “wasted recklessly, then it ceases to fulfill its function of perceiving and producing the symbols that lead to inner intelligence,” the intermediary world (that of the mundus imaginalis and of the soul) can be considered to have disappeared (p. 18).

The idea of hallucination has been used to discredit the imaginal. Watkins (1976) points out that, “Waking dreams and hallucinations... rely on two distinctly different psychic functions: imagination and perception. Hallucinations purport to deal with external material and perceptual reality, whereas waking dreams and dreams pertain to imaginal reality” (pp.18-19). She claims that the “hallucinator is asleep” with regards to awareness of the imaginal. If a person obtains Subject3 awareness he or she is no longer the victim of hallucination.

This point is well-taken, yet it is necessary to point out that all perception is hallucinatory in the broad sense. We perceive wholes (gestalts) which have meaning for us (symbols) and initiate a dialogue about their friendliness/unfriendliness, importance/unimportance, clarity/density of meaning, and so on. The dialogues that generate these gestalts are often under the threshold of consciousness. For various reasons we often do not perceive things that are sensibly presented to us.

Dreams give way to our imaginal dialogues often turning them into full-scale dramatic productions. When these dialogues and dramas occur in the hypnagogic state
between sleeping and waking they are called visions. Almost all remarkable visions occur in this state which is induced by a variety of methods: sleeping, meditation, dancing, reverie, sensory deprivation or overload, exhaustion, fasting, epilepsy, migraines, medication, drugs, etc.

Imaginal dialogues are grounded in our bodies, our histories, and our cultures. They gather their material and intensity from the preoccupations of our waking life, which act as the strange attractors of perception, hallucination, dream, and vision. In the conflict-resolution dream, they give emotional release to our day’s unresolved tensions and also clue us in to the nature of those tensions. In problem-solving dreams, they present us with answers which are arrived at while our rational minds are asleep.

Because our boundaries are porous in endo awareness we may sometimes dream for someone else or dream for our society, especially if we are caught up in their concerns. Again, our attention or Faith acts as the strange attractor in these dreams. Also, because we are not two, our imaginal dialogues sometimes have racial and universal significance, especially in the form of archetypical themes: birth/death/resurrection, war and peace, creation, the quest, etc.

Our imaginal dialogues are usually tied to our time and place for their raw material. For reasons of survival, we do not often obsess on events of another place and another time. If we did, as Toynbee did, we might have flashbacks to earlier historical events as he did, and so breach the relative divisions of space and time. Likewise, if we were to intensely focus on spiritual matters in the context of a dominant mythology, we would create the strange attractor that would draw religious visions from our unconscious. Ordinarily, however, we focus on our personal, familial, and social concerns, and for good reason. Focusing for no reason on existentially irrelevant concerns creates a scattered unconscious, which fosters personal and societal disorganization or disintegration.

The immersion we experience today in the sea of media/information/entertainment dilutes the focus of our imaginal life. On the one hand, this is good because we enter into imaginal dialogue with so many different viewpoints, cultures, and situations. On the other hand, we lose the focused mythology that sustained our ancestors and their societies. In a strange irony, the Internet allows us to live within intellectual smokestacks where everyone thinks the same way. In our global village we are forced, more than ever, to attend to the quality of our Faith.

During situations of great urgency breaches of time and space are more likely to occur as, for example, in the documented premonitions and visions of plane crashes. When there is a strong human bond, and therefore a certain steadiness of the strange attractor, spatial boundaries sometimes fade, as when a mother knows from a distance that her daughter has died. Sometimes physical dysfunction is the catalyst. It is thought that Toynbee’s famous historical visions were a partial result of temporal lobe epilepsy. While visions such as Toynbee’s possess remarkable clarity, many are not so clear, especially when they are induced by mind-confusing chemicals or when they are experienced by people whose attention is not as disciplined as his.

In summary, visions, hallucinations, and dreams are closely related endo experiences that have a limited freedom with regard to space and time. Their content is determined by the focus of our conscious and vital attention. The clarity of their content depends on the single-mindedness of that focus and the steadiness of attention (Faith) with which it is endowed. The principle at work is that of the strange attractor in chaos. These endo experiences have their own logic and language.

In closing, I reflect on the following: Is there some way that the work of chaotic attractors in the imaginal realm can be expressed in terms of neurons, neuropeptides, and quanta? There probably is, but exactly how that might work is beyond me.
References
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